

# DEADLY LIGHT: MACHEN, LOVECRAFT, AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

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March 2014

## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between evolutionary theory and the weird tale in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through readings of works by two of the writers most closely associated with the form, Arthur Machen (1863-1947) and H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), it argues that the weird tale engages consciously, even obsessively, with evolutionary theory and with its implications for the nature and status of the “human”.

The introduction first explores the designation “weird tale”, arguing that it is perhaps less useful as a genre classification than as a moment in the reception of an idea, one in which the possible necessity of recalibrating our concept of the real is raised. In the aftermath of evolutionary theory, such a moment gave rise to anxieties around the nature and future of the “human” that took their life from its distant past. It goes on to discuss some of the studies which have considered these anxieties in relation to the Victorian novel and the late-nineteenth-century Gothic, and to argue that a similar full-length study of the weird work of Machen and Lovecraft is overdue.

The first chapter considers the figure of the pre-human survival in Machen’s tales of lost races and pre-Christian religions, arguing that the figure of the fairy as pre-Celtic survival served as a focal point both for the anxieties surrounding humanity’s animal origins and for an unacknowledged attraction to the primitive Other. The second chapter discusses the pervasiveness of degeneration theory at the fin de siècle, and the ways in which works by both Machen and Lovecraft make use of it to depict the backsliding of both the individual human subject and of wider society, raising the suggestion that the degenerate is always already present within the contemporary human. In the third chapter, portrayals by both authors of hybridity come under consideration. The chapter places these tales in their historical context, with reference to the cultural anxieties surrounding the decline of empire, the rise of anti-immigration sentiment in the United States, and the emergence of the eugenics movement, and argues that these fears become tied to notions about the fitness or otherwise to survive of a “human” associated with Anglo-Saxon whiteness. The fourth and final chapter discusses Lovecraft’s portrayals of highly-advanced extraterrestrial civilisations, arguing that these stories partake of a Utopian impulse that nonetheless expresses itself via contemporary racist discourses, and that they both maintain the notion of a horrific primitive Other within the human and attempt to open up the possibility of a transhuman or posthuman future. The thesis concludes by considering these works in relation to the cyborg theory of Donna Haraway, suggesting that their portrayal of the necessity of inhabiting flux offers a new and less straightforwardly horrific way of thinking about human identity.

## Acknowledgements

Completing this thesis has been a long process, undertaken at a difficult time, and I would never have been able to do so without those who have offered guidance, support, and unending patience along the way.

I am grateful to my supervisors, Neil Badmington and Anthony Mandal, whose advice, support, and recommendations have been invaluable. I am also indebted to the encouragement of Katie Gramich.

Thanks are due to the School of English, Communication and Philosophy for enabling me to carry out this project, and to present my work at conferences. Particularly valuable have been those organised by Hannah Priest at Hic Dragones—I have been glad of the opportunities to discuss the weird (in all senses of the term) with the like-minded.

I would also like to thank Suzie Hathaway and all at ASSL, for their support and understanding as colleagues, as well as for their help with an endless stream of inter-library loans. Thanks also to the staff at Newport Central Library, for allowing me to spend afternoons rooting through the Machen archive.

Last, but by no means least, thanks go to Mum, Becky and Gez, for their love and patience—and to Dad, for showing me stars.

In memory of

**Brian George**  
**1951-2012**

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## Introduction: Weird Notions

We may likewise infer that fear was expressed from an extremely remote period, in almost the same manner as it now is by man; namely, by trembling, the erection of the hair, cold perspiration, pallor, widely opened eyes, the relaxation of most of the muscles, and by the whole body cowering downwards or held motionless.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form. Against it are discharged all the shafts of a materialistic sophistication which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of a naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to uplift the reader toward a suitable degree of smirking optimism. But in spite of all this opposition the weird tale has survived, developed, and attained remarkable heights of perfection; founded as it is on a profound and elementary principle whose appeal, if not always universal, must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness.<sup>2</sup>

H. P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature'

Fear is, in the Victorian anthropological sense, a 'survival'. Like certain primitive tribes, this primitive emotion survives into the modern world unchanged. Like them, it represents the primal conditions of man and allows us to observe those conditions still at work. Moreover, it occupies the same place in the metaphor of development as do 'primitive' peoples: fear is an emotion to be controlled, suppressed, outgrown. Reason is cast as an adult emotion, just as western European man is an 'adult' on the scale of development. So, like primitive peoples, fear is to be kept under control. Yet like them, it is still there, not fully left behind, nor entirely dominated. In the arc of development, fear is perceived, disturbingly, as at the base. It retains its insurgent power and is liable—like mutiny—to break out.<sup>3</sup>

Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872; London: Fontana, 1999), p. 356.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', in *Collected Essays Volume 2: Literary Criticism*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1927, revised 1933-34; New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), pp. 82-135 (pp. 82-83).

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 236.

In his ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’, first published after his death in 1937, but circulated to his correspondents in 1933 in handwritten form, H. P. Lovecraft describes the aim of his stories as being ‘to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis’.<sup>4</sup> The horror tale, he asserts, in an echo of his earlier ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ (1927, revised 1933-1934), is his chosen medium because fear ‘is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions’.<sup>5</sup> Lovecraft’s choice of phrase here is interesting. Does the phrase ‘nature-defying illusions’ refer merely to fictional representations of the supernatural? Tales like ‘The Outsider’ (1926), ‘The Hound’ (1924), and the various “dream-cycle” stories derived from the work of Lord Dunsany would certainly appear to fit into this category. The emphasis Lovecraft places upon the unknown, both here and in ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, suggests, however, a slightly different reading. The ‘picture of shattered natural law’ he seeks to create will allow us to see ‘beyond the radius of our sight and analysis’;<sup>6</sup> it will effect a ‘defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space’.<sup>7</sup> The true weird tale is not ‘one in which the horrors are finally explained away by natural means’,<sup>8</sup> but nor is it simply a representation of an impossible event; rather, it requires a recalibration of our concept of the possible. The unknown occasions fear precisely because of its potential to become known. Fear, furthermore—as noted in the above quote from Gillian Beer—is a kind of survival; an emotion whose expression derives from the ‘oldest’ phase of human existence. In the words of Charles Darwin, since the emotions are often expressed in a similar manner in humans and in the “lower” animals, ‘some expressions, such as bristling of

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<sup>4</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’, in *Collected Essays Volume 2: Literary Criticism*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1937; New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004), pp. 175-178 (p. 176).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

the hair under the influence of extreme terror[...]can hardly be understood, except on the belief that man once existed in a much lower and animal-like condition'.<sup>9</sup> As such a survival, fear does not only rely upon the possibility of confirmation; it is itself confirmation of a fearful fact with which much “weird” fiction is explicitly concerned.

Lovecraft’s attempt to define the ‘true weird tale’ necessitates here a look at the term ‘weird tale’ itself.<sup>10</sup> Whether the weird tale in fact constitutes a distinct genre seems questionable; indeed, even S. T. Joshi, author of *The Weird Tale* and perhaps the most prolific of Lovecraft critics, does not really attempt to so classify it. Of the six authors covered in his eponymous study, he admits that ‘only Lovecraft appears to have been conscious of working in a weird tradition’, and that ‘[if] the weird tale exists *now* as a genre, it may only be because critics and publishers have deemed it so by fiat’.<sup>11</sup> It may, he goes on to suggest, be impossible to define the weird tale as a distinct genre, since ‘an irremediable confusion of terms such as horror, terror, the supernatural, fantasy, the fantastic, ghost story, Gothic fiction and others’ in the field makes it difficult to disentangle the weird tale from all—or, perhaps, any—of them.<sup>12</sup> Joshi goes on to assert that he will ‘use the term “weird tale” more or less as Lovecraft did’, suggesting that one important aspect of Lovecraft’s use of the term is the emphases he places on psychological realism and the short story as a vehicle for the weird in the wake of Poe.<sup>13</sup> Neither these nor any of Lovecraft’s previously-mentioned points serves to distinguish the weird tale entirely from the late-Victorian Gothic or from science fiction, however—and indeed, Arthur Machen, one of Lovecraft’s ‘Modern Masters’,<sup>14</sup> is often mentioned as a minor figure in the late-nineteenth-century Gothic. Certainly, for a contemporary reader, it is as easy to read some of Lovecraft’s work in particular as proto-science fiction rather than as occupying a distinct genre; and if the primarily novel-length works of “New Weird” writers like Ramsey

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<sup>9</sup> Darwin, *Expression of the Emotions*, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 1990), p. 1. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 116.



Campbell and China Miéville are to be counted as weird tales, the short story form does not seem to be an adequate requirement for classification.

Perhaps ‘weird tale’ is ultimately only a term of convenience, referring to a group of writers either identified by Lovecraft and subsequent critics as embodying the tradition in which he wished to place himself, or self-identified as working in a ‘weird’ or Lovecraftian tradition. Both of the authors whose work I examine in this study fall into the former group, and the shared concerns of their fiction, as well as the already-documented influence of Machen upon Lovecraft,<sup>15</sup> mean that they may reasonably be considered together regardless of the genre label ‘weird tale’. Nonetheless, it may be useful for purposes of this study to consider the ‘weird’ not as a genre or (as Joshi later tentatively suggests) as the product of a ‘certain [type] of world [view]’,<sup>16</sup> but as a stage in the reception of an idea—a stage comparable with the ‘strange suspension[...of time, space, and natural law’ identified by Lovecraft,<sup>17</sup> and perhaps best described by Gillian Beer in her 1983 study, *Darwin’s Plots*, to which I will shortly return. China Miéville describes the weird, in terms recalling Lovecraft’s, as ‘a radicalized sublime backwash’, a ‘swillage of that awe and horror from “beyond” back into the everyday’;<sup>18</sup> but where, for Miéville, the weird ‘impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum’,<sup>19</sup> Lovecraft is explicitly concerned with the temporal, asserting that time is ‘the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe’ and that ‘[*conflict*] with *time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression’.<sup>20</sup> Similar concerns are clearly present in Machen’s fiction, steeped as it is in the ancient.

These preoccupations inform the content of the works discussed here, and necessitate placing them in their own cultural and intellectual context. What has been called the ‘Darwinian revolution’ has

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<sup>15</sup> S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press), pp. 298-300, p. 450.

<sup>16</sup> Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’, p. 176.

<sup>18</sup> China Miéville, ‘Weird Fiction’, in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 510-515 (p. 511).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>20</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’, p. 176. (Emphasis in original.)

long represented for historians ‘an episode in which a new scientific theory symbolized a wholesale change in cultural values’, one during which ‘fundamental aspects of the traditional Christian worldview were replaced’.<sup>21</sup> The previous ‘Copernican revolution’ had challenged the notion that the Earth was the centre of the cosmos, but it had still been possible to maintain the uniqueness of human beings, their ‘innate superiority over nature’.<sup>22</sup> But if living things were developed ‘by natural laws rather than by divine miracles’, then ‘the human race itself became merely another animal species, no longer the lords of creation but only superior apes’.<sup>23</sup> It is this implication of evolutionary theory for the “human” that I am primarily concerned with here.

Peter J. Bowler has challenged the traditional notion of the singular ‘Darwinian revolution’, pointing out that ‘Darwin did not present his theory to a public that had never considered the possibility of evolution’,<sup>24</sup> and that the way he presented his theory had to take account of concerns already raised in debates around the theory of Lamarck.<sup>25</sup> (Darwin makes mention of extant works by Lamarck and others early in *The Origin of Species* (1859).<sup>26</sup>) A more general notion of evolution gained traction prior to widespread acceptance of natural selection, which established itself around 1900,<sup>27</sup> so many of the influential scientific texts whose ideas can be identified in Lovecraft’s and Machen’s work—including Darwin’s own writing—also entertain the idea of inheritance of acquired characteristics. For Bowler, Darwin’s ‘great success’ is somewhat more general: it consists in his precipitating ‘a change in public (and hence in scientific) opinion by persuading most educated people that the world was subject to natural law and, by implication, that the origin of species must also be a law-governed process’.<sup>28</sup> Scientists began to feel that they ‘had the right to

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<sup>21</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 54-63.

<sup>27</sup> Bowler, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

investigate this area'.<sup>29</sup>

The implications of a theory of human origins rooted in natural law rather than divine will were wide-ranging, and, as we will see, influenced ideas about topics as diverse as folklore, marriage, urban living, charity, and immigration. The nature, status, and future of the “human” were fundamentally altered, whether the theory espoused was one of Darwinian natural selection, neo-Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics, or some combination of the two (as in much of Darwin’s work following the *Origin*.) According to Bowler, the prospect that human beings ‘are part of nature, and our higher faculties cannot stem from a spiritual factor with which we alone are endowed’ was perhaps ‘the greatest barrier to the acceptance of Darwin’s theory, and it still horrifies many people today’.<sup>30</sup> Up to and even in the present, ‘the idea that humans possess unique faculties has been remarkably tenacious’,<sup>31</sup> and aversion to the loss of this notion is not tied solely to the undermining of religious convictions. Even the hardline atheist Lovecraft, writing well after general acceptance of natural selection, found horror in the loss of human uniqueness. For this reason, I suggest that the works of Machen and Lovecraft take part in a process of coming to terms with the implications of evolution—one that may be seen as still ongoing (as Bowler puts it, ‘[whatever] the success of evolution theory in science, the cultural phase of the Darwinian revolution has not yet reached its conclusion’<sup>32</sup>)—but that the immediate concerns with topics such as immigration, degeneration, and eugenics which inform them also gain their power from contemporary social and cultural issues. I therefore attempt to situate them in relation to both the implications of nineteenth-century evolutionary ideas for the “human”, and the way in which these ideas were bound up with contemporary concerns about “racial” and national degeneration, immigration, and the eugenics movement.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

I begin each chapter, therefore, with a brief consideration of the manner in which a particular idea—the notion of the pre-human survival derived from fairylore; the theory of degeneration; the fear of racial mixing and immigration; and that of the eugenic improvement of the human species—derived its contemporary expression at least partly from scientific and pseudoscientific ideas of the late nineteenth century. I then consider the works which treat it via close textual analysis, exploring the ways in which they use ideas from the works of evolutionists including Darwin, Spencer, and T. H. Huxley; eugenicists, particularly Francis Galton; and theorists of degeneration. These texts contribute to the process of coming to terms with evolutionary theory sometimes by expressing some of the cultural anxieties it engendered, sometimes by partaking in an ambivalence toward the notion of a human origin not resulting from divine will, and sometimes by imagining a posthuman future that also makes use of evolutionary ideas. Finally, I suggest that later works such as Lovecraft’s ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ (1936) adumbrate an embryonic version of twentieth-century posthumanism, thus participating in discourses of human mutability that persist to the present day.

The time these texts engage with, then, is not only the time of the past. Beer argues that “‘the future Life” is the absolute form of fiction, whether it be the idea of personal immortality or the hypothetical, multiple predictions of daily life, or that sense of futurity intensified by evolutionary theory which is preoccupied with the future of life on this earth’,<sup>33</sup> and points out that ‘[fear] is of all emotions that which most takes its life from the future’.<sup>34</sup> The ‘sense of futurity’, then, must also be acknowledged as embedded and pervasive in its historical context. The texts under consideration here, as I have suggested, engage with and contribute to the cultural anxieties engendered by the advent of evolutionary theory; and these anxieties rely upon a perceived future—upon possibility.

Any reader familiar with the study of late-nineteenth-century literature will be aware of the post-

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<sup>33</sup> Beer, p. 183.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Darwinian rise of what Virginia Richter, in her 2011 study, *Literature After Darwin*, calls ‘anthropological anxiety’.<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of this study, however, it is perhaps more accurate to understand “evolutionary theory”—as Bowler’s resistance to the term “Darwinian revolution” suggests—as a set of notions derived not only from Darwin but pervasive in scientific and literary writing from the late nineteenth century onward. (Certainly, degeneration theorists such as Bénédict Augustin Morel often drew upon the neo-Lamarckian idea of the inheritance of acquired characteristics—the notion that structural changes caused by disease, use or disuse, or exposure to new environmental conditions, could be passed on—and Darwin would himself entertain this possibility.<sup>36</sup>) These notions include an emphasis on non-teleological change; a struggle for existence; a recognition of the probable descent of all “races” of humans from a common, animal progenitor; and the concomitant dethroning of the “human” from its central position in the natural order. Richter neatly sums up the crisis occasioned by this ‘displacement of “Man” from the apex of creation’.<sup>37</sup> At the period Darwin was writing, she argues, it was

the idea of conjunction—the claim that all living beings, including man, were descended from the same primitive species—that was deeply disturbing. Collectively they [Darwin’s contemporaries] recoiled from the theory of evolution by natural selection, mainly for two reasons: first, because man’s singular status as a superior being, lifted above his animal nature by his reason, was fundamentally called into question, since even reason and the other higher faculties were no longer considered the unique, divine gift of man; secondly, because man’s dominant position was not the result of a divine plan or even the necessary outcome of natural laws, but the contingent result of a rather messy trial-and-error procedure.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), p. 32; *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (1868; London: John Murray, 1888), I, pp. 467-468.

<sup>37</sup> Richter, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Richter goes on to consider the ways in which literary texts after the emergence of evolutionary theory, and in the context of ‘social changes brought about by the industrial revolution and by the contact with other cultures and peoples through trade and colonisation’, wrestle with the blurring of boundaries between self and Other—both temporally (through the anxiety of reversion to an ape-like, pre-human state) and geographically (‘the fear of “going native”’, losing the distinction between ‘European self’ and an ‘exotic Other’ identified with the primitive’).<sup>39</sup> She discusses the relation of these fears to various cultural and literary tropes—the missing link, the ape-like human or human-like ape, the lost world, and the possibility of degeneration. The relationship between anthropological anxiety and colonial discourse is made explicit; indeed, the temporal and geographical dimensions mentioned above are often difficult to separate, since ‘in colonial discourse, the temporal axis is projected onto the geographical axis, i.e. contemporary “primitive peoples” are seen as living in the evolutionary past’,<sup>40</sup> effectively being considered—as Carole G. Silver has pointed out in her study of fairies in Victorian culture, *Strange and Secret Peoples*—as living missing links.<sup>41</sup> Richter considers the work of authors including Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Rider Haggard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells in the light of anthropological anxiety and ‘the wider issue of cultural pessimism that was intensified in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and once more after the First World War’.<sup>42</sup>

Richter is only one of the more recent critics to have written on the relationship between evolutionary theory and literature. John Glendening in 2007, though writing from a position informed to some degree by the “literary Darwinism” of Joseph Carroll and others, focuses upon the ways in which ‘Darwinism informs novels relative to a late Victorian culture that generally encouraged authors to stress, not objective truths illuminated by Darwinism, but rather the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 8, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>42</sup> Richter, p. 15.

contingencies, uncertainties, and confusions generated by it along with other forms of evolutionary theory'.<sup>43</sup> Glendening, too, emphasises the 'decentering' of the human accomplished by evolutionary theory, suggesting that while it 'could be understood in positive terms, indicating a somewhat egalitarian and cooperative role for humans amidst life on earth', it might also suggest that 'other species might evolve in such a way as to dominate or extinguish humans, who have no sanction for continued dominance'.<sup>44</sup> Evolutionary theory had wide-ranging implications, touching as it did 'upon equally complicated cultural issues—religious, philosophical, economic, and political'.<sup>45</sup>

The imposition of the temporal axis of evolution upon the geographical axis of colonialism is emphasised by Glendening, too: the Victorians, he writes, 'applied physically distinctive Palaeolithic remains, which were turning up with increasing regularity, to non-Western peoples who thereby could be interpreted as prehistoric humans living in the present'.<sup>46</sup> But as knowledge of human ancestors and contact with "primitive" cultures increased, keeping them separate from the self became increasingly difficult. '[Both] archaeology and cultural anthropology', Glendening notes, 'were showing how quickly supposedly primitive and civilized societies can change into one another'.<sup>47</sup> The result was a permeability of the 'modern/primitive divide' similar to that noted by Richter,<sup>48</sup> and a similar anxiety. Glendening emphasises the 'many ideological stances to which Darwinian emphases could be arrogated', and notes that it could be seen to support the idea of degeneration as easily as that of continued progress.<sup>49</sup> Nor is adaptive change necessarily to be construed as 'improvement in any ultimate sense', since increased complexity has no inherent value, and 'retrogression toward simplified and, from the human perspective, cruder forms and

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<sup>43</sup> John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

behaviors' may confer advantages in terms of survival.<sup>50</sup> Picking up Darwin's image of the 'entangled bank' from the *Origin*,<sup>51</sup> employed there as 'a representation of law and order, and of progress as well[...]representing] nature as happy and harmonious, a harbinger of perfection', Glendening highlights the 'negative implications of natural selection'—the 'struggle, disorder, and waste' that the image elides, and that late-Victorian novelists re-centred.<sup>52</sup> In H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), for example

entanglement means chaos, not order or harmony: it entails the commingling of objects, processes, and qualities that strike the human mind as incompatible or antagonistic because they upset boundaries and categories; and it points to the limits of knowledge, since the mind, caught in the very processes it tries to understand, is continually confounded by contingencies, like those governing the course of Darwinian evolution, too complex to be anticipated or fully comprehended.<sup>53</sup>

Kelly Hurley, upon whose concept of the 'abhuman' I draw in my first chapter, has also emphasised the demolition of 'a comfortable anthropocentrism' accomplished by evolutionary theory and by the assertions made by its supporters that 'Nature was ethically neutral and under no compulsion to privilege the human species'.<sup>54</sup> Degeneration theory, which 'reversed the narrative of progress, proposing a negative *telos* of abhumanness and cultural disarray', is emphasised by Hurley as 'a crucial imaginative and narrative source for the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic'.<sup>55</sup> She touches, too, upon the chaotic potential implied in Glendening's repurposing of the entangled bank image from the *Origin*. While for Darwin, 'the intricacy and superb functionality of biological forms contrasted markedly with the chaotic randomness of the processes that, accidentally, generate

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>51</sup> Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p. 125, pp. 459-460.

<sup>52</sup> Glendening, p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 56-57.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



form',<sup>56</sup> late-nineteenth-century Gothic writers

envisioned something rather more terrible. In its plots of both parallel evolutions and abhuman becomings, a randomly-working Nature is figured as *too* imaginative, *too* prolific. Any admixture of diverse morphic traits is possible, so that even highly complex bodies, ingeniously specialized for their environment[...]are abominable.<sup>57</sup>

Prior to Hurley, George Levine argued for a preoccupation in fiction with evolutionary ideas. The 'pervasive secularizing of nature and society' accomplished by evolutionary science meant that 'nature, society, narrative, and language itself were desacralized, severed from the inherent significance, value, and meaning of a divinely created and designed world'.<sup>58</sup> The privileging of the human could no longer be assumed to be divinely ordained; instead, its restoration required 'arbitrary acts of human will' that highlighted its falsity.<sup>59</sup> No longer privileged, the human was 'thrust[...]into nature and time, and subjected[...]to the same dispassionate and material investigations hitherto reserved for rocks and stars'.<sup>60</sup> Fiction wrestled with this intellectual shift: '[the] absorption and response to Darwinism played out in narrative', Levine argues, 'can suggest the resistance and evasiveness and submission of nonscientists to this critical development in Western thought and imagination'.<sup>61</sup> More fundamentally, the 'imaginative possibilities' available to writers of Victorian fiction came to be 'conditioned by the discourse of science, which had begun to assume almost exclusive responsibility for reporting on [the] real; and self-conscious speakers for narrative art frequently invoked science as a model or analogy for their own work'.<sup>62</sup> Levine's book, as he acknowledges, is indebted to the work of Gillian Beer, whose notions regarding plot in the aftermath of evolutionary theory I wish to return to here.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 90. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>58</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. viii.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

Beer argues that ‘[because] of its preoccupation with time and with change evolutionary theory has inherent affinities with the problems and processes of narrative’.<sup>63</sup> The ‘new story’ told by Darwin had deep-seated consequences for the kinds of stories told by writers of fiction in its wake.<sup>64</sup> Beer’s work emphasises many of the elements reiterated by the critics previously mentioned. The potential for multiple readings of the significance of evolution—pessimistic ones as well as optimistic accounts of progress—is clear:

[The] ‘ascent’ or the ‘descent’ of man may follow the same route, but the terms suggest very diverse valuations of the experience. The optimistic ‘progressive’ reading of development can never expunge that other insistence that extinction is more probable than progress, that the individual life span is never a sufficient register for change or for the accomplishment of desire, an insistence which has led one recent critic to characterise Darwinian theory as a myth of death.<sup>65</sup>

The absence of the human as a central focus in the *Origin*, as well as its content, served also to ‘[problematise] the centrality of man to the natural order’ and to ‘subdue the hierarchical nature of man’s thought which places himself always at the pinnacle or centre’.<sup>66</sup> While Darwin framed his marginalisation of the human in the *Origin* as informed by a desire to avoid controversy, the ‘absence of any reference to man as the crowning achievement of the natural and supernatural order’ was a loaded one, with ‘disquieting’ implications.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, in a fashion similar to that suggested by Glendening above, evolutionary theory ‘deconstructs any formulation which interprets the natural world as commensurate with man’s understanding of it’; rather, this world

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<sup>63</sup> Beer, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

‘outgoes his powers of observation and is not co-extensive with his reasoning’.<sup>68</sup> Human beings have neither a privileged place within the natural order, nor a privileged understanding of it.

The pervasiveness of Darwinian ideas meant that succeeding generations ‘found themselves living in a Darwinian world in which old assumptions had ceased to *be* assumptions, could be at best beliefs, or myths, or, at worst, detritus of the past’.<sup>69</sup> We now ‘pay Darwin the homage of our assumptions’ (though Bowler’s analysis suggests this is not quite so established as Beer would have it), but Beer’s concern is with the ‘process of naturalisation’ undergone by his ideas—the way in which they become ‘assumptions’.<sup>70</sup> At their inception, scientific ideas are at their most ‘fictive’, the absence of perceptible, ‘common-sense’ proof holding them ‘within a provisional scope akin to that of fiction’.<sup>71</sup> This does not mean that scientific writing *is* fiction, as Joseph Carroll seems to suggest Beer is arguing.<sup>72</sup> The ‘great number of significant and various meanings’ that can be derived from evolutionary theory do not deprive it of meaning—or, to put it another way ‘it cannot be made to mean *everything*’.<sup>73</sup> Rather, it ‘excludes or suppresses certain orderings of experience’.<sup>74</sup> My concern here is not really with the “literary Darwinism” proposed by Carroll and others—what Richter calls the ‘axiomatic assumption that nature is the foundation for all cultural activity [leading] to the conclusion that all literary texts reflect this unvarying nature—that all novels are about sexual selection’<sup>75</sup> (though I accept that this characterisation may be as unfairly reductive as Carroll’s own portrayal of much humanities scholarship). Judgements about the validity or otherwise of the literary Darwinist project are perhaps best left to those who have studied language and the brain—but what Carroll appears to miss when he describes Beer’s study as an attempt ‘to characterize Darwin, with perverse ingenuity, as a forerunner for the irrationalist

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 6. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph Carroll, ‘Literary Study and Evolutionary Theory: A Review of Books by Alexander Argyros, Walter Koch, Karl Kroeber, Robert Storey, Frederick Turner, and Mark Turner’, in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 45-61 (p. 45).

<sup>73</sup> Beer, pp. 10-11. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Richter, p. 6.

antirealism of such contemporary authorities as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault<sup>76</sup> is that the ‘provisional scope’ she describes, and the hypothesis-plots for whose prominence in the wake of evolutionary theory she goes on to argue, rely upon the potential for confirmation. Lovecraft’s ‘unknown’ can only occasion fear because of the possibility it may become *known*; his suspensions of natural law gain their power because they constitute a first step in the process of knowing, of fact-making or -finding. So Beer can argue that

[plot] in nineteenth-century fiction is a radical form of interpretation: it fixes the relations between phenomena. It predicts the future and then gives real form to its own predictions. It is to that extent self-verifying: its solutions confirm the validity of the clues proposed.

Such plot assumes that what is hidden may be uncovered, and that what lies beyond the peripheries of present knowledge may be encompassed and brought within the account by its completion. In this particular sense it shares the nature of hypothesis, which by its causal narrative seeks ultimately to convert its own status from that of idea to truth. Plot does this by provoking in the reader multiple hypotheses.<sup>77</sup>

Even when Beer writes that Darwin’s ‘text [the *Origin*] is an unusually extensive fiction—one which deliberately extends itself towards the boundaries of the literally *unthinkable*, which displaces the absoluteness of man’s power of reason as an instrument for measuring the world’,<sup>78</sup> the unthinkable—by virtue of being gestured at—cannot be unimaginable. The sense of futurity inherent in evolutionary fiction contains the possibility that the unthinkable may one day become thinkable, of the expansion of ‘reason’ (though this may well entail the opening-up of further uncertainties). We might think of Miéville’s comment that, in ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928), ‘there is no story, only the slow uncovering, from disjointed information and discarded papers, of the *fact*

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<sup>76</sup> Carroll, p. 45.

<sup>77</sup> Beer, p. 162.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99. (Emphasis in original.)

of the Weird'.<sup>79</sup> The 'dysteleological abundance of possibilities' emphasised by Darwin requires that they *be possible*, that one may move beyond the status of hypothesis and thus foreclose the others.<sup>80</sup> Certainly, for Lovecraft, an understanding of the power of the weird tale based in 'our inmost biological heritage' does not preclude the necessity of its provisional scope.<sup>81</sup> It seems no accident that Lovecraft's protagonists are often able to retain their sanity only because of the loss or destruction of what would provide tangible proof of their experiences. The idea of the "weird" which I have suggested above does not deny the possibility of knowledge in evoking the unknown, but requires that it exist in potential. It asks the question, "what are we?" and can exist only in the possibility of an answer. If Bowler is correct in saying that the 'Darwinian revolution' is not yet culturally complete, then evolutionary theory may still be said, for some, to be "weird". Certainly, for Machen and for Lovecraft, it combined with contemporary social and cultural anxieties to unsettling effect.

In the light of the above, it is perhaps surprising that no full-length study of the relationship between evolutionary theory and the weird tale has yet been published—and that studies of evolutionary theory and fiction more generally often fail to touch upon the work of Lovecraft in particular. Machen, often considered as a minor *fin-de-siècle* Gothic or decadent writer, fares a little better—Hurley devotes considerable attention to 'The Great God Pan' (1890; revised 1894) and *The Three Impostors* (1895), while more general surveys of the Victorian Gothic by scholars such as Nicholas Ruddick, Fred Botting, Linda Dryden, and Victoria Margree and Bryony Randall mention him in brief.<sup>82</sup> Although the scope of Richter's study extends to 1939—two years after Lovecraft's death, and fifteen years after the height of Machen's fame—she mentions neither, and

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<sup>79</sup> Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', p. 512. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>80</sup> Beer, p. 191.

<sup>81</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', pp. 83-84.

<sup>82</sup> See Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 143; Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), pp. 29-30, p. 35, pp. 57-58, p. 109, p. 146, pp. 164-165, p. 175; Nicholas Ruddick, 'The fantastic fiction of the fin de siècle', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 189-206 (p. 204); Victoria Margree and Bryony Randall, 'Fin-de-siècle Gothic', in *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 217-233 (p. 225).

in fact asserts that ‘the human likeness of apes is perceived as threatening’ only until around 1900, a remark she certainly could not have made were she familiar with Lovecraft’s ‘Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family’, published in 1921.<sup>83</sup> S. T. Joshi’s study, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* discusses notions of decline similar to those expressed in degeneration theory at some length, but ties them primarily to the work of Oswald Spengler, rather than the biological narratives of writers like Max Nordau, E. Ray Lankester, and Bénédict Augustin Morel. Essays by various scholars have touched upon the biological bases of horror in Machen and Lovecraft,<sup>84</sup> and I draw upon work by Bennett Lovett-Graff, Kirsti Bohata, and others as I attempt a more (though by no means entirely) comprehensive study of the work of Machen and Lovecraft in relation to evolutionary theory and the cultural anxieties thereby engendered.

My first chapter focuses solely on Machen’s work, examining his use of the idea of the pre-human survival and its implications for a human identity destabilised and decentred by evolutionary theory in the three “Little People” stories, the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ (one of the component tales of the episodic novel, *The Three Impostors* (1895)), ‘The Shining Pyramid’ (1895), and ‘The Red Hand’ (1895), as well as four later works that make use of fairylore (at the time firmly tied to notions of human ancestry and the primitive) in rather more ambiguous fashion: the prose-poems ‘The Turanians’ and ‘The Ceremony’ from *Ornaments in Jade* (1924), the short story, ‘The White People’ (1904), and the late novel, *The Green Round* (1933). My second chapter explores fictional manifestations of degeneration, and examines Lovecraft’s ‘The Lurking Fear’ (1923), ‘The Rats in the Walls’ (1924), and ‘The Mound’ (1940) (ghostwritten for Zealia Bishop Reed) alongside Machen’s ‘The Great God Pan’ and ‘Novel of the White Powder’, another tale from *The Three Impostors*. I return to ‘The Great God Pan’ in my third chapter, which explores the themes of

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<sup>83</sup> Richter, p. 106.

<sup>84</sup> Examples include Kirsti Bohata’s essay, ‘Apes and Cannibals in Cambria: Images of the Racial and Gendered Other in Gothic Writing in Wales’, *Welsh Writing in English*, 6 (2000), pp. 119-143; Bennett Lovett-Graff’s essays, “‘Life is a Hideous Thing’: Primate-Geniture in H. P. Lovecraft’s “Arthur Jermyn””, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 8:3 (1997), pp. 370-388, and ‘Shadows Over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics’, *Extrapolation*, 38:3 (1997) pp. 175-192; and Michel Houellebecq’s essay, ‘H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life’, trans. by Dorna Khazeni, in *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991; London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006; first published in 1991).

“miscegenation” and hybridity, and proceed to consider ‘The Dunwich Horror’ (1929)—the Lovecraft story which borrows most heavily from Machen, reworking as it does the basic plot of ‘The Great God Pan’—as well as two other Lovecraft tales: the aforementioned ‘Arthur Jermyn’, and ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ (1936). My final chapter makes perhaps the most original contribution to scholarship in this study, exploring the ways in which Lovecraft draws upon eugenics to explore potential human futures via alien human-analogues in ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’ (1931), ‘The Shadow out of Time’ (1936), and in the novella one critic has described as ‘the very summit of Lovecraft’s fictional achievement’,<sup>85</sup> ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ (1936). Finally, I suggest that even Lovecraft’s often reactionary fantasy may also be read in such a way as to open up space for new ways of thinking about identity, similar to those attempted by late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century posthumanists, ways of inhabiting the “human” and its Other within that require neither an assumed teleology nor wholeness.

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<sup>85</sup> Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, p. 493.

## Chapter One: Survivals

In this chapter, I'll be exploring the ways in which some of Arthur Machen's weird fiction deals with the confirmation of evolutionary theory through encounters with humanity's antecedents, particularly in the figures of pre-human survivals or throwbacks. In the *Origin*, Darwin had noted that isolation could facilitate the survival of 'living fossils' such as Ganoid fishes and the flora of Madeira, having 'been saved from fatal competition by having inhabited a protected station'.<sup>1</sup> Herbert Spencer, in his *Principles of Biology* (1864), had similarly suggested that not all members of a species would necessarily evolve together. While one part of the species was being transformed, another might 'escape transformation by migrating hither and thither, where the simple conditions needed for its existence recur in nearly the same combinations as before'.<sup>2</sup> Such simple conditions might easily be conjectured to include the absence of competitors, including the highly-evolved descendants of their transformed compatriots. Darwin's living fossils often survived on mountain-tops, where the 'tide' of competition had not reached, and he makes explicit comparison between these survivals and 'savage races of man, driven up and surviving in the mountain-fastnesses of almost every land, which serve as a record, full of interest to us, of the former inhabitants of the surrounding lowlands'.<sup>3</sup>

For Machen, the figure of the survival is a focus for horror, a frame upon which to hang the particular set of anxieties generated by knowledge of humanity's status as a (perhaps imperfectly) evolved animal. Although his body of work does feature examples of malignant human beings

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 151-152, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), I, p. 429.

<sup>3</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, pp. 372-373.



whose actions or physical appearances seem to hark back to the prehistoric—such as the titular character of ‘The Bright Boy’ (1936)—much of Machen’s work makes use of those folkloric figures who frequently served as focal points for various Victorian cultural anxieties: the fairies.

Fairies were a common fictional motif and a source of fascination for the Victorians. Newspaper reports of the period attest to a belief in changelings and young men, women and children being “taken” by the fairies. Carole G. Silver, in her study, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, asserts that ‘[well]-documented cases attesting to a living belief in changelingism came from all over England and they did not decline as the century progressed’.<sup>4</sup> Edmund Jones’ account, *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits, in the County of Monmouth, and the Principality of Wales*, printed first in 1780 and again in 1813, attests to a belief in fairies both on the part of the author and of those whose stories he collects,<sup>5</sup> while W. Y. Evans-Wentz, writing in 1911, asserts that ‘the Celtic Fairy-Faith[...]has existed from prehistoric times until now in Ireland, Scotland, Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, or other parts of the ancient empire of the Celts’.<sup>6</sup> Fairy beliefs, then, appear to have existed through the nineteenth century, and folklorists such as Katharine Briggs have suggested that they in fact persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Briggs, early in her study, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, also notes that ‘[every] now and then poets and writers draw on the [fairy] tradition, and make out of it something suitable to the spirit of their age’.<sup>8</sup> Machen’s sinister Little People, certainly, embody

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<sup>4</sup> Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Jones, *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits, in the County of Monmouth, and the Principality of Wales*, (1780; Newport: E. Lewis, 1813), pp. 9-11, p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Henry Frowde, 1911; repr. Glastonbury: Lost Library, [2010]), p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

fin-de-siècle anxieties around evolution both in their bodies, and in the effects they have upon those of human beings.

Briggs suggests that the literary fairies of the early 1900s were considerably more innocuous than their predecessors, illustrating ‘the dangers of whimsicality’ with several examples from children’s literature of the period, and arguing that ‘in the sheltered days of the early twentieth century every care was taken to render [the fairies] unalarming’.<sup>9</sup> As I have already suggested, however, this is not the full picture. The fairies of folklore, certainly, are not the dainty, benevolent flower sprites of the Cottingley photographs,<sup>10</sup> and Machen’s Little People stories, published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, draw upon fairylore to disturbing effect. As Silver illustrates quite extensively, the fairies most often appear as mischievous or malign beings, intruding into the human sphere at will but inflicting disproportionate punishment should a human observer, however unwitting, stumble into their world. Mercurial, amoral and often cruel, the fairies were believed to be ‘incapable of such human feelings as compassion’, and ‘lacked the civilized virtues, behaving like children[...]or like the mob’.<sup>11</sup> The Victorian consciousness conflated children and “savages”, suggesting both were in need of civilising guidance,<sup>12</sup> and in the aftermath of Darwin, this conflation of fairies, children, and savages, suggests that the fairies occupy a station somewhere below that of the “civilised”, adult human on the evolutionary scale. Stories about fairies, then, were fertile ground for the exploration of cultural anxieties around evolutionary progress—or its opposite.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 248-249.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 298-300.

<sup>11</sup> Silver, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. by Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (1876, revised 1878, 1884, 1889, 1896-97; Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 188-192; Silver, p. 5.

The fairies were also liminal entities, appearing and encountering the human world at boundary locations. The fairy wife of legend is often ensnared by her human husband on the shore of a sea or lake, and it is there that she returns when he breaks the terms of their marriage.<sup>13</sup> Humans lured into fairyland, meanwhile, often encounter dead friends and relatives, and risk being permanently taken themselves, unwittingly crossing from the realm of life into that of death.<sup>14</sup> There is a constant crossing and re-crossing. Humans are pixie-led,<sup>15</sup> entranced by fairy dances,<sup>16</sup> or carried off by fairy lovers,<sup>17</sup> and meanwhile, the realm of fairy erupts into the human world in startling ways. The healthy baby is replaced in its cot by a wizened changeling;<sup>18</sup> the miller's lad, waking in the night, finds the fairies carrying out everyday human activities with the household utensils.<sup>19</sup> Even as the Victorian imagination attempts to define and demarcate the fairy, to contain it within an ordered classificatory scheme, it refuses to be contained. It escapes, invading not only the workaday human world but the very definition of "human".

The threatening Otherness of the fairies is inextricably linked with the fact that fairy beliefs, during the Victorian period, were seen as indicative of a primitive backwardness and low class status, as well as being associated with Celtic, rather than Anglo-Saxon, areas of the country. Silver's account of changeling episodes points out that they 'usually occurred in rural areas and among poor or working-class Roman Catholic and Celtic rather than Saxon peoples; such groups were expected to believe in elves and exorcism. Not Anglo-Saxons inherently superior to all others in character and morality, they were weak by nature with an innate tendency to selfishness

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<sup>13</sup> Silver, pp. 90-91.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Briggs, pp. 165-166.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-150.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 137-138.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

and ignorance'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, '[the] barbarous tests to which members of "inferior" groups subjected children were really proof of how backward and primitive they themselves still were—evidences of their kinship to savage tribes and even to lower primates'.<sup>21</sup> Effectively, the fairies and the people who preserved and passed on fairy beliefs became conflated, occupying a similar station somewhere below that of the civilised Anglo-Saxon.

A fairly clear example of this can be found in the introduction to Evans-Wentz's *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911), where he argues that the reason for the survival of fairy beliefs in rural Celtic areas is as follows:

The Celtic peasant[...]is[...]unconventional and natural. He is normally always responsive to psychical influences—as much so as an Australian Arunta or an American Red Man, who also, like him, are fortunate enough to have escaped being corrupted by what we egotistically, to distinguish ourselves from them, call 'civilisation'. If our Celtic peasant has psychical experiences, or if he sees an apparition which he calls one of the 'good people', that is to say a fairy, it is useless to try to persuade him that he is under a delusion: unlike his materialistically-minded lord, he would not attempt nor even desire to make himself believe that what he has seen he has not seen. Not only has he the will to believe, but he has the right to believe; because his belief is not a matter of being educated and reasoning logically, nor a matter of faith and theology—it is a fact of his own individual experiences, as he will tell you. Such peasant seers have frequently argued with me to the effect that

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<sup>20</sup> Silver, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67

‘One does not have to be educated in order to see fairies’.

[...]Instead of Nature, men in cities (and paradoxically some conventionalized men in the country) have ‘civilisation’—and ‘culture’.<sup>22</sup>

According to Silver, as the nineteenth century progressed, fairy beliefs became less an indication that the believer was lower in the evolutionary scale than civilised Anglo-Saxons than a piece of evidence to support the suggestion that primitive, dwarfish—perhaps pre-human—tribes had really existed in the pre-Celtic period in the British isles.<sup>23</sup> In fact, as the above quote from Evans-Wentz in 1911 tells us, the progression was not quite so clear-cut. In his introduction, Evans-Wentz touches on the pros and cons of what he terms the ‘Pygmy Theory’ while maintaining the notion of the pre-civilised Celt.<sup>24</sup> The since-discredited ‘Pygmy Theory’, or, as Silver terms it, the ‘Turanian dwarf theory’, however, is significant, and Silver provides a convincing case for its role in the development of malign literary fairies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Developed by euhemerist folklorists such as David Macritchie,<sup>25</sup> the theory posited that traditional fairy beliefs constituted a folk memory of conquered, mound-dwelling aboriginal peoples who had fled into remote areas. This theory seemed to find confirmation in Western encounters with African “pygmy” tribes during the 1880s. Victorian anthropologists viewed these people as missing links, ‘among the earliest, hence crudest of the human species’,<sup>26</sup> and even debated whether they were fully human. The popularity and persistence of this view is

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<sup>22</sup> Evans-Wentz, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>23</sup> Silver, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Evans-Wentz, pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> David MacRitchie, *The Testimony of Tradition* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1890), pp. 87-88, p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> Silver, p. 130.

illustrated in the tragic case of Ota Benga, a Congolese man who was exhibited in the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo in New York during 1906 in order to illustrate Darwinian theory and “scientific racism”. At the height of his fame, Benga attracted some 40,000 visitors a day.<sup>27</sup> Contemporary accounts of the “pygmies” ascribed to them many of the traits commonly associated with supernatural dwarves and fairies, and it is worth noting that during this period, individuals suffering from dwarfism were sometimes thought to be representatives of or throwbacks to an extinct race rather than people with a distinct medical condition.<sup>28</sup> (The eponymous antagonist of Machen’s late short story, ‘The Bright Boy’, might be read as a fictional iteration of this idea.) Silver attributes this view to ‘a sort of “cultural slippage”’,<sup>29</sup> and it is true that anthropological accounts from the period do ascribe many typical fairy characteristics to “pygmy” tribes, sometimes even going so far as to make the comparison explicitly. Sir Harry Johnston, writing in 1902, for example, said that they reminded him ‘over and over again of the traits attributed to the *brownies and goblins* of our fairy stories’,<sup>30</sup> while Sidney Hinde in 1897 called them ‘gnome-like beings’.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, traits associated with “lower” or “less evolved” humans became associated with and ascribed to the fairies of folklore. Fin-de-siècle dwarfs and fairies lost their individuality, and became a faceless horde, devoid of humanising traits, ‘hunting in packs and skulking in shadows, threatening to destroy or to subvert the ruling race’.<sup>32</sup> Fairies had

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<sup>27</sup> Mitch Keller, ‘The Scandal at the Zoo’, *New York Times*, 6 August 2006 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/06/nyregion/thecity/06zoo.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/06/nyregion/thecity/06zoo.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013].

<sup>28</sup> Silver, p. 120, pp. 128-129.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Sir Harry Johnston, ‘The Pygmies and Ape-Like Men of the Uganda Borderland’, cited in Silver, p. 136. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Hinde, *The Fall of the Congo Arabs*, cited in Silver, p. 136.

<sup>32</sup> Silver, p. 146.

traditionally been considered devoid of souls and incapable of feeling true emotion; now, even distinct personalities and faces were denied them. They came to be described in terms more commonly associated with animals, Darwinian human ancestors, and supposedly “primitive” groups. As Silver puts it,

the Rumpelstiltskins of the world grew fangs, developed the prognathous jaw, and sprouted body hair. Changing their colours—to red, yellow, brown, or black—they took to murder, rape, and cannibalism. As the distorted image of the Pygmy conjoined with a devalued image of the dwarf, post-Darwinian science and belief raised and played on cultural anxieties, confirmed racial prejudices, and fortified the rhetoric and practices of imperialism.<sup>33</sup>

The existence of the “pygmies” appeared to confirm both evolutionary theory and the reality of the fairies—or, at least, that of their primitive originals. Darwin had asserted in the *Descent* that ‘man is constructed on the same general type or model as other mammals’,<sup>34</sup> and encounters with a group of people who were interpreted as occupying an intermediate station seemed to confirm the statement, with its disturbing implications for the “human”. When the fairies became real, then, they became frightening. We find in Machen’s short stories several portrayals of a malign or ambiguous surviving prehistoric race, as well as suggestions of the persistence of an associated pre-Christian spirituality or ritual in the areas where the fairies survive.

Machen’s stories retain some traditional aspects of fairylore—the notion of people, particularly

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-147

<sup>34</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), p. 6.

the young, being “pixie-led” or abducted, and the idea that prehistoric weapons or “elf-shot” are the property of the fairies—but their racialised portrayal is new. In the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ (1895), even magical abilities are reinterpreted as evidence of the Little People’s low evolutionary status. Where for Jones in 1780, the preternatural abilities of fairies (which he considers to be ‘Spirits’) are neutral—he informs us that ‘[the] power of Spirits, both good and bad, is very great, not having the weight of bodies to incumber and hinder their agility’<sup>35</sup>—by Machen’s time, they are atavistic remnants, something modern humans have evolved past or grown out of. Silver argues that fairies lost the high status conferred by their magical abilities when their non-white, and therefore ‘clearly “less evolved”’ descendants—for that is what the “pygmies” were thought to be—were discovered.<sup>36</sup> In her words, ‘as the discovery of the Pygmies rendered the fairies actual, it caused them to lose much of their stature and “superiority”’.<sup>37</sup> Machen’s fairies, accordingly, were malign, grotesque, bestial, even predatory, seizing on unwary humans to use for their own purposes. But the simple physical threat they posed to those unlucky enough to encounter them was not the primary source of horror. Rather, it was the evidence of human descent from lower primates and the suggestion of chaotic evolutionary possibility constituted by their very existence that truly terrified the Victorian mind.

Darwin had noted a number of ‘small unimportant points of resemblance between man and the *Quadrumana*’ that, he believed, ‘when numerous[...]clearly reveal our relationship’.<sup>38</sup> He suggested that, ‘in a series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists, it would be impossible to fix on any definite point when the term “man” ought to

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<sup>35</sup> Jones, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Silver, p. 50

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>38</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 150.



be used'.<sup>39</sup> The existence of such an intermediate form illustrated the difficulty of definitively separating the "human" from the "lower" animals. In a similar fashion to the 'man-like apes' studied by T. H. Huxley, their existence helped puncture the myth of human uniqueness; they provided one more link in the 'extraordinary[...]series of gradations' that constituted the order of primates, leading 'from the crown and summit of the animal creation down to creatures, from which there is but a step, as it seems, to the lowest, smallest, and least intelligent of the placental Mammalia'.<sup>40</sup> Huxley, though elsewhere less pessimistic about the implications of his observations, here notes explicitly their dire implications for the idea of anthropocentrism: '[it] is', he writes, 'as if nature herself had foreseen the arrogance of Man, and with Roman severity had provided that his intellect, by its very triumphs, should call into prominence the slaves, admonishing the conqueror that he is but dust'.<sup>41</sup>

But the gradation here is not as straightforward as Huxley's phrasing suggests. Rather, it calls to mind Spencer's argument that 'the classification of animals that has now been arrived at, is one in which the linear order is completely broken up'.<sup>42</sup> Spencer suggests that linear classificatory diagrams should be replaced with one showing different orders radiating out from a common centre, and that 'the degree of difference which warrants each further elevation in the hierarchy of class' is impossible to define.<sup>43</sup> For Darwin in the *Origin*, the connections between organisms were similarly far from straightforward: he wrote that 'the several members of each class are connected together by the most complex and radiating lines of affinities',<sup>44</sup> and variation was

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas H. Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays* (1894; London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 146.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 301.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 303, pp. 304-305.

<sup>44</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 415.

‘governed by many unknown laws’, rendering its final results ‘infinitely complex’.<sup>45</sup> The difficulty of classifying varieties and species, and the disagreement that such attempts occasioned among naturalists, illustrated this.<sup>46</sup> Pre-human survivals such as these had refused to die in their turn, and they thereby upset the notion of linear hierarchy. They were ‘outcasts from nature, reminders that she could miscarry’,<sup>47</sup> and served as constant reminders of what we might become again.

The non-linear nature of evolutionary development meant that degeneration and atavism were seen as very real possibilities, and Kelly Hurley, in *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, describes the endemic cultural anxieties engendered by such felt threats. If the human was the product of a random and unfinished process, then humanity’s continuing supremacy and progress was by no means assured, and a number of horrific possibilities suggested themselves. Perhaps the human species was not yet fully evolved in itself, not yet ‘fully human’; perhaps other animal species might continue to evolve and eventually overtake us, destabilising human centrality; or perhaps evolution itself was reversible. In the end, we might ‘retrogress into a sordid animalism rather than progress towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection’.<sup>48</sup>

Hurley, discussing the fin-de-siècle Gothic (of which Machen is sometimes considered a proponent; indeed, she does briefly consider his work<sup>49</sup>), develops a concept useful in discussing

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-107.

<sup>47</sup> Silver, p. 143

<sup>48</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> William Hughes, and Victoria Margree and Bryony Randall, in two recent essays on the Victorian gothic, have touched on ‘The Great God Pan’, interpreting it respectively as an exploration of the abuse of medical power

Machen's Little People stories: that of the 'abhuman'. It is worth expanding on the concept a little here. Focusing upon 'the ruination of traditional constructs of human identity that accompanied the modeling of new ones at the turn of the century', Hurley asserts that the late Victorian Gothic offers, '[in] place of a human body stable and integral[...]the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; in place of the possibility of human transcendence, the prospect of an existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality; in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable'.<sup>50</sup> Informed by these fears, fin-de-siècle Gothic fiction dramatizes 'the relentless destruction of "the human" and the unfolding in its stead of what I will call, to borrow an evocative term from supernaturalist author William Hope Hodgson, the "abhuman"'.<sup>51</sup> Abhumanness consists in breaching the boundaries of the human: the abhuman subject

is a not-quite human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other. The prefix 'ab-' signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards—towards a site or condition as yet unspecified—and thus entails both a threat and a promise.<sup>52</sup>

Hurley's abhuman 'resonates with' Kristeva's abject, rather than being identical with it—

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(William Hughes, 'Victorian Medicine and the Gothic', in *The Victorian Gothic*, ed. by Smith and Hughes, pp. 186-201 (pp. 198-199)) and as an example of the silencing of monstrous women (Margree and Randall, p. 225). Earlier, brief mentions of Machen as a Gothic writer appear in Nicholas Ruddick's essay, 'The fantastic fiction of the fin de siècle', (p. 204), and in Fred Botting's *Gothic* (p. 143). A more extensive discussion appears in Linda Dryden's *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*, where she characterises him as a metropolitan Gothic writer heavily influenced by Stevenson (p. 109).

<sup>50</sup> Hurley, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

but the concept of abjection is nonetheless useful here, comprising as it does ‘emphatic, sometimes violent, denial’ and also attraction towards events that ‘[breach] the boundaries of the ego’.<sup>53</sup> Attraction is important. The fin-de-siècle Gothic is both

convulsed by nostalgia for the ‘fully human’ subject whose undoing it accomplishes so resolutely, and yet aroused by the prospect of a monstrous becoming. One may read its obsessive staging and restaging of the spectacle of abhumanness as a paralysis, a species of trauma, but one must also note the variety and sheer exuberance of the spectacle.<sup>54</sup>

The human subject is fascinated by its own dissolution; indeed, one might posit that this fascination signals the embryonic ever-presence of that dissolution within the human itself. A necessary part of its integrity is the possibility of disintegration.

It is this blurring of the boundaries of humanity, the liminal space the fairies occupy somewhere between human and other, that renders them both fascinating and repellent. Their abhumanness consists in their ability to remind us of ourselves while displaying grotesque differences in other aspects. They suggest that the differences between so-called evolved humans and our ancestors are not as clear-cut as we might like to think, that perhaps each of us has a “little man”—or, like the unfortunate Jervase Cradock in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, something worse—lurking beneath the veneer of civilisation. In the recent aftermath of Darwin, who speculated that the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

embryo might actually pass through each phase of evolution while still in the womb,<sup>55</sup> of Haeckel, whose recapitulation theory had not then been refuted,<sup>56</sup> and of Spencer, who suggested that human embryos would gradually ‘[diverge][...] more and more’ from those of “lower” forms of life as they developed and that this offered proof of the ‘primordial kinship of all organisms’,<sup>57</sup> this notion must have had particular resonance. It also chimes neatly with the folk belief that fairies were the spirits of unbaptised children,<sup>58</sup> although the notion does not come up in Machen’s fiction. The notion that the pre- or abhuman exists in the recent past not only of the species as a whole, but of each individual, adds immediacy to the possibility of retrogression. Silver notes that ‘Victorian intellectuals saw even “normal” children as primitive or undeveloped adults’, and links this to the prevalence of changeling beliefs in the Victorian period. She states that ‘[children] (like savage peoples) were supposed to develop; the changeling was a child or individual who would not or could not do so. Hence[...]it was a throwback to earlier stages of human development’.<sup>59</sup> Changeling beliefs emphasised the closeness of the human child to the fairy, the abhuman, and, since the changeling usually replaces a healthy, normal human child, played into more general fears about the stability of human supremacy and the potential for “civilised” humanity’s replacement by other—and perhaps not even superior—forms of life. Darwin had, after all, written that ‘which groups will ultimately prevail, no man can predict; for we well know that many groups, formerly most extensively developed, have now become extinct’.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, pp. 427-428.

<sup>56</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man: A Popular Scientific Study*, trans. by Joseph McCabe, 2 vols. (London: Watts, 1910), I, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 143, p. 366.

<sup>58</sup> Briggs, p. 63.

<sup>59</sup> Silver, p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 169.

Dangerous knowledge is a common theme in traditional fairylore, and it is another which is given a new spin in Machen's fairy stories. In traditional tales, the unfortunate human who comes across the fairies during one of their excursions into the human world or who enters or interferes with the fairy realm, whether by accident or design, may be poisoned or cursed.<sup>61</sup> In these fin-de-siècle fairy stories, however, the curse is not a supernatural one but consists in the irrevocable and unforgettable proof that humanity is not what we thought it to be. The seeker after knowledge ends up haunted by his dreadful discovery, like Selby in 'The Red Hand' (1895), or himself transformed into something other than human, as we are led to believe has happened to Professor Gregg in the 'Novel of the Black Seal'. In effect, the pursuit of intellectual progress, that trait so characteristic of "civilised" humanity, leads the pursuer towards his own retrogression. In discovering that humanity is neither as perfect nor as central to the universe as he once thought, he loses a portion of his own humanity. The protagonist who is physically transformed, or who can respond to his discoveries only by going mad, is a common feature of the weird tale, and is particularly prevalent in the fiction of Lovecraft, whose reliance on Machen as an influence has been previously documented.<sup>62</sup> To give but two examples, the protagonist of 'Dagon' (1919) becomes suicidal after discovering the existence of monstrous sentient beings living on the ocean floor,<sup>63</sup> while the unfortunate Henry Akeley in 'The Whisperer In Darkness' (1931) is literally removed from his human body by the alien beings he encounters.<sup>64</sup> Lovecraft's protagonists, like Machen's are often left in fear of, or actively trying to discourage, further investigation. Much weird fiction expresses anxieties about progress and scientific experiment,

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<sup>61</sup> Briggs, pp. 17-18, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996), pp. 298-300.

<sup>63</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'Dagon', in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1919; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 1-6 (p. 6).

<sup>64</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Whisperer in Darkness', in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1931; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 206- 267 (p. 267).

and it is interesting that this forward march of civilisation so often becomes the instrument of mankind's retrogression and degeneration. Perhaps this reflects, once again, fears about the random and non-teleological nature of evolution as suggested by Hurley; what Silver calls 'the widespread fear of "reeling back into the beast"'.<sup>65</sup>

Traditional fairies also have their seductive aspects, and—in accordance with the fascination that the abhuman is capable of exerting—Machen's fiction does not entirely dispense with these. While fairies were traditionally dangerous, they were also playful and charming, and could entrance mortals into remaining in their realm for decades. They were also seen as representative of an older, more authentic identity, often a British one, and as representing a closeness to nature that was being lost with the advent of industrialisation. Lord Dunsany picks up the theme, albeit a little later, in his 1908 story, 'The Kith of the Elf-Folk', whose protagonist, a small fairy creature 'somewhat human in appearance, only all brown of skin and barely two feet high',<sup>66</sup> eventually accepts her wild life upon a deserted marsh as preferable to human existence and possession of a soul. This story takes as its central theme the impact of industrial development upon the natural world, rather than concentrating on human identity in the context of evolution, so I do not look at it in detail here. However, the more appealing aspects of fairies who may nonetheless be unsettling or threatening are evident in later pieces by Machen: the prose-poems 'The Ceremony' and 'The Turanians', from *Ornaments in Jade* (1924); the short story, 'The White People' (1904); and the late novel, *The Green Round* (1933). These texts, particularly 'The White People', explore the boundaries of human identity in subtler and more ambiguous ways than the earlier Little People stories, and I will look at them in further detail later in the chapter.

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<sup>65</sup> Silver., p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Lord Dunsany, 'The Kith of the Elf-Folk', in *Time and the Gods* (1908; London: Millennium, 2000), pp. 159-174 (p. 160).

### **Turanians, Troglodytes, and the *Tylwyth Têg*: The Little People Stories**

Perhaps the best-known of Machen's Little People stories is the 'Novel of the Black Seal', one of the component tales of his 1895 novel, *The Three Impostors*. It touches on many of the above-mentioned themes, and suggests the terrifying possibility of reversion, as well as raising the abhuman Little People as a source of revulsion in themselves. However, Machen repeated the theme several times in his short fiction, and I will also consider two other stories composed during the same period, whose treatment of the same subject matter is also quite straightforwardly horrific. These are 'The Shining Pyramid' (1895) and 'The Red Hand' (1895).

All three stories feature the amateur sleuth Mr. Dyson, a recurring Machen character, and each features one of his two sceptical friends, Phillipps and Vaughan, in a supporting role. All the stories are rooted in the premise that British folklore, specifically fairylore, consists of a folk memory of "primitive" aboriginal Britons who resemble the prehistoric ancestors of *homo sapiens*; in other words, the Turanian dwarf theory. That Machen was familiar with this notion is clear. His article, 'The Little People', in *Dreads and Drolls* (1926) lays it out concisely, suggesting that the similarity between British fairylore and Congolese tales of small, human-like beings is the result of a common descent:

The substratum in both cases is the same: an aboriginal people of small stature overcome and sent into the dark by invaders. In Britain and Ireland the dark meant



subterranean dwellings made under the hills in the wildest and most remote parts of the country; they will point you out the place of these dwellings in Antrim to this day, and tell you that they are Fairy Rathes. And in nine cases out of ten you may accept the statement with entire confidence; so long as you define ‘fairies’ or ‘the People’ as small, dark aborigines who hid from the invading Celt somewhere about 1500-1000 B. C.<sup>67</sup>

Machen even reiterates the theory in a later piece on Caradoc Evans, published in 1946. With tongue firmly in cheek, Machen declares that he has been bewitched by ‘Caradoc Evans, of the race of the People under the Hills’, and that he has ‘never[...]come into so wild and dark a country as that shown in [Evans’ short story collection] *My People*’.<sup>68</sup> The theory itself, however, remains the same: ‘The Celts’, he writes, ‘found the Little People here when they ended in the West their long march from the Land of Summer. They drove them under the hills, where they became the Fairies; and the Dwarfs of the romances of chivalry’.<sup>69</sup> In his fiction, Machen posits that these people in fact survive to the present day in remote locations in the British Isles, particularly hilly or wooded regions like that surrounding his birthplace, Caerleon. And their continued existence retains the capacity to adversely affect the human.

These Little People appear in liminal areas, remote tracts of countryside reminiscent of traditional fairy-spotting locations, where human habitation begins to disappear amid a perceived rural wildness. Both ‘The Shining Pyramid’, and the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ are set in the

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<sup>67</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Little People’, in *Dreads and Drolls* (1926; Leyburn, North Yorkshire: Tartarus Press, 2007), pp. 104-107 (p. 106).

<sup>68</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘Caradoc Evans’, in *Caradoc Evans*, ed. by Oliver Sandys (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1946), p. 146.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Caerleon area, which Machen describes in his autobiography as an ‘enchanted land’, referring to nearby Twm Barlwm as ‘the memorial of peoples that dwelt in [the] region before the Celts left the Land of Summer’.<sup>70</sup> The fairy inhabitants are racialised and compared to children, being around the same height as a ten-year-old and of ‘Mongolian’ appearance,<sup>71</sup> (use of the term ‘Mongol’ to refer to people of East Asian origin having been popularized by T. H. Huxley<sup>72</sup>) and are secretive and dangerous. (Machen suggests that the traditional practice of referring to the fairies in complimentary fashion—as the “good people”, “good neighbours”, or *tylwyth têg*—is not a reflection of their true nature, but a fiction designed either to sweeten the unpalatable reality or to avoid incurring their displeasure.<sup>73</sup>)

Each of the three tales is framed as a mystery or detective story, and both ‘The Shining Pyramid’ and ‘The Red Hand’ begin with the establishment of an opposition between Dyson, an imaginative literary man inclined towards investigations into the fantastic, and the sceptics, who seek out prosaic, plausible explanations for the events they encounter. It is Dyson, however, who invariably uncovers the truth, and the narrative tacitly encourages us to sympathise with him. Phillipps and Vaughan’s explanations, though based in the everyday, often seem faintly ridiculous in hindsight. For example, in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, Vaughan assumes that the signs left in prehistoric flint by the Little People are the communications of a group of burglars intent on stealing his punch-bowl.<sup>74</sup> In the light of the horrific events they witness, this explanation is comically inappropriate, and its firm centring in mundane human affairs suggests the blindness

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<sup>70</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen*, (London: Richards Press, 1951), p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, in *The Great God Pan* (1895; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 77-110 (p. 91).

<sup>72</sup> Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 48.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1895; London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 29-66 (p. 56).

<sup>74</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, p. 86.

that is necessary to the “civilised” mindset. Phillipps comes up with a similarly human-centred explanation for the murder of Sir Thomas Vivian in ‘The Red Hand’, and sticks to it with tenacity until proved wrong. Dyson, meanwhile, investigates these possibilities, but abandons them when they are shown to be untenable. In this sense, Machen manages to suggest that Dyson’s mindset is the more scientific; that the seeker after truth must question accepted ideas and use his imagination. The knowledge thus acquired is, of course, not always palatable, bringing humans into contact with, or at the very least awareness of, the embodiment of their abhuman potential, the Little People. Direct contact with them may actually bring about the dissolution of the human body, the human condition, as is illustrated variously in all three stories. This is a point to which we will return later. The desire for knowledge, a desire synonymous with progress and with the advancement of civilisation in a fairly traditional, teleological sense, is also the instrument of becoming-other. This anxiety about discovery (particularly where it concerns the nature and origins of the “human”), and about our inability to control where it will lead us, is one of the central preoccupations of weird fiction, and informs perhaps its most often-quoted passage, the opening paragraph of H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu’.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> ‘The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age’. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1928; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 139-169 (p. 139).

## Location and Liminality

As I have already mentioned, each of Machen's Little People stories situates its action at a locus where civilisation is beginning to peter out, where the human world is represented only by small settlements or lone houses, and where the wild countryside surrounding it looms large and threatening. The 'Novel of the Black Seal' and 'The Shining Pyramid' are, as I have already mentioned, clearly set in the Gwent area, and the area where Selby finds the Little People in 'The Red Hand' is described in terms similar to those Machen commonly uses when talking about his home town. We may infer that this is intended to be the same area, despite the fact that Selby inaccurately refers to it as being in the west of England; Machen describes the area as part of England in 'The Shining Pyramid', although the names of the places he refers to are in Wales, and the mound where Selby finds his first clue as to the Little People's whereabouts—'a tumulus, the domed memorial of some forgotten people, crowning the crest of a vast mountain range'<sup>76</sup>—may well be an exaggerated version of Twm Barlwm.<sup>77</sup> This area is familiar ground to any reader acquainted with Machen's work, and it is described here with the customary breathless wonder, and with hints that it may even be an enchanted land. For the purpose of these stories, however, Machen adds an aura of the sinister, a suggestion that the enchantment the landscape holds is not necessarily benign.

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur Machen, 'The Red Hand', in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1895; London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 83-110 (p. 103).

<sup>77</sup> It is sometimes assumed that the county of Monmouth—then encompassing Caerleon—was part of England until 1974. This is not, in fact, strictly accurate. Monmouth's status remained ambiguous until this date, although, according to historian John Davies, it 'was no less Welsh in language and sentiment than any of the other eastern counties' and had usually been treated as a part of Wales in legislation. Davies attributes the assumption that Monmouth had been annexed by England to its having been made responsible directly to Westminster, rather than to the Great Sessions of Wales, between 1543 and 1830. (John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, Penguin: 2007), p. 230.)

Miss Lally, the protagonist of the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, finds herself oppressed by it, saying, ‘here, in this lonely house, shut in on all sides by the olden woods and the vaulted hills, terror seems to spring inconsequent from every covert, and the flesh is aghast at the half-heard murmurs of horrible things’.<sup>78</sup> She feels ‘imprisoned amidst the ancient woods, shut in an olden land of mystery and dread, and as if all was long ago and forgotten by the living outside’.<sup>79</sup> This suggestion of removal from the outside world recalls those traditional fairy stories where the unfortunate human, entranced by fairy ‘merriment’ for what seems like a few minutes, returns home afterward to find that he has been absent for decades and his house is now inhabited by strangers, his friends and family dead and gone.<sup>80</sup> The setting of ‘The Shining Pyramid’ is similarly bordered by an ‘ancient wood’, its environs ‘hushed and haunted’ and possessed of a ‘desolate loneliness and strangeness’.<sup>81</sup> ‘The Red Hand’, meanwhile, begins by giving us a false impression, Dyson suggesting that ‘primitive man’ may still survive amid the urban dwellers of London,<sup>82</sup> but Selby’s childhood experiences in the area where the Little People actually survive recall Machen’s reminiscences of Caerleon. He says that ‘there were certain huge and rounded hills, certain depths of hanging wood, and secret valleys bastioned round on every side that filled me with fancies beyond the bourne of rational expression’.<sup>83</sup> The rounded hills mentioned here

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<sup>78</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>80</sup> Briggs, pp. 123-124.

<sup>81</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, pp. 88-89, p. 97.

<sup>82</sup> Machen, ‘The Red Hand’, p. 83. This notion does, however, resonate with the fears of urban degeneration that characterised fin-de-siècle thinking: ‘J. Milner Fothergill (*The Town Dweller*, 1889) warned that urban degeneration was forming a new subspecies of cockney ‘mannikins’, a ‘race of dwarfs’, as successive generations of East-Enders devolved further and further back to the ‘lowlier’ and more primitive ‘racial types’ (Erse, Celto-Iberians, pre-Aryans) from which their rustic ancestors had sprung’. (Hurley, pp. 69-70.)

<sup>83</sup> Machen, ‘The Red Hand’, p. 50. Compare this passage to Machen’s autobiographical descriptions of the effect of the landscape on his young imagination. For example: ‘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[...]For the older I grow the more firmly am I convinced that anything 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. As soon as I saw anything I saw Twyn [*sic*] Barlwm, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of peoples that dwelt in that region before the Celts left the Land of Summer. This guarded the southern limit of the great mountain wall in the west; a little

and in ‘The Shining Pyramid’ also recall the tradition of fairy mounds, recalling both the presence of the fairies and the possibility of a dangerous enchantment. As I mentioned earlier, time passes differently in fairyland, and the implicit comparison occurs again in ‘The Shining Pyramid’ when Dyson and Vaughan set out for the Bowl and ‘[seem] to walk on and on for hours’.<sup>84</sup>

This wild and vaguely threatening landscape almost takes on a life of its own, and it serves to situate the endeavours of the human protagonists in a larger, more hostile context. Human settlements and houses, representative of security and of civilisation, are bordered on all sides by the mysterious woods, removed from the human world and in dangerous proximity to another, older one. The path that runs by Vaughan’s house, for example, is only feet from the threatening wood, and is used by the Little People for the leaving of signs. These mysterious pictograms themselves recall hieroglyphs or cave-paintings; an ancient form of writing, and thus a more ancient world, makes a sudden incursion into that occupied by modern humans, rewriting and even overwriting its assumed wisdom. The emphasis on the landscape’s age, meanwhile, highlights how ephemeral and relatively recent the human presence is, and how easily it might be ousted. The fitness of humans to inhabit this landscape, into parts of which we do not even dare venture, is implicitly questioned. Will we survive? *Are* we the fittest?

The world of the Little People stories, then, is one to which the human is far from central, and in which survival and supremacy are far from assured. The anxieties thrown up by the emergence

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northward was Mynydd Maen—the Mountain of the Stone—a giant, rounded billow; and still to the north mountains, and on fair, clear days one could see the pointed summit of the Holy Mountain by Abergavenny. It would shine, I remember, a pure blue in the far sunshine; it was a mountain peak in a fairy tale’. (Machen, *Autobiography*, p. 18.)

<sup>84</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, p. 100.

of evolutionary thinking are implicit in the ancient and brooding landscape, a constant, physical reminder of how new, how untested, and perhaps how incomplete the human race really is.

Hurley posits that the emergence of Darwinism in the nineteenth century

was to demolish the model of human centrality in the universe, and replace it with one of human ephemerality, relativity and potential ‘degradation’[...]The new discoveries in the geological and biological sciences required a radical rethinking of humanity’s position relative to its environment: its intimate relation to lower species; the role of the mere individual within the far more important history of the human species; human insignificance in a world that, according to geology, had existed far longer than previously had been conceived and that, according to astronomy, occupied a place far more miniscule than previously had been conceived.<sup>85</sup>

Long-held assumptions about the status and nature of humanity were dissolved: the human no longer held its default position at the centre of the universe, and the rest of that universe was no longer relevant only in terms of its relationship to humanity. Rather, we had to begin to view ourselves in terms of our relationship to a world no longer designed specifically for us, in which we held a position no more secure than that of the so-called lower species. In Hurley’s words, ‘[as] “the human” loses its particularity, it also begins to be evacuated of its meaningfulness. A Darwinian Nature does not privilege, indeed takes no particular notice of, the human species’.<sup>86</sup> And if nature accords us no specific privilege, we can no longer be sure that the position the human species holds—or even the form it takes—will remain constant.

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<sup>85</sup> Hurley, p. 56.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 61

## The Good People?

The references to traditional fairylore in Machen's stories are not limited to descriptions of the landscape. The disappearance of Annie Trevor in 'The Shining Pyramid' is explained by the local cottagers as her having been 'taken by the fairies',<sup>87</sup> and fairy kidnappings of young people and tales of "pixie-leading" are common folkloric motifs.<sup>88</sup> In the 'Novel of the Black Seal', the strangeness of Jervase Cradock, the half-fairy child implicitly conceived by rape when his mother was walking in a remote area, recalls numerous folk descriptions of changelings thought to have replaced healthy, human babies. The changeling is often discovered through its unnatural speech,<sup>89</sup> and during his fits, Cradock emits utterances in the inhuman, hissing language of the Little People and sounds like 'the cry of a wild beast'.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, his 'face[...][blackens]', and we are reminded of the racialised nature of many changeling descriptions.<sup>91</sup> As Silver points out, changelings 'resembled popular stereotypes of[...]ethnic or racial "inferiors" with their sallow skins, dark beady eyes, large-nosed and emaciated faces, and diabolic "cunning"'.<sup>92</sup> Prehistoric flints were traditionally thought to be "elf-shot", and these, as well as other prehistoric stone implements, such as axes and knives, are used by the Little People. Selby, in 'The Red Hand', is led into his search by traditional accounts of fairy gold hidden beneath the hills, but, like traditional fairy gold, his bounty turns out to be worthless when he finds it—though this is because of its unutterable hideousness rather than because it simply

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<sup>87</sup> Machen, 'The Shining Pyramid', p. 82.

<sup>88</sup> Briggs, pp. 140-142, 165-166.

<sup>89</sup> Briggs, p. 139; Silver p. 83.

<sup>90</sup> Machen, 'Novel of the Black Seal', p. 46.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>92</sup> Silver, p. 87.



disappears. The writhing movements of the Little People around the Bowl in ‘The Shining Pyramid’ recall the fairy circle-dances of legend, but this particular ritual is fascinating in its repugnance rather than delightfully enchanting.

We are constantly encouraged to be repelled by the Little People, most of all by the fact that they possess enough of human appearance to make their inhuman aspects fascinatingly repellent, a distorted mirror-image. The Little People witnessed by Dyson and Vaughan in ‘The Shining Pyramid’ are not merely small men but ‘things made in the form of men’ with ‘things like faces and human limbs’, but Vaughan is quite sure that there is ‘no fellow soul or human thing’ among them. Rather, they exist as an undifferentiated ‘mass of naked flesh’, animated by ‘evil and unspeakable lusts’ rather than by real consciousness or intelligence.<sup>93</sup> They are able to communicate, but do so in a hissing, ‘venomous’ speech that mocks the human capacity for language.<sup>94</sup> The point is expanded in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, where Jervase Cradock lapses into the hissing language of his father’s species during his fits, and this difference in speech provides Professor Gregg with one of his principal clues as to the Little People’s existence:

I remember being struck by the phrase ‘articulate-speaking men’ in Homer, as if the writer knew or had heard of men whose speech was so rude that it could hardly be termed articulate; and on my hypothesis of a race who had lagged far behind the rest, I could easily conceive that such a folk would speak a jargon but little removed from

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<sup>93</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, pp. 102-103.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

the inarticulate noises of brute beasts.<sup>95</sup>

Since Cradock lapses into such a ‘jargon’ when his fits cause his humanity to weaken and his atavistic heritage to take hold,<sup>96</sup> the existence of the Little People becomes, for Gregg, a distinct possibility.

For T. H. Huxley, who, like Darwin, acknowledged the structural similarity between humans and other primates, and the likelihood of a common descent, it was humanity’s capacity for ‘intelligible or rational speech’ that allowed its intellectual development and set it apart.<sup>97</sup>

Darwin, however, noted continuities between the ‘convolutions of the brain’ and the ‘fundamental intuitions’ of humans and other primates, and warned readers not to ‘underestimate the mental powers of the higher animals’, among whom he numbered “man”.<sup>98</sup> It would be possible, he suggested, to ‘trace a perfect gradation from the mind of an utter idiot, lower than that of an animal low in the scale, to the mind of a Newton’.<sup>99</sup> Where Huxley had predicated human intellectual development upon the capacity for articulate speech, Darwin wrote that ‘[through] [man’s] powers of intellect, articulate language has been evolved; and on this his wonderful advancement has mainly depended’.<sup>100</sup> The evolution of language from ‘the imitation and modification of various natural sounds’ has been ‘slow and gradual’; and letters, being derived from pictograms, are themselves ‘rudiments’.<sup>101</sup> An intelligence intermediate between that of “civilised” humanity and the lower animals might, then, produce a similarly intermediate

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<sup>95</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, p. 58.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>97</sup> T. H. Huxley, *Man’s Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays* (1894; London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 155.

<sup>98</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 1, p. 66, p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87, p. 144.

language. The existence of these inarticulate-speaking men therefore questions the separateness of humanity, and removes one further claim to human uniqueness. Darwin had drawn parallels in the *Origin* between race and language, arguing that ‘a genealogical arrangement of the races of man would afford the best classification of the various languages now spoken throughout the world’, and had raised the possibility of a survival, a ‘very ancient language’ that might have ‘altered little’.<sup>102</sup> The Little People’s speaking such a language thereby proves their relationship to ‘the races of man’.

Machen gives us much less direct description of the Little People in ‘The Red Hand’, telling us merely that they are not extinct as Selby had believed them to be. The tactic of avoiding description, of telling us that the story’s ultimate horror is simply unspeakable, is a common feature of weird fiction and may actually work in the story’s favour here. As well as removing the need for potentially anticlimactic description, it gives us one of the major reasons that the Little People engender horror. They defy classification; they exist on a borderland for which there are no words.

It is traditional that those who have visited fairyland are never quite the same when they return home, having been cursed or irrevocably altered by the experience, and that the fairies possess preternatural powers which they use to effect this. Machen’s fairies, however, are not merely a race of mischievous imps. They may wreak real, physical harm on those unfortunate enough to encounter them—whether they are educated men like Professor Gregg (who may either have been killed or physically altered so as to have become unrecognisable) or unfortunate locals like Jervase Cradock’s mother and Annie Trevor. Professor Gregg, in his final letter to Miss Lally,

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<sup>102</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 406.

informs her that by the time she reads it, he will have suffered a ‘desperate and horrible’ fate from which there will be no return; the missive is a ‘farewell’.<sup>103</sup> He also warns her of the psychological effect knowing his fate is likely to have upon her, suggesting that she ‘will sleep better of nights’ if she burns the letter without reading further.<sup>104</sup> The curse which remains with those who survive is permanent, and cannot be lifted by magic. It is their world-view, their self-concept, which has been irreversibly changed. The curse is the knowledge of human origin, and the possibility that the abhuman has existed within us all along.

It is worth reminding ourselves here of Hurley’s definition of abhumanness, and of the ‘threat and a promise’ it entails.<sup>105</sup> The Little People are both origin and destination, and, as such, doubly repulsive. They represent the human at an earlier stage of development, but also the possible condition of the regressed, degenerated human. They are monstrous, blending recognisable features of modern man with elements of the prehistoric pre-human, and also of the *inhuman*, the wholly Other. They speak in reptilian hisses; they are able to cause slimy tentacles to issue forth from the seemingly human body. Their existence hints further back into the past even than the era of human ancestors; it strains toward the condition of the lower animals, the ‘single prototype’ from which Darwin suggested ‘all living creatures’ were probably descended<sup>106</sup> (or, as he put it in the *Origin*, the ‘one primordial form, into which life was first breathed’<sup>107</sup>). It recalls the origins of life in primordial slime or ‘first matter’ (a concern touched on by Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton in relation to ‘The Great God Pan, to which we will

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>105</sup> Hurley, p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (1868; London: John Murray, 1888), I, p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 455.

return later<sup>108</sup>), and gestures at the ultimate dissolution of the human subject, the return to an un- or pre-differentiated state. According to Hurley, ‘to be simultaneously human and animal[...]is to explode crucial binarisms that lie at the foundations of human identity’,<sup>109</sup> and this is what the Little People do. They blend the human with the animalistic pre-human, hinting at chaotic, non-teleological possibility.

They may place the human in an evolutionary progression, on a scale that includes us along with the animals, but by raising the possibility of *regression* they prevent us from imagining ourselves moving inexorably toward a higher state of civilisation, becoming ever *more* human. Evolution is arbitrary, neither designed nor bound to privilege the human, and life-forms lose their primacy according to the rule of an indifferent, even hostile, nature. Essentially, the abhuman posits a natural *disorder* rather than a natural order, and prevents us from clearly demarcating the boundaries of what is human. In her discussion of Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, Hurley argues for an alternative reading of Douglas’ argument. Douglas suggests that the classificatory impulse serves to reinforce social order and that, for example, the abominations of Leviticus are forbidden because they are animals with characteristics from more than one family, because they defy classification, or conform imperfectly to it.<sup>110</sup> The corollary of this notion, however, is that ‘classificatory schema are merely functional, artificial rather than natural, and that anomalous phenomena are abominable because they throw into relief the *provisionality* of the categories they confound’.<sup>111</sup> The boundaries of the human are exposed as shifting and potentially untenable, perhaps incapable of ever containing us anyway.

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<sup>108</sup> Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton, *Arthur Machen: A Short Account of His Life and Work* (London: John Baker, 1963), p. 46.

<sup>109</sup> Hurley, pp. 24-25.

<sup>110</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 69.

<sup>111</sup> Hurley, p. 25. (Emphasis in original.)

## The Human Thing

Hurley makes use of the concept of ‘Thing-ness’ in order to designate those beings that collapse the categories of human and abhuman and that are therefore otherwise uncategorisable. The concept ‘has no proper signified, unless this be the non-concept of amorphousness’,<sup>112</sup> and it may be useful when we consider the effect of the abhuman upon the human, with what the human becomes, confronted with its own monstrous potential. If Things possess characteristics we have hitherto considered human, then are they really human characteristics at all? And are we, who possess them as well, fully human? Thing-ness, then, signals ‘the loss of human specificity, the becoming-abhuman of the human body’.<sup>113</sup> As well as signifying the loss of human specificity, however, Thing-ness also calls attention to physical embodiment, to ‘the ineluctibility of matter that resists and exceeds form’.<sup>114</sup> This amorphous matter is both terrible and exciting, offering seemingly unlimited, chaotic possibility even as it erases the human subject. It is telling that, in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, where the Little People appear as a writhing, undifferentiated, constantly-shifting mass with no individual personality or ‘soul’ among them, they are repeatedly referred to as ‘things’.<sup>115</sup>

This formless, uncontained matter also recalls the primordial slime of life’s origin, mutable and holding all forms in potential, occupying the border between liquid and solid, never quite one or the other but always threatening to change. It is matter in the process of solidifying or of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>115</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, pp. 102-103.

dissolving, suggesting the ephemerality of form, the possibility that we ourselves may easily be broken down and reformed into a shape quite new and different. The slimy tentacle produced by Cradock's body in the 'Novel of the Black Seal', and the story's suggestion that the Little People may use incantations to make the human body revert to 'the slime from which [it] came',<sup>116</sup> remind us of this fact, and suggest to us that the body itself—which, after all, contains a fair amount of slimy matter, incantation or none—has no real integrity, and may break down or be swallowed up into amorphousness. 'If the distinction between liquid and solid can be effaced', Hurley argues, 'then other, more crucial oppositions—between human consciousness and the material body, for instance—threaten to collapse as well'.<sup>117</sup> Darwin's suggestion that the tendency to reversion may occur in 'a variety or race which[...]has lost by variation some character that it formerly possessed, and which afterwards reappears' as easily as in a cross between two "races",<sup>118</sup> here gains a horrific significance. And since the range and dominance of a species on the earth is correlated with frequent variability, the current pre-eminence of the "civilised" human is no protection against mutability; rather, the numerousness of the human species means that some member of it, somewhere, must always be straining toward its former condition.<sup>119</sup> A different observation with similar implications is offered by Spencer in his *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1862): since higher rates of 'molecular vibration' are correlated with a higher level of evolution, organisms 'higher in organic activity and complexity' are also more mutable.<sup>120</sup>

The physical repulsiveness of the Little People and their practices—and of the "primitive" in

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<sup>116</sup> Machen, 'Novel of the Black Seal', p. 64.

<sup>117</sup> Hurley, p. 35.

<sup>118</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, I, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1860; New York: Appleton, 1877), p. 303.

general—elicits strong reactions from modern-day observers. In ‘The Red Hand’, Dyson talks about finding certain facial features ‘abhorred’ because they remind him of primitive man,<sup>121</sup> while the unfortunate maid who has to clean up the aftermath of Cradock’s transformation in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ is repulsed by the ‘queer[...]bad smell’ left behind, and reports feeling ‘very sick’.<sup>122</sup> Nausea, as Julia Kristeva has famously pointed out,<sup>123</sup> is a symptom of abjection, allowing the subject to affirm his or her integrity—the reader to affirm his or her humanness—through rejection. However, nausea is an intensely physical experience, and effectively forces the “civilised” subject back into the body, acting as a reminder of materiality, of the subject’s inability to escape from a physical form that is instinctive, animal, in its responses. Darwin had pointed to ‘instinctive dread of serpents, and probably of other dangerous animals’ in apes as a sign of their relationship to humans,<sup>124</sup> though instinct was held to diminish as the development of the brain increased.<sup>125</sup> Evolutionism challenged anthropocentrism in this way, by placing human beings on a continuum with animals, destabilising the boundary between the two. This raised two horrific possibilities:

If humans derived from beasts, then they might still be abhuman entities, not yet ‘fully evolved’, not yet ‘fully human’. And worse, the evolutionary process might be reversible: the human race might ultimately retrogress into a sordid animalism rather than progress towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Machen, ‘The Red Hand’, p. 84.

<sup>122</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, p. 52.

<sup>123</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.

<sup>124</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 67.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>126</sup> Hurley, p. 56.



If humans, like animals, had evolved and progressed in response to a challenging, perhaps unfriendly environment, then might not civilisation itself, and the artificial conditions created under it, eventually prove the instrument of our decline? This point is explored in detail in fiction, with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) being perhaps the most obvious example,<sup>127</sup> and is a worry characteristic of the Victorian era. It was thought that evolution had, perhaps, peaked, that urban living exposed humans to pernicious, morally and physically degenerative influences, and that 'Western civilization, contaminated by the very fruits of its own progress, was sliding into a fatal decline, into senility, dementia, and death'.<sup>128</sup> Some thinkers even suggested that urban dwellers risked devolving into a separate subspecies, dwarfed and prone to immoral behaviours, and that this decline would only continue in successive generations.<sup>129</sup> Even if the conditions of life themselves did not produce backsliding, it was thought that the licentious, unhealthy lifestyles encouraged by big-city living could cause retrogression in the children of wayward parents. Civilised societies were becoming enervated, exhausted, and prone to vice, and the degeneration resulting from their indulgences would reduce subsequent generations to atavism. Degeneration is a subject that I will treat more fully in the second chapter of this thesis. Machen hints at its urban variant in 'The Red Hand', when he has Dyson mention that certain faces among the London crowds remind him irresistibly of 'primitive man',<sup>130</sup> but the more important point here is that progress—the pursuit of knowledge included—may in fact lead the "civilised" human in a circle, back to his origins, rather than toward some future pinnacle of evolution. For Spencer, attempts to seek knowledge of human origins were 'necessary products of progressing

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<sup>127</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895; London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 57-58.

<sup>128</sup> Hurley, p. 77.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>130</sup> Machen, 'The Red Hand', p. 83.

intelligence’;<sup>131</sup> but in Machen, the following of this highly-evolved tendency to its conclusion undermines evolution itself. Figures like Professor Gregg, who seek to discover the origins of humanity, to gain recognition for themselves as great thinkers, and to advance learning more generally, may in fact end up reverting to atavism themselves.

### **The Abhuman Within**

Encounters with the Little People, then, hold the power to reduce even modern, “civilised” humans to an atavistic state. The circumstances of this reversion vary. In the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, it is the reading of an inscription under the correct circumstances that can reduce a human ‘to the slime from which he came’ and force him to ‘put on the flesh of the reptile and the snake’.<sup>132</sup> Annie Trevor, the girl kidnapped for the purpose of sacrifice in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, is ‘no longer fit for Earth’ by the time of her death, and, unable to summon a recognisable word, simply screams instead, rendered as inarticulate as her captors by her experiences in their midst.<sup>133</sup> Even the landscape in which these two stories take place may hold a degenerative significance. Although he suggests that the evidence has been exaggerated, Darwin does concede that domesticated animals and plants which have ‘become feral or run wild’—that is, returned to the conditions of life of their ancestors—may have ‘some tendency to reversion to the primitive state’.<sup>134</sup> In this implicitly pre-human environment, the same as that inhabited by our pre-human ancestors, the reversion of the species becomes the reversion of the individual. This backsliding

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<sup>131</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 13.

<sup>132</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, p. 64.

<sup>133</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, p. 103, p. 110.

<sup>134</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, pp. 5-6. See also *Origin of Species*, p. 77.

is less obvious in ‘The Red Hand’, but when Selby is finally persuaded to tell Dyson and Phillipps about his discovery, the physical transformation wrought upon him by what he has witnessed is striking. We are told that ‘[the] whole bodily frame of the wretched man visibly shrank and wasted; his face grew yellow as tallow[...]and when [his] voice came it sounded like the hissing of a snake’.<sup>135</sup> He regresses in terms of size; his skin yellows (we know that Machen’s Little People are of ‘Mongolian’ appearance); and his speech approximates their hissing language. The sight of them actually seems to have infected the “civilised” human body with their appearance, and their atavistic and racialised attributes. Darwin’s description of the expression of terror in animals springs to mind here. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin notes that ‘[with] all or almost all animals[...]terror causes the body to tremble. The skin becomes pale, sweat breaks out[...]the surface seems bloodless and the strength of the muscles soon fails.[...]The mental faculties are much disturbed. Utter prostration soon follows, and even fainting.’<sup>136</sup> For Darwin, the similar expression of feelings in humans and “lower” animals, as well as in various countries, and in both “civilised” and “savage” peoples, is an indicator of the animal provenance of humanity.<sup>137</sup> Selby, debilitated by fear, backslides toward this ‘common progenitor’.<sup>138</sup>

This reversion is not straightforwardly an outside imposition, then. The transformation of Cradock in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ illustrates this, and adds an extra dimension of horror. The slimy, reptilian tentacle Cradock extends when Professor Gregg recites the Little People’s incantation actually comes *out* of the body; his descent towards the reptilian is not merely a

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<sup>135</sup> Machen, ‘The Red Hand’, p. 109.

<sup>136</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872; London: Fontana Press, 1999), pp. 81-82.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19, p. 241, p. 248, pp. 347-6, p. 356, p. 360.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

transformation. The potential is already there, contained within the human, and this, indeed, is the ultimate horror of Machen's Little People stories, and the horror posited by the notion of the pre-human survival. From Darwin's assertion that reversion is not an anomaly, but 'an essential part of the principle of inheritance', they extrapolate the survival of beastly characteristics within modern more-or-less "human" bodies.<sup>139</sup> For Darwin, it is certain that '[in] every living creature[...]a host of long-lost characters lie ready to be evolved under proper conditions',<sup>140</sup> and rudimentary structures—even those that are usually 'wholly suppressed'—are 'liable to occasional reappearance through reversion'.<sup>141</sup> These 'reversionary structures[...]reveal the descent of man from some lower form in an unmistakable manner'.<sup>142</sup> By transferring Darwin's assertion from the life of the species to that of the individual, Machen makes immediate and horrifying the reversion of the human form. It is not simply that we were once our predecessors, or that we may become them again. It is that we are in fact continuous with our beastly and reptilian ancestors, that human nature still holds something of the abhuman. As Hurley writes, '[the] invertebrate or reptile is depicted[...]as a human ancestor whose loathsome characteristics still lie latent within the human body'.<sup>143</sup> What we should fear is not that the abhuman will swallow up the human subject, or that the Little People may transform us into something other than what we are. Rather, the most awful possibility is that they will reveal what has been there all along. We are already them.

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<sup>139</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, pp. 368-369.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369. See also p. 13, p. 19, p. 21.

<sup>141</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 12.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>143</sup> Hurley, p. 63

## Religion and Forbidden Knowledge: ‘The Turanians’, ‘The Ceremony’, and ‘The White People’

As well as positing the survival of a race of people predating modern, “civilised” humans, Machen’s Little People stories make reference to the survival of their rituals and magics. The transformative spell in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, the human sacrifice in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, and the sacrificial practices hinted at by the image of the ‘Pain of the Goat’ in ‘The Red Hand’ all suggest that the Little People follow some ancient, pre-Christian religion, long forgotten in the human world and barbaric in its rites. The idea of a pre-Christian pagan religion in western Europe was a commonly accepted one during the twentieth century, and was thought to be the basis of stories about witches and devil-worshippers.<sup>144</sup> The Church, the theory runs, incorporated the horned god of the old religion into its own mythology as the Devil, and demonised and persecuted its practitioners accordingly. This theory is elaborated in the works of the anthropologist Margaret Murray, who, along with Machen, was a major influence on H. P. Lovecraft, and who suggests it is possible—though by no means certain—that the fairies of British folklore may be identical with the ‘witches’ she discusses.<sup>145</sup> The rites and practices we see in Machen’s Little People stories are grotesque in and of themselves, but are also linked to the transformative—or revelatory—power the Little People seem to hold over human identity. D. P. M. Michael points out that Machen sometimes ‘attempts to get his horrific effects by encouraging the notion that the Little People are not altogether dead, or alternatively that their

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<sup>144</sup> D. P. M. Michael, *Arthur Machen* ([Cardiff]: University of Wales Press, 1971), pp. 16-17.

<sup>145</sup> M. A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921; London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 14.

practices are still carried on amongst us',<sup>146</sup> or, in other words, that modern, civilised human identity has something older and darker, something predating the human, beneath its surface.

Survivals of what Michael calls 'the Old Religion' appear in several Machen stories not focused on the Little People, although some of them do make reference to 'Turadians' or fairylike beings. These beings are not nearly so physically repulsive as the grotesque 'things' of 'The Shining Pyramid' and the 'Novel of the Black Seal', and the rituals in which Machen's protagonists become involved are not explicitly described as repugnant. Nor, however, are these tales—among which I would number two of the short prose poems from *Ornaments in Jade*, 'The Turadians' and 'The Ceremony', as well as 'The White People'—devoid of the sinister. In 'The White People', particularly, the narrator's fear of a sexually threatening 'black man' implies that it is indebted to some of the same racialised discourses that inform the earlier Little People stories. The struggle with identity in them is, however, focused slightly differently. Although *Ornaments in Jade* was not published until 1924, it was composed two years prior to 'The White People', and the two pieces mentioned here seem like experiments toward, or at least precursors of, the longer story, touching on very similar themes. 'The White People' is the only one of these stories in which fairies as such actually appear (though they are referred to as 'nymphs' or as small people with 'white faces', not directly referenced as the *tylwyth têtg*); the others suggest that groups of modern gypsies are descended from them, or that the practices of their religion are still being passed down. 'The Turadians' and 'The Ceremony' are short pieces, sketching relatively brief encounters. The central section of 'The White People', framed by a discussion between two men, Ambrose and Cotgrave, about the nature of evil, is the 'Green Book' narrative, a diary kept by a young girl who has since committed suicide, detailing her experiences with

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<sup>146</sup> Michael, p. 17.

various arcane rituals, fairylike beings, and enchanted areas of countryside.

All three of these stories feature young, female protagonists, and ‘The Turanians’, and ‘The Ceremony’ are clearly coming-of-age or sexual awakening narratives. Mary, the young girl in ‘The Turanians’, feels her ‘heart [leap]’ when a young man approaches her at the gypsy camp she visits, and later returns to her respectable middle-class home having been changed in some indefinable way.<sup>147</sup> Mary’s attraction to the young man may be read in some ways to prefigure the ambivalence of ‘The White People’. Writing on W. B. Yeats’ *On the Boiler*, Donald J. Childs suggests that there is a ‘eugenical logic’ in the protagonist’s desire to marry a tinker, since these people come to represent a ‘realm of “mother wit” and “natural kindness”’ lost to mainstream society.<sup>148</sup> A similar point might be made regarding the realm of authentic, sensual experience that opens itself up to Machen’s young women. The protagonist of ‘The Ceremony’, meanwhile, is irresistibly drawn to perform some ancient and nameless rite involving the offering of flowers—including red ones resembling bloodstains—to a graven image.<sup>149</sup> The same is quite probably true of ‘The White People’ (though the metaphor is rather less heavy-handed here), the protagonist’s sensual fascination with the strange new country she discovers and her fear of the ‘black man’ who may come to claim her for his wife representing conflicting feelings about her journey toward adulthood.

It certainly seems significant that her experiences take place during adolescence, at a time when identity is still in the process of being formed. Children and young people were traditionally seen

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<sup>147</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Turanians’, in *Ornaments in Jade* (1924; Horam, East Sussex: Tartarus Press, 1997), pp. 11-15 (pp. 14-15).

<sup>148</sup> Childs, p. 182.

<sup>149</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Ceremony’, in *Ornaments in Jade*, pp. 27-30 (p. 28, p. 30).

as being at high risk of fairy abduction,<sup>150</sup> not yet being fully integrated into the adult world, and Haeckel's theory of recapitulation suggests a similar view of the young in the scientific community.<sup>151</sup> If the organism passes through more primitive stages of development during its growth, then the child is an imperfectly evolved creature. Spencer, meanwhile, wrote that 'the structural modifiability of a child is greater than that of an adult man', the child not having yet reached its eventual degree of material integration.<sup>152</sup> If we take this view, then the central figures in these three stories are not merely on the verge of adulthood: they are on the verge of becoming human.

All three, however, take the step forward under the influence of the old religion, the fairies' magic. Unlike the unfortunate women in 'The Shining Pyramid' and the 'Novel of the Black Seal', these girls are seemingly complicit in their own involvement. Whether enchanted, hypnotised, or simply curious, they actively seek out forbidden knowledge rather than being abducted or attacked by the fairies, or stumbling across them unintentionally. Rather than taking their assigned places in the properly socialised, respectable, human world, however, they choose pagan ritual and uncontained sexuality, characteristics usually associated with "primitive" tribes and with peoples of the distant past.

It is significant that the bourgeois world they are expected to inhabit is not portrayed as altogether attractive by Machen. It is built upon artifice, stifling the artistic and imaginative impulse that Machen considered to be the defining characteristic of humanity.<sup>153</sup> The mother of

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<sup>150</sup> Briggs, p. 141.

<sup>151</sup> Haeckel, p. 4.

<sup>152</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 302.

<sup>153</sup> 'The natural man, then, is a singer and a poet, and so we may say that all artists are in reality survivals from an



Mary in ‘The Turanians’ represents the mannered voice of polite society, and warns her against ‘phrases violently expressed, words of too fierce an energy’, replying to her rapturous description of a flame-red rose in the garden with, “‘Yes; but is it nice to feel like that? Do you think that it’s quite *right*, even?’”<sup>154</sup> The protagonist of the ‘The White People’ loses her mother at a young age, and perhaps the absence of this civilising influence is what allows her involvement with the old religion to continue unchecked for so long. She learns the secrets and stories of the old religion from her nurse, who acts as a sort of substitute, shadow-mother, and who in turn has heard them from her grandmother. The protagonist of ‘The Ceremony’, too, first sees the titular rite performed by her nursemaid.<sup>155</sup> It is unsurprising, in the light of Victorian attitudes, that Machen depicts the old religion as having survived among the lower classes, who were thought to be more credulous and superstitious—less advanced, closer to the primitive mindset—as mentioned earlier in reference to fairy beliefs.

The rituals are learned in secret and kept secret, and any encounter with the ‘nymphs’ or the ‘Turanians’ must not be shared. Mary is ‘afraid to say anything to her mother’ regarding her experience,<sup>156</sup> and the protagonist of ‘The White People’ repeats that she ‘must not write down’ and ‘must not describe’ everything that she knows. Even when she has performed what she calls the ‘Comedy’ in front of other people, ‘they didn’t understand anything about it’.<sup>157</sup> A channel of communication between these girls and the civilised world is thereby kept closed; they remain at one remove from it. The Green Book narrative of ‘The White People’ does, in fact, figure the

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earlier time[...]’ (Machen, *Autobiography*, p. 97.)

<sup>154</sup> Machen, ‘The Turanians’, pp. 11-12. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>155</sup> Machen, ‘The Ceremony’, p. 28.

<sup>156</sup> Machen, ‘The Turanians’, p. 15.

<sup>157</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The White People’, in *The Great God Pan* (1904; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 111-166 (p. 125).

girl's experiences as a physical journey. She literally moves away from the world she is expected to inhabit into an unfamiliar country.

Her knowledge, however, is not entirely *learned*. It rather seems to have been something innate in her, something she has been familiar with since infancy ('I was very little when I first knew about these things'<sup>158</sup>), forgetting bits and pieces of it as she grows older, and reconnecting with it in the amorphous, uncertain years before adulthood. Early childhood is portrayed as an uncivilised state, during which she is at one with the white people of the title. They watch her in her cradle and tell her stories; she learns the 'Xu language' in which they speak; and she sees them 'play and dance and sing' in a wood near her home.<sup>159</sup> The child herself does not react to the white people with fear; it is her nurse who '[turns] quite pale' upon learning that she has seen them.<sup>160</sup> Her childhood interactions with them are described simply, without comment, and appear to flow naturally in the narrative. If anything, she recalls them with fondness. This seemingly harmless nostalgia for infancy contrasts vividly with the way in which the narrative is framed by Ambrose, as a piece of evidence for the existence of evil.

Ambrose elaborates his theory of evil by asserting that it can best be defined as 'the taking of heaven by storm', the attempt to penetrate into a sphere higher than that ordained to humans.<sup>161</sup> The passage in which he attempts to explain this to Cotgrave is frequently quoted to illustrate what is meant by the "weird" in "weird fiction", and is worth repeating here:

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning?<sup>162</sup>

These examples all show objects or life-forms behaving in ways we would expect of other, more complex and highly-developed, beings or organisms. Sanctity, or ultimate good, in contrast, consists in an endeavour to recapture Edenic bliss; in a return to origin. Fitting the Green Book narrative into one definition or the other, however, is not straightforward. The narrator of the Green Book appears to have held the knowledge she seeks, at least in part, since early childhood, and there are hints, in the passing-down of secrets by the nurse and her foremothers, that these are the last fragments of an ancient religion, something perhaps once known to all humankind. If this is correct, then is she not seeking to return to Eden—the unbounded, undifferentiated bliss of infancy—rather than to discover a new and forbidden sphere? She is certainly no Faustian power-seeker. In this way, the Green Book narrative itself undercuts and queries Ambrose's definitions, calling into question the whole moral system of "civilised" society. There appears something bloodless in morality as discussed by men like Ambrose and Cotgrave, in studies, as abstract concepts. Even if the events in the Green Book are largely imaginary, they are far more vividly realized in their evocation of nature and of emotion than the intellectual discussion into which they are brought as an illustration. The sensual pleasure of their descriptions harks towards the primal, but also the Edenic:

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-117.

I went down among the rocks to dance with them and to sing extraordinary songs; and I went down through the other thicket, and drank from the bright stream in the close and secret valley, putting my lips down to the bubbling water; and then I went on till I came to the deep, brimming well among the glittering moss, and I sat down[...]. I took off my boots and stockings, and let my feet down into the water, saying the words that I knew. And it was not cold at all, as I expected, but warm and very pleasant, and when my feet were in it I felt as if they were in silk, or as if the nymph were kissing them[...]. I did not go down into the hollow this time, but I turned at the end, and made out the figures quite plainly, as it was lighter, and I had remembered the story I had quite forgotten before, and in the story the two figures are called Adam and Eve, and only those who know the story understand what they mean.<sup>163</sup>

Here, the narrator does not merely mention the Genesis story, but lays claim to a special, more authentic knowledge of its meaning, one presumably available only to those initiated into the Old Religion. The natural, human sphere, as delineated by Ambrose, starts to appear somewhat arbitrary. We might begin to question the naturalness of the distinction itself.

The journey the girl follows on what she calls the ‘White Day’ is a long one, and is related in a long, unparagraphed, undifferentiated block of prose that demands the reader follow it all at once in order not to lose the thread of the narrative. Its events follow a repeated pattern. The narrator comes to a new location, is initially intimidated by its strangeness, familiarises herself with her surroundings, and eventually comes to embrace them. This is clearest in the passage where she

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, pp. 159-160.

finds herself among a large number of unusually-shaped rocks. They are ‘dreadful’ to her at first, and her imagination conjures up horrors out of the stone:

Some were like horrid grinning men; I could see their faces as if they would jump at me out of the stone, and catch hold of me, and drag me with them back into the rock, so that I should always be there. And there were other rocks that were like animals, creeping, horrible animals, putting out their tongues, and others were like words that I could not say, and others like dead people lying on the grass.<sup>164</sup>

She feels as though they are influencing her thoughts, putting ‘wicked songs’ into her heart, but quickly enough she stops being afraid of them and almost appears to become one with them.<sup>165</sup>

She ‘[makes] faces like the faces on the rocks’, ‘twist[s] [herself] about like the twisted ones’ and lies ‘flat on the ground like the dead ones’.<sup>166</sup> Her face and body are distorted, but she is no longer repulsed by this. The human body is here altered, as by the influence of the Little People, but the attendant revulsion, the nausea that affirms this distortion as something exceeding the limits of the human, is no longer present.

We also have aspects of traditional fairylore presented here, and we are reminded that humans who visit fairyland never return unchanged from their experiences. The fairy wife, a frequent motif, particularly in Welsh fairylore, appears, and the mortal who spends a night married to her is never able to fully experience life in the human world again. We learn that ‘he would never kiss any other lady because he had kissed the queen of the fairies, and he would never drink

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

common wine any more, because he had drunk enchanted wine'.<sup>167</sup> The unwary traveller who takes home fairy artefacts is similarly doomed. A young girl who takes grass, flowers, and stones from a fairy hollow discovers that, in the human world, they appear to be expensive jewels. She is admitted to court in her finery, but on the day of her wedding to the king's son, she is borne away by a sinister 'black man' who insists that she is already married to him.<sup>168</sup> One interpretation of these stories would be that those who encounter the fairies lose some essential humanity in the experience; but one could perhaps also argue that they find a deeper, more vivid experience of life that is somehow *more* than that possible within the "civilised" world. This seems particularly apt in the case of the young man who will no longer kiss mortal women or drink ordinary wine, and this story is echoed in the actual events of the Green Book narrative; on her journey, the girl drinks from a stream that tastes 'like bright yellow wine' and imagines that the ripples in the water are the kisses of a 'nymph'.<sup>169</sup> This vividness recalls what Gillian Beer calls the 'counter-element in Darwin's narrative and theory', a 'delight in material life in its widest diversity, [a] passion for particularity, and for individuality and plenitude'.<sup>170</sup> Writing influenced by Darwin may partake of this 'passion' by '[conjuring] the intimacy of the senses by means of which we apprehend the material world', and Machen certainly achieves such a conjuring here.<sup>171</sup> Virginia Richter has also suggested a second function for the figure of the missing link within fiction. It may, she writes be put to effect 'in two ways: as a threat, questioning man's superior ontological status—representative of anthropological anxiety—or as a covenant, binding contemporary man to a less repressive, less alienated, more vital past—

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-132.

<sup>170</sup> Beer, p. 258.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

representative of the pleasure of regression'.<sup>172</sup> Although the framing device of 'The White People' attempts to fix the first of these meanings, the Green Book narrative itself pulls inexorably towards the second.

At the end of the Green Book narrative, the frequency of the girl's communications with these 'nymphs' or supernatural beings increases, and she withdraws almost completely into the world of her secrets. The final revelation, however, is only hinted at. The girl recalls the white lady she saw as a small child in the wood, and tells us that she 'knew who the white lady was' after looking into a well; she goes on to say that the knowledge made her '[tremble] all over, because that told [her] other things'.<sup>173</sup> The implication here seems to be that what she sees is her own reflection, that the 'White People' of the title are not mysterious, wholly-Other beings, but ourselves.

The story's epilogue returns to the dangerous knowledge theme, with Ambrose suggesting that some of the mysteries hinted at in the Green Book will eventually be illuminated by science. 'Well', he says

I think there are references throughout the manuscript to certain 'processes' which have been handed down by tradition from age to age. Some of these processes are just beginning to come within the purview of science, which has arrived at them – or rather at the steps which lead to them – by quite different paths. I have interpreted the

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<sup>172</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 58.

<sup>173</sup> Machen, 'The White People', p. 161.

reference to ‘nymphs’ as a reference to one of these processes.<sup>174</sup>

Once again, progress and investigation are raised as potential catalysts of humanity’s dissolution. Ambrose argues, in essence, that only the correct individuals—educated, “civilised” ones, presumably—are qualified to seek the truth. Knowledge is as dangerous as an unlocked medicine cabinet to those without the proper qualifications; experimenting at random, ‘[the] child may find the key by chance, and drink herself dead’. The ‘child’ here, we infer, does not refer simply to the girl in the Green Book, but to humanity as a whole.<sup>175</sup> In those too imperfectly “civilised”, the search may result in an awful descent into what Ambrose and Cotgrave earlier discuss as ‘evil’.<sup>176</sup> We learn, finally, that the girl who wrote the Green Book committed suicide a year later, and was found dead before a pagan image in the woods. Ambrose states that she ‘poisoned herself – in time’, implying that some terrible fate was about to befall her.<sup>177</sup> Was she to be taken by the ‘black man’, or discovered as a witch and punished accordingly? Lost in fairyland or permanently isolated from humanity? Would she have become something other than human? The ending appears, at first glance, to reinforce Ambrose’s morality, but the Green Book narrative itself suggests that perhaps the old religion and the secrets of the white people are as natural, as essentially human, as anything—including the behaviours of “civilised” humans. How natural is human nature as we define it? The two narratives exist in tension with one another, and while we must agree with Ambrose that the girl’s death does not provide the ultimate horror of the story, it is not her impertinence in pursuing a hidden knowledge that gives the story its sense of unease. It is, rather, the suggestion that the mystery and the ‘white lady’ exist in us already.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-123.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 165.



### **Late Machen: *The Green Round***

Machen's late novel, *The Green Round*, treats the notion of the fairy as pre-human survival in slightly more oblique fashion, incorporating aspects both of the sinister Little People tales and the more ambiguous likes of 'The White People'. Published in 1933 and written primarily for financial reasons, *The Green Round* did not rate highly in Machen's assessment of his own work.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, it continues to treat the recurring Machen themes of pre-human survival and degeneration, the existence of an invisible other world, and the presence of a threatening Other within the "civilised" human subject. In his introduction to the 2000 Tartarus Press edition, Mark Valentine argues that 'we should value [the novel] for the glimpses it gives us into facets of the mystical philosophy that Machen worked with',<sup>179</sup> but within its portrait of a spiritual otherworld and its potential to make frightening incursions into everyday human life are shades of the evolutionary anxieties that have coloured Machen's work since 'The Great God Pan'.

After an apparently rambling prologue, detailing the sighting of a newly-built dancehall near the fictional Welsh seaside town of Porth (not to be confused with the real Porth, in landlocked Rhondda Cynon Taf) by one Smith of Wimbledon, and the town clerk's subsequent denial of the building's existence, the novel picks up the story of the protagonist, Lawrence Hillyer. Hillyer, a reclusive scholar engaged in recherche folkloric studies, suffers an unusual mental disturbance in his rooms, finds himself babbling nonsense, and finally sinks into a state of pseudo-paralysis that lasts the rest of the day. His doctor, putting the disturbance down to his solitary lifestyle, advises

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<sup>178</sup> Mark Valentine, 'Introduction', in Arthur Machen, *The Green Round* (Horam, East Sussex: Tartarus Press, 2000), pp. v-xii (pp. v-vi).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

a holiday, and Hillyer accordingly visits Porth. There has been a murder at a nearby farm, and Hillyer finds himself suspected by his fellow hotel guests of sheltering the killer; they begin to ostracize him, and to ask him in accusatory tones who his ‘friend’ is, though he is not particularly intimate with anybody and is in the habit of taking his daily walks alone.<sup>180</sup>

Hillyer returns to London feeling that his trip has succeeded in its purpose despite his bizarre experience. Shortly after his homecoming, he is present or nearby at a series of bizarre accidents involving the destruction of property; neighbours see mysterious lights coming from the house in which Hillyer lodges, so that his staid landlady finds herself accused of holding gambling and drinking parties;<sup>181</sup> and two bystanders argue as to whether or not Hillyer is accompanied by a dwarf. At length, Hillyer finds himself able to see the cause of the accidents. It is the grotesque ‘friend’ described by his fellow guests at the Porth hotel, a ‘dwarfish child’ with a hideous, grinning face who follows him wherever he goes.<sup>182</sup>

The novel offers no definitive solution as to the identity of Hillyer’s mysterious shadow, or the reason for the bizarre series of events. There are two points, however, that help elucidate their connection to the Little People of Machen’s earlier fiction, and to the evolutionary anxieties that inform so much of Machen’s work. Firstly, returning to the prologue, we find that the apparently tangential subject matter actually serves as a reminder that Hillyer’s tale takes place in a world where the evolutionary “ladder” (if that is the correct metaphor) and the place that humans occupy upon it are still pressing concerns. Smith of Wimbledon’s experience prompts him to write to a London newspaper bemoaning the ‘spoiling of all the beauties of our lovely

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<sup>180</sup> Machen, *The Green Round*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-103.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

country',<sup>183</sup> and his complaint is the catalyst for an explosion of similar letters. Writers bemoan the tearing-down of historic buildings and their replacement with new roads, amusements, and modern buildings and sculptures considered incongruent with the British landscape. One writer expresses disgust at the replacement of an old Town Hall with 'a square monstrosity in white concrete, adorned (?) with grotesque sculptures in the manner of Easter Island'.<sup>184</sup> Another criticizes the demolition of a thirteenth-century chapel to make way for a 'pier and its cheerful pavilion'.<sup>185</sup> A third is horrified by the erecting of a sculpture of 'prehistoric beastliness' on a village green, exclaiming, 'I sometimes think I must be in Nbanga-Nbanga Land, not in Sussex'.<sup>186</sup> The new dancehall apparently seen by Smith, meanwhile, boasted a jazz band and a fair attended by a 'surging mass of people'.<sup>187</sup> The fair and the seaside pier both provide entertainment for the 'masses'; the jazz music and the internationally-influenced art and architecture (an artist who writes in defence of the village green piece has 'a curiously exotic name'<sup>188</sup>) are associated with foreign, and more specifically non-white, peoples. This conjunction of the working-class, the racial and national Other, the 'prehistoric' and the 'grotesque', and the fear that all of these together will somehow crowd out what is English, cannot help but remind us of the degenerative fears so prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century, and so strongly influential upon Machen's earlier work.

That Hillyer's bizarre experience is the work of one of the fairies or Little People, used as a focus for anxieties centring on evolution and the possible antecedents of humanity in works like the

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

‘Novel of the Black Seal’ and ‘The Shining Pyramid’, is suggested both by the novel’s epilogue and by the subject of Hillyer’s own researches, which touch upon both the existence of fairyland and questions of evil reminiscent of those discussed by Ambrose in ‘The White People’. The epilogue, written by an unnamed acquaintance of Hillyer’s to whom he has sent his notebooks upon emigrating, suggests a similarity between Hillyer’s experiences and those of a woman known only as J. C. P., whose recounting of her adventure on Nephin mountain in Ireland the acquaintance has recently read. A member of J. C. P.’s party vanishes ‘suddenly’, feeling ‘as though she [has] lapsed into complete unconsciousness’, and wanders away from the rest of the group. She later describes the sensation of ‘some strange force[...]pulling her away’ and states that she ‘does not know, cannot possibly imagine, what happened to her’.<sup>189</sup> After realizing that she is lost, she hears voices and the sound of a horn, and sees ‘a small person[...]possibly a child’, but they vanish before she is able to reach them.<sup>190</sup> Other members of the party also report seeing disappearing figures.<sup>191</sup> Pixie-leading is suggested both by the walker’s being led astray without realising it, and by the presence of a small, vanishing person. The pixie-led woman’s feeling ‘as though there were *no Time*’ as she is drawn away also contributes to this impression:<sup>192</sup> the unwitting traveller in the power of the fairies frequently finds that time behaves quite differently than that in the human world. After asking a local cottager whether the incident might be the doing of the Little People, J. C. P. receives only the response, “‘We do not talk about that’”.<sup>193</sup> The conclusion of the novel again raises the question of the Little People’s existence, though it is left unanswered:

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 126. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

But as to what is, or should be, the main question: what, who are the powers or forces that were manifested on Mount Nephin and in the Green Round? The Little People, the Fairies?

I believe there is no answer. We had better say, with the man of the cottage: ‘We do not talk about that’.<sup>194</sup>

Hillyer’s personal studies, meanwhile, centre upon the experiences of ‘those who find their way to the Queen of Fairyland’, or otherwise find themselves in another world, and upon the moral acceptability or unacceptability of seeking to do so.<sup>195</sup> Although the narrative shies away from confirming that Hillyer’s experiences involve the Little People, no other explanation is offered, and the events of the novel bear a strong resemblance to those of earlier works featuring the Little People. The novel also uses Hillyer’s experience and the figure of his “shadow” to tease out a familiar set of anxieties: those surrounding the origins of the “civilised” human subject.

I have already mentioned the degenerative anxieties introduced by the novel’s prologue. Earlier stories such as the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, meanwhile, use the possibility of the Little People as pre-human survivals as a source of horror, particularly when encounters with them prompt the revelation of still-extant pre-human traits within the civilised subject. Their primitive features render them grotesque, occasioning instinctual repulsion in humans who encounter them; they are abhuman, presenting human features in a state of flux and throwing the potential inhumanness of the human into sharp relief. Hillyer’s shadow clearly presents similar traits.

When the being is first seen by his fellow guests at the Porth hotel, it is believed to be the ‘Ty

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

Captain murderer’,<sup>196</sup> the killer of a local farmer’s wife whose body has been found ‘shamefully torn and mutilated’ in the nearby countryside.<sup>197</sup> The murder is never solved, and so it is not implausible that the Little People are responsible for the woman’s death. When we remember their actions in earlier stories—the abduction and human sacrifice of Annie Trevor in ‘The Shining Pyramid’; the implied rape of Jervase Cradock’s mother in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’—this begins to seem a likely enough explanation. These Little People kill senselessly; they are brutal and malign, presenting a very real, physical threat to the human. The hotel guests, who see Hillyer’s shadow, react with an automatic revulsion, exclaiming variously:

‘one of the most horrible-looking fellows I’ve ever seen’, ‘made my blood run cold’,  
 ‘something quite ghastly about him’, ‘my notion of a murderer’, ‘a dwarf, you said?’  
 ‘Yes, but those deformed creatures are often tremendously strong: looked as if  
 murder would be child’s play to him’<sup>198</sup>

Hillyer himself, when he gains the ability to see the creature, finds it ‘horrible’,<sup>199</sup> and his nerve specialist remarks, ‘[my] patient hated the sight of him’.<sup>200</sup> Both Hillyer and the hotel guests find themselves reacting involuntarily. The hotel guests assume the creature to be the murderer without proof; Hillyer never speaks to or interacts with the being, but nonetheless knows it to be ‘evil’.<sup>201</sup> The very existence of the creature overthrows civilised rationality and throws them back on primitive instinct (something held by Darwin to diminish ‘as the intellectual powers

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

become highly developed'<sup>202</sup>), illustrating the fragility of the boundary between human and abhuman Other, and the potential danger to progress contained in the knowledge of our origins. The abhumanness of the creature consists in its partial humanness; it embodies the intersection between a recognisable humanity and an atavistic, animalistic pre-humanity. Hillyer repeatedly compares the creature to a child: it is a 'horrible child'; a 'very ugly little boy'; a 'dwarfish child'; and a 'little horror'.<sup>203</sup> The child—as we see in Ernst Haeckel's theory of recapitulation, and in Cesare Lombroso's depiction of the child as natural criminal—was frequently viewed as an imperfectly evolved human being, retaining some of the traits of the pre-human savage. The Little People, then, are not only childlike in their size (though their small stature should remind us of Silver's point regarding the connections made between "pygmies", fairies, and pre-human ancestors by Victorian anthropologists), but in the way that they represent the infancy of humanity, and the possibility that pre-human traits may persist in the species into the present day.

Despite his childlike appearance, the creature has an 'old face'.<sup>204</sup> There is something indeterminate about him; his appearance cannot be pinned down, as we see in the passage where two old men sitting on a bench opposite Hillyer, who has paused during one of his morning walks, argue over the presence of his unwanted companion. One of them has seen the creature; the other has not. The latter demands a description, and the former can only reply, 'I saw him, as I tell you as plain as I see you now. But if you ask me what he was like...'.<sup>205</sup> He is unable to complete the description. The creature, existing at the boundary of the human, exceeds the capacity of human language. His hybridity echoes the disturbing possibility of abhumanity: that

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<sup>202</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 68.

<sup>203</sup> Machen, *The Green Round*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the human has not fully moved past its ancestry and indeed never will; that it will always remain between two states, haunted by the primitive.

The inseparability of the human from the pre-human is embedded in the narrative itself. The haunting of the scholarly Hillyer—apparently a paragon of civilised, educated humanity—by a dwarfish, malign double calls to mind the Victorian Gothic of Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Green Tea’, but also (and perhaps more relevantly here), Prendick’s pursuit by the hybrid Leopard-Man in H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).<sup>206</sup> John Glendening, in *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late Victorian Novels*, argues for an ‘eerily close connection’ between Prendick and the Leopard-Man:

[The] leopard-man represents a primordial embodiment of Prendick’s unconscious as the narrator faces his own evolutionary legacy and experiences the consequent disarrangement of his ontological and moral identity.

[...]Symbolically, Prendick is stalked by an animal nature that he does not wish to acknowledge as his own[...]As Prendick’s double, the leopard-man incorporates those primitive elements in the narrator that have continually been forced upon his awareness since the shipwreck[...]<sup>207</sup>

The being that haunts Hillyer, and for whose acts of destruction he must occasionally take responsibility,<sup>208</sup> might then be seen as representative of a suppressed, primitive element in his

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<sup>206</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896; London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 43-47.

<sup>207</sup> John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 54-55.

<sup>208</sup> During one of his daily walks, he is accused of having smashed the window of a greenhouse (Machen, *The Green*



own nature. It would be possible to read the creature as a Jungian shadow; perhaps Hillyer's psyche has projected its more destructive elements into the outside world, perceiving them in the form of this proto-human being. Hillyer, however, is not delusional. The nerve specialist whom he visits toward the novel's end writes to the owner of the hotel at which Hillyer stayed in Porth, interviews the landlady's daughter, and sees the injuries of a clerk hurt in one of the bizarre accidents. All three corroborate Hillyer's experiences, and the nerve specialist concludes that his is

[a] most extraordinary case; the absolute reverse of the conditions we are usually called on to deal with. Many mental cases think they are persecuted when they aren't; this man had been persecuted in a sort of a way, and was quite sure that his persecution was a delusion in other words, that he was mad.<sup>209</sup>

The creature that haunts Hillyer, despite its apparently preternatural abilities (it is invisible to different people at different points in the narrative, and appears to Hillyer inside the upstairs window of a house he passes on a bus journey, suggesting that it is able to move through masonry and with superhuman quickness) is a real, physical being. Its gross corporeality, then, helps to place the "civilised" human back within the (animalistic, potentially-abhuman) body, emphasising the aspects of the pre-human still extant within us.

Although Hillyer is not delusional, his susceptibility to the influence of the Little People appears to be symptomatic of a weakness in him. Certainly, even before his visit to Porth, he is suffering

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*Round*, pp. 45-46); on another occasion, one of his notebooks is torn to pieces by the creature and he pretends to have destroyed it himself, presumably in order to avoid frightening his landlady and her daughter (p. 82).

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

from a mysterious mental disturbance, and one which blurs the boundaries of his identity. He realises that he is talking to himself, about an event which has never actually occurred, and then falls into a stupor during which ‘[life seems] to have become all misty, uncertain; his own identity [is] blurred in his mind[...]a horrid state, summed up for common use in the familiar phrase, “suffering from loss of memory”, lest the true description, loss of *ego*, loss of true being, should confuse and alarm’.<sup>210</sup> Hillyer is highly educated and a scholar, therefore civilised—but he is also an eccentric recluse, secreted in the heart of London, who has chosen to deprive himself of fresh air and human company. We might, then, also read him as an echo of the fin-de-siècle decadent—of Huysmans’ reclusive Des Esseintes, or Machen’s own Lucian Taylor—representative of the perceived decline of Western civilisation: a sufferer from nervous exhaustion, slipping toward degeneration as a result of his enervating lifestyle. An apparently ordinary human being may, however, experience the mischief of the little people on a less permanent basis without having suffered any such serious prior weakness. Smith of Wimbledon, whose vision of their merriment begins the novel, is implied to have been susceptible to their influence simply because ‘it is quite possible that he had recovered from a bad attack of influenza a week or two before his visit’.<sup>211</sup> Even the most ordinary of men, then, is not immune to the influence of the other within.

For the most part, then, the Little People as presented in *The Green Round*, as in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, and ‘The Red Hand’, function as a source of horror. They act as tangible proof of humanity’s primitive past and, in having survived to irrupt into the modern human world, they remind us that aspects of the primitive pre-human may remain latent

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

in the humans of today, hidden beneath a thin and relatively recent veneer of civilisation. In the threat that they are able to pose to humans—such as the unfortunate woman at Ty Captain—moreover, they remind us of the precariousness of our dominance on Earth. The animalistic pre-human, with its preternatural abilities and its lack of moral encumbrances, may, in the long term, prove more fitted for survival than the “human”; our current position as the dominant life-form does not, after all, render us immune to natural selection.

*The Green Round* does, however, present a slightly different reading of the fairies as pre-human ancestors alongside this overtly sinister one, and this appears in Hillyer’s accounts of his own researches. Here, we find a moral conundrum similar to that posed by Ambrose in ‘The White People’, with a similar implication that a return to the prehistoric state of being represented by the fairies and their realm constitutes a kind of return to Eden. The following passage provides a clear illustration:

[It] is to be enquired whether it be lawful to regain or to attempt to regain the Earthly Paradise; to pass, as it were, under the guard of the flaming swords; to recover a state which is represented as definitely ended, so far as bodily existence is concerned. In the Mabinogion story [of the Assembly of the Noble Head], it may be noted, there is a marked analogy with the Eden story of Genesis.<sup>212</sup>

The analogy between the story from the Second Branch of the Mabinogi and that from Genesis is easily made. For the eighty years spanned by the Assembly of the Noble Head, the companions of Bendigeidfran, along with his severed-but-still-speaking head, feast in a castle at Gwales

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

without ageing. There is a closed door in the castle which they must not open. When a member of the company, Heilyn son of Gwyn, inevitably does so, their idyll comes to an end, and the consciousness of mortality falls heavily upon them.<sup>213</sup> By comparing the Assembly both to the story of Eden and to that of a stay in fairyland, Hillyer sets up the fairies as the origin of humanity. A slightly later passage expands upon this idea:

Of course it may be [*sic*] said that the Fairy Queen tales are to be taken in the same sense, and as referring to the same mysterious loss as the Genesis story and the Welsh story; they may all be understood to refer to the *Parens Protoplastus*, to Adam, the archetypal or Platonic man[...]<sup>214</sup>

The connection between fairyland and a kind of pre-civilised Eden, the potentially seductive nature of reversion, is emphasised elsewhere, too. In the course of his researches, Hillyer discovers and becomes fascinated by a curious little book by a Reverend Thomas Hampole (a character who was to recur in Machen's later short story, 'N'). The book is titled, *A London Walk: Meditations in the Streets of the Metropolis*, and begins by describing the enchanted appearance of the city at dawn. We will recall that the fairies—as pointed out by Carole Silver—appear most frequently in liminal locations and at liminal times, on the borders between night and day, life and death, water and shore, underground and surface. In the passage Hillyer reads, London takes on the aspect of such a locus, becoming touched by 'magic powers', losing its 'familiar appearance' and undergoing 'a mysterious change, into something rich and strange'.<sup>215</sup> The ordinary buildings become 'magical habitations', and, Hampole asserts, 'if the boughs of a tree

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<sup>213</sup> *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 33-34.

<sup>214</sup> Machen, *The Green Round*, p. 50.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

chance to extend over a garden wall, you are ready to vow that its roots must flourish in the soil of Paradise'.<sup>216</sup> This image suggests a rupture in the border between binary oppositions, and the potential for such a rupture to send humanity tumbling back to its earliest beginnings—but its aspect is beguiling rather than repulsive. In a later excerpt, after speculating that the alchemists of the Dark Ages aimed not at 'the transmutation of metals, but[...]the transmutation of the entire Universe',<sup>217</sup> Hampole explicitly links alchemy to the search for Eden:

*'This method, or art, or science, or whatever we choose to call it (supposing that it really exists) is simply concerned to restore the delights of the primal Paradise, to enable men, if they will to inhabit a world of joy and of splendour. I have no authority either to affirm or to deny that there is such an experiment, and that some have made it. I therefore abandon the matter to the consideration and the enquiry of men of equal and ingenious mind'.<sup>218</sup>*

Again, a return to the dawn of humanity seems rather a pleasant prospect.

Hampole's reticence in confirming the existence of such a science, however, alongside his use of the word 'experiment' and his emphasis on the necessity that it be investigated by 'equal and ingenious' minds, may remind us of a slightly darker passage already discussed. Though less heavy with dire warning, Hampole's language is reminiscent of that used by Ambrose at the conclusion of 'The White People', where he warns of the danger to unwary or ill-qualified investigators posed by the Old Religion of the fairies. 'I am afraid', he says to his friend,

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 53. (Emphasis in original.)

Cotgrave, ‘you have neglected the study of alchemy? It is a pity, for[...]if you were acquainted with certain books on the subject, I could recall to your mind phrases which might explain a good deal in the manuscript that you have been reading’.<sup>219</sup> He goes on, however, to warn that ‘it is no doubt better for the great mass of people to dismiss it all as a dream’, and to lay out in no uncertain terms the peril that may await unwary dwellers into the unknown, saying

Powerful and sovereign medicines, which are, of necessity, virulent poisons also, are kept in a locked cabinet. The child may find the key by chance, and drink herself dead; but in most cases the search is educational, and the phials contain precious elixirs for him who has patiently fashioned the key for himself.<sup>220</sup>

Apparently also due to fairy influence are the disconcerting dreams, at first apparently congruent with real life, that Hillyer experiences. On one occasion, he dreams of a visit from his friend Hawkins, with whom he discusses Thomas Hampole’s book. Hawkins relates what he knows of Hampole’s biography, and of the usual value of the book to a collector. So far, so mundane—but while Hillyer is noting down these fact, he looks up at Hawkins and is ‘struck at once by something strange and unfamiliar in his expression’.<sup>221</sup> Terrified, he is convinced that his friend has gone mad, but finds himself unable to move or call for help. At last, he says, ‘[the] figure opposite me seemed to change into a dreadful and unspeakable and most detestable shape, and then everything was black darkness’.<sup>222</sup> Here, as in earlier tales, we see the human form transmuted into something repulsive and unstable, and the human mind apparently deprived of

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<sup>219</sup> Machen, ‘The White People’, p. 163.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>221</sup> Machen, *The Green Round*, p. 72.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

its reasoning capacity. The influence upon Hillyer's mind is not one he can understand or control, and here it furnishes his mind's eye with a dark reflection of Hampole's heavenly transformations, a sinister image of reversion.

Elsewhere, however, his dreams are, at least superficially, attractive. In a transformation of the everyday akin to that described by Hampole, Hillyer finds himself in the street on which he lives, standing before his home—but the quiet house in which dwell Mrs Jolly and her staid lodgers is now 'blazing with light; shining out radiant into the night, and resonant with music'.<sup>223</sup> Inside the house, meanwhile, he finds the 'modest' rooms to which he is accustomed replaced by a 'gorgeous palace'.<sup>224</sup> He is aware that some great change has taken place, but feels unsurprised by it. In the dream, the transformation appears to be something Hillyer has been expecting for a long time; there is a familiarity to it, and the transformation seems to be, rather than a bizarre alteration to the natural course of events, a revelation of a secret to which he has long been party. It is, in both senses of the Freudian term, *heimlich*, with all the attendant connotations.<sup>225</sup> Hillyer finds that 'the palace of golden and glorious light in which [he] stood was utterly rational and acceptable', and knows himself to be 'sharing in a great festival of ineffable joy', the 'cause and reason' of which he understands intimately.<sup>226</sup> The cause of this joy is, however, 'very largely negative in its nature'.<sup>227</sup> He explains further,

I believe that most of us regard happiness, or joy, or well-being, or what you will, as

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>225</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by J. Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1955), pp. 217-256 (p. 220, pp. 222-226).

<sup>226</sup> Machen, *The Green Round*, p. 94.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

a positive thing, based on what a man has gained, or received, or possessed himself of in one way or another it is an affair of having. But in the dream my delight—and it was greater than words can utter—was founded not on what I had gained, but on what I had lost. What I had lost was all the burden of life.<sup>228</sup>

In itself, this relief from worldly cares is suggestive of a return to Eden; and when, at the end of the dream, Hillyer wakes ‘into misery, as one who has been for the second time put out of Paradise’, the suggestion is made concrete.<sup>229</sup>

Earlier on in the novel, discussing the distinction between dream and reality, Hillyer suggests that daily life is in itself a dream, and that ‘those who find their way to the Queen of Fairyland are liberated from these dreams and monsters and delusions, and behold with a rapture of delight the real world’.<sup>230</sup> Visiting fairyland here represents a return to reality from dream; the implication is that the real origins of humanity lie in fairyland, and not in the everyday. Hillyer’s visitors to fairyland, though, are no more capable of remaining there than he himself is of retaining his dreamed contentment. They ‘are forced to return, and the fairy gold is dust and ashes in the morning’.<sup>231</sup> The repetition of this motif—the sleeper or visitor to fairyland awaking or returning to a disappointing everyday world—might be interpreted in two ways. First of all, as an idealisation of humanity’s origins, and a suggestion that reversion offers access to some authentic manner of experiencing the world that is unavailable to modern, “civilised” humans. Secondly, however, we might read it as an affirmation of Ambrose’s warning in ‘The White

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 75.



People’; an admonition against probing too deeply into humanity’s origins, lest we find ourselves seduced by them, revert, and become unable to function within civilised society.

Here again, then, we find a similar ambiguity toward human origins to that displayed in ‘The Ceremony’, ‘The Turanians’, and ‘The White People’. The sinister is certainly present, and for Hillyer, the Little People represent a threat—to his reputation and personal safety, as well as to his “human” capacity for reason. The Little People and their world, however, also appear to represent an opportunity for “authentic” experience unavailable to inhabitants of the mundane world, here represented by the everyday bustle of London, which Hillyer is encouraged by his doctors to experience, and by the society of the Porth hotel guests by whom he finds himself ostracised. More important, however, is the familiar theme of Otherness within. The Little People are able to influence Hillyer and Smith of Wimbledon due to perceived weaknesses in their health, but other accounts of encounters with them—like that given by J. C. P.—give no such reason. They are, perhaps, able to influence humans to due to some susceptibility inherent in the human, though it may be brought closer to the surface by ill-health. The doubling between Hillyer and his “shadow”, too, suggests that it represents or embodies a hidden sinister, “primitive” side within the human, illustrating how close our pre-human origins may in fact be, and how precarious our supremacy on the planet—bolstered by “civilisation” and “reason”, both of which are destabilised by the presence of the Little People—actually is. As in earlier Machen texts, the real threat that they pose is not that of altering the “human”, but that of revealing what is already there. The ‘real world’ experienced by Hillyer’s venturers into fairyland may be threatening or seductive; but in either case, its existence reveals the human as something Other, and something far less different from our primitive origins than we may wish to believe.

## Chapter Two: Degeneration

Machen's Little People stories, then, make explicit our animal origins, dramatising a teleological evolutionary progression and raising the possibility of its opposite, implying the abhumanness of the human. The threat of “reeling back into the beast”<sup>1</sup> remains, however, a largely implicit one. Machen's educated, white, British investigators never appear in danger of spontaneously falling into atavism themselves, and those who are adversely affected by their encounters with the Little People are usually—though not always—marked as other in some way. The incidents forming the basis of the stories usually take place in poor, Celtic areas of the UK, areas already associated with fairy beliefs, with populations viewed as unsophisticated and, perhaps, uncivilised. They are thus separated from Machen's London-based, middle-class protagonists.

Annie Trevor's youth and her gender mark her out as less “civilised”, in nineteenth-century scientific discourse, than adult men. In that of traditional fairylore, she is more vulnerable to abduction and “pixie-leading”.<sup>2</sup> The same can be said of the young woman of the Green Book narrative in ‘The White People’ (1904), as well as the protagonists of ‘The Turanians’ (1924) and ‘The Ceremony’ (1924). Meanwhile, Jervase Cradock in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ (1895) is othered both by his low class status and his half-fairy heritage; in him, the biological taint irrupts visibly into the everyday, its presence signalled by his fits and hissing speech, and by the slimy tentacle that extends from his body under the influence of Professor Gregg's incantation. Selby in ‘The Red Hand’ (1895) is also separated from Dyson and Phillipps by his class, and is,

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<sup>1</sup> Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

perhaps, a member of that group of ‘primitive’ men identified by Dyson as still existing in London.<sup>3</sup>

There is, of course, the case of Professor Gregg, educated and “civilised”, but still apparently transformed by the Little People. However, the placing of the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ within the narrative of *The Three Impostors* puts it at one remove from Dyson and Phillipps, whose viewpoint seems to represent that of the “civilised”—and therefore fully human—subject. While Gregg is presented as a real person within the world of the novel, the story ‘Miss Lally’ tells about what has happened to him is a fiction within a fiction, and, as such, perhaps loses some of its original threatening power. We are left to infer our own conclusions about Gregg’s ultimate fate, and this obfuscation is in marked contrast to the gruesome death of the ‘young man with spectacles’ at the end of the novel, the aftermath of which Dyson and Phillipps witness first-hand. Gregg’s end is never shown to us precisely because it never happened. The “real” Gregg may have been a “civilised” male subject, but the story—like the version of him that appears in it—is the invention of a woman and a criminal, both identities marked out by scientific discourses of the day as already liable to abhuman reversions. We might also recall the remarks made by Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, on the subject of “genius”, whose ‘painfully close relation’ to insanity Galton acknowledges and explains by asserting that ‘[those] who are over eager and extremely active in mind must often possess brains that are more excitable and peculiar than is consistent with soundness’.<sup>4</sup> The following passage suggests an uneasy relationship between the human pursuit of knowledge and the degeneration away from human status implied by loss of

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Red Hand’, in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1895; London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 83-110, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Galton, ‘Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892’ in *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1869; London: Macmillan, 1914), p. ix.

sanity, a relationship whose unsettling implications repeatedly make themselves felt in the weird tale:

If genius means a sense of inspiration, or of rushes of ideas from apparently supernatural sources, or of an inordinate and burning desire to accomplish any particular end, it is perilously near to the voices heard by the insane, to their delirious tendencies, or to their monomanias. It cannot in such cases be a healthy faculty, nor can it be desirable to perpetuate it by inheritance.<sup>5</sup>

Gregg's 'inordinate and burning desire' to uncover the existence of the Little People might then place him as such a case, his pursuit of knowledge simultaneously cementing and undermining his "civilised" status.

But such distancings do not mean that the weird tale shies away from dramatising the backsliding process elsewhere. It appears in explicit form in several of Machen's stories, and occurs frequently in the work of H. P. Lovecraft—who, after all, quite openly took inspiration from Machen. Speculation about the possible reversion of the human subject to a prehistoric state was not the invention of fictioneers, and scientific writers of the period, such as Max Nordau, Bénédict Augustin Morel, and E. Ray Lankester, published various treatises on degeneration, its perceived causes, and its potential consequences. Herbert Spencer, who proposed a more general conception of evolution, pertaining not only to organisms but to the formation of physical matter and of societies, opposed evolution—which he defined as 'the integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion'—to 'dissolution', which was its

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. x.

opposite.<sup>6</sup> For Spencer, evolution could not be said to be in the ascendancy in any overarching sense, since these two processes are ‘everywhere in antagonism, and everywhere gaining now a temporary and now a more or less permanent triumph the one over the other’.<sup>7</sup> On the specifically biological level Darwin, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), refers to the possibility of individuals reverting back to the type of some earlier ancestor, referring at some length to ‘the arrested brain-development of microcephalous idiots’, as well as other characteristics thought to resemble those of animals and of ‘the lower types of mankind’—poor hygiene, hairiness, propensities for climbing and for going on all fours—as offering ‘a case of reversion’.<sup>8</sup> Similar reversions were constituted by ‘the worst dispositions, which occasionally without any assignable cause make their appearance in families’; these characters may also be ‘reversions to a savage state, from which we are not removed by very many generations’.<sup>9</sup> The potential for wider social degeneration, rather than the existence of isolated, anomalous individuals atavistic from birth, is also raised in the *Descent*. Unless high rates of mortality and failure to marry ‘prevent the reckless, the vicious and otherwise inferior members of society from increasing at a quicker rate than the better class of men’, Darwin warns, ‘the nation will retrograde, as has too often occurred in the history of the world’.<sup>10</sup>

Darwin’s use of the word ‘class’ here invokes a wider concern not only with individual evolutionary fitness, but with an assumed association between this and class status. Childs notes the ‘special concern’ afforded the differential birth-rate in the early twentieth century, the fear of

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1860; New York: Appleton, 1877), pp. 285-286.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), pp. 35-36, p. 601.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

‘the lower classes[...]reproducing at a higher rate than the middle and upper classes—and the consequent depopulation of the fittest class relative to the less fit classes.’<sup>11</sup> (A fairly unproblematic correlation between social success and evolutionary fitness was assumed by eugenicists such as Galton, who suggests that ‘those persons who have honourably succeeded in life[...]are presumably, on the whole, the most valuable portion of our human stock’.<sup>12</sup>) Darwin’s work as a whole does not lean heavily towards the pessimistic, however. Dire warnings such as the above are counterbalanced by optimistic predictions of a probable improvement in health and morality.<sup>13</sup> Other scientific writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were less moderate in their predictions of backsliding.

In *The Gothic Body*, Kelly Hurley writes of the importance of degeneration theory as a ‘crucial imaginative and narrative source’ for fin-de-siècle Gothic fiction.<sup>14</sup> Her identification of these scientific treatises as “‘gothic” discourses’ is a salient one, emphasising the teleological narrative form taken by degeneration theory—its sense of an inevitable descent towards a conclusion already written in the biological makeup of the human race—and making explicit the relationship between the doom-laden predictions of Morel, Nordau, and others, and the horrors of Gothic fiction.<sup>15</sup> It is hardly surprising that these dramatic stories told by scientists should, in their turn, have come to influence the writers of weird tales. Daniel Pick, in his study of European degeneration theory, *Faces of Degeneration*, cautions against a simplistic view of fiction as simply reflecting scientific theories, however—and, indeed, against any conception of

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<sup>11</sup> Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Galton, ‘Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892’, p. xxii. See also *Hereditary Genius*, p. 5, p. 21, p. 35, pp. 334-335.

<sup>13</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 124-125, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Hurley, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

degeneration theory as separate from its wider social context. Rather, evolutionary theory itself ‘was undoubtedly social, inextricably enmeshed in the language, politics, culture of a past’.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was degeneration a monolith:

Degeneration was never successfully reduced to a fixed axiom or theory in the nineteenth century despite the expressed desire to resolve the conceptual questions once and for all in definitive texts. Rather it was a shifting term produced, inflected, refined, and re-constituted in the movement between human sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries. It is not possible to trace it to one ideological conclusion, or to locate its identification with a single political message.<sup>17</sup>

Rather, it was a ‘complex term’, both ‘a technical diagnosis and a racial prophecy’.<sup>18</sup> Before delving into the mess of biological fears laid forth in the stories of Machen and Lovecraft, then, it is perhaps necessary to explore some of the different strands of thought developed by theorists of degeneration, to detail the imagined causes of the atavistic reversions they feared, and the varying degrees of inevitability attached to them.

Darwin, in *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), had suggested that organisms did not have any innate tendency to ‘advancement in the scale of organization’. Rather, ‘a very simple form fitted for very simple conditions of life might remain for indefinite ages unaltered or unimproved’, while ‘[members] of a higher group might even become, and this

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

apparently has often occurred, fitted for simpler conditions of life; and in this case natural selection would tend to simplify or degrade the organization'.<sup>19</sup> E. Ray Lankester, whose *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) gives one early iteration of the theory in English, makes an essentially similar argument, concentrating mainly upon degeneration in simple organisms. Lankester argues that the continued existence of 'low' forms of life alongside the more complex is usually explained by their having 'ceased to improve, and being happily fitted to the conditions of life in which they were long ago existing[...]continued down to the present day to exist in the same low, imperfect condition'.<sup>20</sup> The assumption that informs this explanation, and that Lankester seeks to challenge, is that the elaboration of forms is a one-way process, always proceeding in the direction of greater complexity. Although his examples are primarily drawn from the animal kingdom, however, Lankester cannot resist speculating upon the possibility of individual human, and wider social, degeneration, as in the following passage:

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world.<sup>21</sup>

Lankester goes on to raise the possibility of human degeneration, particularly with regard to white Europeans, noting that they have not visibly advanced since the time of the ancient Greeks, and cautioning against the dangers of complacency:

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<sup>19</sup> Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (1868; London: John Murray, 1888), I, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (London: Macmillan, 1880), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



In accordance with a tacit assumption of universal progress—an unreasoning optimism—we are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition than that which our ancestors reached, and as destined to progress still further. On the other hand, it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress.<sup>22</sup>

Lankester ends his treatise with relative optimism, however, expressing a confidence in the human ‘power to *know the causes of things*’ as a powerful weapon against degeneration.<sup>23</sup>

Knowledge is power; it can, if used correctly, give humanity (or, rather, the white, European branch of it, with which Lankester is primarily concerned) the power to direct its own destiny. ‘The full and earnest cultivation of Science’, he writes ‘[...]is that to which we have to look for the protection of our race—even of this English branch of it—from relapse and degeneration’.<sup>24</sup>

The French writer Benedict Augustin Morel, the first to develop a full theory of hereditary human degeneration, was less optimistic.<sup>25</sup> Morel described the inherited taint not necessarily as fundamental to the human organism, but as something that could be acquired from the outside and passed on, leading, within a few generations, to idiocy, sterility and the end of the family line. Outside influences could begin a congenital downward spiral: the use of alcohol or addictive

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 61. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 66.

drugs,<sup>26</sup> exposure to pollution in the urban environment,<sup>27</sup> poor food,<sup>28</sup> famine, and infectious diseases<sup>29</sup> could all cause brain lesions that would be passed down to the following generations. Morel was a believer in the idea that the various human races, descended from populations that had already begun to degenerate according to the terrain they occupied, had eventually, spreading out across the continents, become different enough to create distinct ‘races’.<sup>30</sup> Morel’s notions of the inheritance of acquired characteristics based on environment would be echoed by Spencer, who believed that ‘physical and social conditions’ could bring about ‘modifications of function and structure’, and that this was most clearly illustrated by ‘morbid’ modifications.<sup>31</sup> Spencer uses the example of ‘consumption’, thought to be caused by ‘unfavourable conditions of life’ and passed on from parent to child.<sup>32</sup> Although Darwin in the *Origin* had placed ‘very little weight on the direct action of the conditions of life’,<sup>33</sup> he would in subsequent works entertain the possibility of the passing on of acquired characteristics, for example in his theory of pangenesis.<sup>34</sup> In the *Descent*, he noted that ‘residence in towns and certain occupations have a deteriorating influence on height; and[...]the result is to a certain extent inherited’.<sup>35</sup>

There appears to be a kind of dual thinking about degeneration here. It is an innate characteristic of the human race, and has been so since the dawn of time—but it can also be acquired, through exposure to the industrialised urban environment, or through the moral failings that lead to

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<sup>26</sup> B. A. Morel, *Traité des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l’Espèce Humaine et des Causes qui Produisent ces Variétés Maladies* (Paris: Baillière, 1857), pp. 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365-366.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), I, p. 248, p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Darwin, Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; London: Penguin, 1968), p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, p. 388.

<sup>35</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 31.

intoxication, addiction, and venereal disease.<sup>36</sup> Morel's theory puts forward simultaneously a belief in the hopeless inevitability of degeneration, and a caution against the permissiveness and technological advances of contemporary urban living that may accelerate and exacerbate it. The city as site of degeneration is a theme that recurs in the work of various writers; Galton would later suggest that the 'conditions[...]of life' in London and other towns might be 'too hard' for the 'mass of individuals', and be 'crushing them into degeneracy'.<sup>37</sup> This echoes a notion I mentioned in my first chapter: precisely those elements of human civilisation regarded as the most progressive—the desire for knowledge; the pursuit of technological and scientific advancement—may, inadvertently, lead us down the path of degeneration. Paradoxically, it is these “higher” impulses that contain the seeds of reversion to a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder. However, Morel's degenerates affect (or infect) only their own family lines, and the eventual sterility of the degenerate effectively cauterises this infection, preventing its spread and keeping the rest of the social body comparatively safe.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent theorists rejected this limited view. The narratives of degeneration put forward by Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, in comparison, were social and national or even international in scope, threatening whole societies or continents. Degeneration was no longer a problem of individuals, or of isolated families. Rather, it threatened catastrophe on a vast scale.

Nordau's *Degeneration*, first published in 1892 (translated into English in 1895), casts the degenerate as a baleful influence upon the healthy masses and paints an ominous picture of the spectre of degeneration bearing down upon the civilisations of modern Europe. John Glendening has noted the 'fundamental dependence upon evolutionary theory' of Nordau's work, drawing as

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<sup>36</sup> Morel, pp. 564-565.

<sup>37</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, pp. 328-329.

<sup>38</sup> Morel, p. 5.

it does upon the neo-Lamarckian idea of the inheritance of acquired characteristics resurgent in the late nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Neo-Lamarckism, though usually optimistic, ‘provides for a form of degeneration, in that physical and mental debilitation suffered in one generation was thought to express itself in the next’.<sup>40</sup> The possibility of the inheritance of acquired characteristics had also been touched upon by Darwin in the *Descent*.<sup>41</sup> The very first chapter of Nordau’s book, portentously entitled, ‘The Dusk of the Nations’, claims that the ‘*fin-de-siècle* state of mind is to-day everywhere to be met with’, casting this enervated and ‘curiously confused’ mental state as an unwelcome invader, developing in France and threatening to enter and destroy all ‘civilised’ nations.<sup>42</sup> Degeneration, for Nordau, despite all the obvious physical and mental stigmata that accompany it, is a social and moral contagion.<sup>43</sup> Nordau, too, views degeneration as an acquired condition, resulting from the frenetic, exhausting pace of contemporary life, from urban living, and from the availability of alcohol, tobacco and drugs to a populace upon whom this increased pace and its attendant information overload were beginning to take their toll.<sup>44</sup> The offspring of enfeebled, exhausted and substance-dependant parents inherited these attributes, and passed them on. Lacking both the strength required for adherence to traditional moral standards and the attention-span needed to concentrate upon and fully develop an idea, Nordau’s degenerates were responsible for the breakdown of morality and the development of new aesthetic movements that promised to shock and thrill their ennui-ridden audiences without providing any real substance.<sup>45</sup> The popularity of these degenerate artists—among whom Nordau numbers such diverse figures

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<sup>39</sup> John Glendening, *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 32.

<sup>42</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 1-2, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35, pp. 37-40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

as Wagner, Nietzsche and Ibsen, as well as the symbolists, decadents, and Pre-Raphaelites—and their acolytes threatened to spread the degenerate mindset throughout Europe. Like Cesare Lombroso, by whose work he was heavily influenced, Nordau viewed many successful artists and writers as ‘highly-gifted degenerates’ whose artistic ability was inseparable from their mental illness.<sup>46</sup> However, while Lombroso considered such figures as essential to the cultural development of civilisations, for Nordau, they were a ‘baneful’ influence more likely to ‘corrupt and delude’, leading the masses to ‘abysses or waste places’, passing unnoticed at present, but sure to be seen for what they truly were by future historians.<sup>47</sup> (We might recall Galton’s warning, the same year, against attempts to reproduce ‘genius’, which he viewed as dangerously close to madness, by selective breeding.<sup>48</sup>) It was the duty of the healthy, normal subject to expose and to denounce these degenerate tendencies wherever he saw them; if they were allowed to spread unchecked, a downward progression was inevitable.<sup>49</sup>

Though he is rather more sympathetic towards the degenerate, who he sees as doomed by heredity, ‘born with evil inclinations’ and lacking free will,<sup>50</sup> Lombroso also proposes measures for social protection against atavistic criminals. Lombroso in particular fits Hurley’s description of the Gothic discourse, making use of anecdota and a vivid, “storytelling” style. He devotes a passage in the second (1878) edition of *Criminal Man* to sociologist Richard L. Dugdale’s 1877 study of the Juke family, whose progenitor, a ‘drunkard and seducer’, could allegedly number among his descendants 77 criminals, 128 prostitutes, and 131 ‘impotent, idiotic, or syphilitic

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Galton, ‘Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892’, p.x.

<sup>49</sup> Nordau., p. 557.

<sup>50</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. by Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (1876, revised 1878, 1884, 1889, 1896-97; Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 48.

offspring'.<sup>51</sup> With a few judicious edits, this passage could refer to Lovecraft's Martense family, and it emphasises many of the same features that we shall find in 'The Lurking Fear', the short story in which they appear. The 'immorality' and promiscuity of the family's women are foregrounded here, along with the sheer number of criminals born from a single ancestor; we are probably meant to be as horrified by the fecundity of the Juke family as by its crimes.<sup>52</sup> The spread of criminality through the family line is emphasised here; though Lombroso does mention that their 'numbers fell in the sixth and seventh generations because nature[...]put an end to the problem through sterility', his sustained emphasis on their numbers makes them seem a wider threat than Morel's single, doomed family lines.<sup>53</sup> In some cases, whole towns may develop a higher than average crime rate because of one family's inherited propensity to wrongdoing: Lombroso asserts that '[all] it takes is the survival of one family descended from a wicked progenitor, and the whole place will be corrupted'.<sup>54</sup> There is, however, at least some possibility of a cure in Lombroso's narrative, as in Nordau's. Nordau advocated the curtailment of degenerate aesthetic tendencies, and the promotion of healthy art in order to counteract its influence upon otherwise normal individuals; Lombroso, while holding the born criminal fundamentally not responsible for his crimes, advises the imprisonment of incorrigibles for the protection of society at large.<sup>55</sup> Removing them from the social sphere would both contain their illegal activities and prevent them from producing further degenerate offspring.

The terms in which degeneration theorists discuss their subjects are already familiar to us from Machen's *Little People*. Lombroso's criminals are physically marked by their racialised atavistic

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-126.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

tendencies, with features that ‘recall the black American and Mongol races and, above all, prehistoric man’.<sup>56</sup> Lombroso certainly believed non-white, non-European races to be further down the evolutionary scale, and we remember, of course, that Machen’s Little People are ‘Mongolian’ in their features. The born criminal may inspire an instinctive revulsion in normal people, particularly women. Lombroso relates an anecdote concerning his mother, in which she identifies two young men as potential criminals and is eventually vindicated in her assessment when they are arrested for theft, and offers this as evidence for women’s especial sensitivity to the criminal type.<sup>57</sup> Evidence of the Little People’s presence in Machen’s stories inspires a similar, visceral disgust, whether it is the ‘queer’, nauseating smell identified by the maid in the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, the writhing mass of flesh that convinces Vaughan that they are ‘things’ rather than men in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, or the hideous piece of metalwork that horrifies Dyson and Phillipps on sight in ‘The Red Hand’.

Born criminals are also cruel, and lack any sense of sexual morality, reproducing irresponsibly and, when female, often turning to prostitution. We have already witnessed both of these qualities, too. The Little People perform human sacrifices, as seen in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, and possibly animal ones, as implied in ‘The Red Hand’. They commit rape without compunction, and are motivated by ‘evil lusts’. Even in those stories where the Little People do not appear to pose a physical threat to human beings, exposure to their religion appears to instil a new sexual awareness in its young female followers, and to carry along with it a sexual threat: that of the ‘black man’ who may appear to claim the unwary dabbler as his wife, or the fairy queen whose kiss prevents a man from ever pursuing a normal relationship with a human woman.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 311-312.

Morel's degenerates, like Lombroso's born criminals, lack the self-control of the civilised, giving in to atavistic impulses reminiscent of the 'evil and unspeakable lusts' that drive the Little People,<sup>58</sup> and turning to the vices of alcohol and substance abuse to relieve their exhaustion. The degenerates described by Nordau, meanwhile, are childlike in their lack of moral self-control and their incapacity for attention or rational thought, qualities implied by the mental backwardness of Jervase Cradock in the 'Novel of the Black Seal'.<sup>59</sup> In Nordau's view, the recognisable stylistic tics in the writing of degenerates echoes the inarticulate speech of the savage or the madman, another quality of the Little People, who are contrasted with 'articulate-speaking men'<sup>60</sup> and who communicate in reptilian hisses incomprehensible to civilised humans, or in coded signs and cryptic, primitive drawings. Lombroso, in the fourth (1889) edition of *Criminal Man*, discussed the tendency of criminals to 'express their thoughts through drawings, even when they could express them in words', and the 'hieroglyphics' used as code in prisons, explaining both with reverence to '[atavism]', similarly recalling the Little People's codes and drawings.<sup>61</sup> Nordau objected in similar terms to the writings of poets and thinkers whom he identified as higher degenerates. The poetry of Baudelaire or the philosophy of Nietzsche were, he argued, comprehensible only to other diseased minds. They did not make sense, and so, to the rational subject, were as opaque as secret code.<sup>62</sup>

Theorists of degeneration, then, detailed attributes in their degenerates with which we are already

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<sup>58</sup> Arthur Machen, 'The Shining Pyramid', in *The Great God Pan* (1895; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 77-110 (p. 103).

<sup>59</sup> Machen, 'Novel of the Black Seal', in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1895; London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 29-66 (pp. 44-45).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Lombroso, pp. 239-243.

<sup>62</sup> Nordau, p. 31, pp. 550-551.



familiar from the portraits of pre-human survivals given to us by Machen, and in the fairylore of the Victorian period. They do, however, differ in the emphasis they place upon outside factors in their accounts of the degenerative process. This difference appears to echo that between Darwinian and Lamarckian evolutionary thought, and it is reasonable to assume that perhaps different theorists were more or less strongly influenced by one of the two. For Morel, an alcoholic parent was doomed to produce degenerate offspring; the intoxicant would inevitably and permanently damage a hitherto healthy family line. Nordau, too, suggests that degeneration is at least in part an acquired condition. This seems less true of Lombroso, for whom the taint was always a hereditary one. Degenerates might negatively influence otherwise healthy individuals, and might produce degenerate children with healthy partners, but the physical tendency towards atavism is innate rather than acquired. But for all the protective strategies that Nordau and Lombroso propose, both alternatives make for deeply pessimistic narratives. When the integrity of the human subject is not under attack from all quarters, liable to be worn out by the pressure of modern life or tempted by dangerous vices, it is already doomed by heredity.

Glendening has pointed to wider social factors in Britain that may be viewed as contributors to an overarching cultural pessimism; an atmosphere in which narratives of degeneration-fear thrived, and to which they also contributed. Among these factors are

external sources of worry in the form of colonial setbacks and the growing power of international rivals; patriotic pride in the preeminent status of Britain brought quick loss of confidence once signs of falling away became apparent. The end of the century and the imminent death of Queen Victoria focused doubt, and science seems

to justify it on theoretical bases. Physics and the concept of entropy made degeneration appear cosmic, while biology rendered even the immediate future uncertain, since all life engages in a dubious evolutionary struggle between order and chaos, progress and degeneration, continued existence and extinction. Although many were relatively untouched by such concerns, currents of unease nevertheless flowed through society and coalesced in fiction.<sup>63</sup>

The narratives employed by writers of weird fiction may also be seen to evidence the above-mentioned split. There are stories in which the emphasis is on an external influence, a toxin or process causing the breakdown of the subject, or an influx of inhuman blood causing the species to alter. The latter type of story is, as might be expected, frequently heavy with anti-immigration sentiment or racism. In others, the degenerative process appears to occur spontaneously, resulting from nothing more than the inherently mutable and fragile nature of the human organism. But the weird tale takes and runs with the ominous threats proposed by scientific writers, and frequently discards or discounts their proposed solutions to the problem. There is rarely any possibility for redemption. Humanity—which here usually means a particular sub-set of humanity, circumscribed by class, race, nationality, gender, and age—may sometimes appear to be reaffirmed in the weird tale, with the degenerate subject being placed as someone Other, separated from the protagonist and implied audience by one of these factors, but when the “civilised” subject is caught up in the degenerative narrative, it cannot escape. The weird tale takes the spiralling inevitability implied in accounts like Morel’s, and runs with it, sometimes generalising it to a whole society or species, as Nordau did. In a sense, then, these fictional narratives are often even more pessimistic than the scientific ones that inspired them, allowing

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<sup>63</sup> Glendening, pp. 24-25.

the “human” subject no possibility for escape.

### **The ‘Novel of the White Powder’: Sex, Drugs and Degeneration**

Machen’s ‘Novel of the White Powder’, which appears alongside the ‘Novel of the Black Seal’ in *The Three Impostors* (1895), and is, in fact, related by the same character in another guise, appears to draw heavily upon Morel’s notion of the drug or toxin as a catalyst for degeneration. The narrator, here referring to herself as ‘Miss Leicester’, recounts the story of a horrific transformation undergone by her brother, Francis, after he is given out-of-date medication by a pharmacist. At the beginning of the tale, Francis is a determined aspiring lawyer who studies ‘from the first light in the east to the late afternoon’ and ‘[reads] about feudal tenures when[...]in need of amusement’.<sup>64</sup> There is, perhaps, the hint of something unhealthy in Francis’s workaholicism, and we are reminded of the way in which characters such as Professor Gregg are led to ruin by their obsessively pursued intellectual interests; again, an attribute associated with human progress and civilisation eventually proves the impetus for the human subject’s dissolution. Indeed, Francis’s lifestyle soon begins to make him ill, resulting in ‘nervous irritation’ (a phrase that could have come straight from Nordau) and a ‘wrinkled and despondent’ aspect.<sup>65</sup> The opening of the story contains another small hint of inherited weakness; we are told in the very first sentence of the tale that the Leicester siblings have lost their father to ‘a complicated liver complaint acquired in the deadly climate of India’.<sup>66</sup> However, the genesis of

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘Novel of the White Powder’, in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1895; London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 67-82 (p. 67).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

the illness in a non-European climate places it as an external infection, one belonging to a colonised country rather than something innate to the white, British version of humanity whose disintegration is meant to cause us horror. The story's narrative soon moves onto the effect of the titular 'White Powder', and seems to encompass some of Morel's notions about morality and Nordau's ideas about the stress of contemporary urban life along the way.

Upon first taking the drug, Francis's health appears to improve greatly. He becomes 'more cheerful than he [has] ever been', vows to allow himself some relaxation, and proposes a trip to Paris with his sister.<sup>67</sup> But even at this early stage, the narrative warns us that something is amiss. Francis does not treat his medicine as a simple necessity, but drinks it 'with a parade of carousal as if it had been wine from some choicest bin',<sup>68</sup> the suggestion of hedonistic enjoyment entirely at odds with his established character. He immediately becomes restless, and describes the view of the city from their window in highly-coloured, imaginative, even violent terms. He sees the city as though 'burning in flames', and imagines the sky 'raining blood' between the houses.<sup>69</sup> The image serves a dual purpose, illustrating the violent interpolation of nature into the urban landscape, and suggesting an hallucinatory aspect to Francis's perceptions. The medicine becomes a mind-altering drug, and under its influence, Francis begins to lose some of his capacity for rational thought, his ability to see the material world in empirically provable terms.

Of course, the use of drugs and alcohol is closely associated with a lack of proper moral restraint (particularly in Morel's account) and we soon begin to see evidence of this, too. The 'carousing' pleasure Francis takes in imbibing his medicine soon leads to pleasure-seeking of other kinds. He

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

becomes ‘a lover of pleasure, a careless and merry idler’, forgoing work, growing ‘fat’ at fine restaurants, and, it is implied, engaging in sex with prostitutes.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, his family loyalty wanes; he forgets his promise to take his sister to Paris, preferring to spend his time dining and dancing with college friends. He grows secretive, and soon alienates her, becoming a ‘stranger’.<sup>71</sup> This disavowal of family ties is salient; he is gradually falling out of kinship with other, civilised humans, ceasing to share in their values, descending on the evolutionary ladder. He begins to inspire instinctive disgust, like Machen’s Little People and Lombroso’s born criminals; his sister begins to suffer an ‘icy and intolerable weight’ on her mind when she speaks with him, and to feel ‘unutterable horror’.<sup>72</sup> On witnessing the first sign of her brother’s physical degeneration, a dark, bruise-like patch on his hand, she is seized with ‘grey horror’ that afflicts her in ‘an inner cell’, and faints, only coming around when he has left the room.<sup>73</sup> Shortly after the appearance of the black spot, Francis begins to display other signs of a physical alteration. He no longer eats, appearing to gain all the sustenance he needs from the medicine, and his sister notices ‘a look in his eyes[...]that was scarcely human’.<sup>74</sup> He is no longer alien just to her, but to the whole of the human species.

Lombroso viewed born criminals as particularly likely to inspire instinctive revulsion in women and children, whom he viewed as less evolved, and therefore possessing stronger unconscious instincts. However, when Miss Leicester calls a physician, Dr. Haberdon, to see her brother, he is equally revolted. He, too, experiences ‘unutterable horror’, he is unable to stand up steadily, and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

his speech becomes stammering and ‘unintelligible’.<sup>75</sup> The change in Francis is so profound—he has become so inhuman—that even educated, adult British men (“fully human” subjects) are able to sense the difference. The reader is irresistibly reminded of the changes wrought in some of Machen’s other characters by contact with the Little People. Like Selby in ‘The Red Hand’, Dr. Haberden loses some of his capacity for articulate speech, and his ability to control the outward show of his emotions briefly vanishes. Miss Leicester describes his lower lip as ‘[trembling] like a horse’s’, and this ascription to him of an animal characteristic suggests a descent on the evolutionary scale that, while temporary, is parallel to that of the human Thing that Francis has become.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Darwin had noted the similarity of the expression of fear in humans and other animals—including horses—as part of his argument for descent from a common progenitor.<sup>77</sup> In behaving in a manner that elides the difference between himself and a “lower” animal, Haberden makes a temporary reversion to the status of the progenitor. The extent of the change is thereby emphasised, Francis having reverted to an abhumanness that calls the humanity of civilised subjects into question. When Dr. Haberden departs, instructing Miss Leicester not to send for him again, Francis’s fate is sealed. The doctor ‘can do nothing in this house’.<sup>78</sup> This emphasis on the *house*, rather than the patient, is telling. Haberden extends the degenerative taint to the family as a whole, although Francis is the only one physically affected, paralleling the way in which knowledge of the human organism’s primitive origins may affect the self-conception of the species as a whole, and our sense of our own integrity, without physical alteration.

Francis’s condition quickly deteriorates from this point on. His sister finds his voice near-

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872; London: Fontana Press, 1999), p. 77, pp. 81-82.

<sup>78</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the White Powder’, p. 74.

unrecognisable, he ‘[struggles] to find utterance’, and his speech is difficult to understand.<sup>79</sup> Eventually, his capacity for language dissolves altogether. He makes a ‘choking, gurgling sound’, and a ‘noise like water bubbling and regurgitating’, but is unable to answer his sister’s questions with words. He is no longer an articulate-speaking man.<sup>80</sup> When Miss Leicester glimpses his face through the window of his bedroom (to which he is now confined), she sees no ‘human likeness’,<sup>81</sup> and his movements have become as ‘clumsy’ as those of ‘a beast’s paw’.<sup>82</sup> He has become a ‘thing[...]as formless as [her] fear’, with no fixed bodily integrity.<sup>83</sup> His physical form is now mutable, liable to abhuman becomings, approaching the condition of the primordial slime or ‘first matter’ that holds all forms of life in potential. Eventually, we discover that this is precisely what he has become. After several days’ worry, Miss Leicester and Dr. Haberden enter his room to find that he has decayed into a shapeless mass of some slimy substance. Spencer wrote of ‘definiteness’ as a characteristic of evolution, and distinguished ‘changes constituting disease’ from evolutionary advances by their lack thereof, their variability and confusion—attributes which he also identified in ‘decomposition’.<sup>84</sup> The organic matter Miss Leicester and Dr. Haberden discover has no fixed form, but is ‘seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before [their] eyes’.<sup>85</sup> Francis’s decomposing body has arrived at the abhuman condition, always becoming-other, forever in the process of reversion.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 75, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>84</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, pp. 362-363.

<sup>85</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the White Powder’, p. 78.

### ***The Great God Pan: Internal Forces?***

The narrative of *The Great God Pan* (1890, revised 1894) leads up to a similar scene, though drugs and potions play no part here. The story is told through a number of disparate accounts, and it is only Machen's characteristic use (some might say abuse) of coincidence that allows his characters to piece the whole of it together. Its central mystery is provided by a young woman known as Helen Vaughan, who is apparently conceived as part of a bizarre scientific experiment during which her mother encounters the titular god. Helen passes through a number of aliases, engaging in unspecified horrific practices, and causing the ruin and suicide of a number of respectable men along the way. A deliquescence much like Leicester's occurs at the end of the novella, with Helen's body undergoing several transformations before being reduced to a 'substance like to jelly'.<sup>86</sup> This process is witnessed and described by one Dr. Matheson, whose account incorporates several elements already familiar to us from the 'Novel of the White Powder'.

On entering the room where the transformation takes place, Matheson experiences 'horror and revolting nausea', as Machen's characters (and Lombroso's normal subjects) are wont to do when in the presence of the abhuman,<sup>87</sup> and as Dr. Haberdon and Miss Leicester do when they witness the changes in Francis's condition. Helen's body is surrounded by an 'odour of corruption' that reminds us of the 'bad smell' that accompanied Jervase Cradock's transformation in the 'Novel of the Black Seal', and is referred to as 'that', not 'she'.<sup>88</sup> Like Francis Leicester,

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<sup>86</sup> Arthur Machen, 'The Great God Pan', in *The Great God Pan* (1890, revised 1894; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 1-76 (p. 70).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.



she wavers between forms, moving ‘from sex to sex’ and ‘[descending] to the beasts’.<sup>89</sup> As Angelique Richardson has noted, the loss of sexual differentiation was considered ‘not only unnatural, but [...] an evolutionary falling away from higher organization’, since ‘humans had left hermaphroditism behind’.<sup>90</sup> Darwin had observed that ‘at a very early embryonic period both sexes possess true male and female glands’, and concurred that ‘some remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous’.<sup>91</sup> In the late nineteenth century, both masculinity in women and effeminacy in men were ‘expressions of degeneration’.<sup>92</sup> Dr. Matheson remarks upon this inconsistency as something challenging to his notion of the nature of the human organism, observing that ‘the firm structure of the human body that [he] had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve’.<sup>93</sup> Finally, she takes on a form that is ‘horrible and unspeakable’, ‘neither man nor beast’. This final shape can be referred to only in negatives, and Matheson finally asserts that he ‘will not further describe’ it.<sup>94</sup> Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton have stated that Helen’s transformation is ‘patently a reduction to first matter’,<sup>95</sup> conceived of as a slime or jelly, but perhaps her final shape is less important than its indescribable nature. It defies categorisation so far as to defy definition. Language fails again here, but it is not the abhuman subject who loses her capacity for language. Rather, it is language which loses its capacity to contain the abhuman.

On the strength of Matheson’s account, we might note the similarities between Helen Vaughan’s

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>90</sup> Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 41-42.

<sup>91</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 161.

<sup>92</sup> Richardson, p. 43.

<sup>93</sup> Machen, ‘The Great God Pan’, p. 69.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>95</sup> Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton, *Arthur Machen: A Short Account of His Life and Work* (London: John Baker, 1963), p. 46.

physical dissolution and Francis Leicester's, but might also note that, while Leicester's fate is the result of his having consumed a foreign toxin, Helen's has no such cause. A large part of Matheson's horror at what he witnesses appears to result from this assumption, and the challenges it poses to his existing knowledge. He claims that he 'should have refused to believe' the evidence of his own eyes, since he 'knew that the body may be separated into its elements by external agencies, but[...]here there was some internal force, of which I knew nothing, that caused dissolution and change'.<sup>96</sup>

This suggests immediately under which type we should classify the account of Helen Vaughan's physical degeneration, and the suggestion appears to be borne out by hints in the main body of the story, which suggest to us that the seed of degeneration has existed in her since birth; that she has never, in fact, been entirely human. Sometimes this is stated outright. During the period in which she is known in society as Mrs. Herbert, nobody is entirely sure 'who *or what*'<sup>97</sup> she is, and Mr. Herbert seems sure that the name by which he knew her cannot have been a real one, since '[only] human beings have names'.<sup>98</sup> Villiers describes her not as a human being, but as a 'that' which has 'manifested under human flesh', a usurper of the human form.<sup>99</sup> Physically, she appears strange, but indefinably so; those who encounter her experience an instinctive disgust—like that felt by ordinary humans in the presence of the Little People and the changed Francis Leicester—but are unable to explain it. Austin describes her as 'very handsome' but with 'something about her face which I didn't like'.<sup>100</sup> He is unable to define that 'something', saying

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<sup>96</sup> Machen, 'The Great God Pan', pp. 69-70.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

only that her expression is ‘strange’, but not how so.<sup>101</sup> His aversion to her manifests itself on the level of instinct, beyond or beneath that of language and empirical proof. On looking at a portrait of her, Clarke also identifies a quality that causes him to ‘[shudder][...] in his inmost soul’ but is only able to refer to it in vague terms, as ‘something’ and ‘[whatever] it was’.<sup>102</sup> Even after she has left a place, she appears to leave a taint or infection behind. Upon visiting a house in which she has lived, Villiers experiences a ‘queer’ feeling that eventually becomes full-blown ‘horror’ and finally leaves him bedridden for a week with nervous exhaustion, his self-control and ability to function normally temporarily impaired.<sup>103</sup>

This revulsion, which itself debases the fully human subjects who encounter Helen, overriding their reason with animal instinct, is by now familiar, having appeared in every other story considered so far. (Reynolds and Charlton argue that the story fails insofar as ‘[one] is apt to be nauseated, not awestruck, by the picture of physical dissolution’, but in this reading, such a reaction ought perhaps to be counted as a success.<sup>104</sup>) But Helen appears to bring about a more fundamental change in those unfortunates who fall under her influence for prolonged periods of time. Her first husband, Herbert, describes himself as having been ‘corrupted’ and ‘ruined[...]in body and soul’ by her,<sup>105</sup> and finds himself not only destitute, but involved in a public scandal surrounding the death of another man, apparently from fright. Villiers encounters another acquaintance, Crashaw, who has been involved with her and apparently witnessed the unspecified horrific practices in which she engages (never clearly defined, except that they appear to involve the summoning of other beings like her), and whose expression betrays an

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>104</sup> Reynolds and Charlton, p. 45.

<sup>105</sup> Machen, ‘The Great God Pan’, p. 28, p. 26.

‘infernal medley of passions’ unbefitting ‘human eyes’.<sup>106</sup> In encountering her, Crashaw has himself become something quite other than human: he has a ‘devil’s face’; he ‘no longer [belongs] to this world’.<sup>107</sup>

Crashaw eventually commits suicide, as do a number of other society gentlemen who become acquainted with Helen in her ‘Mrs. Beaumont’ guise. Their reasons for doing so are left to conjecture, but it appears that exposure to Helen and her mysterious practices have fundamentally altered them in some way, removing their humanity and replacing it with something baser, something ruled by instinct and emotion. Investigators attribute the deaths to ‘acute suicidal mania’,<sup>108</sup> and this itself might fit a degenerative account, the absence of reason being so frequently equated with the absence of humanity. Perhaps, however, Helen’s suicidal victims are conscious that they themselves are no longer fully human—like Annie Trevor, ‘no longer fit for Earth’<sup>109</sup>—and retain enough of human consciousness to wish to remove themselves from society and thus prevent the spread of infection.

The presentation of Helen Vaughan before we see her transformed, then, appears consistent with Matheson’s ‘internal force’; she is repeatedly marked as something other than human in the text, deliberately set up as something antithetical and destructive to the civilised (white, male) human subject.<sup>110</sup> However, if we follow Helen back to her point of origin—the experimental procedure with which the novella begins—we will find that the notion of an innate degenerative taint is

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>109</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, p. 110.

<sup>110</sup> Helen Vaughan’s otherness is also foregrounded in racial terms: she is described as being of ‘foreign character’ (Machen, ‘The Great God Pan’, p. 17), and her first husband believes her to be of Italian descent (p. 26).

somewhat more complex, and less restricted, than this. Helen herself is clearly marked as abhuman, but if it were solely she that were so marked, she would constitute only a small, localised threat. The taint that characterizes Helen, however, is not one located within a human family line; rather, it is introduced from outside during the initial experiment performed upon her mother (named, with rather heavy-handed irony, Mary). Dr. Raymond, who carries out the procedure upon Mary's brain, announces that she 'has seen the great god Pan',<sup>111</sup> an experience which results in the loss of Mary's reason (she suffers a fit of terror, and is left a 'hopeless idiot'<sup>112</sup>) and, nine months later, the birth of Helen. We are to assume that Helen's father is in fact the titular deity; her inhuman aspect comes precisely from her inhuman ancestry. The threat posed by Helen Vaughan herself, then, is located outside the human race. But there is another, more pernicious innate danger here: the passion for knowledge which drives Dr. Raymond and allows him to use Mary as an experimental subject with 'cool' indifference.<sup>113</sup> In doing so, he opens the door to the notion that humanity in fact exists in continuance with the inhuman, with entities whose grotesqueness is enough to drive rational subjects to suicide, and who are animated by the '[furious] lust' of prehistory.<sup>114</sup> The pursuit of progress results in both the inhumane treatment of Mary, and the violent reversion to type of the human species.

### **'The Disordered Earth': The Hereditary Threat in H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Lurking Fear'**

So far, the texts under discussion have focused on the degenerative breakdown of the individual

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

human subject. As already mentioned, however, alongside the studies of individual cases and lists of individual characteristics put forward by the theorists of degeneration runs a fear of degeneration on a wider scale—social or national. H. P. Lovecraft’s 1923 story ‘The Lurking Fear’ advances this one step further, taking the traditional degenerative narrative and extending it globally, positing a whole world ‘verminous with millions of cannibal devils’.<sup>115</sup> Although it was written considerably later than the two Machen stories we have already considered, many of their features—and those of the Little People stories considered in Chapter One—are still present in ‘The Lurking Fear’ (1923). The threatening landscape against which the human, with its veneer of civilisation, is powerless; the degenerative effect of encounters with the abhuman upon the psyche of “normal” humans; the threatening and unclassifiable nature of the once-human degenerate beings: all of these motifs recur in ‘The Lurking Fear’. The narrative itself, as it gradually reveals pieces of the whole picture, expands the locus of the eponymous fear from a small rural community to the whole world, taking the narrator’s sanity with it as he imagines the possible consequences of the story’s denouement.

‘The Lurking Fear’ is an episodic narrative, having been commissioned for serialisation in the magazine *Home Brew*, and each chapter revolves around a separate incident. The narrative begins with the nameless protagonist seeing the silhouette of a ‘nameless, shapeless abomination’ which has killed his two companions in the apparently deserted Martense mansion, atop Tempest Mountain.<sup>116</sup> After this experience, the narrator resolves to pursue his investigations, losing another companion, Arthur Monroe, and becoming briefly convinced that the killer is the vengeful ghost of one Jan Martense (murdered by his relatives in the eighteenth century) before

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<sup>115</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Lurking Fear’, in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. By S. T. Joshi (1923; London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 62-81 (p. 81).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

uncovering the mystery. The final chapter shows the narrator's second visit to the Martense mansion, after he has realised that the numerous mounds that run throughout the area are in fact burrows through which the horrors travel, and that there must be far more of them than he has previously believed. He makes his way to the cellar of the mansion, and hides behind a clump of vegetation when a storm—always the herald of a new horrific incident in the story—begins. From a hole at the base of the chimney, a multitude of creatures streams forth. The narrator shoots one of them and is finally able to determine its nature. Here, we learn that nameless horrors lurking beneath the mansion are, in fact, the missing Martense family themselves, degenerated—after years of isolation and indiscriminate breeding—to the level of gorillas, violent, cannibalistic and vastly numerous.

The story is littered with descriptions of the threatening landscape around the Martense mansion, a landscape reminiscent of the haunting, ancient hills and woods among which Machen's Little People lurk and snatch their victims. The impression of an area close to past epochs of history, times in which the human was not yet fully developed, or had not yet achieved dominance over all other species, is present here, as in Machen: the forest is described as 'primeval'<sup>117</sup> and (perhaps one of Lovecraft's favourite words) 'antediluvian'.<sup>118</sup> Its threatening aspect, too, is immediately brought to our attention. At the very beginning of the first chapter, the narrator tells us that this is 'not a wholesome landscape after dark', and suggests that he 'would have noticed its morbidity even had [he] been ignorant of the terror that stalked there'.<sup>119</sup> There is an abundance of plant life in the area, but this is presented to us as unhealthy overgrowth rather than

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

evidence of a hospitably fertile landscape. The vegetation is ‘unnaturally thick and feverish’;<sup>120</sup> the trees have ‘morbidly large boles’ and ‘vast serpent-like roots that [twist][...]malevolently’;<sup>121</sup> and on his climactic trip to the Martense mansion, the narrator makes his way through ‘diseased, precipitous abysses of haunted hillside forest’.<sup>122</sup> And the landscape is not merely unwholesome. It is personified as actively hostile. After the disappearance of his original companions, Bennett and Tobey, the narrator’s flight back to the village takes him past ‘wild-armed titan trees’ and is accompanied by ‘daemoniac mutterings of thunder’.<sup>123</sup> The storms peculiar to the area, usually accompanied by an attack from the lurking fear, are particularly sinister, and this is not the only time the narrator refers to them in demonic terms. Evil intent is similarly attributed to the storm during which Arthur Munroe meets his death, ‘the wolfish wind [rising] to daemoniac crescendoes of ululation’ and the storm itself being described as ‘Nature’s pandemonium’.<sup>124</sup> Even in the absence of the storms, the landscape is hostile—offering no protection to humanity from the lurking fear and its implications—or even actively malicious. Having deduced the full extent of the horror, the narrator describes it thus:

It was a peaceful Arcadian scene, but knowing what it hid I hated it. I hated the mocking moon, the hypocritical plain, the festering mountain, and those sinister mounds. Everything seemed to me tainted with a loathsome contagion, and inspired by a noxious alliance with distorted hidden powers.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 78.



Once again, we see a predatory nature, hostile to “civilised” humanity; and it is suggested that the isolation of the area and its remoteness from the centres of civilisation are at least in part responsible for the degeneration of both the Martenses and the local ‘squatter’ population.<sup>126</sup> We are told that ‘Dutch civilisation once feebly and transiently penetrated’ here, leaving behind only the Martenses and the ‘poor mongrels’ who inhabit the nearby hamlets, and whose degenerate nature is conveyed both directly, through the narrator’s commentary, and indirectly, through their naïve superstition.<sup>127</sup> We learn that the locals ‘[fear] outsiders’, and the narrator describes them as ‘[simple] animals[...]gently descending the evolutionary scale because of their unfortunate ancestry and stultifying isolation’.<sup>128</sup> Their belief that the lurking fear is some kind of ‘devil’<sup>129</sup> and that the thunder is ‘its voice’<sup>130</sup> marks them out as primitive, attributing supernatural explanations to that which they are unable to fathom. The Martense family, too, seem to have degenerated at least partly because of their isolation from other human beings. They shun the English and those other settlers who become Anglicised, and lead an ‘exceedingly secluded’ life, eventually becoming ‘heavy of speech and comprehension’ due to their self-imposed exile from society.<sup>131</sup> Alone in the midst of so hostile an environment, the human subject is unprotected from those forces that act upon it to remove its humanity, to return it to a form as primitive as its surroundings.

The most sinister features of the landscape, however, are the ‘odd mounds and hummocks’ that

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

run throughout the region,<sup>132</sup> and that can hardly fail to remind us of the tumuli beneath which Machen's Little People make their home, and of the Anglo-Saxon burial mounds traditionally thought to mark the entrance to fairyland or the land of the dead. They are twice described as 'sinister',<sup>133</sup> and eventually we learn that they provide the means of travel through which the Martense-descended creatures are able to appear and commit their murders, radiating outward from the mansion beneath which they live:

That summit [Tempest Mountain] was undeniably a centre from which the lines or rows of points radiated indefinitely and irregularly, as if the unwholesome Martense mansion had thrown visible tentacles of terror. The idea of such tentacles gave me an unexplained thrill, and I stopped to analyse my reason for believing these mounds glacial phenomena.<sup>134</sup>

It is not, then, the landscape alone which has created this threatening appearance, but the burrowing of the creatures. The interaction between nature at its wildest and a form of humanity already degenerate, or possessing an innate propensity for degeneration, seems to be at fault here. The threat comes not only from outside, but also from within the human organism.

The creatures which the Martenses have become are grotesques, reminiscent of both Machen's pre-human Little People and the born criminals and degenerates identified by the theorists of

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 72, p. 78.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-79.

degeneration. The Martense family, like Lombroso's born criminals,<sup>135</sup> became 'clannish and taciturn' as well as 'heavy of speech and comprehension' after retreating from the world, and also began to display a heightened and irrational emotionality, exhibiting an animalistic-sounding 'nervous responsiveness to the frequent thunderstorms'.<sup>136</sup> The family's increasingly noticeable 'animal aspect' is also remarked upon by Jonathan Gifford, the friend who discovers Jan Martense's murder.<sup>137</sup> The crime itself serves to further link them with Lombroso's criminals and Morel's immoral degenerates and to suggest a state of being far removed from the social structures of kinship. Like animals in the wild, the Martense family kills its own. Their speech, too, is further deteriorated at this point; like the hissing Little People, and like the degenerates whose use of language Nordau dismisses as 'echolalia',<sup>138</sup> they are losing their communicative faculties, able to speak only in 'broken gutturals'.<sup>139</sup> When lights cease to appear in the windows of the Martense mansion, the local villagers investigate and find it empty but for 'decaying furniture and scattered silverware', suggesting a way of life more similar to that of animals than that of humans, and evidencing how low the family's 'cultural level [has] fallen'.<sup>140</sup> By the time of the narrator's encounters with the creatures, they do not speak at all, but merely '[stare] with vacuous viciousness'.<sup>141</sup> On finding what the reader must assume to be a fraction of the skull of one of the creatures, the narrator decides that it must 'have belonged to a human skull at some time'.<sup>142</sup> The statement acquires a vicious irony once we realise that the creatures were indeed, at one time, human. Beneath the surface, then, the creatures' physical structure remains similar enough to that of "normal" humans to be mistaken for it, a fact which makes their existence

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<sup>135</sup> Lombroso, pp. 72-73, p. 78.

<sup>136</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Lurking Fear', p. 73.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>138</sup> Nordau, p. 270.

<sup>139</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Lurking Fear', p. 74.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

doubly horrifying; it does not require even a fundamental change to transform the human form into that of a ‘filthy[...]gorilla thing’.<sup>143</sup>

The number of ‘improvised penthouses’ in the mansion is also noted after the family’s ostensible departure, and the villagers discern from this how ‘numerous’ they must eventually have become.<sup>144</sup> There is the suggestion of a horrific fecundity here, a primitive, animal-like cycle of endless birthing that reduces the human to the level of breeding-stock, and that produces an ever-growing mass of degenerate subjects that may eventually outnumber and overwhelm “civilised” humans, just as Nordau feared. Witness the writhing mass of limbs made up by Machen’s Little People *en masse*,<sup>145</sup> or Lombroso’s horrified emphasis on the sheer number of criminals produced by the Juke family in the space of a few generations.<sup>146</sup> Lovecraft’s characteristic hyperbole reaches its pinnacle here, and the loathing the narrator displays for the multitudinous Martense offspring can perhaps only be conveyed by quoting the passage in its entirety:

The thing came abruptly and unannounced; a daemon, rat-like scurrying from pits remote and unimaginable, a hellish panting and stifled grunting, and then from that opening beneath the chimney a burst of multitudinous and leprous life—a loathsome night-spawned flood of organic corruption more devastatingly hideous than the blackest conjurations of mortal madness and morbidity. Seething, stewing, surging, bubbling like serpents’ slime it rolled up and out of that yawning hole, spreading like

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>145</sup> Machen, ‘The Shining Pyramid’, pp. 102-103.

<sup>146</sup> Lombroso, pp. 125-126.

a septic contagion and streaming from the cellar at every point of egress—streaming out to scatter through the accursed midnight forests and strew fear, madness and death.

God knows how many there were—there must have been thousands. To see the stream of them in that faint, intermittent lightning was shocking. When they had thinned out enough to be glimpsed as separate organisms, I saw that they were dwarfed, deformed hairy devils or apes—monstrous and diabolic caricatures of the monkey tribe. They were so hideously silent; there was hardly a squeal when one of the last stragglers turned with the skill of long practice to make a meal in accustomed fashion on a weaker companion. Others snapped up what it left and ate with slavering relish.<sup>147</sup>

The theme of fratricide is picked up again here, but with new layers of resonance; the ‘cannibal nutrition’ upon which the creatures subsist<sup>148</sup> calls on associations with and assumptions about “savage” peoples, and, in the context of the life-cycle, makes it abundantly clear that humanity is within a few generations of falling back into an existence evacuated of meaningfulness, in which new generations are spawned only to provide food for the strongest, who go on to produce yet more ‘cannibal devils’.<sup>149</sup>

As with every other abhuman life-form, the Martense ‘devils’ have a degenerative effect of their very own upon the human subject, here illustrated in both the physical violence they enact upon the human body, and the increasingly frenzied mindset of the narrator. The village massacred by

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<sup>147</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Lurking Fear’, p. 80.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

them is almost entirely obliterated; all that remains is ‘disordered earth[...]covered with blood and human debris bespeaking too vividly the ravages of daemon teeth and talons’.<sup>150</sup> No intact human form remains. The Martense creatures have torn apart its integrity, leaving behind the imprints of their own physicality. And in doing so—in proving their ability to prey upon humans—they push the human a notch lower on the scale of fitness-to-survive, ousting it from the top of the food chain. The death of Arthur Munroe is a smaller event, but no less shocking, and it appears significant that the creatures eat his face.<sup>151</sup> Individual subjectivity and identity are removed; the human becomes undifferentiated; it is pulled down into the cycle of reproducing, killing and eating.

More compelling—and perhaps even more horrific—is the gradual slide toward madness of the narrator, who initially presents himself to us as a rational, impartial observer, free from ‘foolhardiness’.<sup>152</sup> At the beginning of his first visit to the Martense mansion, he appears calm and well in control of his actions, arranging with Bennett and Tobey a strategy for best observing and, if necessary, evading the single creature he expects to see. After the disappearance of his two companions and the sight of the shadow on the chimney, he is severely shaken, suffering ‘horrible’ dreams and spending several days in a ‘nervously exhausted’ stupor.<sup>153</sup> Enervation and exhaustion are, of course, common characteristics of the degenerate; even after so brief an encounter, the sight of one of the Martense creatures is enough to pull the narrator toward its level. Even at this early stage, he fears that he may ‘break down completely’ if he is unable to

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

share his story.<sup>154</sup> The main reason he gives for his condition is the unclassifiable nature of the creature; it makes no sound by which he can identify it, but he cannot ‘cast off the instinct’ to do so.<sup>155</sup> The authority of the human is revoked here, its ability to know and to classify “lower” forms of life—and thus the certainty of its place above them—called into question.

After Munroe’s death, the narrator’s actions become increasingly erratic, increasingly irrational. He becomes temporarily convinced that the ghost of Jan Martense is responsible for the murders, his superstitious credulity reducing him to the level of the ‘simple’ squatters, and at the beginning of the third chapter we find him ‘digging alone and idiotically’ in Jan Martense’s grave.<sup>156</sup> Even after he finds the coffin empty, its long since returned to dust, he continues to ‘[delve] irrationally and clumsily down’ beneath its resting-place.<sup>157</sup> Eventually, the earth gives way beneath him, dropping him into one of the tunnels used by the Martense creatures to travel from their subterranean home, and causing him to become lost and hopelessly disoriented. He is placed on the same level as the creatures, figuratively and mentally as well as physically, his rational mind and even his humanity dissolving:

What language can describe the spectacle of a man lost in infinitely abysmal earth;  
pawing, twisting, wheezing; scrambling madly through sunken convolutions of  
immemorial blackness without an idea of time, safety, direction, or definite object?  
There is something hideous in it, but that is what I did. I did it for so long that life  
faded to a far memory, and I become one with the moles and grubs of nighted

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

depths.<sup>158</sup>

He becomes a subterranean life-form, like the Martense creatures, and identifies himself with organisms even less complex than they. By the time he encounters the creature in the tunnel, the narrator is left without conscious thought and relies solely upon instinct. He stops ‘automatically’ upon seeing the creature, but ‘[lacks] the brain to retreat’, and is saved only by a lightning-strike that causes the tunnel to cave in upon the creature.<sup>159</sup> Behaving like a rabbit hypnotised by a predator, he is effectively, positioned as prey, like a lower animal. The Martense creature actually occupies a higher place than him on the food-chain. The implications are clear: without rational thought, without civilisation, without ‘time, safety, direction or definite object’, a human being is very little removed—if at all—from the condition of these degenerate ‘devils’. After this incident, the narrator himself appears well aware that he is no longer the cool-headed, detached observer who began the narrative. He concedes that ‘[there] can be nothing normal in the mind of one who, knowing what I knew of the horrors of Tempest Mountain, would seek alone for the fear that lurked there’, and shows signs of succumbing gladly to mental degeneration, admitting that it may be ‘a relief and even a delight to shriek wildly and throw oneself voluntarily along with the hideous vortex of dream-doom into whatever bottomless gulf may yawn’.<sup>160</sup> This shift in attitude, this delight in abandoning oneself to the mercies of an external chaos, may well remind readers of the way in which thunderstorms were said to ‘intoxicate’ the Martenses,<sup>161</sup> and is later recalled by the uninhibited frenzy in which they pour forth from the mansion and

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 73.



commence killing and eating even one another. The slippage between human and degenerate horror grows ever more noticeable.

As is characteristic of Lovecraft's protagonists, upon witnessing the climactic horror—the degenerate Martense family, in all its numerousness—the narrator finally does lapse into a temporary madness, able to express his thoughts only through a series of horrible images, piling up lurid description in a manner reminiscent of some of Nordau's examples of degenerate art.<sup>162</sup> The passage is typical of Lovecraft's style at its most verbose, and far more vivid than any other section of prose in the story:

Shrieking, slithering, torrential shadows of red viscous madness chasing one another through endless, ensanguined corridors of purple fulgurous sky...formless phantasms and kaleidoscopic mutations of a ghoulish, remembered scene; forests of monstrous, overnourished oaks with serpent roots twisting and sucking unnamable juices from an earth verminous with millions of cannibal devils; mound-like tentacles groping from underground nuclei of polypous perversion...insane lightning over malignant ivied walls and daemon arcades choked with fungous vegetation...<sup>163</sup>

This in itself suggests a kind of revelling in madness, a susceptibility of the human subject to frenzied, irrational, impulses like those that motivate the Martense creatures. The final words of the story are, 'the terrible and thunder-crazed house of Martense',<sup>164</sup> serving to tie the narrator's madness and that of the once-human Martenses together, and to raise the question of just how

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<sup>162</sup> Nordau, pp. 11-12, p. 28.

<sup>163</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Lurking Fear', pp. 80-81.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

much integrity, how much stability, the “civilised” observer possesses.

The themes of the story are, in general, familiar to us already, both from the literature of degeneration, and from other weird tales that use biological fears of degeneration as their source of horror. However, those already considered have tended to question human supremacy on an individual level, focusing in on a single human subject. ‘The Lurking Fear’ extends these fears far wider, and not only because it focuses on the degeneration of a family rather than an individual. The narrator is horrified by the sheer number of the Martense creatures, certainly, but the horrors by which he is haunted do not concern only a remote region in the Catskills. In the passage quoted above, he imagines ‘an earth verminous with millions of cannibal devils’, and even after Tempest Mountain has been destroyed and its burrows stopped, he experiences terror at the sight of subterranean entrances, wondering ‘who can say[...]that analogous phenomena do not exist all over the world?’<sup>165</sup> The human really does appear under attack from all quarters here, inwardly and outwardly. Rather than being an isolated phenomenon, degeneration may be a worldwide one—and in the raising of this possibility, the fears of Lovecraft’s narrator echo the warnings of Nordau, Lombroso, and others. Without intervention, total social collapse is a real possibility. Perhaps the most telling detail of all is that the narrator fears that such phenomena may *already* exist. If this is the case, neither Lankester’s education nor Nordau’s censorship can save us. The structure may already be rotten; we may all be degenerates already.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

### **‘An accursed house’: Heredity and environment in ‘The Rats in the Walls’**

At first glance, ‘The Rats in the Walls’ (1924), composed by Lovecraft the year after ‘The Lurking Fear’, appears to be the simpler tale. Its principal narrative concerns the degeneration of one individual of unfortunate descent, the last survivor of a family ‘cursed of God’.<sup>166</sup> The protagonist, known only as Delapore, relocates from Virginia to England after the death of his only son, Alfred, injured in the First World War. He purchases his family’s ancestral home, Exham Priory, which has fallen into the possession of a relative of one Captain Edward Norrys, a former comrade of Alfred’s. The house itself has fallen into disrepair, the outer walls being the only part of the structure to remain intact, and Delapore soon learns that both Exham Priory and his family are the subjects of much local superstition. The last of Delapore’s ancestors to live in the Priory, Walter de la Poer, fled to America after apparently murdering several of his relatives—but this in itself is not the source of the superstitions. Exham Priory is generally held to have been built on the site of a Druidic temple, and bizarre rites are rumoured to have been practised there right until the house’s desertion. On moving into the house, Delapore begins to suffer bad dreams in which he sees a swineherd with a flock of grotesque beasts in a ‘twilit grotto’,<sup>167</sup> and imagines that he hears rats scuttling downwards in the old stone walls, though other humans are unable to hear them; the only other beings aware of their presence are the house cats, who attempt to chase them. He and Norrys follow the distressed cats, and eventually realise that there must be a still older structure beneath the sub-cellar of the house. This turns out to be the grotto of Delapore’s dreams, and contains skeletal evidence that the de la Poer family did, in fact, raise human cattle for consumption as part of the cult that centred around their home.

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<sup>166</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Rats in the Walls’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1924; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 89-108 (p. 93).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Delapore's companions are horrified, but he follows the sound of the rats into the darkness, eventually becoming lost. He is found three hours later alongside Norrys's half-eaten corpse, his speech gradually degenerating into incomprehensible noises, and ends the book imprisoned in a mental hospital, still haunted by the sound of rats scuttling in the walls. Many of the motifs here are familiar from 'The Lurking Fear': the subterranean chamber of horrors beneath the ancestral mansion; the family's unsavoury reputation and isolation from its neighbours; the physical and mental degeneration that takes place amongst the inhabitants of the underground grotto; and the eventual destruction of the house in order to wipe out every trace of what took place there.

Hereditary degeneration is certainly a factor here, and its consequences perhaps appear more frightening for being able to manifest themselves after several centuries of apparent normality. Delapore is the descendant of an 'abhorred line',<sup>168</sup> and the horror of the circumstances surrounding Walter de la Poer's departure from England, though not their nature, is made clear: the murders were 'intensely hideous, though largely unexplained',<sup>169</sup> and the experience which provoked them is hinted to have been more disturbing still. We learn that '[this] deliberate slaughter[...]was largely condoned by the villagers, and so slackly treated by the law that its perpetrator escaped honoured, unharmed, and undisguised to Virginia; the general whispered sentiment being that he had purged the land of an immemorial curse'.<sup>170</sup> Walter himself makes no attempt to clear his name or regain Exham Priory, fleeing the country '[shaken] by some horror greater than that of conscience or the law, and expressing only a frantic wish to exclude the ancient edifice from his sight and memory'.<sup>171</sup> Some months after his departure, a huge swarm of

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

rats bursts out of the abandoned Priory, rampaging across the surrounding area and devouring everything in its path. The family's name is changed to 'Delapore', so desperate are its descendants to distance themselves from the occupants of Exham Priory and their activities. The history is erased as far as possible, the family maintaining a 'policy of reticence' with regards to its past; Delapore himself knows only 'the bare statistics of [his] ancestry[...]together with the fact that [his] first American forbear had come to the colonies under a strange cloud'.<sup>172</sup> All remaining information regarding the family's past is contained in an envelope passed down the generations, and the envelope is destroyed when the family's American home, Carfax, burns down and Delapore's grandfather perishes in the flames.<sup>173</sup> The text explicitly links the burning of the house to the Civil War, but when we take into account the deliberate later destruction of Exham Priory, and the self-immolation of the titular character in one of Lovecraft's other most famous stories of hereditary horror, 'Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family', it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that perhaps Delapore's grandfather destroyed himself, and the letter, deliberately. And at first, this obfuscation of history appears to work; Delapore becomes preoccupied with business, losing 'all interest in the mysteries which evidently [lurk] far back in [his] family tree'.<sup>174</sup>

But, as always in Lovecraft, heredity is not so easily escaped. As if drawn back irresistibly through the ages, it is Alfred, the narrator's son, who first begins to uncover the family's 'colourful and perhaps sinister' past.<sup>175</sup> We learn that in the Anchester area, near Exham Priory, the family and its former home are surrounded by 'peasant superstitions which few novelists

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

could equal for wildness and incredibility',<sup>176</sup> and that the locals view the house as a 'haunt of fiends and werewolves'.<sup>177</sup> Alfred finds himself 'somewhat avoided' in the town during his stay there, and when the narrator moves to England to supervise the restoration after his death, he too is 'subtly ostracized' because of his heritage.<sup>178</sup> This avoidance does not seem entirely unfounded, however: according to the historical record, the de la Poer family was 'a race of hereditary daemons beside whom Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade would seem the veriest tyros', and may have been responsible for the occasional disappearances of villagers.<sup>179</sup> This emphasis upon heredity emphasises a degeneracy apparently innate in the de la Poer family, and capable of lying dormant, hidden in the family line, for generations. This seems to be borne out by the manner in which Delapore's own descent into atavism takes place. The first hint of it is signalled by his choosing to return to the old spelling of his name, 'de la Poer',<sup>180</sup> and the dreams he subsequently experiences showing the farming of human cattle by the de la Poer family in their subterranean grotto.<sup>181</sup> During his climactic breakdown over Norrys's dead body, Delapore references his family name four times in his ravings, as well as mentioning his son and grandfather, and alluding to the cousin who brought about a scandal by becoming a voodoo priest after the Mexican War.<sup>182</sup> So far, so specific; the fear of evolution reversing itself, and of the horrific possibilities that may lurk in our own heredity, are well-worn themes in Lovecraft, and seem to appear in fairly typical form here. The markers of degeneracy are obvious: Delapore reverts to cannibalism, a practice traditionally associated with "primitive" racial Others; he runs into the darkness underground, like a cave-dweller; and he loses his capacity for language,

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 98, pp. 100-101, p. 103.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

descending through various earlier forms of English (identified by Spencer as the most highly-evolved of languages<sup>183</sup>) to Latin, Gaelic, and eventually, inarticulate mumbling.<sup>184</sup> The de la Poer line is a tainted one, and its descendants risk being engulfed by atavistic madness at any time.

But the threat here is not quite so narrow. The most obvious clue to this may be the ‘inner cult’ that apparently existed in the de la Poer family prior to Walter’s flight to America, and the members of which, presumably, engaged in these ancient rites and cannibal practices.<sup>185</sup> We learn that ‘[temperament] rather than ancestry was evidently the basis of this cult’, and that Lady Margaret Trevor, one of its most infamous members, had in fact married into the family.<sup>186</sup> (One wonders whether this maiden name is a deliberate borrowing from Machen, intended to evoke the orgiastic rites of ‘The Shining Pyramid’.) The propensity for degeneration to the level of the cannibal, then, is not exclusive to the de la Poer line; it exists in potential in others, too. And, interestingly, we are also informed that the history of the de la Poer family was not always one of depravity. There exists, in fact, ‘no evil report’ of the family before 1261, the date when it moved into Exham Priory, and Delapore speculates that ‘something strange must have happened then’.<sup>187</sup>

It is tempting to read house and family as synonymous here, and the association of the two in local superstition,<sup>188</sup> as well as the series of improbable coincidences by which it falls back into

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<sup>183</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 347.

<sup>184</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Rats in the Walls’, p. 108.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>188</sup> ‘I was forced to go outside the immediate locality [for workmen], for the Anchester villagers had an almost unbelievable fear and hatred of the place. This sentiment was so great that it was sometimes communicated to the

Delapore's possession (and which it is perhaps reasonable to read as more than coincidence, given the determinism of Lovecraft's worldview) appear to support this. But the site of Exham Priory was a place of ill repute long before the de la Poer family resided there. It is apparently generally agreed that the Druidic temple upon the site played host to 'indescribable rites', and that the Cybele cult introduced by the Romans incorporated these older traditions into its own. This 'nameless' worship proceeded throughout the Saxon era, the Priory housing a 'strange and powerful monastic order' until at least 1000 A.D., and inspiring fear and loathing among its neighbours.<sup>189</sup> As mentioned above, the family itself only gained its unsavoury reputation after moving into the Priory. There appears to be something about the house—or at least its site—  
itself which contributes to this reversion to "primitive" behaviours and beliefs.

The Exham Priory into which Delapore moves is substantially renovated, its interior being 'free from old vermin and old ghosts alike'.<sup>190</sup> The only remaining parts of the original structure are the stone outer walls—the walls in which Delapore hears the rats. The sound of the rats, in turn, leads him below the sub-cellar to the 'twilit grotto' that he has already seen in his hereditary dreams, and to which he refers with the exact same phrase.<sup>191</sup> Here, Delapore and his companions encounter the evidence of his family's compulsions, and of the human cattle they kept: an 'insane tangle' of skeletal remains, stretching out from the staircase '[like] a foamy sea', the simile itself evoking suggestions of humanity's marine origins.<sup>192</sup> The bones comprise both 'supremely and sensitively developed types'—presumably those members of the de la Poer cult

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outside labourers, causing numerous desertions; whilst its scope appeared to include both the priory and the ancient family'. (Ibid., p. 91.)

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 105.



unfortunate enough to have been trapped underground and devoured by the swarm of rats that burst forth from the house a few months after Walter de la Poer's departure—and degraded skulls denoting ‘nothing short of utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom’ which can only be described as ‘semi-human’.<sup>193</sup> The descendants of the unfortunate villagers abducted as to serve as cattle for the de la Poer cult must themselves have degenerated through several stages of evolution, their remains displaying many of the typical signifiers of degeneration (‘cretinism’ was a particular obsession of Morel's,<sup>194</sup> while Lombroso believed that one could identify a born criminal from the shape of his or her head<sup>195</sup>) and ending up somewhere ‘lower than the Piltdown man in the scale of evolution’.<sup>196</sup> These bones, we must assume, belong to the ‘fungous, flabby beasts’ of Delapore's dreams, and the more highly developed remains to the ‘daemon [swineherds]’ from whom he himself is descended.<sup>197</sup> The threat of backsliding is extended here, albeit in a slightly different form. While the de la Poers (and later, Delapore himself) continue an ancient religion and return to the “primitive” practice of cannibalism, the descendants of their captives have degenerated to the level of lower animals, becoming prey or cattle.

Darwin notes that ‘domestic races of animals[...]often exhibit an abnormal character, as compared with natural species; for they have been modified not for their own benefit, but for that of man’,<sup>198</sup> and that they are ‘much more liable to[...]monstrosities than species living under their natural conditions’,<sup>199</sup> and this appears to be what has happened here. The human agency that would, for Galton, offer an opportunity for human “improvement”, is here employed to

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

<sup>194</sup> Morel, pp. 662-680.

<sup>195</sup> Lombroso, p. 233.

<sup>196</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Rats in the Walls’, p. 105. The Piltdown Man was not exposed as a hoax until 1953, six years after Lovecraft's death.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>198</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, I, p. 4.

<sup>199</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, p. 413.

opposite effect. This blurring of the line between humans and cattle is an equally powerful source of horror. It is the near-human features of these beasts that most disturb Delapore in his dreams,<sup>200</sup> while Thornton, the psychic investigator accompanying the party, faints when he is informed that ‘some of the skeleton things must have descended as quadrupeds through the last twenty or more generations’.<sup>201</sup>

The horror extends beyond the de la Poer family in the story’s present, too. In his fit of madness before being discovered, Delapore kills and partially eats Captain Norrrys, whose face he has previously imagined on one of the ‘fungous beasts’ of his dreams.<sup>202</sup> All of this occurs deep within the earth, this grotto of horrors being the foundation of each building upon the site, from the Druidic temple to the renovated Exham Priory. The cavernous space itself holds a kind of architectural record of every epoch of history during which it has been used. It contains ‘a weird pattern of tumuli [harking back to the underground homes of the Little People], a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood’.<sup>203</sup> The symbolism is not difficult to grasp. Every civilisation to have existed upon English soil has been built upon the same foundation: ‘savage’, primitive instinct. The point is underlined by Sir William’s observation that ‘the passage[...]must have been chiselled *from beneath*’.<sup>204</sup> Simply visiting the site of his ancestors’ crimes is enough to trigger a reversion in Delapore, and to drag Norrrys, too, back to the level of a prey animal. Darwin’s observation that a return to earlier conditions of life—as in the case of animals becoming ‘feral’—may in some cases cause ‘reversion to the primitive state’ is here recalled, and the swiftness of Delapore’s reversion

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 104. (Emphasis in original.)

suggests a degenerative tendency greater even than that of the “lower” animals.<sup>205</sup> The supremacy of humans, both moral and evolutionary, is revealed to be just so much window dressing. The real interior is little altered.

Carolyn Daniel, in her study of eating in children’s literature, in which she draws parallels between the socialisation of children and the “civilisation” of “savages”, has argued for the importance of properly controlled eating for entrance into human society.<sup>206</sup> The child—the “little savage”—must learn to eat the correct things at the correct times in order to become completely human. The cannibal is the ultimate “bad” eater,<sup>207</sup> refusing the values of society and representing a ‘brutish, immoral, uncivilised state’ in colonial discourse.<sup>208</sup> The cannibal refuses to regulate appetite and instinct appropriately; he or she also refuses to recognise the singularity of the human as a body that must not become meat, a life that must not be destroyed in the struggle for survival. The unspeakable act and the refusal of anthropocentrism are mutually reinforcing.

The act of cannibalism is in fact more than unspeakable; it defies representation altogether. Richter notes the frequency with which ‘the cannibal scene is[...]approached *a posteriori*: the cooking pot and the scattered bones tell us what (supposedly) happened—but the act itself is never directly witnessed’.<sup>209</sup> The act of cannibalism need not be seen to happen in order to be accepted; rather than being a social practice, it is a label used to mark as Other the peoples

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<sup>205</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, pp. 5-6.

<sup>206</sup> Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 15-20.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>209</sup> Richter, p. 124.

oppressed by European colonialism, a ‘prefabricated part of colonial discourse’.<sup>210</sup> The image of the cannibal only begins to invoke what Richter terms ‘anthropological anxiety’ ‘when it moves closer to home, when the European traveller really becomes involved’. Most strikingly, ‘the danger of eating is more threatening to his integrity than [*sic*] the danger of being eaten’.<sup>211</sup> Engaging in cannibalism is ‘the surest sign that the white man has irrevocably crossed the border from self to Other’.<sup>212</sup> That Delapore is unable to represent—even to acknowledge—his own cannibalism gains a new significance here. No longer a self—a speaking, colonising subject—he loses access to the realm of representation and meaning. His words, even after he recovers the ability to speak English, are those of a madman. They can no longer be recognised as truth, for Delapore can no longer speak with the authority of the properly human subject.

The human, then, seems innately prone to degeneration, and the downward spiral able to be triggered by simple exposure to the evidence of its past. There are arguably, however, suggestions that the scope of degenerative possibility is greater still, and these exist in the motif that marks Delapore’s madness: the rats of the title. We never see the rats, but it is the sound of their scurrying that leads Delapore down to the subterranean grotto, and it is that sound—‘determined to lead [him] on even unto [the] grinning caverns of Earth’s centre’—which he follows before becoming lost in the darkness and attacking Norrys.<sup>213</sup> We also know that, several months after Walter de la Poer’s flight from England, a huge number of rats swept down from the Priory, wreaking havoc across the countryside and destroying those who still dwelt in the underground cavern. Delapore sees the rats in his dreams of the place, ‘devouring beasts and man

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>213</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Rats in the Walls’, p. 107.

alike'.<sup>214</sup> Even the de la Poers and their human cattle are reduced to the same level here; food for the rats, and no better equipped than the rodents to survive. The undifferentiated multitude of rats seems to represent a threat from still further down the evolutionary scale, and one that envelops the human, the degenerate human, and the animal without discrimination. It is perhaps significant that Delapore, after his imprisonment in the asylum, continues to deny his part in Norriss' death, insisting that it was the rats that devoured him, and attributing his descent into horror to their lead:

When I speak of poor Norriss they accuse me of a hideous thing, but they must know that I did not do it. They must know it was the rats; the slithering, scurrying rats whose scampering will never let me sleep; the daemon rats that race behind the padding in this room and beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls.<sup>215</sup>

The phrase 'hideous thing' here is interesting, recalling as it does the opening lines of 'Arthur Jermyn' with their assertion that '[life] is a hideous thing'.<sup>216</sup> It is this undifferentiated, undifferentiating mass of crawling lower life that is ultimately responsible for Delapore's breakdown, and that proves to be the final leveller of all forms of humanity, reducing them to fodder for this 'nauseous' army.<sup>217</sup> The sound of rodent scurrying continues to haunt Delapore well after his breakdown, and perhaps this is because it reminds him not only of the horrific acts committed by his own family, or the terrible history of Exham Priory, but of the nature of life

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>216</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family', in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1921; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 14-23 (p. 14).

<sup>217</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Rats in the Walls', p. 98.

itself, a cycle of breeding and eating that must be performed by all living organisms, regardless of their complexity or development, and that can reclaim them at any time. Any attempt to rise above it can be only a temporary anomaly. The human is indeed doomed. Not only is the human subject innately prone to atavistic reversion, but it is surrounded on all sides by that which may trigger such reversion—for life itself is inherently degenerate. And if life itself is degenerate, degeneration is unavoidable. While these narratives mirror the concerns of individual and wider social breakdown expressed by the theorists of degeneration, their outlook is a far more pessimistic one. Lombroso and Nordau focused their concerns upon particular sub-groups within society (the criminal, the mentally ill)—groups from which their readership would be able to distance itself. The degeneration narrative of the weird tale seems to refuse this distinction. The threat of degenerative breakdown is everywhere, surrounding and permeating the unfortunate (perhaps temporarily) human subject.

### **‘The Mound’ and the Decline of Civilisations**

A conception touched on in the figure of Machen’s Professor Gregg is that of progress as the agent of degeneration. Daniel Pick notes this ‘apparent paradox’ in his survey of late nineteenth-century evolutionary thought:

Evolutionary scientists, criminal anthropologists and medical psychiatrists confronted themselves with the apparent paradox that civilisation, science and economic progress might be the catalyst of, as much as the defence against, physical

and social pathology.<sup>218</sup>

Here, once again, degeneration is a threat not just to racial or lower-class others, but to “civilised” subjects. Equally important is the image of the crowd, or of ‘crowd civilisation’.<sup>219</sup> The crowd, as Pick points out, was more than just a group of people: it was

the point of connection between present and past—between the individual and a vast array of ancestors. The crowd inverted the law of evolution and moved from present to past. Instead of individual development, it tended towards homogeneity; ‘personal characteristics vanish in the crowd’.<sup>220</sup>

The degeneracy of the civilised and the fear of the crowd coalesced in the city. English theorists of degeneration figured the city as a site of infection which would eventually spread throughout the national body; they predicted a ‘process of decline in which a relative deterioration in the body of the city population in turn undermined the “imperial race” with ensuing disintegrative effects upon the nation and empire’.<sup>221</sup> In the 1860s, Pick tells us,

the question of the ‘degeneration of the race’ was entertained in [*The Lancet*] with references to Darwinian and Spencerian evolution, and with dark thoughts about the future of the cities and more specifically about the capital as a literal breeding ground

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<sup>218</sup> Pick, p. 11.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

of decay.<sup>222</sup>

The notion of a ‘coherent rational subject’<sup>223</sup> became dissolved in the social; in a history whose ‘subject, cause and force’ was degeneration.<sup>224</sup> Education, position, and status afforded no protection; indeed, those at the pinnacle of ‘civilisation’ might be the first to succumb.<sup>225</sup> The literature surrounding these fears ‘reflected back on European society in deeply unsettling ways’;<sup>226</sup> indeed, Pick’s description of it might be applied with relative ease to the fin-de-siècle Gothic, or to the weird tale itself:

Indeed social questions involving crime, moral decadence and racial pollution began to intersect more and more insistently around the middle of the century. Between the 1820s and the 1840s a massive new literature had emerged charting the phenomenon of crime in the cities: a plethora of sensational stories fetishised, romanticised and reviled the criminal mysteries of a Paris, a Naples, a London. Dangerous classes and dangerous races multiplied in literature.<sup>227</sup>

Machen’s London, haunted by evolutionary throwbacks, and Lovecraft’s fantastical lost cities with their alien inhabitants, would echo these fears in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fears of the mob intersected with scientific conceptions of degeneration, resulting in a ‘shift from notions of the individual degenerate (as sustained by nosological models of

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 21.



*dégénérescence*) towards a bio-medical conception of crowd and mass civilisation as regression'.<sup>228</sup> Biological anomaly became social destiny; civilisation was built upon 'a whole subterranean world of racial inheritance'.<sup>229</sup> The edifice of the city—an achievement of "civilised" humanity—held the potential for atavism at its heart, and threatened to reveal the precariousness of "civilised" society. The scope of degenerative potential widened, as it was no longer able to be isolated as something that happened in anomalous cases.

This 'subterranean world' is dramatised, in quite literal form, in one of Lovecraft's lesser-known stories, 'The Mound'. Ghostwritten for Zealia Bishop Reed in 1929-1930, but not published until 1940, after Lovecraft's death (and then only in abridged form), 'The Mound' tells of the narrator's investigation of a mysterious artificial tumulus in western Oklahoma, and the horrific story told in a manuscript he finds there, left by a previous traveller. The mound itself is one of the entrances to an underground realm whose people—the inheritors of a once-proud civilisation, possessed of various preternatural abilities—have physically and socially degenerated into incorporeal shadows, amusing themselves by acting out their ancestors' past glories. The social decline dramatised in 'The Mound' is certainly not unique in Lovecraft's fiction; the tales already discussed here show the decline of degenerate individuals and families, and the narrative of social degeneration appears in modified form in 'The Nameless City' (1921) and 'At the Mountains of Madness' (1936), whose alien civilisations appear, like that in 'The Mound', to have entered a period of decline before their demises (though, in the event, the apparent degeneration of the Old Ones' art in 'Mountains' turns out to have another, more immediately dangerous, cause.)

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

S. T. Joshi, in his study, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, discusses the story at some length, suggesting that it may have its roots in Lovecraft's reading of Oswald Spengler, whose treatise, *The Decline of the West* (vol. I 1918, vol. II 1922), argues that decline is inevitable, and civilisation the 'old age' of culture.<sup>230</sup> To view Lovecraft's treatment of the theme of decline as something influenced solely by Spengler would be a mistake, however. Certainly, Spengler's central metaphor of culture-as-organism invokes the biological, recalling Pearson's assertion that '[permanence] and dominance in the world passes to and from nations even with their rise and fall in mental and bodily fitness'<sup>231</sup> and Galton's comparison of towns to organisms and individuals within them to 'the individual cells of one of the more complex animals'.<sup>232</sup> Herbert Spencer in fact employed an exact mirror of Spengler's metaphor, suggesting in his *Principles of Biology* (1864) that 'the general reader cannot in any other way obtain so clear a conception of functional development in organisms, as he can by tracing out functional development in societies', and going on to compare the differentiation and interdependence of organs to that of different professions within society.<sup>233</sup> As Richter has pointed out, however, Spengler is primarily concerned 'not[...]with individual health or social disease but with a metaphysical desire for extinction that takes hold of the whole "organism" of a nation'.<sup>234</sup> In contrast, the individual and 'social disease' are frequently central concerns in Lovecraft. I do not mean to argue that the influence is nonexistent—but to argue for a simple line of descent from one work to another is to ignore that both existed in a wider context in which anxieties about biological

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<sup>230</sup> S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Berkeley Heights: Wildside Press, 1990) p. 134.

<sup>231</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Scope and Importance to the State of the Science of National Eugenics* (1907; London: Dulau, 1911), p. 10.

<sup>232</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, pp. 349-355, p. 361.

<sup>233</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 160, p. 164.

<sup>234</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 195.

degeneration had been under consideration for decades.

*H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* is a deeply flawed piece of work, relying, as it does, upon a naïve authorial intention approach to literature, and upon a gross mischaracterisation of other schools of criticism to justify this approach.<sup>235</sup> Joshi wavers between the ahistorical ('criticism is nothing but the confrontation of one mind with another'<sup>236</sup>) and the simplistic ('the author, being a product of his cultural environment, unconsciously absorbs certain metaphysical, ethical, or political biases of his time and reflects them in his work'.<sup>237</sup>) A little later, Joshi acknowledges that 'an author manipulates as well as being manipulated by his environment',<sup>238</sup> but, for the most part, retains a limited view of literature as an expression of the worldview of individual 'great intellects' whose reception is determined 'on the one hand by the power of the author to convey his message and on the other hand by the intelligence and background of the reader'.<sup>239</sup> Bizarrely, despite his emphasis upon Lovecraft's reading and intellectual background, the notion of the fictional text as embedded in a social context and a pervasive scientific or pseudo-scientific discourse is mostly absent. *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* is useful, however, in its delineation of that intellectual background, and in its attention to the representation of decline in the relatively little-discussed 'The Mound'. Joshi moves from a discussion of Lovecraft's eventual, qualified acceptance of the notion of entropy<sup>240</sup> to his view of mechanisation as a principal contributor to social decline.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> See Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, pp. iii-v for Joshi's outline and justification of his approach.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iv.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Lovecraft, Joshi argues, regarded the artistic productions of the likes of Eliot, Joyce, and e. e. cummings as symptomatic, ‘beyond the pale of art and[...]indicative of a general state of culture in serious decay’.<sup>242</sup> Nordau’s ideas about degenerate art and its dangers spring irresistibly to mind. Indeed, if for Lovecraft, intellectual curiosity is ‘the highest ethical purpose of man’,<sup>243</sup> perhaps even ‘the highest trait possible in the cosmos’,<sup>244</sup> then the intellectual degradation signalled by this perceived decline in the quality of artistic production does not just bear out the notion identified by Pick, that those at the highest point of civilisation may be the most vulnerable to backsliding: it undermines the very basis of humanity, the ‘*psychological distinction*’ that separates us from the lower animals.<sup>245</sup> The social and the biological are, once again, interlinked. Joshi suggests that the strongest influence of Spengler’s work on Lovecraft’s is this: ‘the consideration of all facets of civilisation (politics, economics, science, art) as interdependent’.<sup>246</sup> Spengler talks about the decline of culture-as-organism, rather than of the individual organism. Cultures, for Spengler, ‘*are organisms*, and world-history is their collective biography. Morphologically, the immense history of the Chinese or of the Classical Culture is the exact equivalent of the petty history of the individual man, or of the animal, or the tree, or the flower’.<sup>247</sup> The social and the biological are entangled once more—and the idea of degeneration as inescapable social force noted by Pick is reiterated. The individual degenerate may not be the focus of Spengler’s work, or of ‘The Mound’, but there is no escape for him. The central manuscript narrative of ‘The Mound’, the story of the unfortunate Pánfilo de Zamacona y Nuñez, illustrates this in dramatic fashion, as do the experiences of the several previous visitors to the

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 43. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>247</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (vol I 1918, vol II 1922; London: Allan & Unwin, 1934), p. 104. (Emphasis in original.)

mound about whom the narrator learns.

A young skeptic named Heaton visits the mound and returns ‘strangely impaired’,<sup>248</sup> raving about apparently impossible things, ‘inhuman captors and grotesque tortures, and[...]other fantastic abnormalities too complex and chimerical even to remember’.<sup>249</sup> The next explorer to visit, a veteran adventurer named Captain Lawton, vanishes for over a week upon arriving at the mound. When Lawton returns, he is ‘*younger* by as much as forty years’, having actually physically regressed to an earlier stage of his life-cycle.<sup>250</sup> And, lest the reader think that this renewal of youth might not be such a bad thing after all, he has forfeited his humanity and his identity in the process: he is now an ‘object’ rather than a person, and is repeatedly referred to as ‘it’.<sup>251</sup> Although he remembers his name, it no longer really belongs to him. We are told that ‘[it] said it was—or had been—Capt. Lawton’, and, a little later, that ‘[it][...]kept repeating the name ‘George Lawton, George E. Lawton’ as if trying to reassure itself of its own identity’.<sup>252</sup> Like Heaton, he ‘[babbles] of incomprehensible things’.<sup>253</sup> Lawton’s human (white, male, high-status) identity is effaced, and with it goes his reliability as a witness. Whether or not Lawton is mad (and this is certainly a possibility, despite the truth of his statements; encounters with Lovecraftian horrors, after all, have a tendency to induce madness), in the eyes of the world, he is robbed of his reason. This perceived inability to function intellectually, and an apparent regression to somewhere below the level of the human, go hand in hand. A third visitor, Ed Clay, loses not his reason, but his ability to articulate experience through language. His suicide note

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<sup>248</sup> H. P. Lovecraft and Zealia Bishop Reed, ‘The Mound’, in *The Loved Dead and Other Stories*, ed. by M. J. Elliot (1940; Ware: Wordsworth, 2007), pp. 141-206 (p. 145).

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

says of the mound people, ‘what they do cant [*sic*] be spoke about’.<sup>254</sup> Again, we see the erasure of a characteristic essential to the ‘*psychological* distinction’ between humans and other animals that Joshi suggests even nineteenth-century scientific writers were keen to preserve.<sup>255</sup>

These instances of individual backsliding associated with the mound serve as introductory hints to the nature of the central manuscript narrative, giving us some idea of what the outcome of Zamacona’s adventure will be (though, in fact, his own fate is quite distinct from that of these others), if not of its content more generally. Indeed, we will later realise that Lawton’s apparently nonsensical exclamation, ‘*that white man—oh, my God, what they did to him!*’ must refer to an encounter with Zamacona’s reanimated corpse.<sup>256</sup> There are early hints, too, at the nature of the mound people’s civilisation, whose trajectory Zamacona’s narrative will trace.

The first, and most obvious, point made by the narrator—and apparently borne out by Lawton’s ravings and Zamacona’s manuscript—is the age of this civilisation. The story opens with the narrator’s observation that ‘most people have stopped thinking of the West as a new land’ and that, due to recent archaeological finds, ‘the idea of newness is fading out pretty rapidly’.<sup>257</sup> The relatively recent date of white American civilisation is emphasised; the land has long before now been the home not just of Native Americans, but of ‘primitive man contemporaneous with extinct animals and known today only through a few fragmentary bones and artefacts’.<sup>258</sup> And this great age has something sinister about it: it is ‘stupefying’, ‘almost horrible’.<sup>259</sup> Ancient

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>255</sup> Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, p. 43. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>256</sup> Lovecraft and Reed, ‘The Mound’, p. 146. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

civilisations and ‘primitive man’, moreover, draw to mind the horrifying pre-human survivals of Machen’s Little People stories and the Turanian dwarf theories. Lovecraft appears to play quite consciously on this association, noting that the mounds the narrator is investigating are ‘artificial-looking’ and associated with ‘apparitions of exceedingly strange aspect and equipment’.<sup>260</sup> The description might as easily apply to the fairy raths of legend. The ‘apparitions’, meanwhile, are referred to by the local Native Americans as “‘those people”, “the old people”, or “they who dwell below””, and held in ‘too great a frightened veneration’ to be much discussed.<sup>261</sup> As well as emphasising their age, this euphemistic form of reference recalls Machen’s portrayal of practice of referring to fairies as “the good people”, “the good neighbours”, or some other vague but complimentary epithet, in order to avoid attracting their wrath.<sup>262</sup> But however similar their role to that played elsewhere by the fairies, and while they may, in a literal sense, be pre-human survivals (Lawton asserts that ‘we’re all descended from them in the beginning’<sup>263</sup>), the mound people are not primitive in any straightforward sense. The folklore surrounding the mound speaks of two apparitions—commonly assumed to be ghosts—who appear on top of it, a man who appears by day, and a headless woman bearing a torch who appears by night. The narrator’s first sighting of the daytime ghost confirms that he is something quite different to Machen’s Little People. The Little People repel “civilised” human subjects on a visceral, physical level; here, the opposite appears to happen. The narrator is impressed by the apparition, ‘noting the kinaesthetic quality of his stride and the poised way he [carries] his head’.<sup>264</sup> He acquires a ‘strong, persistent conviction that this man, whoever or whatever he

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>262</sup> Machen, ‘Novel of the Black Seal’, p. 56.

<sup>263</sup> Lovecraft and Reed, ‘The Mound’, p. 145.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

might be, [is] certainly *not a savage*'.<sup>265</sup> Rather, he believes 'instinctively'—on the same level that Machen's human subjects are repelled by the Little People—that the apparition is 'the product of a *civilisation*'.<sup>266</sup>

That this civilisation is one highly advanced in terms of artistic accomplishment—and therefore in the development of its humanity—is also indicated in this early part of the tale. A local Native American elder, Grey Eagle, provides the narrator with a protective amulet of the mound people's workmanship after failing to dissuade him from visiting the mound. This artefact reinforces the impression of cultivation given by the daytime "ghost"; the narrator is struck by its 'marvellously artistic and utterly unknown workmanship' and the 'exquisitely modelled' designs with which it is decorated.<sup>267</sup> A second look at the apparition on the mound reveals that his clothing and accoutrements are crafted with similar skill, '[bespeaking] exquisite workmanship and cultivation'.<sup>268</sup> The metal cylinder containing Zamacona's manuscript bears carvings similar to those on the amulet and the apparition's outfit. Although 'horrible' in content, they, too, are 'of the highest finish and craftsmanship'.<sup>269</sup> The manuscript itself hints at the accomplishments of the mound people's civilisation in its heyday. Zamacona witnesses the 'monstrous extent and inhuman height' of the capital city of Tsath, whose 'great towers' are now partially disused;<sup>270</sup> he sees the extent to which the hypnotic powers of the mound people, used to control both reanimated corpses and specially-bred slaves, have rendered labour a thing of the past for the free population;<sup>271</sup> and he learns that in past epochs, the mound people's civilisation 'held ideas

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 152. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 187.



much like those of the classic and renaissance outer world, and[...]possessed a national character and art full of what Europeans regard as dignity, kindness, and nobility'.<sup>272</sup> Though life had been rendered 'extremely easy' by mechanisation, 'selective breeding and social evolution' ensured the intellectual excellence of the ruling class.<sup>273</sup> Artistic and intellectual achievements 'had reached very high levels', while science 'had been profound and accurate, and all-embracing'.<sup>274</sup> The mound people had, at this point in their history, attained to the highest possible standards of humanity. They had even gone beyond them; their minds being powerful enough that they were able to communicate telepathically, coming to disregard speech as 'crude and needless',<sup>275</sup> to dematerialise and reappear at will, to effect startling 'human metamorphoses',<sup>276</sup>—even to reanimate the dead.

Joshi identifies intellectual achievement as 'the highest ethical purpose' attainable in Lovecraft;<sup>277</sup> it would seem curious, then, that the narrator of 'The Mound', even as he admires the exquisite craftsmanship of the apparition's trappings, senses also an 'infinite evil and decadence' in his expression.<sup>278</sup> The carvings on the cylinder that contains Zamacona's manuscript, too, unsettle him. Despite their artistic quality, the designs are 'fraught with insidious evil'.<sup>279</sup> They '[glimmer] evilly', too; they are 'abnormal and blasphemous'.<sup>280</sup> Even the artificiality of the mound itself—evidence of the mound people's skill in manipulating their

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>277</sup> Joshi, *H. P Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*, p. 42.

<sup>278</sup> Lovecraft and Reed, 'The Mound', p. 155.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

environment—is suspect: there is ‘a kind of latent menace in its too regular outlines’.<sup>281</sup> These technical and artistic accomplishments ought to convince us of the mound people’s humanity, to render our kinship to them a good. Instead, however, they are tainted. Rather than admiration, they inspire an unease not quite identical with, but akin to, that repulsion elicited in Machen’s educated human subjects by their encounters with the Little People, and in Lombroso’s sensitive observers by the sight of born criminals. Why is this?

The fact that the apparitions who guard the mound are taken to be ghosts gives us one clue to the reason. They are now apparently insubstantial; incorporeal. Their ability to dematerialise has resulted in a permanent movement away from fleshly existence, toward ‘the borderline of spirit’.<sup>282</sup> Charging Buffalo, the guide who shows Zamacona to the mound’s entrance, describes them as ‘half-ghost’, and tells him the lore has it that they ‘no longer [grow] old or [reproduce] their kind, but [flicker] eternally in a place between flesh and spirit’.<sup>283</sup> Their longevity might appear a sign of progress, but that they are no longer able to reproduce suggests the sterility that Morel identified in the degenerate, and this oscillation between corporeal and ghostly existence—coupled with the mound people’s ability to effect strange transformations—suggests a malleability, an instability, in the human form that calls to mind the disintegrations of Helen Vaughan and Francis Leicester. This would be sufficient to explain the narrator’s unease at the sight of the daytime sentinel, a single individual whose insubstantial body bears hints of the human potential for reversion. But the narrator’s revulsion seems intimately tied to those things which mark the mound people out as *civilised*: their artwork; their craftsmanship. So do some of Zamacona’s initial premonitions of evil, adhering as they do to the mound people’s slaves and

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

beasts of burden—products of their preternatural skills—and to the ‘monstrous’ city of Tsath.<sup>284</sup> The degeneration of the individual body has its horrific potential, but in ‘The Mound’, degeneration is an inexorable social force, not sweeping civilisation before it, but inhering in its every achievement.

The importance of the city as the site of civil degeneration returns here. On his foray into the region below the mound—called K’n-yan by its inhabitants—Zamacona encounters a party of the mound people who, after some initial communication difficulties, relay to him the history of the place. The prodigious mechanical inventions of the people of K’n-yan, as well as the slave-class acquired by their conquest of neighbouring peoples and interbreeding of the prisoners with lower animals, rendered life easy in the extreme. The rest of the region was gradually abandoned, the population becoming concentrated in the great city of Tsath.<sup>285</sup> And in Tsath, the intellectual curiosity and achievement of previous ages began gradually to be edged out. In the absence of necessity, the pursuit of progress stalled, entertainment, rather than intellect, becoming the principal social good.

Religion—always a sign of intellectual backwardness for the skeptical Lovecraft—became once again ‘a leading interest in Tsath’, not because of any pious devotion to ‘the colourful ancestral faith’, but because of the ‘mystical moods and sensuous rites’ that accompanied it.<sup>286</sup> The ‘orgies and sacrifices’ that these rites entail are particularly off-putting to the Catholic Zamacona, who is ‘piously reluctant to describe them in his manuscript’.<sup>287</sup> Accompanying the resurgence in

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

religion was a resurgence in superstition, particularly that attached to the ‘Tulu-metal’ brought to Earth by the mound people’s ancestors.<sup>288</sup> (‘Tulu’, it will be noted, appears to be an alternate or corrupted form of ‘Cthulhu’.) This recrudescence of superstition is explicitly held up as an example of backsliding:

Now, as the neglect of science and intellect was dulling the critically analytical spirit, people were beginning to weave around the metal once more that same fabric of awestruck superstition which had existed in primitive times.<sup>289</sup>

More horrible for Zamacona than grotesque rites and bizarre superstitions, however, is the emotional, rather than intellectual, nature of the mound people’s religious—and, increasingly, their social—practices. ‘What he liked least of all’, we learn, ‘were the emotional sounds emitted by the celebrants—jarring sounds in a race that had ceased to use vocal speech for ordinary purposes’.<sup>290</sup> The worshippers voluntarily throw themselves back into the realm of the physical and the instinctual. They reject the intellectual progress of their forbears, the efforts made by them to distance themselves from the animal and the pre-human. Indeed, the daily pastimes of the inhabitants of Tsath tend in general in this direction, diversion having taken over from discovery as their principal object:

Daily life was organised in ceremonial patterns; with games, intoxication, torture of slaves, day-dreaming, gastronomic and emotional orgies, religious exercises, exotic experiments, artistic and philosophical discussions, and the like, as the principal

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<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

occupations.<sup>291</sup>

Zamacona learns that ‘the modern tendency [is] to feel rather than to think; so that men [are] now more highly esteemed for inventing new diversions than for preserving old facts or pushing back the frontier of cosmic mystery’.<sup>292</sup> These diversions are pursued at the expense not only of intellectual achievement, but—as suggested by the casual inclusion of ‘torture of slaves’ in the above list—at that of any system of ethics.

Increasingly, the life of Tsath is characterised by ‘cruelty and subtlety and revolt’, by ‘abnormality’, by ‘curious sadism’.<sup>293</sup> The gratification of an impulse—in this case, the desire for ‘fresh and novel stimuli’—has come to be placed above any moral restriction against causing harm, or even taking life.<sup>294</sup> After their torture and subsequent death in the ‘accursed’ arenas of Tsath, the corpses of these slaves are reanimated, and continue to be used for manual labour in the fields.<sup>295</sup> Once again, instinct comes to the fore. And in this case, instinctual gratification and progress, though apparently antithetical, are intimately entangled. The technological processes by which the need for labour in K’n-yan has been eased—the use of the reanimated slave-class—is fed by the killing of slaves for entertainment in the arenas. Progress is implicated in degeneration. The ‘jaded impulses’ of the people of Tsath, resulting in their craving for what the narrator euphemistically terms ‘delicate sensation’,<sup>296</sup> seem to echo the urban enervation of Morel’s degenerates, their moral backsliding in the permissive environment of the city. Like

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., pp. 187-188, p. 193.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

Morel's degenerates, the people of Tsath are sterile, no longer reproducing—but, unlike them, they are preternaturally long-lived, and so the safety-valve of sterility is rendered ineffective.

As Zamacona comes to realise, the people of Tsath are 'a lost and dangerous race' whose 'frenzy of monotony-warfare and novelty-quest [is] leading them rapidly toward a precipice of disintegration and utter horror'.<sup>297</sup> His growing sense of horror at the direction taken by K'n-yan society is described in a passage whose details would not be out of place in Nordau or Morel:

The more Zamacona studied[...]the more apprehensive about the future he became, because he saw that the omnipresent moral and intellectual disintegration was a tremendously deep-seated and ominously accelerating movement. Even during his stay the signs of decay multiplied. Rationalism degenerated more and more into fanatical and orgiastic superstition, centring in a lavish adoration of the magnetic Tulu-metal, and tolerance steadily dissolved into a series of frenzied hatreds, especially toward the outer world of which the scholars were learning so much from him. At times he almost feared that the people might someday lose their age-long apathy and brokenness and turn like desperate rats against the unknown lands above them, sweeping all before them by virtue of their singular and still-remembered scientific powers. But for the present they fought their boredom and sense of emptiness in other ways, multiplying their hideous emotional outlets and increasing the mad grotesqueness and abnormality of their diversions. The arenas of Tsath must have been accursed and unthinkable places—Zamacona never went near them. And what they would be in another century, or even in another decade, he did not dare to

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

think. The pious Spaniard crossed himself and counted his beads more often than usual in those days.<sup>298</sup>

Again, we see the amorality and emotionality of the people of K'n-yan emphasised. Their scientific prowess, meanwhile, is merely 'remembered'. Their quest for knowledge no longer progresses; rather, it is hampered both by 'frenzied hatreds' of what it might reveal, and an endless, shallow focus on entertainment at all costs. The 'mad grotesqueness and abnormality of their diversions', meanwhile, once again evokes Nordau's emphasis on what he viewed as the abnormality of much contemporary art.

So far, 'The Mound' gives us a fairly textbook narrative of degeneration as sweeping social force, exacerbated rather than combated by technology, the conditions for its occurrence brought about by the very intellectual currents it now disregards in favour of gratifying emotional and instinctual desires. The tale gains its effectiveness, however, not only from this, but from the history of the subterranean realm more generally, as conjectured by the people of Tsath, and from the fate that befalls Zamacona and his lover, T'la-yub. Degeneration is shown to be both greater than a single society, apparently affecting beings earlier established than the people of K'n-yan, and more personal, its effacement of the individual subject providing the tale's climactic horror.

From the party that greets him on his arrival in K'n-yan, Zamacona learns the history of the wider underground world around Tsath. Although the people of K'n-yan are now concentrated in Tsath, in previous eras, they settled the underground world more widely, having 'conquered and

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

enslaved' the other races of inhabitants.<sup>299</sup> This subterranean world 'stretched down to unfathomable abysses', and comprised a region called Yoth, previously inhabited by 'a still older and non-human race', as well as K'n-yan.<sup>300</sup> The existence of this prehistoric civilisation is indicated by the presence of 'relics' found by K'n-yan archaeologists, and by the existence of 'certain horned and four-footed animals[...]whose semi-human leanings were very peculiar'.<sup>301</sup> The people of K'n-yan speculate that these animals, though apparently to some degree artificially engineered, may in fact be 'in part the degenerate descendants of those peculiar entities who had left the relics'.<sup>302</sup> The placing of this observation within the passage in K'n-yan's history is striking: it is immediately followed by the comment that, '[as] aeons passed, and mechanical discoveries made the business of life extremely easy, a concentration of the people of Tsath took place; so that all the rest of K'n-yan became relatively deserted'.<sup>303</sup> A connection between the abandonment of wider K'n-yan and the archaeological evidences 'left' by the inhabitants of Yoth becomes apparent here, as does one between the 'mechanical discoveries' that have made K'n-yan idle and the technological advances that may have led the inhabitants of Yoth to artificially alter their own physical properties. This history of Yoth is reiterated a few pages later, with the additional information that its people left behind 'Cyclopean ruins'.<sup>304</sup> The great, disused towers of the Tsath encountered by Zamacona do not appear very different. The abilities of the people of Yoth to create life artificially are mentioned, and we learn that they made 'several[...]races of industrial and transportational animals in the course of their history—to say nothing of concocting all manner of fantastic living shapes for the sake of amusement and

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., pp. 177-178.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 183.



new sensations during the long period of decadence'.<sup>305</sup> The artificial creation of life recalls the reanimation abilities of the inhabitants of K'n-yan, as well as their interbreeding of other races to create slaves and beasts of burden. The desire for 'entertainment and new sensations', meanwhile, echoes the dominant preoccupations of K'n-yan society as encountered by Zamacona. It would not seem unreasonable to read the trajectory of Yoth's civilisation as a potential blueprint for that of K'n-yan's. The degenerate, semi-human beasts found in the region after its decadence and ruin may well be the eventual state of K'n-yan's people. As in 'The Rats in the Walls', the advances made by a dominant group of humans results in the decay not only of those enslaved by them, but of their own descendants. Here, however, this decay effects not a single family, but an entire civilisation.

If K'n-yan's possible future is a descent, then the 'black abyss' of N'kai—below both K'n-yan and Yoth—constitutes one further, more horrific stage.<sup>306</sup> N'kai's inhabitants show few signs of sentient behaviour beyond their adoration of the toad-god Tsathoggua, whose 'onyx and basalt images' they worship.<sup>307</sup> Even among the human inhabitants of K'n-yan, religious devotion is presented as a sign of irrationality, and therefore of intellectual backsliding. The creatures of N'kai appear to have no more rational form of thought and behaviour than this. There is no reference to civilisation or technology; they simply '[ooze] along stone channels' and take 'temporary shapes for various [presumably sinister] purposes'.<sup>308</sup> Their plasticity is horrifying. They are 'amorphous lumps of viscous black slime' without individuality or coherent form; primordial ooze, like that into which Machen's Helen Vaughan and Francis Leicester eventually

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

dissolve.<sup>309</sup> This resemblance would be enough to suggest that they represent the possible endpoint of degeneration, but their resemblance to the shoggoths of ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ implies that they, like the shoggoths (if that is not in fact what they are) and like the beasts of Yoth, may have been artificially created or altered.<sup>310</sup> On the physical level, they represent the fate of the degenerate human body, undifferentiated, ever in flux. As the products of technological and scientific advancement, they suggest that human reason, too, ends in horror. Civilisation collapses in upon itself; abjection and superstition remain.

The effacement of the individual by degeneration as overwhelming social force is delineated in gruesome detail in Zamacona’s eventual fate, and is first hinted at by the state of K’n-yan’s reanimated slaves, and by various other allusions to what goes on in the ‘accursed’ arenas of Tsath.<sup>311</sup> What Zamacona first notices about the reanimated slaves is that some are headless—decapitation having accomplished both the effacement of identity and the ending of rational thought—and that others appear to have undergone ‘singular and seemingly capricious subtractions, distortions, transpositions, and graftings in various places’.<sup>312</sup> Scientific advancement has destabilised the human form. Reanimation as a headless slave is the eventual fate of T’la-yub, Zamacona’s lover, who assists him in the first of two escape attempts. The headless female “ghost” who guards the mound at night-time is, in fact, her resurrected but mindless corpse. After their first escape attempt fails, and T’la-yub is captured and executed (after what is euphemistically described as ‘picturesque’ treatment in the arenas<sup>313</sup>), Zamacona is

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>310</sup> Shoggoths are mentioned elsewhere in Lovecraft’s work—notably as a weapon which the Deep Ones plan to use in ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’—so it is not unreasonable to assume that he may have been recycling them here.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

informed that the same fate awaits him should he attempt to leave again. He is warned that ‘he—or parts of him—[will] be reanimated to guard some inner section of the passage, within sight of others, where his abridged person might serve as a permanent symbol of the rewards of treason’.<sup>314</sup> That these mutilations efface Zamacona’s humanity is made explicit in the text. The narrator, visiting the mound after having read Zamacona’s manuscript, encounters his reanimated form, to which he refers as ‘it’ and a ‘thing’.<sup>315</sup> Now, ‘lacking[...]customary parts of a human being’—including, like T’la-yub, a head—he is no longer such.<sup>316</sup> Tellingly, the narrator remarks, ‘it had been a very human being once; and what is more, it had been *white*’.<sup>317</sup> Perhaps the narrator is expressing surprise at Zamacona’s whiteness because the people of K’n-yan, for the most part, resemble Native Americans—but in any case, here, Zamacona’s privileged racial identity and his humanity are conflated and demolished in the same sentence. A message has been inscribed on Zamacona’s chest, in ‘an awkward and fumbling Spanish[...]implying a kind of ironic use of the language by an alien inscriber familiar neither with the idiom nor the Roman letters used to record it’.<sup>318</sup> Translated, the message reads, ‘Seized by the will of K’n-yan in the headless body of T’la-yub’.<sup>319</sup> T’la-yub, her individuality already effaced, becomes a tool of the degenerate society; effectively, a depersonalised embodiment of the sweeping social force of degeneration in whose path Zamacona is caught up. Neither his whiteness nor his authority and linguistic competence as author of the manuscript are enough to save him; he is rendered mute and ‘the will of K’n-yan’ now wields his language. His once-human body becomes both a text (‘abridged’ by an outside authority) and the subject of a text—and a ‘fumbling and awkward’

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 206. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

one at that. This 'awkward' use of language echoes the linguistic oddities identified by Nordau as hallmarks of degeneracy. In losing his personhood and becoming parchment for it, Zamacona becomes both a degenerate and the subject of a degenerate civilisation's authority and scrutiny. This body, written out of humanity, is both pervaded and surrounded by degeneration.

### Chapter Three: Hybridities

In this chapter, I'll be focusing upon those weird tales that concern themselves with "miscegenation" or hybridity; with entities that result from the meeting and mating of the human and the nonhuman, abhuman or pre-human. One of the stories examined here, Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan' (1890, revised 1894), has already been touched upon, and there is certainly a degree of interrelatedness between the subject matter of this chapter and the last. The figure of the degenerate, as we have already seen, was frequently constructed as a threatening Other who might drag the human subject down to his or her level, while eugenic discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused upon the 'racial decay'<sup>1</sup> that might result from the unrestricted reproduction of undesirable individuals. Authors of weird fiction during this period undoubtedly drew upon these biological discourses for part of their inspiration. David Simmons, in a recent short essay, has argued that 'Lovecraft's fears of both non-Western peoples and the racial degeneracy that might arise as a result of miscegenation indicate a writer who has been influenced, at least partially, by contemporary discourses that presented racial integration as a significant taboo'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, we might trace this fear of "miscegenation" to Darwin's suggestion, with respect to non-human animals and plants, that 'when two distinct races are crossed, it is notorious that the tendency in the offspring to revert to one or both parent-forms is strong, and endures for many generations'<sup>3</sup> (the term 'revert' carrying resonances of degeneration). But Lovecraft's narratives, and Machen's, too, carry other resonances—political, as well as scientific. Darwin, a few pages later, explicitly applies his ideas about crossing to human beings, observing that while 'many

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey R. Searle, 'Eugenics: The Early Years', in *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, ed. Robert A. Peel (London: Galton Institute, 1998), pp. 20-35 (p. 32).

<sup>2</sup> David Simmons, "'A Certain Resemblance': Abject Hybridity in H. P. Lovecraft's Short Fiction' in *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. David Simmons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 13-30 (p. 28).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (1868; London: John Murray, 1888), II, p. 8. (See also Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; London: Penguin, 1968), p. 85, p. 196.)

excellent and kind-hearted mulattoes have existed’, he has been ‘struck with the fact that, in South America, men of complicated descent between Negroes, Indians, and Spaniards, seldom had[...]a good expression’, and suggesting that ‘the degraded state of so many half-castes is in part due to reversion to a primitive and savage condition, induced by the act of crossing’.<sup>4</sup> This distaste for racial ‘crossing’ would find resonances in the social and political moment in Britain and the United States.

It is surely not coincidence that the emergence of ideas about the need to preserve racial and national purity and strength coincided with the beginning of the end of the British Empire, signified by, among other things, the rise to power of Germany, the US, and Japan, the campaign for Irish home rule, Canadian independence, and decolonisation elsewhere. At the same time, anti-immigration movements in the US gathered force, with the growth of nativism and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. In this chapter, I hope to explore how contemporary biological and political fears come together in those weird tales which focus upon the offspring of human-nonhuman couplings.

### **Heredity, Deterioration, and Improvement: The Eugenics Movement**

If scientific thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries feared human heredity, predicting the deleterious effects of the unchecked breeding of criminal or degenerate undesirables, they might also reasonably have held out some hope for progress, predicting the continued development of humankind, were the right sorts of people to be encouraged to reproduce. In 1901, Francis Galton did exactly that, delivering a lecture entitled ‘The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under the Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment’ to the Anthropological Institute, in

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<sup>4</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, II, p. 21.

memory of T. H. Huxley.<sup>5</sup> Drawing upon ideas developed in earlier works such as *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883), Galton advocated restrictions upon the ability of criminals and the poor—their poverty being attributed to idleness or alcohol abuse—to marry and produce children, while suggesting that cleverer and more advanced members of the species—those in the upper echelons of society—should be encouraged to marry and have children early. Although fully in favour of ‘repressing the productivity of the worst’, Galton considered ‘increasing the productivity of the best stock’ more important.<sup>6</sup> This new scientific creed was intended to be the nation’s salvation (indeed, Galton considered it a moral obligation, and made conscious use of religious imagery to drive his point home: he considered that ‘an enthusiasm to improve the race[...] might well give rise to the sense of a religious obligation’, and that ‘any crusade at all in favour of race improvement’ was justified.<sup>7</sup>) It required tireless promotion in order to inculcate it into the British psyche. Galton called it eugenics.<sup>8</sup>

Eugenicists believed that the Darwinian notion of natural selection held the key to improving the health and efficiency of society, and warding off the degenerative menace. If natural selection had governed the evolution of the human species up until this point, artificial selection would ensure its future. In the *Origin*, Darwin had written that ‘[in] our domestic animals, if any part, or the whole animal be neglected and no selection be applied, that part[...] or the whole breed will cease to have a nearly uniform character. The breed will then be said to have degenerated’.<sup>9</sup> In the *Descent*, he noted the efficacy of ‘methodical selection’ in ‘the well-known case of the Prussian grenadiers’, in which ‘man

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2009), pp. 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Galton, ‘The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under the Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment’, *Nature* 64 (1901), pp. 659-665 (p. 663).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 664-665.

<sup>8</sup> Marr, pp. 23-24.

<sup>9</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, pp. 189-190.

tall men were reared in the villages inhabited by the grenadiers and their tall wives', and in Sparta.<sup>10</sup> It was unfortunate that, while '[man] scans with scrupulous care the character and pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he matches them[...]when he comes to his own marriage he rarely, or never, takes such care'.<sup>11</sup> It is only in the case of human beings that 'any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed'.<sup>12</sup> Much might be done by selection for the 'bodily constitution' of future generations, as well as their 'intellectual and moral qualities', and those who were 'in any marked degree inferior in body or mind' should refrain from having children—but Darwin dismissed such ideas as 'Utopian'.<sup>13</sup> Eugenicists who considered it desirable to apply the principles of animal breeding to human beings, however, thought attention and 'selection' necessary to prevent its downfall—and achievable. Eugenic scientists, according to this viewpoint, had not only a right but a duty to promote their cause. In 1909, Galton's protégé Karl Pearson wrote:

Are we to assert that this great biological movement[...]is to stop short when it approaches the subject of man as a gregarious animal? Is there no science of those vital factors which may improve or impair, physically or mentally, the racial qualities of future generations? And if there be such a science, is it not the first duty of the universities to discover and propound its laws?<sup>14</sup>

Eugenics, then, became not merely a scientific theory, but a social and political movement, self-tasked with 'defending society from the multiplication within it of the residuum of degenerate, unemployable

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 617.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 617-618.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Groundwork of Eugenics* (London: Dulau, 1909), p. 7.



and feckless'.<sup>15</sup> Taking as read the 'inequality of human beings',<sup>16</sup> and the structure of society as an unproblematic reflection of this inequality, eugenicists suggested that the eradication of social problems such as poverty, alcoholism, crime, mental illness and tuberculosis was simple;<sup>17</sup> society had to be encouraged to 'recruit itself "from above", where "above" [had] now to be interpreted not as referring to a social class level, but to the group with the higher grade of the nationally desirable characteristic'.<sup>18</sup> Poverty, criminality, mental and physical illness, and alcohol abuse resulted not from social disadvantage, but from innate and ineradicable heredity inferiority, and these inferior specimens of humanity had to be prevented from passing on their undesirable characteristics. Some eugenicists advocated sterilisation; others favoured institutionalising the poor, the sick, alcoholics and criminals, and segregating the sexes to prevent reproduction.<sup>19</sup> Galton suggested that legal restrictions on marriage were necessary and inevitable,<sup>20</sup> and legislation mandating 'compulsory breeding' for those found fit to reproduce was held to be a possibility.<sup>21</sup> Social measures to improve the lot of the poor, meanwhile, were held to be actively harmful, as they interfered with the ability of natural selection to improve the human 'breed'.<sup>22</sup> The improvement of the nation was to take precedence over the rights of the individual.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, for all this talk of improvement, the eugenic doctrine of human inequality, with its desired

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<sup>15</sup> Greta Jones, 'Theoretical Foundations of Eugenics', in Peel, ed., *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, pp. 1-19 (p. 16).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Lyndsay Andrew Farrall, *The Origins and Growth of the English Eugenics Movement 1865-1925* (doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1969), p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Pearson, *The Groundwork of Eugenics*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Farrall, p. 203.

<sup>20</sup> Marr, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 75-76.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Kevles, 'Eugenics in North America', in Peel, ed., *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, ed. by Peel, pp. 208-226 (p. 208).

<sup>23</sup> Searle, p. 25.

end of ‘retarding the average age of marriage among the weak’,<sup>24</sup> and its suggestion that certain people be ‘peremptorily denied opportunities for producing offspring’,<sup>25</sup> was highly problematic, and its implementation led to numerous cases of social injustice. Darwin had written in the *Origin* that ‘much Extinction of the less improved forms of life’ was a necessary aspect of natural selection,<sup>26</sup> and that an acceptance of ‘the universal struggle for life’ was necessary to any understanding of ‘the economy of nature’.<sup>27</sup> Hardship and death inevitably underlie the flourishing of life, as the following passage vividly illustrates:

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year.<sup>28</sup>

Thinkers who sought to apply evolutionary theory to the organisation of society, like Herbert Spencer, wrote of inequality as something natural and inevitable. For Spencer, ‘the struggles for supremacy must finally be decided in favour of some one; and the differences once commenced must tend to become ever more marked’.<sup>29</sup> The ‘destruction’ of the ‘diseased and feeble’ functioned to ‘keep up the average fitness to the conditions of life’; if the weak were allowed to ‘propagate’, then ‘the

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<sup>24</sup> Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1869; London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 339.

<sup>25</sup> Galton, ‘Improvement of the Human Breed’, p. 663.

<sup>26</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1860; New York: Appleton, 1877), p. 423.

average vigour of any race would be diminished'.<sup>30</sup> Eugenists saw no real problem with subjugating the reproductive power of those who had failed to prevail in society. In addition to the ethical issues surrounding mandatory sterilisation itself, eugenic sterilisation measures in the United States, applied only to those 'feeble-minded' people in the care of the state, impacted disproportionately upon black people, immigrants, and others from low-income backgrounds.<sup>31</sup> The association of eugenics with Nazism has been well documented, and this, alongside growing scientific critique of its methods, has frequently been seen to have contributed to the debunking of eugenics as a serious branch of science after World War II. Clare Hanson, however, has questioned this narrative, arguing that it 'remains hard to separate the conceptual framework of post-war genetics from eugenic assumptions and beliefs', and that thinkers such as J. B. S. Haldane and Julian Huxley kept up a 'sustained commitment to both positive and negative eugenics'.<sup>32</sup>

Incidents of class and, especially, racial discrimination were not isolated accidents resulting from misinterpretation of the eugenic viewpoint; as Lyndsay Andrew Farrall has pointed out, the writings of prominent eugenicists display 'an ideological commitment[...]to nationalism and racism'.<sup>33</sup> This certainly had precedent in evolutionary writings. Darwin had asserted the '[great] differences between the men of distinct races' in the matter of 'mental faculties',<sup>34</sup> as well as that of 'moral disposition'.<sup>35</sup> He further noted that 'ancient races[...]more frequently present structures which resemble those of the lower animals than do the modern', and suggested that this was because they 'stand somewhat nearer in the long line of descent to their remote and animal-like progenitors'.<sup>36</sup> In his Huxley lecture, Galton

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<sup>30</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), I, p. 445.

<sup>31</sup> Kevles, p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> Clare Hanson, *Eugenics, Literature and Culture in Post-War Britain* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Farrall, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. See also pp. 39-40.

posited the imperial significance of eugenics, arguing that ‘[to] no nation is a high human breed more necessary than our own, for we plant our stock all over the world and lay the foundation for the dispositions and the capacities of future millions of the human race’;<sup>37</sup> and in the earlier *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development*, he had asserted that ‘the very foundation and outcome of the human mind is dependent on race, and[...]the qualities of races vary’.<sup>38</sup> Ethel Elderton, among other researchers at the Eugenics Laboratory in London, emphasised the importance of “‘race progress”, “national efficiency”, and “national fitness”’;<sup>39</sup> Pearson expressed concerns about ‘what can make and what can mar national life and racial character’;<sup>40</sup> and eugenicists asserted that Anglo-Saxon superiority to other races was evidenced by Britain’s position as the dominant power on the world stage.<sup>41</sup>

Pearson wrote of the importance of increasing the spread of ‘racially valuable’<sup>42</sup> and ‘nationally desirable’<sup>43</sup> attributes, and asserted the undesirability of marriages between members of ‘superior’ (white) and ‘inferior’ (black) races.<sup>44</sup> The reproduction of Irish Catholics and Jews was warned of as a potential cause of ‘national deterioration’.<sup>45</sup> (Darwin, in the *Descent*, ascribed a degenerative effect to the Catholic church, due to its imposition of celibacy on many of ‘those given to meditation or culture of the mind’, and the Inquisition’s having executed ‘the best men—those who doubted and questioned’.<sup>46</sup>) Eugenic journals published articles warning of the dangers of immigration, one such

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<sup>37</sup> Galton, ‘Improvement of the Human Breed’, p. 665.

<sup>38</sup> Francis Galton, *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), p. 332.

<sup>39</sup> Farrall, p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Scope and Importance to the State of the Science of National Eugenics* (1907; London: Dulau, 1911), p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>42</sup> Pearson, *The Groundwork of Eugenics*, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Farrall, pp. 302-303.

<sup>45</sup> Childs, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 141.

paper being entitled, ‘The Menace to the English Race and to its Traditions of Present-Day Immigration and Emigration’,<sup>47</sup> while in the United States, eugenic arguments were put forward in support of anti-immigration legislation.<sup>48</sup> The eugenics movement’s self-positioning as a line of defence against menaces both internal (criminals, the poor, and the mentally ill) and external (immigrants of “lower” races, from “inferior” nations), as well as the emphasis in eugenic discourse upon maintaining the health of the nation and the race, suggest a pervasive national and racial anxiety, and upon examining the historical context of the movement, it seems reasonable to suggest that these scientific discourses were influenced not just by “objective” statistical data, but by international political concerns.

### **The Historical Moment in Britain and the United States**

In his history of the eugenics movement in England, Farrall reminds us of the challenges to British military might and commercial importance being posed during the period which also saw the rise of eugenics. The increasing prominence of Germany and the US called into question Britain’s status as the dominant global power, as did defeat in the Boer War in 1909. In Farrall’s words, these events led to the rise of ‘a new enthusiasm for nationalism and imperialism in Britain[...]combined with the conviction that Britons were representative of a naturally superior race’.<sup>49</sup> Pearson actually lectured on the implications of British defeat at the hands of the Boers, extending his social Darwinist views to international politics, nations taking the place of living beings, and arguing that the country must turn

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<sup>47</sup> Farrall., p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> Kevles, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> Farrall, p. 50.

to science—in other words, to eugenics—if it were to survive in an increasingly competitive world.<sup>50</sup> In effect, faced with the disappearance of British military and economic supremacy, eugenicists, and supporters of the wider social movement that advocated their views, turned to science to assert the racial supremacy of white Britons.

Meanwhile, in the United States, a similarly racially charged eugenics movement was taking off, as were popular and political movements that divided racial groups and sought to restrict immigration. IQ testing grew in popularity after World War I, and American and Canadian eugenicists believed mental deficiency to be disproportionately high among immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Carl Brigham, an Army psychologist, asserted that ‘the Alpine and Mediterranean “races” were “intellectually inferior to the representatives of the Nordic race”’.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, it was argued that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were more prone to criminality and sexual immorality, and more prone to be swayed by their emotions, than Anglo-Saxons.<sup>52</sup> Black people were also held to be intellectually inferior to ‘Nordic’ people, but since they were not seen as significant contributors to ‘the quality of American civilisation’, eugenicists were less concerned with them than with other ethnic minorities.<sup>53</sup> A further link was drawn between the undesirable characteristics of low intellectual ability and even ‘feble-mindedness’, and reproductive capacity. If immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were mentally deficient in comparison to Anglo-Saxons, and also possessed of a ‘heedless fecundity’, therefore liable to reproduce at a greater rate than ‘natives’, then degeneration was inevitable.<sup>54</sup> Ideas associated with degeneration theory aligned themselves with racial prejudice in the eugenics movement; outside influences, here represented by racial Others, were necessarily

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-304.

<sup>51</sup> Kevles, p. 213.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 211-212.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 214-215.

degenerative, and any increased hybridisation of the nation would be its downfall.

The background to this scientific narrative of national and racial anxiety was, certainly, one of increased immigration. Immigration to the United States increased steadily between the Civil War and the First World War, peaking in 1907, thanks to the development of industry in the States, and a fairly unrestricted immigration policy.<sup>55</sup> And as immigration rose, so did opposition to it. In his history of the Populist movement in America, *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter details the association between popular movements and a racially-charged nationalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Populist movement, he argues, was associated with nationalism, nativism and anti-Semitism, despite the attempts of early leaders to broaden its appeal across ethnic groups.<sup>56</sup> There were a number of reasons for this. The Anglophobia and distrust of the Old World that had existed in America at least since the Civil War persisted, and joined with anti-Semitism and a distrust of big business to form conspiracy theories, including the fear of ‘a conspiracy of the money power against the common people’ directed by foreign interests.<sup>57</sup> Immigrants from the Old World—seen as a hive of corruption and irrational superstition—were viewed with suspicion. Cities, too, were dangerous; urban centres were hotbeds of immorality and crime that threatened to seduce those rural ‘natives’ who travelled to them to seek work. Immigrants, too, looked for promised jobs in the cities, and a link between the city, the immigrant, and the criminal was formed in the American public consciousness. Hofstadter quotes from Thomas E. Watson, writing in 1912:

The scum of creation has been dumped on us. Some of our principal cities are more foreign than American. The most dangerous and corrupting hordes of the Old World have invaded

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), pp. 175-176.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

us. The vice and crime which they have planted in our midst are sickening and terrifying.<sup>58</sup>

The language of invasion here is telling, and seems to have a corollary in the fears of national decay put forward by eugenicists. If Watson feared the overwhelming of Anglo-Saxon American values—virtuous and law-abiding—by those of the European ‘hordes’, proponents of eugenics feared a corrupting influence in the nation’s pool of hereditary characteristics, one that might eventually overrun the Anglo-Saxon. A similar view, Hofstadter writes, was expressed by the ‘Populist Progressive’, Edward A. Ross. The similarity is even more striking here:

Ross was unsparing with the currently most numerous immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe[...]Immigrants were strikebreakers and scabs, who lowered local wage-levels and reduced living standards toward their ‘pigsty mode of life’, just as they brought social standards down to ‘their brawls and their animal pleasures’. They were unhygienic and alcoholic, they raised the rate of illiteracy and insanity, they fostered crime and bad morals; they lowered the tone of politics by introducing ethnic considerations and of journalism by providing readership for the poorest newspapers, the yellow journals; they threatened the position of women with their ‘coarse peasant philosophy of sex’, and debased the educational system with parochial schools; they spurred the monstrous overgrowth of cities, and by selling their votes for protection and favors increased the grip of the bosses upon city politics; they bred in such numbers that they were increasingly dominant over the native stock and thus threatened to overwhelm ‘American blood’ and bastardize American civilization.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-179.



This virulent opposition to immigration was by no means restricted to members of the Populist movement; while ‘Populism and jingoism grew concurrently in the United States during the 1890s’, Hofstadter asserts that ‘[the] rising mood of intolerant nationalism was a nationwide thing, certainly not confined to the regions of Populist strength’.<sup>60</sup> By the 1920s, the desire to assert Anglo-Saxon supremacy would manifest itself in rural America in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>61</sup>

These movements in their particular forms were new, but the sentiments behind them had been a powerful strand in American culture since the inception of the Union. Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, in their history of the United States, suggest that the Constitution and Founding Fathers themselves became the basis for an attempt to create a unified, largely Anglo-Saxon, national culture. In 1787, John Jay wrote of the ‘one united people’ to whom fate ‘[had] been pleased to give’ the nation.<sup>62</sup> These people were ‘descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs’.<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson, meanwhile, predicted that American expansion would eventually ‘cover the whole northern, if not the southern, continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms and by similar laws’, and suggested that no ‘blot or mixture on that surface’ would be acceptable.<sup>64</sup> Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble argue that the fact these assertions could be made in part reflects the virulence of English culture, and the degree to which it assimilated others. They also point out, however, that the making of them involved certain omissions,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 291-292.

<sup>62</sup> John Jay, ‘The Federalist No. 2’, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist with Letters of ‘Brutus’*, ed. Terence Ball (1787; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 5-8 (p. 6).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Jefferson, ‘On Accommodating African Americans’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online <<http://www.britannica.com/presidents/article-9116904>> [1801; accessed 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013].

and that the definition of the American as a white Anglo-Saxon both reflected and contributed to ‘a profound tension within American society’.<sup>65</sup> While Jay, Jefferson, and other commentators ‘did not necessarily intend to exclude Africans, Native Americans, unassimilated Europeans, and women from American history’, their writings ‘illuminated the implicit assumptions held by the American establishment’, for whom ‘the American was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male’.<sup>66</sup>

Nineteenth-century expansionists, too, carried with them this vision of homogeneity, viewing Protestantism as the means by which the ‘purity of the continent’ would be protected from ‘heathen devils’ and ‘Spanish Jesuits’.<sup>67</sup> This concern with preserving a national racial purity manifested itself in protests *against* annexation after the American conquest of Mexico in 1846. The politician John Calhoun put forward the argument that ‘more than half of the Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes’; to incorporate these people into America would undermine ‘the government of a white race’.<sup>68</sup> Immediately after the war, attempts to limit slavery in any lands obtained from Mexico hinged partly on opposition to ‘the presence of nonwhite people in the pure garden of America’.<sup>69</sup> In the 1850s, some northern states banned free black people from entering, for reasons both economic (fear of competition from a new source of cheap labour) and racist.<sup>70</sup> Emancipated slaves were, furthermore, to be encouraged to ‘return’ to Africa; the colonization movement and the founding of Liberia in 1822 were expected to provide solutions to ‘America’s race problem’, its heterogeneity.<sup>71</sup> Abraham Lincoln supported the emancipation of slaves only on the assumption that free black people would eventually leave the United States, and expressed his distaste

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<sup>65</sup> Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States*, (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 134.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

for “miscegenation”.<sup>72</sup> The passing of segregation laws between 1890 and 1910 seems unsurprising in the light of this history of antipathy to any mixing of races—socially, culturally, politically, or sexually—and the view of many late-nineteenth-century commentators that black Americans were incurably ‘deviant’, doomed to become ‘evil and dirty criminals’.<sup>73</sup> Anti-Semitism, too, has been an issue in the history of white America, according to Carroll and Noble. It rose in response to the increasing prosperity of German Jews in the 1880s, many young white American Protestants feeling their supremacy threatened.<sup>74</sup>

As is suggested by the promotion of Protestantism as a unifying force, religious difference was another factor in the anti-immigration sentiments of nineteenth-century America. WASP Americans avoided immigrants from non-Protestant countries, much of their suspicion falling upon Catholics, whose faith both ‘symbolized medieval superstition’ and ‘acknowledged the moral supremacy of an extranational authority’, the Vatican.<sup>75</sup> Although Catholics accounted for only around three per cent of the United States population in 1830, restrictions upon immigration were advocated by some conservatives. Irish Catholic immigrants, in particular, were disproportionately prone to poverty, a disadvantage which ‘encouraged crime and alcoholism—two symptoms that merely reinforced prevailing prejudices’.<sup>76</sup>

Historical narratives from the time of the Civil War had suggested that “progress”, identified with the dominance of white Anglo-Saxons and the disappearance or assimilation of other races and religions, was inevitable. Other groups—Native Americans, black people, Mediterranean and Eastern Europeans, Catholics, and Jews—‘lacked the forcefulness to pioneer in Colonial America’ and would become

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-225.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

extinct.<sup>77</sup> This narrative found an echo in the writings of eugenicists like Galton, who, believing ‘the average intellectual standard of the negro race[...]some two grades below our own’,<sup>78</sup> suggested that ‘it may prove that the Negroes, one and all, will fail as completely under the new conditions as they have failed under the old ones, to submit to the needs of a superior civilization to their own; in this case their races, numerous and prolific as they are, will in course of time be supplanted and replaced by their betters’.<sup>79</sup> The continued existence of these groups and arrival of new immigrants contested this version of American history, and its vision of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as a superior group, a chosen people of Providence, or of natural selection.

The emphasis of the eugenics movement upon race, then, with its dual focus upon preventing the reproduction of racial Others, who might contaminate the purity of the nation, and that of the ill, criminal, or learning-disabled, who threatened the overall fitness of the nation to compete on the world stage, as well as a degree of slippage between the two (with immigrants being held responsible for poverty, disease, and alcoholism, and disproportionately diagnosed as “feebleminded”) seems to have its basis in the vision of a white, Anglo-Saxon America that had persisted since the Civil War, and in the threats to that vision perceived to be posed by the presence of other ethnic groups. In looking at some of the ways in which weird fiction has treated interactions between its human characters and nonhuman beings, I hope to explore how Machen and Lovecraft drew on the scientific narratives used by the eugenics movement alongside the evolutionary and degenerative narratives I have already considered, and how these ideas, as well as more general cultural anxieties about non-Anglo-Saxon races and other countries, came to be mapped onto the supernatural and science-fictional conflicts that

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>78</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 367.

<sup>79</sup> Francis Galton, ‘Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892’ in *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1869; London: Macmillan, 1914), p. xxvi.

take place in their work.

### **Evil Hybridities: ‘The Great God Pan’ and ‘The Dunwich Horror’**

Helen Vaughan, the villainous *femme fatale* at the centre of ‘The Great God Pan’, descends through various stages of evolution before dissolving into primordial slime at the tale’s climax. She evidences many of the characteristics held to belong to degenerate humanity, acting as a singular example of the frightening potential of human evolution in reverse. She is not, however, entirely human, and the breakdown of her human body seems to work in two intertwined, but slightly conflicting, ways. It illustrates the degenerative potential at the heart of the “human”; it also dramatises the threat posed to “human” identity by the intrusion of an outside force, a sphere of being that is altogether Other.

Tellingly, perhaps, the tale begins with the description of an in-between space, a permeable boundary. Doctor Raymond is about to perform the experiment upon his ward, Mary—Helen’s mother—that will result in the half-human girl’s birth, and when we first meet him, the sun is hanging ‘above the western mountain line’, giving off ‘a dull red glow that [casts] no shadows’. His house is set at a border point in the landscape, between a ‘great wood on the hillside above’ and a ‘long lovely valley’ below.<sup>80</sup> We already know that liminal locations, and early morning and twilight—times when the distinction between day and night become blurred—are particularly opportune for fairy sightings; but Mary is about to encounter a different kind of interloper. Doctor Raymond extends, and makes explicit, this notion of the permeable boundary in the following passage, spoken to his friend Clarke, who is in attendance to observe the experiment:

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<sup>80</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The Great God Pan’ in *The Great God Pan* (1890, revised 1894; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 1-76 (p. 3).

You see the mountain, and hill following after hill, as wave on wave, you see the woods and orchards, the fields of ripe corn, and the meadows reaching to the reed beds by the river. You see me standing here beside you, and hear my voice; but I tell you that all these things—yes, from that star that has just shone out in the sky to the solid ground beneath our feet—I say that all these are but dreams and shadows; the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes. There *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, beyond these ‘chases in Arras, dreams in a career’, beyond them all as beyond a veil.<sup>81</sup>

The lack of substance—the fragility—of the world as experienced by humans is brought into play early, and with it the notion of a rupture. A veil is easily rent; ‘dreams and shadows’ might quite easily give way to unpleasant truths. There is a mystery and a strangeness, however, to what is on the other side. Raymond tells Clarke that he ‘may think all this strange nonsense’ and that, in fact, it ‘may be strange’ even though it is not nonsense; Clarke, meanwhile, feels that they are ‘standing on the brink of a strange world’.<sup>82</sup> This image of uncharted territory is a pertinent one, and Raymond takes it up, comparing the opening-up of a new sphere of knowledge which he hopes to achieve through his experiment to the mapping of ‘a whole world, a sphere unknown; continents and islands, and great oceans in which no ship has sailed (to my belief) since Man first lifted up his eyes’; to the crossing of a ‘gulf[...]between two worlds’; and to the reaching of an ‘unknown shore’.<sup>83</sup> The place from which the nonhuman comes, then, is figured as both geographically foreign and incomprehensibly alien to the human mind, ‘strange’ and ‘unknown’. Interestingly, Raymond also describes the part of the brain used in the experiment as a geographical location; it is ‘land to let, a mere waste place for fanciful

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

theories’—or an unoccupied territory, ripe for invasion.<sup>84</sup>

During the experiment itself, Clarke finds himself vividly recalling the home of his youth—but a defamiliarised version of that home. The memory that springs into his mind is that of a summer’s day upon which ‘the heat had dimmed the outlines of all things and all distances with a faint mist’, and the weather was ‘abnormal’, even ‘tropical’.<sup>85</sup> The familiarity of the scene begins to fade; it takes on the qualities of a distant land. Eventually, Clarke becomes cognisant of the ‘strangeness’ of the scene, and that ‘the path from his father’s house had led him into an undiscovered country’.<sup>86</sup> On emerging from his reverie, he finds that his sense of the distinction between worlds has begun to dissolve, and he feels as though he has merely ‘passed from one dream into another’, fearing that Raymond’s house will ‘melt and disappear’, too.<sup>87</sup> The implication is that Clarke’s dream experience mirrors that undergone by Mary, whose mind has been opened by Raymond to the realm beyond this one. Mary, of course, encounters the titular ‘God’, the entity known to humans as ‘Pan’. Clarke, too, encounters a mysterious being in his dream, an alien and incomprehensible ‘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’.<sup>88</sup> If we are to take this as a parallel to Mary’s encounter, then Helen’s father is not the partly-human deity of tradition, but something so far removed from human experience as to be impossible to pin down to a ‘form’.

Certainly, Mary’s condition after the experiment suggests that something particularly bizarre—perhaps too thoroughly incomprehensible for the human brain to contemplate and yet survive—has happened to her. She initially appears to experience a kind of religious awe, her eyes shining ‘with an awful light’

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

and her expression showing ‘great wonder’.<sup>89</sup> This is almost instantly replaced, however, by a terrible transformation of both body and mind. Wonder ‘[gives] place to the most awful terror’, Mary’s face becomes ‘hideously convulsed’, and she suffers a shaking fit that threatens to separate body from conscious mind, her ‘soul[...]struggling and shuddering within the house of flesh’.<sup>90</sup> It soon becomes apparent that this apparent removal of the rational, human mind has indeed been effected; when she next awakes, Mary is found ‘rolling her head from side to side and grinning vacantly’, now a ‘hopeless idiot’.<sup>91</sup> Given the weight placed upon “feble-mindedness” by eugenicists, and their emphasis of the perceived intellectual inferiority and proneness to mental illness of those who were not Anglo-Saxon, it is perhaps significant that this encounter with an Other from an ‘unknown shore’ has a deleterious effect upon Mary’s intelligence; anxieties about what might happen to the white population in the face of foreign immigration seem to have been mapped onto the encounter between human and nonhuman. A similar, and far more widespread, destruction of the “human” will be carried out by Helen Vaughan, the child with whom Mary is found to be pregnant after the experiment, the dangerous, hybrid offspring of human and Other.

Tellingly, Helen is frequently described in terms which emphasise not only her strangeness, but her *foreignness*; those qualities which are decidedly not Anglo-Saxon. Raymond sends the child away to foster parents after her birth and Mary’s subsequent death, and those she encounters find her to be ‘a girl of the most wonderful and most strange beauty’.<sup>92</sup> Her difference from her foster family and their community is noted; she is ‘of a very different type from the inhabitants of the village’, with ‘olive’

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 25.



skin and ‘strongly marked’ features of ‘a somewhat foreign character’.<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere, her ‘olive skin and almost Italian appearance’ are noted again.<sup>94</sup> There is speculation about her non-Anglo-Saxon origins; her first husband, Herbert, initially believes her to be ‘the child of an English father and an Italian mother’,<sup>95</sup> while Austin, a character who has heard of her marriage to Herbert and subsequent events secondhand, speculates that, since ‘nobody seemed to know who or what she was’, any ‘divers after her history’ must have ended up ‘in rather strange waters’.<sup>96</sup> Later, relating what he has heard about Mrs. Beaumont, the next of Helen’s known identities, Austin tells is that she is ‘an oddish sort of woman’ who is believed to have come from South America.<sup>97</sup> A more generalised strangeness, too, is attached to Helen, one which is simultaneously larger than and inextricable from its racialised aspects, being associated with her hybridity—her inhuman descent—and bringing the two aspects of her Otherness together in her ‘marked’ body. She is described variously as an ‘enigma’, a ‘mystery’, and a ‘remarkable woman’.<sup>98</sup> After she marries Herbert, the couple acquire a reputation as ‘queer’ and are ‘in very bad odour’ (the phrase’s intimations of physicality and dirtiness are perhaps significant, touching upon stereotypes about non-Anglo-Saxon peoples) in the neighbourhood where they live.<sup>99</sup> There is, however, ‘nothing tangible’ to support their ostracism. Once again, it is incomprehensible.<sup>100</sup> Herbert asserts her utter alienness, suggesting that while she may go by various aliases, ‘what her real name was [he] can’t say. [He doesn’t] think she had a name. No, no, not in that sense. Only human beings have names’.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 32, p. 38, p. 53.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

It is Helen's physical appearance, however, which carries with it the strongest impression of strangeness, and which repels viewers the most strongly. We learn that, during her marriage to Herbert, a 'respectable country gentleman', referred to only as Blank, was found outside their house, apparently dead of fright.<sup>102</sup> During the ensuing police trial, court observers describe her as 'at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they [have] ever set eyes on', and Austin mentions that one man with whom he discussed her 'positively shuddered as he tried to describe the woman, but he couldn't tell why'.<sup>103</sup> There is yet more shuddering when Clarke, on seeing her portrait, experiences a strong sense of 'evil',<sup>104</sup> Austin, seeing her in the flesh, experiences a nebulous sense of strangeness, and of being pulled back into the past, giving the following description:

She would be called very handsome, I suppose, and yet there is something about her face which I didn't like. The features are exquisite, but the expression is strange. And all the time I was looking at her, and afterwards, when I was going home, I had a curious feeling that that very expression was in some way or other familiar to me[...]

[What] I felt was a kind of dim far-off memory, vague but persistent. The only sensation I can compare it to, is that odd feeling one sometimes has in a dream, when fantastic cities and wondrous lands and phantom personages appear familiar and accustomed.<sup>105</sup>

There seem to be two related factors at play in this account. Helen's hybrid nature is hinted at in the disquieting coexistence in the same body of physical beauty—an ideal human form—and something that inspires instinctive revulsion, usually occasioned by encounters with the abhuman. The fact of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-54.

Helen's attractiveness allows her not only to pass for human, but to do so very well, and we might link it to contemporary fears of foreign blood 'passing', or going under the radar.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, the change occasioned in the fully "human" (white, Anglo-Saxon) observer that we have seen in the stories already considered seems at play in some form here, too. Austin recalls some vague familiarity or memory, suggesting again the power of the inhuman to drag the "human" subject *back* towards its pre-human roots, but the sudden familiarity of the Other—of a 'dream' world of 'wondrous lands', rather like the 'unknown shore' of which Raymond spoke—suggests that the human consciousness itself is becoming more inhuman, detaching itself from its native reality and, as Raymond does, recognising the land beyond the veil as real. Given the racialising of Helen, we might, perhaps, see national and racial anxieties mapped onto the relationship between human and Other here, too; under the influence of this 'strange' woman, the Anglo-Saxon subject is becoming less certain of itself and its sense of belonging, and more foreign.

Changes, too, occur in Helen's victims, those who encounter her, initially becoming captivated as friends or lovers, and find themselves driven to madness or even suicide by the things that they experience in her presence. The first human to be so altered is a small boy who encounters Helen in the woods near her home, playing with a mysterious companion in the form of a "strange naked man", whom he [the child] seemed unable to describe more fully'.<sup>107</sup> Later, the boy comes across a curious carved image that resembles this creature, described as a 'stone head of grotesque appearance', a 'curious head' resembling a 'faun or satyr'. This, presumably, is the physical incarnation of the god Pan.<sup>108</sup> After coming across Helen in the wood, the boy undergoes a change in personality, growing

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<sup>106</sup> The point is developed by Kirsti Bohata, in her essay, 'Apes and Cannibals in Cambria: Images of the Racial and Gendered Other in Gothic Writing in Wales', *Welsh Writing in English*, 6 (2000), pp. 119-143 (pp. 125-126).

<sup>107</sup> Machen, 'The Great God Pan', p. 18.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

‘nervous and strange in his manner’, exhibiting a fear of going out alone, and suffering nightmares. On sight of the carved head, he suffers a convulsion of horror, appearing ‘senseless[...]his face contorted with terror’, suffering ‘violent hysteria’ and ‘paroxysms of fright’.<sup>109</sup> Even this indirect encounter with the Other is enough to affect him permanently; like Mary the ‘hopeless idiot’, the boy is left afflicted with ‘a weakness of intellect which gives but little promise of amending’.<sup>110</sup> The intellectual inferiority ascribed to non-white and non-Western-European people is here brought in as a result of contact with the non-human, layering eugenic racial and national fears onto this encounter with the supernatural. Also of significance, perhaps, is the nature of the boy’s nightmares. He frequently disturbs the household by ‘waking in the night with cries of “The man in the wood! father! father!”’, and the ambiguity of the utterance is interesting; the boy might be calling to his father for protection from the frightening entity he saw in the wood, or calling out to it *as* a father.<sup>111</sup> There is here a blurring of the boundaries between the two, a threat, perhaps, that the monstrous, corrupting father in the woods will usurp the place of the true father, the head of the Anglo-Saxon British household.

Helen’s next victim, a childhood friend known as Rachel M., is similarly altered. After accompanying Helen into the woods and, we can only assume, encountering Pan, or other entities from that sphere of being, she seems profoundly mentally altered: her mother finds her manner ‘peculiar’; she is ‘languid and dreamy’; and, perhaps most significantly, “‘different from herself’”.<sup>112</sup> Again, Rachel’s rational mind seems to have been altered, infected with a strangeness, and with a lack of energy and focus—qualities deemed essential for survival in the harsh arena of natural selection, and attributed to white Anglo-Saxons.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

The most drastic changes, however, take place in Helen's later victims; her husbands and the acquaintances—usually male admirers—whom she initiates into her supernatural practices. The conflation of marriage and romantic relationships with the occult and with corruption in the tale carries further resonances of heredity and of “miscegenation”. Although no children result from these unions, these men are punished for marrying or dallying with the Other, for allowing it the opportunity to mingle with the “human”. Helen, meanwhile, is figured as a sexual threat. We never learn what, exactly, she shows them, but we might conjecture that she is able to summon entities from Pan's realm into that of the human, a kind of incursion or invasion, or a symbolic birthing of the Other—or that she is, perhaps, attempting to effect an actual repeat performance of her own conception, to create another horrific hybrid entity like herself, repulsive, because non-human, but dangerously seductive, because appearing human and beautiful. Again, perhaps, we see the fear of the Other going unnoticed, creeping into the hereditary stream in disguise.

We encounter Herbert, her first husband, through the eyes of Villiers, an old college friend who at first fails to recognise the destitute beggar his former classmate has become. Herbert is a diminished man, a shadow of his old self; Villiers later refers to him as ‘what was left of an old friend of mine’.<sup>113</sup> The permanent change wrought in him by his experience with Helen is emphasised; he is a ‘ruined man’, a ‘haunted man’, living beneath a cloud of ‘indefinite terror which hung about him like a mist’.<sup>114</sup> He tells Villiers that ‘that woman[...]corrupted my soul’<sup>115</sup>; the physical body is prey to Helen's depredations, but the rational mind and the moral sense, those qualities apparently so especially human, are not immune either. The phrase ‘body and soul’ is used repeatedly, both by Herbert himself and by

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

Villiers in his later relating of the meeting,<sup>116</sup> and the repeated pairing of these two words seems to suggest the vulnerability of the human subject. The conscious, rational mind, traditionally the preserve of the “human”, is nonetheless inseparable from the physical body, and may easily be corrupted through it. There is an echo of the eugenic, and of immigration-centred fears, here, too. The supposed intellectual superiority of Anglo-Saxon peoples was held to set them apart, to fit them uniquely for leadership and to win out in any contest for dominance or survival. And yet this advantage was constantly at risk from the reproductive capacity of foreign immigrants and the “feebleminded” (often linked by eugenicists), able to be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Helen holds a similar psychological power over all her later victims. ‘Blank’, the man found dead outside the Herberts’ house, appears to have died ‘of fright, of sheer awful terror’; here, the mental suffering inflicted by Helen overwhelms the body, leaving his features ‘hideously contorted’.<sup>117</sup> The rational mind, and any “desirable” hereditary qualities possessed by a respectable English gentleman, are erased, reducing their possessor to the most instinctual, irrational, and uncontrollable level of fear. Even those who inhabit the uppermost echelons of society are not safe. In the guise of Mrs. Beaumont, Helen occasions the suicides of a number of respectable men, among them Lord Argentine, who kills himself for no apparent reason. That they, too, have been ‘corrupted’ by exposure to Helen’s otherworldly realm is evidenced, as in the case of Blank, by the expressions on the faces of the bodies. The rational mind, the “human” consciousness, is utterly effaced in them, as we can see in the description Villiers gives of Argentine’s corpse:

[It] made my blood run cold to see that man’s face. I could never have supposed that such

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 26, p. 28, p. 34, p. 41.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

an infernal medley of passions could have glared out of *any human eyes*; I almost fainted as I looked. I knew I had looked into the eyes of a lost soul, Austin, the man's outward form remained, but all hell was within it. Furious lust, and hate that was like fire, and the loss of all hope, and horror that seemed to shriek aloud in the night, though his teeth were shut, and the utter blackness of despair[...]*that man no longer belonged to this world*; it was a devil's face that I looked upon.<sup>118</sup>

There is also mention of the 'black swollen face' of the dead man.<sup>119</sup> It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to note that the effacement of the human and the effacement of whiteness are brought together, implicitly linked in this description of Helen's victim.

The hybrid figure of Helen Vaughan, then, brings together the inhuman and the racialised, the 'marked' non-white body. The fears of immigration, of the potential deterioration of racial or national stock and the overrunning of Anglo-Saxon nations by inferior Others are mapped onto the supernatural elements of the story, with the human being figured as implicitly white, English, middle-class and male, while the threat of hybridity appears in the form of a woman of uncertain origin, described variously as Mediterranean and South American in appearance. The coming-together of the two is undesirable, eliciting in "civilised" subjects a revulsion similar to that occasioned by encounters with the abhuman and the degenerate, but also seductive, fascinating men (with the implication of a sexual and reproductive threat) and allowing Helen to "pass" as human in society. From this position, she threatens to usurp the human, granting entrance into the human world to entities yet more alien than herself, and in the process, leeching away the humanity of those humans who see them. The threat

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 58. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

which this poses to the “human” in general is made clear; Herbert claims to have seen ‘such horrors that even I myself sometimes stop in the middle of the street, and ask whether it is possible for a man to see such things and live’,<sup>120</sup> suggesting the *unfitness* of humans to survive in the face of these incursions. Clarke, meanwhile, struggles with even the thought of Helen’s true nature, in a passage in which she is conceived as an invader, a usurper of the human body itself:

Clarke tried to conceive the thing again, as he sat by the fire, and again his mind shuddered and shrank back, appalled before the sight of such awful, unspeakable elements enthroned, as it were, and triumphant in human flesh.<sup>121</sup>

The language of conquest and rule used here is significant, I think, suggesting invasion, and a threat to (white, Anglo-Saxon) human supremacy. The biological and political fears of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are, in this story, joined together. The supernatural elements of the plot draw upon contemporary anxieties around the immigration and reproduction of those who were seen as less developed, less intelligent, and effectively less human than “normal”, Anglo-Saxon whites, and simultaneously feed into them, conflating foreignness with inhumanity, sexual threat, and danger.

Something very similar takes place in H. P. Lovecraft’s 1929 story ‘The Dunwich Horror’, a tale whose plot draws heavily upon that of ‘The Great God Pan’.<sup>122</sup> Like Machen’s tale, ‘The Dunwich Horror’ focuses upon the coupling of a human mother and a non-human father from some indescribable sphere of being beyond this world. And, as in ‘The Great God Pan’, the offspring of that pairing pose a great threat to humanity, promising to open the doors between the human realm and the non-human, and even

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>122</sup> S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996), p. 450.



to utterly efface the human. The story's concerns with non-human entities and non-human bodies seem, like those of 'The Great God Pan', to draw upon anxieties and stereotypes about non-Anglo-Saxon people, particularly immigrants. Lovecraft, an ardent Anglophile given to proudly announcing his descent from 'unmixed English gentry',<sup>123</sup> and apparently somewhat distressed to discover that this was not the case, was vocal in his racism and his distaste for immigrants, becoming particularly vehement after several years spent living in poorer, more multicultural areas of New York.<sup>124</sup> While he reserved most of his vitriol for his private letters, as we will see in later sections, Lovecraft's racism does rear its head in his fiction, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, and it would be disingenuous to try to deny that his disgust for immigrants, and for the mixing of races (socially or otherwise), is partly at play in 'The Dunwich Horror'. There is, however, also a concern with the nature and status of the "human" here, albeit one which—as in 'The Great God Pan'—places some humans as more "human" than others, and which ties this problematic position in with concerns about the human and the non-human. It is interesting, however, that while Lovecraft presents the usurping of the "human" as a highly undesirable outcome, framing his tale in far more simply moralistic terms than was his habit (perhaps with an eye to the market), the right of humanity itself to inhabit and dominate the planet is not taken for granted here. There is a suggestion that we were not here first; that humans may, in fact, be the usurpers.

The tale proper begins by establishing the overabundance of nature and the depletion of the human population in this corner of the world, as well as the degenerate nature of the inhabitants. Dunwich is a place where

[the] trees of the frequent forest belts seem too large, and the wild weeds, brambles, and

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 370.

grasses attain a luxuriance not often found in settled regions. At the same time the planted fields appear singularly few and barren; while the sparsely scattered houses wear a surprisingly uniform aspect of age, squalor, and dilapidation.<sup>125</sup>

The supremacy of the human seems to be in danger here; in comparison to the vigorous vegetation of the area, the ‘scattered’ human inhabitants do not appear to be the surviving fittest. And this thriving nature does not seem entirely benign. The Dunwich area itself, as well as its flora and fauna, holds a vague menace, eliciting instinctive aversion from visitors. There are ‘stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes, and indeed almost fears’,<sup>126</sup> and the countryside is inhabited by ‘creepily[...]piping bullfrogs’, whippoorwills which are thought to act as psychopomps, foreseeing death and carrying off the souls of the dead, and an ‘abnormal profusion’ of fireflies.<sup>127</sup> Even the mountains around Dunwich, crowned with standing stones of unknown origin, are threatening, with ‘summits[...]too rounded and symmetrical to give a sense of comfort and naturalness’ and sides which ‘loom up so darkly and precipitously that one wishes they would keep their distance’.<sup>128</sup> The absence of ‘naturalness’ in the landscape itself stands out, suggesting that human conceptions of the correct order of being are being undermined here: nature itself is unnatural. The danger and revulsion that this menacing environment holds for the “human” is emphasised in the reactions to it of the human inhabitants and their visitors, recalling the instinctive revulsion occasioned in “civilised” human subjects by encounters with the abhuman and the degenerate. Cold Spring Glen, later to become the hiding-place of the titular horror, is somewhere that people avoid ‘without knowing exactly why’.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Tales*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1929; London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 206-245 (p. 206).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

One inhabitant describes it as ‘no healthy nor decent place’ and notes the unnatural behaviour of its wildlife; the whippoorwills and fireflies in the glen do not act like ‘creaters o’ Gawd’.<sup>130</sup>

Alongside this overabundant, mysteriously threatening (un)natural environment, the human inhabitants of Dunwich are portrayed as singularly unfit to survive. Lovecraft utilises the language of degeneracy, playing upon the same fears so often expressed by eugenicists—that a failure to control the fertility of social undesirables would result in an inevitable downward spiral in the population as a whole. Spencer in fact offered ‘the backwoods of America’ as an example of ‘the Anglo-Saxon race’ having ‘lapsed into comparative barbarism: adopting the moral code, and sometimes the habits, of savages’.<sup>131</sup> The ‘natives’ of Dunwich embody the end result of this, having grown ‘repellently decadent’ and displaying ‘the well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding’.<sup>132</sup> Lovecraft is apparently aware of the Army tests that were used to identify an apparent decline in the national intelligence in the US, and even makes use of the event in his story, reporting that, when the draft for the First World War began, the men of Dunwich were found to be so widely unfit for service that medical staff were sent to conduct an investigation into this ‘wholesale regional decadence’.<sup>133</sup> This decadence is associated with religious difference (Dunwich folk ‘curiously observe’ Candlemas ‘under another name’<sup>134</sup>) and with poor hygiene, the narrative remarking that ‘the homes and sheds of Dunwich folk have never been remarkable for olfactory immaculateness’.<sup>135</sup> These associations, tied to the ‘decadence’ of the local population, recall the associations made by eugenicists and political figures between immigrants, non-Protestant religion, and dirt and disease; Catholics, we may remember, were regarded as unassimilable,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp 228.

<sup>131</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 190.

<sup>132</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, p. 208.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p.215.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

while black people were doomed to become ‘dirty criminals’. When Armitage, the Miskatonic librarian who suspects the truth, encounters the Dunwich locals, he exclaims, ““Great God, what simpletons! Shew them Arthur Machen’s Great God Pan and they’ll think it a common Dunwich scandal!””<sup>136</sup> There are resonances here of immorality—sexual indiscretions are ‘common’—and of mental illness, also feared by eugenicists. The unchecked breeding of these backwoods people has let the whole ‘sordid populace’<sup>137</sup> sink down into “feeble-mindedness”. Perhaps most tellingly of all, Lovecraft declares that these degenerate Dunwich natives ‘have come to form a race by themselves’; they are separated from the white Anglo-Saxon American mainstream, having failed to preserve their racial “fitness”.<sup>138</sup> They are no longer able to resist incursions from threatening outside forces, and it is against this backdrop of intertwined racial and “human” vulnerability that the Dunwich horror—or, more accurately, horrors—appear.

The principal plot focuses upon one particularly degenerate and unsavoury family, the Whateleys. In fact, there are several branches of the Whateley family in the neighbourhood, ‘decayed and undecayed’,<sup>139</sup> but those who form the principal interest of ‘The Dunwich Horror’ are distinctly in the former camp. Two generations of the family inhabit a dilapidated farmhouse on the outskirts of Dunwich, the locally-feared Old Whateley, with his ‘reputation for black magic’, and his daughter, Lavinia, a ‘deformed, unattractive albino woman of thirty-five’.<sup>140</sup> (Readers familiar with Darwin might have been reminded of the example he uses, in *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), of a family who produced a generation of ‘perfect albinos’ after two marriages

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

of cousins, as an illustration of reversion.<sup>141</sup>) The Whateleys, according to the narrative, are particularly egregious offenders in the areas of hygiene and religious unorthodoxy; their home is one ‘from which all standards of order and cleanliness [have] long since disappeared’, while Old Whateley is believed to practice bizarre occult rites in the hills around Dunwich, and has passed ‘disjointed scraps of ancient lore’ on to his otherwise uneducated daughter.<sup>142</sup> After the Whateleys have celebrated one such unholy rite, Lavinia becomes pregnant, eventually giving birth to a son, Wilbur, of unknown paternity, and who grows and develops at a prodigious rate, resembling a teenager by the age of four. At the time of Wilbur’s birth, Old Whateley renovates and boards up a hitherto-disused shed in the grounds of the Whateley homestead, and begins work on a similar project with the upper story of the house. Outsiders can only speculate as to what it is that the Whateleys are keeping in the large locked space (and why their pastures never become crowded, although they are continually buying cattle), and the secret—Wilbur’s twin brother, far more closely resembling their father than he—escapes only after Old Whateley, Lavinia, and Wilbur have all met their deaths.

Wilbur, the more human-seeming of Lavinia’s offspring, is described in terms that link him closely to the abundant and disturbing natural landscape around Dunwich, and to the animalistic, as well as to racial Others. It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that the Whateley’s occult practices, used, like Helen Vaughan’s, to summon entities from some entirely alien sphere of being, are initially projected onto a racial Other, the narrative remarking that ‘old legends’ in the area ‘speak of unhallowed rites and conclaves of the Indians, amidst which they called forbidden shapes of shadow out of the great rounded hills’.<sup>143</sup> Wilbur’s physical appearance, too, is emphasised as being foreign. He is known locally as

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<sup>141</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, I, p. 460.

<sup>142</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, p. 210.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

‘Lavinny’s black brat’,<sup>144</sup> and has ‘almost Latin eyes’.<sup>145</sup> Lavinia, meanwhile, is ‘strangely proud of the dark, goatish-looking infant who formed such a contrast to her own sickly and pink-eyed albinism’.<sup>146</sup> The dominance of Wilbur’s non-human ancestry over the human is brought out in this depiction, which also manages to link the ‘dark’ (implicitly the non-Caucasian), the animalistic, and a disquieting health and vitality which contrasts with the sickliness of his mother. The goatishness, of course, cannot help but put us in mind of Pan, the representative of the wholly-other in Machen’s tale, and physically a human-animal hybrid. Later on, Wilbur’s ugliness is emphasised, with the suggestion that there is ‘something almost goatish or animalistic’ about his face.<sup>147</sup> During his infancy, Wilbur is spied bathing with his mother, apparently wearing ‘a fringed belt and a pair of dark trunks or trousers’.<sup>148</sup> Later in the story comes a detailed inventory of Wilbur’s physical abnormalities, but here the image is one of a creature animal from the waist down, and perhaps furry. The image calls to mind the titular deity of Machen’s story, and perhaps also the parallel T. H. Huxley draws between human-like apes and the ‘Centaur and Satyr’ of myth at the beginning of *Man’s Place in Nature* (1894).<sup>149</sup> Hair is also an adult physical characteristic, suggestive of masculinity, and we later learn that Wilbur is beginning to grow a beard at the age of four. This adds another layer to the preternatural growth rate mentioned elsewhere, adding implications of abnormal virility and coming as close as anything one can find in Lovecraft to a suggestion of sexual threat. We might well be reminded of the hypersexual or hypermasculine stereotyping of black men, used by US politicians of the late nineteenth century to portray them as a threat to white women, in order to divide black and white working-class voters, who might otherwise have allied themselves in order to challenge those in power.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 212, p. 227.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>149</sup> T. H. Huxley *Man’s Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays* (1894; London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> Carroll and Noble, pp. 292-293.

This suggestion of abnormally developed masculinity suggests both a sexual and reproductive capacity greater than that of Dunwich's fully human (though degenerate) inhabitants and, in Wilbur's increased growth rate and early development, a greater physical strength and mental ability. At the age of three months, Wilbur has 'attained a size and muscular power not usually found in infants under a full year of age', and by seven months he is able to walk;<sup>151</sup> by the time of his death, he is a 'goatish giant' almost nine feet tall.<sup>152</sup> Spencer's assertion of the 'unusual fertility and vigour' of hybrids comes to mind.<sup>153</sup> Perhaps more disturbing than his physical precocity, however, is his early mastery of those abilities held to be particularly "human". He is a 'fluent and incredibly intelligent talker' before the age of two,<sup>154</sup> and his face gives the impression of 'quasi-adulthood and well-nigh preternatural intelligence'.<sup>155</sup> By the age of four, he is a voracious reader; by ten, his 'mind, voice, stature, and bearded face [give] all the impressions of maturity'.<sup>156</sup> Herein seems to lie the most disturbing aspect of this hybrid figure; this 'goatish', 'gorilla-like' creature,<sup>157</sup> 'shabby, dirty, bearded, and uncouth of dialect',<sup>158</sup> and possessed of alarmingly little regard for conventional morality (having laughed at his grandfather's deathbed, and quite possibly murdered his own mother<sup>159</sup>) is arguably better at being human than humans themselves. Spencer had noted that the predominance of a particular type of life in particular conditions did not necessarily mean it was 'the fittest for them',<sup>160</sup> and Darwin had suggested that forms evolved in temperate regions were likely to oust the natives of tropical regions when they

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<sup>151</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Dunwich Horror', p. 211.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220, p. 223.

<sup>153</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 289.

<sup>154</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Dunwich Horror', p. 213.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

<sup>160</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 311.

invaded, having been better fitted for survival by their harsher conditions of life.<sup>161</sup> ‘Civilised races’ were equipped to ‘resist changes of all kinds far better than savages’ because they had been exposed to ‘diversified or varying conditions’ to a greater extent, and they would, therefore, eventually ‘exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world’, wiping out the ‘anthropomorphous apes’ at the same time.<sup>162</sup> Lovecraft’s story extrapolates from this notion to explore its implications for human dominance upon the Earth. For Spencer, it was inevitable that organisms would ‘[intrude] on each other’s spheres of existence’.<sup>163</sup> In competition with such ‘precocious [monsters]’, what hope for the pure “human” strain?<sup>164</sup>

Even in the hybrid bodies of Wilbur and his brother themselves, the human appears weak, easily overpowered by the alien. We already know that Wilbur has rejected human morality; in the depiction of his true physical nature, the Other appears far more strikingly than the “human”, too. Throughout the story, references are made to the instinctive dislike that dogs have for Wilbur; the local dogs bark throughout the night of his birth, and he is soon unable to walk around the countryside without being attacked by them, resorting to carrying a gun for safety.<sup>165</sup> This last fact is mentioned in conjunction with the ‘dawning look of evil’ that the locals are beginning to perceive upon his face, and the implication appears to be that dogs are more easily able to see beneath the veneer of humanity than humans themselves, and react instinctively to the alienness and immorality they sense in him.<sup>166</sup> It is at the jaws of a dog that Wilbur eventually meets his doom: on attempting to break into the library at Miskatonic University in order to steal a copy of Lovecraft’s fictional grimoire the *Necronomicon*, he is

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<sup>161</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, pp. 370-371.

<sup>162</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 190, p. 156.

<sup>163</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 315.

<sup>164</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, p. 245.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209-214.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.



attacked by the college watchdog—which has always regarded him with ‘unnatural fury and enmity’<sup>167</sup>—and is on the point of expiring when Armitage, reaches the library. The dog attack has torn off much of Wilbur’s clothing, revealing his true physical nature, and here, Lovecraft is able to indulge in some truly outrageous biological fantasy. The nature of Wilbur’s body is foreshadowed by his final scream, an utterance that ‘could have come from no being born of earth, or wholly of earth’,<sup>168</sup> and indeed, from here on in Wilbur’s human heredity is entirely effaced in the narrative. He is no longer a person, but a ‘thing’, the word repeated six times in the description of his death and subsequent decay.<sup>169</sup> The description of his body, too, takes on part of the nature of scientific observation: the careful inventorying of each physical feature suggests that we might be reading a lab report on the properties of an unusual specimen, albeit one written in Lovecraft’s habitual descriptive hyperbole. The collection of features described emphasises both inhumanity and hybridity, drawing upon a number of different types of life-form, mostly non-mammalian. There is fur, but there are also saurian hindlegs, ‘leathery, reticulated hide’ suggesting the reptilian, and ‘long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths’, vaguely suggesting a hermaphroditism not commonly associated with the “human”, as well as the physical properties of some kind of marine life.<sup>170</sup>

There is an indeterminacy to Wilbur’s physical form; an extent to which it seems unfixed. His feet are ‘neither hooves nor claws’, resisting classification, while the colour of his tail and tentacles changes constantly.<sup>171</sup> There are undeveloped features also; a ‘rudimentary eye’ upon each hip, and what is taken to be ‘an undeveloped mouth or throat’ at the end of his tail.<sup>172</sup> There is, then, potential for yet

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 223-225.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

more change in this hybrid body, for the human to be further effaced. Indeed, Wilbur himself has predicted this, speculating that he may be ‘transfigured’ into a shape more like that of his father once he has opened the portal to the alien realm and rid the earth of humans—for this is his ultimate plan—and affirming that there is in him ‘much of outside to work on’.<sup>173</sup> After his death, Wilbur’s physical body dissolves into a ‘sticky whitish mass’, leaving behind no skeleton, no semblance at all of human form.<sup>174</sup> There is also a suggestion that, for all his mastery of human accomplishments—his ability to “pass” as human, if you like—Wilbur’s mind, too, is utterly alien. His death throes have been accompanied by the accustomed piping of whippoorwills outside the window, the birds traditionally being thought to lie in wait for the souls of the dead, keeping up a celebratory chorus all night if they do manage to catch the unfortunate souls, and growing quiet with disappointment if they fail. This time, however, neither of those things happens. Instead, the birds scatter in a ‘panic-struck whining and fluttering[...]frantic at that which they had sought for prey’.<sup>175</sup> Wilbur’s soul, too, is apparently monstrous—or, perhaps, he does not have one in any recognisable sense.

The titular ‘horror’ of the story, Wilbur’s twin brother, however, has not yet emerged. It is only in Wilbur’s absence that it bursts forth from its enclosure in the farmhouse and begins to terrorise Dunwich, and it is in this form that the effacement of the human is almost—though not entirely—completed. The alienness of the creature is such that it is invisible to the naked eye, resisting visual classification and human notions of form, and its repulsiveness, animalism, and savagery are far more pronounced than Wilbur’s. Throughout the text, there are mentions of a ‘stench’ around the Whateley homestead and around the stone circles on the hilltops where ‘horrors’ from beyond can apparently be

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

summoned.<sup>176</sup> The smell that lingers around the stones is well-established in local folklore,<sup>177</sup> but that around the Whateley farmhouse begins to be noticed only after the birth of Wilbur and the horror. Later, after the horror's escape, its progress can be tracked only by its 'unwonted stench' and by the odorous, tarry deposits it leaves behind.<sup>178</sup> The association of smell with the presence of entities from beyond is made explicit in the *Necronomicon*, which declares that, although these beings are invisible to human eyes, '[by] Their smell can men sometimes know Them[...]They walk unseen and foul in lonely places[...]As a foulness shall ye know Them'.<sup>179</sup> The associations of smell and slime are various: poor hygiene; disease; the animal; and still lower forms of life, like the primordial slime into which Machen's Helen Vaughan eventually dissolves. The associations made between immigrants and disease and dirt in the period have already been detailed, as has the notion of other races being less highly-developed than white Anglo-Saxons. The projection of qualities used to denigrate racial and national Others onto a non-human Other appears here, then, as in 'The Great God Pan', allowing the story to play upon contemporary fears of immigration and overrunning, and simultaneously placing the Other as less-than-human.

The effacement of the human threatened implicitly in Wilbur's body is carried out literally by the actions of the horror, which does not differentiate between the cattle in the local farms and their owners, treating all as prey. Even its human family members are not exempt. In the creature's infancy, it is noted that '[odd] wounds or sores, having something of the aspect of incisions' are appearing on the Whateleys' cattle; some of the locals claim to have seen similar sores on Old Whateley and Lavinia.<sup>180</sup> The creature has apparently been feeding upon both, reducing its mother and grandfather to the level of

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 214, p. 215, p. 225.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 225, p. 227.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 219-220.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

livestock. The distinction between human and animal begins to break down; and, when the creature escapes and begins to prey upon the villagers of Dunwich, the human is threatened with total eradication.

The first farm to be attacked, that of the Elmer Frye family, reports a great disturbance amongst its animals when the horror breaks out. (Another house, belonging to a family named Bishop, will also be destroyed later.) At night, it passes close to the household, terrifying human and animal inhabitants alike:

[The sound of the creature] was quickly followed by a hideous screaming and stamping amongst the cattle. The dogs slavered and crouched close to the feet of the fear-numbed family[...]The children and the womenfolk whimpered, kept from screaming by some obscure, vestigial instinct of defence which told them their lives depended on silence.<sup>181</sup>

Rational thought and “civilised” accomplishments are no help here; it is only ‘instinct’ which saves them this time. In a sense, their humanity is already beginning to be siphoned off, fear making them reliant upon older, less conscious impulses, the instincts of prey animals. And when the horror does attack, it does not merely kill. The Frye farmstead is utterly destroyed, ‘nothing living or dead’ able to be found in the ruins. All that remains is ‘a stench and a tarry stickiness’.<sup>182</sup> The human beings themselves have been destroyed, as have the human institutions of home, agriculture, and family. This last, the attack upon human heredity and the continuity of the “human”, is perhaps the most significant.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-229.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

In the creature's physical form, too, there seems to be very little of the human. We already know that it is invisible to the naked eye, and that it is far larger than its brother, having occupied the whole upper storey of the farmhouse. Wilbur's diary, found after his death, throws some light upon the size and the alienness of the creature:

That upstairs more ahead of me than I had thought it would be, and is not like to have much earth brain[...]They from outside will help, but they cannot take body without human blood. That upstairs looks it will have the right cast.<sup>183</sup>

The non-human part of the creature's ancestry is apparently removed from human notions of 'body', existing according to some entirely different laws of physics, and presumably this is why it cannot be seen. Alienness and lack of intellect are linked here, too, with the creature lacking 'earth brain', as are alienness and prodigious growth. The creature is already ahead of Wilbur, and Armitage, speaking at the end of the story, makes explicit that its otherness is the cause of this: 'It grew fast and big for the same reason the Wilbur grew fast and big', he tells the assembled locals, 'but it beat him because it had a greater share of the *outsideness* in it'.<sup>184</sup> So far, so alien; but Wilbur has also noted that the creature is only able to exist in this world at all because of its human blood, the "human" here essentially becoming an accessory to the invading inhuman, a participant in its own demise. The use of human blood as a means to an end effectively reduces the "human" to the level of breeding stock or object, no longer the protagonist its own story, but a tool to be used for the purposes of Others. And it is this, perhaps, that is most deeply to be feared: not the existence of non-human Others, nor the potential destruction of human lives, but the persistence of the human as something *other than itself*, corrupted,

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<sup>183</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Dunwich Horror', p. 232-233.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

altered, and no longer reigning supreme over the earth.

We see this idea embodied when the creature finally becomes visible. Armitage and his compatriots, in their attempt to destroy the creature, acquire a powder that will render it temporarily visible, and Curtis Whateley—one of the ‘undecayed’ Whateleys in the neighbourhood—is rendered unconscious with shock at the sight of it through a telescope.<sup>185</sup> His description of it to the other watchers initially focuses upon its most alien elements: it is ‘all made o’ squirmin’ ropes’, colossal, and covered in eyes, trunks and mouths.<sup>186</sup> The indeterminacy of its form is emphasised, and we learn that there is ‘nothin’ solid abaout it’, that it is ‘all like jelly, an’ made o’ sep’rit wrigglin’ ropes pushed clost together’.<sup>187</sup> Its colour, too, is like nothing found in humans—‘grey, with kinder blue or purple rings’.<sup>188</sup> But the crowning horror, for Curtis Whateley, as least, is ‘*that haff face on top*’.<sup>189</sup> A slightly unclear description, and one which Whateley returns to and clarifies upon waking up. ‘*It was a [sic] octopus, centipede, spider kind o’ thing*’, he informs the waiting locals, ‘*but they [sic] was a haff-shaped man’s face on top of it, an’ it looked like Wizard Whateley’s*’.<sup>190</sup> At the same time that Curtis Whateley is unconscious with shock at this vision, the watchers are left ‘reeling’ by another disturbing revelation.<sup>191</sup> The creature cries out at the moment of its death, a ‘half-articulate’ sound that is clearly inhuman, ‘for the organs of man can yield no such acoustic perversions’.<sup>192</sup> It is calling, however, in English. This uncanny moment, the climactic one of the story, plays quite clearly upon fears about the dilution or overwhelming of the human, and takes them one step further. The vestigial, half-recognisable face and the creature’s familiarity with a recognisable language form a kind of trace or remnant of the human in

<sup>185</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’, pp. 241-242.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

the Other, and the beastly brother becomes here a mirror image of Wilbur. Where Wilbur's apparent humanity was infected by an element of what Armitage calls 'the *outsideness*', the brother's alien nature is infected with a little of humanity. A switch in places is effected here, an alteration in the status of humanity, and in this moment it is the human element itself which becomes horrifying.

Armitage's explanation of the Whateleys' plan cements the horror: we learn that the Whateleys were in conspiracy with the 'Elder Things' (as he calls the creatures that form part of Wilbur's and his brother's ancestry)<sup>193</sup> and that, having opened the gateway to material existence to them through the introduction of human blood, they planned to 'let [them] in tangibly to wipe out the human race and drag the earth off to some nameless place for some nameless purpose'.<sup>194</sup> Here again we have the suggestion of overwhelming, of invasion and usurpation, but perhaps most telling at all is one other detail that Armitage has gleaned from Wilbur's diary. After his initial reading of it, he falls into a raving delirium, and among the claims he makes in this state is that that the earth itself did not originate in this dimension. Rather, it originally existed in 'some other plane or phase of entity'—that of the Elder Things—and fell from it 'vintigillions of aeons ago'.<sup>195</sup> Read in conjunction with the story's epigraph, with its claim that '*they were there before*',<sup>196</sup> Armitage's revelation seems to evidence an even more shocking truth: humans have no prior claim of ownership upon the planet. We may, in fact, be the usurpers.

Given the early invocation of 'Indians' in the story, and the way that racial and eugenic fears are again

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<sup>193</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Dunwich Horror', p. 234. It is unclear whether these are identical with the 'Elder Things' of 'The Shadow Out of Time', but their ability to mate with humans suggests otherwise, since the beings in 'The Shadow Out of Time' are not fully material.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Witches and Other Night-Fears', cited in H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Dunwich Horror', p. 206.

mapped on to human-inhuman relations, one might, perhaps, wonder whether there is some anxiety about the legitimacy of the claim of white Americans to supremacy upon the continent here. There also seem to be fears around the issues of immigration and national or racial “fitness” already mentioned: the horror of a potentially destructive outside invasion, the fear of an overwhelming fecundity or capacity for growth in the Other, the worry that the “human” might not be suitably equipped to compete against the Other, and anxieties around the possibility of an alteration in status for the (white, Anglo-Saxon) “human” or a challenge to its claim upon supremacy. The blurring of boundaries between the “human” and the Other, and Wilbur’s human appearance, might also evidence a fear of challenges to previously clearly demarcated racial boundaries, represented, for example, by alliances between black and white voters, or the spectre of interracial marriage. The “human” and the Other here are not so far removed from one another as to be unable to produce offspring, and those offspring, bearing human and ‘outside’ characteristics in varying degrees, seem to represent a gradation or sliding scale between the two. Spencer’s remark about unusually vigorous hybrids refers, after all, to crosses between different varieties of the same species, not between creatures utterly unlike each other.<sup>197</sup> Wilbur’s ability to pass for human might, too, recall fears about foreign or non-white blood ‘passing’ unnoticed in society, as suggested by Bohata in reference to ‘The Great God Pan’.<sup>198</sup> The ultimate difference of other races and nationalities, and thus the supremacy of the white Anglo-Saxon, was challenged by immigration and by political and personal alliances between races and nationalities; here, the supremacy of the “human” upon the earth is threatened by a horrific alliance between the “human” and the invading, racialised Other.

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<sup>197</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 289.

<sup>198</sup> Bohata, p. 126.



### The Self as Other: ‘Arthur Jermyn’ and ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’

Lovecraft wrote several times upon this same theme, but—perhaps surprisingly, given his reactionary racial views—‘The Dunwich Horror’ is the only one of his major stories in which the hybrid offspring of a human-inhuman union appears as the antagonist. His other workings of the idea, ‘Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family’ (1921) (commonly referred to as ‘Arthur Jermyn’) and the novella in which he would later expand his theme, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ (1936), take on the possibility of an awful hybridity within the ostensibly “human” self.

The earlier story, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, focuses upon the eponymous protagonist—a member of the English upper class, and a distinguished scholar—and his discovery of his nonhuman ancestry, a revelation that will drive him to suicide. Jermyn is introduced to us with his title (he is *Sir* Arthur Jermyn), and as a ‘poet and scholar’ who is not much worried by his own physical ugliness and who is therefore implicitly above fleshly concerns.<sup>199</sup> The mention of his title establishes both Jermyn’s Englishness and his place in the top tier of the class system, while his reputation as a man of letters confirms his intellectual superiority and his level of education; his position, in other words, as the model of a “civilised” human subject. Moreover, these factors are explicitly tied to his ancestry. Both Jermyn’s title and his scholarly abilities have been passed down from his earliest mentioned progenitor, the explorer Sir Wade Jermyn, who ‘possessed an intellectual zeal amounting almost to a mania’.<sup>200</sup> This last detail, linking the scholarly intelligence of a consummately “civilised” man with the spectre of mental instability, is a striking one, and I will return to it later. At the same time that we are introduced to Arthur Jermyn, the upper-class intellectual, we also learn of his untimely end by self-immolation,

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<sup>199</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1921; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 14-23 (p. 14).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

and the attempt that has been made to erase his memory since. ‘No one’, we are told, ‘placed the charred fragments [of his body] in an urn or set a memorial to him who had been’, and some have even denied that Arthur Jermyn ever existed.<sup>201</sup> The aftermath of his death contrasts vividly with the privileged position he occupied in life; he is not accorded the respect due to a human being, or even a well-loved companion animal.

As the narrative sketches out the history of the Jermyn family line, the traces of animalism and of the spectre of degeneration—so feared by scientific writers of the late nineteenth century, and by the eugenicists who followed them—become clearer. Arthur, we learn, is the last scion of a family declining in number, in physical appearance, and in regard: we are told that ‘people were glad there were not many of them’.<sup>202</sup> The Jermyns born since Sir Wade’s time have all possessed ‘a subtly odd and repellent cast’,<sup>203</sup> never having looked ‘quite right’.<sup>204</sup> Arthur, though, is the worst, and his appearance is described as ‘peculiar’,<sup>205</sup> a descriptor also applied to more than one of his progenitors.<sup>206</sup> Philip Jermyn, Sir Wade’s son, signals the start of the decay. He is violent, ‘highly peculiar’, and ‘densely stupid’, and his physical appearance—though closely resembling that of his father—is ‘so coarse that he [is] universally shunned’, forming a kind of degenerate parody of the “human”.<sup>207</sup> He seems, too, to have preternatural physical abilities, being ‘small, but intensely powerful’ and gaining ‘a kind of reputation for feats of strength and climbing’,<sup>208</sup> a capacity which seems decidedly simian. The ideas of hybridity and boundary-crossing are also raised in the story’s recounting of Philip’s life, with reference to class as well as race. Philip himself is downwardly socially

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 15, p. 16.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

mobile, joining the navy as a ‘common sailor’, to ‘general disgust’.<sup>209</sup> His marriage, too, crosses class and ethnic boundaries: he marries a gamekeeper’s daughter, ‘a person said to be of gypsy extraction’, implicitly contaminating his family line.<sup>210</sup> Eventually, he goes missing off the Congo coast, apparently disappearing into the jungle and completing his descent into degeneration, allying himself with a continent populated by non-white people, and with the jungle, an area associated by explorers like his grandfather with wildlife and with “primitive” humans, instead of with the fully “human”, white people, and England.

Philip’s son, Robert, while free from his father’s stupidity, inherits a certain physical strangeness associated in the narrative with foreignness; he has ‘a sort of weird Eastern grace despite certain oddities of proportion’.<sup>211</sup> His intellectual life, too, betrays an interest in the Other, his intensive study of Sir Wade’s African relics suggesting a fascination with the continent. And his children revert to degenerate type, two of them kept hidden due to physical and mental ‘deformities’, while the second son, Arthur’s grandfather and a ‘singularly repellent person’, marries a ‘vulgar dancer’.<sup>212</sup> Indeed, cross-class marriage is common to all of the atavistic Jermyns: Arthur himself is the son of ‘Sir Alfred Jermyn and a music-hall singer of unknown origin’.<sup>213</sup> Clare Hanson has suggested that, for eugenicists, cross-class reproduction was ‘almost as dangerous as miscegenation’.<sup>214</sup> Robert Jermyn eventually succumbs to the madness that has haunted the family since Sir Wade’s time, apparently as a result of hearing ‘a bit of African folklore’ from an explorer with whom he is discussing Sir Wade’s expeditions.<sup>215</sup> After murdering his three children, and attempting to kill the infant Alfred, he is

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>214</sup> Hanson, p. 25.

<sup>215</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, p. 17.

confined to a madhouse, where he dies a year later, having refused ‘to utter any articulate sound’ in the interim.<sup>216</sup> He neither explains his actions nor participates in that hallmark of human exceptionality, verbal communication. Effectively, he refuses his own humanity.

It is Arthur’s father, Alfred, however, in whom atavism is the most readily apparent. He, too, crosses class lines, joining a circus as an animal trainer, and it is here that his animalistic nature emerges. He develops a strange kinship with a performing gorilla, which he trains with great success, but that the two have a relationship closer to that of equals than of animal and human becomes evident in their actions. We learn that Alfred and the gorilla ‘eye each other for long periods through the intervening bars [of the gorilla’s cage]’, a kind of mirroring between man and gorilla taking place, and they later compete in the ring in a boxing match, again implying a rivalry between equals rather than a display put on by the trained at the behest of the trainer.<sup>217</sup> And when the gorilla injures Alfred’s pride by hitting rather harder than usual, it is Alfred who reverts to the level of the animal. He ‘[emits] a shrill, inhuman scream’ and attacks the gorilla savagely, ‘[biting] fiendishly at its hairy throat’.<sup>218</sup>

T. H. Huxley noted that biting had been observed to be the principal form of attack in human-like apes;<sup>219</sup> and Alfred’s expressions of rage also recall those offered by Darwin in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) as evidence of human descent from ‘some ape-like animal’.<sup>220</sup> Darwin notes the similarity in the tantrums of a child and of a young chimpanzee, observing that both screamed and ‘bit everything within reach’;<sup>221</sup> he comments on the appearance, in anger, ‘as if the teeth

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>219</sup> T. H. Huxley, pp. 60-61.

<sup>220</sup> Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872; London: Fontana Press, 1999), p. 238.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

were uncovered, ready for seizing or tearing an enemy, though there may be no intention of acting in this manner'.<sup>222</sup> Alfred, of course, does act in this manner, his primitive instincts overcoming "civilised" restraint. For Darwin, 'some expressions, such as[...]the uncovering of the teeth under[...]furious rage, can hardly be understood, except on the belief that man once existed in a much lower and animal-like condition'.<sup>223</sup> Alfred's fit of rage, then, is proof of his 'descent from a common progenitor' with his simian charge.<sup>224</sup>

By the time Alfred's body is recovered from the cage, it has been mauled 'past recognition', his human face effaced.<sup>225</sup> This attack upon the human face echoes the death of Arthur Munroe in 'The Lurking Fear', as well as other instances in which the recognisability or otherwise of the face seems crucial to human identity—the inability of Miss Leicester to recognise her changed brother at the window in the 'Novel of the White Powder', or the slippage between the faces of Delapore and Norrys and those of the ancient demon swineherd and his beasts in 'The Rats in the Walls'. The human face seems to represent individual identity, in contrast to the undifferentiated mass of the abhuman; attacks upon it, then, also attack the boundaries of the human subject. Its obliteration, removing human individuality, recalls to us Darwin's denial of any "special provision" for expression in the facial muscles of the human form. Calling the reader's attention back to the animal ancestry of human beings, Darwin suggests that such assumptions of uniqueness are absurd, since 'no one[...]would be inclined to admit that monkeys have been endowed with special muscles solely for exhibiting their grimaces'.<sup>226</sup>

Spencer's more general concept of evolution held it to involve 'the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous'; the differentiated was always more evolved than the undifferentiated, and this

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>225</sup> Lovecraft, 'Arthur Jermyn', p. 18.

<sup>226</sup> Darwin, *Expression of the Emotions*, p. 17.

could be seen in the form of the ‘civilized individual’.<sup>227</sup> The individual whose defining feature is obliterated, then, may be seen to have descended the evolutionary scale. Arthur himself reacts with similar vehemence to his great-grandfather upon learning the truth of his own origins, letting out a ‘horrible scream’ and leaving the house ‘frantically[...]as if pursued by some hideous enemy’.<sup>228</sup> His physical ugliness even seems to increase. The look on his face (which is ‘ghastly enough in repose’) is ‘beyond description’.<sup>229</sup>

The recurring atavism of the Jermyn family since Sir Wade’s time is well-established, then, as are hints of an undesirable mingling between social classes. The racialising of these ‘[mesalliances]’, too, has already been mentioned in the form of Philip’s ‘gypsy’ wife.<sup>230</sup> But where did these tendencies initially come from? The Jermyns, after all, are an established aristocratic family, and their family portraits ‘shewed fine faces enough before Sir Wade’s time’.<sup>231</sup> The image of the family portrait gallery invokes Spencer’s illustration of ‘atavism’. ‘In the picture-galleries of old families’, he writes, ‘[...]are often seen types of feature that are still, from time to time, repeated in members of these families’.<sup>232</sup> It highlights the absence of the features which occur in the current Jermyns: where did these come from? The answer to this, again, is tied to racial otherness by the text. We eventually learn that Arthur Jermyn’s great-great-great-grandmother, the wife of Sir Wade Jermyn, was not human, but one of a species of white apes inhabiting a ruined city deep within the Congo jungle. Sir Wade discovered the existence of the place during his explorations, but found his tales dismissed as wild speculation by his contemporaries, eventually leading to his incarceration in an asylum. Reference is made several times

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<sup>227</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 359.

<sup>228</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, p. 22.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>232</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 252.

in the text to the boxed ‘*object*’<sup>233</sup> (the term emphasising inhumanity) which was sent to Arthur Jermyn shortly before his suicide; the climactic revelation is that this ‘*object*’ is the preserved body of Arthur’s ancestress, and confirmation of his animal heredity.<sup>234</sup>

Virginia Richter has discussed the importance of the figure of the ape in post-Darwinian literature, describing apes as ‘a special case of the uncanny missing link: they denote men’s close biological relationship with the animal world, while simultaneously staging the cultural difference which separates men from animals’.<sup>235</sup> The ape, by representing both the animality of the human and its creative aspect—and, in doing so, drawing attention to the derivation of human creativity from the ability of higher animals to mimic or ‘ape’—casts doubt upon the privileged nature of human creativity even while affirming it. ‘The important point’, Richter writes, ‘is that the ape is not simply the Other of culture and of man, but that it is *at the same time* a representative of the human self’.<sup>236</sup> Lovecraft’s narrative seems to draw heavily upon T. H. Huxley’s *Man’s Place in Nature*, in which he collates various accounts of hairy but otherwise human-like Congo apes—some in a region inhabited by people known as the ‘*N’Pongues*’, a name immediately drawn to mind by the ‘N’bangus’ of Lovecraft’s story.<sup>237</sup> Huxley further notes that orang-utans have been reported as building huts, a notion which may derive from their habit of building nests and covering themselves with leaves while sleeping in them, and upon which Lovecraft’s tale of an ape-built city seems to lay its foundations.<sup>238</sup> The blurring of the line between the apes and humans is emphasised in Huxley’s account. He mentions that the term ‘gorilla’ was first applied by Hanno to ‘certain savage hairy people, discovered by the Carthaginian

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<sup>233</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, pp. 14-15. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>235</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 62.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>237</sup> T. H. Huxley, pp. 4-6. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

voyager in an island on the African coast’ and who are not identical with the apes presently called ‘gorillas’.<sup>239</sup> He notes the similarity between young apes and young humans,<sup>240</sup> and that ‘the structural differences which separate Man from the Gorilla and the Chimpanzee are not so great as those which separate the Gorilla from the lower apes’.<sup>241</sup> The implications of this blurring of boundaries are made explicit: ‘[brought] face to face with these blurred copies of himself’, Huxley suggests,

the least thoughtful of men is conscious of a certain shock, due perhaps not so much to disgust at the aspect of what looks like an insulting caricature, as to the awakening of a sudden and profound mistrust of time-honoured theories and strongly-rooted prejudices regarding his own position in nature, and his relations to the under-world of life[...].<sup>242</sup>

The human resemblance of apes, and the implications of that resemblance for the “human”, are explicit in Huxley; and Lovecraft’s story utilises the theme in order to elicit a similar ‘shock’.

Richter also notes the ways in which ‘certain human groups are associated with apes both metonymically—on the grounds of geographical proximity—and metaphorically—on the grounds of similarity of phenotype’.<sup>243</sup> In particular, Africa—the home of Arthur Jermyn’s simian progenitor and Hanno’s ‘savage hairy people’—‘is constituted in travel reports as well as in fictional texts as a space in which evolution was arrested and whose inhabitants are close to “modern”, i.e. European, man’s ancestors and to the other branch of primates, the apes’.<sup>244</sup> And indeed, the association that has been

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p.144.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-81.

<sup>243</sup> Richter, p. 68.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 68.



built up hitherto in the story is between Arthur's unknown ancestry and an undesirable foreignness or racial otherness. Reference is made to the 'Oriental seclusion' in which Sir Wade's mysterious wife lives, and Wade explains it by saying that she '[does] not like English ways'.<sup>245</sup> Their son's only carer, meanwhile, is 'a loathsome black woman from Guinea'.<sup>246</sup> The only characteristics of this woman mentioned are her race, her nationality and her loathsomeness; in the absence of any other explanation, it seems we are to understand that she is 'loathsome' merely on the basis of her race. Arthur's artistic temperament is explained with reference to his mysterious great-great-great-grandmother: Sir Wade had claimed that she was the daughter of a Portuguese trader, and neighbours suggest that Arthur's fondness for the arts, never previously a Jermyn trait, must be due to 'her Latin blood'.<sup>247</sup> That the story takes place in a context of colonialism and assumed white supremacy is also made clear. Black Africans are assumed to be more credulous and superstitious than whites, Sir Wade assuming that '[surely] the imaginative blacks had made the most of whatever events might lie behind the extravagant legendry [of the ape city]'.<sup>248</sup> There is reference to European colonial rule, with the narrative noting the subservient status of the group of Africans Sir Wade encounters: 'the once mighty N'bangus', we are told, are now 'the submissive servants of King Albert's government'.<sup>249</sup> The story simultaneously reminds us of the assumed intellectual and military superiority of white Europeans, and associates the undesirable, animalistic aspects of Arthur's ancestry with foreignness and racial Otherness, implicitly linking the two as less "human" than white Anglo-Saxons.

Richter points to the trope of the 'Family of Man', and details the ways in which it was

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<sup>245</sup> Lovecraft, 'Arthur Jermyn', p. 15.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

used to develop a strategy for vindicating the domination of other peoples. The image of the Western family with a benevolent but firm father at its head is projected onto mankind and linked to the idea of a linear evolution. Within this concept, the so-called ‘primitive races’ correspond to the ‘infancy of mankind’, whereas European peoples have reached full maturity – i.e. Europeans, especially the British, are seen as grown-ups in the Family of Man, and African, Australian and other aboriginal peoples are its children.<sup>250</sup>

We see a component of the notion expressed in relation to evolution in Spencer’s *First Principles*, where he writes that ‘[the] infant European has sundry marked points of resemblance to the lower human races’, and argues that ‘the developmental process by which these traits are turned into those of the adult European’ parallels that by which ‘the like traits of the barbarous races have been turned into those of the civilised races’.<sup>251</sup> In ‘Arthur Jermyn’, where this implied hierarchy is taken for granted, the relationship becomes incestuous.

However, the superiority of the original Jermyn line is not unquestionable. There is a suggestion of something inherently odd in Sir Wade himself, even before the introduction of ape blood into the family line, and Arthur reflects on ‘*both* of his strange progenitors’.<sup>252</sup> Sir Wade’s behaviour is regarded as evidence of his madness by friends and neighbours, and although the narrative eventually evidences the accuracy of his ‘wild stories’, his behaviour still seems rather erratic.<sup>253</sup> He is remembered as a collector of ‘trophies and specimens, which were not such as a normal man would accumulate and preserve’, and his fondness for telling tales of his experiences in the jungle is judged ‘unwise’ in his

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<sup>250</sup> Richter, p. 77.

<sup>251</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 342. See also *Principles of Biology*, I, pp. 142-3.

<sup>252</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, p. 21. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

‘rational age’, the heart of the Enlightenment.<sup>254</sup> Even his enthusiasm for intellectual endeavour is compared to a ‘mania’.<sup>255</sup> It seems that Sir Wade’s experiences in the jungle have called out a latent mental instability, resulting in visibly unpredictable behaviour, rather than simply causing him to be judged mad because of their unlikeliness. This resemblance, drawing attention to the ape and the abjected human of another race as both self *and* Other, sharpens the image of familial likeness. Startlingly, it is the image of incest which here makes “miscegenation” disturbing.

Read alongside this possibility of a degenerative or undesirable element in the original Jermyn bloodline (let us not forget the eugenic fear of “feeble-mindedness”, or the disproportionate extent to which eugenicists identified it in black and immigrant social groups), it is interesting that the apes in the jungle city are themselves referred to as ‘hybrids’.<sup>256</sup> Their indeterminate nature is referred to repeatedly: they are ‘strange hybrid creatures’,<sup>257</sup> ‘half of the jungle and half of the impiously aged city’,<sup>258</sup> and the stuffed body in the box evidences the existence of a species of ape ‘less hairy than any recorded variety, and infinitely nearer mankind—quite shockingly so’.<sup>259</sup> Elsewhere, the similarity actually seems to render the separation of “human” and ape problematic; ‘only a scientist’, we are informed, could tell ‘[whether] it was human or simian’.<sup>260</sup>

Perhaps significant, too, is the nature of the city that the apes inhabit. It is a ‘lost city’, a ‘ruined city’,<sup>261</sup> apparently decayed from some previously “civilised” state, and Mwanu, a Congolese elder with whom Sir Wade discusses the place, suggests that the apes—or, more likely, their ancestors—may

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 17, p. 20.

have built it.<sup>262</sup> Not only their appearance, then, but their behaviour is semi-human, and their quasi-religious belief in a ‘white god’ (presumably Sir Wade himself), which has made its way into the folklore of the local human inhabitants, seems to further illustrate their capacity for “human” thought.<sup>263</sup> The Jermyns, then, are not quite so unassailably sane and rational as we might expect. Their (racialised, white, Anglo-Saxon) humanity is undermined by the spectre of a hereditary mental instability predating Sir Wade’s marriage to the ‘ape-princess’.<sup>264</sup> The apes themselves, meanwhile, are not quite so easily separable from humanity as to be comfortably removable into the distinct realm of the animal—and so humans may no longer be so exceptional as to belong comfortably in the realm of the “human”. A common ancestor may perhaps be at the root of this, or a history of interbreeding. Bennett Lovett-Graff, in his essay on the story, links the appearance of this ape-human to contemporary speculation about the existence of missing links,<sup>265</sup> and pinpoints the potentially devastating effect of this continuity upon notions of human superiority and free will:

[...]as the inheritors of a simian past, we are the subjects of a determined and determining Nature, members of the very animal world to which we human beings have denied any vestige of free will. Despite his accomplishments as an explorer and anthropologist, Arthur Jermyn discovers himself to be really no better than an ape.<sup>266</sup>

The decayed state of the city, however, might be read to suggest an explanation yet closer to home. Lovett-Graff comes close to touching in this possibility, referring to the ‘degenerate ancestry’ of

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>265</sup> Bennett Lovett-Graff, “‘Life is a Hideous Thing’: Primate-Geniture in H. P. Lovecraft’s “Arthur Jermyn””, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 8:3 (1997), 370-388 (p. 376).

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 375.

modern humans posited in the tale, but does not go so far as to make the connection which Lovecraft seems to be implying.<sup>267</sup> Sir Wade speculated about the existence of a ‘prehistoric white Congolese civilisation’, one of the ‘wild stories’ that he was never able to prove.<sup>268</sup> Given Lovecraft’s preoccupation with human degeneration, as evidenced in ‘The Lurking Fear’, might we not infer that the white apes inhabiting the city are the degenerate descendants of these prehistoric humans? The story’s introduction, an oft-quoted and typically Lovecraftian pronouncement of biological disgust, questions the existence of any particular “human” specialness, and warns of the effect that the revelation of our own animal nature might have upon human minds:

Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemonical hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous. Science, already oppressive with its shocking revelations, will perhaps be the ultimate exterminator of our human species—if separate species we be—for its reserve of unguessed horrors could never be borne by mortal brains if loosed upon the world. If we knew what we are, we should do as Sir Arthur Jermyn did; and Arthur Jermyn soaked himself in oil and set fire to his clothing one night.<sup>269</sup>

If the apes of the ruined city are, in fact, the degenerate descendants of prehistoric humans, then our position as distinct from other animals is lost; the germ of the animal is within us, and time and isolation are enough to bring it out. S. T. Joshi has argued that Lovecraft is actually suggesting that the ape city is ‘*the ultimate source for all white civilisation*’,<sup>270</sup> and while the literal truth of this assertion

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>268</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, pp. 14-15.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>270</sup> Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, p. 236. (Emphasis in original.)

as far as the actual events of the story go is not necessarily convincing, the effect is nonetheless the same. Our animal origins place even the most ostensibly civilised humans firmly within the animal kingdom, with no distinctive specialness, and—more worryingly—posit the possibility of a reversion to animal form if we are not careful to preserve our human (and we might hear “racial” or “national” as an echo, for this value of the “human” is most definitely white and Anglo-Saxon) ‘fitness’. The persistent *mesalliances* of Arthur’s forefathers take on an additional significance here; while the initial indiscretion was Sir Wade’s, his sons have furthered the degeneration of the family line by marrying across class and ethnic boundaries. They, too, have failed to see to their hereditary ‘fitness’.

This considered, it might seem that ‘Arthur Jermyn’ would be better placed alongside ‘The Lurking Fear’ as a story of degeneration, and the anxieties that inform it are, to a great extent, the same. However, if this were the case, then surely the simple fact of the apes’ existence would be enough to provide the ultimate horror of the story. The tale’s focus upon breeding and “miscegenation”, though, alongside the hinted association of animalism with foreignness and non-Caucasian races, suggests that there is something more going on here. Perhaps unexpectedly, alongside the implied association the text makes between non-Caucasian, non-Anglo-Saxon humans and the apes runs an emphasis upon the apes’ *whiteness*. Sir Wade specifies that it is a ‘prehistoric white Congolese civilisation’ about which he is speculating,<sup>271</sup> and the descriptor ‘white’ is repeated several times: the city is ‘a grey city of white apes ruled by a white god’;<sup>272</sup> the stuffed body of Jermyn’s ancestor is ‘clearly a mummified white ape’<sup>273</sup>; and the story itself was (much to Lovecraft’s chagrin) published as ‘The White Ape’ when it appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1924.<sup>274</sup> From a writer as virulently racist as Lovecraft was, this seems a

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<sup>271</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’, p. 14.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>274</sup> Lovett-Graff, “Life is a Hideous Thing”, p. 373.

little surprising. Lovecraft's prejudice against non-Anglo-Saxon people is well-documented from his personal writings, and also rears its head in much of his published writing. For evidence, one has only to think of the 'loathsome, gorilla-like' figure of the black boxer in 'Herbert West—Reanimator' (1922),<sup>275</sup> or 'Medusa's Coil' (1939), another tale ghostwritten by Lovecraft for Zealia Bishop Reed, with its climactic revelation that Marceline, the villainess of the piece, is 'unmistakably the scion of Zimbabwe's most primal grovellers',<sup>276</sup> while—as if to drive home the point with a sledgehammer—the poem 'On the Creation of Niggers' (1912) is a disturbingly splenetic expression of racial hatred.<sup>277</sup> But in 'Arthur Jermyn', humans of non-Anglo-Saxon origin are simultaneously connected with the degenerate or non-human, and elided from the narrative. While speculation about Sir Wade's mysterious wife hinges upon her perceived foreignness, this is shown to be merely a cover for the true horror, and the black inhabitants of Congo are mentioned only as adjuncts to Sir Wade's discovery of the ape city.

There are, I think, two possible interpretations of this emphasis upon the whiteness of the apes. Some similarity seems to be implied between the 'imaginative blacks' from whom Sir Wade initially hears about the city and the apes who inhabit it, with their superstitious credulity and willingness to believe that he is a god.<sup>278</sup> Similarly, the fact that the 'loathsome black woman from Guinea' is the only attendant able to deal with Arthur's half-ape ancestor Philip seems to imply a communication or commonality between the two.<sup>279</sup> The ape descendants of these prehistoric white people have degenerated enough to place them on a level with other races, races whom eugenicists of the time, and

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<sup>275</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'Herbert West—Reanimator', in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1922; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 50-80 (p. 63).

<sup>276</sup> H. P. Lovecraft and Zealia Bishop Reed, 'Medusa's Coil', in *The Loved Dead and Other Stories*, ed. by M. J. Elliot (1939; Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), pp. 207-242 (p. 242).

<sup>277</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'On the Creation of Niggers', cited in its entirety in Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, p. 90.

<sup>278</sup> Lovecraft, 'Arthur Jermyn', p. 20.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Lovecraft himself, would undoubtedly have regarded as inferior. The prehistoric whites, presumably, failed to preserve their “racial fitness”; now, confined to their ruined jungle city, their descendants are unable to compete with other races of humanity.

One might also argue, I think, that the absence of any significant non-Caucasian characters from the story, as well as the association of foreignness or racial otherness with the apes, becomes a form of projection. With the exception of Philip Jermyn’s ‘gypsy’ wife, humans of non-Anglo-Saxon descent are excluded from this narrative of horrific procreation. Instead, the African white apes take on connotations of foreignness and racial difference, effectively coming to represent the racial Other. From this point of view, the horror the narrative evinces at the closeness or common ancestry of humans and apes takes on another layer of meaning—coming, perhaps, to represent a horror of the common “humanity” of races, and the challenge it might pose to white Anglo-Saxon supremacy. There are echoes here of those exclusionary political movements which sought to remove black people from the United States and to prevent them from allying themselves with working-class whites, and which opposed the annexation of land predominantly occupied by Mexicans, finding in commonality a threat to the perceived natural superiority of white Americans. The horror of ‘Arthur Jermyn’ is, perhaps, at bottom a fear of equality.

A longer and more detailed reworking of the theme appears in Lovecraft’s novella, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ (1936), written in several years after the height of the eugenics and anti-immigration movements, but clearly illustrating that for Lovecraft, at least, the issues were still pressing.<sup>280</sup> ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ continues the theme of miscegenation, and returns with it to the invasion

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<sup>280</sup> Bennett Lovett-Graff, ‘Shadows Over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics’, *Extrapolation*, 38:3 (1997), 175-192 (pp. 175-176).



narrative hinted at in ‘The Dunwich Horror’. The town of Innsmouth, a decaying Massachusetts seaport, is visited by Lovecraft’s first-person narrator during a coming-of-age tour—‘sightseeing, antiquarian, and genealogical’—of New England.<sup>281</sup> Finding the train from Newburyport to Lovecraft’s fictional town of Arkham prohibitively expensive, the narrator chooses to take the cheaper bus, which runs via Innsmouth. On asking around about the town, which he has never heard of or seen on a map before, he discovers the distaste with which Innsmouth and its residents are regarded by inhabitants of the neighbouring towns—partly because of their sullenness and secrecy, and partly because of certain physical peculiarity common to most Innsmouth people. This ‘Innsmouth Look’,<sup>282</sup> which becomes more pronounced with age, involves an apparent change in the very shape of the skull, giving Innsmouthers ‘queer narrow heads with flat noses’.<sup>283</sup> Their eyes bulge; their skin becomes rough and scaly; and sides of their necks become creased.<sup>284</sup> The narrator finds them ‘repellent’, as do normal people and animals.<sup>285</sup> Slowly piecing together pieces of information about the history of Innsmouth, the narrator eventually falls into conversation with an elderly local drunk named Zadok Allen, one of the few locals without the ‘Innsmouth Look’, who reveals to him the secret of the town. The bizarre appearance of the townspeople is not due to a pervasive disease, as the narrator has previously suspected, but to a history of interbreeding with a species of frog-like underwater monstrosities known as the Deep Ones. These were introduced to the town several generations ago by Captain Obed Marsh, owner of the Marsh gold refinery, who first heard of them from Polynesian islanders during his travels, and provide Innsmouth with plentiful fishing and gold in exchange for mating with humans. The offspring of these interspecies unions initially appear human, but develop the characteristics of the

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<sup>281</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1936; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 268-335 (pp. 269-270).

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284, p. 273.

Deep Ones as they age, eventually returning to the undersea city of Y'ha-nthlei, where they will live eternally. Allen has noticed a recent change in their behaviour, and suggests that they are planning some unspecified atrocity. After being pursued by the amphibious monstrosities, the narrator escapes the town and alerts the authorities, who arrest the townsfolk and launch torpedoes at the Deep Ones' nest. The threat is by no means exterminated, however, for there are Deep Ones all over the planet and they could, if they so chose, destroy the human race entirely.

Certainly, the fears of immigration and of racial mixing that have marked the other stories considered so far are present here, too, and the connection with Lovecraft's personal views on immigration and on race is undeniable. In some ways, the Deep Ones seem to figure as representations of the foreign hordes whom Lovecraft so violently loathed, a disastrous stay in New York between the writing of 'Arthur Jermyn' and that of 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' having raised his extant prejudices to fever pitch.<sup>286</sup> Various aspects of the representation of the Deep Ones in the text can be seen to support this possibility. Even their amphibious forms and marine origins can be connected to Lovecraft's dislike of immigrants, as Lovett-Graff mentions in his 1997 article, 'Shadows over Lovecraft'.<sup>287</sup> In his letters from New York, Lovecraft utilises metaphors of slime, ooze, and the abysses of the deep ocean to give voice to his dislike of foreigners. Immigrants, for Lovecraft, cannot 'by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human'; they are 'monstrous', 'amoebal', and 'moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth's corruption'. He sees them 'slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities'.<sup>288</sup> As Lovett-Graff has pointed out, a connection with the 'deep-sea unnamabilities' of

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<sup>286</sup> Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, pp. 370-371.

<sup>287</sup> Lovett-Graff, 'Shadows Over Lovecraft', p. 182.

<sup>288</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Frank Belknap Long, March 21, 1924, in *Selected Letters I*, ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965), pp. 326-334 (pp. 333-334).

‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ is impossible to avoid.<sup>289</sup> The poor hygiene and danger of disease associated with immigrants by eugenicists and others are also on display in Innsmouth. The town is characterised by an appearance of ‘wormy decay’ and a ‘nauseous fishy odour’,<sup>290</sup> and the fishlike appearance of the Innsmouth townsfolk is supposed by the narrator and others to be a symptom of ‘some foreign kind of disease brought from China or somewhere by the shipping’.<sup>291</sup> Read in the light of Darwin’s comment about inherited peculiarities sometimes ‘ultimately [appearing] in the offspring when mature, or even quite old, as in the case of certain diseases’—as the Innsmouth Look indeed does—this assumption of disease serves to make a connection between sickness and mixed heredity.<sup>292</sup>

The linguistic capacity, or incapacity, of the Deep Ones is also cause for concern for Lovecraft, whose attitude to foreigners encompassed a dismissive distaste for languages that he could not understand. In his letters from New York, he refers to foreigners as ‘jabberers with coarse ways and alien emotions’,<sup>293</sup> writes with shock of the ‘scraps of old papers with Arabic lettering’ found about the lodgings he shared with a number of tenants of varying nationalities, and states that he rarely encountered his neighbours face to face, but only ‘*heard them loathsomely*’.<sup>294</sup> The sounds that the Deep Ones make fill the narrator with horror, and are described variously as ‘bestial scraping and bellowing’,<sup>295</sup> ‘shocking guttural murmurs’,<sup>296</sup> ‘croaking and jabbering in some hateful guttural patois I could not identify’,<sup>297</sup> and ‘a bestial babel of croaking, baying and barking without the least suggestion

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<sup>289</sup> Lovett-Graff, ‘Shadows Over Lovecraft’, p. 182.

<sup>290</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, p. 281, p. 282.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>292</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, I, p. 446.

<sup>293</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Lillian D. Clark, January 11, 1926, in *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), pp. 179-181 (p. 181).

<sup>294</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Bernard Austin Dwyer, March 26, 1927, in Joshi and Schultz (eds.), *Lord of a Visible World*, pp. 164-168 (p. 166). (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>295</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, p. 325.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

of human speech'.<sup>298</sup> Their incomprehensibility to the narrator renders them horrific, as Lovecraft's inability to understand his fellow New York dwellers fed into his loathing for them.

Religious unorthodoxy, too, characterises the inhabitants of Innsmouth. We have already touched upon the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment of the anti-immigration movements, and the promotion of Protestantism as a tool for ensuring national purity. Lovecraft, a fervent atheist, took this a step further, decrying Christianity itself as a religion of the weak, unfit to be followed by white "Aryans".<sup>299</sup> Nonetheless, he found room to single out Catholicism as particularly alien. The arrival of Italian, Portuguese, French-Canadian and Irish immigrants in New York would, he predicted, lead to the formation of 'a separate Roman Catholic culture hostile to our own',<sup>300</sup> threatening the purity of race and culture so important to him.<sup>301</sup> The Innsmouth cult, known as the Esoteric Order of Dagon, hints obliquely at the ritual and opulence of Roman Catholicism; the priest of whom the narrator catches sight on his journey into town wears 'peculiar vestments' and a 'tall tiara' in the distinctive metalwork tradition of the Deep Ones,<sup>302</sup> and the worshippers at the church participate in 'the queerest kinds of ceremonials'.<sup>303</sup> Roman Catholics are not the only religious Other gestured at, however. The Innsmouth cult incorporates various elements associated with the idea of a primitive pre-Christian religion, as used by Machen in his short stories, and considered as a serious possibility by anthropologists like Margaret Murray and James Frazer, whose work Lovecraft occasionally cites in his own fiction. Mention is made of the religion's major festivals occurring on April 30<sup>th</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup>, coinciding with Hallowe'en

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

<sup>299</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Lillian D. Clark, January 11, 1926, p. 179.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>301</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to J. Vernon Shea, September 25, 1933, in Joshi and Schultz (eds.), *Lord of a Visible World*, pp. 325-328 (pp. 325-328).

<sup>302</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p 284.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

and Beltane.<sup>304</sup> Obed Marsh, the ship's captain responsible for bringing the Deep Ones and their religion to Innsmouth, is denounced by Zadok Allen as an 'old limb o' Satan'<sup>305</sup>—a telling detail if we remember that Murray and others suggested that Christian accounts of witches and devil-worshippers were in fact based on recollections or survivals of a pre-Christian pagan cult.<sup>306</sup> Marsh points out to the locals that praying to the Christian god is doing nothing to replenish their depleted fishing-stocks, and tells them that 'they'd orter git better gods like some o' the folks in the Injies—gods as ud bring 'em good fishin' in return for their sacrifices'.<sup>307</sup> The mention of sacrifices, and the fact that the religion is imported from overseas, return us again to the primitive and the foreign. The kind of slippage that occurs in this account of the Innsmouth cult performs an associative sleight of hand, conflating Catholics, foreigners, and the primitive pre-Christian ancestors of Anglo-Saxons.

Perhaps the most disturbing element of Lovecraft's racial prejudice, however, comes out in the methods used to get rid of the Deep Ones. To understand this, we must return to the fear of alien *culture* mentioned in his comments about Roman Catholicism. In a 1933 letter to J. Vernon Shea, Lovecraft talks about the importance of cultural continuity, and ties it intimately to biological racial purity. It is, in his view, imperative both that a civilisation's 'culture-stream remains relatively undiluted by alien traditions', and that its 'race-stock remains approximately the same as that which evolved the culture and institutions now existing'.<sup>308</sup> There is an echo here of Spencer's assertion of 'the affinities of men for others like themselves'; he argues in his *First Principles* that '[emigrants] usually desire to get back among their own people', and that '[the] feelings characterizing a member of a given race, are feelings which get complete satisfaction only among other members of that race—a

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<sup>304</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 286.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>306</sup> M. A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921; London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 12.

<sup>307</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 295.

<sup>308</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to J. Vernon Shea, September 25, 1933, p. 326.

satisfaction partly derived from sympathy with those having like feelings, but mainly derived from the adapted social conditions which grow up where such feelings prevail'.<sup>309</sup> Spencer, of course, also writes that '[the] civilised European departs far more widely from the vertebrate archetype than does the savage',<sup>310</sup> and Lovecraft's letter betrays a similar sense of superiority. Although Lovecraft pretends to a detached, unbiased view, asserting that '[the] races are *equal*, but *infinitely different*' and that 'a need for a certain rational amount of racial discrimination exists *apart from all questions of superiority or inferiority*', when these claims come coupled with asides about 'squat, swarthy [Latins]' and 'basically and structurally primitive' blacks, his pretensions to egalitarianism are a little hard to swallow.<sup>311</sup> And indeed, the letter takes Lovecraft's preoccupation with racial purity to its inevitable conclusion, ending with an affirmation of the naturalness and 'sound policy' of "'Hitlerism'".<sup>312</sup> In 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', Lovecraft makes quite clear reference to what he saw as the efficacy of Nazism. The neighbours of the Polynesian islanders from whom Marsh hears about the Deep Ones eventually find out what has been happening on the island, and Marsh returns only to find the islanders wiped out and the Deep Ones gone, a banishment that has been effected by the use of amulets 'like charms—with somethin' on 'em like what ye call a swastika nowadays'.<sup>313</sup>

One other characteristic of anti-immigration thought to make it into 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth'—and perhaps the most important—is fear of the reproductive capacity of foreigners and racial Others. The overabundance of growth and hints at a horrific virility or sexuality that appear in 'The Great God Pan' and 'The Dunwich Horror' recur here, and in a form less obliquely related to anxieties about the fecundity of immigrants. For newspaper readers, the most striking things about the Innsmouth scandal

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<sup>309</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 477.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>311</sup> Lovecraft, letter to J. Vernon Shea, September 25, 1933, pp. 325-326. (Emphases in original.)

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>313</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 299.

are ‘the prodigious number of arrests’ and ‘the abnormally large force of men used in making them’.<sup>314</sup> The town itself appears to be half-empty of human habitation, but the sheer number of the Deep Ones and their offspring is repeatedly brought home. There are ‘hordes of ‘em’, ‘swarms of ‘em’, ‘millions of ‘em’;<sup>315</sup> Devil Reef, where they meet the Innsmouthers, ‘[bristles] thick with shapes’;<sup>316</sup> they are ‘a teeming horde’.<sup>317</sup> a ‘very large horde’,<sup>318</sup> ‘limitless swarms’, a ‘limitless stream’, and a number ‘past guessing’.<sup>319</sup> Particularly telling is the emphasis upon their numbers in comparison to those of the known human inhabitants of the town. Even in the midst of his flight from them, the narrator has cause to wonder that ‘the number of [his] pursuers must be strangely large for a town as depopulated as Innsmouth’.<sup>320</sup> The recognisably human denizens of Innsmouth are overwhelmingly outnumbered by the unfamiliar Deep Ones, with their alien physiognomy and incomprehensible language. More disturbing still is the existence of a truly ‘limitless’ Deep One civilisation on the ocean bottom, too vast to be wiped out by humans. The islanders tell Obed Marsh that the Deep Ones can be contacted in the sea all over the world, and Zadok Allen raises the spectre of an invasion force of awesome power, telling the narrator that ‘they cud wipe aout the hull brood o’ humans ef they was willin’ to bother’,<sup>321</sup> and suggesting that they may indeed be planning something of the sort, with hints at a nameless atrocity that will take place ‘when they git ready’.<sup>322</sup> The invasion narrative employed in ‘The Dunwich Horror’ here returns in oblique form, the spectre of overrunning made real possibility by the Deep Ones’ numerousness. The human will, if they get their way, be replaced by the alien, the “native” by the foreign.

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

In part, then, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ functions as a cautionary tale, against the opening of borders, and against miscegenation. Through their indiscriminate mating with these inhuman beings, the people of Innsmouth have brought their degenerative fate upon themselves. But, as in ‘Arthur Jermyn’, horror at the violation of sexual and racial taboos is not the only element at work here. And, as in ‘Arthur Jermyn’, the tale culminates with the protagonist’s (in this case, the first-person narrator’s) discovery of his inhuman ancestry. After his Innsmouth ordeal, the narrator returns to his investigations into his own family tree. His vanished great-grandmother, he discovers, was herself a Marsh, and he balks at the suggestion that he himself has ‘the true Marsh eyes’.<sup>323</sup> Slowly, his memories of his great-grandmother, and of his uncle Douglas, who closely resembled her, take on a new and frightening quality. He remembers the ‘staring, unwinking expression of both of them’, and the ‘unaccountable uneasiness’ he felt in their presence—and when he is shown his family’s ancestral jewellery and finds it identical to the gold-work of the Deep Ones, he is plunged into a ‘nightmare of brooding and apprehension’.<sup>324</sup>

The anxieties around racial purity and similarity that we found in ‘Arthur Jermyn’ resurface here, with the narrator’s horror at his own ancestry acting both to warn of the dire consequences of racial mixing and of foreign blood passing unnoticed, and to raise the horrific possibility that the races are not really so different as a white supremacist like Lovecraft would like to think. This anxiety around commonality or kinship is raised quite plainly, in fact, in Zadok Allen’s account, which refers back to Darwin’s conclusion that ‘all the members of the vertebrate kingdom are derived from some fish-like

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, pp. 331-333.



animal’.<sup>325</sup> The islanders from whom Obed Marsh first heard of the Deep Ones explained how they were persuaded to mate with the Deep Ones in this manner:

‘When it came to matin’ with them toad-lookin’ fishes, the Kanakys kind o’ balked, but finally they larnt something as put a new face on the matter. Seems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts—that everything alive came aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back agin’.<sup>326</sup>

Humans are not so special, or so different from the ‘water-beasts’ that so horrified the narrator; and if we read ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ as an allegory for the dangers of immigration, white Anglo-Saxons may not be so very different from the foreigners who reminded Lovecraft so frighteningly of ‘deep-sea unnamabilities’. Lovett-Graff has suggested that the revelation of the narrator’s inhuman heredity may, in fact, have been partly inspired by Lovecraft’s own consternation at the discovery of his Welsh ancestry. Lovecraft had been fond of announcing his descent from ‘unmixed English gentry’,<sup>327</sup> and Lovett-Graff detects an underlying anxiety in his joking remarks about the ‘Celtick taint’.<sup>328</sup> After the debunking of Lamarckian theory, Lovett-Graff suggests, accepting evolutionary thought necessarily entailed accepting the immutability of inherited traits; a kind of entrapment in the biological that could reach out of the past to ensnare even the most ostensibly “civilised” human subject.<sup>329</sup> Certainly, it does not seem implausible that somebody who held Lovecraft’s horror of racial mixing might have reacted with revulsion to the revelation of a ‘taint’ in his own heredity, and dramatised this horror in his fiction.

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<sup>325</sup> Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 158. See also p. 161.

<sup>326</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, p. 297.

<sup>327</sup> Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, p. 7.

<sup>328</sup> Lovett-Graff, ‘Shadows Over Lovecraft’, p. 178.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

There is, however, a further dimension to the narrator's discovery, one which suggests that there is more to 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' than a working-through of personal demons, and it is echoed in Richter's assertion, with regard to miscegenation, that in fact 'the *anxiety* of assimilation goes hand in hand with the *desire* for dissolution, diffusion, amalgamation'.<sup>330</sup> Indeed, Simmons has suggested that Lovecraft's 'racially prejudiced comments belie a deeper and considerably more multifaceted engagement with concepts of the non-Western *Other*. A stance that is attracted to that which it is simultaneously repulsed by'.<sup>331</sup> Unlike Arthur Jermyn, the narrator of 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' resists the suicidal solution—exclaiming, 'No, I shall not shoot myself—I cannot be made to shoot myself!'—and undergoes a shift in perspective.<sup>332</sup> After learning of his ancestry, he begins to suffer nightmares in which he sees the city of the Deep Ones, and even converses with his amphibious foremother. But as his transformation progresses, the horror of his dreams recedes, and he begins to find in them 'a kind of exaltation instead of terror'.<sup>333</sup> Eventually, he decides upon a plan of action: he will rescue his cousin, also of Deep One ancestry and at least partially transformed, from the madhouse in which he has been confined, and they will swim out to the reef beyond 'marvel-shadowed Innsmouth' to join their fellows, finally achieving immortality in the undersea city of Y'ha-nthlei.<sup>334</sup> We might read this change in the narrator's mind as a further horror; a caution, on Lovecraft's part, against the seductive potential of the Other. Perhaps we are seeing from the other side the loss of human reason experienced by Mary in 'The Great God Pan', or encountering a Delapore whose reversion has been permanent. Reason—a hallmark of the "civilised" human—has been defeated, and

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<sup>330</sup> Richter, p. 120. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>331</sup> David Simmons, "'A Certain Resemblance': Abject Hybridity in H. P. Lovecraft's Short Fiction', in *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. by David Simmons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 13-30 (p. 18).

<sup>332</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 335.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

the narrator has regressed so far into animalism that he can no longer see the boundary that separated his human self from his ancestry.

Lovett-Graff, however, has suggested that there is another layer to the story's conclusion: that Lovecraft himself is caught up in the inevitability of reversion and, in effect, seduced in the same way as his narrator. Again, he reaches into the author's personal past for answers, focusing particularly on the early death of Lovecraft's mother, and reading the narrator's dreamed encounters with his female ancestors as a kind of fantasised return to the womb.<sup>335</sup> But if we look at the narrative from the wider perspective of evolutionary anxiety, I think its root is less simply locatable within the author's biography. The great appeal that life as a Deep One holds for the narrator is the promise of immortality, of dwelling 'amidst wonder and glory *for ever*'.<sup>336</sup> It is perhaps the tenacious *survival* abilities of the Deep Ones that sound the most disturbing note in the narrator's predictions of his future. In Lovecraft's fiction, and in Machen's, it often seems that "primitive", pre-human entities, alien Others and evolutionary throwbacks possess abilities surpassing those of ordinary humans—abilities which humans have lost somewhere along the evolutionary ladder. In many cases, with their physical strength and reproductive capacity, they actually seem more fitted for survival than human beings. The Deep Ones fall squarely into this pattern: they have an established and sophisticated artistic tradition, evidenced in their jewellery; they are able to exert control over their environment, bringing plentiful fishing to Innsmouth; they are hinted, in the narrator's dreams, to be telepathic; they are vastly numerous; and they live indefinitely unless killed by violent means. Although Spencer argued that 'lower life is that found in the sea' because 'it has the simpler environment',<sup>337</sup> the Deep Ones have overcome this principle, creating a complex built environment of their own in the deeps. In contrast,

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<sup>335</sup> Lovett-Graff, 'Shadows Over Lovecraft', pp. 187-188.

<sup>336</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 335. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>337</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 85.

the only example we meet of a purely human Innsmouther is old Zadok Allen, who himself exhibits some of the stigmata associated with degeneracy, being frail, unkempt, alcoholic, and ‘touched in the head’.<sup>338</sup> Allen himself disappears after sharing his story with the narrator, apparently having met his doom at the Deep Ones’ webbed hands. In terms of the most basic of biological instincts—that of ensuring the survival of offspring—the islanders’ and the Innsmouthers’ decision to mate with the Deep Ones makes sound reproductive sense. Is it any wonder that they chose to sacrifice the human appearance of their bodies, when doing so has allowed them to “[get] aout o’” perhaps the most fundamental and inescapable aspect of entrapment in the body—the “‘idee o’ dyin’”?<sup>339</sup>

Barton Levi St. Armand has touched upon the intertwining, but differing, strands of horror that run through ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ in his study of ‘The Rats in the Walls’, *The Roots of Horror in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft*.<sup>340</sup> He initially divides Lovecraft’s stories into two separate groups—tales of cosmic horror at the insignificance of humankind, and tales of evolutionary degeneration—but is unable to maintain the distinction, finding that alien forces, working from outer spheres or within the biology of the subject, are in all of Lovecraft’s fiction ‘at work to enable a complete take-over of the self at a personal level, or the human race at that of the species, or the planet on an ultimate cosmic plane’.<sup>341</sup> We can certainly identify these elements at work in ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’. We see the personal transformation of the narrator; we see the potential for humanity to be overrun by the prodigious numbers of the Deep Ones; and, by mentioning the Deep Ones’ subservience to ‘Great Cthulhu’, Lovecraft ties the story in with his best-known tale of cosmic horror, and nods to the

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<sup>338</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, p. 287.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>340</sup> Barton Levi St. Armand, *The Roots of Horror in the Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft*, (Elizabethtown, NY: Dragon Press, 1977), pp. 3-5.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

possibility of earth's eventual conquest by unknown outer forces.<sup>342</sup> But the strands of horror are not so mutually reinforcing as St. Armand suggests, and in fact sit rather uneasily together. On the one hand, contemporary and personal fears of immigration are figured through the frailty of humanity in the face of an overwhelming invasion force surpassing it in numbers and longevity, and possessed of various supernatural and intellectual abilities. On the other, the offspring of such inter-species unions as would ensure survival for the partly-human children are themselves degenerate, and become objects of horror. In order to prevent their utter destruction, perhaps the best chance available to humans is interbreeding with the Deep Ones—but in taking it, they must forfeit their humanity, a price unthinkable to the racial purist Lovecraft.

Perhaps the true root of horror in 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', then, is not just immigrants, or just the Deep Ones who represent them, but the whole system of biological reproduction and natural selection in which all—immigrants and white Anglo-Saxons, Deep Ones and human beings—must participate. Biology is indeed a form of entrapment, and perhaps in a manner more comprehensive than that suggested by Lovett-Graff; we are ensnared not only by our heredity, the circumstances of our birth, but by the biological inevitability of death, and the instinct which compels us to avoid it. Both destruction and the kind of survival that circumstances dictate are equally horrific possibilities. Life, it would appear, is indeed a hideous thing.

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<sup>342</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 334.

## Chapter Four: Futures

In *Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic*, Maurice Lévy argues against the classification of any of Lovecraft's stories as science fiction. For Lévy, the salient identifying feature of the genre is a preoccupation with the future, and where Lovecraft uses the science fictional tropes of interstellar travel or extra-terrestrial encounters, he does so in order to explore the past—that of his characters, and of the human species as a whole. Lovecraft 'belongs to that class of dreamers for whom the deep is *also* above'.<sup>1</sup> Lévy's definition of 'science fiction' here is dated at the very least—unsurprisingly, since his study is based upon a thesis submitted in 1969—if it ever had currency at all. Recent science fiction criticism allows more leeway within the genre—if genre it be!—for Lovecraft and his ilk. In particular, Carl Freedman's updating of Darko Suvin's concept of 'cognitive estrangement' is useful here. If for Suvin, a science fiction text must dissociate the reader from mainstream literary realism while accounting rationally for the different world that it posits, in Freedman's analysis, what matters is 'the attitude of *the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the rationality of the text's explanation for its 'estrangements' is to be determined within, not outside, its fictional world; neither the obsolescence of degeneration theory nor the absence of life on Pluto disqualify Lovecraft's stories from the science fiction label. Though Freedman inquires, rather sniffily, whether, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936) and "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) earn the title of science fiction because their monstrosities have their origin not in the admitted supernatural but in vulgar

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Lévy, *Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic*, trans. S. T. Joshi (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 70. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>2</sup> Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 18. (Emphasis in original.)

pseudo-Darwinian notions of degeneration’,<sup>3</sup> he is ultimately forced to accept them into the science fiction library.<sup>4</sup>

My main concern in this chapter, however, is not the insertion of Lovecraft’s work into some science fiction canon. Rather, I wish to read some of Lovecraft’s later works in the light of Utopian texts such as H. G. Wells’ *Men Like Gods* (1923) and Lord Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871), arguing for a concern with the imagined future of the “human” based in contemporary scientific narratives.

Evolutionary theory necessitated imagining a future in which the “human”, if it survived, would be altered: Darwin had confidently predicted that ‘not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity’.<sup>5</sup> Freedman, significantly, notes the importance of the science fictional text’s accounting for ‘the connections as well as the disconnections of [its imagined world] to our own empirical world’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the ability of the science fiction text to extrapolate from conditions, information, or theories extant at the time of writing is one of its most compelling features. Lovecraft’s fiction frequently seeks to destabilise the relationship of the human subject with time, collapsing past and future together as it does so. The future of the “human”, in Lovecraft and in the weird tale more generally, often involves an atavistic return to past states of being; equally, the antediluvian horrors uncovered by his characters contain the germ of a human (or transhuman, or perhaps superhuman) future. Like the futuristic societies of conventional science fiction, Lovecraft’s imagined civilisations are technologically and socially advanced beyond those of humans, while the individuals who make them up far outclass us in intellectual capacity and physical toughness, and may possess preternatural abilities in other areas. As in Freedman’s science fictional texts, however, the sense of estrangement

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859; London: Penguin, 1968), p. 459.

<sup>6</sup> Freedman, p. 17.

from the human world that they create is counterbalanced by a connection to it. Despite their radical physiological differences from human beings, the Great Race of ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ (1936) and the Old Ones of ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ (1936) are in many ways “human” in their goals and psychologies. The narrator of ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, toward the novella’s end, actually exclaims, ‘Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!’<sup>7</sup> Lovecraft’s science fictional stories explore or expand upon tendencies extant in pre-existing scientific thought, rather than making any kind of radical break with it.

One school of thought on which I have previously touched is the eugenics movement. In the preceding chapter, I focused mainly upon its concern with preventing the less “desirable” elements of society from breeding and thereby contaminating the reproductive pool, the repercussions this project had for marginalised members of society, and the ways in which racist and nationalist elements implicit in it chimed both with contemporary currents of anti-immigration sentiment and Lovecraft’s own personal views. Here, however, I should like to emphasise its more optimistic aspect. (“Optimistic”, that is, within the parameters of its own worldview; to characterise its aims of maintaining national or racial purity and of preventing the reproduction of disabled people as *actually* desirable is certainly not my object here!) Indeed, its basic tenets—its very existence—imply a belief in the perfectibility of the human species. Donald J. Childs discusses ‘the hopes of eugenisists for the bodies of the British people’ faced with the possibility of degeneration: ‘over time, the body might be remade and redeemed.’<sup>8</sup> Karl Pearson urged ‘hope of achievement’,<sup>9</sup> arguing that the inevitable inheritance of negative traits was

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<sup>7</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (1936; London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 246-340 (p. 330).

<sup>8</sup> Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Scope and Importance to the State of the Science of National Eugenics* (1907; London: Dulau, 1911), p. 40.



‘only one side of the picture [...] [if] the iniquity of the fathers be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation—assuredly so is their virtue’.<sup>10</sup> Such perceived possibilities perhaps concur more readily with the views expressed by Darwin than the dire predictions of backsliding made by the theorists of degeneration.

In the *Origin*, Darwin emphasises the ‘perfection of structure and coadaptation’ of organic beings.<sup>11</sup> There are ‘beautiful adaptations’ everywhere; even ‘the humblest parasite’ has been ‘perfected’, and it would be foolish to attribute this to chance.<sup>12</sup> Although willing to acknowledge that ‘there is no innate or necessary tendency in each being to its own advancement’, Darwin offers the comforting counter-observation that, ‘[seeing] how hereditary evil qualities are, it is fortunate that good health, vigour, and longevity are equally inherited’.<sup>13</sup> And, since ‘natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection’.<sup>14</sup> Even ‘the war of nature[...]famine and death’ are redeemed by the end to which they lead, this being ‘the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals’.<sup>15</sup> The future is ‘secure’.<sup>16</sup> In the *Descent*, Darwin argues that

[to] believe that man was aboriginally civilised and then suffered utter degradation in so many regions [as are inhabited by modern ‘savages’], is to take a pitiably low view of human nature. It is apparently a truer and more cheerful view that progress has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 114–115, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (1868; London: John Murray, 1888), I, p.8, p. 455.

<sup>14</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 459.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion.<sup>17</sup>

A similarly optimistic tack is taken by T. H. Huxley, who acknowledges the ‘shock’ likely to be felt by those realising for the first time humanity’s descent from lower primates, but suggests that ultimately, we should ‘find in the lowly stock whence Man has sprung, the best evidence of the splendour of his capacities; and[...]discern in his long progress through the Past, a reasonable ground of faith in his attainment of a nobler Future’.<sup>18</sup> Herbert Spencer, meanwhile, though maintaining the possibility of oscillating cycles of evolution and dissolution, argued that ‘the occasional production of a somewhat higher organism’ was inevitable, and that evolution could ‘end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness’.<sup>19</sup>

As Richardson argues, Darwin’s emphasis upon sexual, rather than natural, selection in the *Descent* placed a renewed emphasis upon choice, and ‘tacitly granted humans agency in their own evolutionary development’.<sup>20</sup> As early as the *Origin*, Darwin had suggested that the ‘power of man in accumulating by his Selection successive slight variations’ was ‘great’ (though it certainly did not compare to the results produced by natural selection).<sup>21</sup> In *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, he had explicitly touched upon the importance of human agency in the breeding of domestic varieties: although human beings have no power over ‘the absolute conditions of life’—they cannot “[tamper] with nature” and [cause] variability’—breeders have nonetheless ‘effected wonderful changes and

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> T. H. Huxley, *Man’s Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays* (1894; London: Macmillan, 1901), pp. 154-155.

<sup>19</sup> Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1860; New York: Appleton, 1877), pp. 446-447, p. 517. See also, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), I, p. 354.

<sup>20</sup> Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 78-79.

<sup>21</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 67. See also pp. 89-90, p. 115.

improvements'.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these emphases imply the possibility of similar 'improvements' in humanity.

The notion of agency is emphasized by Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin and the founder of the eugenics movement, in his 1869 study, *Hereditary Genius*, where he writes that 'each generation has enormous power over the natural gifts of those that follow, and[...]it is a duty we owe to humanity to investigate the range of that power and to exercise it in a way that, without being unwise towards ourselves, shall be most advantageous to future inhabitants of the earth'.<sup>23</sup> Galton argues that 'as a new race can be obtained in animals and plants[...]so a race of gifted men might be obtained',<sup>24</sup> and concludes that 'the human race has a large control over its future forms of activity,—far more than any individual has over his own'.<sup>25</sup> We 'may not be able to originate, but we can guide'—and it is imperative that we do so.<sup>26</sup> Although Galton does acknowledge degeneration as a possibility,<sup>27</sup> it is far from inevitable in his analysis, progress being the dominant narrative. The notion of original sin, for Galton, does not connote a fall from some previous state of perfection, but rather 'that [man] was rising in moral culture with more rapidity than the nature of his race could follow' and that 'the human race were utter savages in the beginning; and that, after myriads of years of barbarism, man has but very recently found his way into the paths of morality and civilisation'.<sup>28</sup> In *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883), he exhorts his readers to active participation in the evolutionary process as a liberating project: 'man' ought, he writes

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<sup>22</sup> Darwin, *Variation*, I, pp. 2-4.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1869; London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Galton, 'Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892' in *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1869; London: Macmillan, 1914), p. xxvii.

<sup>27</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

to be less diffident than he is usually instructed to be, and to rise to the conception that he has a considerable function to perform in the order of events, and that his exertions are needed. It seems to me that he should look upon himself more as a freeman, with power of shaping the course of future humanity, and that he should look upon himself less as the subject of a despotic government, in which case it would be his chief merit to depend wholly upon what had been regulated for him, and to render abject obedience.<sup>29</sup>

We might yet evolve further from the state of our animal ancestors—but whether or not this means that we will become more “human” is up for debate. Virginia Richter suggests that eugenics—which she calls ‘the internal colonisation of the social body by scientific means’—was an attempt to counter ‘the upsetting messiness of evolution’ and to contain the ‘danger of degeneration’; but her description of its project as the creation of ‘a civilised, *designed* organism, eschewing sickness and crime, uniting “health, and strength, intellect and virtue”’ illustrates that it went further than mere damage control.<sup>30</sup>

### **Utopian Impulses and Utopian Texts**

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson argues the existence of an ‘obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse’ existing outside the pages of the Utopian literary text, present in daily life and political practice.<sup>31</sup> Further, the imagined Utopian solution to a social problem ‘must at first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and to extirpate this specific root of

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<sup>29</sup> Francis Galton, *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), p. 334.

<sup>30</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 174. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>31</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 3.

all evil from which all the others spring'.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the eugenics movement, unregulated human reproduction would seem to constitute the 'root of all evil' whose removal would allow for a radically improved society. Certainly—though we should not forget its harmful misconceptions—the movement's desire to improve the human species, and thus the society built by it, would seem to exemplify the Utopian impulse. It is notable that eugenic viewpoints were adopted by many who might otherwise be seen as progressives (in the contemporary, left-wing political sense of that loaded word); as Childs puts in, 'Galton's eugenics made for a church as broad as that of its opponents'.<sup>33</sup> Richardson notes the 'oppressive ideas that coexisted with the emancipatory theories of some New Women—ideas that were supremely class conscious', the 'sustained enthusiasm for biological determinism' held by some prominent New Women writers, and the use 'eugenic feminists' made of ideas about the importance of rational reproduction to promote female choice.<sup>34</sup> Richter seems to express surprise that 'a genuine concern for the welfare of human beings from all classes is linked to the notion of a regulative biopolitics' and that '[the] violence and oppression inherent in the "restriction of undesirable marriages" appear to be simply invisible to the early followers of Galton'.<sup>35</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to expect the Utopian impulses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries necessarily to adhere to present-day standards of ethics. To seek to "left-wash" the politics of Lovecraft—as Paul Buhle does when he argues for a 'proposed alliance with revolutionary art' and a concern with 'the *will* of millions to overcome the existing order' in Lovecraft's fiction<sup>36</sup>—or of nineteenth- and early

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>33</sup> Childs, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Richardson, pp. 6-7, 49-50. For a lengthier discussion of the eugenic views held by feminist and socialist thinkers, see pp. 6-32. See also Childs pp. 7-21, 39, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Richter, p. 175.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Buhle, 'Dystopia as Utopia: Howard Phillips Lovecraft and the Unknown Content of American Horror Literature', in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), pp. 196-210 (pp. 205-209). (Emphasis in original.) Buhle commits a rather more serious offence, however, when he claims that Lovecraft 'was no proto-Nazi' (p. 204) and that he renounced his racist ideas in later life in the light of scientific evidence (p. 205). There is little to no evidence in Lovecraft's life or correspondence to suggest that he ever renounced his racism or his support of Hitler; indeed, S. T. Joshi, the editor of the volume in which Buhle's essay appears, has made assertions to the contrary in

twentieth-century Utopianism is not my aim here. Rather, I would hope to illustrate that the cultural products of a Utopian impulse may be inextricable from the reactionary discourses within whose parameters they took shape—one of the arguments put forward in favour of eugenic measures was that ‘through the judicious control of human reproduction[...]paradise on earth might be gained, and Britain’s supremacy in the world maintained’<sup>37</sup>—but that they are its products nonetheless. Childs notes that the discourse of eugenics ‘apparently circulated in turn-of-the-century Europe and America to simultaneously oppressive and emancipatory effect—both in the realm of modern social policy and in the realm of the modern literary imagination’,<sup>38</sup> and Clare Hanson has argued that this continued well into the twentieth century, detailing the eugenic sympathies of William Beveridge, C. P. Blacker, Margaret Sanger, and others,<sup>39</sup> and the ‘biological racism’ inherent in Blacker’s proposals for treatment of the ‘mentally defective’.<sup>40</sup> The resurgence enjoyed by Utopian fiction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might well have been informed by, as well as helping to construct, social movements including eugenics.

Galton makes explicit reference to Utopian imaginings when he envisions his work in *Hereditary Genius* leading to a project of ‘gradually raising the present miserably low standard of the human race to one in which the Utopias in the dreamland of philanthropists may become practical possibilities’.<sup>41</sup> In the later years of his life (c. 1910), he even worked upon an unpublished fictional Utopia, ‘Kantsaywhere’, aiming to influence future generations with it in the same way as *More* or *Plato*.<sup>42</sup> In

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his extensive biographical work.

<sup>37</sup> Richardson, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Childs, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Clare Hanson, *Eugenics, Literature and Culture in Post-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1, p. 30, pp. 40-43, pp. 122-148.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Galton, ‘Prefatory Chapter to the Edition of 1892’, p. xxvii.

<sup>42</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Life, Letters, and Labours of Francis Galton*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), IIIa, p. 411.

Galton's Utopia, his suggestion in his 1901 Huxley lecture that '[an] enthusiasm to improve the race would probably express itself by granting diplomas to a select class of young men and women' and encouraging them to marry is played out.<sup>43</sup> A eugenic college issues marks to citizens determining the status of their marriages and the number of children they will be allowed to have; those who fail to pass are treated in a manner 'as pleasant as might be, so long as they [propagate] no children. If they [do] so kindness [is] changed into *sharp severity*.'<sup>44</sup> The principle of charity is here directed toward the improvement of the racial stock: one rich philanthropist states 'with much emphasis' in his will that 'none of the income of his property was to be spent on the support of the naturally feeble. It was intended, on the contrary, to help those who were strong by nature multiply and be well-nourished'.<sup>45</sup> For Galton, imagining Utopia necessitates imagining a eugenic programme. Certainly, other Utopian texts of the period depict with some frequency societies and peoples governed—and usually improved—by eugenic programmes, or shaped by processes of natural selection that have worked to bring about the same ends desired by eugenicists.

The Vril-Ya of Lord Lytton's *The Coming Race*, for example, believe themselves to have been exiled from the upper world to the vast subterranean caverns where they live 'in order to perfect [their] condition and attain to the purest elimination of [their] species by the severity of the struggles [their] forefathers underwent', and expect eventually to 'return to the upper world, and supplant all the inferior races now existing therein'.<sup>46</sup> The human narrator, having fallen into the realm of the Vril-Ya in an accident, is calmly informed by his host that, while not a savage, he does not appear 'to belong to any

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<sup>43</sup> Francis Galton, 'The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under the Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment', *Nature* 64 (1901), 659-665 (p. 663).

<sup>44</sup> Francis Galton, 'Kantsaywhere', cited in Pearson, *The Life, Letters, and Labours of Francis Galton*, IIIa, p. 416.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414.

<sup>46</sup> Lord Lytton, *The Coming Race and The Haunted and the Haunters* (1871; Oxford: Oxford University Press; London: Humphrey Mitford, 1928), p. 72.

civilized people’,<sup>47</sup> and discovers that the Vril-Ya look upon those races incapable of commanding the invisible force called ‘vril’—their principal source of both power and weaponry—‘with more disdain than citizens of New York regard the negroes’.<sup>48</sup> Natural selection here has, at least initially, eliminated the need for artificial selection, but has been embraced by the Vril-Ya having engendered their civilisation, their superiority to the ‘barbarous tribes’ on the fringes of their lands and the humans of the surface,<sup>49</sup> and their control over their environment. Their commitment to continuing its work, and maintaining their racial pride, is thereby ensured. César Guardé Paz has suggested that, although Lovecraft did not mention Lytton’s novel in his correspondence until 1933, it is likely that he had read it earlier.<sup>50</sup>

H. G. Wells’ *Men Like Gods*, meanwhile, quite explicitly lays out the problem of the uncontrolled reproduction of the ‘all too common common man’, and the ways in which artificial selection has contributed to the perfecting of Utopia.<sup>51</sup> Wells was an enthusiastic subscriber to the eugenic doctrine,<sup>52</sup> and *Men Like Gods* makes a sustained fictional argument for it. The Utopians have reached a higher pinnacle of civilisation than is imaginable to the ‘Earthlings’ who blunder into their world. They are uniformly attractive, creative, calm in temperament, and possessed of scientific curiosity.<sup>53</sup> Their control over the natural environment and the animals within it is absolute.<sup>54</sup> They are able to communicate telepathically, and need use speech only with the lower animals.<sup>55</sup> They look upon the period of their history corresponding to Wells’s present as an ‘Age of Confusion’ during which

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> César Guardé Paz, ‘Race and War in the Lovecraft Mythos: A Philosophical Reflection’, *Lovecraft Annual*, 6 (2012), 3-35 (pp. 28-29).

<sup>51</sup> H. G. Wells, *Men Like Gods*, (1923; London: Sphere Books, 1976), pp. 56-57, pp. 63-64, pp. 72-74.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2009), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Wells, *Men Like Gods*, p. 30, p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-74.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 50.



exploitation and injustice were enabled by one ‘fundamental evil out of which all the others that afflicted the race arose’ (note the near-identity of Wells’ and Jameson’s phrasing!): overpopulation.<sup>56</sup> The necessity of a eugenic solution is insisted upon repeatedly, in language that invokes both that used by the eugenics movement, and the Darwinian theory of natural selection. The Utopians, we are told, had to ensure their fitness to survive, and to conquer. The population explosion of the Age of Confusion was an ‘overwhelming flood’, made up not of recognisable individual subjects, but ‘great masses of population that had blundered into existence’; these people—a ‘festering, excessive mass’—formed the ‘natural prey’ of a ‘predatory and acquisitive few’.<sup>57</sup>

The idyllic Utopian present is a direct result of carefully controlled breeding, both of the animals over whom Utopians have absolute control, and of the Utopians themselves. The novel’s protagonist, Mr. Barnstaple—one of the ‘Earthlings’ who has blundered into Utopia by accident—considers this to be ‘the most natural and necessary phase in human history’, accepting immediately the superiority of the healthy and beautiful Utopians to his Earth companions, with their ‘carelessly assembled features and bodily disproportions’.<sup>58</sup> Objections to the Utopian way of life—and, by extension, to the eugenic programme—are expressed in the reactionary tirades of Father Amerton, who objects to reproductive control on religious grounds, and the politician Rupert Catskill, whose recklessly impassioned rhetoric satirizes that of the then politically unsuccessful Churchill. Both are faintly ridiculous figures, and the Earthlings’ later doomed attempt at a conquest of Utopia will ultimately result in their destruction. At first, however, the Utopians address their concerns with calm rationality, explaining that the qualities Catskill extols—‘struggle and competition and conflict’—are not missed in Utopia. To the Utopian Urthred, they are no more desirable than ‘[the] gnawing vigour of the rat[...]the craving pursuit of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-58.

<sup>58</sup> Wells, *Men Like Gods*, p. 74.

wolf, the mechanical persistence of wasp and fly and disease germ'. In eradicating them, the Utopians have 'lost nothing worth having'.<sup>59</sup> The denizens of Utopia, rather than degenerating, as Catskill suggests, are a radically improved strain of humanity whose peaceful but intellectually adventurous way of life is beyond the grasp of such undeveloped individuals as Catskill and Amerton. We learn that there has been 'a certain deliberate elimination of ugly, malignant, narrow, stupid and gloomy types'.<sup>60</sup> In the Utopian present, almost every living person

would have ranked as an energetic creative spirit in former days. There are few dull and no really defective people in Utopia; the idle strains, the people of lethargic dispositions or weak imaginations, have mostly died out; the melancholic type has taken its dismissal and gone; spiteful and malignant characters are disappearing. The vast majority of Utopians are active, sanguine, inventive, receptive and good-tempered.<sup>61</sup>

The Age of Confusion seems also to have been characterised by what would have been hallmarks of modernity in Wells' day—unfettered enterprise and industrialisation—corresponding roughly to the 'real' world that Barnstaple inhabits. The interrelatedness of past and future is once again implied. Eugenic progress has allowed the population of Utopia to return to a simpler and more peaceful mode of being. The Utopian present is imagined as a combination of technologically and eugenically perfected future, and idealised rural past. Something similar can be seen in the eponymous nation of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), whose inhabitants have banned all forms of mechanical contrivance, even confiscating the narrator's wristwatch.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-81.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>62</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon & Erewhon Revisited* (1872; London: Dent, 1932), pp. 44-46.

There is, however, something slightly uncanny about the inhabitants of these Utopian texts: a ‘chilly inhumanity’ of the kind remarked on by Richter in her discussion of Utopias, unavoidable, since ‘conquering the passions entails a lack of compassion for lesser humans’.<sup>63</sup> Wells’s Utopians, for all their beauty, intelligence, and even-temperedness, are slightly disconcerting. The title of the novel invokes their difference from earthly humans, and in the first few pages, we find Utopians referred to as ‘elfin’<sup>64</sup> and compared to a “Greek god—and goddess”.<sup>65</sup> Barnstaple finds himself made uneasy by the way a Utopian woman seems to regard him; the narrative notes that ‘though he liked her to smile he wished that she had not smiled in the way she did’.<sup>66</sup> The differences between Earthlings and Utopians are expanded upon later in the novel. Barnstaple becomes aware that their emotions and affections differ from those he is used to. They love ‘a little hardly’, and lack ‘pity’ and ‘tenderness’—unsurprisingly, since they are ‘in no way pitiful’.<sup>67</sup> When Barnstaple falls on a staircase and winds himself, Crystal, the young Utopian boy he has befriended, is ‘polite rather than sympathetic’; a true Utopian, he is ‘as hard as his name’.<sup>68</sup> We may be reminded of eugenic opposition to charity as expressed by Galton in ‘Kantsaywhere’ and in other eugenic works. The tension between ‘human sympathy’ and the disaster that eugenicists saw as an inevitable consequence of the unchecked reproduction of the lower classes is summed up in the following passage from Pearson’s 1907 lecture on *The Scope and Importance to the State of the Science of National Eugenics*:

We see pain and suffering only to relieve it, without inquiry into the moral character of the

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<sup>63</sup> Richter, p. 180.

<sup>64</sup> Wells, *Men Like Gods*, p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

sufferer or as to his national or racial value. And this is right—no man is responsible for his own being; and nature and nurture, over which he had no control, have made him the being he is, good or evil. But here science steps in, crying, ‘Let the reprieve be accepted, but next remind the social conscience of its duty to the race. No nation can preserve its efficiency unless dominant fertility be associated with the mentally and physically fitter stocks. The reprieve is granted, but let there be no heritage if you would build up and preserve a virile and efficient people.’<sup>69</sup>

If there is to be ‘no heritage’ of weakness, there can be no inheritance of the impulse to protect it. ‘Human sympathy’ is a temporary measure. Galton, in *Hereditary Genius*, similarly stops short of condemning charity outright, but exhorts, ‘let us do what we can to encourage the multiplication of the races best fitted to invent and conform to a high and generous civilisation, and not, out of a mistaken instinct of giving support to the weak, prevent the incoming of strong and hearty individuals’.<sup>70</sup> In the later *Inquiry into Human Faculty and its Development*, he is somewhat more strident, asserting that ‘sentiment[...]against the gradual extinction of an inferior race’ is ‘for the most part quite unreasonable’, and that while it is natural that

the members of an inferior class should dislike being elbowed out of the way[...]it may be somewhat brutally argued that whenever two individuals struggle for a single place, one must yield, and that there will be no greater unhappiness on the whole, if the inferior yield to the superior than conversely, whereas the world will be permanently enriched by the

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<sup>69</sup> Pearson, *Scope and Importance to the State*, pp. 37-38. See also pp. 24-25.

<sup>70</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 343,

success of the superior.<sup>71</sup>

By this time, charity is certainly not for the support of the ‘weak’; rather, ‘it is requisite for the speedier evolution of a more perfect humanity that it should be so distributed as to favour the best-adapted races’.<sup>72</sup> If Wells’ Utopians are the product of such a system, it is hardly surprising that they lack sympathy for those less well ‘adapted’ than themselves.

Increasingly, Barnstaple becomes aware that he has access only to parts of Utopian thought. He can hear only those parts of the Utopians’ telepathic communication that he can understand. Despite his enthusiasm for Utopia, he comes to realise that ‘[the] gulfs of misunderstanding might be wider and deeper than he was assuming. A totally illiterate Gold Coast negro trying to master thermo-electricity would have set himself a far more hopeful task’.<sup>73</sup> Although they still resemble the humans of Barnstaple’s world, in their assured power, the Utopians are ‘passing beyond man towards a nobler humanity. They [are] becoming different in kind’.<sup>74</sup>

The Vril-Ya of Lytton’s *The Coming Race* have an even more strongly disconcerting effect upon the novel’s human narrator. His first sight of a member of the race inspires ‘awe’ and ‘terror’.<sup>75</sup> He instantly knows this person to be ‘a type of man distinct from our known extant races’, and compares him to a ‘sculptured sphinx’.<sup>76</sup> Although it is ‘intellectual’, ‘beauteous’, and ‘tranquil’, he reacts to the Vril-Ya’s face with ‘a cold shudder’, sprung from ‘that instinct of danger which the sight of a tiger or

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<sup>71</sup> Galton, *Inquiry into Human Faculty*, pp. 308-309.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>73</sup> Wells, *Men Like Gods*, p. 185.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Lytton, p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

serpent arouses'.<sup>77</sup> The steadfast belief of the Vril-Ya in their own superiority, combined with the awesome power they control in the vril force, actually renders them a threat to humankind. Unlike Wells's peaceful Utopians, who retaliate with violence only when the Earthlings attempt to attack their civilisation (and who in any case inhabit an alternate world), the Vril-Ya foresee a colonial project in their future. Prophecies among their oldest texts tell that the Vril-Ya 'are destined to return to the upper world, and supplant all the inferior races now existing therein'.<sup>78</sup> The narrator considers the likelihood of their successfully doing so, and concludes that, given the vastly greater power of the Vril-Ya, and the combative nature of humanity, they would undoubtedly be able to destroy human beings and take over within a week.<sup>79</sup>

I have chosen here to mention these two texts and the uncanny inhabitants of their Utopias, but more of the same can be found in many Utopian or critical Utopian texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One might think of the 'perversion of thought' among Samuel Butler's Erewhonians, who regard illness and disease as punishable moral failings while robbery and violence are treated with sympathy,<sup>80</sup> or the affectless relationships and mindless entertainments pursued by the inhabitants of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), itself a satirical response to the Utopian imaginings of Wells.<sup>81</sup> Both the Utopian impulse to imagine a future of great evolutionary and technological advances, and the uncanny underside of such imaginings, are present in some of Lovecraft's latest weird tales, and I will focus here upon three stories featuring advanced extra-terrestrial races and their civilisations. Terrifying singular beings such as Cthulhu and Dagon are certainly vastly greater in size and power than humankind, but they offer little scope for speculation on a human future (or if they do,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, p. 71, p. 61.

<sup>81</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932; London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 35-38, pp. 61-63.

it is a very different kind of speculation). Rather, they serve to illustrate the relative insignificance of humans in the face of a vast and indifferent cosmos—an important theme in Lovecraft’s work, to be sure, but one constantly called into question by its obsession with the nature and status of humanity, which is my concern here. In the remainder of this chapter, I will be looking in detail at ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’ (1931), ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ (1936), and ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ (written in 1931, but not published until 1936). The latter two pieces place their civilisations, though extra-terrestrial in origin, in the most distant reaches of Earth’s past. ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, the only story whose aliens make incursions into the lives of contemporary human beings, is the one I shall consider first.

### **Horrific Transhumanism: ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’**

Peter Penzoldt, in an excerpt from *The Supernatural in Fiction*, relates the idea of the pre- or non-human survival, as used in ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ and ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, to Machen’s use of the Little People. He calls it ‘a highly-evolved and completely renewed form of Machen’s primitive idea’.<sup>82</sup> The idea, as already discussed, is not Machen’s; it first appears in full in David MacRitchie’s *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), and recurs in modified form in the work of Margaret Murray, Lovecraft’s familiarity with which is clear from his direct allusions to it in his stories.<sup>83</sup> In the phrase ‘highly-evolved’, however, Penzoldt—perhaps inadvertently—touches on the important difference here, for Lovecraft and Machen really treat the idea very differently. Machen’s

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<sup>82</sup> Peter Penzoldt, ‘From *The Supernatural in Fiction*’, in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. by Joshi, pp. 63-78 (p. 66).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1928; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 139-169 (p. 142), and H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1931; London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 200-267 (p. 208).

survivals are primitive, where Lovecraft's are pre-human only in terms of Earth's chronology. In their social, biological, and technological development, they provide *post*-human models.

The Mi-Go of 'The Whisperer in Darkness' are a race of technologically advanced crab-like 'fungi' whose nearest habitation to Earth is Yuggoth, a small planet on the rim of our solar system corresponding to Pluto. They visit remote hilly areas in rural Vermont in order to mine for minerals they are unable to obtain on the planets where they live. Local inhabitant Henry Akeley is aware of their presence and attempts to document it, bringing himself under attack by them in the process. This part of the narrative is related from the point of view of Wilmarth (previously encountered in 'The Dunwich Horror'), with whom Akeley is in close correspondence, and who has previously been sceptical of the Mi-Go's existence, but is persuaded by the 'specific and logical' manner in which Akeley makes his case.<sup>84</sup> After a series of increasingly frightening near-encounters, however, Akeley changes his tune. In a bizarre letter, he informs Wilmarth that the Mi-Go do not, after all, pose any threat to humanity, but merely wish to establish an intellectual rapport and to share their own scientific and technical knowledge. He invites Wilmarth to visit him in Vermont, where he, too, will become party to the many secrets they wish to share. Wilmarth duly makes the trip, and is startled to find his correspondent the victim of a bizarre illness which lends him a 'damnable abnormal and corpse-like' appearance and gives his voice a curious, buzzing timbre.<sup>85</sup> Akeley informs him that the Mi-Go intend to take him along on their interstellar voyages by removing his brain and transporting it in a metal canister while his body remains in suspended animation on Earth. That night, however, Wilmarth wakes and overhears a conversation that leads him to suspect that all is not as it seems, Wilmarth flees the premises—but not before his suspicions are confirmed. On entering the study, in which Akeley had

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<sup>84</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Whisperer in Darkness', p. 212.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-252.



claimed he planned to sleep, he finds Akeley's chair empty but for his hands and face, or near-identical replicas thereof. The entity with whom Wilmarth has spent the afternoon conversing—the titular 'whisperer'—is not his friend at all, but an alien creature in disguise.

Although 'The Whisperer in Darkness' deals with an alien race visiting the Earth of Lovecraft's day, the collapsing together of past and future is present here in implication. Initially, Wilmarth is sceptical of the Mi-Go's existence, insisting that the testimonies of rural inhabitants who claim to have seen their dead bodies are 'wild, vague tales which [seem][...]clearly an outgrowth of old rustic superstitions'.<sup>86</sup> The folklore to which Wilmarth refers is 'primitive', 'half-remembered', 'ancient', 'largely forgotten by the present generation', and 'obviously [reflects] the influence of still earlier Indian tales'.<sup>87</sup> We might well be reminded here of the fairylore and Turanian dwarf theory upon which Machen drew for his Little People stories, particularly when we learn that '[those] with Celtic legendry in their heritage[...]linked them vaguely with the malign fairies and "little people" of the bogs and raths',<sup>88</sup> and indeed, Wilmarth makes the connection explicit a little later, implying that those who believe there to be some element of truth behind the stories have simply been reading too much Machen.<sup>89</sup> Certainly, the past here is not the pre-Industrial Revolution idyll imagined in Wells' Utopia. Rather, it is 'atavistical' and pre-rational, even sinister.<sup>90</sup> Towards the end of the story, on his journey to Akeley's farmhouse, Wilmarth speculates—in true Machen style—about the 'alien and incredible things', the 'armies of elemental spirits', that the landscape here might harbour.<sup>91</sup> It is 'a region half-bewitched through the piling-up of unbroken time-accumulations; a region where old, strange things have had a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-202.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 241-242.

chance to grow and linger because they have never been stirred up'.<sup>92</sup> At the beginning of the story, however, the folklore surrounding the Mi-Go appears to be primitive superstition, the remnant of an irrational set of beliefs that ought to be regarded at best with amusement by modern, scientifically-minded human beings.

And such human beings Wilmarth and Akeley undoubtedly are. These men of science are reluctant to jump to conclusions without overwhelming evidence, and admit the existence of the Mi-Go only with numerous caveats. Wilmarth, right at the beginning of the story, reminds us that he 'did not see any actual visual horror at the end', and admits that he 'cannot prove even now whether [he] was right or wrong in [his] hideous inference'. Only his belief that 'the plainest facts' support the reality of what he saw has induced him to share the story.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, for the early portions of the story, Wilmarth presents himself as an amused sceptic, in sharp contrast to the 'wonder-loving grandmothers and retrospective nonagenarians' who whisper tales of the Mi-Go's existence.<sup>94</sup> He regards the believers who—like certain euhemerist folklorists of the late Victorian period—insist that the existence of the legends 'must argue the real existence of some queer elder earth-race' as foolish 'romanticists', and does not hesitate to mock their theories openly.<sup>95</sup>

A debate on the issue in the letters page of a small newspaper, however, brings Wilmarth and his scepticism to the attention of Henry Wentworth Akeley. Wilmarth cautions us that '[eccentricity]' may be responsible for Akeley's 'strange acts and apprehensions toward the last', and that his fearful attitude to the landscape amid which he grew up does not, in itself, constitute proof of a malign

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

presence in it: ‘thousands’, we are reminded, ‘are subject to just such morbid fears’.<sup>96</sup> Akeley, however, is not superstitious; neither is he interested in spreading the story for the sake of entertainment or a good scare. In fact, he publicly supports Wilmarth in the debate, insisting that ‘it does not do for people to know too much about these matters’, and expressing a desire to prevent the curious from delving further in search of the legends’ source.<sup>97</sup> Wilmarth, furthermore, has nothing but praise for Akeley’s character and intellectual rigour. He is, we are told, of ‘a long, locally distinguished line of jurists, administrators and gentlemen-agriculturalists’.<sup>98</sup> In Lovecraft—for whom heredity is always destiny—there can be no higher recommendation. He is ‘a notable student of mathematics, astronomy, biology, anthropology, and folklore’, and ‘a man of character, education, and intelligence’; he assumes nothing without solid evidence, and is ‘amazingly willing to leave his conclusions in a tentative state like a true man of science’.<sup>99</sup> Again and again, Wilmarth affirms his confidence in Akeley’s ‘sanity’ and in his scholarly credentials.<sup>100</sup> Little wonder, then, that Wilmarth finds himself persuaded that there is something to Akeley’s stories. Akeley’s attitude—which is ‘removed as far as imaginable from the demented, the fanatical, the hysterical, or even the extravagantly speculative’—and the material evidence he provides suggest that the legends must have *a* source, even if it is not the improbable-sounding one that Akeley suggests.<sup>101</sup> Ironically—though perhaps also appropriately—Wilmarth at first speculates that the Mi-Go voice captured on a phonograph record by Akeley may belong to ‘some hidden, night-haunting human being decayed to a state not much above that of lower animals’.<sup>102</sup>

At length, however, Wilmarth is convinced of the existence of the creatures by Akeley’s rationalist

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 207-208.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

attitude and ability to provide evidence, and when the Mi-Go, in a letter purportedly from Akeley, invite him to visit Akeley's isolated farmhouse to view the evidence in person, his scientific curiosity leaves him unable to resist.<sup>103</sup> It is to these qualities—the characteristics that make Wilmarth and Akeley '[men] of science', consummately advanced and civilised human beings—that the Mi-Go quite deliberately appeal, presenting themselves as kindred knowledge-seeking spirits, and offering Wilmarth a way beyond the limitations of extant human knowledge. Wilmarth admits his 'zeal for the unknown', and ponders the exciting possibilities of "Akeley"'s promise, exclaiming:

To shake off the maddening and wearying limitations of time and space and natural law—to be linked with the vast *outside*—to come close to the nighted and abysmal secrets of the infinite and the ultimate—surely such a thing was worth the risk of one's life, soul, and sanity!<sup>104</sup>

Wilmarth's language here is hardly different from that of the Mi-Go masquerading as Akeley: "Akeley" enthuses that '*as much of[...]infinity as any human brain can hold is eventually to be opened up to [him]*',<sup>105</sup> exclaims that '[what he] had thought morbid and shameful and ignominious is in reality awesome and mind-expanding and even *glorious*',<sup>106</sup> and expresses gratitude for the 'rich boon of knowledge and intellectual adventure' he has been granted.<sup>107</sup> As readers, we already suspect that Akeley is not the author of the letter at all—but with so close an understanding of human curiosity, we might still be tempted to believe that the Mi-Go's desire for 'peace' and 'intellectual rapport' is

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 237. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 235. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 232. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 233-234.

genuine.<sup>108</sup> We learn, that they ‘like to take away men of learning once in a while, to keep informed on the state of things in the human world’,<sup>109</sup> and that their ‘curiosity respecting men’ is well-known.<sup>110</sup> They are more highly advanced than any other known species; while Lovecraft’s stories elsewhere use alien beings to represent the horrific possibility of human backsliding, the Mi-Go are ‘members of a cosmos-wide race of which all other life-forms are merely degenerate variants’.<sup>111</sup> Their apparent possession of attributes associated with human progress places them as a potential template for the future of humankind.

This future, however, is not quite so bright as “Akeley” would have us believe. The Mi-Go, it transpires, are sinister after all, their frightening otherness consisting not only in the real physical threat they have thus far appeared to pose to Akeley, but in their radical physical alterity, and in the effect they have upon humans, including their allies. The narrative is littered with fairly detailed physical description of the bodies of the Mi-Go—bodies that, despite some superficial similarities in colour and size, are definitely not human. They are repeatedly described as ‘things’ and ‘creatures’;<sup>112</sup> they are ‘bizarre and disturbing objects’ and ‘strange shapes’,<sup>113</sup> ‘morbidity’,<sup>114</sup> and ‘blasphemies’.<sup>115</sup> They combine apparently disparate physical characteristics, being compared variously to crustaceans and bats,<sup>116</sup> and possessing ‘membraneous wings’, ‘articulated limbs’, and ‘a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae’ in place of a head.<sup>117</sup> Their footprints are

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-201, p. 204, p. 224.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-203.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

‘queer’,<sup>118</sup> and the substance that makes up their bodies cannot be captured on film; when Akeley finds a dead specimen and attempts to photograph it, he finds that it does not show up, remarking in bewilderment that ‘[it] was surely made of matter—but what kind of matter?’.<sup>119</sup> The Mi-Go have abilities far surpassing those of mankind: they can fly, even in interstellar space;<sup>120</sup> they possess ‘telepathic and hypnotic powers’,<sup>121</sup> and they are able to function without light, having ‘other, subtler senses’.<sup>122</sup> Their bodies resist classification, overspill the bounds of category and of human knowledge, recalling the monstrous hybridity of a Helen Vaughan or a Wilbur Whateley. For all their apparent kinship with us when it comes to scientific curiosity, their bodies are indelibly marked with otherness; the reader is never allowed to forget their difference. Their use of language, too, reinforces their alien nature. Shortly before his disappearance, Akeley receives a letter from them, informing him of the way in which they plan to remove his brain and take him to Yuggoth. He is unable, however, to repeat the information to Wilmarth, saying only that being locked in an asylum would be ‘better than what the *other creatures* would do’.<sup>123</sup> The letter, in order to be intelligible to Akeley, must be written in English or another language with which he is familiar—but Akeley himself, although using the same medium (the above appears in his correspondence with Wilmarth), is unable to express the same idea. Human language is used here for an inhuman purpose. Similarly, the speech of the Mi-Go has an unsettling effect upon those who hear it. Native American legends warn that it is ‘not good’ to hear ‘what they [whisper] at night in the forest with voices like a bee’s that [try] to be like the voices of men’.<sup>124</sup> Wilmarth’s reaction to hearing the voice on the phonograph record that Akeley sends him is stronger still. It is ‘an accursed *buzzing* which [has] no likeness to humanity despite the human words which it

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 229-230.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

[utters] in good English grammar and a scholarly accent'.<sup>125</sup> The importance of mimicry—and competent mimicry at that—is unmistakable here. The speaker's mastery of the tools of human communication renders its inhumanity more shocking, more strikingly uncanny. Wilmarth talks at length about the alien nature of the voice a couple of pages later:

[Though] that voice is always in my ears, I have not even yet been able to analyse it well enough for a graphic description. It was like the drone of some loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an alien species, and I am perfectly certain that the organs producing it can have no resemblance to the vocal organs of man, or indeed to those of any of the mammalia. There were singularities of timbre, range, and overtones which placed this phenomenon wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life.<sup>126</sup>

The Mi-Go may inhabit the human sphere and possess human culture while remaining inhuman. We might be reminded here of the fears of alien blood “passing” as human that we find in tales like ‘The Dunwich Horror’, and, indeed, the anxieties are not unrelated. ‘The Dunwich Horror’ and ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ present us with visions of humanity supplanted by an undeveloped but overwhelmingly powerful alien horde; the Mi-Go, with their ability both to inhabit the human and to exceed its bounds, suggest another kind of displacement—one in which the human, in the very process of its development, becomes other.

The gradual becoming-other of the human occurs in a rather more literal fashion here, too, of course. The effects apparently produced by the Mi-Go upon their human allies, and the horrific transhuman

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

possibilities of the machines in which they propose to transport Akeley and Wilmarth to Yuggoth, imply both progress and dehumanisation. Clare Hanson has noted the coining of the term ‘transhumanism’ by Julian Huxley in 1957, and his suggestion that it would involve “‘man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realising new possibilities of and for his human nature’”.<sup>127</sup> In ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, however, the capacity of a significantly altered humanity to remain “human” is called into question. The story may be said to anticipate the engagement of later science fiction texts with ‘the tension between belief in scientific progress and fear of destruction’, the specificity of the “human” being the thing here destroyed.<sup>128</sup> The ‘telepathic and hypnotic powers’ of the Mi-Go are apparently passed on to their human ‘agents’.<sup>129</sup> The agent who removes a package from Akeley from the train before it reaches Wilmarth appears to have used some kind of hypnosis on the station clerk with whom he spoke, leaving the clerk ‘scarcely sure that he could even recognise the strange inquirer again’.<sup>130</sup> These new abilities, however, come at a steep cost; those who collaborate with the Mi-Go undergo ‘a repellent mental change’, and are ‘shunned and whispered about as mortals who [have] sold themselves to the strange beings’.<sup>131</sup> One agent, who sends a false telegram to Wilmarth under Akeley’s name, is described as ‘a strange[...]man with a curiously thick, droning voice’.<sup>132</sup> It seems significant that the timbre of his voice—the same characteristic used to establish the otherness of the Mi-Go themselves—signifies his strangeness; the agent, it seems, has taken on some of the attributes of his inhuman masters. Even Akeley, before his replacement by a Mi-Go impostor, appears to be feeling their influence to a degree, explaining that, although it would be safest for him to leave Vermont and move in with his son in California, he feels that ‘something inside [his] mind holds [him]

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<sup>127</sup> Hanson, p. 59.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>129</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, p. 224.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.



back'.<sup>133</sup> The human, under Mi-Go influence, gains alien abilities, but also becomes subject to alien whims. It becomes less human.

Of course, the Mi-Go can also pass themselves off as human, as in the case of the false Akeley with whom Wilmarth converses. The letter Wilmarth receives from “Akeley” inviting him to Vermont gives the first clue; although it is written in perfect English, and shows the writer to be aware of the details of Akeley’s situation, Wilmarth finds it ‘curiously different’ from Akeley’s earlier correspondence.<sup>134</sup> He remarks upon the altered ‘flavour of the style’<sup>135</sup> (although, in fact, both sets of correspondence are quite distinctively Lovecraftian), and upon Akeley’s ‘unheralded, lightning-like, and complete’ transition from fear to ‘exultation’.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, the degree to which Akeley’s attitude and manner have changed leads Wilmarth to question his correspondent’s sanity, remarking that

the change in Akeley’s own manner, attitude, and language was so vastly beyond the normal or the predictable. The man’s whole personality seemed to have undergone an insidious mutation—a mutation so deep that one could scarcely reconcile his two aspects with the supposition that both represented equal sanity.<sup>137</sup>

And when Wilmarth finally comes face to face with Akeley in his study in Vermont, he finds this strangeness even more pronounced. He finds his affection for his scholarly correspondent waning fast, replaced by an instinctive dislike; although he pities Akeley’s apparent illness, he finds ‘a hateful as

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

well as pitiful quality' in his hoarse whispers,<sup>138</sup> and remarks that Akeley now inspires 'a distinct repulsion' in him.<sup>139</sup> The reasons for his distaste are several: Akeley's 'strained, rigid, immobile expression and unwinking glassy stare';<sup>140</sup> the nebulously strange timbre of his voice;<sup>141</sup> and the 'faint, half-imaginary rhythm or vibration in the air' inside his study.<sup>142</sup> More disturbing still is the information that Akeley imparts to him about Yuggoth, and the possibility of their travel there—particularly his 'hints of familiarity with this unknown world of fungous life', which make Wilmarth's 'flesh creep'.<sup>143</sup> The bizarre traits Akeley seems to have acquired, of course, are in fact symptomatic of his having been replaced by an alien impostor—but the ability of the Mi-Go to mimic and eventually supplant the human is cemented by their having successfully replaced Akeley. Once again, through their advanced abilities, the human becomes something sinister, providing us with a frightening glimpse of what a humanity that had advanced after the fashion of the Mi-Go might be.

Wilmarth's discovery of the above provides the crowning horror of the text, but equally dramatic—and perhaps more interesting—are the changes that the Mi-Go have already, and deliberately, been making to human bodies and minds. Their telepathic and hypnotic influence upon their followers, and their apparent ability to pass on these powers, are one thing; the alterations hinted at in terror by Akeley when he proclaims his readiness to enter a madhouse rather than fall into the power of the Mi-Go are another:

*They don't mean to let me get to California now—they want to take me off alive, or what*

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

*theoretically and mentally amounts to alive*—not only to Yuggoth, but beyond that—away outside the galaxy *and possibly beyond the last curved rim of space*. I told them I wouldn't go where they wish, *or in the terrible way they propose to take me*, but I'm afraid it will be no use.<sup>144</sup>

The above appears in Akeley's last, frantic letter to Wilmarth before his replacement by a Mi-Go impostor. Compare the calm, matter-of-fact manner in which the false Akeley describes the process:

With proper aid I expect to go backward and forward in time, and actually *see and feel* the earth of remote past and future epochs. You can't imagine the degree to which those beings have carried science. There is nothing they can't do with the mind and body of living organisms. I expect to visit other planets, and even other stars and galaxies.<sup>145</sup>

During their conversation, Wilmarth learns about the process in greater detail. It is scientific progress—that which marks out Wilmarth and Akeley as supremely human—that has made possible this detachment of human mind from human body: the 'prodigious surgical, biological, chemical, and mechanical skill of the Outer Ones [has] found a way to convey human brains without their concomitant physical structure'.<sup>146</sup> He is assured that undergoing the process will entail little real sacrifice. The use of speech-machines and 'adjustable faculty-instruments' allows those brains so encased to retain 'a full sensory and articulate life'.<sup>147</sup> The skill of the Mi-Go makes the process 'easy and almost normal', and brain and body can persist in this state indefinitely; the body 'never ages when

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 228. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 248. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

the brain is out of it', while the brain itself, in its metal casing, is 'virtually immortal'.<sup>148</sup>

The promise sounds too good to be true, and there are hints even at this stage that while the human brain may make the trip intact, aspects of its humanity do not. The sensory life offered is, "Akeley" admits, 'a bodiless and mechanical one'.<sup>149</sup> The simile used to convey the convenience of the method used, too, is curiously mechanical: attaching an encased brain to the necessary instruments is 'as simple as carrying a phonograph record about and playing it wherever a phonograph of the corresponding make exists'.<sup>150</sup> A phonograph record, of course, was the method used by the real Akeley earlier in the tale to pass on his recording of Mi-Go speech. The imagery here performs a conflation of Mi-Go and human, again shifting one into the place of the other. The normality of the procedure to the Mi-Go contrasts vividly to the way it appears to Wilmarth: 'hellish' and 'strange',<sup>151</sup> and 'like the typical vagaries of crazed inventors and scientists'.<sup>152</sup> It is apparently preposterous, and at the same time tied to familiar anxieties around scientific progress, the figure of the mad scientist invoking already-established Gothic narratives of the overreacher-pioneer. Curiosity and mechanical ability are again problematised. What makes Wilmarth and Akeley human, makes the Mi-Go alien. At the same time, mechanical progress is placed as a product of evolutionary progress, and as inextricable from it. The question of human evolution alongside, and eventual dependence upon, technology is thereby opened up, prefiguring later science-fictional preoccupations with the figure of the cyborg.

What Akeley and Wilmarth are offered is a kind of horrific transhumanism, in which the human subject attains marvellous new experiences and abilities at the expense of individual identity and agency. The

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-253.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

tension evident in T. H. Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature* makes itself felt here. Although, for Huxley, the ability to accumulate knowledge is what sets humanity apart from the 'brutes' with which we are, 'in substance and structure', united—'man' is 'transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth'<sup>153</sup>—this triumphal statement is haunted by the earlier assertion that the 'intellect, by its very triumphs[...][admonishes] the conqueror that he is but dust'.<sup>154</sup> The trade-off for any knowledge gained by traffic with the Mi-Go is being controlled and shaped by them; loss of specificity, and effective demotion to the status of lower animals.

The disappearance of the individual manifests itself audibly—appropriately, since it is the singular quality of its whispering that marks out the faux Akeley as an impostor, implying that some unmistakable element of humanity may be found in the voice. There is no human element, however, in the mechanical voices of the encased brains, as the description of the one to which "Akeley" induces Wilmarth to listen shows. 'The voice', Wilmarth notes, 'was loud, metallic, lifeless, and plainly mechanical in every detail of its production. It was incapable of inflection or expressiveness, but scraped and rattled on with a deadly precision and deliberation'.<sup>155</sup> Later, upon hearing the speech-machine attached to the cylinder containing the brain of the real Akeley, Wilmarth at first assumes that the speaker is the same brain with which he spoke previously. However, it soon occurs to him that 'any brain would emit vocal sounds of the same quality if linked to the same mechanical speech-producer'.<sup>156</sup> Individual identity is effaced by this symbiosis between human and machine. Wilmarth's thoughts reflect this; although he becomes aware that the speaker in the cylinder must be Akeley, and

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<sup>153</sup> T. H. Huxley, pp. 155-156.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>155</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Whisperer in Darkness', p. 255.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261. (Emphasis in original.)

sympathises with his predicament enough to exclaim internally, ‘poor devil’,<sup>157</sup> he persists in thinking of the brain the cylinder as ‘it’ and ‘the thing’.<sup>158</sup> When he makes his escape, Wilmarth leaves the cylinder containing Akeley’s brain on the table. Where human consciousness and Mi-Go technology intersect, the latter wins out. Akeley is no longer human enough for him to rescue.

‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, then, presents us with a horrific vision of humanity’s potential highly evolved, transhuman future. Mechanical progress is intrinsically linked to intellectual development. As humanity develops, it may gain knowledge and previously unknown abilities, but with its development of those faculties, it will become more alien. The Mi-Go are sinister here partly because of their striking physiological difference from human beings, their composite forms calling to mind other dangerous Lovecraft creations (Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth, for example). But it is also their relationship to and use of human beings that makes them frightening. Akeley’s voice through the speech-machine is identical in tone to that of the other brain, but Wilmarth also observes that ‘the mechanical voice, notwithstanding its artificial loudness and regularity, seemed to be in a position of subordination and pleading’.<sup>159</sup> Akeley has no choice and no agency in his dealings with the Mi-Go, having come under siege from them and eventually fallen into their power. The ‘repellent mental change’ undergone by their human agents, furthermore, implies that they are perhaps under telepathic or hypnotic control.<sup>160</sup> Humans, for the Mi-Go, then, form a kind of convenient slave-class as well as a subject for study; we are an interesting but inferior race. One might read this element of the story as a reiteration of a familiar Lovecraftian theme: the fear of backsliding, played out in the reduction of human to the status of specimen or beast of burden, and linked closely to the cosmic horror of our insignificance on the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

grand scale of the universe. An additional element of uncertainty regarding the future of the “human” is provided if we remember that the Mi-Go are horrifying, at least in part, precisely because of the danger they pose to humans. What might that imply about the nature and status of a humanity (and let us not forget that, for Lovecraft, the “human” is the white, educated and “civilised”) evolved to a similar level of power over other, inferior races or species?

### **Uncanny Utopias: ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ and ‘At the Mountains of Madness’**

A rather more optimistic vision of advanced society is found in two of Lovecraft’s most acclaimed late works, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ (1936) and ‘The Shadow out of Time’ (1936). We find the germ of both stories contained in the earlier ‘The Nameless City’(1921), whose narrator, exploring an ancient, ruined desert city of unknown origin, discovers the bodies of its reptilian, pre-human builders, and finally learns that their disembodied consciousnesses still haunt the city by night, returning to a subterranean abyss beneath it by day.<sup>161</sup> The creatures were clearly members of an advanced, human-like civilisation, but their surviving minds or spirits—which manifest themselves in the form of rushing air—induce terror in the narrator.<sup>162</sup> ‘The Nameless City’ is a relatively short and undeveloped tale, but Lovecraft reworks the idea in far greater detail and complexity in both longer works.

Each works on the same basic premise: the major plot-point is the discovery of a vast city of pre-human age, apparently a bastion of a technologically, socially and intellectually advanced civilisation

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<sup>161</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Nameless City’, in Joshi, ed., *The Dreams in the Witch House*, pp. 30-41 (p. 41).

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

built by extra-terrestrial creatures long before the evolution of the first humans. ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, in particular, emphasises the discovery of unprecedentedly ancient fossils, and we are reminded of Spencer’s suggestion that, ‘for aught we know to the contrary, only the last few chapters of the earth’s biological history may have come down to us’,<sup>163</sup> and that ‘successive Evolutions analogous to that which is now going on’ may have filled a vast past.<sup>164</sup> The human beings who discover this civilisation come to view its alien creators with a degree of sympathy, viewing their scientific and intellectual curiosity as essentially “human”. Indeed, since the unexpected age of these alien civilisations highlights the relative incompleteness of human knowledge, their inhabitants may come to seem possessed of these defining “human” qualities in somewhat greater degree than human beings. Lovecraft does, however, make one notable change between ‘The Nameless City’ and the two later tales. Where the reptilian creatures of ‘The Nameless City’ have survived in disembodied form to the present day, and become a threatening Other to the narrator, the Old Ones of ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ are mostly extinct, while the Great Race of ‘The Shadow Out of Time’—being able to transfer themselves into the bodies of other species, travelling through space and time in the process—have long since abandoned their city for other bodies in another time and place. Each city *does* exist atop an inhabited subterranean abyss, but in each case what inhabits it is something far more dangerous and further from humanity than the builders of the titanic cities. This allows for a splintering of possibilities: where the Mi-Go are advanced, their utter alienness and the threat they pose to human beings prevents Wilmarth from identifying with them. In ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ and ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, meanwhile, the threatening and utterly alien exists separately from the more “human” alien civilisation. There are further layers of complication in the nature of the Old Ones and the Great Race’s societies, and I intend to explore some of these in the remainder of this chapter.

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<sup>163</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 338.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 537. See also p. 551.



Without mischaracterising Lovecraft as a progressive, as Buhle does, or arguing for the stories' potential posthuman Utopianism as a revealed secret truth rather than one of several available readings,<sup>165</sup> I would argue that there is, perhaps, more to these stories than eugenic ideas simply '[taking] voice through' them and '[extending] the imperial sway of the scientific discourse of the body into[...]the realm of the imagination', as Childs suggests with respect to eugenics-influenced modernist texts.<sup>166</sup> Rather, I hope to illustrate the ways in which they both continue familiar Lovecraftian themes, and adumbrate a posthuman future.

Although the title of his 2009 essay, 'Lovecraft's Avatars: Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, Dagon, and Lovecraftian Utopias' makes reference to the concept of Utopia, Brandon Reynolds really does little with the idea. Reynolds' essay focuses primarily on Lovecraft's treatment of religion, arguing for a division of the fiction into two parts: one characterised by a yearning for a Greco-Roman paganism that would reach its apotheosis in the resurrection of old gods and their worship; the other by a nihilistic atheism that seems to urge the destruction of humankind.<sup>167</sup> Rather bafflingly, Reynolds' article makes no reference to extant Utopian tradition or to the Lovecraft texts that most strongly engage with it. Rather, Reynolds argues for Innsmouth as Lovecraft's 'pagan utopia',<sup>168</sup> relying upon a naïvely literal reading of the narrator's final assertion that he is returning to Y'ha-nthlei to 'dwell amidst wonder and glory forever'<sup>169</sup> and interpreting the Esoteric Order of Dagon as a desirable alternative to Christianity.<sup>170</sup> The other Utopian possibility that Reynolds finds in Lovecraft is that

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<sup>165</sup> Buhle, pp. 199-209.

<sup>166</sup> Childs, p. 14, p. 24.

<sup>167</sup> Brandon Reynolds, 'Lovecraft's Avatars: Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, Dagon, and Lovecraftian Utopias', *Lovecraft Annual*, 3 (2009), 96-108 (p. 96).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>169</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', p. 335.

<sup>170</sup> Reynolds, p. 100.

represented by the mindless Azathoth, and involves ‘total destruction and nothingness’.<sup>171</sup>

Disappointingly, Reynolds does not take the opportunity to explore the idea of Utopia as non-place (rather than, or in addition to, Eutopian good-place) or to consider the realisability or otherwise of ideals—he simply suggests that Lovecraft’s atheism must necessarily entail nihilism. ‘Lovecraft’s atheistic ideal for mankind’, he writes, ‘involves one key principle: mankind’s apocalyptic destruction’.<sup>172</sup> His conclusion is that Lovecraft’s fiction, ultimately pessimistic, can offer as an ideal neither the survival nor the further development of humanity. It offers us ‘two choices: physical degeneration into Innsmouth’s fishlike people coupled with an eternal undersea existence for the rebirth of paganism, or complete and utter destruction of everything for the sake of achieving a “blissful” experience of nothingness’.<sup>173</sup> In support of this, Reynold quotes a passage from one of Lovecraft’s letters to Sonia Haft Greene—one which may be read to contain the seed of its own contradiction: “*If we were at all sensible we would seek death—the same blissful blank which we enjoyed before we existed.*”<sup>174</sup> The emphasis here is my own. The italicized text contains the clear implication that we *do not* seek death; we *are not* sensible. What we do seek, according to the evolutionary viewpoint, is progress; and this is the story that the later tales tell.

‘The Shadow Out of Time’ takes the form of an account by one Professor Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, apparently a sufferer of a bizarre form of multiple personality disorder. Having collapsed while giving a lecture some years ago, Peaslee woke inexplicably altered and apparently suffering from amnesia. He engaged in an intensive programme of research and information-gathering over the next five years. Toward the end of this period of time, a strange mechanical contraption was seen at his place of

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>174</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, cited in Reynolds, p. 104.

residence, and shortly afterwards, Peaslee's original personality returned, with no memory of the intervening period. On his return, however, Peaslee begins to suffer bizarre dreams and visions of a city inhabited by huge, cone-shaped beings, highly intelligent and frequently occupied with reading or writing in an enormous archive. Gradually piecing together his dreams with fragments of ancient myth and legend, he becomes convinced that the creatures in his dreams are the Great Race of Yith, an astoundingly advanced alien species whose telepathic abilities have ensured their survival at the expense of countless less developed races. They are able to effect a kind of mental exchange with members of other species across time and space, and frequently kidnap highly educated minds for a period of time, while a mind of the Great Race inhabits their body and researches their civilisation. This is what appears to have happened to Peaslee; the 'secondary personality' inhabiting his body is a member of the Great Race, and Peaslee spent five years living among them in the distant past of the Earth, having had his memories artificially restricted before being returned to his own time and body. Among the Great Race's buildings are blocks of a sinister 'elder masonry', feared but rarely discussed, connected with a vengeful, utterly alien race of Elder Things that will eventually destroy the Great Race's civilisation. The Great Race will escape the devastation by trading minds en masse with a race of beetle-like creatures who inhabit the Earth after humanity, leaving the displaced minds to die in their places. Eventually, during an archaeological expedition in the Australian desert, Peaslee uncovers the remains of the Great Race's city, confirming the truth of his suspicions, and also discovering the continued existence of the terrifying Elder Things in the abyss beneath the city.

The Great Race, like the Mi-Go, are startlingly alien, their otherness represented in their physical appearance, their speech, and their spatial and temporal origins. The interloper who usurps Peaslee's body is immediately seen for what it is *not*, although—unsurprisingly—human observers fail to note

its inhumanity. His wife reacts to the usurper with ‘extreme horror and loathing’, immediately recognising the being as ‘some utter alien usurping the body of her husband’, while Peaslee’s son, Wingate, while holding out hope that his real father will reappear, recognises that this is a ‘stranger’.

<sup>175</sup> Although ensconced in a human body, the creature inspires an instinctive revulsion in others, just as the horrific hybrid and degenerate entities we have seen in previous chapters do. Peaslee, reflecting upon what he has learned about the period during which he suffered from this apparent amnesia, tells us,

[something] in my aspect and speech seemed to excite vague fears and aversions in everyone I met, as if I were a being infinitely removed from all that is normal and healthful.

This idea of a black, hidden horror connected with incalculable gulfs of some sort of *distance* was oddly widespread and persistent.<sup>176</sup>

The creature’s manner of communicating marks it out clearly as Other, as did the speech of the Mi-Go. When “Peaslee” awakes, the alteration in his personality first becomes apparent in his speech, which is ‘barbarously alien’, with ‘a curiously stilted quality, as if I had laboriously learned the English language from books’, and littered with ‘scraps of curious archaism and expressions of a wholly incomprehensible cast’.<sup>177</sup> The being’s mannerisms, too, are off-putting: the doctors lecturing on Peaslee’s condition occasionally detect ‘some queer trace of carefully veiled mockery’,<sup>178</sup> while Peaslee, in his memoir, suggests that the being’s ‘facial expression’ gave away the fact that it was not

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<sup>175</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1936; London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 335-395 (p. 339).

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-339. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

him.<sup>179</sup> I have earlier touched on the importance of the human face, attacks upon which erase the individuality of the human subject, and that this is what gives away the creature's alienness is perhaps significant. Although it inhabits a human body, the creature is unable to mimic a human self. The creature's writing, too, contains traces of otherness. Reading over the notes it left behind, Peaslee notices that those in human languages ('all of which the writer seemed to know with equal though obviously academic facility') use 'a script and idiom which somehow [seems] oddly un-human'.<sup>180</sup> More startling, however are those which take the form of 'curvilinear hieroglyphs[...]following no recognisable human pattern'.<sup>181</sup> These hieroglyphs are familiar to Peaslee from his dream-visions, in which they seem to be invested with a particularly sinister significance: Peaslee feels that they are 'mocking' him, and fears that they might 'blast [his] soul with their message were [he] not guarded by a merciful ignorance'.<sup>182</sup> The knowledge they contain is beyond the human sphere, and that the creature, despite its ability to write in human language, chooses to make notes in its native script at the risk of arousing suspicion suggests that it is capable of expressing thoughts or facts which have no equivalent in human language. Spencer argued that language evolves in order to allow precision of expression.<sup>183</sup> Human language, then, lacks the precision required to represent the ideas of the Great Race; it is imperfectly evolved, and their alien thought-patterns continue to require expression by alien means.

The physical appearance of the Great Race serves to emphasise their difference from humanity. On his return, Peaslee finds himself oddly apprehensive at the thought of looking at his own body, either in mirrors or simply by glancing downwards. When he does so, he experiences 'a curious relief' at the

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>183</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, pp. 374-375.

sight of ‘the familiar human shape’.<sup>184</sup> And upon discovering the ruined city of the Great Race, he remarks that

[one] thing only was unfamiliar, and that was my own size in relation to the monstrous masonry. I felt oppressed by a sense of unwonted smallness, as if the sight of these towering walls from a mere human body was something wholly new and abnormal. Again and again I looked nervously down at myself, vaguely disturbed by the human form I possessed.<sup>185</sup>

Even his footprints in the city’s ‘millennially untrodden dust’ cause him discomfort; ‘[never] before’, he speculates, ‘had human feet pressed upon those immemorial pavements’.<sup>186</sup> An interesting inversion takes place in these moments, a layering of human and alien over one another. The potential Otherness of the human is invoked in embryo, as is the potential normality of the alien: our ability to recognise ourselves in it, and it in ourselves.

Elsewhere, Peaslee describes the bodies of the Great Race in some detail, building up—as with the Mi-Go—a picture of a race unlike any familiar life-form, incorporating elements of disparate species and even inanimate objects. The Great Race take the form of enormous, ‘ridgy’ cones with four extendible arms, two terminating in ‘enormous claws or nippers’, one in ‘red, trumpet-like appendages’, and one in a yellow, globe-shaped head. They have three eyes, as well as ‘flower-like appendages’ and ‘antennae or tentacles’, and move ‘through expansion and contraction’ of a rubbery foot-fringe, like

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<sup>184</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, p. 345.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

slugs.<sup>187</sup> They speak by ‘clicking and scraping’,<sup>188</sup> and, like the Mi-Go, possess a set of senses different from those of humans. They share only two human senses, sight and hearing, but ‘of other and incomprehensible senses (not, however, well utilisable by alien captive minds inhabiting their bodies) they [possess] many’.<sup>189</sup> It is suggested that they may, also like the Mi-Go, have telepathic abilities; the machines they operate in the great central archive are ‘somehow connected with thought’, although Peaslee is unable to understand their workings.<sup>190</sup> When Peaslee first begins to see them in his dreams, he is appropriately horrified; in a moment that will be neatly reversed by the estrangement of his human body in the Great Race’s city at the end of the story, he observes them working in their great central archive, and is unnerved by the sight of alien bodies carrying out familiar actions:

Their actions, though harmless, horrified me even more than their appearance—for it is not wholesome to watch monstrous objects doing what one has known only human beings to do. These objects moved intelligently around the great rooms, getting books from the shelves and taking them to the great tables, or vice versa, and sometimes writing diligently with a peculiar rod gripped in the greenish head-tentacles. The huge nippers were used in carrying books and in conversation[...]<sup>191</sup>

His horror, however, is short-lived. After a short time in their company, he recognises that they ‘form supremely natural parts of their environment’ and ‘[ceases] to be afraid of them’, even coming to recognise them as distinct individuals.<sup>192</sup> Despite their physical differences from us—and the Great

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

Race differ far more drastically than the Mi-Go—the story begins to emphasise the traits they hold in common with humanity, and, in contrast to tales of monstrous hybridity like ‘The Dunwich Horror’, to present these not as a source of horror but of identification. This identification, combined with Peaslee’s delineation of the Great Race’s abilities, clearly places them as a model for a highly advanced human future.

Indeed, many of the abilities evidenced by the Great Race are those associated with advanced, “civilised” humanity; the same qualities that lend narrators like Wilmarth and Peaslee their authority. Spencer had suggested that the various spheres of knowledge—religion, philosophy, science, and art—evolved in stages similar to those through which ‘the mind of a child passes on its way to maturity’;<sup>193</sup> and the Great Race appear to have reached a particularly advanced level. Their intellectual capacities are immense. During Peaslee’s supposed amnesia, his ‘secondary personality’, really a mind of the Great Race, displays a facility for ‘abnormally rapid assimilation’, and an intelligence ‘enormously superior to [Peaslee’s] own’.<sup>194</sup> The alien mind is able to ‘master every detail of a book merely by glancing over it’, and to ‘[interpret] complex figures in an instant’.<sup>195</sup> Peaslee’s visions of the Great Race’s city bear out this impression; he decides, from ‘their rate of reading, writing, and operating their machines[...]that their intelligence [is] enormously greater than man’s’.<sup>196</sup> Given this ability to absorb and interpret vast quantities of information, their intellectual curiosity should come as no surprise. When the mind inhabiting Peaslee’s body realises its attempt to disguise the ‘amnesia’ has failed, it abandons it at once, becoming ‘eager for information of all sorts’, and appearing mostly concerned with ‘certain points in history, science, art, language, and folklore—some of them tremendously

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<sup>193</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 327.

<sup>194</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, pp. 339-340.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.



abstruse, and some childishly simple’, rather than with finding out who Peaslee is or recovering his memories.<sup>197</sup> It is, in effect, the mind’s quest for knowledge that betrays its alienness. Doctors inform Peaslee after his return that during the ‘amnesia’ he appeared ‘anomalously avid to absorb the speech, customs, and perspectives of the age around me; as if I were a studious traveller from a far, foreign land’.<sup>198</sup> The other, similar cases throughout history discovered by Peaslee in his attempt to understand his experience have been marked in the same way: ‘by a wholesale acquisition of scientific, historic, artistic, and anthropological knowledge; an acquisition carried on with feverish zest and with a wholly abnormal absorptive power’.<sup>199</sup>

In addition to the intensive researches they carry out in the bodies of other species, the Great Race pump the captive minds drawn into their era for information about their civilisations of origin.<sup>200</sup> Their huge central archive holds ‘the whole of earth’s annals—histories and descriptions of every species that had ever been or that ever would be, with full records of their arts, their achievements, their languages, and their psychologies’.<sup>201</sup> It is difficult not to be reminded of T. H. Huxley’s assertion that what sets ‘Man’ apart from the ‘brutes’ is the ability to ‘[accumulate] and [organise] the experience which is almost wholly lost with the cessation of every individual life in other animals; so that, now, he stands raised upon it as on a mountain top, far above the level of his humble fellows’.<sup>202</sup> The Great Race have carried this out at a further remove, retaining the knowledge that would otherwise have been lost with the extinction of other species. They are able to cherry-pick ideas and discoveries from all of time and space to suit their own needs, resulting in their advanced—we might say Utopian—

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>202</sup> T. H. Huxley, p. 156. It is tempting to wonder whether Lovecraft’s story of an alien species studying other civilisations perhaps found its origin in Huxley’s suggestion that we take an unbiased look at the human species by ‘[imagining] ourselves scientific Saturnians’ classifying life on Earth (p. 95).

civilisation. It is this ability, we are told, that has made the species

the greatest race of all; because it alone had conquered the secret of time. It had learned all things that ever were known *or ever would be known* on the earth, through the power of its keener minds to project themselves into the past and the future, even through gulfs of millions of years, and study the lore of every age. From the accomplishments of this race arose all legends of *prophets*, including those in human mythology.<sup>203</sup>

The abilities the Great Race have either gained through their researches, or developed of their own accord, are manifold, and Lovecraft builds up a picture of an ideal society, technologically advanced and intellectually governed, calling to mind aspects of the political thought expressed in his later letters.<sup>204</sup> Their curiosity suggests that they set great store by intellectual achievement and the acquisition of knowledge, and this is borne out in the design of their city, with its ‘vast’, space-dominating central archive, and its walls lined with shelves of ‘immense’ volumes and decorated with ‘curious[...]mathematical designs’.<sup>205</sup> Their technological and architectural achievements are well beyond those of humanity, too; alongside the ‘globes of luminous crystal’ that light the archive, Peaslee notes ‘inexplicable machines formed of vitreous tubes and metal rods’.<sup>206</sup> A similarly ‘unknown machine’ is seen at Peaslee’s house shortly before his own mind is returned to his body, suggesting that the mechanism has something to do with the mental time-travel effected by the Great Race.<sup>207</sup> In his dreams, Peaslee encounters ‘colossal caverns of intricate machinery whose outlines and purpose were

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<sup>203</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, p. 351. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>204</sup> See, for example, the discussion of production, technology, and political administration in H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Elizabeth Toldridge, January 25, 1931, in *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), pp. 313-316 (pp. 315-316).

<sup>205</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, p. 345.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

wholly strange to [him]'.<sup>208</sup> We do find out one purpose for which the Great Race use their mechanical devices: when a captive mind from another time-period speaks a language physically impossible for the Great Race, 'clever machines would be made, on which the alien speech could be played as on a musical instrument'.<sup>209</sup> It is difficult not to be reminded of the brain-theft and speech-machines of the Mi-Go here, and the ethically questionable aspects of the Great Race's practice will be revisited later.

In their city, meanwhile, 'the principle of the arch [is] known as fully and used as extensively as by the Romans',<sup>210</sup> but on a much grander scale. The size and scope of the buildings created by the Great Race is emphasized repeatedly. Peaslee wonders at the 'Cyclopean corridors', the 'monstrous masonry', the buildings whose enormity rivals that of the natural landscape:

There were almost endless leagues of giant buildings, each in its garden, and ranged along paved roads fully two hundred feet wide. They differed greatly in aspect, but few were less than five hundred feet square or a thousand feet high. Many seemed so limitless that they must have had a frontage of several thousand feet, while some shot up to mountainous altitudes in the grey, steamy heavens.<sup>211</sup>

If we remember Spencer's assertion in *The Principles of Biology* that highly-organised animals tend also be larger, then the vast physical size of the Great Race and the highly-evolved skill that has allowed them to accommodate themselves are intimately bound up with one another.<sup>212</sup> Their architectural skill is employed to its greatest degree, however, in the protection of knowledge. The

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>212</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, p. 111.

central archive, a ‘titan repository [surpassing] all other buildings in the massive, mountain-like firmness of its construction’, is designed ‘to last as long as the race, and to withstand the fiercest of earth’s convulsions’.<sup>213</sup> And the ambition with which Peaslee holds it to have been built increases in further descriptions. Later, we are told that

This vast, earth-protected pile, housing the annals of all the solar system, had been built with supernal skill and strength to last as long as that system itself. Blocks of stupendous size, poised with mathematical genius and bound with cements of incredible toughness, had combined to form a mass as firm as the planet’s rocky core.<sup>214</sup>

Their mastery of nature, too, seems almost complete. The ‘artificial breeding’ of plants is well-established among them, Peaslee noting that the outlandish blooms in their rooftop gardens evidence ‘some unknown but well-established horticultural tradition’.<sup>215</sup> They appear, through their acquisition of knowledge from all ages, and their exceptional intellectual abilities, to have created a near-Utopian society. They are no longer reliant upon animals for food, ‘for the Great Race’s mechanised culture [has] long since done away with domestic beasts, while food [is] wholly vegetable or synthetic’.<sup>216</sup> This mechanised culture allows ample leisure time, mostly filled with ‘intellectual and aesthetic activities’.<sup>217</sup> Science has been ‘carried to an unbelievable height of development’, while technology is ‘enormously stimulated through the constant struggle to survive, and to keep in existence the physical fabric of great cities, imposed by the prodigious geologic upheavals of those primal days’.<sup>218</sup> Nor have

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<sup>213</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, p. 360.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

the arts been neglected; they are ‘a vital part of life’.<sup>219</sup>

The intellectual achievements of the Great Race are equalled only by its social development. Aspects of their social organisation—‘a sort of fascistic socialism’—appear related to Lovecraft’s own idiosyncratic political beliefs, particularly the concentration of power in the hands of ‘a small governing board elected by the votes of all able to pass certain educational and psychological tests’, and the fact that ‘[family] organisation [is] not overstressed’.<sup>220</sup> Nevertheless, the society’s mechanised nature, abundance of leisure time, and preoccupation with intellectual pursuits echo the scientific Utopias of Wells and Bulwer-Lytton, as does its generally peaceful equilibrium. Crime, we are told, is ‘surprisingly scanty’,<sup>221</sup> and warfare, though ‘infinitely devastating’, rare.<sup>222</sup> As the picture of their Utopian society is built up, their alienness fades into the background. Peaslee concentrates upon their intellectual curiosity—acknowledged as a common trait of all civilised, ‘keen’ minds—and the qualities which they hold in common with humans, albeit developed to a far higher degree. We might think of Spencer’s assertion that ‘advancing Language, Science, and Art’ reflect ‘advancing human structure, individual and social’ and conclude that their intellectual achievements are inextricably linked with their high degree of evolution.<sup>223</sup> The importance of intellectual curiosity as a principal “human” good here also echoes Galton, when he asserts that ‘indifference or insincerity in the search after truth is one of the most degrading of sins’.<sup>224</sup>

Furthermore, the eugenic practices of their society are made explicit, in passages which recall those

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>223</sup> Spencer, *First Principles*, p. 319.

<sup>224</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 189.

from Wells' *Men Like Gods* discussed above. The Great Race reproduce in small numbers,<sup>225</sup> and only ever deliberately; they have 'no sex, but [reproduce] through seeds or spores which [cluster] on their bases and [can] be developed only under water'.<sup>226</sup> The creation of offspring is independent of basic biological drives; they are less bodily than humans and less fecund, and are therefore able to avoid the overpopulation of which Wells' Utopians speak with such distaste. Only those free from obvious defects are allowed to reach maturity; '[markedly] defective individuals', we are told, are 'quietly disposed of'.<sup>227</sup> This selectiveness, it is implied, has allowed the Great Race to reach the heights which they enjoy in the time of Peaslee's visions. A similar level of achievement might be available to humans, were we to follow a similar path. The world of the Great Race seems here to represent a possible, highly desirable future for a highly developed humanity.

Their relative humanity is stressed further by the sub-plot which is eventually to provide the story's crowning moment of horror. In stories like 'The Dunwich Horror' and 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', human beings are compared and contrasted with horrifying hybrid entities whose combination of human attributes and ones radically alien produces revulsion. In 'The Shadow out of Time', however, the alien is split down the middle. The Great Race have their own incomprehensible Other, functioning as a source of horror and vague threat, and throwing their own relative "humanity" into sharp relief. The city Peaslee sees in his dreams, though vastly imposing in its own right, is in parts dominated by a collection of 'vast dark windowless ruins from which the Great Race shrank in curious fear'.<sup>228</sup> Peaslee struggles to determine the source of this fear, since the ruins are 'the one subject lying altogether under

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<sup>225</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Shadow out of Time', p. 363.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

a taboo among the Great Race'.<sup>229</sup> The rest of his recollections may be '[imperfect] and fragmentary', but this subject is 'still more bafflingly shrouded'.<sup>230</sup> Eventually, he comes to understand that the elder ruins are remnants of one of the 'mighty basalt cities of windowless towers' built by the species that preceded the Great Race in its dominance of Earth.<sup>231</sup> These 'Elder Things' are 'utterly alien', having come 'through space from immeasurably distant universes', and dangerous.<sup>232</sup> We learn that they 'preyed horribly upon the beings they found' when they first arrived, and that their occasional forays into the cities of the Great Race are marked by 'irruptions of a particularly hideous character'.<sup>233</sup> Their Otherness is both physical and psychological. They are 'only partly material—as we understand matter',<sup>234</sup> and possess a 'type of consciousness and media of perception [differing] wholly from those of terrestrial organisms'.<sup>235</sup> Incomprehensible even to the Great Race, who have questioned members of every other civilisation in the solar system, their minds are 'of such texture that no exchange with them [can] be effected'.<sup>236</sup> The qualities of abjected racial Other and of abhuman survivals, found in the Deep Ones and Little People of Lovecraft's earlier stories, and Machen's tales of pre-human survivals, are here attributed to the Elder Things. Their physical bodies can no more be pinned down than their minds: they are 'half-polypous',<sup>237</sup> and their bodies possess a 'monstrous *plasticity*',<sup>238</sup> that calls to mind the fluctuating body of Helen Vaughan at the climax of Machen's 'The Great God Pan'.<sup>239</sup> Peaslee, encountering them at the end of the story, experiences them as 'viscous, sentient darkness' (the racialised overtones are surely inescapable) and as a 'pandaemoniac vortex of loathsome

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 365. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>239</sup> Arthur Machen, 'The Great God Pan', in *The Great God Pan* (1890, revised 1894; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 1-76 (pp. 69-70).

sound and utter, materially tangible blackness’.<sup>240</sup>

The Great Race are able to subdue the Elder Things on their arrival, and they take refuge in ‘those caverns of inner earth which they had already joined to their abodes and begun to inhabit’,<sup>241</sup> just like Machen’s subterranean Little People—who, we should remember, are based upon contemporary theories positing the survival of a pre-human race of “Turanian dwarves” who had fled into their underground dwellings to escape the invading Celts. Fear of invasion or overrunning by the abject Other is here, too; although any attack on the Great Race by the Elder Things would be ‘a matter of vengeance rather than an attempt to reoccupy the outer world’,<sup>242</sup> the Great Race fear their ‘growing strong and numerous in the inner world’.<sup>243</sup> Most importantly, however, we are led to believe that it is some kind of attack by the Elder Things that will eventually lead the Great Race to abandon its city, ‘[sending] its keener minds ahead en masse in time’.<sup>244</sup> Despite the Great Race’s advance in the fields of technology and warfare, the Elder Things will be strong enough to force them to run—and Peaslee, after his encounter in the Great Race’s ruined city, speculates that they might yet be ‘a lingering, lurking menace’.<sup>245</sup>

The existence of the Elder Things reinforces the identification of the Great Race with humanity, and allows the narrative of invading threat from an abhuman Other to be played out at one remove. We might even read ‘The Shadow out of Time’ as offering a reassuring iteration of this narrative, one that reinscribes the superiority of the “human”. The Great Race, after all, survive despite being forced to

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<sup>240</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow out of Time’, p. 393.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.



abandon their city; they travel forward in time, taking for themselves the bodies of ‘the hardy coleopterous species immediately following mankind’, and leaving their original occupants to die in their stead.<sup>246</sup> Despite the power and numerousness of the Elder Things, the Great Race, by virtue of that which makes them most “human”—their knowledge and technological knowhow—are able to escape them. The following passage from Galton, in which he predicts the inevitable survival of the most “civilised”, comes to mind:

We may reckon upon a time when the advent of civilisation, which is now sparse and feeble and far more superficial than it is vaunted to be, shall overspread the globe. Ultimately it is sure to do so, because civilisation is the necessary fruit of high intelligence when found in a social animal, and there is no plainer lesson to be read off the face of Nature than that the result of the operation of her laws is to invoke intelligence in connexion with sociability. Intelligence is as much an advantage to an animal as physical strength or any other natural gift, and therefore, out of two varieties of any race of animal who are equally endowed in other respects, the most intelligent variety is sure to prevail in the battle of life. Similarly, among intelligent animals, the most social race is sure to prevail, other qualities being equal.<sup>247</sup>

Here, however, lies perhaps the most challenging aspect of the identification the story asks us to make with the Great Race—one which invokes Richter’s ‘regulative biopolitics’.<sup>248</sup> The ethically questionable aspects of mind-casting have been touched upon earlier in Peaslee’s account, where he mentions a separate class of captive mind encountered in the city of the Great Race. These, he tells us,

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>247</sup> Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, p. 325.

<sup>248</sup> Richter, p. 175.

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the dying *permanent* exiles, whose bodies in the future had been seized by keen-minded members of the Great Race who, faced with death, sought to escape mental extinction[...]

This fate was least horrible when the captive mind was also of the Great Race—a not infrequent occurrence, since in all its periods that race was intensely concerned with its own future. The number of dying permanent exiles of the Great Race was very slight—largely because of the tremendous penalties attached to displacements of future Great Race minds by the moribund.<sup>249</sup>

There is no such sanction, however, attached to the displacement of minds of other species. Indeed, the Great Race as a group seize the bodies of other races in order to ensure their own survival as a matter of course. Even the forms in which Peaslee encounters them, and in which they have built their great city, are not their original bodies; we are given no indication of what they looked like on their planet of origin, but are told that the original inhabitants of the cone-shaped bodies ‘were left to die in the horror of strange shapes’ on the Great Race’s world.<sup>250</sup> The ‘monstrous doom’ brought by the Elder Things will be inflicted upon the minds of the beetle-civilisation,<sup>251</sup> and when the Earth reaches the end of its life, the Great Race will seize the bodies of ‘the bulbous vegetable entities of Mercury’, leaving their owners to suffer the death throes of a ‘cold planet’ and ‘its horror-filled core’.<sup>252</sup> The Great Race, in their way, are just as ‘predatory’ as the Elder Things; their ability to survive is contingent not only upon their technological and intellectual advances, but their willingness to use other sentient species for their

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<sup>249</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow out of Time’, pp. 352-353.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

own ends, even killing them in the process. The pitiless hardness that renders Wells' Utopians uncanny is taken to its logical conclusion by Lovecraft. César Guardé Paz has suggested that, in the wake of the First World War, Lovecraft's extant prejudice against non-white races was joined by a strain of anti-Germanic sentiment based in the perceived brutality and barbarism of the 'German Teuton' when too far removed from the influence of Latin civilisation.<sup>253</sup> Although Lovecraft elsewhere celebrated (albeit in perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek fashion) the warlike behaviour of his imagined ancestors, Paz's suggestion seems congruent with Lovecraft's fictional idealisation of apparently settled, peaceful, highly cerebral societies, and may help us to account for the unsettling effect of the Great Race's ruthlessness and disregard for other "civilised" life-forms.

Furthermore, the Great Race's failure in sympathy towards other species exists in direct contradiction to some of the more optimistic comments made by Darwin about the *moral* perfectibility of humankind, opening up room for us to think about the contradictions present in the optimism for human "improvement" offered by eugenicists and other evolutionary thinkers. Spencer considered charity an evolutionary evil, 'seriously damaging to the health of the nation[...]both misplaced and cruel'.<sup>254</sup> For Spencer, 'organisms which die, thereby prove themselves in some respects unfitted for living': attempts to save them, then, are implicitly unnatural.<sup>255</sup> Darwin argues in the *Descent*, however, for the pivotal significance of morality—it is 'by far the most important' difference between 'man' and the lower animals<sup>256</sup>—and for the extension of sympathies 'to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals' as the marker of highly-

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<sup>253</sup> Paz, pp. 22-23.

<sup>254</sup> Richardson, p. 60.

<sup>255</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, p. 445.

<sup>256</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 97.

developed social instincts—the source of the moral sense.<sup>257</sup> Indifference to ‘the sufferings of strangers’, the failure to extend the social instincts beyond the immediate community, is, rather, a marker of savagery.<sup>258</sup> To ‘check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason’ would cause ‘deterioration in the noblest part of our nature’.<sup>259</sup> Even Pearson, arguing for caution in the matter of charity, is unable to call for ‘less human sympathy, for more limited charity, and for sterner treatment of the weak’, and acknowledges the ‘developed[...]ethical feelings’ of “civilised” humans as ‘one of the chief factors of national fitness’.<sup>260</sup>

It is possible to argue that this failure on the part of the Great Race is not a mark of backsliding, for Darwin suggests that the moral sense developed by other species would differ greatly from those of humans, even going so far as to speculate on what the moral imperatives of a society of people who existed and reproduced in the same fashion as bees might be.<sup>261</sup> We might, however, also read it in the light of Darwin’s comment, with regard to human selection of animals and plants, that ‘if man goes on selecting, and thus augmenting, any peculiarity, he will almost certainly unconsciously modify other parts of the structure, owing to the mysterious laws of the correlation of growth’.<sup>262</sup> In ‘augmenting’ their own intellectual and survival abilities, the Great Race have—perhaps unwittingly—diminished their capacity for sympathy. Given the extent to which Lovecraft’s Great Race resemble his ideal form of humanity, it is difficult to read this absence of sympathy as fitting entirely comfortably into a vision of perfected humankind. It may not quite represent a reversion to the morality of “savages”, but it suggests an otherness that questions the humanity of these human-analogues. The members of the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-118.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>260</sup> Pearson, *Scope and Importance to the State*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>261</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 99.

<sup>262</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, p. 75. See also p. 134.

Great Race are reliant, too, upon the existence of these other races for them to take over; in a sense, they are highly-evolved parasites. Despite their having developed a society that nurtures reason and curiosity, they are not free from ruthless instinct, or from the need to compete for survival. Their consciousness of their own superiority has done nothing to lift them outside of this cycle; indeed, the fact that they punish those who displace other Great Race minds, but not those who steal the bodies of other sentient beings, suggests that it is this very sense of superiority that has led them to commit repeated genocides. Predatory instinct is still present in the Great Race, albeit in a form modified by their technological advances; it is, in fact, perhaps at the very heart of their ability to adapt and survive.

‘The Shadow out of Time’ is perhaps Lovecraft’s most concise and focused evocation of the theme. No discussion of his fictional alien civilisations, however, would be complete without a consideration of his 1936 novella, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’. More obviously a direct descendent of ‘The Nameless City’ than ‘The Shadow out of Time’, it focuses upon the discovery of a vast, abandoned prehistoric city by the members of a scientific expedition to Antarctica. Lovecraft had been ‘an ardent student of the Antarctic’ since the age of ten, and had followed the Borchgrevink, Scott, Amundsen, and Byrd expeditions avidly.<sup>263</sup> That Lovecraft chose the frozen continent as the setting for his ideal alien civilisation, however, perhaps owes as much to the popular imaginary space occupied by Antarctica as to personal obsession. On the one hand, the continent was home to important fossil discoveries supporting the previous existence of a great southern continent, and was itself a kind of surviving fossil.<sup>264</sup> Tom Griffiths, in *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*, writes that ‘[the] primitive lurked in the wastes of Antarctica for Edwardian explorers’: for them, it was a remnant of

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<sup>263</sup> S. T. Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996), pp. 47-48, pp. 490-491.

<sup>264</sup> Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 76.

‘[the] world in the deep past of the Pleistocene’.<sup>265</sup> Byrd was even reported to believe that the continent might ‘harbour[...]new forms of life, perhaps even an undiscovered people’—a surviving prehistoric race like those posited in Machen’s work, or a lost civilisation in the mould of *Erewhon* or *The Coming Race*.<sup>266</sup> Equally, though, it could represent a ‘bleak future’, a planet ‘spinning cold in space’.<sup>267</sup> The ‘geological sense of time’ felt so acutely in the Antarctic reminded the Australian explorer Douglas Mawson ‘of the inevitability of extinctions and of the passing on of the dominance of the Earth, from species to species and perhaps from race to race’.<sup>268</sup> The frozen landscape encouraged a cognisance of the deep past that necessarily entailed an awareness of the far future. It could serve as a warning—Chris Baldick has pointed to the humbling of ‘[the] exertion of the human will (specifically, of the British will)’ in the death of Scott’s Antarctic team, as well as in the sinking of the Titanic, another disaster inflicted by ice.<sup>269</sup> Antarctica’s hardships might also, however, make it an ‘evolutionary force’.<sup>270</sup> Cold climates were thought to exert an ‘enlivening influence’ upon the races who inhabited them, a theory that the white supremacist Lovecraft would almost certainly have embraced.<sup>271</sup> The Antarctic, then, became a proving ground, a ‘brutal test of racial vigour’<sup>272</sup> as well as a challenging last frontier for declining empires seeking to preserve their preeminence.<sup>273</sup> Scientific research under these circumstances became ‘heroic’, a ‘higher purpose’,<sup>274</sup> and the survival of written records was paramount, essential for ‘dignity and[...]history’.<sup>275</sup> Rather than falling by the wayside in the struggle with the elements, these hallmarks of “civilised” humanity took on singular importance. Referring to

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 222, p. 172.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>269</sup> Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 173.

<sup>270</sup> Griffiths, p. 202.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-13.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

the rise of astronomy in Antarctica from the mid-twentieth century, Griffiths writes that it ‘became a place from which to intellectually encompass the planet and a privileged human window on the universe’.<sup>276</sup> Substitute “past” for ‘universe’, and explorers and interested amateurs of Lovecraft’s day might well have felt the same. Retaining “human” distinctiveness in the hostile environment might be rewarded by a “superhuman” view of the world. The “human” might consciously transform itself into something more than human. In Antarctica, Griffiths writes, ‘[the] present is always caught in the act, always in the process of becoming, sometimes consciously and precipitately so’.<sup>277</sup> Certainly, this seems to have been true of Lovecraft’s Old Ones, with their acute consciousness of history; it might well also be said of their shoggoth slaves, who slowly learn to control their physical transformations. The possibility for self-guided transformation, then, may also be available to humans.

Told in the first person by the expedition leader, Professor William Dyer of Miskatonic University, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ recounts their discovery of a group of large, star-headed, barrel-shaped fossils—some damaged, others apparently whole—which they find impossible to classify. Shortly after the discovery, the group who have discovered the fossils lose touch with the main body of the expedition. On investigation, Dyer and his men discover their camp in ruins, most of the men and dogs dead, and the damaged fossils buried in what appear to be snow graves. They blame a missing member of the party for the murders, concluding that he must have fallen victim to madness. However, when Dyer and a graduate student called Danforth make an investigative plane trip over a nearby mountain range, they discover a vast, abandoned ancient city whose walls are covered in murals that tell the story of its builders. The race who inhabited it, and of which the intact star-headed ‘fossils’, preserved alive in the polar ice, are the sole survivors—referred to as the Old Ones—were a vast and advanced

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

civilisation, and are responsible for the creation of all modern life on Earth. Their great feats of building and engineering were enabled by their use of artificially created protoplasmic masses known as ‘shoggoths’, essentially a slave race bred to do the heavy work required by the Old Ones’ civilisation—but one which became increasingly difficult to control. The murals indicate that the Old Ones feared another, greater evil, located beyond a range of ‘horrible westward mountains’, and never explicitly shown.<sup>278</sup> Eventually, their influence in the rest of the world waning, they are shown retreating to the Antarctic city, and finally to the subterranean caverns below it.

Dyer cannot help but acknowledge the Old Ones’ scientific and intellectual curiosity, and concludes that, despite their having killed several of his colleagues, they are not merely monstrosities but ‘men’.<sup>279</sup> The original inhabitants of the city, however, are no more. During the intervening aeons, their slaves have rebelled, and the subterranean caverns are home not to any surviving Old Ones, but to the vast and destructive shoggoths. There is a suggestion, too, that the further horror beyond the mountains—perhaps identifiable with the Elder Things of ‘The Shadow out of Time’; certainly, at any rate, something older and more alien than the Old Ones themselves—survives. A glimpse of it caught by Danforth as he and Dyer flee the shoggoth-infested city drives him to madness.

It should be noted that, while Lake, the biologist who initially examines the specimens, says that they remind him of ‘certain monsters of primal myth, especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon*’,<sup>280</sup> and briefly refers to them as ‘The Elder Ones’,<sup>281</sup> they should not be confused with the Elder Things of ‘The Shadow out of Time’. The Great Race, we should remember, are unable to effect mind-transfer

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<sup>278</sup> Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, p. 309.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.



with the Elder Things; the Old Ones, meanwhile, are referred to separately, in a passage which makes it clear that the Great Race *are* able to transfer their minds. ‘Of earthly minds’ in their city, we are told, ‘there were some from the winged, star-headed, half-vegetable race of palaeogeon Antarctica’.<sup>282</sup> For this reason, I refer to them solely as the Old Ones; any reference in this chapter to the Elder Things should be read as referring to the subterranean horrors of ‘The Shadow out of Time’.

Like ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’ and ‘The Shadow out of Time’, the story establishes the scientific curiosity of educated humans, and specifically of its protagonists, early on. They are part of a scientific expedition from the fictional Miskatonic University, and the tale begins with a detailed description of their intentions, personnel, and equipment.<sup>283</sup> Dyer asserts again and again the power of ‘scientific zeal and adventurousness’,<sup>284</sup> describing the ways in which, even after the disaster at Lake’s camp, the ‘scientific and adventurous souls’ of the party and ‘the lure of the unplumbed’ led them to continue their investigations.<sup>285</sup> Indeed, he gives as his reason for writing the account the fact that ‘human curiosity is undying’, recognising the inevitability of other scientists wishing to continue the abortive expedition’s work and attempting to warn them of what they may uncover.<sup>286</sup> Scientific curiosity, then, is immediately established as innately human, although not without its risks. The vastness of the polar waste itself, however, as well as that of the time-scale involved, implies something greater than the human mind is able to cope with. Early on in Dyer’s account, we are told that ‘Lake[...]spoke of the ineffable majesty of the whole scene, and the queer state of his sensations at being in the lee of vast silent pinnacles whose ranks shot up like a wall reaching the sky at the world’s rim’.<sup>287</sup> There is,

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<sup>282</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow out of Time’, p. 359.

<sup>283</sup> Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, pp. 246-248.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291, p. 325.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

certainly, a sense of awe here, Dyer's 'lure of the unplumbed' making itself felt in the strangeness and enormity of the Antarctic landscape. The 'queer state' of Lake's sensations, though, tells us that there is something disturbing in it, too, and Dyer's account of his own experiences later on reinforce this sense of the uncanny. The flight that leads to his and Danforth's discovery of the abandoned city is, we learn, 'burned into [Dyer's] recollection because of its crucial position in [his] life. It marked [his] loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature's laws'.<sup>288</sup> Their first glimpse of the mountain range itself is even more unsettling:

In the whole spectacle there was a persistent, pervasive hint of stupendous secrecy and potential revelation; as if these stark, nightmare spires marked the pylons of a frightful gateway into forbidden spheres of dream, and complex gulfs of remote time, space, and ultra-dimensionality. I could not help feeling that they were evil things—mountains of madness whose farther slopes looked out over some accursed ultimate abyss. That seething, half-luminous cloud-background held ineffable suggestions of a vague, ethereal *beyondness* far more than terrestrially spatial; and gave appalling reminders of the utter remoteness, separateness, desolation, and aeon-long death of this untrodden and unfathomed austral world.<sup>289</sup>

The vagueness of the description, with its allusions to 'dream' and to the 'ethereal', suggest the difficulties Dyer's mind is experiencing in adjusting to the changes in world-view occasioned by Lake's discovery, and he admits his discomfort with the idea of intelligent life having existed on Earth

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., pp. 269-270. (Emphasis in original.)

before humanity. He does not, he tells us, ‘relish the proximity of a world that had ever bred such ambiguous and Archaean monstrosities as those Lake had[...]mentioned’.<sup>290</sup> The scene found at Lake’s camp, meanwhile, may look ‘like madness’,<sup>291</sup> but there are indications that some of the disruption must have been the work of non-human forces. Dyer notes ‘objects including scientific instruments, aëroplanes, and machinery both at the camp and at the boring, whose parts had been loosened, moved, or otherwise tampered with by winds that must have harboured singular curiosity and investigativeness’,<sup>292</sup> effectively admitting to the reader that his explanation is unsatisfactory. Later on in the tale, relating the details that suggest to him the Old Ones’ sentience and scientific curiosity, he says as much:

The principal things I have been keeping back relate to the bodies, and to certain subtle points which may or may not lend a hideous and incredible kind of rationale to the apparent chaos. At the time I tried to keep the men’s minds off those points; for it was so much simpler—so much more normal—to lay everything to an outbreak of madness on the part of some of Lake’s party.<sup>293</sup>

Just as human scientific curiosity is established and lauded, the question of its limits is raised. Dyer’s party, in attempting to explore some of the remotest parts of the globe, exemplify the traits of the educated, civilised, fully “human” being. What they discover, however, defies comprehension; their failure (or unwillingness) to grasp what is happening illustrates the gaps in human capability, even where those traits seen as most representative of humanity are concerned. Dyer and his team are

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

human, then—but there is still room for them to be more so. The very existence of the deficit raises the possibility of evolution and development beyond what is currently regarded as human.

This, naturally, is exactly what we see in Lovecraft’s depiction of the Old Ones and their society. Many of the features of the Great Race are present here, too. Indeed, Lovecraft never shies away from recycling an effective detail, and so some distinctive characteristics of the Great Race’s civilisation make their first appearance here. The ‘titanic blocks’ of which the city is built,<sup>294</sup> the arches used in its construction,<sup>295</sup> the ‘curious weapons’ with which they are initially able to subdue the shoggoths,<sup>296</sup> the absence of ‘the family phase of mammal life’ in their society,<sup>297</sup> their ‘abnormal historic-mindedness’<sup>298</sup>—even their use of hinged books<sup>299</sup>—are re-used, in various forms, in ‘The Shadow out of Time’. It is, however, still worth noting some of the aspects of the Old Ones’ physical, intellectual, and social development that impress themselves upon Dyer and his companions.

The initial discovery of the specimens by Lake’s party is marked by comments upon their high level of development relative to other life-forms of their period. That they are ‘evolved and specialised’, according to Lake’s notes, indicates ‘that earth has seen whole cycle or cycles of organic life before known one that begins with Archaeozoic cells’.<sup>300</sup> At this point, the party are mainly concerned with the prestige and media attention that their discovery is likely to garner; however, as Lake’s examination of the specimens continues, their complexity becomes startling in and of itself. References

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

to ‘incredibly advanced evolution’ recur,<sup>301</sup> and we learn that the specimen’s ‘nervous system [is] so complex and highly developed as to leave Lake aghast’.<sup>302</sup> It has a ‘surprisingly advanced’ brain, and—like the Great Race—more than five senses, making it ‘a creature of keen sensitiveness and delicately differentiated functions’.<sup>303</sup> Their history, as discovered by Dyer and Danforth in their city, illustrates further their physical nature—one which seems to have made them well-fitted for survival and dominance in their era. Their tentacles are ‘infinitely delicate, flexible, strong, and accurate in muscular-nervous coördination; ensuring the utmost skill and dexterity in artistic and all other manual operations’, and they possess a ‘prodigious toughness and longevity’, maturing quickly, and dying only when killed by violent means.<sup>304</sup> They are able to fly through space, to survive in extreme temperatures, and to derive nourishment from almost any kind of matter; during their journey to earth, they even managed, by using ‘certain chemicals’, to remove their need for food and respiration.<sup>305</sup> They have ‘excessively vast capacities for speed’ by land, water and air.<sup>306</sup>

Their physical complexity and durability, then, indicates that they are highly evolved beings—but it is their intellectual and social development which foregrounds their similarity to human beings, and to the Utopians who surpass them in texts like Wells’s. The Old Ones’ sentience is hinted at in one of the earliest comments Lake makes on discovering the fossil cache in which they have been preserved. It is not the bodies of the Old Ones themselves that give this clue, but those of the other prehistoric animals found with them. ‘[Certain] skeletal fragments of large and marine saurian and primitive mammals’ are found featuring ‘singular local wounds or injuries to bony structure not attributable to any known

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., pp. 301-302.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

predatory or carnivorous animal of any period'.<sup>307</sup> These injuries—'straight, penetrant bores' and 'hacking incisions'—indicate the use of tools, immediately hinting that the Old Ones are closer to humans than to the animals whose remains surround them.<sup>308</sup> Also found in their vicinity is a puzzling artefact made from green soapstone, possessing a 'curious smoothness and regularity', and marked with 'tiny dots in regular patterns'.<sup>309</sup> Here, again, we see evidence of conscious craftsmanship, and of what will later be revealed as the Old Ones' system of writing.<sup>310</sup> These hints tell us that the Old Ones are, at least, of a similar level of development to early humans.

What Dyer and his party discover after the massacre at Lake's camp, however, implies a far higher level of development. The bodies of men and dogs left at the camp are 'incised and subtracted from in the most curious, cold-blooded, and inhuman fashion[...]as by a careful butcher', and there are 'carefully though oddly and inexpertly dissected' remains on the laboratory table.<sup>311</sup> Taken from the camp are 'anatomical instruments', as well as 'illustrated technical and scientific books, writing materials, electric torches and batteries, food and fuel, heating apparatus, spare tents, fur suits, and the like'.<sup>312</sup> Left behind, Dyer and his men find 'evidences of curious alien fumbling and experimentation around the planes and all other mechanical devices both at the camp and at the boring'.<sup>313</sup> The scientific curiosity of the Old Ones—and its similarity to that of Dyer's party, made evident in their use of the human explorers' equipment for experiments of their own—starts to become visible here, and in Dyer and Danforth's exploration of the city, it is developed further. The designs on their walls in places anticipate 'the latest findings of mathematics and astrophysics'; they make use of 'intricate devices

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., pp. 277-278.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

employing unknown principles of energy’; they possess a ‘scientific and mechanical knowledge far [surpassing] man’s today’.<sup>314</sup> Their artistic and architectural achievements, too, are considerable. The first glimpse Dyer and Danforth gain of their city inspires awe at the same time as fear:

For this place could be no ordinary city. It must have formed the primary nucleus and centre of some archaic and unbelievable chapter of earth’s history whose outward ramifications, recalled only dimly in the most obscure and distorted myths, had vanished utterly amidst the chaos of terrene convulsions long before any human race we know had shambled out of apedom. Here sprawled a palaeogean megalopolis compared with which the fabled Atlantis and Lemuria, Commoriom and Uzuldaroum, and Olathoë in the land of Lomar are recent things of today—not even of yesterday; a megalopolis ranking with such whispered pre-human blasphemies as Valusia, R’lyeh, Ib in the land of Mnar, and the Nameless City of Arabia Deserta.<sup>315</sup>

The technical expertise involved in its construction is emphasised, too: the ‘perfect’ cylinders and cubes which make it up, the ‘expert use of the principle of the arch’ made by its builders, and the similarities that some of its structures bear to ‘modern fortifications’ all suggest a formidable volume of mathematical and practical knowledge.<sup>316</sup> The wall murals illustrating the Old Ones’ history, meanwhile, evidence a technique that is ‘mature, accomplished, and aesthetically evolved to the highest degree of civilised mastery’, far surpassing any human sculpture that Dyer has ever seen.<sup>317</sup> Indeed, its complexity—encompassing ‘a profound use of mathematical principles’ and ‘an analytical

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., pp. 298-299.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

psychology beyond that of any known race of antiquity’—renders it so far advanced (or at least so utterly alien; there is little distinction made here between the two, blurring the boundaries of inhuman and ultra-human) that to compare it to human art is, according to Dyer, largely useless.<sup>318</sup> Moreover, Dyer suggests that, while he and Danforth are able to appreciate some of the skill that has gone into the production of the murals, they lack the necessary senses to do so fully. He senses that there are other ‘excellences[...]lurking beyond the reach of [their] perceptions’.<sup>319</sup> Nonetheless, the psychology of the species that has produced these artworks is not so alien as to render them incomprehensible: Dyer and Danforth find themselves profoundly moved by the images.<sup>320</sup> And—immediately after asserting that the style bears no resemblance to that of any human school of art—Dyer does, in fact, suggest an ‘analogue’: Futurism.<sup>321</sup> Their alienness is de-emphasised as it is pointed out; they are held up as a potential template for the future development of humanity, rather than as a species so very unlike us that to replicate their achievements would be impossible.

The details of their society that Dyer and Danforth are able to pick up add to this impression. It is interesting that, despite their scientific expertise, the Old Ones are not overtly reliant upon technology. They had, it is suggested, ‘passed through a stage of mechanised life’ before coming to earth, but found it to be ‘emotionally unsatisfying’, and abandoned it.<sup>322</sup> The dangerous dependency upon technology presented in anti-Utopian texts like *Brave New World* is hereby circumvented; the scenario here is much closer to that portrayed in *Men Like Gods*, with the mechanised stage corresponding to the industrial Age of Confusion, and the Utopian society utilising technology only where necessary. Their

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., pp. 294-295.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 299.



government is ‘complex and probably socialistic’,<sup>323</sup> a characteristic which—given Lovecraft’s leanings toward (an admittedly idiosyncratic) socialism at this point in his life—we can probably read as having been intended to reinforce the Utopian nature of the Old Ones’ civilisation.<sup>324</sup> As with the Great Race, their society is not structured around the family unit; rather, they live in large households based around ‘comfortable space-utility and[...]congenial mental association’.<sup>325</sup> Their society—egalitarian, scientifically advanced, and promoting intellectual congress—is, then, broadly similar to that of Old Ones, and of Wells’ Utopians and Lytton’s Vril-Ya.

Interestingly, there is no mention of eugenic principles being widely used by the Old Ones, and it is entirely possible that they reached their incredibly advanced stage of evolution on their home planet, before coming to Earth, by means of natural rather than artificial selection. This does not mean, however, that they have no means of directing the growth and development of living organisms; indeed, it is this capacity that perhaps places them most firmly at the top of the evolutionary ladder. In one of Lake’s earliest casual references to the Necronomicon, he compares them to ‘Elder Things [not to be confused with the sinister ‘Elder Things’ of ‘The Shadow out of Time’] supposed to have created all earth-life as jest or mistake’,<sup>326</sup> and the sculptures on their city walls bear out his comment. Later on, they are referred to as ‘the makers and enslavers’ of life on Earth,<sup>327</sup> and the murals indicate that they possessed the ability to create life (‘at first for food and later for other purposes’) long before arriving on Earth.<sup>328</sup> The life-forms currently inhabiting the planet are, in fact, byproducts of the Old Ones’ experiments, ‘suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come in conflict with the dominant

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>324</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, letter to C. L. Moore, October 1936, in Joshi and Schultz (eds.) *Lord of a Visible World*, pp. 316-320 (pp. 316-320), and letter to Kenneth Sterling, October 18, 1936, in Joshi and Schultz (eds.) *Lord of a Visible World*, pp. 320-324 (pp. 320-324).

<sup>325</sup> Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, p. 302.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

beings'.<sup>329</sup> The distant ancestors of human beings fall into this category, having been permitted to survive due to their usefulness as a food source and 'an amusing buffoon' to the Old Ones.<sup>330</sup> The Old Ones' status as creators—their ability to manipulate both organic life and the natural environment—renders them godlike, cementing their place one step above humanity. The impression is further reinforced when Lake, spotting the cube-shaped structures and surprisingly regular cave-mouths on the mountain range that provide the first sign of intelligent habitation, suggests that the natural structures seem to have been 'shaped to greater symmetry by some magic hand'.<sup>331</sup> Even after learning of the Old Ones' ability to shape life, however, Dyer's conviction of their essential similarity to—indeed, their identity with—humans does not waver. In perhaps the climactic passage of the text, he exclaims,

Poor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being. Nature had played a hellish jest on them—as it will on any others that human madness, callousness, or cruelty may hereafter drag up in that hideously dead or sleeping polar waste—and this was their tragic homecoming.

[...]poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? [...]Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!<sup>332</sup>

This conflation of humanity and godlike status again places the Old Ones as a possible template for the eventual evolution of humanity—perhaps an example of the heights to which human beings should aspire.

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., pp. 302-303.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Just as, in earlier tales of abhuman survival and degeneration, the pursuit of knowledge that characterises civilised humanity eventually leads to its downfall, it is the Old Ones' ability to manipulate nature that finally occasions theirs. The intended product of their attempts to create life was a slave class: the shoggoths. They—like the Elder Things—allow the anxieties around atavism and degeneration to be played out with the Old Ones standing in for “civilised” humanity. Having been created by the Old Ones, just like human beings, however, they also offer a possible alternative route for human evolution. Shoggoths are ‘multicellular protoplasmic masses capable of moulding their tissues into all sorts of temporary organs under hypnotic influence and thereby forming ideal slaves to performs the heavy work of the [Old Ones’] community’.<sup>333</sup> Initially virtually mindless, their appearance plays on fears of the atavistic and abject in ways that are by now very familiar. They are ‘shapeless entities composed of a viscous jelly which [looks] like an agglutination of bubbles’, with a ‘constantly shifting shape and volume’,<sup>334</sup> and may remind the reader variously of Yog-Sothoth and his Dunwich descendent, Helen Vaughan, shape-shifting in her dying moments, Francis Leicester, dissolving into a shapeless mass, or even half-human Jervase Cradock, whose body involuntarily produces tentacles under certain influences. Their form is unfixed and unstable; essentially, they are a kind of highly manipulable primordial slime. Indeed, Spencer’s description of a ‘Rhizopod’—one of the simplest of organisms, offered as an example of ‘life without organization’ might almost be a shoggoth in miniature:

From the outside of this creature, which has not even a limiting membrane, there are protruded numerous thread-like processes. Originating from any point of the surface, each

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

of these may contract again and disappear; or it may touch some fragment of nutriment, which it draws with it, when contracting, into the general mass—thus serving as hand and mouth; or it may come in contact with its fellow-processes at a distance from the body, and become confluent with them; or it may attach itself to an adjacent fixed object, and help by its contraction to draw the body into a new position. In brief, this structureless speck of animated jelly is at once all stomach, all skin, all mouth, all limb, and doubtless, too, all lung.<sup>335</sup>

They are repulsive to the senses, their smell reminding Dyer and Danforth of ‘decaying organisms and perhaps unknown subterrene fungi’.<sup>336</sup> Corridors through which they have passed are left ‘polished and almost glistening’, suggesting that they resemble enormous slugs or snails, other organisms far less complex and highly developed than their makers.<sup>337</sup> They are destructive, removing the heads of their victims via ‘some hellish tearing or suction’, and leaving them coated in slime.<sup>338</sup> Their very existence is horrifying enough that Dyer asserts, ‘shoggoths and their work ought not to be seen by human beings or portrayed by any beings’, and wonders at the ‘madness’ that led the Old Ones to create them.<sup>339</sup>

More threatening still, however, is their ability to imitate their masters. The pre-human foreshadowings of Machen’s Little People, the suggestion of continuity between human and pre- or abhuman suggested by degeneration narratives, the half-human nature of beings like Helen Vaughan and Wilbur

Whateley—these creatures function as a source of horror in part because they suggest a continuity

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<sup>335</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, I, p. 156.

<sup>336</sup> Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, p. 326.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 329-330.

between the human and the abhuman, and therefore the possibility of the Other existing within the human self. The shoggoths, born of the Old Ones' ingenuity, eventually develop the ability to form 'organs of sight, hearing, and speech in imitation of their masters', and to '[mimic] their voices'.<sup>340</sup> As well as these, they form 'a semi-stable brain', and a 'stubborn volition' which '[echoes] the will of the Old Ones without always obeying it'.<sup>341</sup> It is, we are to believe, this intelligence and ability to mimic their creators that eventually leads to their triumph, overwhelming and wiping out the Old Ones' civilisation and surviving until Dyer's day in the subterranean abyss below the city. By the time of the expedition, they have even developed the ability to imitate the Old Ones' writing and sculpture, albeit in uncanny, parodic fashion. The following passage, in which Dyer and Danforth study some bas-reliefs which context will later reveal to be the work of shoggoths, illustrates this quite clearly:

Upon resuming our direct progress we cast a beam of torchlight over the tunnel walls—and stopped short in amazement at the supremely radical change which had come over the carvings in this part of the passage. We realised, of course, the great decadence of the Old Ones' sculpture at the time of the tunnelling; and had indeed noticed the inferior workmanship of the arabesques in the stretches behind us. But now, in this deeper section beyond the cavern, there was a sudden difference wholly transcending explanation—a difference in basic nature as well as in mere quality, and involving so profound and calamitous a degradation of skill that nothing in the hitherto observed rate of decline could have led one to expect it.

[...]Danforth had the idea that it was a second carving—a sort of palimpsest formed after the obliteration of a previous design. In nature it was wholly decorative and conventional;

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., p. 304, p. 311.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

and consisted of crude spirals and angles roughly following the quintile mathematical tradition of the Old Ones, yet seeming more like a parody than a perpetuation of that tradition. We could not get it out of our minds that some subtly but profoundly alien element had been added to the aesthetic feeling behind the technique—an alien element, Danforth guessed, that was responsible for the manifestly laborious substitution. It was like, yet disturbingly unlike, what we had come to recognise at the Old Ones' art; and I was persistently reminded of such hybrid things as the ungainly Palmyrene sculptures fashioned in the Roman manner.<sup>342</sup>

As well as literally rewriting the Old Ones' history—illustrating the absence of that 'historic-mindedness' that makes the Old Ones singularly comprehensible to Dyer and Danforth—the 'difference in nature' that the sculptures evidence, the 'alien element' which our human protagonists find so difficult to pinpoint, illustrates the shoggoths' radical alterity. The bas-reliefs made by the Old Ones tell a coherent narrative, and also affect human observers on an emotional level, illustrating the substantial degree of similarity between Old Ones and humans and emphasising that—for the purposes of the story, and certainly in comparison to their monstrous creations—the Old Ones are, despite their alien physiology, 'men'. That the shoggoths are so different in psychology from their creators also illustrates their inhumanity, and links their ability to imitate the Old Ones to the fear of abhuman or hybrid beings passing unnoticed so important in stories like 'The Great God Pan' and 'The Dunwich Horror'. And here, is it the abject Other that triumphs—perhaps, in part, because of its alien psychology and concomitant lack of a moral or intellectual framework. The shoggoths, though intelligent enough to resist the Old Ones' control, seem to lack scientific curiosity or a sense of history, destroying the Old Ones outright instead of studying them. Here, once again, fears of "civilised"

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., pp. 326-327.

humanity being overwhelmed by an abject Other, apparently inferior but in fact more appropriately fitted for survival, are given vent. In some ways, then, Lovecraft is telling the same story he has always done: that of the swallowing-up of civilised humanity by the abhuman, and—more worryingly—that of the survival of the abhuman Other within the human. For if the shoggoths, sprung from the same source as human beings—the life-creating experiments of the Old Ones—are our distant siblings, then perhaps the form of humanity best fitted to survive in a hostile universe would resemble them more closely than their (and our) alien progenitors.

Given the context of Lovecraft's other fiction, his known views, and the identification of shoggoths as a slave race, it would be difficult to miss the the reactionary implications of this section of the narrative. Effectively, while trying to imagine a human or posthuman future, Lovecraft falls back into familiar tropes, asserting the superiority of a particular (educated, scientifically-minded, "civilised") section of humanity and the importance of protecting it from displacement by other, less desirable sectors of society. Certainly, the similarities I drew between Lovecraft's depictions of immigrants in his personal correspondence and the Deep Ones in 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' seem also to apply to the shoggoths; furthermore, the repeated mention made of the shoggoths' having been created to perform manual labour suggests that a degree of class prejudice is at work here. In attempting to imagine beyond the human, 'At the Mountains of Madness' is, perhaps, an ambitious intellectual failure. It is, however, one of Lovecraft's most highly-regarded pieces of work,<sup>343</sup> and one which begins to gesture at a less horrific version of the end of anthropocentrism. Although the shoggoth narrative does revert to Lovecraft's familiar, reactionary narrative of racialised anxiety, it is the passage in which Dyer asserts' the Old Ones' essential humanity—quoted at some length above—rather than the horrific appearance

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<sup>343</sup> See, for example, China Miéville, 'Introduction', in H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), pp. xi-xxv (p. xii, p. xxiv), and Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, p. 493.

of the shoggoth or the nebulous final horror hinted at by Danforth as they flee the city that provides the novella's climactic moment.

Chia Yi Lee has argued that Danforth's vision does in fact function as the tale's climactic horror, reintroducing a sense of ineffable terror into what would otherwise be a straightforward science fiction narrative.<sup>344</sup> This sense of confrontation with radical alterity, Lee suggests, is absent from the encounter with the Old Ones and even the shoggoths due to the possibility of their being absorbed within a comprehensible scientific narrative. This final horror, on the other hand, 'lies not only beyond the rim of human comprehension, but even beyond the comprehension of all the cosmic others that, thrown together, have already been made known'.<sup>345</sup> In support of this claim, Yee raises the bizarreness of Danforth's ravings after his glimpse of the final horror, and contrasts them with the earlier comparison of the shoggoth to a subway train. The expression of horror elicited by the sight of the shoggoth is still comprehensible in human terms; it manifests itself as a list of subway stations. Danforth's exclamations, on the other hand, are 'fragments[...]revolving around that which is in abstentia [*sic*]'.<sup>346</sup> Leaving aside that the shoggoth-train comparison may signal a making-alien of technology as easily (or at the same time) as a rendering of the abhuman in human terms, let us examine the phrases used by Danforth in a little more detail. While some of these details do, indeed, suggest spatial distance and an attempt to render what Lee calls a 'horror[...]too radical to rationalize and explicate'<sup>347</sup> ('the carven rim', 'the moon-ladder', and 'the colour out of space', a reference to the story that represents perhaps Lovecraft's most successful attempt to depict the utterly alien), others—'the proto-shoggoths' (inviting a connection with horrors already depicted and explained), 'the primal

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<sup>344</sup> Chia Yi Lee, 'On *At the Mountains of Madness*—Enveloping the Cosmic Horror', *EurAmerica*, 39:1 (2009), 1-27 (pp. 20-23).

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.



white jelly’, and ‘the original, the eternal, the undying’—call to mind an already-familiar notion of the pre-human abject. This is not to say that Lovecraft is not attempting, as Lee suggests, to reintroduce a horrific Other into his tale, but simply that to depict what Lee calls ‘the horror beyond horrors as an Other beyond the other’ is ultimately impossible.<sup>348</sup> Lovecraft once more splits the alien down the middle, into its super “human” (capable of travelling vast distances and working with ideas beyond the ken of human mathematics; preternaturally long-lived) and abhuman (‘primal’, formless, shoggoth-like) components.

Perhaps the most important aspect of ‘At the Mountains of Madness’—and it is, arguably, an attribute that also appears in ‘The Shadow out of Time’—is not what it ends up doing, but what it attempts to do, even if it succeeds only partially. The shoggoths remain horrifying all along. The Old Ones, meanwhile, start out as alien horrors, monstrous and incomprehensible.<sup>349</sup> Their physiology, part animal and part vegetable, part amphibious and part aerial, appears as chaotically hybrid as that of Wilbur Whateley or the Mi-Go.<sup>350</sup> The awe that Dyer and Danforth experience upon first seeing their city is tempered with horror, and even their ability to create life is ‘blasphemous’, rendering their godlike status frightening as well as admirable.<sup>351</sup> Their scientific curiosity, however, their psychological comprehensibility, and their commitment to an egalitarian society built on the valuing of intellectual endeavour, are enough to make them ‘men’. As well as drawing our attention to the survival of the abhuman within the “human”, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ opens up a space for the human within the posthuman. We may never be able to escape our abhuman heredity—but our posthuman descendants will be no more able to escape us.

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>349</sup> Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, pp. 261-262, p. 265.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

### Conclusion: Survivals (Redux), or, Apocalypse Never

Evolutionary theory implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp. Instead of man, emptiness—or the empire of molluscs. There was no way back to a previous paradise: the primordial was comfortless. Instead of fixed and perfect species, it showed forms in flux, and the earth in constant motion, drawing continents apart. This consciousness of the fluent, of the physical world as endless onward process, extended to an often pained awareness of human beings as slight elements within unstoppable motion and transformation. Nostalgia was disallowed, since no unrecapturable perfection preceded man's history. Ascent was also flight—a flight from the primitive and the barbaric which could never quite be left behind.<sup>1</sup>

Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*

The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other; the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self. To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many.<sup>2</sup>

Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s'

It has been my project here to show that what is commonly referred to as the “weird tale” has much in

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 7-45 (p. 35).

common with other literature after evolutionary theory, insofar as it engages consciously and perhaps obsessively with the theory of evolution, and particularly with its implications for “human” identity. The weird tale has perhaps no exclusively distinguishing characteristic; nonetheless, drawing upon the work of Gillian Beer and upon Lovecraft’s critical essays, we may perhaps say that it exists in the moment between hypothesis and confirmation. Indeed, it relies upon that moment for its evocation of fear—a fear that, like Kristeva’s abjection, throws the “human” subject back into the body and all the problematic implications thereof. The “weird moment” that I discussed earlier relies upon the possibility of a knowledge of the self as other which may in itself open up new uncertainties. The potential extension of human faculties for knowing the world leads to knowledge, but not to a telos of *complete* knowledge; rather, it always necessitates further questions. In Beer’s words, evolutionary theory does not ‘allow either interruption or conclusion’.<sup>3</sup>

Often, the weird tale’s treatment of evolutionary theory has been reactionary. The possibility of pre-human survivals evokes abhorrence, and the racialising of portrayals of such survivals partakes of a colonial discourse that imposes the temporal axis of evolution onto the geographical axis of colonisation, so that colonised peoples come to be viewed as “primitives”, anachronisms, or “missing links”. Both scientific and fictional narratives of degeneration imply the uneasy proximity of the “human” to its animal origins, but also that some humans are closer than others, as the racialising of Helen Vaughan in ‘The Great God Pan’ clearly demonstrates. Anxieties around the dwindling of colonial power, too, manifest themselves in anxieties around racial or national fitness. The fears surrounding “miscegenation” and hybridity, as discussed at some length in my examination of ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, are explicitly racialised and tied to anti-immigration sentiment, as well as to the principles of the eugenics movement. Even those narratives that most orient themselves toward the

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<sup>3</sup> Beer, p. 11.

future—Lovecraft’s Utopian imaginings in ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ and ‘The Shadow Out of Time’—draw heavily upon eugenic principles. In this way, both Machen’s and Lovecraft’s stories are embedded in what Richter calls ‘the lethal biopolitics of the twentieth century’: a web of ‘unsavoury affinities’ that ‘cannot be simply ignored’.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, I do not wish to characterise the conservative Machen or the racist Lovecraft as progressives (in the current sense of the term). As I have already mentioned with regard to Paul Buhle, such attempts at whitewashing are dishonest, and, in any case, exist in direct contradiction to what we read at the most obvious surface level of their texts. I am not, however, wedded like Joshi to author-intentionalist criticism, and I would like to suggest, by way of conclusion, that the provisional nature of the weird moment encourages—perhaps even requires—readings that exist in tension with one another. To say that the possibility of progress implies the possibility of degeneration and vice versa is not enough. That evolutionary change is non-teleological means that neither possibility is *only* itself. Deteriorating complexity and adaptive change may be the same thing: progress may also be degeneration. Their boundaries are permeable, as are those of the “human” self. This self is not a unity or a discrete whole; it never has been; it never can be. Ultimately (or, rather, at this moment in a process without ultimate endpoint), new ways of inhabiting this self, with its shifting boundaries, are required. I would like to touch here upon possible readings of some weird texts that allow for these new ways of existing—ways that appear startlingly prefigurative of Donna Haraway’s assertions, in her seminal posthumanist essay, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’, that ‘a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid[...]of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints’.<sup>5</sup> Haraway’s essay, of course, comes from a rather different position within structures of

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Richter, *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction, 1859-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, p. 13. I would suggest that it is wrongheaded, in the light of statements like this one, to read Haraway’s essay as an example of the ‘antirealism’ condemned by Carroll. Her argument against essentialist tendencies in mainstream feminism

binary division and domination, as well as within history, to the fictions of Lovecraft and Machen. Its explicit concern is the future (or a future) of feminism; it aims to offer the possibility of a politics of ‘affinity’ between groups who have traditionally been placed on the “other” side of the self/other binary. Lovecraft, meanwhile, writes from the position of a privileged identity coming, or failing to come, to terms with the other within itself. Machen’s position, as a writer of the Welsh border, is perhaps a little more complicated. Nonetheless, when one considers Haraway’s assertion of the untenability of wholeness in the face of an otherwise unavoidable ‘dialectic of apocalypse’, it becomes difficult to avoid seeing similar concerns in Lovecraft’s and Machen’s fiction.

I went some way towards touching on the possibility of an ambiguous reading of Machen’s ‘The White People’ in my essay, “‘Mixed-Up Creatures’: Identity and its Boundaries in Arthur Machen’s *Weird Tales*”, which draws partly upon material from the first chapter of this thesis. I argue there that, while ‘framed by a discourse of “evil” that supports the colonial, anthropocentric narrative, [the story] is never far from acknowledging an attraction to the racialised, de-“human”-ised Other within’.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps more accurate, however, to say that the story acknowledges an attraction to the permeability of boundaries, the way in which the self must always contain the other, and vice versa. The other can never exist as Other without the self, and the converse is also true. The hidden world of fairies and witchcraft explored by the narrator of the story’s Green Book section is figured as a journey, requiring a starting point. The threat it poses to the self, embodied in the sexually threatening figure of the ‘black man’, implies a self to be transformed. When we learn that the girl has ‘poisoned herself—in time’,<sup>7</sup> are we to infer that absorption into otherness would be a fate worse than death—or that negation of

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rests in part on the inadequacy of such totalising narratives to the lived realities of women of colour.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica George, “‘Mixed-Up Creatures’: Identity and its Boundaries in Arthur Machen’s *Weird Tales*”, *Almanac: Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*, 15 (2010-2011), pp. 29-46 (p. 44).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The White People’ in *The Great God Pan* (1904; Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 111-166 (p. 165).

either self *or* other would necessarily entail the annihilation of its counterpart, in a ‘dialectic of apocalypse’ like that described by Haraway?

Even more striking is an element of ‘The Shadow out of Time’, which is in this respect perhaps Lovecraft’s most radical fictional work. The Great Race survive by means of technologically-effected mind-transfers between their bodies and those of entities living on other planets and in different epochs. Indeed, the bodies in which Peaslee encounters them are not their original ones. Effectively, they rely on technology and on a kinship with other species close enough to allow for habitation of their bodies—something that is not possible with the semi-corporeal Elder Things—for their survival. Bodies are accessible to them only via machinery; they are inextricable from it. Since the bodies they first evolved in are lost, they, like Haraway’s cyborgs, ‘[have] no origin story’, no ‘myth of original unity’; they ‘would not recognize the Garden of Eden’.<sup>8</sup> Haraway notes the potential for this inextricable union of body and machine to serve as a means for violent domination. ‘From one perspective’, she writes, ‘a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star War apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war’.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, from the point of view of those species displaced by them, the actions of the Great Race constitute violent domination of the most destructive kind. When disaster threatens a time and place inhabited by the Great Race, they, ‘in the name of defence’, impose ‘apocalypse’ upon another species, seizing their bodies and allowing their displaced minds to perish in those the Great Race have abandoned. Individual members of the Great Race seem to have no compunction about doing this outside of such mass migrations when their own bodies begin to die. In Darwinian terms, this absence of sympathy for ‘strangers’ of other sentient

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<sup>8</sup> Haraway, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

species—effectively the Great Race’s ‘lower animals’—denotes savagery.<sup>10</sup> To survive, the Great Race must partake of primitivism; they cannot inhabit unproblematically “civilised” selves. Beer’s suggestion that ascent is ‘also flight—a flight from the primitive and the barbaric which [can] never quite be left behind’ appears to be validated here.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more strikingly, though, the survival of the Great Race depends upon its movement in time and its ability to inhabit multiple, shifting, dis-unified selves, mismatched bodies and minds. Lovecraft’s penchant for immensely detailed physical description works for this interpretation. When Peaslee describes the ‘enormous iridescent cones’ in which he encounters the Great Race, detailing their various appendages and the uses thereof, their approximate size, and the type of matter they appear to be made of, our attention is drawn to the specificity of bodies.<sup>12</sup> The relative difficulty encountered by the transferred minds in working within the Great Race’s unfamiliar bodies, and the horror experienced by Peaslee when he realises that he, too, inhabits one of them, intensify the attendant sense of dislocation, of fractured wholeness. Peaslee’s human body, meanwhile, is inhabited by a mind of the Great Race, and becomes both a self and an other. Disconcertingly, Peaslee describes its actions while inhabiting his body in the first person, though he retains no memory of them, and his wife rejects the Peaslee-Great Race hybrid as an ‘utter alien’.<sup>13</sup> The Great Race, it appears, have adapted to existence as both self and other. Their technological advances, and the fusion of machines, bodies, and other bodies that they enable, entail possibilities for both violent domination and for radical ways of thinking and being of the order imagined by Haraway. The Great Race, like Haraway’s cyborgs, always avoid apocalypse, and must do so by learning to inhabit flux.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; London: John Murray, 1883), pp. 116-118.

<sup>11</sup> Beer, p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow out of Time’, in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1936; London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 335-395 (pp. 356-357).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

The weird tales I have considered here do not, then, deal only with the undermining of anthropocentrism, but with the transformation of what it is to be a human self, and with the potential for an endless series of such transformations—evolution, after all, abhors stasis. Existing in a moment between hypothesis and confirmation that itself implies a future filled with such moments (we will never know exactly what it is we do not know), evolutionary theory requires us to acknowledge that our survival depends upon a renunciation of the imagined wholeness or oneness of human identity, and an adaptation to non-teleological change. To continue existing, the human must give up the hope of ever being *only* human—and perhaps also the fear of its opposite. I hope that this study may go some way towards aiding the understanding of Lovecraft’s and Machen’s work by placing the stories in their historical and intellectual context, and by suggesting some of the possibilities raised by their orientation towards the future.



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