ABSTRACT

"Man Is Made a Mystery":
The Evolution of Arthur Machen's Religious Thought

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Arthur Machen (1863-1947) was a Welsh author now known almost exclusively for his late nineteenth-century weird horror tales such as *The Great God Pan* (1894) and *The Three Impostors* (1895). The few Machen critics who have researched his corpus as a whole sometimes deride his later works, and whether they do or not, most have tried to read his entire body of work as a thematic unity. Even if they admit that his changing outlook on life did affect his fiction, critics often believe his interest in mystical ecstasy—as articulated in his 1899 work *Hieroglyphics*—can be read across his entire career. Absent from this critical discourse is an examination that takes seriously the distinct worldviews of Machen's fiction at its various stages.

This dissertation represents a diachronic examination of Machen's fiction, treating the entire scope of his fiction while proposing several stages in which his altered philosophy led to a concomitant alteration of literary style and structure. Because the events of his life are important to this diachronic reading, chapter one begins with an introductory biography of Arthur Machen, then proceeds to a summary of the critical response to Machen's work and the relevance of this dissertation in that critical conversation. Chapter two treats the first major phase of Machen's career (1890-95), arguing that the horror of his most famous works stems from a fear of the implications of his own skepticism at the time. Chapter three traces his second phase (1896-99), when his initial doubt gives way to belief in a form of ecstatic mysticism, a belief that is still ill-defined and polymorphous, resulting in a fiction characterized by florid imagery but philosophical tension. Chapter four examines the impact of Machen's conversion to Christianity on his twentieth-century career (1899-1936), suggesting that it is marked by a technique of juxtaposition, in which mundane reality is contrasted with ecstatic spiritual experience. Chapter five evaluates some late writings in Machen's Christian career (1930s), positing that their acknowledged aesthetic failure results from a return to the themes of his first stage even though his worldview can no longer accommodate such terrors.

"Man Is Made a Mystery":
The Evolution of Arthur Machen's Religious Thought

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

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To Mary

We read about the Grail-quest, men’s summation

Of Jesus’ sacrifice, the ancient story,

How God became a man became a gory

Love offering. And so this celebration

We seek in churches, sunsets, intimation

Of His great Passion. This one allegory,

This cup that caught Divine love amatory,

Is symbol of the source of our elation,

That we with God at last may have relation.

And so, within my own heart’s inventory

I count my beats, draw strength to chase His glory,

To seek each day anew His consummation.

With you I’ll travel every winding trail;

With you I’ll seek that source, that Holy Grail.

CHAPTER ONE

Arthur of Camelot
The Long Quest of Arthur Machen

Why study Arthur Machen? It is a valid question, for his is hardly a household name—utter it, and one is likely to meet with a blank stare and an awkward pause in the conversation. Even in his beloved hometown of Caerleon-on-Usk in southern Wales, where his birthplace is humbly marked, one cannot be certain his name will be recognized. His work is probably known best indirectly, through his literary disciples such as John Betjeman, H. P. Lovecraft, Clive Barker, or Stephen King. Those who do know who he is may be familiar with one or two works, perhaps *The Great God Pan* or a chapter from *The Three Impostors*. Few indeed know that he was a prolific author with a career spanning half a century, able to wield different styles and voices, capable of weaving in and out of various genres. Few realize that he was a self-consciously literary artist who thought of writing as his one true calling in life, and that, for a brief time, he did have a carefully cultivated reputation as an author of some merit. Given his obscurity, why study Arthur Machen?

There are several responses one might give to such a question. Though he is by no means widely celebrated, Machen has nonetheless been the subject of

some solid criticism, during his lifetime and in the decades since his death. In the genres of horror and weird fiction, he is thoroughly influential and widely regarded—no reference work in these fields would omit discussion of his works. Dozens of essays, articles, and books have been written about him, as have multiple prior theses and dissertations, the earliest appearing in the 1930s. He also retains a coterie of loyal and dedicated enthusiasts, as evidenced by the continuing prosperity of The Friends of Arthur Machen, a society over twenty years old. Machen's works are now widely available through a variety of publishers, often in several editions. If he is not truly popular, Machen and his stories have nonetheless endured throughout the years; they still retain the capacity to entertain, to frighten, and to inspire readers, and they possess literary merits and depths that have yet to be plumbed.

Yet despite Machen's depth and variety, few substantial books have been devoted to the study of his works. Most critics treat him in journal articles, focusing on one or two of his writings. What books have been written on Machen are mostly biographical, and only a small number of helpful critical studies exist. Even those critics who do examine Machen's work at length do not always do justify to the changes that mark his writing over his career, changes that track with his evolving worldview. In particular, most Machen scholars acknowledge his insistence on "ecstasy"—transcendent mystical experience—as

the defining characteristic of his writing. What they do not recognize is that this standard is not always applicable to Machen's fiction and that Machen's own understanding of the term shifts over the course of his life. This study represents a diachronic examination of the relationship of Machen's personal philosophy to his fictional output across his career, a study which acknowledges his perennial interest in the relationship of the material world to the spiritual world but which proposes a new schema for understanding how Machen's works change to reflect his own changing perspective on the nature of that relationship.

The Chronicle of Arthur

Arthur Llewelleyn Jones-Machen was born in the southern Welsh town of Caerleon in 1863, and his birthplace always held special significance for him. Before the French legends of King Arthur placed him in the mythical Camelot, his seat was often depicted as being in Caerleon, and that gave Machen immediate connections to an ancient, mysterious land. His father soon became vicar of Llandewi Fach slightly to the north and moved the family there when Machen was very young, Caerleon remained in easy traveling distance, and the entire countryside was enough to stir the imagination of any young and impressionable child. The long, misty history of southern Wales returns again and again in Machen's fiction: the Welsh dissenting church with its periodic revivals, the Celtic saints who joined themselves to Christ before the Catholic

Church got there, the Roman legions who left traces of their occupation strewn about the landscape, the pagans whose rites were swallowed up by the millennia, and perhaps cultures more ancient and insidious than any of these. In one of his later wistful autobiographies, Machen would affirm,

> 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 I am convinced that anything which I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in earliest childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land. (*FOT* 14)

Machen's later heroes, solitary in their youth, must often persevere in the face of schoolyard persecution, as with Lucian Taylor in *The Hill of Dreams* or Ambrose Meyrick in *The Secret Glory*. But there is little evidence that schoolboy Arthur Machen was especially miserable or that he did poorly in school. He might have studied at Oxford—that was the plan, anyway—but his father's increasing poverty precluded such options, and he failed the exams necessary for entrance to the Royal College of Surgeons. Nonetheless, he found himself in London in the 1880s, looking for a career as a journalist but more often working on eclectic printing, writing, and translation projects, including a stint that involved reading and cataloguing arcane and occult books. London became his home base for the rest of his life, though he would return to his ancestral land to

translate Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptameron* and later to attend his dying mother and destitute father, who would himself pass away soon after.

Though his income was apparently slight during this period, Machen made enough to survive, and at some point he met the enigmatic Amelia "Amy" Hogg, who was over a decade his senior and whom he married in 1887. Little is known about Amy, though she was apparently an unconventional woman with several male friends of the artistic and bohemian persuasion. One of her acquaintances was Arthur Edward Waite, an American-born occultist who would become one of Machen's closest friends the rest of his life. Another of Amy's friends was the author Jerome K. Jerome, who remains one of the few sources of information on her life. While Machen doubtless mourned the deaths of his parents, life began to look cheerier for him around this time. He was happily married, and inheritance money from some deceased maternal relatives kept him from collapsing back into his earlier poverty.

Though he would continue to take on journalism and translation jobs during the 1890s, Machen was now in a position to return to what he had always considered his vocation—the high calling of literature. It was during this decade that he wrote many of the works on which his reputation has been built. Though his fiction was already seeing print, Machen's first literary splash came in 1894 with the publication of a book containing two stories, *The Great God Pan and The*

Inmost Light. Everything about the publication was custom-made for controversy. The book was released as part of John Lane's infamous Keynotes Series, which was by then already bound up inextricably with the scandalous Decadent movement. The shocking contents of the book, particularly the novella *The Great God Pan*, drew disgusted reviews from the literary establishment for its implications of sexual depravity and its explicitly grotesque ending, to say nothing of its indirect and convoluted narrative. Notwithstanding the critical disapprobation, *The Great God Pan* was reprinted, and John Lane released another Machen opus the following year, *The Three Impostors* (1895). The latter book has plenty of its own horrors to turn reviewers' stomachs and raise their hair, but Machen's second Keynotes work suffered the inexcusable fate of bad timing. Its publication ran alongside Oscar Wilde's 1895 trials and conviction for gross indecency, leading to a knee-jerk reaction against anything in the Decadent orbit. Indeed, even before the trials, as Kirsten MacLeod has noted, the entire Keynotes series had come under attack, for its very existence proved that Decadence was no isolated phenomenon but was in fact becoming an industry (117-19). And beyond its Decadent associations,[1] *The Three Impostors* borrowed heavily in its

[1] Machen always denied any involvement in the Decadent movement, but however his protestations are regarded, his publisher's involvement could not be denied.

structure from Robert Louis Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* (1882) and *The Dynamiter* (1885), a fact that even Machen readily acknowledged.

Machen did not stop writing after *The Three Impostors* was released; two other stories published in 1895 feature his recurring "detective" Dyson, who is central to "The Inmost Light" and *The Three Impostors*. After these stories, Machen would not see print again until 1902. But while he kept pen to paper, several important changes were to occur in his life at the close of the nineteenth century, changes which together would have profound implications upon his approach to writing. First, the accusations that he pastiched Stevenson in *The Three Impostors* caused him to rethink his very writing style. "I shall never give anybody a white powder again!" he declared to Waite (*TNF* 144), referring to "The Novel of the White Powder," one of the more grotesque episodes of *The Three Impostors*. But that meant developing an entirely new voice for his prose, forsaking the horrific levity of his previous work in favor of a more sensuous verbosity. "It was hideous work, doing this," he would later claim, "almost like the learning of a new language . . . as if, accustomed to work in wax, one had suddenly to beat shape out of rock or stubborn metal" (Danielson 39). In the process of changing crafts, some fragments of "stubborn metal" later became *Ornaments in Jade* (1924), ten little poetic episodes of exquisite beauty. In mid-1899, he wrote the short story "The White People" (1904), a favorite of Lovecraft

and weird writers since, and began the novella *A Fragment of Life* (published 1904). Also a product of mid-1899 was *Hieroglyphics* (published 1902), a manifesto asserting that the purpose of literature is to produce what he terms "ecstasy."[2] But the focus of his energies was *The Hill of Dreams*, written in 1897 but published fully in 1907 by Grant Richards, who had earlier rejected it. These works together mark a pivotal moment in Machen's writing history, when he turned away from the degenerative horrors and dark Stevensonian flippancy of his earlier work and developed a careful, meandering, dreamy, poetic voice, one that was ironically more Decadent in tone than his earlier Keynotes books, perhaps one reason why they were all published so belatedly.

But there were changes in Machen's life more drastic than his new way of writing, influenced by more dramatic reasons than merely a few bad reviews. Amy had struggled for much of the decade with cancer, and she finally succumbed in 1899. Her death either made no impression on Machen or was profoundly distressing, for in the nearly fifty remaining years of his life, he would almost never mentioned her directly in his writings. The latter interpretation seems the most likely. In one of his autobiographical volumes, he quietly notes that in 1899 "a great sorrow which had long been threatened fell

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[2] The nature of Machen's aesthetics as they are revealed in *Hieroglyphics* will be discussed at length later.

upon me: I was once more alone" (*TNF* 175). Jerome remembered "the last time I saw his wife. . . . She was dying, and Machen, with two cats under his arm, was moving softly about, waiting on her" (121). While it is impossible to know for certain the extent of Machen's grief over Amy's passing, it appears to have been considerable.

Moreover, her death may have laid the groundwork for another significant change in Machen's life—his interest in supernatural mysticism, both occult and Christian. What had once been an obscure hobby and occasional job became a passionate interest. His writing indicates that he used some esoteric practice to help soothe his mind and spirit after Amy died. The precise nature of this practice is much debated; Machen occasionally referred to it but refused to give details. Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton believe he "tried to bewitch himself" through some process that "whilst not actually Satanist in character . . . was one of those experiments, discouraged by orthodox authority, which are poised between psychology and magic" (74). Mark Valentine is more charitable: "The sceptic or agnostic will shrug, put it down to psychological trauma, and pass on: those willing to accept the possibility of a spiritual dimension to humanity will find Machen's account a rich confirmation of the archetypes associated with this dimension" (73). *Hieroglyphics* contends that the purpose of

literature is to evoke ecstasy, and around this time, Machen seems to have been seeking out some suitable catalyst of ecstasy.

Perhaps toward that end, he joined Waite as a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, that most famous of Victorian/Edwardian magical brotherhoods whose membership also included William Butler Yeats and the weird horror writer Algernon Blackwood. But while some in the Golden Dawn advocated the study of ancient pagan traditions—Egyptian, Hindu, Buddhist, and others—the Order, it seems, "was conceived as a Christian organization," with "emphasis placed on Christian doctrine in the Golden Dawn, especially in the beginning" (Harper 71). Later tensions would cause a schism between the Christian camp and the more theosophically oriented members, "but at the very beginning both camps were united in declaring that 'to establish closer and more personal relations with the Lord Jesus, the Master of Masters, is and ever must be the ultimate object of all teachings of our order'" (Coulombe 348). In other words, while magic rites and occultism are now seen by many churches as antithetical to Christianity, such distinctions were far less firmly established at the turn of the century. Machen clearly favored the Christian side of the Order and later joined Waite's splinter group which opposed the encroaching theosophical influences. Despite his mystical predilections and friendship with Waite, however, Machen was hardly a devout acolyte; Mark Valentine observes that "he was never an

important member of the Order" and that, in his later writings, "he is dismissive of the episode" (74).

Only at the very beginning of his involvement, when his sadness over Amy was still fresh, did he take the Golden Dawn seriously. "It was at this point," according to Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton, "that Machen was probably in most danger of going frankly Satanist" (79). Instead, he turned to the faith of his youth for solace. Unlike his association with the Order of the Golden Dawn, Machen appears to have taken his conversion to Christianity very seriously. Amy herself had returned to her childhood Roman Catholicism on her deathbed, and while Machen remained an Anglican, his love of ritual and hatred of Protestant moralism put him distinctly on the High Church end of the spectrum. His own peculiar version of Christianity relied heavily on accounts of a Celtic church that largely predated Catholic missionary ventures, a church with its own relics and saints that were not always acknowledged by Rome. But while his variant of the faith may have been highly idiosyncratic, his devotion to it has never been questioned.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, several of Machen's older works were published or reprinted. He did not write as much as he had at the *fin de siècle*, though one of his first explicitly Christian efforts, a paean to Celtic Grail legends called *The Secret Glory*, was penned around 1907 but published

much later, while a screed against low-church Protestantism, *Dr. Stiggins*, was basically ignored when published the year before. Needing a job, he joined an acting troupe as a "strolling player" in 1901, and two years later, he married Dorothie Purefoy Huddleston. Following on the heels of his conversion, Machen's glee at being an actor, coupled with the consoling influence of Purefoy (as she was known), helped pull him out from the shadows of his darkest days. But even when he started seeing more writing in print, acting was insufficient to pay the family bills, and in 1910, Machen took the disagreeable step of becoming a writer for the *Evening News*.

As Valentine observes, "There is no doubt that his journalistic career did much to enrich Machen's experience, but his pleasure was almost always marred by the harrying necessity to get his copy in by deadline before being told of his next assignment" (98). Yet however much Machen may have loathed such deadlines, his time at the *Evening News* marked his final major development as a writer, the stage which is most often ignored or despised by critics and aficionados. In the 1900s, Machen had already added a mordant satirical edge to his writing style that contrasted significantly with his previous dreaminess. Now, as a reporter, he had infiltrated the very society he so despised, middle-class rationalist normalcy, and in his later fiction he would wield their "impartial" journalistic writing style. His facility for such writing became

especially apparent during World War I. On September 29, 1914, shortly after the British military was forced to retreat at the Battle of Mons, Machen published a short story in the newspaper called "The Bowmen," describing visions of ghostly bowmen who come to the aid of the soldiers and hold off the Germans. For some time after the stories' publications, reports began to follow of eyewitnesses claiming to have seen these bowmen or, in other cases, a host of angels. The incident brought brief notoriety to the tale of "The Bowmen" and its author, though the furor died down soon. Machen himself disliked the unassuming work, and it did not help him sell copies of a little Grail novella, *The Great Return*, published by a small Christian press in 1915. Machen continued to write stories utilizing his journalistic voice, including *The Terror* (1917), a short novel about a series of mysterious animal attacks.

Machen left the *Evening News* in 1921, and it was in the 1920s when his reputation began to improve, in part due to American readers who loved his early works. The American publisher Alfred Knopf began to reprint Machen's old works and issue official copies of the new ones. *The Secret Glory* was finally published in 1922, at a point when Machen's newfound status allowed him to settle with a publisher that could actually make the venture profitable. Also during this decade, Machen published three autobiographical pieces: *Far Off Things* (1922), *Things Near and Far* (1923), and *The London Adventure* (1924). All

three were written in the meandering, allusive style he had cultivated at the turn of the century, and while hardly bestsellers, they brought him some critical acclaim—a new experience—and helped solidify his reputation as an author during his lifetime. Given that Machen had always seen writing as his true vocation, such recognition, however belated, was profoundly gratifying, and for the rest of his life he and Purefoy would play host to acolytes making pilgrimages to their various residences.

Over the next quarter-century, Machen would continue to publish collections of essays and stories, many reprints but with occasional new works appearing. Only one more novel would be produced during this period, *The Green Round* (1933), a return to the themes and style he had employed in the early 1890s. But nothing from this period advanced his reputation, in either the popular sphere or the literary sphere. He lived the last quarter century of his life happily and modestly, harvesting the crop he had sown decades earlier when he struggled to find his voice, dying, apparently peacefully, on December 15, 1947, at the age of eighty-four.

"Among the Very Great"

Throughout his lifetime, Machen saw literature as his true calling, his singular vocation, and he fought for and treasured his reputation as an author. As such, he maintained a complex relationship with his reviewers and critics. He

could be scornful of their lack of understanding or bemused at their shock; he might agree with their censure or disparage it; but in the spirit of the adage "any publicity is good publicity," he seems to have treasured every word. Indeed, in the 1920s, when his reputation was at its highest, he secured the publication of the facetiously titled *Precious Balms* (1924), a compilation of his early books' most virulent contemporary reviews. But the ever vociferous Machen could also give as well as he got, and he often expressed his opinions for his own work, not only in letters but in publication. Machen commented on his writings in various prefaces and introductions, as well as in chapters of his three memoirs. His most sustained commentary, however, may be found in *Arthur Machen: A Bibliography*, a book published in 1923 by Henry Danielson.

Early analysis of Machen's work in the 1890s was generally limited to the vituperative condemnations that he published as his "balms." They denounced his subject matter as absurd, disgusting rather than terrifying. His roundabout storytelling in *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors* left reviewers cold—*The Lady's Pictorial* found *The Great God Pan* "gruesome, ghastly, and dull" (*PB* 12), and *The Manchester Guardian* pronounced it "the most acutely and intentionally disagreeable we have yet seen in English" (*PB* 8); *The Westminster Gazette* famously declared it "an incoherent nightmare of sex" (*PB* 10). Similar charges were levied against *The Three Impostors*, *The Hill of Dreams*, and the volume that

first collected his weird tales together, *The House of Souls* (1906). But when English tastes changed sufficiently for his horror fiction to be reprinted and for many of his unpublished stories to see print, his reputation as just another Decadent shocker began to fade. The notoriety of "The Bowmen" may not have helped sales immediately, but it surely introduced Machen's name to many who may have been unfamiliar with him. And in the United States, avid readers of fantastic pulp fiction hungrily consumed his tales of supernatural terror. As a result, reviews began to take on a less appalled tenor, and, more importantly, critics began to take Machen seriously as a literary figure, which was, in the end, what he had dreamt of all along.

The first critic to do so was Vincent Starrett, an American journalist and writer who admired virtually all Machen's work. Starrett collected any scrap of old writing Machen would give him and received permission to publish many of these earlier works. This arrangement led to some unfortunate bad blood in the 1920s when the Alfred A. Knopf editions of Machen's work appeared. Having apparently forgotten his casual dismissal of copyright permissions in the days of his obscurity, Machen now felt affronted by Starrett's volumes, which were in competition with the more prestigious Knopf series and which, consequently, might be costing him money. If the matter was never fully resolved in their lifetimes, Machen and Starrett nonetheless were able to make peace, and prior to

any such disputes, Starrett had helped create the market for the disputed Knopf volumes by publishing *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* (1918). The book is brief, unbalanced, and mostly superficial, but it treats its subject with almost hagiographical gravity, and Starrett's vast knowledge of Machen's existing corpus gives it a breadth that perhaps no other writer could have achieved at the time. Significantly, Starrett clearly views Machen as more than a hack, and the commentary ends with an impassioned plea on his behalf, insisting that "posterity is going to demand of us why, when the opportunity was ours, we did not open our hearts to Arthur Machen and name him among the very great" (31).

It is difficult to know how many read or heeded Starrett's call directly, but Machen's influence was profound in the sub-genre of "weird fiction," exemplified by the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, which not only published Starrett's own fiction but reprinted some of Machen's earlier output. Perhaps the most famous advocate and devotee of Machen, however, would be H. P. Lovecraft, who considered Machen one of "the Modern Masters" in his classic study, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927). Lovecraft read Machen voraciously, and Lovecraft's fiction is often clearly influenced by Machen's own *fin-de-siècle* writings. "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), for instance, is an unapologetic adaptation of *The Great God Pan* and even cites the work explicitly

(Lovecraft, *TD* 221). Fellow *Weird Tales* contributor Clark Ashton Smith's story "The Nameless Offspring" (1932) was also based on *The Great God Pan*, and in proposing the idea to Lovecraft, he agreed that "Machen's prose-style is exquisite in its degree of perfection" (Smith, *SL* 145)

But while Machen's influence on horror and weird fiction has always been significant, he was living almost entirely by reputation for the last decades of his life, and while critical work on him continued to appear before and after his death in 1947, it was seldom substantial in volume or content. Two major publications in the early 1960s helped change that. In 1963 Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton published the first substantial biography, *Arthur Machen: A Short Account of His Life and Work*. Notwithstanding its subtitle, the book may still be the best biographical resource available on its subject. Perhaps even more influential in establishing Machen's critical reputation was the work of Wesley Sweetser. In 1959 he wrote as his dissertation for the University of Colorado *The Works of Arthur Machen: An Analysis and Bibliography*. With Adrian Goldstone, Sweetser compiled *A Bibliography of Arthur Machen*, published in 1965, adding "Arthur Machen: A Bibliography of Writings about Him" (1968) in *English Literature in Transition*. His Twayne literary biography on Machen, published in 1964, is still one of the standard references for both biographical and critical analysis of Machen's works.

Since that time, some other noteworthy book-length resources on Machen have been published. D. P. M. Michael's *Arthur Machen* was published by the University of Wales Press in 1971, though it is brief and adds relatively little to the work of Reynolds and Charlton or Sweetser. Several compilations of Machen's correspondence have also been published. Michael Murphy's *Starrett vs. Machen: A Record of Discovery and Correspondence* (1977) reprints all the available exchanges between the two, starting with their early acquaintance through their falling out and tentative reconciliation. *Arthur Machen: Selected Letters* was edited by Roger Dobson, Godfrey Brangham, and R. A. Gilbert and published in 1988 by Aquarian Press. As its name suggests, it is hardly comprehensive, but though it lacks an index, the letters are well annotated and include some of Machen's most substantial correspondents. In 1994, Kent State University Press released *Arthur Machen and Montgomery Evans: Letters of a Literary Friendship, 1923-1947*, edited by Sue Strong Hassler and Donald M. Hassler, a well-compiled collection of letters exchanged with one of Machen's later friends.

The most recent substantial book-length treatment is Mark Valentine's *Arthur Machen* (1995). As Wendell Harris alludes in his review of the work, Valentine's brief biography contributes little to our understanding of Machen's life that is not already available, but it is nonetheless eminently readable (Harris

190-91). It is, moreover, marred by poor citation, and, like the *Selected Letters*, the lack of an index is painfully obvious. Still, Valentine's treatment hovers between biography and criticism, and though brief, his critical comments touch on many of Machen's most neglected works. He is probably the most charitable of Machen critics or biographers, a fact which annoys Harris (193) but is helpful to the dedicated Machen scholar, as he gives solid interpretations of some pieces that might have little comment elsewhere.

Despite these competent biographies and collected letters, no full-length works of Machen criticism exist,[3] though Machen has been the subject of much solid literary examination, some of it in very prestigious sources. And yet, he never seems to have quite shaken the encyclopedia curse, his influence acknowledged but seldom treated in much depth. Often his work is either mentioned in passing or subsidiary to other authors. Stephen Pricket's *Victorian Fantasy* (1979, rpt. 2005) allocates him only a couple pages. Other treatments are more substantial, though never book-length. Kelly Hurley covers Machen's works in some depth in *The Gothic Body* (1996), but not as much as several other authors she examines. Glen Cavaliero devotes a few pages to Machen in *The*

[3] Of course, all the biographies (especially Sweetser and Valentine) contain some criticism. Roger Dobson and Mark Valentine's *Arthur Machen: Artist and Mystic* (1986), a potpourri of primary sources, critical pieces, and memoir fragments, was printed with a limited 300-copy run. Several dissertations and theses on Machen do exist as well. Still, none of these constitute a serious academic book-length critical treatment solely on Arthur Machen.

Supernatural and English Fiction (1995), acknowledging him as “an author who, however obscurely, retains his readers” (79). Similarly, he makes a five-page cameo in *Haunted Presence* (1987), in which author S. L. Varnado declares that he has “a secure place in the annals of supernatural fiction” (119). Two brief discussions of his 1890s work appear in *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (1999) by Robert Mighall. Machen is one of the “largely ignored authors” who is “given pride of place”—an entire chapter—in Susan Navarette’s *The Shape of Fear* (1998). He warrants no single chapter in Kirsten MacLeod’s *Fictions of British Decadence* (2006), though he figures prominently in several sections.

But if these authors acknowledge Machen’s importance, they all pigeonhole him as a product of the *fin de siècle*, limiting their analyses to his “Decadent” work of the 1890s and at best paying lip service to his corpus as a whole. S. T. Joshi in *The Weird Tale* (1990) is the only literary critic to survey Machen’s entire oeuvre, but while he examines everything, Joshi too believes that “nearly all his best work was produced within the single decade of 1889-1899” (17) and that “the rest of Machen’s tales can be virtually ignored” (18). Joshi’s own criticism cannot be ignored—a prolific writer and critic, his work dominates the sub-genre of weird fiction. The term “weird fiction” itself was derived from, or at least popularized by, *Weird Tales*, and it was in *Weird Tales* that H. P. Lovecraft and other writers of his ilk often found print. Joshi’s publications on

Lovecraft, in whom he finds a kindred spirit philosophically, are especially voluminous, though Joshi has a hand in the critical cookie jar of almost every weird writer. His efforts must be commended, and weird fiction scholarship would be worse off without him. Yet his analyses are often repetitive and superficial, and his work is highly opinionated, prone to sweeping, dismissive judgments. Himself a devout atheist, Joshi tends to denigrate religious elements in the works he studies, a tendency that is quite pronounced in his treatment of Machen's religious views and writings.

Joshi has edited several Machen volumes, but his most substantial treatment of Machen is in *The Weird Tale*, where Machen is just one of six writers authors studied. Similarly, many other critics do not examine Machen alone; in journal articles, he is often paired or compared with other writers, including E. T. A. Hoffmann (Willis, 1994), the Order of the Golden Dawn (Coulombe, 1995), Bram Stoker (Sparks, 2002), and Wilkie Collins (Ferguson, 2002).[4] This gives the misleading impression that Machen's work is not strong enough to stand on its own merit. Still, a substantial body of critical essays has accumulated, not only in specialty journals like *Studies in Weird Fiction* or the Arthur Machen Society's

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[4] Christine Ferguson's essay "Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment" was published in the prestigious *PMLA*, a good sign for Machen, but it also exemplifies all the ways in which Machen's work is so often typecast: Ferguson labels him a Decadent, accords him only a few pages, and cites only *The Great God Pan*.

Faunus, but also in more mainstream critical publications like *English Literature in Transition*, *Folklore*, and *PMLA*.

In typically gracious form, Mark Valentine sums up the thorny issues surrounding Machen's literary reputation:

> [D]espite the survival of his work in print, the avowed influence he has had on an impressive array of artists and writers, the esteem he earned from major literary figures such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jorge Luis Gorges, and the devotion of his followers, Machen remains outside of the literary mainstream. Partly this is due to critical fashion. Machen is a traditionalist when existential humanism is the vogue; a Romantic when kitchen-sink realism is called for; a rhapsodiser of beauty when ugliness is more eagerly worshipped. Perhaps, as some of his qualities come to be valued again, Machen's work may begin to attract wider scholarly interest. But it is more likely that he will always belong with those other individualist writers, such as John Cowper Powys, Henry Williamson, L. H. Myers, and David Lindsay, not afraid to place their own deeply-held form of spirituality at the heart of their work, and trust to certain like souls through the ages to keep it eternal. (138)

Valentine is certainly correct that even now Machen "remains outside of the literary mainstream." Machen is thus far the only one of the six authors in Joshi's *The Weird Tale* whose work has not been picked up by Penguin Classics.[5] Valentine's paean to Machen's spirituality seems in the main to relate to

[5] Joshi's three volumes of Machen's weird fiction have instead been released by the far less prestigious publisher Chaosium. Joshi has recently announced, however, that he will be editing an upcoming volume for Penguin ("S. T. Joshi's Blog").

Machen's twentieth-century fiction (few would use the term "beauty" in connection to his early 1890s fiction).

Joshi, meanwhile, takes a view similar to Valentine, but he is more attuned to Machen's early weird fiction, contending that "[i]n the short run the care of Machen's reputation will rest in the hands of horror aficionados. Whether he will ever attract a mainstream audience it is difficult to say . . . Machen is a writer who will always suffer the indignity of periodic resurrection" (38-39). And indeed, Machen's influence remains profound to this day in the horror genre, where he is often praised by its most famous practitioners. T. E. D. Klein considers him "fantasy's pre-eminent stylist" (65) and modeled his novel *The Ceremonies* (1984) explicitly on "The White People." Clive Barker, acknowledging Machen's obscurity, nonetheless finds him "easily as important as Lovecraft. He's certainly a better writer, no question, and infinitely subtler in his effects. Infinitely more humane in his philosophies . . ." Stephen King considers *The Great God Pan* "one of the best horror stories ever written. Maybe the best in the English language." While he thinks "Lovecraft was ultimately better," King believes *The Great God Pan* to be "more reader-friendly. And Machen was there first." Such commendations may help Machen's sales somewhat, but if his star is on the rise, he is still hardly a household name. That could change if any of his work were brought to screen, which may be a future possibility: director

Guillermo Del Toro considers Machen among his favorite writers and has admitted Machen's influence on his acclaimed film *Pan's Labyrinth*. It remains uncertain whether the time has finally come for Machen's literary reputation to break free from its current constraints, but there is enough substance in Machen's work to sustain a much wider body of scholarship and criticism, if the stars should align properly.

"Superficial Variety"?

It should be evident that despite the efforts of Machen's many insightful critics and passionate enthusiasts, some glaring lacunae remain to be filled regarding criticism of his work. The most obvious is the question of coverage. Machen criticism has been dominated by analyses of *The Great God Pan*. *The Three Impostors* has also received its share of scrutiny, though critics often take the individual stories in the narrative and treat them independently of the novel's overall structure and ideas. Other stories of the 1890s—"The Inmost Light," "The Shining Pyramid," "The Red Hand," and "The White People"—occasionally attract attention, as does *The Hill of Dreams*. Even these works, however, are underrepresented in the Machen critical discourse, and his twentieth-century publications (with the exception of "The Bowmen") are all but ignored.

Much of the existing commentary on *The Great God Pan* and the other *fin-de-siècle* horrors is valuable and provides the Machen scholar with a solid foundation. Yet often these critics show only peripheral knowledge of Machen as a writer; they are interested solely in his work as it pertains to their critical interest, usual the Decadent period of literature, despite Machen's many subsequent protestations that he had nothing directly to do with the Decadent movement. Frequently *The Great God Pan* is the only Arthur Machen text to appear in the works cited, and previous Machen criticism may be ignored entirely. In his generally positive review of Valentine's *Arthur Machen*, the widely-read Wendell Harris admits what is surely true of many other critics: "for a long time, I knew Machen only as the writer of late nineteenth-century horror stories such as *The Three Impostors* and *The Great God Pan*" (190). Harris eventually realized the variety in Machen's corpus, but many other scholars have not, and it is a curious irony that some of the most blatant examples of this critical myopia appear in some of the most highly regarded academic forums.[6]

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[6] Eckersley (1992) appears in *English Literature in Transition* and draws all his stories—including two chapters of *The Three Impostors*—from the posthumous collection *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (1949). Ferguson (2002) cites only *The Great God Pan* in her *PMLA* article. Joshi's *The Weird Tale*, published originally by the University of Texas Press, is comprehensive in primary sources but entirely eschews secondary works. Cavaliero (1995), published by no less than Oxford University Press, likewise passes over all Machen criticism and in fact makes several errors; besides misspelling *The Three Impostors* and Lovecraft's "Cthulhu" Cavaliero asserts that "there are no ghost stories in Machen's fiction" (79), indicating unawareness of Machen's late

There are perhaps even greater ironies, however, in many of the more comprehensive treatments of Arthur Machen. The most peculiar of these ironies is the fact that the aforementioned critics who focus solely on Machen's *fin-de-siècle* works often provide better interpretations than those scholars who have read more widely into his oeuvre. Such a contention is not quite as surprising as it initially sounds. Because of their familiarity with his entire body of work, Machen's most devoted critics have an understandable tendency to read his fiction thematically or systematically rather than diachronically. Whereas Machen novices often gain good insight into his works by examining them within the context of their historical and cultural milieu, his more avid critics often look for thematic unities across his works and, as a result, sometimes stretch his texts to fit these themes. This is particularly tempting in Arthur Machen's case because of the existence of *Hieroglyphics*, his 1899 manifesto on the hallmarks of good literature. The dominant note in *Hieroglyphics* is ecstasy—Machen cotends in the book that no work can be true literature without. Because *Hieroglyphics* so explicitly lays out a theory of what good writing entails, it is almost irresistible to stretch that theory across Machen's career, from his earliest publications in the 1880s to his final writings in the 1930s. And while many

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story "The Exalted Omega" (1936). Mighall (1999), also published through Oxford, likewise misspells *The Three Impostors*.

devout fans of Machen will acknowledge that his views changed over time, they nonetheless feel compelled to bind his fifty years' worth of work into a single thematic package.

For this reason, Sweetser believes that "the standards of *Hieroglyphics* represent, to a great extent, simply a rationalization of what Machen had been trying to accomplish in the field of art" (99). Cavaliero too finds ecstasy to be "a tenet that underlies all Machen's more thoughtful writing in the supernaturalist vein" (76). Joshi, who affirms that a "writer's entire output is a philosophical unity, changing as the author's conception of the world changes"[7] (*WT* 10-11), nonetheless contends that Machen is unphilosophical precisely because "his views never changed through the whole course of his long life" (16). Joshi believes *Hieroglyphics* to be "a transparent elucidation of [Machen's] own literary goals" (13), and making him something of a one-trick ideological pony: "The notions of ecstasy, of the veil, and of the sacrament: can these be sufficient to unlock the mysteries of Machen's entire output? I rather think so, since, in spite of the superficial variety of form and genre, Machen's work returns again and again to these basic principles" (14). Starrett and Michael read Machen's works dualistically, seeing two competing forces in tension. For Starrett, it is (as his

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[7] It is not entirely certain what Joshi means by this statement—how can an author's "entire output" be "a philosophical *unity*" if it is subject to change?

work's title indicates) the forces of ecstasy and sin. For Michael, Machen is caught between paganism and Christianity, "inspired partly by the Old Religion and partly by the New" (16). Perhaps ironically, perhaps appropriately, it is only his biographers—first Reynolds and Charlton, then Valentine—who show an ability to resist overly comprehensive interpretations of Machen's writing career.

Of course, it is not by any means wrong to look for themes or ideas that pervade an author's writing career. And indeed, anyone who has read Machen extensively will appreciate certain characteristics of his style and subject matter that remain consistent throughout. Machen never grew tired of exploring the uneasy relationship between the material world and the spiritual world. All analyses of Machen's work begin at this point, and they are right to do so. But if Machen's *interest* in the relationship between the mundane and the spiritual remained constant throughout his life, his personal beliefs regarding the *nature* of that relationship were anything but static; and as his position changed, so too did the plots, structures, and styles he deployed in his fiction. This dissertation, then, represents a diachronic examination of Arthur Machen's fiction, across his lifetime, from his early horrors in the 1890s to his final work in the 1930s. It will situate his works in stages based on his shifting worldviews and demonstrate the ways in which his fiction at each stage is a reflection of that worldview. The first

chapter surveys Machen's life and the literary criticism of his works, locating the dissertation within that critical context.

The second chapter will trace Machen's writing from 1890-95, his first substantial period of publication. Examined within the context of Decadent publishing prior to Oscar Wilde's sodomy trial and late Victorian fears of a meaningless materialist cosmos, Machen's fiction during this period emerges as an expression of the psychic effects doubt can have on the human mind and soul. Far from reflecting the emphasis on "ecstasy" that is evident in his later work, Machen's *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light*, *The Three Impostors*, "The Shining Pyramid," and "The Red Hand" all display a mock levity which covers over an intense underlying dread that humans may possess no spiritual component.

The third chapter begins with Machen's essay *Hieroglyphics*, which asserts that the goal of literature is to produce "ecstasy." This work has often been taken as an explanation of his lifelong philosophy; however, he did not seem to adopt this philosophy until 1896, when bad reviews forced him to revise his writing style. During this period, his works *Ornaments in Jade*, *The Hill of Dreams*, and "The White People" for the first time exemplify Machen's idea that reproducing mystical experience in written form is the goal of literature. Yet these works remain journeys in which no single source of ecstasy is located, while many

possibilities are proffered. These texts, while consistent in their exploration of the ecstasy theme, are otherwise characterized by ambivalence on the narrative and philosophical levels.

Machen's conversion to Christianity is the subject of chapter four. In part due to the failure of modern materialism to speak to his native spirituality, and in part as a result of his first wife's death from cancer, Arthur Machen converted to Christianity at the turn of the century. This conversion had profound implications for his writing. Almost all Machen's Christian fiction is characterized by competing rhetorical techniques, in which the blandness of mundane modern materialism is juxtaposed against the ecstatic mystical beauty of the Christian story, most often symbolized in Machen through the image of the Holy Grail. Sometimes his style evokes the nondescript tedium of daily life (*A Fragment of Life*); sometimes he adopts a harsh satirical tone (*The Secret Glory*); and sometimes he takes on the matter-of-fact simplicity of journalistic writing ("The Bowmen," *The Great Return*, *The Terror*). But all these styles are contrasted with bursts of richer language to create a sense of ecstatic euphoria, to show how one might actually experience transcendent glory in a modern world that increasingly rejects it.

Chapter five examines Arthur Machen's late writing, generally discarded by critics, and poses the question of why they are so poorly received. The

marked distinction between Machen's early weird fiction and his later Christian work can be seen in his final novel *The Green Round*, in which Machen attempts to return to some of his old themes, such as the dark side of the "little people" mythology or the evocation of a sense of horror rather than awe. While it is understandable that he would want to write again in the genre that first made his reputation, the obvious dissonances in the novel between Machen's old worldview and his Christian worldview are readily apparent.

CHAPTER TWO

"The Abyss of All Being"
The Great God Pan, *The Three Impostors*, and the Death of Metaphysics

At no point in Machen's writing career did he ever lose his interest in exploring the distinctions between the material world and the spiritual world. This overarching theme is the glue that binds together his work at all phases of his life. Whether it is concealed within the ancient misty groves of southern Wales or crouching around the corner of a dingy London alley, the supernatural world for Machen is always hidden just out of sight, waiting for a fleeting moment in which to reveal itself. "His purpose," observes Wesley Sweetser, "both as an artist and as a humanist was to discover, behind the ordinary, the extraordinary and transcendental meaning" (132).

This thematic consistency does not, however, justify S. T. Joshi's contention that Machen's "views never changed through the whole course of his long life" (*WT* 16). In fact, the caricature of Machen as a mystic who opposes science and materialism at all costs fits quite poorly with his best-known works. During the first phase of Machen's mature writing, the early 1890s, hidden realms and spiritual worlds are objects not of ecstasy but of abject terror. This is precisely why devotees of weird fiction love them so much—they are not the

work of a Christian author with a belief system buttressed by an eschatological hope, but rather by a skeptic who views the unknown with horror rather than wonder. Machen himself admitted as much. In a letter written on October 1, 1899, to the French writer Paul-Jean Toulet, who translated *The Great God Pan* into French, Machen explained,

> Je ne sais vous si êtes mystique. J'ai toujours été catholique (anglican, pas romain), et un catholique est naturellement attaché au mysticisme et tant que système. Mais j'avoue que je n'avais que des préoccupations artistiques quand j'écrivis *Pan* et la *Poudre Blanche* (dans les *Trois Imposteurs*). Alors je n'aurais pu croire un instant que d'aussi étranges événements fussent jamais arrivés dans la vie réelle ou meme aient jamais été susceptibles de s'y produire. Mais depuis, et tous récemment, il s'est produit dans ma propre existence des *expériences* qui ont tout à fait changé mon point de vue à ce sujet. Je ne dis pas évidemment que toutes les circonstances de la *Poudre Blanche* se soient produites en réalité comme je les ai racontées, mais je les crois désormais très possible. Je suis tout à fait convaincu même qu'il n'y a rien d'impossible sur terre. J'ai à peine besoin d'ajouter, je suppose, qu'aucune des *expériences* que j'ai faites n'a de rapports avec de telles impostures que le Spiritualisme et la Théosophie. Mais je crois que nous vivons dans un monde de grands mystères, de choses insoupçonnées et tout à fait stupéfiantes. (Martineau 53-54, italics original)

This letter reveals several important points about the development of Machen's thought. First, it shows that at the time he wrote *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*, he was a skeptic. While Machen admits his lifelong Anglicanism ("J'ai toujours été catholique), this comes across as a peripheral matter at best, an inheritance from his father rather than an active system of belief. He was mystic

only insofar as any High Churchman would be mystic, and he apparently rejected the supernatural: "Alors je n'aurais pu croire un instant que d'aussi étranges événements fussent jamais arrivés dans la vie réelle ou meme aient jamais été susceptibles de s'y produire." Here Machen appears to be talking about the supernatural in general, and not the kind of horrific events of his earlier novels.[1] In other words, Machen is writing this letter from a time of belief (late 1899) reflecting on a time of unbelief (1890-95).

This is a highly significant fact that few scholars have sufficiently recognized: despite his interest in occult subjects and his religious upbringing, at the beginning of the *fin de siècle*, Machen was, for all intents and purposes, an agnostic, at least in regards to mysticism and the supernatural. He did not believe encroachments from other worlds into our own were possible, if any such other worlds even existed. Such a revelation leads to another question—if

[1] Reynolds and Charlton point out that Machen would later encounter people resembling the more fanciful characters of *The Three Impostors* (72), members of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Machen discusses these events in *Things Near and Far*, and the letter might have those encounters partly in mind, but he is also clearly making a more substantial claim. Indeed, Machen's account in *Things Near and Far* suggests that his dealings with the Order were an effect, rather than a cause, of these "strange events": "I must say that I did not seek the Order merely in quest of odd entertainment. As I have stated in the chapter before this, I had experienced strange things—they still appear to me strange—of body, mind and spirit, and I supposed that the Order, dimly heard of, might give me some light and guidance and leading on these matters. But, as I have noted, I was mistaken . . ." (*TNF* 218). Machen discusses the "strange things" in the ninth chapter of *Things Near and Far*, which is where he describes the mysterious process he used to alleviate the pain of Amy's death, "a more raging pain than that of any toothache" (189-90). Even then, however, this mystical process appears to be but one of many ways in which he found "the world . . . presented to me at a new angle" (176).

indeed Machen did not believe in the supernatural, why did he write about it so much? What does it represent in his earliest works of weird fiction? The answer to these questions lies in a close reading of the way in which the supernatural functions in Machen's earliest horrors—as a symbolic representation of the psychic consequences doubt can have on the human person.

Dead Poets' Society

Such symbolism is evident in Machen's most infamous work of the period, *The Great God Pan*. The novella opens with a chapter entitled "The Experiment," in which a scientist named Raymond is preparing to operate on the brain of a young woman named Mary, whom he has "rescued" from poverty. The operation, Raymond claims, will open up Mary's mind and senses to the world of transcendent spirit. Raymond cannot speak directly of what he thinks will happen, but he refers to the experience metaphorically as "see[ing] the Great God Pan" (*TI* 7). But during the experiment—witnessed only by Raymond and his associate Clarke—Mary becomes terrified and is afterwards reduced to a vegetative state. The remaining story is told through a series of episodes that seem initially unrelated, following the adventures of various young gentlemen as they flit about London, often meeting each other with heightened serendipity. Mary, we gradually learn, died nine months after the experiment upon giving birth to a child, a child who has grown up to become a lady named Helen

Vaughan. Helen, it seems, has a habit of attaching herself to influential young men, luring them into intimate relationships, and then somehow leading them into soul-wrenching depravity and often suicide. At last, one of the gentleman protagonists, Villiers, learns of Helen's whereabouts. Bringing with him Clarke and a medical doctor, Villiers demands of Helen that she kill herself. This she does, by degenerating into a protoplasmic mass before their eyes.

The crux of this tale, so shocking to late Victorian audiences, lies in what to make of its eponymous symbol, the god Pan. To Raymond, at least initially, Pan clearly represents some form of sublime reception of a trans-materialistic world. It is a form of alchemical scientific Platonism in which the substances of this world

> 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. I do not know whether any human being has ever lifted that veil; but I do know, Clarke, that you and I shall see it lifted this very night from before another's eyes. You may think this all strange nonsense; it may be strange, but it is true, and the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan. (2)

Raymond, though a scientist, speaks in purely metaphysical terms here. His comparison of the material world to shadows is straight out of the Allegory of the Cave. His quotation derives from "Dotage," by the Metaphysical poet George Herbert, for whom this life is filled with transient pleasures only:

False-glozing pleasures, casks of happiness,
Foolish night-fires, women's and children's wishes,
Chases in arras, gilded emptiness,
Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,
Embroidered lies, nothing between two dishes;
These are the pleasures here. (Martz ll. 1-6)

Herbert laments that most people are "brute beasts" (15) who choose such pleasures of

a loathsome den
Before a Court, ev'n that above so clear,
Where are no sorrows, but delights more true
Than miseries are here! (15-18)

Raymond, like George Herbert, is looking for a world which makes the mundane material world pale in comparison. For Herbert, of course, the Platonistic yearning is fused to the Christian conception of heaven. Raymond, adopting the Greek symbol of Pan and referring to his temple acolytes, keeps the imagery purely pagan. Both writers, however, envision a realm exponentially grander than the physical realm, and both long to experience it.

Yet even from the start, there are clearly problems with Raymond's pursuit of his ideal spiritual world. His utilitarian treatment of Mary, for instance, reveals that his interests are by no means purely altruistic:

> "Consider the matter well, Raymond. It's a great responsibility. Something might go wrong; you would be a miserable man for the rest of your days."
>
> "No, I think not, even if the worst happened. As you know, I rescued Mary from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation,

> when she was a child; I think her life is mine, to use as I see fit. Come, it is getting late; we had better go in." (4)

Raymond's callous disregard for his young ward undercuts his grandiose claims as a pioneering researcher. As Tabitha Sparks observes, "Dr. Raymond's surgical experiment rests upon Mary's status as his dependent. Raymond justifies Mary's destruction and Helen's birth with the gains of what he terms 'transcendental medicine,' representing a wholly clinical interest in Mary's surgical transformation" (97). But even in his own superlative claims, his project begins to appear rather suspect. In trying to elaborate on his theories to Clarke, he struggles to find the right words:

> . . . I do not know whether what I am hinting at cannot be set forth in plain and homely terms. For instance, this world of ours is pretty well girded now with the telegraph wires and cables; thought, with something less than the speed of thought, flashes from sunrise to sunset, from north to south, across the floods and the desert places. Suppose that an electrician of to-day were suddenly to perceive that he and his friends have merely been playing with pebbles and mistaking them for the foundations of the world; suppose that such a man saw uttermost space lie open before the current, and words of men flash forth to the sun and beyond the sun into the systems beyond, and the voices of articulate-speaking men echo in the waste void that bounds our thought. As analogies go, that is a pretty good analogy of what I have done; you can understand now a little of what I felt as I stood here one evening; it was a summer evening, and the valley looked much as it does now; I stood here, and saw before me the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit; I saw the great empty deep stretch dim before me, and in that instant a bridge of light leapt from the earth to the unknown shore, and the abyss was spanned. (*TI* 3)

Machen is a master of analogical language when he wants to convey supernatural or transcendent forces, but the analogies he gives to Raymond are noteworthy primarily for their ambivalences. They are "pretty good," and yet Raymond "does not know whether what I am hinting at cannot be set forth in plain and homely terms." The speech emphasizes gaps and lacunae—"the unthinkable gulf," "the great empty deep," "the abyss"—and such language foreshadows the book's later contents. Raymond's inability to express his project or its anticipated results with unequivocal language suggests that he is not the great metaphysical scientist he believes himself to be. He is conducting an experiment without any viable prediction of what the final results will yield, and his optimism at its eventual outcome seems at best naïve.

Of course, the final result of Raymond's experience is not transcendent ecstasy but transcendent horror, and Mary's reaction represents a consummate weird fiction moment:

> Suddenly, as they watched, they heard a long-drawn sigh, and suddenly did the colour that had vanished return to the girl's cheeks, and suddenly her eyes opened. Clarke quailed before them. They shone with an awful light, looking far away, and a great wonder fell upon her face, and her hands stretched out as if to touch what was invisible; but in an instant the wonder faded, and gave place to the most awful terror. The muscles of her face were hideously convulsed, she shook from head to foot; the soul seemed struggling and shuddering within the house of flesh. It was a horrible sight, and Clarke rushed forward, as she fell shrieking to the floor. (7)

Even after this horrific occurrence, Raymond cannot accept failure: "'Yes,' said the doctor [to Clarke], still quite cool, 'it is a great pity; she is a hopeless idiot. However, it could not be helped; and, after all, she has seen the Great God Pan'" (7).

The results of the Experiment, and Dr. Raymond's initial reaction to those results, suggest a profound angst in the face of late Victorian science. As a scientist, Raymond appears oblivious to the metaphysical consequences of his experiments. Not only does he refuse to believe that his experiment could undermine a stable conception of the spiritual world, he actually believes his work will *unite* the physical world and the spiritual world. The initial ambiguity of his project allows him to interpret the results favorably—Mary has indeed "seen the Great God Pan." Yet he is only able to do so by ignoring the actual evidence, the convulsions and cries and "awful terror." Mary cannot tell him what she has experienced, so he assumes that he has succeeded in bridging the gulf between the realm of matter and the realm of spirit. Even if he has succeeded, though, the spiritual realm to which he has connected is not the glorious world he might have been expecting.

But is the Great God Pan really representative of transcendence, even transcendent evil? Initially, it might appear that way. After all, Machen's novella is loaded with religious language about malevolent spirituality. After

the Experiment, Clarke's "sole pleasure was in the reading, compiling, and rearranging what he called his 'Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil'" (9). Charles Herbert, one of the men to fall under Helen's sway, becomes "a ruined man, in body and soul—body and soul . . . a man who has seen hell" (16). Another such man's face becomes "an infernal medley of passions" with "the eyes of a lost soul . . . the man's outward form remained, but all hell was within it. . . . it was a devil's face . . . " (38). Indeed, the word "soul" appears over a dozen times in the novella. While Machen's vocabulary might indicate a morbid fascination with the demonic side of the spiritual world, it seems, at least cursorily, to presuppose the existence of such a world.

A closer examination of *The Great God Pan*, however, suggests that the religious language of the novella is anything but straightforward. As Kostas Boyiopoulos notes, the novel is shot through with Christian imagery, both orthodox and kabbalistic, so that "[t]he masking of Christian lore in paganism" actually "amplifies the feeling of the uncanny" (373). Boyiopoulos is interested in esoteric patterns in the text, and so is Marco Pasi, who reads *The Great God Pan* as a reflection of "negative epistemology," exposing the limitations of humanity's ability to apprehend certain planes of existence. In this case, those planes are inhabited by "monstrous, invisible, all-pervading evil" which is "aptly symbolized by Pan, the god of subversion and one of the ideal ancestors of the

Christian arch-enemy" (81). For Pasi, the horror in Machen's tales is "a direct effect of the fears that modernity provoked in their author" (81). He is certainly correct, but it is important to recall that at this time, Machen is himself a skeptic, part of that very modernity. Boyiopoulos and Pasi, like so many other critics, persist in reading the *fin-de-siècle* Machen on Christian terms and therefore assume that Pan is the evil force he superficially appears to be. A more thorough analysis, however, reveals that the Pan symbol may reflect something that was even more disturbing to the *fin-de-siècle* mind than transcendent evil—nothing. Specifically, the book's imagery represents the ways in which materialist science has stripped away the spiritual world entirely, leaving only the material world and, beyond that, the entire annihilation of consciousness and existence. The devil and hell are terrifying thoughts, to be sure, but at least they could always be read in opposition to another, heavenly, supernal realm. Moreover, Victorians were increasingly beginning to doubt that there was a hell. In the 1890s, while some may have feared going to hell when they died, many feared that there would be nothing at all.

It is this fear that animates *The Great God Pan* and drives its terror. Men like Raymond may have hoped that science could shed new light on spiritual dimensions, but instead, their work results only in a frightening betrayal, the revelation that there are no such dimensions. As Sage Leslie-McCarthy points

out, "Raymond's assumption that understanding the other world could be a matter of simple surgery demonstrates a materialistic worldview that denies the essence of the very spiritual world he is attempting to connect with" ("Chance" 39). Machen hints at this in Raymond early speech, where imagery of nothingness is pervasive. Raymond believes he can bridge "the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf," but perhaps there is nothing to bridge. In the materialist scientific worldview, there is nothing inherently special about people—humans are simply a well-evolved, well-adapted species. What we call the "soul" is in fact a series of physiological, biochemical reactions in the brain. These processes have come about through that process of evolution by natural selection that Darwin so memorably described in *The Origin of Species*.

The Great God Pan is one work of several in Machen's oeuvre to broach the theme of degeneration, the fear in Victorian society that the evolutionary process might turn backward and result in a de-evolution. Helen Vaughan's "suicide" represents a pinnacle of hyperbolized degeneration in Victorian fiction:

> Though horror and revolting nausea rose up within me, and an odour of corruption choked my breath, I remained firm. I was then privileged or accursed, I dare not say which, to see that which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve.
>
> I know that the body may be separated into its elements by external agencies, but I should have refused to believe what I saw.

> For here there was some internal force, of which I knew nothing, that caused dissolution and change.
>
> Here too was all the work by which man had been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed.
>
> The light within the room had turned to blackness, not the darkness of night, in which objects are seen dimly, for I could see clearly and without difficulty. But it was the negation of light; objects were presented to my eyes, if I may say so, without any medium, in such a manner that if there had been a prism in the room I should have seen no colours represented in it.
>
> I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again... [*here the MS. is illegible*][2] ...for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not farther describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of... as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death. (46-47)

This is perhaps the most infamous scene in *The Great God Pan*, and doubtless the primary reason for the controversy surrounding the book's publication. But in this description, Machen is simply setting down in highly exaggerated terms the fear of many Victorians, the terrible thought that humanity was no special creation of God, but was instead an animal whose progenitors were the basest of primordial creatures.

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[2] This line is part of the original text.

Some critics have argued that this depiction is not particularly scientific, and in fact derives from other sources. Charlton and Reynolds note that Machen is likely drawing on the seventeenth-century alchemist Thomas Vaughan in his descriptions (46). In *Lumen de Lumine*, Vaughan writes

> When I seriously consider the *System*, or *Fabric* of this *world*, I find it to be a certain *Series*, a *Link* or *Chaine*, which extended *a non Gradu ad non Gradum*, From that which is *beneath* all *Apprehension*, to that which is *above* all *Apprehension*. That which is *Beneath* all *Degrees of Sense*, is a certain Horrible Inexpressible *Darknesse*, The *Magicians* call it *Tenebrae Activae* . . . (*WTV* 328, ll. 1065-71, italics original)

It is beyond doubt that Machen was influenced by Vaughan, a fellow Welshman whose works he had read. Helen's name derives (in part) from this connection, and in her death, she does travel backward along the chain in "Horrible Inexpressible *Darknesse*." Yet her degeneration is also clearly the product of current scientific thought as well. Kelly Hurley examines Helen's dissolution in the light of T. H. Huxley's 1868 essay, "On the Physical Basis of Life."[3] "To be a Thing," she observes, "is to inhabit a body having no recognizable or definite form, but it is unmistakably to inhabit a *material* body. . . . Within a materialist reality, there are nothing but Things: matter subjected, provisionally, to the contingency of forms" (31). What makes Helen so terrifying, then, is not only that she—a seemingly human woman—is in actuality a Thing, but that she is so

[3] Navarette also invokes Huxley's essay in discussing *The Great God Pan* (*Shape* 182-85), as does Sophie Mantrant (295-96).

little different from anyone else. All humans, materialistically speaking, are Things in the same way she is, and the path she travels backward is the one that we have traveled forward.

These materialistic reminders terrify Dr. Matheson, the narrator of the passage, because travel to a primordial past annihilates an eschatological future. Humans, like Helen, have come from nothing, and thus they may return to nothing, even as she does. As in Raymond's early speech, the passage is shot through with the language of absence and nothingness. The Helen creature herself becomes "black like ink." Black is not a color but the absence of color, and the ink image ties that absence to writing. Matheson's writing—and therefore Machen's writing—is writing about blackness, about absence. This absence is even more pronounced when the darkness surrounds the scene, a "blackness" which is "the negation of light" and has "no colours represented in it." Helen herself is becoming progressively *less* as the process continues—she "began to melt and dissolve." In perhaps the most important description, which is definitely more scientific than alchemical, Matheson watches "the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being." This reversal of the evolutionary process brings the human to the bestial world, but then the next step of this process is "the abyss of all being." Raymond had tried with Helen's

mother to span the "abyss" between matter and spirit, but in this climactic scene, there is nothing beyond the abyss. Life, being, is fundamentally empty, fundamentally abysmal.

Of course, in some ways, the language of this passage might be interpreted Biblically. The term "abyss"—translated as "deeps" or bottomless pit" in the King James Version—appears in the New Testament as a holding place for demons,[4] and Jesus speaks of unfaithful followers being cast into darkness.[5] Adrian Eckersely observes that Helen's degeneration is described "through a vocabulary and periodic rhythm that flirts with the biblical, taking on gradual moral overtones which reach a climax in 'the abyss of all being,' a kind of hell that has been fully reconciled with biology" ("Theme" 283). But Machen's world in *The Great God Pan* has no Christian redemption, no heaven. Only hell remains, and it is a materialistic hell, an abyss that is so terrifying because it lies within each person, since each person has implicitly arisen from the same biological depths as Helen. As Navarette points out, *The Great God Pan* is a textual example of modern science's "dysteleological emphasis on fragmentation, variability, and entropy" ("Soul" 89). "Like Helen Vaughan's body," she contends, "the narrative structure of 'The Great God Pan' is

[4] Luke 8:31; Revelation 9:1-2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20: 1-3.

[5] Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30.

destabilized and degenerative," and "the integrity of the narrative structure dissolves before the reader's eyes" (102). In Navarette's analysis, the gaps in the plot and the text exemplify the true horror, for the readers are then "forced to fill in the lacunae with material drawn from our own reserves of anxiety" (102). If twenty-first century readers remain anxious about the repercussions of a materialist existence, such anxieties were doubtless magnified in late Victorian culture, and particularly in Machen himself.

He thus portrays a world in which science has destroyed the soul, physics has devoured metaphysics. One of the primary ways Machen dramatizes this conflict is in his characters' names. The seemingly generic name Helen Vaughan is in fact one of Machen's most brilliant creations. As Eckserley notes, she is given "a good pagan name" to contrast the "good Christian name" of her mother Mary ("Panic" 70). From the start, then, Machen is already implying a degeneration, from the high-minded spiritual world of Christianity to pagan Greece, not the philosophical paganism of Plato or Aristotle but the bacchic polytheism of Pan-worship, beneath which lies raw nature stripped of any religious sensibility. One might also see the abysmal traces of "hell" in her name—"hell in Vaughan." Her surname, one may quickly deduce, derives in part from the alchemical speculations of Thomas Vaughan. Yet it is also the surname of Thomas Vaughan's brother, Henry the Silurist, who would write so

memorably in "The World," "I saw Eternity the other night / Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light" (Martz ll. 1-2). Like George Herbert, Henry Vaughan sought out a Christian Platonic heaven. Herbert's unsaved men in "Dotage" are "brute beasts" who chase "Shadows well mounted," and Vaughan shares with Hebert a frustration for such people:

> O fools (said I) thus to prefer dark night
> Before true light,
> To live in grots and caves, and hate the day
> Because it shows the way,
> The way which from this dead and dark abode
> Leads up to God . . . (49-54)

Such high-minded aspirations have no fulfillment in *The Great God Pan*. The visions of Vaughan the Metaphysical Poet are subsumed beneath the researches of Vaughan the alchemist and his "Horrible Inexpressible *Darknesse*."

Machen's penchant for naming characters in *The Great God Pan* after Metaphysical Poets may seem singularly out of place, yet it is an important aspect of the novella. The term Metaphysical Poets is retroactively applied to a group of English poets writing from the late Elizabethan period through the Restoration, among the most famous being John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell. The term was first used by Samuel Johnson in the first volume of his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-81) in his discussion of Abraham Cowley, in which Johnson asserts, "The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour" (11). Johnson criticizes the

Metaphysicals because, in their effort to show off their wit, their poetry and ideals become inventive rather than imitative. T. S. Eliot would later help resuscitate their reputation for those very reasons. As Metaphysical Poets, they sought not only to display their learning and ingenuity, but also to explore the tensions of human existence and the nature of the world—the intellectual domain of metaphysics, the philosophical examination of reality.

While Machen wrote *The Great God Pan* several decades prior to the revival of interest in Metaphysical Poetry, he was certainly familiar with their work, and likely knew of the term—he frequently quoted Samuel Johnson, and even portrayed him as an actor. Yet the Metaphysicals fare poorly in Machen's little book. Machen quotes George Herbert early on, but it is from the mouth of the deluded Dr. Raymond. Later, a character named Herbert marries Helen, only to find his life brought to utter ruin. He finally dies, and his "life was all a tragedy, and a tragedy of a stranger sort than they put on the boards" (23). Similarly, a man named Crashaw commits suicide after visiting Helen, his face "an infernal medley of passions" and "a devil's face" (38). This name may refer back to Richard Crashaw, a religious Metaphysical Poet. And then, of course, there are the references to Henry Vaughan, who hailed from the same Welsh region as Machen himself and who furnishes the degenerate Helen with her

surname. All told, *The Great God Pan* racks up some substantial Metaphysical carnage in its few pages.

The motivation behind Machen's naming is appallingly simple: *The Great God Pan* is narrating the death of metaphysics. Of course, a materialistic worldview is not intrinsically opposed to the field of metaphysics; on the contrary, many atheist philosophers (in the nineteenth century and afterwards) develop quite intricate metaphysical systems. But at the heart of metaphysics lies a search for unity, for a coherent, organized understanding of reality. Writing at the time *The Great God Pan* was published, the British Idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley defined metaphysics as "an attempt to know reality as against mere appearance, or the study of first principles or ultimate truths, or again the effort to comprehend the universe, not simply piecemeal or by fragments, but somehow as a whole" (1). The world of *The Great God Pan* is inimical to such a definition of metaphysics. It is a piecemeal book from varied perspectives whose last chapter is aptly titled "The Fragments." There is no fundamental reality beneath Helen's transformations, only dissolution and darkness. Christine Ferguson has observed that many Victorians opposed the scientific positivism of their day for fear "that antimetaphysical zeal might eliminate morality and produce social disintegration. . . . A science absolved of its obligation to metaphysics must become dehumanized, for the idea of the

person . . . as a vessel for a soul is profoundly metaphysical" (468-69). In Ferguson's reading, Helen Vaughan becomes the Decadent embodiment of scientific positivism taken to its farthest measure, and her "metamorphic flight from a stable order of meaning represents the ultimate fulfillment of Decadent experimentalism" (476). In other words, *fin-de-siècle* science culminates in a collapse of metaphysics, "a stable order of meaning."

The character of Villiers problematizes this reading somewhat in his discussion of the Pan symbol. He tells his friend Austin,

> We know what happened to those who chanced to meet the Great God Pan, and those who are wise know that all symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing. It was, indeed, an exquisite symbol beneath which men long ago veiled their knowledge of the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things; forces before which the souls of men must wither and die and blacken, as their bodies blacken under the electric current. Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint, poetic fancy, to some a foolish tale. But you and I, at all events, have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form. (*TI* 43)

If indeed, as Villiers says, "all symbols are symbols of something, not nothing," how can Pan represent the nothingness of *The Great God Pan*'s materialistic worldview? The answer lies in following Machen's Chinese box usage of

symbolism.[6] In his book, characters often attempt to articulate what exactly Pan signifies, but they are never able to do so with any clarity. Raymond initially believes the experience will be a positive, transcendent one for Mary, proclaiming that he "will level utterly the solid wall of sense, and probably, for the first time since man was made, a spirit will gaze on a spirit-world" (3-4). What this means, however, he cannot tell: "I can complete the communication between this world of sense and—we shall be able to finish the sentence later on" (3). By the end of the book, Raymond regrets his actions but believes he has succeeded, writing to Clarke,

> What I said Mary would see, she saw, but I forgot that no human eyes could look on such a vision with impunity. And I forgot, as I have just said, that when the house of life is thus thrown open, there may enter in that for which we have no name, and human flesh may become the veil of a horror one dare not express. I played with energies which I did not understand, and you have seen the ending of it. (50)

Raymond's claim to have "forgotten" such terrors is weak, especially given his own admission that he was "playing with energies which [he] did not understand." His assertion that Mary saw what he said she would can only be accurate if he is using the same symbol—Pan—to represent two different things:

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[6] Machen himself uses the metaphor of Chinese boxes in *The Great God Pan* when Villiers ruminates, "A case like this is like a nest of Chinese boxes; you open one after another and find a quainter workmanship in every box" (17).

a positive life energy principle (his first definition) and a negative energy principle (his second definition).

The second interpretation of the Pan symbol quickly becomes the dominant one in the story. It is Villiers' interpretation—"the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life"—and Raymond's later interpretation—"a horror one dare not express." It is also Clarke's interpretation. Notwithstanding his "Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil," Clarke grows increasingly terrified as the events of the story unfold. At the end, he writes to Raymond about walking by Helen's old house in a small Welsh town: "I looked over the meadow where once had stood the older temple of the 'God of the Deeps,' and saw a house gleaming in the sunlight. It was the house where Helen had lived" (48). Clarke sees elsewhere in the town a pillar whose Latin inscription may be translated, "To the great god Nodens (the god of the Great Deep or Abyss), Flavius Senilis has erected this pillar on account of the marriage which he saw beneath the shade" (49). Nodens, an obscure British god, is here implicitly associated with Pan.[7] The "marriage . . . beneath the shade" hints at an encounter with "Pan," much like Mary's. And the language of the passage

[7] The actual nature of the god Nodens remains confusing. He has been identified as a variant of other Celtic gods or heroes and has been linked to Roman gods such as Mars or Neptune. As Valerie J. Hutchinson has noted, however, symbological connections do exist between Nodens and Bacchus (15, 431), and thus Machen's implicit identification of Nodens and Pan is not wholly imaginative.

mirrors the language Machen uses in the first chapter, when Clarke witnesses the Experiment. In the midst of Raymond's bizarre fusion of Victorian science and ancient paganism, the smells in the air put Clarke into a trance-like state, where he recalls a walk he took many years prior. At first he encounters only the beauties of nature, but then,

> Clarke, in the deep folds of dream, was conscious that the path from his father's house had led him into an undiscovered country, and he was wondering at the strangeness of it all, when suddenly, in place of the hum and murmur of the summer, an infinite silence seemed to fall on all things, and the wood was hushed, and for a moment in time he stood face to face there with a presence, that was neither man nor beast, neither the living nor the dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form. And in that moment, the sacrament of body and soul was dissolved, and a voice seemed to cry "Let us go hence," and then the darkness of darkness beyond the stars, the darkness of everlasting. (6)

In this early vision, the being "neither man nor beast" who is "the form of *all things* but devoid of all form" is clearly Pan, who is depicted as a cross between human and animal and whose name, literally, means "all things." In his vision, Clarke is in "cool shaded places, deep in the green depths" (5), a description which is echoed by the pillar inscription to "the god of the Great Deep . . . on account of the marriage . . . beneath the shade."

Yet once again, in Clarke's dream, we can see the progressive stripping away of symbols and meanings and metaphysics, until at last nothing at all remains. The path Clarke follows begins in "his father's house" (6), which at

least connotes safety and civilization, and may more specifically indicate church or the traditional Christian faith. But the path leads "to an undiscovered country" (6), an allusion to Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" monologue. In Shakespeare,

> the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of . . . (III.i.79-83)

As Hamlet fears what might lie beyond death, "the undiscovered country," so in *The Great God Pan*, Clarke's path leads him from the safe confines of his ancestral faith into a world of deeper and darker knowledge. Beneath civilized Christianity, he first finds nature, beautiful and enchanting. But farther in, that nature grows darker, until he is in the silent realm of the Pan-symbol. And Pan's voice beckons him to follow to the ultimate depths, "the darkness of darkness beyond the stars, the darkness of everlasting."

This darkness is deeper than any hell or any mystery religion. This is the darkness of a cosmos without metaphysics. Villiers is both right and wrong when he asserts that "all symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing." The Great God Pan is used by its characters to represent something unspeakable and transcendent. Initially, in Raymond's mind, this transcendence is a positive spiritual force, but it is ultimately revealed to be transcendent evil. And yet,

what exactly is meant by this transcendent evil force? Is Machen really positing a sort of maltheism or dark Satanism, in which spiritual evil exists without a countervailing spiritual good? Jill Tedford Owens seems to think so, asserting that "Machen resurrected Pan to embody . . . evil" (120). In making her case, Owens cites Patricia Merivale's sweeping examination of Pan literaturein which she condemns Machen for playing fast and loose with the symbol: while appreciating the innovation of a horrific Pan figure, she, unlike Owens, believes that "Machen did not make the best of the material" (166) by "leaving out the hoofs and the murky odour" (167). Owens believes that despite "vagueness in his description of Pan," Machen's use of the symbol is ultimately "concrete" (120), while Merivale wants the malevolent god to have a more active incarnation. Either way, *too* complete an incarnation would be inappropriate for Machen's purposes, as his own comments, and the story itself, indicate. "Evil" in the world of *The Great God Pan* is not any religious formulation of devil, god, or devil-god, but rather an encounter with something more horrifying than the devil himself—a world without the devil, without God, without anything beneath the tapestry of nature. It is the pure cosmic horror that lies at the core of the best weird tales, the reason authors like Lovecraft are so enamored of Arthur Machen's writing.

The Black Cinder

The Great God Pan was not the only such work Machen produced during this period. Indeed, when John Lane first published it, the novella was paired with a shorter story, "The Inmost Light." While not as infamous as its counterpart, "The Inmost Light" dramatizes the same sense of terror in the face of a world emptied of religious significance. The story follows one Charles Salisbury and his friend Dyson, the latter of whom is a recurring Decadent sleuth in Machen's *fin-de-siècle* fiction.[8] The two men, and Dyson in particular, are interested in Dr. Steven Black, a respected physician whose wife Agnes goes missing and is later found dead. Dyson claims to have seen her alive during the period of her disappearance, though he experiences "a nameless terror" (*TI* 56) at the sight of her. Dr. Black, it is eventually revealed, has performed an experiment on his wife and removed her soul, somehow transferring it into a small jewel. Upon realizing the soulless devil he has created, Dr. Black kills his wife, as she had requested he would prior to the experiment.

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[8] As noted earlier, Machen frequently objected to being identified with the Decadent Movement, and so it pays to be wary of placing too much emphasis on these connections. Nonetheless, John Lane's Keynotes books quite obviously tapped into the Decadent market. And Dyson—a would-be writer living off a small inheritance—shows the same insistence on viewing the world from a literary aesthetic perspective that one would expect to find in a conscious member of the movement. For more connections between Dyson and Decadence, see Paul Fox, "Eureka in Yellow: The Art of Detection in Arthur Machen's Keynote Mysteries." In a similar vein, for an interpretation of Dyson as a *flâneur*, see Sage Leslie-McCarthy, "Chance Encounters: The Detective as 'Expert' in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*," 38.

Though the plot of "The Inmost Light" differs in many ways from that of *The Great God Pan*, it carries out the same themes to the same horrific conclusion. Once again, a man of science has abused his relationship to a vulnerable woman in an attempt to access the spiritual world through a surgical procedure. Black's own aims sound remarkably similar to Raymond's, "and each night I had stolen a step nearer to that great abyss which I was to bridge over, the gulf between the world of consciousness and the world of matter" (75). The language of nothingness—"the great abyss"—here extends even to the doctor's own name, Black. And like Raymond, Black's attempts at uniting science and spirit serve only to annihilate the latter. The doctor who performs the autopsy on Mrs. Black recognizes this fact, as he informs Dyson:

> I have always been firmly opposed myself to any partnership between physiology and psychology. I believe that both are bound to suffer. No one recognizes more decidedly than I do the impassable gulf, the fathomless abyss that separates the world of consciousness from the sphere of matter. We know that every change of consciousness is accompanied by a rearrangement of the molecules in the grey matter; and that is all. What the link between them is, or why they occur together, we do not know, and most authorities believe that we never can know. Yet, I will tell you that as I did my work, the knife in my hand, I felt convinced, in spite of all theories, that what lay before me was not the brain of a dead woman—not the brain of a human being at all. (65)

Rather, the doctor asserts, he has seen "[t]he brain of a devil" (65). Again, in this statement we see the recurrence of the language of absence, "gulf" and "abyss." Ostensibly these words apply to the *gap* between body and spirit. As in *The Great*

God Pan, however, the reader is forced to question whether there is in fact ultimately anything beyond this gap.

Initially, it would seem incontrovertible that "The Inmost Light" assumes the existence of souls beyond the darkness, and therefore assumes a supernatural and potentially divine quality in humanity. The very title of the story refers to such a quality. And yet, as Kelly Hurley has noted, this assumption is not as straightforward as it may seem. "Dr. Black," she points out,

> Appears to affirm that a human "soul" exists independently from the human body, and thus that the human identity cannot be fully explicated within a materialist framework.
>
> Yet the story as a whole will not bear out this conclusion. It dwells obsessively on the horrific prospect of a human being conceived in utterly material terms. (117)

Instead of focusing on the existence of a transcendent evil, as is often supposed, "The Inmost Light" functions in essence as an allegory, in which the eponymous light is reduced to material components and then destroyed by the advancement of science. As in *The Great God Pan*, the religious language of devils and satyrs is used as a thin gauze of symbolism, beneath which lies "evil," but an evil which is, ultimately, a world bereft of the spiritual, the supernatural, or the mystic. The scientist, Dr. Black, makes the once supernal soul into a purely atomic object.

Ironically, however, it is the Decadent Dyson who finally finishes the job. Having located the jewel that now contains the soul of Agnes Black,[9] Dyson learns of Dr. Black's story, then

> turned and looked again at the opal with its flaming inmost light, and then with unutterable irresistible horror surging up in his heart, grasped the jewel, and flung it on the ground, and trampled it beneath his heel. His face was white with terror as he turned away, and for a moment stood sick and trembling, and then with a start he leapt across the room and steadied himself against the door. There was an angry hiss, as of steam escaping under pressure, and as he gazed, motionless, a volume of heavy yellow smoke was slowly issuing from the very centre of the jewel, and wreathing itself in snakelike coils above it. And then a thin white flame burst forth from the smoke, and shot up into the air and vanished; and on the ground there lay a thing like a cinder, black and crumbling to the touch. (77)

Early in "The Inmost Light," Dyson had begun to articulate the tenets of what would come to be known as weird fiction cosmicism. "Our common reporter," he tells Salisbury, "is a dull dog; every story that he has to tell is spoilt in the telling. His idea of horror and of what excites horror is so lamentably deficient. Nothing will content the fellow but blood, vulgar red blood, and when he can get it he lays it on thick, and considers that he has produced a telling article. It's a poor notion" (53). By the end of "The Inmost Light," after reading Black's

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[9] Yet again, Machen provides an intensely meaningful name. Agnes may mean "pure" or "holy," deriving from the Greek word for saint. It also resembles the words for "lamb" (*agnus*) and "fire" (*igni*). In one fell swoop, Dr. Black has made his pure wife into a sacrificial lamb by quenching the fire within her.

account and beholding the jewel, Dyson has learned his own lesson only too well. It is not coincidence that he feels "unutterable irresistible horror" at the sight of the objectified soul. He has seen the outcome of scientific materialism—the human spirit has been extracted and reduced to a collection of molecules. It has ceased to be immortal, and all that remains is for someone to destroy it entirely. Dyson—aesthete, Decadent, *flâneur*—is aptly poised to deliver that final blow, and to watch it happen. The last destruction of Agnes Black's soul, as it goes from "thin white flame" to "a thing like a cinder, black and crumbling to the touch," exemplifies Christine Ferguson's argument that Decadence was a fulfillment of scientific positivism's elevation of logic and abstract knowledge over ethical consequences.

The character of Dyson reappears in two Machen short stories and one novel, all published in 1895. The two stories, "The Shining Pyramid" and "The Red Hand," both follow the pattern of "The Inmost Light," in which Dyson and a less astute companion must solve a paranormal mystery, largely by means of coincidence, serendipity, and trivial arcane knowledge. These two Dyson tales elaborate on the "little people" mythology that was running through Britain at the time, often connected to the Celtic Revival. Interest was steadily growing in the Celtic lore of fairies and their relations, but in Machen's stories these beings are interpreted as a primitive race of Asiatic pygmies who observe brutal pagan

rites. Neither "The Shining Pyramid" nor "The Red Hand" focuses obsessively on the metaphysical quandaries seen in *The Great God Pan* or "The Inmost Light," but the fear of degeneration that Helen Vaughan embodies is certainly evident. As Leslie-McCarthy observes, "Questions are raised" in the stories "as to the boundaries between man and beast and the possibilities of parallel evolution" ("Re-vitalising" 76). In "The Shining Pyramid," the narrative consistently suggests that the ancient, subterranean pygmies are not only degenerate but soulless. When Dyson advises his compatriot Vaughan[10] that they should speak quietly lest they be overheard, Vaughan replies,

> "Overheard here! There is not a soul within three miles of us."
>
> "Possibly not; indeed, I should say certainly not. But there might be a body somewhat nearer." (*TI* 92-93)

And as Dyson and Vaughan witness the "little people" in their horrible rite, Vaughan thinks of them in animalistic terms, seeing "faintly that there were things like faces and human limbs, and yet he felt his inmost soul chill with the sure belief that no fellow soul or human thing stirred in all that tossing and

[10] It is ironic that Dyson's witless sidekick in "The Shining Pyramid" is named Vaughan. This does not seem to indicate any connection to *The Great God Pan*, however. Machen frequently recycles character names. Some, like Dyson, clearly are the same person. Others might be the same, or not, depending on the context—the "Meyrick" of "The White People" might be Ambrose Meyrick, protagonist of *The Secret Glory*, but he is certainly not the Meyrick of *The Great God Pan*. Names like Vaughan, Meyrick, Williams, and Phillips (various spelled) can be found throughout his corpus, and while Machen certainly does use names significantly in certain texts, his choice at other times seems more based on preference than meaning.

hissing host. He looked aghast, choking back sobs of horror . . ." (93-94). The fact that beings primitive but basically human in form could be devoid of any souls has chilling implications, for it means the "soul" itself might be only an evolutionary development, material rather than transcendent. The final ceremony is orgiastic but not ecstatic—it is profoundly physical and by no means spiritual. "The Red Hand" is even less concerned with metaphysics than "The Shining Pyramid," for until the end, it appears to be more of a generic murder mystery than a weird tale. Only in the final section, when the killer reveals that he has been to the secluded dwelling of the aboriginal beings, does the story turn horrifying. Machen here returns to Pan symbolism, when the murderer, Selby, reveals a golden token he has stolen from the little people, telling Dyson and his friend Phillipps that it "is the Pain of the Goat" (*WP* 28) and "that hell burns hot within me forever" (*WP* 27) on account of what he saw when acquiring it. Selby again establishes a link between the primitive tribe and the animal kingdom, claiming that "they are little higher than the beasts" (28). Predictably, "Phillipps and Dyson cried out together in horror at the revolting obscenity" of the Pan object (28). Though "The Red Hand" is set entirely in the labyrinthine byways of ordinary London, cosmic fear occurs at its conclusion when the protagonists are faced with grotesque reminders of a buried bestial heritage.

But while Machen consistently exposes the characters in his *fin-de-siècle* fiction to uncomfortable reminders of their own limited materiality and the horrors of an anti-metaphysical cosmos, some critics believe that his stories are saved from nihilism through the investigative efforts of their gentleman-detective heroes, particularly Villiers and Dyson. Thus, Leslie-McCarthy insists that Villiers is able to make sense of events in *The Great God Pan* by understanding the hidden patterns of the city of London; Machen's amateurs "trust that in the 'city of encounters' the solution to the mystery will be offered to the man who is willing to seek meaning in both the physical and symbolic realms" ("Chance" 43). In this way, "the *flâneur*-like amateur detective becomes the 'expert,' able to construct meaning in the urban space of a modernity whose spiritual dimension was no longer natural" (44). In a similar way, Paul Fox argues that Machen's detectives succeed because, like good Decadent aesthetes, they can impose meaning on an environment which otherwise resists stable interpretation. "The characteristic order of Mr. Villiers and particularly Mr. Dyson," Fox argues, "may be that of dilettante, but, for Machen, their task is the most serious imaginable: It is no less than the attribution of a redemptive order to the flow of impressions that dissolve identity, to ascribe formal meaning to the chaos of life" (68). This paramount task of manufacturing meaning in otherwise random spaces justifies Machen's frequent use of outrageous coincidence. There

are patterns to be found in the city, if one knows how to understand it. Dyson says as much in "The Red Hand," articulating his so-called "Theory of Improbability." Essentially, he argues that if he experiences enough of the city, if he places himself often enough at the right places at the right times, what he seeks will come to him, when "two lines which are not parallel are gradually approaching one another, drawing nearer and nearer to a point of meeting" (*WP* 18).

But if Machen's detectives undertake either to see a deep meaning beneath the city's apparent chaos (as Leslie-McCarthy maintains) or to impose their own artistic meaning upon that chaos (as Fox believes), their actions are at best only superficially successful. They solve their mysteries, to be sure, but these solutions lead to no solace, to no lasting significance. Their task is one of ever diminishing returns. Far from being a new brand of gentleman interpreters, Villiers, Dyson, and company are simply the latest in a long line of idle *flâneurs* wandering the streets of London. According to Judith R. Walkowitz, "the flaneur transformed the city into a landscape of strangers and secrets" (16), and Villiers and Dyson do just this. But he was nothing new:

> Throughout the Victorian period, it had been the prerogative of privileged men to move speedily as urban explorers across the divided social spaces of the nineteenth-century city, to see the city whole, and thereby to construct their own identity in relation to that diversity. However, in London in the 1880s, the prevailing imaginary landscape of London shifted from one that was

> geographically bounded to one whose boundaries were indiscriminately and dangerously transgressed. (11)

Wandering through the city freely, trying to make sense of its seeming coincidences, Machen's gentlemen follow the long pedigree of London flanerie, but the city and its meanings have grown ever more complex, more labyrinthine, more difficult to explain satisfactorily. And ultimately, the meanings these men construct prove shallow and unhelpful.

Villiers and Dyson are indeed able to puzzle out what has occurred in each of Machen's stories. But they do not always do so in a consistent or accurate manner. Dyson admits to having "made several gross blunders" (*WP* 26) in "The Red Hand," despite the fact that he finally tracks down Selby. Even more troubling, however, is that none of Machen's paranormal detective tales end on reassuring notes, concluding instead with open-ended dread. Dr. Raymond of *The Great God Pan* calls Helen Vaughan "a constant, an incarnate horror" and, in the book's last line he asserts that "now Helen is with her companions" (*TI* 50). While Raymond may mean that Helen has somehow entered the transcendently evil world of "Pan," we can also note that, materialistically speaking, we are all Helen's "companions," and thus any reader could join her in death. "The Inmost Light" ends abruptly with Dyson's sudden destruction of Agnes Black's material soul. The last lines of "The Shining Pyramid" find Dyson unremorseful that he and Vaughan were unable to save

the girl Annie Trevor from the bestial "little people" when they burned her in their ancient ritual:

> ". . . I don't regret our inability to rescue the wretched girl. You saw the appearance of those things that gathered thick and writhed in the Bowl; you may be sure that what lay bound in the midst of them was no longer fit for earth."
>
> "So?" said Vaughan.
>
> "So she passed in the Pyramid of Fire," said Dyson, "and they passed again to the underworld, to the places beneath the hills." (*TI* 99)

By referring to Annie as "what lay bound in the midst of them" and asserting that she "was no longer fit for earth," Dyson is indicating not only that the little people are soulless and subhuman, but that they have somehow succeeded in transforming an ordinary girl into a Thing as well. The final chapter of "The Red Hand" introduces the murderer Selby as a man who has likewise encountered the horrific "little people" and is now a "wretched man" (*WP* 27), a "shaking, horrible man" (28). He speaks in a voice that "sounded like the hissing of a snake" (28), which mirrors the description of the aboriginals in "The Shining Pyramid," who "seemed to speak to one another in those horrible tones of sibilance, like the hissing of snakes" (*TI* 93). In other words, Machen's mysteries are not the cozy detective tales of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, in which the case is resolved tidily and episodically at the end. In solving the proximate mystery to which they are tasked, his protagonists always uncover deeper, more unsettling secrets that can have no clean or comforting conclusion.

"A Relentless Mechanism"

Perhaps none of Machen's "detective" works is so unsettling as his 1895 novel *The Three Impostors*. The ostensible hero of *The Three Impostors* is again Dyson, who is here paired with his sidekick from "The Red Hand," Charles Phillipps. Dyson and Phillipps spend much of the novel in their customary fashion, idly wandering the streets of London waiting for adventures to come to them. The novel begins ambiguously with two men and a woman, all of dubious character, as they leave a dilapidated house, shortly before Dyson and Phillipps arrive there. Jumping back in time, the narrative describes the first meeting of Dyson and Phillipps, after which we learn of Dyson's most recent adventure: in the course of his wanderings, Dyson was almost knocked over by one man who was in flight from another. The former individual threw an object down near Dyson as he ran, an object which Dyson recovered and which is revealed to be the Gold Tiberius, an extremely rare and priceless Roman artifact. From this point, we follow Dyson and Phillipps around London over some months' time as they encounter several individuals who tell them rather outlandish and horrific stories. It eventually becomes evident to the reader that these individuals are in fact the three people from the prologue and that they are the three impostors of the novel's title. They are still in pursuit of the man who had thrown away the Tiberius and apparently believe that Dyson or Phillipps may know of his

location. Dyson finally encounters the man pursued, Joseph Walters, and reads Walters' account of his life. Walters' interest in the occult had brought him into the service of a man named Lipsius, an evil force who investigates devilish matters and whose followers enjoy arcane, orgiastic rites. Walters was assigned to retrieve the Tiberius for Lipsius, but upon acquiring it, he tried to escape his former master, who then sent the three impostors in pursuit. The novel then ends where it began, in the dilapidated house, where Dyson and Phillipps walk in, only to find the handiwork of the three impostors—the mutilated remains of Joseph Walters, tortured to death ironically for stealing the Gold Tiberius which Dyson now owns.

Machen's other detective stories dramatize the successes of his sleuths in using happenstance and "improbability" to solve a small mystery, even as they stumble upon darker insoluble mysteries. *The Three Impostors* represents the complete failure of his detectives, who are unable even to solve the mystery presented them, let alone impose any metaphysical meaning upon it. In tales like "The Shining Pyramid" or "The Red Hand," not only is Dyson always one step ahead of his sidekick, but also one step ahead of the reader. In *The Three Impostors*, it is the reader who is consistently one step ahead of the detectives. Dyson and Phillipps remain oblivious to the connections that the audience makes with each passing chapter, realizing that they are all being told stories by

impostors, and that these stories and these impostors are linked to the Gold Tiberius and the flight of Joseph Walters. Indeed, the two do no investigating in the novel—they are passive, not through some theory of improbability, but simply from their own obtuseness. As David Trotter observes, Dyson and Phillipps "solve nothing. Indeed, they fail to notice, until too late, that there is anything to solve. It is their failure which interests Machen" (xxi).

Trotter's observation that Dyson and Phillipps fail is not necessarily the view of all critics, for there is always a temptation to read Machen's protagonists as autobiographical, and this is certainly true in the case of Dyson (and his counterpart in *The Great God Pan*, Villiers). Paul Fox and Sage Leslie-McCarthy both seem to take this approach when they maintain that Machen's detectives are able to construct or decipher meaning in a seemingly random London environment.[11] Yet in *The Three Impostors*, far from being an ideal interpreter, Dyson is instead the subject of some of Machen's most scathing commentary.

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[11] In fairness to Fox and Leslie-McCarthy, neither focuses on *The Three Impostors*. Fox is primarily interested in *The Great God Pan* and "The Inmost Light," while Leslie-McCarthy concerns herself mostly with *The Great God Pan*. Both critics, however, mention Dyson and *The Three Impostors*. Fox clearly connects Machen and the character of Dyson with Decadence and maintains that *The Three Impostors* sold poorly after Oscar Wilde's trial because it was so Decadent: "[T]here was no further favor shown to Machen's mysteries, for their originality subsisted on that self-same, and now maligned, artistic philosophy" (59). Though Leslie-McCarthy's analysis relies on *The Great God Pan* to show how the *flâneur*-detective decodes hidden patterns, she places Dyson in the same category as Villiers and calls him a "recurring character" ("Chance" 38), showing no indication that he is any less representative in *The Three Impostors* than in any of the other Dyson tales.

Machen describes him as “pompous” (*TI* 104) early in the novel, and soon after the reader discovers that Dyson is

> a man of letters, and an unhappy instance of talents misapplied. With gifts that might have placed him in the flower of his youth among the most favoured of Bentley's favourite novelists, he had chosen to be perverse; he was, it is true, familiar with scholastic logic, but he knew nothing of the logic of life, and he flattered himself with the title of artist, when he was in fact but an idle and curious spectator of other men’s endeavours. Amongst many delusions, he cherished one most fondly, that he was a strenuous worker . . . (105)

Some of this passage’s “critiques” are tongue-in-cheek. Machen himself would not likely want to be “the most favoured of Bentley’s favourite novelists,” an apparent swipe at Charles Dickens, contributor to *Bentley’s Miscellany*.[12] And indeed, many of Dyson’s qualities and habits may mirror those of the *fin-de-siècle* Machen, such as his aimless strolling and observation of London and his love of fine tobacco.

Even so, the profusion of negative descriptions applied to Dyson here—“unhappy,” “perverse,” “delusions”—suggests that Machen is engaging in more than affable self-parody. The same is true of another way in which Dyson and Phillipps both resemble Machen: “By the mistaken benevolence of deceased relatives both young men were placed out of reach of hunger, and so, meditating

[12] Machen, with his disdain for literary realism, considered Dickens “by no means in the first rank of literary artists” (*H* 53), though he would grant some merit to *The Pickwick Papers*.

high achievements, idled their time pleasantly away, and revelled in the careless joys of a Bohemianism devoid of the sharp seasoning of adversity"(106). Like his fictional creations, Machen was living off inheritance money. But he was not so well provided as his detectives are—his income, while passable, was hardly substantial and eventually petered out. Moreover, prior to receiving it, Machen had worked eclectic low-wage jobs in the city to earn money. And unlike Dyson or Phillipps, Machen was married, and Amy's illness had already manifested itself by the time *The Three Impostors* was published. So when Machen excoriates his characters for indulging in "the careless joys of a Bohemianism devoid of the sharp seasoning of adversity," his comments should not be taken lightly. And, as the novel's shocking denouement reveals, his criticism is not ill-founded.

The nexus of Machen's scorn for his protagonists derives from their obsession with style over substance. Dyson, the true Decadent aesthete, believes that "the task of the literary man" is "to invent a wonderful story, and to tell it in a wonderful manner" (105). Phillipps, meanwhile, is more interested in science, especially the "science" of ethnology. Like his studies in ethnology, Phillipps' artistic theories are concerned entirely with externals: "The matter is of little consequence; the manner is everything. Indeed, the highest skill is shown in taking matter apparently commonplace and transmuting it by the high alchemy of style into the pure gold of art" (105-06). While Dyson and Phillipps have

differing aesthetic theories, each idling artist privileges form over content. For Phillipps, the story or the message is irrelevant—only the telling is significant. Dyson places a little more value on the content, but it still must have a "wonderful manner." And for Dyson, the story is invented—it is fictional, with its sources in the artist. As in the case of Machen's other tales from the early 1890s, truth is entirely manufactured by the artist.

But in *The Three Impostors*, even more than in Machen's other works of the period, their production of meaning fails, and the horror of what lurks beneath their tapestry of lies eventually must emerge. When Dyson, at the very beginning of the novel, first remarks on the deserted residence in which lies the dead body of Joseph Walters, he muses,

> I yield to fantasy; I cannot withstand the influence of the grotesque. Here, where all is falling into dimness and dissolution, and we walk in cedarn gloom, and the very air of heaven goes mouldering to the lungs, I cannot remain commonplace. I look at that deep glow on the panes, and the house lies all enchanted; that very room, I tell you, is within all blood and fire. (104)

The novel's ending, of course, reveals "a cruel and unknowing irony in their musing aestheticism" (Valentine 39). Acts have just occurred in that house more grotesque than Dyson's imagination can conceive. "Blood and fire" are more than the poetic tropes Dyson intends: for one of the few times in the novel, he is speaking truth—unintentional, horrific truth. Similarly, in the final pages, just before Dyson and Phillipps enter, Dyson suggests that at this house

> one might moralize over decay and death. Here all the stage is decked out with the symbols of dissolution; the cedarn gloom and twilight hang heavy around us, and everywhere within the pale dankness has found a harbour, and the very air is changed and brought to accord with the scene. To me, I confess, this deserted house is as moral as a graveyard, and I find something sublime in that lonely Triton, deserted in the midst of his water-pool. He is the last of the gods; they have left him, and he remembers the sound of water falling on water, and the days that were sweet. (232)

Any stray poetry that might actually inhabit Dyson's attempt to "moralize over death and decay" is entirely undermined by the novel's conclusion soon after. At least in his early monologue, Dyson starts with "fantasy" and ends up making a true statement, however unknowingly. His final rambling sermon starts with something real and present—the death and decay that haunt the house—and somehow meanders into Greek mythology. Rather than beginning with a myth and seeking to discern truth, he has inverted the order and, as a result, says nothing. Nor does Phillipps do anything to discourage such ramblings, fatuously stating, "I like your reflections extremely" (232). Indeed, Phillipps himself soon adds his own pseudo-literary interpretation of the house, after Dyson (perhaps correctly) thinks he hears human groaning:

> No, I can't say I heard anything. But I believe that old places like this are like shells from the shore, ever echoing with noises. The old beams, mouldering piece-meal, yield a little and groan; and such a house as this I can fancy all resonant at night with voices, the voices of matter so slowly and so surely transformed into other shapes, the voice of the worm that gnaws at last the very heart of the oak, the voice of stone grinding on stone, and the voice of the conquest of Time. (233)

As Dyson has just done, Phillipps takes something real and terrible—the voice of a man groaning in agony—and transmutes it into a grandiose metaphor, waxing philosophical on the passage of Time. As with Dyson's words, there are unintended tidbits of truth—the "matter" of Joseph Walters' body has indeed been transformed, due to the tortures of the three impostors. But Phillipps is not interested in such lowly truths as individual lives; he and Dyson only want to make grandiloquent proclamations.

The reality of death is presented at the end briefly and shockingly by Machen. The reader is given enough detail to appreciate Walters' suffering, but it is stark and grotesque,[13] with little figurative language and none of the mock-Stevensonian flippancy evident elsewhere in the book:

> A naked man was lying on the floor, his arms and legs stretched wide apart, and bound to pegs that had been hammered into the boards. The body was torn and mutilated in the most hideous fashion, scarred with the marks of red-hot irons, a shameful ruin of the human shape. But upon the middle of the body a fire of coals was smouldering; the flesh had been burnt through. The man was dead, but the smoke of his torment mounted still, a black vapour.
>
> "The young man with spectacles," said Mr. Dyson. (234)

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[13] As Claire Wrobel points out, Machen has employed imagery of Gothic ruins leading up to this moment, and finally "[l]a personne est devenue ruine" (347): Walters himself is the novel's last ruin.

It is significant that Machen gives his protagonists no opportunity to moralize or interpret or pontificate. Nothing Dyson or Phillipps have said or known about death has any significance when they are faced with the real thing.

Even worse, as Trotter, points out, they themselves are complicit in Walters' death: "If they had not wanted so badly to believe the stories they were told, if they had not become so addicted to style, they would have seen the young man with spectacles for what he really was: the injured party, the victim. They might have even done something to help him" (xxix). Most of the novel consists of Dyson and Phillipps listening to the three impostors tell them outrageous stories. And the impostors help show Dyson and Phillipps for what they really are, beneath all their aesthetic pretensions and pomposity: liars. Like the two would-be artists, the impostors captivate with style rather than substance. They lie about their identities to Dyson and Phillipps, and their tales are patently unbelievable. Yet the two "detectives" allow them to tell these outlandish stories. Phillipps, the supposed scientist of the two, proves the most gullible. When Helen, the female impostor, tells him "The Novel of the Black Seal," he listens "in a deep reverie of thought" (174). Phillipps the artist gets the better of Phillipps the scientist, for he is willing to believe her story even before she has told it, assuring her "Before you began I knew that whatever you told would be told in good faith" (174). "The most extraordinary circumstances in

your account," Phillipps tells her, "are in perfect harmony with the very latest scientific theories" (174)—that is, the outlandish pseudoscientific theories he espouses. Helen herself seems surprised at his gullibility, assuming his agreement is facetious. But he is serious—he is willing to believe her story, because his own artistic imagination is so wedded to his scientific understanding.

Likewise, Dyson begins as equally credulous. After the impostor Richmond tells him "The Novel of the Dark Valley," Dyson responds, "This is a terrible story . . . I can well believe that your days and nights are haunted by such fearful scenes as you have described" (130). That juxtaposition—"a terrible story" with "I can well believe"—gets at the heart of the issue for the two artists, whose imaginations want so desperately to find the tales true. Even so, Dyson at least grows more skeptical as the novel progresses, though his reasons for doing so are suspect. He is inclined to believe the impostor Davies's "Novel of the Iron Maid," until the latter tries to steal one of his books: "Dyson, considering this violent attack on the rights of property, and certain glaring inconsistencies in the talk of his late friend, arrived at the conclusion that his stories were fabulous, and that the Iron Maid only existed in the sphere of a decorative imagination" (191). Richmond's improbabilities, in other words, are only the secondary cause of Dyson's suspicion, and he does not begin to suspect duplicity until Richmond

wounds him personally. Nonetheless, when Helen tells Dyson "The Novel of the White Powder," he wants nothing to do with her, reacting to her story with discomfort and disgust rather than fascination.

It is therefore unsurprising that the impostors themselves also look on their actions as artistic. Walters says that the impostors "have proved their ability for tracking down persons" and calls Helen "the most subtle and the most deadly" (229). He adds that "I too have some portion of craft," thinking "my craft was greater than theirs" (229). The "too" in his statement suggests that the impostors' tracking ability is their "craft." Machen uses that same word elsewhere in *The Three Impostors* to refer to Dyson's art: "Dyson was a craftsman who loved all the detail and the technique of his work intensely" (214). Like Dyson, the impostors clearly take great delight in their elaborate conceits, and they fondly bid farewell to the various personas of their imposture after they finish torturing Walters. Torture itself is aesthetic for them. "Davies is an artist" (102), Helen tells Richmond, and she herself cuts off Walters' hand and brings it with her, believing "it will do nicely for the doctor's museum" (104).[14]

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[14] Dr. Lipsius too views his depravations artistically. When Walters accomplishes a task for Lipsius that leads to the acquisition of the Gold Tiberius at the expense of another man's life, the doctor tells him, "I congratulate you warmly; your work was done in the most thorough and artistic manner. You will go far" (227).

And like the detective work of Dyson and Phillipps, the art of the three impostors is in fact spectacularly unsuccessful. Most of their elaborate lies and storytelling yield no results, since Dyson and Phillipps do not know where Walters is. It is only when Dyson rashly refers Helen to his literary friend Russell that the impostors are able to locate their quarry. And even then, after Walters has been tortured and killed, the impostors have still failed in what was ostensibly their primary objective: to locate the Gold Tiberius. Davies wonders, "[W]here could he have hidden the thing? We can all swear it was not on him" (104). Indeed, the tremendous irony is that these three expert trackers have been so focused on their prey that they never realize that Dyson—to whom they have told three wild stories—has had the Gold Tiberius in his possession all along. All their art—tracking, tale-telling, torture—has failed. And yet, they are not particularly bothered by their failure. When Davies brings up the subject, Helen merely laughs and shows her companions the "art" of Walters' severed hand. They return to their superior, Dr. Lipsius, with no fear of punishment from him, despite his obviously malevolent nature. Their joy and confidence is born out of their aestheticism—yes, they were searching for the Tiberius, but the art itself is really the point. They have made beautiful stories and performed an exquisite torture. The style is all that matters.

What then lies beneath the style of the three impostors? What lies beneath the style of the two aesthetes? The same thing that lay beneath the Pan symbol or the opal: dark, horrific nothingness. The novel's very title is highly suggestive of such a reading. Machen himself noted,

> The title of this book has a curious history. "De Tribus Impostoribus" was a book much talked of by the learned in the seventeenth century. As far as I can remember, quoting without book, Browne of the "Religio Medici" speaks of that "villain and secretary of hell that wrote the miscreant piece of 'The Three Impostors.'"[15] But it is doubtful whether such a book were ever in existence—in print at any rate. . . .
>
> . . .[T]he three impostors, by the way, were Christ, Moses and Mahomet. Perhaps there never was such a book, perhaps such a book did exist in manuscript, was seen by a few and talked about by many. (Danielson 26)

By Machen's own admission, then, almost every aspect of the book's title connotes confusion, duplicity, and deception. On the literal level, it refers to impostors, individuals who pretend to be what they are not. Moreover, the title is derived from a book that may never have been written, a book whose existence is a lie. And most significantly, the three impostors of the supposed original *De Tribus Impostoribus* are Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, founders of the three most

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[15] Machen's memory here is good. The quotation occurs in section 20 of Browne's *Religio Medici*: "That villain and Secretary of Hell, that composed that miscreant piece of the three Impostors, though divides from all Religions, and was neither Jew, Turk, nor Christian, was not a positive Atheist" (21, lines 5-8). In this passage, Browne contends that true atheism is actually impossible, that all forms of unbelief have in the background some acceptance of the divine. Of course, Machen's novel does not necessarily *advocate* atheism but rather dramatizes the fear of its implications. In this sense, the artistic figures in the novel are also "secretaries of hell," using what Browne refers to as "the Rhetorick of Satan" (21, lines 10-11).

significant religions in Western civilization. In other words, the original work supposedly posits that monotheistic religion is itself a lie. And by choosing to title his own novel *The Three Impostors*, Machen not only plays on the original's atheistic implications but also invites comparison between the two sets of impostors. Thus, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed are set side by side with Davies, Richmond, and Helen, three sadistic murderers who tell lies for personal gain. It would no doubt be exaggeration to assert that Machen, even in the mid-1890s, was so contrarian as to believe that the three most important religious figures of the Western hemisphere were really tantamount to deceptive epicurean killers. But it is likewise impossible to ignore the obvious intimation that the two trios share a common thread of imposture.

And as in *The Great God Pan*, in *The Three Impostors* transcendent evil becomes a stand-in for the horror of an uncaring, anti-metaphysical cosmos. All of the impostors' tales end in some form of death or destruction. At the end of "The Novel of the Black Valley," Richmond calls his fictional villain Smith an "incarnate fiend, whose soul is black with shocking crimes" (130). Helen, in "The Novel of the Black Seal," sees sights that are "horrible, almost beyond the power of human conception and the most fearful fantasy. . . . [H]orror broke through all such reasonings and left me shattered and loathing myself for the share I had taken in the night's work" (173). Davies recalls "the hideous agony" (190) in

which a man dies at the end of "The Novel of the Iron Maid." And at the end of Helen's "Novel of the White Powder," one of her characters proclaims that what he has seen "has tempted me to doubt the Eternal Goodness which can permit nature to offer such hideous possibilities" (211).

Of course, these tales are all elaborate fictions constructed by sociopathic liars, so the ideological conclusions their narrators draw must be considered suspect. But the fact that Dyson and Phillipps find themselves drawn to such narratives indicates that they too have some sympathy, however unknowing, for the impostors' dreadful worldview. More importantly, the only honest character in the novel, Joseph Walters,[16] is forced by the circumstances of his life into the same awful nihilism as his pursuers. When Walters realizes the part he has played in another man's death, he steals the Tiberius, only to recognize shortly thereafter just what he has done: "I knew that I had put forth my finger to thwart a relentless mechanism rather than a man" (228). Walters' observation in this context is extremely important, because it demonstrates the layered symbolism of Lipsius that parallels the symbolism of Pan. Lipsius as a person represents a transcendent evil, a maleficent force hunting down a nearly helpless man who

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[16] Technically, one could argue that we should not assume Walters' honesty, that his own narrative could be as duplicitous as all the others. But such a reading is highly improbable. The most starkly, obviously "real" moment in the novel is Walters' death, described by the omniscient third-person narrator. Moreover, the words of the impostors in the prologue—talking candidly amongst themselves—entirely corroborate Walters' account.

has dared to show a scrap of conscience. But, beneath that, Lipsius is "a relentless mechanism rather than a man." The workings of Lipsius are like the mechanistic workings of an atheistic cosmos, a universe that is nothing more than an impersonal series of moving parts, a universe in which an individual means nothing. Lipsius and his minions pursue pleasure—violent, sexual, dishonest, amoral—because there is no greater teleology in their world. "[T]he greatest of all sciences," Lipsius tells Walters as he corrupts the idealistic young man, "the key to all knowledge, is the science and art of pleasure" (220). It is through words, through "speeches such as these" that Walters is "seduced" (220).[17] Lipsius "succeeded in undermining all my principles," until at last "I viewed existence with the eyes of a pagan" (220). Walters knows the nihilistic hedonism of Lipsius and his crew, knows that "if I fell into his hands, he would remain true to his *doctrine of style*, and cause me to die a death of some horrible and ingenious torture" (228, italics mine).

Walters desperately tries to evade Lipsius, to rebel against the "doctrine of style" and live a life informed by morality. But in the end, he cannot escape it.

[17] Martin Willis suggests that Machen, drawing from his researches into esoteric mysticism, privileges those who can effectively control language. While he acknowledges that superficially Lipsius "appears to have these forces subjugated to his will" (198), Willis contends that even Lipsius "lacks the necessary skills" (198). His justification for this claim, however, is not only far too brief but actually based (ironically) on a transcription error: he spells the villain's name "Lispius" throughout his essay and bases his argument almost entirely on the presence of "lisp" in the name, connoting a speech impediment. In reality, *Lipsius* truly is the unstoppable master of language in the text.

His death forces the pompous aesthetes Dyson and Phillipps to confront the logical end of their own Decadent doctrines. They are instinctually disgusted by the act, and yet they have no fundamental basis in their own philosophy to feel such disgust, for Walters' murder, in its own way, is as stylish as their own fictions. Lipsius and his impostors have written their worldview over the one man in the book who had opposed it. Machen, in all his early weird tales, allows his characters to manifest disgust at the horrors they encounter; there seems to be *something* inherently wrong in such apparently transcendent evil. And yet the greatest horror of all is that perhaps there is *nothing* wrong with it, because the traditional standard of good and evil is itself a lie. It is a horror at the implications of a purely aesthetic world, a world in which surface and style are everything, because spirit and substance do not exist. The reason Machen's early stories are often considered his best, the reason writers like Lovecraft praised them so highly, is that they spring from the pen of a man who at the time had the soul of a mystic but the mind of an atheist, who could not bear the possibility that there might be nothing beyond "the abyss of all being."

CHAPTER THREE

Hieroglyphics and Ornaments
The Search for the Source of Ecstasy in *The Hill of Dreams* and "The White People"

Any number of explanations might be proffered for the commercial failure of *The Three Impostors*. Perhaps readers dismissed it as nothing more than a Stevenson pastiche, or perhaps its more horrific moments were simply too gruesome even for a late Victorian audience. John Lane's association with Decadence, and therefore with that Decadent *par excellence*, Oscar Wilde, may have impeded sales when Wilde went on trial. Whatever the reasons, the public's lack of interest in *The Three Impostors* helped prompt Machen's wholesale refashioning of his entire prose style, which marks the second ideological phase that will be analyzed here. Though the briefest of the three phases, and in many ways primarily transitional in nature, Machen's fiction during this stage is markedly distinct from that which precedes it and that which follows it.

It was shortly after the last of his Dyson stories appeared in 1895 that Machen began the "hideous work" (Danielson 39) of creating a prose voice for himself, one distinct from the high-wire balance of sarcasm and horror in his Keynotes novels. Even without Machen's own explicit statements, the stylistic change in his works from this period is immediately evident, to casual readers as

much as to literary critics and Machen connoisseurs. What is less often noted, however, is that the change in technique is accompanied by an apparent change in philosophy, a philosophy that can be summed up in a single word—ecstasy. In Machen's second phase, ecstasy is the only constant, but here it is primarily literary in nature, because Machen is still searching for a philosophy that will properly align with its pursuit; the only thing stable in Machen's world during these years is art itself, art which becomes a means of metaphysical exploration.

"The Best Symbol of My Meaning"

It was during this second phase of his writing that Machen penned his book *Hieroglyphics*, finished only a few weeks prior to Amy's death in 1899 and published three years later. Though read almost exclusively as an expression of Machen's aesthetic and literary theories, *Hieroglyphics* is technically a novel, as Valentine has pointed out (64). The frame narrator encounters a literary hermit, who then expounds on his ideas about art and literature. Fundamentally, the Hermit argues, the defining characteristic of great literature is "ecstasy":

> If ecstasy be present, then I say there is fine literature, if it be absent, then, in spite of all the cleverness, all the talents, all the workmanship and observation and dexterity you may show me, then, I think, we have a product (possibly a very interesting one), which is not fine literature.
>
> . . . I have chosen this word as the representative of many. Substitute, if you like, rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown. All and each will convey what I mean; for some particular case one term

> may be more appropriate than another, but in every case there will be that withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness which justifies my choice of "ecstasy" as the best symbol of my meaning. (*H* 11)

This declaration, perhaps more than any other, has been taken as a clear articulation of Arthur Machen's perspective regarding the intent of his writing. He spends the rest of the book elucidating this theory, giving examples of writers and works that manifest this quality, as well as some that fail to do so.

Whether tacitly or explicitly, most critics presuppose that the ecstasy criterion is the key to understanding Machen's entire corpus, both in terms of his artistic agenda and his worldview. According to Wesley Sweetser, it "represents a crystallization of his artistic standards" (99). Robert S. Matteson believes that in *Hieroglyphics* "Machen stated his artistic aim quite clearly" (260), even if he "failed to accomplish his goal in his first books" (261). And for Joshi, Machen's philosophy is so simplistic that "[t]he notions of ecstasy, of the veil, and of the sacrament" are indeed "sufficient to unlock the mysteries of Machen's *entire* output" (*WT* 14, italics mine). Many others who admire Machen's writings subtly signal their assent by referring to his works from the 1890s as a single collective unit. Indeed, in the eyes of weird fiction author Donald Wandrei, "The two years, 1895 to 1897, are the life of the author, for in them he summed up his life, and from them he produced his masterpiece [*The Hill of Dreams*]" (30). It is certainly convenient either to lump all his writings together (as Joshi and

Wandrei do) or to bisect them by centuries (as most other critics do), drawing a line between his nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction. But regardless of the approach, *Hieroglyphics* is stretched horizontally from east to west across Machen's timeline. It is read as the statement of his philosophy for all the works that precede it down to the final words to leave his lips. Such a reading is tempting, of course, because it allows for an efficient way of categorizing his entire oeuvre. But can *all* of Machen's writings, fiction and non-fiction, *fin-de-siècle* and Modern, really be read according to this standard? While the principles set forth in *Hieroglyphics* accurately describe his second and third phases of life, they are singularly ill-suited for his earlier works, particularly those weird tales for which he is so famous.

Though the word "ecstasy" recurs throughout Machen's writings of the late 1890s, neither *The Great God Pan* nor *The Three Impostors* ever uses any variant of the term. And why should they? Ecstasy is in short supply in the world of Villiers and Dyson. People commit unspeakable atrocities and degenerate into oozing puddles. The only experience close to ecstasy in Machen's early horrors is the "great wonder" (*TI* 7) Mary feels at the beginning of Dr. Raymond's experiment. But this wonder soon becomes abject terror. Some pagan or atheistic ecstasies are hinted at—Helen Vaughan's private time with her lovers, the seething ceremony in "The Shining Pyramid," the "strange rites" (*TI* 222) by

which Lipsius initiates Joseph Walters—but these are treated in their various narratives as decidedly loathsome acts. As already discussed, the ecstasies of Machen's first phase are ecstasies of fear, the fear of an empty and unsupernatural cosmos.

It was in 1896 that Machen began writing the first of his works that would truly exemplify the pursuit of ecstasy, on both the literary and ideological level, though none would see print until *Hieroglyphics* found a home in 1902. This first work, conceived as a *Robinson Crusoe* into the mind of an aspiring young writer, was originally to be titled *The Garden of Avalaunius*, though it would later be known as *The Hill of Dreams*. But if *The Hill of Dreams* would mark the final culmination of ecstatic writing during this phase, its first flowering would be *Ornaments in Jade*.

Ornaments in Jade was not published in book form until 1924, and even then its print run was limited. It consists of ten short prose fragments, all written in 1897[1] as Machen was still struggling through the future *Hill of Dreams*. It is difficult to know what even to call the ten little pieces that make up the volume. They are often referred to as prose-poems, though this label downplays the fact that they are all narratives, however brief. Yet, conversely, the term vignette

[1] Four of the tales were first published in 1908, while the other six did not appear until the 1924 collection.

cannot fully capture the dreamy, melodic quality that they possess. And while they all have "plots" of a sort, they begin and end *in medias res*, making them too fragmentary to be considered stories. Perhaps they are best described by Machen's own word for them—ornaments. The *Ornaments in Jade* are not directly connected to one another, but they share certain overlapping themes: the baseness of shallow materialism, a glorification of ritualism (particularly pagan), a delight in nature. Though they offer only glimpses of larger canvasses, each fragmentary ornament is nonetheless beautifully self-contained. The ten pieces published later as *Ornaments in Jade* thus represent Machen's earliest complete articulations of the theme that would encompass all his remaining writings, the pursuit of that elusive, exquisite ecstasy.

Several of the ornaments convey a careful yet languid sense of near transcendent joy that is entirely absent from Machen's weird detective fiction. The protagonist of "The Rose Garden" is "ecstatic as a poet dreaming under roses," having learned "that bodily rapture might be the ritual and expression of the ineffable mysteries" (*WP* 31). In "The Turanians," Mary "laughed for joy, and murmured and whispered to herself, asking herself questions in the bewilderment of her delight" (35). The main character of "The Ceremony" experiences "devout passion" as she follows another whose "whole body palpitated with expectation" during an ancient ritual (45). Julian in "Nature"

tells his friend about his experience of the world around him, which is "the story of a wonderful and incredible passion" (58). Experiences of this passionate mysticism are decidedly absent from the texts Machen was writing earlier in the decade, which are occasionally comical and often frightening but never supernally ecstatic.

But what is soon evident to the reader of *Ornaments in Jade* is that the ecstasies Machen describes are almost entirely pagan. Of course, Machen was no stranger to paganism. He grew up side-by-side with traces of it in Caerleon, and his job cataloging occult works no doubt dovetailed with his natural curiosity, so that by the time he was writing in earnest, he well stocked with pre-Christian stories and imagery to weave into his fiction. *The Great God Pan* gets its very name from Greek myth, and occult references abound in *The Three Impostors*. But in those works, as shown in the previous chapter, Machen's paganism serves primarily as a symbolic mask for an underlying metaphysical dread; in those works, paganism is scary.

In *Ornaments in Jade*, on the other hand, paganism represents the single most significant means of participating in the ecstatic. The ordinary British girl Mary discovers a glimpse of ecstasy by secretly observing the mysterious communion of gypsies in "The Turanians." Ethel Custance seeks to win the affections of Captain Knight through Mrs. Wise's magical prescriptions in

"Witchcraft." The unnamed female protagonist of "The Ceremony" reverently lays flowers at an old pagan stone, having "performed there all the antique memorial rite" (45). Julian, a character in nature, finds that the valley reminds him of "the fire of a sacrifice beneath the oaks" (58). In "Midsummer," Leonard watches a seemingly demure farmer's daughter participate in a "shameless, unabashed," and presumably pagan event that includes "writhing figures" doing "things that he thought the world had long forgotten" (55). More subtly, Machen imbues his ornaments with frequent references to exotic and ancient Eastern locales: a "Persian carpet" (30) or "Persian roses" (54), the Iranian city of Ispahan (31) or the *Ombres Chinoises* (38-39). The ten brief *Ornaments in Jade* evoke a sense of mystery and wonder that is at times hypnotic and dream-like and at times intense and passionate, but certainly positive.

English Christian society, however, is largely portrayed as inimical to these essentially pagan ecstasies. Many of the pieces follow conventional, respectable men and women as they take tentative steps to observe or even participate in pre-Christian rituals whose power they envy. The gypsies' harmony with nature in "The Turanians" fascinates Mary, despite what society has said of them: "'Those horrible people' she had heard the yellow folk called, but she found now a pleasure in voices that sang and, indistinctly heard, were almost chanting" (34). The young lady in "The Ceremony" watches Annie

Dolben perform a pagan ritual, despite the fact that Annie was "lately a promising pupil at Sunday school. Annie was a nice-mannered girl, never failing in her curtsy, wonderful for her knowledge of the Jewish Kings" (45). Annie's act of ecstatic sacrilege leads her concealed observer to do the same, and she "kissed the grey image with devout passion" (45). In "Witchcraft," Ethel Custance knows of Mrs. Wise's magical arts and seeks to use them. Mrs. Wise herself must pay lip service to Christian society—"I have the Book, sir" (41)—but in private "she leered at the shy, pretty-faced girl" (41), giving Miss Custance an obscene image to complete the desired rite.

Even in ornaments that are not explicitly pagan, the superficial Christian religion of society is depicted as harmful to sensitive and artistic souls. Symonds in "The Idealist" cannot bear his coworkers' coarse humor. In "Torture," young Harry's burgeoning mysticism is repressed by a public school life that values only education and competition, so that he seeks unsuccessfully to inflict pain on others. This tendency holds true even in "The Holy Things," in which the protagonist experiences ecstasy through the medium of church ritual, for the ritual is juxtaposed with the mundane urbanity of Holborn, and Machen portrays the rituals themselves as being nearly pagan in their antiquity. "The Holy Things" is the last ornament and the one which ventures closest to the

philosophy Machen would adopt in the twentieth century, but it nonetheless remains redolent of pagan rites, even if they have been Christianized.

This is not to say that Arthur Machen has subscribed literally to a pre-Christian religious perspective, that he became in the late 1890s a polytheist who practiced pagan ceremonies. The paganism of *Ornaments in Jade* is always purposefully ill-defined, the rites ambiguous, the idols and pantheons and incantations left unnamed and unspoken. Machen was no more a member of some witch-cult than he was a devotee of the Greek gods. As in *The Great God Pan*, paganism in *Ornaments in Jade* is functional—it is the vessel by which characters are enabled to experience moments of mystical transcendence, moments of ecstasy. Wesley Sweetser finds only "The Rose Garden" a fully engaging portrayal of mysticism, and complains that some of the other ornaments "are all rather unsuccessful attempts to convey ecstatic union through [Machen's] usual series of symbols: music, incense, the bell, ritual, and burning pools at sunset" (110). Sweetser's contention that these pieces are "rather unsuccessful" is certainly disputable, but even more significantly, his dismissal of Machen's "usual series of symbols" misses an important point—at the time Machen wrote the ornaments, those symbols were not his "usual series" at all. To be sure, "music, incense, the bell, ritual, and burning pools at sunset" all appear in his earlier work, but in those contexts they symbolize something far

different—the deep and abiding dread of cosmic abyss. *Ornaments in Jade* represent Machen's first fleeting attempts to use his impressive symbolic powers for his new artistic end: the production of ecstasy.

Lucian's Journey

As discussed in chapter two, Arthur Machen was frequently associated with the Decadent movement, largely because his shocking books were published by John Lane, the firm responsible for the entire Keynotes series and the infamous periodical *The Yellow Book*. Indeed, while he steadfastly disavowed formal association with the movement, Machen had to admit the inevitable guilt by association, given that his own works were released "when yellow bookery was at its yellowest" (*TNF* 138). His protestations are not taken seriously enough by critics, though as Ferguson, Fox, Leslie-McCarthy, and others demonstrate, *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors* do share some traits in common with other Decadent writers of the period. Nonetheless, the underlying horror of these works—the almost manic fear of a world without metaphysical meaning—sets his earlier fiction apart from the fiction penned by many writers of the *fin de siècle*. It is just such amoral Decadent writers that Machen excoriates through the characters of Dyson and Philipps in *The Three Impostors*. Ironically, it was after 1895, after *The Three Impostors*, after the Wilde trial attached a further stigma to the movement that Machen would produce his most Decadent material.

Complementing Decadence, the Aesthetic movement held to the now-famous axiom, "Art for art's sake." By this standard, what could be more Aesthetic than an ornament, an exquisite little piece of crafted beauty? In their rejection of more Christian tradition for pagan sumptuousness, the *Ornaments in Jade* exemplify Aestheticism.

But even *Ornaments* would not stand as Machen's most Decadent work. They are elegant, self-contained little pieces, but they were only shards of Machen's master plan, the work he conceived of following the debacle of *The Three Impostors*. That work, *The Hill of Dreams*, is the culmination of Machen's second stage of philosophy, in which the realms of fiction and fact, illusion and reality, become at times virtually indistinguishable. This phase is the link between the unbelief of his early writing career and the faith of his later life. For the Machen of the late 1890s had moved beyond the dreadful emptiness embodied in Helen Vaughan and Dr. Lipsius and was now willing to acknowledge the existence of mystical transcendence. He had not yet perceived a set *path* to that transcendence, however, and that lack of direction is what animates *The Hill of Dreams*.

The Hill of Dreams follows the troubled writing career of would-be author Lucian Taylor, from his first youthful recognition of his vocation to the end of his brief life. Lucian grows up in the Welsh town of Caermaen, and the first four

chapters juxtapose the baseness of his worldly village community with the spiritual ineffability of the visions which beckon him toward the artistic life. Even Lucian's genuinely sympathetic clergyman father cannot truly fathom his son's calling. Lucian is unable to connect with any living person, except Annie Morgan, a pretty local girl whose kiss awakens one of his ecstasies. Shortly before kissing her, Lucian experiences perhaps his most significant vision, in which ranks of dead Roman legions are brought to life and Caermaen seems transported almost two thousand years into the past. Unable to reconcile his mystic spirit and literary aspirations with his philistine environment, Lucian moves to London, scene of the book's last three chapters. Annie as a person ceases to be a significant factor in his life, remaining to Lucian as an idealized muse, and his father has passed away, leaving a meager inheritance. But London life is difficult, and Lucian struggles to write material that will satisfy his demanding standards. Finally, after stumbling upon an orgy at a London tavern, Lucian encounters a bronze-haired prostitute, whose advances he refuses. Haunted by continued visions of the woman, however, Lucian at last finds himself seemingly able to write. And yet, this last hope is a cruel trick, for his few months of artistic success prove to be illusory, the hallucinations of his fevered mind upon returning home from the tavern. In reality, he is dying, and the manuscripts upon which he has lavished so much anguish are all illegible.

There are several incontrovertible truths about *The Hill of Dreams*. It is, of course, semi-autobiographical, featuring a sensitive young Welsh author with a parson father who moves from Wales to London and pursues writing. Clearly Machen put some of himself into Lucian Taylor, and Lucian's struggles to write in London mirror Machen's own as he was writing *The Hill of Dreams* itself. Moreover, though it was published in 1907, the novel clearly belongs to the 1890s. While critics often debate the extent to which *The Hill of Dreams* reflects the Decadent and Aesthetic movements, the influence of those movements on the book is undeniable.[2] As a study of the dissolution of a sensitive artistic figure; as a sometimes voluptuary depiction of sensual pleasures; and as a work in which visions, hallucinations, and literary imaginings blur the line between reality and fantasy, *The Hill of Dreams* is overall a far more Decadent work than the Keynotes novels that first tied him to the movement. Indeed, Lucian thinks of himself as "'degenerate,' *decadent*" (*HD* 64, italics original).

But given these basic observations, what more is *The Hill of Dreams* about? "I will write a *Robinson Crusoe* of the soul," Machen claimed, "the story of a man who is not lonely because he is on a desert island and has nobody to speak to, but lonely in the midst of millions, because of his mental isolation, because there

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[2] David Vessey (125-26), George C. Schoolfield (198-214), and Kirsten MacLeod (135-38) locate *The Hill of Dreams* with the Decadent movement, as do Wesley Sweetser (73-75) and John Batchlor (3-4, 7) in comparing Machen to Walter Pater.

is a great gulf fixed spiritually between him and all whom he encounters" (Danielson 39-40). Of course, this spiritual gulf is Lucian's ability to participate in visions of mystic ecstasy. The ultimate source of this ecstasy, however, remains unclear throughout the course of the novel. Indeed, the plot of the novel consists largely in Lucian attempting—and failing—to account for his visions, to locate their source and to communicate them to those around him. He knows that he has tapped into something far greater than the provincials of Caermaen can imagine, something only a few other poets and writers have ever known, but he cannot express to anyone the force or the urgency of this mysterious something.

Yet Lucian's inability to articulate or convey his mysticism should hardly come as a surprise. After all, Machen himself was probably experiencing the same artistic helplessness at the time. There was, of course, the pain of having to manufacture a new writing style; and Machen's ups and downs as a London writer are clearly mirrored in Lucian's "agonising nights when the pen seemed an awkward and outlandish instrument, when every effort ended in shameful defeat, or . . . the happier hours when at last wonder appeared and the line glowed, crowned and exalted" (*HD* 248). But *The Hill of Dreams* also reflects the growing pains of Machen's changing belief system. He was moving from doubt

to belief,[3] and the first clear manifestation of this belief is ecstasy. Variants of that word occur nine times explicitly in the novel, a stark contrast to the occasionally comical but always bleak cosmos of *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*, where the word never appears. So a change has certainly occurred. Yet while men and women do often experience sudden life-altering epiphanies, changes of worldview can also be gradual phenomena. What makes *The Hill of Dreams* such an interesting—and often enigmatic book—is that Machen appears to have been trying out various systems of belief even as he was writing the novel. If the fundamental theme of ecstasy provides a unifying matrix for the work, it is nonetheless the product of a mind and heart in flux. In *The Hill of Dreams*, we see one novelist in search of a worldview.

As such, Lucian experiences his ecstasies in a variety of different ways during the course of the novel. John Batchlor finds that "Lucian seeks ecstasy of experience under (at least) three headings: diabolic, literary, or holy" (4). Batchlor's categories may not be the most helpful in understanding the novel as part of Machen's own philosophical development, though he is quite correct to

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[3] The transitional nature of *The Hill of Dreams* is simultaneously one of its most and least Decadent features. The instability of the Decadent movement meant that it was characterized by flux, change, transition. It is, according to David Weir, "a dynamics of transition" (15). And with ever shifting worldviews, *The Hill of Dreams* is the crowning work in Machen's phase of transition. Yet the transition Weir is describing arcs away from Christianity and toward modernism: "Christian and classical values are very much in the process of being rejected and replaced during the so-called decadent period" (14). This is the opposite of Machen, who is moving *toward* Christianity and *away* from modernism.

note that *The Hill of Dreams* does not present a single, stable source of ecstasy. In the novel, Lucian's visions generally seem religious in nature, though the religions vary. Machen often evokes pagan Wales in his descriptions of Lucian's early career. As a youth, Lucian wanders into a scene with clear prehistoric religious significance, described as "the fairy hill, within the great mounds, within the ring of oaks, deep in the heart of the matted thicket" (20). This setting, with its "ring of oaks" and "round heap of fallen stones" (18), is clearly meant to suggest places sacred to the most ancient residents of Wales, an effect reinforced by Machen's frequent use of the term "fairy." The allusions to the ancient Welsh culture are not as quite as sinister as the "little people" of the Dyson mysteries, yet neither are they indications of some idealized Celtic dreamland. They are simply one source of Lucian's ecstatic inspiration, and he becomes joined to the pagan lands when "he lay in the sunlight, beautiful with his olive skin, dark haired, dark eyed, the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun" (20).

The faun image, like the fairy image, is often applied to Lucian after this point, always reiterating the connection of his experiences to the animism of the land's earliest Celtic inhabitants. While Machen's treatment of the faun in *The Hill of Dreams* superficially follows his treatment in *The Great God Pan*, the differences in his usage of the goat-god symbol are even more informative. Notwithstanding Dr. Raymond's grandiose pretensions, the god Pan is almost

entirely in Machen's earlier writings a representation of an empty, horrifying universe. In *The Hill of Dreams*, on the other hand, the faun takes on other connotations, some of them positive. On the one hand, he may represent Lucian's role as a creative storyteller in the midst of the humdrum Caermaen. Merivale notes that the classical poet Lucian envisioned Pan as "a fragment of another world (that of familiar tradition and myth)" who "wanders into a 'realistic' context" (5). Machen goes even further, however, and in *The Hill of Dreams* he uses faun in reference to the ecstasy that first motivates Lucian. Yet even here, it is an ambivalent rather than a wholly positive symbol, because—tormented Decadent artist that he is—Lucian is never certain whether the visions which consume him are organic or parasitic, life-sustaining or life-devouring, positive or negative. As Lucian hearkens back to his first experience,

> [h]e saw before him a vision of two forms; a faun with tingling and pricking flesh lay expectant in the sunlight, and there was also the likeness of a miserable shamed boy, standing with trembling body and shaking, unsteady hands. It was all confused, a procession of blurred images, now of rapture and ecstasy, and now of terror and shame, floating in a light that was altogether phantasmal and unreal. (*HD* 30)

The faun in this passage becomes Lucian's surrender to his most primeval artistic instincts, in contradistinction to the "miserable shamed boy" he otherwise is. But Lucian's later experiences, and especially his move to London, prompt him to

attempt a rejection of the nature religion which so binds him to the Welsh countryside:

> [H]e felt that he had escaped. He could now survey those splendid and lovely visions from without, as if he read of opium dreams, and he no longer dreaded a weird suggestion that had once beset him, that his very soul was being moulded into the hills, and passing into the black mirror of still water-pools. He had taken refuge in the streets, in the harbour of a modern suburb, from the vague, dreaded magic that had charmed his life. Whenever he felt inclined to listen to the old wood-whisper or to the singing of the fauns he bent more earnestly over his work, turning a deaf ear to the incantation. (159-60)

The recurrence of fauns and fairies signifies the interlacement of Lucian's art with the pagan past of the land to which he is bound by soul and heredity, and it is in one sense appropriate that his writing flounders in the city when he turns away from his heritage, though destructive elemental forces appear hopelessly bound up with this creative wellspring.

Lucian has other possible religious sources for his ecstasy, however, such as the religions of classical antiquity, an age that his first name partially invokes. This becomes dramatically manifest in perhaps the most famous scene in *The Hill of Dreams*, the resurrection of the Roman legion, when Lucian hears

> the note of the Roman trumpet, *tuba mirum spargens sonum*, filling all the hollow valley with its command, reverberated in the dark places in the far forest, and resonant in the old graveyards without the walls. In his imagination he saw the earthen gates of the tombs broken open, and the serried legion swarming to the eagles. Century by century they passed up; they rose, dripping, from the river bed, they rose from the level, their armour shone in the quiet

> orchard, they gathered in ranks and companies from the cemetery, and as the trumpet sounded, the hill fort above the town gave up its dead. By hundreds and thousands the ghostly battle surged about the standard, behind the quaking mist, ready to march against the mouldering walls they had built so many years before. (59-60)

This vision occurs sometime after his vision of the faun, and it too is intricately connected to Lucian's creative process. Indeed, Machen replays the entire scene near the end of the novel. The Roman religion itself—which consisted of little more than Greek myths dressed in Latin names—plays little direct role, but it establishes the relevance of classical antiquity as an alternative to the ancient Celtic paganism. Later, in the Caermaen museum, Lucian carefully notes "the memorial stones from graves, and the heads of broken gods, with fragments of occult things used in the secret rites of Mithras" (115-16), linking the Romans of his village to the Mithraic mystery religion which promised transcendent revelation to adherents.

But if Machen appeals to the pagan and Roman religions when attempting to account for the wellspring of Lucian's visions, he also subtly proffers a mystical form of Christianity as another possible source. He first hints at the Christian redemptive pattern in the Roman legion passage: as George Schoolfield observes, the Latin phrase that begins the scene, "*tuba mirum spargens sonum*," derives not from the Roman Empire but from the Medieval *Dies Irae (Day of Wrath)*. Schoolfied calls the quote "chronologically jarring but effective" (201),

though it is an ambiguous line in the context; since those words signal the trumpet sounding immediately prior to Christ's return, they suggest judgment, which could represent either salvation or damnation.

The presence of Christianity is even more manifest in the character of Annie Morgan, whom Lucian encounters on the same evening he perceives the revivified Roman legion. Annie certainly becomes linked to his creativity, and even as he experiences his most intimate physical contact with her, she becomes a Platonic ideal figure. Following the Roman vision, Lucian stumbles about in the dark woods until he encounters Annie. His first glimpse of her strongly suggests religious iconography and strikes a sharp contrast to his prior experience:

> He began to walk with trembling feet towards the light, when suddenly something pale started out from the shadows before him, and seemed to swim and float down the air. He was going down hill, and he hastened onwards, and he could see the bars of a stile framed dimly against the sky, and the figure still advanced with that gliding motion. Then, as the road declined to the valley, the landmark he had been seeking appeared. To his right there surged up in the darkness the darker summit of the Roman fort, and the streaming fire of the great full moon glowed through the bars of the wizard oaks, and made a halo shine about the hill. He was now quite close to the white appearance, and saw that it was only a woman walking swiftly down the lane; the floating movement was an effect due to the sombre air and the moon's glamour. At the gate, where he had spent so many hours gazing at the fort, they walked foot to foot, and he saw it was Annie Morgan. (63)

The halo around the hill suggests saintliness, as does her almost ethereal white gliding. The Roman fort, meanwhile, is a "darker summit" in the midst of darkness. Annie has been bringing food to an elderly woman, and her care demonstrates to Lucian that "there were really people who helped one another; kindness and pity were not mere myths, fictions of 'society'" (64). In other words, she embodies Christian compassion. Though she has little effect on Lucian at first, her kindness causes him to regard her more thoroughly, and

> [a] hazy glory of moonlight shone around them and lit up their eyes. He had not greatly altered since his boyhood; his face was pale olive in colour, thin and oval; marks of pain had gathered about the eyes, and his black hair was already stricken with grey. But the eager curious gaze still remained, and what he saw before him lit up his sadness with a new fire. She stopped too, and did not offer to draw away, but looked back with all her heart. They were alike in many ways; her skin was also of that olive colour, but her face was sweet as a beautiful summer night, and her black eyes showed no dimness, and the smile on the scarlet lips was like a flame when it brightens a dark and lonely land.
>
> . . . .
>
> . . . And their lips were together again, and their arms locked together, each holding the other fast. And then the poor lad let his head sink down on his sweetheart's breast, and burst into a passion of weeping. The tears streamed down his face, and he shook with sobbing, in the happiest moment that he had ever lived. The woman bent over him and tried to comfort him, but his tears were his consolation and his triumph. Annie was whispering to him, her hand laid on his heart; she was whispering beautiful, wonderful words, that soothed him as a song. He did not know what they meant.
>
> . . . .
>
> He fell down before her, embracing her knees, and adored, and she allowed him, and confirmed his worship. (66-67)

Annie thus seems to be an anodyne to the wild, dark frenzy Lucian feels after the Roman vision. While the vision causes him turmoil, Annie's kiss is "the happiest moment that he had ever lived"; the tears he cried become "his consolation and his triumph." Her compassion extends beyond other people and even to Lucian in her attempts "to comfort him." Most importantly, she becomes an object of worship to him, as Christ is an object of worship. And this is hardly surprising, as she is the apparent incarnation of his longing for ecstatic, supernal beauty. Long after she ceases to become a real presence in his life, she remains to him as "the symbol of all mystic womanhood" (237).

But even in his "happiest moment," in the midst of their embrace, there are suggestions that Annie's presence is no more benevolent to Lucian's soul than any other. Machen notes that Lucian's appearance "had not greatly altered since his boyhood," and the description echoes the earlier description in the pagan faun scene. Yet Annie and he "were alike in many ways," hinting at a pagan earthiness beneath her apparent classical transcendence. Perhaps most significant is that "the smile on the scarlet lips was like a flame when it brightens a dark and lonely land." This image contains within it all the contrarieties of Machen's own artistic chaos in the novel. On the one hand, it clearly connotes illumination, indicating that Annie's smile may be a celestial light to Lucian's tormented spirit. Yet this is no white light but "scarlet lips . . . like a flame."

And there is no image more prevalent in *The Hill of Dreams* than the flame. Indeed, the novel begins and ends with fire and flames, words which appear dozens of times in its pages. In the book's first line, "There was a glow in the sky as if great furnace doors were opened" (3) when the twelve-year-old Lucian rambles about the Welsh countryside. And on the final page, when he dies among his unreadable writings, the people who discover his body "took up the blazing paraffin lamp, and set it on the desk, beside the scattered heap of that terrible manuscript. The flaring light shone through the dead eyes into the dying brain, and there was a glow within, as if great furnace doors were opened" (268). As the metaphor which brackets the novel's contents and pervades its pages, the symbol of the flame remains as ambivalent as all Machen's symbols in *The Hill of Dreams*, as it is when describing Annie's lips. For flame can allude to illumination in darkness, as well as passion and life, but also damnation and torment. These paradoxical connotations extend even to the protagonist's name, Lucian, with its obvious evocation of Lucifer. Lucifer, who was a bearer of light and may appear as an angel of light, becomes the furious enemy of God tormented in hellfire. The Protean nature of flame symbolism makes fire the perfect emblem for *The Hill of Dreams*, because even as he is exploring diverse systems of thought, Machen can retain a consistent image for his entire novel. Thus, he can apply the depiction of flame to Annie Morgan, the "symbol of all

mystic womanhood" (237) and also to the London prostitute, "a tall and lovely young woman who seemed to be alone. She was in the full light of a naphtha flame, and her bronze hair and flushed cheeks shone illuminate as she viewed the orgy. She had dark brown eyes, and a strange look as of an old picture in her face; and her eyes brightened with an argent gleam" (207).

If *The Hill of Dreams* does work as a coherent novel, however, its success ultimately returns to Machen's exploration of the theme of ecstasy, and the frustrated artist who has sporadically known such ecstasy but is doomed to fail in his attempts either to understand that ecstasy himself or to communicate what little he has learned to uncomprehending outsiders. All of Machen's marshaled symbolism and imagery, all of his religious and literary allusions, revisit this singular defeat. The myriad worldviews of Wales—pagan, Roman, Christian—all provide potential sources of mystical experience, yet their external differences are finally unimportant to Machen at this stage of his life; these religions are all palimpsests, various ways men of the past have attempted to explain an awesome, awful joy. Lucian himself is but another link in this chain, another layer to the palimpsest—after the Roman vision, for instance, he discovers that

> he himself was in truth the realisation of the vision of Caermaen that night, a city with mouldering walls beset by the ghostly legion. Life and the world and the laws of the sunlight had passed away, and the resurrection and kingdom of the dead began. The Celt assailed him, beckoning from the weird wood he called the world, and his far-off ancestors, the "little people" crept out of their caves,

> muttering charms and incantations in hissing inhuman speech; he was beleaguered by desires that had slept in his race for ages. (65)

This passage certainly connects Lucian to the pagan world; yet at the same time, "the vision of Caermaen that night" is a vision of *Roman* soldiers, the "mouldering walls" are the same "mouldering walls" the Romans "had built so many years before" (60). And if his subsequent ecstasy in the arms of Annie Morgan depicts a more Christian layer of experience, it is an ecstasy as fraught with contradiction and peril as any other. Moreover, these experiences all eventually degenerate into debased forms of their originals, evident when Lucian begins "a singular study of corruption" (141). In the wake of this most Decadent of projects, he learns a story—apparently set in antiquity—of a woman who tempts her slave-boy with indulgent pleasures, dramatizing the loss of spiritual vision to earthly pleasure. Lucian's "idealized" love for Annie Morgan leads him to private masochistic acts: "It was for her that he sought strange secrets and tried to penetrate the mysteries of sensation, for he could only give her wonderful thoughts and a wonderful life, and a poor body stained with the scars of his worship" (128). Lucian's worship of Annie also paradoxically leads him toward greater exposure to pagan and Roman sources. The real Annie Morgan, meanwhile, marries a farmer and apparently settles into Caermaen's materialistic Protestant existence. And finally, Annie will be replaced in his imagination by

the woman with bronze hair, substituting a white sainted natural figure for an enflamed metropolitan prostitute.

Yet this degeneration should come as no surprise, for Machen has suggested throughout *The Hill of Dreams* that the true artist will always finally be damned. He is damned by the incommensurability of his reality with his vision, by the gulf between the mundane and the spiritual. And, most of all, he is damned by his inability to tell anyone what he feels, what he *knows* to be true. Words almost always fail Lucian in *The Hill of Dreams*. Notwithstanding his desire "[t]o win the secret of words" (231), Lucian's writing efforts most often seem to fall short of what he seeks to communicate. While he does occasionally get some words down that he is proud of, more often he finds his own words appalling: "Wooden sentences, a portentous stilted style, obscurity, and awkwardness clogged the pen; it seemed impossible to win the great secret of language; the stars glittered only in the darkness, and vanished away in clearer light" (41). But while some of this may be related to a degree of literary ineptitude on his part, the "stars" vanish as much because he does not even understand what his own feelings are. When Annie speaks to him, "she was whispering beautiful, wonderful words, that soothed him as a song. *He did not know what they meant*" (113, italics mine). Lucian tries desperately to capture "that high theurgic magic" (162) of pure literature:

> It was this magic that Lucian sought for his opening chapters; he tried to find that quality that gives to words something beyond their sound and beyond their meaning, that in the first lines of a book should whisper things unintelligible but all significant. Often he worked for many hours without success, and the grim wet dawn once found him still searching for hieroglyphic sentences, for words mystical, symbolic. (162-63)

Machen would later recycle many of the elements in this paragraph in composing *Hieroglyphics*. Clearly, Lucian's struggles mirror the struggles Machen was having as he was writing the novel. An important paradox in Lucian's writing, however, is his need to write a text that will "whisper things unintelligible but all significant" (163). In other words, he is attempting to write about something he *experiences but does not understand*. He is seeking to mold words to simulate an ecstasy he has felt, an ecstasy whose source is beyond his comprehension.

That is why Lucian's failure as an artist is a damnable offense, why he is dogged by flames on almost every page of *The Hill of Dreams*. Lucian is not quite as bad as Dyson and Phillipps (or, for that matter, Lipsius and his impostors); he does have some substance beneath his style. But his mystical visions and dreadful ecstasies are so sporadic and ill-defined that he finds himself utterly unable to convey them to anyone else. Consequently, for all practical purposes, style is all he has. Without knowing the origins of his experiences, Lucian must try to forge them from language. But precisely *because* there is real substance to

his ecstasy, his efforts to recreate it fictively are doomed to failure. His own words will be at best a pale imitation of a transcendent reality, at worst a form of idolatry. Like a painter who has mastered colors but not perspective, Lucian can write words that are beautiful but lack depth. Only at the very end might Lucian succeed in saying what he wants to, but in so doing, he has made his words unintelligible to anyone else; though "[h]e thought it was beautiful" (268), his final manuscript is "all covered with illegible hopeless scribblings" (267) that "nobody could read . . . if they wanted to" (268).

The Two Ecstasies

The last substantial work from this period of Machen's life is his story "The White People." Written in 1899 and first published in 1904, "The White People" is often regarded as one of Machen's finest weird horror tales. In the frame narrative, a man named Cotgrave pays a visit to the philosophical lunatic Ambrose Meyrick. The two soon get begin discussing the nature of good and evil, Meyrick asserting that true goodness and evil have little to do with ordinary mundane conceptions of right and wrong, and to prove his point, he lets Cotgrave read a book that has come into his hands. This book is a journal of sorts kept by a teenage girl who has been reared largely by her nurse, a nurse who knows a great deal about supernatural rituals that take place in the surrounding countryside. Whether at the nurse's behest or her own willing

involvement, the girl becomes a participant in some such ritual, apparently orchestrated by the eponymous "white people," who seem to be akin to the "little people" of the Dyson stories. It is not entirely clear what occurs next, though perhaps she is impregnated by some non-human entity, as was Mary in *The Great God Pan*. Meyrick had found her dead, but as to the cause, he tells Cotgrave only that "[s]he had poisoned herself—in time" (*WP* 97).

Like *Ornaments in Jade* and *The Hill of Dreams*, "The White People" represents a stylistic experiment for Machen, which is what makes it so difficult to summarize. While the frame narrative is a conventional third-person account, the girl's tale is told in a manner that anticipates twentieth-century stream-of-consciousness fiction. The girl tells her story in a distinctive meandering, allusive voice, frequently coining words and drifting into tangents in the midst of lengthy languid sentences and paragraphs. Though its plot outline resembles his earlier horrors, "The White People" is clearly a product of Machen's second stage in that the theme of ecstasy is given frequent attention by Meyrick at the beginning of the story. Meyrick, however, articulates this ecstasy far more clearly than Lucian Taylor ever does. Ecstasy is "a transcendent effort to surpass the ordinary bounds" (66), and it has two possible sources: extreme holiness or extreme wickedness. Indeed, Meyrick begins the tale by proclaiming that "[s]orcery and sanctity . . . are the only realities. Each is an ecstasy, a withdrawal

from the common life" (62). These heightened conditions, Meyrick claims, are rare—most ordinary people will never know true evil, any more than they will know true holiness. Meyrick presents the girl's journal to Cotgrave as his roundabout example of transcendent evil.

One may fairly ask why "The White People" does not belong more properly in Machen's third stage, which—as will be explored shortly—is characterized by more formal Christian belief. After all, unlike most of the *Ornaments in Jade* or *The Hill of Dreams*, "The White People" frames its philosophy in explicitly Christian language. Certainly "The White People" is a transitional transitional piece, forming a sort of bridge between the second and third phases of Machen's worldview. Yet tempting as it is to read Meyrick as a pure spokesman for Arthur Machen, the story as a whole resembles *The Hill of Dreams* in its philosophical instability, for it is questionable just how completely the girl's tale bears out Meyrick's claims.

"The White People" leaves its readers with many questions, even after it ends. The most obvious is simply, "What just happened?", and even after several readings, one cannot be certain of everything that has occurred. But another equally significant question many readers pose is, "How does the girl's journal bear out Meyrick's belief in ultimate evil?" The first step is to locate the evil in the text, which is itself a tricky feat, since we see everything through the

eyes of a less-than-objective adolescent. Yet Machen does subtly indicate where we ought to seek this wickedness when, after Cotgrave has read the manuscript, Meyrick tells him that the girl "poisoned herself—in time. No; *there was not a word to be said against her in the ordinary sense*" (97, italics mine). This phrasing is significant, because at the beginning of "The White People," Meyrick is at great pains to demonstrate that the wickedest people in the world often externally appear the most ordinary. He tells Cotgrave that "true evil has nothing to do with social life or social laws . . . If you met a very evil man, and recognized his evil; he would, no doubt, fill you with horror and awe; but there is no reason why you should 'dislike' him" (67, 68). What Meyrick suggests at the end, then, is that the girl externally appeared respectable but was, in fact, precisely the example of horrific evil he wants to show Cotgrave.

The problem with this assertion, however, is that the girl does not come across as being evil incarnate. Of course, in one sense, this might support exactly what Meyrick is saying, that the worst evil is undetectable by conventional moral standards. Yet Meyrick maintains to Cotgrave that "the manuscript illustrates the talk we had last week" (97). Cotgrave is presented as Machen's typical interested but hapless audience, who is present in the story to give Machen's sage-like authority figure Meyrick an excuse to pontificate. Thus, one would expect the "illustration" of the journal to be sufficiently obvious that even

Cotgrave can understand it. Joshi believes that the story fails in this regard and "is simply the (admittedly mesmerizing) story of a girl insidiously indoctrinated by her nurse into the witch cult and the orgies she eventually practices" (*WT* 22). This description is rather misleading—there is in fact nothing "simple" about "The White People." But he is right to implicate the nurse and the witch cult. These are the most obvious sources of evil in the tale. The girl's tale ends when "[t]he dark nymph, Alanna, came, and she turned the pool of water into a pool of fire . . ." (96). "Nymph" is one word the girl uses for the white people, and so Alanna and her kind are clearly the instigators of some questionable practices. One cannot help but think back to the ceremony of "The Shining Pyramid," and such rituals are clearly in Machen's mind. The girl's participation in such activities may mark her as evil; yet how can she be truly, transcendently wicked if she is merely acceding to the white people? Do not they deserve the chief blame? And what of the nurse, who has abused her trusted position and fed the girl on stories of this dark fairyland for her entire life?

That is not to say the girl is merely an innocent bystander in the supernatural crimes of the story. The nurse may have given her the means, but it is she herself who concertedly summons Alanna and the other to visit her (95-96). The nurse tells the girl the story of Lady Avelin, a woman who uses magic

to kill all but one of her suitors before being burned as a witch, and the girl identifies herself with the lady:

> And I thought of it so much that I seemed to get into the story myself, and I fancied I was the lady, and that they were coming to take me to be burnt with fire, with all the people in the town looking at me. And I wondered whether she cared, after all the strange things she had done, and whether it hurt very much to be burned at the stake. (89)

But while the girl is clearly complicit in her own pagan indoctrination, she nonetheless comes across as more of a victim than a malevolent force. She is the victim of a business-minded father who leaves her in the charge of the nurse; a victim of the nurse, who uses her authority to twist the girl's mind from a young age; a victim of the white people, who seem to be using her for their own enigmatic ends; and, if some critics are correct, a victim of a Pan-like force that impregnates her. The girl does not always willingly accept the nurse's intents, and her early dabbling with the fairy forces of the country seem more innocent curiosity than active evil. It feels more like the ecstasies of *Ornaments in Jade*, where paganism is actually contrasted favorably with Protestant Christianity.

But then, such tension is exactly what we might expect in Machen at this time. On the one hand, Meyrick's definition of ecstasy is far more precisely delineated than any description in *The Hill of Dreams*; indeed, the very point of *The Hill of Dreams* is that Lucian's ecstasies cannot be articulated. Yet it is still a dualistic—and highly idiosyncratic—definition. Critics almost universally

believe that Meyrick's "sorcery and sanctity" definition applies to Machen's thought and writing, even after his conversion. And they are probably right. But if so, it is only in a theoretical sense; practically speaking, "The White People" is the last Machen fiction piece to treat the dark side of ecstasy in any significant way. As Robert Matteson observes, "The malefic visions of *The Hill of Dreams* and *The White People* picture Machen at his evil best and form a rather useful contrast with *The Secret Glory* and *A Fragment of Life*, both of which explore the other side of the coin by suggesting the essence of saintliness" (262). What Matteson does not make clear is that the first two works were written prior to the last two, and that after "The White People," Machen's coin has for all intents and purposes only one side. This is because in *The Hill of Dreams* and "The White People," Machen is still struggling to discern for himself the nature of ecstasy. This exploration leads to a literature of flux, of changing styles and uncertain worldview. *The Hill of Dreams* is a philosophical grab-bag, in which art is the only constant religion, yet a singularly ineffectual and shallow religion. The philosophy of "The White People" is more refined, but Machen's affinity for the girl he has labeled as evil suggests that he had still not entirely formulated his view of ecstatic mysticism, despite Ambrose Meyrick's confident, precise system. After "The White People," Machen would largely abandon such meditations on evil, and what horror remains in his oeuvre is of a different nature.

Thus, "The White People," written as it was just prior to Amy's death, signals the last flowering of Arthur Machen's second phase of writing, from 1896-99, during which he would not only alter his writing style, but adopt his renowned dedication to the experience of ecstasy. The reason this second phase is so brief, however, is that this early conception of ecstasy seems bereft of any true philosophical or epistemological foundation. As articulated in *Hieroglyphics*, ecstasy seems like little more than a heightened emotional state. It certainly plays a pivotal role in *The Hill of Dreams*, yet the nature and source of that ecstasy are never made manifest. Valentine points out the many ambiguities and unanswered questions of the novel, and he is probably right to a certain extent when he claims that "Machen exercises considerable authorial restraint in *The Hill of Dreams*" (55) to allow his audience multiple interpretations of the book's events. But perhaps another key reason for the novel's ambiguity is that its author had not himself made up his own mind. Having clearly recognized the importance of ecstasy, Machen was then forced to determine what exactly that meant, on the philosophical, artistic, and practical levels, and *The Hill of Dreams* was the early proving ground. The writing of *The Hill of Dreams* spans a period of time that we *know* was transitional in other ways for Machen. Amy's cancer would have become increasingly prominent during these years. Machen himself was being forced to develop an entirely new writing style. By the end of the

century, he would adopt the Christian faith as his own, and, as we have already noted in his letter to Toulet, he was moving from a position of skepticism about the supernatural world to one of acceptance. All things considered, it would be more surprising if Machen's writing in the last years of the nineteenth century did *not* reflect these changes.

The Hill of Dreams and "The White People," like Machen's shorter works during this time, are ornaments, exquisitely worked and yet oddly decorative. The *Ornaments in Jade* and "The White People" are beautiful artifacts and certainly bear the marks of Machen's subsequent thought, but they are all fragmentary, because their author's thoughts were fragmentary when he wrote them. *The Hill of Dreams* likewise espouses no single perspective—it is a novel of process, of discovery, a novel that parallels its author's own search for meaning, a meaning he desperately needed as his darkest hour was approaching. And as the new century dawned, Arthur Machen would at last find that meaning.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I Saw My Treasure Found at Last"
Eruptions of Christian Ecstasy in *A Fragment of Life*, *The Secret Glory*, and Machen's Journalistic Tales

Talking precisely about the nature of Arthur Machen's "conversion" to Christianity is a difficult matter. The very terms of such a debate would probably be irksome to him, smacking as they do of the evangelical Protestant fervor that stresses a single moment of belief. Though Machen himself could certainly appreciate spiritual epiphanies, he never specifically locates a moment when he "made a profession of faith" or "turned his life over to Christ." Reynolds and Charlton point out that "he had never left the church in which he was brought up" (100-01), a fact readily apparent in his letter to Toulet. Yet, they add, "he had strayed some distance from its main tradition, and had certainly not displayed any concern with questions of theology" (101). Reynolds and Charlton suggest Machen's marriage to Purefoy as a motivating factor in this shift, but it was clearly already occurring at around the time of Amy's death, and "it had given him much satisfaction when [Amy] was received back into her church on her death-bed" (Reynolds and Charlton 101). In general, Machen locates late 1899 and early 1900 as the period of time when mystical encounter began to manifest itself in his life. Connecting his experience to his 1915

Christian story *The Great Return*, Machen would later write that “in that winter “and autumn of 1899-1900 . . . the two worlds of sense and spirit were admirably and wonderfully mingled, so that it was difficult, or rather impossible, to distinguish the outward and sensible glow from the inward and spiritual grace” (*TNF* 197-98). More specifically, he identifies “a bright, keen morning in November” (*TNF* 184) of 1899 when this process began. It is unclear whether or not that day marked his “conversion,” as he does not articulate it in specifically Christian terms, but as will be seen, all his writing from this point on is demonstrably Christian in nature.

Machen’s return to faith may seem counterintuitive or reactionary in some ways. After all, according to conventional wisdom, the Victorians had experienced a crisis of faith that led an increasingly significant percentage of the population toward unbelief. Such perceptions, however, are more than a little misleading. G. R. Searle observes that in late Victorian England, “militant unbelief was relatively rare” and “the proposition that religion was ‘in decline’” is “a highly dubious one” (534). “Indeed,” Searle notes, “the English population may have been more imbued with Christian values in the late Victorian period than at any previous period” (535). More specifically, Machen’s return to his ancestral belief more or less conforms to a pattern perceived by Timothy Larsen, the “crisis of doubt,” in which freethinking and atheist converts abandoned their

skepticism and returned to their childhood faith. In fact, according to Larsen, "a remarkably high percentage of Secularist leaders did reconvert. There was a substantial crisis of doubt in the Victorian Secularist movement. A far greater percentage of Secularist leaders became Christians than Christian ministers became sceptics" (vii). Machen, of course, was neither a minister nor a secular apologist, but the yawning doubt so evident in the London of Villiers and Dyson did give way to a genuine acknowledgment of faith, in much the same way as the Secularists whose lives Larsen traces in his book.

Even if such a trend had not existed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, it seems unlikely that Machen could have stayed away from the faith forever. As the terror of *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors* indicates, a world bereft of transcendent meaning was abhorrent to him—sooner or later, he would have had to choose either or faith or despair. At first, Amy's death prompted him toward the latter, and on that November day he began "in a state of very dreadful misery and desolation and dereliction of soul" (*TNF* 188) prompted, it seems, by Amy's death. Yet it is ultimately unsurprising that he chose faith, even in his darkest hour, for it is scarcely plausible that an arbitrary naturalistic world could ever explain to his satisfaction the emotions evoked by his memories of "the vision of an enchanted land" in "noble, fallen Caerleon-on-Usk" (*FOT* 14). Nor could a life of Decadent artistry succeed in capturing that

ecstasy, as demonstrated by the failures of Lucian Taylor in *The Hill of Dreams*. Moreover, though a thoughtful and intelligent individual, Machen was often at odds with the tenets of a modernizing England, and his return to a faith-filled (and literate) past makes perfect sense.

The commitment to ecstasy outlined in *Hieroglyphics* would remain consistent until his death, and "The White People" begins to examine that ecstasy in more Christian terms. Nonetheless, as the previous section shows, these works truly belong to the transitional phase. Arthur Machen's first "Christian" work of fiction, on the other hand, is *A Fragment of Life*, and in it, he began adopting a technique that would remain the basis for most of his subsequent fictional works. Unlike the sometimes facetious, sometimes horrifying indirectness of his first stage or the searching, artistically indulgent prose-poetry of his second stage, Machen's Christian writing is almost always characterized by a juxtaposition of the mundane and spiritual worlds, so that the latter shines all the brighter in contrast to the former.

"They Changed Their Lives, Like King Arthur"

A Fragment of Life was begun in 1899, though he did not finish it until 1904, the year it was first published. The novel is concerned with Edward and Mary Darnell, a couple who have been married about a year. Despite their relative youth and recent marriage, the Darnells hardly seem in love with one another,

nor are they hostile. Edward is an ordinary clerk, and he and Mary spend most of their time discussing what to do about spare bedrooms and inconvenient relatives. Yet on certain occasions, Edward begins to see, symbolically or elusively, glimpses of a vibrant mystical realm beyond his humdrum existence. Sometimes these glimpses break through the drab confines of London and environs, but often they are connected to Mary, who he identifies with a vision of an ancient, mysterious forest. Mary responds favorably but tentatively to Edward's perceptions, but the couple's conversations on the subject eventually fade into the background of suburban "reality." At last, however, while researching his Welsh heritage, Edward begins increasingly to see his present reality as in fact the true illusion, and at last he and Mary abandon their former lives, questing together in search of this mystic truth and embarking on adventures that the third-person narrator does not presume to describe.

Subsequent reaction to *A Fragment of Life* has been mixed. Wesley Sweetser, while acknowledging that it "is Machen's nearest approach to expressing the inexpressible," still finds it unconvincing, "so nebulous and remote from common experience that it has had only a small body of readers in the past—and even that number is steadily diminishing" (32). Sweetser's judgment, however, appears premature. Valentine has more recently noted that *A Fragment of Life* "has gradually become accepted as amongst Machen's most

consummate achievements" (71), and Joshi agrees that the novel represents "the Machen we love and admire: the writer who can invest the ordinary with a sense of numinous wonder" (*WT* 28-29). In his introduction to a recent publication of it, Joshi adds that "it deserves far wider recognition as one of Machen's most finished works" (*WP* ix). While *A Fragment of Life* certainly does not have the readership of *The Great God Pan* or *The Three Impostors*, it has survived to become one of Machen's most critically acclaimed works.

If Sweetser misses the enduring value in *A Fragment of Life*, he does recognize that the work "marks a shift in approach and subject matter from the black magic and demonology of the 1890s to the more positive revelation of miracles and communion which he was to adopt thereafter" (31). This change in theme is an obvious concomitant to his change in worldview. Gone are the chilling horrors of the Keynotes books and the Dyson mysteries. Moreover, despite its gestation period of half a decade, *A Fragment of Life* is a remarkably unified work thematically, as critics have discovered. This sets it apart from its predecessors like *The Hill of Dreams*, in which Machen is concertedly searching for a style and a philosophy he can call his own. In *A Fragment of Life*, he found both, for it exemplifies what Machen would do in fiction over the course of the twentieth century.

What critics justifiably admire in the novel is the finely tuned interplay of commonplace details with exquisite bursts of otherworldly beauty. Anyone who reads a plot summary of what actually happens in *A Fragment of Life* is unlikely to pick up the book itself. Indeed, almost nothing really happens—Edward goes to work, he and Mary have discussions and occasional undramatic arguments, and the two perform daily household tasks while lightly gossiping about acquaintances. Such a book should be excruciating to read, and some passages do extend to several tedious paragraphs and interminable conversations. But by the time one has endured these banalities, the peripheral gleam of heavenly realms is so welcome that Machen's depiction of ecstasy becomes truly convincing.

In "The White People," Ambrose Meyrick contends that true evil has nothing to do with the everyday peccadilloes and behavior of life. But if Machen continued to hold that opinion, he must also have shared Meyrick's belief that such evil "is rare, and I think it is growing rarer" (*WP* 66), because from *A Fragment of Life* on, the target of Machen's attacks is not the evil of supernaturally heightened wickedness but the evil of average middle-class existence. It was one of the most marked distinctions of Machen's Christian phase, and among the reasons his twentieth-century work is so often ignored by weird scholarship—gone are the shocking horrors of "transcendent evil," replaced by horrors that

Machen seems to portray as equally heinous, the horrors of the ordinary. These horrors do not appear terrifying, because most people live daily with them, but in Machen's thought, they are no less reprehensible, and he marshals all his literary faculties toward convincing the common reader that his or her life is abominable.

The opening paragraph to *A Fragment of Life* immediately sets the tone, establishing the contrast between the world of the mystic imagination and the world of anesthetic routine:

> Edward Darnell awoke from a dream of an ancient wood, and of a clear well rising into grey film and vapour beneath a misty, glimmering heat; and as his eyes opened he saw the sunlight bright in the room, sparkling on the varnish of the new furniture. He turned and found his wife's place vacant, and with some confusion and wonder of the dream still lingering in his mind, he rose also, and began hurriedly to set about his dressing, for he had overslept a little, and the 'bus passed the corner at 9.15. He was a tall, thin man, dark-haired and dark-eyed, and in spite of the routine of the City, the counting of coupons, and all the mechanical drudgery that had lasted for ten years, there still remained about him the curious hint of a wild grace, as if he had been born a creature of the antique wood, and had seen the fountain rising from the green moss and the grey rocks. (99)

The comfortably middle-class Edward is in the main not an autobiographical depiction of Machen, but he does share with Machen an ancestral kinship to a land more natural and beautiful than suburban London, "as if he had been born a creature of the antique wood." Like most of Machen's later heroes, Edward Darnell is at heart a nature-loving mystic, but a mystic whose soul has been

borne down by the gradual attrition of shallow worldliness. The opening sentence transitions from a half-remembered vision of natural beauty to the actual beauty of the sunlight, then degenerates into "the varnish of the new furniture." It is Edward's difficult task, in this paragraph and throughout the books, to retain his "wild grace" despite "the routine of the City, the counting of coupons, and all the mechanical drudgery that had lasted for ten years."

In this quest, Edward is the initiator. It is his walking tour of London that uncovers to him hidden enchantments in the city, entering into a "fairy tale" (133) in which "some enchantment had informed all common things, transmuting them into a great sacrament" (134). It is his journey through his genealogy that leads him to discover "the old blood that had suddenly stirred in him; the resurrection of the old spirit that for many centuries had been faithful to secrets that are now disregarded by most of us" (164). Mary, on the other hand, is more inured to workaday life, and much of the subtle suspense in *A Fragment of Life* centers around her. The reader expects Edward will ultimately achieve his transfiguration, but will he be able to articulate his revelations to Mary? Can he break through all the barriers of middle-class daily existence and persuade her of her worth and value to him on his quest?

Machen dramatizes this tension in his first physical description of Mary. Upon arriving at breakfast, Edward "kissed his wife seriously and dutifully. She

had brown hair and brown eyes, and though her lovely face was grave and quiet, one would have said that she might have awaited her husband under the old trees, and bathed in the pool hollowed out of the rocks" (99). The reader often wonders which aspect of Mary Darnell will triumph—the "grave and quiet" reserve of her current life, or that expectant waiting that aligns with Edward's own dreams. Will Edward's attitude toward her remain "serious and dutiful," or will he be transformed, not only in his own spirit but in his marital relationship? Edward himself is unsure; when face-to-face with Mary, he is like "a scholar confronted with a doubtful hieroglyph, either wholly wonderful or altogether commonplace" (114). In one of his earliest visionary moments, Edward scares Mary rather than enchanting her:

> As he came to his gate he saw his wife standing in the doorway, with a light in her hand, and he threw his arms violently about her as she welcomed him, and whispered something in her ear, kissing her scented hair. He had felt quite abashed a moment afterwards, and he was afraid that he had frightened her by his nonsense; she seemed trembling and confused. And then she had told him how they had weighed the coal. (117)

Mary's initial reactions—her apparent fear and retreat into normalcy ("she had told him how they had weighed the coal")—do not initially suggest grounds for optimism.

In the end, however, they are both successful in freeing themselves from the shackles of their old life. While the mystic quest may be in one sense solitary,

as Ambrose Meyrick suggests in "The White People," Machen allows it to be a communal venture in *A Fragment of Life.* R. B. Russell points out that Edward "gains his sense of this [ideal] life individually," but Mary "is also included in his visions and has visions of her own" (19). Indeed, Mary becomes one of Edward's chief sources of inspiration in this regard. Her "voice . . . was incantation in his ears, tones that summoned before him the vision of a magic world" (*WP* 124), and when she speaks,

> the sound of [her] words came to his ears as strange, heart-piercing music, tones from another, wonderful sphere. And yet he was her husband, and they had been married nearly a year; and yet, whenever she spoke, he had to listen to the sense of what she said, constraining himself, lest he should believe she was a magic creature, knowing the secrets of immeasurable delight. (115)

Eventually, Edward begins to cease constraining himself, and together they move toward embarking on their mystical quest. In a later scene, her physical features—once indecipherable to Edward—become beautiful, both because of their own beauty and as a reflection of Edward's own discoveries, his words

> causing earthly works to glow with the fire and the glory of the everlasting light.
>
> And some splendour of that light shone on the face of Mary as she sat still against the sweet gloom of the night, her dark hair making her face more radiant. She was silent for a little while, and then she spoke—
>
> "Oh, my dear, why have you waited so long to tell me these wonderful things?" (134)

The contrast pictured in Mary's features, "her dark hair making her face more radiant," could equally symbolize Machen's aesthetic technique in his Christian phase. Even defenders of *The Hill of Dreams* will admit that its cavalcade of florid descriptions, its "stylistic pyrotechnics" (Reynolds and Charlton 61), can eventually become overwhelming, perhaps even numbing.[1] No such effect is present in *A Fragment of Life*, however, for Machen has carefully sustained his seesaw of dark and radiant, playing "the grey phantasmal world, akin to death, that has, somehow, with most of us, made good its claim to be called life" (*WP* 121) in opposition to "the mysteries and the far-shining glories of the kingdom which was [Edward's] by legitimate inheritance" (121). Thus, by the end of the brief work, when supernal visions begin piling up, the reader has not already been gorged with a superabundance of imagery.

The word "ecstasy" only occurs once in *A Fragment of Life*, but the Darnells' experiences are certainly ecstatic in Machen's highest sense of the word. What separates this novella from *Ornaments in Jade* or *The Hill of Dreams* is the locus of that ecstasy. The fragmentary ornaments or the meandering biography of Lucian Taylor lack any true center; they manufacture ecstasy

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[1] *The Hill of Dreams* does at times juxtapose satires of the common Caermaen residents with the artistic Lucian, but Machen's use of the technique in that novel is far less consistent than the careful oscillation in *A Fragment of Life*. The default prose in *The Hill of Dreams* is always verbose and sensuous, and it becomes increasingly so as the novel progresses and changes setting to London.

through stylistic sleight of hand. Paganism, Classicism, Christianity, and just plain literature are all proffered as potential sources of ecstasy. *A Fragment of Life*, besides being a more restrained work, is also a more focused work. The ecstasy now has a source: the Christian faith.

For Machen, the most perfect symbol of the faith was the Holy Grail (or the Graal, as he called it). On the one hand, the Graal represented a concrete connection to the defining moment of Christianity, the crucifixion of Christ. Usually depicted as the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper, in early legends the Graal sometimes resembled other objects like a basin, a plate, or an altar, but in all cases it was tied to Christ's Passion. On the other hand, Machen probably preferred the Graal over other symbols because it allowed him to evoke his beloved ancestral Wales. The origins of the Graal legend remain shrouded in ambiguity, but Machen firmly believed that the legend's origins derived from stories told about the old pre-Catholic Welsh saints. Moreover, the Graal cup's association with the Lord's Supper made it a distinctly sacramental object, a physical vessel imbued with spiritual significance, an earthly means of grace by which one might effect transcendent experiences. In short, the Graal was the perfect way for Machen to wrap all his loves into a single image, and he first uses that image in *A Fragment of Life*.

The presence of the Graal may also explain why the actual term ecstasy is used so infrequently in the novella. Machen's preferred terms in the work are "sacrament" and "mystery." While "ecstasy" in his earlier works referred to some general mysticism, "sacrament" is a more specifically Christian term, one which is itself a Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. It is with such words as these that Machen portrays Edward and Mary Darnell's gradual enlightenment. Edward must learn that "man is made a mystery for mysteries and visions, for the realization in his consciousness of ineffable bliss, for a great joy that transmutes the whole world, for a joy that surpasses all joys and overcomes all sorrows" (156). "[W]e are not called to sit as the spectators in a theatre, there to watch the play performed before us," Machen asserts, "but we are rather summoned to stand in the very scene itself, and there fervently to enact our parts in a great and wonderful mystery" (167). In perhaps the most potent statement of his newfound faith, Machen writes of the Darnells,

> So day by day the world became more magical; day by day the work of separation was being performed, the gross accidents were being refined away. Darnell neglected no instruments that might be useful in the work; and now he neither lounged at home on Sunday mornings, nor did he accompany his wife to the Gothic blasphemy which pretended to be a church. They had discovered a little church of another fashion in a back street, and Darnell, who had found in one of the old notebooks the maxim *Incredibilia sola Credenda*, soon perceived how high and glorious a thing was that service at which he assisted. Our stupid ancestors taught us that we could become wise by studying books on "science," by meddling with test-tubes, geological specimens, microscopic

> preparations, and the like; but they who have cast off these follies know that they must read not "science" books, but mass-books, and that the soul is made wise by the contemplation of mystic ceremonies and elaborate and curious rites. In such things Darnell found a wonderful mystery language, which spoke at once more secretly and more directly than the formal creeds; and he saw that, in a sense, the whole world is but a great ceremony or sacrament, which teaches under visible forms a hidden and transcendent doctrine. It was thus that he found in the ritual of the church a perfect image of the world; an image purged, exalted, and illuminate, a holy house built up of shining and translucent stones, in which the burning torches were more significant than the wheeling stars, and the fuming incense was a more certain token than the rising of the mist. His soul went forth with the albed procession in its white and solemn order, the mystic dance that signifies rapture and a joy above all joys, and when he beheld Love slain and rise again victorious he knew that he witnessed, in a figure, the consummation of all things, the Bridal of all Bridals, the mystery that is beyond all mysteries, accomplished from the foundation of the world. So day by day the house of his life became more magical. (166-67)

This is surely the process by which Machen's own life "became more magical," a phrase that brackets the paragraph. One might read in his dismissal of "science" a final casting off of the materialist fears that so haunt his tales of the early 1890s. He talks often about mysteries and wonders, but these are not the scattershot beauties of *The Hill of Dreams.* These wonders all derive from the concrete reality of the church—not the "Gothic blasphemy," which surely represents ordinary Broad Church Anglicanism, but the mysterious, ritualized (and probably Celtic) ceremonies of the little church Edward has found. And, even more particularly,

they are tied to the death and resurrection of Christ, "when he beheld Love slain and rise again victorious," which is "the consummation of all things."

Some may be frustrated by the book's ending, which begins with the assertion that

> [i]t would be impossible to carry on the history of Edward Darnell and of Mary his wife to a greater length, since from this point their legend is full of impossible events, and seems to put on the semblance of the stories of the Graal. It is certain, indeed, that in this world they changed their lives, like King Arthur, but this is a work which no chronicler has cared to describe with any amplitude of detail. (171)

There is an abruptness to this pronouncement which may be at odds with the novella's overall fluidity. Still, it is a highly significant passage, and not only because it is Machen's first explicit reference to the Graal. It is hard to resist substituting another "Arthur" for the king alluded to, for *A Fragment of Life* as a whole seems to indicate that, like the Darnells and King Arthur, Machen did change his life through that which the Graal symbolizes—the defining moment of the Christian religion. When Machen "quotes" a poem by Edward Darnell that includes the line, "I saw my Treasure found at last" (172), he is surely speaking of himself as well.

There are, perhaps, echoes of Machen's earlier pagan dabbling in the Christianity of *A Fragment of Life*. The imagery of the Welsh woods and countryside, which in this work represents the true mystical natures of Edward

and Mary, had previously been used by Machen in connection with the land's pre-Roman inhabitants and belief systems. "The Holy Things" from *Ornaments in Jade* reads like some passages in *A Fragment of Life*, but it predates his conversion and appears syncretistic in its connection to the other pagan ornaments. *The Hill of Dreams* had depicted Christian Caermaen as but the uppermost layer over several substrata of belief. The identification of Edward and Mary as legendary and their association with the Graal—a myth often believed to be pagan in origin—may indicate that Machen is merely superimposing a Christian structure over a more ancient Celtic belief system.

Yet the language in the definitive paragraph describing Edward's church experience is triumphantly Christian in nature, if poetically and allusively phrased. Given Machen's hatred of dissenting moralistic "Puritanism" or Broach Church Anglicanism, it is hardly surprising that his descriptions of Edward's transformation eschew the standard Christian terminology of conversion. Moreover, Machen's own theories of the Graal actually point away from pagan interpretation. While he felt quite adamantly that the Graal legends were Celtic, and specifically Welsh, in origin, he rejected theories positing *pre-Christian* Celtic origins. Rather, he believed that the stories could be dated back to the so-called Age of Saints (ca. 500-700), a period of relative ecclestiastical autonomy for the Welsh church before Catholic missionaries imposed a more hierarchal system.

This period was clearly Machen's ideal church, and he maintained that "in the legends of these Welsh saints, hallowed in the east, endowed with miraculous altars of divine origin and wondrous form, evangelisers of Britain, there is the probable ancestry of the great romances of the Graal" (*SS* 25). Given its relationship to Machen's conversion, *A Fragment of Life* is unsurprisingly imbued with some pre-Christian touches, and a flavor of paganism may linger in subsequent work as well. This should not be taken to mean, however, that his admittedly idiosyncratic Christianity was not genuine or, in the main, theologically orthodox.

Reynolds and Charlton, in their evaluation of *A Fragment of Life*, contend that "[t]he day-to-day preoccupations of a young clerk and his wife are depicted with nice satirical effect" (77), but if the work is satirical, it is only subtly so. Satire depends on exaggeration, and the realism of the Darnells' daily life is only slightly hyperbolized. Machen himself denounced satire as inimical to high art, proclaiming in *Hieroglyphics*, "Art, you may feel quite assured, proceeds always from love and rapture, never from hatred and disdain, and satire of every kind *qua* satire is eternally condemned to that Gehenna where the pamphlets, the 'literature of the subject,' and the 'life-like' books lie all together" (112). Perhaps this is the reason that Machen's own pure satire was so ill-received. Published in 1906, his book *Dr. Stiggins: His Views and Principles* purports to be "a series of

interviews conducted by Arthur Machen" (3) with a noted Protestant leader. The fictional Dr. Stiggins condemns himself from his own mouth, basically advocating a worldview that is an ungainly mix of materialist and low-church philosophy. Of this philosophy, Machen wrote, "It was not only that I regarded it as a theological blasphemy and an intellectual folly; it offended that part of the man which does not reason, but only feels" (*DS* 10).

According to Machen, *Dr. Stiggins* was designed to be an expansion of the critiques he had earlier made in the preface to his collection *The House of Souls*, a work which gathered together much of his weird fiction from the 1890s. But material that had made a good preface to a volume of the fantastic may have been ill-suited to book-length format; only Machen scholars read the book today, and none have seen fit to defend it. The book is "his most self-indulgent, and . . . amongst his least-read" (Valentine 80); indeed, it "was not read in his day and is unreadable in ours" (Joshi, *WT* 17). It "was hardly noticed at the time and has received even less attention since" (Sweetser 33). Machen himself would admit, "There are good things in it for those who like controversy, and also many weary pages. It was written in a hurry—30,000 words in a fortnight—was badly printed on bad paper, was barely noticed by the Press (two reviews, I think), and fell stone dead on publication" (Danielson 33).

What *A Fragment of Life* and *Dr. Stiggins* have in common is an intense hatred of "the dreadful wheel of material progress" (*DS* 12). The former work succeeds because it contrasts that "wheel" to the beauties of the mystical Graal, whereas the latter is nothing but an incessant screed. Nonetheless, even the bombastic satire of a book like *Dr. Stiggins* might succeed if played in counterpoint to ecstasy, and that is what Machen would do in his next work, his Graal *magnum opus*, *The Secret Glory*.

Horbury's Bane

Written 1907-08 but not published until 1922, *The Secret Glory* follows the mystical career of young Ambrose Meyrick. At age twelve, Meyrick is a student at the prestigious public school of Lupton, where he must toil under the authority of his uncle, the ambitious High Usher Horbury, whose zeal for Lupton ideals is fanatical. Though hardly defenseless, Meyrick chafes under the school's obsession with practicality and sporting events, for he has grown up with his late father's delicate devotion to mystical Celtic Christian rites. On an otherwise ordinary day, Meyrick experiences a numinous vision of the Graal, a vision that transforms him inwardly. For a time, however, he must restrain his fervor, looking to all outward appearances like a fervent disciple of the Lupton way for several years. Finally, he breaks free, escaping to London with Horbury's long-suffering maid, Nelly Foran. The two enjoy each other's company, discovering

the hidden wonders of London, before Meyrick realizes that as part of his high mystical calling, he must forsake Nelly—and conventional life altogether—becoming a custodian of the Graal. The book ends with a brief note stating that he has delivered the Graal to some mysterious Eastern location, where he is captured and put to death.

While *The Secret Glory* was clearly a personal story for Machen, reception of the novel has been mixed, as it is with all Machen's Christian-era fiction. The critical uncertainty stems largely from the book's most obvious feature, the oscillation between vituperative satire and jubilant ecstasy. Wesley Sweetser best sums up the critical reservations when he asserts, "The book, half satire and half mysticism, is imperfectly blended" (33). At least, however, Sweetser understands what Machen is doing: "He is countering the antithesis with the thesis: he opposes materialism and spirituality to denigrate the former" (33). The contrast between the two theses is indeed jarring, far more so than the clear yet gentle transitions he had earlier employed in *A Fragment of Life*, which may account for Sweetser's view that they are "imperfectly blended." But then, jarring contrast is precisely the point. The English poet John Betjeman, who was profoundly affected in his youth by *The Secret Glory*, catches the spirit of this contrast in his poem *Summoned by Bells*:

> I would not care to read that book again.
> It so exactly mingled with the mood

> Of those impressionable years, that now
> I might be disillusioned. There were laughs
> At public schools, at chapel services,
> At masters who were still "big boys at heart"—
> While all the time the author's hero knew
> A Secret Glory in the hills of Wales:
> Caverns of light revealed the Holy Grail
> Exhaling gold upon the mountain-tops;
> At "Holy! Holy! Holy!" in the Mass
> King Brychan's sainted children crowded round,
> And past and present were enwrapped in one. (87)

This passage of Betjeman's poem sets the "laughs / At public schools" in contrast to the "Caverns of light," following Machen's own narrative pattern in the novel.

Machen's assault on Britain's vaunted public school system is obviously exaggerated, but scathing nonetheless. His own schoolboy experiences seem relatively uneventful, but as an adult, during his days as a traveling actor, he saw his troupe ridiculed by the boys at Harrow. Machen was disgusted by this disdain for true art, as well as the school's manufacture of poorly-written self-promotion, which he noted in a letter to Vincent Starrett:

> The venom [of *The Secret Glory*'s satire] is extracted from a chance reading of the life of one Bowen, a famous Harrow master. The point of view annoyed me; and the annoyance got into my book. Bowen, by the way, was famous as a writer of Harrow School songs: nauseous muck, most of them. (Murphy 68)

It is only natural that Machen, who viewed true literature as a medium for communicating and experiencing ecstasy, should be revolted by the ephemeral

spirited propaganda produced by public schools and by the overall ethos that privileged physical culture and worldly accomplishment above all.

If Machen's ridicule in *The Secret Glory* seems at times to go too far, Reynolds and Charlton believe it was in fact innovative, contending that "[i]n 1907, no one had yet dared to raise a whisper against [public schools] unless one regards *Stalky and Co.* as an attack; a reason, no doubt, why *The Secret Glory* had to wait fifteen years to be published" (103). Their praise is perhaps exaggerated. As Edward C. Mack has observed, Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* (1899) led to a spate of 1900s novels that eschewed the propagandistic *Tom Brown's Schooldays* formula for a more realistic approach, including six such novels in 1905-06 (199-208). Though not as ruthlessly satirical or universally condemnatory as *The Secret Glory*, such novels did not shy away from depicting the negative qualities of the public school system, indicating that Machen wrote his novel at a time when it was becoming acceptable to find fault with the public school system. Valentine steadfastly defends the presence of the satire in *The Secret Glory*: "Far from being an unwelcome distraction from the mystical passages of the book, the public school satire is an integral element, a necessary counterpoint and, in all its sardonic splendor, a highly entertaining blast against a wholly deserving foe" (88).

The book's chief target is Horbury, who, based on Machen's comments, is clearly derived from Edward Ernest Bowen, a longtime schoolmaster, and author of the Harrow school song, "Forty Years On." Horbury's consistently damns himself by his own words and thoughts, as in his contention that

> the boy comes from his home, which may or may not have possessed valuable formative influences; which we often find has tended to create a spirit of individualism and assertiveness; which, in numerous cases, has left the boy under the delusion that he has come into the world to live his own life and think his own thoughts. . . . We discourage all excessive individuality; we make it quite plain to the boy that he has come to Lupton, not to live his life, not to think his thoughts, but to live *our* life, to think *our* thoughts. (150-51, italics original)

Each public school has its own mark, and Machen contends that "the note of Lupton may, perhaps, be called finality. The Old Luptonian no more thinks of arguing a question than does the Holy Father, and his conversation is a series of irreformable dogmas, and the captious person who questions any one article is made to feel himself a cad and an outsider" (147).

Such passages effectively illustrate Machen's biting parody of the public school system, but they also demonstrate his underlying, more serious concern: the lack of attention to the individual's intellectual and spiritual well-being. Horbury's desire to "discourage all excessive individuality" is nightmarish for the impressionable young mystic Ambrose Meyrick, who can never think

Lupton's thoughts. The reader sympathizes with Meyrick as he struggles to hold his own, to retain a spiritual life, in the midst of the materialism around him:

> Only one thing was clear to him. He knew that he was Ambrose, that he had been driven from great and unspeakable joys into miserable exile and banishment. He had come from a far, far place by a hidden way, and darkness had closed about him, and bitter drink and deadly meat were given him, and all gladness was hidden from him. This was all he could remember; and now he was astray, he knew not how or why, in this wild, sad land, and the night descended dark upon him. (56)

Meyrick's vague but tenacious recognition of his own true identity pays off soon, when he encounters the Graal in the forest. The ensuing chapter represents one of Machen's best manifestations of the ecstasy principle he sets forth in *Hieroglyphics*. When Meyrick first drinks from the Graal, he enters into a communion with nature and with a procession of ancient Celtic saints. In his new state, he can contrast "his days of exile" at Lupton as "broken spectres, miserable shapes and crooked images of the world" in comparison to "the shining vision of things immortal" (58). He experiences ecstasy, mystery, rapture:

> Every sinew, every muscle, every particle of deadly flesh shuddered and quickened in the communion of that well-water. The nerves and veins rejoiced together; all his being leapt with gladness, and as one finger touched another, as he still bent over the well, a spasm of exquisite pleasure quivered and thrilled through his body. His heart throbbed with bliss that was unendurable; sense and intellect and soul and spirit were, as it were, sublimed into one white flame of delight. And all the while it was known to him that these were but the least of the least of the

> pleasures of the kingdom, but the overrunnings and base tricklings of the great supernal cup. (58)

The parade of glorious mysteries Meyrick encounters in this chapter is memorably described throughout, but much of the impact derives from disparity between the scene and his "days of exile" at Lupton. An entire novel's worth of such visions would be almost gluttonous, but because Machen has spent the previous fifty pages elucidating the harrowing horrors of ordinary public school, his descriptions of the Graal experience have a depth of feeling that he could not otherwise have achieved, and Meyrick's own spiritual recovery is so much more poignant.

That is Machen's technique throughout *The Secret Glory*: to give his readers lengthy sarcastic descriptions of Lupton that are comical enough to be endurable but harsh enough to be difficult and then to break in with interludes of Meyrick's spiritual renewal. It is a difficult balancing act to keep going in a novel-length work, but Machen accomplishes it in part through his indirect narration. Like the Keynotes novels, *The Secret Glory* is told in a roundabout fashion. Though there is a third-person narrator, that narrator often produces documents, fragments, and accounts to fill in storylines. These accounts often seem highly tangential, serving only to reinforce a theme, though they do usually return eventually to some significant plot point. But this indirectness also serves an important narrative purpose, emphasizing what Meyrick himself learned,

"that these were but the least of the least of the pleasures of the kingdom, but the overrunnings and base tricklings of the great supernal cup." In *The Great God Pan*, Machen had to treat his subject obliquely and allusively because it was too terrible to be looked at directly. In *The Secret Glory*, he must treat his subject the same way because it is too wonderful to be looked at directly. They represent the distinction between the two meanings of the word "awful": the modern definition, which emphasizes horror and despair, and the older definition, with its connotations of awe and majesty. In *The Great God Pan*, the modern meaning is at play, while *The Secret Glory* returns to the ancient form of the word.

For this reason, *The Secret Glory* consistently reiterates Meyrick's inability to express his joys, which are "great and unspeakable" (56). According to his "Great Axiom," "Poetry is the only possible way of saying anything that is worth saying at all" (64). Meyrick uses "poetry" to stand in for art in general, believing "that the mysteries can only be conveyed by symbols" (64)—in other words, that truth must be communicated *indirectly*. Even then, however, Meyrick contends that "symbolism is inadequate; but that is the defect of speech of any kind when once you have ventured beyond the multiplication table and the jargon of the Stock Exchange" (65). Of course, Machen had been running up against the limits of human expression all along, especially in *The Hill of Dreams*, in which Lucian's final manuscript is unintelligible. But in that novel, Machen was searching not

just for the right words but for a meaning to buttress those words. As a Christian, he had found a meaning, but because it dealt with matters too glorious for humanity to know, he was forced to write symbolically. When Machen tells his reader that the Darnells' life story "seems to put on the semblance of the stories of the Graal" (*WP* 171), he indicates that his readers cannot comprehend all that they encounter, but he also plays on a shared understanding of Christian lore to guide them in the right direction. Those who know the Graal legend, those who have been initiated, will have a better idea of what happens to the Darnells, and those who do not will have to learn.

The same can be said of the ending to *The Secret Glory*, which is even more abrupt than that of *A Fragment of Life*. As with the Darnells, detailed accounts fail, "and the rest of Meyrick's life must be left in dim and somewhat legendary outline" (276). It is almost impossible not to wish that Machen had fleshed out his Epilogue, perhaps even made it into a sequel,[2] but the ending we have actually serves to reinforce the book's themes in several ways. For one thing, it continues the oblique form of storytelling, as the description of Ambrose's final moments is drawn from an account told by "[o]ne of the native Christians" (279)

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[2] Machen did write two additional chapters to *The Secret Glory*, which were only recently printed. However, both excised chapters continue the technique of indirect narrative and focus on his English life, adding no further details about his experiences in the Holy Land (though see note 3 in this chapter for one slight difference).

who watched Ambrose's execution. And, in truncated form, it provides one final contrast between worldly suffering and heavenly ecstasy:

> [T]he Turks or the Kurds—it does not matter which—descended on the place and worked their customary works, and so Ambrose was taken by them
>
> One of the native Christians, who had hidden himself from the miscreants, told afterwards how he saw "the stranger Ambrosian" brought out, and how they held before him the image of the Crucified that he might spit upon it and trample it under his feet. But he kissed the icon with great joy and penitence and devotion. So they bore him to a tree outside the village and crucified him there.
>
> And after he had hung on the tree some hours, the infidels, enraged, as it is said, by the shining rapture of his face, killed him with their spears.
>
> It was in this manner that Ambrose Meyrick gained Red Martyrdom and achieved the most glorious Quest and Adventure of the Sangraal. (279).

Machen's curious statement that "it does not matter" whether Turks or Kurds killed Ambrose may seem odd, perhaps even racist, given that the Turkish and Kurdish peoples are certainly not interchangeable and indeed are often at odds with each other. What Machen really seems to do, however, is to demonstrate that the persecution of the Christian mystic is a universal phenomenon.[3] Meyrick's fate at the hands of his executioners is really no different from his earlier fate at the hands of Horbury, who beat his nephew for wandering around

[3] Machen seems to have been very intentional in leaving the identity of Meyrick's executioners vague. The original sixth chapter identifies them specifically as Kurds (*CFSSG* 86), meaning that he deliberately changed the ending to be more ambiguous.

old church ruins. And as in his "exile" at Lupton, Meyrick retains his identity even under duress, so that he can be devoted to Christ and can experience "shining rapture" even under the harshest circumstances. Lupton was his White Martyrdom—a Celtic "martyrdom" of exile—which prepares him for his final, triumphant Red Martyrdom, following literally in his Lord's footsteps. In a few, final, brief paragraphs, Machen is able to tie together all the themes his novel has been exploring, so that Ambrose Meyrick's end is entirely appropriate.

Transcendence and Terror in the Evening News

The shallow, worldly materialism that Machen so detested had many manifestations, whether it was the bland middle-class existence of *A Fragment of Life*, the iconoclastic Protestant dreariness of *Dr. Stiggins*, or the industrialized public school group-think of *The Secret Glory*. In 1910, Machen would come face-to-face with another such manifestation when he was forced to take a job as a reporter for the *Evening News*. It is not difficult to understand why Machen would dislike such an occupation. For an artist who thrived on moments of ecstatic inspiration, the journalistic life's unceasing flow of deadlines was distasteful. Newspaper stories were more substantial in the Edwardian age than they are today, but even then writing had to be brief and succinct. A reporter had to rely on sources and facts for a story and had to adopt an impartial voice, all of which were at odds with the fanciful and opinionated writing style Machen

had cultivated over the years. But he was not stymied forever, and Machen soon learned how to use journalistic writing as yet another weapon in his arsenal for the fight against modern materialism. Life at the *Evening News* marked a new variant of Machen's Christian fiction. His work from the 1910s retains the mode of contrast between mundane and mysterious, but with a dispassionate reportorial voice substituted to represent the follies of worldly life.

This technique proved more effective than Machen could possibly have imagined with the 1914 publication of "The Bowmen." The story itself is simple enough. Early in World War I, the British had been forced to retreat from the Germans at the Belgian city of Mons. In Machen's brief tale, witnesses to the retreat see a company of archers appear to save the lives of some British soldiers caught behind enemy lines. They are bowmen of Agincourt who have responded to the offhand invocation of Saint George by one of the soldiers. The retreat is successful, and though shot through with arrows, the German bodies are found without any discernible marks upon them.

The brief tale was published in the *Evening News*, but fiction still appeared in newspapers at the time, and the story was clearly marked as such. Even so, the story had a life of its own and began to spread, even as it was distorted. The resurrected bowmen became angels, so that people spoke of the Angels of Mons. Within a few months of the publication of "The Bowmen," people all across

England truly believed that the soldiers at the battle had demonstrably received divine aid in their escape. The actual source of this popular myth is disputed; while Machen claimed the story originated solely with his own imagination, other sources were frequently promulgated, by believers and skeptics alike. David Clarke appears to have developed the likeliest thesis. He contends that the legend did indeed originate with Machen's story in the *Evening News*. It proved popular, and the paper gave permission for it to be reprinted in occult journals and myriad local parish magazines. Appearing often without additional commentary, the story became accepted by some as fact,[4] while the image of the bowmen as "a long line of shapes, with a shining about them" (*WP* 186) may have been interpreted as angels.[5] In dark times, anxious for any patriotic glimmer of hope, the English populace pounced at the news that God might be miraculously on their side.

The ready acceptance of the angels' factuality was something of an embarrassment to Machen, yet in many ways, it serves to show just how successful an artist he had become. Machen disliked "The Bowmen," declaring

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[4] For the extensively researched argument, see Clarke (2002). In a later issue of the same journal, Jacqueline Simpson (2003) questions Clarke's conclusion that Machen was the source of the legend, but Clarke's own rejoinder (2004) adds support to his claims .

[5] This, anyway, was Machen's belief. In a later introduction to "The Bowmen," he maintained that the English, with their love of angels but distrust of Catholic trappings, were more inclined to view the "shining" as an angelic manifestation (*WP* 180-81).

in the introduction, "I was heartily disappointed with it, I remember, and thought it—as I still think it—an indifferent piece of work" (*WP* 178). Yet Machen is perhaps being overly harsh with himself. As Clarke maintains,

> The artistic talents of Arthur Machen had combined with the power of the media to create a rumour of angels that appealed to a deep well of belief and tradition invoked in times of national crisis. To the evident surprise of author and newspaper editor alike, "The Bowmen" set in motion a chain of events that could not be defused. Ultimately, this resulted in the creation of an enduring legend that outlived the short story that inspired it. (171)

Clarke acknowledges the fact that the legend ultimately overwhelmed the tale, but the tale first caught on precisely because of "[t]he artistic talents of Arthur Machen." Machen had unwittingly discovered a new mode of writing that was more effective than he could have imagined, a way of making the supernatural credible to a skeptical modern audience. By telling his story in a style associated with objective, factual reporting, people were able to credit the plausibility of his contentions far more than they ever could in his past, more poetic accounts.

Joshi goes so far as to suggest that "The Bowmen" and other such "tales—knowingly designed for newspaper publication, where the very context would augment their credibility as fact, not fiction—were consciously planned *hoaxes*" (*WT* 33, italics original). In noting the "evident surprise" of Machen and his editors, Clarke takes Machen's side, a more generous reading. Joshi also

ultimately rejects the hoax hypothesis, but he still implicates Machen for a certain degree of deception by maintaining that he

> would insidiously convince his readers that the strange and wonderful and nonmaterialistic things that happen in these stories—for they are hardly more than peculiar incidents not amenable to rationalistic explanation and are told with scarcely any "artistry" in the traditional sense of narrative skill, character portrayal, and mood development—actually did happen. (*WT* 32)

Joshi's contention that Machen's new style is "insidious" betrays his own contempt for Machen's religious perspective. Even if Machen did not plan his tales as deliberate hoaxes, he is still dishonest to Joshi insofar as he uses an ostensibly trustworthy journalistic style to convince readers that his supernatural events could actual happen.

Several responses could be made to this objection. First, while Joshi is correct that "The Bowmen" features relatively little character development,[6] his position that the story lack "artistry" is simply mistaken. Indeed, Machen's style demonstrates a great deal of "narrative skill," for journalistic writing is so different from traditional fictional narrative that to apply it to fiction requires some calculation. Moreover, Machen does allow for brief bursts of more poetic language when describing his miraculous rescue. In the initial descriptions of

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[6] Even on this count, however, Machen succeeds in very briefly creating the memorable character of his primary "source" for the story, a British soldier who eats at vegetarian restaurants and speaks Latin.

the battle, his figurative language is chiefly limited to stock metaphors, describing the enemy forces as a flood and referring to war as hell or as a storm (*WP* 184). When one British soldier mutters a Latin phrase invoking Saint George, however,

> he felt something between a shudder and an electric shock pass through his body. The roar of the battle died down in his ears to a gentle murmur; instead of it, he says, he heard a great voice and a shout louder than a thunder-peal crying, "Array, array, array!"
>
> His heart grew hot as a burning coal, it grew cold as ice within him, as it seemed to him that a tumult of voices answered to his summons. He heard, or seemed to hear, thousands shouting: "St. George! St. George!"
>
> "Ha! messire; ha! sweet Saint, grant us good deliverance!"
>
> "St. George for merry England!"
>
> "Harow! Harow! Monseigneur St. George, succour us."
>
> "Ha! St. George! Ha! St. George! a long bow and a strong bow."
>
> "Heaven's Knight, aid us!"
>
> And as the soldier heard these voices he saw before him, beyond the trench, a long line of shapes, with a shining about them. They were like men who drew the bow, and with another shout, their cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air towards the German hosts. (185-86)

While this passage hardly rivals Machen's lavish evocations of the Welsh countryside or the ceremonies of the Graal, it gently pushes the boundaries of newspaper language. Many of the metaphors are still stock imagery—electric shock, hot as coal, cold as ice—but they are far more concentrated. The language of the bowmen is archaic and deliberately chosen for effect—Machen told a colleague "that a 'Monseigneur' here and there struck me as picturesque" (178).

The uses of assonance and consonance—"a long bow and a strong bow," "singing and tingling"—are unlike the conventions of journalism as well.

But while such artistry is certainly present in "The Bowmen," it is also deliberately understated, still leaving Machen open to the charge of deception. Yet why should one object to an author writing a work that is plausible? After all, authors have tried to write convincingly for centuries, and they are seldom accused of willful trickery. Among those who *do* seek to deceive, weird writers are arguably the worst offenders. The original Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, was published with a duplicitous preface asserting its authenticity, and the great progenitor of twentieth-century weird fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, could play perversely and effectively with his knowledge of journalistic conventions. What may offend Joshi is not so much Machen's deliberately "impartial" style as the ends to which he uses it: the disruption of materialistic conventions.

This does not mean that Machen actually wanted people to believe his stories; on the contrary, he is scornful in his introduction of those who took the Angels of Mons at face value. What "The Bowmen" controversy illustrates is that the medium may have become more important than the message in some cases. Machen's journalistic stories, never intended to be literally believed, nonetheless show that even in a supposedly skeptical age, anything can be made

believable if told in the correct format. He alludes to this fact at the end of "The Bowmen":

> In Germany, a country ruled by scientific principles, the Great General Staff decided that the contemptible English must have employed shells containing an unknown gas of a poisonous nature, as no wounds were discernible on the bodies of the dead German soldiers. But the man who knew what nuts tasted like when they called themselves steak knew also that St. George had brought his Agincourt Bowmen to help the English. (*WP* 187)

Literally, "the man who knew what nuts tasted like when they called themselves steak" is the British soldier, who had eaten at a vegetarian restaurant. But in this final passage, Machen indicts *materialism* for being deceptive. The Germans, with their "scientific principles," are wrong and try to explain the matter in purely rational fashion, while the soldier, with the testimony of his own eyes and his own prayers, can spot the reality beneath the scientific explanation. Machen had spent year cataloguing alchemical works, and knew full well (decades before Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) that yesterday's science could become tomorrow's superstition. The reason people were so eager to accept the "rumours of angels" is because the materialist worldview they had so long been taught had impoverished their spirits, so that when provided a materialistically "acceptable" account opportunity to believe in the supernatural, they jumped at the chance. This, anyway, was Machen's interpretation of the furor:

> [H]ow is it that a nation plunged in materialism of the grossest kind has accepted idle rumours and gossip of the supernatural as

> certain truth? The answer is contained in the question: it is precisely because our whole atmosphere is materialist that we are ready to credit anything—save the truth. (183)

But if the scientific and journalistic community bore some of the blame for inculcating the English populace with materialist dogma, Machen laid even more of the blame at the doorstep of the church, an accusation he levels at the end of the introduction to "The Bowmen":

> And the main responsibility for this dismal state of affairs undoubtedly lies on the shoulders of the majority of the clergy of the Church of England. Christianity, as Mr. W. L. Courtney has so admirably pointed out, is a great Mystery Religion; it is *the* Mystery Religion. Its priests are called to an awful and tremendous hierurgy; its pontiffs are to be the pathfinders, the bridge-makers between the world of sense and the world of spirit. And, in fact, they pass their time in preaching, not the eternal mysteries, but a twopenny morality, in changing the Wine of Angels and the Bread of Heaven into gingerbeer and mixed biscuits: a sorry transubstantiation, a sad alchemy, as it seems to me. (183)

This is the church as portrayed in *The Secret Glory*, infected by the worldly spirit of the age and infecting future generations. In that novel, the much oppressed Ambrose Meyrick has "always doubted whether moderate Anglicanism be Christianity in any sense, whether it even deserves to be called religion at all" (*SG* 192). In his next substantial work after "The Bowmen," Machen would return to the Graal theme of *The Secret Glory*. This time, however, he would apply his new journalistic technique to the subject, creating a story that could appeal both to the religiously minded and the skeptics alike.

This new work was his 1915 novella *The Great Return*. The story's journalist narrator sets out to investigate a "recent Revival" (*WP* 202) in the Welsh town of Llantrisant, an event alluded to mysteriously in the newspaper. Curious about certain "[r]emarkable occurrences" (202) that have been reported, the narrator slowly learns what has apparently taken place. For nine days, the Graal had secretly appeared, accompanied by the ringing of a bell, the appearance of bright lights, and the presence of mysterious guardians, perhaps ancient Welsh saints. The Graal manifestations lead to physical healings, as well as relational healings, with longtime rivals making peace and members of all denominations participating in a final ecstatic church service.

The Great Return was first serialized in the *Evening News*, though it was commissioned by the Faith Press, a Christian publisher hoping to ride the coattails of the popularity he had recently gained with "The Bowmen." Machen claims to have "urged [the manager] Mr. Burgess to desist from his plan" (Danielson 45). Machen did not expect the book to sell well, and his fears were apparently justified, resulting in "a huge and dusty mound of 'Great Returns' . . . lying in a cupboard" (45). "There were hardly any reviews" (45), according to Machen, and he felt that the one that did appear (in *The Times Literary Supplement*) was marked by a "sumptuous ignorance" of Graal literature and

legend. Machen noted bemusedly how offended the reviewer seemed that the Graal is given "to quite common people, such as farmers and grocers" (46).

Subsequent opinion of *The Great Return* among Machen scholars has come to no consensus. H. P. Lovecraft considered it to be "[o]f utmost delicacy, and passing from mere horror into true mysticism" (*ASHL* 65), despite his overall preference for Machen's earlier weird fiction. Sweetser affirms the story's mystical appeal but believes, "Broadly speaking, the work is not one of Machen's best efforts" (38). Reynolds and Charlton are of the same mindset; Machen, in their eyes, "felt, rightly, that *The Great Return* is not a more successful attempt than its predecessors." They do concede, however, that "Machen put a great deal into the story, and never ceased to think that what he was trying to say in it was worth saying" (116). Valentine's approach aligns more closely to Lovecraft's—while acknowledging that its story elements are little different from Machen's other Graal tales, he find that "they are more gently and allusively conveyed, and the later story has a satisfying unity which makes the reader more at home with the theme" (95).

Even those critics favorable toward *The Great Return* have made little effort to analyze it substantially. Such a paucity of comment is hardly surprising, given the general lack of attention paid to Machen's later works, coupled with the novella's dismal publication history. Far from boosting *The Great Return*'s

sales and reputation as publishers may have hoped, "The Bowmen" furor likely hurt the novella. In the aftermath of the Angels of Mons, readers would be unlikely to grant Machen's subsequent tales with the same level of credibility, and though the publication of *The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War* seems to have sold well, its success was likely due more to interest in the controversy than any acknowledgment of Machen's prowess as an author; he was probably right to warn the Faith Press to avoid the commission. And with its Welsh provincialism, *The Great Return* had none of the nationalistic spirit that helped carry "The Bowmen" to fame.

Thus, whereas "The Bowmen" had an array of circumstances working in its favor, *The Great Return* had several strikes against it even before it was written. Yet Machen himself liked the work, telling Vincent Starrett that it had "something of the real stuff about it" (Murphy 26). And while "The Bowmen" is by no means without merit, *The Great Return* is probably an even more significant literary achievement in the way it is able to appeal to multiple audiences at once. Machen knew that its dual publication meant it could be read on the one hand by the ordinary readership of the *Evening News*, and also by the religious constituency of the Faith Press, which could include devout Christians and also the kind of "moderate" Anglicans that Meyrick so decries in *The Secret Glory*.

Machen thus retains the journalistic voice he had cultivated in "The Bowmen," the voice that a ("Christian" or skeptical) materialist reader could appreciate. In fact, the novella begins with a terse newspaper byline, "His Holiness the Tashi Lama then ascended the Mountain and was transfigured—Reuter" (*WP* 200). The mystery of this brief, inexplicable reference calls to mind for the narrator another notice, equally cryptic:

> LLANTRISANT.—The season promises very favourably: temperature of the sea yesterday at noon, 65 deg. Remarkable occurrences are supposed to have taken place during the recent Revival. The lights have not been observed lately. The Crown. The Fisherman's Rest. (202)

Both entries are written in the most reductionist condensation of language, perfectly succinct newspaper notices. Yet Machen knows that the most hardened skeptic will not be satisfied with such accounts, and he devotes the remainder of his tale to exploring the details of the latter. Clearly, more has occurred than such a concise paragraph can tell. Thus the narrator, who is himself a reporter, decides to investigate the matter. The account is therefore slightly more personal than "The Bowmen," appropriate to its publication as an extended serial in the *Evening News*, yet the personality of the narrator is one that both the Christian and non-Christian reader can respect. On the one hand, he is skeptical of skepticism, being dissatisfied that he has "never heard a word of explanation or comment on this amazing statement" (200) of the Reuters report. Yet he is just as

skeptical of the miraculous, assuring the reader, "I am not professing any fervent personal belief in the reports to which I have alluded" (201). If anything, he might be considered hostile; the rector of one church gives more information about his background:

> You are a railer and a bitter railer; I have read articles that you have written, and I know your contempt and your hatred for those you call Protestants in your derision; though your grandfather, the vicar of Caerleon-on-Usk, called himself Protestant and was proud of it, and your great-grand-uncle Hezekiah, *ffeiriad coch yr Castletown*—the Red Priest of Castletown—was a great man with the Methodists in his day . . . [Y]ou are a railer, and see nothing but the outside and the show. You are not worthy of this mystery that has been done here. (206-07)

The rector thus establishes the narrator's credentials as one who is unlikely to be taken in by pure superstition. It is precisely for this reason that the narrator does what any good reporter would do—he investigates.

It is against this backdrop that the narrator learns the history of the Graal and its appearance in Llantrisant. He pieces the events of the nine-day revival through a series of interviews with witnesses or secondhand sources, but his understanding comes slowly. He often describes himself as "bewildered," and his occasional use of the word "mystery" to describe the events effectively plays on the sacramental nature of the Graal, which is also called a "mystery." But personal testimonies might be fabricated or erroneous, a reality the narrator

acknowledges from the outset. In speaking of one particular eyewitness, the narrator concedes,

> Still; what do we know? He may have been mistaken, "the great rose of fire" that came over the deep may have been the port light of a coasting-ship. Did it shine at last from the old chapel on the headland? Possibly; or possibly it was the doctor's lamp at Sarnau, some miles away. I have had wonderful opportunities lately of analysing the marvels of lying, conscious and unconscious: and indeed almost incredible feats in this way can be performed. (202-03)

The reporter thus establishes his skeptical credentials. He is not to be taken in purely on the basis of hearsay and is in fact profoundly cognizant of the dangers of being too gullible. Yet his disbelief is overwhelmed by that which every reporter, every researcher, every skeptic demands—evidence:

> If I incline to the less likely explanation of the "lights" at Llantrisant, it is merely because this explanation seems to me to be altogether congruous with the "remarkable occurrences" of the newspaper paragraph.
>
> After all, if rumour and gossip and hearsay are crazy things to be utterly neglected and laid aside; on the other hand, evidence is evidence, and when a couple of reputable surgeons assert, as they do assert in the case of Olwen Phillips, Croeswen, Llantrisant, that there has been a "kind of resurrection of the body," it is merely foolish to say that these things don't happen. The girl was a mass of tuberculosis, she was within a few hours of death; she is now full of life. And so, I do not believe that the rose of fire was merely a ship's light, magnified and transformed by dreaming Welsh sailors. (203)

In one sense, of course, Machen is here stacking the deck in the favor of his own mystical thesis. It is easy to have the "facts" line up on one's side in a

fictional story, when the author dictates what the "facts" of the narrative are. Yet, as in "The Bowmen," the *language* is part of the point. *The Great Return* is credible not because the events are more or less likely to occur in reality, but because they are told in a way that the audience finds credible. The added dimension of research, of investigation, lends a further air of credibility to the tale. Anyone, Machen suggests, could write a convincing story simply by using the accepted style and asserting that the events have been "researched." What Machen's 1910s work lacks in lyric embellishment it makes up for in believability.

Yet it is also clear that Machen finds the journalistic style inadequate to explore fully the wonders of his own mystical worldview. Thus, as in "The Bowmen," he alters his language when the actual wonders begin to occur. Just as numinous ecstasy may break through the boundaries of the material world, he suggests, so symbolism and poetry break through the prosaic diction of journalism. As in *A Fragment of Life* and *The Secret Glory*, this has the effect of heightening the reader's sense of awe, a fact, Joshi hints at when he observes that "the narrator adopts a slightly greater tone of skepticism and incredulity than [Machen] probably felt, so as to emphasize the miraculous events of the tale—events so unlike what we would expect to find in the columns of a newspaper"

(*WT* 32).[7] Machen, of course, would maintain that events such as these do occur and either go unreported or are molded and "cut" to fit a medium which does not suit them.[8] Machen's narrator, rather than "cutting," chooses to report the events as he has learned them, but to do so means that he must change style, for the mysteries of the Graal simply cannot be conveyed by the prose of the *Evening News*. The narrator's account of Olwen Phillips' dream, which deserves to be quoted at length, is one such occasion:

> She said she woke up in the deep darkness, and she knew the life was fast going from her. She could not move so much as a finger, she tried to cry out, but no sound came from her lips. She felt that in another instant the whole world would fall from her—her heart was full of agony. And as the last breath was passing her lips, she heard a very faint, sweet sound, like the tinkling of a silver bell. It came from far away, from over by Ty-newydd. She forgot her agony and listened, and even then, she says, she felt the swirl of the world as it came back to her. And the sound of the bell swelled and grew louder, and it thrilled all through her body, and the life was in it. And as the bell rang and trembled in her ears, a faint light touched the wall of her room and reddened, till the whole room was full of rosy fire. And then she saw standing before her bed three men in blood-coloured robes with shining faces. And one man held a golden bell in his hand. And the second man held up something shaped like the top of a table. It was like a great

[7] Joshi makes this point even more explicitly when he remarks that "the coldly reportorial narrative voice causes the miraculous incidents to stand out in even bolder relief" (*WT* 19).

[8] Machen early in *The Great Return* makes note of this journalistic procedure in describing the curious Llantrisant byline that first attracts the narrator: "The style was odd certainly; knowing a little of newspapers, I could see that the figure called, I think, 'tmesis,' or 'cutting,' had been generously employed; the exuberances of the local correspondent had been pruned by a Fleet Street expert" (*WP* 202). In other words, the author of *that* article had also probably found journalistic language ill-suited to the task, and so editorial revisions had to be made to fit the story to the newspaper's standard writing.

> jewel, and it was of a blue colour, and there were rivers of silver and of gold running through it and flowing as quick streams flow, and there were pools in it as if violets had been poured out into water, and then it was green as the sea near the shore, and then it was the sky at night with all the stars shining, and then the sun and the moon came down and washed in it. And the third man held up high above this a cup that was like a rose on fire; "there was a great burning in it, and a dropping of blood in it, and a red cloud above it, and I saw a great secret. And I heard a voice that sang nine times: 'Glory and praise to the Conqueror of Death, to the Fountain of Life immortal.' Then the red light went from the wall, and it was all darkness, and the bell rang faint again by Capel Teilo, and then I got up and called to you." (*WP* 225-26)

This extended passage contains some traces of the journalistic method, ending as it does by a direct quotation of Olwen Phillips' own words. Yet it is clearly far more literary and ornate than a conventional newspaper story. Mellifluous phrases like "the swirl of the world" fit poorly with the Reuters style, as do Machen's almost hypnotic run-on sentences, strung together with conjunctions and comma splices, building momentum as they go. The vividly colored descriptions of the Welsh saints approach the potency some of Machen's other memorable passages in works like *The Hill of Dreams*, *Ornaments in Jade*, *A Fragment of Life*, and *The Secret Glory*.

His description of the final Mass of the Sangraal is equally poetic, strewn about with music and extemporaneous ritual, bringing back the three saints of Olwen Phillip's vision. By once again returning to the Graal symbol, Machen is able to appeal not only to the devout readers of Faith Press books but to readers

who might espouse Meyrick's detested "moderate Anglicanism." The journalistic narrative would be as convincing to the cultural Christian with no real religious conviction as it would be to the outright atheist, while the visions of the ceremony would remind backsliders of all they might have lost. Indeed, the narrator, with his rich religious ancestry, is just such a character. Moreover, the novella could also find an audience among low-church readers from Dissenting denominations. Machen is more charitable toward nonconformists in *The Great Return* than elsewhere. Rather than rejecting them, he calls on them to join in recognizing their Celtic Christian heritage and participate in the Mass of the Sangraal. Thus, they sing hymns from their own tradition, but in Welsh in a sacramental ceremony at an ancient "typical example of a Welsh parish church, before the evil and horrible period of 'restoration'" (221). Such a building, Machen intimates, is exactly where *all* Christians belong for worship: "There was not a single chapel of the Dissenters open in the town that day. The Methodists with their minister and all their deacons and all the Nonconformists had returned on this Sunday morning to 'the old hive'" (228). The worshipers are able to recite an old Welsh liturgy "as if an age-old memory stirred in them" (228). Eschewing his usual invective condemning Anglicans for their "twopenny morality" (*WP* 183), in *The Great Return*, Machen beckons for *everyone*—Celtic

Christian, Anglican, Dissenter, and skeptic—to join him in the little Welsh parish church for initiation into the greatest of mysteries.

Even if Machen put some thought into *The Great Return*, was his technique effective? On the purely pragmatic level, it of course was not, for few people read it. In his review for *The Time Literary Supplement*, Thomas William Rolleston recognized Machen's technique of juxtaposition and rejected it: "It is still possible for many people to believe in angels. It is not possible to believe, or even to make-believe, in the Holy Grail . . . These traditions are insuperably incongruous with the notebook of the journalist interviewing farmers and grocers about the 'remarkable occurrences' in Llantristant" (41). Notwithstanding such early ill will, however, *The Great Return* remains for some Machen aficionados one of his most beloved achievements. Vincent Starrett—whose *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* was the first book-length analysis of Machen's work—considered *The Great Return* "an extraordinary short tale" (30). Given that Starrett is generally more interested in Machen's use of "sin" or his earlier vague "ecstasy," his commendation of the Graal novella is significant. Even more significant is Lovecraft's praise for *The Great Return* as being "[o]f utmost delicacy, and passing from mere horror into true mysticism" (*ASHL* 65). Lovecraft treats Machen extensively in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, but unsurprisingly focuses almost entirely on the 1890s weird output of this

“Modern Master.” That Lovecraft should write well of *The Great Return* when he ignores works like *The Hill of Dreams*, *A Fragment of Life*, and *The Secret Glory*[9] bespeaks its impact on him. He is at least one skeptic who, if not persuaded by Machen’s technique, was at least receptive to its use.

Machen’s last substantial work written during his years with the *Evening News* was *The Terror*, which once again employs his journalistic writing technique. As World War I rages on, the reporter narrator becomes interested in a series of brutal and seemingly unrelated deaths in a Welsh district he calls “Meirion,” deaths which may even be part of a larger outbreak of brutality across England. Curious whether “the terror” is purely coincidental or the result of some deeper connection, he chooses to investigate this “series of extraordinary and terrible calamities” (*T* 10). During his visit, such calamities continue to occur, though the government shuts down most speculation of the matter by issuing a circular forbidding discussion of the events in the regional newspapers. Still, local townspeople speculate, and the narrator tallies their theories, which often surround a potential German invasion of England from the coast. The reporter finally uncovers the apparent truth, however, after locating a journal kept by a man named Secretan, who died of thirst with a family while trapped in

[9] Lovecraft owned *The Hill of Dreams* and *The Secret Glory*, as well as *The House of Souls*, which contained *A Fragment of Life* (Joshi, *LL* 98-99).

their house. The seemingly random deaths, he learns, have all been the results of exceptional animal attacks, attacks which cease as abruptly as they started. Discounting the possibility of mere coincidence, some of the narrator's acquaintances believe that "a certain contagion of hate" (104) from the Great War had infected the animals. The narrator himself opts for a different rationale, suggesting that the animals were in revolt because humans, given dominion over them, have become so little different from them by denying their superior spiritual natures.

The Terror was first serialized in the *Evening* News in 1916, and then published in book form a year later. Machen thought little of it, often dismissing it as "a shilling shocker" (Murphy 26, Danielson 47). Subsequent reviewers have been more charitable, frequently citing it as one of his better works. Starrett, noting Machen's own opinion, finds it "a finer work, withal, than most of the 'literature' of the day" (30). Sweetser is equally impressed, while Valentine believes "that the suspense . . . is expertly handled" (109). Noting this appreciation, Joshi nonetheless claims that "it is in fact quite bad" (*WT* 31). He joins with Reynolds and Charlton (*AM* 119) in believing the plot is too scant for a novella length, preferring "The Coming of the Terror," an abridgement of the longer work.

From a narrative perspective, *The Terror* follows the pattern set with "The Bowmen," *The Great Return*, and Machen's other tales of the decade. The skeptical but intrepid reporter traveling the Welsh countryside retains much the same voice as the "railer" in *The Great Return*. Like the railer, he keeps himself aloof from the assumptions of both gullible faith and hardheaded materialism. On the one hand, Machen derides "rumours and fantastic tales," including the Angel of Mons furor he had helped create (*T* 4). He even suggests that newspapers, if functioning properly, might serve some benefit to society. The narrator is consistently dogged by his inability to recover accurate information due to wartime government censorship of the newspapers, a censorship so overwhelming that a small Welsh weekly is shut down for printing a paragraph of gossip in its back pages; the narrator apparently cannot even give its real name.[10] In part, Machen uses this as a condemnation of the newspapers, suggesting that "we have grown of late to such a reverence for the printed word and such a reliance on it, that the old faculty of disseminating news by word of mouth has become atrophied" (3). And newspapers are at times even worse offenders at spreading rumors than community, as the Mons story indicates. Still, Machen clearly opposes the state's oppressive silencing of periodicals,

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[10] The narrator's words are, "The Meiros *Observer* (we will call it)" (2), indicating that he has altered the name for his account.

which has become so brutally thorough that news of "the long inaction of the British armies . . . was rigorously protected by the censorship, which severe, and sometimes severe to the point of absurdity . . . became in this particular matter ferocious" (1-2).

The matter of British military inaction is not lightly mentioned by Machen; the *Evening News* was one of several papers owned by Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe, who used his position as purveyor of information to keep British military and political leaders accountable and to push for more action. These factors "gained the press lord an influence more powerful than that of any British press figure before or afterward" (Thompson 3) but also made his newspapers prime targets of military censorship. Machen is clearly rankled by the suppression of information, which hampers the ability of his narrator and the people of Meirion to discover the truth:

> Let it be remembered, again and again, that, all the while that the terror lasted, there was no common stock of information as to the dreadful things that were being done. The press had not said one word upon it, there was no criterion by which the mass of the people could separate fact from mere vague rumour, no test by which ordinary misadventure or disaster could be distinguished from the achievements of the secret and awful force that was at work. (70)

While Machen may have lamented the British dependence on newspapers, clearly a "common stock of information" would be helpful to those who wish to learn more about the circumstances of the terror.

However, even if Machen is slightly more favorable toward the press as a potential instrument of truth, he nonetheless maintains all his usual criticisms for blatant materialistic skepticism. G. K. Chesterton's[11] Father Brown in one story asserts that "hard-shelled materialists" are "all balanced on the edge of belief—belief in almost anything" (116), and the credulity of skeptics is a dominant theme in *The Terror*. Indeed, he had said much the same thing in his introduction to *The Angel of Mons*. The inability of the modern doubter's mind to accept anything outside its paradigm leads Machen to conclude in typically hyperbolic fashion "that, in the highest court of appeal, all science is a lie . . . and so . . . we grin at Darwin, deride Huxley, and laugh at Herbert Spencer" (35). Machen's attack is leveled at those who assume *a priori* that naturalistic explanations exist for every mystery. Thus, when they encounter something that does not fit this mould, they become like "the mathematician . . . confronted with a two-sided triangle" (35).

This tendency is particularly manifest throughout *The Terror* in the various theories promulgated to explain the brutal deaths. One of the characters, a "man

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[11] Despite many obvious similarities between Machen and Chesterton, very little critical work has been done to compare them. Reynolds and Charlton briefly note some parallels (104) and suggest that Machen may have had a passing acquaintance with Chesterton (97). Brocard Sewell also compares the two in his essay, "*In Diebus Illis*: Memories of the Distributist Era: Arthur Machen, 1863-1943," but as the dates in the title suggest, the brief essay is marred by errors. It is beyond doubt, however, that the two shared many things in common, including a dislike for modern materialism and a love of paradoxical aphorisms.

of theories" (29) named Mr. Remnant, very early in the book realizes that animals are responsible for the killings; but rather than draw the correct conclusion, he suggests that Germans are responsible for the animals' behavior, using a heretofore unknown form of energy he calls the "Z ray." The Z-ray theory has the practical purpose of acting as a major red herring in the plot, and German-related explanations dominate the ensuing pages, so that the role of the animals themselves in the killings is almost forgotten until the end. But it also serves to illustrate Machen's point: Remnant has abandoned a plausible supernatural explanation for an implausible rational explanation. Dr. Lewis, who listens to Remnant's theory, has the good sense not to heed it but is all the more stymied when he encounters phenomena he cannot explain. It takes the more evenly balanced narrator to solve the mystery at last.

In some ways, then, *The Terror* falls right in line with Machen's other works of the period, using the skeptics' own vocabulary and reasoning tools against them. The chief innovation in the work lies in the way it manages to be simultaneously subtler and more explicit than his previous works. On the one hand, as has often been noted, he shows far more restraint in his treatment of the

supernatural than in his earlier works, and much of the novella reads more like a mystery story[12] than his standard horror fare. Sweetser believes,

> In relation to the sum total of his works, it is unique; and, when compared with his other works in the genre of the weird and occult, it has plot and substance rather than the airy nothings in his dream-vision tales. It is a modern mystery story, except on an entirely different level. (128)

Machen's uncharacteristically judicious use of the overtly mystical allows *The Terror* to be effective as the "shilling shocker" he had planned. He throws enough convolutions into the mix to keep the reader's attention until the denouement. Sweetser finds the narrator's explanation quite plausible, "more weirdly rational than any of the wildest conjecture offered as misleading clues in the great mystery" (128). Other critics are not so convinced. Valentine thinks the solution "seems too ponderous and sounds unconvincing" (109), while Joshi simply mocks it (*WT* 31-32).

But if Machen maintains self-control in deploying his supernatural motifs until the end, he is surprisingly generous in the amount of carnage presented. Not since the 1890s had he written a work with so many casualties, and *The Terror* is in some ways more shocking, as the victims are not dabblers in the occult but seemingly average families, including women and children. Children

[12] That is, "mystery" in the generic detective sense, not Machen's mystical rendering of the term.

or youths are stung to death by bees, mauled by beloved family dogs, drowned in the sea, or asphyxiated by moths. A family dies of thirst in their home after the father has been gored to death by his own cattle. These killings make *The Terror* in some ways more ghastly than anything in the Keynotes books, because the victims are by all accounts ordinary people, seemingly innocent victims. Some of the stories collected in book form with "The Bowmen" mention violence toward children, but these are brief references in very short works, their purpose primarily to establish the cruelty of the Germans. In *The Terror*, for the first time, Machen's violence appears gratuitous.

In many ways, however, *The Terror* may be read in conjunction with Machen's brief work *War and the Christian Faith*, published a year later. Like *The Terror*, this little theodicy denounces materialism, using many of the same tropes. Not surprisingly, Machen appeals to the mystery of God's ways as a response to the inexplicable evil and carnage of World War I, specifically to the mystery of the crucifixion:

> As to the task of justifying the ways of God to men, of showing by human analogies that apparent ferocious, undeserved cruelty may be sweet mercy: that were indeed the task of a high theologian. I do not think that the problem should be very difficult for the orthodox Christian. For he, by the very definition of his belief, grounds all his faith on the fact of the most infamous and hideous act of cruelty and injustice, pursued to the very death, that the world has ever seen. (10)

In *The Terror*, people die apparently senseless and horrible deaths, just as British citizens were dying senseless and horrible deaths in the trenches of the Great War. This, Machen insists, is simply the way a fallen world works, for "the world of the natural order isn't a very pleasant place, never has been a very pleasant place, and never will be a very pleasant place, so long as water drowns and fire burns and steel cuts flesh, and lightning destroys this body" (11). Few people would be so attuned as Arthur Machen to the wonders of nature, but even he could recognize that within the order of creation exists a certain degree of callousness as well.

Beyond the simple fact of nature's intrinsic brutality, however, the animal attacks also clearly serve as a form of judgment from God on the people of England. If this explanation seems rather harsh, it is nonetheless profoundly biblical. Mr. Secretan, whose manuscript provides the final clues needed to solve the mystery, transcribes a prophetic message he hears as his life is waning, a message whose first words read, "*Incipit liber ire Domini Dei nostri*. (Here beginneth The Book of the Wrath of the Lord our God)" (90). Though certainly unpopular in the twentieth century, the theme of God's wrath and his judgment upon humanity recurs throughout Scripture. Alice Cassazza notes that Secretan's final message resembles the genre of biblical lament as seen in prophets such as Jeremiah. Even more substantially, however, she points to two

passages of the Pentateuch in which animals specifically act as instruments of God's judgment (175). In Deuteronomy 32.24-25, Israel's idolatry provokes God to anger:

> *They shall be* burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.
> The sword without, and terror within, shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling *also* with the man of gray hairs. (KJV, italics original)

This passage definitely bears on *The Terror*'s content in several ways. Not only are the beasts direct means of God's judgment, they also invoke "terror." The twofold judgment of external ("the sword without") and internal ("the terror within") mirrors the judgment upon England, as does the catholicity with which it is applied: "the young man and the virgin, the suckling also with the man of gray hairs." No one is immune from this punishment.

The other passage Cassazza points to is just as applicable. Promising all the blessings he will lavish on Israel if they keep his commandments, the Lord then warns about the consequences of rejecting his ways:

> But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments;
> And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do all my commandments, *but* that ye break my covenant:
> I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, and the burning ague, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart: and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.

> And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.
> And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins.
> . . . .
> And if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins.
> I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your *high* ways shall be desolate.
> . . . .
> And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall avenge the quarrel of *my* covenant: and when ye are gathered together within your cities, I will send the pestilence among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy. (Leviticus 26.14-18, 21-22, 25, italics original)

Again, the term "terror" is used to describe God's judgment upon his people. Again, "wild beasts" are among the instruments appointed as ministers of his wrath. Again, these animals will be indiscriminate in their brutality, abducting children and "mak[ing] you few in number." In this passage, the brutality is connected also to Israel's enemies, an equally apt allusion in the midst of World War I. If Israel departed from God's ways, they would face attack on two fronts: from the beasts around them and from the neighboring ungodly nations. So too does England face a two-front war in *The Terror*, and so begins "The Book of the Wrath of the Lord our God."

Clearly, Machen intends the animals' sudden attacks to be a sign of God's judgment upon his people. But why? What cause has God to punish the people

so harshly? The answer, once again, lies in the materialism that has infected society. Sweetser finds that in *The Terror* Machen "expressed creatively one of his favorite expository themes: the distinction between man and animal, namely spirituality versus rationality" (128). Quite unlike the gentle invitation to beauty of *The Great Return*, *The Terror* is a vicious condemnation of materialism, and not just the materialism of skeptical rationalists noted earlier. We should not necessarily presume that all the victims in the tale are innocent. That the animals attack ordinary people is exactly the point, for "ordinary" life is one of Machen's most consistent targets after his conversion. The animal kingdom attacks because normal humans do not recognize themselves for the rulers that they are, for

> the beasts also have within them something which corresponds to the spiritual quality in men—we are content to call it instinct. They perceived that the throne was vacant—not even friendship was possible between them and the self-deposed monarch. If he were not king he was a sham, an impostor, a thing to be destroyed. (*T* 106)

The "innocent" people are one and all guilty of diminishing their own significance. They have made themselves soulless animals, and the animals treat them as such.

But Machen does not directly implicate God in the attacks; rather, the killings are portrayed as a natural reaction to a profoundly unnatural phenomenon: humanity's rejection of its own inherent authority over nature. In

Genesis 1.28, God had commanded humanity to "subdue" his creation, to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." For Machen, this dominion was sustainable because humans, unlike animals, were spiritual creations.[13] In *War and the Christian Faith*, Machen asserts that "what we call animals, or 'the beasts,'" are "occupying a higher place than ourselves" (29-30) in God's eyes, for they have never transgressed his will in the way humans have. Animals know their place in the hierarchy of creation. Humanity was made to rule over the beasts because humanity was made spiritual, in God's image. In the materialistic mindset, however, men and women differ from animals only quantitatively, not qualitatively. In a world where the soul, "the inmost light," has itself become de-spiritualized, nothing remains to separate humans from the rest of nature. Hence, the violence of *The Terror* can be seen as wholly consistent with Machen's faith, and there is a definite logic to the narrator's conclusion

> that the subjects revolted because the king abdicated. Man has dominated the beasts throughout the ages, the spiritual has reigned over the rational through the peculiar quality and grace of spirituality that men possess, that makes a man to be that which he is. And when he maintained this power and grace, I think it is pretty clear that between him and the animals there was a certain

[13] Darryl Jones, seizing on the political language in the descriptions of the animal revolt, tries rather ingeniously to read *The Terror* was an allegory of the War. However, he ultimately finds the work "a confused and contradictory fable" (39), which perhaps suggests simply that Machen was writing primarily for spiritual rather than political purposes.

> treaty and alliance. There was supremacy on the one hand, and submission on the other; but at the same time there was between the two that cordiality which exists between lords and subjects in a well-organized state.
>
> * * * * * * * * * *
>
> For long ages he has been putting off this royal robe, he has been wiping the balm of consecration from his own breast. He has declared, again and again, that he is not spiritual, but rational, that is, the equal of the beasts over whom he was once sovereign. He has vowed that he is not Orpheus but Caliban. (*T* 104-06)

Machen symbolizes the vain rationalism of society through his use of light. "Can you tell me," Dr. Lewis asks of his brother-in-law, "why moths rush into the flame?" (60). The perceived tendency of moths to perform just such a self-destructive act parallels, to Machen, the human tendency to rush toward self-destructive materialism. Indeed, on several occasions in the book, characters die because they have been chasing a mysterious light. That light, the narrator later concludes, is in fact the eyes of moth swarms in the night. These swarms are among the most deadly animal predators in *The Terror*, frequently suffocating characters who pursue their glowing eyes. Their light, then, is a false light, and self-destructive for the people who chase after it. Just as Dr. Lewis's moth "succeeded in its mysterious quest" (60) for the flame by burning itself up, so humanity follows after the "light" of materialism.

If materialism is the cause of God's judgment, it is perhaps appropriate that the final, authoritative words are delivered by Mr. Secretan, an artist who in his last days is deprived of material comforts. Well-stocked with food but

running out of water, Secretan and the Griffith family are isolated from the rest of Meirion, trapped in a farmhouse and unable to leave because of the vicious cattle and moth swarms outside the door. That they die of thirst is entirely appropriate, because Machen is suggesting that however full the human belly may be, it will always have spiritual thirst that cannot be quenched in this world. Dying slowly, cut off from worldly human society, and aware of their own lack, their spiritual natures begin to be catalyzed. The material world begins to appear more dreamlike, and Secretan and the others start to experience waking dreams and visions. "It was then," Secretan writes, "we began to dream of wells and fountains, and water coming very cold, in little drops, out of rocky places in the middle of a cool wood. We had given up all meals; now and then one would cut a lump from the sides of bacon on the kitchen wall and chew a bit of it, but the saltness was like fire" (88). The food, the bacon—which depicts their worldly state—fails to satisfy or sustain them and in fact causes their thirst to intensify. The dream of wells and fountains represents their spiritual nature crying for relief. It is an image that should be familiar to regular Machen readers, who will recall that *A Fragment of Life* begins with Edward Darnell waking from an almost identical dream, one which there also symbolized his yearning for spirituality in the midst of a mundane existence. And as in the case of Ambrose Meyrick of *The Secret Glory*, it takes denial of the world's trappings to attain this spiritual state.

That is why Secretan is finally privileged to write down the Letter of Wrath and deliver God's message. His account is the moment of *The Terror* in which ecstasy finally breaks free from the narrative prison of materialistic journalism. Appropriately, it is penned by an artist and not by the primary narrator. It is difficult to say whether this final awful scene, which appears near the conclusion of *The Terror*, is worth the wait, worth the clinical, procedural cataloguing of deaths that presage it. Nonetheless, the scene clearly roots *The Terror* firmly among Machen's Christian works.

Thus, while *The Terror* may initially seem radically different from Machen's other fiction of the period, it is simply because he is pursuing the same end with different means. *The Terror* is a "shocker" in part because it is Machen's first major *Christian* horror story. In the early 1890s, he had shown how frightening a world could be if there were no mystical transcendence; in *The Terror*, he shows how frightening the world could be if such transcendence existed but were rejected. If *The Terror* succeeds, it is because Machen was able to create a horror very different from that of *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*; if it fails, it is because he could not accommodate horror to his ecstatic understanding of the cosmos.

CHAPTER FIVE

"The Rough, Unfinished Ends in the Tale": The Failure of *The Green Round* and Arthur Machen's Long Road Home

In 1921, Arthur Machen's employment at the *Evening News* ceased, in part due to a libel lodged against the paper by Lord Alfred Douglas: Machen had mistakenly written an obituary for the litigious and very much alive nobleman and former acquaintance. Initially, the departure was at least in some ways a relief, for Machen was no longer hostage to Fleet Street's unceasing deadlines. Dovetailing nicely with his newfound freedom, the early 1920s saw Machen's reputation as a writer grow increasingly widespread. In the first half of the decade, Machen wrote no new fiction, though *The Secret Glory* finally saw print. With his star on the rise, however, Machen was able to publish his three autobiographies, along with the Danielson bibliography, the reviews in *Precious Balms*, *Ornaments in Jade*, and various essays and non-fiction pieces.

However, this new appreciation for his work never fully reached critical mass, as Reynolds and Charlton observe:

> The sudden vogue for Machen's writing did not quite catch on, to turn him into an author of established success; it was one of the dry-grass fires, not the stead glow required, and as it died down and receipts began to fall off, the lack of the *Evening News* salary came increasingly to be felt. (138)

As a result, Machen turned his pen back to fiction, this time with mixed results. Over the final decade of his writing career, Machen published several more short stories and one more novel. If contemporary Machen critics slight his Christian fiction as a whole, they are often especially dismissive of his last surge of writing.[1] Sweetser calls this stage his "Indian summer" (41) and holds that "Machen's literary output during these declining years was not significant either in volume or in merit" (47). Joshi is of course more forthright in his opinions, calling "Machen's fiction after *The Secret Glory* . . . one long succession of failures" (*WT* 31). He is, however, somewhat more measured in his introduction to *The Terror and Other Stories*, which collects Machen's weird work from this period, tactfully suggesting that "Machen could on occasion still wield the magic that makes his earlier works so shuddersomely memorable" (x). Valentine castigates Joshi for being "rather donnish critical" but admits of Machen's last collection of stories, "It is usual to regard this book as of little consequence" (129).

Once again, the critics too offhandedly trivialize Machen's work when writing about his last period of writing. Nonetheless, there is some substance behind the critiques. Machen himself frequently expressed distaste for his later

[1] Reynolds and Charlton are the lone exception, though other critics will occasionally note the merits of one or two late tales.

fiction, and taken as a whole, it does not measure up to his best achievements in any of the previous stages of his fiction. But why is this the case? It cannot simply be, as some critics maintain, that Machen has returned to the well too often. After all, many accomplished writers develop a successful formula and hold to it throughout their careers without any diminishing effects. And, as we have already seen, Machen was in fact anything but repetitive, demonstrating a remarkable facility for slipping in and out of various genres and styles. Much of Machen's late work *is* unconvincing and uncohesive, but not simply because he is recycling old material. The problem, rather, is that he is recycling old material that is no longer consistent with his worldview.

It makes sense that Machen would return to horror in the late 1920s. In need of added income, he must have realized that for all his varied work, he was still known first and foremost for his *fin-de-siècle* output. Moreover, he had already begun this return to form in his *Evening News* days when he wrote *The Terror*. From 1927 to 1936, Machen would publish several more stories, some printed in anthologies edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith, other compiled primarily in two late collections, *The Cosy Room* (1936) and *The Children of the Pool* (1936). The strongest of these stories continue to use with good effect the technique of juxtaposition he had employed in his early Christian fiction, while sometimes adding new stylistic innovations. The weakest, however, try to

recreate the themes of his early fiction without ever attaining the same success. However, the unevenness of Machen's late work is nowhere more fully on display than in his last novel, *The Green Round*.

The narrator of *The Green Round* relates the story of one Lawrence Hillyer, a bookish London recluse who travels to the Welsh resort of Porth on doctor's orders. At first, Hillyer is refreshed by the excursion, but soon the locals begin to look askance at him. He gradually learns that he is being followed by a hideous child-like figure, though he is the only one who cannot see it. When a local woman disappears, presumed dead, Hillyer and his mysterious *doppelganger* become the popular suspects, and he finally must return to London. There, he continues his mystical researches, trying to learn more about the Reverend Thomas Hampole, author of the 1853 occult book *A London Walk*. He becomes the victim of numerous otherworldly pranks and is now able to see the hideous little figure, though no one else can. He decides on "going abroad for his health" (*GR* 200), moving at last to the Syrian city of Aleppo.

The Green Round was published in 1933; Machen wrote the novel when he was in his late sixties, finishing it only because he had been paid in advance by publisher Ernest Benn. Reynolds and Charlton find *The Green Round* "a very creditable effort in the circumstances" (149), which is the most generous praise it has ever received. Machen hated it, telling Colin Summerford in a letter, "Poor

Uncle Ernest! What he will say to 'The Green Round' I do not know. Gollancz told me that Sir Ernest was a man absolutely without religion; but I trust that this is not the case. He will want consolation" (*SL* 130). Other critics have been equally harsh. Valentine remarks that "as literature, it is a failure" (128). It has been called "a hodgepodge fantasy lacking continuity and verisimilitude" (Sweetser 46) and "a drearily verbose and unfocused rehashing of old themes" (Joshi, *WT* 19).

No attempt will be made here to defend *The Green Round*; whatever merits it may possess in parts, as a whole it is precisely the failure that critics and Machen himself believe it to be. What is missing from this critical discourse, however, is any *sustained* explanation for why it is a failure: most scholars dismiss it in a paragraph and move on. Michael has one theory, believing that

> *The Green Round* is an admirable illustration of a critical observation that cannot be too strongly stressed. The book is a so-called *short* novel of some sixty-thousand words, nevertheless it fails because, like *The Secret Glory* and *The Terror*, it is too long. Machen's subjects are ideally the brief horror of the momentary vision of splendour. (61, italics original)

Michael is to a certain extent correct; Machen found the writing of *The Green Round* grueling and needed to add material to push it to novel length. Yet Machen's work almost always deals in tangents and allusiveness, so the expansion of the book would not necessarily occasion failure. Certainly *The Secret Glory* and *The Terror* are not as bad as Michael maintains, nor does he

address in this evaluation Machen's other lengthy works, such as *The Three Impostors*, *The Hill of Dreams*, or *A Fragment of Life*. Of course, Machen wrote many memorable short works, but at all points in his career prior to *The Green Round*, he was perfectly capable of crafting novel-length prose. Sweetser's complaint that the novel lacks verisimilitude is something of a *non sequitur* where Machen is concerned. After all, none of Machen's writing is known for its realism, though he makes *The Green Round* as authentic as possible by adopting a voice very similar to his old journalistic persona. Likewise, why should Joshi be indignant at Machen's verbosity? It is hardly any wordier than the rest of Machen's corpus; indeed, as will be explored in more depth, it is more often marred by its *lack* of solid description.

What Michael, Sweetser, and Joshi all recognize, however, is the unevenness. It is indeed "a hodgpodge fantasy," as Sweetser terms it, and Joshi is even closer to the mark when he calls the book an "unfocused rehashing of old themes." The novel truly is a cobbling together of ideas from across Machen's career. But even this is not alone the foundation of *The Green Round*'s failure. Rather, the novel is poorly made and unfocused because in it Machen is attempting to blend together themes from different stages of his life, stages with incompatible worldviews. Nothing proves the extent and significance of Machen's conversion so effectively as the literary incoherence of *The Green*

Round, because the book's inconsistency represents two very different philosophies unequally yoked into a single text.

Critics seem at odds in trying to categorize the genre of *The Green Round*. Such generic instability is hardly anything unusual in Machen, but it is especially telling in this novel's case. Is *The Green Round* a horror novel or isn't it? Reynolds and Charlton think not, believing that "horror is no longer prominent" (155). Joshi refers to it vaguely as a "work of the supernatural," though in doing so he sets it alongside *The Terror* (Introduction, *T* xi). Michael, on the other hand, characterizes the novel explicitly in terms of horror (60). It is Valentine, however, who best captures the unhealthy generic tensions that mar the novel:

> The main thrust of the narrative is the Little People theme, and this is not told with the same masterly control of his 1890s tales. A stunted familiar dogs Hillyer's footsteps, though he cannot see it, and there is a variety of destructive, poltergeist-type activity, but both these devices are too conventional to strike a chord with the reader, and nowhere near as compelling as the shadowy rituals hinted at in the deep forests and hollows of Gwent in "The Shining Pyramid" and "The Novel of the Black Seal." Neither is there any clear correlation between the Little People theme and the otherworld motif, so that the novel does not quite cohere. As the further exploration of the idea of a world which intersects with our own, a spiritual region holding both imperishable delight and fundamental danger, *The Green Round* cannot be entirely disregarded: but as literature it is a failure, with a narrative prolonged by commercial considerations, and a vicarious "horror" element similarly dictated. (128)

Valentine's observations are quite astute. The "little people" motif is prevalent in Machen's early horror fiction but noticeably absent from his early

Christian writing. Indeed, it was Machen's genius at the beginning of his career that he returned to the darker origins of fairy mythology, that he was "not a typical member of the Celtic Revival. Though he makes use of traditional fairy folklore, his 'little people' bear little resemblance to those of Yeats and his contemporaries. They are ugly, malevolent and inspire dread in their observers" (Leslie-McCarthy, "Re-Vitalising" 77). Karl Petersen, also placing Machen in the Celtic Revival, comments on "Machen's predisposition to see [fairies] as evil" (166). It was his distinct innovation to take beings that late Victorians saw as tiny and effeminate and to turn them into objects of horror.

But while Machen would deploy the little people again at the end of the career, probably motivated as Valentine contends "by commercial considerations," he would be far less successful the second time around. Malevolent fairy beings make appearances in several late Machen tales, such as "Out of the Picture," "The Bright Boy," and "Change," all of which appeared in *The Children of the Pool*.[2] In part, these stories do not chill because the descriptions of the little people are far less menacing: they appear more like little more than grotesque children. "Out of the Picture" features vague descriptions of a "Horrible Dwarf" (*T* 242) or a "Devilish Dwarf" (245). The eponymous

[2] The title story of the collection initially appears as though it too will be a variant of the little people mythos, but "The Children of the Pool" is ultimately a psychological tale in which the fairy "children" are mental representations, not physical realities.

character in “The Bright Boy” is simply a man in his fifties whose childlike appearance masks his brutal appetites. Only “Change” attains any substantial horror, keeping its darkest secrets hidden or unsaid and subtly echoing the plot of “The White People.”

Hillyer’s familiar in *The Green Round* is very like the beings in “Out of the Picture” or “The Bright Boy.” He is described as a “dwarf” a “deformed creature” who may be “tremendously strong” (59). Elsewhere he is “a very ugly little boy” or a “dwarfish child”: “Something twisted and deformed about the creature; he had the old face of a dwarf” (196). Another witness cannot even describe him: “I did see him, I’ll take my oath, and there was something wrong about him, and I’m blest if I can tell you any more than that” (73). Despite the fact that Machen is obviously invoking his old subject matter, these depictions fail to produce any appreciable measure of terror. They are simultaneously too descriptive and not descriptive enough. Machen might have had more success if he had left the visuals more to the imagination, falling back on the quality of “unspeakableness” that often energizes his *fin-de-siècle* fiction; or he might have made the being more monstrous, lavishing the kinds of grotesque imagery that make the climax of *The Great God Pan* or certain stories in *The Three Impostors* the classic weird tales that they are. Instead, he opts for a middle ground that can neither chill nor disgust.

Nor do the *doppelganger*'s actions increase the audience's fear of him. We are never certain that the dwarf is responsible for Mrs. Prothero's death, but even if he is, that killing is the extent of his serious crimes. In London, the being is at worst responsible for various acts of vandalism or destruction of personal property, such as smashing furniture, strewing papers, or breaking a greenhouse. And even here, the reader is never told for certain that the being has caused this damage. In "The Shining Pyramid," the seething little people sacrifice a young girl; in "The Red Hand," they terrify the killer Selby; in "The Novel of the Black Seal," they abduct a respected scientist; and in "The White People," they seduce a teenage girl into unspeakable acts. In *The Green Round*, the little person destroys a mirror that Hillyer dislikes anyway.

But if the horror does not horrify, what then of the mysticism? Valentine believes that aspect "cannot be entirely disregarded," and as Machen's Christian stage is more readily identifiable with mysticism, it would make sense that these portions would be stronger. Even here, however, Machen's last novel does not prove wholly satisfactory, for several reasons. The first problem is that he does not establish the level of contrast and juxtaposition that is so well exemplified in his best Christian fiction. In *A Fragment of Life*, the visions of the wood and the Graal stand in stark opposition to the blandness of the Darnells' workaday world. *The Secret Glory* is marked by the interplay of vitriolic satire and supernal

beauty. "The Bowmen," *The Great Return*, and *The Terror* all allow supernatural experiences to burst vividly and poetically out of the stranglehold of journalistic terminology. But in many of his last works, these contrasts have become dulled. The 1927 story "The Gift of Tongues"—one of Machen's first pieces of fiction after his hiatus—begins again with the journalistic narrator, describing a brief outburst of heavenly language in a small Welsh town. But while the descriptions of "those sonorous words" (*R* 213) begin to evoke the wonder of the moment, they never arise even to the level of "The Bowmen." "Ritual" (1937), Machen's final piece of fiction, features no irruption of transcendence whatsoever.

The Green Round is narrated in a manner similar to the reportorial tone he cultivated while at the *Evening News*, and the interpolation of various documents and accounts into the course of the novel calls to mind the structure of *The Secret Glory*. At times, however, he takes his indirectness too far, wandering off on tangents that never satisfactorily meander back to the main theme. The book begins with a prologue describing a debate in the newspaper about small English and Welsh towns becoming too commercialized. The debate is catalyzed by one man's complaint that he stumbled upon a raucous dance hall in the middle of the quiet beaches of Porth. Eventually a Porth reader corrects this complaint, insisting that no such establishment exists. The apparent point of this exchange is to establish that unexplained phenomena occasionally occur. But other than

the setting, the newspaper column bears little relationship to the rest of the novel, and Machen includes several pages written by other readers, who are simply griping about commercialization in their own towns. In *The Secret Glory*, the tangents eventually find their way back to Ambrose Meyrick; in *The Green Round*, Smith of Wimbledon and his vanishing dance hall remain disconnected.[3] At his best, Machen carefully weaves his narrative threads to form a coherent whole; in *The Green Round*, there are pronounced gaps in the stitching.

Even so, tortuous narrative structures are hardly foreign to Machen readers and might be forgivable if the payoff proved worthwhile. Unfortunately, *The Green Round* does not deliver on this count. We have already seen how Machen's descriptions of his hideous fairy fall flat in evoking any sense of terror. But his ecstatic moments in the main prove equally hollow. There are some echoes of Machen's old magic in Hampole *London Walk* description of the city at dawn, which is a tapestry of allusions:

> The houses which you have passed daily, it may be for many years, as you have issued forth on your avocations or your amusements, now seem as if you beheld them for the first time. They have suffered a mysterious change, into something rich and strange. Though they may have been designed by no extraordinary exertion of the art of architecture, though their materials may be of common brick and stone and plaster, though neither Pentelicus nor Ferrara has assisted in the adornment of these edifices; yet you have been

[3] Smith of Wimbledon is mentioned in passing in the main narrative (41, 43) and never appears as a character, nor is there ever a suggestion that Hillyer has any knowledge of him.

> ready to affirm that they now "stand in glory, shine like stars, apparelled in a light serene." They have become magical habitations, supernal dwellings; more desirable to the eye than the fabled pleasure dome of the Eastern potentate, or the bejewelled hall built by the Genie for Aladdin in the Arabian Tale. (91-92)

The idea that dawn may transmute the appearance of the city, that the extraordinary may appear in the ordinary, is quintessential Machen. This passage, however, cannot help but be disappointing to the dedicated Machen aficionado, for it gives almost no real visual images. *How* is the city changed, made magical by the rising sun? Allusions to *The Tempest* and "Kubla Khan" and the *Arabian Nights* are all well and good, but they cannot mask the overall vagueness of what could have been an exquisitely worked paragraph.

It might be possible to argue that the passage's abstraction simply represents Hampole's voice, not Machen's. However, the same abstraction prevails throughout the novel, regardless of the narrator. Indeed, when Hillyer himself experiences a moment of transcendence, Machen's description become even *less* tangible:

> I went up the steps, through the open door, and found myself not in Mrs. Jolly's extremely modest apartments, but in a gorgeous palace. Here one would suppose, the absurdity should have arrested me, and brought the whole fabric of the dream crashing to the ground. It was not so. I knew that this was not the aspect of the place to which I was used. For an inappreciable instant of time, the jaundiced marble paper of the passage, the dingy carpet on the stairs, the sordid light that crept through the landing window were present to me; that, I recollected, was the accustomed greeting of the house. I quite appreciated the vast difference between that and

> this splendour into which I had entered; but I understood perfectly what had happened. For this, it seems, was one of those dreams which do not stand alone as solitary incidents, but are a part of a larger whole, and in relation to a whole world of circumstance. And so the palace of golden and glorious light in which I stood was utterly rational and acceptable. In the dream, I say, I was in the secret, I knew what had happened and how and why it had happened. It was all a part of a scheme which was perfectly familiar to me; I received it and rejoiced in it, not as one who is incredulous and all amazed at the coming of some tremendous unexpected good, saying to himself, scarcely daring to believe: "Then my dreams have come true!" but rather, as a man witnessing a happy ending which he has long foreseen in the fashioning of which he has, perhaps, played his part. I say, "a happy ending" for the figures about me were, I knew, possessed with the felicity that was in my heart. I was sharing in a great festival of ineffable joy. And the cause and reason of it were not hidden from me; I participated in the secret possessed by all, and could have uttered it in a word. But when I awoke, the word, though it was even then on my lips, was lost. (158-60).

Quoting this passage at length helps illustrate not only what it is but what it *might* have been if written earlier in Machen's life. In *Hieroglyphics*, Machen wrote that "the work of all artists" is "the shaping for us of ecstasy by means of symbols" (136). Hillyer's vision has the potential to be lavished with the kind of carefully constructed symbolic imagery that Machen could craft like few others. Where are the woods? Where is the Graal? He nicely paints a picture of Hillyer's old living space, setting the stage for one of his trademark juxtapositions. But in several pages' worth of description, the most concrete image we are given of the climactic ecstasy is a "palace of golden and glorious light."

Hillyer's assertion is that he *cannot* describe the scene in any greater detail. In the moment of the ecstasy, of the vision, he possessed the ability to communicate his rapture univocally—he "could have uttered it in a word." Having lost that word, however, he apparently does not feel the need to attempt any symbolic or equivocal descriptions. Indeed, he steadfastly refuses to: "I have said that the dream was a singularly vivid one. So it was. Not so much in the recollection of its detail and imagery, as in my extraordinary conviction on awaking of having gone through a real and veritable experience" (161). Hillyer's reticence to attempt symbolic language may be due to the fact that his experience

> was very largely negative in its nature. . . . I believe that most of us regard happiness, or joy, or well-being or what you will, as 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 the burden of life. (161-62)

Hillyer's moment of ecstasy is characterized by absence rather than presence, and as a result it becomes an apophatic experience, unable to be framed in imagistic language. Yet the reader cannot help but feel rather let down. After all, Machen had spent his entire career running up against the limitations of language, and it never before prevented him from writing memorable sensory descriptions. Why, then, should Hillyer—who has had "a singularly vivid" dream—be exempted from providing a concrete description of its contents, even

if the language is metaphorical or symbolic? It would surely be more moving than the catalogue of jumbled impressions we are given.

But if *The Green Round* is limited by Machen's inability or unwillingness to provide an effective study in contrasts, its most fundamental flaw lies in its absence of a clearly defined organizing principle. Simply put, what is the point of the novel? Here is where the dissonance of Machen's genres and worldviews is most keenly felt. The reader searches in vain for some well-defined connection between the dwarfish *doppelganger* and *A London Walk*. One might argue that the connections exist below the surface and that Machen trusts in the reader's intelligence to discover them. But such subtlety is highly uncharacteristic of Machen's writing at any stage, and particularly in his last works. Late stories like "The Children of the Pool," "The Tree of Life," and "The Dover Road" all feature lengthy and at times belabored explanations for the mysteries that have been set up.

Even so, some conjectures might be proffered to bring a degree of closure to the novel. Hillyer is drawn to Hampole's work because both are occultists. Hillyer speculates on "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" (88, italics original). Hillyer keeps his musings at the speculative

level, but immediately thereafter, he discovers *A London Walk*, in which his eyes are drawn to Hampole's assertion,

> *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.* (94-95, italics original)

These speculations, idle or not, should be familiar to the dedicated Machen reader: they align with Ambrose Meyrick's definition of holiness in "The White People." In that story's frame narrative, holiness is presented as "an effort to recover the ecstasy that was before the Fall" (*WP* 65). Evil is described as "in its essence is a lonely thing, a passion of the solitary, individual soul" (63). If this is the case, then holiness, its inverse, must be lonely as well.

Given this definition, Hillyer and Hampole may in Machen's world be perched on the cusp of sainthood. This would explain why both of them experience profound, glorious visions. Perhaps the grotesque little man represents the residue of worldliness that clings to Hillyer, that he must divest himself of in order to achieve his full sanctity. Could this be the burden he feels being lifted during "the palace of golden and glorious light"? In his finally pilgrimage to Aleppo, Hillyer follows in the footsteps of that other Ambrose Meyrick, protagonist of *The Secret Glory* and an ecstatic ascetic himself.

Unfortunately, this explanation is not entirely satisfying. At the beginning of the novel, Hillyer is the only one who cannot see the deformed being. Is that because he is not as materialistic as the others? Or is it because he must first recognize his own materialism before he can banish it? If the former is true, then it is puzzling why the being should materialize at all. But if the latter is true, then why should other people *stop* seeing the dwarf at the end of the novel? And if the dwarf is a symbol of materialism, its actions become inexplicable, not only in the possible murder of a woman with no connection to Hillyer, but in the destruction of property as well—it makes little sense for an embodiment of worldliness to *attack* worldly possessions. Moreover, Hillyer feels his burden lifted in the palace vision, and yet the dwarf continues to dog his steps even afterward. So while it is tempting to read the deformed familiar as a residue of materialism that the protagonist must cast off, such a reading is shot through with logical inconsistencies.

Even more significantly, Machen basically admits that there is no connection between the horror and the mysticism of *The Green Round.* In the Epilogue, where one might hope the novel's loose ends will finally be tied up, the narrator in fact quite conspicuously refuses to do so, writing that Hillyer

> has never attempted to give me any account of what happened to him in the year 1929; chiefly, I think, because he doesn't know what did happen to him. Hence the fragments, hence the gaps, hence the rough, unfinished ends in the tale. . . . [T]here are the uncertainties.

> There is that business of Hampole and his book, *A London Walk*, which melts into the story of Hillyer's mysterious visitor—or of a very bad dream. And the bright light which a man—and only one man, apparently, saw pouring from the house where Hillyer lodged, in the dead of night. *That is a loose end, and I must leave it loose*. (204-05, italics mine)

In his later fiction, Machen would at times emphasize the apparent arbitrariness of supernatural phenomena. In "The Dover Road," several skeptics travelling to a supposedly haunted house encounter a well-known antiquary, only to learn that this same man was actually in another part of the country at that very moment. The skeptic who "solves" the mystery must admit that, regarding such *doppelgangers*, "there is hardly a single case . . . where the apparition was any thing but purposeless" (*T* 297). He quotes by way of example an account by Dickens (first published in *All the Year Round* in 1859) in which the narrator reports having seen an apparently random vision of his father at his bedside ("Haunted" 2-3). Machen liked the anecdote so well that he also used it in "N" (1936), a story that brought back Thomas Hampole's *London Walk*. His fascination with the passage is ironic, however, as it is apparently fictional; and while there *is* a supernatural explanation in "The Dover Road," Dickens generally favored psychological explanations.[4]

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[4] Louise Henson demonstrates how the Christmas 1859 number of *All the Year Round* featured "sketches which detailed his personal objections to the kinds of ghostly incidents"

Fictional or factual, when the narrator of the Dickens story saw his father, "nothing ever came of it" ("Haunted" 2), and this is the point for Machen, not only in "The Dover Road," but in *The Green Round* as well. With his final novel, Machen was apparently far less ambitious than in his younger days. For, ultimately, the chief end of the book is nothing more than to demonstrate that there are things science cannot explain. Hillyer's familiar and his mystic visions are entirely unconnected except insofar as they show that there are supernatural forces at work in the world that defy rational explanation. Machen hopes his readers will understand "that the scientific mind is loath to accept isolated supernormal phenomena which have no theory behind them, no *logos* to rationalise them, no scheme in which they can be fitted" (*GR* 202). The inexplicability of the plot, the unrelatedness of its strands, is in fact precisely the point:

> The *lacunae*, the gaps in the history are both wide and deep. And they are of two kinds; the gaps in any theory which can be constructed of what actually happened to Hillyer; and then the *lacunae* in the actual story, gathered in odd pieces from here and from there, and put together doubtfully, conjecturally; without any very strong conviction, in some instances at any rate, that this jig goes into that saw. (203)

touted by mesmerist William Howitt and "mobilized arguments that were well known in medical aetiology" (119).

Here, then, is Machen's apology for his work, and here is its essential failing—he has aimed too low. The fiction of the early 1890s was visceral in its primal fear because it tapped into a deep spiritual void. His transitional work was dynamic, kinetic, searching for a source to the ecstasy he was certain existed. And in his Christian phase, he could allow that ecstasy to be depicted vibrantly on the page, because it was connected to a very particular system of belief. *The Green Round*, on the other hand, feels very much like a work "put together . . . without any very strong conviction." Arthur Machen in the 1930s no longer possessed the awful cosmic dread that so pervades "The Novel of the Black Seal," "The Shining Pyramid," or "The Red Hand"; little people that were once terrifying and ritualistic subhumans become deformed tricksters. Yet the visionary scenes lack the wonder of his earlier work as well. Perhaps, frustrated by his inability to communicate the wonders he knew, Machen gave up on imagery entirely, settling instead for an apophatic mysticism, a *via negativa*. Perhaps in aging he had lost some of his old sense of the ecstatic. Other works of the period, such as his lone ghost tale, "The Exalted Omega" (1936), are pervaded by a sense of dreary numbness quite unlike anything in the rest of Machen's corpus. Yet "N," written at the same time and directly lifting passages out of *The Green Round*, also includes some exquisite visual descriptions that can certainly stand toe-to-toe with his old Graal visions. In 1933 he could still write

"that Theology is the only true & exact science" (Hassler and Hassler 70), showing no indication that his Christian belief had faded.

Thus, *The Green Round* succeeds in that it presents varied accounts of the supernatural plausibly in Machen's signature journalistic voice. But its success is at the same time a failure of sorts, for never before had Machen attempted to do so little in a novel. Its visions are abstracted and cold, and they fit poorly with the ostensibly horrific bad fairy; it is justifiably panned because it represents the *Christian mystic* Machen trying to incorporate the incompatible *materialist* Machen into a single work. In *The Terror*, Machen showed that he could still produce some effective weird horror in a Christian setting by changing the locus of the horror. But *The Green Round* shows that maintaining such horror with his old tropes was a more difficult proposition, because the horror that motivated those original tales no longer lay at the pit of his stomach or the bottom of his soul. He could not frighten because he was no longer afraid.

Paradoxically, then, the failure of *The Green Round* only serves to illustrate more profoundly the overall complexity of the author Arthur Machen. He was hardly the philosophically shallow or static hack writer that he is sometimes portrayed as. His overall oeuvre quite varied, and his writing was the result of much calculation and careful thought. Moreover, that thought evolved throughout his life, and he adapted his fiction accordingly. As a skeptic himself

in the 1890s, he was able to convey the true abysmal horror that underlay his skepticism, a horror bereft of any notion of ecstasy. While searching later in the decade for a philosophy that better accorded with his own mystical and ecstatic inclinations, he was able to dramatize that journey into some of his most memorably evocative writing. And when at last his quest led him to his ancestral faith at the dawn of a century more infamous for its supposed rejection of that faith, he developed new styles and voices to call others to join him—to join him in a little Welsh church to partake in the greatest mystery—the greatest ecstasy—of all.

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