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Title: "A city of resurrections" and "a city of nightmares" : London, Female, Monstrosity, and the Weird Sublime in Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan"

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Citation style: Mydla Jacek. (2015). "A city of resurrections" and "a city of nightmares" : London, Female, Monstrosity, and the Weird Sublime in Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan". W: M. Kowalczyk-Piaseczna, M. Mamet-Michalkiewicz (red.), "Urban amazement" (S. 25-55). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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“A City of Resurrections” and “a City of Nightmares”: London, Female Monstrosity, and the Weird Sublime in Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan”

ABSTRACT: As a point of departure I present the psychoanalytic interpretive strategies used to address late-Victorian, or *fin-de-siècle*, Gothic fictions. These strategies see in the fictions expression of the numerous anxieties that troubled Victorian at the turn of the nineteenth century. Also, one of the second-wave Gothic’s representatives, Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan” can be read as a fictional expression of those anxieties.

The approach I propose in the main body of the article consists in seeing in Machen’s story a realisation of a new type of the sublime, called here the weird sublime. I show how Machen engages the ideas of the modern metropolis (London), the *femme fatale*, and of the occult to construct this type of sublimity. In particular, attention is drawn to the way in which the female element becomes fused, via the intercession of the pagan deity, with the city.

KEYWORDS: late-Victorian Gothic, the weird tale, sublime, the city, femininity, monstrosity, decadence

Introduction

In the following analysis of Arthur Machen’s “weird” story “The Great God Pan” I set out to examine these problems: How a vision of the city and of the woman allows Machen to defy the protocols or conventions of realism in an attempt to construct a new type of sublimity, the weird sublime. This line of interpretation is proposed as an alternative to the prevalent psychoanalytic interpretive strategies which I review in the first part of the

article. Subsequently, I look at some metafictional implications of Machen's late-Victorian Gothic fiction. I ask, what does the weird sublime tell us about the role and functioning of fiction in the particular milieu that gave rise to it? Thus broadly formulated, the question breaks down into at least these two aspects: it concerns both the reading process ("What is reading weird fiction basically about?") and the writing process (for instance, "Why make attempts at the weird sublime?," "What statement do such attempts imply?"). The general assumption here is that while "verisimilar" stories, stories produced in the realistic mode, find it easy to justify themselves, not least because they have the legitimating power of tradition to defend them, weird fictions do not. A weird story must, I submit, at least indirectly, justify its weirdness. Such justifications may and indeed often are sophisticated. Weirdness, as H. P. Lovecraft has defined it, is in itself a philosophical statement; that is, a weird author makes statements about the nature of reality, about cognition, and about the purposes of human existence. Because such statements are *universal*, their implications must also concern fiction in its defining and essential aspects; they must be self-reflexive, and thus meta-fictional, though not necessarily explicitly so. As we shall see, in Machen's story justificatory statements are related to its main concerns, that is, chiefly, to how he portrays the relation between the two genders and to his visions of the metropolis (London).¹

The Victorian *Fin de Siècle* and Its "Anxieties"

"The Great God Pan" earned a bad reputation soon after the publication of its early version in 1890.² The Penguin editor of Machen's weird tales,

1 Recently the "Gothicness" of Machen's story has been addressed in a contribution to *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*, ed. Lawrence Phillips and Anne Witchard (Lodnon and New York: Continuum, 2010); Amanda Mordavsky Caleb, "A City of Nightmares: Suburban Anxiety in Arthur Machen's London Gothic" (devoted chiefly to *The Hill of Dreams*). Arthur Machen's fictions figure prominently in a study by Joanna Kokot, *W świetle gazowych latarni. O angielskiej prozie „gotyckiej” przelomu XIX i XX wieku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2013).

2 On the immediate critical responses to the story see: Kokot, *W świetle gazowych latarni*, 239ff.

S. T. Joshi, explains: "It shocked the moral guardians of an enfeebled Victorian culture as the diseased outpourings of a decadent mind; but the reviewers who condemned it as sexually offensive could not know that Machen shared the very inhibitions he seemed to be defying."³ Decadence indeed seems to be an idea that simply springs to mind on a first reading of the story. A section in Kirsten MacLeod's *Fictions of British Decadence* bears the tell-tale—and inevitably quibbling—title "Arthur Machen's (Great God Pan) and Decadent Pan(ic)."⁴ At the same time, it is not clear—and it hardly ever is on such occasions—where specifically decadence (in the common sense of moral decay) is to be located: Is the story decadent because it exposes cultural febleness? But that would suggest the author's daring rather than weakness.

Despite the shock and the attendant ambiguities, the story easily found admirers, readers who evidently did not share late-Victorian inhibitions. Lovecraft, to whom the idea of literary weirdness owes its origin, gave the following summary and appreciative interpretation of it, in his critical history of fear fiction, *The Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

Of Mr. Machen's horror-tales the most famous is perhaps "The Great God Pan" (1894), which tells of a singular and terrible experiment and its consequences. A young woman, through the surgery of the brain-cells, is made to see the vast and monstrous deity of Nature, and becomes an idiot in consequence, dying less than a year later. Years afterward a strange, ominous, and foreign-looking child named Helen Vaughan is placed to board with a family in rural Wales, and haunts the woods in unaccountable fashion. A little boy is thrown out of his mind at sight of someone or something he spies with her, and a young girl comes to a terrible end in similar fashion. All this mystery is

3 S. T. Joshi, Introduction to "*The White People*" and *Other Weird Tales*, by Arthur Machen (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), xii. Oddly, this collection does not contain "The Great God Pan." The story was published in book form in 1894 (ibid.).

4 Kirsten MacLeod's *Fictions of British Decadence. High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); the entire chapter suggests in its title that Machen's story is a "keynote of decadence."

strangely interwoven with the Roman rural deities of the place, as sculptured in antique fragments. After another lapse of years, a woman of strangely exotic beauty appears in society, drives her husband to horror and death, causes an artist to paint unthinkable paintings of Witches' Sabbaths, creates an epidemic of suicide among the men of her acquaintance, and is finally discovered to be a frequenter of the lowest dens of vice in London, where even the most callous degenerates are shocked at her enormities. Through the clever comparing of notes on the part of those who have had word of her at various stages of her career, this woman is discovered to be the girl Helen Vaughan, who is the child—by no mortal father—of the young woman on whom the brain experiment was made. She is a daughter of hideous Pan himself, and at the last is put to death amidst horrible transmutations of form involving changes of sex and a descent to the most primal manifestations of the life-principle. But the charm of the tale is in the telling. No one could begin to describe the cumulative suspense and ultimate horror with which every paragraph abounds without following fully the precise order in which Mr. Machen unfolds his gradual hints and revelations. Melodrama is undeniably present, and coincidence is stretched to a length which appears absurd upon analysis; but in the malign witchery of the tale as a whole these trifles are forgotten, and the sensitive reader reaches the end with only an appreciative shudder and a tendency to repeat the words of one of the characters: "It is too incredible, too monstrous; such things can never be in this quiet world. [...] Why, man, if such a case were possible, our earth would be a nightmare."⁵

5 Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature* (first published in 1927), edited by S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012), 82–83. The passage quoted by Lovecraft occurs relatively early in the story; Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan," in *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 195 (pages for the story in this collection are: 183–233). Subsequent quotations will be marked GGP and given in parentheses in the main text (e.g. GGP 195).

Lovecraft stresses the decadent element in the mention of the way the "callous degenerates," in Machen's story, are drawn to, and then undone, by "her enormities." Also, he comes close to naming—very real—moral corruption as a viable alternative life-option to the intolerably stagnant life of middle-class denizens of the metropolis.

Nowadays, the first-impressions interpretation of "The Great God Pan" is more than likely to find in it, as it did more than a hundred years ago, a projection or an expression of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, as the title of Amanda Mordavsky Caleb's article already spells out. Indeed, this is, broadly, the most common interpretive strategy adopted in our contemporary studies of late-Victorian or *fin-de-siècle* "decadent" or "Gothic" fictions,⁶ which seem to have repeatedly brought into the open the kind of content that the morally "enfeebled" society was at great pain to suppress. The premises and interpretive strategies of this type of approach are of course familiar to us; the logic is that of psychoanalysis when applied to the "daydreams" of fiction writers. The Freudian idea of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*)⁷ offers a ready explanation of the "shock" experienced by the "sexually inhibited," or otherwise insecure and panicky, reading public when confronted with a content that "brings to light" what the "enfeebled" superego (culture) has been unable successfully to restrain. The well-known formula, namely that of "the return of the repressed,"⁸ repeatedly applied to the "outpourings" of "decadent"

6 In this part of the article I use interchangeably these terms, that is, "late-Victorian," "*fin-de-siècle*," "decadent," and (second-wave) "Gothic." Later I will attempt to be more accurate about the element of "weirdness." Roughly speaking and following the conception of Lovecraft, a Gothic or a decadent story may be "weird" to a degree only. In other words, Gothicism is not synonymous with weirdness; at the same time, the weird sublime may be seen as a development and a radicalisation of the Gothic sublime.

7 In his famous 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud illustrates the dialectic of concealment and revelation with a quotation from Schelling: "[uncanny is] everything that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light." Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 944.

8 In the words of Freud, the uncanny "is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression." This passage from "The 'Uncanny'" as quoted in Kelly

authors, found a book-length execution in Valdine Clemens's 1999 study *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*. In the aptly chosen words of Jamieson Ridenhour, "Freud is the commonly invoked deity of psychological Gothic readings."⁹

Let us now look more closely at chosen examples of this approach, as applied to so-called second-wave Gothic.

Gothic makes a great "return" in the 1890s because—as Fred Botting and other scholars suggest—of the critical accumulation of fears or anxieties in society. Typologies of those fears and anxieties, as well as their sources, vary. Provisionally, at least these three areas should be named: science, society (crime and sexuality), and the Empire.¹⁰ Obviously, these cannot be treated as mutually exclusive. The development of natural sciences, of which Charles Darwin with his theory of evolution has been emblematic, raised anxieties about the resulting changes in the commonly accepted worldview, especially as concerned man's position in the great scheme of things. As to social life, the nineteenth century witnessed, not only in Britain, radical transformations in the social fabric, reflected in the ever-topical need for "reforms" as a means of addressing the most urgent and potentially incendiary issues. As a matter of course, London, the greatest metropolis of the world, concentrated in it also the most sinister of the issues, poverty and crime among them. Also as a matter of course, London concentrated the anxieties about the accelerated colonial expansions; for, in the eyes of the average citizen, as Britain exploited her position of a superpower, she herself was threatened by the possibility of becoming easy prey. In the alarming diagnosis delivered by Dr John Watson in the first Sherlock Holmes story: "I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air—or

Hurley, "British Fiction, 1885–1930," in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 198.

9 Jamieson Ridenhour, *In Darkest London. The Gothic Cityscape in Victorian Literature* (Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 6.

10 The allusion is to the title of Chapter 7 (and that of its section) of *Gothic*, which reads "Gothic Returns in the 1890s." Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 88ff. Writes Botting: "In disclosing threatening natural forces[,] scientific theories gave shape to the anxieties about cultural degeneration and provided ways of disciplining and containing deviance" (89).

as free as an income of eleven shillings and sixpence a day will permit a man to be. Under such circumstances, I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained."¹¹ What gives extra poignancy to this comment is the fact that Watson has freshly returned home a wounded veteran of one of the many imperialistic conflicts around the globe.

According to the prevailing psychoanalytic or Freudian interpretive strategy, as already mentioned, Gothic or weird fictions have disturbing qualities precisely because—to use Oscar Wilde’s mirror metaphor¹²—they disclose and reflect the society’s fears in the shape of a nightmare.¹³ Late-Victorian Gothicism, when placed in its proper cultural context, lends itself easily, almost too rewarding, to such “Freudian” interpretive strategies. As a type of violation of the so-called mimetic conventions of literary representation,¹⁴ a “decadent” Gothic fantasy is approached as

11 Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* [1887] (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 8.

12 Allusion here is made of course to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and specifically to two of the aphorisms in the preface: “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” and “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.” Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 4.

13 It needs to be mentioned at this point that *The Picture* figures prominently in studies of the British *fin de siècle*, and of fantasy and decadence in particular; see, for instance, Nicholas Ruddick, “The fantastic fiction of the *fin de siècle*,” in Gail Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 196ff.; MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, 79ff. The novella is also an example of the “Victorian Gothic,” in fact, side by side with “The Great God Pan,” a Victorian Gothic masterpiece; see, for instance: Cannon Smith, “The Gothic Romance in the Victorian Period,” in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, eds., *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Alexandra Warwick, “Victorian Gothic,” 35; Glennis Byron, “Gothic in the 1890s,” in David Punter, ed., *A New Companion to the Gothic*, 187. Unfortunately, here we cannot go into Wilde’s representation of London and what it has in common with those of other “decadent” and “Gothic” fictions. See also Roger Luckhurst’s “Introduction,” in *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, 23: “Many Englishmen hoped that he [Wilde, after publishing *The Picture*] would stay in the Parisian den of iniquity and not return. [...] Wilde was pushing his challenge to middle-class respectability too far and too explicitly.”

14 Ruddick, for instance, defines fantasy as “departure from consensus reality”; “The fantastic fiction of the *fin de siècle*,” 189. Kokot uses the term “mimetic (or empirical) model of reality”; e.g. *W świetle gazowych latarni*, 34.

an *expression*, or “return” in the fictional and nightmarish guise, of the anxieties that disturbed late Victorians in their beds. All the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic masterpieces have been laid on this Freudian couch and asked to disclose the suppressed, “unhomely,” and “unwholesome” secrets of the sorely troubled milieu.¹⁵

What follows is a brief illustrative examination of the most salient literary examples.

For instance, when applied to the prime representative of the late-Victorian Gothic, R. L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), this type of interpretation detects an expression of “degenerationist” anxieties. In the words of Nicholas Ruddick, “[the novella] is a remarkable achievement: a work that initiated a renaissance of fantastic fiction by discovering a strategy to articulate some of the most alarming anxieties of the age. Stevenson explored the implications of his intuition that the mentality of the Victorian urban professional class [...] was divided against itself in a manner that cast an ominous shadow over their civilisation.”¹⁶ In the novella, in other words, anxieties about science (irresponsible experimentation; the degeneration of Jekyll into Hyde) are linked with those about criminality and the difficulty of restraining it in the metropolis (Soho as Hyde’s “lair”; Hyde’s gratuitous, atavistic aggressiveness).

To reach for another masterpiece, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) has been read again and again as containing another example of the many “abhuman figures” that haunt late Victorian fictions.¹⁷ Aleksandra

15 “Unhomely” is an accepted equivalent of the Freudian *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny); Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept. The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 12.

16 Ruddick, “The fantastic fiction of the *fin de siècle*,” 191, emphasis mine. Often, “The Great God Pan” is regarded as a literary offspring of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; MacLeod, for instances speaks of Machen’s “borrowing” of “the style and themes” (*Fictions of British Decadence*, 54).

17 Abhumanness is a key term in Hurley; see “British Fiction, 1885–1930” and in *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In the article, in a passage on *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about science, we read: “[...] the proliferation of Gothic [uncanny?] representations of abhumanness at the *fin de siècle* may be partly attributed to the destabilising effects of nineteenth-century Darwinian science.” The “destabilising

Warwick argues that they "can be seen as *symbolic of more than physical anxiety*." Warwick also makes a significant generalising comment: "These narratives have convincingly been read as rehearsing contemporary [i.e. late Victorian] questions of gender, sexuality, immigration and imperial power [...]."¹⁸ Thus, *Dracula* "rehearses" the highly topical issue of gender in its gruesomely fantastic representation of the New Woman as a "voluptuous" (i.e. sexually liberated) predator prowling the streets of London in search of fresh infant blood.¹⁹ But, at the same time, *Dracula* "rehearses," in no less disturbing fashion, another question that would haunt an average middle-class Victorian: the idea that the bloated Empire might be in for some blood-letting.²⁰ In the words of Nicholas Ruddick, "vampirism is Stoker's metaphor for the insidious destructiveness of *all* expressions of sexuality unsanctified by marriage. His novel dramatises moral panic: aliens (continental, oriental, Jewish) were secretly importing diseases (syphilis), practices (sexual perversion), and beliefs (feminism) into England [...]. The pillars of patriarchy were endangered, and it was to these men that *Dracula* was chiefly addressed [...]."²¹

effects" are perhaps to be viewed in a broader perspective, as linked with Victorians' fascination with the idea of metamorphosis: see Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 104ff. The anxiety-raising potential of Darwinism had to do with the possibility, not only of development or "progress," but also of retrogression, or atavism. "Many Victorians were fascinated by transformation and the limits of metamorphosis" (*ibid.*, 131). See also Roger Luckhurst, Introduction to *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, xx: "The animal now lurked very close to the human; indeed, it was encoded in the human body and mind as our evolutionary inheritance, and animalistic instincts were never far from swamping the fragile late additions of civilized morals and behaviour."

18 Warwick, "Victorian Gothic," in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 35, emphasis mine.

19 More on the anxieties about the New Woman, as expressed in portrayals of fictional "monster women," in Hurley, "British Fiction, 1885–1930," 200–202.

20 More on reverse colonisation narratives in Ross G. Forman's "Empire," in Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, 91–112.

21 Ruddick, "The fantastic fiction of the *fin de siècle*," 200–201, emphasis in the original.

Already the few examples cited above may be regarded as indicative of the fact that the last decades of the nineteenth century were a difficult period for the British nation, beset as they found themselves with all manner of concerns, threats, horrors even. Indeed, the range of the anxieties is amazing, from scientific progress, with the disclosed possibilities of physiological, mental, and moral degeneration, to the consequences of large-scale and possibly catastrophic political engagements. Even single works produced during the *fin de siècle*, such as *Dracula*, when seen in the light of recent criticism, give an overwhelming sense of there having been almost nothing that did *not* produce some sort of anxiety or concern.

As I have already suggested, it is little wonder that London, the capital and axis, but also the “cesspool” of the Empire, came to be perceived as a place in which the anxieties, as it were, assembled and concentrated, their accumulation and scale raising anxieties unique to the urban environment, but also magnified to overwhelming proportions. Poverty alone, with the attendant ills of disease, ignorance, and moral corruption of all kinds (chiefly, of course, crime and prostitution), was enough to unsettle the genteel echelons of society.²² Inevitably, parallels were drawn, between London and the African jungles and so between the slum-dwellers of the metropolis and the barbarians of the dark colonised territories. Henry Morton Stanley’s book entitled *In Darkest Africa*, published in 1890, was responsible for inspiring the so-called African parallel, which was used in William Booth’s *In Darkest England* (1890) and next, in 1891, in Margaret Harkness’s *In Darkest London*. The last-named book, a novel, compares “the conditions of the urban jungle to those of the imperial heartland.”²³

22 The issue of urban poverty is present from the beginning of “The Great Pan”; Mary, the subject of the uncanny experiment, is said to have been “rescued [...] from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child; [...]” (GGP 186). Later, Villiers meets his “old friend,” Charles Herbert—now a broken man, the *femme fatale*’s victim—in rather peculiar circumstances: “There, close beside him, his face altered and disguised by poverty and disgrace, his body barely covered by ill-fitting rags, stood his old friend Charles Herbert [...]; and now he looked upon this wreck of a man with grief and dismay [...]” (GGP 197).

23 Forman, “Empire,” 106.

The interpretive strategies presented in this section, which fall under the category of cultural Freudianism, are a method of addressing and of making sense of the Gothic and weird deviations from realism, for which the rather problematic term "supernaturalism" can be used. In particular, the various types of "abhumanness" (e.g. retrogressive and "imperial"),²⁴ are read as "indices" of society's anxieties. An abhuman figure is to be seen as "[an] embodiment of unbearable or unaccountable fears, wishes, and desires that are driven from consciousness and then transmuted into representations of monstrosity [...]"²⁵ Kelly Hurley comments on the essential element of *supernaturalism* in the following manner: "Thus the Gothic can serve as a sort of historical or sociological index: if the genre serves to manage a culture's disturbances and traumatic changes, its thematic preoccupations will allow us to track social anxieties at one remove, in the register of supernaturalism. Psychoanalytical interpretations of the Gothic are also concerned with the ways in which *social anxieties are supernaturalized* and rendered in displaced form."²⁶

Thus also the female monster, Helen Vaughan, in "The Great God Pan," may be regarded as a particular instance of the "return of the repressed," an uncanny figure that brings to light, albeit in a roundabout fashion, a knowledge about something that society does not wish to, or perhaps cannot, confront directly. It is not surprising, therefore, to read that, like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, "The Great God Pan" also "discloses horrors and questions concerning human nature and sexuality," even though, in the latter story, "different fictional and discursive arrangements" have been used.²⁷ In the above-quoted summary of "The Great God Pan," Lovecraft leaves aside the two motifs that, one would think, are central to the message the story strives—subliminally?—to convey: the woman and the city. Shifts and changes of perspective notwithstanding, female figures and London are present in the story from the

24 Retrogressive as in the ape-like Hyde, "imperial" as in the wolf-like monster in Kipling's short story "The Mark of the Beast" (1890), the transformation of an Englishman being revenge for offending an Indian deity.

25 Hurley, "British Fiction, 1885–1930," 197.

26 *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

27 Botting, *Gothic*, 93.

beginning. Even though the setting is not urban throughout the story, London is the scene of the monstrous woman's reappearance; the metropolis, or rather its shady areas, is Helen's element, no doubt about that:

"Where did you see her?"

"Hardly in a place where you would expect to see a lady who lives in Ashley Street, Piccadilly. I saw her entering a house in one of the meanest and most disreputable streets in Soho."
(GGP 222)

The chief of Machen's "discursive strategies" seems to be to arouse the interest of the reader with both the woman and the metropolis, by rendering them both simultaneously fascinating and repellent. Villiers is shocked at the appearance of his now-ruined old friend at the moment when he, Villiers, mentally congratulates himself on his curious connoisseurship: "Villiers prided himself as a practiced explorer of such obscure mazes and byways of London life [...]" (GGP 197). Moments later, he is reprimanded by his friend for his ignorance: "You, Villiers, you may think you know life, and London, and what goes on, day and night, in this dreadful city; [...]" (GGP 198). What goes on, of course, is corruption, "enormities," things of which Helen comes to be seen as an epitomic representation: "Everyone who saw her at the police court said she was at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on. [...] She seems to have been a sort of enigma; [...]" (GGP 202).

If, as Villiers emphatically asserts, "*She is the mystery*" (GGP 206), then the unravelling of this mystery means working out the puzzling if fascinating topography, the "obscure mazes and byways of London." However, our urban connoisseur and *flâneur*, who confesses a "fascination" about empty houses and their "desolate" interiors, is nauseated by the incomprehensible "horror" he senses when going through Number 20 Paul Street (GGP 205). The fact that Helen succeeds in luring and destroying one respectable man after another confirms the fact that she has made the metropolis her habitat, as it were, just like another abhuman figure of *fin-de-siècle* fiction, the guest from Transylvania, successfully

setting up a lair of corruption and spreading vampirical abhumanness in the Empire's capital.²⁸

Our task is presently to take the matter beyond this rather obvious approach and well-trodden terrain, and to focus, not on what Machen's weird fiction expresses (in terms of its immediate context: the anxieties), but what it presupposes and projects. Our focus shifts, in other words, from what is stated by way of mirror-reflection to what is added in the process of rendering weirdly sublime the factual and realistic givens. To use the famous dictum of Philip Sidney, the weird author is a poet, and as such, as a maker of new worlds; he "never affirmeth," but rather "counterfeits" and "figures forth."²⁹

The Sublime of the Weird

It is common to speak of the rise of the Gothic in relation to the idea of the sublime, made current in the eighteenth century due to the reception of Longinus's *Peri Hupsous* ("On the Sublime"),³⁰ and also, more relevantly, to Edmund Burke's reformulation, which—in the second half of the eighteenth century—bound the sublime to obscurity and terror.³¹ The advent of Gothic fiction, however, compounded the ambiguities already present in the term. In Ann Radcliffe's romances, for instance, the word "sublime" is used in contexts that give it an unequivocally positive sense, that of spiritual elevation, typically in response to the vastness of

28 It is not without significance that the corruption ("acute suicidal mania") affects society's best representatives: "within three weeks [of Lord Argentine's death], three more gentlemen, one of them a nobleman, and the two others men of good position and ample means, perished miserably in almost precisely the same manner" (GGP 215).

29 Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 331, 348–49.

30 This reception is reconstructed in Samuel Monk's seminal study *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935).

31 Allusion is made, of course, to Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

natural objects, such as the mountains. In a stock scene of this kind, the heroine's eye, after a careful contemplation of natural objects, stimulates in her mind reflections that bring devotional comforts:

The sun, soon after, sinking to the lower world, the shadow of the earth stole gradually over the waves, and then up the towering sides of the mountains of Friuli, till it extinguished even the last upward beams that had lingered on their summits, and the melancholy purple of evening drew over them, like a thin veil. How deep, how beautiful was the tranquillity that wrapped the scene! All nature seemed to repose; the finest emotions of the soul were alone awake. Emily's eyes filled with tears of admiration and sublime devotion, as she raised them over the sleeping world to the vast heavens, and heard the notes of solemn music, that stole over the waters from a distance.³²

The so-called natural sublime is thus neatly connected with its mental equivalent, that is, spiritual elevation. "The vastness that had been glimpsed in the natural sublime"—writes Fred Botting—"became the mirror of the immensity of the human mind."³³ Perhaps even more importantly, the sublime is sought and found outside the tumult, the distressing "din," of the city; it is only in the lap of Nature that a properly inclined person is capable of reaching spiritual recuperation.³⁴

Also the new sense that the sublime acquired in the context of the Gothic was intended—at least initially—to be embraced in its salutary

32 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho. A Romance* (London & New York: Penguin, 2001), 167.

33 Botting, *Gothic*, 27. This, in turn, is close to the so-called religious sublime. For these distinctions, see Jack G. Voller, *The Supernatural Sublime: The Metaphysics of Terror in Anglo-American Romanticism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), 4ff.

34 The word "din," as associated with the city ("in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities"), is an allusion to William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" ("Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798"); the word "sublime" occurs twice in the poem, in contexts that might be described as "Radcliffean."

properties and uses. Terror, Radcliffe believed, had the capacity to "expand the soul, and awaken the faculties."³⁵ But even as she affirmed this, Radcliffe was battling against a sense of the sublime that would be deprived of these beneficial properties. In other words, the path had already been opened for the ushering of a horrific, non-romantic type of sublimity. From our contemporary perspective, it was inevitable that a new wave of Gothic horrors should find a perfect residence in the nightmarish cities of the late nineteenth century. Thus, in the entry "urban Gothic" in the *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, for instance, we find the following, somewhat quaintly worded explanation of this transition:

As romanticism gave place to realism, Gothic fiction abandoned castle turrets and lapsed cloisters for the claustrophobia, aberrant behavior, and foreboding found in cityscapes. In place of encircling moats, stone-paved halls, and dungeons are the high-rise walls of modern cities, which house the monsters of capitalism and shadow random crime and squalid living conditions in tenements and back alleys [...].

[...]

As a wave of citified Gothic battered the complacency of the Victorian Age, Gothic fiction ventures further into psychological miasmas and well-plotted mysteries that exploited the city dweller's unease.³⁶

This brings us back to the London of Machen's stories.

There is definitely a competition of sorts that Machen has entered with "The Great God Pan" and his other weird tales. His aim clearly was to defy more pedestrian types of fiction. Passages that are ostensibly

35 Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," in E. J. Clery and Robert Miles, eds., *Gothic Documents. A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 168.

36 Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Encyclopaedia of Gothic Literature. The Essential Guide to the Lives and Works of Gothic Writers* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 342. Snodgrass cites a wide range of literary examples, including such "urban melodramas" as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860).

dedicated suggestively to create the appropriate atmosphere are found in abundance, and we have already alluded to some of the more vividly disturbing. Let us examine more closely one of them, with the aim to identify the strategies involved in the construction of a new type of sublimity, one in which the city plays a crucial role, especially when coupled with an elusively threatening female partner:

You, Villiers, you may think you know life, and London, and what goes on, day and night, in this dreadful city; for all I can say you may have heard the talk of the vilest, but I tell you you can have no conception of what I know, no, not in your most fantastic, hideous dreams can you have imaged forth the faintest shadow of what I have heard—and seen. Yes, seen; I have seen the incredible, such horrors that even I myself sometimes stop in the middle of the street, and ask whether it is possible for a man to behold such things and live. (GGP 198)

You will think, no doubt, that I am in possession of some secret information, and to a certain extent that is the case. But I only know a little; I am like a traveller who has peered over an abyss, and has drawn back in terror. What I know is strange enough and horrible enough, but beyond my knowledge there are depths and horrors more frightful still, more incredible than any tale told of winter nights about the fire. (GGP 209)

Even though the term “the weird sublime” may sound like an odd coinage, it is tuned, in my opinion, to the tenor of this and similar passages. As has been suggested, with the advent of the Gothic, the sublime acquired new meanings and significantly broadened its connotative range.³⁷ We might even submit that weird fiction twined the sublime more tightly than before with terror, that the “decadent” and pseudo-scientific fictions of *fin de siècle* stripped the idea of the sublime of the remnants of positive connotations that it still possessed at the birth of the Gothic (especially in its association with romanticism). For, while

37 Vijay Mishra, “The Gothic Sublime,” in David Punter, ed., *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 288–306.

Radcliffe leaves open the possibility of spiritual uplifting and eventual recuperation as a consequence of communion with the sublime, authors of weird tales exclude such sanative effects, even though, like Machen, some may pay lip service to the principle of reticence.³⁸ Yet, even if the author/narrator refuses to be explicit, the gaps thus left open are apertures for the appearance of some ultimate horrors. The weird's descent into the unspeakable—as suggested by “to have no conception of [...],” “to peer over an abyss,” “incredible depths and horrors beyond knowledge,” etc.—is always at attempt, negatively, to figure forth the ultimate sublime.

The sublime, especially in its now-classic Gothic variety, rests on a peculiar confusion or indeterminacy. In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), a supernatural occurrence, an instance of the marvellous, strikes the reader as sublime because of its incomprehensibility.³⁹ In Radcliffe, a particular scenery strikes the viewer as sublime because of its vastness, and specifically because of the way in which it “elevates” the mind by raising our thoughts to the omnipotent if obscure Deity, the Creator of all things. But in both these cases, the sublime is justifiable within the confines of traditional metaphysics, which posits the benevolent Absolute as the ultimate principle, the Cause of all Being. Just as in Walpole the Just Hand of God puts in motion the machinery of the marvellous, in Radcliffe the awe-inspiring scenes ultimately serve the purpose of asserting the workings of Benevolent Providence. For this reason we may say that here epistemology yields to ontology, inasmuch as the cognitive frustration produced by encounters with the inexplicable is healed by theodicean assurances. We may be doomed to seeing things “through a glass, darkly,”⁴⁰ but ultimately belief in the

38 In the words of Roger Lockhurst, “As a serious scholar of the occult, [...] Machen knew how to suggest, but never show.” Introduction to *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, xxix. I return to this aspect in the concluding paragraphs.

39 On the supernatural sublime and its varieties, see Voller, *The Supernatural Sublime*. Voller, however, leaves no space for the “cosmic” variety of the sublime, contained in a germinal form in Lovecraft's conception of weird fiction.

40 “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” 1 Cor. 13:12. *The Holy Bible* (Oxford: at the University Press, n.d.).

divine super-vision is the trump card. Ultimately, just as the marvellous has a divine provenience and mandate, so natural objects—no matter how awe-full they may seem to a benighted mortal—bear the stamp and pedigree of their Heavenly Author.

Having said this, the characteristic trait of the Gothic sublime is the ambivalent response it elicits in the receiver, be it the actual reader of a story or a fictional character. Thus a ghost, as an instance of the supernatural, will both and simultaneously attract and repel. The “attraction” is chiefly of the cognitive kind; the ghost must mean something, the question being: What? The repulsion has, I believe, a complex aetiology, as it may be caused by purely sensory disgust towards the “abject,” but may also be mingled with other concerns, such as reservations of religious nature.⁴¹ Whatever the case may be, moral judgement eventually takes control over emotions and the senses (the realm of the “aesthetic”). Thus, the spectre may be fearful or otherwise repellent, and yet ought to be heard and, if need be, laid to rest. No matter how strong the emotional tribulations during the course of the story, at the end of the day the moral equilibrium is finally restored.

The new, “decadent” type of sublimity, I argue, greatly complicates matters. It too has the two sides to it (if for the time being we leave aside moral considerations, central as they otherwise might be): epistemological and ontological, but now ontology cannot claim authority or precedence. Chief among the reasons is, somewhat paradoxically, the “scientization” of the worldview in the latter part of the nineteenth century. For the unprecedented “advancement of learning” brought with it, not only a naturalistic conception of man as a species descended from other species,⁴² but also destabilised the natural world by liberating

41 The ghost in *Hamlet* is read as a conveyor of signification, and therefore repeatedly asked, indeed commanded, to “speak.” At the same time, as a walking corpse (an “abject” thing), it is a great cause of terror: “it harrows [the witnesses] with fear and wonder.”

42 Darwin’s *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* appeared in 1871. “Darwin’s emphasis on continuity between *Homo sapiens* and ape-like ancestors could be offensive even to those without Christian convictions. [...] Victorian prudery and animal lewdness were not the best of bedfellows.” John Hedley Brooke, “Darwin and Victorian Christianity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, 2nd ed., ed. Jonathan

Nature from God, thus rendering her unpredictable. As we have seen, Darwinian naturalism, despite the centrality of the idea of progress, did not eliminate the possibility of regression and degeneration, ideas which were eagerly transferred from the realm of the natural to social sciences. As many second-wave Gothic stories illustrate, authors and the reading public found this possibility irresistibly attractive due to the gruesomely fascinating alleys it opened for quasi-scientific fantasising.⁴³

It is interesting to observe how in the above-quoted and similar passages, addressing as they do the concerns of—and setting the tone for—the story, the narrator weaves into his uncanny tale an idea of weirdness that corresponds with Lovecraft's famous definition. The weird tale may be a type of "fear-literature," but the fears are not raised by mundane causes. A weird tale ought to convey "the true sense of the morbidly unnatural." The unnaturalness—which is natural, as opposed to marvellous—must have cosmic dimensions; hence the term "cosmicism."⁴⁴ Lovecraft explains: "The literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense" has to have in it "a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint [...] of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign

Hodge and Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 199. However, although Darwin's theories "challenged" (in the words of Brooke) many ideas of traditional Christianity, it would be wrong to put Darwin down as an atheist and his theories as pugnaciously anti-Christian.

43 One of the most popular fictions of the period, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), while indebted to the Gothic tradition, is a case in point, as it openly formulates the intriguing questions: "Is Disease a Reversion?" and "Do We Progress?" (these being the titles of Dr Mortimer's publications). While the story's detective, an eccentric, has an "unnaturally" developed brain (as suggested by Dr Mortimer's comment on Sherlock Holmes's "so dolichocephalic a skull" and "such well-marked supra-orbital development"), its villain, Stapleton, is a morally degenerate, bastardly offshoot of the ancient Baskerville clan; this solution to the mystery suggested obliquely by yet another article of the medical doctor, published in *The Lancet*, "Some Freaks of Atavism." See Nils Clausson's excellent article, "Degeneration, *Fin-de-Siècle*, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35.1 (2005): 60–87.

44 See S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), 175.

and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the dæmons of unplumbed space.”⁴⁵ This conception of terror, underpinning the weird as a “new” literary genre,⁴⁶ allows us to speak of a new species of the sublime, even though this term, “the weird sublime,” has not yet been put into academic circulation.

What is characteristic of the weird sublime is that it blurs the line between epistemology and ontology more radically than classic, that is, first-wave Gothic texts. The fictional worlds of the early Gothic, with their awe-inspiring mountain-scapes and impenetrable labyrinthine interiors, may be overwhelming; yet it is always in principle possible to distinguish between “what is known” and “what is.” The mind of the heroine may sometimes be unequal to the task, but the world out there is posited as God-made, and therefore as mentally penetrable. If the idea of the divine Designer is central to traditional theology,⁴⁷ then the parallel suggests itself between the all-knowing and beneficent God and the author; mysteries resolve themselves into certainties, obscurities into illuminations.

Already the uncanny experiment with which “The Great God Pan” opens is utterly ambiguous in terms of knowledge-gaining. The science-wielding and typically reckless overreacher, Dr Raymond, attains his goal; the experiment is a success: the veil has been lifted and Reality has been seen. At the same time, it is the subject, Mary, who has seen the god Pan, and not the scientist. Moreover, there are the unforeseen consequences, the to-be-expected fallout from scientific hubris, reminiscent of *Frankenstein* and indeed rehearsed repeatedly in late-Victorian

45 Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror*, 27–28; see also: Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 6 (Introduction). On the idea of the weird tale, and the ontology of “weird worlds” in particular, see also my “Weird Tales—Weird Worlds,” in *Nature(s): Environments We Live By in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Jacek Mydla, Agata Wilczek, and Tomasz Gnat (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014), 91–104.

46 In his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft attempted a historical outline of weird fiction. The culminating phase was reached, on this account, in the authors of the *fin de siècle*, Machen among them.

47 Brooke, “Darwin and Victorian Christianity,” 199.

stories. Mary has become a "hopeless idiot" (GGP 190); also, more bizarrely, she has conceived and given birth to the female monster, Helen V. (Vaughan), who soon makes her appearance, by way of an embedded narrative, in "a village on the borders of Wales" (GGP 191). This unholy conception strikes one as a blasphemous variation on the dogma of immaculate conception.⁴⁸ Within the parameters of the entire story, the Helen motif follows the trajectory of revenge narrative: a woman is subjected to an experiment; she couples with the ancient god Pan, as a result of which she bears (is "resurrected," as the text suggests, in) female offspring; this woman in turn corrupts and drives to suicide a number of respectable men.

Mary, as we have seen, is *introduced* to us as already a victim. Before the experiment, Dr Raymond utters the following shocking words: "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" (GGP 186). When we take "gutter" to stand in synecdochical relation to the city, and also connoting, metonymically, its socially oppressive forces, then we may read this brief remark as a hint about the meaning of the entire story. The *femme fatale*, the demonic Helen, daughter of Mary and Pan, returns in the latter part of the story to avenge her mother.

That the story is concerned with *knowledge* is made clear from the very beginning, as the metaphor of the veil indicates, in Dr Raymond's speech addressed to his companion:

You see the mountain, and hill following after hill, as wave on wave, you see the woods and orchards the fields of ripe corn, and the meadows reaching to the reed-beds by the river. [...] I say that all these are but dreams and shadows: the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes. There *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, [...], beyond them all as beyond a veil. (GGP 184; emphasis in the original)

48 It might be noted in passing that this blasphemous playfulness with which weird tales engage traditional Christian ideas is an aspect of the genre that would certainly merit further exploration.

This speech may be seen as an allusion to the romantic idea of the sublime, which, as we have seen, informs the conservative Gothic's depictions of natural scenery. The metaphor of the veil, however, soon assumes sinister tones. When Mary opens her eyes, Clarke "quails" at the sight of her face, which now reflects, as it were, the sight that the experiment has opened her to: "They [Mary's eyes] 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. [...] It was a horrible sight, and Clarke rushed forward, as she fell shrieking to the floor" (GGP 189). This description has a close parallel with that of one of Helen's male victims, a Mr Blank, as reported by a doctor summoned to examine the body: "I know perfectly well what caused death. Blank died of fright, of sheer, awful terror; I never saw features so hideously contorted in the course of my practice, and I have seen the faces of a whole host of dead" (GGP 202).

The lifting of the veil means exposure to the "face" or "sight" which can only be described as that of the ultimate sublime. This sight, however, utterly defies human powers of contemplation; it is a sight whose contemplation brings about idiocy instead of illumination or uplifting. As Villiers rephrases the verdict:

"You see," he concluded, "there can be but little doubt that this Mr Blank, whoever he was, died of sheer terror; he saw something so awful, so terrible, that it cut short his life. And what he saw, he most certainly saw in that house, which, somehow or other, had got a bad name in the neighbourhood. I had the curiosity to go and look at the place for myself." (GGP 204)

This comment reinforces the identification of the *femme fatale* with London and its ugly, unspeakable—un-sightly—secrets. The simple question is this: "What could a respectable country gentleman like Mr Blank [...] want in such a very queer house as Number 20?" The question, in view of the content of the entire story, sounds like a rhetorical one. Evidently, what has drawn this gentleman to a notorious corner of the metropolis was something that the *country* could not afford. How could

a respectable medical doctor, Raymond, think of such a queer experiment as that carried out on poor Mary?

The Monstrous Female and Her City; or, the City and Its Monstrous Female?

It may have become clear now that the city "naturally" became a "perfect" seat for the weird sublime. The transition in the topography of "The Great God Pan," from the Welsh countryside to London, may at first strike us as odd. Yet it somehow does make a great deal of sense; namely, when we take into account how Machen represents London, at once "a city of Resurrections" and "a city of nightmares." Notable passages in the other weird stories complete the image of an overwhelming, impenetrable yet mesmerising entity:

"It is all more strange than I fancied," he said at last. "It was queer enough what I saw; a man is sauntering along a quiet, sober, everyday London street, a street of grey houses and blank walls, and there, for a moment, *a veil seems drawn aside, and the very fume of the pit steams up through the flagstones, the ground glows, red hot, beneath his feet, and he seems to hear the hiss of the infernal caldron.* A man flying in mad terror for his life, and furious hate pressing hot on his steps with knife drawn ready; here indeed is horror."⁴⁹

London in Machen's stories is repeatedly described as a *pandemonium*. The metaphor of the veil, in the passage just quoted, reminds us of the opening pages of "The Great God Pan" and the idea of the "veil-lifting" or "eye-opening" experiment. In the words of Kelly Hurley, "one may read the city as an *unheimlich* space: familiar and yet alien, labyrinthine, unknowable."⁵⁰ Analysing London, depicted in late-

49 Arthur Machen, "Adventure of the Gold Tiberius," in *The Three Impostors, or The Transmutations* (Boston: Roberts Bross, 1895). A Project Gutenberg ebook, accessed December 13, 2014, emphasis mine.

50 Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 159.

Victorian fictions as the “Gothic” city, the scholar has proposed the oxymoronic terms “urban *chaosmos*” (Hurley’s italics), thus attempting to convey the ambivalent attitudes to an entity that has eluded *logos*; a monstrous being that is threatening at yet infinitely enticing: “The metropolis [...] was understood as a dangerous and yet attractive space by the Victorian middle class [...]” The London slums, the “gutter,” in particular, were construed as “an undifferentiated space” which “resisted and exceeded language.”⁵¹ Hurley adds this important comment: “In the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic novel, however, it is the entire metropolis itself, not just its relatively delimited slum neighbourhoods, that is figured alternatively as a labyrinth, a ‘seething mass,’ an ‘awful slough,’ an unchartered wasteland.”⁵² Written with Machen’s fictions in mind, these comments make us realise the inevitability, as it were, of the images of dissolution in “The Great God Pan” and other fictions, images that may and clearly did shock readers.⁵³ Evidently the “hissing infernal cauldron” was never absent from the mind of the author who renewed attempts at “narrativizing the Gothic city” (Hurley’s phrase).

When we take into consideration its structure, Machen’s story makes prominent the otherwise seemingly unimportant figure, that is Clarke. He is described as a respectable gentleman, who, however, cannot stifle his fascination with the occult *and also*—as we have seen—*with London*, and its “obscure mazes and byways.” “Deep in his heart”—the principal narrator tells us—“there was a wide-eyed inquisitiveness with respect to all the more recondite and esoteric elements in the nature of men” (GGP 190). Clarke’s presence during the uncanny experiment carried out on Mary *and* his fascination with London streets and their secrets—are simply two examples of how this curiosity, which is described by the story’s detached narrator with a degree of censure, found its gratifications. We might thus say that also the theme of female monstrosity is given such prominence not so much despite as *because of* the fact that the perspective that orients the narrative is consistently male. In fact, this

51 Ibid., 161–62.

52 Ibid., 162.

53 There is a scene of decomposition similar to that in “The Great God Pan” in “The Novel of the White Powder.”

seemingly minor figure all of a sudden assumes different proportions altogether: after all, he is the seeker after curiosities, which means that his witnessing the experiment is far from accidental or redundant. He is unwholesomely addicted to the occult, and he is also, as we recall, the Gothic *flâneur*, as much as he is a connoisseur of good food and wine.⁵⁴ *But these are not two very distinct interests*, Machen seems to suggest.

It is also at this level that we detect the logic of victimisation and retribution. Finally, what, in view of our analysis, should we make of the blood-curdling scene of Helen's dissolution, thus reported by the male avenger of moral propriety?

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. (GGP 228)

So who or what is Pan? At least one answer suggests itself: the god Pan is transcendence, both in the epistemological and the ontological sense.⁵⁵ The scene of Helene's dissolution is an expression, not only of some uncanny, even ungodly, fascinations of respectable but morally feeble Victorians. It also has the sense of a gratification or completion of sorts; for, after all, we witness here a scene of return to the elements, and thus, perhaps, of some ultimate fulfilment, a moment in which Nature comes back to her own. This would suggest that for Nature there is no space left in the city; similarly as there is no room for the poor and the outcast or—especially—for a woman who defies the moral code and thus spreads corruption and death.

Machen's narrative unceasingly engages the idea of seeing as a synecdochic mode of referring to perception and, indeed, to knowledge

54 On the idea of "Gothic *flânerie*," see Ridenhour, *In Darkest London*, 80ff.

55 For transcendence as the defining feature of the sublime, see Voller, *The Supernatural Sublime*, 6, 8ff.

in general. It also narrates a crisis of language; for the knowledge that matters, the knowledge of the un-veiled Reality is inexpressible: “such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken.” The superior kind of knowledge is thus cursed, for what has been glimpsed of Reality cannot and should not be verbalised. The weird is an attempt to go beyond *logos*; to gesture at the unseen as a means to embrace the un-embraceable. At the same time, and no matter how decadent, Machen does not really bid farewell to his “morally enfeebled” or otherwise restrained contemporaries, making a sacrificial offering of the elements that undergo a rather conventional process of demonization: the woman and London. These, at once attractive and repellent, make up the unspeakable substance that—we are told—eludes and defies naming. At the same time—and hence the idea of offering—they allow Machen and his readers to fantasise, and thus to challenge realism. As the city, so the woman—we are tempted to say. If the city, or, if cityscape is a domain of signification (as a hyper-rationalised, i.e. entirely civilised, space), then Machen suggests a collapse or a crisis of this type of rationalisation. A final nightmare is a city where attempts to identify and express in order to make sense do not make sense and fail.

Machen makes two visions of the world collide, as is characteristic of the weird tale in general: The world as something that we see with our own eyes and accept versus the world as something that the senses and the reason cannot penetrate, as suggested by the returning metaphor of the veil and as impersonated in the god Pan and the *femme fatale*, and as made palpably real in the “chaosmos” of the metropolis. The human intellect, gendered in the story as the male *logos* and made flesh in the shape of natural (experimental, and thus potentially abusive) sciences, can only come to the verge or border of the unknown (the “veil”), but on its own—and as the idea of the experiment suggests: without impairment, without incision, that is violence—cannot penetrate. Natural science, as a realisation or fulfilment of *logos*, is ultimately a failure, however; indeed, it sounds as a contradiction. The progress of science is bound to produce in man a sense of ignorance and helplessness. By analogy, the modern metropolis, as by-product of technological advancement, also generates in its dweller a dystopian sense of things-having-gone-badly-wrong, of disorientation and loss.

As we have suggested, there is a degree of irony in the idea of the experiment at the beginning of the story, motivated by a desire to confront, to *see* Nature in her bare essence. As we have suggested further, the god Pan, open as "it" fundamentally is to interpretation, may be taken to stand for "weird" transcendence, and thus to figure as an essential component in Machen's construction of the weird sublime. In gender terms, the female element serves as a vehicle for the introduction of the sublime. But what distinguishes "The Great God Pan" is the unique alliance that it suggests, between the ancient deity, the modern metropolis, and the woman—the alliance before which men capitulate and prostrate themselves. If London is a city of nightmares, as the story describes it, it is one because it encourages some men, like Clarke, to dabble in the occult and others to seek the company of ungodly women, as in the case of Mr Blank. What we suggest by this is of course a conflation of Machen, his protagonists and his readers—allied together in the great decadent conspiracy whose name is the weird tale.

Conclusion

Machen's weird stories certainly are mirror reflections of social anxieties, anxieties about science, about social inequalities and injustices, about otherness and alienation, etc. At the same time, this mirror is certainly a distorted one. His contemporaries did see in them the face of a Caliban mockingly contorted. Just as the city has become a nightmarish place, a living blasphemy, in that it blurs borders, collapses distinctions and invalidates bearings, the immoral woman in the centre of the story becomes a mass of putrid slime. My goal, however, has not been to look in this story for an image that could be seen as an "expression" of London and of women, the former distorted and the latter "abhuman," but to examine how London and women become—to switch to a Shakespearean metaphor—the stuff that weird dreams are made on. If to vindicate the independence of fiction as a form of art, for which, principally, "vice and virtue are materials," makes Machen a decadent author, then literary weirdness, with its sublime morbidities is a powerful assertion of decadence. But then perhaps self-conscious and autonomous fiction is doomed to be decadent.

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**"Miasto zmartwychwstań" i "miasto koszmarów":
Londyn, kobieca potworność i osobliwa wzniosłość
w opowiadaniu Artura Machena *Wielki bóg Pan***

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest próbą interpretacji opowiadania Artura Machena *Wielki bóg Pan* (1890, 1894) jako utworu, w którym szczególną, meta-fikcyjną rolę pełnią zabiegi powodujące zerwanie z realistycznymi, mimetycznymi konwencjami narracyjnymi. Analizy eksponują demonizowanie pierwiastka kobiecego i to, w jaki sposób współgra ono z miejscem rozgrywania się „gotyckich” epizodów utworu, tj. „koszmarnym” Londynem przełomu dziewiętnastego i dwudziestego stulecia. Motywy kobiecej potworności i miejskiego koszmara traktuje się jako wątki, za pomocą których Machen konstruuje nowe oblicze wzniosłości.

Jacek Mydla

**„Die Stadt der Auferstehung“ und „Die Stadt der Alpträume“:
London, weibliche Ungeheuerlichkeit und seltsame Erhabenheit in
Arthur Machens Erzählung „Der Große Pan“**

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel ist eine Interpretation von der Erzählung „Der Große Pan“ (1890, 1894) von Arthur Machen in der verschiedene Maßnahmen, mit realistischen und mimetischen narrativen Konventionen zu brechen eine besondere, metafikitive Rolle spielen. Die Analysen heben die Dämonisierung des weiblichen Elementes und deren Synergie mit dem Handlungsort von „gotischen“ Episoden des Werkes, d.i. dem „furchtbaren“ London von der Wende vom 19. zum 20.Jh. hervor. Die weibliche Ungeheuerlichkeit und der Stadtalpträum erscheinen dabei als Motive, mit denen Hilfe Machen der Erhabenheit ein neues Gesicht verleiht.