

**THE DAEMONOLOGY OF UNPLUMBED SPACE:
WEIRD FICTION, DISGUST, AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE UNTHINKABLE**

by

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Abstract

“The Daemonology of Unplumbed Space: Weird Fiction, Disgust, and the Aesthetics of the Unthinkable” explores the aesthetic and metaphysical significance of disgust in weird fiction. Beginning with the weird’s forefather, Edgar Allan Poe, the study traces the twisted entanglement of metaphysics, aesthetics, affect, and weird fiction through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, considering along the way the myriad attempts of authors such as Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and H.P. Lovecraft to stage encounters with the unthinkable. Drawing on recent philosophical efforts to reinvigorate metaphysical thought – including speculative realism and new materialism – as well as affect theory, the dissertation argues that in contrast with earlier Gothic writers, whose focus on sublime aesthetic experience reified the importance and power of the human subject and entertained fantasies of spiritual transcendence, authors of weird fiction exploit the viscerality of disgust to confront readers with the impermanence and instability of a subject polluted by nonhuman forces which seep into it from the world around it. In doing so, weird fiction helps us to think about the nature of this queasy, nonhuman world, to glimpse an existence beyond the world merely as it appears to us. By investigating the intertwinement of the aesthetics of disgust and metaphysical speculation about the nonhuman world, the dissertation expands our understanding of weird fiction and the study of affect in literature. It thus contributes to a growing understanding of weird fiction as more than a pulp, essentially commercial genre, rather interpreting the weird as literature of ecstatic yearning for a non-anthropocentric reality, literature which dwells on questions of being, becoming, and the ultimate nature of the universe.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jonathan Newell.

Portions of Chapter 4 were presented at the 2015 Biannual Conference of the International Gothic Association.

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List of Abbreviations

- DTP* *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1.* Zero Books, 2011.
- OOO Object-oriented ontology.
- SHL* *Supernatural Horror in Literature.* 1927. Wildside P, 2011.
- SL* *Selected Letters 1911-1937.* Edited by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, Arkham House, 1968.
- STI* *System of Transcendental Idealism.* 1800. Translated by Peter Heath, UP of Virginia, 1978.
- SSC* *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 2.* Zero Books, 2015.
- TLN* *Tentacles Longer than Night: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 3.* Zero Books, 2015.
- WWR* *The World as Will and Representation.* 1818/19. Translated by E.F.J. Payne, Dover, 1969. 2 vols.

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To Alli, who makes the chaos of the universe bearable.

Chapter 1: Introduction – Metaphysical Malignancies

His solid flesh had never been away,
For each dawn found him in his usual place,
But every night his spirit loved to race
Through gulfs and worlds remote from common day.
He had seen Yaddith, yet retained his mind,
And come back safely from the Ghooric zone,
When one still night across curved space was thrown
That beckoning piping from the voids behind.

He waked that morning as an older man,
And nothing since has looked the same to him.
Objects around float nebulous and dim –
False, phantom trifles of some vaster plan.
His folk and friends are now an alien throng
To which he struggles vainly to belong.

- H.P. Lovecraft, “Alienation” (1943)¹

In H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “Cool Air” (1928), the nameless narrator moves into a converted brownstone in New York. Alarmed by an odour of “pungent ammonia” (131) and a dripping ceiling, he investigates and is informed that the source of the chemical spill is the enigmatic Dr.

¹ From Lovecraft’s “Fungi from Yuggoth.” *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*. Arkham House, 1943, pp. 395-407.

Muñoz, his upstairs neighbour. Despite the strangeness of the chemical baths the doctor takes, his proximity proves life-saving when the narrator suffers a sudden heart attack and lurches upstairs in search of help. Upon meeting the strange, reclusive man, the narrator is instantly but unaccountably repelled, a nausea stealing over him despite his desperation: “as I saw Dr. Muñoz in that blast of cool air,” he tells us, “I felt a repugnance which nothing in his aspect could justify” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 133). Returned to health by Dr. Muñoz, the narrator slowly befriends the curious and “and even gruesome” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 135) physician. As the story progresses it is revealed that using techniques of extreme refrigeration Dr. Muñoz keeps a mysterious malady at bay, relying on what at first seems to be some combination of medicine and unusual cryonic science. But as time passes the physician hints at other forces sustaining him beyond those explicable by science, speaking of how “will and consciousness are stronger than organic life itself” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 133), and of certain “incantations of the medievalists” (134). But all is not well with the good doctor, for all his cooling technology and “cryptic formulae” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 134): he seems to be dwindling, eating less and less, talking often of death. An unpleasant odour develops in his apartment that has nothing to do with his constant chemical baths.

Then, one day, “the horror of horrors came with stupefying suddenness” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 136): the refrigeration machine breaks. Dr. Muñoz alerts the narrator to his need by thumping on the floor and cursing in “a tone whose lifeless, rattling hollowness [surpasses] description” (136). Kept in a tub of ice, the physician is rapidly declining, and there is a hint of “fiendish things” in the air as the stench intensifies (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 137). The narrator goes out to find workmen to repair the doctor’s machines, but returns to discover the apartment in disarray. The only trace of Dr. Muñoz is a “terrible little pool” and a few “nauseous words” of “noisome scrawl” on a paper “hideously smeared as though by the very claws that traced the hurried last words,” as

well as a “dark, slimy trail” which leads from the note to the couch “and [ends] unutterably” (Lovecraft, “Cool Air” 137-38). The words reveal that Dr. Muñoz had literally defied death, persisting in a state somewhere between life and death despite having “died” some years before. His liminal state presents a host of ontological paradoxes, inviting the reader to question the boundary between life and death, human and nonhuman, consciousness and world, spirit and matter. What may seem at first a story about speculative technology turns out to be a story that is also about speculative metaphysics, about the possibility of some horrific, dark vitalism, life sustained by the power of the will rather than the operation of organs. Such philosophical speculations are not illustrated using the dry, detached tone of the metaphysician, however, but with expostulations of growing repugnance finally culminating in an awful confrontation with the doctor’s horrifically deliquescent remains.

“Cool Air” was initially rejected by *Weird Tales* for the intensity of its disgusting content (Joshi and Schultz 47). Lovecraft credits the inspiration of the story to “The Novel of the White Powder,” an embedded tale in *The Three Imposters* (1895) by Arthur Machen, one of Lovecraft’s literary heroes (Joshi and Schultz 47). Machen’s story, in turn, owes much to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845). Both predecessors of “Cool Air” are tales of bodily disintegration, putrefaction, and necrotic slime, the horrific, undifferentiated sludge of decay; both also deal with ontological paradox and the breakdown of normally sacrosanct categories. “Cool Air” and its fictional forebears dwell with both disgust and fascination upon things otherwise unthinkable, literally beyond the limit of thought: what it is like to be dead, what happens to consciousness after death, and the mystery of thinking matter. Such stories act as speculative portals, as vortices through which we imagine realities otherwise unthinkable. They propel us vertiginously into the realm of the unknown.

In *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), Lovecraft himself tells us that what he calls the true “weird tale” must have “something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule” (19). For Lovecraft, to qualify as authentically weird “a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (*SHL* 19). This dissertation, *The Daemonology of Unplumbed Space*, takes Lovecraft’s suggestion seriously to argue that weird fiction, through the means of an aesthetic experience generated by a form of disgust, allows for a moment of what the philosopher of art Carolyn Korsmeyer calls “aesthetic cognition,” a visceral aesthetic encounter that “leads the mind toward the ineffable” (126) and allows for queasy re-conceptions of reality otherwise difficult to comprehend. Beginning with the weird’s forefather, Edgar Allan Poe, the study traces the twisted entanglement of metaphysics, aesthetics, affect, and weird fiction through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, considering along the way the attempts of weird authors such as Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood to stage encounters with the unthinkable through the intuitively unlikely conduit of aesthetic disgust, arriving finally back at Lovecraft and his own weird writing.

Lovecraft claimed that we “will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse” (*SHL* 18). For him, weird fiction is a kind of “composite body of keen emotion and imaginative provocation” (Lovecraft, *SHL* 18). This dissertation is an anatomy of that body and a cartography of unholy

dimensions, a gazetteer of the unfathomable, with Poe, Machen, Blackwood, and Lovecraft for guides. Like the demonological grimoires of Johann Weyer and Jacques Collin de Plancy it is also a bestiary, a book of monsters and monster theory. Indeed, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's third thesis on monsters in his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" – that "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis," a creature "suspended between forms" that refuses "to participate in the classificatory 'order of things'" and resists "attempts to include [it] in any systematic structuration" (6) – in many ways serves as this study's theoretical starting-point. Monsters in weird fiction and the revulsion they precipitate show how the epistemological schema and structures of meaning human beings use to make sense of the world break down, how so many are anthropocentric conceits used to reify human specialness and an image of the world as if it were "for" us, and how a cosmic outside always seems to hover just beyond the familiar world revealed by our senses. Absolute differences and distinctions of kind and essence are obliterated by the enmonstered reality that the affects of weird fiction convey. As the New Weird² author China Miéville puts it, such creatures are "expressions of that unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning" ("On Monsters" 381). I do not set out simply to decode each monster in its turn, to impose order on the fundamental unruliness of monsters. Rather, I claim that the monsters of the weird are uniquely useful to think with – and that such thinking is inextricably wrapped up in *feeling*. I demonstrate here that there is a metaphysical dimension of weird fiction – a concern with a speculative, absolute reality beyond that described by scientific observation – which is captured in

² The New Weird, exemplified by Miéville and by authors like Jeff Vandermeer, Stephanie Swainson, K.J. Bishop, M. John Harrison, and (arguably) Thomas Ligotti, hearkens back to the weird fiction of the sort discussed here, subverting tropes and clichés in fantasy and science fiction that came into ascendancy in the late-twentieth century.

this fiction through the powerful emotion of disgust. Weird revulsion, I suggest, creates aesthetic encounters which help us to think about the unthinkable.

1.1 Gothic Tumour

What exactly do I mean by “weird fiction?” The term is as categorically slippery and confused as the realities it so often describes. I am using the term here primarily in reference to a particular subgenre of texts published towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, although I also identify the works of Poe as an early of example of weird fiction *avant la lettre*. S.T. Joshi, one of the weird’s foremost critics, stresses the genre’s nebulosity, noting that “if the weird tale exists *now* as a genre, it may only be because critics and publishers have deemed it so by fiat” (*The Weird Tale* 1). Despite the fuzziness of its borders, however, I side with Joshi in distinguishing the weird from the Gothic and want to resist the urge to completely subsume the former into the latter (or vice versa). While Joshi’s objection to the umbrella term “Gothic” as employed by critics like David Punter is essentially temporal or historical, however, mine is primarily aesthetic. I have no objection to applying the term Gothic to works beyond the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries when they share substantially in the sensibilities, techniques, and preoccupations of the original Gothic novel – one thinks of the vampire novels of Anne Rice, or many of the works of Stephen King, for instance. But I argue that weird fiction as written by the authors in this study – Poe, Machen, Blackwood, and Lovecraft – must be seen as distinct from the Gothic for reasons of both style and substance.

I imagine the weird as a kind of tumour growing out of the Gothic – an outgrowth, composed of the same tissues but unfamiliar, defiant of category, alien and yet not-entirely-so, at once a part of its progenitor and curiously foreign to it. A literary excrescence, weird fiction shares

many of the same tropes and trappings as its eighteenth-century host, including a fixation on negative affect. But where the Gothic is primarily preoccupied with what Ann Radcliffe calls “the gloomy and sublime kind of terror,” accomplished through a “union of grandeur and obscurity” (149-150) – a giddy Kantian thrill, an exquisite fear in which the human subject’s power is glorified and uplifted – the weird revels in a far less rarefied form of horror, one derived not from the subject-affirming power of sublime fear but from the subject-dissolving power of disgust. While there are certainly Gothic works that turn the stomach (for example, Matthew Lewis’ 1796 novel *The Monk*, or many of the works of the Marquis de Sade), the disgust precipitated by weird fiction emanates from a specific source – the nonhuman world, or even, sometimes, what philosophers have called world-in-itself, the mind-independent world beyond the human which exists whether it is being actively perceived or not. Concerned with “cosmic” and metaphysical mysteries, the weird explores ontological depths, striving through language to glimpse strange and otherwise elusive vistas of being. The weird is a speculative and affective negotiation of the real, in its most elemental sense. This is not to say that weird tales can be neatly separated from discourse, or that they do not reflect the culture in which they were written – only that weird fiction is metaphysically rather than socially or psychologically oriented. Weird authors do not share a single, dogmatic metaphysics, either. Their speculations are often contradictory, and a consistent, fully intelligible ontological system cannot be neatly deduced from the close reading of a series of weird texts; there is no single, wholly coherent philosophy for which the weird *in toto* is merely an elaborate cipher. One of this dissertation’s central claims, however, is that weird fiction, in part using affect, attempts to access a form of reality difficult to cognize, one in some sense radically distinct from the human mind, or at the very least, from an anthropocentric viewpoint that privileges the human subject.

From a structuralist standpoint, weird fiction can be best understood as a subset of what horror scholar Terry Heller, following Tzvetan Todorov, calls the literature of the fantastic, in which there exists a kind of hesitation on the part of both readers and characters as to whether events are natural or supernatural in nature (10). In some weird tales – those of the “pure fantastic” – the truth of things remains unclear or ambiguous, but in most a supernatural or at least “preternatural” or “supernormal” explanation is confirmed. Following Lovecraft’s insistence that the true weird tale needs to express an otherworldly affect linked to the “suspension or defeat of [the] fixed laws of Nature” (*SHL* 19), I want to exclude from the domain of the weird those tales which Heller and Todorov would term “uncanny” – that is, tales in which “there is never a serious suggestion that the supernatural is operating in the story” (11) – as well as those of the “fantastic/uncanny,” otherwise known as tales of the supernatural explained, a subgenre exemplified by Radcliffe’s Gothic novels.³

By weird fiction, then, I am speaking of a sort of fiction which includes the supernatural, or at least the suggestion of the supernatural – including works that leave the actual supernaturalism of events unclear, including stories such as Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1843). As further chapters will show, however, I also argue that despite (or, indeed, through!) its supernatural elements, weird fiction is engaged in a form of unorthodox realism. Quite distinct from the social realism or literary naturalism of late-Victorian novels which strive to depict everyday life with faithfulness to social reality, weird fiction seeks to estrange readers from mundane existence while

³ Lovecraft is effusive in his praise for Ann Radcliffe, suggesting that she often “approached genius” with her “genuine sense of the unearthly,” giving impressions “of illimitable frightfulness,” but he complains bitterly of her “provoking custom of destroying her own phantoms at the last through laboured mechanical explanations” (*SHL* 30).

remaining faithful to a deeper, profoundly *asocial* reality; indeed, a nonhuman reality. The curious realism of weird fiction thus finds its closest cognate not in the various literary realisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they are usually understood but in philosophical and metaphysical realism – and especially in the recent philosophical project that has come (not uncontroversially) to be known as “speculative realism.”

1.2 The Weird World-in-Itself

The philosophical attempt to think about the world-in-itself has been a major preoccupation of the loosely-defined movement known as speculative realism, originally associated with Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Ray Brassier and now extended to include many additional thinkers like Timothy Morton, Levi Bryant, Ben Woodard, and Eugene Thacker, among others. Positioning itself against both a naïve realism that presupposes we might have direct, unmitigated access to the world-in-itself *and* against what Meillassoux, in *After Finitude* (2008), terms “correlationism,” upholding the ban on metaphysics established by Immanuel Kant, under which “we only have access to the correlation between thinking and being” (5), speculative realism strives “to achieve what modern philosophy has been telling us for the past two centuries is impossibility itself: *to get out of ourselves*, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not” (27). In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant scathingly observes that “in metaphysics we have to retrace our path countless times, because we find that it does not lead where we want to go, and it is so far from reaching unanimity in the assertions of its adherents that it is rather a battlefield, and indeed one that appears to be especially determined for testing one’s powers in mock combat; on this battlefield no combatant has ever gained the least bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory” (108-109). To move forward, Kant argues,

we must distinguish between phenomena – the world “as it appears” – and noumena, or things-in-themselves – things “as they are” (*The Critique of Pure Reason* 347). The minds of human beings utilize *a priori* categories of understanding in order to cognize phenomena, but the thing-in-itself remains always elusive – the best we can do is to think of it “under the name of an unknown something” (Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* 351) to which we are always denied access. As Kant steadfastly insists, “we can never get beyond the boundaries of possible experience” (*The Critique of Pure Reason* 112).

It is this iron-clad emphasis on the contents of the human mind and the way that objects conform to our thinking, and in which we cannot know anything of the world outside of this correlation, that the speculative realists critique. Meillassoux urges us to wake from the “correlationist slumber”⁴ induced upon us by Kant, in order “to reconcile thought and the absolute” (128), to try and know the world as it exists in-itself (or, as Thacker might say, “without us”), rather than confining ourselves to the correlates of our own consciousness. As Steven Shaviro recently put it, speculative realism calls on philosophers “to do precisely what Kant told us that we cannot and must not do” (67): namely to move beyond the bounds of the world as we perceive it, to leave behind what Ben Woodard evocatively describes as “the dead loop of the human skull” (11).

The problem, of course, is the vicious correlationist circle or “correlationist two-step” (Meillassoux 5) which inextricably seems to circumscribe all thought and so doom us to ignorance of the world-in-itself. As Graham Harman observes, for the correlationist “we cannot think of the

⁴ Meillassoux here is rather cheekily echoing Kant, who famously roused himself from “dogmatic slumber” after encountering David Hume’s sceptical attack on causality, prompting him to rethink the relationship between subject and world and leading to *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

world without humans or humans without the world, but only of a primordial relation between them,” a predisposition which has essentially dominated philosophy for the last two hundred years by attempting “to anchor the whole of reality either in the human subject who perceives the world, or in a society that constructs it” (“An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 188). Or, as Eugene Thacker explains, “the world-in-itself is a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us” (*DTP* 5). The second we begin to think of the world-in-itself it passes into the realm of our consciousness and becomes enmeshed in the world of our representations, our senses and subjective viewpoint. Thacker thus imagines the world-in-itself as “a horizon for thought, always receding beyond the bounds of intelligibility” (*DTP* 5).

The responses of various speculative realists to the seemingly ineluctable correlationist ouroboros have been multifarious, to the point where some have disputed the very coherence of the “speculative realist movement” altogether.⁵ Shaviro notes that speculative realists tend to disagree strongly on fundamental issues, though they are united nonetheless by a commitment “to restore the dignity of metaphysical investigation and invention” and reinstate “a robust ontological realism” after the long spell of twentieth-century antirealism as exemplified by such schools of thought as phenomenology, structuralism, and some variations of continental philosophy (5). Meillassoux, fighting back against the correlationist circle and the Kantian transcendental subject, turns to the idea of “contingency” and David Hume’s denial of the necessity of the laws of nature.

⁵ Despite its controversy, I do think the term “speculative realism” is a useful one: even if the various philosophers operating loosely under its heading come to radically different conclusions, their overall aims are comparable. The speculative realists most important to this study are Graham Harman and Eugene Thacker, since both have also written about the role of horror fiction, but I will also frequently draw on Quentin Meillassoux’s terminology.

He ultimately comes to view the laws of nature as merely contingent and endorses a vision of reality as a churning “*hyper-Chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, nor even unthinkable,” a kind of monstrous inversion of the Cartesian God which he describes in terms suitable for a Lovecraftian abomination: a “menacing power . . . capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything, of realizing every dream, but also every nightmare, of engendering random and frenetic transformations, or conversely, of producing a universe that remains motionless down to its ultimate recesses, like a cloud bearing the fiercest storms, then the eeriest bright spells, if only for an interval of disquieting calm” (Meillassoux 64). Others, such as Harman and other adherents of “object-oriented ontology” or “OOO” as it is sometimes abbreviated, while sharing Meillassoux’s antipathy towards correlationism, have argued against the idea that philosophy can ever produce knowledge itself, claiming instead that philosophy “aims at objects . . . that can never be successfully defined but only indirectly approached” (An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 191). Accordingly, OOO has set about exploring the gaps between objects and their qualities.

Also notable here is new materialism or neo-materialism, an emerging metaphysics and loose philosophical movement with significant points of contact and overlap with speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. In many ways an outgrowth of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, new materialism is championed by thinkers like Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad, and finds its roots in an eclectic range of philosophers including Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Henri Bergson, and Baruch Spinoza, combining vitalist and immanentist ideas about the ontology of life with the ways that actor-network theory calls on us to rethink the boundaries and distributions of agency between human and nonhuman. Though sometimes less explicitly committed to popping the correlationist bubble

than object-oriented ontologists, the new materialists are interested both in metaphysical realism and in grappling with the relation between the human and the nonhuman in a non-anthropocentric fashion.

Whole books have and will be written exploring the various speculative realist and new materialist rejoinders to metaphysical antirealism and correlationism. This dissertation is not among such works precisely, since it is not primarily a work of philosophy but of literary criticism: my intent here is not to persuade readers of some specific metaphysical system or to critique antirealism directly, but rather to show that weird fiction engages with philosophical quandaries pertaining to metaphysics that still vex philosophers today and which are becoming increasingly relevant in an age struggling to come to grips with the nonhuman and the idea of a world that is not “for us.” Speculative realist philosophers have also shown an interest in fiction – particularly horror and weird fiction. Harman, for instance, has written extensively about Lovecraftian “ontography” – the way that, in his view, Lovecraft’s writing presents reality as riven with gaps or rifts, structured by tensions between objects in their full actuality and their sensual properties. Even more recently, Thacker has written a three-volume series, *The Horror of Philosophy*, that touches on weird fiction (among many other topics, ranging from black metal to Japanese film) as it explores the intersection between horror and philosophy, approaching horror as “a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically” (*DTP* 9). Thacker begins the first volume of his series with a discussion of demonology, presenting the demon “as a limit for thought,” unfettering the demonic from its theological origins and repurposing demonology “as a philosopheme” (*DTP* 47) that negotiates problems of being, nothingness, language, and the unhuman. My project, *The Daemonology of Unplumbed Space*, is both an extension of Lovecraft’s suggestion that weird fiction concerns “the assaults of chaos and the

daemons of unplumbed space” (*SHL* 19), and in a sense, a demonology of the sort Thacker envisions and which he suggests has not yet been fully realized. This dissertation can thus be broadly aligned with many of the perspectives of speculative realist philosophy even if its aims pertain to literary criticism rather than metaphysics itself *per se*.

At the same time, however, some of the literary claims of the speculative realists have run the risk of reducing weird and horror fiction to allegory – philosophy dressed up with tentacles and fangs. This approach marginalizes the affective power of the weird, which so many of its authors have specifically identified as the very “point” of their work. Beginning with the stories of Poe and his “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), weird authors have afforded emotional effects tremendous primacy. Machen, Blackwood, and Lovecraft all uphold aesthetic attitudes broadly similar to Poe’s, looking also to Aestheticism and Decadence and largely endorsing the idea of *l’art pour l’art* while criticizing didactic and moralistic works that foreground some particular social, political, or ethical aim as the point of fiction. Lovecraft insists that while the “emotional level” of a weird story is of the foremost importance, “a weird story whose intent is to teach or produce a social effect, or one in which the horrors are finally explained away by natural means, is not a genuine tale of cosmic fear” (*SHL* 19). Though many of Thacker’s claims in *The Horror of Philosophy* are illuminating, he returns again and again to a vision of horror fiction as fundamentally idea-driven rather than emotion-driven. At one point Thacker argues that for Lovecraft “horror is less defined by emotion and more by thought” (*TLN* 120). Later, he argues that Thomas Ligotti’s *Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010) is the “logical next step” in horror as it dispenses entirely with “narrative, character, and plot, in favour of the *ideas* of horror fiction” (Thacker, *TLN* 159), and describes such works as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (142) as essentially “idea-driven” (14). I am not denying that horror fiction has ideas

in it – ideas worth exploring. Indeed, much of this dissertation will be spent complicating and unpacking the ideas voiced by the likes of Poe, Lovecraft, and others. But by foregrounding ideas at the expense of aesthetics, written off along with the details of plot and character, Thacker and his fellows neglect what seems to me the real engine of horror – affect.

Among my claims will be the idea that for weird fiction, affect and metaphysical speculation become intimately intertwined. This study thus intervenes in philosophical readings of weird fiction by privileging affect: both the affective states of characters and the potential affective states of readers. Specifically, I argue that disgust is an especially important affect for the weird, serving not only to impart a certain frisson of aesthetic pleasure (an effect itself fraught with paradox) but serving as a way of knowing – or, at least, of speculating. This is in part because disgust is an emotion centrally concerned with boundaries and borders, demarcations of being, selfhood, subjectivity, and category. My project here, then, is to bring together two ways of thinking about weird fiction: one that emphasizes the ways that the weird offers metaphysical speculations, and another which foregrounds the unusual, even paradoxical aesthetics of disgust. In doing so, I aim to expand the study of weird fiction as a genre, one particularly invested in metaphysical speculation, and also to emphasize the unexpected aesthetic value of disgust.

1.3 Disgusting Thoughts

Disgust and metaphysics may seem very strange bedfellows. The former, intuitively, we associate with the gut, a visceral, biological reaction, while the latter clearly belongs to the brain, the abstract province of reason and the intellect. Yet time and time again the otherworldly monstrosities and things-from-beyond depicted in weird fiction seem calculated to repulse and disturb in such a way as to arouse speculation around the contours of the self, the cosmos, and the relationship between

them. Noël Carroll observes that horror fiction typically deploys imaginary monstrous creatures to engender an emotion he terms “art-horror,” a mixture of fear and disgust. Carroll singles out the disgusting in particular, observing that “the monster in horror fiction . . . is not only lethal but – and this is of the utmost significance – also disgusting” (22). Building on Mary Douglas’ account of ritual impurity, which I explore in greater depth in Chapter 3, Carroll argues that the disgust monsters arouse is linked to their disruption of the categorical schema by which human beings make sense of the world: “an *object* or *being* is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (32). Monsters “involve the mixture of what is normally distinct,” either by splicing together different sorts of creatures or by superimposing two categorically separate beings (as in demonic possession, for example): they are “categorically transgressive” (Carroll 33). Monsters disgust because they *disrupt our ways of knowing*.

Carroll’s philosophical objective is primarily to explain the appeal of horror and unravel what he calls the paradox of horror, one iteration of the broader aesthetic paradox of aversion that arises in the face of art that elicits negative affective responses. While I have different aims than Carroll, his observation about the way disgust operates in horror fiction forms a useful beginning. Because monsters are impure and categorically interstitial, they pose an epistemological problem, calling into question the social, cultural, and scientific schema of characters and readers and so introducing doubt into the way the world is perceived and understood, vexing the processes by which meaning is made and reality comprehended. By mixing and intermingling that which is usually understood to be separate, those things which we find disgusting invite ontological speculation about the true nature of reality, a speculation facilitated by the affect they elicit. But where in life we might not give the disgusting a second thought, surrendering swiftly to its aversive character and turning aside from that which revolts us, in art, disgust achieves a kind of fascination.

Even if disgust in art is more “immediate” or “transparent” than other emotions, it rarely entails the same sensory intensity as it might in a non-artistic context. Where we might simply recoil from the decaying body of an animal or the slime on mouldering bread, in art we are safe to experience and even savour what Aurel Kolnai calls disgust’s “macabre allure” (42). Moreover, the particular aesthetic encounters which weird fiction creates rely on a disgust generated by monstrous, supernatural beings, defying categories more viscerally and conspicuously than creatures that might disgust us in life. Formless and shapeless things, indeterminate creatures, amorphous and chimerical monsters – all such weird horrors hint at the possibility of an undifferentiated, unified, or oozingly intermingled ontology, or one in which organisms and objects are forever melding together and influencing one another in a web of complex relations. Within weird fiction, the possibilities of such boundary-blurring and category transgression become especially fecund. Violently irrupting into the human world, or world-for-us, monsters in weird fiction serve as manifestations of a base or primal reality beyond our normal comprehension. They elicit disgust because they violate everyday epistemological rules, constructs, and intuitions, obliterating the familiar, comforting, and thoroughly anthropocentric apparatus used to impose a sense of order on reality. At the same time, they open up a space for speculation, confronting us with the reality that lies beneath the correlationist crust. Necrotic hands burst forth from grave-dirt, dragging us down into chthonic chaos.

Core to the connection I am proposing between disgust, weird monstrosity, and metaphysical realism is the idea that disgust, when encountered in art generally and weird fiction in particular, can be used to facilitate ways of thinking that are normally foreclosed – that it functions as a cognitive catalyst for speculation about the nonhuman world of the kind that Meillassoux and his fellows urge. Korsmeyer’s work (which traces some of its roots to Carroll)

adopts a cognitivist framework for affect in art, one that returns to the original meaning of “the aesthetic” in philosophy – that is, a type of “immediate insight” derived from an art object, a form of knowledge “too particular to be brought under the abstractions of reason” (7). Drawing on the work of Anthony Kenny and Gilbert Ryle to reinterpret aesthetic pleasure or satisfaction as a kind of “modifier of attention” engendering “fascination, concentration, rapt attention” or “absorption” (118), Korsmeyer argues that art can create an “aesthetic apprehension” which “imparts the impression that one is on the brink of an intuition that eludes articulation in plain language and can only be approached by means of the artwork which induces it” (126). While making room for a whole range of possible ideas that disgust might make viscerally known through aesthetic encounters, she pays the greatest attention to the possibilities offered by what she calls the “sublate,” an aesthetic experience arising from disgust, comparable to the sublime. Like the sublime, Korsmeyer contends, the sublate transmogrifies “a supremely uncomfortable and aversive emotion . . . into powerful and transportive aesthetic insight” (133).

The sublime and the numinous, of course, have a more extensively theorized history than disgust – even while disgust oozes in the background of aesthetics almost since its inception, since as Winfried Menninghaus observes, in many ways modern aesthetics rests “on a foundation based on prohibition of what is disgusting” (7). I will return repeatedly to the sublime in its various guises as presented by the likes of Edmund Burke, Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer, to name a few, as well as more recent reformulations of the sublime such as the perverse sublime, the apocalyptic sublime, the ecological sublime, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and the “sublate” described by Korsmeyer. Central to my argument will be the idea that disgust can provide a version of aesthetic experience in some sense profoundly parallel to the sublime but in another wholly inverse to it – a form of sublimity utterly shorn of anthropocentrism. As I discuss in detail in

Chapter 2, the Kantian sublime ultimately upholds and confirms the supposedly awesome power of the human subject, exalting in the superiority of consciousness and so entrenching the anthropocentric worldview correlationism fosters.

In thinking through the connection between affect, art, and metaphysics, my work here builds on the recent theories of weird affect by thinkers like China Miéville, an author of the weird as well as an academic, whose aesthetic formulations are addressed directly in Chapter 4. Miéville's focus on the affect generated by weird fiction is linked to "radical otherness," which he compares (but does not equate) to the eighteenth-century sublime, noting the ways that "writers like Wollestonecraft and Radcliffe and Schopenhauer and Schelling wandered up mountains to where the fabric of language and the symbolic order is thinnest and frayed, and stared out into geological scale, into the breathtaking abyss of the unrepresentable, and what they've called the Sublime" ("On Monsters" 380). For Miéville, weird fiction is thus an iteration "of a long, strong aesthetic and philosophical tradition, one endlessly obsessed with questions of the Awesome, a beauty that is terrible and beyond-kenn-or-kennableness" ("On Monsters" 380). As Miéville notes, however, the "Weird Affect" ("On Monsters" 380) is a "bad numinous," closer to "sublime backwash" (383) than it is to the sublime itself. The aestheticized disgust of weird fiction operates much as the sublime does, transmuting negative affect into awe and even ecstatic delight, but where the sublime empowers the subject, weird disgust ruins and erodes it. My argument draws on Korsmeyer and other recent theorists of disgust such as Colin McGinn, who calls disgust "a kind of metaphysical emotion" (96), William Ian Miller, who describes disgust in terms of "life soup" (18), an undifferentiated organic substance of life, death, and decay, and Susan Miller, who focuses on disgust as an emotion tied up in the question of subjectival borders and the maintenance of the self, its ability "to define individuals' concepts of self and body and to establish relationships

between the two conceptual realms” (5). I thus expand and develop Miéville’s observations around affect and the weird to argue that disgust is uniquely suited to facilitate metaphysical speculation in art. Weird fiction exploits disgust’s connection to impurity, the threat of dissolution, and the porousness of the body to imagine new worlds beyond the boundaries of the human and the self.

In addition to the philosophical work of the speculative realists, scholarship on disgust and aesthetics, and Miéville’s formulations around the weird, this dissertation builds on the work of several seminal critics, adding to a growing body of scholarship on weird fiction. It owes substantial intellectual debts to Joshi, who argues that weird fiction is strongly tied to the “philosophical predispositions” and “distinctive world views” of its authors (*The Weird Tale* 10). While Joshi is, by his own cheerful admission, a member of the “pedestrian school of criticism,” his attempt to try and ascertain the “philosophical purpose” (*The Weird Tale* 230) of a given weird author’s writings is foundational to my own approach. Joshi, however, is notably dismissive when faced with the occult and idealist metaphysics of authors like Machen and Blackwood, noting, for example, that he finds he simply “cannot follow the courses of reasoning – if they can be called that – by which Blackwood arrives at his conclusions and attitudes” and that he simply does not understand “the mystical temperament” (*The Weird Tale* 10). In his approach to Lovecraft, Joshi reveals an unsurprising reverence for materialism, sympathetically emphasizing Lovecraft’s atheism and mechanistic materialism and arguing that Lovecraft is perhaps the only weird writer, specifically “not excluding” Poe, “whose world view is of interest in itself” (*The Weird Tale* 170). In contrast, my aim is to take seriously the metaphysical speculations of occultists and idealists such as Blackwood, and my portrait of Lovecraftian ontology complicates his mechanistic materialism considerably.

This project also extends and elaborates a concept that the Gothic scholar Kelly Hurley introduces in her illuminating monograph *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle* (1996) – that of the “abhuman.” The abhuman is a monstrous or ruined subject “figured in the most violent, absolute, and often repulsive terms” (3) which Hurley links primarily to *fin de siècle* British Gothic. As she puts it, “in place of a unitary and securely bounded subjectivity,” the abhuman subject is “fragmented and permeable” (3), one that is forever on the edge of “becoming other” (4). Hurley’s account of the abhuman, especially its disgustingness, resonates closely with my conception of the weird monster, a figure of formlessness and alien horror contaminating the human. However, Hurley’s theory identifies the anxieties around the boundaries of the human primarily in relation to late-Victorian science and “scientific discourse, biological and sociomedical,” including “evolutionism, criminal anthropology, degeneration theory, sexology, pre-Freudian psychology” and other discourse that vexed conventional understandings of “the human” (5). In this sense, Hurley shares a great deal in common with the mechanistic materialism of Joshi: both scholars are interested primarily in the ways that nineteenth- or twentieth-century scientific discoveries shaped Gothic and weird fiction, with an emphasis on the anxieties and revulsion concomitant with materialism and the various metanarratives of human specialness it disrupts.

Hurley’s approach to horror and disgust has been influential, leading to such works as Xavier Aldana Reyes’ *Body Gothic* (2014), which shares with this work an interest in the disintegration of bodies and affects such as fear and disgust. For Reyes, horror fiction is rooted in anxieties around “interstitiality” and the refusal of “absolute human taxonomies” (5), and he notes that what he calls body gothic “prods the limits of taste and decorum” (7). I have in common with Reyes an appreciation for the way that weird texts elicit “horror, shock or disgust in those who

stand for a normative version of humanity” (12). Like both Joshi and Hurley, however, Reyes is interested in the ways that the revolting transgressions and disgusting spectacle of horror confront us primarily with a sense of “unspeakable corporeality” (7) and a kind of base materialism, one that reduces not just human beings but reality as a whole to purely physicalist terms.

I am certainly not entirely denying the viability of the materialist approach broadly shared by scholars like Joshi, Hurley, and Reyes, or the merit of thinking about late-Victorian Gothic and weird fiction in relation to scientific discourses, but at the same time I think that weird fiction is not merely a reflection of what Hurley calls “the realities of gross corporeality” (3), the brute thingness of a wholly materialist world and the “*gothicness of matter*” (33). I suggest that weird monstrosity and revolting subjects of the sort Hurley terms abhuman and Reyes identifies as corporeally transgressive can be read not only in relation to scientific discourse but also to metaphysical speculation that explicitly moves beyond a mechanistically materialist or wholly scientific understanding of the world.

In its emphasis on disgust, my project is also in some ways adjacent to a particular tradition of thinking about the aesthetics of disgust and horror, a tradition we can trace to works like Heller’s *The Delights of Terror* (1987), Carroll’s landmark study *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990),⁶ Yvonne Leffler’s *Horror as Pleasure: The Aesthetics of Horror Fiction* (2000), Matt Hill’s *The Pleasures of Horror* (2005), and Korsmeyer’s *Savoring Disgust: The Foul & The Fair in Aesthetics* (2011). Insofar as these works investigate what is often called the “paradox of aversion,” they can trace their critical heritage back to ancient questions in aesthetics, such as those of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

⁶ *The Philosophy of Horror* inspired the title of Eugene Thacker’s *Horror of Philosophy*, as he notes in an interview with *Scapegoat*, and indeed, Thacker considers his three-volume work a kind of inversion of Carroll’s seminal study (380).

This scholarship lies at the border between literary criticism and the philosophy of art and asks a question about horror fiction generally: why is it that we find the aversive emotions that horror fiction arouses to be pleasurable? It was, in fact, this very question that first interested me when I began research on this project, and while the dissertation no longer tackles the paradox of aversion directly in the same way as previous work on the subject, it does rely on some of the theoretical bedrock established by literary critics and aestheticians interested in the question of disgust and enjoyment – specifically, the idea that the affects aroused by horror fiction have meaningful cognitive content.

1.4 Awed Listening at the Known Universe’s Utmost Rim

The story of weird fiction that this dissertation tells is one of the genre becoming gradually aware of itself – or, to put it differently, of weird authors becoming more intentionally invested in a particular kind of aesthetic project. *The Daemonology of Unplumbed Space* considers four authors in detail, two American and two British: Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Not only are these four figures widely considered luminaries of the weird, their approaches to weird fiction are paradigmatic of the form of ontological horror story this dissertation considers: each articulates a metaphysical vision of an ultimate reality that always seems to recede from a wholly intellectual grasp but which can be partially, speculatively apprehended through art and the affects it arouses. Yet when Poe, in the words of Lovecraft, “did that which no one else ever did or could have done,” laying the groundwork for “the modern horror-story in its final and perfected state” (*SHL* 55), he was not, I think, setting forth to instantiate a new subgenre of the Gothic, or even explicitly aiming to speculate about matters metaphysical. Haunted by the slow and horrifying deaths first of his mother and then his wife by tuberculosis,

Poe writes stories of death-in-life, psychic breakdown, and apocalyptic contagion, returning repeatedly to ideas of the Absolute and the convergence of matter and spirit. While his goal may not have been to grasp at metaphysics, he stumbles into a weird new way of thinking and writing about them nonetheless. By the time Lovecraft penned his seminal study, however, the genre had significantly developed – the Gothic tumour metastasizing, growing into something new.

At the same time a certain trajectory can be traced from Poe to Lovecraft in the content of their metaphysical explorations. Where Poe, Machen, and Blackwood all break down distinctions between the human and the nonhuman in ways upholding what Thacker, in his description of German Idealists and other post-Kantian Idealists, calls an “ontology of generosity,” where life comes “to serve as a metonym for the Absolute” even when it is intertwined with forces of decay (SSC 110), Lovecraft overturns this recuperation, exposing instead a reality utterly devoid of meaning, a world of endless suffering and pointless striving. The development of the weird is thus also a slide towards pessimism.

While the four weird authors differ significantly in both artistic style and philosophical substance, they share a disdain for Victorian didacticism, for moralistic literature that seeks to indoctrinate its readers in a dogmatic fashion. Repeatedly emphasizing emotion and feeling over the articulation of social or political commentary, all four exalt in art’s affective power in their criticism, essays, or letters. Unlike previous critics who have approached weird tales as idea-driven rather than emotion-driven, I embrace the aestheticism of these authors and position affect as central to the weird exploration of the unthinkable, an aesthetic gateway through which each story invites its readers to step.

In the weird tales of Edgar Allan Poe, the body becomes something alien, not-wholly-human but always tinged with monstrosity. Consciousness, also, becomes something eminently

strange, but rather than separating itself from the physical according to Cartesian, dualistic conceptions of mind and matter, it is forever bleeding into bodies or the surrounding environment. Focusing on “Ligeia” (1838), “Morella” (1835), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), and “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842), Chapter 2 “The Putrescent Principle,” investigates some of Poe’s dead, diseased, and decaying bodies and the stories around them in search of clues into Poe’s unusual, often-slippery ontology. Poe’s conception of a cosmos bent on “inevitable annihilation” (8), as he puts it in *Eureka* (1848), manifests in his fiction a rapt fascination with decay, linking aestheticized disgust with a vision of the universe in perpetual and irresistible decline towards total indifferenciation. Poe’s weird tales of decay, this chapter thus argues, provide a glimpse of the entropic abyss of undifferentiated unity into which Poe hints the universe will collapse – what he calls “Material Nihilism,” a state of “Nothingness” engendered by the “absolute Unity” or “Heart Divine” that *Eureka* suggests our reality will attain as all matter and spirit dissolve into one another, a Dark Romantic ontology derived in part from the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling.

In this chapter I build on readings of Poe in terms of that “absurd metaphysician” (as Poe terms Schelling), on recent work on Schelling by philosophers like Eugene Thacker, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Theodore George, and on conceptions of disgust emphasizing the interpenetration of life and death. I read Poe’s preoccupation with the too-animate, metamorphic, and putrescent corpse in terms of Schelling’s conception of the “Absolute,” a unity between the knowing subject and the world-in-itself bridging the Kantian division between phenomena and noumena. In doing so, I expand an understanding of Poe in metaphysical terms and complicate understandings of Poe’s anti-didactic aesthetics by linking them, through disgust, to an Idealist ontology. My aim here is not to claim that Poe is deliberately encoding Schellingian philosophy into his fiction in

any direct, intentional sense, but rather that Poe's stories possess a metaphysical dimension that Schelling's philosophy is useful in exploring. Preoccupied with the idea of consciousness surviving death, Poe's stories are more than psychological, they are ontological, propelling us past the normal limits of thought into speculative philosophical terrain – but with a speculation always intertwined with and indeed conveyed through palpable disgust and unease.

Poe serves as the logical starting point for this study for several reasons. A significant influence on most of the authors in subsequent chapters – far more directly so than the Gothic authors who came before him and, indeed, than many who came after – Poe is in many ways the progenitor of weird fiction, wresting the Gothic further away from its roots in post-Enlightenment nostalgia for the social structures of the medieval period and towards the cosmic, the unknowable, and the metaphysical. Lovecraft, as previously noted, identifies Poe as one of his most significant influences, devoting an entire chapter to him in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* in which he describes Poe's weird writing as “a literary dawn directly affecting not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole” (55).

Chapter 3, “Ecstasies of Slime,” examines the works of the *fin de siècle* Anglo-Catholic weird author and occultist Arthur Machen, a fervent anti-materialist and member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn whose yearnings for spiritual “ecstasy,” a kind of withdrawal from common life, manifest not in the traditional sublime, as might be expected, but in slime, sin, and monstrosity, revealing a world of Decadent horror and primal mystery. Reflecting on Machen's mystic and aesthetic doctrines as outlined in his singular theoretical work *Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902), I read Machen's novels *The Great God Pan* (1890) and *The Three Imposters* (1895) as efforts to restore what Machen feels is a vanished sense of sacred reality, banished from late-Victorian life by the seemingly inexorable advances of a scientific materialism

Machen saw as rapidly stripping the universe of its wonder and mystery. Machen – influenced by Poe, a friend of Blackwood’s, and a major influence on Lovecraft – presents in his fiction a series of monstrous regressions back into primordial abysses of time, most potently incarnate in beings that secrete or deliquesce into mucus, sludge, and protoplasmic ooze. Far from serving as representations of abject material thingness, however, such slime accrues a kind of sacramental status, animated by an immanent spiritual presence interfusing the shadowy illusion that is, for Machen, the physical universe. Disgust in Machen’s fiction is a means for gnosis, for seeing past the world of our immediate experience and ecstatically reuniting with the divine.

Drawing on Mary Douglas’ account of ritual impurity and theorizations of slime and grotesquery such as William Ian Miller’s concept of “life soup,” this chapter interprets Machen’s slime as the unlikely manifestation of Godhead. While previous criticism has tended to consider Machen’s disgusting horror stories in scientific and materialist terms or else explored his esotericism without considering the role of disgust and horror in sufficient detail, this chapter brings both together to think through the implications of disgust for Machen’s esoteric project. I pair theories of disgust and impurity with late-Victorian occult metaphysics and Meillassoux’s discussion of the “arche-fossil,” an ancestral remnant out of deep time that disrupts correlationist accounts of reality, to argue that the weird works of Machen’s “Great Decade” utilize the surprising affect of disgust both to impart the sense of wonder or ecstasy that he imagines as the *raison d’être* of “fine literature” while simultaneously presenting an immanent onto-theological account of being. Blending Decadent poetics and Christian mysticism with vivid, often repugnant representations of monstrosity, Machen’s works exemplify the power of the weird to contest what in the 1890s were becoming powerful metanarratives of scientific progress, while at the same time refuting an anthropocentric theology obsessed with human uniqueness or holiness.

The weird eco-fiction of Machen's contemporary Algernon Blackwood, a journalist, broadcaster, outdoorsman, British spy, and Buddhist mystic, is the focus of Chapter 4, "Horrible Enchantments." I approach Blackwood's tales of backwoods horror, including "The Willows" (1907), "The Wendigo" (1910), and "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912) using ecocritical and new materialist interventions in metaphysics such as those carried out by Michael Marder and Jane Bennett, alongside ontologies of vitalism, immanence, panpsychism, and pantheism as imagined by the likes of Deleuze, Bergson, and Spinoza. I pair these biophilosophical explorations of matter, life, and substance with theories of disgust, abjection, and the aesthetics of horror, most notably those of Julia Kristeva and China Miéville. Where Machen imagines the universe in Anglo-Catholic terms as a kind of grand sacramental symbol for the "Source of all Souls," a hieroglyphic mystery, Blackwood – reacting against a strict Evangelical upbringing – elevates Nature to a position analogous to Godhead in Machen. I argue that Blackwood's stories of the weird wilderness stage confrontations between anthropocentric, colonial perspectives and ecological powers that always exceed human understanding or circumscription and, in so doing, reveal the amorphousness and permeability that trouble our conceptions of subjectivity and the subject's relation to the universe. This confrontation, I suggest, can be understood in relation to the world-for-us imagined by anthropocentric discourse and a seemingly unthinkable and thoroughly nonhuman Nature.

This chapter brings a new perspective on Blackwood's tragically under-discussed weird fiction while linking together recent scholarship on metaphysics and the aesthetics of disgust. I contend that the very difficulties inherent in conveying the unthinkable natural world are harnessed by Blackwood's stories to cultivate a sense of cosmic awe, an ecological sublimity inseparable from a form of aestheticized disgust. Rather than simply confirming an essential alterity between

humanity and nature, the dualistic, hierarchical configuration that characterizes the sublime as it is usually understood and which might undergird either a correlationist account of human consciousness or an understanding of nature as inert or mechanistic matter, Blackwood's weird nature-stories entangle the human and the nonhuman in a rhizomatic mesh of nonhuman actants and vegetal horrors.

The final chapter of this dissertation, "Cosmic Contamination," considers the weird fiction of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a great admirer of Poe, Machen, and Blackwood and perhaps the best-known author of weird fiction in history. My analysis focuses on short stories like "The Rats in the Walls" (1923), "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) and "The Dunwich Horror" (1929), as well as the novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936). Like his predecessors, Lovecraft is concerned both with engendering affective responses in his readers and with forms of metaphysical speculation. In many ways, his work assimilates the influences of the three authors discussed in previous chapters, both in terms of plot and imagery and in relation to the ideas underlying his stories. With Poe he shares a fascination with the decomposing corpse, with decay and entropy; with Machen, an interest in combining teratology and deep time, monstrosity and ancestrality; with Blackwood, a quest for seeking the universe's outermost rim, the cosmic outside, the utterly other, setting many of his tales in remote locations, metaphorically closer to the "Great Outdoors." But while Lovecraft's precursors displace the human in their metaphysical speculations, each also recuperates humanity through an ontology of generosity, in which life and thought are "overpresent" (Thacker, *SSC* 110): Poe's decaying, quasi-Schellingian Absolute, Machen's Godhead of sacramental slime, and Blackwood's panpsychic, vitalist Nature all dethrone human beings only to embrace them once more, recuperating them into a primal unity. In Lovecraft, this recuperative move is thwarted, for human beings in Lovecraft's fiction are not only insectile,

insignificant beings of no cosmic importance; the universe itself is a malignant force – a force I describe in relation to Arthur Schopenhauer’s ontology, which identifies the world-in-itself with an all-encompassing, non-sentient will-to-live, a brute, nihilistic striving.

While Lovecraft’s weird fiction is an increasingly popular subject for scholarship, the role of disgust in his fiction is rarely given the centrality it deserves, and his metaphysics are rarely discussed in terms beyond those of mechanistic materialism. Key to Lovecraft’s works, I contend in Chapter 5, is the revelation that even the most seemingly dependable human conceptions, such as those of selfhood and self-knowledge, are unreliable: his weird stories are rife with protagonists who, with spasms of revulsion, apprehend not only the emptiness of their human values but the reality of their own alienage, of the strangeness and repulsiveness of life and the universe itself, and of a continuity between human beings and that nauseating cosmos. The only solace from this endless horror lies in a dissipation of the self, a loss of ego kin to madness which I relate to Schopenhauer’s formulation of the sublime and to the nullification of the will in the moment of its full apprehension.

The story this dissertation tells is not always a neat, linear one – there is no clear roadmap of the Great Outdoors. What emerges from my analysis is not a single, consistent picture of the unthinkable world-in-itself but a series of shifting visions, coalescing miasma-like to provide strange and sometimes unsettling glimpses of the reality we inhabit but imperfectly comprehend. My goal here is to contribute to a growing critical understanding of weird fiction as serious literature engaged in exploring meaningful questions about the nature of reality and our access to it, and to bring to the study of the weird new perspectives emphasizing the significance of affect generally and the cognitive and aesthetic power of disgust particularly.

Chapter 2: The Putrescent Principle: Edgar Allan Poe

2.1 Macabre Metaphysics

Edgar Allan Poe's first short published story, "Metzengerstein: A Tale in Imitation of the German" (1832), is explicitly concerned with metaphysics. Its central conceit of metempsychosis – an idea Poe would return to in works like "Morella" (1835) and "Ligeia" (1838) – concerns the transmigration of the soul, and manifests in the form of a grotesque, demonic horse with the soul of a man, a liminal figure somewhere between life and death, human and animal. The horse becomes the obsession of Frederick, the Baron Metzengerstein, a likely arsonist who burned down the stables of his neighbours, the Berlifitzing family, with whom his own family had long feuded. The horse, branded with the letters "W.V.B." is implied to have become possessed by the spirit of William von Berlifitzing, who died trying to save one of the horses. Poe describes the steed in terms that emphasize not only its power and ferocity but also its inherent repulsiveness: it possesses "gigantic and disgusting teeth" made visible by its "distended lips" (Poe, "Metzengerstein" 160), and its rider, Frederick, contracts from the beast "a hideous and unnatural fervour" described with the language of wasting disease, a "morbid melancholy" (161). From the story's beginning Frederick is afflicted with an irresistible fascination for the creature: upon first seeing its representation in a tapestry, foreshadowing its physical manifestation, "his eyes [become] unwittingly riveted" to the "unnaturally coloured" thing, and his lip twitches with a "fiendish expression . . . without his consciousness," his gaze returning inexorably to the image "mechanically" (Poe, "Metzengerstein" 160). Here Poe simultaneously erodes the individual agency of the Baron while hinting that the horse may be the product of his unconscious mind, adding another layer of paradox to the already contradictory beast. The Baron's infection by the

monstrous horse, itself an abominable amalgam transgressing both physical and metaphysical boundaries, serves to blend the hideous steed and its rider together, the two blurring into a single, categorically confused horror. This union, in which the human and the nonhuman meld and melt, dissolving into one another and, finally, into the flaming hulk of the Baron's castle, is inseparable from the revulsion it elicits.

Poe returns to the idea of the soul or consciousness surviving death again and again, blurring the boundary not only between living and dead but between matter and spirit, calling into question what precisely constitutes a subject at all, and threatening to collapse the mental and the physical, the subject's perceptions and the objective world-in-itself. As such, we can read Poe's fiction as aspiring to bridge the supposedly unbridgeable gap between phenomena and noumena upon which Kant and his correlationist disciples so emphatically insist. In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), one of his most famous stories, Poe again depicts a grotesque undead being, the eponymous tubercular Valdemar, dead and yet speaking, hypnotized by the narrator. Valdemar's diseased, decomposing cadaver remains "alive" and speaking in a disgusting, paradoxical state between death and life. His speech itself is rendered repulsive and monstrously physical, almost slimy in its syllables: Poe describes it as impressing upon the auditory senses "as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch," a mucilaginous synesthesia, but also as somehow defeating or moving beyond our full comprehension, "the hideous whole" of this speech being decidedly "indescribable" ("Valdemar" 19). Valdemar's speech is itself unspeakable, unthinkable, even "unearthly," resounding, as it were, from what Lovecraft might call unplumbed space: "the voice seemed to reach our ears . . . from a vast distance or from some deep cavern within the earth" (Poe, "Valdemar" 19); it arouses a horror which is itself "unutterable" (21). At the end of the tale, Valdemar finally collapses, rapidly rotting in the hands of the narrator into "a

nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putrescence” (Poe, “Valdemar” 21), a kind of quintessence of decay in which the contradictory metaphysical states Valdemar embodies at last decompose into a mushy, putrid unity.

I am not the first, of course, to notice that stories like “Metzengerstein” or “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” are disgusting. Adam Frank, for example, in his persuasive discussion of Valdemar’s horrifically wagging tongue as a figure for the then-emerging technology of electromagnetic telegraphy (conveying, as it does, the impression of speech from a great distance, invested with a strange simultaneity and “liveness”), argues that the disgust aroused by the story’s “revolting climax” (655), and Valdemar’s decomposition more generally, functions as part of a complicated joke on Poe’s part, using disgust in a kind of “decontamination script” in which a struggle over the “purity” of language is parodied by the power-struggle between the mesmerist and Valdemar’s mesmerized corpse (666). My readings in the pages below certainly do not aim to overturn interpretations invested in Poe’s interests in technology, sociality, and the writing process, such as Frank offers, or to deny other readings of disgust in Poe’s work. Rather I want to claim that the aestheticized disgust that appears frequently in Poe’s writing does something else as well, something which later weird writers looking back to Poe would excitedly draw upon themselves: disgust, in Poe’s writing, helps us to speculate about those things which otherwise lie beyond the borders of our thought, things which are “hideous beyond conception” (Poe, “Valdemar” 19), which resist ordinary cognition. To read Poe’s proto-weird tales of premature burial, mesmerized corpses, and death-in-life is to have an aesthetic experience, however fleeting, suggesting a kind of dissolution of the self brought about by disgust in art.

Carolyn Korsmeyer argues in *Savoring Disgust: The Foul & Fair in Aesthetics* (2011) that the disgusting in art exposes us to truths which are difficult to grasp, “existential truths” whose

magnitude “slips through the mind and cannot be held,” reminding us, for example, that “our corporeal selves will suffer disintegration and putrefaction” (158). Disgust, I will suggest, serves in Poe’s tales as a means of thinking about concepts that are hard to comprehend, process, or keep firmly in mind. Eugene Thacker, paraphrasing and expanding Meillassoux, has recently argued that there are certain ideas that are difficult for philosophy to tackle, ideas that lie at the border of the unthinkable or beyond and so engender “a vicious cycle of logical paradox” (*DTP* 5). He describes this border of the unthinkable as “a horizon for thought, always receding just beyond the bounds of intelligibility” (Thacker, *DTP* 5), and claims that horror fiction offers an unexpected means of approaching the “blind spots” of philosophical inquiry (9). Following Meillassoux and his description of Kantian correlationism, Thacker specifically identifies the thought of the world-in-itself as an especially difficult idea to cognize which horror renders at least partially thinkable (*DTP* 9). It is precisely thoughts of the relation between the knowing subject and the nonhuman world that Poe’s horror fiction, with its disgust-provoking scenes, explores. In this way, Poe’s horror also responds to crises in philosophy – although, perhaps, unintentionally.

Poe was clearly aware of both the revoltingness and the mystical qualities of his fiction. In a retort to a now-lost letter from Thomas White, editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, who had evidently disapproved of certain aspects of Poe’s horrific story of mutilation and madness “Berenice” (1835), Poe justifies his grotesque excesses in primarily commercial terms, but his defense of the tale also touches on the mystical. He notes that the antebellum reading public is hungry for horrors, and that while “Berenice” may approach “the very verge of bad taste,” tales which tiptoe up to this line “are invariably sought after with avidity” (Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* 1: 58). He characterizes the “nature” of such sought-after tales as “the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the

burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical” (Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* 1: 57-58). Poe’s motivations for writing stories of horror and mysticism were at least significantly commercial, though as Sean McAlister observes, there is no reason “to continue viewing Poe’s authorial motivations as either exclusively artistic or exclusively mercenary” (504). The point here is that whether or not Poe was explicitly interested in exploring metaphysical ideas in his fiction, he understood that the reading public was fascinated both by the grotesque and by the “strange and mystical” – that antebellum readers had an appetite for metaphysical horror. In his efforts to sell his fiction – in his letter to White, Poe promises to produce a story of the same horrible nature as “Berenice,” if somewhat less extreme, once a month (*The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* 58) – Poe is clearly ready to draw on the vogue for horror, Germanism, and the metaphysical. Judging from White’s later recrimination in the 1839 issue of *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe’s tales were still perceived in close relation to “gloomy German mysticism” (708) years later with “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). White insists that Poe is too inclined to “the relish of gross pleasures,” writing that Poe’s stories possess “great power,” but ultimately leave only a “painful and horrible impression,” and he warns Poe that to become “a useful and effective writer” he must completely divorce himself “from that sombre school” of Germanism (708).

We might expect, given the Gothic tradition in which Poe is working, for his fiction to draw on an essentially Cartesian metaphysics emphasizing the duality of body and spirit, considering the preponderance in the Gothic of ghosts and disembodied spirits, tales of immaterial substance. But such dualism is neither the ontology of the gloomy German “mystics” that White charges Poe with excessive attachment, nor, in fact, the ontology born out in the stories themselves. From the flickering undead tongue and liquid putridity of Valdemar to the grotesque fusion of horse and man in “Metzengerstein” to the monstrously embodied hauntings or possessions of

“Morella” and “Ligeia,” Poe’s stories seem to trouble substance dualism rather than confirm it. In this chapter, I pursue the link between the disgusting and the metaphysical in Poe’s writing in relation to the philosophy of the German Idealist Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, who claimed that art is the “universal organon of philosophy” (*STI* 12) and that it could thus truly represent that which philosophy could only abstractly describe at a remove. In obsessively returning to conceptions of cosmic decay, and dissolution, a recurring ontological nightmare in which everything slides towards a hungry homogeneity, an all-consuming totality of indifferentiation, Poe’s tales enact the central drama of Schelling’s thought. This state of total unity, in which all distinctions become meaningless, closely resembles what Schelling calls the “Absolute” or “Absolute identity,” in which the differences between subject and object collapse to reveal a primal oneness. For Schelling, only art can reveal the Absolute: philosophy remains limited by the seeming division between consciousness and the world-in-itself, a division which art can uniquely collapse. Art thus works to undo the antinomy between phenomena and noumena identified by Kant as the basis for his ban on dogmatic metaphysics but understood by the German Idealists as a problem to be solved, a challenge to overcome.

Before beginning my analysis of Poe’s fiction, I first consider Poe’s familiarity with Schelling and recent scholarship that has increasingly considered Poe and Schelling together. I also briefly discuss Poe’s aesthetic theories and metaphysical thinking to address possible objections to a metaphysical reading of Poe, given his emphasis on artistic autotelism. Next, I consider two stories of putrescent, possessed brides, “Morella” – which contains an explicit reference to Schelling – and “Ligeia.” In these two stories, I examine the way that Poe subverts the typical nineteenth-century aestheticization of the female consumptive and the female corpse, using the affective potency of disgust to confront rather than console. Both texts use the

decomposing and metamorphosing cadavers of women to represent the breakdown of subjectivity in the face of the all-consuming Absolute; the bodies of Poe's diseased brides are always on the verge of breaking down or of becoming something other, hinting at some primal oneness which can be described in terms of the Schellingian Absolute. Next, I turn to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842). Everything in these stories is subsumed by the Absolute, be it the murky unity of the abysmal tarn in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or the pestilential void of human extinction in "The Masque of the Red Death." I conclude the chapter with an examination of "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) to better conceptualize the seemingly paradoxical attractions of entropy and the destruction of the self.⁷ Considering the strange combination of aversion and attraction that the imp represents in relation to ideas of *jouissance* and the bliss of deindividuation, I use the story to help frame Poe's proto-weird tales as part of a longer tradition both in aesthetic thought and in the composition of weird fiction.

To read Poe metaphysically is not to deny that he can also be read psychologically, or politically, or socially, or to privilege a metaphysical reading over these other, perfectly viable accounts, but rather to tease out a particular version of Poe's fiction that would become extremely important for later authors of weird fiction. Such authors look back to Poe as an important precursor to their own often more overt and intentionally metaphysical efforts to speculatively uncover some version of absolute or ultimate reality. For Lovecraft in particular, Poe is the "opener

⁷ The term "entropy" is used here somewhat anachronistically for its descriptive merits, evocative of deterioration, decay, decline, and decomposition into disorderliness. The term would evolve over the course of the nineteenth century, as scientists like Rudolf Clausius developed theories of thermodynamics, beginning in earnest in the 1850s, the decade after Poe's death. A precise scientific usage in terms of lost energy in thermodynamic processes is not intended here.

of artistic vistas” (*SHL* 55) of “strangeness and gloom” and “decay rather than growth” (57) which reveal “the terror that stalks about and within us, and the worm that writhes and slavers in the hideously close abyss” (58). For the likes of Lovecraft, then, Poe is more than a writer of psychological tales of terror but a visionary whose fiction possesses a cosmic dimension, one of “festering horror” and “horrible half-knowledge” (*SHL* 58), of a nonhuman, mind-independent reality which presses close upon us but from which we are normally cut off. It is this weird dimension of Poe’s writing that I look to explore here.

2.2 The Abominable Absolute

The full extent of Poe’s familiarity with German philosophy and the German language has been subject to considerable scholarly debate, but there is a growing understanding of Poe as receptive to some of Schelling’s ideas. Certainly, Germanic elements and references permeate Poe’s work both explicitly – as in tales like “Ligeia” with its portrait of a “large, old, decaying city near the Rhine” (127) – and stylistically; Charles Baudelaire called Poe’s mind at once “profoundly Germanic” and “sometimes deeply Oriental” (162). Poe himself was sometimes ambivalent about his “Germanic” influences, insisting that the horror of his tales was fundamentally of the soul rather than of Germany *per se* (Hansen and Pollin 15). He likely derived some of his knowledge of German philosophy (including Schelling) in translation and second-hand, through sources such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the writings of Thomas Carlyle and Thomas de Quincey, and various periodicals including *The Dial* and *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Recent critical reassessments of Poe and Schelling have taken care not to attribute to Poe an expertise with Schelling (or German culture and philosophy more generally) that did not exist. Rather, as Sean Moreland and Devin Zane Shaw argue, “Poe’s reception, or misprision of

Schelling's ideas had a much more vital influence on his thought and writing" (50) than has been previously suggested. With this relationship in mind, several critics have begun explicitly considering the ways that his fiction and poetry exhibit the influence of Schelling, in part through figures like Coleridge.

Aspasia Stephanou, following Maurice Lee, argues that Poe's stories reflect some of Schelling's philosophy. Stephanou suggests that Poe's stories of dying and vampiric women – what Daniel Hoffman terms the "marriage group" (233) – intertwine nineteenth-century medical discourses around consumption with Schellingian philosophy, reflecting what she calls a "gothic materialism" (38) or "dark vitalism" (48).⁸ Stephanou argues that Poe's interpretation of the metaphysics of unity diverges substantially from the account of the Transcendentalists. While the Transcendentalists sought to "elevate spirituality," Poe rather sought to expose what Stephanou calls "the dark life writhing behind the mask of spiritualism and theological mysticism" (50). In other words, Poe perceives in the Schellingian Absolute something monstrous and disturbing rather than uplifting. The approaches of scholars such as Moreland, Shaw, Lee, and Stephanou have built a foundation both for reading Poe in relation to Schelling and for a metaphysical Poe, but none of these critics have considered the relationship between Poe's writing, Schellingian metaphysics, and the affect of disgust, which I argue is the key to the ways that Poe's texts convey the unthinkable. My intervention in the study of Poe is not simply to link Poe with Schelling but to explicate the ways that disgust specifically, when approached using a cognitivist aesthetics, enables a kind of metaphysical speculation – even if this is not, strictly speaking, part of Poe's primary authorial intention. My contention in this chapter is that Poe's tales – intentionally or otherwise – create aesthetic encounters with the Absolute.

⁸ Other stories in the marriage group include "Berenice" (1835), "Eleonora" (1842), and "The Oval Portrait" (1842).

Schelling has, in the twenty-first century, undergone something of a philosophical reappraisal, with influential philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek engaging with his work, pairing Schelling with Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist political theory. More directly, Schelling has inspired several of the speculative realists, included Thacker as well as Iain Hamilton Grant, who in *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (2006) uses Schelling as his philosophical foundation for thinking through a new *naturphilosophie* that moves beyond correlationism, or what Grant calls a “two-worlds metaphysics” (9), accommodating our modern world of climatic disaster, energy shortages, and the other assorted apocalypses unleashed by the Anthropocene. As Grant puts it, Schelling is, in a sense, a “contemporary philosopher” precisely because he “provides a rare instance of the as yet mostly untried consequences of exiting the Kantian framework which has held nature in its analogical grasp for the two hundred years since its inception” (19). Quite apart from Poe’s own interest in Schelling, then, or the body of scholarship that has begun to link the two, Schelling would be relevant to a metaphysical reading of weird fiction for his own contributions to philosophizing about the Absolute.

What, then, is the Absolute for Schelling? Put most simply, the Absolute is “the coincidence of an objective with a subjective” (5) as Schelling writes in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). The “objective” is the world of nature, the “subjective . . . on the contrary, the *self*, or the *intelligence*” (Schelling, *STI* 5). As Schelling observes, these two concepts are “mutually opposed” (Schelling, *STI* 5), and it seems difficult to imagine a system that does not grant one or the other a kind of priority or primacy over its opposite: thus we must either “make an intelligence out of nature, *or* a nature out of intelligence” (Schelling, *STI* 7). It is Schelling’s goal to solve this contradiction, a contradiction with implications for what Grant calls Kant’s two-world metaphysics. As Thacker writes of Schelling’s philosophy: “for Schelling, the key intuition was

that the self that thinks about the world is also part of the world, and it is a mistake to presume that there is first a separately existing self that then turns towards and reflects on the world as an object” (TLN 143).

Like the other German Idealists – most notably Fichte and Hegel – Schelling’s philosophy builds on Kant’s, but where Kant maintains a staunch separation between the world of appearances (phenomena) and the world-in-itself (noumena) the German Idealists approach this split as a crisis to be solved. Schelling is committed to a kind of monism in which everything – human beings, objects, nature – is ultimately part of a single whole, and in which there is “identity,” in the philosophical sense, between the knowing subject and the object of thought, the nonhuman world.⁹ As Schelling succinctly puts it in the second edition of *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1803): “Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind the invisible Nature” (42). Unlike Fichte, whose

⁹ One of the challenges and frustrations often noted by philosophers and historians is that Schelling’s ideas tend to lack the kind of systematic rigour sometimes attributed to his contemporaries. As Devin Zane Shaw puts it, “Schelling literature is split between interpreting him as a protean thinker endlessly shifting in his philosophy, or a philosopher restlessly unfolding the consequences of one fundamental intuition” (86). I am principally concerned here with Schelling’s identity philosophy, in which he moves away from a Fichte’s system of subjective idealism. Fichte’s system jettisons the Kantian noumenon or thing-in-itself in favour of a self-positing “I,” wholly rejecting the possibility of a world beyond the boundaries of subjective experience: for Fichte, everything becomes wholly subordinate to the subject. Fichte thus essentially argues that there are no things-in-themselves at all. His solution to the problem Kant introduces effectively elevates the knowing subject even beyond its giddy Kantian heights to become the originator of everything. Schelling’s movement away from subjective idealism resonates more closely with the aesthetics of disgust that I identify in Poe’s writing since they tend to blur distinctions between subject and world, to erode the subject’s boundaries and call its supremacy into question. Both Schelling and Fichte, however, are essentially responding to the correlationist split that Kant introduces in metaphysics and which the speculative realists seek to overcome.

system does away with things-in-themselves altogether and posits the subject as that which produces the world, Schelling attempts to incorporate elements of Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy into his own thinking, noting that Spinoza was "the *first* who, with complete clarity, saw mind and matter as one, thought and extension simply as modifications of the same principle" (*Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* 15) – or, as Schelling puts it in his later, unfinished work, *The Ages of the World* (1815), Spinoza was, among all modern philosophers, the most cognizant of "a dark feeling of . . . primordial time" (104), a unity which heals the wound made by Descartes when he "lacerated the world into body and spirit" (105). Schelling recuperates the supposedly "dogmatic" philosopher's idea of a single, monist nature or substance – Spinoza's pantheistic God – while taking pains to avoid some of the seemingly fatalistic consequences of Spinozist monism.¹⁰ In this sense, Schelling is neither an idealist in the subjective, immaterialist meaning of the term as attributed to philosophers like George Berkeley, nor a Fichtean transcendental idealist making the subject the centre of his philosophy at the expense of the world-in-itself. He is trying, rather, to unite on the one hand what he calls a "transcendental philosophy," one "proceeding from the subjective," and a "nature-philosophy," one proceeding from the objective (*Schelling, STI* 7). He insists that "how both the objective world accommodates to presentations in us, and presentations in us to the objective world, is unintelligible unless between the worlds, the ideal and the real, there exists a *predetermined harmony*" (*STI* 11).

This harmony is the Absolute, an original, undifferentiated unity, homogenous and total. In *The Philosophy of Art* (1802) Schelling contends that "the universe (by which we always mean the universe in itself, eternal and unbegotten) – the universe is, like the Absolute, utterly One,

¹⁰ For more details on Schelling's reconciliation of freedom within a philosophy of nature influenced by Spinoza, see Devin Zane Shaw's *Freedom and Nature in Schelling's Philosophy of Art* (2010).

indivisible, since it is the Absolute itself” (Schelling 33). This establishes what Thacker, in his work on Schelling, calls “a continuum that stretches without demarcations between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself” (SSC 118). The Absolute is a metaphysical totality which encompasses both the thoughts of individual subjects and the world-in-itself, a substratum that unites the thinking mind and the mind-independent world. Recent Schelling scholarship has also suggested that there is something “monstrous” about Schelling’s Absolute. As Theodore George notes, Schelling identifies tragedy as the highest art because of its ability to “remedy the shortcomings of philosophy” (143) through its all-encompassing capacity to capture both the conflict between the reasoning subject and the objective world but also their ultimate unity. Tragedy, George points out, may represent an Absolute unity, but a unity “marked much more by strife, contradiction, and incompleteness than anything else” (143). It is this monstrous dimension of the Schellingian Absolute that I argue Poe taps into in his horror stories – stories which consummate the Schellingian reunion of subject and object through disgust, an affect predicated on contradiction and the precariousness of boundaries, particularly boundaries of the self.

Poe’s debts to Schelling are better understood if we consider Poe’s incorporation of certain metaphysical ideas into his poetry, specifically *Eureka* (1848), and look for a moment at the direct correspondences between the writing of Schelling and Poe. As previously noted, in all likelihood Poe derived much of his knowledge of Schelling’s philosophy from British Romantic writers such as Coleridge. For example, *Biographia Literaria* contains a number of distinctly Schellingian passages, sometimes to the point of near-plagiarism. Coleridge himself anticipates this charge by insisting that he arrived at many of them same ideas independently, noting that he and Schelling “had studied in the same school” and had “been disciplined by the same preparatory philosophy, namely, the writings of Kant” (235), and Coleridge’s explicit praises of Schelling are effusive: he

describes the German thinker as responsible for a veritable “revolution in philosophy” (236). His protestations aside, parts of *Biographia Literaria* are essentially paraphrases of Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*, as when Coleridge writes that:

Now the sum of all that is merely objective we will henceforth call nature, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all the phenomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand the sum of all that is subjective, we may comprehend in the name of the self or intelligence. Both conceptions are in necessary antithesis. Intelligence is conceived of as exclusively representative, nature as exclusively represented; the one as conscious, the other as without consciousness. (291).

Like Schelling, Coleridge maintains that “during the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs,” and that they therefore become “coinstantaneous and one” in an “intimate coalition” (291). He thus seeks to combine Idealism with “the truest and most binding realism” in order to avoid exile to what he calls “a land of shadows” that “surrounds us with apparitions” (294), just as Schelling seeks to unite nature-philosophy and transcendental philosophy; and like Schelling he is in search of “some absolute truth,” one that is “self-grounded, unconditional, and known by its own light” (296). It is likely through works like this one that Poe would have received an understanding of Schelling, and of related ideas that clearly owe much of their substance to the German Idealist.

Poe singles out Schelling in his “Exordium” in the 1842 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, describing Schelling as one of several German authors worthy of respect for their “*critiques raisonnées*” and for their “more careful elaboration, their greater thoroughness, their more profound analysis” than their British counterparts (69). Poe’s own metaphysical views, like so many of his

theories, can be slippery, but what Poe does disclose is consistent with the sort of universe that Schelling and Coleridge describe. Perhaps the closest Poe comes to espousing his metaphysics in detail is the long, often opaque, and rather poorly-received prose poem *Eureka*, which expresses various ideas strongly reminiscent of Schelling's Absolute and which evinces the very mystical character Poe elsewhere criticizes.¹¹ In *Eureka*, Poe writes that the universe began with an "Original Unity of the First Thing" and that its seeming diversity or heterogeneity disguises the "sublimity of its oneness" (8). He stresses the difficulty of capturing certain ideas, noting that the idea of "infinity" cannot actually lead a mind to *grasp* infinity, but rather constitutes "the representative but of the *thought of a thought*" (Poe, *Eureka* 22). Poe thus hopes that his poem will function as a kind of "mental gyration of the heel" (*Eureka* 9), turning readers on the summit of a figurative Mount *Ætna* in a kaleidoscopic blurring-together of the seemingly-differentiated

¹¹ While *Eureka* has rarely been taken at face value as an actual cosmology, recent scholars such as J. Alexandra McGhee and Courtney Fugate have argued that the poem should be treated with greater seriousness than it has previously been afforded. Alongside other critics investigating links between Poe and German philosophy, Fugate contends that *Eureka* can trace many of its ideas to Kant and Schelling (109), as well as Coleridge and Alexander Von Humboldt (himself acknowledged in the poem). In particular, "the conviction in the unity of the cosmos, both material and spiritual" – the idea that "from the standpoint of the universe, all oppositions . . . must ultimately be recognized as different expressions of the one Absolute unity, because it is from just such a unity that they were originally born" (Fugate 117) – stands out as Schellingian in the post-Fichtean mode of identity philosophy. The prose poem has been understood as everything from a coded meditation on democracy and the American constitution, as W.C. Harris argues (1), to an elaborate joke akin to the Balloon-Hoax perpetrated by Poe in 1844 in *The Sun* (though Courtney Fugate argues that viewing *Eureka* as a hoax is a mistake, since the circumstances around its composition were quite different than those around the Balloon-Hoax's). For a thorough survey of the multifarious ways that *Eureka* has been interpreted, see Cantalupo, Barbara. "*Eureka*: Poe's Novel Universe." *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Edited by Eric W. Carlson. P, 1996, pp. 323-44.

universe. It is back into this “original Unity” (*Eureka* 141), Poe claims at the poem’s end, that the tendency towards collapse will inevitably pull the universe till everything is drawn into “a final agglomeration of all things” (132).

The agglomeration into which, Poe suggests, everything will converge possesses a pantheistic quality that resembles the Absolute of Schelling or the immanent, pantheistic God of Spinoza, since in it “the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness,” and human beings “will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when [we] shall recognize [our] existence as that of Jehovah” (Poe, *Eureka* 143). What we call “The Universe,” Poe writes, is in fact but the “present expansive existence” of a “Divine Being, who thus passes his Eternity in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost Infinite Self-Diffusion” – all organisms, all life, and, indeed, everything in the universe, even those things we might “deny life for no better reason than that [we] do not behold it in operation . . . are really but infinite individualizations of Himself” (*Eureka* 142). God may currently be differentiated or individualized into diverse creatures and other manifestations, “the diffused Matter and Spirit of the Universe” (Poe, *Eureka* 141), but this differentiation is a kind of illusion which the spiritual and physical gravitational collapse of everything into itself, “the Universal agglomeration and dissolution” (Poe, *Eureka* 139), will banish. Poe’s vision of this apocalyptic future, in which everything is drawn back together, is described in terms of the unthinkable. He writes of “unfathomable abysses,” from which will glare “unimaginable suns” and describes the entire process, the universe’s “appetite for oneness,” as an “inevitable catastrophe” (Poe, *Eureka* 136), even while at the same time this sinking “into Nothingness” and “Material Nihilism” (139) will also give way to a throbbing “Heart Divine” (139) and the renewal of a new universe.

Eureka's status within Poe's critical framework is difficult to discern, but he offers the poem "not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truths" (5), closely linking metaphysical truth and the aesthetic in a way one might not expect from the curmudgeonly advocate of art for art's sake. It is given "to those who feel rather than to those who think" (Poe, *Eureka* 5), suggesting that affect and feeling, here, are superseding rational inquiry. Early in the text, Poe offers an account of intuition that specifically touches on a two-worlds metaphysics, describing two philosophers, Aries and Hog. Aries, using *à priori* philosophy, Poe directly associates with noumena, while Hog's system "depended on *phenomena*" (*Eureka* 11). But so great is the admiration of all for Hog, Poe writes, "that a virtual stop was put to all thinking, properly so called," and "no man dared utter a truth for which he felt himself indebted to his soul alone" (*Eureka* 12), with anyone who defied this ban being branded a "theorist" and ignored (13). By "cultivating the natural sciences to the exclusion of Metaphysics" (*Eureka* 14), Poe suggests, we neglect the power of intuition, of speculation and imagination. Godhead, the primal unity, may seem at first beyond our comprehension, since "in order to comprehend what he is, we should have to be God ourselves" (*Eureka* 28), but of course, for Poe – and for Schelling, as for Spinoza before him – ultimately, we are.

If we take *Eureka* as an earnest description of Poe's metaphysical views, or at least a tentative one, we can see a significant resemblance between the universe he envisions and the one Schelling's philosophy describes. Like Schelling, Poe's cosmos is fundamentally monist, and his Divine Being, like Schelling's Absolute, suffuses what seem like individual subjects and the nonhuman world, ultimately collapsing the two into one another. Poe's description of the forces of "Attraction and Repulsion" as matter itself (*Eureka* 138) closely accords with Schelling's insistence that even seemingly dead or inert matter consists of "a space limited by attractive and

occupied by repulsive forces” (*Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* 184). Poe thus shares with both the American Transcendentalists and Schelling a rejection of a “mechanistic” universe in favour of one characterized by unity, as several critics have noted. Matthew Taylor claims that Poe shared with them a belief in “an all-encompassing cosmic energy” (197). Where the Transcendentalists put great emphasis on individualism and the self, however “the first principle of Poe’s cosmology is that the universe actively erodes that which can only heuristically be called ‘human,’ ‘individual,’ or ‘self’”: Poe’s stories in fact enact “a perverse yet consistent calculus that unites everything in existence under a universal law that, by definition, eliminates all differences” (Taylor 199). Thus, we must think of Poe’s universe as one filled with a cosmic force, a force “not in the service of human interests” but rather “asocial, and nonhuman,” relegating human beings to “at best, an ephemeral existence,” one undermining individuality and difference; for Poe, “you cannot have it both ways, cannot transcend the self for the sake of the self, cannot unify the social, much less the universal, without eliminating (the individuality of) individuals” (Taylor 198).

Despite his metaphysical speculations and intuitions in *Eureka*, Poe was, at times, rather cantankerous about metaphysical systems, and pokes fun at monist ontology in stories like “How to Write a *Blackwood* Article” (1838) when his narrator, Signora Psyche Zenobia, is advised by Mr. Blackwood to adopt “the tone metaphysical,” and to “put in something about the supernal oneness,” while avoiding all mention of “the infernal twoness” (211). It is clear, though, that Poe is engaging as much in self-parody here as he is skewering other authors, when he writes of a supposedly model story of premature burial “full of taste, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition” (“How to Write a *Blackwood* Article” 211). As Moreland and Shaw suggest, Poe’s “penchant for ambiguous parody” makes his true feelings somewhat murky – insofar as he mocks Coleridge and his influences, he may well have been at pains to avoid being “perceived as an

imitator of British writing” (54), and, in any event, “Poe notoriously evinces the greatest scorn for those writers from whom he has borrowed the most” (51). Moreland and Shaw note that while various parodic and tonally ambiguous references to Schelling in Poe’s writing may vex Schellingian interpretations of Poe (54), his indebtedness to that “absurd metaphysician,” as Poe refers to Schelling in a cut reference that survives as a footnote in “Loss of Breath” (1832), has been underestimated, especially insofar as Poe, like Schelling, rejects mechanistic materialism (51). They observe that while Poe was sometimes at least publicly suspicious of Idealist philosophy, his scorn seems to have congealed most prominently around Kant, while references to Schelling are “invoked with express admiration” (Moreland and Shaw 57). They further note that while, as Hansen and Pollin point out, Poe was keen at times to publicly repudiate German writers, his seeming annoyance with Germanism “does not seem to apply to Schelling,” and by 1839 at least had stopped being “the butt of Poe’s parodies and instead becomes praised as a critic” (Moreland and Shaw 57). Had Schelling read Poe’s fiction, they muse, he “would have found himself in the position of the narrator of ‘William Wilson,’ unable to recognize his reflection, but unable to shake its haunting, and strangely familiar, aspect” (Moreland and Shaw 74).

So far, I have pointed out a number of similarities between Schelling’s conception of the Absolute and Poe’s metaphysical universe, made a case for Poe’s familiarity with Schelling’s writing (in part through Coleridge’s translation, adaptation, and near-plagiarism), and suggested that Poe’s interest in using quasi-German Idealist or “mystic” elements in his fiction is linked to his understanding of the antebellum reading public’s desire for horrific, metaphysical fiction. I also want to suggest that while Poe may not have set out primarily to instill in his readers specific metaphysical insights, the idea that certain aesthetic encounters can help us to think about things

which are otherwise difficult to cognize is not in itself incompatible with Poe's famously anti-didactic critical theory.

In "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) Poe writes "of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect" (164), and can be dismissive of art that attempts to teach some particular lesson. He notes in the posthumously published essay "The Poetic Principle" that "the demands of Truth are severe" and that "all *that* which is so indispensable in Song, is precisely all *that* with which *she* has nothing whatever to do" (Poe 5). Poe argues that poetry is not well-suited to articulating those forms of "Truth" which arise from "the satisfaction of Reason" ("The Poetic Principle" 6). However, Poe admits that both "the precepts of Duty" and "the lessons of Truth" can be introduced to a work of art "and with advantage," provided they do not subsume the "real essence" of the poem ("The Poetic Principle" 8), and even this "real essence" is described as more than appreciating "the Beauty before us" (7). Rather, Poe urges, art is inspired by "a wild effort to reach the Beauty above," by "an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave" and reflections on "eternity" ("The Poetic Principle" 7). Art, for Poe, is excited by "our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" ("The Poetic Principle" 7). Poe's language, saturated with talk of souls, inner essences, immortality, eternity, and the world beyond mundane, earthly existence, is all explicitly metaphysical. The poetic sentiment he describes is a longing to reach beyond the obvious sorts of beauties that simply appear before us, what we might call the beauties of mere phenomena and the world-for-us, and reach instead for a never-wholly-grasped, ecstatic beauty associated with aspects of reality outside our normal scope. But instead of drawing on the language and imagery of the sublime, as one might expect from Poe's American Transcendentalist contemporaries, Poe turns instead to the revolting,

the impure, and the deliquescent. His vertiginous approach to something like Schelling's Absolute is propelled not through the sublime but through aesthetic encounters with disgust.

As recent affect theorists assert, disgust is often called on to police the borders of the body and the boundaries of selfhood. Disgust is a peculiar, often unstable emotion – both profoundly embodied and, simultaneously, shaped by social and cultural forces. Robert Rawdon Wilson calls disgust an “untidy” and “hydravarious” (xvii) emotion characterized by “radical metamorphicity” (49). While its manifestations are varied and manifold, disgust is frequently tied to the transgression of boundaries, to liminal spaces such as bodily orifices, and to processes of transformation such as death and decay. As Korsmeyer argues, disgust is “a response to the transition between life and death – to that which has recently died and is falling apart, to waste that was food and is now used up, to the mindless life-forms that invade and complete the process of disintegration” (122). In this she echoes Aurel Kolnai's reading of putrefaction as the “prototypical object of disgust” (53), foremost of the nine principal types of disgust-elicitors he delineates. For Kolnai all of the processes of putrefaction – “the corruption of living bodies, decomposition, dissolution, the odor of corpses” and “in general the transition of the living into the state of death” (53) – constitute the epitome of disgust: the threshold between living and dead, when a body hovers between the two states or seems to contain both. Indeed, Kolnai argues that many other things which elicit disgust can ultimately trace the root of their revulsion back to the liminal state of “life *in death*” (54). He identifies disgust with life and vitality in the midst of death – for example, maggots writhing in a decomposing body, suffusing the cadaver with a ghastly post-mortem animation.

Colin McGinn's recent “impure philosophy” of disgust similarly claims putrescence as disgust's master-trope, following Kolnai and extending his formulation into metaphysical territory.

McGinn suggests that disgust always “proceeds from an oxymoron, a kind of collision or clash of categories” – most saliently from “the friction between two of the categories most central to our conceptual scheme as self-conscious animals,” namely “Life and Death” (93). As he argues at length, building on Kolnai’s account and combining some of William Ian Miller’s conceptions around disgust and the organic and other theories such as Ernest Becker’s that relate disgust and death:

When these resounding categories refuse to stay separate, but merge together, disgust floods in . . . We fear and shun death and we embrace and celebrate life, but when the two come together, or are hard to tell apart, our reaction is to turn away in disgust – as if we wish to remain ignorant of the fact of interpenetration. We feel positive about the life that throbs even within putrefying flesh, but the heavy weight of negative affect concerning death robs that positive feeling of its usual value: we are torn, conflicted, confused . . . the astonishing force of life impresses us, but the terrible inevitability of death dampens and depresses. Putrefaction, as disgust paradigm, transparently combines both: the vital and the nullifying. (McGinn 93).

For McGinn, the “death-in-life” theory not only synthesizes several previously unsatisfactory accounts of disgust, it is “closely bound up with ideas of consciousness and its annihilation” (95). It is thus, for McGinn, a pre-eminently “metaphysical emotion, spanning the divide between (roughly) mind and matter” (96). Our stubborn materiality, the brute fact of our bodily functions, exists in tension with our consciousness and our aspirations for transcendence. Because we are “*both* clean and unclean, superlative and sordid” (McGinn 141), this insoluble union of body and spirit generates a kind of metaphysical and aesthetic shock – a constant surprise that our consciousness is tied so intimately to our decaying, mortal, animal bodies. As McGinn eloquently

puts it: “consciousness appears to us as a non-disgusting zone of reality, but then we discover that we are also enmeshed in another zone consisting of gross biological material” (140). While McGinn’s quarrel here is primarily with Descartes rather than Kant, his argument could also be applied to the sort of “two-world metaphysics” that Grant identifies Schelling as challenging, a metaphysics which seeks to split “organic from ‘anorganic’ nature” and which divides the thinking subject from the world, and ideas from nature (9).

Poe’s horror holds the potential to achieve a representation of the Absolute, apprehended not as a spiritually uplifting totality as it might have been envisioned by the Boston Transcendentalists (and sometimes, perhaps, the German Idealists) but rather in a putrid, Dark Romantic form as an unstable, oozing unity and contradiction, depicting the merging of subject and world through figures like “Morella” and Ligeia.” Rather than sublime fear or terror – the affect more often associated with horror fiction and the Gothic generally – Poe’s fiction cultivates a form of perverse affect that aestheticizes disgust, calling upon its uniquely visceral metaphysical insights.

2.3 The Metaphysics of Death-in-Life in “Morella”

In Poe’s stories of the marriage-group, such as “Morella” and “Ligeia,” the Absolute is represented through an inversion of what Bram Dijkstra calls “the consumptive sublime” (29), an aestheticization of the sickly woman as holy, pure, and saint-like. Poe’s tales of unhappy and disease-ravaged marriage foreground conflicting states of being, obsessing over the liminal moment between life and death or death infecting life through scenes of decay, death, revivification, and reincarnation. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe insists that death is the “*most melancholy*” of the various “melancholy topics” universal to humanity and claims that death

is at its most poetical “when it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*” (165). For Poe, “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (165). In several of Poe’s best-known stories, diseased women wither and die, sometimes to return from the grave or, in their death throes, to metamorphose into some new, sensually malignant form. All of these stories invite us to witness the dissolution of a whole host of binary oppositions, oppositions that structured many nineteenth-century assumptions about the fundamental nature of the world: spirit and matter, life and death, and, most significantly for a Schellingian reading, the thinking subject and the nonhuman, mind-independent world. In these texts the normally sacrosanct borders between things become amorphous; categories break down, seemingly immaterial spirits are grotesquely materialized, identities merge and overlap, and decaying bodies become repulsively lively. All this dissolution and decay, this collapse of hitherto-stable structures, resonates with a decomposing cosmos, becoming, in its dissolution, an undifferentiated totality. What seem macabre snuff-tales about vampires and revenant-brides thus accrue metaphysical significance, foreshadowing a final state of being in which all seeming differences are subsumed by divine oneness, an eschatology difficult to keep fully in view.

“Morella” tells the story of Morella, a scholarly woman much dedicated to the study of German philosophers, who acquires a “crimson spot” (Poe, “Morella”171) – suggesting consumption – and eventually dies in childbirth. The daughter of Morella and the nameless narrator begins to mature, acquiring an ever-more-apparent resemblance to her mother till eventually the uncanny similitude between the two becomes a source of horror. The girl’s father has curiously refrained from naming his daughter, and when prompted by a priest at her baptism he names her “Morella,” beseeching the reader: “What demon urged me to breathe the sound, which in its very recollection was wont to make ebb the purple blood in torrents from the temples to the heart . . .

what fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables – Morella?” (Poe, “Morella” 173). The story ends with the daughter calling out “I am here!” as she falls upon her mother’s tomb and expires. When her father opens the crypt to bury his daughter, he finds that his wife’s body has disappeared. “Morella” is a ghost story, the spirit of a dead women returning from the grave to haunt her beloved, but unlike most Gothic ghost stories the spirit of Morella is not a spectral apparition or disembodied phantom: rather she is too-embodied, her presences materializing and so fusing with, subsuming, and finally replacing the body of her daughter. I want to look closely at Morella’s materializing spirit to tease out the relationship between the affective qualities her transformation arouses and, following Korsmeyer’s theory of aesthetic cognition and McGinn’s conception of disgust, the Schellingian metaphysics such affects might help to cognize.

“Morella” contains one of the few direct references to Schelling in all of Poe’s fiction; he is mentioned in the same sentence as Fichteian “wild Pantheism,” as well as Pythagoras, but his “doctrines of Identity” are afforded particular primacy (Poe, “Morella” 170). Texts like “Morella” utilize putrescent undead characters to collapse not only a Cartesian dualism of body and spirit, but also the kind of two-world metaphysics that neatly separate the transcendental subject from the nonhuman world. Morella’s undead liminality undercuts dualism or the integrity of a transcendental subject, but in Poe’s writing this leads us not simply to mechanistic materialism but rather towards something very much like the Absolute: a universal continuum both ideal and real that courses throughout all of nature and unifies the thinking subject and nature, the physical world. The Absolute of Schelling subsumes the subject. As Schelling puts it in *System of Transcendental Idealism*: “one cannot say of the self that it exists . . . precisely because it is *being-itself*” (32) a

part of the Absolute which has become aware of itself through what Poe, in “Morella,” calls the “*principium individuationis*” (170).

Poe emphasizes the horror of Morella’s wasting illness by calling attention to her prematurely decomposing flesh, noting the way that “the blue veins upon the pale forehead became prominent,” and to her sinister eyes, exciting in the narrator “the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss” (171). When Morella’s spirit possesses her own daughter, transforming the girl’s body into that of Morella, once again the focus is on the “hues of death,” on Morella’s “glassy eyes” turning “from the earth to heaven” (Poe, “Morella” 173). Morella’s very name, attached like a parasite to her daughter as “a worm that would not die,” becomes representative of “the memory of the buried dead” (Poe, “Morella” 173). As the “shadows of similitude” grow steadily “more full, and more definite, and more perplexing, and more hideously terrible in their aspect” (Poe, “Morella” 171), Morella’s daughter becomes an uncanny figure of the living dead, of death infecting life. Her final death throes and transformation into her cadaverous mother conjures a kind of apocalyptic vision in the narrator’s mind, as if the strange sickness of Morella threatened to spill from her body and infect the world: “I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark, and its figures passed by me like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only – Morella” (173).

This imagery of spreading darkness, creeping malignity, disease, grave-worms, and the lure of the abyss stand in contrast to conventional nineteenth-century representations of the consumptive female body portraying it as heavenly and beautiful, a mask of spiritual purity disguising the physical corruption of death-in-life. It is no coincidence, of course that Poe’s women characters frequently suffer from consumption. Stephanou argues that “nineteenth-century medical discourse and literature on consumption exalted the materiality of the consumptive female body

by transforming suffering into something beautiful, pure and spiritual, or even sexual” (38). Elizabeth Bronfen, in her influential study on dead women and art in the nineteenth century *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992), similarly contends that in Western, post-Enlightenment patriarchy, aesthetic representations of dead women allowed the masculine, rational subject to confront and conquer death: “even as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed” (x). Aestheticized representations of dead women thus constitute an “opium-induced, wish-fulfilling dream representation” that “[soothes] the mourner about his own fear of mortality” (334). For Bronfen, the abundance of art depicting dead women in the nineteenth century not only re-inscribes patriarchal constructions of female alterity, it forms part of a delusional, anthropocentric longing for triumph over death, decay, and loss of all kinds.

Rather than ameliorating anxieties about death by depicting the female corpse as both holy and beautiful, however, Poe assails the reader with repulsive representations of bodily decay and aberrant death-in-life. By refusing to efface the disgusting realities of decomposition and redoubling this revulsion through the figure Morella, Poe undermines discursive constructions of the female corpses as celestially pure that elsewhere reified notions of masculine power and allowed for fantasies of immortality and control over death and entropy. In place of the misogynist idealization of the consumptive woman predominant in the nineteenth-century “cult of invalidism” (Dijkstra 33), the fixation in “Morella” on death-in-life and disgust reorients the text towards a metaphysics of the Absolute.

The narrator writes of the “perfect identity” between mother and daughter, but with a shudder at the reflection of death and horror, “the melancholy of the dead” in her normally “holy, and mild, and eloquent face” (Poe, “Morella” 171) – rather than being purified and beautiful in her

illness, her beauty and holiness are profaned. Just as Schelling's Absolute merges together subjects and objects into a single, monist totality, and just as the cosmos Poe describes in *Eureka* is ultimately but one quasi-Spinozist divine being, so do matter and spirit fuse in "Morella" as death infects life, the terrifyingly precocious development of Morella's daughter's "mental being" mirrored by strange, monstrous growth, "a rapid increase in bodily size" (171). The intermingling of the physical and the mental in the girl's transformation brings about a reaction first of "agonising anxiety" ("Morella" 171) and later "consuming thought and horror" (173) in Poe's narrator, a horror linked both to the consumptive disease that wracks his nameless child's body and at the transformation, associated with the "mystical writings" (170) of figures like Schelling, which she undergoes.

Instead of the idealized, feminine paragon of purity and "sublime tubercular emaciation" (Dijkstra 29) to be expected in a sentimental scene of death and mourning, Morella bursts from the tissues of her daughter in a perversely reversed birth with a disgusting array of physical signs and symptoms, repulsively materialized as a force of decay. Her features are "convulsed" by a "fiend" (Poe, "Morella" 171) such that the narrator's "pure affection" is "darkened, and gloom, and horror, and grief, swept over in clouds," leaving his senses "appalled" and his thoughts "aghast" (170). In foregrounding the revolting horror of death-in-life and presenting Morella not as the pale, suffering saint so often the subject of artistic representation but as an entropic vampire cannibalizing her own daughter in disgustingly spectacular terms, Poe's story cuts against the prevailing consumptive aesthetics that made sickliness and feminine sacrifice virtues and disguised the decay of the wasting female body to sustain a patriarchal fantasy of control and immortality, a fantasy predicated on binary structures of masculine and feminine, body and spirit, and physical

and mental, and which thus depends on a Kantian two-worlds metaphysics structured around fundamental divisions between the subject and nature.

“Morella” offers a kind of nauseating gyration of the heel of the sort Poe imagines in *Eureka*, mother and daughter literally blurring together as the story whirls towards its vertiginous conclusion. It is exactly in such amalgamations that Schelling himself claims that art can reveal the Absolute, since for Schelling, art can represent the Absolute in a way that philosophy, ultimately, cannot. Schelling states in *The Philosophy of Art* that the essential nature of all art “is the representation of the absolute” – all art, to one degree or another, serves as “a reflex of the infinite” (204). Or, as he puts it in *System of Transcendental Idealism*:

It is self-evident that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious. Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart. The view of nature, which the philosopher frames artificially, is for art the original and natural one. What we speak of as nature is a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script. (231-32)

For Schelling, then, art unveils the original unity of all things, the Absolute union of the subject and the objective world: “the ultimate ground of all harmony between subjective and objective could be exhibited in its original identity only through intellectual intuition; and it is precisely this ground which, by means of the work of art, has brought forth entirely from the subjective, and

rendered wholly objective” (*STI* 232). Art, in Schelling’s view, does precisely what the speculative realists aim to do – overcome the correlationist prohibition of thinking the Absolute.

Morella’s consumption and re-integration of her own daughter mirrors the ouroboros-like cyclicity of Poe’s quasi-Germanic cosmos, the originator of things eventually devouring its progeny. As Korsmeyer suggests, part of disgust’s cognitive power is its insistence on the uneasy truth that “our corporeal selves will suffer disintegration and putrefaction” (158). While Morella’s triumphant will, her corrupting spirit, might at first seem to affirm either a subjective idealism closer to Fichte than Schelling or an entirely dualist universe in which the spirit lives on wholly independent of the flesh, her persistent corporeality and close association with the disgusting, with death-in-life, points rather to the collision and dissolution of opposites, the instability of binaries in the face of category crisis, and the collapse of beings, flesh, and spirit into a single, awful unity. In this sense, Morella refuses the possibility of what McGinn calls the “pure kernel” of the soul (137), that “charmed sphere” of the self that we try to preserve from the “tincture of disgust” (138). Confronted with the disgusting spectacle of Morella’s metamorphosis, such immaterial purity is foreclosed.

This is not to suggest that disgust in “Morella” transparently leads us to the true state of things while somehow eliding all of discourse: disgust, as any emotion, cannot be neatly disentangled from social contexts, and is shaped by culture as well as shaping it. Doubtless some of the disgust associated with Morella’s body springs from a misogynist abjection of the female body, an association especially strengthened by the links between disease and reproduction in the text. Indeed, some critics have read “Morella” and other texts of the marriage group as stories of

primal masculine envy, interpreting the mysterious illnesses of Poe's undead brides as pregnancy.¹² Yet insofar as disgust is predicated on boundaries under threat of collapse, even as the emotion is called on to police such borders it betrays their ultimate arbitrariness and illusoriness, their permeability. The disgust Morella's categorically confusing, undead body inspires may owe some of its loathsome power to patriarchal constructions of the female reproductive body as grotesque and unclean, but the very anxiety underlying this construction points to its artifice while betraying a glimmer of the Absolute throbbing beneath the discursive skin of the story.

2.4 "Ligeia," Affect, and the Absolute

"Ligeia" repeats many of the same concepts and images as "Morella" at greater length and with greater complexity; indeed, "Morella" has been called a kind of "preliminary study" for "Ligeia" (Quinn 213). Both of Poe's diseased, vampiric women have bodies in transformation, occupying multiple states simultaneously: they are what Noël Carroll, in his discussion of monsters as figures of category confusion or crisis, would call fusion figures: "single figures in whom distinct and often clashing types of elements are superimposed or condensed, resulting in entities that are impure and repulsive" (45). Like "Morella," the story concerns the death and return of its eponymous character: Ligeia, the scholarly wife of the tale's unnamed narrator, contracts a wasting illness, writes a strange poem, "The Conqueror Worm" and, cryptically quoting Joseph Glanvill, pronounces the words "*Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will*" (Poe, "Ligeia" 130), before finally succumbing to the

¹² Dawn Keetley, for example, argues that the narrators of these stories are repressing and denying knowledge of the procreative powers of their "phantasmatic mothers," their intense scrutiny mimicking the infantile gaze and the inability of infants to "apprehend the whole person" (4).

ravages of the disease. The narrator remarries a woman named Rowena, who also contracts a horrific sickness. In the paroxysms of her death throes Rowena undergoes a bizarre transformation, metamorphosing from “the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine” (Poe, “Ligeia” 134) into the black-eyed, raven-haired Ligeia.

While lacking explicit reference to Schelling, “Ligeia” exhibits the same fascination with questions of matter and spirit, body and mind, and subject and nature as “Morella.” From the outset of the story, the narrator persistently physicalizes Ligeia’s intellect while simultaneously describing her bodily features in spiritual terms. Ligeia’s learning is “immense” and her metaphysical acquisitions “gigantic” (Poe, “Ligeia” 129). She possesses “the radiance of an opium-dream,” and her mouth is described as the “triumph of all things heavenly,” along with “the magnificent turn of the short upper lip – the soft, voluptuous slumber of the under – the dimples which sported, and the colour which spoke – the teeth glancing back, with a brilliance almost startling, every ray of the holy light which fell upon them serene and placid” (Poe, “Ligeia,” 128). After describing Ligeia’s mouth the narrator then moves on to her chin, observing its “fullness and . . . spirituality” before finally arriving at her eyes, lavishing an entire paragraph on her “divine orbs” (Poe, “Ligeia” 128). Even in these early stages of the story, Poe intermingles the spiritual and the material, hinting at the more horrific loss of distinction to come.

As the story progresses Ligeia’s amorphousness becomes more acute. She becomes another figure of death-in-life, a malignantly corporeal ghost whose haunting and possession of Rowena collapses the binary distinction between matter and spirit. The parasitic Ligeia becomes one with Rowena and body and spirit melt together in a Schellingian dissolution into Absolute unity as Ligeia’s incorporeal soul takes on hideously material form, undermining substance dualism and producing a “tumult unappeasable” in the mind of the narrator: not only do two people fuse into

one, undermining the idea of a coherent, individualized subject, Ligeia casts off “the fetters of death” to become an enshrouded “thing” (Poe, “Ligeia” 134). The veil between life and death becomes a permeable membrane rather than a one-way threshold as Ligeia performs a “hideous drama of revivification” filled with “unspeakable horrors” (Poe, “Ligeia” 134) – nameless, they cannot be categorized or codified. So horrific and yet repetitious are the changes undergone by Rowena’s corpse as it incubates the monstrously material parasite of Ligeia’s corporealizing spirit that Poe’s narrator ultimately elides the details in order to “hurry to a conclusion” (“Ligeia” 134), leaving segments of the text literally unspoken or unspeakable and lending Ligeia’s strange performance a hysterical and macabre element of farce, as if the normally sacrosanct border of death were being mocked.

Though silent throughout the story, Ligeia achieves a kind of agency by its end. By violating and transforming the fair-haired, angelically submissive Lady Rowena, Ligeia exhibits a will to live and a “passionate . . . idolatrous love” (Poe, “Ligeia” 131) – a desire so intensely aggressive as to approach blasphemy – that reveals itself as an all-consuming and irrepressible force, the very “extremity of horror” (134). While this horror depends in part on a patriarchal system that imagines femininity and female desire as Other and even inhuman, the contaminating quality of Ligeia’s manifestation hints at the primordial, metamorphic unity Poe suggests in *Eureka* that the cosmos will disintegrate into, a unity in which all individuality, all distinctions, are lost. Once again, our glimpse of this unity is provided through the vexed, putrefying body of Ligeia and later Rowena through a panoply of symptoms – first of disease, then of Ligeia’s demoniac possession of her husband’s new bride.

“Ligeia” does more than simply reiterate the same ideas as “Morella.” Firstly, the story is longer, allowing Poe to better develop a sense of suspense and dizzying downward progression,

what – to utilize terms put forth by Kelly Hurley – could be termed an “entropic” plot. For Hurley “entropic plotting – which bears rough similarities to tragic plotting” concerns the breakdown of complexity and the undoing of forward-moving concepts of progress, a narrative unravelling linked to sensations of nausea” (90).¹³ “Ligeia” is structured around a series of breakdowns and resuscitations, the narrator obsessively charting the decay first of Ligeia and then of Rowena, noting with increasing density and intensity of description every shrivelling or tremor of the lips and each paling or flush of the cheeks with mounting disgust. He observes with nauseated fascination as “a repulsive clamminess and coldness overspread rapidly the surface of [Rowena’s] body” (Poe, “Ligeia” 134), death-in-life made flesh as Ligeia’s vampiric spirit materializes. The story devolves into a series of symptoms, shudders and paroxysms intermingling with morbidly detailed descriptions of body parts and subtle changes and fluctuations, breaking into a kind of narrative hysteria. In this way, Poe’s narrative strategy mirrors the content of “Ligeia,” conventional narration decaying into indifferentiation in a giddy onrush towards the churning ontological chaos of the Absolute.

“Ligeia” also includes representations of aesthetic objects – the elaborately refurbished abbey the narrator purchases following Ligeia’s death, and the embedded poem “The Conqueror Worm,” originally published independently by Poe in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1843 but later added to the text of “Ligeia” in 1845. The poem, which in the story is penned by Ligeia herself and constitutes the only words of her own that we read, wildly raves of “vast formless things” acting

¹³ The oft-remarked similarity between tragedy and horror is particularly salient for my reading of Poe in Schellingian terms, since Schelling was enraptured by tragedy and saw it as the genre especially well-suited to depicting the Absolute and so overcoming the crisis of thought occasioned by philosophy’s failure to represent the fundamental unity at the heart of all things.

as puppeteers of mimes performing a play on stage set to of “the music of the spheres,” and above all of “a blood-red thing” writhing forth to devour the players; at the poem’s end the play is described as a “tragedy, ‘Man’,” and the Conqueror Worm deemed its only hero (Poe, “Ligeia” 130). Elena Anastasaki has recently argued that while embedded poems like the one used in “Ligeia” might seem to threaten the much-vaunted unity of effect so prized by Poe, in fact “The Conqueror Worm” is invested with a crucial aesthetic and narrative significance. She points out that the poem allows Poe to communicate to the reader more than prose can accommodate, noting that poetry “is presented as conveying a higher form of Truth, one that bypasses both the unreliability of the narrator and the limitations of the rationality of prose” (Anastasaki 211). In this sense the relationship between “The Conqueror Worm” and “Ligeia” mimics the relationship between philosophy and art described by Schelling.

“The Conqueror Worm” begins when the narrator, his brain reeling from the “wild meaning” of Ligeia’s words (Poe, “Ligeia” 129), claims himself unable to continue his account, insisting that he has “no utterance capable of expressing” Ligeia’s strange suggestions (130): we have approached a limit of thought and articulation, a limit “The Conqueror Worm” is about to transgress. The poem is remote from the narrative and even from linear time; it turns our mind to the scale of the universe, its beginning and ending, and our place within it. The “vast, formless things” that lurk behind the shifting scenery suggest a hidden world beyond ordinary comprehension, obfuscated from our sight, which the irruption of the worm unveils. In addition to foreshadowing Ligeia’s now-imminent death and eventual revivification, the poem’s deployment of disgust through the figure of the gore-smeared, vermin-fanged worm, a revolting “thing” that transforms the stage curtain into “a funeral pall” that “comes down with the rush of a storm” (Poe, “Ligeia” 130), serves as another instance of death infecting life, of inevitable putrefaction and the

triumph of indifferentiation and disorder. The worm, a symbol of decay, bursts into the angelic theatre of the poem's beginning, "a crawling shape" which intrudes into the "motley drama" and transforms it into a tragedy "of Madness," "Sin," and "Horror, the soul of the plot" (Poe, "Ligeia" 130).

In this sense the poem functions as a microcosmic example of tragedy of the sort Schelling praises as revealing the Absolute. Schelling singles out tragic drama as particularly well-suited to approach the Absolute, for tragedy produces a kind of sublime experience in which collisions between freedom (the power of the subject) and fate (the power of nature, the world-without-us) are dramatized.¹⁴ For Schelling, "the view of the universe as chaos . . . is the basic view of the sublime to the extent that within it everything is comprehended as unity in Absolute identity" (*Philosophy of Art* 34).¹⁵ Schelling writes that the mythology revealed by tragedy, and some forms

¹⁴ Of course, Schelling's eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century context very likely predisposed him to prefer Greek tragedy over other dramatic and literary forms.

¹⁵ Recent re-appraisals of Schelling have emphasized his initiation of what has been called the poetic turn in Continental philosophy (George 135). George argues that while Schelling by no means abandoned philosophy for poetry or argued for the supremacy of the latter over the former, he did see the poetic turn as "required for philosophy because poetry enjoys resources that serve to remedy or redress a certain difficulty, predicament, or crisis native to the operations of philosophical inquiry itself" (136). Working with Schelling's *Philosophical Letters of Dogmatism and Criticism* (1797) and other texts, George suggests that Schelling identifies a kind of "short circuit" within philosophy as it approaches the Absolute, since for Schelling "the representation of the Absolute entails . . . the utter unity of subject, thought itself, with the concrete, material world" (138). Andrew Bowie notes the same limit of philosophy for Schelling, the limit that leads to the elevation of art as the organ of philosophy – while "concepts cannot . . . grasp the totality of an object" (118) and "theoretical philosophy cannot articulate a way of overcoming our sense of division" (119), art *shows* the unity of subject and world. Past the limit of reason and philosophy, art can succeed where philosophy fails.

of poetry, “is nothing other than the universe in its higher manifestation, in its absolute form, the true universe in itself, image or symbol of life and of wondrous chaos in the divine imagination” (*The Philosophy of Art* 45). Like a profane but all-powerful divine being, the worm disrupts the world of appearances and presentation, the phenomenal world, and, with totalizing power, consumes the “mimes” who cavort on the stage. After hearing the poem recited aloud, Ligeia recoils in horror, wondering whether human beings are “not part and parcel in [God]” and pondering “the mysteries of the will” (Poe, “Ligeia” 130), perceiving, in a flash of poetic insight imbued with horror and revulsion, a pantheistic oneness encompassing all things.

Thacker notes that usually when we think of the world, of existence, we think of it as the “world-for-us,” an anthropocentric daydream shaped and indeed constructed by discourse: “this is the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from” (*DTP* 4). The world frequently “resists, or ignores our attempts to mold it into the world-for-us,” because ultimately its seeming for-us-ness is illusory. The world exists “in some inaccessible, already-given state,” the “world-in-itself,” which seems to lie beyond human thinking: “the moment we think it an attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us” (Thacker, *DTP* 5). “Morella” and “Ligeia” both begin by presenting what looks like a version of the world-for-us: a conventional, sentimental narrative of the death and mourning of a woman, exactly the kind of consolatory representation, common in the nineteenth century, through which masculinist fantasies of conquering death, decay, and the other organic processes of time and nature are enacted. But instead of this familiar story, Poe’s tales of undead brides erupt into ontic horror, the horror of cosmic dissolution. Rather than gazing upon a mask of beauty, placed like a funereal shroud over the face of the deceased, Poe’s stories stare

unflinchingly into the rotting visage of death-in-life and the monstrous unification of subject and world it signifies.

In the following sections I consider the aesthetic ramifications of the entwinement of disgust, sublimity and metaphysics more closely by examining “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Masque of the Red Death” using eighteenth-century theories of the sublime alongside the more recently proposed theory of the “sublate” of Korsmeyer, a form of sublime experience linked to decay, putrescence, indifferenciation, and the epistemological quandary posed by thoughts of non-being. Like the conventional sublime, sublate disgust is an overwhelming emotion with aversive characteristics, but, as many theorists and aestheticians have observed, disgust also possesses a curious magnetism. As Miller puts it, while “disgust must always repel in some sense or it is not disgust . . . repulsion, however, might bring in its train affects that work to move one closer again to what one has backed away from,” affects that include curiosity, fascination, and “a desire to mingle” (111). I connect the aesthetic frisson of this “desire to mingle” with the putrescent downwards progress of Poe’s cosmos, its inexorable slide towards the Absolute.

2.5 Entropy, Sublimity, and the Sublate

Poe’s stories have long been considered in terms of the sublime in both its Kantian and Burkean iterations. Especially notable are Poe’s stories of shipwreck and voyaging, such as his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) with its windswept Antarctic vistas, tumultuous seascapes, raging tempests, and atmosphere of ominous gloom. “A Descent into the Maelström” (1841) likewise qualifies with its “mountainous waves” (Poe 35) and titular vortex, described as a “wonderful . . . manifestation of God’s power” (32). Such tales partake of the traditional sublime, the aesthetics of clouds and cliffs and mountaintops, caverns and abysses,

oceanic splendour, ancient oaks and dread monarchs. Conventional sublimity is a blend of awe and fear, transmuting the affect of terror into a form of aesthetic pleasure or, to use Burke's term, "delight." But fear, by and large – at least in its Romantic form, as sublime terror – tends to be an atomizing and individuating affect, one that entrenches hierarchical power dynamics and reinforces the boundaries of subjectivity. Disgust, in contrast, even as it patrols the boundaries of selfhood, brings with it a recognition of the subject's permeability and porousness, even its potential unreality.

Recent scholarship has frequently highlighted the ways that Poe's employment of sublimity bleeds into other aesthetic categories or otherwise recasts the sublime in unexpected ways. Frederick Burwick, for example, argues that Poe mingles sublime, grotesque, arabesque, and picturesque aesthetics in order to "defy rational order" (425) and to create "a new mould for probing the relationship between the stimuli of experience and the constructing mind" (434).¹⁶

¹⁶ Dennis Pahl adopts a specifically anti-Kantian view of Poe's tales, contending that Poe draws on Burkean sublimity to counter the idea of a sublime that elevates the power and autonomy of the subject; rather, Poe's sublime throws the subject into "a permanent state of crisis" (31). Jonathan Cook reads Poe's sublime as specifically apocalyptic in character, extending Morton Paley's account of the "apocalyptic sublime" in British Romanticism to claim that "The Fall of the House of Usher" is carefully constructed around a crescendo of "sublime apocalyptic terror" (4), while McGhee intertwines sublimity with disease and suggests that Poe's particular Dark Romantic version of sublimity is rooted in "the embrace of annihilation," a kind of "positive dissolution" which she links with Poe's idea of the perverse (57); she argues that for Poe those who "seek dissolution" are "privy to sublime truths beyond the grave that are inaccessible to the rest of us" (64). My analysis of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" is indebted to these readings, but while previous critics have emphasized sublime terror and fear, my investigation of disgust as the paradigmatic affect of Poe's horror complicates interpreting his fiction through a sublime lens.

Terror, the affect of individuating self-preservation, calls upon the subject to flee or cower, solidifying the division between subject and object. Likewise, the sublime terror so valued by authors like Kant tends to confirm the stability of a transcendental human subject, a reasoning mind outside of time, able to exercise its freedom and autonomy unfettered by the causal determinism of nature. Put metaphysically, it brings into focus the distinction between the knowing subject and the world around it, to make the subject aware of its subjectivity. This leads us back to the Kantian phenomena-noumena split, the impasse between the world as it appears to us subjectively and the unknowable world-in-itself – to two-worlds metaphysics, to correlationism. In contrast, disgust tends to deindividuate, calling into question the integrity and autonomy of the very human subject on which the sublime typically relies. Disgust worries at the boundaries of selfhood even as it patrols them, admitting the possibility of the subject's disintegration; it coalesces around things which violate our conceptual categories, around things that seem to belong both to the self while being simultaneously other, and around zones of vulnerability and permeability in the self, such as bodily orifices. As Miller puts it, such orifices “are the holes that allow contaminants in to pollute the soul, and they are the passageways through which substances pass that can defile ourselves and others too” (59). Disgust's metaphysical implications and the ways of thinking they uniquely enable stand in stark contrast with those of sublime terror as it is usually understood.

Like “Morella” and “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the Houser of Usher,” I argue, draws on this affect to destabilize the boundaries between subject and world, inviting comparisons between the rotting eponymous house, the decaying mind of Roderick Usher, and the decomposing body of Madeline Usher as part of an ontological assemblage that vexes distinctions between self and world and eventually collapses into abyssal “deep and dank tarn” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of

Usher” 89), descending into indifferenciation. “The Masque of the Red Death” similarly invokes a form of “perverse,” entropic sublimity in its apocalyptic forecast of a world without thought, an Absolute posterior to our own existence, using this version of sublime disgust to represent the ungraspable enormity of human extinction.

As should already be evident, coupling disgust and the sublime is problematic, especially given the hostility towards disgust typically exhibited by the eighteenth-century aestheticians whose theories of sublimity still enjoy widespread critical currency and which are entwined with Kant’s correlationist account of reality. Not only does disgust seem to interfere with what has been called the sublime’s power to “convert” negative affect into a form of uplift or pleasure, it occupies a particular overdetermined position in eighteenth-century aesthetics and disrupts the subject-exalting nature of sublimity. Kant took care to specifically dismiss the disgusting from his account of aesthetic experience, singling it out as the one emotion that always resists aestheticization. As he puts it in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790):

There is only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature, without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty; viz. that which excites *disgust*. For in this peculiar sensation . . . the object is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful. (116)

For Kant, disgust refuses aestheticization because it collapses the aesthetic distance between an object and its representation, a distance crucial to the disinterestedness Kant sees as essential to aesthetic pleasure. Disgust for Kant is transparent – as Korsmeyer puts it, “there is little gap between belief and emotion, because it is what is presented by the artwork itself that is the object

of disgust” (56). Yet as Korsmeyer points out, what for Kant is a weakness may be reinterpreted as one of disgust’s greatest strengths, granting it what she calls “a special aesthetic force” granted by its “palpable qualia” (56) or “immediacy” (49) – its transparency and ability to inspire, through art, intense reactions even while one remains abstractly aware of the artificiality of the object to which one is reacting.

Kant’s theory of the sublime also insists on the centrality and power of the human subject. The sublime, for Kant, confirms the inherent superiority of human reason over nature: while “nature is sublime in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity,” what we find sublime is “not so much the object as the mental attunement in which we find ourselves when we estimate the object” (*The Critique of Judgment* 112). Sublimity is ultimately a reaction not to the nonhuman world but to the power of the subject itself. As Kant puts it, speaking specifically of the “dynamical” sublime, “nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevate it even above nature” (Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* 120). The dynamical sublime arises when we see the fearfulness of nature in all its power and awesomeness without actually being afraid of it. Provided we are in a safe place, untouched by nature, we can imagine ourselves superior to it: we like to call objects like volcanoes or oceans sublime, Kant argues, “because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to reply which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (*The Critique of Judgment* 120). Kant’s formulations of the sublime thus privilege human rationality and power above all else: “sublimity is contained not in any thing in nature,” Kant insists, “but *only in our mind*, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and

thereby also to nature outside us” (*The Critique of Judgment* 123, emphasis mine). As Graham Harman reminds us, with Kant we are “limited to discussions of human experience” (*Weird Realism* 17) – or, as Meillassoux puts it at the outset of *After Finitude*, for Kant and his correlationist disciples, “thought cannot get *outside itself*” (3). In this sense the Kantian sublime is part and parcel of the strong demarcation between subject and world that Kant’s Copernican revolution establishes – the very demarcation I am suggesting that aestheticized disgust calls into question.

Like Kant’s sublime, Burke’s sublime consists of a kind of “astonishment” in which the pains of terror become converted into pleasure, although Burke reserves the word “pleasure” in connection with beauty, the sublime’s opposite. Sublime delight, for Burke, is “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (64). Suggesting that “fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain” (64), Burke presents sublime delight in opposition to the mere “pleasures” engendered by beauty: while the pleasures of beauty are gentle and cosseting, sublimity intertwines terror and pain with awe and reverence. Indeed, for Burke the power underlying sublimity ultimately traces its origins to God: “we have traced power through its several gradations unto the highest of all, where our imagination is finally lost; and we find terror, quite throughout the progress, its inseparable companion, and growing along with it” (73). “The images raised by poetry,” Burke further contends, “are always of [an] obscure kind” (67), and, he suggests, “to make anything very terrible, obscurity in general seems to be necessary” (65). Though the obscurity of poetry aids the sublime, Burke does not see mimesis as providing a shield of aesthetic distance necessary for enjoyment, as Kant does: “we are equally fascinated by pains, terrors, and horrors in reality, so long as they

do not press too closely” (Korsmeyer 73).¹⁷

Once again, however, “*one* single ‘unpleasant passion’ stands apart as something that *cannot* be incorporated into the field of aesthetic pleasure”: disgust (Menninghaus 35). Like Kant’s theorization of beauty and representation, Burkean sublimity excludes disgust from the range of emotions that can be successfully transformed through art from pain into pleasure. Burke claims that things which “are merely odious; as toads and spiders” (28) cannot be properly considered sublime. The sublime, for Burke, must spring from terror and awe, a respect for power that entails a kind of transcendental thrill. But, as Korsmeyer puts it, “encounters with disgust do not seem to pay this kind of dividend, as its objects are base and foul – unworthy of our regard” (45). Consequently “it is hard . . . to defend the idea that disgust is the vehicle for any aesthetic uplift equivalent to sublimity” (Korsmeyer 45). In *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), Noël Carroll specifically denies that the attractions of what he calls “art-horror” are compatible with theories of sublimity, specifically citing disgust and the objections of Kant but also noting that “if we are disgusted by an object, we are, in Burke’s idiom, pained by it – genuinely pained by it – and so it does not correlate to the kind of distance Burke maintains the sublime requires” (240). Carroll notes that “this is not a direct criticism of Burke’s notion of the sublime” – “rather, it is a consideration that should warn against one trying to assimilate art-horror to the Burkean sublime” (240).

Alongside these older theories of sublimity Korsmeyer proposes a theory of what she calls the sublate. A kind of negative or inverse counterpart of the sublime, the sublate offers a means of

¹⁷ It can also be argued that disgust by its very nature *always* presses too closely, that it assails the viewer and collapses all distance. In this sense, Kant’s objection to disgust on the basis of its transparency would be mirrored in Burke.

interrogating Poe's texts without insisting on a Kantian or correlationist account of the autonomous, transcendental subject or employing aesthetic formulations that exclude the disgusting as a matter of course. Like the sublime, the sublate draws its aesthetic potency from overwhelming powers connected with death and dread, but while the sublime yields an experience of "thrill and awe" connected to "the destructive sweep of mighty forces" the sublate fixates on "dismemberment, putrefaction, or the slow and demeaning disintegration of individual bodies, even the most complex forms of which are eventually overtaken by hordes of proliferating microbes and vermin" (Korsmeyer 134). As such, the sublate is far more compatible than the sublime with Poe's (and Schelling's) metaphysics of unity and indifferentiation; where the sublime exalts and uplifts, the sublate impresses upon readers a visceral apprehension of their own porousness and vulnerability. While Korsmeyer's specific version of sublate as presented in *Savoring Disgust* is rather too grimly and insistently materialistic to perfectly fit with German Idealism or the cosmos of Poe, Korsmeyer herself presents the sublate as one of many possible aesthetic manifestations of disgust, and her theory offers a useful aesthetic touchstone for both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death." In both works, the inevitability of dissolution and oblivion is represented through an awful and awesome putrescence – putrescence as a cosmic force, a universal constant drawing everything towards its own annihilation, propelling thought past the veil of correlationist incomprehensibility by virtue of its rawly repulsive, insistent power. The analysis below revises Korsmeyer's sublate, investing it with a different kind of metaphysical significance than her essentially reductive materialist account. Insofar as Korsmeyer presents the sublate as enabling "a moment of sustained recognition" which "gains intensity from the hallmark visceral repulsion of disgust" (158), I fully endorse her account. But where for Korsmeyer the sublate simply registers the fact that "organic life is mortal," her

theory is incomplete, at least when applied to Poe's horror stories. Instead, the sublate in Poe leads to the apprehension of – or, at least, speculation about – a different fundamental truth, at least as Schelling would have it: the truth of the Absolute, of the collapse of all difference and the ultimate equivalence between subject and world.

2.6 Decay, Disgust, and Indifferentiation in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

“The Fall of the House of Usher” begins as the unnamed narrator comes to visit one of his old “intimate associates,” Roderick Usher, responding to a letter in which Roderick, complaining of “acute bodily illness” and “mental disorder” (Poe 81) requests his old friend's presence. Upon arriving, the narrator finds Roderick “terribly altered” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” 82) and also catches a glimpse of his twin sister, Madeline, who also suffers from a disease that has “long baffled the skill of her physicians” (83). The narrator passes some time with Roderick, viewing his paintings and listening to his “fervid” musical compositions with suggestions of “mystic” inner meaning, including the strange, horrible ballad “The Haunted Palace” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” 84) which gives rise to thoughts of “the kingdom of inorganization” and the sentience of stones and “of all vegetable things” (85). The latter parts of the tale consist of Madeline's seeming death, possibly premature entombment, and revivification or return. After her burial, Madeline seems to stir from the grave – or, perhaps, to simply wake from her cataleptic state. She rushes forth from her tomb and clasps her brother in a monstrous embrace, till both fall to the floor, dead. The narrator rushes from the house only to witness its collapse into the black waters of the tarn that already seemed to contain the house, holding the gloomy mansion in its reflection.

Along with several other of Poe's stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" has helped to cement the idea of Poe as an author of psychological horror, and, indeed, the story is full of uncanny doubles, Freudian suggestions, the possibility of incest and homoeroticism, and a dream-like atmosphere rich with possible symbols for the unconscious or the fractured psyche. Without denying or discarding such readings, I read the story in ontological terms rather than purely psychological ones. Like "Ligeia" and "Morella," "The Fall of the House of Usher" presents us with a kind of possession narrative, but here it is unclear who (or what) is possessing whom – is the house reflecting and exteriorizing the madness of Roderick and his sister, or is it actually causing their decline, as the story sometimes hints? The tale continuously blurs the boundaries between characters and setting, troubling conceptions of selfhood, agency, and humanness. The omnipresent imagery of decomposition in the story not only suggests the mental breakdown of Roderick and possibly the narrator, it foreshadows the breakdown of all distinctions and the subsumption of everything into "the deep and dank tarn" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher 89), both Ushers and their house dissolving back into a putrescent totality in which all distinctions are lost.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is saturated with the imagery of decay from its onset. We are told that the house and surrounding landscape inspire in the narrator a sense of nausea or "sickening of the heart" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher 81). When the narrator approaches the decrepit Usher mansion, whose grotesquery is compounded by architectural variegation and the depredations of organic growths, an excess of life, we are told that:

Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine, tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion

of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 82)

Poe's language here stresses the house's incoherence, its contradictoriness. It is both incredibly old and yet without extreme dilapidation; its individual stones are crumbling and its woodwork rotted, but none of it has fallen. Even the fungi – already a categorically confused and confusing force of decay, caught between animal and plant, parasitically infesting host organisms – also resemble arachnid cobwebs, blurring the line between seemingly passive, non-sentient matter and vermin, themselves sometimes seeming to fall somewhere "*between* life and death" as a kind of "intermediate quasi-life" (McGinn 114). The fungi, in their rhizomatic profusion and penetration of the house, suggest a series of connections and couplings between the house and its grounds, blurring the boundaries between natural and artificial as they hasten the house's decomposition. It is not that the house, in its contradictoriness and defiance of schema and category, is an "anomaly" *per se*. Rather, the house suggests that multiplicity and difference always form part of a greater totality beneath the surface, that our distinctions themselves are flawed or superficial. While the "barely perceptible fissure" that runs along the wall of the house until it becomes "lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 82) foreshadows the mansion's collapse, I also want to read it as a physical representation of the Kantian split between subject and object which the collapse undoes.

The house is a kind of loathsome amalgam. H.P. Lovecraft wrote that "The Fall of the House of Usher" "hints shudderingly of obscure life in inorganic things," most prominently

through “an abnormally linked trinity of entities at the end of a long and isolated family history – a brother, his twin sister, and their incredibly ancient house all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment” (*SHL* 62). It is this abnormal and revolting linkage between organic and inorganic components that leads us towards indifferentiation, a monist ontology in which the line between living beings and non-living things is smudged, breathing body and wasting corpse and decaying house melding in a cadaverous Absolute. The house’s mismatched inorganic components are host to organic ones, the actors of decay, and the house itself seems horribly like a decomposing body, with “vacant eye-like windows” suggesting the empty sockets of a skull (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 81). It seems of a piece with the “ghastly tree-stems” and “few white trunks of decayed trees” which protrude from the grounds like the bony fragments of a half-exhumed skeleton and conspire alongside the decaying house to produce “an utter depression of soul” most comparable to “the hideous dropping off of the veil” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 81), the liminal, disgust-inducing moment between life and death inviting metaphysical awareness of the fragility of consciousness, its rootedness in the physical world. Catalyzed by the onset of decomposition, house, trees, landscape, fungi, and water run into one another to form an affective assemblage exerting power over the narrator. The Ushers themselves form part of this decaying assemblage as well. In their own diseased decline, the Ushers mirror the decomposition of their hereditary mansion, house reflecting family and vice versa: the Ushers bear the same monstrous decrepitude as their estate, while the house resembles their emaciated features. As the narrator states, the original title of the estate has merged with the Usher family name, such that “the quaint and equivocal appellation of the ‘House of Usher’ . . . seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion” (82). This slippage of language between house and family is reiterated in the description of the

Ushers. The narrator notes Roderick Usher's "cadaverousness of complexion," his "thin and very pallid" lips and his hair's "weblike softness" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher 82) – a softness with a texture like "wild gossamer" recalling the "web-work" of fungi hanging over the house's eaves – as well as a "ghastly pallor of the skin" and "emaciated fingers" (83).

As with the house, Usher is in a state of decay: "surely, man had never been so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher 82). Roderick's disease is specifically defined in terms of affect and the tyranny of things over the human body and mind. His description brings to mind a living corpse, already wasting away, and thus invites particularly powerful disgust. Again, as McGinn claims, the collision between life and death underlies much if not all of what we consider disgusting: "disgust occupies a borderline space, a region of uncertainty and ambivalence, where life and death meet and merge" (90). Roderick, with his thinness and pallor, his fungous-cobweb hair like a post-mortem growth, his "cadaverousness" and wasting illness, exemplifies this borderline-space. If, as McGinn claims, "the proper object of disgust is really a process" – specifically "the process of putrefaction" (91) – then the slow process of Roderick's decline can be understood as the quintessence of the disgusting. As in Schelling's much-vaunted tragedy, we see a "representation of unity that is marked . . . by strife, contradiction, and incompleteness" (George 143), here represented through the repulsive processes of putrefaction invading the living body of Roderick Usher.

Like her sibling, Lady Madeline Usher is a figure of decomposition and living death, a doppelganger of her brother wracked with "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequently through transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher 83). Even more so than Roderick she is marked as an embodiment of death-in-life: like the diseased, undead brides of "Morella" and "Ligeia" she is a revenant, literally

returning from the grave (where she may well have been prematurely buried). But even before she is interred she is presented in a “region of horror” and inspires a mixture of awe and revulsion suggesting sublate affect (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 86). Poe writes of “the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face” and of a “suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death” (“The Fall of the House of Usher 86), both suggesting a blurring of life and death, the “process of transition . . . where the two poles of the transition are life and death” (91) that McGinn stresses as the essential elicitor of disgust. The signs of life that linger around Madeline suggest what McGinn would call “a moment of deep metaphysical transition” as life and death are “paradoxically unified” such that it seems as if “the consciously living is still hovering around the organically dead” (94). The state of uncertainty clouding Madeline’s actual decease only compounds this moment of horror and disgust. Her “striking similitude” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 86) to her brother is emphasized by the narrator; house, brother, and sister thus emerge as part of putrid troika, an amalgam that further includes the disease(s) afflicting the two siblings and the various aesthetic objects that Roderick uses to soothe his condition. This similarity again points to the underlying unity of the house/House of Usher – their “shared soul,” to use Lovecraft’s term.

All of this interconnection – this interpenetration of subjects and objects, the organic and the inorganic – erodes boundaries between consciousness and world, calling the sanctity, stability, and sanity of the human subject into question and replacing it with the amorphous ontology of the Absolute. Roderick himself seems to endorse a quasi-animistic or panpsychic ontology that affords the non-human a peculiar agency, insisting on “the sentience of all vegetable things” and arguing that the “grey stones of the home of his forefathers . . . in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around

them” and “above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of the arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn” are evidence of the estate’s sentience, a sentience which possesses a “silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which had made *him* . . . what he was” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 85). The malign power of objects to affect and otherwise influence the human subject extends to the collection of artworks that Roderick treasures; indeed these are said to literally form “no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 85). We are told throughout the story that Roderick’s malady relates to a certain hypersensitivity to affect and sensation: “he suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 83). Roderick cultivates peculiar aesthetic fascinations in order to soothe his frayed nerves, yet even these efforts cast a kind of “sulphurous lustre” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 84) over everything, suggesting both a rancid smell and the fires of Hell.

Roderick’s artistic fixations lead us back towards the entwinement of affect, metaphysics, and horror, as if modeling the aesthetics of Poe’s horror fiction. The narrator’s aesthetic experiences with the music, literary works, and paintings that Roderick adores lead him not only into a peculiar intimacy with his friend, they emphasize the futility of action in the face of a mind imprisoned by the inevitability of entropy – “a mind from which darkness, as if an inherently positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 84). We are told that “if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher,” his abstract paintings evoking “an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which [the narrator] had felt ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 84). The metaphysical imagery here suggests a cosmos of endless gloom, while the strangely “positive”

darkness suggests a kind of excess, a negation so utter it becomes corporeal. As Thacker writes, in his consideration of the mysticism of darkness through philosophers and theologians ranging from Dionysus the Areopagite to George Bataille, excessive or palpable, “positive” darkness – darkness not as an absence of light but as a presence of its own – can be understood as darkening the human, working “to undo the human by paradoxically revealing the shadows and nothingness at its core, to move not towards a renewed knowledge of the human, but towards something we can only call an unknowing of the human, or really, the *unhuman*” (SSC 38). The text’s aesthetics of infernal gloom and decay couple with its emphasis on Roderick’s lack of discrete subjectivity and the nauseous erosion of boundaries between self and other, organic and inorganic, house and family, to produce a metaphysical awareness of the subject’s ultimate oneness with the Absolute.

Sublate awe mingles with grotesquery and disgust in the most noteworthy of Roderick’s aesthetic obsessions, “The Haunted Palace,” which like “The Conqueror Worm” of “Ligeia” was published independently of the short story in which it is embedded. Jonathan Cook argues that the poem “provides a poetic abstract of the collapse of Usher’s mental and physical worlds” (23) and suggests that “The Haunted Palace” invites a view of “the human body as a microcosmic view of the universe” (24). The poem is a narrative of collapse and decay – specifically, the decay of consciousness. It stages a confrontation between the aesthetics of beauty and sublate horror, between reification of the subject’s transcendental excellence exalting thought and rationality and the monstrous Absolute. The imagery of the poem mirrors this confrontation, turning from bucolic, heavenly, and sublime in a conventional sense to necrotic, hellish, and disgusting. Beginning with a depiction of “the monarch Thought’s dominion” as “a fair and stately palace” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” 84) surrounded by green valleys and protected by angels, the poem interrupts its Neoplatonic idyll with the presence of “evil things, in robes of sorrow” which assail Thought’s

estate, replacing the celestial figures glimpsed in its now “red-litten windows” with “Vast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody” (85). Here the antagonists of thought are rendered as grotesque agents of decay and malignancy, forming a “hideous wrong” that resembles “a rapid ghastly river” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 85): homogenous and multitudinous, their incursion undermines the supremacy of the subject, suggesting a kind of cosmic pessimism in which eternity and transcendence are refused and the inevitability of entropy is affirmed. Even the simile of the river suggests ontological fluidity, a lack of discrete boundaries, while also bringing to mind the river Styx and thus the transition between life and death. Like “The Masque of the Red Death,” “The Haunted Palace” uses the trope of usurpation and the collapse of a kingdom to represent the supremacy of indifferentiation, a noetic abyss that swallows up any delusion of the human subject’s ascendancy or endurance. In this sense the poem – like “The Fall of the House of Usher” as a whole – inverts the Kantian sublime, its glorification of the subject, and its entrenchment of a two-worlds metaphysics, of the division between subject and world. And like “The Conqueror Worm,” the poem reveals something deeper than the rest of the (prose) story fully discloses: in this case “the tottering of [Usher’s] lofty reason upon her throne” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” 84), the fragility of the human mind as Usher flirts precipitously with madness and non-being. Any pretense of self-aggrandizement or transcendental mastery of the sort imagined by Kant is dashed to pieces by “The Haunted Palace,” which announces instead the inevitability of the dissolution of the self and of thought into all-encompassing unity.

The story’s final section constitutes a sublime crescendo. The loud, inexplicable, unknown sounds, such as “a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 89) reverberation, foreshadow Madeline’s emergence from the tomb, the irruption of life from death, in a climax that closely resembles the traditional sublime. But unlike those forms of

the sublime that reinforce a sense of the subject's wholeness, the sublime here – intermixed with disgust, the horror of death-in-life – corrupts and destroys the self. Both Cook and Pahl have described the sublime aesthetics of “The Fall of the House of Usher” as Burkean rather than Kantian. But disgust, as other theorists have noted and as I discussed above, strains Burke's account of sublimity as well as Kant's. What Poe presents instead of the sublime as it might typically be understood is a perverse revision of sublimity, one owing its power to the sickening forces of decay and the metaphysical unity such entropic inevitability suggests.

At the story's end Madeline – diseased, cadaverous, and catatonic – is prematurely buried (or, possibly, she dies and is buried only to revive as an undead revenant). She is yet another figure of death infecting life – a mutilated, walking corpse, seemingly returned from death – and also the embodiment of her brother's mental deterioration, erupting with “violent and now final death-agonies” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 89). Appearing as an “enshrouded figure” with “blood upon her white robes,” she clasps Roderick in an incestuous final coupling and bears him “to the floor a corpse, and a victim of the terrors he had anticipated” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 89). In their grotesque union the siblings seem to trigger the collapse of the house itself, the fissure that runs throughout it rapidly widening till the house falls into the tarn. The Ushers and their estate seep back into an undifferentiated oneness, represented by the black waters of the tarn.

Disgust, once again, serves as the ideal affective vehicle to undo the subject's delusions of grandeur while simultaneously revealing the Absolute reality described by Schelling. As McGinn puts it, despite our desire to transcend our “base material,” we remain impermanent and prone to decay, putrescence, death: “anything that presses this point home will occasion discomfort, as our vaunted quasi-divinity dissolves into the mess of organic reality” (74), a reality that can be likened

to Schelling's Absolute.¹⁸ Thus though we may "strive for ontological distance" from a reality whose indifferenciation inspires disgust, "we must accept that everything we are" depends on it (McGinn 74). Instead of the triumph or aggrandizement of the subject, of the human, of thought or reason, Poe instead presents the subject's decomposition back into numinous putrescence, the artifice of the house and the artifice of Roderick's subjectivity dissolving in a moment of entropic sublate horror, the moment of Madeline's abject embrace. Subject and world are united and dissolved to become a single, seeping unity once more, a sickly version of the Absolute.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" represents dissolution domestically and personally, enacting its scenes of the sublate and undoing the human subject to reveal ontological unity of things from within a single family, a single house. Though Poe was probably not specifically aiming to refute Kant in any sort of conscious, intentional fashion, his tale has the *effect* of inverting the Kantian sublime in order to collapse the phenomena-noumena distinction at the heart of Kant's metaphysics, the split that German Idealism sought to mend. In place of the transcendental, subject-affirming affect of the Kantian sublime is evident an aesthetics of disgust facilitating an understanding of the monstrous Absolute, fulfilling Schelling's identification of art as the organon of philosophy.

¹⁸ At times, McGinn seems to have a more materialist monism in mind when he discusses the dissolution of the transcendental soul in the face of disgust. In exploring Poe's metaphysics in relation to Schelling, I am not claiming that disgust is incompatible with materialism or that it leads inevitably to idealism – merely that for Poe's stories *specifically*, figures of death-in-life facilitate understanding of a particular, monstrous form of the Absolute approximately as it appears in Schelling. As I will show with later authors, this is not the only form of aesthetic apprehension disgust can provide.

The next story, “The Masque of the Red Death,” extends putrescence to a universal level, depicting the end of human civilization and indeed the human species in a final disgusting paroxysm, one that communicates affectively the philosophically fraught idea of human extinction. The tale also conspicuously inverts the Burkean sublime by overturning its onto-theological and political hierarchy, replacing God and the sovereign with queasy nothingness.

2.7 Meontological Sovereignty in “The Masque of the Red Death”

Poe’s apocalyptic horror story “The Masque of the Red Death,” like so many of Poe’s tales, concerns disease and disintegration: set on the cusp of a pestilential apocalypse, the story presents a cataclysmic vision of cosmic entropy. There is little plot to this short but evocative tale. Taking place in a country made desolate by a terrible epidemic of the eponymous Red Death, the story follows the hubristic Prince Prospero, “happy and dauntless and sagacious,” a decadent nobleman who retreats with his court into one of his “castellated abbeys,” a sort of opulent medieval bunker, “the creation of the prince’s own eccentric yet august taste” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 109), in order to outlast the plague in luxurious safety. Much is made of the fortifications employed to keep the abbey secure: we are told not only of the abbey’s ample provisions but also the “strong and lofty wall” and of the “furnaces and massy hammers” used to weld the bolts of the door shut (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 109). Within the security of the abbey Prospero keeps various entertainers and holds a “voluptuous” masquerade of “unusual magnificence,” while outside “the pestilence raged most furiously” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 109). The emphasis here is on boundaries, a series of protective layers and measure to keep those within the abbey from contamination. Poe goes on to describe in great detail the peculiar architecture, lavish decorations, and “delirious fancies such as the madman fashions,” emphasizing in particular the

macabre, grotesque, and disgusting quality of the place: “There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 110). Due to this decadence, the revellers at first do not recognize the Red Death, instead mistaking it for a particularly audacious reveller as it infiltrates the hall, stalking openly from room to room with the appearance of a plague victim. Rumours of the masked guest “spread [themselves] whisperingly around” like a kind of contagious gossip mimicking in speech the miasmatic transmission of the plague, and the other revellers view the stranger with a mixture “of horror, and of disgust” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 112). The diseased phantom is seized on Prospero’s orders and indeed attacked by the Prince, who falls dead when the Red Death looks upon him; the other revellers, leaping upon the guest, find its garments empty, and themselves succumb to the ravages of pestilence.

“The Masque of the Red Death” is a story of human extinction, a concept notoriously difficult to keep fully in view since it necessitates the thought of non-thought, the negation of all thought, and an explicit move beyond the correlationist bubble. As Thacker puts it, building on Kant’s thoughts of our species’ future, “any postulation about the state of the world after the end can only be speculative” (*DTP* 123). Ray Brassier similarly observes in his reflection on nihilism *Nihil Unbound* (2007) that “extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience” (238) – by its very nature it cannot be experienced, cannot be witnessed. It can be imagined in the abstract, but stubbornly resists further cognition, constituting a receding philosophical horizon by definition beyond the reach of human comprehension. Human extinction is thus a noetic void, an abyss of thought – “a *speculative annihilation*” (Brassier 125). Poe’s story draws on the entropic sublime to incarnate this void affectively; more specifically, I argue that in its enthronement of the disgusting deity and all-powerful sovereign, the Red Death, the story enacts

a perverse parody of the Burkean sublime, especially as it manifests in the supposed “dread majesty” of monarchs.

As with the other texts discussed in this chapter, “The Masque of the Red Death” is invested in matters of ontology and meontology – with being and non-being, presence and absence, thought and the unthinkable. In Poe’s prose poem *Eureka*, a work deeply interested in metaphysical speculation, in the last moments of the universe all things and beings collapse together in a “final ingathering” (Poe 131) – a conglomeration of matter and spirit that results in a form of non-being. As Poe puts it: “In sinking into Unity, [matter] will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception, Unity must be” (*Eureka* 139). In *Eureka* this nothingness is part of a divine heartbeat, “swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness” (Poe 139), a cycle of rejuvenation and destruction; non-being is thus perhaps not quite so fearful as might otherwise be imagined. In “The Masque of the Red Death,” however, no such cyclic renewal is foreshadowed. While the text shares the apocalyptic concerns of *Eureka* and likewise meditates on the dissolution of all things and the end of consciousness, it paints a singularly grim portrait of the world-to-come, a pestilential futurity that devours all hope and all thought. The story represents Poe at his most pessimistic, the entropic cosmos it depicts a darker universe than the numinously cyclic one depicted in *Eureka*. In its figuration of the Red Death as an awful, putrescent deity and sovereign, the tale resonates with ideas of the Godhead imagined by mystics and philosophers ranging from Meister Eckhart to Schopenhauer to Bataille – God as a non-anthropocentric enigma, an omnipresent nothingness, what Bataille calls the “unknown Nothingness” (104), union with which conjures “the ecstasy of the void” (122). Or, as Thacker describes the Godhead, “the Nothing that is God, the God-beyond-Being” (*SSC* 73), a God present in all things and all creatures that so undoes all distinctions. In this sense, also, the tale constitutes a shadowy reflection of *Eureka*,

insofar as the poem imagines the rushing-together of all spirit and matter into a single unity understood as a divinity, a divinity pantheistically diffuse and immanent in the world prior to its collapse back into its original oneness.

In Poe's text a terrible plague, the Red Death, threatens to destroy all human life through a process of monstrous and all-engulfing putrescence. Where the stories of the marriage group intertwined disease and gender, playing off the fascination of medical discourse (and nineteenth-century culture more broadly) with the consumptive female body, here disease wracks everyone in equal measure, widening the apocalyptic reach of contagion to universal proportions. Like a pantheistic god, the Red Death is in everyone – diffuse, miasmatic, all-contaminating. The beginning of the story also establishes the Red Death as a singularly *disgusting* plague:

No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal – the redness and horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow men. (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 109)

The revolting inside oozes outside, suppurating bodily boundaries and, through contamination, interpersonal boundaries as well. Poe describes the blood-marks as "stains," stressing their unclean nature. By marring the face especially, the Red Death erases personhood and individuality, transforming individual subjects into an anonymous mass and so presaging their entropic descent into the oblivion of non-being, the mark of pestilence rendering them socially and physically abject.

As many scholars have noted, skin is highly significant as a disgust-elicitor since it "defends us from the outside" and "covers our polluting and oozing innards," thus coming to bear

“a heavy symbolic load” as the boundary of selfhood (Miller 52). As William Ian Miller observes, “there is nothing quite like skin gone bad; it is in fact marrings of the skin which make up much of the substance of the ugly and monstrous,” and when “the festering inside” desecrates skin by “erupting to the surface” (52) every demarcation of bodily integrity is overturned. Since we overload skin with meaning – moral, aesthetic, social, political – it becomes potently abhorrent when breached: skin can “serve as a covering for the deeper self inside” while also allowing us “to entertain the illusion of our own non-disgustingness to others, if not quite ourselves” (Miller 52-53). McGinn sees disease similarly, especially “diseases of the flesh,” whose corruption of living tissue constitutes “the zenith of disgust” (97). McGinn puts his finger close to the distinction between conventional sublimity and the form of entropic sublimity or sublate that I am utilizing here when he notes the difference between disease and purely destructive forces such as fire: “corruption of the flesh is not the same as destruction” (98). As he notes, “lepers have always been shunned, and not merely because of a fear of contagion; it is their flesh that we cannot stand, as it decomposes on their poor bones” (15). For McGinn, then, “putrefying flesh on the living individual seems particularly potent as an agent of disgust” (15). Poe’s blood-stained disease victims approach the epitome of disgust, their infectious, seeping skin signifying the extremity of death-in-life and the effacement and dissipation of the subject.

The Red Death combines the disgust typically associated with disease with that connected to blood. McGinn notes that “blood in circulation is one thing, but blood flowing freely from a wound is another matter – passing from life-essence to messy, useless deadness” (103), another representation of death-in-life and morbid liminality. In bleeding wounds “we see the corpse foreshadowed” (McGinn 106) – we see not merely death but death-in-life, life infected with death. The unclean blood of the plague-victims itself recalls the tubercular issue of a consumptive: it is

blood out-of-place, vitality literally and symbolically leached away by the vampiric pandemic. Poe's choice to make blood the central symbol of disease and decay in his tale further conflates the forces of dissolution with a dark vitalism, a life-force immanent in all beings. It is as if blood in the story is not really human at all but some nonhuman fluid that the tolling of Prospero's ebony clock calls hideously forth, bursting through the thin skin that grants us our delusions of human autonomy. Blood here is the Absolute as alien liquid, revealing our dependence and inseparability from the nonhuman – a union which for some might be glorious or ecstatic, but which here is horrific. Our attempts to protect ourselves from the ravages of the nonhuman are always doomed to fail – the real is in our veins. In contrast with other texts the disgust of the Red Death is depersonalized, menacing not individual characters but the species as a whole. Already it appears as a cosmic force of “dissolution,” the end of being, as bodies everywhere break down and pass their infection to other bodies, the abominable grandeur of the exsanguinating illness endowing it with entropic sublimity. Like Korsmeyer's sublate the Red Death “apprehends not just destruction but reduction – of the noblest life to decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated” (134).

The architectural detour the story next takes has been much-remarked on by critics, and may at first seem a curious digression out of step with the aesthetics of disgust and the story's considerations of extinction and decay. But as Brett Zimmerman points out, the polychromatic aesthetics exhibited by the suite of rooms the decadent Prince Prospero constructs have both metaphysical and temporal significance (63). In their sequence of colours the rooms suggest the passage of time and the deterioration of life, beginning with the blue room, to which Zimmerman attributes “clear metaphysical associations,” noting nineteenth-century connections between blue and god, heaven, immortality, and Neoplatonic truth, all of which he suggests link it to “the

supernatural stage immediately preceding birth” (64) within some metaphysical traditions. The succeeding colours can be read as stages of life, passing from the colours of youth and life – the “positive” colours, what might be called the negentropic colours – into the “mortuary colours of white, violet, red, and black” (Zimmerman 65), the hues of decay, disease, and death. The final two colours are especially noteworthy in their connection to entropy and Poe’s metaphysics of unity, indifferentiation, and non-being. Though there is no red room, the final black room is suffused with “a deep blood colour” (Poe, ‘Masque’ 110), a colour obviously connected with the plague itself. The link between redness and illness is not simply self-referential. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in his discussion of the text, notes that “from Biblical times red has been associated with plague, especially the contagious viral cholera,” and that “in England through the times of Pepys, corpse-bearers were required to carry red wands, and infected houses had red crosses painted on the door” (144). The room’s blackness similarly conjures paradoxical thoughts of non-being. Thacker has connected blackness¹⁹ to a kind of “cosmic pessimism” and a “dark metaphysics of negation, nothingness, and the non-human” (*DTP* 20) which he derives from Schopenhauer’s will-to-live, a blindly impersonal nothingness opposed to nature-for-us (19) which I will discuss extensively in relation to Lovecraft’s weird fiction in the final chapter. Blackness, for Thacker, signifies the meontological horror of the world-without-us and the negation of thought; through its long association with death in Western culture, black likewise suggests finality, oblivion, and absence.

¹⁹ Thacker is actually speaking principally of the musical subgenre of black metal, but his comments regarding blackness apply well to Poe’s text. He returns to the subject of darkness, blackness, mysticism, and negation in *Starry Speculative Corpse* (2015).

The black room, then, with its “blood-tinted panes” making it “ghastly in the extreme” and producing in the faces of those few who step within it a “wild look” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 110), serves as the final architectural embodiment of an entropic sequence signifying the gradual decline of life and the end of existence. Its further association with time through the image of “a gigantic clock of ebony” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 110) establishes the black room as the cosmic end-point, the sublime nihilism that time propels Poe’s universe inevitably towards. Much like the grotesque, womb-like chambers of “Ligeia” and the decaying mansion in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the architecture of “The Masque of the Red Death” serves as a kind of aesthetic reflection of the metaphysical fascinations of the text. The sequence of rooms represents the life and death of human beings and the entropic fate of the universe, from the empyrean blue room suggesting Neoplatonic wholeness proceeding inevitably towards all-consuming darkness, the hungry nothingness of the black room. The palace also functions – or rather, fails to function – as a kind of *cordon sanitaire*, a way of shutting out the plague. In its penetration by the Red Death, its total failure to protect the revellers, it suggests the insignificance of human artifice in the face of the nonhuman.

The figure of the Red Death itself functions much as Poe’s other undead phantoms, as a figure of death-in-life: the gaunt figure is “shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave” with what looks to be a mask “made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty detecting the cheat” (“The Masque of the Red Death” 112). Poe’s emphasis on the shrouded hiddenness of the spectre’s body suggests the difficulty of accessing the world-without-us, the perversely sublime nothingness the apparition represents: it has effectively disguised itself within the social context of the party that throngs the Prince’s seven chambers. Like the plague that devastates the world beyond the palace, the spectre

disturbs boundaries of outside and inside through the “scarlet horror” of its bleeding face (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 112). Initially exciting a profound rage in Prospero, whose symptoms are strongly coincident with the plague – reddening the aristocratic brow and wracking his body with convulsions – the Red Death comes to inspire “a certain nameless awe” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 112). This mixture of reverence and revulsion – the desire to avoid contamination from the putrescent figure coupled with a worshipful respect of the being – pervades the hall, perturbed only by Prospero’s murderous assault. Instead of a physical being, however, Prospero and his minions discover to their “unutterable horror” that “the grave cerements and corpse-like mask they handled with so violent a rudeness” are “untenanted by any tangible form” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 112-113). In an especially grotesque example of category confusion the phantom combines not only life and death in a single body but being and non-being together: the spectre of the Red Death makes physical the meontic void, the gaping emptiness of non-being following human extinction.

Like a contagious miasma, what Thacker might term an “ambient plague” shaped by “a medieval hermeneutics of plague and pestilence as Neoplatonic – a supernatural force emanating from a divine centre” (*DTP* 106), the Red Death infiltrates the heavenly blue room and usurps its mortal ruler, Prospero, to establish itself as a diseased sovereign, demanding acknowledgment from its subjects:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out and that was the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and

Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 113).

The Burkean sublime traces its power to divinity and, in accordance with Burke’s eighteenth-century conservatism, to monarchs, who through their supposed divine right incarnate the will of god on earth; his vision of the sublime is explicitly both political and theological.²⁰ As he states in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), before the sublime presence of god “we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him” (72); moreover, we find a trace of this awful presence in kings and queens, those who “are frequently addressed with the title of *dread majesty*” (71). “The Masque of the Red Death” presents the sublate inversion of the Burkean sublime. In place of a rightful human sovereign ruling in the stead of god, himself symbolized by the blue room, the Red Death achieves an entropic reign of decay and dissolution founded not on the social institutions of power but on the inescapable realities of death and the inevitability, in Poe’s Schellingian cosmos, of the collapse of all things back towards primal unity and the abyss of non-being. To merely describe this blasphemous elevation in abstract terms would, in Burke’s terms, be akin to contemplating Godhead “merely as he is an object of the understanding, which forms a complex idea of power, wisdom, justice, goodness” (71), as opposed to contemplating God imaginatively and so affectively, which instead invites us to “rejoice with trembling” (72) and to shudder at sublime deific power. Instead Poe presents the dark, inverse monarch of his universe in aesthetic, affective terms, the better to inscribe the totality of its sovereignty, a rulership not social but meontic – the dominion of the void. The Red Death is the revenge of the real, dethroning the social order. It obliterates human

²⁰ The political and ideological implications of Poe’s use of affect are explored at length in Jonathan Elmer’s monograph *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (1995).

power structures and hierarchies – Prospero’s palace and court, the world of artifice and discourse – to reveal the nonhuman Absolute that throbs and oozes beneath, the seething, pestilential infinitude that endlessly retreats from philosophy’s grasp but which, through a spasm of aestheticized disgust in the form of the entropic sublate, “The Masque of the Red Death” tantalizingly exposes.

We may know abstractly that extinction and death are inevitable, that all things decay, that our bodies will die and that life will end. As Korsmeyer observes, “we already know that we are mortal, that generations pass, that civilizations are finite” (134). Just as for Schelling philosophy can offer a kind of model of the Absolute, we can speak of non-being and extinction, can imagine such speculative realities in the abstract. But it is one thing to imagine such things intellectually and another to relate to them affectively via aesthetic experience. As Korsmeyer puts it, “it is the nature of aesthetic encounters to be singular; they bring home general truths in a particularly vivid manner, deepening their apprehension more profoundly than straightforward statement can accomplish” (134). “The Masque of the Red Death” offers such a singular aesthetic encounter, inverting the Burkean sublime to imagine a universe unguided save by the “illimitable dominion” of decay, one hurtling towards the end of all consciousness as the world collapses, dissolving into blood. By choosing contagion – and, more specifically, a contagion that suppurates bodily boundaries, levelling all social hierarchy in its rapaciousness – as the vehicle for his apocalypse, Poe (consciously or otherwise) harnesses disgust’s uniquely metaphysical ability to bring the queasy boundaries of consciousness and selfhood into view within a work of art. His texts thus exploit the surprising aesthetic qualities of disgust, conveying Schellingian cosmic conceptions on an apocalyptic scale.

2.8 Perversion and Self-Annihilation in “The Imp of the Perverse”

I want to conclude this chapter with a brief consideration of one of Poe’s later tales – the bizarre hybrid of metaphysical essay and horror story “The Imp of the Perverse.” This story, written at the high point of Poe’s career, constitutes perhaps the clearest expressions of Poe’s thoughts on the perverse attractions of annihilation, the lure of the abyss and the fascinations of putrescence. The text might also be thought of as some of Poe’s most overtly “demonological” writing, concerning the figure of an “invisible fiend” (“The Imp of the Perverse” 271) embodying “a radical, primitive impulse,” an “overwhelming tendency to do wrong for wrong’s sake” (“The Imp of the Perverse” 270). Poe describes this impulse in terms of teetering on the edge of a precipice, growing “sick and dizzy” but gradually becoming aware of “a shape, far more terrible than any genius or any demon of a tale” which yet “chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror” (“The Imp of the Perverse” 270) – speculating on what it would feel like to fall into the abyss. “This fall,” Poe writes, “this rushing annihilation – for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination – for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it” (“The Imp of the Perverse” 270). This “demoniacally impatient” (“The Imp of the Perverse” 270) passion perfectly encapsulates the intertwining of affect, metaphysical speculation, and aesthetic cognition that unfolds in Poe’s tales. “The Imp of the Perverse” undermines any delusion of autonomous subjectivity, presenting instead a version of the human subject riven by self-destructive instincts and drawn inexorably towards its own annihilation. But the story also imagines perverse conation in terms of a giddy, enthralling surfeit, a surfeit I link both to disgust and to aesthetic experience.

Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" represents perversity as an unfathomable craving, an intense *jouissance* connected to ghastly and loathsome images, imagined as a formless, miasmatic cloud inspiring feelings of "sickness and dizziness and horror" (Poe 270). As several theorists of disgust have suggested, disgust is intimately bound up with the notion of the surfeit and the transgression of limits, one giving way to just such an experience of excess. Miller, writing of "the strange association of desire and disgust," follows Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva to argue that "disgust and other reaction formations were not just there to prevent pleasure but were needed to heighten it, or even create the conditions for it" (113). Surpassing cultural barriers or limits and transgressing against social mores may inspire disgust, but it also engenders a kind of reverence: "those that violate the norms that hold us in their grip are objects of fear, loathing, awe, precisely the emotions that drive tragedy, horror, suspense, and some religious devotion" (Miller 115). Disgust can thus become limned with the sublime; as I will discuss at far greater length in the next chapter on Arthur Machen, it can even mingle closely with the sacred, with religious experience and a profound sense of the numinous. According to my reading of disgust in Poe's tales, the affect signals the eruption of the real, or the ontic, into the discursively mediated experience of life – into, for example, stories of connubial bliss as in "Ligeia" and "Morella," or into the domestic space of the Usher family, or the high society of Prince Prospero.

The eponymous Imp in "The Imp of the Perverse" externalizes thought, representing not only a breakdown of the division between consciousness and world but the narrator's desire to do wrongness for its own sake. In doing so, the Imp of the Perverse closely resembles what Schelling terms "evil," part of a principle of metaphysical freedom that he insists upon in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), his last finished book, as a means of preserving the human capacity for free will against the determinism and fatalism often attributed

to pantheistic monism of the kind presented by Spinoza. For Schelling, the ability to will evil constitutes the essence of human freedom. Evil consists in trying to return to the elemental chaos of indifferenciation, to surpass all individual, finite limits, a desire to be all things at once: “in evil there is the self-consuming and always annihilating contradiction that it strives to become creaturely by annihilating the bond of creaturely existing and, out of overweening pride to be all things, falls into non-Being” (Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* 55). The narrator’s revolt against the social order in Poe’s story suggests such a yearning for reunion with the real, with the Absolute. Though the confession of Poe’s murderous protagonist (one of the Imp’s “uncounted victims”) lands him in chains, he notes that in death he will have transcended all stricture and ventured into the unknown: “Tomorrow I shall be fetterless! – *but where?*” (Poe 271). “The Imp of the Perverse” thus marries together affect and metaphysical speculation, perversity and disgust giving rise to a kind of ontological curiosity. The story links the perverse desire for self-dissolution with fascination, what Korsmeyer would call disgust’s magnetism, a concomitant of its “transportive aesthetic insight” (133) which she tantalizingly compares to the Dionysian impulse of Nietzsche – what in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he describes as “the blissful ecstasy that wells up from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature” at the “collapse of the *principium individuationis*” (36) an ecstasy connected to the reaffirmation of “primordial unity” (37). The perverse desire for the loss of selfhood exhibited in Poe’s story accrues both transgressive joy and metaphysical significance, mingling together in poisonous unity like the vapours of the pestilential candle the Imp-possessed murderer lights to kill his victim.

Insofar as Poe’s fiction concerns itself first and foremost with the generation of affect – with, as Poe puts it in “The Philosophy of Composition,” the cultivation of “a vivid effect” (163) – it opens for the reader a metaphysical window. Disgust in Poe’s horror fiction stages an aesthetic

encounter with the real, with the Absolute, figured repeatedly through images of putrescence, death-in-life, disease, and decay. If, in its perversity, its lack of aesthetic distance, Poe's weird breaks with eighteenth-century traditions that positioned disgust as the limit of the aesthetic, this only strengthens its transgressive power to pierce the Kantian, correlationist veil between subject and the world-in-itself, fomenting an unlikely alliance between "bad taste" and metaphysical comprehension. By reading Poe as confronting through fiction what philosophy repeatedly falters upon, however, I do not want to simply reify an old understanding of Poe as a kind of anachronism or anomaly. Rather I want to read him not only as indebted to past metaphysicians – as embedded in, rather than resistant to, the philosophy of his time – but as the harbinger of an entire tradition of weird fiction invested in the comprehension of reality at its rawest, its most fundamental. By reading Poe as the forefather of the weird, I place him at the beginning of a historical and generic narrative that would continue to entangle the aesthetics of disgust with the nature of being and non-being, the distinctions between subjects and nature, and the essence of the universe. As the following chapters will show, the permutations of this impure amalgamation of the real and the revolting are manifold.

The Gothic and the weird with it went into something of a hibernation in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, what Joshi calls the "interregnum" (*Unutterable Horror* 109). While the trickle of supernatural stories would never dry up, and while authors such as the Brontës, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins borrowed liberally from the Gothic, it would take figures like Joseph Sheridan le Fanu (who coined the term "weird fiction") and Robert Louis Stevenson to once again open the floodgates, restoring the genre to something approaching its prominence in the early nineteenth century. The 1890s saw a febrile rekindling of interests in the horrific and the loathsome, and it is here that I turn next. It is in the late nineteenth century, I think, that we can

meaningfully begin think about weird fiction as a distinct genre coming fully into its own, and not merely a flavour of the Gothic: the process Poe begins, perhaps unknowingly, in the 1830s and 40s reaches a horrid maturation some fifty years later, with the grotesque flowering of the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*.

Chapter 3: Ecstasies of Slime: Arthur Machen

3.1 Horrific Hieroglyphs

Arthur Llewelyn Jones-Machen occupies a pivotal position in the history of weird fiction, revered by Lovecraft as one of the finest authors of “cosmic fear raised to its most artistic pitch” (*SHL* 92). An Anglo-Welsh author who dabbled in occultism, active for a time in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Machen wrote most of his best-known works of weird fiction in what has been called his “Great Decade” – the 1890s, during the full flush of the late-Victorian obsession with the supernatural, both in literature and in occult practice. In many ways, Machen’s views exemplify the mystic fascinations of his day, which included popular obsessions with spiritualism, mesmerism, clairvoyance, and mediumship, and which formed the basis for organizations like the Theosophical Society and even the ostensibly scientific Society for Psychical Research. Closely associated with John Lane’s Keynote Series, Machen’s works of Decadent, *fin-de-siècle* horror possess a dedication to aesthetic effect which harken back to Poe, but their influences also prominently include Celtic mythology, medieval romance, and the works of figures like François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes. While Poe was obviously interested in metaphysics to some extent, as *Eureka* attests, it seems clear that he turned to quasi-Schellingian German Idealism or “mysticism” in his fiction not, primarily, to impress upon readers the specifics of some particular cosmic vision, but rather to exploit the appetite of the antebellum reading public for horrible tales of the German school. Poe’s aesthetic predilections do not preclude a metaphysical reading of his works, as I have argued, but neither are his intentions predominantly oriented towards the expression of metaphysical truths or theories. The same cannot be said for Machen, who sought to weaponize his fiction in a war against what he saw as the dreary disenchantment of his age.

We find in Machen's stories figures and imagery that epitomize weird fiction, figures which would reappear thirty years later in Lovecraft's writing, and which have become falsely associated more with the latter author's work than with Machen's *fin-de-siècle* weird tales: antediluvian monsters from the depths of primordial abysses of deep time, hybrid creatures produced through the interbreeding of human beings and otherworldly forces, and, most importantly, a sense of numinous, unfathomable horror at the thought of nonhuman powers lurking behind the façade of everyday existence. In their intertwining of aesthetic experience and metaphysical speculation, his tales, like Poe's, revel in the repulsive and the grotesque. As with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Machen's horror novels and stories were often criticized as immoral and disgusting, as the reviews collected by Machen in the perversely titled *Precious Balms* (1924) attest. One reviewer for *The Lady's Pictorial*, for example, wrote of Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1890) that "men and women who are morbid and unhealthy in mind might find something that appeals to them in the description of Dr Raymond's experiments and results," but "the majority of readers will turn from it in disgust" (*Precious Balms* 12), while of *The Three Imposters* (1895) a reviewer declared that "There are some stories which produce a positive physical repulsion in their reader," and "Mr. Machen's extremely disagreeable story is one of them", describing the text as "palpably and very literally sickening" (18). Machen's weird fiction exemplifies what I have identified as the genre's key distinction from the Gothic as such – a conscious pivot away from the contents of the human mind and towards the nonhuman world in all its awful and awesome horror and wonder.

The ascendance of scientific materialism during the nineteenth century greatly problematized wide-spread and long-cherished conceptions of the supernatural and the transcendental soul, even while growing movements like spiritualism and Theosophy intensified

investigations of the occult and the esoteric beyond the traditional remit of Christian theology. Debates around both the ontological nature of reality and the possibility of our knowing and thinking it were also correspondingly intense. Towards the end of the century in Britain, neo-Hegelian Absolute Idealists were contesting the advances of naturalism and mechanistic materialism, while critics of Idealism like G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell attacked the ideas of organic unity and the Absolute early in the next century. Logical empiricism, positivism, and other variants of analytic philosophy would soon be shunning metaphysical systems in favour of verificationism, scientific methodology and a “common sense” approach to reality, hoping to make philosophy science’s handmaid. These seething intellectual conflicts are reflected in the pages of *fin-de-siècle* weird fiction, with many writers of the supernatural using their fiction to metaphorize and explore the shadowy concomitants of scientific progress and the tensions between science, faith, and metaphysics. Miss Lally, the protagonist of Machen’s “The Novel of the Black Seal” – one of the embedded tales in the mosaic novel *The Three Imposters* – while musing on such tensions, notes that:

Though I understood little or nothing, I began to dread, vainly proposing to myself the iterated dogmas of science that all life is material, and that in the system of things there is no undiscovered land even beyond the remotest stars, where the supernatural can find a footing. Yet there struck in on this the thought that matter is as really awful and unknown as spirit, that science itself but dallies on the threshold, scarcely gaining more than a glimpse of the wonders of the inner place. (100)

The philosophically vexed nature of matter, spirit, and ultimate reality described in this passage, and the question of our access to knowledge of them, was a central preoccupation for Machen, and Miss Lally’s musing about the possibilities of an immanent mystery untrammelled by the advances

of science encapsulates the core of his artistic and metaphysical concerns. A fervently if non-traditionally religious author, Machen was a mystic whose unorthodox Anglican faith was influenced by Catholicism, Celtic paganism, and his fleeting dalliance with the Golden Dawn; though Machen was, at times, suspicious and dismissive of some Theosophical and spiritualist thought, an interest in the occult animates much of his writing. Throughout his life, Machen remained a staunch critic of scientific materialism, railing against the rationalization of what he saw as a fundamentally mysterious world.

As S.T. Joshi writes, Machen deeply resented the intrusion of science into other fields, such as art, and decried such encroachments at every turn (*The Weird Tale* 14). Machen's antipathy for scientific materialism, his desire to restore to the world a sense of wonder and mystery, is reflected in his idiosyncratic aesthetic philosophy, a doctrine he expounds upon at length in his treatise *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902), which weaves into its arguments strands of ontology, theology, and epistemology. Here, Machen writes that for a text to be considered "fine literature" – for it to approach aesthetic greatness, and transcend mere "reading-matter" – it must contain what he calls 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 . . . which is not fine literature" (*Hieroglyphics* 24).

Machen's exact definition of ecstasy remains somewhat elusive throughout his treatise, sometimes to the point of ineffability, but he provides for it a list of potential alternative terms: "substitute if you like rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire of the unknown" (*Hieroglyphics* 24). Ecstasy constitutes a kind of revolt from a mundane existence – a "withdrawal from the common life" (*Hieroglyphics* 110) – and a return to a

mysterious reality of exultant imagination that Machen believes children still glimpse and which all human beings once enjoyed prior to the crushing advent of materialism and the “progress” of civilization. To invoke the Idealist metaphysics of F.C. Bradley, whose influential *Appearance and Reality* (1897) exemplifies late-Victorian British Idealism, Machen wants to recede from the world of mere “appearances,” with its contradictory-fraught phenomenal constructions and relations, and get instead at a unified “reality,” a divine wholeness beyond the veil of illusions that constitutes the physical world. Or, to put it in the terms of Meillassoux and the speculative realists, Machen wants to step outside of the correlationist circle and the supposedly (according to Kant and his successors) iron-clad bounds of individual consciousness and look instead upon the Great Outdoors. Science, while providing an account of the world-for-us, the superficial world as we perceive it as human beings, fails to account for the wholeness of true reality, Machen contends – a magical world of spiritual unity that has been lost, but which ecstasy in art can temporarily restore.

While at his most ambitious Machen wishes to truly unveil something of Godhead, he also believes that our perceptions of the world – even our phenomenal perceptions – have become tainted by the advent of science and modern education. He claims that:

. . . children, especially young children before they have been defiled by the horrors of “education,” possess the artistic emotion in remarkable purity, that they reproduce, in a measure, the primitive man before he was defiled, artistically, by the horrors of civilization. The ecstasy of the artist is but a recollection, a remnant from the childish vision, and the child undoubtedly looks at the world through “magic casements” . . . When men are young, the inward ecstasy, the “red powder of projection,” is of such efficacy and virtue that the

grossest and vilest matter is transmuted for them into pure gold, glistening and glorious as the sun. (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 101-102)

Machen's writing here and elsewhere repeatedly celebrates the idea of "primitive man," for whom "a common meal [was] a sacrament" (*Hieroglyphics* 176), a conception obviously informed by the Romantic trope of the noble savage as well as emerging modernist fascinations with "primitive" art. However, a close reading of *Hieroglyphics* reveals the bounds of what Machen considers "primitive" to be incredibly broad. For Machen, "primitive man, Homeric man, medieval man, indeed, almost to our own day when the School Board (and other things) have got hold of him, had such an unconscious but all-pervading conviction that he was a wonderful being, descended of a wonderful ancestry, and surrounded by mysteries of all kinds, that even the smallest details of his life partook of the ruling ecstasy" (*Hieroglyphics* 176).

If Machen's aesthetic objective, as he claims in *Hieroglyphics*, is to produce in readers a sense of ecstasy and awe in order to cultivate a form of gnosis, the sense of "delight" fomented by the literary sublime and the wonder it typically produces would logically seem the most fitting aesthetic experience to cultivate. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, theorists of the sublime have been careful to separate the sublime from the disgusting, construing the two as antithetical, inimical to one another: the forms of sublimity described Kant and Burke are incompatible with the disgusting. Yet time and time again, Machen turns not to the sublime but to the repulsive – to slime, putridity, corruptions of the flesh, and oozing, atavistic horrors. As Kelly Hurley notes of *The Great God Pan*, Machen's work "hardly makes an approach towards the sublime"; instead his texts "work to produce a nauseating affect" (47). Given Machen's aesthetic theory, his desire to re-create in readers a glimmer of some lost wondrousness, a deeper reality that "fine literature," through ecstasy, provides a glimpse, it is striking that much of Machen's literary output –

especially during the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* – is of a horrific, disgusting character. Machen’s weird fiction teems with disgusting monstrosities and revolting images deriving much of their visceral affective potency from anxieties surrounding the body and its violation, degradation, and deliquescence. Of particular prominence are beings that transform into, exude, or vomit forth slime, ooze, mucus, or semi-liquid putrescence – what William Ian Miller would call “life soup, the roiling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot, and regeneration” (18), which he believes is the paradigmatic stuff of disgust.

Machen’s taste for the disgusting, then, seems a counter-intuitive, even paradoxical choice when considering his aesthetic theories and metaphysical objectives. This chapter concerns itself with Machen’s intertwining of the ecstatic, the disgusting, and the metaphysical, examining those ways Machen’s texts seize upon an aestheticized form of disgust as a means of eliciting ecstasy and so conveying the sense of an occult reality beneath the physical world of appearances. I argue that Machen finds in disgust a means of aesthetic transport which is also, simultaneously, a method for combating the advances of reductive scientific materialism, without surrendering to the anthropocentrism that arises both from a correlationist account of the subject and its relation to the world and from late-Victorian culture’s scientific obsessions – anthropocentrism the traditional sublime would risk reifying. To demonstrate this, I read several of Machen’s key texts in relation to disgust, ecstasy, and theories of the grotesque and the “sacred-unclean,” considering the ways that Machen’s weird fiction works to impart a sense of revelation through an ecstatic affect intertwined with revulsion. I especially focus on the importance of slime, interpreting Machenesque slime as a representation of a divine, primordial substance, a seeping Godhead.

Previous scholars have paid relatively little attention to the philosophical theories expressed in Machen’s *Hieroglyphics*, and none have attempted to reconcile them coherently with

the strong element of disgust present in his stories. Several critics have discussed slime in Machen's work, however, often touching on the subject of disgust as they do so. Hurley, for example, links Machen's slimy monstrosities to materialism, contending that Machen's spiritualistic worldview is belied by his texts' tendency to collapse into "the terrible reality of physicality" (117). Hurley notes that "in its generation of an endless procession of abhuman embodiments the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic dictates, as the 'proper' somatic response to abhumanness, the sensation of disgust" (45), but she leaves the question of disgust's metaphysical potentiality – its capacity to incite ecstasy or some other form of transport, and so to act as a vehicle for gnosis – relatively unexplored. "Certainly we enjoy texts that evoke a strong affect," Hurley observes, "but why *this* affect, the unpleasurable sensation of nausea?" (49). Her reading illuminates some important historical and aesthetic contexts for Machen's weird fiction, but tends to elide Machen's ardent mysticism and anti-materialism. Other accounts, such as those of Susan J. Navarette, Adrian Eckersley, and Aaron Worth, have similarly emphasized the scientific contexts of Machen's texts, sometimes at the expense of their occult dimensions.²¹ Of these, Worth's account is particularly

²¹ A number of critics have discussed Machen's texts in terms of nineteenth-century science. Adrian Eckersley points to the relevance of theories of degeneration as espoused by thinkers and physicians like Cesare Lombroso, Henry Maudsley, and Max Nordau, claiming that while, in his estimation, Machen's stories "lack convincing characters" and feature convoluted and overly coincidental plot-lines, the anxiety of degeneration, "common to the age," that they express would have provided them a "compelling unity" to the late nineteenth-century reader (280). Eckersley suggests that "from the Enlightenment onwards, the imagery of evil was being translated gradually from a spiritual to a scientific register, just as the function of the priest as society's moral guardian was steadily and imperceptibly being taken over by the medical man; and the priest's sanctions of spiritual damnation were being replaced by the medical man's ideas of biological degeneration" (277). For Eckersley, then, Machen's fiction derives its aesthetic potency, its sense of horror and evil, from a profoundly physical rather than spiritual source, albeit one coloured by a spiritual

pertinent, as he has recently argued that Machen's horror fiction draws inspiration from Victorian theories of deep time, "the abysses of time disclosed by science" (217) – specifically by then-recent advances in paleontology, evolutionary biology, and geology. While he does not address Meillassoux's concept of the arche-fossil and its disruption of correlationism, his invocation of "abyssal" temporality does work to link the human and the nonhuman, to undo the "comforting conceptual separation from our bestial forebears," blending human and animal, history and

history. He reads Machen's weird fiction in terms of scientific materialism. Indeed, for Eckersley what grants Machen's tales their "immediacy" (277) is precisely their "roots more in biology than spirituality," their sense of "newness" rather than primitiveness (285). While these accounts address important dimensions of Machen's supernatural stories, their emphasis on scientific materialism and physicality remain at odds with the theories of ecstasy elucidated in *Hieroglyphics*, effacing the mystic, anti-materialist, anti-positivist, Romantic, and occult elements present both in Machen's texts themselves and in his philosophical writings. Moreover, such approaches, though historically illuminating, frequently leave the tantalizingly metaphysical implications of the aesthetics of disgust in Machen's works unexamined, even when noting the revulsion they can elicit. Roger Luckhurst does observe that Machen was satirizing and criticizing scientific materialism, noting the ways that the structure of texts like *The Three Imposters* call into question "the certainty of any one system of meaning" and creating a "quick shuffle between mysticism and scepticism" (201). Other critics, such as Sondeep Kandola, Mark De Cicco, Susan Graf, and Nicholas Freeman have taken Machen's mysticism more seriously. While I build on their scholarship in my analysis, these critics do not substantively engage with the elements of disgust in Machen's texts; indeed, some of them tend to gravitate towards Machen's non-horror works, such as the *The Secret Glory* (1922), as opposed to the weird fiction of his "Great Decade," the 1890s – in his later works as in his personal spiritual life, Machen increasingly veered away from occultism and gravitated towards a more typical Anglicanism, albeit one inflected with elements of the Celtic Church. The problem, then, is that critics who do think about Machen and disgust tend to emphasize science and risk falling into a materialist reading at odds with Machen's aesthetics and metaphysics, while those who consider his mysticism in detail fail to consider the role of slime and the role of the disgusting in sufficient detail.

prehistory, to elicit emotional effects and uncover “collectively suppressed” continuities (225), a reading that will prove useful in relation to the idea of the unthinkable.

Though my account draws on readings of the weird monster’s bodily mutability and categorical instability, it pursues the question of disgust’s aestheticization and its link to metaphysics in light of Machen’s *Hieroglyphics*, his desire, as Joshi puts it, “to restore the sense of wonder and mystery into our perception of the world” (*The Weird Tale* 16). Rather than reading slime and other textual elicitors of disgust in Machen’s works as signifying the world’s amorphous physicality or the entrapment of his characters in matter, I draw on theories of the grotesque to conceptualize slime as a sacramental substance that, for Machen, elicits aesthetic ecstasy by troubling materialist ontology, unsettling scientific ways of knowing, and confounding a naïve or “common sense” realism as he perceived it, while simultaneously suggesting an occult, undifferentiated world, a primal, spiritual unity. Machen’s universe is doggedly anti-anthropocentric, his God anti-anthropomorphic: his view of reality is not fettered to the bounds of individual subjectivity but forever gestures to an immanent Godhead which, while including the human, is not formed in humanity’s image. The divine substance Machen imagines shares more in common with Spinoza’s pantheistic universe, the Idealist metaphysics of British neo-Hegelianism, and *fin-de-siècle* occultism than to traditional Christian metaphysics: Machen’s God is not some distant, anthropoid sovereign operating from outside the universe, but a mysterious force known and felt subconsciously, coursing through everything and everyone. The world Machen seeks to reveal is what Thomas Carlyle, following the “Germans,” calls in “State of German Literature” (1827) the “Primitive Truth, the necessarily, absolutely and eternally *True*” (68), and Machen’s weird fiction serves “to open the inward eye to the sight of the Primitively

True,” using grotesque estrangement to “clear off the Obscurations of Sense, which eclipse this truth within us” (69).

My analysis will focus on several key texts in Machen’s corpus which exemplify the aesthetic applications of disgust in relation to ecstasy, all of them from Machen’s “Great Decade.” After a brief exploration of the occult, esoteric contexts that inform Machen’s writing, I will begin with Machen’s novella *The Great God Pan*, focusing not only on the tale’s slimy grotesques but on the narrative nausea the story’s structure elicits, its implications for the form and aesthetics of the weird tale, the cultivation of “ecstasy,” and the metaphysical vistas such ecstasy reveals. Next, I move on to Machen’s intricate novel *The Three Imposters*, with a particular focus on two of the interpolated tales therein, “The Novel of the Black Seal” and “The Novel of the White Powder.” These texts have attracted critical attention and influenced later authors of horror and weird fiction, and illustrate Machen’s fascination with and aestheticization of disgust in the context of debates around materialism, mysticism, and metaphysics. Through disgust, I suggest, Machen seeks to estrange readers from what he sees as the illusory world of pure materiality posited by a narrowly circumscribed scientific naturalism and rationalism, to reveal a deeper, mystic reality throbbing beneath the fragile skein of the physical. As such, I argue that Machen uses disgust in his fiction as an affective weapon in his struggle against scientific materialism and its generic concomitant, conventional literary realism.

3.2 The *Fin-de-Siècle* Mystic Revival

Though later in life Machen became more ambivalent towards occultism, his early literary work is steeped in the esoteric thinking of *fin-de-siècle* Britain. Nicholas Freeman suggests that Machen’s ecstasy “transcended or overrode doctrinal affiliations” and was deeply personal, part

of a “spiritual quest” (253). He notes that Machen’s concept of ecstasy is linked to ideas of epiphany that stand in stark contrast with the more secular versions taken up by modernist writers (Freeman 242). While the modernists derived their epiphanic ecstasy from such sources as the controversial and essentially materialist conclusion of Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* (1873),²² Machen’s ecstasy has more in common with the medieval ecstasy of Meister Eckhart (Freeman 249), as well as the *mysterium tremendum* as articulated fifteen years after Machen’s *Hieroglyphics* by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). Machen’s occult associations climaxed in his induction into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the most prominent magical society of the age, which he joined shortly after losing his wife to cancer in 1899. His interest in the occult, however, long preceded his time in the Order and was especially strong during his Great Decade. Graf notes that while Machen “silently and privately repudiated his life during the ‘yellow nineties’” and the “sexually dark, spiritually dangerous *oeuvre*” of his 1890s weird fiction, his Decadent supernatural stories were written near the height of his occult fascination (63). Wesley Sweetser similarly remarks in his critical biography of Machen that during the 1890s, Machen “openly embraced the cause of the idealists, the anti-materialists, the romanticists, and the mystics” (29) and was a close friend and frequent correspondent with A.E. Waite, a prominent occultist and co-creator of the enduringly popular Rider-Waite Tarot – indeed, Waite likely introduced Machen to the Golden Dawn, as Mark Valentine observes (73).

While Machen’s involvement in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was brief, the Order’s occult goals parallel his literary ambitions: as Graf suggests, “for a Golden Dawn initiate, the work at hand was to make contact with the divine spark that was thought to reside in all

²² This is not to say that Pater’s aesthetics have nothing in common with Machen’s; certainly, Pater made significant contributions to the Symbolist movement in Britain.

humans” (8) to navigate a multilayered reality and approach a Godhead that, “was not unchristian,” but which “was Jewish and pagan in addition to being Christian” (7). The mystic revival of the 1890s grew out of the Theosophical Society, itself a hybrid of American spiritualism and “Eastern-oriented metaphysics” (Owen 29), as well as the spiritualist movement popular throughout much of the later nineteenth century, though *fin-de-siècle* mystics like Machen tended to distance themselves from the spiritualists. As Alex Owen observes in her history of Victorian occultism *The Place of Enchantment* (2004), “contemporaries regarded the spiritual developments at the end of the century as quite distinct from recent precursors,” and even while the spiritualists “raised their standard against what they saw as the crude materialism of the age,” they often made “positivist claims” (20). Owen also draws a firm distinction between traditional religious thought – and the onto-theology typical of organized religion – and late-Victorian mysticism. While noting that “occultism was characterized by a particular view and understanding of the universe, and of the place of humankind within it, which could loosely be called religious” (Owen 27), she argues that the mystic revival was more than a response to a “Godless universe” but rather grew out of a confluence of “late-Victorian intellectual trends and fashionable interests” (28).

Rather than a single dogmatic metaphysics, then, syncretism and eclecticism remained central both to Machen’s idiosyncratic spirituality and to the *fin-de-siècle* mystic revival in general. Waite, in *The Occult Sciences* (1891), comments that the terms “transcendental, Hermetic, Rosicrucian, mystical, and esoteric and occult” were all used more-or-less “indiscriminately” over the course of the nineteenth century (1), and his compendium documents such diverse practices as alchemy, astrology, Kabbalah, mesmerism, and Theosophy. Machen himself describes an eclectic catalogue of texts he compiled in “The Literature of Occultism and Archeology” (1885), including “obscure treatises on Alchemy, on Astrology, on Magic,” books “about Witchcraft, Diabolical

Posessoïn, ‘Fascination,’ or the Evil Eye,” various “comments on the Kabbala,” and notes on “Gnostics and Mithraists,” “Neoplatonists,” and “the modern throng of Diviners and Stargazer and Psychometrists and Animal Magnetists and Mesmerists and Spiritualists and Psychic Researchers” (quoted in *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen* 165). Given the heterogeneity of *fin-de-siècle* occultism, it would be a mistake to impose a single occult framework on Machen’s fiction, to project a totalizing occult “system” onto his work. While individual branches of occult practice certainly espoused different sets of beliefs – Theosophical emanationism, for example, emphasized the indivisibility of matter and spirit more than other esoteric philosophies (Owen 38) – the disparate array of mysticisms, occultisms, and esotericisms at play around the turn of the twentieth century were united in their shared disdain for materialism, positivism, and in particular the “mechanical” model of the universe popularized by Victorian scientists like Huxley and Spencer. Owen notes that while the mystic revival was a hodgepodge, incorporating aspects of Renaissance Christian mysticism, the pagan Greek mysteries, Eastern religion, and German Idealism, “what united many of these different trends and factions was a loosely Neoplatonic belief in an occluded spirit realm and a broadly conceived sense of an animistic universe in which all of creation is interrelated and part and expression of a universal soul or cosmic mind” (21).

It is this concept of a shadowy, “occluded spirit realm” that underlies much of Machen’s writing, including his aesthetic theories in *Hieroglyphics*. Machen may not have fully accepted the Golden Dawn as a serious occult organization – Valentine suggests that Machen felt for the Order and its later offshoots the same kind of affection he cultivated towards “various fraternal drinking societies” (74), several of which, such as the “Rabelaisian Order of Teapots” and the “Sodality of the Shadows,” he founded himself (78) – but his writings do express a firm belief in this obfuscated spiritual dimension, a primal reality for which the world of matter is a symbol and sacrament that

an excessively reductionist materialism has mistaken for the totality of existence. Like other Victorian intellectuals, Machen found in the occult a respite from the seemingly implacable advances of mechanistic materialism, a last redoubt of fervent, determined anti-materialism in which to shelter from the forces of positivism, secularism, and modernity that were transforming the world around him in a way that appalled him.

Apart from their shared interest in a spiritual reality underlying, interfusing, or superseding the world of matter, occult movements were also united in their intense interest in the past – an atavistic fascination that parallels *fin-de-siècle* scientific preoccupation with theories of degeneration – and in the foreign – an obsession informed by the Orientalist and generally imperialist enthusiasms of the day. These fixations, as well, are illuminating to consider in Machen’s aesthetic thought and weird fiction. Resisting the powerful meta-narrative of progress and advancement fostered by nineteenth-century science (though, of course complicated by dissenting voices and scientific considerations of regression), *fin-de-siècle* occultists turned to the past – to Hebraic mysticism, medieval Christian mysticism, Gnosticism, Ancient Egyptian religion, and other old belief systems. Simultaneously, they looked outward to systems of thought beyond the familiar, comfortable constraints of nineteenth-century Christianity. The occult thus served as an alternative both to a moribund Christianity and to the spiritual sterility of mechanistic materialism. As Patrick Brantlinger suggests, late-Victorian occultism functioned alongside imperialism as a kind of substitute ideology for both “declining and fallen Christianity” and also “for declining faith in England’s future” (246), mitigating the malaise precipitated by the erosion of traditional systems of belief. Such anxieties are clearly at play in Machen’s theoretical and literary writing; *Hieroglyphics* is centrally concerned with recovering a mode of mystic perception common to “primitive man,” in which a sacred unity disavowed by modern civilization is

recovered, and the text's touchstone examples of "fine literature" (that is, ecstatic literature) prominently include the *Odyssey*, Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and Rabelais' *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Machen attempts, through his fiction, to recuperate this "forgotten" way of seeing the world, to uncover the hidden world of the spirit.

The occult attraction to the past finds an artistic parallel in the Symbolist movement, and despite his distinct lack of doctrinal affiliation, Machen's aesthetics can be broadly associated both with Decadence generally and the nostalgic "Celtic Twilight" beloved by the Symbolists more particularly; his Celtic fascination is evident both in his frequent use of fairies and in his interest in the Grail myth and other elements of Arthurian legend.²³ As Murray Pittock observes, the Symbolists found in the Celtic past "a way of attacking the bourgeoisie and Victorian materialist culture" (86). Pittock notes that Symbolism and occultism share "a deliberate interest in some of the ways of thinking practised in [the] past," such as, for example, "the idea of an animate universe" (10), and that Symbolist ideology sought to challenge scientific and empirical accounts of reality in order to encourage different ways of thinking (11). As Arthur Symons observes in his 1893 essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature," Decadent artists sought "not general truth merely but *la vérite vraie*, the very essence of truth – the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it; and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision" (859). Symbolists in particular, Symons writes, seek "that which can be apprehended only by the soul – the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident" (859). Here we can also find a connection to Poe, whose influence on Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé helped to shape the Symbolist movement. While decades (and the Atlantic Ocean) separate Machen and

²³ Indeed, Machen's *The Great Return* (1915) and *The Secret Glory* originate the idea of the Grail surviving into the modern era, a trope which has endured in popular culture ever since.

Poe, in many ways Machen follows on from Poe both aesthetically and metaphysically. The Schellingian, Idealist ontology and Dark Romantic obsession with decomposition and dissolution which preoccupy Poe's more "cosmic" or "proto-weird" tales have much in common with Machen's esotericism and his own fascination with deliquescence, the slime of decay, and the capacity for such profane and disgusting imagery to produce powerful emotional effects which have metaphysical implications.

Before delving into *The Great God Pan* and its entwinement of the grotesque, the ecstatic, and the esoteric, it is worth touching on the links between recent developments in speculative realism and the occult philosophy that underlies Machen's work, and which his weird fiction artistically instantiates: like the post-Kantian Idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, mysticism has been of interest to the speculative realists. Thacker observes that mysticism "aims for a total union of the division between self and world" (*DTP* 158), bridging the correlationist gap. He notes that mystics like Eckhart developed a conception of God which was "non-anthropomorphic, abstract, and metaphysical," a being which is "not one part seen, and one part unseen" but rather "a flow and unbroken continuity" (Thacker, *SSC* 25). Mysticism, then, offers another means of accessing Meillasoux's Great Outdoors. *Fin-de-siècle* occultists like Machen not only opposed a reductive materialist account of the world, they were attempting to tap into a version of the suprasensible world, to reach beyond the borders of individual consciousness and touch the divine. What we might call the spirit of occult realism animating Machen's writing, moreover, has profound implications for the contours and constraints of the self. As Owen puts it, "the occult conceived of divinity as bound up in complex ways with the self just as occult practice sought direct experience of both divinity and a spiritualized 'real' through a unique understanding and

exploration of subjective consciousness” (147). Disgust, as I will show, plays a crucial and perhaps unexpected role in this restoration of the sacred in Machen’s weird fiction.

3.3 Sacramental Slime and *The Great God Pan*

Machen’s Decadent masterpiece *The Great God Pan* is simultaneously a tale of Victorian experimental neurosurgery and one of mystic experimentation in the tradition of *fin-de-siècle* occultism, mingling Judeo-Christian imagery and Celtic and Roman myth in its idiosyncratic evocation of a spiritual world beyond the “dreams and shadows” (10) of what Machen saw as the vapid materialism of his day – an ecstatic reality which, through “transcendental medicine” (8), might be explored. The weird novel is, in addition to all these things, a singularly disgusting work. As Susan Navarette suggests, the novel “was designed to produce in the reader . . . symptoms of confusion, indeterminacy, and destabilization” as well as “a visceral shudder or a sense of physical aversion” (196). While critics have situated the novel in a set of specifically materialist and scientific contexts, recent scholarship has begun to explore the occult aspects of the story. Though focused on *The Three Imposters*, Sondeep Kandola’s research on Celtic symbolism in Machen’s work mentions *The Great God Pan* alongside Machen’s other tales of Welsh mysticism, while Kostas Boyiopoulos claims that the “Dionysian frenzy of fauns and satyrs” the text imagines – beginning with the lurid Aubrey Beardsley cover of the 1894 edition, depicting an androgynous faun – is merely “a frontage of an understated Judeo-Christian scheme” (363), linking the story’s antagonist, the alluring and repulsive Helen Vaughan, to Lilith and the Antichrist. Darryl Jones touches briefly on the story in his survey of spiritualism and occultism in *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian Welsh and Irish horror, in which he suggests that the story negotiates “the permeable borderland between the two worlds of spirit and matter” (36). A more thorough treatment of the

tale's occult dimensions can be found in Mark De Cicco's recent article "'More than Human': The Queer Occult Explorer of the *Fin-de-siècle*," which contends that alienated Victorian intellectuals, reeling and disoriented in a post-Darwinian and increasingly scientific world stripped of traditional spiritual meaning, saw in the occult an alternate system of thought "in which marginalized belief in supernatural forces could be reorganized and re-amalgamated" as part of an "anti-materialist, anti-positivist quest" for the "eternal/Otherworld that lay beyond the sensorial world claimed by the materialist trend that had dominated scientific thought since the Enlightenment" (6).

Here, I build on conceptions of *The Great God Pan* as a specifically esoteric, anti-materialist text while pursuing the question of ecstasy and disgust in Machen's work, suggesting that aestheticized disgust plays a crucial role in Machen's anti-materialist search for the spiritual. Reading Helen Vaughan's hybrid body and the protoplasmic slime it dissolves into as a grotesque anomaly designed to estrange readers from a materialist conception of reality, I suggest that the story constitutes Machen's attempt to restore – through text rather than neurosurgery – a sense of the numinous. Contrary to De Cicco's reading of the tale as a cautionary one, "a dire warning against dabbling with forces beyond the pale of normative knowledge and science" (17), I read the novel as an extended esoteric experiment on Machen's part designed to inculcate a kind of revelatory nausea, a powerful affective state that will, Machen hopes, lead readers to see "the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes" (*The Great God Pan* 10) and thus, perhaps, catch a fleeting glimpse of Pan themselves. While this state resembles the affective transport supplied by the sublime, I draw on an understanding of the grotesque as the sublime's shadow rather than relating disgust in *The Great God Pan* to the sublime itself. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes, "both the sublime and the grotesque exceed rational balance by resisting the observer's attempt to encompass what it observes," but the grotesque specifically engenders a fascination with "the

anomalous and chaotic,” derived from “experiencing combinations of elements that cannot occur, or should not occur, according to the established categories of scientific reason or customary observation” (79).

The Great God Pan was published first in *The Whirlwind* in 1890, then revised and republished in 1894 as part of the somewhat notorious Keynote Series of novels and short fiction put out by John Lane, the same publisher as the periodical *The Yellow Book* whose name has become synonymous with Decadence and Beardsleyesque grotesquery and lent its name to the “yellow nineties.” Machen’s novel begins with “The Experiment,” originally an independent story altogether, in which a neurosurgical procedure is conducted by the sinister Dr. Raymond on Mary Vaughan, a young woman Raymond “rescued from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child,” and whose life he therefore claims as his own “to use as [he sees] fit” (*The Great God Pan* 16). Dr. Raymond describes the operation in starkly materialistic terms: “a slight lesion in the grey matter, that is all; a trifling rearrangement of certain cells, a microscopical alteration that would escape the attention of ninety-nine brain specialists out of a hundred” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 11). In an 1894 letter to Lane on the subject of the first chapter, Machen writes that:

If I were writing in the Middle Ages I should need no scientific basis for the reason that in those days the supernatural *per se* was entirely credible. In these days the supernatural *per se* is entirely *incredible*; to believe, we must link our wonders to some scientific fact, or basis, or method. Thus we do not believe in ‘ghosts’ but in *telepathy*, not in ‘witchcraft,’ but in *hypnotism*. If Mr Stevenson had written his great masterpiece about 1590-1650, Dr Jekyll would have made a compact with the devil; in 1886 Dr Jekyll sends to the Bond Street chemists for some rare drug. (218)

Despite this seeming concession to the scientific mindset of his readers, Machen almost immediately complicates and problematizes the clinical materialism framing the experiment, as Dr. Raymond expounds his aim to span “the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds” (*The Great God Pan* 14) – a phrase that might as easily apply to the quest of the speculative realists, to bridge the correlationist gulf between self and world. Dr. Raymond is seeking, through his experiment, a means of exploring a “sphere unknown,” with “continents and islands, and great oceans in which no ship has sailed . . . since a Man first lifted up his eyes and beheld the sun and the stars of heaven, and the quiet earth beneath” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 13). Though the operation Raymond performs is a scientific, surgical procedure rather than a mystic ritual *per se*, a minor adjustment to “a certain group of nerve-cells in the brain” which previous scientists had been unable to fully account for, he intends the result of the experiment to “level utterly the solid wall of sense” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 15), and so the procedure is as much occult as it is scientific. To put it another way, while the procedure bears the trappings of scientific materialism, the metaphysics it is designed to confirm are not in any sense materialist, but presuppose a spiritual “Great Outdoors” – an occult world, a normally suprasensible absolute reality.

Following the surgery, Mary sees “the Great God Pan,” but is left imbecilic, “rolling her head from side to side, and grinning vacantly” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 27); she also becomes pregnant as a result of the surgery, in what Boyiopoulos reads as a Satanic travesty of the immaculate conception in which Machen “appropriates the supernatural conception through the ear, from the spiritual sphere to the sphere of organic matter,” replacing “holy breath” with “the Victorian scalpel” (365). Mary dies, but her daughter, Helen, survives and proceeds to wreak havoc on London, pursuing a series of marriages (thus changing her name several times) and luring

seemingly upright, life-loving male socialites into despair and horror so intense they commit suicide, usually through grotesque, eroticized self-strangulation. What, exactly, Helen shows her victims – or does with them – is never fully disclosed: repeatedly, characters refuse to speak of what they have seen, only hinting at the mysterious diableries into which Helen tempts them. Herbert, one of Helen’s husbands, says to the inquisitive London flâneur Villiers that “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” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 54-55). Helen’s crimes themselves are unspeakable and unthinkable; the best hint we get as to the specifics of Helen’s activities is a drawing, sketched by one of Helen’s victims, depicting a “frightful Walpurgis Night of evil, strange monstrous evil” in which the “figures of Fauns and Satyrs and Ægipans” dance and writhe” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 97), though there are also suggestions of an incestuous, paedophilic affair between Helen and her malevolent father, Pan, during her childhood. At the end of her rash of lethal debaucheries – whose serial nature De Cicco speculates may have been inspired by the murders of Jack the Ripper, reading Helen as “essentially a female, aristocratic Jack the Ripper-figure . . . a queer, refracted mirror image of both sexual attraction and horror that undermines the normative structure of late Victorian London” (16) – Helen is found out by the indefatigable Villiers and his gentlemanly associate Austin, who confront her and offer her a noose, threatening to alert the police if she refuses to kill herself by the same method as her victims. Helen chooses the proffered noose, but upon her death she dissolves into protean amorphousness, a mass of bestial forms that eventually give way to a primordial jelly and then, ultimately, a “Form . . . too foul to be spoken of” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 145).

The Great God Pan is preoccupied with descriptions of Helen’s body, descriptions that seem calculated to elicit both disgust and desire simultaneously but which also become linked with

occult speculation. The overall effect is that Helen, despite the copious description she is afforded, disrupts language and its power to describe the world: she is unspeakable, defying efforts to categorize or define her. Moreover, she also seems to be unthinkable, beyond the remit of ordinary cognition, a condition that precipitates both repugnance and fascination. Austin claims to Villiers that all who look on Helen declare her “at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they have ever set eyes on” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 67). She inspires an enigmatic and ineffable abhorrence; Austin states that when he spoke to one who saw her, “he positively shuddered as he tried to describe the woman, but he couldn’t say why” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 67). Susan B. Miller argues that one of the central tasks to which disgust is put is the promotion of “certain self-conceptions, certain illusions, even” (6); disgust, on one level, works “to protect the spiritual integrity of the individual or the group, either of which can insist that something is morally, ethically, or aesthetically unacceptable” (7). This function of disgust is readily apparent in Machen’s treatment of Helen’s body. The disgust it inspires – and the cultural anxieties it encodes – is overdetermined: her body is excessive, monstrous, fecund with revulsion-producing signification. As Jack Halberstam writes, “monsters mark difference with and upon their bodies,” for “within the traits that make a body monstrous – that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting – we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native” (8). With her “clear olive skin and almost Italian appearance” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 43), Helen is ethnically Othered, harnessing contemporary unease surrounding foreignness, race, and reverse-colonization in much the same manner that other works of “imperial Gothic” – texts like Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897), as well as later works such as the stories of H.P Lovecraft – play on the potential disgust produced by forms of difference. What Helen – and, indeed, many of her

monstrous kindred in other weird and Gothic texts – reveals, however, is not the ontological “truth” of difference, not some robust, essentialist distinction between categories, but the possibility of their dissolution. Helen’s otherness, her disgustingness, always threatens to seep beyond her, to spill out of her body; she is a manifestation of a metaphysical indifferenciation that threatens to undo the categories that help to constitute the world of appearances, and so estrange us from the comforting, reliable world-for-us.

Helen is also a hybrid, the product of a union between the human and the nonhuman, and so her body destabilizes taxonomic boundaries, blurring the borders of “humanity” and throwing into crisis the schema by which we make sense of the world. Her parentage is both human and divine, both physical and spiritual, and her link with the hircine deity Pan smudges the line between divine and bestial. Her gender and sexuality are also central to the sense of disgust she might inspire in a Victorian audience. As Carol Margaret Davison argues, in the face of socio-political shifts surrounding conceptions of gender and sexuality during the Victorian period, “the explicit battlefield . . . was the female body and the issue of embattled femininity” (125). Moving from husband to husband and leaving a trail of bodies in her wake, Helen emerges as a femme fatale, a sexual parasite. In this she resembles many other supernatural villainesses of the period, such as Stoker’s vampiric Lucy Westenra, who, like Helen, is instilled with “languorous, voluptuous grace” (197), an allure belied by her monstrous visage resembling “the passion masks of the Greeks and Japanese” (198).

Helen’s transgressive sexuality and multivalent monstrosity are construed in terms of a kind of contagion or disease. As De Cicco writes, Helen “becomes a queer force of nonnormative sexuality and consequently is a mental and physical danger to all of those around her” (16). Helen’s presence is frequently described in terms of contamination. Early in the novel she terrifies a

childhood playmate, Trevor, who glimpses her “playing in the grass with ‘a strange naked man,’ whom he seemed unable to describe further” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 38) but who is later identified with her father, Pan; Trevor contracts a case of what is diagnosed as “violent hysteria” (41) which leaves him with “a weakness of intellect” (42), a description whose gendered nature suggests that Helen’s disorderliness has affected Trevor as well, destabilizing his masculinity. Accounts of Helen’s activities likewise provoke symptoms of hysteria and sickness: upon hearing of another of Helen’s youthful encounters, Clarke suffers a “paroxysm of horror” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 45), as if the mere mentioning of her deeds was sufficient to produce a hysterical reaction, the “hysteric paroxysm” being one of the chief diagnostic symptoms of hysteria (Laycock 1). As Hurley argues, “a ripple of revulsion emanates from without the unspecifiably disgusting body of Helen Vaughan, infecting even the most casual observer” (49). Even the sight of a manuscript recounting the details of Helen’s sexualized occultism (a manuscript whose text, naturally, Machen withholds from readers) is enough to provoke physical sickness: Austin, glancing at a single phrase of the manuscript, becomes “sick at heart, with white lips and a cold sweating pouring like water from his temples” (*The Great God Pan* 134).

Speaking of Helen likewise engenders nausea; one individual grows sick in the mere telling of Helen’s “nameless infamies” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 129). Entering a room in which Helen’s diabolism was conducted produces in Villiers a sensation he compares to being poisoned:

“. . . it was more physical than mental. It was as if I were inhaling at every breath some deadly fume, which seemed to penetrate to every nerve and bone and sinew of my body. I felt racked from head to foot, my eyes began to grow dim; it was like the entrance of death.”

(Machen, *The Great God Pan* 88-89)

At the same time, however, Helen is also presented as intensely, supremely desirable. Her physical attractiveness is mentioned time and time again, her beauty caught up in and inextricable from her inhumanness, her repulsiveness: Herbert describes her as “a girl of the most wonderful and most strange beauty” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 53) and tells of his wedding night when, in her “beautiful voice,” she speaks of things “which even now [he] would not dare whisper in blackest night, though [he] stood in the midst of a wilderness” (54). As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s fifth and sixth theses of “Monster Theory” suggest, monsters on the one hand embody all that “must be exiled or destroyed” – “the monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker,” linked to “forbidden practices” (16) – but on the other hand also seduce and attract, evoking “potent escapist fantasies”: “the linking of the monster with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from restraint” (17). Susan Miller points out that “the bounded state is not the only state of being humans enjoy and value, nor the only state we seek,” as “we look as well for moments in which boundaries are blurred and abandoned, moments that bring the outside in and cast doubt on the salience of the demarcated self” (16). Helen Vaughan is brimming with life to the point of excess; her corruption is contagious in part because of its perverse desirability, its vitality.

Helen’s infectiously boundary-blurring, grotesquely category-disrupting body is simultaneously the source of her disgustingness and her capacity to incite ecstasy as defined in *Hieroglyphics*. In defying the rationalistic schemas which science utilizes to model and make sense of the world, troubling ontological boundaries, and embodying a host of contradictions, Helen undermines the materialist worldview that Machen opposes. At the end of the novel, she dissolves entirely into an esoteric iteration of protoplasmic slime, an occult ooze that serves as the ultimate incarnation of grotesque flux, becoming one with Pan, the force that sired her, “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” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 22-23). Her transformation is recounted in the final section of the novel, “The Fragments,” in a description worth quoting at length that foregrounds both her deliquescence’s revoltingness and its ecstatic strangeness:

“Though horror and revolting nausea rose up within me, and an odor 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 knew 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 has been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed . . .

“I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again . . . [Here the MS. is illegible] for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not further describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of . . . as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death.” (Machen, *The Great God Pan* 143-145)

The passage is fraught with an underlying ambivalence, a vacillation between horror and fascination: the writer, Dr. Robert Matheson, is uncertain whether he is “privileged or accursed,” and though he is filled with “revolting nausea” due to the pestilential “odor of corruption” Helen’s decomposing body exudes, his description evokes the presence of a mysterious “internal force,” a supreme energy of the sort imagined by *fin-de-siècle* occultists. As Helen’s skin, flesh, and muscles slough off into formlessness all that seemed “unchangeable” and “permanent as adamant” gives way to metamorphic flux: the solid, knowable world of matter gives way instead to “jelly” and then, ultimately, to “a horrible and unspeakable shape” which is “too foul to be spoken of.” Helen’s body is both divine and disgusting all at once, awful and awesome, its unspeakability suggesting that to speak of it, to represent it, would be a kind of blasphemy. Even as Helen traverses the evolutionary chain in what Navarette calls a “reverse ontogeny” (190) the vitalist life-force Machen sees as interfusing the sacrament of the material world is revealed, “the principle of life” which “always remains.” Thus, through Helen’s grotesque dissolution, Machen gestures towards a numinous existence beneath the familiar, knowable world of “common life,” an immanent, pantheistic divinity.

It is here that I think theories of what Geoffrey Galt Harpham calls “the special logic of sacred uncleanness” (83) become relevant in a consideration of Machen’s aestheticization of disgust and the grotesque slippage between mystery and blasphemy, sin and ecstasy that *The Great God Pan* exhibits. Taking up Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966), Harpham construes the sacred unclean as “the source of our powerful and contradictory feelings concerning things that are both high and low, both transcendental and descendent” (81) a juxtaposition reflecting an archaic or “primitive” understanding of the slippage between the divine and the tainted. “The modern mind finds it especially difficult to see what qualifies filth to be sacred,” Harpham writes,

“because we have lost the sense of participation in a living cosmos that renews itself in an organic pattern” (82). Thus, for societies embracing notions of sacred uncleanness, “everything that comes out of the body . . . can, with proper ritualization, be made creative,” since “all the body’s outcast substances are heavy with creation, and so the simplest bodily acts can be a medium of communication with the divine” (82). As Douglas herself writes, “our idea of sanctity has become very specialized,” and “sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement” – the very idea of sacred uncleanness seems paradoxical since “there is nothing in our rules of cleanness to suggest any connection between dirt and sacredness” (9). But for other societies practising what Douglas calls “primitive religion,” the distinction between “sanctity and uncleanness” is less clear: “sacred rules are . . . rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness the two-way danger of contact with divinity” (9). While Douglas notes that “each culture must have its own notions of dirt and defilement,” she points out that “it still remains true that religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence” (196). Dirt, filth, waste, the unclean – such things are discarded “in the course of any imposing of order” and are thus “recognizably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away” (Douglas 197). But like the revivifying waters of a primeval deluge, dirt “purifies and regenerates” by restoring “even if only for a moment” the primal “integrity of the dawn of things” (Douglas 199). Thus, for Douglas, “formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay” (198).

Like Harpham and Douglas, the seminal theorist of the grotesque Wolfgang Kayser argues that grotesquery “presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable” (185), involving “the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape, the suspension

of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order” (185). If, as Kayser suggests, “the grotesque is the estranged world” (184) which “appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments” (186), it also serves as a key to the spiritual reality Machen and his fellow occultists imagine, a vehicle for revelation. In its category-annihilating, identity-disrupting liminality, the grotesque slime into which Helen dissolves embodies the quintessence of the estranged world that is normally hidden – occult.

Douglas and Harpham’s conception of the sacred unclean and Kayser’s theory of the grotesque are productive to consider in relation to Machen’s horror generally – and *The Great God Pan* in particular – in light of his mystic reverence for the primitive and the primordial, especially when integrated with Korsmeyer’s concept of “aesthetic cognition.” Helen’s deliquescence into primordial slime exemplifies the special logic of sacred uncleanness, being at once the epitome of disgust, an unspeakable “jelly” of supreme revoltingness suggestive of William Iain Miller’s “life soup,” while simultaneously demonstrating the shared substance of all things, the primal oneness of an occult reality. For Miller, slime is the most potent elicitor of disgust imaginable because its viscous, sticky contagiousness makes it the ideal vehicle for spreading impurity: what he calls life soup is “the boiling and seething of life,” life which is unruly and contaminating (64). Not only does bodily waste manifest frequently as slime, slime is inherently a paradoxical substance, being neither wholly liquid nor solid but an unsettlingly non-Newtonian mixture of the two. Slime does not fit into what Miller, following Douglas, calls the “ordering structures” used to sort objects into categories, but is always an anomaly (43). It is also almost inevitably organic: as Miller observes, that which was never alive rarely disgusts (39), while slime – perhaps especially in the form of

“protoplasm,” the supposed ur-stuff of life for the Victorians²⁴ – is “fecundity itself” (41). As with the entropic universe envisioned by Poe and accessed, however fleetingly, through the aestheticized forms of disgust found in his stories of decay and disease, the disgust and nausea a reader might experience on reading of Helen’s spectacularly revolting death carries with it the potential for a kind of revelation, a glimpse of the occult world of spirit Machen holds is vital to all fine literature. Machen denigrates the “photographic” mode of realism, comparing “the secondary writer to the photographer” (*Hieroglyphics* 74): the conventionally realist writer, like the photographer, captures “the surface of life” and so makes “a picture of the outside of things” (73), the world of appearances, of phenomena, the world-for-us. In contrast, the writer of fine literature – the ecstasist, the “true poet” – estranges us from the surface of things and asks us to look upon mysteries, to peer into the vertiginous “abyss of all being” (Machen, *Hieroglyphics* 144) and perceive “the presence of the unknown world” (62). The ecstasist, in other words, strives always for metaphysical realism rather than photographic realism.

²⁴ Navarette has considered the slime prominent in Machen’s texts in relation to Victorian theories of protoplasm, a viscous, primordial ooze first theorized by the German botanist Hugo von Mohl, which scientists like Thomas Huxley posited as the physical basis of all life, the “one kind of matter which is common to all living beings” (452). Navarette argues that texts like *The Great God Pan* are “designed to produce in the reader the symptoms of confusion, indeterminacy, and destabilization that are integral both to many of the theories that had emerged in the biological sciences and to similar horror stories that had also adopted materialist principles, phylogenetics, degeneration, and recapitulation as their subject matter – and also as their source of horror” (196). In essence, then, Navarette claims that the “sense of physical aversion” (196) Machen’s stories elicit is derived from and expressive of a scientific, materialist perspective. Like other critics who read Machen’s texts in relation to nineteenth-century science, Navarette tends to read around his staunch anti-materialism.

Like Machen and the Symbolists, the speculative realists are also highly interested in ideas of temporality and concepts of “deep time,” an understanding of the universe’s great age which only emerged in the nineteenth century with the advent of scientific discoveries in geology, paleontology, and evolutionary biology. Meillassoux opens *After Finitude* with an extended discussion of what he calls the arche-fossil and its implications for concepts of “ancestrality,” concepts which problematize correlationist accounts of the world. As Meillassoux puts it, for him the term “ancestral” refers to “any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species” and arche-fossils are “not just materials indicating the traces of past life,” such as fossilized bones, “but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event” (10). An arche-fossil “thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of ancestral phenomena proceed – for example, an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation: (Meillassoux 10). It is an “ancestral statement,” an artefact that precedes observation and that thus, by definition, exists before thought, and so would seem to indicate the presence of the mind-independent reality that correlationists claim does not exist, or at least which we cannot know (Meillassoux 9). Like the unthinkable post-extinction world represented in Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” and recently theorized by Ray Brassier, the world before human beings is a horizon for thought. Helen’s backwards slide into protoplasmic slime transforms her from an at least partially human woman into a sort of arche-fossil, a pre-human jelly from the unthinkable “abyss of all being.” She has passed beyond the borders of thought, and yet in her grotesquery she allows the reader to cognize something of a world anterior to the thinking subject – a world of ancestral slime.

3.4 Revulsion and Regression in *The Three Imposters*

Published a year after *The Great God Pan*, Machen's *The Three Imposters* was also part of John Lane's Keynote Series. The novel is primarily episodic, with inset stories framed by an overarching plot set in *fin-de-siècle* London. My focus here is not primarily on the novel as a whole but on two of the individual weird novellas embedded within it, in no small part because these two tales in particular proved highly influential to H.P. Lovecraft, whose works are the focus of the last chapter: "The Novel of the Black Seal" and "The Novel of the White Powder," both of which have frequently been anthologized separately and discussed by critics independently of the novel. Really, *The Three Imposters* is closer to an anthology of short stories than it is to a conventional novel, and in many ways its individual stories can be treated as self-contained. Consequently, I will keep my discussion of the frame narrative relatively brief, showing that far from contrasting with or undercutting the revulsion and ecstasy the text's inset stories cultivate, the frame is of a piece with the interpolated stories – unified with them, aesthetically and philosophically. While the frame narrative might seem to call the truth of the stories within *The Three Imposters* into doubt, this is only a "problem" for the novel if we insist on a particularly literal model of reading, a model which Machen explicitly denigrates in *Hieroglyphics*.

This preliminary dispensed with, I will next consider "The Novel of the Black Seal" and then "The Novel of the White Powder." In the first story, set in rural Wales, the focus is on the categorically vexed body of a changeling, a kind of gastropod-reptile-human hybrid, who initially seems to be a simple-minded boy but who is in fact the descendent of the monstrous "Little People," a species from a primordial age who linger on in the Welsh hills. Like the unspeakable jelly into which Helen Vaughan transforms, the changeling's slimy, disgustingly unstable body is linked to notions of "deep time" and ancestry, and so helps to conjure a sense of primeval

mysteriousness. The second story is more explicitly religious, even Christian, in its metaphysical implications, but rather than using the language of holiness and sublimity to reveal the wondrousness of God, it relies on tropes of sin, decadence, and deliquescence, evoking a dark sacrament, a mysticism of slime.

The Three Imposters concerns the eponymous three imposters – villainous members of an occult society not dissimilar to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn²⁵ – tracking down a man known as “the young man with spectacles,” who they believe possesses “*the* gold Tiberius,” a Roman coin “stamped with the figure of a faun standing amidst reeds and flowing water” with “a face lovely and yet terrible,” which was reputedly created “to commemorate an infamous excess” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 15) – presumably a Roman orgy. Unbeknownst to these sinister figures the coin is picked up by the artist Dyson, one of two London gentlemen prone to literary debate, the other being the scientifically-minded Phillipps. The two in many respects embody the warring philosophical factions Machen saw as contesting the intellectual battlefield of his day, with Dyson clearly closer to Machen’s own view. Phillipps lectures Dyson about “using a kaleidoscope instead of a telescope” to view the world, and insists on “the necessity of accurate observation,” but Dyson counters that it is Phillipps who is really the “visionary” (here meant derisively), a “dweller in metaphorical Clapham” whose “scepticism has defeated itself and become a monstrous credulity,” kin to that of “a bat or owl . . . who denied the existence of the sun

²⁵ Machen would later draw some speculative connections between *The Three Imposters* and his experiences in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, suggesting that the “young man with spectacles” was none other than Yeats, that Miss Lally also resembled a Golden Dawn member, and that Aleister Crowley – who at that point was feuding with members of the group, despite being a member himself – planned to murder Yeats, just as the young man with spectacles is killed in *The Three Imposters* (Graf 76-77).

at noonday” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 53). Dyson paints himself as “the sober and serious spectator” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 53), the more truly “realist” of the pair, despite Phillipps’ scientific mindset. Lest the novel create a sense of false equivalence between these two figures, the narrator is clear to side with Dyson, mocking Phillipps for his hypocrisy and his materialist dogmatism: “he laughed at the witch, but quailed before the powers of the hypnotist, lifting his eyebrows when Christianity was mentioned, but adoring protyle and ether” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 52). Phillipps and Dyson proceed to encounter members of the secret society who are seeking the man with the spectacles and who tell the stories that comprise most of the text, which also obliquely allude to their quarry. At the novel’s conclusion, the young man with the spectacles is finally ensnared and horribly murdered by the three imposters, though they do not discover the resting place of the coin.

What should we make of the frame narrative? Critics have often ignored it, or found it puzzling. Because of the frame narrative, Joshi declares *The Imposters* as a whole “not only comic but ironic” since the tales are potentially reduced to “complete fabrications” (*The Weird Tale* 25-26), though admittedly Machen receives rather short shrift from Joshi at times, who deems Machen’s mysticism “very tiresome and narrow-minded” (16).²⁶ Joshi confesses he does not know “what Machen is trying to get at in undercutting his own work in this fashion,” but speculates that perhaps “he is ridiculing the whole modern tendency of literary realism” and suggests the “perfectly ludicrous, Arabian Nights context” renders the stories “a grotesque joke in light of the awesome mystery of the cosmos” (*The Weird Tale* 26). Joshi’s suggestion that we read the frame

²⁶ Joshi is more enamoured with Lovecraft’s atheism and avowed materialism, though as Chapter 5 will show, I think that Lovecraft’s metaphysics are substantially more complicated than his mechanistic proclamations or Joshi’s straightforwardly materialist reading might suggest.

narrative as undermining not the stories themselves but a particular genre of realism – what Machen, in *Hieroglyphics*, calls “photographic” realism – is productive, though coloured by Joshi’s preference for the verisimilitude striven for by the likes of Lovecraft over literature which calls attention to its own fictiveness. The “real” experience represented in conventionally realist novels is, for Machen, actually nothing more than the scurf of the senses – the world-for-us, the world of appearances. As Machen angrily declares, “I am dealing with very bad people, who understand nothing but materialism . . . and when these people tell you in so many words that it is the author’s business to clearly and intelligently present life – the common, social life around him – then believe me, the only thing to be done is to throw *Odyssey* and *Oedipus*, *Morte d’Arthur*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Don Quixote* straight in their faces, and to demonstrate that these eternal books were not constructed on the proposed recipe” (*Hieroglyphics* 45). If we interpret the novel (and indeed Machen’s corpus as a whole) as an aesthetic project designed primarily to inculcate a sense of ecstasy in readers and so reveal an occult, spiritual reality, the internal “veracity” of the tales in question becomes less important than the effect they produce. The “facts” of the novel are, after all, only appearances; what matters is not their literal truth or falsity, but the affect they stir, and the transformation of perception this affect facilitates.

The frame narrative of the novel does not possess a markedly different tone than the embedded stories themselves, as one might expect were readers intended to find the inset tales wholly risible. When the three imposters enter an old, deserted house at the outset of the novel, Machen emphasizes a sense of “dimness and dissolution” in which “the very air of heaven goes mouldering to the lungs” (*The Three Imposters* 7), describing “patches of gangrenous decay” on the “yellow walls” and “neglected shrubberies, grown all tangled and unshapen” which smell “dank and evil,” all contributing to “an atmosphere . . . that proposed thoughts of an opened grave”

(5). Machen's description of the house would not be out of place within any of the inset tales – it is not as if the frame is told in a spare, conventionally realistic style stripped of embellishment or suggestions of numinous horror. Rather, Machen uses the house's repulsive decrepitude and slow disintegration to cultivate an atmosphere of otherworldly malignancy that transfigures his characters' perceptions, instilling within them thoughts of metaphysical mystery. Dyson, on his own visit to the house, insists that he "cannot withstand the influence of the grotesque," noting that the eerie, decaying house "lies all enchanted" (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 7), and when he first sees the young man with spectacles he describes how the "quiet, sober, everyday London" with its "grey houses and blank walls," becomes transformed: "a man is sauntering along . . . 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 cauldron" (17). Machen presents Dyson as estranged from his everyday experience of the world, from the world of appearances, and given a new means of apprehension, glimpsing a deeper reality.

Strangest and most gruesome of all – within the frame narrative, in any event – is the final scene of the novel, in which Phillipps and Dyson discover what remains of the young man with spectacles after entering the same house as the titular three. Before arriving at the corpse itself they glimpse on the lawn a "fungoid growth" which "had sprung up and multiplied, and lay dank and slimy, like a festering sore upon the earth (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 219), and they come upon a hall whose floor is "thick with the dust of decay" and whose ceiling is "disfigured with sores of dampness" (220), with painted cupids made hideous by time. Machen's description here recalls Poe's fungus-ridden house of Usher:

No longer the amorini chased one another pleasantly, with limbs that sought not to advance, and hands that merely simulated the act of grasping at the wreathed flowers; but it appeared

some savage burlesque of the old careless world and of its cherished conventions, and the dance of the Loves had become a Dance of Death; black pustules and festering sores swelled and clustered on fair limbs and smiling faces showed corruption, and the fairy blood had boiled with the germs of foul disease; it was a parable of the leaven working, and worms devouring for a banquet the heart of the rose. (*The Three Imposters* 220)

Passages like this one exemplify not only Machen's use of the disgusting, but the way in which disgust acts to estrange the reader from ordinary experience. The potential ecstatic affect stirred by the cherubs might normally be compromised by their status as mere ornaments, and tediously conventional ones at that. It would be difficult indeed to infuse a description of unblemished painted cupids with the full sense of awe and strangeness that Machen associates with ecstasy. But here, disfigured and malformed, corrupted by fungus and time, the cupids are invested with a numinous quality they ironically would have lacked in their untarnished but more wholesome form. They are transfigured from superficial ornaments – sentimental, expected, decorative – into objects of primal horror and pestilential bizarrerie; into icons of the unthinkable. This is the aesthetic power of the grotesque, the power of disgust to make us look again, fascinated, at what we would otherwise dismiss or ignore.

The corpse itself, encountered in the novel's final pages, is graphically described in language that seems calculated to shock and repulse, with "flesh that had been burnt through" by still-smouldering coals and a "black vapour" rising from a body "torn and mutilated in the most hideous fashion, scarred with the marks of red-hot irons, a shameful ruin of the human shape" (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 223). These florid, disgusting descriptions, rich with the language of corruption and torturous mutilation, work to muddle the boundary between the fanciful world evident in the inset stories and the world of the frame narrative. Again, the frame narrative is not

in any sense photographically realistic: it shares with the embedded tales a sense of grotesque strangeness, of an unseen world throbbing beneath familiar existence, made monstrously visible in moments of visceral revulsion, irruptions of the sacred-unclean which estrange readers from what Machen sees as the anthropocentric illusions that constitute material “reality.” Indeed, the tales within *The Three Imposters* function metafictionally – each is an example of ecstasy in action, of the power of art to summon a sense of the numinous and restore a sense of lost mystery otherwise foreclosed by what Machen sees as the stultifying effects of modern life. That such tales are fiction does nothing to blunt their efficacy in this regard, or, for Machen, to undermine the reality of the sacred universe they reveal.

3.5 Mucilaginous Mysteries in “The Novel of the Black Seal”

Whatever the “truth” of the stories within *The Three Imposters*, they remain exemplary weird tales in their own right. “The Novel of the Black Seal” exemplifies Machen’s obsession with the primordial while illustrating his intertwinement of the disgusting and the ecstatic, producing a mystic mode of apprehending what Machen believes to lie beyond the boundaries of human perception. Revered by Lovecraft as “the highwater mark of Machen’s skill as a terror-weaver” (*SHL* 96), the tale revolves around the eponymous Black Seal, a sinister object discovered by the ethnologist Professor Gregg, “a thing about two inches long and something like an old-fashioned tobacco stopper, much enlarged” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 74). The banality of this description is belied by the strange characters inscribed on the seal, and by its “secret, unspeakable name; which is Ixaxar” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 83). As the tale progresses it is revealed to be the creation of the “Little People,” a lost species that “dwells in remote and secret places, and celebrates foul mysteries in the savage hills” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 83), beings that “hiss

rather than speak” and who are loosely identified with “the fairies, the good folk of the Celtic races” (107).

We are also introduced to Jervase Cradock – a “mentally weak” boy with “a queer harsh voice” that gives Miss Lally, the story’s narrator (who is, in fact, the same hazel-eyed woman as Miss Leicester of “The Novel of the White Powder”), “the impression of someone speaking deep below under the earth” with “a strange sibilance, like the hissing of the phonograph as the pointer travels over the cylinder” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 89) – Jervase’s voice itself seems to come from somewhere beyond or beneath everyday experience, an occult, chthonic world, a bit like the distant-seeming, almost subterranean voice of Poe’s Valdemar. Professor Gregg initially hires Jervase to help around the house, and Jervase is later revealed to be a descendent of the same elusive creatures who created the seal and who still dwell in the hills, a hybrid being whose heritage is betrayed by a slimy tendril that bursts forth from his body. I argue that the story’s emphases on atavism, hybridism, monstrosity, and deliquescence are calculated not only to nauseate readers but to transport and perhaps transform them.²⁷ While the incantation on the Black Seal can cause

²⁷ Worth has recently posited that “it might be the depths or abysses of temporality which fuel the . . . more unsettling anxieties” of Machen’s texts (216), noting the Black Seal’s immense age and the prehistoric horror of the “Little People” in the story and relating them to what scholars have termed “deep history” or “deep time” – the nineteenth-century geological discovery of the planet’s tremendous age. Writing of the pseudo-Celtic “fairies” in “The Novel of the Black Seal,” Worth argues that “the true horror of Machen’s ostensibly prehistoric men inheres in their conceptually hybrid status: they embody unsettling blends of the very categories of prehistory and history, Paleolithic and postlithic, themselves, as the age was coming to define them” (224). Eckersley likewise attributes the “immediacy” of Machen’s horror tales to theories of degeneration, citing the fairies or Little People as evidence and suggesting that “degeneracy of this race is such that its position in the evolutionary hierarchy is unstable, so much so that a mere text is enough to summon primal slime from within its members” (282). Though both Worth and Eckersley are dedicated

humans to regress into a slimily primeval, quasi-reptilian state, so too, I suggest, does the “The Novel of the Black Seal” function as a kind of incantation through which Machen hopes readers will experience their own regression, a return to an ecstatic state of being effaced by the forces of reason, progress, and civilization. The story exploits the aesthetic potential of the grotesque as aroused by the numinous horror of the Little People to confound a reductively materialist, scientific metaphysics, instead plunging vertiginously into an ancestral abyss.

The Little People of “The Novel of the Black Seal” are interstitial beings that problematize taxonomic and ontological boundaries, mingling not only the human and the animal generally but the human, the reptilian, and the gastropod, as well as the human and the demonic, the earthly and the spiritual. Professor Gregg connects the Little People with stories of “demons who mingled with the daughters of men”²⁸ (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 108) and with “the amoeba and the snail” (109), both mucilaginous creatures which, as Colin McGinn might suggest, could remind us of human secretions and orifices that “are caught up in a life-to-death transition, a migration from living body to entropic world, and as such excite our revulsion” (103). Professor Gregg’s speculative description of the Little People in relation to changeling myths also mixes infancy and

to a more materialist or scientific interpretation of “The Novel of the Black Seal,” as opposed to a mystic or occult one, their emphasis on atavism and time is significant in light of Machen’s theories concerning ecstasy and prehistoric or “primitive” humans and in relation to what Machen conceives of as “the eternal moral”: “the strife between temporal and eternal, between the soul and the body, between things corporeal, between ecstasy and the common life” (*Hieroglyphics* 82).

²⁸ Machen is very likely alluding here to the “sons of God” in Genesis, who, seeing that the “daughters of men” were “fair,” interbred with them (*Authorized King James Version*, Gen. 6.2), necessitating the flood. This description not only suggests otherworldliness, it links the Little People to an antediluvian epoch, in the extreme past, and thus, again, to a time when, Machen insists, our perceptions of the universe fundamentally differed.

extreme age: “there are stories of mothers who have left a child quietly sleeping, with the cottage door rudely barred with a piece of wood, and have returned, not to find the plump and rosy little Saxon, but a thin and wizened creature, with sallow skin and black, piercing eyes, the child of another race” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 108). The categorical instability of such beings, and the disgust their hybrid bodies might elicit, functions as a vehicle for the ecstasy Machen strives to achieve; as Gregg exclaims, they inspire a seemingly paradoxical mixture of revulsion and fascination, “a strange confusion of horror and elation” (*The Three Imposters* 111). Their anomalous bodies confound rationalistic ways of knowing, the scientific imperative to categorize and taxonomize: they are “a race which had fallen out of the grand march of evolution” and so retain “as a survival, certain powers which would be to us wholly miraculous” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 109-110). Epistemically disruptive, the Little People are estranged from the rules of a rational, ordered world, the precepts of what Machen would call “common life.” Even while on the one hand they clearly draw on popular anxieties surrounding the pseudo-scientific theory of degeneration, their links both to an ancient folklore, to the demonic, and to the ontological chaos of slime put a strain on the rational processes on which such theories supposedly depended. Thus, as I will show, the Little People are more than just pygmy Neanderthals – they are a manifestation of the occult world, of the hidden mystery which for Machen is the ultimate form of reality.

The disgust evoked by the Little People is concentrated most powerfully in Jervase Cradock, whose grotesque body encodes and harnesses the affective potential of a host of anxieties surrounding ethnicity, mental illness, and the boundaries of the human. Cradock’s mother is heavily implied to have been impregnated by one of the fiendish Little People. Following her husband’s sudden death from a lung-disease “owing to working in the wet woods” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 89) she sets out to inform family members of her husband’s demise but disappears

in the hills, only to be discovered “crouched on the ground by the limestone rock, swaying her body to and fro, and lamenting and crying . . . mixing her lament with words of some unintelligible jargon” (115-116). She is pronounced insane by a physician and sinks into a coma “like one lost and damned for eternity” but eventually gives birth to a son, Jervase, “who unhappily proved to be of weak intellect” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 116). With a “curious vacancy of expression” indicating “that he was mentally weak” and “a queer, harsh voice” reminiscent “of someone speaking deep below the earth” with “a strange sibilance” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 89), Jervase plays on Victorian conceptions of degeneration, atavism, and mental illness. Henry Maudsley, in his collected lectures *Body and Mind*, theorizes a connection between idiocy, heredity, and animality, noting that “insanity in the parent may issue in idiocy in the offspring, which is, so to speak, the natural term of mental degeneracy when it goes on unchecked through generations” (44) and that “in the conformation and habits of other idiots the most careless observer could not help seeing the ape” (47), descriptions which could easily apply to Jervase.²⁹

²⁹ Maudsley’s description of “wild men” and “idiotic” mothers reads almost like Professor Gregg’s own description of the Little People and of Mrs Cradock:

A curious and interesting fact, which has by no means received the consideration it deserves, is that, with the appearance of this animal type of brain in idiocy, there do sometimes appear or reappear remarkable animal traits and instincts. The old stories of so-called wild men, such as Peter the wild boy, or the young savage of Aveyron, who ran wild in the woods and lived on acorns and whatever else they could pick up, were certainly exaggerated at the time. These degraded beings were evidently idiots, who exhibited a somewhat striking aptitude and capacity for a wild animal life. Dr. Carpenter, however, quotes the case of an idiot girl, who was seduced by some miscreant, and who, when she delivered, gnawed through the umbilical cord as some of the lower animals do. And Dr. Crichton Brown, of the West Riding Asylum, records a somewhat similar case in a young woman, not an idiot naturally, but who had gone completely demented after insanity. She had been in

Jervase's weak-mindedness, then, is linked to hybridity and degeneration, his association with the distant past and its mysteries.

Gregg compares his reaction to his discoveries to the hypothetical response of “one of [his] *confrères* of physical science, roaming in a quiet English wood [being] suddenly stricken aghast by the presence of the slimy and loathesome terror of the ichthyosaurus, the original of the stories of the awful worms killed by valorous knights” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 111); Jervase and the Little People are relics of a lost world of enchantment, the world of sacred significance to which Machen wishes to return. Though Gregg's scientific colleagues scoff at the idea of the “hideous enormities” he suspects led to Jervase's conception, ridiculing him and labeling him a “madman” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 116), Gregg comes to believe that Jervase must be the product of a union between Mrs Cradock and one of the Little People and later discovers that Jervase has had subsequent contact with his forebears. Having hired Jervase as a servant Gregg

the habit of escaping from home, and of living in solitude in the woods, feeding upon wild fruits or what she could occasionally beg at a cottage, and sleeping in the brush-wood. She had frequently lived in this manner for a fortnight at a time. During one of these absences she was delivered of twins; she had sought out a sheltered hollow, and there, reverting to a primitive instinct, gnawed through the umbilical cord. (46-47)

Maudsley's description is striking in its simultaneous disgust and fascination with the animality he perceives in those suffering from “idiocy,” and Professor Gregg's own fixation on Jervase displays a similar mixture of enthrallment and abhorrence. The point here is not, of course, that Maudsley – a staunch opponent of the supernatural – was secretly a mystic, like Machen, or that Machen's Little People can be circumscribed by the language of Victorian science: just as Helen's experimental surgery can't be reduced to a simple reconfiguration of matter, so are the Little People more than simply atavistic, degenerate creatures. Like *The Great God Pan*, *The Three Imposters* is not science fiction but sleight of hand: Machen pulls the rug out from beneath a scientifically materialist explanation, despite Phillipps' vague, unimaginative attempt at the end of the “The Novel of the Black Seal” to assimilate the events of the tale into his narrow worldview.

witnesses a hideous metamorphosis resulting from the recitation of the inscription on the Black Seal, “the key to the awful transmutation of the hills” consisting of “phrases which tell . . . how man can be reduced to the slime from which he came, and be forced to put on the flesh of the reptile and the snake” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 119). Machen’s choice of animals here suggests both the demonic and the primitive, reptiles long preceding mammals in the evolutionary development of life, while also recalling the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and thus Satan as well; the reptilian Jervase is thus doubly associated with deep time and ancestry. The primordial slime “from which [humanity] came” likewise serves this purpose, reminding us of the disgusting, nonhuman world that preceded human consciousness: an undifferentiated substance, defying categorization, out of which all individual beings developed.

It is tempting, because of Jervase’s apparently degenerate nature, to interpret him as a figure not of elemental mystery but of scientific curiosity, confirming a reductive metaphysics of “common sense” materialism, a scientific or positivist account of reality – to read him as the product not of occult powers but scientifically knowable, evolutionary ones. It is true that Jervase’s description clearly incorporates elements of Victorian theories of degeneration and mental illness. But Machen draws on *fin-de-siècle* anxieties informed by the science of the day precisely to undermine the very basis on which a reductively materialist view of metaphysics depends. Not only is a staunchly materialist reading unsettled by the supernatural nature of Jervase’s transformation, as noted by Gregg, Jervase’s categorically confused body is described in terms emphasizing both its repulsive character and its alienating, epistemologically fraught strangeness. There is something unthinkable about him as he begins to slough off his humanity altogether under the influence of the Black Seal’s incantation, spoken by Professor Gregg:

In the waste hollow of the night I awoke at the sound of those hissing syllables I knew so well; and on going to the wretched boy's room, I found him convulsed and foaming at the mouth, struggling on the bed as if he strove to escape the grasp of writhing demons. I took him down to my room and lit the lamp, which he lay twisting on the floor, calling on the power within his flesh to leave him. I saw his body swell and become distended as a bladder, while the face blackened before my eyes; and then at the crisis I did what was necessary according to the directions on the Seal, and putting all scruple to one side, I became a man of science, observant of all that was passing. Yet the sight I had to witness was horrible, almost beyond the power of human conception and the most fearful fantasy. Something pushed out from the body there on the floor, and stretched forth, a slimy, wavering tentacle, across the room, grasped and burst upon the cupboard, and laid it down on my desk.

(Machen, *The Three Imposters* 120-121)

The wavering tentacle emerging from the depths of Jervase's body troubles distinctions between inside and outside, suggesting the exposure of his intestines and viscera. Colin McGinn claims that "once we purge the surface of the skin, the body reveals itself as a disgusting assemblage of grisly organs, damp tissues, and noisome fluids (blood, bile, gurgling foodstuffs)," noting that "few things are more revolting to us than disembowelment, when the intestines are exposed and ripped from the still-living body" and that "part of the horror of the body's orifices derives from the threat of exposure of the body's internal landscape – the butcher's shop that lies within each of us" (24-5). Wilson likewise argues that things which breach the body's boundaries or "seem like they might touch the skin, contaminating it by their mucoid or otherwise slimy condition" threaten "the horrible possibility of personal dissolution" (11). Jervase's hissing ejaculations and slimy tendril are suggestive of animals that human beings often find disgusting, such as gastropods and snakes.

Daniel Kelly observes that experimental research confirms that certain groups of animals are often found aversive by humans, an aversion driven by disgust: “this group includes slugs, snails, and caterpillars, as well as animals that can be dangerous to humans but are not predators,” such as snakes (31). But all this disgust – the breaching of inside/outside boundaries, the mixing of human and oozing, aversive animality, the focus on orifices and slime – adds up to more than a simple gross-out: as Gregg notes, the transformation is so intensely horrible that it is “almost beyond the power of human conception,” and his attempts to become again “a man of science” falter. The disgusting, slimy spectacle of Jervase’s metamorphosing body propels us once again into the unthinkable.

Gregg’s account of Jervase’s transformation thus stresses not only the disgust the boy’s hybrid body provokes in its categorical liminality; he also emphasizes the threat such overwhelming horror poses to rationality and the scientific process, for his attempts to rationalize what he has seen ultimately fail. He “vainly tries to reason with [himself],” trying desperately to insist that “nothing really supernatural” has occurred, claiming that “a snail pushing out his horns and drawing them in was but an instance on a smaller scale of what [he] had witnessed,” but his attempts at such justification fall short: “Horror broke through all such reasonings and left me shattered” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 121). Even while Jervase embodies Victorian conceptions of mental malady, idiocy, and regression, the anomalousness of his body and the physical aversion it excites problematizes a rationalistic or purely materialist perspective. It is here, then, that Machen’s ecstasy truly arises. The slime, breached boundaries, and mucilaginous horror of Jervase, in their very disgustingness, overwhelm Gregg’s reasoning powers: it is *horror*, the affect, which disrupts his rational detachment, compromising his materialist reading of the transforming boy and filling him instead with a sense of numinous awe.

Jervase's connections to writhing worms, serpents, quasi-Celtic elves fallen out of evolution's "grand march," protoplasmic slime, and primordial, inhuman speech, "an infamous jargon with words, or what seemed words, that might have belonged to a tongue long dead since untold ages, and buried deep beneath Nilotic mud, or in the inmost recesses of the Mexican forest" (*The Three Imposters* 91-92) mingle the repulsive and the ecstatic, propelling characters and readers backwards into deep time, into the abyss of all being and the lost mode of perception Machen associates with "primitive" society, in which the occult world-in-itself is more easily glimpsed (if never wholly understood). Machen claims in *Hieroglyphics* that "ecstasy is at once the most exquisite of emotions and a whole philosophy of life," suggesting that "there are . . . two solutions of existence; one is materialistic or rationalistic, the other, the spiritual or mystic" (79). Like Professor Gregg, Miss Lally is unable to reconcile the horrors she has witnessed with the "iterated dogmas of science" (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 100). Try as she might "to summon scepticism to [her] aid" or "by cool common sense to buttress [her] belief in a world of natural order" her reasoning faculties are overwhelmed by visceral revulsion, her "flesh . . . aghast at the half-heard murmurs of horrible things," a *frisson* of disgust mingling with ecstatic wonder: "the air that blew in at the open window was a mystic breath, and in the darkness I felt the silence go heavy and sorrowful as a mass of requiem, and I conjured images of strange shapes gathering fast amidst the reeds, beside the wash of the river" (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 102).

While Jervase and the Little People disgust, then, their repulsiveness is entwined with both fascination and a sense of strangeness that stimulates metaphysical speculation both for the characters in the text and, potentially, for readers. Professor Gregg becomes so obsessed with the creatures that he wanders into the Grey Hills himself to seek them out, to uncover the mysteries they might keep. As he sloughs off the rigidity of his rationalistic world-view and embraces the

ecstatic possibility the Little People represent, Gregg tells Miss Lally that “there are still . . . quaint, undiscovered countries and continents of strange extent,” and that “we stand amidst sacraments and mysteries full of awe”; he insists that “Life . . . is no simple thing, no mass of grey matter and congeries of veins and muscles to be laid naked by the surgeon’s knife; man is the secret which [he] is about to explore” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 72). By finding his “wonderful land” not across “weltering seas” (*The Three Imposters* 72) but in the wilds of his own country, discerning in the Welsh landscape a “mystic hush and silence amidst the woods and wild hills” (*The Three Imposters* 80), Gregg becomes filled with the sense of ecstasy Machen extols, withdrawing from the rationalism and materialism of society in favour of “lonely places, far from the common course of life” (80), as Machen puts it in *Hieroglyphics*.³⁰ On the one hand the anomalousness of the Little

³⁰ Machen was Welsh, and Wales and the other fringes of England serve a particular role in his texts – Wales seems closer to the numinous, occult world that for Machen is more real than the physical universe. Though Wales only features centrally in this chapter via “The Novel of the Black Seal,” Machen’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) and his strange novel *The Terror* (1917) are set in Wales as well. For Machen, modern civilization and its constitutive elements – education, science, technology – are what obfuscate the numinous mystery of the universe, and so Wales and places like it, on the margins of civilization, are less “corrupted” than the metropolitan, disenchanting modern world. Jones notes that the Celtic associations of Wales and Ireland were linked by thinkers like Matthew Arnold to ideas of primitivism, with the Celt as a symbol of all that is “pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment, superstitious, supernatural, magical, occult, irrational or pre-rational” (33-34). As Jones observes, *fin-de-siècle* writers interested in Celticism put it to “contradictory ends” by “simultaneously validating the spiritual identity of the native Welsh and Irish, and subhumanizing or monstrosifying them through their recurring representations as inarticulate beast-men” (31). It is precisely this strange tension – between, on the one hand, the disgusting, monstrous, and horrific, and on the other, the ecstatic, the numinous, the spiritual, and the metaphysical – that Machen’s works obsessively depict, and with which weird fiction more generally is always to some degree engaged.

People and Jervase disturbs and disgusts. Their bodily liminality and interstitiality, their slimy atavism, their connections with mental illness and degeneration, their suggestiveness of rape and violation, their profane admixture of animality and humanity – all of these traits fuel a feeling of nauseated horror. But at the same time, inseparably from the disgust they inspire, their resistance to definitive categorization conjures a sense of awe linked to the estranging power of the grotesque, a queasy, perspectival shift in which quotidian existence is torn asunder and the comforting world of materialism and rationality that Machen objects to is thrown into question in an ecstatic reconfiguration of reality.

It is telling that Jervase's grotesque transformation is precipitated by a series of hieroglyphic marks found on the Black Seal, pointing to the centrality of language and art in Machen's conception of "fine literature." Written words become perilous in the text, but also key to revelation: Gregg, having translated the sigils of the Black Seal into "plain English" becomes so anxious at the sight of them that "with fingers all trembling and unsteady [he tears] the scrap of paper into the minutest fragments" before casting the paper into a fire and crushing the ashes into powder (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 119). Language itself becomes tainted, alien, contaminating – but also charged with occult power, with a kind of magic. The power of art to effect transformation is not, for Machen, limited to the world of "The Novel of the Black Seal," but extends into the "real" world as well. As Machen writes in *Hieroglyphics*, speaking of those skilled in evoking ecstasy through art:

. . . In the works of the writer whom we are discussing, obscurities, dubieties of all kinds are far from uncommon; and in many of his books there are passages which hardly seem to be English at all. The words are familiar – most of them – the grammatical construction often offers no very considerable difficulties – it is rarely, I mean, that one has to search very long

for the nominative of the sentence – but when one has read the words and parsed them, one feels inclined to think that after all the passage is not in English but in some other language with a superficial resemblance to English (68-69)

The hieroglyphics bring forth a primitive essence, a regurgitated primeval tendril, along with ecstatic logorrhea in an unfathomably ancient language, “a ghastly jargon” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 120). In other words, the black seal’s power is both metaphysical and explicitly aesthetic. Its incantation is a microcosmic reflection of “The Novel of the Black Seal” as a whole: the story attempts to call forth from readers that which Machen believes is eternal within them, asking them to look with opened eyes on a world transmuted by the power of language, an ancient and long-forgotten vista obfuscated by modern civilization. Just as, for Schelling, art functions as the organon of philosophy, enabling an experience of the Absolute that philosophy itself can only abstractly describe, so can “fine literature,” for Machen, radically alter our perceptions, restoring a foreclosed means of apprehension. “The Novel of the Black Seal” thus constitutes a kind of hermetic incantation, an aesthetic experiment designed to rekindle in the reader something primitive and childlike, “to invest every detail of existence with its own single and inexplicable glory” (*Hieroglyphics* 174).

The ever-scientific Phillipps, of course, upon hearing “The Novel of the Black Seal,” insists that Miss Lally’s tale is “in perfect harmony with the very latest scientific theories,” dismissing the supernatural elements of her story by claiming that the “wonders of spiritualism (so called)” can be rationally explained (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 136). Here Phillipps exactly resembles what Machen calls in *Hieroglyphics* “the literalist, the rationalist, the materialist critic” who mistakes symbolic meaning for literal meaning (115) – he is one of the “very bad people, who understand nothing but materialism” (45), an “enemy” who would heap praise on Homer “because

he depicted truthfully the men and manners of his time” rather than understanding *The Odyssey* as surpassing “the bounds of its own age,” or any age (46). The materialist critic’s error is in understanding the language of art “as a means of imparting facts,” as Machen puts it; rather, the language of “fine literature” (which is to say, the language of ecstasy) creates an “impression of subtle but most beautiful music” through “words and phrases and cadences that the ear and the soul through the ear receives” (*Hieroglyphics* 49). This is why the actual “facticity” of the stories told in *The Three Imposters* does not matter; as Machen notes, Thomas Malory never saw the holy grail, and “such a character as Don Quixote never existed in the natural order of things” (*Hieroglyphics* 44), but this says nothing for the ecstatic effect that literary texts can create, or the deeper truth that Machen believes such effects reveal.

3.6 Sin and the Sacred in “The Novel of the White Powder”

Machen concludes *Hieroglyphics* with the extraordinary statement that “literature is the expression, through the aesthetic medium of words, of the dogmas of the Catholic Church, and that which in any way is out of harmony with these dogmas is not literature” (195-96). He goes on to note that “no literal compliance with Christianity is needed, no nor even an acquaintance with the doctrines of Christianity”: he counts as “good Catholics” everyone from the ancient Greeks “celebrating the festival of Dionysus” to “Dickens measuring Mr. Pickwick’s glasses of cold punch” (196). It is this sense of mystic religion, in which all of reality becomes infused with a sense of the divine, that Machen’s horror fiction evokes.

Machen’s mystic Anglo-Catholicism is especially visible in another of *The Three Imposters*’ tales, “The Novel of the White Powder,” which further illustrates his conflation of the sacramental and the grotesque, this time using the language of religion explicitly. As his unusual

interpretation of “Catholic dogma” suggests, Machen’s faith was complex, a unique amalgam of High Church Anglicanism, Celtic Christianity, and occultism. Sweetser notes that “Machen . . . ultimately came to accept the faith of his father – Catholicism within the Anglican Church but tinged with Welsh mysticism,” a Catholicism particularly animated by his “love of ritual sufficiently strange to accentuate the bond between God and man”; he abjured Protestantism with its “cold, practical application of moral principle which denied the beauties of mystical intuition and the pleasures of the flesh” (58). If “The Novel of the Black Seal” is about a rational materialist losing his faith in science and learning to perceive a lost sense of numinous mystery springing from an occult reality, then “The Novel of the White Powder” concerns the entanglement of this sacred reality with a Decadent sensuousness and an explicitly Christian cosmic framework. Where disgust in the former story arises out of hybrid and atavistic bodies eliciting feelings of ecstasy by confounding rationalistic ways of knowing in their grotesque anomalousness, in the latter tale it proceeds from a kind of surfeit of pleasure, bohemian excess married to ritualized transgression, inciting its own set of ambivalent pleasures, pleasures intertwined, for Machen, with an occult metaphysics. Idiosyncratic as Machen’s faith might have been, the centrality of his Anglo-Catholicism to his writing and his pronounced sense of the sacred has frequently been neglected in favour of readings that highlight the seeming abject physicality of his stories. In this chapter I have sought to reconcile Machen’s fixation on the disgusting with his ardent spirituality, suggesting that far from being at odds the two are actually deeply interconnected. In “The Novel of the White Powder,” in some senses the climactic tale of *The Three Imposters*, this connection is made manifest through tropes of Decadence and sin, producing another slimeward regression kin to those of Helen Vaughan and Jervase Cradock. As one of the story’s characters, Dr. Chambers, suggests, “every branch of human knowledge, if traced up to its source and final

principles, vanishes into mystery” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 180). As in “The Novel of the Black Seal,” what seem at first like sturdy scientific explanations are ultimately supplanted by occult ones, undermining attempts to reduce the universe to purely material, scientifically knowable terms.

In contrast with the convoluted narrative of “The Novel of the Black Seal,” “The Novel of the White Powder” is a linear story describing the gradual deterioration of a young decadent, Francis Leicester, as narrated by his “sister,” Miss Leicester – in fact the same hazel-eyed woman who narrates “The Novel of the Black Seal.” The story shows the clear influence of Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and would go on to influence tales such as H.P. Lovecraft’s “Cool Air.” Francis begins the story as “a man who seemed to live in utter indifference to everything that is called pleasure” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 159), but after taking ill he is given a prescription from a physician, Dr. Haberden, and begins to visit an old chemist who prescribes him “an innocent-looking white powder” (161). As he continues to take the drug he seems revitalized and becomes “a lover of pleasure, a careless and merry idler of western pavements, a hunter out of snug restaurants, and a fine critic of fantastic dancing” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 164). His excesses deepen and he begins to show curious marks of physical corruption, culminating in his utter dissolution, his transformation into a pool of black rotteness which must be destroyed. Following her brother’s death Miss Leicester is given a letter from Dr. Chambers to Dr. Haberden, describing the results of a chemical analysis the former performed on the white powder the mysterious old chemist provided Francis. Dr. Chambers, like Professor Gregg, proclaims himself “a scientific man,” who describes “the hopeless gulf that opens beneath the feet of any who think to attain to truth by any means whatsoever except the beaten way of experiment and observation in the sphere of material things,” but who now admits that “the old

iron-bound theory is utterly and entirely false” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 179). Having examined the white powder, Dr. Chambers discloses that the substance is in fact “the powder from which the wine of the Sabbath, the *Vinum Sabbati*, is prepared,” but which has undergone “certain recurring variations of temperature . . . at regular intervals, and with varying degrees of intensity and duration,” constituting “a process so complicated and delicate” that the doctor questions “whether modern scientific apparatus directed with the utmost precision could produce the same result” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 182). The process transforms the wine into the same substance consumed during the Witches’ Sabbath as part of an “infernal sacrament” in which those who drank the wine would find themselves “attended by a companion, a shape of glamour and unearthly allurements, beckoning [them] apart, to share in joys more exquisite, more piercing than the thrill of any dream, to the consummation of the marriage of the Sabbath” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 183). Through the white powder, Chambers declares, “the house of life was riven asunder and the human trinity dissolved, and the worm which never dies, that which lies sleeping within us all, was made a tangible and external thing, and clothing with a garment of flesh” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 183-4).

More so than “The Novel of the Black Seal,” “The Novel of the White Powder” fixates on ideas of sin, and the sense of disgust – and ecstatic exultation – pervading the story arises in part out of a kind of sinfulness. Yet for Machen “sin” does not carry the tawdry bourgeois connotations with which it might normally be invested: it is far more than common vice. As he writes in a later story, “The White People” (1904):

“Really, the average murderer, *quâ* murderer, is not by any means a sinner in the true sense of the word. He is simply a wild beast that we have to get rid of to save our own necks from his knife. I should class him rather with tigers than with sinners . . . What would your feelings

be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning? Well, these examples may give you some notion of what sin really is.” (Machen 115)

For Machen, sin is divorced from the exigencies of petty social contexts and niceties; rather, it constitutes a violation of the nature of things, an overturning of the established order of reality as it is normally perceived. Machen’s description of singing roses, talking animals, swelling stones, and blooming pebbles suggest that true “sin” has metaphysical stakes, partaking of the mystic truth of reality rather than the world of appearances – to truly sin is to blaspheme against rationality, to sin not against petty societal dogma but against empirically knowable, familiar existence. By upsetting categories and disrupting the rational, knowable world, Machen’s sin strays into the realm of the grotesque, and as he argues in *Hieroglyphics*, grotesquery “is present in all of the masterpieces” – he impels readers to “remember the Cyclops, remember the grotesque shapes that decorate the Arabian Nights, remember the bizarre element, the almost wanton grotesquery of many of the Arthur romances” (64). Machen points out that “in all these cases . . . the same result is obtained; an overpowering impression of ‘strangeness,’ of remoteness, of withdrawal from common life” (*Hieroglyphics* 64).

In this sense, then, Machen’s conception of sin and his theory of ecstasy cannot be neatly divorced. For Machen, ecstasy, like sin, estranges the reader (or sinner) from the mundane world, the world of the school-house and the city, the world of common sense, at least partially or ephemerally restoring to them the “all-pervading, all-influencing conviction that [they are] a

wonderful being, descended of a wonderful ancestry, and surrounded by mysteries of all kinds” (*Hieroglyphics* 176). As Machen states in a letter to the composer John Ireland in 1933:

It is, indeed, hard to deal with mysteries. Hard, as you and I know, to express them in art; hard even to speak of them. It was St Paul, I think, who heard things which it is not lawful to utter. And, it is to be remembered, that only a hair’s breadth divides the mysteries from the blasphemies. (242)

It is this ambivalent sense of intertwined mystery and sinfulness or blasphemy that permeates “The Novel of the White Powder.” Even as Miss Leicester is oppressed by “an icy and intolerable weight” suffocating her “with the unutterable horror of the coffin lid nailed down on the living” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 164-165) at the sight of her brother’s slow descent into decadence, madness, and addiction, her perception of the world around her is radically transformed, every detail invested with poetic intensity. As she looks out the window at the city beyond she sees “between two dark masses that were houses an awful pageantry of flame . . . lurid whorls of writhed cloud, and utter depths burning, grey masses like the fume blown from a smoking city, and an evil glory blazing far above shot with tongues of more ardent fire, and below as if there were a deep pool of blood” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 165). In this moment of numinous perception Miss Leicester first notices the beginning of her brother’s physical deterioration, knowing “by some sense [she] cannot define” that the seemingly innocuous bruise on his hand is “no bruise at all,” but some sinister affliction that fills her with “grey horror”: “oh, if human flesh could burn with flame, and if flame could be black as pitch, such was that before me” (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 165). Machen’s description compounds impossibilities and incongruities – flame, flesh, and pitch mingle in a grotesquely incoherent totality which itself elicits a sense of spiritual dread, its very incoherence a revolt against the mundane, scientifically knowable world.

Catholic in the original sense of the word, Machen's religious sentiments intermingled with his aesthetic doctrines, as the latter portions of *Hieroglyphics* attest. The disgusting slime into which Francis Leicester dissolves, then, can be read as an exemplification of the "dirt" central to Douglas' theory of sacred uncleanness:

I looked, and a pang of horror seized my heart with a white-hot iron. There upon the floor was a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling with unctuous oily bubbles like boiling pitch. And out of the midst of it shone two burning eyes, and I saw a writhing and stirring as of limbs, and something moved and lifted up that might have been an arm.
(Machen, *The Three Imposters* 177)

The "putrid mass" that Francis becomes is specifically singled out as "neither liquid nor solid": it exists in a state of disorder, refusing fixity or classification as it melts and changes. While on the one hand it is tempting to interpret this slime as representative of our entrapment within a materialist reality, such a reading ignores not only Machen's own anti-materialist religiosity, it strains against the conclusions of the characters themselves in the text, who connect the "horrible liquor" (*The Three Imposters* 175) into which Francis deliquesces with the "primal fall," a representation of "the awful thing veiled in the mythos of the Tree in the Garden" (184), yet another invocation of deep time. Francis' transformation is not, for his sister and Dr Haberden, a descent into meaninglessness and a confirmation of rational materialism but a direct *threat* to materialism: as Dr Chambers notes in his letter to Dr Haberden:

I remember the scorn with which you have spoken to me of men of science who have dabbled a little in the unseen, and have timidly hinted that perhaps the senses are not, after all, the eternal, impenetrable bounds of human knowledge, the everlasting walls beyond which no

human being has ever passed. . . Yet, in spite of what I have said, I confess to you that I am no materialist, taking the word of course in its usual signification. It is now many years since I have convinced myself – a sceptic remember – that the old iron-bound theory is utterly and entirely false . . . I stand in a world that seems so strange and awful to me as the endless waves of the ocean seen for the first time, shining, from a peak in Darien. Now I know that the walls of sense that seemed so impenetrable, that seemed to loom up above the heavens and to be found below the depths, and to shut us in evermore, are no such everlasting impassable barriers, as we fancied, but the thinnest and most airy veils that melt away before the seeker, and dissolve as the early mist of the morning about the brooks. (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 179-180)

Unless we simply ignore passages like this one, interpreting the disgusting slime Francis dissolves into in terms of material entrapment is problematic. While Hurley's suggestion that the protoplasmic sludge that Francis becomes signifies "indifferentiation," a flux of incoherent states whose disorderly nature invites disgust and abjection, such amorphousness can still be invested with a sense of the sacred: as Douglas notes, in the "final stage of total disintegration, dirt is utterly undifferentiated" (198), an indifferentiation compatible with sacred uncleanness. While the festering putridity Francis dissolves into is suggestive of excrement, decomposing flesh, and death, it is also hideously animate, filled with squirming, pulsating life; its amorphousness is, in Douglas' terms, symbolic of both growth and decay simultaneously. Francis' gradual descent is accompanied by bouts of intense liveliness. The white powder leads to his corruption, but it also fills his dull, anhedonic life with bliss, with something like ecstasy. Upon consuming the powder "the weariness vanished from his face, and he became more cheerful than he had ever been" (Machen, *The Three Imposters* 162). "I find I have blood in my veins," Francis declares: he has

undergone a “transmutation” of character (163) and becomes “a lover of pleasure, a careless and merry idler of western pavements” (164). The unclean corruption that infects him is the concomitant of his indulgence.

Machen presents the putrescent slime in “The Novel of the White Powder” as a sacramental substance, the product of a Witches’ Sabbath itself a reflection of primeval ritual: “The secrets of the true Sabbath were the secrets of remote times surviving into the Middle Ages, secrets of an evil science which existed long before Aryan men entered Europe” (*The Three Imposters* 183). To drink the wine is to participate in an unhallowed Eucharist, a dark reflection of the Anglo-Catholic ritualism to which Machen himself cleaved. As Machen writes in “The Red Hand” (1895), “there are sacraments of evil as well as of good about us, and we live and move to my belief in an unknown world, a place where there are caves and shadows and dwellers in twilight” (255). It is this gloaming world that Machen wishes to expose – another version of the “Great Outdoors,” the absolute reality which should, according to the correlationist, be unthinkable. The ritualized sensuousness of Francis’ deliquescence into slime not only confronts readers with an anomalous substance whose liminality overturns the neatly categorized schema Machen sees rationalism as imposing on the world, its disorderliness serves as a representation of sacred uncleanness, commingling the divine and the demonic in a single witch’s brew brimming with affective potentiality, eliciting an ambivalent mixture of disgust and ecstasy.

While Machen is devoted to imagining Godhead through weird fiction, to use the genre and the ecstasy it engenders as a mystic conduit, his peculiar, occult revision of Anglo-Catholicism retains vestiges of human ritual and religion. Even his Little People, enigmatic relics of a primeval epoch, possess what seems to be a distinct culture, a trace of anthropomorphism. In contrast, the author whose works I explore in the next chapter – Algernon Henry Blackwood – dedicates himself

to a communion with Nature lonelier and more austere than the grotesque sacraments of Machen's Decadent *fin-de-siècle* tales. In Blackwood's writing, Nature emerges as at once utterly other – alien, unthinkable, and indifferent to human system of value – and, simultaneously, all-encompassing.

Chapter 4: Horrible Enchantments: Algernon Blackwood

4.1 Weird Nature

In Algernon Henry Blackwood's *The Centaur* (1911), the Irishman Terence O'Malley is a kind of cosmic conduit, a man joined with Nature.³¹ As Blackwood writes, "the moods of Nature flamed through him – *in* him – like presences, potently evocative as the presences of persons, and with meanings equally various: the woods with love and tenderness; the sea with reverence and magic; plains and wide horizons with the melancholy peace and silence as of wise and old companions; and mountains with a splendid terror due to some want of comprehension in himself, caused probably by a spiritual remoteness from their mood" (*The Centaur* 5). Linked inextricably with a Nature suffused with a kind of consciousness, O'Malley resents civilization, which has "blinded the eyes of men, filling them with dust instead of vision" (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 5). He seeks to look not upon the world-for-us, the world as human beings see it, but a radically nonhuman world which escapes our anthropocentric conceptions – to experience Nature fully, in all its unhuman wholeness.

Praised by Lovecraft as a master of weird atmosphere "wedded to the idea of an unreal world pressing upon ours" (*SHL* 100), Blackwood is notable for his prolific literary output and his

³¹ "Nature" should always be capitalized for Blackwood, and frequently appears as such in his writings, both fictional and non-fictional. I retain this capitalization, but unlike Timothy Morton, who uses a similar capital to signify Nature as a kind of social construction, like "environment" or "world," which he contrasts with his own landscape of hyperobjects and "mesh" (43), I am using it here in something closer to a Spinozist, pantheistic sense, to signify a monist, all-extending substance that encompasses both people, other living organisms, and non-living things all at once.

spiritual approach to weird fiction. Like Arthur Machen, Blackwood – known to close friends by his nickname “Pan” – was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but where Machen imagines the universe in Anglo-Catholic terms as a kind of grand sacramental symbol for the “Source of all Souls,” a hieroglyphic mystery, Blackwood, reacting against an Evangelical Christian upbringing, incorporates Theosophist and Buddhist elements into his philosophy while elevating Nature to a position analogous to Godhead in Machen. Where many of Machen’s tales are decidedly urban, transforming the gaslit metropolis of *fin-de-siècle* London into a weird labyrinth, Blackwood’s most significant stories are all tales of the wilderness, of weird Nature. In addition to his interest in mysticism and Eastern philosophy, Blackwood was a dedicated outdoorsman and spent the better part of a decade in North America, including periods of time in the Canadian wilderness – an experience which, along with his time in the Caucasus Mountains and canoe-trips down the Danube, deeply informs his tales of backwoods horror.

During the Edwardian period, weird fiction matured at an accelerated rate compared with its slow progression in previous decades, and the number of figures that can be meaningfully referred to as weird writers increases notably during the twentieth century. Authors like William Hope Hodgson³² and Montague Rhodes James were producing works now considered seminal to the genre, and authors of science fiction and detective fiction such as Matthew Phipps Shiel and Arthur Conan Doyle could be found dabbling in weird fiction as well. Blackwood’s contributions, however, are especially noteworthy in their commitment to depicting the utter otherness and

³² I would have liked to include Hodgson in this dissertation, had space permitted, and plan on returning to his work in the future; like Poe, Machen, and Blackwood, he is a towering figure in the history of weird fiction, and his exclusion from this study tragically perpetuates his too-frequent marginalization as an author. I have only left him out in order to treat the fiction of the authors I have included with the depth and detail I believe they merit.

inhumanness of the universe, their utter refusal of anthropocentrism. Like Machen and Lovecraft, Blackwood was not remotely interested in depicting everyday life, the banalities and common cruelties of society, politics, and history. He writes of “the sham and emptiness of modern life, its drab vulgarity, the unworthiness of its very ideals,” which stand “appallingly revealed before some inner eye just opening” (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 317) an eye which gazes on a stranger but also “realer” world than that revealed by conventional literary realism. Like Machen, Blackwood’s realism is metaphysical; he does not seek after mere appearances, the often-petty vicissitudes of the world-for-us. He seeks to dissolve, to lose himself – his very sense of self – in Nature. As he writes in his memoir *Episodes before Thirty* (1923), without Nature something starved in him: “It was a persistent craving, often a wasting *nostalgia*, that cried for satisfaction as the whole body cries for covering when cold, and Nature provided a companionship, a joy, a bliss, that no human intercourse has ever approached, much less equalled” (37). Blackwood’s writing is profoundly asocial. In its evocation of the weird, wild world, it articulates an ontology that always strives to reconnect us with the flux and flow of Nature.

Throughout Blackwood’s fiction courses an affect of awe in relation to Nature. But tinging this sense of wonder – and, sometimes, superseding it – is another affect: a note of creeping horror and a form of disgust. Nature, in Blackwood’s writing, always threatens to subsume and even obliterate the integrity of human subjectivity. Repeatedly, it is represented as a maternal figure, a “Mother-Earth” (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 194). Ultimately, Blackwood suggests in *The Centaur*, all things, all objects, all organisms – “bodies of trees, stones, flowers, men, women, animals” (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 198) – are merely “projections” of Nature, “mothered by the whole magnificent planet” (199). The maternal metaphor is linked not only to the planet but to the entire pansychic cosmos: Earth, “in her turn,” is “but a Mood in the Consciousness of the Universe, that

Universe again was mothered by another vaster one” (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 279), a kind of particular manifestation of a cosmic wholeness. This primordial mother, furthermore, may absorb her children back into her body, into a state of primal unity. As Blackwood writes:

The Cosmos, in a word, for him was psychical, and Nature’s moods were transcendental cosmic activities that induced in him these singular states of exaltation and expansion. She pushed wide the gateways of his deeper life. She entered, took possession, dipped his smaller self into her own enormous and enveloping personality. (*The Centaur* 5)

The language here, for all its wondrousness, is also that of the monstrous feminine, of the abject mother’s body threatening to obliterate the integrity of the subject. As the narrator puts it, “if he yielded entirely, something he dreaded without being able to define would happen; the structure of his being would suffer a nameless violence,” and “complete surrender would involve somehow a disintegration, a dissociation of his personality that carried with it the loss of personal identity” (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 6). Blackwood’s description almost perfectly aligns with what Ann Radcliffe would term “horror,” a visceral revulsion which “contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates” (150) the soul, in stark contrast with the soul-uplifting sublimity of “terror.” Rather than an absolute otherness which, even while dwarfing the subject, lends it stability, Blackwood’s Nature can become a subject-destroying, abject force, a violating power that overturns the fantasy of transcendental, individual agency and reveals the self and its boundaries as illusions.

Blackwood’s metaphysics incorporates elements of panpsychism: organisms intertwine in a network of consciousness and life, a rich rhizomatic ecosystem in which all differences

ultimately break down.³³ This conception of Nature is central to Blackwood's life, his mystical philosophy, and his fiction. It is a conception which shares much in common with other mystics and occultists, as well as philosophers such as Henri-Louis Bergson with his vitalist *élan vital*, or even the psychiatrist Richard Bucke, who wrote of the "cosmic consciousness" – a conception of the universe not as "dead matter" but as "a living presence" (8), a pantheistic universe in which "the universe is God" and "God is the universe" (14). Blackwood recounts his first exposure to Eastern thought in terms of a discovery or recovery that gives way to a mystic experience of primal unity, of continuity with Nature:

Shutter after shutter rose, "lifting a veil and a darkness," letting in glimpses of a radiant and exciting light. Though the mind was too untaught to grasp the full significance of these electric flashes, too unformed to be even intelligently articulate about them, there certainly rushed over my being a singular conviction of the unity of life everywhere and in everything – of its *one-ness*. That objects, the shifting appearance of phenomena, were but a veil concealing some intensely beautiful reality – the beauty shining and divine, the reality biting, terrifically actual – this poured over me with a sense of being not so much discovered as re-covered. (*Episodes before Thirty* 29)

In this chapter, I argue that Blackwood's weird tales stage confrontations between anthropocentric perspectives and ecological powers that exceed human understanding or circumscription and, in doing so, reveal the amorphousness, and permeability that trouble our conceptions of subjectivity and the subject's relation to the universe. This confrontation can be understood as a juxtaposition

³³ Rhizomatic both in the Deleuzian sense – a non-hierarchical, de-centered "multiplicity" of interrelated, interconnected components without beginning or end, as opposed to a hierarchical, linear, "arborescent" structure (18) – and, indeed, often in the botanical one, given Blackwood's obsession with plants.

of the world-for-us imagined by anthropocentric discourse and the wild world of horrible enchantments.

Even as it seeks to imagine a panpsychic, non-anthropocentric, nonhuman Nature, however, Blackwood's weird fiction reintegrates human beings into the very cosmos they have renounced. In this sense, Blackwood's weird tales continue the tradition that Poe inaugurates: to intuit metaphysics and communicate reality affectively rather than intellectually. Poe's apocalyptic obsessions and Dark Romantic fixation on putrescence, entropy, and futurity continually suggest a world in decline, a universe spiralling towards cosmic singularity. In his writings the reunion between subject and object is frequently associated with eschatological visions, collapse, and putrefaction, with the corpse and undead figures of death-in-life. For Blackwood, on the other hand, the collapse of the split between human beings and Nature is more like the restoration of a link between mother and child and possesses a kind of atemporal consistency as well as a distinctly biophilosophical character, a focus on life, animacy, and the ontological relationships between different sorts of organisms, including not only humans and animals but also plants and other actants that accrue a kind of life or sentience as they form complex assemblages with other actants. Blackwood's tales help to illustrate what he sees as the immanent oneness of all things already pervading existence, jarring us loose from our small-minded human concerns to recognize a connection with Nature that nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrial civilization disavowed. For all its focus on Nature, then, Blackwood's fiction also has significant political stakes. The numinous, ecocentric ontology it uncovers functions as a critique of philosophical attempts to assert anthropocentric mastery over the natural world or to reduce plants, animals, and other forms of life to resources and commodities to be exploited.

Of course, despite what S.T. Joshi terms a certain “upbeat” and optimistic perspective present in many of Blackwood’s stories (*The Weird Tale* 89), his weird fiction is still undeniably horrific. Even as he adores and worships Nature, Blackwood presents it in disturbing terms as a force of unfathomable alterity which comes to infect, contaminate, and possess the human – a daemonic force, one that inspires disgust as well as awe, horror as well as mystic fascination. One might expect such an ardent Nature-lover to write works of rhapsodic poetry rather than tales of monsters and ghosts. But Blackwood repeatedly frames Nature as a possessing presence that expands and fills us, even violates us, while simultaneously delighting us. As he writes in his memoir, when “this Nature spell that invades heart and brain like a drenching sea, and produces a sense of rapture and ecstasy” reached its fullest intensity for him, “the ordinary world, and my particular little troubles with it, fell away like so much dust; the whole fabric of men and women, commerce and politics, even the destiny of nations, became a passing show of shadows, while the visible and tangible world showed itself as but a temporary and limited representation of a real world elsewhere whose threshold I had for a moment touched” (Blackwood, *Episodes before Thirty* 36). Blackwood’s description suggests an engagement with a Platonic metaphysics as allegorized by the cave of *Republic*, a world of shadowy perceptions as opposed to one of truth and reality, and a moment in which a world beyond the world of the senses (what Kant would term phenomena), “the visible and tangible world” which is “temporary and limited representation” accessible by the human subject, is cognized, a “real world elsewhere.” As this chapter will show, Blackwood finds in weird fiction the affective power to satisfy his ontic yearnings, a power linked to imagery of invasion, penetration, and subsumption.

To help elucidate Blackwood’s weird fiction in ontological and ecological terms, I turn first to Michael Marder’s concept of the “vegetal soul” and other elements of his philosophy of

plants, which seeks to reimagine the ontology and ethics of plant-life. Marder uses plants to conduct a critique of traditional metaphysics and to resist the totalizing and instrumentalizing ways in which plants have been imagined as nothing more than inert, exploitable matter. I explore Marder's ontology, as well as China Miéville's theory of the "abcanny," primarily in relation to Blackwood's story "The Willows" (1907) before turning to "The Wendigo" (1910) a tale focused on the animal rather than the vegetal. Here I look to Christopher Hitt's theory of the ecological sublime, a version of sublimity that rethinks the dynamics of subject and object at the heart of sublime aesthetic experience, as well as theories of disgust, continuing to develop the associations between life and its vital forces and disgust that I discussed in the previous chapters. I intertwine Hitt's theory with Julia Kristeva's formulation of the abject and abjection, alongside more recent philosophical treatments of disgust, to illuminate the ways that disgust preys and plays on the permeable borders of selfhood, borders which Blackwood's fiction constantly erodes to reveal human beings and the self as aspects of Nature rather than separate, autonomous intellects aloof from it. As I will show, the sense of smell in particular, and the eponymous Wendigo's curious "odour of lions," are particularly important to the story's metaphysically charged aesthetics of disgust and its attack on anthropocentrism. Finally, I look to Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant materialism and its philosophical forebears in relation to Blackwood's novella "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912).³⁴ While Bennett's materialist sympathies may seem a strange fit for such a numinous writer as Blackwood, her biophilosophical ontology restlessly troubles divisions between human and nonhuman in a way that resonates closely with Blackwood's rapturous vision

³⁴ Bennett's interlocutors include Gilles Deleuze and his concept of the plane of immanence, Henry Bergson's *élan vital* or vital impetus, and Baruch Spinoza's account of *Deus sive Natura* – God or Nature.

of Nature as a panspsychic totality, a network of consciousness present in things both animate and seemingly “inanimate”: trees, air, fire, snow, sound, even odours.

Obviously, the theorists and philosophers I utilize in this chapter primarily are writing considerably after Blackwood himself. While thinkers like Marder, Hitt, and Bennett build their ontological and aesthetic theories on a foundation of earlier philosophers who may have influenced Blackwood, my use of them here is not based solely on that influence: I am not claiming that Blackwood’s fiction is simply a translation into fictional terms of, say, Bergson, or Spinoza. Rather, I am drawing on these recent philosophers alongside theorists of disgust and horror to help describe and unpack the interesting metaphysical relationships Blackwood’s stories depict. My argument, then, is that Blackwood’s fiction partly *anticipates* elements of more recent developments in metaphysics – more so, indeed, than many of the other authors in this dissertation. Even Lovecraft, in many ways the most formally innovative author considered here, is forever looking backward – not only to primordial epochs of time, but to past philosophers and ways of life. Poe, like Lovecraft, derives the metaphysical underpinnings of his fiction from the philosophy of approximately his own era. While certainly, like Machen, deriving some of his ideas from the occult, mystic, Romantic, and metaphysical thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Blackwood is in many ways radically forward-looking.³⁵

³⁵ It must also be said that unlike Machen, Lovecraft, and to a lesser extent Poe, Blackwood kept the particulars of his philosophical beliefs relatively private. Apart from his memoir *Episodes Before Thirty* (1923) he wrote relatively little of himself, and lost many of his papers during the blitzkrieg in WWII. As Susan Graf observes, Blackwood was somewhat “secretive about his occult activities” (80), though we know his motto in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, translated from Latin, was “Truth puts shadows to flight” (79) – *Umbram Fugat Veritas* – which sounds a great deal like a Platonic invocation grasping after the in-itself, dismissing the “shadows” of mere appearance and the world-for-us. Graf further notes that there is a dearth of material on Blackwood’s occultism that complicates scholarly

Aesthetic effects are key to Blackwood's effort to break down the artificial barrier between humanity and Nature. The mixture of horror and blissful *jouissance* Blackwood's characters experience as they become one with a Nature they have been cut off from blends abject revulsion, queer desire, and quasi-religious awe; in such mystical reunions the ego is annihilated, absorbed back into the vegetal bosom of the weird wilderness. Art appears time and time again in Blackwood's fiction as a gateway to this primal, occult dimension of existence, made invisible by the small-mindedness and brute dogmatism of modern life and civilization; philosophy alone is insufficient to open this gateway, being fundamentally intellectual and rational rather than intuitive. As Blackwood writes in *The Centaur*, "mere intellectuality, by which the modern world sets such store, [is] a valley of dry bones" (9). To deify reason and intellect, "to make a god of them [is] to make an empty and inadequate god" (Blackwood, *The Centaur* 9). Rather Blackwood seeks "a spiritual intelligence . . . divorced from mere intellectuality," an intuitive and affective restoration of "a sense of kinship with the Universe which men, through worshipping the intellect alone, had lost" (*The Centaur* 11).

Blackwood wrote a prodigious number of stories, and as with the previous authors this chapter is not intended as a comprehensive survey. Though I mention a number of Blackwood's weird tales throughout, I focus on the novellas and stories mentioned above, which best illustrate the juxtaposition of ontology, ecological reverence, and mystic horror that characterizes Blackwood's unique approach to the weird: "The Willows," "The Wendigo" and "The Man Whom the Trees Loved." In these three texts, Nature appears at first in some incomprehensible guise –

understanding of his occult practices and metaphysical views more generally, though she suggests that his occult interests were "omnivorous" (81). Accordingly, my recourse to new materialist philosophers is in part a response to this absence.

alien and seemingly unknowable. But, repeatedly and crucially, this alterity flows from Nature back into the human, possessing and re-assimilating humanity, rendering our own flesh and consciousness suddenly alien, uncanny – or, as Miéville would put, it abcanny, an alternative to the Freudian uncanny linked not to repressed psychological trauma but to a more radical, nonhuman otherness. Recontextualizing us and unraveling the human, Nature encroaches on the minds of Blackwood’s protagonists, eliciting horror and revulsion as what seem forces of the utter and unreachable outside turn to undo the very distinction between inside and out, to make unintelligible the very basis on which such borders are drawn. At the same time, Blackwood’s stories dwell on the traditional blind spots of occidental philosophy, those things which it has repeatedly ignored, abjected, or simply failed to conceptualize.

4.2 Vegetal Ontology and Abcanny Alterity in “The Willows”

Set in the swampy depths of a nameless, desolate region identified only as the *Sümpfe*, the German word for marshes, “The Willows” follows the narrator and his companion, called the Swede, as they travel down the Danube in their Canadian canoe, somewhere between Vienna and Budapest. This interstitial space is a fluidic morass of willow trees, sand, wind, and water. The travellers set up camp on a small island being gradually eroded by the force of the river, riddled with tiny holes by rivulets of water. They encounter two other creatures during the first stage of the journey. The first is a “black thing” initially mistaken for a drowned human body but which the travellers eventually decide must have been an otter, black-skinned and with an “odd yellow” eye (Blackwood, “The Willows” 10). The second is a man or man-like figure in a boat – a figure who ominously crosses himself upon seeing the travellers before being swept along with the current. The identity of both figures is later debated; the latter figure is referred to simply as “the thing in

the boat,” and the Swede notes that he remembers “thinking at the time it was not a man” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 30).

During the night, the narrator wakes to discover a column of bizarre creatures streaming up into the sky, “immense, bronze-coloured, moving, wholly independent of the swaying of the branches,” despite their close connection to the willows, and “interlaced one with another” with “limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 18). Isolated by the raging torrent, they find their canoe mysteriously broken and come to believe that the strange spirits of the willows – or whatever the beings are – demand a sacrifice. These menacing, incomprehensible entities are associated at once with the trees and with a kind of cosmic outside seeping through into our world, threatening to invade the minds of the narrator and the Swede. As tension mounts and the willows seem to close in on the two, the Swede offers himself as a sacrifice, but is saved the necessity when the *Sümpfe* or its unfathomable denizens seize another, whose corpse is later discovered riddled with tiny holes, just like the island. While the travellers resolve to bury the body, it is caught by the water and rushes out of sight, “turning over and over on the waves like an otter” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 53).

Given his adoration of Nature, one might expect Blackwood’s fiction to employ something like the conventional sublime in its description of the wilderness’ power, vastness, and inhumanness. But Blackwood specifically distinguishes the strange feeling evoked by the willows from the sublime as it is typically understood. Staring out at “acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 8), the narrator carefully describes for us his emotional

state, taking great care to disentangle the disconcerting feeling he experiences from what one might expect. As he says:

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of the great forest exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt. (Blackwood, “The Willows” 8).

In contrast to the sublime uplift created by mountains, oceans, or vast forests, the willows possess “some essence . . . that besieged the heart,” creating a feeling that the narrator “had trespassed . . . upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 9). Blackwood is clear here that the traditional, Romantic sublime is still dependent on the subject, on the human – on an anthropocentric perspective. But in the wetland of the willows, such a perspective comes under direct attack, and the corresponding affective response is not the exalting sublime but something less familiar. “What I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear,” the narrator tells us, but an experience “infinitely greater, stranger,” and tied to a sense of having strayed “into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 38). The willows and the *Sümpfe* as a whole are anomalous, cosmic, unearthly. It is not, precisely, that they are not part of Nature. Rather, as Anthony Camara argues, they create a conception of the cosmos “as an outside space that continually infiltrates, un-grounds, and subverts nature, subjecting it to strange transformations and eruptions of novelty that cause nature to exceed humans’ limited conceptions

and definitions of it” (44). Rather than conforming to the natural/supernatural distinction common to the Gothic, the willows enlarge and unsettle the very notion of the “natural.”

In their extreme alterity, the willows stand as potent representations of what Thacker calls the world-without-us, “the subtraction of the human from the world” (*DTP* 5). Blackwood’s descriptions of the *Sümpfe* emphasize its remoteness from humanity, its total otherness. The lonely island amidst the willows is “untrodden by man, almost unknown to man” and “remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows and the souls of willows” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 14). The frontier here is not just physical, but psychic: a border not merely of geography but of thought. The travellers are “interlopers, trespassers” and are “not welcomed” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 15) – about to pass into the realm of the unthinkable. The willows themselves are compared to “a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding to drink” and to “gigantic sponge-like growths” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 7), bringing to mind in the narrator a “sense of unfamiliarity,” provoking thoughts of “a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps” (15). In their unfamiliarity and in their eerie animacy it might be tempting to employ the language of the uncanny or *unheimlich* to describe the willows. But as China Miéville has recently argued, the uncanny of Freud is but one of several “not-cannies” that might be imagined, and one to which the weird is often “starkly opposed” (“On Monsters” 111).

For Miéville the weird “is not the return of any repressed” and weird monsters tend to embody “unprecedented forms” (“On Monsters” 112) rather than heavily symbolic ones representing aspects of the psyche. As Miéville himself notes of “The Willows,” the “evasive and indescribable presence encountered by Algernon Blackwood’s avatar is emphatically not a

revenant spirit” (“On Monsters” 380).³⁶ In place of the uncanny Miéville posits an alternate “not-canny” to characterize the monstrosities of weird fiction: the “abcanny.” He argues that “monsters of the abcanny are teratological expressions of the “unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning” (Miéville, “On Monsters,” 381). The abcanny, then, is a kind of “sublime backwash” (Miéville, “On Monsters” 381) that which escapes our knowledge and understanding. It is “categorically other . . . neither knowable nor recalled” (380). And, as Miéville points out, abcanny monstrosity inevitably fosters “a certain disgust” (“On Monsters” 381). For Miéville the association between abcanniness and disgust arises from the “enormous preponderance of shapeless, oozing gloopiness in the abcanny monstrous” (“On Monsters” 381), a preponderance linked with the conspicuous resistance to representation and meaning that abcanny monsters embody.

While plants might seem an unlikely elicitor of disgust, several theorists have noted their ability to produce revulsion. William Ian Miller argues that while “it is much harder for plants to disgust than animals,” when we descend into what he calls the “lower phyla” of the vegetable kingdom “primitive plant and primitive animal merge into slime, ooze, and murky quagmire, fens, bogs, and swamps,” a kind of undifferentiated “vegetable muck” or “generative rot” which disgusts in its reunion of “the having lived and the lived” (40). Miller also notes that while taken singly plants are rarely disgusting, “a host of them is a different matter, much as in the difference in affect raised by one cockroach and a thousand” (42). The willows of *Sümpfe* qualify on both counts. While possessing a certain silvery beauty, the willows droop down into the swamp-water to form part of the amorphous confusion of the marsh. The willows in the region “never attain the dignity

³⁶ Miéville names “The Willows” Blackwood’s second-greatest wilderness story, one would presume after “The Wendigo.”

of trees” and lack rigid trunks; they are “supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and *alive*” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 1). Blackwood’s language here smudges the line between animal and plant, animate and inanimate, confusing categories to approach something like Miller’s “vegetable excess” (42), the essence of “fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling” (41). Blackwood further writes that the willows “herded” in “overpowering numbers,” tainting the “wild beauty” of the landscape with an “unbidden, and unexplained . . . feeling of disquietude” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 7). Later we are told they form “serried ranks” which wake in the narrator “the curious and unwelcome suggestion” of having violated the willows’ world (Blackwood, “The Willows” 9). Here, then, is the multitude, Miller’s “host.” Blackwood’s description stresses both the inhuman strangeness of the willows and their “aliveness,” investing them with animistic agency. He insists on the total alterity of the willows, their complete otherness.

Striving to preserve the alterity of plants while reimagining an ontology of plant-life that refuses anthropocentrism while still acknowledging the profound echoes of the vegetable kingdom in the animal, Marder has recently suggested that plant-life and the “vegetal soul” (51) as he puts it (retrieving and recuperating an ancient conception of the vegetal soul), “possesses special challenge” for philosophy since it “is an obscure non-object: obscure, because it ineluctably withdraws, flees from sight and from rigorous interpretation; non-object, because it works outside, before, and beyond all subjective considerations and representations” (20). He notes that in the history of Western philosophy, plants occupy a “zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities” (Marder 2). For Marder, then, plants are another of those things which philosophy – at least Western philosophy – has trouble conceptualizing. As he puts it, “vegetal exuberance,” the ontologically vibrant, stubborn “plant-soul,” a kind of bare, non-

anthropocentric, non-animal life, always “escapes capture and taming by philosophical conceptuality” (Marder 22). While even Marder cannot wholly escape any trace of anthropomorphism – the very word “soul” seems to attribute to plants a certain humanity – his development of the concept strives to separate the plant or vegetal soul from an anthropocentric metaphysics, especially of the hierarchical sort in which human beings rule over inert plant matter. The idea of the perspective of plants – of understanding the universe from a plant’s point of view – chafes the imagination: the vegetal soul is occult, hidden from view. While Marder describes the plant-soul as being tinged with the uncanny (4), I want to make a case for the congruence between the aesthetic of the *abcanny* and the ontology of the vegetal soul, a congruence made manifest in Blackwood’s text. The *abcanny* or “Weird Affect,” as Miéville puts it, is characterized by an “essential antimeaningness” or “beyond-meaning-ness” (“On Monsters” 382): a sense of dread and disgust that arises when we encounter something that exceeds our epistemic frameworks, that evades conceptualization. Plants, the “weeds of metaphysic . . . growing in-between the classical categories of the thing, the animal, and the human” (Marder 90) embody exactly the sort of “radical otherness” that Miéville sees as key to the *abcanny*, insofar as they are cognitively slippery, troubling a conception of the world as somehow for-us, a world centred on our experiences. The plant-soul is impure, weed-like, part of Miller’s “lower phyla,” seemingly meaningless and purposelessness insofar as it lacks a *telos* beyond continued growth and survival.³⁷ The not-

³⁷ Of course, one might very well point out that human beings also lack *telos*, as we will see with particularly spectacular gloominess in the next chapter – H.P. Lovecraft was at great pains to show just how pointless and painful human existence could be. In this context, I am not suggesting that human beings *do* have some greater purpose or end-point and that plants do not, but rather that Marder’s plant-soul exists outside any sort of teleological projection we might concoct for ourselves.

canniness of plants, then, is not a bubbling-up of repressed psychological trauma but a far less human unfamiliarity.

Insofar as Blackwood's willows embody total alterity, falling into something like Marder's zone of absolute obscurity, they would seem to perpetuate a sense of extreme discontinuity between animal and plant life, a discontinuity with a long history in Western philosophy. As Matthew Hall writes, philosophy has "systematically backgrounded plants" (17) to reify an exclusionary ethics and ontology founded on the separation of humans from nature as part of a "zoocentric and hierarchical" schema that "precedes acts of domination" and "acts of commodification and ownership" (157). The difference between animal and plant, in other words, has become overburdened, the better to justify rapacious exploitation and resource use: "shared characteristics such as life and growth have been rejected in order to focus on the gross differences" (157). Marder resists denuding plants of their alterity or projecting anthropomorphic attributes onto them and cautions against fetishization of plant-life. As he notes, when fetishized or placed in a framework that succumbs to anthropomorphic conceits of what consciousness entails, vegetal life becomes "numinous and obscure, so that its meanings are completely withdrawn, made unapparent and indiscernible, paving the way for the projection of human purposes and goals onto it" (Marder 29). Blackwood and his protagonists, in their at-times reverential attitude towards Nature, seem in danger of falling into the "mystifying fetishization" (29) that Marder bemoans. The narrator, during moments of panic, describes the Swede, who initially construes the willows as the "old gods" and the *Simpfe* as an "ancient shrine" (Blackwood, "The Willows" 39), as a "damned old pagan" and "superstitious idolator" (45), but he himself thinks of the willows as "the gods whose territory we had invaded" (16) and is stricken with "a genuine deep emotion of worship" and a desire to fall down and "absolutely worship" (19). He seems to project human

ethics and motives onto the willows, claiming, for example, that “*the willows were against us*” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 15).

The personifications and anthropomorphizations of the Swede and the narrator eventually ebb, as the two characters realize their models are inadequate to contain or conceptualize the entities they have encountered. As the Swede puts it:

“You think . . . It is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is – *neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own. (Blackwood, “The Willows” 42)

The willows, then, cannot be slotted into onto-theological metaphysical systems, resisting assimilation into anthropocentric cultural schemas; their alterity appears absolute. Moreover, Blackwood’s willows are not represented as passive, inert plant-life of the sort usually marginalized by the hierarchical structures of being identified by Hall and Marder. The willows are preternaturally animate and more self-aware than plants usually seem to be; they possess qualities we might normally associate with animals. Blackwood repeatedly represents the willows as active and intelligent, using active verbs to endow them with a distinct agency and self-awareness: the willows in the wind are always “chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 15) in a way that makes one think of Roderick Usher’s theory of the “sentience of all vegetable things” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher 85). Blackwood notes that the willows come to possess “a bizarre *grotesquerie* of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures” (“The Willows” 32). They are capable of movement, as the narrator notes, a realization that stirs in him

powerful emotions of horror: “they moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the *horrible*” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 15). After waking in the night, observing that the willows “*had moved nearer*” the narrator begins to feel claustrophobic and paranoid, doubting his senses: “surely the bushes now crowded much closer – unnecessarily, unpleasantly close” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 23).

The willows also blend and merge with the surrounding environment, participating in a series of complex connections between water, sand, wind, and vegetation, an ecosystem imagined as an alien world into which the human characters stray but which they cannot fully grasp. As well as moving, the willows also make noise – a noise not produced by the wind but audible fully only once the wind recedes. The sound, the willows’ “cry” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 35), resembles “the humming of a distant gong . . . suspended far up in the sky” (34) and is thus associated with the willow souls’ cosmic outsidership. All of these qualities – movement, intelligence, the ability to produce sound – subvert the typical attributions of passivity, inertness, and non-sentience usually projected onto plants, attributions that have allowed humans to place plants at the bottom of ontological hierarchies. Of course, plants *are* animate and capable of movement, most commonly through growth but also through decay and other means as well, from the snap of a Venus flytrap’s jaw-like lobes to the eerie heliotropism of sunflowers. As Marder notes, plants have typically been defined in terms of their immobility and rootedness (19), but this definition effaces their cryptic vitality and activity – plants move with exquisite subtlety according to profoundly nonhuman rhythms out of synch with our own perceptions, and so we falsely imagine them inanimate. In their uncanny horror – their category-confusing repulsiveness – Blackwood’s willows provide a glimpse of the occult plant-soul without reducing its otherness, affect revealing a hidden vegetal ontology. The willows’ animacy throws into sharper relief the animacy of all

plants, while their alien intelligence approximates what Marder calls “non-conscious intentionality” (153) – the climbing of vines towards light, the foraging of roots through soil.

Though marked as irreducibly other, Blackwood’s willows are more than a symbol of Nature’s alterity. Seen through the horrified eyes of the protagonists, the willows threaten to subsume the human beings that have transgressed upon their territory through psychically violent acts of reverse-colonization; while the willows are unnerving and even disgusting throughout the tale, they achieve the epitome of horror as the protagonists realize that they are psychically vulnerable to the unfathomable alien tree-things. The Swede notes that the cry of the willows seems peculiarly internal, as if it were stealing into their bodies: “Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but *within myself* – you know – the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 34). The term “fourth dimension” is used somewhat cryptically here; writers such as H.G. Wells and Joseph Conrad had used similar terms before to describe additional dimensions of space and time. The Swede uses it to describe a sound which is “utterly outside of common experience,” a sound which is “*unknown*” – he says that “only one thing can describe it really: it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 38). Though, obviously, the sound is perceivable in a certain sense, it does not seem to be so through any of the senses as such: it doesn’t come “by the ears at all,” but rather “the vibrations reach [the Swede] in another manner altogether, and seem to be within [him]” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 37). The nonhuman “sound” or vibration is totally “outside humanity,” from an unknown world beyond all familiar senses, conjuring a feeling of “being utterly alone on an empty planet,” quite literally a world-without-us (Blackwood, “The Willows” 38). The narrator also notices, to his great discomfort, that his companion seems mentally perturbed by the willows: “what disturbed me most . . . Was the clear certainty that some curious

alteration had come about in his *mind* – that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 28). He becomes convinced that “in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into *their* world” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 39), and the Swede insists that the two must “keep them *out of our minds* at all costs possible” lest they succumb to “a sort of inner suffocation” (43). The language here is of violation, contamination, and the loss of subjectivity and selfhood. The Swede is clear that this would be a fate different and worse than death:

Death, according to one’s belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. *You* don’t suddenly alter just because the body’s gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution – far worse than death, and not even annihilation. (Blackwood, “The Willows” 41)

This threat of possession by the willows – their psychic penetration, pollution, and usurpation of the protagonists – intensifies the text’s potential for disgust. Susan Miller argues that disgust is “fundamentally about protecting and maintaining the self” (5), specifically a “boundaried self” (15). For Miller, horror is a particularly violent version of disgust, “a response to what truly is alien and other-than-self and thus could obliterate self” (171), establishing a “total communion of self and Other” that invites “a sense of boundarylessness” (173) as “things move across the permeable membrane that enwraps ‘self’” (172). Throughout the tale, Blackwood represents the willows using the language of smothering or envelopment, describing, for example, the way in which their “multitudinous soft pattering” grants the impression that “the tent was *surrounded*” or comparing the omnipresent humming of the tree-things to “a swarm of great invisible bees”

surrounding the protagonist on all sides (“The Willows” 49). The willows’ seeming desire to violate, consume, and colonize the human characters is linked to affects of disgust and horror with profound ontological implications, eroding the boundaries of the human subject as surely as the river eats away at the islands of the *Sümpfe*.

Marder insists that while the vegetal ontology of the plant-soul must resist anthropomorphization and the projection of anthropocentric emotions onto plants, at the same time an echo of the plant-soul persists in animals and other living beings: “all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and are alive in the most basic sense insofar as they neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained” (51). For Marder the vegetal soul eschews “the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority” – plants, like the lepers and zombies that Miller identifies as the epitome of horror (175), seem to hover on “the brink of death, in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead,” a predicament ultimately “common to all living beings” (53) despite philosophical attempts to shore up the boundaries of the self or disentangle human beings from the natural world. In their demand for sacrifice, the willows seek to reintegrate the narrator and his companion into Nature. Though they arrive in the *Sümpfe* seeking in some sense to master it with their Canadian canoe and gipsy tent, the travellers discover to their horror the instability of their own humanness.

Of course, the protagonists of “The Willows” do manage to escape, surviving the *Sümpfe* but not conquering it. Their lives are only purchased at the expense of another, his corpse snared “in the grip of the willow roots,” its “skin and flesh . . . indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that [they] had found all over the islands” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 53), his body literally made porous, reshaped to become a thing of beauty and horror, continuous with the surrounding environment. The travellers’

inability to bury the man's body – the way that the current and the *Sümpfe* claim it utterly, sweeping it away – further signifies the way in which it has been utterly reclaimed by the landscape, by Nature.

4.3 Monstrous Odours in “The Wendigo”

Like “The Willows,” Blackwood’s “The Wendigo” is a tale of backwoods horror, presenting Nature as simultaneously awe-inspiring and revolting. While the eerie willows have no specific origin in folklore, the eponymous Wendigo is drawn from Algonquian folklore; according to these indigenous beliefs it is a ravenous creature, sometimes represented as a cannibal made monstrous by anthropophagy. Blackwood’s story concerns a group of hunters, principally made up of Scotsmen, who travel to the Canadian backwoods in search of moose but instead encounter the mythic creature. During the night, one of the hunters’ guides – the French-Canadian woodsman Défago – goes missing, apparently snatched from his tent by the creature, or else lured to it by its overpowering call. The Wendigo spirits Défago away to a “fiery height” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 83) and, somehow, infects and transforms him. When he returns his personality is strangely altered, and his face and body have been warped and metamorphosed in a way that the text seems scarcely capable of articulating: we are told that “the ‘Défago’ who sat huddled by the big fire, wrapped in blankets, drinking hot whiskey and holding food in wasted hands, was no more like the guide they had last seen alive than the picture of a man of sixty is like a daguerreotype of his early youth in the costume of another generation” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 97-98). The transformed woodsman’s body seems on the verge of lapsing into indifferentiation and formlessness, with features malleable as a kind of “bladder” and a body precariously close to becoming “incoherent”; his feet have also have been altered, though only a glimpse “of something

dark and oddly massed where moccasined feet ought to have been” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 100) is offered. The implication is that Défago is becoming a Wendigo himself – or like the Wendigo, at least – acquiring the appalling “feet of fire” about which the Wendigo can frequently be heard shrieking with “a faint and windy cry . . . calling in tones of indescribable anguish and appeal” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo 95). Défago disappears again and is later discovered only to perish shortly thereafter. We are left with an impression of “savage and formidable Potencies lurking behind the souls of men” and of a thing which “had survived somehow the advance of humanity” and “emerged terrifically, betraying a scale of life still monstrous and immature” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo 102).

Blackwood calls the Wendigo the “Call of the Wild personified” (“The Wendigo” 92) and associates it consistently with a conception of the natural world that shimmers between seemingly total alterity and disconcerting unity with humanity. Within the text its presence is always foretokened by a curious smell, the “odour of lions” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 87), a strange stench that increasingly pervades the text and seeps into the characters, contaminating and transforming them. This odour, I argue, is a manifestation of the immanence of Nature, an immanence that here undermines anthropocentric and colonial metanarratives that seek to subordinate Nature to human control. Despite its alterity, the natural world envelops the human characters and temporarily reintegrates them into a mystic continuity. As in “The Willows,” however, this reintegration is presented in terms of disgust and horror, as a kind of hideous possession. The stench of the Wendigo is imagined as a miasmatic reek that violates physical and psychic boundaries while conspicuously exceeding entrapment in language, thus drawing attention to the failures of human culture to triumph over Nature. The Wendigo’s close association with smell and the complicated relationship between smell, disgust, language, and metaphysics will be

my focus here. The Wendigo and its tantalizing, disturbing, abject, invisibly contagious “odour of lions” represents all that colonial expansion strove to suppress, conquer, and control. Rather than entrenching the divisions between human and animal, natural and civilized, and human and nonhuman, the scent destabilizes the binary logic of such dichotomies, revealing their fragility and ultimate fictiveness. Defying categorization or linguistic circumscription, bleeding through the porous boundaries of the human to menace the subject’s sacrosanctity from within, the odour in “The Wendigo” undermines weird fiction’s usual reliance on sight (along with the hegemonic structures it perhaps too-often entrenches) to instead suggest not merely a world of smell but the presence of an undifferentiated nonhuman world into which human beings are subsumed.

Given the text’s engagement with colonialism and indigeneity, it is worth contextualizing the story in relation to other Wendigo tales, considering the ways that Blackwood appropriates and adapts indigenous mythology, before delving into the text itself. Margaret Atwood notes that the Wendigo has long fascinated non-indigenous writers, “illustrating the extent to which Native motifs have infiltrated non-Native literature and thought” (62). Blackwood’s version of the Algonquian monster is unusual insofar as his Wendigo subsists entirely on moss rather than human flesh. The Wendigo – variations include the Weedigo, Wittako, Windigo, and Windagoo, among others – is usually a cannibal, and is generally linked to concepts of contagion and madness. As Atwood puts it: “fear of the Wendigo is twofold: fear of being eaten by one, and fear of becoming one” (67). Typically, the Wendigo has been figured as an embodiment of human greed, appetite, and profound selfishness. So-called “Wendigo psychosis,” a theorized culture-bound psychopathology with symptoms including an appetite for human flesh, has been debated extensively by psychologists and anthropologists, with some positing seasonal vitamin deficiency

as the basis for the story, others arguing that the psychosis was used to justify Algonquian “witch-hunts” to execute those who transgressed cultural taboos around cannibalism (Wonderley 70).

Recent western appropriations of the Wendigo, such as that found in Antonia Bird’s film *Ravenous* (1999), have used the monster to critique consumer capitalism and materialism, revealing, as Danette DiMarco puts it, “western culture’s unhealthy and systemic commitment to over-consumption” (134). Marlene Goldman argues that Wendigo stories, in fact, are disaster narratives about the clash between native culture and European culture (167). Rather than reading Wendigo myths as “exotic artifacts of primitive cultures” (167) Goldman claims that such stories “attest to the native people’s awareness that the Europeans posed a threat to the health and well-being of their society” (171). Some anthropological scholarship supports Goldman’s thesis; Charles Bishop, for example, claims that “Wendigo lunacy,” as he terms it, was essentially a response to endemic famine and subsequent cannibalism of necessity, a means of justifying the execution of those who, “for physical, social, or cultural reasons, expressed a desire for human flesh” (246-247). By depleting local fauna and other resources, colonists created or exacerbated famines, thus potentially giving rise to incidents of cannibalism and Wendigo stories. As Goldman writes, “unwittingly, the explorers and fur traders who reported the savagery of the natives . . . were themselves responsible for creating starvation conditions” (171).

Blackwood’s Wendigo may seem at first to be little more than an exotic monster drawn from a “primitive” culture. Blackwood’s racialized language can appear dated and problematic to modern readers; in several stories, including “The Wendigo,” he employs terms such as “red Indian” and consistently associates indigenous characters with animality and atavism. The Wendigo itself is initially described by Défago as “a sort of great animal . . . quick as lightning in its tracks, an’ bigger than anything else in the Bush,” and is dismissed by the Scottish divinity

student Simpson as nothing more than “a backwoods superstition” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 71). Simultaneously, however, Blackwood’s Wendigo is something altogether more cosmic and unfathomable than an indigenous phantom cheaply appropriated for its exoticism, and like recent literary and cinematic depictions of the Wendigo, it serves as a means for Blackwood to critique anthropocentric, colonial attitudes towards Nature – and, indeed, Eurocentric attitudes towards indigenous peoples. Though never fully deracinated from the Algonquian mythology from which Blackwood borrows it, the Wendigo exceeds and transcends its cultural specificity within the story and is never defeated or suppressed, refusing the mastery of the white hunters. On the one hand the creature is a manifestation of Nature in all its alterity, its voice resembling “all the minor sounds of the Bush – wind, falling water, cries of animals, and so forth” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 93), but at the same time it cannot be read simply as a symbol of otherness. Its cry awakens something *within* those who hear it, speaking to some dark desire already inside them, filling their feet with “the lust of wandering” and causing them to burn, also precipitating bleeding behind the eyes (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 93). And, of course, the Wendigo is persistently linked to smell, to the mysterious, language-defying “odour of lions.”

Literary representations of odour in Gothic horror and weird fiction have not received the critical attention one might expect given the ubiquity of decay, rotting flesh, and loathsome stench in these genres. Some scholars have actively denied the significance of smell for horror, insisting on the primacy of sight; most have simply neglected the topic altogether. Outside of genre scholarship the question of smell fares little better, with a few notable exceptions. Hans Rindisbacher, in one of the few earlier studies on olfactory perception in literature, notes that “over the years . . . a shift has taken place from the sensate aspect of aesthetics, its grounding in the sensory and sensual dimension of the object world and its roots in the bodily realm of the subject,

toward more abstract intellectual and theoretical concepts” (17) and that smell, along with the other “lower senses” (taste, touch), was often specifically excluded from the aesthetic realm by philosophers like Kant and Hegel (18). Danuta Fjellestad remarks that “in literary criticism, smell is undoubtedly one of the most neglected subjects,” suggesting that the intellectual abjection of smell can ultimately be traced “to the goal of the Enlightenment project to deodorize and standardize the public and private spheres and to the general tendency to privilege the intellect at the cost of the body” (640). In her study of odour and the Victorian novel, Janice Carlisle contends that smells were frequently characterized as animalistic and disgusting during the nineteenth century:

Although there have been times in the history of Western culture when smell has risen to the middle of the hierarchy of senses, the great majority of commentators on bodily experience have placed it at the bottom, well below the other chemical sense, taste, which in at least some forms can be proof of refinement and the source of aesthetic interest. Smell, by contrast, seems inveterately low: corporeal, animalistic, primitive, and therefore degraded. (4)

Fjellestad also argues that in the early twentieth century, texts began to make greater use of smell, the “most liminal of senses,” noting what she calls its “subversive potential” and “its ability to violate boundaries, assault rationality, and evoke powerful emotions of disgust and attraction” (650).

Of the many senses which can arouse disgust, olfaction is amongst the keenest and most sensitive, in part because of its intrinsic diffuseness, its inability to be precisely localized. Miller notes that “smells are pervasive and invisible, capable of threatening like poison; smells are the very vehicles of contagion”: thus odours are “especially contaminating and much more dangerous

than localized substances one may or may not put in the mouth” (66). Bad smells forcibly impinge on the subject, refusing to respect bodily boundaries, problematizing distinctions between outside and inside, between the self and the exterior universe. Korsmeyer notes that while “vision and its companion hearing are philosophically, scientifically, and in common parlance considered the ‘higher’ senses,” olfaction (along with taste and touch) have been conceptualized as more bodily or “lower” (68). Thus, olfaction already hovers on the edge of animality, reminding us of our own status as animals and as corporeal beings. William Ian Miller puts it even more dramatically, suggesting that while “vision and hearing belong on high” and constitute “the proper entrances to intellectual and contemplative pleasures,” smell in contrast is one of “the senses of Hell” (75). He notes that “the high/low opposition invariably makes disgust the domain of the low, whether that be the genitals and anus or the dark and primitive” and that therefore “in the Western tradition smell ends up associated with the dark, the dank, the primitive and bestial, with blind and subterranean bestiality that moves in ooze” (Miller 75). Nineteenth-century accounts of smell were also quick to link it to animality. Grant Allen, who in *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877) likewise situates smell as one of the “lower senses” in contrast with sight and hearing, emphasizes olfaction’s capacity to elicit revulsion while terming olfaction “a mere relic,” describing the parts of the brain linked to olfaction as “shriveled” in relation to those of “lower animals” and suggesting that, “of all the senses of man, Smell is the one which is least intellectual and most purely emotional” (83). He also claims that children and “savages” are the most sensitive to smell, in contrast to “civilized adults” whose senses have been blunted or deadened (Allen 43).

The association between smell, lowness, and animality is especially important when considering its relation to disgust. Theorists of disgust have noted that things which remind us of our animality disturb our ontological self-perception and so tend to repulse us by calling our human

uniqueness into question. As McGinn observes, our anthropocentric image of ourselves as superior to animals places us above an inert and passive Nature in a hierarchical position of authority, but when we contemplate our own bodily materiality our clearly animal nature undermines our delusions of grandeur: “we must eat, digest, and excrete; we cannot reproduce without recourse to the messy process of copulation” (73). As a result, anything that reminds us of our animality discomforts us by perturbing the artificial hierarchy of being erected by anthropocentric metaphysics; when we are forced to confront our own animal nature, “our immersion in the biological world inhabited by rats and worms, digestion and death” and our evolutionary and ecological continuity with the rest of the world, “we find ourselves repelled” (McGinn 73). The psychologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues postulate a similar theory, suggesting that “the desire not to be considered animals may itself have as its root a concern with death, an animal property shared by humans that is particularly unsettling and one that we try to put out of our minds” (870). It is not merely that unpleasant smells are especially powerful elicitors of revulsion, but rather that olfaction itself, in the context of a discourse that associated it closely with animality, primitivism, and crude physicality, bears the taint of disgust. Blackwood’s particular representation of olfaction, however, harnesses the bestial potency of disgust to offer a unique form of aesthetic transport: the disgust the Wendigo’s odour elicits mingles with cosmic awe and wonder comparable to the literary sublime. Rather than confirming the mastery of humanity over Nature, the Wendigo’s smell undoes the very distinctions between humanity and Nature that undergirds our constructions of “the human” and the rational subject.

In their travel into the Canadian woods, the moose-hunters of “The Wendigo” attempt to assert their human supremacy over the natural world, to transform the untamed forest into a sporting ground – to make it literally a world-for-them. Instead they find themselves subsumed

into that world, with one of them, the French-Canadian guide Défago, transformed and then killed by the monstrously rank creature. The very difficulties inherent in describing smell are harnessed by Blackwood's story to strengthen the association of the Wendigo's malodorousness with the nonhuman world. The disgust evoked by the sinister odour mingles with an ecstatic awe that I relate to Christopher Hitt's theory of the ecological sublime and the Kristevan abject. Rather than simply confirming an absolute alterity between humanity and nature – the dualistic, hierarchical configuration that usually characterizes the sublime – the contaminating odour of the Wendigo throws ideological and ontological conceptions into question.

In contrast with eighteenth-century theories of the sublime, Christopher Hitt's "ecological sublime" preserves "the radical alterity of nature while resisting its reification or objectification" (613). Hitt observes that the sublime has been either ignored or dismissed by most ecocritics in part due to its associations with eighteenth-century philosophical accounts such as those of Burke and Kant. Accordingly, Hitt's ecocritical revision of the sublime reclaims it from anthropocentric ideological discourse (605). He points out that even within problematic theories that reify the individual subject's superiority over nature, a certain humility before nature is evident (607). While Enlightenment models of sublime experience undermine this humility in order to aggrandize the subject, Hitt's model resists "the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature" (609). Instead, the affective potency of ecological sublimity relies on the realization that we are actually *part* of the seemingly alien "unfathomable otherness of nature" (611): the ecological sublime first estranges us with the alterity of nature, then reminds us that our own bodies and minds are inseparable from it. In the moment of sublime rapture, we are offered a glimpse of something like Nature in its panpsychic wholeness. As Hitt puts it, "we are temporarily jarred loose

from our linguistic moorings, and because these define our sense of self, it, too, is threatened at this moment (614). The veil through which we perceive reality is frayed.

Hitt's account works well in tandem with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kristeva speaks of the abject as being "edged with the sublime" (11), positing that those things that repulse us disturb our sense of "identity, system, [and] order" and so must be abjected in order to protect and constitute the self (4). While she holds that abjection can ultimately be traced to a rejection of the maternal body and thus threatens to lapse into an essentialist account of gender, her attention to the ambivalent desires caught up in the process of abjection is helpful in considering the relationship between disgust and the ecological sublime in "The Wendigo." Abjection, Kristeva insists, "is above all ambiguity" (9). Kristeva singles out animality in particular as an aspect of the abject: "the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territory of the *animal*" (12). Abjection, she suggests, provides a means for societies to demarcate "a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals of animalism" (Kristeva 12-13). But at the same time, abjection is not merely a mechanism for demarcation and control. Even as the abject disgusts us, it also engulfs us in a "vortex of summons and repulsion" that produces ecstatic affect: it "places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (Kristeva 1). The result is a "*jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up" (Kristeva 9). We are reminded, in confronting the abject, of our own oneness with the universe; as such the abject beckons the subject to return to primal unity, relieving it of the burdens of individuated subjectivity.

The Wendigo's contaminating odour engenders disgust, but a disgust limned with sublime awe. Rather than the visual spectacle usually associated with sublimity, the Wendigo's odour menaces the moose-hunters invisibly, appealing to their lower, "animal" senses and blurring the

boundary between subject and world. Accompanied by “deep silence” and mingling with “the faint, bleak odours of coming winter” which, the narrator notes, “white men, with their dull scent, might never have divined” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 59), the smell is initially borne into the camp by a change in the wind detected by the party’s indigenous guide, Punk:

The thick darkness rendered sight of small avail, but, like the animals, he possessed other senses that darkness could not mute. He listened – then sniffed the air . . . After five minutes again he lifted his head and sniffed, and yet once again. A tingling of the wonderful nerves that betrayed itself by no outer sign, ran through him as he tasted the keen air . . . [the wind] came from the direction in which he had stared, and it passed over the sleeping camp with a faint and sighing murmur through the tops of the big trees that was almost too delicate to be audible. With it, down the desert paths of night, though too faint, too high even for the Indian’s hair-like nerves, there passed a curious, thin odour, strangely disquieting, an odour of something that seemed unfamiliar – utterly unknown. (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 60)

The narrator describes Punk’s heightened senses in animal terms: “like the animals,” he has keen senses apart from sight. The European hunters, conversely, are largely dependent on their eyes: “even Hank and Défago, subtly in league with the woods as they were, would probably have spread their delicate nostrils in vain” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 60). The Europeans have abjected that part of themselves deemed too animal: their olfactory senses have atrophied, and they have unduly privileged the more “rational” sense of sight. Punk, in contrast, retains sensitivity to the olfactory dimensions of the landscape, lacking socialization in a discourse that consistently equates bad smells with disorder, death, and primitivism. Far from replicating an imperialist disdain for atavistic natives, then, Blackwood’s description exalts Punk’s intertwinement in the panpsychic web of ecological relations comprising Blackwood’s Nature. Though Blackwood’s emphasis on

Punk's "Indian blood" ("The Wendigo" 60) may re-inscribe the problematic racial archetype of the noble savage, the olfactory insensitivity of the other characters functions as a symptom of an anthropocentric denial of humanity's place in a greater ecosystem, their retreat from Nature and the real.

As the hunters travel deeper into the Canadian wilderness – splitting up into two groups and leaving their canoe, "a symbol of man's ascendancy" (Blackwood, "The Wendigo" 63), behind – the text becomes increasingly concerned with the odour of lions and with smells more generally. Défago begins "peering about . . . in the Bush, as though he heard or saw something," eventually abandoning these senses in favour of sniffing the air "like a dog scenting game . . . [drawing] the air into his nostrils in short, sharp breaths, turning quickly as he did so in all directions, and finally 'pointing' down the lake shore" (Blackwood, "The Wendigo" 67). Similarly, as Simpson – the story's protagonist – marvels at the "austere beauty" of the wilderness "his lungs [drink] in the cool and perfumed wind" (Blackwood, "The Wendigo" 61): his relationship with the forest is increasingly defined by smell as well as by sight. Swallowed by the primordial woodland, the hunters begin to slough off their "civilized" qualities as nature shifts the "personal values" of the moose-hunters, even those "hitherto held for permanent and sacred" (Blackwood, "The Wendigo" 62). The backwoods trouble their over-reliance on sight over smell; the hunters no longer stand outside of Nature, looking upon it, they are becoming a part of it, the boundaries between them and Nature eroding.

On smelling the odour of lions itself, Défago initially denies that he "heered – or smelt" anything, but interrogates Simpson as to whether he has smelled anything unusual; tellingly, Simpson still only smells the campfire (Blackwood, "The Wendigo" 68). Défago's olfactory anxieties foreshadow the guide's sudden disappearance in the night and later metamorphosis; after

emerging in search of the French-Canadian even Simpson can smell the “penetrating, all-pervading odour” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 76), an “elusive scent” which resists identification and disappears before he can “properly seize or name it” (77). The language here is exactly that of colonization, specifically a failed colonization: the unfamiliar and “elusive” smell refuses Simpson’s attempts to force it into his rationalistic purview. The narrator notes that “approximate description, even, seems to have been difficult” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 77): the smell defies the power of language to define or contain it. It is “unlike any smell [Simpson] knew,” somehow both “faint yet pungent” (76), and though “acrid” it is also “almost sweet” and “not wholly unpleasing,” the double negative emphasizing the scent’s categorically fraught and ambivalently alluring nature (77).

Even while it eludes description, the odour of lions violates bodily boundaries as it overwhelms Simpson in his tent, forcing itself down his throat and conjuring a surfeit of connotations. It brings to mind “the scent of decaying garden leaves, earth, and the myriad, nameless perfumes that make up the odour of a big forest,” a sensory tumult of ecological sublimity suggesting a roiling mixture of organic growth and putrefaction (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 77). Here the odour of lions plumbs the depths of abjection. Even as it repulses, the miasmatic scent blurs the boundary between self and other: Simpson’s experience of the odour is as close as he can come to an unmediated experience of Nature, of the panpsychic oneness that Blackwood believes lies behind our discursive construction of reality. The odour exceeds any attempt at physical mastery; it cannot be grasped by means of sight nor touch. At the same time the Wendigo’s odour beckons human beings back to pre-semiotic unity with Nature. While the call of the Wendigo that infects Défago takes the form of sound, Simpson quickly becomes aware that the cry is accompanied by “a strange perfume, faint yet pungent,” which pervades the tent (Blackwood, “The

Wendigo” 76). There is a moment in which Simpson loses control of his body as it sucks in the odour despite his revulsion: “his nostrils were taking this distressing odour down into his throat” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 76). Simpson’s nostrils, rather than Simpson himself, are afforded grammatical and phenomenological “subjectivity” here.

The semiotic slipperiness of the odour recurs when Simpson recounts the story of Défago’s disappearance to the rest of the hunting party. While Simpson’s uncle, Dr. Cathcart, rationalizes the rest of the story with ease, he fails to account for the “damned odour” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 88). Simpson notes that “it made [him] feel sick” and again struggles to capture it in words: “a kind of desolate and terrible odour is the only way I can describe it” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 88). The smell’s linguistic indeterminacy prevents its assimilation into a coherent system of meaning. When Défago at last returns, monstrously and irrevocably changed by the Wendigo’s embrace, he exudes “whiffs of that penetrating, unaccustomed odour, vile, yet sweetly bewildering” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 97): on the one hand, it repels, but on the other it seems to brim with intoxicatingly ambivalent pleasures. While the hunters try to rationalize the horrific physical changes that Défago has undergone as the work of “exhaustion, cold, and terror” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 97) they still hold cloths to their mouths, unable to deny the potency of the Wendigo’s odour: their nostrils betray the feebleness of their denial.

As the moose-hunters fail to rationally account for the story, we are told that Punk’s contribution to their narrative “throws no further light upon it” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 104) – another metaphor emphasizing the failure of sight. The indigenous hunter discerns “the faint whiff of a certain singular odour” and promptly starts for home, driven by “the terror of a whole race” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 104). The hunters are unable to fit the encounter into any kind of rational framework, and we are told that Simpson is able to offer the best account, “though not

most scientific” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 102). Simpson claims that the Wendigo offered them “a glimpse into prehistoric ages, when superstitions, gigantic and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men; when the forces of nature were untamed, the Powers that may have haunted a primeval universe not yet withdrawn,” Powers “not evil perhaps in themselves” but inimical to civilization, human values, and the idea of “the human” itself (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 102). Years later the odour still haunts both Simpson and Dr. Cathcart, Cathcart cryptically noting that “odours . . . are not so easy as sounds and sights of telepathic communication” to explain; the narrator observes that Cathcart “was not quite so glib as usual with his explanation” (Blackwood, “The Wendigo” 102). What we are left with, then, is neither the victory of humanity over monstrosity nor, conversely, the destruction of humanity by all-powerful Nature; instead the story refuses any kind of definitive closure, destabilizing the typical generic structures of horror fiction further.

Blackwood’s treatment of the Wendigo’s smell exploits the very problems that arise when olfaction is described to strengthen its ecological sublimity. Describing smells is inherently problematic because language often lacks an abstract terminology for smell; as a result, any description of olfaction “necessitates a linguistic detour through the metaphoric, that is, a breach of reference in the text each time we attempt to describe a smell adjectivally,” as Hans Rindisbacher claims (15). William Iain Miller similarly comments that “the lexicon of smell is very limited and usually must work by making an adjective of the thing that smells” (67). Smells, in other words, draw attention to just how incompletely human language represents external reality. By conspicuously exceeding our capacity to represent them linguistically, smells undermine any confidence we might have in the ability of language to adequately capture the world around us, troubling our semiotically mediated experience of things. While sight and hearing become allies

in the moose-hunters' attempts to force a rationalist perspective on the Wendigo – and thus to master the natural forces that the Wendigo represents – smell refuses co-option, instead stressing the sublime irreducibility of Nature, its resistance to human control or comprehension.

4.4 Vitalism and Vibrant Assemblages in “The Man Whom the Trees Loved”

Like “The Willows,” Blackwood’s “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” is a tale of arboreal horror, but where the malignant, extradimensional willow-things of the earlier story seem to demand sacrifice, in this later tale they desire instead a peculiar intimacy with the protagonist, the elderly David Bittacy. The story, more than either “The Willows” or “The Wendigo,” blurs the boundary between cosmic horror and a kind of eldritch eroticism, bringing Blackwood’s reverential relationship to Nature into sharper relief and with it a vision of his universe, a universe defined by unity. As Mr. Bittacy declares, functioning, more or less, as a mouthpiece for Blackwood himself: “It’s rather a comforting thought . . . that life is about us everywhere, and that there is no dividing line between what we call organic and inorganic” (“The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 29). He is answered by the dendrophiliac artist Sanderson: “The universe, yes . . . is all one . . . We’re puzzled by the gaps we cannot see across, but as a fact, I suppose, there are no gaps at all” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 29). The universe, for Blackwood, is *one thing*, a single pulsating super-organism of which humans are but a part.

“The Man Whom the Trees Loved” is the story of Mr. and Mrs. Bittacy and is told primarily from the increasingly horrified perspective of the latter as her husband slowly becomes more and more enamoured with the woods around their home. Mrs. Bittacy, a staunch Evangelical protestant of the same sort as Blackwood’s parents, fails to comprehend the increasing fascination the woods hold for her husband. A woman who sees “Beezlebub [lying] hidden among” (Blackwood, “The

Man Whom the Trees Loved” 29) the syllables of long words and who would have preferred “more open country that left approaches clear” (56) to the claustrophobic press of trees encircling them, Mrs. Bittacy comes to loathe the Forest, becoming jealous of its sway over Mr. Bittacy and attributing malevolent intentions to it. “It would absorb and smother them if it could” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 57) she worries, anxious that the woods might engulf them entirely. After procuring a painting from Sanderson, Mr. Bittacy’s fascination with “the Forest” outside of their home grows, and Mrs. Bittacy becomes conscious that her husband is transforming: “the alteration spread all through and over him, was in both mind and actions, sometimes almost in his face as well” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 52).

While Mr. Bittacy seems welcomed by the Forest, it holds for Mrs. Bittacy only dread and loathing: within its green shadows she feels that the trees are “aware of her” and view her as an “intruder” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 77). She begins to question her faith, to recognize the possibility of certain “Powers” belonging neither to good nor evil. In the end, she loses her husband to the wood, a loss that dwarfs and belittles her next to the cosmic enormity of Nature: “the whole world knew of her complete defeat, her loss, her little human pain” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 98). Though her husband remains physically with her, she realizes that his soul has fled, leaving him “but a shell, half emptied” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 98) while his spirit roams the Forest, his voice mingling with the roaring of the trees in the wind – though it is unclear whether this state of being is metaphorical or metaphysical.

Greg Conley has recently suggested that “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” as well as “The Willows” is entirely concerned with estranging humanity from Nature, making “trees into aliens” and showing readers “that grotesque aliens are their own life forms and that evolutionary

pressure does have an end goal in mind” (443). His anti-teleological reading of Blackwood’s texts draws on T.H. Huxley and other evolutionary biologists to insist on “the alienness of nature itself” (Conley 444). While I agree with Conley that Blackwood’s texts “de-center humanity in the cosmos” and undermine “former assumptions about humanity’s importance to the natural order of the inherent nature of right and wrong to cling to,” I am unconvinced by his contention that Blackwood’s horror stories portray the “vast distances” between humans and Nature as “difficult or impossible to bridge” (442). Conley’s attention to evolutionary difference overlooks the underlying ontological continuity present throughout Blackwood’s writings. Stories like “The Willows,” “The Wendigo,” and “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” all seem to be stories about confrontations between humanity and the nonhuman world which result in precisely the kind of bridging that Conley suggests is impossible. Demarcating the human as special, superior, unique, and important is, for Blackwood, a cultural delusion, a contrivance of ethnocentric colonial attitudes, Evangelical Christianity, and the presumptions of much of Western philosophy. Ontologically speaking, there is nothing which separates humanity from the nonhuman world. As Mr. Bittacy suggests, “behind a great forest . . . may stand a rather splendid Entity that manifests through all the thousand individual trees – some huge collective life, quite as minutely and delicately organised as our own,” a life which “might merge and blend with ours under certain conditions, so that we could understand it by *being* it, for a time at least” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 31). Blackwood’s weird fiction, far from emphasizing the gulfs between humanity and other species, insists on their essential ontic illusoriness.

Though the ending of “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” might be interpreted as suggesting a kind of dualism, the story as a whole works to collapse distinctions between spirit and matter, restlessly troubling Mrs. Bittacy’s dualist, Christian worldview and hinting rather at

the primal unity between humanity and the “Vegetable Kingdom.” Mr. Bittacy undergoes a mystic experience, but not with a transcendental God – rather, he embraces the immanent unity of all things. It is here, I think, that Bennett’s ecocentric ontology of “vibrant materialism” becomes useful. Bennett’s vibrant and vital materialism “tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota,” drawing attention “away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and towards a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans” (112). Drawing on Spinoza’s distinction between the passive matter of *natura naturata* and the endlessly generative *natura naturans*, Bennett seeks to tell an “onto-tale” in which “everything is, in a sense, alive” (117) and notes that the monism her vibrant materialism describes is hard to discern – “and, once discerned, hard to keep focused on” (119). While she calls upon readers to embrace the “intrinsically polluted nature” of the human, to “admit that humans have crawled or secreted themselves into every corner of the environment; admit that the environment is actually inside human bodies and minds” and so “give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman” (116), she admits that “it is very hard to keep focused on the oxymoronic truism that the human is not exclusively human, that we are made up of its” (113), that we are in fact “*an array of bodies,*” our flesh “populated and constituted by different swarms of followers,” our porous selves constituted by “biochemical-social systems” and the “complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans” (112). It is difficult ontological truisms about the human and the nonhuman that Blackwood’s weird fiction brings into focus by means of aesthetic cognition, a cognition intertwined with disgust, horror, and a repulsive, ecocentric inversion of sublimity. Blackwood’s weird fiction does not merely *contain* a world-view, it continuously strives to expand the consciousness of its readers, to impress upon them the awesome fullness of Nature, its all-encompassing, nonhuman animacy.

For Bennett, human knowledge and accounts of subjectivity fail to acknowledge the presence and agency of what she calls the “nonhuman” and “thing-power” (2), concepts which she compares to the Wild of Henry David Thoreau, the conatus of Spinoza and the absolute of Hent de Vries, a kind of “vitality intrinsic to materiality” (3). Tracing the ways that “human beings and thinghood overlap” (4), Bennett strives to replace our self-conception as autonomous agents with a shifting landscape of actants or operators (terms she borrows from actor-network theory, in particular the work of Bruno Latour), horizontalizing hierarchies of being. Actants are sources of action: “an actant can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both” (Bennett 9). Rather than possessing discrete, bounded bodies and consciousness, Bennett argues, we are mosaics or “assemblages,” a term she adapts from Deleuze and Guatarri: “assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). “Picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral,” Bennett urges: “an affective, speaking human body is not *radically* different from the affective, signalling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes” (116-17). Yet, as Bennett suggests, this act of imagining is difficult: the nuances of the strange ontology she posits are slippery. The nonhuman world lies on the border of “the limits of *intelligibility*” (3), and, as Bennett notes following Bruno Latour, “we are much better at admitting that humans infect nature than we are at admitting that nonhumanity infects culture, for the latter entails the blasphemous idea that nonhumans – trash, bacteria, stem cells, food, metal, technologies, weather – are actants more than objects” (115).

Using Bennett’s monist, ecocentric ontology of human-nonhuman assemblages and vibrant materialism, we can read Blackwood’s “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” as what she would call

an “onto-tale,” one that insists that “everything is, in a sense, alive” (117). Just as affects of horror and disgust function in “The Willows” and “The Wendigo” to communicate vegetable and animal ontologies, so in “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” does weird affect estrange us from our delusions of autonomy, inviting us to vicariously experience the becoming-plant of its protagonist and the renewal of a disturbing but blissful intimacy with the nonhuman. Near the novella’s beginning, Mr. Bittacy reads to his wife snippets of scientific papers hinting at the consciousness of plants: “We must believe that in plants there exists a faint copy of what we know as consciousness in ourselves” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 15), he tells Mrs. Bittacy, though by the tale’s end this “copy” will seem neither faint nor a mere shadow of human consciousness. Sanderson, similarly, peppers Mr. Bittacy with mystic suggestions and attributions of sentience to trees, hinting already at the quasi-malevolence that will come to characterize the Forest: “there *is* ‘God’ in the trees, God in a very subtle aspect and sometimes – I have known the trees express it too – that which is *not* God – dark and terrible” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 24). Repeatedly, Sanderson makes the trees the grammatical subjects of sentences rather than objects. He speaks of trees concealing and revealing themselves, and of “making a clear, deliberate choice” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 24) as to where to stand and grow and what to allow near them, speech which seems to bring “the whole vegetable kingdom nearer to that of man” so that “the Forest edged up closer” to listen (25). In painting a cedar, he says he quests after “the naked being of the thing” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 21). And it is Sanderson, also, who first tells Mr. Bittacy that the trees love him, having become “*aware of [his] presence*” – “trees love you, that’s a fact” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 25).

Sanderson's simultaneous role as both artist and ontologist affirms a connection between aesthetic experience and the essence of things, the interpenetration of human and nonhuman existence. Sanderson's paintings make trees seem somehow more alive: his painting of the cedar, for instance, makes Mr. Bittacy aware of "the 'something' trees possess that makes them know [he's] there when [he stands] close and [watches]" (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 7). As Mr. Bittacy remarks, "Sanderson knows what he's doing when he paints a tree," such that "you can almost hear it rustle," "smell its leaves," "hear the rain drip through its leaves," or "see the branches move," sensory experiences which tap into the feeling of "communion" he shares with them, perhaps partially attributable to his "years spent in the forests and jungles of the eastern world" (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 4) – as if the mere act of walking through such jungles allowed Mr. Bittacy to absorb some kernel of Eastern philosophy. Sanderson's paintings reflect the same form of aesthetic experience Blackwood's story as a whole attempts to create. The novella is a veritable tangled bank of intertwining emotions – fear, awe, dread, disgust, wonder, melancholy, horror, hate, jealousy, and love – which, alongside rich descriptions of the Forest, mingles an affective reaction to art with mystic gnosis.

Like Sanderson, Blackwood's narrator affords the trees a kind of distributed agency and grammatical subjectivity. The Forest possesses actual needs, actual desires, actual moods; we are told that when Mrs. Bittacy leaves the woods that "the Forest did not want her" (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 81). Blackwood writes of the Forest as "a remorseless, branching power that sought to keep exclusively for itself the thing it loved and needed, spread like a running desire through all its million leaves and stems and roots" ("The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 70). The trees are what Bennett would term "actants." As Bennett notes, when we relinquish the idea of autonomous agents and replace it with a horizontalized ontology of actants, "agentic capacity

is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types” (9), just as the moods of the Forest seem to suffuse its rhizomatic network of distributed consciousness, its “million leaves and stems and roots,” before suffusing in turn the human beings who wander into its brooding enormity. Blackwood describes the Forest’s jealousy as “some blind tide of impersonal and unconscious wrath” distributed amongst “a host with endless reinforcements” (“The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 70).

The Forest exerts its power on human beings through affect as well. While Mrs. Bittacy comes to understand the Forest’s power, its strange consciousness, and so to question her ontological assumptions, she does so *affectively* rather than intellectually. She watches as her husband becomes drawn into the Forest, becoming part of its assemblage: “sometimes, before she could face the thing, argue it away, or pray it into silence, she found the thought of him running swiftly through her mind like a thought of the Forest itself, the two most intimately linked and joined together, each a part and complement of the other, one being” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 53). But this idea “was too dim for her to see it face to face,” too amorphous: “its mere possibility dissolved the instant she focussed it to get the truth behind it” as it “was too utterly elusive, mad, protæan” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 53). The thought of the Forest and its link with her husband lies beyond the reach of intellectual intelligibility, “behind any words that she could ever find, beyond the touch of definite thought” such that “her mind was unable to grapple with it” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 53). Instead she is left only with a *feeling*: “the horror certainly remained” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 53).

Mr. Bittacy clearly experiences not horror but wonder and euphoria as the Forest envelops him, integrating him into its assemblage, but his eerie becoming-plant inspires loneliness and

revulsion in his wife. Blackwood's description of Mr. Bittacy coming inside after a trip into the Forest encapsulates this horror:

His hair was untidy and his boots were caked with blackish mud. He moved with a restless, swaying motion that somehow blanched her cheek and sent a miserable shivering down her back. It reminded her of trees . . . He brought in with him an odour of the earth and forest that seemed to choke her and make it difficult to breathe; and – what she noticed with a climax of almost uncontrollable alarm – upon his face beneath the lamplight shone traces of a mild, faint glory that made her think of moonlight falling upon a wood through speckled shadows. (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 71)

Mr. Bittacy's mud-caked boots suggest roots, while his sway recalls the movement of trees in the wind; his overpowering odour makes Mrs. Bittacy gag. Like the "odour of lions" this smell signals the presence of the nonhuman world, of Nature; because Mrs. Bittacy clings to the anthropocentric comforts of her Bible, of a world created for human beings and with humanity at its centre, she perceives the Forest and the reality it stands for as abominable, its presence an intrusive, infectious force. She begins to suffer nightmares of suffocation and bodily violation, as if the trees are consuming her body: "there seemed wet leaves pressed against her mouth, and soft green tendrils clinging to her neck" (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 96). She perceives "huge creepers . . . feeling about her person for points where they might fasten well, as ivy or the giant parasites of the Vegetable Kingdom settle down on the trees themselves," her disgust manifesting in her mind as a kind of "morbid growth" which "possessed her life and held her" (Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" 96). The imagery here, crucially, is not merely of alienage and difference, of the alterity of the nonhuman world: her horror consists not only in terror of the Forest but in disgust at the thought of becoming one with it, of being engulfed by what her husband might

call “the immense whirlpool of its own vast dreaming life” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 31). The wet texture of the leaves and comparisons to parasitic vines and bodily growths emphasize the particular grotesqueness of the Forest here – we have returned to the vegetal horror of life soup and Miller’s repulsive “lower phyla” (40).

Even while Mrs. Bittacy’s jealousy and disgust intensify, however, Mr. Bittacy’s wonder grows in parallel intensity. Conjoined with the Forest, his consciousness expands, his mind becoming “charged with trees – their foliage, growth development; their wonder, beauty, strength; their loneliness in isolation, their power in a herded mass” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 64). As the text progresses, however, Blackwood increasingly confines the narrative to Mrs. Bittacy’s point of view: instead of witnessing her husband’s transformation first-hand we experience it vicariously, through Mrs. Bittacy’s mounting revulsion. Her disgust reaches its extremity when she awakes in the night to discover “wet and shimmering presences” about the bed, their “green, spread bulk . . . massed yet translucent, mild yet thick, moving and turning within themselves to a hushed noised of multitudinous soft rustling” (Blackwood, “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 91). Blackwood writes that there “was something very sweet and winning that fell into her with a spell of horrible enchantment” (“The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 91), again stressing both the intrusiveness and the seductiveness of the sticky, categorically contradictory tree-things. With their collective agency and shimmering, inconstant bodies, these mysterious embodiments of the vegetal soul are near-perfect representations of Bennett’s vibrant matter, vital materialism made manifest: not individuals but a “mass” of affect-generating actants, these “Presences” as Blackwood calls them enmesh Mr. Bittacy in their “pale-green shadow,” an ontological reclamation of the human that leaves his wife sure that she has “lost [her] God” (“The Man Whom the Trees Loved” 92), her anthropomorphic, transcendental deity toppled by the

insistent immanence of the Forest, of a weird Nature that subsumes even the human into itself. “It is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity, and it is foolish to define the self as something purely human,” Bennett argues, but as she asks “how can I start to feel myself as not only human?” (116). The tree-Presences of Blackwood’s text “recast the self in the light of its intrinsically polluted nature” (116) in exactly the way that Bennet demands. They tell an onto-story, offering readers a glimpse of a different way of being.

Like Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood uses his fiction to estrange readers not only from the banalities of everyday experience but from an anthropocentric reality. But in place of sacramental slime and Anglo-Catholic mysteries, Blackwood instead conjures a vision of a world untamed, a version of Nature that cuts across artificial human hierarchies and supplants a world of appearances with one of multiplicity and transformation. Primal unity with Nature in all its wondrous, nonhuman totality is restored within the pages of his weird stories, albeit through what may superficially seem an unlikely aesthetic conduit: the affect of disgust. From the dripping tendrils and rustling horrors of “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” to the gag-inducing odour of lions in “The Wendigo” to the inhuman, “fourth dimensional” vibrations of “The Willows,” Blackwood draws again and again on a form of disruptive revulsion, one that wrenches characters – and, potentially, readers as well – from the comforts and conceits of their familiar existence and plunges them into the rank, roiling realities of Nature.

For all the eldritch monstrosity of his weird Nature, Blackwood’s cosmic vision is essentially optimistic, life-affirming, and even joyous: even as it horrifies and disgusts and obliterates the stable, human subject, there is something uplifting in his fiction’s strange splendour. The universe of Blackwood’s writing is not in itself one of suffering and cruelty *per se*, and reunion with it brings relief as well as repulsion, even while those outside of its dripping, rustling, writhing

envelopment regard it with horror and disgust. The same cannot be said of H.P. Lovecraft, whose works I turn to next.

Chapter 5: Cosmic Contamination: Howard Phillips Lovecraft

5.1 Assaults of Chaos

The term “Lovecraftian horror” has become virtually synonymous with weird fiction. Howard Phillips Lovecraft’s contributions to the weird are immense; his influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century horror is scarcely less than Poe’s. As scholars have noted, Lovecraft’s cultural influence is currently waxing – the stars, as it were, seem to have aligned for the once-obscure author, a pulp writer often scorned in his time (and after it) as a hack, but whose works have enjoyed global celebration and the praise of literary and philosophical figures as towering as Jorge Luis Borges, William Burroughs, and Gilles Deleuze. At the same time, powerful and innovative as it may be, Lovecraft’s writing should be understood as part of a longer tradition of the weird, one invested in speculation about the nonhuman world and reality at its most essential level. Lovecraft looks back to Poe, Machen, and Blackwood as idols, seeing in their writing models for the sort of literature he yearned to create himself. His work can thus be seen as the culmination of a kind of metamorphosis – the evolution of a certain strand of the Gothic, the aesthetics of terror and the uncanny transforming into a strange, new, often-revolting form.

Lovecraft’s fiction is filled with motifs of contamination, infection, and impurity: demonic possession, abominable hybridity, alien parasitism, otherworldly pathogens, and similar cosmic threats. In his stories the bodies and minds of his vulnerable New England characters are always disintegrating under the influence of nonhuman powers, corrupted by unclean forces beyond the full ken of human comprehension. Such horrors prey on anxieties around the threat of a menacing “cosmic outside,” an alterity key to Lovecraft’s vision of the “authentically” weird. As Lovecraft writes in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), those “with minds sensitive to hereditary

impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse” (18). The “hereditary impulse” he speaks of here, which he believes all share to some extent, though some more potently than others, is a deeply ingrained horror and awe at the unknown, at those metaphysical mysteries of the cosmos that stubbornly swirl in the human mind, no matter how thorough the demystifications of science.

Many critics engaging with Lovecraft’s contaminating monsters have approached them politically, interpreting them in light of Lovecraft’s undeniably racist and xenophobic beliefs and his distinct dislike of those of lower socioeconomic class (despite his own lifelong struggles with poverty). As Michel Houellebecq suggests, “it seemed self-evident to [Lovecraft] that Anglo-Protestants were by nature entitled to the highest positions within the social order” (105), and Lovecraft’s exposure to ethnic diversity in New York pushed these deep-seated bigotries to new extremes. In a letter written at the nadir of his New York experience Lovecraft claims that “it is not good for a proud, light-skinned Nordic to be cast away alone” amongst those “whom his deepest cell-tissues hates and loathes as the mammal hates and loathes the reptile, with an instinct old as history” (*Lord of a Visible World* 181) and speculates that “we shall be driven either to murder them or emigrate ourselves, or be carried shrieking to the madhouse” (180). As we can see, Lovecraft’s racist vitriol, even while grounded in the scientific and cultural racism of his day – derived partially, in Lovecraft’s case, from readings of eugenicists like Havelock Ellis and Ernst Haeckel, as well as philosophers like Oswald Spengler – was intense, and floridly expressed. David Simmons argues that Lovecraft’s fears of “racial hybridization” reflect a preoccupation with racialized abjection shared by other authors of Gothic and weird fiction, and that Lovecraft thus

participates in a literary tradition “of depicting non-Western people and cultures as a horrific *Other*” (15). China Miéville similarly suggests in his introduction to *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) that the “central engine” of Lovecraft’s art is “race-inflected nihilism” (xix) and that beings like the oozing shoggoths, for all their seeming meaninglessness, also constitute “a mass presence, various, multicoloured, refusing to behave” and stand for “Lovecraft’s dehumanizing, subhumanizing vision of the masses” (xxiii). These readings uncover an important dimension of Lovecraft’s fiction, albeit an exceedingly ugly one. However, such interpretations, by their nature, usually have relatively little to say about Lovecraft’s “cosmic” qualities, with Lovecraft’s concern for the fundamental nature of reality and the rules that govern it. One critic, Mitch Frye, goes so far as to claim that texts like “The Rats in the Walls” (1924) and *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936) are not concerned with the “horror of the infinite cosmos” at all but with “genotypic horror” in which the Anglo-Saxon hero is at war “with the mysterious machinations of his own genes” (239).

Without in any way denying the validity of approaches that deal with Lovecraft, race, and class, I think that they leave something important out – Lovecraft’s fascination with the nature of being, with the metaphysical laws (or lack thereof) and mysteries of the universe – of nonhuman, mind-independent reality in-itself, beyond the boundaries of human subjectivity. Lovecraft insists that “the one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim” (*SHL* 20). While Lovecraft was clearly obsessed with and enraged by the “alien invaders” he saw as befouling his precious New England, his disgust at

immigrants and miscegenation is complexly interconnected with his cosmic fascination and ontological speculations in a way that remains critically undertheorized.

Lovecraft writes in a letter that weird fiction can create “a rich emotional experience” (*SL* 2: 301) which is in fact “*an approach to the mystic substance of reality itself* – the hidden reality which our senses only imperfectly apprehend” (311). He notes that while “we have only extremely fragmentary and illusory specialised projections to go by” – that is to say, those particular projections detectable by human organs, chimerae of the senses – and while “the limits of the five senses are a fixed and insurmountable barrier beyond which we have no possible avenue of access” (*SL* 2: 302), the emotions aroused by art can facilitate “a slow, gradual approach, or faint approximation of the approach” to “absolute reality itself” (301). Lovecraft goes so far as to suggest that this search for “ultimate reality” is universal among human beings, undertaken to mollify “the troublesome feeling that the senses are imperfect informers” even by those who may “not have the faintest notion of any difference between phenomena and noumena” (*SL* 2: 311). Lovecraft’s comments in this letter complicate the anti-didacticism he inherits from Poe and Aestheticism, such as his claim in the short essay “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” (1933) that all fiction can ever truly present is “*a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood,*” and that “the moment it tries to be anything else it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing” (118). If affect and a kind of mystic quest for ultimate reality and the world-in-itself cannot be neatly divorced but are, in fact, intimately connected, by presenting a “certain type of human mood” and creating an “emotional experience,” Lovecraft’s stories *also* function metaphysically, grasping for a reality forever just-beyond the reach of the senses.

Previous scholars who do consider Lovecraft in relation to philosophical questions of being, knowledge, and the nature of reality have almost overwhelmingly upheld an understanding

of the world in Lovecraft's fiction as "mechanistically" materialist. For such authors, the Lovecraftian universe's uncompromising physicalism strips existence of greater meaning and construes reality as indifferent to human desires, values, and flourishing. In part, this reading is derived from Lovecraft himself, who described himself as a proponent of mechanistic materialism, viewing the universe as "a wholly purposeless and essentially temporary incident in the ceaseless and boundless rearrangements of electrons, atoms, and molecules which constitute the blind but regular mechanical patterns of cosmic activity" (*SL* 2: 41). One of the most prominent mechanistic materialist readings is that offered by S.T. Joshi, a prolific Lovecraftian scholar and a renowned expert on weird fiction more generally. Joshi argues that "the Old Ones, the fungi from Yuggoth, the Cthulhu spawn, and the Great Race," some of Lovecraft's greatest creations, are all "entirely material" (*The Weird Tale* 192). For Joshi, Lovecraft's gradual pivot away from "supernaturalism" and towards a kind of quasi-science fiction affirms the essential materialism in his stories, growing more stalwart as time goes on and the Mythos develops. Joshi claims in his biography of Lovecraft that his writing was an attempt to face "the new realities revealed by modern science" (*The Weird Tale* 298). While Vivian Ralickas is suspicious of anthropocentric readings, she likewise argues that Lovecraft's cosmic indifferentism – his notion that the universe has no *telos* or purpose, that there is no cosmic force, deity, or design that privileges human flourishing – rests primarily on a "mechanistic materialist foundation" (367); so too does James Arthur Anderson, who claims that Lovecraft's "fantastic, impossible worlds" are a front for "a realistic, scientific view of the universe in which we live," one "guided strictly by natural laws" (29). For Anderson Lovecraftian horror is

by definition “realistic, scientific horror” (77) – indeed, a kind of “super-realism” (152) based “upon scientific principles of the space age” (147).³⁸

While mechanistic materialist readings of Lovecraft can provide a compelling portrait of human insignificance in the face of an uncaring cosmos devoid of transcendental meaning, the problem with such interpretations is that they tend to address Lovecraft’s depiction of things as they appear, rather than his attempts to speculate about the world-in-itself, when Lovecraft explicitly writes that he was trying to do the latter. Indeed, Lovecraft, ever the aesthete, insists that science is “the great destroyer of beauty” (*SL* 2: 302), and that instead of simply replicating in fiction the world as revealed by scientific inquiry – however much Lovecraft believed in the importance of science – he wished to instead unveil “the stark, cosmic reality which lurks behind our various perceptions” (301), even if such an unveiling is only speculative. In the extreme, mechanistic materialist readings might risk associating Lovecraft with what Graham Harman calls a “brand of harsh scientism” (“An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 190) which seeks to make philosophy “the handmaid of science” (189). Such readings would fail to account for the way the Lovecraftian universe always seems to exceed even the most profusely adjective-laden description

³⁸ Many critics who describe Lovecraft’s writings in materialist terms emphasize both his atheism and his commitment to determinism. I am questioning neither belief, nor their presence in his fiction, but rather complicating his materialism and resisting any possibility of a reductive, scientific reading – especially one which relies on the idea, as Harman puts it, “that science answers philosophical questions better than philosophy itself” (“An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 189). Harman’s critique of this form of scientism is part of his larger critique of dogmatism; for the dogmatist, “truth is legible on the surface of the world” (Harman, *Weird Realism* 16). In essence, I want to move beyond a surface reading of Lovecraft that stops at his materialism and delves no further into his metaphysical speculations.

or the most extensive scientific analysis on the part of his characters, evading attempts by humans to fully comprehend it.

Take, for instance, the bizarre, eponymous colour in “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), a story I will discuss at length later in this chapter; Lovecraft notes that “words could not convey” this “unknown colour” which weaves itself “into fantastic suggestions of shape which each spectator later described differently” (96). The colour possesses “an unknown spectrum” and proves “baffling to the laboratory” – indeed, it is “almost impossible to describe” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 82). Now, of course we should not say that “The Colour Out of Space” overturns the whole of the scientific enterprise, or that it disproves science altogether, or anything of this nature; I do not want to make strawmen out of twentieth-century scientists, who were well aware, of course, that the senses were fallible, and that our perceptions could not always be trusted, and many of whom were not necessarily committed to a view that construed most metaphysics as cognitively meaningless. What the monstrous colour does is confront the reader with a piece of the cosmic outside which science and language utterly fail to describe yet which still impresses itself horribly upon us: it is used, in part, to speculate about something seemingly outside the bounds of human comprehension, something which should be unthinkable. It is at once utterly unknowable, and simultaneously, horrifically *present*, a seeming impossibility. The colour is more than a scientific curiosity; it is an opportunity for Lovecraft to speculate about things-in-themselves, in precisely the way he hopes art can accomplish. “We have no terms to envisage entity apart from those subjective aspects which reside wholly inside our own physiology and psychology,” Lovecraft writes, but art must take up the cause that religion once pursued, “the basis of every real religion, and the foundation of all that nobly poetic body of philosophy which has its fount in Plato” – the quest for an “absolute reality” (*SL 2*: 301).

To be perfectly clear, I want to emphasize that of course not all materialism – including much of the scientific materialism of the early twentieth century – is *inevitably* committed to reductionist or anthropocentric accounts of reality, or what the speculative realists sometimes call “philosophies of access.” Indeed, part of Quentin Meillassoux’s philosophical project is in imagining a “speculative materialism” (121) and Bennett’s “vibrant materialism,” as well as other variants of new materialism, certainly also complicate both a simplistic philosophy of access and correlationist accounts – theories which emphasize the centrality of the human subject. The mechanistic materialism used to sometimes describe Lovecraft’s writing, however, threatens to fall into the traps described above, as if Lovecraft were attempting to replace metaphysics with science and to use his weird fiction to explore the world as revealed by science and science alone. This move betrays a kind of “unspoken reductionism,” as Harman puts it (“An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 189). To the extent that critics of Lovecraft pair Lovecraft’s materialism with his “cosmicism” and other elements of his philosophy, they tend to neglect the metaphysical implications of this pairing. Critics who acknowledge that Lovecraft’s fiction complicates a straightforwardly “mechanistic” universe tend to leave the implications of this complication relatively unexplored, or argue that Lovecraft’s fiction has little to say about the nature of reality at all. For example, while Steven Mariconda argues that Lovecraft’s fiction is concerned with the *violation* of natural laws, suggesting that Lovecraft’s unyielding Newtonian materialism actually compelled him to write supernatural fiction in the first place (197), he dwells entirely on the cosmic imagery of Lovecraft’s writing rather than unpacking the qualities of the strange universe Lovecraft’s fiction reveals. Moreover, Mariconda’s stark separation of Lovecraft’s “mechanistic universe” and the world of his fiction undercuts the possibility that Lovecraft’s tales might offer any kind of genuine search for truth, for “ultimate” or “absolute” reality, even a speculative one.

In addition, the more cosmically-oriented critics become, the less they concern themselves with Lovecraft's monstrous bodies or tropes of infection and contamination.

In other words, then, there is a mostly-undiscussed relationship between what has been called Lovecraft's cosmicism or indifferentism – his emphasis on a nihilistic cosmos, devoid of meaning, in which human beings are insignificant – and tropes of contamination, infection, and grotesquery, especially as they might pertain to the way he speculates about metaphysics and the nature of absolute reality. While occasionally materialist readings of Lovecraft do make room for things permanently or necessarily “beyond” human understanding in Lovecraft's fiction, construing them as a kind of supplement for religious feeling, this explanation still often leaves unexplored the metaphysical significance of such supplements; even mechanistic materialist readings that do not fall into the epistemological trap of a naïve scientism still seems to fall short of giving a full account of the kinds of speculation in which Lovecraft engages. Lovecraft's writing is not just science fiction; his works do not simply confirm those elements of reality that empirical observation and experimentation have revealed. His oozing monsters and otherworldly plagues and tentacular horrors tell us more than that we're all buzzing masses of elementary particles, or that we're here by the exigencies of chance and natural selection rather than design. Lovecraft is not content with restricting his fiction to our observable, testable, perceived existence, wondrous as the advances of science reveal this existence to be. He is also concerned with the world of “unplumbed space” – with levels of reality he believed were forever beyond the reaches of science.

Recently, an alternative to the mechanistic materialist reading (dogmatic or otherwise) of Lovecraft has been offered by the speculative realists – most notably Harman. As Harman suggests, there is more to Lovecraft's horrors than clouds of subatomic particles: “Lovecraft's monsters are not spirits or souls, [but] they are also not just electrons, any more than Kant's things-

in-themselves are made of electrons” (*Weird Realism* 27). Harman offers an illuminating interpretation of Lovecraft’s fiction, and I build on his work here. However, his approach does have significant shortcomings. Firstly, Harman’s monograph describes Lovecraft’s metaphysics primarily in reference to Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger (*Weird Realism* 5) and examines Lovecraft’s monstrous creations and other fictional elements as objects amenable to analysis using Harman’s own particular brand of speculative realism, object-oriented ontology or “OOO.”³⁹ I think this vision of Lovecraftian ontology, while compelling, fails to account for the ways that Lovecraft’s universe seems to be essentially undifferentiated: too much integrity is granted to objects and individuals, when it is precisely such a sense of integrity that is always under threat from the “assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (*SHL* 19). The project of OOO is to invest objects and the nonhuman world with a kind of withdrawn, uncanny interiority kin to human consciousness and its own supposed depths, what Timothy Morton calls “inner space” (47). If Kantian philosophy and Romantic art “discovered” human inner space, then OOO extends this discovery to objects, granting them the same ontological priority as people. Lovecraft’s fiction, however, is so profoundly skeptical of human importance, autonomy, or agency – let alone the interiority and autonomy of objects – that I am unconvinced by OOO’s full applicability. Rather,

³⁹ Harman’s approach, as the “OOO” moniker makes clear, is fundamentally object-oriented, concerning itself primarily with the way in which objects around us are simultaneously withdrawn from us. As Harman describes at the outset of *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), “the major topic of object-oriented philosophy is the dual polarization that occurs in the world: one between the real and the sensual, and the other between objects and their properties” (4). His discussion of Lovecraft concern how Lovecraft’s weird inventions – from his monsters to the strange architecture of his sunken cities – always exceed their lists of properties in some fashion. As Harman puts it, “no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess” (*Weird Realism* 3).

I think that Lovecraft is engaged in a process that OOO philosophers might call a kind of “undermining,” one that, like OOO, dethrones human beings from their privileged position of knowing and understanding, but which does so by reducing them, and everything else, to a disgusting, all-encompassing monism, a shoggothic muck.

Other critics have also begun reading Lovecraft in relation to speculative realism, as recent texts like the anthology *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016) attest. Isabella van Elferen considers sounds in several of Lovecraft’s stories in relation to what she calls a “hyper-cacophony” similar to Meillassoux’s “hyper-chaos” (79). Although this sonic focus is fairly narrow, van Elferen helps to lay further foundations for thinking about Lovecraft’s writing as creating an “aperture onto the absolute, the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought” (89). She also points out that materialist readings and even some speculative realist ones, such as those undertaken by Harman, still tend to overlook the significance of “the immaterial, possibly metaphysical components in Lovecraft” (van Elferen 91). I want to build on van Elferen’s observations here by extending her emphasis on the immaterial still further.

As I have noted before, recent philosophical investigations of weird fiction have ended up emphasizing ideas at the expense of affect, which I think is integral to understanding weird fiction as a genre. This is true not only of Harman’s approach to Lovecraft specifically but also to other speculative realist readings of horror more generally, such as those offered by Eugene Thacker. By neglecting and marginalizing affect, philosophers have missed a key component of Lovecraft’s aesthetic strategy for conveying absolute reality. This chapter intervenes in discussion of Lovecraft’s metaphysics by positioning affect at the centre of his literary project and by considering Lovecraft’s writing not in terms of objects and their qualities but rather in relation to the thing or world-in-itself in its totality. In contrast both with a mechanistic materialist reading

that mostly ignores speculative metaphysics in Lovecraft and with the recent work of object-oriented ontologists, I interpret Lovecraft's contaminating horrors and the purple prose that describes them in relation to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, with whom Lovecraft was highly familiar. Schopenhauer holds that the world as we perceive it, the world of representation,⁴⁰ is only the phenomenal instantiation of the world-as-will or "will-to-live," an uncaring totality beyond time and space characterized as "a blind, irresistible urge" (*WWR* 1: 275) to which human beings are slaves.

I am not the only scholar to ever employ Schopenhauer to interpret Lovecraft; Paul Montelone argues that Lovecraft's very early Dunsanian pastiche "The White Ship" (1919) exhibits the influence of Schopenhauer insofar as it is a tale of desire forever thwarted, of endless, pointless striving (13). Thacker more recently observes that "to find an equal to Schopenhauer, one would have to look not to philosophy but to writers of supernatural horror such as H.P. Lovecraft" (*DTP* 19). Joshi, as I discuss below, has also written about Lovecraft's readings of Schopenhauer in a general fashion. None of these critics make as extensive a use of Schopenhauer as I do here, however. Montelone's analysis is confined to a single, very early story, and Thacker's own fairly brief readings of Lovecraft do not utilize Schopenhauer. Moreover, no one, to my knowledge, has attempted to combine a Schopenhauerian reading of Lovecraft with a cognitivist account of the aesthetics of disgust. I endeavour to show not only that Schopenhauer's will-to-live is useful in thinking about Lovecraft's weird fiction, but that affect – specifically disgust – provides a means of speculating about the world-as-will; and, moreover, that despite some of

⁴⁰ "Representation" is one translation of the German term Schopenhauer uses, *vorstellung*, which can also mean "idea" or even "presentation," a kind of performance, an interpretation favoured by Richard Aquila, who recently produced a new translation of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/19).

Schopenhauer's own reservations around disgust, its aesthetic power functions in Lovecraft's writing to produce an experience comparable to what Schopenhauer calls *Aufhebung*, a nullification or "mortification" in which the self as a bounded, individual being seems to dissolve and the human subject becomes cognizant of the will-to-live in all its awful eternity.

Lovecraft himself does not provide an exhaustive theoretical account of how emotion and cognition are intertwined. To explain how an emotional effect could provide a means of cognizing the absolute reality Lovecraft believes we all long for, I turn both to Schopenhauer, as mentioned, in combination with recent theories of disgust, including those of Korsmeyer and Susan Miller. Miller argues that disgust at the idea of contagion and contamination is predicated on "our fears of loss or deterioration of the self" (177), of "the complete disintegration of the body's form and function" in which "the boundary between inner and outer collapses" (185). For Miller, disgust reaches its most feverish intensity in those horrifying cases where "little can be done to resist the invasion of some powerful outsider, an invasion that threatens to supplant the self cell-by-cell, often with a spirit that seems alien rather than kindred and familiar" (171). Lovecraft's fiction is filled with such invasions, in which the cosmic outside attacks and contaminates human beings and destroys their sense of individual selfhood. As close readings of Lovecraft's stories will show, the loss of individuality occasioned by disgust resonates strongly with Schopenhauer's ontology, especially with regard to the body and its function as a meeting place for the world-as-will and the world-as-representation. Korsmeyer, whose cognitivist and aesthetic theory of disgust I have already discussed at some length, suggests that aesthetic encounters that arouse disgust can "give rise to an *apprehension*, a grasp of an idea that is so imbedded in affective response to the work that provokes it as to be virtually inseparable" (134). I use her theory of disgust as a cognitive vehicle in conjunction with Schopenhauer's aesthetics and metaphysics to explain how the disgust

Lovecraft's fiction might engender can function as a cognitive gateway to speculate about the will-to-live despite its usual inaccessibility. I show that Lovecraft's formless, contaminating monstrosities and half-human hybrids occasion a crisis in language and ontology, eliciting a revulsion that is also revelatory by exposing Schopenhauer's will-to-live, the normally unthinkable "ultimate reality."

I begin my analysis by providing an overview of Schopenhauer's metaphysics and aesthetics, reconciling them with recent theories of disgust and establishing Lovecraft's own familiarity with and admiration for the German philosopher. Next, I examine what might be called Lovecraft's cannibal stories, tales which show the clear influence of Edgar Allan Poe, of whom Lovecraft was a devout disciple.⁴¹ Racialized depictions of cannibalism have a long history in the Gothic,⁴² and considering Lovecraft's well-known xenophobia, it is easy to read his cannibal tales

⁴¹ S.T. Joshi describes Lovecraft's early work – everything up to 1926 and the composition of "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) – as "entirely routine and conventional, utilizing supernatural or macabre elements with occasional competence but without transcendent brilliance," calling "The Rats in the Walls," a model short story but really nothing more than a supremely able manipulation of Poe-like elements" (*The Weird Tale* 177). I find Joshi's assessment lacking in two respects. Firstly, of course, my own reading of some of Poe's tales is closer to Lovecraft's cosmic horror than Joshi's comments would construe. As Chapter 2 has argued, many of Poe's stories of metempsychosis, doubling, entropy, and disease can be interpreted not only psychologically but ontologically. Secondly, while it might be expected that Lovecraft's metaphysical ruminations are primarily evident in his stories of far-flung dimensions and the extraterrestrial incursion, I argue that these tales of anthropophagic horror query many of the same philosophical questions as his later, more overtly "cosmic" texts; by reading Lovecraft in relation to Schopenhauer's philosophy, and by emphasizing the role disgust plays in his fiction, his cannibal stories take on new significance.

⁴² Gothic horror and weird fiction during the late-Victorian and Edwardian period was especially preoccupied with anxieties about reverse-colonization, regression, and the invasion of civilization by "barbaric" forces or creatures.

in this light; however, I argue that in Lovecraft's fiction cannibalism can be read in metaphysical as well as racial terms. Just as the putrescent corpses of Poe's stories disclose the Schellingian Absolute by fusing together nature and spirit into a disgusting but perversely sublime whole, so do Lovecraft's animalistic cannibals, feasting on human flesh, provoke both intense revulsion and, simultaneously and inextricably from this affect, a glimpse of a reality comparable to the Schopenhauerian will-to-live. Lovecraftian cannibalism reveals the will not only because it horrifyingly represents the brutish, animalistic striving of two organisms, one preying on and consuming the other, but because it ultimately blurs the distinction between organisms entirely, reducing bodies to so much meat: individual subjects bleed into one another, contaminating and contaminated, consumer and consumed becoming increasingly confused to show that ultimately all bodies are but passing phenomena, ephemeral manifestations of the eternal will-to-live. Moreover, the "The Rats in the Walls" features a specific breakdown of language at the moment of the narrator's bestial regression and cannibal attack on one of his companions, illustrative of Schopenhauer's ontological formulations.

H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), and many similar works are noteworthy for their depictions of voraciously appetitive ethnic and sexual Others seeking to devour and so corrupt and assimilate vulnerable white, middle-class, heterosexual men (and sometimes women) and so to undermine the social structures on which imperialism depends. Such monstrous figures are symbolically destroyed at the ends of these texts, re-affirming the stability of conventional social structures and the imperial state while abjecting those that threatened the hegemonic sociopolitical order (Hurley 7). Lovecraft's cannibals can easily be fit into this tradition, in which textual representations of cannibals as monstrous racial others menacing the ideals and bodies of white, often Anglo-Saxon protagonists are weaponized, deployed as part of a machinery of subjectivity in order to establish and maintain the supposed superiority of Western peoples and to justify colonial oppression.

Following this discussion, I turn to representations of the preternatural world in Lovecraft's fiction, in particular "The Colour Out of Space" (1927), widely considered one of his best works. The eponymous colour confounds the ability of human beings to understand it even as it revoltingly contaminates and colonizes everything it encounters, and its seemingly mindless impulse to consume reflects Schopenhauer's world-as-will. Pairing Korsmeyer's theory of the sublate with Schopenhauer's version of the sublime, I argue that the disgusting contamination permeating "The Colour Out of Space" wrenches readers and characters from the anthropocentric illusions of the world of representations, forcing them to contemplate the awful essence of existence, unhuman and horrific in its alien rapaciousness. Like the nebulous monstrosities in Algernon Blackwood's wilderness stories, preternatural beings which exceed human comprehension and so expand and complicate our relationship with Nature, the extraterrestrial colour violently overturns metanarratives of human mastery and anthropocentric epistemologies. But where, for Blackwood, this overturning leads to a mystic reawakening and the recognition of a vitalist, panpsychic oneness immanent throughout all Nature (including human beings) but foresworn by "civilized" society, for Lovecraft otherworldly contamination leads only to suffering and the repugnant ruination of all that it infects, bespeaking a cosmic pessimism consistent with Schopenhauer's bleak, malignant universe.

The chapter concludes with close readings of "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) and *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936). Here I reconcile sociopolitical and genotypical interpretations of Lovecraft's disgust at miscegenation and racial difference with Schopenhauer's will-to-live and the spirit of metaphysical speculation. In "The Dunwich Horror," inspired by Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* and reminiscent of his numinous approach to the weird, the abominable Yog-Sothoth, a cosmic entity of terrible and incomprehensible power, interbreeds with human beings

to produce a monstrous hybrid, partially unperceivable to normal human senses; where for Machen the resulting monster might signify a mystic reunion with Godhead, in Lovecraft the story is desacralized; the cosmic outside infecting the familiar human world does not restore a sense of lost religious mystery to perception. Rather, Yog-Sothoth, “undimensioned and to us unseen” – a being beyond space and time but coterminous with it – reveals itself as another avatar of the will-to-live, for it is a creature for whom “past, present, future” are all one and which pervades all being, an entity explicitly linked to procreative drives and a blind need to conquer and consume (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 113).

As in “The Dunwich Horror,” instances of contagion, inter-species hybridization, and contamination throughout *The Shadow over Innsmouth* produce intense disgust in Lovecraft’s characters, a revulsion reflective of Lovecraft’s own prejudices. At the same time, however, the ambiguous ending of the story, in which the narrator embraces an already-tainted heritage and seems to pass beyond the phenomenal realm and into an eternal, nonhuman totality, complicates a straightforward reading of the tale as simply one of racist hatred and anti-miscegenation. Drawing on Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theories, in which individual subjects wrest themselves from the world of representations and individual ego during an aesthetic experience and dissolve, if only for a moment, into the nonhuman world, I interpret *The Shadow over Innsmouth*’s ambivalent intertwining of bliss and disgust as a powerful moment of aesthetic apprehension of the sort which Korsmeyer argues the sublate is capable.

5.2 The Blind Idiot God

Before examining Lovecraft’s texts in detail, I will provide a brief overview of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and its connections to Lovecraftian cosmic horror. By drawing on Schopenhauer’s

metaphysics and aesthetics I will elucidate the philosophical underpinnings of Lovecraft's weird fiction while also providing a new way of thinking about the tropes of contamination that recur throughout his stories, as well as the affects such tropes might produce. I also want to address what I think could constitute major objections to my employment of Schopenhauer's philosophy alongside the cognitivist aesthetics of disgust this dissertation makes use of throughout.

We know from his letters that Lovecraft read Schopenhauer and admired him as a philosopher. He recommends Schopenhauer (along with Nietzsche) in a 1921 letter to Anne Tillery Renshaw, describing both thinkers as superior "sequels to Kant," whom he derides as "an empty and exaggerated name . . . who receives accretions of blind adulation" but whose "revered mouthings . . . would evaporate if examined without the deafness and blindness of irrational veneration" (*SL* 1: 134). In his essay "Nietzscheism and Realism," also written in 1921 and originally part of a letter, Lovecraft quotes Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism* (1851) in order to claim that "all human life is weary, incomplete, unsatisfying, and sardonically purposeless" and that as such we should "despise life and sneer at its puerile illusions and insubstantial goals" (*Miscellaneous Writings* 175). Although he does not delve deeply into Schopenhauer's philosophy in this essay, Lovecraft's language here evokes Schopenhauer's split between the world-as-representation, with its sensory illusions, and the grimmer truth of the world-in-itself, the world-as-will. In his critical biography of Lovecraft, Joshi suggests that in the early 1920s Lovecraft had "explicitly [tied] Epicureanism, Schopenhauerianism, and cosmicism" into a single philosophy (*A Dreamer and a Visionary* 132). Joshi claims that Lovecraft became less expressly pessimistic and more interested in cosmic "indifferentism" over time (*A Dreamer and a Visionary* 133). However, Lovecraft's more mature "cosmicist" or "indifferentist" philosophy does not strike me as incompatible with Schopenhauer at all: while, for Schopenhauer, life is suffering, the world-in-

itself is not actually evil in any intentional sense, but rather a blind totality, quite indifferent to individual human beings or, indeed, any other creatures, objects, or ends, since all phenomena are simply manifestations of the eternal and timeless will in space and time.

Lovecraft's fiction bears out his admiration of Schopenhauer (and perhaps his dislike of Kant) in its consistent reduction of the human.⁴³ Time and time again, human beings are shown to be insignificant, their insectile lives overshadowed by a horrific and pointless cosmos and the ancient, uncaring entities known variously as the Great Old Ones, Elder Gods, or Outer Gods, among other monikers. But even more than this, Lovecraft's human and quasi-human characters are also repeatedly deindividuated, reduced to an undifferentiated mass, to meat, or to ooze, contaminated by the cosmic outside that lies beyond their capacity for understanding. Ruled by blind procreative drives, Lovecraft's ghouls, shoggoths, Deep Ones, and other hybrid monsters suggest, in their bestial fecundity and taste for human flesh, a universe dominated by purposeless conflict, a self-perpetuating cycle of appetite and suffering. Much like the world-in-itself described by Schopenhauer, the world of will dominated by "endless and implacable struggle" (*WWR* 1: 153), an "endless striving," "eternal becoming," or "endless flux" (164) which pits creature against creature and matter against itself in a multitudinous series of seething contests which are themselves merely expressions of a single inner nature which "has no end in view" (165), the Lovecraftian universe lacks any overarching *telos*, any consolatory sense of meaning or

⁴³ Of course, Schopenhauer is not Lovecraft's only intellectual influence when it comes to dismissing the self-importance of human beings – certainly he derives some of his disdain for anthropocentrism from thinkers like Nietzsche and, of course, Darwin. Lovecraft seems somewhat less enamoured with Freud, despite some of the similarities between Freud and Schopenhauer; in his story "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919), Lovecraft derides Freud as dealing only in "puerile symbolism" (15).

transcendental order. As Thacker puts it in his recent reappraisal of Schopenhauer, the cantankerous German philosopher “pulls apart the Kantian split” in order to counter what he perceives as “the furtive anthropocentrism in post-Kantian Idealism,” coming to understand the will-to-live as driven by a kind of “inner antagonism” which is both “radically unhuman” and “utterly indifferent” (SSC 125).

While Schopenhauer is deeply influenced by Kant and his separation of phenomena and noumena, his conception of the world as both “will and representation” complicates Kantian ontology by unraveling its humanist foundation, discovering the will-to-live in everything from animals to plants to stones and so undermining the power and centrality of the human subject. Schopenhauer provides a detailed account of the supposedly inaccessible world-in-itself, including means for nullifying the boundaries of selfhood in order to better apprehend the true essence of things. He divides the world into two halves superficially comparable to Kant’s phenomena and noumena: the world is, “on the one side, entirely *representation*, just as, on the other, it is entirely *will*” (WWR 1: 4). For Schopenhauer the thing-in-itself is *Wille*, the will or “will-to-live,” what he calls “the inner content, the essence of the world,” but far from the kind of individuated will the term might bring to mind, Schopenhauer’s will is a strangely impersonal, abstract force, existing beyond the bounds of time, space, or particular persons: “the will, considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge” (WWR 1: 275). The will is a kind of mindless striving that recalls both the Freudian id (though ontologically prior to human beings, immanent in everything rather than merely the mind) and Lovecraft’s Azathoth, “the blind idiot god” (“The Haunter of the Dark,” 800) who “gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time” and “gibbers unmentionably outside the ordered universe” (*The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* 156), or Yog-Sothoth, the All-in-One, who exists beyond the “tri-dimensional

world” which is but “shadow and illusion” (“Through the Gates of the Silver Key” 283) and who is able to perceive the unreality of time, and that “change is merely a function of [human] consciousness” (284). The phenomenal world of representation is “the mirror of the will,” bound inextricably to the thing-in-itself: “this world will accompany the will as inseparably as a body is accompanied by its shadow” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 1: 275). Individuals are but fleeting phenomenal manifestations of the will, as indeed are all objects, organisms, and other forms of matter.

For Schopenhauer we are slaves to the endless striving of the will, puppets bound to suffer – for, as he puts it, “all *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering,” and while an individual desire may be fulfilled “for one wish that is fulfilled there remains at least ten that are denied” and in any case, any wish fulfilled “at once makes way for a new one” (*WWR* 1: 196). The only respite from this endless horror, he suggests, is to become lost in aesthetic experience, “forgetting all individuality” and thus entering a state of “will-less knowing” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 1: 197).⁴⁴ In this “forgetting-oneself” we are dissolved and so can “withdraw from all suffering” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 1: 199) as the individual will is temporarily nullified. Schopenhauer makes particular note of the power of his version of the sublime, which facilitates will-less knowing by a “violent tearing” which results in a sort of “exaltation,” one accompanied by “a constant recollection of the will, yet not of a single individual willing, such as fear or desire, but of human willing in general” (*WWR* 1: 202). During our experience of the sublime, Schopenhauer argues, we reach a state of will-less contemplation of what he calls the “Idea” of things that is constantly checked by a kind of anxiety, in which the individual’s self-consciousness

⁴⁴ Comparisons between Schopenhauer and Buddhism are common, and the resemblance between Schopenhauer’s “will-less knowing” and the state of nirvana has been often remarked-on.

threatens to reassert itself unless we manage to sustain an “emancipation from the interest of the will” (*WWR* 1: 204).

For Schopenhauer, then, works of art can literally deliver us “from the miserable self” (*WWR* 1: 199). While the beautiful provides relief from the world-as-will, the sublime is more powerful and more threatening, since it springs from things which might destroy the human body: “they may threaten it by their might that eliminates all resistance, or their immeasurable greatness may reduce it to nought” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 1: 201). Sublime art, Schopenhauer argues, can “reveal to us most completely the essence of the will, whether in its violence, its terribleness, its satisfaction, or its being broken (this last in tragic situations), finally even its change or self-surrender, which is the particular theme of Christian painting” (*WWR* 1: 213). As Thacker puts it, “part of Schopenhauer’s strategy is to undo the notion that the subject is separate from the world it experiences, that it relates to, and that it produces knowledge about,” and thus “all of Schopenhauer’s rants concerning pessimism and the limits of human knowledge dovetail on this strange counter-experience that the subject is not a subject, the experience of the dissolving of the *principium individuationis*” (*SSC* 140). Even while human beings are part of the world, they “forget that the world is not human” (Thacker, *SSC* 143).

In addition to applying Schopenhauer’s philosophy to Lovecraft’s fiction, I also want to extend this project’s arguments about affects to claim a particular form of disgust as the unlikely key to the metaphysics of Lovecraftian horror. The affect of cosmic disgust obliterates any stable, knowable sense of self, as Susan Miller argues, exposing a contaminated universe in which human beings are not impermeably-bounded, autonomous creatures with individual souls unsullied by the oozing muck of existence, but corporeal coagulations unfortunate enough to have developed a limited consciousness, bereft of any kind of transcendental free will or genuine agency. Just as

Schopenhauer's sublime functions to "impress on our consciousness the immensity of the universe," so that we "feel ourselves reduced to nothing" and "feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient phenomena of the will, like drops in the ocean, dwindling and dissolving into nothing" (*WWR* 1: 205), so does Lovecraftian revulsion engulf the reader in ceaseless flux and all-encroaching formlessness, in madness and chaos.

One major objection to this interpretation of Lovecraft immediately presents itself: Schopenhauer's dismissal of disgust.⁴⁵ Like many eighteenth-century aestheticians, Schopenhauer reserves a special disdain for the emotion, which he considers too sensuous to qualify as aesthetic. As Korsmeyer notes of Schopenhauer, disgust has too much "sensuous immediacy" and thus is always an "aesthetic defect" (49); or, as Schopenhauer himself puts it in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/19), disgust "disturbs purely aesthetic contemplation" and functions, along with what he calls the "charming," as "the real opposite of the sublime" (1: 207-208). Disgusting objects, therefore, are "absolutely inadmissible in art" (*WWR* 1: 208) as far as Schopenhauer is concerned.

There are, I think, two ways around this objection. One is to point out Schopenhauer's own recourse to the disgusting in describing his metaphysics, with which his aesthetics are intimately intertwined. As Thacker points out, the naturalistic examples Schopenhauer selects to describe the will-to-live made manifest in time and space "read more like scenes from a monster movie" than examples from science (*SSC* 124). Consider Schopenhauer's description of living beings at the

⁴⁵ We might merely state that Lovecraft's views are not bound by Schopenhauer's; however, given the extensive use of Schopenhauer's aesthetics I make below, and the close intertwinement I present between Lovecraftian cosmic horror and Schopenhauer's philosophy, it is worth addressing Schopenhauer's complaints about disgust themselves rather than simply dismissing them.

beginning of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*: “In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered over with a hard cold crust; on this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings; this is empirical truth, the real, the world” (3). Life here is a parasite, a disgusting “mouldy film” that taints the sterile, incandescent beauty of stars and planets. In his description of the world-as-will he describes the way that “the will-to-live . . . feasts on itself,” invoking examples from throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms, including insects which “lay their eggs on the skin, and even in the body, of the larvae of other insects, whose slow destruction is the first task of the newly hatched brood” or the way that “a young hydra, growing out of the old one as a branch, and later separating itself therefrom, fights while it is still firmly attached to the old one for the prey that offers itself, so that one tears it out of the mouth of the other” (*WWR* 1: 147). Later, when discussing at length the complex relationship between matter and the will, Schopenhauer turns to putrefaction and the growth of fungi and lichens, noting that in decay “the omnipresent will-to-live can . . . take possession of [living beings], in order, according to the circumstances, to produce new beings from them” (*WWR* 2: 311). Living creatures “coagulate out of the chemical constituents” into which putrefaction reduces organic bodies and so become objectifications of “the will’s volition” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 2: 311).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Schopenhauer’s description here hints at spontaneous generation, which science has obviously thoroughly disproven and which Lovecraft would have scorned as ridiculous, but reconciling Schopenhauer with Darwinian evolution is not especially difficult – indeed, one suspects that Schopenhauer would have been darkly delighted at Darwin’s theory of natural selection, driven as it is by death and reproduction, which seems eminently compatible with the idea of the will-to-live.

While Schopenhauer himself may not be deliberately engaged in arousing a particular affect, all of his examples, I think, qualify as disgusting, or at least potentially so; even the most philosophically detached of descriptions cannot strip away all measure of revoltingness of a “mouldy film” or of creatures devouring one another from the inside-out. Parasitic subcutaneous insects consuming their host, hydra in the midst of fission, the slow, inexorable processes of putrefaction – these images read like a catalogue of the disgusting, the sort of list of disgust-elicitors rather gleefully compiled by theorists and philosophers of disgust like William Ian Miller, Susan Miller, or Colin McGinn. Schopenhauer’s descriptions of life as mould or chemical coagulation, for example, closely resemble William Miller’s “life soup,” the “slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming” stuff that arises from “generative rot” (40), which I have already discussed extensively in relation to Machen’s primordial slime, while his images of cannibal insects and arachnids recall Miller’s catalogue of disgusting animals – “insects, slugs, worms, rats, bats, newts, centipedes,” and other beings that present life as “oozy, slimy, viscous, teeming” or “messy” (50). While Schopenhauer is not attempting “art” as such in *The World as Will and Representation*, and his descriptions are not necessarily calculated to enhance disgust *per se*, his unacknowledged use of images that many would consider disgusting to illustrate the inner nature of the universe suggests a blind spot when it comes to his own employment of the disgusting. Schopenhauer’s aesthetics are all about exposing the continuity between self and world. But if disgust’s sensuous immediacy inhibits understanding and will-less contemplation so utterly, why utilize it in this way? One counterargument to Schopenhauer’s disdain for the disgusting, then, comes from Schopenhauer himself: the will-to-live is never more visible in all its ceaseless horror than in the disgusting.

A second (and complementary) way around Schopenhauer's objection to the disgusting is to demonstrate that the sublime and the disgusting are not as antithetical as he claims. To accomplish this, I again take up Korsmeyer's formulation of the sublate, which I brought up previously in connection with Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death." To review, Korsmeyer argues that disgust can be aestheticized into what she calls the sublate, much as fear can be transmuted into sublimity. While the sublime, she argues, is connected to a sense of mortal terror, signifying "human powerlessness and possible annihilation," the sublate "apprehends not just destruction but reduction – of the noblest life to decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated" (Korsmeyer 134). Accepting disgust as more than a limit of the beautiful, more than the aesthetic's entire other, Korsmeyer makes a persuasive case for its aesthetic value, and when in the form of the sublate in particular, disgust seems eminently compatible with Schopenhauer's aesthetics. As she puts it, aesthetic disgust and the sublate "bring home general truths in a particularly vivid manner, deepening their apprehension more profoundly than straightforward statement can accomplish" (134). Like Schopenhauer's sublime, the sublate arouses a negative emotion which must in some sense be overcome or transmuted to sustain enjoyment, even if it never fully loses its threatening character. The sublate, moreover, is inherently deindividuating, divesting human beings of autonomy and permanence while emphasizing "the vulnerability of . . . nature" (Korsmeyer 157). Just as Schopenhauer's sublime brings home to the subject its insignificance, revealing it as "helpless . . . dependant, abandoned to chance, a vanishing nothing in the face of stupendous forces," impressing upon the subject "a profound sense of loss of individuality" (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 1: 205), so does the sublate annihilate the illusion of the pure, autonomous, rational, or transcendently free self.

Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetic experience, in emphasizing awareness and a state of "pure knowing" (*WWR* 1: 203), in which we "lose ourselves in contemplation" (205), seems remarkably close to Korsmeyer's account of aesthetic experience and its capacity to aid us in thinking. In essence, Schopenhauer has an overdetermined view of disgust, one likely informed by the eighteenth-century conception of the disgusting as a limit for beauty, a constitutive outside for the aesthetic. Thus he does not imagine the possibilities of a disgust so intermingled with cosmic awe as to approach sublimity, a disgust that can reduce the human and the individual to nothing, to reveal the insignificance of the subject as a mere phenomenal instantiation of the will. But Korsmeyer's sublate provides just such a version of disgust. Korsmeyer, conversely, does not fully consider the ontological possibilities of her theory of disgust, dancing around its potentially metaphysical portent when she considers it as a means of apprehending the finiteness of life or the ephemerality of matter but never fully fleshing out such possibilities. As the following readings of Lovecraft's stories will further demonstrate, however, her cognitivist aesthetics of disgust and Schopenhauerian philosophy are eminently compatible: I use Korsmeyer's insights into the aesthetics of disgust to show that Lovecraft's fiction unveils something similar to Schopenhauer's will-to-live in all its amorphous horror.

5.3 The Metaphysics of Cannibalism and "The Rats in the Walls"

Lovecraft's stories exhibit a fascination with cannibalism, usually on the part of animalistic or "degenerate" creatures – humans become debased anthropophagi. While it is perhaps especially tempting to interpret Lovecraft's tales of cannibal horror in relation to discourses of race and "primitiveness," cannibalism in Lovecraft's stories has the effect of blurring boundaries otherwise

distinct, such as those between human and animal and between individual human bodies.⁴⁷ As Kristen Guest points out, “the shared humanness of cannibals and their victims . . . draws our attention to the problems raised by the notion of absolute difference” (3). In fact, she argues, “if we look beyond the oppositional logic of cannibalism as a discourse, we see that as a taboo its efficacy relies not on its participation in differential systems of meaning but rather on its recognition of corporeal similarity” (3). Schopenhauer himself touches on cannibalism at several points in *The World as Will and Representation*, singling it out as the “most distinct and obvious” example of “the greatest conflict of the will with itself” (1: 335), a description which highlights something like Guest’s “corporeal similarity” to help establish a continuity of being shared by cannibal and victim.

⁴⁷ In “The Picture in the House” (1921) for example, the cannibal appetites of the wizened antagonist are closely linked to his fascination with the Congolese cannibals or “Anziques” of the Italian explorer Filippo Pigafetta’s *Regnum Congo or Report of the Kingdom of the Congo* (1591), which includes an illustration depicting “a butcher’s shop of the cannibal Anziques” (Lovecraft 39) to which the book seems given to falling open to, inspiring an intense “sensation of disquiet” (38) in the narrator. “The Afriky book” (Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House” 42), as the old man calls *Regnum Congo*, stirs within him bestial, animalistic urges associated with the African cannibals depicted in the text. Much is made in the story’s outset of the New England setting, of the old man’s “Yankee dialect,” and of the fact that “but for his horrible unkemptness the man would have been as distinguished-looking as he was impressive” in stature (Lovecraft, “The Picture in the House” 41). The illustration thus enacts a kind of textual reverse-colonization, corrupting the New England gentleman with its cannibalistic depictions just as the arrival of Africans, Asians, and other immigrants in New York invited the city’s decline and the devastation of Western civilization, in Lovecraft’s xenophobic eyes. Even here, however, where the link between cannibalism and racialized foreignness is most noticeable, Lovecraft’s disgust resides in the blending-together of cultures and the transgression of boundaries, undermining any absolute or essential differences and gesturing instead towards ontological homogeneity.

“The Lurking Fear” (1923) features a cannibal clan of inbred, animalistic monsters living deep in the Catskills, described collectively by the narrator as “a burst of multitudinous and leprous life” and “a loathsome night-spawned flood of organic corruption more devastatingly hideous than the blackest conjurations of mortal madness and morbidity” which spreads “like a septic contagion” to “scatter through the accursed midnight forests and strew fear, madness, and death” (Lovecraft 80). These creatures are “dwarfed, deformed devils or apes” described as “monstrous and diabolic caricatures of the monkey tribe”: people implied to have regressed into animalistic forms, dwelling in mound-like barrows and “pits remote and unimaginable” (Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear” 80). Upon killing one such being, “the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground,” the narrator notices with a shock that its mismatched eyes mark it as a member of the Dutch Martense lineage, revealing to him “in one inundating cataclysm of voiceless horror what had become of that vanished family” (Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear” 81). Lavishing his cannibals with language that emphasizes their disgustingness, linking them with disease, human waste, animality, decay, and slime, Lovecraft simultaneously singles out their specifically European ancestry. His cannibal monstrosities are loathsome to Lovecraft because of a contamination *already present*, the ape or demon latent even in those he would consider racially superior.

Obviously, part of the horror in “The Lurking Fear” can be linked to degeneration theory, such as that promoted by the likes of Max Nordau in his infamous *Degeneration* (1892), and consistent with Lovecraft’s racism. Even beyond a Darwinian or genotypic horror, however, there seems to be something more metaphysically disturbing underlying cannibal appetite in “The Lurking Fear” and other anthropophagic stories. While such stories can be read as tales of

biological retrogression, and certainly degeneration theories and eugenicist understandings of human evolution absolutely colour Lovecraft's cannibal texts, in many there are hints of something more going on, of speculation about ultimate reality unrevealed by science, beyond the bounds of the senses. The narrator in "The Lurking Fear" speaks of one of the Martense cannibals as the "embodiment of all the snarling and chaos and grinning horror that lurk behind life" (Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear" 80). He himself is sometimes filled with wonder at the "alluring grotesqueness" of the creatures, and is filled with "a mad craving to plunge into the very earth of that accursed region, and with bare hands dig out the death that leered from every inch of the poisonous soil" (Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear" 77), as if possessed, almost yearning to become infected with the same corruption. He confesses to thinking only "of the quest for a horror now grown to cataclysmic stature in [his] imagination" (Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear" 72) and even begins the account by telling of a "love of the grotesque and terrible" (63). In his quest for the horrible and hidden, for the mysteries of "the earth's unknown caverns" and "the nameless secret of the lurking fear" (Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear" 81), the narrator sounds very much like Lovecraft himself describing the "reality-seeking impulse" or search for "hidden reality which our senses only imperfectly apprehend" (*SL* 2: 311). In other words, there is something *metaphysical* about the narrator's search after the horrific; his thirst for affect, to uncover the "lurking fear," is connected to a search for ontological truth, a truth he ultimately glimpses – a cosmic chaos, underlying all of life, in the malformed and monstrous form of a "filthy whitish gorilla thing" (Lovecraft "The Lurking Fear" 81).

The category crisis provoked by cannibalism in Lovecraft's fiction reveals an ontological indifferentiation that suffuses the world in his texts, an indifferentiation I want to relate to Schopenhauer's will-to-live. As with Poe and Schelling, I don't think Lovecraft set out explicitly

to craft philosophical parables to intentionally communicate Schopenhauer's exact ideas. Rather, I think that Lovecraft's stories are interested in speculating about ultimate reality through affect, and that Schopenhauer's philosophy is useful in examining the metaphysical commitments and aesthetic strategies Lovecraft uses to explore that reality. I will focus in particular on "The Rats in the Walls," with reference to several other stories as well. For Schopenhauer, the act of consumption offers a glimpse of the will-to-live "feasting" on itself. Because the will-to-live exists beyond time and space but becomes instantiated in the phenomenal realm in individual organisms, it must devour itself "in different forms for its own nourishment" (Schopenhauer *WWR* 1: 147). When animals eat plants or one another, then, this conflict between them, "this strife itself," is ultimately "only the revelation of that variance within itself that is essential to the will" (Schopenhauer *WWR* 1: 147). As Thacker writes in *Starry Speculative Corpse*, for Schopenhauer "the body is . . . a kind of crystallization of abstract anonymity, a 'Will' that is at once energy and drive, but that has no origin or end, and leads to no goal" (122). To approach cannibalism through a Schopenhauerian lens is thus to view the act as an instance of the will-to-live feeding on itself, as the bodies of consumer and consumed are but phenomenal manifestations of the same world-as-will. In other words, cannibalism exposes a fundamental continuity between organisms which appear to be distinct, a continuity which is more than biological or evolutionary.

"The Rats in the Walls" concerns an American expatriate, Delapore, who returns to his family's ancestral home in England, Exham Priory, which is subject to dark rumours. He commences renovations of the ruins but begins hearing an ominous scuttling; upon investigation he uncovers a catacomb beneath the estate, giving way to "a subterranean world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion" (Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls" 26) including Roman, Saxon, and English ruins, as well as "an insane tangle of human bones" which are "gnawed, mostly

by rats but somewhat by others of the half-human drove,” skeletons “in postures of daemoniac frenzy, either fighting off some menace or clutching other forms with cannibal intent” (27). He finds evidence that for centuries his family have been cannibalizing herds of quasi-human cattle kept in stone pens, a revelation that sends him into a state of madness as he seems to devolve, raving first in Early Modern and then Middle English, then in Latin, then Gaelic, then finally in animalistic gibberish. He is discovered by his companions “crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrys” (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 29) whose murder he blames on the rats that teem throughout the crypt amidst the bones of his cannibal forebears.

“The Rats in the Walls” has often been interpreted psychologically; Barton Levi St. Armand reads the priory as an “oneiric house” in the tradition of Poe’s house of Usher (19) and interprets the story as a kind of Jungian exploration of the self and the “subcellar beneath consciousness itself” (57). Contrary to this reading and others like it, in which, as St. Armand puts it, the whole story may be nothing more than “the horribly diseased vision of a deranged mind” (57) – an exercise in the Todorovian “uncanny” or in the Radcliffean supernatural explained, a genre which tended to annoy Lovecraft – I want to approach the tale’s strange happenings as reflective not merely of an abnormal psychology on Delapore’s part but as evoking, via disgust, the horror of Schopenhauer’s will-to-live. While only a single act of cannibalism actually occurs in the story, Delapore’s murder of Capt. Norrys is foreshadowed by disturbing dreams, including visions of “a Roman feast like that of Trimalchio, with a horror in a covered platter” (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 25). In some he descends into the depths of Exham Priory and sees visions of his family’s anthropophagic rites. Since later evidence confirms the physical reality of these dreams, they cannot be read as merely psychological or uncanny in the Todorovian sense of the word, unless we completely discount everything the narrator writes as mere fantasy; rather, it is as

if the protagonist is accessing something like the ancestral memories of his lineage, or receiving psychic visions from out of the past due to his proximity to the caverns below.

In Delapore's nightmares humans and animals are conflated, reflecting not only anxieties over race and heredity but also an ontological crisis wherein human specialness, superiority, and reason are undermined. The human cattle kept in the pens beneath the Priory are described as a "flock of fungous, flabby beasts" that inspire "unutterable loathing" in Delapore and are driven by "a white-bearded daemon swinehead" (Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls" 21). One dream ends with a swarm of rats descending on the "stinking abyss" in which the quasi-human cattle are kept and devouring "beasts and man alike" (Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls" 21). The line between human and animal becomes increasingly smudged here, approaching meaninglessness; Lovecraft himself, in his discussions with Frank Belknap Long about "The Rats in the Walls," espouses opinions that touch on this point, claiming that "no line betwixt 'human' and 'nonhuman' organisms is possible, for all animate Nature is one – with differences in degree; never in kind" (*Lord of a Visible World* 122). Rather than simply confirming the realities of evolution and the animality of human beings as revealed by Darwin, however, this blurring of the boundary between human and animal in "The Rats in the Walls" also works to establish a drive common to both – an insatiable and all-encompassing need to devour and consume, as the reader is told that old tales of the priory's dark past include stories of a "scampering army of obscene vermin" which "had swept all before it and devoured fowl, cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent" (Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls" 18). The rats, with their boundless animalistic appetite, represent this impulse, a desire which Delapore and his family share: beneath a civilized veneer of cultivation the family are ruled by fundamental urges, just as the stone pens and their cadaverous horrors lie beneath the priory above.

Delapore's dreams are not only disgusting in their content; the implication that he is losing his sense of selfhood and merging with his ancestors, and with the rats that plague his nightmares and seemingly infest his house, is also salient both to the story's horror and to the ontological relations entwined with this affect. The rats in the walls that Delapore hears may or may not be entirely real, although the behaviour of his cat, who seems alerted to something moving in the walls, suggests they may not be entirely imaginary. At the same time their hiddenness and obfuscation evoke the idea of a seething, secret layer of reality behind the artificial world of representations manufactured by human consciousness, here symbolized by the man-made walls of the priory. That Delapore hears the rats so soon after awaking from his dream at the very least links the rats of his nightmare with the rats in the walls of Exham Priory, the world inside Delapore's head and the world outside it merging in the moment of waking. With their "verminous slithering," a "nauseous sound" which makes the very walls of the priory seem "alive" (Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls" 21), infusing the priory itself with a kind of animacy, the rats excite profound disgust in the narrator, and their indiscriminate omnivorousness only compounds this revulsion.

Susan Miller argues that "we often feel disgust toward animals when they are portrayed as creatures dominated by their drives, which are seen as base, unruly, and undignified" (49). Building on William Iain Miller's conceptions, she argues that the disgusting is far more efficacious at disturbing our sense of order and human specialness and selfhood than the distant reaches of the cosmos: "we will not be provoked to disgust by explosions of stars a billion miles away," she writes, and while such "faraway, inorganic forms (mountains, nebulae) may dwarf us if we attend to them . . . we are not obligated to do so" – but should nature "manufacture a bloom of algae that thoughtlessly poisons a dozen fish and sends them stinking onto our beach, we will

be retching with the careless disturbance of order on our neighborhood” (Miller 56). For Miller, then, the near-at-handedness of the disgusting makes it especially good at threatening the autonomy of human beings, at making them feel vulnerable and reducing anthropocentric pretensions of powerfulness, immortality, or rationality. The rats, in their bestial, multitudinous swarming, represent not only Delapore’s madness but also the destruction of his singular, stable subjectivity, appearing not as individual animals but as a “viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that [feasts] on the dead and the living,” the thought of which provokes the question, “why shouldn’t rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things?” (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 29). Compared also to “a black putrid sea” (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 29), the rats infest “carrion black pits” and “nightmare chasms” filled with the morass of “pithecanthropoid, Celtic, Roman, and English bones of countless unhallowed centuries” (28), an osseous jumble in which individuals are subsumed into a single, awful totality. Insofar as they possess Delapore, breaking down his modern, cultivated, civilized persona to reveal a beast beneath, they make of him a puppet to the insatiable striving they represent, exposing the continuity between Delapore, his “primitive” cannibal ancestors, and the nonhuman world-as-will.

Lovecraft represents this breakdown of individual subjectivity – this sloughing-off of the self into a madness of bone and primordial slime – through an extended metamorphosis of Delapore’s language, a kind of linguistic regression through time that culminates in the cannibal act itself:

The war ate my boy, damn them all . . . and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret . . . No, no, I tell you, I am not that daemon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was not Edward Norrys’ fat face on that flabby fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! . . . Shall a Norrys hold the land of a de

la Poer? . . . It's voodoo, I tell you . . . that spotted snake . . . Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do! . . . 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust . . . wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? . . . *Magna Mater! Magna Mater! . . . Atys . . . Dia ad aghaidh's ad aodaun . . . agus bas dunarch ort! Dhonas's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! . . . Ungl unl . . . rrlh . . . chchch . . .* ("The Rats in the Walls" 29).

Lovecraft's use of language here fulfills several functions at once. On the one hand the episode provides the climax with a means of representing Delapore's dissolving consciousness while retaining a first-person perspective. The loss of distinctions underlying the act of consumption and Delapore's slippage through space and time contaminate the text itself. Simultaneously, the changing vernacular and eventual entire shifts in language, including the medieval minced oath "'Sblood" and later a snatch of Gaelic borrowed from William Sharp's "The Sin-Eater" (1895), suggest a metaphysical rather than merely psychological regression, as Delapore's mind slithers through the generations before finally arriving at the bestial, vowel-less grunts, suggesting a being without language at all (sounds which may also indicate a mouth full of human flesh).

Despite Lovecraft's general antipathy to most forms of literary Modernism, his use of stream of consciousness in this story has invited comparisons to *The Waste Land* (St. Armand 50), using a breakdown of coherent narration into maddened and anachronistic raving to evoke the throes of madness and the viscous collision of past and present into a totality of gibbering horror beyond time and space.⁴⁸ While certainly Delapore's madness is suggestive of the idea of

⁴⁸ In a 1927 letter to August Derleth, Lovecraft rather snidely denigrates *The Waste Land* (1922), noting that while its "dissociation of ideas" and "resolving of our cerebral contents into its actual chaotic components" is clearly "supposed to form a closer approach to reality," he personally "cannot see that it forms any sort of art at all" (*SL* 2: 96). Lovecraft went on to parody the poem with one of his own, *Waste Paper*, a "poem of profound insignificance."

biological or genetic memories passed down through bloodlines, a then-scientific concept which recurs in Lovecraft's fiction, Lovecraft himself insists in a letter that "Delapore's spectacular atavism is largely *spiritual*" and cautions that "scientific smart alecks" are constantly "contradicting themselves" (*Lord of a Visible World* 123). He specifically criticizes excessive "scientific literalism" in relation to the story's horrors, while extolling the virtue of "extraphysical malignancy," noting explicitly that "weird tales have the privilege of including mythological ideas" rather than purely scientific ones (Lovecraft, *Lord of a Visible World* 123). Lovecraft is speaking here of a non-biological form of regression; while Delapore's descent into his ancestor's memories might coincide with then-scientific theories, an interpretation along "spiritual" lines seems equally plausible as a wholly biological or scientific explanation, the horror and disgust of his transformation mingling with ontological speculation about a reality beyond that revealed by science.

The continuities that Delapore's slide down the evolutionary ladder reveal – continuities between animals and humans, between consumer and consumed, and between subjects through time – provoke a disgust that simultaneously exposes not only the chain of evolution but something very much resembling Schopenhauer's will-to-live, a blind, pointless drive, as insatiable as the rats in the walls. Of course, on one level, Delapore's madness can be seen in post-Darwinian terms

One suspects that much of Lovecraft's antipathy for Eliot sprung more from his inherent dislike of all things modern than from an honest engagement with Eliot's work, since the two share much in common, including various political convictions, an interest in the breakdown of meaning in the face of an uncertain future, a taste for literary experimentation, a reverence for seventeenth and eighteenth-century poetry, and a debt of inspiration to Poe. Norman Gayford goes so far as to argue that while Lovecraft was obviously anti-modern in his antiquarian tastes and archaic phrasings, he was nonetheless "a philosophical modernist . . . probing the limits of art" (274).

as a form of degeneration, and my reading here is not intended simply to discredit such a view; rather it is to suggest that the Darwinian qualities of Delapore's transformation only constitute the surface of the text – its *vorstellung*, its phenomenal manifestation. Each being, each separate individual into whose personae Delapore slips, is but one phenomenal manifestation of a single continuity, and for all of Delapore's seeming abhorrence of his ancestor's excesses, he, too, is ruled by the same metaphysical urgings. In Schopenhauerian terms, each of Delapore's cannibal ancestors are but ephemeral embodiments or aspects of the ultimately unified will: “the shapes and forms are innumerable,” Schopenhauer writes of matter, but simultaneously these shapes and forms are “the mere visibility of the will” (*WWR* 2: 309-10) – in other words, “matter is that whereby the *will*, which constitutes the inner essence of things, enters into perceptibility, becomes perceptible or visible” (*WWR* 2: 307).

Delapore's linguistic and psychic breakdown is specifically understood in temporal terms, past and present rushing together so that Delapore becomes one with “a race of hereditary daemons beside whom Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade would seem the veriest tyro,” including such monsters as the Lady Margaret Trevor, “favourite bane of children all over the countryside” (Lovecraft, “The Rats in the Walls” 17), Randolph Delapore of Carfax who “became a voodoo priest after he returned from the Mexican War” (18), and even the ancient Celts who performed “indescribable rites” at the “prehistoric temple” (16) which once stood in the priory's place. “The Rats in the Walls” presents an image of humanity ruled not merely by some sadistic psychological impulse but by an underlying metaphysical cruelty from which there is no escape, something kin to the “mad faceless god” that Delapore glimpses as he loses his sense of self – Nyarlathotep, a being of “the illimitable gulf of the unknown” who “howls blindly to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute players” (28). It is not merely that Delapore succumbed to the degenerate impulses of

his inner ape, responding to some quirk of evolutionary psychological and so reverting to animalistic impulses. Rather, as he transforms, he reveals in its horrifying fullness the metaphysical horror that throbs monstrosly through all of reality itself.

As cannibalism eats away at boundaries of difference, it reveals the Lovecraftian universe as one of roiling indifferentiation, eater and eaten blurring together, both but fleeting manifestations of the same blind, remorseless will. Lovecraft's cannibal stories expose, as he puts it in "The Lurking Fear," a "nameless, shapeless abomination which no mind could fully grasp" (66), an unkennable universe indifferent to our desires and social constructions whose revelation is bound to a sickening frisson of disgust. As Susan Miller notes, disgust reaches its most potent form when a state of "total communion of self and Other" occurs, inviting a sense of "boundarylessness" (173). Lovecraft's early stories, with their focus on the melding and fusion of bodies and minds, foreshadow his later works of more overtly cosmic horror in their metaphysical implications, conveyed through the affect of disgust. While cannibalism and the disintegrating selves of characters like Delapore deal primarily with the loss of boundaries between human subjects and animals (and one another), revealing the will-to-live in the moment of breakdown, Lovecraft's later works bridge a gulf that seems even wider than that between living organisms: the division between the animate and inanimate cosmos, between the human and the more radically nonhuman. As I will show, the revolting dissolution of this boundary is not only consistent with the Schopenhauerian ontology discernable in Lovecraft's cannibal stories, it also illustrates the potential aesthetic power of disgust in Schopenhauer's aesthetic framework, despite his own misgivings.

5.4 Preternatural Disgust and the Great Outside in “The Colour Out of Space”

When Meillassoux writes about the idea of the world-in-itself he invokes the idea of a “great outdoors” or “absolute outside” – a world that exists “whether we are thinking of it or not” and which “thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere” (7). It is precisely such an “outside” that preoccupies Schopenhauer when he writes of the will-in-itself, and while Schopenhauer inherits much from Kant, including an insistence that the world of our senses is one of mere phenomena or “representation,” his “strange immanentism of noumena” (SSC 119), as Thacker puts it, links the will-to-live to the phenomenal world, since the latter is but the manifestation in space and time of the indifferent and inaccessible former. While Lovecraft, like Schopenhauer, begins with the body, finding in the living organism (and in such organisms devouring one another) a kernel or trace of the will-to-live, as his fiction develops he increasingly seeks a grander setting and scope, turning from the cannibalized corpse to the cadaverous light of long-dead stars and the stygian blackness of outer space. But here, no less than in the half-eaten carcass, Lovecraft finds neither salvation nor transcendental purpose. Characters in Lovecraft’s fiction are often permitted a momentary glimpse of things beyond the veil that normally limits human perception, but the results lead to madness and disaster rather than enlightenment, and we are left with a picture of a cosmos horrifically indifferent to human flourishing, a repugnant reality.

In “From Beyond” (1934), for example, the scientist Crawford Tillinghast invents a “resonator” which alters human senses, gifting them with a kind of “augmented sight” (49), which is actually not sight at all but a form of perception associated with vestigial, atrophied parts of the human brain. The human subject becomes capable of perceiving what Tillinghast refers to as “beyond”: “a vortex of sound and motion” into which pours “a seething column of unrecognizable

shapes or clouds,” creating a kaleidoscopic “jumble of sights, sounds, and unidentified sense impressions” always on the verge of losing “the solid form,” and which brings with it the physical sensation of “huge animate things brushing past” and occasionally even “*walking or drifting through*” the seemingly solid body of the perceiver (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 49). Gifted with the ability to surpass normal sensory limits and apprehend an otherwise suprasensible reality – a reality that has always existed, just out of sight – Lovecraft’s protagonist is stricken at first with awe, and then a spasm of palpable disgust. The inhabitants of this hitherto unseen layer of reality, this occult plane of existence, prove to be revolting, slimy, formless things. “Indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every known thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities,” Lovecraft’s narrator tells us, characterizing the “loathsome profusion” of monstrosities as “inky, jellyfish monstrosities which flabbily quivered in harmony with the vibrations of the machine” and which, he notes with horror, overlap one another: “they were semi-fluid and capable of passing through what we know as solids” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 49). Indeed, the narrator observes, “it likewise seemed that all the known things entered into the composition of the unknown things, and vice versa” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 49), and as Tillinghast raves in an ecstatic expostulation of the “newly visible world that lies unseen all around us,” revealing reality as an amorphous chaos of medusoid horror, the polyp things are “creatures that form what men call the pure air and the blue sky,” things which “flop about you and through you every moment of your life” (“From Beyond” 50), drifting through solid bodies, interpenetrating the phenomenal world. The horror of the story lies not merely in the contemplation of an alien world, but, crucially, in the realization that the world has *always* been suffused with alienage. “From Beyond” reveals that reality has been *already, always contaminated*.

On one level, just as we could read “The Rats in the Walls” merely as a story of degeneration and post-Darwinian atavism, we could also read “From Beyond” as a sort of microscope-story, a science fiction tale about seeing things which could not normally be perceived but which science can now reveal, and which are omnipresent. The polypous beings vaguely resemble blown-up bacteria, made visible by the Tillinghast resonator just as bacteria are by a microscope. Undoubtedly, bacterial imagery does feature prominently in the story, and the disgust the creatures generate is certainly suggestive of a kind of germaphobia. But the “nauseating fears” that the narrator experiences are linked specifically to things which are “unutterable and unimaginable” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 45), which literally defy thought. Tillinghast is not only a scientist but a philosopher, and his researches are explicitly described as “both physical *and* metaphysical” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 45, emphasis mine). The resonator acts not merely on the eyes or other regular senses but on “unrecognized sense-organs that exist in us as atrophied and rudimentary vestiges,” and the creatures it reveals “can never be detected with the senses we have” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 46). It does not merely enhance the senses to an extraordinary degree, as a microscope does, it supplements them in such a way that human beings can perceive that which would otherwise lie utterly beyond all possible sense perception, a “hideous world” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 48) of “ultimate things” (50) which is literally “*beyond*” (49) the phenomenal realm, “the *truth*” of things (47). Tillinghast has not just invented some superior optical instrument, he has “succeeded in breaking down the barrier” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 50) that normally limits human perception, what in his letters Lovecraft calls “the . . . fixed and insurmountable barrier” of “the five senses,” beyond which “we have no possible avenue of access” (SL 2: 302). Such is the horror and strangeness of this experience that the narrator almost seems to lose coherence as a knowing subject: “I felt that I was about to dissolve or in some way

lose the solid form” (Lovecraft, “From Beyond” 49). Lovecraft is not simply writing a story about a better microscope; he uses “From Beyond” to speculate about the unknown bedrock of existence, to “peer at the bottom of creation” and “overlap time, space, and dimensions” (46).

Perhaps the most disastrous consequence of penetrating into the inner essence of things and apprehending that which is otherwise beyond the bounds of human thought comes at the end of Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, when the graduate student Danforth looks out to see a final horror which lies beyond the Antarctic mountains into which the story’s characters delve – a horror that seems as much metaphysical as physical. In this “single fantastic, daemoniac glimpse, among the churning zenith-clouds, of what lay back of those other violet westward mountains which the Old Ones had shunned and feared,” Danforth’s mind is unhinged and he is reduced to whispering “disjointed and irresponsible things” concerning such fragmented images as “the black pit,” “the carven rim,” “the proto-Shoggoths,” “the windowless solids with five dimensions,” “the nameless cylinder,” “the elder Pharos,” “Yog-Sothoth,” “the primal white jelly,” “the color out of space,” “the wings,” “the eyes in darkness,” “the moon-ladder,” “the original, the eternal, the undying,” and “other bizarre conceptions” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* 220), though following this “instantaneous glance,” Danforth’s description is confined to a “mad shrieking” (219) and “the repetition of a single mad word” (221) the *Tekeli-li* cry of the amorphous shoggoth, a primordial monster that pursued the characters through the mountains. Danforth’s glimpse of something like the “great outdoors,” of something a human mind should not comprehend, punctures the otherwise detached, scientific exactitude that elsewhere characterizes the expedition members, leaving him temporarily bereft of language and seemingly overcome by the mindless gibbering of the shoggoths. It is as if his consciousness has been obliterated or

nullified, the cry of *Tekeli-li* an ancestral remnant from a pre-human past, an arche-fossil, bubbling up to speak from the recesses of deep time.

The motif of the absolute outside disrupting human consciousness and undermining the powers of language, reason, and perception recurs throughout Lovecraft's fiction, as in the strange void in "The Music of Erich Zann" (1922), the hyper-dimensional chaos in "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1933), and the otherworldly, pseudo-gaseous, pseudo-fungous monstrosity in "The Shunned House" (1937). This lattermost transforms the narrator's uncle through a process of "nauseous liquefaction whose essence eludes all description," such that his "gelatinous face assumed a dozen – a score – a hundred aspects," making him "at once a devil and a multitude, a charnel house and a pageant" (Lovecraft, "The Shunned House" 48). In a scene reminiscent of Delapore's cannibalistic regression in "The Rats in the Walls," the uncle's face shifts and bubbles with "features old and young, coarse and unrefined, familiar and unfamiliar" in a way that is "beyond conception" (Lovecraft, "The Shunned House" 49). As in many of Lovecraft's stories, the thing cannot be reduced to materialist terms: as Lovecraft puts it, "matter it seemed not to be," and it is also not "ether, nor anything else conceivable by mortal mind" ("The Shunned House" 49). This substance – neither matter nor ether – is literally unthinkable; the protagonist describes the being as a "nameless thing" or an "unthinkable abnormality" (Lovecraft, "The Shunned House" 50). In these examples and many others Lovecraft repeatedly depicts a preternatural irruption, the intrusion of a reality inimical to human thought eliciting disgust, madness, and the breakdown of language in the face of the unthinkable. In this section I unpack one such story of preternatural incursion, "The Colour Out of Space," in detail, noting the ways that it evokes the world-in-itself through a recourse to a mixture of disgust and awe, which I relate to Korsmeyer's sublate and the Schopenhauerian sublime.

“The Colour Out of Space” is in some ways Lovecraft’s homage to Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows,” and while Lovecraft’s tale is certainly bleaker and less overtly “spiritual” than Blackwood’s numinous story, it shares with “The Willows” an intense interest in the indescribable, that which confounds our imperfect senses and remains forever beyond our full comprehension. While Blackwood’s story is ultimately somewhat ambivalent towards the strange forces that oppress its characters, dangerous as they may seem, however, Lovecraft’s colour is a malignant and all-consuming force, even more voracious than any of his cannibals or demonic rats. Joyce Carol Oates reads the story as “parable-like,” the “repudiation of American-transcendentalist optimism, in which the individual participates in the divine and shares in nature’s divinity” (xv); it is a profoundly pessimistic work, and thus, again, readily susceptible to a Schopenhauerian reading. It is also undoubtedly one of Lovecraft’s most profoundly disgusting tales – a story of physical and mental disintegration, in which people, animals, and entire landscapes slowly succumb to a torturously creeping otherworldly decay.

In “The Colour Out of Space,” the eponymous colour is overwhelmingly powerful and cannot be fought, resisted, expunged, or otherwise defeated, thwarting all efforts to contain or even understand it. Lovecraft’s eco-horror story concerns the utter futility of human action in the face of an unknown and nearly inconceivable cosmic force which, as Oates observes, seems to prophetically foreshadow environmental collapse and nuclear fallout (xv).⁴⁹ The “plot” of the story

⁴⁹ The colour’s etiolating effects and phosphorescent blight resemble radiation sickness, though it is not completely certain whether Lovecraft intended the similarity. Public awareness of radiation sickness was increasing at the time of Lovecraft’s composition as accounts of radium poisoning appeared in newspapers. Andy Troy has recently argued that the story was inspired accounts of the “radium girl” poisonings; for more detail, see “A Stalking

is one of Lovecraft's most rudimentary – as Lovecraft himself writes, “atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity [of the weird tale] is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation” (*SHL* 6). The anonymous narrator is a surveyor investigating the mysterious “blasted heath” (Lovecraft “The Colour Out of Space” 78) in the fictitious countryside west of Arkham⁵⁰ in preparation for the creation of a reservoir, likely based on the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts or the Scituate Reservoir in Rhode Island, or both (Klinger 311). He seeks out an elderly man, Ammi, who relates an account of a mysterious meteorite that fell to earth in 1882. Following the meteorite's descent, the land around it begins to sicken and die, along with the animals and people who dwell nearby, all of them turning grey and eventually disintegrating; awful hints are given of a thing living in the well of the local farm, owned by Nahum Gardner and his family: an eldritch, luminous colour of nameless hue. The toxic colour ravages Arkham, killing and maddening all that come into contact with it, and though the colour seems to return to space some part of it still lingers underground, ineradicable.

From the beginning, the story unfolds a two-level ontology – a familiar world of human perceptions, and, beneath or beyond it, a world that exceeds the limits of comprehension or empirical knowledge. The surveyor's initial descriptions of the regions surrounding the “blasted heath” grant it a kind of artificiality that underscore its status as an artefact of the senses – an instance of what Schopenhauer would call the world's “external side” (*WWR* 1: 30), a mere

Monster’: The Influence of Radiation Poisoning on H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Colour out of Space’,” in *Lovecraftian Proceedings Number 1*.

⁵⁰ Arkham is the setting of many of Lovecraft's stories: a town in the equally fictitious Miskatonic Valley and part of what is sometimes called “Lovecraft Country” or the “Miskatonic region” – the parts of New England in which Lovecraft set the majority of his stories.

representation. The narrator remarks that “upon everything was a haze of restlessness and oppression; a touch of the unreal and grotesque, as if some vital element of perspective or chiaroscuro were awry” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 78). Terms like “chiaroscuro” and “perspective” liken the landscape to a painting, and so seem to equate reality as the surveyor perceives it with a visual artwork, a surface or representation. Indeed, the land around the heath is “too much like a landscape of Salvator Rosa” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 78), the gloomily baroque Italian painter. The heath itself consistently confounds human perceptions and understanding, disobedient of physical laws – a disobedience that produces suspicion and disgust in the surveyor, who describes “a fine grey dust or ash which no wind seemed ever to blow about” and the “yawning black maw of an abandoned well whose stagnant vapours played strange tricks with the hues of sunlight” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 78). Lovecraft’s language at the tale’s outset emphasizes not only the narrator’s emotional uneasiness – his “odd reluctance about approaching” the region – but also the ways that the heath seems to elude rational explanation, since while the surveyor reasons that the “grey desolation that sprawled open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields” must “be the outcome of fire,” he still remains confused that nothing had grown in the lifeless patch (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 78).

The colour out of space described in Ammi’s embedded narrative totally stymies scientific classification, empirical investigation, or even simple description, not only undermining the possibility of an unmediated philosophy of access within the metaphysical world of the story but also indicating the presence of a thing which seems to have arrived from beyond the bounds of human comprehension, beyond the ability of any science, however nuanced, to understand. The meteorite the colour arrived on is described as “a piece of the great outside” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 82), and a specimen the scientists collect acts “quite unbelievably” in a

“well-ordered laboratory” (80), while the colour is only a colour “by analogy,” displaying “shining bands unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum,” “bizarre optical properties,” and “other things which puzzled men of science” (81). The meteorite furthermore possesses a “torrid invulnerability” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 81) and remains unaffected by acid or other caustic chemicals. The colour stubbornly eludes precise description: in one of his signature descriptive pileups Lovecraft describes it as a “riot of luminous amorphousness,” an “alien and undimensioned rainbow of cryptic poison . . . seething, feeling, lapping, reaching, scintillating, straining, and malignly bubbling in its cosmic and unrecognizable chromaticism” (“The Colour Out of Space” 97). Lovecraft can employ an almost hysterical profusion of verbs, adverbs, and adjectives, an excess of purple verbiage, but none of it gives us anything approaching an accurate picture of what the colour is really like.

The point here is not merely about the arbitrariness of signifiers or the difficulty that arises when describing something new or anomalous, or which lies beyond our current perceptions but which we can still conceptualize; describing the colour is not simply a difficulty in describing its particular qualia, its individual, ineffable qualities. Nor is the colour merely like ultraviolet or infrared light, some hitherto undetected wavelength; it instead obeys “laws that are not of our cosmos” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 99). It is not that the colour lies somewhere new on the spectrum – it is that *it is not even a proper colour at all*, not something we should be able to sense, but rather a “blasphemy from beyond” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 95) which “our universe must needs disown” (99). We are told that even after extensive study “nothing of value had been learned of it” – it has “almost no identifying features whatsoever” and the scientists are “forced to own that they could not place it” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 82). Their results aren’t just puzzling, they are totally useless. The colour is a “cryptic vestige of the

fathomless gulfs outside” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 82) and is literally described as “against Nature” (94), utterly “unplaceable,” even as it excites an affective response, “a sense of doom and abnormality which far outraced any image [which] conscious minds could form” (95).

Now, despite the total failure of the scientists to understand it, it might still be tempting to read the colour out of space as a scientific curiosity, perhaps some stray fragment from a far-off region of the universe where the laws of physics somehow differ, but which might, nonetheless, be potentially amenable to at least theoretical understanding as a scientific phenomenon. Perhaps, we could imagine, science might eventually be able to glean something of the colour, even if it is temporarily defeated. After all, science is continuously confronting new and initially unexplained phenomena, and, eventually, making sense of them, even if this process requires radical revisions to previous scientific knowledge. Thomas Kuhn famously argues in *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) that inevitably a given scientific paradigm will encounter novelties which are “necessarily subversive of its basic commitments” (5) and which thus prompt “the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact” (6). Could it be that the colour is what Kuhn would call an “anomaly,” something which doesn’t defeat science itself in any fundamental way but rather violates “the paradigm induced expectations that govern normal science” (52-53) and so facilitates a scientific revolution, creating a new paradigm? At first, the scientists examining the meteorite seem hopeful for something along these lines; we are told that “there was much breathless talk of new elements, bizarre optical properties, and other things which puzzled men of science are wont to say when faced with the unknown” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 81). Not only does a paradigm shift fail to occur, however, Lovecraft’s narrator emphasizes that the colour is literally impervious to any form of scientific investigation or rational understanding. “This was no fruit of such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes and photographic plates of

our observatories,” we are told – “this was no breath from the skies whose motions and dimensions our astronomers measure or deem too vast to measure” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 99). It is not merely that the colour is beyond current measurement or understanding: rather, it is “a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature,” from “realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 99).

The colour out of space is not merely a colour from *outer* space, it is a colour *from out of space itself* – an “infinity” that is “beyond all Nature.” Lovecraft establishes the colour as something utterly outside the ordinary scope of human cognition – beyond the membrane of what Morton terms the correlationist “bubble” (38) which speculative realism pops, in the nebulous terrain of the unthinkable. It is “nothing of this earth” but is “dowered with outside properties and obedient to outside laws” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 82). All human conceptual schema, our categories, our models, our methods, our symbols, our experiments, our measurements, our science – they are all useless when faced with the colour. It is comforting to imagine some hypothetical science that could master the colour, a future where the colour is understood, where the colour transforms the paradigms of science and ushers in a new way of thinking. But this is not the story Lovecraft writes. There are no hints of future understanding, no foreshadowing of a paradigm shift, no proclamations of faith in the scientific method’s ability to conquer this new puzzle. Initial hopes of such advances are dashed. The scientists have no conclusions; they don’t even have hypotheses, and what the colour is, “God only knows” (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space” 99). “The Colour Out of Space” is not a story of a scientific setback or of some funny new type of matter, some phenomenon with quirky behaviour we happen not to have seen before. “The Colour Out of Space” is about the “absolute outside,” the Great

Outdoors – it comes not from some odd corner of the galaxy but, as Meillassoux would put, from “entirely elsewhere” (7).

In its total otherness and its irresistible power, the colour could seem exemplary of the sublime as conceptualized by any number of thinkers, including Kant and Burke. Bradley A. Will notes that since the colour “is outside the system of classification and, thus, outside the system of signification” (14) it can be understood in relation to Kantian noumena and thus to the Kantian sublime, where a failure of the faculty of understanding is recuperated by human reason and converted into awe and aesthetic pleasure arising not from the thing-in-itself *per se* but from the human mind’s own abilities. But as with previous authors of weird fiction, Lovecraft’s use of disgust complicates a straightforward reading in terms of sublimity, as does his singularly dim view of humanity and free will. Ralickas, arguing against Will, notes that Kant’s epistemology “places us above nature” (365) and affirms the integrity and power of the human subject, while Lovecraft’s misanthropic perspective on human nature precludes such an affirmation: “in denying the human subject freedom, an idea crucial to the aesthetics of sublimity, Lovecraft’s worldview necessarily makes an experience of the sublime impossible” (367). Lovecraft’s fiction utterly refuses the humanistic framework of Kant or the comforting consolidation of the subject’s power: “in Lovecraft, the subject suffers from a violation of its sense of self, but is graced with no consolatory understanding of the human condition to mollify its fragmented psyche” (Ralickas 365).

In short, Kant insists too strongly on the centrality of human subjectivity to be compatible with Lovecraft’s universe, a universe in which the subject is in constant danger of disintegrating. Ralickas herself, as noted before, pivots towards a kind of mechanistic materialism to explain Lovecraft’s cosmic horror (while also gesturing towards a psychoanalytic interpretation), a reading

which, though at times productive, accounts for the epistemological quandaries Will identifies rather obliquely and incompletely. In essence, I think Will is quite right to note that the colour exceeds the human faculty of understanding and seems to relate to things-in-themselves, but Ralickas is also right to question the anthropocentrism of a Kantian reading, including the entanglement of noumena and transcendental free will. Fortunately, Schopenhauer's idea of the will-to-live can be used to conceptualize the cognitive and categorical crisis the colour precipitates *without* privileging the human subject. Indeed, Schopenhauer's pessimistic ontology is forever diminishing human importance, since it makes human beings nothing more than puppets of the will-to-live.

The colour's disruptions of human understanding continuously manifest not just through the queasy-making failures of language so favoured by Lovecraft but through images that seem calculated to elicit intense disgust. The colour is frequently compared to a disease, infecting not only people and animals but the landscape itself. In the skunk cabbages and orchard trees of the Gardner farm it produces growths lacking "sane wholesome colours" – a description that equates the stability of physical laws with the stability of consciousness – but rather "hectic and prismatic variants of some diseased, underlying primary tone without a place among the known tints of earth," a kind of "chromatic perversion" (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space" 85). Lovecraft's language here emphasizes not only the colour's alien defiance of classification but also its uncleanliness, its infectiousness. Later it afflicts the Gardners' animals: first the chickens, whose meat proves "dry and noisome upon cutting" (as if already cooked?), then the swine, who "undergo loathsome changes which no one could explain" and begin "growing grey and brittle and falling to pieces" before dying, developing "singular alterations," and finally the cows, which suffer from "atrocious collapses and disintegrations" ("The Colour Out of Space" 88), revolting bodily

symptoms whose strange horror is exacerbated by the deliberate vagueness of Lovecraft's descriptions. As Ammi makes clear, there was no poison involved, and the animals did not consume any tainted plants; the colour has simply passed to them, manifesting as something kin to a "disease," though as the story's narrator states, "what disease could wreak such results was beyond any mind's guessing" (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space" 88). The pathology is unthinkable, yet disgustingly manifest.

Finally, the colour out of space attacks human beings, consuming the Gardner family one by one, some fallen or dragged into the well. Nahum is encountered by Ammi in a state of living death. Though he protests that "there are things which cannot be mentioned" (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space" 90), refusing to fully delineate the scene of horror and again pointing to the impotence of language in the face of the colour and the great outside, Ammi nonetheless provides a sickening portrait of Nahum, who has by now been reduced to an ambiguously human "it" in the text:

A feeble scratching on the floor downstairs now sounded distinctly, and Ammi's grip tightened on a heavy stick he had picked up in the attic for some purpose. Slowly nerving himself, he finished his descent and walked boldly toward the kitchen. But he did not complete the walk, because what he sought was no longer there. It had come to meet him, and it was still alive after a fashion. Whether it had crawled or whether it had been dragged by any external force, Ammi could not say; but the death had been at it. Everything had happened in the last half-hour, but collapse, greying, and disintegration were already far advanced. There was a horrible brittleness, and dry fragments were scaling off. Ammi could not touch it, but looked horrifiedly into the distorted parody that had been a face (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space" 91).

The language of disease and the colour's horrific afflictions, which ravage the Gardners as if decomposing their bodies while they are still alive, seems calculated to disgust. As we have already seen in relation to Poe's stories, theorists of disgust such as William Miller and Colin McGinn have pointed out that diseased flesh is near-universally disgusting. Susan Miller concurs, noting that in her particular model of disgust, disease disgusts especially powerfully because it "withers our sense of agency, which constitutes a core aspect of the self" and so "threatens our sense of control over the form and function of the body and, ultimately, the self" (178). As she notes, "the ultimate danger implied by illness and death is the complete disintegration of the body's form and function so that the boundary between inner and outer collapses" (Miller 185). This is, of course, exactly what happens to Nahum, whose body has "contracted" the colour and which consequently deteriorates in a disgusting sequence of "greying and disintegration." Nahum's rambling, half-mad death-speech, a slurring series of ellipses-punctuated fragments that borders on incoherence as language again breaks down in the face of the colour's outsideness, its infectious otherness, show that his mind is likewise disintegrating, claimed by the thing that "come from some place whar things ain't as they is here" which "burns an' sucks" (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space" 92) and leaves its victims empty husks.

Rather than the traditional sublime, then, the colour exemplifies Korsmeyer's sublate: disgust at its most awesome and awful, intermixing awe with revulsion as it demonstrates, cruelly but powerfully, the vulnerability of the self, the permeability and impermanence of boundaries between human beings and the world beyond. In "The Colour Out of Space" we do not simply marvel at some far-off immensity, as in the sublime, reflecting on the vastness and scale of the universe or the power of human consciousness. The Korsmeyerian sublate not only transmutes an unpleasant affect into a partially pleasurable one, giving rise to aesthetic delight, it brings with it

a key insight into the nature of things, an apprehension grasped “with palpable somatic resonance” (134). In “The Colour Out of Space” this apprehension is firstly of the unhuman nature of the world, its uncaring indifference to our human wants and desires and its total refutation of human attempts to know or categorize it comprehensively, and secondly that despite the seeming boundaries of human selfhood, human bodies are no more invulnerable or separate from the will-to-live than are plants, animals, or architecture. In Lovecraft’s story the cosmic outside does not stay outside but rather contaminates and corrupts the familiar world, the world of representations or world-for-us. New England itself, Lovecraft’s much-beloved homeland, serves as a synecdoche for the phenomenal world, just as the colour functions in the opposite way, signifying the suprasensible world-in-itself, though a version of this world that continuously intrudes on the phenomenal world. It may make a mockery of human perception, but its effects are made monstrously and revoltingly apparent: it is an eruption of the world-in-itself, of a profoundly nonhuman reality. Even Harman, who, consistent with his object-oriented approach, reads the colour primarily as an object disproving the theories of Hume, notes that the text suggests that we “shift our attention from this single renegade object and focus instead on the horrifying super-cosmic environment” (*Weird Realism* 84). The colour out of space is more than a single anomalous entity or phenomenon; in its nebulously category-eroding, subject-disintegrating nonhumanity, its contaminating preternaturalness, it evokes a metaphysical force mounting a fundamental challenge to human ways of knowing and to anthropocentric ontology.

Thacker’s recent reinterpretations of Schopenhauer argue that “Schopenhauer posits a principle of continuity that would collapse the Kantian split between phenomena and noumena” while totally refusing “to grant the human being, or the human perspective, any priority with respect to this principle” (*SSC* 126). The will-to-live, therefore, cannot “be granted any

anthropocentric conceits” – human life is not some “pinnacle” of life (Thacker, *SSC* 126). Rather, the will-to-live itself is radically nonhuman, even while human bodies and minds are but crystallizations of the will – thus, for Schopenhauer, “the human [is] also the unhuman” (Thacker, *SSC* 142). “The Colour Out of Space,” like all of Lovecraft’s stories, is not some exact delineation of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in fictional terms, any more than Poe’s stories precisely map to Schelling’s identity philosophy and ontology of the Absolute, or Blackwood presciently anticipates the precise delineations of new materialism as described by Bennett or Marder. In any case, stories are not philosophical proofs – even weird stories, even stories concerned with metaphysical truth, with “ultimate reality,” as Lovecraft might put it. But what “The Colour Out of Space” does accomplish is to draw on the affective power of disgust – as aroused by the categorically confused colour and its sickeningly deleterious effects on people, animals, vegetation, buildings, and the landscape – in order to impress on the reader a sense of a cosmic outside malignantly and horrifically indifferent to human life but nonetheless suffusing and consuming the phenomenal realm. If the colour were merely a thing that defied scientific investigation, or which seemed to baffle human conceptual systems or resist full comprehension – if all it did was function as a limit to our understanding – it might be read in more purely Kantian terms, in relation both to the unknowable, suprasensible noumena, as a hard border for thought, and to a version of sublimity firmly ensconced in the correlationist circle, in which sublime wonder is actually delight at the power of human consciousness. But Lovecraft does more than this: the colour is not merely beyond human thought, it irrupts into everyday reality, infecting and transforming it. Lovecraft uses weird fiction in order to represent something which in reality would be impossible – a confrontation with the actuality of the world-in-itself. Like Schopenhauer’s will-

to-live, the colour is voracious, all-consuming, and totally indifferent to the suffering or well-being of humans, animals, or other organisms.

Susan Miller argues that “in our relations with nature, disgust stirs if we feel dwarfed by the vigour of the not-self, which can make us feel less real, solid, and robust than we like” (192). What Miller calls “horror” is an extreme extension of disgust, its revolting apotheosis – the affect which takes hold when “we must cope with the invasion of a force we construe as alien that threatens to substitute its being for our own” (194). In the moment of horrific disgust, “the self has . . . been overcome and permeated” by an alien Other, and thus “no boundary-keeping action is possible” (Miller 175). Lovecraft’s cancerous colour, which subsumes all it touches in its polychromatic miasma of unthinkability, evokes precisely this affect – as does Schopenhauer’s all-encompassing will-to-live, to which human beings and indeed all things are but slaves, devouring one another in a feast of horror as sickening as it is eternal. “The Colour Out of Space” utilizes this version of the sublate, linked to the total otherness and category-defying nature of the colour, an alien force which contaminates the world-for-us with its alterity, in order to communicate affectively the intellectually slippery concept of the world-in-itself, the unthinkable will-to-live.

5.5 Collisions of the Cosmic and Corporeal in “The Dunwich Horror”

Schopenhauer writes that if we “confront nature as strangers, in order to comprehend her objectively, we find that, from the grade of organic life upwards, she has only *one* purpose, namely that of *maintaining the species*” (*WWR* 2: 351). The will-to-live, the very “kernel of reality itself,” is powerfully manifest in the sexual impulse, which he describes as possessing a “pressing intensity” (Schopenhauer, *WWR* 2: 351). The body, as “nothing but the phenomenal appearance of

the will,” makes visible “the chief demands and desires by which the will manifests itself” – thus, for, Schopenhauer, “teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal are objectified hunger; the genitals are objectified sexual impulse; grasping hands and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will they represent” (*WWR* 1: 108). Schopenhauer sees sex as exhibiting an “inner significance” as “the most decided *affirmation of the will-to-live*,” a means by which the eternal and timeless world-as-will begets new phenomenal manifestations (*WWR* 1: 328). Though in some senses foreshadowing Darwin and Freud, Schopenhauer sees sexual desire less in terms of biology or psychology and more in terms of ontology: while the urge to reproduce might be rendered in the world of representations in terms that biology and psychology can *describe*, for Schopenhauer this imperative originates in the will.

The act of sex itself is, for the most part, conspicuously absent in Lovecraft’s fiction, with a few notable exceptions such as the “weird orgies” (122) in “The Horror at Red Hook” (1927) where “cosmic sin had entered, and festered by unhallowed rites” which yield a frenzied “Dionysiac fury” in which “the bounds of consciousness were let down, and man’s fancy lay open to vistas of every realm of horror and every forbidden dimension that evil had power to mould” (132-133), though even here matters are vague and impressionistic. Lovecraft possessed a Puritanical contempt for sex and generally held himself above what he called “amatory phenomena,” at least until his sudden (and ill-fated) marriage to Sonia Greene in 1924. “Eroticism belongs to a lower order of instincts,” he proclaims in one letter, “and is an animal rather than nobly human quality” (Lovecraft, *Lord of a Visible World* 83). Indeed, Lovecraft seems rather more taken with “the sky, with its tale of eternities past and to come, and its gorgeous panoply of whirling universes,” with “sinister forces” that “hurl through the black incurious aether these titanic globes of living flame, and the insect-peopled worlds that hover about them” (*Lord of a*

Visible World 83) than with his fellow human beings. Yet despite his distaste for eroticism, sex suffuses Lovecraft's fiction – especially and unavoidably his utter horror and simultaneous fascination with miscegenation, often thinly veiled through the interbreeding of human and nonhuman beings. For obvious reasons, not the least of which include Lovecraft's tentative endorsements of fascism and eugenics in some of his letters and essays, his preoccupation with matters of race and in particular interracial mixing have been justifiably troubling to critics.

I make absolutely no apologies for Lovecraft's egregious bigotry or deeply unpleasant racial politics; nor, as others occasionally attempt, do I want to put Lovecraft's racism to one side as a kind of infelicitous eccentricity of the texts. Houellebecq writes that "it is racial hatred that provokes in Lovecraft that state of poetic trance where he surpasses himself in the rhythmical and insane beating of cursed phrases; which illuminates his later major works with a hideous and cataclysmic glare" (107). Miéville, concurring with Houellebecq, suggests that "it is unconvincing that [Lovecraft's] racism is extrinsic to his major work," and that "the horror, the awe, the very stuff that makes Lovecraft great" is fundamentally inseparable from "the paranoid terror of mixing the races" ("Introduction," xix). Like Miéville and Houellebecq, I read Lovecraft's fascinated disgust with miscegenation, appalling though it may be, not (merely) as an embarrassing blemish on his weird fiction but as central to its aesthetic strategy – and indeed, I argue, its metaphysical speculations. While Lovecraft's racism cannot and should not be reduced to a mere cipher for metaphysical anxieties, I think it is possible to read his racial anxieties as a microcosmic reflection of a greater unease, a cosmic disgust tied to the collapse of categories in the face of an all-encompassing, nihilistic monism of the sort Schopenhauer imagines through the will-to-live. Gina Wisker has recently connected the strange, liminal women that appear throughout Lovecraft's fiction both to miscegenation and to cosmic transgression, noting the ways that his stories exhibit

“a fascination with women as the source of disruption and disorder” since they “are culpable of miscegenation, interbreeding with the alien Other, creatures from the seas, from Hell, from other dimensions, and, controversially for contemporary readers, in Lovecraft’s view, the ‘racially inferior’” (31). Wisker suggests that we can read Lovecraft against the grain, identifying, for example, liminal figures which, even as they horrify, nonetheless disturb “the comfortable, closed systems of families, heritage, tradition, restricted worldviews, and xenophobia” (33). It is in this spirit that I want to approach tropes of racial mixing in Lovecraft’s fiction – with eyes open to the abhorrent attitudes underlying his disgust, yet also to the gaps and ambiguities fissuring the text, and to the possibilities they open up.

Throughout Lovecraft’s fiction, sexual reproduction often serves as the mechanism through which nonhuman forces and the cosmic outside interpenetrate with the human world – the world-for-us, Schopenhauer’s world-as-representation. The intermingling of what seem disparate kinds of being, rather than entrenching divisions between the human and the nonhuman (or, for that matter, between human racial groups), problematizes and finally dissolves these divisions to reveal instead an essentially homogenous reality, one whose unveiling is greeted both with horrified revulsion and, sometimes, a kind of bliss – a Schopenhauerian *jouissance*, or, to use his own term, the *Aufhebung* of will, a beatific nullification of the will sometimes translated as the “mortification” of the will, in which “complete knowledge” of one’s inner being becomes “the quieter of all willing” (*WWR* 1: 383). Even while abhorring racial and ethno-cultural category crisis some part of Lovecraft is clearly enthralled by it, as he is by the idea of a suspension of the universe’s “fixed laws.” As Lovecraft writes to Donald Wandrei in 1927: “I have often wished that I had the literary power to call up visions of some vast & remote realm of entity *beyond the universes of matter and energy*; where vivid interplays of unknown and inconceivable influences

give vast & fabulous activity to dimensional areas that are not shapes, & nuclei of complex rearrangement that are not minds” (*SL 2*: 127). It sounds as if some part of Lovecraft wishes to be like the beldame Keziah Mason of “The Dreams in the Witch House,” to unveil, as she does, “the spiral black vortices of that ultimate void of Chaos wherein reigns the mindless daemon-sultan Azathoth” (329) and so plunge his readers “through limitless abysses of inexplicably coloured twilight” (304). But quite aside from what Lovecraft intended or the conflict between the cosmic and the conservative in his own mind, his texts betray a definite ambivalence regarding the very reproductive anxieties he finds so disturbing and disgusting.

Building on Wisker’s recuperative feminist reading and on Miéville and Houellebecq’s insistence on race’s centrality to Lovecraft’s strategy, as well as Schopenhauer’s emphasis on the sexual urge as one of the most powerful manifestations of the world-as-will, I approach two of Lovecraft’s longer works – “The Dunwich Horror” and *The Shadow over Innsmouth* – as textual collisions of the cosmic and the corporeal, in which reproduction with the alien other becomes entangled with a metaphysical exploration of the world as both will and representation and an aesthetic meditation facilitating Schopenhauerian mortification of the self. Both weird tales are centrally concerned with the interbreeding of human beings with nonhumans, stories of genotypic, biological horror with clear racial subtexts, but stories which also link miscegenation to the idea of a more cosmic contamination. It is not merely the blood of people unlike himself that repulses Lovecraft – it is the seepage of a cosmos indifferent and often inimical to human happiness, a cosmos which uses human beings like living incubators to propagate its myriad monstrosities. Rather than allowing human beings to cut themselves off from seething, unfathomable forces of the nonhuman world, Lovecraft’s stories assert the inevitability of their contamination as part of the very profane universe against which they seem to struggle.

“The Dunwich Horror” has elicited decidedly mixed reactions from critics, some of whom have considered it at least partly parodic, although Donald Burleson suggests it may simply be that the story suffers “from curious lapses in plot credibility” (106). In part, attributions of parody can be traced to the story’s Christian overtones, which may derive from the influence of Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* on the story – an influence so noticeable that Joshi declares the tale “not much more than a pastiche” and criticizes it for its perceived “naïve moral dichotomy” of good-versus-evil (*A Dreamer and a Visionary* 274).⁵¹ The story’s potentially parodic status, as well as its seemingly moralistic elements, are significant to any reading of the tale’s metaphysics, since they open up the possibility of an interpretation built on crude moral binaries, in which Lovecraft sacrifices his cosmic pessimism – and the Schopenhauerian ontology underlying it – for the sake of melodrama or spoof. Burleson, who reads the text in part using Noël Carroll’s aesthetic theories in *The Philosophy of Horror*, suggests that “The Dunwich Horror” is “a sort of category mistake” since “it belongs neither to the realm of the stylistically impeccable nor to the realm of the literarily inconsequential” – rather, it is “a felicitous hybrid,” a “dweller in interstices” (116). Peter Cannon argues that while there is a superficial moral dimension to the tale, its conflict is ultimately “far from black and white”; he reads the story in part biographically as a kind of “sardonic inversion” of Lovecraft’s own childhood (87). Harman somewhat similarly argues against Joshi that the Christian moralism in “The Dunwich Horror” is part of a “grotesque parody, and [does] not constitute a true deviation from the amoral cosmos found in Lovecraft’s other

⁵¹ Machen’s text is even referenced in the story, when Henry Armitage ridicules an explanation of simple inbreeding for Wilbur Whateley’s hideous and partly non-human appearance, pondering “what Roodmas horror fastened itself on the world in half-human flesh and blood” at the moment of Wilbur’s birth (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 114).

stories” (*Weird Realism* 99). I side strongly with Harman against Joshi here: while I think the influence of Machen is felt throughout the story, and more than a trace of his Anglo-Catholic mysticism inflects the narrative, “The Dunwich Horror” engages with Christianity only to invert and distort it, deploying the affect of disgust in its depictions of inter-species hybridity to mock the very moral binaries whose presence Joshi deplores. What is being ridiculed, then, is not ultimate reality, but an anthropocentric conception of it in moralistic, theological terms.

The story is set primarily in the eponymous town of Dunwich, an old, backwoods village in the wilds of New England, established from the outset as a place linked to decay, revulsion, sexual perversion, and racial otherness: its residents are described as “repellently decadent,” suffering from “retrogression” such that they form “a race by themselves, with the well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding,” and whose “annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnameable violence and perversity” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 102). The village is furthermore haunted by “the impression of a faint, malign odour . . . as of massed mould and decay of centuries” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 102), as if the deeds of its inhabitants had congealed into a disgusting miasma. The story centres around the Whateley family farm, and in particular Wilbur Whateley, his grandfather, and his mother Lavinia, a “crinkly-haired albino” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 105). Mysterious happenings at the farm ensue following Wilbur’s birth, most notably the purchasing of large numbers of cattle, who develop horrible and inexplicable sores, also to be found about Lavinia’s and her father’s throats. Wilbur is malformed and animalistic but also possesses a stunning intellect. He eventually sneaks into Miskatonic University and steals a copy of the *Necronomicon*, a grimoire by the “Mad Arab” Abdul Alhazred which shows up frequently in Lovecraft’s stories, but is killed by a guard-dog. Dr. Henry Armitage (the University’s librarian)

and two other professors investigate Wilbur's corpse and are horrified at its mutated state, before it dissolves into a "sticky whitish mass" with a "monstrous odour" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 118). It is then revealed that Wilbur had a twin: a huge, invisible creature that had been kept in a farmhouse. Without Wilbur's intercessions, the creature bursts from the farmhouse and rampages through Dunwich. The brothers are revealed as the spawn of Yog-Sothoth, a god-like being found in several of Lovecraft's stories and which is both coterminous and also somehow radically separate from the universe, hailing from "some vague realm or dimension outside our material universe" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 135) but which is also described in other stories as infinite and immanent, "an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self – not merely a thing of one space-time continuum, but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence's whole unbounded sweep – the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike" ("Through the Gates of the Silver Key" 371).⁵²

⁵² Though Lovecraft's stories do share a loose pantheon, it is somewhat dubious to assume that a given figure is identical from story to story, the best efforts of August Derleth aside. For instance, Lovecraft uses the term "Old Ones" in association with all sorts of different creatures, ranging from a group of god-like beings in "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Dunwich Horror" to an alien species in *At the Mountains of Madness*. In the case of Yog-Sothoth, however, the information we receive in "The Dunwich Horror" is consistent with that found in stories like "Through the Gates of the Silver Key." Indeed, Yog-Sothoth seems to have been a much more central figure for Lovecraft than Cthulhu, despite the latter's ascendancy in popular culture (again thanks to Derleth), and Lovecraft himself sometimes used the term "Yog-Sothothery" to refer to his tales as a whole, describing the being as a kind of "cosmic phantasy" born of a "sense of *outsideness*" (quoted in Joshi and Shultz, *An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* 51) – though typical of the ever self-deprecating Lovecraft, there are also instances in which he describes the entity as "a basically immature conception" (Joshi and Shultz, *An H.P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* 51).

Like many of Lovecraft's stories, "The Dunwich Horror" focuses on the categorically fraught bodies of its characters, and here human-nonhuman hybridity is entangled both with a horrific cosmic outside invading the familiar, phenomenal world, as in "The Colour Out of Space," but also with language that specifically evokes a kind of monstrous sexuality resonant with Schopenhauer's will-to-live in its procreative manifestations. Throughout "The Dunwich Horror" this emphasis on reproduction is always couched in terms of intense disgust, related to animality, bodily urges, and, naturally enough for Lovecraft, racial miscegenation. This is primarily notable through descriptions of the Whateleys, including Lavinia, "a somewhat deformed, unattractive albino woman of thirty-five" who "had no known husband" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 104), but even more prominently through her son, Wilbur. From the story's outset, Wilbur is described in language evocative of a Greek satyr, a figure of rapacious sexual appetite: there is something "goatish or animalistic about his thick lips, large-pored, yellowish skin, coarse crinkly hair, and oddly elongated ears" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 107).

When Wilbur reaches adulthood he retains these satyr-like qualities, though they become yet more distorted and grotesque. His body is described in great detail following his fatal injury at the hands of the guard dog at Miskatonic University. While still "partly human," with "very man-like hands and head" and a "goatish, chinless face," only Wilbur's upper body is "semi-anthropomorphic," though even this has "dog's rending paws," is scaled like "a crocodile or alligator," and is "piebald with black and yellow" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 116), descriptions evocative not only of the satyr or animality more generally but also functioning as a kind of monstrous literalization of miscegenation, as if he were a racial patchwork. As Lovecraft puts it, "below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and sheer phantasy began" (Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" 116). Again like a satyr, Wilbur has

skin “thickly covered with coarse black fur,” but even more suggestive are the almost blatantly penile “score of long greenish-grey tentacles with red sucking mouths” that protrude “limply” from his abdomen, with a curious arrangement that “seemed to follow the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 116-17), a description which combines obviously phallic imagery with that of a vagina dentata, while simultaneously linking Wilbur Whateley’s monstrous genitalia with the cosmic outside. As Cannon wryly observes, it feels as if Lovecraft is “almost deliberately baiting the Freudians” here (88). Even this is just the beginning, however, as a whole range of even more bizarre features swiftly follow:

On each of the hips, deep set in a kind of pinkish, ciliated orbit, was what seemed to be a rudimentary eye; whilst in lieu of a tail there depended a kind of trunk or feeler with purple annular markings, and with many evidences of being an undeveloped mouth or throat. The limbs, save for their black fur, roughly resembled the hind legs of prehistoric earth’s giant saurians; and terminated in ridgy-veined pads that were neither hooves nor claws. When the thing breathed, its tail and tentacles rhythmically changed colour, as if from some circulatory cause normal to the non-human side of its ancestry. In the tentacles this was observable as a deepening of the greenish tinge, whilst in the tail it was manifest as a yellowish appearance which alternated with a sickly greyish-white in the spaces between the purple rings. Of genuine blood there was none; only the foetid greenish-yellow ichor which trickled along the painted floor beyond the radius of the stickiness, and left a curious discolouration behind it. (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 117)

It is as if Wilbur Whateley’s body makes visible all the traces of evolution, including the pre-historic and pre-human; he is an arche-fossil embodied, with his “saurian” parts linking him

explicitly with deep time despite his young age. Through a Schopenhauerian lens his body simultaneously signifies the multifarious phenomenal manifestations of the will-to-live in a single body – just as Delapore’s mind slipped between generations so does Wilbur’s body slip between geological epochs, like Helen Vaughan’s melting form temporarily crystallized into a chimeric totality. Where Machen’s dissolving femme fatale confirms the fundamental mystery of the cosmos, however, dissolving into a sacramental slime that Machen links to the occult, divine nature of the universe, Wilbur’s dissolution into a disgusting, sickly ichor carries no such gnosis; the revelation he and his brother provide is not one of theological wholeness but only another layer of mindless, pointless horror.

What cements Wilbur Whateley as a distinctly Schopenhauerian figure is not his monstrous, sexualized body, but his relationship with his twin brother, the invisible abomination housed in the Whateley farmhouse. If Wilbur’s body is the will-to-live made material in the phenomenal plane, his phallic tentacles and goatish features representing the will “objectified,” then his brother’s suprasensible form is the will itself. Like the colour in “The Colour Out of Space,” the invisible monster defeats description; it is a kind of “imponderable menace” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 133) or “invisible blasphemy” (132), detectable only by the presence of whippourwills, by a series of footprints reminiscent of the wendigo’s in Blackwood’s “The Wendigo,” and by the curious sound-like emanations it produces – a series of “deep, cracked, raucous vocal sounds which will never leave the memory of the stricken group who heard them,” which could not be created by any “human throat” as “the organs of man can yield no such acoustic perversion” and which indeed “it is almost erroneous to call . . . *sounds* at all, since so much of their ghastly, infra-bass timbre spoke to dim seats of consciousness and terror far subtler than the ear” (“The Dunwich Horror” 134). Just as the colour is only a colour “by analogy” so are these

sounds not truly sounds but rather half-articulate thunder croakings” from “unplumbed gulfs of extra-cosmic consciousness,” and so is its body “an impossibility in the normal world,” since it was “like its father,” the inhabitant not of the phenomenal, material world but “some vague abyss” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 134). The being defeats all attempts to assimilate it into human systems of knowledge: “reason, logic, and normal ideas of motivation stood confounded” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 122). Sounds here function similarly to the Wendigo’s odour in Blackwood’s tale, but where for Blackwood the odour confirmed a call of the wild and the omnipresence of immanent, panpsychic Nature comparable to Spinoza’s divine substance, for Lovecraft the sounds’ resistance to human understanding only reiterates an essential cosmic pessimism, driving home the insignificance of human beings in a universe they cannot completely comprehend and which cares nothing for them.

When rendered temporarily visible using a special powder, the Dunwich horror’s body cannot be described with any sort of coherence and seems to unhinge the minds of those subjected to its sight. As Curtis Whateley, “of the undecayed branch,” attempts incoherently to put it, it was “Bigger’n a barn . . . all made o’ squirmin’ ropes . . . hull thing sort o’ shaped like a hen’s egg bigger’n anything, with dozens o’ legs like hogsheds that haff shut up when they step . . . nothin’ solid abaout it - all like jelly, an’ made o’ sep’rit wrigglin’ ropes pushed clost together . . . great bulgin’ eyes all over it . . . ten or twenty maouths or trunks a-stickin’ aout all along the sides, big as stovepipes, an’ all a-tossin’ an’ openin’ an’ shuttin’ . . . all grey, with kinder blue or purple rings . . . *an’ Gawd in heaven – that haff face on top!*” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 132-133). As with Wilbur’s description, this passage seems designed to disgust, mingling animal qualities with those of gelatin, the emphasis on its gaping, trunk-like mouths and swinish heads solidifying its connection to hunger, appetite, and carnality, with the horrific “half face” the sole trace of

humanity. The phallic mouths conflate the two orifices – oral and genital – which, as William Miller notes, can both make a claim to be the “prime mover” of disgust, both suggesting that humans are “amoral beings who eat and grow, reproduce . . . then die and rot, leaving other reprehensible beings to continue the process” (95), both zones of exchange between outside and inside connected to “lowly” bodily fluids and functions. In a sense, it is less as if the powder makes the Dunwich horror visible and more as if it temporarily fixes the will-in-itself into a phenomenal form similar to that of Wilbur, a chimerical collection of brute animal urges whose manifestation is profoundly revolting, disgust serving as a means of apprehending the will-to-live just as it does in Schopenhauer’s examples of the hydra or the parasitic insect.

As Armitage notes, the being was “a kind of force that acts and grows and shapes itself by other laws than those of our sort of Nature” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 135) – it is *beyond* the phenomenal realm, the other side of the ontological coin. Wilbur is all body, an excess of the material meticulously described: his body, indeed, in its atemporal hybridity, encompasses all life, all phenomena at once. His twin, on the other hand, remains stubbornly beyond the senses, even as it grows and mindlessly consumes, devouring vast quantities of cattle and carrying out a series of violent attacks on the countryside before it is destroyed by a spell cast from the *Necronomicon*, struck down by a lightning bolt and vaporized in a grotesque parody of Christ’s ascension into heaven. For all its invisibility or suprasensibility, for all its “noumenal” not-quite-qualities or anti-qualities, the Dunwich horror, like its twin, is again and again associated with disgust, its sense-defying, language-defeating elusiveness linked to impurity, wrongness, nausea, and the profane. The farmhouse it grows within is riddled with “diseased fungi” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 105) and leaves behind a “thick and foetid deposit” of “tarry stickiness,” while nearby vegetation wilts to “a curious, sickly-yellow grey” at its approach (134). In destroying the creature, then,

Armitage and the other Miskatonic professors are enacting a kind of purity ritual, sealing themselves off from the unwelcome, contaminating intrusion of the nonhuman world-in-itself. Their spell is essentially an effort to seal the breach, to restore the correlationist “bubble” of human perception to its semblance of solidity. That they succeed in this endeavour, however temporarily, is perhaps the most disappointing thing about the story, and here one can see how the critics’ complaints have some merit – for in triumphing over the Dunwich horror the professors reassert the power not of some crude version of moral goodness but of human knowledge, restoring the privileged position of human reason after the horror overturned it. Wilbur and his brother are twin avatars of the world-as-representation and the world-as-will, but the ending of “The Dunwich Horror” restores a depressingly Kantian status quo, returning the noumenal to its rightful place and sternly policing the boundary between human beings and the world-in-itself, just as the story’s white protagonists, by exterminating the impure hybrid product of miscegenation, reify their own white supremacy. The reader, like the characters, can retreat into the familiarity of the phenomenal world, and restore the illusion that we live in an anthropocentric universe. Even while Lovecraft strains against the limits of representation, harnessing the power of disgust to depict irruptions of the world-in-itself into the phenomenal realm, “The Dunwich Horror” once again pries these two layers apart.

5.6 Abominable Aufhebung and Sublate Sainthood in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*

Though human beings seem to defeat the forces of cosmic contamination in “The Dunwich Horror” and so ritually purify the world, making it again a world-for-us free from the queasy-making violations of the world-in-itself, such efforts fail catastrophically in Lovecraft’s novella *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, another tale in which tropes of racial miscegenation become

entangled with questions of ontology. The unnamed narrator of the tale begins by announcing he is going to “defy the ban on speech” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 223) which surround the incidents of the story, a decision which becomes fully understandable by the novella’s end. The tale takes place in the heart of the same Miskatonic region featured in “The Colour Out of Space” and “The Dunwich Horror,” specifically in the eerie Massachusetts town of Innsmouth, supposedly near to Ipswich (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 223). The narrator visits the decaying seaside town ostensibly to make an antiquarian and architectural study of the place, and notices that many of the town’s inhabitants possess what he calls the “Innsmouth look,” a set of “namelessly sinister qualities” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 234), “certain peculiarities of face and motions which [the narrator] instinctively [dislikes]” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 233). He hears a strange tale from an old vagrant, Zadok, concerning a species of “Deep Ones,” fish-like beings with a taste for human sacrifice, which he claims are connected to the towns’ inhabitants, having interbred with them (the Deep One-human hybrids which result from such unions eventually transforming fully into Deep Ones) at the behest of Obed Marsh, a patriarch of the elite Marsh family in Innsmouth. The narrator’s attempts to leave town are thwarted when the bus breaks down, and he is forced to spend the night. When someone tries to break into his room he flees out the window and escapes into the town, to discover that Zadok’s tale was true: Innsmouth swarms with hybrids of humans and Deep Ones. He falls into a faint outside of town and awakes unharmed. The U.S. Federal government, informed by the narrator of the horrors at Innsmouth, mounts a raid on the town, arresting its denizens, burning down many of its buildings, and sending torpedoes to destroy Devil Reef, home of the Deep Ones. While this might seem to reiterate the ending of “The Dunwich Horror,” in which the forces of cosmic contamination are expunged and the heroes and their world purified, in the final pages the narrator makes an

unsettling discovery. Tracing his familial ancestry, he learns that he had forebears in Innsmouth, and that he himself possesses Deep One blood. The story ends with the narrator feeling “queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them” and slipping into paroxysms of Lovecraftian gibberish, planning to “dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y’ha-nthlei,” where they Deep Ones still dwell (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 274).

The Shadow over Innsmouth intermingles disgust with curiosity, fascination, and euphoria, both in its nameless protagonist and, potentially, in readers as well – a welter of affects connected both to the narrator’s discovery of the Deep Ones and his later recognition of his “tainted” heritage. The Deep Ones’ hybridity is consistently presented using the language of contagion and contamination, inspiring in the protagonist a deep and instinctual disgust which he cannot “define or comprehend” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 233) – the Deep Ones, like the colour out of space or the Whateleys’ chimeric bodies, evade human understanding, and the very fact of this evasion forms part of their repulsiveness. One individual is described as possessing “sparse yellow hairs that straggled and curled in irregular patches” and skin which is “queerly irregular, as if peeling from some cutaneous disease” as well as a fish-like odour (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 231). These repulsive traits are immediately linked by Lovecraft’s narrator to miscegenation, as the narrator ponders “just what foreign blood was in him” (*The Shadow over Innsmouth* 231). A travel agent describing Innsmouth to the narrator even claims that dislike of Innsmouth amongst its neighbors boils down to “race prejudice,” though he quickly clarifies that he does not blame those who hold such prejudice since he hates the Innsmouth folk himself: “I s’pose you know – though I can see you’re a Westerner by your talk – what a lot our New England ships used to have to do with queer ports in Africa, Asia, the South Seas, and everywhere else, and

what queer kinds of people they sometimes brought back with 'em" (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 225). Indeed, it is the agent who first describes the Innsmouth look, blaming it specifically on the "odd specimens" that he speculates Captain Marsh must have brought back from overseas, and noting that "some of 'em have queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right," and that "foreign talk" with an "unnatural" and "slopping-like" sound could be heard in the Innsmouth hotel (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 226). The Innsmouth children are dirty and, to the narrator's eyes, "simian-looking" (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 233), an animalistic description hinting at their status as nonhuman hybrids and recalling racist caricatures. Even the town's buildings seem to have acquired the interstitial taint of the Deep Ones: its streets are "dead" and "stench-cursed," with "huddles of rotting roofs," and the narrator ponders whether "the germ of an actual contagious madness lurks in the depths of that shadow over Innsmouth" (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 268). The landscape similarly reflects the same sense of alienage, with Devil Reef bearing "a suggestion of odd latent malignancy" and "grim repulsion," though one that also possesses "a subtle, curious sense of beckoning" (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 233) which foreshadows the narrator's transformation. Buildings, landscape, and people all exude a miasmatic smell, "the most nauseous fishy odour imaginable" (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth*).

To summarize, the Deep Ones of Innsmouth bring together a whole host of disgust-elicitors shaped by early twentieth-century racial prejudices, sexual anxieties, and cultural constructions of difference and linked to diseased flesh, animality, decay, and foul odours. Salient among these elicitors is the sexual horror of human-Deep One coupling and the half-hidden nonhumanness resulting from such hybrid unions. Though disgust is most concentrated around the Deep Ones,

Lovecraft's narrator discerns the same corruption in buildings and the landscape, the human and the nonhuman seeping into one another. Though there are hints of ontological horror here, much of the story revolves not around the outer reaches of the cosmos but around the way racialized and hybrid bodies provoke intense anxiety and revulsion in the narrator, with the shadow of a kind of sexual horror lurking in the background in Zadok's story of interbreeding. The narrator's disgust-filled descriptions of Innsmouth approach what Miéville or Houellebecq might call a "poetic trance" of race-hatred and repulsion for Lovecraft. While of course the particular contours of sexual disgust vary wildly from culture to culture, sex itself always involves a disruption of personal boundaries – as Susan Miller argues it "can bring anxiety over loss of individuality" (110) and, moreover, can present "a brew of desirable and disgusting elements" (112). She also observes that disgust predictably enters into discourses of foreignness and racialized hierarchies (154), noting in particular that "blood mixing is an image that recurs and attracts disgust in discourses of both race and class," since it helps to reinforce socially constructed forms of difference while denying the possibility of an essential sameness that "would make such mixing inconsequential" (156). Other theorists of disgust have expressed similar views. Martha Nussbaum, for example, in her critique of disgust's role in morality and the law, claims that "most societies teach the avoidance of certain groups of people as physically disgusting, bearers of a contamination that the healthy element of society must keep at bay" (72) – disgust, in other words, plays a powerful role in the Othering of certain people within the social order, even while its very presence arises from the possibility of distinctions between groups collapsing.

If *The Shadow over Innsmouth* simply ended with the extermination of the Deep Ones, the story's uses of disgust would be confined, by and large, to the sociopolitical (and phenomenal) plane; while something might be made of the Deep Ones' connection to the otherworldly Dagon,

ultimate progenitor of the creatures and now the god of their offspring, by and large the novella would seem more “genomic horror” than cosmic horror. Indeed, the novella would be difficult to read as anything but a pro-eugenics text railing against miscegenation: our white hero arrives in town, is disgusted and then attacked by those of “impure” blood whose atavism and animality warn against the supposed dangers of miscegenation, and then government forces arrive to destroy these hybrids and restore a sense of order and (racial) purity. The ending of the story, however, totally upends this straightforward reading and reframes the preceding action. The disgust the narrator makes so viscerally felt throughout the beginning of the story is complicated and recontextualized in such a way that the straightforward eugenicist or genomic reading of the text is compromised and the space for a Schopenhauerian reading opens up.

The narrator’s metamorphosis into a Deep One at the end of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* involves a powerful loss of individuality and ego comparable to that Schopenhauer describes ascetics undergoing in what he calls the “mortification of the will” (*WWR* 1: 381), a process which finds an echo in the experience of the sublime. The narrator’s outbursts of unpronounceable, quasi-incantatory gibberish constitute a form of hysterical utterance signifying the inability of language to cope with the world-as-will which the narrator is apprehending, his selfhood dissolving as he becomes one of the “nameless swimmers” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 267) which infest the sea, exuding an “insufferable” fishy stench inspiring an “air of death and desertion” (242), a ghastly sublate mixture of awe and revulsion. Even while the narrator’s slippage into the nonhuman disgusts and horrifies, it also carries a kind of rapturous potentiality suggestive of the ambivalent nature of cosmic nausea, a perverse and paradoxical attraction comparable to the will-less delight of the Schopenhauerian sublime. The narrator notes that while his dreams disgust him when awake, while sleeping he feels no such horror. While certain “other shapes,” presumably

Deep Ones, fill him with “nameless horror,” upon waking, while he slumbers he is “one with them; wearing their unhuman trappings, treading their aqueous ways, and praying monstrosly at their evil sea-bottom temples” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 273). He begins speaking of the “stupendous and unheard-of splendors” which await him below (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 274) and after a while he begins feeling “queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-depths instead of fearing them” and awakes from sleep “with a kind of exaltation instead of terror” (274).

The story ends on such a note of exaltation, with the narrator certain that he will “dwell amidst wonder and glory forever” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 274): he dissolves into the sea, losing all sense of time and individuality. While he wakes screaming from such nightmares, there is a sense in these passages that the narrator is finally perceiving reality in all its fullness, acknowledging a “contamination” that was always-already present. His use of plural pronouns and feeling of being “one” with his ancestors and “other shapes” suggest that the abyss of darkness and alienage is not so much a torment as it is a reunion, an escape from the futility of human desire. Like his grandmother and uncle Douglas, figures who the narrator had once felt “heightened feelings of repulsion and alienation” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 272) and who also underwent the metamorphosis, the narrator’s dissolution into the sea is an escape from the bounds of time and the *principium individuationis*: “I would never die but would live with those who had lived since before man ever walked the earth” (Lovecraft, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* 274). As Schopenhauer writes, the subject experiencing the sublime almost ceases to become a subject, since the subject will feel itself “the eternal, serene subject of knowing” (*WWR* 1: 205). While the narrator experiences intense disgust at his transformation, this emotion is part and parcel of the “tearing away” from “single individual willing” that Schopenhauer identifies in the sublime in order to ultimately yield “the peace of contemplation” (*WWR* 1: 202). As the sublime evokes a

sense of delight, converting terror to wonder, so too does the sublate impart a sense of “transgressive magnetism” (Korsmeyer 128), converting disgust and nameless horror into what Schopenhauer might call a “state of pure knowing” (*WWR* 1: 202).

The Schopenhauerian revelation the sublate provides invites readers to experience a form of awe and delight while reading Lovecraft’s text by confronting them with the ruination or putrefaction of the nameless narrator’s subjectivity and his simultaneously horrible and ebullient metamorphosis, his egoless apprehension of his body as nothing more than a phenomenal manifestation of will, part of the “struggle of the forms for matter” (*WWR* 1: 153). Obviously, this is not the same as the uplift provided by the Kantian sublime, the subject-affirming delight experienced when subjects marvel at the power of their own minds. But disgust, in the form of the sublate, offers pleasures of its own. As Korsmeyer writes, aesthetic disgust “teases consciousness and the limits of tolerance,” and even while it “remains aversive . . . the knowledge gained by means of it affords enjoyment” (130). For Korsmeyer, the allure of disgust in works of art is tied up with its “elusive significance” (121), and while reflecting on the implications of disgust is not a cause for “joy or happy anticipation,” the thoughts of disintegration it engenders can nonetheless inspire “curiosity, fascination” and “intense absorption,” qualities that she believes lie at the root of aesthetic enjoyment (124). This dissolution of Lovecraft’s narrator – his urge to return to the black, abysmal depths of the primordial sea, his hysterical, gibberish-utterances – suggests a kind of sublate bliss that carries with it the egoless contentment Schopenhauer describes as *Aufhebung*, a nullification of the will-to-live consummated in the moment of its apprehension.

For Schopenhauer, those who are able to fully grasp the truth of their “own inner being” – that is, that individuality exists only in the phenomenal world of representations, which is but the objectification of the will-to-live – become capable of denying the will’s power, something

attainable, Schopenhauer says, by saints and ascetics (*WWR* 1: 383). The narrator's transformation into a Deep One at the end of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* functions as a kind of Schopenhauerian beatification. His metamorphosis is not an escape from the corporeal into some heavenly realm, an ascent from the body's materiality and inevitable decay, but a form of becoming, an exultant acceptance of the universe's monist ontology and an acknowledgment that human beings have always been a part of the world-in-itself in all its weird monstrosity.

In *The Shadow over Innsmouth* – and, indeed, in most of his weird writings – H.P. Lovecraft is engaged in a kind of metaphysical speculation. While he admits that, as far as we know, we are bound by the limits of our imperfect senses, and that science, however rigorous and however advanced, can never give us access to things-in-themselves, he uses weird fiction and the aestheticized affect of disgust to try and conjure something akin to numinous experience, an experience of existence beyond the borders of subjective reality. While, atheist that he is, he insists that we are outgrowing the “benign delusion” offered by religion – the delusion that human beings possess “mystic information-channels apart from the senses” (Lovecraft, *SL* 2: 302) – he is nonetheless engaged in a metaphysical quest, perhaps quixotic, for ultimate reality. Lovecraft believes that art can supply “guesses regarding ultimate reality” by means of “an emotional surge of approximation to the divine comprehension,” a surge created when “a new artistic experience suddenly enlarges our horizon” (*SL* 2: 302). But the dark, pessimistic world that Lovecraft's fiction affectively unveils is not the reassuringly anthropocentric universe of most human religion. Neither the transcendental soul nor the centrality of human beings are affirmed by his grotesque, meaningless cosmos of churning chaos and endless, undifferentiated horror. In this chapter I have argued that Lovecraft's metaphysical musings can be productively described in relation to Schopenhauer's philosophy – that the repulsive, subject-dissolving experience of indifferentiation

experienced by his characters and, perhaps, second-hand by readers, functions to provide a glimpse of something very much like Schopenhauer's version of the thing-in-itself, the will-to-live. This immanent horror courses throughout Lovecraft's weird texts, from the mind-melding cannibals of "The Rats in the Walls" to the diseased Deep Ones of *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, an infection which is everywhere and everything. Lovecraft draws on the aesthetic power of disgust in art to provide a glimmer of this metaphysical malignancy, his characters marionettes dancing on the strings of a blind, idiot puppeteer.

At the end of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer concludes by describing his philosophy not only in relation to Kant but to Spinoza, noting that the German Idealists, frustrated by Kant's limitation on metaphysics, all "cast themselves back on to Spinoza" (644). Schopenhauer, too, relates his own metaphysics to those of Spinoza, but "as the New Testament is to the Old" – for where Spinoza finds, in the "inner nature of the world" a vision of optimism and excellence, "*Deus*" or "Jehovah" (*WWR* 2: 645), Schopenhauer, in contrast, recoils from this vision as from a false deity, comparing his own version of the inner nature of things not to God the Father but to a suffering, crucified Christ – or even the thief on the cross beside him. So it is with Lovecraft and his most important influences, whose works have preoccupied the previous chapters. Even while Poe, Machen, and Blackwood offer up their own versions of the nonhuman world or world-in-itself, even as they exploit some of the same affects and aesthetic potentialities as Lovecraft, their works hint at some saving grace to the oozing horror of being, some glimmer of optimism – the "Heart Divine" of Poe's putrescent cosmos, the ecstatic wonder of Machen's slimy Godhead, the alien, quasi-maternal embrace of Blackwood's rustling, untamed Nature. For Lovecraft, the mysteries of absolute reality may be fascinating, compelling, even perversely delightful in their own dark, peculiar manner, but they are utterly without

consolation. As we voyage with Lovecraft past the works and worlds of his predecessors, past the bounds of good taste, and past the bounds of the human senses into the realm of the unthinkable and the tenebrous reaches of unplumbed space we find a cosmos of endless, illimitable monstrosity, a cosmos that feels irrevocably contaminated.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: The Wisdom of the Unhuman

Weird fiction is profoundly uninterested in many of the things that preoccupy other forms of literature. Though it may contain fascinating characters, as a rule it is largely unconcerned with the mundane anxieties, hopes, or beliefs of ordinary people, with the banalities of everyday life. It has little regard for the accurate representation of contemporary society or its institutions. Though, like all literature, it cannot escape politics or discourse, it is rarely polemical. Sitting queasily between other genres of speculative fiction, it has little truck with the swashbuckling escapism, quasi-medieval nostalgia, or utopian aspirations that animate some of its closest literary relatives. It has little time for precise scientific facts or exactitude. It does not rigorously construct plausible futures or verisimilar pasts; it is neither obsessively extrapolative nor meticulously historical. Unlike its forebear, the Gothic, its strategy is not principally one of psychological projection, of the pathetic fallacy or the uncanny, wherein the contents of the human mind – our traumas, desires, neuroses, and taboos – come to adhere to objects or places. The weird inverts and extends this relationship; in weird fiction the nonhuman seeps into the human, its tendrils inveigling their way past the porous membranes of the self. Weird fiction confronts us with a depiction of reality not just stranger than we might have expected but with a subject – or what remains of a subject – intertwined with forces and beings that seem utterly other. It reveals us as riddled with the alien.

Weird fiction, it should be stressed, is not philosophy: indeed, it is precisely its fictionality, its aesthetic nature, that enables it to communicate ideas which philosophy only abstractly describes. In pursuing a project focused on the particular aesthetic effects produced by works of weird fiction, I have endeavoured to reconcile the emphasis on affect espoused by its authors and readily evident in weird texts themselves with philosophical approaches that think through strange,

speculative explorations of the “Great Outdoors.” In doing so I have tried to avoid some of the critical pitfalls that plague metaphysical readings of the weird: the weird attempt to represent the unrepresentable and so help us to think the unthinkable is undertaken with the aid of a visceral, queasily illuminating mode of apprehension. Ecstasy, bliss, *jouissance*, the abecanny, the perverse sublime, the sublate – weird fiction relies on a version of a peculiar affect that mingles disgust and horror with awe and wonder to impart a sense, however fleeting, of the absolute beyond, the bizarre, often-horrifying reaches of unplumbed space.

In its own strange, indirect fashion, weird fiction functions as a rejoinder to those who decry metaphysical thinking, who suggest we should concern ourselves with the world only as it is revealed by the senses, or who consciously or otherwise promote a perspective that enshrines human beings at the philosophical centre of the universe. The weird dethrones the human, stressing not only the ways in which our perspective is flawed and incomplete but also the power of the nonhuman, its all-encompassing being. This study has been an exercise in a form of weird criticism, blending together things which we might think disparate, mingling the strange aesthetics of the gross-out with metaphysical inquiry, reading pulp fiction alongside philosophy, finding something akin to the sublime or the numinous in worlds of putrescent slime and cannibal monstrosity. I have sought to articulate philosophical insights gleaned from the festering tongues of too-animate corpses or the hungry, myriad mouths of hybrid abominations – the wisdom of the unhuman.

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