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Submissions
n his 1874 *Fortnightly Review* essay ‘A Fragment on Measure for Measure’, Walter Pater takes as his topic a literary work that nineteenth-century critics commonly ignored or disparaged. In his opening paragraph, he characterizes Shakespeare’s comedy as ‘less skilful’, ‘not rais[ed] […] to an equal degree of intensity’, ‘rough and disjointed’, and ‘in contrast with the flawless execution of *Romeo and Juliet*’. But in a signature move, Pater also shifts *Measure for Measure* away from critical disparagement and elevates it to the pinnacle of Shakespeare’s canon. He interprets it as uniquely important and paradigmatic: a work ‘far above the level of all but [Shakespeare’s] own best poetry’ (p. 171). Moreover, Pater takes the drama as an example of what he describes in his essay on *Love’s Labour’s Lost* as ‘those works of art which, though not meant to be very great or imposing, are yet wrought of the choicest material’. Jonathan Bate maintains that this critical reassessment on Pater’s part was unique and unprecedented in its time. Pater, he notes, makes *Measure for Measure* into a central and characteristic, as opposed to a marginal and awkward, Shakespearean play. […] No one hitherto […] had seen the centrality of *Measure for Measure* to the mind of Shakespeare”.

**Thomas Albrecht**

**Walter Pater’s Poetical Justice:**
**Ethics and Form in ‘A Fragment on Measure for Measure’**
Pater defines the centrality of *Measure for Measure* in distinctly ethical terms. The comedy’s importance, he maintains, lies in its epitomizing Shakespeare’s overall ethical vision: ‘the play might well pass for the central expression of [Shakespeare’s] moral judgments’ (p. 171). ‘[I]n its ethics’, he similarly concludes in his final paragraph, *Measure for Measure* ‘is an epitome of Shakespeare’s moral judgments’ (p. 183). Furthermore, the play is for Pater an epitome of not only Shakespeare’s ethics but also Shakespeare’s greatness as a moral artist: ‘*Measure for Measure* […] is hardly less indicative than *Hamlet* even, of Shakespeare’s […] power of moral interpretation’ (p. 173).

Even if *Measure for Measure* was overlooked and underappreciated in the nineteenth century, it is surprising that the striking claims that Pater makes about it have not received much attention from twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics. In his 1906 biography of Pater, A. C. Benson asserts broadly that Pater’s ‘Shakespearian studies do not demand any very close attention’, and scholars of Pater and aestheticism seem largely to have taken his word for it. It is this critical oversight that I wish in part to correct. Following Pater’s argument about Shakespeare, I argue that ‘A Fragment on *Measure for Measure*’ is similarly an epitome of Pater’s own ethical vision, and, by extension, an epitome of Pater’s greatness as a moral critic. In making this argument, I am in some respects guided by Pater himself, who intimates a parallel between the essay, which he calls a fragment, and the play, which he compares to ‘a fragment of life itself’ (p. 170).5

Similar to his definition in ‘A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli’ (1870), which concentrates on the Italian artist’s ethical vision, Pater equates Shakespeare’s ethical vision in *Measure for Measure* particularly and in his work generally foremost with an existential humanism, with Shakespeare’s penetrating insights into human nature in its variety and complexity.6 As he does in Botticelli’s paintings, Pater finds in Shakespeare’s play revelations of human inconsistencies and contradictions, of struggle with external circumstances, of tension between higher and lower impulses, and of the recognition of human mortality. He describes the comedy, or certain elements within it, as ‘impressive, as with the true seal of experience’ (p. 170), as ‘full of what is really tragic in man’s existence’ (p. 171), as ‘lending […] a true human propriety to its strange and unexpected turns of feeling and character’ (p. 171), as dealing ‘with mere human nature’ (p. 173), as a ‘little mirror of existence’ (p. 175), as a depiction of ‘this strange practical paradox of our life’ (p. 175), and as giving ‘utterance to some of the central truths of human
feeling’ (p. 181). For Pater, these existential insights are distinctly ethical insofar as they arise out of Shakespeare’s sympathy with the human inconsistencies and human suffering that he perceives and identifies in *Measure for Measure*. (What Pater calls *sympathy* is what today we would more commonly refer to as *empathy*.) Pater describes the Shakespeare of *Measure for Measure* as a ‘humourist […] who follows with a half-amused but always pitiful sympathy, the various ways of human disposition’ (p. 184); this description recalls his essay on Charles Lamb, in which he similarly refers to Shakespeare’s ‘deeply stirred soul of sympathy’. In addition, he finds Shakespeare’s sympathy for human suffering and mortality also reproduced in some of the characters in *Measure for Measure*: ‘they are capable of many friendships and of a true dignity in danger, giving each other a sympathetic, if transitory, regret—one sorry that another “should be foolishly lost at a game of tick-tack”’ (p. 174).

Yet Pater does not concentrate solely on the sympathies of Shakespeare himself and of his characters; he also focuses on the sympathies of the audience. (In this regard, he tellingly compares Shakespeare’s insights into human nature to ‘the moral judgments of an observer, of one who sits as a spectator’ (pp. 183–84).) The primary ethical effect of *Measure for Measure*, as Pater defines it, is its complementary generation of existential insights and human sympathies in the audience. ‘Then what shall there be on […] our side, the spectators’ side, of this painted screen’, he asks early on in the essay, turning his attention from the characters and setting to the audience, ‘what philosophy of life, what sort of equity?’ (p. 174). In supplementing the question about a ‘philosophy of life’ with the question about a ‘sort of equity’, Pater explicitly correlates an existential with an ethical imperative. He suggests that *Measure for Measure* instils in its audience not only an existential philosophy but also a sense of justice. And the answer he gives in the essay’s final paragraph to his question ‘what sort of equity?’ is sympathy:

the justice [humankind] requires of our hands, or our thoughts, is the recognition of that which the person, in his inmost nature, really is; and as sympathy alone can discover that which really is in matters of feeling and thought, true justice is in its essence a finer knowledge through love. […] It is for this finer justice, a justice based on a more delicate appreciation of the true
conditions of men and things, a true respect of persons in our estimate of actions, that the people of Measure for Measure cry out as they pass before us [...]. (p. 183)

In this passage, true existential insight (‘the recognition of that which the person, in his inmost nature, really is’, an ‘appreciation of the true conditions of men and things’) is made possible by having a sympathetic disposition towards other persons and towards humankind more generally. Such appreciation is in turn also the foundation for further, deeper sympathy. The ethical result of this bilateral interaction is what Pater characterizes as a ‘true justice’, a ‘finer justice’. It is this kind of justice, according to Pater, that Measure for Measure both elicits from and enables in its audience.9

Pater suggests that the ethics of Measure for Measure is a ‘true justice’ and a ‘finer justice’ because its moral judgements are grounded in a ‘finer knowledge’ of human beings and of their complicated feelings and situations, ‘a more delicate appreciation of the true conditions of men and things, a true respect of persons in our [moral] estimate of [their] actions’. According to Pater, the play acknowledges the difficulty of attaining such a ‘finer knowledge’ by dramatizing the difficulty of truly understanding human thoughts and feelings. The comedy illuminates its characters ‘by the light of a philosophy which dwells much on what is complex and subtle in our nature’ (p. 171). As Germaine D’Hangest puts this point, ‘Dans Measure for Measure, nous dit Pater, la créature humaine paraît échapper à toute définition et presque à toute connaissance, tant elle recèle de profondeurs mystérieuses pour elle-même comme pour les autres, tant elle est à la merci des circonstances qui peuvent à chaque instant [...] mettre au jour des aspects insoupçonnés de sa nature’ (In Measure for Measure, Pater tells us, the human creature appears to elude all definition and virtually all understanding, both in that it conceals mysterious depths from itself and from others, and in that it is at the mercy of circumstances that at any moment may reveal unsuspected aspects of its own nature).10 For Pater, both Shakespeare’s and his audience’s recognition of human complexity and obscurity correlates with their recognition of the difficulty of ethically judging human beings and their actions. In Measure for Measure, he writes, ‘the very intricacy and subtlety of the moral world itself, the difficulty of seizing the true relations of so complex a material, the difficulty of just judgment, of judgment that shall not be unjust, are the lessons conveyed’ (p. 182).
In Pater’s view, the ‘difficulty of just judgment’ is not simply an obstacle that our moral judgements must overcome. Rather, it is itself inherently a form of ethics, and ultimately a more just form of ethics. What makes it more just is precisely its acknowledging of difficulty, its recognition of the complexity and obscurity of human beings and relationships. As Albert J. Farmer puts it: ‘The moral the play points rests, then, on the acceptance of the intricacy of the moral world, on the recognition of the difficulty of judging rightly’.11 In Pater’s eyes, the acceptance and recognition of intricacy and difficulty to which Farmer refers makes Shakespeare’s ethics a higher ethics, a ‘true’ and ‘finer’ form of justice. It elevates those ethics above and beyond two alternate, easier and lesser, conceptions of ethics that are also evoked within Measure for Measure. One of these is the conception of ethics in legal terms, as law or principle; this is an important theme in the play, especially in the character Angelo. Pater refers to Shakespeare’s ‘true justice of which Angelo knows nothing, because it lies for the most part beyond the limits of any acknowledged law’ (p. 183). The second alternate conception of ethics is what Pater calls morality: the definition of ethics as moralism, as a clear-cut moral or lesson to be inculcated. Pater finds in Measure for Measure ‘traces of the old “morality”, that early form of dramatic composition which had for its function the inculcating of some moral theme, [...] some rough-and-ready lesson’ (p. 182). By specifically referring not only to a ‘just judgment’ but also to a ‘judgment that shall not be unjust’ as the play’s true ethical lesson, Pater alludes to potential injustices that, according to Shakespeare, may inhere within both these two alternate conceptions of ethics.

What Pater terms Shakespeare’s ‘true’ and ‘finer’ justice he also calls poetical justice. He finds this latter concept evoked in the play’s title, Measure for Measure, which he reads as ‘expressly suggesting the subject of poetical justice’ (p. 183). The phrase poetical justice commonly refers to the idea of receiving a fitting or deserved retribution for one’s actions, an idea that is, as Pater says, evoked by Shakespeare’s title. Poetical justice, the phrase Pater actually uses, means—according to the Oxford English Dictionary—an ideal justice in distribution of rewards and punishments supposed to be appropriate in a poem or other work of imagination. Such an ideal justice is also suggested in the play, most obviously in Duke Vincentio’s culminating allocations of rewards and punishments to various characters in Act V.
For Pater, however, poetical justice also signifies something else that has specifically to do with poetry and poetry’s unique effects on readers and listeners. He finds a poetical form of justice realized not only in the plot outcome of *Measure for Measure*, or in the judgements of an individual character such as the Duke, but also in the minds and judgements of the play’s readers and audience:

The action of the play, like the action of life itself for the keener observer, develops in us the conception of this poetical justice, and the yearning to realise it [...]. This true justice is dependent on just those finer appreciations which poetry cultivates in us the power of making, those peculiar valuations of action and its effect which poetry actually requires.

(pp. 183–84)

In the second of these sentences, Pater shifts from speaking about the ethics of *Measure for Measure* to speaking about the ethics of poetry more generally. The latter sentence suggests that ‘poetical’ or ‘true’ justice is a unique province of poetry, of works such as *Measure for Measure*. But unlike the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Pater associates poetical justice not with the distribution of appropriate rewards and punishments, but with ethical effects on the minds of readers. Plays like *Measure for Measure*, and poetry more broadly, develop an ethical disposition ‘in us’ by teaching and obligating us to see individual persons and things more keenly, to appreciate them more finely, and to judge them more particularly. In other words, poetry hones ‘in us’ that aforementioned ‘finer knowledge’, that ‘more delicate appreciation’, that ‘true respect’ of diverse persons, things, and actions. Conversely, we are ethically engaged and empowered by this nuance and careful discrimination that poetry distinctively, even uniquely, ‘requires’ of us and also ‘cultivates in us’. This engagement and empowerment of our minds is the realization of the poetical justice for which poetry, according to Pater, develops in us both a concept and a yearning.

The correlation of poetical justice with poetry, and with poetry’s unique and powerful ethical effects on its readers, is in essence how the few critics who have paid some attention to ‘*Measure for Measure*’ have understood Pater’s idea of poetical justice. I contend, however, that there is more to his idea. The word poetical derives etymologically from the Greek *poiesis*, which means production,
composition, or the act of making something. Not surprisingly, Pater pays close attention in his essay to form, to the textual and material qualities of *Measure for Measure*, to the qualities of which, as a text and as a play, it is composed. But more surprisingly, he brings these formal qualities into a direct relationship with the question of ethics. In the lines that follow his aforementioned question as to the ‘sort of equity’ *Measure for Measure* inspires in its audience, he directs our attention, and describes Shakespeare directing his reader’s attention, to the materiality, and more particularly to the tactility and visibility, of the play’s characters, actions, and settings: ‘Stimulated to read more carefully by Shakespeare’s own profounder touches, the reader will note the vivid reality, the subtle interchange of light and shade, the strongly contrasted characters of this group of persons, passing across the stage so quickly’ (p. 174). As an implicit response to Pater’s question about equity, these lines prompt us to ask: In what sense for Pater is an attention to form, to light and shade and contrasts, a form of ethical attention? In what ways, we might also ask, is formalism a possible basis for equity?

Pater makes explicit in ‘*Measure for Measure*’ that attention to form, in art as in life, is not a purely aesthetic appreciation. For him, to reiterate, such attention is also an ethical mode. Conversely, ethical attention necessarily realizes itself as an attention to form. Pater insists that the ethical nature of any character, situation, or action is inseparable from the specific, unique material forms as which that character, situation, or action presents itself to us, and specifically to our senses, and as which we apprehend the character, situation, or action. And he insists that any ethical judgement we make of a character or situation or action, any equity or justice we attempt to render it, is similarly inseparable from the specific material forms as which it presents itself to us, and as which we apprehend it. *Measure for Measure*, Pater asserts, draws our attention to this crucial point. The play’s ‘ethical interest’, he writes, ‘in accordance with that artistic law which demands the predominance of form everywhere over the mere matter or subject handled, is not to be wholly separated from the special circumstances, necessities, embarrassments, of these particular dramatic persons’ (p. 182). By insisting that ethical judgement is inseparable from the characters’ ‘special circumstances, necessities, embarrassments’, he does not mean simply that judgement must be relativist, that any judgement of the characters needs to situate them within their various outer and inner, social and psychological contexts. He also means that the ethical nature of the characters and, by extension, the play’s actions and
situations are effectively inseparable from the singularity and individuality, the materiality and physicality, of those characters, actions, and situations. (The word embarrass, it is worth noting, is rooted in medieval Portuguese and Spanish words for cord or leash, and etymologically suggests a material, physical impediment. The word *circumstance* is rooted in the Latin *circumstantia*, which literally means a surrounding material condition, while the word *necessity* is rooted in the Latin *necessitas*, which means, among other things, a bond or tie between persons. Here as elsewhere, Pater is acutely sensitive to such etymologies.)

My contention therefore is that what Pater here calls an ‘artistic law’ (‘the predominance of form everywhere over the mere matter or subject handled’)—that law he will go on to lay down so paradigmatically in his essay ‘The School of Giorgione’ (1877)—is also for him an ethical law. Ethical truths, judgements, and insights are for him inseparable from the material forms that they take. They are not a ‘matter’ or ‘subject’ that exists ideally, abstractly, and separately from this or that given form in which it manifests itself. This formalist conception, according to Pater, elevates Shakespeare’s ethics above the aforementioned rival conceptions of ethics as ‘acknowledged law’ or principle, or as ‘moral theme’ or ‘rough-and-ready lesson’. The two latter conceptions define ethics in extrinsic terms, as a separate entity (a general principle, code, theory, law, moral, or lesson) that from the outside bears in some way on the specific characters, actions, and situations in the play. By contrast, Shakespeare, according to Pater, defines ethics in intrinsic terms—in formal terms, that is, as the very physical and material forms in which he presents to us the play’s persons, actions, and situations, and through which we apprehend them. Such forms include ‘the strongly contrasted characters’, their ‘special circumstances, necessities, embarrassments’, and ‘the subtle interchange of light and shade’. Bate approximates this intrinsic conception when he asserts that, in Pater’s view, ‘the ethical vision is shaped by the very structure of the play’. I would add that, for Pater, the play’s ethical vision, and also our ethical responses to it, are both shaped not only by the play’s structure but also by the very physicality and materiality of its forms.

For a specific example of Pater’s correlation in *Measure for Measure* of ethics with form, take his following description of the character Isabella: ‘it is Isabella with her grand imaginative diction, and that poetry laid upon the “prone and speechless dialect” there is in mere youth itself, who gives utterance to the equity, the finer judgments of the piece on men and things’ (p. 179). The reference in these
lines is to Act I, scene 2, where Claudio urges Lucio to engage his sister Isabella to intervene on his behalf with Angelo, the deputy ruler of Vienna, on whose orders he has been condemned to death for fornication:

Acquaint her with the danger of my state;  
Implore her in my voice that she make friends  
To the strict deputy; bid herself assay him.  
I have great hope in that, for in her youth  
There is a prone and speechless dialect  
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art  
When she will play with reason and discourse,  
And well she can persuade.\(^{16}\)

In these lines, Claudio imagines that the ‘prone and speechless dialect’ of Isabella’s youth, and her persuasive ‘reason and discourse’ might seamlessly work in tandem to release him from prison and save him from death. For his part, Pater is aware that in Isabella’s interview with Angelo, her ‘prone and speechless dialect’ will inadvertently subvert the higher aims of her ‘reason and discourse’, to unintended inimical consequences. Although Pater says that Isabella ‘gives utterance’ to the play’s equity, to its ‘finer’ ethical judgement of persons and things, such equity does not lie for him (as it does for Claudio) in the joint appeal made by her words and her youthfulness. Neither does it lie in any verbal or non-verbal statement made by Isabella, or by any other character in the play. What Pater describes as the ‘utterance’ of the play’s equity—‘the finer judgment of the piece on men and things’—is not a statement at all. Instead, it is the juxtaposition of (and the possible tension between) Isabella’s grand, eloquent words and her youthful body, and of whatever each of them might signify in the play. Pater pointedly declines to paraphrase the play’s equity and judgement, to reduce it to an extrinsic lesson or moral. He simply places the two things alongside each other, as he maintains Shakespeare has placed them. And, tellingly, Pater frames each in explicitly formal terms, as formal elements. He does not refer to the content, argument, or message of Isabella’s words, to the high moral ideals through which she appeals to Angelo, for instance, but rather refers to her ‘utterance’ and her ‘diction’. Moreover, picking up Claudio’s metaphor, Pater compares Isabella’s youthful body to a ‘dialect’ and to ‘poetry’. For Pater, then, the equity of \textit{Measure for Measure}, its ‘finer judgments’,
realize themselves, and are apprehended by us, in elements of form, as we are said to hear them in Isabella’s utterances, diction, and dialect.

Pater makes an analogous argument about the correlation of ethics with form in his essay ‘The Character of the Humourist: Charles Lamb’, published in the *Fortnightly* four years after the piece on *Measure for Measure*. As the word *character* in its title suggests, this essay shares with the latter essay an explicit interest in ethics. Here, Pater maintains the following view of Lamb’s moral vision and legacy as a writer:

> working ever close to the concrete, to the details, great or small, of actual things, books, persons, and with no part of them blurred to his vision by the intervention of mere abstract theories, he has reached an enduring moral effect also, in a sort of boundless sympathy. Unoccupied, as he might seem, with great matters, he is in immediate contact with what is real, especially in its caressing littleness, that littleness in which there is much of the whole woeful heart of things, and meets it more than half-way with a perfect understanding of it. What sudden, unexpected touches of pathos in him!—bearing witness how the sorrow of humanity, the *Weltschmerz*, the constant aching of its wounds, is ever present with him […]\(^\text{18}\)

Pater highlights Lamb’s ‘boundless sympathy’, his ‘perfect understanding’ of the ‘whole woeful heart of things’, much as he similarly highlights Shakespeare’s great sympathy and understanding in ‘*Measure for Measure*’. And just as he says of the moral effect of *Measure for Measure* on its audience, Pater suggests here that the ‘enduring moral effect’ of Lamb’s work lies in eliciting from its readers a ‘boundless sympathy’ that approximates Lamb’s own sympathy, his acute sense of the sorrow of humankind.

But beyond these two parallels, Pater also intimates that the ethics (the ‘enduring moral effect’) of Lamb’s works, their sympathies and the sympathies they elicit in us, remains inseparable from the specific physical, material forms that Lamb apprehends in the world. These are the forms Lamb presents to us in his writing, and which we in turn apprehend through his texts. Lamb’s sympathies and our sympathies, Pater maintains, are always in one or another way formally
and materially mediated, rather than existing as abstract moral doctrines or imperatives. He describes Lamb as ‘working ever close to the concrete, to the details, great or small, of actual things, books, persons’. He maintains that it is by means of these concrete details—the things and books and persons that Lamb sees and shows to us—that he ‘has reached an enduring moral effect […] a sort of boundless sympathy’ in himself and ourselves. Pater alternately describes Lamb as being ‘in immediate contact with what is real, especially in its caressing littleness, that littleness in which there is much of the whole woeful heart of things’. In this description, too, Lamb apprehends, and teaches us to apprehend, the ‘whole woeful heart of things’ through ‘what is real, especially in its caressing littleness’. Like Shakespeare’s ethics, then, Lamb’s ethics is for Pater materialist and intrinsic, rather than abstract and extrinsic. Pater maintains that Lamb’s sympathy is entirely founded on and mediated by visible, tangible concrete details, ‘with no part of [those details] blurred to his vision by the intervention of mere abstract theories’. Moreover, he characterizes Lamb as ‘Unoccupied […] with great matters’. In these descriptions, the phrases ‘mere abstract theories’ and ‘great matters’ presumably refer to idealist philosophies and to what I am calling extrinsic conceptions of ethics.

In ‘Measure for Measure’, Pater similarly suggests that if ethical truths, problems, and dilemmas in life and in art are always formally and materially mediated, then so are our ethical recognitions, feelings, and judgements. ‘[I]n Measure for Measure’, he writes, ‘Shakespeare has directed the attention of sympathetic readers along certain channels of mediation beyond the immediate scope of his work’ (p. 173). These ‘certain channels of mediation’ at first glance seem to refer to the material things by which our sympathies and moral responses are mediated, things such as Shakespeare’s poetry; the objects, sights, sounds, and movements on the stage; the characters’ necessities, circumstances, and embarrassments; Isabella’s diction, dialect, and utterances; the subtle interchange of light and shade; the strongly contrasted characters. But the qualifying phrase ‘beyond the immediate scope of his work’ makes it explicit that Pater is also talking about something outside the work: namely, Shakespeare’s reader or audience. This additional prepositional phrase suggests that ‘the channels of mediation’ refer as much to the reader’s or audience’s feelings, attentions, and sympathies as to anything in the text or on the stage. As Pater makes plain, ‘we have in [Measure for Measure] a real example of that sort of writing which is sometimes described as suggestive, and which […]’
brings into distinct shape the reader's own half-developed imaginings' (p. 173). This sentence pointedly describes the reader's imaginings (including presumably her moral imaginings) as being brought ‘into distinct shape’.

Pater also suggests in ‘Measure for Measure’ that, if the ethical dimension of a person, action, or situation is necessarily given to us as formal, material objects or elements, the ethical judgements we make in response to those persons, actions, and situations are effectively much like aesthetic responses and judgements. Which is to say, they are uncertain, unpredictable, and singular. They are, as Pater puts in the Preface to The Renaissance, ‘each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind’. Furthermore, they are indeterminate and free—free, for instance, from moral laws, principles, and systems, and from what Pater in his essay on Lamb calls ‘abstract theories’. D’Hangest uses the phrase ‘une justice esthétique’ (an aesthetic justice) for the kind of ethics Pater finds in Measure for Measure, as an implied synonym for what Pater himself calls a poetical justice, a true justice, and a ‘finer’ justice. In accounting for this phrase, D’Hangest maintains that Shakespeare’s moral vision, as Pater interprets it, ‘reposerait sur les mêmes intuitions dont se nourrit la poésie, sur des intuitions semblables à celles que peut développer en nous l’œuvre d’art en dehors de tout propos didactique’ (rests on the same intuitions as those that poetry lives on, on intuitions that are similar to those that the work of art can develop within us, beyond any didactic aim). According to D’Hangest, ethical judgements and responses, the equity we attempt to render to a person or thing or situation, are fundamentally intuitions, in much the same way that aesthetic responses to particular works of poetry and art are intuitions. Both sets of intuitions are ‘developed’ (Pater’s own word is ‘cultivated’) within us by the formal, material qualities of the artworks, texts, persons, things, and situations that we see and read and hear. Neither aesthetic nor ethical intuition is bound by any outside determination, by what D’Hangest calls any ‘propos didactique’ (didactic aim). D’Hangest takes aesthetic responses as a kind of prototype or analogue for ethical responses. They are a model for ethical responses as Pater conceives them—for our ethical responses to the material forms in which we encounter what Pater calls ‘the very intricacy and subtlety of the moral world itself’. (Here again, Pater’s deliberate diction indicates his materialist conception of the ethical sphere. The word intricate is derived from the Latin intricare, to entangle, and the Latin tricae, which can mean toys or trifles. The word subtle, meanwhile, is rooted in the Latin subtilis, which among other things signifies what is fine in texture, composed of
fine particles, and marked by delicate precision or fineness of detail.) D’Hangest’s
concept of an aesthetic justice, with its emphasis on intuitions and indeterminate
responses, should not be simply taken as identical with Pater’s conception of a
poetical justice. Rather, it usefully complements that conception, and specifically
that conception’s evocation of poiesis. In particular, D’Hangest’s emphasis on the
essential subjectivity of our ethical responses complements Pater’s own emphasis
on the material, textured, manufactured objectivity of the persons, things, actions,
and situations to which we respond.

* * *

Although he does not say so explicitly, in writing about Shakespeare in ‘Measure
for Measure’ Pater is also obliquely writing about himself. In defining Shakespeare’s
ethical vision in Measure for Measure and beyond as a ‘poetical’, ‘true’, and ‘finer’
form of justice, he is not merely interpreting Shakespeare’s text. By commenting
on Shakespeare, he articulates his own correlative ethical vision. It is in this
sense that I interpret his essay as a central expression or epitome of his moral
judgement, in much the same way as Pater says he reads Measure for Measure as an
epitome of Shakespeare’s moral judgement. As R.V. Johnson remarks, ‘the moral
outlook which [Pater] divines in Measure for Measure is one which we know to be
particularly congenial to Pater himself’. Johnson defines this congenial outlook
as a ‘plea for charity in moral judgments’ and as ‘a dramatic exposition of the
[Gospel] text, “Judge not that ye be not judged”’. Johnson is right to say that
Shakespeare’s moral outlook as Pater defines it, and Pater’s own moral outlook, are
congenial. And he is right to say that charity is an important ethical value for Pater
(although charity is also not wholly synonymous with sympathy, the word Pater
actually uses). The line he quotes from Matthew 7:1 invokes the idea of poetic
justice, of a fitting retribution: if we judge others, we must expect to be judged in
turn. But Johnson appears to understand Pater’s adoption of this idea foremost as
an appeal to moral leniency: we should not judge others, so as not to be judged in
turn. As I hope to have shown, there is more to Pater’s moral outlook, and more
to the parallel between his essay and Measure for Measure, than a plea for charity.

In their respective commentaries on ‘Measure for Measure’, both D’Hangest
and Denis Donoghue interpret the essay biographically. They see it as Pater’s
defensive reaction to either one or both of the two major scandals that affected him
in 1873 and 1874. The earlier scandal is the February 1873 publication of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and the subsequent critical backlash against the book and against Pater himself. The later scandal is the controversial disclosure in 1874 of Pater’s relationship with Oxford undergraduate William M. Hardinge.\(^{22}\) (Pater scholars have generally assumed that one or both of these controversies accounted for the principle reason that Benjamin Jowett, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, decided to pass over Pater for a University Proctorship in early 1874.) Donoghue concludes that the essay on *Measure for Measure* reveals that as a consequence of these scandals, Pater ‘set a new course for his professional life’, ‘kept his head down’, and ‘confined his attention to safe subjects’.\(^{23}\) I disagree with Donoghue’s interpretation of the essay, and disagree more generally with what Matthew Kaiser has critically characterized as the ‘retreat hypothesis’, in which scholars such as Donoghue map the trajectory of Pater’s oeuvre subsequent to *The Renaissance* as a corrective swerve away from his controversial early texts, topics, and ideas.\(^{24}\)

For his part, D’Hangest argues that Pater’s rehabilitation of the critically disparaged *Measure for Measure* is effectively also a rehabilitation of himself and his ideas in the wake of hostile critical responses to *The Renaissance*. The essay on *Measure for Measure*, he writes, ‘trouve visiblement sa place dans une méditation par laquelle, sans renoncer aux attitudes de l’esthétisme, il s’efforce de les humaniser en leur découvrant des résonances morales’ (clearly has its place in a meditation that does not renounce aestheticism as much as try to humanize it by revealing its moral resonances).\(^{25}\) D’Hangest is correct, I think, in concluding that ‘*Measure for Measure*’ is not Pater’s defensive renunciation of his earlier ideas and topics from *The Renaissance*. He is right that rather than renouncing those ideas and topics, Pater is revealing the moral resonances that inhere within them and that, he implies, have inhered within them from the very beginning.

Thus ‘*Measure for Measure*’ is indeed an epitome of Pater’s broader ethical vision. The essay discloses how the moral element in Pater’s work transcends commonplace Victorian conceptions of ethics as ‘acknowledged law’, ‘moral theme’, ‘rough-and-ready lesson’, or ‘abstract theories’. It also transcends what D’Hangest defines as sympathy and humanism, and what Johnson defines as an appeal for charity and moral leniency. It even transcends recognizing the great variety and complexity of human beings and situations, and consequently recognizing the difficulty of morally judging those beings and situations. Beyond
the terms of humanism and sympathy, beyond the terms of complexity and
difficulty, Pater defines his ethics in ‘Measure for Measure’ in formalist terms, as
what he calls a ‘poetical’ justice. He demonstrates that the ethical dimension of
any person, action, or situation, as well as the ethical dimension of any moral
recognition, response, or judgement on our part, necessarily inheres in the
specific material forms as which we apprehend those persons, actions, situations,
and recognitions, and through which we make our responses and judgements.
The ‘ethical interest’, he writes, ‘is not to be wholly separated from the special
circumstances’. As I have demonstrated, this is less an ethical relativism than
an ethical formalism, one founded on ‘that artistic law which demands the
predominance of form everywhere over the mere matter or subject handled’.

Like Shakespeare’s power of moral imagination, Pater’s correlative power lies
in his ‘true’ and ‘finer’ existential and ethical insights into human nature, as well
as in his insights into the unique capacity of art and poetry to instil sympathy
and complex moral appreciation in the minds of viewers and readers. Both of
these recognitions Pater deliberately models on Shakespeare’s own. But beyond
them, Pater’s authority as a moral critic lies in his radical, arguably unprecedented
understanding of the nature of ethics itself. For what he teaches us in ‘Measure for
Measure’ is not only that powerful ethical insights inhere within literary works like
Measure for Measure and within our aesthetic responses to them. He also reveals to
us a formal, ‘poetical’ dimension that inheres objectively within our ethical insights
and judgements, dilemmas and predicaments, equities and positions.

Tulane University
talbrech@tulane.edu

NOTES
1 Walter Pater, ‘Measure for Measure’, in Appreciations, with an Essay on Style (Evanston: Northwestern
University Press, 1987), pp. 170–84 (p. 170). All references to Pater’s essay will be to this edition.
All further page references will be given parenthetically in the body of the text. ‘A Fragment on
Measure for Measure’ was originally published in the Fortnightly Review, 16 (1874), 652–58, and
included under the abbreviated title ‘Measure for Measure’ in Appreciations (1889). In this article, I
refer to the essay under its abbreviated title. On the biographical background of the essay in Pater’s
1865 trip to Pisa with Charles L. Shadwell, see Michael Levey, The Case of Walter Pater (London:
Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 154; and Denis Donoghue, Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls


6 In the essay ‘A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli’, included under the abbreviated title ‘Sandro Botticelli’ in Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873), Pater maintains that Botticelli’s interest as an artist is ‘with men and women, in their mixed and uncertain condition’ and that Botticelli’s ‘morality is all sympathy; and it is this sympathy, conveying into his work somewhat more than is usual of the true complexion of humanity, which makes him, visionary as he is, so forcible a realist’. See Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 39–48 (pp. 43–44).


8 Pater’s reference in the quotation is to Act I, scene 2 of Measure for Measure, in which Lucio plans to appeal to Isabella’s compassion on behalf of her brother Claudio, who has been arrested and sentenced to death for breaking Vienna’s newly reinstated laws against fornication.


11 Farmer, Walter Pater as a Critic of English Literature, p. 22.


14 ‘The School of Giorgione’ was originally published 1877 in the *Fortnightly Review*, three years after the essay on *Measure for Measure*, and included in the third, 1888 edition and subsequent editions of *The Renaissance*. See Walter Pater, ‘The School of Giorgione’, *The Renaissance*, ed. by Hill, pp. 102–22. In the phrase I quote from ‘Measure for Measure’, Pater anticipates the opening pages of the later essay, in which he expounds in greater detail on the idea that the defining, essential element of any given work of art is its form, more than its subject matter (pp. 102–04). In ‘The School of Giorgione’, Pater goes on to say that for our aesthetic responses to a given artwork, the respective roles of that work’s form and subject matter, the two ‘constituent elements of the composition’, are inseparable and ‘so welded together, that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect’ (p. 109). In the essay on *Measure for Measure*, I am arguing in this paper, Pater similarly insists that an artwork’s ethical composition and ethical effects on viewers and readers inextricably weld together form and matter.


17 As he had with the essay on *Measure for Measure*, Pater included the essay on Lamb in *Appreciations*, under the abbreviated title ‘Charles Lamb’, in the first section of the book dedicated to English Romanticism, alongside the essays on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.


23 Donoghue, Walter Pater, p. 66.


misrepresentation is a recurring theme in the history or narrative of Pater’s critical reception. Beginning with Oscar Wilde, whose 1891 *Intentions* offered the first fully formed account or, if you will, defense of Pater’s textual practice, Pater specialists have come to regard misrepresentation in Pater to be a conscious strategy—rhetorical, artful, at times political, misrepresentation as intervention or resistance. The critical literature articulates three primary activities in support of which misrepresentation functions in Pater: 1) Pater is participating in an ongoing contemporary discourse in defense of criticism as a fine art;\(^1\) 2) Pater is theorizing and enacting a particular method of historical analysis, what Carolyn Williams has described as ‘aesthetic historicism’;\(^2\) or Matthew Potolsky, ‘decadent historiography’;\(^3\) 3) Pater is challenging or complicating ideas of textual authority, and protesting against the increasing specialization and professionalization of literary studies.\(^4\) My test case for reconsidering the function of misrepresentation in Pater is ‘Sir Thomas Browne’, first published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* (May 1886) and collected in *Appreciations* (1889). In the course of my analysis, I will attempt a kind of crude taxonomy of various types of misrepresentation in the essay, representative, I believe, of Pater’s practice throughout his career, early to late. But my primary
focus will be two surprising, even outrageous, acts of misattribution committed, like so many of Pater’s misrepresentations, for the pleasure of a specialized audience and hidden from the view of the vast majority of readers. Pater’s winking delivery of misrepresentation, I suggest, with its incongruities and provocations, works to ironize his critical performance, offering intervals of play that at once refuse traditional seriousness and raise serious issues.

In something of a delicious irony, Christopher Ricks, in his infamous attack on Pater’s ‘misquotation’ problem, will lead us to the first of these misattributions. Ricks recites a litany of misquotation by Pater—mostly of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Wordsworth—but his larger point is to denigrate Pater for rewriting authors so that they say Paterian things in Paterian fashion. At one point, however, Ricks singles out two quotations in Pater, including one from ‘Sir Thomas Browne’, that he asserts stand in opposition to misquotation. For the ‘two most important quotations—as against misquotations—in Pater are the following, and […] they are built upon the same syntactical turn […]’ (p. 402). The phrase, ‘as against misquotations’ is somewhat enigmatic; the real point of the passage is to warn readers that statements by Pater that include the favorite Paterian periphrasis—‘is but’ or ‘does but’ or ‘will be but’—are almost always ‘cunning constrictions of the truth’. ‘Pater, mild and obdurate as only a lover of the relative spirit can be, needs this turn because it is uncoercive in tone while being fiercely exclusive in substance’ (p. 403). But in making the point, Ricks plainly singles out the two quotations ‘as against misquotation’. This is the line from ‘Browne’, as Ricks gives it: ‘that long quiet life…in which “all existence”, as he [Browne] says, “had been but food for contemplation”’ (p. 403). As Ricks notes, the antecedent of ‘he’ is indeed Browne. Pater is characterizing Browne’s relation to the turbulent times in which he lived undisturbed ‘through that long quiet life (ending at last on the day himself had predicted, as if at the moment he had willed) in which “all existence,” as he says, “had been but food for contemplation”’ (p. 132). But of all the thousands of quotations in Pater from which Ricks could select to stand ‘against misquotation’, he has chosen what is, in fact, a radical misquotation. For the quoted phrase, ‘all existence had been but food for contemplation’, is nowhere in Browne but is instead an astonishing misattribution of text lifted from the Encyclopedia Britannica, specifically the anonymous entry on Sir Thomas Browne from the now-famous ninth edition. The entry appears in volume four, published in 1878, eight years before the publication of Pater’s essay: ‘Deeply speculative, imbued
with the Platonic mysticism which taught him to look upon this world as only the image, the shadow of an invisible system, he regarded the whole of experience but as food for contemplation’ (p. 390). Pater has slightly modified the quotation, and attributes the words to Browne himself, the very subject of his literary portrait. Elsewhere in the Browne essay, Pater misattributes another passage from the same encyclopedia essay, strongly suggesting that these misrepresentations are no accident. I will take both of them up in more detail later in my discussion. But I want first to provide a broader account of quotation and misquotation in the essay, as well as some introductory remarks, given that ‘Sir Thomas Browne’ is not one of Pater’s most frequently read pieces.

Pater’s primary source for his composition is the 1835–1836 four-volume edition of Browne edited by Simon Wilkin, recognized, in the words of Geoffrey Keynes (whose own edition of Browne was published a century later), ‘as one of the best edited books in the English language’ (I, viii). The first volume of the Wilkin edition consists wholly of memoir and letters and includes Samuel Johnson’s 1756 *Life of Sir Thomas Browne*, as well as Wilkin’s own ‘Supplementary Memoir’, and then a great many letters divided into ‘Domestic’ and ‘Miscellaneous’ correspondence. Pater quotes extensively from these letters and relies on Johnson’s *Life* and the Wilkin ‘Supplementary Memoir’ for much information.

The Wilkin edition represents the greatest achievement to emerge from the long nineteenth century’s preoccupation with Browne. As Daichi Ishikawa has recently detailed, English critics from Samuel Johnson through to Edmund Gosse in the early twentieth century formed a ‘complex intellectual network’ around Browne—the seventeenth-century physician, metaphysician, scientist, naturalist, antiquarian, and essayist—thereby creating a powerful legend of Browne as an idiosyncratic genius, creator, and keeper of a singular and strange museum of curiosities. Pater’s essay is squarely in line with this tradition. Like so many of the treatments of Browne before him, Pater portrays Browne as a humorist characterized by insatiable curiosity. Pater rehearses a number of other typical conclusions and gestures from previous commentaries on Browne—emphasizing Browne’s ‘quaintness’, referring to his belief in witches and witchcraft, relating the legend of Browne’s father, like the father of Origen of Alexandria, kissing the breast of his sleeping child to welcome the Holy Ghost, celebrating the concluding paragraph of *The Garden of Cyrus*, and so on.
Yet, Pater’s essay is a particularly rich contribution to the nineteenth-century discourse on Browne—sophisticated, learned, an intellectually dense and more accomplished treatment of the seventeenth-century figure than that afforded to him by any of Pater’s predecessors or contemporaries. Pater deftly historicizes Browne’s work as an essayist and prose stylist, not only in relation to the English tradition (referring to at least eighteen English authors, from Hooker and Hobbes to Thackeray and Blake), but to the literary traditions of France and Germany as well. The magisterial, carefully revised opening paragraph projects enormous confidence and mastery.

English prose literature towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the hands of Dryden and Locke, was becoming, as that of France had become at an earlier date, a matter of design and skilled practice, highly conscious of itself as an art, and, above all, correct. Up to that time it had been, on the whole, singularly informal and unprofessional, and by no means the literature of the “man of letters,” as we understand him. Certain great instances there had been of literary structure or architecture—The Ecclesiastical Polity, The Leviathan—but for the most part that earlier prose literature is eminently occasional, closely determined by the eager practical aims of contemporary politics and theology, or else due to a man’s own native instinct to speak because he cannot help speaking. Hardly aware of the habit, he likes talking to himself; and when he writes (still in undress) he does but take the “friendly reader” into his confidence. The type of this literature, obviously, is not Locke or Gibbon, but, above all others, Sir Thomas Browne; as Jean Paul is a good instance of it in German literature, always in its developments so much later than the English; and as the best instance of it in French literature, in the century preceding Browne, is Montaigne, from whom indeed, in a great measure, all those tentative writers, or essayists, derive. (pp. 127–28)

Pater introduces Browne as a culmination of that early English prose, still in its state of undress, before the advent of neoclassical correctness represented by
Dryden and Locke. In effect, Pater is working in the Browne essay, along with several other essays collected in Appreciations, to delineate the English literary essay tradition, and his approach to English literary historiography is always in relation to and comparison with the modern European literary tradition. Pater’s reference to French neoclassicism is an allusion to the influence of Françoise de Malherbe, court poet to Louis XIII, and to Jean Louis Guez de Balzac, and recalls an earlier reference to the ‘school of Malherbe’ in ‘Joachim du Bellay’.14 In the first of several references to Montaigne, Pater alludes to his Essais (1580, 1595), which founded the essay as a genre of prose literature. The allusion to Jean Paul, pen name of the German Romantic novelist and humorist, Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, evokes the capricious quality of his work and its strong engagement with the reader, and points also to the relative absence in the German tradition prior to Jean Paul of such an unusual prose stylist. Later in the Browne essay, Pater invokes Madame Rambouillet and the Paris salon that prefigured the French Academy. In the course of his analysis, Pater contrasts Browne’s easy religious faith with Pascal’s difficult religious pilgrimage. Browne’s work as a naturalist Pater reads in relation to the eighteenth-century French naturalist and stylist, Buffon, and his forty-four-volume Histoire Naturelle; Browne’s antiquarian study he compares to the French historian and poet, Claude Guichard and his 1581 book on diverse burial customs. Gowan Dawson has detailed how, in his comments on Browne’s belief in witches and superstition, Pater aligns himself with Huxley and Tyndall and other scientific naturalists in their rejection of spiritualism and assertions of supernatural agency operating in the material world.15

The essay, then, like so many others in Pater’s canon, establishes a large and complex ‘web of intertextual relationships’, and it is ‘dense with allusion and quotation’ (Small, ‘Introduction’, xii); more than seventy-five quotations are interwoven in the essay. If we include relatively ‘minor’ modifications—changes in punctuation, capitalization, and syntax, the silent deletion of words or parenthetical phrases or clauses—at least half of these quotations are what we would regard as misquotation. Of these, a number turn out not to be quotations at all, but rather accurate paraphrases of Browne’s text. This confusion of quotation and paraphrase is not peculiar to Pater but is rather a tendency he shares with many of his contemporaries. As Elizabeth Prettejohn has recently reminded us, it is only during Pater’s lifetime and the emergence of the modern scholarly journal that the conventions of scholarly referencing that we take for granted
were becoming codified. Indeed, it is often difficult to discern motive in Pater's uneven treatment of quotation or other references to source text, and it may make as much sense to regard many of them as indicative of the still nascent critical/professional standards of scholarly referencing than evidence of Pater's peculiar practice of misrepresentation.

Yet, the litany of misquotation in Pater is consistent with his persistent method of mistranslation, reshuffling of source text, and other more obviously wilful acts of misrepresentation, even fabrication, employed to achieve a variety of specific rhetorical aims, or other motives. A significant example from the Browne essay may have been first detected by Samuel Chew who, in his brief 1914 essay, 'Pater's Quotations', points out that in the essay 'quotations even from English authors have been slightly altered in being woven into the tissue of Pater's discourse'. Chew does not identify the quotations, but he is likely referring to Pater's treatment of Samuel Johnson. Early in the piece, Pater describes Browne as a 'poetic visionary' who, amid his quiet and uneventful life in Norwich, divines a world 'full of wonders' (p. 133). He chooses to make the point in opposition to Johnson's *Life of Sir Thomas Browne*, and in the course of a paragraph provides three quotations from Johnson with each of which he disagrees. The first and third quotation come from the opening sentence of Johnson's *Life*, and Pater gives the first with only minor modifications. 'Johnson', Pater writes, 'in beginning his *Life of Browne*, remarks that Browne "seems to have had the fortune, common among men of letters, of raising little curiosity after their private life"' (p. 132). Pater demurs. 'Whether or not, with the example of Johnson himself before us, we can think just that, it is certain that Browne's works are of a kind to directly stimulate curiosity about himself—about himself, as being manifestly so large a part of those works' (p. 132).

When Pater returns to Johnson's opening sentence at the end of the paragraph, he is far less scrupulous, fictionalizing his quotation in order to gain the advantage of a rhetorical reversal. As 'uneventful' as Browne's life was, Pater writes, 'commonplace as it seemed to Johnson, to Browne himself it was so full of wonders, and so stimulates the curiosity of his more careful reader of to-day. "What influence," says Johnson again, "learning has had on its possessors may be doubtful"' (p. 133). With the quotation, Pater has literally reversed Johnson's meaning by adding to his sentence the words, 'may be doubtful'. Johnson is merely introducing his account of Browne's life as an attempt to gratify 'that curiosity
which naturally inquires, by what peculiarities of nature or fortune eminent men have been distinguished, how uncommon attainments have been gained, and what influence learning had on its possessors, or virtue on its teachers’ (Wilkin, I, xvii). Pater then asserts that the influence of learning on Browne is not at all doubtful, but rather profound. ‘Well!’, Pater writes with that characteristic flourish, ‘The influence of his great learning, of his constant research on Browne, was its imaginative influence—that it completed his outfit as a poetic visionary, stirring all the strange “conceit” of his nature to its depths’ (p. 133).

Likewise, and as he does in so many other of his portraits, Pater adds imaginative coloring to the legend of Browne by manipulating details of the correspondence. Referring to letters that Browne exchanged with the English antiquarians William Dugdale and Elias Ashmole (whose bequest initiated the establishment of the Ashmolean Museum), Pater writes that, in a letter to Dugdale, ‘who had written a work on the history of the embanking of fens’, Browne ‘communicates the discovery of certain coins, on a piece of ground, “in the nature of an island in the fens”’ (p. 145). But this is Pater writing into legend what he would prefer the letters to say. The quoted phrase, ‘in the nature of an island in the fens’ appears in a letter of 9 November 1658 written, not by Browne, but by Dugdale to explain that he was mistaken when he reported that Ashmole had found Roman coins in the fens:

It seems I mistook when I signified to you that Mr. Ashmole had some Roman coins, which were found in the fens; […] the diggers found seven or eight urnes, which by carelessness were broken in pieces, but no coyne in or near them. The ground is about six acres, and in the nature of an island in the fenne (Wilkin, I, 382).

There are a number of other perhaps less dramatic examples of misrepresentation in ‘Sir Thomas Browne’. At one point, for example, Pater’s syntax implies he is quoting from Browne—‘Yet we almost seem to hear Bacon when Browne discourses on the “use of doubts, and the advantages which might be derived from drawing up a calendar of doubts, falsehoods, and popular errors”’ (p. 152)—when in fact the quote is actually from Wilkin and his preface to Pseudodoxia
Epidemica” (II, 161). Taken together, the essay exhibits the kind of misquotations and mischaracterizations we find in so many of Pater’s productions.

But nothing in the essay is nearly as provocative as the unacknowledged and falsely attributed quotations taken from the Encyclopedia Britannica. I turn now to the other moment in which the Encyclopedia speaks, this time through the august voice and figure, again, of the redoubtable Samuel Johnson. Like the other encyclopedia misattribution, this comes early in the essay (in the paragraph preceding ‘food for contemplation’), embedded, significantly, in the midst of Pater sounding the ‘charm of an absolute sincerity’ (p. 129) as the keynote in the work of Brown and his contemporaries. While Browne’s writing exemplifies ‘in its entire ignorance of self, how much he, and the sort of literature he represents, really stood in need of technique, of a formed taste in literature, of a literary architecture’ (p. 130), Pater proposes, for such ‘faults’ (p. 128), abundant ‘recompense’ (p. 128):

And yet perhaps we could hardly wish the result different, in him, any more than in the books of Burton and Fuller, or some other similar writers of that age—mental abodes, we might liken, after their own manner, to the little old private houses of some historic town grouped about its grand public structure, which, when they have survived at all, posterity is loth to part with. For, in their absolute sincerity, not only do these authors clearly exhibit themselves (“the unique peculiarity of the writer’s mind,” being, as Johnson says of Browne, “faithfully reflected in the form and matter of his work”) but, even more than mere professionally instructed writers, they belong to, and reflect, the age they lived in. (p. 130)

Like ‘quaint’, picturesque cottages of old, the uneven prose works of Browne and other early modern English writers convey, more successfully than the work of the ‘mere professionally instructed writers’ of a later time, authentic expressions of individual personality and vivid representations of the spirit of the age. Sincerity, such a serious and important word in Pater’s lexicon, always signifying profound artistic achievement, ‘absolute sincerity’, Pater suggests, is more easily and transparently expressed in an earlier intellectual culture, one yet to embrace correctness, technique, professional training. That the parenthetical invocation
of Johnson is utterly ‘insincere’, then, comes as a real surprise, and one I am suggesting we best regard as an unexpected bit of esoteric humor. We might say that Pater playfully enacts the claim he is making; the unconscious expression of authenticity is no longer possible in his own late age. To the initiated reader, Pater’s surreptitious misattribution projects an ironic consciousness, a tongue-in-cheek assertion of personality or sensibility conveyed through paradox and insincerity. As Wilde’s Mrs. Cheveley will quip, almost a decade later, to be natural ‘is such a very difficult pose to keep up’.

The Johnson ‘quotation’ is a reworking of the following sentence in the anonymous encyclopedia entry: ‘A mind like this is a psychological curiosity, and its peculiarities are faithfully reflected in the form and matter of his works’ (p. 390). The idea, of course, is central to Pater and defines his understanding of the ‘quality of sincerity’ (p. 214). Pater makes this connection most explicitly perhaps in the essay on Rossetti. The poet’s faithful reflection, in form and expression, of his mind’s unique peculiarity is the index of his ‘perfect sincerity’ (p. 214); in his work, he realizes the ‘exact equivalence to those data within’ (p. 214), ‘the just transcript of that peculiar phase of soul which he alone knew, precisely as he knew it’ (p. 215). The idea is expressed all through *Appreciations*, what he details in ‘Style’ variously as the very condition of literary art: ‘the necessity of mind in style’ (p. 18); ‘the finer accommodation of speech to the vision within’ (p. 6); the writer’s ‘transcript of his sense of fact’ (p. 6). Pater discovers the concept expressed in the encyclopedia article on Browne, including its use of the aphorism, ‘the style is the man’ (p. 390), coined in Johnson’s day by the French stylist, Buffon, in his *Discourse on Style*. It is not, however, a notion we find expressed anywhere at all in Johnson. Surely Pater admired Johnson a great deal, and even devoted a whole essay to him, now sadly lost. Yet, one can picture Pater and a group of sympathetic readers enjoying a laugh at Johnson’s expense, the great literary authority and creator of the *Dictionary of the English Language* made the dummy of Pater the ventriloquist ‘throwing’ the voice of an anonymous encyclopedia entry.

As a number of scholars have begun to explain, during the second half of the nineteenth century, English intellectuals were forced to come to terms with the increasing intellectual authority granted to academic institutions and the collective judgment of the academic community. Pater’s cheeky acts of misattribution in the Browne essay are consistent with his ongoing resistance to this expanding authority exercised by ‘mere’ literary professionals, and to ‘institutional attempts
to define literary knowledge in objective, factual terms’ (Atherton, ‘Critics and Professors’, p. 73). That resistance is given sustained expression, for instance, in *Marius the Epicurean*, published less than a year before ‘Sir Thomas Browne’. In chapter 15, Pater describes the Roman Stoic and orator Cornelius Fronto delivering a discourse on ‘The Nature of Morals’. As Ian Small has detailed, Cornelius Fronto was historically real enough, but ‘The Nature of Morals’ is not. The fictitious text was in fact composed of material from Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, although substantially edited and reordered by Pater (*Conditions of Criticism*, pp. 97–104). The covert misattribution in *Marius*, as Small demonstrates, is one element of the novel’s sustained manipulations of classical literature and scriptural discourse, a ‘subtle and cumulative’ challenge to authority—‘historical, scholarly, and textual’—and directed at the educated reader. Thus, Pater changes both his mode of composition and the reader’s mode of engaging with the text. In ‘Sir Thomas Browne’, the clandestine intertextuality represented by the encyclopedia misattributions is not part of any such sustained iconoclastic rendering of source material. In the course of the essay, they stand as isolated gestures, and it is difficult to determine with any confidence to what extent they are intelligible to late nineteenth-century readers, educated or not. Yet, the misattributions are incoherent without positing an audience to which they are directed. In order to function as parody—of scholarly referencing, of academic specialization—an informed reader must recognize the encyclopedia intertext from which the humor derives. Woven seamlessly into the texture of the essay, the misattributions are far less visible, for instance, than the parodic footnote to the word ‘kissing’ in the ‘Winckelmann’ essay in early editions of *The Renaissance*, to which Adam Phillips called our attention. Yet, there they are, and the effectiveness of their disguise heightens the surprise and comic effect of their disclosure.

Pater’s deliberate strategy of covert misrepresentation also calls into question the status of other ‘errors’ in the essay. Introducing that ‘wonderful book’ the *Hydriotaphia*, Browne’s antiquarian study of the cremation urns discovered near his home of Norwich, Pater writes that Browne ‘put forth the finished treatise […] (by way of frontispiece) with one of the urns, “drawn with a coal taken out of it and found among the burnt bones”’ (p. 159). (See Figure 1.) But, as the illustration demonstrates, he has confused the frontispiece of *Hydriotaphia, or Urn-Burial*, with the frontispiece of ‘Brampton Urns’, an account of another discovery of cremation urns written at least ten years after *Hydriotaphia*, and published posthumously.
An honest mistake, or yet another purposeful misrepresentation meant to guard against his work ever happening to fall into careless habits of accuracy?

The double insertion of the encyclopedia lines into the essay, together with manuscript evidence, suggest it is highly unlikely that the misattributions are errors. The holograph fair copy of ‘Sir Thomas Browne’ gives evidence of the scrupulous care Pater took with his compositions, clearly demonstrating how he refines and recalibrates his prose, very often leaving spaces for quotation, names, and other material to be added at a later time. (See Figure 2.) The illustration is of the Browne manuscript, folio 48, where Pater has clearly left a blank space to be filled in later with the Browne quotation: ‘But of the fourth species of error, noted by Bacon, the Idola species, that whole tribe of illusions, which are “bred
amongst the weeds and tares of one’s own brain”, Browne tells us nothing by way of criticism […]. For the Pascal essay, we have even more textual evidence at several stages of composition: the slips of paper featuring brief, abbreviated references and notes; a heavily reworked draft; and fair copy (at which stage Pater continues to polish his writing). Taken together, these pieces of evidence indicate that Pater is not misquoting casually from memory—these are not ‘vulgar errors’, to borrow Browne’s running title in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. Pater’s textual manipulations are deliberate, thoughtful, and abundantly playful.

In a remarkable passage from Pater’s very first publication, the anonymous 1866 essay on Coleridge, he takes Coleridge to task for ‘an excess of seriousness’. It is the great philosopher-critic’s ‘chief offense’ arising ‘not from any moral principle, but from a misconception of the perfect manner’:

> There is a certain shade of levity and unconcern, the perfect manner of the eighteenth century, which marks complete culture in the handling of abstract questions [...] A kind of humour is one of the conditions of the true mental attitude in the criticism of past stages of thought. Humanity cannot afford to be too serious about them, any more than a man of good sense can afford to be too serious in looking back upon his own childhood. Plato, whom Coleridge claims as the first of his spiritual ancestors, Plato, as we remember him, a true humanist, with Petrarch and Göthe and M. Renan, holds his theories lightly, glances with a blithe and naïve inconsequence from one view to another, not anticipating the burden of meaning ‘views’ will one day have for humanity. In reading him one feels how lately it was that Cræsus thought it a paradox to say that external prosperity was not necessarily happiness. But on Coleridge lies the whole weight of the sad reflection that has since come into the world, with which for us the air is full, which the children in the market-place repeat to each other. Even his language is forced and broken, lest some saving formula should be lost [...].

Pater is already working out an account of his ideal critical sensibility, which is, crucially, conditioned by humor, an attitude of ironic detachment fused with a
carefree embrace of different points of view and perspectives. The Plato of the later Plato and Platonism is already almost fully formed. He teaches levity and lightness of touch, qualities that will promote proportion and aesthetic quality, justness, in the work of the scholar, the critic, even the theologian. Michael Levey is correct to read in the passage Pater’s larger protest against Victorian earnestness, of which the air is full.23 That protest, as I have been describing, often takes unexpected and esoteric form. Another of Pater’s biographers, A. C. Benson, neatly describes these characteristic shapes of Pater’s humor:

That the inner and deeper current of Pater’s thought was profoundly serious is only too plain from his books; such humour as is here not infrequently introduced is of a delicate kind, often almost mournfully disguised; the same kind of humour that one may sometimes discern in the glance of a sympathetic friend when some mirth-provoking incident occurs at a solemn ceremony at which it is essential to preserve a dignity of deportment. At such moments a look of silent and rapturous appreciation may pass between two kindred spirits; such, in its fineness and secrecy, is the humour of Pater’s writings, and presupposes a sympathetic understanding between writer and reader.24

Pater’s delicate employment of misrepresentation, often almost mournfully disguised, produces textual strategies meant to surprise and delight his sympathetic readers. Like Browne, Pater never forgot that the best writing always includes some textual ‘alchemy’.

Columbia College Chicago
kdaley@colum.edu
NOTES

I would like to thank Lesley Higgins for her comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

1 See, for example, John J. Conlon, ‘Walter Pater and the Art of Misrepresentation’, *Annals of Scholarship*, 7 (1990), pp. 165–79.
6 The other is Pater’s rendering of the line from 1 Samuel 14:43 in ‘Winckelmann’: ‘I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and lo! I must die’ (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p. 195).
8 In his recent *Selected Essays of Walter Pater* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2018), Alex Wong proposes an alternative source, namely Simon Wilkin’s 1836 edition of Browne, specifically a footnote in the ‘Supplementary Memoir’ included in Volume 1. The footnote, as Wong explains, is quoting from an article on Browne published in the *Athenaeum* (1839). Wong suggests that Pater is ‘loosely’ paraphrasing from this sentence: ‘In all likelihood, he was an absent and solitary man, extracting the food of serious contemplation from all objects indifferently,…’ (pp. lvii–lviii). Wong concludes that a ‘mix-up in WP’s note-taking would be sufficient explanation’ (p. 406). This is a reasonable suggestion. As I will explain in more detail, the Wilkin edition is Pater’s primary source for the essay, and he would have read the footnote on the first page of the ‘Supplementary Memoir’, a text to which he alludes in a number of instances. Yet, while both the Wilkin and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* bring together ‘food’ and ‘contemplation’, in diction and grammatical construction the encyclopedia phrase is far closer to Pater’s ‘quotation’.
The character of ‘humour’ and the ‘humourist’ is something of a recurrent theme in the middle section of *Appreciations*, running from ‘Charles Lamb’ through ‘Sir Thomas Browne’ and ‘Love’s Labours Lost’ to ‘Measure for Measure’.

Of particular interest is the give and take between Pater and John Addington Symonds in their reception of Browne. Pater’s 1886 essay echoes elements of Symonds’s 1864 essay on Browne published in the *Saturday Review* (25 June), and Symonds’s 1886 introduction to a new edition of Browne’s work, a revised version of his 1864 essay, responds in part to Pater’s essay. See Ishikawa, ‘A Great Chain of Curiosity’, pp. 118–20.


Elizabeth Prettejohn, ‘Pater on Sculpture’, in *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aesthetics*, eds Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 219–40 (pp. 232–33). A representative example from the essay comes in Pater’s discussion of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Browne’s encyclopedic enquiry into human error and superstition. Pater writes that Browne ‘begins from “that first error in Paradise,” wondering much at “man’s deceivability in his perfection,”’—‘at such gross deceit’ (p. 151). The first quotation, ‘that first error in Paradise’. accurately states the subject of the passage, the temptation and fall of Eve and Adam, yet Browne does not use the phrase that Pater places in quotation marks, or even the word, ‘Paradise’. The quotations in the second half of the sentence are a reworking of Browne’s statement that Adam and Eve ‘were grossly deceived in their perfection, and so weakly deluded in the clarity of their understanding, that it hath left no small obscurity in ours, […]’ (Wilkin, II, 183).

An example of one among many, Pater misquotes from Browne’s *Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial*, an antiquarian study of the cremation urns discovered near Browne’s hometown of Norwich. Browne is discussing urn and cemetery decoration, and notes that ‘the cemeterial cells of ancient Christians and martyrs’ are often decorated with representations of Scripture stories […] hinting imagery of resurrection, which is the life of the grave, and sweetens our habitations in the land of moles and pismires’ (Wilkin, III, 474). Pater misquotes the phrase as ‘the abode of worms and pismires’ (p. 160), replacing ‘habitations in the land’ with ‘abodes’, and substituting for ‘moles’ the more conventional ‘worms’. The substitution arguably takes away from Browne’s more terrifying evocation of darkness and the smell of the grave, for the mole is a blind animal that relies on its sense of smell, reinforcing the stench evoked by pismires, so called on account of the urinous smell of ant hills.


See especially Small, *Conditions of Criticism*, and Atherton, ‘Critics and Professors’.


Decadence and the Weird: New Perspectives
Introduction

Decadence and the weird are genres notably difficult to define in any kind of rigorous or programmatic way in the Anglophone context. ‘Decadence’, on the one hand, was a common, if rather imprecise, late-Victorian term that was used to describe anything that seemed to threaten the cultural status quo, ‘used loosely by critics to describe everything from Naturalism and Impressionism to Realism and New Woman fiction’, as Kirsten MacLeod claims.1 ‘Weird,’ on the other hand, originated as a term ‘to describe a certain tonality of the fiction of Poe or Edward Bulwer-Lytton in the 1840s’ but then grew to comprise a carefully curated but still indistinct set of writings in American pulp fiction of the 1920s and 30s.2 S. T. Joshi, in one of the earliest scholarly works to explore weird writing, rejects attempts to develop a firm definition for weird fiction, claiming that the weird tale ‘did not (and perhaps does not now) exist as a genre but as a consequence of a world view’.3 James Machin’s recent work positions the weird as a mode and highlights the prominence of weird fiction in the 1890s, yet also stresses the fact that the term had not yet been used to anthologize and prioritize certain literary texts during the 1890s. For more recent enthusiasts of weird fiction, the term has ex post facto come
to encompass the genre’s nineteenth-century progenitors, especially those named in H. P. Lovecraft’s influential *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), such as Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, and Bram Stoker. Despite the difficulties of drawing strict conceptual boundaries around decadence and the weird, they can both be understood to participate in what Alex Murray and Jason David Hall call, after Friedrich Nietzsche, the ‘transvaluation’ of commonly held values that occurred in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, when cultural norms were turned on their head, and notions of decay, decline, and the uncanny came to be seen as sources of innovation, creativity, and rebellion against the status quo.4

Both genres have long been considered disreputable by the literary-critical establishment, though for very different reasons. Decadent writing employed a highly allusive and citational literary style that self-consciously sought to signal to its readers a highbrow sophistication that was meant to excuse its linguistic difficulty and perverse subject matter. By contrast, weird fictions have tried to fight the stigma of being associated with the lowbrow and mass produced by placing themselves within fictional, esoteric archives that serve as alternatives to the high-cultural canon, as Leif Sorensen has argued.5 Yet despite the fact that both genres were held in low regard for much of the twentieth century, they can nevertheless be shown to have influenced the development of institutionally celebrated high modernism, even if the modernists themselves (and the critics who celebrated them) often wanted to disavow the connection.

In their introduction to the recent collection *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019), Kate Hext and Alex Murray quote Peter Nicholls’s assertion that modernism ‘appropriated the linguistic opacity and psychic density of a decadent aesthetics’.6 As much as influential critics of modernism such as Edmund Wilson dismissed weird fiction as aesthetically inferior,7 weird fiction, according to Machin, was driven by the same impulse towards literary distinction that motivated modernist writers and critics.8 Since the advent of the new modernist studies in the late 1990s, scholars have expanded the field of literary studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ‘vertically’, such that ‘once quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been reconsidered’.9 This expansion of the field has included pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* (1923–54). Critical works such as Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* (1998) and David M. Earle’s *Re-Covering Modernism* (2009) highlight the imbrication of
canonical modernist writing with a variegated ‘public realm’ and with genre fiction, respectively, during the first half of the twentieth century. Although neither of these critics focuses on the weird specifically, their works anticipate recent critical interest in weird fiction in relation to Anglo-American modernism. Jonas Prida, for example, claims that the ‘suppressed history of modernism is written’ in the ground-breaking magazine *Weird Tales*, where ‘Gothic tropes—haunted houses, lycanthropes, abandoned castles—vie for space with modernist narratives of repressed memories and monsters in the ether’.11

Despite these connections, it is important to note that both late-Victorian decadence and the weird-inspired twentieth-century literary traditions are marginal to, or exist independently of, high modernism, and are increasingly recognized as important contributions to twentieth-century writing in their own right. Recent scholarship has pushed against the idea that decadence and the weird are only important in relation to culturally prestigious and ‘reputable’ high modernism. Hext and Murray forcefully assert that ‘the place of twentieth-century decadence in literary history is not contingent on the bits of it that influenced high modernism’ and that it ‘persisted as a distinct tradition that cannot easily or desirably be brought under the umbrella of modernism’.12 Critics such as Kristin Mahoney and Vincent Sherry have examined decadent texts of the twentieth century in order to challenge the usefulness of the Victorian and modernist divide. Mahoney recognizes that she is ‘extending the time of the Victorian Period’ in her discussion of figures such as Max Beerbohm and Vernon Lee,13 while Sherry, in the words of Robert Volpicelli, positions decadence and modernism together in ‘an expanded historical framework which stretches from about 1820 to 1920’, a period characterized by literary writings that evince a sense of belatedness and a melancholic loss of possibility.14

Machin’s research on weird fiction highlights previously ignored correspondences among weird tales, literary decadence, and modernism in a manner that ultimately questions the received wisdom of how these different kinds of writing might be distinguished: both H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction and the publication of *Weird Tales* (where some of Lovecraft’s early writing appeared) emerge as parallel with modernist writing rather than its opposite. Yet Machin also challenges the centrality of Lovecraft in discussions of weird writing by emphasizing Edgar Allan Poe’s prominence as the originator of the weird tale. The fin-de-siècle revival of Poe impacts the decadent literature and weird tales
of the 1890s, such that the period becomes central to both decadence and the weird.\textsuperscript{15} In works by writers such as Arthur Machen and M. P. Shiel, ‘notions of a weird mode in literature and notions of Decadence were commingled in the 1890s’.\textsuperscript{16} These same writers gained recognition in \textit{Weird Tales}, such that there was a ‘valorization of decadence’ within this specific strain of pulp modernism in the United States.\textsuperscript{17} As much as modernism is still understood as relying on a distinction between difficult, sophisticated literary masterpieces and stylistically unsophisticated, mass-produced popular fiction, a distinction that would exile the weird to the realm of the lowbrow, Machin contends that calling certain works of fiction \textit{weird} bestows literary value on stories that might otherwise be dismissed as unsophisticated and bloody horror fiction. The weird ‘is, at root, predicated on the same high/low cultural divide precipitated by the fin-de-siècle publishing boom and intensified by Modernism’.\textsuperscript{18} The weird mirrored modernism in its reliance on coteries that emphasized the \textit{weird} as a term of literary quality and distinction. As part of the project of transvaluation that has been central to both the decadent and weird literary projects, both genres share an overriding interest in thinking beyond the figure of the human and the humanist philosophy that have been central to the post-Enlightenment political imagination. Weird and decadent writings challenge Romantic assumptions about the harmonious relationship between nature, human consciousness, and the organic form of the artwork.

Readers of \textit{SWPA} will recognize that the epithet \textit{weird} is not in any way alien to Walter Pater’s oeuvre. In \textit{Imaginary Portraits} (1887), he makes use of the terms \textit{weird} and \textit{strange} in ways that overlap with the supernatural, the uncanny, and the unexpected aspects of the emerging weird fiction of the late nineteenth century. The Paterian weird signals the surprising intersections of the natural landscape and supernatural forces. Attentive to etymology and nuanced meanings of \textit{weird} in ‘Duke Carl of Rosenmold’, Pater describes the landscape that Duke Carl encounters near Cassel. After Duke Carl has staged his death and commenced a series of wanderings in Germany, the landscape’s appearance suggests dark forces that might impact his fate: ‘Above Cassel the airy hills curved in one black outline against a glowing sky; pregnant, one could fancy, with weird forms, which might be at their old \textit{diableries} again among the ruins in those remote places ere night was quite come there’.\textsuperscript{19} Pater’s prose anticipates the infernal Welsh landscapes of Machen’s \textit{The Hill of Dreams} (1907) and suggests that the hills, contrasted with the ‘glowing sky’ are ‘pregnant’ with forms—witches perhaps—that may practice
rituals ranging from the mischievous to the devilish. It is perhaps unsurprising that he frequently uses *weird* as an epithet of praise in relation to English Romantic poets. In the essay collection *Appreciations* (1889), Pater describes William Wordsworth’s sensitivity to ‘a certain weird fellowship’ between ‘the moods of men’ and ‘an emanation, a particular spirit’ that ‘belonged, not to the moving leaves or water only, but to the distant peak of the hills arising suddenly, by some change of perspective, above the nearer horizon, to the passing space of light across the plain, to the lichenèd Druidic stone’. What Pater calls “romantic” weirdness and ‘fineness of weird effect’ is also the keynote of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s menacing supernaturalism in poems such as ‘Christabel’, ‘Dejection: An Ode’ and ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.

Dennis Denisoff has identified in decadent literature a proto-environmentalist politics that challenges the assumption that humans are distinct from, and therefore the rightful masters of, the natural world. In their preoccupation with pagan rituals, decadent authors such as Pater show their investment with ‘counter-humanist deindividuation and species intersubjectivity’ that resists the individualism that is the legacy of Victorian liberalism. Similarly, Benjamin Morgan has looked to Shiel’s novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) to argue that decadent writing undermines ‘the distinction of the natural and the made’. Decadent texts provide us with the imaginative resources for comprehending the problem of climate change by situating ‘the totality of human life in relation to the totality of natural systems’, allowing us to understand ‘depletions of energy and life’ on a planetary scale in relation to man-made ‘geopolitical systems of and structures of cosmopolitanism, imperialism, and global capitalism’. Weird fiction, because it ‘causes readers to question, revise, or refashion their views of the universe’, often mingles elements of horror and the sublime in order to minimize the significance and power of humanity. Visions of nature in weird writing, whether tentacled monstrosities imagined by Lovecraft, sinister plants described by Algernon Blackwood, or the proliferating swine-things of William Hope Hodgson, defy systems that seek to categorize and render legible the natural world.

While the Paterian weird suggests the sinister and the uncanny elements of the natural world, such as the odd forces at work within Duke Carl’s homeland described above, the Paterian strange highlights the exotic and foreign characteristics of objects that add depth to the individuals Pater examines in *Imaginary Portraits*. Perhaps echoing descriptions of the ‘weird elegance’ and
'weird foreign grace' of Joachim du Bellay in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Denys L'Auxerrois is the strangest of such figures, as his connections with the Middle East and Asia render his character increasingly unique and worthy of Pater's attention. Even before the local peasants begin to connect Pater's French organ-builder and proxy wine god to 'strange motiveless misdeeds', Denys journeys to Marseilles where, in prose that echoes Pater's famous description of the Mona Lisa, Denys 'trafficked with sailors from all parts of the world, from Arabia and India, and bought their wares, exposed now for sale, to the wonder of all, at the Easter-fair'. Denys's exotic wares enhance the foreignness and strangeness of his stall in Auxerre. The stall 'formed a strange, unwonted patch of colour, found suddenly displayed in the hot morning'. Significantly, Pater also details that Denys's wine god costume for a local pageant features, 'for headdress, a strange elephant-scalp with gilded tusk'. While the elephant-scalp headdress was a highly unusual form of headgear both for early modern France and late Victorian England, Lene Østermark-Johansen notes that Denys's headdress matches that of Alexander the Great in depictions of Alexander on ancient Ptolemaic coins. Thus, Denys's strange outfit marks him as an agent of foreign cultural change associated with the 'East' as well as a source of Greek influence in feudal France. When Denys is hunted and murdered by the people of Auxerre, his role shifts from foreign conqueror to the conquered; he is terminated in a revolt against the freedom and license that marked his presence. In *Imaginary Portraits*, strangeness aligns with the 'arabesque' aspects of weird fiction, a term that James Machin notes was used by critics of Poe to emphasize 'Moorish' features as well as 'unnatural' features in his writing, specifically Poe's reliance on *One Thousand and One Nights* for inspiration. The 'arabesque' endured as a 'context' for decadent weird fiction of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and, when pinpointing the emergence of weird fiction it is fruitful to consider the 'arabesque' as a counterpart to the idea of strangeness that Pater explores in *Imaginary Portraits*.

Pater's emphasis on the weird and the strange enhances the vividness of the legends and figures he describes in *Imaginary Portraits*; through these terms, Pater draws attention to the ways that local legends and exotic foreign influences deepen the mystery behind the figures from European history that he finds fascinating. Just as the individuals depicted by Pater produce a range of emotional and intellectual responses in readers, the creatures, monsters, and individuals depicted in weird fiction do not always provoke horror and confusion. Nicholas Freeman has shown
how some weird fiction intermingles the bizarre with the everyday; he describes what he calls ‘weird realism’ as an unsettling combination of the quotidian with the bizarre, such that there is a ‘subtle distortion of a seemingly given reality’ in the stories he discusses.\textsuperscript{33} The scale and impact of the weird can, then, vary drastically in the way that it explores the erosion of received accounts of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. It can ask readers to rethink the space and time of the entire universe; it can ask readers to rethink the clarity and solidity of the objects in an apartment.

China Miéville, in his experimental ‘Afterweird’ to \textit{The Weird: A Compendium of Dark and Strange Stories} (2011), describes the weird in a way that clearly echoes descriptions of decadence in its allusions to disease, proliferating organic matter, and a loss of stability: ‘A virus of holes, a burrowing infestation, an infestation of burrowingness itself, that births its own pestilential hole-dweller’.\textsuperscript{34} Miéville’s chiastic rendering of infestation and burrowing, along with the preponderance of metaphor, recalls not only the content of decadent and weird writings but also their stylistic innovations and negations. Both decadence and the weird appear to draw creative energy from not only overturning cultural norms but also troubling the legibility of language and representation. Taken together with science fiction, decadent and weird texts are perhaps the most profound imaginative embodiments of thoroughly post-Darwinian worldviews. The four essays in this cluster explore the entanglements between decadence and the weird in the works of four different writers of the fin de siècle and early-twentieth century, including those commonly associated with weird fiction, such as Blackwood and Machen, and those usually less directly connected, such as H. Rider Haggard and the coauthors of the gay pornographic novel, \textit{Teleny} (1893). The essays are included here loosely based on the dates of the primary texts that they discuss.

The essays that we have brought together here also suggest new avenues for discussions of gender and sexuality in weird fiction. Decadent writing’s overt sexuality has long made feminist and queer approaches a critical mainstay, yet modes of analysis attentive to gender have yet to make a similar impact on the weird. With the exception of a handful of women writers such as Vernon Lee, the weird canon consists mostly of male authors centered on the figure of Lovecraft, whose ‘dismissive, discriminatory attitudes toward women […] are central to his mythos’, according to Alison Sperling.\textsuperscript{35} Scholars are beginning to acknowledge the mode’s complicated gender politics, in the essays by Carl H. Sederholm and
Patricia MacCormack from the anthology *The Age of Lovecraft* (2016), as well as Roger Luckhurst’s recent description of the weird as a form of ‘queer errancy’. It is our hope that further research into the intersection of decadence and the weird will help to further this important critical project, as evidenced most notably in the first two essays in this cluster. In the first essay, Molly Youngkin explores the position of the ‘sublime woman’ first in two of Haggard’s early romances, *She* (1887) and *Cleopatra* (1889). Through her reading of these novels, Youngkin demonstrates Haggard’s emphasis on the ties between these sublime women and the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Haggard’s Ayesha and Cleopatra, with their ability to cut across swaths of space and time, anticipate the monstrous, racialized Egyptian women of Lovecraft’s fiction, their ability to cross racial boundaries, and their centrality to Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos.

Dustin Friedman’s essay, which follows Youngkin’s, looks to *Teleny* to propose a ‘weird’ rewriting of the history of sexuality. Critics have often assimilated this anonymously written pornographic text to Michel Foucault’s well-known narrative of the late Victorian ‘reverse discourse’ of homosexuality, which proposes that when same-sex desiring people defended themselves using the same sexological vocabulary and conceptual apparatus used to discriminate against them, they inadvertently consolidated the networks of power they ostensibly sought to resist. Yet Friedman interprets *Teleny* not as part of the reverse discourse, but as showing that all forms of sexual desire are an impersonal cosmic force indifferent to the minds and bodies they inhabit, thereby sharing weird fiction’s recognition that Darwinism destroyed the philosophical foundations of the liberal-humanist subject.

In the third essay, Neil Hultgren explores the faultline between the formal and the formless through a discussion of Arthur Machen’s disorienting and lengthy paragraph in his 1899 short story, ‘The White People’. While interrogating the stylistic ties between a ‘green pocket-book’ full of a young woman’s occult writings in Machen’s story and the narrative experimentation of modernist writings by James Joyce or Knut Hamsun, he notes that Machen’s writing rejects theories of the ‘modern paragraph’ developed in the late nineteenth century. Machen’s story erodes the boundaries between modernism and the weird, establishing continuity between distinct narrative innovations often described as modernist and a seemingly instinctual and occult record written by a young woman.
Jessica Straley, in the fourth and final essay, asks that we take seriously the inscrutable agency of plant life. She discusses Algernon Blackwood’s limning of the deficiencies of human faculties in his representation of plant communication in the short stories ‘The Willows’ (1907) and ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ (1912). In the process, she discovers how the weird can help us to cultivate an ecological awareness that understands plant life to have a will of its own, rather than serving as a passive backdrop for human actions.

American University
dustinfri@american.edu

California State University, Long Beach
Neil.Hultgren@csulb.edu

NOTES

6 Kate Hext and Alex Murray, ‘Introduction’, in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Hext and Murray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 1–26 (p. 8); Nicholls’s emphasis.


16 Ibid., pp. 94–95.

17 Ibid., p. 52.

18 Ibid., p. 48.


21 Ibid., pp. 92, 100.


24 Ibid., pp. 611–12.


27 Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, pp. 180, 179. Østermark-Johansen makes a similar connection between Pater’s descriptions of Denys and the Mona Lisa in her notes to the essay (p. 179n35).


29 Ibid., p. 178.

30 Ibid., p. 178n33.


32 Ibid., p. 39.

33 Nicholas Freeman, ‘Weird Realism,’ *Textual Practice*, 31.6 (2017), 1117–32 (pp. 1120, 1123).


After reading H. Rider Haggard’s most famous romance, *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to Haggard that he could see in the work ‘flashes of a fine weird imagination and a fine poetic use and command of the savage way of talking’, elements in Haggard’s writing that ‘thrilled’ Stevenson.¹ Sigmund Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, described Haggard’s next romance, *She* (1887), as ‘a strange book, but full of hidden meaning’ about ‘the eternal feminine’ and ‘the immortality of our emotions’.² Neither Stevenson nor Freud were commenting at a time when H. P. Lovecraft’s definition of the ‘weird tale’ had been articulated, but S. T. Joshi, the foremost expert on Lovecraft, has argued that stories as early as 1880 and as late as 1940 exemplify the genre, even if the description Lovecraft provided in ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ (1927) encourages a ‘narrow’ interpretation of the genre. Still, Lovecraft’s essay identifies essential elements of the genre and places Haggard’s work in the weird tradition through nineteenth-century reworkings of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel. His essay also confirms that Haggard’s work is weird via the tradition’s attention to Eastern locations as especially rich sites for weirdness.
According to Lovecraft, the weird tale ‘has survived, developed, and attained remarkable heights’ across time because it appeals to the reader who is ‘free [...] from the spell of the daily routine’ and who possesses ‘a certain degree of imagination’, qualities that the reader of Haggard possesses. The weird tale evokes ‘awe and fear’, emotions that are central to the nineteenth-century concept of the ‘sublime’, which I will argue also are central in Haggard’s work. Furthermore, the weird tale involves the suspension of the typical laws of time and space evident in Haggard’s fiction, elements that Lovecraft describes when he defines the weird tale as ‘something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains’ found in ‘mundane gruesomely gruesome’ literature. This something more is ‘[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces’, as well as ‘a hint [...] of that most terrible conception of the human brain [...] 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’. Lovecraft also traces the history of the ‘horror-tale’, which Joshi believes is at least a ‘subset’ of the weird tale if not equivalent to it. Lovecraft explains that the horror-tale ‘fluorished from prehistoric times’ and ‘reached its highest development in Egypt and the Semitic nations’, and he stresses that texts from this period ‘illustrate the power of the weird over the ancient Eastern mind’.

In tracing the weird across time periods and nations, Lovecraft includes Haggard’s work in this tradition, describing She as a ‘remarkably good’ example of the ‘romantic, semi-Gothic, quasi-moral’ version of the weird that characterizes nineteenth-century reworkings of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel. Lovecraft’s engagement with Haggard in ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ encourages analysis of the weird in Haggard’s work, and the present essay asserts that Haggard’s romances are precursors to Lovecraft’s weird tales; or, put another way, the weird in Haggard’s Victorian texts resurfaces in Lovecraft’s modern texts. More specifically, Haggard’s Egyptian romances, especially She and Cleopatra (1889), demonstrate an attention to ancient Egypt as a sublime space and time that evokes the feelings central to Lovecraft’s weird tale. In both of these romances, sublime women characters’ associations with ancient Egypt, and Isis in particular, enable them to evoke these feelings in the male characters who encounter them. In She, the overtly masculine and English Holly Horace is not only ‘blinded and amazed’ but also ‘terror[ized]’ by Ayesha, a ‘white’ but also ‘Arab’ queen who rules over the African Amahagger tribe. Ayesha knows ancient Egyptian culture
deeply through her rivalry with the Egyptian princess Amenartes (*She*, p. 43), and we learn in sequels to *She* that Ayesha was a priestess of Isis before she ruled the Amahagger.\(^\text{12}\) In *Cleopatra*, Harmachis, a priest of Isis, is awed by Cleopatra, who presents herself as an earthly form of Isis, but he is also terrorized by her after his love for her supersedes his commitment to overthrow her rule and save Egypt from the Romans.

Haggard’s own experiences in Egypt in 1887, 1904, 1912, and 1924 seem to have had an effect similar to that experienced by his male characters who encounter Egypt and the women who inhabit it. In his memoir, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography* (1926), Haggard writes about his *terror*, one of two typical feelings evoked by the sublime, when he and his friend Brownrigg were nearly buried alive in the Egyptian pyramids.\(^\text{13}\) He also describes his *awe*, the other feeling evoked by the sublime, at the sight of the Nile river flooding the ‘boundless’ plain.\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, Haggard expresses strong attraction to ancient Egyptian women—‘I venerate Isis, and always feel inclined to bow to the moon!’\(^\text{15}\)—suggesting that these women are central to evoking sublime feelings in Western, white men.

It does not appear that Lovecraft ever travelled to Egypt, but he also perceived ancient Egypt as a weird space and time. He consistently represents the country in this manner in his tales ‘The Wall of Sleep’ (1919), ‘The Temple’ (1920), and ‘The Nameless City’ (1921), which include scattered references to sublime experiences in Egypt. His ‘Imprisoned with the Pharaohs’ (1924), set entirely in Egypt, is said to have been based on an experience Harry Houdini had in the country in 1910, and it features ancient Egyptian women, the Sixth Dynasty Pharaoh Queen Nitocris and Isis, who are linked explicitly to decadent practices of mixing human and animal body parts into ‘composite mummies’.\(^\text{16}\) ‘Medusa’s Coil’ (1939), which Lovecraft ghostwrote for Zealia Brown Reed Bishop,\(^\text{17}\) features an awesome but terrifying sublime woman, Marceline, who transfixed a young man, Denis de Russy, but also terrorizes his misogynist father, Antoine de Russy, as well as the narrator who relays the story. Though some critics have argued that Lovecraft co-wrote the story with Bishop, Joshi’s research shows that Bishop typically provided a ‘plot germ or outline’ for the stories, and ‘all the structural elements, character portrayals, and prose’ were Lovecraft’s.\(^\text{18}\) When ‘Medusa’s Coil’ was published in *Weird Tales* in 1939, two years after Lovecraft’s death, Bishop sent half the payment she received for the story to Lovecraft’s aunt, as a symbol of her ‘debt’ to Lovecraft.\(^\text{19}\) In ‘Medusa’s Coil,’ which will be analyzed in this essay, the male
characters’ awe and fear of Marceline is based in part on her ties to ancient Egypt and other civilizations in which space and time operate differently from those of contemporary culture.

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As context for understanding the threat of sublime women in Haggard’s and Lovecraft’s work, it is worth noting some key points about the sublime in the modern European and ancient Egyptian traditions. The modern European concept typically is traced to Edmund Burke, who in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) defined the sublime as ‘rugged and broken’ objects, in opposition to beautiful objects that were ‘smooth and polished’. William Gilpin more fully extended these concepts to landscapes and created a middle category of picturesque in *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty, on Picturesque Travel, and on Sketching Landscape* (1794). Gilpin defined ‘roughness’ as the ‘most essential point of difference between the beautiful and the picturesque. [...] Instead of making the whole smooth, make it rough; and you make it also picturesque’. Following this distinction, the sublime landscape is undomesticated and found in the most secluded areas, as opposed to the beautiful landscape, which is domesticated and found in close proximity to towns and cities. Moreover, in both Burke and Gilpin, the sublime, which is central to the argument of this essay, evokes particular emotions, summoning awe at the vastness of the landscape and terror because of the precarious position of humans in relation to nature.

In nineteenth-century literature, the contrast between these landscapes—and the feelings evoked by them—can be found in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Victor’s travels through the Alps in pursuit of the creature evoke awe and terror because of the sublime nature of the landscape but also because Victor is aware of the creature as the Other, the sublime personified. Encounters with the Other—which in the nineteenth century is represented by the frightening feminine, the rebellious working classes, and/or the threatening foreigner—become more terrorizing as the century progresses, when mainstream culture interprets changes in gender, class, and race relations as leading to ‘decadence’ and ‘degeneration’. As Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst indicate: ‘The degenerate was the [...] undeserving pauper, [...] the sexually active woman, [...] the sub-human residuum that threatened the race—anything deviating from a middle-class-defined “normalcy”’. The notion that the degenerate could be found in many corners of society led some people to believe that the threat of the
Other was greater than it had been earlier in the century. Late-Victorian texts that explore these seemingly more extreme versions of sublime threats include Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1892) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The former shows the ways in which the feminine sublime was perceived as threatening, since Salomé asserts her agency in opposition to the patriarchal Herod by asking for John the Baptist's head on a plate, and the latter exposes how the threat of the foreigner was perceived as dangerous, since the Eastern Dracula threatens to overtake the Western world when he is brought to London by Jonathan Harker in order to 'satiate his lust for blood'. By the end of the century, the sublime was fully intertwined in cultural attitudes toward gender and race, and sometimes served to express misogynist and racist views.

Any discussion of sublime women in Haggard's and Lovecraft’s respective works draws on the European tradition, but it also is important to recognize how the concept functioned in the ancient Egyptian tradition. In this context, the sublime is not explicitly defined, but awe and terror are evoked simultaneously by key women goddesses, Isis and Hathor, who are venerated but also feared, in part because of their procreative abilities. Modern historians have noted that even as Isis and Hathor were portrayed in ancient Egyptian oral tales and visual art as gentle and nurturing mothers, they also were represented as aggressively exposing their genitals when necessary to show their power. Moreover, women worshippers of Isis and Hathor imitated this display of agency at the annual festival in Bubastis, which attracted 700,000 pilgrims each fall, when the Nile rose and crops along the river grew extensively, connecting the fertility of the goddesses to the fertility of the country. Even without a clearly articulated definition of the sublime, early Greek historians and clergymen found this display of agency threatening. Herodotus, representing himself as a witness to the festival in the fifth century BCE, described the women worshippers without acknowledging their actions in the context of a fertility celebration, focusing instead on the display of their genitals in relation to other activities he perceived as objectionable, such as cursing and drinking. And Epiphanius, writing in the fourth century CE, characterized Egyptian festivals, including the one at Bubastis, as 'orgies' where women 'abandon their modesty'.

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The patriarchal commentary of early Greek men about ancient Egyptian women aligns with similar views by modern men, including Haggard and Lovecraft. As Gerald Monsman has argued, in *She*, Ayesha possesses the powerful qualities of Isis, even as she also embodies qualities of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Ayesha is ‘at war with herself’ because she is similar to both goddesses, and Haggard ‘inextricably link[s] good and evil powers’ through this characterization. I do not believe that Ayesha and Isis necessarily represent ‘evil’ but would agree that they were perceived as such by nineteenth-century men who were familiar with the European sublime but unfamiliar with the ancient Egyptian version of this concept—or who distorted the Egyptian version in order to affirm their own European perspective. Isis’s power lies in her ability to procreate, and when Ayesha dramatically unveils herself to Holly, she displays this ability in a manner similar to that used by Isis, Hathor, and their women worshippers when they exposed their genitals.

As Barri J. Gold’s analysis of Haggard’s romance suggests, Ayesha need not literally procreate in order to play the role of a powerful feminine reproductive figure. Ayesha offers a metaphorical mode of reproduction based on ‘longevity’, in which natural forces are an ‘extension’ of and reliant on the concept of procreation. Ayesha seeks a partner who will unite with her, as evident by her desire to rekindle love with her deceased lover, Kallikrates, via his descendant, Leo Vincey. When she steps into the ‘flame of Life’ in the ‘very womb of the earth’ at the end of the romance, she expects to give Leo and herself ‘enduring life’ as well as the ‘wisdom’ of the ‘old Sphinx of Egypt’, though she ends up a ‘badly-preserved Egyptian mummy’ as she begins disintegrating in the fire (*She*, pp. 255–56, 260–61). Ayesha’s metaphorical desire to procreate also is evident in her jealousy over Leo’s relationship with Ustane, one of the Amahagger women over whom Ayesha rules. When she learns that Ustane has taken Leo as her husband, she turns Ustane’s hair ‘white as snow’ with a blow to the head (p. 195). Having witnessed this and other displays of Ayesha’s power, Holly believes Ayesha will ‘blast’ her way into England and become its queen if given the chance (p. 232), anticipating the plot line in *Dracula* about the threat of the foreigner to procreate and dominate England.

Holly’s fear of Ayesha, as a foreigner who might dominate through procreation, capitalizes on the sublime as an experience that involves suspension of space and time. Even as Ayesha looks ‘young’ to Holly, it is evident to him that she is
‘haunt[ed]’ by ‘memory’, ‘passion’, and ‘sorrow’ that crosses time, or goes ‘from age to age’ (pp. 153–54). Besides, as Claire Mabilat has suggested, Ayesha’s association with Isis—an Eastern feminine Other who threatens Western masculine authority because she is from another space and time—contributes significantly to Ayesha’s ability to induce awe and terror in Holly. Her use of veils, which hide her beauty from but also make her alluring to Holly, and her musical voice, which operates as a ‘metaphorical veil’ protecting her from men as she seduces them, are part of the ‘Isis myth’ she creates around herself.33 Mabilat points out that Ayesha’s voice sounds like ‘bells’, which were used in ancient Egyptian culture to ‘safeguard against the influence of evil spirits’, and in sequels to She, Ayesha carries a sistrum, the ringing Egyptian instrument that Hathor and Isis used to drive away malevolence.34

No doubt, Holly’s initial encounter with Ayesha evokes a sublime feeling in him that is produced through her use of veils and her voice. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the romance, Holly describes his first sight of Ayesha as she draws aside a curtain/veil: ‘[T]he curtain was drawn, and a tall figure stood before us. […] I felt more frightened than ever at this ghost-like apparition, and my hair began to rise upon my head as the feeling crept over me that I was in the presence of something that was not quite canny’ (She, p. 143). This moment in the narrative might also be seen as an example of Freud’s ‘the uncanny’, which, as Hugh Haughton observes, ‘is, unlike Burke’s Sublime, a paradoxical mark of modernity’, since the person who encounters the uncanny ‘experiences the return of the primitive in an apparently modern and secular context’.35 Yet, Freud’s concept of the uncanny is rooted in Burke’s notion of the sublime, since Freud himself indicates in his 1919 essay on the topic that he undertakes a task similar to that of Burke—to ‘move beyond an idea of aesthetics “restricted to the theory of beauty” … to explore an aesthetics of anxiety’.36

The anxiety Holly feels at seeing Ayesha is produced by the uncanny convergence of the past with the modern, but this feeling also is rooted in the sublime, especially when we consider Ayesha as an ancient Egyptian woman, who is able to evoke the sublime primarily through her connection to the past. Immediately after Ayesha pulls the curtain aside, she invites Holly into her ‘recess[ed]’ room behind the curtain, where she relays the details her life, which has spanned two thousand years, and asks questions of Holly that suggest she remains firmly rooted in the past: ‘[T]here is yet an Egypt? And which Pharaoh
sits upon the throne? (She, p. 146). Ayesha’s connection to the past ‘bewilder[s]’ Holly, a form of confusion that might be associated with encountering the sublime, since Holly does not understand how any woman could live so long (p. 148), and Ayesha’s effect on Holly anticipates the power of outside forces and disruption of fixed laws about space and time that are central to Lovecraft’s weird tale.

Once under Ayesha’s spell, Holly is able to access alternate spaces and times with her as his guide. Recent editorial introductions to She cite Haggard’s attention to the role of space and time in his description of Kôr, the ancient city Ayesha shows Holly and Leo on their way to the flame of Life, but they do not discuss Haggard’s explicit linking of Kôr’s expansive time and space to the procreative qualities of the sublime ancient Egyptian woman. As described in She, Kôr contains ‘miles upon miles of ruins—columns, temples, shrines, and the palaces of kings’ (p. 235) and ‘space upon space of empty chambers that spoke more eloquently to the imagination than any crowded streets’ (p. 238), making it similar to the ancient cities Lovecraft describes in his tales. Holly compares one of the city’s temples to El-Karnac on the Nile, and Ayesha states that she, Kallikrates, and ‘that Egyptian snake’ (presumably Amenartes) stayed in a chamber of this temple two thousand years ago (p. 237). In addition, Kôr’s Temple of Truth features a ‘nude’ statue of a woman with her ‘face […] thinly veiled’ and her ‘arms […] outstretched’, offering to any man who ‘unveils’ her the ‘sweet children of knowledge and good works’ (pp. 239–40). Kathy Alexis Psomiades has shown that Holly ‘literaliz[es]’ the metaphor of ‘the Goddess Truth’ by directly connecting the statue and Ayesha, since he says that ‘Ayesha was veiled like the marbled Truth’. Although Hathor and Isis are not directly referenced in Haggard’s romance, they play a role similar to the Goddess Truth, and Haggard implies that Kôr offers something to men precisely because of their link to ancient Egyptian women’s procreative power.

The sublime woman who awes and terrorizes because she can access alternate spaces and times and because she possesses the procreative abilities of ancient Egyptian goddesses is developed in relation to traditional history in Haggard’s next romance, Cleopatra. Though few critics have written extensively about this work, the few who have agree that Cleopatra is a more ‘historical’ version of She, with the title character appearing similar to Ayesha because she uses her overwhelming beauty to bring male characters into submission. Haggard’s memoir indicates that his first trip to Egypt was used to develop specific details in Cleopatra: he recounts
witnessing ‘millions of bats’ in the Pharaoh Seti’s tomb and translating this scene directly into Cleopatra when the main characters are ‘haunted’ by a ‘great bat’ while searching for valuable jewels in the tomb of Men-kau-ra. Analyzing Cleopatra is beneficial in understanding Haggard as a precursor to Lovecraft, or Lovecraft’s work as a site for Haggard’s ‘weirdness’ to re-emerge, since Cleopatra illustrates how sublime historical women with ties to Egypt evoke the feelings central to Lovecraft’s tales. Narrated by Harmachis, the romance traces Harmachis’s attempt to undermine a corrupt Cleopatra’s rule in Egypt. Of course, he falls in love with Cleopatra but takes ‘vengeance’ on her (as evident in the subtitle to the novel, Being an Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis, the Royal Egyptian, as Set Forth by His Own Hand) after she abandons him for Antony. Though Cleopatra’s affiliation with Isis is represented as performative rather than genuine, as it is represented in the case of Ayesha, Cleopatra shares with Ayesha an ability to awe and terrorize precisely because she is able to access alternate spaces and times.

Framing his story as one of a ‘fallen’ man who ‘forgot the voice of God in hearkening to the voice of woman’, Harmachis puts considerable emphasis on the importance of mother figures in ancient Egypt, noting that while his mother died shortly after his birth, ‘the Hathors filled [his] dying mother with the Spirit of Prophecy’ before her death, ensuring that Harmachis would become a priest of Isis. Harmachis presents Isis as a positive, supportive force, referring to her as ‘Mother Isis’ and praying to her for guidance (p. 36–37). He recognizes her as symbolizing ‘unending Birth’ (p. 58), similar to the role Ayesha believes she plays when she walks into the flame of Life. J. Jeffrey Franklin has argued that Haggard’s portrayal of Isis is as the ‘immanently divine’, akin to the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition, and her role in the romance supports the Christian idea that Harmachis must atone for his sin: the ‘temptation of women’, which manifests itself as seduction by Cleopatra. ‘Resurrection, forgiveness, and redemption […] are the blessings of Isis’ in Haggard’s view, a view that acknowledges the influence of ancient Egyptian religion on Christianity but does not allow this influence to overshadow Christianity.

In opposition to Isis, Cleopatra represents the ‘negative side’ of the ‘duality’ of the ‘divine feminine’, which ‘Haggard’s male protagonists never can either resist or possess’. In Haggard’s romance, Cleopatra is not a mother figure akin to Isis. Except in reference to bringing her son to the throne of Egypt (Haggard, Cleopatra, p. 46), she is never referred to as a mother, despite the fact that she had
four children. Instead, she is characterized as someone against whom Egypt ‘boils
and seethes’ because of her affiliations with the Romans (p. 46). She has fooled
the Egyptian people by ‘dress[ing] in the robes of the Holy Isis’ and referring to
herself as ‘Isis come to earth’ (pp. 85, 118), even as she intends to be Isis’s ‘rival’
(p. 118). But once Harmachis meets Cleopatra, he cannot resist her. To him, she is
a ‘Wonder of the World’ who ‘shines as a star on the twilight’s glow’ as she lies on
her ‘silken couch’ in her ‘curtain[ed]’ and ‘perfumed chamber’ (p. 146). In making
Cleopatra primarily an awesome seducer of men, Haggard follows late-nineteenth
and early-twentieth-century productions of Shakespeare’s play, which reinforce
Shakespeare’s decision to de-emphasize Cleopatra’s motherhood in favor of
emphasizing her role as a lover.46

Still, even as Haggard’s Cleopatra is a clear contrast to Isis, Mabilat points
out that Cleopatra aligns herself with Isis in ways that make her comparable to
the threateningly sublime Ayesha. The ‘music of [Cleopatra’s] speech’ reminds
readers of Ayesha’s ‘dark and deadly’ songs,47 and the ‘kiss of death’ Cleopatra
gives Harmachis—who as he dies cries out that he ‘[s]till must hug this serpent
to my heart’ and ‘[s]till in my ears must ring that low laugh of triumph’ from
Cleopatra (Cleopatra, pp. 335–36)—mirrors the ones Ayesha gives to Leo in
She.48

Furthermore, I would argue that by replacing the purely fantastical Ayesha with the
more ‘historical’ Cleopatra, Haggard heightens the threat of the sublime woman,
since to British readers this figure represented a threat not just to individual men’s
identities but also to modern Britain as it negotiated its relationship to Egypt.
This threat is like that of the Eastern Dracula in Stoker’s novel but perhaps is even
more menacing, since the foreigner is a woman.

The threat of the woman foreigner points to a broader issue at play in
Haggard’s work—the interplay of history and myth, realism and imagination, and
straightforward description and metaphor. Among the many critics who discuss
this interplay, Psomiades has compellingly shown that the weird in Haggard’s
work is evidence of the complex dynamic between realism and imagination that
already was at work at the time Haggard was writing and came to be associated
with Freud’s twentieth-century method of finding ‘hidden meanings’ via myth.49
It is not surprising that some readers of Haggard’s work did not separate his
imaginative elements from reality. Wilkie Collins stated that he was ‘already
adrift in that boat among the swamps of the fatal coast […] longing to make
an African Discovery’ when reading She,50 and Andrew Lang, one of Haggard’s
primary influences in terms of incorporating myth into his writing, characterized the opening of a draft of *Cleopatra* as possessing ‘a kind of living life’ that Lang hoped Haggard would reproduce throughout the book.\(^{51}\) Letting ‘Trope become truth’,\(^{52}\) the ‘editor’ of *She* himself recognizes the complexity of the relationship between realism and imagination when he states that readers themselves will have to determine what the ‘history’ of Ayesha means, since he has abandoned the idea that it is ‘some gigantic allegory’, even as he believes that the narrative ‘bear[s] the stamp of truth’ (*She*, pp. 38–39).

Other readers believed that the imaginative elements in Haggard’s work were equally important, or even superior to, his realist elements. C. S. Lewis appreciated the ‘mythopoetic dimension’ of Haggard’s work, and Rudyard Kipling commented that Haggard was ‘a whale at parables and allegories’.\(^{53}\) These imaginative elements served as conventions that Norman Vance argues allow writers to ‘point […] to meaning beyond the specifics of time and place’.\(^{54}\) Perhaps the most important imaginative element Haggard uses in relation to his women characters in *She* and *Cleopatra* is the symbol of the serpent, which is also referred to as the uraeus or cobra and sometimes is worn by Isis on her head or held in her hands.\(^{55}\) The uraeus is incorporated from the serpent goddess Wadjet, who ‘inspires fear’ but also protects and ‘ensures […] continued power’ of important people, especially Egyptian kings.\(^{56}\) In *She*, Holly describes Ayesha as having ‘a certain serpent-like grace that was more than human’, and her costume includes a belt with ‘a double-headed snake of solid gold’ (p. 153). Moreover, when Ayesha spots the scarab ring Holly wears, she ‘throw[s] her head back like a snake about to strike’ if he doesn’t tell her how he acquired the ring (p. 154). Cleopatra also is presented as a serpent, as evident in Harmachis’s initial description of her: ‘On her head was the covering of Isis, the golden horns between which rested the moon’s round disk and the emblem of Osiris’ throne, with the uraeus twined around […] Her breast was bare, but under it was a garment that glistened like the scaly covering of a snake’ (*Cleopatra*, p. 90). Additionally, Isis is described as snake-like by Harmachis, who sees her as a ‘fiery snake’ emerging from a ‘dark cloud’ on a ‘horned moon’ when he asks for her guidance after the death of his father (pp. 258–59).

Harmachis’s experience seeing Isis when she appears as a snake is not unlike that of Holly seeing Ayesha, since Harmachis’s knees ‘waxed loose in the presence of the Glory’ (p. 259), and he recognizes that Isis represents access to alternate spaces and times. She has ‘watched Universes wither, wane, and, beneath the
breath of Time, melt into nothingness; again to gather, and re-born, thread the maze of space’ (pp. 260–61). Cleopatra, too, represents access to alternate spaces and times, since she sings to Harmachis about time standing still when they are together (p. 148), and Harmachis characterizes the time spent with her as being in a different world: ‘[A]s she sang, I seemed to think that we twain were indeed floating alone with the night, upon the starlit summer sea’ (p. 149). When Harmachis takes revenge on Cleopatra, she turns to Antony as someone with whom she believes she will cross space and time. As she dies from the poison given to her by Harmachis, she curses Harmachis but envisions life after death with Antony: ‘O Antony! I come, my Antony!—I come to thy own dear arms! Soon I shall find thee, and, wrapped in a love undying and divine, together we will float through all the depths of space’ (p. 322). Though the alternate spaces and times that Cleopatra accesses may not be as complex as that accessed by Ayesha, both women affect the men who encounter them because they are able to suspend traditional laws of physics, creating a sense of the weird.

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The sublime women in She and Cleopatra anticipate the portrayal of women who contribute to a sense of the weird in Lovecraft’s tales because of their connections to ancient civilizations and their ability to cross space and time in ways most ordinary people are not able to do. Although Haggard could not explicitly link his work as a nineteenth-century romance writer to that of the early twentieth-century writer of weird tales, he saw an opportunity to extend the romance genre in ways that might develop into what we now call science fiction, defined as fiction that allows writers ‘to situate their stories anywhere they like—on Earth, on alien worlds, […] in the past, present, or future—and they can have their characters do anything they like, unrestricted by the limitations of the real world’. In his memoir, Haggard notes that although the romance could not portray ‘the utterly alien life of another world or planet with which human beings cannot possibly have any touch’, he did think ‘new avenues may open to those unborn scribes of which at present we can catch no glimpse’. In addition, he notes that Andrew Lang believed She was ‘a story from the literature of another planet’. If nothing else, Haggard anticipated future-orientated literary genres, and, as I argue here, the sublime women in his Egypt-centered works anticipate the portrayal of women in the work of Lovecraft, who acknowledged Haggard’s
romances as weird. Writing to the science fiction writer Donald Wandrei in 1927, Lovecraft listed Haggard’s *She* among the ‘weird-literary lacunae’ he planned to loan Wandrei, and in 1933, writing to the poet Elizabeth Toldridge, Lovecraft indicated that Haggard was among the authors whom Victorians ‘went in strongly for’ in their obsession with ‘weird fiction’. Furthermore, Lovecraft’s Commonplace Book includes a transcription of a footnote from Haggard and Lang’s coauthored *World’s Desire* (1890), which explains how Meriamun, an ancient Egyptian queen who is associated with Hathor and Isis via the serpent, speaks the ‘dead tongue’ found in ‘the mysterious and indecipherable ancient books’ of ‘old Egypt’. The serpent figure, which I already have shown to be central in *She* and *Cleopatra*, also is central in Lovecraft’s ‘Medusa’s Coil’, where Isis and her Greek counterpart Tanit shape Marceline’s ability to cross boundaries of space and time.

Very little critical attention has been given to ‘Medusa’s Coil’, though Robert H. Waugh has analyzed it in relation to Plato’s ideas about Eros as a ‘daemon’ that facilitates ‘erotic’ love, and Gina Wisker has considered it in relation to Julia Kristeva’s theories about the abject Mother and the ‘fear of her generative power’. Waugh argues that Marceline represents the necessary ‘destruction’ men encounter when they experience erotic love, in which women are the ‘spiritual lights’ who take their lovers to ‘a higher realm of being’. Furthermore, the ‘ecstasy’ of this kind of love begins ‘outside of time’, when the soul ‘stands outside itself’, and Marceline, because she is associated with Lovecraft’s imagined ancient city R’lyeh and ‘incarnates something older than anything that can be located within human prehistory’, facilitates this process of erotic love. Wisker details how Lovecraft’s early-twentieth-century upbringing, in which he was taught to see himself as a member of a ‘degenerate’ family and encouraged to abstain from sex, resulted in a fear of miscegenation that contributed to his presentation of Marceline as an abject Mother. Marceline is one of the many ‘monstrous’ women in his stories who ‘cause […] disgust and fear’ because they ‘cross into worlds that run on different geometrics and dimensions than our own’. Many of these women, Wisker points out, are ‘mothers or grandmothers’, and Marceline’s potential for procreation is especially threatening to men who share Lovecraft’s fear of miscegenation, since she is revealed to be a black woman at the end of the story.

Both Wisker and Waugh mention Marceline’s association with ancient Egypt, but neither examines it in detail. I would like to conclude my discussion.
by examining this association in relation to Haggard’s sublime women, in order
to show the ways in which we might consider how Haggard’s Victorian weird
resurfaces in Lovecraft’s modern writing. Similar to Haggard’s women, Marceline
is sublime because of her ties to ancient Egypt, her ability to cross space and
time, and her ability to procreate. Early in the story, de Russy describes his son
Denis’s relationship with Marceline, whom he initially encounters while visiting
his friend, Frank Marsh, in Paris. Through Marsh, Denis encountered ‘some cult
of prehistoric Egyptian and Carthaginian magic […] some nonsensical thing
that pretended to reach back to forgotten sources of hidden truth in lost African
civilizations […] and that had a lot of gibberish connected with snakes and
human hair’.70 De Russy also relays how Denis described Marceline, a ‘priestess’ in
the cult, in relation to specific women from ancient Greek and Egyptian culture:
‘Denis used to quote Marsh as saying odd things about the veiled facts behind the
legend of Medusa’s snaky locks—and behind the later Ptolemaic myth of Berenice,
who offered up her hair to save her husband-brother’ (p. 32). Like Ayesha and
Cleopatra, Marceline is perceived as having inhabited ancient civilizations that
allow her to cross space and time, and Marceline describes herself in relationship
to Greek and Egyptian women, calling herself Tanit-Isis while still in Paris,
but giving up that name and supposedly her position as cult priestess when she
marries Denis and moves to the American South with him (pp. 32–33). As the
Greek version of Isis, Tanit is a ‘Virgin Mother’, a ‘goddess of fertility’ but ‘also
a force for death and destruction’, the ‘mother of all monsters’, and the ‘mother
of snakes’.71 In Lovecraft’s story, Tanit and Isis clearly are one; when Marceline
dies after purportedly killing Marsh and causing Denis’s suicide, an old Zulu
woman servant who works for de Russy, Sophonisba, mourns Marceline’s death
by proclaiming, ‘[P]ore Missy Tanit, pore Missy Isis…. No mo’Tanit! No mo’Isis!
[…] She daid [dead]!’ (‘Medusa’s Coil’, p. 45).

Though Sophonisba presents Marceline’s connection to Egypt in a sympathetic
manner, de Russy’s view is entirely negative. Before Marsh’s and Denis’s deaths,
which are described by de Russy as caused by a fit of rage from Marceline in
which her coiled hair becomes a snake that strangles Marsh and prompts Denis
to kill himself (p. 45), de Russy witnesses Marceline’s ‘alluring’ effect on Denis and
believes she takes Denis away from his friends (p. 32). Furthermore, after Marsh’s
and Denis’s deaths, de Russy sees a painting of Marceline by Marsh, which he
believes captures the ‘truth’ about her: that she is ‘a high priestess’ who holds a
‘witches’ sabbat’ with ‘black shaggy entities that are not quite goats’, ‘the crocodile-headed beast with three legs and a dorsal row of tentacles’, and ‘the flat-nosed Aegipans dancing in a pattern that Egypt’s priests knew and called accursed!’ (p. 48). Yet, the rituals Marceline performs extend to a place and time before Egypt and other ancient civilizations, an interesting connection to Haggard’s She, where Ayesha refers to people of Kôr as pre-Egyptian (She, p. 171). Of the scene in the painting that depicts Marceline, de Russy says, ‘but the scene wasn’t Egypt—it was behind Egypt; behind even Atlantis; behind fabled Mu, and myth-whispered Lemuria. It was the ultimate fountain-head of all horror on this earth, and the symbolism shewed only too clearly how integral a part of it Marceline was’ (‘Medusa’s Coil’, p. 48). De Russy goes on to say that he thinks the scene ‘must be the unmentionable R’lyeh’ (p. 48), a sunken city in the South Pacific that was part of the Cthulhu mythos Lovecraft developed in his stories, beginning with ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928).

Interestingly, there are no women in Lovecraft’s initial articulation of this mythos in ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in which the narrator of the story learns about various encounters with a set of evil gods called the Great Old Ones who come to the earth from the sky, but Lovecraft clearly contextualizes Marceline in relation to this mythos through de Russy’s comment about her relationship to R’lyeh. Furthermore, Wisker has shown how Lovecraft associates other ‘monstrous women’ with the Cthulhu mythos, and these women produce odd offspring within this mythical world. For example, in ‘The Dunwich Horror’ (1929), Lavinia Whatley procreates with an Elder God from the Cthulhu myth, Yog-Sothoth, and produces ‘nightmarish’ children, and Shub-Niggurath, ‘the most extreme case of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos of procreative female monsters’, appears in multiple stories, beginning with ‘The Last Test’ (1928). Carl H. Sederholm has extended Wisker’s analysis to show that these women are also monstrous because they are racially different: quoting Gavin Callaghan, Sederholm argues that Shub-Niggurath links Lovecraft’s ‘fears of an archetypal Great Mother with an equally strange concern with racial difference’, and Sederholm believes Lavinia Whatley is especially ‘abject’ because she is a ‘somewhat deformed, unattractive albino woman’ who is ‘a (possibly) willing participant of a terrible union’ with Yog-Sothoth that produces a ‘dark, goatish-looking infant’.

Like Ayesha, Marceline does not procreate literally, but she does metaphorically, since she is described by de Russy and the narrator of the story as a being
who grows beyond normal boundaries and continues to live even after she is dead. Marsh, who worships Marceline, describes her as ‘a magnificent being, a splendid focus of cosmic forces who has the right to be called divine if anything on earth has!’ (‘Medusa’s Coil’, p. 37), and when de Russy sees Marsh’s painting, he can see she is part of a ‘scene’ in which ‘an exterior or an interior’ cannot be determined and in which ‘[t]he geometry of the whole thing is crazy—one gets the acute and obtuse angles all mixed up’ (p. 47). While these space/time boundary-crossings are threatening to de Russy, the most threatening aspect of Marceline is that she continues to live even after her death. Her dead body is ‘bloated, discolored’, but her hair is ‘not even slightly decayed’ (p. 50, emphasis in original). Furthermore, he believes that ‘She and her hair will come up out of their graves’ (p. 51, emphasis in original), indicating that, from de Russy’s perspective, the life/death boundary is especially blurred when the boundary-crosser is associated with the deep past, as Marceline is with R’lyeh. De Russy characterizes his life after being terrorized by Marceline as no different from death: ‘I don’t even dare to die’, he says, ‘for life and death are all one to those in the clutch of what came out of R’lyeh. […] Medusa’s coil has got me, and it will always be the same’ (p. 49).

The narrator confirms de Russy’s view of Marceline in the last lines of the story, stating that her ‘serpent-hair must even now be brooding and twining vampirically around an artist’s skeleton’ in the de Russy house (p. 53). Then, he explains why this is the case: ‘No wonder she owned a link with that old witch-woman Sophonisba—for, though in deceitfully slight proportion, Marceline was a loathsome, bestial thing, and her forebears had come from Africa’ (p. 53). In an earlier version of the story, which was constructed by Lovecraft in 1930 before August Derleth significantly edited the narrative for its publication in *Weird Tales*, the last line is more straightforward, stating ‘Marceline was a negress’ instead of ‘Marceline was a loathsome, bestial thing, and her forebears had come from Africa’. Moreover, a synopsis of the story constructed by Lovecraft refers to the last line of the story and uses the term ‘negress’ in this reference as well. Although W. Scott Poole does not discuss ‘Medusa’s Coil’ in his article about Lovecraft’s understanding of witchcraft, he does explain how the witch-cult functions in Lovecraft’s 1932 story ‘Dreams in the Witch House’, in which ‘a transdimensional witch’, Keziah Mason, returns from her death to ‘haunt the odd geometrics’ of the room occupied by a math student. Lovecraft’s obsession with a ‘global witch cult’, which provides the ‘atmosphere’ and ‘narrative’ for the Cthulhu mythos,
was based on the Egyptologist Margaret Murray's theory that the Christian Church had constructed the idea of Satan to 'demonize' the 'ancient religion' of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{80} Still, Lovecraft 'racialized' Murray's ideas, linking the 'primitive rites' of witches 'to his notion of a hierarchy of primitive and superior races'.\textsuperscript{81}

In making Marceline a sublime woman who is simultaneously associated with ancient Egyptian goddesses and witches in the American South and represented by the black servant Sophonisba, Lovecraft presents the threat of procreation by a black woman as especially overwhelming.

Marceline's similarity to Haggard's sublime women is primarily through her association with ancient Egypt, her ability to cross space and time, and her ability to procreate, but her direct link to black African culture sets her apart from Haggard's women, since both Ayesha and Cleopatra are described as 'white', even as they also are described as 'Arab' (Ayesha) and 'Grecian' (Cleopatra) (\textit{She}, pp. 43, 146; \textit{Cleopatra}, pp. 107, 90). Haggard does engage the issue of miscegenation in \textit{She}, where the Amahagger are described as 'varied in their degree of darkness of skin' (p. 93), a characterization critics have argued point to Haggard's dislike for the mixing of races.\textsuperscript{82} Still, in \textit{King Solomon's Mines} he presents 'pure' blacks, such as the Zulus, as 'noble savages',\textsuperscript{83} a characterization critics have attributed to Haggard's life experience in Natal as a member of Lieutenant-Governor Henry Bulwer's staff in the mid-1870s.\textsuperscript{84} Haggard's portrayal of ancient Egypt—as awe-inspiring even as it had the potential to terrorize through its sublime women—may follow a similar logic to his view of the Zulus, since ancient Egyptians were often seen as 'pure', or even 'white', in comparison to nineteenth-century Egyptians, who were perceived by Haggard and other nineteenth-century Britons as having been 'corrupted' by intermixing with Arabs.\textsuperscript{85}

Nevertheless, any views Haggard might have had about miscegenation do not result in a depiction of Ayesha or Cleopatra as evil, while Lovecraft clearly characterizes Marceline as threatening because of her ability to procreate across racial boundaries. Lovecraft's upbringing, which included his mother's view that Lovecraft looked 'hideous', encouraged him to view the very act of procreation as dangerous.\textsuperscript{86} Furthermore, his cultural experiences in early twentieth-century America resulted in his embrace of racist views about black and Jewish people in the 1920s, and these views developed into fascism as Lovecraft was influenced by German and Italian far-right political movements in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{87} Marceline's negative association with black African and African-American culture, then, is
one significant difference between the two authors’ representations of the sublime woman, and one that might be understood as variations in views about race that are both individual and cultural.

Although there are differences in Haggard’s and Lovecraft’s respective visions of sublime women and their role in constituting ‘the weird’ that can be attributed to writing in distinct historical periods, it is important to recognize the connections between the two writers’ work across these periods. By acknowledging Haggard’s position as a precursor to Lovecraft, or how Haggard’s ‘Victorian weird’ resurfaces in Lovecraft’s modern writing, we can better understand the development of the twentieth-century weird tale and the role of sublime women in the effect produced by this genre. Certainly, the weird tale is ‘more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains’, as Lovecraft wrote in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*.88 The weird tale also explores the ‘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’,89 and sublime Egyptian women are central to the articulation of Victorian and modern ways of pushing the boundaries of space and time to reconceptualize these conventions of the material world.

*Loyola Marymount University*

*myoungki@lmu.edu*

NOTES

3 S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale: Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsay, Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 1, 6. Joshi characterizes Lovecraft’s definition of the weird tale as ‘narrow’ because he seems to exclude ‘non-supernatural horror’, even as he includes in the genre authors who have written non-supernatural horror (p. 6).
5 Ibid., p. 348.
6 Ibid., p. 349.
7 Ibid., pp. 349–50.
10 Ibid., p. 368.


14 Ibid., II, 86–88.

15 Ibid., II, 255.


18 Ibid., p. 8.


27 Ibid., p. 142.


29 These patriarchal views also align with those of Arthur Machen, discussed in Neil Hultgren’s essay in this issue (pp. 87–109). Machen’s representation of horror as connected to sexualized rituals such as the witch’s Sabbath are referenced in Hultgren’s essay.


31 Ibid.


34 Ibid., pp. 117–18.


36 Ibid., p. xlii.


41 H. Rider Haggard, *Cleopatra: Being an Account of the Fall and Vengeance of Harmachis, the Royal Egyptian, as Set Forth by His Own Hand* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., Ltd., 1889), pp. 13, 15; subsequent references to this text appear in parentheses.


43 Ibid., p. 159.

44 Ibid., pp. 160, 162–63.

45 Ibid., p. 159.


48 Ibid., p. 121. Ayesha also kills Leo by kissing him near the end of Haggard’s sequel to *She, Ayesha: The Return of ‘She’* (1905).

49 Psomiades, ‘Hidden Meaning’, para. 3 of 36


51 Haggard, *Days*, I, 269.


54 Ibid., p. 171.


56 Ibid., p. 73.


58 Haggard, *Days*, II, 90, 92.


64 Waugh, ‘Ecstasies’, p. 137.

65 Ibid., pp. 139, 150.


67 Ibid., p. 33.

68 Ibid., pp. 41–42.

69 Ibid., p. 38; Waugh, ‘Ecstasies’, p. 149.

70 Z. B. Bishop [H. P. Lovecraft], ‘Medusa’s Coil’, *Weird Tales* (January 1939), 26–53 (pp. 31–32); subsequent references to this text are in parenthetical citations.


73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., p. 50.


76 Ibid., p. 142.


80 Ibid., p. 218.

81 Ibid., p. 220.


83 Ibid.


86 Wisker, ‘Liminal Women’, p. 34.


89 Ibid., pp. 349–50.
Dustin Friedman

Weird Sex:
*Teleny* and the History of Sexuality

The story usually goes like this: in 1890 Oscar Wilde purchased a number of French novels and books ‘designated by the euphemism of “socratic”’ from Charles Hirsch, a clandestine erotic bookseller in London.¹ Some days later, Wilde dropped off at Hirsch’s establishment a ‘tied up and carefully sealed’ manuscript (p. 172). This document was called for, taken away, and returned three times by three different men before Hirsch’s curiosity finally drove him to open the package. Inside, he found the jointly-written manuscript version of what would eventually be published as *Teleny or the Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance of To-Day* (1893), which Brian Reade claims was ‘the one English novel until then in which the main story was concerned with homosexuality at its fullest extent’.² The novel describes the sexual awakening of Camille Des Grieux, a young businessman, through an affair with the Hungarian pianist René Teleny. Hirsch, impressed by what he called the ‘extended scholarship, […] elegant style, [and] sustained dramatic interest’ of the book’s defense of same-sex desire, claimed to have heard no more about *Teleny* until it appeared three years later under the Cosmopolita erotica imprint published by Leonard Smithers, who would soon become famous as the publisher of England’s major decadent authors (p. 173). It was produced in a richly bound edition of two hundred copies.
sitting for five guineas each. According to Hirsch, however, the Cosmopoli edition differed significantly from the handwritten manuscript he read: it switched the setting of the action from London to France (supposedly Paris, though this version of the novel never specifies the city by name) and removed the original manuscript’s prologue.3

This narrative of Teleny’s genesis has been irresistibly suggestive for critics, especially those who have used the novel to reconstruct a crucial moment in the history of Western sexuality. Prominently featuring Wilde, the man considered by many to be the originator of the modern image of the homosexual, as he organizes the circulation of a text jointly written by a group of men as they take turns describing their desires and the unique sense of self those desires imply, Hirsch’s story operates almost perfectly as an allegory for the formation of homosexual self-identification at the Victorian fin de siècle. The key elements are all there: secrecy that paradoxically provides an enabling opportunity for the inscription of homoerotic desire; the clandestine textual circulation that creates the foundation for sexual identity; and a defense of that new identity category through recourse to the rhetoric of biological ‘naturalness’. Teleny would appear to encapsulate the various discursive forces operating at the watershed moment when, as Michel Foucault famously writes in the History of Sexuality, ‘the aberration’ of the ‘sodomite’ transforms into the ‘species’ of the ‘homosexual’.4

The problem, however, is that this oft-repeated story is entirely apocryphal. Hirsch did not offer his history of Teleny’s composition until 1934, some forty-one years after its initial publication, in the preface to his French translation of the text. While Hirsch claimed his edition was based on the original manuscript, switching the location ‘back’ to London and including the ‘original’ prologue, there is no documentary evidence to support any of his claims. Until quite recently, however, this dubious story was repeated with greater or lesser degrees of credulity in nearly every major analysis of the novel for the past four decades.

Why has this story been seized upon so readily? I argue that a close examination of the novel’s most explicitly pornographic scenes reveals that they do not anticipate the bourgeois, individualistic liberal gay subject described by Foucault and suggested by allegorical readings of Hirsch, but are instead more closely related to the cosmic horrors found in the genre of weird fiction. While Hirsch’s account is some of the only information we have about the origins of this historically significant yet mysterious text, critics’ determination to make
interpreting hay out of this dubious story, to the point where it becomes central to their arguments about Teleny, also points to a determined investment in a particular conceptual framework for understanding the history of Victorian sexuality.

Recurrent references to Wilde’s involvement with the lost original manuscript of Teleny are, among other things, an attempt to lend literary and historical credibility to an otherwise disreputable text. Critics thereby reenact a phenomenon not commonly associated with gay pornography, but with another less-than-respectable mode of writing also that also developed in England during the 1890s: weird fiction. Leif Sorensen and Roger Luckhurst have both identified ‘pseudobiblia, the invention of fake books, fake libraries, and fake traditions’ as a literary strategy that ‘lies at the core of the weird archive’ going back to the late Victorian tales of Arthur Machen and M. R. James. According to Sorensen, pseudobiblia is an attempt to make up for the ‘lack [of the] kind of institutional standing that renders an archive official or legitimate’, and fulfills the need to belong to an alternative canon that does not actually exist. Smithers, one of the only publishers willing to take on Wilde’s works after his imprisonment, claimed in his ‘Adverts Prospectus’ for Teleny that it contained ‘scenes which surpassed in freedom the wildest license’, and ‘the culture of its author’s style,’ a phrase Amanda Mordavsky Caleb asserts was meant to punningly suggest Wilde’s involvement with the original version of the text without affirming it explicitly. Due in part to this connection, Smithers claimed that Teleny’s handling of the combination of literary polish with homosexual eroticism was an innovation worthy of a minor form of canonicity: ‘It is a book’, he said, ‘which will certainly rank as the chief of its class, and it may truthfully be said to make a new departure in English amatory literature.’

Unquestionably, Teleny’s wealth of cultural references […] suggests that this work sought to lend scholarly authority to its impertinent portrayal of gay sex. References to the lost original manuscript of Teleny are, despite their appearance in legitimate academic criticism, similar to weird fiction’s creation of a legacy for imaginary occult texts like the Necronomicon, which was first referred to in the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and subsequently proliferated in texts by later authors.

Both Teleny and weird fiction writing inhabited the same decadent cultural milieu. In 1892, the year before he published Teleny, Smithers published Machen’s
translation of the French pornographic text *The Memoirs of Jacques*. Machen’s most famous early novels, *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light* (1894) and *The Three Imposters; or, the Transmutations* (1895), were all published in the Bodley Head’s decadent Keynotes series.10 After the scandal of the Wilde trials in 1895, the publisher John Lane requested that Machen expurgate *The Three Imposters*, a novel which, while not explicitly pornographic, describes the titular characters wandering the streets of London in search of a coin commemorating an orgy put on by the Roman Emperor Tiberius and culminates in a mysterious, violent, and implicitly sexual pagan ritual.11 The setting of *Teleny* in London (or Paris), with its depictions of clandestine gay sex parties in aristocratic homes and phantasmagoric public spaces cruised by ‘night-walkers […] sickening faces of effete, womanish men […] trying to beguile [him] by all that is nauseous’, that give Des Grieux a ‘creepy feeling’ that ‘nevertheless was so entirely new that I must say it rather interested [one]’, anticipates depictions of urban wandering in search of the perverse found in both *The Three Imposters* and Machen’s *The London Adventure; or, the Art of Walking* (1924) (pp. 85, 87, 86). In this latter volume, Machen describes ‘the magic touch which redeems and exalts the dullness of things’ found in ‘unknown, unvisited square’ and introduces, in Luckhurst’s words, ‘the possibility of levering open other realities of the mundane world by stumbling across them’.12

In *Teleny*, this other world is the underground gay social and sexual network that hides its luridness just below the surface of everyday life in the metropolis.

While there does not seem to be definitive evidence that Machen was influenced directly by *Teleny* or vice versa, I maintain that these connections are more than merely incidental, and moreover, that their implications have been obscured by the desire to write *Teleny* into a Foucauldian version of the history of sexuality. While it is clear that the novel is first and foremost a gay pornographic text, many episodes exhibit qualities more commonly associated with the weird. Lovecraft, in his well-known essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), asserts:

Most of the choicest weird work is unconscious; appearing in memorable fragments scattered through material whose massed effect may be of a very different cast. […] If the proper sensations are excited, such a ‘high spot’ must be admitted on
its own merits as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is later dragged down.\textsuperscript{13}

This definition has led James Machin to describe the weird as a literary ‘mode’ rather than a genre, giving one ‘free rein to identify “weird elements” in other works that could never convincingly be wholly appropriated as weird fiction, were it a genre’.\textsuperscript{14}

It is certainly true that \textit{Teleny} presents to us what looks like a recognizably modern understanding of gay identity, written as it was during an era when law and medicine were creating new sexual typologies and categories. Yet the presence of the weird mode in one of the earliest identifiably ‘homosexual’ texts suggests that we should reconsider elements of the now-standard accounts of the history of sexuality that has taken root in Victorian studies. Like weird fiction, \textit{Teleny} can also be read as a response to ‘scientific discovery in the nineteenth century’ which, Luckhurst writes, ‘dethroned anthropocentric conceptions of the world’.\textsuperscript{15}

Although it is not often considered in the context of weird fiction, this would include the Victorian pseudoscience of sexology, which portrayed sexual ‘perverts’ as individuals without agency, victims of uncontrollable pathological impulses. As scientific authorities consolidated their power to define the subject, they took away queers’ ability to define themselves, delimiting them to the monstrous, criminally degenerate body of the sexual pervert. As Foucault famously states, this made ‘his sexuality […] the root of all his actions, because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle’.\textsuperscript{16}

Sonja Ruehl writes that for Foucault, sexual ‘categories have a rigidifying effect, imprisoning individuals whose lives are administered under them’.\textsuperscript{17}

Attempts to characterize \textit{Teleny} as part of what he calls the ‘reverse discourse’ of homosexuality—a conscious response to the prison of gay identity by defending same-sex desire as innate, natural, and nonthreatening—domesticate what is most disturbing about the novel: its often horrific portrayals of homo- and heteroerotic desire operating outside the logic of individual intention, intertwining with a drive to annihilate both the subject and the object of erotic desire.

Lovecraft defined the weird as a

breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces.

[…] 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.  

Similarly, Teleny depicts all sexual acts, both homosexual and heterosexual, as embodying a fantastic yet nevertheless entirely material energy that erupts into everyday life and violates the ostensibly ‘natural’ laws of Victorian domestic ideology. Rather than attempting to redeem gay identity from pathology, Teleny universalizes sexology’s dehumanization of the sexual subject. It shows how all forms of sexuality, when examined with the intensity and attention to detail characteristic of pornography, expose the chaos underlying the ‘fixed laws of Nature’, sharing weird fiction’s desire to destroy the philosophical foundations of liberal-humanist subjectivity. The novel turns sexology’s pathologizing of the homosexual body on its head not by reversing the discourse, but instead by showing sexual desire to be an impersonal force that is cosmically indifferent to the minds and bodies it inhabits.

**Reversing the Reverse Discourse**

To be sure, there are a small number of moments in Teleny that seem to anticipate modern liberal defenses of homosexuality. Des Grieux, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, asks

Had I committed a crime against nature when my own nature found peace and happiness thereby? If I was thus, surely it was the fault of my blood, not of myself. Who had planted nettles in my garden? Not I. They had grown there unawares, from my very childhood. (p. 107)

This is an early version of a biologically essentialist, ‘born-this-way’ understanding of same-sex desire as rooted in bodily difference and unchangeable. This has led critics to emphasize that the historical moment that produced Teleny also produced the ‘reverse discourse’ of homosexuality. According to Foucault, nineteenth-century medical and legal discourse effectively created the deviant and
pathological ‘homosexual’ subjects whose sexual practices they sought to regulate. Yet this process resulted in homosexuals consciously embracing this identity. The reverse discourse is when homosexuality ‘began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified’. Homosexuals themselves thus actively participated in the ‘multiple and mobile field of force relations wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced’.

As Aaron Ho argues in his assessment of the novel’s critical history, studies of Teleny apply [...] Foucauldian theory as an ‘unquestioned’ analytical paradigm for understanding its depiction of late Victorian homosexuality. They proffer a historicized reading that characterizes the novel as historical evidence from a key moment in the development of modern sexual identities. Ed Cohen, in his well-known and influential article ‘Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation’ (1987), portrays Wilde as Teleny’s ‘general editor and coordinator’ and states that even if Hirsch’s account of its genesis ‘proves apocryphal, the unevenness of its prose styles suggests that the novel was the collaboration of several authors and possibly a set of self-representations evolving out of the homosexual subculture in late Victorian London’. This assumption supports Cohen’s argument that the narrative is ‘a counterhegemonic representation of homoerotic desire’ and affirms ‘the naturalness of […] homoerotic experience’ by presenting the ‘new joyous possibility’ of gay identity.

Even studies that have attempted to revise Cohen’s thesis operate under the assumption that the novel represents a coherent vision of gay identity more or less identical to the one we know today. Lisa Sigel repeats the Hirsch story to call attention to ‘the simultaneous arrival of a gay identity […] and a full-fledged consumer culture’, and uses the novel as evidence of the connection between those two discourses as ‘one of the first pornographic novels to explore homosexuality as an identity rather than a practice’. Similarly, Matt Cook uses Hirsch’s narrative as evidence for the existence of ‘a circle of men, possibly centered around Wilde, working together to construct a decadent fantasy of homosexual life and sex in London’. For Diane Mason, Teleny exposes the ‘problematic’ nature of ‘this early point in recognisable gay history’, insofar as its attempts to defend same-sex desire rely on the ‘medical models’ provided by sexologists, and are thus ‘curative rather than celebratory’. As Leo Bersani has argued, the effect of this assumption
has been that literary historians of sexuality present the late Victorian era as the moment when 'an intentionally oppositional gay identity' was developed that 'by its very coherence, only repeat[ed] the restrictive and immobilizing analyses it set out to resist'. Foucault argues that oppressive power structures discursively bring into being those identities they ostensibly repress in order to consolidate the networks of power themselves. Thus, the repressive hypothesis can only function if the ideal of liberation remains available to the homosexual subject.

These studies tend to ignore the weird elements arising strangely during Teleny's most explicitly pornographic moments, which foreclose the possibility that sexual desire can ever be liberated into a healthy, unpressed expression. These episodes undermine characters' sense of self-possession and make the text an uncomfortable fit for the 'reverse discourse' narrative. The novel portrays desire as not merely out of the individual’s control, but as a force residing outside of and as a threat to the self. The first erotic encounter between the two main characters occurs when Des Grieux attends a concert where Teleny is playing. While listening to Teleny’s music, Des Grieux becomes hypnotically ‘spell-bound, yet I could hardly tell whether it was with the composition, the execution, or the player himself’ and starts seeing visions of ‘the Alhambra’, ‘the sun-lit sands of Egypt’, and ‘the gorgeous towns of Sodom and Gomorrah’ (pp. 6–7). Once ‘the pianist turned his head and cast one long, lingering, slumberous look’ at Des Grieux, his hallucinations become more intense and explicitly erotic: '[A] heavy hand seemed to be laid upon my lap', Des Grieux recounts, ‘something was bent and clasped and grasped, which made me faint with lust. The hand was moved up and down, slowly at first, then fast and faster in went in rhythm with the song’, bringing him to the brink of orgasm (p. 7). Later, during their first conversation, Teleny asks Des Grieux if he 'believe[s] in the transmission of thought, of feelings, of sensations' before revealing that he had the same visions, accompanied by a desire for 'that powerful withering love that shatters both the body and the soul' (p. 15). ‘Our glances met, and then there was a current between us, like a spark of electricity running along a wire, was it not?’ asks Teleny. ‘Yes, an uninterrupted current’, responds Des Grieux (p. 18).

Caleb identifies this key moment in the novel, which is both the first explicitly pornographic scene and, effectively, the beginning of Des Grieux and Teleny's romantic relationship, as partaking of the late Victorian discourses of ‘telepathy and spiritualism’. This connection is solidified during a later moment, when
Des Grieux describes how he was able to enter telepathically into the mind of both Teleny and a woman known as ‘the Countess’ while they have a heterosexual encounter; he makes reference to ‘the doings of the Psychical Society,’ more commonly known as the Society for Psychical Research, to explain how such a phenomenon was possible (p. 57). For Caleb, this indicates the extent to which the authors of Teleny had absorbed the latest scientific discourses, including sexologists’ insights into role of “psychic symptoms” [...] in many cases of sexual perversion’ (p. xv). By contrast, Robert Gray and Christopher Keep argue that the novel’s language of sexual electrification ‘signifies the productive passing of desire from one individual to another in the text’ in a way that mirror the round-robin composition of the novel, and which resists cooptation to sexology’s naming of the single, isolated, and pathological ‘homosexual’.30

Yet the paranormal qualities of Des Grieux’s experience of desire are shot through with feelings of dread, fear of the unknown, and a loss of personal agency in the face of an overwhelming material force that resides outside the self, thereby presenting a sexualized version of the weird’s depiction of a threatening, unknowable universe. He describes his psychic encounter with Teleny and the Countess as preceded by the sense that ‘my inward self seemed to disintegrate itself from my body’ (p. 50). When he becomes ‘spell-bound’ by his initial experience of homoerotic desire, he gives up his individual agency in a manner that is as odd and disturbing as it is attractive and alluring, surrendering himself to a disturbing parody of sublime vision. After Teleny stops playing, Des Grieux’s fantasies mutate from eroticism to horror. He sees Sodom and Gomorrah succumb to a fiery hail, a rain of rubies and emeralds that was consuming the cities of the plain, and he, the pianist, standing naked in the lurid light, exposing himself to the thunderbolts of heaven and to the flames of hell. As he stood there, I saw him—in my madness—change all at once to the dog-headed God of Egypt, then by degrees into a loathsome poodle. I shivered, felt sick, but speedily changed into his own form again. (pp. 7–8)

Des Grieux’s vision transforms from awe-inspiring Biblical destruction and mythical creatures from an exotic oriental past into an unsettling and campily bizarre ‘poodle’, before he finally returns to normal.
Unlike the feeling of ‘excitement but with horror’ that characterizes one’s experience of the Kantian sublime, Des Grieux’s homoerotic fantasy partakes of what China Miéville describes as weird fiction’s puncturing of ‘the supposed membrane separating the sublime’ from more quotidian experiences, and ‘allows swillage of that awe and horror from “beyond” back into the everyday […]’ The weird is a radicalised sublime backwash’.31 Rather than eliciting a new sense of either self-knowledge or group identity, Des Grieux’s homoerotic experience culminates in an odd mixture of melancholy and apprehension. ‘Analyzing my feelings’, he says after having an odd sex dream where he imagines that Teleny is his sister (a person who does not exist in real life, but only in Des Grieux’s fantasy),

I was now conscious that a new sensation has come over me—a vague feeling of uneasiness and unrest. There was an emptiness in me, still I could not understand if the void was in my heart or in my head. I had lost nothing and yet I felt lonely, forlorn, nay almost bereaved. (p. 22)

Des Grieux’s desire transforms into a ‘void’ and an ‘emptiness,’ an unidentifiable lack that creates a ‘vague’ and subtle sense of dread.

The vision of same-sex desire represented in Teleny, far from being a motivating force for the articulation of a homosexual identity that seeks liberation from the strictures of a compulsory heterosexuality, instead calls attention to the presence of a disavowed violence driving the construction of any identity whatsoever that bases itself upon sexual object choice. It is, in other words, a text that implicitly rejects sexology’s attempt to discipline the unruliness of sexual desire through the creation of quasi-scientific categories of identity based on object choice. It presents sex as a chaotic force undermining the supposedly ‘natural’ laws of Victorian domestic ideology and its disciplining of sexual impulses toward socially productive ends, replacing it an understanding of sexuality as a destructive force that is beyond human comprehension, and that seeks to obliterate both the subject and the object of desire. When Des Grieux explains why he did not recognize the presence of his homoerotic desires until the age of twenty-four, he states that

Withal, I never understood that I loved men and not women. What I felt was that convulsion of the brain that kindles the
eyes with a fire full of madness, and eager bestial delight, a fierce sensual desire. Love, I thought, was a quiet chaffy drawing-room flirtation, something soft, maudlin and aesthetic, quite different from the passion full of rage and hatred which was burning within me. (p. 34)

Retrospectively, Des Grieux believes his inability to comprehend his sexuality stemmed from an opposition between the intellectual and the emotional, what he ‘understood’ and what he ‘felt’. For him the concept of ‘love’ had nothing to do with bodily sensations such as the ‘convulsion of the brain’, ‘bestial delight’ or ‘sensual desire’. Instead, he believes himself to have been indoctrinated into a coercive ‘quiet chaffy drawing room flirtation’ ideology of love that completely disavows the role of physical desire in romantic attachments. It is only when he meets Teleny that he feels the ‘fire full of madness’ that is his first adult experience of erotic attachment. Sharon Marcus has argued that, contrary to studies that view nineteenth-century queer culture as inherently opposed to Victorian domestic ideology, Teleny presents ‘a bond between male lovers organised around domestic privacy, interiority, aestheticism, and sentiment’. Yet at this moment, Des Grieux realizes that Victorian domestic ideology, which finds cultural expression in narratives of genteel courtship between the sexes, has tricked him into believing that romantic love had nothing to do with the ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that is his experience of sexual desire. When he realizes that ‘sensual desire’ is the unspoken yet omnipresent foundation undergirding romantic love, he can finally articulate his true erotic orientation, that he ‘loved men and not women’.

Upon consideration, however, Des Grieux’s description of his erotic desires as a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ becomes strange, one might say ‘weird’, insofar as they appear to be the exact opposite of what is commonly referred to as the experience of ‘love’. To understand why this is so, it is important to keep in mind the rhetorical work Des Grieux performs to impose coherence on his sexual identity. He has the task of constructing a narrative that accounts for two seemingly contradictory statements: first, that Des Grieux had a sexual attraction towards other men that was always already there (as he says later, ‘I know that I was born a sodomite, the fault is my constitution’s, not mine own’ [p. 47]); second, that he did not become aware of that sexual attraction until a specific and particular moment in his life, i.e. meeting Teleny. In order to make these two assertions cohere
into a unified narrative of sexual maturation, he has recourse to the ‘quiet chaffy drawing room flirtation’ model of romantic love, whose denial of the body made it so that he did not understand what his erotic desires ‘really’ signified until those desire were powerful enough with a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ to obliterate that socially instantiated discourse of romantic heterosexuality. Thus, the oddness of Des Grieux’s violent articulation of his sexual desire becomes understandable: for his narrative of sexual development to work, Des Grieux must experience his sexuality as opposed to the ‘soft, maudlin and aesthetic’ ideology of genteel domestic heterosexuality in order to negate it and therefore attain the knowledge of a sexual orientation that was ‘really there all along’. To maintain both the coherence of his sexual identity over time (‘I had always loved men instead of women’) and account for the sudden realization of that identity (‘I finally realized I loved men when I met Teleny’), Des Grieux must posit the existence of a hegemonic and coercive ideology of genteel heterosexuality that becomes violently negated by an experience of homosexual desire that is its exact opposite.

In this way, Des Grieux’s description of coming to understand his desires echoes the less explicit, but no less disorienting, experience of Joseph Walters, the ‘young man with spectacles’ in Machen’s *The Three Imposters*. Walters narrates that he participated in a pagan sexual ceremony by drinking ‘the Wine of the Fauns’ which

boiled in my veins, and stirred, I think, something that had slept within me from the moment I was born. It seemed as if my self-consciousness deserted me; I was no longer a thinking agent, but at once subject and object. […] I was bidden to enjoy myself and care for nothing but pleasure.33

This passage uses rhetoric similar to Des Grieux’s description of his coming to sexual self-knowledge, but not for the purpose of establishing the innateness of sexuality identity. Instead, Walters here depicts the violent, identity-annihilating capacities of sexual desire, a drive seemingly detached from either ‘subject’ or ‘object’ that uses the body as a conduit for the proliferation of a weirdly disembodied and impersonal ‘pleasure’ that echoes Bersani’s well-known description of desire as the enjoyable dissolution of selfhood.34 When read through the lens of the weird rather than the Foucauldian reverse discourse, Des Grieux’s account of his
sexuality reads less like a liberal-humanist defense of his desires and more like an admission of the horrifying nature of sexuality itself, a revelation that emerges when it is untethered from the ‘chaffy drawing room affair’ of domesticity.

**Weird Heterosexuality**

*Télény* repeatedly shows the chaotic force underlying all forms of sexuality, both homo- and heteroerotic. The novel represents straight sex, perhaps to an even greater extent than gay sex, as a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’, primarily motivated by a drive to destroy both the subject and the object of erotic desire. Early in the novel, Des Grieux relates in vivid and horrifying detail his memory of an adolescent trip to a brothel with a group of school friends, where they observe the ‘loathsome’ sight of a consumptive woman coughing up blood while performing oral sex on another prostitute until she dies of a broken blood vessel, with ‘the death-rattle of the one mixed […] up with the panting and gurgling of the other’ (p. 45). In a passage that ironically echoes his description of the ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that is his experience of homoerotic desire, Des Grieux describes how

> the *cantinière* continued to writher in her senseless and ungovernable rage, twisting and distorting herself; but at least feeling the warm blood flow into her womb, and bathe her inflamed parts […] began to pant, to scream, and to leap with delight, for the ejaculation was at length taking place. (p. 45)

Although this is, obviously, a sexual act occurring between women, the fact that it is done for the sexual arousal for a group of young men exposes reveals the perversity underlying normative male desire. This episode is an especially vivid moment from what the text’s overall trajectory of demystifying the heterosexual ‘laws of Nature’ by repeatedly calling attention to the violence underlying heteroerotic desire.

Later, Des Grieux describes an incident when his coachman raped his chamber-maid, who had rejected the coachman’s offer of marriage. She does so because Des Grieux had cruelly manipulated her into falling in love with him, even after he realized he was primarily same-sex oriented, for his own amusement. He explains that, at the moment of the rape, the coachman
hardly knew whether he loved or hated this girl most, and he cared but little what became of him provided he could satisfy his craving for her. All the softness which love had awakened gave way to the sexual energy of the male. […] It was hardly a question with him now of pleasure given or received, it was the wild overpowering eagerness which the male brute displays in possessing the female, for you might have killed him, but he would not have let go his hold. (pp. 74, 76)

The coachman’s masculine ‘sexual energy’ cancels out his entire range of affective responses towards the girl, from ‘love’ all the way to ‘hatred’, even to the extent of obliterating his desire for physical pleasure entirely. Desire is figured in terms of appetite, the satisfaction of a ‘craving’ and an ‘overpowering eagerness’, such that it undercuts not only the illusion of the desiring subject as a rationally willing being, but even the assumption that sexual desire is ultimately about the maximization of pleasure. Sexuality, instead, is presented as the male’s innate desire to submit to the destruction of both himself and the object of his desire through an overwhelming desire to ‘possess’ the female. It is thus that the novel demystifies the hypocrisy of the Victorian domestic ideology, where the ‘soft, maudlin and aesthetic’ obscures the destructiveness of a heterosexuality that, paradoxically, has the male assert his sexual prerogative over the female by means of becoming ‘overpowered’ by an antirational erotic appetite for destruction.

These passages are two especially vivid moments from what the text’s concerted demystification of a ‘naturalized’ discourse of domestic heterosexuality by repeatedly calling attention to the violence underlying heteroerotic desire. The effect of this exposure is the sort of cosmic horror more typically associated with weird fiction, which elicits madness and a self-destructive impulse in the face of the unfathomable. This occurs when the chamber-maid kills herself after being raped. As the coachman and Des Grieux both stand in the chamber-maid’s bedroom, ‘she stood, not far from the window, her glances from the coachman [falling] upon me with loathing and scorn. She now knew what the love of men was’ (p. 78). Immediately after attaining this knowledge, she throws herself out of the window to her death. Gazing upon the straight man who has raped her and the gay man who does not want her yet has nonetheless ‘put her into his
power’ purely for his own enjoyment, her suicide is motivated not only by the violence done against her person per se, but by her realization that ‘the love of men’ is ultimately nothing but the desire to ‘satisfy a craving’ for power, and that at the height of sexual passion, the identity of that craving’s object is entirely incidental. Both men simply want to subordinate her into the object of their own desires. In this, one of the few moments when the novel focuses on female sexuality, the chamber-maid’s experience effectively eliminates the constitutive difference between a homosexuality full of ‘rage and hatred’ and heterosexuality. For a woman, the ‘love of men’ really is all the same, insofar as all male sexuality is a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that works towards the obliteration of the object of erotic desire through a destructive and seemingly impersonal sexual appetite.

Sodomical Annihilation
The incident of the chamber-maid’s suicide, by focusing on the similarity between male heterosexuality’s and male homosexuality’s capacities to abuse women, forcefully calls attention to persistence of violence that is the result of the unequal power dynamic that exists between the sexes in a patriarchal society. Yet the text also presents the gay sex that is its primary pornographic focus, and which it supposedly valorizes, as similarly violent and reason-destroying expression, a ‘paroxysm of erotic rage’ and ‘mad delirium’ inherent to sex itself (Teleny, p. 99). In the case of male homosexuality, sexual encounters are portrayed as radically destructive of the boundary between the subject and the object of erotic desire, rather than the destruction of the object of desire by itself. This becomes shockingly literal in the scene depicting Des Grieux’s attendance at his first gay orgy, which culminates with a character called ‘the Spahi’ asking to be anally penetrated by a glass bottle. First, the experience obliterates the distinction between mind and body, reason and sensation, with the Spahi saying that it makes him feel “a sharp and yet agreeable irritation from the bum up to my brain” (p. 134). This enjoyable confusion of the higher and the lower faculties soon transforms into violence when the bottle breaks inside him, ‘cutting all the edges that pressed against it, the other part remaining engulfed within the anus’ causing him to emit a ‘loud scream of pain and terror’ (p. 135). Too ashamed and afraid of ruining his reputation to go to the hospital, he shoots himself with a revolver rather than allowing himself to die slowing of an infection. The Spahi’s sexual desire leads him to abandon all
reason in an act that pleasurably, and then horrifyingly, destroys the boundary between the subject and object of desire—here, literally an inanimate object—and then destroys both altogether.

This same process occurs, albeit more subtly, in the ostensibly more romantic sexual encounters between the novel’s two main characters. When describing his first actually physical encounter with Teleny, Des Grieux describes that, ‘as my hands wandered over his head, his neck, his shoulders, his arms, I could not feel him at all; in fact, it seemed to me as if I were touching my own body’ (p. 89). While he experiences his first homosexual contact as if Teleny were an extension of his own corporeal self that erases the physical boundary between himself and the object of his desire, further sexual encounters erase the boundary between himself and Teleny as psychologically distinct entities. Later, after another sexual encounter, Des Grieux describes them as

unconscious of everything save the pleasure of feeling each other’s bodies, which, however, seemed to have lost their own individuality, mingled and confounded as they were together. Apparently we had but one head and one heart, for they beat in such unison, and the same vague thoughts flitted through both our brains. (p. 149)

These descriptions gesture towards a Platonic ideal of homosexual love the uniting of two separate beings into a single entity. Although the process of this merging might be violent, it results in the creation of a newly unified, wholly complete being.

Although Des Grieux presents this erasure of the boundary between subject and object as positive and enlightening, there is also a dark underside to this experience that comes through in his descriptions. Describing his orgasm while penetrating Teleny for the first time, Des Grieux declares,

I was melting away, but he never stopped till he had quite drained me of the last drop of life-giving fluid there was in me. My eyes were swimming in their sockets. I felt my heavy lids half close themselves; an unbearable voluptuousness of mingled
pain and pleasure, shattered my body and blasted my very soul; then everything waned in me. He clasped me in his arms, and I swooned away whilst he was kissing my cold and languid lips. (p. 106)

The vampiric overtones of this passage are especially odd considering that Des Grieux is actually playing the ‘active,’ penetrative role in this sexual encounter. However, his penetration of Teleny results in a passive ‘melting away’ and a ‘draining of life-giving fluid’ that makes him ‘swoon away’ as the victim of Teleny’s experienced sexual maneuverings. This paradoxical passivity is described in terms of Des Grieux’s ‘soul’ being ‘blasted’ and his ‘body’ being ‘shattered,’ as if his orgasm caused him to lose the sense of his body as a discrete entity, which is experienced as a radical and nearly fatal loss of both physical and mental identity. Des Grieux describes another orgasm as leaving him ‘crushed and annihilated; then a pleasant state of torpor followed, and my eyes closed for a few seconds in happy oblivion’ (p. 116). Applying the rhetoric of shattering and blasting, crushing and annihilating to the post-orgasmic loss of proprioception partakes of the discourse of the sublime. Yet Des Grieux depicts his experience not as a desire for pleasure strong enough that it erases the confining boundary between the erotic subject and the erotic object. Instead, sex enacts the desire to destroy oneself by allowing it to be subsumed into the body and mind of another being.

Gay sex becomes an opportunity to engage in what Luckhurst has described as the ‘disorientation’ characteristic of the weird, which ‘inheres in perversity or transgression. It twists or veers away from familiar frames and binary distributions’.

He quotes Bruno Latour to describe how weird disorientations create opportunities for ‘new entanglements that ‘have no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and the environment’.

This makes weird fiction ‘a place for potentially radical disarticulations and reformulations of traditional binaries, starting with self and other, subject and object’. Far from being an apologia for homosexuality in the terms of the Foucauldian reverse discourse, the novel instead presents sex between men as an occasion for a disorienting experience of horror mingled with pleasure that ‘dethrones the subject’. However, this horror is not rooted in the ‘panic and disgust’ of homophobia and gay panic, but instead in the chaotic force of sex itself,
which always escapes attempts to discipline it, whether through the social controls of Victorian domestic ideology’s gender binary or the proliferating categories of sexual pathology created by the sexologists.\footnote{Charles Hirsch, ‘Notice bibliographique extraite des notes et souvenirs d’un vieux bibliopole,’ in Attributed to Oscar Wilde and Others, \textit{Teleny or The Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance of Today}, ed. and trans. by Amanda Mordavsky Caleb (Kansas City, MO: Valancourt Books, 2010), p. 172; Further references to this edition appear in parentheses.}

Ultimately, the tragedy of \textit{Teleny} is not, as some critics have maintained, that late-Victorian society had no place for healthy gay sex—in the universe of the novel, no sex is truly healthy. Rather, the novel represents all sexual acts as ‘passions full of rage and hatred’ that are inscribed in a discourse that forecloses the possibility of sexual liberation through the rights-based logic of liberalism. The novel’s very raison d’être as an explicitly pornographic text is to inscribe, in vividly grotesque terms, the destructive logic of sexuality itself, forcing readers to think beyond the binaries of man/woman, gay/straight that were hallmarks of Victorian social and scientific discourse. That a novel demonstrates this level of awareness at the supposed inaugural moment of modern homosexual identity should give historians of sexuality pause. \textit{Teleny} invites us reimagine the history of sexuality not as a teleological movement away from the repressive hypothesis, but instead as a constantly reiterating investigation of desire’s inherent capacity for destruction.

\textit{American University}

dustinfr@american.edu

\textbf{NOTES}

\footnotetext[4]{Roger Luckhurst, ‘The Weird: A Dis/Orientation,’ \textit{Textual Practice}, 31.6 (2017), 1041–1061 (p. 1047).}
\footnotetext[5]{Leif Sorensen, ‘A Weird Modernist Archive: Pulp Fiction, Pseudobiblia, H.P. Lovecraft,’ \textit{Modernism/ modernity} 17.3 (2010), 501–22 (p. 506).}
\footnotetext[7]{Caleb, ‘Introduction’, p. xxii.}
Joseph Bristow, “‘A Few Drops of Thick, White, Viscid Sperm’: Teleny and the Defense of the Phallus’ in Porn Archives, ed. by Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycy, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 144–60 (p. 145). Bristow notes that the text asserts the robust health of the ‘man-loving penis’ in response to a ‘medicolegal establishment’ that sought to pathologize the male homosexual body (pp. 154, 158). I argue, however, that such moments often transform into the phallic sublimity that is one of the hallmarks of weird fiction’s disorienting effects.

Nelson, Publisher to the Decadents, p. 36.


Foucault, History of Sexuality, p. 43.


Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror, p. 15.


Ibid.


Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885–1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 104. More recently, Antonio Sanna has used Foucault’s framework to argue that Teleny represents how ‘[t]he aggressive enactment of heteronormative legislative power caused the systematic silencing of late-nineteenth-century homosexuals, who came to be very concerned about the possibility of being publicly exposed and ruined.’ Antonio Sanna, ‘Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde’s Teleny and The Picture of Dorian Gray and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,’ Law and Literature 24.1 (2012), 21–39 (p. 24).


Robert Gray and Christopher Keep, “An uninterrupted current”: Homoeroticism and Collaborative Authorship in Teleny, in Literary Couplings: Writing Couples, Collaborators, and the Construction of


32 Sharon Marcus, ‘At Home with the Other Victorians,’ South Atlantic Quarterly 108.1 (2009), 119–45 (p. 135).


35 Christopher Wellings notes how in Teleny ‘women are treated throughout the text […] not [as] individuals, but archetypes of the female, defined solely in relation to male perceptions of their sexualities, or lack thereof.’ While he is undoubtedly right to identify a thread of misogynistic disgust that runs throughout the text, I argue that the impulse to depersonalization characterizes every sexual encounter in the novel. Christopher Wellings, ‘Dangerous Desires: The Uses of Women in Teleny’ The Oscholars: Special Teleny Issue (2008, rev. 2017), http://www.oscholars.com/Teleny/wellings.htm.


In his 2011 ‘Forweird’ to the anthology *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, Michael Moorcock defines the weird ‘by what it is not’.1 He writes of the weird story:

In popular terms, it came to mean a supernatural story in something of the Gothic tradition and we currently have a plethora of bad Gothic, ‘shudder tales’ topping the charts in the media. These vampires, werewolves, and ghouls produce an effect of the kind which made bosoms heave by the thousand in early Victorian times before the genre was relegated to the ranks of the shilling shocker or the tuppenny blood, still popular with the general public, if not polite society. […]

The ‘blood’ at the bottom of the literary pond was the 19th century’s version of the splatter tale in the 20th and 21st. And what is left after other definitions are exhausted is the weird story. The weird story can contain all the quality of a fine modernist writer like Conrad or Bowen, a great popular novelist like Greene or a master of the numinous like Lansdale, whose
finest stories often contain only a slight twist in reality to make them so good.²

Moorcock’s description of the weird tale attempts to align the tale with experimental modernist writing.³ The weird tale is a complex, subtle, and disturbing butterfly of prose that casts off the chrysalis of Victorian popular fiction to explore what H. P. Lovecraft calls ‘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’.⁴

James Machin’s recent monograph on the British weird tale draws attention to such critical attempts to distinguish the mode of weird fiction from other supernatural fiction. Machin observes: ‘One subtextual implication here is that weird fiction is a more literary mode, which values originality and subtlety rather than the standard […] tropes of the Gothic and horror genres’.⁵ Like modernism, the value of weird fiction depends on ‘a distinction between two conceived groups: the consumers of populist lowbrow texts and a more educated cultural elite who can identify and appreciate literature of value’.⁶ Machin is hesitant to accept this distinction, however, especially when it comes from recent critics like Moorcock who want to promote the value of the weird, but he advocates historicizing and interrogating the distinction of the weird. He argues for ‘putting aside the nature of the texts themselves and considering how the mode is used as a process of distinction’, effectively placing the weird tale ‘into its wider continuum, taking as [his] starting point the nineteenth century’.⁷

Machin’s approach is especially helpful when considering critic S. T. Joshi’s description of Arthur Machen’s ‘The White People’, an 1899 story Joshi finds worthy of distinction because its textual features that anticipate those of British modernist writing. Joshi compliments the narrative form of the ‘green book’ at the center of Machen’s story. He writes:

I wonder whether many literary historians have noted the stupendous anticipation of stream-of-consciousness represented by this diary—we are still in 1899, years before the emergence of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. This diary is a masterpiece of indirection, a Lovecraft plot told by James Joyce.⁸
Joshi here improves upon Lovecraft’s designation of the green book section as ‘a stream of innocent childish prattle’, recasting the word *stream* so as to refer to *stream of consciousness*. Joshi lends legitimacy to Machen’s ‘The White People’ by connecting it to modernist narrative experimentation. While many terms used by narrative theorists today were developed in part to discuss modernist writing, Joshi’s claim is both apt and odd. On the one hand, Joshi’s references to Joyce and Woolf are ways of signaling his fascination with and even admiration of the narrative of ‘The White People’. Other scholars of Machen’s writing and of weird fiction have noted the connections between modernism and the weird in relation to narrative form. On the other hand, the references suggest that even late-Victorian writers can only anticipate and prefigure the emergence of a narrative form such as stream-of-consciousness, and, by extension, anticipate and prefigure the weird. Joshi reminds us, ‘we are still in 1899’.

To an extent, the anticipatory modernism detailed in Joshi’s comment and interrogated by Machin would not surprise any student of the late Victorian period. The ties between modernism and late-Victorian writing, especially of the decadent and aestheticist milieu in which Machen was writing, are well known. Also, as indicated above, Lovecraft, most likely the inspiration for Joshi’s classification of ‘The White People’ as a Joycean tale, has to a great extent shaped current understandings of Machen’s work as prefiguring the weird tale. Modernism and the weird emerged as unique forms of writing almost simultaneously. Anglo-American authors began publishing self-consciously innovative modernist works in the late 1910s and early 1920s, at the same time that Lovecraft commenced writing his ‘cosmic horror’ stories: Lovecraft’s story ‘Dagon’, ‘the earliest to contain any elements of what eventually became known as Cthulhu Mythos’ and notable for featuring ‘experiences and sensations that cannot be processed by human brains’, first appeared in 1919. Lovecraft famously developed the genre and terminology of the weird tale in his essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), such that the tales that precede his writings, even those that he praises highly, are always already positioned to anticipate him. Read in conversation with recent scholarship on the late Victorian period, Lovecraft’s search for his own literary prestige via retroactive canon-making serves as a mirror image of such scholarship, where late-Victorian works are legitimated because of their anticipations of modernist masterpieces.
Despite the importance of Lovecraft and the simultaneity of the composition of weird tales and modernist novels, the present essay revisits the weirdness of Arthur Machen’s ‘The White People’ while still resisting—as best it can—the gravitational pull of Lovecraft’s writing and theorizing about Machen. I examine the form of ‘The White People’ to reorient how we talk about Machen and how we talk about the weird when the weird engages with forms of writing typically regarded as modernist. While I am sympathetic to Machin’s research, what follows resembles close reading more than a study of literary distinction and resonates with provisional attempts to consider the form of weird fiction, such as Mark Blacklock’s recent discussion of what he terms weird fiction’s ‘higher spatial form’.13

Three claims comprise my argument. First, in ‘The White People’ Machen creates what I call an ‘infinity effect’ by providing readers with a sense of confusion and infinite time via what is labeled ‘The Green Book’, a fascinating interpolated text within ‘The White People’. Machen achieves this effect through the green book’s style and narrative structure: it is repetitive, paratactic, and reliant on a fluctuating form of self-narration that melds past and present and eventually imagines a circular form of temporality. Secondly, Machen’s story, as it contains a uniquely lengthy paragraph within the green book, explores the tensions between form and formlessness as well as between utilitarian and decadent writing of the late nineteenth century. Thirdly, these formal aspects of ‘The White People’ suggest a way to understand the Victorian weird in relation to modernism. Machen’s version of the weird undermines the notion of break or rupture that is central to narratives about the innovation of modernism. ‘The White People’ forces readers to notice the continuity between the horror of uncontrolled and auratic ‘weird’ writing and the self-conscious break with tradition that characterizes modernism. Machen’s weird aims to ‘make it archaic’ rather than make it new and calls into question the alignment between the direction of literary history and increasing stylistic innovation.

Infinity, Obscurity, and Parataxis in the Green Book

be a ‘great sinner’ and to be evil. Ambrose presents himself as a specialist on these matters and offers some initial examples of evil that call to mind Dennis Denisoff’s claim that Machen was interested in occult and decadent sources and networks ‘for his exploration into modes of communication with other levels of reality’. Ambrose asks Cotgrave: ‘What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents?’ (p. 113). Ambrose Disconnects evil from crimes such as murder, which he views as merely anti-social, answering affirmatively Cotgrave’s question whether ‘sin is an esoteric, occult thing’: ‘It is the infernal miracle as holiness is the supernal’ (p. 116). Unsurprisingly, Cotgrave is baffled by these formulations and requests a ‘concrete example’ of what sin would be for a human (p. 117). Ambrose replies by lending to Cotgrave a ‘green pocket-book’ as a concrete example (p. 118). After a heading titled ‘The Green Book’, the bulk of Machen’s story is an excerpt from the manuscript in the green book itself, as written by someone that Ambrose calls only ‘the girl’ (p. 118). The text of the green book is the truly distinctive aspect of Machen’s story, as, from its opening, the girl’s comments are hard for the reader to decipher. In the opening sentences of the text of the green book, the girl writes:

I am going to write here many of the old secrets and some new ones; but there are some I shall not put down at all. I must not write down the real names of the days and months which I found out a year ago, nor the way to make the Aklo letters, or the Chian language, or the great beautiful Circles, nor the Mao Games, nor the chief songs. I may write something about all these things but not the way to do them, for peculiar reasons. And I must not say who the Nymphs are, or the Dôls, or Jeelo, or what the voolas mean. (p. 119)

Both Aaron Worth and H. P. Lovecraft have acknowledged the opacity of this passage, which suggests secrecy and indecipherability. There are no footnotes that can help readers decode the unknown words; readers do not know, for example, ‘what the voolas mean’.

The difficulty of deciphering this passage is indicative of a larger trend in the story that is acknowledged after the green book has broken off. Cotgrave, after reading the book, admits partial interpretive defeat: ‘I see the drift of a good deal,
but there are many things that I do not grasp at all’ (p. 145). Ambrose’s response seems to signal some of Machen’s rationale for why the manuscript cannot be easily understood. Ambrose highlights the green book’s ‘obscurity’ and elaborates that ‘in this particular case it must have been dictated by instinct, since the writer never thought that her manuscript would fall into other hands’ (p. 146). Rhetorically, the green book resembles a diary written for no audience but the author herself, yet its subject matter is occult and obscure so that its occult rituals cannot be reproduced. Ambrose compares the green book’s secrets to ‘[p]owerful and sovereign medicines’ that must be kept in a ‘locked cabinet’, the cabinet serving as a physical protective analogue to the protective layer of obscurity that hides occult knowledge from all but the most adept readers of the green book (p. 146). The occult knowledge is ultimately fatal to the green book’s author, however, as Ambrose reports discovering her, one year after the green book’s composition, ‘poisoned’ and dead in front of a statue ‘of Roman workmanship’, an image ‘white and luminous’ that ‘had been incorporated into the monstrous mythology of the Sabbath’ (p. 147). Ambrose’s concluding references elaborate on what is merely suggested in Machen’s earlier story, ‘Novel of the White Powder’, wherein a Dr. Chambers contends that the recurring temperature changes that converted an ‘uncommon salt’ to the wine of the witch’s Sabbath, ‘have constituted a process, and a process so complicated and so delicate’ that modern science cannot reproduce it. Ambrose associates the supernatural events of the green book with the same term, processes, to answer Cotgrave’s question about the presence of nymphs in green book, saying that the nymphs are a reference to ‘certain “processes” which have been handed down by tradition from age to age’ outside the purview of science (p. 145). The parallel wording between the stories suggests that the disorienting narrative of the green book affords the reader greater intimacy with the sinister Stevensonian scientific processes only referenced briefly in ‘Novel of the White Powder’.

The occult and enigmatic nature of the green book itself, as well its opening passage about ‘the voolas’, are later intensified when the adolescent girl writing the manuscript journeys into the woods where she finds moving stones, a magical well, and a Roman monument. She also recalls a previous encounter, when she was five, with two tiny ‘white people’—a man and woman—who danced and sang for her when her nurse left her sitting near a pond (p. 120). Part of the green book that covers the story of her journey into the woods and recounts the nurse’s tales to the girl spans eighteen pages in the 2011 Penguin Classics edition of the story,
and consists of one entire paragraph. Though there are five block-quoted lines of poetic incantations included in the paragraph (all of which are part of interpolated tales), all other formal breaks are missing. The visual effect of these blocks of text is striking and, from this reader’s perspective, daunting. Both in *The House of Souls* (Figure 1), and even more noticeably in the two-columned publication in *Horlick’s Magazine* (Figure 2), the green book’s text elides the distinctions between the monolith and the monolithic. Given the girl’s landscape descriptions within the green book (see, for example, the passage block quoted in the next paragraph), the story’s closing description of ancient statuary, and the visually striking blocks of texts encountered by current and original readers of ‘The White People,’ the long paragraph resembles both ‘[a] single block of stone, esp. a large one shaped (frequently in prehistoric times) into a pillar or monument’ and is also itself monolithic, or ‘massive; immovable; solidly uniform’. The appearance of the double-columned *Horlick’s Magazine* version of the story also resembles a medieval manuscript, and thus partially resembles the similarly obscure manuscript.
which Lucian Taylor labours in Machen’s novel written during the same period as ‘The White People’, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). The narrator in that novel observes that Lucian ‘gained some skill in illumination […] always choosing the obscurer word as the obscurer arts’. The paragraphing of the green book signals its kinship with Lucian’s manuscript, and, in turn, with the ways that texts might, by their appearance, become obscure, reflecting on a visual level the impenetrability of language and subject matter.

The style of the green book is repetitive; it builds on the initial parallelisms in the earlier block quotation: ‘I am going to write’, ‘I must not write’, ‘I may write’, and ‘I must not say’. The repetitions continue as the narrator of the green book describes climbing out of a valley:

And when I came to the top, the ground rose up in front of me, tall and steep as a wall, and there was nothing but the green wall and the sky. I thought of ‘for ever and for ever, world without
end, Amen'; and I thought I really must have found the end of the world, because it was like the end of everything, as if there could be nothing at all beyond, except the kingdom of Voor, where the light goes when it is put out, and the water goes when the sun takes it away. I began to think of all the long, long way I had journeyed, how I had found a brook and followed it, and followed it on, and gone through bushes and thorny thickets, and dark woods full of creeping thorns. (p. 124)

The text is paratactic, with the conjunction *and* serving as the predominant word that connects together different sentences and ideas, such that it appears ten times in the passage about the girl's climb to the 'end of the world'. The lack of paragraphing combines with the paratactic style, however, to create a sense of uniformity and timelessness among the different events that are narrated. The green book enables the confusion of past and present and, in connection with the plot of the story, suggests that the narrative might continue infinitely or indefinitely. Repetition of a word, rather than logic, often serves to transition between ideas and events that are narrated. The words and phrases *wall, I thought, end of, goes when, long, found, follow it, and thorn* are repeated in the above passage, often in close succession though separated by commas, generating a prose style notable for its simplicity as well as its continuity. The unnamed author of the green book narrates via straightforward accumulation, assembling a story in small pieces that could seemingly continue indefinitely. The girl's way of writing contributes to the story's infinity effect.

**Temporalities of Narration in ‘The White People’**

The rhetoric, characterization, and narrative form of the green book only amplify the murkiness of Machen’s syntax. When the green book narration begins, the reader has not been informed of the time period in which the narrator writes. Ambrose mentions that the book is a valuable part of his collection, that he 'knew the girl who wrote this' (p. 118), and that the book is 'something that bears on the very curious subject that we have been discussing' (p. 117), the notion of sacred evil and sin. While Cotgrave and Machen’s readers are aware of these facts as ones that Ambrose conveys, they know little about who is writing the green book and at what time period. The green book that the girl finds is empty, and she describes, in
the first block quotation above, some of what she will or may write in it. Yet before this, when she describes discovering the empty book in her home, she relates, ‘It is full of secrets’ (p. 119). Given that she is planning early on what she will write, readers fully expect for her to say that the book will be full of secrets, but in fact, even when it contains only a few sentences, it is, strangely, already full of them. Perhaps the manuscript was composed out of order, but the narrative provides no way to verify this timeframe. Though there are tags that help the reader separate different time periods as in typical first-person accounts, the book also breaks from the diary form in its exclusion of discrete, dated entries. The green book’s structure ultimately defies linearity, despite the tags that assist readers in separating the present, the recent past, and the long past.

Pages after the girl designates her largely blank green book as full of secrets, she refers to a past experience with her nurse and admits the age at which she is writing. She employs the phrase ‘I remember’ to suggest that she is not currently experiencing the events she describes:

I remember it all so well, though I was only eight, and it is eight years ago now as I am writing it down, but the sky was a deep violet blue, and the middle of the brake where we were sitting there was a great elder tree covered with blossoms, and on the other side there was a clump of meadowsweet, and when I think of that day, the smell of the meadowsweet and elder blossoms seems to fill the room, and if I shut my eyes I can see the glaring blue sky, with little clouds very white floating across it, and nurse who went away long ago sitting opposite me and looking like the beautiful white lady in the wood. (p. 134)

The passage distinguishes between the sixteen-year-old writer and the eight-year-old child accompanying her nurse; it references the room the writer occupies and the middle of the brake that she recollects. While the girl employs phrases to distinguish between the two time periods, such as ‘when I think of that day’, the lengthy paratactic structure of the sentence, its baggy chain of ands, brings different times into close syntactical contact, bridging the gaps that divide past and present. The first sentence above, for instance, begins by providing the respective ages of the girl-narrator and the girl-character. When the sentence begins, it
also foregrounds the act of writing. Yet, with the reference to the ‘deep violet blue’ sky, the eight-year-old memories become continuous with the expository information, as both exposition and recollected images alternate with one another in the lengthy first sentence.

This continuity signals what narrative theorist Dorrit Cohn terms consonant and dissonant self-narration. According to Cohn, dissonant self-narration is notable for having an ‘enlightened and knowing narrator who elucidates his mental confusions of earlier days’, while consonant self-narration features ‘a narrator who closely identifies with his past self, betraying no manner of superior knowledge’. In the green book, the narrative distance between the sixteen-year-old writer and her younger selves expands and contracts abruptly. Because there are only minor examples of the ‘elaborate mental vocabulary, the hypotactic style, the expansive concern with psychological motivation’ that Cohn sees as ‘stress[ing] the cognitive privilege of the narrating over the experiencing self’, readers encounter only a rudimentary form of dissonant self-narration in the green book. Machen’s narrator is less like the narrator of Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu (1913–1927), who is Cohn’s example of dissonant self-narration, and closer to that of Cohn’s ‘consonant first-person narration’, ‘the unobtrusive narrator [who] identifies with his earlier incarnation, renouncing all manner of cognitive privilege’. There is little of what Cohn refers to as ‘corrective hindsight’ in which the sixteen-year-old judges or even puzzles over her younger selves, and at times the boundary between the recollecting sixteen-year-old and the wandering eight-year-old seems so thin as to be practically nonexistent. Consonant self-narration in the green book brings with it, to borrow Cohn’s terms from her analysis of Knut Hamsun’s novel, Sult (1890; translated as Hunger in 1899), ‘a narrator’s fascination with psychological incongruities’ and the narrator’s ‘endeavor to present them without corrective hindsight’. In Machen’s tale, the girl is not fascinated by her own psychological incongruities, though she displays them and Ambrose certainly finds them intriguing. Corrective hindsight, however, is lacking. Though she does mention fears at a younger age, the girl at sixteen feels little guilt or even discomfort about the strange magical rituals in which she participated when she was eight, an attitude that suggests bildung has been suspended if not eradicated.

The unstable distance between the narrating girl and the protagonist of the green book partially accounts for the ties that critics have suggested between ‘The White People’ and modernist writing, though additional features of Machen's
narration highlight these ties. Cohn’s *Transparent Minds*, with its project of elucidating what exactly critics mean when they refer to *interior monologue* or *stream of consciousness*, provides two opposing critical terms that can be used to emphasize the distinctiveness of the green book. First, Cohn refers to ‘autobiographical monologues’, or narratives in which ‘a lone speaker recalls his own past and tells it to himself—in chronological order’ almost as a ‘rehearsal for communication’.27 Though the girl writes rather than speaks, she relates her past to herself. She has no outside audience and, despite the fact that she is unwilling to record certain occult secrets she has discovered, she appears uninterested in anticipating an audience. She also does, at times, depend on chronology to structure her writing, narrating events in the order that they occurred. Yet the green book’s narrative also resembles what Cohn calls ‘memory narratives’ or ‘texts that maintain a perfectly conventional narrative presentation but follow an order determined not by biographical chronology but by associative memory’.28 At times, the chronology of the girl’s narrative fractures and confuses past experience, past reflection on earlier experience, and the present recording on paper of these memories of experience and reflection. The green book also incorporates fairy tales that the girl heard from her nurse and repeats in her writing; it chronicles an oral account of a witch’s Sabbath that was seemingly told to the nurse’s great-grandmother at a young age before it was conveyed to the nurse and subsequently to the girl (p. 133). While the elastic and associative green book narration appears more organized and less ‘autonomous’ than Molly Bloom’s monologue in *Ulysses* (1922), it contains some of the features that distinguish the ‘Penelope’ episode.

The story’s plot also resembles the infinite, self-contained loop of an M. C. Escher illustration. Jessica George has emphasized the moment late in the green book when the writer recalls that her thirteen-year-old self looked into a well and acknowledged: ‘then I knew who the white lady was that I had seen come out of the water in the wood long ago when I was quite little’ (p. 144). George infers that ‘what [the narrator] sees is her own reflection’, which means ‘that the “White People” of the title are not mysterious, wholly Other beings, but ourselves’.29 The phrasing of the passage also implies that the narrator has seen her thirteen-year-old self eight years earlier. Earlier in the green book, she details her initial encounter with the white people—and specifically with a white lady—when she was around five. She recollects ‘the beautiful lady with kind dark eyes, and a grave face, and long black hair’ who danced (p. 120). Though the story is vague on the
identity of the ‘beautiful lady’ and the thirteen-year-old that looks into the well, it
does not discount the possibility that the thirteen-year-old woman—already one
of the white people because of her journeys into the forest, her adherence to ritual,
and her knowledge of fairy lore—achronologically introduced her five-year-old
self to the story’s occult world. The sixteen-year-old writer seems at least partially
aware of the seemingly infinite temporality of her life, as she describes having
touched a Roman statue in the woods just before encountering the well, and notes,
‘and the story was all true, and I wished that the years were gone by, and that I had
not so long a time to wait before I was happy for ever and ever’ (p. 144).

The lack of paragraphing in the green book echoes its distinctive narrative
loop. While Lovecraft is most likely trying to account for the unbroken text
when he calls the narrator’s writing ‘artless’ and ‘a stream of childish innocent
prattle’, the paragraphing blurs all time periods into a chronological tangle that
approaches infinity.30 The narrative refuses to subordinate the past to the present
or distinguish a digression from the primary narrative. If momentarily distracted,
readers find themselves frequently returning recursively to earlier sentences to pick
up the thread of the narrative, but even this reading technique is difficult given the
paragraph length. The green book, as it is included in ‘The White People’, ends
with suspension points, which seem fitting given that the narrator repeatedly uses
phrases such as ‘over and over again’ as she cycles through her departed nurse’s
tales or repeats charms (p. 156). For the critic Kimberly Jackson, who reads ‘The
White People’ in line with Machen’s *Hieroglyphics*, the green book suggests that
‘such literature is a form of sorcery; it conjures up figures of the unknown, of the
formless and shapeless deep out of which all things emerge’.31 Though lengthy
paragraphing is in itself a formal feature of prose that brings with it the meanings
and associations that I have described, potential readers might also see the duration
of the girl’s paragraphs as a sign of ‘the formless and the shapeless’.

Jackson’s comments, when combined with Lovecraft’s reference to ‘childish
innocent prattle’, hint at an impulse to read the green book section of ‘The White
People’ as a form of stylistic and artistic naiveté, in which readers encounter a
sort of untutored formlessness, the unstructured writing of a young woman, who,
having encountered ancient pagan cultures, composes in rural isolation. Machen’s
*Hieroglyphics*, in one of its many definitions of literature, describes it as ‘the
endeavour of every age to return to the first age, to an age, if you like, of savages,
when a man crept away to the rocks or to the forests that he might utter, all alone,
the secrets of his own soul’. This passage provides a foundation for Jackson’s statement and intimates that we might read ‘The White People’ as just the sort of literature that Machen is endorsing. Since Machen declares, in an echo of Robert Louis Stevenson, that ‘children, you must remember, are all “primitives” and therefore natural’, the writing in the green book aligns the primitive, the childish, the female, and the ancient with a paratactic prose style and refrains from systematic paragraphing. This conception aligns with readings of Machen’s earlier work, *The Great God Pan* (1894), in which Dennis Denisoff and Kelly Hurley relate the biological and spiritual amorphousness of the story’s female antagonist, Helen Vaughan, to questions about the coherence of the categories of the human, the species, and the body, as well as, for Denisoff, disruptions in the form of the story, such as the male narrators’ ‘communication breakdowns’.

Read in light of certain of Machen’s ideas in *Hieroglyphics* and *The Great God Pan*, the green book narrative of ‘The White People’ also aligns literary decadence with an unconscious female nature typified by the formlessness of the young girl’s prose. Yet the concept of formlessness, as it relates to the human body or the category of the species, does not necessarily translate to discussions of literary form. Caroline Levine’s recent work on the ‘affordances’ of literary and social forms highlights the long history of conflating literary form with constraint and containment, a notion that Levine both seems to endorse and resist. Sandra Macpherson has suggested that Levine’s *Forms* aligns open forms with freedom from constraint, even though Levine states that ‘formless or antiformal experiences have actually drawn too much attention from literary and cultural critics in the past few decades’. Macpherson comments on *Forms*, perhaps somewhat too broadly, that Levine ‘has only one thing to say about a range of genres, forms, media, and modes: that they are good when they are open and bad when they are closed’. Macpherson questions the connection between political control and totality in Levine’s argument, by claiming: ‘I don’t find myself as frightened of sonnets as I am of Nazis’. The debate between Macpherson and Levine is useful in relation to ‘The White People’ as it provokes skepticism about the alignment of form, control, and constraint. It is just as easy to discuss the long paragraph of the green book as it is to comment on a lack of paragraphing for eighteen pages; the apparent absence of form is itself another kind of form. Thus, readers of ‘The White People’ should be wary of considering the green book as formless, while they should also interrogate the notion that the modernist stream-of-consciousness writing to
which Machen is related somehow represents a liberation from the oppressive formal constraints of nineteenth-century fiction and an inclination towards a truer form of representation of consciousness.

Machen himself muddies the waters between the natural and the artificial kinds of writing in *Hieroglyphics*, contending that restrictive forms are liberating, or that poetry demonstrates ‘the essential rule that freedom is chiefly free when it is most bound’.39 Andrew McCann distinguishes *The Hill of Dreams* from ‘The White People’ by emphasizing that the narrative alterity of the latter story’s green book, unlike that of the concluding chapters of *The Hill of Dreams*, is ‘contained’ in line with the story’s position as commercially viable ‘entertainment’, but McCann also acknowledges that such containment requires ‘the fiction of the author in control of his or her compositional process’, but McCann’s reading is emblematic of the unstable boundary between the formal and formless in Machen’s writing and the fact that drawing such a boundary requires a decision about who is in control of formless prose and whether the formless signifies freedom or constraint. ‘The White People’, both by aligning savagery, naiveté, and girlhood with narrative ambiguity and by exhibiting them as they are encountered, investigated, and yet not explained by amateur male researchers, makes evident the pitfalls of dictating who is in control of seemingly ‘formless’ narrative. Such pitfalls are in fact one of the unique features of weird fiction, where questions about the delineation of what constitutes form and the politics of who generates form provide a nagging question, one that modernism attempts to answer.

The Organic Paragraph and the Decadent Paragraph

The complicated distinction between the formal and formless in Machen’s ‘The White People’, specifically in relation to paragraphing, can also expand our understanding of the story’s composition in the 1890s and publication in the early twentieth century. Historians of modern English rhetoric and rhetoric instruction note that the modern paragraph became a self-conscious part of writing instruction during the nineteenth century. Historians of modern English rhetoric and rhetoric instruction note that the modern paragraph became a self-conscious part of writing instruction during the nineteenth century. Associationist psychologist Alexander Bain published *English Composition and Rhetoric* in 1866, a book that went into multiple editions and contains what Paul C. Rodgers calls ‘the first systematic formulation of paragraph theory’.41 Rhetoricians during the last third of the nineteenth century synthesized Bain’s formulations in order to develop the concept of the organic paragraph. In 1895, Fred Scott and Joseph Denney
described the production of a paragraph as having ‘the effect of a symmetrically developed organism’.42 According to Rodgers, the modern organic paragraph was Bain’s response to what was perceived as increased ‘incoherence, irrelevancy, pointlessness, [and] meandering illogic’ in nineteenth-century writing, symptoms that had developed as English sentences grew shorter and more numerous in relation to the number of breaks within a composition.43 Thus, Bain developed the modern paragraph as a way to allow his students and readers to preserve focus and unity despite changing sentence length.

While reinforcing Bain’s formulation of the organic paragraph, Harvard Professor of English Barrett Wendell would also claim in 1891 that the paragraph was a visual entity as well as a logical one. Wendell resists the notion of ‘paragraphs as purely ornamental devices, serving in literature some such purpose as that filled by illuminated initials’, though he admits that ‘[a] page or two of unbroken text is ugly’.44 As he later outlines the criteria for a good paragraph, he recommends that writers follow good sense in breaking up texts into paragraphs and suggests that paragraphs be governed by ‘the principle of Mass—that the chief parts of the composition should be placed as readily to catch the eye’.45 While his claims seem directed at those writing non-fiction compositions, his theories do involve references to fiction, as he points out how both child and adult readers are more drawn to books with many paragraph breaks: books with frequent dialogue. Readers describe long paragraphs as ‘solid or heavy or serious’, such that children and tired adult readers ‘generally prefer Dumas to Walter Scott’.46 He designates the paragraph of more than one hundred and less than 300 words as a unit of discourse that engages readers, echoes the brevity of speech, and appeals to the eye. The paragraph of the green book, then, composed as it is by an adolescent writer, might be seen as distinctly un-childish, intimidating, and ugly in the light of Wendell’s commentary.

The rise of the organic paragraph, though it seems to have been most prominent in books from the United States that focused on English composition, accompanied a contemporary British shift within the field of rhetoric, as rhetoricians of the late nineteenth century began to see rhetoric as a more practical and less philosophical subject of inquiry.47 Bain’s conception of English rhetoric and writing had a decidedly scientific, utilitarian and practical bent. Historian of rhetoric Thomas P. Miller observes, ‘Bain’s scientific efficiency advanced utilitarian ideals in just the sort of reductivist way that would set them, and the teaching of
composition founded upon them, outside the realm of “literature”. Bain ‘saw no problems in applying the logic of the sciences to the arts and humanities’, while his approach to writing and rhetoric ‘included no sense of the aesthetic experience of literature, the political use of rhetoric, or the creativity involved in the composing process’.

Though my account of the history of the paragraph and its ties to English rhetoric and writing is condensed and limited, the shift in teaching and writing about rhetoric in which Bain participated was part of a larger cultural shift in which literature was being reconceived as a form of autonomous art that could be discussed outside of rhetorical studies, practical concerns, or moral education: a shift, in other words, to modernism. Miller follows his discussion of Bain with an examination of the debates about education between T. H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold in the 1870s and 1880s, seeing the debates as ‘the point where utilitarian justifications for the teaching of English were repudiated as elite institutions began to establish the study of literature as a subject unto itself’. Machen, who began attending school in the 1870s, appears aware of the seeming opposition between literature and other more practical fields of study. Lacking the finances and the personal ties that would make an Oxford or Cambridge education possible, Machen developed his initial interests in literature first at Hereford Cathedral School and then as he struggled to study for medical examinations at the Royal College of Surgeons, tests that he ultimately failed. Though Machen later became a journalist, his attempts to learn shorthand were equally unsuccessful when he subsequently returned to London to try a different profession. Machen’s sense of the literary, then, was initially founded on an opposition between literature and professional life. This opposition would become one of the main conflicts depicted in *The Hill of Dreams*, a book in which the protagonist Lucian Taylor’s interest in the literary becomes so profound that it makes any form of practical life untenable, ultimately leading to a conclusion that combines fantasy, drug use, and stylistic opacity prior to death.

Machen’s long paragraph in ‘The White People’ is indicative of his attempt to gain an insider’s understanding of a literary vocation that was both a reaction to and an escape from the professionalized form of education that Bain endorsed and the orderly, practical, and understandable modern organic paragraph that Bain contributed to the history of English writing. An examination of Machen’s use of the paragraph in response to the development of the organic paragraph allows for
a new take on the familiar concept of literary decadence. If the organic paragraph aligns prose writing with a notion of what Scott and Denny term a 'symmetrically developed organism', then Machen's lengthy paragraph and its arcane narrative style are a unique textual example of an overgrown, mutant, or ingrown organism and, simultaneously, a kind of writing that depends for its effects on opacity and obscurity rather than the clarity and unity.

Decadence might be seen, then, as the alter ego or malignant offshoot of the organic paragraph. Decadent writers do not seem overly concerned with the paragraph as a determinative structure of writing. In his essay on Charles Baudelaire published in 1883, Paul Bourget neglects to mention the paragraph in his formulation describing decadent style as a book breaking down (he uses the French se décomposer) ‘to make room for the independence of the page’, then the ‘independence of the sentence’, and finally the ‘independence of the word’.53 While the emerging emphasis on the paragraph may not have been recognized in France, Bourget’s description of formal decay nonetheless positions the narrative of the green book as a decadent one and suggests that the organizational regime of the paragraph would collapse in decadent writing. The decadent text, with its ties to heredity and biology and its metaphors of proliferation, mutation, and, for Vladmir Jankélévitch, ‘cancer metastasizing’,54 occupies the same metaphorical register as a paragraph that, in an attempt to promote a certain type of clear and logically structured writing, is described as organic. Writing after Bourget, Barrett Wendell aligned the organic paragraph, ‘English grammar’ and Britishness.55 Wendell almost seems to echo Bourget’s conception of decomposing decadent writing when he imagines homologies between different units of written meaning. Wendell specifies that ‘a paragraph [can] really be to a sentence what a sentence is to a word’, and then concludes his argument by relying on a claim that ‘for us, English grammar is little else than a clumsy codification of British good sense’.56

As the composition of a Welsh author, the paragraph in the green book can clearly be conceived as a pointed violation of a vision of ‘British good sense’ premised upon a conflation of Britishness with English grammar and, presumably, the English language.

Machen’s stylistic performance in the green book section of ‘The White People’, when considered in light of the organic paragraph and the pagan subject matter of the story, is consistent with recent critical interventions that relate late-Victorian decadence to both the anthropocene and ecopaganism. Benjamin Morgan has
discussed how decadence is a ‘mode of ecological thought’ that ‘transforms large-scale processes of entropy and degeneration into an aesthetic style’, while Dennis Denisoff claims that pagan decadent writers such as Machen hold an ‘interest in counter-humanist deindividuation and species intersubjectivity’. Both of these quotations could be used to describe the style and strange subjective blending that characterizes the green book narrative. Yet ‘The White People’ is distinct in way that it relates to global timescales and species identity. When discussing late-Victorian speculative fiction, Benjamin Morgan notes, ‘by eschewing the realist novel’s attention to the textures of individual psychic life, [these narratives of speculative fiction] make room for fictional accounts of the interactions among social and ecological systems at the scale of the planet’. In contrast with the time travel works that Morgan is describing, the narrative technique of ‘The White People’ delves so deep into the ‘textures of individual psychic life’ that it muddles conceptions of the totality of time. The weirdness of ‘The White People’ and the weird tale in general were shaped by 1890s entanglements with ecopaganism and decadence, but ‘The White People,’ neglects a planetary scale for the frighteningly intimate one of an adolescent girl’s thoughts as she reflects on her encounter with menacing ancient rituals.

Despite its embrace of the small scale of the organic world over competing larger scales, ‘The White People’ as a weird tale suggests ways that we, as critics, might weird the narrative of literary history. In his discussion of Lovecraft and the weird, Mark McGurl describes Lovecraft’s writing: ‘deep space and deep time alike are reasons to doubt the significance of humanity, whose ontological purchase on the universe it inhabits is vanishingly small’. McGurl’s account harmonizes with Aaron Worth’s examination of Machen’s other stories. For Worth, Machen’s fiction erodes the boundary between prehistory and history; ‘the privileged markers of civilization are projected indefinitely backward in time, while being associated with radical stasis or historylessness’. The green book flirts with this stasis, backwardness, and historylessness, but its narrative style suggests intriguing connections among modernism, the weird, and literary form. What if, rather lending Machen cachet by suggesting that his innovations are Joycean, we expanded the range of texts we study to imagine modernism’s apparent newness as another form of archaism? Reading Machen’s narrative techniques in connection with figures such as Proust and Joyce risks becoming an exercise in legitimation similar to what James Machin has noted both in the periodical
Weird Tales of the early twentieth century and in the anthology with which this paper begins. Instead, by emphasizing the ambiguities of ‘The White People’, we can see modernism, decadence, and the weird as inextricably bound together in their excessive and often rebellious responses to the emerging practicality and usefulness of the organic paragraph.

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California State University, Long Beach
Neil.Hultgren@csulb.edu

NOTES
2 Ibid., p. xi.
3 The intersections between weird fiction and literary modernism have proven an exciting area for scholarship in the last decade. See, for example, Leif Sorensen, ‘A Weird Modernist Archive: Pulp Fiction, Pseudobiblia, H. P. Lovecraft’, Modernism/Modernity, 17.3 (2010), 501–22. Sorensen hypothesizes that pulp magazines served as ‘an alternative site for working out concerns about cultural integrity, the politics of representation, and access to a literary tradition that also run through more recognized venues of modernist writing’ (p. 502).
5 James Machin, Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 48. Machin elaborates that the weird ‘is, at root, predicated on the same high/low cultural divide precipitated by the fin-de-siècle publishing boom and intensified by Modernism’ (p. 48).
6 Machin, Weird Fiction, p. 48.
7 Ibid., pp. 13, 2.
10 See also my and Dustin Friedman’s introduction to this cluster of essays (pp. 35–44). Nicholas Freeman acknowledges that weird fiction borrows modernist narrative techniques, but notes, ‘it is still quite unusual to find writers using full-blown stream-of-consciousness’ (Nicholas Freeman, ‘Weird Realism,’ *Textual Practice*, 31.6 (2017), 1117–32 (p. 1128)). Footnoting Joshi’s comment on ‘The White People’, Andrew McCann suggests that the final chapter of Machen’s novel, *The Hill of Dreams*, can also be associated with modernist narrative techniques: ‘The sense of being dislocated, in time and space, that Lucian’s memories conjure associates the sequence with the sort of prose that will typify modernist experiments with interiority: Joyce’s stream of consciousness, or the interior voices of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship, and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 170).
12 Lovecraft’s canon creation in ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ is a less heterogeneous echo of the ‘internal self-reference’ that Matthew Potolsky identifies in the ‘idiosyncratic outsider canons’ of decadent writing (Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 72). Lovecraft’s assemblage of texts in the essay should also be distinguished from the weird fascination with pseudobiblia. While Lovecraft’s essay can be aligned with T. S. Eliot’s notion of tradition in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Lovecraft’s other writings are evidence of a bolder invention of tradition that Sorensen contrasts with Eliot: Lovecraft ‘produce[s] a non-existent tradition of occult writing that is altered any time a member of the *Weird Tales* group invents a new addition to this canon of pseudobiblia’ (Sorensen, p. 510).
13 Mark Blacklock, ‘Higher Spatial Form in Weird Fiction’, *Textual Practice*, 31.6 (2017), 1101–16 (p. 1104).
20 Thanks to Amy Woodson–Boulton for connecting the visual aspects of Machen’s story with a medieval manuscript.

23 Ibid., p. 143.
24 Ibid., p. 151.
25 Ibid., p. 155.
26 Ibid., p. 157.
27 Ibid., pp. 181, 181, 182.
28 Ibid., p. 182.
33 Ibid., p. 196.
36 Ibid., p. 9; Levine’s emphasis.
38 Ibid., p. 1218.
42 Ibid., p. 405.
43 Ibid., p. 401.
46 Ibid., pp. 121, 122.
49 Ibid., pp. 266–67.
50 Ibid., p. 268.
52 Ibid., pp. 35–36.
55 Wendell, *English Composition*, p. 120.
56 Ibid., p. 120.
In ‘supernatural horror in literature’ (1927), H. P. Lovecraft famously lays out the requisites of the ‘weird tale’. Drawing a wide net that includes horror and the Gothic, but excludes fantasy and the occult, he insists that ‘weirdness’ lurks at the fringes of our lived experiences; it partakes of the known world but raises ‘[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces’ that impinge on our reality, largely repressed until a frightful event compels us to reckon with them.¹ The weird tale imposes ‘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’.² The elimination of such a safeguard—any principle that we take for granted about how the universe works—plunges us into the weird. Though not his favourite writer, Algernon Blackwood earned Lovecraft’s esteem as ‘the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere’.³ In particular, Blackwood’s story ‘The Willows’ (1907), in which sentient plants seem to threaten the lives of two stranded men, impressed Lovecraft as ‘the greatest weird story ever written’ where ‘art and restraint in narrative reach their very highest development’.⁴
‘The Willows’ epitomizes the weird because it upends our customary ideas about plant passivity, immobility, and defencelessness, in contrast to human energy and inventiveness. The grass under our feet, the vegetables on our plates, and the trees framing our homes seem to us resources, not rivals. But in ‘The Willows’ and a later story, ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ (1912), Blackwood imagines the inscrutable agency of the plants that we too often dismiss as inert and unconscious. Taking the sentient plant seriously is comical, almost absurd, as it has appeared in films from Roger Corman’s Little Shop of Horrors (1960) to M. Night Shyamalan’s The Happening (2008). But these works have deep roots in English literature, emerging in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (fourteenth century) and blossoming in the late-Victorian period with a cluster of floras-phobic tales. Examining this literary lineage in Plant Horror (2016), Dawn Keetley claims that the alterity of plants has always weirded us out. Their decentralized biological functions, their purposeful movements operating without a brain or central nervous system, and their unrestrained growth threaten to unseat the very categorical divisions that organize our world: active vs. passive, mobile vs. immobile, individual vs. collective, conscious vs. unconscious.

The present essay takes up an unexplored dichotomy that ‘The Willows’ and ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ even more dramatically explode: communicative versus mute. Blackwood’s plants not only stalk and kill; they also speak to each other and listen to people. Essential to Blackwood’s fiction is his avoidance of anthropomorphism; these vegetal voices are not, for instance, as articulate as the farcical cry ‘Feed me, Seymour!’ of Corman’s Audrey II. Rather, Blackwood’s plants exchange messages in ways totally alien to human methods of transmission. Given what twenty-first-century botanists are continually learning about plant intelligence and communication, Blackwood’s visionary weirdness presciently speculates about agencies beyond the human and, importantly, reveals ecological truths possibly better than staid Victorian realism. ‘The Willows’ not only challenges assumptions that plants are deaf and mute but also revises what constitutes hearing and speaking in the first place. ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ goes further. While the trees effectively call out and listen in, it is man’s articulation of natural phenomena that proves deficient. Both stories posit the reality of plant communication in order to ask a truly weird question: can our limited human faculties comprehend talking and hearing like a tree?
Eavesdropping Woods

In ‘The Willows’, two men canoeing on the Danube become stranded on an island that is being slowly engulfed by the Black Sea. The rising waters, the rustling of the willows, the unexplained damage to their canoe, and an unidentifiable object bobbing in the waves persuade the narrator and his taciturn companion, known as ‘the Swede’, that—though they might be the only men for miles—they are not alone. The story’s weirdness emanates from its challenge to the campers’ egoistic assumptions of anthropocentrism. The nature that they expect to form a passive backdrop for their masculine adventures instead operates according to a non-human agency with its own unfathomable purposes. The river, trees, and rocks are not inert elements constrained to the setting of a human plot; rather, as unwanted interlopers into this natural domain, the men are forced to recognize their ‘utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements’. In the end, they identify the floating object as a human corpse, perhaps a sacrifice to the undefined and mysterious powers of the wilderness, and fear that they are the next victims of a hostile arboreal intention that they cannot penetrate.

Literary scholars group ‘The Willows’ with fin-de-siècle stories about monstrous, man-eating plants. The trope was popular enough to comprise a sub-genre, including Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘The American Tale’ (1879), Phil Robinson’s ‘The Man-Eating Tree’ (1881), Lucy Hooper’s ‘Carnivore’ (1889), H.G. Wells’s ‘The Flowering of the Strange Orchid’ (1894), Frank Aubrey’s *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado* (1897), and Fred White’s ‘The Purple Terror’ (1898). T. S. Miller, in ‘Lives of the Monster Plants’ (2012), claims that this anxiety about man-eating vegetation began with Charles Darwin’s *Insectivorous Plants* (1875), which introduced British readers to the existence of flesh-feeding plants, upsetting the conventional upward flow of the food chain from flora to fauna to man. For Miller, the carnivorous plant amplifies evolution’s unsettling threat to anthropocentrism, delving beneath the already humbling relation between man and beast and linking us—via shared feeding habits—to even ‘lower’ organisms. Also recognizing Darwin’s treatise as the seed for fin-de-siècle plant terror, Cheryl Blake Price’s ‘Vegetable Monsters’ (2013) shows that rumors of man-eating plants circulated in the popular press; inhabiting the outposts of Empire, carnivorous flora characterized the colonies as spaces where the hierarchies of prey and predator get shuffled. Here, she writes, ‘the threat of Darwinian evolution expands beyond fears of human degeneration to also highlight the threat of an unconquered and highly evolved natural world’.
But Blackwood suggests more dreadful possibilities than plants eating men. The willows seem to be 'a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps all discussing a mystery known only to themselves' ('Willows', p. 23). In 'The Uncrossable Evolutionary Gulfs of Algernon Blackwood' (2013), Greg Conley argues that the willows 'horrify by reminding readers that human development was due to a chain of evolutionary events, and that an alternative chain could result in alien intelligences, different from and separate from the hominid line'. At the same time that humans were evolving to reign over the animal kingdom, a rival apex predator could have arisen among the vegetables. Elizabeth Chang, in 'Killer Plants of the Late Nineteenth Century' (2017), agrees with Conley that it is not the gastronomic similarity between humans and plants that the killer plant genre explores but the possibility of intellectual difference: 'the major problem of fiction was how to perceive and understand the nature of another, particularly when that other may be self-replicating, divided, multiple, obscured, invisible, or otherwise fractured and dispersed'. Plant consciousness marks the limit of Victorians’ ability to imagine and to empathize. Casting transplanted vegetal newcomers to English soil—these immigrants in a new ‘global plant exchange’—as agential enemies was the consequence of this incomprehension.

Miller, Price, Conley, and Chang use the terms ‘Gothic’ and ‘horror’ but do not invoke the ‘weird’. Although Lovecraft employed these terms almost interchangeably to describe interrelated members of a literary lineage, modern scholars of weird fiction take pains to distinguish the weird from its generic kin. In 'Weird Fiction' (2009), China Miéville argues that while the gothic evokes the ‘uncanny resurgence guilt-function, the return of a repressed’, weird fiction relies on a 'lack of recognition'. The weird resides, he writes, in the ‘unthinkable novum’. Roger Luckhurst’s ‘The Weird: A Dis/orientation’ (2017) reiterates this generic split: '[t]he Gothic is burdened by the nightmare of history and the doom of repetition, but [weird] dread is anticipatory, oriented towards the future'. Emily Alder succinctly claims that the weird’s ‘indifferen[ce] to human concerns’ and its focus on ‘monstrosity beyond human ken’ ‘make it a mode in which anthropocentricity is already fundamentally undermined’. The Gothic and the weird similarly generate vague dread and otherworldly awe, but while the Gothic recalls a familiar though repressed human past, the weird introduces possible non-human futures uninterested in our agency and existing outside our frames of reference. So which is the killer plant?
Victorian monster plants before Blackwood tend to be Gothic; their carnivorous consumption represents the history of imperialist violence. The attacking upas tree in Robinson's 'Man-Eating Tree', for instance, 'was quivering through every bough, muttering for blood, and, helpless with rooted feet, yearning with every branch towards me. [...] Like hands [its leaves] fumbled together, their fleshy palms curling upon themselves and again unfolding, closing on each other and falling apart again'. The corporeal metaphors—feet, hands, flesh—render the tree a humanoid monster who, except for its immobility, grasps its victims according to familiar monster tropes. Aubrey's Devil-Tree likewise imagines the arm-like branches servicing a zoomorphic mouth: 'the terrible trailing branches swept in after [its victim], twined round his legs and threw him down, then quickly drew him out feet foremost. [...] With an awful deliberation and absence of hurry, or even of the appearance of effort, he was hauled high into the air and disappeared into the hollow of the fatal tree'. Aubrey employs this 'vegetable vampire', according to Price, to convey an ethical ambivalence about British history: 'With its unending appetite, the tree is like the empire'. Price thus justly places these killer plants within a 'sub-genre of “imperial Gothic”'.

This anthropomorphic other typifies the uncanny monster of the Gothic, but the weird draws its inspiration from alternative taxonomies. According to Miéville, '[p]aradigmatic is Weird Fiction’s obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic’, and he celebrates Lovecraft’s fiends ‘patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans’. Luckhurst agrees: ‘the signature of weird fiction and horror film is not the vampire or the zombie, those minimal allegorical displacements of the human, but the tentacle, that limb-tongue suggestive of absolute alterity’. In contrast to Robinson's and Aubrey's hand-like branches, Blackwood invokes a limb structure even less human than the tentacle: the root. In ‘The Willows’, his campers find ‘funnel-shaped hollows in the sand […] beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg’ (p. 58). While the source of these hollows is never confirmed, the narrator speculates that the willows walk, like ‘several animals grouped together […] moving slowly’ (p. 57). These cryptic funnels, then, are suggestive of a series of root-pits, plunged into the earth during the plants’ ambulation. In a weird and wily nod to Robinson Crusoe (1719), ‘The Willows’ recasts the single footprint that so unmans Daniel Defoe's marooned sailor into an alien presence much more terrifying. When the men find the same cavities in

Blackwood’s walking willows, piercing the sands and clasp ing bodies in their wake, are more Darwinian than their literary predecessors. While Victorian vegetal killers seem drawn from Darwin’s *Insectivorous Plants*, Blackwood’s work has more in common with *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880), published five years later. This study, which Darwin wrote with his son Francis, argues that, from the moment that the embryonic root (the radicle) emerges from its seed casing, plants stretch their leaves up towards the light and their roots down towards moisture. Despite our assumptions that plants are stationary while animals are mobile, plants do indeed move—and they do so purposely. The final paragraph of *Power of Movement* profoundly disrupts our common understanding of plants:

We believe that there is no structure in plants more wonderful, as far as its functions are concerned, than the tip of the radicle. If the tip be lightly pressed or burnt or cut, it transmits an influence to the upper adjoining part, causing it to bend away from the affected side […] If the tip perceives the air to be moister on one side than on the other, it likewise transmits an influence to the upper adjoining part, which bends toward the source of moisture. When the tip is excited by light […] the adjoining part bends from the light; but when excited by gravitation the same part bends towards the centre of gravity. […] It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the tip of the radicle thus endowed, and having the power of directing the movements of the adjoining parts, acts like the brain of one of the lower animals […]²⁴

Contemporary scientists mocked this equivalence between the excitable root-tip and the conscious animal brain—derisively referring to it as Darwin’s ‘root-brain hypothesis’.²⁵ But *Power of Movement* compellingly maintains that plant movement is not simply an automatic reaction to environmental stimuli; it is a considered response to a complex calculus of variables like light, gravity, and moisture. Even more suggestive is its claim that the subterranean root-tip, perceiving facts about environmental conditions below, ‘transmits an influence’ to the leaves above.
Though they do not explain the mechanics of this transmission, the Darwins suggest that plants broadcast information among their disparate parts.

‘The Willows’ extends this scientific hypothesis that individual plants send internal messages into speculative fiction that they talk to each other. The narrator suspects that the Swede is ‘always listening attentively to something I could not hear, or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes’ (p. 41). Like the funnels on the beach, the unheard sound has no definite origin. The Swede later says, ‘It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us’, as if the willows are only the material manifestation of an even more ethereal and otherworldly threat (p. 54). But in this tenuous hum, Blackwood hypothesizes non-human communication. Humans hear because sound waves bounce off the tympanic membrane in our ears. In contrast, ‘The Willows’ imagines alternative sensory mechanisms. ‘The sound doesn’t come to me by the ears at all’, the Swede says: ‘The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimensional sound might be supposed to make itself heard’ (pp. 48–49). This supposition of the fourth dimension recalls Edwin Abbott’s *Flatland* (1884), where the residents of a geometrical plane have no words to describe any position above or below their flat bodies except inside themselves. However, this reference to higher dimensionality is a red herring. More pertinently, the Swede shifts his vocabulary from ‘sounds’ to ‘vibrations’. Sounds require a tympanum; vibrations require only three-dimensional materiality.

This purely vibratory communication is distinctly inhuman. The Swede rightly insists that ‘it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity’ (p. 49). This is the ‘unthinkable novum’ that Miéville identifies as the weird. Blackwood’s narrator thinks that the semi-audible hum ‘was new not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all’ (p. 50). The newness of this experience tests the plasticity of man to receive it. In his introduction to *Tales of Algernon Blackwood* (1938), the author asserts that his stories consider ‘extended, or expanded, consciousness’: ‘if a ghost is seen, what it is interests me less that what sees it? Do we possess faculties which, under exceptional stimulus, register beyond the gamut of seeing, hearing, feeling?’ The tragedy of ‘The Willows’ is the campers’ inability to adapt their mental faculties in time. Emerging from his tent, the narrator feels ‘plunged into a sort of torrent
of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. [...] The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty’ (p. 59). It is his human body, not that of the earless vegetal willows, that fails to hear.

If Blackwood’s weird fiction was inspired by the Darwins’ scientific work, then modern science is catching up to Blackwood. Monica Gagliano (evolutionary ecologist), Richard Karban (entomologist), Stefano Mancuso (plant neurobiologist), and Daniel Robert (bionanoscientist) are part of a growing group of specialists who argue that plants do, in fact, communicate information about light, soil, water, and insects. Colin Tudge’s *The Secret Life of Trees* (2005) and Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) have brought these ideas to popular audiences. In *Brilliant Green* (2013), written with journalist Alessandra Viola, Mancuso asserts: ‘From the roots to the leaves, a plant is composed of billions of cells, whose surfaces often have receptors for volatile substances able to set off a chain of signals communicating information to the entire organism’. Plasmodesmata—the sequential opening and shutting of a plant’s cell walls—transmit electrical, chemical, and hydraulic signals from roots to stems, branches, and leaves. This communication network tells petals when and how much to open, roots when and where to dig, and leaves when to exude odors to ward off unwelcome invaders. Notable is the absence of a centralized brain center; not only is each root-tip a neural receptor, but ‘[t]he whole plant is capable of hearing, somewhat as if—below and above ground—it were covered with millions of tiny ears’.

New discoveries about plant intelligence and communication challenge what we think we know about our vegetal neighbors. We are right to find these revelations weird. Especially so is the theory that, not only do plants send signals along their own networks, but they also intercept messages meant for others. In *Plant Sensing and Communication* (2015), Karban hypothesizes that plants opportunistically listen in on frequencies emitted by other species and ‘benefit by eavesdropping on the volatile cues of neighbors’. Blackwood imagines his willows not only transmitting vibrations but also sensing the campers’ nervous tremors; ‘The Willows’ evocatively first appeared in a collection titled *The Listeners* after another tale. The Swede warns: ‘We must keep our minds quiet—it’s our minds they feel’ (p. 52). Though the men cannot interpret the flora-phonics that they only half perceive, the plants can hear the pulses that the men involuntarily
emit. This suggestion allows ‘The Willows’ to branch off from the Gothic uncanny of Victorian killer plant tales into the budding canon of the weird—all the weirder, indeed, because its seemingly far-fetched fancies about conspiring plants might contain a seed of truth.

Failing Speech
Further distinguishing Blackwood’s plants from earlier Gothic killers is his optimistic embrace of such sentience. ‘The Willows’ horrifies because the men cling to assertions of their mastery, but relinquishing oneself to vegetal collectivity can be exhilarating. In ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’, David and Sophia Bittacy live in a cottage on the edge of the New Forest, a hunting preserve in southwest Hampshire. By day, Sanderson, an artist, paints a Lebanon cedar bordering their lawn; at night, David reads from Francis Darwin’s 1908 reiteration of the root-tip hypothesis before the British Association for the Advancement of Science, lingering on the possibility that ‘in plants there exists a faint copy of what we know as consciousness in ourselves’.32 Sophia suspects forest voices that cannot quite be heard but which manifest conscious purpose: ‘listen as she might, there was nothing audible but the inarticulate murmur of the night. […] this murmur as of rustling branches in the very room, a sound of foliage whispering’ (pp. 41–42). In contrast to the victims of ‘The Willows’, however, David hears the trees calling to him, expands his consciousness, and concludes the story disappearing—seemingly dissolving—into the forest. ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loves’ thus teeters between the horror of human annihilation and the utopic fantasy of ecological harmony.

David represents an ideal in Blackwood’s fictional universe. A former employee of the Woods and Forest Commission in India, he resettles to the New Forest to protect the trees: ‘his best years of active life had been spent in the care and guardianship of trees. […] He could not live for long away from them without a strange, acute nostalgia that stole his peace of mind and consequently his strength of body’ (pp. 57–58). David thus resembles American environmentalist John Muir, who advocated to designate the Yosemite Valley a National Park (which it became in 1890) and established the Sierra Club (1892), based on the philosophy that ‘[g]oing to the woods is going home’.33 With this metaphor of a shared ‘home’, Muir worked to undo the exploitative relationship between man and nature.34 He also granted the trees the ability to communicate. In his essay, ‘A Wind-Storm in the Forests’ (1894), he recounts, ‘Spruce, and Fir, and Pine, and leafless Oak […]
Each was expressing itself in its own way,—singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures’. Specifically, the trees sing in praise of God. In *The Yosemite* (1912), Muir says that the pines ‘are waving and singing in worship […] as if with religious ecstasy’. The forest is a church and the trees members of a gospel choir. Muir’s theism allows him to de-anthropomorphize nature; the forest sings and prays independent of man’s will. But in making the trees man’s equal, under God, he forgoes making them other. In an 1872 letter, he writes, ‘Rocks and water, etc., are words of God and so are men. We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love’.

Muir’s intoxication with nature’s symphony offers Blackwood another prototype for the arboreal lullaby in ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’. David gladly gives in to ‘the dim enchantment of the trees’ (p. 93). But for Blackwood, Muir’s metaphors are too easy, his forest songs too audible, and his theism too anthropocentric. In ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’, there is no God for the trees to address; Sophia regards her husband’s flora-philia as sacrilegious because it resembles nothing in her Bible, while David ‘regarded her little biblical phrases as oddities […] like horns and little useless things some animals have not yet lost in the course of evolution while they have outgrown their use’ (p. 13). His melding with the trees initiates a higher evolutionary phase that renders Protestant humanity a quaint atavism. Sanderson admits that ‘there is “God” in the trees’, but there is also ‘that which is not God’: the residuum at which Blackwood hints (p. 24). Without a deity for nature (including man) to praise, a rivalry erupts among competing voices, and the human voice loses. Pursuing David into the forest, Sophia finds that ‘[h]er shrill voice crossed the lawn and died away into the Forest, quickly smothered. No echo followed it. The sound fell dead against the rampart of a thousand listening trees’ (p. 19).

David’s absorption into the forest is told through Sophia’s point of view, which some critics consider a satirical move allowing Blackwood to mock the narrowness of her religion. But more central to Blackwood’s project is his rendering of Sophia’s inability to articulate the experience. She continually struggles to find English analogues for the forest sounds: ‘some such word she used—swishing, sishing, rushing, or something of the kind’ (p. 35). None hit the mark: ‘these things she saw, formless, wordless; she could not put them into any kind of language’ (pp. 68–69). Her failure is not the result of linguistic incompetence; she cannot find the right words to talk about how the trees talk because no such words exist. The failure
of her Bible to provide a frame of reference is less a jab at Christianity than it is a pointed departure from Muir’s attempt to incorporate the unknown phenomena of nature into our familiar Western philosophies. In his autobiographical memoir *Episodes before Thirty* (1924), Blackwood directly addresses this problem: ‘language can only describe the experience of the race’, and humans have yet to experience the full intelligence of the animate world. This yet unknown ‘Mystical Experience’ of nature, he says, is thus ‘incommunicable’.40 The weird is too new for words.

‘The Willows’ gestures at what humans cannot hear: the vibratory hums that escape our imperfect sensory receptors. ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ shifts to what human cannot say: the phenomena of nature which we have never known and for which we have no language. Blackwood’s plants are doubly weird because they communicate in defiance of human biology and they resist containment by ordinary human expression. More than David’s fantastical merging with the forest, ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ concerns both Sophia’s and Sanderson’s inability to represent the forest at all. At one point, Sanderson tells David, ‘Trees love you […] Your service to them all these years abroad has made them know you’ (p. 25). David balks at the anthropomorphism of this assertion, and the artist responds: ‘We’re getting rather mixed […] we’re talking of one thing in the terms of another really’ (p. 27). *Love* is a word for a human emotion; Muir uses it to equate rocks, water, trees, and men as ‘expressions of one Love’ for God. Sanderson amends his statement from the trees’ ‘love’ to their ‘awareness’. Though more sympathetic to the trees than is Sophia, Sanderson nevertheless shares her struggle to avoid ‘talking of one thing’ (the forest) ‘in the terms of another’ (man).

Not simply an exposition of failure, ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ tries to imagine what a faithful representation of the forest might look like. Sanderson’s painting of the cedar offers one possibility. David praises the picture not for its fidelity to that tree, but because, as he says, ‘It reminds me of another tree—that Kentish lawn in the spring’ that he recalls from his youth (p. 6). According to S. T. Joshi, this secondary cedar has a third referent: a tree that Blackwood loved in his childhood.41 To represent one tree, then, is to invoke a potentially endless series of others both in and outside the fictional text. For Sophia, this referential slipperiness signals a loss: she laments that ‘it would have been more real if it had been the original tree, wouldn’t it?’ (p. 7). But her husband easily discards the singular bond between sign and referent: ‘It has made me fond of all cedars for its sake’ (p. 7). Stretching representation beyond ‘talking of one thing in the terms of
another,’ David reaches for a semiotics that branches out metonymically toward totality—talking about one and all simultaneously. Sanderson’s singular ‘portrait of the cedar’, then, might indeed capture something of the forest’s ‘huge collective life’ where what looks like many individual trees is often one organism connected via a network of underground, communicative roots (pp. 5 and 31).

Since the reader never sees Sanderson’s picture, its success can be asserted without being assessed. More complex, however, is the problem of representing plant speech—speech that we have neither the capacity to hear nor the language to express—within narrative. Having deemed human vocabulary insufficient for articulating plant speech, Blackwood chooses another sign from the fabulist’s toolbox: the ellipsis. This typographical tick dominates whenever the characters try to talk about the trees. One night as they listen to the forest and erroneously attribute the clamor to the wind, Sanderson, David, and Sophia use roughly the same phrase, each time inadequate to their purposes. Within their utterances, ever-present ellipses move around and stake out new positions between the human speakers’ words (all ellipses in original):

‘The wind’, [Sanderson] added, glancing at his host a moment significantly, but in so discreet a way that Mrs. Bittacy did not observe it, ‘the wind, too, has begun to roar … in the Forest … further out’. (p. 38)

[Sophia] noticed, too, the apparent depth of meaning he put into those simple words that ‘the wind had begun to roar in the Forest … further out’. (p. 38)

‘They are roaring in the Forest further out … and I … must go and see’. [David] stared beyond her as he said it, to the woods. ‘They are needing me. They sent for me …’(pp. 43–44)

In her recent book *Novel Cultivations* (2019), Elizabeth Chang returns to Blackwood’s sentient trees and the phenomenon of dispersed and divided consciousness. She provocatively suggests that, in making one character’s thoughts indistinguishable from another’s, ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ develops a ‘narrating consciousness’ that succeeds in being ‘both nonhuman and collective’.
The human characters appear to think like a forest. But, I argue, Blackwood’s interrogation of thinking—and speaking—like a tree goes further than this. As this shared phrase passes from one speaker to the other, Blackwood’s ellipses convey a breakdown in Sanderson’s, Sophia’s, and David’s attempt to describe what they hear, or what they do not quite hear and do not know how to translate into articulate speech. The words that the ellipses follow—‘roar’, ‘forest’, ‘out’, ‘I’, and ‘me’—disintegrate into the silent pauses that they create. The punctuation halts the human speech, allowing us to strain to hear other voices, though no sound comes through.

Novelists can employ ellipses, according to Anne Toner’s analysis of the punctuation, in order to reject narrative closure in favor of the ‘suspension’ and ‘non-rationality’ apropos of the Gothic. But Blackwood’s ellipses are weird; they do not so much extend the human story as suggest that there is another, alien conversation going on in the background just out of earshot. As David becomes more susceptible to the trees’ call, Blackwood ramps up his use of the punctuation. Sophia thinks to herself (again, all ellipses in original):

[The trees’] number was a host with endless reinforcements, and once it realised its passion was returned the power increased….
Her husband loved the trees… They had become aware of it….
They would take him from her in the end… (p. 70)

The ellipses here mark Sophia’s inability to articulate her husband’s experience, the newness of his relationship with nature that finds no corresponding human diction. But though she struggles to find the right words, the ellipses nevertheless signify her coming to terms with the truth of the forest’s awareness of and desire for her husband. As the passage progresses, Sophia is learning to decipher the forest’s meaning—as if, during the punctuated pauses in her articulate thoughts, other kinds of messages are successfully (if almost silently) exchanged between the forest and the house. We might read this passage, then, not as the musings of a solitary Sophia, but rather as a dialogue between Sophia and the trees. She speaks the words, and the trees strum the beat in between them. Indeed, the wordlessly staccato triple beat of the ellipses’ dum-dum-dum ingeniously mimics the subaudible, vibratory pulses that Blackwood elsewhere imagines constitute arboreal
communication. This series of typographical dots, rather than the English words, seems to be the trees’ way of telling Sophia what they want.

‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’—though not as celebrated as ‘The Willows’—is an experiment in the weird. Blackwood attempts to tell the story of the union between man and trees in two tongues: human words that betray their inadequacy and typographical beats that stand in for the barely audible clicks of plants sending information along their networks. The punctuation of the later story also eerily recalls the punctures of the first: the ‘funnel-shaped hollows’ suggestively created by the willows’ roots plunging into the sands. We can picture the root-pits that confront Blackwood’s campers as a series of dots on the beach looking something like an ellipsis on the page. In ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’, those plunging pits constitute a kind of language of their own, interrupting human speech to draw attention to themselves and disrupting the type on the page to refocus our attention on the page underneath: not coincidentally constructed from the pulp of felled trees. That pinnacle of human specialness—the written word—appears simply a mess of scribbles that obscures the material bodies and the sub-audible communication networks of the trees. And just in case they are listening, Blackwood reaches out to them in their own vibratory, elliptical beat.

Both ‘The Willows’ and ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ may be rooted in the Victorian killer plant tales, but this literary lineage alone does not account for their reconstitution of who speaks and who listens. Confronted with new scientific discoveries suggesting that plants do communicate, we return to the weird not only as a subgenre of horror but also as a prescient mode that reevaluates the human within a nature that we still underestimate. In ‘The Weird’, Luckhurst acknowledges that ‘ecocriticism has been thoroughly weirded’ when we imagine ‘the earth becoming an actor again, pushing back against human development’.

He cites Timothy Morton’s assertion, in Dark Ecology (2016), that ‘ecological awareness is weird [...] suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing’. Talking trees, in particular, inform the latest ecocritical fiction; Richard Powers’s New York Times bestseller The Overstory (2018) opens with a pine tree whispering to an unsuspecting dendrologist: ‘Listen. There’s something you need to hear’. A century ago, Blackwood’s stories not only introduced this prophetic ecological awareness that the plants that we take for passive backdrops have wills and speech of their own but also admits the paucity of our symbolic systems to convey natural facts. Plants may communicate, but the
weirdest part of this possibility is we do not even have the words to talk about how truly weird that is.

University of Utah
jessica.straley@utah.edu

NOTES

My title is taken from Dr. Seuss [Theodore Geisel], *The Lorax* (1971; New York: Random House, 1999), n.p. I also want to thank my colleague, Alf Seegert, for his enthusiastic conversations about Blackwood and suggestions regarding this piece.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 95.
12 Ibid., p. 91.
13 Conley cites S. T. Joshi’s *The Weird Tale* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), but the category does not feature in his argument.
15 Ibid., p. 513.
21 Ibid., p. 312.
30 Ibid., p. 312.


38 Emphasis in original.

39 See, for example, Conley, ‘Uncrossable Evolutionary Gulfs’.


42 Early editions of ‘The Man Whom the Trees Loved’ in *Pan’s Garden* included two black-and-white illustrations by W. Graham Robertson of a human figure exalting in the forest; neither, however, represents Sanderson’s painting.


The Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), who was an ardent admirer of Walter Pater, got to know his works through the Austrian princess Elsa Cantacuzène (1865–1946) in 1894. It was from her that Hofmannsthal borrowed copies of The Renaissance, Imaginary Portraits and Marius the Epicurean; immediately after reading these, he published his important essay with the simple title ‘Walter Pater’.1

Elsa Cantacuzène, who was also a friend of Rainer Maria Rilke and Rudolf Kassner, was born in 1865 in Bavaria as the eldest daughter of Theodor Fürst Cantacuzène (1841–1895). Her family belonged to one of the oldest Greek-Byzantine aristocratic families—the Kantakuzenos—and one of her early forefathers had been emperor of Byzantium.2 Despite this famous name, the family was not rich, and Elsa tried to earn money after she studied in Geneva by producing different kinds of applied art, as well as by publishing articles and poems and working as governess for the daughter of the baroness Worms. In this position, she met Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1893 when she stayed with the family of the baroness at the Palais Todesco in Vienna. Hofmannsthal, with whom she had a short and unhappy flirtation, was a close friend of the family Todesco. She drew his attention to Pater and his writings, as becomes clear in her letters to...
The letter she wrote on 30 June 1894 is especially interesting for Pater scholars; here, she declares that she knew Pater and his sisters, having met them during her stay in London in 1891. I have not found any hint that explains how Elsa Cantacuzène became acquainted with Pater and his sisters, as there exists very little information on her time in London.

In this letter, Cantacuzène declares that she visited Pater quite often on Sundays. Her description of these visits might shed new light on Pater’s pastimes in London. At first, she mentions (and this is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of her letter) that Pater liked her voice and therefore asked her, during ‘still English Sunday afternoons—between 5 and 6’, to sing Italian songs for him; the songs were by Pergolese and Gordigiani, which, to her understanding, did not quite fit together, as she remarks. She also states that Pater asked her, because she was enthusiastic about his books, whether she did not want to translate them into German; she replied by saying that, up to now, she had not found the opportunity to do so. In a later part of her letter, she describes Pater and his way of living:

Pater is a friendly, quiet and reserved man of around fifty years. It struck me that there is something untouchable in him and a kind of shy drawing-back-into-oneself when meeting with disharmonious colours, a harsh organ of speech or something brutal. Modest, quiet, exclusive, living in the most peaceful intimacy with his two unmarried sisters. They glide in soft shoes and long, beautifully creased Pre-Raphaelite dresses through the harmoniously tuned rooms, have—especially one with her 45 years—something peculiarly maiden-like, and are, I believe, very much a la hauteur of their brother. All three adore French things and Catholicism, a little bit, and Botticelli and the Italian Renaissance very much.

The picture she conveys seems heavily influenced by the former fashion for Pre-Raphaelite art and perhaps as well by Hofmannsthal’s interest in this school of painting. She presents Pater and his sisters very much like persons in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, as they are moving quietly in subdued harmonious surroundings. Of interest also is her hint at the close relationship between Pater
and his sisters and their shared interest in Catholicism. Therefore, one might assume that this was a subject of conversations between the Pater family and Elsa who, as a Bavarian, was Catholic. Furthermore, one might guess that Pater was interested in her as a late representative of a very old Byzantine noble family.

It seems that after 1891 there was no further contact between Elsa Cantacuzène and Pater, and to my knowledge there is no other reference in her letters to Pater or to his 1894 death. But she herself later gained notoriety in a different respect. In 1898, she married the publisher Horst Bruckmann and started a famous salon in Munich, which was opened with a reading by Houston Steward Chamberlain from his anti-Semitic book *Grundlagen des XIX. Jahrhunderts*. In the following years, Elsa Bruckmann-Cantacuzène’s salon became an important meeting point for influential members of society from politics, science or art who were mostly, especially after the First World War, part of the conservative movement and felt uneasy with modernism. During the 1920s, she became a ‘motherly friend’ of Adolf Hitler, whom she had visited when he was imprisoned in Landsberg and who in December 1924 made his first appearance in her salon in Munich. From then on, Hitler was a regular guest there, together with Rudolf Hess and other Nazi politicians. Her new political opinions made the friendship with Hofmannsthal, whose grandmother was Jewish, obviously difficult and the contact with Hofmannsthal ended in 1924. Bruckmann-Cantacuzène lived to see the end of the Nazi-terror and to become deeply disappointed about Germany’s destiny. Certainly, she is a special and very irritating case with regard to Pater’s reception in Germany, as she combines a serious interest in art and aestheticism with a later enthusiastic commitment of fascism.

Humboldt University
stammulr@hu-berlin.de

NOTES

More letters by Elsa Bruckmann were published in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rudolf Kassner und Rainer Maria Rilke im Briefwechsel mit Elsa und Hugo Bruckmann: 1893–1941*, ed. by Klaus E. Bohnenkamp (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2014).

In the original German text these last words are in English: ‘an stillen engl. Sonntag Nachmittagen—between 5 and 6’. *Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rudolf Kassner und Rainer Maria Rilke im Briefwechsel mit Elsa und Hugo Bruckmann: 1893–1941*, ed. by Klaus E. Bohnenkamp (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2014), p. 182.

At the same time, she confesses that she wanted to translate Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*, but there are no traces of this project to be found. See Bohnenkamp, p. 19, n. 1.

In the original text, these words are in French.


Klaus E. Bohnenkamp relates that she was regarded as and called ‘müterliche Freundin des Führers’ (‘Hofmannsthal’s Egeria’, p. 37).

Bohnenkamp, ‘Hofmannsthals Egeria’, p. 36. In her favor, one should note that she managed in 1943, by personal intervention with Baldur von Schirach, the German Gauleiter in Vienna, to save her former hostess, Yella von Oppenheimer, from deportation to Auschwitz.

We have been waiting for too long for this book. When, almost forty years ago, Richard Jenkyns in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) dismissed Pater as ‘languorous’, not strong enough for Aeschylus, incapable of appreciating the ecstasy of the maenads or the subtlety of Euripides’ portrayal of Pentheus, nobody seems to have been provoked to say a word in contradiction. It is alarming to think for how long observations such as Pater ‘shrinks from precision like an aesthete from an aspidistra’ or that *Plato and Platonism* is ‘spectacularly bad’ have gone unchallenged. Of course, signs of discontent have been growing. Stefano Evangelista’s *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece* (2009) showed the vitality and fecundity of Pater’s engagement with antiquity. Yet it failed to generate the immediate explosion of studies that its conclusions warranted. Instead, it has been true for a while now that the best work on Pater and antiquity has been done on the margins or as part of larger works. For example, Eileen Gregory’s *H.D. and Hellenism* (1997) should be singled out for the quality of its discussion of Pater. The work of Lene Østermark-Johansen should also be acknowledged.

This astonishing imbalance has now been addressed by this collection of essays that takes Pater’s classicism seriously and shows just how important his
views on the topic are both for understanding Pater, but also for thinking about
the discipline of Classics. Charles Martindale’s introduction sets the scene well in
explaining why Pater’s views matter. Martindale has been arguing for a while that
Pater is a model for anyone wanting to study classical reception and those views are
rehearsed here. Pater’s modernity continually shines through. In his lectures and
teaching, Pater broke new ground, offering a breadth of vision that prefigures many
of the important intellectual developments in the discipline. Martindale’s view
that, through his discussion of antique art, Pater became ‘the most sophisticated
sculpture theorist of his day in England’ (p. 5) is amply demonstrated here and
elsewhere in the volume. Rather than a superficial ornament, classical antiquity
runs thick and deep in the work of Pater. To understand Pater, you need to
immerse yourself in the classical.

The first section of the book establishes Pater’s professional capacities and
outlines his activities as a classical scholar. Isobel Hurst gives an accessible and
straight-forward account of Pater’s academic career. He was schooled at the
King’s School Canterbury and entered the Queen’s College, Oxford in 1858.
His education not only trained him in the great canonical authors of Greek and
Roman literature (Homer, Cicero, Virgil, Demosthenes, the Greek dramatists, and
the ancient historians), but also gave him exposure to leading works of German
philosophical thought. The encounter with Germany was to prove a potent one,
as many of the essays in this volume demonstrate. Two other chapters in this
section—the one co-authored by Stefano Evangelista and Katherine Harloe and
the other by Whitney Davis—explore just how important his lifelong engagement
with the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann would prove to
be. All the evidence is that Pater read widely, perhaps too widely (Hurst suggests
this as a possible cause for Pater only gaining a second in his examinations for
Literae Humaniores in 1862). He was awarded a fellowship at Brasenose College
in 1864 where he tutored in Classics. From the 1870s onwards, he gave lectures
to the university on ancient literature, archaeology, myth, and history. Yet Pater’s
contribution to education on classical topics was not limited to the confines
of the university. Through his essays and publications, Pater was an important
conduit for some of the most innovative thinking about the Classics current in
the Victorian period. It was not a matter of content, but also of style. In her essay,
Bénédicte Coste illustrates well Pater’s significant place in the history of Greco-
Roman translation through a reading of his essay ‘The Myth of Demeter and Persephone’ (1876).

One of the tantalizing threads that warrants further exploration in this first section is the discussion of Clara Pater. The fact that both Walter and Clara were tutors in Classics at Oxford at the same time is remarkable for the period (indeed any period). It would be useful to have more on the impact of this relationship on both Walter’s work as well as the education of women in the Classics more generally.

As one would expect in such a volume, Marius the Epicurean demands considerable attention. In the second section, four essays are devoted to it. As an experimental text that combines fictional biography with aesthetic reflection Marius is radical enough. What these essays show is that Marius was not just radical in form, but also in its engagement with antiquity. Duncan Kennedy shows just how deeply influential the work of the Roman poet Tibullus was. He is the first author explicitly alluded to in the text and Marius continually returns to this author in allusions, intertexts, and thematic synergies. What makes this so remarkable is that when Pater was writing, Tibullus was far from a mainstream author. This profound, scholarly engagement with Tibullus breaks new ground for the period and for the reception of Tibullus more generally. Pater’s ability to find value outside the canon is repeatedly demonstrated throughout these essays. His interest in the newly emergent field of classical archaeology (at the time an innovative topic on the Oxford Classics curriculum) is reflected, as Shelley Hales shows, in his construction of domestic space in Marius. Richard Rutherford shows how much of the literature relating to Marcus Aurelius can be found in Marius, again works that fell well outside a traditional canon of classical literature. Finally, Jim Porter examines how this extraordinary confection comes together as part of a much grander meditation on the possibilities of the reception of classical antiquity in general. As a neat appendix to this section, Caroline Vout offers a reading of another of Pater’s imaginary portraits, ‘Apollo in Picardy’ (1893). It is a work that deserves to be much better known, not least because, as Vout deftly shows, it connects with and amplifies much that is found in Pater’s other works.

The third section is more diffuse in character, focussing on Pater and Hellenic culture. Lene Østermark-Johansen examines what is Euripidean about Pater’s ‘Hippolytus Veiled’ (1889), an essay which crops up in several of the essays in
this volume; most notably, in Charlotte Ribeyrol’s chapter on Pater’s use of Pausanias, an essay which again demonstrates the importance of the materiality of Greece (real or imagined) for Pater’s thinking. Elizabeth Prettejohn gives the fullest account in the volume of Pater’s art-historical contribution, showing again, what other contributors point in out in different ways, just how significant Pater’s writings are for thinking through art-history. Robert Fowler completes the section by discussing Pater’s view on Greek religion; a dark, unique vision, but one inspired by a desire to understand ‘more seriously than anyone before him in England … the Greek gods as gods, not as long-dead divinities but as living spirits’ (p. 241).

The final section deals with Pater as a writer on Greek philosophy. Giles Whiteley shows the influence of Heraclitus, a philosopher who crops up in a variety of places (The Renaissance, Marius, Plato and Platonism). Lee Behlman and Kurt Lampe excavate the value of Plato and Platonism, especially in relation to Platonic Ideas, for contemporary debates about Plato’s philosophical significance. Dan Orrells situates Plato and Platonism within contemporary discussions about the value and purpose of education and elegantly demonstrates how Pater completely reorientates these late Victorian debates. Adam Lee shows just how important Aristotle would become to Pater, especially as he formulated his thinking in ‘On Wordsworth’ (1874). In the introduction to this section, Martindale reminds us that T. S. Eliot sneered that Pater was no philosopher and ‘was incapable of sustained reasoning’. These essays prove entirely the opposite. The Pater that emerges is astonishingly original, learned, and exciting.

An extremely helpful, annotated bibliography compiled by Charles Martindale on Pater and the Classics rounds off this volume.

Alastair J. L. Blanshard
University of Queensland
a.blanshard@uq.edu.au

Introducing the first biography of the quintessential minor 1890s poet Theodore Wratislaw, D. J. Sheppard remarks that his ‘finest poems possess their own peculiar charm—something to do with the coincidence of the coy and the lewd, the wide-eyed and the cynical, the lightsome and the melancholic’ (p. 21). He is quite right. Wratislaw’s small body of verse is uneven in quality, but it is always interesting and, on occasion, rather striking. I have had a fondness for it ever since I encountered ‘Hothouse Flowers’ as the epigraph to Michael Moorcock’s *An Alien Heat* (1972) over thirty years ago, but until now, I knew little about its author. A fusion of Enoch Soames, Prufrock, and Pooter, Wratislaw appears at once exotic yet provincial, mysterious yet faintly absurd.

Sheppard’s detailed and wryly amusing account of Wratislaw’s marginal existence is richly informative on two levels. First, it traces the poet’s life from his early years as a day-boy at Rugby to his brief heyday in the London of the 1890s and on to his mournful decline, revealing much hitherto-unknown information and making excellent use of Wratislaw’s unpublished memoir, *Salad Days*, left incomplete when he died in 1933. Second, it puts the poet properly into context, noting his friendships with late-Victorian luminaries such as Wilde, Beardsley, and Arthur Symons, the powerful creative influences of Swinburne, Wagner, and Verlaine, and the vicissitudes of his publishing career, particularly his dealings with the notorious Leonard Smithers. There is a well-conveyed sense of the literary and artistic networks operating in London at the end of the Victorian period, and this in turn magnifies the gulf between Wratislaw’s background and humdrum job as a clerk for the Inland Revenue on one hand and his attempts to become a poet and man-about-town on the other.

Unlike many biographers of ‘minor’ writers, Sheppard does not inflate the importance of his subject or his own study—nothing revealed here will elevate Wratislaw to the first (or even second) rank of 1890s’ literature. What he does instead is provide reliable information, judicious critical readings, and a sympathetic though never indulgent response to a man who could be annoyingly opinionated, even obtuse.
Potential readers of this biography will be primarily interested in chapters 3–5, which cover the period from Wratislaw’s arrival in London to his first marriage. Here, Sheppard paints an engaging picture of the poet’s determined assault on the cultural citadels of the metropolis, an assault which was frequently undermined by the limitations of his talent and, still more so, by his misunderstanding of social situations. Offered the chance to be involved with *The Realm*, Wratislaw mistook the periodical’s name for a public house. He wrote needlessly harsh reviews, fell out with friends such as Norman Gale, showed himself careless in his choice of enemies (crossing the influential Richard Le Gallienne did him no favours), and left many dubious of his sincerity, especially after the brief controversy concerning his poem, ‘To a Sicilian Boy’ (1893), which ended with a reference to ‘the dull ennui of a woman’s kiss’. Whether ennui exists in forms other than dullness is less important than whether the poem was heartfelt or merely an experiment with persona. It certainly encouraged speculation as to Wratislaw’s sexual leanings, something which in turn helped draw him into Wilde’s orbit during the late summer of 1893.

Invited to enjoy a weekend in the countryside, Wratislaw had little notion that his trip to Goring-on-Thames was destined to play out as farce. Sheppard rightly sees similarities with Henry James’s ‘The Author of “Beltraffio”’ (p. 75) in the meeting between an established writer and his star-struck admirer, but this was James’s story as rewritten by Jerome K. Jerome. Wratislaw came to Goring without his summer wardrobe (though he did purchase a straw hat), and found himself wandering along the river bank in a tailcoat. Worse was to come. Having enjoyed over two hours of Wilde’s most sparkling conversation over dinner, the younger man ventured criticisms of his theatrical dialogue, following up this faux pas the next morning with thoughtless remarks about Home Rule. This time, he fell foul of Wilde’s young son, Cyril, though his host rescued him with a wry aside about the possibility of Ireland ruling England instead. The weekend finished with Wratislaw retiring to bed with a cold caused, it seemed, by having dried his hair by hanging out of the train window on his journey from London.

Two years later, Wilde was in prison and there was little public enthusiasm for the decadent culture associated with him. Wratislaw could easily have given up on his literary ambitions at this point, but instead, he was able to contribute to *The Savoy*, edited by his sometime friend, Symons. The magazine had shown great promise when launched in January 1896, but an unwise shift from quarterly to
monthly publication and an embargo by W. H. Smith, which refused to stock it after it published nude male drawings (albeit by William Blake), left it doomed. By the time Wratislaw’s story ‘Mutability’ appeared in September 1896, the editor was finding it hard to attract illustrious contributors, though as Sheppard points out, it would be unfair to see the story’s publication as being prompted by ‘a lack of competing submissions’ (p. 146). ‘Mutability’ and the assured translation from Villon which he contributed to the October number were among Wratislaw’s most interesting works, the former a cut above most of his attempts at fiction. They may not have changed his fortunes (or those of The Savoy), but they did secure him a measure of appreciation and the poem would be sought out by aficionados of 1890s’ writing when there was a revival of interest in the period following the Great War.

Wratislaw’s literary career petered out early in the new century, but not before he published Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Critical Study in November 1900. Sheppard is sanguine as to its worth. It is, he says, ‘only notable as the first published study of the poet’ (p. 164) and ‘contributes far more to our understanding of Theodore’s biography than it illuminates Swinburne’ (p. 159). It did however run to a second edition (unlike his other works) and remains a useful snapshot of attitudes towards Swinburne just as he was becoming eclipsed by new poetic developments and changes in taste.

Sheppard’s biography begins with Beerbohm’s fictional ‘Enoch Soames’, the wretched poetaster who sells his soul to the Devil in return for a modicum of literary fame and who may be partly based on Wratislaw. Whether Wratislaw made a similarly Satanic bargain is unknown, but he has certainly been very fortunate where his biographer (and publisher) are concerned. This is a valuable book which combines critical insight with many fascinating discoveries and an excellent sense of period. It is also very attractively produced, its cover design reworking the block-printed tulip motifs by Gleeson White which adorned Wratislaw’s Caprices in 1893.

Nick Freeman
Loughborough University
N.Freeman@lboro.ac.uk
Elisa Bizzotto’s *Walter Pater: Reception, Rewriting, Adaptation* carefully considers Pater’s use of myth and its appropriation. The little book of four essays, published by Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia in March 2018, seeks to serve two critical objectives: the first is to revitalize Pater criticism in Italy, particularly since Stephen Bann’s edition of *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe* (2004); and the second is to contribute to current scholarship that takes seriously the view of Pater as a classicist and ‘a precursor to twentieth-century cultural theory’ (p. 14), while maintaining his traditional role within aestheticism. The book is inclusive, written in English in a clear and direct style, beginning with a brief review of recent Pater criticism. Methodologically, Bizzotto explores little-known instances of intertextuality, in her words, ‘adaptation, rewriting, borrowing, echoing, intermedial translation, also including reception’ (p. 14), mainly in Pater’s fiction, offering a nuanced handling of his mythic allusiveness. Although it displays a broad understanding of Pater’s corpus, the strength of the book is in its attention to details. The result is a greater appreciation of Pater’s writing as an intricately spun network of allusions to artists and myth-makers both ancient and new.

The first chapter provides an excellent background in the mythography of Pater’s time, leading up to the publication of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) and the creation of psychological archetypes in the work of C. G. Jung, before delving into an analysis of ‘Hippolytus Veiled’ (1889). Although included in *Greek Studies* (1895), Bizzotto considers ‘Hippolytus’ alongside the imaginary portraits ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’ (1886) and ‘Apollo in Picardy’ (1893), which similarly imagine a Greek mythic character, but in altered modern settings. Chapter 2 is very successful in dealing with Pater’s ekphrastic use of the Giorgionesque. Although the essay ‘The School of Giorgione’ (1877) has received plenty of critical attention regarding its aesthetic theory, Giorgione’s direct influence on Pater’s fiction, particularly ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’ and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), has been widely overlooked. This second chapter exemplifies the exciting work that can result from intertextuality, when it gathers and intertwines seemingly disparate threads in a new arrangement to reveal the complexity of Pater’s art. It situates Pater within a broader tradition of English poetry, with insightful analysis of Dante Gabriel
Rossetti’s own use of the Giorgionesque, whose handling and style clearly inspired Pater. Yet Bizzotto is careful to show direct influence from Giorgione’s paintings themselves. Pater’s description of Marius’s friend Cornelius, for example, appears drawn from the figure of Saint Liberale in Giorgione’s Castelfranco Madonna, as noted by Michael Levey. Bizzotto traces a similar form of ekphrasis in ‘Denys l’Auxerrois’ from Giorgione’s The Tempest, which is also thought to incorporate the myth of Dionysus. And to continue what Bizzotto calls ‘intermedial translation’ (p. 60), she observes that The Tempest might be seen as a biographical portrait of Giorgione’s own family, which has remained in some historical obscurity. By shining light on one subject, therefore, Bizzotto exemplifies how, through intertextual analysis, we might gain insight into its model by reflection; so that an examination of the Giorgionesque in Pater leads back to discoveries of the painter’s life itself.

The third chapter turns towards reception, particularly examining Pater’s influence on the poet Giovanni Pascoli, an important figure in Italy’s fin de siècle. The relation of the turn-of-the-century Latinist to Pater has been so far been remarked on only by Italian critics, and Bizzotto hopes to expand upon this fruitful connection for English readers. Pascoli moved in a literary circle who knew Pater well, including Angelo Conti and Gabriele D’Annunzio, and he shares with Pater a concern for childhood, especially its importance in the formation of the artist, as well as a thematic interest in beauty and death. In their work Bizzotto identifies a shared religious syncretism in the culture and language of the Roman Empire. Between the Latin of Pascoli’s Carmina and the long lines of Marius, for example, a similar stylistic tendency is recognized that acts as ‘a frail bulwark against impending linguistic barbarization’ (p. 90). Through a perceptive understanding of Pater’s and Pascoli’s styles, in the Euphuism of the former, Bizzotto is able to trace pervading ideas of Decadence.

Finally, Bizzotto returns to Pater’s use of modern myth through the legend of Tannhäuser. Also known as the legend of the Venusberg, the myth was prevalent in the nineteenth century across Europe, employed by artists from Wagner to Wilde. Bizzotto argues that Pater employs this myth to explore contemporary issues regarding power, sexuality, and gender at the fin de siècle. After adopting the Tannhäuser legend in The Renaissance, Pater revisits it in the unfinished manuscript of Gaston de Latour, and thus one is able to chart a change, where in the later writing one can recognise the author’s struggle to come to terms with
same-sex desire. As the Tannhäuser legend is embedded within ‘Two Early French Stories’, Bizzotto asks what this myth concerning the pursuit of beauty at all costs says about Pater’s understanding of the historical transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and its changing sympathies with the individual within society. Through her interpretation of the word ‘antinomian’, she finds a rebellious spirit in Pater that follows one’s passion rather than Church authority and societal mores. Another way to look at the term ‘antinomian’, however, is in its theological context, which includes within its rebellion on the one plane an obedience to a higher or spiritual law on another, and which seeks to expand Christianity rather than to oppose it. Thus, with regard to Bizzotto’s reading of ‘Amis and Amile’, for example, although the friends are at odds with current ethos, they are sanctioned by a higher law and again at the end of their lives, when their coffins are found side by side miraculously—by a similar kind of divine ordinance that makes the Pope’s staff bloom in the Tannhäuser legend. This alternate reading could see a strong faith in love in accordance with the New Testament rather than a rejection of religion. In any case, Bizzotto makes a parallel argument about Pater’s cultural dissidence which questions narrow views of Christianity that oppose the freedom of man’s spirit to pursue love. The conclusion of her chapter offers an interesting discussion of some of Pater’s unpublished chapters in Gaston, particularly ‘Anteros’, where death, rather than eternal life, results from an unequal and thus profane love in the story of Raoul and Jasmin. Bizzotto enforces that the way in which critics view long-term trends in Pater’s writing often depends upon how they read The Renaissance, whose meaning requires the interpretation of many, at times obscure, myths.

Overall Walter Pater: Reception, Rewriting, Adaptation says very insightful things about some of the most relevant themes in Pater studies today. It presents to the reader a collection of viewpoints rather than a single, sustained argument—but in that is an implicit argument about how Pater ought to be read. More than anything, Bizzotto’s spirited approach helps even those of us outside of Italy appreciate Pater’s work in another of the myriad contexts in which he worked—to mine deeply, but carefully, as she has, and carry up to the light many of the fine gems still hidden there.

Adam Lee
Tyndale University College
adam.lee@tyndale.ca

What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy': this quotation from the ‘Conclusion’ to Walter Pater’s The Renaissance gives both its title and its introductory statement to Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, and Charlotte Ribeyrol’s fine collection of essays arising from the International Walter Pater Conference held in Paris in 2014. ‘New opinions’ and ‘new impressions’ are indeed the focus of the volume, which purports to offer fresh views on the works of Pater taking into account the changes in approach over the last two decades and the new methodologies made possible by ‘the influx of disciplines such as sociology, media history, and intermedial studies’ (p. 2).

The twelve essays of the book are organized in four balanced parts, preceded by a full and effective introduction by the three editors and Bénédicte Coste, who helpfully present the aims of the collection and delineate its contents, providing a short summary of each essay. The first part, entitled ‘Modern Involvement: New Editorial and Biographical Approaches’, breaks away from the stereotype of the aesthete detached from the world and presents Pater as a writer deeply connected with his own time and immersed in the cultural life of the late Victorian period. The second section (‘Intertextualities: The Aesthete and Contemporary Culture’) further highlights the writer’s engagement with his period, in this case focusing on his intertextual practices and his constant dialogue with contemporary authors. The third part (‘Modern Interactions: Aestheticism, Desire and Artistic Detachment’) proposes a reassessment of the philosophical dimension of Pater’s aestheticism. The fourth and final section (‘Interart Poetics: The Art of the Portrait’) is concerned with Pater’s dealings with the art of portraiture, be it in his own imaginary portraits or in his reflections on art history.

Pater’s involvement with ‘the modern world, with its conflicting claims, its entangled interests’ (to use Pater’s words in his essay on Winckelmann), is the thread running through the book, and the focus of some of its most enlightening
chapters. The first essay, Laurel Brake’s study of ‘Walter Pater and the New Media’, provides a compelling example of this engagement through its detailed analysis of Pater’s journalism. It contains eleven tables which present Pater’s patterns of publications in the media of his time, showing in particular the numbers of contributions by title, by genre, by decades of entry, by category, and thus providing the reader with valuable information about Pater’s careful choices of magazines, reviews and newspapers. The essay itself, after examining Pater’s appropriation of contemporary publishing mores, offers three case studies explaining Pater’s selection of the Westminster Review, the Fortnightly Review and Macmillan’s Magazine to publish his most influential work. It suggests through these examples ‘alternative frameworks to the Pater, Shadwell, Gosse and Macmillan editions’ and persuasively shows that ‘most of the posthumous editions particularly are arbitrary, if historical, selections’ (p. 35).

The question of publishing choices is further scrutinized by Lesley Higgins and David Latham, the two general co-editors of Pater’s Collected Works in ten volumes at Oxford University Press. They explain that they were confronted by two questions when examining different variants of the texts: the first one was about the kind of edition best suited to Pater; the second, which they attempt to answer in their essay, concerned the choice of the copy-text. Dispelling the myths that the first iteration—being presumably closer to the author’s original inspiration—is the best, and that Pater in his revisions of his works shied away from controversy, they demonstrate that the writer’s endless reconsiderations of his texts were ‘an act of restoration and a new commitment to the sensuality of words and the mobility of ideas’ (p. 39), hence forcefully justifying their choosing the last iteration for the Collected Works project’s copy-text.

Textual criticism is also the approach privileged by Joseph Bristow in his engaging examination of Walter Pater’s unpublished fragment ‘The Aesthetic Life’, written circa 1893. Drawing on a close analysis of the 5,000 word manuscript kept in the Pater archive of the Houghton Library at Harvard, Bristow brings into focus Pater’s vision of a ‘highly trained, exquisitely receptive, and keenly inquiring young aesthetic critic’ (p. 128), a ‘supposed son of the age’ (to use Pater’s words) who will thrive in the grey world of urban modernity. In his carefully outlined essay, Bristow starts with a presentation of the structure and content of the manuscript, before drawing on Kate Hext’s philosophical analysis of Pater’s text, and finally
turns to an exploration of the characteristics of Pater’s metropolitan aesthete and his ‘synchronization’ with the modern age.

If the discerning male subject of ‘The Aesthetic Life’ is perfectly adjusted to his historical moment, this is not the case with previous young Paterian heroes, such as the ones whose portraits Lene Østermark-Johansen invites the reader to consider in her essay on ‘Change and Continuity in Pater’s Portraits’. This richly illustrated chapter examines the affinities between narrative portraits and painted portraits through a highly convincing parallel between the small genre paintings by the nineteenth-century French artist Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier and Pater’s Imaginary Portraits. Østermark-Johansen then goes on to show how in ‘A Prince of Court Painters’, Pater resorts to Jean-Baptiste Pater’s portrait of his sister Marie-Marguerite and exploits references to Watteau as portraitist to exploit them as narrative devices. The chapter also comprises a cogent reassessment of Pater’s contribution to the reception of seventeenth-century Dutch realism in Britain.

Other particularly stimulating chapters include Adam Lee’s study of the influence of Ernest Renan’s Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse on Pater’s Gaston de Latour, in which he uses the concepts of trace, race, and grace to unearth a convincing genealogy linking the two texts; Thomas Albrecht’s comparison between Pater and George Eliot and his exploration of their shared advocacy of human sympathy as a principle of aesthetic criticism; or Pascal Aquien’s stylistic study of Pater’s famous description of Leonardo Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa in The Renaissance. Other thoughtful chapters cover an eclectic range of topics: habitus and the multifaceted self in Pater’s work (Martine Lambert-Charbonnier); curiosity in the essay ‘Sir Thomas Browne’ (Daichi Ishikawa); Pater’s dialectical history of same-sex desire (Michael F. Davis); excess and restraint in his rhetoric of affect (Nicholas Manning); and his portrayal of lives of the philosophers in ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ and ‘Sebastian van Storck’ (Kit Andrews).

All in all, the rich and varied panorama of recent research on Pater that the book offers—by established specialists as well as by younger researchers—makes it indispensable reading for both Pater scholars and for any reader desirous to ‘test new opinions’ or ‘court new impressions’ about the cultural and literary context of late Victorian Britain.

Claire Masurel-Murray
Sorbonne Université
claire.murray@sorbonne-universite.fr
Until quite recently, scholars wishing to consult a published collection of Vernon Lee’s letters would be obliged to seek out an academic library that possessed one of the fifty copies of the edition compiled and privately printed by her literary executor Irene Cooper Willis in 1937. Assuming that this rare book was available, they would most likely be required to read it in a designated area under the watchful eye of a librarian.¹ Cooper Willis’s edition consists of letters Lee wrote to her father in 1870 when she and her mother visited her half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton in Paris, letters written during 1871–8 to the novelist Henrietta Jenkin, one of her early literary mentors, and the many ‘letters home’, written to her mother during 1881–94 when travelling in Italy and abroad. Jenkin apart, this collection does not include letters to recipients outside Lee’s immediate family, although she had a vast correspondence that included many notable contemporary figures. Those seeking published letters beyond this would either have to fossick through obscure journals such as Colby Library Quarterly or the Italian periodical English Miscellany, or ferret out those reprinted in biographies by figures such as Mario Praz or Ethel Smyth.² Alternatively, if they wanted to consult some of Lee’s many archived letters, then the most substantial collection, along with other MS material by her, is at Colby College, Maine, not the easiest place to access but one chosen for that very reason by Cooper Willis who, after World War II, thought it the safest repository for Lee’s papers.

In spite of its rarity, Cooper Willis’s edition of Lee’s letters has been frequently cited by scholars writing on nineteenth-century aesthetic and decadent culture, as Lee’s perceptive, pithy, often caustic remarks on the art and literature of this period and the figures who produced it, are eminently quotable. Yet, in addition to its limited timespan and range of addressees, the 1937 collection has obvious deficiencies: it has no index, has few annotations, contains some egregious mis-transcriptions, and Cooper Willis was obliged to cut or censor various letters—for example, those containing Lee’s more intemperate comments about the surprise engagement in August 1887 of her first romantic partner, Mary Robinson, to
the French orientalist James Darmesteter. A scholarly, more comprehensive edition has long been needed, and thus the publication of the first of the three projected volumes of Lee’s *Selected Letters*, edited by Amanda Gagel, is particularly welcome, with Volume 1 (1865–1884) an indispensable resource to anyone trying to reconstruct in more detail the formative years of the young Vernon Lee.

The introduction opens using the first person singular, but readers subsequently learn that ‘this edition is a beginning and a sincere effort on the part of the editors to offer for the first time transcriptions of hundreds of the author’s letters’ (p. xxi). Sophie Geoffroy acts as a contributing editor, but also a translator of Lee’s letters in French, along with Crystal Hall and Christa Zorn, who respectively translate her Italian and German letters, an essential requirement for such a cosmopolitan, multi-lingual writer. Perhaps understandably for a volume of this length, the introduction is concise and business-like rather than critically discursive. It succinctly evaluates Lee’s current literary standing as a major critic and thinker rather than, as was often the case in the past, a talented, if somewhat eccentric, minor celebrity with a ‘prickly’ personality and frustrated lesbian tendencies. The editors generously acknowledge those scholars who have helped shape this modern perception of Lee, and provide a few interesting examples—tantalizing foretastes of letters to come—of the older Lee ‘talking with her pen’ and ‘working out her thoughts on paper’ (pp. xvi–xviii). This is followed by some brief remarks on her professional life and her correspondence in French, Italian, and German, and a few pages on the rationale for selection. Subsequent sections detail the editorial principles, provide a condensed biographical overview of 1865-1884, and usefully provide each of Lee’s correspondents in Volume 1 with a short biography.

This new edition is undeniably a substantial achievement and a huge advance on what was previously available. It reprints most of those important early letters found in Cooper Willis’s edition in which the young Lee is developing her intellectual interests—‘All my desire is to fit myself to study aesthetics, more especially those of music, illustrated by the principles of the other arts’ (19 April 1874; p. 165). We follow her struggles to get into print—‘If Blackwood will have my article on Bologna, I shall be delighted beyond all things—The next best is to have the MS back and send it to someone else’ (18 May 1875; p. 193)—and learn her need for a pseudonym because ‘no one reads a woman’s writings on art, history or aesthetics with anything but mitigated contempt’ (18 December 1878; p. 244). We also see Lee exploring London, passing judgement on the homes of
the rich and the famous—‘The Leyland’s [sic] house is in Prince’s Gate: frightfully vulgar & badly got up’ (11 July 1883; p. 434); and she makes this remark on the domicile of William and Lucy Rossetti: ‘Oh what a grimy, dingy, filthy aesthetic house! I shuddered to sit down in my white frock’ (16 June 1882; p. 361). She records her candid impressions of her fellow authors and artists. At first meeting, Pater is ‘lymphatic, dull, humourless’ but ‘quite unaffected, & not at all like Mr Rose’ (18 July 1881; p. 315); the poet William Sharp has a ‘linendraper’s sleekness & prettiness’ and ‘looks the incarnation of underbredness’ (22 June 1881; p. 293); the recently married novelist Anne Thackeray Ritchie is ‘quite brimming over at the idea of having babies at an age when she ought to be ashamed of it’ (21 June 1882; p. 363); while the critic Theodore Watts is ‘mediocre & self sufficient’ (9 July 1883; p. 432).

The new edition adds a considerable amount of valuable new material such as Lee’s precocious letters in French to Eugene detailing her adolescent intellectual activities, evidence of her early attempts to publish in Italian journals, and indications of other significant mentors like the novelist Cornelia Turner and, somewhat later, the historian Linda Villari, with whom Lee often discusses her work and petitions for advice and guidance. We also find letters to other important friends such as the Italian poet and critic Enrico Nencioni, who reviewed her Euphorion (1884), the critic Carlo Placci, and the women’s rights campaigner Frances Power Cobbe who, unlike many, was an enthusiastic reader of Lee’s controversial novel Miss Brown (1884). Characteristically, Lee’s pleasure at Cobbe’s appreciative response does not prevent her informing her correspondent that her praise is excessive and that she does not share her ‘animosity against aestheticism’, which ‘has on the whole been a most healthy & useful movement’ (13 December 1884; p. 608).

Not all of the letters in Cooper Willis’s edition are included (a case in point being Lee’s letter to her mother of 14 June 1882), something that needs to be borne in mind when considering the prefatory assertion that ‘almost all of the letters the editors located are printed’ (p. xxi). As the editors subsequently note, the most important new inclusions in this volume are the letters Lee wrote to Mary Robinson, now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which chart the beginning and development of their all-important romantic and intellectual relationship. (Robinson was instrumental in introducing Lee to the London literary scene.) While acknowledging the significant contribution made by many of these letters, it should be pointed out that they constitute just a portion of Lee’s
correspondence to Robinson in the BnF. Admittedly, including all of it would have resulted in a much bulkier edition, but to claim, as the editors do, that they have printed all of Lee’s located letters apart from ‘brief notes of invitation, highly illegible drafts or incomplete letters’ (p. xxi) is highly misleading. Moreover, the excluded BnF letters, only some of which are incomplete, are often extremely important. While Lee’s handwriting is often appallingly difficult, these are not ‘drafts’, and one wonders at the exclusion of key letters like the early fragment that reveals that it was Robinson who started the relationship by making an overt declaration to Lee, or Lee’s letters (17 and 21 December 1880) written just after the all-important honeymoon tour that the women made to Siena and Pisa in December 1880.3 (It was during this trip that Lee and Robinson made their visit to the Castello di Belcaro commemorated in the opening chapter of Lee’s Belcaro of 1881, an essay collection dedicated to Robinson.) Also omitted is the letter of 26–27 February 1881 cited by Martha Vicinus in her Intimate Friends, in which Lee reflects that ‘once at Siena … you said you had become mine, because you kissed me & I had held you tight’.4 Indeed, although other letters are included that allude to the women’s time in Siena at ‘Tognazzi’s’ (the pensione where they stayed), these references and indeed the trip itself will not be fully legible to readers because they are not glossed.

Although the level of annotation supplied by the editors is vastly superior to that of Cooper Willis, it is not always helpful as it might be. It has long been unclear to Lee scholars precisely when she met Robinson. We are informed in a footnote (p. 261, n. 1) that they met in Florence on 16 October 1880, but no source is supplied for this key fact, and only a diligent reader would find what looks like confirmation in a later anniversary letter (16 October 1884; p. 590). It is virtually impossible to publish a work, especially one of any length, without introducing errors but there are some disconcerting slips. To give but two small examples: the name of the American Lee scholar Phyllis Mannocchi is consistently misspelt, and Lee’s comment about Francis Hueffer—‘I tried to nub him, but who could nub an oberkellner [headwaiter] with any success?’ (10 July 1881; p. 310)—must surely be ‘I tried to snub him’, as in Cooper Willis (p. 75).

Nonetheless, this new edition will be invaluable in helping readers construct a much more nuanced picture of one of the major intellectual figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Those impatient for the next two instalments of letters can find a generous sample in Gagel’s original PhD thesis.
(Boston 2008), although the selection printed there will be considerably enlarged in the volumes to come.  

Catherine Maxwell  
Queen Mary  
University of London  
c.b.maxwell@qmul.ac.uk  

NOTES  

1 Colby College has generously made available for free download a pdf of its copy of the Cooper Willis edition. See https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/vl_published/  
2 Articles from *Colby College Quarterly* are also now available as free pdfs from https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/  
3 Lettres de Vernon Lee à Mary Robinson I: 1880–1882, Fonds Anglais 244, f. 49 (incomplete and undated); ff. 41a–44b, 45a–48b (17 December 1880; 21 December 1880), BnF, Paris. Readers prepared to grapple with Lee’s hand can now read scanned versions of these letters for themselves in free downloadable pdfs from the BnF website.  
5 Available as a pdf from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global (from subscribing libraries).

ARTHUR MACHEN (1863–1947) is best known by contemporary readers as a writer of ‘weird fiction’, a term that encompasses the supernatural literature, fantasy, and futuristic horror commonly associated with writers such as M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany (Edward Plunkett), and most notably perhaps with H. P. Lovecraft. Those who have read *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Imposters; or, The Transmutations* (1895), and ‘The White People’ (1904) will doubtless recognize the unknown but malign terrors that characterize these works, and this longstanding connection with the ‘weird’ has played an important part in raising Machen’s profile in popular culture. Yet, as Dennis Denisoff notes, this contemporary emphasis on the role of horror and the supernatural in Machen’s writings relates to but has obscured the significance of his oeuvre in the context of Decadence. This edition extends our understanding of Machen’s ‘innovations in weird and horror literature’ and explains ‘the ways in which his lifelong interests in the occult and supernatural shaped his unique contribution to Decadence’ (p. 2). In emphasizing the intersections between the weird, the decadent, and the occult in his writings, Denisoff’s annotated volume constitutes a vital addition to existing critical editions of Machen’s works.

The collection consists of a substantial and informative introduction entitled ‘Arthur Machen’s Chamber of Decadence’ that is followed by two sections which centre on Machen’s fiction and non-fiction writings respectively. The first is composed of well-known works such as *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), as well as a range of extracts and shorter tales that signal Machen’s engagement with Decadent ‘styles, tropes, and authors’ (p. 2). These include ‘The Recluse of Bayswater’ from *The Three Imposters* and ‘The Lost Club’ (1890) that resonate with the urban decadence to be found in contemporaneous texts such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), and Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897), and selections from *Ornaments in Jade* (1924)—the title of which evokes the aestheticist poetry
of Théophile Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées* (p. 22). A late story, ‘The Ritual’ (1937) concludes this section. Reproducing texts published between 1890 and 1937, this collection highlights the ways in which Decadence and mysticism lie at the heart of Machen’s oeuvre, and Denisoff’s extensive ‘literary, aesthetic, and philosophical annotations’ (p. 2) both enrich our knowledge of Machen’s texts and stimulate new avenues of research.

From a critical perspective, the second section on Machen’s non-fiction writings is perhaps the most intriguing. ‘The Literature of Occultism’ (1899) and extracts from *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902) provide key insights into his ‘philosophical and literary views’ and Machen’s introductions to *The Angels of Mons: The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War* (1915) and *The Great God Pan* (1916) permit us to see how Machen situated his own work ‘within the culture of his time’ (p. 23). Denisoff’s annotations are especially sensitive, here, and deepen our knowledge of the works themselves and of the cultural zeitgeist in which they were produced. His notes on alchemy, magic, and mysticism in ‘The Literature of Occultism’ will be especially helpful to students encountering this text for the first time, and his comparison of Machen’s discussion of style in *Hieroglyphics* with Walter Pater’s essay ‘Style’ (1888) not only serves to further connect Machen’s writing to decadence and aestheticism but also encourages us to consider his emphasis on ‘Ecstasy’ as the means by which ‘fine literature may be discerned from reading matter, by which art may be known from artifice’ (p. 284) in the light of Pater’s own advocacy of experiential ecstasy in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).

The third and final section comprises supplementary material that includes excerpts from A. E. Waite’s *The Occult Sciences* (1891), Florence Marryat’s *The Spirit World* (1894), and Alfred Egmont Hake’s *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* (1896) that function as comparisons to and offer contexts for Machen’s ‘The Literature of the Occult’. It also includes contemporary reviews of *The Three Imposters* and *The Hill of Dreams* as well as Arthur Sykes’s ‘The Great Pan-Demon’ (1895), a parody of *The Great God Pan*, all of which afford useful insights into the fin-de-siècle reception of Machen’s works.

There is no doubt that this collection achieves what it sets out to do. Denisoff’s selection of key texts, his ‘Decadent Chronology of Arthur Machen’s Life’, and his provision of critical contexts all situate Machen successfully as a decadent writer
whose interests in the occult dovetail with and underpin the decadent tropes discernible in his fiction. However, as Denisoff wryly observes, Machen was a rather reluctant and inadvertent Decadent. Quoting from Machen’s introduction to *The House of Souls* (1906), Denisoff shows how he is at pains to distance himself from Decadent writers such as Huysmans; Machen writes, ‘Several papers, I remember, declared that “The Great God Pan” was simply a stupid and incompetent rehash of Huysmans’ “À-là-bas” and “A Rebours.” I had not read these books so I got them both. Thereon, I perceived that my critics had not read them either’ (pp. 1–2). Yet both *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Imposters* appeared in John Lane’s Keynotes series, a series that also published works by writers like George Egerton and Ella D’Arcy who were associated with Decadence and the *Yellow Book*. In addition, the covers of both *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Imposters* were designed by Aubrey Beardsley who, at that time, was art editor of the *Yellow Book* and known for the risqué nature of his illustrations. Moreover, as Denisoff remarks, notwithstanding Machen’s disavowals of decadence, his occultist interests brought him into contact with members of networks in which the concepts of decadence, aestheticism and occultism were interwoven, including Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Florence Farr, and A. E. Waite (pp. 14–15).

In retrospect, Machen’s efforts to distance himself from the decadence of the 1890s have proved somewhat futile: the works he produced during that period are undoubtedly ‘his most Decadent’, dealing with themes such as occultism, paganism, eroticism, sexual ambiguity, and the femme fatale that are indicative of decadent literature (p. 4). But, as the scope of this collection shows, those themes emerged in works that spanned his lifetime, suggesting that decadence—consciously or unconsciously—informed his writing well beyond the 1890s. The combination of occultism and decadence found in Machen’s oeuvre also straddles the line between late-Victorian and modernist literature. While occultism’s contribution to modernist literature and culture has received continued attention, most recently in John Bramble’s *Modernism and the Occult* (2015) and in Tessel M. Baudin and Henrik Johnsson’s collection, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (2018), the relationship between decadence and occultism remains relatively underexplored. This is surprising given that decadent literature, with its noted focus on the strange and the curious, lends itself easily to such critical scrutiny. Denisoff’s collection points to the fascinating ways in which not only
Machen’s, but other decadents’ works might be fruitfully revisited and repositioned in this context.

Patricia Pulham
University of Surrey
p.pulham@surrey.ac.uk

Our colloquial usage of the word *tact* often implies superficial politeness, even to the point of deception: when a friend asks us how they look, it would be tactful to offer our compliments regardless of what we actually think. But as David Russell reminds us in the introduction to his astounding new book *Tact*, the word, despite its intimation of squeamish avoidance, is bound up in the intimacies of touch. Derived from the Latin *tactus*, meaning ‘to touch’, tact connotes a kind of haptic delicacy: tact, in Russell’s formulation, ‘privileges encounters over knowledge, and an aesthetic of handling over more abstract conceptualization or observation’ (p. 1). It is this sense of tact (i.e., tact as an aesthetic style or manner) that, Russell argues, motivates some of the most significant critical writing of the Victorian period and beyond. *Tact’s* fascinating analysis of nineteenth-century criticism makes it essential reading for all Victorianists, and Walter Pater scholars in particular. More intriguingly, Russell’s book also stands as a testament to the possibilities of tact as an alternative critical posture we might adopt today.

The first chapter of *Tact* traces the origins of the concept to the early nineteenth-century work of Romantic writer Charles Lamb. Lamb’s essays, responding to modern socioeconomic conditions, model what Russell terms ‘tactful sociability’: an approach to interaction in which individuals relate to others without claiming or even seeking to know them (p. 24). Rather than striving after precision and truth (the central values of what Russell calls the ‘suspicious critical mode in social interaction’), Lamb’s prose relishes the beauty and play of unknowing (p. 29). Perhaps more radically, Russell adds, Lamb’s brand of tact challenged bourgeois ideas of progress by advocating an attentiveness to present experience in all its wonderful ambiguity.

Russell further explores the politics of tact in a second chapter on the philosopher John Stuart Mill. On its face, Mill’s rather coercive utilitarianism seems incongruent with tactful sociability. But Russell persuasively argues that Mill, especially early in his career, also elaborated an oft-overlooked strand of liberalism based in tact. This strain of what Russell terms ‘aesthetic liberalism’
valued liberty not for its social or economic benefits, but for the fuller life that it could allow individuals to lead (p. 42). By underscoring the tension between the utilitarian and aesthetic aspects of Mill’s liberalism, Russell both lays the groundwork for his chapter on Pater and proposes a more nuanced interpretation of Mill’s oeuvre.

Next, Russell examines the function of tact in the work of cultural critic Matthew Arnold. Like Mill, Arnold’s inclusion in a genealogy of tact is unexpected: at first glance, Arnold’s notably patrician conservatism appears incompatible with tact’s more democratic impulses (tact, to reiterate, destabilizes the distribution of epistemological power between observer and observed, writer and reader, etc.). Russell prompts us to remember, however, ‘what is radical in [Arnold’s] claims for culture’, particularly his vision for social equality through mass aesthetic education (p. 60). In Arnold’s pedagogy, the purpose of education is to ‘democratiz[e] […] the critical sensibility in a practice of tact’, thus equipping people of all backgrounds with a more humane, more fulfilling way of engaging with the outside world (p. 89).

Russell shifts gears in a brief fourth chapter that contrasts the apparently tactless vehemence of George Eliot’s prose criticism with the remarkable tact of her fiction. At their most heated, Russell explains, Eliot’s essays rail against a teleological theory of life, endemic in fiction, which conceives of the lived realities of the present merely as antecedents to some future reward. In her own novels, Russell argues, Eliot offers a tactful alternative to this teleology by writing conclusions that ‘provid[e] not so much ends as hard-won foundations for new beginnings’ (p. 107).

Naturally, the highlight of Tact for readers of SWPA is Russell’s subsequent chapter on Pater. As Russell demonstrates in a series of short but edifying readings of Pater’s early essays, the concept of tact furnishes a worthwhile framework for thinking about the various ‘conundrum[s]’ (to use Russell’s word) at the heart of the aesthete’s work. First, tact helps us make sense of the apparent disconnect between Pater’s philosophical commitment to ‘life in the moment’ and his dreamy, strikingly un-lifelike style, which his critics famously dismissed as decadent and contrived. In a tacit repudiation of Pater’s contemporary detractors, Russell argues that the nebulous quality of Pater’s prose is in part a principled eschewal of the oppositional, competitive logic of conventional public discourse. By focusing on
atmosphere rather than argument, Pater ‘opens wider, virtual grounds of relation’, in which individuals can contemplate concepts, forms, and one another with disinterested liberalty. In this regard, Russell explains, Pater’s writing suggests ‘a way to a new life’ without dictating how exactly his readers should live (pp. 114–15).

Along the same lines, Russell’s analysis also powerfully counters the charges of solipsism that have dogged Pater since the 1860s. Tact, as practised by Lamb, Arnold, and Eliot, is pro-social insofar as it seeks to reform the way people relate to one another. To see Pater’s style as tactful, then, is to recognize his fascination not with the self per se, but with the always perplexing interface between self and world. Pater’s own practice of tact seeks to negotiate this interface in a liberating way: for Pater, Russell writes, ‘freedom must first depend on facing one’s own dependence and penetrability, with less of a shamefaced sense of the wall between an inner and outer world’ (p. 139).

In lieu of a conclusion (after all, anything so clean-cut as a conclusion would hardly be tactful), Russell ends with a chapter on the memoirs of psychoanalyst Marion Milner. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Russell argues, Milner developed a clinical practice that drew as much on Pater’s conception of vulnerability as Freud’s hermeneutics. Instead of focusing on the hidden traumas underlying their disorders, Milner treated her patients by helping them cultivate what Russell describes as ‘an appreciative vision of the world’ (p. 157).

This final turn in Milner’s therapeutic aesthetics hints strongly at the ethical promise of tact. Of course, Russell stops short of issuing any kind of direct appeal for the practice: polemic is too violent and too stultifying to be tactful, and Tact is itself an experiment in tactful handling. I suspect that some of the oddities of this book (the opacity of its argumentative through-lines, for instance, and the obliqueness of its prose) can be attributed to Russell’s own fidelity to the approach he theorizes. Additionally, and perhaps regrettably for some Pater scholars, Tact is relatively silent on the subject of aestheticism as a whole, save some passing references to Oscar Wilde.

But its blend of reticence and boldness is also what makes Tact so refreshing. Russell’s somewhat elliptical style is a treat to read, his close readings are often brilliant, and his occasionally sagacious statements (‘death makes idealists of us all’, he writes in a gloss of Pater’s ‘Conclusion’) are provocative without being
pompous (p. 128). Luckily for us, *Tact* is not primarily interested in delineating a literary history or explicating a method. Rather, Russell evokes—gently, neutrally, *tactfully*—a less knowing, but consequently more just and vital way of conducting ourselves in the world.

*Lindsay Wilhelm*
*Oklahoma State University*
*lindsay.wilhelm@okstate.edu*

Alastair Blanshard is the Paul Eliadis Professor of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Queensland. He sits on the editorial board of the *Classical Receptions Journal* and is an editor for Cambridge University Press’s ‘Classics after Antiquity’ monograph series. He is also the subject-area editor in ‘Classical Reception’ for the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Together with Kathleen Riley and Iarla Manny, he co-edited *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2017).


Nick Freeman is Reader in English at Loughborough University. He has published widely on decadent culture, his work including *Conceiving the City* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and his microhistory, *1895: Drama, Disaster and Disgrace*.
in Late Victorian Britain (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). He has also edited Arthur Symons’s Spiritual Adventures for the MHRA’s ‘Jewelled Tortoise’ series (2017). Other recent work includes essays on Robert Hichens and decadence after 1895. He is currently working on a biography, Arthur Symons: A Life of Sensations.

DUSTIN FRIEDMAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Literature at American University in Washington, DC. He is the author of Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). His writings have also appeared in the Journal of Modern Literature, ELH, Literature Compass, and Studies in Romanticism. His research and teaching interests include Victorian aestheticism and decadence, gender and sexuality studies, the history and theory of aesthetics, and global nineteenth-century writing.

NEIL HULTGREN is Professor of English at California State University, Long Beach. He has held a year-long postdoctoral fellowship at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at UCLA and a one-month fellowship at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of Melodramatic Imperial Writing: From the Sepoy Rebellion to Cecil Rhodes (Ohio University Press, 2014). His recent publications include essays on Richard Marsh and Guillermo del Toro.

ADAM LEE completed his D.Phil. at Oxford in 2013 and currently teaches literature from Classics to contemporary at Tyndale University College in Toronto. His book The Platonism of Walter Pater will be published in 2020 by Oxford University Press.

CLAIRE MASUREL-MURRAY is Associate Professor in English at Sorbonne Université. She is the author of Le Calice vide: L’imaginaire catholique dans la littérature décadente anglaise (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011) and has published several articles and book chapters on religion and literature in the Victorian fin de siècle, including recently “I am not a Catholic, I am simply a violent Papist”: Oscar Wilde’s Protestant “Romishness”, in Wilde’s Other Worlds, edited by Petra Dierkes-Thrun and Michael F. Davis (Routledge, 2018).

CATHERINE MAXWELL is Professor of Victorian Literature at Queen Mary University of London. Her publications include The Female Sublime from
Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness (Manchester University Press, 2001), Swinburne (Northcote House, 2006), Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature (Manchester University Press, 2008), and Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture (Oxford University Press, 2017), which received the 2018 ESSE award for Literatures in English.

**Patricia Pulham** is Professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Surrey, and editor of the journal *Victoriographies* (Edinburgh University Press). She is author of *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Ashgate Press, 2008), and co-editor of several collections including *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Libidinal Lives* (Routledge, 2015). In addition, she has published articles on nineteenth-century literature and culture in a wide range of academic journals.

**Jessica Straley** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Utah. She is the author of *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Her work has also appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Literature and Victorian Studies* as well as book collections: *Oscar Wilde and the Cultures of Childhood*, edited by Joseph Bristow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), *Adapting Frankenstein*, edited by Dennis Cutchins and Dennis Perry (Manchester University Press, 2018), and *Drawing on the Victorian: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, edited by Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Ohio University Press, 2016).

**Ulrike Stamm** studied German and English literature and Philosophy in Freiburg, Nottingham and Berlin. She has taught in many universities, including the Humboldt-University Berlin, Potsdam, Lüneburg and at the University of Virginia. Currently she is Professor for German literature at the University of Upper Austria, Linz. Her publications include *Ein Kritiker aus dem Willen der Natur: Hugo von Hofmannsthals und das Werk Walter Paters* (1998) and *Der Orient der Frauen: Deutschsprachige Reiseberichte aus dem frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (2011).

**Lindsay Wilhelm** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Oklahoma State University. Her interests include late nineteenth-century literature and science, aestheticism, and Victorian Hawai‘i. She has published
articles on these and related topics in *Victorian Studies* and *Victorian Literature and Culture*. Currently, she is working on a book project that examines the ideological overlap of aestheticism and evolutionary science in the decades after Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

**Molly Youngkin** is Professor of English and Associate Dean at Loyola Marymount University. She has published two critical monographs, *British Women Writers and the Reception of Ancient Egypt, 1840–1910: Imperialist Representations of Egyptian Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle: The Influence of the Late-Victorian Woman's Press on the Development of the Novel* (Ohio State University Press, 2007). She also has published numerous journal articles and book reviews.
Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism welcomes the submission of original research to our editorial board for review: studiesinwalterpater@gmail.com. Submissions, which should be presented in Word, must not exceed 8,500 words in length, including notes, with double spacing throughout. Our journal follows most of the conventions of the MHRA Style Guide (3) (2013), edited by Brian Richardson, which can be accessed at http://www.mhra.org.uk/pdf/MHRA-Style-Guide-3rd-Edn.pdf. Authors are asked to remove from the main text and notes any information that discloses their identity. Details about the author, including full name, address, and contact information, should be submitted in a separate file. Our editorial team aims to respond to submissions within a three-month period. We adhere to COPE Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors: http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/Best_Practice.pdf.