

“FORMS OF SOME INTENSER LIFE”: GENRE AND IMPERIALISM AT THE TURN OF  
THE CENTURY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

My dissertation establishes a critical dialogue between two distinct phenomena at the turn of the twentieth century: first, the exponential growth and mercurial nature of novelistic genres and, secondly, the emergence of modern global consciousness. Experimentations with genre, I argue, allowed writers to develop new narrative forms capable of representing an increasingly global, interdependent, and actively anti-imperialist world. Thus, this project specifically addresses late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction that participates in or combines multiple genres, including Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Inheritors* (with Ford Madox Ford), H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, Bram Stoker's *The Snake's Pass*, and Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows." This concentration of generic discontinuities not only demonstrates genre's formal instability but also its inability to function as a symbolic solution to the real socio-economic contradictions of empire. While these texts reflect the stress-fractures of expanding imperial sovereignty, they can hardly be read as outright critiques of imperial rule. Instead, they operate dialectically. They are unstable yet flexible. Though discontinuous texts thwart generic expectations, they also offer systems of flexibility that express and potentially manage imperial crises.

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## CHAPTER 1: DISCONTINUITIES IN EMPIRE AND THE NOVEL FORM

Unknown to my respectable landlady, it was my practice directly after my breakfast to hold animated receptions of Malays, Arabs, and half-castes. They did not clamour aloud for my attention. They came with a silent and irresistible appeal—and the appeal, I affirm here, was not to my self-love or my vanity. It seems now to have had a moral character, for why should the memory of these beings, seen in their obscure, sun-bathed existence, demand to express itself in the shape of a novel, except on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on this earth?

Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (1912)

The problems of the novel form are here the mirror-image of a world gone out of joint.

Georg Lukács, Preface to *The Theory of the Novel* (1962)

### War of the Narrative Worlds

H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) is as much a story about competing narratives as it is about invading Martians. Under catastrophic conditions, the narrator is driven from one set of survivors to another, and each attempts to translate the brutal alien encounter into some discernible narrative genre. The novel centers on this struggle to render meaning out of violence; it foregrounds the aporia that follows the delirious curate's question: "What do these things mean?" (69).<sup>1</sup> Vacillating between animal whimpers and "helpless exclamations" from the Book of Revelation, the curate finds tenuous solace in the genre of biblical apocalypse (131). The novel, however, targets his inability to deal with any information outside his narrative solution. In a momentary burst of mad courage, he struggles to face the Martians, "bear witness [. . .] unto this unfaithful city" (137-138), and embrace what he believes to be his well-deserved

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 69. Subsequent page number references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

annihilation. Instead, the narrator abruptly knocks him unconscious. Alien tentacles soon reach into the house and collect the curate's body for food. Although the scene evokes genuine dread, it also reads quite anticlimactically. The text briefly interpellates its readers into the apocalyptic genre only to deny any expectation of meaningful immolation. The pious curate simply becomes food. In fact, such a brutal and ignoble fate awaits most characters, including the Martians. Even the supposed protagonists, the narrator and his brother, find themselves questioning the possibility of heroism. After repeatedly beating the curate, the narrator explains: "It is disagreeable for me to recall and write these things [. . .]. Those who have escaped the dark and terrible aspects of life will find my brutality [. . .] easy enough to blame; for they know what is wrong as well as any, but not what is possible to tortured men" (132). Moreover, when a group of fellow survivors nearly commandeer a woman's pony-chaise, the narrator's brother fights them off with "no time for pugilistic chivalry" (94). Again and again, the novel thwarts any readerly expectation of romantic adventure, most notably in the novel's abrupt conclusion in which the Martians die off from a chance susceptibility to terrestrial disease. Wells satirizes the fantasy of romance most acutely through the drunken artilleryman, who imagines a new human race reinvigorated by their violent struggle for existence. The artilleryman's practical outlook, however, depends on partial identification with the genocidal aliens. The Martians, he admits, can hardly be blamed for seeing the mass of bourgeois clerks as potential foodstuffs. For the artilleryman, the Martians offer real men a primal struggle lost in modernity—a masculinist narrative of imperial adventure that the novel also considers but ultimately refuses to adopt.

In fact, identification with the invaders pervades Wells's novel. The curate, for example, understands the Martian as "God's ministers" (71), harbingers of divine justice. Even the narrator, staring at a tripod surrounded by a barrage of British weaponry, feels an outreach of sympathy for the alien visitors. Although he understands that the invaders pose a threat, "schoolboy dreams of battle and heroism came back. It hardly seemed a fair fight to me at the time" (40). While the inverse turns out to be true, the narrator still concludes his account by asserting that

We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man [. . .]. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, [. . .] and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind. (178-179)

This "commonweal" is founded in the encounter with the Martians. Early in the novel, the narrator wonders how the Martians perceive humankind: "Did they grasp that we in our millions were organized, disciplined, working together?" (86). Yet the poisonous Martian vapor quickly reveals the narrator's mistaken notion of a human hive. Realizing the superiority of the alien force, crews on navy boats mutiny, and survivors fight "savagely for standing-room in [railway] carriages" while engines plow "through shrieking people" (90-93). Human commonality consists, at this point, of only "fear and pain" (99). They are a collective in the most basic sense; in Walter Benjamin's words, they embody the "mere existence" of man, in which there is "no sacredness in his

condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury.”<sup>2</sup> The irresistible Martians, on the other hand, “interchanged thoughts without any physical intermediation” (129). While humankind’s response is fragmented, confused, and selfishly brutal to one another, the Martians telepathically coordinate their collective movement. Against this force, imperial Britain can muster no such organization.

When the curate asks “What are these Martians?”, the narrator grimly replies, “What are we?” (70). Wells’s novel obsesses over this unanswerable question: what does it mean to understand the collective nature of “we” in the face of a threat that undermines group identity? And yet, by stripping Earth to “mere existence,” Wells exposes a glimmer of utopian hope. The Martian’s invasion leads to a planetary consciousness—a notion of humankind in opposition to the extraterrestrial threat—and, in doing so, existing social distinctions become obsolete or provisional in the struggle for survival. As the world government realizes in the radiological aftermath of Wells’s *The World Set Free* (1914), humanity is forced “to see the round globe as one problem; it was impossible any longer to deal with it piece by piece. [. . .] On this capacity to grasp and wield the whole round globe their existence depended.”<sup>3</sup>

In *The War of the Worlds*, this macroscopic challenge is most intense at the level of genre. Not only does the novel tend towards the meta-generic by representing characters’ failing struggles to translate violence into preexisting narratives, it also repudiates the most immediate genre in which it appears to participate: the invasion narrative. Although it belongs to the late-nineteenth-century vogue for future-war or

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986) 299.

<sup>3</sup> H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1914) 230.



invasion novels, popularized by George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), the novel avoids a militaristic European enemy and instead directly engages the colonial project.<sup>4</sup> The civilized, invulnerable imperial power becomes the primitive colonized. They face the reflected image of their own imperial logic:

what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought [. . .] upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. (9)

As the artilleryman says, the humans can only wield “bows and arrows against the lightning” (59). Of course, as Wells was fully aware, the Zulus had famously fought off the British in the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana with spears and cowhide shields, despite the imperial force's technologically advanced artillery. No such dramatic battle ensues in *The War of the Worlds*. The novel denies a heroic or even Pyrrhic victory; the humans destroy a few Martian tripods, but the Martians strategically adapt. For Wells, the potential world collective stems from, first, the antagonism of non-humans, and, secondly, the chance destruction of the antagonist. Martian colonization fails because the alien are unable to adapt physically to the new environment.

Thus, Wells's novel has frequently been read as an ironic reversal, in which the colonizers become victims. As Fredric Jameson writes in passing, the novel is “patently a guilt fantasy on the part of a Victorian man who wonders whether the brutality with

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<sup>4</sup> For the invasion novel tradition, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism (1800-1914)* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1988) 233-238; Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Identity and Empire* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1996) 109-120; and I. F. Clarke, “Future-war Fiction: The First Main Phase 1871-1900,” *Science Fiction Studies* 24.3 (1997): 387-412.

which he has used the colonial peoples [. . .] may not be visited on him by some more advanced race intent, in its turn, on his destruction.”<sup>5</sup> This imperial guilt does not, however, preclude the narrator's admiration for the evolutionary and technological superiority of the Martian collective. The novel invites readers, like its various human survivors, to sympathize or identify with the overpowering might of the Martians and then, as they die off, contemplate the sudden fall of a formidable empire. Such a reading, however, renders a rather conventional moralistic interpretation of this unconventional, anti-romantic romance. In reading the novel as a speculative thought experiment, critics have not only equated the narrator with Wells himself but also neglected the form of the novel. The narratives of religion, imperialism, and science all fail to make totalizing sense of the Martians’ invasion. The novel, like much of the late-nineteenth-century fiction considered in this project, anesthetizes the very narrative genres it incorporates. The human commonweal, which emerges from galactic antagonism, offers the potential for a collective human identity, but no conventional genre or discourse can narrate this utopian promise. In his later political writings, Wells frequently targeted nineteenth-century British individualism,<sup>6</sup> but, in *The War of The Worlds*, we see this emergent critique at the level of form. In order to explain the traumatic encounter with radical alterity, each character struggles to articulate his individual relationship to a recognizable narrative structure. Moreover, they inevitably assign an individualistic role to themselves within their respective genres. The insane curate adopts the role of prophet and

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<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2007), 265. See also p. 339. For similar arguments on the reversal of the colonizer-colonized positions, see Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1961) 179; and Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992) 368.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, “What Is Coming? A Forecast of Things after the War” (1916).

apocalyptic witness as he paraphrases various scriptures from the Book of Revelation. For the artilleryman, “[l]ife is real again” chiefly because he hopes to become the “wild” virile hero of his own urban Robinsonade (157). However, the sheer anemia of such narratives in the face of the radical and global imperial event only highlights their conventionality and artificiality as representational strategies. In adopting narratives in which they imagine themselves as rugged individual protagonists, the curate and artilleryman only emphasize their status as frenetic, insecure, and ineffectual minor characters—as if, as a result of the alien encounter, they must struggle to justify their very existence as characters in Wells’s novel. As for the narrator, he can only haphazardly cobble together a fractured account of the invasion, choosing at times to repress traumatic memories while casually and sometimes ironically appropriating the language of boyhood heroism, biblical apocalypse, and various other discourses.

*The War of the Worlds* represents Wells ongoing interest in narrative experimentation as well as his political interest in an increasingly interconnected world that held more promise of a global commonweal than ever before. In this sense, his novel encapsulates the focus of this book, which attempts to bring together the critical imperial strife and growing global interdependency at the turn of the twentieth century with accompanying innovations in novelistic forms. In order to account for the variety and hybridity of narrative forms at the *fin de siècle*, I analyze competing genre formations through the lens of an empire thrown into crisis by an upsurge in real and imagined resistance. Generic proliferation and disintegration, I argue, reflect the stress-fractures of an expanding imperial system. Narrative experimentation allowed *fin de siècle* writers,

such as Conrad, Wells, and Stoker, to negotiate between a heightened sense of global interdependency and the supposed integrity of national and individualistic identity.

My project joins other scholarly challenges to the long-entrenched disciplinary tendency to dismiss popular Edwardian and Georgian fiction as a wish-fulfilling retreat to static form in a time of crisis or simply a point of departure for modernist literature.

Instead, I argue, such “genre fiction” remains an under-examined ground of innovation—a neglected substratum of modernism and a nexus not only between late Victorian and early Modernist literature but also between popular fiction and the literary avant-garde.

By attending to this interstitial moment, *Forms of Some Intenser Life* offers several important correctives to current readings of the period. First, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between modernism and imperialism by resisting the tendency in modernist studies to posit a centrifugal model of “originality” at the imperial center and “imitation” along the colonial fringe. Instead, I argue, formal innovations developed along the borderlines of imperialism. Secondly, by attending to the pressure that burgeoning forms of collective life, like colonial nationalism, placed on narrative and genre, my project contributes to one of the most challenging tasks of critical theory and literary criticism: how can we understand collective forms of desire, especially the dynamic nature of political subjects? Finally, my approach stresses genre as a redress to the persistent disciplinary tendency to posit a unified history of “the novel.” Rather than relying on a model of linear development, my project foregrounds, through genre, the more fragmentary and diverse history of the modern novel.

## Genre and its Discontents

“[A] text cannot belong to no genre,” Jacques Derrida writes, “there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.”<sup>7</sup> As Derrida notes, *genus* functions—whether as genus, gender, or genre—by the principle of participation with and without belonging. Although Derrida’s theory remains largely ahistorical, it offers a potentially nuanced understanding of literary history. The notion that “participation never amounts to belonging” reveals the crucial way in which texts, as well as modern subjects, engage the principle of *genus*, of belonging, always with surplus or compromised engagement with prescribed, supposedly coherent identity. We might connect Derrida’s notion of always-already incomplete generic participation to what Fredric Jameson deems “generic discontinuities.” In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues that by attending to the competing narrative paradigms in which novels participate, we can subject

the ‘novel’ as an apparently unified form [...] to a kind of x-ray technique designed to reveal the layered or marbled structure of the text according to what we will call *generic discontinuities*. The novel is then not so much an organic unity as a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms that have their own specific and contradictory ideological meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Such approaches to genre promise to offer, as Raymond Williams long ago proposed,

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre.” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 55-82. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1981) 144. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

“new kind of constitutive evidence” in literary studies: to set aside genre as “a set of technical rules” in favor of understanding genres as “the practical and variable combination and even fusion of what are, in abstraction, different levels of the social material process.”<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti and other scholars have begun to reconcile the particularism of new historicism with the longer structural perspectives of literary history and political criticism. Genres are no longer considered static formulae but rather, in Jameson’s words, “experimental constructs [...] dissolved into the historical contradictions or the sedimented ideologemes in terms of which alone they are comprehensible” (145).

This “x-ray technique” of reading allows us to understand the ways in which novels index and attempt to reconcile various generic expectations, but it also offers a significant challenge to traditional accounts of genre. After all, the prevailing tendency, as Franco Moretti writes, has been to “choose a ‘representative individual’, and through it define the genre as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, scholars quickly outline the literary milieu surrounding the “imperial gothic novel,” for example, and then work through Haggard’s *She* in order to understand the genre. The problem, Moretti alleges, is that the individual reading “counts as an analysis of the entire genre,” and for such “typological thinking there is really no gap between the real object and the object of knowledge” (76). Instead, he argues, we must imagine genre as an “abstract ‘diversity spectrum’ [. . .] whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent” (ibid.).

And yet our desire (as critics, authors, publishers, readers) for typological

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1977) 185.

<sup>10</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (New York: Verso, 2007) 76.

thinking reveals that genre often adopts the authority of law—even, as some have pointed out, in the problematic taxonomies of Moretti’s recent work.<sup>11</sup> To return to Derrida:

as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity. [. . .] If a genre is what it is, or if it is supposed to be what it is destined to be by virtue of its telos, then “genres are not to be mixed” [. . .]. Or, more rigorously: genres should not intermix. And if it should happen that they do intermix, by accident or through transgression, by mistake or through a lapse, then this should confirm, since, after all, we are speaking of “mixing,” the essential purity of their identity. (56)

These are, of course, preliminary remarks for Derrida’s real interest in genre—that “lodged within the heart of the law itself” there exists “a law of impurity or a principle of contamination” (59). In fact, he wonders, “suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason?” (57). Derrida’s brief speculation seems to me to raise several important challenges to a social scientific approach to literary genres. First, “distant reading” of literary historical data can easily endow genres with the appearance of clear demarcation. After all, Moretti’s graph, “British novelistic genres, 1700-1900,” distinguishes specific hegemonic forms and their duration (Figure 1). It is not difficult here to identify unsatisfactory labels: should the “spy novel” belong primarily to the early 1800s? Why shouldn’t “nautical tales” include pre- and late-nineteenth-century fiction

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Frances Ferguson’s productive critique in “Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text,” *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008): 657–684.

by Daniel Defoe, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Rafael Sabatini? Does fantasy really taper at the *fin de siècle*? And what about later modernist novels that incorporate the bildungsroman? Fastidious criticisms aside, a more serious problem surfaces when Moretti's appends a "Note on the Taxonomy of Forms." I should first stipulate that, as with the project as a whole, Moretti intends to lay out a suggestive methodology to be subsequently challenged, revised, and improved. Moreover, he realizes to some extent the limitations of such a graph in accounting for various genre forms:

a few genres experience brief but intense revivals decades after their original peak, like the oriental tale in 1819-25, or the gothic after 1885, or the historical novel (more than once). How to account for these Draculaesque reawakening is a fascinating topic, which however will have to wait for another occasion. Finally, the chart shows neither detective fiction nor science fiction; [. . .] their peculiar long duration seems to require a difference approach. (31)

However, as Francis Ferguson has pointed out, the problem seems to be inherent in the classificatory network itself, which uses the "generic designations that various scholars have provided" despite the fact that "most of the informants are working in independence of all the others" (671-672). Thus, Ferguson concludes, we are presented with a "a collection of nonce terms, originally devised to show the limits of a particular scholar's responsibility in a particular article or book rather than to make it possible for all the various scholars to apply similar terminology (which seems the most basic claim of a taxonomy)" (672).



Ferguson's reservation about taxonomy extends beyond this problematic graph. Despite the compelling data highlighted by Moretti's social scientific method, she writes:

it seems to me that he's after a target that is distinct from that of social science—something closer to the emergent or the future than to the past that has been the traditional preserve of social science [. . .]. Visual and verbal art thus comes to participate less in the retrospectiveness of the social sciences than in the effort to track the present and anticipate the future [. . .]. [T]he artists whom I've mentioned are perhaps less consistently interested in choosing the social-scientific language of evaluation *tout court* than simply in pushing consistent language—whether natural or artificial—past its own bounds. (674-675)

In other words, quite unlike the social scientist, the literary historian is faced with—to return to Moretti's distinction—"real objects" of study (texts) that are themselves engaged in the production, history, and evaluation of "objects of knowledge." After all, novels often present compelling insight into ideology, identity, and history as well as literary forms (novelists are perhaps the most productive scholars of genre). What seemed a promising epistemic distinction fundamental to any social scientific approach soon seems untenable for understanding works of verbal art. Moreover, when we attend to the histories of various genres, individual texts more often than not refuse to limit themselves to the expectations of a specific genre. Genres represent far messier historical confluences—all the more engaging for writers and readers—rather than, as in Moretti's graph, methodical categories into which novels might be placed.

We are left then with the apparent law of genre (“do” or “do not”) and the madness that ensues when confronted with generic multiplicity—whether as a result of a given text’s inability to exhaust a generic set, as Moretti suggests; or its constitutive fusion of conflicting layers of generic expectations, as Jameson proposes; or, as Derrida speculates, a counter-law inherent in announcing one’s belonging. To synthesize our understanding of genre thus far, we might propose the following hypotheses:

1. Although perceived notions of genres and their conventions hold real traction for writers and readers, genres suggest tendencies and potential choices rather than fixed formulae. They are indexical rather than definitive.
2. Despite the prescriptive enunciation of genre, there remains a “principle of contamination.” An individual text can neither exhaust the multiplicity of a single genre nor assuredly mark itself as belonging to the confines of a given generic set.
3. Individual texts, in fact, are crucial in understanding how genre works when we consider genres to be more rhizomatic and experimental than classificatory or episodic.

This final hypothesis underscores the fact that I do, in fact, read texts closely in the chapters that follow. Such an approach risks falling victim to the typological thinking critiqued thus far. While I agree with Moretti that “the explanation of general structures” are “necessary preconditions” for new readings of individual texts (91), I also believe that, as Ferguson writes, to read with such sociological awareness does not preclude treating individual works deductively as units in themselves—individual works engaged with the very objects of knowledge that interest me here artistically, historically,

politically, and philosophically. Thus, when I invoke a specific genre, it remains always, to recall Deleuze and Negri's distinction between a map and a tracing, a rhizomatic attempt "oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real."<sup>12</sup> Traditional studies of genre attempt to "trace" genre by deriving its arboreal, law-governed structure from individual works. Instead, a more rhizomatic approach should, like Deleuze's map, account for the potentialities of generic fields: "The map [. . .] fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages [. . .]. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'" (12-13). My task here is to understand how texts engage in a wide network of discourses, especially those of empire, globalism, and insurgency, and how, especially as modernism emerged in a fraught global world, "improper" texts survived, adapted, and evolved by using genre's inherent instability and performativity to reconcile these competing discourses.

### **Insurgency at the *Fin du Globe***

"Fin de siecle," murmured Lord Henry.  
"Fin du globe," answered his hostess.  
"I wish it were fin du globe," said Dorian with a sigh. "Life is a great disappointment."

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

As Patrick Brantlinger, Stephen Arata, Judith Wilt, and others have argued, invasion narratives like *The War of the Worlds* or *Dracula* are driven by late-Victorian fears of national decline, threats to English purity, and a failure of British collectivity or collective will.<sup>13</sup> Britons at the turn of the century were hyperconscious of living in a

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003) 12.

<sup>13</sup> See Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness* 227-253; Arata, 109-120; and Judith Wilt, "Imperial Mouth: Imperialism, the Gothic and Science Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14:4 (1981): 618-628.

transitional time of social reform, rapid technological advancement, and new global relationships. As C. F. G. Masterman wrote in the 1911 preface to *The Condition of England* (1909),

I believe there are possibilities as yet undreamt of, for the enrichment of the common life of our people, and that in another century men and women—and children—may be rejoicing in an experience better than all our dreams. I am not pessimistic, but I am anxious, as I believe all the thinking men of today are anxious, when they realize the forces which are making for decay.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, however, Nicholas Daly has cautioned against oversimplifying late-nineteenth-century culture as fraught with neurotic anxiety. As Daly argues, “[a]ttempts to historicize the ‘revival of romance’ too often take the *fin de siècle* at its own estimate.”<sup>15</sup> Readings of the period, he contends, too neatly map historical anxieties onto literature. Instead, when anxiety arises in texts, it is performative rather than mimetic. Late nineteenth-century texts, Daly writes, “produce and manage anxiety as well as express it” (30). My approach here follows Daly’s call for more nuanced understandings of the period. Narrative experiments, in my readings, are not simply an archive of imperial anxieties but, in fact, produce and manage a global imagination even as they are produced by shifts in geopolitical horizons.

Reevaluating *fin de siècle* literature does not, however, mean dismissing social

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<sup>14</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1911) viii.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2007) 31.

and political anxieties as structuring forces. On one hand, the late Victorian revival of romance, replete with inhuman invasions, monstrosities, and degenerations, became obsessed with such threats at the very moment when Britain no longer faced significant military threat or imperial competition from its European rivals. By the late 1890s, the British Empire held influence over nearly three-fourths of the globe. Such global dominance, however, relied on constant imperial maintenance, which inevitably bred concern over the expansive empire's integrity. Scholars have traced how such political anxiety fed the literary imagination. Judith Wilt goes as far as to argue:

There are, of course, minor counter-attacks to Victorian imperialism—the Zulus, the dervishes, the Indian Mutiny, the Boxer Rebellion. But the Great Counter-Attack, the one that hits the west itself, occurs nowhere but in the Victorian imagination, which summons it in the great gothic and science fiction tales of the 80s and 90s. (620)

For Wilt, gothic forms find new currency because they voice concerns over the future of British society, including fear of increased immigration and doubts about the discourse of progress.<sup>16</sup> Two critical misconceptions, however, underscore this anxiety thesis. First, Wilt's argument downplays the gravity and density of the counterattacks that Britain faced at home and abroad throughout the so-called "Pax Britannica." Wilt represents the host of nineteenth-century colonial uprisings as simply minor counterattacks and thus dismisses their influence on accompanying innovations in post-Gothic literature.

Although there may have never been a "Great Counter-Attack" (read: European war),

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Daly, despite his attempt to revise such common anxiety readings, constructs a similar argument when he reads *Dracula*. See *Modernism* 35.

major conflicts were not merely imagined or discursively constructed by imperial power. They occurred everywhere (including the streets of London), rose to visibility every few years, and reverberated throughout the metropole, whether in passionate political debates (e.g., Morant Bay) or through actual attacks (e.g., Fenian bombing campaigns). Discounting such colonial resistance ignores its powerful historical legacy in generating various forms of nationalism, networks of cross-national and post-colonial affiliation, and other new constitutive political forms that directly influenced British culture. In fact, the historical coherence of the “Pax Britannica” and Wilt’s assumption rest on the same premise: both base Britain’s superiority on its predominance over other Western powers. The period was “peaceful” because it marked a lull in conflict between Britain and other European powers.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, even as Daly attempts to intervene in *fin de siècle* scholarship, his crucial historical premise remains unexpectedly similar to this Eurocentric anxiety argument. He writes: “Despite an increasingly shrill rhetoric of decline, Britain was in fact far from collapse. On the contrary, the British empire grew dramatically during this period, while at home state power was also undergoing a phase of expansion” (30). Despite the misnomer, the “Pax Britannica” was neither peaceful nor non-militaristic. The “New Imperialism” of the late nineteenth-century signifies both a heightened sense of empire (of administering and absorbing colonies and dependencies within a global and cultural framework) and an intense return to brutal forms of colonization. A reconsideration of late-nineteenth-century literature calls for both a nuanced account of how it produced, performed, and managed anxieties as well as

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<sup>17</sup> Even this approach remains simplistic. Britain faced increased fierce economic competition from Germany and the United States and internal political pressure from the English working classes, syndicalists, and suffragettes.

contextualization that takes seriously the pressures that an expanding geopolitical field (what Anne McClintock refers to as a new “planetary consciousness”<sup>18</sup> placed on the concept of Britishness.

In other words, a more nuanced reading of *fin de siècle* literature requires an equally nuanced model of imperial history. In most accounts, the historical model is a binaristic one. When attending to imperialism, literary scholars often adopt a centrifugal trajectory that privileges the national both historically and culturally. The “imperial” becomes conflated with the “national” when, as Gauri Viswanathan argues, “English ‘national’ culture is read almost exclusively as ideologically motivated by social currents and institutional developments within England.”<sup>19</sup> Even when extending such a framework, the imperial appears simply as an extension of the national as if “what makes an imperial culture possible [...] is an already existing national culture” (47). Instead, Viswanathan stresses the urgency of considering

English culture first and foremost in its imperial aspect and then to examine that aspect as itself constitutive of “national” culture. Such a project challenges the assumption that what makes an imperial culture possible is a fully formed national culture shaped by internal social developments; it also provokes one to search for ways to reinsert “imperial” into “national” without reducing the two terms to a single category. (49)

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<sup>18</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 34.

<sup>19</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, “Raymond Williams and British Colonialism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4:2 (1991: Spring) 47.

Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan call for a similar reconsideration of the “imperial”—one that will account for “those who reside at the categorical edges of the imperial.”<sup>20</sup> Adopting an Althusserian concept of “social formation” in an imperial context,<sup>21</sup> Stoler and McGranahan propose “imperial formations” as a critical analytic capable of underscoring:

not the inevitable rise and fall of empires, but the active and contingent process of their making and unmaking. Our interest lies less in institutions and fixed ideologies than in the prevalence of blurred genres of rule and partial sovereignties. Empires may be “things,” but imperial formations are not. Imperial formations are polities of dislocation, processes of dispersion, appropriation, and displacement. [. . .] Imperial formations are not steady states, but states of becoming, macropolities in states of solution and constant formation. (8-9)

Genres of imperial rule; genres of literature. Genres as states of becoming; empires as states of becoming. Yet these two becomings, I argue here, are more than theoretical analogues. The two are caught up in a mobile block or line-system of becoming [*bloc de deviner*] to use Deleuze's terms; after all, “the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world” (11). Rather than follow the referential impulse to trace

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, “Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains” in *Imperial Formations*, Eds. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan and Peter Perdue (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007) 9.

<sup>21</sup> See also Mrinalini Sinha’s comparable use of “imperial social formation” in *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengal” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1995).



historical changes and coordinate them with the evolution of various delineated genres, the following chapters form a series of experiments attempting to enter into the ways in which texts manipulate the flexibility of genre in order to grapple with, think through, or reterritorialize an intense awareness of the unstable *genera* of modern subjectivity.

Reinforced by the traditional “anxiety story,” problematic connections between imperialism and literature continue to oversimplify late-nineteenth-century narrative forms, especially the proliferation of romance genres. In *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siecle*, Stephen Arata uses genre critically and notes the generic hybridity of the period, yet he concludes that “if imperial problems are seldom allowed to surface *as* problems in these works [of adventure, science fiction, Gothic], that is in part because they tend to be subsumed by the kinds of issues appropriate to their specific generic forms” (132, original emphasis). *If* imperial anxieties did indeed infiltrate popular fiction, Arata argues, such texts calmed these anxieties with their formal obduracy; or, as Judith Wilt implies, such fiction voiced “anxiety” and thus somehow subverted imperialist ideology. The problems here stem from a deficient theory of genre. Despite his nuanced historical readings, Arata dismisses the crucial exchange between popular literature and imperialism by insisting on the supposed formulaicity of genre fiction. While my analysis is attentive to the ways in which genre can, in Arata’s words, “manage unruly anxieties by rearticulating them within the conventions of the genre” (132), I argue that, with such conventions in flux, generic expectations are actively thwarted, critiqued, and precarious at best (and thus it is much more difficult for such “formulae” to rein in imperial anxieties securely).

## Reading Genre at the Turn of the Century

Thus far, I have offered both a theory of genre, which I find exemplified by the narrative diversity of the late nineteenth century, and a brief account of the imperial context of this illustrative period. Although I hope to connect these two trajectories more rigorously, we should first note that their concurrence is no historical coincidence. It is no accident, I would argue, that many studies of genre and the novel anchor their arguments in the transitional literary market of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One might think of the centrality of Conrad in Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Conan Doyle in Moretti's recent work, New Woman fiction in Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels*, and so on.<sup>22</sup> The end of the nineteenth century has become an archival treasure for literary scholars because it remains a vast nexus of changes in the nature of modern literary production and consumption, including the decline of circulating libraries and three-volume novels, the novel as an affordable commodity, and a wider reading public with competing tastes.

As circulating libraries and three-volume novels lost their dominance, high Victorian realism found new competition from romantic modes. This "revival of romance" became a breeding ground for the popular literature that would fill the literary market in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Yet, prior to niche marketing of pulp magazines in the 1920s (and cheap paperbacks after the Second World War), to classify this romance revival as "genre fiction" is clearly anachronistic, despite its constitutive role in mystery

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<sup>22</sup> Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U P, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> See Ann Vaninskaya, "The Late-Victorian Romance Revival: A Generic Excursus." *English Literature in Transition*, 51.1 (2008): 57-79.

novels, spy novels, science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Post-sensation novels at the turn of the twentieth century rarely fit cleanly into these later formations. In fact, often these novels actively complicate existing genres (such as the sensation novel, the new woman novel, or Gothic) by mixing them or estranging them—questioning each set of conventions even while calling attention to them.

Yet experimentation with genre was not simply facilitated by shifting modes of literary production and reproduction. Such a claim, although interesting, seems well-supported by the macro-historical patterns set out by Moretti and others. My intention here is to place genre in a more rigorous dialectical relationship with its wider historical and political context. As I have outlined, the notion of genres as fluid rather than fixed also implies that genres are historical rather than ideal. My approach then situates itself within the recent return to formalism, especially the “activist” or “dynamic” strain that regards

form not as static or ideologically given but as a dynamic (Blakean) process necessary (although not in itself sufficient) for critical thought, and for thinking the historical. On this view, dynamic twentieth-century formalisms begin to resemble earlier Kantian formulations about [. . .] primary engagements between form and material—only raised now to the second or third power, to theorizations in which form and its histories become the material, the objects of analysis or refashioning.<sup>24</sup>

It is not enough, as Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, for literary historians to sketch

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Kaufman, “Everybody Hates Kant: Blakean Formalism and the Symmetries of Laura Moriarty.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 21.1 (2000): 131-155. 136.

how a genre changes over time: “In the history of forms, subjectivity, which produces them, is qualitatively transformed and disappears into them. [...] genres are no less dialectical than the particular.”<sup>25</sup> Later, he explains, “artworks sediment historical experiences in their configurations” (364). Working through Adorno’s intermittent discussions of genre, Eva Geulen suggests that his notion of genre as a social symbolic order “follows from the close connection he establishes between genres and language. Genres are to art what concepts are to language, ‘that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and to society.’”<sup>26</sup> This is the crucial dialectic I hope to stage in the following readings of individual novels and their generic discontinuities. Through recourse to genre, novels elide the fundamental break between the object world and its objectification in the form of narrative. Despite its artifice, genre allows representations to strengthen this connection by naturalizing the form a novel takes. Genres, after all, are historical and carry with them sets of expectations that appear independent of individual works; genres then are capable of falsely naturalizing contingent reality as if genres stemmed from deep ahistorical structures and possessed a life of their own. The result, however, is always incomplete; genre-as-law cannot function as a solution to real social crises. Appropriation then takes the form of estrangement; the attempt to use genre to structure the objectification of the social world suddenly seems to make the world unreal.

Imperial social formations also turned to “generic” flexibility as crises emerged under new imperialism. As states of becoming, Stoler and McGranahan argue, such

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<sup>25</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Athlone, 1997. 265.

<sup>26</sup> Eva Geulen, “Adorno and the Poetics of Genre” in *Adorno and Literature*, eds. David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp (New York: Continuum, 2006) 63. The quotation from Adorno appears in *Notes to Literature, Volume I* (New York: Columbia U P, 1991) 43.

formations were “dependent both on moving categories and populations” and not as apparently stable as historical models of empire suggest. The oscillation between supposed stable categories suggested by imperialism and their contingency finds intense currency at the *fin de siècle*. As British imperialism attempts to achieve an administered world, “New Imperialism” is the history of radical imperial instability marked by insurgent, collective subjectivities formed in rejection of imperial rule at the very moment in which the British Empire consolidates biopolitical sovereignty, “applied not to man-as-body but to [. . .] a multiplicity of men, [. . .] to the extent that they form [. . .] a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on.”<sup>27</sup>

The set of imperial crises surrounding insurgencies involves not only the rejection of colonial rule by both native peoples and hybrid formations of quasi-metropolitan resistance (Afrikaners, Anglo-Irish, anarchists) but also the forced recognition of structural dependence. These anxieties—of metropolitan dependency, of increasingly “familiar” insurgents—become channeled into what we might see in literature as the crisis or failure of romance and its ability to represent and structure modern life. The exponential growth of novelistic genres and formal experimentation at the turn of the twentieth century does not simply coincide with British “New Imperialism” and the growing sense of immanent and ubiquitous insurgencies. The variety, hybridity, metafictionality and schizophrenia of generic forms are, in fact, responses to how *fin de siècle* writers negotiated the heightened sense of global interconnectedness (often in the

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003) 242-243.

violent recognition of interdependency) with the fantasy of national individualistic subjectivity.

Of course, despite the intensification of formal discontinuities, the *fin de siècle* is not the only period marked by generic instability.<sup>28</sup> Genre, as Derrida argues, is a concept necessarily determined by instability. The concentration of generic discontinuities at the turn of the century—that is, texts which participate in or combine multiple genres—demonstrates both genre’s instability and also its inability to function as a solution to imperial crises.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that generically diverse texts can be read as outright critiques of imperial rule. In fact, they operate dialectically. They are unstable yet flexible. Though discontinuous texts thwart generic expectations, they also offer systems of flexibility that express and potentially manage imperial crises. If these texts stage the instability and failure of genre as law, then they also suggest the potential of a self-recuperative failure—as if through the loss of generic coherence, they might resurrect the flexible wholeness of the text and thus map a solution to the lack of British collective identity (or the heightened sense of lack) in the face of collective forms of imperial resistance rising like the Hydra across the globe. To return to Derrida, these texts *participate* in imperial crises by offering generic discontinuities as flexible solutions, yet they do not *belong* to these generic solutions. As the accelerated development of genre fiction during New Imperialism attempts to manage imperial crises—to exceed this sociopolitical context by exceeding generic conventions—these discontinuities, flexible

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<sup>28</sup> See for example the essays in *New Literary History*, 34.32 and 34.33 (2003).

<sup>29</sup> I diverge here from those scholars, who like Arata, assert that the formal considerations of genre have nothing *inherently* to do with Empire. In fact, my project reads genre fiction (fantasy, horror, science fiction, mystery) as engendered by these imperial crises (as reactions, recognitions, misrecognitions, refractions, et cetera).

yet unstable, remain unable to consolidate such solutions.

## **Outline**

In the following chapter, I examine Joseph Conrad's revision of the maritime romance in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), which, I argue, stages the anachronistic nature of romance in modernity in order to offer a cautionary critique of the revolutionary capacity of the body and collective labor. Throughout his work, Conrad participates in a range of popular genres—often at the same time, often burning through multiple genres in one novel. Thus, Conrad's novels become, as Jameson writes, "a unique occasion for the historical analysis of broadly cultural as well as more narrowly literary forms" (208). Such formal reflexivity at least partially accounts for Conrad's complex critical legacy as a writer who exposes the very imperialist ideology in which he participates. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, however, demands that we partially amend our notion of Conrad's deconstructive aesthetic. The novel, I argue, does register the liberating or critical potential revealed in the fragile constructedness of both genre and history. The text reformulates generic conventions in order to confront the growing anxiety of imperial interdependency: the rejection of commodified labor by an insurgent workforce, the legacy of slavery, and imperial insurrections traced across the globe. Yet this critical potential, in part generated by the instability of genre, becomes part of a wider ideological method for Conrad. At a moment in imperial history when the recognition of interdependence and antagonism threatens the ideological, economic, and political underpinnings of imperialism, Conrad taps into the flexibility of genre in order to acknowledge and confront mounting critical pressure and thus reconstruct a more

flexible representation of imperial relations.

In the third chapter, I turn to the work of H. G. Wells, another prolific writer of multiple genres. The generic tension in *Tono-Bungay* (1909)—a strange novel that combines the bildungsroman, condition of England novel, and imperial adventure—exposes social realism’s inability to capture the phantasmagoria of imperialist capitalism. As in Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900), economic interdependency in Wells’s novel informs a sense of aesthetic and imaginative dependency. The text constructs what Adorno describes as the “absolute reality of the unreal”<sup>30</sup>—a commodity fetish that not only conceals labor and its construction of the social world but thus also conceals any ability of transforming existing conditions. In the end, it is the narrator’s own attachment to genre, particularly the imperial adventure, that exposes the novel’s connections between capitalism (centered around the product Tono-Bungay) and the narrator’s “detached” colonial excursion (centered around his quest for the raw material of “quap”). In his scientific romances, including *The War of the Worlds*, Wells often represented the return of imperial crises in domestic space (both unfamiliar and familiar resistance in increasingly familiar spaces). Such movement not only draws closer to “home” geographically, but it also demonstrates an imperial paranoia that metropolitan subjects are themselves “more native.” While Conrad remained wary of all collective formations and attracted to all things British, including rugged individualism, Wells offers frequent critiques of individualism and favors instead an aesthetic of the commonweal. Yet both writers ultimately construct modern individualist subjectivity as emptied of all content in

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<sup>30</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, Trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 2005) 79.



novels that fail to fully reproduce generic conventions.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to the genre of “weird fiction,” a description H. P. Lovecraft later assigned to the post-Gothic fiction that preceded science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Specifically, I analyze those narratives, including Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) and Conrad and Ford Madox Ford’s *The Inheritors*, that “naturalize” the supernatural component of the Gothic while intensifying the inexplicability of such strange occurrences. These narratives represent what I call “geo-insurgency,” ecological uprisings represented by applying the language of native insurgencies to space itself. Whereas Conrad borders on the technophobic and Wells employs a dialectical account of the dangers and potential of technology, these “geo-insurgent” narratives stage the failure of technology (including genre) to capture the immanent crises of modern life. Faced with the growing sense of insurgency everywhere, this immanent political crisis is translated into sublime landscapes endowed with resistant agency. These “political ecologies” of insurgency, while apparently de-politicizing imperial problems—by representing them as ecological or paranormal—can be read against the grain in order to expose an emergent sense of global capitalism.

Throughout this book, I avoid restricting my account of collectivity to dominant ideology or the general operation of ideology itself; instead, my attention to insurgencies always veers towards the birth an insurgent subject, a counterforce against dominant ideology. I use “insurgency” then to designate both a historical development and a theoretical concept. Reading the historical emergence of forms of resistance offers the theoretical promise of understanding collective forms of agency. As Amanda Anderson

writes, contemporary literary history and theory suffers from “insufficiently or confusedly theorized” notions of agency.<sup>31</sup> In *Forms of Some Intenser Life*, I have tried to sustain both a historicized and nuanced theory of power. I remain fundamentally interested in how imperial resistance undermined or pulled against the emergence of political rationality and modern governmentality. Though each of these chapters is drawn to acts of defiance and even self-destruction, I have no interest in romanticizing resistance. In fact, the exceptional agency of disenfranchised characters in nineteenth-century literature precisely depends on an individualistic notion of agency whereas, in counterimperial violence, as Franz Fanon writes, “individualism is the first to disappear [. . .]. Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact everyone will be discovered by the troops, everyone will be massacred—or everyone will be saved.”<sup>32</sup> Colonial resistance, he adds, “introduces into each man’s consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and a collective history” (93). Representing such collectivity is of the utmost interest to the colonizer, the colonized, and those precarious subjects between such binary opposition. In the conclusion, I pursue this implication further. Working through Bram Stoker’s *The Snake’s Pass* (1890), I consider how the interstitial space of Irishness serves as a primary site of generic and ethno-national discontinuities.

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<sup>31</sup> Amanda Anderson, “The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: Feminist Histories and the Horizon of Modernity,” *Victorian Studies* 43.1 (2000) 51.

<sup>32</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963) 47.



Figure 1: “British Novelistic genres, 1740-1900,” from Franco Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, p. 19.

## CHAPTER 2: BELABORING THE MARITIME NOVEL IN *THE NIGGER OF THE "NARCISSUS"*

Conrad's [. . .] narrative forms draw attention to themselves as artificial constructions, encouraging us to sense the potential of a reality that seemed inaccessible to imperialism, just beyond its control [. . .]. For if Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of empire [. . .]. With Conrad, [. . .] we are in a world being made and unmade more or less all the time.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

Writing to *Times* critic Richard Curle, Joseph Conrad reflected on “the difficulty that critics felt in classifying [his work] as romantic or realistic.”<sup>33</sup> Instead, he explained, “it is fluid” (44). In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897), Conrad channels his own maritime experience into the public vogue for sea literature, nautical adventures and sailors’ tales—increasingly popular genres in nineteenth-century Britain from Frederick Marryat to Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and William Hope Hodgson. In doing so, Conrad confronts a genre fraught between naturalism and the wish-fulfillment of romance—a genre that simultaneously pressures Conrad to draw on his personal maritime experience and yet also translate it into a palatable and conventional form of mass fantasy. At this fissure between the object world and its representation, one might argue that the tradition of the maritime novel manages the anxieties of imperialism by transforming them into matters of generic conventions. Or, we might argue that *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, as a more experimental novel, manages imperial anxieties by refashioning them in the terms of Conrad’s particular aesthetic interests. Both approaches, however, seem reductive. The first overestimates the power of genre by

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<sup>33</sup> See Joseph Conrad, “To Richard Curle, July 14, 1923” in *Joseph Conrad on Fiction* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1964) 42.

positing it as a rigid formula, both structurally and ideologically, while the second devalues the importance of the narrative history that Conrad clearly engages.

My argument, first and foremost, diverges from the notion of genre as the management of anxieties rearticulated in terms of formal conventions. Instead, I argue that the flexibility of genre—intensified in the generic hybridity of late nineteenth-century fiction—became a central strategy for managing crises in the emerging global imperial system of the *fin de siècle*. Only by first attending to the novel’s depiction of generic laboring bodies can we understand the larger implications of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* on Conrad’s representations of imperial crises and their generic pressure. Contrary to many critics’ interpretation of the novel as “lyrical about authorized deportment and venomous towards deviations, [. . .] declaring social obedience a moral imperative,”<sup>34</sup> I offer a more dialectical reading: the text both entertains the “truth” of mutiny and exposes the untruth of maritime romance—its own precarious genre—while attempting to adapt to and contain this revolutionary potential. While *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* reveals both genre and history as precarious constructs, it also attempts to reconstruct and adapt generic conventions in an increasingly interdependent world. Thus, while the novel addresses the rejection of commodified labor by an insurgent workforce, the legacy of slavery, and imperial insurrections traced across the globe, this critical potential, in part generated by the formal instability of genre, becomes part of a more insidious ideological strategy. The formal flexibility of genre allows Conrad to

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<sup>34</sup> Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 61.

acknowledge and confront mounting critical pressure while also reconstructing a more flexible representation of modern imperialism.

### **Sea-Anachronisms: Genre as Machine**

In his poem “The Three-Decker,” Kipling uses a towering, sailing warship as an extended metaphor for the traditional and “extinct” three-volume novel. The success of “the old three-decker” is a fading “route [...] barred to steamers” (line 25).<sup>35</sup> In Kipling’s poem, the image of the three-volume novel as a sailing warship draws in the romantic associations of both. While the ship becomes the metaphorical image of the three-volume novel, it is the generic expectations of the latter that regulate how we imagine the material vehicle. On the three-decker, one can expect a resolution that celebrates the punishment of the wicked and reestablishes social stability through marriage:

No moral doubt assailed us, so when the port we neared,  
The villain had his flogging at the gangway, and we cheered.  
‘Twas fiddle in the forc’s’le—‘twas garlands on the mast,  
For every one got married, and I went ashore at last. (16–20)

On “a ram-you-damn-you liner with a brace of bucking screws” (28), there remains only the “scent of old-world roses through the fog that ties you blind” (44). For both Kipling and Conrad, transformations in literary production, including genre, map onto the technology of empire. Kipling’s three-decker as well as Conrad’s various ships, including Marlowe’s decaying Congo steamer, the hellish *Patna*, and the anachronistic *Narcissus*, are representative of the wider discursive practice in which many *fin de siècle*

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<sup>35</sup> Rudyard Kipling, “The Three-Decker,” *The Seven Seas* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896), 118 – 122, 120.

writers utilize the technologies of shipping to work through the changing role of empire and the corresponding shifts in genre.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, sea narratives, as recent scholars have recognized, may be seen as nascent attempts to conceptualize modernity itself and, consequently, to adapt new representational strategies in order to voice or resolve the various contradictions of an emerging global capitalist system.<sup>37</sup> Though trans-national and trans-cultural, ocean space for Britain became an imaginative and even material way of managing the difficult cognitive task of grasping imperial space. In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, as Jacques Berthoud writes, “the sea had become a national obsession.”<sup>38</sup> In *The Seven Seas*, Kipling envisions ships at sea as “shuttles of an Empire’s loom that weave us main to main,” and Henry Newbolt, commemorating a long line of naval heroes from Drake to Nelson, praises the British Empire as “the kingdom none can take—/ The realm of the circling sea.”<sup>39</sup> This “realm of the circling sea” begins to function not simply as a trope of the global but as an unstriated fluid space in which trade ships opened and traced the

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<sup>36</sup> For a short discussion of how late Victorian industrial technology intersected with the disillusion of imperial romance, see Brantlinger 37-45.

<sup>37</sup> See Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). For a transatlantic history of the genre of early nineteenth-century sea fiction, see Margaret Cohen, “Traveling Genre,” *New Literary History* 34 (2003). I especially rely on her account of the generic components of the maritime novel.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Berthoud, “Introduction” to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), viii. As Berthoud outlines, the late-1890s market in sea literature included popular histories of sailors and buccaneers, such as Froude’s *English Seamen* (1895); heroic nautical poetry, including Kipling’s *Seven Seas* (1896) and Newbolt’s *Admirals All* (1897); and sea novels, such as Kipling’s *Captains Courageous* (1897), Hodgson’s seafaring horror novels, and Conrad’s *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897).

<sup>39</sup> Rudyard Kipling, “Coastwise Lights” in *The Seven Seas* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896). Henry John Newbolt, “Admirals All” in *Admirals All* (London: E. Mathews, 1907).

networked flows that capital would fill.<sup>40</sup> Increasingly efficient industrial technologies, like the compound steam engine, not only facilitated the global circulation of goods but they also stimulated international financial investments.<sup>41</sup> As Cesare Casarino argues, the nineteenth-century sea narrative plays no small role in this macroeconomic shift towards a global system:

It is precisely such a preoccupation with the world of the ship and the sea voyage conceived as autonomous enclosures that turns the emergent form of the modernist sea narrative into a representation producing machine for the turbulent transitions from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism, into a laboratory for the conceptualization of a world system that was increasingly arduous to visualize, the more multiple, interconnected, and global it became. (10)

In Conrad's sea adventures, the anachronistic nature of romance is consistently linked with the obsolete status of sailing, which, as Conrad's novels so often note, was to be gradually replaced by steam technology. In *Lord Jim* (1900), the hellish atmosphere of the *Patna* is as technological as it is metaphysical: the "phantom" steamer lets out a

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<sup>40</sup> See Christopher Connery, "The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary" in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke U P, 1996) 284 – 311, especially 298. See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "Maritime Model" of striated space in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 478-482; Fredric Jameson's discussion of the sea as "non-place" in *The Political Unconscious*, 210-219; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1992); Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*, especially the introduction, 1 – 18; Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke U P, 2005); and Margaret Cohen, "The Chronotopes of the Sea" in *Novel: Volume 2, Forms and Themes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 647 – 666. For concomitant juridical developments, see China Miéville, "States, Markets and the Sea: Issues in the History of International Law" in *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006), 153 – 224.

<sup>41</sup> See Kevin H. O'Rourke and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1999) 33-34, 217.



“slight hiss” as it moves across a “viscous, stagnant, dead” sea.<sup>42</sup> Jim describes the ship and its white engineers as foolishly complacent: its “propeller turned without a check, as though its beat had been part of the scheme of a safe universe” (19). These steam engineers, Jim earlier notes, aren’t “bad chaps,” but, despite their opportune success in the expanding industry of steam navigation, “those men did not belong to the world of heroic adventure” (25). For Conrad, romance does not function simply as nostalgic longing for a romanticized past; instead, the world of romance is anachronistic—it lingers on out of sync with modernity.

Likewise, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) elaborates on the role of technology in Conrad’s metacommentary on the anachronism of romantic adventure. In the manuscript, Marlowe’s lament that Africa “had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery” follows an extended description of a steamship as both the conduit to explore the “unknown” inner continent and the reason why the earth has lost its mystery.<sup>43</sup> As Marlowe looks out across the traffic on the Thames,

A big steamer came down all a long blaze of lights like a town viewed from the sea bound to the uttermost ends of the earth and timed to the day, to the very hour with nothing unknown in her path[,] no mystery on her way, nothing but a few coaling stations [. . .]. And the earth suddenly seemed shrunk to the size of a pea spinning in the heart of an immense darkness (11)

Rather than simply dismiss the modern steam industry, *Heart of Darkness* constructs new

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (New York: Penguin, 1971) 18.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Norton, 1988) 11.

technology as a pharmakon—both poison and antidote. Through technology, Marlowe twice wards off his mix of desire and horror towards the “black and incomprehensible frenzy” of the African jungle around him (37). Faced with the thrill of “the thought of [his] remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar,” Marlowe responds to his audience’s unasked question, “You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t” (38). Marlowe’s reason is simple, surprisingly devoid of conventional justification:

I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (38)<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the steamer, which so often registers Conrad’s disillusion with the impossibility of romance in modernity, becomes in *Heart of Darkness* the vehicle for narrative. It produces the unconventional form of the text as it oscillates between imperial romance, quest narrative, and metaphysical impressionism. The steamship, like the generic discontinuities it brings, is mobile. While it appears vulnerable (always on the verge of deterioration), it also becomes a resistant boundary marker, toiling along the edge of darkness. The very technology that closes the spatial distance between Britain and Africa becomes the only (precarious) marker of difference. Faced with the recognition of remote kinship, Marlowe can only bandage the leaky steam pipes. Whether confronted

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<sup>44</sup> Of course, the racist justification inheres in this emphasis on technology. Marlowe must ensure that the superstitious black fireman (grotesquely juxtaposed next to Western technology) performs his job correctly.

with the thrilling music of drums or a deadly barrage of arrows, technological disparity becomes Marlowe's only reassurance.

"The book," Deleuze and Guattari write, "is a little machine" (4), and it is this second form of technology that allows Marlowe to turn from the jungle around him. Following his compulsive attention to the steam engine, Marlowe finds a sailor's handbook left by Kurtz's Russian disciple. He draws comfort from the work's dull intransigence:

Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson—some such name—Master in his Majesty's Navy. [. . .] The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. [. . .] I slipped the book into my pocket. I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship. (39)

The book offers reassurance not only through familiar English but also through genre—its singleness of intention, its solidity, its dedication to an older way of life before the steamship.<sup>45</sup> Like the sailor's handbook with its strange marginal ciphertext, Conrad's work participates in familiar genres but gestures towards something more. The novel itself becomes a machine, hovering between romance and its failure, threatening to break down, signaling its own failure, participating in romance but not belonging to it.

In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, steamships are constantly described as

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<sup>45</sup> As Cohen notes, maritime novelists often incorporated their naval ranks as part of their authorial persona (*Traveling Genres* 490).

monstrous. Returning to the English channel, the crew sees “a string of smoking steamboats waddled, hugging the coast, like migrating and amphibious monsters, distrustful of the restless waves” (162). The cook describes firemen in the stokehold of steamers as “fiends [. . .]—firing—firing—firing—down there” (114). At the novel’s conclusion, the narrator equates the steam industry with death: “The sea took some, the steamers took others, the graveyards of the earth will account for the rest” (172). Though the ship glides like a planet with “her own future,” it is destined for disassembly (29). The *Narcissus* wavers between the monstrous steam inheritors and the fading “long record” of the romantic history represented by Old Singleton (172). However, while steamboats may be the graveyards of romance, the romantic nostalgia embodied in Old Singleton proves no less illusory.

At first, in contradistinction to the monstrous steamers, Old Singleton seems a fading romantic embodiment of an older form of ocean life:

For many years he had heard himself called “Old Singleton,” and had serenely accepted the qualification, taking it as a tribute of respect due to a man who through half a century had measured his strength against the favours and the rages of the sea. He had never given a thought to his mortal self. He lived unscathed, as though he had been indestructible, surrendering to all the temptations, weathering many gales. He had panted in sunshine, shivered in the cold; suffered hunger, thirst, debauch; passed through many trials—known all the furies. (98-99)

Yet, as often as Old Singleton appears a steadfast and selfless “incarnation of barbarian

wisdom” (6), the text offers competing connotations of Singleton’s nickname. The crew finds “Old Singleton” venerable but also outdated and ridiculous. Often, as the ship’s “oracle” (43), his proverbs seem to parody wisdom. As the participant narrator observes, “Singleton seemed to know nothing, understand nothing. We had thought him till then as wise as he looked, but now we dared at times, suspect him of being stupid—from old age” (42). The crew’s suspicions are confirmed when, after Singleton prophesies that Wait will die, Donkin acridly explains to the naïve Nilsen, “so will you” (43). The crew is “appalled. We perceived that after all Singleton’s answer meant nothing. We began to hate him for making fun of us. All our certitudes were going” (43). Contrary to many critics’ desire to read Singleton as the moral center of the novel,<sup>46</sup> Conrad represents the old sailor as a vestige, “a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation [. . .] with a vast empty past and with no future” (24). As a fading remnant whose romantic travels are a “vast empty past,” Old Singleton counterbalances the nostalgia for traditional ocean life and the disgust at steam technology with a continual sense that romance was absent all along. This absence is the very “sinister truth” Singleton confronts in the storm—one of two dark epiphanies Singleton experiences in the course of the novel.

After surviving a storm off the Cape of Good Hope, “there were blank hours: a

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<sup>46</sup> See Ian Watt, “Conrad Criticism and *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’*” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12.4 (1958): 257-283. While Watt avoids many of his contemporaries’ unabashed praise for Singleton, he still argues that “Singleton does, and the heroic quality of his labors reminds us, not only that what has been most enduring about human society has been the mere continuity of its struggle against nature [. . .]” (283). Contra Watt, Benita Parry claims that “Conrad intended his audience to see in Singleton an exemplary and wholly admirable being,” but that “the meanings immanent in this representation are not as unambiguous as many critics [...] would have an audience accept” (68). However, Parry locates this ambiguity in potential readers’ ideological reactions: “not all readers in this or any other age would necessarily agree to such an interpretation as canonical since this requires belief in the ethic of means, acceptance of a form of solidarity that is inseparable from the mechanics of political domination [...] It can therefore be argued that some audiences will see in Singleton not a paradigm of moral excellence but a living condition of blind obedience and psychic constraint” (68-69).

livid blurr—and again we lived! Singleton was possessed of sinister truth” (100). The “sinister truth” breaks through Singleton’s insipid wisdom after he collapses from exhaustion. While the crew fret over the old sailor, Singleton returns to the deck for midnight duty. Then, with a shift in focalization, the narrative peers into the old man’s thoughts:

He brooded alone more than ever, in an impenetrable silence and with a saddened face. For many years he had heard himself called “Old Singleton,” and had serenely accepted the qualification, taking it as a tribute of respect due to a man who through half a century had measured his strength against the favours and the rages of the sea. He had never given a thought to his mortal self. He lived unscathed, as though he had been indestructible, surrendering to all the temptations, weathering many gales. He had panted in sunshine, shivered in the cold; suffered hunger, thirst, debauch; passed through many trials—known all the furies. Old! It seemed to him he was broken at last. And like a man bound treacherously while he sleeps, he woke up fettered by the long chain of disregarded years. He had to take up at once the burden of all his existence, and found it almost too heavy for his strength. Old! He moved his arms, shook his head, felt his limbs. Getting old... and then? He looked upon the immortal sea with the awakened and groping perception of its heartless might; he saw it unchanged, black and foaming under the eternal scrutiny of the stars; he heard its impatient voice calling for him out of a pitiless vastness

full of unrest, of turmoil, and of terror. He looked afar upon it, and he saw an immensity tormented and blind, moaning and furious, that claimed all the days of his tenacious life, and, when life was over, would claim the worn-out body of its slave.... (98-99)

In this epiphany, two interpretations pull at one another. On one hand, Singleton realizes the futility of the crew's narcissistic sense of their own heroism. He recognizes their sense of indomitability as a ruse; instead, he merely survives "*as though* he had been indestructible." The sea becomes the "pitiless vastness" of existence that claims worn-out bodies despite their "tenacious life." As many critics have argued, Singleton peers into the sea and understands the emptiness and futility of existence. Yet Old Singleton not only relies on the metaphysical—the apparent futility of his service to the indifferent vastness of the ocean—he also emphasizes the material human body. Singleton's "sinister truth" then is equally a recognition—in "the worn-out body," in his examination of his arms and limbs, in bodily suffering—of what is repressed in the romantic conception of the sea: the actual conditions involved in the expropriation of living labor.

Conrad's short essay on Marryat, "Tales of the Sea" (1898), published six months after *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, articulates many of the problems unraveled in the novel. Few works, for Conrad, represented the romance of maritime adventure more powerfully than Captain Frederick Marryat's work.<sup>47</sup> In praising Marryat's work as the "completely successful expression of an unartistic nature,"<sup>48</sup> Conrad constructs a series of rhetorical paradoxes to capture the pleasure of reading Marryat's ocean adventures.

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<sup>47</sup> For discussions of Marryat's work, see Brantlinger 47-70 and Cohen, "Traveling Genres" 494-498.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Conrad, "Tales of the Sea" in *Joseph Conrad on Fiction* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1964) 47.

First, Conrad picks up on the tension in Marryat between the acknowledgment of mass labor and the tendency to repress this labor through the conventions of genre. For Marryat, “the sea was not an element. It was a stage, where was displayed an exhibition of valour,” and yet, Conrad quickly points out, the achievement of such theatrical heroes “cannot be pronounced imaginary, since its reality has affected the destinies of nations” (47). Conrad’s causal link between Marryat’s romantic fictions and “the destinies of nations” is twofold. Not only does Marryat represent those men who achieved naval prowess for Britain, but he also supplies a generation of young men, including Conrad, with “the initial impulse towards a glorious or a useful career” (50). Most importantly, Conrad writes, echoing *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, these ocean adventures function as a supplement for official History:

History preserves the skeleton of facts and, here and there, a figure or a name; but it is in Marryat’s novels that we find the mass of the nameless, that we see them in the flesh, that we obtain a glimpse of the everyday life and an insight into the spirit animating the crowd of obscure men who knew how to build for their country such a shining monument of memories (47)

Unlike the more individualistic tradition of historical romances, Conrad finds in Marryat’s everyman heroes the recognition of a collective subject of history that remains nameless. Like Singleton, they are unable to sign their name in the payroll of History. And yet, if Marryat does foreground “the crowd of obscure men” as crucial to collective identity, he represents them as equally dispensable in such a collective. Conrad notes, for



example, the novels' "intimacy with violence" (48). In gruesome battles, bodies are mutilated and dismembered. As Patrick Brantlinger argues, this repetition of pure violence threatens to reduce Marryat's characters to "figures of heroic slapstick, odd yet expendable cells of the body politic for whose health and happiness they would cheerfully sacrifice limbs, eyes, wives, lives" (55). Such violence becomes the ground on which to stage the fast-paced *bildung* of a young hero. From the routine violence, rigidity of the ship's hierarchy, devotion to his captain, and desire for glory, Marryat's young heroes ultimately realize the "true" principle of authority. At the end of *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, the enlightened Jack Easy denounces his father's liberal ideals of equality and offers the following social ideal:

The most lasting and imperishable form of building is that of the pyramid, which defies ages, and to that may the most perfect form of society be compared. It is based upon the many, and rising by degrees, it becomes less as wealth, talent, and rank increase in the individual, until it ends at the apex or monarch, above all. Yet each several stone from the apex to the base is necessary for the preservation of the structure, and fulfils its duty in its allotted place.<sup>49</sup>

In many ways, this passage represents the dialectical counterpart to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Jack Easy realizes that the social is "based upon the many," and yet "the many" serve as a dutiful support structure for their superiors, whose wealth and rank corresponds to their social productivity. The ship for Marryat becomes the space to

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<sup>49</sup> Frederick Marryat, *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) 304-305.

establish romantic recuperation: individual bodies (or body parts) may be lost, but they are sacrificed to the collective of the ship. The difference, however, is that Marryat's ship is a closed and instrumental totality while Conrad's *Narcissus* is an open and expressive totality. Marryat's ship stands for "the most perfect form of society," yet he acknowledges constituent power only for the purposes of organizing it as a constituted pyramid in which blocks merely support their superiors. Conrad's *Narcissus*, however, is both a fragment and a small planet—never a closed form—constituted by the crew as a whole. Marryat's ship is transhistorical, embodied in the pyramid and the navy ship, and structurally determined by the sovereign monarch; but Conrad's *Narcissus* is steeped in historical sediment even as it attempts to escape its own historical situatedness.

### **From Survival to Insurrection: Reading the Collective**

“[I]n the darkness of the narrow place [he] could be heard growling  
angrily, like an irritated and savage animal uneasy in its den [. . .].”  
—Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*

Like most of Conrad's early fiction, the novel offers realistic representations of sailors' labor, the central component of sea fiction, which, as Margaret Cohen writes, “dramatizes humans at work” (487) at the very historical moment when the “nature of work, along with the status of the worker, are among the most urgent social questions [. . .] in the advanced capitalist nations of the world where sea fiction flourished” (491). Participating in this generic tradition, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* explores the world-making power of labor on the “small planet” of the *Narcissus*. Yet, in a striking twist on the maritime novel with its fantasy of reader participation and meritocratic ethos, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* reveals labor, corporeality, and rebellion as interconnected in

way that exceeds the conventions of its genre. As the sailors struggle to keep the *Narcissus* afloat during a violent storm off the Cape of Good Hope, the immediacy of the laboring body gives birth to a collective antagonist that thwarts both socioeconomic and generic mechanisms.

The *Narcissus*, on its way out to sea, seems

a fragment detached from the earth, [. . .] lonely and swift like a small planet [. . .]. She had her own future; she was alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks; like that earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies [. . .]. (29-30)

Here, the ship at sea becomes both a detached space and a social microcosm—a paradoxical representation that expresses the “desire [. . .] to escape the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting, inverting it” (Casarino 21). Between “fragment” and “small planet”, the ship at sea emerges both as an acknowledgment of the labor underpinning imperial trade and as a repression of that labor.<sup>50</sup> While representing individual laborers, the ocean work-place, and its daily tasks and dangers—all of which are repressed in the capitalist imperial economic system—the *Narcissus* also becomes a stage for archetypal characters and generic conventions. Conrad's novel foregrounds the repressed labor of imperial trade, yet this return of the repressed is not strictly disruptive. The maritime novel, in fact, reconfigures this labor under generic conventions. While naturalistic maritime fiction offers elaborate descriptions of work and technical

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<sup>50</sup> As Jameson argues, “the sea [for Conrad] is both a strategy of containment and a place of real business; it is a border and a decorative limit, but it is also a highway, [. . .] the repression of work [. . .] as well as the absent work-place itself” (210).

knowledge, these passages are not the social cataloging of realists. Instead, these conventional descriptions of specialized labor, which Cohen describes as “active descriptions,” invite readers into the adventure “as if [such technical terms] were obviously known to readers, with no gesture towards their possibly specialized status” (489). The genre’s “reality effect,” Cohen argues, derives from proximity and performance rather than detailed explanation.

While criticism has long focused on the mythic and philosophical symbolism in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, labor—perhaps more than any of Conrad’s later novels—remains central in the text. The novel relies on the maritime novel’s representation of the concrete daily tasks of sailing while also exploring a more abstract sense of labor, “that eternal natural necessity,” in Marx’s words, “which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself.”<sup>51</sup> The former is a representation of those specific (sometimes specialized) tasks exchanged for wages while the latter is a more general understanding of the “productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands” (*Capital* 134). Nowhere does *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* note the cargo that the ship transports, and yet the text foregrounds realities of labor, including abject bodily exhaustion and exposure to the elements, that conventional ocean adventures had generally avoided or managed. Initial reviewers of the novel could not help but note the novel’s gritty “realism.” *The Spectator*, for example, found that Conrad’s “choice of themes, and the uncompromising nature of his methods, debar him

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<sup>51</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 133. Also, see Marx’s *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin, 1973) 704-706.

from attaining a wide popularity.”<sup>52</sup> Whereas *Lord Jim*, Jameson argues, juxtaposes the fiction of romance with life at sea (and then rewrites the genre),<sup>53</sup> *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* operates not through the repression or recontainment of labor but through representing the laboring power of the body in a form that exceeds capitalist value. The *Narcissus* becomes a microcosm in which, rather than simply romanticize work, Conrad probes living labor’s constituent power.<sup>54</sup>

In the frequently discussed passage following the storm at sea, the text resorts to its more omniscient narration:

On men reprieved by its disdainful mercy, the immortal sea confers in its justice the full privilege of desired unrest. Through the perfect wisdom of its grace they are not permitted to meditate at ease upon the complicated and acrid savour of existence. They must without pause justify their life to the eternal pity that commands toil to be hard and unceasing, from sunrise to sunset, from sunset to sunrise; till the weary succession of nights and days tainted by the obstinate clamour of sages, demanding bliss and an empty heaven, is redeemed at last by the vast silence of pain and labour, by the dumb fear and the dumb courage of men obscure, forgetful, and enduring. (90)

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<sup>52</sup> Qtd. in Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U P, 1984) 217.

<sup>53</sup> See Jameson 242-269.

<sup>54</sup> By constituent power, I mean the ontological, innovative power (*puissance, potentia*) of human beings to produce new political arrangements. See Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 264-268.

This passage appears to solicit an existentialist reading. Like the sublime experience of Jim on the *Patna*, this moment on the *Narcissus*, following a violent storm, can be read as Conrad's tendency to represent labor in existentialist terms, which become "the pretext for the production of a new metaphysic—a new myth about the meaning of life and the absurdity of human existence in the face of a malevolent Nature" (Jameson 216). This realization, however, is not simply a stoic view of existence as a "vast silence of pain and labour" in a postlapsarian world. Alongside this continual toil emerges the potential of *justification, redemption, and endurance*—a potential that, for the laboring crew, cannot be abstracted into a philosophical tenet about the "acid savour of existence." In this opening passage, the narrator supplements any such universal existentialist insight with a dialectical recognition of the productive forces of human labor, which are both repressed (obscured, forgotten) and enduring. As Ian Watt argues, the account of the storm

is a sequence of unequalled enactments of the theme of solidarity. [. . .] It is the climactic recognition of our utter and yet often forgotten dependence, night and day, by sea and by land, on the labors of others. (282)<sup>55</sup>

The storm, however, not only exposes an interdependent imperial system but also represents the solidarity of the crew. When the crew member, like Marx's worker, "cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality and develops the capabilities of his species" (*Capital* 447). Foregrounding such interdependence, Conrad abandons an individual protagonist for a collective subject. As

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<sup>55</sup> It seems telling that, while Watt notices the novel's deep interest in a collective subject, he reduces "solidarity" to the social writ large—opposing "our dependence" and "the labor of others" in a way that potentially imagines laborers as outside the social world. That is, Watt imagines a "dependent" world rather than an "interdependent" one.

the *Narcissus* embarks, the narrator prefigures this collectivity, describing the ship as “alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks” (29). The ship becomes the living embodiment of its crew. More than a decade later, reminiscing on his reputation as a writer of the sea, Conrad articulates this core interest:

in my two exclusively sea books, “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” and “The Mirror of the Sea” [. . .], I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also *that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships—the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care.*<sup>56</sup>

The ship at sea, for Conrad, becomes the dwelling place of a form of life generated by the cooperation of its crew members. In this case, one cannot disentangle the ship from its crew. Parry argues that the crew “fails to live up to the stringent codes of the sea, [while] the ship [. . .] rises above her material shape as an instrument of trade, to stand as the novel’s heroine” (63). To posit such a distinction, however, repeats the early misunderstanding between Wait and Singleton. When Wait asks “What kind of ship is this? Pretty fair?”, Singleton replies “Ship!... Ships are all right. It is the men in them!” (24). Punning on the metonymic sense of “the ship” as its crew, Conrad lets us in on the joke: Singleton’s response is no kernel of oracular wisdom. Rather, it is an empty response that avoids Wait’s question by figuring “the ship” literally. Singleton’s cantankerous answer may appear to reiterate the novel’s interest in the relationships

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph Conrad, “A Familiar Preface” in *Joseph Conrad on Fiction* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1964) 120, emphasis added.

between men on the microcosmic *Narcissus*, but it becomes empty sophistry. A wooden vessel cannot be fair or unfair, the novel implies, because justice lies in the community of the crew. Rather than an autonomous symbol, the *Narcissus* emerges as the living expression of the collective subject created by the cooperation of the crew.

In fact, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* underpins its recognition of enduring but repressed collective labor by emphasizing animal, biological existence in pain and fear. Throughout the storm and in its aftermath, the narrator anatomizes the crew's bodies. Despite the accounts of individual crew members, like Old Singleton at the wheel, the narrative often describes jumbled body parts and indistinct masses of bodies: "as soon as they got up they shot to leeward in clusters [. . .]; then, groaning, they rolled in a confused mass" (58). The crew "crawled in heaps where there was foothold; they held on with both arms, hooked themselves to anything to windward with elbows, with chins, almost with their teeth" (59-60). In this dire moment, they become "a crowd of cold and hungry men, waiting wearily for a violent death" (61). These bodily descriptions, which both strip the crew to their basic vulnerable parts and mesh the crowd together through shared corporeality, become starkly impersonal: "[u]nder the torment [. . .] a pair of shoulders would writhe a little. Teeth chattered" (61). With the nonspecific "a pair of shoulders" and the plural "teeth chattered" (one mouth or many mouths?), the description oscillates between an unidentified sailor, suffering in the dark, and the crew in general. In a twofold movement of synecdoche, the shoulders and teeth stand in for the anonymous sailor and that sailor (via his body) represents the crew as a whole. In the storm, there is only a collectivity struggling for survival. Though the crew will recall this



survival as heroism, they are stripped down to their shared animal life. The crew “looked wretched in a hopeless struggle, like vermin fleeing before a flood; [. . .] half naked and staring wildly” (58). Mr. Baker, the chief mate, grunts, “spluttering and blowing amongst the tangled ropes like an energetic porpoise” (56). The steward’s ripped shirt sleeves “flapped like wings” (60). Rescuing the trapped James Wait, “Wamibo made noises resembling loud barks” (66), and when Wait emerges, he glares “with his bulging eyes, mute as a fish” (71). On one hand, these descriptions reduce the crew to their animal substructure—to an immediate capacity to feel pain and “dumb fear.”<sup>57</sup> They appear, in Arendt’s formulation, as *animal laborans*.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, through drawing attention to the body, Conrad also illustrates the collective capacity of the crew. While the former “animalizes” the human, the latter reveals humans’ constituent capacity. As Marx writes, a “new power” not only “arises from the fusion of many forces into a single force” but also in the “mere social contact” that

begets [. . .] a stimulation of the ‘animal spirits’ [. . .]. This is why a dozen people working together will produce far more, in their collective working day [. . .] than twelve isolated men [. . .]. This originates from the fact that man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at all events a social animal. (443-444)<sup>59</sup>

In a more dialectical account of labor in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, the emphasis on

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<sup>57</sup> For a compelling discussion of animality in *Lord Jim*, see Sanjay Krishnan, “Seeing the Animal: Colonial Space and Movement in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 37.3 (2004), especially 341-342.

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> See Negri’s discussion of these passages and “the process of ‘cooperation’ and of its becoming antagonistic subject,” *Insurgencies* 259-268.

labor, including descriptions of the crew as “life-long prisoners of the sea” or the “sea’s slave,” draws our attention to the biopolitical workings of imperialism—its growing capacity to dominate, organize, and administer life, reducing humans to the collective survival of their animal substructure—and yet, at the moment the text represents such animal life, we witness the emergence of the crew as a resilient and collective force.

It is thus no coincidence that, directly following this focus on the capacity of the body to feel pain and fear but also endure and resist, the threat of mutiny intensifies. Not long after the storm, the participant narrator notes that the crew, proud of “our pluck, of our capacity for work, of our energy,” “decried our officers—who had done nothing” (100). Of course, the novel then redirects this recognition of exploitation through the “venomous” Donkin, whose “picturesque and filthy loquacity flowed like a troubled stream from a poisoned source” (ibid.). Yet even then, despite their constant distaste, the crew

listened to the fascinating Donkin. His care for our rights, his disinterested concern for our dignity, were not discouraged by the invariable contumely of our words, by the disdain of our looks. [. . .] We abominated the creature and could not deny the luminous truth of his contentions. It was all so obvious. We were indubitably good men; our deserts were great and our pay small. Through our exertions we had saved the ship and the skipper would get the credit of it. What had he done? we wanted to know. Donkin asked:—“What ‘ee could do without hus?” and we could not answer. We were oppressed by the injustice of the world, surprised to

perceive how long we had lived under its burden without realising our  
unfortunate state, annoyed by the uneasy suspicion of our undiscerning  
stupidity [. . .]. (100-102)

While *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* may end "with the transformation of its villain, Donkin, the epitome of the *homme de ressentiment*, into a labor organizer" (Jameson 215-216), the ongoing abomination of Donkin makes it difficult to identify him as any type of romanticized rebel hero. Neither is it possible to understand this transformation as character development. Instead, the narrative often implies that Donkin's idleness, hatred, and loquacity qualify him as the perfect labor organizer. The critical point here, as Casarino points out, is that Conrad represents Donkin as "the modern political subject of an antagonistic working class that is [. . .] determined to resist ruthless exploitation" (231). The narrator, the crew, and potentially the audience despise Donkin even as they acknowledge the truth of his antagonism. Clearly, Donkin is an *homme de ressentiment*—from the beginning we witness his abject poverty and the pleasure he takes in antipathy. Following the storm, however, Donkin's general *ressentiment* connects with the immanent recognition of exploitation. He thus exposes an affirmative correlative: the constituent power of the crew. In other words, to reinterpret Singleton's answer to Wait, he reveals that ships have always been constituted by the cooperation of their crews. Even in Donkin's bitterness, the text implies, there emerges the potential of "luminous truth." In the collective animal moment, the possibility of being more than an animal emerges—but it is only a glimpse of constituent power. This truth remains in the form of the negative. The implied answer to Donkin's question—"What [the skipper] could do

without hus?”—is *nothing*. And yet even this answer remains absent. The chain of negating prefixes (“injustice”, “unfortunate”, “uneasy”, “undiscerning”) indirectly reinforces this silence of concession. The crew, including the narrator, simply “could not answer.”

The narrator, however, quickly devolves from Donkin’s “luminous truth”—which, in this case, is fairly *specific*, directed at the exploitative conditions of the ship—to a hyperbolic notion of *universal resentment*. Rather than address Donkin’s call for revolt on an individual ship, or even his complaints about the industry of shipping and by extension the economic system of capitalism, the participant narrator zooms out to “the injustice of the world” and “its burden.” In other words, the recognition of an unfair labor system becomes part of the text’s more existential commentary. If the “luminous truth” of Donkin’s critique remains, it is in the overstatement and the potential sarcasm embedded in the narrator’s repeated claim of ignorance—“We were men enough to courageously admit to ourselves our intellectual shortcomings”—which threatens to become a parody of the very message that critics have often extracted from the novel: the stoic, unquestioning, and somehow heroic endurance—embodied in Old Singleton at the wheel—in the face of antagonistic Nature. Instead, the crew’s silence and (potentially ironic) claim of ignorance appear as the only method of coping with the aporia that follows Donkin’s complaints. Moreover, after recognizing exploitation, the participant-narrator, speaking on behalf of the crew, retroactively imagines the ship as courageous rather than struggling for survival—or, more accurately, he conflates the two. Rather than repress labor by reorganizing the narrative, as Jameson argues, “in melodramatic

terms, in a subsystem of good and evil which now once again has villains and heroes” (216), Conrad allows the sailors of the *Narcissus* to confront and then manage their status as the exploited. Rather than dismiss the toil of the storm, they transform their struggle for survival into a narcissistic work ethic:

The hours of ineffective turmoil were forgotten; the fear and anguish of these dark moments were never mentioned in the glowing peace of fine days. [. . .] And we were conceited! We boasted of our pluck, of our capacity for work, of our energy. We remembered honourable episodes: our devotion, our indomitable perseverance—and were proud of them as though they had been the outcome of our unaided impulses. We remembered our danger, our toil—and conveniently forgot our horrible scare. (99-100)

This nostalgia, with its romantic stoicism, allows the crew to decry their officers yet continue to guide the ship on its “unswerving path.” They ward off any specific mutinous desire—and the collective antagonist engendered by their capacity as a species—by turning towards a hierarchal system of steadfast longsuffering. Though the “little world” of the *Narcissus* now carries a “a discontented and aspiring population,” Donkin’s whispers to let the skipper slip overboard become a comforting fantasy for the crew, who found comfort of a gloomy kind in an interminable and conscientious analysis of their unappreciated worth; and inspired by Donkin’s hopeful doctrines they dreamed enthusiastically of the time when every lonely ship would travel over a serene sea, manned by a wealthy and well-fed crew of

satisfied skippers. (103)

The crew copes with both the brutality of natural force and their disruptive social collectivity in one fell swoop. They simultaneously submit to the world's injustice and turn that submission into "pluck," "devotion" and "indomitable perseverance." Though their physical domination by the storm leads to a recognition of their economic exploitation, both forms of domination are then turned into the "indomitable."

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that modern subjects' instrumental domination of nature inevitably leads to dominating one another. "What human beings seek to learn from nature," they write, "is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings."<sup>60</sup> The modern subject's commanding ability to manipulate the surrounding object world—only through recourse to a false sense of its objectivity—posits "power as the principle of all relationships" (5). Yet, as they note, this domination does not always take the form of brute control; in the face of an asymmetric relationship, the modern subject can master nature through acknowledging his own powerlessness—that is, by adapting:

The superiority of nature in the competitive struggle is repeatedly confirmed by the very mind which has mastered nature [. . .]. The reason, however, is that all power in class society is beset by the gnawing consciousness of its powerlessness in face of physical nature and its social successor, the many. Only deliberate adaptation to it brings nature under the power of the physically weaker. (44)

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<sup>60</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 2002) 2.

The crew of the *Narcissus* may manipulate currents and trade winds with shipping technology, but the storm exposes the precariousness of such control. In terms of “second nature”—the domination of others solicited by the control of nature—the storm also demonstrates the economic system’s vulnerability when it forces the recognition of “the many,” the constituent power of the working crew members. Only by recourse to the adaptive nature of generic discontinuities can the novel repeat the exploitative system’s recontainment. Only by a self-recuperative failure can the political, economic, and generic structures adapt to the disruptive recognition of their own provisional status. The novel represents the conservative ideological alternative to rebellion: stoic resolve on the part of the many. Torn between their physical weakness and their cooperative endurance in the face of superior natural force—a tension reflected on the social level between their cooperative potentiality and their recognition of its expropriation—the crew turns precarious survival into “indomitable perseverance.” Thus, they repress their fear and re-master nature, but this “devotion” plays another ideological role. In their sense of unappreciated worth, the crew, like Adorno's wandering Odysseus, soon faces the false conclusion that they “can never have the whole, [they] must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce” (44). While Conrad remains fascinated with the crew’s ability to withstand and endure the unmediated violence of the sea, the crew ultimately re-channels this struggle into mediated socio-economic domination. To imagine the “world’s injustice” is to return to the hierarchal workplace with a bit more *ressentiment*, but in universalizing their “unappreciated worth”—abruptly zooming out from Donkin’s situated critique to the metaphysical—they reassert the social’s founding mastery of their

constituent power.

To reiterate the larger argument here, the sequence of the storm and its aftermath lead in a false ontological circle. The animalistic survival of the crew calls attention to the constituent power and collective nature of living labor. This recognition is inherently disruptive; it leads to the “luminous truth” of exploitation. Rather than mutiny, however, the crew transforms this truth into a form of existentialist ideology. Living labor becomes dead labor, constituent power becomes merely work, and work becomes a quasi-Christian longsuffering with the dream of an infinitely delayed transformation. Thus, the text moves from one ontological position—the collective constituent power of living labor—through the specific social situation towards a false ontological position: stoic comfort in the world’s injustice, an injustice that conflates the indifference of the sea with the indifference of an economic system. Put differently, the crew recognizes the domination inherent in the objectification of living labor. Rather than the “domination of people by other people,” social domination under capitalism, as Moishe Postone writes, “is grounded in the value form of wealth itself, a form of social wealth that confronts living labor (the workers) as a structurally alien and dominant power.”<sup>61</sup> Such domination is particularly intense at sea, where labor faces unmediated physical danger, but *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* collapses the structural alienation of a socio-economic system, or dominated labor, into the indifference of the natural world.

### **The Narcissism of Genre: James Wait and Laboring Bodies at Sea**

“My name is Wait—James Wait. [. . .] I belong to the ship”  
—Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*

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<sup>61</sup> Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1993) 30.



There is another disruption of labor (and genre) in the social microcosm of the *Narcissus*: James Wait refuses to work. Though a seemingly minor act of insurrection, the eponymous Wait's refusal to work aboard the *Narcissus* becomes even more discomfiting to the narrative than Donkin's explicit call to mutiny. While critics have attended to Conrad's potentially racist metaphysical representation of Wait's blackness, few have accounted for the specific historical and literary implications of James Wait—as a black cosmopolitan imperial subject—in a text concerned with labor and its constitutive role in the maritime novel.<sup>62</sup> If, like Donkin, Wait rejects the expropriation of labor, Conrad must address a very different set of anxieties and ideological contradictions as he moves from the Cockney labor radical to the black cosmopolitan sailor. In fact, James Wait embodies that nexus between history and genre which *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* interrogates. Wait's very presence disturbs genre; insurgencies trail behind him. Though the novel rarely notes geographical details, it does provide a cognitive map of James Wait's global movements—a map that interconnects the Caribbean, India and England. Moreover, his passive refusal combines the subservient black characters one might expect from the maritime genre with the seething historical memory of violent insurrections.

If the maritime romance was to claim any semblance of naturalism, it was forced—from the eighteenth century on—to acknowledge the racial diversity of the sailors who

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<sup>62</sup> On Wait's symbolic blackness, see Brian Schaffer, "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (1897)" in *A Joseph Conrad Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1999) 51-54. For a brief yet insightful discussion of Wait's role as a black sailor, see Ian Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic,'" *Postmodern Culture* 8.1 (1997), especially pars. 20-21. In Casarino's reading, "the explosive question of racial difference is [. . .] allowed to be present as no less than the historical-political condition of possibility for the complex apparatus of labor, discipline, and same-sex desire" (243).

served on merchant and military vessels. While *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* demonstrates one common strategy—avoiding race by representing the crew as diverse only in terms of nationality—most maritime romances offer occasional non-white characters.<sup>63</sup> Often these characters are simply oceangoing versions of the “noble savage”—characters like Umbopa in Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* or “the Negro Prince” in Defoe’s *Captain Singleton*, who, although princely and proud, devote themselves fully to the British hero. However, maritime fiction was forced to translate these conventional and subservient “native” characters from extremely localized representation in imperial fiction to the close-quarters (both spatially and socially) of a nomadic ship. Thus, most often, the loyal black character works as the ship’s cook. He contributes to the collective labor of the ship, but, limited to the galley, he is contained in his movements, rarely appearing outside of this limited space. The cook works, as the ship requires, but he does not work alongside the white sailors. Moreover, as cook, he performs the ship’s primary domestic labor. Thus, while often fiercely masculine, the black cook is also represented as maternal in his devotion to the generic young hero. In *Captains Courageous*, the reserved Macdonald, regularly asks the young hero “Harvey, and Harvey alone, whether the cooking was to his taste” (75).

In Marryat’s *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Mesty—a former Ashanti prince and an escaped slave—immediately devotes himself to the young Jack. In part, his intense devotion stems from Jack’s naïve yet passionate arguments for liberty and equality. Through the young hero’s friendship with Mesty, Marryat critiques American slavery and

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<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, as others have noted, the *Narcissus* is clearly less diverse than Conrad’s own experience on the ship on which he based the novel.

the hypocritical racism of abolitionist Britain:

on board of a man-of-war [Mesty] was condemned, although free, to the humblest of offices. [. . .][A]lthough people talked of liberty and equality at New York, he found that what they preached for themselves, they did not practise towards others, and that, in the midst of liberty and equality, he and thousands more were enslaved and degraded beings. Escaping to England, he had regained his liberty, but not his equality; his colour had prevented the latter, and in that feeling all the world appeared to conspire together against him, until, to his astonishment, he heard those sentiments boldly expressed from the lips of Jack, and that in a service where it was almost tantamount to mutiny. (65-66)

Yet, one must remember, the novel as a whole offers a practical critique of Jack's liberal idealism; in the end, the novel's social ideal is the hierarchal structure of the ship. Thus, while Marryat critiques the practice of slavery and its racist legacy, he balances this potential with Mesty's deference to young Jack. Early in the novel, Jack finds himself the provisional leader of a drunken crew that quickly grows mutinous. Despondent, he must "submit" to Mesty's wise counsel. The former Ashanti prince, however, replies:

What you say, Massa Easy—submit to me?—no sar, when you are on board *Harpy* as officer, you talk with me as friend, and not treat me as negro servant. Massa Easy, [. . .] for all first time since I leave my country, I feel I am something; but, Massa Easy, I love my friend as much as I hate my enemy—and you nebber submit to me—I too proud to allow

dat, ‘cause, Massa Easy—I am a man—and once, I was a prince. (109)

In this moment of potential equality, Marryat offers an ideological flexibility that anticipates Conrad. While exposing exploitation and inequality, Marryat deftly uses this critical potential for a deeply conservative purpose. The pathos of Mesty’s declaration that “I am a man” rather than a “negro servant” becomes both a convenient generic strategy of avoiding Jack’s submission to the more experienced black sailor and the preparatory work for allowing Jack to assume a hierarchal position over the African noble. In Mesty, Marryat takes the language of resistance (against racist determination, against despotic hierarchy) and refashions it as an act of submission to the British hero in his struggle against treacherous mutiny.

In *Captains Courageous*, published the same year as *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*,<sup>64</sup> Kipling streamlines Marryat’s ideological method. Macdonald, the ship’s portentous black cook from Cape Breton, prophesies that the young Harvey Cheyne will one day become “master.”<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Macdonald, like Marryat’s Mesty, is coded as both African and Celtic. Mesty strongly identifies as Ashanti, but he speaks English with a “strong brogue” learned from Irish sailors; he exhibits, Marryat writes, “the drollery so often found in his nation, with a spice of Irish humour” (53). As his name attests, Kipling’s Macdonald—“the coal-black Celt with the second sight” (156)—more fully identifies as Celtic. As a Cape Breton sailor, he has strong cultural links with Gaelic communities. He shares the surname of the primary founder of the Scottish community

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<sup>64</sup> *Captains Courageous* began publication in November 1896 and was serialized until March 1897 in *McClure’s Magazine* (it was also serialized in *Pearsons’ Magazine* from December to April). *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* was serialized from August 1897 to December in *The New Review*.

<sup>65</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Captains Courageous* (New York: Oxford U P, 1999) 58.

on Cape Breton Island, Michael Mor McDonald, and, most likely a descendant of black loyalists, his connection to Africa is less direct than Mesty's lineage. Thus, exploiting the ethnic flexibility of maritime adventures, Kipling conveniently collapses imperialist representations of African and Gaelic peoples and, in one fell swoop, solves the potential anxiety revolving around multiple insurgencies. The Celt and the African—wherever these flexible identities manifest themselves in trans-Atlantic circuits—may be supernaturally gifted, but, as Arnold argues in his *Study on Celtic Literature*, this imaginative capacity proves the Celt's—the colonial other's—inability to exist independently of rational British rule. In other words, the deferential black cook of the maritime romance provides a crucial component in the genre's romantic wish-fulfillment: he allows the young Anglo-Saxon to prove his inherent capacity as a responsible authority. Mesty's submission coded as resistance and Macdonald's racialized clairvoyance merely testify in advance that, inevitably, the imperialist Anglo-Saxon hero will emerge as "master."

Conrad, on the other hand, breaks from this generic tradition. In fact, he invokes this very convention (and implicitly stresses its absence in his novel) when James Wait joins the crew:

Again [Wait] was heard asking: "Is your cook a coloured gentleman?"

Then a disappointed and disapproving "Ah! h'm!" was his comment upon the information that the cook happened to be a mere white man. (19)

In this incisive moment, the novel recognizes those generic conventions it actively thwarts and thus foregrounds the fraught relationship between readers' historical and

generic expectations, neither of which can be satisfied. On one hand, Wait voices a generic expectation. Like readers, he expects a “coloured gentleman” to be the ship’s cook. On the other hand, Wait’s desire for a fellow black sailor is also a historical expectation in that—*unlike* the maritime novel—one expects multiple non-white crew members on a ship. Moreover, in Wait’s unsuccessful search for the generic black cook, Conrad emphasizes the fact that Wait himself cannot be reduced to this fictional, non-threatening character.

Wait is disappointed, Conrad adds perhaps mockingly, because the cook happens to be a “mere white man.” Certainly, like Wait’s “disappointed and disapproving ‘Ah! h’m!’”, the adjective “mere” emphasizes Wait’s supposed moral superiority over the crew, but “mere white man” also questions the conjuncture of historical and generic expectations. The ship’s cook might be any of a host of ethnicities, including Anglo-Saxon, and yet “mere” expresses disappointment—a frustrated generic expectation. In other words, in the moment that Conrad signals an innovative departure from generic conventions, this transcendence becomes also a source of regret. We might expect this from Conrad, who often longs for romance, but it is through Wait himself (the character partially liberated from generic confinement) that Conrad voices this failure. The “mere white man” becomes a source of disappointment rather than fulfillment for Wait. He is

not Mesty, for whom “mere” and “white” are antithetical.<sup>66</sup>

The modern James Wait cannot function as the subservient cook. It is not simply that romantic narratives can no longer survive in an ocean of black citizen sailors. After all, they had always done so. Rather, Wait, as a cosmopolitan black sailor, can no longer be contained within generic constraints in a world structured by insurgency. Wait disrupts generic expectations through the genre’s own naturalism—intensified by his colonial movements that nearly bring global insurgencies to London docks—but Conrad’s strategy of adapting to this anxiety is not simply to kill off James Wait. His generic discontinuities offer a far more subtle and effective method. To endow Wait with metaphysical significance is to make him more than a mere resistant West Indian—to offer innumerable interpretive possibilities, to make him a more complex character and thus to escape Wait’s own historical embeddedness. My task here is to skirt the edges of Wait’s metaphysical significance, which has been thoroughly discussed by critics, in favor of reading Wait’s particular historical connections. If, as readers, we assert that Wait embodies a universal pathos—that we witness our own doubt and mortality in Wait’s suffering—we risk repeating the narcissism of crew members like Donkin, who

watching the end of that hateful nigger, felt the anguishing grasp of a great  
sorrow on his heart at the thought that he himself, some day, would have

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<sup>66</sup> Merely white also signals that space outside of representation, outside of genre. “Mere” implies the “insignificant” or “feeble” but also what is “pure, unmixed” or “unadulterated.” Both connotations stem from the fundamental meaning of “mere” as that which “is in the full sense of the term qualified; nothing short of (what is expressed by the following noun)” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, March 2010, s.v. “mere”). In Conrad, only white men can function as “mere” men; only they can be precisely designated in the novel’s representation of the object world. Whether in the background or foreground, Conrad’s non-white characters—even if they break from generic expectations as Wait does—can never be merely human. As part of fin de siècle and modernist primitivism, these characters must carry with them the weight of figurative value.

to go through it all—just like this—perhaps! (153)

Faced with Wait's suffering, the self-absorbed Donkin can only imagine his own mortality, and yet the supplementary exclamation—"perhaps!"—registers that, despite the text's repeated interest in the universality of death, Donkin will not simply meet death "just like this." While the halting pauses in Donkin's reflection certainly gesture towards the ontological condition of infinite alterity, the hesitation between common biological existence and Wait's particular experience of death also leads to a more a more historically rooted sense of Wait's difference as a black cosmopolitan subject.

If, in the storm scene, the novel calls attention to corporeality at its most immediate and abject and thus recognizes a "sinister truth"—that the romantic conception of the sea relies on the repression and expropriation of labor and bodily suffering—then one cannot overestimate the role that the legacy of slavery plays at the margins of the text. In a second dark epiphany, Singleton offers a half-glimpsed flashback, partially filtered through the narrative and partially imagined by the crew members who stare at him. When the crew grows mutinous because of Wait's illness, Singleton tells them:

"I have seen rows aboard ship before some of you were born [. . .] for something or nothing; but never for such a thing. [. . .] And a black fellow, too [. . .] I have seen them die like flies." He stopped, thoughtful, as if trying to recollect gruesome things, details of horrors, hecatombs of niggers. [. . .] He was old enough to remember slavers, bloody mutinies, pirates perhaps; who could tell through what violences and terrors he had lived! (129-130)



Through the faded romantic Singleton, we realize that the romantic ship was a slave ship. This realization—the ineffable presence of slavery—is reiterated as Wait dies. When the malicious Donkin tells Wait that he is destined to be put “Feet fust, through a port... Splash! [. . .] Overboard!”, Wait grows terrified: “as though he had been looking at unspeakable horrors; and by his face one could see that he was thinking of abominable things. Suddenly with an incredibly strong and heartbreaking voice he sobbed out: ‘Overboard!... I!... My God!’” (153). In these elliptical cries—a culmination of the dialogic anacoluthon that pervades the novel—we glimpse an invisible presence in the very water that marks romantic English identity. The maritime romance does not simply repress the constituent labor of sailors but also the traffic in laboring bodies and the imperial legacy of the expropriation of colonial labor.

If sailors are forced to abandon the “romance” of sailing in favor of steamers in Conrad’s novels, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* represents both steamships as ghastly illusions of romantic splendor *and* represents romantic splendor (embodied in the paraphernalia of older sailing technology and Old Singleton himself) as illusory. This imagined past becomes another narcissistic misrecognition, another disruption in perceived Self. After all, when the narrator describes Singleton as “a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future,” it is clear that the old seaman, like the *Narcissus* itself, has grown anachronistic. Yet unlike the ship, destined for salvage, and the obsolete practice of sailing, Conrad notes Singleton’s “vast empty past.” This is a radical move in a text that has long been interpreted as nostalgic for the romanticized naval past embodied in ancient Singleton. He appears in the present as an anachronism—and yet

the narrator describes an absence that runs in both directions, towards futurity and back into the past. As Wait's name implies, both he and Old Singleton interrupt the identity of the present. To read nostalgia in Old Singleton is to fight against the text's disruptive potential. Critics have mourned Singleton as the loss of a romantic past, but, Conrad implies, such a past was always already empty. The romantic *never-there* has always been *never-there*.

Ian Baucom insightfully argues that *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* "suggests that to map England is not to map its grounds but its waters," which include both romanticized dead naval heroes and "the eternally resurfacing body of James Wait, and [. . .] the slaves drowning beneath the surface of Turner's canvas and John Ruskin's prose" (21). However, contrary to Baucom's suggestion that Conrad relies on a notion of "Englishness, apprehended only as an object ever fully present in the past" (21), *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is punctual rather than substitutive: Wait becomes paradoxically, as Conrad wrote in the American preface, "nothing" and "the centre" of the novel. Rather than forgetting James Wait and turning towards a romantic memory of the "English" sea, as Baucom argues, Conrad's novel exposes the vacuity of this ideological construction of history.

This recognition, however, always threatens to turn towards the metaphysical as an adaptive mechanism. This movement seems most apparent when the narrator describes Old Singleton—who, the text suggests, may have served on a slave ship—as the sea's "slave."<sup>67</sup> If the memory of slavery animates the text, here it is turned back into

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<sup>67</sup> Inversely, see the early description of Wait peering over the crew "like a sick tyrant overawing a crowd of abject but untrustworthy slaves" (34).

a metaphysical form of powerlessness in the face of nature. By reverting to stoic metaphysics, the text attempts to solve (provisionally) the anxiety of a culture founded on slavery and beset by insurgencies. The powerlessness of Old Singleton in the face of time and natural force easily becomes an adaptive mechanism in the novel. Faced with the multitude expropriated, commodified, yet constitutive laborers that resurface in the *Narcissus*'s ocean pathways, Old Singleton refashions himself ontologically as powerless (rather than complicit in this expropriation of life), as a stoic being-towards-death, and thus transforms from victimizer to victim.

Whereas Singleton turns complicity into powerlessness, Wait embodies a strange form of powerful passivity. To the narrator and crew, his very presence becomes an intense form of metaphysical judgment, but his only action is his choice *not* to work. Unlike Melville's *Bartleby*, however, this refusal need not strictly imply some universalist form of existential inaction. Wait's global movement—his home in Saint Kitts, his boarding of the *Narcissus* in Bombay, the storm at the Cape of Good Hope, his near approach to England—echoes those forms of collective life that violently refuse and threaten the hierarchal organization on which romances of the sea, particularly Marryat's novels, rely. Wait's refusal to work—his refusal to belong to the collective subject of the *Narcissus*—not only (inversely) recalls the exchange in animalized, commodified, laboring bodies, it also echoes the primary source of anxiety under New Imperialism: the rejection of imperial rule as a legitimate authority. The novel suggests that Wait originates from the Antilles island of Saint Kitts, Britain's first West Indian holding, situated unnervingly near the violent slave revolts of Haiti and Jamaica. Wait boards the

ship in Bombay, the most important holding in British India. Coupled with the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, where the ship faces the dramatic storm, these geographical points register two of the most crucial global ports. At once, Wait's global trajectory signals Britain's pride and its anxiety, its imperial identity and the discontinuities exposed as this identity stretches across global space. Terry Eagleton argues that the "brooding passivity of James Wait [. . .] signifies an anarchic dissolution of social order too metaphysically deep-seated to be articulable,"<sup>68</sup> but reading Wait in the context of imperial identity, the very social order he disrupts, exposes empire as an opening of Britishness global in scope and thus simultaneously encompassing and dislocating.

Old Singleton then represents Donkin and Wait's dialectic counterpart. He pays no heed to the mortal body, and this neglect only solidifies his position as one-time slaver and antithesis to the forms of rebellion proposed by Donkin and echoed by Wait's transversal network. Rather than interpret Donkin and Old Singleton as binary "symbols of opposed attitudes toward death and life" where Donkin "becomes ignorance personified" and Singleton "the last of an unremembered, unsung race,"<sup>69</sup> Conrad's novel confronts the contradictory nature of both Donkin (who exposes truth despite the "ignoble" negating nature of his freedom) and Old Singleton (whose romanticized ignorance becomes sinister in its complicity). Thus, "solidarity"—that which, Conrad wrote in the preface, "binds men to each other"—is acknowledged through both sailors in a way utterly antithetical to the moralistic readings of the novel that have praised Old

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<sup>68</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2006), 138.

<sup>69</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Re-Examination," *PMLA* 66.6 (1951): 911-918. 914.

Singleton. Singleton exposes collectivity not positively through “courage” or “wisdom” but negatively through the recognition of romance’s anachrony. The novel offers fragments of a failed maritime adventure that point to a false whole: the vacuous ideological construction of history embodied in romance.

### **Conclusion: Genre and History**

As I proposed in the introduction, genre strengthens or naturalizes the tenuous connection between the object world and its objectification in the form of the novel. And yet, as *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* implies, genre no longer suffices in naturalizing this objectification; the maritime novel can neither neatly adapt to a global world nor maintain its ideological construction of history. In interpreting the sequence of the storm and its aftermath, I have invoked both the existential presence of laboring bodies and Conrad’s recourse to proto-existentialist ideology, which is less a coherent philosophy in his work than a field of phenomenological interrogation.<sup>70</sup> Thus, it remains important here to distinguish between what we might call Conrad’s situated existentialism and his more abstract, universalist existentialism.

In his reading of *Lord Jim*, Jameson distinguishes two existentialisms—or affinities with existentialism—present in Conrad’s work:

a properly existential “metaphysic”—in other words, a set of propositions about the “meaning of life,” even where the latter is declared in fact to be “the absurd”—and that more properly existential analytic [. . .], which [. . .] lays out a whole anatomy of lived time, action, choice, emotion, and

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<sup>70</sup> See Jameson 259.

the like. The former, the metaphysic, is an ideology; the latter can be used ideologically, but is not necessarily in itself ideological. (259)

*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, however, not only demonstrates the dialectical relationship of Jameson's two constructed categories, it also reveals that the "existentialist analytic" is hardly a potential escape from ideology. In Conrad, ideology does not announce itself in the "metaphysic" alone. Instead, by oscillating between forms of situated and universalist existentialism and exploring their close relationship, Conrad unfolds the ideology of imperialism. His situated existentialism, as opposed to the Sartrean analytic outlined by Jameson, functions as a crucial component in the ideological process as a whole. The force of Conrad's universalist existentialism—his recourse, for example, in both *Lord Jim* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* to representing Nature as a metaphysical force of enmity—*derives* its ideological power from critical recognitions or disclosures at the situated or analytic level.

Despite the idealism of the maritime romance—its interest in the "perfect form of society"—Conrad, in his essay, claims that Marryat's novels are primarily *historical*; they capture a material base for history that cannot be fully recovered—a corporeal mass of laboring men who leave behind "a shining monument of memories." In both *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and his short essay on Marryat, Conrad wrestles with the generic conventions of the maritime romance, which foregrounds the dialectical interplay between genre and history. On one hand, he offers a claim quite similar to Robert Louis Stevenson's defense of romance in "A Humble Remonstrance" (1884).<sup>71</sup> Refuting Henry

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Humble Remonstrance," *Longman's Magazine* 5:26 (1884).

James's challenge that the artist should "try and catch the colour of life itself,"<sup>72</sup>

Stevenson advises the young artist to

bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity. For although, in great men, working upon great motives, what we observe and admire is often their complexity, yet underneath appearances the truth remains unchanged: that simplification was their method, and that simplicity is their excellence. (147)

The danger in the mimetic desire to represent life, Stevenson argues, is that "in seeking to draw the normal, a man should draw the null, and write the novel of society instead of the romance of man." Like Stevenson, Conrad is clearly interested in the romantic tradition, which turns to "great men" in order to understand unchanging truths. However, unlike Stevenson, Conrad undermines this ahistorical desire for "the truth" by insisting both on the historical contingency of Marryat's romance *and* the materiality of such idealism.

This historical contingency is precisely the "truth", Conrad argues, captured by Marryat's "endless variety of types, all surface, with hard edges [. . .] They do not belong to life; they belong exclusively to the Service. And yet they live; there is a truth in them, *the truth of their time*" ("Tales" 48, emphasis added). Though maritime romances are often historical (exemplified by the scrupulous historical detail of Rafael Sabatini's sea-faring novels), the ship at sea also offers an imaginative space to disengage from a specific socio-historical context and stage archetypal struggles of young Britons whose inherent

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<sup>72</sup> Henry James, "Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine*, 4:23 (1884): 502-521. 521.

virtue develops through adversity. The fullness that is already present in the young man—his inherent Britishness—is revealed through the individualistic yet hierarchal community of the ship. Thus, in the romance of the sea, Conrad foregrounds the desire for that which declares itself beyond ideology—a desire crystallized in his disruption of the illusion of unchanging genre forms. As *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* demonstrates, however, this longing for escape is ultimately reined in by a more flexible ideology.

Some of the most insightful readings of Conrad have noted his ability to expose the very imperialist ideology in which he participates. Thus, complicating the dichotomous interpretation of Conrad as either a modernist innovator or a simple jingoist, critics have concluded that what makes Conrad’s aesthetic decidedly modernist is the way in which it is inevitably entangled in imperialist ideology. Conrad’s aesthetic, as Edward Said argues, relies on a self-conscious and even deconstructive awareness of the construction of discourse.<sup>73</sup> *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, however, demands that we amend this notion of a critical Conradian aesthetic. Through its generic diversions, the novel confronts the immanent potential of constituent power and the growing anxiety of imperial interdependency, including the rejection of commodified labor by an insurgent workforce, and yet the novel’s very aberrancy—its warped relation to the nineteenth-century maritime novel—allows for a more subtle alternative to a form overburdened with the sediment of increasingly anachronistic imperial ideology. Insofar as the novel offers a “recontainment” of its destabilizing representation of imperial relations, it hardly reestablishes authority through any of the typical generic apparatuses. No fatherly officer

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<sup>73</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1994) 28-30. See also Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 219-220 and throughout; and Terry Eagleton, both *Criticism and Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2006) 130-142 and *The English Novel* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006) 237-243.



emerges as a source of legal and political authority. Conrad refuses even to rely on authorial power—the ability to mold a coherent narrative within the confines of generic expectations. Clearly, Conrad is drawn to the anachronistic lingering of the ocean romance. This generic desire, however, is not simply a romantic longing for a world-view no longer capable of capturing modern social and political realities. In Deleuzian terms, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, as a line of flight, ruptures the molar or socially predetermined organization of the maritime romance—both its rigid generic form and the subsequent ideological implications. Conrad reveals the supple, molecular potential of laboring bodies embedded in the genre itself. Nevertheless, the novel transforms this potential into sinister indifference and self-repression; the slight semblance of narrative and ideological closure must derive from the collective character of the crew itself who recodes its own social power. It is precisely the formal elasticity of the novel that allows for this possibility.

If the conventions of the maritime novel genre remain unable to confront modern social, economic and political pressures, Conrad expresses and manages these anxieties by recourse to the flexibility of genre. Rather than argue that Conrad exposes a liberating potential only then to contain it, I have tried to show that *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* participates in the maritime novel yet hardly belongs. Instead, it relies on a more subtle strategy inherent in generic participation. If *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* stages the instability and impotence of genre as law, it is a self-recuperative failure—as if, through the loss of generic coherence, Conrad might resurrect the flexible wholeness of the text and map in turn a solution to the lack of British collective identity (or the heightened and

anxious sense of lack) in the face of that Hydra of countervailing collectivities rising across the globe.

### CHAPTER 3: UNREALITY AND METAFICTION IN *TONO-BUNGAY*

Our cosy inner office became a little place, and all our business cold and lifeless exploits beside his glimpses of strange minglings of men, of slayings unavenged and curious customs, of trade where no writs run, and the dark treacheries of eastern ports and uncharted channels [. . .]; our world was England, and the places of origin of half the raw material of the goods we sold had seemed to us as remote as fairyland or the Forest of Arden. But Gordon-Nasmyth made it so real and intimate for us that afternoon—for me, at any rate—that it seemed like something seen and forgotten and now again remembered.

—H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (1909)

‘I wish,’ I shout against the traffic, ‘I could *smash* the world of everyday [. . .]. You may accept *this* as the world of reality, *you* may consent to be one scar in an ill-dressed compound wound, but so – no I! This is a dream too – this world. *Your* dream, and you bring me back to it – out of Utopia –’

—H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1904)

#### Wells and Conrad

Early in their friendship, Conrad was convinced that, despite their clear political differences, he and H. G. Wells shared a deep entanglement of interests. Writing to Wells in September 1903, Conrad was clearly disturbed by Wells’s socialist vision of the future in *Mankind in the Making* (1903), but he remained satisfied that there were “points of contact” in their thinking and praised Wells’s work:

the ‘virtue’ of the book is great. I feel it even where the force of dissent is strongest within me. Our differences are fundamental but the divergence is not great.—Graphically our convictions are like that



Figure 2: Letter from Conrad to Wells, [19 September 1903], in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Eds. Laurence Davies, Owen Knowles, Gene M. Moore, and J. H. Stape. 9 vols. New York: Cambridge U P, 2008. 3: 62.

The letters that followed from 1903-1906 suggest that Conrad admired Wells's artistic skill and human insight more than his political and sociological speculations. Conrad was convinced that "at the bottom" Wells was "an uncompromising realist":

There is a cold jocular ferocity about the handling of that mankind in which You believe that gives me the shudders sometimes. However as you do believe in them it is right and proper and excellent that You should get some fun in making their bones rattle. And can't you do it too! Well more power to you. I'll do the sighing and slobbering and lamenting and sneezing—or whatever it is I am trying to do—and never getting done.<sup>74</sup>

Conrad may not have shared Wells's utopian beliefs in humanity's potential, but he was convinced with the release of *Kipps* (1905) that both Wells's romances and realist fiction

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<sup>74</sup> Letter from Conrad to Wells, [November-December 1903], in *Collected Letters* 3: 79.

“are strangely and inexplicably underestimated.”<sup>75</sup> As he wrote after reading *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), “I am as yet under the sheer power of your art—the compulsion of it.”<sup>76</sup>

Although Wells helped launch Conrad’s professional career with a favorable review of *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), he never fully reciprocated Conrad’s admiration or attention.<sup>77</sup> The two became increasingly estranged, and no letters survive after 1907. Much later, long after their falling out, Wells recounts their early meetings in his autobiography:

We never really ‘got on’ together. I was perhaps more unsympathetic and incomprehensible to Conrad than he was to me. I think he found me Philistine, stupid and intensely English; he was incredulous that I could take social and political issues seriously. [. . .] The frequent carelessness of my writing, my scientific qualifications of statement and provisional inconclusiveness, and my indifference to intensity of effect, perplexed and irritated him. Why didn’t I *write*?<sup>78</sup>

Jaded with literary personas and pretensions, Wells continues, he found something “ridiculous in Conrad’s *persona* of a romantic adventurous un-mercenary intensely artistic gentleman carrying an exquisite code of unblemished honour through a universe of baseness” (621). Neither man, it seems, could rectify or understand the other’s genre.

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<sup>75</sup> Letter from Conrad to Wells, 28 November 1905, in *Collected Letters* 3: 297.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Conrad to Wells, 15 September 1906, in *Collected Letters* 3: 356.

<sup>77</sup> See Najder 176, 199, 242-244. See also Martin Ray, “Conrad, Wells, and ‘The Secret Agent’: Paying Old Debts and Settling Old Scores,” *The Modern Language Review* 81.3 (1986): 560-573.

<sup>78</sup> H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934) 618-619, original emphasis.

Whereas Conrad could not reconcile Wells's literary talents with his competing roles as scientific futurist, Cockney radical, and popular author, Wells, distracted by Conrad's romantic intensity, artistic aspirations, and general pessimism towards humankind, clearly neglected the complexity of the latter's own attempts at romance.

Bernard Bergonzi speculates that the final straw in their falling out was Wells's malicious caricature of Conrad in *Tono-Bungay* as the incompetent and corrupt captain of the *Maud Mary*.<sup>79</sup> Martin Ray, however, explains that the attack may have been in retaliation for Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, which, although dedicated to Wells, can easily be read as a satire of his sociological and political writings. Conrad, Ray argues, represents the Professor as the "true apostle of Wells" and reveals "Conrad's view of the likely consequences of such programmes of reform as advocated in Wells's *Anticipations*, *Mankind in the Making*, or *A Modern Utopia*" (573). After years trying to connect their divergent thinking, Conrad reportedly summed up their incompatibility: "the difference between us, Wells, is fundamental. You don't care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not!" (Qtd. in Ray 573).

*The Secret Agent* not only registers a fundamental skepticism towards political and social transformation at the level of content, but, at the level of genre, it eviscerates each genre it brushes up against, whether Dickensian domestic and urban realism, the spy novel, detective story, or political thriller. Whereas hopeful traces of social cooperation had glimmered, as I argue in the second chapter, even in the skeptical conservatism of *The Nigger of "Narcissus"*, *The Secret Agent* effectively anesthetizes collective political

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<sup>79</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *The Turn of a Century: Essays on Victorian and Modern English Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 95-98. See also Wells's initial impression of Conrad in *Experiment in Autobiography* 615-616.

desire with its utter and unrelenting irony.

In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells responds with his own critique of modern life in a novel that uses a similar method of generic anesthesia. Whereas Conrad targets the delusions of political activity in broad allegorical terms, Wells focuses on the dehumanizing inaction and bourgeois stagnancy that result from capitalist imperialism. Fittingly enough, after *Tono-Bungay* novel exhausts the bildungsroman, the industrial novel, and “Condition of England” novel, it culminates in a deep-seated critique of the rugged, imperial romances that had generated Conrad’s initial success.

### **Smashing the Condition of England Novel: Metafiction and Commodity Capitalism**

At the turn of the twentieth century, H. G. Wells branched out from fantastic scientific romances in a series of novels that examined contemporary socio-political issues through variations on the bildungsroman. While *Kipps* (1905) offers the story of an orphan who enters upper-class society, the controversial *Ann Veronica* (1909) follows the maturation of a “New Woman.” The bildungsroman offered Wells the opportunity to work through one of his central interests, the relationship between the individual and collective.<sup>80</sup> As Wells later wrote, “I have never been able to get away from life in the mass and life in general as distinguished from life in the individual experience, in any book I have ever written. I differ from contemporary criticism in finding them inseparable.”<sup>81</sup> The bildungsroman, which oscillates between socialization and individualistic development, foregrounds the inseparability of the individual and “life in

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<sup>80</sup> As his relationship with Conrad perhaps foreshadows, such socio-political interests would later lead modernists to dismiss his work as outdated. See Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford U P, 2008) 6-12.

<sup>81</sup> Preface to *Seven Famous Novels* (New York: Knopf, 1934) ix.

the mass.”<sup>82</sup> And yet this genre appears increasingly anachronistic in the first decade of the twentieth century—it lingers on “out of joint” with its Victorian generic predecessors. In novels such as Conrad’s *Youth* (1902) and *Lord Jim* (1900), Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)—novels that Moretti deems late *bildungsromane*—

the world [. . .] has solidified into impersonal institutions, while youth has become more vulnerable, and reluctant to grow. With a shift in narrative agency, opportunities turn into accidents: kernels are no longer produced by the hero as turning points of his free growth – but *against* him, by a world that is thoroughly indifferent to his personal development. [. . .] At the polar opposite from experience, in a trauma the external world proves too strong for the subject – too violent [. . .]. (*Way of the World* 233-234)<sup>83</sup>

Moretti problematically links this moment of generic discontinuity with the trauma of the First World War, though he vaguely notes (in order to account for the vast number of pre-war examples) that “perhaps, the war was the final act in a longer process” (229).

Although Moretti neglects to disclose the nature of this longer process, his examples of late *bildungsromane* are nearly all colonial or semi-colonial novels by writers at the fringes of British identity—most notably, Joyce and Conrad. Building on Moretti’s

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<sup>82</sup> For this bourgeois tension between “self-determination” and “socialization” in the *bildungsroman*, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 15-30, 233-237. For the *bildungsroman* tradition, see also Mikhail Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2007) 10-59; Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971) 77-79, 132-143; Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 1996); and John R. Maynard, “The *Bildungsroman*” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 279-301.

<sup>83</sup> Here and in subsequent quotations, the emphases are Moretti’s.



argument, Jed Esty productively links the late bildungsroman and its formal tension to the “late-Victorian formalization of global imperialism,” which “exacerbated a symbolic split between the insular nation (a culture proper to the bildungsroman’s allegory of development) and the imperial state (a culture-diluting unit whose spatiotemporal coordinates violate ‘national-historical’ time).”<sup>84</sup> He continues:

the developmental logic of the late bildungsroman [. . .] undergoes drastic revision as the (relatively) stable temporal frames of national capitalism gave way to a more conspicuously imperial frame of reference, in which modernization itself seemed alternately stalled and unbridled. What seems like the transformation of the bildungsroman into the novel of disillusionment (with its logic of fixed social hierarchies, broken destinies, and compensatory, if socially eccentric, private or artistic visions) has an allegorical analogue here: the imagined harmony between culture and the state, taken as a way to manage the uneven development of capitalism, comes under pressure as a new phase of global empire-building reveals modernization to be an unpredictable, mercilessly uneven, and supra-national process. Colonial modernity disrupts the progressive yet stabilizing discourse of national culture by breaking up its cherished continuities. It is in this sense that empire throws out of joint the Goethean formula for narrative closure along with the customary temporal alignment

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<sup>84</sup> Jed Esty, “The Colonial Bildungsroman: The Story of an African Farm and the Ghost of Goethe,” *Victorian Studies* 49.3 (2007): 407-430. 414. See also Esty, “Virginia Woolf’s Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction,” in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1900-1939*, eds. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham: Duke U P, 2007).

between biographical and “national-historical time.” [. . .] The colonial thematics of backwardness, anachronism, and uneven development thus become the basis for a non-teleological model of subject formation—a late-Victorian model of social delay and narrative distension that will, in the hands of Joyce and Woolf, become a hallmark of modernist style. (414-416)

In this context of interconnected narratological and historical tensions, I read *Tono-Bungay*, which Wells regarded as his “finest and most finished novel,”<sup>85</sup> as an experimental attempt to register the accumulative trauma of capitalist imperialism.

If Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* demonstrates the disruptive yet potentially recuperative process of generic making and unmaking, Wells’s remarkable *Tono-Bungay* relies on the unrestrained critical capacity of generic discontinuity—genre’s radical ability, through staging its own formal unmaking, to interrogate social, political, and economic parameters. Wells’s novel not only offers the failed development and stagnation that Esty and Moretti note in late bildungsromane, but it also entangles two stories of *bildung*: that of the protagonist, George Ponderevo, and that of a business empire based on the product Tono-Bungay. Whereas both *Kipps* and *Ann Veronica* take their titles from their respective protagonists, *Tono-Bungay* derives its title from the commodity itself. The autobiography of George Ponderevo merges with an account of commodity fetishism. The resulting narrative, as Lucille Herbert observes, has long confused those critics who struggle to understand “the precise character of the traditions

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<sup>85</sup> “Preface to Volume XII of the Atlantic Edition (1925),” *Tono-Bungay* 3.

supposed to operate in *Tono-Bungay*”, which has been “been variously described as ‘spiritual biography,’ as a ‘Condition of England novel’ in the manner of *Hard Times*, and, by Wells himself, indiscriminately as a novel ‘on Dickens-Thackeray lines’ and ‘a social panorama in the vein of Balzac.’”<sup>86</sup> Despite the tendency to read Wells’s novel as, in Bergonzi’s words, “one of the last examples . . . of the panoramic novel, of a kind familiar to the Victorians” (Qtd. in Herbert 140), its innovative form remains essential in understanding the pivotal moment between late-Victorian and modernist fiction. In *Tono-Bungay*, Wells not only combines multiple sets of generic expectations, but, even more importantly, he also exploits the metafictional awareness that results from the self-conscious and capricious exhaustion of generic sets.

In fact, we might link metafiction and its historical emergence with generic experimentation in late-Victorian and Edwardian fiction and, in doing so, help clarify the historical and aesthetic debates over metafictional narratives (and their complicated generic conventions).<sup>87</sup> If the novel, in Jameson’s account of generic discontinuities, is “a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms that have their own specific and contradictory ideological meaning” (144), then metafiction can be seen, at least in part, as a crucial strategy in the narrative attempt to negotiate or

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<sup>86</sup> Lucille Herbert, “*Tono-Bungay*: Tradition and Experiment,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 33.2 (1972): 140-155. 140.

<sup>87</sup> In articulating the relationship between generic discontinuities and metafiction, we might note that William H. Gass coined the term “metafiction” (an alternative to “antinovel”) to describe the productive resistance of postmodern American writers to novelistic convention. See Gass, “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Jaffrey, NH: Godine, 1979) 3-26, 25. Subsequent discussions of metafiction include Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1984) and Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984). Although all three critics focus on metafiction as a particularly postmodern genre, they also see it as a historical intensification of a self-conscious and self-referential tradition in the novel (see Waugh 5-7).

harmonize competing and even contradictory paradigms. Like James Wait, who asks if the Narcissus's cook is a "coloured gentleman," the narrator of *Tono-Bungay*, George Ponderevo, is painfully aware of both his own contrived persona and the simulacra of modernity. The novel renders each identity offered to Ponderevo—national, individualistic, capitalist, masculine, imperial—as illusory and hollow. As an English businessman, he fails at every point to coincide with social expectations—expectations informed by and refracted through, at the formal level, various genre forms. Moreover, the metafictional awareness embedded in the very tissue of generic variation allows Wells to represent a social and economic system dependent on fiction as a coping mechanism for "the violent and irrational nature of nineteenth-century capitalist development" (Moretti, *Way* 125) as well as "the breakdown of historical positivism and the massive but strained expansion of European political hegemony" (Esty, "Colonial" 411). In other words, like Conrad, Wells turns to "generic discontinuities" in order to represent and negotiate the flexible, interdependent nature of emergent global capitalism. The result is a narrator who participates in but does not belong to generic codes—his genre (as writer), his gender (as failed masculine hero), his genetics (as semi-colonial subject) form a disjuncture with those ideological fantasies that surround him. Like the discontinuous novel form itself, George Ponderevo inevitably collapses under the pressure of "untellable things" (373).

Though this chapter follows those critics who have read *Tono-Bungay* as an "experimental novel," I find this innovation to be inescapably linked to the novel's colonial backdrop, including George Ponderevo's brief excursion to Africa and his

father's semi-colonial status. George Ponderevo develops an arrested subjectivity split between identification with the colonial insurgent and the unrestrained power of imperial counter-insurgency. Though insurgency, as I have defined it both discursively and materially, occupies a marginal role in *Tono-Bungay*, the novel is striated through with a destructive impulse directed at Britishness. While George re-directs his destructive impulse towards pure violence—his “meaningless” murder of the African stranger and, in the end, his design of the battleship *X2*—the novel never recuperates, reorganizes, or manages its disruption of genre. There is no re-directing this destructive impulse in terms of *Tono-Bungay*'s aesthetic, which endeavors, like the narrator of *A Modern Utopia*, “to smash the dream of this world” using “art and illusion” to wake up to its impossibility.<sup>88</sup> As Conrad wrote, Wells is a “realist of the fantastic,”<sup>89</sup> in his scientific romances, the unreal becomes momentarily plausible. In *Tono-Bungay*, however, Wells develops the radical correlative: the implausibility of the real.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the “condition of England” novel had become one of the most important and popular subgenres of Victorian literature.<sup>90</sup> Under “the broad rubric of the ‘condition of England,’” novelists catered to the public interest in “questions about the lives and labors of the populace [. . .] with issues such as the ‘factory

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<sup>88</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 241.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Conrad to Wells, 4 December 1898, in *Collected Letters* 2:126.

<sup>90</sup> For the “Condition of England” genre and *Tono-Bungay*, see Susan Keen, *Victorian renovations of the Novel: Narrative Annexes and the Boundaries of Representation* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1998) 145-177; William Kupinse, “Wasted Value: The Serial Logic of H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 33.1 (1999): 51-72; and David Lodge, “‘Tono-Bungay’ and the Condition of England” in *Language of Fiction* (New York: Columbia U P, 1966) 214-242. For historical accounts of the “Condition of England” and industrial novel traditions, see James Richard Simmons, Jr., “Industrial and ‘Condition of England’ Novels” in *A Companion to The Victorian Novel* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 336-352; and Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985).

question,' the 'hungry forties,' the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the Chartist uprisings as rich ground from which to mine subject-matter" (Simmons 336). Like its more specific industrial or factory novels, the "condition of England" genre draws on the disparate social conditions of industrial capitalism. However, by the 1860s, "the melodramatic factory novel was seen as *passé*. [. . .] Employment in the factories had become more normalized [by the 1860s], and while abuses still existed [. . .] clearly the widespread problems that had existed fifty years before had been improved or even, in many cases, eradicated" (ibid. 350). The industrial novel, much like the traditional bildungsroman, must have seemed an increasingly "meaningless" way to explain the world at the end of the nineteenth century. "If history can make cultural forms necessary," as Moretti writes, "it can make them impossible as well" (*Way* 229). Already in *Felix Holt* (1866), George Eliot writes the "industrial novel" as if it only continues to produce meaning if imagined decades in the past.<sup>91</sup>

Nonetheless, while the genre's focus on hard labor and industrial production waned, a second industrial revolution electrified Britain. Rather than industry fading from the cultural sphere, rapid technological advancement became key concerns of sensation drama and the subsequent genres it influenced (e.g., mystery and detective novels, imperial gothic, and scientific romances).<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the period witnessed significant advancements in global capitalism through economic concentration,

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<sup>91</sup> See Simmons 350.

<sup>92</sup> See Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2004).

international finance, commodity fetishism, and speculative investment.<sup>93</sup> Hence, in *Tono-Bungay*, work consists primarily in “booming” or advertising. George’s technological skill modernizes the factory so that it requires only the minimal labor of a few “poorly paid” girls.<sup>94</sup> No money is spent extracting raw materials since Tono-Bungay, George implies, consists of adulterating an inexpensive mixture of flavoring, spirits, and various tonics (131).<sup>95</sup>

Thus, anxieties about the “condition of England,” a term popularized by Thomas Carlyle, resurfaced at the turn of the twentieth century in Charles F. G. Masterman’s “The Condition of England” (1909), which relied extensively on Wells’s work, including *Tono-Bungay*. Rather than a literary genre, the “condition of England,” for Masterman, refers to the “hidden life of England” obscured by the delusional modern relativism of the metropole.<sup>96</sup> This “real” condition of England is

only revealed in times of national crisis: just as an individual only comes to “know himself” when confronted with the challenge of some overwhelming choice or anxiety [. . .] so a nation in social upheavals, foreign perils, or some similar intrusion of reality, discovers in a moment also that it no longer possesses adequate forces of resistance, or that its religion, its boast of power, its patriotism, have been meaningless phrases.

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<sup>93</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (New York: Random House 1987) 43; and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973) 135-137.

<sup>94</sup> H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 166.

<sup>95</sup> Kupinse even suggests it may include urban and industrial waste. Although the narrator’s description of the product as “trash” is most likely figurative rather than literal, see Kupinse’s compelling reading of the novel and its critique of the waste-driven destabilization of economic value.

<sup>96</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909) 8.

(8-9)

Masterman finds Wells representative of “certain contemporary writers who [. . .] set themselves definitely in the heart of present affairs to endeavour to understand and to interpret the meaning of their day and generation” (234). In fact, much of Masterman’s concept derives from *Tono-Bungay* itself. Through George Ponderevo, he writes, Wells “reveals an experience fragmentary and disconnected in a tumultuous world. Mr. Wells can show that world in its rockings and upheavals, until beneath the seeming calm and conventionality of the surface view, is heard the very sound of the fractures and fallings; an age in the headlong rush of change” (234-235).

In the 1890s, as demonstrated by both Wells and Masterman, aesthetic concerns shift from voicing the repressed conditions of production (as in the industrial novel) towards revealing the entrenched illusions that seem to mask the normalized workings of capitalism. This shared interest, however, neglects the serious analytical differences between Wells and Masterman. Still in a Carlylean mode, Masterman hopes to uncover the “heart” of reality. In many ways, this is a continuation of the pedagogical impulse of the industrial novel, which had, for many, become “a method of teaching the middle and upper classes about the ‘real’ condition of England” (Simmons 336). At the same time, however, such novels produced an avid market of voyeuristic entertainment based on intimate knowledge of the working classes. Wells, on the other hand, questions this empirical desire to reveal social reality as it “really is” in *Tono-Bungay*. Whether for reform or entertainment, this impulse towards discovering the “real” becomes in the hands of Wells an irrelevant and anachronistic line of inquiry in a world that operates



under its own entrenched illusions. The generic hybridity and metafictional mode of *Tono-Bungay*, which the narrator admits “isn’t a constructed tale [. . .] but unmanageable realities” (13), reveals that social reality depends on ideological mystification, without which the world would seem unmanageable. In other words, social reality cannot continue to reproduce itself without these ideological processes that Masterman deems “meaningless phrases.”

As a “condition of England” narrative, reported by an engineer more accustomed to writing scientific papers, one might assume that “reality” would hold a somewhat stable position in *Tono-Bungay*. Yet, throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly resorts to metaphors of “fiction” to describe the world around him. The opening invokes this metafictional mode: “Most people in this world seem to live ‘in character’; they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the three are congruous one with another and true to the rules of their type. [. . .] They are, as theatrical people say, no more (and no less) than ‘character actors’” (9). Likewise, when his uncle dies, George Ponderevo reacts to the corpse:

Death! It was one of those rare seasons of relief, when for a little time one walks a little outside of and beside life. I felt as I sometimes feel after the end of a play. I saw the whole business of my uncle’s life as something familiar and completed. It was done, like a play one leaves, like a book one closes. I thought of the push and the promotions, the noise of London, the crowded, various company of people through which our lives had gone, the public meetings, the excitements, the dinners and disputations,

and suddenly it appeared to me that none of these things existed. It came to me like a discovery that none of these things existed. Before and after I have thought and called life a phantasmagoria, but never have I felt its truth as I did that night.... [ . . . ] He had died a dream death, and ended a dream; his pain dream was over. It seemed to me almost as though I had died, too. What did it matter, since it was unreality, all of it, the pain and desire, the beginning and the end? (366)

Transitory human life—the “pain and desire” as well as its social formalities—become “a phantasmagoria.” The narrator, however, reflects not only on “human life” in the abstract but on his uncle’s particular rise and fall in the capitalist market. As he struggles to explain his reaction, the chain of similes calls attention to the “unreality” of his uncle’s life and death, which become a fiction like a “play,” “book,” or “dream.” Faced with the very material of biological life and death—the body or corpse—the narrator can only recognize the “unreality” of social existence.

His uncle’s death is the intense (anti)climax of the novel’s ongoing struggle to provide a social panorama—a struggle not simply for the amateur novelist but also a fundamental problem, the novel implies, endemic to modern life. Earlier in the novel, when the Ponderevos first enter upper-class society, George describes the Beckenhams:

The impression that Beckenham company has left on my mind is one of a modest unreality; they were all maintaining a front of unspecified social pretension, and evading the display of the economic facts of the case. Most of the husbands were “in business” off stage, it would have been

outrageous to ask what the business was – and the wives were giving their energies to produce, with the assistance of novels and the illustrated magazines, a moralised version of the afternoon life of the aristocratic class. (236)

Throughout *Tono-Bungay*, the narrator repeatedly resorts to theatrical metaphors, as he does here to describe the women’s relinquishing of business matters to “off stage.” Moreover, this passage also calls attention to the wives’ need for “novels and the illustrated magazines” to produce their life.

This sense of unreality is most potent in the novel’s representation of the commodity form itself. *Tono-Bungay*, the product, is mere fiction. Not only is it a quack remedy, it also becomes representative of the wider economic system. As George Ponderevo explains: “modern mercantile investing civilisation is indeed such stuff as dreams are made of. [. . .] Yet it seems to me [. . .] that all this present commercial civilisation is no more than my poor uncle’s career writ large, a swelling, thinning bubble of assurances; [. . .] its ultimate aim as vague and forgotten; [. . .] it all drifts on perhaps to some tremendous parallel to his individual disaster...” (221). Of course, the narrator is both correct and incorrect in asserting that *Tono-Bungay* is a colossal lie: its status as medicinal cure is false, but its status as market commodity is precisely the “truth” of the economic system. The concealed “realities,” he writes, “are greedy trade, base profit-seeking, bold advertisement” (384). Thus, the uncle’s quasi-mystical faith in the product he knows to be fake—a product that combines his own labor and various adulterated materials, most likely of colonial origin—captures the dialectical nature of

phantasmagorical consumption.<sup>97</sup> As Adorno writes, the repression involved in the commodity fetish produces as well as conceals. In fact, it produces the “absolute reality of the unreal;”<sup>98</sup> it not only conceals labor and constituent power (its construction of the social world), but, as a result, it also conceals any ability to transform existing conditions. Like George Ponderevo (and Marx), Adorno resorts to dream-like language to explain the process. The phantasmagoria of commodities, he writes, “mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with a product of its own labor, but in such a way that the labor that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. The dreamer encounters his own image impotently, as if it were a miracle, and is held fast in the inexorable circle of his own labor, as if it would last forever” (*In Search*, 91). Tono-Bungay, the product, relies on its most fictional quality, its value, which it increases through ridiculously fictitious advertising and insatiable consumer desire. The product has no utility—on the contrary, it is detrimental to one’s health—and consists almost entirely of surplus-value.

Thus far, I have relied mostly on the narrator’s own distanced critique of the “fantastical community” around him—a critique that may imply that the narrator himself is free from the illusions that he observes in others. For example, in a love scene with Beatrice (perhaps the most genuine scene of intimacy in the novel), the narrator cannot help but draw pleasure from the detached recognition that their intimacy stems mostly from fiction: “She had read of love, she had thought of love, a thousand sweet lyrics had sounded through her brain and left fine fragments in her memory; she poured it out, all of

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<sup>97</sup> We should note while the term “phantasmagoric” [*phantasmagorische*] itself does not appear in the English translation of *Capital*, but we can assume that Wells would be aware of Marx’s particular use of the optical, ghostly, and fantastical to describe economic processes.

<sup>98</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* 90.

it, shamelessly, skilfully, for me” (318-319). Nevertheless, the narrator’s own attachment to generic fiction, particularly imperial adventure, not only exposes his half-realized delusions but also reveals the interconnections between the representation of capitalism in the novel (centered around the product Tono-Bungay, in the “condition of England” genre) and the narrator’s “detached” colonial excursion (a failed imperial adventure centered around the raw material of “quap”). Through the narrator’s discontinuous subject formation—his fractured identity that results from his desire for authenticity in an unreal world—the fissure between the object world and its objectification turns inward, revealing that it is not only the surrounding world that operates under illusion but also the human subject.

#### **“English of the Open”: Quap and the Colonial Adventure**

At first, the fourth section of the novel, “How I Stole Heaps of Quap from Mordet Island,” seems to fit only loosely in the narrator’s bildungsroman and panoramic account of Tono-Bungay’s success and failure. However, rather than a tangential experience that, as George Ponderevo writes, “stands apart from all the rest of my life, detached” (320), it serves to elucidate the novel’s extensive capitalist and imperialist critique, which one cannot simply reduce to the narrator’s own criticisms of conspicuous consumption. On one hand, considering our sympathetic connection to George Ponderevo—sympathy mostly extorted through the first-person narrative<sup>99</sup>—we might read the scene on Mordet Island as an experience of “reality” that counterbalances the phantasmagoria of Britain.

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<sup>99</sup> Certainly, the narrator is not “sympathetic” in the sense that readers fully understand or like him. More often, George Ponderevo is objectionable and self-loathing—he’s not only a murderer but he also employs racist and sexist ideology, which Wells himself combated in his non-fiction. I mean only that, in the first-person narrative, we are forced to feel with him.

In other words, within the context of late nineteenth-century imperial romance, the trip to Africa—seen as the last uncharted territory—often reads as an encounter with the raw biological material of humanity (both noble and savage), which in turn reinvigorates the imperial hero. In his introduction to *Tono-Bungay*, Edward Mendelson notes that the non-chronological sequence of the novel may have been adapted from Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, to which Wells would have certainly been invested in responding.<sup>100</sup> It may be more productive, however, to look to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published six years previously. In fact, at times, George Ponderevo's account of his journey echoes the broken structure of Conrad's novella; both narratives circle inexplicable or "untellable things" with copious ellipses and occasional *non sequuntur*.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, both colonial adventures involve a narrator on a ship looking across the dark Thames and meditating on London. With Conrad cast as captain of the *Maud Mary*, it is not difficult to read George's colonial adventure (and the novel *in toto*) as Wells's commentary on the favorite romantic genre of his estranged friend.

The narrator's ill-fated journey begins when Gordon-Nasmyth, a generic young imperialist, entertains the two dull businessmen with exhilarating tales of Africa:

Our cosy inner office became a little place, and all our business cold and lifeless exploits beside his glimpses of strange minglings of men, of slayings unavenged and curious customs, of trade where no writs run, and the dark treacheries of eastern ports and uncharted channels [. . .]; our world was England, and the places of origin of half the raw material of the

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<sup>100</sup> Edward Mendelson, introduction to *Tono-Bungay*, by H. G. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2005), xx.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, *Tono-Bungay*, 10, 333, 373.

goods we sold had seemed to us as remote as fairyland or the Forest of Arden. But Gordon-Nasmyth made it so real and intimate for us that afternoon—for me, at any rate—that it seemed like something seen and forgotten and now again remembered. (226)

Fictional and actual colonial exploits blend in this passage and the fantasy of “eastern” and “uncharted” territories redoubles back into England itself. The question remains, however, what exactly does George Ponderevo *remember* or imagine remembering when he hears these imperial adventures?

When George compares the geographical remoteness of Africa and Asia to “fairyland or the Forest of Arden,” he collapses spatial distance into the common imperial concept of temporal distance, a fantasy of the colonies as pre-modern, pre-capitalist. At the same time, however, George realizes a material connection: Gordon-Nasmyth represents those places from which the Ponderevos—or perhaps the manufacturers of the tonics which they re-brand—import raw materials. This recollection of the repressed economic interconnection between the metropole and elsewhere, however, is hardly a critique of colonial exploitation. In fact, the fantasy of a world of “where no writs run” fascinates both George and his uncle for very different reasons. For the narrator, “trade where no writs run” means the absence of modern capitalism, but it implies unrestrained capitalism for his uncle, who fantasizes about a Napoleonic freedom of commerce and exploitation.

The vivid image of Africa, which provides George with a fantasy of a pre-capitalist identity, also helps to ease his gender anxiety. Despite the narrator’s supposed

distance from the business of writing novels and his frequent description of others' fictitious lives, his motivation to set out for Africa must inevitably be shaped by imperial romance. From Walter Hartright in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) to Ned Malone in Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), colonial adventure offers the chance to reinvigorate a character's masculinity (and ultimately his marriage prospects). In fact, such colonial adventures fascinate George Ponderevo as a child: "We spent our rare pennies in the uncensored reading matter of the village dame's shop, on the Boys of England, and honest penny dreadfuls—ripping stuff, stuff that anticipated Haggard and Stevenson, badly printed and queerly illustrated, and very very good for us" (29). Moreover, it is precisely these boys, grown into disillusioned and impotent men, whom Teddy Ponderevo hopes to target on a mass scale with Tono-Bungay. As the sardonic Ewart explains, Tono-Bungay appeals, in the "poetry of commerce," to those "little clerks and jaded women and overworked people. People overstrained with wanting to do, people overstrained with wanting to be [. . .]. The real trouble of life, Ponderevo, isn't that we exist—that's a vulgar error; the real trouble is that we *don't* really exist and we want to" (157-158, original emphasis). Ewart's comments, however, avoid the gendered nature of this appeal. In fact, Teddy Ponderevo's earliest advertisements for Tono-Bungay appeal directly to anxious middle-class men by asking a "penetrating trio of questions: 'Are you bored with your Business? Are you bored with your Dinner? Are you bored with your Wife?'" (148). The narrator may recognize Tono-Bungay as "quack medicine" (145), but he is hardly exempt from this masculine boredom.

In fact, George Ponderevo's economic success threatens to disrupt his provisional



masculine identity. Recounting his childhood, George describes the class antagonism he felt towards the “rather over-fed, ageing, pretending people” who patronized his single mother (22). He grows increasingly frustrated that his “youthful restlessness and rebellious unbelieving eyes should be thrust in among their dignities” (22). In contrast to the artifice and stagnation of the upper-classes, the narrator trans-values his social status—his freedom from social pretense—into a source of virile energy. Nevertheless, George Ponderevo quickly points out, his potential for development was stifled by a mother who not only revered the rural gentry but denied him access to any intimate knowledge of his *colonial* father: “She was afraid, I think, that if she turned her mind in that direction my errant father might suddenly and shockingly be discovered, no doubt conspicuously bigamic and altogether offensive and revolutionary. She did not want to rediscover my father at all” (24). While his mother remains “resolute to suppress the slightest manifestation of vitality” (22), George Ponderevo remembers jeering the wealthy Mackridges and identifying instead with the colonial masculinity of his father, who he imagines as one of the “brave emancipated sunburnt English of the open [who] suffer these aristocratic invaders as a quaint anachronism” (24). During his boyhood, the narrator’s semi-colonial status is further reinforced not only by the failure of his chances with the upper-class Beatrice, but also in childhood games. George makes clear his preference for imagining himself as “Red Indians and cowboys and such-like honourable things, and not young English gentlemen” (29). However, when Beatrice plays the beautiful damsel in distress, her half-brother Archie, refusing to be “a whole tribe of Indians,” denies George the heroic role of gentleman and husband: “You can’t be a

gentleman, because you aren't. And you can't play Beatrice is your wife. It's—it's impertinent" (39). In the end, George thrashes Archie, but only by violating the latter's "high code" of "proper fighting" (40-41).

Such memories in the bildungsroman are not merely "things adrift, joining on to nothing, leading nowhere," as the narrator describes them (35). Youth "achieves its symbolic centrality" in the bildungsroman tradition, Moretti argues, "because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to modernity" (*Way* 5). As the "symbolic form" of modernity, he continues, the bildungsroman endowed youth with all the dynamism, instability, mobility, and restlessness of nineteenth-century modernization (*ibid.*). At the same time, however, the centrality of youth allowed for a countervailing ideological principle. Because youth is "brief, or at any rate circumscribed," it "enables or rather *forces* the *a priori* establishment of a formal constraint on the portrayal of modernity. Only by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be represented" (6). In the classic English novels of social development, Moretti contends, youth "has meaning only *in so far as* it leads to a stable and 'final' identity" (8).

However, "the developmental logic of the late bildungsroman," Esty adds, "underwent drastic revision as the (relatively) stable temporal frames of national capitalism gave way to a more conspicuously imperial frame of reference, in which modernization itself seemed alternately stalled and unbridled" ("Colonial Bildungsroman" 414). He continues:

The allegorization of uneven development becomes more conspicuous and

more colonially-coded between 1880 and 1920 in the modernist fiction of unseasonable youth. There, temporal experimentation scrambles biographical time, fewer middle-class protagonists can be managed into a mature social accommodation, and youth comes to figure not just the managed dynamism of industrial capitalism, but the uneven development of colonial modernity. Youth, increasingly untethered from the model and telos of adulthood, seems to symbolize the dilated/stunted adolescence of a never-quite modernized periphery [. . .]. (415)

While Esty provides crucial insight on the colonial underpinnings of the temporal and teleological breakdown Moretti observes in the late bildungsroman, *Tono-Bungay* seems to me to offer two inverse possibilities embedded in its narrative experimentation. First, the novel implies that such stalled modernity, dilated by the open-ended development of international capitalism, extends through global space, incapacitating the metropole as well as the periphery. As Benita Parry argues, by “extending the understanding of finance capitalism to include its integral *imperialist* dynamic,” *Tono-Bungay* encompasses “the connection between imperial homeland and overseas territories, and stretch to incorporate hazy sightings of a vast and amorphous hinterland sustaining a metropolitan centre.”<sup>102</sup> Under the pressure of an increasingly global economic system, modernity itself has been irrecoverably disrupted by both the betrayals of colonial resistance and an economic system no longer stable or domestically centered. Secondly, *Tono-Bungay* pursues a contravening possibility in the form of the bildungsroman and,

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<sup>102</sup> Benita Parry, “Tono-Bungay: Modernisation, Modernity and Imperialism, or the Failed Electrification of the Empire,” *New Formations* 34 (1998): 95.

with desperate and unfulfilled desire, looks to the colonial periphery for a source of renewed dynamism. This is the world concentrated in the symbolic form of the narrator's youth and development. He is simultaneously attracted to the destruction of the stagnant hierarchical system that has refused him and repulsed by the imagined drain capitalism places on older codes of chivalry (which, for the narrator, blends with the colonial image of his father, the emancipated "English of the open" for whom old hierarchies become quaint anachronisms).

The discourse of uneven development relied on a temporal scheme quite analogous to that of the *bildungsroman*. Colonial holdings, full of child-like peoples, required education and development from the more mature, paternal metropole. However, even as this discursive convergence represented the "adult" social world of Britain as the unquestionable and stable *telos* of development, it threatened to render Britishness as stagnant in comparison with the "less civilized," dynamic, and restless periphery. After all, this possibility remained inherent in the form of the *bildungsroman*, even if outside the British tradition. In the novels of Flaubert and other French novelists, Moretti writes, maturity becomes "a sort of betrayal, which would *deprive* [. . .] youth of its meaning rather than enrich it" (8). In fact, he argues, the *bildungsroman* existed and thrived because it was forced to contain this contradictory balancing act between stable maturity and youthful dynamism: "For the contradiction between conflicting evaluations of modernity and youth [. . .] is above all the paradoxical *functional principle* of a large part of modern culture. [. . .] [F]reedom and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphoses: although antagonistic, they are *all equally important* for modern Western

mentality (9).

When the product Tono-Bungay becomes the very embodiment of phantasmagoric capitalism, George's finds recourse in his boyhood fiction. Africa, the land of adventure from the penny dreadfuls of his youth, is given new currency by Gordon-Nasmyth's exploits and becomes an imaginary space for the chivalrous hero to escape domestic, social, and economic requirements. Later, as he waits for his ship, George Ponderevo's youthful desires resurface. Surrounded by the "bustle" of the port town of Gravesend, "under dingy skies, in narrow, dirty streets," he grows reflective: "I realised that I was a modern and a civilised man. [. . .] I was immensely self-conscious" (313). Setting off on his colonial adventure, he realizes the trajectory of his social development. From the repressed boy, who played "Red Indians," he glimpses his "modern and a civilised" reflection with ambiguity. At this point, his African quest promises to fulfill the generic expectations of the traditional English bildungsroman. If successful, George can put behind him the meaningless digressions of business—the anemic condition of England—and render meaning out of the painful experiences of his youth. He has the opportunity to become a colonial hero and to redeem himself and his fortune through the *real* raw material of "quap." In doing so, moreover, he will vastly improve his prospects of marrying Beatrice while avoiding the artificial, class-based social pretensions of bourgeois courtship.

In other words, by this point in the novel, "modern" and "civilised" are by no means model qualities for the narrator. As opposed to virility and chivalry, "modern" becomes synonymous with the ever-new illusions of capitalism while "civilised" recalls

George's frustrations with an empire vaguely modeled on the social conformity of his early life in Bladesover. When he first arrives in London, he finds it a

city of Bladesovers, the capital of a kingdom of Bladesovers, all much shaken and many altogether in decay, parasitically occupied, insidiously replaced by alien, unsympathetic and irresponsible elements; – and withal ruling an adventitious and miscellaneous empire of a quarter of this daedal earth. Complex laws, intricate social necessities, disturbing insatiable suggestions, followed from this. (103)

While George's discussion of decay, which he traces to the alien forces of modernity, directly follows his description of "money-lenders and Jews" (ibid.), he chiefly blames the expansive imposition of Bladesover-style laws and "intricate social necessities" across the globe. As Parry writes, "despite utterances which speak a resentful anti-semitism the Jews are not located by George Ponderevo as the only despoilers of England's stable and organic system. [. . .] This disparagement extends to an impeachment of the entire structure generated by capitalism in its imperialist stage" ("Tono-Bungay" 99). While Parry rightly reads the novel as charting the "deleterious effects on the metropolis of a modernizing process generated and implemented by capitalism-as-imperialism" (ibid.), George hopes to find in the mobility offered by imperialism some method of escape from *both* the traditional aristocracy of the Bladesovers *and* vapid consumer capitalism. Though we can see here (and later on his journey to Africa) that George is by no means comfortable as cosmopolitan, he does imagine the periphery as a space for unrestrained freedom. Uninterested in the open-

ended “free trade” imagined by his uncle, George hopes to prove his masculine heroism by retrieving the raw material that will literally illuminate Britain. As opposed to Tono-Bungay, which is the “quack medicine” and “trash” (145), quap will be used in electrical filaments. Ultimately, George figures, this raw material, used in conduits of *real* power, will be a respectable way to rescue his family’s fortune and marry the heroine, Beatrice, whose name only further emphasizes her role as the desired object and imagined “audience” of his Dantesque adventure (313)—as intercessor and goal on George Ponderevo’s ascent through the Hell of consumerist Britain and the Purgatory of Africa.

Before moving on to the wholesale failure of this imagined mission, we should note that, for a brief moment, George’s boyhood dreams of colonial adventure are partially realized. As the ship draws near Africa, the narrator enjoys momentary recognition by the ship’s first mate, “an Essex man of impenetrable reserve” (312). A few words and an otherwise inconsequential conversation becomes, for George, a memory of intimate kinship:

The mate lifted his heavy eyes to me and regarded me for a moment.

Then he began to heave with the beginnings of speech. He disembarrassed himself of his pipe. I cowered with expectation. [. . .]

‘E—’

He moved his head strangely and mysteriously, but a child might have known he spoke of the captain.

‘E’s a foreigner. [. . .] That’s what E is—a *Dago!*’ [. . .]

‘Romanian Jew, isn’t he?’ I said.

He nodded darkly and almost forbiddingly.

More would have been too much. The thing was said. But from that time forth I knew I could depend upon him and that he and I were friends. It happens I never did have to depend upon him, but that does not affect our relationship. (323-324)

George's friendship with the only English crewmember is a moment in which dialect, class, and colonial status are abandoned in the homosocial space of the ship and subordinated to national (contra "foreigner") and ethnic (contra "*Dago*" or "Romanian Jew") kinship. For a fleeting moment, George becomes the manly adventurer who can reconcile his metropolitan and colonial status in terms of a shared ethnicity as "English of the open." If, in the bildungsroman, the protagonist's development brings into alignment his own conflicting nature and experiences (as well as the contradictory expectations of modernity), then here George the adventurer can reconcile his youth with his adulthood; his kinship with the Essex mate is equally a relationship with his younger self, the virile rural boy who "drops his aitches" (39). As in Marryat's ocean adventures, this crystallized moment at sea relies on the ship as a chronotope of development: "narratives set on shipboard dwell on the in-between space of passage, rather than the goal. Nonetheless, they have the teleology of a character's passage in personality, a *rite de passage*, quite often from youth [. . .] to maturity" (Cohen, "Chronotopes" 664).

Nevertheless, this moment of satisfaction becomes quickly eclipsed by the ship's arrival to Mordet Island. Rather than the tropical paradise advertised, the island only reflects the sterile environment of capitalist Britain: "I can witness that the beach and



mud for two miles or more either way was a lifeless beach—as lifeless as I could have imagined no tropical mud could ever be” (330). Although George Ponderevo maintains that this colonial episode stands detached, the form of the bildungsroman (and the intradiegetic autobiography) unavoidably interconnects this section with the rest of the narrator’s “development”—a link emphasized through repeating scenes and images. His solitary meeting with the African native, whom he kills in “the most unmeaning and purposeless murder imaginable” (333), blurs with both his earlier encounter with Beatrice and a recurring dream of his dead uncle. Before leaving for Africa, George describes a midnight rendezvous with Beatrice in her garden. Beatrice imagines that the two lovers share a “fairyland” (319):

You see, dear, the whole world *is* blotted out – it’s dead and gone, and we’re in this place. This dark wild place . . . . We’re dead. Or the world is dead. No! We’re dead. No one can see us. We’re shadows. We’ve got out of our positions, out of our bodies – and together. (317)

This description is later repeated in more sinister terms when George encounters the African stranger. In his earlier daydreams, the narrator constructs Africa as a fairyland. Like Beatrice’s midnight garden, it is a “dark wild place” where social limitations are suspended. Moreover, in her passionate speech, Beatrice combines the fantasy of escape with the rhetoric of global extinction and personal death. This is precisely the way in which the narrator understands “quap,” which not only damages biological life but, for the narrator, evokes fantasies of mass extinction:

When I think of these inexplicable dissolvent centres that have come into

being in our globe – these quap heaps are surely by far the largest that have yet been found in the world [. . .] I am haunted by a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating away and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world. So that while man stills struggles and dreams his very substance will change and crumble from beneath him. [. . .] Suppose indeed that is to be the end of our planet; no splendid climax and finale, no towering accumulation of achievements but just atomic decay! [. . .] If single human beings – if one single rickety infant – can be born as it were by accident and die futile, why not the whole race? These are questions I have never answered [. . .] but the thought of quap and its mysteries brings them back to me. (329-330)

Whereas Beatrice and the narrator’s “irrational community of happiness” is held together by the conventional trope of togetherness-in-death (319), the inexplicable nature of quap and the surrounding African landscape become, for George, an anti-community of total misanthropy. Rather than becoming one of the “brave emancipated sunburnt English of the open” (24), George has a different realization:

I found out many things about myself and humanity in those weeks of effort behind Mordet Island. I understand now the heart of the sweater, of the harsh employer, of the nigger-driver. I had brought these men [of the *Maud Mary*] into a danger they didn’t understand, I was fiercely resolved to overcome their opposition and bend and use them for my purpose, and I hated the men. But I hated all humanity during the time that the quap was

near me. (331-332)

In the boys' fiction he once read, colonial violence buttressed British masculinity, but when George wields such violence, he not only finds it purposeless but also discovers that it erodes rather than consolidates his sense of self. Rather than a space for self-actualization and autonomy (with the dynamism necessary to drive the bildungsroman), the colonial setting allows the narrator to project his own *ressentiment* (towards his uncle and the general condition of England) on to the black body. The narrator never explains the recurring dream of his uncle with an "ochreous" throat: "for three nights running, so that it took a painful grip upon my inflamed imagination, I dreamt of my uncle's face, only that it was ghastly white like a clown's, and the throat was cut from ear to ear—a long ochreous cut. 'Too late,' he said; 'Too late!...'" (332). Nonetheless, after he murders the African stranger, the "long ochreous cut" across his uncle's neck blends with the black corpse covered in blood and mud. Although George initially feels the murder to be an "matter-of-fact transaction," like "the killing of a bird or rabbit," the memory returns with a vengeance:

In the night, however, it took on enormous and portentous forms. 'By God!' I cried suddenly, starting wide awake; 'but it was murder!'

I lay after that outcry, staring at my memories. In some odd way these visions mixed up with my dream of my uncle in his despair. The black body which I saw now damaged and partly buried, but which, nevertheless, I no longer felt was dead but acutely alive and perceiving, I mixed up with the ochreous slash under my uncle's face. I tried to dismiss

this horrible obsession from my mind, but it prevailed over all my efforts.

(335)

Though this repeated nightmare appears to be an unexplained premonition of his uncle's eventual death (of exasperated but natural causes), I would argue it represents the remnant of a repressed fantasy of killing his uncle (his surrogate father).<sup>103</sup> Driven by the phallic fantasy of his absent father's colonial freedom and strength, George murders the incomprehensible native, whom he ends up remembering as a reflection of the metropolitan capitalist (his uncle). In other words, these scenes are not simply parallel. Though the narrator tells us from the beginning that the murder "is the most incidental thing in my life" (10), the colonial encounter and the radioactive nature of quap itself form the real content of the narrator's colonial fantasies.

In fact, George's inexplicable and impulsive violence towards the African stranger helps elucidate his complicated desire for the "authenticity" he sees embodied in his settler father. From his early days in Bladesover, he learns to identify the *social* with the inauthentic. His involvement with the Tono-Bungay business empire strengthens his conviction that social identity is simply a simulacrum. Tono-Bungay's ability, as a "quack" product, to offer empty promises of realness, stimulation, and masculine vigor only further convinces the narrator that modern social life has grown inauthentic and effete. As a result, George desperately desires an escape from the social Self to an authentic other space. Nevertheless, in abandoning the integrity of social being, he risks

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<sup>103</sup> Though Freud and Wells did exchange letters, I am less interested in a psychoanalytical explanation of this colonial encounter than in how this representation of character psychology relates to the overall critique of capitalism. The Oedipus Complex, psychoanalysts like Felix Guattari have argued, is precisely the creation of a capitalist system that relies on (an impossible) normative family unit; in other words, psychoanalysis aids capitalism by creating the image of the father who, like George Ponderevo's, is both more powerful and inaccessible.

complete dissolution of Self; he risks becoming only biology—a danger illustrated by quap’s radioactive deterioration of the crew’s bodies and, even at the metropole, Beatrice’s attempt to “escape” through a semi-comatose state induced by opium (yet another colonial product). It is no “incidental thing” then that the African body—othered, opposed to Self and the social, identified with the biological—becomes the repressed, recurring image of horror for George Ponderevo. Not only does the black body haunt his dreams, but it also refuses to stay buried. After he dreams of the “black body [. . .] damaged and partly buried,” he compulsively returns to the murder scene twice (335). First, he finds the body disinterred and scavenged by some “evil and detestable beast” and, for a second time, buries the “swollen and mangled carcass” (ibid.). After two more nights of restless dreams, he returns yet again to find “he had gone, and there were human footmarks and ugly stains round the muddy hole from which he had been dragged” (ibid.). Although the narrator kills the stranger as if he were a mere game animal, suddenly the corpse itself is endowed with subjecthood—“he had gone”—as if it refuses to stay buried or decay and simply walks away in its traumatized state.

The linch pin, I would argue, of George’s desire to escape social determinism through the colonial adventure is the “authenticity” he imagines in his colonial father—that is, an authentic colonial masculinity that promises to maintain the integrity between the social Self and the dynamism of the biological being. For George, the settler—“the sunburnt English of the open”—offers a vigorous identity that positions itself against the effete social metropole and yet still maintains an “English” self. Inevitably, however, his colonial search for such an identity remains unsuccessful because his desire for a

reinvigorated identity outside of social constraints is equally a desire for a specifically *gendered* identity, which as the novel points out, is always a *socially* constructed identity. Gender may seem like a biological reality, and, when “discontinuities” remain safely repressed, it can effectively seal the disjuncture between the social and biological, buttressing the precarious link between physical differences and the social meanings ascribed to them. *Tono-Bungay* takes the insight George experiences with the simulacra of London and turns it inwards. Gender ends up performing a role analogous to the commodity or even genre itself—each attempts to safely foreclose the inevitable tension between the material world and its representation. George’s increasing frustration and disillusionment stems from his inability to perform gender effectively without the self-conscious sense of its artifice (as opposed to the men who presumably buy into the market slogans of Tono-Bungay) or its failure (as demonstrated by his thwarted attempt to discover an authentic masculinity through colonial adventures). In fact, *Tono-Bungay* plays out this internal contradiction at every level, from George’s identity to its critique of imperial capitalism to its use of genre. In a capitalist world where the rule of the object produces contradictions and an overwhelming sense of artificiality, the novel implies, imperial Britain justifies its rule with claims of social and civilized superiority over the primitive, autochthonous periphery. The desire, however, to maintain this opposition between the social, metropolitan Self and the biological Other recoils back on the imperial, disrupting this very opposition when the Other begins to stand in for biotic *reality* itself. At every level—genre, gender, subjectivity, economic, imperial—the artificiality inherent in genre resurfaces to testify that all attempts to smooth the internal

contradictions that stem from representation only belie the very fissure they strive to render seamless.

*Tono-Bungay* then does not simply reflect the constructed nature of all things; instead, it suggests a growing historical consciousness of a global system that jeopardizes the collective imperial self in its dynamism along the increasingly unbounded periphery. Whereas for Conrad generic discontinuities offer the promise of a more flexible imperial ideology, they become for Wells a skeptical method of voicing truth—that is, the untruth on which capitalist imperialism relies. In what seems to be a realist undertaking—the narrator’s attempt to construct a meaningful story of development in spite of the “condition of England”—becomes an account of the elaborate fictions necessary for imperial capitalism to function simultaneously on interrelated socio-political levels (imperial adventure, free trade, legal right to colonies) and the most quotidian levels of subjectivity (gender, ethnicity, colonial status, familial structure).

Like the African stranger rendered raw biological matter—*corpus* turned corpse—the novel continually returns to the radical dissolution of the constructed self. In adopting the role of colonial adventurer, George finds himself understanding “the heart of the sweater, of the harsh employer, of the nigger-driver” and, in doing so, reveals the brutal domination inherent in the colonial fantasy and in himself. Suzanne Keen, in her reading of the novel, finds this passage to be “an excuse, a denial of the vengeful hatred that motivates the murder,” but it is less a denial of “personal responsibility” than a disavowal that acknowledge the brutal, instrumental logic imperial modernity.<sup>104</sup> As

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<sup>104</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Victorian renovations of the Novel: Narrative Annexes and the Boundaries of Representation* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1998) 173-174.

Horkheimer and Adorno write in the addenda of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

the transformation into dead matter, indicated by the affinity of *corpus* to corpse, was a part of the perennial process which turned nature into stuff, material. The achievements of civilization are a product of sublimation, of the acquired love-hate for body and earth, from which domination has violently severed all human beings. [. . .] the murderer, the killer, the brutalized colossi who are used by the ruling powers, legal and illegal, [. . .] all the werewolves lurking in the darkness of history and sustaining the fear without which there is no domination: in them the love-hate for the body is crude and direct; they desecrate what they touch [. . .] and this destruction is a rancor against reification; in blind rage they repeat against the living thing what they cannot make undone: the splitting of life into mind and its object. The human being irresistibly attracts them, they want to reduce him or her to the body [. . .] The hostility of the enslaved to life is an inexhaustible source of history's dark side. (194-195)

*Tono-Bungay* may become “the *Bildungsroman* of a sociopath” (ibid.), as Keen suggests, but it is not only the story of individual pathology. If the protagonist of the *bildungsroman*, as Bakhtin writes, “reflects the historical emergence of the world itself” (23), then Wells's novel presents a world in which capitalism-as-imperialism has begun to colonize all forms of genuine social engagement. The only endpoint of such a narrative is the *X2* battleship, the stark image of modern global warfare, unaffiliated with any nation-state or empire, and a discomfiting contrast to the furled sails of imperial



adventure, as it tears “out to the unknown across a great gray space [. . .] into the great spaces of the future” (387).

## CHAPTER 4: HOSTILE SWARMS AND GEO-INSURGENCY IN WEIRD FICTION

[M]ore and more the earth over-grows me, woos me, assimilates me; so that I ask myself this question: ‘Must I not, in time, cease to be a man, and become a small earth, precisely her copy, extravagantly weird and fierce, half-demoniac, half-ferine, wholly mystic—morose and turbulent—fitful, and deranged, and sad—like her?’

—M. P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901)

The bramble bushes shot out long prickly vines, amongst which he was entangled, and lower he was held back by wet bubbling earth [. . .]; the weird wood noises were the only sounds, strange, unutterable mutterings, dismal, inarticulate [. . .]; he had sinned against the earth, and the earth trembled and shook for vengeance.

—Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (1901)

Sometime in the decades leading up to the First World War, so the old assumptions go, the British reading public lost touch with reality; they turned instead to the solace of romantic adventures, apocalyptic fantasies, and Gothic tales. As I suggested in the introduction, these types of historical accounts of the “revival of romance” represent such fiction as either escapist fantasy or, more critically, as a reflection of a diverse set of mass cultural anxieties. Both approaches, however, reflect what Nicholas Daly calls the “anxiety story” privileged in *fin de siècle* scholarship. Instead of repeating this formulaic interpretation of the period, he argues, the task is to “leave the anxiety story behind, reading the text as more performative than reflective, as providing a cultural narrative that reshapes society rather than mirroring social anxieties” (*Modernism* 35). Attending to generic discontinuities, I have argued, allows for such a critical approach. They reveal, in nuanced terms, how texts engage their historical moment in ways that both assuage cultural anxieties and resist or undermine the possibility of any formal

resolution.

This revisionist trend by Daly and other scholars has challenged the long-standing critical dismissal of popular fiction at the turn of the century. However, while H. G. Wells, Bram Stoker, and H. Rider Haggard have enjoyed renewed interest, other paracanonical writers, who remain at the fringes of literary histories that strongly emphasize a specific generic genealogy like sensation fiction, Gothic, or imperial adventure, have received less critical attention. Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, M. P. Shiel, Lord Dunsany, and Marie Corelli, for example, all hold privileged places in contemporary popular fiction, yet their presence is rare in literary criticism. Despite their vast influence over twentieth-century fiction, such writers never fully recovered from their critical reputation as examples of “Edwardian survival out of tune with the times.”<sup>105</sup>

In fact, such literature—specifically the “weird fiction” I analyze in this chapter—functioned in more complicated ways than literary historians have supposed. Rather than a push toward hidden frontiers in a time of imperial anxiety, as Patrick Brantlinger and others have argued, occult fiction (and weird fiction, more generally) attempted to cope with an increasingly global society in which the boundary between inside and outside no longer served to describe Britain’s imperial identity. At the turn of the twentieth century, the recourse to spaces of the occult and the impossible does not so much offer an escape from a world without frontiers as it registers fundamental epistemological, political, and historical crises in such a world. This is not to repeat the oft-rehearsed “anxiety story.” Far from a *reflection* of contemporary anxieties, weird fiction displays a wide array of

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Amory, *Biography of Lord Dunsany* (London: Collins, 1972) 160.

generic experimentation, which, even when it failed spectacularly, opened up generic possibilities not only for mass market genre fiction but also modernist experimentation. Thus far, I have treated individual texts that participate in and deviate from multiple genres. These texts' generic discontinuities, I have argued, can be seen as symptomatic of the late nineteenth-century struggle to assimilate real historical time into the novel form. This chapter foregrounds instead a specific genre, if it can even be labeled as such. Emergent weird fiction's instability and nebulosity as a genre serves as an apt final chapter. It represents the *ne plus ultra* of genre. Because it remains so generically diverse, it illustrates how flexibly *fin de siècle* narratives engaged with the immanent crises of increasingly global modernity, including empire's shift towards a more tightly connected space of repressed violence and economic interdependence.

Here, I am particularly interested in those post-sensation, post-Gothic texts that merge the supernatural with the corporeal and biological. I use the term post-Gothic to avoid those historical debates that surround the definition of the Gothic—whether, for example, the Gothic is a common mode or strictly a late-eighteenth-century genre. Moreover, as Daly cautions, late Victorian and Edwardian writers did not necessarily see themselves as consciously engaging “the Gothic” tradition.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, understanding the Gothic as a set of narrative possibilities, which repeatedly die off, revive, and mutate, seems to me to capture the inherent fluidity of genre. Moreover, despite the relatively recent scholarly designation of a Gothic revival, late Victorian fiction carries with it lingering traces of the Gothic in a multitude of forms: the imperial

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<sup>106</sup> See Daly's insightful survey of Gothic criticism and its tendency to “short-circuit historical inquiry” into late nineteenth-century popular fiction in *Modernism* 12-22.

romance, sensation fiction, popular drama, the Victorian ghost story and so on. Writers of the period certainly imagined themselves as engaging a long history of supernatural fiction. In 1923, M. R. James reflected on the legacy of Sheridan Le Fanu and distinguished this “modern” tradition from its Gothic predecessors. Literature of the fantastic, he explained, “depends largely, I fancy, upon its modernity: in style, at any rate, it must not be antiquated, however remote the scene or date of the events described. To be really *frightful*, the story must seem possible and near for the moment.”<sup>107</sup> In weird fiction, this blend of the fantastic tradition and uniquely modern technological, sexual, and racial concerns often produces “abhuman” beings, a term Kelly Hurley borrows from William Hope Hodgson to describe

a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other. The prefix ‘ab-’ signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards—towards a site or condition as yet unspecified—and thus entails both a threat and a promise.<sup>108</sup>

This threat, as Hurley continues, extends beyond tales of human degeneration to weird stories of the amorphous active life of matter itself (31-38). As I shall discuss here, landscapes often transform from mere settings into active subjects brimming with hidden sentience. In fact, much of the fiction of Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood, for

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<sup>107</sup> M. R. James, “M. R. James on J. S. Le Fanu,” *Ghosts and Scholars* 7 (1985).

<sup>108</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2004) 4.

example, centers on such ecological mysteries. In *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), Machen's narrator gazes at an ancient Roman fort as "all the grotesque postures of stem and root began to stir; the wood was alive."<sup>109</sup> Blackwood's tales regularly include sentient deserts and deeply passionate forests. Bram Stoker's *The Snake's Pass* (1890), which I consider at length in the conclusion, centers on the phenomenon of the shifting bog, which becomes not simply an uncanny Gothic backdrop but an active, vengeful, and uncontrollable embodiment of Ireland. These narratives, I argue, construct such ecological sources of fascination and horror by applying the language of native insurgencies to metropolitan and semi-colonial spaces. Faced with the growing sense of insurgency everywhere, these discontinuous texts translate the anxieties of empire into sublime landscapes endowed with resistant agency. They stage, quite literally, world revolutions, and they do so not in some distant, rebellious colony but in peripheral spaces within or at a marginal distance from the metropole itself.

### **The Emergence of Weird Fiction**

Early weird fiction remains difficult to classify as a genre. Its internal diversity and discontinuities helped spawn the genres of fantasy, horror, and science fiction, which quickly emerged as marketable categories for pulp magazines and later inexpensive paperbacks. Still, weird fiction endured the advent of these competing, more dominant genres. It became anchored in the 1920s with the rise of H. P. Lovecraft; the pulp magazine, *Weird Tales*; and the publisher Arkham House, which in the light of Lovecraft's success, retroactively marketed the earlier fiction of Blackwood, Le Fanu,

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<sup>109</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan and The Hill of Dreams* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006) 85-86.

Machen, and others. These niche markets remained quite hybrid; *Weird Tales* and Arkham House, for example, often solicited and published tales that failed to conform to conventional horror, fantasy, and science fiction.<sup>110</sup>

From Le Fanu to Blackwood, writers at the turn of the twentieth century often described their work as “weird;” titles and subtitles of short fiction collections, especially those re-collected and re-marketed, bear the term.<sup>111</sup> In its adjectival, nominal, and adverbial forms, “weird” was the favored choice of writers when capturing indescribable phenomena. In the short story “Sand” (1912), Blackwood describes sand that seems to follow the main character, turning “luminous too, with a patchwork of glimmering effect that was indescribably weird.”<sup>112</sup> This relatively new modern adjective—capturing perhaps its oldest, most obscure Germanic roots (*wyrd*, *werd*, “becoming”)<sup>113</sup>—serves, in fact, as the organizing principle of the genre. As H. P. Lovecraft later wrote in his survey of supernatural fiction:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones,  
or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere

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<sup>110</sup> For a history of the magazine, see Robert Weinberg, *The Weird Tales Story* (West Linn, OR: FAX Collector’s Editions, 1977). For a literary account of early weird fiction, see S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990), which includes chapters on Machen, Blackwood, and Dunsany.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Le Fanu’s *The Watcher and Other Weird Stories* (1894), a posthumous collection illustrated by his son; and Charlotte Elizabeth Riddell’s *Weird Stories* (1882); At times, “weird” mixes etymologically with “Fate”: *The Weird o’ It* (1902) by M. P. Shiel and *King of the Dead: A Weird Romance* (1903) by Frank Aubrey (Francis Henry Atkins). In 1885, several of E. T. A. Hoffman’s stories, including “The Sandman,” were newly translated and published as *Weird Tales*. Likewise, several of the Norwegian writer Jonas Lie’s tales were translated and published in 1893 as *Weird Tales from the Northern Seas*.

<sup>112</sup> Algernon Blackwood, *Ancient Sorceries and Other Weird Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2002) 334.

<sup>113</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Shakespeare’s “Weird Sisters” remains the pivotal historical moment in the modern sense of “weird,” despite Shakespeare’s unconventional usage (“weyward” or the goddess of Fate) (*OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. “weird”). For a discussion of Shakespeare’s usage, see Albert H. Tolman, “Notes on *Macbeth*,” *PMLA* 11.2 (1896). Tolman also attempts to make sense of the sudden emergence of the term at the end of the century.

of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. [ . . . ] Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation. [ . . . ] The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.<sup>114</sup>

In this passage, whether consciously or not, Lovecraft embraces popular fantastic literature as the descendant of nineteenth-century sensation fiction. In tapping this bodily aesthetic, he also reveals the *modus operandi* of weird tales: such fiction forces characters and readers to wrestle with meaning that exists at the “utmost rim” of the comprehensible and thus adapts, in fact, the domestic thrill of the sensation novel to an utterly alien realm. Yet this confrontation does not stem strictly from an outside or foreign threat; dread arises from the “defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos.” In other words, Nature does not change its

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<sup>114</sup> Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1973) 15-16.



laws in weird fiction; instead, infinitely complex natural forces thwart the precarious laws in which humankind places its self-assured trust. Hence, weird fiction exists in the interstitial space between the supernatural and the domestic sensation traditions. In her account of the Victorian Gothic, Alison Milbank describes these two mid-Victorian genres as running along different axes. Le Fanu and Wilkie Collins, she argues, share “a concern with the formal aspects of the house: its function as a barrier, its separation of outside from inside, its invasion by alien forces, and its fragility under attack,” yet Collins offers “a purely horizontal and metonymic fiction [. . .] while Le Fanu presents an ‘other world’ which [. . .] invades vertically.”<sup>115</sup> At the turn of century, however, weird tales stretch the verticality of the supernatural along the horizontal axis. Like other examples of post-Gothic fiction, from sensational tales of crime to Victorian ghost stories, weird tales internalize the Other, bringing the alien, the demonic, the weird into domestic space—even noticing its uncanny presence as always already inside. Most importantly, however, this attention to alterity has a remarkable ability to question and undermine, in quite covert ways, the imagined binary between the metropole and periphery, and thus radicalize the metaphorical boundary of “home” found in earlier sensation and fantastical fiction.

As Patrick Brantlinger argues, much of the “imperialist writing after about 1880 treats the Empire as a barricade against a new barbarian invasion,” but it also “treats the Empire as [. . .] a temporary means of preventing Britain itself from relapsing into barbarism” (230). Insofar as imperialism faced “the disappearance of earthly frontier,” he

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<sup>115</sup> Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992) 159.

argues, occult fiction can be seen as an attempt to compensate through the “opening of new frontiers in the beyond” (240). Thus, in Brantlinger’s reading, occult fiction becomes simply contiguous to previous “popular romance formulas” (236), which frequently express “anxiety about the waning of opportunities for heroic adventure” (239). In fact, he suggests, “complex, unconscious interconnections between imperialist ideology and occultism. [. . .] the borderland itself becomes a new frontier to cross, a new realm to conquer” (249). While Edwardian spiritualism and occult fiction did often appropriate the language of imperial adventure, neither can be dismissed as simply an extension of imperialist ideological concerns, nor can they be oversimplified as a naïve retreat to magical thinking. Arthur Machen, for example, in his preface to *Hill of Dreams*, recalls his desire to “write a ‘Robinson Crusoe’ of the soul” (69), and yet, rather than the spiritual or metaphysical, Machen is drawn to the psychological and social alienation of modern urban life: “I would take the theme of solitude, loneliness, separation from mankind, but, in place of a desert island and a bodily separation, my hero should be isolated in London and find his chief loneliness in the midst of myriads of myriads of men” (ibid.). As Janet Oppenheim argues, many late-nineteenth-century occultists imagined spirit to be “a creative, causative agent” that permeated and connected “the diverse parts of the universe.”<sup>116</sup> The true task for the modern scientists, they believed, was to understand the natural dynamic connections of an expansive universe. Rather than oppose modern science, many eminent Victorian and Edwardian spiritualists hoped to combat what they believed to be a destructive positivist

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<sup>116</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1985) 193.

methodology:

They realized that, throughout history, the contours of natural science had time and again proved more elastic than orthodox defenders believed possible, and they took as their guiding examples the treatment of Galileo and Harvey. They asserted repeatedly that scientific methodology applied to the [occult] subjects that they explored because nature's rules extended over a far vaster range of phenomena than scientists had previously suspected. (Oppenheim 201)

Moreover, occult fiction and the wider discourse of *fin de siècle* spiritualism often questioned the calculating practicality of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.<sup>117</sup> As Joy Dixon has argued in her study of feminist spirituality within the Theosophical Society, the “inequalities of power that structured exchanges in the colonial context mark theosophy's syncretizing impulse as a distinctively colonial one. [. . .] Theosophy was therefore a kind of middle-brow orientalism (in Edward Said's sense), which reinscribed divisions between eastern mysticism and western science” (11). However, she adds, the “operations of what we might call the colonial syncretic could also permit a critique of imperialism and of English political and culture life” (ibid.).

### **A Fierce Earth: Inter-dimensional Insurgency in “The Willows” and *The Inheritors***

“No mere ‘scenery’ could have produced such an effect.”  
—Blackwood, “The Willows”

“The Willows” (1907) seems, at first, to belong to the popular leisure travel

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<sup>117</sup> See Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001) 10-11, 155, 219-225; and Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany: SUNY U P, 2006) 75-96.

literature of the late nineteenth century. As the story opens, the narrator describes a dramatic shift in scenery as he and his fellow traveler begin their journey down the Danube: “The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest” (18). Here, the bioscope serves as an apt metaphor. On one hand, its invocation captures the scenic visuality of the story’s opening and signals the tale’s participation in the genre of picturesque travel writing. Blackwood, in fact, had produced such work, including a two-part account of his own adventures down the Danube in 1901.<sup>118</sup> The bioscope metaphor, however, also aligns the shift in scenery with the visual manipulation of film technology and thus adds to the picturesque a jarring sense of displacement. The narrator’s personification of the Danube maintains this ambivalence. As in a typical romantic travel guide, the narrator offers an extended pathetic fallacy:

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its *aliveness*. [. . .] [I]t had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage. (19, original emphasis)

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<sup>118</sup> See “Down the Danube in a Canadian Canoe,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 84 (1901). For more of Blackwood’s travel writing, see “Summering in Canadian Backwoods,” *Longman’s Magazine* 37:219 (1901).

This passage demonstrates travel writing's tendency to emphasize the figural. The tourist's gaze, as Jonathan Culler argues, transforms real experiences into ideal types of the beautiful, authentic, or extraordinary.<sup>119</sup> In Blackwood's tale, however, such figurative descriptions grow increasingly literal. Beneath this "awe and wonder" the narrator feels a growing uneasiness towards this sublime "region of singular loneliness and desolation" (17). Distress readily accompanies his experience of the sublime: "a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night" (23). However, it is not the "sense of remoteness from the world of humankind" or vastness of the Danube swamp that affects the narrator. Such "utter isolation" is hardly a departure from leisure travel writing's interest in individual autonomy and aesthetic control.<sup>120</sup> Instead, it is the willows, "humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems" (17), which grow increasingly menacing:

my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of

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<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics of Tourism," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 1.1 (1981): 127-140.

<sup>120</sup> See Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing From Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Exploration* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), especially 82-105.

their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us. (23)

The vast landscapes of oceans, mountains, and vast forests may alarm or terrify, but “all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt” (ibid.). The “multitude of willows,” the narrator explains, produces a feeling “far different:”

Their serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain [. . .]! (23-24)

From this point on, the vacation travelogue begins to read more like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Stoker's *Dracula* set in the continental countryside. From the marshes of the Danube, alien life—sentient, hidden—menaces the civilized trespassers. After they set up camp on a river island, a Hungarian boatman floats by, crossing himself and reminding the travelers of other “superstitious” peasants who had warned them not to land on the river island “because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man’s world” (26).

Blackwood represents these beings as a form of collective life that rises up against the gentlemanly adventurers. The narrator describes the willows as a “multitude” (23),

“serried ranks” (23), “a host of beings from another plane of life” (29), “a vast army” (29), “a swarm of living creatures [. . .] huddled together in masses, hostile” (30). The willow creatures, inhabiting a dimension that touches reality, produce a humming sound that “comes from everywhere at once. [. . .] behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us” (48). As the creatures close in on the travelers, the sound grows menacing like a “swarm of great invisible bees [. . .] about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere” (ibid.). The willows, the Swede theorizes, “*mask* the others [. . .] because the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us” (53-54, original emphasis). The two do, in fact, momentarily glimpse the swarm of alien life:

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface—“coiling upon itself like smoke,” he said afterwards. (56-57)

This form of collective life—a natural mystery between human and animal—begins to accrue colonial implications. In fact, “The Willows” participates in two apparently contradictory genres. On one hand, the tale begins as a picturesque travelogue closely related to Blackwood’s own nonfictional travel writing. In the oppressive isolation of the

Danube island, however, the narrator's account transforms into a very different type of story. Incapacitated with fear, he longs "for the 'feel' of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces; peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome" (49). In other words, he longs to return to the genre with which the tale began: the cosmopolitan picturesque with the consumer-tourist's awkward yet safe distance. Instead, the tourists become absorbed in the frontier space that seems to be lacking in the modern world, and yet they have no resources to become generic romantic heroes. They can only resist becoming "the victims of our adventure" (ibid.), and, in fact, each of their ill-conceived strategies fail.

Ultimately, the tale offers no resolution. Although the two travelers think they may be saved by a corpse (because it may substitute as a sacrifice to the Others), the humming returns. Staring at the corpse, they gasp at the image of their own potential fate; the skin and flesh of the corpse as well as the sand around it has been "beautifully" marked by the willows (62). Throughout the tale, the narrator can only cling to "that diminishing portion of my intelligence which I called my 'reason.' An explanation of some kind was an absolute necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary—however absurd" (41). From a tale of leisure abroad, Blackwood incorporates increasingly romantic components of the Gothic imperial adventure: the Canadian canoe, the rugged Swede, the superstitious (yet inevitably correct) warnings of local peasants, the difficult conditions of the resistant Danube that prevent any leisure gentlemanly boating. Even the willow-beings seem a component of imperial fiction. Not



only do they inhabit a radically strange world, barely visible and menacing to the European intruders, but they are described as “nude [. . .] with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins” (32). They are described as “bushy” headed, “shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack” (29).

Not long after publishing “The Willows,” Blackwood wrote several tales that serve as ideal examples of the typical imperial Gothic. In “The Wendingo” (1910), for example, English adventurers, led by a Native guide, face a threat in the deep Canadian forest that latches on to the susceptible Défago, a French-Canadian who “goes native” in quite an unconventional sense as he regresses into a horrible animal form legendary among Native Americans. Although “The Willows” satisfies Brantlinger’s account of imperial Gothic when the strong, adventurous Swede digresses into madness as primal forces invade his camp,<sup>121</sup> there is no adventure to a clear imperial setting. In fact, unlike other occult tales in which someone unwittingly brings home exotic phenomena,<sup>122</sup> “The Willow” provides no indication of any non-European infiltration—that is, other than the discourse itself. Through this tension between the sanitized travelogue and romantic imperial adventure, “The Willows” offers a striking revision of both picturesque travel writing and the imperial Gothic. Rather than provide a safe aesthetic distance—the kind the narrator fantasizes about—the tale collapses the tourist’s sense of distance and autonomy as well as the supposed safety implicit in continental travel within civilized Europe. As this generic security breaks down, the imperial repressed rises up, coherent

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<sup>121</sup> See Brantlinger 230.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Lot No. 249” (1892), Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897), and H. G. Wells’s “The Truth About Pycraft” (1903).

identity breaks down, and the tale devolves into the ineffable.

Like its Gothic relatives, weird fiction follows everyday protagonists as they perceive, pursue, or are pursued by hidden threats that lurk “beyond the veil” of reality. In fact, nearly all weird tales include a veil or curtain metaphor; certainly the examples I consider here abound with the image of a lifted veil, which fails to keep distinct realities separate. The two adventures in Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) camp “in a spot where their region touches ours, where the veil between has worn thin” (49). Dr. Raymond, the disturbing scientist in Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894), sets out his vision of “a whole world, a sphere unknown; continents and islands, and great oceans in which no ship has sailed” (11). “[T]his world of ours is pretty well girded now with the telegraph wires and cables,” the doctor writes, but his secret experiment will bridge “the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit” (ibid.). Like Blackwood and Machen’s fiction, Hodgson’s sea-faring novels also refuse to consolidate a clear supernatural explanation for the strange forms the sailors come across at sea. Many of these creatures are corporal and organic—mushroom and weed men—and the most ghostly hauntings are undermined by the language of dimensional rifts. Even in *The Ghost Pirates* (1909), the shadowy creatures might be interpreted to be, as the title implies, the spirits of long-dead pirates, but the narrative emphasizes the failure of both supernatural and rational explanations of the phenomena:

“My idea is, that this ship is open to be boarded by those things,” I explained. “What they are, of course I don’t know. They look like men—in

lots of ways. [. . .] I don't know a bit whether they're flesh and blood, or whether they're what we should call ghosts or spirits. [. . .] I believe that this ship is open, as I've told you—exposed, unprotected, or whatever you like to call it. I should say it's reasonable to think that all the things of the material world are barred, as it were, from the immaterial; but that in some cases the barrier may be broken down. [. . .] Don't you see, in a normal state we may not be capable of appreciating the *realness* of the other? But they may be just as *real* and material to *them*, as *we* are to *us*. [. . .] The earth may be just as *real* to them, as to us. I mean that it may have qualities as material to them, as it has to us; but neither of us could appreciate the other's realness, or the quality of realness in the earth, which was real to the other. It's so difficult to explain."<sup>123</sup>

It is important to note the perspectival quality of Hodgson's weird phenomena. In a similar experience, the narrator in Blackwood's "The Willows" describes "the veil [. . .] worn thin" as a "a sort of peep-hole whence [outer world dwellers] could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen" (49)—and, in fact, these outer world dwellers struggle to understand the human intruders, who in turn attempt to make sense of the unearthly forces that threaten them from all around. In other words, as the narrating sailor argues in Hodgson's novel, *realness* (as a concept) must be relative in weird fiction. Both "us" and "them" may be material, but neither can "appreciate the other's realness."

Often represented as a conflict in dimensional perspective, this fundamental

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<sup>123</sup> William Hope Hodgson, *The Ghost Pirates*, in *The Ghost Pirates and Other Revenants of the Sea: The Collected Fiction of William Hope Hodgson, Volume 3* (San Francisco: Night Shade, 2005) 50-51, original emphasis.

ambivalence over what constitutes the real stems not only from weird fiction's spiritualist underpinnings but also from its combination of the supernatural Gothic and the Gothic's more naturalistic offshoots in sensation fiction. Like sensation narratives, the weird often penetrates the safest of places: the domestic space of the nation, the home, and the body. Moreover, sensation fiction not only lends to weird tales multiple, unreliable narrators but also crucial narrative techniques solicited by modern technologies, including newspapers, phonographs, telegraphs, and steam and electric power—"modernity up-to-date with a vengeance," as Jonathan Harker writes in Stoker's weird masterpiece. And yet this realist strain in weird fiction inevitably confronts its inability to explain phenomena in rational terms—or in *any* recognizable discourse. In fact, we might understand weird fiction as a popular form of emergent modernism in that it resists genre and even narrative as formal organizing principles. A plot may reveal a hidden secret—an interconnecting thread that holds disjunctive narratives together (such as the identity of the demonic woman, which only surfaces in the fragments that conclude Machen's *The Great God Pan*)—but weird tales may just as readily collapse with the protagonists' confusion and formally dissolve into ellipses and narrative incoherence. In M. P. Shiel's last man novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), there remains no way to explain why a late nineteenth-century woman seems possessed by the journal of a survivor of a distant apocalypse of the future. Does the narrative dissolve into chaos because the survivor is driven mad by isolation or are these simply the hysterical ravings of a madwoman? The novel never provides an answer. In Blackwood's "A Descent into Egypt" (1914), the narrator forewarns readers that his tale is "not a detective story" (172) and, in fact, the story grows increasingly

impervious to any form of explanation as the narrator witnesses an Egyptologist disappear.

This centrifugal narrative resistance often stems from characters' intense attraction, despite the risk of their own dissolution, to forms of alien, collective life. In fact, much of Blackwood's nature-based fiction is less interested in terror, as in "The Willows" or "The Wendingo," than in a taboo desire for the collective life embodied in nature. In "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912), for example, the Forest, a mysterious yet active "Collective Personality" (236), steals a husband's love and attention from his wife. The man is drawn towards a "splendid Entity" of global scope that "manifests through all the thousand individual trees—some huge collective life, quite as minutely and delicately organised as our own. It might merge and blend with ours under certain conditions, so that we could understand it be *being* it, for a time at least" (230). The husband gets his wish; not only does he appear more and more "like a tree" (260), but, as his wife urges him to "Resist the devil," he leaves his "semi-dead" body "like a shell, half-emptied" to join the "roaring of the Forest" (273-4). Even in "The Willows," the rugged Swede regresses near madness and the narrator finds him wandering the island uttering "the most outlandish phrases in his anger about 'going *inside* to Them,' and 'taking the way of the water and the wind'" (60, original emphasis). In other words, the *coup de force* of Blackwood's tale is the fact that it voices desire for the terrifying dissolution of the boundaries between self and others, inside and outside, and civilized and natural. The Swede has "gone native" in a fundamental sense. Surrounded by the humming of radically alien life, he longs to be absorbed in this collectivity even if, as he

argues earlier, the result may be far worse than death: “Death [. . .] means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. [. . .] But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation” (52). This is not the conventional fear of degeneration, but of “radical alteration” and “substitution.” Degeneration implies a Darwinist theory of common descent, yet, as the narrator proffers, the willows are of “another evolution altogether” (29). Rather than progression or degeneration (two of the most compelling models of the late nineteenth century), weird fiction anticipates a postmodern model of displacement. Instead of oscillating between the center and periphery, the weird exists at the liminal.

As “The Willows” exemplifies, one of the most compelling trends in occult fiction is its tendency to situate weird phenomena in the peripheral spaces of empire. Such phenomena remain difficult to organize symbolically and nearly impossible to explain, but they are also increasingly difficult to locate spatially and temporally. Not only do imperial boundaries threaten to collapse, but such boundaries become indiscernible. For many, the Empire may have been imagined as the last barricade against barbarism, yet, as weird fiction reveals, a more insidious problem revolved around the inability to imagine such a barricade—the inability to draw firm distinctions between the imperial inside and outside in a world without geographical frontiers (exhausted by imperialism and constantly eroded by international capitalism) and without clear markers between the civilized and barbaric (a repeated concern in the often confusing confluences of imperial resistance, as exemplified by the conflicted British response to white Boers in South

Africa). Occult fiction—rather than simply an otherworldly *compensation* for “the waning of geographical adventure” (Brantlinger 240)—resists a strictly “vertical” story of invasion. Although many such narratives represent “occult phenomena [that] follow characters from imperial settings home to Britain” (231), other examples actively thwart all notion of an imperial outside.

In fact, just as “The Willows” takes place at a historical and cultural crossroads between Pressburg (or Bratislava) and Budapest and along the Danube, once the contested border of the Roman Empire, supernatural encounters in weird fiction often occur in geo-cultural border regions. Blackwood uses the Swiss Alps in “The Glamour of Snow” (1911) and the Nile in “A Descent into Egypt” (1914) and in “Sand” (1912). In his essay, “The Psychology of Places” (1910), Blackwood explains the ritual act of setting up camp. On his frequent travels, he refused to set up camp on any geographical border space, which he, along with his fellow travelers, believed to be a frontier between the known world and unseen dimensions.<sup>124</sup> Gothic fiction, of course, often situated its taboo threats in an imagined feudal Roman-Catholic south, and sublime Celtic and especially Irish landscapes serve as an enduring stage for Maturin, Scott, Le Fanu, Machen, Stoker, and Bowen.<sup>125</sup> Even as Eurocentrism reached its pinnacle, weird narratives obsessed over marginal and semi-colonial spaces: Catholic Wales in Machen’s writing, the significant role Ireland plays in Dunsany’s “edge of the world” fantasy,

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<sup>124</sup> See Mike Ashley, *Algernon Blackwood: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001) 108.

<sup>125</sup> See Luke Gibbons, “Topographies of Terror: Killarney and the Politics of the Sublime,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95.1 (1996): 23-44. See also W. J. McCormack, “The Irish Gothic and After” in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 2:841-845; and David Punter, “Scottish and Irish Gothic” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 105-123.

Hodgson's representation of the ocean in his seafaring horror tales and Ireland in the *House on the Borderland* (1908), the North Pole in Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), and so on.<sup>126</sup> Each of these spaces allows a certain distance from metropolitan reality. At times, this distance is quite literal: Shiel's protagonist survives a global apocalypse because of his journey to the North Pole and Hodgson's sailors find new adventure in the unmapped, fluid landscape of the ocean. At other moments, the semi-colonial landscapes provide alternative traditions to British modernity. Weird fiction is often drawn, for example, to the occult Celtic or Egyptian magic championed by, among others, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, to which Blackwood, Machen, Yeats and other speculative writers belonged. Yet, despite such distance, the broken veil metaphor in "The Willows" and throughout occult fiction reveals that the weird is an overlapping presence—a mutual intrusion of distinctive, material, and yet inconceivable worlds. The horror of "The Willows" occurs within the boundary itself. On the Heraclitean boundary of the turbulent Danube, the travelers find themselves not only between cities and nations but also between enfolded realities. Watching the "nude, fluid shapes," in "The Willows," he admits, "I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed" (32).

If Conrad's political fiction reveals the possibility of insurgency anywhere—even at the heart of empire, even by apparently metropolitan subjects—weird fiction intensifies such paranoia. If space itself might overlap with distinct realities, then violence might erupt anywhere and at any time, it might occur everywhere simultaneously, or it may be

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<sup>126</sup> Though I focus on imperial spaces here, certainly urban and domestic versions of the Gothic also influenced weird fiction. For the urban and domestic Gothic, see Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).



occurring even now in unrecognized forms. Rather than an unnerving possibility, insurgency becomes an immanent potentiality in weird fiction. Malevolent resistance looms just beyond the reality constructed by an overconfident civilization. The abject threats of weird fiction thwart and exceed all distinctions between outside and inside, including subject/object and self/others. They remain utterly alien and abhuman, yet they infiltrate metropolitan space or, even more disturbing, they arise from inside—if there can even be said to be an inside.

Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad's collaborative novel, *The Inheritors* (1901), extends this peripheral position not only into metropolitan space but into time itself. Their novel synthesizes imperial and domestic space through a weird, indecipherable collapse of multiple genres, including a New Woman novel, an account of the publishing industry, a fantastic narrative with cutting-edge science and an invasion plot, and a spy novel of political intrigue. Its journalist narrator Arthur Granger attempts to offer rational answers to the fantastic occurrences and vast political conspiracy he has witnessed, but his first-person narrative begins to fracture under the weight of the inexplicable and inter-dimensional. As he faces the pressure of comprehending both the existence of a "fourth dimension" and his own desire for one of its abhuman spies, the novel increasingly relies on faltering ellipses and then abruptly concludes with a sentimental anticlimax in which the narrator self-consciously realizes the sheer absurdity as his role as the story's protagonist. Undermining the adventure and romance of the novel, Granger understands that his imagined resistance to the Fourth Dimensionists was not a conflict at all. Like the travelers in "The Willows," Arthur Granger finds himself the relatively meaningless

object—rather than heroic subject—of an imperial romance.

As the narrator remarks early in the novel, the mysterious Miss Etchingham Granger speaks English so well that she cannot be English. Moreover, he discovers, she has not arrived from Australia, America, or any British colony. With an air of condescension, Granger explains her origins:

“I come from the Fourth Dimension,” she said, patiently. [. . .] She had the listlessness of an enlightened person who has to explain, over and over again, to stupid children some rudimentary point of the multiplication table.

She seemed to divine my thoughts, to be aware of their very wording. [. . .]

“Yes,” she said. “It is as if I were to try to explain the new ideas of any age to a person of the age that has gone before.” She paused [. . .]

“I understand,” I said, “that you wish me to consider myself as relatively a Choctaw.”<sup>127</sup>

Faced with Granger’s “insolent modernity” (16), the narrator uses the familial language of empire to conflate his ignorance with “stupid children” and then “Choctaw.” The imperial inversion continues: “She had a something [. . .] Perhaps it was only the confidence of the superseder, the essential quality that makes for the empire of the Occidental. But I was not a negro—not even relatively a Hindoo” (16). At this point in

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<sup>127</sup> Joseph Conrad and F. M. Hueffer. *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1924) 8-9. In all likelihood, the novel was conceived and written by Ford, while Conrad advised the younger writer and helped in publishing and marketing his work. On the authorship and indifferent reception of the novel, see Najder 239, 259-260, 274-276.

the novel, we might read this inversion—the British gentleman as colonial native—as illustrative of the discursive power of the white metropolitan subject, who can freely wield popular representations of the colonial at his pleasure. The novel, however, transforms this discursive play into a literal power shift. The being who appears as Miss Granger is part of a vast invasion conspiracy by a race that appears more British than the British, the very embodiment of imperial identity and temporality:

I heard the nature of the Fourth Dimension—heard that it was an inhabited plane—invisible to our eyes, but omnipresent [. . .]. I heard the Dimensionists described; a race clear-sighted, eminently practical, incredible; with no ideals, prejudices, or remorse; with no feeling for art and no reverence for life; free from any ethical tradition; callous to pain, weakness, suffering and death, as if they had been invulnerable and immortal. [. . .] “You would—you will—hate us,” she concluded. [. . .] “Your”—she used the word as signifying, I suppose, the inhabitants of the country, or the populations of the earth—“your ancestors were mine, but long ago you were crowded out of the Dimension as we are to-day, you overran the earth as we shall do to-morrow.” (9-10)

The Fourth Dimensionists boast the ultimate empire. It is “omnipresent,” “clear-sighted, eminently practical,” invisible, evolved, and populated by amoral invaders whose only perceivable difference is their inexplicable charisma. They “come in swarms, to materialise, to devour like locusts, to be all the more irresistible because indistinguishable” (12). Arthur Granger’s dimension remains vulnerable “because we

were worm-eaten with altruism and ethics” (13). On one hand, this seems a condemnation of a British empire grown overconfident in its global might and, in its stagnation, prone to producing weak men who forget the romantic vigor of imperial identity, much like Donkin in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: “The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company” (16). As Brantlinger argues,

After the mid-Victorian years the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial ‘stock.’ [ . . . ] Apocalyptic themes and images are characteristic of imperial Gothic, in which, despite the consciously pro-Empire values of many authors, the feeling emerges that ‘we are those upon whom the ends of the world are come.’ (230).

However, as an American reviewer pointed out at the time, the novel becomes a satire of “some of the most cherished traditions and achievements of Englishmen.”<sup>128</sup>

Discomforted by this interpretation (and the attribution of the novelistic “experiment” to himself rather than Ford), Conrad responded in print for the only time in his career. In Conrad's reading of the novel, the critique is not aimed at tradition, so much as “the materialistic exaggeration of individualism,” including the fraud of imperial philanthropy.

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<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Conrad's response, “Letter to the New York *Times* Saturday Book Review,” in *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces* (New York: Doubleday, 1978) 73-76. 74.

As Conrad writes, “Egoism, which is the moving force of the world, and altruism, which is its morality, these two contradictory instincts [. . .] cannot serve us unless in the incomprehensible alliance of their irreconcilable antagonism” (75). “Fiction,” he continues, “demands from the writer a spirit of scrupulous abnegation. The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascination, so dangerous full of hope” (ibid.).

As Conrad points out, the contradictions of individualism remain at the heart of *The Inheritors*. Faced with the superiority of the colonizers from the Fourth Dimension, Arthur Granger reacts in starkly individualist terms. Unlike his colonial counterparts in the third dimension, he maintains, “I was somebody, confound it, I was somebody. As an author, I had been so uniformly unsuccessful, so absolutely unrecognised, that I had got into the way of regarding myself as ahead of my time [. . .] This girl came to confound me with the common herd” (16-17). Although they may reflect British imperial dominance, the Fourth Dimensionists do not subscribe to this British sense of individualism. Unlike the narrator, who desperately seeks individual recognition, they embrace their power as a common herd—or rather a swarm. As a journalist, Granger is paid to write atmospheres of famous individuals, but the Fourth Dimensionists scoff at individual importance. At the end of the novel, when Arthur Granger desperately asserts “I was at the heart of it all,” his Fourth Dimensional lover replies,

“You have done nothing at all,” she said. “Nothing. [. . .] You were at the heart, yes; but at the heart of a machine.” Her words carried a sort of

strong conviction. I seemed suddenly to see an immense machine—  
unconcerned, soulless, but all its parts made up of bodies of men: a great  
mill grinding out the dust of centuries; a great wine-press. [. . .]

“As for you—you are only a detail, like all the others; you were set  
in a place because you would act as you did. It was in your character. We  
inherit the earth and you, your day is over . . .” (206-207)

Like Helen Vaughn in Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, Miss Etchingham Granger gains influence over powerful men for the mere purpose of guiding “a mighty engine of disintegration. It has crushed out a whole fabric, a whole plane of society. It has done that. I guided it. I had to have my eyes on every little strand of it [. . .]. I have inherited the earth. I am the worm at the very heart of the rose of it” (208). Human desire, Granger points out to the narrator, is inherently self-centered. In the novel’s chiastic attack on Britishness, the colonizing Fourth Dimensionists, who embody futurity, share with the “primitive” colonized a capability of participating in the dynamic collective formation of the “herd” or “swarm,” which is simply not available for the individualist Englishman, who remains closed off from any genuine experience of collectivity or encounter with alterity. The narrative form lures readers into sharing this subjective logic by leading us to assume that the protagonist, the narrative focalizer who attempts to discover the mystery of this conspiracy and writes to us in the immediacy of first-person, must be somehow “at the heart of it all.” In the end, however, the novel disavows this mimetic compulsion to understand a narrative as reflecting the development of its protagonist; despite the historically individualistic impulse of the novel form, neither the

integrity of the individual subject nor the integrity of the novel survives. “What a remarkable peculiarity,” Robert Southey writes, “that they (the English) always write the personal pronoun I with a capital letter. May we not consider this Great I as an unintended proof how much an Englishman thinks of his own consequence?”<sup>129</sup> Despite Conrad’s attempt in his open letter to circumscribe the generic instability by attributing it to an excessive individualism, the novel leaves little room for any sense of individual identity in lieu of the Dimensionists’ essential sameness.

Arthur Granger embodies the most individualist attributes of British identity: he continually asserts his personal autonomy, examines his feelings and ethical obligations, attempts to decipher events in rational terms, and yearns for individual recognition as a writer. At the same time, however, the Fourth Dimensionist critique of individualistic identity reflects back the contradictory counterpart of British imperial identity, the desire, as Ian Baucom writes, for a sense of Englishness that will train subjects “to submit themselves to a deindividuating principle of rule, will define Englishness as a principle of sameness, and will clear a space of common belonging in which England can see itself repeated, unaltered, across time and space.”<sup>130</sup> This is precisely the imperial desire that the Fourth Dimensionists threaten to satisfy in the novel. They are the future embodiment of perfected imperialism; their collective identity does not face the same crises of difference across space and time or the contradictions of one’s individual role within the larger social totalities of nation and empire. In this sense, the Fourth Dimension represents a radical, corporate Sameness that estranges Britishness, rendering

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<sup>129</sup> Qtd. in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 145.

<sup>130</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1999), 149.

it simultaneously as the Other of an imperial invasion and the anemic, historic remnants of a failed imperial Self. On one hand, they share a kinship with the English narrator —“your ancestors were mine” (10)—and yet they are fundamentally different—“our languages are different, and there's no bridge—no bridge at all. We *can't* meet . . .” (127, original emphasis). In other words, the inter-dimensional spacetime of the novel allows the Fourth Dimensionists to form a rhizomatic connection between an imperial ideal (Sameness) and the mass psychology ascribed to insurgent forces within empire (emergent colonial resistance, urban mobs). “Don't you see?”, the beautiful Fourth Dimensionist asks, “Don't you understand? We *are* the inevitable . . . and you can't keep us back. We have to come and you, you will only hurt yourself, by resisting” (126).

The sameness of the Fourth Dimension is further emphasized in its overlapping presence. It is not distant or peripheral. Staring at Canterbury Cathedral, a concrete objectification of shared English history, the narrator momentarily glimpses “something beyond, something vaster—vaster than cathedrals, vaster than the conception of the gods to whom cathedrals were raised. The tower reeled out of the perpendicular. One saw beyond it, not roofs, or smoke, or hills, but an unrealised, an unrealisable infinity of space” (7-8). The anachronistic monument of a spiritual identity gives way to a new spatio-temporal form that intrudes into the present from another world and a future time.

If insurgency becomes an immanent and ubiquitous potentiality in weird fiction, such work also registers its dialectical counterpart: the emergence of global imperial-capitalist modernity. As Bakhtin argues, the modern novel constructs “an image of *man*



*growing in national-historical time*” (25).<sup>131</sup> The modern protagonist “reflects the historical emergence of the world itself [. . .] at the transition point from one [epoch] to the other” (23). In doing so, “concrete visibility loses its static quality and fuses with time. Everywhere the *seeing eye* seeks and finds *time*—development, emergence, and history” (29). These spatial manifestations of historical emergence allow us to “*read time*, in the spatial whole of the world and, on the other hand, to perceive the filling of space not as an immobile background [. . .], but as an emerging whole, an event—this is the ability to read in everything *signs that show time in its course*” (25). Conrad, in his published defense, may attempt to limit the novel's critique to hypocritical, egocentric, or philanthropic development, but the interdimensional narrative with its experimental form cannot be qualified. Like *Tono-Bungay*, such weird narratives incorporate the spatial and temporal logic of emergent global capitalism. As Christina Britzolakis argues, the overlapping plane of reality of the Fourth Dimension “represents the increasingly organized, controlled, and administered global connectedness of the new imperialism. The emergent turn-of-the-century imperial world system seems to confound both liberal notions of progress and realist notions of narrative perspective.”<sup>132</sup> Earlier, I suggested that the weird fiction anticipates a postmodern model of knowledge in that it relies on the horizontal rather than the vertical, the liminal rather than the internal or central, and displacement rather than progression or degeneration. The inter-dimensional space of *The Inheritors* demonstrates that this is more than a precarious or anachronistic leap. The

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<sup>131</sup> Here and in the following passages, the emphases are Bakhtin's.

<sup>132</sup> Christina Britzolakis, “Pathologies of the Imperial Metropolis: Impressionism as Traumatic Afterimage in Conrad and Ford,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.1 (2005) 5.

“unrealisable infinity of space” that leaves Granger feeling naked and unhinged represents not only an increasingly global and interconnected form of imperialism, which forces together competing cultural realities, but a dynamic form of emergent capitalism, which is not only moves with ease across national borders but moves beyond the very limits of global space. As Marx writes, the “tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome” (*Grundrisse* 408, original emphasis). Thus, on one hand, these apocalyptic narratives may be seen as staging capitalism’s confrontation with the material limits of a finite earth and human population,<sup>133</sup> but they also reveal a far more insidious reality. Capitalism is not limited by finite space, but, in encountering the bounded space of the globe, moves inward. In reaching exterior limits, as Deleuze and Guattari write, it sets about establishing and displacing interior limits. Capitalism, they argue, “would like for us to believe that it confronts the limits of the Universe, the extreme limit of resources and energy. But all it confronts are its own limits [. . .]; all it repels or displaces are its own limits [. . .]. And it does both at once: capitalism confronts its own limits and simultaneously displaces them, setting the down again farther along” (463).

However, although weird fiction shares with capitalist modernity the radical decoding or deterritorialization of all boundaries, it is not strictly bound by the same axiomatic impulse to recode. In fact, it is no wonder that Deleuze and Guattari are drawn to H. P. Lovecraft in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Fr. 1980).<sup>134</sup> Weird phenomena exemplify

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<sup>133</sup> This is essentially Rosa Luxemburg’s argument in *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 222-224, which has been recently popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2000) 225-229. Contra Hardt and Negri, see Ellen Meiksins Wood and her situating of Luxemburg’s argument in *Empire of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2005) 124-130.

<sup>134</sup> See *A Thousand Plateaus* 240-251.

their notion of anti-mimetic becomings—the becoming-animal, the demon as haecceity, assemblages and multiplicities of matter<sup>135</sup>—all of which exist at “a peripheral position, such that it is impossible to tell if the anomalous is still in the band, already outside the band, or at the shifting boundary of the band” (245). “We do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity,” Deleuze and Guattari write before moving on to Lovecraft’s “Through the Gates if the Silver Key” (1934), a story that directly recalls the “The Willows:” “Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings that is the nameless summit of agony and dread” (Qtd. in Deleuze 240). What we witness in weird fiction is a Deleuzian flat multiplicity—consistent or flat only so far as the weird tale inscribes multiplicities on the plane of its narrative, which becomes an experimental cross-section of endless potential linkages between forms, formlessness, and affect. Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the plane of consistency holds equally true for the genre of weird fiction:

Its number of dimensions continually increases as what happens happens, but even so it loses nothing of its planitude. It is thus a plane of proliferation, peopling, contagion; but this proliferation of material has nothing to do with an evolution, the development of a form or the filiation of forms. Still less is it a regression leading back to a principle. It is on the contrary an *involution*, in which form is constantly being dissolved, freeing times and speeds. (267, original emphasis)

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<sup>135</sup> See *A Thousand Plateaus* 233-256.

As Conrad writes in his open letter to the *Times* reviewer, the “only fundamental truth of fiction” is its “courageous recognition of [. . .] irreconcilable antagonisms” (75), and nowhere is this more potentially charged than in confronting the anomalous. By re-imagining the figural landscapes of romance literature as sentient settings and by constantly representing hosts and swarms, weird tales are drawn to collective life and multiplicity that fascinates even as it disturbs individual identity. The smooth space of weird fiction—its endless border spaces of the earth and self—provide the ultimate self-contradictory promise of freedom inherent in capitalist modernity.

### **Dark-minded Mother: Global Apocalypse and the Feminine Threat**

O dark-minded Mother, with thy passionate cravings after the Infinite, thy regrets, and mighty griefs, and comatose sleeps, and sinister coming doom, O Earth: [. . .] I cannot take wing from her: for she is greater than I, and there is no escaping her; and at the last, I know, my soul will dash itself to ruin [. . .] against her wild and mighty bosom.

—Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*

Weird tales are narratives of borderlands; they are set in geographical or spatial thresholds haunted by phenomena indescribably alien. As narratives of becoming, their anarchic forms fragment and collapse. The animalistic, elemental, and demonic phenomena of weird fiction all trouble existing semantic order. In addition, however, weird fiction often associates the feminine in this assemblage of wild, chaotic forces. In Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, for example, the mysterious name-shifting Helen Vaughan is a child of the god Pan—the anarchic, pagan/Satanic force hidden beneath the mask of civilization. She attracts and repulses; she destroys and traumatizes respectable London society. As Christine Ferguson explains, Vaughan seems, in some ways, a “typical fictional adventuress” who seeks money and social status “because they confer

stability.”<sup>136</sup> However, Vaughan can never settle down. She attracts wealthy suitors, easily undermines their sanity, and drives them to suicide. As Ferguson argues, “Vaughan seeks the antithesis of stability. She aims to induce the same type of ontological collapse that accompanied her birth in all those who look on her” (475). After destroying each lover, “Vaughan remakes herself and continues, neither progressing nor degenerating but continually becoming something that is never quite finished enough to be absorbed into the logic of her surrounding culture;” even in the final pages of the novel, she refuses “the imperative to be semantically stable and socially useful—to, above all else, mean something” (ibid.).

Likewise, in Blackwood’s “Ancient Sorceries” (1908)—the inspiration for Jacques Tourneur’s 1942 film *Cat People*—the occult detective John Silence listens to the story of Vezin, a tourist who, in a small French village, experiences a deeply discomfoting desire for a beautiful young woman, Ilsé. “[T]here was something about her,” he tries to explain, “something unholy. [. . .] She drew me, and at the same time repelled me” (107).<sup>137</sup> Vezin discovers that Ilsé, like the rest of her village, belongs to a cat-like race of ancient sorcerers, who secretly continue to practice the Witches’ Sabbath. Believing that Vezin is the reincarnation of her lost lover, Ilsé beckons him to join the great Sabbath dance: “I have called to you for years, and you came with the whole force of the past behind you. You had to come, for I own you, and I claim you” (115). Even as he attempts to resist, he feels “the Call of the Dance again in his heart” (121), and Ilsé

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<sup>136</sup> Christine Ferguson, “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment,” *PMLA* 117.3 (2002) 475. See also Hurley 46-49.

<sup>137</sup> See the nearly identical description of Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan*: “she was at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on” (31).

cries out to him: “See where they await us! The woods are alive! Already the Great Ones are there, and the dance will soon begin! [. . .] Transform, transform! [. . .] Come! Come with me to the Sabbath, to the madness of its furious delight, to the sweet abandonment of its evil worship!” (123-4). Vezin, like many of Blackwood’s male protagonists, only survives his self-threatening desire by haphazard chance:

Another moment and he would have yielded and gone, for his will turned soft and the flood of passionate memory all but overwhelmed him, when—so can a small thing alter the whole course of an adventure—he caught his foot upon a loose stone in the edge of the wall, and then fell with a sudden crash on to the ground below. (125)

The momentary lapse allows his instinct for survival to take over; he lights a match, the edge of the forest catches fire, and the monsters disappear. Yet, even then, he calls out “feebly” to Ilsé “for his heart ached to think that she was really gone to the great Dance without him, and that he had lost the opportunity of its fearful joy” (125). Afterwards, he remains unaware of how he returned to the mundane metropole. In Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, the narrator vaguely forces Helen Vaughn to strangle herself—a conclusion that in many ways mirrors the explicit masculinist violence perpetuated on her mother’s body—yet, in Ferguson’s reading, this strange conclusion only reiterates Vaughn’s destabilizing presence. Her death is the “ultimate refutation of the imperative to be semantically stable” (475). As the narrator watches, she writhes in the throes of death; she turns “black like ink,” her body “wavers from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited” and even the form of shared biological existence wavers: “The

skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve” (62). Eventually, her body “descend[s] to the beasts [. . .] even to the abyss of all being [. . .] a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast” (62).

These *femme fatales*, who draw men into the border-spaces of empire, illustrate Anne McClintock’s argument that “women served as mediating and threshold figures [. . .] as the boundary markers of imperialism, the ambiguous mediators of what appeared to be—at least superficially—the predominantly male agon of empire” (24). Although McClintock highlights both the discursive and material ways in which women served as such threshold figures, her initial discussion of the femininizing of terra incognita remains most important to our discussion here. In fact, the masculinist conquest of feminized territory seems a striking analogue to weird narratives. Engulfed by the liminal territory of the colony, “the land as female” became

a traumatic trope, occurring almost invariably [. . .] in the aftermath of male boundary confusion [. . .] as a historical, not archetypal, strategy of containment. [. . .] The femininizing of the land represents a ritualistic moment in imperial discourse, as male intruders ward off fears of narcissistic disorder by reinscribing, as natural, an excess of gender hierarchy (ibid.).

All such examples remind us of conventional Gothic abjection. As Jerrold E. Hogle explains,

repressed, archaic, and thus deeply unconscious Feminine is a fundamental

level of being to which most Gothic finally refers, often in displacements of it that seem to be old patriarchal structures, and all the blurred oppositions that are abjected onto monsters or specters by Gothic characters face their ultimate dissolution into primal chaos as they approach this feminized nadir that is both the ultimate Other and the basically groundless ground of the self.<sup>138</sup>

Scholars have linked demon women to historical anxieties, including prostitution, early feminism, and New Women.<sup>139</sup> Here, however, I am most interested in how weird fiction diverged from its Gothic cousins in its representation of femininity through prioritizing primordial dissolution.

Not only is weird fiction permeated with taboo desires for Others—the masses of willows, the collective *jouissance* of the Witches’ Sabbath, the mysterious woman from the Fourth Dimension—but these narratives also regularly condemn quotidian British society. Vezin, in Blackwood’s “Ancient Sorceries,” looks around at his fellow train passengers, the “unredeemed holiday English,” whose superficiality disgusts him; “his fellow-country-men” are “noisy and obtrusive, obliterating with their big limbs and tweed clothing all the quieter tints of the day that brought him satisfaction and enabled him to melt into insignificance and forget that he was anybody” (88). Vezin longs to “melt into insignificance,” to join an existence beyond the veil of appearances in which his fellow

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<sup>138</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2002) 11.

<sup>139</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U P, 1982); Patricia Murphy, “The Gendering of History in *She*,” *Studies in English Literature* 39.4 (1999); Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U P, 1990); Carol A. Senf, “Dracula”: Stoker’s Response to the New Woman,” *Victorian Studies* 26.1 (1982).



“English clashed about him like a brass band, making him feel vaguely that he ought to be more self-assertive and obstreperous, and that he did not claim insistently enough all kinds of things that he didn’t want and that were really valueless, such as corner seats, windows up or down, and so forth” (88-9). In Machen’s semi-autographical *The Hill of Dreams*, the narrator Lucian expresses this dislike in stronger terms as he rants against the hypocritical middle-classes that he joins as a professional writer after a childhood in poverty,

This putrid filth, moulded into human shape [. . .] these men and women spoke of sacred things, and knelt before the awful altar of God [. . .]; and in their very church they had one aisle for the rich and another for the poor. [. . .] he felt that when he lay dead beneath the earth, eaten by swarming worms, he would be in a purer company than now, when he lived amongst human creatures. And he was to call this loathsome beast, all sting and filth, brother! “I had rather call the devils my brothers,” he said in his heart, “I would fare better in hell.” (107).

Lucian is drawn to occult magic because of its promise of “another sphere” and its potential to “annihilate the race, or at all events to reduce them to wholly insignificant forms” (143). Moreover, he looks to his colonial past for strength and “truth”: “The Celt assailed him, becoming from the weird wood he called the world, and his far-off ancestors, the ‘little people,’ crept out of their caves, muttering charms and incantations in hissing inhuman speech; he was beleaguered by desires that had slept in his race for ages” (112). In M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud*, human civilization is finally annihilated.

A “last man” narrator from the future recounts the extinction of humankind. As in *The War of the Worlds*, the novel uses mass extinction to develop a global sense of the collective human species.<sup>140</sup> On his way to London, he notices the global diversity of the dead, who fill the city and western suburbs after their attempt to flee north to escape the deadly poison cloud that covers the earth. Despite all the discursive work of racialist, patriarchal imperialism, he soon discovers he must “wade” through a London train station, which is filled with “a slough of bodies” that form “a packed mass” of biological matter: “flesh was everywhere, on the roofs of trains, cramming the intervals betwixt them, on the platforms, splashing the pillars like spray, piled upon lorries, a carnal marsh; outside, too, it filled the space betwixt an army-park of vehicles, carpeting that district of London.”<sup>141</sup>

Whereas colonial discourse, including imperial romances, rehearses strategies of violent containment, weird fiction’s embrace of social destruction is unrelenting; any redeemable social order involves the dissolution of self and the superficial mask of imperial superiority. In reaction to women and the world, weird narratives stage an analogous repulsion: both the feminine and the unrestrained totality of nature threaten to wreak vengeance. They strike with the full force of the return of the repressed—they

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<sup>140</sup> See Rosemary Jackson’s reading of Mary Shelley’s *Last Man* as “a fantasy of annihilation of the human [and] a violent attack upon the symbolic order [of patriarchal society]” (103-104) in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1981).

<sup>141</sup> M. P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000) 103-104. Several versions of Shiel’s novel exist: the original serial version, which ran in *The Royal Magazine* from January to June 1901; the original novel, published by Chatto & Windus in September 1901; and a much later version, condensed and revised by Shiel and published in 1929 by Gollancz. See John Clute’s introduction to the 2000 edition (vii), which uses the 1929 text (as do most reprinted editions). I have also selected quotations from the longer 1901 version, which remains available electronically on *Project Gutenberg*. Citations from the 1901 edition will be parenthetically noted as E, followed by the page numbers of the corresponding passages in the 1929/2000 version.

threaten to engulf, to dissolve the individual. Nature and femininity become an intertwined abjection. As Kristeva writes,

the maternal body is the place of a splitting [. . .]. Through a body, destined to insure reproduction of the species, the woman-subject, although under the sway of the paternal function (as symbolizing, speaking subject and like all others), more of a *filter* than anyone else—a thoroughfare, a threshold where ‘nature’ confronts ‘culture.’<sup>142</sup>

The active women of weird fiction, though they often appear as demon temptresses, are embodiments of the threshold moment—of the indistinct border spaces that proliferate in weird fiction between supernatural/natural, life/death, biological/social, domestic/public, metropolitan/colonial, human/animal, masculine/feminine, and so on. Like Helen Vaughn, the figure of the woman—the potential becoming-a-mother—embodies the principle of dissolution, of losing one’s individual identity in a larger totality. Yet these women are consistently active; Vaughn leads men to suicide, Ilsé kisses and beckons Vezin, Miss Etchingham Granger is instrumental in conquering the present dimension. On one hand, these women threaten to dominate men. However, if we consider the dire threat of losing one’s identity in weird fiction, they also perform precarious reassurance. Again and again, these women, despite their threshold existence (and their reminder of the precarious boundaries of self), remain powerful. They become, in Kristeva’s words, “the fantasy of the so-called ‘Phallic’ Mother.” They allow the narratives to “imagine that there is *someone* in that filter.” This fantasy, as Kristeva argues, provides comfort

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<sup>142</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia U P, 1980) 238.

because

if, on the contrary, there were no one on this threshold, if the mother were not, that is, if she were not phallic, then every speaker would be led to conceive of its Being in relation to some void, a nothingness asymmetrically opposed to this Being, a permanent threat against, first, its mastery, and ultimately, its stability. (238)

Nothingness in this context may be misleading. The “threat” to the “stability” of subjective identity and the symbolizing order is also a desire for the maternal and the Kristevan semiotic, which although unrepresentable gestures towards the multiplicity of Being. In other words, weird narratives may be read as anxious attempts to cope with the threatened loss of individual specificity—implied not only by the maternal abyss but also historical developments of urban life, evolutionary theory, and colonial resistance.

However, in stressing the negative and thanatic moments of apocalyptic self-immolation, we should not neglect the deeply erotic compulsion that also inheres in this desire. The desire of engulfment—to lose specificity, to return to the primordial maternal Earth—can also be read as movement towards the collectivity foreclosed by metropolitan discourse—a return to the symbiotic oneness and multiplicity of the maternal body. The narrator offers a lengthy lament over the lonely earth near the end of *The Purple Cloud*: “The Earth is all on my brain, on my brain, O dark-minded Mother, with thy passionate cravings after the Infinite” (E, 169). “Is she herself a living being, with a will and a fate” (171), he wonders, yet the maternal earth is too vast for him to comprehend. He attempts to read the planet, convinced that she “has meanings, secrets, plans” in the

design of her continents (170). He notes the interconnected formation of the continents —“it is obvious to me [. . .] that they once were one” (170)—and he ponders how geographic formations appear to mimic one another across the globe in meaningful yet indiscernible repetition: “What does she mean? What can she mean” (E, 171). He can only begin to grapple with its complex ecology, geology, biodiversity, and evolutionary history. He can only conclude: “I do not know them, but they are of her, and they are like me, molten in the same furnace of her fiery heart” (E, 172). The earth “rends her young like a cannibal lioness [. . .] over-grows me, woos me, assimilates me; so that I ask myself this question: ‘Must I not, in time, cease to be a man, and become a small earth, precisely her copy?’” (E, 172). The effect here is two fold. On one hand, the narrator, like many characters in weird fiction, embraces destruction in a way that seems to exceed the potential for recontainment. With bitter recognition, protagonists condemn Englishness, bourgeois complacency, the tedium of modern life—barely able to contain their excitement when the world crumbles around them—even if it means their own utter dissolution. On the other hand, the narrator imagines himself becoming a microcosmic repetition—“a small earth, precisely her copy”—a fractal image that overturns his previous social identity as “man.” The gendering of humanity as male seems purposeful here; the feminine earth not only threatens his biological species identity but his social, gendered identity as well. This cross- or de-gendering is complicated further by the fact that the narrator has been channeled by a woman in the narrative present. The narrator’s cryptic fantasy of being cannibalized by Mother Earth and becoming a small earth signifies a rebirth on a Deleuzian plane of consistency. Like the adventurers in “The

Willows,” he does not face degeneration or evolution but “radical alteration,” and this alteration maps the emergence of global consciousness through the maternal function. In other words, if capitalism threatens to exhaust all national boundaries and then turn inward, constantly displacing its internal limits, then no space is safe from its appropriation, even the human body. At the same time, however, the narrator is “wooded” at the thought of exceeding the boundaries of individual identity into pure multiplicity, becoming a fractal repetition-with-difference through the transindividual figure of the maternal.

Weird fiction, as I have argued, is drawn to the expansive fullness that exists just beyond the representable. They repeatedly depict phenomena as collective pressures from a world that resists modern explanation. Although the Gothic tradition has a long history of complicating and undermining individualist ideology, these potential critiques of individualism continue to rely on strong individual characters who embody “excessive individualism.” Weird tales, however, rely on hostile swarms. In *The Inheritors*, beings from a Fourth Dimension plan to invade “in swarms, to materialise, to devour like locusts” (12). On almost every page, Blackwood’s tales offer multitudes of sentient willows, woods, snow peaks, and sand dunes. In Hodgson’s *The Ghost Pirates*, a “queer, undulating greyness” spreads from the sea over the lost ship’s deck: “the greyness resolved into hundreds of strange men [. . .] unreal and impossible [who] swarmed in upon us in a great wave of murderous, living shadows.” In fact, by the late nineteenth century, romantic adventures, as Nancy Armstrong writes, obsessed with “the peculiar threat posed by [. . .] versions of collective man,” which, she suggest, stems from

a residual strand of sensibility that gathered ominous energy against the background of a growing mass of urban poor, the uprising of colonial populations, and the steady encroachment of the new mass media on traditional British culture. Mass man is distinguished by the fact that its psychic energy exceeds the sum total of individual desires composing such a group, were the group indeed composed of individuals. In the late-nineteenth-century romance, something like this transindividual desire sends a current through the human aggregate, welding any and all individuals into a single body without regard for differences of race, gender, class, and nation. Although novels that participated in the ‘romance revival’ questioned whether we are in fact individuals for whom interiority is destiny, those novels nevertheless rejoined the mainstream in defending the individual against external assaults, which they portrayed as an assault on humanity itself.<sup>143</sup>

Although Armstrong’s approach to the history of the novel remains compelling, her early-Foucauldian approach, which ends up repeating the conventional *fin de siècle* “anxiety story,” tends to limit historical and textual nuances. Her use of Haggard’s *She*, for example, seems a convincing example of this collective threat—the aggregate of the bodies of both the cannibals and their victims forming a dark mirror of London—yet the claim weakens when we widen our account of “romance revival” literature, especially fiction not explicitly engaged in imperialist adventure. In fact, most of the writers I have

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<sup>143</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia U P, 2005) 23-25.

considered here, despite their wide-ranging political positions on poverty and imperialism, belong to traditions committed to alternative forms of subjectivity—to that very “transindividual desire” that threatens individualistic, imperial society.

Along with *She*, Armstrong regularly cites *Dracula* as representing “collectivity as a radically different mode of being fundamentally opposed to individualism” (110). “Themselves products of the individualistic culture of the novel,” she writes, “*She* and *Dracula* cannot help portraying the alien thinking of the rhizome in highly artificial and negative terms” (114).<sup>144</sup> Yet, as Joseph Valente has argued, the social alternative to *Dracula*’s implicit critique of individualism is not the horrific community of blood but the distinctly Irish communitarian allegory offered by Mina in opposition to bourgeois English individualism.<sup>145</sup> Mina’s “inherit potential for entertaining alterity”—implied in her birth surname, her sympathetic and telepathic connections, her *becoming-a-mother*—allows for a quite difference interpretive possibility: “the Utopian possibilities of ethnic hybridization [. . .], an aptitude for social connectivity buried deep within the often divisive metrocolonial condition” (130). “As Stoker knew,” Valente writes, “the Irish prided themselves on a communitarian *Weltanschauung* that distinguished them from the more atomized individualism dear to John Bull” (130).

Thus the particular *jouissance* of weird fiction, an affective release it achieves at the level of genre. It confronts the threat of the total dissolution of all national, social, generic and even biological boundaries, and yet embedded in this overturning is the

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<sup>144</sup> Armstrong does see some “Utopian potential” in *Dracula*’s breast-feeding (150, 153).

<sup>145</sup> Joseph Valente, *Dracula’s Crypt: Bram Stoker, Irishness, and the Question of Blood* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002).



promise of multiplicity. An exciting colonial adventure like *She* expresses taboo desire for the exoticized Other, and then not only concedes to overwhelming terror, usually directed towards the feminine and colonial aggregate, but also reduces desire to homeostatic pleasure, usually figured in punitive physical violence that stabilizes and homogenizes a homosocial, masculine, and imperial community. Weird fiction, on the other hand, rarely conforms to this model of ego-stabilizing pleasure. It gives in to the violent, shattering promise of *jouissance*. Even sheer terror cannot overcome its desire for the transindividual Other.

### **Rediscovering a Lost World: The Parodic Potential of Generic Dissolution**

Insofar as generic discontinuities are charged throughout with the conflicted nature of historical emergence, they present the same potential as capitalism of releasing anarchic, genre-disrupting energy and then guiding it into specific ideological channels. Many late-nineteenth-century romances, for example, share weird fiction's delight in the destruction of social order, but the destruction is only a temporary exercise intended to reinvigorate a stronger, more masculine notion of English identity. As I discussed in Chapter One, Marryat's ocean adventures, which influenced later boys' fiction, including Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, offer an early example of such a strategy. These adventures dissolve social order so that a young Anglo-Saxo hero might emerge as authentically dominant.

Certainly, generic discontinuities offer a flexible strategy for the recuperation of English vigor. Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1911), for example, begins by constructing a primitive fantasy of South America that offers the possibility of romantic

adventure for Ned Malone, the middle-class Irish narrator. He discovers a rare opportunity in the modern world: the chance to become an ideal hero of romantic adventure (rather than a professional journalist). Like George Ponderevo, he hopes this manly adventure will win him the devotion of his love-interest, Gladys. Nevertheless, *The Lost World* also carries with it the ambiguities of generic experimentation. On one hand, it is Doyle's consummate criticism of the post-adventure mindset—a biting satire on Britain's misplaced pedestrian concerns. Professor Challenger, in his academic approach, remains unaware that he himself is a red-haired version of the primate. Likewise, although she desires “a man of great deeds” at the novel's start,<sup>146</sup> Gladys—always the stereotypically self-absorbed and fickle woman—is hardly wooed by Malone's heroic adventure. When he finally returns, she has moved on. Malone desperately asks her new husband, “Have you searched for hidden treasure? [. . .] Where is the glamour of romance? How did you get it?” (216). With a “vacuous” expression, the man replies that he works as a “solicitor's clerk” (ibid.).

The conclusion of the novel, in many ways, encapsulates its generic method. Heart-broken yet wiser, Ned Malone returns to his fellow adventurers, who divide up the 200,000 pounds that Lord John Roxton has received for their smuggled diamonds. In the final paragraphs, Roxton discusses his plans to use his share of the loot to equip a new expedition back to the lost world. He turns to Malone:

“As to you, young fellah, you, of course, will spend yours in gettin' married.”

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<sup>146</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World* (New York: Random House, 2003) 6.

“Not just yet,” said I, with a rueful smile. “I think, if you will have me, that I would rather go with you.”

Lord Roxton said nothing, but a brown hand was stretched out to me across the table. (218)

The novel then does not end in bourgeois marriage; it offers a “rueful” denial of such a narrative telos. Moreover, it denies the feminine bourgeois space of the metropole. It turns instead to an idealistic homosocial bond in the unspoken, manly promise of new adventures cemented between the charitable, “brown” English gentleman and the grateful Irishman.<sup>147</sup> In fact, within the narrative world of the novel, Malone really has no choice but to rejoin Roxton’s new exploration. The novel’s telos claims a rugged masculine autonomy for its Irish hero only so far as it denies the obvious fact that he has been denied entrance into metropolitan, bourgeois space.

This narrative endpoint only crystallizes the novel's continual reliance on imperial stereotypes. Roxton is always the gentlemanly imperialist, a rugged yet chivalrous Anglo-Saxon ego-ideal. The narrator is our Celtic hero, who tames his unruly tendency to engage in flights of imagination. The expedition relies on a “devoted negro,” who helps police and destroy their nefarious mulatto guides (106). The ape-men, the climactic antagonists of the novel, are the very image of colonial atavism. In fact, the adventurers discover a quintessential space for colonial conquest: a land lost in time, the literal spatial representation of an anachronistic colonial temporality. As Lord Roxton reminisces, “What, my friends, is the conquest of one nation by another? It is meaningless. Each

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<sup>147</sup> Even before the novel begins, its epigraph clearly announces its gendered programme: “I have wrought my simple plan / If I give one hour of joy / To the boy who’s half a man, / Or the man who’s half a boy.”

produces the same result. But those fierce fights, when in the dawn of the ages the cave-dwellers held their own against the tiger folk [. . .] those were the real conquests—the victories that count” (182). In an increasingly interconnected world, it becomes more difficult to maintain an imperial temporality, in which spatial distance from the metropole means historical or evolutionary distance. Instead, as we have seen earlier, fiction at the turn of the century often presents a kind of temporal dilation or indeterminacy across both metropolitan and colonial space.<sup>148</sup> However, by positing a “real” land altogether outside history, Doyle’s novel can invite readers to suspend disbelief and retreat into this temporal fantasy and its primal scene, in which human society dominates both nature and one another. After all mixed-race characters, conventionally represented as intelligent yet duplicitous, have been killed off, the band of explorers join together to fight the ape-men, who despite their human faces must be expelled back into the realm of nature. In the antagonistic struggle, the protagonists become part of a more inclusive social unit, comprising Indians, a devoted African, an Irishman, and English gentleman, which is then reintegrated into a more rigid racialist hierarchy.

The generic discontinuity of Doyle’s novel derives not from a flexible, nearly schizophrenic inclusion of multiple genres (as in Wells or Conrad), but from its parodic version of the imperial romance. Like Gladys, *every* character in the novel is reduced to stereotype. When the narrator meets Professor Challenger, he immediately faces phrenological analysis meant to discredit his word of honor:

“Round-headed,” he muttered. “Brachycephalic, grey-eyed, black-haired,

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<sup>148</sup> See Esty’s reading of Olive Schreiner’s *The African Farm* (1883) in “The Colonial Bildungsroman,” especially 415-416.

with suggestion of the negroid. Celtic, I presume?”

“I am an Irishman, sir.”

“Irish Irish?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That, of course, explains it.” (27)

Not only is Malone subjected to such stereotypes, he has also internalized them and their contradictions: “I have an Irish imagination which makes the unknown and the untried more terrible than they are. On the other hand, I was brought up with a horror of cowardice and with a terror of such a stigma” (58)

However, when they arrive in the lost world, it is Professor Challenger who simultaneously faces the danger of “going native” and finds himself reflected in the atavistic Other. Although the narrator retains the very language of phrenology that the professor has used against him, he describes Challenger as a red-haired, English mirror of the simian inhabitants:

A single day seemed to have changed him from the highest product of modern civilization to the most desperate savage in South America. Beside him stood his master, the king of the ape-men. In all things he was [. . .] the very image of our Professor, save that his coloring was red instead of black. The same short, broad figure, the same heavy shoulders, the same forward hang of the arms, the same bristling beard merging itself in the hairy chest. Only above the eyebrows, where the sloping forehead and low, curved skull of the ape-man were in sharp contrast to the broad brow and

magnificent cranium of the European, could one see any marked difference. At every other point the king was an absurd parody of the Professor. (165)

Returning to camp, Lord Roxton must assure their frightened Indian companions that the disheveled Professor, the “chosen child” of “European science,” is “only a human, just the same as the rest of us” (168). In retrospect, the Professor narcissistically reassures himself that the “king of the ape-men was really a creature of great distinction—a most remarkably handsome and intelligent personality” (169). The narrative recognizes a kinship with the radical colonial Other, but only for the purpose of critiquing Professor Challenger’s magnified, antisocial, and supposedly detached intellectualism. Only those characters who, like the Irish narrator or the “brown” gentleman, recognize and tame their kinship with the Other remain immune to colonial degeneration.

I include *The Lost World* for two reasons: first, to note the conservative potential of generic flexibility and, secondly, to outline briefly the relationship between generic experimentation and the discontinuities of metropolitan identity. Although imperial romances had long lost their popularity by 1912, Doyle’s novel became an enormous success, spawning a renewed “lost world” genre that enjoyed full access to imaginative, impossible spaces in a world devoid of imperial adventure. Although *The Lost World* offers a naturalistic version of the fantastic by including fictional sketches, maps, and photographs, it also reproduces images and tropes packaged for mass consumption, including the stereotypical characters and the parody of the colonial dark self. As Michael Saler explains, Conan Doyle “scrupulously supervised the creation and

placement of [ . . . ] photographs, sketches, and illustrations of the Lost World itself and its prehistoric inhabitants. He remarked in a letter to his illustrator, ‘I feel that we shall make a great joke out of this. . . . I look forward with great interest to see your first studies of fakes.’”<sup>149</sup>

Whereas H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* uses temporal distance and the quasi-human Mollocks and Eloi to satirize English class divisions and the imperial romance,<sup>150</sup> the temporal fantasy of *The Lost World* allows the novel to reconcile its artificial stereotypes with the naturalistic form of the narrative. Specifically, the Irish narrator provides much of this reconciliation. On the fringes of white imperial identity, Malone can draw attention to the superficiality and artificiality of bourgeois London society. In this sense, Conan Doyle’s novel repeats the logic Wells criticizes through George Ponderevo in *Tono-Bungay*. As I argued in chapter three, George identifies with his absent father settler because he provides a phallic imperial ideal that is paradoxically hybrid. Between what George Ponderevo imagines as an effete sociality of the metropole (the inauthentic Self) and the ineffable reality of colonial biology (the authentic Other), the image of his father provides an integral mediator. Although Wells represents George’s fantasy as a failure, Conan Doyle uses this interstitial logic to reinvigorate the fantasy of imperial adventure. While weird fiction discovers in its non-Euclidean spaces the relative insignificance of mankind and his empires, *The Lost World* invokes the conventions of the weird and renders them a gag. Its parody, however, allows the novel

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<sup>149</sup> Michael Saler, “Modernity, Disenchantment, and the Ironic Imagination,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28.1 (2004) 144.

<sup>150</sup> See Paul A. Cantor and Peter Hufnagel, “The Empire of the Future: Imperialism and Modernism in H. G. Wells,” *Studies in the Novel* 38.1 (2006).

to turn to the evolutionary past and, in the very act of disavowing imperial adventure and racist caricature, reinstate an imperial hierarchy as if were the inevitable outcome of the primal colonial encounter. As an Irishman, Ned Malone belongs to the borderlines of metropolitan identity. Like the black Celts of Marryat and Kipling's maritime adventures, which I address in chapter two, imperial discourse relied on a radically mobile sense of Irishness—a "metrocolonial immixture," as Joseph Valente argues, in which "affinity with the metropolitan (Anglo) center was assumed and even assured, but was at the same time shadowed (both troubled and exaggerated) by [a] continued connection with the colonial (Celtic) fringe" (18). His flexible identity, at the heart of a flexible romance, provides a safety valve for the weird's destabilizing, centrifugal narrative force. On one hand, his sensitive "Celtic temperament" contributes to the team by allowing him to sense colonial danger through an ethnic "telepathy" (137). In the end, however, he successfully compensates for his internalized feelings of racial inferiority and thus masters the Other within himself. As if his internal development was insufficient, the novel externalizes this mastery in the destruction of the ape-men, whose hyphenated identity captures their abject fusion of human and animal. As Lord John, the action hero, exclaims in a line that so perfectly captures the novel's transformation of out-dated Victorian anxieties of degeneration into campy fun: "Ape-men—that's what they are—Missin' Links, and I wish they had stayed missin'" (158).

By reducing imperial adventure to fantasy and even farce, the novel offers a gratuitous fulfillment of the genre in which it participates. By satisfying generic desires—even to the point of acknowledging their artificiality—Doyle shores up a more flexible



yet nostalgic imperial identity. The novel—both comedic and naturalistic—becomes an exercise in collective fantasy as it draws on the discursive field of imperial representation. Like Ned Malone, who repeatedly invokes his Irish flights of fancy, one cannot recognize the stereotypes or parody without being included in the field of representation. As Michael Crichton writes in his introduction to *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle’s “approach does not reduce the reader’s acquiescence, but rather encourages it: even as we are amused, even as we are told not to take it seriously, we are subtly encouraged to go along with the gag” (xv). On one hand, such an approach offers the potential of critical or ironic distance.<sup>151</sup> However, although I agree that the novel’s generic method remains more complex than mindless escape, I would argue that, rather than undermine the stereotypes reproduced, the novel offers the reading public consumable images of itself. Put differently, Conan Doyle’s novel uses the ironic distance of its generic parody not to sustain such critical irony but rather to invite readers to participate in its ideological disavowal. “I know that the notion of modern imperial adventure is absurd and that the racist stereotypes it invokes are clearly outdated,” the clever reader thinks, “but I choose to suspend my belief.” Rather than follow weird fiction’s Deleuzian model of disavowal, in which the Real is neutralized through an imaginative unfolding of new dimensions, *The Lost World* adopts a Lacanian model. In staging imperial mastery, the novel refuses to acknowledge its desire for what it lacks and excludes: the multiplicity and collectivity of the Other, “the missing link,” the Celt.

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<sup>151</sup> This is essentially Saler’s reading of the novel and its immersive “paratextual elements” (145).

## CHAPTER 5: WEIRD IRELAND IN *THE SNAKE'S PASS*

The sound of the waves dashing on the rocks below, [. . .] but through it came another sound [. . .] something terrible, resistless, and with a sort of hiss in it, as of seething waters striving to be free. Then the convulsion of the bog grew greater; it almost seemed as if some monstrous living thing was deep under the surface and writhing to escape.

—Bram Stoker, *The Snake's Pass* (1890)

Authors of weird fiction, like the writers included in Chapter Four, often share complicated relationships to British individualist identity, and many write from the ethnographic fringes of empire. M. P. Shiel may have helped spawn the racist genre of “yellow peril” stories with his best-selling serial novel *The Yellow Danger* (1898)—reissued as *The Yellow Peril* in the midst of the Boxer Rebellion—but Shiel himself was a colonial subject, the Caribbean son of parents of Irish and African descent. Lord Dunsany (Anglo-Irish) and Arthur Machen (Welsh) molded modern fantasy out of Celtic folklore. The overwhelming sense of displacement and alienation in Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) stems not only from the narrator’s struggling career as a writer in modern London but also from his conflicted Welsh-Catholic identity. The mysterious self-styled persona of Marie Corelli (or Mary Mackay) and the questions surrounding her identity—as the illegitimate and cosmopolitan daughter of a Scottish poet (during her lifetime) and as a contested lesbian (in contemporary criticism)—draw our attention to the fluctuating identities of characters throughout her romances. Algernon Blackwood, despite being born into suburban London nobility, regularly emphasized his maternal Irish and paternal Scottish heritage. Like his semi-autobiographical counterpart in *The Centaur* (1911), Blackwood was drawn to the idea of an ancient, shared Celtic

imaginative capacity:

Of mingled Irish, Scotch, and English blood, the first predominated, and the Celtic element in him was strong. A man of vigorous health, careless of gain, a wanderer, and by his own choice something of an outcast, he led to the end the existence of a rolling stone. [. . .] he found himself in a state of perpetual astonishment at the mystery of things [. . .] getting no further than the House of Wonder, on whose cusp surely he had been born.

Civilization, he loved to say, had blinded the eyes of men, filling them with dust instead of vision.<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, despite their imperialist sympathies, the work of generic innovators Arthur Conan Doyle (Anglo-Irish) and Rudyard Kipling (Anglo-Indian) has also been re-evaluated in an attempt to understand their nuanced relationship to British identity.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, Conrad's early experiences in Poland left him acutely aware of the tensions between individualism (whether Romantic or pragmatic), imperialist hegemony, and collective identity.<sup>154</sup>

In noting the Celtic threads that run through the preceding list of weird and speculative writers, we should also include Bram Stoker as not only a pioneer of weird, generically discontinuous fiction, but also as personally representative of the kind of fringe subjectivity, which, as I have argued, attracts and occupies weird narratives. From

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<sup>152</sup> Algernon Blackwood, *The Centaur* (London: Macmillan, 1916) 4-5.

<sup>153</sup> See Catherine Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism, and the Gothic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002); Zoreh Sullivan's *Narratives of Empire: the Fictions of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993); and Ian Baucom's reading of *Kim* in *Out of Place* 86-100.

<sup>154</sup> See Eagleton, *Criticism* 133.

their interstitial position within the British Empire, Anglo-Irish writers in particular grasped the artificiality of the *genera* employed by imperialism to shore up discontinuities in the ethnic, cultural, and political identities it imposed. Moreover, as Joseph Valente has argued, Stoker's ethnic identity was more complicated than the already complex affiliation of the Anglo-Irish: "Stoker was not a standard-issue middle-class Anglo-Irish Protestant, as has been almost universally imagined, but an interethnic Anglo-Celt and hence a member of a conquering and a conquered race, a ruling and a subject people, and imperial and an occupied nation" (8). This hybridity, Valente continues, informed Stoker's "sophisticated manipulation of generic, specifically Gothic conventions," to the point of pushing these classificatory structures to the point of "genre abrasion" and "formal breakdown" (35). Resistance at the level of form, he argues, allowed Stoker to engage and undermine the identitarian logic of English and Irish stereotypes.

In fact, Ireland represents a compelling site for the imperial crises I have addressed thus far. As David Lloyd argues, Ireland underwent "the transition to hegemonic colonialism far earlier than any other colony,"<sup>155</sup> and, in many ways, England's neighboring colony seems to anticipate new imperialism, including its shift from conquest and colonization to imperial administration and capitalist development. A century earlier, British colonialism had faced considerable crises. After the American colonies' successful war for independence, the United Irishmen, inspired by the American and French revolutions, led a failed rebellion in 1798. In response to the uprising, Britain

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<sup>155</sup> David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 3.

formally incorporated Ireland through the Act of Union, which “yoked the two countries together under the Parliament in London [and] represented a further integration of Ireland into English political life.”<sup>156</sup> The Act was the end product of a long colonial history, in which conquest was only a first step in subjugation. The early strategy of settlement, as Ellen Meiksins Wood writes, aimed “not only to ‘civilize’ the Irish but also [. . .] to absorb Ireland into the English economy, making it into a dependency in a way that attempts at political and legal integration had so far failed to do so” (80). Economically and politically, Ireland became the laboratory for British imperialism. It became the testing ground, for example, of colonial “development” motivated by the logic of capitalist profit.<sup>157</sup>

As Stoker’s first novel qua novel, *The Snake’s Pass* (1890) represents both an important step in the development of Stoker’s work, from his early narrative experiments with genre in the serial *The Primrose Path* (1875) to the deft generic volatility of *Dracula* (1897), and a revealing engagement with the intricacies of Irish identity. However, in his account of Stoker’s engagement with Irishness, Valente dismisses *The Snake’s Pass* as programmatic. In borrowing its “allegorical plotline from Boucicault’s most famous and formulaic Irish offerings, *The Colleen Bawn* and *The Shaughraun*,” he argues, Stoker offers a “conventional deployment of English and Irish types” (12). Valente is right to point out the conventional allegorical plotline of Stoker’s novel, which can easily be seen as a “metropolitan marriage comedy,” in which “an English soldier (*The Shaughraun*), settler (*The Colleen Bawn*), or tourist (*the Snake’s Pass*) engage a native, exoticized Irish

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<sup>156</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1996) 20.

<sup>157</sup> On Ireland and imperial capitalist development, see Meiksins Wood 82-83.

girl on her home turf, her stationary life-posture standing for her relatively unitary and organic, because premodern, ethno-national identity” (Valente 13). In fact, initial reviews also found the novel’s characters typological; they are “pleasant company,” a reviewer in *Punch* wrote, “in spite of the fact that they inhabit a purely archetypal Ireland.”<sup>158</sup>

However, I would argue, the novel is far less conventional than it first appears and hardly the formal outlier to Valente’s argument. In its representation of the shifting bog and its adaptation of theatrical melodrama, *The Snake’s Pass* demonstrates how the symbolic and generic pressures of the weird force the novel form to confront the discontinuities of capitalist imperialism.

### **The Missing Genealogy of *The Snake’s Pass***

The anonymous *Punch* review captures one initial reaction to *The Snake’s Pass*: it is “a simple love-story, a pure idyl of Ireland.”<sup>159</sup> This pithy description highlights two narrative engines that drive most of the novel: first, the romantic adventure, in which the English gentleman narrator overcomes obstacles in order to wed the virtuous Irish peasant; and, secondly, the sustained attention to the regional Irish (and idealized pastoral) backdrop against which the romantic plot takes place. While traveling on a leisurely holiday in the west of Ireland, the young Englishman Arthur Severn is forced to weather out a storm in a rural village. After a communal supper of “roasted herrings and whiskey punch,” his cabdriver Andy and other villagers recount the local legend of the Shleenanaher or “Snake’s Pass.”<sup>160</sup> Long ago, they explain, before St. Patrick banished

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<sup>158</sup> Unsigned review of *The Snake’s Pass*, by Bram Stoker, *The Academy* 39 (1891) 11.

<sup>159</sup> Baron de Book-Worms, review of *The Snake’s Pass*, by Bram Stoker in *Punch, or the London Charivari*, December 6, 1890, 269.

<sup>160</sup> Bram Stoker, *The Snake’s Pass* (Chicago: Valancourt Books, 2006) 9.

the snakes from Ireland, the terrible King of Snakes nested in the nearby mountain.

When St. Patrick ordered all snakes into the sea, the snake king resisted, claiming that his sovereignty exempted him from the saint's jurisdiction. Forced to accept exile, the snake king, in a final act of defiance, hid his jeweled crown deep within the mountain, which became known as Knockcalltecore or "Hill of the Lost Golden Crown." As the giant serpent slithered down into the sea, he left the cliffs known as the Snake's Pass.

But not all the snakes have left, explains an old man. The nefarious "Gombeen Man," the local moneylender Black Murdock, aims to acquire all of Knockcalltecore in order to continue his methodical search for another treasure. During the failed invasion of 1798, a French gun-carriage carrying gold for Irish rebels sank in the treacherous bog that covers the hillside. Obsessed with finding this treasure, Murdock storms into the house, announcing his claim to his neighbor's land based on an unavoidably late loan payment. Afterwards, the narrator offers to take the distraught neighbor home, where he meets his lovely daughter Norah.

Amidst sweeping sublime descriptions of a "primal desolation" of mountain, valley, sky, and sea (3), a somewhat familiar Gothic tale ensues. The narrator soon meets Dick Sutherland, an old schoolmate and geologist who, in studying the peculiar local bog, has been paid by Murdock to search it for the sunken gun-carriage. Both men fall in love with Norah, but the two quickly and amiably reconcile when Sutherland concedes. With his friend's geological expertise and loyal help, Arthur attempts to protect Norah and her land from the increasingly desperate Murdock. The narrator's heroic fantasies come true as he and Norah struggle against this fanatical dark villain, who tricks, kidnaps, and

assaults the beautiful heroine. This “simple love-story” accumulates additional Gothic overtones when the heroes must not only survive the despicable landlord but also, in the words of an *Academy* reviewer, the “curious natural phenomenon” of “strange and terrible scenery” (ibid.). Contrary to the “quiet pastoral beauty” of southeast England, the narrator Severn explains, the oppressive “wild majesty” of the Irish countryside “arrested my attention and absorbed my imagination” (4). Although *The Snake’s Pass* is Stoker’s first foray into the novel form, it offers important contributions to emergent weird fiction through its revision of the Gothic tradition and its picturesque descriptions of sublime landscapes in decay. As with later weird tales, the novel does not ultimately rely on the supernatural, favoring instead the pseudo-geological phenomenon of the peculiar shifting bog. While weird fiction, including Stoker’s own later work, would not be as eager to offer clear explanations for ab-natural phenomena nor reconcile multiple genres, *The Snake’s Pass* eventually offers both a scientific account of the bog and a somewhat coherent generic conflation around the melodrama of the metropolitan marriage.

In describing the novel as a conventional “metropolitan marriage comedy,” Valente identifies the pervasive political allegory in which masculine England joins feminized colonial Ireland through the Act of Union.<sup>161</sup> The allegory became well-entrenched in political rhetoric and literature, including the popular mid-century Irish melodramas of Dion Boucicault. As a theater critic and business manager for the West End’s Lyceum Theatre, Stoker was, in fact, personally acquainted with the famous Anglo-Irish playwright and had helped stage several of his plays. Boucicault’s comic

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<sup>161</sup> See Valente 12-13; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, “National Identities in Performance: The Stage Englishman of Boucicault’s Irish Drama,” *Theatre Journal* 49.3 (1997) 295-297.



melodrama, *The Shaughraun* (1874), Valente points out, “could, with certain details altered, easily stand as a stage version of Stoker’s novel” (12).<sup>162</sup> Both works follow the romantic entanglement and eventual marriage of an Englishman and a virtuous Irish woman. In both cases, comedy generally follows the Englishman who awkwardly navigates the local customs and vernacular of rural Ireland, while melodrama stems from the devoted woman’s conflicted loyalties to her future husband and her community as well as the materialistic Irish villain’s crafty attempts to “acquire” the beautiful Irish woman by seizing her family land (and, when this fails, both villains resort to kidnapping). The conventional conclusion of the “metropolitan marriage” plot becomes, in Valente’s words, “an Anglocentric framework for projecting gendered, hierarchically disposed stereotypes of Englishness and Irishness under the sign of a harmonious reconciliation of the two lands and peoples” (12). We should note, however, that the “metropolitan marriage” has no discernible generic trajectory in the tradition of the novel. Julie Miller traces the domestic national trope in Edgeworth’s *The Absentee* (1812) and Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806),<sup>163</sup> and, much like *The Snake’s Pass* and Boucicault’s play, both novels rely on Anglicized heroes of privilege, native Irish women, and some economic crisis that endangers their family estate. In terms of genre, these novels might be situated within the history the novel of the Big House. As James Cahalan writes, “the Big House novel was the most popular and enduring subgenre

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<sup>162</sup> Nicholas Daly also notes the similarity between *The Snake’s Pass* and *The Shaughraun*. See Daly, *Modernism* 67.

<sup>163</sup> Julie Anne Miller, “Acts of Union: Family Violence and National Courtship in Maria Edgeworth’s *The Absentee* and Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*,” in Kathryn Kirkpatrick, ed., *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

within the Irish novel, except for the Irish historical novel.”<sup>164</sup> While the Big House remains an ubiquitous image and setting in Irish fiction, “the Big House novel” also denotes a formal genre. As Vera Kreilkamp points out, Big House novels often present a young landlord, long resident in England, who finds his authentic identity in Ireland.<sup>165</sup>

Of course, *The Snake’s Pass* is not a “Big House novel.” It can only be said to engage the specific thematics of the Irish genre in the general sense that the narrative revolves around the acquisition and cultivation of land and concludes with a country estate, as if the image and its Anglo-Irish associations embodied the novel’s ultimate picture of blissful familial, ecological, and political unity. Rather than focus on an Anglo-Irish landlord, Stoker stages a gradual process in which the English narrator becomes a munificent landlord in direct contradistinction to the malevolent native Irish landlord and usurer. The big house becomes the telos of the novel rather than the physical or ideological topos of conflict. Moreover, whereas the typical Anglo-Irish hero of the “Big House novel” discovers his own authentic identity, the union of the Englishman and native Irish woman in *The Snake’s Pass* leads to a discovery—quite literally—of the “true identity” of the land itself.

Big house novel, catastrophic tale, adventure romance, regional idyll, Irish Gothic, Boucicaultian melodrama, early weird fiction—no category or even constellation of categories provides a reliable genealogy for the novel form of *The Snake’s Pass*.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> James Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne, 1988) xxii.

<sup>165</sup> Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse U P, 1998) 23-25.

<sup>166</sup> On catastrophe in adventure fiction and the imperial discourse of development, see Cara Murray, “Catastrophe and Development in Adventure Romance,” *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 53.2 (2010).

The very fact that the clearest precursor to Stoker's novel lies on the Irish stage—altogether outside the novel tradition—indicates that we are dealing with a strange generic specimen. However, before returning to this question of genre, we should first map out the political implications of the narrative itself.

### **Political Allegory in *The Snake's Pass***

Whether situated in the Anglo-Irish Big House tradition or the spectacle of the metropolitan marriage, we might read *The Snake's Pass* as a somewhat politically conservative allegory that ultimately reinforces a romantic notion of the responsible and rational English landlord who weds a dutiful native woman and transforms her fractured, neglected estate into a paradise. Meanwhile, the loyal pair must survive the assaults of the evil Irish villain. In fact, the novel's mythical background story, which drives the novel from the early scenes to the conclusion, easily maps onto this plot. In repeated dream sequences, the narrator explicitly connects the current events of the novel with the local myth. Norah is the hidden treasure—"a bigger treasure from Knockcalltecore than ever was hidden in it by men" (163)—while Black Murdock, "the Gombeen Man," is the snake:

And so in dreams [. . .] I seemed to live over again in isolated moments all the past weeks; but in such a way that the legends and myths and stories of Knockcalltecore which I had heard were embodied in each moment. Thus, Murdock [. . .] got inextricably mixed up with the King of the Snakes. They freely exchanged personalities, and at one time I could see the Gombeen Man defying St. Patrick [. . .]. (155)

The allegory recurs in a later dream: “When my dreams began, [the Hill] was bathed in a flood of yellow moonlight, and at its summit was the giant Snake, [. . .] whose face and form kept perpetually changing to those of Murtagh Murdock” (176). In the novel’s catastrophic conclusion, Murdock and the seething bog (also described as a mass of “writhing snakes”) are swept away into the sea. Just as the narrator dreamed, the “serpents” are expelled, the multiple treasures—Norah, the mythical crown, and French gold—are liberated, and a new verdant paradise is reestablished. In this “fairy-land” (212), marital bliss, ecological rejuvenation, and widespread economic prosperity soon follow.

In linking the exoticized native Irish girl with the buried treasure, she becomes a hidden beauty, who the narrator struggles to discover and secure. Moreover, the novel and its sincere narrator posit Norah as a moral alternative to the obsessive materialism of Murdock. Norah is the “bigger treasure” (163), which can be held “in your arms” (124). The detestable gombeen man, on the other hand, imagines he can buy Norah and thus acquire more land, under which his treasure might be buried. In a moment of utter indignation, her father replies to the villain’s abrupt marriage proposal: “Thank ye, Mr. Murtagh Murdock, but me daughter is not for sale!” (145). The native Irish villain emerges as the figure of predatory capitalism. Without the intervention of the visiting Englishman, virtuous Ireland (feminine, devoted) would inevitably fall victim to the “Black” Irish fanatic. Murdock’s figuration as the Sheelander or serpent king links him to an endemic Irish danger that, despite being linked to capitalism, is represented as premodern and organic as Norah’s chastity. He must be driven out in a repetition of the

foundational Irish moment in which Saint Patrick banishes its native satanic presence. The fact that the novel associates Murdock with native Ireland only serves to bolster its conservative drive. He stands in as the dangerous Hibernian typical of imperialist propaganda—“Black,” “serpent,” “infection,” “naygur [nigger],” all of which index his phenotypic threat.

Thus, as William Hughes argues, *The Snake's Pass* “functions essentially as a fable of reconstruction; a synecdoche in which supposedly representative Irish ‘problems’ are identified, and an arena where these are overcome through the intervention and energy of an outsider rendered the more conspicuous through his non-participation in the well-wrought dialect of the fictional peasants” (17).<sup>167</sup> In mapping the love plot onto the mythic, however, several complications arise from the legend’s symbolic possibilities. First, in the symbolic economy of *The Snake's Pass*, which establishes Norah as treasure, Murdock as serpent, the male heroes as Saint Patrick, and the love plot as an idyllic Act of Union, what does the shifting bog represent?

As Nicholas Daly writes, while “Stoker partly succeeds at transforming historical trauma into a neatly packaged plot, one feature seems to place considerable strain on its procedures – the shifting bog” (*Modernism* 75). One cannot simply dismiss this central phenomenon as a backdrop or simple mechanism for the novel’s romantic plot. This “carpet of death” is given as much symbolic weight and metaphoric linkages as the main characters, but it remains far more flexible in its symbolism. Often, the bog functions as a metaphor for Norah and women in general, but it is also described as writhing snakes

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<sup>167</sup> Hughes, William. “‘For Ireland’s Good’; The Reconstruction of Rural Ireland in Bram Stoker’s ‘The Snake’s Pass,’” *Irish Studies Review* 12 (Autumn 1995) 17.

and thus linked with Murdock, the Sheelander, and threatening primordial Irishness. In his dreams, Severn foresees the bog flowing into the sea: “over the cliff poured the whole mass of the bog, foul-smelling, fœtid, terrible, and of endless might. [. . .] the whole mighty mass turned into loathsome, writhing snakes, sweeping into the sea!” (177). Despite this description, however, the bog is not an ancient but a modern ecological problem. It is the direct result of Murdock’s greedy desire to circumscribe his property by damming a stream. In the climactic conclusion of the novel, this “carpet” is swept away to reveal a prosperous ancient Ireland.

With so many competing associations, it becomes difficult to map the bog onto the conservative imperial allegory of the novel. Instead, it stands in as an overabundance of interpretive potential. Moreover, in its refusal to absorb a fixed meaning, the bog becomes joined with the feminine, and yet this association cannot be strictly reduced, as it is in Hughes’s reading, to the conventional misogynist logic of inconstancy. To repeat Andy’s ongoing joke, Norah is “a bit of bog” you can “put your arrum around while ye’re lukin’ at it” (60). She is the closed container, to use Luce Irigaray’s distinction, as opposed to the open container or *l’incontournable volume* of the shifting bog.<sup>168</sup>

Whereas Norah becomes the wife and future mother of the imperial utopia, the bog is the ultimate threat to masculinist imperial mastery: it respects no territorial marker, flows in a liminal state between liquid and solid, and cannot be appropriated. Unlike Norah, it can neither be embraced physically or symbolically as the solid foundation for a big house. It becomes an exaggeration of the abject maternal body. It can only be banished, abjected,

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<sup>168</sup> See Luce Irigaray, “Volume without Contours,” in *The Irigaray Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

and pushed out as the fluid remainder of the (re)birth of an Irish paradise. You cannot, under any circumstances, “put your arrum” around the shifting bog. Consider the Arthur and Dick’s disgust when Murdock attempts to embrace the bog after discovering a rusty gun-carriage, which he believes contains his beloved treasure: “It certainly was most filthy. It was a shapeless, irregular mass, but made solid with rust and ooze and the bog surface through which it had been dragged. The slim ran from it in a stream; but its filth had no deterring power for Murdock, who threw himself down beside it and actually kissed the nauseous mass” (132). In fact, the bog is a perfect example of the weird and abject: it is neither alive nor dead, consisting of decaying plant matter, and yet it “shifts” with sentience and purpose. Through metonymy, the abject bog is an abject *Éire*, a contradictory zone of social life uninhabitable yet populated, unlivable yet living. The metropolitan marriage may be the structuring political allegory of the novel, but Stoker places within it the abject phenomenon that this exclusionary allegory sloughs off: the surplus Ireland not included in its domesticated figuration as the virtuous peasant woman. This abject zone—into which Murdock is immersed—forms the identification against which the new colonial subject—figured in the metropolitan marriage, its emergent big house and offspring—gains its autonomy.

Thus, although Stoker's representation of overlapping, sentient, insurgent space offers a clear precedence for later weird fiction, its internal logic remains quite different. As I argued in Chapter Four, Algernon Blackwood offers characters who are drawn to some phenomenon that punctures through everyday reality with a glimpse of a

mysterious fullness beyond the representable.<sup>169</sup> Here, in *The Snake's Pass*, Stoker's logic is precisely the opposite. The veil, which typically masks a primordial collective, is the weird phenomenon, and the underlying reality it reveals is not the inchoate Real but the revelatory telos of the novel. This is the conservative formal structure that sediments the novel's troubling appropriation of the metropolitan image of Ireland. It forces the realization of an abject or weird realm that essentially resists symbolic realization, but, rather than trauma or self-immolation, Stoker's characters find full symbolic stability. They push aside the abject as if it were simply a mask or, in Sutherland's words, "a carpet of death." The absurdity of such a phrase—although accurate in its description—registers the novel's general strategy of ideological avoidance: "carpet," a quotidian domestic metaphor that implies a simple layer rather than an absolute limit. Thus, while Stoker's novel stages an unsettling confrontation with the Real in its violent abject form, the confrontation becomes the ultimate strategy in avoiding the Real. In other words, if weird fiction demonstrates an early-twentieth-century "passion for the Real," as Alain Badiou characterizes the century, then Stoker's novel presents this passion's more insidious counterpart or what Slavoj Žižek describes as "passions of semblance:" "this Real Thing is a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency ('antagonism')." <sup>170</sup> Whereas the phantasms of "The Willows" or *The Inheritors* refuse to

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<sup>169</sup> Of course, Blackwood's identification with the Celt was largely an imaginative resistance to the bourgeois English society that surrounded him, whereas Stoker writes from lived experience on the thresholds of Irish identity.

<sup>170</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the desert of the real!: five essays on September 11 and related dates* (New York: Verso, 2002) 32. See also 5-6. Badiou describes the twentieth-century passion for the Real in *The Century* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008) 48-57.



be reincorporated into a discernible narrative, Stoker's shifting bog bolsters the novel's conservative allegory. In the climactic end, Norah, the very figure of colonial loyalty, risks her own life to save her English fiancée, and the bog sweeps away Murdock with its own unproductive dead matter, both of which stand in resistance to the productive estate established at the end of the novel.

Nevertheless, this ideologically conservative thrust (both in form and content) cannot fully seal off the destabilizing pressure of the weird. While the novel re-stabilizes its narrative and literally re-territorializes the resistant Irish terrain, Stoker's need for a distinctively Anglo-Irish position in the novel's colonial allegory leaves an unexpected ambivalence, which becomes registered formally in the specific doubling of mythical treasures and the novel's Boucicaultian debt.

### **On Repeating Irish Origins**

As we have seen thus far, the novel offers a unifying Irish allegory in its repetition of a safe act of union between Celt and Anglo-Saxon. Our well-meaning English narrator marries a fearlessly loyal Irish peasant, brings together her land, and uses modern technology to improve it. He wards off the parasitic native "Black Murdock" and offers economic and social benevolence. The novel reinforces this love story by staging it as a repetition of the Irish legend that bookends the novel. Stoker's incorporation of the myth into the opening and closing of the novel lends a cyclical sense of historical time to an otherwise reconstructive, archetypal, and ultimately conservative Irish political allegory. In many ways, repetition is the modus operandi of *The Snake's Pass*. The jokes with Andy the cabdriver recur until they are nearly drained of humor. For much of the novel,

his sole purpose is to appear and repeat an inside joke he shares with the narrator, whose interest in Norah they allude to through coding her as a fairy or bog. Moreover, the novel is driven by the ongoing mythic repetition of Norah as treasure and Murdock as snake. Early in the novel, Norah herself is redundant in that she is mistaken as two women, and her multiplicity leads to romantic tension between the two male heroes, both of whom are attracted to her. Even the competition between the narrator and Murdock, who both gradually accumulate the legendary hill through the tedious legal and commercial acquisition of various plots of land, becomes repetitive.

On one hand, we might interpret such reiterations as attempts to minimize ambiguity in a work centered around the amorphous, incoherent phenomenon of the bog (and by extension the inherent ambiguities of Irishness)—a desire to render symbolic unity out of the border regions of the abject—but the repetition of the mythical treasure undermines this drive towards an original unity. Throughout the novel, we wonder if the buried treasure actually exists, and, if it does, *which* treasure will our heroes discovered? There are, after all, two legends competing for attention. The predominate suspicion, which the novel actively elicits, assumes that the legend of the snake king and his treasure is only old folklore of the superstitious Irish. The narrator contemplates how strange it is that “men must be always putting abstract ideas into concrete shape [. . .]. The Shifting Bog, for instance; [. . .] as the people could not account for it in any way that they can understand, they knocked up a legend about it” (21). After all his friend notes, Ireland has always had a surplus of legends (89).

The story of the sunken carriage, on the other hand, is only one generation past.

Old Moynahan can recall his father's detailed account. Despite his irrational obsession, the calculating Murdock focuses on this treasure and conducts a methodical search, hiring Sutherland for his scientific expertise in plotting a grid search of the land. Considering that the novel misdirects our attention to this potential treasure, let us imagine, as an exercise, that the novel culminated in the discovery of the French treasure, intended for the Irish rebels, and *only* this treasure. On one hand, after the sublime climax of the deadly bog, safety and rationality would be restored. The legend, as our heroes expected, had only been an attempt to explain a natural geological phenomenon. The loving couple would still modernize their land, but there would also arise an interesting interpretive possibility: the violent mass of the bog had been protecting a treasure meant for Irish rebels, which now funds the metropolitan marriage.

In Stoker's later novel, Count Dracula explains that local superstitions about buried treasure stem from Transylvania's long history of invasions, during which riches would be hidden away. Raphael Ingelbien suggest that this insider knowledge “sets Dracula apart from the local peasantry by giving him the knowledge possessed by dead Ascendancy patriarchs.”<sup>171</sup> The overlapping Transylvanian and Irish accounts of treasures buried during political upheaval, he argues, link Dracula to Ascendancy landlords, who often haunt their buried treasures in Gothic tales. The treasure of gold coins in *The Snake's Pass*, however, holds a quite different genealogy. Although it was lost during a time of political turmoil, it was explicitly intended to aid the Irish rebellion of 1798. Rather than Anglo-Irish wealth, it was a treasure, in the narrator's words, “sent

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<sup>171</sup> Raphael Ingelbien, “Gothic Genealogies: Dracula, Bowen's Court, and Anglo-Irish Psychology,” *ELH* 70.4 (2003) 1094.

by freemen to aid others [. . .] for Ireland's good" (207). One might imagine that by coupling the ancient legend of the Sheelander with the 1798 rebellion, the novel would produce a fundamental ambivalence: while the legendary treasure can circumvent the long violent colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland, the French treasure nonchalantly highlights the quintessential Irish rebellion, which carries with it the memory of a unified Irish resistance and the horror of British counterinsurgency. However, both treasures fulfill a similar fantasy. As Daly argues, "[t]he traces of an ancient Celtic order revealed when the bog disappears [. . .] hold out the promise of a culture before political division; and when the bog slides away it carries with it the history that fuels division" (*Modernism* 75); when the cumulative sediment of the bog—and all the colonial history it has absorbed—rushes out to sea, it not only opens a space for the loving metropolitan marriage, but it also leaves behind the trace of a non-sectarian Ireland. In this aspect, Stoker also draws from Boucicault's play, in which the English hero becomes brother-in-law to a Fenian rebel. As Cullingford argues, *The Shaughraun* "implies that the bond between colonizer and rebel, honorable enemies and decent fellows, is threatened not by the English people, but by the land-grabbing Kinchela and the informer Harvey Duff, lower-class Irishmen complicit with a corrupt colonial system" (299). Despite their clear contradictions, the novel can balance the French treasure of the 1798 uprising, the golden crown of the Sheelander, the interethnic marriage, and the developed estate all with relative stability only if it expels Murdock, who contradictorily embodies an *imperialist* need to accumulate land refracted through the phenotype of the colonial villain, and the bog, which simultaneously signifies a native

Irish threat (Real) and the sediment of colonial history (veil).

After the bog is cleared away, the heroes find indecipherable aboriginal writing or ogham on the walls of the cave that contains the legendary treasure. Even with their new-found autonomy (symbolized by the ancient crown) and the plenitude of a revitalized Irish landscape, which will serve as the foundation for their Big House, they confront the inaccessibility of history. Once again, in response to the inscrutable, the novel inserts a symbolic substitution. Nearby, the narrator raises a monument to Norah's "Courage and Devotion" (208); thus, the novel concludes with the Englishman memorializing the domesticated figure of loyal Ireland. And yet the ogham reminds us, even if only for a moment, that the story before us is not the only narrative of Ireland. There remain other unreadable narratives outside and in resistance to the convenient repetition of Union. The ogham, which is soon supplemented by the monument to Norah, stands as a breach in the very act of meaning. Even as the novel drives towards its allegorical conclusion, it is compelled to reinsert the absence of an originary meaning—and only moments after the abjection of the bog, which had refused to stay symbolically stable.

Not only is this gesture beyond immediate meaning repeated through the bog and the ogham, it also operates at the novel's formal or generic register. Despite its tendency to repeat the fantasy of the metropolitan marriage, *The Snake's Pass* accomplishes something Boucicault's melodrama cannot. In reaching beyond itself, in gesturing beyond the novel form to the social space of the Irish theater, Stoker foregrounds contradiction at the level of form. To return to the question of genre, Nicholas Daly

argues that the novel negotiates between the metropolitan marriage plot and the genre of imperial adventure. While the descriptions of the wild, sublime West certainly carry colonial resonances, the sheer amount of time the novel devotes to the slow melodrama of Norah and Arthur's interethnic romance renders its participation in the homosocial imperial adventure tenuous at best. Even the "treasure hunt" seems mostly incidental to everyone except the villainous Murdock. Daly, however, rightly pinpoints the formal effect of the novel: "we have the sense of an inadequation of narrative models and historical materials" (*Modernism* 55). This crucial feeling of inadequacy, I would argue, stems not from the genre of imperial adventure, but from Stoker's desire to reach altogether outside the novel.

*The Snake's Pass* offers the unlikely pairing of typological, Boucicaultian drama and the unwieldy Gothic polysemy of the shifting bog. "Stage types are not peculiar to colonial situations," as Elizabeth Cullingford writes, but Irish dramatists were particularly invested in responding "to English constructions of Paddy by restaging Irish identity, not by returning the gaze of the colonizer. No English roles exist in the plays of Yeats, Synge, or Gregory. Shaw argued that a secure national identity must be achieved before it can be forgotten" (288). The (semantically) shifting bog, on the other hand, functions as the ultimate antithesis to the dramatic type, and its constant fluctuation not only endangers characters within the world of the novel but also threatens their very generic status as characters. It indiscriminately undermines and absorbs Irish, Anglo-Irish, and English identities; it threatens to engulf them all in its hyperbolic doubling of Irishness, a horrific literal reflection of many nationalist's desire for an organic, environmental identity. In

this sense, *The Snake's Pass* directly anticipates the motif of soil in *Dracula*, in which, as Valente argues,

the Count's biological need to renew himself by repeated immersions in the native earth of his ancestors installs him as a parodic illustration of Thomas Davis's Young Ireland maxim, 'racy of the soil,' which summarized his effort to redefine the Irish ethnos on cultural and environmental grounds that would encompass all racial and religious constituencies under a single national banner. (67).<sup>172</sup>

More importantly, it anticipates *Dracula's* geographical complexity, in which "Ireland and Transylvania engage in a tromp l'oeil oscillation, flipping in and out of identification with one another, and through this phantasmal geography, Stoker sets about representing Ireland's otherness to itself, its own undecidability as a national community" (51). This is the crucial importance of the shifting bog. It represents the otherness necessary to the novel's metropolitan allegory. If *The Snake's Pass* stages a hierarchal allegory of Union, turning a hostile colonial situation into a romantic love plot, then the bog represents "Ireland's otherness to itself"—that is, the return of the colonial repressed: the discursive flexibility of Irishness within British imperialism and Irish nationalism, the historical sediment of their long colonial struggle, the mutual entanglements of English and Irish identities, and the general inability to fix an Irish (and English) type or origin. Stoker adds to this dissemination at the level of form by moving outside the form of the novel and by pioneering the geo-insurgent weird phenomenon. The result is an anomalous

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<sup>172</sup> On Davis and Young Ireland, see also David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 1988) 35.

narrative that subtly undermines generic boundaries. Like the shifting bog, the novel cannot be said to be either an individual example (it relies on other narratives and participates in multiple genres) or *genus* (it may participate in genres, but it clearly belongs to none). In this sense, *The Snake's Pass* serves as a fitting example of the generic discontinuities I have interrogated. By exceeding the novel or generic conventions, the novel's anomalous position seems to momentarily promise an imaginative escape from its contentious political and historical context. At the same time, however, the shifting bog of alterity, which seems to trouble all possibilities of generic belonging, constantly reminds us that the discontinuous novel can never fully consolidate its formal or ideological reconciliation.



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