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**ARTHUR MACHEN'S SUPERNATURALISM:  
THE DECADENT VARIETY**

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The links are numerous between Arthur Machen and that rather ill-defined group of writers and artists in the 1890s known as "decadents." In 1894 John Lane at the Bodley Head published Machen's *The Great God Pan* and *The Inmost Light* in his Keynotes series, complete with an Aubrey Beardsley cover. Machen knew Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas; he dined with Wilde on several occasions and when critics characterized Machen's stories as "disgusting," "revolting," "loathsome," and "demoniac," Wilde congratulated him on the furor he had caused. The general public obviously associated Machen with the decadent coterie of writers connected with either Wilde or *The Yellow Book*, because the Wilde scandal of 1895 had an adverse effect on the sale of Machen's *The Three Imposters*, again published by Lane. But Machen's personal links with this group never went beyond these rather superficial, mostly professional connections. He himself asserted that he was "not even a small part, but no part at all" of the nineties,<sup>1</sup> and the critics Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton maintain that these decadent figures "scarcely affected Machen at all."<sup>2</sup> Wesley Sweetser points out that "he derived fringe benefits from the school without becoming a part of it":

Though Machen was not of the absinthe-sipping school, he took his gin, four-ale, and Australian burgundy on any occasion; though not a catamite, he wore his cape; and though not a complete literary bounder, he saw some of his works between yellow covers.<sup>3</sup>

Machen enjoyed a good wine, good company, good plays, but his temperament did not admit cynicism or despair. Evil to him was not the facile, fleshly decadence of bordellos, or homosexuality, or opium. A Johnsonian figure, he was not of Yeats's "Tragic Generation." But in his supernatural stories published in the 1890s, his themes, settings, and style were indeed influenced by the decadent manner, as I seek to prove by discussing three of his 1890s stories: "The Great God Pan," "The Inmost Light," and "The Novel of the White Powder." In their luridly and sensationalism, these studies of a mysterious, omnipotent

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evil lurking in London streets and behind closed doors in London suburbs clearly align him with the decadents.

First, let me present a quick summary of these stories since none of them is now widely read:

In "The Great God Pan" a scientist performs "minor" brain surgery on his beautiful, innocent ward, Mary, to enable her to see beyond the "veil" of material things, in other words, to "see the great god Pan." The operation is a success but after her initial glimpse of "something wonderful," she slips into a horrible insanity. Nine months later she gives birth to a daughter and dies. When the child, Helen Vaughan, is about ten, the doctor sends her to a farm in Wales; he asks the farmer and his wife to leave Helen to her own devices, and she spends most of her time in the deep forest. Gradually mysterious happenings alarm the neighborhood. One young boy goes insane after having seen Helen and a "strange naked man," whom he later associates with a satyr sculpture found in a local Roman ruin. Then Helen's friend, Rachel, disappears in the forest under mysterious circumstances. Her disappearance is later associated with an ancient place of worship for the "god of the Deeps" and a marriage ritual. Helen then disappears for some years and returns married to a Dr. Herbert, whom she corrupts "body and soul."

The story is told through a Chinese box of narratives by various men. One of the narrators, Villiers, finally pieces all the information together to describe Helen's life after her husband commits suicide. After several years in Argentina, she has returned to London as a Mrs. Beaumont and has made a mark in London society. A series of mysterious suicides by prominent, aristocratic young men stymie the police, but Villiers connects them to Mrs. Beaumont. When he has put together all the data about Helen Vaughan, Mrs. Herbert, and Mrs. Beaumont, he reveals they are the same woman, the daughter of Mary and the god Pan, and that unspeakable horrors have been revealed to these young men, from which their only escape is suicide. When Villiers confronts her with exposure, she kills herself. As she dies she transforms or deliquesces from sex to sex, beast to man, man to beast, and beast to a primordial ooze. The overall effect is meant to be an ineffable, unspeakable horror, an awareness of inhuman forces and powers in the world which destroy and horrify.

In "The Inmost Light" a doctor interested in the occult sciences, appropriately named Black, experiments on his young wife. A horrible transformation results; she becomes a vile, inhuman creature and upon her death, an autopsy reveals her brain to be "not the brain of a human being at all."<sup>4</sup> Her husband somehow has converted her essence into an opal-like stone which emanates a prismatic, flamelike light. A

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common thief steals the box containing the stone, but the narrator, Dyson, who befriends Black before his death, tracks it down. When he sees it and reads Dr. Black's account enclosed in the box, he is compelled to crush the stone to pieces out of sheer terror—a flame, steam, and yellow smoke issue from the stone and only a black cinder remains.

In "The Novel of the White Powder," which is not a novel but actually the shortest of the three stories, a Miss Leicester relates the horrible history of her brother's death. He becomes ill from overwork while studying law. The apothecary makes an error in filling the doctor's prescription and sends Leicester a white powder which is efficacious initially but leads to behavior changes after a while. The once serious-minded, studious young man becomes dissolute and licentious and abandons his studies. His sister becomes increasingly worried. One day she notices a mysterious black spot on his finger. He goes about with a bandaged hand for awhile, but eventually retires permanently to his room. The girl calls in the doctor who discovers the aged apothecary has made an error in the powder. A chemist friend analyzes the innocent-looking white powder and discovers it to be "the powder from which the wine of Sabbath, the *Vinem Sabbati*, was prepared," (the wine of the Witches' Sabbath). The doctor leaves his interview with Leicester trembling and disoriented, saying, "I can do nothing in this house." No one sees Leicester for weeks, and he eventually stops eating. One morning the maid discovers a black ooze dripping from the ceiling under Leicester's room. The doctor comes once more, and he and the sister break down the door to discover

... a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling with unctuous oily bubbles like boiling pitch, and out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes...something moved and lifted up that might have been an arm.<sup>5</sup>

The doctor soon dies from the shock.

The first obviously decadent feature we notice in these three stories is Machen's fascination with evil, but Machen's evil is of a different type from Wilde's or Beardsley's. There is no impish, naughty attractiveness here, no promise of physical, sinful delights of flesh or intellect. Machen's evil is terrible—something beyond words. His is a primordial, transcendental evil which lurks beneath the exterior of

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material reality. His is a more philosophical, primal consciousness of evil in the world. Machen resurrected Pan to embody this evil, and in the process contributed an important element to supernatural fiction. Machen played a major role in initiating the Pan craze so obvious in early twentieth-century literature. Somerset Maugham describes this striking phenomenon in *Cakes and Ale*. He notes that around 1900 "God went out (oddly enough with cricket and beer) and Pan came in. In a hundred novels his cloven hoof left its imprint on the sward, poets saw him lurking in the twilight on London commons, and literary ladies in Surrey and New England, nymphs of an industrial age, mysteriously surrendered their virginity to his rough embrace. Spiritually they were never the same again."<sup>6</sup> According to Patricia Merivale in her study *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times*, Machen's primary accomplishments were "to bring back to the Pan motif possibilities that had lain buried for centuries, to counteract the pretty sterilities of the minor poets and provide the first major examples of a Pan in modern fiction."<sup>7</sup> His Pan is a hostile force who represents unspeakable horrors and an ineffable evil. This Pan appears frequently in those early twentieth-century stories alluded to by Maugham, including works by Saki, E. M. Forster, and E. F. Benson, to name a few. But Machen's sinister Pan was the first.

By using the Pan myth, Machen makes the evil in "The Great God Pan" more concrete than in the other two stories, where the evil manifestation is equally terrifying and loathsome but has no name. But Machen's Pan is a universal, natural reality underlying the conscious world, not a hoofed, lecherous goat-god visible to his victims. The vagueness in his description of Pan is typical of his treatment of evil. For example, in the descriptions of Helen Vaughan or Mrs. Black or Leicester the power resides more in what is *not* said than in what *is*. The graphic description of Leicester's decomposing, oozy form quoted above is one of the most concrete descriptions Machen offers. The deliquescent figure in "The Great God Pan" is similar but more mysterious in its descent of the evolutionary ladder. The narrator reports:

"I was then privileged or accursed, I dare not say which, to see that which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought so unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve.

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...I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed....

I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly....for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not farther describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of...."<sup>8</sup>

Machen presents the horrible Mrs. Black in "The Inmost Light" more indirectly. Her death is not described. The narrator dwells on his reaction more than on her:

"...I looked up in the direction of the houses, and as I looked I felt my breath caught back, and my teeth began to chatter, and the stock I had in one hand snapped in two with the grip I gave it. It was as if I had had an electric current down my spine, and yet for some moment of time which seemed long, but which must have been very short, I caught myself wondering what on earth was the matter. Then I knew what had made my very heart shudder and my bones grind together in an agony." (p. 160)

He says her face bespoke "a lust that cannot be satiated" and "a fire that is unquenchable." She had "the visage of a satyr" (p. 161).

These grotesque, vivid revelations constitute climaxes in the action in each story. Machen more often uses expressions such as "scenes evil beyond the power of words," "that for which we have no name," "a horror we dare not express," or "an indefinite terror which hung about him like a mist." In "The Great God Pan" the narrator says Helen "spoke of things which even now I would not dare whisper in blackest night, though I stood in the midst of a wilderness" (p. 77). Dr. Black tells Dyson:

"...there is a region of knowledge which you will never know, which wise men seeing from afar off shun like the plague, as well they may, but into that region I have gone. If you knew, if you could even dream of what may be done, of what one or two men have done in this quiet world of

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ours, your very soul would shudder and faint within you....No, when men say that there are strange things in the world, they little know the awe and the terror that dwell always with them and about them." (pp. 173-74)

Of course, these speakers never reveal any of this knowledge or mention any unspeakable truths. In "The Great God Pan" Rachel tells her mother about her experiences in the forest with Helen, but the narrator breaks off because he cannot bear to read the account of this conversation. Machen consistently describes evil in its effects, not in its reality. Villiers sees a visitor to Mrs. Beaumont's leaving at 2:00 a.m. and reports:

"I knew I had looked into the eyes of a lost soul...the man's outward form remained, but all hell was within it. Furious lust, and hate that was like fire, and the loss of all hope and horror that seemed to shriek aloud to the night, though his teeth were shut; and the utter blackness of despair. I am sure he did not see me; he saw nothing that you or I can see...it was a devil's face I looked upon." (p. 102)

Many readers have objected to Machen's vague and obscure assertions of unrepeatable evils, but as the unfortunate Herbert says of his wife in "The Great God Pan," "Only human beings have names." Machen tries to suggest a level of evil which transcends words—admittedly a difficult task for a writer. Machen's point is that there are forces in the world which go so far beyond human comprehension that language does not exist with which to describe them. Man must rely on mysterious symbols and signs.

In his shadowy aloofness and suggestiveness Machen demonstrates a kinship with Baudelaire and the French Symbolists (favorites of the decadents). Material reality—objects or words—*mean* more than they *are*. He shared Baudelaire's belief in the material symbol's ability to reveal underlying truth. This vagueness is consistent with Machen's literary creed outlined in his book of criticism, *Hierglyphics* (1902). He holds that "fine literature" concerns itself with the communication of "ecstasy" (which includes "wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown") and that "literature, by means of ecstasy leads man beyond the common world of appearances to the world of the miraculous, of realities."<sup>9</sup> In his works, whether we call them Symbolist, Romantic, Coleridgean, Idealistic, or Transcendental,

Machen seeks to reveal what Russell Letson calls "the horror at the heart of things."<sup>10</sup>

Though Machen's evil is of a more cosmic sort than that of his contemporaries, evil often carries the sexual overtones associated with decadence. In "The Great God Pan" Helen plays in the forest with a "strange naked man" and her friend Rachel disappears in the woods, near ancient Caermaen, where a small pillar of white stone is later found bearing this inscription: "To the great god Nodens (the god of the Great Deep or Abyss) Flavius Senilis has erected this pillar on account of the marriage which he saw beneath the shade" (p. 114). The gatherings at Mrs. Beaumont's where guests drink one-thousand-year-old wine and revel until 2:00 a.m. certainly suggest a sexual element.

One of Mrs. Beaumont's victims leaves behind a collection of drawings in black and white which Villiers examines:

Villiers turned page after page, absorbed, in spite of himself, in the frightful Walpurgis-night of evil, strange monstrous evil that the dead artist had set forth in hard black and white. The figures of fauns and satyrs and Ægipans danced before his eyes, the darkness of the thicket, the dance on the mountaintop, the scenes by lonely shores in green vineyards, by rocks and desert places, passed before him: a world before which the human soul seemed to shrink back and shudder. (p. 93)

(Could anything be more Beardsleyesque?) Helen's crimes, though described in indefinite terms, have a sexual edge. Villier's contact on Queer Street who reports on her is even shocked. Villiers says, "The person from whom I got my information, as you may suppose, no great Puritan, shuddered and grew sick in telling me of the nameless infamies which were laid to her charge" (pp. 104-5). Mrs. Black in "The Inmost Light" is associated with "lust that cannot be satiated" and is described as having "a mist of flowing yellow hair" which looked as if it were "an aureole of glory round the visage of a satyr" (p. 161). Pan is never mentioned in this story, but the satyr allusion clearly suggests his lusty, goat god qualities.

In "The White Powder," as the young man slips into dissipation, he tells his sister, "I have felt what it is to be young and a man; I find I have blood in my veins as other men have" (p. 446). Peter Penzoldt asserts that this story is about masturbation and believes "the symbolism is so transparent that the reader feels what is meant and is disgusted rather than terrified."<sup>11</sup> He particularly focuses on the guilt



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which would account for the change in Leicester's appearance, and on the dissolution of his hand, an appropriate punishment for masturbation. He concedes that Machen probably was not aware of the symbolism. I find this interpretation suspect not only because the suggestion is there that Leicester's sexual pleasures go beyond masturbation but because such transparent symbolism is so atypical of Machen. Machen did not aspire to disgust, but rather to terrify. His evils are always larger than some personal naughtiness or perversity, but obviously the sexual note is struck in the evocation of evil in this story.

A more concrete feature of all three stories which clearly aligns Machen with his decadent contemporaries is his use of the London setting. He brings Pan into Soho and onto Ashley Street. An emanate evil lurks in the London suburbs; Dyson in "The Inmost Light" says, "I had...looked through the window of a commonplace, brand-new house, and seen hell open before me" (p. 160). The London streets figure largely in all three stories, and worldly young men-about-town enjoy London night life. In "The Great God Pan" Villiers loves to roam the London streets:

Villiers had emerged from his restaurant after an excellent dinner of many courses, assisted by an ingratiating little flask of Chianti, and, in that frame of mind which was with him almost chronic, had delayed a moment by the door, peering round in the dimly lighted street in search of those mysterious incidents and persons with which the streets of London teem in every quarter and at every hour. Villiers prided himself as a practised explorer of such obscure mazes and byways of London life, and in this unprofitable pursuit he displayed an assiduity which was worthy of more serious employment. (p. 76)

He describes the joy of a late night walk: "It's a curious thing,...to be alone in London at night, the gas-lamps stretching away in perspective, and the dead silence, and then perhaps the rush and clatter of a hansom on the stones, and the fire starting up under the horse's hoofs" (p. 101). In investigating Mrs. Beaumont he admits to having been "in very strange places." He says, "I have always been fond of diving into Queer Street for my amusement" (p. 104). His friend Austin is "famous for his intimate knowledge of London life, both in its tenebrous and luminous phases" (p. 79). Either Villiers or Austin could be Wilde's young man who "loitered down the moonlit street / And stopped beneath the Harlot's House."<sup>12</sup> The young men Dyson and Salisbury,

in "The Inmost Light," drink Chianti and make such comments as, "Do you know, I have heard people describe olives as nasty! What lamentable Philistinism! I have often thought...that I could write genuine poetry under the influence of olives and red wine. Let us have Chianti; it may not be very good, but the flasks are simply charming" (p. 156). Such a speech epitomizes the nineties *flaneur*. Dyson, "an idler about town" asserts he is studying a "great science." It is:

"the science of the great city; the physiology of London; literally and metaphysically the greatest subject that the mind of man can conceive....Yet I feel sometimes positively overwhelmed with the thought of the vastness and complexity of London. Paris a man may get to understand thoroughly with a reasonable amount of study; but London is always a mystery. In Paris you may say: 'Here live the actresses, here the Bohemians, and the Rates'; but it is different in London. You may point out a street, correctly enough, as the abode of washerwomen; but in that second floor, a man may be studying Chaldee roots, and in that garret over the way a forgotten artist is dying by inches." (p. 157)

This delight in London byways and obscure quarters, particularly at night, is a recurring feature in 1890s fiction and poetry—Wilde, Dowson, Douglas, and Symons, to name only a few, write of metropolitan nights and share Richard LeGallienne's sentiment in his "A Ballad to London":

Ah, London! London! our delight,  
Great flower that opens but at night,  
Great City of the midnight sun,  
Whose day begins when day is done. (Beckson, p. 127)

Machen may have felt himself to be "no part at all" of the nineties, but these London walks and London nights definitely lend his stories a decadent, *fin de siècle* flavor. The occasional purple prose in the conversations of his dandified young narrators clearly dates his early tales. Like his contemporaries, he strove to push the bounds of experience, but his bounds are the farthest of all. He shares their preoccupation with evil but makes an original contribution to supernatural fiction by parting the veil and loosing Panic terror once again on the world.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wesley D. Sweetser, *Arthur Machen* (New York, 1964), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton, *Arthur Machen: A Short Account of His Life and Work* (London, 1963), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Sweetser, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Machen, "The Inmost Light" in *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (New York, 1948), p. 162. Subsequent references to "The Inmost Light" are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Machen, "The Novel of The White Powder" in *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (New York, 1948), p. 162. Subsequent references to "The Novel of the White Powder" are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup>W. Somerset Maugham, *Cakes and Ale*, Modern Library Edition (New York, 1950), pp. 122-123.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 166.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan" in *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (New York, 1948), p. 111. Subsequent references to "The Great God Pan" are to this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Russel Letson, "The Short Fiction of Machen" in Frank Magill, ed. *Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature*, IV (Englewood Cliffs, 1983), p. 1654.

<sup>10</sup>Letson, p. 1634.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London, 1952), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Oscar Wilde, "The Harlot's House" in Karl Beckson, ed., *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s* (Chicago, 1981), p. 241.