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Glimpses Beyond the Veil: Occult Concepts in Algernon Blackwood's Weird Stories*

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the writings of Algernon Blackwood, a relatively lesser-known English author of supernatural fiction, in the context of the modern occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blackwood was actively involved with the most notable occult organisations of the age, but how this might have influenced his stories has not been studied until quite recently, and he is mostly remembered for his impact on the development of weird fiction, a literary mode that has emerged in roughly the same period. This thesis is an attempt at exploring the possible intersections between occultism and weird fiction by analysing four occult concepts (reincarnation, *anima mundi*, Neopaganism, and Egyptomany) in four short stories ("Old Clothes," "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," "The Sea Fit," and "A Descent into Egypt"). Based on the findings, it can be observed that the weird atmosphere results from the occult.

1. Introduction

In June 1900, an Englishman arrived in Budapest in a canoe accompanied by a friend, marking the end of a long rowing journey down the Danube that had begun about a thousand miles upriver in the Black Forest. Before returning to England, he spent a few days with the Hunnia Rowing Club in the city, travelled to Balaton to cross the lake by canoe from Balatonföldvár to Tihany, and enjoyed the hospitality of composer Antal Siposs in Révfülöp and of Count Imre Hunyady in Keszthely while exploring the lakeside towns. Though he doubtless enjoyed his stay in Hungary, the most momentous event of the Danube journey occurred sometime between passing Pressburg (today's Bratislava in Slovakia) and reaching Budapest, when they made camp for the night in an uninhabited area where the river splits to multiple streams forming small islands full of willow trees. The general atmosphere of the place captivated the Englishman's imagination, so much so that years later, when he was an up-and-coming writer, he relied on the experience to create the setting for one of his supernatural stories, a short story H. P. Lovecraft regarded as "the greatest weird tale ever written."[1] The title of the story, first published in 1907, was "The Willows" and the name of its author was Algernon Blackwood.[2]

Given that he has hitherto been a marginalised figure in the study of literature and culture, it is safe to assume that Blackwood's name sounds unfamiliar to most today, so providing a brief overview of his life, based on Mike Ashley's exhaustively researched biography, would perhaps

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1 H. P. Lovecraft, "H. P. Lovecraft: Letters to Fritz and Jonquil Leiber," in *Fritz Leiber and H. P. Lovecraft: Writers of the Dark*, ed. Ben J. S. Szumskyj and S. T. Joshi (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2003), 15.

2 Algernon Blackwood, "The Willows," in *The Listener and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917).

be welcome.[3] Born in 1869 to an upper-class family, Blackwood's early life was relatively uneventful until he left England at the age of twenty-one to make something of himself on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Failed attempts at dairy farming and running a pub in Toronto, however, led to his quickly losing most of his capital and he ended up in New York where he made ends meet mainly by reporting for *The Sun* and *The New York Times*, but also by giving violin lessons and modelling for artists, before becoming the private secretary of a wealthy banker. There were adventurous episodes during his years in America, too: he mingled with the New York underworld in order to have his criminal ex-roommate arrested, he took part in an expedition to the backwoods of Canada in search of gold, and only typhoid fever stopped him from joining Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders on their Cuban campaign. Nevertheless, the majority of these years was characterised by extreme poverty—including periods of sleeping on a bench in Central Park and living exclusively on dried apples and porridge—and it was amid these dark times that he discovered writing fiction as a means of escapism.

Blackwood had always had a natural talent for storytelling that he demonstrated both at campfires and in social gatherings, yet he never thought about becoming an author. After returning to England at the age of thirty, he still pursued various jobs until, unbeknownst to him, one of his friends submitted a couple of his stories to a publisher whose reader deemed them worthy of print. Blackwood's first collection of short stories in 1906 was met with generally positive reviews and his writings were suddenly in demand. His third collection, *John Silence—Physician Extraordinary*, was successful enough that its royalties enabled him to become a full-time writer in 1908. Blackwood's most creative period spanned from 1910 to 1914, when he produced what Ashley calls "the most remarkable body of supernatural fiction ever written."[4] This corpus consists of two short story collections, *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* and *Incredible Adventures*; two novels, *The Human Chord* and *The Centaur*; and a children's book, *A Prisoner in Fairyland*. Unfortunately, the horrors of the Great War, during which he operated as a secret agent, extinguished most of his creative spark and he focused mostly on the theatre and children's books afterwards. He also wrote an autobiography—titled *Episodes Before Thirty* and chronicling his years in Canada and the United States—which became a bestseller.[5] Blackwood never married and settled down; when he was not travelling around the world, he spent his time either as a guest at friends' houses or renting a room in the Swiss Jura Mountains. Despite his general distaste for modernity, he embraced new technologies and became a popular storyteller initially on the radio, then on television. Blackwood was dubbed "the Ghost Man" and received a Commander of the British Empire honour for his services as an entertainer in 1949, so he was somewhat of a celebrity around the time of his death in 1951.[6]

The fact that Blackwood has mostly been overlooked by the academic community is quite surprising, considering he was such a striking figure in the first half of the twentieth century. Via his membership in the Savile Club, he was acquainted with the likes of H. G. Wells, H. Rider Haggard, and Thomas Hardy, while his friends made through his years in the theatre included composer Edward Elgar and actor Henry Ainley. Blackwood's fiction won him many contemporary admirers; in addition to Lovecraft, whose appreciation of Blackwood is well-documented, trench poet Siegfried Sassoon, modernist Rainer Maria Rilke, and fantasy author C. S. Lewis were all among those full of praise for his work. J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis's friend and

[3] Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*, rev. ed. (Eureka, CA: Stark House Press, 2019). All information concerning the life and times of Blackwood is taken from this book, except where noted.

[4] Ibid., 185.

[5] Algernon Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty* (London: Cassel and Co., 1923).

[6] Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 410.

fellow member of the Inklings (a literary discussion group of Oxford professors), also acknowledged his familiarity with Blackwood's stories and some passages in his Middle-earth legendarium might have been influenced by them.[7] Others, however, were less impressed. Noted psychoanalyst C. G. Jung, for instance, referred to him as "a very poisonous writer," though not explaining why and admitting that at least some of his stories were "very good from a psychological point of view."[8] It would be reasonable, therefore, to reckon Blackwood among the more noteworthy people of the period and a re-evaluation of his legacy may be timely.

The limited scholarly attention Blackwood's work has received so far is predominantly concerned with establishing him as a founding father of weird fiction. The earliest of these studies is Lovecraft's influential essay on supernatural horror, where he is identified as one of the four "modern masters" of the weird, the other three being Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, and M. R. James.[9] Lovecraft describes Blackwood's work as "voluminous and uneven," but claims that his better stories authenticate him as "the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere."[10] In the first monograph on the subject, S. T. Joshi dedicates an entire chapter to the author, declaring his writings "more consistently meritorious than any weird writer's except Dunsany's."[11] Joshi adds that Blackwood is "the most wholesome and cheerful horror writer" he knows about, which also highlights his uniqueness.[12] More recently, China Miéville reaffirms Blackwood's position as a "key name" in the weird canon.[13] While Blackwood's fundamental role in the development of the tradition is indeed undisputable, his *oeuvre* lends itself well to other types of inquiry, and a promising approach would be an examination of his significance within the context of the period that he lived in: the period of modernity.[14]

For most of the twentieth century, modernity was associated with the decreasing prevalence of magic and mystery in people's lives, a phenomenon described by Max Weber as the disenchantment of the world. Weber's theory, however, has come under serious criticism since the end of the millennium and scholars provide more and more evidence for the presence of various forms of enchantment and re-enchantment coexisting with or brought about by the processes of disenchantment.[15] One such scholar is Christopher Partridge who discusses the widespread emergence of the occult in modern culture and argues for the existence of an "occulture," which he defines as "a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and sym-

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[7] Dale J. Nelson, "Possible Echoes of Blackwood and Dunsany in Tolkien's Fantasy," *Tolkien Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004).

[8] C. G. Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934*, ed. Claire Douglas, vol. 1, 2 vols., Bollingen Series 99 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 713.

[9] H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*, The H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2 (London: Panther Books, 1985), 493.

[10] Ibid., 501.

[11] S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale: Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft* (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2003), 132.

[12] Ibid., 89.

[13] China Miéville, "Weird Fiction," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould et al., Routledge Literature Companions (London: Routledge, 2009), 510.

[14] For another possible approach, namely an ecocritical reading of Blackwood's works, see Michelle Poland, "Walking with the Goat-God: Gothic Ecology in Algernon Blackwood's *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories*," *Critical Survey* 29, no. 1 (2017); David Punter, "Algernon Blackwood: Nature and Spirit," in *EcoGothic*, ed. Andrew Smith and William Hughes, International Gothic (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[15] Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000).

bols."[16] Literature and the arts are certainly among the areas where this "occulture" is heavily capitalised on, as writers and artists often turn to the occult for inspiration. Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson advocate a similar view when they discuss the "dynamic interaction" between occultism and modernism, concluding that: "Occultism offers modernism new modes of expression; so does modernism for occultism."[17]

Blackwood, too, is known to have been deeply interested in occultism, even though he refuses to mention any "mystical, psychic, or so-called 'occult' episodes" in his autobiography, claiming the book's intention is "to recapture surface adventures only."[18] Ashley's biography, however, reveals that he eagerly engaged in the activities of the most prominent occult organisations of his time: he inspected haunted houses for the Society for Psychical Research, he became a member of both the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and he attended G. I. Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Yet the ways his involvement in these establishments may have influenced his writing remains a largely unexplored topic. Lovecraft complains about Blackwood's "too free use of the trade jargon of modern 'occultism'" and, as a consequence, this aspect of his fiction does not seem to be a point of interest for the devotees of the weird.[19] David Punter and Glennis Byron point out that the uniqueness of Blackwood's stories is the result of his being "one of the few writers of Gothic fiction actually to have believed in the supernatural," but do not deliberate further on the matter.[20] Fortunately, as occultism has become an increasingly researched topic, a good opportunity presents itself to reassess Blackwood's merits. Justin Sausman takes the crucial first step in this direction in an essay discussing how the occult understanding of vibratory energy is presented in *The Human Chord*.[21] Susan Johnston Graf—aptly calling Blackwood "an omnivorous occultist"—extends the scope of investigation to cover the majority of his novels (plus the short stories featuring John Silence, a recurring character comparable to a modern magus) and surveys how the teachings of the Golden Dawn can be observed in them.[22]

Blackwood's output as a writer thus fits well into the theoretical framework of (re)enchantment summarised above, but he was a prolific author and a substantial part of his works has not been studied from this perspective. The aim of this thesis is to contribute towards a more complete understanding of Blackwood's relevance in this context by examining how the weird and the occult interact in four of his short stories. After conceptualising the two terms, the inquiry is focused on ideas associated with occultism as they appear in the individual narratives: reincarnation in "Old Clothes," *anima mundi* in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," Neopaganism in

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[16] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 84.

[17] Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Occult Modernism," in *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, ed. Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

[18] Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty*, 304.

[19] Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," 502.

[20] David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic*, Blackwell Guides to Literature (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 90.

[21] Justin Sausman, "From Vibratory Occultism to Vibratory Modernism: Blackwood, Lawrence, Woolf," in *Vibratory Modernism*, ed. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[22] Susan Johnston Graf, *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 81.

"The Sea Fit," and Egyptomany in "A Descent into Egypt."[23] Based on the findings, this thesis argues that what makes these stories weird is rooted in the occult. By doing so, it hopes to further support the notion that Blackwood should be seen as a primary literary representative of (re)enchantment, since his tales are overflowing with the occult concepts that prevailed in the period.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The weird

The weird as a concept referring to a distinct type of supernatural fiction might sound familiar to a great number of people, yet it would be a fairly hard task to provide an unequivocal definition of it. When James Machin writes that weird fiction is "intrinsically problematic for critical discourse," one cannot help but agree with his statement.[24] Nevertheless, two things can be taken for granted. First, as already touched upon in the introduction, there is a consensus among scholars that the majority of Blackwood's stories, without doubt, have their place in the canon of the weird. Second, even though his "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (the essay that popularised the concept) was first published in 1927, Lovecraft is still considered as one of the foremost critics of the field, since it is virtually impossible to find any critical literature dealing with weird fiction that does not make at least a passing mention to his treatise. It seems appropriate, therefore, to start discussing the weird by taking a look at his original remarks.

According to Lovecraft, the emergence of the Gothic novel should be seen as the inception of the weird tradition in the second half of the eighteenth century, the work of his compatriot Edgar Allan Poe as the most important milestone of its development in the nineteenth century, and the stories of the aforementioned quartet of British writers as its zenith in the first decades of the twentieth century. In an oft-quoted passage, he declares that "[t]he true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule."[25] Instead—and this is the only criterion he offers—the necessary effect has to be achieved by building "a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" that often results from "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."[26] Lovecraft's definition is noticeably vague, but it has still managed to stand the test of time, as evidenced by the fact that most scholars of the weird formulate their own definitions based on his. Joshi, for instance, calls the weird tale "inherently philosophical," because "it frequently compels us to address directly such fundamental issues as the nature of the universe and our place in it."[27] Another example is Jeff VanderMeer, who, in his introduction to a relatively recent anthology, describes the weird in an even more obscure manner than Lovecraft does, claiming it to be "the sometimes supernatural or fantastical element of unease"

[23] Algernon Blackwood, "Old Clothes," in *The Lost Valley and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917); Algernon Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," in *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912); Algernon Blackwood, "The Sea Fit," in *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912); Algernon Blackwood, "A Descent into Egypt," in *Incredible Adventures* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914).

[24] James Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939*, Palgrave Gothic (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 19.

[25] Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," 426.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 11.

in literature.[28] The reason for the persistence of Lovecraft's definition, as Machin argues, is that it abstains from "any inaccurately reductive rendering of weird fiction as a rigidly prescribed genre."[29]

Indeed, as it ultimately turns out, weird fiction cannot be recognised as a genre at all, at least not as a genre proper, because there are a multitude of stories that exhibit the qualities of the weird, but otherwise meet the requirements of precisely defined genres, too. Partly contradicting Lovecraft's initial concept, this overlap is not restricted to the subtypes of horror. Joshi provides a list of the most common of such genres (fantasy, supernatural horror, non-supernatural horror, quasi-science fiction, as well as the combinations and subsets of these), while Machin singles out the Gothic as the one which the weird tale is the most intimately intertwined with (that also explains why Blackwood is often labelled as an author of Gothic fiction, like in the case of Punter and Byron).[30] Consequently, weird fiction is more often conceived as a literary mode—Machin, for example, clarifies the relationship between the weird and the Gothic in accordance with this sentiment, stating that "[the former] is a *mode* closely identified with [the latter] *genre*."[31]

The most conspicuous characteristic feature of the weird mode, as already accentuated in Lovecraft's seminal essay, is that it prioritises the story's atmosphere over its plot. The work of Blackwood illustrates this aspect particularly well and it does not escape the attention of Lovecraft either: "Plot is everywhere negligible, and atmosphere reigns untrammelled," he writes in "Supernatural Horror in Literature," alluding to those of Blackwood's narratives that he holds in the highest esteem.[32] As for the atmosphere the weird tale creates, Lovecraft seems adamant that it has to be characterised by an intense sense of horror, which is somewhat puzzling, in light of his inclusion of Dunsany, who barely wrote anything horrifying, as one of the most outstanding representatives of the tradition. Recent scholarship has sought to eliminate this inconsistency by arguing that the mode is inclined to evoke a sense of awe instead. Miéville, who insists that an "obsession with numinosity under the everyday" is a fundamental trait of weird fiction, is a good example for this tendency.[33] On an interesting side note, he makes a connection between this awe-inspiring quality and the various traumas associated with modernity that the weird writers experienced, so it would be an interesting research topic to examine the extent to which the tradition as a whole can be interpreted as a form of (re)enchantment.

Miéville's remark about weird fiction's link with modernity calls attention to another significant issue concerning the mode—its periodisation. There is a widespread misconception among lay readers that the weird refers exclusively to the body of work written by Lovecraft and his friends (such as Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and August Derleth, to name a few), most of which was published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars, however, all agree that Lovecraft's circle should be seen only as the peak of a tradition reaching back to the end of the nineteenth century. In the introduction to *The Evolution of the Weird Tale*, Joshi, who is arguably the pre-eminent contemporary researcher of the field, identifies two major periods within the history of the mode. He distinguishes between a "Golden Age" spanning approximately from 1880 to 1940 and a "Silver Age" beginning after the Second

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[28] Jeff VanderMeer, "The New Weird: 'It's Alive?,'" in *The New Weird*, ed. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008), ix.

[29] Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain*, 3.

[30] Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 6–10; Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain*, 14–16.

[31] Ibid., emphasis in original.

[32] Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," 503.

[33] Miéville, "Weird Fiction," 510.

World War and still continuing today.[34] Lovecraft and the "modern masters" are the most notable "Golden Age" authors, while the "Silver Age" (which, as Joshi's terminology implies, does not come without a "marked falling-off of quality and richness") includes such writers as Shirley Jackson and Ramsey Campbell.[35] What is important here is that the high phase of weird fiction more or less coincides with the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (discussed in the next subchapter), so there is indeed a strong possibility that the two developments are different manifestations of the same dissatisfaction with modernity.

Turning back to the idea that awe is the feeling the weird tale conjures up, Blackwood's work is no exception in this regard either. Joshi proposes a tripartite typology to categorise his writings—"stories of awe," "stories of horror," and "stories of childhood"—and determines that the bulk of them falls into the first group.[36] "The Willows," Blackwood's most widely anthologised tale, definitely belongs to that category. In this atmospheric short story inspired by the author's Danube trip, two travellers stop for the night in a swampy area of the river, but unpleasant weather conditions extend their stay on the island they are camping on. Essentially cut off from the outside world, they experience several bizarre phenomena, but it is up to the reader to decide whether they really encounter something supernatural or merely the isolation gets the better of them. One of the most notable scenes occurs in the middle of the first night, when the narrator wakes up and peeping out of the tent, unsure whether he is dreaming, witnesses strange human-like shapes ascending from the trees, which elicits a potent sense of the numinous: "Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship."[37] In his in-depth analysis of "The Willows," Anthony Camara clearly shows why it should be thought of as a quintessential weird tale, so Lovecraft's fondness for the short story is completely understandable.[38] Even though the titular creatures might bear a slight resemblance to the elemental spirits that feature heavily in the beliefs of certain occult currents, "The Willows" is not a narrative that is overtly influenced by occultism. This thesis focuses on stories in which occult ideas are unmistakably present, but before discussing a few of those, first it needs to be clarified what is meant by the occult.

2.2. The occult

The occult is a greatly similar term to the weird in the sense that both of them are relatively well-known but easily misconceptualised. In colloquial use, the occult has diminished to "an unhelpfully broad umbrella term," as Partridge fittingly observes, "under which is collected a constantly recycled hodgepodge of spiritual, paranormal and transgressive beliefs and practices, many of which are widely dismissed as perverse, profane, ephemeral, irrational, or childish."[39] In the academic context, however, the occult has become a seriously researched area since the last decades of the twentieth century, because scholars have recognised its significance in the fields of religion, philosophy, science, as well as literature and the arts. For a period of time, the occult was (and sometimes still is) used interchangeably with the esoteric, but while the two

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[34] S. T. Joshi, *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2016), Kindle.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 90.

[37] Blackwood, "The Willows," 154.

[38] Anthony Camara, "Nature Unbound: Cosmic Horror in Algernon Blackwood's 'The Willows,'" *Horror Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013).

[39] Christopher Partridge, "Introduction," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, Routledge Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

terms are closely related, current scholarly conventions restrict the former to a specific period, whereas the latter denotes a wide range of topics from the Antiquity to the present day. These topics, as Wouter J. Hanegraaff specifies, are "those worldviews, practices and ways of knowing that have not succeeded in becoming dominant and have therefore been marginalized as 'rejected knowledge' since the age of Enlightenment."[40] These systems of beliefs and practices were, in the words of Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "kept in epistemological quarantine lest they cause a relapse from progressive rationalism."[41] While simply defining the esoteric as "rejected knowledge" is a practical way to collectively identify these trends, claiming that anything rejected by mainstream epistemology belongs to the realm of esotericism would be a mistake—what all of them have to have in common, according to Arthur Versluis, is an endeavour to acquire *gnosis* (or spiritual knowledge) by particular techniques of reading, both in the literal and in the figurative sense of the word.[42]

In his *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Hanegraaff outlines the three most common concepts of the esoteric, which are the following: first, "an 'enchanted' pre-Enlightenment worldview with ancient roots but flourishing in the early modern period;" second, "a wide array of 'occult' currents and organizations that emerged after the Enlightenment as alternatives to traditional religion and rational science;" and third "a universal, 'inner' spiritual dimension of religion as such."[43] The current, narrower meaning of the occult in scholarly understanding is based on the second model and it refers, therefore, to those specific forms of esotericism that emerged in the nineteenth century and have pervaded Western culture ever since. As stated by Hanegraaff, these traditions have "ideas and worldviews inherited from pre- and early modern periods," but they were radically transformed "under the impact of new cultural and intellectual developments in secular society."[44] It was this modernist version of the occult that came to be an integral part of Blackwood's life. Although he himself remained extremely secretive about the subject, there is ample evidence to support this claim.

An amusing anecdote in *Episodes Before Thirty* recounts how Blackwood discovered the occult.[45] Owing to his father's strong commitment to the Methodist Church, he had a strict religious upbringing, but he himself could not find solace in the Christian faith. When a friend of the family visited with a copy of Bhagwan Shree Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms*—as proof for Satan's infiltration of the Western world under the guise of Eastern philosophy—the teenage Blackwood stole the book and skimming through it was a revelation-like experience for him. From then on, he always paid close attention to what his father's circle was preaching against, thus compiling a reading list for himself. This list included, among others, *Magic, White and Black* by Franz Hartmann, *The Perfect Way* by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *Esoteric Buddhism* by A. P. Sinnett, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and reading them had a considerable effect on him during his formative years. It is not surprising, then, that he eagerly turned to organised occultism as soon as he could, partly in the hope of gaining access to similar books and hence the wisdom transmitted in them.

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[40] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Guides for the Perplexed (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), vi.

[41] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

[42] Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1–7.

[43] Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 4–5.

[44] Ibid., 8.

[45] Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty*, 27–33.

The first occult institution that Blackwood came into contact with was the Society for Psychical Research. This British establishment was founded in 1882 by well-renowned scientists and scholars who, to quote Egil Asprem, "set out to bring the torch of science to the dim region of the occult."[46] Indeed, they used legitimate scientific methods to study a wide variety of previously dismissed paranormal concepts, such as communication with spirits, apparitional experience, and telepathy (a term coined by founding member Frederic W. H. Myers). Their main aim was to introduce these topics to a broader audience, and they successfully did so, for many intellectuals became interested and joined them in their efforts. Though Blackwood was not an official member, he carried out investigations of haunted houses on behalf of the society. Ashley relates some examples in his biography—they all ended in disappointment, but they might have inspired some of Blackwood's ghost stories from the beginning of his writing career.

The next organisation that has to be mentioned is the Theosophical Society, the teachings of which Blackwood "swallowed whole."[47] Launched in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, the association quickly gained international following and was in large part responsible for popularising such concepts in the West as reincarnation, karma, and ancient knowledge being passed down through the ages. Goodrick-Clarke describes the ideas of modern Theosophy—propagated in books like *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* by the charismatic Blavatsky, published in 1877 and 1885 respectively—as an amalgamation of Neoplatonism, Renaissance magic, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology and religion, Buddhism, and Hinduism.[48] The various iterations of Theosophy also had a manifold impact on literature and culture in the twentieth century, of which an article by Olav Hammer (mentioning, among others, Blackwood) gives a concise account.[49] Blackwood learned about the Theosophical Society during his years in Canada and did not hesitate to apply for membership first in the Toronto Branch, then in the London Lodge soon after moving back to England. In addition, he acquainted himself with the leading Irish promoters of the Theosophical movement, most notably George William Russell (or Æ, as he was called) and William Butler Yeats. Blackwood occasionally quoted from the poems of Yeats in his own prose, and it was the Irish poet who eventually introduced him to the most illustrious occultist collective of the period—the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The groundwork of Golden Dawn was laid down in 1887 by three members of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, namely William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell Mathers, and William Robert Woodman. In a succinct sentence, Goodrick-Clarke summarises the origins and agenda of the organisation as follows: "The Rosicrucian tradition of initiatory societies coupled with Freemasonry interacted with Eliphas Lévi's promotion of Western magic to generate a lively succession of English occultists involved in ceremonial magic from the end of the nineteenth century."[50] Blackwood proved to be an enthusiastic student, but Ashley speculates that he treated the order primarily as a social hub that enabled him to meet like-minded people for discussion of occult topics. There was at least one member of the Golden Dawn, however, with whom he could not get along well—the notorious Aleister Crowley. The antagonism between the two became evident in a very unfavourable review of *The Human Chord* by Crowley, which in turn might have been a reaction to the fact that Philip Skale, the novel's villain, appears to

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[46] Egil Asprem, "The Society for Psychical Research," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, Routledge Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2015), 266.

[47] Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty*, 32.

[48] Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 211–12.

[49] Olav Hammer, "The Theosophical Current in the Twentieth Century," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, Routledge Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[50] Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 196.

show similarities with Crowley, a divisive figure even within the order. According to Goodrick-Clarke, the major goal of the organisation's rituals was "to evoke powers on the inner or higher planes of reality," and the whole story of *The Human Chord* is built around Skale's attempt at one such ceremony, though with strongly questionable motives.[51] Crowley was undoubtedly an enigmatic figure and many are of the opinion that it was his machinations that ultimately led to the fragmentation of the Golden Dawn. After the separation, Blackwood joined A. E. Waite's offshoot of the order, but around this time he seemed to have lost some of his fervour.

Although Ashley notes that Blackwood's involvement in the activities of these organisations decreased proportionally as his success as a writer increased, occultism remained an essential facet of his life. He was already in his fifties when he learned of new developments in the field, like the theories of Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky, and J. W. Dunne, but he still embraced them keenly, so occultism was certainly more than just a youthful rebellion in his case. Since the four short stories discussed in the next chapter had already been published at the time he encountered these fresh waves of occult thought, the analysis is restricted to those notions that could have influenced him during the writing process of these specific narratives. As for a brief summary of this chapter on theoretical background, the weird is understood in this thesis as a literary mode that evokes a sense of awe by challenging the everyday conception of reality, while the occult as an idea that can be connected to any of the modern esoteric currents.

3. Occult concepts in Algernon Blackwood's weird stories

3.1. Reincarnation in "Old Clothes"

The fact that Blackwood could succeed in becoming a well-established author can be ascribed to his skilfulness in writing ghost stories, a genre that was immensely popular in the Edwardian period. Actually, the majority of his early tales—that is, every single short story in his first two collections apart from a few exceptions, most notably "The Willows"—are traditional ghost stories to the core. For these, a great amount of inspiration came from his involvement with the Society for Psychical Research, but it was not necessarily the stories themselves, but the way they were presented that gained him acclaim. A contemporary reviewer of *The Bookman* magazine had the following praise for the contents of *The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories*, his first volume published in 1906:

> They are written so vividly and with such plausibility of circumstance that these most supernatural incidents wear a matter-of-fact vesture of reality and are the more ghostly and the more grimly impressive because of their every-day surroundings.[52]

Blackwood's distinct style is indeed commendable, but his talents were not at full display until he started to write about non-conventional topics, which fundamentally resulted from his occult teachings finding their way into his fiction. "Old Clothes," first collected for *The Lost Valley and Other Stories* in 1910, nicely illustrates this shift in his career, since it is a story that initially appears to be a typical tale of a haunted house (like many of his earlier works), but eventually turns out to be one built around a concept that featured heavily in the occult discourse of the period—reincarnation, or the rebirth of the soul. The theory that a soul can return to life in a different body has its origins in the Antiquity, but has been popularised by Blavatsky, who, after her travels to places like Tibet and India, introduced an Eastern understanding of rein-

[51] Ibid., 207.
[52] Quoted in Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 171–72.

carnation to the Western audience via the teachings of the Theosophical Society. Blackwood, understandably fascinated by the idea as an eager Theosophist, uses the concept very cleverly in "Old Clothes."

The central character of the short story is Aileen, an eight-year-old girl who has an unusually vivid imagination. She not only seems to see and hear things that other people cannot, but she also accepts them as reality without any reservations. What is more concerning, however, is that these experiences often terrify her to such a degree that it is beginning to have a detrimental effect on her health. Theresa, the child's mother, is seriously worried and summons George, her brother (who narrates the story), for a visit, hoping that he, relying on his knowledge in psychology, can provide some advice concerning her daughter. When the siblings are privately discussing the subject for the first time, Theresa hints that what she is truly afraid of is not that Aileen might have a mental disorder, because she does not display any symptoms that would indicate such a condition apart from her colourful fantasies, but rather the possibility that she sees and hears these things for real, concluding that their house may be haunted. Believing that a change of atmosphere would surely be beneficial for the child, they temporarily move to an old family mansion in Norfolk near the sea, but this achieves the opposite effect, as her fits dramatically intensify in the new location. In addition, she develops a habit of drawing figures in costumes worn centuries ago, her general distaste for wearing a belt grows into a phobia, the doctor's suggestion that she should go on a diet triggers a hysterical reaction in her, and she is obsessed with a particular patch of wall in one of the unused rooms. Consequently, the theory that the disturbances are caused by ghosts is quickly abandoned, but the adults are still puzzled by the origins of Aileen's strange behaviour.

George remains determined to investigate Aileen's case and spends most of his time with the child in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the nature of her delusions. He learns that there are several characters populating the girl's imagination, but she is especially interested in and talkative about one named Philip, and when George asks further questions about this Philip, he is utterly shocked by his niece's answers—according to the child, he ought to know everything better, since he and Philip are, in fact, the same person. Aileen continues to talk about her imagined world openly, even revealing a few macabre details that are very surprising from someone of her age, and from this point forward, her fantasies have a palpable effect on the narrator, too. For instance, he starts to feel a pain in his wrists every time he is in the presence of the child and on one occasion he even mispronounces the name Aileen as Helen. George is even more perplexed than before, since he cannot explain these bizarre occurrences with the help of his psychological theories anymore.

The truth is finally discovered one night when they catch the child sleepwalking and George, via hypnotic suggestion, manages to extract the full story from the girl's subconscious. Apparently, Aileen's condition is caused by her remembering one of her past lives centuries ago, when she was Lady Helen, wife to the lord of the very same Norfolk manor they are currently staying on. Lady Helen had an extremely unhappy marriage with an infamously cruel ancestor of the narrator's family and secretly started an affair with a knight from the neighbouring lands called Sir Philip Lansing. The knight was about to elope with the lady across the sea, but the wicked landlord had learned about their plan and intervened just in time. As a punishment, he immured his wife alive in the walls of the house with an iron band fastened around her waist and left her to die either of starvation or of suffocation, while he ordered her lover's hands to be chopped off, so he was unable to set her free. Since Aileen's story is supported by official family documents as well as local folklore, George and Theresa cannot help but accept that the child can really recall these memories from a previous life. As a final piece of evidence, the skeletal remains of a woman are found between the walls when renovation work is undertaken

on the house some time later. Despite this grim reveal, the short story has a happy ending—George successfully uses hypnosis to make Aileen forget these disturbing events and takes the child for a holiday overseas, thus fulfilling a promise made centuries ago.

If reincarnation were not brought into the picture, "Old Clothes" would probably play out just like the rest of Blackwood's ghost stories, but since it is, the result is an unconventional narrative that is characterised by a definitely weird atmosphere, central to which is Aileen's portrayal as a "queer, wayward, mysterious little being."[53] Because of her ability to recollect the memories of a past existence, her presence always evokes a curious feeling in those around them. As the narrator explains:

> She was not eerie, bless her little heart of queerness and mystery, but she had a way of suggesting other ways of life and existence shouldering about us that made me look round in the dark and wonder what the shadows concealed or what waited round the next corner.[54]

This description is a perfect example for weird fiction at its most conspicuous, because it corresponds well to Miéville's notion about the mode's primary distinctive feature—its tendency to show the sense of the numinous operating hidden under the surface of the quotidian experience of everyday life. In this specific case, the source of the weird is a very un-childlike child, and the source of her extraordinariness is the fact that she has a reincarnated soul.

In fact, even before the adults figure out that they are dealing with a true case of reincarnation, George considers such a possibility, though he does not take it seriously. In the passage where the title of the short story comes from, he expresses his suspicions about the child in a quite poetic way:

> Were I a painter I might put her upon canvas in some imaginary portrait and call it, perhaps, "Reincarnation"—for I have never seen anything in child-life that impressed me so vividly with that odd idea of an old soul come back to the world in a new young body, a new Suit of Clothes.[55]

Joshi takes notice that Blackwood—with his choice of words for the title--plays with a traditional metaphor—the eternal soul inhabits different bodies from time to time, just like the body is constantly dressed in different attires.[56] The quotation is also interesting from an autobiographical point of view, as it contains an allusion to an important element of Blackwood's personal worldview. In *Episodes Before Thirty*, he writes at some length about how he likes to categorise his acquaintances as either "old souls" or "young souls."[57] According to this distinction, the "old souls" are those people whose souls have been reincarnated many times (whether they are aware of it or not) and who, as a consequence, are wiser, more empathic, and less interested in worldly matters, as opposed to the "young souls" who only pursue wealth, power, fame, and the like. Blackwood, unsurprisingly, finds the former group more appealing, while he considers "the Napoleons of the earth" the "youngest souls" of them all.[58]

Although Blackwood became somewhat sceptic towards the end of his life, he had been an ardent believer in reincarnation for the most of it, including the years prior to and during the Great War, when he wrote the majority of his fiction. The esoteric books he encountered as an

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53 Blackwood, "Old Clothes," 133.
54 Ibid., 150.
55 Ibid., 141.
56 Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 99.
57 Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty*, 259–61.
58 Ibid.

adolescent, including those of Blavatsky, were filled with plenty of theories about reincarnation, which was probably one of the most influential factors in his decision to join the Theosophical Society. Later, when he was already a member of the organisation, he could gather even more information at the meetings, so it is plausible to say that he had a well-developed view on the subject. It is no wonder, then, that "Old Clothes" is not the only Blackwood narrative that features this occult concept. Ashley, for example, though describing it as one of the better short stories in the corpus, sees this one merely as a "practice run for [his] major novel of reincarnation *Julius LeVallon*."[59] Joshi also identifies reincarnation as one of the two central themes in the author's work, but he spends more time discussing the previously mentioned novel, too. It should also be mentioned, that the other theme Joshi mentions—nature—appears to be the more dominant of the two.[60]

3.2. *Anima mundi* in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved"

Nature was arguably Blackwood's biggest inspiration—not only for his writing career, but also for his life in general. Even from a very young age, he embarked on long walking trips, took multiple rowing and paddling journeys down the Danube and other rivers, explored the Canadian wilderness and the Caucasus Mountains, and remained an able skier well into his seventies. Michelle Poland compares Blackwood to William Wordsworth on the basis of their shared fascination with walking, a practice she argues to be similar to writing.[61] There is a further commonality between the two men—Blackwood, just like Wordsworth, was at the height of his creativity while he was in nature, so he often took a notebook with him for his strolls to pen down sketches that he finished on his typewriter in the evenings. His love for nature manifested in a large number of his stories and, since many of them contemplate about the relationship between humans and nature, it seems perfectly logical that his fiction has become a point of interest in the context of ecocriticism. In the early 1910s, he produced enough of these narratives to compile a book titled *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories*, which was published in 1912 (though it should also be noted that the collection includes a few non-nature stories as well). Ashley neatly sums up Blackwood's affinity with the natural world in a sentence stating that he "sold his soul to Nature," and something remarkably similar happens to the titular character of the opening tale in the volume—"The Man Whom the Trees Loved."[62]

The person whom the title refers to is David Bittacy, an elderly man who, for most of his life, worked as an arborist in the forests of India. At the beginning of the story, he is already spending his retirement years in a secluded cottage somewhere in the Hampshire countryside, living in an idyllic marriage with his wife Sophia. They love and respect each other, but there are two minor discords between them. In Mrs Bittacy's subconscious, after long periods of separation due to his husband's service in India, the woods and anything that may be connected to them have become associated with danger, so she cannot share his unusually strong enthusiasm for excursions in the forest. Mr Bittacy, in turn, can at times get slightly irritated by the religious zeal of Sophia, who thinks of the Bible as a "Baedeker for earth and heaven" and lives

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[59] Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 202. The novel, along with its sequel *The Bright Messenger*, is discussed in Graf, *Talking to the Gods*, 89–95.

[60] Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 99.

[61] Poland, "Walking with the Goat-God," 56.

[62] Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 133.

her life accordingly.[63] The *status quo* of the couple's relationship is brilliantly encapsulated in the following two sentences: "*She* loved her God and him. *He* loved the trees and her."[64]

Their bucolic existence is disturbed by the appearance of Arthur Sanderson, a painter who cannot paint anything but trees, but he can paint them in a way that they seem to come alive on the canvas. During one of his lengthy conversations with the Bittacys, he reveals that he holds animistic beliefs, which arouses the curiosity of David, who is open to the idea that every single thing in nature is alive in its own way, but goes against the Christian values of Sophia, who views the soul as a gift by God to humanity—and to humanity alone. Even though Sanderson is noticeably careful about his choice of words regarding the subject, there are moments when his well-formulated worldview becomes obvious, like in the following utterance from him about the life of plants:

> They breathe, they eat, they digest, they move about, and they adapt themselves to their environment as men and animals do. They have a nervous system too... at least a complex system of nuclei which have some of the qualities of nerve cells. They may have memory too. Certainly, they know definite action in response to stimulus. And though this may be physiological, no one has proved that it is only that, and not—psychological.[65]

Mr Bittacy is easily convinced by the painter's arguments and begins to feel an even stronger attraction towards the natural world, more specifically towards the forest that surrounds their house. Mrs Bittacy, on the other hand, cannot comprehend Sanderson's line of thought and automatically dismisses it as blasphemy. The painter also posits a theory as to why his host has been under the impression lately that the woods, in a strange way, seem to welcome his presence. Trees, as Sanderson speculates, not only have some sort of consciousness of their own, but also a collective one that connects them all around the world. This allows them to be aware of Mr Bittacy's lifelong work benefiting their kind and, as a form of expressing their gratitude and appreciation, they seek two merge his life with theirs. In other words, they invite him to share their own mode of existence.

What follows in the rest of the short story can be best described as a strenuous battle for the soul of Mr Bittacy between his wife and the forest. He spends more and more time among the trees and, at least in the eyes of Sophia, resembles less and less his former self. Fearing that she is going to lose her husband, Mrs Bittacy's dislike for the woods increases dramatically—she even starts to have nightmares about trees, in which the forest appears as an enormous wave of destruction, much like the great flood that destroys the world in the Old Testament. Even their annual holiday has to postponed, because Mr Bittacy says that he is unable to leave their home (meaning his trees); he claims, with a subtle play of words, that his life is "deeply rooted in this place."[66] Blackwood develops the metaphor even further by constantly portraying David in a way that he resembles a tree, describing, for instance, his movement as swaying and tree-like. This leads up to the most grotesque scene in the short story, which occurs when Mrs Bittacy, bravely conquering her fears, decides to follow her husband into the woods, though she is completely unprepared for what she is about to witness. After wandering for a while through the forest paths in search of him, she comes across "a man, like a tree, walking," whom she recognises as Mr Bittacy:

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63 Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," 11–12

64 Ibid., 53, emphasis in original.

65 Ibid., 31.

66 Ibid., 60.

> With hands behind his back, and head uplifted, he moved quite slowly, as though absorbed in his own thoughts. Hardly fifty paces separated them, but he had no inkling of her presence there so near. With mind intent and senses all turned inwards, he marched past her like a figure in a dream, and like a figure in a dream she saw him go. Love, yearning, pity rose in a storm within her, but as in nightmare she found no words or movement possible. She sat and watched him go—go from her—go into the deeper reaches of the green enveloping woods.[67]

At this precise moment, Sophia realises with horror that David has terminally succumbed to the temptation of the natural forces, and that she has lost the struggle to save her husband's soul. All that remains of Mr Bittacy by the end of the tale is an empty shell that has only the outward appearance of a human being, since his soul now forms a spiritual communion with the forest.

Punter and Byron praise Blackwood's "thrilling depiction of natural forces which are only partially transmutable into words," and this narrative nicely illustrates their point, since what principally makes it weird is evidently the author's portrayal of the woods, which is based on two main components.[68] First, as Poland rightfully observes in her essay, the implications that the title of the short story has with its passive construction—it is "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," not "The Man Who Loved the Trees"—should not go unnoticed.[69] Blackwood's choice for the title cleverly forebodes that his intention is to challenge the generally accepted perception of the natural world, or in this case, that of a single forest. Beyond any doubt, he does so successfully, because, as Poland takes notice, the readers are not faced with a familiar, "quantifiable mass of wood," but with "a supernaturally powerful, communicative, unpredictable and nurturing character."[70] Second, Blackwood endows the woods with an unmistakable quality of the sublime. For example, it is pointed out that Mr Bittacy's forest is an ancient one that has been standing there—unaltered by modern civilisation—for several centuries, at least since the eleventh, when it already formed a part of the hunting grounds that belonged to William the Conqueror. As a result, this primeval forest has an "august, deep splendour" that puts it in sharp contrast with plant life governed by humans, such as parks and gardens, for it is confidently more alluring, but not without a terrifying aspect.[71]

The former point about Blackwood's depiction of the forest can be nicely connected to an occult concept that is included in the teachings of both the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn, though in the author's case it predates his involvement in organised occultism, This concept is the *anima mundi*, or the soul of the world, that refers to a spiritual dimension that links together all things alive on the planet (and even beyond), and which can be accessed by attaining a higher, more expanded state of consciousness. It is this world soul that makes the spiritual union between Mr Bittacy and the forest possible. In the beginning of the short story, Sanderson explains the idea to the Bittacys in a simplistic but effective way, thus opening the eyes of his host to such a prospect: "The universe [...] is all one, really. We're puzzled by the gaps we cannot see across, but as a fact, I suppose, there are no gaps at all."[72] Blackwood, too, could glimpse into this wholeness from a surprisingly young age. In *Episodes Before Thirty*, he claims to have developed his perception of the *anima mundi* as a child—he would often climb out of the window of his room at nights only to be alone and undisturbed on the family estate, for he had

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67 Ibid., 79.
68 Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, 90.
69 Poland, "Walking with the Goat-God," 60.
70 Ibid., 63.
71 Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," 11.
72 Blackwood.

discovered that his perception of the spiritual realm is heightened in such a serene setting, and he brought this habit into adulthood:

> Forests, mountains, desolate places, especially perhaps open spaces like the prairies or the desert, but even, too, the simple fields, the lanes, and little hills, offered an actual sense of companionship no human intercourse could possibly provide. In times of trouble, as equally in times of joy, it was to Nature I ever turned instinctively. In those moments of deepest feeling when individuals must necessarily be alone, yet stand at the same time in most urgent need of understanding companionship, it was Nature and Nature only that could comfort me. When the cable came, suddenly announcing my father's death, I ran straight into the woods... This call sounded above all other calls, music coming so far behind it as to seem an "also ran." Even in those few, rare times of later life, when I fancied myself in love, this spell would operate—a sound of rain, a certain touch of colour in the sky, the scent of a wood-fire smoke, the lovely cry of some singing wind against the walls or window—and the human appeal would fade in me, or, at least, its transitory character become pitifully revealed. The strange sense of a oneness with Nature was an imperious and royal spell that overmastered all other spells, nor can the hint of comedy lessen its reality. Its religious origin appears, perhaps, in the fact that sometimes, during its fullest manifestation, a desire stirred in me to leave a practical, utilitarian world I loathed and become—a monk![73]

The previous passage is quoted at length, because it shows really well how strongly nature and spirituality are connected in Blackwood's mind. *Anima mundi*, too, appears in other stories, most notably in *The Centaur*, which is perhaps his most acclaimed novel. In a chapter discussing the world soul in the context of the novel, Graf argues that the concept is comparable with the collective unconscious of Jung, which is interesting, because there is an allusion to the Jungian theory in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" as well.[74] What is certain, however, is that nature and spirituality are important themes for Blackwood, and he explores their interaction in different ways.

3.3. Neopaganism in "The Sea Fit"

"The Sea Fit" is contained in the same collection as the previously discussed narrative, so it should not be surprising at all that it, too, elaborates on the nature theme that permeates Blackwood's literary output. Even though this tale cannot be specifically linked to any of the occult organisations in which he is known to have had a membership, it demonstrates that the author had a well-informed vision of the occult's place in the culture of modernity, which is by no means restricted to organised forms of occultism. In this particular short story, Blackwood is again addressing the relationship that can be observed between the forces of nature and the spiritual capabilities of humans, but this time from a different approach. Drawing on the presence of and the possibilities offered by elemental worship in the modern age, "The Sea Fit" might be considered as the author's acknowledgement of the widespread pagan revival emerging in the Western world.

These modern forms of pagan beliefs and practices are collected under the umbrella term Neopaganism in the scholarly context. Most of them have emerged as a reaction to the noticeable dissatisfaction with Christianity as the dominant religion of Europe or as an expression of the yearning for the ancient, pre-Christian past of specific cultures, and some of them are widely popular even today. In the introduction to her thorough article on the subject, Joanne E. Pearson claims that these currents are "often inspired by the practices of indigenous peoples and the paganisms of the ancient world revealed through archaeology, classics, myth and history,"

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[73] Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty*, 35.
[74] Graf, *Talking to the Gods*, 96.

and adds that the practices and beliefs of the proponents of Neopaganism are "revived or re-created in the context of modern-day life in a continual creative process."[75] In addition, Pearson identifies Wicca, Druidry, Heathenism, and Baltic Neopaganism as the four most common manifestations of the phenomenon. The events chronicled in "The Sea Fit" correspond to the ideas expressed by the third group, which refers to the revival of pre-Christian tradition and ancient concepts associated with the Germanic people in the northern parts of Europe, especially Scandinavia.

The story is set in a seaside bungalow at Poole Harbour. In its descriptive introduction, Blackwood alludes to the world soul again, but in the case of this story, it is not used as a plot device, but serves merely to set the mood of the narrative:

> For through that moonlight, through that roar of surf, there penetrated a singular note of earnestness and meaning—almost as though these common processes of Nature were instinct with the flush of an unusual activity that sought audaciously to cross the borderland into some subtle degree of conscious life.[76]

It is on such an atmospheric evening that three old friends gather to spend the Easter weekend together. Unbeknownst to them, however, this holiday is going to be centred around not the resurrection of the Christ, but the resurgence of an unexpected divinity. The three characters are Major Reese, a military man; Dr Malcolm Reese, his half-brother, and Captain Erricson, their host. "Big Erricson" is described as "Norwegian by extraction, student by adoption, wanderer by blood, a Viking reincarnated if ever there was one," but more importantly as a somewhat "primitive man in whom burns an inborn love and passion for the sea that amounts to positive worship."[77] Worship and Erricson's Scandinavian ancestry are going to be the vital factors in this short story

The entire tale is one long conversation that quickly intensifies once the course of it shifts to Erricson's views about religion. He firmly believes that the gods (apparently pagan ones) are not dead, but merely withdrawn from the modern world, still accessible to honest worshippers, which might as well be interpreted as Blackwood's provocative nod to the advocates of Nietzsche. As to provide evidence for his claim, Erricson declares to have seen several terrifying rituals during his sea journeys all around the world. He also beliefs that sacrifice is the ultimate form of worship and that "[t]he devout worshipper [...] should go to his death singing, as to a wedding—the wedding of his soul with the particular deity he has loved and served all his life."[78] In the meantime, an ominous storm is approaching the harbour and Erricson's "sea fit" gets more intense in accordance with it. Father Norden, Erricson's nephew joins them in the bungalow, summoned by the Norwegian's worried body-servant, and claims that on his way there, he "almost expected to hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn," which alludes to a Wordsworth poem about the yearning for an earlier age when humans lived in closer contact with nature.[79] What is hinted at in the Wordsworth poem is going to actually happen in this Blackwood story, as Erricson's inspired speech seems to have caught the attention of the sea deity he worships. When the storm is at its hardest around the bungalow, he suddenly jumps out of the window

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[75] Joanne E. Pearson, "Neopaganism," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 828.

[76] Blackwood, "The Sea Fit," 115

[77] Ibid., 116.

[78] Ibid., 118.

[79] Ibid., 127.

with a loud cry and starts to run towards the waves. The others are unable to catch up with him, but are close enough to witness the completion of the Scandinavian's sacrifice:

> The next instant, curving over like a falling wave, he swept along the glistening surface of the sands—and was gone. In fluid form, wave-like, his being slipped away into the Being of the Sea. A violent tumult convulsed the surface of the tide near in, but at once, and with amazing speed, passed careering away into deeper water—far out. To his singular death, as to a wedding, Erricson had gone, singing, and well content.[80]

It remains an open question whether they have truly witnessed a religious sacrifice and the appearance of an elemental deity, or only Erricson's passionate talk has had an effect on their nerves and their eccentric host has just committed suicide by drowning himself. Considering it is a Blackwood story, the former option seems more probable.

By synchronising the intensity of the storm and the intensity of the conversation, Blackwood uses a technique that can be often found in Gothic fiction, so "The Sea Fit" makes it easy to see why the Gothic and the weird, as it has been pointed out in reference to Machin, are intimately intertwined. But this narrative also demonstrates what has been established as the major characteristic feature of the mode, its ability to undermine the conventional understanding of reality through atmosphere building. In "the Sea Fit," this quality is the most palpable in the following quotation:

> It was really a little bit beyond comprehension how the wild words of this old sea-dog in the full sway of his "sea-fit" had altered the very air of the room as well as the personal equations of its occupants, for an extraordinary atmosphere of enthusiasm that was almost splendour pulsed about him, yet vilely close to something that suggested terror! Through the armour of every-day common sense that normally clothed the minds of these other two, had crept the faint wedges of a mood that made them vaguely wonder whether the incredible could perhaps sometimes—by way of bewildering exceptions—actually come to pass. The moods of their deepest life, that is to say, were already affected. An inner, and thoroughly unwelcome, change was in progress. And such psychic disturbances are hard to arrest.[81]

As this excerpt clearly shows, "The Sea Fit" is a very illustrative short story of how the weird atmosphere should look like. Interestingly, Lovecraft does not mention this story in his "Supernatural Horror in Literature," but it is quite probable that he read it at some point prior to or early in his writing career, because its core idea can be spotted in a large number of his own works. Old gods, who lie hidden at the bottom of the sea, waiting for their time to come, as well as their worshippers who eagerly anticipate their return—these are all found in some of his best-known stories, such as "Dagon," "The Call of Cthulhu," and "The Shadow over Innsmouth."

3.4. Egyptomany in "A Descent into Egypt"

"In modern times, ancient Egypt has inspired many works of literature, music, and art," writes Antoine Faivre, and it is true for the writings of Blackwood, too.[82] For the last couple of centuries, the country has not only been a popular destination for tourists, but it has also attracted a lot of people invested in the occult. According to Faivre, two factors are responsible for this phenomenon that is usually referred to as Egyptomany (or Egyptophilia): the fact that Egypt

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[80] Ibid., 131–32.

[81] Ibid., 125.

[82] Antoine Faivre, "Egyptomany," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 328.

"differs widely from the common European heritage of Greco-Roman culture, thus readily lending itself to mystery and appealing to a taste for exoticism," and that "its antiquity has caused it to appear in the Western imagination as the cradle or depository of a buried primordial or 'traditional' knowledge."[83] In the context of occultism, the remnants of the country's ancient civilisations (which are among the earliest ones known on the planet) are full of concealed wisdom ready to be accessed through specific means. For the Theosophists, Egypt is a hotspot of ancient knowledge, while the magicians of the Golden Dawn use various Egyptian elements in their ceremonies.

Blackwood visited the country several times during his life, though only as a tourist on every occasion, unlike his fellow Golden Dawn member Crowley, who performed various rituals in the Egyptian desert and *The Book of the Law*, the central text of his Thelema, was allegedly dictated to him there by an ancient spirit. Blackwood, nevertheless, was certainly captivated by the qualities of Egypt. In his article published in *Country Life* magazine shortly after his first visit, he writes the following about the experience:

> Its scale has stupefied the ability to measure, appraise, estimate; and this balance once destroyed, wonder and awe capture the heart, going what pace they please. Size works half the miracle, for it is size including a quality of terror—monstrous; and, but for the glorious beauty that thunders through it, this sheer size might easily work a very different spell—dismay. The modern mind, no longer terrified by Speed, to which it has grown contemptuously accustomed, yet shrinks a little before this display of titanic and bewildering size.[84]

Blackwood's fascination with the North African country made its way into several of his stories, each of which would demonstrate well what has been discussed so far about Egyptomany. The most notable among these, perhaps, is "A Descent into Egypt," which is included in the 1914 collection *Incredible Adventures*. Just like the author's other Egyptian tales, it reads like his love letter to the country and almost everything he mentions in the above quoted excerpt can be found in it one way or another.

The story focuses on a middle-aged man named George Isley, an acquaintance of the unnamed narrator. When they meet for the first time in years in a small hotel in Helouan, the first impression of the narrator is that Isley has changed in a remarkably bizarre way. Even though he appears to be in a perfect physical and mental shape, his vitality seems to have somehow disappeared entirely. The narrator recounts how Isley used to be an energetic person with a number of successful enterprises behind him and how he generally enjoyed all things modern life could offer. This distinct attribute of his, however, has mysteriously and completely vanished. In the words of the narrator:

> George Isley to-day is a picture with no meaning in it that charms merely by the harmonious colouring of an inoffensive subject. He moves undiscovered in the little world of society to which he was born, secure in the groove first habit has made comfortably automatic for him. [...] He is an admirable, perfect automaton.[85]

The reason for this extraordinary change is soon revealed through a series of conversations between the two. In the last couple of years, Isley has become interested in archaeology, but the secrets of ancient Egypt have proven to be too much for him, because what he has been doing is not archaeology in the traditional sense of the word.

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[83] Ibid.
[84] Quoted in Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 236.
[85] Blackwood, "A Descent into Egypt," 244.

As it turns out, Isley has not been alone in his endeavours—he has formed a partnership with an enigmatic figure called Moleson, who, appearing later as a character in the story, introduces himself as "a speculative archaeologist [...] and an imaginative Egyptologist."[86] While they were excavating a tomb in the nearby valley, they unearthed several artefacts which had been used by the Egyptian priests of old for ceremonial purposes. The narrator learns that Moleson's dubious intention is to recreate a ritual of sun worship that was practiced in the period of Aknahton. He and Isley have been experimenting with that for a while, and it has already had a serious effect on the latter's soul. Isley is so overwhelmed by the glimpses into the ancient splendour that is still contained in the ruins and sands of Egypt that he is unable to exist in the present anymore, hence his reduction to what is described by the narrator as an automaton. Unwillingly, the narrator witnesses their latest attempt at the ceremony, but claims that he cannot give a credible account of it, stating that "[t]he incredible adventure was literally true, but, being spiritual, may not be told in terms of a detective story."[87] The Egyptian element combined with the possibilities opened up by the ritualistic use of sound show the unmistakable influence of Blackwood's involvement in the ceremonies of the Golden Dawn.[88]

Throughout the short story, ancient Egypt is compared with the modern world in a way that the former dwarves the latter in every possible aspect. In the very beginning, the narrator points out that what he is about to tell will be meaningful only "to the handful who realise that trains and motors are not the only means of travel left to our progressive race," alluding to the fact that the whole narrative is the description of a spiritual journey.[89] The destination of this journey—ancient Egypt—has the capacity to render the present meaningless: "The whole of modern life, indeed, seemed suddenly reduced to a paltry insignificance that produced a longing for the pageantry of those millions of vanished souls."[90] Furthermore, Egypt is personified in a way that when the characters become aware of its greatness, they feel overwhelmed:

> It seemed a third had silently joined our little table in the corner. Something intruded, evoked by the power of what our conversation skirted but ever left unmentioned. It was huge and shadowy; it was also watchful. Egypt came gliding, floating up beside us. I saw her reflected in his face and gaze. The desert slipped in through walls and ceiling, rising from beneath our feet, settling about us, listening, peering, waiting. The strange obsession was sudden and complete.[91]

Since this short starts to build the weird atmosphere at the very beginning and maintains it throughout in the form of lengthy descriptive passages, it is hard to pick a single episode in which the weird is the most clearly visible.

Ashley briefly summarises the story by stating that "[i]t translates 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' to Egypt," and he is right, since David Bittacy and George Isley lose their souls to something beyond the borders of consensus reality in a remarkably similar way.[92] While Joshi acknowledges the merits of "The Willows" and agrees with Lovecraft on the story's significance, he considers "A Descent into Egypt" the author's "finest single work."[93] In addition, Joshi

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86 Ibid., 317.
87 Ibid., 275.
88 *The Human Chord* also depicts sound used in rituals, see Graf, *Talking to the Gods, 85*.
89 Blackwood, "A Descent into Egypt," 242.
90 Ibid., 271.
91 Ibid., 258–59.
92 Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 250.
93 Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 103.

thinks that *Incredible Adventures* is "the premier weird collection of this or any other century."[94] Unfortunately, when it was published, the Great War had already been raging on and Blackwood's flow of creative writing was put to a halt.

4. Conclusions

This thesis has aimed to show that the stories that can be seen as the products of Blackwood's most creative period—some of which are in a great deal responsible for cementing his place in the canon of weird fiction—demonstrate the undeniable influence of the author's background in occultism. Four short stories have been analysed to establish that the weird atmosphere that characterise them can be closely related to specific occult concepts the writer is known to have been familiar with, primarily through his involvement in the most notable occult organisations of his age. First, it has been examined how the notion of reincarnation, one of the central beliefs of the Theosophical Society, is used to put a twist on the traditional haunted house tale in "Old Clothes" by depicting a child whose young body is possessed by an old soul. Second, the *anima mundi*, the world soul in the occult thought, has been explored as it is manifested in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," a narrative that is reminiscent of a bizarre love triangle between a man, his wife, and the forest surrounding their home. Third, "The Sea Fit" has been discussed, a story that capitalises on ideas that are associated with Neopaganism, the re-emergence of pagan rituals in modern times, and shows one such ritual successfully carried out by a worshipper of the sea. And fourth, Egyptomany, the occultists' obsession with ancient Egypt, has been the focus of analysis in "A Descent into Egypt," a short story that gives an account of how a series of rituals comparable to those of the Golden Dawn results in the disappearance of a man's vitality.

It has also been indicated that occultism and weird fiction have some more general points of intersection, not only those that are detectable in the stories of Blackwood. The most notable among these is a certain dissatisfaction with the experiences offered by modernity. The occult, if understood in the narrower sense of the word, refers to those specific forms of esoteric thought that have emerged in the nineteenth century to serve as alternatives to dominant forms of religion, philosophy, and science. Weird fiction, having emerged in roughly the same period, seeks to underpin the generally accepted notions about the perception of reality, thus invoking an intense sense of awe. Bearing all these in mind, it would seem reasonable to investigate on a wider scale whether both the occult and the weird are rooted in the same aversion to modernity.

What can be taken for granted, as this thesis has argued, is that both the occult and the weird are unmistakably present in the stories of Blackwood. Given that the corpus of the author is very extensive, a thorough study of it would have exceeded the confines of a master's thesis, but this analysis of four carefully selected short stories might provide a sufficient starting point for further research. Finally, since Blackwood's fiction can definitely be categorised under the label of (re)enchantment, as this thesis has hoped to prove, it is perhaps high time to reconsider the significance of his contributions to literature.

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[94] Ibid., 131.

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