

# Late-Victorian Modes of the Aesthetic Impure

## The Strange Case of Arthur Machen

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**Abstract** In his fiction (novels and short stories), the Welsh fin de siècle writer Arthur Machen tends to feature various forms of transformations/mutations of the body, often associated with transgressive practices (scientific or occult experiments) implying some form of moral deviation or perversion in relation with forbidden knowledge. In *The Great God Pan* set in London, Machen stages one of these uncanny experiments, the mating of a young girl with the God Pan which brings to the world a feminine incarnation of evil who leads her many suitors to suicide. In *The Three Impostors*, a novel or rather a loosely connected collection of stories, the author emphasizes the way in which the supernatural encroaches upon the empirical world. Various modes of body hybridity and physical and mental degeneracy are foregrounded, but the description of these devolution processes generates a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection, thus illustrating the notion of aesthetic impure which may be considered at various levels: in the diegetic universe, as an ethical issue, but also as a generic/textual one. The city of London itself appears as a cosmopolitan, hybrid, labyrinthine locus, invested with beauty and sublimity but also with decadence, moral corruption and archaic, primitive forms of behaviour. The text itself evinces a certain form of impurity because of its hybrid status and its use of various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche.

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**Keywords** Arthur Machen. Decadence. Hybridity. Metamorphosis.

### 1 Introduction

The combination of the two words «aesthetic» and «impure» may imply some kind of implicit contradiction and may be also a challenge to certain norms in matter of taste. Indeed to derive aesthetic pleasure out of an impure object might be problematic or subversive. The term «impure» can be used in various fields. For instance André Bazin, the French film theoretician, considers cinema as an impure form of art as it associates several features: text, image, sound (diegetic noises and voices) and music. In the domain of aesthetics, Kant associates beauty with the idea of purity

and unity while the sublime is implicitly linked with some form of impurity. Mary Douglas in her well known study, *Purity and Danger* (1966), identifies impurity with the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization. Phenomena perceived as impure or otherwise dangerous within a culture are thus violating the classificatory systems through which the culture is able meaningfully to organize experience. Things that are interstitial, that cross boundaries of deep-set categories in a given culture, may be seen as impure. Julia Kristeva, defining her concept of abjection, also emphasizes the notion of liminality, in-betweenness, mixity, all that which prevents differentiation: «Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte» (Kristeva 1980, p. 12).

Noël Carroll, in *The Philosophy of Horror*, takes up this concept to define his approach to horror literature (and film). For him, the monsters of the horror genre are «beings or creatures that specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality and categorical contradictoriness» (Carroll 1990, p. 32). The author provides some obvious examples: ghosts, zombies, mummies, werewolves, humanoid insects or Dr. Moreau's «manimals». Thus in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the notion of impurity is cardinal and plays on different levels. Within the diegesis, the vampire is interstitial, in-between life and death, transgressing space and time boundaries, shape-shifting. His peculiar predatory mode, blood sucking, raises also the problem of contamination. As an example, among many others, we may remember Jonathan Harker's description of Count Dracula in his coffin:

There lay the Count but looking as if his youth had been half renewed, for the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey; the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were gouts of fresh blood which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran over the chin and the neck. Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh, for the lids and pouches underneath were bloated. It seemed as if the whole awful creature were simply gorged with blood; he lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion. (Auerbach, Skal 1997, p. 53)

This horrible spectacle triggers within Jonathan Harker a nightmarish image of invasion: «This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless» (p. 54).

The novel is also textually impure as it mingles various heterogeneous documents (diaries, letters, press cuttings, telegrams, business or legal documents, gramophone recordings, etc.), combines popular (sensation

fiction devices) and high culture (quotations from Shakespeare and other literary references) and also various genres, such as gothic, supernatural horror, detective fiction, fairy tale, and travelogue.

Since all these aspects<sup>1</sup> of Stoker's novel have been studied extensively, this article will focus on Arthur Machen, a relatively less well known author whose work also provides a good illustration of the notion of aesthetic impurity, both in terms of the fictional universe it depicts and because of its specific narrative construction and playing upon generic conventions.

In his fiction (novels and short stories), the Welsh fin de siècle writer Arthur Machen tends to feature various forms of transformations/mutations of the body, often associated with transgressive practices (scientific or occult experiments) implying some form of moral deviation or perversion in relation with ancient and/or forbidden knowledge. In *The Great God Pan* (1894), a novel set in London, Machen stages one of these uncanny experiments, the mating of a young girl with the God Pan which brings to the world a feminine incarnation of evil who leads her many suitors to suicide. In *The Three Impostors* (1895), a novel or rather a loosely connected collection of stories, the author emphasizes the way in which the supernatural encroaches upon the empirical world. Various modes of bodily hybridity and physical and mental degeneracy are foregrounded, but the description of these devolution processes generates a strong feeling of fascination mingled with a sense of horror and abjection, thus illustrating the notion of aesthetic impurity which may be considered at various levels: in the diegetic universe in terms of the spectacular representation of horror and the abject, as an ethical issue, but also as a generic/textual one. Indeed, the text itself evinces a certain form of impurity because of its hybrid status and its use of various genre conventions at time verging upon parody or pastiche.

Arthur Machen is known to us through some of his works but also through the tribute paid to him by H.P. Lovecraft in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Lovecraft confesses his debt to the Welsh writer, one of his literary mentors. Both writers are concerned with the coexistence of modernity and ancestral rites, with the return of the archaic and the ancient gods. Both deal with the question of body metamorphosis and processes of hybridization, as for example in *The Great God Pan* where a transgressive experiment leads to the creation of an evil woman figure that assumes various identities. A central idea in Machen's work is also that trivial daily life reality is only a mask behind which unnamable terrors lurk, hence the use of the recurrent metaphor of the «tearing of the veil» to perceive reality as it is. Machen uses a narrative structure based

1 Narrative strategies and generic hybridity have been analyzed by several scholars over the last three decades. See for example Seed (1985) and Wicke (1992).

on investigation leading to the elucidation of a mystery, often involving a crime or a series of crimes. He gets closer to the conventions of the story of detection by having recourse to a recurrent investigative character named Dyson who shares some features with the author: they both live in London, have a relatively mediocre social status, a similar taste for literature and the arts, and a passion for words and writing. Indeed Dyson's favourite quest is the «chase of the phrase» (Joshi 2001, p. 214). Thus by means of this «Mr. Seek» to quote Stevenson,<sup>2</sup> Machen stages in several stories a quest narrative where investigation implies the deciphering of enigmas and the interpretation of signs both graphic and linguistic, an intellectual and analytical process which also involves the reader.

Indeed, in most of Dyson's cases, investigation starts with a relatively matter of fact event (abduction, disappearance, murder), then it reaches a point when rational explanations prove impossible or unsatisfactory, thus leading to the emergence of the fantastic. Through the detective plot, the reader passes smoothly from the empirical, rational world to a more uncanny form of experience involving different facets of otherness. Machen associates two protagonists, Dyson and his close friend Charles Phillips, both similar and different. Both characters are relatively young and can be defined as dilettantes. Phillips is an amateur ethnologist whose limited competence leads him, in a story called «The Red Hand», to confuse authentic prehistoric artefacts with rather crude copies. Dyson, far from being a professional detective like Sherlock Holmes, introduces himself rather as a writer who has a passion for mysteries. While Phillips constantly loses his bearings and gets lost in the mazes of London streets, Dyson is endowed with a keen sense of orientation. The two protagonists do not live like Holmes and Watson under the same roof, but they meet regularly to smoke a pipe, drink a glass of beer and observe the spectacle outside in the streets. These habits partake of the building up of a familiar and prosaic world where people walk, muse, eat and drink. It is often by chance that the two strollers get involved and absorbed in an uncanny experience, either criminal as in «The Red Hand» or fraught with supernatural elements as in *The Three Impostors* on which I shall primarily focus, after a few remarks on *The Great God Pan*.

2 In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Utterson declares: «'If he be Mr. Hyde', he had thought, 'I shall be Mr. Seek'» (Stevenson 1992, p. 106).

## 2 The Impure and Hybrid as a Source of Horror and Aesthetic Fascination

As has been pointed out by many critics, the Victorian age is beset by many fears and phobias having to do with devolution, physical and mental degeneracy and hybridization, ethnic and cultural contamination, criminality in large cities, etc. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, published in the same year (1897), testify to this Victorian fin de siècle *Angst* as they both feature a form of alien invasion and contamination coming from the East – Eastern Europe, in one case, Egypt in the other. As Judith Halberstam shows, the two novels share many features: «Like *Dracula*, the *Beetle*'s disgusting aspect depends upon its foreign features, its un-English habits and a certain penchant for human blood. The *Beetle* does not suck blood however, she demands it in the form of human sacrifice» (Halberstam 2002, p. 101). Kelly Hurley also devotes several pages to a close analysis of *The Beetle*, as an embodiment of all the worst forms of hybridization and abjection.

Arthur Machen, at least in the first part of his literary career, partakes of this obsessive, paranoid approach. His fiction also relies on the theories of Lombroso and Max Nordau on degeneracy and criminality (also quoted in *Dracula* by Mina Harker). Already in *The Great God Pan*, Machen stages Helen Vaughan, a diabolical female character who is a perfect incarnation of evil, of physical and moral corruption, implicitly associated with immoral and pervert sexual practices even though we never learn anything concrete about these practices as all potential witnesses refuse to disclose any detail or even to read concrete testimonies. Indeed, when Austin, one of the investigators, is given a written memoir, he only glances at the contents and lets the diary fall to the ground, expressing sheer horror and disgust: «Sick at heart, with white lips and a cold sweat pouring like water from his temples, he flung the paper down» (Joshi 2001, p. 42). Austin, a man of good taste, expresses a moral viewpoint by refusing to read further and to revel in abominable details about the depraved behaviour of Helen and its lethal consequences, but he is also physically affected by the little he has read, only a word and a phrase that will never be quoted and are left to the imagination of the reader. On the contrary, Clarke, Raymond's friend, is an amateur of uncanny, supernatural events, beyond a self-asserted rationality and he compiles in secret his own encyclopedia of horrors, *Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil*.

Helen Vaughan's perversion is accounted for by the fact she is the product of a transgressive experiment practised on her mother by Raymond, a doctor and dabbler in transcendental medicine, a rather simple form of brain surgery («a slight lesion in the grey matter»), supposedly leading to the lifting of the veil on true reality, that is equated, according to

ancient knowledge, with «seeing the God Pan». The operation succeeds and the girl does see Pan. Presumably she even has some sort of sexual intercourse with him, which leads to the birth of the hybrid Helen, whose beauty seduces and fascinates while at the same time conveying a sense of horror and the non-human.

Onomastics are already revealing here as Helen Vaughan's true name (she has also the identity of Mrs. Beaumont) has obvious hybrid connotations. As Helen, she is the embodiment of seduction by means of association with Helen of Troy, but her family name Vaughan is phonologically close to the word «faun», recalling the hybrid semi-monstrous nature (origin) of the woman. Indeed, the heroine is clearly associated with impurity, both moral and ontological on different counts. Her beauty is the product of a transgressive, unethical form of surgery leading to an unnatural sexual union between a human female and a God. Her own physical appearance reflects that impure origin: the beauty of a goddess, but also the stigmata of the inhuman, ab-human, monstrous. Mrs. Beaumont both fascinates and repels the aristocrats whom she ensnares on account of her strange looks (and her dark Italian complexion) and whom she either leads to suicide or reduces to the status of beggars like Herbert, one of the investigators of this strange case defined as «a nest of Chinese boxes» (p. 17).

This image fits the narrative structure of the novel itself, made of embedded texts coming from varied sources of enunciation and made more complex by added fragments of manuscripts and letters whose contents remain often mysterious or cryptic. After the prologue that provides some hints to the perceptive reader (who may guess who Helen Vaughan is), the story takes up the form of a quest for a beautiful *femme fatale*, seemingly responsible for a series of mysterious deaths, unexplained irrational suicides, amongst the London aristocracy. Several investigators are inter-related, each providing his own contribution in order to solve the enigma. This leads to a polyphonic narrative made of various oral and written testimonies (diaries, letters, memoranda). Helen Vaughan, like Hyde, can't be really described. During a police investigation, she is defined by witnesses as «At once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on» (p. 20). Austin, another friend of Villiers, also stresses the uncanny contrast between her exquisite features and her strange expression. Her portrait drawn by painter Arthur Meyrick reveals nothing more, highlighting the same traits, a glance, a smile on the full lips, but it makes Clarke shudder and turn «as white as death» as he watches «the most vivid presentment of evil I have ever seen» (p. 25).

The climactic death scene of Helen Vaughan, compelled to hang herself, is related in another embedded narrative, a manuscript written by Dr. Robert Matheson (who himself died of apoplectic seizure). This scene is an example of what Mary Douglas refers to as interstitial «bodily margins» (Douglas 1966, p. 122), conveying both to the protagonists of the tale and

to the reader a sense of the aesthetic impure, a mingling of fascination and horror felt by the eye-witness who reports his traumatic experience of watching a breaking of the boundaries between the human and the non-human:

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. (Joshi 2001, p. 46)

As Sophie Mantrant writes in her remarkable (soon to be published) monograph on the Welsh writer, *L'art du hiéroglyphe: essai sur la fiction d'Arthur Machen*, the body of Dr. Matheson, witness to this horrifying mutation, is also affected as if it were also threatened with contagion and dissolution. He won't survive the experience of the abject like Dr. Haberden in «The Novel of the White Powder» (and Dr. Lanyon in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). In addition to the diegesis, the text itself, already fragmented, heterogeneous, seems to be contaminated. The manuscript accounting for the experience, made of notes scribbled hastily in Latin, contains abbreviations, suspension marks and blanks and it is sometimes illegible. As Mantrant states: «The intrusion of italics in this short segment visually marks the destabilization of the text whose homogeneity is threatened» (Mantrant, p. 32, my translation). The text itself is marked with impurity and the last chapter, full of blanks, is fittingly entitled «The fragments». The whole novella can be seen according to Mantrant as a «deliquescent body, verging upon the protoplasmic, the formless» (p. 32, my translation). These motifs of amorphousness, viscousness, dissolution and contamination will be taken up in *The Three Impostors*.

*The Great God Pan* is indeed remarkable on account of its particularly complex, fragmented and heterogeneous structure. Its originality relies on its «impurity» in terms of form, which echoes or mirrors the ontological impurity of the heroine. However, despite this multi-layered set-up and fragmentation, the narrative remains focused on the same story from beginning to end. The structure is also circular as we revert in the epilogue to a scene between the same protagonists who featured in the prologue, that is Raymond and his friend. The epilogue provides some missing facts, confirming the supernatural origin of Helen Vaughan, born nine months after her mother was compelled to «see Pan». During his evocation of the event, Raymond also expresses a kind of remorse, though he still asserts that his theory was sound: «It was an ill work I did that night when you were present; I broke open the door of the house of life, without knowing or caring what might pass forth or enter it [...] You did well to blame me, but my theory was not all absurdity. What I said Mary would see, she saw,

but I forgot that no human eyes could look on such a vision with impunity» (Joshi 2001, p. 50). Raymond is a prototypic hubristic mad scientist who associates the human and the divine to create a hybrid, interstitial creature that challenges good taste and Victorian morality.

In *The Three Impostors*, the aesthetic impure is foregrounded at various levels, both within the main narrative and the embedded ones. The main narrative, the search for Joseph Walters who, out of sheer panic, stole or rather inadvertently took away with him a precious unique roman coin, the Gold Tiberius, is already full of references to a certain form of taste or aesthetic bent verging on the perverse and the sadistic. Dr. Lipsius, the mastermind and orchestrator of all the events, is a collector of rare, ancient, precious objects and has constituted his own museum to which Helen, his woman accomplice, wishes to contribute. She gives him the severed finger of Joseph Walters, the victim, one among numerous gruesome details in the novel. A second characteristic feature of Lipsius is that his taste for art extends to his criminal activities. Indeed, like Thomas De Quincey (*On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*), he thinks that murder should be carried out as a work of art and set up as a spectacle. The novel offers two illustrations of this 'philosophy'.

We find a reflection of these features in the embedded narratives, which however introduce new topics and go far beyond in horror and abjection. The motif of quaint taste is developed in one of the episodes told by Burton, «The Novel of the Iron Maid». The narrator tells of his encounter with a strange old man, Mr. Mathias, whom he meets by chance while walking home. This man he only knows by sight, offers him hospitality, but his main aim seems to have him visit his private museum, a collection of torture instruments from various countries and periods. The owner relishes describing with lavish details the various instruments and, in so doing, triggers a feeling of revulsion on the part of Burton. He especially emphasizes the refinement of the Orientals, though no Oriental artefact is actually described apart from a vaguely referred to «contrivance»: «These are the Chinese contrivances; you have heard of the 'Heavy Death'? it is my hobby, this sort of thing. Do you know, I often sit there, hour after hour, and meditate over the collection. I fancy I see the faces of the men who have suffered, faces lean with agony, and wet with sweats of deathgrowing distinct out of the gloom and I hear the echoes of their cries for mercy» (Joshi 2001, p. 190).

This is a clear instance of a pervert fascination for physical torture and death which we may associate with a form of aesthetic impurity. Mr. Mathias then introduces his latest find, just received from Germany, «The Iron Maid», a large statue of a naked woman, fashioned in green bronze, which he describes with a touch of pride as «quite a work of art» (p. 190). However, the macabre irony of the text's closure transforms the collector himself into an object, a spectacle of horror when, without taking heed



of the instructions provided in a note, he triggers the lethal mechanism of the metallic artefact. The dramatic outcome is announced, as often in Machen's fiction, by a sheer sound, unnoticed at first: «There was a slight click of which I took no notice», then more ominously «a sudden whirr, the noise of machinery in motion» occurs, lastly changing in a «heavy droning» (p. 190). The evolution of the sound conveys the ongoing, slow but inexorable deathly process by which the collector becomes a victim of the collected object. We may emphasize that the artefact has a female shape, that her body is naked and that the small knob triggering her mortal embrace is situated between her breasts, thus associating a form of morbid eroticism and death: «The head had slowly bent down, and the green lips were on the lips of Mathias» (p. 191).

### 3 Generic Hybridity

*The Three Impostors*, written in 1890, but only published in 1895, is indeed a hybrid and «impure» narrative in-between novel and collection of stories. Its specificity relies partly on its structure defined by circularity and the embedding of seemingly heterogeneous and self-contained narratives. However this narrative model is not fully original as it is borrowed from R.L. Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* (1885), a sequel to *The New Arabian Nights*, featuring Prince Florizel of Bohemia. Indeed both works follow the same structural pattern. A frame narrative introduces the various protagonists whose stories are narrated in turn, these stories containing secondary narratives. Stevenson's text also opens with a prologue introducing the three main protagonists, three young men, talented, elegant and well-dressed, but penniless and eager to succeed in life. They are offered by a mysterious shopkeeper, Mr. Godall, to investigate upon a seemingly dangerous man who will later be identified as the dynamiter, a mad terrorist bent on destroying London with his home-made bombs.

The prologue of *The Three Impostors* stages a seemingly banal situation, a simple conversation. In fact the opening sentence, «and Mr. Joseph Walters is going to stay the night?» (p. 102), does not address a potential visitor but concerns a dying man who has just been tortured. The male locutor, «smooth and clean-shaven», addresses a more hairy one, «not of the most charming appearance » (p. 102). The physical traits of the two men become clues as well as the colour of the eyes, a shining hazel, of a third female character who enters stage afterwards. This trio echoes the title of the novel, but the text remains enigmatic. We don't know anything about the «young man with spectacles», the victim. Each protagonist invokes one or several names that also constitute masks: «I propose to say good-bye here to my friend Mr. Burton», «I bid adieu to Mr. Wilkins», «Farewell to Miss Lally and Miss Leicester» (pp. 102-103). The reader will

soon learn that these very names, Burton, Wilkins, Miss Lally and Miss Leicester, correspond to various fictitious identities borrowed by the three accomplices. These names are quoted regularly through the various embedded narratives while their real names (Davies, Richmond and Helen) are only provided once.

The structure is also circular since the last episode brings us back to the same enigmatic place and to the same time, only slightly later, a few minutes after the departure of the three impostors who are now identified as criminals. Dyson and his friend cannot do anything to prevent the death of the young man whom they discover has been burnt alive. This time discrepancy underlines ironically the fact that Dyson and Phillips do not control the events and are essentially manipulated, their role being limited to the part of listeners (narratees) to the tales told by the impostors, crime or supernatural stories. The different embedded narratives aim at involving Dyson and Phillips in the quest for the young bespectacled man.

The inscription in a tale of detection of secondary narratives belonging to other literary genres (supernatural horror, exotic adventure) or modes (satire, parody) raises doubts as to the generic identity of the text. The reader also wonders what is true, what is authentic or unreliable, what is primary or secondary. The embedded stories have more impact on the reader than the investigation narrative because of their sheer poetic and horrific intensity, which prevails over the relative triviality of the main plot. The parodic and ironic dimension, noticeable in some passages, also identifies this pseudo-novel with a metatextual literary game.

The first main embedded narrative, a «novel» told by Henry Wilkins, supposedly the son of a «poor but learned clergyman» (an obvious cliché), takes place in the USA, in a remote mining area close to the Rocky mountains. The narrator tells of his acting as a secretary for a man named Smith who proves to be the leader of a secret society, dealing in blackmail and murder. This exotic adventure story is highly derivative of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and of Stevenson's «Story of the Destroying Angel» (from *The Dynamiter*, 1885), both set in a Mormon community. The second «novel» is set in Wales, but again in a remote and wild place: «Barren and savage hills, and ragged commonland, a territory all strange and unvisited, and more unknown to Englishmen than the very heart of Africa» (p. 148). The story is more complex, containing another embedded text, but it also partakes of a different genre, much closer to the gothic trend, with different shades of terror and horror. So is the third main narrative, «The Novel of the White Powder», a story of horrible physical transformation and reversion to *materia prima*, providing spectacular visions of an aesthetic impure. The mere mention of an impure powder causing the mutation is obviously a reference to Jekyll's potion in Stevenson's novel, but Machen goes further in the detailed description of the mutation seen as a continuous relentless and abject process. «The Novel of the Iron Maid» provides,

as we saw, another example of sensational horror story. In-between those main embeddings, several other narratives are inserted, including the testimony of the victim, Joseph Walters.

By means of all these stories often told by unreliable narrators who don various masks to hide their true identity, we are carried to other spaces, to the American wilderness, to Wales and the land of the little people, to Italy, Germany, the Orient and Africa thanks also to numerous intertextual allusions. As stated by Claire Wrobel, a movement of interiorization is noticeable in this structure, with a gradual refocusing on London, seen as a locus of contamination by evil, affecting even such prestigious institutions as the British Museum, where Dr. Lipsius first encounters Joseph Walters and ensnares him (Wrobel 2008, p. 342).

The relative complexity of this multilayered narrative necessitates a constant work of deciphering. In these fictions, the city of London plays a prominent part in various ways, as realistic setting, imaginary locus, but also as a stage for drama and a source of intradiegetic storytelling.

#### 4 The London Metropolis as Aesthetic Impure

In *The Three Impostors*, we do have a realistic approach to the city which is apprehended by means of walking through the streets and observing the spectacle of the crowd at all times of day and night, with a lot of emphasis on movement, the hectic circulation of people and vehicles, and the play of lights and shadows. We are given very precise locations of the various dwellings mentioned. However London is fraught with uncanny connotations and becomes a mysterious, poetic, at time horrifying locus, a maze where the traveller loses spatial as well as time points of reference.

The city appears as varied, multiform, cosmopolitan, hybrid. It is a labyrinthine locus, invested with beauty and sublimity but also with decadence, squalor, moral corruption and primitive/regressive forms of behaviour. The metropolis is the site of a series of metamorphoses blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal. During their strolls, Dyson and Phillips pass through many different districts of London from the posh bourgeois areas of Oxford Street or Picadilly to the more popular areas of the Strand and finally reach the grim sinister district of Clerkenwell. But we also discover other parts of the city through the secondary narratives. In «The Novel of the Iron Maid», Burton the narrator walks from a far suburban area towards Waterloo bridge, through «mere protoplasmic streets, beginning in orderly fashion with serried two-storied houses, and ending suddenly in waste, and pits and rubbish-heaps, and fields whence the magic had departed» (Joshi 2001, p. 187). To characterize the city, Machen uses a number of images and metaphors suggesting hybridity, contradiction, incongruity and various form of aesthetic impurity.

What is indeed emphasized is the juxtaposition of extremes of beauty and ugliness: «Beyond, the streets were curious, wild in their irregularities, here a row of sordid dingy dwellings, dirty and disreputable in appearance, and there, without warning, stood a house, genteel and prim, with wire blinds and brazen knocker, as clean and trim as if it had been the doctor's house in some benighted little country town» (pp. 215-216). London is also characterized by a certain architectural style (a jagged skyline) which is compared favourably to the Paris just rebuilt by Haussmann: «Conceive if you can a human being of ordinary intelligence preferring the boulevards to our London Streets; imagine a man calling for the wholesale destruction of our most charming city, in order that the dull uniformity of that whited sepulchre called Paris should be reproduced here in London. Is it not positively incredible?» (p. 177).

A second trait concerns the opposition between noise and silence, which changes in relation to the area and the moment of the day. The narrator describes accurately the bustle of the city and its characteristic noises during the day. He emphasizes also movement, dynamism, circulation, describing the traffic of the city along Oxford Street: «A treble line of hansoms, carriages, vans, cabs and omnibuses was tearing East and West, and not the most daring adventurer of the crossings would have cared to try his fortune» (p. 112). Contrary to this, Dyson lives in a moderately quiet street where he «held his finger on the pulse of life without being deafened with the thousand rumours of the main arteries of London» (p. 213). In the same way, in the area of Notting Hill, close to Abingdon Grove, «one is conscious of a certain calm, a drowsy peace, which made the feet inclined to loiter» (p. 191). The noisy atmosphere of central London is contrasted by moments when characters stroll along empty streets, or even narrow passages paved with flagstones. As they stray away from the center, noises are less intense, muffled by the distance. In the last episode of the novel, Dyson and Phillips reach a suburban area, which looks appealing because of its silence and the presence of nature: «and presently the half-finished road ended, a quiet lane began, and they were beneath the shade of elm trees» (p. 231). This quietude will prove misleading.

Another feature is the emphasis on lighting or the interplay of lights and shadows. The most pleasurable moment seems to be in the evening when the sun is setting: «the last flush of sunset», «the pale greens and fading blues and flushing clouds of sunset» (p. 91). Two kinds of artificial light are contrasted: the soft light diffused by the gas-lamps contrasts with the blinding radiance of the electric light: «the lounging idlers by the public-house, and the casual passers-by rather flickered and hovered in the play of lights than stood out substantial things» (p. 106). People are spectralized and become part of an uncanny spectacle. The description of London just after sunset plays upon lights and shadows and the varied hues taken by the sky and clouds, but it also relies upon sounds to conjure up an

unreal and uncanny mood: «A chiaroscuro that had something unearthly», «a figure would shape itself and vanish», «semi-theatrical magic» (p. 106). This mingling of perceptions blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, object and subject, and partakes of a form of aesthetic impurity. Thus London is seen as a place of contrasts, both in terms of architecture and people. Lastly London is often associated with the notion of maze, labyrinth where one loses one's landmarks. The complexity of space organization, but also the sense of surprise, unexpectedness, discovery leads to a mood of mystery which is recurrently evoked.

## 5 London as the Site of Observation, Investigation and Adventure

London is used as a dramatic setting, a backcloth for narrative. Characters either follow a determined course dictated by somebody who holds authority like Lipsius (as Walters does when he follows the instructions of the fatal letter) or are dependent on chance encounters, the text playing upon a dynamic tension between these two contradictory approaches.

Contrary to some kinds of pre-determined movement with a purpose, the text refers recurrently to the notion of strolling idly,<sup>3</sup> purposelessly through the various areas of the city. Both Dyson and Phillips walk endlessly through the city streets, discovering new, at times disquieting areas, propitious to uncanny experiences. London is also a place of encounters, either casual or contrived. Dyson meets Phillips by chance at a tobacco shop and they become close friends. In the same way seemingly, Joseph Walters first meets Dr. Lipsius, the criminal brain, rather casually in the reading room of the British museum: «I became acquainted with a serene and benevolent gentleman, a man somewhat past middle age, who nearly always occupied a desk next to mine» (p. 219). However, the gentleman's benevolence is quite misleading and his frequenting the venerable Library suggests that crime wears many masks.

Thus London becomes a place of investigation on both counts. On the one hand, the three emissaries of Lipsius are following the track of the young Joseph Walters and seeking for clues, by using false identities and telling stories to unknown passers-by. We may wonder how they choose their potential witnesses who become privileged listeners, but also figurations of the reader who discovers the narrative along with them. We may also wonder what the efficiency of this technique of investigation may be.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of stroller (*flâneur*), present in Baudelaire's poetry where it applies to the poet wandering through the streets of Paris is later taken up by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished book on Baudelaire (1973).

We have to suppose that the three storytellers tell their tales to as many Londoners as they can, just in case one of them may have a valuable piece of information on their prey. Thus they mostly rely on chance and coincidence.

On the other hand, Dyson tries to inquire on the mystery of the «young man with spectacles». Dyson is endowed with a prime quality, the gift for observation. The beginning of the narrative entitled «The Encounter on the Pavement», a rather commonplace title, is rich with terms suggesting this quality: «Mr. Dyson [...] staring with bland inquiry at whatever caught his attention, enjoyed in all its rare flavours the sensation that he was really hard at work. His observation of mankind, the traffic and the shop windows tickled his faculties with an exquisite bouquet. [...] He was attentive in his glances to right and left for fear he should miss some circumstances of the most acute significance» (pp. 111-112).

However, the text is tinged with ironical touches. Contrary to Sherlock Holmes who uses his gifts of observation in specific circumstances and in order to find clues, Dyson merely observes the flux of life and the movement of the traffic in the London streets. He is sensitive to the attitudes of the passers-by and on the look-out for some event that may happen or may not. Thus he persuades himself that this is genuine work: «He looked serious, as one looks on whom charges of weight and moment are laid» (p. 112). The narrator uses ironical expressions in order to describe Dyson's confrontation with the spectacle offered by the street «gaping like a fish» and adopts a mock heroic tone, referring to «the most daring adventurer of the crossings», as if crossing a street were indeed a form of adventurous endeavour. Dyson is also fond of formulas such as: «I always like to be accurate» which is ironically denounced by the narrator: «As he somewhat pompously expressed, he held his finger on the pulse of life» (p. 134). Dyson is also characterized by naivety and credulousness and, in the course of his dealings with other characters, he is easily manipulated and deceived.

At the same time, Dyson is sensitive to matters of external appearance and taste and he senses that something is amiss with Mr. Henry Wilkins whose personality clashes with his elegant clothes: «From his hat to his boots, everything seemed inappropriate. His silk hat, Dyson thought, should have been a high bowler of odious pattern, worn with a baggy morning-coat, and an instinct told him that the fellow did not commonly carry a clean pocket-handkerchief. The face was not of the most agreeable pattern, and was in no way improved by a pair of bulbous chin-whiskers of a ginger hue, into which moustaches of like colour melted imperceptibly» (p. 113).

These dominant traits are introduced at the beginning of *The Three Impostors*. Dyson is presented as a man of letters, but also as «an unhappy instance of talents misapplied» (p. 105). Thus, from the outset, the narrator adopts an ironical stance: «He knew nothing of the logic of life and he flattered himself with the title of artist, when he was in fact but an idle and

curious spectator of other men's endeavours» (p. 105). Later, the anonymous narrator evokes Dyson's illusions: «He delivered himself a little with the name of artist, yet his amusements were eminently harmless» (p. 135). The image that is given of Dyson is rather that of a banal individual, neither gifted for literature nor for the sciences and who lives an idle life with a few male companions. Thus Machen features an anti-hero, a failed artist (he has never published a line) far remote from characters like Dupin or Holmes who are endowed with a superior intellect and imagination. Contrary to Holmes, who relies on his powers of induction and deduction and pays attention to the slightest material detail which could be a clue, Dyson only relies on chance encounters to solve enigmas. Hence, Machen subverts the conventions of the detective tale by foregrounding the incompetence of the investigator who is also easily deluded and manipulated by clever criminals endowed with the gift of storytelling.

In that context, London becomes a locus of conflict, tension, a place of chaos, an «urban chaosmos» as Kelly Hurley states in *The Gothic Body* (Hurley 1996, p. 159), but it is also metatextually associated with fiction.

## 6 London as a Receptacle of Stories

For all these qualities, London becomes a receptacle of stories, real or potential or dreamt of, true or fabricated, contrived, offered by the various protagonists to the two main characters, Dyson and Phillips, who play the part of narratees and thus can be partly identified with a reading instance. Both characters, moreover, are associated with language and story-telling or -writing. Thus going through London and encountering people leads to the unravelling of stories, more and more uncanny, even fantastic or improbable because of the excessive predicaments they delineate, even though at times they have a ring of truth. The novel is structured loosely thanks to these storytellers casually met. As Kelly Hurley observes: «Dyson stumbles onto fantastic tales in progress, of orgies, murders, corpses in mummy cases, dramatic pursuits. The city yields narrative, wildly sensational narratives at every turn»; «London becomes a dense clamorous place from which to extract sensation, incident, narrative» (pp. 164-166). London is not only the backcloth, it literally produces fictions. Some are seemingly real accounts such as the story told by Joseph Walters which contains relatively few references to violence or transgression. We learn nothing concerning the orgiastic rituals the character may be submitted to (and the language is subdued and elliptical). The only graphic detail provided is the reference to the disposing of the body of the victim, Mr. Headley, who carries the gold Tiberius: «I peered into the face, while he held the lamp. The flesh was black with the passing of the centuries but as I looked I saw upon the right cheekbone a small triangular scar, and the

secret of the mummy flashed upon me: I was looking at the dead body of the man whom I had decoyed into that house» (Joshi 2001, p. 228). This gruesome spectacle induces a state of panic and subsequent flight, sealing the fate of Joseph Walters.

There are also potential narratives for would-be writers. Thus a young friend of Dyson, Edgar Russell, who has failed to produce any work so far, is aware of the fictional potential of the city and he fantasizes about his future project:

It dawned upon me that I would write the history of a street. Every house should form a volume. I fixed upon the street, I saw each house and read as clearly as in letters the physiology and psychology of each: the little byway stretched before me in its actual shape – a street that I know and have passed down a hundred times; with some twenty houses, prosperous and mean, and lilac bushes in purple blossom. And yet it was at the same time a symbol, a *via dolorosa* of hopes cherished and disappointed, of years of monotonous existence without content or discontent, of tragedies and obscure sorrows; and on the door of one of those houses I saw the red stain of blood, and behind a window two shadows, blackened and faded on the blind, as they swayed on tightened cords, the shadows of a man and a woman hanging in a vulgar gaslit parlour. These were my fancies; but when pen touched paper they shrivelled and vanished away. (p. 193)

Contrary to this creative impotence, the three intra-diagetic narrators are extremely gifted and vivid in spinning their stories. There are in fact seven narratives, which are all told either to Dyson or Phillips through a casual encounter with someone of the trio who assumes a false identity each time. «The Novel of the Dark Valley» is told by Wilkins, alias Richmond, who pretends to be a victim of a mysterious Smith, whereas of course Richmond is the henchman of Dr. Lipsius, the true criminal brain. The third narrative, «The Novel of the Black Seal», is preceded by another meeting, that of Phillips with a young woman, Miss Lally, who pretends she has lost her young brother in mysterious circumstances: «In one moment of horror I realized that it was a formless thing that had mouldered for many years in the grave. The flesh was peeled in strips from the bones and hung apart dry and granulated [...] and the fingers that encircled my brother's arms were all unshapen, claw-like things and one was but a stump from which the end had rotted off» (p. 136). This morbid, macabre and highly gothic vision is soon interpreted by Phillips as a hallucination caused by the woman's suffering: «You expected to see your brother, you were alarmed because you did not see him and unconsciously, no doubt your brain went to work, and finally you saw a mere projection of your own morbid thoughts – a vision of your absent brother, and a mere confu-



sion of terrors incorporated in a figure which you can't describe» (p. 137).

However this description, especially the detail of the warped hand, reminds the reader of a detail in the prologue, when Helen shows a little package, «all oozing and dripping», which is said to contain «the hand that took the gold Tiberius» (p. 104). In the light of Miss Lally's gothic description, the reader can operate a series of correlations and wonder if there may be links between the package and the nighmarish vision of the brother accompanied by the living-dead man. The mutilated hand is probably that of the tortured young man, identified here with the vanished brother. This vision is thus a lie, but it is also proleptic. It adumbrates the final torture of Joseph Walters, burnt alive and amputated. This description has a dual function: it provides an explanation to a cryptic dialogue and announces the tragic outcome of the whole story.

The reader is thus gradually led to reinterpret even the descriptive elements of the city. Far from being purely decorative, albeit pictorial touches, these elements become part of the drama and acquire an ominous dimension. The urban landscape or details of the decor become something to be deciphered. In the same way, before the two strollers are confronted with the horrifying spectacle of physical death, the text adumbrates this macabre discovery thanks to textual elements that evoke death and decomposition, image of gangrene, of wounds, graveyard, allusion to worms and to the «danse macabre»: «Black pustules and festering sores swelled and clustered on fair limbs - and the fairy blood had boiled» (p. 232). That last image conveys an idea of how the body has been destroyed by the flames. Again, the textual fabric anticipates the diegetic discovery of the corpse of Joseph Walters. The narrative is a cryptic manuscript that the reader must decipher, not only in terms of narrative embedding, but in some meaningful lexical and syntactic elements.

Another textual transformation concerns colours. In the prologue, the colour red is only evoked in the description of the setting sun: «The sun slid down and shone red» (p. 103). The lexis remains neutral, describing a natural process. The dominant colours of the passage are grey and green. In the epilogue, however, the text is saturated with references to the red colour and fire images: «all the West and South were in flames», «the glow shone reflected» (p. 231). These images, especially the first one, may be seen as romantic clichés, aiming at a poetic evocation of the intense light of the setting sun, suffusing the horizon line. However, they must also be linked to another source of light, the fire which burns inside the house, ablaze on the very flesh of the «young man with spectacles». Thus, the recourse to a simile - «it seemed as if blood and fire were mingled» (p. 231) - which appears as an extended metaphor associated with the sun, is also evocative of the tragic fate which is being sealed (i.e., the fusion of flames and organic flesh).

The inside of the house where the victim is sacrificed offers a setting which perfectly illustrates the notion of aesthetic impurity. The wall paper

is a mingling of what is left of the wealth and decorum of the place, «a rich old flock paper» and various signs of degradation and corruption, «blackened with vague patches of rising damp» (p. 232). The baroque painted ceiling, once featuring cupids in vivid colours, is «disfigured with sores of dampness» (p. 232), changing the very meaning of the painting, transforming a celebration of classic conventions of Love into a dance of Death. Moreover, the painted two-dimensional bodies seem to acquire some kind of organic life by means of the decaying process that affects the texture of the material: «black pustules and festering sores swelled and clustered on fair limbs and smiling faces showed corruption, and the fairy blood had boiled with the germs of foul disease» (p. 232). Here indeed some form of bad taste is invoked by means of an uncanny and impure combination of features which conveys an impression of both physical and moral decay. The work of art becomes an object of abjection.

The description of the fountain and of the bronze triton erected in the midst of the courtyard provides another illustration. In the prologue, the triton is only covered with rust. In the epilogue, the text refers to the «bronze flesh» of the triton, introducing a new element which suggests the macabre ritual that is being carried at the very moment. The lexical accuracy - «rust had eaten into the bronze flesh» (p. 232) - dramatizes the idea of torture, which directly echoes Joseph Walters' body devoured by flaming embers.

These different atmospheric, decorative and symbolic notations adumbrate the subsequent macabre discovery of the tortured body of Joseph Walters, much before the moment when Dyson becomes sensitive to the smell of burnt flesh: «But upon the middle of the body a fire of coals was smouldering, the flesh had been burnt through. The man was dead, but the smoke of his torment mounted still, a black vapour» (p. 234).

## 7 The Aesthetic Impure, Modernity and Metatextual Effects

In this strange, hybrid, formally impure narrative, the true detective is indeed the reader. The investigation concerns also the meaning of specific words and the way they help correlate various unconnected events. Each secondary narrator tells an unreliable story aiming at deceiving the narratee. But the story may contain a grain of truth, hence the constant parallels drawn between the true situation of the impostors and their fictitious personae. An illustration is provided by the comparison between the two narratives of Helen, that of the missing brother and «The Novel of the White Powder», supposedly told by Miss Leicester, another mask for Helen. Both stories concern missing brothers, but in the first narrative, the anecdote serves as a prelude to the far more complex story of the Black Seal in which professor Gregg, a scientist open to the irrational, also investigates

on a strange case. In the same way, «The Novel of the White Powder» tells the story of the disappearance of a brother in horrific circumstances. This time, it is not the brother's companion who is seen as a living corpse but the brother himself who, having absorbed a seemingly harmless white powder, undergoes an abject transformation. Under the effect of this *Vinum sabbati*, the young man gets carried away and becomes corrupt like Dorian Gray or Helen Vaughan, the evil heroine of *The Great God Pan*. This is how the narrator describes the ultimate stage of the metamorphosis: «There upon the floor was a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes and bubbling with boily bubbles like boiling pitch. And out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes [...] and something moved and lifted up what might have been an arm» (p. 126).

One finds again the motif of the mutilated member, which evokes the vision of the living-dead character that accompanies the brother in Miss Lally's narrative. The link confirms the fictional nature of the tale she tells, sprinkled as it is with gothic conventions and clichés, at times verging on parody. Indeed, in «Adventure of the Missing Brother», the female narrator tells a sensational tale of the supernatural, describing with a hyperbolic style the uncanny gruesome spectacle of the frightening character with a rotting hand which supposedly leads her brother onwards: «I saw the hand that held him by the arm, and seemed to guide him, and in one moment of horror I realized that it was a formless thing that had mouldered for many years in the grave. The flesh was peeling in strips from the bones, and hung apart dry and granulated, and the fingers that encircled my brother's arm were all unshapen claw-like things, and one was but a stump from which the end had rotted off» (pp. 135-136). Despite (or because of) the melodramatic tone and the use of Poesque cosmic metaphors of chaos («the heavens and the earth seemed to rush together with the sound of thunder», p. 135), the reader may find it difficult to believe the story. Miss Lally's description of her brother reminds of the young man with spectacles while the person accompanying him wears a bowler hat like Joseph Wilkins. She also expresses feelings («there seemed almost a twinkling as of mirth about her eyes», p. 137) quite at odds with the tragic predicament she describes.

In «Novel of the Black Seal», Miss Lally's narrative is more complex and corroborated by two other embedded testimonies: first a manuscript written by a scientist, Dr. Chambers, who testifies that the white powder is used during sabbaths, then a short letter by an eye witness, Dr. Haberdern. The reader is then constantly placed in an unstable situation, wondering whether s/he should believe an incredible, but very intense and vivid story, or deny its authenticity as part of a fabulation, a set of lies. But what is the fabulation about? Is it limited to the shift of identity or does it concern the contents of the story? The mystery is never clarified. At the end of her

story, Helen masquerading as Miss Lally evokes again the «young man with spectacles», supposedly her lost brother.

In «Novel of the White Powder», the same Helen (Miss Leicester), addressing Dyson at the end of her narrative, refers to «a youngish man, with dark whiskers» (p. 212), as a detective on her trail because he suspects her of having killed her brother. When Dyson, a bit suspicious at last, refuses to help her, she goes off into a shriek of laughter which is again at odds with the fear she has just expressed. Dyson, as a narratee, is thus confronted with heterogeneous moods and tones and so is the reader whose emotions may be divided. Here Machen combines a tale of supernatural horror and a parodic form of crime fiction, a clear case of aesthetic impurity.

Thus, the reader seeks to find clues to back up his hypothesis. On first or second reading he will associate apparently disconnected signs: when Dyson meets casually a man defined as «an indefinite-looking figure» (p. 216) hidden to the eye by his garment, he seems not to realize that it could be Joseph Walters, the young man with spectacles. However the reader may, at this stage, identify him. It is only much later that Dyson has a revealing intuition: «It suddenly flashed into Dyson's mind that he knew the man; it was undoubtedly the young man with spectacles for whom so many ingenuous persons were searching» (p. 217). The true story of Walters as told in the pocket-book («an old-fashioned notebook, bound in faded green marroco», p. 217) alludes to fragments of other secondary plots: his projects are close to those of Miss Lally's brother. The circumstances of his disappearance recall those of the first fictive brother. Joseph Walters' initiation to evil practices thanks to the wine of the Fauns also evokes that of Miss Leicester's unfortunate brother. In both cases, a potent and magic potion and impious rituals and sexual perverted practices are mentioned.

Dr. Lipsius, the criminal mastermind, is present implicitly in three narratives: that of Wilkins, another narrative of Burton (Davies) and the «Novel of the Iron Maid» where the collector of torture instruments dies a victim of the mechanism, the bronze lips laid on his own lips. This torture echoes other tortures described in Walters' narrative, that of the true owner of the gold coin transformed into a mummy, and that of Walters himself, burnt alive in atrocious conditions. A few other links can be established between the different narratives. If we compare the prologue and the epilogue, for instance, striking similitudes are revealed. The prologue refers to the entrance door which remains open, against Richmond's advice: «We'll leave the front door open. He may like to see company» or «Let the door stand open» (p. 102). This is taken up by Mr. Phillips at the end of the narrative: «I may mention that the door of the house is open» (p. 232).

Retrospectively, the reader may correlate this last scene with the words *in medias res* of the prologue: «and Mr. Joseph Walters is going to stay the night?» (p. 102). The sardonic smile of the three companions and the references to signs of closure suggest a story ending: «There is nothing

else to be done», «It is finished at last» (p. 102). The tale will be told retrospectively, but in a serpentine and twisted way. Other references are explained or made interpretable *a posteriori*.

Moreover, and this attests to its modernity, the text refers to its own process of construction. The metatextual dimension is first present in Dyson's (as would be writer) reflections on literature, which function as a matrix, programming the forthcoming narrative: «The task of the literary man is to invent a wonderful story and tell it in a wonderful manner» (p. 105). However his friend Phillips is more specific and highlights the importance of manner rather than matter: «The matter is of little consequence; the manner is everything. Indeed the highest skill is shown in taking matter apparently common place and transmuting it by the high alchemy of style into the pure gold of art» (pp. 105-106). This alchemical metaphor is central in Machen's work. Later Dyson announces, unconsciously, the textual labyrinth that is provided to the reader, setting the terms of a reading contract: «I see the plot thicken; our steps will henceforth be dogged with mystery and the most ordinary incidents will teem with significance. [...] A clue, tangled if you like, has been placed by chance in our hands; it will be our business to follow it up» (p. 110).

Dyson uses the double terms «clue» and «tangle», thus relating the index and the image of the labyrinth which Machen often uses to depict London streets. Dyson also evokes the task he has to assume, to follow a certain track, starting from a chance encounter or object. But Dyson is mistaken when he believes that he can fill in this part. Indeed only chance (not his own abilities) enables him to be a witness to the denouement of the plot. As to the criminals, they all escape punishment, which would be fairly provocative in a classic tale. Moreover, Machen plays with the conventions of the crime novel so as to subvert them by introducing a form of ambiguity which helps trigger fantastic effects, but also compels the reader to perform crucial interpretive tasks, offering him a particularly tortuous and mystifying reading contract.

## 8 Conclusion

*The Three Impostors* enables us to approach the notion of the aesthetic impure from various angles. The novel expresses Machen's obsession with rotteness, the amorphous and the viscous, with body metamorphosis, physical degeneracy and devolution, but also with moral and spiritual degradation. Occult rituals and scientific experiments lead to the same result, hybridization between the human and the non-human. Jervase, the idiotic character of «The Novel of the Black Seal», even projects a tentacle while Francis Leicester's body turns into a putrid mass equated with primordial slime. The London urban setting reflects this hybridity, this

blurring of boundaries, by contrasting or blending poverty with affluence, dereliction with luxury, beauty with ugliness, light versus darkness. Atmospheric phenomena, natural processes of degradation mirror dramatic events. Some characters, like Dr. Lipsius, embody the desire for extreme experiences or transgressive patterns of behaviour, but the reader himself is attracted toward the dramatized spectacle offered by uncanny, interstitial, unstable, horrifying creatures and objects. The abject, the monstrous, the ugly, architectural decay, become a source of aesthetic fascination, of violent emotion, of 'pathological' pleasure for some of the protagonists in the diegetic universe, even if, as regards the reader, irony, parody and pastiche introduce, at times, a form of distance from the explicit horror or terror generated by the narrative.

The second type of aesthetic impurity is related to the text's unstable generic identity. *The Three Impostors* is both a collection of autonomous short stories and a novel which connects these stories loosely by means of a frame narrative. Moreover these stories use the conventions of various genres, including popular and more established ones. The investigative mode is foregrounded because of the prominence of amateur detectives like Dyson, the presence of criminal plots and the issues of quest and pursuit. However, the gothic mode is also emphasized and its various tropes are mobilized. Other secondary narratives lead us far away from London, enhancing a form of exotic adventure set in the American wilderness or Italy while the narrative also transports us into such remote historical periods as ancient Rome, the Medieval era or even the more archaic and legendary time of the «little people» in the dark forests of Wales.

Machen does express a number of anxieties of his age concerning the risk of devolution and hybridity, «reverse colonization», the return of the archaic, the pagan past, the presence of perversion and crime at the heart of the city. But he also manages to instil forms of impurity into the very textual fabric, hence also the highly reflexive dimension of his fiction. The Welsh writer who was for a time a member of a secret society, the Golden Dawn, partakes of the revival of mysticism and the occult, which goes together with nostalgia and a certain criticism of the excesses and alienating character of his contemporary world (which does not prevent the use of modern narrative devices). His fiction testifies indeed to his fascination with ancient gods, supernatural dionysian creatures, obscure and secret rituals, but also monstrous mutations questioning the limits of the human paradigm and scientific hubris. In that respect, he advocates an aesthetic impure which characterizes the nineteenth century fin de siècle.

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