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Evolution of Effect: The Numinous in Gothic and
Post-Gothic Ghost Experience Literature

by

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The earliest instances of Gothic fiction can best be described as the guilty pleasures of a self-congratulatory period of Enlightenment. The empiricism of thinkers like John Locke had come to dominant acceptance, and the belief was that the reproducible evidence of the senses was the only thing that could be upheld as truth. In this sort of atmosphere, seemingly spectral appearances were written off; the belief was that, if a spirit would not kindly consent to the demands of scientific rigor, then there was no reason to entertain their existence. E.J. Clery, author of several books on the rise of the Gothic school and the development of supernatural fiction offers an explanation for the change in perspective in regards to ghostly subject matter:

“It is as though the urban relocation of the supernatural has effected a change in the very nature of superstition. The audience’s laughter seems to mark a transition, a displacement of the old opposition of belief and scepticism, truth and error. It celebrates the wresting of the invisible world from the sphere of religious doctrine, and its incongruous, hilarious embrace by the fashion system of the city. Freed from the service of doctrinal proof, the ghost was to be caught up in the machine of the economy; it was available to be processed, reproduced, packaged, marketed and distributed by the engines of cultural production. All spirits, whether spuriously real or genuinely fictional, will from this time be leveled to the status of spectacle...The town has added the supernatural to its list of commodities.” (Clery 17).

And the earliest Gothic writings were precisely that: simplistic, almost nostalgic fiction cashing in on the fad of the times, following along on the guilty pleasure people took in thinking themselves above the simpler superstitions of a more barbaric time now passed.

And the first real recognized instance of this type of opportunistic writing is *The Castle of Otranto*, a novella by Horace Walpole and *not*, as it was originally thought, a sixteenth century

work by an Italian named Onuphrio Muralto. The method of storytelling and the subject matter addressed was considered a risky venture by Walpole, and in order to hedge his bets he published the work under false pretenses, purporting it to be a translation of a manuscript discovered in Naples, dating back to 1526. And, whether fortunately or unfortunately, this was a canny move on Walpole's part; the public took great pleasure in the text, believing it to be a lost treasure of a time in which supernatural events such as the story describes were taken at face value. The story itself became very popular, very widely read; in its February 1765 edition, the *Monthly Review* recommended the book, "promising 'considerable entertainment' to those who can 'digest the absurdities of Gothic fiction, and bear with the machinery of ghosts and goblins...for it is written with no common pen; the language is accurate and elegant, the characters are highly finished; and the disquisitions into human manners, passions, and pursuits, indicate the keenest penetration, the most perfect knowledge of mankind'" (*Monthly Review* qtd in Clery). High praise, certainly; modern scholars agree with the assessment of the novella as representative of the school of Gothic fiction, and further award it the dubious honor of being the first Gothic work, serving as the progenitor for a long line of supernatural tales.

But if this is the case, that the work is so well written and insightful, how can we square such praise with H.P. Lovecraft's vicious assessment of *The Castle of Otranto*? Lovecraft, a progenitor in his own right of the style of "weird fiction," (arguably the spiritual successor to the Gothic style) agrees with the claim that Walpole's novella played an important role: "*The Castle of Otranto*, a tale of the supernatural which, though thoroughly unconvincing and mediocre in itself, was destined to exert an almost unparalleled influence on the literature of the weird" (Lovecraft 14). But the value of Lovecraft's critique comes not from his assessment of the novella's importance, but from his take on the story's composition, its style: "The story—

tedious, artificial, and melodramatic—is further impaired by a brisk and prosaic style whose urbane sprightliness nowhere permits the creation of a truly weird atmosphere. [...] Such is the tale; flat, stilted, and altogether devoid of the true cosmic horror which makes weird literature” (Lovecraft 15-16). And in fact, as Clery goes on to mention, *The Monthly Review*, which was so quick to laud the fictitious Onuphrio Muralto, issued a retraction once Walpole stepped from the wings to claim credit for the work as a present-day supernatural tale:

“While we considered *The Castle of Otranto* a translation we could readily excuse its preposterous phenomena, and consider them as sacrifices to a gross and unenlightened age. But when, as in this edition, it is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we offered to the foibles of a supposed antiquity, we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false tale in a cultivated place of learning. It is, indeed, more than strange that an Author, of a refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!” (*The Monthly Review* qtd. in Clery).

But while *The Monthly Review*'s delayed reaction speaks more to a sense of embarrassment at being taken in—the tale was enjoyed, regardless of the deception—perhaps Lovecraft is biased, being overly critical of an eighteenth century Gothic work for its failure to comply with his opinions on what constitutes horror and supernatural fiction; in other words, his 20th century, post-WWII conceptions. Richard Davenport-Hines, a scholar of the Gothic school and author of the nearly-definitive *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*, at least has something nice to say about Walpole's work: “Horace Walpole's pioneering Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* is an extended camp joke; but it is shot through with ideas about power relationships which recall those developed in the altogether less frivolous works of

Rousseau and Hegel” (Davenport-Hines 9). And it is overly reductive and short-sighted to claim that Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto* for no other reason than to turn a quick profit or pander to the sentiment of the time. Davenport-Hines compares Walpole to men like Rousseau, and with good reason; though he may not equal their talent Walpole certainly shared in their desperation, their belief that city life was draining away all the beauty, all the wonder, all the worthwhile-ness of the world. The titular castle of the text was based on Walpole’s own retreat, a Gothic-style castle which he dubbed Strawberry Hill, acquired by Walpole in the 1740s and which served as his small consolation in a world that he judged to be going through what he called “an age of abortions” (Walpole qtd in Davenport-Hines). Walpole could have filled several books with correspondence devoted solely to the task of describing his renovation of Strawberry Hill, and his almost childlike delight in doing so. He took a delight in these types of antiquities, which satisfied both his desire to be surrounded by substance and his desire to be morose. Davenport-Hines provides this explanation of Walpole’s tastes: “He expressed what was serious in his life in terms of artifice, elegance and mocking laughter: a mode which in the twentieth century became known as camp. ‘He liked Gothic architecture,’ declared Lytton Strachey, ‘not because he thought it beautiful, but because he found it queer’” (Davenport-Hines 131).

In many ways, the sudden popularity of *The Castle of Otranto* can be said to be almost coincidental. Walpole was not indicative of his time; rather, he could only have presented in this time, when a childish fascination in things gone by served as an easy salve for the difficulties involved in the new urban sprawl. Given that *The Castle of Otranto* is little more than a love letter written from Walpole to his house, that it became as popular as it did demonstrates that people felt the same lack that Walpole did. And hidden away within the story, perhaps in the

sorts of hidden chambers and secret passages that would come to litter the genre, are hints of what was to come, important themes and questions which more directed, confident writers than Walpole would later elaborate upon. The main character and lord of the castle, Manfred, is a man of terrible ambition and greed, desiring to possess land, prestige and position through any means necessary. His initial attempt, and the plan which opens the novel, is to wed his weak, effeminate son to the daughter of a powerful local lord. When his son is killed through unbelievable, supernatural happenings—crushed to death by the helmet of a statue standing in the castle itself—Manfred fears his chance is missed; that is, until he decides to put aside his loving and faithful wife and wed the heiress himself. The events of the novella detail her flight from Manfred, finding a love of her own, as all swells to numerous clashes twixt good and evil, ultimately resulting in heroic sacrifices, tragic deaths and secrets aplenty revealed in the end. All in all, a text which gives the impression of being crammed with all a writer's favorite tricks and tropes, without any thought to the overall effect created by so many dramatic devices constrained in such a small space. But the character of Manfred, the greedy, ambitious man who lets nothing stand in his way—who claims that, "Heaven nor Hell shall impede my designs" (Walpole 20) is one which will become familiar to Gothic readers. Manfred's momentary hesitation, before finally violating the sanctity of a declaration of sanctuary within the castle's chapel, will become equally commonplace. Both are repetitions on the theme of the careless, uncompromising violation of the sacred, both of which result in supernatural retribution for the violator. The theme that emerges could not be better suited for the time in which it appeared: as people became more and more willing to transgress their old beliefs in the name of reason and empiricism over superstition, the thought of possible spectral backlash played on the doubt that still lurked in everyone's minds, despite their collective shows of bravado. Lovecraft makes

mention of this as well: “There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it, and too much a part of our inmost biological heritage to lose keen potency over a very important, though not numerically great, minority of our species” (Lovecraft 3).

There is a sense, already present in Walpole’s confused work, that there is something special, some *je ne sait quoi* in regards to the fear produced by spectral forces. Lord Manfred’s challenge of, “If beings from another world...have power to impress my mind with awe, it is more than living man can do; nor could a stripling’s arm” (Walpole 101) is answered with a later encounter, at which the character of the Marquis remarks, “This is more than fancy...her terror is too natural and too strongly impressed to be the work of imagination” (Walpole 124). What draws the attention in the Marquis’ comment are the two qualifiers he uses to posit the presence of spectral forces which, even at this late point of the story, several characters persist in denying. He claims that the fear is both “too natural” and “too strongly impressed” to be something that the character only thought she saw. He does not offer empirical data to support the hypothesis that the character has seen a spirit; he does not indicate the room turned crime scene and mark out points of entry. Rather, he examines the character’s emotional state, and finds that whatever affected her was too powerful, and too primeval to have been caused merely by what the character observed. There must be something more to experiencing a ghostly presence than the visual phenomenon.

Rudolf Otto, a theologian and scholar of comparative religion, published one of his most important works, *The Idea of the Holy* (released in Germany as *The Holy—On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*) 1917. The world that Otto lived in bore

some similarities to Walpole's: the holy, the spiritual, had never quite gotten rid of the stigma attached to it during the Enlightenment as 'old superstition.' Faith, to the Enlightenment way of thinking, was the result of the absence of reason, or the inability to properly understand something. Otto's work set out to pin down "the holy," to provide some concept of the holy to the rational mind such that it could be understood and studied. In essence, Otto attempted to break down the human understanding of holiness, examine and understand its composite parts, and then put it back together again in order to inculcate it into the post-Enlightenment mindset.

What Otto arrived at was a concept he called "the numinous;" and despite his repeated claims to the contrary, an understanding of the numinous will allow an understanding of how the truly great Gothic writers were able to inspire the same sorts of feelings of dread, horror and awe in the minds of their Enlightened audiences that their superstitious predecessors had so enjoyed. Before examining Otto's conclusions involving a tri-partite understanding of religious feeling, attention must be paid to the baseline claims made by Otto in the beginning of his book. First and foremost, Otto puts forward that the miraculous, which is his stand-in term for the holy (prior to establishing the numinous as a reliable construct) is NOT a denial of rationalism. This is, of course, a direct contradiction to the prevailing sentiment of Walpole's time, which believed that rationalism and the miraculous, which *they* called "superstition," were mutually exclusive opposites. Otto argues against this, and takes it a step further by claiming that the traditional understanding of the miraculous is itself rational: "For the traditional theory of the miraculous as the occasional breach in the causal nexus in nature by a Being who himself instituted and must therefore be master of it" (Otto 2). Otto is quick to point out that this by no means argues that our conception of God should be expressible in purely rational terms. Rather, it is key to Otto's argument that, much as his explanation of the numinous will be seen to be tri-partite, so too is

Otto's conception of God; namely that certain aspects of God can be expressed rationally, others cannot, and others still can be expressed in semi-rational terms; i.e., only through analogy.

Important to note is that which Otto believes to be the domain of the purely rational:

“[T]he traditional language of edification, with its characteristic phraseology and ideas; by the learned treatment of religious themes in sermon and theological instruction; and further even by our Holy Scriptures themselves. In all these cases the ‘rational’ element occupies the foreground, and often nothing else seems to be present at all. But this is after all to be expected. All language, in so far as it consists of words, purports to convey ideas or concepts;—that is what language means...And hence expositions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the ‘rational’ attributes of God” (Otto 2).

Otto's explanation of the miraculous as being allied with rationalism is essentially that he believes the miraculous *could not exist but for rationalism*. The thought being that the miraculous is, by definition, a hiccup in the normal flow of events. Put another way: consider a board game; a rational world in which what can and cannot be done is laid out in a series of understandable, demonstrable rules. The miraculous, in this context, would constitute cheating at the game to reach some effect—an effect whose aspects *are* allowed for within the rules of the game—by way of some cause—which is *not* allowed for. Otto's argument is that, without the existence of the game rules, there could be no concept of cheating. Likewise, miracles and the miraculous can only occur and be considered in a rational world.

But all of this is mere groundwork for Otto's main objective, which is understanding that aspect of the divine that is *not* rational, but which must rather be understood and interfaced with *through* the rational. To wit: Otto claims that what can be said of the divine, apart from the rational, is that which can be said of the beautiful. And this is a very important claim, both for

Otto's purposes and our own, as connoting this further aspect of the divine with beauty, Otto makes an important shift in his discussion of God. Otto aims to use the term 'holy' in its derivative, as opposed to its denotative sense; instead of a Kantian absolute, perfect good he uses the definition of holy absent its moral factor. In other words, the concept of holy which underlies the concept of the numinous is ethically, morally neutral. The morality that we know of, the morality that we see in the actions of the divine, come after the fact, and are rather human efforts to rationalize that which is not itself rational. And in the Gothic texts that make use of the numinous concept in their work, the depiction is that of human beings trying to force an ethical meaning not to understand, but rather to impose (or superimpose) a rational meaning on the ghosts they see. In this sense, every human narrator in every Gothic tale can be considered an unreliable narrator in their reporting of their supernatural experience.

Otto puts forward the numinous, coined from the Latin term *numen*, which will come to stand in for "the holy without the moral, rational facet" (Otto 6). He further explicates this notion by describing the nature of its active force on the human mind/emotional self: "In other words our X cannot, strictly speaking, be taught; it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes 'of the spirit' must be awakened" (Otto 6). The first of the three elements of the numinous derives directly from this concept: begrudgingly given the term "creature-feeling" by Otto, who was reluctant to tie the concept too closely to insufficient words, it describes that aspect of the holy that manifests when man is directly confronted with the divine. Otto gives the example of Abraham present before God, pleading for the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, but examples abound in Gothic literature as well. Any time that a human narrator is confronted with the spiritual manifested in some sort of perceivable form, a similar reaction is caused, described by Otto as "the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own

nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (Otto 10). Taking it a step further, Otto qualifies it as such: “Everything turns upon the *character* of this overpowering might, a character which cannot be expressed verbally, and can only be suggested indirectly through the tone and content of a man’s feeling-response to it. And this response must be directly experienced in oneself to be understood” (Otto 10).

This then is the challenge that faced the Gothic fiction writers. If they could not simply appeal to the old superstitions, where the mere mention of a spectral creature would cause children to shake and old women to make the sign against the evil eye, they would have to up their ante. They would have to evoke this sort of response in their audience, in precisely the manner in which Otto says: they would have to do so indirectly, using only what words they had at their disposal, to evoke (rather than merely illustrate) a sense of the divine. Otto references a fellow theologian in his book, William James, quoting from his work *Varieties of Religious Experience*: “It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective present, a perception of what we may call “Something there,” more deep and general than any of the special and particular senses by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed” (James qtd. in Otto 12).

But, as Otto himself points out, this sense of creature-feeling, or “creature-consciousness” is just that: a consciousness, an awareness of something, but which does not qualify the nature of that which we become aware. Otto also posits a second element of the divine: “mysterium tremendum, the overwhelming mystery”—the quality which Otto identifies as affecting the human perception of the perceived object. Otto describes it as a sudden surge of conviction and piety, a power in faith unlike any the human soul could conceivably self-manufacture. In other words, Otto is describing in 1917 exactly the same conclusion in regards to experience of the

divine that Walpole penned in 1764. This sensation, according to Otto, can come upon a person quite suddenly: “It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy” (Otto 15). More to the point, “It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of a creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressibly and above all creatures” (Otto 16).

Despite Otto’s determination that the ghost stories of the Gothic style fall firmly into the category of crude, barbaric antecedents, he cannot argue that the ghost experience literature fits the criteria he has put forth thus far for belonging to the numinous. Taking it a step further, Otto breaks down *mysterium tremendum* into its two basic components, mystery and awefulness; that is, the sensation of being in awe. *Tremendum* comes from the term “tremor,” and its inclusion renders *mysterium tremendum*, at its core, a fear response, similar in nature to religious dread or “the fear of God.” The distinction that Otto makes at this point is that ghost stories, and by association Gothic fiction, manage a convincing facsimile of *tremendum*, but fail to truly capture its effect, as well as failing to imitate the mystery of it. He specifically addresses the fear of ghosts:

“Its antecedent stage is demonic dread (cf. the horror of Pan) with its queer perversion, a sort of abortive offshoot, the dread of ghosts. It first begins to stir in the feeling of ‘something uncanny,’ ‘something eerie’ or ‘weird.’ It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in

history...And all ostensible explanations of the origin of religion in terms of animism or magic or folk psychology are doomed from the outset to wander astray...unless they realize this fact of our nature...to be the basic factor and the basic impulse underlying the entire process of religious evolution” (Otto 15).

Rather than take Otto’s outlook on the value of Gothic fiction comparative to the value of religious sentiment, it is instead more valuable to consider his comments on those understandings of religion that attempt to ground themselves in supernatural fictions such as Gothic fiction encompasses. Otto clearly believes, as did the Gothic writers, that this capacity to perceive and process the supernatural, the numinous, was something inherent to them; for Otto, he takes this inherent talent to be evidence of a higher creative power. For the Gothic writers, they simply took it as evidence of a supernatural realm with supernatural inhabitants; something “other” which served to act upon this inborn potential in man. And what both of these indicate is the truth in what Otto claimed as a consequence of this potential; Otto believed that ghosts and the like—the primitive beliefs of primitive man—were a stopping place on the road to a true appreciation of the numinous. He believed that, in time, the belief in ghosts and the supernatural would be replaced by a higher, purer form of the numinous. Interesting to note, however, is that Otto believed that man would most likely never be free of their previous, crude beliefs:

“But even when this has long attained its higher and purer mode of expression it is possible for the primitive types of excitation that were formerly a part of it to break out in the soul in all their original naiveté and so to be experienced afresh. That this is so is shown by the potent attracting again and again exercised by the element of horror and shudder in ghost stories, even among persons of high, all round education. It is a remarkable fact that the physical reaction to which this unique dread of the uncanny gives

rise is also unique, and is not found in the case of any ‘natural’ fear. There is something non-natural or supernatural about the symptom of ‘creeping flesh.’ ... It may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across his mood. It has therefore nothing to do with intensity, and no natural fear passes over into it merely by being intensified” (Otto 17).

In other words, Otto understood all too well how the readers of the 18th century, living in the pleasant, Enlightened time before the French Revolution, could have become ensnared and been affected by a Gothic revival.

Although mention has been made, a direct examination of Otto’s consideration of ghosts and ghost literature will be valuable in going forward. Categorizing the ghost experience as the “degraded offshoot and travesty of the genuine ‘numinous dread or awe’” (Otto 28) it is clear that his opinion of Gothic fiction was likely very low. But he does provide some interesting insights into how the numinous is presented in the ghost experience. First, that it is not the ghost itself, but being rid of the ghost, that brings the relief in ghost stories: Further, he posits that, “The ghost’s real attraction rather consists in this, that of itself and in an uncommon degree it entices the imagination, awakening strong interest and curiosity; it is the weird thing itself that allures the fancy” (Otto 28). However, despite Otto’s dismissive (and occasionally hostile) attitude towards supernaturalism and superstition, his point is well made and well taken. For many readers, and for many writers of Gothic fiction, the tales are idle distractions. The average ghost story, many of which are on par with if not worse than Walpole’s opus, are designed to affect the precise emotional state that Otto describes. One can think of the average ghost story as a concentrated shot of synthetic numinous, combined with a chaser of protective narrative device—i.e. the disappearance of the ghost—to relieve the stress caused by the story itself. It is

an experience of the numinous that does not exert the same type of strain that a true experience of the divine demands, and affords the readers what is essentially a method of experiencing the numinous recreationally.

And while that tendency, namely viewing the numinous in Gothic fiction to be purely for recreational use, is both widespread and largely justified, there is still a great deal of benefit to be had in studying the works themselves: what is the aim of the author? How well is the effect achieved? *How* is it achieved? These considerations will become especially pertinent in discussing the post-Gothic works, and in determining the change from a concern primarily with the Gothic—that is, ghost stories that draw on the past for inspiration and power—to a concern with contemporary time, and the looming future. And it will be perhaps even more important when it comes time to examine current ghost stories, written in the last twenty years—both in determining inspirations for the stories as well as gauging effect and effectiveness of their new techniques, designed to affect an even more jaded and rational culture than Walpole wrote for.

But first, Otto's theories on the numinous and its role in indicating and explicating it within the rational world must be put to the test in a legitimate Gothic novel. And while a consideration of every Gothic writer is not feasible for this survey, a few notable contributors must be included. Arthur Machen, a Gothic writer able to benefit not only from Walpole and his predecessors, was able at the same time to draw on the vivid imagery inspired by the Romantic period having run its course. Lovecraft describes Machen as having "absorbed the medieval mystery of dark woods and ancient customs, and is a champion of the Middle Ages in all things...He has yielded, likewise, to the spell of the Britanno-Roman life which once surged over his native region" (Lovecraft 93). Machen's most famous work of horror is *The Great God Pan*, which details the strange consequences of a mad scientist's attempts to persuade the human mind

to perceive and encompass all of Nature. The importance in considering *The Great God Pan*, particularly after a discussion of Otto's attempts to categorize the rational Divine, is to demonstrate how his thinking was echoed and distorted by the post-Romantic Gothic writers. The Divine and Nature were equated in their way of thinking; but the Divine and Nature are possessed of far removed attributes, with Nature serving as a far more chaotic and amoral entity. Any attempts to contact or perceive Nature through the human senses necessarily evokes sensations similar to the numinous, but with a definite level of perversion. Lovecraft has this to say in regards to the story itself: "But the charm of the tale is in the telling. No one could begin to describe the cumulative suspense and ultimate horror with which every paragraph abounds without following fully the precise order in which Mr. Machen unfolds his gradual hints and revelations" (Lovecraft 94). As will be seen later in Henry James' *The Jolly Corner* and *The Turn of the Screw*, the primary method by which Gothic writers overcome their perceived handicap in inspiring the numinous is subtle building of tension, eventually leveraging the combined effect of the atmosphere with the climactic ghost experience to create the sense of creature-feeling that Otto defined.

In contrast to James' works, in which the preference is to directly describe the ghost experience through a third-person limited perspective, Machen prefers to describe the ghost experience from the exterior, describing characters other than the narrator who catch a glimpse of the divine. The reason for this is clear in context of the story: characters who are treated to this glimpse react much in the way of people in the Bible described as having seen an undisguised angel: they go horribly mad, and die: "[Her eyes] shone with an awful light, looking far away, and a great wonder fell upon her face, and her hands stretched out, as if to touch what was invisible; but in an instant the wonder faded, and gave place to the most awful terror" (Machen

16). As will be seen when compared to the James works, what is described is a disjointed, third person account of someone undergoing a semi-numinous experience, in which the elements of *mysterium and tremendum* are separated from each other, speaking to an imperfect or crude (to use Otto's term) experience.

But at the same time, the imperfection of the experience is noted, both by the scientist responsible and Clarke, his invited guest, as both express a desire to see it succeed, to see it perfected: “[T]hough his considered judgment had always repudiated the doctor's theories as the wildest nonsense, yet he secretly hugged a belief in fantasy, and would have rejoiced to see that belief confirmed” (Machen 17). Continuing this line of thought, Clarke reminisces on his attempts to banish the superstition that he otherwise finds instinctive: “He for some time attended the séances of distinguished mediums, hoping that the clumsy tricks of these gentlemen would make him altogether disgusted with mysticism of every kind...Clarke knew that he still pined for the unseen, and little by little, the old passion began to reassert itself” (Machen 18). But again, as he persists in considering the failure of the experiment, and the terror and subsequent death of its subject, Clarke conjures in himself some aspects of creature-feeling, enough to make him uncomfortable: “Clarke tried to conceive of the thing again, as he sat by the fire, and again his mind shuddered and shrank back, appalled before the sight of such awful, unspeakable elements enthroned as it were, and triumphant in human flesh” (Machen 27).

But it would be a mistake to believe that the ghost story that Machen puts together is superior to Walpole's solely by virtue of its superior composition. Machen does in fact evidence an understanding of what will truly serve to unnerve his audience—namely, the presence of “the weird, the queer”—both words used to understand something that has rational qualities but which does not obey rational rules. He even has his characters discuss the concept, as they try to

come to an understanding of the strange events occurring in their town: “I hate melodrama, and nothing strikes me as more commonplace and tedious than the ordinary ghost story of commerce; but really, Villiers, it looks as if there were something very queer at the bottom of all this” (Machen 52-3). The tale resolves itself much like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, seeing the greatest supernatural events occur off-stage, with its explanations coming in the form of correspondence between the characters after-the-fact, as each tries to assign some kind of rational explanation to what they had seen. These types of attempts at rationalization will be seen to be particularly common in Gothic ghost stories, serving as the final defeat of empirical Enlightenment thinking: the characters struggle to countenance something which cannot, should not exist; their failure to do so, and their subsequent attempts not to understand but simply to take solace, seems to speak against the easy relief that Otto attributed to the commonplace ghost story. But all of these dramatic techniques came from the stylistic custom which said that directly showing the ghosts would be gauche, and would cheapen the tale. Taking subtlety to its understandable conclusion, Machen makes only sparing use of actual supernatural events; this is a stylistic choice that his successors, men like Henry James, would disagree with.

James is one of the true pioneers of the ghost experience in literature. His ability to create truly exemplary tales of ghost experiences earns him a double take in this examination: his short story *The Jolly Corner* and his longer novel *The Turn of the Screw* both serve to demonstrate the role of the numinous in Gothic fiction. *The Jolly Corner*, written by James in 1908—more than a hundred years after Walpole published—is described by Davenport-Hines in the following summary of the tale: “*The Jolly Corner* describes a successful, self-sufficient, loveless man returning after thirty years in Europe to live on his New York properties. At night, in the dark

passages of his house, he stalks a spectral figure that he at first believes is his doppelgänger, yet when he finally glimpses its face he sees a stranger, 'evil, odious, blatant, vulgar' (Davenport-Hines 321). The story provides us with a protagonist that could have come from any Gothic tale that preceded it: a well-to-do man of the world, intelligent, experienced, poised and ultimately unfulfilled, a victim of a world that has replaced everything that came before it with unfeeling materialism. When confronted with the possibility of a spectral occurrence, his determination is to subject it to investigation, to personally take on the challenge of finding it out and learning what it is. This is the rational, Enlightened mind working overtime, particularly as he struggles against his fancy that the specter he seeks is none other than himself; specifically, the protagonist believes that the specter is another possible him, one who had made different choices, embraced different vices, and followed a different path. But this does not terrify him; it drives him, filled as he is with a horrible desire to see what he could have been. That which he finds is horrible to behold, and elicits the common conclusion to a ghost experience in Gothic fiction: a description of the inadequacy of the senses to fully understand what they perceive, followed by a surrender to the overwhelming; in other words, the protagonist is found insufficient to withstand the full *tremendum* force of the ghost.

But let us examine the experience itself, as well as the events leading up to it. As Lovecraft pointed out in his comments on *Otranto*, Walpole's major shortcoming was his stilted presentation; specifically, that it precluded any development of an atmosphere of the weird or supernatural within the context of the story. *The Jolly Corner* is entirely a different sort of beast, using the protagonist's journey through the house to create a thick, almost suffocating atmosphere of tension. This atmosphere of tension is not unique to James; it is, however, unique to those stories deserving consideration as not only Gothic fiction, but as legitimate works of

literature. Rudolf Otto seemingly takes offense at this device, no doubt believing that it cheapens the overall experience by playing on basic psychological fear; be that as it may, it is precisely this device that allows the Gothic writer to overcome the barrier of skepticism and almost narcissistic worldliness that their readers diligently cultivated. Lovecraft conceives of the problem as such: “The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from everyday life. Relatively few are free enough from the spell of the daily routine to respond to rappings from outside, and tales of ordinary feelings and events, or of common sentimental distortions of such feelings and events, will always take first place in the taste of the majority; rightly, perhaps, since of course these ordinary matters make up the greater part of human experience” (Lovecraft 2).

This, then, is the task of the Gothic writer: to excite the imagination and to distance the reader from their everyday life. The latter is easier than the former: the prevalence of old, ruinous castles, out-of-the-way flats and lonely graveyards in Gothic fiction provides ample settings that do not allow the reader to identify with and slip into old, familiar patterns. The former is the more difficult, as it is a fine line the writer must walk, exciting the imagination without overwhelming it. This is the purpose of the building of tension throughout the story; this is why James allows us to experience the slow transition from self-assured bemusement on the part of the protagonist, to his slowly growing suspicions, to his cautious journey forwards, too afraid to go back, to the literally “unreasoning” terror that comes just before the climax which is, of course, the appearance of the apparition.

But what, precisely, are the tools of the trade that James uses to build this sort of tension; the sort of tension where capping it off with a ghost leaves us unnerved and shuddering, rather

than scoffing or sharing a good laugh? The first task he sets himself to is altering the sensory perceptions of the protagonist—not, as one might suppose, as the result of direct spiritual interference, but rather as a result of the space the spirit and the protagonist inhabit: “[H]is laugh struck him even at that moment as starting the odd echo, the conscious human resonance (he scarce knew how to qualify it) that sounds made while he was there alone sent back to his ear or his fancy” (James 16). On the one hand, this is James accomplishing in one move both of his objectives; he is exciting the imagination by forcing the reader to reconsider what the narrator hears, what he sees; he creates a doubt, an unknown that the reader can fill with their own suppositions, perhaps even their own anxieties. He is at the same time establishing that the setting, which is after all a normal house in New York, well kept despite his thirty year absence, is not what it seems, nor does it obey all the rules it should. Interesting to note is the target that James has chosen; he has aimed his talents directly (and early on) at undermining that empirical mindset, that what is real can be observed, that so resists allowing for Gothic-style happenings.

James also employs another tactic which, though it would no doubt anger Otto further, is very effective, as well as being quite commonplace in Gothic fiction: he cheats. More specifically, he tells the story *in medias res*, with the sole intention of presenting the reader with a narrator who has already passed through the early periods of skepticism. The reader is not afforded a chance to decide whether to side with the protagonist against the perceived ridiculous nature of the existence or presence of ghosts. In an early sequence within the story, the narrator’s companion, a young woman with whom he is romantically involved, jokingly brings up the topic of haunting in the narrator’s home. The reader, as themselves, is expected to agree with the companion; therefore it is all the more jarring when the reader experiences the narrator’s reaction from within his head: “He had a positive sense of turning pale...For he made answer, he

believed, between a glare and a grin: ‘Oh ghosts—of course the place must swarm with them! U should be ashamed of it if it didn’t. Poor Mrs. Muldoon’s right, and it’s why I haven’t asked her to do more than look in’” (James 20). Clearly, the narrator knows something that the reader doesn’t, which in turn enflames the imagination of the reader further. In other words, James works towards his second objective in two levels: in addition to exciting the imagination of the reader, he works to create an unfamiliar environment inside the reader’s head: their point of view is not the normal, ordinary outlook on the world that the reader is accustomed to. But at the same time, James works to counter the effects of this, by making the narrator someone down to earth, someone who is—if not familiar—at least down-to-earth: “I’ve followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods; it must have come to you again and again—in fact you’ve admitted to me as much—that I was leading, at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life. And you see what it has made of me” (James 26). It all works together to create a balance of opposed forces, its own particular breed of tension, which has as its terminus a state of unease in the reader’s mind.

James’ intent is to change the reader’s way of thinking, to put them in a state of mind where they are willing to consider things as more than they appear. In *The Jolly Corner*, as well as in *The Turn of the Screw*, James’ masterpiece of the numinous ghost experience, James uses a deliberately introspective character, one who both entertains the supernatural as a possibility while considering rational explanations for the phenomena: “[I]t had broken out with the oddest abruptness, this particular wanton wonderment: it met him there—and this was the image under which he himself judged the matter, or at least, not a little, thrilled and flushed with it—very much as he might have been met by some strange figure, some unexpected occupant, at a turn of one of the dim passages of an empty house” (James 13). The effect is a narrator who entertains

and dismisses the reader's natural skepticism, all without their conscious knowledge. They consider the reasonable explanation with the narrator, and dismiss them with the narrator, all without realizing it. Case in point: "With habit and repetition he gained to an extraordinary degree the power to penetrate the dusk of distances and the darkness of corners, to resolve back into their innocence the treacheries of uncertain light, the evil looking forms taken in the gloom by mere shadows, by accidents of the air, by shifting effects of perspective...he wondered if he would have glared at these moments with large shining yellow eyes, and what it mightn't verily be, for the hard pressed alter ego to be confronted with such a type" (James 35). The reader goes along for the ride as the narrator attributes to himself the ability to pierce superstition, to see things as they really are and not be taken in by appearances; so too does the reader go along as the narrator reassures himself that such faculties will no doubt strike fear in the heart of his ghostly prey, which assuredly exists.

But the true secret to creating unfamiliar environs that leaves the reader feeling not only out-of-place but uncomfortable, unsettled is the use of the imagery of the weird. The house that James' narrator explores, late one night, is an average home, decorated in the style of the time it was built: marble floors, elegant staircases, interconnected rooms that together comprise a normal setting, on its own. But consider the following description of the house, which is among the first images we are given: "[H]e put his stick noiselessly away in a corner—feeling the place one more in the likeness of some great glass bowl, all precious concave crystal, set delicately humming by the play of a moist finger round its edge" (James 31). This description immediately plants in the reader's mind that the place has energy about it, something soundless, something felt without being perceived—a tiny taste of the numinous. James' narrator continues, "The concave crystal held, as it were, this mystical other world, and the indescribably fine murmur of

its rim was the sigh there, the scarce audible pathetic wail to his strained ear, or all the old baffled forsworn possibilities. What he did therefore by this appeal of his hushed presence was to wake them into such measure of ghostly life as they might still enjoy” (James 32).

In a Gothic work such as this, the process by which *tremendum* is established must be a gradual, subtle thing. But the introduction of *mysterium*, once the creature-feeling has reduced the narrator to a state of awe, must be sudden and succinct. If correctly established, the feeling of *mysterium*, the actual ghost experience is a strain on the reader, who is experiencing by proxy the extreme emotional and mental distress of their narrator. James’ protagonist, at the peak of his panic, has shut the door on what he believes to be his spectral pursuer, and wants nothing more than to escape the house and never look back. As a result, his fear occupies the majority of his thinking, as well as the majority of the descriptions given to the reader. The narrator is now unable to think clearly, is unable to describe his surroundings to the reader, leaving them quite literally in the dark. When finally the ghost confronts him, its face covered, Brydon recoils but is unable to flee. Still the greater mystery remains unsolved: is the ghost Brydon has hunted his own self or some other force entirely? Finally, the hands drop and the reader is treated to the following description:

“The presence before him was a presence, the horror within him a horror, but the waste of his nights had been only grotesque and the success of his adventure an irony. Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous. [...] Then harder pressed still, sick with the force of his shock, and falling back as under the hot breath and the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed, he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way. His head went round; he was going; he had gone” (James 61).

There is nothing in the experience described that unsettles the reader as much as does the horrible recognition that Brydon experiences, a sense of being in the presence of something human, something quantifiable, but at the same time something so utterly beyond him. This is the numinous effect encapsulated in a Gothic tale; namely, the careful orchestration of events so as to leave the readers' senses first engaged, then overwhelmed, and finally overcome.

But James' true Gothic masterpiece must be *The Turn of the Screw*; a tale of a governess, her two young charges, and the ghosts of a past governess and her lover (that may or may not exist). Everything from the setting—an old manor house far from society, understaffed and for the most part vacant—to the characters of the impressionable, sexually repressed governess to the charismatic, emotional boy Miles, to the quivering cohort in the character of Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper; each serves to strike a note that together create the perfect fifth of the Gothic tradition. And so it comes as no surprise that in the actual scenes in which the ghosts manifest themselves, James paints the numinous experience perfectly.

James constructs the character of the governess, his chosen narrator, as a overwrought, highly devoted and sexually confused/repressed young woman, with little to no life experience to draw on. Contrasted with Mrs. Grose, the matronly, dependable and experienced housekeeper, the two together make a pair that constitutes both the old superstition and the new excitability. Mrs. Grose was raised in the old ways, and when the governess comes to her with her fears that some strange man has been seen skulking about Bly Manor, both women spare little time in coming to the conclusion that the man is, in fact, no man at all. Rather, the ghost of Peter Quint, a former servant at Bly and a salacious man to boot, has returned to haunt the manor. The first visitation is a simple matter, in which the governess espies a male figure lurking in the garden, which she cannot immediately identify. She determines that no such mystery can be permitted on

her watch, and moves to overtake the figure, but he vanishes around a corner before she can reach him. This weighs heavily on the governess' mind, as this unknown figure represents a threat not only to herself, but to her charges Miles and Flora, both of whom she has come to love to distraction.

But it is the second visitation of Peter Quint that James chooses to truly strike fear in the governess, to unnerve her mind and unsettle her spirit. He has let the agitation grow, the feeling of hidden threat. The governess, in her attempt to rationalize out an explanation for the figure she saw, peruses in her mind's eye a variety of ironically Gothic possibilities: "Was there a 'secret' at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I can't say how long I turned it over, or how long, in a confusion of curiosity and dread..." (James 17). It is not until a few days later that the governess receives the answer to her question in the form of a second manifestation by Peter Quint, this time standing outside a window, peering into the room in search of she knows not what. And while there is a certain sentiment of dread in the reaction of the governess, it stems not from concern over personal safety, but again for the safety of the children. She says as she observes his searching gaze, "Something, however, happened this time that had not happened before; his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room, was as deep and hard as then, but it quitted me for a moment during which I could still watch it...it was not for me he had come there. He had come for someone else" (20).

Convinced of this, the governess investigates, drawing Mrs. Grose into her search for answers. The scene that follows perfectly illustrates not only the effect that this spiritual occurrence has had on the governess' sentiment, but even more so the point Otto was making when he spoke of "creature-consciousness." The fear of the supernatural and the fear of the

divine—which as stated share several key components—exists only insofar as the rational mind is applied. There is no fear, or at any rate no dread of the thing save that it fails to conform to the objective sense of reality present in the developed intellect. To contrast with this, James includes several scenes in which the ghosts are seen by the governess to interact with the children themselves, in which the children are completely at ease, and even amused by the governess' resulting fear. Children are in general more open, more accepting—they are still learning the limits of their rational mind, and as such cannot fear ghosts and the like to the extent that adults must. One wonders if this gives new significance to Christ's dictum that one may only enter the Kingdom of Heaven as a child, but this is mere digression.

The governess and Mrs. Grose discuss the man's appearance, in the course of which the governess describes a male of fiery red hair and piercing gaze, passing handsome and without a hat, who Mrs. Grose identified as Peter Quint, the master's old valet. It is at this point that the governess is informed that she cannot have seen such a man, for Peter Quint is dead—ran off the road on a stormy night while fleeing with his lover, the former governess at Bly and the current governess' predecessor. Of note, during the governess' description of Quint, her words fail her, and she gives voice to her confusion: ““What IS he? He's a horror!’ ‘A horror?’ ‘He's—God help me if I know WHAT he is!” (22). She goes on to admit “I'm afraid of HIM” (22) but as the two try to rationalize not what he *is*, but rather what he *wants*, there has already been a line crossed that was not in *The Jolly Corner*. For *The Jolly Corner* was a tale of Gothic terror, nothing more, and nothing less. But in *Turn of the Screw*, James has his sights set higher. In this tale he seeks to pit the rational against the supernatural; her fear for her charges lends the governess courage, courage enough to confront the ghost, to stand watch against him and prevent him from appearing to the children to have his way with them. But already her nerves are

infected, and she privately admits that she is not the most grounded of women: “It took of course more than that particular passage to place us together in presence of what he had now to live with as we could—my dreadful liability to impressions of the order so vividly exemplified, and my companion’s knowledge, henceforth—a knowledge half consternation and half compassion—of that liability” (24). The governess is a poor champion of reason against these spirits, and the parallels drawn by James between the current governess and the ghost of her predecessor, who appears alongside Quint on several occasions, make it clear that she cannot be trusted as a source of rational thought. And ironically, it is the application of her reason to the situation, trying to maintain some semblance of composure that her fear becomes overwhelming, in perfect accord with Otto’s creature consciousness. Consider her description of her inquisitiveness and its effect on her senses: “It seems to me indeed, in retrospect, that by the time the morrow’s sun was high I had restlessly read into the fact before us almost all the meaning they were to receive from subsequent and more cruel occurrences. What they gave me above all was just the sinister figure of the living man—the dead one would keep awhile!” (38). When reason makes a decision and interprets all that comes after it to fit with the original assumption, reason has been abandoned in favor of blind faith, a dangerous turn for an overzealous governess guarding her charges.

The governess comes to understand that the children, whose innocence she values above all else, are in fact aware of the ghosts, and have been since the beginning. The governess takes it upon herself to stand watch over the children, keeping a careful eye on the stair from the main floor, from which she is certain the inevitable penetration of Peter Quint is to come. Reading by candlelight, alone in the whole of the main house, she begins to feel the stirrings of creature consciousness upon her: “There was a moment during which I listened, reminded of the faint sense I had had, the first night, of there being something undefinably astir in the house” (39).

And what transpires at this point is perhaps one of the most intriguing pieces of evidence in favor of the theory that the ghosts are mere hallucinations on the part of the governess. She enters the stairwell and sees Quint at the bottom heading up, and she knows instinctively that he is there, a living entity: “He was absolutely, on this occasion, a living, detestable, dangerous presence. But that was not the wonder of wonders...dread had unmistakably quitted me and that there was nothing in me there that didn’t meet and measure him. I had plenty of anguish after that extraordinary moment, but I had, thank God, no terror...It was the dead silence of our long gaze at such close quarters that gave the whole horror, huge as it was, its only note of the unnatural” (40). The governess’ creature consciousness has slipped to mere awareness, and no *mysterium tremendum* is visited upon her. Rather there is anguish only; anguish enough, one might suggest, to give her bravery significance. If indeed these are naught but visions of an overactive imagination desperate to feel significant, these emotions would be all too fitting. The absence of any numinous sentiment, present in ghost experiences in James’ other writings, indicate the absence either of religious faith in the governess or existence of the spectral visitors. This absence is present even at one of the most climactic moments in the text, when finally the ghost of the former governess Miss Jessel appears before not only the governess, but Mrs. Grose and Flora as well, neither of whom can actually see the spirit. Even more damaging to the governess’ testimony is her own admission of neither terror nor awe, but rather relief and joy: “Miss Jessel stood before us on the opposite bank exactly as she had stood the other time, and I remember, strangely, as the first feeling now produced in me, my thrill of joy at having brought on a proof...I consciously threw out to her—with the sense that, pale and ravenous demon as she was, she would catch and understand it—and inarticulate message of gratitude” (70). The governess believes herself to understand the ghosts’ intent, their moods. These are not creatures of

nightmare, nor are they creatures of the unknown; because the governess is uniquely irrational, she is able to apply the full measure of her reason to the ghosts, ascribing to them human ambitions and motivations. The whole effect is to produce the sense that the scene the governess describes, whether by her fault or no, is one more terrifying than it first appears. It is rather the reader who is left without understanding, along for the ride, unsure of who to trust, unsure of who is the more dangerous to the children, the specters or the governess.

The final scene in the novel, which cements its ambiguity with the curious death of the young Miles, comes closest in the text to a true representation of the numinous. The governess' command of reason and language finally fails her; or at the least, she acknowledges that fact: "[H]e offered to the room his white face of damnation. It represents but grossly what took place within me at the sight to say that on the second my decision was made; yet I believe that no woman so overwhelmed ever in so short a time recovered her grasp of the *act*" (83). One could argue that the absence of a pure numinous experience on the part of the governess renders this text irrelevant to the present discussion. Rather, we must consider *The Turn of the Screw* to serve as the exception that works to prove the rule. In the absence of the numinous experience and its accompanying language, the text is rendered ambiguous. Theories abound about the reliability of the governess, the truth of the ghosts and the author's purpose in writing the text. The most intriguing theory belongs to one Dorothea Krook¹, who argues that the ambiguity itself was James' intent; to create a tale that posed just such a is-it-so puzzle, not to be solved, but to be considered. In this sense, the is-it-isn't-it nature of ghosts themselves is represented in the text's structure. Nor does the tale provoke fear in the same sense as "The Jolly Corner;" there is not so

¹ Krook, Dorothea. *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*. Cambridge, England:

Cambridge UP, 1962.

much a sense of tension building to horror, but suspense building into mystery. The importance of the numinous concept and language is such that its presence or absence directly determines whether a specter is a curiosity or a horror. If human reason is allowed to have its own way, there can be no emotional connection to the unknown or supernatural. There is a lesson in this, and the premier students of James' teaching and that of his fellows are the "weird fiction" writers of the 1940s and 50s.

The weird fiction writers can be considered the spiritual successors to the Gothic fiction writers in two aspects, namely the question and answer of their work. As the Gothic writers struggled to overcome the skepticism and glorified reason-based intellectualism of the post-Enlightenment era, when superstition and fancy were at a premium, the weird fiction writers were if anything given an even more difficult order to fill. The atomic bomb had just been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the world was living in the newborn fear of the newborn atomic age, in which neither heaven or hell need be considered to believe in imminent, unavoidable destruction. People lived in fear of technology, they lived in fear of their own power; for the first time in history, man frightened man far more than God ever could. Joseph Payne Brennan, writer and one-time editor of the magazine *Macabre*, deals with this atmosphere of uncertainty and its effect on the literature of the time in his article "Can the Supernatural Story Survive?" He refers to the plight of the supernatural story in the post-World War I era as having been either completely abandoned, or at the least neglected. "Detective stories became the popular rage," Brennan writes, "A good puzzle, no matter how intricate and even improbable, was considered far preferable to a tale about an evil apparition or the eerie room in an isolated castle...the introduction of anything unearthly in a detective story was considered unforgivable—a breach of contract with the unsuspecting reader" (Brennan 253). And as in

every century, professional, talented writers are to a great extent bound by the whims of the literary marketplace. With supernatural fiction writers being paid a penny a word, “few aspiring and genuinely gifted writers were impelled to spend much time on a genre which appeared so restrictive and unrewarding” (Brennan 254).

Brennan focuses his article around the rise and fall of the last great literary publication of supernatural fiction during the early twentieth century, *Weird Tales*. Using *Weird Tales* as an indicator, Brennan notes the steep fall in readership towards the end of the 1940s, pointing out that, “World War II unleashed and revealed horrors which probably hastened the end of *Weird Tales*. Nuclear annihilation became more than a nightmare; it became a looming possibility. Few fictional horrors, supernatural or otherwise, could compete with such a prospect” (Brennan 255). But what World War II unleashed along with nuclear horror and fear was the beginning of a technological revolution, and literature answered with a new fascination with science fiction writing. Brennan notes that, “As readers of science fiction multiplied...supernatural stories gradually grew in popularity again. In some respects, the two genres were related...They both delved into the unknown. Frequently they both explored strange realms distant from everyday reality” (Brennan 256-7). But supernatural fiction had to evolve; it could not simply exist on science fiction’s coat tails. Brennan talks about the boredom readers experienced with traditional ghost stories: “Readers had become restless with more traditional stories of ghosts and haunted houses...The somewhat tentative ghost, perhaps rarely seen, fluttering tapestries in the seldom-used room of a castle or Victorian country house, became outmoded. Readers demanded more forthright apparitions—more visible, more convincing and more malicious” (Brennan 257). But this, Brennan is quick to point out, is by no means a death blow for supernatural fiction, nor is it unique to its development as a genre: “The popularity of traditional supernatural stories has been

adversely affected by varied developments besides world wars, nuclear fission and the competition of other fictional genres. Old-time kerosene or whale-oil lamps, and candles flickered out as electricity was turned on. One can imagine ghosts, real or fictional, deserting the shadowy corners of once ill-lighted rooms for more congenial quarters” (Brennan 258).

But the increase in convenience nearly always mirrors a decrease in collective patience, and supernatural fiction was no exception: “By tradition, most supernatural stories were somewhat slow-paced and leisurely. The reader was not expected to be in a hurry to finish...As time went on, some authors who write supernatural stories responded to reader demands for less introductory matter, more action and more contemporary backgrounds” (Brennan 259). But this increase in pandering to a more impatient reader base has a serious side effect to supernatural horror’s effect as a whole, and to the numinous experience in particular, with its reliance on atmospheric buildup and internal narration. Supernatural fiction written in this way suffers from the law of diminishing returns, with readers building up what amounts to an immunity to such cheap scares and gut reactions:

“When shock follows shock, when horror is heaped on horror, with only minimal attempts to achieve a degree of subtlety or verisimilitude, the hardened reader’s sensibilities become blunted. When overt horror is troweled on too heavily, with little or no regard for atmosphere and milieu, the adult, reasonably intelligent reader is apt to lay down the book or story unfinished” (Brennan 259).

Enter into this scenario the weird fiction writers, whose task was now to frighten or unnerve an audience that existed in an atmosphere of fear and oppressive doom. Life could now be completely undermined on a whim by mortal man, which was in itself truly frightening. The path to an answer that the weird fiction writers took was the same as the Gothic fiction writers:

they sought to undermine not life, but reality itself. The Gothic writers accomplished this through callbacks to prior religious superstition to impose the unknown on the known. But by the 1940s, God had been nearly obliterated by the bomb; the weird fiction writers had to work with a new, pseudo-technological form of the unknown. By infusing new fear into something already present in their daily lives, the weird fiction writers actually had an easier time of it than the Gothic writers; the post-Enlightenment thinkers glorified in their skepticism, while the post-WWII thinkers found themselves exhausted and hopeless by the empty world beneath the blast had exposed. In a word, an environment ripe for weird fiction.

Leading the movement, albeit reluctantly, the cult phenomenon author H.P. Lovecraft was an avid scholar of fear and the supernatural, examining the nature of supernatural fiction, its effects and its tools, and its place in the world he wrote for. *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, his long form article on the subject, details Lovecraft's thoughts on the matter, as well as traces the progress of the genre through time, touching on the major authors of each period. More specifically, Lovecraft examined the techniques of those he considered to be exemplary supernatural fiction writers for an eye towards what he considered to be the key components to incorporating and producing horror in a reader. His understanding of fear's role in the human experience echoes that of Otto: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft 2). What Lovecraft terms the fear of the unknown, Otto considers the awe produced by *mysterium tremendum*. But where Lovecraft and Otto vehemently part ways is in their consideration of what Lovecraft terms "the weird tale" (Lovecraft 2). Otto saw the weird and the spectral as crude; Lovecraft argues rather that "[I]n spite of all this opposition the weird tale has survived, developed, and attained remarkable heights of perfection; founded as it is on a profound and elementary principle whose

appeal, if not always universal, must necessarily be poignant and permanent to minds of the requisite sensitiveness” (Lovecraft).

We must for the moment consider the merit of Lovecraft’s final caveat: namely that the weird tale can only affect the minds of those with the requisite degree of sensitiveness. This almost seems to beg the question in the argument as to the merits of the weird tale; if it is effective only on those who are predisposed to *be* affected, can it be considered a merit of the work, or merely a strategic positioning of phrases and themes geared towards an admittedly narrow audience. Lovecraft goes on to qualify his caveat further: “The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because to demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from every-day life” (Lovecraft 3). Compare this to Otto’s description of the numinous and the imagination: “In other words our X cannot, strictly speaking, be taught; it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes ‘of the spirit’ must be awakened” (Otto 14). There is a key difference between Otto and Lovecraft’s concepts here, but there is a unity in their thoughts that demonstrate that each is talking about the same concept. The difference arises not from a difference of opinion but of circumstances; Otto was a theologian writing in a time when belief in God had fallen out of fashion; Lovecraft was an intellectual writing in a time when God was dead. Otto conceptualized the imagination as external working inwards, something evoking from the spirit an effect on the mind. Lovecraft conceptualized the imagination as internal, a personal act that could respond to external stimuli, but did so not according to the degree of the external force (i.e. a power of God-like proportions) but rather according to the tastes of the individual. Therefore it did not surprise or even particularly bother Lovecraft that few could truly appreciate his work and those of his

contemporaries; it was simply a matter of personal capacity for imagination, which had nothing to do with him.

Stemming from this, Lovecraft nonetheless saw himself as the successor to the Gothic tradition, in that he continued their work of plying their craft on those fragments on the unknown that were still perceived to exist in his society. He considers the development of fear in man to work parallel with the development of pain and pleasure: “Man’s first instincts and emotions formed his response to the environment in which he found himself. Definite feelings based on pleasure and pain grew up around the phenomena whose causes and effects he understood, whilst around those which he did not understand—and the universe teemed with them in the early days—were naturally woven such personifications, marvelous interpretations, and sensations of awe and fear” (Lovecraft 5). Lovecraft and weird fiction writers come closer to hitting upon Otto’s concept of the numinous, incorporating those lingering aspects of primal man in their audience to properly evoke creature consciousness, to tap into the undercurrent of *mysterium tremendum* that existed, not where reason had failed, but rather where reason had yet to reach. The weird fiction writers, by virtue of their audience and narrowly selected subject matter, entered into an arms race, both with each other and with the technological bloom witnessed in the middle of the 20th century. Their target was the ever decreasing gap between known and unknown, the explicable and inexplicable.

But Lovecraft had a solution, based partly on his firm belief in the nature of primeval man, but more specifically focused on his understanding of that underworld of the human mind, the subconscious:

“... [M]an’s very hereditary essence has become saturated with religion and superstition.

That saturation must, as a matter of plain scientific fact, be regarded as virtually

permanent so far as the subconscious mind and inner instincts are concerned; for though the area of the unknown has been steadily contracting for thousands of years, an infinite reservoir of mystery still engulfs most of the outer cosmos, whilst a vast residuum of powerful inherited associations clings round all the objects and processes that were once mysterious, however well they may now be explained” (Lovecraft 6).

God is dead in Lovecraft’s world, but this fact produces not despair but curiosity. What, then, is out there in the outer reaches of the cosmos? To this end, much of Lovecraft’s fiction swings between the two extremes of completely known and completely unknown, treading between the unknown of the conscious mind and the unknown of the subconscious mind. Or put another way, Lovecraft works both with what is objectively unknown, like space and beyond, and undermining what is *thought* to be known, working with elder gods and creatures below our understanding. In so doing, he goes from the crude to the sublime, though neither would truly fit with Otto’s tastes. Recall Otto’s explanation for the nature of the divine that supersedes reason, namely that that which can be said of the divine apart from the rational is that which can be said about the beautiful.

Lovecraft’s own writings followed one overarching principle in their construction. First and foremost was the atmosphere, the *feel* of the piece: “Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation” (Lovecraft 7). This decision effectively separates Lovecraft from the worst excesses of the Gothic tale while retaining what made those stories effective. For, “The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains...A certain atmosphere of breather and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present... There must be a hint...of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and

particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard” (Lovecraft 7). And yet his choices in the creation of that atmosphere often followed along the known constants of Gothic fiction, beginning in a graveyard or cave; in other words, a place in which the reader’s subconscious recognizes that a fear-response is expected of it, and begins to work to counter that reaction in predictable ways. The typical Lovecraftian weird tale works as a sucker-punch, using not so much the element of shock but rather the unexpected, subtle though the distinction is.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the short story simply titled “The Unnamable.” In it, Lovecraft’s narrator Carter, an author insert character and a writer of horror fiction, in conversing with his old college friend Joel Manton in an overgrown graveyard by a dilapidated old house, either of which could have been borrowed wholesale from any urban-set Gothic tale. The two characters have gotten into an argument regarding the former’s storytelling technique: “My constant talk about ‘unnamable’ and ‘unmentionable’ things was a very puerile device, quite in keeping with my lowly standing as an author. I was too fond of ending my stories with sights or sounds which paralysed my heroes’ faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced” (Lovecraft 100). One need only read that description to recognize the device used by James at the end of “The Jolly Corner,” or Arthur Machen several times in *The Great God Pan*.

The two characters, Manton and Carter, form an interesting pair; the one serving as the voice of the old guard, a traditionalist in the fullest sense of the word; the latter is Lovecraft himself in all but name, a craftsman of weird tales and weirder writing conventions. Manton in particular is interesting, as he is very nearly an anachronism of himself: not content with dismissing weird fiction, his arguments group the Gothic writers in as well, and he condemns

them both with equal term and equal vigor. “‘We know things,’ he said, ‘only through out five senses or our religious intuitions; wherefore it is quite impossible to refer to any object or spectacle which cannot be clearly depicted by the solid definitions of fact or the correct doctrines of theology’” (Lovecraft 101). In short, a proper Enlightenment thinker expressing the belief that we know things only objectively, through empirical evidence; we can no more “half-see” something than we can “half-know” something; both concepts, it is worth noting, are roundly dismissed by Lovecraft.

But Manton takes it a step further; allowing for the possibility of these half-perceptions that Carter is so fond of—ostensibly for the purposes of argument—Manton goes on to claim that, even were they possible, there would be no aesthetic significance to these experiences, and would therefore be useless for art or literature. Manton argues that, “Only our normal, objective experiences possess any aesthetic significance, and that it is the province of the artist not so much to rouse strong emotion by action, ecstasy, and astonishment, as to maintain a placid interest and appreciation by accurate, detailed transcripts of every-day affairs” (Lovecraft 101). Granted, Lovecraft’s depiction of Manton is exaggerated for his purposes; the traditionalist viewpoint is transformed into an almost puritanical distaste for art for art’s sake. Manton further objects to Carter’s choice of subject, namely the supernatural: “For although believing in the supernatural much more fully than I, he would not admit that it is sufficiently commonplace for literary treatment” (Lovecraft 101). Lovecraft goes on to describe Manton’s sentiments further, and finally it is revealed what Manton truly is: more than a traditionalist, Manton is a product of the scientific age, in which the laws of physics have, if not been explained, have been rendered explicable. The world obeys strict physical rules:

“With him all things and feelings had fixed dimensions, properties, causes and effects; and although he vaguely knew that the mind sometimes holds visions and sensations of far less geometrical, classifiable and workable nature, he believed himself justified in drawing an arbitrary line and ruling out of court all that cannot be experienced and understood by the average citizen” (Lovecraft 101).

Their arguments continue on, with Carter arguing that the presence of the inexplicable in Nature expressly provides for the possibility of the supernatural existing. So long as that possibility exists, it can be manipulated to produce an effect; it *has* effect simply by virtue of its being convincing on a deeper, instinctive level. This deeper level is precisely the level at which Otto’s creature-consciousness works on the mind. They argue back and forth, sitting in a cemetery outside the rundown building Lovecraft describes as “a witch-house,” with a touch of Gothic flair, until Carter consents to meet Manton on his own terms with a piece of verifiable, authenticated anecdote. Attributing the earliest reports to Cotton Mather, the well-known colonial American theologian, Carter describes a report of a strange child, possessed of more animal traits than human, hidden away in an attic by his fearful parent. In other words, something less than human, something which has no discernible explanation, but which all the same is allowed for by the physical rules of the world. He ends his tale with a description of the final witness to the beastly monstrosity, a young boy who, after looking into the empty attic where the creature had once been kept, had run out screaming maniacally, his mind quite gone.

Manton’s rebuttal is thus: “He granted for the sake of argument that some unnatural monster had really existed, but reminded me that even the most morbid perversion of Nature need not be *unnamable* or scientifically indescribable” (Lovecraft 103). Their discussion goes on, with Carter bringing up increasingly perverse and unbelievable accounts he’s gathered

through his writing, each time insisting that there is a level at which Nature no longer offers an explanation or a description. Finally Manton demands, much as his humor would insist, on being allowed to examine the attic earlier described, to assess for himself the possibility of a supernatural occurrence. Carter calmly tells him that the attic in question is that of the witch-house, which lies not a hundred feet behind them. At this, what the narrator describes as a “harmless bit of theatricality” (109)—there describing not only his own actions but the comparable actions of Gothic writers gone by—Manton recoils with an instinctive fear, as both hear a sound that neither can identify coming from the house.

What occurs next in the text perfectly captures the techniques that Lovecraft uses to accomplish his effect, that of leaving the reader with the sense of something unnamable. The two characters are beset—seemingly from all sides—by sensory data that has no source, or at the least has no observable cause. This sort of disconnected information serves to overwhelm the reader, or at the least confuse, as there is simply not enough information given to apply reason to the situation. The scene described is one of violence and inexplicable noise and light; further, it is described in such high, heavy prose as to further overwhelm the reader. At no point in his stories will Lovecraft’s prose be anywhere near as decadent as in these climactic scenes: “From the tomb came such a stifled uproar of gasping and whirring that my fancy peopled the rayless gloom with Miltonic legions of the misshapen damned. There was a vortex of withering, ice-cold wind, and then the rattle of loose bricks and plaster; but I had mercifully fainted before I could learn what it meant” (Lovecraft 111).

Finally there is the attempted application of reason, as the two characters awake in hospital beds, everything from the previous scene having vanished as quickly and with as little warning as when it appeared. Each has suffered a grievous wounding, Manton worst of all, with

several deep, malignant cuts along his torso. The doctors inform the two that they have been the inexplicable victims of a rampaging bull, offering the imprint of a split hoof left on Carter's body as evidence. But once they are alone, and each can confer with the other, the skeptical Manton tells a different tale: "It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime—yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, *it was the unnamable!*" (113). But these descriptions together form a picture as conceivable as had the description been "It was everything and nothing all at once." Nature does not afford us an understanding, because we as readers have no point of reference. So too must the primeval man have felt in the presence of rain and fire upon first experiencing it, when experience outstrips words. The real moment of fear comes not from Manton's hushed explanation in the hospital bed, but rather from the cacophonous scene prior. But the story lingers in the mind because of this ending; for if no explanation be given, no explanation can be disproved. We are simply left unsettled, with our imaginations stimulated with this paradoxical puzzle. This was the intent of the weird tale, to excite the senses in the same manner as the Gothic writers, to reach the same part of man that undergoes the numinous experience.

Although "The Unnamable" is perhaps the most direct address to the question of the numinous experience to be found in Lovecraft's work, he returns to these themes and techniques time and again. Two further examples—which merit a short perusal for the sake of establishing the theme—are the short stories titled "Hypnos" and "Nyarlathotep," both which deal with a pet concept of Lovecraft's, that of so-called "Elder Gods," creatures of another realm older than, but co-existent with our own. These creatures are deities in the sense of their ability to affect the physical world at whim, given spheres of authority in a hierarchical pantheon similar to the

Greco-Roman tradition. However, they are rendered strange in the Lovecraftian sense by the absence of anything approaching human reason, motivation or morality. They seem to possess no aspect which would establish them as anthropomorphic forces, such as the monotheistic deities familiar to us today; however, they *are* motivated, sentient and ostensibly self-interested beings, unlike the nature spirits or elemental forces prayed to by pagan traditions. They do not intercede; but merely exist beyond the reach of human understanding, though sadly not beyond human perception.

“Hypnos” in particular deals with this subject at length, detailing the attempts of two men to reach another level of awareness through deeper and deeper sleep. Working both from a meditative standpoint and a drug-assisted standpoint, the two plunge deeper and deeper into a realm beyond explanation, regrettably so: “Among the agonies of these after days is that chief of torments—inarticulateness. What I learned and saw in those hours of impious exploration can never be told—for want of symbols or suggestions in any language. I say this because from first to last our discoveries partook only of the nature of *sensations*; sensations correlated with no impression which the nervous system of normal humanity is capable of receiving” (Lovecraft 45). Here we see some manner of *mysterium tremendum* presented or intimated to the reader, but there is a difference to its quality that strikes one after a while. There is a sense that, at least on the part of the writer, *mysterium tremendum* has been seen to give diminishing returns; put another way, the above passage reads in a sense as one in which the value of awe has become inflated, requiring richer prose, more insistence on the unexplainable. Again, this is a product of the atmosphere Lovecraft worked in, in which the cynicism of the Enlightenment had been mixed with the paranoid confusion and disarray of the mid-twentieth century had resulted in an impatient audience.

Finally there comes the point in their explorations when they have explored too far, crossed some unknown line, the nature of which the narrator either does not know or will not relate. He knows only that his partner, evidencing more fear than he had ever before seen, warns him that to fall asleep again for any reason could very well result in an unspeakable doom. Thus begins the build-up to the climactic scene of the story; a build-up in which Lovecraft makes good use of the sleep deprivation both characters endure to twist their perceptions and unseat their senses. Lovecraft contrasts the lethargy of his pose, the repetition of phrases with the frantic actions of his protagonists as they turn to any sort of escape from sleep. Their lives disintegrate, and the whole of their energy, drained as it is, is devoted to the act of staying awake.

Of course such wakefulness cannot last, and finally the narrator's friend, who first crossed the unseen line, falls into a deep sleep from which he cannot be awakened. Immediately the atmosphere changes, as for the first time since the story's introduction we are given a description of their surroundings:

"I can recall the scene now—the desolate, pitch-black garret studio under the eaves with the rain beating down; the ticking of the lone clock; the fancied ticking of our watches as they rested on the dressing-table; the creaking of some swaying shutter in a remote part of the house...and worst of all the deep, steady, sinister breathing of my friend on the couch—a rhythmical breathing which seemed to measure moments of supernal fear and agony for his spirit as it wandered in spheres forbidden, unimagined, and hideously remote" (Lovecraft 49).

The narrator keeps a vigil over his friend, waiting for him to reawaken. At the same time, Lovecraft begins to blend a greater awareness on the part of the narrator into the narrative, a greater perspective that works to unnerve the reader: "All at once my feverishly sensitive ears

seemed to detect a new and wholly distinct component in the soft medley of drug-magnified sounds—a low and damnably insistent whine from very far away; droning, clamouring, mocking, calling, *from the northeast*” (Lovecraft 49). This whine begins to so overwhelm his senses that he cries out, but as he describes, it was not the sound that overwhelmed him, as is key to remember. In the depiction of a ghost-experience, which save for the specific lore underwriting it is precisely the nature of the event, there must first be awareness—the creature-consciousness—followed by an overwhelming, often paradoxical visual effect. In the case of “Hypnos,” the visual effect is that of a horrible light, an impossible light that originated from nowhere and cast no illumination:

“It was not what I *heard*, but what I *saw*; for in that dark, locked, shuttered and curtained room there appeared from the black northeast corner a shaft of horrible red-gold light—a shaft which bore with it no glow to disperse the darkness, but which streamed only upon the recumbent head of the troubled sleeper, brining out in hideous duplication the luminous and strangely youthful memory-face as I had known it in dreams of abysmal space and unshackle time, when my friend had pushed back the barrier to those secret, innermost, and forbidden caverns of nightmare” (Lovecraft 49).

His friend is awakened, and described as a truly ghastly sight, before their joined screams force outside interference, with the police breaking down the door to assist the occupants. It is there that the narrator is shocked to find his companion to be no human, but rather a perfectly sculpted marble bust of the face he’d spent so long beside; no living body, no sign of there having been another person living there.

This sort of twist ending is peculiarly Lovecraftian, not in the sense of compared to his colleagues, but as compared to their predecessors of the Gothic school. As stated earlier, there

was a difference in technique between the Gothic and the weird necessitated by the difference in religious sentiment present in their audiences. For the Gothic writers, the task was to highlight the possibility of the strange occurrence: some physical evidence is often left at the end of the tale, such as the dead body of the boy Miles at the end of *Turn of the Screw*. For the weird writers, their task was to highlight the impossibility, to further confuse the reader's mind so as to better affect their intended effect, to unnerve, to work past skepticism by way of paradox. The Gothic writers were working to light a fire from the spark of superstition that still existed; the weird fiction writers were trying to make fire from scratch.

“Nyarlathotep” is another example of a typical Lovecraftian tale, placed in his setting of elder gods. In many ways “Nyarlathotep” is an even more ambitious tale than “Hypnos.” “Hypnos” made use of sleep and dreams, two interconnected aspects of the human experience that still held great mystery for people in the 40s and 50s. Working from that entry point, Lovecraft was able to accomplish his goal of unnerving the reader. “Nyarlathotep” by contrast abandons the conceit of entry points within the individual experience, and instead seeks to accomplish through a similar effect through a collective, cultural experience. Taking the form of a prose poem, the story follows yet another unnamed narrator in his experiences in the service of the titular character Nyarlathotep, a being of strange power and chaotic intent. The other characters, humans all who fall under the influence of this strange being, are much as the readers might see themselves: reasonable men and women existing in a world which corresponds to known physical rules, within which these men and women have placed their faith. Over the course of the prose-poem, the character takes on an almost messianic level of significance within what is clearly a dying culture in a doomed world; the world of “Nyarlathotep” would have been all too familiar to the readers living through the atomic age, with the first murmurs of the Cold

War on the horizon: “The general tension was horrible. To a season of political and social upheaval was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all-embracing, such a danger as may be imagined only in the most terrible phantasms of the night. I recall that the people went about with pale and worried faces, and whispered warnings and prophecies which no one dared consciously repeat or acknowledge to himself that he had heard” (Lovecraft 20).

And though Nyarlathotep himself seems to revel in this chaos and destruction, he still takes on a pseudo-religious significance amongst his followers, even those—like the narrator—who first go to meet him determined to expose him as a fraud. There exists in Nyarlathotep the opportunity to satisfy the deeper need for faith in something greater that, in Lovecraft’s view, is permanently etched into the human subconscious. And so the numinous experience we see laid out for us in “Nyarlathotep” is one perhaps even more worrying for Otto, as its mere possibility would have disproved the spirit of the numinous without contradicting its existence. For while Nyarlathotep is consistently described as a pharaonic figure, there is more of the devil in him than anything else. If the numinous be expressed through him, we see a numinous experience which, while not being crude or barbaric as Otto thought the Gothic, would still be opposed to God; in short, a numinous experience wherein what is not rational is also not beautiful. But in contrast to “Hypnos” and “The Unnamable,” there exists no point in the story where the author sets aside his objective prose in favor of the more decadent style of the numinous experience. Rather, the entirety of “Nyarlathotep,” framed as prose-poetry, executes on this concept, with image-rich sentences of conflicting emotional content serve to exaggerate the chaos described within.

Lovecraft also chooses to shorten what would be considered the “ghost-experience” scene—the moment of interaction between the narrator and Nyarlathotep—in favor of extending the period of confusion and the departure of reason that follows. The narrator is presented to Nyarlathotep, to hear his words and experience his marvels, and in the end, in accordance with the formula, makes one final attempt to apply his reason to the scenario: “And when I, who was colder and more scientific than the rest, mumbled a trembling protest about ‘imposture’ and ‘static electricity,’ Nyarlathotep drove us all out, down the dizzy stairs into the damp, hot, deserted midnight streets. I screamed aloud that I was *not* afraid; that I never could be afraid; and others screamed with me for solace” (Lovecraft 21). In the following scene—which concludes the prose-poem—the narrator and those who were present at meeting Nyarlathotep wander the streets, desperately trying to convince one another that what they had seen had not been true, and that the world they lived in had not changed. Such is the task of the rational mind in those moments after a numinous experience: the reassessment of previously held beliefs. In the Gothic tradition, such a reassessment generally took the form of reassessing the Enlightened faith in empirical reason. In the weird tradition, it is rather the overwhelming of skepticism by emotion, in order to reassess the dispassionate cynicism of the Modernist tradition.

This is accomplished in “Nyarlathotep” through two distinct changes in the narrative: first, the conflict of reason against the unknown, and second, the surrender of reason to the unknown. The first comes from the only “beyond” recognized universally by Lovecraft’s audience—namely, space: “I believe we felt something coming down from the greenish moon, for when we began to depend on its light we drifted into curious involuntary formations and seemed to know our destinations though we dared not think them” (Lovecraft 21). This is more than a conflict between reason and the unknown; this is a demonstration of the insufficiency of

reason in the case of the unknown. Following instructions they neither hear nor understand, the characters walk through streets, darkened by the loss of man-made light as their minds have been darkened by the loss of man-made reason, until finally they reach their destination: the unknown, beyond description, in which their world is strange to them, and they have surrendered to they know not what: “As if beckoned by those who had gone before, I half floated between the titanic snowdrifts, quivering and afraid, into the sightless vortex of the unimaginable” (Lovecraft 22). The world in which the characters find themselves in after passing through the gulf is indescribable, and the author does not try to alter that fact. Rather, he describes it as a realm in which only terrible gods could know anything, and all owe their allegiance to Nyarlathotep. The purpose of this final scene is to affect a similar state of mind in the reader as the scene of chaos described in “The Unnamable.” The reader is transported along with the narrator to a world in which descriptions fail along with reason and the senses, but through the prose they can gain glimpses, intimations of the emotional that that exists within. In short: a *mysterium tremendum*-like awe provoked by Lovecraft’s detailed description of standing at the gates of hell and daring to steal a glimpse inside.

But Lovecraft spoke the truth when he recognized the necessary elements that needed to be in place for the effect to take hold necessarily limited his potential audience. A cursory examination of his work reveals that more often than not, extraterrestrial and extra-dimensional beings play a large role, and one that requires a suspension of disbelief difficult in the unwilling. As a result, contemporary literature has seen a parting of the ways with Lovecraft’s school of thought on the supernatural horror tale. The weird tale still exists, but in an even more ancillary, specialized state than it did in the 40s and 50s. Joseph Brennan remarks that, although the supernatural tale has seen an upturn since the dry period after World War I, “the reading public

will have nothing to do with the genre. They don't believe in ghosts" (Brennan 259). Brennan goes on to say that, "Freud, Jung and their followers have done their work well. Evil has been explained away, and there is no longer such a thing as evil, pure and simple...A belief in the existence of evil is almost essential to the reader of supernatural stories, especially if he is to enjoy them. [...] Like religion, they are largely a matter of faith" (Brennan 260).

Now, supernatural tales—particularly those which seek to describe and inspire a numinous experience—have travelled along one of two major paths. The first looked at the state of weird fiction and did an about face, instead seeking to capitalize on the majority of the mainstream reading public. Tales of this nature focus on either long form narrative, with the supernatural element serving as either backdrop or plot point rather than end goal. *Beyond Black*, a contemporary novel that could only have been written in a post-Gothic, post-Modernist world, is an example of this. In like mind, *The Conjugal Angel*, a novella by A.S. Byatt, could only have been written in this modern age, but so well captures the spirit of the Gothic writers in intent and execution that his work could almost be seen as a Gothic revival, despite its Victorian aesthetic.

Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black*, as an example of contemporary supernatural fiction, is a novel which truly suffers from the interjections of the weird fiction writers of the 40s and 50s. The weird fiction writers and the Gothic writers both were uniquely suited to environments they wrote in; what's more, they were mindful of, and responsive to, the tastes and sentiments of the day. But the transition between the two was less a gradual development, and more a Darwinian natural selection; Gothic fiction no longer served a purpose in the Modernist era, much less the post-Modern era. Mantel's writing suggests an attempt to return to a form no longer suited to the environment. But what renders *Beyond Black* viable for this discussion is that Mantel is mindful

of this fact; her characters exist in a world where supernaturalism and superstition are both viewed not only with the disdain of the Enlightenment, but with the cynical consumerism of the post-Modern era. Her characters have turned supernaturalism into a business, one with bull and bear markets, in which the fluctuation of stock is directly related to the amount of skepticism/ignorance present in the populace at any one time. But beneath this, particularly in the character of Colette, is an undercurrent of longing for something higher (or lower) to believe in. We begin to see the fear of the post-Modern age, when the threat of physical destruction has passed, or at any rate lessened; there is now nothing to fill the spiritual void first emptied by the Enlightenment. The post-Modern age is one in which all the benefits of the Enlightenment have been called into question, and *Beyond Black* chronicles a few of the meager attempts to return the “imaginary” genie to its bottle.

The novel follows the exploits of Alison, a psychic of some local renown, and her business partner and manager Colette, as they travel throughout Britain performing in out-of-the-way venues. There is an ambiguity surrounding Alison, as well as a mystery regarding her past; as the novel progresses the reader is treated to episodes from Alison’s horrifying childhood, in which she is repeatedly subjected to sexual exploitation by an abusive, uncaring mother. But the ambiguity stems from Alison’s apparent possession of legitimate supernatural powers: the ability to read minds, or at the least lift “surface thoughts” from those in range; and the ability to see spirits, when they choose to reveal themselves. Neither power is within her conscious control, to the point where the thoughts of surrounding people crowd in on her, leaving Alison with pounding headaches and strained nerves. Likewise, her ability to see ghosts is little more than a curse, as it allows her to perceive her guiding spirit, a foul mouthed and petty Cockney cutthroat by the name of Morris, the spirit of one of the gang of men that molested her as a child. But as

the stories of the abuse Alison suffered as a child expand, granting the reader a better understanding of Alison's overall mental state, the question arises whether it isn't all hallucination and parlor tricks, all within the realm of explainable possibility. There is in this a tacit indictment of the superstition drawn upon by the Gothic writers: if even this can be explained, if there is no reason to believe in spirits and the beyond save for our fervent desire to believe, the superstition thought so childish by the Enlightened thinkers becomes something akin to a universal human need, a desperate need that is no longer being met.

And in keeping with this lack of fulfillment, the presence of the numinous in the novel is reduced to a few scraps. Consider the opening to the novel, thoughts from an unknown narrator as to the atmosphere of a typical psychic reading: "It is a time of suspension, of hesitation, of the indrawn breath. It is a time to let go of expectation, yet not abandon hope; to anticipate the turn of the Wheel of Fortune. This is our life and we have to lead it. Think of the alternative" (2). And the alternative is demonstrated for us: Morris and the cadre of ghosts he brings with him are all too human, with human needs and human desires. Their grotesque nature, made all the more repellent for its human qualities, is a demonstration of the supernatural stripped of the spiritual. And the ghost experience in the novel is altered as a result; no longer the unnamable of Lovecraft or the overwhelming *presence*, the *mysterium tremendum* of the Gothic; both have both run their course in the consumerist staged supernaturalism of Mantel. It is all seemingly out of place, with strangely Gothic conventions being utilized knowingly so as to create the proper atmosphere, and that to increase profits. For example, the conscious effort on the part of Colette to market Alison's performances to women: ten women to every one man is the ratio we are told, reinforcing the stereotype that the female sex is naturally closer to the spiritual than the male (a

trope that, interestingly enough, is used again by Byatt in her contribution to supernatural literature).

But above all, it is the self-awareness of Alison and her fellow psychics that renders these Gothic-style conventions so flat, so revealing of the baser aspects of human desire. Alison is of course well versed in the history of her craft, thinking back on that time of “Victorian cheats,” as she calls them: “In those days the dead manifested in the form of muslin, stained and smelly from the psychic’s body cavities. The dead were packed within you, so you coughed or vomited them, or drew them out of your degenerative organs. They blew trumpets and played portable organs, they moved the furniture, they rapped on the walls...Sometimes they stood at your shoulder, a glowing column made flesh by the eyes of faith” (64). This is the post-Modern take on Gothic fancy: nothing more than self-induced awe, helped along by cheap prestidigitation. There is no attempt made to replicate God or his presence in any of these charades; in fact, God is explicitly stated to be non-existent, or at the least non-important. In response to the question of God’s role in the afterlife, Alison answers: “Morris says he’s never seen God, he doesn’t get out much. But he says he’s seen the devil; he claims he beat him at darts once” (139).

And if Alison is the last remnants of spirituality, surviving through adapting itself to a marketable product, Colette is the epitome of the market force that consumes the product. Coming to Alison first as a supplicant, seeking advice in personal matters; then returning with a business pitch to streamline Alison’s work, Colette’s arc is Mantel’s argument for the natural progress of belief in modern society. First the desperation, the feeling of being lost—the recognition of the need for something higher, something deeper; second, the withdrawal from disappointment as the deception is revealed; finally, the recognition of the need *as* a need, and the cynical desire to take advantage of it. Colette becomes the premier skeptic of the novel,

harshly judging the other mediums and psychics as though trying to convince herself that nothing exists in their work to place hope in: “*Why* do [the mediums] look so ridiculous? Why all these crystal pendant earrings swinging from withered lobes; why the shrunken busts exposed in daylight, the fringes, the beading, the head scarves, the wraps, the patchwork, and the shawls?” (140).

But, much like the supernatural aesthetic of the mediums, Mantel’s discussion of the trappings of the trade is largely a superficial concern in the narrative. *Beyond Black* is a character drama, an investigation of two individuals representative of a larger society: Colette the problem, Alison a proffered solution. And for both characters, the supernaturalist profession is an escape from the undesirable physicality of their existence. Colette’s root motivation throughout the entire novel is her frustration with the romantic sphere of her life; a common complaint in the post-Modern world, where romance has essentially died out, to be replaced with tired pseudo-masculine figures like Colette’s ex-husband, the unimaginative and frustratingly dull Gavin. And throughout all her frustrations is cut an undercurrent of purely sexual frustration, a sense that were her physical needs to be met, she could come to some reconciliation with Gavin: “Tea, tea, tea! said Colette. How refreshing to come into the cleanliness and good order of the Collingwood. But Colette stepped short, her hand on the kettle, annoyed with herself. A woman of my age shouldn’t be wanting tea, she thought. I should be wanting—I don’t know, cocaine!” (327). Colette is an extremely repressed individual; she keeps herself wound extremely tight, restricting her behavior to the point where she can satisfy her desire to be superior to others by priding herself on her own virtue. And from this desire to be superior comes her skepticism, the cynical outlook on the world that is as much a put-on as any of her other personality traits. Colette is not the Enlightenment, no matter how much she may wish to be; Colette has far too

much of the frustration of the post-Modern in her for that. Throughout the novel, serving as a excuse to explore Alison's tortured past, Colette makes tape recordings of her conversations with Alison, trying to understand her craft, trying to pin down the exact nature of the supernatural forces at work. And while this refusal to believe anything without evidence and investigation, and this desire to force supernaturalism to answer to reason and rationality would ordinarily qualify Colette for Enlightenment status, her frustration with Alison's uncooperative nature belies her true intent: Colette is frustrated not at meeting something that cannot be explained, but rather at meeting something which *she* cannot explain. Priding herself on her intellect as she prides herself on all her aspects, the vain Colette cannot stand being stymied in her attempts to explain away Alison's strange abilities and stranger visitations. Everything must be reducible to the physical in Colette's world, even if that belief cannot be justified.

Alison is a far cry from Colette, while still being an equally contradictory character. Her horrible childhood obligated her to recede into herself, into a realm of imagination where the horrors of the flesh could less affect her. But she is a supremely post-Modern figure, if only in that she could exist only in a post-Modern world of cynicism, commonplace concern and a dearth of imagination. She is introduced as a 'Sensitive,' an individual whose senses are arranged in a different way than most people: her powers stem, then, not from magic or divine gift but from physical perceptions, the ability to see more, rather than to see what is not there. Consider the description, coming soon after, which lays out the role society expects her to play: "She was a clairvoyant; she could see straight through the living, to their ambitions and secret sorrows, and tell you what they kept in their bedside drawers and how they had travelled to the venue. She wasn't (by nature) a fortune-teller, but it was hard to make people understand that" (7). It is a sobering thought to place the ability to truly understand a person—their hopes and dreams and

fears—in the realm of the supernatural or the superhuman. And that such intimacy is neither asked for nor wanted is even more saddening, that people instead want to either verify her ability through known constants, in a playful manner similar to trying to guess which in hand the magician has palmed the coin; or better yet they simply want the attention, to know that something, somehow, is observing them, taking note of their humdrum existence and keeping track.

Having described Alison's character as contradictory, it comes as no surprise that her physicality, in answer to Colette's, is equally confusing. The presence of the unnamable in *Beyond Black* is seen entirely through Alison's point of view, and for the majority of the novel is represented by the gaps in her memory. Having blanked out the majority of the trauma she experienced as a child, Alison is very much a woman without a past, which lends an added level of significance to the possible hallucinatory nature of the ghosts she sees; a surrogate past, if you will. The fact that the majority of the specters that she sees are older woman, surrogate mother figures for a woman whose mother played a key role in her repeated molestation, while her spectral tormentors are exclusively male, is another point in favor of that interpretation. But in either case, the unknowable for Alison is the mind, her past, and the nature of her gift. Even Heaven, or the afterlife, is an unsure concept for Alison. The spirits she communicates with describe an afterlife most similar to the fields of Asphodel, from Greek mythology: an everlasting place without memory, without virtue, and without purpose, in which all aspects of the human experience fade away, to be replaced with nothing.

By contrast, Alison's physical body plays an important role in the novel. Being of poor health and large size, Alison suffers from a variety of aches, pains and discomforts, all of which are exacerbated by the strain of performing and using her abilities. Blaming Morris, her perpetual

tormentor, for the majority of her ills only goes so far, although Alison does experience a period of restful recovery after Morris departs from her. But what is important is that her physical body is closely tied to not only her abilities, but her memories as well. Her body is both the only known quantity in Alison's life, composed of physical ills that she can treat with physical methods; likewise, it is the anchor that allowed her childhood to be so awful, and which even now enables her to practice her gifts. But it also lessens her gifts, not within the context of the novel, but within the context of supernatural literature and the execution of the ghost experience narrative. By fixing the unnamable of Lovecraft or the eerie supernaturalism of the Gothic within the physical body, a known quantity which responds in predictable ways, the effect is considerably diminished. Examining from the context of the numinous concept, there is virtually nothing of higher significance at work here. There is no *mysterium tremendum* present, as the supernatural is a constant companion, rendered with human personality, wants and desires. There is no awe present, as the other world is presented as commonplace; it isn't some other realm that occasionally impinges on our own, but is rather past aspects of our world popping in for a quick visit to address some mundane concern left over from their old life. Nothing new is learned or gained through their death, the ghosts are literally dead humans returned, neither tormented nor ennobled by their experience, a terrifying thought and a depressing one. And without that awe, the observer can neither be inspired nor changed; it becomes a matter of maintaining personal relationships, no more (perhaps no less?) complex than physical relationships. Alison describes the spirits she meets as such: "They're not reliable. They'll pull the rug from under you. They don't become decent people just because they're dead. People are right to be afraid of ghosts. If you get people who are bad in life—I mean, cruel people, dangerous people—why do you think they're going to be any better after they're dead?" (155).

And this brings us to the discussion of Morris, Alison's spirit guide and former, as well as current tormentor, without whom there would be little to no evidence to support Alison's claims to supernatural prowess. Supremely human, a Cockney street tough, foul-mouthed and riddled with vice and bad manners, he is the epitome of the masculine ideal liberated from moral constraint. What he wants he does, and to hell with any who tell him otherwise. He and his gang, as he refers to them, were the chief customers to Alison's mother, who as previously stated played the role of pimp more than parent in Alison's life. And having died in some sordid way, he re-enters Alison's life as her link to the other world, ostensibly a guide, in actuality a demon in disguise. But more importantly, he is the unavoidable link to her personal past, which is what allows him to torment her so easily. So long as he lingers, Alison cannot come to grips with what happened to her as a child; again, this is the more typical understanding of ghosts in popular culture, that they represent an unfinished bit of forgotten business.

But ghosts are more than that, especially in Mantel's novel. Ghosts are given the supernatural abilities of intangibility and sudden appearance specifically because the nature of their business is inescapable. And Mantel accomplishes this effect through seeming to remove Morris from the narrative and from Alison's life. He simply disappears one day, cast out by Alison, and although she is paranoid about his possible return, she eventually becomes used to his absence. But Morris does return, as does Alison's past, in a very significant way. The relationship between Alison and Colette has deteriorated to the point where their business relationship, with Colette managing Alison, telling her when and where and how to perform parallels the prostitution that Alison experienced at the hands of her mother. Likewise, Morris returns, this time having collected the spirits of his entire gang from 'the old days,' but his attention appears to have turned away from Alison. No longer solely concerned with her, he and

his boys allude to some agreement reached with some higher-up, allegedly the devil, referred to as 'Old Nick': "What is our mission? It is to track down useless and ugly people and recycle them" (310).

And again the reappearance of the ghosts, referred to by Alison as 'the fiends,' expresses itself in physical terms through a sudden downturn in Alison's health: "Throughout her whole body, they left their mark. It's as if, she thought, they're walking in one by one, and wiping their feet on me. Her temperature dropped; her tongue furred up with a yellow-green coating. Her eye looked small and bleary. Her limbs tingled and she lost sensations in her feet; they still seemed intent on walking off, leaving the whole mess behind, but through the intention was there, she no longer had the ability" (310). Having tried and failed to put her past to rest, Alison is left worse off than ever. And the fiends themselves no longer concern themselves with her in any capacity, save for some reason that her continued presence is a prerequisite for their remaining on Earth. The change in intent in the ghosts is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the novel, specifically because the nature of the ghosts has been established as so completely human up to this point. But with Morris' return, he is charged by old Nick to root out all the ghosts that no longer have a place on Earth: "Not just kicking, kicking out. We are chasing out all spooks what are asylum seekers, derelicts, vagrants, and refugees, and clearing out all spectres unlawfully residing in attics, lofts, cupboards, cracks in the pavement, and holes in the ground. All spooks with no identification will be removed" (312). The last vestiges of supernaturalism are being forcibly evicted from the world, and all that will be left is cold, exacting business and calculation. Colette leaves Alison's service by the end of the novel, resigned to the fact that she cannot get what she wants from her any longer; the novel ends with collapse, the collapse of an attempt to comfort with outdated superstition and the last crumbs of belief left in the world. *Beyond Black*, the title

refers to the one thing that Alison will never inform her clients of: “Never utter the word *death* if she could help it. And even though they needed frightening, even though they deserved frightening, she would never, when she was with her clients, slip a hint or tip a wink about the true nature of the place beyond black” (155). And so the final state of affairs at the end of the novel is thus: supernaturalism is nothing to be relied upon, is no relief; what’s more, there is nothing greater beyond that awaits us; human relationships are difficult, and ultimately not worth it, but are simultaneously the only available option. *Beyond Black* describes the end to everything the Gothic tradition stood for, believed in and hoped to achieve, not as a direct attack on a literary genre, but because of a genuine belief in a fundamental change in human perception. Mantel describes a grim world of people in which the numinous is impossible, and its absence is sorely felt.

Providing a counter-argument to this is A. S. Byatt’s *The Conjugal Angel*, a novella which takes on the same issues as Mantel, and sets it amongst the same types of petty, materialistic (and sexually frustrated) characters, but manages to establish a numinous experience all the same. If *Beyond Black* is post-Modern cynicism, *The Conjugal Angel* is post-post-Modern hope. Published in 1991, the novella describes a group of women, meeting together to enjoy the latest passing fad in Victorian society: séances, or attempts to contact the departed through use of communal effort. Set in the tail end of the Victorian era in 1875, the story explores first the motivations of the various women for participating in the séances, usually to contact a loved one, or to assuage an old guilt, or simply because it provides a semi-illicit social thrill. Like Mantel, Byatt includes a subtext of stymied sexuality, primarily in the character of Liliás Papagay, who longs to contact her rough, pre-eminently virile husband whom she is certain, wrongly as it turns out, has died at sea. Byatt also includes the character of Mr. Hawke, a

spiritual advisor of sorts to the women and an overly priapic, though woefully awkward academic whose attempts to throw himself at Liliás only result in his own embarrassment.

But all of these scenes of physical need and dissatisfaction come into play in in-between scenes, immediately before and after the séance proper. And it is in these séances that the main character, Sophy Sheeky, comes to center stage. It is clear throughout that Sophy is the only character that actually undergoes any sort of spiritual happening; similar to Mantel's Alison, she is a clairvoyant, able to hear and see ghosts in a way that no one else in the circle can. Liliás, perhaps the most well-intentioned of the group, can see nothing beyond that which she wills herself to see: "Can't you just see the Angel? Clothed with a cloud and with a rainbow on his head, and his face is it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire. And in his hand a little book open.' ...She knew she was straining. She desired *so* to see the invisible inhabitants of the sky sail about their business, and the winged air dark with plumes. She knew that that world penetrated and interpenetrated this one" (188). This sets up the fundamental difference between Byatt's novella and Mantel's novel: namely, that Byatt is what can be considered the true descendant of the Gothic school, recognizing as she does that people's desire to believe in something is an incredibly powerful motive force, speaking to an equally powerful need to *have* something to believe in. This understanding, paired with an understanding of the present-day audience Byatt wrote for, reveals the importance of setting the story in Victorian England, where there could be some appreciable distance to allow for the overcoming of inbred skepticism in the reader. To accomplish a numinous effect, Byatt requires a suspension of disbelief or at the very least a suspension of hostility towards the fanciful and the inexplicable.

Louisa A. Hadley, author of the article "Spectres of the Past: A. S. Byatt's Victorian Ghost Stories" supports this contention, that Byatt's novella serves as a bridge to return the

numinous to a world gripped in post-Modern skepticism: “Any possibility of an either/or distinction between belief and skepticism, ghosts and reality, however, is deconstructed. Instead of a simple opposition Byatt’s texts reveal different forms of belief and skepticism” (Hadley 85). In particular, Hadley makes special point in explaining the reasoning behind relating the events of the séance to the reader purely through character perception, and that of subtly untrustworthy characters at that: “[T]his technique of distancing the narrator from absolute credulity in the spiritualism of the novella is a consequence of its status as a neo-Victorian text...Despite this distancing of the narrator, there is a suggestion that there may be some truth to [the women’s] activities” (Hadley 88). The question of distance is important to Hadley’s consideration of the novella, and for more than the role it plays in narrator reliability. Hadley’s thesis that Byatt’s novella serves as an excellent portrayal of Victorian spiritualism requires her to appreciate that the distance of the narrator, which could guarantee objectivity, would also eliminate a more concise emotional account of supernaturalism during the period. Hadley points out that, “The narrator’s objectivity fails to account for the emotional sustenance spiritualism provided” (Hadley 90).

To this end, Byatt establishes a similar parallel to Mantel, in that she places the supernatural in the context of the material, through use of a real-world, short lived theological movement called the Church of the New Jerusalem, established by Emanuel Swedenborg in 1787: “That Spiritual Columbus, Emanuel Swedenborg, had made his voyages through the various Heavens and Hells of the Universe, which he was shewn was in the form of a Divine Human, every spiritual and every material thing corresponding to some part of this infinite Grand Man” (191). But what is more interesting is the clear parallel made between the Victorian era’s view of the world and our present cynical take; the only difference is that where we view it

with despair, they viewed it with a sort of light-hearted frivolity: “We live in a material time, Captain Jesse—apart from metaphysics, the time is gone by when anything is made out of nothing” 191).

The séances described in the novella are similar fare to what would have been in vogue at the very beginning of the Gothic era: ghosts are comprised of strange knockings and mischief, rather than any sort of higher purpose or nature. The women’s meetings are characterized by bouts of automatic writing, possessions and strange visitations, all primarily works of overwrought imagination and sympathetic hysteria on the part of the more sensitive characters. And to some extent characters like Liliás are aware of this, questioning why the occurrence of ghost experience has skyrocketed in recent years, as if in keeping with social fads. She muses to herself that perhaps ghosts are being displaced by new knowledge, shaken out of the rafters by science and reason and the like. And Liliás is particularly perceptive in noting the inevitable consequence of this process: “And yet we cannot bear the next thought, that we come nothing, like grasshoppers and beef-cattle. So we ask them, our personal angels, for reassurance. And they come, they come to our call. But it was not for that, she knew in her heart of hearts, that she travelled to séances, that she wrote and rapped and bellowed, it was for *now*, it was for more life *now*, it was not for the Hereafter, which would be as it was, as it always had been” (196). And that fear is clear in the character of Mrs. Jesse, married woman of numerous failed pregnancies, whose life is so richly sown with sorrow that her grief is described by characters in the novel as decadent. The fear that there is nothing better, nothing after; the universal, primal fear of death—religion having not yet fallen from grace, being merely splintered beyond practical use; these are the concerns that uplift this passing fancy with the Hereafter.

And yet these women, like Mrs. Jesse and Lilius Papagay, who most want to contact the Spirit World so as to ease the pain in their physical life, are unable to contact spirits, and are rather merely victims of their own desperately overactive imagination. On the other end is Sophy, who is described as being divorced from the physical: "Part of her spiritual success might be due to this intact quality of hers. She was a pure vessel, cool, waiting dreamily" (219). She has rejected, in other words, what Mrs. Papagay and Swedenborg both referred to as the "conjugal delights of married life" (220). Sophy presents an interesting parallel to Alison, as the two react in markedly different ways to similar occurrences. Sophy, it seems, was also molested, an experience during which, "She left her body entirely cold like a dead fish, cold like a marble peach when he put his hot hand on it, and jumped back, burnt by ice" (223). There is a definite sense throughout that Sophy is much removed from the physical world, existing in a sort of abstracted dream state that doesn't allow for intimate, commonplace human interaction.

Through Sophy we see described all the "true" supernatural occurrences in the novella. Therefore, it is by Sophy that the numinous concept in the novella must be supported. But all the same, there are some significant departures made from Otto's original concept. In the ghost experiences here discussed, the primary feature has been the human nature of the ghost. Whether too human, as in Mantel, or strangely abstracted, as in Lovecraft, there has been some aspect of humanity present in the experience through which the reader experiences the effect. The change to Mantel is the change to perspective; the dreamy withdrawal of Sophy is a permanent state for the majority of the novella, and the descriptions we receive are equally abstracted. With the absence of emotion comes the absence of the 'creature' element of creature-consciousness; the absence of awe or fear declares as it were *mysterium tremendum*. Take, for instance, the verbal description of the first apparition of the story by Sophy: "It is made up of some substance which

has the appearance of—I don't know how to say this—of—plaited glass. Of quills, or hollow tubes of glass all bound together like plaits of hair...It appears to be very hot, it gives off a kind of bright *fizzing* sort of light. It is somewhat the shape of a huge decanter or flask, but it is a living creature” (232). And the reaction to this creature's presence at the séance is equally blasé: “The séance, even at its most intense, visionary and tragic, retained elements of the parlour game. It was not that Mrs. Jesse did not believe that Sophy Sheeky saw her Visitor; it was more than there were all sorts of pockets of disbelief, skepticism, comfortable and comforting unacknowledged animal *unawareness* of the unseen, which acted as checks and encouraged a kind of cautious normalness. What is described is the abstracting of creature-consciousness away from a subject, which results in a sort of undirected excitement. Without personal experience or sympathetic emotion on the part of the dreamy Sophy, there is nothing for the other characters to latch onto.

There is an argument to be made that the spiritual perceptions of Sophy and the associated trivializing or disbelief that occurs during the séance sessions are analogous to the current state of religious sentiment in an environment of physicality and skepticism. And nowhere is this possibility more readily apparent than during the climactic scene of the novella, in which Sophy is visited by the unsettled spirit of Arthur Hallam, an actual historical figure and the alleged homosexual lover of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Here Sophy is twice removed: removed from social obligation and setting and removed from her physicality as well; having placed herself in a pseudo-meditative state through dreamlike contemplation of lines of poetry, she becomes aware of a presence in her room, despite being clearly alone. Hadley refers to this incident as evidence that “literature is explicitly connected to spiritualism, since Sophy Sheeky uses it as a way to induce her trances” (Hadley 96). The creature-consciousness is lessened in

this instance by her abstracted mental state; no longer tied to her body, she no longer experiences the fear or sense of diminishment that Otto described. This is not to say Sophy does not feel fear; however, her fear is due to the acutely male nature of the spirit, a vestige of its former life. Nowhere is seen the fear inspired by the divine or otherworldliness.

However, while this removal results in diminishment of effect in terms of the numinous awe and awareness, it does allow for a unique interaction between the observer and the divine, represented by Arthur's spirit. Sophy's awareness of the presence in the room comes gradually: "She felt a sudden weight in the room, a heavy space, as one feels tapping at the door of a house, knowing in advance that it is inhabited, before the foot is heard on the stair, the rustle and clink in the hall" (287). But the challenge, when it comes, is familiar, colloquial: "Whatever was behind her sighed, and then drew in its breath, with difficulty. Sophy Sheeky told him dubiously, 'I *think* you are there. I should like to see you.' 'Perhaps you wouldn't life what you saw,' she heard, or thought she heard... 'It isn't my habit to like or dislike,' she found herself answering (288). The uniqueness of this encounter stems from the physicality of the spirit in question. Unlike Morris in Mantel, who retained his mortal vices while reveling in his ghostly nature, Arthur Hallam is represented as flesh and bone, if not blood as well; note that in the above passage, he is said to draw breath. He has presence, as do all the spirits, but he evokes sensorial experience as well—he has smell: "The face behind her bulged and tightened, sagged and reassembled, not pale, but purple-veined, with staring blue eyes and parched thin lips, above a tremulous chin. There was a sudden gust of odour, not rose, not violet, but earth-mould and corruption" (288). Arthur Hallam is placed in the novella between two 'divine visitations,' spirits whose forms are fiercely inhuman, to provide a contrast to popular opinion, specifically the opinion on what occurs to the human spirit after death. The spirits that appear to the women's

circle serve as wish fulfillment; Arthur Hallam is the ugly truth. We begin to see Byatt's aim in her presentation of the spirits; knowing her audience, she plays on their latent fears by hinting not that God exists and shepherds the spirits of the dead, but rather that perhaps he does not.

Hallam's physical description encapsulates perfectly that while he is something not-quite-human, the change has not enhanced him: "He stood there, trembling and morose. The trembling was not exactly human. It caused to swell and contract as though sucked out of shape and pressed back into it...She saw that his brows and lashes were caked with clay. He said again, 'I am a dead man' (289). Sophy muses on the supposed state of the newly dead, a confusion stemming from tangled ties to their previous existence. This sentiment is echoed by Hallam, who struggles to express the nature of his experience to Sophy: "I walk. Between. Outside. I cannot tell you. I am part of nothing. Impotent and baffled," he added, quick and articulate suddenly, as though these were words he knew, had tamed doggedly in his mind over the long years" (290). The result of the physicality Hallam exhibits is simultaneously subtle and startling: although Sophy certainly fears him, she pities him as well, and embraces him as to give comfort to the dead man: "[She] felt his weight, the weight, more or less, of a living man, but not a man breathing, a man inert like a side of beef. Perhaps it would kill her" (290). The women of the circle, many working from idle fancy, have reached out to the spirits of the departed, some seeking amusement, and some seeking comfort. Little could they suspect the spirits of the dead would still retain such sadness, that they would answer the pleas for comfort with their own?

This contact accomplishes one primary goal, necessary to Byatt's efforts to restore the numinous to effectiveness. Sophy's reserve is shattered by Hallam's visit; in the development of her character, there has been a restoration of the feminine set in motion by Hallam's sorrow arousing her sympathies. According to Hadley, "Women were thought to be better able to

receive spiritual messages since they were presumed to be naturally passive creatures” (Hadley 91). And so it is that when next Sophy experiences the supernatural, once more amongst the supposed safety of the circle in the parlor, she experiences it as a fully present, sensitive human:

“Sophy felt cold hands at her neck, cold fingers on her warm lips. The flesh crept over the bones of her skull, along the backs of her fingers, under the whalebone. She began to shake and jerk. She fell back open-mouthed in her chair and saw something, someone, standing in the bay of the window. It was larger than life, and more exiguous, a kind of pillar of smoke, or fire or cloud, in a not exactly human form. It was not the dead young man, for whom she had felt such pity; it was a living creature with three wings, all hanging loosely on one side of it” (328).

Furthermore, there is now an awareness of intent, an understanding in Sophy’s perception that the creature that had appeared was “hungry for the life of the living creatures in the room” (329). This final apparition is strange and terrible, and beholding it has a pronounced and negative effect on Sophy. This is a scene that has been played out many times in the Gothic theatre, but there is a strangeness, an alien quality to the apparition that, as described, could have come straight from a Lovecraftian tale.

The Conjugal Angel is something more than *Beyond Black* both have an appreciation for the potential and the aesthetic of the supernatural tale of spirits interacting with man. But Byatt’s novella can be better considered the successor to the numinous tradition, in that it understands the concept well enough not only to execute on it, and draw from those who came before, but to advance the concept further. The spiritual world of Byatt is one of dualism and separation, much like the Swedenborg philosophy it references. Under Swedenborg, the male and female are imperfect halves of a celestial being, reformed and reunited in the afterlife. The spirits of Byatt

are likewise halved, the rational and irrational, the human and divine. The strange visitors that Sophy sees in the circle almost fail description in human terms, moving beyond what the rational mind can conceive. But Arthur Hallam is pained, bitter and afraid, seeking warmth and comfort in another's arms, demonstrating that there is no ascension awaiting the human spirit: simply the decay of the body and the decay of the self as we pass from other's memory. The elements of Otto's numinous experience are all present in the novella, but they are disjointed or diminished; despite being written in Victorian prose in a Victorian setting, the problems of Mantel echo in Byatt, and neither can answer with revelation: their answers are as imperfect as the characters that seek them. Clearly, these tales have come a long way from the gallant paladins and untouched maidens that populated Walpole's tale.

And so, Mantel and Byatt: two examples of the current state of affairs for ghost literature. On the one hand, a self-aware return to the aesthetics of the past, to demonstrate beyond question the state of disrepair that faith and superstition now occupy. On the other, a defense of pure faith as being stronger than mere superstition, capable of stirring even the most jaded contemporary hearts; no doubt Rudolf Otto would be pleased. But the change in supernatural literature is perhaps a lamentable one. Characterized in this paper as a 'synthetic shot of the numinous,' a chance for readers to recreate in superstition and affect; this no longer has a place in current supernatural literature. The audience is too jaded, too cynical; they are too quick to dismiss creature-feeling as irrational, undesirable. They are too unwilling to let fall their critical defenses to allow for a true feeling of awe, a true change in perception; both aspects necessary for the experience Otto termed the *mysterium tremendum*. There is little likelihood that Otto would be pleased, or feel triumphant, at the slow disappearance of Gothic conventions from ghost stories. The disappearance of superstition in many ways parallels the loss of imagination, a willingness

on the part of the audience to engage with the unlikely or the unpredictable. This paper has traced the path the numinous has taken, how it has appeared, how it has been conjured through authorial intent and atmospheric build-up. But it has also traced the deeper meaning beneath, the nature of fear-response, and the willingness to believe each author assumed when they set out to write. There may be a chance for a revival of the numinous, a real revival—but it will not come from literature but from the audience itself. The Gothic writers eventually faded away because the audience can only cast their minds back so far, and still feel the real effects of the past. Will readers develop patience, will they be able to once again suspend their disbelief? Or will the process begun with the weird fiction writers, the arms race of shock and surprise, eventually end with readers having no time at all for strange rappings at old doors?

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