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NATURE AS THE SOURCE OF MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM: AN ESSAY ON THE POETIC WORKS OF BLACKWOOD, SMITH AND CAMPBELL

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to analyze three horror classics – Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907), Clark Ashton Smith's "Genius Loci" (1936) and Ramsey Campbell's "The Voice of the Beach" (1977) – in which the landscape is envisioned as the abode of supernatural power. The common thread between these stories is the concept of natural scenery which merges and blends the real and unreal, the mind, flesh and the phenomenal world. As landscape is a major component of the plot, rather than mere background to the stories, the authors use it to formulate certain metaphysical ideas about existence and the nature of reality itself. My objective is to historically and epistemologically contextualize these ideas, clarify them and relate them to particular recent developments in philosophy and social theory. My second aim is to examine the semantics of space particular to each narrative, the association and partition of its structural elements, and the latent level of meaning arising from the organization of the stories' *mise-en-scène*.

KEYWORDS

landscape, semiotics, nature, horror, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Algernon Blackwood, Clark Ashton Smith, Ramsey Campbell

There is a strong reason to suspect that humans have always feared nature – all over the world, archaeological evidence, ethnographic and folklore material show us that for millennia people have used cultural means to physically or symbolically delimit their abode from the surrounding wilderness and its cultivated and uncultivated, visible and invisible, real and imagined, domestic and demonic threats (for a relevant comparative study, see: Tuan 1970; for the case of Serbian traditional culture, see: Detelić 1992: 128–130). In a number of modern literary texts belonging to the horror genre, this fear – along with many others, "old" and "new" – is thematized in various forms: nature may be employed in a horror tale as an aspect of an ill-omened scenery which, for its part, has a function to create a certain mood within the narrative, or to



heighten the tension of the story. Such atmospheric settings may be imagined and described as relatively close to human settlements (yet, widely avoided by locals – as in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*) or set apart from them in some isolated area of wilderness (as in Edgar Mittelholzer’s *My Bones and My Flute*). Very rarely does nature play a substantive role in the plot – one can think, in this regard, of stories such as Arthur Machen’s “N”, or H.G. Wells’ “The Door in the Wall”, where the remarkable beauty of a particular landscape leads to the protagonist’s growing obsession and highly ambivalent ending, or Michel Bernanos’ *The Other Side of the Mountain*, where the stark and barren solitude of the natural environment has fantastic effects on the leading character’s mind and body.

In this paper, I will analyze natural sceneries featuring as manifestations of metaphysical evil in three supernatural horror tales written by Algernon Blackwood, Clark Ashton Smith and Ramsey Campbell. What sets these stories apart from a rather modest number of comparable tales in which landscapes are more significant than people or objects and take active part in the plot is the seeming ordinariness of the stories’ locations. Instead of adhering to grandiose landscapes typically imagined as spaces of encounter with the “natural sublime” – mountains, oceans, deserts, volcanoes, waterfalls, polar caps, etc. (Duffy 2013; Des Pres 1983; Poland 1992) – the authors have placed their characters in ostensibly unremarkable settings: a river delta, a beach, a lonely countryside meadow – these are the main sites whereupon paranormal and horrific occurrences in the stories unravel.

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the authors of three selected tales have considerably altered the Romanticist notions of sublime, despite the fact that they have adopted the counter-Enlightenment view of nature – as not merely a resource to be dominated and utilized, but a domain possibly concealing a consciousness of a higher order. The core of this alteration, as I wish to propose, is their rejection of the Romanticist idea that an encounter with the “natural sublime” can be experienced principally on the “classic ground”, that is, in spaces whose cultural values are already inscribed with a rich layer of historical and cultural associations, and therefore highly determined (such as the Alps, Mt. Vesuvius, vast desert sands or some other composites of landscape and apparent cultural significance) (Duffy 2013: 9). I do not wish to claim that the authors had any philosophical intent to challenge the dominant perspectives of sublime as an aesthetic category. It is, nevertheless plausible that they’ve devised this conceptual strategy for the practical reason of the stories’ effect: to make the familiar look strange and the natural appear as otherworldly, in order to enhance the uncanny tone of the narratives.

As “the literature of horror in its pure state belongs to the uncanny” (Todorov 1973: 47), and as the notion of strange and frightening overtones in the ordinary setting (and vice versa), can generate an uncanny effect (Freud [1919] 2003: 124–132), familiar, generally recognizable environments, such as real or fictional towns, villages, houses, “quiet and safe” suburban areas are often the main places of action in horror fiction. This is, of course, not a general rule.

However, in many works of horror literature there first needs to be a textual reality similar to ours in order for it to be transgressed by the fantastic; in other words, in a horror story, the supernatural element is usually not integrated in the natural law of the textual reality, but rather proves itself to be a disruption of this, realistic environment (Garcia 2015: 16). To use Freud's terminology, *Unheimlich* ('uncanny', 'scary') and *Heimlich* ('domestic', 'familiar') can be viewed as two sides of the same coin: the more we, as readers, can relate to *Heimlich*, the more frightening the uncanny will become.

This is, perhaps, why the authors whose works I analyze here have chosen to place their stories in relatively unexceptional environments, rather than on the "classic ground" of the "natural sublime". At an overt level of meaning, these ordinary settings signify certain places within nature as intrinsically bad, or as samples of sacred ground where humans are not, incidentally, meant to be. Typically, horror concepts are concerned with concrete forms of (human or inhuman) Otherness (Ognjanović 2014: 42–43); and even if this Otherness can be very subtle, ambiguous and elusive, it is very rarely projected onto spaces that are both unexceptional and completely intact by humans. The main problem I wish to solve in this paper is what makes the seemingly common natural scenery alien and forbidding in the context of the supernatural horror tale; and how this particular effect of the uncanny is produced. In resolving this problem I also wish to analyze cultural and existential meanings of these stories' main settings (the meadow, the beach, the river delta) acting as signifiers of the radical Outside.

Theoretical Background

Numerous categories in the taxonomy of horror literature signify particular aesthetic dimensions of the genre in addition to certain preoccupation with space and place. Indeed, from its very outset in the last part of the 18th century, gothic was strongly influenced by the new attitude towards Nature that sprang up in the English Romantic poetry (Berlin 2012: 17), and by new styles of visual art, inspired by authors like Salvator Rosa, whose supreme gift was in "painting savage and desolate scenery" (Davenport-Hines 1998: 19). As the godfathers of the picturesque¹ in 18th century England (Praz 1951: 18), artists like Rosa and Claude Lorrain stimulated a burgeoning interest in landscape, which was "invented" by English gardeners (such as Vanbrugh² and William Kent³) imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors (Trott 1999: 81).

1 *Picturesque*, a word naturalized in English language by 1767 from its French or Italian roots, has been applied to nature, as a term designating 'that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture', signifying a particular way of looking at landscape by criteria drawn from painting. The picturesque, on the one hand required the application of artistic rules, and appealed, on the other, to the (heavily contested) ground of 'nature', whose appearances it claimed both to imitate, and to correct (Trott 1999: 80).

2 John Vanbrugh, architect, 1720–1726.

3 William Kent, gardener, 1730–1748.

Even if it is hardly safe to date the discovery and “invention” of landscape from the eighteenth century (Praz 1951: 18–19), it is nonetheless historically sound to assert that among writers and poets of the era the descriptions of landscape went far beyond the prosaic portrayals of the environment. Instead, landscape became the “mirror of the interior world”, open for articulating and transmitting personal emotions. Reflective of moods, sentiments, moral and mystical inclinations of its author, literary landscape, similar to its counterpart in the figurative arts, became an efficient instrument for exploring states of mind in order to make the nature understandable, to make its “ineffability” accessible to intuition or to express the “inexpressible” (Scaramellini 1996: 51).

It is hardly surprising, then, that the descriptions of literary landscapes in Romantic as well as gothic texts⁴ employed an evocative and suggestive vocabulary, more in tune with the observer’s sensations than with the intrinsic attributes of the object observed (Scaramellini 1996: 51). Placing heart over reason, or feelings, moods and mental associations over clear and realist depictions of the external world (more conventional in the Rationalist literature of the previous epoch), Romanticism expressed a pronounced inconsistency, and even a considerable polarity of meanings, which Isaiah Berlin, following thinkers like Lovejoy and Boas, underlined as immanent to the movement:

[Romanticism] is the strange, the exotic, the grotesque, the mysterious, the supernatural, ruins, moonlight, enchanted castles, hunting horns, elves, giants, griffins, falling water, the old mill on the Floss, darkness and the powers of darkness, phantoms, vampires, nameless terror, the irrational, the unutterable. Also it is the familiar, the sense of one’s unique tradition, joy in the smiling aspect of everyday nature, and the accustomed sights and sounds of contented, simple, rural folk – the sane and happy wisdom of rosy-cheeked sons of the soil. (Berlin 2012: 31–32)

These shifting, and in many aspects self-contradictory currents of literary Romanticism make it exceptionally resistant to comprehensive definition, let alone generalization. For the purpose of this analysis, it is, nevertheless, reasonably safe to argue that gothic and horror literature borrowed a great deal

4 From mid-18th century and the publication of the first gothic novel (*The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole in the year 1746) to present times, literary Gothic has evolved its dominant tropes from motifs such as imperilled heroines, dastardly villains, ineffectual heroes, supernatural events, dilapidated buildings and atmospheric weather, to its more recent emphasis on the returning past, its dual interest in transgression and decay, its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear, and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy (Spooner, McEvoy 2007: 1). By the last decades of the 20th century, Gothic has dispersed through contemporary non-literary media (music, fashion, visual arts, video-games, etc. See, in this regard Davenport-Hines 1998: 366–385), and has become a more inclusive and widely popular cultural category than horror. Since horror is still largely understood as a literary and film genre, and not as a clothing style, or a trend in the music industry, there can be drawn a subtle distinction between the two categories, whereby the former is more hybridized and inclusive, and the latter is more “full-blooded” and exclusive.

from the gloomier strands of Romanticist writing; and that nature in these texts is usually portrayed by blending images and moods, uncertain outlines and ominous suggestions, with darker shades of the Romantic pallet. This alone, however, is not enough to adequately address the problem of metaphysics of landscape and potential *otherworldliness* of nature in supernatural horror fiction that is central to this paper. To interpret this problem in its proper context, it is – in my opinion – necessary to introduce a pair of distinct, albeit in many ways related theoretical notions relevant to the subject: Edmund Burke’s⁵ conception of the sublime and Rudolf Otto’s⁶ idea of the numinous. I will immediately clarify why – and how – these pair of notions provide us with the conceptual framework needed for the accurate interpretation of the stories I wish to present and analyze in this paper.

The notion of sublime was first introduced in philosophy by Pseudo-Longinus in the 1st century A.D. For this late antique author, sublime was primarily an attempt to measure his distance from the Homeric world, where “there had still been intercourse between gods and men” (Deguy 1993: 7–8). Defined as a power that creates great thoughts and inspires passion for all that is more divine than ourselves, sublime was in Pseudo-Longinus’ considerations a poetic ideal – one that includes the remarkable aspects of nature (great rivers, seas, the distant stars), as well as its unconstrained forces in its imagery (Euron 2019: 22). Nature great and unbound will in fact become one of the central points in the debates on the notion, which went into a millennia-long hiatus with Pseudo-Longinus’ death; and returned as a topic of intellectual inquiry only with Burke’s and Kant’s writings on the subject in the 18th century.

For modern poetics, Kantian notion of the sublime has been vital. Kant, however, derived certain moral conclusions from his understanding of the concept; and precisely these conclusions were called into question by writers such as Blackwood, Smith and Campbell. In simple terms, Kant wrote that raw nature demonstrates the sublime as far as it contains greatness; only nature in its raw appearance, independent of any human manipulation, provides, as he wrote, the specific feeling of the sublime – on the condition, however, that the spectator is not being endangered, but in relative safety from its raging powers (Escoubas 1993: 61, 70). The sublime show of nature (displayed in phenomena such as storms, volcanoes, or spectacular sunsets) conveys, through intuition – in Kant’s view – the idea of their infinity; as such, it makes us more profoundly aware of the infinite aspects of our own being: that is, our own rational faculties and moral qualities. In the presence of raw nature, in other words, we feel that, despite our physical weakness and material nothingness, we are bigger than nature by virtue of our moral purpose (Euron 2019: 70). Kant’s depiction of a man’s moral overpowering of nature is the core issue of the stories I wish to examine: they offer a drastically different view on human significance in

5 British philosopher and statesman from the 18th century, born 1729, died 1797.

6 German Lutheran theologian and philosopher (b. 1868, d. 1937), one of the most influential scholars of religion in the early 20th century.

the grand scheme of the world; one that is – admittedly, more in tone than in content – closer to Burke’s and Otto’s considerations. But to demonstrate this point, I would first like to focus briefly on the main ideas of the two authors.

Sublime in Burke’s doctrine, namely, corresponds to Romanticist notions of grandiosity and awesomeness of nature’s glory felt at its highest aesthetic level, one that exceeds the feeling of pleasure, and terrifies and astonishes the viewer (Burke 1764: 58–59). The sublime should be vast, obscure and astounding in order to achieve its twofold effect, as terror and awe are its necessary conditions. To illustrate the notion more clearly, and in contrast to Kant’s more overtly anthropocentric perspective, we can imagine an individual standing on a cliff above the raging sea and observing the arrival of a tremendous storm. The beholder is terrified by the crushing forces of nature below him, yet the dread soon gives way to apprehension of transcendence: by observing the roaring abyss from the safe distance, the spectator is lifted above his mere self, and becomes one with the surrounding forces of destruction. Sublime is, against this background, “the drama or *agon* played out between the mind and that which terrifies us” (Des Pres 1983: 142).

The concept of numinous is, by contrast, more abstract. While Burke’s debate on the sublime is formulated in the idiom of classic British empiricism (Quinton 1961: 71), the numinous, in Otto’s terms, is not a natural phenomenon and cannot be gained empirically (Lopez 1979: 467), but refers, instead, to the intuitive level of religious experience. Otto claimed that the numinous is the basic factor underlying all religious ideas and feelings, and thus universal; yet, he did not comment on any non-Christian monotheistic tradition in his study probably because he was unfamiliar with Jewish and Islamic theology (Schlamm 1991: 394). However, one of the most iconic examples of the numinous encounter, as Rudolf Otto saw it, can be found precisely in the religious history of the Muslim faith. It relates to the event of Muhammad’s first call to prophecy, on a hill outside of Mecca, called Hira, where the 40 years old soon-to-be Prophet of Islam was often found secluded in meditation. On one of such occasions, while contemplating on creation and spiritual truths, he suddenly heard a voice commanding: “Recite thou in the name of thy Lord”. Deeply alarmed, Muhammad rushed home and asked his wife to put some covers on him, whereupon the second command “descended” on him from heavens: “O thou, enwrapped in thy mantle! Arise and warn!” (Hitti 1970: 112–113). This was the starting point of Islamic religion – the night of Muhammad’s immediate revelation, which came to be known, in Islamic belief, as *Laylat al-qadr* (“The Night of Power”).

By Otto’s own standards, the numinous provides the setting for raw religious experience, corresponding to the description of *Laylat al-qadr*. It includes categories of *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans* as ultimate responses to the numinous feeling. *Mysterium*, within this frame of meaning, denotes “that which is hidden and esoteric” (i.e. angel Gabriel’s voice that took Muhammad by surprise in the cave and, later on, below the blankets), while *tremendum* evokes a “peculiar dread” of this intrinsically obscure and absolutely unapproachable

mystery, that goes beyond conception, causing the flesh to creep (Lopez 1979: 468). Muhammad fled in great distress from mount Hira and, once arriving home, asked his wife to hide him. His encounter with *mysterium* – the numinous object – resulted in bewilderment and terror. Only on rational reflection did he assign the specific meaning to his experience: he gradually *understood* that he was approached by an angel, who called him to prophetic office. He opted for a solution of the mystery that infused it with the semantics of the holy and thus liberated himself from the tension of *tremendum* and *fascinans*. By adopting a new role, Muhammad discarded his liminal status and emerged from the unreal as the messenger of God.

My hypothesis is that the three horror stories put under scrutiny here present similar mystical encounters with reality beyond human comprehension, but that the character of these encounters does not allow immediate or subsequent ascription of any rational meaning to the experience. Evading the faculty of reason, the surplus of meaning thus generated gives rise to the faculties of imagination and understanding instead; these, on their part, grow in terror alone. The further the mind imagines and understands the plethora of meanings referring to an object of the senses that, paradoxically, “doesn’t really exist at all” (Poland 1992: 188), the more terrified it becomes, until it reaches the breaking point, or passes over it into decomposition. Smith’s, Blackwood’s and Campbell’s tales each in its own way portray this process, using nature as a metaphor for this “nothing” that is in fact a surplus of meanings – for the absolute agency that nullifies reason.

Stories Synopses

On the level of the narrative structure, “Genius Loci”, “The Willows” and “The Voice of the Beach” have at least three elements in common to begin with: 1) landscape as the main source of fear; 2) supernatural presence; and 3) the companionship of a friend. Their synopses may be summarized as such: a pair of companions are secluded at a distant location. One of them – either the narrator or the narrator’s friend – soon begins noticing unusual details in their surroundings. Due to the increasingly upsetting perception of the landscape, the behavior of either of two (or both) of the stories characters starts deteriorating, along with their sanity. Gradually, as the landscape develops into an elaborate sensory trap, the friends grow more distant from each other, compelled to obsessive scrutiny and exploration of the unnerving details of the scenery. Finally, one or both of them meets his doom, or narrowly escapes it, leaving the story’s narrator permanently affected by the vision of reality hidden behind the appearance of the phenomenal world.

At the conceptual plan, all three texts advance the vision of the radical Otherness⁷ – or rather, the radical Outside to the textual reality – as impenetrable,

⁷ Radical Otherness is a term widely used in contemporary horror and gothic studies (see, for instance, its various embodiments in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s (ed.) “The

obscure and horrifying. The idea of elusiveness of *mysterium tremendum* within the stories is in perfect harmony with the anti-Enlightenment cult of obscurity (reflected in Burke's ideas of the sublime) which favours suggestion over definition and limitless over lucid (Burke 1764: 252–285). The Romantic tradition of cultivating the “mysterious tantalising vagueness of outline” (Berlin 2012: 33) is very palpable in all three tales: they quite literary epitomize Burke's notion of dark, uncertain, confused and terrible images being “sublime to the last degree” (Berlin 2012: 50–51). The inhuman agency they introduce cannot be fully grasped, either by perception or by reason. Contrary to usual experience, its presence is more evident in the night time than during the day which is, again, concomitant to the Burke's notion of darkness being more productive of sublime ideas than light (see also: Trott 1999: 87–89). This brings us to the fourth element common to the stories: 4) the qualitative change of landscape in full dark.

Here one can see a rather interesting philosophical concept that may be articulated along these lines: reality is fragmented; the division of reality is as profound and as deeply acknowledged by the stories' protagonists as that between the sacred and the profane; in its sublime form, nature belongs to the sacred domain of reality; on a purely ideational level, this domain is alien and hostile to human life; it is the “wholly other” and in this regard, fundamentally unknowable.

Up to this point, the described metaphysics is relatively conventional, as it follows, however loosely, the Romanticist notions of the sublime. Yet, the stories' authors do not stop at this point, but continue to develop the concept in the following manner: the concealed reality embodies itself in the form of a structure characteristic of its domain; this structure, on its part, generates schemes, patterns and practices conforming, evidentially, with its radical Otherness that is antagonistic to human biological and cognitive framework; if exposed to it accidentally, the human mind and body may lose its composition: the revealed domain of reality becomes a property which appropriates its beholder reducing him to an (in)significant part of itself – to a structure, a pattern, a scheme signifying some inconceivable level of existence.

Accordingly, there is yet another common element in the stories, one that is central to their metaphysical vision: 5) the theme of bodily transformation. Indeed, in Smith's, Campbell's and Blackwood's works, a certain form of radical alteration of human figure is either on the brink of happening, or actually takes place near to the story's conclusion. In the texts, the disfiguration of the human body – or its fusion with the landscape – *mentally* corresponds to complete dissolution of the protagonists' apparently stable and rational perception

Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters”). It refers to any manifestation of a threat to the natural order, or a violation of socio-culturally established conceptual categories which pose to the individual – or to the whole of the society – the epistemological threat of confronting that which should not be (for a wider discussion on the subject, see Pišev 2016: 327–349).

of the world. On the *physical* level, it is the result of nature blurring the boundaries between the domains of human and inhuman space and progressively drawing the individual into the spiritual realm, concealed behind its mask of remote impassiveness.

As indicated, these stories not only perpetuate, but also elevate the earlier Romanticist poetic and literary attempts to depict “the shapeless shape” (Trott 1999: 87) to the highest degree. Their authors part from the Romanticist traditions, however, in their portraying of this shape as both invading and unapproachable to human inquiry. While posing a threat to dissolve, absorb or completely annihilate the human individuality, it causes mixed feelings of fascination and terror. Contrary to Otto’s assumptions, the numinous shape – as these stories demonstrate – is not necessarily holy, at least not in the Christian sense of the word: it is fundamentally linked with the more ambivalent concept of the sacred. Differently put, we should not fear it for the same reason we fear God or, incidentally, nature. Rather, we should fear it precisely because God (*or* nature) has nothing to do with it – the mystery sheds its light on utter insignificance of human existence against the backdrop of the universe.

In the next sequence of chapters, I will direct my attention to the close reading of the texts, so as to thoroughly examine the “shapeless shape” that is crucial to their depiction of the radical Outside. As it embodies itself in the landscape and by degrees unfolds its content, it generates the unity of meaning which, on its part, obliterates all meaning and presents itself as alien to human comprehension. I will try to come to an answer what is this unrepresentable agency structured of, and what role do landscapes play in its gradual unveiling.

The Possessed Landscape – Clark Ashton Smith’s “Genius Loci”

Smith’s tale opens with a description of the central location in the story: the lonely meadow hidden from the road by trees, placed in the little blind valley somewhere in the American countryside. Supernatural aspects of the place in “Genius Loci” are perhaps not as subtly incorporated in the story’s narrative as in Blackwood’s and Campbell’s texts, but they perfectly match the requirements outlined in the introductory chapter of this paper: natural scenery is the exclusive cause of fear in the tale, and a key element to its plot; the landscape consists solely of the elemental parts of nature, such as land, plants and water; it conspicuously lacks any sign of human-built artifact, in or around it; finally, it keeps within itself an emerging structure of a “wholly other” reality that completely exceeds human ontological concepts and worldly experience. This numinous feature of the landscape, as I will demonstrate, emerges in the fictional world of the story from a synthesis of its adverse elements, such as stagnant and running water, plant and mist, or growing and decaying trees; a number of binary oppositions (‘dead’ : ‘living’, ‘animate’ : ‘inanimate’, ‘anthropomorphic’ : ‘zoomorphic’, etc.) that characterize the scenery, amalgamated together, develop an image of a concealed, impure and captivating environment that effectively cloaks the radical Outside.

The story's narrator, Murray, is a novelist and a newcomer to the fictional hamlet called Bowman, where he has a house which serves him as a recluse for writing. He receives a visit by a close friend, Francis Amberville, the painter, who takes advantage of the local environs to gain inspiration for his art. While Amberville, "armed with sketching-materials" explores the surroundings for "the pictorial potentialities of landscape" (Smith 2011: 223), Murray writes. Over the course of two weeks, during which the main events of the story take place, the narrator helplessly observes his friend's decline from a vibrant and cheerful companion to a man overwhelmed by "some form of mental alienation" (Smith 2011: 230) which gradually leads him to his (and his fiancé's) macabre death.

The reason for the ominous change in the artist's character is his intuitive discovery of the lonely meadow not far from Murray's house. Once he observes its disquieting scenic charm on the artist's sketches, Murray admits that he must have missed it in his previous country walks. His friend, the painter Amberville is immediately obsessed with it:

Several days passed [...] and I put off my proposed visit to the meadow discovered by Amberville. My friend, on his part, was evidently engrossed by his new theme. He sallied forth each morning with his easel and oil-colours, and returned later each day, forgetful of the luncheon-hour that had formerly brought him back from such expeditions. On the third day, he did not reappear till sunset. (Smith 2011: 225)

Amberville's monomania soon takes alarming proportions, as the painter makes compulsive revisits to the site, sinking ever deeper into his morbid mood and peculiar hostility toward his host. Frightened by the signs of his companion's deteriorating mental condition, Murray writes a letter to Amberville's fiancé, miss Avis Olcott, inviting her as a fellow-guest of the artist during the rest of his visit at Bowman. The arrival of miss Olcott near the story's finale does not, unfortunately, achieve a favorable outcome: the girl proves to be subservient to her lover (Smith 2011: 230) and restricted in her powers to keep him away from the inimitable darkness that consumes him. Instead of bringing him back to his old and cheerful self, she follows Amberville to his daily excursions at the site and falls prey to the same peril that has already decided her fiancé's fate. The pair finally meets their demise at the "accursed meadow" – the narrator finds them drowned in the stagnant lake covered by the greenish scum.

Murray visits the site only twice – in the middle, and at the end of the story, whereupon he discovers the two bodies. He is repelled by the meadow: it depresses and frightens him with its "sick alders" that seem to beckon him, its sluggish water and boggy terrain that appears to "drag him down in some intangible way" (Smith 2011: 227). There is an undeniable feeling of aberration to the place: it lies somehow separate from the "autumn world around it" (Smith 2011: 226); it is unnaturally quiet and simultaneously aware and watchful: as Amberville notes, and the narrator empirically affirms, "I feel that the meadow itself – or the force embodied in the meadow – is scrutinizing me all the time" (Smith 2011: 226). Once he first observes it in the painter's drawings,

Murray is instantly reminded of old Chapman, an owner of a nearby ranch, who was found dead a little while back at that very field, supposedly of heart failure. Even if there were “legends about old Chapman’s insanity” circulating in Bowman—tales spread by visitors to his household, who “used to find him in that lower meadow, standing idly about and staring vacantly at the trees and water”, there were no rumors that the meadow itself might be the cause of his insanity. After old Chapman’s death, his family moved away, abandoning the ranch to its fate, and leaving the meadow to its previous equilibrium – “It’s a lonely spot”, Murray observes, “and I don’t imagine that anyone ever goes there now” (Smith 2011: 224).

Chapman or some spectral aspect of him is, however, still there – Amberville repeatedly notices him at the site, while working on his painting. At first he feels his presence, or sees him only with a corner of his eye, but as the time passes, the old man’s presence becomes both more evident and, paradoxically, more fragmented:

Sometimes, when I am studying the dead willow very intently, I see his scowling filthy-bearded face as a part of the hole. Then, again, it will float among the leafless twigs, as if it had been caught there. Sometimes a knotty hand, a tattered coat-sleeve, will emerge through the mantling in the pool, as if a drowned body were rising to the surface. Then, a moment later – or simultaneously – there will be something of him among the alders or the cat-tails. These apparitions are always brief, and when I try to scrutinize them closely, they melt like films of vapor into the surrounding scene. But the old scoundrel, whoever or whatever he may be, is a sort of fixture. He is no less vile than everything else about the place, though I feel that he isn’t the main element of the vileness. (Smith 2011: 226)

The main element of “the vileness” is the landscape itself – the particular configuration of natural scenery that reflects and emits some other, more vague and impersonal influence to its spectator. The painter, Amberville, refers to this other influence as a quality perceived by feeling, instead of senses – a presence that is benign or wholly indifferent to human welfare, “perhaps oblivious of human existence” (Smith 2011: 225). Instead of resting on the condition that the spectator’s position is secure (Des Pres 1983: 141), the sublime in “Genius Loci” emerges as an intrusive power: the spectator himself is examined, and *acted upon*; his mind and body are directly exposed to the obliterating dynamics of “the shapeless shape” arising from the landscape he is attracted to. Arranged like a decoy – “a deadfall of malignity and despair” (Smith 2011: 227) – the natural scenery succeeds in disintegrating and absorbing his image in a manner comparable to breaking up and reassembling an object on a cubist painting:

[The landscape] seemed to curdle and thicken gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity. Out of these curdlings, as if disgorged by the ambient exhalation, I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, neither mist nor plasma. One of these faces seemed to detach itself from the bole of the ghostly willow; the second and third swirled upwards

from the seething of the phantom pool, with their bodies trailing formlessly among the tenuous boughs. The faces were those of old Chapman, of Francis Amberville, and Avis Olcott [...] The three human faces, through a further agitation of the curdling mass, began to approach each other. Slowly, inexpressibly, they merged in one, becoming an androgynous face, neither young nor old, that melted finally into the lengthening phantom boughs of the willow – the hands of the arboreal death, that were reaching out to enfold me. (Smith 2011: 231)

The transcendence lurking on the scene in “Genius Loci” is clearly numinous in its character: it is the “wholly other”, an unrepresentable but independent force, “a thing that doesn’t really exist at all”, until it is brought into view, schematized by other feelings (Poland 1992: 188). As I already pointed out, the feelings that schematize it are not absolutely and intensely positive, however – they cannot be subsequently pinioned by rational and self-assertive concepts. They are depressing, alarming, nightmarish, “tainted with insidious horror” (Smith 2011: 228), “too awful to be described” (Smith 2011: 228). What directs them to pessimistic ground is the failure of human mind to ascribe any self-affirmative meaning to the phenomenon it encounters: instead of overcoming the “unattainable” by grasping for some effective metaphor – such as God, or Higher Consciousness, or Purpose – it reaches and finds nothing except the vision of the world, “even life itself, as essentially unknowable, chaotic and terrifying” (Packer, Stoneman 2018: 35).

The Radical Enmity of Landscape: Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows”

The location of Blackwood’s story is the “wilderness of sand-banks and swamp land” (Blackwood 1917: 129) on Danube river; or, more precisely, on a very restricted region of it, not far from Bratislava, the capitol of today’s Slovak republic. A pair of companions, the narrator and his friend, depart from Vienna, *en route* to Budapest, on a joyful, unhurried journey down the Europe’s second-longest river. The pair travels alone on a Canadian canoe. The story’s opening sentence places the reader directly into the landscape, and sets out the framework within which the specific semantics of space would develop: “After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes” (Blackwood 1917: 127).

The Danube’s loneliness on this particular part of its watercourse, the spreading of the water into miles of swamp surrounded by shifting sand, and of course the broad-sweeping presence of the willows represent the constitutive elements of the landscape’s picturesque quality. The combined effect of the strong wind and the swirling flood soon makes the travelers exhausted and they start searching their surroundings for a suitable camping-ground. They succeed in landing their canoe on a sandy bank, no larger than an acre in extent, and “too thickly grown with willows to make the walking pleasant” (Blackwood 1917: 135). The

protagonist explores the island, nevertheless, and immediately notices how the willows, observed from a certain distance, seem like a herd of monstrous creatures crowding down to drink (Blackwood 1917: 136). The attribution of animal and human characteristics to different aspects of landscape features prominently in Blackwood's text, attempting to suggest that the scenery is alive or brimming with consciousness alien to human life: "[The willows'] serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain..." (Blackwood 1917: 139). At another page, the narrator reflects:

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their 'note' either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent, because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause – after supper usually – it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow camp now became unmistakably plain to me: we were interlopers, trespassers; we were not welcomed. (Blackwood 1917: 147)

The "psychology of the place" in Blackwood's "The Willows", as the reader soon notices, cannot be reduced to some residuum of previous human activities, no matter how vague or compulsory (as in Smith's "Genius Loci"); it bears no relations to humanity whatsoever. It is "a spot held by dwellers in some outer space, a peep hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin" (Blackwood 1917: 181–82). The experience of such a place provokes an individual reaction that reaches beyond ordinary ghostly fear. It is, as Blackwood's protagonist reveals, "infinitely greater, stranger, and seems to arise from some ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything I have ever known or dreamed of" (Blackwood 1917: 181). Its disturbing effect is due to the radically negative moment of the sublime which springs out of it, refuting any possibility of meaning – there are too many signifiers for the mind to render meaningful, and it becomes gradually lost in a succession of signs that "seem to go on endlessly" (see Poland 1992: 181).

To draw concrete parallels between Otto's use of the term *numinous* and Blackwood's novella, I will focus briefly on the subject of ineffability. In Otto's argumentation, the numinous is "preconceptual", in the sense that it is prior to and independent of the language used to disclose and to represent it (Poland 1992: 188). In "The Willows" the leading character briefly encounters the numinous object during the first night of his stay on the river island. What he observes at that particular moment are "shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows", "immense, bronze colored, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches" (Blackwood 1917: 152). These "nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes [...] rising up in a living column into the heavens" initially provoke disbelief, then the feeling of awe and wonder in

the narrator. As he notes: “I felt that I must fall down and worship – absolutely worship” (Blackwood 1917: 154).

This episode is followed by a more sinister encounter near the end of the story. The narrator and his companion wander into the dark to collect wood for their campfire. They are already overwrought by what they half grasped around them, and feel deeply unnerved as a result of their conversation on the subject. Suddenly, while picking branches, his companion draws his attention to something moving in front of the campfire. The narrator discerns the thing as a tangled mass of animals, slowly progressing toward them. To the companion, the spectacle gives an impression of a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, coiling upon itself like smoke (Blackwood 1917: 193–194). The sight paralyses the two men with fear; certain that he is going to die, the narrator loses his senses, but his friend catches him in falling and accidentally inflicts pain to his body. It is this pain that saves him, concealing his mind from “the shapeless shape” at the moment of its unfolding.

The notion of ineffability is quite obvious here. It is not only that the protagonist and his friend cannot find the words for what they perceive, it is also that their perception of the same spectacle is different, and only partial at that. The majority of phenomena they witness is half hidden, concealed from their eyes, since it cannot be comprehended in its entirety: the mind is too limited and feeble to incorporate it, let alone to process it without falling to pieces. The otherworldly presence in “The Willows” hence reveals itself as superimposed on the landscape, or else, manifests itself in the form of metonymy: the approaching of the supernatural is felt through enormous weight of the atmosphere, through fourth dimensional sounds, reminiscent of booming of the gong, through deep, spiral shaped funnels in the sand, and of course, through willows, which are, in fact, masks – or symbols of the forces that are radically against the two men (Blackwood 1917: 189).

Chanting Without Mouth: Ramsey Campbell’s “The Voice of the Beach”

The idea of inexpressibility of a truly mystical, numinous experience, or a contact with a presence so fundamentally different from any human conception of the real that it must uncover itself only through an “acceptable metaphor” (Campbell [1977] 2005: 217) is further elaborated in Ramsey Campbell’s story “The Voice of the Beach”. With a proficient use of evocative, formulaic language, Campbell unfolds a narrative whose place of action is the anonymous beach (the exact location of it is left unknown) and the small, unremarkable rental house, a bungalow, situated on its coastal sands. Two men occupy the bungalow: the narrator (also left anonymous) and his companion, Neal. Neal is in a sensitive state of mind – not only that he has recently reached his friend’s summer retreat, he is freshly divorced as well, and seems slightly unstable and lost. In an arrangement similar to Smith’s “Genius Loci”, the narrator, Neil’s

host and companion, is a writer who has rented the house, and settled in it earlier on, in order to write without being distracted by city life. However, he finds himself distracted by the beach, “compelled to scribble notes about it, trying to define the images it suggested” (Campbell 2005: 198). The majority of the story’s events happen in the course of three days, beginning with Neal’s arrival. Once the two friends acclimatize to each other’s presence after a long hiatus, Neil proposes a bit of walk to view the beach. The reader is immediately immersed in the story’s landscape: we are informed that the beach looks artificial, unconvincing, to the narrator’s eye. He observes the sands as a herd of faceless dunes, and the beach as a complex of patterns. The haze and the dazzle of waves distort his view, making him ill at ease and apprehensive. This is, however, nothing new: he has seen it and felt it before – an implied fact hinting at narrator’s tendency for derealization. The pivotal moment in the story is Neil’s abrupt decision to pick up a seashell from the sand. “It’s too small to hear anything”, comments the narrator, but his companion puts it to his ear nevertheless. Thus, the voice of the beach speaks out, transfixing its emancipator, “as though the shell is holding him, rather than reverse” (Campbell 2005: 203).

Neal’s second initiative, important to the story’s fable, is a visit to the abandoned village of Lewis. The settlement is located not far from the bungalow – we never learn how far exactly – and from a certain distance, the abandoned village seems like “a few uprights of rock”, encrusted with sand, and “glowing sullenly as copper through the haze” (Campbell 2005: 199). When the narrator and his friend approach it, it becomes visible that what appeared to be a pattern of standing stones is really the remains of the village, jagged slate walls with gaps for windows and doorways. The village shows “the skull beneath the skin” of the landscape (Armitt 2018: 291): the grey walls are “cavities as skulls” forming “a maze whose center is desertion”, the gaping windows display “an absence of rooms” (Campbell 2005: 200). Taken from a closer perspective, the village reveals itself to be an enigma, “a puzzle whose solution would clarify a pattern, a larger mystery” (Campbell 2005: 200). In the deserted settlement, Neal – the narrator’s friend – uncovers an old notebook scribbled in unsteady handwriting. The unidentified owner of the notebook recounts that the beach is “not so bad” during daytime, but that it becomes worse at night, steadily growing and flashing patterns in the glowing dark – the beach is alive, he states, but it’s only “the image being put together” (Campbell 2005: 202): something worse is hiding behind that image, something alien that was, perhaps, kept small by the stones which the founders of Lewis unwisely moved as they built the village.

The discovery of the notebook has a profound effect on Neil: he is becoming obsessed by its contents as well as by the mystery it refers to. After a time of research and keen reflection, he approaches the narrator with a question: “Don’t you feel there are places that are closer to another sort of reality, another plane or dimension or whatever”, he asks. He elaborates further: “Suppose this other reality was once all there was? Then ours came into being and

occupied some of its space. We didn't destroy it – it can't be destroyed. Maybe it withdrew a little, to bide its time. But it left a kind of imprint of itself, a kind of coded message of itself in our reality. And yet that image is itself an embryo [...] Things become part of its image, and that's how it grows" (Campbell 2005: 211).

Once the voice of the beach finally takes over his organs of speech, Neil makes his way out of the house and vanishes in the coastal sands in a series of elaborate movements which resemble dancing. The narrator follows him into the glowing dark, cold with terror. On the beach, he notices Neil's footprints, spiraling back on themselves in intricate patterns, which refuse to fade from his mind. He has a sudden depersonalization episode in which he observes himself, "a figure tiny and trivial as an insect", making an effort to join in the dance of the beach (Campbell 2005: 216). He only manages to break through suffocating panic by tearing his lip with his teeth, and similarly to Blackwood's protagonist, who is saved by the sudden spasm of physical pain, he succeeds in escaping the grip of the unreal. However, his escape is only temporary. Possessed by a sickening temptation to learn the truth of what his friend has become, and what he is becoming, he finds out that he cannot leave the bungalow. He tries to write, hoping that the act would liberate him, but "of course, the more one thinks of the beach, the stronger its hold becomes" (Campbell 2005: 218). He anticipates that he will soon become what Neil is, a part of the dream of the beach, a living pattern which serves the growth of the beach but is too insubstantial to satisfy its hunger.

Active Landscapes: Semiotic and Structural Analysis (and Conclusion)

The physical environment is the holder and the catalyst of the supernatural in the analyzed texts: it is set around the fantastic element and holds it in place, eventually causing it to emerge and act. But the question remaining is how. To answer it, we can start by noting that in all three stories, the landscapes are fully active: they are portrayed as teeming with movement, endlessly shifting, more or less subtly modifying their internal and external boundaries. The motions of the *mise en scène*, caused by elemental forces, are significantly emphasized in the texts, perhaps even amplified to a degree. Therefore, we can note that the authors of the stories use hyperbolization as a literary device, to foster the impression that the landscape is alive.

In "Genius Loci", the meadow emanates a faint vapor, neither light nor mist, that flows and wavers about; it becomes worse at night, rising and coiling in a pallid, luminous film that "seems to curdle and thicken gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity". In "The Willows", the river is rising, the wind rips through the trees. The river island is continually affected by erosion: chunks of it are driven apart and claimed by the boisterous Danube. To the protagonist, the camp site appears to have changed in size over night: it seems smaller, and the willows closer, than they should be. Only gradually the

uncanny aspects of movement seem to take over the nature: the willow branches move without the aid of wind; the atmosphere gains crushing weight; the canoe, safely pulled up the shore, becomes unexplainably damaged; and on closely examining one of the paddles, the narrator observes that the blade is “scraped all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sand-papered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow” (Blackwood 1917: 166).

In “The Voice of the Beach”, the constant shifting of the elements is even more conspicuous – the sea waves are washing the sandy shore, changing it restlessly by their unstoppable power. Archipelagos of clouds flow low above the sea; the effect of the haze creates magnificent shadows, running in quick motion – too fast, indeed, to be properly observed; the sunlight spills over the beach, which suddenly “leaps into clarity”; and when it grows dark, there are things apparently moving on the beach, “stiff as scarecrows jerking into various contorted poses”. Here, also, the fantastic transgresses the realistic scenery in sequential movements, becoming more horrible with every repetition (see Stewart 1982: 36): the combined force of breeze and quicksand shifts, creating living patterns on the ground. Thick sea foams form symbols, which look like they’re made of flesh. The dunes recede creating an illusion of the vastness of the beach; the looming sky observes, indifferent as outer space, threatening to crush the narrator to nothing.

Studies in the anthropology of cultural classification have provided many useful insights to theoreticians of horror genre, who have adopted the concept of liminality to discuss themes like monstrous bodies and genre-specific spatial settings. Categories between nature and culture, between human and animal, human and machine, have all been addressed and explored at length by thinkers like Noel Carroll (1990: 42–52) and Eugene Thacker (2010: 104–159). In the three stories under discussion here, the liminal character of the landscape makes itself distinct in many ambiguous spheres between categories of the natural: the swamp and the beach are part water, part land; Smith’s meadow is located at the outermost edge of the old Chapman’s ranch; it is part grassland, part orchard, part stagnant pool. Blackwood’s willows are portrayed as bushes which have not reached “the dignity of the trees”; Campbell’s seashells are, as it happens, former inhabitants of the sea which the waves have poured out on the sand. And, of course, the idea that the stories’ place of action rests on the border of two worlds – or two planes of dimension – pushes the notion of liminality to its extreme.

This notion, in fact, can be best described as a structural device, rather than merely as a motif, as it is embedded not only into the structure of the setting, but more significantly, into the characters’ observations of it. The way that they distinguish details in their environment continually oscillates between perception and illusion: “When I glanced back, *it looked as though* something enormous was imitating my walk” (Campbell 2005: 141, *italic is mine*); “At that instant *I seemed to discern* a faint, unholy aura, neither light nor mist, that flowed and wavered about the meadow, preserving the outlines of the willow,

the alders, the weeds, the pool” (Smith 2011: 231, italic is mine; see also Todorov 1973: 52). This uncertainty of perception increases tension in the text and, at the same time, emphasizes the story’s ambiguity which derives its power from the very boundary between the real and the fictive, where the “didn’t really happen” of the fiction is transformed into a fear which is “real”, yet which has no actual referent (Stewart 1982: 35). Thus, liminality, in the function of a structural device, generates suspense and instability of the sensual experience which, at first, leads to blurring and then, to fusing of the threshold between the exterior world of nature and the interior world of the character’s personhood, culminating in the character’s transformation, or rather, his absorption into the landscape.

The unreliability of the various conceptual categories involved in interpreting the exterior world, or the inconsistency of “distribution of patterns of perceptual experience” (Packer, Stoneman 2018: 35) is further stressed by different levels of projection, identifiable in different degrees in all three texts. Inferred to as ideal-type models serving to clarify the means by which nature figures as the holder and the catalyst of the supernatural, these levels of projection can be described as threefold. They rest on attribution of (a) *intelligence* to natural surroundings, as in the following from Smith’s “Genius Loci”: “The place has an entity of its own – an indwelling personality. It’s there, like the soul in a human body, but I can’t pin it down or touch it. [...] This thing [...] is hatefully aware and watchful. [...] The place has the air of a thirsty vampire, waiting to drink me in somehow, if it can” (Smith 2011: 226). The following passage from Blackwood’s story is also quite illustrative in this respect:

When common objects [...] become charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre grotesquerie of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. (Blackwood 1917: 173)

Acting as a carefully arranged *mise-en-scène* against which the supernatural element displays its contours, the landscape is imagined to convey a specific sensation of space where the cloth gets ragged and reality is thin (King 2008: 132). At this point, the “ordinariness” of the setting is transgressed by an impossible element, creating a problematic coexistence of two excluding orders (the realistic and the supernatural) (see Garcia 2015: 135–136). The tension arising from the contradiction between the two worlds, that of the real, and that of the fantastic, allows the supernatural phenomena to emerge – without this tension, the frightening effect of the story would be considerably limited. This tension is further achieved through attribution of (b) *human and/or animal characteristics* (anthropomorphism, zoomorphism) to the natural scenery. There are many examples of such ascription in the stories, but the most important one, common to all three, is implied in the idea that the landscape serves as a camouflage for the numinous object. The notion of some vast, otherworldly

force hiding behind the disguise of the external world “calls into question the adequacy of rational thought to organize and structure the sensible world of appearance” (Packer, Stoneman 2018: 36), thus suggesting “the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary” (Freud 2003: 150). Consider these lines from Campbell’s tale: “I felt that the beach was somehow separated from its surroundings: introverted, I remember thinking” (Campbell 2005: 194); “Closer to the sea I felt slightly less oppressed – but the *whispering* of sand, the light *murmur* of waves, the *bumbling* of the wind, all *chanted together* insistently. Everywhere on the beach were patterns, *demanding to be read*” (Campbell 2005: 203, italic is mine). In a like manner, the “accursed meadow” in Smith’s “Genius Loci” acts as a spider web, luring the victim to participate in its delicate – and ultimately fatal – enigma: “The place haunted me like a phantasm, horrible but seductive. I felt an impelling morbid curiosity, an unwholesome desire to visit it again” (Smith 2011: 230). “The boughs of the sick alders beckoned. The pool, over which the bony willow presided like an arboreal death, was wooing me foully with its stagnant waters” (Smith 2011: 227).

At the outset, the otherworldly presence in all three stories is camouflaged, *de facto* imperfectly, by the seeming commonplaceness of the landscape – either immediately or gradually, the narrator feels that there is something wrong with it, entering, thus the domain of the uncanny. He is never quite sure what it is, or what he is seeing – not until the story’s end, at least, when the spectacle finally reaches its striking transformation. The possibility of it being an elaborate camouflage is exactly what makes it so captivating – and so dangerous: it poses an epistemological puzzle to the spectator, although not one that is meant to frighten, but to teach him, in the spirit of the true rite of passage, the proper shape of things (Turner, cited in Stewart 1982: 40).

Lastly, the act of opening of the setting to fantastic transgression is achieved by ascription of the (c) *cosmic dimension* to the landscape. As I have noted before, the subtle othering of the landscape in the stories reflects the idea that there are higher forms of reality, completely unrelated to ours, and indifferent to human life. Common to all three tales is the impression of some shapeless aberration – much greater than shown in text – that does not suddenly or inexplicably intrude into our world “but rather reveals it to be, in a sense, monstrous or wrong” (Packer, Stoneman 2018: 32–33). Even when it makes itself present, the sublime and terrifying dimension of landscape remains largely obscure, and can only be hinted at through accumulation of details. Simultaneously, without considerably altering its outward appearance, the affirmed order of reality gradually cracks open, allowing some other, concealed reality, to slip into the familiar world, changing it, again bit by bit, into something alien and frightening. The mind is overwhelmed by what it perceives; and even more by the extreme magnitude of what is left concealed. Lost in the profusion of signifiers which refer to some profound but impenetrable sign, the reason cannot regain its power by coming up with a relevant symbolic substitute. There is no indication of God, Law, Harmony, Value or Higher Purpose. If human existence has any significance, it is futile to devise any firm conception of what it might be.

As the “monster” resides in some sort of reality independent of man’s consciousness, it cannot be abolished; it is revealed as “a far-reaching (if not universal) constant” – and the humankind as an exception (Ognjanović 2021: 249). Once it imposes itself as an integral part of one’s consciousness, the assumed laws of reason cannot be restored, given that the half obscure transcendence lurking “behind the veil” cannot be represented either as corporeality or as a meaningful symbol. The numinous feeling it generates can, perhaps, be described as the “emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness” (Lopez 1979: 468); however, we might ask ourselves – is there a contrast to this nothingness? Otto would reply that there indeed is; and that one’s own insignificance is most profoundly recognized in the face of the absolute, “that which is above all creatures” (Otto 1924: 19–20). Against the background of Otto’s theological argument, the feeling of one’s own insignificance is, in fact, considered a virtue: it furnishes life with meaning by affirming the reality of the Supreme.

The existential message coming from our trio of authors evidently defies this view. It portrays transcendental reality as physically detrimental, metaphysically unapproachable and cognitively inscrutable. Moreover, it dethrones the human from his assumed privileged role in the world and negates the possibility of any transcendent natural subjects. The ontology it proposes is completely “flat” – all things, including trees, rivers, seashells, beach sands, bungalows, orchards and humans – share the same ontological status and are immersed in a vast network of shifting relations (Scott 2014: 864).

In a non-philosophical sense, or rather in a manner differing from conventional philosophical argument, Smith’s, Blackwood’s and Campbell’s horror tales undermine the Enlightenment project that has placed subject over object and culture over nature. Interestingly – but, perhaps, coincidentally – a number of contemporary social thinkers (Morton 2010; Latour 2004; Latour 2014; Harman 2018) and philosophers tend to break down these deeply-ingrained dichotomies in the fairly similar fashion but with a different intent: they aim to identify the effects of the Cartesian style dualism in the Western thought as paralysing on environmental issues – and perilous for all life forms in the (not so) long run. By stating this, I am not claiming that horror fiction has succeeded in significantly influencing today’s philosophy or that it may have worked as an inspiring background of recent academic attempts to “think about the world-without-us philosophically” (see Thacker 2010: 9). However, it pre-dates and announces these discussions inasmuch as showing us the thin line between perceiving the nature as a vessel containing some nameless, timeless and sense-devaluing force, and viewing our own self-affirming values – especially those founded on the duality of human and non-human domains – as tragically mistaken and ruinous.

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Marko Pišev

Priroda kao *mysterium tremendum*: esej o poetici Blekvuda, Smita i Kembela

Apstrakt

U ovom radu nastojaću da analiziram tri klasika horror književnosti – "The Willows" (1907) Aldžernona Blekvuda, "Genius Loci" Klarka Eštona Smita (1936) i "The Voice of the Beach" Remzija Kembela (1977) – u kojima je pejzaž zamišljen kao prebivalište natprirodnog. Zajednička nit ovih priča je koncept prirode koja spaja i stapa stvarnost i nestvarno, um, telo i spoljni svet. Budući da je pejzaž glavna komponenta radnje, a ne puka pozadina događaja u pričama, autori ga koriste da formulišu izvesne metafizičke ideje o ljudskoj egzistenciji i prirodi stvarnosti. Moj osnovni cilj je da te ideje istorijski i epistemološki kontekstualizujem, razjasnim ih i povežem sa određenim recentnim tokovima u filozofiji i društvenoj teoriji. Moj drugi cilj je da ispitam semantiku prostora u svakom od narativa ponaosob, analiziram spajanja i razdvajanja njihovih strukturnih elemenata, i proučim latentni nivo značenja koji proizilazi iz organizacije mizanscena priča.

Ključne reči: pejzaž, semiotika, priroda, horor, prosvetiteljstvo, romantizam, Aldžernon Blekvud, Klark Ešton Smit, Remzi Kembel.