

Other Ethics:

# Decentering the Human in Weird Horror

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## ABSTRACT

Margrit Shildrick has argued that the monster's ability to disturb and unsettle arises from its position as simultaneously same and different, both self and other at the same time. Through an analysis of Algernon Blackwood's novella *The Willows*, this article discusses the challenge posed by the nonhuman Absolute other, the nebulous creatures whose whose difference is total, as they appear in weird fiction. Drawing on posthuman theory, it explores the ethical implications of imagining the crumbling horizons of human subjectivity in the meeting with the absolute and unknowable other. This article argues that by bringing concepts such as the horror of scale, eco-phobia, the transformative power of awe, and the strangeness of matter into the monstrous figure, the weird undermines the structures that constructs human, culture, and mind as separate and different from the non-human, nature, and matter. By making us imagine a perspective from which humans are not just insignificant, but irrelevant, weird fiction not only challenges the anthropocentric worldview, but also makes us aware of the limitations and situatedness of human experience.

## KEYWORDS

*Weird fiction, otherness, posthuman ethics, awe, monsters.*

A humanist ethics won't suffice when the "face" of the other that is "looking" back at me is all eyes, or has no eyes, or is otherwise unrecognizable in human terms. What is needed is a posthumanist ethics, an ethics of worlding. (Barad 2007, 392)

**M**onsters are cultural manifestations of our collective and individual anxieties about our others, they are "difference made flesh" (Cohen 1996, 7). Our culture is haunted by women, queer, disabled, or racialized subjects that (re)appear as monsters (see for example Braidotti 1999; Creed 1993; Shildrick 2002). While the figures used to represent these others vary, they are often unmistakably people-shaped. Their bodies are framed as horrifying and wrong, but still ultimately recognizable. Even though their existence is framed as transgressive, disgusting or abject, the other that they represent is familiar, often intimately so. Their desires and wants are seen as irreconcilable with our own, but are frequently understandable. While language is often an issue, communications can sometimes be established, and their perspectives can be known. In *Embodying the Monster* (2002), Margrit Shildrick argues that this very familiarity is the source of the monster's ability to disturb and unsettle. According to Shildrick, the cultural impact of the monstrous figure originates from its simultaneous embodiment of otherness and sameness, difference and recognizability. Through its indeterminate and ambiguous status as "neither wholly self nor wholly other" (Shildrick 2002, 3), it reflects back to us that which we have repressed. This threatens the coherence of the self, reveals our vulnerability and triggers our impulse to expel and reject them in order to re-establish the boundaries threatened by the other. Monsters, Shildrick argues, are never absolute others, they are (twisted) mirrors

of the self, representing not the threat of difference but the threat inherent in the disruption of that difference. Arousing the contradictory responses of "denial and recognition, disgust and empathy, exclusion *and* identification" (2002, 17), they are always already with us. The monster is calling from inside the house.

But not all monsters are equally available for identification. Not all monsters allow themselves to be known or understood. The pages of weird horror are populated by nebulous figures of non-human creatures whose alienness is described as irreducible, whose difference is total. Defying all familiarity, these figures pose an interesting challenge: If, as according to Shildrick, the cultural power of the monstrous comes from our conflicting reactions of denial and recognition, how can we explain the impact of monsters that are, per definition, unrecognizable? How can we make sense of monsters that defy meaning? And what can the creatures of weird fiction bring to perspectives of the monstrous?

A slippery genre to define, weird fiction is an offshoot of the horror genre, feeding on impulses from science fiction, surrealism, the fantastic, and the gothic. H.P. Lovecraft was the first to describe the weird tale as a distinct genre, hailing Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Lord Dunsay as its (then) modern masters. The genre was metastasized by the circle of writers connected to H. P. Lovecraft and the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the 1920s, including, among others, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and William Hope Hodgson (Vandermeer and Vandermeer 2012). It was later fed by a wide range of writers such as Thomas Ligotti, Caitlin Kiernan, and Michel Bernanos, and more recently by authors like China Miéville, Jeff Vandermeer, Kelly Link, and Sofia Samatar, becoming as many-limbed and difficult to define as the monsters that populate it. Eschewing typical horror tropes such as vampires, ghosts, werewolves

or demons, its monsters often remain unnamed and shapeless, described in vague, contradictory, abstract, or composite terms. The tentacle quickly became the “default monstrous limb-type” (Miéville 2009, 512) of the unsettling creatures populating these stories, but they also commonly appear in agglomerations of insectoid, crustacean, vegetal, or mineral shapes. A “literature of cosmic fear” (Lovecraft, 2012, 27), its monsters are not necessarily supernatural: the physics of a black hole are more weird than a vampire (Fisher 2016, 15). H.P. Lovecraft described the desired effect of the weird tale as:

(...) a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. (2012, 28)

Unlike the uncanny, which is the return of something familiar made strange, the horrors of the weird are often entirely new to human eyes. The archetypal weird tale depicts encounters between people and creatures whose difference from us is absolute, phenomena whose irreducible otherness creates a fundamental tear in the webs of meaning we use to make sense of the world (Miéville 2012, 380).

We are living in an increasingly unthinkable world (Thacker 2011) rife with problems that require “reflection on scales beyond the grasp of the human” (Blackman 2014, 1), and human-shaped monsters are ill equipped for the task. In order to become capable of responding to the issues that are obscuring our view of the future, we need to grapple with weird monsters: the limits of anthropocentric perspectives, the subjectivity and agency of the fundamentally non-human, and the otherness of the natural world. Reading weird fiction through posthuman feminist theory, this article seeks to explore what happens when

the weird takes on the unanswerable question of what the world looks like from a perspective outside human subjectivity: How can the gaze of post-/in-/non-human others challenge the anthropocentric humanist worldview?

Considering its origins, weird horror and feminist posthumanism might seem like strange bedfellows: the racism, sexism, and antisemitism of H.P. Lovecraft and several of his contemporaries is well documented and in Lovecraft’s case so deeply embedded in his writings that it is practically inseparable from his horror (Noys and Murphy 2016; Miéville 2009, 511; Houellebecq 2005). Acknowledging its troublesome heritage is necessary to be able to make use of the tools this genre may provide, while remaining mindful of what to pass on and what to leave behind. This article will focus on works by authors who, in the shadow of Lovecraft, have perhaps not received all the attention they deserve. It will follow the meandering path of Algernon Blackwood’s novella *The Willows* (2012, originally published in 1907) down the Danube delta, making brief detours through stories by James Tiptree Jr., Thomas Ligotti, Caitlin Kiernan, Michel Bernaros, and Jeff Vandermeer, hopefully not getting lost in the twists and turns along the way.

## THE ABSOLUTE OTHER

“You think,” [the Swede] said, “it is the spirit of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is – neither. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind.” (Blackwood 2012, 47)

Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951) was a prolific English author, whose writings amounted to a large number of short fic-

tion and novels, as well as several children's books and theatrical plays. Throughout his life he worked as a journalist, radio narrator, and TV presenter, and during World War I he served as an undercover agent for British military intelligence. A forerunner of H. P. Lovecraft, (Vandermeer and Vandermeer 2012, xvii), awe of the natural world is the core sentiment running through his work (Joshi 2017, 203). Although many of his stories are characterized more by wonder, whimsy, and cheerful optimism than terror and fright, he is best known for his supernatural horror, which often approaches themes of nature, wilderness, and the cosmos with a combination of dread and fascination (Joshi 2017). *The Willows*, the story that will guide us on this exploration of the unknown, is Blackwood's most famous story, and has been described as "perhaps a near perfect exposition of Lovecraft's idealized 'true Weird Tale'" (Machin 2013).

In *The Willows* there is more than one kind of nonhuman other at work. One such other is materialized in the landscape: The two protagonists, our nameless narrator and a man referred to only as "the Swede," are traveling down the Danube river delta by canoe, and right from the start the flooding river upon which they are floating is described as a living creature: "Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, (...) holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders" (Blackwood 2012, 28). A persistent presence, the river has its own voice throughout the story, singing, laughing, whispering, muttering, shouting and roaring at the two men. Initially a friendly companion for our protagonists, occasionally playing tricks on them yet still benevolent and good-natured, after they enter the delta the river becomes a more serious presence, claiming their awe and respect. Fluid, vast, and overflowing, the river is a powerful force, changing the surrounding

landscape: "tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape" (ibid, 27; see also Shildrick 2002). Gradually eroding the ground beneath their feet, it threatens to engulf the island upon which our protagonists set camp.

But more than the river, it is the willow bushes blanketing the sandy banks of the area that arouses in the narrator a sense of "strange distress" (Blackwood 2012, 34):

But the willows especially; for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing (...). And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. (Blackwood 2012, 34)

The horror of the willow bushes derives from their strangeness, their remoteness from human life. Our narrator is made to consider the unimaginable perspective of the willows, and realizes that theirs is a world entirely inaccessible to us, with which we have no possibility of communication, a point of view radically different from our mammalian ways. It is worth remarking on the mention of their evolutionary difference, which closely echoes Vilém Flusser's maxim "disgust recapitulates phylogenesis" (2012, 11): the idea that the further away from humans a creature is on the evolutionary tree, the more aversion, disgust, and finally, fear, do we have for it. This mining of evolutionary distance for its monstrous potential is a frequent motive in weird horror (Thacker 2015). The recurring use of tentacular creatures has already been mentioned, but other kinds of evolutionary distant beings abound. For instance, in *The Voice in the Night* by William Hope Hodgson (2014, first published in

1907), the source of the horror is a fungus that grows on, and ultimately absorbs, human beings. And in Caitlin Kiernan's short story *In the Waterworks* (2007), the monster is a composite creature seemingly evolved from prehistoric troglobites, discovered deep inside a mountain during the building of a waterworks tunnel. These stories all rely on evolutionary distance to underscore the difference, the otherness, of the weird monsters. The horror and dread produced by these creatures is made possible by our evolutionary alienation from fungal, insectoid, vegetal, mollusk, and other biologically remote forms of life.

But the unease which is present from the beginning of *The Willows* is not solely a result of the alien strangeness of the willow bushes, it also arises from the sense of aliveness and agency of the surrounding landscape. The river and the willows are not a passive terrain for the two travelers to traverse, nor a resource for them to use, they are active and wily antagonists. The rising river, the howling wind, the rustling willow bushes, the shrinking island, nothing in *The Willows* is still or passive, everything, including the land, is shifting and moving, resisting the travelers' attempts to make sense or use of it. During the night, their equipment is sabotaged, their food stolen, and the willows seem to have moved closer to their tent, acts that are interpreted by the narrator as signs of "personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility" (Blackwood 2012, 38). Throughout the story there is a sense of the active and unpredictable agency of the environment, an agency that defies anthropocentric interpretations.

Portrayals of the natural environment as active, resistant, or outright hostile is another familiar theme in weird fiction. Michel Bernaros' novella *The Other Side of the Mountain* (2012, first published in French in 1967) is another story about two protagonists facing a strange and unknown wilderness, after getting shipwrecked on an

unknown shore. Trying to make it to the other side of the mountain, they struggle through a landscape teeming with alien, bewildering, and carnivorous plant life. And more recently, the *The Southern Reach* trilogy by Jeff Vandermeer (2014) centers around a zone of strange, seemingly 'too alive' nature, a landscape whose agency cannot be ignored or contained. In these stories the fear of the agency of the natural environment, or 'ecophobia' (Estok 2009), provides fertile soil for the imagination of monstrous landscapes.

Yet beyond the river and the willows, the story contains another other, of a more nebulous and amorphous kind: waking up in the middle of the night, the narrator crawls out of the tent and sees a mass of tentacular, "nude, fluid shapes" (Blackwood 2012, 36) writhing in a column toward the sky, shifting and melting into each other. Faceless and featureless, these utterly alien creatures inspire in them both the combined feelings of awe and horror. Later, when the wind abates, they hear a sound seemingly coming from every direction at once, including from within themselves, "a non-human sound, [...] a sound outside humanity" (ibid., 45). Neither gods nor natural elements, it is clear that the creatures, shapeless and nameless, are not a spectre from the past, they are entirely new to human senses. Originating from beyond the limits of human experience, they refuse any identification. They are the absolute other, and the protagonists have come to their attention.

## DECENTERING THE HUMAN

"Hush!" [the Swede] whispered, holding up his hand. "Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them by name. To name is to reveal; it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us." (Blackwood 2012, 47)

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, being confronted with the objectifying gaze of the other is the source of our awareness of ourselves as subjects (1993, 256). This experience is unnerving, because it forces us to perceive ourselves as an object in the vision of the other. The immediate effect of this realization is the experience of vulnerability, since the other's look forces us to see ourselves as "fixed in the midst of the world, as in danger, as irremediable" (Sartre 1993, 267). Being watched by the other is a source of fear, as it threatens to destabilize our sense of self. And all this just by being seen by a fellow human! So what, then, are the consequences of being seen by the absolute other? When we are seen by the non-human other, what does it see?

In *The Willows*, the attention of the others is a constant, imposing, threatening presence. It is first manifested in the imagined attention directed toward them by the surrounding willow bushes, which are described as pressing, crowding, and "watching, waiting, listening" (Blackwood 2012, 31). But the true danger is the attention of the otherworldly creatures hidden beyond the willows. Stranded on a shrinking island, the two men have become aware of the presence of the absolute others, and scramble to avoid getting caught. It becomes essential not to name them, not to talk about them, not to think about them. (Yet they do nothing but think about and talk about them.) Their fate, if they get caught, or give in, is described as worse than death: "a radical transformation, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution" (Blackwood 2012, 46). So what is at stake in this encounter with the absolute other is the transformation and/or loss of self. How does this loss of self come to be? What is it about the attention of the absolute other that carries this potential?

This question leads us to a central paradox in *The Willows*: It juxtaposes the sense of the intent attention of the others, combined with the profound sense of their in-

difference. The effect of this paradox is the key to the horror of the tale: If we are made aware of the gaze of the absolute other, we are forced to consider a perspective from which the world as we know it, all of human knowledge and experience, is peripheral or irrelevant. In the attention of the absolute other we are confronted with our own insignificance. This sense of human insignificance is sometimes made explicit, as when the nameless Swede tells his travelling companion that "Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our insignificance perhaps may save us." (Blackwood 2012, 46) but it is also achieved indirectly through the effects of what I call the horror of scale. The awe-inspiring display of the strength and size of the river, the vast number of the willows, the constant wind invoking "the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space" (Blackwood 2012, 33), all the elements of the landscape conspire together to make human beings seem small and inconsequential.

Another example of the use of this device to great effect is the short story *A Momentary Taste of Being* (2014) published under Alice Sheldon's pseudonym James Tiptree jr. The story takes place on a spaceship carrying an alien organism, a scientific sample from another planet, attached to the ship in an external capsule. The staff on the spaceship soon find themselves inexplicably haunted by the organism, until they decide to take it onboard the ship. Then, one by one, they are drawn to it, leave something behind, and come back changed, lesser, emptied. The narrator is the only one who comes to realize what has happened: the final revelation of the story is that the organism is the alien equivalent of an oocyte, for which people are the alien equivalent of sperm cells, fertilizing the egg with the contents of their minds. The story has the profoundly weird effect of making one consider the vastness of space both the micro and macro levels, as well as being an

effective antidote to certain anthropocentric notions.

In *The Willows* the impression of human insignificance is intensified by the notion that the protagonist and his companion have stumbled into an area in which they do not belong: “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, 2012, 31). There is a sense that the alien presence in this landscape is not the otherworldly creatures from beyond, and definitely not the native willows, but rather the humans. The protagonist experiences himself as an intruder, an invader in a foreign land. It becomes increasingly clear to him that they have no right to be there: “the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate” (ibid., 33).

One interpretation of this description of the two men as invaders in a strange and hostile land is to read it as a manifestation of colonial anxieties, as James Machin points out in his article on Algernon Blackwood in the *Weird Fiction Review* (2013). It is also possible to read it as an expression of the aforementioned ecophobia, or what Bruno Latour calls our “terror of trespassing on Nature” (2011, 24), the shadow side of the modern narrative of human emancipation from nature, the fear of the erosion of our control over and separation from our natural environment. Without denying that both of these anxieties are present in *The Willows*, I would like to suggest a third interpretation: that the men are experiencing the sudden collapse of the systems of meaning from which such a thing as ‘a right’ originates. How can we speak about a world to which humans have no right, when the concept of ‘having a right to something’ originates in human systems of meaning and language? The radical, absolute otherness of the landscape, the willows, and finally the intrusive

gaze of the otherworldly creatures, offset and disintegrate the human framework of meaning. The two men’s desperate attempts to cling to reason and construct explanations of their experiences are futile, or maybe even outright unhelpful: At one point when the protagonist tries to attribute a rational explanation to the ongoing events, the Swede retorts: “This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you’re forced to meet it” (Blackwood 2012, 41). The absolute others do not mean anything except for the lack of, or failure of, meaning itself; they are the breakdown of the language that sets us at the center. The vision that Blackwood invokes in *The Willows* is that of a universe that is not our own. It is not there for us. It does not conform to our categories, the sense it makes is not ours, it bends to entirely other wills. It is not an anthropocentric but, to borrow a term from China Miéville (2008, 112), an anthropoperipheral universe. This decentering of the human is the final and dizzying consequence of the meeting with the absolute other.

In ‘Come, so that I may Chase you Away!’ *On Ghost Hunts and Posthuman Ethics*, Line Henriksen explores the topic of companionship with and responsibility for the non-human through the image of the spectre using examples from ‘creepypasta’, short horror stories that are shared on the internet. Invoking Haraway, she explores the potential of a posthuman “ethics of respons(e)ability” (2014, 45) in which the mutually directed attention of the gaze opens up a “space of not-knowingness” (ibid., 46) between irreducibly different but still situated and mutually entangled subjects. She argues that the hunt for the spectre as it is expressed in creepypasta reveals a world that is “far more active, far more cunning and witty than expected, and that engaging with it from an anthropocentric point of view is nothing short of dangerous” (ibid., 44). *The Willows* opens a similar space of not-knowingness, this time

between humans and the natural world of which, ultimately, we are a part. The persistent drawn-out engagement with the unknowability of other life-forms and the natural world, creates an opportunity to question what would become of the human subject if it was no longer able to place itself at the center of its universe, and no longer imagined to be separate from its others. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway asks “what happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism (...) become unthinkable: not available to think with” (2016, 30). This is the question that holds the two men (and I do not think that it is entirely inconsequential that they are two men) in *The Willows* suspended in its grip. The organizing categories that gave them the ability to see themselves as separate from and in the center of the world are crumbling. In so doing, the story opens up a space for the reader to imaginatively challenge their own and humans’ monopoly as the sole originator of meaning, and the “givenness” of their position at the center the universe. Even if such attempts are doomed to collapse from our inability to experience the world unmediated by human subjectivity, failure itself can be enlightening. Haraway has argued for situated knowledges, partial perspectives, and a view from a body, rather than “the view from nowhere” (1988, 589) of universal knowledge claims. By grasping for the edges of reason, imagining the outside of meaning, and falling short, we become aware of our own limits: the embodied, situated, and specific nature of our own subjectivity. This is a first step toward making respectful contact with other worlds: realizing the limits of our own.

## TOWARDS OTHER ETHICS

[I]t may well be the inhuman, the insensible, the irrational, the unfathomable, and the in-

calculable that will help us face the depths of what responsibility entails. A cacophony of whispered screams, gasps, and cries, an infinite multitude of indeterminate beings diffracted through different spacetimes, the nothingness, is always already within us, or rather, it lives through us. We cannot shut it out, we cannot control it. We cannot block out the irrationality, the perversity, the madness we fear, in the hopes of a more orderly world. But this does not mitigate our responsibility. On the contrary, it is what makes it possible. (Barad 2017, 164).

In recent years, the importance of grappling with experiences beyond the scale of the human has received renewed urgency and relevance. The time scale and scope of climate change, the multitude of factors involved in species extinction, the microscopic world of toxins and microbes, the massive amounts of waste, and more generally, the sum of human interventions that has given rise to the term “anthropocene” to describe or current geological era, all occur on scales so remote from ordinary human experience that people have difficulty grasping them (Neimanis et al. 2015). “Massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 2013, 1), these entities, which Timothy Morton calls ‘hyperobjects’ (Morton 2013) are as amorphous, vast, and intangible as any of the monsters that can be found in weird fiction.

The ethical turn in posthumanism is about the attempt to recognize the other (Åsberg 2013, 8) and to become responsible to them, that is to say, capable of response (Barad 2012). But how can we develop this capability when the other that needs to be recognized is on a scale in time and space that is unfathomable to us? What do we have to become, to be able to recognize and meaningfully engage with entities that are beyond our grasp and understanding? A clue to the answer to this question can be found in the peculiarities of the ex-



perience of awe, one of the core sentiments of weird fiction, and the main recurring theme throughout Blackwood's sprawling authorship (S.T. Joshi 2017). Based on an interdisciplinary literature review, Keltner and Hait (2003, 297) found that the two core elements of experiences of awe are 'vastness' and 'a need for accommodation'. The sense of vastness can stem from an impression of physical scale that differs radically from one's ordinary frame of reference, but it can also be brought forth by displays of far-reaching or massive power, abstract sizes such as the mathematical concept of infinity, experiences of overwhelming beauty and the sublime, and even by epiphanic experiences from realizing "the breadth and scope of a grand theory" (ibid., 310).

The second main feature of experiences of awe is that they cannot be assimilated within one's current knowledge and mental structures, requiring a process of mental accommodation often accompanied by feelings of confusion, obscurity, or wonder. This need for accommodation may or may not be satisfied, and Keltner and Hait (ibid.) posits that whether or not one manages to reach a new understanding may constitute the difference between terrifying and enlightening experiences of awe. They further argue that when awe culminates in understanding, it can have profoundly transformative effects, reorienting people's lives, values, and goals.

This is corroborated by research from the interdisciplinary *Space, Science, and Spirituality* project which combines philosophy, neuroscience, and the humanities in a phenomenological study of awe and wonder based on the reports written by astronauts in orbit around the earth, as well as experiments of simulated space flight. Descriptions of awe, wonder, and overwhelm in response to the view of earth from space are recurrent themes in diaries written by astronauts, and often include shifts in perspective similar to those produced by weird

fiction, such as a sense of relative insignificance compared to the vastness of the universe (Gallagher et al. 2014). This shift in perspective is often followed by a moral shift: astronauts describe being struck by the vulnerability, interconnectedness, and unity of the earth, and some report gaining an increased sense of responsibility toward other people and other lifeforms on earth. This moral shift has also been observed following experiences of simulated space flight (Gallagher et al. 2014; Reinerman-Jones et al. 2013).

In *The Willows*, Blackwood brings the full register of awe into play. Descriptions of great physical scale, bewildering beauty, and immense power, all work together to form the impression of vastness. The alien aliveness of the willows, the undeniable agency of the landscape, and the bewildering encounter with the absolute others, strains the mental structures of the two protagonists, leading to a moment of crisis. They are faced with the possibility of having to give up their individualist humanist subjectivity and allow themselves to be transformed, radically altered, in the meeting with the other, a prospect they both find to be unthinkably terrifying. Their inability (or unwillingness?) to accommodate this challenge to their anthropocentric worldview, is what stains their awe with horror.

Their only defense is their now crumbling anthropocentrism. At one point our narrator glances at a hole in his shoe, and remembers the shoe-shop in London where he bought them, which leads him into a chain of association of thought of quotidian objects: "roast beef, and ale, motorcars, policemen, brass bands and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility" (Blackwood, 2004). This immediately grants him some relief. As long as they can think about mundane, practical, human-centered matters, they remain safe. But the environment is conspiring against them, and their mental defenses

cannot long withstand the force of the elements. Twice, once each, they are close to succumbing. Upon waking up in the middle of the night, our narrator crawls out of the tent and is struck by overwhelming awe at the sight of the otherworldly creatures, feeling the need to give in and worship them. And at a later point the Swede, our narrator's companion, is discovered wading into the river talking about "going inside to Them" and "taking the way of the water and the wind" (Blackwood 2012, 51).

In the end they are saved, not by any effort of their own, but by the means of a human sacrifice, or more precisely, a replacement victim: the death of a stranger whose corpse they discover on the banks of the island. Initially, the concept of the sacrifice seems almost out of place with the logic of the story: Why would these otherworldly creatures care about a human sacrifice? If these creatures have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, how would such an act have meaning to them? It does, however, have meaning to the humans. By means of the concept of a human sacrifice, the death of a fellow man, man is reinstated as the center of meaning, and the two travelers are given the chance to look away from the senseless idea of their own insignificance. After being face to non-face with the unthinkable, they are allowed to back away, and the invasion of inhuman agency and intent recedes below their horizon. They no longer need to confront the edges of reason, the imposing presence of the absolute other. By recentering the figure of the human, the dead man lets the protagonists escape the gaze of the others, or is it the other way around: they are able to look away, the others slip out of their attention.

Their narrow escape seem to foreclose any promise of transformation for our protagonists. It is easy to imagine that they continue with their travels, once again confident in their ability to make sense of the universe. The true horror of the story is of

course that the 'sacrifice' did not make the terrifying others disappear, it merely allows our protagonists to redirect their attention, to close the doors of perception and try to forget, in order to continue their lives with their anthropocentric worldview intact. In this way the story positions the absolute others as a threatening attack on meaning, and anthropocentrism is shown as our only (admittedly fragile) defense against senselessness. The story can lend itself to a nihilist reading, in which all human efforts of meaning and understanding are delusions to which we desperately cling because we are incapable of existing in the "shivering void" (Noys and Murphy 2016, 117) of the universe, and unable to contemplate our own insignificance or irrelevance.

This nihilist undercurrent is not uncommon in weird fiction, and is perhaps most purely expressed in some of the stories by Thomas Ligotti, such as *The Shadow*, *The Darkness* (2008), in which the monstrous presence is not a creature of any kind, but rather a darkness inherent in all things, a blackness behind all of existence for which words and meanings only serve as a cover-up. While leaning heavily toward nihilism, the story also allows for a reading that decenters the human and undermines anthropocentric systems of meaning, especially if read along with Barad's words on "[t]he infinite touch of nothingness threaded through all being" (2017, 161) and our "inseparability from the void" (ibid, 161). This poses a considerable challenge to post-human theory: How can we decenter the human without abandoning the basis for meaning, value, and knowledge? After decentering the human subject, what fills the vacuum it left behind?

One guide through this quandary is the posthumanist performative approach proposed by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). Taking on the strangeness and agency of matter, she questions the representationalist split between

matter and meaning, nature and culture. To Barad, thinking and meaning-making are material processes, “we are part of that nature which we seek to understand” (Barad 2007, 352). Meaning is performed intra-actively in and by matter, we are the universe making sense of itself. As a result, the other is no longer a being external to and separate from the subject, but rather an inherent feature of materiality itself, as “matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with, the other” (Barad 2007, 393). This is the source of the monstrosity of the absolute others in *The Willows*: the erosion of the boundary between human agency and passive matter. Matter has become permeated with agency, from which human agency becomes inseparable.

A source of terror for our protagonists, for the reader this challenge raised by the absolute others is a chance to consider the second dizzying consequence of the decentering of the human in this story: if there is something in the natural world that is entirely unrecognizable and unknowable, and both it and they are of the world, it would be a short leap for the two men to realize that their bodies, as well, are infected by the same impenetrable strangeness, the same unknowable agency. By acknowledging their mutual and inseparable entanglement with the absolute otherness of the world, the distinction between human and non-human, subject and other, and man and nature, would collapse. They would be sucked into the world of the others, and the otherness of matter, its difference and indeterminacy, would rush into them.

To loop back to Shildrick, once again the horror is not in the difference between the two men and the absolute others, but in the erosion of that difference, as the two men would have to realize that they are “infinitely and infinitesimally shot through with alterity” (Barad 2017, 161). This is the radical transformation the two men were trying to avoid at all costs. This realization, had they pursued it, would have

the potential to lead them to an ethical shift. It would no longer be possible to think of ethics as being about the proper response to an external other. Instead, ethics would need to involve the recognition of responsibility and accountability in mutual entanglements of matter (Barad 2012).

In *The Willows* the transformative potential of this meeting is lost by the two men’s resolve to uphold the separation between themselves and the others. But the reader does not have to follow their example. The extended consideration of something genuinely other than us, which does not allow itself to be integrated into an anthropocentric worldview, is an opportunity to contemplate the agency of the non-human, and the inseparability of the human and its others, thus taking the first step towards being able to make contact with, and be responsible to, other worlds: realizing that we are always already involved in and entangled with them. Once again, the monstrous call is coming from inside the house. We are back where we started, but hopefully we are not the same. Weird fiction like *The Willows* brings new, non-human creatures to the theory about monsters and the monstrous, creatures which put us face to non-face with the unspeakable and unthinkable unknown. These creatures provide both challenges and tools with which to think about the non/posthuman. If we allow it, an encounter with the weird monster is an opportunity to confront issues that are beyond the grasp of the human – the agency of nature, evolutionary alienation, the anthropoperipheral universe, the horror of scale, the strangeness of matter – and let them transform our ideas about who and what we are.

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