



Chambers of Consciousness and Houses of Life: Nietzschean Hermeneutics in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*

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Abstract

This article provides a comparative study of the underlying cognitive structures laid out in Arthur Machen’s decadent novella *The Great God Pan* (1894) and Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (1873). It scrutinizes the images of the “chamber of consciousness” and “the house of life”, deployed by the German philosopher and the Welsh author respectively, and explores how the use and the stylistic qualities of both images affect and determine the overall conception of reality exposed in each work. This analysis helps identify Nietzschean undertones in Machen’s novella, which, in turn, allows an interpretation of *The Great God Pan* through the lens of Nietzsche’s discourses on cognition and reality. The reading resulting from the analysis puts forward two conclusions. Firstly, Nietzsche’s concept of “Dionysian wisdom” brings to light and informs a specific and yet unexplored source of horror in Machen’s novella, i.e., the feeling of revulsion developed by Helen Vaughn’s victims after they experience Dionysian rapture. Secondly, the analysis of the concepts of reality implied in Nietzsche’s and Machen’s imagery contributes an argument for the idea of *reality as becoming* in the context of Machen’s novella.

Keywords Machen · Nietzsche · *Fin-de-siècle* · Pan · Dionysian wisdom · Becoming

Introduction

The critical appeal of Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894) has risen significantly since the onset of the twenty-first century—and most notably in the last decade—in the wake of the “revival of interest in the *fin-de-siècle* decadence” (Jackson, 2013, p. 125). Since the early noughties, Machen’s novella has elicited a wide

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range of critical responses, most of them negotiating its place in the canon of decadent literature. Kimberley Jackson (2013), for instance, discusses the story of Helen Vaughn's mysterious exploits and horrors in the larger context of Machen's approach to "degeneration" (a decadent topic in its own right). Gabriel Lovatt (2016) offers a cogent argument about the novella delving in the consequences of "modern embodied thought" (2016, p. 21), and upholds that the text upends Cartesian dualism in order to "investigate embodied being" (2016, p. 20), a (radically) decadent viewpoint on the negotiation between mind and body. Samantha Morse (2018) explores modes and ideas of sexual consent and female submission in the novella, as she probes the "cultural misgivings associated with jurisprudence and the law" (2018, p. 484) that the novella lays out. Aaron Worth, other than preparing a recent critical edition (2021), has construed the text as a response to the anxiety elicited by the discovery of "deep time" (2012, *passim*), "the depths and abysses of temporality" beyond the timespan of history and "its attendant" misgivings "of reverse evolution and atavistic retrogression" (Worth, 2012, p. 216). Readings concerned with religion, spiritual awakening and/or the occult, whether in the context of decadence or elsewhere, abound (Boyiopoulos, 2009; Newell, 2020; Pasi, 2007) as do readings which incorporate *The Great God Pan* into broader discussions of Machen's poetics, cognition, and ontology overall (Alder, 2020; Mantrant, 2014; McCann, 2014; Reiter, 2019; Valentová, 2017).

It is in the context of the relationship between the novella and Machen's general conception of reality in which there seems to be an intriguing point of contention. For some critics (Pasi, 2007; Boyiopoulos 2009; Valentová, 2017; Alder, 2020; Newell, 2020) *The Great God Pan* showcases an attempt to reveal "the real world behind the shadows, a sense of the numinous" (Newell, 2020, p. 69) or "the spiritual reality that lies beyond our senses" (Pasi, 2007, p. 69). These readings directly connect *The Great God Pan* with Machen's "ecstatic mysticism of his twentieth century work" (Reiter, 2019, p. 264) as well as with his general theory on art and literature as ecstasy (Machen, 1926, p. 11). Critics who interpret *Pan* thus tend to envisage "the supernatural elements" in Machen's novella "as an out-working of the same belief in the transcendent that so readily characterizes his later work (fictional or otherwise)" (Reiter, 2019, p. 266). Yet this interpretation is problematic at best, and, as other commentators uphold, *Pan* "and other works from the first phase of Machen's mature writing" do not correspond to the "work of a Christian author" or a mystic "with a belief system buttressed by an eschatological hope, but rather of a sceptic¹ who views the unknown with horror instead

¹ I agree with Geoffrey Reiter in that Machen's scepticism in the early to mid 1890s "is a highly significant fact that few scholars have sufficiently recognized" (2019, p. 268). Yet the reason *The Great God Pan* "fits quite poorly" in Machen's general occulture, aesthetics and/or poetics, particularly as they appear in Machen's literary "manifesto" *Hieroglyphics* (2019, p. 266), lies in the fact that "at the time" Machen "wrote 'The Great God Pan' and *The Three Impostors*, he was a *sceptic*". And "despite his interest in occult subjects and his religious upbringing, at the beginning of the fin de siècle Machen was, for all intents and purposes, an *agnostic*, at least in regard to mysticism and the supernatural" (2019, p. 268; emphasis added). In view of this, *The Great God Pan* can be construed, metafictionally, as a troublesome experiment, one devised to expose the world of spirit, but which rather reveals the lack thereof (Reiter 2019, p. 271). For a thorough analysis of the many and critical ways in which *Pan* deviates from Machen's poetics of ecstasy, see Reiter (2019, pp. 265–267).

of wonder” (Reiter, 2019, p. 267). In that strain, critics like Ferguson (2002), Jackson (2013), Lovatt (2016) or Reiter (2019) seem to ascribe to a *bona fide* decadent reading of the text, one that reveals the “aesthetic expression of perception and cognition derived from embodied experience”, an organic conception of mind and body that rejects the soul and body divide (Lovatt, 2016, p. 40). Even Adrian Eckersley, in his oft quoted essay on Machen (1992) points in the same direction when he upholds that “Machen was one of the first writers to create a sense of horror with roots more in biology than in spirituality” (1992, p. 285). The different stances in the debate can be summarized thus:

Some believe that the book is at its heart a meditation born out of late Victorian anxieties about atheistic materialism and its implications for the human soul (*or lack thereof*). Others maintain that “The Great God Pan” affirms the existence of a supernatural world beyond the veil of our ordinary sensory experience, much as his later writings do, even if the emphasis here is on numinous terror rather than transcendent ecstasy. (Reiter, 2019, p. 264; emphasis added)

Whereas one trend of reading focuses on spiritual notions and senses of the “numinous”, the other dwells largely on biology, the body, and its contingent materiality, whether it is read as a manifestation of a deeper, yet equally horrific reality, or simply as the space wherein cognizance as engagement with said reality occurs. In sum, these two folds contend on the way the novella envisages what the “real” is: whether a numen, a divinity, a spirit or a “being”, as it were, or something akin to a materialistic conception of the world, to a reality conceived as a contingent and chaotic “becoming”. In any case, as Kimberley Jackson points out, the debate is organic to Machen’s literature in the 1890s, since in “Machen’s supernatural stories, the scientific and the supernatural or occult battle it out for which discourse more closely or adequately represents reality and humanity” (2013, p. 126).

To shed light on this debate I will also grapple with another issue that, oddly enough, critics have overlooked consistently in the past, viz, the possible alignments between the worldview and aesthetics encoded in *The Great God Pan*, on the one hand, and those of Friedrich Nietzsche on the other. Several authors have hinted at affinities between Machen and Nietzsche (Pasi, 2007, p. 69; Boyiopoulos, 2009, p. 363; Worth, 2012, p. 225; Jackson, 2013, p. 135), albeit contingently and without following through. Jackson, for instance, affirms in an endnote that both Machen and Nietzsche “utilize” similar imagery (in *The Great God Pan* and *The Birth of Tragedy* respectively), as well as that both authors “sought to illuminate the productive side of decadence” (2013, p. 135). Others, like Sophie Mantrant (2014), have scrutinized the Dionysian element in Machen’s *oeuvre*, but in connection to Walter Pater, whose overall “treatment of Dionysus”, Patrick Bridgwater informs, is fundamentally “different from Nietzsche’s” (1999, p. 236). The affinities between Machen and Nietzsche, in sum, remain untouched yet.

To start bringing these authors together, this article offers a comparative study that investigates the underlying cognitive structures at work in *The Great God*

Pan, which are not dissimilar to the cognitive process Nietzsche lays out in his essays *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT, 1872) and “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (TL, 1873). The article starts by examining two specific images deployed by Nietzsche and Machen: “the chamber” and “the house of life” as metaphors for “consciousness” and “the body” respectively. Then it explores how the use and the stylistic qualities of said images affect and determine the overall conception of reality exposed in each work. This analysis draws, firstly, a significant parallel between both authors, by virtue of which Nietzsche’s concept of “Dionysian wisdom” brings to light and informs a specific and yet unexplored source of horror in Machen’s novella, i.e., the feeling of revulsion developed by Helen Vaughn’s victims after they experience Dionysian rapture. Secondly, the analysis of the concepts of reality implied in Nietzsche’s and Machen’s imagery contributes an argument for the idea of *reality as becoming* in the context of Machen’s novella.

The article does not assume there is a direct influence between Nietzsche and Machen, nor does it purport to establish one.² Instead, it presents a comparative study to decode Machen’s novella in the light of the elective affinities it shares with Nietzsche. Accordingly, I use the discourse of the philosopher as a hermeneutical key, properly framed in the context of the debate on “being” and “becoming”. The Nietzschean interpretation of the commonalities shared by Nietzsche and Machen’s *Pan* allows me to probe into the ambiguities and self-contradictions the novella showcases. Thus, I intend to offer novel and alternative readings to such ambiguities and contradictions. All in all, I explore the ontology *The Great God Pan* lays out as a discourse that both lies neighbour to and slices across Nietzsche’s philosophy. This cross-reading serves me to conclude that the ultimate worldview in *Pan* is that of a materialistic, non-spiritual, thus horrific reality, in agreement with a novella devised from a sceptic point of view on mysticism (Reiter, 2019, p. 268).

Nietzsche’s “Chamber of Consciousness”: Apollonian Individuation

Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” offers a thorough critique of language, epistemology, and metaphysical truth. The essay, written in 1873, but not published until much later (1896), is cognate with *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in that both texts explore life and its representation from a fundamental dualist perspective. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche envisages the experience of the world in terms of aesthetics. In “On Truth and Lying”, conversely, the philosopher explores the epistemological side of such dualist perspective and grapples with issues of

² Most likely, there is none. Nietzsche’s direct influence on fin de siècle British intelligentsia does not begin, arguably, until 1896, when Bernard Shaw published his review of Thomas Common’s translation of Nietzsche’s *Der Fall Wagner* (*The Wagner Case*, 1888) in *The Saturday Review* (11 April 1896) (Valls Oyarzun 2017, p. 208). Before then, only a handful of German-speaking English authors, artists and thinkers may have been privileged enough to read one of the few copies of Nietzsche’s books in circulation. By 1886, Safranski notes, these copies amounted to hardly five hundred copies altogether, circulation not improving significantly in later years (Safranski 2002, p. 283–284). For a brief history of the reception of Nietzsche’s thought in Britain, see Valls Oyarzun (2017, pp. 203–221).

cognition and value. Summarily, the first part of “On Truth and Lying” asserts the impossibility of knowledge outside the space of consciousness, rendering said consciousness as the site of *episteme*. This idea limits the only possible knowledge to an elaborate, complex, and multi-layered web of misleading metaphors within consciousness. “Knowledge” summarizes Rüdiger Safranski, “becomes” thus “self-referential and registers its own particular autism” (2002, p. 174). Truth as the primary object of knowledge proves then to be elusive, for it cannot leap outside the sphere of language (the web of interconnected metaphors) and/or consciousness, and is critically determined by both:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins. (TL, p. 146)

This elaborate, self-referential—indeed solipsistic—web of constructs and “human relations” that ultimately inform subjectivity are the product of “consciousness”. Therefore, the term will be used, from here on and for the sake of the argument, to designate subjectivity and self-awareness overall. Consciousness fulfils two functions: one social and one individual. Socially, consciousness sets up “a normatively binding order” among individual subjects (Emden, 2019, p. 279). Individually, it prevents the subject “to be swept away” and “lose himself” amidst “fearful powers” (TL, p. 150). “The arrogance inherent in cognition and feeling” that Nietzsche upholds “casts a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of human beings” (TL, p. 142). This fog, in turn, effectively isolates individuals and prevents them from collapsing in front of the “primordial One” or “primordial Unity” (“*das Ur-Eine*”), i.e., “reality” as Nietzsche envisages it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT, *passim*). Both functions, social and individual, are intertwined, up to a point in which the social level of consciousness can be construed as a development of the individual role. Nietzsche clarifies the issue better in *The Gay Science* (1882). The philosopher expounds consciousness therein as a product of the social trait of the human animal (GS, p. 213) and, consequently, re-locates its origin in the human compulsion to articulate social structures “under the pressure of the need to communicate” (GS, p. 212). Consciousness, to all intents and purposes, bespeaks a common space which ultimately gives rise to identity, society and culture. And because these concepts are constructed in the shared space of consciousness, they are all subject to “the normatively binding order” constituted organically from the delusion of knowledge and truth. Further and accordingly, identity, society and culture serve, too, with Safranski, as “a protective device against the void” (2002, p. 131).

Consciousness constitutes a set of illusionary tools—metaphors, concepts, knowledge, value, identity, and culture—that helps protect the individual (TL, p. 142) from two existential issues, interacting. On the one hand, consciousness segregates the human animal from the “monstrous” [*ungeheuer*] reality (BT, p. 88)

or “Primordial One”—pending the phrase “Dionysian world” to encode reality as becoming. On the other hand, the segregation prompts the “spell of individuation” (BT, pp. 48, 53, 76), as consciousness makes the individual aware of and subject to its own estrangement. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, consciousness is largely represented by the Apollonian principle of tragedy. As the “god of *individuation*, order, restraint, imagistic (plastic) art,” and “the logos”, Apollo is also the god of “*consciousness* and lucidity” (Del Caro, 2013, p. 109). The Apollonian mask or veil contains and restrains the “pro-nature properties of Dionysus, god of wine, chaos, music, tragedy, sexuality, the unconscious, superabundance, resurrection, and fertility” (Del Caro, 2013, p. 109). The constraint “in intellectual-historical terms”, Del Caro upholds, is so profound that it “[comes] to stand” for culture’s “*agon*” with Nature (2013, p. 109).

Nietzsche scrutinizes said “*agon*” both in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in “On Truth and Lying”. The main metaphor the philosopher devises to hypothesize Apollonian consciousness in *The Birth* is the “veil” (BT, p. 21), “the veil of maya” (BT, pp. 18, 21) or the “mask” (BT, pp. 51, 55). In “On Truth and Lying”, conversely, the metaphor the philosopher puts forward to envisage the existential isolation produced by the Apollonian mask is the locked-up “chamber of consciousness”, thus,

Nature has thrown away the key, and woe betide fateful curiosity should it ever succeed in peering through a crack in the chamber of consciousness [*Bewußtseinszimmer*], out and down into the depths, and thus gain an intimation of the fact that humanity, in the indifference of its ignorance, rests on the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable, the murderous—clinging in dreams, as it were, to the back of a tiger (TL, pp. 142–143).

On the surface, “consciousness” encloses the individual within a simulacrum of reality—the “chamber”—one that ostensibly evinces the Cartesian dualist structure of a mind/soul ontologically detached from body/matter. *Prima facie*, then, consciousness would be a form of spiritual reality far removed from the physicality of the body. Yet Nietzsche’s argument is fundamentally materialistic and thereby privileges the body as pre-requisite for cognizance, self-awareness, and subjectivity. It is in fact the “clever animal” who invents “cognition” as an extension of itself (TL, p. 141). Consciousness coheres by acknowledging the organic, living body as the site wherein to build the “chamber”, as it were. The “chamber of consciousness” is an organic extension evolved from and physically determined by the body. It is also—Nietzsche intimates—the site wherein life, through the body, becomes aware of itself (TL, p. 149).

The materiality evinced in the foundation of consciousness suggests that any interaction between the human animal and reality can only occur as unconscious physical engagement. The “peering through [the] crack of the chamber” into “the back of the tiger” (TL, pp. 142–143) points to a type of “supplementary” “[knowledge] that goes beyond” the “boundaries” of consciousness and even as far as to “[sensing said] boundaries” (Safranski, 2002, p. 131). Nietzsche theorizes this supplementary knowledge as “Dionysian wisdom” (BT, *passim*), a concept that, in essence, captures the ecstatic experience of the Dionysian principle in tragedy (characterized by overflow, excess, music *qua* harmony and melody, lyric poetry, and

the like). Dionysian wisdom comes about through intoxication [*Rausch*], the point of which is “to dissolve our individuality and provide a sense of oneness with the rest of existence” (Came, 2013, p. 214), but not with purported transcendent entities behind said existence.

“Dionysian wisdom” shows three traits that cannot be overlooked. First off, as has already been suggested, it involves an unconscious engagement with reality. Secondly, the Dionysian rapture defies subjective representation and embodies instead “Nature [expressing] itself with its highest energy” (DW, pp. 122–123). This expression implies Nature affirms itself by conversely dissolving the culture/nature divide. In the image of the “chamber”, consciousness is seemingly set aside, or rather, above Nature, but as Nietzsche intimates in the “Dionysian Worldview”, this division is apparent only conceptually, which means it is built-in into conscious knowledge. The conscious memory of Dionysian wisdom reveals that the *principium individuationis*, that is, the boundaries of individuality in material entities such as the human animal, are simply a “state” of the forces that comprise nature (DW, p. 123). Lastly, once “Dionysian wisdom” passes off and “consciousness [resumes] its domination over thinking and experience, ‘disgust’ comes over the disillusioned Dionysian”. This disgust “can” and does “escalate to the point of horror” (Safranski, 2002, p. 79) in the face of “what is terrible or absurd in existence”, which is now everywhere, “wherever [the subject] looks” (BT, p. 40). Said horror is the appalling consequence that derives from the “fateful” Dionysian “curiosity”, that is, from peering through the “crack in the chamber of consciousness” (TL, p. 142). In fine, the subject engages with reality through Dionysian wisdom, by dissolving the limits of subjectivity in said reality. Dionysian wisdom thus reveals the common material ground consciousness and culture share with Nature. It is the overall experience of reality, the yawn of “the gulf of oblivion” that “separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience” (BT, p. 40). Once consciousness sets back in, the memory and representation of Dionysian intoxication lead to a nauseous feeling of revulsion and horror.

Machen’s “House of Life”: Body and Consciousness

In *The Great God Pan*, Arthur Machen sets out to probe larger metaphorical dwellings than the one Nietzsche hypostatizes as the “chamber of consciousness”. For Machen, the body is not a chamber, but a whole house, “the house of life” to be precise (2021, p. 53). At first glance, the metaphor channels St. Paul’s conception of the body as the material and contingent dwelling of Divinity, the “tabernacle” of the spirit (Carroll and Prickett, 2010, p. 1196; 2 Cor. 5:1). Indeed, the imagery Machen deploys is congruent with the tropes St. Paul resorts to, the house and the clothing, or, in Machen’s positively classical twist, “the veil” (2021, p. 2, *passim*), albeit with different results, since *The Great God Pan* ultimately subverts the “classic neo-Platonist view of reality” (Luckhurst 2005, p. 279) conveyed by said imagery.

The first section of *The Great God Pan* relates the disturbing experiment of Dr. Raymond, a stock mad scientist of the same breed as Dr. Frankenstein (Valentová, 2017, p. 216), Dr. Jekyll (Alder, 2020, p. 100) or Dr. Moreau (Lovatt, 2016, p.

22). Raymond carries out a surgical procedure to remove a “group of nerve-cells” from the brain of his protégé—and likely lover—Mary (Machen, 2021, p. 4). The ultimate purpose of the procedure—carried out under the scrutiny of Raymond’s friend, Clarke—is to allow Mary to “[see] the Great God Pan” or, as per Raymond’s hypothesis, to prompt “a spirit [...] gaze on a spirit world”, to lift “the veil” beyond which the real world lies (Machen, 2021, p. 2). As Eva Valentová points out, “the veil” recurs constantly in Machen’s *oeuvre* to inform his “neo-Platonic view of the universe, in which the perishable material world is just a reflection, a shadow”, or a medium “of the ineffable reality” (2017, p. 215; see also Boyiopoulos, 2009, p. 364). Yet far from exacting a clear-cut formulation in support of Machen’s neo-Platonic thesis, the trope of the “veil” in Raymond’s narrative problematizes the formula in a positively Nietzschean way. The purpose of Raymond’s experiment is twofold: on the one hand, he attempts to abolish Cartesian dualism by bridging “the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit” (Machen, 2021, p. 3), i.e., the “real world”. On the other hand, Raymond’s experiment aims at retrieving first-hand information from said spiritual world (the “Dionysian visions”), as is evinced in his hesitation to define said world until after the experiment has concluded: “with a touch I can complete the communication between this world of sense and—we shall be able to finish the sentence later on” (Machen, 2021, p. 4).

The experiment does not go as planned, but that does not seem to discourage “Raymond”, who “cannot accept failure” anyhow (Reiter, 2019, p. 270). Rather than leading to an ecstatic contemplation of a significant spiritual reality, unmediated by matter, the procedure seems to “open” Mary’s “consciousness to unrestricted Dionysian visions” (Lovatt, 2016, p. 22) or, with Christine Ferguson, “the chaotic life force that lies beneath the surface of civilization” (2002, p. 475). Raymond, nevertheless, “appears oblivious to the metaphysical consequences of his experiment” (Reiter, 2019, p. 271) and “not only does he refuse to believe that his experiment could undermine a” metaphysically sound “conception of the spiritual world” (Reiter, 2019, p. 271), but “he” still “believes his work will *unite* the physical world and the spiritual world” (Reiter, 2019, p. 271). At the end of the section, Raymond assumes that Mary “has seen the Great God Pan” (Machen, 2021, p. 8), an assumption that seems problematic at best. The experiment yields no apparent information regarding the nature of the spiritual world. Contrariwise, the procedure turns Mary “into a hopeless idiot” (Machen, 2021, p. 8) as it depletes her body of “consciousness” through physical means. Mary’s idiocy then bespeaks the nature of “the veil” that purportedly separates spirit and matter. Since Mary’s conscious “self” collapses as a direct aftermath of Raymond’s intervention, the outcome of the experiment identifies “the veil of matter” with conscious subjectivity and suggests that said subjectivity arises from the self-awareness of the materiality of the body. Matter does not prevent the subject from seeing the Great God Pan; *but the self-awareness of matter does*. In other words, the ecstatic vision of the God is not and cannot be an intellectual achievement, enabled by “a scientific grid of intelligibility” (Alder, 2020, p. 109) but rather a “physical effort” (Lovatt, 2016, p. 23). The novella thus “demands” “a different understanding of the nature of reality” as well as “a different” more “transgressive” “understanding of knowledge” (Alder, 2020, p. 108–109).

This new, positively decadent type of understanding lies neighbour to Nietzsche's "Dionysian wisdom", and by and large constitutes what Gabriel Lovatt defines as "modern embodied thought", an organic "symbiosis between physical sensation and interior perception" (2016, p. 21). Once Mary's consciousness and the subjectivity it underpins collapse, she is ready to see the Great God Pan—possibly, though, not the Pan Raymond initially hypothesizes.

If Raymond's investigation problematizes Machen's "neo-Platonic view of the universe" (Valentová, 2017, p. 215) but fails at revealing the "eternal, inner realities, 'the things that really are' of Plato" (Machen, 1922, p. 42), the core story conveyed by the novella—i.e., the account of Helen Vaughn's ravages in London's social life, and the epidemic of suicides she gives rise to—compels the scientist to nuance his hypothesis. Raymond's last words elaborate on the aftermath of his experiment, this time, though, in an out-and-out apologetic tone:

It was an ill work I did that night, when you were present; I broke open the door of the house of life, without knowing or caring what might pass forth or enter in. I recollect your telling me at the time, sharply enough, and rightly enough too, in one sense, that I had ruined the reason of a human being by a foolish experiment, based on an absurd theory. You did well to blame me, but my theory was not all absurdity. What I said Mary would see, she saw, but I forgot that no human eyes could look on such a vision with impunity. And I forgot, as I have just said, that when the house of life is thus thrown open, there may enter in that for which we have no name, and human flesh may become the veil of a horror one dare not express (Machen, 2021, p. 53).

The part of Raymond's theory that is "not all absurdity" suggests that "the house of life" and "the veil" are inextricably connected. Opening the "house" sets off the interaction with unutterable forces. These in turn break into the body to turn it into a "veil". On the one hand, it depicts the experience of Dionysian wisdom. As Lovatt explains, "the scientific [transgression] dissolve[s] the boundary between Mary's sensing [body] and thinking [brain]" (2016, p. 26) and allows Mary to experience reality as a Dionysian abyss. Indeed, this experience is not the sublime contemplation of a primordial being, beholden through a sacred mystic union—as the later Machen would explore (Mantrant, 2014, p. 6)—but rather, the unrestricted experience of chaos and overflow of matter behind normative Apollonian categories. The opening of the "house of life" here works akin to the "peering through the crack of the chamber of consciousness" Nietzsche hypothesizes in "On Truth and Lying" (TL, p. 142). This is the dissolve of consciousness, which betrays, in passing, the material connection between consciousness and the body—to paraphrase Alexander Nehamas, consciousness here emerges as "a creation and part" (1999, p. 119) of the body.

The experience of Dionysian wisdom, however, "cannot be contained" and "ultimately" spreads "from the individual woman into the larger community" (Lovatt, 2016, p. 26). The transmission of this "potentially fatal knowledge" as Gabriel Lovatt brands it, "[passes] from body to body" (2016, p. 28), "induc[ing] the same ontological collapse that accompanied" Helen's "birth in all those who look on her" (Ferguson, 2002, p. 475). The process of becoming-other through the dissolve of

individuality Mary undergoes—and Helen Vaughn later embraces—transmutes thus into a dreadful process of cultural dissolution, whereby “an esoteric and potentially fatal knowledge”, congruent with Nietzsche’s Dionysian wisdom “alters consciousness” (Lovatt, 2016, p. 27). In Nietzschean terms, this coheres in the Dionysian wisdom of Helen Vaughn’s victims, whose consciousnesses now work as Apollonian masks and convey the feelings of revulsion and horror sustained after the Dionysian interaction. Interestingly, the individuality of Helen’s victims is fatally dissolved by suicide, oftentimes in the privacy of their bedrooms (Machen, 2021, pp. 36–43). This, in effect, turns the private space—the “chamber”—into a surrogate for consciousness and a symbol of the Apollonian forces, as it is the place wherein the victims become aware—rationally—of their unspeakable experience. The suicides then bespeak the same feelings of revulsion and horror Nietzsche explores as the Apollonian aftermath of Dionysian wisdom. When discussing the death of Mr Crashaw, for instance, Villiers recalls seeing him at night, just a few hours before Crashaw committed suicide. Villiers also recalls that “[seeing] that man’s face” “made his blood run cold” (Machen, 2021, pp. 47–48) and proceeds to elaborate on the incident:

I knew I had looked into the eyes of a lost soul, Austin; the man’s outward form remained, but all hell was within it. Furious lust, and hate that was like fire, and the loss of all hope, and horror that seemed to shriek aloud to the night, though his teeth were shut; and the utter blackness of despair. I am sure he did not see me; he saw nothing that you or I can see, but he saw what I hope we never shall (Machen, 2021, pp. 43).

Villiers’ horror stems from the hell burning within Crashaw. This hellish passion truly rests on feelings of lust, rage, and despair, which overtly point to the elemental tenets of Dionysian interaction, to wit: ecstasy in the dissolve of conscious individuation and the interaction with unrestrained existence. Yet this ecstasy is followed by revulsion and horror, once the principle of individuation, Crashaw’s conscious state sets back in. Villiers’s “reading” of Crashaw as a symbol registers in Villiers’s own subjectivity a horror compatible with what Crashaw experienced as Dionysian wisdom. Crashaw’s body here becomes an Apollonian surrogate for the experience of Dionysian wisdom, a living, aesthetic, and ineffable stand-in for the horror arisen in conscious existence *qua* individuation.

The multifarious subjectivity of Helen Vaughn lies at the core of this process. She enables her victims to endure Dionysian interaction and ultimately epitomizes the forces that make up the Dionysian world, but in the Apollonian space of consciousness. Helen bespeaks different conscious subjectivities that are compatible with Victorian standards. Yet these subjectivities also work into Victorian society the Apollonian surrogate of the forces “for which” Raymond and the late Victorian community “have no name” (Machen, 2021, p. 53). These surrogates enable her victims to feel the uncontrollable experience of “Dionysian wisdom”, i.e., the opening of “the house of life” through intoxication and sexual rapture. Helen Vaughn, “the daughter of Pan”, as Sophie Mantrant points out, “presides over the orgiastic rites of a mystery cult [...] reminiscent of Bacchanalia” (2014: 3–5). The ritualistic form of these Dionysian mysteries suggest they lead to a type

of knowledge that cannot be retrieved by means of the *logos*, but rather by “wine, chaos, music, tragedy, sexuality, the unconscious, superabundance, resurrection, and fertility” (Del Caro, 2013, p. 109). Nevertheless, the narrative sets forth Helen Vaughn’s Dionysian raptures in terms that can only be represented through Apollonian *surrogates* of the Dionysian experience. Villiers’ reminiscence of Crashaw’s countenance, Herbert’s vague narrative, Arthur Meyrick’s sketches, or the anonymous manuscript relating Mrs Beaumont’s orgies (Machen, 2021, pp. 16–26, 37, 47–48, 53–54) are but a few instances. These surrogates cannot be properly uttered, or rather they cannot be incorporated fully into the shared Apollonian sphere of language and culture without a risk of bringing home the limits of the *principium individuationis*, or that which “is terrible or absurd in existence” (BT, p. 40).

This is the Nietzschean, yet apparently contradictory logic that falls behind the idea of the ineffable in the text. Whatever havoc Helen Vaughn wreaks in respectable London society, it can only be suggested by sensible depictions as Apollonian “veils”. These depictions hint at aesthetic Dionysian ecstasy but can only be retrieved cognitively in Apollonian form. Gooding-Williams elucidates this apparent inconsistency in Nietzsche by elaborating on the point of “the Dionysian” being “a cultural modality”, which “free from the grips of a savage barbarism”, “has always been [...] compromised by Apollonian boundaries and distinctions” (2001, p. 108). The novella plays upon these distinctions compellingly, in that it brands Dionysian representations as unutterable whilst encoding them as Apollonian symbols. This process ushers in an Apollonian representation of the Dionysian world that far removes said world and keeps it at bay within the narrative, even if the text still allows a glimpse into the horrors of the “abyss” (Machen, 2021, pp. 11, 32, 50) the experience of the Dionysian world evokes.

The Dionysian remains in the narrative as “an object of subliminal awareness” (Gardner, 2013, p. 614) that in turn imbues the Apollonian with aesthetic value and cognitive significance. Sebastian Gardner conceives the relation between Dionysian reality and Apollonian appearance as intimate and univocal. “The compelling quality of aesthetic appearance”, Gardner upholds, “thus derives from what it excludes, in something like the way that Freud conceives conscious representatives of repressed contents, such as symbols, as recruiting their force and significance from the repressed” (Gardner, 2013, p. 615). The novella makes a point of this too, as Villiers timely notes that “all symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing”. Symbols are “that which is without form” (i.e., “the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things”) “taking to itself a form” (Machen, 2021, pp. 47). The formless forces of reality and the form they take are therefore mutually dependent and correlated. In Nietzsche’s vocabulary, the aesthetic experience of the Dionysian world acquires meaning in the Apollonian space of consciousness. The Dionysian substratum—or “that which is without form”—acquires form and enthuses it with significance, singularly and univocally, as a stand-alone and unique Apollonian representation. The symbol, conversely, becomes the conduit through which consciousness can ascertain Dionysian reality. The “house of life”, the body becomes indeed “a veil” in the novella, but it remains part of the same underlying reality it recruits its meaning from.

This is not a minor issue. Since the relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is material and co-dependant, and the Apollonian masks recruit “their force and significance from” within the Dionysian substratum, it is worth investigating how said “significance” bespeaks the type of reality that constitutes the Dionysian substratum and what kind of reality this substratum is. In the following section I will expound how *Pan*’s ontological tenets work akin to Nietzsche’s model of the Dionysian world. The Nietzschean implications of *Pan*’s model ultimately allow for a cogent interpretation of the ambiguous concept of reality in Machen’s novella as material becoming, rather than metaphysical being.

Outside Conscious Dwellings: Reality as Becoming

Nietzsche and Machen—in *Pan*—face similar challenges in the way they thematize and discuss reality. The early Nietzsche referred to reality as “*das Ur-Eine*” or “the primordial unity” (BT, p. 18, *passim*). In “On Truth and Lying”, Nietzsche borrows from Kant and refers to the totality of the world as “[precisely] that truth, truth without consequences” that crucially defies cognizance in the space of consciousness: “the ‘thing-in-itself’, which ‘is impossible for even the creator of language to grasp” (TL, p. 144). However, in both *The Birth* and “On Truth and Lying”, Rüdiger Safranski notes, “the concept of absolute reality” is introduced “as an additional theoretical remnant and a residual category” (2002, p. 160). It is more of an academic pre-requisite for the argument than a fundamental axiom in Nietzsche’s postulation (2002, p. 161). Nietzsche, at this stage, is more “concerned with establishing the presence of the absolute in ecstasy, in feelings of horror and rapture” (Safranski, 2002, p. 160) than with deriving the ontological underpinnings of said “absolute” from his investigation. Admittedly, as Safranski suggests, there is a more emphatic notion of the totality (i.e., reality) in the symbolic or metaphorical phrases with which Nietzsche characterizes Dionysian wisdom than in the analytic postulates the philosopher develops in his early *oeuvre*. There is, for instance, “the back” of the “tiger”, which stands for the material substratum lying at the bottom and outside “the chamber of consciousness” (TL, p. 144). The back of the tiger bespeaks in a single image “the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable,” and “the murderous” (TL, p. 143). The trope infuses reality with the conceptual overtones of cruelty, power, creation and destruction that characterize the later Nietzsche, i.e., the philosopher committed to the “will to power” and “the eternal return” (Z, *passim*). But there is also the act of looking through the crack, which, as has been suggested, characterizes the dissolve of consciousness in Dionysian ecstasy. Both ideas combined (will to power and Dionysian rapture) suggest a process of change, ongoing action and interaction, creation, and destruction of forms the human animal experiences by way of Dionysian wisdom. And, in the light of said wisdom, “the totality [appears] [...] [first] and foremost as tumultuous becoming”, one which “is always at its goal because there is no final goal” (Safranski, 2002, p. 130) nor possibility to create one outside the Apollonian simulacrum of consciousness. Reality is becoming and eternal change. There are no progressive categorizations, nor biological hierarchies pointing upwards, just change synthesized into the future. This principle allows Nietzsche to

undermine notions of biological improvement based on idealistic—i.e., Platonic—prejudices: “Humans”, Nietzsche contends in *Antichrist* (1888), “are in no way the crown of creation”, since “all beings occupy the same level of perfection” (A, p. 12) in that they all are material manifestation of the same process of transformation. Indeed, to conceive reality as a Dionysian abyss assumes an unbalanced and ongoing flow of power—namely, the will to power—that can never reach equilibrium if it is to be characterized by “the pitiless, the greedy, the insatiable” and “the murderous” (TL, p. 143). The ideas of power (over)flow, change and becoming are also suggested at the outset of “On Truth and Lying”, wherein the “universe” “[flickers] in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured” (TL, p. 141; emphasis added), whilst the human animal adds a quantum of change—albeit during a brief, interim period—by inventing cognition. Several commentators, chiefly Gilles Deleuze, warn against not interpreting Nietzsche’s idea of being as becoming. Deleuze even nuances the concept of eternal return crucially in this sense, as he affirms that “it is not some one thing which returns but rather *returning itself* is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity” (Deleuze, 2005, p. 48; emphasis added). In brief, the philosophical implications of the rhetorical imagery Nietzsche deploys in “On Truth and Lying” help understand—thinking with Safranski—“absolute reality” as “the world of becoming” (2002, p. 162).

In *Pan*, Raymond, too, revisits his vision of the world, as well as its ultimate symbol, Pan. And he nuances said vision in a positively Nietzschean way. As Geofrey Reiter upholds, the only way to make full sense of Raymond’s “assertion that Mary saw what he said she would” is by construing “the same symbol—Pan—” as “two different things”: on the one hand, “as a positive life energy principle”, which accounts for Raymond’s first definition of the symbol at the beginning of the novella; and, on the other, “as a negative energy principle”, “his second definition”, which “quickly becomes dominant” in the story (Reiter, 2019, pp. 279–280). The image of the second Pan, “that for which we have no name” or the “horror one dare not speak” (Machen, 2021, p. 63) betrays a conception of the world fundamentally at odds with a neo-Platonic vision of reality. After the dreadful experiment, the disquieting epidemic of suicides and the horrific immolation of Helen Vaughn, Raymond moves past the world of a monist *numen* to envisage reality as an unutterable, yet dynamic set of forces that enter the “house of life” after consciousness—i.e., the Apollonian illusion—dissolves.

The transcendence of the spirit is thereby substituted by the immanence of incomprehensible “energies” and forces (Machen, 2021, p. 63), which in exchange bring about change and transformation, even as they turn the “house of life” into a veil for their horrors. These energies do not belong to a different ontological plane than that of the body or consciousness (as would be the case in Cartesian dualism), but rather coalesce in both. Physical matter here does not constitute a medium between mind and spirit, but reality’s sole component. This abstraction becomes apparent in the way Pan manifests in the novella. As Marco Pasi points out, “Pan” at first “seems to be just a metaphor for the spiritual reality that exists beyond our senses” (2007, p. 71). This interpretation is consistent with the neo-Platonic Pan Raymond divines

at the outset of the novella, “but in fact”, Pasi goes on to argue, Pan proves to be “a real, concrete entity as well” (2007, p. 71). This is the interpretation of the symbol that dominates in the novella. Pan is more physical than ideal, more immanent than transcendent, more material than spiritual.³ Aaron Worth and Gabriel Lovatt hint at similar conclusions albeit from different perspectives, as they downplay the mystic flair of traditional readings the novella elicits in favour of a more materialistic approach when construing the occult. Pan serves as a symbol of an occult reality, indeed, but the god also betrays the materiality of said reality. “Machen blends biology and culture,” Aaron Worth contends, “animal and symbol, in unsettling ways” (2012, p. 225). Pan stands for “the very archetype of therianthrope blending [...] perhaps the definitive symbol of the admixture of human and animal” (Worth, 2012, p. 224). Yet, in this “admixture”, Pan becomes “equally emblematic of the culturally repressed act of conceptual integration represented by deep history”, that is, the “continuity” between the “historical man” and “the historyless man” Machen brings about with the symbol of Pan (Worth, 2012, pp. 224–225). This integration lays out a novel sort of historiography that nevertheless accounts for the ineffable reality the novella is concerned with. Likewise, Lovatt upholds that “categorizing ‘The Great God Pan’ as an examination of machinations on ‘a spiritual plane’ erroneously disengages Machen from the discourse of the body” (2016, p. 29). The physical body proves to be the thematic crux at the core of the world symbolized by Pan, which self-reflectively imbues its own materiality with the meaning the symbol stands for.

If Pan is a concrete symbol of reality, it is consistent with a notion of reality as becoming. At its core, the novella tells the story of “the house of life” becoming other by virtue of life energies taking control of it. Becoming then turns pervasive and spreads epidemically, as has already been discussed, but also organically, from the depths of the Dionysian reality, or “the abyss of all being” (Machen, 2021, p. 57), to the very Apollonian rendering of itself said abyss spawns. Change pervades all reality, from the Dionysian abyss to the Apollonian illusions “the chamber of consciousness” elicits. As Helen Vaughn epitomizes the forces of becoming, she enacts a series of becoming-other, changes in identity that help spread her disease, to wit, the dissolution of normative boundaries and privileged cultural categories that define individuation. Accordingly, Helen Vaughn (tellingly pronounced like “faun”) seldom manifests as the same character. She is Miss Raymond and Mrs. Herbert, as well as Mrs. Beaumont, proving to be “less of a stable archetype than a protean, dynamic element” (Lovatt, 2016, p. 27). A performative force of change in-itself, Helen Vaughn is not constrained by any concrete or fixed identity. She “neither [progresses] nor [degenerates], but continually becomes something that is never quite finished” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 475). As a symbol of becoming, its material flux

³ Emily Alder argues somewhat differently, but her argument does not cancel this line of reasoning. Alder upholds “Machen’s weird tales” challenge “pure materialism (...) as the defining relation of body to spirit becomes fluid and uncertain” (Alder 2020, p. 110). Alder however zeroes in on the many ways “dominant positivist assumptions about the nature of reality” fail to make sense of “unknown weird beings of shapes and textures that don’t belong in the natural order of physical existence” (2020, p. 110). The “spirit” for Alder, like Nietzsche’s “*das Ur-Eine*”, works as a theoretical requisite to posit the reality positivist science cannot penetrate.

of change *becomes* apparent in her own suicide, wherein the categories determining different types of individuality shift so abruptly they turn utterly meaningless:

The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve. (...) Here there was some internal force of which I knew nothing that caused dissolution and change. Here too was all the work by which man has been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed (Machen, 2021, pp. 49-50).

To Mark de Cicco, “[Helen Vaughn’s] is a body beyond [evolution]”, beyond “structure and beyond time” (2012, p. 17). Her body defies hierarchy and organization, whether it be sensible (material), semiotic or cultural; it also lacks purpose: it is “beyond evolution” in that it does not progress along the lines of a prescribed or given essence or identity; and it changes as the material manifestation of the forces that constitute “unrestrained life” (De Cicco 2012, p. 17). The thorough description of the unleashed forces of life comes from Dr. Matheson, who, being a man of science, cannot but report what he sees, even though, in his own words, he “should have refused to believe” it (Machen, 2021, p. 50). Matheson contributes a definition of reality and life far removed from the spiritual hypothesis advanced by Raymond. The last observation pinpoints “the principle of life” as a force that “makes organism”, that arranges life in structures and hierarchies manifested in the changes of the “outward form”. Matheson characterizes Helen’s becoming in terms of progression and regression, evolution, and devolution (“I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended”) and, as a result, he opposes “the principle of life” to the idea of “change”. However, it is advisable not to take his words at face value. Like Raymond, Matheson has a flair for imagery. The “ascent”/“descent” metaphor imprints a sense of progressivity, fraught with moral and spiritual undertones (the beasts lie at the bottom, humanity rests at the top). From a scientific perspective, Matheson draws from “the known, in language of analogy, negation, and inversions” in a futile “endeavour” to “describe the unknown” (Alder, 2020, p. 106). “Scientific truth” thus fails, as Emily Alder rightly observes, as “empirical observation conveyed through the symbolic order of written or spoken language” proves unable “to [pin] down” said truth (Alder, 2020, p. 107). Metaphysics fails too. Matheson attempts to construe Vaughn’s shape-shifting chaos through a purportedly “coherent” and “organized, understanding of reality”, that is, assuming a “fundamental reality” (Reiter, 2019, p. 276) that imbues the physical world with “a stable order of meaning” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 475). Matheson’s attempts thus actualize an assumed system of metaphysics (Reiter, 2019, p. 277) that nevertheless collapses in the face of Helen Vaughn’s “metamorphic flight” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 475).

Nietzsche, too, helps to conceptualize this flight and the subsequent “collapse of metaphysics” in the novella (Reiter, 2019, p. 277). Helen Vaughn’s constant becoming implies an ongoing re-arrangement or re-organization of organisms,

the structures and hierarchies enforced by the principle of life—as per Matheson’s description. Yet these changes do not necessarily lead to higher, more advanced, or near-complete structures, despite Matheson’s imagery. Enforcing such imagery imbues empirical observation with a closed “description of being” (Ferguson, 2002, p. 476) *qua* being, or being as a “primordial One” [*das Ur-Eine*] (BT, *passim*). This means assuming, again, “a stable order of meaning”—here, a progressive hierarchy or design. Yet behind the imagery of “ascent” and “descent”, the immanent forces of reality, the “principle of life” only manifests as an ongoing process—force—of change and becoming. In Matheson’s vague observations, the principle of life eventually coalesces in a material entity, a type of slime:

I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again (...) for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not further describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of (Machen, 2021, p. 50).

Interpreters who read *Pan* as an affirmation of the supernatural “being” lurking behind the veil of the sensory world, construe this slime as the ultimate manifestation of occult reality. To Jonathan Newell, for instance, the “identity-disrupting liminality” of “the grotesque slime into which Helen dissolves embodies the *quintessence* of the estranged world that is normally hidden—occult” (2020, p. 76; emphasis added). Newell hence pinpoints the slime as the ultimate manifestation of an absolute spirit or essential *numen*. This should help understand *Pan*, Newell obliquely suggests, as the “anti-materialist” text it purportedly is (2020, p. 69). Nevertheless, Newell does not elaborate on the rest of Matheson’s account. The slime never ceases to become, it manifests as one state of matter in a process of continuous becoming, a process that nonetheless keeps on organizing and structuring itself, *differently*, through change and transformation. Newell, in fine, builds his argument on Matheson’s vague imagery of hierarchy, construing the slime as a primeval essence on account of its being, as per Matheson’s trope, at the bottom of the “ladder”. It is the metaphor of progress—a *bona fide* Apollonian illusion, by the bye—that leads to the assumption that there is transcendent hierarchy or spiritual design behind Matheson’s observations. In other words, said spiritual design arises from the “failure” and the inadequacy of “the symbolic order of (...) language” (Alder, 2020, p. 107) to convey the embodied Dionysian experience.

Behind Matheson’s rhetoric, the principle of life appears to be congruent with Nietzsche’s “eternal return”, yet construed by Deleuze, to wit, as the ongoing, perpetual return of “affirmation”, “the different” and “the dissimilar” (2013, p. 484), change and becoming. The slime transforms again to reveal, fleetingly, the god Pan. Yet far from closing the process of becoming, the symbol of the god Pan embodies the very idea of reality as perpetual transformation. The many metamorphoses Helen Vaughn undergoes at her deathbed lead to the apparition of both a material slime and then Pan himself as a symbol of “the principle of life”. Pan’s body is indeed a body—thinking with Kelly Hurley—in a perpetual state of becoming. Hurley envisages the “Gothic body” as a “horrific re-making of the human subject” (2004, p. 5). The “ab-human” subject, as Hurley defines it, is then a not-quite human

subject “characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (2004, p. 3). It is a body in perpetual “act of becoming”, “never finished”, “never completed” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293), or rather at the singular, concrete moment of “synthesis” (or “contraction”) of “the lived present”, constantly between past and future:

[We are] contracted water, earth, light and air—not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed. Every organism, in its receptive and perceptual elements, but also in its viscera, is a sum of contractions, of retentions and expectations. At the level of this primary vital sensibility, the lived present constitutes a past and a future in time (Deleuze, 2013, p. 93).

This ongoing, perpetual mechanism of synthesis and contraction, change and differentiation, still operates at the final stages of Helen’s transformation. The material slime featuring at the end of Matheson’s fragmentary narrative breaks down the categories that prompt individuation. Yet the process of becoming still points to future categories—just future, not higher, more progressive, or more evolved—forms, structures, and organisms—such as Pan—that symbolize the act of becoming even as they manifest as material becoming themselves. There is only matter in an ongoing, perpetual process of change and transformation. Geoffrey Reiter contends “there is no fundamental reality beneath Helen’s transformation”, no luminary spirit lurking behind the abyss of chaos, “only dissolution and darkness” (Reiter, 2019, p. 277). Reiter’s anti-metaphysical interpretation is sound and coherent, but it still argues for matter as a medium. I would go slightly further and argue that a model so close to Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Dionysian world would also allow for a reading of the abyss as pure matter in a perpetual state of becoming, the “monstrous” [*“ungeheuer”*], the experience of non-mediating matter, or a matter devoid of transcendental meaning.

Conclusions

The Great God Pan problematizes Arthur Machen’s neo-Platonic vision of the world in the narrative of Raymond’s experiment, which initially aims at cutting across the “gulf” dividing “the world of matter and the world of spirit” (Machen, 2021, p. 3). Raymond attempts to lift “the veil” that hinders the vision of the ineffable. As is the case with Nietzsche, “the veil” in *The Great God Pan* stands for the conscious self, and it is, too, like in Nietzsche’s model, an extension of the “house of life”, i.e., the body. Both Nietzsche and Machen (in *Pan*) explore an alternative mode of cognition, an unconscious, physical and involved experience of reality effected beyond the “chamber of consciousness”/“house of life”, which, in turn, creates and enforces the illusionary “veil” of culture, subjectivity and civilization. Tampering with “the house of life” exposes the unstable and wavering condition of consciousness, but also of human flesh. When the veil of consciousness, self-awareness or subjectivity does not protect the “self” from the world (when the Apollonian forces do not fence off the Dionysian world, in Nietzsche’s model), it is flesh and pure matter, then,

that become the symbol of said world. Nietzsche discusses the feelings of horror the experience of Dionysian wisdom imprint on the Apollonian forces of the “disillusioned Dionysian”, but Machen actualizes these feelings in the consciousness of civilized Victorians who encounter the very flesh that serves as “veil” of the Dionysian. Thus, the horror these forces give rise to can be construed as the same appalling revulsion the disgusted Dionysian undergoes. By the same token, this source of horror exposes, too, the weakness, arbitrariness and wavering condition of the Apollonian illusions that make up civilization and culture.

Moreover, Machen’s *Pan* problematizes matter, spirit, and knowledge through a “participatory” cognitive model (Alder, 2020, p. 143). This model, in turn, betrays a conception of reality at odds with a monist, numen-based, neo-Platonic account of the world. The “Pan” model lies neighbour to Nietzsche’s conception of reality as a Dionysian abyss, an overflow of power devoid, as Ferguson notes, of a “stable order of meaning” (2002, p. 475). The patterns of change and metamorphoses the novella articulates operate as a multi-layered and materialistic process of becoming. Helen Vaughn thus embodies a force of uncontrollable transfiguration, creation, and annihilation of Apollonian illusions (identity, society, and culture). These transfigurations mirror and acquire their otherwise fleeting Apollonian meaning from the very transformative energies that make up life, matter, and the human body at the Dionysian abyss of becoming. These energies, these “principles of life”, indeed, cannot be named or uttered—they are ineffable—because they completely defy the fixed quality of the categories language deploys to brace concepts, identity, and culture. In fine, *Pan* synthesizes a Nietzschean concept of becoming elicited from the exploration of the Dionysian experience.

The commonalities Machen’s *Pan* shares with Nietzsche’s metaphor of the “chamber of consciousness”, in the context of the Apollonian and Dionysian interaction, help reinforce the decadent critique of cultural categories the novella ushers in, and they bring to the fore the notion of pure becoming as the force that makes up for the ineffable and occult reality. Machen’s scrutiny of physical matter as a medium to channel spiritual reality, as Geoffrey Reiter contends, “reveals that the Pan symbol may reflect something (...) even more disturbing to the fin-de-siècle mind than transcendent evil—namely, nothing”. This “[leaves] only the material world and, beyond that, the entire annihilation of consciousness and existence” (2019, p. 271). The *Pan* model is thus congruent with the Dionysian abyss, a conception that foregrounds matter and the overflowing power of becoming as ultimate reality.

In *Far Off Things* (1922), Machen famously derided *Pan* as an outright failure. Instead of arousing “the awe and solemnity and mystery of the valley of Usk, and of the house called Bartholly hanging solitary between the deep forest and the winding esses of the river”, Machen’s *Pan* “translated awe, at worst awfulness, into evil” (1922, p. 123). Machen puts forward this notion of seemingly transcendent evil as a recast of the story, now updated in the light of the poetics of ecstasy he later develops in the early twentieth century, ostensibly in *Hieroglyphics*. Therein he outlines his fundamental idea of literature as a medium that prompts the “withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness” (1926, p. 11) into an experience of ecstasy. But the twentieth century Machen understands ecstasy differently, as “spiritualization through mystic union” (Mantrant, 2014, p. 5), not quite as the material

experience of frightful darkness he explored in the 1890s (Mantrant, 2014, p. 5). Reading *Pan* in the light of Machen's post-decadent poetics suggests there is a "concomitant supernal good" (Reiter, 2019, p. 282) supplementing the seeming transcendent evil Machen pinpoints in hindsight. However, "the terror" the story elicits, "might" only "be labelled 'ecstasy' for convenience's sake (though Machen never uses the term [in the novella]), but it is hardly indicative of any philosophical mysticism" (Reiter, 2019, p. 267). Rather, it betrays the experience of reality in Nietzschean terms, as Dionysian abyss, which later Machen would label as "evil". Yet if *Pan* translates awe into transcendent evil, it is an evil consistent with "something more horrifying than the devil himself—a world without the devil, without God, without anything beneath the tapestry of nature" (Reiter, 2019, p. 282). It is consistent, in short, with the Dionysian abyss, with a nature devoid of transcendental or metaphysical meaning. Reading *Pan* in the light of the profound commonalities the novella shares with Nietzsche allows for a cogent interpretation of the text and its many ambiguities in the same vein as Reiter's, Ferguson's, or Lovatt's. The Nietzschean reading foregrounds the text as a complex organic experiment that shows the decadent collapse of Neo-Platonism and its transformation into the Dionysian abyss.

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