

## BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

*The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, ed. by A. Worth  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

*‘Sorcery and sanctity ... these are the only realities’* (p. 261).

Aaron Worth’s anthology of works by a master of the weird and ineffable, Arthur Machen, is suitably draped in the yellow that heralded Machen’s introduction to the literary stage. Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894) was published when ‘yellow bookery was at its yellowest’.<sup>1</sup> This ‘yellow bookery’ refers to John Lane’s publications with The Bodley Head, which were aligned with the Decadent movement. Machen disavowed any association with the ‘yellow nineties’ (p. xv), but the connection continues to resonate to this day.

Nevertheless, Machen is more closely associated with the emergence of ‘weird tales’, which promote the uneasy sense that reality and sensory experience cannot be trusted. Worth’s collection focuses on this uneasy world as it appears in Machen’s fiction, by offering some of the earliest tales written and published in the 1890s, which present the idea that the world is fragmented and made of many realities. This uncanny reality is amply represented in Worth’s collection by early, well-known stories such as ‘The Great God Pan’ and ‘The Lost Club’ (both 1890); however, it also moves on to include later tales that offer a sense of fragmentation, like ‘The Three Imposters’ (1895), as well as Machen’s more mature work, with tales such as ‘The Bowmen’ (1914).

A number of Machen’s tales begin with framing narratives set in a parlour, a study, or drawing room, and include two or more learned men discussing the nature of the world, evil, goodness, or what a character in ‘The White People’ (1904) calls ‘sorcery and sanctity’ (p. 261). An evidentiary artefact is then revealed and the recipient is encouraged to delve into the secret truth of the world, after which the story delves directly into this secret world through a journal or memoir. Machen’s weird tales are therefore framed or encircled by the mundane, which includes the key to interpreting the inner tale. The nucleus of the story is this inner tale, based on a found document, which provides the evidence for proposing the theory about supernatural forces, charmed items, or hidden realities, the reality of which is then affirmed at the end of the tale.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Machen, *Things Near and Far* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), p. 138.

This narrative style is exemplified in ‘The Great God Pan’, which is possibly Machen’s best-known story, and contains all the key elements of his work. As science and occultism pervaded London, Machen’s works dwelt on the interface between the noumenal, the phenomenal, and the spiritual. In ‘The Great God Pan’, it is science that enables Dr Raymond to rend the veil between the spiritual and the noumenal, giving birth to a monster for the new age, whose beauty hides the monstrous primordial essence of spirit and substance. The story combines this challenge to the foundation of reality with the idea of the beast hidden within us all, and the role that science might play in rending it asunder, making ‘The Great God Pan’ an enduring and classic work of weird fiction.

In general, the stories are particularly concerned with philosophical, spiritual, and scientific experimentation, as Worth highlights in his selection. However, one of the failings of Machen’s tales is that they can be as inaccessible as the very thing he seeks to describe. Worth attempts to ameliorate this difficulty with a thorough Introduction. He also includes excellent notations that are, unfortunately, hidden at the back of the book. Worth’s Introduction is essential to the success of the collection and might have been improved by including and discussing of some of Machen’s non-fiction in the selection. These non-fiction works, such as *Heiroglyphics* (1902), and the autobiographical novels *Far Off Things* (1922) and *Things Near and Far* (1923), can be considered ciphers to his work. Worth does, however, reference *Things Near and Far* (p. xxvii), in which Machen refers to the horror of repetition, a central tenet of his work. Worth also references autobiographical material in the Introduction and as notes throughout the collection, which aids the reader by demonstrating that, for Machen, horror comes from the infinite, and from the mind’s inability to comprehend the whole of reality, instead tending to focus on the fragments that are right before our eyes. Beyond the idea of infinity or repetition, Machen included other insights in his non-fiction that would have made this collection stronger. These non-fiction works explore the nature of reality, ideas around symbolism and the occult, and contextualise the fiction within Machen’s world where nothing is what it seems, but everything contains a hint of what lies just beyond sensory experience.

Overall, however, Worth has framed this collection such that the sense of the ineffable that is central to Machen’s fiction is given centre stage. The collection begins and ends with short tales; the first, ‘The Lost Club’, is a tale about a hidden cult that seemingly causes its members to disappear, and itself vanishes in the light of day. As Worth suggests, embracing the horror of the ineffable, unknown, and unknowable is key to appreciating

Machen's works (p. xxvii). 'The Lost Club' only hints at the uncertainty of the protagonist's experience (and, by extension, at the disquieting tales to come in the rest of the volume), and implies that there is always something hidden in the world as we know it. 'The Lost Club' also shares some thematic elements with the final tale, 'Ritual' (1937), which revolves around magical or spiritually charged places, artefacts, or actions that can reveal and use the powers of this hidden world.

The next tale that Worth includes is 'The Great God Pan', followed by 'The Inmost Light' (considered to be an early version of 'The Great God Pan'), before offering 'The Three Imposters', which begins with a mystery. Dyson and Phillips – supernatural detectives who appear in other, unrelated works – search for a man with spectacles. Their investigation draws them into various sub-narratives that have occasionally been published separately from the central narrative and treated as stand-alone stories. Worth's 'Note on the Text' directly addresses the fact that 'The Three Imposters' is presented in this collection in its complete form rather than 'harvested for individual stories' (p. xxxi), which is a commendable and effective decision. For instance, 'The Adventure of the Gold Tiberius' and 'The Adventure of the Missing Brother' make sense as individual pieces, but they also work well woven into the frame narrative, and the revelations that they offer aid Dyson and Phillips in their investigation. Other tales, such as 'The Novel of the Dark Valley', are told to the detectives and do not directly involve them, nor do they bear directly on the Dyson and Phillip's investigation, though they do give a sense of the world that Machen built around the two men. Indeed, Worth's collection itself functions in a similar manner to 'The Three Imposters'. All of Machen's short works can be read independently, but taken as a whole and considered among the scope of his corpus, they flesh out the picture of Machen's fictional world – full of mystery, the supernatural, and the uncanny.

Even though the shorter tales stand alone, they are greatly improved by being part of the frame of Worth's collection. Worth has succeeded in using these short stories to complement the longer tales and demonstrate the depth of Machen's ability to delve into the unsettling corners of psychology, science, and spiritualism. Of these short stories, a number were published as part of the *Ornaments in Jade* (1924) collection, including 'Midsummer', and 'Psychology'. 'Midsummer', a vignette of a midsummer night, follows a man who, restless and feeling the urge to be outside, ventures on a walk in the countryside, during which he encounters several maidens appearing as 'white writhing figures' (p. 260) moving toward a glade. Even though the women are then hidden from sight, the narrator hints that

they are engaged in a long-forgotten ritual, and the story implies that the natural world is a potent force, actively summoning people to this glade. In similar fashion, 'Psychology' suggests that all people have a natural side that is concealed and that can be triggered by such things as the full moon. The narrator discovers that his untamed thoughts are deranged, and likens them to having an extra beast living inside him; the implication is that nature draws out our baser or unsocialised aspects.

The theme of hidden aspects of the soul and psyche is carried through Machen's work from 'The Great God Pan' to 'Psychology', and is firmly linked with the spiritual. However, there was at least one work that went farther still. Machen's later writings include a number of tales inspired by World War One, of which 'The Bowmen' (1914) is the most famed, since it caused quite a stir at the time (p. xxi). According to Worth, the reading public believed that the account of a ghostly bowman from Agincourt, who rescued a British company from decimation, was a true account. Despite Machen's statement to the contrary, the public were adamant that the event had happened. So, Machen's weird world in which the supernatural is infused into reality did in fact come to bear on the reality at the time.

Aaron Worth's compilation of tales by master horror writer Arthur Machen builds a world in which the weird and ineffable are all around. Machen's tales of horror, some of the earliest in the weird-fiction canon, centre around the other-worldly and deeply buried horrors that lie in ourselves as well as in the world we inhabit. Regardless of whether those horrors can be found in the corruption of the soul through scientific occultism, lingering in the maze of London's smog-obscured streets, or etched in the stones and woods of Wales, they are no less disturbing. Worth does well to introduce and position Machen's work in an accessible and strongly contextualised collection, which showcases the ongoing appeal of the best-known tales, while bolstering the lesser-known fragments and short tales into a position in which they can best be appreciated.

*Erin Corderoy*