

Chance Encounters: The Detective as ‘Expert’ in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*

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In the late Victorian period, stories of supernatural horror were both fashionable and abundant. One way of reading this phenomenon has been to see it as a manifestation – along with other forms such as the gothic, invasion narratives, new woman fiction and narratives of race and empire – of the eruption of the cultural unconscious, the return of the repressed. Such forms of popular narrative are symptomatic of the desires and anxieties of a culture that mixed Imperial jingoism with fears about the inner decadence of the nation, masculinist notions of character and manliness mixed with fears about both homoeroticism and the emerging feminist movement, belief in the constitutional superiority of the British state mixed with fears about an increasingly militant working class. While readings of this kind have much to recommend them, I want to take a different approach in this article. Using the example of Arthur Machen’s first major work, *The Great God Pan*, published by the Bodley Head in 1894, I want to argue that in Machen’s case at least, the preoccupation with the supernatural can be read in much more ‘positive’ or even progressive terms.

This is not to suggest that the supernatural is somehow etiolated in Machen’s narratives. Despite his interest in occult studies,¹ he harboured a dislike of popular Spiritualism, which he refers to disparagingly in *The London Adventure* (1924) as the “amiable Conandoylery that is now in such fashion in certain quarters” (27). His contention with Spiritualism seems to have been with the way in which it demystified and made “safe” the possibilities of the other world. In talking of a séance he witnessed during his acting days, Machen reflects with concern: “when their desire is realised, as they suppose, there is no trace of horror. There is no sense of the awfulness of another order of being impinging on ours. It is all as cheerful as a tea-party” (67). In his fiction he therefore attempted to recapture some of the true ‘horror’ of the supernatural by depicting scenes and events that could not be easily resolved or re-integrated into everyday experience. However, the message he offers is not one of fear when faced with the unknown. In *The Great God Pan*, as in a number of his other ‘psychic detective’ stories, he introduces us to amateur detectives who are nevertheless experts in their chosen field: strange occurrences in the mysterious city of London. Through the medium of ‘chance’, a powerful symbol of the unseen world in Machen’s narratives, the trained eye may see order in what may, to the uninitiated appear to be merely chaos and confusion. That is to say, there is horror, but the horror has a kind of meaning, or at least is something that must be both respected and faced.

The Great God Pan met with mixed success when it was published. Contemporary reviews tended to converge around two primary criticisms: firstly, that the texts were “unwholesome” and “disgusting”, and secondly, that the element of “nameless terror” was ineffectual. The first of these is evident in a review from *The Lady’s Pictorial*, which characterises the story as “gruesome, ghastly, and dull. ... [A]lthough men and women who are morbid and unhealthy in mind may find something that appeals to them in the description of Dr Raymond’s experiment and its results, the majority of readers will turn from it in utter disgust” (*Precious Balms* 12). Judgements such as these tend to rest upon the opinion that Machen’s stories contain references to rape, murder and suicide without the redeeming feature of a clear moral message. Alternatively,

some critics objected to the book on more stylistic grounds, claiming that Machen's "horrors" fail to convince. The reviewer for *The Daily Chronicle* complains that Machen "never lets us have so much as a glimpse of the monster for ourselves. How can we be petrified unless we see Medusa's head?" (*Precious Balms* 3). Similarly, a writer for *The Echo* assures his readers that "not the ghost of a 'creepy' feeling will this story produce in the mind of anybody who reads it" (5). These at times conflicting sentiments – that he tells us too much or nothing at all – serve to illustrate the real critical issue of Machen's work: the actual supernatural event or crime is of less importance than how people react to it.

Machen's religious, mythological and occult interests contributed to his perception of a reality hidden behind everyday events and objects, a reality in which the spirits of the dead and perhaps things more monstrous abide, "unconjectured worlds which it is not meant to visit" (*London Adventure*, 68). In his fiction this reality is often portrayed as terrifying, but it is the terror of the soul glimpsing beyond the veil rather than secular or physical fear. In *Hieroglyphics* (1924), Machen argues that "the camera and the soul of man are two entirely different things" (58), for the role of the camera is "to portray the surface of life, to make a picture of the outside of things" (59) whereas the human soul is capable of interpretation, of relating to the world symbolically and understanding events and objects in the material world as "outward sign[s] of an inward mystery" (74). His belief that "mere incident is nothing, it only becomes something when it is a symbol of an interior meaning" (80) is the guiding principle behind his mysteries and the basis upon which his detective characters operate.

The popular late nineteenth century fascination with psychical research would seem then to be akin to the rending of the veil or trespassing on forbidden territory. In Machen's words: "[t]here are, unhappily, in these days, people who profane these holy mysteries" (46). It is therefore not surprising that this theme of penetrating the Other World and its consequences recurs frequently within Machen's fiction, and is a particular focus of *The Great God Pan*. The perpetrator in this text (and other like it, such as *The Inmost Light*) is a medical man eager to undertake what proves to be disastrous research into psychic realms. However, Machen's texts do more than simply highlight the dangers of science. Like many others of the period, they also engage with problems of knowledge construction triggered by notions of chance, probability and contingency that were the focus of the new sciences. As Reba Soffer neatly puts it, "beginning in the 1870s, [...] traditionally comfortable epistemological and ontological theories were eroded fatally by the new sciences. In particular, the concept of chance, inherent especially in Darwinian biology, subverted the ascendant rationalist reliance upon a determinate physical, social, and psychic order regulated by discernable natural laws" (Soffer 8). Chance and unpredictability turn the experiments of Machen's scientists into "horrors", but this can be seen as a criticism of scientific arrogance rather than of science as a whole.

Developments in modern science also stressed the fact that, since the older, mechanical models of the world required revision, the world was now open to new interpretations. This was evident not only in the hard sciences but also in the popular interest in psychical and occult studies and the emerging social sciences. In all of these fields, the man who is able to "read" the "text" and make meaning out of the chaos of modernity is the expert, initiate or professional. Machen's detectives, through their engagement with ideas of chance and randomness and their detailed knowledge of the urban space, are able to construct meaning for a phenomenon that to the non-

expert would seem merely a welter of confusion. *The Great God Pan* and several of his other early stories feature a detective figure or figures who come across a mystery by accident and investigate it as a result of curiosity. In the process they demonstrate the importance of looking not only at material clues but also below the surface realities of the city in order to understand the deeper truth, which is revealed through coincidence and chance encounters.

The trope of a “hidden” London was a familiar one at the *fin de siècle*. Henry James, for example, in the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), evokes the mysterious nature of London, focussing upon the city’s enigmatic character: “Truly, of course, there are London mysteries (dense categories of dark arcana) for every spectator, and it’s in a degree an exclusion and a state of weakness to be without experience of the meaner conditions” (15). James continues by remarking upon the “suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld, heaving in its pain, its power and its hate; a presentation not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities ...” (28-29) and characterises the city dwellers as “guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface” (30).

The tone and imagery of James’s descriptions capture perfectly the ambiguity regarding perceptions of London that characterise Machen’s early fiction. On the one hand, James evokes the city of dark labyrinths, unseen horrors and subversive tendencies that is the focus of discussions of the urban Gothic. On the other hand, his description highlights London residents’ subjective *experience* of this dark city within a city, both fascinated and repulsed by their surroundings, curious but reticent. This resonates with the inquisitiveness coupled with worldly urban experience that characterises both Machen’s detectives and the “social explorers” who aimed to investigate this squalid world below the surface in order to understand the reality of urban poverty and crime. The voyeurism and attention to secret spaces that this characterisation implies, together with the conception of the city as a realm that offers both danger and titillation, can be seen as clearly in Machen’s psychic detective fiction as in the reports published concerning the conditions of the urban poor such as William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), where descriptions of living conditions frequently depicted violence and veiled sexual immorality. It is this latter understanding of the city as a site to be explored, a text to be read and interpreted, that characterises Machen’s urban supernatural fiction in general, and *The Great God Pan* in particular. Not only does it tally closely with his understanding of the symbolic nature of reality, but notions of the urban space as a site of investigation account for the dominance of interpretative rather than horrific scenes in his narratives.

The role of the detective in these tales is intimately linked to the figure of the *flâneur*, “the secret spectator of the spectacle of the spaces and places of the city” (Tester 7); he is an observer of the city and its denizens, and is intimately acquainted with both the well-traversed street and the forgotten byway. Machen himself is known for his *flâneur*-like association with the city, largely as a result of his work as a journalist. In his 1924 memoir *The London Adventure*, for example, he discusses his enthusiasm for what he terms his “London science” (33), reminiscing how he “poked about and mooned about in Soho instead of doing honest work, and speculated as to its narrow alleys and its archways and houses, and its sudden alarms and excursions” (32).

Machen's amateur detectives such as Villiers in *The Great God Pan* and the recurring character Dyson, who is first introduced in *The Inmost Light*, fit the *flâneur* model as ardent observers of the city but they also move beyond the role of observer in their investigations. As "detectives" they become actively involved in understanding and interpreting events that occur in their environment, a factor that links them to the figure of the social explorer or the social worker. Merlin Coverley also makes the connection between the role of the urban detective and the social scientist, suggesting that

The detective offered a figure whose specialist vision could penetrate the social and criminal mysteries of the city, who could walk its most dangerous streets with impunity, and who could expose truths which would otherwise remain hidden. To this extent, the detective is a surrogate social explorer, enabling readers to confront the 'fearful contrasts' of London but with the reassurance of authority and specialist knowledge. (*Psychogeography* 118)

Though their status as amateur detectives gives Machen's investigators very little official authority, their strength lies in their specialist knowledge of the ways of the city and, like their counterparts the social explorers, their experience of the out of the way places that were generally hidden from the middle-class gaze. Again, like the social explorers, though the tales of their investigations may be sensational, this is not their primary aim. Underlying the actions of both the social explorer and the *flâneur*-detective is a desire to know, to understand and interpret their environment and in order to do this they use their training and skills.

The specialist knowledge to which Machen's investigators are privy is an understanding of the function of "coincidence" in the modern world, and more specifically in the urban environment. Coincidence is a relatively common feature of early and mid-Victorian fiction, frequently utilised for purposes of plot convenience in sensational texts, or to provide evidence of the role of providence in human lives. By the end of the century, though, as John Reed has argued, "the gradual replacement of Providence by more deterministic views reflected a widespread conviction that man was a prisoner not only of the flesh and of a particular society, but of existence itself, where all coincidences were interchangeable, all happenstance equal to the most careful plan" (*Victorian Conventions* 141). Machen, however, has a different conception of the relation between chance or coincidence and order. As he puts it in *The London Adventure*, "I try to reverence the signs, omens, messages that are delivered in queer ways and queer places, not in the least according to the plans laid down either by the theologians or the men of science" (14). He goes on to assert that,

It is possible, just dimly possible, that the real pattern and scheme of life is not in the least apparent on the outward surface of things, which is the world of common sense, and rationalism, and reasoned deductions; but rather lurks, half hidden, only apparent in certain rare lights, and then only to the prepared eye; a secret pattern, an ornament which seems to have but little relation or none at all to the obvious scheme of the universe. (21)

It is this ability to interpret the random signs and symbols of the city that constitutes the special knowledge and training of Machen's amateur psychic detectives. Though they are represented as gentlemen of leisure who undertake investigation as a hobby, they are, in effect, professional *flâneurs* ideally suited to the task of interpreting events in the urban environment. This

investigation and interpretation occurs on two levels: the material, having to do with physical clues and more traditional detective procedures, and the symbolic, understanding what the clues really mean and how this meaning can be obtained through a skilled reading of seemingly random events. How then is this played out in *The Great God Pan*?

The narrative is essentially the exploration of the unintended consequences that accompany an experiment in “transcendental medicine” (1). By performing “a trifling rearrangement of certain cells, a microscopical alteration that would escape the attention of ninety-nine brain specialists out of a hundred” (2), Dr Raymond hopes to enable his patient, his ward Mary, to span “the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit” (3). In the tradition of Greek mythology, Raymond refers to this process of lifting the veil between the two worlds as “seeing the god Pan” (2). On the surface this may seem the kind of aim that a mystic such as Machen would endorse, seeing beyond the veil of the material world to the realm of spirit beneath. However, it is Raymond’s approach and attitude towards the experiment that differentiate him from practicing occultists such as Machen’s friend Arthur Waite.

For the trained Initiate a foray into the spirit world is intricately prepared for according to the tradition of his practice and only attempted when a specific level of accomplishment is achieved. It is not to be undertaken lightly and the Initiate is a voluntary participant in the event, well aware of the risks he may be exposed to. In *The Great God Pan*, Raymond performs his experiment on a naïve young woman who has no idea what to expect. His callous assertion that “I rescued Mary from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child; I think her life is mine, to use as I see fit” (4) indicates not only his contempt for human life but his intention to place scientific experimentation above all moral or ethical considerations. It is this type of scientific arrogance that Machen abhorred. Moreover, Raymond’s assumption that understanding the other world could be a matter of simple surgery demonstrates a materialistic worldview that denies the essence of the very spiritual world he is attempting to connect with. Though his experiment is ultimately successful in that Mary does seem to see into a world beyond, her experience is depicted as terrifying:

Suddenly, as they watched, they heard a long-drawn sigh, and suddenly did the colour that had vanished returned to the girl's cheeks, and suddenly her eyes opened. ... [A] great wonder fell upon her face, and her hands stretched out as if to touch what was invisible; but in an instant the wonder faded, and gave place to the most awful terror. The muscles of her face were hideously convulsed, she shook from head to foot; the soul seemed struggling and shuddering within the house of flesh. (7)

Mary is left brain-damaged and, surprisingly, pregnant. In due course she dies giving birth to a daughter who is subsequently fostered out to a family in the country.

If this were all there was to Machen’s novel then it would be a relatively simple horrific tale about the consequences of science meddling with things it doesn’t fully understand. For example, in her discussion of the figure of the scientist in nineteenth-century fiction, Roslynn Haynes suggests that

we search in vain for more than a very few examples of sympathetically-presented scientist

characters in Victorian literature. ... Instead, we have numerous representations of the figure of the mad, evil and dangerous scientist, conceived in the tradition of Faust and Frankenstein and often presented in frankly derivative gothic terms. These characters are not realistically depicted. Rather they are a metonym for science itself ... The fear of the new secular power of science in conflict with religion and individual aspirations – a fear which could not be discussed within the parameters of actual science - is transferred to an evil mage figure who overthrows the social and moral order. ... They act by imposing their mysterious, almost superhuman, power on the innocent, invariably with evil consequences. (120)

Dr Raymond certainly fits the evil scientist model, and his experiment does have horrific consequences, but Machen's narrative does not end with his failure. It is merely the first chapter in a string of events, the true nature of which is revealed by piecing together seemingly unconnected narratives and evidence gathered by chance.

The majority of *The Great God Pan* focuses on the investigation into the actions of Mary's daughter Helen by a series of amateur detectives. They trace her movements, beginning with the atrocities she committed in the countryside where she spent her youth, to her current residence in London. The detective narrative is told through a series of letters, fragments and oral histories pieced together by Clarke, Villiers and Austin, who are motivated by their curiosity to discover all the details they can pertaining to the life of this mysterious woman. Though they uncover various crimes she has committed, the reader is never given many details regarding the true nature of her actions or what her victims really suffered. At these points the narrative trails away into the hyperbole regarding "nameless terrors" and "unspeakable horrors" that was so criticised by contemporary reviewers. While it is true that this technique fails to rouse any real sense of horror in the reader, what it does accomplish is maintaining focus upon the actions of the detectives and the current aspect of their investigation. The reader is drawn into the investigative process rather than focussing on the visceral aspects of the crimes themselves.

Following the description of Dr. Raymond's experiment, the narrative skips forward a little over twenty years to the present, where Clarke, the man who witnessed the surgery, is involved in compiling a book entitled "Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil" (9). He has just finished recording an unusual story told to him by an acquaintance regarding the actions of an adopted child who, eleven years ago, terrified her neighbours and induced madness in her playmates. A certain dramatic irony surrounds this episode as an astute reader realises from the hints provided about the early childhood of the orphan that she was the daughter of Mary, raised by Raymond until he could no longer control her behaviour. That the earliest history of Mary's child should happen to be given to the one man who could possibly realise the true import of the story is the first of many meaningful coincidences on which the narrative hinges.

As the point of view shifts with the beginning of each chapter, the reader temporarily leaves behind the narrative of Raymond and the story of the child Helen V. to join Clarke's friend Villiers, an idle, urban gentleman, in his nightly ramble through the streets of London.

Villiers prided himself as a practised explorer of such obscure mazes and byways of London life, and in this unprofitable pursuit he displayed an assiduity which was worthy of more serious employment. Thus he stood beside the lamp-post surveying the passers-by with

undisguised curiosity, and with that gravity only known to the systematic diner, had just enunciated in his mind the formula: “London has been called the City of Encounters; it is more than that, it is the City of Resurrections” (14)

During his *flânerie* Villiers encounters an old college friend, Herbert, begging in the street. He relates how he has been reduced to this condition through an unfortunate marriage to a young woman who corrupted his soul:

The night of the wedding I found myself sitting in her bedroom in the hotel, listening to her as she spoke in her beautiful voice, spoke of things which even now I would not dare whisper in blackest night, though I stood in the midst of a wilderness. You, Villiers, you may think you know life, and London, and what goes on day and night in this dreadful city; for all I can say you may have heard the talk of the vilest, but I tell you you can have no conception of what I know, not in your most fantastic, hideous dreams can you have imagined forth the faintest shadow of what I have heard – and seen. Yes, seen. I have seen the incredible, such horrors that even I myself sometimes stop in the middle of the street, and ask whether it is possible for a man to behold such things and live. In a year, Villiers, I was a ruined man, in body and soul. (16)

When Herbert mentions that the name of the woman to whom he had been married was Helen Vaughan, the reader realises that another episode in the history of the mysterious Helen has been revealed as a result of a chance encounter. Though at this stage the name means nothing to him, Villiers feels “together with compassion all the relish of the amateur in mysteries (15). His curiosity aroused, he senses that “a case like this is like a nest of Chinese boxes; you open one after another and find a quainter workmanship in every box. Most likely poor Herbert is merely one of the outside boxes; there are stranger ones to follow” (17).

Villiers takes his story to Austin, a fellow *flâneur* who recalls a scandal associated with Herbert being published in all the London papers: a well-connected gentleman reportedly died of fright after visiting Herbert and his wife. Villiers investigates the scene of the crime and discovers among the mess a pen and ink sketch of a woman, which he takes to show Clarke. Clarke is horrified to see what he believes to be Mary’s face staring back at him, but soon realises there are some subtle differences around the eyes. It is only when he turns the image over and sees “Helen” written on the back that he realises the truth, and makes the connection between the surgery he witnessed, the story of the child and the portrait of the woman responsible for the ruination of Herbert’s soul. At this point all of the chance encounters and coincidences, together with the material evidence (letters and sketches) that have driven the narrative come together to reveal to both Clarke and the reader the truth behind the mysterious events that have been hinted at: Mary’s child, conceived in a vision of Pan, is alive, and wherever she goes, horrible events follow. Finally Austin, an art collector, acquires a book of paintings by Arthur Meyrick who died mysteriously on a trip to South America. Inside they discover another portrait of Helen, this time surrounded by mythological figures of evil.

Machen’s amateur detectives rely on chance and random events to lead them inexorably to a greater understanding of the case. This is not ineptitude or laziness on the detectives’ part; rather, their knowledge of the workings of the urban environment have taught them that the city is

truly a mystical place in which random, yet meaningful events are in fact commonplace. As the narrative thus far has demonstrated, the man of the street is continually running into old friends in unexpected places, finding answers to unasked questions and fortuitously encountering just the person about whom they were thinking. This is the very nature of the urban environment. As late nineteenth-century scientists were beginning to discover, when enough autonomous entities interact, unexpected patterns often emerge. These patterns are what the urban detectives understand. They realise that meaning can emerge from seeming chaos when the observer is able to gain the right perspective. Thus the urban space is a text that must be read, its symbols interpreted by the expert who is able to piece together the physical and metaphysical clues that can be discovered in the ever-changing current of the city.

The discovery of Meyrick's painting signals the point at which Machen's narrative changes from the idle investigation of past events into a more urgent quest. A number of respected London gentlemen have committed suicide, some of whom were friends of the three investigators, and the police and their families are at a loss to find a reason for their actions. "The police had been forced to confess themselves powerless to arrest or to explain the sordid murders of Whitechapel; but before the horrible suicides of Piccadilly and Mayfair they were dumbfounded, for not even the mere ferocity which did duty as an explanation of the crimes of the East End, could be of service in the West" (33). In this reference to the murders of Jack the Ripper some five years earlier, Machen emphasises the upper-middle class nature of Helen's current victims and the investigators themselves. The East End, the site of the Ripper murders and also the part of the city most associated with poverty, crime and prostitution, was also the site most commonly investigated by social explorers. It is to this quarter that Villiers now turns to investigate the current whereabouts of Helen, whom they suspect to be behind this latest series of mysterious deaths.

Villiers eventually encounters Helen in Soho. "If you see mud on the top of a stream, you may be sure that it was once on the bottom. I went to the bottom. I have always been fond of diving into Queer Street for my amusement, and I found that my knowledge of that locality and its inhabitants very useful" (40). In this way Villiers demonstrates that he knows how to use the random events that typify the urban space to his advantage. He places himself in their way, going to the place most likely to yield up a fortuitous coincidence, and remaining open to the currents of the city. The detective finds that Helen had been masquerading as a Mrs Beaumont, the new darling of London society, terrorising the men who attended her "at-homes" or, as Susan Navarette eloquently puts it, "amusing herself by introducing her male friends to her father" (Navarette 189).

Helen's association with the God Pan is hinted at throughout the novel. Her mother, Mary, presumably fell pregnant during her brief encounter with the God, and during her childhood she terrified her playmates by cavorting with satyrs. Meyrick depicts her in a similar fashion, surrounded by dark mythological figures. Pan was a popular figure in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction and embodied a variety of meanings depending on the genre of the piece, ranging from the inspiring nature god of pastoral poetry and vignettes to the destructive "panic" inducing force of supernatural fiction. The Victorian literary representations reveal the dual nature of Pan, a God traditionally symbolising the crossing of boundaries between human and animal, mortal and divine as a result of his parentage. A God of binaries, he represents the beauty of nature and music as well as the destruction and grotesquery of the rites of Dionysus or the Bacchanal. In Machen's novel Pan represents the power of the unseen world, that which cannot be understood on

the material plane and, more importantly that which should not be tampered with by the uninitiated. While Pan is primarily a nature God, Machen emphasises the darker, more primal aspects of his mythology, elements that can be transferred to a modern setting,

it is an old story, an old mystery played in our day, and in dim London streets instead of amidst the vineyards and the olive gardens. We know what happened to those who chanced to meet the Great God Pan, and those who are wise to know that all the symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing. It was, indeed an exquisite symbol beneath which men long ago veiled their knowledge of the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things; forces before which lie at the heart of all things; forces before which the souls of men must wither and die and blacken, as their bodies blacken under the electric current. Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint poetic fancy, to some a foolish tale. But you and I, at all events have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form. (43)

Pan is both an actual figure and a symbol in this novel. He is the Goat God that terrifies and impregnates Mary but he is also a symbol of the forces of the other world that the ancient mystery religions of Greece and contemporary occultists sought to understand. Though his nature in this text is terrifying, this too may be a symbol of forbidden knowledge or an inappropriate approach to the mysteries rather than the specific nature of the God himself. This ambiguity is what makes the symbolic approach to Machen's work all the more interesting since it provides us with various ways of approaching the text that do not narrow its conceptual framework to simply anxiety concerning the potential evils of science or materialism.

The novel ends with Helen's death. Having finally tracked her to a house in Piccadilly, Villiers, Clarke and an independent witness, a medical man by the name of Robert Matheson, watch her commit suicide. Later the doctor reports,

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 ... and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. (46)

Thus, by following a trail of physical clues and the pattern of coincidence, the three investigators are able to piece together the sordid history of Helen Vaughan and stop her from committing any further atrocities. Though the detectives are not especially experienced in conducting criminal investigations they are very familiar with the city and how to obtain information within it. The initial pieces of information are acquired fortuitously but, once the detectives sense that there is a mystery to be uncovered, like the social explorers they actively seek out the dark places of the city in search of clues that will enable them to offer assistance. They do not ignore the accidents and coincidences that occur daily in the city; instead they trust that in the "city of encounters" the solution to the mystery will be offered to the man who is willing to seek meaning in both the physical and symbolic realms, exemplifying the view of the "new sciences" and occultism alike. It is only by meeting the city *on its own terms* they are able to make progress.

In this, the first of his novels, Machen introduces the ideas that are developed further in his subsequent work: the dual nature of reality, the possibility of experiencing the spiritual through symbolism, and the important role that chance and coincidence play in attaining an understanding of the modern world. Just as the new sciences were beginning to propound the importance of the close observation of seemingly random occurrences in order to understand the bigger picture, Machen's detectives show us order in the apparent chaos of urban spaces. It is through understanding the significance of and utilising the vicissitudes of chance encounters that the *flâneur*-like amateur detective becomes the 'expert', able to construct meaning in the urban spaces of a modernity whose spiritual dimension was no longer natural.

Notes

¹ Machen's associations with Victorian occultism are varied and complex. In 1885, after moving to London to pursue a career in letters, he found work cataloguing occult books for publisher and bookseller George Redway. In addition, his lifelong friendship with Arthur Edward Waite led to Machen's brief participation in the Golden Dawn after the death of his first wife. In addition to these more formalised associations, Machen's lifelong passion for the mythology of his native Wales and the mystic traditions of the Celtic church become recurring themes in his fiction.

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