Paganism in Late Victorian Literature (1891-1904): fear, fantasies, and mythmaking

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, the notorious occultist wrote that 'paganism is wholesome because it faces the facts of life'. Crowley's words could be interpreted to mean that paganism acknowledges the importance of our corporeality, of our sexuality, and of our mortality and decay, realities which struggled to be accepted by a strait-laced Victorian culture, both fascinated and repulsed by what paganism suggested on the nature of mankind and its desires and drives. In the late nineteenth century, the collision of Victorian and pagan moralities would clash to produce new cultural forms. This research thesis is interested in the relationship between paganism and literature during the Late Victorian Era (1875-1901). Relying on a corpus comprising Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel T*ess of the D'Urbervilles*, Arthur Machen's short story 'The Great God Pan', published in 1894, and Montague Rhodes James's 1904 collection of short stories, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, it seeks to understand why and how paganism was used in the literature of the fin de siècle. Studying the relationship between paganism and Late Victorian literature prompts several questions. A first evident interrogation bears on the nature of Late Victorian paganism. It is indeed my contention that paganism in the latter years of the nineteenth-century is not a straightforward resurgence of ancient creeds, but a distinctively Victorian product, resting in tension between 'present weirdness and accumulated tradition', in the words of H.P. Lovecraft[1]. What then, made it so peculiarly Late Victorian? And what can explain its return in favour and its popularity during the fin de siècle? Could its foreign newness compensate for a constitutional deficiency of the Late Victorian spirit? Finally, what was its distinctive impact on literature, and in what ways was paganism used in fiction to produce a commentary on Late Victorian society?

In order to address these questions, I will first take a look at the broader cultural context of the Late Victorian Era, by granting special attention to the 'fin de siècle' period of the 1880s to the 1900s, focusing in particular on the 'Yellow Nineties'[2]—a nickname the 1890s acquired in their association with the Decadent magazine 'The Yellow Book'—as this period features a very specific cultural climate, marked by the importance of aestheticism, the notion of decline, and general pessimism and anxiety about the future. In the history of the nineteenth-century, the fin de siècle indeed constitutes a period of transition into modern times, and the Late

[1] Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 1927, H.P. Lovecraft.com, accessed 15/03/21. https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx.
[2] "Introduction to the Yellow Nineties", The Yellow Nineties online, accessed 27/08/21, http://www.1890s.ca/.

Victorians were aware that they were witnessing a shift in paradigm. The Late Victorian Era succeeded to an Early Victorian era (1838-1851) marked by unregulated capitalism, social agitation, and the beginning of State action in public matters and collective welfare, followed by a Mid-Victorian era (1851-1875) that was marked by optimistic trust in the sciences and in the 'age of improvement'[3]. Enthusiasms had dampened by the 1870s, and the Late Victorians had a more sombre outlook on the world, as the religious crisis that brewed during the Mid-Victorian Era reached its peak, and the hostile world of the Industrial Revolution was reviled. These disillusions were both caused and accompanied by new anxieties about Victorian identity, as the original ethnocentrism of the era was forcibly displaced by the realities of imperial Britain's racial diversity, and by the seismic importance of Darwin's *Origin of Species,* published in 1859. According to British historian W. E. Houghton, the Victorian Era was a time of "dissolving creeds and clashing theories"[4]: the 'Victorian frame of mind' (Houghton, 1957) was affected by spiritual and moral uncertainty as the historical makers of Victorian community that were the Church, the family unit and the class-system were perturbed by profound social change. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the 'death of Christian Britain'[5], the secularization of the British Isles, and the scientific discoveries of geology and Darwinism played a substantial role in the resurgence and shaping of Late Victorian paganism.

Faced with 'the demise of the nation's core religious and moral identity'[6], the Late Victorian public was not just despondent, it also looked for convenient alternative moral systems. The '*fin de siècle* pagan revival'[7] featured an incredibly dynamic upsurge in paganism, which, far from being a prerogative of the upper classes, infiltrated the Victorian humanities and sciences and shaped the aesthetics of the period. Its message resonated with the preoccupations of the Late Victorians, as paganism expressed 'a reaction against industrialisation, materialism, scientism, and against the religious crisis that rocked Great-Britain, and it translates the—often creative, sometimes provocative—quest for other forms of belief'[8].

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[3] Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867,* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[4] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 20.
[5] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, (1800-2000),* (London: Routledge, 2001), i.
[6] Callum G. Brown, *Ibid,* i.
[7] Sophie Mantrant, 'Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and "The True Literature of Occultism"', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies,* 1.2 (2018): 81.
[8] 'L'expression d'une réaction à l'industrialisation, au matérialisme, au scientisme, et à la crise religieuse que traverse la Grande-Bretagne, et traduit la recherche souvent créative, parfois provocatrice, d'autres formes de croyance.' *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 80 online (Autumn 2014), Preface.

The conditions for the resurgence of paganism were further met by the development of history and archaeology as established scientific disciplines, which progressed immensely in the Mid- to Late Victorian Era, with the digs of Sir Charles Newton in Halicarnassus, Cnidus and Didyma in 1856, and Schliemann's 1870 discovery of the mythical city of Troy in 1870, followed by the discovery of Mycenae in 1874. This revolutionized both the conception the Victorians had of the past, and their relationship to earlier eras. Firstly, the physical resurgence of ancient civilisations brought the mythical past shaped by oral history into the present and proved the historicity of some myths. Moreover, the past could no longer be constructed as a melioristic course of progress that put the Victorians at the apex of civilisation. As linearity gave way to circularity, time became liable to disruption, reminiscence on the individual and collective levels, and repetition in the present. The Late Victorian attitude to the past was ambivalent: bucolic escapism to an idealized Ancient world—a legacy of earlier Victorian periods—cohabited with the Decadent identification to a 'favourite era'(Rancy, 1982) that was the Late Roman Empire, favoured because of its historical connotation of decline and decadence: 'following the Gothic revival and the pre-Raphaelite fashion, it is the Late Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire that captured the imagination, the first for its luxury and excess, the other for its barbaric exoticism and its curious character as an "age of transition"'[9]. The Victorian Era thus rediscovered and reconstructed the past and the collective cosmogony that had so far ruled Western beliefs. Because these uncertainties about the past threatened identity, the past became both object of scientific study and a personal preoccupation: 'the nineteenth century was marked by an upsurge of interest in the past, which became a kind of fascination with paganism in the fin de siècle'[10].

Although the Late Victorian Era featured no unified movement of paganism and the use and interpretation of ancient motifs are multiple, dominant trends can be distinguished today. In this dissertation I will refer to three strands of paganism using expressions borrowed from Jennifer Hallett, who identified them in her thesis 'Paganism in England, 1885-1914'*:* 'responsible paganism', 'decadent paganism'[11] and 'magical paganism'[12]. Responsible paganism mobilises 'images and ideas which depicted paganism as a healthy lifestyle, involving

[9] 'Après le renouveau gothique et la mode préraphaélite, c'est le Bas-Empire romain et l'Empire byzantin qui captivent l'imagination, l'un par sa luxure et ses excès, l'autre par son exotisme barbare et son curieux caractère d''âge de transition', Catherine Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914*, (C.N.R.S. Editions, 1982), 38% calibre ebook.
[10] Sophie Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 80 (Autumn 2014): 1.

simple living, and which perceived nature as a loving force, it heavily relied on a sanitized and idealized vision of the ancient world' (Hallett, 8), while Decadent paganism is characterized by 'the throwing off of morality and its replacement by indulgence in hedonistic freedom and sensuality'(Hallett, 9). Finally, magical paganism is distinctively esoteric in nature and appropriates ancient pagan motifs for nineteenth-century ritual magic. Magical paganism will be excluded from my analysis, as it covers the Late Victorian appetite for occultism, which was practiced among secret societies and is not so obviously reflected in the literature, and as the scope of my essay cannot extend beyond its own subject matter. In all these variants, Hallett identifies a 'radical desire for paganism to be restored in the modem era'[13]. As a 'functional and sociological threat'[14], it was dichotomous: both attractive and repulsive to the Victorians, it clashed with their strict moral and religious values, but it also catered to their yearning for new spiritual and moral solutions in a context of cultural disorientation and identity crisis. Greco-Roman paganism dominated the arts, and thanks to the imitation of ancient motifs in literature, many Victorians had better knowledge of the Classics than of Scriptures: 'Classical antiquity was anything but esoteric; it was inescapable'[15]. A fundamental characteristic of Late-Victorian paganism is thus this ambivalent tension between a new form of cultural exoticism and a profound familiarity with the images of the ancient world. This resulted in a period-specific brand of uncanny that will be further studied in the second part of this dissertation (Decadent paganism and the supernatural). The attested cultural omnipresence of paganism during the British *fin de siècle* sparks interrogations on the nature of this paganism. What in the first place is paganism? And what distinguished Late Victorian paganism from ancient religions? To answer these questions, I will focus on three aspects of Late Victorian paganism: its problematic linguistic genesis, its dialectic relationship with Christianism, and its heterogeneity. The very origins of the word 'paganism' have caused a heated debate among linguists and historians for centuries:

> For over a hundred years writers had commonly asserted that the Latin word *paganus*, from which it was derived, signified 'rustic'; a result of the triumph of Christianity as the dominant, metropolitan, and urban faith, which left the old religions to make a last stand among the more backwards populations of the countryside. In 1986, however, the Oxford-based historian Robin Lane Fox reminded colleagues that this usage had never actually been proved and that the term had more probably been employed in a different sense in which it was attested in the Roman world, of a civilian; in this case a person not enrolled

[13] Jennifer Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", (PhdD Diss. University of Bristol, 2006), abstract.
[14] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon, A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.
[15] Ronald Hutton, *Ibid*, 17.

> in the Christian army of God. A few years later, a French academic, Pierre Chuvin, challenged both derivations, arguing that the word *pagani* was applied to followers of the older religious traditions at a time when the latter still made up the majority of town-dwellers and when its earlier sense of non-military, had died out. He proposed instead that it simply denoted those who preferred the faith of the *pagus*, the local unit of government; that is, the rooted or old, religion. His suggestion has so far met with apparent wide acceptance[16].

This quote demonstrates the inherent difficulty of conceiving paganism without bias as it exists against our default Christian frame of cultural reference. It further acknowledges the alternating dominance of the two traditions throughout history as their fortunes shifted from majority to minority religion. By the Late Victorian period, paganism constituted the negative mirror image of Christianity because the Victorians had built their worldview on Christian beliefs. Hence, paganism was not an evident alternative in a world that was still overwhelmingly Christian, if not in faith at least in morals. This produced 'tensions and anxieties'[17] as the Late Victorians struggled to preserve 'a pre-eminent place for the Christian revelation'[18] in their enthusiasm for paganism, which constituted an inferior creed, but it also offered the opportunity of emulation or syncretism between the two traditions because of their shared cultural heritage. If delimited by Victorian morality, paganism could help revive Christian feelings or strengthen the country's morality:

> In such popular histories and works of fiction, a very large public was inoculated with the instinct that classical paganism had represented some of the lower rungs on the ascent to the true religion, and that it had left a treasury of images and ideas which could be enjoyed within limits tightly defined and patrolled by Christian faith and morality. Should those limits be ignored, the same texts suggested, then not merely individuals but whole societies would become vulnerable to spiritual and institutional decay and dissolution of the sort which had beset the ancient world[19].

For the sake of coherence, in this dissertation 'paganism' will be correspond to the non-Christian polytheistic religions of the ancient world, or to some folk beliefs from Britain and Europe, as they correspond to active forms of non-Christian belief systems. Although the Victorians initially equated paganism with the Ancient world, the disciplines of mythography and folkloristics sparked new interests in the ancient Celtic and Norse religions. Because of the

[16] Ronald Hutton. *The Triumph of the Moon, A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.
[17] Hutton, *Ibid*, 14.
[18] Hutton, *Ibid*,13.
[19] Hutton, *Ibid*, 17.

historical confusion that reigned in the nineteenth-century, I will also include much older heliolatries from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age which were sometimes mistakenly believed to be much more recent by the Victorians. Given these elements, it is evident that any discussion centring on Late-Victorian paganism must be accompanied by an analysis of Victorian faith. A third important point was the heterogeneity of the cultural sources of Late Victorian paganism, and the different degrees of moral values ascribed to these heritages by the Late Victorians. This diversity is visible in my corpus. In 'The Great God Pan' and in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Ancient Greek references cohabit with a pervasive insular folklore, and in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, Scandinavian folk beliefs dominate. Despite their geographic diversity, these paganisms collectively represented a threat to the Victorians, who feared this purported cultural invasion would defile the Victorian frame of mind.

And yet, it seems paganism was winning over the Victorian public. According to R. Hutton, 'as the century drew to a close, the positive language of paganism grew more aggressive'[20], a reality that brings us to the subject of this dissertation: the impact of paganism on fin de siècle literature. Literature being the privileged medium of the Victorian era, it was chosen for its testimonial value, because it bears a faithful record of the presence, forms, and influences of paganism on the Late Victorian imagination. Before assessing the relationship between paganism and Late Victorian fiction, it is important to recapitulate the main characteristics of Late Victorian literature which had the most influence on literary paganism. The nineteenth-century saw the triumph of the novel and of prose over poetry. Rising social awareness and concern for public welfare in the Early- and Mid-Victorian Era bolstered the demand for novels about the everyday of everyman. Moreover, the Romantic movement's exaltation of Nature and the Gothic's insistence on the supernatural and on the gross materiality of mankind both influenced the handling of paganism in Late Victorian literature. A final important development is the rediscovery—through the popularity of Antiquarianism—of British folklore, which was recorded in the hopes of preserving a fast-fading world.

The three works in my corpus belong to the same timescale of paganism, but all pursue different visions of paganism and different moral goals. Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, grounded in realism and discussing themes of society, soul-searching and morality, falls under the category of 'responsible paganism', while Machen and James's later works belong to 'decadent paganism' and use ancient motifs as tools to negotiate Victorian

[20] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon, A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 26.

frustrations and fantasies. While the aesthetic omnipresence of paganism in fiction was nothing new as a theme, the nineteen-nineties featured a new development. The 'Yellow Nineties' used paganism for its shock value, and to emancipate the reader from a disappointing present:

> The aesthetic and decadent period is thus dominated by a pessimistic conception of life, which orients literature in tree distinctive directions: first towards the description of the darker sides of life, with naturalism; then with the description of an idealised past or of an inner paradise refined and decorated, with aestheticism, and, later, symbolism; ultimately towards the exploration of the physical and psychic beyond, with the fantastic novel[21].

This attitude is clearly featured in Arthur Machen's approach where paganism is indissociable from the occult, and the largely positive connotations of the earlier period are replaced by a darker dimension of paganism which as an outer force offers a new reading grid for the world and at the same time threatens the basis of Victorian society. In the case of James, his first collected volume was published in 1904, but most of the short stories within *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* were written a decade or so earlier. Although James's horrific fiction may seem more related to Machen's weird fiction, the mythopoeia central to his story-telling matches Hardy's interest for folk belief in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and Machen's lifelong interest in Greek mythology and Welsh folklore. Considering these elements, I believe the common references mobilized in these three works outweigh their differences in tone and nature. In my discussion of Late Victorian paganism in literature, I will also analyse the appropriation of folklore by Late Victorians writers, as paganism and folklore present many generic and stylistic similarities and were fictionalized at the same time. It can also be attested that the resurgence of paganism and the resurgence of folklore operated in a simultaneous and mutual movement against traditional accepted narratives of history and fiction. As we will see in the second part of this dissertation (Decadent paganism), Late Victorian pagan literature is indebted to the fantastic movement, which was itself breaking away from literary normativism and adopted folklore as its subject: 'folklore is alive—not dead—in texts of the literary fantastic where traditional beliefs and motifs compete for narrative authority with normative and elite

[21] 'L'époque esthétique et décadente est donc dominée par une conception pessimiste de la vie, qui oriente la littérature dans trois directions distinctes : d'abord vers la description des aspects sombres de l'existence, avec le naturalisme ; ensuite vers la description d'un passé idéalisé ou d'un paradis intérieur au décor raffiné, avec l'esthétisme, et, plus tard, le symbolisme ; enfin vers l'exploration de l'au-delà physique et psychique, avec la nouvelle fantastique.' Catherine Rancy, "Romantisme et post-romantisme" *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914*, (C.N.R.S. Editions, 1982).

standards'[22]. It is thus important to put these three works in tension the better to highlight this evolution throughout the Nineties and into the early twentieth century.

Because of the complexity of my subject, I would like to avoid some misunderstandings. Hardy, Machen, and James were not estranged from the Christian religion, neither were they religious radicals. Although the three men were all heavily influenced by paganism—sometimes to the point of practicing occultism as Machen did later in life—none of them revendicated a theistic form of paganism. Hardy was a regretful atheist, Machen was an Anglo-Catholic believer, and James had the propriety of the Anglican. Furthermore, they all demonstrated a deep knowledge of Scriptures: Hardy had envisaged an ecclesiastical career, while Machen was the son of a country vicar from a long line of vicars, and M. R. James was an esteemed scholar of the *New Testament Apocrypha*[23]. In integrating paganism to their literature, these authors were thus not marginal voices, but conduits for a sweeping cultural phenomenon.

This subject falls within the framework of Victorian literary studies, borrowing from cultural history and folkloristics. To respect the interdisciplinarity of my subject, I will adopt a chronological approach by studying these three works of fiction in succession, and I will build my analysis around great thematical axes and the micro-readings of excerpts. The first part of this dissertation will focus on the religious anxieties of the Late Victorian Era and their interplay with paganism as an ethos with the help of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It will put forward the positive connotations paganism could hold in the Late Victorian era, by delineating the preoccupations and hopes of the Late Victorians for a spiritual renewal in a context of weakened faith. In contrast, the second part of this dissertation will focus on Decadent paganism, and its insistence on horrific corporeality, highlighting Victorian fears and fantasies about degeneration, biology, and deep time, through the mobilization of both Machen and M.R. James's short stories. In the third and final part of this dissertation, I have made the choice of focusing on one salient aspect of literary paganism: mythopoeia. By uncovering Hardy, Machen and James's mythical inspirations, I intent to prove that this expression of paganism is definitely a Victorian occurrence, tailor-made to fit the Late Victorian Era's imagination and human needs.

[22] Jason Marc Harris. *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-century British Fiction.* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), viii.
[23] Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament, Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924).

I. 'The possibilities of faith and ethics in a Darwinian world'[24]: religious anxieties and paganism in the Late Victorian Era.

In this first part of my dissertation, I will be studying the relationship between paganism and Late Victorian religious attitudes, supporting myself with the text of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which expresses the cries 'for a new faith that would end their distress of mind'[25] of many Late Victorians, and which explores 'conceivable alternatives'[26] to the Christian-based Victorian morality.

A. 'A creed outworn'[27]: religious criticism in *Tess.*

In 1807, William Wordsworth wrote in his poem *The World is Too Much With Us* that he would rather choose being 'A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn' over Christian faith. Almost a century later, the striking qualification could be applied to *fin de siècle* Christianism as much as to its ancient contender. In *Tess*, Hardy offers an almost ethnographic rendering of Late Victorian attitudes to faith and lack of faith, and he proves highly critical of what Christianism has become, deploying an 'unrelenting attack on Christianity, the Churches, and their "redemptive theolatry" enforced by the scientific and rationalist assumptions of the modern temper'[28].

a. 'Hellenism and Hebraism': an irreconcilable polarity.

Thomas Hardy's penultimate novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles, A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented,* was first published in serialised form in 1891, and tells the story of Tess Durbeyfield, a sixteen-year-old peasant girl from a poor family living in Hardy's fictional Wessex. Although Hardy does not specify in what year the story begins, Tess is set in the late nineteenth century. Tess is of innocent character and is gifted with extraordinary beauty. After

[24] Marie Panter, 'Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (Autumn, 2014).
[25] Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 126.
[26] Panter, *Ibid*: 1.
[27] 'I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn', William Wordsworth, 'The World is Too Much With Us', *Poems, in Two Volumes*, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown (1807)).
[28] David J. De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels', *ELH* 34 No. 3 (September 1967): 381.

her shiftless father discovers by chance that they are the last descendants of a once illustrious line, the D'Urbervilles, he drinks too much to be able to work, and replacing him, Tess causes an accident that kills the family horse, their only source of income. Ridden with guilt, she obeys her mother and goes to the neighbouring Trantridge to claim kin with the D'Urbervilles, who, in an ironic twist of fate, are not truly related to the Durbeyfields as they bought their title. There, she accepts a job and is relentlessly pursued by Alec D'Urberville. After he takes advantage of her, Tess returns home and gives birth to a son baptized Sorrow. The baby dies soon after his birth, and after spending a year confined, Tess accepts to work as a milkmaid at Talbothays dairy, in the Vale of Froom, the Valley of the Great Dairies, near Tess's home in Blackmore Vale, where her history is unknown. At Talbothays she meets Angel Clare, the free-thinking son of a vicar who wants to become a farmer. They fall in love, and despite her troubled conscience, she accepts his marriage proposal. When she slips a confessional note under his door, fate works against her and Angel marries her without ever having found the letter and learned her past. After their wedding, both Angel and Tess confess indiscretions, but while Tess readily forgives him, Angel is unable to reconcile his idealised notion of Tess with the truth, and he sends her away until he will come for her.

Tess falls on hard times and toils at the swede fields of Flintcomb-Ash. When she tries to seek the help of her father-in-law, she overhears Angel's brothers talking about his disreputable marriage and renounces out of shame. On her way back from Emminster to Flintcomb-Ash, she encounters a wandering preacher who turns out to be Alec. He begins to pursue her again, turning his back on his newly reformed self. Soon afterwards, Tess learns that her mother is near death, and goes to tend to her family. Her mother recovers but her father dies, and the Durbeyfields are evicted from their Marlott home. Alec offers her help, but she refuses. After an ellipsis, Angel, who had emigrated to Brazil, realises he misjudged Tess and returns home, intent on reconciling with his wife, and unaware of her hardships. He discovers her in the pleasure town of Sandbourne, living as the kept mistress of Alec. Both are heartbroken, and Angel leaves. Enraged by Alec's taunting, Tess stabs him to death and runs away, catching up with Angel with whom she evades capture for a few days. The couple are cornered at Stonehenge, and Tess is arrested and sent to jail, where she is later executed. Angel and Tess's sister Liza-Lu watch from afar, and leave, their fate unknown.

A first striking feature of the novel is the importance of faith and ethics in the life of its protagonists. Their progress is split between the novel's three systems of belief: established Christianism, pagan folk beliefs, and nineteenth-century critical spirituality, inspired by ancient

Greek paganism. This section focuses on the 'differences and affinities' (Panter, 2014) between the two systems of beliefs that are paganism and Christianism, adopting Matthew Arnold's concepts of 'Hellenism' and 'Hebraism', which directly influenced Hardy's thought. British literary critic and poet Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) greatly influenced the Mid-Victorian Era, being one of the first to acknowledge the discrepancy between the Victorians' cultural baggage and the disconcerting new world they were facing. According to him, 'traditional beliefs and institutions [were] no longer adequate to embody contemporary life'[29]. As a result, Late Victorian attitudes towards religion were characterized by a great discomfort and a feeling of loss:

> The gradual decline in Christian faith [accelerated] between 1850 and 1918 [...] From the 1870s church attendance ceased to keep up with population growth and Evangelicalism had passed its peak by the 1880s. Victorians faced the combined theoretical challenges of biblical criticism, geological discoveries and Darwinian evolution theory[30].

To palliate this spiritual disorientation, Arnold looked to another religious tradition: Greek paganism. Spiritual revival began to be envisioned outside of Christianity, and by the Late Victorian period, radical voices suggested that paganism was not just a substitute to the 'creed outworn' of contemporary Christianism but that it could supersede Christian morality in its promise of spiritual fulfilment: 'many radicals increasingly called for paganism in earnest, imagined paganism as the embodiment of delight, and looked to paganism as a source of alternative wisdom'[31]. In his critical essays, Matthew Arnold accordingly expounded a positive conception of paganism—akin to Hallett's 'responsible paganism'—which relied on the Classics. In *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism,* published between 1867 and 1868 in periodicals, Arnold constructs a polarity between two moral traditions, 'Hellenism' and 'Hebraism', a polarity which according to him, structures all of the modern Western world: 'Hebraism and Hellenism, — between these two points of influence moves our world'[32]. In order to analyse Arnold's influence on *Tess*, two important points must be made at this stage: Arnold does not antagonize the two traditions, which is a first revolution in the Victorian apprehension of the polarity between Christian and non-Christian. Instead,

[29] Matthew Arnold cited in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 17.
[30] Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings ed. *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 248.
[31] Jennifer Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", (PhdD Diss. University of Bristol, 2006), 1.
[32] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy, An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, Blackmask online (2001), accessed 26/03/ 21, http://public-library.uk/ebooks/25/79.pdf.

Arnold acknowledges the different pursuits of both creeds, and likens them in their common goal of spiritual fulfilment:

> The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience [...] At the bottom of both the Greek and the Hebrew notion is the desire, native in man, for reason and the will of God, the feeling after the universal order, — in a word, the love of God[33].

A second point that will play an important role in the novel is that Arnold does not advocate a theistic resurgence of ancient paganism to palliate the failure of Late Victorian Christianism. He favours a spiritual and intellectual competition between the two traditions in their actualised Victorian forms, drawing a line between modern Hellenism, and the 'anterior Hellenism of the Pagan world'[34]. For critic David J. De Laura, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* constitutes Hardy's 'complex response to Matthew Arnold'[35]. Indeed, in the novel, paganism is primarily confronted to a Christian faith that fails to fulfil its social and spiritual missions to the point that Hellenic paganism constitutes a 'conceivable alternative' to Christianity (Panter, 2014). Through the freethinking character Angel Clare, Hardy directly references Arnold:

> Once upon a time Angel had been so unlucky as to say to his father, in a moment of irritation, that it might have resulted far better for mankind if Greece had been the source of the religion of modern civilization, and not Palestine[36].

According to Stefania Grosso, Angel actually 'seems a representation of a younger and more modern Matthew Arnold'[37], and he plays a key role as the mouthpiece of a spiritual current of the Late Victorian Era, with both positive and negative consequences on the protagonists' lives, as I will later demonstrate in **I-C-b 'Reasoned paganism'**. In the novel Hardy is committed to an 'unsubtle disparagement'[38] of Christianism, primarily constructing his denunciation of Late Victorian religious attitudes through a pejorative portrayal of established religion. In *Tess,* all the figures that represent organised religion are either insincere—their motivations not being piety but rather personal interests and a dogmatic interpretation of Scriptures—or they are the last representatives of a dying version of Christianism. Angel's parents are indeed sympathetically portrayed by Hardy, but they are

[33] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Blackmask online 2001 ed, , accessed 26/03/2021, http://public-library.uk/ebooks/25/79.pdf
[34] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Blackmask online 2001 ed.
[35] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 380.
[36] Hardy, *Tess*, 124.
[37] Stefania Grosso, 'Hellenism, paganism and aestheticism: Arnold's influences on Hardy's later novels', PhD Diss. University of Venice, 2012-2013, 5.
[38] De Laura, *Ibid*: 397.

'two of the few remaining Evangelical school'[39], despite the domination of the First and Second Evangelical Revivals on British faith during the Early and Mid-Victorian periods. Through this allusion, Hardy points out the transience and inconsistence of Christian schools in the nineteenth-century. Despite its instability, Christianism remains the organisational structure of society in *Tess*, and many secondary characters are defined by their relationship to established religion: parson Tringham, the Clare family, the reformed Alec D'Urberville, and the menacing 'itinerant painter of Biblical texts' (XII). Through the relationship of the three Clare brothers, Hardy skilfully illustrates the growing moral and spiritual gulf between characters of the same generation and class, torn between Hebraism and Hellenism. During the reunion of the three brothers at Emminster in chapter XXV after Angel's stay at the Arcadian Talbothays, the young men reciprocally judge one another on their morality:

> His two brothers, non-Evangelical, well-educated, hall-marked young men, correct to their remotest fibre; such unimpeachable models as are turned out yearly by the lathe of a systematic tuition […] If these two noticed Angel's growing social ineptness, he noticed their growing mental limitations[40].

If the two young men are characterized as respectable, their brother's deviant 'heterodoxy'[41] ironically sheds light on the conformism of Late Victorian morality, while not truly showing a viable alternative in Angel's misled paganism as I will later show in this dissertation. Hardy is especially critical of Late Victorian Christianity, and his portrayal of the Clare brothers is much harsher than that of their father, who is described as 'sincere'[42] if misled in his faith. A secondary, specific divergence effectively overlaps with the divergence between Hellenism and Hebraism: throughout *Tess*, Hardy alludes to a harsher religious doctrine that is sweeping through the countryside, borne by austere and dogmatic preachers, who show little talent in their personal interpretation of Scriptures, corresponding to the Puritan revival of the Late Victorian Era.

During Tess's encounter with the disquieting itinerant painter, the omniscient narrator judges that Christianity suffers from 'the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time'[43]. Employed by these radical preachers, the man roams the peaceful countryside to paint Bible verses randomly in crimson letters in chapter XII. The symbolism

[39] Hardy, *Tess*, 135.
[40] Hardy, *Tess*, 124-5.
[41] Hardy, *Tess*, 132.
[42] Hardy, *Tess*, 123.
[43] Hardy, *Tess*, 62.

of this episode is strong: carved out of their interpretative frame, the verses are emptied of their meaning to only retain their condemnatory message, which threatens any onlooker's morality, including the innocent Tess. Through Tess's natural faith which prompts her to disbelieve the painter, saying to herself: 'Pooh—I don't believe God said such things!'[44]. Hardy suggests to the reader that no God of love could be at the origin of such dogmatism.

Far from the principles of compassion and charity, Christianism in the novel is characterized by its ruthlessness: The Church as a community of believers represents a judgmental institution that morally condemns Tess by judging her biographically and not on her actions, grounds that are denounced by Hardy as Angel later laments in the novel: 'he had asked himself why he had not judged Tess constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed?'[45]. Another key scene that illustrates the lack of compassion of Late Victorian Christianism is the baptism of Sorrow, which Tess performs herself: here, respectability overrides Christian charity, as Tess reads the baptismal service refused to her son herself, and the baby is buried in unhallowed ground, his innocence trumped by the social affront of his existence. No matter the incarnation, the writer always reaches the damning conclusion that Christianism is either inadequate for the spiritual and social needs of the characters, or that Christianism has suffered a 'hideous defacement'[46] as its ministers are unable to understand its tenets properly. The consequences of this lack of sincerity are especially disastrous since Tess is portrayed as in frequent need of spiritual counsel, but religion systematically evades her in the crises of her life. Through her social victimization, Hardy conveys his desire to reinject humanity in the organisation of established Victorian religion: 'Hardy's thrusting toward a "new", more humane basis for morality in *Tess* and *Jude* was firmly situated in the late-Victorian debate over modernism in the Churches'[47] notes critic David J. De Laura.

The lack of empathetic spirituality and the harsh moralism of Christianism in the novel contrast with a paganism that is presented as more natural, logical, and more immediately rewarding for the characters. Far from being the singularity of Angel Clare, many of the novel's characters: Tess, Alec, Angel, and the countryfolk, all show a conscious or unconscious 'divergence'[48] in their approach to accepted Late Victorian religious and social norms,

[44] Hardy, *Tess*, 63.
[45] Hardy, *Tess*, 292.
[46] Hardy, *Tess*, 62.
[47] David J. De Laura, "The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels, *ELH* 34 No. 3 (September 1967): 388.
[48] Hardy, *Tess*, 124.

programming their social and sometimes utter destruction in the case of the three youths. Hardy explicitly claims this superiority of paganism in chapter XIV:

> The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression. His present aspect, coupled with the lack of all human forms in the scene, explained the old-time heliolatries in a moment. One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky. The luminary was a golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, gazing down in the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him[49].

In this excerpt, the natural world takes pride of place, and the proof of paganism's logical superiority simply rests in the harmony of Nature itself, caught up in a dialectic of interest that is utterly absent from Hardy's Christianism. Here, the writer draws inspiration from the Apollonian sun-worshipping tradition of Ancient Greece, but he also bridges remote time periods by mentioning the primaeval 'heliolatries', which will play a role during the apotheosis at Stonehenge. Despite this proclamation, the polarity remains irreconcilable, and according to Marie Panter, the moral conclusion of Tess is atheistic, since Christianism is inadequate, and paganism is not accomplished enough to ensure the survival and happiness of the main characters. But Hardy's involvement with Arnoldian thought supports the idea that Hardy aimed to produce a 'moral' novel, a text structured by the questions of faith and ethics, which were a main concern of the writer throughout his life:

> Hardy does seem to believe in a specifically pagan ethics whose spirit should be renewed in Victorian Britain. His writing therefore aims at renewing his notion of a pagan imagination and literature endowed with a moral mission. In his later novels, paganism thus appears as a theme or a keyword, and stands for an ideal view of life, which associates poetry and ethics[50].

Indeed, despite his professed atheism, Thomas Hardy remained culturally indebted to the Bible, and mobilises a thorough knowledge of Scriptures. His personal correspondence further shows his desire and need to believe in the divine (and his disappointment): 'Jan. 29 [1890]. I have been looking for God 50 years, and I think that if he had existed, I should have discovered him. As an external personality, of course—the only true meaning of the

[49] Hardy, *Tess*, 67.
[50] Panter, "Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World": 3.

word'[51]. The responsible and hopeful moralism of Tess was lost on the Victorian public because Hardy simply does not subscribe to Late Victorian morality, and escapes even Arnold's own polarity, which sometimes turns into a natural syncretism produced by the lack of education of the countryfolk of the Vales: 'the confused beliefs which she held, apparently imbibed in childhood, were, if anything, Tractarian as to phraseology and pantheistic as to essence.'[52] Christianism is thus a heterodoxy like Angel's spiritual approach, and the novel's textual construction mirrors this cultural diversity.

b. Textual hybridity

Two noticeable cultural trends come together in Hardy's penultimate novel: the Christian Scriptures, and the Hellenic heritage of Aristotelian tragedy. On the one hand, the core of the text blends pagan and Christian imagery, sometimes in the same sentence. On the other, the novel's architecture is greatly influenced by the organisational principles of Aristotelian tragedy—a literary form that was undoubtedly pagan in the eyes of a Late Victorian readership, because functioning on a non-Christian ethos—while justifying the tragic fate of the characters through scientific principles that are typically Victorian. *Tess*, as we are about to see, is thus a work of synthesis, 'a tragedy in Classical form built on a foundation of scientific empiricism'[53].

In *Tess*, references to Christianism are not limited to socially aware criticism, or to a discussion of faith. The Christian cultural heritage plays a central role in the architecture of the novel, on several levels: the textual construction itself, the characterization, the moral message, the author's own religious identity and the meta-text. As the introduction has underlined, Christianism constituted the default worldview for the LV public, and was automatically assumed to be morally superior to all prior religions. But in *Tess*, Hardy puts the two traditions on equal terms, and expresses the radical assumption that paganism could be superior. He moreover puts forward the symbiotic relationship between Christianism and paganism because of their shared cultural heritage and chronological overlapping, freeing himself from a Christian narrative. Consequently, Hardy's works 'explicitly dramatize a constant oscillation

[51] Hardy cited in Laurence Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the 'Animative Impulse' of Thomas Hardy's Verse', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 80 (Fall 2014): 4.
[52] Hardy, *Tess*, 135.
[53] Peter R. Morton, 'Neo-Darwinian Fate in Tess of the D'Urbervilles' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 437.

between the pagan and the Christian'[54]. While the writer tries to build a novel that could reconcile both traditions, he chooses the Bible as the 'main intertext'[55] of *Tess*. Indeed, despite its defiance towards organised Christianism, the novel is laced with Biblical imagery and quotations. By putting forward his own minute knowledge of Scriptures, Hardy further highlights his characters' unsatisfying comprehension and application of Christian morality in their lives. Alexander D'Urberville best illustrates this theological ignorance in chapter XLV when he converts to the 'extremest antinomian type'[56] of Christianism:

> It was less a reform than a transfiguration. The former curves of sensuousness were now modulated to lines of devotional passion. The lip-shapes that had meant seductiveness were now made to express supplication; the glow on the cheek that yesterday could be translated as riotousness was evangelized to-day into the splendour of pious rhetoric; animalism had become fanaticism; Paganism, Paulinism; the bold rolling eye that had flashed upon her form in the old time with such mastery now beamed with the rude energy of a theolatry that was almost ferocious[57].

In this description, Hardy depicts a transformation that is neither sincere, nor natural or even desirable. Alec's unnatural rejection of his intrinsic pagan nature mirrors the 'hideous defacement'[58] of Neo-Christianism, and it does nothing to save the character from his cardinal sin of lust, or from his moral oscillations, as he is doomed to die a 'bad death'[59] by the Victorian standard, murdered and in a disreputable relationship. The episode of the 'Cross-in-Hand' which follows in chapter XLV develops this hybridity within the intrigue itself, as Alec D'Urberville confuses the pagan and the Christian. During his travesty of repentance, he asks of Tess to swear that she will never tempt him again, using an ancient stone to seal her oath: '"This was once a Holy Cross"'[60] says he to the heroine, but the narrator ironically contradicts him by explaining that this landmark, believed to be 'a devotional cross', is closer in aspect to the insular pagan tradition of standing stones. Hardy describes it as a 'strange rude monolith'[61] marked by a 'negative beauty of tragic tone', which is ominously reminiscent of the Stonehenge monoliths, and of the tragedy that plays out there.

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[54] Laurence Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the "Animative Impulse" of Thomas Hardy's Verse', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (Fall 2014): 2.
[55] Laurence Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the 'Animative Impulse' of Thomas Hardy's Verse': 2.
[56] Hardy, *Tess*, 237.
[57] Hardy, *Tess*, 239.
[58] Hardy, *Tess*, 62.
[59] Patricia Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59.
[60] Hardy, *Tess*, 244.
[61] Hardy, *Tess*, 244.

The narrator also hints that the characters' inability to distinguish Christian symbols from pagan ones may have negative consequences on their future, as the stone is 'a thing of ill-omen', the last resting-place of a criminal who died from hanging, as the heroine will at the end of the novel.

Ironically, the Christian message in Tess offers no comfort or illusion of free will, and even the elder Clare's compassionate Evangelical beliefs are pervaded by the Darwinist zeitgeist of the period:

> The New Testament was less a Christiad then a Pauliad to his intelligence—less an argument than an intoxication. His creed of determinism was such that it almost amounted to a vice, and quite amounted, on its negative side, to a renunciative philosophy which had cousinship with that of Schopenhauer and Leopardi[62].

Tragic fate is a common trope in Hardy's later novels, where the characters are relentlessly constrained by their illusion of free-will. *Tess* depicts a higher cosmic power that toys with the lives of oblivious protagonists. This grappling with external forces outside of the protagonist's control is the result of two determinist currents of thought: Social Darwinism and Aristotelian tragedy, as I will develop in I-B-c 'Social inadequacy and Pagan sacrifice'. Greek tragedy functioned on a form of ruthless determinism, as the protagonists could not escape from their fate. Ancient paganisms did not encourage freewill either, but characters like Angel, who shows very little understanding of the actual logics of ancient Greek religion, try to use paganism as an alternative to evade their social destinies, and fail because paganism does not offer freedom from the constraints of society. *Tess* can be considered tragic for a number of reasons: the destruction of the three main characters' social prospects—and their very lives for Alec and Tess—could be avoided at every choice they make, for it is not verisimilitude that dictates their meetings, but accident, and yet they are irresistibly driven to destruction. The novel's borrowing from Ancient Greek tragedy is quite straightforward as it complies with the rules of tragedy Aristotle enunciated in his *Poetics*[63] ca. 330 B.C.E. In the novel, Tess is driven to her fall—social alienation, suffering, death, or exile—by an innate flaw in her nature, a *hamartia* that somewhat leaves room for the illusion that she has the power to alter her life's course. Although she seems to possess and exercise her free-will, yet Tess remains a victim. Moreover, Tess, above all other characters, suffers from an excessive and inadequate pride

[62] Hardy, *Tess*, 123.
[63] Aristotle, *Poetics*, Project Gutenberg ed. [online] 2008.

(*hubris*) that prevents her from making the right choices or asking for help. Thirdly, her noble lineage matches the Ancient Greek principle that only noble characters may be considered tragic, even if the young woman's straddling of social lines parodies this reality, as she is the 'belated seedling of an effete aristocracy'[64], a fact that does nothing for her social integration. She is ultimately made grander and nobler in the reader's eyes through her futile struggle against fate, but she cannot really be defined as noble. Finally, the heroine's life is marked by tragedy and suffering. But her personal tragedy is such a common occurrence that she is more archetypal in this dimension of her characterization. Indeed, her bygone trouble seems such a common occurrence that it is the motif of folk ballads maliciously sung by young women in chapter XIV. But despite her incomplete tragicness, Tess fulfils her cathartic mission: she becomes a 'social warning' (Hardy, 72), a scapegoat who takes upon herself to carry the burden of her society, and by extension, of the book's readership, a burden which causes her guilt, shame, suffering, and excludes her from society.

Hardy's fin de siècle pessimism finds in Classical tragedy the medium for his *mal de vivre*, and the novel, which closes upon Tess's execution, offers a nihilistic reading of the universe: '"Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess'[65]. 'President of the Immortals' is a translated quote from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (1.169), and it suggests that the higher cosmic power controlling human fate does so for 'sport', for leisure, and that all the social humiliations the heroine suffers do not serve a moral purpose. Despite the novel's dark conclusion, Tess is a sort of *Bildungsroman* in the female perspective which carries the hopes of its writer. The novel features a desirable and wholesome heroine, who is an easily identifiable model in her quest for happiness despite her internal and external struggles:

> There are to be sure, instances of self-indulgent writing in this novel which can be described as late-romantic, even decadent, but the controlling perception of Tess is restrained and, if one cares to use such terms, "healthy." Tess demands nothing that can be regarded as the consequence of deracination or an overwrought will; she is not gratuitously restless or neurotically bored; she is spontaneously committed to the most fundamental needs of human existence. Indeed, she provides a standard for what is right and essential for human beings to demand from life. And because we respond to her radiant wholeness [...] Tess is finally one of the great images of human possibility, conceived in the chaste, and chastening, spirit of the New Testament. Very few

[64] Hardy, *Tess*, 182.
[65] Hardy, *Tess*, 314.

proclaimed believers have written with so complete a Christian sentiment as the agnostic Thomas Hardy[66].

c. Pagan aesthetics

If Thomas Hardy 'challenged the ethics of Victorian Christianity frontally'[67], his pagan stand was not a religious revendication, rather an aesthetic preference. Indeed, French scholar Laurence Estanove believes that 'Hardy's leaning towards paganism is undoubtedly more poetic than theistic [...] one element of a more general 'animative impulse' that attaches to the celebration and preservation of human individual experience'[68]. Hardy's paganism is thus deeply influenced by the Romantic conception of the self and the movement's fascination for the natural world as a sentient deity; and his pagan aesthetics develop along three main axes: a ruralism imbued with Arcadian references, a focus on sexuality and desire as natural processes, and an animism in the writer's depiction of the world.

In the eighteenth-century, European arts rediscovered the classical motif of Arcadia, which proved immensely popular. Arcadia is a mountainous, landlocked region of Greece, which has been mythicized through classical pastoral poetry because of its beauty and peaceful way of life, unburdened by the hostility of the modern world. Overtime, *Arcadian* has become a shorthand in the English language to designate 'a place of rustic innocence and simple, quiet pleasure'. The motif is recognizable by its tropes: youthful shepherds and shepherdesses and fauns and nymphs flirt and frolic in a natural setting[69]. The geography of Hardy's fictional Wessex is deeply influenced by Arcadian imagery. During transient scenes of metamorphosis, such as the dance at Chaseborough, the pagan undertext is revealed:

> Of the rushing couples there could barely be discerned more than the high lights—the indistinctness shaping them to satyrs clasping nymphs—a multiplicity of Pans whirling a multiplicity of Syrinxes; Lotis attempting to elude Priapus, and always failing. At intervals a couple would approach the doorway for air, and the haze no longer veiling their features, the demigods resolved themselves into the homely personalities of her own next-door neighbours[70].

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[66] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement', 409.
[67] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 388.
[68] Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the 'Animative Impulse' of Thomas Hardy's Verse', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (Fall 2014): 28.
[69] According to the Merriam-Webster, 'English speakers often use *arcadia* to designate a place of rustic innocence and simple, quiet pleasure. *Arcadian* can mean "idyllically pastoral" or "idyllically innocent, simple, or untroubled. Arcadia, Merriam-Webster online, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arcadia, accessed 26/04/2021.
[70] Hardy, *Tess*, 48.

Hardy creates a stark contrast between the rustic innocence of the Vales, where the pagan vitality of the countryfolk rules over the young people of Talbothays and Chaseborough, the mechanised violence of Flintcomb-Ash, and the artificial ahistoricism of the new pleasure town of Sandbourne. If he ascribes a Hellenic aesthetic to Talbothays and Chaseborough, Flintcomb-Ash and Trantridge are also pervaded by an ancient irrepressible paganism. Even the hostile, unpoetical swede-fields of Flintcomb-Ash participate in this pagan aesthetic, in its most coarse and primal dimension. As they toil in the fields, the dairymaids are surrounded by a landscape that is full of curvaceous and organic shapes, and the soil—itself a token of fertility—brings up phallic flints back to the surface of modern England when it is stirred. Hardy's almost scientific and detailed description of the site, and the manner the flints are found, can be read as a resurgence of deep time, and perhaps they constitute a nod to the importance of geology in the destabilisation of the Christian timeline, as this scene exposes an Arnoldian 'trans-historical conception'[71] of paganism:

> The swede-field in which she and her companion were set hacking was a stretch of a hundred odd acres in one patch, on the highest ground of the farm, rising above stony lanchets or lynchets—the outcrop of siliceous veins in the chalk formation, composed of myriads of loose white flints in bulbous, cusped, and phallic shapes[72].

This scene is also important because of the way the young women react. Marian, the plump and lively dairymaid who takes to drinking after Angel chooses Tess, is of a vigorous pagan nature, she shows an undisguised knowledge of sex, and is delighted to find the flints, while Tess totally conforms to Late Victorian morality and refuses to participate in her friend's bawdy laughter: 'Marian, primed to a humorous mood, would discover the queer-shaped flints aforesaid, and shriek with laughter, Tess remaining severely obtuse'[73]. But despite this Hellenic aestheticization, Hardy's pagan England is not a mythical place, it exists alongside and against civilised modern England, and Hardy relies on 'repeated polarities'[74] to highlight the aesthetic revolution the countryside is being subjected to. For example, the brand new and ahistorical Stokes-D'Urberville estate at Trantridge lies near The Chase, the most primaeval and wild place in the novel. It is where the 'seduction or rape' (Hardy, XI) scene occurs, and Hardy constantly insists on its antiquity:

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[71] Panter, "Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World": 2.
[72] Hardy, *Tess,* 223.
[73] Hardy, *Tess,* 223.
[74] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 393.

> The Chase—a truly venerable tract of forest land, one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primaeval date, wherein Druidical mistletoe was still found on aged oaks [...] All this sylvan antiquity, however, though visible from The Slopes, was outside the immediate boundaries of the estate[75].

These polarities give Talbothays dairy its full significance as the only haven Tess will know in the novel. Indeed, Hardy creates pagan aesthetics to serve his moral fiction, not as a means of Romantic escapism, and there is nothing primitive about 'green sunny romantic Talbothays'[76]:

> The Talbothays farm is not a place of fantasy pitted against a decadent or corrupt civilisation; it is itself representative of a phase in civilized existence. Centuries of effort have had to pass before the civilization of Talbothays could be achieved, though only a few decades of technological change would be required to destroy it[77].

Moreover, the Romantics' emphasis on the importance of the self, the individual capacity for feeling, and the sensual dimension of the human consciousness all have their part to play in Hardy's construction of a pagan aesthetic in *Tess*. In his novels, Hardy tends to imbue the natural world with sentient feeling, and he demonstrated a peculiar emotional sensitivity to Nature, as his *Notebooks* show: 'I sometimes look upon all things in inanimate Nature as pensive mutes' (Hardy 1989, 117; 30 May 1876)'[78]. From an aesthetic point of view, the animism of Hardy's 'pagan eye'[79] is most visible in the way the writer emphasizes the kinship between the countryfolk and Nature. Indeed, in the novel time is split between a Christian civil calendar and the overpowering rhythm of the natural world. Mostly unfolding in an agrarian setting, the novel's timeline exists during a time when mechanization had not emancipated farm workers from following the seasons' natural lifecycle. Accordingly, the idea of 'germination' (Hardy, XV) is central to the novel's conception of beauty and life. Tess's existence follows the rhythm of the seasons, her good fortunes matching the summertime, while her tragedies occur in the winter. The very courtship of Angel and Tess at Talbothays dairy 'follows minutely the pattern of the solar day and the solar year'[80], and the general regeneration of springtime at Talbothays overlaps with the dairymaids' conjugated desire, as they all pine

[75] Hardy, *Tess*, 26.
[76] Hardy, *Tess*, 224.
[77] Irving Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 415.
[78] Hardy 1989, 302; 10 February 1897, cited in Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the 'Animative Impulse' of Thomas Hardy's Verse': 3.
[79] Estanove, 'Poetry as Pagan Pilgrimage: the "Animative Impulse" of Thomas Hardy's Verse': 1.
[80] J. B. Bullen, Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Apollo, Dionysus, and Stonehenge: 4.

for Angel. In the novel, pagan pleasure is indissociable from female sexuality and desire, and it finds its best illustration in the natural world, as the harp-playing twilight scene at Talbothays dairy shows. Heavily drawing on Arcadian motifs of pastoral seduction, the scene translates Tess's sexual arousal through a number of metaphors, and according to J.B. Bullen, it 'becomes identified by the "natural" arousal of the garden'[81], as Hardy references the most physical dimension of love, sexuality, with an emphasis on the *bas corporel*. Bodily fluids, blood, and genital arousal are all symbolised by the garden's own frenetic reproduction:

> The outskirt of the garden in which Tess found herself [...] was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at a touch; and with tall blooming weeds emitting offensive smells [...] She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin[82].

Indeed, the novel's pagan aesthetic is also conveyed by its emphasis on sexuality and desire. Since the writer considered that 'life [is] a physiological fact', he believed fiction should be allowed to portray 'the relations of the sexes'[83] as something natural and not immoral, and in *Tess* he rejects Christian sexual morality by presenting a world ruled by a pagan vitality, a principle of generation which overwhelms human law. Hardy's stance on women is unusual for the Late Victorian period:

> As a writer of novels Thomas Hardy was endowed with a precious gift: he liked women. There are not, when one comes to think of it, quite so many other nineteenth century novelists about whom as much can be said[84].

The author indeed shows a keen interest and a lack of mistrust of women, common attitudes in the nineteenth century which presented a very skewered vision of women. This cultural construction is a Christian legacy which rests on the notion of dualism between the soul and the body, and which has greatly penalised women throughout Western history. In Ancient Greece, men were associated with strength and abstract thinking, rationality, honour

[81] J.B. Bullen, *Ibid*: 6.
[82] Hardy, *Tess*, 96.
[83] Margaret R. Higgonet, 'Sexuality and desire in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles', Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, British Library, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/sexuality-and-desire-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles#footnote3, accessed 27/04/2021.
[84] Irving Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement', 406.

and virtue, while women were associated with the sensuous, irrational and more natural facets of human nature[85]. Christianity followed suit by adding the notion of original sin, committed by Eve, and believed women were more liable to sin and carnal pleasure. The Christian belief in eternal life completed this aversion for the physical, as the body became nothing more than the prison of the soul, a prison that had to be transcended in order to leave a terrestrial life of sorrow[86]. As women were associated with the flesh, they became the primary targets of the Christian hatred of the body:

> Western dualism has shaped the body into an object of repulsion, a stranger to the real self, a prison, an enemy worthy of distrust, the seat of pulsions and needs that are capable of provoking the failure of its 'owner's' will. The object is thus to transcend it, to silence its instincts[87].

By the Late Victorian Era, this attitude was still deeply anchored, and Angel, for all his Hellenic rejoicing, is still 'the result of generations of ultra-Christian training [who shows] an inherent aversion to the female'[88]. Unlike his character, Thomas Hardy displays progressist and even modernist views on sex, and his moral barometer is at odds with the socio-sexual morality of his day: '*'Tess* derives from Hardy's involvement with and reaction against the Victorian cult of chastity, which from the very beginning of his career he had known corrupted by meanness and hysteria'[89]. Poles apart with the procreative assignation of women in the Late Victorian Era, Hardy exalts in the novel the 'aesthetic, sensuous, Pagan pleasure in natural life'[90], which Angel discovers at Talbothays dairy as a desirable goal. It is in this context that the novel's major controversy inscribes itself: its subtitle 'A Pure Woman, Faithfully Presented', which endows an adulterous, unmarried single mother and murderess with one of the most sacred qualities of the Victorian angel, moral and sexual purity, was unacceptable to

[85] Jean-Noël Allard, Pascal Montlahuc and Marian Rothstein, 'The gendered construction of emotions in the Greek and Roman worlds', *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 47 (2018):23-44.

[86] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives', *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34 (2014):83.

[87] 'Le dualisme occidental a fait du corps un objet de répulsion, étranger au vrai soi, une prison, un ennemi dont il faut se méfier, le siège de pulsions et de besoins susceptibles de mettre en échec la volonté de son « propriétaire ». Il s'agit donc de le transcender, de faire taire ses instincts'. Mona Chollet, *Beauté Fatale, Les nouveaux visages d'une aliénation féminine*, (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 2012 (2015)), 137.

[88] D. H. Lawrence, cited in Howe, Irving Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991),416.

[89] Irving Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 408.

[90] Hardy, *Tess*, 124.

a Late Victorian audience, which condemned the novel for its 'improper explicitness'[91]. But Hardy presents the possibility that despite her sensuousness, Tess can be pure and innocent, if not in the face of civilisation, in the face of Nature. To do so, Hardy systematically contrasts the law of man and the law of Nature: 'she had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly.'[92]

Tess is essentially an innocent character who is unconsciously sensuous, and this ambivalence structures her characterization. Her first presentation to the reader, and to a younger Angel, is in a pagan setting, during the Marlott club-walking, a debased version of the ancient fertility rite of *Cerealia*. The sixteen-year-old Tess is dressed in a virginal white shift, but wears a red ribbon in her hair and her 'mobile peony mouth' excites desire, and she carries in her hand a 'phallic peeled willow-wand'[93]. Her ambiguous sexual maturity further continues in her physical appearance, which oscillates between her 'luxuriance of aspect' and her 'fullness of growth' (Hardy, 30), and the child that can be still seen in her face. If Tess is a sensual character, her purity is defendable because she is influenced by natural forces completely out of her control, and she suffers from her noticeable pagan physicality: 'there was revived in her the wretched sentiment which had often come to her before, that in inhabiting the *fleshly tabernacle* with which Nature had endowed her, she was somehow doing wrong' (Hardy, 243, italics are mine). Sex and other natural desires are not a sin in Hardy's eyes, but an uncontrollable human impulse. In *Tess*, he presents a natural driving principle of humankind he calls the 'appetite for joy' (Bonaparte, 420), an all-powerful phenomenon 'which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed'[94]. That Tess should be a sexual being is then not disrespectable, but just human. Furthermore, Hardy makes his heroine's sensual physicality more acceptable by insisting on her social class, and on the archetype of the lusty country girl she represents.

If Tess is regularly aestheticized as a pagan goddess, it is by Angel, who tends to idealise her and exoticize her, calling her a 'daughter of the soil' (Hardy, 134), 'a new-sprung

[91] Margaret R. Higgonet, 'Sexuality and desire in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles', Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, British Library, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/sexuality-and-desire-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles#footnote3, accessed 27/04/2021.
[92] Hardy, *Tess*, 67.
[93]Margaret R. Higgonet, 'Sexuality and desire in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles', Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, British Library, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/sexuality-and-desire-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles#footnote3, accessed 27/04/2021.
[94] Hardy, *Tess*, 149.

child of nature' (Hardy, 182) or a 'fresh and virginal daughter of Nature'[95], whose direct filiation matters less to him than her supposed animalism. When Hardy adopts Angel's focalisation, the young woman is perceived through the distorting medium of the mist as 'a sort of celestial person, who owed her being to poetry—one of those classical divinities Clare was accustomed to talk to her about when they took their walks together' (Hardy, 167). Angel idealises the young woman to an impossible standard by comparing her to 'Artemis' and 'Demeter'[96], and this idealisation through a Hellenic prism is in the end nefarious, showing the limitations of Hellenic paganism. Indeed, Angel's blindness to reality evades the true nature of Tess and ignores the danger that weighs on her life: her profound social inadequacy.

B. Social criticism and the influence of Neo-Darwinism on Late Victorian paganism

If Tess can be described as 'a tragedy in Classical form built on a foundation of scientific empiricism'[97], it is because the heroine's social downfall could be predicted by the scientific logic of the Late Victorian Era. Using the fate of Tess, this section will discuss how Darwinism influenced Late Victorian writers' appropriation and handling of pagan references. To do so, I will take a closer look at the ruling morals of the 1890s, at Hardy's 'Ache of Modernism'[98], and at the notions of social inadequacy and Darwinian / pagan sacrifice.

a. 'Victorian socio-sexual morality'[99]

A remarkable dimension of Tess's moral message is the novel's awareness of its Western identity. When Angel tries to seduce Tess's friend Izz Huett, he admits that it would be wrong to live unmarried with a mistress, but the young woman answers that 'it will be wrong-doing in the eyes of civilization—western civilization, that is to say'[100]. The novel is both an exploration and a challenge of Victorian 'socio-sexual morality', which is studied

[95] Hardy, *Tess*, 95.
[96] Hardy, *Tess*, 103.
[97] Peter R. Morton, 'Neo-Darwinian Fate in Tess of the D'Urbervilles' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 437.
[98] Hardy, *Tess*, 95.
[99] J. B. Bullen, 'Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Apollo, Dionysus, and Stonehenge': 5.
[100] Hardy, *Tess*, 211.

under a Darwinian conception of the world. Like every product of the Victorian era, Darwinism possessed a moral dimension, and it especially questioned the possibility of morality by doubting the existence of freewill. In the novel, Hardy's 'Neo-Darwinian convictions'[101] challenge the reader by asking what sort of impulse could lead the young main characters to deviate from 'the path of social righteousness'[102], and whether they can be held accountable for their social transgression if they do not possess freewill.

As a 'Victorian naturalist'[103], Thomas Hardy showed great interest for the society he lived in, and he supported his writing on a lot of research: the propaedeutic work in his notebooks is augmented with newspaper clippings, text excerpts, etc... and closely studies the general mood of the Late Victorian Era. As a result, 'the complex contemporary matrix of Hardy's fiction'[104] is a remarkable witness of the ideological background of the Late Victorian Era and it offers a faithful portrayal of the rigid 'socio-sexual morality' which dictated attitudes under the reign of Queen Victoria. While deploying a convincing pagan rhetoric, the novel goes over all the moral enforcers of LV respectability: piety, chastity, and social stratification. The novel's section titles: 'The Maiden', 'Maiden No More' or 'The Woman Pays' attest that at the core of a LV woman's identity—and her social worth—was her virginity, and the novel essentially narrates the punitive response LV women were expected to face if they strayed from the path of respectability. Indeed, if the narrative includes all the major steps in the social life of a Victorian woman—defloration, motherhood, marriage, sexuality—Tess's experience systematically goes against the idealised expectations of the 'domestic angel's'[105].

The untenable contradictions of Late Victorian moralism are especially apparent in Hardy's treatment of sexuality. In the novel spiritual and sexual love cannot be reconciled, and they both exist alongside Victorian morality. Alec's love is primal, overwhelmingly sexual, and he gives up on his reformed self to pursue Tess once again, while Angel constitutes his absolute antithesis: his love for Tess is diaphanous and highly idealized, but he is actually blinded to Tess's nature and needs, believing her to be 'a fresh and virginal daughter of

[101] Scott Elledge, 'Preface to the Third Norton Critical Edition' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), viii.
[102] Lisa Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* PhD diss., University of Ghent, 2012-2013, 45.
[103] Nollet, *Ibid*, 6.
[104] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 380.
[105] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon, the Life of a Victorian Myth*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 9.

Nature'[106] when Tess is 'maiden no more'[107]. Angel's contempt for physical love is criticized by the narrator as his abstinence causes Tess great unhappiness: as we have seen in I-A-c 'Pagan Aesthetics', Tess is superbly at ease with her sexuality when it is not thwarted, and lust which might have provoked a reconciliation after Tess's confession is utterly absent from Angel. Hence, the struggle between the natural desire for sexual fulfilment and the Victorian mandate of sexual repression make for an impossible relationship between Angel and Tess. As a foe of Victorian morals, Nature partakes in the travesty that Angel accuses Tess of committing when she reveals her indiscretion: 'She looked absolutely pure. Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maidenhood upon Tess's countenance that he gazed at her with a stupefied air'[108]. This scene, which features perhaps Tess's gravest social mistake, her confession to Angel on their wedding night, also serves to illustrate the hypocrisy of the Victorian sexual double-standard. Both spouses confess an indiscretion, and while Angel escapes unscathed, he finds in Tess's confession the right to rebuke her.

Hardy makes his moral stance clear by systematically portraying his heroine in a positive light, and through Tess's moral behaviour, he further denounces the contradictions of Late Victorian morality: by showing honesty, endurance and abnegation, 'Tess loses her only chance of social regeneration and social advancement'[109], and instead becomes a scapegoat for LV society, which antagonizes her as a 'social warning' for other members of the community (Hardy, 72). Although she wishes to conform, Tess is driven to social transgression by her unhappy circumstances, and she becomes more than a social failure, she turns into a social threat: 'in her rebellious action of killing Alec, her superior both in class and sex, Tess has become a danger to a Victorian patriarchal society; a danger that should be eliminated'[110]. *Tess* is indeed a 'class-conscious novel'[111], in the very choice of its heroine, a country girl, and the class tensions between the novel's protagonists play a central role in the intrigue. Indeed, Tess's fate is compromised by the cupidity of arriviste individuals like her parents or the Stokes-D'Urbervilles, and what society reproaches her the most is not her actions at the beginning of her novel, but her social hybridity which challenges the obvious 'social stratification' (Nollet, 39) of the LVE. The Durbeyfield parents 'obliviousness to their true place on the social ladder is the catalyst for their daughter's tragedy. Finally, the novel's moral message is made even

[106] Hardy, *Tess*, 95.
[107] Hardy, *Tess*, 58.
[108] Hardy, *Tess*, 186.
[109] Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'*, 77.
[110] Nollet, *Ibid*, 80.
[111] Nollet, *Ibid*, 39.

more interesting by Tess's constitutional paradox: like all the novel's characters, she is a vessel for Victorian moralism, and she too condemns herself for her overstepping. What makes Tess a scapegoat is not only her social condition but also her quality as a sensuous being. Coming from a poor family she has none of the protection of higher rank women, and her family are all too aware of her possible mercantile value precisely because of her sensuousness.

b. The 'Ache of Modernism'[112]

In order to outline the meaning of Hardy's expression 'The Ache of Modernism', I will base myself on the in-depth analysis provided by David J. De Laura in his article '"The Ache of Modernism" in Thomas Hardy's Later Novels'. *Tess* is part of Hardy's 'modernist' corpus, and according to critic D. J. De Laura, his 'Ache of Modernism' is yet another response to Arnoldian philosophy. It is structured by three fundamental themes that run through Hardy's later novels:

> At stake here are three crucial and interrelated themes of Hardy's three "modern" novels. There are, first, Hardy's fumbling attempts to define and endorse a "Greek" or "Hellenic" view of life, which is also somehow natural. [...] Second, there is the theme of "modernism" itself, the insistence on the distress and rootlessness of those whose intellectual honesty forces them to live without a sense of Providence [...] and there is, finally, the unrelenting attack on Christianity[113].

The 'Ache of Modernism' is an experience of failure and inadequacy, an indeterminate and instinctual fear of life which Angel detects in Tess during their private conversations at Talbothays. Although the setting of *Tess* is overwhelmingly rural, it cannot escape the realities of the Industrial Revolution which is gaining terrain and upsetting a millenary way-of-life. In the face of this inexorable extinction, Hardy is nostalgic of a bucolic and idealised world. The novel affectionately yearns for a vague past when mankind worshipped a 'saner religion', but this call is echoed through a Christian voice aware of paganism's previous failures. The critic John Holloway hinted that Hardy's diagnosis of the state of the rural world was even more disquieting than a simple mass extinction. In *Tess,* the writer is not just chronicling the vanishing of a way of life, but realising that 'the earlier way did not possess the inner resources

[112] Hardy, *Tess*, 95.
[113] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 381.

upon which to make a good fight for its existence'[114], in other words, the old order was not a less powerful mode of life than the new, but it ultimately proves helpless before it because of inner defects, suggesting that human civilisations themselves are subjected to Darwinism. The consequence of this great vanishing in favour of modernity is the 'ache' felt by the characters. This modern *mal de vivre* had already been identified by Arnold, who called it 'the 'emotional price of modernism' (De Laura, 380), the 'sense of psychic dislocation and alienation, of wandering in an unmapped no man's land "between two worlds"'[115]. In contradiction with the Victorian enthusiasm for technology and progress, Hardy stresses: 'not the promise, but the painfulness and (in a sense) the tragic waste and unfulfillment of those who "prophetically" live out the modernist premises'[116].

As a consequence, the moral oscillation of Hardy's characters is materialised in their physical wanderings between an ancient and rural world rooted in conservative beliefs and ordained by folk customs, and a modern world which is mechanized, a-historical and hostile to these countryfolk, even if they are unaware that they are unfit to participate in it. Indeed, during an encounter with the train which newly crosses the Wessex countryside, Tess is deeply impressed by the new technology: 'Tess was so receptive that the few minutes of contact with 'the whirl of material progress lingered in her thought'[117]. Here, Hardy adopts Tess's focalisation to describe the steam-engine of the train, and the positive qualification of technology as 'material progress' thus comes from Tess herself, who remains a young woman unaware of her social determinism. The genius of the novel is that the characters themselves do not condemn modernism, they are only vaguely aware of its leaping forward, and the narrator acts as a tragic prophetic voice, who focuses on a programmed experience of loss. Hardy's disavowal of Christianism in the novel stems from this dire realisation. It is not an attack on Christianism *per se*, but as De Laura writes: 'the attack is in a special sense directed against "neo-Christianity", a compromising position with regard to the old theology, associated in England above all with Matthew Arnold'[118]. If established religion cannot provide a spiritually fulfilling model, neither can modern science, and the 'Ache of modernism' draws all of its psychologically destructive power from the realisation that no product of the modern world is enough to replace the spiritual and moral certainties Christianism used to offer. Worst

[114] John Holloway, 'Hardy's Major Fiction', *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad Essays Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 234-245.
[115] De Laura, *Ibid*: 380-1.
[116] De Laura, *Ibid*: 381.
[117] Hardy, *Tess*, 147.
[118] De Laura, *Ibid*, 381.

of all, Nature which becomes the supreme entity of the LVE after Darwin's revelations have devitalized Christianism, is actually utterly devoid of moral value. In an actantial model, Nature is neither Tess's helper nor her opponent, it is simply superbly indifferent to the characters' fates, matching the Huxleyan 'moral indifference' of Nature:

> For Huxley there was no compromise between evolution and justice. Nature, for him, was not good or bad, simply it was unmoral, a thought which deeply influenced Hardy. Moreover, Huxley distinguished a 'State of Nature', primeval, the perfect scenery for the struggle, from a 'State of Art', artificial, human and sorrowful[119].

In the face of this existential turmoil at a personal and collective stage, Hardy paints the countryside as the last bastion of *ataraxia*, the freedom from all worries in existence:

> They [the peasants] are eternal. We meet them over and over again in the novels, and they always have something typical about them, more of the character that marks a race than of the features which belong to the individual. The peasants are the great sanctuary of sanity, the country the last stronghold of happiness. When they disappear, there is no hope for the race[120].

Tess is thus more than the chronicling of nineteenth century rurality, it is the prophetic and anxious vision of a collective spiritual collapse.

c. Social inadequacy and pagan sacrifice

As we have seen, the moral indifference of Nature in *Tess* was shocking to a Late Victorian audience: the benevolent design of the Christian cosmos was suddenly replaced by a merciless struggle for survival between beings who are determined by their social origins, and which reconsiders Nature as a more eerie and powerful force. Because it was reformulated in the Late Victorian Era, neo-paganism included this new cosmos in its reading of the world, and Neo-Darwinism and Late Victorian paganism visibly share common motifs: heredity, the struggle for survival in a natural world, and the need for sacrifice to ensure the collective survival. The novel's plot is quite simple and archetypal as the novel essentially explores through a series of tests whether the characters are '"fit" or not in social Darwinist terms'[121]. If the young Hardy accepted Darwin's theories and vindicated his views, it was nonetheless an emotional challenge for the writer because it upset his previously held beliefs:

[119] Stefania Grosso. 'Hellenism, paganism and aestheticism: Arnold's influences on Hardy's later novels', PhD Diss. University of Venice, 2012-2013, 17.
[120] Virginia Woolf, 'Hardy's Moments of Vision', in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991, 403.
[121] Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'*,7.

> The two major emotional and creative problems which evolutionary theory forced on Hardy were to find a scale for the human, and a place for the human within the natural order. Like Darwin, an ambiguous anthropomorphism pervades his writing—an anthropomorphism which paradoxically denies human centrality and gives the human a fugitive and secondary role in his system of reference but not in his system of values[122].

As I have demonstrated before, the writing of *Tess* was subjected to a moral imperative on Hardy's part, and his interest in the scientific theories of his day can be partially explained by his need for proof of the divine, and his painful awareness of the threat science posed to the core of Victorian identity. Ten years before publishing *Tess*, he wrote in his journals about this tentative of compromise: 'May,9,1881. After infinite trying to reconcile a scientific view of life with the emotional and spiritual, so that they may not be interdestructive'[123]. Hardy's Darwinist inclinations are attested: scientists Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer were contemporaries of Thomas Hardy, and although pinpointing exactly when the writer first came into contact with Darwin's works *The Origin of Species* (1859) is difficult, we can consider that it was in the early 1860s (Nollet, 8), when the writer was in his twenties. Thomas Hardy's reaction to his discovery of Darwinism is thus 'well-documented'[124] in his notebooks, and it shows the moral influence of Darwin's theories on Hardy's Christian beliefs as 'the discovery of the law of evolution, which revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively'[125] in the writer's own cosmology.

As a recently converted 'agnostic' (Nollet, 9), Hardy embraced Darwin's theories, but he differed slightly from his model by regarding himself as an 'evolutionary meliorist', a concept he picked up from another nineteenth-century scholar, French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte. J. O. Bailey describes Hardy's new doctrine as 'a hope, at least, that human action can make the circumstances of life and life itself better in ethical quality and in happiness than they have been. His adjective evolutionary means that improvement may take an extremely long time, proceeding in minute stages over thousand years, in process of

[122] Gillian Beer, 'Finding a scale for the human: Plot and Writing in Hardy's Novels', in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 458.
[123] Hardy, *Tess,* 329.
[124] Peter R. Morton, 'Neo-Darwinian Fate in Tess of the D'Urbervilles', in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 432.
[125] Hardy (1930, 190) cited in Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'*, 9.

adaptation like those of biological evolution'[126]. Moreover, the secular dimension of positivist philosophy seems to have played a role in Hardy's move towards paganism in his fiction:

> Hardy, it seems, discovered in Comte's writings ethical alternatives to Christianity, which might have prompted him to develop his own philosophy of 'evolutionary meliorism' [...] He appreciated Comte's philosophy due to the fact that it offered a non-religious morality based on scientific foundations[127].

In 1891, the year of Tess's publication, Neo-Darwinism was surging in popularity, and another offshoot of Darwin's theories that was gaining traction was Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is an 'enterprise or ideology, founded in the nineteenth century, which holds social evolution to depend upon the operation of the law of natural selection of favourable inheritable variants'[128], it was first introduced in the early 1880s[129], and proved understandably popular, as Late Victorian scientists believed social classes were justified by biological criteria, aided by the works of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and disciplines like phrenology, which had an incredibly racist foundation to their theories. Social Darwinism was further influenced by the racialist theories of the nineteenth century, and the notion of human devolution was fed by German doctor Max Nordau's best-selling *Degeneration*, which was first translated in 1895 in English. As a result, social classes were no longer stratified by money alone, but by racial characteristics, which also came to justify their station in life as a result of their flawed nature and produced inter-class fears. In the case of Tess Durbeyfield, this logic is both followed and parodied by Hardy in the tragic fate of the D'Urberville line to which belongs Tess, and in the young woman's social inadequacy as she is straddling social lines, something her noble physical appearance betrays. The novel's very title plays on the irony of social Darwinism: Tess is not Tess D'Urberville, but Tess Durbeyfield, and the only way she is ever of the D'Urbervilles is by belonging to Alec D'Urberville, who is himself a usurper of nobility because his bourgeois arriviste family could buy their title. There is no possible return to a better station, as Tess's family is crestfallen, and the only way seems to be downwards for the young heroine. Tess's social integration is constrained by several external factors over which

[126] Bailey, J.O. "Evolutionary Meliorism in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy." Studies in Philology 60, no.3 (July 1963): 569-587, cited in Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Tess of the d'Urbervilles', 90.
[127]Andrzej Diniejko, 'The Influence of Auguste Comte on Thomas Hardy', The Victorian Webhttps://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/diniejko5.html, accessed 07/04/2021.
[128] Halliday (1971,389) cited in Nollet, *'*Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure and Tess of the d'Urbervilles',* 18.
[129] Nollet, *Ibid*,19.

she has no control. Moreover, the series of tragedies in her life negatively impact her status as a respectable LV woman.

Late Victorian morality's fear of social transgression produces interesting results in both LV paganism and Neo-Darwinism, which are both haunted by the sacrifice of unfit individuals. In the 1890s, the Passion of Christ, the fundamental sacrifice of Christianism, was challenged by new associations, especially following the publication in 1890 of Sir James George Frazer's best-seller *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. Three years earlier, the author had already published *Totemism*, which studied ancient pagan rites and put the accent on their inexorable cyclicity. The essay also took interest in the link between ritual initiation and human sacrifice as makers of pagan community. Victorian fascination for the rumoured bloodthirst of ancient religions was nothing new: already in 1820, Wordsworth depicted Stonehenge in his poem 'Trepidation of the Druids'[130] as a site of ritual human sacrifice. Hardy's insistence on sacrifice in the novel is thus influenced by the Christian notion of divine sacrifice, the Darwinian elimination of unfit individuals, and the Victorian belief that ancient insular cultures revelled in human sacrifice. As a result, the novel is haunted with 'sacrificial images'[131]. During her confrontation with Alec in chapter XLVII Tess exclaims: 'once victim, always victim—that's the law!'[132]. If Tess is victimized by Victorian morality, the cyclical law she refers to is the law of the natural world which supersedes the justice of man. The ambiguity of Hardy's paganism, between a rediscovery of sensuality in Nature, and the shock at Nature's insensitiveness, is illustrated in the novel by the mirror scenes of Tess's violation in The Chase, and the unconsummated union with Angel on her wedding night. In both cases, 'Druidical mistletoe'[133] is hanging above the place she lies and suggests sacrifice. Indeed, Tess is a doubly sacrificial figure: she sacrifices her virginity in The Chase, and her life at Stonehenge, as she lies on the druidical stone of sacrifice at the centre of the solar temple. From the very beginning of the novel, Tess seems destined to be sacrificed to an indefinite deity, and after Alec takes advantage of her in The Chase, the pace of the novel picks up and portrays a hunt that will end only in the heroine's death:

> The trap has been sprung for Tess, be it a trap of fatality, social pressure or family sloth, or all at once. Throughout the remainder of the book, Hardy will employ a pattern of

[130] Wordsworth, 'Trepidation of the Druids', *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1820).
[131] Hardy, *Tess*, 424.
[132] Hardy, *Tess*, 261.
[133] Hardy, *Tess*, 26.

> hunting images[...] 'Tess will be harried from place to place at what seems like gradually increasing speed'[134].

Tess is not the only character aware of Nature's overwhelming power. For example, Angel bows to the natural law by calling Alec Tess's 'husband in Nature[135]' and saying he has more right to be called her husband than he, because she sacrificed her virginity to him.

In this respect, Neo-Darwinism and Late Victorian paganism converge again in their frontal confrontation with Christian ethics. If it is evident that pagan morality contradicts Christian ethics, the principles of Social Darwinism also go against those of Victorian morality:

> from a social Darwinist perspective at least, dishonesty and secrecy are important character traits which help individuals to adapt to their social environment. Moreover, since social adaptation is one of the most important markers of social fitness, consequently, dishonesty appears to be a character trait of socially fit survivors only[136].

Hardy's own response to Darwinism and social Darwinism is ambivalent. If he adopts a Darwinian reading of society in *Tess*, he also depicts his protagonists as beautiful, strong, loving, brilliant minds and freethinkers when they would be deemed weak or unfit from a strictly Darwinian perspective: 'in portraying his protagonists as such, Hardy, in fact, challenges the social Darwinist perspective of what social Darwinists consider to be 'weak or 'strong' individuals[137]. In Hardy's modernist corpus, the characters often struggle because their innocent and idealistic natures clash with the 'growing mental limitations' of Late Victorian society and its societal pressure, their social inadequacy leads them to commit social mistakes that condemn them to destruction or unhappiness. Tess's first social mistake is not to inform Alec of her pregnancy since he offers to 'pay to the uttermost farthing'[138] and so he may have supported her and her bastard child financially. Not seeking the help of the Clare parents is another mistake.

Finally, the resurgence of the past is another common obsession of Late Victorian paganism and Neo-Darwinism: in the novel they translate themselves in a concern for heredity and its consequences, and a palimpsestic geography that carelessly overlaps time periods, and

[134] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement', 411.
[135]Hardy, *Tess*, 190.
[136] Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* 77.
[137] Nollet, 'Social Darwinism in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* 88.
[138] Hardy, *Tess*, 60.

which corresponds to Hardy's 'palimpsestual'[139] vision of paganism. Already before Tess Durbeyfield is introduced to the reader, Hardy emphasizes the decadence of her line. Like his heroine, Hardy came from 'an old family of spent social energies'[140] And Parson Tringham's peculiar choice of words when he describes the D'Urbervilles as 'extinct' (V) emphasize the racial component of class, and the determinism weighing on Tess as she is flawed by her hereditary unfitness for life, something which develops in the trait of violence of her ancestors. Hence, Tess is not just herself, but the sum of generations of degeneration: the recurring legend of the D'Urberville coach and her murderous streak thus become justified by heredity and foresee how and why Tess becomes a murderess. Consequently, Tess cannot rely on her freewill.

C. A pagan ethos

Despite the tragic fate which weighs on the characters, Hardy also expresses his hopes that it is not too late to develop a liveable ethos to face the difficulties of the modern world. As a result, the characters are aestheticized as pagans, but also actively display pagan behaviours as they look for spirituality outside of the Christian mind frame and are motivated by the need to act morally. This section will inspect the ethos of the countryfolk, and of the novel's two main characters, Tess, and Angel. From the Ancient Greek *ēthos*, which means 'custom, character', the word 'ethos' designates 'the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution'[141]. In this section, I will define the three pagan ethos of the novel: the countryfolk's, Angel's reasoned paganism, and Tess's spontaneous creed, and I will explain how these are not equivalent in Hardy's eye: 'in comparison to Hardy's harsh treatment of Angel's neopaganism, his treatment of the rural pagans is sympathetic'[142].

a. A pagan country folk

[139] Panter, "Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World": 2.
[140] 'Hardy's Autobiography' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 317.
[141] Ethos, Merriam-Webster online, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethos#learn-more, accessed 22/03/2021.
[142] Charlotte Bonica, 'Nature and Paganism in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.' *English Literary History* 49 no. 4 (1982): 851.

The paganism of the people of the Vales is an instinctual behaviour closely linked to reproduction. As we have seen in Part I-A-c 'pagan aesthetics', most of the characters in *Tess* are rural countryfolk who are aestheticized as Hellenic pagans, and sometimes likened to mythical beings. Chaseborough in particular is a pagan place with a different mindset, more attuned to the formidable 'appetite for joy'[143] of the countryfolk. During the scene of the dance metamorphosis, Tess's acquaintances undergo a dual transformation, they become Hardy's minor Hellenic deities, but they also regress in a sort of atavistic way to an absolute principle of generation: 'forming together a sort of vegeto-human pollen'[144]. Moreover, they are portrayed as superbly at ease in their transformative nature, most unlike Alec's painful and unnatural transfiguration from Paganism to Paulinism. This transformation is liable to a veil, a strong pagan motif that will be further studied in the third part of this dissertation: 'the haze no longer veiling their features, the demigods resolved themselves into the homely personalities of her own next-door neighbours' (Hardy, 48). The people of Chaseborough are especially remarkable as the most sensual group of the novel. Their harmony with the natural world is a direct source of physical pleasure and is even reminiscent of maenadic 'ecstasy' (Hardy, 49), a motif that I will further explain in the third part of this dissertation on mythopoeia. After the dancing at Chaseborough, the young women return home extremely drunk, as Hardy highlights, and they secretly commune with the natural world. This moment is the enacted poetry of the countryfolk, and the women are elevated by a transcendence that they alone perceive: 'however terrestrial and lumpy their appearance just now to the mean unglamoured eye, to themselves the case was different'[145]. The women are indeed transported by 'a sensation that they were soaring along in a supporting medium, possessed of original and profound thoughts, themselves and surrounding nature forming an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other'[146].The emotional perception of nature that characterizes the countryfolk's relationship to the natural world reaches an apotheosis in this vignette: 'the spirit of the scene, and of the moonlight, and of Nature, seemed harmoniously to mingle with the spirit of wine'[147].

[143] Hardy, *Tess*, 149.
[144] Hardy, *Tess*, 48.
[145] Hardy, *Tess*, 50.
[146] Hardy, *Tess*, 50.
[147] Hardy, *Tess*, 53.

Although Hardy regularly aestheticizes the people of the Vale as Hellenic pagans, he is also capable of a more lucid portrayal of nineteenth century British countryfolk. The Durbeyfields themselves evolve in a space time continuum outside of Victorian rationalism and resist its incursion into the countryside:

> Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed[148].

The programmed extinction of the countryfolk is plainly illustrated at Flintcomb-Ash, during the stand-off between the 'engine-man' (Hardy, 255) and his machine, and the 'natives'[149], where Hardy introduces a frightening embodiment of modernity in the shape of the 'red tyrant that the women had come to serve'[150], accompanied by a human slave who is insensitive to the world around him: 'what he looked he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun' (Hardy, 255). In doing so, Hardy presents the pagan world as the antithesis of modernity, but also as a more desirable way-of-life: the countryfolk are more alive than the engine-man, enthralled by his 'Plutonic master', and Hardy's choice of words to describe the countryfolk: 'aborigines'[151], 'natives',... underlines the almost racial difference between the protagonists, pitted against a totem of modern progress who also embodies the 'Ache of Modernism', its feelings of rootlessness, and its unnatural rupture with the natural world.

If the people of the Vales oppose the incursion of material progress in their land, they further disrupt the Victorian chronology through the upholding of ancient rituals, visible in the overlapping of different rites that all share in common the presence of Tess and their pre-Christian origins: 'the forests have departed, but some old customs of their shades remain. Many, however, linger only in a metamorphosed or disguised form'[152]. In order to survive, paganism too has had to evolve and adapt to its new environment. The Roman relic of the Cerealia becomes disguised as the Marlott club-walking and continues unperturbed by the passing of time, as the narrator explains: 'the club of Marlott alone lived to uphold the local

[148] Hardy, Tess, 14.
[149] Hardy, *Tess*, 255.
[150] Hardy, *Tess*, 255.
[151] Hardy, *Tess*, 255.
[152] Hardy, *Tess*, 6.

Cerealia. It had walked for hundreds of years[...]and it walked still'[153], even if meaning has been lost to time. Indeed, in order to ensure their survival 'the old rituals have been shorn of their significance and reduced to pleasant customs'[154]. But these pagan settings still retain their power over the 'summer-steeped heathens'[155] of the Vales: the druidic dimension of The Chase and the emphasis on the 'primaeval' nature of the setting offer the possibility of a regression to animalism, and Tess and Alec are reduced to just another species of animals within the forest, in the full throb of reproduction. The novel's pagan geography essentially offers 'a history of England levelled in space'[156], and the people of the Vale are eternal in their immutability.

Moreover, their harmonious relationship with the natural world means that the countryfolk spontaneously entrust their existence to a cosmos that is natural and that can be deciphered and predicted through omens read in the behaviour of the natural world. Indeed, according to Charlotte Bonica: 'at the heart of the country people's paganism is the tendency to see congruence between events and situations in their own lives, and phenomena in the natural world'[157]. This results in their own brand of fatalism, 'the fatalistic convictions common to field-folk and those who commonly associate more extensively with natural phenomena than with their fellow-creatures'[158]. This reliance on omens plays an important role in the episode of the 'afternoon crow', where the soon-to-be wed Tess and Angel depart from Talbothays and the dairy farm's cock craws in broad daylight. This insignificant occurrence is immediately picked up by the dairy workers and interpreted as a bad omen concerning Tess's virginity. Hardy could have dismissed what amounts to another superstition of the Vale, but by giving it reason after Tess confesses her indiscretion to Angel, the author actually empowers a belief system which is absolutely irrational. In doing so, he further grants a veiled intentionality to the natural world, a will that is inaccessible to the civilised Angel Clare when this information could have saved him and Tess from their life's tragedy: 'the cock crew again—straight towards Clare […] "It only means a change in the weather," said she; "not what you think: 'tis impossible!"'[159].

A final important dimension of the countryfolk's spontaneous paganism is their unVictorian attitude to sex, as the flirtatious dancing at Chaseborough suggests. After her

[153] Hardy, *Tess*, 6.
[154] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement'410.
[155] Hardy, *Tess*, 123.
[156] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement', 409.
[157] Bonica, 'Nature and Paganism in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.' 850.
[158] Hardy, *Tess*, 159.
[159] Hardy, *Tess*, 169.

seduction, Tess cries to her mother, demanding why she was not warned of the danger men presented to an inexperienced and innocent girl like her. Her mother's reaction would be scandalous for a Victorian audience, as she considers sex a social tool to a practical end for a woman, and does not value her daughter's virginity for moral reasons, telling her daughter: 'you ought to have been more careful if you didn't mean to get him to make you his wife!'[160], and she presents the countryfolk's distinctive fatalistic streak, accepting her daughter's plight as something natural and wilfully caused by the Christian God: 'Well, we must make the best of it, I suppose. 'Tis nater, after all, and what do please God!"'(Hardy, 64). Throughout the novel, Tess is never morally condemned by her mother, who relates the banality of her 'trouble' in her answer to the letter Tess writes her for advice:

> J did not tell everything to your Father, he being so Proud on account of his Respectability, which, perhaps, your Intended is the same. Many a woman—some of the Highest in the Land—have had a Trouble in their time; and why should you Trumpet yours when others don't Trumpet theirs? No girl would be such a Fool, specially as it is so long ago, and not your Fault at all[161].

The different mindset of the countryfolk when it comes to sexuality is not just the result of their pagan ethos, it also proves the disconnection of Victorian socio-sexual morality with the lives of poorer Late Victorian women, who have to deploy stratagems to ensure their respectability. The countryfolk are also Victorians, and they too strive for respectability. Even Joan D'Urberville acknowledges that men equate female respectability with a lack of sexual initiation, and through her letter, Hardy defends the women's lack of guilt in acting sexual, since they are subjected to the overwhelming sexual force that rules Nature. In a time of vacillating Christian faith, Hardy shows in *Tess* that paganism is very much alive in the countryside despite the attacks of Christianism to uproot it and substitute it, by presenting a syncretism that actually turns against Christianism. This apparent superficial victory of Christianism is observed in the novel by Angel himself, who believes that monotheism is ill-suited to the countryfolk: 'Angel was quite earnest on the rather automatic orthodoxy of his beloved Tess, which […] he had been prone to slight when observing it practised by her and the other milkmaids, because of its obvious unreality amid beliefs essentially naturalistic'[162]. But if the countryfolk are portrayed as possessing a correct model for comprehending the world, they are flawed like all the novel's characters, and represent a species soon to be extinct

[160] Hardy, *Tess*, 64.
[161] Hardy, *Tess*, 150.
[162] Hardy, *Tess*, 129.

because it cannot defend itself against modernity: 'because their culture is circumscribed by the encroachment of civilization, their paganism is powerless'[163].

b. Reasoned paganism

Tess also narrates the story of a bright and promising young middle-class gentleman who turns himself into a socially unfit individual by making inappropriate choices for a Late Victorian audience. Unlike the countryfolk and Tess who spontaneously experience paganism, and paradoxically profess Christianity, Angel professes Hellenic paganism, and rejects his family's natural Christianity. As an outsider observer of the syncretic world of the Vales, Angel tries to fulfil Matthew Arnold's secular idealism, but fails because of his inherent Late Victorian moralism. Throughout the novel, Angel is portrayed as inconstant. His personality exists in tension between his Apollonian side, his Arnoldian attitude, and his angelism. He is the most lucid character in the novel, and he possesses the sufficient education to produce an intentional paganism inspired by Arnold's Hellenism. He is also aware of the 'Ache of Modernism' which he detects in Tess, and in his tentative to reconcile the modern world with the imperative of moral happiness, he is much like the writer himself. But Angel ultimately proves his own 'mental limitations', and through him, Hardy produces his most scathing commentary on the modern Victorian condition.

At first, Hardy paints the young freethinker in a positive light. Angel is distinctive in his freedom of thought, and he shows courage in deciding against a clerical career, as it seems an almost hereditary fate in his family of clergymen. From the very beginning of the novel, Angel deviates from his brothers and society's chosen path, as he is fascinated by the Marlott women's club walking and goes to join them, symbolically preferring paganism over the reading of a pious book brought by his brother. He has the moral beauty of believing in happiness and seeking it in the emulation of 'pastoral life in Ancient Greece'[164], which according to him, reconciled the body and the soul. As such, Angel's own moral evolution is interesting. He becomes aware of the spiritual inadequacy of Late Victorian Christianism by observing his parents, realising that the contradiction they observe by separating the body and the soul forgets an entire dimension of humanity, and can never be entirely satisfying on a

[163] Bonica, 'Nature and Paganism in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.' 851.
[164] Hardy, *Tess*, 99.

spiritual and moral level. Here, he is the mouthpiece for Hardy's own critical voice, and produces 'elaborate sarcasms'[165]:

> The self-denying pair had been occupied in coaxing the appetites of some of their sick parishioners, whom they, somewhat inconsistently, tried to keep imprisoned in the flesh, their own appetites being quite forgotten[166].

Another positive facet of Angel is his lack of regard for Late Victorian social stratification, wealth, or respectability. During his stay at Talbothays where he is learning the rudiments of farming, he falls in love with Tess, and he deliberately chooses a wife who is below him socially because he values her innocence more than her status: 'it was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance'[167].

But if Angel is more corporeal than the novel's other Christian characters, he is diaphanous[168], and his love is 'ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability' (Hardy, 192). As we have mentioned before, Angel is incapable of lust, a central element of paganism, and his love is described as insufficient in consequence: 'Angel […] was in truth more spiritual than animal […] He could love desperately but with a love more especially inclined to the imaginative and the ethereal.' (Hardy, 151). The writer himself points Angel's angelism as the major fault in his character: 'with more animalism he would have been the nobler man'[169]. Unlike Tess who is subjected to external pressures which lead to her destruction, Angel is free from concerns of survival, he is socially and sexually privileged, so his unhappiness can directly be chalked up to his 'disastrous moral idealism'[170]. He idealises Tess as a Greek goddess, and later makes her pay her lack of conformity to his ideal. Despite his open mindedness, he still presents class-bound attitudes, and he idealizes the countryfolk, missing their true nature: 'He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them'[171].

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[165] Hardy, *Tess*, 180.
[166] Hardy, *Tess*, 126.
[167] Hardy, *Tess*, 129.
[168] 'Walter Pater's Diaphaneitè (1895) is a short essay presenting the character of an ideal kind of person who revives the values of Ancient Greece: 'according to Pater features of the diaphanous temperament, are "a moral sexlessness" and "a clear crystal nature" (W. Pater, Diaphaneitè in The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry, (1873), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 136-140, p.139.) which are all features present in Angel'. Grosso, 'Hellenism, paganism and aestheticism: Arnold's influences on Hardy's later novels', 28.
[169] Hardy, *Tess*, 191.
[170] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 391.
[171] Hardy, *Tess*, 103.

Moreover, Angel's paganism is striking in its lack of maturity and its artificiality. Angel is not gifted with Tess's or the countryfolk's natural, hereditary paganism and kinship with Nature, something that is visible in the apotheosis at Stonehenge. Both characters are groping in the dark, and the monument is apprehended in a fragmented and unidentified manner, pillar after pillar. While Tess wonders about the nature of the place and is only able to identify it once Angel has named it, Angel compares it to 'a very Temple of the Winds' before understanding they are standing at Stonehenge. This is significant because the temple of the winds, also known as the tower of the winds, is a temple located in Athens used for telling time. Faced with the pagan heritage of his homeland, Angel's only possible interpretation is through a Hellenic frame of reference. While his intuition about time is correct, he does not pick up on the sacrificial dimension of the monument on which Hardy intended to insist. Accordingly, Angel's biggest flaw is perhaps his Victorianism. The young man is civilised, and part of the world eludes him:

> With all his attempted independence of judgement this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings[172].

Torn between the polar opposites of Arnold's 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism', Angel suffers from his moral contradictions. Faced with Tess's revelation, Angel's Hellenism faces its hardest test, and he reverts to his Hebraism by rejecting her, surrendering to the morals of his day:

> Angel Clare […] is agnostic and an enthusiast for Greek ideas, has read and absorbed his Huxley, and communicates to Tess the "incredulity of modern thought". And, yet, when Hardy calls Angel "a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years", the epithet is meant to be disparaging. […] 'Angel Clare in fact becomes for Hardy the representative of a whole generation of "advanced" but misdirected thought[173].

This results in an 'imperfect modernism'[174] because Angel is fundamentally incapable of living his precepts to the fullest. The construction of Angel's neopaganism seems actually quite fragile as it collapses when he realises Tess is not the goddess he believed her to be, and critic David J. De Laura points out the lack of sincerity of his paganism. Angel's limitations are all too visible, but Tess is also guilty of idealising her husband, which is perhaps her biggest mistake in the novel, and a painfully ironic one, since he commits the same mistake: 'she had

[172] Hardy, *Tess*, 208.
[173] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels'': 385.
[174] David J. De Laura, *Ibid*: 382.

not known that men could be so disinterested, chivalrous, protective, in their love for women as he. Angel Clare was far from all that she thought him in this respect; absurdly far indeed.'[175] Angel's moral steadfastness is indeed less evident than Tess's: his initial dissipation with a stranger in London, followed by his rejection of Tess after learning of her past, and his attempted and aborted seduction of Izz Huett all show a strain of irrationality in his reasoned behaviour.

Because of his untenable moral idealism, Angel has been harshly treated by critics. The young man is caught up in the moral heredity of Victorianism, just like Tess is caught up by her pagan heredity and by the hereditary violence of the D'Urbervilles. This means that Angel's flaws are the flaws of a generation, portrayed in all their spiritual variation and indecision by the awkward reunion of the Clare brothers who discern in each other fundamental flaws but who are uncapable of seeing their own. Hardy's characterization of Angel is perhaps the greatest illustration of his pessimism for the future:

> In effect, though Hardy allows our essential sympathy for Angel to remain unimpaired, his treatment of Angel becomes one of the keenest portrayals of "angelism" in modern literature. […] Angel is not merely ineffectual, but dangerous. In Angel, the "sample product" of a quarter-century of English intellectual life, Hardy conveys his judgment of the consequences of the residue of irrational idealism still infecting even advanced thought in the ethical sphere[176].

To conclude on Angel, it is my opinion that his actions are the most destructive for Tess. Indeed, if Alec is responsible of the outrage that brands Tess as socially unrespectable, Hardy partially explains it by Alec's own pagan nature. But in the living-out of his Arnoldian fantasy, and in his violent rejection of Tess, Angel makes her lose her only chance at social reintegration and happiness, despite the young woman's absolute abnegation and the pure love she bears him. This is also the opinion of De Laura, who notes:

> Angel's more intense and authentic moral idealism, as well as his own romantic unrealistic temperament, are presented as leading directly to Tess's tragedy; and his quandary is more clearly fixed in the contemporary intellectual situation, where freethinking idealistic Late-Victorians retained outdated and destructive moral scruples[177].

[175] Hardy, *Tess*, 151.
[176] De Laura, '"The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels': 392.
[177]David J. De Laura, "The Ache of Modernism" in Hardy's Later Novels, *ELH* 34 No. 3 (September 1967): 394.

c. 'Spontaneous paganism'[178]

In this dissertation, my previous analyses of Tess's paganism focused on her portrayal as both a pagan country girl and her allegorisation as a syncretic pagan goddess by Angel. I will now focus on how Tess acts in the novel, and on how the freewill she expresses in these choices can be deemed pagan. Tess Durbeyfield is not passively pagan through the cultural references Hardy applies to her; she is a woman who shows active involvement in spiritual questions: 'Tess's capacity for moral speculation [is] displayed in her anxieties about the rectitude of concealing her secret from Angel'[179]. Paganism is Tess's intrinsic nature, and before she is ever presented to the reader Parson Tringham tells her father Jack Durbeyfield that they are the descendants of 'Sir Pagan D'Urberville'[180], the founder of their line. Furthermore, 'Durbeyfield'—the debased version of the ancestral name she bears—is also marked by the presence of 'field', which further links the heroine to the etymology of 'pagan'. But beyond her hereditary pagan traits, Tess is also the bearer of a hybrid moral and spiritual culture. Because of her Sixth Standard education, she is quite educated for her social background, and she has been exposed to a Victorian ethos that she has internalised. Despite being submitted to the beliefs of her milieu, she is a young woman anxious to conform to the externalized and internalized social pressure of Late Victorian morality.

Tess is a believer, but after the initial tremor of Alec's violence, she believes in her own pantheistic and syncretic religion. During their reunion at the Cross-in-Hand, Alec laments that she has lost her faith, telling her: 'you seem to have no religion'. Tess's answer is quite surprising: 'But I have. Though I don't believe in anything supernatural'[181]. Her rejoinder highlights Tess's spiritual maturation, and her logical belief in the divine she can sense in the world around her. The novel actually features Tess's spiritual evolution, and her awakening to critical thinking and Hellenic morality through her proximity with Angel, whose philosophical reasonings she is fully capable of relating to Alec, thanks to her 'naturally bright intelligence'[182].

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[178] Marie Panter, Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World: 6.
[179] Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell, 'Revision in the Novel' in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton Critical Edition (3), 1991), 373.
[180] Hardy, *Tess*, 1.
[181] Hardy, *Tess*, 252.
[182] Hardy, *Tess*, 159.

Moreover, Tess professes Christianity, but like the other countryfolk, it seems to contradict her very nature, something her husband observes at Talbothays. Angel indeed comments that her Christian faith and observance of churchgoing are unbeknownst to her an 'automatic orthodoxy', which is tarnished by its 'obvious unreality amid beliefs essentially naturalistic'[183]. If some of Tess's beliefs can be ascribed to her class: "like all the cottagers of Blackmoor Vale, Tess was steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions"[184], she is more refined in her spirituality than the other countryfolk, and her poetic appreciation of the world around her distinguishes her from the other characters in the novel. Angel himself realises that she accesses a truth that he can only perceive. When he discusses her religiosity with his parents at Emminster, he describes her as 'brim full of poetry—actualized poetry, if I may use the expression. She *lives* what paper-poets only write'[185]. Tess essentially succeeds in developing her paganism where her husband fails, and her kinship with nature produces an unconscious animism, which is translated in the text by her recurrent assimilation with animals, or her blending in with the natural world. Her paganism is plainly visible when the text adopts Tess's focalisation, as her consciousness confuses the limits of the natural world and of her own being: 'at times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes till they seemed a part of her own story' (Hardy, 67). This animism fructifies enough to become an inkling of revolt against Christian moralism: 'it was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she'[186].

Tess's paganism is not just spontaneous, it is highly poetic. When she leaves Marlott for Talbothays, the beauty of nature alone gives her inspiration for psalms, and the young woman unconsciously operates a successful syncretism, by singing a Christian song in honour of nature:

> the half-unconscious rhapsody was a Fetichistic utterance in a Monotheistic setting; women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematized religion taught their race of later date[187].

Although her fate is an unhappy one, Tess is spurred on by her natural desire for happiness, and she experiences lyrical episodes of ecstasy when she is closest to the natural

[183] Hardy, *Tess*, 129.
[184] Hardy, *Tess*, 140.
[185] Hardy, *Tess*, 135.
[186] Hardy, *Tess*, 67.
[187] Hardy, *Tess*, 81.

world at Talbothays: 'the days of declining autumn which followed her ascent, beginning with the month of October, formed a season through which she lived in spiritual altitudes more nearly approaching ecstasy than any other period of her life'[188]. More than Angel himself, she is the positive mouthpiece for Hardy's hopes of a spiritual renewal: '[Tess] is Hardy's greatest tribute to the possibilities of human existence, for Tess is one of the greatest triumphs of civilisation: a natural girl'[189]. Under these circumstances, her wilful capture at Stonehenge becomes more than the novel's closure, it incarnates Hardy's own pagan ethos: 'Hardy turns Stonehenge, a quintessentially English place, into the cradle of a renewed civilization, based on Greek pagan virtue. Tess's stoic death may thus be read as a defence of her heathen experience with Angel, as she dies with no remorse'[190]. Finally aware of her own anachronism, the young woman feels for the first time at home in the pagan temple, and the frenetic rhythm of her symbolic hunt abates. Before her capture, Tess goes so far as acknowledging her pagan nature to her husband, but she affiliates herself not to his Romantic Hellenism, she rather revendicates the continued British paganism which is part of her heritage: "you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home"[191]. But Tess's pagan ethos is also doomed to fail because her internalized Victorianism is a source of violence which prevents her from finding fulfilment in paganism, and for a more troubling reason, delineated by Charlotte Bonica: 'paganism, in whatever form, is nevertheless based on the impossible premise that the natural world can function as a source of human value'[192]. Paganism, in the wrong hands, can also become a double-edged sword:

> Although Tess's sense of guilt and her conception of a disapproving deity may be derived from conventional morality and traditional Christianity, her ascription of a disapproving consciousness to the natural world is entirely pagan. In short, she is a victim as much of her paganism as of her Christian training[193].

Hardy likes his heroine, and through her fate, he declares the powerlessness of mankind in the modern period: 'the clash between sterile denial and vital existence occurs repeatedly, in a wide range of episodes, yet through none of them can Hardy protect his heroine. And that

[188] Hardy, *Tess*, 151.
[189] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement' 421.
[190] Panter, "Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World": 7.
[191] Hardy, Tess, 168.
[192] Charlotte Bonica, 'Nature and Paganism in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.' *English Literary History* 49 no. 4 (1982): 852.
[193] Bonica, *Ibid*, 853.

[...] is the full force of his darkness of vision: how little can be done for Tess'[194]. Hardy's penultimate novel thus presents two ethos that fail because of the human limitations of the protagonists which consciously or unconsciously seek to apply them to fulfil their spiritual and moral needs, but they have the merit in Hardy's eye to propose a 'conceivable'[195] moral alternative to the overwhelmingly dysfunctional world of the Late Victorian era. Despite his 'evolutionary meliorism', Thomas Hardy cannot escape the pessimistic determinism of the *fin de siècle*: 'a pervasive theme of Hardy's writing is how things decay, yet how fully and abruptly they are alive. A haunting question is how they survive.'[196] In this respect, Hardy's apprehension of the developments of Late Victorian sciences brings him near the Decadent movement's analysis of these same elements:

> For Hardy the implications both of evolutionary theory and of entropy bore in on the life of his fiction and his poems. They are often expressed as a struggle between individuality and energy. Hardy's career as a writer developed alongside the emergence of the Decadent or fin de siècle movement in Britain, but he is not often set in a close relation to Decadent writing of the 1880s and 1890s[197].

The next part of my dissertation will focus on another dimension of paganism that coexisted with 'responsible paganism' during the Late Victorian era. For the sake of clarity, I will use Jennifer Hallett's term 'decadent paganism', as this strand of paganism coincided with the advent of British Decadentism during the 1890s. The literary production of decadent paganism is two-fold, it either corresponds to an aesthetic escapism from a disappointing present into 'an ideal world of joy and freedom' as 'many were disenchanted by their situation in the modern world but felt impotent to affect any actual change' (Hallett, 168), or it corresponds to tales of horror which rely on Gothic tropes, the fantastic mode, and a shift from the secular to the supernatural world view to produce narratives of ruined bodies and dislocated identities, and to elicit violent emotions of fear, disgust, or metaphysical estrangement in the protagonists and the reader. Hallett further defines two characteristics of decadent paganism. First, it is less politicized than responsible paganism: 'the literary basis of this variety of paganism must be stressed. Through the decadent representation, paganism may have been

[194] Howe, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles—At the Centre of Hardy's Achievement', 422.
[195] Panter, "Paganism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*: The Possibility of Faith and Ethics in a Darwinian World", 1.
[196] Gillian Beer, 'Hardy and Decadence', *Celebrating Thomas Hardy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 90.
[197] Gillian Beer, 'Hardy and Decadence', *Celebrating Thomas Hardy*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 90.

perceived as a threatening social alternative, but this type of paganism was not written in the form of social manifesto'[198]. Secondarily, its ethos was a much darker and defeatist one: 'this variety of paganism was primarily the product of disillusion rather than the optimistic search for a more fulfilling philosophy' (Hallett, 170).

From a moral standpoint, decadent paganism upsets the tentative of reconciliation of paganism and Christianism at the heart of responsible paganism, and instead chose to shape and addressed the deep-seated anxieties of the Late Victorian public. Yet, it still served a moral purpose. Indeed, if responsible paganism aimed to redress the failing moral capacities of the Late Victorians by looking outside the exhausted Christian frame of reference for answers, its controversial counterpart dared to explore the possible consequences if this moral enterprise failed. This paganism still dialogued with Christian faith, as 'the decadents created images of a paganism not calm and sane but disreputable, immoral and fundamentally unchristian'[199], which allowed them to imagine the subsequent dangers of biological, cultural, and spiritual regression uncompromisingly, and by confronting them in their most abject form, attempt to exorcize them. Not only does this strand of Late Victorian paganism prompt interesting questions about the Victorian ethos, but it also encourages 'a shift in our understanding of Victorian agnosticism'[200], as it challenges the usual portraiture of the Victorian era as an age of secularization and technological enlightenment or of straightforward religious tension. The Late Victorian era was instead saturated with supernatural beliefs which suffused the aesthetics of the period:

> It was a golden age of belief in supernatural forces and energies, ghost stories, weird transmissions and spooky phenomena. For a long time, historians ignored these beliefs as embarrassing errors or eccentricities, signs of the perturbations produced by the speed of cultural change. In fact, it is much easier to grasp the religious and scientific strands of the century as closely intertwined. Every scientific and technological advance encouraged a kind of magical thinking and was accompanied by a shadow discourse of the occult. For every disenchantment there was an active re-enchantment of the world. Because the advances in science were so rapid, the natural and the supernatural often

[198] Jennifer Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", (PhdD Diss. University of Bristol, 2006), 160.
[199] Jennifer Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", (PhdD Diss. University of Bristol, 2006), 122.
[200] Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, *The Ghost Story and Theology from Le Fanu to James*, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 1.

became blurred in popular thinking, at least for a time. And no area of the literary culture of the Victorians was left untouched by this interplay of science and magic[201].

With these elements in mind, it is easy to understand how these liminal beliefs could successfully be paired off with paganism, another liminal force that was at the same time underrated and omnipresent in the cultural production of the Late Victorian era. In this section, through the texts of 'The Great God Pan' (1894) by Arthur Machen and *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904) by Montague Rhodes James, I will study the aesthetics of decadent paganism, the high emotional investment it demands of readers, and how it both symbolized and influenced the Late Victorian state of mind.

II. Fantastic paganism: an outlet for Victorian fears

A. Paganism as a horrific embodiment.

During the Victorian fin de siècle, the nation's religious decline and the progress of medicine unveiled new and disturbing truths about the origins of man: 'not only did the new sciences demolish a comfortable anthropocentrism, but they also problematized the relationship between external appearances and internal reality, most notably in the case of the human body'[202]. This upset traditional identities and encouraged a re-centring of moral concerns on the social and biological body. As a result, the aesthetics of decadent paganism are primarily constructed around the body and its destruction to symbolize the crumbling of moral norms: moral decadence resulted in anomalous morphologies, and wreaked havoc on unsuspecting individuals through non-human antagonists. In this section, I will first retrace the cultural genesis of decadent paganism, then describe the typical 'abhumanness'[203] of pagan antagonists, and I will finally analyse one of the most recognisable tropes of decadent paganism: contagion, and the moral warning it represents.

[201] Roger Luckhurst, "The Victorian Supernatural", Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians, British Library, May 15th, 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-victorian-supernatural# last accessed 05/07/2021.
[202] Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 (2009))*, 56.
[203] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, ix.

a. The aesthetics of Decadence.

In order to understand the nature and function of decadent paganism, one must first look at the literary precursors of Decadentism in Great Britain. I will focus especially on the Gothic movement and the fantastic vein. The Gothic is a cultural movement that appeared in the last decades of the Eighteenth century in Britain. In the midst of Enlightenment rationalism, the Gothic re-actualized aesthetic expressions of the irrational side of man. Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally considered the first Gothic English novel. Subtitled 'A Gothic Story', Walpole's Italianate tale already featured key Gothic tropes and character types: the secret passageways, the rediscovery of an ancient account of historical events as the framed narrative for the plot, a tyrannical and powerful male antagonist, and curses and the supernatural as plot devices. Gothic literature shocked audiences with violent and licentious content, but it also proved popular as its violence could match the 'widespread perception that all old structures were in a tottering condition' (Hogle, 44). To equate the birth of the Gothic movement with the trauma of the French Revolution is a 'contemporary, rather than a retrospective phenomenon' (Hogle, 43), as the movement was equally 'derived from the Burkean cult of the sublime'(Hogle, 43), and looked from its inception to explore deeper truths about human nature. Indeed, a constitutive quality of the proteiform Gothic is its efficiency in shaping, addressing, and containing the anxieties of a given period. This is thanks to its aesthetic plasticity, as Kelly Hurley highlights in her seminal essay *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (1996):

> The very popularity of a genre speaks for its efficacy in interpreting and refiguring unmanageable realities for its audiences. Gothic in particular has been theorized as an instrumental genre, reemerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises[204].

As a result, Gothic works until the 1830s[205] tended to locate their intrigues in exotic lands and distant pasts, usually an obscurantist and Catholic Europe that contrasted with the enlightened vision England had of itself. In the Early Victorian era, the realist movement in literature dominated, but writers still integrated Gothic tropes to mainstream literature: two iconic examples are the sinister figures of the eternal bride Miss Havisham in *Great*

[204] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 5.
[205] Alison Milbank,'The Victorian Gothic in English novels and stories, 1830-1880', *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 145.

Expectations[206] (1861), and the madwoman villainess of *Jane Eyre*[207] (1847). This weakened version of the Gothic became more discreet but displaced the Gothic landscape closer to home: the seedy and dismal urbanism of industrialised England comes to mind here. After the weakened expression of the mid-Victorian period, the growing anxieties, and the cultural pessimism of the fin de siècle encouraged a revival of the Gothic under a new form that recentred its intrigue on the human body:

> The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the re-emergence of the Gothic as a significant literary form in Great Britain, after its virtual disappearance in the middle of the century […] More graphic than before, soliciting a more visceral readerly response than before, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic manifests a new set of generic strategies […] which function maximally to enact the defamiliarization and violent reconstitution of the human subject[208].

By the Late Victorian era, the human body, at the heart of the social and religious preoccupations of imperialism, new medicine, and first wave feminism, became the primary *locus* of Gothic aesthetics as Hurley explains: 'later still in the Victorian *fin de siècle* the scene changes again: it is no longer the physical landscape that provides the location for Gothic tales but rather, more disturbingly, the human body itself'[209]. And the most famous works of the fin de siècle effectively all represent mutating and decaying bodies that mirror the physical, intellectual and moral corruption of civil society: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan' (1894); H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) are but a few examples. These works all adopt Gothic tropes and belong to the horror genre, the genre of the two works studied in this section. Horror can be defined as a form of acute and visceral fear. It denotes an aversion to objects that have the potential to elicit the same reaction in most individuals. If it is a subjective emotion, horror represents a universal experience of danger. As there is no final differentiation in literary criticism between horror and terror, I will prefer the term horror in this dissertation. The word's etymology betrays the importance of the body in the experience of horror: from the Latin

[206] John Bowen, 'The Gothic in Great Expectations.' *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, British Library Online, accessed 25th June, 2021. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-gothic-in-great-expectations

[207]Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard Gothic Jane Eyre and its Progeny*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,2010).

[208] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 14.

[209]Greg Buzwell, "Gothic fiction in the Victorian fin de siècle: mutating bodies and disturbed minds", Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians, British Library, published May 15th, 2014. accessed July 06/07/2021. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-fiction-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle

horrere, it means to tremble or shudder, or to feel hair standing on end. In his book *The Supernatural in Fiction*, Peter Penzoldt deeply links the horror genre with the supernatural, and describes horror as an experience of absolute rejection of reality, where the individual is 'totally overcome, incapacitated or paralyzed' (Penzoldt, 3) by the truth he witnesses. Horror thus works on a metaphysical level by questioning the boundaries of reality and of human identity.

It seems that in the Late Victorian era, horror changes status, and infiltrates mainstream literature. Indeed, in the chapter 'Horreur décadente et beauté de l'horreur' (Decadent horror and the beauty of horror) of her 1982 book *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914 (The fantastic and Decadence in England: 1890-1914),* French scholar Catherine Rancy highlights the pervasiveness of horror in the fin de siècle as it defied genre barriers: 'no author absolutely specialised in the horror genre, but almost all the fin de siècle authors who took an interest in the fantastic wrote horror'[210]. Horror was already a popular genre, as the importance of the Gothic movement shows in the late 18th century but fin de siècle horror is highly distinctive: it prefers the short format of the novella to the lengthy gothic novel as its conciseness helps heightening the reader's fear, its stories often end tragically, with no definite victory of the human protagonist and of good versus evil. It also shows a marked interest for pseudo-medical or pseudo-scientific discourse, as the turn of the century was marked by the increased influence of psychoanalysis and the medicalization of the unconscious:

> This flourishing production of horror is not confined to the fin de siècle: it carries over to the first years of the twenty-first century, up until the First World War. The taste for horror corresponds to a transitional period during which subjects which had remained taboo during the Victorian era began to be treated in fiction without having fully been explained by psychoanalysis. The fantastic literature of the decadent period is thus dominated by the obsession of death in its most physical dimensions, and the result of this physical haunting is a privileged genre, horror, a favourite stock character, the fantastic doctor, and a haunting metaphor, decomposition[211].

[210] 'Aucun auteur ne s'est absolument spécialisé dans l'horreur, mais presque tous les auteurs fin-de-siècle qui se sont intéressés au fantastique ont fait de l'horreur', Catherine Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914,* 34% calibre ebook.

[211] 'Cette floraison de l'horreur ne se confine pas à la fin du siècle : elle continue dans les premières années du vingtième siècle, jusqu'au début de la guerre de 1914-1918. Ce goût de l'horreur correspond à une période de transition pendant laquelle les sujets restés tabous à l'époque victorienne commencent à être traités en fiction sans avoir encore été totalement expliqués par la psychanalyse. La littérature fantastique de l'époque décadente est donc dominée par la hantise de la mort dans ses aspects les plus physiques, et il résulte de cette hantise physique un genre privilégié, l'horreur, un personnage favori, le médecin fantastique, et une métaphore obsédante, la décomposition. Mais bien que l'aspect physique de l'existence soit toujours souligné, les perversions décadentes ne sont pas uniquement d'ordre physique : l'imaginaire décadent est hanté par la décomposition psychique'. Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914,* 33% calibre ebook.

The internalized Gothic of the fin de siècle also encouraged the fantastic, which had a decisive impact on decadent paganism. The fantastic premise adopts the realist setting of the realist novel, only to subvert it with the irruption of a supernatural disturbance which triggers doubt in the mind of the protagonist. The fantastic serves a hermeneutic purpose: it expresses a fundamental crisis in the character's perception of the world and in the meaning of the world. This crisis goes beyond individual fragmentation, it threatens the communal certainties and the consensual structures of reality and exposes society to the contagion of doubt. The fantastic, unlike the Gothic, often chooses a familiar setting and time period the better to install the illusion of a rational world, so the reader can be shocked when reality is disrupted. The characters either present a lack of exceptionality or possess a generic quality. They are ordinary and do not react heroically in the face of fear. Fantastic fiction also resorts to a multiplicity of recognizable archetypes: obsessed artists that live and die for their art, erudite occultists or doctors that seek forbidden knowledge, or staunch rationalists like the Jamesian antiquarian whose scepticism is ultimately proved wrong.

There is still a heated academic debate on the nature of the fantastic, which is either understood as a genre or a mode, and on its origins. French literary criticism acknowledges the filiation between the British Gothic and the birth of the fantastic, but it usually pinpoints the beginning of the fantastic with the translation of the Tales of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822). Breaking away from explicit Gothic tropes and German supernatural folk tales, Hoffmann effectively creates a romantic fantastic form. Fantastic works are distinctive for their complex narrative structures, which resort to interpolated or embedded narratives, their questioning of the foundational structures of normative reality, the presence of non-human doubles, the authentication of the narrative by the reproduction of documents like letters and shifting focalizations. Hoffmann introduces an internalized fantastic which is evident in unreliable perception and a crisis of the protagonist's subjectivity. The character's experience often brings him close to the limits of experience or causes incurable madness: as Denis Mellier writes in *La Littérature fantastique* 'with Hoffmann the process of internalization of the fantastic crisis begins'[212]. Because of its unspeakable nature, this crisis is symbolised in liminal creatures: 'it reemploys the gothic elements of the ghost, the vampire

[212] 'Avec Hoffmann débute le processus d'intériorisation de la crise fantastique.' Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique*, (Paris : Seuil, 2000), 26.

or the animated portrait, the collector, the antiquary or the doctor, all the while adding to it a series of typically decadent characters, like the "femme fatale", the Adonis or Pan'[213]; liminal acts of apparition, destruction, metamorphosis and possession, and liminal settings like the bedroom, the wilderness or spiritual buildings. The theme of the frontier is typical of the fantastic, because the frontier symbolises the fine line between rational reality and the supernatural, and it is in marginal spaces that the narrative tilts in favour of either side. These characteristics explain the attractivity of the fantastic for the Decadents who sought to produce transgressive literature:

> Though the fantastic exists in "parasitical" relation to the dominant cultural order, bringing into view the forces of disorder and non-meaning against which this order constitutes itself, when the fantastic text refuses closure and leaves these forces in view it disrupts conventional meaning systems and makes rooms for new ones to emerge[214].

In the decadent appropriation of the fantastic, it is interesting to note that new meaning systems were being built upon the vestige of ancient civilisation, and that decadent paganism stripped ancient cultures to the bare necessity of aesthetics, sometimes contradicting the historical values of Roman, Hellenic of Scandinavian cultures. Decadentism originated in mid-nineteenth-century France, with the works of dark Romantics like Théophile Gautier, who is credited with the slogan 'L'Art pour l'art' or Art for Art's Sake, which promoted autotelic works that divorced artistic forms from any didactic, moral, political, or social function, arguing that a work of art could exist in itself and for itself. In prose, the most (in)famous work of French Decadence is perhaps Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), which was called by British decadent Arthur Symons 'the breviary of the Decadence', and whose themes of occult forbidden knowledge greatly inspired the authors in my corpus. In England, their contemporaries were the late generation of the Aesthetic movement. The Decadents were 1890s figures such as Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson, who were members of the Rhymers' Club or contributors to *The Yellow Book*, the foremost pagan journal. Hallett considers that Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) marks the beginning of British Decadence: 'Pater undermined the concept

[213] 'Il réutilise les éléments gothiques tels que le fantôme, le vampire ou le portrait animé, le collectionneur, l'antiquaire ou le médecin, tout en y ajoutant une série de personnages typiquement décadents, tels que la « femme fatale », l'Ephèbe, ou Pan'.'Fantastique et Décadence, Convergences et Divergences', Catherine Rancy. *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre: 1890-1914*, 90%.
[214] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 7.

of art as morally elevating […] it was Pater who articulated and expanded the idea in England. Pater argued that art gives one nothing but the highest quality to one's moments as they pass and exists simply for those moments' sake'[215]. Decadentism disrupted the entire timeline of didactic Victorian literature, and presented a new permeability between time periods and moral codes:

> The bridge which decadent ideas made between art and life brought paganism in literature into the social arena and encouraged the idea of paganism as a very real social threat. Decadent ideas changed concepts of morality. Since art was no longer linked to social progress, it was no longer linked to its age. (Hallett, 126).

This decadent desire for disorder is also characteristic of the Decadent approach to religion: the Decadents believed in original sin and in the fallen nature of man, their imagery revelled in grotesque, artificial and perverse expressions of nature, and they produced nightmarish iterations of the human body fuelled by degeneration anxiety. Their work is best defined by 'oscillation' (Hurley, 46): oscillation between morbidity and creative impetus, between the denunciation of modern corruption, and the rejection of reconciliation, and, finally, oscillation between revulsion and fascination for evil: 'reacting against Christian moral codes, they attacked Christian ideas of sin […] decadence came to positively enjoy the evil aspect of aesthetic experience and pushed it to the foreground'[216]. Their brand of paganism is thus characterized as being the 'epitome of decadent evil'[217]. Released from the constraints of traditional morality, the decadents often crossed the boundary into outright defiance, and to serve their aesthetic purpose, they betrayed historical accuracy: 'linked to the 1890s decadence, images of paganism became cut off from their classical roots. *The Yellow Book* was the mouthpiece of the decadents and, although it has the odd classical reference, it is in fact not especially pagan in the classical sense'[218]. Unlike the figureheads of responsible paganism who defended the pertinence of importing ancient morality to cure present uncertainties, the Decadents toyed with paganism: 'the decadents and its critics were playing the same game with paganism; both presented it as the dangerously real and potent negation of all that modem society stood for (Hallett, 136), making it the ultimate signifier of all the threats to Victorianism that pervaded the fin de siècle.

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[215] Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", 125.
[216] Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", 132.
[217] Hallett, *Ibid*, 132.
[218] Hallett, *Ibid*, 2.

As I have already demonstrated, the Late Victorian era was a period of religious crisis and of cultural pessimism. The source of most reckonings was to be found in the modern sciences. As a result, decadent paganism was deeply influenced in its aesthetic choices by the predominant scientific theories of the time: Neo-Darwinism, degeneration theory and criminal anthropology. These theories particularly influenced decadent paganism's treatment of the body: Late Victorian Neo-Darwinism caused an initial shock by portraying 'the natural order as a disorder'[219]. If evolution was synonymous with progress, it also threatened devolution and decline. Darwinism attacked the telos of the age of progress of the Mid-Victorian era, and the divinely ordained teleology of Christianism which placed man at the apex of Creation. Moreover, Darwinian Nature was often read as amoral: 'Nature was ethically neutral and under no compulsion to privilege the human species' (Hurley, 57). The Late Victorian public faced the hideous prospect of regression because of an inherent 'human liability to atavism or reversion'[220], a threat that came from inside the body and destroyed silently despite good moral intentions and conscious efforts to maintain order. Darwin's theories were interpreted by literature and deformed the human subject to the point of grotesque shapes that connected mankind to the supernatural. Through their refusal 'to acknowledge any limitations to bodily plasticity'[221] these Darwinist fantasies produced supernatural possibilities as the principle of 'natural selection authenticated the fantastic'[222], and suggested that a civilised state of being was not the default true state of mankind, but rather an unstable state only maintained through 'the "artificial devices" of social breeding and education' (Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 64). These elements posited the unsettling truth that the edifice of Victorianism was on the brink of ruin and could collapse at any given moment. The immorality which had been a matter of personal responsibility and a collective burden in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, mutates in decadent fiction to become 'causal and symptomatic'[223], in other words, it becomes another illness fabricated by the Victorians. As Hurley explains in *The Gothic Body*, if degeneration was a medical term, the diseases it encompassed 'wrought moral effects'[224], which at the same time could be read as a caution against degeneration.

[219]Hurley, *Ibid*, 10.
[220] Hurley, *Ibid*, 10.
[221] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 7.
[222] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 60.
[223] Hurley, *Ibid,* 71.
[224] Hurley, *Ibid,* 71.

'Degeneration theory', an influent medical theory of the late nineteenth century, was formulated by Max Nordau in his book *Degeneration,* published in 1893 and first translated in English in 1895. A fierce critic of modernity, Nordau dubbed the fin de siècle the 'Twilight of the Nations'[225]. *Degeneration* is an angry and anxious book that rejects most progressive aspects of nineteenth century culture as the proof of cultural and racial decline: 'the primary target of *Degeneration* is such fin-de-siècle aesthetic movements as impressionism, naturalism, mysticism, and symbolism, "effete" movements which emphasized form over substance, and which Nordau believed to be unhealthy and dangerous'[226]. The book had a widespread influence in England as it resonated with the themes of Late Victorian Darwinism:

> *Degeneration* was *the* book of the 1890s, phenomenally popular throughout Europe. It was perhaps the most successful example of that late-Victorian sub-genre, the sociomedical text, incorporating biology, evolutionism, psychopathology, moral philosophy, and sociocultural analysis into one sweeping critique of modernity[227].

The particularism of *Degeneration* was that it associated moral decline with physical regression, and it further developed the paradoxical theory that degeneration was a Western predicament: to suffer decay, civilisations needed to be highly evolved first. Nordau's notion that progress, if pushed too far, could betray itself, is at the centre of the 'forbidden knowledge' trope that I will present in this dissertation. Nordau's theories drew from the works of Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, who penned the very influent *The Criminal Man* (1876) and developed the theory of the 'born criminal' as an 'evolutionary throwback'[228]. Lombroso believed in the principles of phrenology: by measuring the skull, one could predict the intelligence and the moral traits or the vices of an individual. Criminals became an identifiable racial group, whose features contained inherited traits from diverse creatures far removed from man, in a form of indiscriminate atavism. Lombroso's fantasist Darwinism is apparent in the heterogeneous bodies of Jamesian and Machenian monsters and their evil instincts: they act without rational motive with the only clear intention to destroy life.

These monsters are, in my opinion, the embodiment of decadent ambivalence. According to Rancy: 'the fin de siècle generation is aware it is seeing the end of an era, and it

[225] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 77.
[226] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 75.
[227] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 76.
[228] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 93.

is haunted at the same time by images of agony and hope, of degeneration and of regeneration[229], and faced with an impossible reckoning, authors like Machen and M.R. James turn to the supernatural to renew meaning in their world. Arthur Llewellyn Jones, better known as Arthur Machen, was born in 1863 in Caerleon, Monmouthshire, Wales[230]. Machen was the son of a clergyman. His family enjoyed a good situation until financial problems made him unable to attend university. Machen failed medical school and became a journalist, after spending eighteen years in poverty. Machen's relationship to paganism was an active one, and he partook both in decadent and 'magical paganism'[231] as he became an initiate of the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1899. Machen is what Catherine Rancy calls a Decadent by coincidence:

> Machen is a "decadent by coincidence": like many writers of his generation, he took an interest in the occult, in diabolism and in the fight between the superior and inferior instincts of man; like Yeats he was received into the secret society of "The Golden Dawn"; like numerous decadents he had John Lane publish his works, *The Great God Pan* for example, which was illustrated by Beardsley; finally his evocation of a nocturnal London, of diabolical possessions and unutterable orgies, along with his treatment of the Pan motif, undeniably affiliate him to the "Nineties"[232].

Machen's conception of true historical paganism was far removed from the flowery paganism inherited from Aestheticism, a vision which Machen heavily criticized as, in his opinion, ancient paganism as a religion was the implacable counterpart to sterner modern currents of Christianism:

> He asserted that it was much more austere, the nearest modern equivalent being Calvinism: "the Oedipus Tyrannus is nothing but the doctrine of predestination set to solemn music ... [paganism] is Calvinism in marble; and judgement and inexorable vengeance on guilty sinners are sung on choral odes" (Hallett, 148).

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[229] 'La génération fin-de-siècle est consciente de vivre la fin d'une époque, et elle est hantée à la fois par des images d'agonie et d'espoir, de dégénérescence et de régénération', *Rancy, Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 2% calibre ebook.

[230] "Arthur Machen", Britannica, accessed June 23rd, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Machen

[231] Hallett*, "*Paganism in England", 180.

[232] 'Machen est un « décadent par coïncidence »: comme de nombreux écrivains de sa génération il s'est intéressé à l'occulte, au diabolisme et à la lutte entre les instincts supérieurs et inférieurs de l'homme ; comme Yeats il a été admis à la société secrète « The Golden Dawn » ; comme de nombreux décadents il a fait publier ses œuvres chez John Lane, par exemple *The Great God Pan,* qui fut illustré par Beardsley ; enfin ses évocations du Londres nocturne, de possessions diaboliques et d'orgies indicibles, ainsi que son traitement du thème de Pan, l'apparentent indéniablement aux « Nineties ».' Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 30%.

His take on decadent paganism was thus primarily motivated by his Anglo-Catholic faith, and far from enthusiastically adopting pagan beliefs, the Welsh author 'made paganism his target'[233]. Ronald Hutton explains that Machen reacted in 1894 to 'the contemporary eulogization of Pan' by identifying the god as 'an ancient spirit of corruption, madness, and destruction equivalent to the Christian Devil'[234]. The most obvious link between Machen and James is their conception of time as an uncontrollable force that surges from deep times into the present, producing inadequate and thus monstrous lifeforms. Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936), Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and later of Eton, was a noted medieval scholar, antiquary, and expert on Bible Apocrypha[235]. He remained to the end an avowed Christian and believer, embodying the feelings of Parkins, the protagonist of 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad': 'a man in my position cannot, I find, be too careful about appearing to sanction the current beliefs on such subjects'[236]. Although *Ghost Stories* was published in its collected form in 1904, many prominent tales were published up to ten years earlier in autonomous journals. The original edition contained 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', 'Lost Hearts', 'The Mezzotint', 'The Ash-Tree', 'Number 13', 'Count Magnus', 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' and 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas'. Of the eight tales, only four take place in England. 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' is set in Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges in the South of France, 'Number 13' is set in Viborg in Denmark, while the story of 'Count Magnus' unfolds in Råbäck in Sweden. Finally, 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' is set in the German town of Steinfeld. Unlike Hardy and Machen, James locates the epicentre of his paganism away from Britain, or from Greco-Roman antiquity. James's preferences can be explained by the Victorian infatuation with the Old North, studied by Andrew Wawn in *The Vikings and the Victorians, Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. In chapter IV, 'Living the Old North' Wawn chronicles the new tourism around Scandinavia[237], in which James partook, as he drew much of his inspiration during 'repeated cycling holidays in Denmark and Sweden with various friends-in 1899, 1900, 1901, 1906 and 1923' (Simpson, 11). In his tales, paganism is a form of supernatural triggered by hapless victims who either stumble upon ancient artefacts, or antiquarians who actively seek them without fully

[233] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon, A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 256.
[234] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon, A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 255.
[235]Ghosts and Scholars, homepage, Last altered: March 29th,2012.http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/GS.html.
[236] Ron Weighell, "Dark Devotions, M.R. James and the Magical Tradition", *Ghosts & Scholars* (1984): 6.
[237] Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 283.

understanding their dangerous nature. Even when the supernatural occurs in England, it is always disrupted by the incursion of foreign paganism: either from other lands or other time periods in English history. His predilection for the ghost story genre and for the theme of journeying posit the importance of liminality and metaphysical questions at the heart of his fiction, despite their seemingly innocuous narratives.

b. Pagan 'abhumanness'[238].

Liminality will be the point of interest in this section: Kelly Hurley defines 'monstrosity as liminality' in *The Gothic Body*, where she explains that the 'indifferentiation' of fin de siècle Gothic creatures 'explode the crucial binarisms that lie at the foundation of human identity' (Hurley, 24-5). From this disorder can emerge new parasitic lifeforms. Indeed, decadent paganism, like the rest of the Late Victorian horror corpus, could not escape the idea that an evil other lurked within every respectable English citizen. Julia Briggs chalks the Doppelgänger motif up to a specific type of modernist alienation: 'out of an alienation, to which the decay of supernatural beliefs contributed, there emerged the figure of the double, neither the self nor another, a powerful symbol of unresolved inner conflict'[239]. This other was repeatedly characterized as sub-human, non-human or degraded. To describe such a creature, I will prefer William Hope Hodgson's term 'abhuman', introduced in his horrific science fiction novel *The Night Land* (1912), and which was picked up by Hurley in *The Gothic Body,* where she explains that 'the "abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other' (Hurley, 55). In the case of my study, I will divide pagan abhuman characters in two categories: these monsters rest outside of the human realm either because they were born human and were transformed by death, or they are supernatural monsters whose origin is unexplained. Kelly Hurley also defines the abhuman body as 'liminal, admixed, nauseating, abominable'[240], four qualities that feature in the very texts of Machen and James. These creatures both exist as a fantasy, as a warning, and as an attempt to re-establish slipping boundaries between normal and deviant behaviour, in a cultural context where Victorian organisational principles suffered so much stress they were becoming dysfunctional and unable to conceptualize disorder. Hence, these

[238] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 3.
[239] Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, (London: Faber, 1977), 19.
[240] Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, 9.

stories are not just tales of supernatural encounters, but chronicles of the 'gothic ruination of the human subject' (Hurley, 3) as the human protagonists of James and Machen are often victims who end up destroyed by the supernatural forces they disturb or find themselves degraded by these encounters. Moreover, the additional collapse of the crucial opposition between the human and the animal produced new life forms in Late Victorian fiction (Hurley, 29). These constructions result partially from a traumatic response to Darwinism, as decadent paganism, which heavily relies on ancient nature cults, features 'a randomly working Nature [that] is figured as *too* imaginative, *too* prolific'[241]. Catherine Rancy attests that Machen was familiar with Darwinism, and that his subsequent abhuman biology results from his confrontation with it:

> Machen was fascinated by the theme of metamorphosis, and the root of this fascination is more profound that a simple decadent taste for carrion and for decomposition, or than an unwholesome attraction to the abominable; I rather see it as the trauma sustained by nineteenth-century man who discovered Darwinian theories, the Victorian's horror as he witnesses the animal side of man, synonymous of evil and soon exposed to the daylight by Freud, the atheist pessimist's cry facing human agony and the return of the magma of death. I finally see a fascination mixed with the disgust of androgynous figures and the motif of the return to primaeval return, a typical fin de siècle fascination quickly turned into aesthetic nostalgia, and sometimes sublimed and translated into a symbol of horror[242].

These unbridled fantasies on Darwinism produced uncanny bodies, which correspond to the Freudian concept of *unheimlich* because they resonate with his trinity of the abject, the familiar and the disgusting. And de facto, 'the recognition / repression dynamic of uncanniness' (Hurley, 42) is recognizable in both Machenian and Jamesian fiction. In 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', an entire sequence is structured around Dennistoun's slow identification of the night demon that has crept into his bedroom:

> He had taken the crucifix off, and laid it on the table, when his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with their own incalculable quickness. "A penwiper? No, no such thing in the house. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? I trust to goodness not—

[241] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 90.

[242]« Machen était fasciné par ce thème de la métamorphose, et l'origine de cette fascination est plus profonde qu'un simple goût décadent pour la charogne et la décomposition, ou qu'une attirance malsaine pour l'abominable ; j'y vois plutôt le traumatisme des théories darwiniennes sur l'homme du dix-neuvième siècle, l'horreur du Victorien au spectacle du côté animal de l'homme, synonyme de mal et bientôt exposé au grand jour par Freud, le cri du pessimiste athée face à l'agonie humaine et au retour au magma qui suit la mort. J'y vois enfin une fascination mêlée de dégoût pour la figure de l'androgyne et le thème du retour à l'unité primitive, fascination typiquement fin-de-siècle tantôt transformée en nostalgie esthétique, tantôt sublimée et traduite en symbole d'horreur ». Rancy, Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914, 32%.

> no. Good God! a hand like the hand in that picture!" In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale, dusky skin, covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny and wrinkled[243].

Here the abhuman is so unfathomable that it is outside Dennistoun's rational frame of reference, and it cannot be taken in as a whole. Dennistoun perceives it through a series of focalizations on a body part that seems inanimate, as it is first compared to an object. The interrogative mode increases the impression of uncertainty and unreliability felt by Dennistoun as his senses seem to betray him. The 'penwiper' is analysed and invalidated, only to be replaced by a new conjecture which links the thing to the animal realm this time. The impression of danger increases with the comparison to a 'large spider,' which is alien to the British Isles, when Dennistoun finally exhausts all rational possibilities and recognizes the familiar object as the creature's hand. This fragmented perception is the typical response to abhuman creatures, since they are either too terrifying or too unfamiliar to be understood directly. The monster is an ancient pagan demon from the Middle East, and when Dennistoun looks at him for the first time, his terror culminates as he realises the monster is an intelligent life form. But the creature's intelligence is as interstitial as his body, it rests in between categories:

> He flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp. There was black and tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin—what can I call it? —shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips; there was no nose; the eyes, of a fiery yellow, against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them—intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man[244].

These pagan abhumans necessarily evolve in supernatural narratives, and in the Late Victorian era, the privileged genre for their appearance is the ghost story. We can actually consider that the ghost story is a pagan, or at least a non-Christian endeavour. Indeed: 'primitive and ancient epics had always concerned themselves with encounters between the human and non-human' (Briggs, 25), and the presence in early Christendom of ghost narratives is a legacy

[243] Montague Rhodes James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 19.
[244] Montague Rhodes James, *Ghost Stories of An Antiquary*, 20.

of earlier narratives from the pre-Christian Western world. Despite their defiant posturing, Decadent texts showed profound metaphysical preoccupations, and often feature immortals that are not divine but rather demonic. M.R. James's predilection for the ghost story as a literary genre was not a marginal occurrence in the nineteenth century, as Julia Briggs explains in her analysis of the history of the British ghost story: 'between 1850 and 1930 or so [the ghost story] achieved enormous popularity'[245]. In my analysis of the link between Late Victorian ghost stories and decadent paganism, I would like to put forward the definition of 'ghost story' used by Briggs herself, as she logically classifies *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* as a ghost story, but also considers that 'The Great God Pan' is among the 'full-length ghost stories of importance' (Briggs, 13) of the fin de siècle:

> The term "ghost story" is being employed with something of a latitude that characterizes its general usage, since it can denote not only stories about ghosts, but about possession and demonic bargains, spirits other than those of the dead, including ghouls, vampires, werewolves, the 'swarths' of living men and the 'ghost-soul' of *Doppelgänger* (Briggs, 12).

Strangely, the spectres James conjures up in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* are all incarnate, and their appearance is unwholesome: 'in the modernist ghost story even otherworldly spirits are often disgustingly embodied, materializing into slime-entities [...] or into the spider-like or octopoid part-human anomalies of M.R. James's "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book" (1895) and "Count Magnus" (1904)'[246]. In the *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, Jacqueline Simpson, a specialist of James, notes the following in the entry 'undead': 'this modern term usefully differentiates the reanimated corpse emerging physically from its tomb from the ghost (a spiritual entity). […] Post-medieval English folklore prefers ghosts to wandering corpses[247]. Far from the disembodied spectral apparitions of traditional ghost stories, Jamesian ghosts can touch and be touched, something they repeatedly do, and they primarily convey fear through abnormal physical traits: the most recurrent and curious characteristic of Jamesian ghost is that they are 'thin' (James, 28), or that they mutate after death to obtain non-human characteristics, like the children's frightfully long nails in 'Lost Hearts,' analogue to the racial other as they resemble 'a Chinaman's fingernails' (James, 29).

[245] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 14.
[246] Hurley, Kelly. "Chapter 10 British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930" In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 189-207. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 196.
[247] Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 371.

Aesthetically speaking, these ghosts are much closer to the gross physicality of the human corpse, something which testifies to the Late Victorians' shifting conception of the afterlife:

> His description of what he saw reminds me of what I once beheld myself in the famous vaults of St. Michan's Church in Dublin, which possess the horrid property of preserving corpses from decay for centuries. A figure inexpressibly thin and pathetic, of a dusty leaden colour, enveloped in a shroud-like garment, the thin lips crooked into a faint and dreadful smile, the hands pressed tightly over the region of the heart (James, 28).

James operates a reboot of the traditional ghost archetype, and his ghosts translate every Late Victorian anxiety: they are 'admixed'[248] bodies that straddle species lines, or they present the outward symptoms of illness, they hint at a different line of evolution, or they endow inanimate objects with life, in a parody of the Christian Genesis. However, James's message is quite ambivalent. In 'Lost Hearts', the ghost children are the only creatures in the corpus who are irresponsible for their corruption, and they are presented as highly pathetic. The narrator even tries to obtain the reader's sympathy when he describes their 'hungry and desolate cries' (James, 33), as if these ghosts still had the biological needs and vulnerabilities of children. More than any other spectre in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, I believe that the wraiths in 'Lost Hearts' function as an unsettling warning: paganism can corrupt innocence, and every human is liable to 'devolution' (Hurley, 16) in the spiritual After. Furthermore, these ghosts illustrate the decadent theme of autonomous evil life that can perpetuate itself despite death: 'this decadent ghost is special: it is made of flesh and bone, what is more of corrupted flesh' writes Catherine Rancy in *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*[249]. In exploring pagan abhumanness, James goes beyond Machen and creates monsters out of inanimate objects. His pagan body progresses in such a way that it heralds the 'eldritch horrors' of Lovecraftian fiction, as Lovecraft himself notes in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*:

> Inventing a new type of ghost, he has departed considerably from the conventional Gothic tradition; for where the older ghosts were pale and stately, and apprehended chiefly through the sense of sight, the average James ghost is lean, dwarfish, and hairy—a sluggish, hellish night-abomination midway betwixt beast and man—and usually touched before it is seen. Sometimes the spectre is of still more eccentric composition; a roll of flannel with spidery eyes, or an invisible entity which moulds itself in bedding and shows a face of crumpled linen[250].

[248] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 23.
[249] Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 30% calibre ebook.
[250] H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, (Project Gutenberg Australia, 2006), accessed 07/06/21, http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0601181h.html

The two most striking examples of this disintegration of the Victorian impulse to classify the natural world are presented in 'Oh, Whistle' and in 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas'. In 'Oh, Whistle', Parkins unearths an old engraved Roman whistle in the ruins of a templar preceptory, and unheeding the warnings of traditional folklore, he blows it, only to be followed and later attacked by the wind, which, lacking any physicality, constructs a body out of his hotel bedsheets. In the second story, Mr. Somerton, a man of antiquarian pursuits, deciphers the location of the treasure of the titular Abbott Thomas and goes with his valet to the little German town of Steinfeld. After he has descended into the well where the treasure is hidden, and while he dislodges a large stone, he is set upon by an unspecified creature, an attack he later describes to his friend in the following terms: 'I was conscious of a most horrible smell of mould and of a cold kind of face pressed against my own and moving slowly over it; and of several-I don't know how many-legs or arms or tentacles or something clinging to my body'[251].

This unspecified creature is highly similar to Helen Vaughan in "The Great God Pan", a short story that makes good use of a Decadent staple, the 'pan-motif', only to turn it into a lasting emblem of abhumanness. Despite being a minor god in the Greco-Roman pantheon, Pan the goat-footed god of the woods became more popular than more established gods during the Late Victorian era. A god of vitality and sexuality, but also of death and panic fear, Pan's name was interpreted at the time as signifying '*all* of nature' (Hallett, 171), and he could thus represent Nature's positive and negative sides. Installed as a primaeval God of the natural world, Pan symbolised an aesthetic simplification of ancient paganism: 'the myth which juxtaposed Pan and Christianity played an important part because it allowed Pan to stand for paganism in its entirety, as did his name. Similarly, the lack of myths surrounding Pan allowed his image to be far more malleable than the already established images of Dionysus' (Hallett, 165). Moreover, Pan in the modern era was inextricably linked to Christianism in a confrontational stance. The Victorians were well aware of the myth of the death of Pan relayed by the Roman historian Plutarch: 'Pan died when the pagan order gave place to the ministry of Christ, the rule of primitive nature being succeeded by the era of Christian salvation. Pan as the Devil, the cloven-footed and horned god of witches, could thus be regarded as the disinherited deity of pre-Christian religion' (Briggs, 79).

[251] Montague Rhodes James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 156.

According to Hallett, Pan's popularity is highly significant, not just as a Victorian taste for Classical Antiquity, but as a concession of the highly rational mid Victorians to the superiority of the numinous world, as the 'belief in the inability of man to know everything alongside a continued concern with the unknown supernatural'[252] spread and voiced itself through the fantastic. If Pan was already a staple of nineteenth-century literature, Catherine Rancy estimates that the 1890s mark a turning point in the use of Pan in Victorian literature: [Pan] becomes a fantastic character, responsible for terrifying stories which steadily grow in number between 1890 and 1930, and especially between 1904 and 1912. In fact, the return of Pan is one of the most uncontested innovations of the fin de siècle fantastic[253]. Still according to Rancy, Machen was the first to use the fantastic mode to treat the theme of Pan's return[254]. The association between Pan and horror is also the result of Christianism. Indeed, Pan's goat legs, cruel tendencies and strong sexual connotations had already associated him with the Devil into a form of syncretism. In their treatment of Pan as evil, the Decadents were thus 'operating within established Christian images of equating Pan with the Devil' (Hallett, 158). But Pan also symbolised the new awareness of the mind's duplicity and uncontrollability: 'late Victorian paganism usually saw [Pan] as horrific, the suppressed part of the mind breaking out in revenge'[255]. It is the pagan deity's amorphousness that leads Rancy to consider that 'Pan constitutes the ideal vessel for horror, because he has no precise shape, and because he provokes an irrational—and fatal—terror, to the point of representing the Freudian Id, an "unheimlich" element which comes to take revenge on the self and the present time'[256]. Because Pan is a vehicle of failed repression of unconscious desires, his aesthetic role in the Late Victorian era likens him to such neo-Gothic creatures as Count Dracula. I would like to make two points here: although 'The Great God Pan' can be considered a Gothic work, the association of Pan with subconscious desires and drives dates back to his ancient association with 'pan'-ic fear, something which was consolidated by the 'ancient myth of Pan intervening in the battle at Marathon' (Hallett, 172), which caused the Persian army to flee in terror.

[252] Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", 173.

[253] '[Pan] devient personnage fantastique, et responsable d'histoires terrifiantes dont le nombre ne cesse d'augmenter entre 1890 et 1930, et en particulier entre 1904 et 1912. En fait le retour de Pan est une des innovations les plus incontestées du fantastique fin-de-siècle'. Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre* 1890-1914, 71% calibre ebook.

[254] 'Machen a eu le mérite d'être le premier à utiliser le thème du retour de Pan à des fins fantastiques, et à montrer que le dieu appartient aussi bien à la Grèce antique qu'au Pays de Galles contemporain', Rancy, Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914, 72% calibre ebook.

[255] Wilfred Stone cited in Briggs, Night Visitors, 80.

[256] 'Pan constitue un véhicule idéal pour l'horreur, car il n'a pas de forme précise, et qu'il provoque une terreur irrationnelle — et fatale —, au point de représenter le ça, un élément « unheimlich » qui revient prendre sa revanche sur le moi et le présent', Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 73% calibre ebook.

Secondly, Pan's nature is not really monstruous as he is of divine essence. While the monsters of Gothic fiction exist within the bounds of Victorian conventional reality, Pan rules over his own dimension, and it is this hidden realm of knowledge, this alternative to Victorian civilisation, that Raymond desires to access.

The Victorians gave great importance to the moral qualities that distinguished humanity from animals, and in these stories, decadent paganism threatens more than biological definition, it suggests the 'loss of human specifity' (Hurley, 28), as the characters who seek forbidden knowledge lose their humanity by destroying other human lives. Dr. Raymond, the ruthless neurologist in 'The Great God Pan' and the alchemist Mr. Abney in M.R. James's short story 'Lost Hearts' are two clear examples of this danger. Machen's weird tale opens on a scientific experiment conducted by Dr. Raymond on his ward Mary, a young virgin. By performing a 'slight lesion in the grey matter' (Machen, 10) of Mary's brain, he will scientifically open her eyes to the spiritual plane. The experiment is a dual scene of metamorphosis: by vivisecting Mary to prove his theory, Raymond irremediably destroys her mind, and the young woman is rendered a 'hopeless idiot' (Machen 15). The violation is dual as during the encounter she is impregnated by the God and produces an Abhuman offspring, Helen Vaughan, which causes her to die in childbirth. As Mary is transformed into a quasi-animal form, Raymond loses his humanity. In terms of ethics, Raymond's pagan ethos is the only source of destruction, and it respects no balance because he will stop at nothing to obtain forbidden knowledge. In the case of 'Lost Hearts', the young Stephen is taken in by his eccentric cousin Mr. Abney after he is orphaned. Abney is a Classical scholar who wishes to secure immortality and supernatural abilities through occult means. To do so, he must conduct a pagan ritual of human sacrifice, and cannibalize the hearts of three children. By the time Abney's nefarious intentions are discovered, two children have already disappeared at Aswarby Hall. Abney dies after his young victims return as vengeful ghosts and rip his heart out of his chest, but he lost his humanity by sacrificing the children as a necessary evil for his own ends, and the logic of pagan abhumanness is drawn further in this story in the evil transformation of the two innocent children into vengeful wraiths and their grisly murder of Abney through what we can only infer is the pagan magic performed on them.

c. The threat of pagan contagion.

These stories also exemplify another theme of decadent paganism: the threat of contagion, both moral and physical, with the consequence of moral or utter physical devolution and destruction. Jennifer Hallett attests that the Victorian obsession with illnesses did not spare paganism: 'paganism was depicted as a symptom of a disease and it was argued that no good could come from it. (Hallett, 134). This threat is both sociological and functional and produces its effect by shattering the binary oppositions of Victorianism that oppose sexual normativity and 'aberrant sexuality' (Hurley, 73) or moral conformism and transgression. I believe this trope of contagion is linked to the 'cultural contagion'[257] of the Christian order by paganism, something I have analysed in my study of *Tess*. For Hurley, the analogy between contagious disease and decadent paganism springs from degeneration theory: 'degeneration was linked to the rise of democracy, class mobility, and racial miscegenation.' (Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 70). In my corpus, the terrifying fate of pagan practitioners symbolizes the cultural danger of accepting the ethos of paganism. This motif also reveals the ambivalence of decadent texts which hold the same form of moralism as the rest of Victorian literature. The ghost story was well adapted to convey a moral message: 'Ghosts, like detectives, commonly operated in middle-class homes. Several of the periodicals were intended for reading aloud to the whole family'[258]. These supernatural tales could indirectly address the Late Victorian fears of sexual, moral and mental contagion.

All these tales are narratives of characters actively seeking or accidentally stumbling upon occult knowledge that is too evil to be without consequence. Either the character is haunted by this knowledge and forever changed, either his mind is destroyed because the knowledge gained is beyond the fathomable, or he is physically destroyed by the forces that embody this knowledge. In *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, the evil Mr. Abney is killed by the ghosts of children he murdered, Sir Matthew Fell and his descendant Sir Richard Fell are killed by demonic spiders residing in the titular ash tree, while Mr. Wraxall who fell under the spell of Count Magnus is butchered by the revenant Magnus and the supernatural creature he brought back from his satanic pilgrimage to the cursed town of Chorazin. In 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' Dennistoun is forever traumatized by his encounter with the night demon in St-Bertrand-de-Comminges, in 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' Parkins' nerves are forever altered by his encounter with the wind spirit, while in 'Number 13' Mr. Anderson is also deeply shaken by his brush with the evil alchemist Nicolas Francken, like Mr. Sommerton

[257] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 68.
[258] Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story,* 14.

and his valet in 'The Treasure of Abbott Thomas'. The body count in 'The Great God Pan' is just as sobering: as a child, Helen first causes the madness of Trevor, a village boy of Caermaen, then she causes the death of Rachel M. who vanishes in plain sight. After she moves to London, she marries Charles Herbert and utterly destroys his life in a single year. She then disappears to Argentina where she makes one more victim, the young painter Meyrick whose art holds the key to her true nature, only to return under a new identity, the socialite Mrs Beaumont, who leads upper-class men to an epidemic of suicides. In Machen, there are two types of contagion: mental and sexual, which communicate with one another and all spring from Dr. Raymond's original experiment. Mental contagion even suggests sexual corruption since sexual corruption was a symptom of mental disorders in Victorian medicine. Machen's mental contagion is the madness Helen propagates whenever she discloses her true nature or conjures up other abhumans. Before it is traced back to its original source, this pagan madness works like a highly contagious and deadly disease and is likened to one by the characters themselves: after many aristocratic London bachelors suffer from 'acute suicidal mania' (Machen, 38), Villiers reflects to his friend Austin that 'suicidal mania is not smallpox' (Machen, 39). The men are initially misled because they adopt the wrong frame of reference, this illness is spiritual and defies the laws of nature: 'the transmission is of an esoteric and potentially fatal knowledge passed from body to body'[259]. The theme of contagion functions in opposition with the theme of containment, or here failed containment, which is central to these decadent pagan narratives, as they prove the powerlessness of modern rational men threatened by an alien evil:

> In 'The Great God Pan', 'the individual experiment cannot be isolated, but serves as an index case in an epidemic of mind-body breakdown that spreads throughout the community. This vision of modern embodiment, fraught with excess and conducive to the transmission of strange new orders, marks Machen's Decadent horrors[260].

The second form of pagan contagion in Machen is sexual, a theme absent from Jamesian fiction. Sexually transmitted pagan madness would have been even more terrifying to a Victorian audience because it attacked in the intimate sanctum of Victorianism: the home, but also because it sounded eerily familiar to a public acquainted with the ravages of syphilis and other incurable venereal diseases. Fear of these illnesses is evident in the Victorian era, with

[259] Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"': 28.
[260] Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"', 21.

the billing of numerous Contagious Diseases Acts from 1864 onwards, which regulated the disposal of corpses, but also made it the law for women suspected of prostitution to register with the police and submit to an invasive medical examination. If these women were found carriers, they could be forcibly removed and held in medical facilities. This objectification of the female body as a simple carrier and transmitter of illness concords with Helen's portrayal. Moreover, syphilis was particularly feared for its hereditary consequences on an innocent offspring, and Helen is the epitome of this fear: her heredity makes her corruption itself. I believe that when Machen suggests the sexual contamination of Mrs Beaumont's admirers, he is encoding another fin de siècle trope in the narrative: 'the plot of the double life, the carefully concealed depravity of Victorian men' (Hurley, 143), who then seem partly responsible for their fate. Much like the nocturnal perambulations of Enfield in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it is because the men transgress social and moral boundaries by wandering around London in the night-time that they become involved with the supernatural. More than anything, Helen Vaughan's femme fatale behaviour reveals the 'abjected masculinities'[261] of Late Victorian men, and their absolute vulnerability constitutes a dire threat for Victorian gender ideology.

I would now like to study the most representative scene of pagan abhumanness in 'The Great God Pan', the death of Helen Vaughan. In Machen, Helen Vaughan is a highly problematic figure of abhumanness: 'the daughter of a human woman, a nonhuman force, and experimental neurosurgery'[262], she is at the same time able to mimic humans in appearance and behaviour, and she also holds a part of pagan divinity in her as the offspring of a god. But all the other characters who encounter her feel a deep malaise when trying to define her and 'nobody seemed to know who or what she was' (Machen 25). Those who have come close to her true nature seem aware that she is non-human, as Charles Herbert tells his old friend: 'only human beings have names, Villiers' (Machen, 23), but this discovery is incompatible with life, and they invariably die after their encounter. Once Villiers discovers her true lineage, he blackmails her to kill herself. Her agony is recorded in one of the novel's many fragments by Dr. Matheson:

> That which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. 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

[261] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 142.
[262] Kelly Hurley. "Chapter 10 British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930", *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 189-207, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

> and dissolve. […] 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. […] I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not farther 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… as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form[263].

Helen's death is a fascinating syncretism of Darwinism and Machen's ancient evil paganism. When she kills herself, Pan's demonic daughter undergoes a recapitulation of all evolution, and her body's 'indifferentiation'[264] is so pronounced it leads to Dr Matheson's alienation. Helen is caught in a downward spiral of regression: she first loses sexual specificity, then racial superiority as a White woman, then species specificity, before the material boundaries of her body are liquefied into 'primordial slime'[265]. Slime is a highly symbolic substance: it translates the 'gross materiality' (Hurley, 34) of the human body that is still entrapped in its physicality despite the Victorian era's best efforts to erase pollution and despite the Christian desire for bodily transcendence. Furthermore, because of its in-definition, slime is disturbing and anomalous. This scene does not just read as a Darwinist nightmare, it highlights 'salient points of stress and fracture within Victorian gender ideologies'[266] which contradicted Victorian binaristic understanding of the male and female principles and associated gender roles. One of Max Nordau's biggest fears was the growing sexual indifferentiation of Western nations, as men became effete, weak-willed, and hysterical. In this respect, the androgynous stock character of pagan Decadentism could read as an absolute abomination. As the only distinctive supernatural female antagonist of my corpus, Helen also asks the question of the gender of the pagan body:

> The abomination is a specifically *female* one. One cultural tradition, older than the Victorians but nonetheless prominent within the late nineteenth century, identifies women as entities defined by and entrapped within their bodies, in contrast to the man, who is governed by rationality and capable of transcending the fact of his embodiment. In nineteenth-century social medicine in particular, women were theorized as incomplete

[263] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 50.
[264] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 10.
[265] Hurley, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 196.
[266] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 34.

> human subjects. They are but partially evolved from the state of animalism […] and thus are essentially admixed creatures[267].

Hardy's insistence on Tess's body in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* already subscribed to the Victorian obsession with the female body, which was 'intrinsically pathological (Hurley, 120) in Late Victorian culture. Helen is particularly monstrous because she resists against the 'Victorian impulse towards scientific classification'[268], and she has the ability to transcend the categories of Victorian gender ideology. Much like her divine father, Helen outsmarts Victorian images of the woman by combining radical opposites into one personality and evades capture because her pursuers find it unthinkable that Herbert and Beaumont could be the same woman:

> Victorian representations of women tend to polar extremes: women are saintly or demonic, spiritual or bodily, asexual or ravenously sexed, guardians of domestic happiness or unnatural monsters. These two incompatible perceptions of femininity (women as angels, women as beasts) are often found side by side within the same text[269].

From a supernatural point of view, Helen's monstrosity is logical: she is an abhuman creature that wears the skin of a socially successful and beautiful woman, and she preys on men. But it is my contention that from a rational point of view, Machen uses paganism to address the Late Victorian fear of first-wave feminism indirectly. Indeed, Helen is socially monstrous because she infects privileged male spaces, from her very childhood she enjoys unconceivable freedom of movement for a Victorian woman, and her intrinsically pathological female body cannot be contained in the home which was the assigned place of Victorian women. Instead, Helen subverts the sacred space of domesticity as a place of insecurity for Victorian men. Seen in this light, Helen's murderous rampage mirrors the audacity of the New Woman and her claims to social and political androgyny:

> Helen Vaughan, the murderous result of a barbaric scientific experiment in Arthur Machen's short story 'The Great God Pan' wavers 'from sex to sex' in nightmarish fashion, mutating rapidly from male to female and back again. This particularly dark and disturbing idea can be read as an attack on the New Woman – the label for the confident and independent females who emerged into society during the final years of Queen

[267] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 119.
[268] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 8.
[269] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 121.

Victoria's reign. The New Woman was regarded with admiration by some, but seen as rather mannish, sexually-threatening and unnatural by others[270].

From then on, pagan contagion can be read as the ultimate threat of 'increasing indifferentiation or chaotic disorder'[271] in Late Victorian society, and Helen as a herald of modernity: 'Helen may be the host body, but what makes her version of the demonic potent is its pervasiveness: everything she touches irrevocably changes[272]. Using the similar gateway of science as Stevenson, Machen's pagan outlook thus shines in the suggestion of a whole alternative secret world that the fantastic qualities of the female protagonist validates as more than fantasy.

B. Textual and temporal disruption.

This threat of dissolution of the physical and moral identity carries over to the pagan text: 'the syntax of the fin-de-siècle Gothic'[273] is full of hesitations, corrections, and aphasia. In Machen's text, this is exemplified by his recourse to labyrinthine narrative structure, while James often resorts to delayed resolutions and to the piecing together of clues that indicate the real nature of his monsters in the same vein as Victorian detective novels.

a. The pagan body and the pagan text: a disturbing fragmentation.

In the eighth chapter of *The Gothic Body* titled 'Narrative Chaos', Kelly Hurley explores the 'textual hysteria' (Hurley, 155) typical of decadent pagan texts. These narratives are out of sequence, disjointed or incomplete, and yet the audience knows enough to feel fear and to envision the evil at the heart of the narrative before the protagonists themselves are made aware of its true nature. This form of convoluted and paranoid plotting is best symbolised by

[270]Greg Buzwell, "Gothic fiction in the Victorian fin de siècle: mutating bodies and disturbed minds",Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians, British Library, published May 15th, 2014. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-fiction-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle , accessed July 06/07/2021.
[271] Hurley, Kelly. "Chapter 10 British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 189-207. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 197.
[272] Gabriel Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"': 28.
[273] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 31.

the labyrinth or maze, an imagery that is found in the works of James in such short stories as 'Mr Humphrey's Inheritance', or in Machen's other weird tales like 'The Three Impostors', where it is used both as a subject and as a rhetoric device. The labyrinth is a pagan architecture. It originates from the Cretan myth of the Minotaur: after King Minos's wife gives birth to an abhuman creature, the Minotaur, the king commands the artificer Daedalus to build an inescapable enclosure to hold it. The labyrinth or maze was later appropriated by Christianism as a symbol of spiritual pilgrimage, and it has been a familiar construct in England since the Middle Ages: 'in England, the Medieval Christian labyrinth design never appeared inside ecclesiastical buildings. Many English turf mazes may have been cut at this time or recut to the Medieval Christian design to banish their earlier pagan origins'[274]. Moreover, labyrinths are one of the many interesting examples of pagan / Christian syncretism produced in England. In 'The Great God Pan', the story's setting and construction is labyrinthine. As Villiers and Austin investigate the 'obscure mazes and byways of London life' (Machen, 21), so the story is slowly pieced together from titled fragments and recovered documents. There is no unifying narrative voice, but rather a polyphony of witnesses to the supernatural. Kelly Hurley describes this storytelling as a 'narrative occlusion'[275], as the unreliable narrators either systematically hide the truth from other characters, or as the second-hand narrator can only infer as to the true nature of the supernatural. The characters are aware that they are in over their heads when they first confront what they think is a detective mystery. Villiers, the amateur sleuth of 'The Great God Pan' concludes that: 'a case like this is like a nest of Chinese boxes'[276] which contain smaller boxes and are like Russian dolls. But Helen's nature defies this logic as 'the secret nested in the centre is never reached, as is evidenced by ellipsis that "closes" the novella'[277]. These unreliable and patch-worked narratives disorient the reader to destabilise their certainties. But, like any other cypher, these works exist to be elucidated, and I would like to highlight how the unreliability of Jamesian and Machenian narrators differently address various readers in function of their level of knowledge, a direct legacy of nineteenth-century occultism.

What Mellier calls a 'récit-piège' is the condition of the efficiency of the fantastic narrative: the unreliable narrator's perspective must authenticate his experience and at the same

[274] Adrian Fisher, "The History of Mazes in Britain", Landscape and Amenity, accessed July 12th 2021, https://landscapeandamenity.com/sections/professional-horticulture-and-landscape-design/articles/2016-10-01/-the-history-of-mazes-in-britain-
[275] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 47.
[276] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 24.
[277] Sophie Mantrant, 'Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and "The True Literature of Occultism"', Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies, 1.2 (2018): 88.

time, the story must escape his control and work on its own and against him, through Freudian slips. The narratives of James and Machen are characterised by the presence of a first-person narrator that is either the victim of the supernatural, or an extradiegetic storyteller recounting an experience. Often their words contain the clue to the mystery because the reader can see them in the context of interpolated narratives. This constitutes another type of textual liminality, as meaning appears between the embedded texts, and despite the intentions of the intradiegetic narrators. This device connects to a typically Late Victorian preoccupation that speech cannot fully account for reality. And indeed, here, reality always appears despite of and through language, in the liminal space between narrative levels. The disturbing fragmentation of these texts expresses a modernist anxiety about the stability of reality: 'chaos is constantly lying in wait for the decadent protagonist, and it constitutes the inevitable resolution of the fantastic narrative; the fantastic is a disorder, it does not believe in the stability of anything, and it plunges the reader in an abnormal and arbitrary world'[278]. This anxiety is relayed by the common displacement of the narrative frame of the ghost story, which depends on an oral transmission of the supernatural:

> Another common narrative frame for realist ghost stories features narrators who do not themselves experience the haunting, but who narrate it honestly, insisting on the exactness of their representations, though without being able to say for sure that ghosts really exist. Such a frame serves a function not unlike that of the Hesselius-style narration: it gives readers a way to approach the narrated content as truthful, while at the same time insisting that knowledge about ghosts or the supernatural is impossible[279].

These stories spell out a paradox: while the characters' purpose is to look for an elusive truth, the narrator spends the entire narrative misleading the reader, but the text at large does constitute a way of access to this reality which is forbidden to the intradiegetic narrators. In 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', the main protagonist is first nameless, then referred to as a 'Cambridge man' or 'our Englishman'. These epithets lead us to a double conclusion: first that the narrator suggests that he is a friend of Dennistoun, secondarily, that there is a strong narratorial intervention, and he later proves he is altering or withholding information when he takes liberties with the retelling: 'let us call him Dennistoun' (James,8). In 'The Great God Pan', the withholding of knowledge is even more refined. As the characters retrieve the written

[278] Le chaos guette donc sans cesse le héros décadent, et constitue le dénouement inévitable de l'action fantastique ; le fantastique est désordre, il ne croit à la stabilité de rien, et plonge le lecteur dans le monde de l'anormal et de l'arbitraire. Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914,* 36% calibre ebook.
[279] Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story, (*Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011) 82.

accounts of Helen's other victims, their testimony is embedded into the narrative. But what they have to say is so unbearable that they interrupt their reading and prevent the reader from knowing the truth: 'Rachel told her a wild story. She said—Clarke closed the book with a snap, and turned his chair towards the fire. When his friend sat one evening in that very chair, and told his story, Clarke had interrupted him at a point a little subsequent to this, had cut short his words in a paroxysm of horror' (Machen, 20). This oblique storytelling is indebted to the fin de siècle's taste for occultism: the distinctively occultist notion of initiatory elitism, the idea of a "happy few" who possess a hidden form of knowledge will be very common in fin de siècle fantastic literature, which will exploit this sense of mystery and secrecy'[280]. Indeed, Machen's reader is often made to feel that they do not possess the superior knowledge required to fully understand the texts. According to Sophie Mantrant in her article 'Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and "The True Literature of Occultism"', Machen was more interested in 'the use of symbolic or hieroglyphic language rather than on what it supposedly reveals'[281].

I have already commented on Machen's direct involvement with fin de siècle 'magical paganism' as he joined the Order of the Golden Dawn and held a lifelong fascination for mystery and ritual: 'in an article entitled 'The Cult of the Secret' (1926), Machen underlines that humanity has always been drawn to secret societies and mysterious rites, a powerful attraction he personally experienced' (Mantrant, 81), and these alchemical texts, as I would like to call them, primarily focus on the possibility of an esoteric truth rather than on the nature of this truth:

> In an 1899 article entitled 'The Literature of Occultism', Machen ventures that the true literature of the occult may not be that which consciously sets out to write of hidden things, but imaginative literature that thrills the heart 'with inexplicable, ineffable charm'. Such literature is made of 'runes which call up unknown spirits from the mind'. 'Runes', 'hieroglyphics', or 'symbols' are abundantly used by Machen in the definition of 'high literature' he outlines in Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature (written 1899; published 1902)[282].

[280]' La notion d'élitisme initiatique propre à l'occultisme, l'idée des « happy few » possesseurs d'une connaissance cachée sera très courante dans la littérature fantastique fin-de-siècle, qui va exploiter le sens du mystère et du secret, Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre* 7% calibre ebook.
[281] Sophie Mantrant, 'Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and "The True Literature of Occultism"', Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies, 1.2 (2018): 82.
[282] Sophie Mantrant, 'Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and "The True Literature of Occultism"', Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies, 1.2 (2018): 81.

These secrets are consequently coded, as Machen and James systematically use Latin, an alien language, to signify the supernatural. This recourse to the language of Scriptures and alchemy gives the text an esoteric aesthetic, and it leaves out a number of readers who lack the key to understand the meaning of Alberic's discussions with the night demon, or the inscription on the stone pillar in Caermaen. Moreover, this necessity of a secondary language suggests that the secret's true form is debased once it is translated in English, and that the protagonists or the reader cannot fully access the meaning of this language. Thus, the disturbing fragmentation of decadent pagan texts serves a dual purpose. It first produces a very efficient fear as the text's reluctance to yield its secrets can suggest the utmost degree of horror and alienation, something beyond words, a conceit I will further analyse in II-B-c **'The unutterable and the limits of experience'**. On the other hand, its labyrinthine storytelling links it to religious tradition, and signifies unattainable metaphysical truths that would be better left undiscovered: 'unutterability is […] a typical motif of mystical writing, in which 'the sign evokes the alterity that motivates it, but that is always beyond its scope' (Mantrant, 2018). In 'The Great God Pan', Clarke is withholding the knowledge of Helen Vaughan's multiple identities from his fellow protagonists. If the reader makes the connection through his *Memoirs*, this information will only be accessed later and imperfectly. If Villiers and Austin understand Helen is supernatural, but will never know her true nature, as the total truth is contained in the last fragment of Raymond's letter to Clarke. In this respect, these narratives seek the limit of what the human mind can fathom, and it is arguable that out of a fictional narrative, the metaphysics explored in decadent pagan literature would be even harder to conceptualize.

b. The archaeological uncanny and the resurgence of the past.

The circularity of the storytelling in decadent pagan texts mirrors the temporal disruption of traditional time by pagan rites. In *Tess*, the landscape of Hardy's fictional Wessex and its pagan geology already foreshadowed the decadent trope of a resurgent past. The cultural remoteness of paganism was an interesting tool for Victorians to rebuild their temporality after historiography, geology, and Darwinism had shattered the old Biblical timeline spanning only a few thousand years, and the Late-Victorians were caught in tension between welcoming modernity and rewriting a past that stretched way beyond familiarity. The dislocation of the natural continuum between past, present and future which ran seamlessly into one another before modernity were now diverging, as progress made the Victorians aware that the past was

in the past because it was inadequate to survive in the present, an idea that Hardy replicated in his treatment of the countryfolk suspended in time. As a result, historicity is at the core of the ghost story genre: it structures its literary genesis and its narratives. According to Simon Hay, the academic establishment of history influenced literature, and this influence produced two opposite genres: the historical novel on the one hand, and the ghost story genre, its negative image on the other. The two genres sometimes overlap, and this dialectic is exemplified by the role of an author like Walter Scott who developed the historical novel in England, but who also formulated the tropes of the ghost story genre in his ghost stories:

> 'Modern' ghost stories begin with Walter Scott in the early years of the nineteenth century.Certainly there were ghost stories before then, as far back as the Greeks and Romans, and they were common enough through the Middle Ages in many parts of the world, but 'ghost stories only take on their modern form when they begin to be concerned with history, and especially with the particularly modern mode of historiography[283].

As European countries developed their national folklore in the nineteenth century, the ghost story genre also explored the margins of British identity, and posed the question of what made up Britishness, as Simon Hay explains that: ''English' ghost stories, it is worth reminding ourselves, are written largely by the non- or complicatedly English'[284]. Hay cites the Welshman Arthur Machen as a prime example of this trend, since Machen's paganism is greatly indebted to the folklore of his native Monmouthshire, something I will explore in more detail in my third and final part. Since Victorian time threatened to collapse, the ghost story enabled a storytelling based on retrospection, looking into the past from the present, as Julia Briggs explains:

> The Catholic revival and the interest in folklore and primitive belief […] included strong retrospective elements. Ghosts were a traditional medium of communication between the past and the present, the dead and the living, and thus the ghost story might be used to assert continuity at a time when it seemed threatened on many fronts. For writers with a special interest in the past, the ghost story offered certain advantages over other forms such as the historical novel since it could present a direct, rather than vicarious, encounter, occurring within a contemporary setting which increased its immediacy. It could legitimately treat past events while viewing them through modern eyes and retaining them within a modern framework[285].

[283] Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story, (*Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011) 21.
[284] Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, 11.
[285] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 111.

This retrospective quality of the Late Victorian ghost story reveals its dialectic purpose:

> The ghost story is, as I use the term, not a positive term, but one defined only relationally. This book will consider the genre through a series of relationships: the ghost story and the historical novel, the ghost story and modernism, and so on. In a certain sense, the categories I have chosen are optional: choosing different genres and their relationships to the ghost story would give a different picture of what the ghost story is. But though optional, they are not random, in that they are the genres that dominated the literary scene during the period of the ghost story's flourishing[286].

This dialectic is then projected unto the landscape of Victorian Britain, as it unearths a geography of paganism: the archaeological uncanny spells out a scientific truth, that pagan architectures and symbols co-exist in space if not in time with the Victorian present, and that they have been accepted as familiar to the point that they become dangerously overlooked for what they truly are. The settings of the stories in my corpus reflect these preoccupations, as they divide themselves between antiquated villages or countryside settings, and the modern 'chaosmos'[287] of the Industrial city. Whereas London is another metamorphic and mysterious entity in Machen's literature, the village is 'old and traditional but not in such a way as to have been disadvantaged or made backwards; this is not the agedness of neglect, but rather of stability, tradition, order'[288]. This geography of paganism has the merit of making a third spatio-temporal locus emerge: sandwiched between the unheimlich pagan past and alienating modernity is the attractive stability of the Ancient Regime and the old order of time:

> A landscape is interesting, a story is worth telling, if it contains and makes visible 'some fragments' of the past – indeed, here at least, of an aboriginal past. And the substance of the story then becomes the project of working out some sense of how modernity inherits those fragments, of how those fragments persist into the present (Hay, 84).

In direct contrast to this vestigial past is the experience of failed modernity at the core of the modern ghost story. According to Hay, Late Victorian ghost stories express a deep anxiety about the failure to be modern, and the improperly exorcised ghosts can be read as the past returning to the present and winning over it. Indeed, if Jamesian protagonists miraculously survive their encounters and defeat the spectres, it is by accident and not their own volition. Since modernity has excised something out of mankind on a spiritual level, these sceptical

[286] Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, 21.
[287] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 159.
[288] Hay, *Ibid*, 46.

characters are emotionally unable to deal with the ghosts. From an architectural point of view, even buildings seem to have to fall in line with the new Darwinian timeline, and mutate in order to survive, much like Castringham Hall in the 'Ash-Tree' whose Queen Anne architecture is completed with Neo-Classical features that are directly derived from pagan architecture.

French scholar Evelyne Caron qualifies Machen's fantastic of 'archaeological' (Caron, 38) because the fantastic crisis occurs when the past surges into the present in the form of 'witness objects'[289] that disturb the natural timeline. This conception of time operates an 'emotional recuperation' (Rancy, 1982) of the past, and it is this emotional perception of time that gives the possibility of the feeling of uncanny. In these narratives, time is sticky, the past is highly persistent, and it leaves traces after the supernatural events have unfolded. A good example is the fit that overtakes Villiers when he visits the house at 20, Paul Street to investigate Mrs Herbert, one of the many aliases of Helen Vaughan. The notion of 'uncanny' or *unheimlich* was elaborated and developed by Freud in his 1919 essay of the same name. The uncanny is 'that species of the frightening which goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' [290]. An aspect of the uncanny that is highly relevant to my subject is the 'hidden and the dangerous' (Freud, 134) which could spring up at any time into consciousness. Freud explains how the ghost story genre produces the uncanny:

> Freud's explanation for the power of ghost stories to affect us is that in them, the old logic of witchcraft and the spirit world reasserts itself: "We appear to attribute an "uncanny" reality to impressions that seek to confirm the omnipotence of thought and the animistic mode of thinking in general, after we have reached a stage at which, in our judgment, we have abandoned such beliefs" (*Totem and Taboo*, 1913, trans. James Strachey, 1950, footnote to III. 3)[291].

In decadent pagan fiction, the resurgent past is most often pre-Christian, and man's pagan inheritance is presented as 'a terrifying, disruptive force'[292]. In 'The Great God Pan', the faun's head, the Wine and the 'small square pillar of white stone'[293] that act as witness objects are *unheimlich* precisely because they emerge looking brand new from a revolved past. They are evil because they link occult pagan cults with the present time and contaminate it, but

[289] Evelyne Caron, 'Structures et organisation de quelques thèmes dans les œuvres d'Arthur Machen', *Littérature* no. 8 'Le fantastique' (1972), 38.
[290] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.
[291] Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, 16.
[292] Sophie Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties', 1.
[293] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 52.

also because their persistence in an inadequate timeline is unnatural. Just like the witness objects in *The Great God Pan*, James's paganism is articulated around a sort of fetishism as most of the tales in the collection present witness objects like the titular scrapbook of Canon Albéric de Mauléon, the Roman wind-conjuring whistle of 'Oh, Whistle', the parchment box of 'Number 13', and these objects are often the vessel or the means to conjure the pagan spectres. Unlike the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which 'lacked a framework for conceptualizing, or differentiating among'[294] different time periods, James instead insists on archaeological dating of his artefacts: 'in each case, the style and period of the object is carefully established' (Briggs, 126). Conversely, in 'The Great God Pan', Evelyne Caron notes 'time's loss of value'[295] ('déperdition de la valeur du temps') as the trope responsible for the uncanny. Contrarily to Jamesian time periods that are strictly delimited, there is an interpenetration of past and present and thousand years are devalued when Mrs Beaumont can serve millenary wine to her guests, and the Bacchanalia and Walpurgis Sabbaths painted by Meyrick are evil because they should not logically exist in the rational present, and yet they are painted from memory, as Villiers remarks to his friend Austin: 'Yes; it is horrible enough; but after all, 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' (Machen, 47). These events are horrible because they suggest that another construct of reality prevailed for millenia, and that the supernatural could exist alongside humanity in the same dimension, and not beyond the Machenian veil. Unlike the threat of Gothic Europe, which is safely left in the past, the pagan threat in Machen is thus a very real and modern occurrence. This moral warning about the evil of inadequate timelines is present in James as well. In his preface to the follow-up of his original volume *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, published in 1914, he explained that 'a ghost story of which the scene is laid in the twelfth or thirteenth century may succeed in being romantic or poetical: it will never put the reader into the position of saying to himself, 'If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!'.

This resurgence is triggered by an unwholesome desire for forbidden knowledge: 'A more sinister and reprehensible curiosity is the subject of James's stories of black magic, and its disastrous consequences for those who practice it. Here the model is […] the legend of Faust's hunger for forbidden knowledge, which ultimately proved fatal' (Briggs, 138). This desire for forbidden knowledge also springs from the new conceptual distance with past eras

[294] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', xxii.
[295] Evelyne Caron, 'Structures et organisation de quelques thèmes dans les œuvres d'Arthur Machen', *Littérature* no. 8 'Le fantastique' (1972) : 39.

developed in the nineteenth century. The past becomes a discipline, and it requires specialised knowledge to be decoded much like the ciphered narratives. The past becomes an object too, something to be retrieved:

> In James's stories, history is not something inherited. Rather, it is locked away in archives, vaults and drawers; there is in James's stories a radical disjunct between past and present, without inheritance across the divide. Archivists are his heroes because only archivists go places that disturb the spirits of the past; and the project of each story is to return us to a future that constructs itself ex nihilo, without regard for the past[296].

As a result, this past only becomes accessible to a class of scholars, and the 'antiquarian', the foremost Jamesian archetype, becomes a mediator between the pagan past and the reader. These male protagonists are scholarly types, with a great and minute knowledge of their field, something Dennistoun shows when he analyses the scrapbook and finds a fifth century 'patristic treatise' (James, 13):

> Most of James's heroes are antiquarians of some sort: academics, librarians, archivists, editors and clerics and curators; collectively, they are figures who know about old things. But more than that: their very ways of knowing are themselves outmoded, persisting into a modern world in which such forms of knowledge are increasingly marginal. They are odd heroes: fusty and fussy, with some sense of the dust of the library or the chapel lingering on them. […] there is no way to uncover the past without disrupting it, disturbing it, even producing it. It is messing around in the archives, disturbing the records of the past, that prompts the ghosts to turn up in the first place: archivists produce ghosts, we can say as a shorthand[297].

This insistence on the knowledgeability of the protagonists only serves to show their ignorance of what truly matters in these narratives: the occult warnings. Dennistoun is unable to decipher the occult alchemical symbols painted by Albéric de Mauléon on his plan of St-Bertrand's church, and he is just as unable to understand the ritual divination the Canon conducted with the demon, and as a result, becomes haunted by the creature. Antiquarianism is thus judged as an ambivalent occupation: it can be safe, but it becomes dangerous when it stops containing the past and it lets it disrupt the present in a setting that is non-archival, not made for the specific purpose of outmoding the past. This uncontrollable surging of a pagan past mirrors the Victorian reaction to the popularity of pagan revival in all circles during the

[296] Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, 96.
[297] Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, 96.

nineteenth century, and it asks the question of the reliability and purpose of history: 'whether the focus is the foolishness of a modernity that tries to reproduce its past or that builds from the ruins of the past, or the foolishness of an antiquarian who delves into that past, the reason both are foolish is that the past is dangerous, that modernity is best imagined as a present with no past'[298]. Ultimately, this repression of the past proves equally dangerous in its excess, and Jamesian antiquarians warn us against both extremes.

c. The 'unutterable'[299] and the limits of experience.

The 'unutterable' or 'unspeakable' is a stock trope of Gothic fiction which was 'pioneered' by Machen[300], and was also used by James. I have already mentioned it in part **II-B-a: the pagan body and the pagan text: a disturbing fragmentation,** and I would like to explore its functions within decadent pagan narratives. The unutterable is what 'Jean Bellemin-Noël has coined as a process of pseudo-preterition, a passage beyond the describable which leaves to the reader the task of imagining the unimaginable: that which cannot be named'[301]. According to Mellier, the unutterable is one of the conditions of existence of the 'radical incompatibility'[302] of the monsters of the fantastic. Indeed, pagan monsters are often so incompatible with our reality that even cultural approximation will not suffice to describe them. In these instances, the authors resort to the aesthetic mediation of witness objects, or artistic renditions like the faun head, Helen's portraits, or Meyrick's ink drawings 'The Great God Pan', or the night demon sepia drawing in 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' and the hunting scene carved onto Count Magnus's sarcophagus. These monsters are hermetic creatures: in terms of focalization, it is interesting to note that Machen and James never give access to the inner life of Helen Vaughan or any of the monsters. The absence of inner narrative furthers the process of dehumanization because these creatures only exist to provoke the human protagonists. they are literally "off-stage" narratively speaking, they elude the narrative containment in the text The unutterable deploys a 'rhetorical strategy typical of the fin-de-siècle Gothic: a simultaneous movement towards, and convulsive retreat from, the representation of horrific

[298] Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, 99.
[299] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', xiv.
[300] Machen, *The Great God Pan,* xiv.
[301] 'Il s'agit bien là de ce que Jean Bellemin-Noël appelle le procédé de pseudo-prétérition, passage au-delà du descriptible qui laisse le soin au lecteur d'imaginer l'inimaginable : ce qui ne peut pour lui être nommé'. Evelyne Caron, 'Structures et organisation de quelques thèmes dans les œuvres d'Arthur Machen', *Littérature* no. 8 'Le fantastique' (1972) : 40.
[302] Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique,* 38.

bodily realities' (Hurley, 46). The text shows the paradoxical intentions of the narrator, and behind them, of the author, as the 'narrative oscillates between graphic depictions of abhuman and other monstrosities and a refusal to describe them. The text itself, in other words, is rent by the same irresolvable ambivalence as Kristeva's abjected subject, in the throes of both desire and loathing for the prospect of an abhuman becoming[303].

In decadent pagan literature, the experience of paganism is an avowal of failure: it is clear from the systematic destructions of protagonists in 'The Great God Pan', and 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', 'Count Magnus' and 'Lost Hearts' that paganism is not more spiritually fulfilling than Christianism for those who seek metaphysical truths, but that it instead corrupts 'body and soul'[304]. It also fails because pagan language is just as inadequate to describe the spiritual experience the characters are witnessing. James, and especially Machen, do not resort to the 'Gothic rhetoric of the ineffable' (Hurley, 14) as a simple rhetoric device to generate fear. The 'rhetorical obfuscation' (Hurley, 82) at the heart of these narratives holds much more complex meaning. These stories withhold the truth from the reader and they operate in several ways: by having ignorant protagonists narrate the story to mislead the reader because they can describe the supernatural only through cultural approximation. This is paralleled by the complex narrative structures of these short stories where the lack of chronology and interpolated narratives are built to confuse the reader, as I have analysed in **part II-B-a: the pagan body and the pagan text: a disturbing fragmentation**. An interesting aspect of this unreliable narrativization is that both the narrator and the protagonists prevent the reader from accessing knowledge. Peter Penzoldt attributes this habit to a form of Victorian 'reluctance' in Machen whose fin de siècle inhibition.

Victorianism is the source of the next category of unspeakable, which features heavily in Machen, and shines by its utter absence from the Jamesian corpus: sexuality and pleasurable evil. According to Denis Mellier, the unutterable is a core device that distinguishes the fantastic from other genres. Paradoxically, its narratives are not built for total resolution, and the 'pleasure' drawn from its reading thus comes from 'the manner the reader experiments the inability to fully master the meaning of the text's letter[305]'. The Christian frame of mind of Victorianism has stripped mankind from the possibility of finding natural certain taboos which

[303] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 46.
[304] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 23.
[305] 'Le plaisir du fantastique tient alors à la manière dont le lecteur fait l'expérience d'une incapacité à maîtriser pleinement le sens ou la lettre du texte', Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique*, 34.

were celebrated in ancient pagan rituals like Bacchanalia or Maenadic orgies, which recognized the tension between creation / destruction. According to Kelly Hurley, abhuman sexuality is the 'great unspeakable'[306] of 'The Great God Pan', the ultimate trauma against which the narrative falls to pieces: the narrator 'cannot bear to put a name to the unspeakable thing he has discovered' and the text always trails off before it can be fully disclosed. This potency of sexuality in 'The Great God Pan' turns it into the gateway to the fantastic for Catherine Rancy: 'it is the word "lust" that becomes the key-word symbolizing not just Evil, but also the most repulsive forms of corruption: it is the vessel of the fantastic'[307]. Mrs Beaumont's victims are captured through lust. The text of the 'Great God Pan' further convulses around the unacceptable truth that there is a form of pleasure in witnessing the 'ruination of the human subject', and that this pleasure is Helen Vaughan's drive in the story. According to Hurley, this pleasurable evil was a requirement for 'fin-de-siècle readers [who] were not only successfully trained to respond to Gothic texts with disgust, but also to like it' (Hurley, 50).

If decadent pagan narratives seek Greek catharsis when they depict the most absolute evil that the authors can conceptualize, this catharsis of Late Victorian anxieties is either short-lived or incomplete, since the core problem it hints at is not resolved and will not be resolved in Victorian times because of the limitations of Victorian scientific knowledge. In 'The Great God Pan' the secret cannot be revealed because its perversion threatens the immortal soul, it can only be glimpsed at through the mediation of pictures that shield from direct corruption:

> Villiers turned page after page, absorbed, in spite of himself, in the frightful Walpurgis Night of evil, strange monstrous evil, that the dead artist had set forth in hard black and white. The figures of Fauns and Satyrs and Aegipans danced before his eyes, the darkness of the thicket, the dance on the mountain-top, the scenes by lonely shores, in green vineyards, by rocks and desert places, passed before him: a world before which the human soul seemed to shrink back and shudder[308].

Finally, the unspeakable is such a pertinent device in decadent paganism in my opinion, because it pushes the boundaries of human identity to such unrecognizable extremes that it defeats the abilities of language to describe reality: 'The Great God Pan, the text indicates, is a "presence" impinging upon human realities, but not explicable within human symbolic

[306] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 86.
[307] 'C'est le mot « lust » qui devient le mot-clé symbolisant non seulement le Mal, mais aussi les formes de corruption les plus répugnantes : il est le véhicule du fantastique', Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 11% calibre ebook.
[308] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 36.

systems. Though embodied, this "god" exists at the juncture of various bodily identities, and is "neither man nor beast, neither the living nor the dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form"' (Hurley, 13). This is an essential feature of the ghost story genre as Simon Hay explains. Indeed, the sociological function of the ghost story is to illuminate the mysterious and incredible, and ghosts function as reminders of a structural truth dispelled by the modern rationalism of the *fin de siècle:* 'ghosts here mark the breakdown or the failure of an epistemological project, mark the limits of what can be known; they do not exactly figure something decipherable in themselves; they are merely placeholders for what can't be, strictly speaking, known'[309]. This textual dissolution is the ultimate fear at the heart of decadent paganism: the language that makes up these fictions seems the ultimate distinctive feature of humanity, and yet, it fails to keep up with a reality that then becomes too alien to be bearable. An unbearable reality is another device of decadent paganism that is systematically used by M.R. James. I would care to define the Jamesian unutterable along the same lines as Machen's: the text fails to describe or reveal the truth of evil because the protagonists are limited in their understanding, and this leads to delayed elucidation of the true nature of things. In *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary,* James usually offers the key to the supernatural mystery at the very end of the narrative, and this key is found in recovered documents that do not belong to the original plotline. It is in this manner that an older Stephen discovers in the deceased Abney's papers his true intentions of sacrificing him to gain eternal life. Sometimes the disjunction is symbolized in the presence of an addendum separated from the main body of the text and written in a different hand from that of the narrator, which draws out the narrative's temporal limits and offers and blurs the limits between fact and fiction. An additional and final perversity of James's pagan occult knowledge is, in my opinion, that he cleverly divides his readership between those who can pick up the early clues of danger through their knowledge of paganism, and those who are educated at the conclusion of the narrative. Those able to decipher and anticipate the supernatural are almost guilty of colluding with perverse pagan characters like Mr. Abney in 'Lost Hearts', as Ron Weighell explains:

> The Mithraic cult statue foreshadows in great detail Abney's intentions. In the ritual it symbolised, life sprang from the spilled blood generated by the sacrificial act. The rites of Mithras were a quest for immortality and equality with the luminous gods. Devotees attained to the celestial banquet, the earthly counterpart of which was a sacramental

[309] Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story, (*Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 62.

communion compared by Tertullian and Justin Martyr to the Eucharist. The prevalent theme was triumph over death in nature and the soul[310].

The unutterable trope delineates the limits of human experience just as decadent pagan texts question the limit between body and soul: 'a central tenet of Aestheticism and Decadence was the rejection of Cartesian dualism in order to investigate embodied being'[311], and these narratives insist on making their own mind about the metaphysical. By this, I mean to say that they are not content with vicariously living spiritual experiences that would be dictated in Scripture or passed down through myth. The unutterable occupies such a prevalent place in decadent pagan fiction because these narratives are about finding the numinous within the human body and reconciling body and soul into one single sentient being. Gabriel Lovatt explains that in 'The Great God Pan' and 'The Inmost Light' Machen highlights the significance of his experimental aesthetic: 'in both novellas experiments serve as origin events - the initial shift in an individual that augurs a new way of being'[312]. The entire aesthetic pursuits of the nineteenth century are here presented as perilous and contradictory in their ends: there is a disjunction between the empiric and the spiritual knowledge that Jamesian and Machenian characters gain through their disruption of the past, and the increasingly hostile world of these narratives leads the characters to introspection: 'Machen uses horror to explore the symbiosis between physical sensation and interior perception against the backdrop of an increasingly unrepresentable modern world'(Lovatt, 21). In the novella, Machen breaks away from the traditional Pan motif: the god himself is not only never seen and the text does not describe his attributes. In this respect, "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light" fit into the larger ambitions of Decadence, in which expressions of the modern world can only be represented as excess, abnormality, and discontinuity'[313]. This introspective quality of decadent pagan fiction leads me to my third and final part, 'Negotiating anxieties'.

a. Negotiating anxieties.

[310] Weighell, *Dark Devotions, M.R. James and the Magical Tradition* (Ghosts & Scholars 6, 1984).
[311] Gabriel Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"': 20.
[312] Lovatt, Ibid, 24.
[313] Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light": 21.

Ghost stories are particularly well-suited to express unconscious anxieties, since Freudian psychoanalysis and ghost stories are intimately linked: the etymology of uncanny in German can mean haunted house: 'Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. As we have seen, many languages in use today can only render the German expression "an unheimliches house" by "a haunted house"'[314]. Beneath their implacable narratives, the ghost stories paradoxically express fears because the Late Victorians held high moral standards: 'like other forms of fantasy—myths, legends or fairy tales—it could be made to embody symbolically hopes and fears too deep and too important to be expressed more directly.' (Briggs, 23).

a. Medicalizing fear: 'nausea' and rational victims.

In the nineteenth century, medicine became an established science that treated both the body and the mind with the development of psychoanalysis. In her capital work *Death in the Victorian Family*, Patricia Jalland has shown the importance of the doctor in Victorian society: as faith waned and medicine progressed, the doctor became a substitute figure for moral comfort. This is illustrated by the presence of Dr Matheson at Helen's deathbed, almost as if Late Victorian medicine had to defuse the supernatural pagan dissolution of Vaughan through scientific terms. But the sacrifices needed to obtain medical knowledge became an object of moral fear for the Victorian public, a fear clearly illustrated in the experiment Dr. Raymond conducts on Mary, and that Gabriel Lovatt describes as 'the fear that indifference to the suffering caused by vivisection represents the scientific community's willingness to trade humanity for knowledge'[315]. I would like to highlight the interplay of decadent paganism and medicine by discussing the medicalization of fear, the way pathological behaviour initially displace the supernatural as the only possible explanation for the phenomena, and the strange behaviour of the protagonists who respond to the supernatural with scientific inquiry, and, finally, I would like to analyse the 'fantastic doctor' figure which was the object of an in-depth analysis by Rancy.

[314] Freud, *The Uncanny*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 13.
[315] Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"': 22.

The importance of medicine as *fait social* of the Late Victorian era affects these texts textually and thematically and influences the authors' approach to character psychology. Indeed, in keeping with the Gothic's focus on strong bodily reactions and minute descriptions of panic fear, the encounter with evil pagan creatures in the tales of Machen and James often results in physical symptoms: nausea, spasms of disgust ('The Treasure of Abbott Thomas') or fits (Parkins fainting in 'Oh, Whistle'). These narratives of decadent paganism demand high investment from their readers. By describing fear using medical vocabulary, they incite the reader to feel the same visceral reactions. Fear is a particular emotion in the sense that it is an internal phenomenon existing without being liable to outside stimuli: fear exists within us, waiting to be projected onto an object. As for panic fear: '[it] is nowadays held to be a contagious, baseless phenomenon, but it has its origins in a quite specific, and usually solitary experience: fear of the great god Pan'[316]. Furthermore, in these stories, fear, like the narrative itself, is progressive and fragmentary, suggesting the fear conceptualised by psychoanalysis, as the characters move through the motions of recognition, denial, and displacement of a truth too hard to bear for them because of its supernatural nature. Kelly Hurley has extensively discussed nausea in *The Gothic Body*, where she points out the peculiar insistence of Late Victorian Gothic writers on their characters feeling nauseous when they encounter horror. For Hurley, nausea is a 'symptomatic reading' that recurs in Late Victorian fiction: 'within this model, nausea—the prelude to vomiting—could be said strikingly to literalize, or somatize, the dynamic of catharsis' [317]. Nausea, according to Caron, is linked to the unutterable. It is the marker that allows the reader, in the absence of disclosure, to measure the horror in the reaction of the protagonist.

This scientific description of profound spiritual disturbance mirrors the misaligned methodology of Late Victorians when it came to proving the supernatural, as Briggs explains in *Night Visitors*: 'There was something inherently materialistic in the quantitative and mensurative approaches of the psychic researchers to questions that are and always will be shrouded in the ultimate mystery of death itself' (Briggs, 15). The secular, or at least non-Christian, frame of reference of the protagonists in 'The Great God Pan' and *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* leads them to apprehend the world through rigorous scientific, sceptical and medical terms, perhaps in order to compensate for their initial inability to compute with their supernatural encounter, an idea that I will develop in the section '**II-C-c: The pagan fantastic**

[316] Steve Duffy. "'They've got him! In the trees!' M.R. James and Sylvan Dread", *Ghosts and Scholars* 29 no.46 (1999), accessed February 4th, 2021.
[317] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 50.

as a gateway for spiritual renewal'. Decadent paganism's obsession with the motif of 'decomposition' and with the figure of the 'fantastic doctor' highlighted by Catherine Rancy is thus paradoxically brought closer to Victorian socio-medical discourse, as the protagonists do not act from faith, and analyse the world in all its gross materiality, stripping it of the possibility of the supernatural.

In 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', Dennistoun mistakes the verger's 'hunted and oppressed air' for mental illness when he tells himself that 'the man must be a monomaniac' (James, 10), forcibly imposing a scientific diagnosis to a supernatural causality. This device is used again in 'Number 13', where the antiquarian Mr. Anderson goes to Jutland in Denmark to explore the last days of Catholicism in the country and witnesses supernatural occurrences at his inn. In Danish inns, there is no room with the number 13 because of superstition, yet at night, Mr. Anderson who sleeps in Number 12 clearly sees a room with a number 13. Anderson's reaction to the supernatural is strange and inadequate: he feels he is 'evidently being treated to a very interesting experience' (James, 79). The antiquarian shows an incredible reflexivity as the sceptical protagonist of an undeniably supernatural narrative, who acknowledges the rupture of rationality and decides to conduct an empiric inquest into the phenomena. Not only does he enjoy the critical conclusions he might draw from the experience, but his reaction also utterly evacuates the supernatural denigrates the wisdom of communal belief, which could recognize the danger of the supernatural, and respect the balance between worldly and otherworldly. His first rational explanation for the disturbance in Number 13 is that the occupant, whom he believes to be the lawyer settled in Number 14, is having a psychotic breakdown, something the narrator tries to convince the reader of: 'the lawyer had in this moment begun to sing […] in a manner which could leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he was either exceedingly drunk or raving mad' [318]. All the characters, even the most superstitious ones, reach this consensus and resort to pathological behaviour before acknowledging the supernatural as the conversation between the antiquarian and the landlord shows: "Is he mad?" said Anderson. "He must be; and what a sad thing!' (James, 84). We could go as far as to conclude that these characters are themselves responsible for their ill-equipped response to the supernatural since they evacuate uncertainty early on in the narrative: Dennistoun shows 'no doubt' (James, 10) when he brushes past the supernatural, and Jamesian threats rely on this staunch rationalist archetype to produce fear. James only suggests the nature of the abhuman during the first encounters because it is apprehended through the focalisation

[318] James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 84.

of a sceptical narrator with a fragmented perception, and the first-person narrator's focalization heavily influences the narrative, conversely consolidating the frightening properties of the supernatural.

Decadent pagan fiction also taps in another Victorian literary tradition: the possibility of a 'transcendental medicine' (Machen, 9) that can unlock the numinous by performing surgical acts on the body. Indeed, narratives associating medicine, forbidden knowledge, evil lifeforms, and metaphysical interrogations would have felt familiar for the Late Victorians, almost eighty years after the 1818 publication by Mary Shelley of *Frankenstein*. Moreover, the mad scientist is a stock character of fin de siècle fiction, with famous figures such as H.G. Wells's Dr. Moreau, or Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll, who mutilate the bodies of their characters, but also ruin their minds and their moral fibre by conducting 'medical experiments that alter the patients' minds through manipulation of the body'[319]. I would like to discuss the peculiarly hybrid nature of this occult medicine. Indeed, decadent paganism often features the Victorian sciences as subordinated to more powerful ancient magic, and these works share the disturbing idea that modern Victorian sciences, despite their potency, are only just catching up with ancient and arcane knowledge. Just like Victor Frankenstein's discovery of the essence of life in outmoded mediaeval treatises, in 'The Great God Pan' Dr Raymond finds the first inkling of the truth in the ancient work of Oswald Crollius, while Abney studied 'Hermes Trismegistus'[320]. If the old sciences have been denigrated as occult superstitions, they are rehabilitated by the strength of the narrative as the supernatural proves they work.

More than any other figure in the decadent pagan corpus, the fantastic doctor participates the most in the 'forbidden knowledge' trope. In 'The Great God Pan', Dr Raymond uses the same technique as Victor Frankenstein, when he tells Clarke he holds the knowledge to lift the veil but would not want to burden his interlocutor with a specialised description of an experimental process that would be too technical for him to understand anyway. This dialogue sums up in my opinion the dynamics of decadent paganism. First, Machen's fantastic doctor is withholding knowledge when he describes his very discoveries. Moreover, the author's clever smattering of genuine Late Victorian scientific knowledge and vocabulary, with the references to grey matter, scientific journals and experimental neurosurgery, authenticates and legitimizes his protagonist's knowledge by showing he could provide this information if

[319] Lovatt, 'From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light"': 21.
[320] James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 34.

another savant figure asked him. Finally, this is an ingenious way for Machen to simulate a knowledge that he himself does not possess because the nature of the experiment and its results are impossible in our own reality. Despite its defiant ethos, decadent pagan literature adopts the same conclusion as Mary Shelley did when it comes to the result of such experiments: it is inevitably unnatural and evil. If Abney dies, Raymond ultimately writes a letter of contrition to his old friend Clarke, where he realises the consequences of his transgression: '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'[321]. From this, we can infer that forbidden knowledge is an imperfect form of knowledge that contains a large measure of ignorance, and it calls for a 'remedial punishment'[322] to correct the balance between worlds. It finally reveals that, although they may believe themselves to be superior in power and knowledge, occultist figures are limited by their human capacities. Once the spectre is conjured, they react like any other human protagonist and, faced with an overwhelming metaphysical estrangement, refuses to confront it:

> The characters' idea of knowledge is dialectical, totalizing, while the narrator's is positivist, descriptive. But in the story's terms, it is the narrator's knowledge that amounts to genuine knowledge of the ghost, of the past. The characters, confronted with the ghost, retreat from the possibility of knowledge […]. The characters' knowledge fails to resolve the problem of the haunting or even to address the ghost; the narrator's knowledge, on the other hand, functions to contain the ghost within his narrative (Hay, 98).

b. 'Metaphysical estrangement'[323].

Decadent pagan texts manifest profound anxieties about identity, ontology, and human purpose, and pagan ghosts serve as an outsider force to translate these collective feelings into individual experiences of spiritual doubt and reassessment of the world the Late Victorians inhabited: 'a late romantic such as Thomas Hardy indicates within his poetry, deeply haunted as it is, some of the possible significances of the ghost, as a figure of the lost past, of what might have been, or of that greatest of all nineteenth-century spectres, the empty universe'[324]. At the heart of decadent paganism and fin de siècle Gothic narratives, there is an enterprise of

[321] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 53.
[322] 'Châtiment réparatoire', Evelyne Caron, 'Structures et organisation de quelques thèmes dans les œuvres d'Arthur Machen', *Littérature* no. 8 'Le fantastique' (1972) : 37
[323] Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 12.
[324] Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Story*, 19.

metaphysical estrangement. Although these characters believe in their free-will, they are robbed of their agency to become the toy of cosmic forces. And yet, these narratives function this way because they express the Late Victorian desire for metaphysical reassurance and for spiritual certainty, this explains why decadent pagan narratives inherit the themes of an age-old tradition in literature: 'the nature of evil in the universe has always been a central concern of literature, pagan and Christian alike'[325]. In 'The Great God Pan', Clarke's secret spiritual life revolves around his 'Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil'[326] as he 'pine[s] for the unseen'[327], and acts as a paragon of Victorian dualism:

> The language of scepticism shaped a discourse which nonetheless sought to describe some sort of metaphysics of life and afterlife. Ghost fiction, just as much as ghost 'fact', was haunted by the uneasy hope that behind Victorian empiricism lay the promise of revelation, and it is the nature of Victorian ghostly discourse which lends this sense of unease. Susan Navarette, for instance, notes that Arthur Machen's weird-tales make use of the very language of the natural sciences and scepticism to which they respond (Lehmann Imfeld, 3).

Evelyne Caron puts the texts of Machen and James at the cross-roads of 'classical fantastic' and 'scientific fantastic', since the traditional monsters of the horror genre, the vampires and werewolves, are absent. Upon her reading of these texts, she distinguishes two distinct sources of inspiration: ancient paganism, and 'inspiration mystique' (mystical inspiration). In 'The Great God Pan', the prime example of this mysticism is the lifting of the veil, a spiritual ability of ancient cultures which was lost by the modern, and can now only be accessed through forbidden knowledge, as Raymond tells Clarke before the experiment: 'the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan' (Machen, 10). Moreover, British Decadence adopted a peculiarly paranoid approach to the metaphysical. According to Rancy, 'the decadent believes and leads others to believe that he perceives a hidden—and generally evil—signification under the appearances of objective nature' [328], Machen was obsessed with ritual, and the Great God Pan, with its evocations of Walpurgis Night, the sabbaths and Dionysian orgies shows an 'insistence on the ineluctability of rite and

[325] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 22.
[326] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 16.
[327] Machen, 'The Great God Pan', 15.
[328] 'Le décadent croit et fait croire qu'il perçoit une signification cachée et généralement maléfique sous les apparences de la nature objective', Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 6%.

ritual, ceremony and mystery, as sources of meaning in an age of religious decline' [329]. This obsession with ritual is also a fixture of M.R. James's ghost stories, since 'of the thirty pieces that comprise *The Collected Ghost Stories of M.R. James*, no less than thirteen use ritual magic and the related practices of divination, witchcraft', and these elements are not just aesthetic fixtures, as 'Pagan cults and the evocations of demons [constitute] the core'[330] of James's plotting. This need for ritual, for formalized texts and behaviour, hints at the growing incomprehensibility of the modern world: 'estrangement from reality might be a specifically Gothic characteristic but with M.R. James this is also associated with his implicit critique of a modernist subjectivity which in its claims for coherence (its urbanity) generates an amoral view of the world that creates a Gothic fragmentation'[331].

I would like to define this experience of metaphysical estrangement as a progressive experience. The original scepticism of the protagonist is validated only to be violently invalidated by the supernatural, and the protagonists' foundational beliefs are then liable to reconfiguration. This experience goes beyond the bounds of pagan spirituality and questions the Late Victorian public's Christian certainties too, by suggesting the possibility of a Christian occultism. In his introduction to the 1924 collected ghost stories *Ghosts & Marvels* (1924), M.R. James discussed ghost stories, and his 'rules' (not that he ever used the term himself) can be applied to any Jamesian tale: 'Let us, then, be introduced to the actors in a placid way; let us see them going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings; and into this calm environment let the ominous thing put out its head'. For Julia Briggs, it is this initial spiritual resistance that distinguishes modernist ghost tales from old folk narratives:

> The narrator's scepticism may act as a disarming anticipation of that of his audience. If he himself voices their objections or reservations, then they may be more willing to accept his testimony without question. In fact a background of general scepticism or disbelief is one of the factors that distinguishes the ghost story of the two last centuries from earlier examples, encouraging writers to concentrate on creating an effect of verisimilitude in order to convince their readers of the reality of the world into which the unbelievable intrudes. There is an obvious contrast between the easy acceptance of the supernatural in primitive literature and the modern ghost story writer's careful exploitation of realism to lend conviction to his work[332].

[329] Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), XX.
[330] Weighell, Dark Devotions: M.R. James and the Magical Tradition, *Ghosts & Scholars* (1984): 6.
[331] Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840-1920, A Cultural History*, 183.
[332] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 17.

Interpreted in this way, pagan ghost stories sound like a call for the return of older spiritual certainties, and they reassert a supernatural reading of the world as the true mode of being by seeming 'at the outset to invite the reader's modern cynicism, only to vanquish it with a reassertion of older and more spiritual values. Even amidst its superficial terrors it might thus provide subtle reassurances'[333]. Due to the consequential patterning of the ghost story, the action can take place only after the initial refusal to believe of the protagonists, which leads to a form of transgression, as sceptical characters do not heed the warnings of folk wisdom: 'in metaphysical terms, [the hero's] refusal to be warned is symptomatic of a wider rejection of unproven forces and inexplicable powers, whether they are conceived as emerging from an outer darkness or an inner id'[334].

Curiously for a series of tales that build their supernatural around pagan sources, mostly from Old Norse mythology or from traditional English folklore, the setting for the encounter with the pagan other in James is often a sanctified Christian space. This opens the possibility of a Christian occultism. In *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary,* ecclesiastical characters do not shy away from the occult, more often than not, they seek it. This is the case in 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' and 'The Treasure of Abbott Thomas' where the two church-men are actually portrayed as leading parallel spiritual lives with their priestly occupations. Even when Mr Crome, the Vicar of 'The Ash-Tree' is portrayed in a positive moral light, he still dabbles in the occult, by resorting to *sortilegium* with the Bible itself. This sheds a new light on the real role of Christianism in preserving rather than extinguishing ancient beliefs:

> The dominant themes of MRJ's occult fiction, the continuing power and influence of ancient ritual, and the often questionable dividing line between such practices and their Christian counterparts, are evident in the earliest of the tales […], in his depiction of the part played by the Church and its ministers in the continuation of Pagan influences, represented by Biblical quotations with their disturbing secondary meanings, and by the Abbot or Canon revealed to be guilty of proscribed practices. Here too, MRJ was reflecting a very real state of affairs of which his studies in the history of the Church must have made him well aware. The early Christian assimilation of Pagan deities, sacred rites and festivals, is too well recorded to require detailed description here […] Suffice to say that for a long while Christianity and Paganism were uneasy bedfellows. Even when the gods of the old religion were made the devils of the new, an insoluble theological problem remained. Deny the existence of the Devil and one calls into question the goodness of his Divine opposite. "Sine Diabolo Nullus Dominus"[335].

[333] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 17.
[334] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 136.
[335] Weighell, "Dark Devotions, M.R. James and the Magical Tradition", *Ghosts & Scholars* (1984): 6.

One of the best examples of this syncretism is to be found in M.R. James's 'The Ash-Tree', where the lords of Castringham Hall, Sir Matthew and his descendant Sir Richard Fell, are killed by the evil familiars of Mrs Mothersole, the witch Sir Matthew testified against during a witch craze in the year 1690 in Suffolk. This tale mingles Celtic paganism, as Mothersole is caught gathering ash twigs with a 'peculiarly curved knife', with Christianism, as Sir Matthew's friend, the Vicar Mr Crome, resorts to a peculiarly occult and unorthodox use of the Bible to elucidate his friend's death: "I made, then, three trials, opening the Book and placing my Finger upon certain Words: which gave in the first these words, from Luke xiii. 7, *Cut it down*; in the second, Isaiah xiii. 20, *It shall never be inhabited*; and upon the third Experiment, Job xxxix. 30, *Her young ones also suck up blood*"[336]. In the King James Bible, the full text is: 'Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain *are*, there *is* she'. Here, we find again James dropping arcane clues within the texts. If the reader is Bible educated, he can crack early on the mystery at the heart of 'The Ash-Tree'. This device heightens the fear because of its ominous quality, and because it suggests the blasphemous conniving between the holy and the Satanic as the Bible is the only source of explanation.

c. The pagan fantastic as a gateway for spiritual renewal.

As I have already pointed out in my introduction, a discussion of Late Victorian paganism is indissociable from a discussion of Christianism as the 'Late Victorian frame of mind'—to borrow Walter Houghton's expression—was structured by Christian beliefs. From the outset, it is important to understand that decadent paganism was not the product of agnostic Britain as 'the literature of paganism often contained assertions that paganism was not the expression of irreligion. Taking this further, many wrote of paganism in terms of their own faith'[337] explains Jennifer Hallett. Zoë Lehmann Imfeld concurs with this analysis: when she writes that 'recent scholarship of Victorian theology has gone far beyond conflating Enlightenment discourse or scientific empiricism with what was so long assumed to be agnostic panic […] the nineteenth-century story is really one of contested Christianity rather than the ebbing of the sea of faith"' (Lehmann Imfeld, 2). Behind Machen and James's narratives of triumphant evil pagan forces, we can read a call for the re-legitimization of Christianism, and

[336] M.R. James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 59.
[337] Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", 162.

a desire for spiritual renewal in the Christian framework of belief: 'Larsen convincingly argues for a Victorian Britain in which religious 'doubt' contributed to a resituating of Christian thought, rather than undermining it'(Lehmann Imfeld, 3), as the Late Victorians feared that the public was becoming so estranged from the Christian language of theology that its web of reference would become obscure, or closer to folklore. In her book *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology from Le Fanu to James*, Zoë Lehmann Imfeld argues that the ghost story genre is deeply linked to Victorian Christianism. Consequently, the phenomenon of decadent paganism is not a necessary proof of the decline of Victorian faith, but as Roger Luckhurst points out in my introductory quote, it is the expression of an 'active re-enchantment of the world'. In such a cultural climate, the monstrous fantasies of decadent paganism express in psychoanalytic terms a form of civilizational malaise: 'the staging of occult rituals and/or pagan ceremonies should be seen in light of the fascination with Satanism and black magic at the fin de siècle. This 'deviant' interest was a manifestation of the quest for a new spirituality that marked the era'[338].

In the Late Victorian era, folk belief and theology still guaranteed a space for an irrational reading of the world. In this sense, the Christian miracles, the demons of the Old Testament or the ghosts present in the Bible Apocrypha all function along the same reality as supernatural pagan tales. One might be tempted to say that the possibility of God and of the Christian afterlife are the catalysts for this supernatural reading of reality. According to Lehmann Imfeld, these works illustrate the spiritual danger the Victorians exposed themselves to if they encountered the world without accounting for its part of divinity. Indeed, if we adopt a theological reading of the world, encounters with liminal supernatural creatures are frightening but explainable, while in the secular reading grid, these encounters not only cause panic fear, but threaten the foundations of consensual reality:

> This malaise provides a perfect description for the protagonists of many a Victorian ghost story. These stories are filled with beacons of post-Enlightenment Victorianism who, when faced with the spongy and porous world of the supernatural, have no tools with which to encounter it. In the stories examined here, the ghosts and demons confront the characters with an inherent and necessary anti-structure, something which Taylor claims is missing from the secular world (Lehmann Imfeld, 14).

[338] Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties': 4.

It is my contention that decadent pagan texts voluntarily or unconsciously participate in the religious revival of the Victorian fin de siècle, which was a reactionary movement against the disappointing failure of materialism and progress ideology. But this spiritual renewal adopted the individualist approach of paganism which primarily focused on 'a religious and mystical renewal, a revalorisation of the inner self, of the irrational and the imaginary, accompanied by a desire to broaden the limits of human experience[339], and not on collective worship. According to Nicholas Freeman, Machen was disappointed by how little spiritual comfort the modern Anglican Church could bring. Instead of providing a link to the numinous, the Church was now dealing with morality because it could no longer access the Divine, which in turn justified the growing irrelevance of the institution for the population. (Freeman, 245). According to Nicholas Freeman, Machen's spiritual craving was nourished by a number of experiences in his life that explain his approach to paganism in 'The Great God Pan' and his other weird tales:

> Machen's religious upbringing was extremely influential on his later views, but one should note two subsequent important events. The first was a period in the mid-1880s when he catalogued occult books for the London publisher, George Redway, and marinated himself in arcane knowledge. The second was his friendship with A. E. Waite, mystic, magician and historian of freemasonry (Freeman, 244).

The theological significance of Arthur Machen's early weird tales has been neglected due to his production of many non-fictional theological writings later in life. But his religious leanings were distinctively 'Anglo-Catholic' (Lehmann Imfeld, 7). In her analysis of 'Man Without Christ in The Great God Pan', Lehmann Imfeld consequently considers that Machen's Pan worship is not construed as spiritually fulfilling or attractive. It instead represents a negative mode of being as the absence of Christianity is an experience of loss: 'Machen's weird tales expose the nihilism of being without divine creation, or rather, the non-being of profane creation. For Machen, Christianity has the power to reveal to man the mystery of divine creation of which human being is part'[340]. Coupled with his idiosyncratic spiritual sense, Machen, still according to Freeman, showed great awareness of impending modernity in

[339] 'L'indice de la faillite du matérialisme et de la croyance au progrès, et cette révolte contre la raison amène un renouveau religieux et mystique, une revalorisation de l'univers intérieur, de l'irrationnel et de l'imaginaire, et un désir d'élargir les limites de l'expérience humaine. Rancy. *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, 2% calibre ebook.

[340] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology From Le Fanu to James*, 8.

literature, and preferred to research his alternatives, not in the future, but much like in his personal mythos, in an alternate timeline of mankind:

> Machen undoubtedly set himself against modernity, disliking its literature, art, music, architecture and even food, but he was not simply a reactionary curmudgeon who refused to move with the times. He sought instead an alternative way of viewing the world, one steeped in mystical and occult tradition and within which the artist played a central role. There are 'two solutions of existence', he wrote in 1902. 'One is the materialistic or rationalistic, the other, the spiritual or mystic'. It is from a dialogue between the two that true art and enlightenment emerge[341].

In order to survive this challenge, Machen hybridized his literary ethos by structuring it on the Christian concept of epiphany, and the ancient Dionysian concept of ecstasy. In his non-fictional essay *Hieroglyphics*, he wrote: 'we are to conclude that both the ancient people and the modern writers recognized Ecstasy as the supreme gift and state of man, and that they chose the Vine and the juice of the Vine as the most beautiful and significant symbol of that Power which withdraws a man from the common life and the common consciousness'[342]. Machen's hybrid ethos leads me to think that decadent paganism was inevitably caught and conceptualized within the Christian framework of Victorianism. Indeed, if religion could no longer organise secular life, it still offered the most satisfying answers to spiritual questions. In her analysis of Jamesian ghost stories: 'M.R. James, Anglican Dogma and the Moral Authority of Text', Lehmann Imfeld underlines the importance of movement and journeying in James's tales, which illustrate a form of theological conflict: by introducing ghosts, these stories validate the afterlife, and the reader is forced to adopt non-secular beliefs. But pagan ghosts are also incompatible with a Christian Heaven, and this spiritual uncertainty demands clear-cut revelations. At their core, ghost stories are thus apocalyptic narratives: 'several of the tales considered in this book [*The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology From Le Fanu to James*] draw on ideas of apocalypse as revelation—a moment of crisis in which a complete understanding can occur'[343]. Indeed, the human protagonists of the ghost story genre are confronted to a presence that symbolizes a truth which challenges their secular ontological commitments. One could then argue that ghost stories helped Late Victorian theological discourses in re-establishing themselves, and it is important to adopt a 'theological reading of

[341] Nicholas Freeman, 'Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany' *Literature and Theology* 24 no. 3 (September 2010): 243.
[342] Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 115-6.
[343] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology*, 6.

the supernatural tales, not only as they remind us that the theological story being told is not univocal, but also as they establish a position of doubt from which teleological journey […] can begin' (Lehmann Imfeld, 2). The journeys between time periods and geographies in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* and 'The Great God Pan' are mirrored by the symbolic telos of the narrative, which moves towards the unveiling of a horrific truth, and, on a metaphysical level, realises a 'labyrinthine journey from the abyss to grace' (Lehmann Imfeld, 9), as the characters cast away their doubts about the supernatural. In a way, these pagan narratives actually lead to the possible existence of God: 'the supernatural events of the stories confront their protagonists with themselves as theological beings. The events challenge the protagonists to recognise themselves within a theological and Christological narrative of being'[344]. This is where theology and the fantastic meet up, as Denis Mellier explains that 'the conflict exposed by the fantastic, similar to the one exposed by tragedy, leads the protagonist to the moment where he must feel and realise his imprescriptible part of humanity[345]. In decadent pagan tales, humanity is defined against the abhuman creatures, and according to Zoë Lehmann Imfeld who puts in relation Le Fanu, Machen and M.R. James in the following quote, the only viable way out of the encounter is a symbolic return to Christ:

> M. R. James uses many of the same motifs in his vivid depictions of the demonic—of nihilism given form. Just as Machen's demonic humans return to primordial states of non-being, MRJ's demons are creatures for whom the vestiges of humanity are enveloped in bestial form. Each one is given their horrific quality by being 'nearly' human. Where Machen's protagonists stare into the abyss, MRJ's protagonists respond to 'being without humanity' with blind confusion. Their survival, both spiritual and physical, relies on their ability to navigate a path back to their own Christian teleological journey. In this way MRJ's stories show this journey to be not a linear path, but labyrinthine and unnavigable without guidance. As the hunters of Abbot Thomas' treasure are reminded, 'Oculos habent, et non videbunt. (They have eyes and shall not see)[346].

Thus, the literature produced by decadent paganism does not reject theological debate or the promises given by the Christian religion, it symbolises the two sides of the same coin: the fallen and saved man of Christian theology. We can then conclude that decadent paganism is the most successful language to express an experience of failed modernity and of failed salvation, as its narratives present outmoded theological journeys to a Late Victorian public

[344] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology From Le Fanu to James*, 27.
[345] 'Le conflit qu'expose le fantastique, tout comme celui de la tragédie, conduit le personnage à l'instant de devoir éprouver ou penser sa part imprescriptible d'humanité'. Denis Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique*,47.
[346] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology from Le Fanu to James*, 8.

confronted to the vertiginous emptiness of their secular age: 'the teleological journey taken through Machen, MRJ and Le Fanu's stories serves to highlight the tragedy which permeates stories in which the haunted protagonist remains static, or only recognises his own fallen condition too late, thus damning himself to remain haunted'[347]. Yet, Christianism's use of paganism to conceptualize its own evolution in the Late Victorian era wasted a large potential according to Jennifer Hallett:

> In 1933, Chesterton remarked that he was glad fiction was full of a return to paganism because paganism led to an eventual christening. […] While Chesterton may have believed that paganism was ultimately good for the religiosity of the nation, tethered to literature, paganism was prevented from serving its own ends. When writers of literature tried to assert paganism in religious tones they could not detail a thorough exposition of pagan religion and could at best only express religious sentiment. Had paganism been used more as a religious tool, a dialogue between ancient and modem worldviews may have been able to strike a compromise to better cater for modern needs[348].

In the face of deep cultural unrest, decadent paganism thus emerged in literature as a destructive force that wanted to mock the traditional order of Victorian society, and yet still held the hope of salvaging the reassuring realities of an outmoded world. For all its complexity, decadent paganism remains a fundamentally flawed enterprise, which could not well survive beyond the First World War and modernity, as the refined horrors of Decadentism in general paled in front of the crude horrors of modern war, as the Decadents could not move beyond their limited *topoi*, and as Victorian moralism relaxed after the turn of the century. But its sources of inspiration, thanks to their much deeper roots, held fast. These mythical narratives will be the primary concern of my final part, and their reconfiguration during the Victorian era will perhaps be the best symbol of the fin de siècle will to mutate in order to survive.

III. Victorian Mythopoeia

In my two first parts I have focused on pagan aesthetics, and how they could alternatively convey moral beauty or horror in the hands of Victorian writers, and I would now like to emphasize the importance of pagan narratives in Late Victorian literature. Indeed, the pagan aesthetics at the heart of 'responsible paganism' and 'decadent paganism'—which were

[347] Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, *The Ghost Story and Theology from Le Fanu to James*, 9.
[348] Hallett, "Paganism in England", 175-6.

the objects of the previous sections—were developed by Victorian writers because they came in contact with the mythology of Ancient Greece and Rome. As I have demonstrated, pagan beliefs developed in the Late Victorian Era were not truly religious sentiments, and the Late Victorians certainly did not believe in the reality of the Ancient gods, but there was still room left for the fictionalisation of pagan beliefs and for their recuperation by English literature, and Jennifer Hallett points out that 'the Greeks epics became the stuff of children's bedtime stories - a series of exhilarating stories to excite the imagination; and it is interesting to note that an affection for paganism was often formed in childhood' (Hallett, 13). In this perspective, paganism was for Late Victorian writers a tool of creative imagination to regenerate the collective representations used in literary texts. Because of the length of this dissertation, I do not intend this section as a discussion of paganism in Late Victorian literature in all its aspects, I instead chose to examine a specific characteristic of literary paganism which appeared especially prevalent in my corpus, and pertinent in my analysis: Late Victorian mythopoeia, the fin de siècle tendency to create myths or reshape myths. I would like to present how the authors in my corpus used references from older texts, both from the Ancient world and from folk literature, to produce rewritten versions of famous and lesser-known motifs in fiction. This is where paganism meets folklore, which was erroneously believed by Victorian sciences to be 'to the history of human civilisation what the fossil record was to earth history'[349]. I will begin by a contextualization of folklore in Late Victorian society, and I will show how the formalization of folklore as a discipline affected the handling of folklore and paganism in fin de siècle literature. I will then move on to a study of 'Victorian mythology'[350], to show how mythological motifs underpin Late Victorian pagan literature, and finally, I will end my dissertation on the Victorian creation of new myths in literature, by studying the application of folklore dynamics to paganism in the works of my corpus, and by briefly presenting how pagan motifs backed up Victorian societal myths.

A. From paganism to folklore: a matter of belief

a. The 'Invention of Tradition'[351] and folklore's identity politics

[349] Gillian Bennett, 'Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and "The Science of Folklore"', *Folklore* 105 (1994): 29.
[350] James Kissane, *Victorian Studies* 6 no 1 (September 1962).
[351] Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

In *Woman and the Demon, the Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina Auerbach notes that many scholars who studied the 'Victorian religious crisis' 'have followed Hougton in examining only traditional forms of religion, ignoring the unifying vitality of popular myth' (Auerbach, 3) during the Late Victorian Era. I have already insisted in this dissertation on the paradoxical fact that the nineteenth century was an age of accrued belief, both spiritual and supernatural, and I would now like to turn to this 'unifying vitality of popular myth'[352]. If paganism was used by Late Victorian literature to palliate spiritual disorientation and to conceptualize deep-seated cultural anxieties, it is my contention that it also participated along with folklore in the Late Victorian quest for identity, as Britain and Europe eagerly refashioned their history through artistic and literary tools to strengthen their growing nationalisms: the 'study [of folklore] [indeed] gathered momentum in the latter half of that century from the currents of nationalism and romanticism that were predominant in the British Isles and on the Continent'[353]. The word 'folklore' was invented in 1846, when it was coined by British writer and editor of the review *Notes and Queries* W. J. Thoms. Beforehand, it had been known as 'popular antiquities', and it was the domain of antiquarians and other amateur aficionados of history. Folklore is a fluid and dynamic concept, which can be broadly defined as follows:

> Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples. […] Folklore manifests itself in many oral and verbal forms ("mentifacts"), in kinesiological forms (customary behavior, or "sociofacts"), and in material forms ("artifacts"), but folklore itself is the whole traditional complex of thought, content and process which ultimately can never be fixed or recorded in its entirety; it lives on in its performance or communication as people interact with one another[354].

Folklore also helps put paganism in perspective in Late Victorian fiction because it is not necessarily pagan. Indeed, although folk beliefs and practices could in some cases prove to the Late Victorians that paganism had survived somehow in their countryside, like the Marlott Club walking in *Tess*, the folklore of nineteenth-century Britain mostly built on Christianism:

> The 'relationship [of paganism] to folklore has long been debated […] There is an important distinction between showing that a custom or belief is older than Christianity

[352] Nina Auerbach *Woman and the Demon, the Life of a Victorian Myth*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 3.
[353] Hasan El-Shamy and Jane Garry ed, *Archetypes and Motifs in folklore and literature: a handbook* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), xix.
[354] Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York: Norton, 1986) 4 cited in Harris, viii.

> and arguing that when it is found among Christians it means paganism is still alive. Some aspects of the supernatural (e.g. fear of ghosts and witchcraft, belief in dreams) are so commonplace that they can occur in virtually any period, including our own, and do not correlate with one religion rather than another[355].

For this reason, I think folklore bridges the gap between Late Victorian Christianism and paganism in the works of my corpus. In the late nineteenth-century, folk belief was still pervasive and existed alongside Christian belief, or rather against it like Late Victorian paganism: 'in Hardy's novels, the fact can be verified that folk belief was marginalized and existed underground, with Christianity in the dominant position. Superstition was a supplementary existence to Christianity'[356]. A fundamental dimension of folk belief was belief in the supernatural, a truth about the irrationality of the Victorians that they themselves struggled to accept:

> The regional folklorists whose collections began appearing in Victorian times amply confirmed that these beliefs [in ghosts] were widespread, recording them with amusement or amazement as examples of 'superstition' which they themselves definitely did not share. They also included lively dramatic local legends about laying ghosts, phantom coaches, skulls, black dogs, boggarts, barguests, etc… (Simpson and Roud, 143).

Much like the fin de siècle conception of paganism, Victorian folklore is not the folklore of today. Antiquarians and their successors, the more established folklorists, were originally interested in the curiosities of the 'peasantry'[357], and were heavily biased in terms of class prejudice: Charlotte Sophia Burne, who was the first female president of the Folklore Society, defined folklore as 'the generic term under which the traditional Beliefs, Customs, Stories, Songs and Sayings current among backward peoples, or retained by the uncultured classes of more advanced peoples (T*he Handbook of Folklore*, Folklore Society, 1914, 1). This attitude is reflected in the works of James and Hardy, where folk believers are systematically members of the lower classes, despite the prevalence of folk belief in all strata of Victorian society. Yet the interest of Victorian writers for folklore slowly moved beyond class condescension, as folklore gained a cross-cultural dimension after anthropological works such as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* revealed 'the existence of what were perceived to be analogous

[355] Simpson and Roud, *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, 272.
[356] Chen Zhen, Folk Belief and textual construction in Hardy's Latter novels, *The Hardy Society Journal* 11 no 2 (Summer 2015), 57.
[357] Gillian Bennett, 'Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and "The Science of Folklore"', *Folklore* 105 (1994): 32.

materials among non-Europeans' (El-Shamy, xvii). In other polytheistic cultures, folk beliefs were essentially contemporary forms of paganism respected as established religions, and it is attested that Late Victorian paganism is indebted to folkloristics for its rediscovery in my period of study:

> 'Neo-paganism' had begun to be brought to the attention of the general public at the turn of the 1890s with the publication of J. Frazer's study in magic and religion *The Golden Bough* (Luhrmann 218). As a religious phenomenon encompassing various manifestations, it had been fostered in part by the demise of religious authority regardless of confessional affiliation, the development of scientific discourses, and by other forms of worship which the Empire had brought the British population into contact with[358].

The popularity of paganism and folklore in Late Victorian fiction was also caused by the growing nationalisms of nineteenth-century Europe. Indeed, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger argue that most traditions that seemed rooted in time were invented in the nineteenth-century to serve an ideological purpose. As the definition of nation went beyond frontier lines, countries with complicated and heterogeneous cultural identities like Germany or the United Kingdom needed cultural delimitations to consolidate their legitimacy. The invention of traditions came as a socially structuring solution in the face of 'a rapid transformation of society [that] weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed'[359]. These traditions built upon images and stories drawn from folklore, and the appropriation of paganism and application of pagan aesthetics to a modern British setting can be read as an attempt to legitimize Britain's cultural imagination by recontextualizing it in line with older traditions imported to the British Isles.

Wales, the birthplace of Arthur Machen, is a dignified example of this use of folklore. Eric Hobsbawm notes that the Welsh folklore and Welsh identity which seemed so particular in the Late Victorian era were themselves the result of a mythopoetic construction by Romantic writers earlier in the century: 'in Wales the movement of revival and myth-making grew out of a crisis in Welsh life' (Hobsbawm, 99), and this 'Romantic mythologizing' (Hobsbawm, 44) served to rebuild a cultural identity that had been smothered by British imperialism. But much like paganism, folklore also points out the fragilities of British identity, as 'many of the most

[358] Bénédicte Coste, "Late-Victorian Paganism: the case of the *Pagan Review*", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 80 (Autumn 2014): online.
[359] Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

successful [ghost story writers] grew up in remote areas where folklore and oral tradition still flourished'[360]. Briggs cites Arthur Machen's Welsh identity as a prime example of complicated Britishness, as his mythos of the Little People, or Tylwyth Teg, directly corresponds to the resurgence of fairy belief as a symptom of cultural affirmation for British minorities during the Celtic Revival. The Celtic Renaissance or Celtic Twilight was a cultural movement of the 19th century, which showed particular vivacity in the 1890s, and which put forward a Celtic identity by rediscovering traditional Scottish, Irish and Welsh tales, songs and folk practices, emphasizing the non-Christian dimension of these cultures by claiming the filiation with the pagan Celts.

This concern with identity is visible in Hardy's regional folkloristics, in James's journeying folklore, or in Machen's haunted Welsh countryside, as they are all constructed along a dynamic of HOME / AWAY, and consciously feature travelling between opposite spaces: in *Tess*, spaces dominated by 'folk metaphysics'[361] and degraded pagan beliefs like the Vales, The Chase or Stonehenge clash with emblems of Victorian modernity like Trantridge or Sandbourne. In 'The Great God Pan', if London is terrorized by Helen Vaughan, her origin is firmly set in ancient Roman Wales. As for James, his short stories encode the most this stand-off between British beliefs and the foreignness of Northern Europe which is conveyed through its distinctive folklore, and the stories subtly hint at the old Norse religion: for example, Count Magnus's monstruous acolyte possesses the attributes of the Norse god Odin[362]. Finally, folklore functions as historical proof of the cultural similarities between Britain and its neighbours, and these remanent beliefs become more than superstition, they encode the country's past:

> As regards individual motifs, they are of course a great many that are common to British and to Danish lore—that ghosts come at dusk, but that candle-light keeps them at bay; the ghost or fiend in the form of a dog; ghosts that enter only when invited; storms at the deaths of evil men; ghosts or demonic animals guarding buried treasure; the revenge of the dead on those who steal from them or maltreat their bodies; witches that turn into hares; the learned black magician, with his satanic pact and his devilish familiars (Simpson, 12).

b. The construction of folklore

[360] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 17.
[361] Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-century British Fiction*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), viii.
[362] Weighell, Dark Devotions: M.R. James and the Magical Tradition, *Ghosts & Scholars* (1984): 6

Unlike paganism which could not be experienced, folk beliefs could be witnessed first-hand by Late Victorian writers. But I would like to defend that folklore too was a literary construction, shaped by the Late Victorians not to fit anthropological accuracy, but rather to find in traditional cultures answers to their anxieties: 'the error of the nineteenth-century folklorists was not that they focused on similarities, but that their methods for alleging such similarities were not always sound. Much of what they did involved picking and choosing arbitrarily among inadequate ethnological data and inferring similarity where in many cases it did not exist'[363]. Before appearing in fiction, folk beliefs suffered additional distortion: they were discovered through indirect literary channels, as James did by studying the works of Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen (Simpson, 12), and if Thomas Hardy collected folklore himself, Michael Taft notes that his methodology was not sound: 'His intuitive, subjective manner of collecting folklore and his ability to recombine traditional material and to mingle folkloric facts with the products of his imagination may have been bad ethnography, but was excellent literature'[364]. This research of pleasing aesthetic results is the best indication that we should not take at face value the folklore included in *Tess* or *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Indeed, James is heralded as the most British of ghost story writers, and yet the folklore he presents in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* is profoundly indebted to Danish paganism and early Danish folkloristics. James was greatly inspired by the works of Evald Tang Kristensen, and Jacqueline Simpson notes that 'the Danish influence continued throughout his years as a ghost-story writer' (Simpson, 12).

The association between folklore and paganism was strengthened by their use in the validation of a theory about human evolution known as 'cultural evolution theory':

> The evolutionary approach to culture […] was a cultural theory based on a metaphor drawn from natural history. Contemporary natural science was using fossils embedded in geological strata to reconstruct the history of the earth and its species, demonstrating that both had evolved to their present form by slow degrees according to regular and observable laws of nature. Thinkers interested in the "mental history" of mankind used this analogy to propose that human societies had also evolved through several stages, each race passing through identical points on its climb to civilisation (Boas in Darnell 1974, 263; Herskovits in Spiro 1965, 405) (Bennett, 25).

[363] Hasan El-Shamy and Jane Garry ed, *Archetypes and Motifs in folklore and literature: a handbook* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), xviii.
[364] Michael Taft, 'Hardy's Manipulation of Folklore and Literary Imagination: the Case of the Wife-Sale in the "Mayor of Casterbridge"', *Studies in the Novel* 13 no. 4 (winter 1981): 400.

In this respect, folklore served 'the possibility of a fictive connection with an ancient Pagan past', as early folkloristics borrowed the theoretical framework of geology and produced the 'false analogy […] that the "unchanging" life of the countryside retained "fossilized" remains from a pre-Christian past'[365]. Paganism and folklore were cut off from their cultural context to constitute interchangeable landmarks in a universal evolution of the human mind towards rationalism that refused to acknowledge the modernity of folklore, and its function as a dynamic and vital part of British beliefs: 'just as fossils were the remains of once-living creatures, so folklore was the remains of once-living culture. […] To use this analogy meaningfully, of course, folklore had to be a dead artefact rather than a living organism' (Bennett, 33).

Despite their misunderstanding of folklore, Late Victorian writers showed a keener awareness of the internal dynamics of folk beliefs in their appropriation of traditional motifs. M.R. James in particular adopted the methodology of folkloristics when he wrote his ghost stories: '[M. R. James] was something of a folklorist too (more so than his self-deprecating remarks on the topic imply), with a particular interest in the development and persistence of local legends and historical memories, a good knowledge of traditional beliefs, and an interest in oral narration' (Simpson, 9). James goes as far as to acknowledge them as 'he declared in the Preface to the collected volume of his ghost stories that, although he was not conscious of being indebted to any specific local legend whether written or oral, yet he had "tried to make my ghosts act in ways consistent with the rules of folklore" (James 1970, viii). (Simpson, 9). I believe folklore influenced Hardy, James and Machen's Welsh tales such as 'The White People' or 'The Shining Pyramid' on more than the aesthetic front. These texts emphasize oral story-telling and framed narratives, and by choosing the ghost story genre, James and Machen affiliate themselves to a long tradition:

> [James] was fully aware that the literary ghost story, as practised by himself and his admired forerunners Dickens and Le Fanu, was only a recent offshoot from the older custom of oral storytelling, to which he pays tribute in the framing of two of his lesser tales, "An Evening's Entertainment" and "There Was a Man Dwelt by a Churchyard" (Simpson, 10).

c. The functions of folklore in Late Victorian literature

[365] Chas S. Clifton, 'Earth Day and Afterwards: American Paganism's appropriation of "Nature Religion"' in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Boston : Brill Press, 2009), 113.

This hybridized status of folklore, resting in tension between science and poetry, is reflected in the functions of folklore in Late Victorian literature. The following remarks are my observations from reading the texts in my corpus and though they offer only an incomplete study of folklore in Late Victorian literature, I believe they are of interest nonetheless. Including folklore in fiction meant an act of subversion on the part of the authors. In my introduction, I already put forward Jason March Harris's statement that 'folklore is alive—not dead—in texts of the literary fantastic where traditional beliefs and motifs compete for narrative authority with normative and elite standards' (Harris, 8), and more broadly speaking, I believe this appropriation of folklore served to valorise denigrated and unofficial aspects of the Late Victorian imagination:

> In supernatural folkloric literature, the demands of aesthetics, class, morality, superstition and skepticism compete for authority—producing a dynamic rhetoric of superstition characterized by competing cultural voices and intruding moments of interpretative hesitation. This rhetoric of superstition that these authors engage serves as both a communicative tool and a system of cultural interrogation that exerts its own power over these literary works (Harris, viii).

The strong association between folklore and the lower classes in fin de siècle fiction makes folklore both an identity and a social marker. First, folk beliefs play a vital part in the lives of the countryfolk in *Tess*, and folklore is a shortcut to the 'soul' of the people of the Vales: 'folk belief keeps a close correlation with literature, particularly in popular literature and regional literature, as reflecting the spiritual state of a nation or a part of culture in a certain area' (Zhen, 55). But its inclusion also participates in the Victorian rhetoric of class. I have put forward in Tess that Joan Durbeyfield's social inadequacy is summed up by her 'Jacobean' culture made up of folk beliefs. Jason Marc Harris in *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-century British Fiction* notes that 'the fictional applications of folk beliefs, fairy tales, and folk legends, repeatedly convey conflicts between the worldviews, practices, and virtues of the upper and lower classes' (Harris, 17). Accordingly, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* and *Tess* present a hierarchical relationship to folklore, where the lower-class characters who are the 'folk' systematically introduce the upper-class characters like Angel Clare or James's antiquarians to folk belief. In James, Wraxall hears the folktales about Magnus from his Swedish landlord who is the first to suggest to the unfortunate antiquarian that the evil Count is more than human, while in 'Oh, Whistle', Parkins is guided by the fear of a local lad and the folk tales of the old army captain. But while the lower-class characters are defined and constrained by their adherence to a vision of the world structured by folk beliefs, the upper-

class characters can rationalise folklore, like Anderson in Number 13, and can also choose whether they believe and participate in these collective fears. This hierarchy between the characters leads me to how folklore facilitates the introduction of pagan magic. In 'The Ash Tree', Mrs Mothersole is seen gathering ash twigs with a Druidic sickle, and this reference to Celtic pagan rituals is immediately associated with one of the most common superstitions about witches in Britain, their ability to turn into a hare. In 'Number 13', James insists on the triskaidekaphobia of the local Danes who refuse to sleep in a room with that number, and when the supernatural room 13 appears, it is haunted by the spirit of an evil alchemist.

In James, folklore sometimes acts as a screen for paganism. If the lower-class characters connect the more educated characters with paganism, they are unaware of their role, and folklore acts as a filter to access transcendent truths. The lower-class characters are able to notice the supernatural but are blinded by their 'lumber of superstition' (Hardy, 14), but the characters educated to Victorianism go beyond a simple folkloric explanation to see the pagan magic as the true cause of supernatural disturbance. A good example of this is in the short story 'Lost Hearts', where the lower-class servants characteristically share folk beliefs: 'the tale from the men in the shipyards about the rat that could speak' (James, 30) comes to explain the sounds in the cellar, actually caused by the restless spirits of the children whose corpses were disposed of in the wine bins after Abney conducted his pagan ritual of sacrifice. In the case of James, I finally believe his appropriation of folk motifs also participated in a concession to traditional belief systems: 'throughout his life there are occasional signs that, in spite of his strong Christian faith, he could not shake off a lurking fear that ghosts might exist, though his public remarks on the matter were always resolutely neutral' (Simpson, 10).

B. 'Reading mythically'

In *Images et Symboles*, published in 1952, The Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade observed: 'What an inspiring study it would be, to bring to light the real spiritual function of the nineteenth century novel, which despite all scientific, realistic or social 'formulas', remained the great repository of degraded myths'[366]. To draw out the mythical allusions embedded in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and 'The Great God Pan', I will now adopt a

[366] Mircea Eliade, *Images et Symboles*, cited in Hasan El-Shamy and Jane Garry ed, *Archetypes and Motifs in folklore and literature: a handbook* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), xv.

deeper level of reading than in my previous analyses of the texts. Why did Hardy and Machen make the artistic choices they make and why did they refer to Apollo, Pan or Dionysus rather than to other gods of the Pantheon? This can be explained by the cultural preferences developed in the literary circles of nineteenth-century Europe. I have already touched upon the surge in popularity of the 'Pan motif' in fin de siècle fiction, and I would now like to draw attention to two major motifs that were influenced by the development of mythography: the Gods in Exile/ Return of the Gods and the Rape of Persephone, as they influenced the narrative strategies of both Hardy and Machen. I will then move on to the elusive figure of Dionysus, visible beyond the pagan veil, and how this god's mythology links back to Hardy's pagan 'appetite for joy', and Machen's concept of ecstasy.

a. The Return of the Gods: paganism as the object of mythography

In the previous sections, I have broached upon the role of folkloristics on the Late Victorian perception of paganism and folklore, and I would now like to underline the role mythography played in the construction of these motifs. Myth is 'a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon'[367]. Mythography is the discipline that studies myths and the 'representation of mythical subject in art'[368]. It is an 'interdisciplinary area that transverses folklore, theology, classics, literature, anthropology, and history'[369]. Just like Eliade's definition of the nineteenth-century novel, mythography was more than a scientific discipline, it served a spiritual mission:

> From 1800 to the 1920s, the evolution of mythography both informed and was informed by wider cultural developments: the great and difficult project of replacing that Christian mythos that for so long formed the imaginative core of Western culture; the struggle between the drive toward transcendence and a reviving reverence for the material world and its seasonal cycles; the brief but culturally significant dominance of pessimism and, in reaction, the celebration of fertility and the life force (Louis, 329).

[367] "Myth",Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, accessed 10/08/21, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth

[368] 'Mythography', Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, accessed 21/07/21.https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mythography#h1

[369] Joshua Essaka, "Myth", *Victorian Literature*, Oxford Bibliographies Online. Accessed 25/08/21, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199799558/obo-9780199799558-0147.xml?rskey=UEAcQ3&result=73

Margot Louis explains in *Persephone Rises:1860-1927, Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* that the use of 'a mythical allusion or pattern of mythical echoes within a literary text operates within that text's cultural context' (Louis, xi), and myths in the Victorian era were used to discuss Victorian preoccupations about issues of spirituality, temporality, and the nature of creation. Indeed, Joshua Essaka tells us that 'myth is a prominent part of the Victorian engagement with the past and the present, and myths were essential to the Victorians' conception of themselves'. Hence, the appropriation of pagan motifs was not the first time Victorians engaged with myths, as the Arthurian revival of the early Victorian era constituted a noteworthy precedent. The Victorians championed a poetic rather than scientific definition of mythology as:

> 'Conceptions, which having no link on historical fact, yet, because they arose naturally out of the spirit of man, and embodied, in adequate symbols, his deepest thought, concerning the conditions of his physical and spiritual life, maintained their hold through many changes, and are still not without a solemnizing power even for the modem mind' (Greek Studies, p. 151). If mythology was without positive significance, still less was it merely ancient and outworn fancy. It was felt to possess, because of its organic and adaptable nature, an unbounded and enduring appeal[370].

If the Victorians emphasized the 'aesthetic' quality of mythology, it still remained an object of 'ethical' discourse for them (Kissane, 28). Furthermore, the Late Victorians did not just accept these myths, but tried to analyse their content, and 'explored the mentality of mythmaking, the variants of myths, and the social function of myth'[371] in ancient cultures to inform their own uses, showing the same awareness of their dynamics as they did with folklore. A final noticeable similarity between folklore, paganism and myths is the gradually more inclusive definition they developed of these elements as the century progressed: 'before the 18th century, myth usually refers to the inherited stories of the Greeks and Romans, but, with the expanded exploration, through travel and scholarship, this gradually widened to include mythologies belonging to other cultures'[372]. The Victorians used mythical narratives in what I would call a sort of 'mythological throwback': their structural nature and the reassuring familiarity of their narratives could be used to explore the uncharted experience of modernity.

[370] Kissane, 'Victorian Mythology', 21.
[371] Essaka, "Myth", Oxford Bibliographies Online.
[372] Essaka. "Myth", Oxford Bibliographies Online.

In *Persephone Rises*, Margot K. Louis puts forward that the Victorians' 'literary uses of myth' included 'the development and redirection of spiritual energies' (Louis, xi), and accordingly, an analysis of the Victorian interest in mythological narratives should include a discussion of Victorian faith. At its inception, mythography was not fully in the hands of science, and writers who heavily borrowed from Hellenic paganism like Walter Pater considered that the root of Greek myth was not so much religion than poetry. Yet, just like in folkloristics, myths became appropriated by the unimaginative sciences: 'Pater knew he was writing at a time when anthropology was beginning to place the study of myths more and more in the hands of science'[373]. Machen and Hardy, the two authors in my corpus who relied on Greek myths, had familiarized themselves with the concepts of mythography: Hardy was familiar with the works of contemporary mythographers like Max Müller, famous for his theory on universal sun worship (Bullen 3), and Jane Ellen Harrison, an eminent Hellenist, and a member of the Cambridge Ritualists, who redefined myths as springing primarily from rituals of worship that ultimately produced narratives that formed myths. As for Arthur Machen, his ulterior critical writings reveal his knowledge of syncretism, Greek and insular mythology, and they also clarify his narrative strategies:

> In an essay published in *Dog and Duck* (1924), Arthur Machen discusses the origin of 'fairies' and simultaneously highlights the two main anachronistic elements used in his supernatural tales of the Nineties, namely, pagan gods and a pre-Celtic race: "In true popular tradition the fairies were always dreaded; partly because they were old gods and goddesses, accursed by the Christian faith, partly because they were the dark little people who lived in the hills and stole away the fair Celtic children from the Christian hearth" ('A Midsummer Night's Dream', 61). This view is in line with Heinrich Heine's 'Gods in Exile', whose first sentence underlines how Christianity turned heathen deities into demons. To pagan gods Machen adds the 'dark little people', an ancient race whose past existence supposedly accounts for the belief in the Tylwyth Teg of Welsh folklore[374].

In Tess—aesthetically—and in 'The Great God Pan'—literally—lies the motif that the ancient Greek deities went in exile after Christianism triumphed only to return in disguise to live in the present day. This trope was popularized by German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine, who published in French 'Les Dieux en exil' in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*[375]. Heine was a radical poet, journalist and writer who challenged many of the religious and social orthodoxies

[373] Kissane, 'Victorian Mythology', 21.
[374] Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties', 2.
[375] Heinrich Heine, 'Les Dieux en Exil', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 2e série de la nouvelle période, tome 2, 1853 :5-38.

of his native early nineteenth-century Germany, and 'Gods in Exile' was an extremely influential piece of semi-fictional writing which had larges echoes in England: 'Heine's "romantic paganism" […] deeply impressed Hardy' (Bullen, 5). The chief proponent of this motif in England was Walter Pater, who wrote a series of Imaginary *Portraits* with *Denys l'Auxerrois* in 1887 and *Apollo in Picardy* where he exploits this premise. Walter Pater's novels show the spiritual concern the Mid-Victorians already attached to the handling of mythical narratives. Indeed, Catherine Rancy observes that 'the obsessive legend of the exiled gods does not appear by chance in his writings, but rather corresponds to a historical reflexion on Antiquity in the face of modern times, and especially on the concept of rebirth / renaissance, which for Pater is not just a time period, but a symbol of past lives, of cyclical return, and of reincarnation'[376]. In both works, the disguised gods can be identified through the attributes that are traditionally associated with them in the original Greek epics, and they often become a simple synecdoche of their object of worship: in *Tess*, Dionysus is evoked by the presence of Wine, the reference to Satyrs, nymphs and sileni, and by the scene of maenadic ecstasy. For Persephone / Tess, it is the roses Alec / Hades places in her bosom, the fruit he forcibly feeds her to keep her in his domain—referencing the episode of the pomegranate in the original myth—or abducting her in his chariot / dog-cart (Louis, 88).

Like most motifs exploited by the Victorians, the Return of the Gods is a double-edged sword. Indeed, J. B. Bullen tells us that: 'Heine's Gods represent various human impulses and desires repressed or ignored within the orthodoxies of nineteenth-century culture. They are a remnant of pagan vitality that had a powerful influence on the expression of neo-paganism in the work of Pater, Swinburne, John Addington Symonds and Vernon Lee'[377]. In *Fantastique et Décadence en Angleterre*: *1890-1914*, Catherine Rancy further explains that their return corresponds to what Louis Vax calls 'the scheme of repetition', a concept that is close to the archaeological uncanny as it covers 'any repetition, any resurgence of the past [which] brings into the present time a malaise that corresponds to Freud's unheimlich. Pagan Gods symbolize the resurgence of a distant and atavistic past foreign to the present time: it is no longer a problem of personal unconscious, but of collective unconscious'. As a result, Rancy argues that fin de siècle narratives feature the motif the better to describe collective neuroses and hysterical

[376] 'La légende obsédante des dieux en exil n'apparaît pas par hasard sous sa plume, mais correspond à une réflexion historique sur l'antiquité face à l'époque moderne, et en particulier sur le concept de renaissance, qui pour lui est non seulement une période historique, mais un symbole de vie antérieure, de retour cyclique, de réincarnation', Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre,* 70% calibre ebook.
[377] Bullen, 'Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Apollo, Dionysus, and Stonehenge', 5.

epidemic fear, like in 'The Great God Pan' where the London intelligentsia is struck by a wave of suicides.

b. The Rape of Persephone

If the Gods in Exile allowed the exploration of the collective unconscious, the struggle between the Olympian and the Chthonian Gods, a mythological conflict crystallized around the mythical episode known as the 'Rape'[378] of Persephone, and the subsequent revolt of her mother Demeter against her fellow Olympians, became a favourite topos of Victorian literature, because it served to translate the religious concerns of the Late Victorian Era:

> In the polarized atmosphere of the late Victorian era, denigrating the Greek gods became a way to attack the Christian cult of transcendence and immortality, the focus on life after death; the exaltation of the Mysteries became a way to celebrate the sacredness of this life, of sexuality, and of the life force. More and more, late Victorians privileged ritual over myth and saw the fertility cult as central to the development of religion, while the myths they still honored were those pertaining to the gods and goddesses of the Mysteries[379].

The Chthonic gods, literally gods of the earth, are a subdivision of the Greek pantheon. The Chthonic gods were liminal gods of the underworld and who were 'connected with souls'[380]. They can be further divided into two classes, for some like Hades and Persephone, this is their only function, while other Chthonic gods like Demeter and Hermes are also linked to the Olympians. Finally, Dionysus is an Olympian, but with a pronounced Chthonic aspect, as he is associated with grape-harvest, fertility rites, which leads me to the second meaning of 'chthonic', linked to ritual: as 'a cultus term to denote a god of agriculture' (Fairbanks, 246). Demeter and Persephone were the goddesses celebrated during the Eleusinian Mysteries, yearly initiations and secret rituals based at the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Eleusis. At the beginning of the century, the Olympians with Apollo at their head were triumphing in the arts, while the 'chthonic deities were relegated to the margins' (Bullen, 11). But a noticeable shift occurred as the Victorians traversed their religious crisis:

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[378] The word 'rape' is to be understood as the translation of the Latin 'raptus', which means 'seized' or 'carried off'. The motif is otherwise known as the Abduction of Persephone and does not refer explicitly to sexual violence.
[379] Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927, Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality,* 330.
[380] Arthur Fairbanks, 'The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion', *The American Journal of Philology* 21 no. 3 (1900):259.

> As this sensibility and anger are slowly turned against Christianity itself, the Olympians are attacked for their separateness from humanity, their lack of sympathetic feeling, and their indifference or cruelty, while the Mysteries are increasingly seen as expressions of human anguish, hunger, or desire—revelations of the sacral within the swift, bloody, and beautiful cycles of natural life. In the end, only the gods that die survive; the imperishable gods are dead (Louis, 24).

Interest then moved to the Chthonic deities, and in consequence, to the Mystery cults, a movement encouraged by the recourse of 'magical paganism' to the mythology of Greek mystery religions. Just like the Chthonic God Pan, the figure of Persephone had been growing in popularity:

> For reasons very close to Hardy's, the myth of Persephone had been growing in popularity through the century. From Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Song of Prosperpine" and Mary Shelley's play on the subject (Prosperpina) through poems by poets like Aubrey de Vere ("The Search After Proserpina"), Tennyson ("Demeter and Persephone"), Swinbume ("Hymn to Proserpina," "The Garden of Proserpina," and "At Eleusis"), and Meredith ("The Appeasement of Demeter"), as well as a painting by Rossetti ("Proserpine"), not to mention an important article by Walter Pater, "Demeter and Persephone" published in 1876, it had become, by the time of Tess in the early 1890's, a popular Victorian trope (Bonaparte, 420).

To affirm that *Tess* is actually a modern variation of the Rape of Persephone, I was careful to base myself on the works of Margot K. Louis, who dedicated a whole chapter of *Persephone Rises, 1867-1927* titled 'The Virgin with the Sheaf: Fertility, Ritual, and Imagination in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and My Ántonia' to this theory, and on the concurring opinion of Felicia Bonaparte, who claims that 'textual and contextual evidence show that Hardy conceived of Tess as an embodiment of Persephone and of the story the novel tells as an enactment in modern dress of her mythic rites and history'. (Bonaparte, 415). I cannot exhaustively present all the similarities between Tess and Persephone in the original myth such as it is presented in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* for example, but I would like to point out a few. Tess's very first appearance in the novel imitates the traditional iconography of Persephone / Kore, the maiden goddess of corn, bearer of a sheaf of wheat, unmistakably participating in a 'local Cerealia' (Hardy, 6). Kore is first a maiden goddess in Greek mythology, who then becomes a mother, and is a 'fallen virgin' (Louis, 86): this mirrors the section titles 'The Maiden' (Hardy, 1) and 'Maiden No More' (Hardy, 58) in the novel. After her mother, who acts antithetically with the mythical Demeter, sends her to claim kin, she

'descends'[381] into the realm of Alec, who plays the role of Hades here (Bonaparte, 422). And after reawakening in the springtime, Tess descends again into winter and the realm of the dead at Flintcombe-Ash, and she thus completes her transformation as 'Persephone', literally a 'bringer of death', when she murders Alec. But in *Tess*, the roles are not set, and in his rivalry with Angel, the novel's would-be Apollo, Alec assumes another identity, that of Dionysus. It is attested that in Greek mythology Apollo and Dionysus were sometimes treated as 'opposite forces' and often as 'complementaries or as equals' (Bullen, 11). If we keep in mind the seasonality of the plot in *Tess*, the tension between the two gods seems even more evident as in Ancient Greece the year was divided between them: 'the four winter months belonged to Dionysus and the summer months belong to Apollo (Bullen, 11). In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Alec d'Urberville's violation of Tess takes place in September, and his pursuit of her continues in the bleak days of the winter at Flintcombe Ash, while Angel awakens the milkmaids' sexual desires in the spring and summer at Talbothays and departs for Brazil in the winter.

Dionysus and Apollo had also been conceived in the earlier part of the nineteenth century as 'contrasts between the irrational and instinctive and the rational and the tranquil'[382]. The dialectic movement between the extremes of Dionysian and Apollonian plays an important part in the structure of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as throughout her life Tess seems to have been caught between conflicting forces: 'chthonic Dionysianism and draconian Apollonianism, often expressed metaphorically in terms of the contrast between darkness and light, night in conflict with daylight' (Bullen, 10). Angel is characterized along mythic lines in Tess: he heralds spring, plays the harp, and sexually awakens the milkmaids at Talbothays Dairy. Tess herself sees him as her 'Apollo'[383]. But if he bears the attributes of the Olympian, it is in a 'weakened or diminished form' (Bullen, 5), and just like Alec, he presents a sinister side in a double-sided nature that corresponds the 'apotropaic' quality of Apollo in Greek myth (Bullen, 4), as 'one who brought healing and comfort to mankind, but who also brought plague, pestilence and death'. Angel is responsible both for Tess's most ardent radiance throughout the story, and for her final destruction, as she is captured at the solar temple of Stonehenge. But this mythological transfiguration remains incomplete because the characters systematically misapprehend their identity: 'Tess has no idea herself what her mythic function is. […] She is no longer able to recognize the mythic deity in herself' (Bonaparte, 425). Felicia Bonaparte argues in her article 'The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the

[381] Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927*, 90.
[382] Bullen, 'Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Apollo, Dionysus, and Stonehenge', 11.
[383] Hardy, *Tess*, 304.

d'Urbervilles"' that Hardy voluntarily causes this failed apotheosis of his characters, as, in concordance with his 'ache of modernism', they are too modern and corrupted by their modernity to realise their true nature: 'the fact that these exceptions are in almost every case engendered in the minds of the characters suggests that Hardy is setting up an ironic relationship between the reality he sees and the reality seen by his characters, often in their critical role as archetypes of the modern world[384]. Bonaparte even believes that Hardy fools not just his characters, but also his audience: 'it is clear in the novel itself that Hardy expects his readers as well to misconstrue the mythic text both of the world and of his novel' (416, Bonaparte). Beyond the moral discourse Hardy develops in Tess, he thus seems to hide at the core of his novel this warning and fear about the direction of Victorian spirituality and morality: 'this is what makes misreading so deadly, that, in classifying ourselves in the wrong conceptual frames, we live our lives on the wrong premises, making wrong decisions and choices' (Bonaparte, 425).

c. Beyond the pagan Veil: Dionysian ecstasy

The use of mythology to illustrate the systematic misapprehension of identities and the modern misunderstanding of human nature is consistent with the third and final mythical allusion present in the texts that I would like to put forward. Both Hardy and Machen present a 'distorting medium' (Bonica, 852) in their novel, alternatively the explicitly named 'Veil' in Machen, or the 'mist' in Hardy, which disguises the true nature of the world and its inhabitants. The lifting of this veil between our reality and deeper transcendent truths can only occur when the protagonists reach a state of ecstasy. Ecstasy is linked to the god Dionysus and to his cult at Eleusis, where his female worshippers, the Bacchae, entered a state of spiritual trance through inebriation. Machen's interest for Chthonic deities and mystery religions marks his earliest writings: 'a long poem he wrote at the age of seventeen, reflects the period's interest in Greek chthonic ritual. The poem is entitled 'Eleusinia' (1881) and depicts the rites of Demeter's worship' (Mantrant, 1). But Machen took a more marked interest in the figure of Dionysus:

> Though it is very rarely mentioned in studies of Machen, Dionysus figures prominently in his non-fictional texts and also haunts the pages of his fiction, most often in the guise of wine. In many a text, wine is used in the ceremonies that bring Man closer to the other reality, be it transcendent good or transcendent evil, and thus fulfils its traditional function as a symbol of initiation and knowledge[385].

[384] Bonaparte, 'The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles', 424.
[385] Sophie Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties': 4.

Accordingly, an important topos of Machenian fiction is the ‘millenary wine’ which Helen serves to Lord Argentine, one of her victims: ‘Argentine asked her how old the wine was, and what do you think she said? 'About a thousand years, I believe.' Lord Argentine thought she was chaffing him, you know, but when he laughed she said she was speaking quite seriously and offered to show him the jar’ (Machen, 34). If we accept the important role of Dionysus in Machen’s other works, Helen Vaughan becomes more than the daughter of Pan. According to Sophie Mantrant, she is a sort of female Dionysus who opens the eyes of her followers to transcendental truths, these are simply too unbearable for the human mind. Helen is indeed the daughter of a mortal woman who is a Semele archetype and she is closely associated with the traditional attributes of the god: the wine, mystery rituals and orgiastic excess. Despite its frightening potentiality in ‘The Great God Pan’, the ecstasy unlocked by ‘the sacramental use of wine in Machen’s fiction must be seen in relation to his vision of the world as a sacrament, as an array of signs pointing to higher, spiritual realities’ (Mantrant, 1), and I would further comment that it participates in Machen’s intention to generate an ‘active re-enchantment of the world’.

Inebriation is also the context for Hardy’s conjuring of Dionysian references. Returning to the fair of Chaseborough which I analysed in **I-A-c pagan aesthetics**, I would like to argue in the wake of J.B. Bullen that Hardy means to represent the ancient rite of ‘Bacchanalia’, and the Maenadic ecstasy actively pursued by the Bacchae, Dionysian followers. The mythological creatures the dancers become through the mist are associated with Dionysus, who, according to J.B. Bullen, is represented by Alec D’Urberville. As Alec seems to appear ex nihilo from the mist: “a loud laugh from behind Tess’s back, in the shade of the garden, united with the titter within the room. She looked round, and saw the red coal of a cigar: Alec d’Urberville was standing there alone’[386], Bullen points out his Dionysian attribute: ‘the familiar phallic thyrsus in the form of a lighted cigar’. Alec rules over a village where the youth is noted for its relaxed mores and hard drinking, something that produces the scene of Maenadic ecstasy: after the dance at Chaseborough three women, Car Darch and her sister Nancy, and a young married woman leave the dance and travel along the country road, where they become one with their surrounding: ‘the spirit of the scene, and of the moonlight, and of Nature, seemed harmoniously to mingle with the spirit of wine’ (Hardy, 50) . Despite the comic quality of their drunken

[386] Hardy, *Tess*, 49-50.

antics, the young women attain 'spiritual altitudes more nearly approaching ecstasy'[387] that Tess will only briefly feel in her love for Angel.

Like Machen, Hardy equated the vital force of Dionysian mysteries with the act of writing and the true nature of paganism:

> We know that The Bacchae had a powerful influence on Hardy. Not only did he possess an 1850 imprint in the Bohn's classical Library, he copied (with approval) the words of a review of a more recent translation of the play from The National Observer: "There is nothing more fascinating for a modern mind than to study the essential forces of Paganism.… The Bachæ is a play of surpassing interest. Dramatically & artistically it is p[erha]ps the poet's most finished work: instinct with a feeling for nature, it is ever suggestive of the charm of mountain, wood, & river, &c." To this Hardy added a note saying, 'I quite agree with the above criticism (Hardy 1985, entry 1905) (Bullen, 8).

In their interest in 'ecstasy' and the 'appetite for joy', Machen and James are both drawn to the idea that even in their degraded forms, folk beliefs [are] containing remnants of truths (Hallett, 11-2), and their appropriation of both folk and pagan images participate in their quest for spiritual and creative enlightenment.

C. Creating new myths in literature

In this final part of my dissertation, I build on Felicia Bonaparte's idea that, despite its apparent realism, it is poesis rather than mimesis that is at work in the Victorian novel, and I believe that the mythical allusions mobilised by Victorian writers participate in a larger enterprise of reinvention of the self and of the act of writing. To do so, the writers in my corpus alternatively resort to syncretism, to the consequential patterning at the heart of folk literature, and finally use pagan mythologies to help develop Victorian myths.

a. Late Victorian syncretism

Syncretism is the combination of different forms of belief, or of different practices, either through time, or wilfully, to reconcile different cultures: historically, the Christian Church absorbed and syncretised pagan rituals into the rites of the Church when it failed to

[387] Hardy, *Tess*, 151.

eradicate folk belief. The works in my corpus show the tendency to amalgamate different folk traditions:

> The literary productions of the fantastic drawing from folk narratives demonstrate an instable cultural synthesis. Industrialism, economics, empire, politics (virtually the whole of Victorian society) is engaged in these narratives, shaped both by the innovative artistic vision of an individual author and the chorus of implied voices from the folkloric tradition (Harris, 33).

In the chapter 'Imagination and the quest for new belief' (*Imagination et recherche de nouvelles croyances*) Rancy highlights the syncretic tendency of Late Victorian occultist societies when it came to constructing their mythology as they were the purveyors of new beliefs:

> The Neo-Celtic movement and the Hermetic order of the 'Golden Dawn' which counted in its ranks S.L. 'McGregor' Mathers, author of The Kabbalah Unveiled, the actress Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, George Russell— 'A.E.'—, W. B. Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and Bram Stoker, produce a synthetic version of the Celtic heritage and the contributions of modern theosophy[388].

Syncretism was thus firmly associated with the Victorian desire for new beliefs. Moreover, Late Victorian syncretism shows incredible diversity, and the works in my corpus feature combinations of Christianism with paganism, and of different paganisms. In **I-A-b: textual hybridity**, I have already underlined the syncretism of pagan and Christian references in *Tess*, but Hardy also mixes his pagan myths—which—according to Felicia Bonaparte, is 'a common nineteenth-century practice that reflects the popularity of comparative mythology. Parallel rites and deities are layered through the length of the novel' (Bonaparte, 423). Angel is both angelic and a pale Apollo, while Alec embodies both Hades and Dionysus in his relationship with Tess. Even the characters themselves participate in the confusion as Angel calls Tess both Artemis and Demeter, showing his superficial knowledge of divinities who are fundamentally opposed in Greek ritual. Felicia Bonaparte even argues that Hardy conceals these pagan references under misleading Christian ones: Angel is pure, aloof and even plays the harp, mimicking the classical iconography of Christian angels. While Alec, always his polar

[388] 'Le néo-celtisme et l'ordre hermétique de la « Golden Dawn », qui a compté parmi ses membres S.L. « McGregor » Mathers, auteur de la Cabale Révélée, l'actrice Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, George Russell — « A.E. » — , W.B. Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen et Bram Stoker, font un effort de synthèse de l'héritage celtique et des apports de la théosophie moderne'. Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre* 8% calibre ebook.

opposite, is presented in the infernal heat of the Chaseborough jig, ‘always smoking a cigar with a tip that burns like coal (e.g., X), the smoke rising and enveloping him (e.g., V), seems the image of the devil. The fact that he has a "black moustache" and that it ends in two "curled points" (V) further identifies him, in fact, with the stereotype of the villain in the melodramatic pieces that were greatly in vogue at the time’ (Bonaparte, 426). Hardy wilfully uses syncretism to mislead the reader: ‘he is teasing us by mirroring, in these deliberate exaggerations, what he expects our judgments will be’[389]. Much like the mythic transfiguration of his characters however, syncretism ultimately fails in Hardy. While Tess produces beautiful, enacted poetry by mixing her pagan sentiments with Christian psalms, Hardy makes a number of parallels between the ‘mythic emblems’ (Bonaparte, 428) of remote Druidic rituals and the old-time heliolatries mentioned in chapter XIV. Yet the solarism which culminates at Stonehenge serves the apotheosis of the wrong god: ‘the Druid worship of the sun coincides with the rites of Apollo rather than those of Persephone. It is no accident, thus, that Angel has brought Tess to just this spot’ (Bonaparte, 428).

Another important syncretism that is especially prevalent in the narrative strategies of Arthur Machen and M.R. James is the analogy of paganism with Catholicism. This is twofold: on the one hand it derives from Machen’s exaltation of ‘mystery’ which he finds lacking in the modern world, and which he associates with both paganism and Catholicism: ‘the Greeks, celebrating the festival of Dionysus . . . were all sufficiently Catholic’ (Hieroglyphics, 160)[390]. Here, Catholicism holds the key to a desirable spiritual state for mankind, while on the other hand, James associates Catholicism with his evil paganism, participating in the smear campaign of the Late Victorian Era against Catholicism which was gaining a stronger foothold in England, and especially among the Decadents, as several members of the movement were either fascinated by this evil corrupted nature of Catholicism, or converted later in life.

To a Late Victorian audience, ‘The Great God Pan’ could easily read as an Antichristic narrative. Indeed, Pan, as we have seen, was associated with the Christian devil, and Helen, a demonic entity, is born of the body of a young virgin named Mary after she comes in contact with a superior being. Mary’s pregnancy is not just a parody of the Christian Annunciation, it is an inversion: her child is the devil incarnate. Yet, Zoë Lehmann Imfeld warns against a direct interpretation of Helen’s nature: ‘For Helen is not simply a symbolic Antichrist, she is anti-Christ. In creating Helen as Christologically inhuman, Machen reveals the extraneous,

[389] Bonaparte, ‘The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d’Urbervilles’, 426.
[390] Mantrant, ‘Pagan Revenants’, 2.

autonomous concept of 'The Devil' to be but a cosy symbol in comparison to the real embodiment of an anti-Christ—a human being without humanity' (Lehmann Imfeld, 58). There was a historical association between folklore and a distrust of Catholicism in England:

> In England, the first people to discuss folklore from the outside (as opposed to participating in it) were Elizabethan Protestants, who used it as a weapon in their campaign to identify Catholicism with paganism. They sought out every possible similarity between medieval customs and rituals and those of the only two pagan cultures they knew about: Old Testament Gentiles, and classical Greeks and Romans[391].

Longstanding associations between pagan Rome and Catholicism lead to the weaving of a fictional representation of Catholicism far from the reality: 'in an age that discovered folklore, the fin de siècle imagination was fascinated by a remote past and by legends from all around the world, from Greece to Denmark, from prehistory to the Renaissance; but in a period of Catholic revival, the Christian legends and anecdotes constitute a distinct literary group'[392]. As I have mentioned before in **part II-C-b Metaphysical Estrangement**, Jamesian ghost stories heavily draw from Scandinavian folk traditions, but the supernatural almost systematically occurs in a Christian setting, which offers the possibility of a Christian occultism, which is explicitly linked to Catholicism by the Anglican author. Catholicism is a recurrent theme in James's tales: Anderson studies the last days of Catholicism before the Reform in Denmark in 'Number 13', while in 'The Treasure of Abbott Thomas' the Abbey of Steinfeld is a symbol of the power of monastic orders. In 'Oh, Whistle', Parkins finds the whistle in the ruins of a Templars 'preceptory, and his acquaintance Colonel Wilson deems it dangerous not for its pagan association but for its Catholic origin: 'in Parkins's place, he should himself be careful about using a thing that had belonged to a set of Papists' (James, 126).

A final, and most noteworthy aspect of syncretism in fin de siècle pagan literature is how it serves to forge authenticity. If Hardy uses syncretism chiefly to mislead his reader, in the case of James, the author rewrites motifs not so that they can be identified through cultural referencing, but to better produce frightening and believable narratives:

> One motif can be definitely identified as Danish, for it has no equivalent in British lore-even though James, with characteristic cleverness, has transplanted it into a wholly English setting which conceals its origins […] We can appreciate how skilfully he

[391] Simpson and Roud, 'Paganism' in *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, 272.
[392] 'A une époque de découverte du folklore, l'imagination fin-de-siècle a été fascinée par le passé lointain et les légendes de tous les pays, de la Grèce au Danemark, de la préhistoire à la Renaissance ; mais à une époque de renouveau du catholicisme, les légendes et anecdotes chrétiennes constituent un groupe littéraire distinct', Rancy, *Fantastique et décadence en Angleterre : 1890-1914* 54 %.

> combined elements from varied sources-and how cunningly he covered his tracks (Simpson, 13).

Through the inclusion of foreign folklore, James cleverly shows the possibility of Britishness being overwhelmed by other beliefs that are stronger or that end up justified by the narrative. A good example of this is the early acknowledgment that in Irish folklore ash trees are evil, brushed off by the protagonists of 'The Ash-Tree'. But in his transplantation of Danish folklore to England, he is in involved in a pure act of mythopoesis.

b. Reading the patterns: paganism and the folk motif

Inevitably, an appropriation of pagan and folk motifs in Late Victorian literature meant engaging with the causal or magical thinking that structures these systems of belief, and posed a creative challenge, as folklore is a highly referential genre where the stylistic conventions are rigidly set:

> By its very nature, folk narrative is a continuous retelling of a story in which the elements of the narrative become more and more fixed; the characters become two dimensional and Stereotypic, and the whole tenor of the tale becomes less flexible, less open to interpretation, with each retelling. The author intent on using traditional material, therefore, must contend with the expectations and a priori "folk" knowledge his readers have of traditional narrative. In order to reinvest a folk narrative with a new meaning or message, the author must first understand the significance of the folk narrative and then have the ability to break down the barrier of his readers' familiarity with the original, traditional material (Taft, 399).

In *Tess* or *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, the authors use folk motifs to build their story: a motif is a 'small narrative unit recurrent in folk literature'[393] that proves so consistent they are catalogued since the late nineteenth-century into the following categories of tabu, magic, the dead, marvels (journeys to other-word), tests, the wise and the foolish, deception, ordaining the future, chance and fate, social system, rewards and punishments, unnatural cruelty, sex, religion[394].Thanks to his understanding of what he called the 'rules of folklore', James brilliantly adopted the causal logic inherent to folklore and mythical stories, and his horror is constructed as an 'elaborate network of allusions'[395], for example, the title 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You My Lad' comes from a folk song by Burns with the following refrain:

[393] Hasan El-Shamy and Jane Garry ed, *Archetypes and Motifs in folklore and literature: a handbook* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), xv.
[394] El-Shamy and Garry ed, *Archetypes and Motifs in folklore and literature: a handbook* Sharpe, table of contents.
[395] Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 134.

‘Though father and mother and brother go mad,/ Oh, whistle and I’ll come to ye, my lad.’ Julia Briggs tells us in *Night Visitors* that:

> [M.R. James] found in the ballad a useful source of supernatural episodes, and was particularly interested in the Danish and Breton versions. It is worthwhile, in the light of his interest in the ballad, to consider how far his own narrative technique was influenced by it. The prosaic, matter-of-fact tone with which supernatural events alike are presented, […] and perhaps above all, the sense of a background of shared traditional beliefs conveying further implications to the audience (Briggs, 132).

Hardy too was well aware of the challenges of rewriting ballads to create new stories as a ‘major source for [him] was the popular ballad tradition’ (Taft, 401), but its profound familiarity and simple intrigues offered a sincere way to express the universal and unending struggle at the heart of human experience, and unmistakably, ‘the seduction of the naïve rural girl by the aristocratic rake is a common motif in English literature, from Fielding’s *Pamela* to Eliot’s *Adam Bede* and Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles’*[396]. The patterning of paganism and folklore was indeed read as the proof of some universal truths about human development: the ‘structural parallels [which] were being discovered around the globe by students of comparative mythology meant, and so many Victorians took it, that the ideas encoded in myths expressed, if not a divine eternity, at least those eternal verities that characterized the human condition’ (Bonaparte, 417).

This is why the systematic association of folk motifs and rituals in the texts is significant. Because the Late Victorians did not believe in pagan religions, their interest in ritual is more linked to *praxis* than faith: despite an absence of faith, the structural role of pagan ritual helped order society, and in my corpus, paganism is always most potent when it is associated with ritual practices, whether they are magical or not, such as the Cerealia and the sacrifice scene at Stonehenge in *Tess*, the conjuring of Pan and the Dionysian rites in ‘The Great God Pan’ or the Mithraic and Druidic rites in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. In turn, this insistence on the ritual nature of paganism is directly derived from the shift in paradigm between Olympianism and Chthonic mysteries, as Margot Louis explains in *Persephone Rises*:

> To Hardy, as to the Myth and Ritual School, creeds are essentially insignificant. In a primitive society, religion is not a matter of faith, as it is to later Protestant traditions, but of acts, of performing the sacred rituals necessary to maintain the fertility of the earth. So it is possible to have many versions of the same myth without compromising the religion to which that myth seems central. For the myth only explains, or at best complements, the ritual that is the true centre of religion[397].

[396] Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-century British Fiction*, 130.
[397] Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927*, 95.

But Hardy goes beyond the Myth and Ritual School as his novels suggest that 'we live out the very patterns of behaviour that are formalized in ancient rituals of sacrifice, scapegoating, and communion'. (Louis, 94). In this light, *Tess* is a narrative of human sacrifice, along with 'The Great God Pan' where Helen's final sacrifice is necessary to re-establish the cosmic order and the boundaries between worlds. Ultimately, the use of motifs produces a palimpsestual literature that offers a reflexion on the act of reading, and on authorial expectations, as the texts constantly offer forking paths: in *Tess* 'Hardy is not only illustrating in the errors of his characters the misconceptions of his age, he is making a substantive point about the act of reading itself. Reading is interpretation and whether we see a fallen woman or a mythological deity hinges on our interpretive premises'[398]. Paradoxically, this return to the most traditional and ancient forms of literature is an attempt to reconcile the entire cultural imagination of Victorian literature with the constraints of modernity as an age of unbelief:

> Hardy is well aware at the end that myth is a problematic language for a writer of modern texts, offering only one or the other of two impossible alternatives. Either the modern writer must seek a true rebirth by repossessing the literal magic of the myth, in which case he ends up writing an old-fashioned religious narrative, or he must find a suitable image for suggesting a resurrection in a secular, modern way, in which case he undermines the very point of his paradigm. This is the novel's final irony, that in the making of mythic arguments modern texts must simultaneously and inescapably mismake them. It is the price of having to live, of having to write, in a secular age (Bonaparte, 431).

c. Literary paganism at the service of Victorian myths

The Late Victorian Era thus appropriated ancient pagan narratives and the dynamics of folk narratives to renew debates of religion and identity, so it would seem logical that in turn, ancient myths would be used to back up the construction of specifically Victorian myths. I have evoked a few of these Victorian myths like the evil femme fatale, the atavistic criminal, or the mythicized pagan countryside of 'Merry England'. But the unifying myth that haunts my corpus and that had been haunting English literature since Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is the Christian motif of the Fall from Grace. In Victorian times, the fall translates anxieties about social respectability and spiritual salvation, as individuals suffer the punishment of being cast

[398] Bonaparte, 'The Deadly Misreadings of Mythic Texts: abstract.

out from the ranks of society or from a community of believers. The 'fallen woman' is a typically Victorian myth that was developed by authors like Arnold, who 'employs the figure of the fallen woman to embody the misery, desperation, and immorality hidden at the heart of his era' (Louis, 87), and it was extensively studied by Nina Auerbach in her seminal essay *Woman and the Demon, the Life of a Victorian Myth*. According to Auerbach: 'the decorous clash of Victorian cultures coalesced in a myth that was never quite formulated but that recurs incessantly in literature and art, a myth crowning a disobedient woman in her many guises as heir of the ages and demonic savior of the race' (Auerbach, 2). This feminine principle had several facets: angel, demonic woman, mermaid or old maid, which are summed up in the omnipresent figure of the 'fallen woman' in Victorian art, a 'haunting Victorian type in whom angel, demon and old maid converge (Auerbach, 160), which shapes itself in Victorian mores, and which she explicitly links to Tess's character in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy already participated in the motif early on in his writing career with the poem 'The Ruined Maid' he published in 1866, and in his appropriation of the motif, he follows George Elliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) or Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). But his association of Tess with the mythical figure of Persephone reinstated the full narrative of Persephone's status as a victim and acknowledged the violent conflict at the heart of the myth on the one hand, while on the other it shone a more sympathetic light on the Victorian fallen woman archetype and created new associations within the Victorian myth:

> Victorian Persephones were generally either embodiments of despair and death or else consorts of Hades; they were rarely connected with the victim of seduction or rape who appears so prominently in the socially conscious literature of the age. Only in the literature of the fin de siècle and the early Modernist period does it become common to represent Persephone as a rape victim (Louis, 87).

The fall from Grace as the mode of being of man in the modern age is the second iteration of this Christian myth which rests at the heart of 'The Great God Pan' and *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Indeed, Zoë Lehmann Imfeld defends that the real terror haunting Jamesian ghost stories is 'the human being as fallen man'[399], and this Christian motif of a fallen humanity is, still according to her, the common denominator of James and Machen's supernatural nineties fictions (Lehmann Imfeld, 79-80). If the evil pagan rites which feature in 'The Great God Pan', 'Lost Heart', 'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book', 'Count Magnus', 'The Ash-

[399] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology From Le Fanu to James,* 80.

Tree', and 'Number 13' belong to the forbidden knowledge trope, this trope links back to the foundational myth of the Edenic Fall, precisely because Adam and Eve desired Knowledge, and Jamesian and Machenian characters thus constantly re-enact the Original Sin of the Fall, feeding into the Late Victorian fear that the 'world in which humanity in Christ has been replaced by materialist aestheticism'[400] is resolutely empty of divinity.

CONCLUSION

Late Victorian paganism is thus a complete construction of its time. Although no definitive work seems to be available on the subject, it is my contention that Late Victorian paganism in literature was effectively a phenomenon that could only exist in the Victorian era, and that it answered vital social, religious, moral, and aesthetic questions. Not only was it a Victorian product tailored to fit Victorian needs, but its permeability to and influence on the other cultural trends of the fin de siècle give us important insights as to the possibilities of the

[400] Lehmann Imfeld, *The Victorian Ghost Story and Theology From Le Fanu to James,* 58.

Late Victorian imagination, both in fiction and in everyday life. By drawing parallels between Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan', and Montague Rhodes James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, I have attempted to show that despite the heterogeneity of Late Victorian paganism noted by Jennifer Hallett, 'responsible' and 'decadent' paganism present unifying characteristics: the adoption of mythological motifs, the use of syncretism, the reliance on folklore and the adoption of the causal patterning of ritual religions that make sense of a world increasingly disconcerted by impending modernity. Perhaps the most interesting and unifying quality of Late Victorian literary paganism is its ambivalence.

The use of paganism in Late Victorian literature can further be read as an active engagement of fin de siècle writers with spiritual and ethical questions, and with their roles as authors. It is a symbol of intellectual resistance in the case of Hardy or Machen, and the symptom of a new awareness of the rest of the world, as the conjoined appropriation of folklore and pagan imagery provoked a cultural displacement that forced the Late Victorians to look beyond the exhausted conceptual framework of Christianity, which had dominated for more than a millennium, while at the same time these images paradoxically helped reinject mystery and wonder in their Christian faith. Paganism in Late Victorian literature thus fulfils an ambivalent role: both mediator of cultural anxieties and easy scapegoat to fixate a general fin de siècle malaise about change, as 'the feeling of living in an age of transition was a key Victorian experience'[401]. The cult of individual fulfilment at the heart of paganism was also very well-suited for its use in literature. Indeed, the idea of 'self-realisation' (Hallett, 244) is an encouragement of autonomous creation.

Darwinism, Christian decline, and scientific advances did play a role in the resurgence of paganism, but not quite in the way it could have been expected: the decline of Christian Britain did feature a rising number of doubters, agnostics and atheists, but the readiness with which the Late Victorians appropriated the aesthetics and narratives of paganism and folklore shows a desire to believe in something beyond the material and the mundane. As the works in my corpus are rarely studied for their pagan inspiration, and even less frequently compared, I hope to present an original commentary on the vast topic of Late Victorian paganism, and I believe that their generic, textual and stylistic disparities actually reinforce my demonstration, by showing the large web of influence of paganism on British literature at the fin de siècle.

[401] Hallett, "Paganism in England 1885-1914", 243.

Indeed, the use of paganism in the literature of the Late Victorian era went beyond an elitist intellectual game of referencing, since it adopted the dynamics of the most traditional form of literature: the anonymous and unautographed oral story-telling that makes up most of the literary production in history.

Despite its flaws and its brevity, Late Victorian paganism made a lasting cultural impact on the aesthetics of Great Britain, even if it took a long time to be recognised to its just value. Much like the Gothic, the aesthetic plasticity of paganism seems to connect with the most universal preoccupations of human society, and the Late Victorian Era's use of paganism was not an isolated accident in English history, indeed, other periods of transition like the 1940s saw the emergence of Gardnerian Wicca in Great Britain, while the 1990s and 2000s saw an unprecedented rise of neo-pagans who moved towards Celtic and Norse religions, and the syncretic religion of Wicca. The subject of mythological appropriation is everywhere in literature and the arts today, from TV series such as *American Gods* which play out the Return of the Gods, to such novels as Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), which is an imaginative and sensitive rewriting of the Hellenic myth of Geryon. While our 21st century relationship to paganism is uncomplicated by the presence of Christian dominance, pagan aesthetics and narratives still engage audiences by bringing aesthetic comfort and helping build identity for those neo-pagans who consciously construct their beliefs to suit their aesthetic and spiritual needs.

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