

Aliens and Animals: Notes on Literary Lifeforms After Darwin and Freud

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## Introduction: Animal Figures

In his longest work, “Apology for Raymond Sebond” (1580), Michel de Montaigne defends—the title really gives it away—the writings of Raymond Sebond, a fifteenth-century Catalan scholar of Christian theology and natural philosophy. Montaigne’s essay expresses a scathing doubt about human reason and knowledge. He casts both as a pittance compared to the power of faith. As he writes, citing a phrase from the Book of Matthew, “The Word of God says that if we had one single drop of faith we would ‘move mountains’,” but men lack such a drop (Montaigne 494). He concludes,

It is evident to me that we only willingly carry out those religious duties which flatter our passions. Christians excel at hating enemies. Our zeal works wonders when it strengthens our tendency towards hatred, ambition, avarice, evil-speaking... and rebellion. (495)

Humans, according to Montaigne, are not first and foremost thinking beings but passionate creatures. We are fickle, changeable, and faithless. Our hatred, ambition, and avarice motivate us more strongly than any religious feeling. No doubt the religious violence of his own time influenced Montaigne’s point of view, for the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion saw Catholic mobs massacre Protestant villages and neighborhoods, not to mention open warfare between Huguenot and Catholic armies.

Though “Apology” amounts to a defense of Christian faith, it does so by way of questioning the power of human thought and feeling, that is, our capacity to believe—actually believe—in God. Without God, we are nothing. “Let us consider for a while,” Montaigne writes, “Man in isolation—Man with no outside help, armed with no arms but his own and stripped of that grace and knowledge of God in which consist his dignity, his power and the very ground of his being” (Montaigne 502). Beholding the figure, he has

thus envisioned, Montaigne finds it ludicrous. He wonders if it is “possible to imagine anything more laughable than that this pitiful, wretched creature—who is not even master of himself, [sic] but exposed to shocks on every side—should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe” (502). Without God, human beings do not merely lack dignity and power. They barely exist. If they are fickle, changeable, and faithless, their feelings and their passions guide them. They lack control even over their thoughts. Montaigne would perhaps share Nietzsche’s skeptical idea, expressed in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), that “a thought comes when ‘it’ wants, not when ‘I’ want” (47). Montaigne’s solution to the problem of faithless humanity is a bestialization of humankind.

To make human beings faithful and wise, Montaigne implies, they must be dealt with like animals. As he puts it,

Do you want a man who is sane, moderate, firmly based and reliable? Then array him in darkness, sluggishness and heaviness. To teach us to be wise, make us stupid like beasts; to guide us, you must blind us. (548)

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to assess the shrewd and ironic argumentation of “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” but Montaigne is perfectly serious here. The solution that makes humans “sane, moderate, firmly based, and reliable” is freedom from fickle and compulsive passions. Darkness, sluggishness, and heaviness could arrest the urgency of our whims. Ignorance and forgetting could defend us against the “blows and outrages of Fortune,” which leaves humans with debilitating pain and sorrow (Montaigne 550). Montaigne does not say so, but it keeps with his thinking that stupidity could even defend us against thought itself—since thought is not an act of rational control but another passion. Thought represents a passivity that leaves us open to whatever thinking comes to mind, right or wrong. Not human beings but beasts, Montaigne implies, are capable of

wisdom. They have the darkness, sluggishness, and heaviness required to be sane and faithful.

As with Montaigne, so with the writers that are the subject of this dissertation: Jack London, D.H. Lawrence, H.P. Lovecraft, and, in the conclusion, Djuna Barnes. Each of these writers considers the difference that non-human behavior, appearance, feeling, and intention makes when it is held up for comparison with the behaviors, appearances, feelings, and intentions that constitute human life. Considered for comparative purposes, nonhuman animals serve as a model for human beings and admonish us. In the literary cases presented in the chapters that follow this introduction, nonhuman lives offer differing lens to see changed conceptions of being human. Readers can perceive correctives to the frailties of humankind in the deluded horse from Jack London's *John Barleycorn*, in Lawrence's singular horse, the eponymous stallion from his novella, *St. Mawr*, and in the alien power of Lovecraft's teasingly un-representable monsters in "The Whisperer in Darkness."

In his essay, "Language, Power, and the Training of Horses," the philosopher and horse trainer Paul Patton muses on the philosophical writings of another trainer, Vicki Hearne, whose work has also been the subject of ecofeminist and theorist Donna Haraway's scholarship. Like Hearne, Patton meditates on the meaning and responsibility of the animal-trainer relationship. He suggests that in the shadow of Nietzsche's and then Foucault's analyses of power—"all human social relations are power relations" is Patton's summary of their philosophical work—the question of ethical relationships becomes perplexing, for "power relations are relations of inequality" (Patton 95). But

Hearne's position in *Adam's Task* is that "[t]he better trained a dog is—which is to say, the greater his 'vocabulary'—the more mutual trust there is, the more dog and human can rely on each other to behave responsibly" (Hearne 21). Training represents a relationship of unequal power but creates conditions for both increased communication and increased responsibility. Training creates trust and fosters intimacy. Patton puts the same thought in terms of political theory: "[W]hat we learn from the disciplines of animal training is that hierarchical forms of society between unequals are by no means incompatible with ethical relations and obligations towards other beings" (Patton 95). Hearne and Patton exhibit a peculiar form of realism. They accept inequality of power as a feature of a world in which we must become more just and create better conditions for justice. Their argument is not so distant from Montaigne's. In the case of Hearne, Patton, and Montaigne, though only Montaigne's language suggests punishment and the power of Catholic faith, responsibility requires discipline, instruction, and obedience as much as, or rather more than, freedom. Freedom, particularly in the case of Montaigne's skeptical theology, leaves us at the mercy of compulsions like hatred and avarice. Responsibility starts where obligations exist.

For Hearne, Patton, and Montaigne, the obligated or unfree animal may be prepared for greater moral freedoms by the very fact of its obligation: the freedom to more openly communicate, the freedom to relate to another being, the freedom to have faith. The figure of the horse neatly suggests the unfree/free dynamic, for equine life as we know it, like the familiar form of canine life, exists at the intersection of discipline and impulse, human-imposed training and ostensibly inborn instinct. This dynamic of discipline and impulse will be particularly relevant in chapters 1 and 2, where I examine



Jack London and D.H. Lawrence, respectively, with particular consideration for their writing about the lives of horses.

As rhetorical figures, the animals I have mentioned so far serve to illuminate the conditioning of humans as well. Montaigne's purpose in proposing "darkness, sluggishness and heaviness" is to suggest that these would be useful tools for the treatment of humankind. Likewise, when Hearne discusses the trust and faith developed in canine training, it is trust for the human trainer as well as the educated dog. Both learn and earn more trust. In all of these cases, a nonhuman animal acts as an avatar for a different way to be "human" or experience that way of being called "human." Humans are animals, too, of course, and all animals may attain a different life to the extent that they find ways to be obligated to one another. For writers like Montaigne, Hearne, and Patton, animals figure the possibility of this virtuous obligation. Animals *are* figures of obligation.

There is, however, another animal that shows up in "Apology for Raymond Sebond." This figure puts under question the whole notion of hierarchy from the human point of view. It may be the case that power relations are unequal relations, but how we measure that inequality is open to question. Montaigne suggests exactly this point when he writes, "When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?" (505). Montaigne's leisurely conundrum suggests that we do not have any real idea of how this cat values her own time. Which of these two creatures is pausing for a few moments to toy with the other, and which of them is in charge of their play? Montaigne thinks he is playing with her but becomes uncertain. If you have played with a cat, then you know the strange and requisite proportion of caution and fear that it

entails and how decisive claws, teeth, or a twitch of a tail can be. On this small scale, a cat has a power that is anything but inconsequential. Animals do not only figure obligation; they figure desire, intention, and power. They figure whatever a human being can figure.

The appearance of this or that animal, cat or dog or horse, in a text poses difficulty because these creatures are so often reduced to allegory or metaphor. As if to mirror their fate on industrial farms and in threatened habitats, animals that appear in a text matter on human terms. Their significance, positive or negative, is assigned to them in a husbandry of symbolic significance. Such making-symbolic happens to human beings in text as well, of course, but less common are those texts that attempt to sketch the personhood of a nonhuman animal. The notion of a *person*, as I understand it, signifies an entity with thoughts, feelings, interests, and communicable understandings of the world.

Reduced to allegory or symbol, dogs and horses and cats become, as Derrida calls them in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, “animot.” *Animot* is a pun in French; the final syllable of the plural of animal (*animaux*) is a homonym for *mot*, which means word. Animals in writing become figures in words. They are distinct from actually existing animals. When Derrida famously speaks in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* of the cat in his bathroom that sees him naked, he insists, “Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized” (9). In looking at the ways of living, desiring, and imagining figured and depicted by nonhuman animals in the work of Jack London, D.H. Lawrence, H.P. Lovecraft, and Djuna Barnes, this dissertation will determine if each of these writers is really talking about animals at all.

Their animal figures often appear not anthropomorphic but like figures of speech. The difference between animal and *animot* is in the turn to or from the lives of nonhuman animals. When the writers I examine in what follows turn to look at nonhuman life, they see something alien and enticing. The nature of this alien lifeform determines the difference between animal and *animot*.

Montaigne's sense of human frailty is apt for the post-Darwinian and post-Freudian historical moment in which London, Lawrence, Lovecraft, and Barnes were writing. In "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne remarks about the human being:

This creature knows and sees that he is lodged down here, among the mire and shit of the world, bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey [sic] of the building, the farthest from the vault of heaven; his characteristics place him in the third and lowest category of animate creatures, yet, in thought, he sets himself above the circle of the Moon, bringing the very heavens under his feet. (505)

For Montaigne, the irony of human existence is the discontinuity between our material situation and our self-regard. Despite being "bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe" and despite being "among the mire and shit," as Montaigne puts it, we take ourselves to be learned and powerful masters of the universe. To put it simply, Montaigne takes exception to human exceptionalism. Rather than viewing human beings as unshackled from the mortal sphere, close to God because we were made in his likeness, Montaigne insists that we, like animals, are earthbound and small.

Insisting on the material and animal reality of human life, the work of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud likewise implies an anti-exceptional view of the human being. One of the most controversial suppositions of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of*

*Man* (1871) was the continuity of ape and human. Partly inspired by Darwin's scholarship, Freud's psychoanalytic theories aimed to explore the limits of rational self-control and the mechanisms of unconscious thought and action. Neither scientist saw the human being as superior to animal life but rather part of it. "Apology for Raymond Sebond" has a few morsels of proto-Freudian thought, as when Montaigne writes, "The appetite which enraptures us when we lie with women merely aims at banishing the pain brought on by the frenzy of our inflamed desires; all it seeks is rest and repose, free from the fever of passion" (549). It is very much a masculinist perspective, but his sentiment prefigures Freud's explanation of sexual pleasure in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud theorizes "that unpleasure corresponds to an *increase* in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a *diminution*" (4, emphasis in original). He shares Montaigne's sense that the human body and mind seek to relieve themselves of excitation: "the mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible" (Freud 5).

Darwin and Freud are enormously important for the writers I consider throughout this dissertation and for reasons similar to those outlined above. Darwin and Freud suggest the proximity of human and nonhuman animals. Darwin matters in particular for the first chapter, on Jack London's memoir of alcoholism, *John Barleycorn* (1913), in which London's sense of habit and training recapitulates Darwinian thinking about the habits that found emotional and gestural forms of expression for both human and nonhuman animals. Darwinian theories of evolution serve as a counterpoint and foil for the peculiar sense of alien life in the third chapter, which examines H.P. Lovecraft's short story, "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931). This chapter investigates the apparently anti-humanist terms of Lovecraft's thought, specifically his implicit notion that human beings

represent a specific perceptual limit, i.e. that the human way of seeing is a form of blindness. In the second chapter, on D.H. Lawrence's novella, *St. Mawr* (1924), Freudian psychoanalytic theory forms a backdrop against which Lawrence expounds in fiction his own anti-psychological ideas on the unconscious. Though he specifically explicates his idiosyncratic understanding of the unconscious in his books, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), *St. Mawr* demonstrates Lawrentian individuality by portraying the singular and unanalyzable stallion that enraptures Lou Witt, the novella's protagonist.

In their discourse on animals, Jack London and D.H. Lawrence in particular have much to say on the role of women in their philosophical schemes. Both suggest the closeness of women and nonhuman animals in way that emphasizes a sexist thought not dissimilar to Paul Patton's notion of ethical obligation under hierarchy: Subjugation and domination create opportunities for new kinds of freedom, expression, and society. I will attend to the prejudice and misogyny expressed in each writer's thought that animal being revises notions of human life. Women are notably absent from Lovecraft's fiction. This absence does not mean they are not present, however, particularly when one considers the colonialist streak that colors London, Lawrence, and Lovecraft's sense for the exercise of power. These writers intend to escape into the nonhuman, reformatting and reforming and reimagining human life in a freer, more authentic, or, in the case of Lovecraft, less blinkered way, but each nonhuman comparison reinstates human specialness—and in masculine terms.

Before getting on with the business of the dissertation itself, I want to summarize briefly the arguments made throughout. Each of the following chapters highlights a

peculiar arrangement of subject and object, self and other, that inflects the relation of human and nonhuman. London, Lawrence, and Lovecraft negotiate their own peculiar way of understanding subject and object in light of whatever image or figure they have taken as their theme, whether horse or alien (sometimes both).

Chapter 1, “Drunk Without Drinking, or Life Is Good: Language, Imagination, and Equine Habit in *John Barleycorn*,” takes as its subject Jack London’s *John Barleycorn* (1913), which is a memoir with a drinking problem. Throughout this curious text, which is part autobiography and part tract in support of the prohibition of alcohol, London tells stories about his drinking while denying that he is an alcoholic. Drinking, he argues, represents nothing more than a habit of mind. As such, it can be revised. London encounters difficulty in making this argument convincing, for not only alcohol but the law, his sense of human imagination, and finally the English words he uses to depict himself all prove to be figures for exterior forces that can be brought to bear on an individual subject, remaking him or her from the inside out. Supple and plastic, the subject takes shape in response to a foreign body it ingests. Because London conceives of them as laborers dedicated to the advancement of the human race, women in *John Barleycorn* are avatars for the forces of remaking. He supports women’s suffrage only because he believes they will help to pass Prohibition. Crucial in the context of this dissertation is London’s consideration of a dray horse, which models the way in which humankind can accept its mortal plight (rather than giving in to the despair of drink) by swallowing the “vital lie” that life is good. For human and dray horse alike, no such thing as sobriety exists. I argue that *John Barleycorn* implies that each individual subject is governed by an object—language, imagination, or legal authority—that they ingest to

become what they are or could be. An exterior constitutes the interior. The figure of the animal and the figure of women aids London here, insofar as each models the acceptance of an exterior object suffused with revisionary power.

Chapter 2, “Alien Lifeforms: Personality and Singularity in D.H. Lawrence’s *St. Mawr*,” considers Lawrence’s novella, *St. Mawr* (1924), in which the protagonist Lou Witt becomes fascinated and enamored by the stallion of the title. Where London gives the impression of an individual subject constituted by whatever “foreign” object, so to speak, that she ingests, Lawrence argues that the true individual is something different. The Lawrentian individual is singular and object-like in its inscrutability. *St. Mawr*, the stallion, models this object-like power for Lou. The horse represents an unknowable and singular object that cannot be circumscribed by notions of psychology or personality. It has no personality, in fact, and refuses to be “intimate.” Lou identifies this refusal of intimacy as the reason for the horse’s superiority to humans in general and men in particular, for human beings are wracked by attitude, personality, and unctuous intimate behavior. In phenomenological terms borrowed from Edmund Husserl by way of Timothy Morton, I argue that the eponymous stallion of *St. Mawr* represents an “inexhaustible” object, which can never be defined, or exhausted, by its many appearances. As an avatar of the god Pan, the horse is singular but multiform; as an instinctual wild animal, it can be “every animal at once,” or so Lou believes. Though Lou takes the wild animal as her model of individual singularity, the stallion betrays her. In America, he shows interest in mares for the first time. Lou retreats without him to the mountains of New Mexico, where she finds a grander wild spirit in the desert. The

novella ends with a dialogue between Lou and her mother that situates womanhood in direct subjugation to wildness.

Chapter 3, “The Accursed Buzz in H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Whisperer in Darkness,’” turns from horses and dogs to nonhuman figures that, at first glance, are more like monsters. To speak of first glances is misleading, however, for Lovecraft’s narrator announces in the first line of the story that he “saw no visual horror in the end.” He only hears it, and even “hear” goes too far, for rather than hearing strange voices, Albert Wilmarth, Lovecraft’s narrator, hears a distortion inside otherwise familiar voices. He can hear that he cannot hear something. This marks the presence of the nonhuman alien. I argue that “The Whisperer in Darkness” attempts to tell a tale of representational impossibility, where an alien and nonhuman presence makes itself known by failing to “show up,” so to speak, in representational language and imagination. The “accursed buzz” in a familiar voice is Lovecraft’s key to this notion. For Wilmarth and the Vermont setting of Lovecraft’s story, this “accursed buzz” unsettles the entire notion of earth as a native home for human beings. The perceptual limit becomes territorial, implying that there are places where humans are not truly native but merely contingent—and that earth could be one such place. The problem for Lovecraft is that aside from the buzzing distortion, “The Whisperer in Darkness” offers so many other details that bring his aliens back to earth. This has largely to do with the resemblance between figures of imperial power and the alien beings Lovecraft describes. They seem less nonhuman and more like human imperial agents working in far-flung outpost.

London’s memoir implies that the subject is constituted by the object it ingests, and that animals teach this lesson. Lawrence suggests that the lesson of the truly wild



animal and wild spirit is to become not a subject at all but an object, one that cannot be reached in its essence. Lovecraft, finally, sees the nonhuman lesson as the object inside the subject, the alien matter that cannot be perceived except as a distortion that disturbs everything. The point of looking at these stories at all is simply to understand whether it is a human or nonhuman entity that each writer imagines. As my conclusion will explain, Djuna Barnes gets closer than London, Lawrence, and Lovecraft to suggesting animal presence.

Reduced to its pith, Montaigne's point in "Apology for Raymond Sebond" consists in his emphatic argument that human beings are as earthbound as any animal. When he writes that humans are "bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey [sic] of the building, the farthest from the vault of heaven," he asserts a notion that resembles one of Lovecraft's primary ideas: The place in the cosmos that is apparently reserved for human beings does not glorify them. Stagnant and most dead of all places, it may in fact be alien to human beings, as it is certainly alien to their supposed self-image as masters of the universe. In various ways, London, Lawrence, and Lovecraft connect human and nonhuman animal life. They seem to understand that there is a continuity between human beings and what are called "animals." But they turn away or circle back, in covert and sometimes unconscious ways, to the mastery represented by the human. They reaffirm the privilege of self-assertion and its human power. In the work of Jack London, D.H. Lawrence, and H.P. Lovecraft (Djuna Barnes is the exception here), animals and other nonhumans play a role which seems at first like an escape hatch to get out of the human; in the end, the hatch leads back inside.

Chapter 1: Drunk Without Drinking, or Life Is Good: Language, Imagination, and Habit  
in Jack London's *John Barleycorn*

Once upon a time, little Jack London loved candy. When he grew to adolescence, he realized that all the men around him, many of them examples of the man he would like to be, swore off the sweet stuff and swilled alcohol instead. In *John Barleycorn* (1913), which London calls his "Alcoholic Memoirs" (5), he writes that he began when he was a teenager to drink with determination, "striving to be a man amongst men" (58). He adds, woefully, "And all the time I nursed secret and shameful desires for candy" (58). Looking back over the course of his drinking career, London implies that he is still living out a version of this conflict between an immature impulse and manly indulgence. He claims that

[t]his physical loathing for alcohol I have never got over. But I have conquered it. To this day I re-conquer it every time I take a drink. (20)

London is stuck in a time warp, reliving his commitment to trying on, with distaste, the drinking done by the men he wanted to be. He even uses a term for military mastery ("re-conquer") as if it were an expression of self-control, though it implies a revanchist campaign, for by the logic of his metaphor he never holds the territory for long. He has to whip it, or really himself, into shape whenever he comes to take his next drink.

London portrays himself here, at the outset of *John Barleycorn*, as disciplined, lax, and self-destructive at the same time: the boyish victim, sensitive and unhabituated, and the mature bully, ashamed but alcoholically drilling himself into submission. The cost, at very least, seems to have been his teeth, which from smoking, chewing tobacco, candy, and drink would "later become a factor in his [London's] poor health," according

to his biographer, Earle Labor (82).<sup>1</sup> London's teeth suggest exactly the sensitive and corruptible physicality (or materiality) that London spends most of *John Barleycorn* lamenting. He strives to make peace with mortal vulnerability.

These themes of mortality and decay move London to write both in his own voice, advocating for Prohibition, and in the voice of the "White Logic." The White Logic is London's figure for the seductive and pessimistic spirit of alcoholic thought, which fixates on physical decrepitude and death by insisting that finitude and the breakdown of the body are all a human being can expect from its life. In defiance of the White Logic, London embraces Prohibition, because a ban on alcohol will allow the "vital lies of life" to flourish (4). Vital lies, such as the idea that "life is good," shelter toiling beasts, human and not, from the recognition of inevitable disintegration and decay. Though the memoir as a whole argues in favor of Prohibition and vital lies, telling the story of London's drinking from age five to the peak of his fame, the monologues of the White Logic represent its most vivid passages. As prose, vital lies do not match the White Logic in range and power.<sup>2</sup>

There is no getting around it: *John Barleycorn* is a memoir with a drinking problem. London cannot decide how best to write about it, or, rather, the drinking problem keeps insinuating itself. London has to dissuade his reader from believing he is

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<sup>1</sup> When he was young, London indulged in excessive chewing of tobacco, according to Labor, to "deaden the pain in his aching teeth" (81-82). Likely hastened by his love of candy, London's pained teeth began to rot, his gums to be infected (Labor 82). His sister was so disgusted at the state of his mouth that she paid to have his cavities filled and for a set of false front teeth when he first entered high school at age nineteen. That, he boasted later, was also when he got his first toothbrush (Labor 82).

<sup>2</sup> John Crowley has commented that *John Barleycorn* sits uncomfortably "on the border between fictional autobiography and autobiographical fiction" (19). Though the memoir is narrative in the way of memoir, I think it is passages like those written in the voice of the White Logic that make it seem generically hard to pin down, for it is in those passages that London's sense for both dramatic monologue and bleary poetry come to light and give the book its theater and its self-pitying lyricism.

an alcoholic. The primary problem consists in the fact that how London writes about himself makes it clear he has a drinking problem, so he is forced to say he does not have one. He writes, “I have no constitutional predisposition for alcohol” (London 6).<sup>3</sup> He further specifies that “comparatively few alcoholics are born in a generation,” and “by alcoholic I mean a man whose chemistry craves alcohol” (4). Not constitutional and not chemical, alcoholism for London represents rather an insidious “habit of mind” (London 205). The male environment he so prized as a young man—he writes in *Barleycorn* of how he spent his time “dreaming of wild life in the wild man-world” (27)—enforces and nurtures this habit of mind. London ultimately names this environment a “pseudo-civilization” (189) to indicate both its far-reaching social effects and, in his estimation, its artificiality. The “wild man-world” is not nature.

The appeal of alcohol and its “pseudo-civilization” emerges from the miserable realism that London identifies as the core of the White Logic.<sup>4</sup> As he writes of the man, like himself, whose mind but not body is drunk when under the influence of alcohol:

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<sup>3</sup> Revelations about “dipsomania” (alcoholism) would have been scandalous at the time of the book’s publication.

<sup>4</sup> John Sutherland points out in his notes for the Oxford University Press edition of *John Barleycorn* that the term “White Logic” is a cousin to the eponymous quiet in the short story, “The White Silence” (1899), which is part of London’s famous sequence of “Klondike” tales. In that story, the “white silence” is London’s name for the hush and snowbound cold encountered on certain harrowing days in the Yukon. London writes,

Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity,—the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven’s artillery,—but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot’s life, nothing more. (301)

Like the White Logic, which insists on human mortality and finitude, the White Silence “convinces man of his finity.” There are other parallels. In *John Barleycorn*, the White Logic speaks in “pitiless” syllogisms to convince its victims that their finitude is all they have (London 7). The White Silence is “pitiless” as well, lacking the mercy and sympathy that even the “silence of gloom” conveys (London 307). Both the White

It is when in this condition that he strips away the husks of life's healthiest illusions and gravely considers the iron collar of necessity welded about the neck of his soul. This is the hour of John Barleycorn's subtlest power. It is easy for any man to roll in the gutter. But it is a terrible ordeal for a man to stand upright on his two legs swaying, and decide that in all the universe he finds for himself but one freedom, namely, the anticipating of the day of his death. With this man this is the hour of the white logic (of which more anon), when he knows that he may know only the laws of things—the meaning of things never. (7)

London writes with compassion about this hypothetical man who is also himself, the “imaginative” man who is uniquely vulnerable to the bitter truthfulness of the White Logic (London 7). That this upright creature knows only laws and not meanings suggests not simply nihilism but a triple sense of his nature. As London writes, “he [the drunk who is also London himself] is compounded of meat and wine and sparkle” (7). The physical law of mortality makes this man meat plus alcohol, with an additional trace of something more than human, although that surplus sparkle, small and twinkling, serves to underscore the meaty animality of the doomed figure with the collar around its neck.

What so distresses London in the truth-talking White Logic is the reality of physical decay, which began with his teeth and follows him to the end of *John Barleycorn* (and to the end of his life). What I want to explore in this chapter consists not only of this bodily finitude London identifies but another finitude that turns out to be more pressing and distressing than the first. This latter finitude constitutes the dilemma of using words, language, to express oneself and tell one's story: the dilemma of the memoir

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Logic and the White Silence insist that human beings are solitary toys in a mechanistic universe. Each phrase relies on “white” to convey the wasteland of snowy desolation, in which everything is dead and human bravery squashed in the face of the devastation that touches all life. London also implies a racial dimension: A dying man in “The White Silence” remarks, “This country was not made for white men” (London 304). He is grieving in advance that he will never meet his unborn child and begs his friend not to let the child be raised in the Yukon, where there is no “good schooling” (304). His dying comments imply that the real problem is the Yukon itself. For the Yukon, he fears, the place of the “white silence,” affronts human dignity and bravery in a way unsuitable for white men and women, who ought to have their dignity and autonomy go unchallenged, not undermined.

with the drinking problem. Cary Wolfe identifies this finitude in the work Jacques Derrida, and glosses the Derridean idea by remarking that human beings have to live out “our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (Wolfe 27).<sup>5</sup> Telling the anecdote, speech, or scene that shows his drunkenness, London always hurries to add that he is not a “dipsomaniac” (London 5). Language always has its say before London can, and so he must stress that he does not have the drinking problem he seems to have, when his words make it apparent that he does.

Alcohol poses a problem of language for London. The White Logic puts words in his mind and mouth. He needs to counter such words with other words—words on the side of Prohibition and on the side of whipping himself into shape. Though *John Barleycorn* is from the outset an argument in favor of a law prohibiting the consumption of alcohol, London’s real challenge is to get out of the vexing trap of being a creature of a fake environment and of a language, like the White Logic but also language in general, that has the power to speak for him.

Against the White Logic, London presents the figures of women and of animals—mothers, wives, sisters, and a dray horse (draft horse) that London sees on the street—as avatars of the rhetoric of “vital lies.” This self-deceptive rhetoric will rewrite the “pseudo-civilization” of drink only if the law makes the “wild man-world” illegal. There

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which touches on the point Wolfe is making, Derrida comments that “the ‘I’ is always posed autobiographically. It refers to itself. The ‘I’ shows itself, it speaks of itself and of itself as living, living in the present, in the living present, in the moment in which ‘I’ is said, even were it to be already a dead thing speaking” (Derrida 56). I will not be addressing in detail Derrida’s sense of autobiography, but in what follows will understand that it is in and with an inorganic thing called language that the aliveness of the ‘I’ is asserted.

should be no “wild man-world” at all, London’s memoir implies, but instead a world of men and women together, soberly embracing the pleasure of productivity (sexual and otherwise) and child-rearing.<sup>6</sup> Women therefore appear in London’s imagination to be nature’s deciders. It is they who, from a position of maternal concern for the human race, can rationalize living in the opposite of a “pseudo-civilization.” The dray horse makes a similar calculation that models how men ought to think. The question is how London imagines women or horses to represent a “natural” rationality and what the consequences of such a depiction are.

With Prohibition, London believes, comes new or newly remade forms of life: lives ruled by vital lies. He is vague on the details, but implicit in his idea of prohibited and disciplined life is a dematerialization of the male body, which can be reformed and reconstituted by language and imagination, that is, by new habits of mind.<sup>7</sup> When London writes that Prohibition “will mean life more abundant for the manhood of the young boys born and growing up—ay, and life more abundant for the young girls born and growing up to share the lives of the young men” (London 4), the implication is that women will finally be living with men in control of themselves. Note, too, that men have “manhood,”

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<sup>6</sup> London is not explicit on this point, but I think it is clear that vital lies oppose the “wild man-world” and promote heteronormative coupling. The alcoholic fellowship of men takes them away from women and away from reproduction, which itself represents an investment in the idea that life is worth living in the first place. The White Logic does not think life is worth living. Men carouse and gather under the sign of this nihilistic belief. Making alcohol illegal, London argues, forces men back to women, where they can embrace companionship, reproduction, and a belief in living (for oneself and for future generations).

<sup>7</sup> Peter T. Okun suggests that, in *John Barleycorn*, London attends to what his “body” could be, given the right rationalizations and trainings, but “even as his body grows solid,” Okun writes, borrowing a phrase from Marx and Engels, “it melts into air” (81). The body that London talks about is as “plastic” as the imaginative and curious future author who took up drinking in the first place (London 24). In this regard, London is part of what Cary Wolfe identifies in *What is Posthumanism?* as the post-Cartesian tradition that tends to suggest “that ‘the human’ is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (Wolfe, xv).

like an inheritance to be claimed, while young girls have only the young men, with whom they must live in either their un-reconstructed state or their coming liberated one. Freed from thoughts of mortality, vulnerable no more to the predation of alcohol and the consuming power of the White Logic, such men appear to be “plastic,” to use a term London employs to identify his own youthful imaginativeness and curiosity. Plasticity is political, or a precondition for how to live with others.<sup>8</sup> This plasticity of men still has to happen within the finitude of language, of course. As in London’s relationship to alcohol and to writing, it is a matter of whipping oneself or being whipped into shape, like taking that next drink that is always the first drink. Here the imagery of horses, as in the following chapter on D.H. Lawrence, makes a crucial difference. On the question of habit, Gilles Deleuze as well as London’s own favorite, Charles Darwin, have much to say that illuminates the question of how an organism comes to be composed, shaped, and possibly revised.

### **Who speaks when London writes**

“It all came to me one election day,” Jack London writes (1). He opens *John Barleycorn* in the relaxed manner of one who is confident of the breadth and scope of the tale to come. He and his wife, Charmian, are on horseback, coming home in the afternoon after having “ridden down into the Valley of the Moon from the ranch to the little village to vote yes and no to a host of proposed amendments to the Constitution of the State of

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<sup>8</sup> On London’s sense of social reform, Jonathan Berliner has written that, while the “conception of nature at the heart of London’s socialism is violent in character,” London presents “nature as a brutal force but crucially one that could be harnessed for socialistic purposes” (Berliner 56). Comparing London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908) to Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), Berliner writes that “[for] Norris... the poor are fatalistically condemned to rabbithood [Norris’s metaphor], and he depicts as immutable laws of nature the economic processes that are their undoing. For London, this immersion in the naturalized abyss of capitalism is only a temporary state of affairs; social structures are far more malleable for London than they were for Norris” (Berliner 58).



California” (1).<sup>9</sup> London reports that it was a warm day, so he “had had several drinks before casting my ballot, and divers drinks after casting it” (1). Appropriately, given the intimate tone of his beginning, London soon becomes self-conscious about the way he has presented his character and habits. He is anxious to represent, correctly and carefully, his relationship both with the drinks he has had and the ballot he has cast. The “warmth of the day” sounds less and less, to London’s ear, like an explanation for what he is up to. Having drawn his readers close with presumed familiarity, he wants to be sure of their sympathies.

As London presents it, the conversation turns to the topic of Prohibition when Charmian asks him, “How did you vote on the suffrage amendment?” (1). On the ballot had been an amendment to give women the right to vote. London answers that he voted for it, and when Charmian expresses surprise, London admits dramatically that “in my younger days, despite my ardent democracy, I had been opposed to woman suffrage” (1). He adds that in his “more tolerant years” he accepted the inevitability of it, but unenthusiastically (1). Charmian asks him why, on this particular election day, he voted in favor. Upping the drama, London delays his answer with rhetorical bluster. He writes, “I answered. I answered at length. I answered indignantly. The more I answered, the more indignant I became” (1). Tidy and anaphoric, these sentences immediately make

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<sup>9</sup> David Stanley sees this opening as an index of London’s fame at the time of *Barleycorn*’s publication in 1913. He suggests that “the citation of the ‘Valley of the Moon’ without naming the town or locality in California all signify London’s assumption that his legend is well known to his readers” (Stanley 79). As Earle Labor’s biography makes clear, London’s life and activities were of great interest to U.S. newspapers. When he and Charmian were married in Chicago on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1905, “the newlyweds drove to the Victoria Hotel... [and] Charmian quietly walked upstairs by a side entrance to avoid the newspapermen who were lying in wait to get the latest story on her celebrity husband” (Labor 225). London’s conviviality is that of a writer confident he can depend on the sympathy and interest of his audience. This will become important in the opening scene.

London self-conscious of the way he has structured them. His repeated use of “I answered” strikes him as incriminating: He worries that he sounds drunk. He stresses, parenthetically: “(No; I was not drunk. The horse I had ridden was well-named ‘The Outlaw’. I’d like to see any drunken man ride her.)” (1). Following London, I want to stop here, too, for it neatly exemplifies the theme around language that persists throughout his “alcoholic memoirs.”

It would be appropriate to London’s self-cultivated image as a former oyster pirate, Alaskan gold-seeker, war correspondent, and sailor that he would advertise the unusual difficulty of his horse and name her “The Outlaw.” London’s aside about his repeated use of “I answered” suggests as well his fear that he seems inebriated rather than clear and honest. Throughout *John Barleycorn*, he makes much of the fact that when he was young, he had nurtured the desire to be a writer rather than a “work-beast” (London 36), and his parenthetical remarks also scan as a writer’s hesitation. He is revising on the page, fussing over what it sounds like his words mean.

In an interview with Cary Wolfe, the ecofeminist writer and theorist Donna Haraway answers a question about her own writing and its reception by remarking “You simply can’t say what you mean—that’s not how language works” (Haraway 209). Wolfe had asked her about the popularity of her “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), a text which she and Wolfe provisionally label “ironic,” prompting Haraway to describe how the essay became seminal, inspiring individuals working in disciplines as diverse as performance art and animal rights advocacy. The comment “that’s not how language works” takes for granted the notion that, in speaking or writing, words always “mean” before or after they mean what their author means by them. Especially troublesome is the case of

autobiographical writing, as Jacques Derrida suggests in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. In this series of lectures Derrida asks, “Is there, and in particular in the history of discourse, indeed, of the becoming-literature of discourse, an ancient form of autobiography immune to confession, an account of the self free from any sense of the confession?” (21). For Derrida, in any text that “does not dissociate truth from an avowal” (21), there is confession. London appears to resist exactly the confession his self-portrayal constitutes, to disavow what it avows. He sounds drunk but will not confess it. He simply cannot say what he means without instantly revising it to say what he meant.

Derrida later in the same volume names the use of ‘I am’ in the language of autobiography—and in general the assertion of ‘I’ in written language—as “autobiographogenesis” (in David Wills’s translation). He calls it an act of seduction (69). Writing about oneself autobiographically, in a memoir, is an act of self-engendering. It seduces those who come after to think that where the words ‘I am’ can be read, a virtual finger has turned to indicate an ‘I’ that is capable of indicating its presence and that can be responded to and finally that seduces its reader into responding.<sup>10</sup> Not autonomous because it depends on this self-indicating reference of the signifying unit ‘I’, autobiographogenesis relies on a mechanism, a technical element, to announce itself. The written or spoken ‘I’ is a prosthesis. What London confronts, in the moment of disavowing the avowal of his being drunk, is the prosthetic work his words accomplish

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<sup>10</sup> I take the figure of the finger from David Wills’s translation, again, of Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*: “But what is in dispute—and it is here that the functioning and the structure of the ‘I’ count so much, even where the word *I* is lacking—is the power to make reference to the self in deictic or autodeictic terms, the capability at least virtually to turn a finger toward oneself and say ‘this is I’” (94).

without him intending that they should do it. The words suggest he is drunk, and so he cannot say what he means, that is, indicate his sobriety. Nevertheless, with words (unruly material that they are) London supposes to indicate himself as he really is, sober-minded despite his seemingly drunken bluster. He adds his aside, his revision, his second 'I am' to say that he was sober.

In each of the instances where I have quoted Derrida above, the philosopher is speaking of animals and of the questioning of their capability to auto-indicate themselves, to respond and ask for response. London likewise depends, though without questioning what he is doing, on the indicated presence of a self-asserting animal: "the Outlaw." He writes, keeping the parenthesis intact, "(No; I was not drunk. The horse I had ridden was well-named 'The Outlaw'. I'd like to see any drunken man ride her.)" (London 1). The Outlaw would appear to be an unruly horse, not unlike the words London has found resistant to depicting him the way he wants to be depicted, but no matter. He has mastered the Outlaw, implying mastery over himself. To be more precise: At the moment when his account of his own speech suggests inebriation, London asserts his mastery of a horse's unruly body. He has the law of fundamental sobriety on his side. Paradoxically, the image of the Outlaw shows an animal whose unruliness makes it plastic and manageable. The Outlaw's self-assertiveness is a precondition for indicating London's mastery and self-control, not the horse's. Imagine the writer atop his rowdy words.

Immanuel Kant makes a similar suggestion about the proof of autonomy with a difficult horse. In Book Two, section 47, of the *Critique of Judgement*, in a discussion of genius in the fine arts, Kant remarks that

seeing that originality of talent is one (though not the sole) essential factor that

goes to make up the character of genius, shallow minds fancy that the best evidence they can give of their being full-blown geniuses is by emancipating themselves from all academic constraint of rules, in the belief that one cuts a finer figure on the back of an ill-tempered than of a trained horse. (139)<sup>11</sup>

As in London's image of the Outlaw, the ill-tempered horse suggests a lack of constraint and rule that demonstrates the mastery of the rider who can discipline such a creature. Kant's point in the section from which this passage comes, however, is that while genius cannot be taught, it expresses itself through art that abides by academic training and the rule of taste, for works of genius still have to have a goal (they are not made by chance but according to forms) and must "stand the test of judgement" (Kant 139) if they are to be called works of genius at all. Received forms are one of the criteria for such judgement. The ability so described as genius by Kant remains a matter of unteachable talent made manifest in tutored and trained expression. Genius depends on the sobriety inside of inspiration, regardless how wild and original that inspiration may be. London's image of himself atop the Outlaw, speechifying to his wife, strives to show readers his exceptional control. It simultaneously evokes the strain of holding the reins in his prose, trying to corral the reader along with the Outlaw. He wants his reader not to conclude the obvious conclusion.

London's mastery of the Outlaw contrasts with a scene later in *John Barleycorn* in which he depicts himself in literal physical conflict with a typewriter. After dropping out of college, unable to afford his tuition, he describes himself embarking on his writing career for the first time. Not coincidentally, he abstained from alcohol during this period.

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<sup>11</sup> I owe the discovery of this particular parallel image of an unruly horse to Paul Patton, who quotes the same sentence of Kant's in a footnote of his essay, "Language, Power, and the Training of Horses," an essay I examined in the introduction.

He wrote poems, stories, and essays for up to fifteen hours a day, he says. His abstention from drink seems to have been of a general ascetic program, for he also “at times forgot to eat, or refused to tear myself away from my passionate outpouring” (London 134). At night, he would use his brother-in-law’s typewriter, presumably as an aid to composition. Here the struggle to express oneself in writing literalizes the agony of working in and through a technology.<sup>12</sup> London writes:

That machine was a wonder. I could weep now as I recollect my wrestlings with it. It must have been a first model in the year one of the typewriter era. Its alphabet was all capitals. It was informed with an evil spirit. It obeyed no known laws of physics, and overthrew the hoary axiom that like things performed to like things produce like results. I’ll swear that machine never did the same thing in the same way twice. Again and again it demonstrated that unlike actions produce like results. (134)

As if the typewriter, like an unruly horse, could be an atavistic remnant of an earlier and wilder generation, London jokes that it must have been “a first model in the year one of the typewriter era.” Completing the picture of pre-modern intransigence, he imagines the typing machine imbued with “an evil spirit.” Like the Outlaw, the typewriter requires special physical control, but London implies he was barely up to the task. His back aches with the effort. “Prior to that experience,” he writes, “my back had been good for every violent strain put upon it in a none too gentle career. But that typewriter proved to me that I had a pipe-stem for a back” (134-5). It makes him “doubt” his shoulders, too (135). From hitting the keys so hard, London says he strained his “first fingers to the elbow” and blistered his fingertips (135). In typewriting, London conjures an image that mirrors his depiction of lifelong workers with their “labor-stiffened bodies” (190), not to mention

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<sup>12</sup> Likely to be familiar to anyone who has been, as I am now at the moment of typing these sentences, in a protracted disagreement with so-called word-processing software.

his own advancing decrepitude: his ruined thumbs, the “strained and snapped and ruptured” joints of his legs, and his fattened stomach (191). The peak of his image of decrepitude comes when he writes, “I am aware that within this disintegrating body which has been dying since I was born I carry a skeleton” (191). But he is afraid of this disintegration, for “to be afraid is to be healthy” (191). Writing has been part of the physical toil of his life, a reckoning with a material (language) he had to shape, bang out, twist, and injure himself to accomplish with it what he wanted. His fear and decrepitude are part of that accomplishment. The typewriter evinces the Outlaw spirit, an “evil” spirit perhaps, even in the words on the page. London kept up a pace of a thousand words a day for years. It is a cyborg’s dilemma.

Back to the beginning.

After his parenthetical comment that he was not drunk and really could not have been on that fabled election day, since he was riding the Outlaw, London allows, “I was lighted up, I was feeling ‘good’, I was pleasantly jingled” (1). Illuminated and vibrating, London seems as agitated as his repetition of “I answered” had insinuated. Placing the word “good” in quotation marks shows as well that to be animated by alcohol is to be in good spirits that are not entirely one’s own, as if playing out a role or borrowing one’s enthusiasm from elsewhere, especially in the instant of declaring a passionate political opinion.

If London’s drinking problem is of the mind and not the body (not chemical but a habit of mind), the mind at work under the influence of alcohol shows off a peculiar mix of exterior and interior influence. Avital Ronell remarks that intoxication “names a

method of mental labor that is responsible for making phantoms appear” (5).<sup>13</sup> London’s deathly White Logic is one such phantom, but more to my point is Ronell’s observation on England’s famous opium-eater, Thomas de Quincey: “To locate ‘his’ ownmost subjectivity, Thomas de Quincey cited Wordsworth” (29). Ronell is talking about de Quincey’s quotation of Wordsworth in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. She suggests that there are expressions of interiority—and London’s White Logic is exemplary, with its nonchalant acceptance of death and bodily decay happening right inside the drunkard’s mind—that depend explicitly on an exterior citation, an other-than-me that is me. This is a Derridean point. The ‘I’ is an other, for it depends on a technology of writing that locates this ‘I’ where the one who “speaks” cannot be: on the page, where ‘I’ can remain after death. Words already represent exteriority, yet they represent interior states. Every word is citation.

It is not only the White Logic that expresses this interior/exterior structure for Jack London in *John Barleycorn*, though he concedes alcohol’s influence in similar terms when he writes, “I thought, or rather, John Barleycorn thought for me” (53). The exterior that is interior is also in the pleasant “jingled” feeling; it is in the story of the Outlaw, whose ridden body evidences London’s own bodily discipline; and it is, finally, in the autobiographical language from which London tries to wrest the power of confession (that he is drunk and not in control). He simply cannot say what he means because the words he uses are themselves already exterior to him. Taking them in, he expresses his

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<sup>13</sup> This is from *Crack Wars*, in which Ronell later writes that “the moment the animal body enters literature, it, too, belongs to technicity and artifice” (114). It is hard to imagine, though, after reading, for example, Donna Haraway, that animals could be conceived of, prior to their injection in literature, as not technically and artificially enabled in the “naturecultures,” to use Haraway’s term, where the organic and inorganic make meaning together.



interiority, as though they are a drug. It is as Cary Wolfe writes in his essay, “Exposures”: as human beings we live out our “our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (Wolfe 27). London does not have the vocabulary to define the problem in this way, but he demonstrates its irritations and torments throughout *John Barleycorn*, as language second-guesses him. When he seems drunk, he must deny it, despite having chosen the drunken-seeming words himself. In the episode with the typewriter, language toys with him by the very resistance of the instrument that is supposed to ease the labor of composition.

London’s memoir cannot figure out the best way to talk about its author’s drinking. The problem is that using words puts words in one’s mouth. This is the drinking problem *behind* the drinking problem, an exteriority already imbibed by the subject.

### **An answer for Charmian**

London does answer Charmian, right there on the first page of *John Barleycorn*. The question was simply why he had cast his ballot for women’s suffrage despite years of unenthusiastic support. London writes: “‘When the women get the ballot, they will vote for prohibition,’ I said. ‘It is the wives, and sisters, and mothers, and they only, who will drive the nails into the coffin of John Barleycorn’” (1). It is not clear who will kill John Barleycorn—not men, for they do not seem to be able to take that responsibility—but for the personified figure of alcohol, it is wives, sisters, and mothers who will successfully bury him. Maybe he is already dying. Only seven years out from the historical enactment of Prohibition, London has a sense of its inevitability, in the same way he has a sense of inevitability about women’s suffrage. The lack of a killing blow in London’s choice of

words is telling, for though the cliché of driving nails into metaphorical coffins has a certain violence, his vision of what women who would vote for Prohibition can do has a gentility despite its disciplinary function. Their role seems to be one of caretaking.

The implication is that American men have failed to discipline themselves and shake off their alcoholic habit of mind. London implies as well that wives, sisters, and mothers have failed in the realm of argument, be it moral, religious, or otherwise based on articulable values with reference to some tradition that distinguishes between proper and improper behavior. The ballot will do what no self-discipline, appeal to reason, or moral argument ever could. London seems to give up on everything but the power of the law.

Such fatalism in the face of legal power accords with his attitudes throughout his memoir. In the ambivalent accounting of his drinking career that follows the opening pages of *John Barleycorn*, London recounts his love of saloons, which were the “brightest spots in my child life” (21); his early experience carousing on oyster raids with oyster pirates; his attempts at love and courtship, though he puts the issue clearly when he says of his younger self that he knew nothing about girls because he had “been too busy being a man” (104); and his years of sailing and exploring and adventuring, not to mention his budding writing career, soon to explode into international success. Among all these stories, he pauses for a chapter late in the book to explain that in the grips of the White Logic’s point of view, he embraced pessimism. According to the beginning of the memoir, the White Logic acquainted the imaginative drinking man like London with “only the laws of things—the meaning of things never” (7). As a result of this

pessimism, he contemplates suicide and ticks off a list of things for which he has worked and that no longer matter to him:

Success—I despised it. Recognition—it was dead ashes. Society, men and women above the ruck and the muck of the water-front and the forecastle—I was appalled by their unlovely mental mediocrity. Love of woman—it was like all the rest. Money—I could sleep in only one bed at a time, and of what worth was an income of a hundred porterhouses a day when I could eat only one? Art, culture—in the face of the iron facts of biology such things were ridiculous, the exponents of such things only the more ridiculous. (156)

The White Logic fills him with contempt for all of these, which, if they were working, would constitute vitalizing illusions helping London to overlook the “iron facts of biology.” They would constitute not only illusions but pleasures, from sex to spending money, yet the White Logic has deadened the thrill of each one. London’s desire to kill himself cannot even stave off the obligation he feels towards the “too many dependent directly upon me for food and shelter” (155). In his besotted state, London dismisses this obligation as “sheer morality” (155).

In the absence of moral reasons or strong personal feeling or the sufficient strength of various pleasures to maintain their pleasing character, only “one remaining illusion”—that is, one vital lie—prevents London from ending his own life (155). As he writes, using capital letters each time he repeats the words throughout this short chapter: “the PEOPLE saved me. By the PEOPLE was I handcuffed to life” (156). In other words, Jack London embraced socialism. Despite this pledge, his claim does not consist in specifics beyond his repeated, capitalized invocations of the “PEOPLE.”

If London’s saving thought, while inside the White Logic, is of the “PEOPLE,” then his more considered and sober thoughts ought to muster something more than vague statements of socialist enthusiasm. He calls the thought of the “PEOPLE” an “illusion,”

after all. The thought of the “PEOPLE” may inspire him, but it is a vital lie. There must somewhere be a true and positive reason to reject drinking. A candidate emerges when one considers London’s picture of life under the sign of alcohol, for he depicts a world that separates the sexes, the “wild man-world” that has turned men away from happy, heteronormative coupling and the responsibilities of domestic life. In the regime of alcohol, men drink and women watch them go to pieces from drinking. Men, London writes,

learned [to drink] because alcohol was so accessible. The women know the game. They pay for it—the wives and sisters and mothers. (4)

Women suffer because men are irresponsibly absent from heteronormative social life.<sup>14</sup> In other words, life is not good when men do not believe that life is good. The phrase “they pay for it” suggests the physical and verbal abuse experienced by women in families and homes dominated by an alcoholic man.

Much later in his memoir, London acknowledges this un-articulated abuse when he writes that, at the height of his success and despite all he had achieved after being saved by the thought of the “PEOPLE,” he started to fall into alcoholic thinking again. Social interaction had become tiresome, “painful and difficult” (160). The “PEOPLE” no longer appealed. London comments that his attitude was not pessimistic in this instance, but bored, for he knew the “cogs of the machinery behind the scenes so well, [knew] that the posing on the stage, and the laughter and the song, could not drown the creaking of

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<sup>14</sup> John W. Crowley emphasizes how exclusionary was the culture of saloons, to which London thought of himself when he was young as having “escaped from the narrowness of women’s influence into the wide free world of men” (London 3).

the wheels behind” (160). Whereupon he announces the abuse of women and sweeps it away:

It doesn't pay to go behind the scenes and see the angel-voiced tenor beat his wife. Well, I'd been behind, and I was paying for it. (160)

London emphasizes the cost to *him* of knowing about this violence against women, as if it were a feature of a secret, ugly world rather than an experience women ought not to suffer. He does not raise an explicit objection to it, moral or otherwise. The cost for women of such violence may be clear to the reader, but London leaves it implicit. Whether or not alcohol is their cause, the hardships of women are facts of London's experience more than they are items in a complaint about what men ought or ought not to do. It turns out that the abuse of women, on its own, is not a much more substantial reason to reject drinking than thoughts about an abstract “PEOPLE.”

London had briefly raised the idea of normative rules for behavior, including the proscription of drinking, when telling the tale of a bender in the Bonin Islands. He concludes the tale by remarking that “[one] who has been burned by the fire must preach about the fire” (94) but goes on to disavow this sermonizing impulse. As he sees it, with regard to alcohol,

it is not a matter of what one ought to do, or ought not to do. It is what one *does* do. That is the everlasting, irrefragable fact. I did just what I did [spent all his money, lost his shoes, watch, belt, and pride]. I did what all those men did in the Bonin Islands. I did what millions of men over the world were doing at that particular time. I did it because the way led to it, because I was only a human boy, a creature of my environment, and neither an anemic nor a god. (94-95)

This is not only a disavowal of the obligation to “preach about the fire.” It represents a refusal to moralize at all on the topic of drinking. Like the suffering of women, the self-destructive drinking of men in appears to be a fact of existence.

This is what makes so fascinating the opening of *John Barleycorn*, in which London answers Charmian's question. He insists that if women can vote they will prohibit men from access to their "pseudo-civilization" of drink. He offers no distinct and coherent moral argument, here or throughout the memoir, and no extended appeal based on someone's suffering, except the suffering of men unable to fully inhabit their manhood. Women's objections to drinking fall back on the cost to them, of course, but London makes this point in passing and does not dwell on the reality of abuse to which he alludes.<sup>15</sup> Instead, once they get the franchise, women will be able to expose the pseudo-civilization of drink to the cleansing force of the Law. London had said that in the grip of the White Logic, the imaginative drinking man like London knew "only the laws of things—the meaning of things never." It turns out that the sober man, the man in control as he writes *John Barleycorn*, embraces the power of law over meaning as well. There is no middle ground. There is the law that could enforce social stability and healthy relationships, but on the other side are not the vital lies that life is good. These vital lies come in the form of sex and money, art and culture. Alcohol deadens the thrill of each one. Neither the pleasures of life nor the pains of people's suffering can make the difference that the law can make. The law can prohibit alcohol. Doing so will protect the vital lies (that life is good, that "love of women" is satisfying) and allow them to flourish. The structure of London's argument presents, on the one side, the law and, on the other

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<sup>15</sup> Again, as John W. Crowley has emphasized, the saloon life *Barleycorn* seems to celebrate, even while critiquing it, "secures its virility through the exclusion of women and the domestic sphere" (26). Crowley concludes that "the real purpose of drinking is not to impress women, but to render them superfluous" (26). Turning his point to the craft of writing itself, Crowley continues, "London anticipates other male modernists in appropriating 'manliness' to a sick-souled vision of life (deep, muscular, dark), thereby denigrating healthy-mindedness (shallow, soft, light) by implicit association with 'femininity'" (34).

side, the abyss where nothing means anything except the “iron facts of biology” (London 156). In this regard, though his memoir poses as an act of sobriety, London has not entirely disavowed the White Logic. The iron facts are still there, provisionally kept at bay.

London’s legalistic thinking in *John Barleycorn* mirrors the logic suggested by Michel Foucault when he elaborates the idea of “*homo œconomicus*.” As Foucault writes in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, his 1978-79 lectures,

*homo œconomicus*, that is to say, the person who accepts reality or who responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment, appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo œconomicus* is eminently governable (270).

London supposes that besotted American men will, in the manner of Foucault’s *homo œconomicus*, respond to modifications introduced artificially into their lives. Prohibition is precisely the disciplinary intervention that promises to create sobriety by sobering an otherwise alcoholic environment.<sup>16</sup>

It could not be clearer. London favors women’s suffrage because women will vote for Prohibition. Women activate the killing machine that will destroy John Barleycorn by introducing an exterior governmental force that can remake habits of mind by changing the conditions in which those habits are formed. By doing so, London writes, women will change the environment in which men are born and bred, for

when they [women] come to vote they will vote for prohibition. And the best of it is that there will be no hardship worked on the coming generation. Not having access to alcohol, not being predisposed toward alcohol, it will never miss alcohol. (4)

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<sup>16</sup> The malleability of *homo œconomicus* resembles the adaptive plasticity that London ascribes to his curious, youthful self. Adaptation to the stimulations of one’s environment form the core of this malleability and plasticity.

In London's utopian reimagining, women's suffrage leads directly to a new "generation" of American men who are bred in a non-alcoholic environment. Such a transformation means "life more abundant for the manhood of the young boys born and growing up—ay, and life more abundant for the young girls born and growing up to share the lives of the young men" (London 4). As I have suggested, it is "manhood" that is crucially at stake for boys in this sentence, while girls and women have no analogous quality to preserve. They are companions to men. Given London's suggestion about suffrage and Prohibition, they also appear to be cops. Ready to police, London implies, they should be allowed to commence the policing. Men will then join them at home, rather than abandoning them for the saloon.

As in his comment on "The Outlaw," London imagines that an exterior rationalizing force can discipline an otherwise undisciplined body, in this case a law prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. His understanding of what the law can do is that it can affect, by means of exterior discipline, the habits of mind of drinking men. As in his wrestling with language, the Outside (re)makes the inside. No moral or religious arguments and no arguments based in the awareness of pleasure or pain appear as powerful as the legal imposition of a rule.

### **The status of women who save the world**

London's argument for banning alcohol suggests that only an electorate which includes women will enact Prohibition. Extending the franchise to women serves as a mechanism to empower men. In other words, *John Barleycorn's* exclusion of women runs deeper than the chauvinisms of the saloon. The overarching assumption of London's



book is that men can master their bodies, reorganizing the “chemistry” that constitutes them—if women make alcohol illegal. If women can introduce the exterior enforcement of the law, then they represent a force of rationalization and enlightenment, or so it would seem.

Figures and images of progress appear throughout *John Barleycorn*, often explicitly linked with imperial power, savagery, and evolution. A theme of growth and healthy sexual behavior clings to London’s memoir as well. It is not simply that women can finally be good wives when sober men are good husbands, although that is the implication of London’s remark that Prohibition will mean “life more abundant for the young girls born and growing up to share the lives of the young men” (4). London expresses an additional anxiety that men are mired in a homosocial nightmare when they ought to commit themselves to civilized reproductive life with women.

London cannot decide the case when it comes to this question. It nags him because he cannot dispel either his suspicion of women or his preference, while growing up and learning to drink, for the company of men. At one point, he delays repayment of a loan from his “Mammy Jennie,” who had been a surrogate mother to him, and wastes the money on drinking. London writes: ‘But what of it?’ I thought, or rather, John Barleycorn thought it for me, ‘You’re a man and you’re getting acquainted with men. Mammy Jennie doesn’t need the money as promptly as all that’” (53). London passes this feeling off as belonging to “John Barleycorn,” which he figures, like the White Logic, as an exterior persona that can do his thinking for him.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Crowley glosses this passage by writing that “the incident exemplifies a contempt for women that is inseparable in *John Barleycorn* from the representation of drinking and the gendering of alcoholism itself as exclusively and homosocially male” (27). That is true as far as it goes, but what Crowley does not attend

Nowhere does the young London's preference for the company of men underscore the exclusion of women as when he recounts his first experiences of adolescent courtship. As I have mentioned, he comments that he "didn't know anything about girls. I had been too busy being a man" (London 104). London grasps the irony, but nevertheless he implies that, categorically speaking, a "man," as his adventure-, drink-, and candy-obsessed mind would have had it, is a category disconnected from certain bodily realities, in this case sex.

The adult Jack seems likewise unwilling to engage with women, though he expresses special affection for Charmian, whom he describes in the same terms he reserves for himself: "I was married to a rare soul, or a fool [he calls himself and people he likes rare souls, or fools], who never bored me and who was always a source of new and unending surprise and delight" (160). Elsewhere in this same passage, in which London also speaks about seeing the "angel-voiced tenor beat his wife," he insists that his boredom with social life was the impetus, after a period of productive sobriety, for his truly problematic and habitual drinking. He writes that

I could neither laugh with nor at the solemn utterances of men I esteemed ponderous asses; nor could I laugh with nor at... the superficial chatterings of women, who, underneath all their silliness and softness, were as primitive, direct, and deadly in their pursuit of biological destiny as the monkey women were before they shed their furry coats and replaced them with the fur of other animals. (160)

Not only are women superficially social; they are biologically programmed to seduce men. As John Crowley says, London casts them as "atavistic sexual predators" (27).

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to is the shifting personae onto which London displaces his thoughts, motives, and feelings. London is struggling not only with drink but with which entity he feels comfortable blaming for the alcoholic choices he has made.

The tone differs greatly from Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, but London evokes a similar logic regarding the figure of women's intelligence.<sup>18</sup> As Darwin puts it, "The exertion of some choice on the part of the female seems a law almost as general as the eagerness of the male" (257). Despite the conviction that "wives and sisters and mothers" have the rational sense required to enact Prohibition, London's reason for believing in their responsibility does not stress rational thinking. He writes in the penultimate chapter of *John Barleycorn* that "women are the true conservators of the race" (203). Where men waste, gamble, and adventure, women make the choice to save men unable to police themselves. "Ever jealous for the race," London argues, "[women] will legislate for the babes of boys yet to be born; and for the babes of girls, too, for they must be the mothers, wives, and sisters of these boys" (204). None too distant from Darwin's statement on female "choice"—contrasted with the exuberance and recklessness of male "eagerness"—the implication in *John Barleycorn* is that despite their reliable and rationalizable desire for Prohibition, women are the rational part of nature.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, they represent less a society or a politics than the legislation of a racial protectiveness and female sexual selectiveness.

The terms London uses to elucidate the goals of Prohibition likewise depend on naturalized rather than politicized images of social progress. After describing his animated discussion with Charmian, promoting Prohibition and claiming not to be drunk, London thinks over the idea for the very book his readers are holding in their hands.

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<sup>18</sup> As Michael Lundblad and others have made clear, *On the Origin of the Species* was a remarkably influential book for those in London's generation. See Lundblad's "From Animal to Animality Studies." An edition of Darwin's seminal work was, in fact, one of three books London took with him to the Yukon in 1897 (Labor 398)

<sup>19</sup> More on the definition of nature below.

Reviewing memories of his drinking life, London stresses that he has “no organic, chemical predisposition toward alcohol” (2). Training imposed the alcoholic habit on him. The training runs deep, for London claims that “always where men came together to exchange ideas... always they came together over alcohol” (3). As the capitol city of alcohol’s “pseudo-civilization,” the saloon represents a primitive barbarism. Men gather at the saloon “as primitive men gathered about the fire of the squatting-place or the fire at the mouth of the cave” (London 3). London goes on to connect his anthropological speculation to modern instances of “primitive” life:

I reminded Charmian of the canoe-houses from which she had been barred in the South Pacific, where the kinky-haired cannibals escaped from their womenkind and feasted and drank by themselves, the sacred precincts taboo to women under pain of death. (3)

It is not simply that men exclude women from saloon. What makes saloon life a pseudo-civilization is that it demeans men who ought not to live like “kinky-haired cannibals.”

The racial dimension of this South Pacific passage reinforces a point London insists upon later when he expresses the hope that Prohibition will “relegate to the nineteenth century and all the preceding centuries the things of those centuries, the witch-burnings, the intolerances, the fetiches [sic], and, not least among such barbarisms, John Barleycorn” (95). History appears to be a progressive act of sobering. Twentieth-century modernity requires turning away from indulgence of these “barbarisms.” London’s rhetoric implies that women, who are those figures in nature endowed with the truest capacity for choice, will make men modern.

By this logic, it appears that nature produces modernity. I think there is a reason for this in London’s implicit construction of what is natural. If drinking represents a

“pseudo-civilization,” then men who drink need to join authentic civilization, which consists of men with women in the home and in stable relationships. Men, in other words, must be corralled into being natural. Drinking is a habit of mind that blocks what should occur naturally. This means that it is in the nature of men and women to grow up, share their lives, and reproduce. Vital lies encourage and protect such ways of being, while the White Logic narrowly fixates on finitude, dragging men into a pessimistic homosociality that impedes nature. The idea that what is natural needs to be nurtured or activated represents exactly Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of “nature” in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes that in Rousseau “naturalness [is] sleeping potentiality” (185). This idea “asks us to think of nature not as a given, as a real presence, but as a *reserve*” (Derrida 185, emphasis in original). Jack London’s *John Barleycorn* suggests the same Rousseauian idea. For London, what is natural needs to be nurtured and protected to have its rightful and natural existence. The “pseudo-civilization” bars a natural civilization from taking hold.

But the fake civilization of alcohol makes difficult the embrace of heteronormative life. On the final two pages of *Barleycorn*’s opening chapter, London makes clear to Charmian that

John Barleycorn must have his due. He does tell the truth. That is the curse of it. The so-called truths of life are not true. They are vital lies by which life lives, and John Barleycorn gives them the lie (4).

The vital lies are not true, but they are how one lives. Being a little “lighted up” might inspire London’s argument in favor of women’s suffrage and Prohibition, but true alcoholic pessimism erodes faith in his relationships with women and with his children, with the “life” he wants to live. The vital lies are weakened by drink. London writes in

the second chapter that “[w]ife, children, friends—in the clear, white light of his [John Barleycorn’s] logic they are exposed as frauds and shams” (London 8). That wife, friends, and children are shams is not a thought London can easily dismiss while under the sway of alcohol. He needs what is natural, like a family, to be propped up and brought into being. He needs this to happen without the White Logic fixating so intently on death and decay that it crowds out reproduction and the engendering of further generations.

What John Barleycorn insists is that life is not familial or social at all. According to this line of thinking, a human is “compounded of meat and wine and sparkle, of sun-mote and world-dust, a frail mechanism made to run for a span, to be tinkered at by doctors of divinity and doctors of physic, and to be flung into the scrap-heap at the end” (7). Another writer might have presented this image as the shared plight of mortal creatures. It could have been basis for an ethical appeal to different relationships with animals and other human beings. Instead its imagery clings to an atomistic and mechanistic assumption of common but unshared finitude.

Women, according to London, will not actually enable men to join a real society if they vote for Prohibition. Enfranchised women will rather enable men to launch society as a whole away from the “customs of savagery” (203) represented by alcoholic sociability. What is natural is not savagery and its exclusion of women, which for London characterized life among “barbaric” non-white islanders in the South Pacific, but heteronormative coupling. Men are the key to this progress and general advancement. Women do not have the same plasticity accorded to men, for they are nature’s rationalists, at least in the case of drinking. The way London writes about women in *John Barleycorn*, they are not even political but “conservators of the race.”

The trouble is that due to their plasticity, men (or *homo œconomicus*) do not have fixed bodies. I quote at greater length London's grim scrap of poetry:

I am aware that within this disintegrating body which has been dying since I was born I carry a skeleton; that under the rind of flesh which is called my face is a bony noseless death's head. All of which does not shudder me. To be afraid is to be healthy. Fear of death makes for life. (191)

"Living" consists in turning away from mortal finitude, in acting as if disintegration and decay are not inevitable. Later in the same passage, London writes that "[o]nly in man is morality, and man created it—a code of action that makes toward living" (191). Be that as it may, it is Prohibition and law, not morality per se, that London upholds in *John Barleycorn*. That the word "living" means turning away from finitude implies a means of self-conquering discipline and the realization of sober habits of mind. That is what the fear and vital lies are for; they help one to ignore death and enjoy a variety of pleasures that are, at bottom, illusory. What I find so curious is that in the figure of self-discipline and sobriety—"fear of death makes for life," the "vital lies by which life lives"—London takes a draught of sustaining illusion. The habit of mind that turns away from finitude is not sobriety either but another altered state of consciousness.

### **The company of men**

If sobriety can be a matter of artificially altering consciousness, then drinking itself in *John Barleycorn* takes on the qualities of its opposite partner and looks a lot like discipline. Again London's words signify different meanings; he cannot say what he means. After telling Charmian that he voted for women's suffrage because only women "will drive the nails into the coffin of John Barleycorn," she interrupts him and objects that he has always been a "friend to John Barleycorn" (1). London, with tipsy fervor,

writes, ““I am. I was. I am not. I never am. I am never less his friend than when he is with me and when I seem most his friend. He is the king of liars”” (2). John Barleycorn is the “enemy of life” and “a red-handed killer” who “slays youth” (London 2). London notes that during this excited speech, Charmian “wondered where I had got,” but he “continued to talk. As I say, *I was lighted up*” (2, emphasis added). To be *lighted up*, as London describes it, constitutes the sensation that

[i]n my brain every thought was at home. Every thought, in its little cell, crouched ready-dressed at the door, like prisoners at midnight awaiting a jail-break. (2)

Being “lighted up” lights the way out. In case the cause was not clear, London writes that his brain was “illuminated by the clear, white light of alcohol. John Barleycorn was on a truth-telling rampage... [and] I was his spokesman” (2). In this state, even examining memories of his drinking life is a disciplinary act for London, who envisions his past experiences as “arranged like soldiers in some vast review” (2). His thoughts are prisoners, his memories soldiers. If women’s suffrage suggests the possibility of sobriety and discipline in the form of a law proscribing the consumption of alcohol, drinking disciplines the body, too. In the guise of masculine personae (prisoners, soldiers) it expresses the alacrity of those who live according to someone else’s time, in this case John Barleycorn’s.<sup>20</sup>

The time London claims to want to live by is the time women can enact with their ballot. That coming time of Prohibition will make good the promise of a sober life, for it

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20 David Stanley has argued that “alcoholism [...] for London represents the loss of the self-determination and will that are the chief characteristics of his heroes and the primary factors in his own self-conception” (Stanley 79). Not entirely, I think. A term like “lighted up,” with its institutionalized thoughts and ready-for-inspection memories, suggests that alcohol in part determines London’s argument against drinking—an argument supposedly in favor of self-determination.



will give room for “vital lies by which life lives” to flourish and grow.<sup>21</sup> Vital lies live better under Prohibition. Despite the fact that this theme is foundational for *John Barleycorn*, when London describes the desirability of the sober life his accounts lack the passion of his accounts of drinking in the company of men.

Not that his drinking lands him in a millennium of joy. He writes near the end of his memoir that recent time in the company of the White Logic has left him with the “cosmic sadness that has always been the heritage of man” (189). When he seeks to explain this sadness, he enumerates the reasons he should not feel such depression:

I have land, money, power, recognition from the world, a consciousness that I do my meed of good in serving others, a mate whom I love, children that are of my own fond flesh. I have done, and am doing, what a good citizen of the world should do. I have built houses, many houses, and tilled many a hundred acres. (189)

None of it seems to matter. His language suggests that his work and success have been guided, not by a desire to do good (as he claims), but by a sense of obligation (“what a good citizen of the world should do”). He appears to love his children because of his love for himself. Only a few pages before, he admitted that he eventually became a habitual drinker, yet he still calls himself a “non-alcoholic” (184). In fact, it his lack of chemical dependence that he sees as his savior. In the penultimate chapter of the book, where one might expect a rousing defense of the American family and of the love that brought him through, London remarks that luck—the luck of not being an alcoholic and the luck of possessing “an organism unusually resistant” to alcohol—brought him through the worst

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<sup>21</sup> In a reading of London’s novel, *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* (1914), Per Serritslev Petersen has associated *John Barleycorn*’s “vital lie”—that represents the illusions by which life lives—with *Elsinore*’s “Maia Lie,” Maia being “the Buddhist term for the power that creates or recreates the world as cosmic illusion” (Petersen 44).

of his drinking habit. He adds that “[m]y life, my career, my joy in living, have not been destroyed” (202), sounding sadly dispassionate about his survival.

In contrast, London describes the pseudo-civilization of his earlier drinking career in loving, adjective-happy detail. He writes of his drinking companions: “I was just human, and I was taking the path in the world that men took—men whom I admired, if you please; full-blooded men, lusty, breedy, chesty men, free spirits and anything but niggards in the way they foamed life away” (95). London calls these men “breedy,” implying their sexual suitability and reproductive vigor, for they teem with desire (“lusty”). Foam is a metonym for ejaculatory excitement. Both full of desire and easy to desire, men like this are company London still recalls fondly. He loved them and their artificial world because he “was just human,” and desire is mimetic anyway (“I was taking the path in the world that men took”).

London cites elsewhere the pleasures of having a “mate,” but he does not wax lyrical about it. His argument for Prohibition turns explicitly away from the affection between male bodies and towards the malleability of disciplined flesh, conserved and prodded by nature’s selectors, women. Where women represent a natural rationality, men appear essentially immaterial, puppets of whatever exterior force can be brought to bear on them. This makes them ideal political subjects. If women can be depended upon to make rational decisions, men be counted upon to respond and change their behavior, becoming in fact the political subjects that the “conservators of the race” do not need to be. Men make the crucial difference in the advancement of a modernizing civilization. Women’s suffrage serves that end but does not reflect that modernizing turn all on its own.

In this struggle, one can see distinct differences between London and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work London alludes to when he remarks that the White Logic has the “jaundiced eye of a pessimistic German philosopher,” one who “transvalues all values” (7-8). In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that “[n]o one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives” (65, emphasis in original). In *John Barleycorn*, London asks for the accounting that Nietzsche finds impossible; women will deliver it. And if, as Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “man is the animal *whose nature has not yet been fixed*” (88, emphasis in original), *John Barleycorn* declares it time to “fix” and establish the sober nature of American men.

### **The plight of the imaginative man**

It is not every American drinker that especially concerns Jack London in *John Barleycorn*. If Prohibition is enacted, the “only ones that will be hurt will be the toppers and seasoned drinkers of a single generation” (204). He continues, “I am one of these, and I make solemn assurance, based upon long traffic with John Barleycorn, that it won’t hurt me very much to stop drinking when no one else drinks and when no drink is obtainable” (204). Due to his claim that the social institution of drinking is a “habit of mind,” London assures his readers (and himself) that it can be shaken off with relative ease. What is true for him is true for the seasoned drinkers of a single generation who typify the alcoholic habit of mind.

But London does not depict himself as a typical drinker, and it is not because he claims to have no chemical attraction to alcohol. Describing the White Logic, he writes that “all this is soul-sickness, life-sickness... is the penalty *the imaginative man* must pay

for his friendship with John Barleycorn” (London 7, emphasis added). It is his imagination that makes London’s uniquely vulnerable to the soul-sickness that defines truly degraded drinking.

For the stupid man, London writes, drunkenness is “simpler, easier” because that man “drinks himself into sottish unconsciousness” (7). To the imaginative man, London continues, “John Barleycorn sends the pitiless, spectral syllogisms of the white logic” (7). Imaginativeness is not equally distributed among humankind, so it makes for a receptiveness to the insinuating thoughts of the White Logic.

It is not only in an alcoholic context but a social one that London examines the costs and benefits of imaginativeness. In the fourth chapter of *John Barleycorn*, he recounts attending a dance as a boy. While London was there, “one young Italian, Peter, an impish soul, seeing me sitting solitary, stirred by a whim of the moment, half-filled a tumbler with wine and passed it to me” (14). The young London does not interpret this gesture as generous. He remarks that his mother had instructed him in the ways of Italians. They are prone to stabbing one in the back, he says. The phrase is everything here, and London emphasizes it, writing that “that was her particular phrase—‘stab you in the back’” (London 14). London’s imaginative fixation on this phrase contrasts with the unimaginative turn of mind he ascribes to the other boy. Of Peter he writes, “I had been taught to believe that if I offended him he would strike at me with a knife precisely as a horse kicked out when one got too close to its heels and worried it” (London 15). To be like a horse in this instance suggests nervous habit rather than rational thought, but London’s imagination turns on the phrase “stab one in the back.” His reaction depends on

it. The phrase spurs him to action. Not wanting to be stabbed in the back, he accepts the drink.

Though London implies that he later felt embarrassed for believing his mother, the story of the dance documents the imaginative panic he derived from her prejudicial phrase. He accepted the drink because “frightful visions” of murderers overtaking him on the drunken walk home convinced him he might be killed should he refuse the wine (London 18). London writes that had he “*lacked imagination*, had I been stupid, had I been *stubbornly mulish* in having my own way [and not taken the wine], I should have never got in this pickle” (London 16, emphasis added). He means that he never would have taken that fateful drink—it is one of the bouts of childhood drunkenness that set him on his drinking path—if he had not had visions of murder. His visions of murder resulted directly from his mother’s repeated claims that Italians will “stab you in the back.” The blame lies with his imagination, London says, for it took that phrase and turned it into a feeling of certainty, panic, and response in a real-life situation. Mulishness would have saved him from this particular dilemma.

London implies that his imaginativeness was human, in contrast to the mulish stubbornness that might have inspired him to rebuff the offer of wine. If only he had been a mule, he seems to declare. Remember that the Italian boy, Peter, is a like a horse, who will unthinkingly lash out. So, London could have been a mule, but instead he was a boy touched or infected by a racialized cliché. London fails to grasp that the same automaticity he attributes to Peter he also attributes to himself. His reaction to Peter and

to the offer of wine originates in a phrase that supplies his thinking unthinkingly.<sup>22</sup> If Peter represented a reactive animal in young London's eyes, then his adult perspective makes it clear that human imagination can be as reactive any animal way of thinking. Far from being a simple strength or advantage, imagination makes one vulnerable, too. It causes one to take up thoughts and feelings that may not be one's own. That is the implication of *John Barleycorn's* construction of imagination. The imaginative man may be superior to others, but this strength also represents a weakness.

### **A solution for all imaginative man**

Another "Italian" appears prominently at the end of *John Barleycorn*, as the topic of a conversation between London and the White Logic. The White Logic "makes one grin jocosely into the face of the Noseless One [death] and to sneer at all the phantasmagoria of living," London writes (191). In this case, the phantasmagoria of living offers the sight of an Italian farmhand London notices while out riding at dusk near his Sonoma Valley farm (London 191). The farmhand could be an aged Peter himself, though he is not identified. The two paragraphs London and the White Logic devote to this immigrant laborer constitute one of *John Barleycorn's* most fearful passages on bodily ruin and mortality. London describes the man:

He takes his hat off to me in all servility, because, forsooth, I am to him a lord of life [London is likely the man's employer, or potential employer]. I am food to him, and shelter, and existence. He has toiled like a beast all his days, and lived less comfortably than my horses in their deep-strawed stalls. He is labor-crippled.

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<sup>22</sup> In the *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida calls into question the entire apparatus of response, over and against a reaction, that humans are thought to accomplish with language. As he writes, "What never even crosses the mind of any of the thinkers we are listening to or will listen to here on the subject of the response, from Descartes to Lacan, is the question of how an iterability [as in language] that is essential to every response, and to the ideality of every response, can and cannot fail to introduce nonresponse, automatic reaction, mechanical reaction into the most alive, most 'authentic,' and most responsible response" (112). London writes about Peter as if the boy were merely reactive, while describing himself in terms that cast doubt on the apparently non-automatic nature of his "response."

He shambles as he walks. One shoulder is twisted higher than the other. His hands are gnarled claws, repulsive, horrible. As an apparition he is a pretty miserable specimen. His brain is as stupid as his body is ugly. (193)

London literalizes the “beastly” condition of this farmhand. Though he states that labor has “crippled” the man, he also metaphorizes the encounter as one between “lord” and “beast,” suggesting that economic inequality reproduces a natural hierarchy. London comments near the beginning of *John Barleycorn* that he wanted to avoid being exactly the kind of “work-beast” (London 36) the farmhand seems to embody, so there is an anxiety in the distinction he draws as well. The man represents London’s fear.

In his essay, “How I Became a Socialist” (1903), London comments that he had once upon a time believed in individualism, but this was when his body was healthy and strong. His attitude changed when he met

all sorts of men, many of whom had once been as good as myself and just as *blond-beastly* [a nod to Nietzsche]; sailor-men, soldier-men, labor-men, all wrenched and distorted and twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident, and cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses. (London 1119).

Here we find exact precursors to *John Barleycorn*’s “labor-crippled” Italian farmhand. The experience of meeting broken “labor-men” not only served as London’s initiation into socialism, but also as the point when he devoted himself to *not* working with his body (1119).<sup>23</sup> “How I Became a Socialist” declares his desire to be a writer.

From the terror of bodily degradation and human finitude, London deliberately retreated into literary labor. No matter that words will prove to be resistant and unwieldy in the act of autobiography embodied by *John Barleycorn*. With writing, London hopes

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Auerbach argues that “How I Became a Socialist” shows that London “is primarily motivated by the ‘terror’ of joining the underclass” (Auerbach 63).

to escape from physical ruin. His imagination enables this adaptation. It brings him riches that make him a “lord of life.”

After London’s description of the farmhand, the White Logic has something to add. It tells London that the farmhand is a “slave of the dream of life” (London 193).

Where London emphasized the farmhand’s senselessness and physical decay, the White Logic sees the “labor-crippled” man as caught in a self-delusion of cosmic proportions:

‘Beyond the shadow of a doubt he [the farmhand] is convinced that the universe was made for him, and that it is his destiny to live forever in the immaterial and supersensuous realms he and his kind have builded [sic] of the stuff of semblance and deception.’ (London 193)

The White Logic then turns to consider the drunken London himself and says:

‘But you, who have opened books and who share my awful confidence—you know him for what he is, brother to you and the dust, a cosmic joke, a sport of chemistry, a garmented beast that arose out of the ruck of screaming beastliness by virtue and accident of two opposable great toes. He is brother as well to the gorilla and the chimpanzee. He thumps his chest in anger, and roars and quivers with cataleptic ferocity. He knows monstrous, atavistic promptings, and he is composed of all manner of shreds of abysmal and forgotten instincts.’ (193)

This latter passage represents the truth of the White Logic. The personified voice of alcohol insists that the immigrant farmhand lives by a fantasy about having a soul and living on after his death as a super-sensuous spirit. London, the White Logic supposes, knows better, because he is well read, imaginative, and he drinks. What the White Logic’s observation suggests, however, is that despite having a beastly stupidity, the farmhand wants as badly to get free of his body as did London in “How I Became a Socialist.” Both men have entertained a fantasy of avoiding physical ruin and death; it is only when under the thumb of the White Logic that London agrees the body cannot be escaped.



I argued above that London's imagination proved as reactive as the animalized Peter in the anecdote of the dance. It looked like a weakness. Here on the road in the Sonoma Valley, what again appeared to be an inequality of imagination, which distinguished writer from Italian farmhand, turns out to be a common desire to dream a way out of mortality and decay. That does not mean that London sympathizes with the White Logic's point of view. The White Logic is dangerous, he believes. He writes in his memoir's second chapter that "John Barleycorn... looks upon life and all its affairs with the jaundiced eye of a pessimistic German philosopher" (London 7-8). Not only is it pessimism but deception, for

[John Barleycorn] does tell the truth. That is the curse of it. The so-called truths of life are not true. They are the vital lies by which life lives and John Barleycorn gives them the lie. (London 4)

These vital lies, which can take the form of pleasures like sexual companionship, the spending of money, or a belief in the "PEOPLE," resemble exactly the farmhand's dream of "supersensuous realms." All turn away from thoughts of death and imply hope of continued or sustained reward and happiness. That, London says, is how "life lives."

This means that if the White Logic preys on imaginative men, the solution of "vital lies" requires imaginativeness as well. To abide by a vital lie means envisioning a life that is more than the sum of its physical infirmities and brutal acts. For London, to believe that wealth is fun and people are always good requires ignoring interpersonal violence and the fact that one can "sleep in only one bed at a time" or purchase and eat one steak a day (London 156). For the non-wealthy man, like the Italian farmhand, being vitally deceived means seeing that "the universe was made for him, and that it is his destiny to live forever in the immaterial and supersensuous realms he and his kind have

builded [sic] of the stuff of semblance and deception” (London 193). The farmhand and his ilk need and use imagination, too. They have the same weakness for fantasies that give them something to think unthinkingly, albeit the dream depicted here in the case of the farmhand is a cosmic-scale self-deception compared to London’s belief in, for example, the “PEOPLE.”

In “Companions in Conversation,” the interview with Cary Wolfe I cited earlier, Donna Haraway remarks on two directions to take when considering the meaning of the word *human*. She and Wolfe are laughing together, riffing on the ideas they are discussing. Haraway says:

Etymologically, the human is rooted in *humus*. Too many tones of “human” go to *homo*—which is the “bad” direction—but then there’s “human” that goes to *humus*, which is the good direction. Not to be too simplistic about it. (*Both laugh.*) There’s being part of the making of the soil and the earth and the *humus* direction, and there’s the phallic “man” in the *homo* direction. (261)

The good and bad “directions” that Haraway remarks here could apply as well to the way London marks two imaginations. First is the White Logic’s imagination, which mockingly names the human being a “sport of chemistry.” Second is the countervailing imagination—shared by London and the farmhand, though on different scales and to different degrees of self-awareness—of the “vital lie.” According to the vital lie, it is good when a human being has faith in hope, sustained happiness in some form, and the reality of “immaterial and supersensuous realms.”

The White Logic’s judgement perverts the reality of “humus” or soil that is important for Haraway by taking it as risible to be so materially embedded in the world that there is no escape from finitude. To be a “brother to dust” interprets as undesirable

and pathetic the closeness of *human* to *humus*. Being a “sport of chemistry” is a “cosmic joke.”

Instead of the joke of being dust, London embraces the life-protecting “vital lie,” which sounds more like the phallic *homo* to which Haraway refers. Haraway elaborates by noting the “ever-parabolic tumescence and detumescence of *homo*” in the bad direction (261-262), and the whole point of vital lies is the tumescent and sustained sense of power for a human being who otherwise may doubt his own autonomy.<sup>24</sup> Vitalizing deceptions rouse and empower a man. They make life live instead of despairingly give up. London opposes the emasculating truth of shared finitude with the tumescent vital lie.

London’s sense of imagination does not succeed in setting him apart from other human beings. Rather the opposite, for he explicitly commits himself to what an ignorant farmhand does as a matter of course. He denies that finitude will hamper and end his life. His sense of imagination represents a vision or “dream of life” made interior. It can influence and direct both thought and action. London implies as much near the beginning of *John Barleycorn* when he writes that he had “an imagination and curiosity about all things that made me plastic” (24). This imaginativeness represents the plasticity of men. It is their imaginative character that will make them amenable to the rationalizing power represented by women, whose imaginativeness appears to extend in *John Barleycorn* no farther than a belief in legal prohibition and a commitment to heteronormative coupling.

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<sup>24</sup> Wolfe and Haraway’s discussion also occurs under the sign of John Barleycorn, for their high spirits in the passages I have quoted here are immediately succeeded by the following note, which intervenes between Haraway’s remarks on tumescence and the next section of the interview: “(Many deep breaths and some well-aged Scotch later...)” (262). To whatever extent they follow an alcoholic logic, Wolfe and Haraway are untroubled by it. Moreover, they are untroubled by the recognition of the human as earthy and vulnerable.

The imaginative man is fixable. Any stiff enough illusion can prop him up. That the imagination makes him plastic is only another way of saying he can be drunk on something other than alcohol. All that is needed is Prohibition—to ensure drunk without drinking can occur.

### **The immaterial body**

It is not enough that imagination represents plasticity. London's conception of the body follows suit. Deemphasizing the body's embeddedness in a material environment turns out to be London's ambition in *John Barleycorn*. When he attributes his drinking to his being a "creature of environment" (London 95), the dilemma becomes one of seeing the possibility of making a different environment in order to make a different creature. This does not mean that creature and environment go together, constituted in mutual formation, but instead that the "environment," in this case social and behavioral, can be trusted to produce its necessary indigenes, which in London's case would be sober bodies ready to embrace vital lies.<sup>25</sup>

In an earlier work, like the novel *White Fang* (1906), London was readier to accept the notion that human or animal creatures do not require a sense of autonomy "in" their environments. Rules of engagement for reckoning oneself to one's world—or, we might say, "vital lies" about how to sustain an engagement with one's surroundings—do not exist in London's narrative of the Yukon's joys and terrors. As London writes early in

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<sup>25</sup> This offers another distinction from the thinking of Donna Haraway, who in "Companions in Conversation" remarks, "There are no individuals plus environments. There are only webbed ecosystems made of variously configured, historically dynamic contact zones" (250). See Haraway's book, *When Species Meet*, for more detailed elaborations of "co-constitutive naturalcultural dancing" that is part of the making of environments and companion species (27). In that volume's first chapter, Haraway discusses the work of developmental biologist Scott Gilbert, whom she quotes: "I believe that the *embryonic* co-construction of the physical bodies has many more implications because it means we were 'never' individuals" (Haraway 32).

the novel about White Fang's father, One Eye, "he [One Eye] had long since learned that there was such a thing as Chance ... There was never any telling what might happen, for with live things events were somehow always happening differently" (London 129). This conception of "live events" implies that living in any environment is a challenge to autonomy. No amount of imagination can foretell the nature of things. Error and learning are pervasive. Complete autonomy does not exist for One Eye, White Fang, or the human figures that appear in the novel.

London's expression of One Eye's chancy situation aligns with Charles Darwin's sense in *The Descent of Man* that nature does not "purposely" create species or help them adapt to their surroundings (Darwin 81).<sup>26</sup> Species happen to fit or they do not, according to natural selection, chance, and habit (Darwin 81). Jack London's depiction of human and animal figures in *White Fang* emphasizes their vulnerability and capacity for error as they struggle for life where they happen to live. By the time London writes *John Barleycorn*, which aims to confront the social problem of male alcoholic consumption, London seems to set aside *White Fang*'s focus on exposure and finitude. He argues instead for the "vital lie" that rouses a notion of individual autonomy and sustained happiness.

The "vital lie" takes different forms depending on whose deception is at stake. In the same way that London racializes the farmhand, the White Logic racializes "vital lies" and makes them risible. As London styles himself a defender of life and hence an enemy of the White Logic, the White Logic sputters angrily:

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<sup>26</sup> This Darwinian idea accords as well with a line of Nietzsche I have already cited. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that "[n]o one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives" (65, emphasis in original).

‘It is nothing new, these vital lies men tell themselves, muttering and mumbling them like charms and incantations against the powers of the Night. The voodoos and medicine men and the devil-devil doctors were the fathers of metaphysics... And the metaphysicians would win by if they had to tell lies to do it. They were vexed by the brazen law of the Ecclesiast that men die like the beasts of the field and their end is the same.’ (199)

The White Logic argues that philosophies in support of “supersensuous” vital lies are beneath London’s dignity because they are nothing but refurbishments of beliefs promulgated in backwards traditions. The vital lie that humans are exceptional and not fated to die like animals is, in the White Logic’s estimation, a primitive superstition that survives atavistically in “metaphysics.”

London does not dismiss this chauvinism. The portrait of the farmhand concludes with London’s mild riposte: “‘Yet he dreams he is immortal,’ I agree feebly. ‘It is vastly wonderful for so stupid a clod to bestride the shoulders of time and ride the eternities.’” (London 194). He adds, “To be stupid is to be happy” (London 194). The conceit of this conversation is that London is drunk. Defending the farmhand from the White Logic’s scorn, he does not deny the putative truth. Still, he clings to the notion of an immaterial body bestriding “the shoulders of time,” like a soul freed from the earth. If this looks like autonomy, it represents the same illusion that London argues for when he is sober. It is a vitalizing lie.

When sober, or presenting himself as sober in *John Barleycorn*, London attributes the fact of his surviving alcohol to his body, though the terms for describing it make it sound like a fantasy body, which luck bestowed on him. He writes, “I survived, through no personal virtue, but because I did not have the chemistry of a dipsomaniac and

because I possessed an organism unusually resistant to the ravages of John Barleycorn” (202). London can hold his drink better than most men, because his body is special.

If his imagination appears in the end to resemble the imagination of other men, insofar as it takes in sustaining illusions, London’s body gives him a superior edge. This despite his tales of rotted teeth, a back ruined by a typewriter, injured thumbs, and ruptured joints. He raises the specter of the skeleton he carries inside his body, too. No matter. His body is too mythic for him to dwell on this skeleton, for his body has carried him through. He finishes the paragraph on his “unusually resistant” body by reminding his readers of the shambling farmhand he met on the road: “I have watched the others die, not so lucky, down all the long sad road” (202).

Earlier in the text he had stated the problem more clearly: “My body is a strong body. It has survived where weaklings died like flies” (169). London’s body sets him apart, and it does so by seeming less like a body—chemical, leaky, and weak—and more like a superior machine, through which alcohol moves because of mental habit only.<sup>27</sup> Admitting to the injuries of mortal vulnerability (the ravages of age, for example), London declares himself notwithstanding a special case. He is vulnerable but not as vulnerable as others. In the manner of his portrayal, his body appears both material and immaterial. It has endured age and injury but also outlasted where other fly-bodies died. His is not a fly-body but an “unusually resistant organism,” as if what it resists is the very

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<sup>27</sup> Commenting on the supposedly animal world of London’s writing, Mark Seltzer writes, “The call of the wild—drawing into relation the simulated nature of men in furs and the simulated nature of throbbing male engines—is the wild work of a techno-primitivism: the replicant nature of the body-machine complex” (81). I agree with Seltzer that London’s writing on animal life and on life in general tends to combine the mechanical and the natural. London bears more similarity to a writer like J.G. Ballard than one would initially think. In both Ballard and London, what conventional perspective would regard as natural (e.g. animal behavior) under other circumstances becomes machinic and technological, revealing the input/output processing power of creatures and environments.

materiality of its existence. His organism resists the degrading touch of what affects it. Here the reader can see London declaring his own autonomy. Rather than emphasize the element of chance, for example, he tells himself his own vital deception when he stresses that his body “has survived where weaklings died like flies.”

The point of London’s argument regarding women and Prohibition depends on the weakness and infirmity of men in general. Only women’s natural rationality will enable a ban. The vital lies are crucial, though, for it is the male imagination, deceived by dreams of sustained happiness in whatever form, that allows bodies actually to be seen and remade as different, sober bodies. Prohibition allows the vital lie to flourish, for alcohol brings with it the low of cosmic sadness, while the vital lie acts as a high. London admits too that

the [vital] lie and the hypocrisy were those of a man desiring to live. I deliberately blinded myself to what I took to be the savage interpretation of biological fact.  
(165)

Vital lies soar over this “savage interpretation.” They help to deny materiality in order to reformulate the body.

That is all well and good so far as it goes, but the question remains: If London has portrayed the body as amenable to change and susceptible to illusion, and if a human being can be drunk without drinking—that is, drunk on vital lies—then how does the vital lie do its rule-imposing work? How is it administered? How are good habits of mind substituted for bad habits of mind? Prohibition is necessary to destroy John Barleycorn, but it is embracing the vital lie that does direct combat with the White Logic. To replace the pseudo-civilization of drink with a “natural” and sober twentieth-century society, to make an exterior lie enter and remake the mind of the American drinker, all London



needs is habit. And London's portrayal of habit—not to mention the vital lie—depends on the image of a horse.

### **London's dray horse**

In *John Barleycorn*, alcohol props up a “pseudo-civilization” of male sociability. Saloons have trained men to drink and, in so doing, to retreat from the companionship of women. This is what makes alcoholic culture a sham. London thus suggests that what is natural is a reserve, to repeat Derrida's critical term (in Gayatri Spivak's translation). Nature must be nurtured into existence or activated. Only an alternative form of training—in a society liberated from saloons—can cultivate a modern and more naturalized civilization, free from “witch-burnings,” “intolerances,” “fetiches [sic],” and alcohol (London 95). This alcohol-free society rejects the exclusion of women, too, as a modern people must reject the “canoe-houses” from which Charmian London had been barred while she and Jack traveled in the South Pacific.

Since it takes root in social training, the “pseudo-civilization” of drink has no basis in “chemical” dependence, either. London says that in his own case “the point is that all the chemistry of my healthy, normal body drove me away from alcohol” (London 35). He expresses skepticism that there are many who physically depend on it at all. He concludes emphatically that drinking is “entirely a habit of mind” (205). It all comes down to bringing out and nurturing an acceptable and natural form of modern society.

I have argued throughout this chapter that language, law, the imagination, and, above all, the “vital lie,” all represent in *John Barleycorn* an exterior force that can do your thinking for you. Drinking is not the only altered state of consciousness. To put it simply, words, legal injunction, and imagination all appear to alter or remake

consciousness in Jack London's alcoholic memoir. A phrase as simple as "Italians will stab you in the back" can oblige one to its way of thinking when you are a child. This phrase exemplifies the dilemma, for though it represents the young London's thought, the phrase is not his but his mother's. A vital lie (e.g. that life is good, or that "love of woman" is satisfying) likewise does its work by remaking from the "inside" the perspective of the drinking man given to "savage interpretation." The exterior becomes the interior. For this to happen, it is habit that must be remade, and habit is all about text, composing and recomposing a textual object conventionally called an individual organism. London would not put it this way, of course, but his vision of a dray horse points the way.

In the concluding part of this chapter, I will rely on the work of both Charles Darwin and Gilles Deleuze, for each envisions habit as a way to see the compositional nature of individual organisms, written and revised by environment and inheritance. Both also establish conditions on which it becomes possible to question the autonomy of the organism. Though new habits of mind are what London calls for to create a sober society, such revisions of habit may violate individual autonomy to a degree he cannot admit. Nor does London go in Haraway's "good direction" for the meaning of the word *human*. Haraway named it *humus* for its connection with the soil, and London's dray horse implies this possibility as well. Yet London turns away. He chooses the autonomous heavens—the high of the vital lie—over what he perceives as the earthly shackle.

Like the dogs and wolves in *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, horses in *John Barleycorn* exist at the intersection of instinctual impulse and human discipline. London writes of his job in a steam laundry, describing himself as "toiling longer hours than the

horses toiled, thinking scarcely more frequent thoughts than horses think” (137). He suggests not so much a lack of intellectual activity as the imposition of a stultifying physical discipline. The laundry exhausts him to the point of habituation. He accepts his lack of intellectual life. The horse here is not a thoughtless kicker, as in the anecdote about Peter. It signifies a consciousness dulled by repetitive labor.

Drinking alcohol works the same way. When London reflects on why he came to the point of his regular consumption, at a time when his professional writing began to bring him success, he remarks, “I don’t know, save that the old schooling held, the training of the old days and nights, glass in hand, with men, the drinking ways of drink and drinkers” (151). In other words, he thought scarcely more thoughts than drinkers think. The problem is that while drinking may itself be pleasurable, it undermined London’s other pleasures such as pleasure in success, the companionship of his wife, art and culture, and his wealth. Alcohol’s White Logic insists that these are illusions, but London implies instead that they are vital lies. Vital lies insist that life is good. This rationalization is life-giving when compared to alcoholic despair.

It is precisely when London considers the nature of the vital lie that the figure of the horse makes its most notable appearance in *John Barleycorn*. When London writes near the end of the book about the power of lies which foster and support life, as opposed to the deathly truths of the White Logic, he expounds the experience of a typical “dray horse” (draft horse). This horse’s life exemplifies the general mechanics and realities of the “vital lie”:

Alcohol tells the truth, but its truth is not normal. What is normal is healthful. What is healthful tends toward life. Normal truth is a different order, and a lesser order, of truth. Take a dray horse. Through all the vicissitudes of its life, from first

to last, somehow, in unguessably dim ways, it must believe that life is good; that the drudgery in harness is good; that death, no matter how blind-instinctively apprehended, is a dread giant; that life is beneficent and worthwhile; that, in the end, with fading life, it will not be knocked about and beaten and urged beyond its sprained and spavined best; that old age, even, is decent, dignified, and valuable, though old age means a ribby scarecrow in a hawker's cart, stumbling a step to every blow, stumbling dizzily on through merciless servitude and slow disintegration to the end—the end, the apportionment of its parts (of its subtle flesh, its pink and springy bone, its juices and ferments, and all the sensateness that informed it), to the chicken farm, the hide-house, the glue-rendering works, and the bone-meal fertilizer factory. To the last stumble of its stumbling end this dray horse must abide by the mandates of the lesser truth that is the truth of life and that makes life possible to persist. (187)<sup>28</sup>

London envisions the horse's denial of its physical ruin as a denial of brutality at human hands: "beaten," "stumbling a step to every blow [as from a whip]," and menaced by "the glue-rendering works." For the horse's labor to be bearable, the horse must believe that "slow disintegration" is not its only fate. This belief is more motivating than unthinking obedience. The animal must also believe that its pain is not the sum of its work and that it will not be reduced to a "scarecrow," which is an imitation of life. For its labor to be psychologically sustainable, London argues, the horse must wear blinders. Keeping in mind the likely truths of its demise, the beatings and blows and glue-rendering, the horse would give up and perhaps die, as London himself contemplated suicide when the White Logic had soured him on his wealth, success, and happiness. To help one to do one's work and enjoy it, vital lies push all the truths of pain and transient pleasure out of sight.

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<sup>28</sup> The dray horse's "subtle flesh" echoes a passage near the beginning of *White Fang* in which a man on the verge of being eaten by wolves wonders at his own "subtle flesh," thinking it must have an agency and thoughtfulness of its own (London 111). Threatened by predation, the man regards his flesh as too complex to be a mere object. It has wonderful enabling powers, for his fingers are a "cunning mechanism" whose "nerve-sensations" he gauges as if they exceed his agency or surpass his own control (London 111). When confronted by the wolves, his flesh, the man realizes, "was no more than so much meat, a quest for ravenous animals" (London 111). In London's imagination, horse and human flesh, when considered in light of their ultimate dismemberment, appear simultaneously mechanistic and thoughtful, meaty and subtle: object and subject.

The horse's thinking recalls the farmhand's dedication to "supersensuous realms he and his kind have builded [sic] of the stuff of semblance and deception" (London 193). The horse's "vital lie" resembles this human denial of pain in favor of a fantasy of ease and peace. Old age will be "decent, dignified, and valuable." Drudgery's ultimate reward will not be pain and "merciless servitude" but salvation and redemption. London does not explain to what degree the horse consciously makes this decision about its point of view. He insists instead that the creature could not dedicate itself to its work if it knew its fate was so brutal. The horse represents the reality of living a life that avoids despair. This despair-avoidance constitutes a life lived by the vital lies that life is "beneficent and worthwhile."

It appears that human beings have to tell themselves vital lies as habitually as the horse does. London writes,

This dray horse, like all other horses, like all other animals including man, is life-blinded and sense-struck. It will live, no matter what the price. The game of life is good, though all of life may be hurt, and though all lives lose the game in the end. (187).

Life, it seems, consists in the habit of living as if death and exhaustion have nothing to do with it.

London's remark that life "blinds" the horse and that sense "strikes" it derive from his brutalized interpretation of Darwinian thought. In this he agrees with the White Logic. To wit: He writes shortly before describing his encounter with the aged farmhand, "I look about me as I ride, and on every hand I see the merciless and infinite waste of natural selection" (London 191). London's sense of the Darwinian truth represented by the "infinite waste of natural selection" comes as much from Herbert Spencer's Social

Darwinist revisions as from Darwin's work itself. Spencer's coinage of "survival of the fittest," a phrase Darwin retroactively added to *On the Origin of Species*, naturalizes violence and combat. The White Logic compels the same "savage interpretation."

For the sake of the vital lie, London rejects this supposed truth. Natural selection after all does not suggest the "life" he envisions when he promotes heteronormative stability or all the pleasures of success that the White Logic makes hollow and meaningless. He chooses the self-deception that "life" exists apart from strife and death, because it seems to him that the thought of mortality is too dispiriting, deflating, and brutalizing to withstand. He aims to comport himself as he imagines the dray horse does: as if life is healthful activity. The ideology of health looks to him like a motive that mortality never could be. This is the high represented by the vital lie.

As one is habituated to drink, one has to be habituated in the fantasy of the vital lie. Though London never does free himself entirely from the White Logic, he insists that stopping his detrimental drinking "was merely forswearing a bad habit, foregoing a bad frame of mind" (London 164). No shame inspired him to restrain himself from drink, as it had in the case of candy. In fact, he was rewarded for drinking, as it was interacting with other men in situations of alcoholic consumption that won London his "manhood's spurs" (London 55). He is the horse his environment has made him out to be. In that case what is required is something stiffer than alcohol: Prohibition.

So long as alcohol remains legal, London contends, the issue continues to be one of habits that are allowed to flourish in generation after generation of young men. He is explicit:

My concern is that it is so much of the best we breed whom John Barleycorn destroys. And the reason why these best are destroyed is because John Barleycorn stands on every highway and byway, accessible, law-protected, saluted by the policeman on the beat, speaking to them, leading them by the hand to the places where the good fellows and daring ones foregather and drink deep. With John Barleycorn out of the way, these daring ones would still be born, and they would do things instead of perishing. (75)

London describes the problem in terms of breeding. When alcohol is legal it destroys otherwise well-bred men by giving them self-destructive habits. Alcohol “twists and malforms [them] out of the original goodness and fineness of their natures” (London 75). This deformation is artificial and such young men become unfit for doing “things instead of perishing” (75). Utopian but non-specific, London does not articulate what these doable “things” that are preferable to death really are, though fathering and raising children constitutes a large part of it. He introduces the notion of “breeding” for that exact reason. Raising children appears to require the vital lie that life is beneficent and worthwhile. No one would have children, London assumes, unless motivated by a fantasy that children could be well bred and that this good breeding could be maintained.

London may be right, but he has no faith that there is any argument more persuasive than what the law can do. The vital lie needs the sheltering protection of Prohibition, for the question of men’s drinking is not a normative matter. That young men “[consume alcohol] is not a matter of what one ought to do, or ought not to do. It is what one does” (London 94). He reiterates the point by supposing that critics will urge “that [young men who drank] might have gone to the Y.M.C.A., to night school, and to the social circles and homes of young people” (113). “The only reply is that we didn’t,” London writes,” adding that this is “irrefragable fact” (113). From inside this pseudo-civilization, no one alters his behavior. The environment itself has to be altered.

Prohibition, not argument, is the only way to create an environment in which vital lies can have their rousing effect.

Although London claims that alcoholic truth “is not normal” (London 187), it is clear from the “irrefragable fact” (London 113) of boys drinking in saloons that the alcoholic truth has been normalized. Only women, with their sympathy for legal intervention, can help to normalize *new* habits of health and sobriety. Men will not do this, London supposes, despite seeming to be a man who would vote for Prohibition. He never explicitly conceives of male responsibility in this regard at all. He imagines that because women are “conservators of the race,” their consciences will effect change when they have been enfranchised. This argument gives the impression that empowering women means allowing them to do their “natural” job (a question of activating nature’s potential again) and that women themselves are not afflicted by habits of mind in the way that men are. Presumably London would concede that environment and training affect women’s habits, but no strong evidence for this presumption appears in the text of *John Barleycorn*. Men’s mental habits remain London’s exclusive focus.

London’s sense that habits embody a normalized response to one’s environment stems directly from Darwinian thought. Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) offers the clearest articulation. As in London’s discussion of vital lies, here again the reader comes across horses. They represent the entire problem of habit.

One of the chief speculations in the *Expression* is the idea that many bodily reactions we consider automatic or innate were once deliberate. For example, sneezing.



Darwin writes, “It is probable that sneezing and coughing were originally acquired by the habit of expelling, as violently as possible, any irritating particle from the sensitive air-passages” (48). Darwin continues, “As far as time is concerned, there has been more than enough for these habits to have become innate or converted into reflex actions” (Darwin 48). Where London’s “habit of mind” has a reflexive connotation—a creature of his environment, he drank out of reflex—Darwin separates deliberate action (“the habit of expelling”) from reflexive action. The deliberate act of expelling matter from the nasal passages represents a repeated strategy. Darwin’s use of the word “habit” does not have the compulsive implication London gives it. It is Darwin’s treatment of weeping as an expression of grief that better clarifies how a particular action becomes automatic and compulsive. His analysis demonstrates the logic of normalization implicit in *John Barleycorn*.

As Daniel Gross points out, Darwin’s treatment of expression in regard to emotions like grief or suffering is “fundamentally rhetorical, which is to say Darwin’s methodology accounts for the emotion’s medium, occasion, and social situation” (Gross 48). Weeping to express grief is not natural or innate, but an arbitrary expression normalized in human society. Darwin associates the original secretion of tears with a reflexive closing of the eyes during an intense scream: “[Whenever] the muscles round the eyes are strongly and involuntarily contracted in order to compress the blood-vessels and thus to protect the eyes [as when screaming], tears are secreted” (Darwin 152). Darwin allows that very small infants appear to scream without the accompanying flow of tears until they are a few months old, then they follow suit, so Darwin maintains the connection between secreting tears and protecting the eyes (152). “Expiatory efforts,”

such as vomiting, choking fits, or sneezing may produce a similar action (160). The more important point is that “the eyes of infants have been acted upon in this manner during numberless generations, whenever they have screamed” (Darwin 161). The passage continues:

and on the principle of nerve-force readily passing along accustomed channels, even a moderate compression of the eyeballs and a moderate distention of the ocular vessels would ultimately come, through habit, to act on the [lachrymal] glands. (Darwin 161)

Crying appears automatic because “nerve-force,” which remains a vague term in Darwin’s analysis, runs along its regular channels and slowly widens, so to speak, those accustomed passages. It comes to pass that even “moderate distention,” or lesser stimuli, sets off a response that originated in the protection of the eyes. “[S]uffering readily causes the secretion of tears,” Darwin writes, because the long habit of screaming to attract attention or seek relief from discomfort has so sensitized the lachrymal glands and ocular muscles that even irritations that do not prompt a scream continue to prompt tears (Darwin 163). The incidental nature of tears does not diminish their power as a relief of suffering, Darwin says, “on the same principle that the writhing of the whole body, the grinding of the teeth, and the uttering of piercing shrieks, all give relief under an agony of pain” (163).

These speculations anticipate Freudian analysis, especially in their attention to infantile experience as formative for adult realities.<sup>29</sup> What seems to be an automatic reaction of habit realizes itself through long practice. A deliberate thought, in a particular

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Winters comments that Darwin views expression as a “product of nerve action and muscle contractions produced in the course of the expression’s evolution either through infantile habits or, more anciently, by an ancestral response to the environment” (Winters 142).

situation, works so diligently and repeatedly inside a nerve channel that the deliberate thought vanishes, leaving behind its ghostly remainder, which is the automatic reaction. The body becomes haunted by such ghosts, the residues of deliberation, and is ready to react to stimuli without the intervention of a deliberating intelligence, for example, crying without needing to protect the eyes. It is as if, from then on, stimuli provoke this hauntedness of the body. The body can act without deliberation, i.e. act via habit.

Darwin's speculations suggest that the widening of "accustomed channels" increases the likelihood that "nerve-force" will be directed along them in response to stimulation. An automaticity in human physiology and social expression emerges through these interiorized hauntings. London takes on this Darwinian logic, for he supposes that alcoholic male sociability is a custom and practice, rather than the physical need some suspect that it is.

Since he understands it as a "habit of mind," London considers drinking breakable only for a generation that grows up under Prohibition. That generation will be less haunted by the long practice of drinking. Without prohibition, young men gather where the accustomed paths lead them: saloons, not "responsible" places like the Y.M.C.A. Frequency of movement along such paths increases the likelihood of their use, as, paradoxically, the deliberate choice to drink melts into a reflexive and "irrefragable" habit of convening in the way that accommodates a male sense of social life (London 113). Where no law of Prohibition exists, what is currently automatic will persist.

What Prohibition promises is evolution. The stress lies on the "fit" between creature and environment. London writes of evolutionary transformation explicitly:

The only rational thing for the twentieth century folk to do is to cover up the well [of available alcohol]; to make the twentieth century in truth the twentieth century, and to relegate to the nineteenth century and all the preceding centuries the things of those centuries, the witch-burnings, the intolerances, the fetiches [sic], and, not least among such barbarisms, John Barleycorn. (95)

London's call to rationalize historical drinking habits by way of banning alcohol defies the notion that human beings are "sports of chemistry." Rather than barbaric, he suggests, human beings ought to be subjects of modern judgment. London's evolutionary thinking is no more apparent than when he describes his own drunkenness. When inebriated, London writes, "all the books I had read, all the wisdom I had gathered, went glimmering before the ape and the tiger in me that crawled up from the abyss of my heredity, atavistic, competitive and brutal, lustful with strength and desire to outswine swine" (152-3). To ban drinking is to assert the power of law over an animalistic body that is always ready to reemerge and indulge its swinish character, the piggish ghost in the machine, except that it is as much body as mind. The point of London's evolutionary vision consists in repelling this atavistic animal body eager to leap out from its prison of books and accumulated wisdom. Prohibition helps to suppress it; new habits will then flourish.

Where *John Barleycorn* figures the dray horse as an avatar of the turn away from Darwinian reality, Darwin's *Expression* uses the image of a horse to explain a similar problem of breeding and expression. Considering the way in which animal habits might be formed, Darwin writes:

That some physical change is produced in the nerve-cells or nerves which are habitually used can hardly be doubted, for otherwise it is impossible to understand how the tendency to certain acquired movements is inherited. That they are inherited we see with horses in certain transmitted paces, such as cantering and ambling, which are not natural to them,—in the pointing of young pointers and

the setting of young setters—in the peculiar manner of flight of certain breeds of the pigeon, &c. (39)

This logic should be familiar. Channels that customarily carry “nerve-force” evolve such that a variety of excitations in response to stimuli can be vented along these pathways.

Weeping is incidental, but the secretion of tears has evolved as a mode of venting.

Darwin argues that this habituation also explains acquired movement, for example, cantering. Here Darwin goes a step farther to suggest that such traits—habits of acquired movement—can be inherited. How else, he wonders, to explain the way horses seem to reproduce from birth those movements and gestures which only human training could produce? Like London’s dray horse and the man with the drinking problem, the Darwinian animal exists at the intersection of an imposed discipline and an interior impulse. The boundary of exterior and interior is hard to determine.

The principle of inheritance (later discredited) constitutes the horse as such. A horse by this logic represents a collection of congenital habits. Like London’s drinker, it appears less to be itself and more to be manufactured by a prior generation’s establishment of habituated modes of living. Sigmund Freud would rely on such Darwinian logic in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) when he described the genetic heritage of the “countless egos” buried in the Id. As he puts it:

The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured [sic] residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection. (35)

According to Freud, one's desires are not necessarily one's own. The concept of the Freudian super-ego, after all, suggests an importing into the child's psyche of the Father's prohibition of the child's claim on the body of the mother; the super-ego is the father dispersed within the self. Freud owes much to Darwin's notion of expressive habits built up by different species (animal and human alike) over generations and generations.

If London imagines that the piggish ghost in the machine is eager to escape the literate human perspective, the Freudian-Darwinian creature confronts a literary dilemma, as well. It is a text of recorded knowledges, feelings, and actions. Like an archive, it consists of the thoughts and decisions of "countless egos" that preceded it. That collection of ghostly material represents the anonymized rationalizations of generations of creatures, including the way in which they articulated through gesture and expenditure of energy their place in their environment.

The point is that no sober ego exists. No ego is unaffected and uninflected by countless others taken in and absorbed. Each ego is composed of these accumulated compulsions, habits, and inherited impressions, meanings, and former existences. Haunted to the point of being only hauntings, Freud's ego is Darwin's horse, literally repeating the footsteps of its ancestors.

London's habituated drinkers contend with an archive as well—London calls it a "pseudo-civilization"—stocked with other people's compulsions taken for one's own. That is why London turned from candy to drink. In "striving to be a man amongst men," he acclimated himself to the alcoholic fashion of their camaraderie. Their habits became his, and it pulled him away from a world in which men and women ought to stably mix rather than remain volatile and at odds due to drink.

Trading one habit of mind for another depends on revision, in this case the revision offered by Prohibition. The reason London could not stop secretly devouring candy is the same reason drinking grew to have such power over him. Deliberate action becomes compulsion, in an environment of specific and repeated stimuli. It alters consciousness. Candy had given London a candied brain, and it took effort to make it an alcoholic brain instead. Now the time has come, according to *John Barleycorn*, for a Prohibited brain.

In a real sense, no one has ever been sober. What each has instead is the textured archive of thoughts and actions identified with oneself, despite the fact that—like London’s mother’s phrase, “stab you in the back”—they are taken in from outside, ingested.

London chooses to believe that Prohibition will create anew the environment of American drinkers by eliminating the pseudo-civilization of drinking altogether. It will nurture the existence of a more natural civilization. Breeding a new generation will break with the habits of the old, for those growing up sober will no longer live in the same alcoholic “social soil” (London 205).

### **Conclusion**

Not only in the sweeping purview of Prohibition, but also in London’s examples of everyday drinking, the reader sees the realization of human power. Take London’s avowed dislike for the taste of alcohol: “I shuddered and swallowed my gorge with every drink, though I manfully hid all such symptoms” (29). Manfully hiding symptoms is one of *John Barleycorn*’s primary themes. To be “manful” means to demonstrate

physiological power and control, as if the body were another horse to be disciplined and held in check from its (vomiting) impulses.

To be manful also means to be plastic. It is in this sense that men appear to have a political future freed from drink, while the political future of women extends as far as voting for Prohibition and enabling men to realize the control and power they are due. London neglects to discuss the ways in which women themselves could be shaped by habits of mind and environmental influences, of which saloons are only one example. His argument in *John Barleycorn* requires someone's deliberate choice to activate the potential for a more heteronormative and sober civilization, one that has given up savage barbarisms. He casts women in the deliberative role. They are guardians of the race, according to London. For their part, men can be relied upon to respond to stimuli. In a sober environment, they will be sober. London does not stress the paradox that men have to be corralled into self-control, but it represents another intersection of interior impulse and exterior force. *John Barleycorn*, as a memoir, shows London dependent on a language he cannot control to declare his independent power. It leans on law, imagination, and the emotional labor of women to show that he does not have to lean on alcohol.

In its Darwinian mode, *John Barleycorn* implicates the repetitiveness of habit, but not its sameness. The dray horse's vital lie, which says that life is good, turns its repeated labors into different occasions for hope. Gilles Deleuze likewise grasps habit not in terms of the same, but in terms of the different. In *Difference and Repetition*, he argues that

[humans] are made of contracted water, earth, light, and air – not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed. Every organism, in its receptive and perceptual elements, but also in its viscera, is a sum



of contractions, of retentions and expectations. (Deleuze 73)

Deleuze then asks what is in question in this “domain” of retentions and contractions from environments and surroundings (73). He answers: “[David] Hume says precisely it is a question of the problem of habit” (73). “Habit,” Deleuze writes, “*draws* something new from repetition – namely difference... In essence, habit is contraction” (73, emphasis in original). To put it in alcoholic terms, the habit of taking a drink individuates each experience of drink-taking, “drawing” a difference from a series—a series of drinks, for example. London had commented on the first page of his memoir that he re-conquers his distaste for alcohol every time he takes a drink. His drinking habit is not an experience of the same, mechanically repeated. It is the living out of a series in which each term is differently intensive, a different variation on the ever-varying terms of that series. Each drink revives the experience of the first drink. Hence the re-conquering.<sup>30</sup> Habit makes meaning where there would otherwise exist undifferentiated sameness. It means living out individuated difference from within the same: a contraction of difference. Deleuze’s conception of habit emphasizes the life-giving quality of habituation, and its textual nature, revising the same *as* the different so that it might have meaning. This conception of habit enables continuation, like London’s dray horse that carries on when suicide appears preferable.

Unfortunately, this dray horse looks an awkward fit for Deleuze’s notion of habit. As Deleuze asks, “[w]hat organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby

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<sup>30</sup>As James Williams puts it, Deleuze’s argument suggests that habit “is about a novel variation continuing to vary, thereby constituting time as the synthesis of the variation” (Williams 41).

intertwining all the habits of which it is composed?” (75). What so interests London is an image of the individual horse or human being as sovereign, destined for more than death—not subject only to the power of the elements that constitute it. Deleuze explodes that picture. The organism is carbons and sulphates, water and nitrogen. The Deleuzian picture veers into the territory that London calls the “savage interpretation” of the natural world. The farmhand, dray horse, and London himself reject this savagery, though it is hardly savage to Deleuze.

Darwin’s analysis, rerouted through Freud, suggested that there is no “horse” but only the horse’s inherited habits. These habits reproduce generations of entanglements with various material environments. Deleuze envisions the organism as a composition, too. If London were able to accept interpretations like these, or more like Haraway’s “humus” conception, according to which the sporting of chemistry does not seem savage but productive, he might not have to abide in fear by the notion that life is good. What London calls vital lies, such as the pleasures of success, could be accepted for their contingent benefits rather than the for hope that they will forestall one’s death or pain. London’s is a crisis of faltering masculine confidence. He seems to wish he did not have a body at all. He engages the image of a horse specifically to deny his materiality and animality.

In an essay on J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, the philosopher Cora Diamond remarks on the character of Coetzee’s protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, “She sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal” (53). What Diamond means by “living animal” applies to human and horse alike. Her own argument, which concerns how to

conceive of a response to suffering, aims not to reduce suffering to a fact of experience and instead see it as an exposure to the torment of mortal life. This torment disrupts both a sense of reality and the coherence of philosophical response. From inside this torment, Diamond proposes, we should try to imagine the embodied nature of our own thinking and to respond to suffering as we feel our own and others' torment of being a vulnerable body—not run from it. In *John Barleycorn*, self-deceptive creatures regard the bodies they are given as divorced from material ruin and decay, for London everywhere refuses to countenance the torment Diamond aims to face. The problem is that he chooses to conceive of vitalizing feelings as “lies” in the first place, dooming him to look for a high that can sustain him against the reality of “what it is to be a living animal.”

## Chapter 2: Alien Lifeforms: Personality and Singularity in D.H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr*

Near the end of the previous chapter, on Jack London, I considered a paragraph from Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Freud's paragraph echoes a passage from Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) in which Darwin describes the heritability of certain experiences and actions. One of Darwin's examples is the cantering of a horse, which is a creature, according to Darwin, not "naturally" prone to canter but which does so because cantering became habitual with the horse's forebears (Darwin 39). The acquired movement of cantering has been inherited. Freud echoes this idea when he discusses the "countless egos" buried in the id. As he puts it:

The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity. Thus in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection. (35)

The id appears to be a trove of previous decisions and experiences. The superego, then, being part of the unconscious, may be a "resurrection" of prior individual egos. The self is not self but other, or partially other.

Though he explicitly attacks Freudian psychoanalysis in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), D.H. Lawrence writes throughout his fiction and poetry about a sense of individual singularity that cannot abide the Darwinian-Freudian picture of a consciousness composed of inherited experiences

and actions. That would be a perversion of the individuality Lawrence prizes. One of the richest and most curious texts to address Lawrentian singularity evokes not only human singularity but that of a horse. This is Lawrence's novella, *St. Mawr* (1924). The tale's eponymous stallion models a different, anti-personal conception of individuality.

In *St. Mawr*, the protagonist, Lou Witt, and her mother, usually identified as "Mrs. Witt," disdain the personality of human beings. In their estimation, human personality represents a pose and attitude. A personality can be discussed, analyzed, and dissected. It has constituent parts, explicable mechanisms, and is a cause of and topic for sociable gossip. Such discursive dissectibility constitutes the essence of psychology. Opposed to psychology and personality in *St. Mawr* stands the singularity and enigma of animal existence, embodied by the novella's eponymous stallion, which has no structural elements but rather *is* an element. Lou Witt puts this Lawrentian formulation crisply when she remarks about the stallion, St. Mawr:

We call him an animal, but we never know what it means. He seems a far greater mystery to me, than a clever man [sic]. He's a horse. Why can't one say in the same way, of a man: *He's a man?* There seems no mystery in being a man. But there's a terrible mystery in St. Mawr. (80-81)

A man cannot be a man, but a horse can be a horse. Similar sentiments appear in Lawrence's poems, particularly in the collection, *Pansies* (1929), in which a formulation identical to Lou's makes up the last two lines in the poem, "Lizard." In its entirety:

A lizard ran out on a rock and looked up, listening  
no doubt to the sounding of the spheres.  
And what a dandy fellow! the right toss of a chin for you  
and swirl of a tail!

If men were as much men as lizards are lizards  
they'd be worth looking at. (524)

Man cannot be man, but horse and lizard can be horse and lizard. These animals express the essence of the thing which they are, with élan and on an enigmatic (“terrible mystery”) or cosmic (“sounding of the spheres”) scale. Failing this, humans constitute something paltry.

In Lawrence’s novella, the horse’s expressive fulfillment—“he’s a horse”—paradoxically makes the stallion a singular anomaly rather than an example of a species. Where an example illustrates and is subsumed by the category to which it belongs, St. Mawr is an exemplar that expresses its own individual equinity, its autotelic horse-ness.<sup>31</sup> This distinction resists succinct formulation, and for that reason it is the topic of this chapter.

What St. Mawr is, human beings could be, or so Lou Witt hopes—and Lawrence concurs. He suggests as much when he comments in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that “No man is a man unless to his woman he is a pioneer” (192). In this associative book-length essay on Lawrence’s anti-Freudian notion of the unconscious, a man can be a man only if, like St. Mawr, he expresses and grows according to his own principle of development. Such a man, like St. Mawr, must also rule or guide a woman, a domineering portrait of heteronormativity that accords with Lou Witt’s desire, when she grasps the alien anomaly of St. Mawr, to “retreat” into the “living background” represented by this stallion (Lawrence 61). A male figure beats through a wilderness in both images, guiding a woman-companion who follows, taking submissive shelter in him.

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<sup>31</sup> As critic Margot Norris writes on *St. Mawr*, “The wild thing’s aggressiveness is autotelic, referring only to itself, to the potency of its life flowing forth unchecked and dangerously” (Norris 182).

Companionship glorifies a man's essential character not by making him a partner and companion but instead a "pioneer."

The "personality" denigrated by Lou Witt and her mother has none of this essential power. It exists at the level of socialized perception but lacks the essence of the thing itself, to borrow a philosophical term, represented by a horse that can be a horse. Since she desires to elude the superficiality of personality, Lou feels compelled, attracted, and (potentially) fulfilled by the peculiar way in which the stallion, St. Mawr, looks at her "without really seeing her, yet gleaming a question at her" (Lawrence 51).<sup>32</sup> The unseeing eye persists as an image and theme in *St. Mawr*.

While the unseeing gaze, shared by other male figures in the Lawrence's novella, does command female submission, what the stallion un-sees is Lou Witt as a personality. In *St. Mawr*, "personality" is Lawrence's word for a degraded subjectivity—the only kind of subjectivity that exists in the novella—in which the self exists as a circumscribed and socially comprehensible figure. It is the self for other people; a role. It exists in reference to others. The question that the unseeing stallion "gleams" at Lou is the question of her own singularity, which is Lawrence's word for the opaque self, the self for self's sake. It makes no reference to others and does not see them. It is instinctual, if instinctual can mean not fixed but spontaneous. In *St. Mawr*, "subject" is not a suitably capacious term for this opaque self that eschews the other. The unseeing eye suggests a place where there

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<sup>32</sup> Critic Peter Balbert acknowledges that "it is for Lou his [St. Mawr's] inscrutability, the unfathomability of his profound otherness that entrances her," but he argues as well that "there is nothing androgynous or even phallic about this imposing stallion" (43). Balbert does not emphasize that the horse remains, importantly, male. Its potency suggests something domineering, pioneering, and misogynistic, all while offering a strange and poetic vision of singularity. The peculiar ways in which St. Mawr remains or does not remain male—questions swirl around St. Mawr's virility, e.g. is he interested in reproduction or not? is he tender or cruel?—is what makes the crucial difference.

is no personality at all, “another world” (Lawrence 50) that is not personal, not human, but thoroughly alien, anomalous, and singular. This other world of the opaque self is also older. But rather than frozen in time, it is forever in a process of becoming. The opaque, instinctual self grows according to its own principle of development that can only unfold in experience, not according to the conceptualizing and cataloging of knowledge. Like St. Mawr, the other “unseeing” figures in the novella such as Lewis and Phoenix, are coded as subaltern and/or nonwhite. Theirs and the horse’s masculinity appear to be an older, singular power asserting itself in the face of emasculated forms of domination represented by Lou’s husband, Rico.

If St. Mawr un-sees, then the stallion remains himself essentially unseen, hence his anomalous status. Or, to put it a different way, since St. Mawr stands for singularity rather than personality, his expression of horse-ness is not encompassed by gazing at or, generally speaking, perceiving him. As he does not see Lou, qua personality, likewise he cannot be seen except as a “full, dark, passionate blaze of power and of different life” (Lawrence 51).

It is as an instinctual “blaze of power” that St. Mawr can be a horse, as a man cannot be a man. Having given in to the flimsiness of personality, men and women alike lack the character that might protect them from the exhaustions of their perceptibility and discursive dissectibility by others. The personality is, par excellence, that which is “seen” as opposed to unseen. Where London imagined that the human subject could be remade by taking in different consciousness-altering substances (language, for instance), Lawrence imagines a human being able to become more like the anomalous object that St. Mawr represents: opaque or unseen, and, most importantly, expressive of an



exemplary singularity. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Timothy Morton comments on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the work of Husserl's contemporary epigones, such as Graham Harman.<sup>33</sup> Morton writes that Husserl "noticed" that "objects can't be exhausted by perception" (Morton 36). An object, the thing itself, has many appearances but remains withdrawn. Such an inexhaustible object is what St. Mawr is. Not a self for others—that is, a personality or subject with socially circumscribed thoughts and feelings—the stallion does not have a self in the sense of a subjectivity with clearly defined form. This horse is a shapeshifter, the instinctual One that evokes many forms or iterations of itself. Lou can observe St. Mawr, even understand some of his motives and feelings, but she cannot penetrate to his essence, which is instinctual horse-ness. That essence is always in a process of mysteriously becoming, so that being a horse that is a horse means that the stallion can be a "flame" or a "living background" (Lawrence 61) while still being itself. It is more like an object than a subject—a Horse, not a horse. But as object, it is multiform.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida describes the feeling of shame when seen by a cat in his bathroom. He writes, "If I say 'it is a real cat' that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity" (9). The cat is not a representative of cats in general but an actually existing cat. Derrida goes on to say, "Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized" (9). The cat's existence, insofar as it refuses to be turned into an idea, means that it "has a point of view regarding me" (Derrida 11). In *When*

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<sup>33</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage deeply with Morton's work, but I will examine Harman's work in more detail in the next chapter, on H.P. Lovecraft.

*Species Meet*, the ecofeminist writer and theorist, Donna Haraway, critiques Derrida's account of this close encounter of the feline kind, precisely because in Derrida's essay, "the cat was never heard from again" (Haraway 20). Haraway goes on, "Even if the cat did not become a symbol of all cats, the naked man's shame quickly became a figure for the shame of philosophy before all of the animals" (23). For Haraway, "full human male frontal nudity before an Other, which was of such interest in his philosophical tradition, was of no consequence to her [the cat]," and Haraway is "prepared to believe" that Derrida did not know how to greet or respond to this animal (Haraway 23). Haraway's point is that even a question about a singular, existing animal distracts from other questions: about the play and work that companion species can do together, for instance. She wonders not so much about whether or not a cat or a baboon or a horse can be a responsive social subject, but whether human beings can be (24). These are questions for Lou Witt and Lawrence's unseeing eye as well, especially considering the problem of the stallion's singular but multiform self. As the novella moves toward the New Mexican desert, which is Lawrence's final figure for nonhuman presence, one wonders if *St. Mawr* is or was a horse at all.

### **Mind v. instinct: the expression of equinity**

*St. Mawr* is brief, beautiful, and equal parts provocative and preposterous. As Samuel Becket wrote upon reading it: "lovely things as usual and plenty of rubbish" (Knowlson 122). The plot of *St. Mawr* is simple. Lou Wit, an expatriate American woman is uneasily married to Henry Carrington, known as Rico, with whom she had a brief love affair that has become a sexless marriage. They have become like "brother and sister," for "sex was shattering and exhausting" (44). Lou meets and then buys a stallion

named St. Mawr, who entrances her with his alien power. Rico, who is described at the outset as “a horse that might go nasty any moment” (47), is too timid to assert himself. Unlike St. Mawr, he lacks the confidence, integrity, and finally singularity to express his nature. He is an emasculated animal, and this grows to disgust Lou as she comes to admire the stallion. Eventually, the incompetent Rico, who has never been comfortable riding the stallion his wife bought for him—Lou never rides St. Mawr in the novella—mishandles the horse, which rears and bucks and then falls on Rico, injuring him. Rico and his friends aim to sell St. Mawr and have him gelded, but a horrified and disgusted Lou conspires to have her mother, Mrs. Witt, along with the horse groom, Lewis, and their servant, Phoenix, take St. Mawr to America. Lou joins them, and they escape to the American Southwest, where St. Mawr for the first time shows interest in mares and sex. Lou leaves the horse behind but finds and buys a ranch in the New Mexican mountains, where she pledges herself, provisionally, to celibacy. She declares, “I am here, deep in America, where there’s a wild spirit that wants me, a wild spirit more than men” (175).<sup>34</sup> There the novella ends.

The theme of *St. Mawr* is the mystery of animal singularity. There “seems to be no mystery in being a man,” as Lou Witt remarks to her mother (Lawrence 80). There is, she continues, “a terrible mystery in St. Mawr,” for Lou takes the animal to be the avatar of a sovereignty of self that she desires (80). The decisive difference here between

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<sup>34</sup> Balbert explicitly reads Lou Witt as Lawrence in “drag-disguise” (63) working out his wounded feelings over his suspicion over the unfaithfulness of his wife, Frieda Lawrence, in 1924. Balbert writes that Lawrence “uses the novella to ‘shed’ his emotional tension and weakening libido through an integrated process of sublimation and projection” (65). Margot Norris’s reading of *St. Mawr* in her *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, which reckons with notions of animality and aggression, aligns better with the reading of this chapter, though I will have occasion to refer to Balbert again.

terrible mystery and the unctuous or superficial obviousness of human beings — Lawrence is fond of the metaphor of “mayonnaise” in this context—is the question of mind.

Lou says that she does not want to be involved with men who have a “mind,” for it “seems to me there’s something else besides mind and cleverness, or niceness or cleanness” (79). “Perhaps,” she muses, “it is the animal” (79). What constitutes the animal in *St. Mawr* is a both an aggressive autonomy and an embodiment of a particular species’ essential, instinctual way of being, in this case, the way of being that belongs to a horse. Lou makes the distinction clear: “[St. Mawr] seems a far greater mystery to me, [sic] than a clever man. He’s a horse. Why can’t one say in the same way, of a man: *He’s a man?*” (80, emphasis in original). Mrs. Witt objects that men have minds, and horses do not. Her daughter counters that, where a man is mindful or clever or nice, a horse has no need of supplemental personal qualities and gets its life “straight from the source” and not “from a lot of old tanks, as we [humans] do” (Lawrence 80-81). The metaphor of the tank suggests the staleness of human life but also the suspicion that thinking is stored up, fearfully, against a permanent scarcity or an unwillingness to live alone in the world that is the “source” of vitality. The tank suggests as well the Freudian Id, filled with “countless egos.” Animals, on the other hand, “get their life straight” (81). This makes the thinking of animals “quick” and unmediated by the “deadness” of life stored in tanks (81). The “mind” appears to be exactly the tank-like vessel that intervenes between

human beings and the world, which could be the source of more life and quicker thought.<sup>35</sup>

Woman seem to be closer to animal life than men. Lou remarks, “Why can’t they [men] think quick, mother: quick as a woman: [sic] only farther than we do?” (Lawrence 81). If humans get their life from old tanks, from a mind that conventionally intervenes between creature and world, then women, Lou implies, remain quicker thinkers. That may make women closer to animals than men are. But Lou wants men to think quick as animals and therefore quicker than women. She wants to be dominated. As it stands, Lou admits, “I don’t know one single man who is a proud living animal,” for “the animal in them has gone perverse, or cringing, or humble, or domesticated” (81). Not only do men get their lives from old tanks and their thought from the mind that mediates and separates. They also constitute an animal of emasculated power. When Lou says that men “are all women, knitting and crocheting words together” (81), the image suggests that not only mind but language (here pejoratively feminized) represents nothing so much as an intervening embellishment—an ornament—entirely adjacent to the wild vitality of the world: an auxiliary, not a source.<sup>36</sup>

Gilles Deleuze writes in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* that “the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life” (40). Lawrence’s stallion is an organism, but it embodies a venting of the imprisoned life to which Deleuze refers. Lou implies as

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<sup>35</sup> Lou’s thought that animals get their life and thoughts “straight” from the “source,” resembles George Bataille’s comment in *Theory of Religion* that animals are like “water in water” (Bataille 24). For Bataille and Lawrence, animal existence has none of the mediation that characterizes human life and thought.

<sup>36</sup> In the previous chapter, on London, I made use of the Derridean portrayal of language as, in the words of Cary Wolfe, “always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (Wolfe 24). It would seem that Lawrence is alert to the possibility that language has a troubled relationship with the reality that it depicts, but he presumes, as we will see later in this chapter, that there is an expressiveness before or without language. This is precisely the sort of thinking that Derrida aimed to critique.

much when she says that the horse get life “straight,” rather than from old tanks. The stallion is a direct conduit of instinct, if instinct can be understood to mean spontaneous, not fixed, impulse. Lou identifies St. Mawr not so much with his superficial qualities as an individual organism but with the life he vents from the “source.” The stallion thus expresses equine life wholly, without mind or language getting in the way of its instinctual responses to the world, whatever these instinctual responses may be.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the Deleuzo-Guattarian animal eludes personal individuation, which fixes individuals in the Oedipal arrangement, according to the law of the father. Were this thought to be applied in the case of *St. Mawr*, it would mean that the stallion “can be a horse,” because he has no fixed identity (as son or as pet, for example) to constrain his venting of life. I will return to this point but for now want to note that the stallion named St. Mawr represents not this Deleuzo-Guattarian, anti-identitarian perspective so much as a revised law of the father. The horse is multiform but individual. He is the One in many different guises and serves as a symbolic Father more competently male than the men that Lou Witt knows. His identity may not be a “personality,” but he is emphatically the horse individuated as St. Mawr.

With mind and language so beside the point, St. Mawr wholly expresses his instinctual equinity. This means that there is no shortfall between the individual entity and the general type to which the stallion belongs. The mystery of St. Mawr originates here. The horse is both entirely itself and also a typological exemplar. Not every animal can attain this peculiar status, Lawrence implies, but men refuse to do it at all. Mind and language leave humans un-whole, at the mercy of perception and dissection, but as Lou says of St. Mawr, “He stands where one can’t get at him” (Lawrence 80). The stallion

that vents its life straight from the instinctual “source” embodies horse-ness, yet is not graspable in his individuality. There is no saying ahead of time what all the horse’s instinctual impulses will be. As Lawrence writes in his essay, “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” any “creature that attains to its own fulness [sic] of being, its own *living* self, becomes unique, a nonpareil” (Lawrence 358, emphasis in original). St. Mawr is just such a creature, a nonpareil because of the fullness of his horse-ness.

There is a peculiar characteristic to this horse’s uniqueness, however. “I love St. Mawr,” Lou explains, “because he isn’t intimate” (Lawrence 80). Because “one can’t get at him,” because this stallion cannot be essentially grasped and perceived, he is not “intimate.” There is a sexual dimension to such lack of intimacy, for St. Mawr shows no interest in mares, even though he was raised for reproductive purposes as a stud (Lawrence 49). He will not mate with any mares at all. His “not intimate” character also signifies his nonpareil status as a fully living being, for it is aloneness that characterizes the singular animal. As Lou speculates later in the novella (I will return to this thought), the singular animal has the “courage to maintain itself alone and living in the midst of a diverse universe” (Lawrence 102). Hence St. Mawr’s disinterest in intimacy and reproduction. He exhibits no reproductive anxiety—no urge for another, companion or offspring—for he is a self-authoring and self-authorizing animal, alone and apart. One would perhaps think sexual reproduction is instinctual for Lawrence, but in this case St. Mawr’s instincts are too much of the self to bother about sex.

As Lawrence emphasizes in “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” each creature “impinges on other existences, and is itself impinged upon” (Lawrence 358). Impingement rather than intimacy represents the closeness of creatures living alongside

rather than “with” one another. To be unique or nonpareil is to impinge, as St. Mawr does on Lou, overwhelming her precisely because the stallion makes her see the paltriness of mindful men, who express with words rather than silence. Wordy and mindful, men “are such *unpleasant* animals” (Lawrence 81, emphasis in original). It is the emasculated and cringing nature of men that makes them unpleasant. Lacking the fullness of life characteristic of St. Mawr, they do not impinge but only irritate.

That irritation comes with a certain numbness and deadness, too. Lou Witt suggests as much when she talks of St. Mawr’s fullness as a singular creature, explicitly in terms of the instinctual “life” that one gets “straight”:

And he burns with life. And where does his life come from, to him? That’s the mystery. That great burning life in him, which never is dead. Most men have a deadness in them, that frightens me so, because of my own deadness. Why can’t men get their lives straight, like St. Mawr, and then think? (80-81).

St. Mawr’s venting of “great burning life” defies the deadness of the human, which Lou feels when she pauses to consider the tensions between herself, her mother, and Rico. These feelings constitute a “cloud of numbness” that mutes experience (Lawrence 60). Lou explicitly attributes this “cloud of numbness” to the conflict of will between Rico and Mrs. Witt. This conflict results from their familial and personal intimacy, which both mediates and sustains an unending clash of opposed emotional interests. They snipe over Lou constantly, or Mrs. Witt says something scathing about men that Rico must passive-aggressively rebuff. The conflict between Rico and Mrs. Witt implies that intimacy itself results in deadness, numbness, and irritation. Intimacy represents a scratching, scathing, irritating pain. Intimacy does not rise to the level of impingement, which is about power and singularity rather than sniping and the personal conflict of clever minds. Getting



one's life "straight," as St. Mawr does, means that it is not crooked by the pettiness of social and emotional strife.

Simone de Beauvoir writes about singularity in her critique of Lawrence in *The Second Sex* (1949). She suggests that

It is not by asserting his singularity, but by fulfilling his generality as intensely as possible that the individual can be saved [in Lawrence's work]: male or female, one should never seek in erotic relations the triumph of one's pride or the exaltation of one's ego; to use one's sex as a tool of the will, that is the fatal mistake; one must break the barriers of the ego, transcend even the limits of consciousness, *renounce all personal sovereignty*. (215, emphasis added)

The operative term here is "personal sovereignty," or sovereignty of the personal. What Lou so admires about St. Mawr is his non-personal sovereignty. He fulfills his generality as horse as intensely as possible, to use de Beauvoir's terms, just as a man could renounce personal sovereignty and embody instinctual Maleness (this is exactly what men cannot or refuse to do, according to Lou). Though de Beauvoir says that this is not singularity, I think that this fulfillment of generality constitutes exactly what is singular in the Lawrentian imagination. A fulfillment of generality is the achievement of a creature that maintains itself alone rather than on intimate terms with another, even in relation to another. It is the unique creature that can do it, though human is less likely than animal. It is self-authorization, where self is not personal but a venting of a particular kind of instinctual life—a venting of wild horse life in St. Mawr's case—heedless of others and in the process breaking the "barriers of ego," as de Beauvoir says.

The dismissal of the personal looms over *St. Mawr*. Rejecting the sovereignty of the personal means rejecting the analyzable feelings and ideas that can be dissected,

explicated, and justified (or not) as expressions of an individual ego. These analyzable feelings and ideas are at the heart of the conflict between Rico and Mrs. Witt.<sup>37</sup>

The sovereignty that interests Lou—and Lawrence—has little to do with the personality of a human being at all. If a man could be like St. Mawr, he would lack all personality, which is the stuff of gossip, spite, and cheap admiration. As Lou says,

The pure animal man would be as lovely as a deer or a leopard, burning like a flame fed straight from underneath. And he'd be part of the unseen, like a mouse is, even. And he'd never cease to wonder, he'd breathe silence and unseen wonder, as partridges do, running in the stubble. He'd be all the animals in turn, instead of one, fixed, automatic thing, which he is now, grinding on the nerves.— Ah no, mother, I want the wonder back again, or I shall die. I don't want to be like you, just criticizing and annihilating these dreary people, and enjoying it. (82)

A horse that fulfills its horse-ness, like St. Mawr, points the way toward Lou's vision of "pure animal man." The personality that grinds on the nerves represents an automatic fixation.<sup>38</sup> According to the logic of Lou's imagination, the Lawrentian singularity of the animal means that a human who achieves such singular existence would be "all the animals in turn" and would be "part of the unseen." Lawrentian singularity demands the paradoxical thought that, for a man to be a man as a horse like St. Mawr is a horse, his essence would not be limited by a unitary appearance. This is the multiform One to which I alluded in the introduction of this chapter, venting its life in a variety of supple and spontaneous ways according to its instinct(s).

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<sup>37</sup> This would make "instinctual" feeling un-analyzable for Lawrence.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche comments in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "If one has character, then one has one's characteristic experience, which recurs again and again" (91). The Nietzschean thought resembles Lou's "one, fixed, automatic thing" insofar as both represent the repetition of the Same that is personality. Lou does not want personality but instead wants to "breathe silence and unseen wonder," that is, to live on and see what is hidden. There is a strange repetition even in this, though, for it means that the horse, St. Mawr, shows itself repeatedly in its multiform appearances.

Singularity means something different than personality in *St. Mawr*. Personality is a pathological condition. It grinds on in one way, mechanistic. Singularity means that the One appears to be many things, each of which express the One's spontaneous instinctual nature: "lovely as a deer or leopard, burning like a flame fed straight from underneath." The singular stallion has exactly this multiform character when Lou comes to see him in the stables at a house where she and Rico are living in the Shropshire countryside:

But when he lifted his lovely naked head, like a bunch of flames, to see who it was who had entered, she saw he was still himself. Forever sensitive and alert, his head lifted like the summit of a fountain. And within him the clean bones striking to the earth, his hoofs intervening between him and the ground like lesser jewels. (84)

This image of *St. Mawr* "still himself" depicts him as a flower-like bunch of flames, a fountain, and at last a visible skeleton with jewels for hooves. He appears to be all these things, because no one image can complete the task of portraying him in his essence. As Timothy Morton writes of objects considered from the phenomenological point of view, "objects can't be exhausted by perception" (36). Appearances do not get to essence. Phenomenologically, *St. Mawr* exceeds any single appearance. His burning, sensitive alertness and his poised physicality, statuesque and charged with condensed energy, demands that he appear fountain-like, bejeweled, aflame. All of these are the stallion called *St. Mawr*, who in his instinctual horseness remains "part of the unseen" (Lawrence 82).

It is here that things begin to get mystical. The stallion is part of the unseen because of his association with the god Pan. As the artist, Cartwright, whom Lou and Rico meet in the countryside, explains, Pan was "the God that is hidden in everything" (Lawrence 85). Cartwright makes it clear that he is talking about Pan "before the

anthropomorphic Greeks turned him into half a man” (85). The Pan that interests Cartwright and that Lou sees in St. Maw is “the hidden mystery—the hidden cause,” Cartwright says (85). This Pan represents the instinctual, creative force in everything, but crucially one cannot see Pan directly.<sup>39</sup> Cartwright even denies that Pan was male:

Pan wasn't a *he* at all: not even a great God. He was Pan, All: what you see when you see in full. In the daytime you see the thing. But if your third eye is open, which sees only the things that can't be seen, you may see Pan within the thing, hidden: you may see with your third eye, which is darkness. (85)

It is this “All,” which is the singular thing that is not exhausted by perception, that Lou sees in the flaming and bejeweled St. Mawr. Yet any one sighting of the All cannot claim to have seen it all, for its essence is opaque. Its creative power impinges on everything, but one cannot be intimate with it, for it is not personally graspable. It is silent and without mind. It is instinct.

This avatar of Pan, the non-personal St. Mawr is, to use Rupert Birkin's words from Lawrence's earlier novel *Women in Love* (1921), “beyond the influence of love” (145). In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett expands on de Beauvoir's comment in her own critique of Lawrence's fiction to argue specifically about love and the way in which Lawrence's male protagonists tend to imply the extinction of the personal. Discussing the romance between Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwen in *Women in Love*, Millett writes that “the ‘new’ relationship, while posing as an affirmation of the primal unconscious sexual being, to adopt Lawrence's jargon, is in effect a denial of personality in the

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Balbert argues that *St. Mawr* demonstrates both Panophilic and, notably, “phallophobic” sentiments. The novella refuses, Balbert suggests, the phallic power that grounds so much else in Lawrence's fiction. While I find some of Balbert's commentary on the non-phallic nature of St. Mawr persuasive, it remains the case that the sensual appreciation Lou has for the stallion is erotic and that her wish to be subsumed by him—or by a Pan-like power hidden in him—represents a subservience of women visible elsewhere in Lawrence's body of work.

woman” (Millett 264). Rupert Birkin, who critics have tended to identify as a proxy for Lawrence himself, serves as the basis for Millett’s point. As she notes, Birkin wants a “woman I don’t see” (Lawrence 147). Not “seeing” a woman means not seeing her on the “emotional, loving plane” (Lawrence 146). Instead, Birkin suggests a different kind of desire, one which “is quite inhuman” and “responsible for nothing” (Lawrence 146). On this plane, each creature (Birkin refuses the terms “man” and “woman”), takes from the other “according to the primal desire” (Lawrence 146). Birkin serves as Ursula’s tutor in this doctrine. His is the misogynistic upper hand, and his desire for the singular, “primal” (read: instinctual) desire guides Ursula’s, as St. Mawr will guide Lou, though without explicit direction.

Key to the non-responsibility of singularity is Birkin’s notion of “not seeing.”

This lack of response appears in *St. Mawr* as well. Take, for instance, the paragraph directly following the description of the stallion as a flaming, jeweled fountain:

He knew her and did not resent her. But he took no notice of her. He would never ‘respond.’ At first she resented it. Now she was glad. He would never be intimate, thank heaven. (84)

The point is that Lou learns not to resent being “unseen.” It gladdens her that St. Mawr does not “respond” to her. While this does indicate the extinction of the personality of the woman that Millett proposes, it does not eliminate the crucial detail that St. Mawr and Pan remain unseen as well. They represent a power that, in essence, is hidden. That does not change the fact that Lou craves a subservient position in relation to this unseeing power; Lawrence has portrayed her that way.

If Lou expresses impatience with the intervening mediations of “mind,” language, and personality—if she prefers the non-intimacy of St. Mawr—then her passion for the

stallion begins with his stare. Her first encounter with him foretells his later appearance as a jeweled flame and shows her the singular animal's unseeing eye:

The wild, brilliant, alert head of St. Mawr seemed to look at her out of another world. It was as if she had had a vision, as if the walls of her own world had suddenly melted away, leaving her in a great darkness, in the midst of which the large, brilliant eyes of that horse looked at her with demonish question, while his naked ears stood up like daggers from the naked lines of his inhuman head, and his great body glowed red with power... He was some splendid demon, and she must worship him... She could not bear the triviality and superficiality of her human relationships... She felt that it [St. Mawr's head] forbade her to be her ordinary, commonplace self. (Lawrence 50-51)

The "demonish question" of the eyes in that wild, alert head look at Lou "without really seeing her" (51). These are the unseeing eyes of the stallion. Lou has become the unseen woman Rupert Birkin wants in *Women in Love*.

Forbidding Lou to be her commonplace self, St. Mawr demands worship, not the accommodation of personal relations.<sup>40</sup> His ears knives, his size vastly increased in a place with few coordinates (the walls gone), the horse glows "red" like a sun, seemingly inexhaustible in his burning. In this case, Lou encounters the same hidden cause that will later appear like a jewel and a fountain. Many are the stallion's forms of appearances, and his unseeing eye therefore forbids Lou's "ordinary, commonplace" personality, which is paltry compared to the godhead she meets. As preposterous as it sounds, the singular but multiform stallion is a horse that can be called a horse, for it vents its life "straight" from Pan, the "hidden cause" of creation. Here there is no intervening mind or language. There

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<sup>40</sup> Feeling the horse as the avatar of an alternate cosmos, Lou feels she *must* worship him. In passages like these, one can sense particularly well the cause for de Beauvoir's sarcastic remark that Lawrence wrote guidebooks for women (De Beauvoir 223). And in Lawrence, as de Beauvoir continued, "It is much more difficult for woman than for man to 'accept the universe,' for man submits to the cosmic order autonomously, whereas woman needs the mediation of the male" (De Beauvoir 223). St. Mawr is Lou's mediating male element.

is only a living out of spontaneous, instinctual feeling, instinctual life, without regard for others. Not every creature so totally expresses its instinctual essence, but St. Mawr does—and mindful men, Lou says, never do.<sup>41</sup>

### **Personality and self-authorization**

The human personality appears in *St. Mawr* to be the most exhausting and exhausted thing of all. For Lawrence, it is a degraded subjectivity yoked to others, dependent and entirely lacking in self-authorization. Lou Witt finds the personal exertions around sex to be particularly exhausting. She hates “to think that most of all the young people in the world are like this: so bright and cheerful and so brimming with libido” (137). Her gripe about intimacy is similar: “Ah intimacy! The thought of it fills me with aches, and the pretense of it exhausts me beyond myself” (140). St. Mawr—multiform, inexhaustible, avatar of Pan—entirely lacks the pretense and striving that constitute sex and intimacy. He does not pose at all, according to Lou. Indeed, “black fiery flow in the eyes of the horse was not ‘attitude.’ It was something much more terrifying, and real, the only thing that was real” (Lawrence 52). The horse has an instinctual reality, not an attitudinal pose; he does not have a personality. As Lou puts it, “Personalities, which means personal criticism and analysis, pre-supposes a whole world-laboratory of human psyches waiting to be vivisected. If you cut a thing up, of course it will smell” (64). St. Mawr lacks this vivisected “smell” altogether. I want to examine more closely the flimsy “personality” in *St. Mawr* and how it is connected to the inexhaustible and self-authorizing stallion around which the novella revolves. Here we

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence tends to treat a notion like “horse” as though it is an objective instinctual essence.

move from the “unseeing” to the expressive nature of the horse: the reality that it expresses.

In their initial appearance in *St. Mawr*, horses appear to be personal accessories for a weary generation living in the aftermath of World War I. At the beginning of the novella, Lou and her mother observe socialites riding horses in London’s Hyde Park. Lou’s mother, Mrs. Witt, watches with her “grey eagle eye,” Lawrence writes, and “seemed to be pointing a pistol at the bosom of every other horseman or horsewoman, and announcing: *Your virility or your life! Your femininity or your life!*” (45; 46). Gender identity, in Mrs. Witt’s eyes, is wearied and weakened in postwar London; she could take the virility or femininity from these cardboard men and women by a simple threat of force. Lawrence insists, however, that Mrs. Witt does not know exactly what she wants “them [the riders] to be: but it was something as democratic as Abraham Lincoln and as aristocratic as a Russian Czar, as highbrow as Arthur Balfour, and as taciturn and unideal as Phoenix. Everything at once” (46). Such a figure, multiform but singular, sounds like a preview of the “pure animal man” that can be all animals in turn. It sounds as well like the stallion, St. Mawr.

The only fictional figure on Mrs. Witt’s list is Phoenix, a World War I veteran from Arizona whose given name is Geronimo Trujillo. He is Mrs. Witt’s groom, the caretaker of the horses she already owns. As the “son of a Mexican father and a Navajo Indian mother,” he is associated throughout the novella—along with Lewis, a Welsh groom who is St. Mawr’s handler—with the anti-personal singularity that fascinates



Lawrence and Lou (44).<sup>42</sup> Lawrence codes both characters as subaltern and nonwhite, fetishizing their connection with a pre-modern, instinctual world. These characters represent a rebuke to the modern moment in which they are situated but, for this very reason, appear to be avatars of its salvation. While Phoenix reflects an American primitivism, Lewis implies “the spirit of aboriginal England... old savage England, whose last blood flows still in a few Englishmen, Welshmen, Cornishmen” (93). These characters embody a return of the instinct repressed in modern culture. Their racialization is key to this romance, since their racial marginalization allows Lawrence to reclaim them as a redemptive signifier for Lou. They become counter-cultural. During an era of British imperial decline, this racial romance recapitulates colonialism. Lewis and Phoenix are symbolic resources from which Lawrence/Lou can extract images and ideas. They show that humans can act like St. Mawr (and that St. Mawr can act like them). Through them, Lou grasps the meaning of standing at the edge of modern culture as a rejection of human self-assurance in favor of animal indifference.<sup>43</sup> An American Indian and an aboriginal

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<sup>42</sup> Like St. Mawr, Phoenix has an “impersonal will” (Lawrence 59) that is essentially instinctual. He handles the horse “without sympathy,” mirroring St. Mawr’s own unsympathetic nature (66). Similarly, when Mrs. Witt takes time to cut Lewis’s hair, she finds it animalistic. Lewis has never been married and evinces, like St. Mawr, little interest in romance or sex (79). Mrs. Witt concludes that he is a “man with no mind!” (79). By mind she means the “clever” mind of the civilized man that Lou expresses distaste for. And like St. Mawr’s eyes, with their nonhuman world, Lewis “has the eyes of a human cat: a human tom-cat” (79). These human figures serve to show that the qualities that so distinguish St. Mawr are not so much purely animal as capable of being adopted by human beings as well.

<sup>43</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to unpack all of the racial elements of *St. Mawr*, but Phoenix and Lewis represent a “primitivist” strain in Lawrence’s thought. On the one hand, this primitivism relates to the idea of a pre-Classical Europe, where a figure like Pan (Pan before the Greeks made him “half-man”) rules creation. On the other hand, this primitivism depends on the supposedly more violent or cruel nature of societies that existed prior to the period about which Lawrence is writing. The point is that Lewis and Phoenix represent cultural remainders, leftover during the postwar era, and because they are remainders, they signal a way back to something otherwise repressed, e.g. the instinctuality of animals. They suggest the romance of redemption for a character like Lou. As Oliver Mellors represents sexual redemption in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the racialized other in *St. Mawr* represents a precious symbolic resource to be used, as far as it goes, by those in the modernized world who in their crumbling empire continue the practice of extraction at the level of discourse. Ultimately, however, Lou will be skeptical of Lewis, Phoenix, and even her own mother and St. Mawr.

Welshman represent literal human resources that help to make the stallion's style of indifference and aggression counter-cultural to begin with.

What the reader sees with Mrs. Witt in Hyde Park, accordingly, is the absence of the self-assurance that characterizes figures like Lewis and Phoenix, who are echoes in human form of St. Mawr the stallion. Mrs. Witt's observations of riders in Hyde Park suggests that people on horses expect animals to do a measure of their self-asserting for them. She would mock Jack London's claim in *John Barleycorn* that only a man of sober self-control could ride his horse, named The Outlaw. Requiring a horse to demonstrate self-assurance is exactly what she disparages in Hyde Park, where horses are personal accouterments, like the niceness and cleverness that Lou later rejects.

It is not only the horses, which are part of a hesitant gender expression, that irritate Mrs. Witt. She hates as well the "finickiness and fine-drawn discriminations" of Englishmen and -women and pines for the "sardonic grimness" of the Louisiana plantation where she grew up (Lawrence 44). As Lou will later say that all modern men are like women knitting words together, so Mrs. Witt suggests that society at large turns its face from the brutality of power. Mrs. Witt conceives of the more naked exercise of power in a society organized around slavery as more authentic than postwar London, where men and women lack the grimness compelled by owning, selling, surveilling, and punishing other human beings. Mrs. Witt wants, in fact, to be violent herself; she wants to "put her foot through" fine distinctions (44), as if to bring out the violence that has proved, in the aftermath of World War I, to be a true world-shaping force. During the war she worked as a nurse, and Lawrence implies that she did so partly because she "loved men—real men" (44). These real men are as much a fantasy as her desire to "put her foot

through” conventional ways of thinking, though, for she “never met any” real men at all (44).

Horses and “fine-drawn distinctions” may convey the superficiality of postwar personality in Mrs. Witt’s eyes, but newspapers represent its apotheosis. Having moved from London to a house in Shropshire with Lou and Rico, Mrs. Witt has a habit of standing at the window and watching funerals in the adjacent cemetery. She tells Lou, “I’ve come to the conclusion that hardly anybody in the world really lives, and so hardly anybody really dies” (112). What does die, she says, is the personality, which is in its essence the stuff of newspaper gossip and obituaries: a prosaic summary of events and facts. Reflecting on the death of a neighborhood girl, Mrs. Witt says, “I feel that there should be a solemn burial of a roll of newspapers containing the account of the death and funeral, next week. It would be just as serious: the grave of all the world’s remarks” (112). It resembles the funeral of a person lost at sea, with no body to inter. All that is left is words, no other mark. Words and remarks provide a flimsy assurance, like the horses in Hyde Park. They shore up a superficial selfhood, which can be summarized as fact(s) but otherwise has no substance. Living in remarks exemplifies the life lived from “old tanks” rather than instinctually “straight” from the source.

When Lou objects to the notion, Mrs. Witt insists. She says, “I’m sure I never really conceived you and gave you birth. It all happened in newspaper notices. It’s a newspaper fact that you are my child, and that’s about all there is to it” (112-113). Life, death, and now birth happen “in newspaper notices.” Gestation appears to be superficial. Likewise her motherhood, girlhood, and marriage. All happened in newspaper notices, she says (113). If the written account of her life captures it entirely, then Mrs. Witt

implies that it constitutes a self for others, i.e. a personality, and nothing else. “Bury everything I ever said or that was said about me,” she laments, “and you’ve buried *me*” (Lawrence 113, emphasis in original). What makes the personality so flimsy is that it consists of words to begin with. Like language considered as knitting, the personality so conceived is an embellishment and ornamentation.

The stallion’s silence is something else entirely. St. Mawr’s silence impresses Lou and Mrs. Witt because it has no need of language or newspaper facts. It depends not on remarks but on its self-authorization.

Compared with St. Mawr, Rico also demonstrates the difference between flimsy personality, a self for others, and self-authorizing singularity. First of all, the horse constitutes a tense violence. As Lawrence writes,

Lou at once decided that this handsome figure [St. Mawr] should be Rico’s. For she was already half in love with St. Mawr. He was of such a lovely red-gold colour, and a dark, invisible fire seemed to come out of him. But in his big black eyes there was a lurking afterthought. Something told her that the horse was not quite happy: that somewhere deep in his animal consciousness lived a dangerous, half-revealed resentment, a diffused sense of hostility. She realised that he was sensitive, in spite of his flaming, healthy strength, and nervous with a touchy uneasiness that might make him vindictive. (48)

Lou senses the unseen Pan in the stallion’s flaming health—its vent-able instinctual life—but Rico himself is “a horse that might go nasty any moment” (47). Given the stallion’s “touchy uneasiness that might make him vindictive,” husband and horse appear to be alike. It would be wrong to think so, for Rico explicitly fears that he “might rip in an eruption of life-long anger all this pretty-pretty picture of a charming young wife and a delightful little home and a fascinating success as a fashionable painter, and at the same time great portraits” (47). In short, Rico “daren’t quite bite” (47). The social cost of

misogynist rage restrains him from expressing it. St. Mawr has no such problem. He has killed two men in riding accidents, after all, for he is unwilling to tolerate riders he does not like. Mr. Saintsbury, the owner of the stable where St. Mawr is kept in London, says that the horse is “eaten up with his own power” (49). One would not say the same of Rico, who polices his potential “bite” precisely to preserve what secures him as a person: the “pretty-pretty picture” of himself together with his wife, his nice house, and his fashionability as a painter. In other words, the newspaper facts that constitute Rico’s personality.

It is implicit in *St. Mawr* that the eponymous stallion is just as self-conscious as a character like Rico, but the horse lacks his self-doubt and hesitation. What Lou thinks of as a “diffused sense of hostility” is the stallion’s instinctual spontaneity, untrammelled by indecision. St. Mawr, in short, self-authorizes. He is satisfied on his own. As Lou is told when first buying St. Mawr, “There are horses like that: don’t seem to fancy the mares, for some reason.—Well anyway, they couldn’t keep him for the stud” (49). This horse that has no needs of others, no need of accessories; it does not live out newspaper facts. The point is that the stallion expresses, without words, only its own instinctual character. Rico and St. Mawr might be resentful animals, but only St. Mawr’s resentment comes from power, pride, and self-assurance. Rico derives his from the insecurity around the trappings that define him. Mrs. Witt worries explicitly over the same thing, anxious for the sufficiency of self for self’s sake.

**What one sees in the world, what one sees in St. Mawr**

The accident in which Rico is injured while riding St. Mawr is a decisive point in Lawrence's narrative. During and after this incident, Lou sees the world anew. St. Mawr's essence becomes clear to her as well.

It starts with an irritation. Out riding St. Mawr with several other friends, including Lou, Rico insists on hearing again a whistled tune he likes. The noise aggravates St. Mawr, who "shied sideways as if a bomb had gone off" (96). Rico cries out "Fool!" and pulls the reins "viciously," attempting to bring the horse to order (96). It does not work. When the horse rears—"his favourite trick," Lawrence writes—Rico continues pulling the reins and, in Lawrence's phrase, "He pulled the horse over backwards, on top of him" (96). Rico should have known better, Lawrence implies. In the ensuing chaos, St. Mawr kicks another man in the face, knocking out some of his teeth and drawing blood.

The situation is complex. Though Rico acted out of a natural enough mixture of fear, anger, and inexperience with a horse that is unafraid to defend itself from any irritation, Lou broods on whether the horse or rider was at fault. She rides her own horse back to the house to get brandy for a stunned Rico. As she moves across the countryside, she has a "vision of evil" (98). She sees that a "mysterious evil" has "enveloped" the world in "one great flood" (98). Lou's vision explicitly springs from the image of St. Mawr after Rico pulled the horse backwards and onto the ground: "the pale gold belly of the stallion upturned, the hoofs working wildly, the wicked curved hams of the horse, and then the evil straining of that arched, fish-like neck, with the dilated eyes of the head" (98). Taking the horse's panic symbolically, Lou sees "the same in people," for "they [too] were thrown backwards, [sic] and writhing with evil" (98-99).

The evil that Lou envisions has everything to do with the difference between humans with personalities and a singular animal world. Though Lou thinks with horror of the look on St. Mawr's face when the stallion was on its back, she thinks with "a colder horror" of Rico's face as he lay pinned under his steed (99). This horror is at Rico's "fear, his impotence as a master, as a rider, his presumption" (99). His incompetence accords with the characteristics of the "unpleasant animal" that refuses to bite. The sight of him disarmed by his own impotence horrifies his wife.

Lou considers also the horrifying qualities of the Manby girls, friends in Shropshire who fawn over Rico. Rico and the Manby girls represent together one of the great irritants of Lou's life: the ideology of "fun." As Lawrence wrote of Lou only a few paragraphs before St. Mawr and Rico fell: "The atmosphere of 'enjoying ourselves' was becoming cruel to her: it sapped all the life out of her" (95). A dozen pages before that, Lawrence had written, also from Lou's point of view, "It had begun again, the whole clockwork of 'lots of fun'" (83). In her vision of evil, Lou surmises, "Nearly every individual wanted peace and a good time all round: everybody to have a good time" (98). The ideology of fun abets evil but is also an active part of it, for the enjoyable surface of a life lived by unpleasant animals gives cover to nihilism. Entranced by her vision of evil, Lou wonders:

What did they want to do, those Manby girls? Undermine, undermine, undermine. They wanted to undermine Rico, just as that fair young man would have liked to undermine her. Believe in nothing, care about nothing: but keep the surface easy, and have a good time. *Let us undermine one another. There is nothing to believe in, so let us undermine everything.* (99)

The "fun" to which Lou refer exists when no one believes in anything. It represents the surface of a nihilistic abyss. In the spirit of "fun," people also act out resentful

subterfuges, gaining interpersonal power over others without having to openly declare the conflict.<sup>44</sup>

According to Lou's vision of evil, it is in the nature of "undermining" to ensure that injures remain concealed: "Never draw blood. Keep the hemorrhage internal, invisible" (99). Blood shocks. It gives an external sign of distress that is intolerable in a "enjoyable" society of undeclared interpersonal aggression. So Lou's vision suggests. The hemorrhage must remain invisible so as not to ruffle the placid surface of things.

But for Lou the evil society also craves a specific kind of safety. As she puts it,

Creation destroys as it goes, throws down one tree for the rise of another. But ideal mankind would abolish death, multiply itself million upon million, rear up city upon city, save every parasite alive, until the accumulation of mere existence is swollen to a horror. (100)

"Ideal mankind" safeguards "mere existence," not positive living.<sup>45</sup> Abolishing death, this society would preserve biological functioning without a thought to what living is for. Cities and parasites would flourish, and as they flourish, they would take what is required to keep drawing breath and perpetuate their existence. One can sense Lawrence's fascist leanings in sentiments like this.

In defiance of fetishized safety, Lou thinks that death and decay are part of "creation." One tree's demise serves as the opportunity for another to grow. The living

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Balbert speaks of the "uber-rationalist and cynical world that Lawrence openly deplors in *St. Mawr*" (Balbert 52), and while I think the passage I am discussing here—about "undermining"—demonstrates a critique of cynicism in particular, Lawrence's sympathies for the singular animal represent nothing if not a refined or mystified cynicism. The singular animal has a far less anxious selfishness than that of the undermining human beings Lou disparages. It is no less self-interested for that. The singular animal favors open conflict, not subterfuge.

<sup>45</sup> What Lawrence calls "mere existence" appears to be like "bare life" in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. Bare life is, in Greek, *zoē*, which means simple biological functioning, or, in Agamben's phrase, "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)" (Agamben 1). Despite his denunciation of fascism, Lawrence seems to sympathize with certain fascistic ideas, e.g. the notion that some ways of living are not authentic.



thing in general “destroys as it goes” (Lawrence 100), until it expires or is destroyed itself. As Deleuze writes, “the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life” (40).

Organisms die, but life flourishes.

“Ideal mankind,” with its personalities, its “fun,” and its hoarding of an exhaustible life, cannot accept such a state of affairs and, according to Lou, “undermine[s] the natural creation, betray[s] it with kiss after kiss, destroy[s] it from the inside, till you have the swollen rottenness of our teeming existences” (100). The impulse to undermine, then, derives from the denial of nature’s casual destruction. An anemic safety reigns in the (modern, postwar) human world instead.<sup>46</sup> To undermine creation is to sustain mere existence at the expense of allowing beings like St. Mawr to flourish when their flourishing entails harm to or destruction of others. But, Lou thinks, creation cannot be purged of its dangers. Her vision of the undermining evil of modern life suggests that there is a deluded urge among people to eliminate the inherent risk(s) of being alive.

As if to illustrate this point, Rico demands that St. Mawr be shot as soon as Lou sees him again after the accident. Lou considers the possibility that the stallion really is, as Rico argues, evil and treacherous. She decides that if it is true, then St. Mawr should be shot. She wonders as well if the stallion has the “slavish malevolence of a domesticated creature” (100). “[M]ost slaves can’t be freed,” Lou thinks (100). She continues, “like domestic animals, they are, in the long run, more afraid of freedom than

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<sup>46</sup> Lou’s vision of evil adds, in a line that now reads as ironic, “Nobody’s going to make another bad break, such as Germany and Russia made” (100). She cannot foresee World War II.

of their masters” (100). That the stallion is a wild rather than treacherous or slavish animal is the only alternative view.

Lou’s idea of the wild animal turns out to be one of the most decisive passages in *St. Mawr*, a companion to the passage on the multiform, singular stallion:

The wild animal is at every moment intensely self-disciplined, poised in the tension of self-defence [sic], self-preservation, and self-assertion. The moments of relaxation are rare and most carefully chosen. Even sleep is watchful, guarded, unrelaxing, the wild courage pitched one degree higher than the wild fear. Courage, the wild thing’s courage to maintain itself alone and living in the midst of a diverse universe. (102)

Lou’s wild animal does not undermine. Its fear and anxiety do not rule it or determine its behavior, for its courage is “pitched one degree higher than the wild fear.” This wild animal expresses with its very being the tension of its existence. It is ontologically unrelaxed. As Lou notes, self-discipline, self-defense, self-preservation, and self-assertion distinguish the wild animal. One senses that, by Lou’s logic, the wild animal expresses its own instinctual essence—its self for self’s sake—with every twitch and gesture, though its instinctuality is still spontaneous. Even the wild animal’s sleep little resembles sleep, insofar as sleeping suggests a slackening of awareness and physical readiness. Nothing about this “wild animal” fails to express its courage to maintain itself. It has the “lonely responsibility of real freedom” (102). This is self-authorization, according to Lawrence, in the object-like integrity of a horse that can be a horse.

Given this conclusion about the stallion, Lou decides that Rico is an enemy of the diverse universe. He “was one of mankind’s myriad conspirators, who conspire to live in absolute physical safety, whilst willing the minor disintegration of all positive living” (102). Rico’s desire for safety has to do, I think, with his discomfort at the feeling of

having to defend himself. St. Mawr should be shot, he believes, precisely because Rico does not want to have defend himself at all, ever. He mishandled the horse, suffered the consequences, and now aims to expunge St. Mawr from the world. A wild animal knows that it lives in the “midst of a diverse universe,” but when Lou calls Rico “one of mankind’s myriad conspirators,” the implied conspiracy is a movement against the diverse universe itself. *St. Mawr* suggests that Rico, the Manby girls, and others who revel in “fun” ache with the desire not to share the world with creatures like St. Mawr. They want safe horses that are personal accouterments, like those in Hyde Park.

Though it could perhaps be a companion, the wild animal is never an accessory.<sup>47</sup> Lou imagines St. Mawr in a noble past as the companion of worthier human beings. She thinks that for “St. Mawr, that bright horse, [it would have been] a fulfilment for him to serve the brave, reckless, perhaps cruel men of the past, who had a flickering, rising flame of nobility in them” (103). In Lou’s time, men are unpleasant, cringing, and tainted by personality; they are “dead, guttering out in a stink of self-sacrifice whose feeble light is a light of exhaustion” (104). Their paltry “self-sacrifice” cannot make up for their deficit in self-discipline, self-preservation, and self-assertion.

Such exhausted men do not ride horses. They invent “motor-cars and other machines, automobile and locomotive” (104). Because exhausted men ride around in their passive, mechanical chariots, “the horse is superannuated, for man” (104). What this really means is that “man is even more superannuated, for the horse” (104). A stallion

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<sup>47</sup> Donna Haraway writes in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, “Beings do not preexist their relatings” (6). This is not Lawrence’s philosophical approach. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn Haraway’s thought more fully in Lawrence’s direction to understand the companionship between St. Mawr and Lou, between Lou and the desert to which she retreats.

like St. Mawr does not need humans like Rico at all, hence the animal's unhesitating, spontaneous conduct in the incident where it reared and fell on top of its impotent master. St. Mawr ought to have lived in another era, Lou thinks, one populated by human beings who shared his singular and selfish nobility. The horse is not one of humankind's carousel rides but a self-authorizing wild animal.

Though they have no outright sexual contact in the novella, the appeal for Lou of St. Mawr has an erotic charge as well. At their very first meeting, Lou strokes the horse's shoulder in what seems a masturbatory gesture; she finds that the stallion is "slippery with vivid, hot life" (50). If Lou had been "half in love" upon first seeing St. Mawr (Lawrence 48), that love deepens once she touches him. As Lawrence writes, in terms that connote virginal excitement, "in her young-woman's soul, an ancient understanding seemed to flood in" (50). "Ancient" suggests her feminine receptivity and also the distant (and fantastical) past invoked by the image of "brave, reckless, perhaps cruel men of the past, who had a flickering, rising flame of nobility in them" (103). In light of the notion that modern men are superannuated for this horse, it becomes clear over the course of the novella that the stallion represents not only a figure of noble singularity but one who exerts a pull on both Lou's excitement and her grief. She may not want to have sex with the stallion—she slowly decides that she does not want to have sex with anyone at all—and yet even to look at St. Mawr is to touch him again and feel drawn into proximity with him.

After the incident with Rico, she approaches the stallion, pledging out loud that she does not "want to touch... I only want to look at you, and even you can't prevent that" (103). Looking proves too painful. She must avert her eyes in grief, because when

she gazes at the horse and sees that men are superannuated for it, she realizes what the stallion has lost. The stallion has lost contact with those noble riders it might have had in the past. The vocabulary of St. Mawr's hypothetical fulfillment with these vanished men suggests an energetic arousal that is erotic without implying sex directly. If St. Mawr had lived with them, the stallion would have followed that "flickering, rising flame of nobility," which "obliges men to be brave, and onward plunging" for it is a "forward-pressing nobility" that has slipped away (103-104). Without suggesting sex per se, these visions of what St. Mawr could have had (if he existed in a long-gone noble epoch) imply the same thing that Lou experiences when she admires the horse: a spirit aroused to excitement, to conquest, and to the taking of what is desired according to instinct. Mrs. Witt had said all that constitutes her are "remarks," which might as well be buried in the ground instead of her own body. Here in Lou's vision of noble men and horses, the reader finds individuals who are not connected only "in newspaper fact" but in a vitalizing relation of mutual fulfillment and excitation. Without the intervening and cheap personality that insists on "fun," a more genuine eroticism of contact takes place. Or at least that is the supposition Lawrence suggests in *St. Mawr*, as an alternative to the evil undermining of the modern world.

With no way to get to this myth of the past, the way to fight modern evil is for the individual to "depart from the mass, [sic] and try to cleanse himself" (100). Lawrence implies that the crowded mass is not only dirty, or impurifying, but noisy. Departing from it means trying to "hold fast to the living thing, which destroys as it goes, but remains sweet" (100). Most importantly for what is about to happen in *St. Mawr*, this solution calls for a "retreat to the desert" (100).

Though he drops the thought of shooting St. Mawr, Rico does sell the stallion to the Manbys, and their plan is to geld the horse.<sup>48</sup> The threat of castration so distresses Lou that she soon conceives of the plan to take the horse back to America, to the deserts of the American Southwest, in fact. There the retreat to the desert can begin in earnest. Lou has to escape the undermining world of “fun,” which is the world of self-for-others that “undermines, undermines, undermines.”

Mrs. Witt concurs with Lou’s plan. She remarks that taking the stallion to America will “preserve one last male thing in the museum of this world” (117). Protecting the horse means defending it from the “eunuch-civilization” (116) that fetishizes safety and lives in terror of danger. In the museum of the world, everything is neutralized, neutered, and without vital energy. Keeping the horse masculine means keeping it vital and instinctual. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, Lawrence always depicts a “woman [who] needs the mediation of the male” (De Beauvoir 223) to learn the lesson of independent singularity. Preserving St. Mawr’s literal penis ensures that he can be a horse that is a horse, since protecting the horse’s maleness protects its symbolic potency and its wild animality, both of which are models of spontaneous self for the worshipful Lou.

The horse may be Pan, multiform but singular and always becoming. It may be silent and non-personal. Yet all these ways of being are expressive. Everything the self-authorizing animal does expresses its singular nature. Words, Lou suggested earlier in the

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<sup>48</sup> It turns out that Rico has broken ribs and a crushed ankle and will probably have a permanent limp. He is a precursor to the paralyzed Clifford Chatterley of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), for Rico’s injury likewise prepares the way for the departure of his spouse.

novella, represent mere knitting, an ornamentation—and a feminized one at that. As in “newspaper facts” and the world’s remarks, words pale next to true self-expression, which is silent. *St. Mawr* evokes this possibility of self-expression without language. This is an expression independent of others, and its essence remains opaque, for the One can appear to be many things that express the One’s instinctual nature. Lawrence seems to believe there is a place before or prior to language of which humans can partake or which humans can and must approach.<sup>49</sup>

### **Singular and alone**

To understand what an expression without language looks like, I want to take a few moments to describe *St. Mawr* using the vocabulary and concepts of one of the most influential texts in contemporary animal studies. In their discussion of the concept of “becoming-animal” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, “Lawrence is another of the writers who leave us troubled and filled with admiration because they were able to tie their writing to real and unheard-of becomings” (244). Deleuze and Guattari do not speak of *St. Mawr* specifically in this passage, but their words are fitting to the extent that *St. Mawr* represents an anomaly. Deleuze and Guattari continue, “the anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects” (244). The eponymous stallion of *St. Mawr* seems to distinguish itself as just such an anomaly. When Lou recognizes the multiform appearances of the stallion, each signals a way in

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<sup>49</sup> This notion of a pre-linguistic expression presumes that there is a form of expression prior to writing at all. Derrida’s critique in *Of Grammatology* argues the opposite. Not even speaking is prior to writing for Derrida. Writing is always logically prior to speaking, because language depends on a system that “brings classificatory difference into play” (Derrida 109). Take the word “I.” The word “I” is part of a system of differences in which two people can say this word “I,” and the difference between each speaker is not nonsensical. Both are “I.” For Derrida, writing is this play of differences. If writing is understood as the play of classificatory difference, then “no reality or concept would therefore correspond to the expression ‘society without writing’” (Derrida 109). Representation always already intervenes.

which the horse affects and is affected by its surroundings. Connected to the ground, the horse is sturdily bejeweled; connected to the sun, the horse is aflame; connected to a noble past, the horse bears itself with aristocratic assurance. These are not passive traits, but passionate ones: both affected and affecting. They demonstrate the horse's enigmatic energies, always self-assertive and self-preserving. St. Mawr shows off this affectedness of its equine nature without an intervening personality or attitude, too, according to Lou. Conventional or sociable forms of feeling do not constrain this animal as they constrain an unpleasant one like Rico. As Lou says, the stallion gets its life "straight," that is, instinctually, rather than from "old tanks." It has no being but only becoming. The Deleuzo-Guattarian vision of a heterogeneous becoming suggests, as does Lawrence's animal that is "everything at once," that such an entity is unconstrained by socialization.

I hesitate in embracing the point of view Deleuze and Guattari expound in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Multiform but singular, St. Mawr is One that appears in many guises ("everything at once"). Its multiform character nevertheless does not appear to be the multiplicity of affects so prized by Deleuze and Guattari, for the term that Lawrence repeatedly invokes (and which I have been invoking throughout this chapter) is "self," as in the litany of characteristics that express the wild animal's instinctual autonomy: *self*-defense, *self*-assertion, *self*-preservation. In the Lawrentian imagination, the multiform but singular organism not only coheres as a single entity, it has an identity: St. Mawr. Its essentially opaque self is expressed in the appearances of this inexhaustibly object-like creature (a horse that can be a horse) that Lawrence imagines the wild stallion to be. It is a becoming with a name, not only affects.



I have called St. Mawr exemplary rather than an example specifically to evoke this expressiveness of the One that Lawrence implies. Though Lou says that he is a horse that can be a horse, St. Mawr does not fulfill a preexisting idea of what a horse should be. It is meeting St. Mawr that makes Lou think that she has met a horse. She does not begin from the clear definition, scientific or otherwise, of what a horse is and then find it embodied to the utmost in the stallion she meets and purchases.<sup>50</sup> St. Mawr expresses instinctual equinity in a way that makes her see from their initial meeting onward that a “horse can be a horse” in a way that men cannot be men. The One makes her see; this is its expressiveness of itself (its self) for its self—and its name is St. Mawr. He has an identity expressed in multiform appearances, not a multiplicity of affects that makes him Many rather than One.

It is necessary to wonder, however, to what extent this stallion called St. Mawr can be thought of as a horse at all. Given the novella’s discourse on the “wild animal,” St. Mawr’s equinity seems beside the point. The stallion embodies the notion of the wild animal articulated by Lou, or by Lawrence speaking in Lou’s voice. Its self-asserting, self-defending, and self-preserving instinctuality matters more than its mane, its hooves, or the fact that it is occasionally saddled. That a horse represents human training and an irrepressible animal independence does make a difference—a horse seems like a “natural” pick for the story Lawrence tells—but only insofar as it intensifies the sense in Lawrence’s story that the horse has an opaque and alien self, a self for self’s sake rather

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<sup>50</sup> Though the Derridean point would be that she does not need to reference an articulated definition of “horse.” The play of difference is what makes her statement that a “horse can be a horse” comprehensible to begin with. Lawrence’s thought tends towards a belief in something prior to language—the ineffable that is, in fact, comprehensible only because of language, as the existence of clothing makes nudity possible.

than a knowable self for others. What matters about St. Mawr matters because of the One's putative wild nature not because it is a horse per se.

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway comments on the exact passage from *A Thousand Plateaus* that I quoted above. Deleuze and Guattari write, "The anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects" (Deleuze and Guattari 244). Haraway goes into extensive detail in her response to this and other passages, sketching how "becoming-animal" in *A Thousand Plateaus* favors the anomalous and wild over the prosaic and the domestic. She argues that Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is one of contempt: "No earthly animal would look twice at these authors" (Haraway 28). The reason no animal—one of Haraway's own dogs, say—would not look twice at Deleuze and Guattari has to do with the nature of their philosophical approach. "This," Haraway writes of their manner of thought, "is a philosophy of the sublime, not the earthly, not the mud" (28). As in her critique of Derrida's "And Say the Animal Responded?" Haraway wants to clarify the difference between a philosophy that makes of animals a challenge to specific philosophical conceits and a line of thought that engages with the lives, interests, curiosities, and companionship of actually existing animals. Derrida approaches the discussion of actually existing animals, but Deleuze and Guattari reject it, Haraway argues. Citing Deleuze and Guattari's dismissal of the "sentimental Oedipal animals" otherwise known as domestic pets, Haraway says that "no reading strategies can mute the scorn for the homely and the ordinary" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Haraway 29). As with *St. Mawr's* stallion, the animals in *A Thousand Plateaus* serve a philosophical or conceptual purpose quite distinct from the lives of actually existing creatures.

Haraway even cites Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of D.H. Lawrence. She offers the following passage from *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Ahab's Moby Dick is not like the little cat or dog owned by an elderly woman who honors and cherishes it. Lawrence's becoming-tortoise has nothing to do with a sentimental or domestic relation... But the objection is raised against Lawrence: 'Your tortoises aren't real!' And he answers: Possibly, but my becoming is, my becoming is real, even and especially if you have no way of judging it, because you're just little house dogs. (Deleuze and Guattari 244)

Haraway's response to this passage clarifies two things. First, she fixes on the casual way in which Deleuze and Guattari depend on the language of individuation—their pantomime of Lawrence has him answering “my becoming”—in a philosophy otherwise impatient with and in opposition to individual identity. Second, she identifies the prejudicial strain of Deleuze and Guattari's thought. Her response, in full, is best:

“My becoming” seems awfully important in a theory opposed to the strictures of individuation and subject. The old, female, small, dog- and cat-loving: these are who and what must be vomited out by those who will become-animal. Despite keen competition, I am not sure I can find in philosophy a clearer display of misogyny, fear of aging, incuriosity about animals, and horror at the ordinariness of the flesh, here covered by the alibi of an anti-Oedipal and anticapitalist project. (Haraway 30)

Haraway argues that Deleuze and Guattari explore “becoming-animal” at the expense of animals, women, and the “ordinariness of the flesh,” including the companionship that occurs in the home between, for example, women and their dogs (or cats). The knowledge of how human beings relate to the cats, dogs, and horses with which they share their lives interests Haraway to the utmost. This knowledge interests her, because companions “do not preexist their constitutive intra-action at every folded layer of time and space” (32). To know the relationships between human beings and actually existing animals means coming to know a human being and a dog, a human being and a cat, a

human being and, of course, a horse. Inter-species communication and companionship obviously poses many difficulties, which Haraway eagerly engages. As she suggests in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, one cannot know self or other and thus cannot know animals except in the challenges and pleasures of companionship (Haraway 50). Her point is that animals are nevertheless not anomalous. They are “earthly” because they are co-created with their human companions and their surroundings.

Lawrence’s conception of the stallion, St. Mawr, seems in a way to suggest the “co-creation” that interests Haraway. In the eye of St. Mawr, Lou sees a “living background, into which she wanted to retreat” (Lawrence 61). She also sees it in the horse’s groom, the Welshman named Lewis, who looks “at her as if he looked from out of another country” (Lawrence 124). These worlds of horse and horse’s groom are silent. Lou imagines Lewis’s to be a “world dark and still, where language never ruffled the growing leaves” (124). What Lou sees is what the sight of Lewis expresses for her. Her consciousness of it provides its ground and makes it sensible.

The alien silence of the stallion can only express without language when a representational consciousness like Lou’s can picture it. More than this, it is the *difference* between, on one side, the chattering cleverness of the Manbys and Rico and, on the other side, the austere quiet of St. Mawr that makes it possible for the silent world to stand forth and appear to Lou as silence in the first place. Like nudity, which is not possible without the existence of clothes, silence exists because of its differential relationship with its contrary term.<sup>51</sup> The singular silence epitomized by an unseeing,

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<sup>51</sup> In Derrida’s terms from *Of Grammatology*, this is the “classificatory play of differences,” which he calls writing in general (Derrida 109).

wild animal only *appears* to stand apart and independent from the petty personality of language, which according to Lou's metaphor is mere knitting. Singular silence looks like the result of a co-creating difference.

But Haraway's notion of "co-creation"—like the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of multiplicity—does not adequately capture St. Mawr's singular self, which Lawrence insists stands alone. To grasp Lawrence's insistence on this point, one should look to his understanding of the term "unconscious." The Lawrentian unconscious directly opposes Freudian psychoanalysis, which takes the term to mean a reservoir of repressed psychical material that can be clothed or expressed in conscious behavior. In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921), Lawrence suggests an alternative. He writes, "By unconscious we wish to indicate that essential unique nature of every individual creature, which is, by its very nature, unanalyzable, undefinable, inconceivable. It cannot be conceived, it can only be experienced" (Lawrence 214). As the principle of growth that determines how a creature develops and lives out its needs and instincts, Lawrence's unconscious is inexplicable; it follows the apparently tautological desire for self-actualization. Such self-actualization only occurs practically and materially, rather than hypothetically, because, as Lawrence writes, again in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, "Knowledge is always a matter of whole experience" (Lawrence 215). It cannot be conceived abstractly. One must realize it in experience. Though Lawrence implies the "unique nature" of each individual has its own instinctual path, which comes close to sounding like a plan, knowledge cannot grasp it. Only in experience does the One unfold itself and appear in its many guises.

The eponymous stallion in *St. Mawr* embodies this notion of a self that is “unanalyzable, undefinable, [and] inconceivable” more clearly than any of the cringing animals that pass for human beings in Lawrence’s story. This self is not a subject that exists in relations of reciprocity with the objects around it. Impersonal and silent—a wild, instinctual animal par excellence—St. Mawr is “eaten up with his own power” and burns like the sun. It is the sun that is precisely Lawrence’s image in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* for the inexhaustible object I have suggested constitutes a creature like St. Mawr.<sup>52</sup> Both sun and stallion represent an expressiveness that cannot be broken into constituent elements. Neither has need of words. Both express only their own nature and nothing else. They do not and cannot relate to others. As Lawrence writes in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*,

We know the sun. But we cannot conceive the sun, unless we are willing to accept some theory about burning gases... And even if we do have a mental conception of the sun as a sphere of blazing gas—which it certainly isn’t—we are just as far from knowing what *blaze* is. (215)

In other words, we experience the sun phenomenologically, being solar creatures tied to diurnal rhythms and the fluctuating touch of heat. Lawrence is against psychological understanding for the same reason he praises the inconceivable nature of the sun: The blazing of the sun is the expression of its nature as an object that inexhaustibly burns. Not the Many but the One, not co-created but expressing only its singularity, this blazing self is tautological, like a horse that blazes or radiates its horse instinct.<sup>53</sup> Like the sun, St. Mawr is the One which expresses its oneness without reference to others.

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<sup>52</sup> Rico says after riding the difficult stallion, “Between the sun and the horse, really!—between two fires” (70).

<sup>53</sup> Instinct itself is a tautological idea in Lawrence.

Once Lou and St. Mawr reach America all this will disintegrate and be reconstituted in/by the deserts of New Mexico.

### **What unseeing eyes do**

Before reaching the American desert, I want to survey the other unseeing eyes that appear in Lawrence's writing. As a species, they show how singularity without reference to others looks in Lawrence's imagination, asserting itself without orientation toward or acknowledgment of the other. In the Derridean view, such exclusion is not possible, but Lawrence's singularity suggests a fantasy of precisely this exclusion, where the opaque self looks less like a discreet organism and more like an instinctual Oneness secreted behind its appearance(s).<sup>54</sup>

In Lawrence's poem, "Snake" (1921), the eponymous reptile arrives at a water trough on a hot New Mexican afternoon. The speaker, whom I will call Lawrence for convenience's sake, recounts that the snake "looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do" (349). At best, this animal's attention is fleeting. Like St. Mawr's gaze, the snake's eyes inspire respect, for the creature "looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air" (350). It is the "unseeing" character of the snake's eyes that denote its godliness. "[L]ike a god," Lawrence writes, the snake does not deign to perceive all that it might see.

Once the reptile retreats into a "horrid black hole" in a nearby wall, Lawrence throws a "clumsy log" at it (351). The "black hole" into which the snake escapes mirrors its "vague," unseeing eyes, for the black hole marks another place that does not admit

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<sup>54</sup> Though I make no attempt to do so here, it would be worth pursuing the question of just how Spinozian is Lawrence's point of view, for Spinoza's sense of the divine substance, of which individual organisms are not really individuals but rather modes of substance, bears a striking similarity to his hints in *St. Mawr* about Pan as the hidden cause of everything.

Lawrence entry as he sits dully “in pyjamas [sic] for the heat” (349). The snake has a place both behind its eyes and inside the “earth-lipped fissure in the wall-/front” where Lawrence cannot follow (351). Though the border between snake and human world matters to Lawrence, he attributes to the snake no anxiety about it. There is no “other,” not really, from the reptile’s point of view as Lawrence imagines it.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike “Snake,” Lawrence’s essay, “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” chronicles his successful attempt to kill an animal with a projectile. Following a porcupine at night, Lawrence stops to observe it climb into a tree. The porcupine, he writes, “made a certain squalor in the moonlight of the Rocky Mountains,” adding that “all savagery has a touch of squalor, that makes one a little sick at the stomach” (349). Lawrence concludes that it would be even more squalid-feeling to actually pick up a “pine-bough” in order to club the porcupine to death (349). He implies that there are forms of life one should not have to touch at all.

Lawrence’s attitude on killing the porcupine changes after he spends an afternoon pulling quills from the nose and jaw of a local dog. His wife, Frieda, later notices the porcupine and remarks the horrific sight of the animal. Though Lawrence says that “never in my life had I shot at any living thing” and had “never wanted to,” the

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<sup>55</sup> In his reading of Lawrence’s “Snake” in *The Beast & the Sovereign* (2008), Derrida argues that there is an ethics of hospitality towards the reptilian other at work in the poem. Once the snake has eluded him, Lawrence feels shame over his attempted assassination. Derrida stresses Lawrence’s remorse as that of one who has abused a guest’s sovereign right to hospitality (Derrida 236-249). Yet the poem stresses the unbridgeable gap between snake and human, perhaps as prerequisite for an ethical encounter in which difference cannot be eradicated by a claim of universalist or cross-species values. As Derrida makes clear, the ethics of hospitality necessarily involves the “exile” status of the other. One extends hospitality to an exile; that is the nature of hospitality. In the same way that Lou Witt feels the “walls” of her world melt when confronted by the “demonish question” of St. Mawr’s eyes, it is again a wall in “Snake” that demarcates the border between human and nonhuman realms. The undisclosed redoubt of an animal hints at its alien life.



circumstances of this night are different (353). Thinking of the fact that he has never shot any living thing, he supposes that “something slowly hardens in a man’s soul” (353). “And I knew now,” Lawrence writes, “it had hardened in mine” (353). This calcification bars the porcupine from prior considerations. Lawrence shoots it, concluding that “[t]hings like the porcupine, one must be able to shoot them, if they get in one’s way” (353). Disgust leads murderously to territorial boundaries.

Reflecting on the death of the porcupine, Lawrence speculates that there exist certain laws of life. Sounding like Jack London, he writes that these laws are the “truth behind the survival of the fittest” (Lawrence 357). Everywhere, he claims, that “man establishes himself, upon the earth, he has to fight for his place, against the lower orders of life” (354). Despite his assurance that the hierarchy of higher and lower forms of life is given, Lawrence asserts that “[o]ne must kill” to maintain it (354). Not only killing a porcupine but watching a horse in a field, “[o]ne suddenly realises [sic] again how all creatures devour, [sic] and *must* devour the lower forms of life” (354). Skinning a rabbit, for example, demonstrates “what an enormous part of the animal, comparatively, is intestinal,” and the intestinal reality is that animals devour each other (354). The porcupine was destined to suffer by this law, though Lawrence does not eat its body. His murderous impulse has less to do with intestinal reality than with the disgust he felt when the porcupine got in his way.

Clearer signs of intestinal reality belong to Lawrence’s cat, Timsy, who has “hunting eyes” (356). In “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” Lawrence describes Timsy playing out a scene almost identical to that of “Snake.” Timsy observes two chipmunks drinking milk “from the chickens’ bowl” (355). Watching the critters rub their

faces together “in a sort of kiss,” Timsy “can’t stand this” (355). The cat pounces and, much more successful than Lawrence with his log, captures one of the tiny creatures. The cat proceeds to play with but not kill the chipmunk, releasing it only to capture it again until it “escapes into the wood-pile” (356).

The “kiss” between chipmunks that Timsy “can’t stand” suggests that intimacy provokes the cat to violence. Lawrence’s description suggests a pantomime of unreadable communication:

[the chipmunks] sat up in front of one another, lifting their inquisitive little noses and humping their backs... each put its two little hands on the other’s shoulders, they reared up, gazing into each other’s faces; and finally they put their two little noses together, in a sort of kiss. (355)

“Snake” likewise implies a resentment on Lawrence’s part regarding the secret lives and feelings of animals, for he throws his “clumsy log” precisely when the reptile begins to retreat into its “dreadful hole” in the wall (351). In the poem, he writes that “a sort of horror, a sort of protest against his [the snake’s] withdrawing/into that horrid black hole,/Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing/himself after,/Overcame me now his back was turned” (351). As with Timsy, there is offense to be taken at the absolute privacy of what animals are doing. Their inaccessibility makes them distressing.

Timsy could not see it that way, though. When Timsy attacks Lawrence’s blanketed foot, Lawrence implies the cat’s utter disregard for human interests and feelings, for Timsy just “looked at me with the vacant feline glare of her hunting eyes” (356). “It is not even ferocity,” Lawrence continues, suggesting instead that Timsy’s eyes have “the dilation of the strange, vacant arrogance of power” (356). If it lacks ferocity, then Timsy’s attack lacks strong feeling altogether. Timsy sees Lawrence’s foot as

nothing other than an enticing movement like that which the chipmunks acted out by the chickens' bowl. While Lawrence presumes his foot is not prey, Timsy seems not to care. The cat's interest is a "vacant" reaction to stimulating motions.<sup>56</sup>

Where the elusive secrecy of the snake irked Lawrence, his cat acts out of the "arrogance" of power. Triggered by stimuli, it captures and toys with the chipmunk. The cat could not begin to disregard the interior lives of these little creatures when it barely registers them as anything other than bit of scurrying matter.

Lawrence's poem, "Fish" (1922), intensifies the blinkered nature of the unseeing eye which belongs to an animal. The poem explicitly remarks the human image as something the fish does not perceive. At the beginning of the poem, the fish represents the singular sensation of being in water. "You [the fish] wash in oneness/And never emerge," Lawrence writes (335). The poem implies that the fish virtually is water, calling the animal "aqueous," for "[a]s the waves roll/Roll you" (334-335).<sup>57</sup> But Lawrence continues, "You lie only with the waters;/One touch./No fingers, no hands and feet, no lips;/No tender muzzles,/No wistful bellies,/No loins of desire,/None. (335). Lawrence's fish has a single-access experience of touch, relying on its entire body as a sensory organ. Like St. Mawr, it has no constituent parts.

Lawrence concedes that the fish knows "[f]ear also!/He knows fear!" (336). He enumerates the fish's affective experiences as "[f]ood, and fear, and joie de vivre,"

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<sup>56</sup> Lawrence's implicit notion that animals react to stimuli rather than identifying the being or essence of other creatures suggests the bio-semiotics of Jakob von Ueküll, whose work I deal with in the following chapter on H.P. Lovecraft.

<sup>57</sup> I recall again Bataille's comment in *Theory of Religion* that animals are like "water in water" (Bataille 24). This is animal existence without the mediation that characterizes human life and thought.

though he quickly revises the order, writing, “The other way about:/Joie de vivre, and fear, and food” (336). Joie de vivre consists in the fish’s being emphatically “alone with the element [water]”, though the fish is “without love” (336). Still Lawrence describes the fish as water’s teasing paramour, exclaiming, “To have the element [water] under one, like a lover;/And to spring away with a curvetting click in the air,/Provocative./Dropping back with a slap on the face of the flood./And merging oneself!” (337). The snake and the cat appear walled off in their own world, as Lawrence wants to be in his own, intolerant as he is to the incursion of the porcupine, but the Lawrentian fish takes it further. In shoals, fish are “soundless, and out of contact./They exchange no word, no spasm, not even anger./Not one touch./Many suspended together, forever apart,/Each one alone with the waters, upon one wave with/the rest” (337). Each fish lives in inaccessibility alongside its fellows, who are effectively not its fellows at all. When Lawrence remarks at poem’s conclusion that “I don’t know fishes,” it is because the fish he imagines has a life concealed by its permanent withdrawal into its “grey, monotonous soul in the water” (340;338). The creature lives where it cannot exit, where the poet can never enter. It is washed in oneness, like St. Mawr.

When Lawrence pulls a fish out of the water, he looks into its “red-gold, water-precious, mirror-flat bright eye” (339). Like Timsy, the fish’s gaze shows no true recognition, and its “red-gold mirror-eye stares and dies” (339). Lawrence suggests that before dying the fish does not see him except as a horrifically unfamiliar monster from, literally, another world: “And I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him,/Have made him die” (339). Lawrence inhabits a “daylight” world that is extraterrestrial for the fish.

As a “many-fingered horror of daylight,” Lawrence sounds like a Lovecraftian monster. He represents an Outside that the fish can confront with nothing but horror.

What was a territorial boundary in “Snake” and in “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine” becomes in “Fish” a cosmic borderland. The final lines of the poem compare the eponymous creature to Christ: “In the beginning/Jesus was called The Fish.../And in the end” (340). Lawrence’s comparison suggests that the Son of Man, like the fish, moved “in other circles,” not only in his apparent “element,” which consisted of his company of disciples, supplicants, and prostitutes. Christ dwells apart with God, too. Realizing he does not “know” the fish, Lawrence admits as well that “I didn’t know his [the fish’s] God./Which is perhaps the last admission that life has to wring/out of us” (338). The poem realizes that the unique singularity of every creature means that each has a cosmos unto itself, though they live side by side with others. That is the origin of Lou’s sense that St. Mawr looks out from another world.

What this means is an impossibility of knowledge and a limit to sympathy. Lawrence writes, “*there are limits/To you, my heart;/And to the one God./Fish are beyond me.*” (338, emphasis in original). Neither god nor his own heart can grant Lawrence knowledge of fish. A fish’s world is anciently alien, for fish were “born before God was love,/Or life knew loving” (337). This line echoes Lou’s thought at the end of *St. Mawr* that New Mexico is “before and after the God of love” (Lawrence 169). As if an alien species in a narrative of science fiction, fish move in their “other circles” as “Outsiders./Water-wayfarers. Things of one element” (340). The border between human and other realms takes on an extraterrestrial hue in “Fish.”

Humans have unseeing eyes as well, for example Lewis and Phoenix in *St. Mawr*. In their case, each character codes as non-white. This brings them closer in Lawrence's imagination to the squalidness of savagery and to instinctual, premodern ways of thinking.

A curious case of human unseeing appears in *Twilight in Italy* (1916), the first of Lawrence's travelogues about Italy. In an early section of the book, Lawrence encounters an old woman spinning yarn on a terrace near the Church of San Tommaso in a village above Lake Garda. He talks to her, but their conversation is awkward and halting. He observes, "Her eyes were clear as the sky, blue, empyrean, transcendent. They were clear, but they had no looking in them" (20). Lawrence supposes that from the perspective of the woman's "no looking" eyes, he himself appears as "a bit of the outside, negligible" (20). Though Lawrence does not imagine that, like a fish, the old woman regards him with horror, he signals that her absorption in her labor amounts to a perceptual frontier beyond which she has no grasp, certainly not of the Englishman speaking with her.

Lawrence expatiates on the "no look" of the old woman's eyes. He writes that

She glanced at me again, with her wonderful, unchanging eyes, that were like the visible heavens, unthinking, or like two flowers that are open in pure clear unconsciousness. To her I was a piece of the environment. That was all. Her world was clear and absolute, without consciousness of self. She was not self-conscious, because she was not aware that there was anything in the universe except *her* universe. In her universe I was a stranger, a foreign *signore*. That I had a world of my own, other than her own, was not conceived by her. She did not care. (21)

Lawrence allows that the woman knows he is from England but dismisses the thought as irrelevant (21). In the woman's old age, he identifies an example of savage and remote

animal consciousness, which is not even conscious of him. Like St. Mawr, she hardly notices the human being standing before her.

As Lawrence describes the scene, in ever more mystical terms, it becomes clear that he fantasizes the woman as a cosmos unto herself. Noting that there are parts of the woman's body that she can never see, Lawrence asserts that these parts "were none the less her own because she had never seen them" (21). Mystifying the female body as the font of the universe and a trove of knowledge, Lawrence writes that

The lands she had not seen were corporate parts of her own living body, the knowledge she had not attained was only the hidden knowledge of her own self. She *was* the substance of the knowledge, whether she had the knowledge in her mind or not. There was nothing that was not herself, ultimately. Even the man, the male, was part of herself. He was the mobile, separate part, but he was none the less herself because he was sometimes severed from her. If every apple in the world were cut in two, the apple would not be changed. The reality is the apple, which is just the same in the half apple as the whole. (21-22)

Lawrence has made this Italian spinner into a modified Eve, the mother of all the living. It is not the woman that is taken from Adam's rib, for the man is the "mobile, separate part." Not knowledge of good and evil, but a "hidden knowledge of her own self" eludes her, yet she embodies this knowledge. Like the apple, she represents the holistic conception of everything, for nothing is not part of her. Knowledge of herself would be knowledge of everything. She, Lawrence writes, "was the apple, eternal, unchangeable, whole even in her partiality" (22). "It was this," he continues, "which gave the wonderful clear unconsciousness to her eyes" (22). It is her presumed lack of distinction between self and other that makes Lawrence indistinct to her. Like the fish, she is washed in oneness, but this oneness encompasses everything.

That does not mean that Lawrence knows her at all—quite the contrary. Where he was a “many-fingered horror of daylight” to the fish, he again resorts to the imagination of fantasy. Remarking that spinner does not care that he had a “world of my own,” Lawrence compares her vision with our own view of stars in the night sky: “We are told that they are other worlds. But the stars are the clustered and single gleaming lights in the night-sky of our world” (Lawrence 21). One world does not accommodate the idea of another. The stars are not worlds but points of light. He makes the point explicit, “If I say ‘The planet Mars is inhabited,’ I do not know what I mean by ‘inhabited,’ with reference to the planet Mars. I can only mean that that world is not my world” (21). In “Fish,” Lawrence noted that there were limits to his “heart” and to the “one God.” In *Twilight in Italy*, having a world at all signifies an excluding limit that is also a grandiose oneness. What could be recognized as other worlds—other entities, other intelligences—exist instead as features of the perceiver’s cosmos. The Lawrentian uniqueness of each creature, its unconscious, constitutes its incapacity to recognize others. To recognize others *as* others. The self for self’s sake is both unseeing and unseen. It exists behind the wall of its own world.

### **Singularity in America**

In the American Southwest, Lou and her mother are with Lewis, Phoenix, and St. Mawr. If there existed the possibility of redemptive romance among these characters, it has become clear over the course of Lawrence’s novella—and with finality in America—that no intimacy between any of them can work. Mrs. Witt had proposed to Lewis while they were still in England. Though he may have appeared to her as one of the “real men” that so interest her, he rebuffs her offer, chiding her for her sarcasm: “No woman who I



touched with my body should ever speak to me as you speak to me, or think of me as you think of me” (131). The novella makes it clear that Mrs. Witt’s desire for him has a domineering impulse, but Lewis’s rebuke attains a full-throated misogyny. He says, “The thought of it [loving a woman] makes me feel shame” (132). His understanding is that women mock, despise, and disrespect men, so he wants no part of this intimacy. It looks to him like the conflict of personalities and an insult to his essential male character.

Telling her daughter about Lewis’s refusal in a letter, Mrs. Witt receives a response that transforms Lewis’s misogynistic denial into a revision of Christian allegory, not unlike that in Lawrence’s poem, “Fish.” Lou writes,

I do understand why Jesus said: *Noli me tangere*. Touch me not, I am not yet ascended unto the Father. Everything had hurt him so beyond endurance, he felt he could not bear one little human touch on his body. I am like that. I can hardly bear Elena to hand me a dress. As for a man—and marriage—ah no! *Noli me tangere, homine!* I am not yet ascended unto the Father. (140)

Lou’s injunction against human touch encompasses the touch of men and women. Human contact, with its cheapness and pretense to intimacy that is only a covering for undermining attack, wearies and disgusts Lou. The touch she wants is the touch of the “Father,” not really meaning the Christian god but rather the “washed in oneness” feel of her aloneness or, to say what it really means, her own instinctual self-authorization, under the auspices of St. Mawr.

Phoenix, with his tendency to silence like St. Mawr, allows her this selfhood, for he “almost gives me my sheath of aloneness,” Lou says (140). Her aloneness was a “sort of shame” to Rico (140). In psychoanalytic terms, Lou wants the law of the father, which organizes reality according to the hierarchy of identification. The law of the father names and defines each place—self and other, defining who/what it is appropriate to desire—in

the “Oedipal regime,” to borrow Cary Wolfe’s phrase from *Animal Rites* (Wolfe 228). Lou wants to feel that she is herself—not a daughter or wife in “newspaper fact,” not a sociable personality, but her own One that preserves, asserts, and defends itself and that has its objects of desire clear. The psychoanalytic figure of the Father grants precisely this coherent oneness of identity.

As an impotent master, Rico cannot enforce Lou’s identity but instead tolerates a quasi-incestuous relationship between them, for in their sexless marriage they have “became like brother and sister,” according to the beginning of the novella (Lawrence 44). The resulting tension makes for fuzzy identity rather than clear roles. Phoenix has no such anxiety. His mastery comes “naturally” to him, and he exudes the confidence of roles assigned to him, Lou, and Rico, whom he obeys but also openly teases. If Lou wants to be touched by the Father, it seems that Phoenix is her ideal mate.

While Lou does take comfort in Phoenix’s lack of anxiety and his air of self-mastery, she dismisses the notion of marrying him or being sexually involved with him for exactly the same reason he had initially seemed an alternative to Rico: his being Native American. “His marrying her,” Lou thinks, “would be a pact between two aliens” (155). The fact that Phoenix is a “predative alien-blooded male” had at first allied him with the stallion, St. Mawr. His being neither English nor white had made him a savage alternative to an unpleasant animal like Rico. Now, confronted with the possibility of having a relationship with him in America, Lou thinks that Phoenix’s indigeneity means he only wants to possess her as a white woman. Were they to marry, she believes he would possess as well a “shawled Indian or Mexican woman,” who would truly arouse him as a sexual partner (155). The savagery of Phoenix actually resembles the unpleasant

animality of Rico. Phoenix, so goes Lou's racist thought, cannot be anything but a servant. Accordingly, he wants to possess the accessories of whiteness, including not only her "but the white man's motor-cars and moving-pictures and ice-cream sodas and so forth" (156). Phoenix recapitulates the social tension she knew with Rico, though she thinks of his acquisitiveness as childish and therefore more manageable than Rico's maturity. Phoenix is more pleasant, but he is no companion. And unlike St. Mawr, he lacks the disinterest of the true wild creature. His unseeing gaze by the end seems mocking, his domineering character vengeful. Lou decides instead that she wants "to be very, very still, and recover her own soul" (157).

None of this would matter if Lou could be alone with her unseeing horse. The silence of the stallion looks like a companion for the stillness she wants. No such communion is possible, though, for the "Father" that Lou wants cannot be the stallion, either.

In Texas, St. Mawr changes before Lou's eyes. The people are different, too. Lou finds that they are flimsier than those in England, for in the American Southwest it is all "film-psychology," with Americans playing at being cowboys on the frontier (Lawrence 151). But the horse has betrayed Lou. They keep him at a ranch, and Lou is "rather piqued" because the stallion has soon "made advances to the boss' long-legged, arched-necked, glossy-maned Texan mare" (151). As if to signal the reassertion of reproductive gender roles that St. Mawr had previously denied, Lawrence writes that "the boss was pleased" (151). In this final instance, the horse acts like Phoenix, not vice versa. When St. Mawr had been his unseeing, opaque, and instinctual self, he evoked a disinterested domination. His self-assertion commanded Lou's love because he did not seem interested

in her as an individual. If he dominated her, then it was due to his power as model of horse instinct, a self for the sake of embodying self.

Now in Texas, St. Mawr evokes interest that borders on prurient and teasing, not unlike Phoenix, who has come to represent in Lou's mind a vengeful resentment. Phoenix wants what the powerful have. The object of the stallion's advances ("the boss' long-legged, arched-necked, glossy-maned Texas mare") appears like a symbol wrested away from an authority figure, like the accessories of whiteness that Lou believes Phoenix really wants. In the new world that had held such promise, St. Mawr turns from a symbol of the singular One to a suitor who "followed at the heel of the boss' long-legged black Texan mare, almost slavishly" (152). America turns out to be a "film-setting" driven by money (Lawrence 152). The silent stallion that seemed so opaque in England takes on the most denigrated role of all: a sycophant to the nameless "boss." Lou loved St. Mawr because he stood apart from the world, self-authorizing. In America his self-authorization gives way to the affirmation of his commodity value. He really becomes objectified here. Though he is like "a jewel among stones, a pearl before swine," the "swine were no fools" (150). They see the monetary value in St. Mawr. As if in response, it after this appraisal that St. Mawr starts after the boss's mare.

There is a feeling in America that everything, reduced to an empty image, is for sale—even the horse that had seemed so singular and opaque. The stallion does not look like Lewis, who misogynistically turned down Mrs. Witt's proposal of marriage. He is like Phoenix, whom Lou scorns because he resentfully wants what others have or can give him rather than maintaining the disinterest of self-authorizing singularity and instinctual wildness. The stallion is corrupted.

Leaving Lewis with the horse, Lou moves on to New Mexico with her mother and Phoenix, who retains his role as a servant. Without her horse, Lou looks for another example of the wild spirit, one that exhibits the unseeing disinterest of singularity. In New Mexico, Lou finds it. She buys a ranch called Las Chivas.

At Las Chivas, Lou decides that the New Mexican landscape rather than St. Mawr is the “living background” into which she wants to retreat. The desert and the mountains embody the One that models the wild and opaque self that excludes others; in this case, those “others” constitute humankind as a whole, for “the landscape lived, and lived as the world of the gods, unsullied and unconcerned” (166). This unconcern turns out to be the power of unseeing writ large: “The great circling landscape lived its own life, sumptuous and uncaring. Man did not exist for it” (166). New Mexico itself unsees the human being. Where St. Mawr was subsumed by a “film-setting,” the wilderness of New Mexico represents a self-authorizing wild spirit, bigger and wilder than both horse instinct or mindful men. “I am here, right deep in America,” Lou says,

where there’s a wild spirit wants me, a wild spirit much more than men. And it doesn’t want to save me either. It needs me. It craves for me. And to it, my sex is deep and sacred, deeper than I am. (175)

One cannot mistake the desert for a person, or for being personal, but that does not mean its wild spirit is not male. It may be more than men, but it still scans as archetypically Male in its disinterested domination. The desert puts Lou in her symbolic place, affirming this womanhood as the truer part of her. When she says that her “sex is deep and sacred, deeper than I am,” it means that the wild spirit takes her sex more seriously than her personal identity. Her personality is nothing compared to such an essentialist vision. Faced with this wild spirit, she is archetypal Woman, receptive and impassioned—and, in

exactly the misogynistic gesture that Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet have written about, affirmed by male power.

Though this abiding spirit of place does not want to save Lou, it “saves me from cheapness” (175). The personality is what would be cheap. To be a woman in the cosmic sense of the novella’s ending means instead a consecration.

What seems so curious in *St. Mawr*’s final pages is that this cosmic power in the New Mexican landscape represents, in Lawrence’s phrase, a “pre-sexual world” (164). Such a “pre-sexual primeval world” consists of many creatures, “each crudely limited to its own ego, crude and bristling and cold, and then crowding in packs like pine-trees and wolves” (165). But Lawrence implies that the landscape is one vast organism. The “wild life, even the life of the trees and flowers, seemed one bristling, hair-raising tussle” (168). This “pre-sexual” world constitutes one reservoir of life-force, expressed through the existence of many lifeforms. Where *St. Mawr* had seemed at first to get his instinctual life straight, to vent it without the intermediary of mind or language, the entire New Mexican landscape vents a wild and impersonal life in many shapes and sizes, from pine trees to flowers to wolves. It grows and is always in the process of becoming itself, for it is not like a subject with socially circumscribed contents put it in reciprocal relation with others. It is an opaque wilderness. This wildness in the landscape signifies the One with many faces—a wolf face, a flower face. Lawrence implies it is not many things that constitute this wilderness, but one wildness expressed in many forms. It fulfills its “generality [as wildness] as intensely as possible,” to adapt Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase.

When Lou arrives at the ranch and feels that her sex is “deeper than I am” due to the power of the place she has chosen to live, it is like the first woman arriving on Mars.

Lou is Eve on a new planet. If this world is “pre-sexual,” it involves still a presentiment of the sexual. Lou says that she cannot “fool around with [men], or fool myself about them” (173), but the affirmation of her sex by the landscape itself indicates that being Woman promises an alien communion. The landscape “craves” her; it “needs” her. Her relationship with it signifies an alien intercourse of male and female power. This is accomplished by Lou being, in the unseeing eyes of the “wild spirit,” not herself at all. She must be an archetype, the One with many faces, like a horse that can be a horse. None of the men in Lawrence’s novella have this power, and not Mrs. Witt either. It is for Lou alone.

In effect, Lawrence has crafted a mystical version of the psychoanalytic law of the father. Here a woman exists to be consecrated in smallness compared to the unseeing power of a wild spirit that may, as a matter of course, “hurt me sometimes” (Lawrence 175). Its disciplinary power does not disgust Lou any more than did St. Mawr’s violence, for the New Mexican landscape is a superior exemplar of opaque self. More important to her is that this wild spirit affirms not her but her essential sex—and thus her place in the Oedipal regime—but on a scale that “saves her from cheapness,” that is, from the chattering superficiality of desire represented by Rico or the Manbys. The desert and mountains satisfy not sociable sex, but Lou’s wish for something bigger, stronger, and deeper than her. Only in the desert can she retreat into the “living background” the stallion failed to be when he became part of a film setting in pursuit of the boss’s mare. Eve on an alien world, Lou can become Woman, not a personality. To imagine this new world, Lawrence seems to have to wipe it clean. The desert in that sense is both new and post-apocalyptic.

Intercourse with this living background also metaphorizes American colonial power. When Lawrence writes in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, “No man is a man unless to his woman he is a pioneer” (129), his statement suggests that companionship expresses a man’s essential solitude and purpose. A woman’s submission affirms a man’s dominion. Lou’s attitude at the end of *St. Mawr* expresses a correlated feeling, for submission to the pioneering spirit of New Mexico ensures the value of exalting it. Consecrated as a woman, Lou can consecrate a still higher sacredness: the wild spirit, the One, that enlists her as its worshipper. And this only seems possible “right deep in America.” Its national meaning cannot obtain in exhausted England. America provides the space, the literal territory, for this romance of wild nature, so long as it happens at a frontier and away from the film setting the landscape proved to be in Texas. Lawrence’s mystical law of the father, which affirms Lou’s gender identity with more certainty and clarity at the end of *St. Mawr* than at any other moment in the narrative, expresses a colonial spirit still in action.<sup>58</sup> This constitutes the opaque self as masculine and pioneering.

## **Conclusion**

In Akira Mizuta Lippit’s *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (2000), he writes that “[t]he Freudian unconscious... is synonymous with a Darwinian environment: it is characterized by a material exteriority that still functions as a genuine

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<sup>58</sup> In *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence also indicates the masculine urge of colonial power. Repeating a common misunderstanding of Freud in the opening pages of the book, he claims that Freud attributes a “sexual motive” to “all human activity” (17). Instead, Lawrence argues, the “greater impulse” is “the essentially religious or creative motive,” that is, “the desire of the human male to build a world: not to ‘build a world for you, dear’; but to build up out of his own self and his own belief and his own effort something wonderful. Not merely something useful. Even the Panama Canal would never have been built *simply* to let ships through” (Lawrence 18, emphasis in original). Lawrence’s metaphorization of the Panama Canal asserts that colonial projects are masculinity projects through and through.



exteriority, that is, removed from the chronologies of human time” (98). Lippit’s point, in part, is that the notion of the unconscious imports animal otherness or difference into human behavior, or at least represents, in the calculation of human motive, the “possibility of a nonhuman world” (Lippit 100).<sup>59</sup> Such an interpretation foregrounds the de-mystifying questions of psychoanalysis. What were thought to be enigmatic and resistant problems of understanding, e.g. neuroses and psychoses, become tractable and comprehensible as soon as one grasps the environmental and adaptive conditions of ego psychology. One has only to accept the ungainly and otherworldly forces at work in the human mind.

Lawrence opposes the de-mystification of individual psyches. His critique of Freud stems from what are, in his mind, the messy, insulting, and undignified revelations of psychoanalysis. Like many careless readers of Freud, Lawrence tended to see Freudian thought as hopelessly reductive, offering sexual motivation as the explanation for all human action. Lawrence sees the alternative explanation for individual psychology as, simply, the instinctual life of the individual him- or herself, e.g. as Male or as Horse. Such lives are objective essences for him. As he wrote in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, “By unconscious we wish to indicate that essential unique nature of every individual creature, which is, by its very nature, unanalyzable, undefinable, inconceivable. It cannot be conceived, it can only be experienced” (Lawrence 214). He puts a Christian-mystical spin on the same idea when he writes in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that “each individual [is] his own Holy Ghost” (Lawrence 30), yet “only at

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<sup>59</sup> As if to underscore Lippit’s point that the Freudian unconscious represents a nonhuman force at work in human behavior, Lawrence complains in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that the Freudian idea represents an “unpleasant menagerie,” where animal impulses muck about (Lawrence 17).

his maximum does an individual surpass all his derivative elements, and become purely himself” (31). Lawrence adds, “And most people never get there” (31). Not every individual organism can attain the self-authorization of St. Mawr or, when St. Mawr fails to maintain his singularity, of the New Mexican wilderness. The self-authorizing individual is in the process of becoming, following its own principle of growth and development: unanalyzable and undefinable.

Looking into the eyes of animals, Lawrence exhibits the same desire he expresses in regard to human character. He privileges the anti-social mystery of instinctual self. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, the unseeing eye appears as the province of predators in particular. He writes, “Those animals which, like cats, wolves, tigers, hawks, chiefly live from the great, voluntary centres, these animals are, in our sense of the word, almost visionless. Sight in them is sharpened or narrowed down to a point: the object of prey. [...] They see no more than this” (65). These creatures do not perceive beings as such but only, like Timsy the cat in Lawrence’s “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” the stimulating movements of their prey.<sup>60</sup> In *St. Mawr*, the stallion’s eye reproduces the predator’s “visionless” seeing. On a grandiose scale, New Mexico does as well, when the stallion no longer does.

The ultimate object of Lawrence’s polemic in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* is the human mind. As he writes, “The final aim is not to *know*, but to *be*” (Lawrence 68, emphasis in original). A personality, or self for others, allies itself with the trivia of mind. It interferes with the process of becoming a singular self and an embodiment of instinct.

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<sup>60</sup> I do not reckon with Heidegger in this chapter, but there are striking parallels between his thought on the animal that is “poor in world” and Lawrence’s own reflections on animal worldliness.

Mind, for Lawrence, is convention and “automatism” (68), rather than the spontaneous living of animals like the stallion in *St. Mawr*. In *St. Mawr*, Lawrence imagines the savagery of nature as the pretext for Lou’s embrace of the One with many faces, as I have called the opaque self that expresses itself in every gesture and action. To the extent that Lou wants to be and not know and takes as her model first the instinctual wild animal that is *St. Mawr* and then the wild spirit that is the New Mexican desert, she aims to preserve, defend, and assert herself. She could be or become a woman who can be woman, as a horse can be a horse. To do so would be to become imperceptible, although this is not Deleuze and Guattari’s imperceptibility that is against identity but the imperceptibility of the One that has a name but is “everything at once.”

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes in defense of the work of poet, scholar, and animal trainer Vicki Hearne. Haraway specifically cites and defends Hearne’s use of anthropomorphic language. The attribution of human characteristics to animals, Haraway writes, is “necessary to keep the humans alert to the fact that somebody is at home in the animals they work with” (Haraway 50). Haraway’s use of the colloquial phrase “somebody is at home” nicely encapsulates the supposition that animals have thoughts, feelings, and meanings to communicate—that they are people—while remaining agnostic on the best way to conceive of animal personhood. On this point, Haraway continues

Just *who* is at home must permanently be in question. The recognition that one cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship, is the key. (50, emphases in original)

Lou rescues *St. Mawr* precisely out of the determination that someone is at home in the stallion. Her interest in the animal also appears to be in regard to “who or what” emerges

in her relationship with him. However, the power of Pan that Lou fixates on and that appears again in more austere form in the New Mexican desert discourages the question Haraway wants continually to ask, for who is at home in St. Mawr defies the possibility of relationship. St. Mawr recedes from recognition even when his eyes blaze their demonish question. He is a self without reference to others. What *St. Mawr* affirms is an impossibility of relating. To borrow Lou's own vocabulary, relating happens at the level of the personality. Her traffic with St. Mawr is neither personal nor responsible, and her communion with the New Mexican desert at the end of Lawrence's narrative suggests not nonhuman reality but the affirmation of gendered archetype. In Lawrence horse's novella, Lou becomes not animal but Woman.

### Chapter 3: The Accursed Buzz in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness"

Like the work of many writers whose fiction has been critiqued for racism and misogyny, Harold Phillips Lovecraft's stories have nevertheless continued to grow in stature and influence. The "Lovecraftian" universe appears in homages and parodies alike, in both popular culture and academic studies. Contemporary novelists, keen to revise the unsavory aspects of Lovecraft's fiction, tend to pilfer his work for its more peculiar and metaphorically rich elements, often a mix of Gothic and science fiction, to wit: unfathomably old nonhuman monsters, alternate histories of alien evil, the grotesque fecundity of lifeforms descended from both human and nonhuman forebears, hints of an apocalypse that is already in progress, and the idea of insanity as both the result of fear and a mode of perception. To name only a few of these fictions that amend Lovecraft: Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country*, Kij Johnson's *The Dream Quest of Vellitt Boe*, and Paul LaFarge's *The Night Ocean*. Popular and critical acclaim has met the release of these novels. They deal in part with Lovecraft's racism in New York City, rewrite one of his invented worlds from a woman's point of view, link horror fiction with vigilante violence and lynching in the South during the era of Jim Crow, and, finally, investigate and play with the question of Lovecraft's intense friendship with a real-life fan and fellow writer. Even scholars like Donna Haraway have likewise reclaimed Lovecraftian language for purposes of philosophical and ecological speculation.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene*, when Haraway uses the term "Chtulucene" to mean "rich multispecies assemblages" and "diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things," she does so explicitly in defiance of "H.P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial-nightmare monster

In the preceding chapters of this dissertation, I argued that the writings of D.H. Lawrence and Jack London attempt to reimagine human relationships on the basis of nonhuman examples, horses and dogs in particular. These animals afford an image either of an anti-social power, opposed to personality and psychology (Lawrence), or of a monstrous pragmatism, even self-delusion, that accommodates an otherwise disintegrated self to reality in order to lay claim to it (London). Borrowing and adapting ideas found in Darwin and Freud, Lawrence and London imagine what it might mean for human animals to make decisions in the manner nonhuman animals are thought to do, thus gaining an alien power. Lovecraft represents a divergent perspective. His fiction expresses a philosophy of agency that denies the power of human decision. The Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi refers to Lovecraft's attitude as one of "mechanistic materialism," according to which the universe operates by "fixed laws (although these may not be known to human beings)", adding that, for Lovecraft, "there can be no immaterial substance such as a soul or spirit" (*Cthulhu*, xiv). Aside from the Gothic pleasures of his fiction, this latter attitude, skeptical about human rationality, explains some of the enduring appeal of Lovecraft's work.

While Lovecraft once described himself as an imitator of Edgar Allan Poe, his stories add another turn of the screw to Gothic convention. Take, for example, the appearance and usage of the figure of the "tentacle" in Lovecraft's tales. As the writer and critic China Miéville has noted, "The spread of the tentacle—a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in 'Western' aesthetics)—from a situation of near total

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Cthulhu (note the spelling difference)" (Haraway 101). The reference so strongly implies a Lovecraftian connection that her move resembles the long-established rehabilitation of terms like *queer*, which have been turned from deprecation to solidarity, identity, and approbation. It goes against the grain of Lovecraft.

absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to Weird culture” (Miéville 105).<sup>62</sup> As tentacular as it is, Lovecraft’s is “weird fiction,” a term that defines a specific subgenre in contemporary literature, although originally it meant something closer to the mash-up its name suggests: a mixture of elements from ghost stories, detective fiction, horror tales, and science fiction. While Miéville argues for the foundational characteristics of the weird fiction that Lovecraft practiced, his point is broader.<sup>63</sup> The philosophy of Lovecraft marks a shift in epoch and attitude, according to which, in the words of Eugene Thacker, horror means not simply an emotion felt by a human being but a state of confrontation with the limits of thought, where a human being attempts to think about a “world-without-us” (Thacker 8). Even in the instance of imagining the tentacle, Lovecraft’s fiction depicts as fearful those objects and figures that radically lack recognizable form, all while suggesting the inscrutability of a universe that is indifferent to human beings.<sup>64</sup> As Joshi puts it, “Lovecraft’s pseudomythology brutally shows that man is *not* the center of the universe, that the gods care nothing for him, and

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<sup>62</sup> Lovecraft was an admirer of the ghost stories of English writer, M.R. James, whose story, “Count Magnus,” does in fact feature a brief image of a tentacle, in a description of a stone engraving of a hooded figure: “The only part of the form which projected from that shelter was not shaped like any hand or arm. Mr. Wraxall compares it to the tentacle of a devil-fish” (James 76).

<sup>63</sup> For Lovecraft, “weird” fiction offered a way to gawk, in a horror that is close to wonder, beyond the limits of time and space. In a letter to a friend, he once wrote that weird fiction afforded him the opportunity to suggest and sketch “real externality” (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* 150).

<sup>64</sup> Patricia MacCormack, in “Lovecraft Through Deleuzio-Guattarian Gates” (2010), has also developed a suggestive argument about Lovecraftian “formlessness” that goes “beyond representation.” Her essay explicitly links such anti-representationalism to Deleuze and Guattari. It is important to argue that while monsters in Lovecraft’s weird fiction appear somehow “formless,” these entities “beyond representation” exist nevertheless within a representational mode, as the sense of their formlessness serves to represent the fear of the human observer who encounters them and is, within the context of pulp horror, concrete and clear.

that the earth and all its inhabitants are but a momentary incident in the unending cyclical chaos of the universe” (*Cthulhu* xvii, emphasis in original).<sup>65</sup>

The observation that Lovecraft’s fiction dwells on this indifference fails to capture its specific sense of human limitation. Lovecraft is like neither Lawrence nor London, who for all their apparent flirtation with a nonhuman, anti-humanistic point of view, reaffirm the power to remake human life. Lovecraft’s fiction suggests instead that human beings fail to grasp the power at work even in the tiny scrap of cosmos they happen to inhabit. The contemporary English philosopher, John Gray, writes that both rationalist and romantic thought

serve the same infantile fantasy: the magical omnipotence of thought. Whether affirmed in the terms of classical logic or denied in those of romantic will, the message is the same: the human mind is the measure of reality. (Gray 51)

Lovecraft’s stories likewise demonstrate a skepticism of human cognition; however, it is not so much that the universe is indifferent and immeasurable. For Lovecraft, human beings perceive that which aligns formally with their own perceptual limitations. Like the arachnid digging into the back of its mammalian host, a tick, in the work of German biologist Jakob von Uexküll, whose work demonstrates distinct Lovecraftian characteristics, the human animal in Lovecraft’s fiction cannot perceive the alien figure it encounters. It glimpses those aspects that accord, or nearly accord, with familiar rules of human perception and their related forms of appearance. A tentacle is always more exactly tentacle-like than an actual tentacle in the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. Hence the

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<sup>65</sup> More recent scholarship, like Timothy S. Murphy’s essay, “Labor of the Weird: William Hope Hodgson’s Fantastic Materialism,” maintains the idea of Lovecraft’s “mechanistic materialism,” labeling it a materialism of “aristocratic contemplation” to contrast it with the more labor-oriented mechanism of one of Lovecraft’s precursor’s, William Hope Hodgson (Murphy 225).



baffled description in Lovecraft's story, "The Call of Cthulhu," of two stones posed at an "angle which was acute, but [that] acted as if it were obtuse" (167). Though it seems impossible, a man falls into this gap that should not be there and which cannot be rightly seen. Lovecraft's human characters see as humans see rather than in the manner of a transcendental realism. Human vision is necessarily a form of blindness. The idea of the universe's "indifference" papers over this central conceit of the Lovecraftian cosmos.

When Lovecraft's human characters encounter alien monsters—not so much malevolent as intractably unlike them—these alien existences put into question the idea that the human animal is at home on its planet, with all the intellectual, cultural, and mortal privileges earthly inhabitation might suggest. Human territory starts to look nonhuman. Throughout this chapter, I examine how Lovecraft deploys this philosophical scare tactic. His primary device is to imagine objects and figures that do not "show up," so to speak, in the representational imagination of human characters. The nonhuman appears without definite form or measure and instead presents itself by means of distortions of appearance and distortions of sense. Representation breaks down. Most crucial of all is the "accursed buzz" of a human voice that, due to this distortion, makes an alien presence clear. Ironically, humans fail to grasp the full substance of alien forms exactly when they are certain of sensing them; representation, breaking down, seems to work. As a result, Lovecraftian landscapes and figures look, feel, and sound alien, though they may be simply a road in Vermont or a letter from a friend. The alien figures in Lovecraft are not life forms so much as avatars of a persistent nonhuman existence, which shreds confidence in human power, control, and decision—or, at least, this is Lovecraft's ambition. How alien the aliens really are in a story like "The Whisperer in

Darkness,” which abounds with imagery of human imperialism, is an essential concern in this chapter.

Lovecraft’s fiction remains in the Gothic tradition. It depends on the contrivance of secret histories, forbidden books, and obscure monsters. It relies as well, in conscious and unconscious ways, on racial prejudice, according to which undereducated, European, and black and mixed-race characters are explicitly connected to both a pathetic human sociability but also to nonhuman horror. The French writer Michel Houellebecq once described Lovecraft’s prejudice as “no longer the WASP’s well-bred racism; [his] is the brutal hatred of a trapped animal who is forced to share his cage with other different and frightening creatures” (106). In his admiring tone, Houellebecq captures the excitation of horror and its inseparable overtones of urban racism in Lovecraft’s stories. This perceptual prejudice underscores that what is horrific for Lovecraft’s characters is precisely what doesn’t manage to benignly “show up” in the close(d) quarters of the imagination. To be clear, this does not mean that the nonhuman image is absolutely formless or “not there” in Lovecraft’s work. Against critics like Graham Harman, I see the Lovecraftian universe as plainer and less confounding; its pulpy evocation of forms that do not “show up” ultimately evinces something concrete rather than abstract or impossible, something that may be horrific but that can also be banal. Lovecraft cannot dispel the tension between, on the one hand, inflections like the “accursed buzz” that imply the presence of the nonhuman and, on the other hand, exposition and images regarding alien life that turn out to be familiar and human.

### **Liberty from the human trammel**

Published in 1931, when it earned Lovecraft the largest payment he ever received for a single tale, “The Whisperer in Darkness” is an exemplar of his interest in the representational problem of the nonhuman. The opening sentence of the story makes it clear: “Bear in mind that I did not see any actual visual horror at the end” (200). Our narrator, Albert Wilmarth, makes this declaration despite attempts to photograph the alien creatures that menace the Vermont countryside. He only perceives them by “hideous inference” from what he does manage to hear and see (200). Decisive for Wilmarth in this respect is the tone of certain alien voices. These tones afford him his only concrete representation of nonhuman life, and it’s precisely due to the fact that in the tone of those alien voices—the voices of monsters—there is something (in)audible that Wilmarth can hear but not place. In an alien tone, the nonhuman shows up by slipping away.

If the nonhuman slips away, the “human” appears no more certain. In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” as in other Lovecraft stories, the idea that a time, a place, even a planet, belongs to human beings represents a merely rhetorical claim. While human beings are born and die, the cosmos persists.<sup>66</sup> As imagined by Lovecraft in “The Whisperer in Darkness,” the aliens encountered by Wilmarth epitomize that persistence. He writes that they are “nameless infinities” (Lovecraft 221). They seem able to transfer their consciousness from body to body and cross the gulf of space without aid of ship or transport. Most disturbing of all is their speech. If there is a certainty about them, the horror that they inspire simply by the tone of their voices is it.

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<sup>66</sup> For a similar idea, in a context not altogether different, see Emmanuel Levinas’s seminal essay, “On Escape,” in which he calls this persistence of being the “purity of the fact of being” (57). Eugene Thacker comments that “horror expresses the logic of incommensurability between Life and the living” (Thacker 117).

Things, however, are far from certain. It turns out that what should be horrifying in Lovecraft's tale of fear and loathing in Vermont disappoints expectations of unease and suspense. Take the character of Henry Akeley. Akeley suggests in a long letter to Wilmarth that he feels excited when faced with the prospect of being taken to the "Outside"—beyond known space and time—by the entities who have surrounded his home in rural Vermont. He ultimately describes his relationship with these nonhuman creatures in tones of excitement and pride:

As a beginning of this improved rapport, the Outer Ones have naturally chosen me—whose knowledge of them is already so considerable—as their primary interpreter on earth. Much was told me last night—facts of the most stupendous and vista-opening nature—and more will be subsequently communicated to me both orally and in writing. I shall not be called upon to make any trip *outside* just yet, though I shall probably *wish* to do so later on—employing special means and transcending everything which we have hitherto been accustomed to regard as human experience. (233, emphasis in original)

Akeley conveys his eagerness to realize a nonhuman ambition, to have a "vista-opening" experience. He wants an alien vision.

What becomes clear by the conclusion of "Whisperer" is that the person writing this letter is not Akeley himself, but an alien imposter. This imposter lures Wilmarth to Vermont in order to destroy Wilmarth's evidence that aliens have arrived in New England at all. While Wilmarth's horror at the outcome of this situation is authentic, Akeley's letter suggests the conditional nature of human life and the pleasure in giving it up.<sup>67</sup> When the imposter Akeley writes that he will transcend "everything which we have hitherto been accustomed to regard as human experience," he notes a limit and a

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<sup>67</sup> There are often figures in Lovecraft's fiction—often racialized figures—who *not* horrified by the nonhuman aliens with which they are involved and seem to show how easy it is to give up on human life; see "The Shadow over Innsmouth" or "The Horror at Red Hook," the latter of which is treated briefly later in this chapter.

trammeling that can be escaped. A trip to the “Outside,” which the real Akeley does undertake (against his will) has as its appeal a romantic notion of liberty.<sup>68</sup>

The liberty of the Outside promises knowledge—“superhuman knowledge,” in Wilmarth’s own words. Akeley’s letter puts a fine point on it and casts the notion of such knowledge as a narrative of racial progress. In previous messages, he had expressed to Wilmarth his mounting alarm about the invasion of his home by beings that talk to him in a “cursed buzzing voice” (228). The Akeley double dismisses these fears and their attendant speculations about who or what the aliens are as being like the anxious “guesses of illiterate farmers and savage Indians” (232). The Outside puts the lie to such guesses. It represents civilization in the sense of superior technology and scientific knowledge, which supersede the ignorance and superstition of those who, poor and savage, are unprepared for education and preeminence. As the Outside’s “primary interpreter on earth,” Akeley could be a missionary and messiah of that nonhuman ascent, as if human beings in general are the pre-industrial people of a country slated for Christianization.

The tone of this letter distresses Wilmarth even as it reassures him: “I have said that I was at once relieved and made uneasy, but this expresses only crudely the overtones of diverse and largely subconscious feelings which comprised both the relief and the uneasiness” (“Whisperer,” 236). Sensing the nonhuman intelligence that writes to him as Akeley, Wilmarth describes it as if it were a question of being unable to render what he is perceiving. What he senses only comes through “crudely,” through feelings

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<sup>68</sup> It eventually turns out that Akeley’s reaction to the alien creatures was indeed one of mingled wonder and terror. Writing on the German theologian Rudolf Otto, Eugene Thacker points out a similar mix of attraction and repulsion, revelation and occultation, in the “contradictory experience of horror and wonder that is encapsulated in [Otto’s] phrase, *mysterium tremendum*,” which in its full phrasing (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) means “fearful and fascinating mystery” (Thacker 111).

that, at a level below consciousness, both calm and alarm him. He is not attuned to the nonhuman well enough to decide, even unconsciously, what he feels about it. Not that the unconscious, per Freud, represents non-contradictory thought and feelings. Wilmarth admits nonetheless that superhuman knowledge tempted him. He writes that his own “zeal for the unknown flared up to meet [Akeley’s]” (237). The pleasure and liberty of the Outside arouses him. It constitutes a claim to superiority and satisfaction, racialized as a turn away from human savagery and backwardness. He could be a master, of one kind or another.

### **Suggestion, not revelation**

As with much of Lovecraft’s fiction, “The Whisperer in Darkness” conveys minimal suspense. Unlike “The Shadow over Innsmouth” or *At the Mountains of Madness*, much of the action in the story comes to the reader secondhand, communicated through letters that recount experience reflectively, not dramatically. Furthermore, the events of the story’s plot tend to surprise only the narrator. That the lure of the nonhuman represents the pleasure of going “Outside” to transcend human ignorance is ironic in this case, for though it is obvious to Lovecraft’s readers, Wilmarth fails to grasp that it is not his friend writing to him but an alien who has replaced him. His obliviousness implies exactly the limits of human knowledge and imagination that the imposter Akeley writes about in his final letter. Sluggish inference, not realization, defines human comprehension in “The Whisperer in Darkness,” a title which, after all, implies not one but two straining senses.

After arriving at Akeley’s house in Vermont, Wilmarth is surrounded, though he only suspects it at first, by spies in league with the aliens and with alien entities disguised

in human bodies, including the imposter who wrote to him. Overhearing their voices near the end of the story, one voice more alien than the other (it may be an alien talking with one of the aliens' human spies), Wilmarth remarks that "even their frightful effect on me was one of *suggestion* rather than of *revelation*" (262, emphasis in original), for the voices are coming up through the floor where he is sleeping. He cannot imagine what he would see if he actually beheld the creatures speaking, but the tone of their voice suggests monstrosity.

The important point is that Wilmarth does not pull back any curtain. He does not clap eyes on anything that shows what the suggestive voices imply. As if to highlight the idea, the alien creatures, which, the reader learns, are superhumanly intelligent fungi from a distant planet named Yuggoth, do not even show up on photographic film. None of Akeley's attempts to take pictures of them have successfully reproduced an image. Only the buzzing within certain voices, like the strange footprints left outside Akeley's house, constitute a trace of their presence.

Despite these representational challenges, it is not the case, as Wilmarth claims initially, that he "did not see any actual visual horror at the end." The traces are not scraps. He indeed sees "visual horrors," or, to put it plainly, he sees things that horrify him. What he happens to perceive and what horrifies him, like the buzzing voice, happen not to "make sense." They only make Wilmarth wonder about what he senses.

Really, there is much for Wilmarth to take in, much for him to pore over with his senses—and Lovecraft's readers with him. For all its interest in suggestion, "The Whisperer in Darkness" abounds with painstaking, even exaggerated historical,

geographical, social, and, curiously enough, visual detail. As a whole, these details embody the alien fungi in a way that a photograph never could.<sup>69</sup>

The narrative begins in November of 1927 and stretches to September of the following year. Wilmarth, an “instructor of literature” (200) at the fictional Miskatonic University, has become embroiled in an ongoing argument conducted in the letters’ section of several New England newspapers. The point of contention is that, after a series of historic Vermont floods in November of 1927, strange bodies have been found washed up on the banks of different rivers. There are no verified reports but only detailed rumors about “crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membraneous wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be” (201). Less a collage and more architectonic, these details yield themselves to cataloging because each unit stands out by virtue of its own shape and hypothetical orientation. Even assembled, they imply disassembly and do not add up. Yet their overall arrangement still suggests a head. A photograph of these bodies would not really be more precise; it would simply count as better evidence than a description. As it stands, these discrete bits resemble a diagrammed sentence: The elements are there, even labeled, but that does not mean that the meaning is clear.

The critic Edmund Wilson once dismissed the horrors of Lovecraft’s fiction by pointing out the disappointment of coming to the end of a story to find only “an invisible

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<sup>69</sup> In *Weird Realism*, treated in more detail later in this chapter, Graham Harman repeatedly uses the fantastical details that appear in Lovecraft’s stories, such as the acute angle that behaved as if it were obtuse, to illustrate a novel philosophy of “weird realism.” It’s natural enough given his philosophical topic, but Harman’s turn away from the clear and concrete elements of Lovecraft’s stories miss the more banal and even funny ways in which the Lovecraftian nonhuman turns out to be human after all.



whistling octopus” (Wilson 702). It is not an unjust satire of Lovecraft’s imagined monsters. However, that Lovecraft risks this laughter, and quite consciously, registers his earnest attempt to see a nonhuman entity unrealizable in more felicitous terms. It can be funny precisely because it risks looking unreasonable, as D.H. Lawrence too risks ludicrousness in his determinedly alien image of the horse in *St. Mawr*, with its fantastically flaming eyes and sexual projection. To see something different, both writers insist on a literalized difference. It is not a metaphor; it is simply a stark mashup of otherwise familiar elements. How much of a difference this difference actually makes is the whole question, for its oddness can be either striking or banal.<sup>70</sup>

Striking or not, almost all of the contentious details that Wilmarth describes at the beginning of “Whisperer” turn out to be true. By story’s end, it is clear that alien entities, who appear no less capable of drowning than their human counterparts, have occupied the Vermont hills from time immemorial because there they can “get metals from mines that go deep under the hills” (Lovecraft 210).<sup>71</sup> They appear as well to be curious about human beings; as Akeley says, “there are non-human creatures watching us all the time” (209). A small number of human spies serve them as assistants, too, though it is unclear whether or not all of these human beings may be aliens in human form. Some of them surely are. Regardless, it is the aliens’ keen wish to remain hidden and unknown.

As this quick sketch suggests, the entities from Yuggoth (their name for the dwarf planet we now know as Pluto) have established a mining operation in New England. They strive to protect themselves from the local population even as their anthropological

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<sup>70</sup> Wilson observes that “escaping from time seems the motif most valid in [Lovecraft’s] fiction” (703).

<sup>71</sup> “The Whisperer in Darkness” implies that the alien fungi’s visits to earth may predate humankind altogether.

interest in human beings inspires them to take some, like Akeley, away from earth to reveal the alien cosmos. If their knowledge transcends human backwardness, embodied in an image of “illiterate farmers and savage Indians,” then these aliens are, by analogy, a civilizing imperial power, with a mineral interest in the New England hill country. Their nervousness resembles that of the proverbial adventurers among restive locals; maintaining distance is part of their security protocol. I do not think it would be venturing too much to suggest they are wrestling with a cosmic version of Rudyard Kipling’s “white man’s burden,” though “Whisperer” only implies this incidentally by its racialized index of superhuman superiority. This is far from John Gray’s idea of an anti-humanism that refuses to mythologize human thought as the measure of reality. In this context, the aliens look like nothing so much as imperial agents in membranous wings.<sup>72</sup> They are all too human, all too middle management.

As an expert in New England folklore, Wilmarth at first publicly debunks all the published speculations as backwoods rumor. Soon thereafter, he begins to exchange letters with the aforementioned Henry Akeley. Akeley is a cultured figure, an anomaly in Lovecraft’s rendering of Vermont, which Wilmarth later describes as a “region half-bewitched through the piling-up of unbroken time-accumulations; a region where old, strange things have had a chance to grow and linger because they have never been stirred up” (241). In this formulation, urban civilization dispels the accumulation of time that otherwise takes hold in rustic country. Time appears by definition nonhuman. Left on their own in those slow, rural places, nonhuman realities assume their proper place in

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Seltzer notably comments that Jack London’s wolves were simply “men in furs” and connects them not with organic nature but with “machine culture,” for they represent a simulation of machine work and motivation. (81)

unbroken time with its bewitching power. Akeley's letters provide the initial bulk of the story's tension, for as he tells it, his house is besieged at night by the aliens from the "unfrequented" hills (201). They intend to hush his communications with Wilmarth and thus stymie any production of knowledge about them that these communications suggest. Written language poses a threat that a photograph cannot.

Due to the exposure threatened by the written word, the aliens, or their human agents, monitor Akeley's mail. It seems almost quaint. As Akeley tells it, though, with the story's only real suspense, his dogs slowly dwindle, killed one by one over the course of multiple nights. Inhuman footprints appear closer to the house each morning. He sends reports and photographs of footprints to an increasingly terrified Wilmarth, who only vaguely doubts Akeley's sincerity when the latter's final letter shifts in tone and expatiates on the topic of the aliens, extolling their "superhuman knowledge," expressing his excitement over the possibility of cosmic enlightenment, and inviting Wilmarth to visit. Even the request that Wilmarth bring with him all previously shared letters and photographs does not unduly unnerve the literature professor. By the time he does suspect what has happened—he is in Vermont—Akeley's brain has been removed and placed in a cylindrical machine suited for extraterrestrial travel. The surgically inclined aliens that sought Akeley's silence have forced him—against his will—on a journey of cosmic inquiry.

In a different narrative, this turns of events would appear adventurous rather than horrific. Lovecraft cannot quite dispel the ambiguity of the aliens' intent. The machine in which they have imprisoned Akeley's brain has apparatuses for sight and speech, "so that after a little fitting these traveling intelligences [Akeley's is not the only brain to have

been transferred into one of the cylindrical machines] could be given a full sensory and articulate life—albeit a bodiless and mechanical one—at each stage of their journeying through and beyond the space-time continuum” (Lovecraft 252). Far from indifferent to Akeley as a person, they seem indifferent to his human body, as they appear indifferent to their own, since they seem to shed their crustaceous, winged bodies and occupy a form more amenable to human disguise. Nevertheless, what they give in place of that human body are senses to grasp what the human body never could.

These creatures from Pluto appear for that reason to be earnest in their aim to share a transcendent vision of the nonhuman universe. This aim unites a bizarre society they have gathered. As the Akeley imposter puts it, the aliens’ collection of various cylindrically sealed brains, buried in a hilltop, represents a “very cosmopolitan place” (Lovecraft 253). Humans and other aliens all reside there in the expressive and perceptive wonder of a traveling cylinder, which is essentially a prosthetic body outfitted to convey sensory experiences where it would ordinarily be impossible to have them (in outer space, in other dimensions). The Akeley imposter calls this gathering cosmopolitan because it is cross-cultural and cosmic: a literal selection of the universe’s people. Again, the aliens of Vermont look like the advance agents of an empire transcending space and time, advocating for the pleasure of its learning. That their offer of transcendence is enforced via a surgical procedure is never in doubt. If it is a Cartesian nightmare, however, it does not promise suffering and death but revelation and ironic adventure—ironic because it is not the adventurer that goes but the adventurer’s brain in a

prefabricated body provided by the tour guides.<sup>73</sup> The detail itself confirms the fantasy of accelerated human intelligence; the cylinders suggest a ballistic advancement, as the brains encased inside speed far from their home planets, remade anew for the trip.

Wilmarth duly uncovers the entirety of this secret plot and flees Akeley's house. He escapes to tell his readers about the "face and hands of Henry Wentworth Akeley" (Lovecraft 267), lying on a chair like the discarded props of a theatrical production—that is what they essentially are. Those hands and face remain the final piece of evidence, one Wilmarth can write about but not reproduce. They had been used by an alien with a buzzing, whispering voice to impersonate their erstwhile owner. Against his initial claim of not seeing a "visual horror at the end," it is the terrifying sight of Akeley's face and hands that conclude Wilmarth's account. Concrete and specific, the story's suggestiveness hardly fails to be revealing.

It is still sound, rather than visual phenomena, that tends most to badger and distress Wilmarth. Whisperings, buzzings, and whirrings constitute concrete and elusive evidence of a nonhuman presence, for whatever is suggested or revealed comes through the conduit of noises and tones. For instance, there is Wilmarth's realization that the "queerness" of Akeley's Vermont farm derives from its "total silence" when it ought to have been "moderately murmurous from its various kinds of livestock" (246). The

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<sup>73</sup> In *Out of Our Heads*, his book-length argument against the notion that consciousness happens "inside the brain," the philosopher Alva Noë writes,

The character of my brain's condition is fixed by an ongoing dynamic of action and interaction between me and the environment around me, both the physical environment in which I find myself and also the biological environment of my bodily milieu... This brings us to the crux: to act on the brain so as to simulate the effects of normal interaction with an environment would be tantamount to supplying, for the brain, an alternative bodily milieu and environment.

It is exactly this virtual world Noë suggests that makes it hard to dispel the wonder of what is supposed to be horrifying in Lovecraft's story.

absence of noisy creatures assumes a tone or inflection, for it is the “total silence” that reveals to Wilmarth, or brings it home to him, that they are gone in the first place, as if he were hearing them *in absentia*. The quiet has an effect within the context of audibility. If the silent farm therefore sounds uncanny, then it is due to the murmurs its quiet alludes to. It suggests something nonhuman at work: “that stillness was anomalous—interplanetary” (Lovecraft 258). Stillness hints at the vast vacuum between planets and implies an incalculable ignorance of what is there.

Confusing as well are the sounds of the brain machines, for before Wilmarth’s suspicions have been fully confirmed, he meets and talks with the Akeley imposter, who continues to expound on the wonders of a cosmos revealed by the denizens of Yuggoth. He wants Wilmarth to listen to and talk with the cosmopolitan collection of creatures, human and otherwise, that have traveled via cylinder across space. Wilmarth follows his instructions, selecting a cylinder from the shelf in the farmhouse living room and connecting the “tube machine” and the “disc apparatus” to the proper sockets, so that the mechanical life of the brain contained in the cylinder can be played like a phonograph (Lovecraft 254). Wilmarth writes that he does “not know why I obeyed those whispers so slavishly,” as he follows their instructions to connect the cylinder, but his interest in that cosmopolitan, superhuman culture compels him, precisely due its far-fetched promise (254). The voice that emanates from the cylinder disturbs him for the same reason as the quiet of absent farm animals: It suggests a presence there in the room with him. The machine at first emits a “mixed grating and whirring” but soon subsides into a voice “with a point and intelligence which left no doubt that the speaker was actually present and observing us” (Lovecraft 254). Despite emanating from the prosthesis of the cylinder

played like a record, the tones of the machine convey the proximity of an alienated presence. The voice might belong to a human being, but it has become the avatar of a cosmic vista.

Though this voice speaks to him from a cylinder, claiming to be a human being whose body has been preserved elsewhere while the brain took flight in space, the “mixed grating and whirring” prepares the way for its lengthy speech on the amazement of traveling in a mechanical form. The grating sound, like a burst of static, announces the break with the limits of the human body, an aural signpost of the surgical intervention that rendered this human voice as only a voice to begin with, speaking through an alien mechanism about its feeling of being at home in the nonhuman universe, “the great abysses that most of us have had to dream about in fanciful ignorance” (Lovecraft 255). As with the silent farm, Wilmarth senses or accesses a remarkable environment via peculiar sounds and tones.

Finally come the sounds of the aliens themselves; Wilmarth eavesdrops on them from his room in Akeley’s house, where through the floor on his final night in Vermont he hears their odd shuffling movements. The critic Graham Harman makes much of this brand of Lovecraftian description:

Objects seemed now and then to move across the room like conscious entities; the sound of their footfalls having something about it like a loose, hard-surfaced clattering—as of the contact of ill-coordinated surfaces of horn or hard rubber. It was, to use a more concrete but less accurate comparison, as if people with loose, splintery wooden shoes were shambling and rattling about on the polished board floor. On the nature and appearance of those responsible for the sounds, I did not care to speculate. (Lovecraft 261)

Harman tends to read these moments as akin to Cubism, where the image can only come through in fractured bits that do not cohere because their object, here an alien entity,

exceeds the descriptive powers of human language. In Harman's reading, Lovecraft's descriptions are parables of the unknowable objects of perception. Patricia McCormack might identify the passage as an example of Lovecraftian formlessness. I hasten to add that Lovecraft's shorthand for the noise of the aliens on the floor below sounds like nothing so much as dancing. More than that, these distressing, shuffling sounds would fail to have their full effect were it not for the voices Wilmarth can hear at the same time. I do not mean the suggestive and half-heard alien voices that Lovecraft is at pains to communicate in the pages following the description excerpted above. I mean instead the "crude speech of an unknown and evidently rustic man, and the other the suave Bostonian tones of my erstwhile guide Noyes" (261). These human voices also speak at the same time as mechanical voices from the cylinders containing the brains of human and nonhuman alike. What Wilmarth hears is a chorus, as if overhearing a party: "buzzing" alien voices, "loud, metallic, lifeless voices," a rural Vermonter, the educated cadence of a man from Boston, and the disconcerting, nearly dancing sound of unknown physical movement (Lovecraft 261). All these constitute, in a phrase familiar from earlier in "The Whisperer in Darkness," the aliens' "very cosmopolitan place." They have gathered their society of cosmic adventurers. What comes to the fore through absent farm animals, whirrings, whispers, buzzings, gratings, and shamblings is the concreteness of a suggestion—a suggestion of nonhuman life and of alien territory. Whether this concreteness represents a human reality regurgitated in alien costume or instead a concept that serves to show something different—the nonhuman—depends on what, in Lovecraft, the idea of territory really means.

### **Sounding territory**



Invaded geographies are key to Lovecraft's fiction.<sup>74</sup> The Vermont of "The Whisperer in Darkness" took shape first in Lovecraft's own travels in New England. He lived for a difficult period in New York City as well, an experience that revolted him. His narrative depiction of the urban geography of Brooklyn—its tenements and harbors—depends for its effect on the connection between territory and sound. In "The Horror at Red Hook," written in 1925 and published in 1927, a particularly racist vision of Lovecraft's makes this clear when the narrator considers the residents of the city:

The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organ litanies of the harbour whistles. (119)

"Here," Lovecraft continues immediately after the above sentences, "long ago a brighter picture dwelt" (119). Notice the switch from auditory to visual phenomena, whereby sound appears outright nonhuman, strangely crying in sympathy with foul water and the whistling of machines likened to monsters. The implication is that where there had been a picture—discreet, quiet, and sterile—a noisy mass has colonized that picture's proper place. Sound claims territory.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write about a "territory-producing expressiveness" (315). They go on:

The marking of a territory is dimensional, but it is not meter, it is a rhythm. It retains the most general characteristic of rhythm, which is to be inscribed on a different plane than that of its actions.

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<sup>74</sup> See James Kneale's "H.P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror" for a consideration of the crucial "thresholds" that, by their crossing, define the horrific in the fiction of Lovecraft.

A meter follows a preset pattern, fulfills a form—the concept of meter already goes too far—but for Deleuze and Guattari a general characteristic of rhythm is that it distinguishes itself from the plane in which it occurs and makes a difference concretely. They draw on the examples of the colors of a coral fish or birds that sing to claim a place against rivals to make the point that territory does not begin with an aggressive claim to a place, so that every sense of territory presumes the existence of that territory, which then has to be defended. Instead they insist that the “expressive is primary in relation to the possessive” (316). Sounds, tones, colors, songs, or, in a word, art—all these expressions make a territory “become,” cause properties of that territory to emerge and carry the mark of the subject that produced that territory, as in the fish that, with its color, is the coral fish claiming its home on the coral reef. Its color is a signature. The territory is a matter of expression. This expressiveness represents an autonomy rather than a dependency: an autonomy of the marking subject.

The mark of the (“Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro”) subject, expressed through a “babel of sound and filth,” appears to be exactly what territorializes Red Hook as horrific in Lovecraft’s story. Even the harbor whistle and the oily waves appears to be of that subject, expressing in concert what the babel and filth express. They are part of the same plane. That brighter picture that “dwelt” in Red Hook at one time constitutes Lovecraft’s protagonist’s response to this horror, but also showcases a different sensory existence, or a plane from which the filth and babel differ: the visual, clean and bright, against the “hopeless tangle,” or intimacy, of sound.

### **Whose territory**

In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” the “mark of the subject” has less definite or explicit properties than the racialized “babel and filth” of Red Hook, though the alien fungi from Yuggoth appear like human imperial agents offering the advancements of a cosmopolitan civilization. Lovecraft’s presentation of the tale in “Whisperer” nevertheless insists on the aliens’ horrific aspect, which has much to do with their supposed indefiniteness, insofar as they are impervious to photography and their buzzing voices suggest a monstrous, inconceivable appearance. The threat remains one of intrusion and ultimately abduction. As Lovecraft writes in his story, “The Dunwich Horror,” “the world was in danger, since the Elder Things wished to strip it and drag it away from the solar system and cosmos of matter into some other plane or place from which it had once fallen” (Lovecraft 234). In more sedate language, Wilmarth in “The Whisperer in Darkness” speculates that the buzzing aliens he encounters in Vermont have “some policy hurtful to the earth and its normal inhabitants” (Lovecraft 260). Human space is due either for alien annexation, or a prior claim to ownership. Deleuze and Guattari suggest an analogous situation when they describe French composer and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen’s notion regarding birds which sing territorial songs: “If the robber sings better than the true proprietor, the proprietor yields his place” (Deleuze and Guattari 317). The dilemma for Wilmarth and for other Lovecraftian protagonists, as in “Dunwich,” is their suspicion, given the ancientness and strangeness of the universe they perceive, that the earth has never really been human at all. They may have to yield their place. Despite being the planet’s “normal inhabitants,” human beings can only presume that it is their home.

Though S.T. Joshi and much of the critical discourse conceives of Lovecraft's philosophy as a mechanistic one—Lovecraft suggests as much himself in his letters—a horror based on the presumption that the earth represents a human territory implies an important difference. The indifferent universe frightens the human being precisely because of the presumption of human indigeneity. Believing yourself at home makes it possible to feel the horror of inevitable incursions. Though in “The Horror at Red Hook,” sound claimed territory, this vulnerability depended on there being no naturalized territory in the first place, for any species, human or not. If territory depends on the “mark of the subject” that constitutes it, then Wilmarth's horror lies in the perception that another marking subject, this time nonhuman, might stake a claim that he cannot defy.

In his novel, or theory-fiction, *Cyclonopedia: complicity with anonymous materials* (2008), Reza Negarestani speculates on the takeover of human space in Lovecraft's work in much the same manner. Commenting on the concluding passage of Lovecraft's 1925 story “The Festival,” which speculates that “great holes” have been dug throughout the earth by monstrous worms, Negarestani writes that “Lovecraft addresses holey space or ( )hole complex (with an evaporative W) as the zone through which the Outside gradually but persistently emerges, creeps in (or out?) from the Inside” (44). These holey spaces “unground the earth” (Negarestani 44). As in the horror film trope where the victim pleads with police over the phone, only to be told that the killer's unnerving call “is coming from inside the house,” the Outside evaporates the cozy inside-ness of territoriality. Negarestani's comment on Lovecraft constitutes a comment on the illusion of territory. As in Olivier Messiaen, a switch of “robber” and “proprietor”

depends on the autonomy of the marking subject, not on the naturalness of one claim over the other. The Outside disintegrates the Inside.

In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” the sense of nonhuman presence moves through the tonal grating and buzzing of alien voices. Wilmarth first hears it before arriving in Vermont. Akeley sends him a phonograph recording he made in the woods, capturing a conversation between one of the Yuggoth aliens and one of their human agents. Wilmarth describes it: “The second voice, however, was the real crux of the thing—for this was the accursed *buzzing* which had no likeness to humanity despite the human words which it uttered in good English grammar and a scholarly accent” (218). The content of what Wilmarth hears has all Lovecraft’s usual sense of pseudomythological scale, as when the buzzing voice mutters, “To Nyarlathotep, Mighty Messenger, must all things be told. And He shall put on the semblance of men, the waxen mask and the robe that hides, and come down from the world of Seven Suns to mock...” (219). Alone these words accomplish little. The buzzing tone provides the “real crux of the thing,” according to Wilmarth. To use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, the buzzing embodies the “mark of the subject.” It testifies to a nonhuman presence that cannot be reduced to words or meanings: the buzzing is “like the droning of some loathsome, gigantic insect... wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life” (Lovecraft 220). Though the buzzing appears to be an individual voice, it expresses an entire cosmos. In Wilmarth’s words, “When the longer passage of buzzing came, there was a sharp intensification of that feeling of blasphemous infinity” (220). The buzz expresses or conjures an unscalable territory, an infinite place where Wilmarth is not at home.

Where Negarestani makes much of the “great holes” that have been dug in the earth in Lovecraft’s story, “The Festival,” the implied holes in “The Whisperer in Darkness” suggest a more prosaic, even domesticated, aim. For all the accursed buzzing of their voices and the infinity of their blasphemy, the aliens from Yuggoth have come to extract minerals and put human brains in metal canisters outfitted with sensory apparatuses. They have mastered surgery and, apparently, sound engineering. Yet the “mark of the subject” expressed by their buzzing voices rattles Wilmarth. What is terrible about the Outside, as Negarestani emphasizes, is that it emerges from Inside, which proves to be a species of porousness rather than a redoubt; the Outside has already dug through the earth. It begins everywhere and never ends. As the early twentieth century writer Charles Fort wrote in one of his screeds against the exclusion of anomalous data from scientific research: “to all local phenomena there are always outside forces” (9).<sup>75</sup> Fort implies in *The Book of the Damned*, sometimes with bitterness, that this is the nature of human thought: to exclude certain data and thus discover phenomena, which do not have to account for contradictory or complicating evidence. What human beings “see” takes shape as a limitation of sight.

If the measurelessness of the buzzing cannot be grasped, the marking subject does not show up in the medium Wilmarth relies upon to sense him/it/her/them. Not even the buzz shows up, strictly speaking, as a buzzing, for it is “*like* the droning of some loathsome, gigantic insect” (emphasis mine). That this entomological reference suits a

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<sup>75</sup> In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” Wilmarth mentions in passing “the extravagant books of Charles Fort” (Lovecraft 206).

noise “wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life” indicates that Wilmarth’s allusion to an insect represents a crude approximation.

In *What Is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe spends part of a chapter on the film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) pondering the writing of philosopher Stanley Cavell. Cavell’s consideration of photography fascinates Wolfe, for Cavell writes that we do not know the proper way to think of the connection between a photograph and the thing of which it is a picture. Sound represents another matter for Cavell. Wolfe writes:

The idea here is that with the visual, the lines of determination run from the intentional subject to the object, to what we “look at,” and hence the magic of the photograph and of film is that our role in so making the world manifest is suddenly removed from the equation. With sound, on the other hand, the lines run from the object (“where sound comes *from*”) to the subject—it is, as Derrida might put it, a “spatialization” of the subject/object relation—so that a corollary magic would involve our insertion into the equation, as if we had to actively listen, just as we actively direct sight, to hear anything at all. (178)

Where Deleuze and Guattari, in their notes on the autonomy of the marking subject, emphasize territory expressed by a signature, be it color or song, Wolfe’s gloss on sound and photograph in the writing of Stanley Cavell adds another dimension: the difference between voice (or, speech) and sound.<sup>76</sup> The buzz Wilmarth hears in a story where he claims not to see its speaker—because he does not really want to look—comes to him unbidden. He cannot “unsee,” so to speak, the buzz he hears. In Wolfe’s phrase, the “lines run from the object to the subject,” from buzz to Wilmarth. But “buzz” only approximates what is audible to him; it seems to suggest the marking subject—the alien

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<sup>76</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Deleuze and Guattari fail to account for something that Wolfe and Cavell pick up, for the distinction here between sound and voice bears a strong resemblance to Deleuze’s distinction between the face and the head in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, with voice and face being associated with a prescriptive identity, whereas sound and head imply a resistant materiality with its own non-identitarian energies.

or nonhuman entity that expresses cosmic blasphemy. With Wolfe, another articulation for Lovecraft's sense of human limitation becomes clear. The buzzing that speaks human words with proper English grammar and in a scholarly accent signals the object inside the subject, the Outside that comes from Inside.<sup>77</sup> What renders so uncanny the marking subject in Lovecraft's implicit notion of territory, conjured and possessed through expression, is that it does not wholly appear qua subject, despite seeming clearly to be one, that is, an alien intelligence. It appears instead as the buzzing object inside the voice of a subject otherwise cosmopolitan and recognizable in its accent and grammar.<sup>78</sup>

This object inside the subject creates both a racist possibility and an epistemological one, though these are not mutually exclusive possibilities. The object-inside-subject can appear to be either the teeming mass of non-white people living in Brooklyn, as in "The Horror at Red Hook," or, as in "The Whisperer in Darkness," it remains anomalous and excluded, to borrow the vocabulary of Charles Fort. The marking subject does not show up in Wilmarth's hearing. Paradoxically, that is how Wilmarth knows it is there. What the buzz sounds like is the limit of what can be heard. At last: the nonhuman according to Lovecraft.

### **Clarity and inflection in Lovecraft's language**

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<sup>77</sup> As discussed briefly in the last chapter, on D.H. Lawrence, Akira Lippit writes similarly in *Electric Animal* of the Freudian unconscious, suggesting that the psychoanalytic entity, supposed to play so decisive a role in Freudianism, represents an exteriority, a bit of Darwinian nature, preserved inside the human psyche (Lippit 98; 100).

<sup>78</sup> One more note on Deleuze and Guattari, for they are perfectly aware of Lovecraft's writings about the "Outside" and mention him several times in *A Thousand Plateaus*, such as when they write, "A fascination for the outside? Or is the multiplicity that fascinates us already related to the multiplicity dwelling within us?" (240). They comment shortly thereafter that "Lovecraft applies the term 'Outsider' to this thing or entity, the Thing, which arrives and passes at the edge" (245). In highly concentrated form, that is one of the main arguments of this entire chapter.



It is all well and good to identify as nonhuman in “The Whisperer in Darkness” precisely the accursed buzz, or the object-inside-subject, but I want to be precise about how it works. The “buzz” indicates a marking subject—a nonhuman from Yuggoth—and emphasizes that this subject does not really “show up” in Wilmarth’s hearing. Except that Wilmarth knows it is there. He cannot hear it (he hears only the cosmopolitan voice) but hears that he cannot hear something else, an audible limit that indicates an alien presence. As I noted above, the buzz inflects spoken words that Wilmarth overhears. A tension therefore exists between clear speech, with recognizable and meaningful words, and sound, in this case the buzz that inflects those words and introduces into them something alien and frightful. It is the tension between a word that has, on the one hand, a signified meaning and, on the other hand, a signifying inflection. That inflection is the word’s warped and alien quality.

In more practical terms, the push and pull between a signified meaning and a signifying inflection means that there is a tension in “The Whisperer in Darkness” between words that clarify who/what the aliens from Yuggoth are and the buzzing sound that indicates the impossibility of knowing them at all. Recall that the written word, embodied in Akeley and Wilmarth’s letters, threatens to expose the aliens from Yuggoth as a photograph cannot—and as the accursed buzz cannot. In *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), Graham Harman reads Lovecraft’s fiction, which abounds with examples like the “accursed buzz,” as parables of “real objects” that are “locked in impossible tension with the crippled powers of language” (Harman 27). I do not think this is adequate, especially in the case of “The Whisperer in Darkness,” where the tension

is precisely between word and sound.<sup>79</sup> Spoken or written, a word signifies something, and the sound of the “buzz” that is in the scholarly voice alienates (or alienifies) that signification. It may not, strictly speaking, change the meaning of the word, but it causes the word to indicate something horrifically other than humanity. A word in this case resembles a territory like Red Hook, overtaken by an alien buzz.

As a result of the contest of sound and word, the entities in “Whisperer” appear alien and nonhuman when seen from the point of view of the buzz. From the point of view of the words used to describe them, they tend to appear more or less human. After all, they represent a fathomable and prosaic enterprise like mineral extraction, which appears to be the basis for their recognizable cosmo-imperial leisure of interdimensional travel and learning—abetted along the way by monstrous surgical operations that they perform on humans as well as themselves (in order to occupy human bodies). Words indeed describe them.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to note that the alien inflection in Lovecraft’s fiction is not limited to sound. In one of Lovecraft’s most celebrated works, *At the Mountains of Madness* (written in 1931, published serially in 1936), one finds many examples of words that shift between clear meaning and the intrusion of alien warping. In its first half, this short novel features a complex description of an alien city seen from the air above Antarctica, where an expedition has stumbled on the remains of a nonhuman civilization that predates

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<sup>79</sup> Here and in what follows, I follow Derrida’s suggestion in *Of Grammatology* that “language is always already a writing” (106). This means that writing is (logically) prior to speech. The reason for this priority is that, to be coherently spoken, words have to have been codified: Each has to be *this* word rather than *that* word. This is the “classificatory play of differences” (109) that Derrida calls writing in general and which makes speech possible. In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” Lovecraft implies the notion of a sound that does not amount to a meaningful word in the play of differences. The inflecting sound comes from a notional Outside, exterior to the play of differences. This point will be elaborated in what follows.

<sup>80</sup> The last section of this chapter on “alien empire” will return to this point in more detail.

humankind. The details accumulate into a bizarre architectural image that, in its flirtation with un-visualizability, harkens back to the description in “Whisperer” of the drowned alien bodies with their “membraneous wings.” In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the alien city implies both a high degree of order and a jumble of chaotic construction:

The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie. There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs; and strange, beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars with each one overlapping the one beneath. There were composite cones and pyramids either alone or surmounting cylinders or cubes or flatter truncated cones and pyramids, and occasional needle-like spires in curious clusters of five. (29)

None of the words in this description, on its own, lacks a clear meaning. Together, though, they are less clear, for like the “buzz” in “Whisperer” that is only “like” an insect’s buzzing, many terms in the description of the Cyclopean city seem to be approximations.<sup>81</sup> Table-like constructions appear to be and not be tables. Moreover, these table-like constructions may or may not be “piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs.” Sound plays no role in this passage, but nonetheless there is an alien inflection at work on its vocabulary.

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<sup>81</sup> Harman rightly points out that the “strange, beetling, table-like constructions” in Lovecraft’s description “merely *suggest* piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs” (Harman 166, emphasis in original). I agree that it would be a mistake to think that “piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs” were really on hand, but Harman again is too imprecise, for he ignores the tension between clear words and their inflection by the sight of an alien metropolis. For him, the passage embodies the parable of withdrawn objects and “crippled” language. In my mind, it is not a contest of object and word, but of word and inflection. About the object itself we cannot say, except that, as I argue in this chapter, the alien object often turns out to be human after all.

One can best grasp this alien inflection in *At the Mountains of Madness* by revisiting the moment in “The Whisperer in Darkness” when Wilmarth crouches in his room and ponders the alien cacophony coming up through the floor. He experiences something like the profusion of the Cyclopean city:

Objects seemed now and then to move across the room like conscious entities; the sound of their footfalls having something about it like a loose, hard-surfaced clattering—as of the contact of ill-coordinated surfaces of horn or hard rubber. It was, to use a more concrete but less accurate comparison, as if people with loose, splintery wooden shoes were shambling and rattling about on the polished board floor. On the nature and appearance of those responsible for the sounds, I do not care to speculate. (261)

Wilmarth admits that the reference to shoes is “less accurate” than the notion of “contact of ill-coordinated surfaces of horn and rubber,” but he calls the noises “footfalls” without second-guessing himself. Most crucial of all, he anxiously claims that he is unable to “escape the impression that it [the room] was full of living beings” (Lovecraft 261). The sounds in the room below ineluctably suggest the motions of life—the clear stepping of feet—while simultaneously they do not sound to Wilmarth like living creatures at all, for otherwise his desire to “escape” the impression that these sounds are those of living beings would make no sense. Such “footfalls” imply something so alien that they must not be considered lifelike or conscious, as if mechanical or inanimate forces produced the clatter. Nevertheless, they are footfalls. The word “footfalls” appears to describe them accurately. The story implies no reason to believe we are wildly misled by the term. It just so happens that a surplus sound inheres in what are called “footfalls” and knocks the word off kilter. Here we have signified meaning (footfall) in unreconciled tension with an audible inflection that warps the step of a foot into something alien and perhaps not a

footfall in the first place. Yet Wilmarth does not balk at calling it a “footfall.” The word remains intact, so to speak. It simply has to contend with an inflecting (alien) agent.

The same holds for the Cyclopean city in *At the Mountains of Madness*. Sound plays no role in that passage, but Lovecraft’s lengthy and bizarre description of “table-like constructions” and the like does not repudiate the appropriateness of the word “city.” He could have described it as something other than a city. For example, a sculpture. Given the profusion of nouns and adjectives used to capture its terraces and cones and pyramids, the Cyclopean city could as easily be a gargantuan, complex sculpture—or perhaps a hive, given its nonhuman geometry. As in the case of “footfall,” though, the word “city” remains intact. *At the Mountains of Madness* never questions the appropriateness of the term, either. The Cyclopean jumble is a city and nothing else. Its tables and slabs and pyramids and cones are buildings, however alien and however obscure in purpose. The rest of the short novel only confirms the initial confidence that this is in fact an alien metropolis.

If it is sound that alienates but leaves intact the word “footfall,” then the arresting sight of the buildings of the Cyclopean city impart a warping sense of inscrutable alien industry even as it leaves the word “city” in place. The sight of this alien city intrudes on vision, making the pile-up of words applied to it both adequate and inadequate. The plain word “city” applies as readily as terms like “table” and “cone,” but a sense of alienness leaps out from the sight of this city, making the tables “table-like” and the cones “composite cones and pyramids.” The signified meanings of each word seem to hold, but jumbled together the way they are, a signifying inflection makes the words waver and

look irresolute. An alien quality impresses itself on otherwise transparent words. It makes them falter in their struggle to be literal.

In the case of the “accursed buzzing” voice, the buzz signals an object inside the subject, a sound that Wilmarth hears against his will despite actively listening for something like it.<sup>82</sup> Cary Wolfe suggests, in his reading of Stanley Cavell, that with sound it is possible for the “lines [to] run from the object to the subject,” meaning that human beings can hear against their intention to do so, unlike sight, which is more inflected by the will of the perceiver. What Lovecraft describes in *At the Mountains of Madness* offers an example where something is indeed seen against the will of the perceiver. An alien sight intrudes, rendering words like “spires,” “cones,” “cylinders,” “pyramids,” and “truncated” both intentionally meaningful and warped out of true. The vision impresses itself as alien, no matter the prosaic clarity of any of these words on their own. What is seen is a shock despite careful observation.

In Wilmarth’s case, his intention to listen for something strange does not dispel the line of intentionality, to adopt Wolfe’s terminology, that runs from the object to his ear. The buzz makes itself heard in a way not easily integrated into Wilmarth’s understanding, not so much because he does not know what he is hearing but also because he does not seem to hear it, not actually. He comes up against the limit of his hearing when he approximates as “buzzing” the alien sound inside the well-known accent. Something similar could be said of the Cyclopean city in *At the Mountains of*

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<sup>82</sup> Harman writes, in his discussion of “The Whisperer in Darkness” that the “buzz” Wilmarth hears has an “imperfect untranslatability between the buzzing creature and ostensible humanity” (136). Again, as I have argued, this is imprecise, for it is less a case of “untranslatability” than the object-in-the-subject—an alien inflection of a something familiar and normal.

*Madness*, for it suggests an alien intelligence inside the recognizable activity of architecture. Gazing on that vast construction with a sharp, observational eye does not prevent its sights from leaping out at the observer in a way that defies sight, as in those “table-like constructions” that only suggest multitudinous slabs. What Lovecraft depicts in such arrangements of perception represent limits of the perceiving human subject. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, it is a tension between word and sight, in “The Whisperer in Darkness” a tension between word and sound. Lovecraftian style implies that words can be inflected and rendered alien as any territory. As Cary Wolfe writes, “one person’s voice is another person’s noise” (Wolfe 179). A scholarly accent can become monstrous. An inflection, whether by sound or sight, warps the capacity of words to comfortably mean what they mean. It reveals an Outside, an alien presence.

### **Authorial inflection and tangible effect**

The dilemma faced by Wilmarth when confronted by the alien “buzz” inside an otherwise human voice represents a conflict between the object-in-the-subject, i.e. the nonhuman alien, and the comprehensible words that it speaks. It is a conflict, in other words, between signified meanings and a signifying power that intrudes on what is otherwise transparent. This tension between word and inflection recurs at the level of Lovecraft’s own writing in “The Whisperer in Darkness.”

Take, for example, one of the key features of Lovecraft’s style, a feature that infects as well those who write about Lovecraft, such as Graham Harman or Eugene Thacker: persistent use of italics. Of course, italics are a convention of emphasis in written English. In the case of “The Whisperer in Darkness,” though, they are over-emphatic to the point of gratuity. Lovecraft depends on italics to convey what his words

alone cannot. They allow inflection to suggest what is not in a word but in the voicing of the word, as if Lovecraft were reading aloud. By using them, he intrudes on his own writing. Like the accursed buzz, these italics suggest an alienated presence in the very words of Lovecraft's story. The alien from outside the narrative is him, and the inflection authorial.

Lovecraft italicizes the "accursed buzzing" when it first appears in "The Whisperer in Darkness." That buzzing voice, along with the scraps of sentences that Wilmarth can hear later when he listens through the floor, have a peculiar effect. Read again the aforementioned scene:

Isolated words—including the names of Akeley and myself—now and then floated up, especially when uttered by the mechanical speech-producer; but their true significance was lost for want of continuous context. Today I refuse to form any definite deductions from them, and even their frightful effect on me was one of *suggestion* rather than of *revelation*. A terrible and abnormal conclave, I felt certain, was assembled below me; but for what shocking deliberations I could not tell. It was curious how this unquestioned sense of the malign and the blasphemous pervaded me despite Akeley's assurances of the Outsiders' friendliness. (Whisperer, 262; emphasis in original)

Lovecraft italicizes *suggestion* and *revelation* to capture Wilmarth's bewilderment. The reader hears his delicate conviction in the choice. It is *suggestion* rather than *revelation*. Wilmarth's denial of revelation looks odd in light of his admission that he felt "this unquestioned sense of the malign and the blasphemous." An alien intention seems to be more than suggested to him. Does it not stand revealed? He feels assured of it, in spite of Akeley's assurances to the contrary.

If Wilmarth remains uncertain, he does not act like it. He decides to flee the house shortly after hearing a few more "isolated words." As the italics convey his conviction, so



the blasphemous tone of these isolated words, not their “true significance,” convinces Wilmarth to run.

Lovecraft’s italics have a tonal effect. In their direct allusion to voicing and to the possibility of reading such lines aloud, they throw our attention back onto a reading and/or speaking body. This body is not necessarily the reader’s own, but a phantom body, Wilmarth’s, palpable in the written words even if it does not show up in them. Moreover, these italics stress Lovecraft’s authorial hand.

Other italicizing passages appear through “The Whisperer in Darkness.” The first notable example, already discussed:

The second voice, however, was the real crux of the thing—for this was the accursed *buzzing* which had no likeness to humanity despite the human words which it uttered in good English grammar and a scholarly accent. (218, emphasis in original).

Or consider this frightened excerpt from one of Henry Akeley’s letters to Wilmarth:

It is true—terribly true—that *there are non-human creatures watching us all the time*; with spies among us gathering information. (209, emphasis in original).

Sometimes the italics seem to want to grab the reader by the lapels, so to speak:

Those to whom I have since described the record [of an accursed buzzing voice] profess to find nothing but cheap imposture or madness in it; but *could they have heard the accursed thing itself*, or read the bulk of Akeley’s correspondence (especially that encyclopaedic [sic] second letter), I know they would think differently. (220, emphasis in original).

Planning his trip to Vermont, italics dramatically impress on readers the risks of going:

The strange thing was *reaching out* so. Would it suck me in and engulf me? (225, emphasis in original)

And, finally, from the last letter of Akeley’s to Wilmarth, a letter written by an imposter in human disguise:

I shall not be called upon to make trip *outside* yet, though I shall probably *wish* to do so later on. (233, emphasis in original)

These are only a few examples from “Whisperer.” Lovecraft’s italics tends to imply a need for the listener/reader to grasp—really grasp and understand—what is being said or read. They also betray a lack of confidence in what the same words could be doing if they remained un-italicized and thus un-inflected, as if Lovecraft or Akeley or Wilmarth were anxious that the reader/listener should not miss the point.

The point does not seem so hard to miss, though. In a story that features characters like Wilmarth and Akeley repeatedly attempting to record alien speech, using phonographs, for example, writing seems up to the task of creating a convincing record. Italics alone testify to this, for although italics imply that written words must be stressed to convince readers of their reality, it remains the case that it is written words that make it possible. A photograph of a footprint cannot be italicized with the emphasis of the photographer’s conviction. That the alien fungi from Yuggoth fear the publication of letters between Akeley and Wilmarth seems entirely plausible when one considers that Wilmarth, in the third quotation above, equates encountering the “*thing itself*” with “Akeley’s correspondence.” Either experiencing the thing itself or reading the letters that describe it would appear, in Wilmarth’s mind, to express what needs to be expressed. The written word can convey the reality of the existence of mineral-extracting aliens in Vermont.

If, however, the authentic alien presence remains so resistant to sense that it most compellingly shows up as a distorting buzz inside words spoken in “good English grammar and a scholarly accent” (Lovecraft 218), then the “thing itself” appears to be at

a remove from the observer anyway. In the spirit of Jacques Derrida's critique in *Of Grammatology* and *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, I am tempted to suggest that this Lovecraftian situation is one where there exists in a word, modulated by a buzz, only a trace of an absent presence. That is where writing leaves us, per Derrida—with traces. Not even "I" (me, myself) shows up in words, when it is the case that this supposedly grounding and foundational word, "I," is available for use not only to me but to anyone writing and speaking of themselves. The word "I" is not unique to me; I am not "I". So "I" is an absent presence, a trace, because "I" is not the same as me. I use "I" like a mask that everyone uses, though in this case the mask is the only way to know there is a face beneath it. Take off the mask—take away the "I"—and it becomes difficult to know who/what is there at all. This is one way to understand words from a Derridean point of view, with language as a technical apparatus for making traces by an always already absent subject.<sup>83</sup> Were Lovecraft's "accursed buzz" precisely like the Derridean trace, the nonhuman alien would be an absent presence in "The Whisperer in Darkness."

But Lovecraft's italics imply an intention for something more. They intend to show something more. They strive—impossibly, for the italicizer, Lovecraft, is long dead and absent<sup>84</sup>—to indicate a present entity by rendering palpable the voice that stresses a word and makes not only the emphasis but also the emphasizing agent felt: the authorial

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<sup>83</sup> Or take Cary Wolfe's summary statement of the Derridean point of view in his essay, "Exposures," cited in Chapter 1, on Jack London: "'we' are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, our mammalian existence, of course, but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity" (Wolfe 27).

<sup>84</sup> To be a good manqué Derridean, I should point out that even while he was living, Lovecraft was already dead from the point of view of the self-indicating italics he left behind. The I that italicizes is never in the "I."

hand at work. Given Lovecraft's tendency to put words, written or spoken, in contest with an inflecting agent—and in the case of italics, he is that inflecting agent—he wants to let this inflector be alarmingly felt, not absent present. He wants to allow what Derrida denies writing can do despite striving to achieve it: presence, but for Lovecraft it looks peculiar and alien.

This is why I have used the phrase “leaps out” when describing the buzz that is heard as object-inside-subject. It is from Outside. The buzz is not like the term “I.” The term “I” can be used by anyone. That is not the case with the alien buzz. The buzz is singular. It is an alien term, perhaps even the Unique Term, from a human point of view.<sup>85</sup> It does not exist inside the “play of differences” that Derrida defines as writing in *Of Grammatology* (109), for if it were possible to imagine an originary and unique utterance outside the play of differences, the buzz embodies it. It warps human words with its alien modulation. It indicates the inflecting agent directly, not as an absent presence, and makes this inflector tangibly felt in a horror that touches everything. That is what “The Whisperer in Darkness” wants to convey with its “accursed buzz.” I have said the buzz represents a limit to audibility, rather than something that is heard in and of itself. That is true to a point. Lovecraft wants it both ways. On the one hand, the buzz appears to be a limit in audibility, a limit that could be Derridean. On the other hand, the buzz seems to clarify that the object-inside-subject is exactly the “marking subject” that Deleuze and Guatarri discuss in *A Thousand Plateaus* as a claimant and possessor of territories. The alien is heard, there and present, in a sound no human could make.

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<sup>85</sup> Compared to D.H. Lawrence's stallion, Lovecraft's accursed buzz more successfully suggests singularity.

Lovecraft's story insists on this. The nonhuman reaches out and touches Wilmarth via its buzzing inflection that covers everything with "blasphemous infinity." Its sound is tactile and material.

### **The soap bubble**

The "buzz" so central to the argument of this chapter represents, paradoxically, both a limit and a point of contact. What Wilmarth senses when he hears the alien inflection really does indicate a border he cannot cross. That does not mean the border is impermeable. His alarm and horror imply as much, for the "The Whisperer in Darkness" is not the tale of a deluded man. Lovecraft means for his readers to take seriously that the "blasphemous infinity" emanates from the alien entity, that this is really happening in the narrative. The alien entity touches Wilmarth via its distorting inflection of scholarly words.

No metaphor or philosophical conceit explicates this structure of a limit and point of contact better than the notion of the "soap bubble" from the work of post-Darwinian biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944).<sup>86</sup> Lovecraft and Uexküll were contemporary thinkers of the nonhuman. Like many a Lovecraft story, Uexküll's *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (1934) evinces a fascination with the least anthropomorphizable figures, such as sea anemones and ticks. As in Lovecraft, Uexküll's

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<sup>86</sup> Uexküll has become a key figure in Animal Studies, precisely because his work has meant so much for the philosophers whose own thought has been decisive for contemporary scholarship on human and animal life. Martin Heidegger read and wrote about Uexküll, as did Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Giorgio Agamben has taken up his work as well, in *The Open* (2002), and so have scholars like Kari Weil and Brett Buchanan. See Kari Weil's *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (2012) and Brett Buchanan's *Onto-Ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze* (2008).

focus on the nonhuman addresses in each instance the alien distinctions enabled by different subject-object interfaces.<sup>87</sup>

It is worth taking a moment to be clear on this. Uexküll's central conceit, represented by his notion of the *umwelt*, or surrounding world, is that a particular animal interprets a set of tones or signs in its surroundings that are meaningful specifically for that creature.<sup>88</sup> Though animals, according to Uexküll, are not the passive victims of exterior forces, slaves to certain understandings, the meanings they interpret and choose to respond to within their *umwelt* follow a "plan." Each creature's plan and its set of interpretable signs constitutes its environment as such. As Giorgio Agamben puts it in his book, *The Open*, in Uexküll:

There does not exist a forest as an objectively fixed environment: there exists a forest-for-the-park-ranger, a forest-for-the-hunter, a forest-for-the-botanist, a forest-for-the-wayfarer, a forest-for-the-nature-lover, a forest-for-the-carpenter, and finally a fable forest in which Little Red Riding Hood loses her way. (41)

Uexküll's own elaboration clarifies that

There are thus purely subjective realities in environments. But the objective realities of the surroundings never appear as such in the environments. They are always transformed into perception marks or perception images and equipped with an effect tone which only then makes them into real objects even though no part of the effect tone is present in the stimuli. (125)

Subjective meanings reverberate through the *umwelt*, which is not objective, for any environment appears differently for each creature in it. Whatever appears there for that creature, like a tree, has an "effect tone" particular to the effect this specific, perceiving creature can have on that tree. To a bear, a tree means something different than it means

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<sup>87</sup> What interests Uexküll, according to Brett Buchanan, is the way in which "the organism responds to certain signs that are significant to it, and likewise creates signs for others" (Buchanan 32).

<sup>88</sup> I follow common practice in what follows and refer to *umwelt* in the original German.

for a snake, which cannot climb or stand up and scratch its back—and different again is the tree’s meaning for a nesting bird. That effect tone (scratching, nesting) already exists inside the perceiving creature. In the subjective character of the *umwelt*, Uexküll shows himself to be a Kantian, for his understanding of animal perception is that the world appears as it does due to a specific creature’s forms of cognition. As Kant says in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, time and space are forms of human intuition (Kant 34), so Uexküll’s writing suggests that each animal has its forms of thought that shape ahead of time what it perceives. That is its *umwelt*.

A concrete example of this creaturely intuition is Uexküll’s writing about the tick. The tick does not identify its mammalian prey as such, according to Uexküll. It grasps instead a set of signs. Uexküll writes,

The blind and deaf bandit [the tick] becomes aware of the approach of its prey through the sense of smell. The odor of butyric acid, which is given off by the skin glands of all mammals, gives the tick the signal to leave its watch post and leap off. If it then falls onto something warm—which its fine sense of temperature will tell it—then it has reached its prey, the warm-blooded animal, and needs only use its sense of touch to find a spot as free of hair as possible in order to bore past its own head into the skin tissue of the prey. Now, the tick pumps a stream of warm blood slowly into itself. (45)

The tick does not recognize the mammal on which it feeds. It recognizes instead hair, butyric acid, which is sweat, and the temperature of blood. Uexküll reports that experiments performed on ticks demonstrate that they have no sense of taste. They will suck any liquid that is at (mammalian) blood temperature. The sensory equipment of the blind and deaf tick, in short, constrains it to perceive certain realities. For Charles Fort, this is as good as saying: Phenomena are born or generated where there is an exclusion of data, in this case the exclusion of a datum that means *mammal*. The tick does not need it.

The effect tone of mammalian skin renders it an actionable material for the tick, for the tick understands by the signs of sweat and hair that here it can have (or effect) its meal. It burrows its head into the flesh. Brett Buchanan explains Uexküll's logic: "The mammal emits a tone that complements the tick's own; a meaningful relation is formed" (Buchanan 32). Kari Weil's perspective is helpful as well:

Each and every animal constructs "its" own subjective universe, its *Umwelt*, in which objects are perceived and responded to according to the functional or perceptual signs or tones they emit for each individual subject. Von Uexküll gives the example of a dog who has been trained to jump on a chair when given the command "chair." When the chair is removed and the command given, any other object on which the dog can sit assumes the meaning or "canine sitting tone" of "chair"—couch, crate, shelves. There is no chair in itself. This is also true for humans for whom objects such as a stone can change meaning without changing their physical characteristics. (31)

In the original text which Weil is quoting, Uexküll adds a stress on the fact that learned relationships organize human environments: "We notice in all objects that we have learned to use the act which we perform with them, with the same assurance with which we notice their shape or color" (Uexküll 94). We recognize the "act which we perform with them," as though the function of the object for us inflects it. That is the effect tone ringing within us. Uexküll relies on the metaphor of light to make the same point about the tick when he writes that from "the enormous world surrounding the tick, three stimuli glow like signal lights in the darkness and serve as directional signs that lead the tick surely to its target" (51). It is as if phenomenological experience advertises the very features of the perceiver's mind—back in the direction of the perceiver.

The *umwelt* is a medium and material, too, and here we come back to Lovecraft. Each creature walks around inside a "soap bubble" of its own perceptions, Uexküll writes (69). Like a forcefield, the soap bubble keeps out that which a creature can never quite



know. Like a suit of armor, it encloses that which the creature knows best of all, including the knowledge of all that the creature notices “out there” in the world. What is “out there” in the world is really inside the soap bubble, in the virtual sense indicated by the “effect tone.” The tick does not know the mammal as such is “out there,” but it acts on the mammal because it recognizes the act(s) it performs on features of the mammalian body. Such actions inflect the great expanse of the tick’s prey.

From Inside comes the Outside. The soap bubble represents a blindness to certain (and it can be many) elements or features of the world at large, if one can speak of a world at large in this context. Some of those occulted features may show up for a given creature but only on its own terms, i.e. from the inside, as an “effect tone.” Take the dog that will treat any object like a chair when it hears the word “chair.” This dog can always sit on a “chair,” according to Uexküll’s logic, though it can never identify the chair as such. Insofar as the dog can “hear,” so to speak, the “canine sitting tone,” it sits on a chair. The Outside leaps out from the Inside. An *umwelt* embodies both a limit and a point of contact.

Encountering the accursed buzz in “The Whisperer in Darkness,” Wilmarth resembles Uexküll’s tick, though with an important distinction. Wilmarth figures the Uexküllian tick but only if the tick could have a dim yet concrete sense that aside from the sweat, hair, and blood there existed a vast creature of alien intelligence on whose back it was riding and in whose flesh it was furiously digging. The buzzing inflection that Wilmarth senses represents the “blasphemous infinity” of realizing the existence of such an entity.

Alien blasphemy represents an “effect tone.” It rings in Wilmarth’s head as a horror he tells his reader he could not help but feel, despite “seeing no visual horror at the end.” Wilmarth’s contact with the Outside comes from the Inside, as a distortion in audibility that nevertheless brings him into intimate contact with a nonhuman entity. Although Uexküll’s “effect tone” indicates an action, for Wilmarth no action is possible other than his reverberation with “fear and loathing” at the “incessant whispering [that is] so hateful and unhuman” (Lovecraft 257). Soon enough, he runs.

The object inside the subject of that “scholarly accent” informs Wilmarth of a territory that extends from Vermont to a place beyond known time and space. This territory does not and never will belong to human beings. The alien cosmos has claimed and possessed it in the moment of conjuring it up for Wilmarth’s understanding. In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” a structure of limit and contact, at a point of inflection, forms a matrix. Inside this matrix the nonhuman appears as a distortion in accent, a sound inflecting words, which Wilmarth grasps as something Unique and overwhelmingly present. He can blindly see it, and with sickening certainty. It is the whisperer in darkness.

At the very end of Lovecraft’s story, despite claiming to have seen no visual horrors, Wilmarth finds the mask and gloves that an alien wore to disguise itself as Akeley. It is implied that these may actually be the true “face and hands of Henry Wentworth Akeley” (267), sheared from the man’s body and used as props. Akeley brain’s sits in a cylinder somewhere, ready for transport across the cosmos against his will, despite the fact that it is wonders that he will be shown. The story suggests that other alien creatures and even the aliens from Yuggoth themselves have undergone

arcane surgical operations to transfer their consciousnesses or to alter their tongues and enable their human speech.<sup>89</sup> These are creatures who, in a gesture that suggests a perversion of Uexküll's anti-Darwinism, have taken their own evolution into their hands, reproducing themselves and adapting themselves to whatever environment they choose. They can write their own "plan." All of these details, e.g. about alien surgery, represent exposition in excess of the accursed buzz. Where the blasphemous inflection sketches a delicate and mysterious encounter, small but expansive, Lovecraft accumulates a mass of images and ideas throughout the remainder of the story that drag the alien out of the soap bubble and into a human light.<sup>90</sup>

### **Alien empire**

Much that seems like it should be alien in "The Whisperer in Darkness" turns out to be knowable, albeit in a way unlike the tangible enigma of the "accursed buzz." The story's implicit themes of empire, in particular, make the aliens seem less cosmic than earthbound. Likewise the aliens' appearance and history, neither of which is the unprecedented and utter shock that Wilmarth would have his readers believe.

Though Wilmarth claims at the beginning of the story that he saw "no actual visual horror at the end" (200), plenty of visuals become clear to the reader. Take Wilmarth's initial skepticism about the reports of horrifically strange bodies washing up after Vermont's historic springtime floods:

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<sup>89</sup> More on this in a moment.

<sup>90</sup> See the fiction of Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006), the work of the Russian brothers, Arkady (1925-1991) and Boris Strugatsky (1933-2012), or, for a contemporary example, *Blindsight* (2006) by Peter Watts for novels and stories that detail the horror and wonder of first contact, all while remaining explicitly skeptical that their human characters can begin to understand what makes itself present to them as alien. The Strugatskys' novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1972), tells a story about an alien landing site where the entire problem of alien life is an epistemological one, whereas Lovecraft's aliens from Yuggoth, despite everything, seem knowable. Andrei Tarkovsky filmed *Roadside Picnic* as *Stalker* (1979).

It was really remarkable how closely the reports from different sources tended to coincide; though the wonder was lessened by the fact that the old legends, shared at one time throughout the hill country, furnished a morbidly vivid picture which might well have coloured [sic] the imaginations of all the witnesses concerned. It was my conclusion that such witnesses—in every case naïve and simple backwoods folk—had glimpsed the battered and bloated bodies of human beings or farm animals in the whirling currents; and had allowed the half-remembered folklore to invest these pitiful objects with fantastical attributes. (201-202)

Wilmarth suggests that “naïve and simple backwoods folk” perceive bodies in the water by means of a “morbidly vivid picture” they already have in their heads. They see what legends have predisposed them to see. In a similar vein, only a few pages after this passage, Wilmarth says, “the Indians had the most fantastic theories of all,” for they tell stories of voices whispering at night in the forest and of the aliens’ mining operation (204). Indian legend hints as well that the alien entities in the Vermont hills can speak many human languages, though they themselves are telepathic (204). The most fascinating aspect of all these legends is that they turn out to be unambiguously and unerringly accurate. The bodies that have washed up really are alien bodies with wings; the aliens are in fact mining minerals in the hills; they do speak many human languages (they can surgically alter their vocal organs to mimic human speech); and “telepathy is their usual means of discourse” (234). They also “like to take away men of learning once in a while, to keep informed on the state of things in the human world” (210). Far from the enigma of the alien “buzz,” such descriptions reinforce the sense that the beings from Yuggoth are imperial agents of a cosmic empire. They are masters of mining, mimics of language.<sup>91</sup> Their own language appears on a “great black stone with unknown

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<sup>91</sup> The distorting buzz of the “scholarly accent,” in particular, calls to mind Homi Bhabha’s critique of the mimicry (as camouflage) that is part of the exercise of colonial power. It is more an imperialist agenda that holds in “The Whisperer in Darkness,” but the aliens in this story are keen as well to take human beings away from earth and experience the surgically enhanced way of life common to the beings from Yuggoth.

hieroglyphics,” of which they are jealous when Akeley finds and keeps it, as if it were a key to a galactic encyclopedia (210). They travel great distances, and while they do not live permanently on earth, they exhibit a condescending curiosity about its goings on. They kidnap the natives and bring them home. The reader cannot avoid the conclusion that Vermont epitomizes an imperial outpost.

Wilmarth’s own intuition about Vermont, prior to his arrival at Akeley’s house, demonstrates a unity of first impression and truth that echoes the accuracy of the folklore he dismissed as legend. His fantastical imagination turns out to be of a piece with what is literally the case, i.e. that one cannot safely assume that Vermont is human territory. As S.T. Joshi notes, “[w]hole passages of [Lovecraft’s] essay ‘Vermont—A First Impression’ have been bodily inserted into the text” of “The Whisperer in Darkness” (“Whisperer” notes, Lovecraft 401). The story contains descriptive passages that would fit comfortably in a travelogue. But Lovecraft’s romance of the New England landscape is curious. He renders it as an “unspoiled, ancestral New England without foreigners and factory-smoke, billboards and concrete roads” (239). This description in particular makes Vermont sound not only un-modern but like a far-flung backwater ripe for imminent resource extraction. Wilmarth also notes a railroad track that “seemed to exhale a nebulously visible air of desolation” (241). Not unlike the alien footfall that both is and is not a footfall, the “nebulously visible air of desolation” is invisibly visible. It suggests industry still un-arrived. Wilmarth has not come to Akeley’s home, and already he has a sense for the alien-ness of Vermont, which inheres precisely in its dilapidated anti-

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As Bhabha writes, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 122, emphasis in original). The aliens are like humans but not quite, and they are curious to see humans as aliens, but not quite.

modernity. It looks like an uncouth and undeveloped waystation far from the imperial capitol.

When Wilmarth arrives in Battleboro, Vermont, he senses a creeping “atmospheric tensivity” he cannot explain (240). Here again we have an alien inflection but also a hint of wilderness from the imperial point of view. The register in this case is visual. Conveyed by car to Akeley’s house, Wilmarth critiques the appearance of the town. He first connects it with bucolic fantasies of New England: “[Battleboro] drowsed like the older New England cities which one remembers from boyhood, and something in the collocation of roofs and steeples and chimneys and brick walls formed contours touching deep viol-strings of emotion” (241). As Wilmarth moves out of Battleboro and into the rural countryside, he notes “close-pressing green and granite slopes [that] hinted at obscure secrets and immemorial survivals which might or might not be hostile to mankind” (241). Half-remembered boyhood fantasies morph into a sense of pastness so remote it seems unwelcoming yet enticing to human beings. This picture of Vermont recalls Marlowe’s descriptions of coastal jungle in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Wilmarth’s eye has some of Marlowe’s imperial perspective, entranced and menaced. “Watching a coast as it slips by is like thinking about an enigma,” Marlowe says, before continuing, “There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out” (Conrad 15). Wilmarth’s Vermont mixes a similar cocktail of invitation and secretiveness, not to mention the eerie, whispered (yet mute!) call to hazard and adventure. Marlowe too knows an Outside that comes from the Inside; that is what the heart of darkness of Conrad’s title is. The Vermont of “obscure secrets and immemorial

survivals” falls short of the accursed buzz, but Wilmarth still thinks of the place as full of unknown whispers. New England seems to be a savage and ancient jungle. Keep in mind as well that Wilmarth generally regards Vermont as empty of educated people like himself. Akeley seems an anomaly to him in this way, an isolated representative of erudition and civilization, a Kurtz figure in either threatened or threatening alliance with the locals.

The close-pressing sense of Vermont only increases as Wilmarth and his companion pass through another town and again into the wilderness:

After that we cast off all allegiance to immediate, tangible, and time-touched things, and entered a fantastic world of hushed unreality in which the narrow, ribbon-like road rose and fell and curved with an almost sentient and purposeful caprice amidst the tenantless green peaks and half-deserted valleys. Except for the sound of the motor, and the faint stir of the few lonely farms we passed at infrequent intervals, the only thing that reached my ears was the gurgling, insidious trickle of strange waters from numberless hidden fountains in the shadowy woods. (242)

The “ribbon-like” road could be a strip of film. It marks a passage into a fantasy world. Its only sounds are lulling hushes: the hum of the motor and the trickle of water from hidden places. Again, all of these are whispers that say, “Come and find out.” The road, rather than any cosmic alien, inflects this space with its “almost sentient and purposeful caprice.” In the “tenantless” space of Vermont, the road itself appears to be a resident, toying with its visitors.

The “fantastic world of hushed unreality” (242) into which Wilmarth moves has Orientalist overtones as well. Wilmarth “felt that the very outline of the hills themselves held some strange and aeon-forgotten meaning, as if they were vast hieroglyphs left by a rumoured [sic] titan race whose glories live only in rare, deep dreams” (242). He sees the

landscape as a massive, dreamy hieroglyphic text that opens in the hills about him. I recall on this score Edward Said's implication of the textual obsession of Orientalism. As he writes on Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, the Orientalist fantasy takes the place of engagement with the people and life of a place, opting instead for the "form of encyclopedic presentation of material" (Said 188). Said continues, "[Flaubert's] St. Anthony is nothing if not a man for whom reality is a series of books, spectacles, and pageants unrolling temptingly and at a distance before his eyes" (188). Remember that Wilmarth's temptation is a "zeal for the unknown" (Lovecraft 137) that brought him out to Vermont to meet Akeley in the first place. Now arrived, his zeal for that "unknown" feels distinctly bookish and textual, as if fantastical representations, e.g. a landscape of unreadable script, constituted the very thing he came to see. His interest is not in people, but in texts and their fantastical possibilities. He is a student of folklore and recondite books, after all.<sup>92</sup>

The sense of Vermont as a fantastical image with shades of alien empire comes to a head when Wilmarth directly states that the landscape is a painting—an "Italian primitive" painting at that:

Even the sunlight assumed a supernal glamour, as if some special atmosphere or exhalation mantled the whole region. I had seen nothing like it before save in the magic vistas that sometimes form the backgrounds of Italian primitives. Sodoma and Leonardo conceived such expanses, but only in the distance, and through the vaultings of Renaissance arcades. We were now burrowing bodily through the midst of the picture, and I seemed to find in its necromancy a thing I had innately known or inherited, and for which I had always been vainly searching. (243)

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<sup>92</sup> Said stresses the sexual possibilities in the Orientalist imagination as well. Though there is no sex at all in "The Whisperer in Darkness," the sense of Wilmarth's "zeal for the unknown" implicates his desire as ambivalently erotic. He wants to be touched by what he does not know, wants contact, and experiences Vermont as both repulsing and seductive. Its textuality lulls him and brings him pleasure, all the while creeping him out.



Wilmarth describes going inside this rustic, un-modern representation. The inflection at work here consists, really, of Wilmarth's own memory of certain Italian paintings. It is his remembered impression of them that "mantles" the Vermont countryside, as if he were entering a forgotten gallery. He experiences the drive through this picture-scape as a reunion with "a thing I had innately known or inherited, and for which I had always been vainly searching." Vermont appears like the recovery of an atavistic point of origin. No longer at a distance, he is so far inside the representation of it that he has found its truth. This is an intensification of his moving among hills that are like hieroglyphs. This New England backwater promises to embody an outsider's innermost fantasies.<sup>93</sup>

It is on this car journey through Vermont that Wilmarth first encounters the odd voice that dogs him (or the other way around) the rest of the story. His companion's voice evinces a "vague, teasing, baffling familiarity" that is not "ordinary or healthy despite the thoroughly wholesome and cultivated nature of the voice" (Lovecraft 242-243). Wilmarth links it "with forgotten nightmares" (243). This is only a preview of the accursed buzz to come.

If restricted to that "accursed buzz," it would appear that Lovecraft has provided in "The Whisperer in Darkness" a picture of the nonhuman. The "buzz" indicates the presence of an inflecting agent that warps otherwise familiar words into an eerie and horrifying sense of an intelligence from the Outside. This sense of the alien Outside does not hold, however. The "Outer Beings," as Akeley calls them, do not look nearly as alien

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<sup>93</sup> In "The Horror at Red Hook," Lovecraft writes that the babel of nonwhite populations colonizes and claims Brooklyn, where "long ago a brighter picture dwelt" (Lovecraft 119). In that earlier story, a "bright" picture formed the white-supremacist plane against which a racialized alien people expressed and possessed a given territory. In "Whisperer," the notion of a picture itself becomes the site of an intrusion, but it is Wilmarth burrowing through it.

in light of so many of the story's other details. They appear to be agents of an imperial hierarchy, arrived at their backwater outpost in Vermont for the acquisition of minerals useful to them in their industry. They are masters and mimics of the local languages. Despite their cosmo-imperial power from "far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum" (221), their motives and interests are comprehensible, even banal, supported as they are by a network of human spies and the donning of various camouflaging disguises that are not entirely a success. Not only do the Outer Ones kidnap human beings and others for their own edification, they themselves are not a monolithic group; they are a genus with multiple species. It may be that they have made themselves this way, what with their prodigious surgical skill. As the real Akeley says in one of his letters to Wilmarth, "Only a few species have the ether-resisting wings characteristic of the Vermont variety" (234). Others who visit different parts of the earth have distinct abilities, distinct characteristics. As a whole, the genus represents variations on the theme of cosmic, imperialist adventurers. It is coincidental that the "Vermont variety" are coal barons with wings. The image suggests less a vivid devilishness than a fantastical version of a human type. Far from being utterly alien, the entities from Yuggoth in "The Whisperer in Darkness" mirror or reproduce the hierarchical technocracy of human empire. Vermont plays the role of their remote station, far from a rich capitol. Wilmarth's own reveries reinforce that notion. In the end, Vermont's alien occupiers represent the domineering exercise of knowledge and the triumph of acquisitive power.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the implication that the aliens from Yuggoth elude representation, the writing of letters threatens their security. It creates the possibility that other human beings

could learn as much about them as readers of “The Whisperer in Darkness” come to know, or as much as folkore and indigenou legend have recorded about them since long before Albert Wilmarth took an interest in the backwaters of Vermont. Writing exposes, concretely and clearly, what the tale itself divulges—that these entities from “far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum” represent the familiar tropes of scientist-adventurers. They are the avatars of a cosmo-imperial power. Having taken their own evolution into their hands, they cross long distances of space and time with the modest purposes of obtaining minerals on earth and from time to time pilfering a human being for an exhibition of native knowledge. Though Akeley does not want to be surgically separated from his body and travel by neurological canister to the far reaches of space and time, the story does not imply his fate is only suffering and death. It seems that his alien captors may in fact reveal cosmic vistas to him. Like Jack London’s “men in furs,” the beings from Yuggoth are acquisitive imperial agents in membraneous wings, with knowledge to share.

It is only in the delicate but in fact elaborate notion of the “accursed buzz” that the reader of “The Whisperer in Darkness” senses the presence of a nonhuman entity. That buzz represents a limit and a point of contact, for inside the clear subject with its scholarly accent and fine grammar, Wilmarth hears a distortion in audibility. As the inflection of words, this distortion makes present to Wilmarth’s horror the “blasphemous infinity” that unseats his confidence in the presumption of human indiginity on planet earth. For a small squiggle, a burst of static, the buzz indeed sounds accursed. It makes tangible the presence of an object-inside-subject, an Outside that comes from Inside,

allowing the “marking subject” that creates and claims territory with possessive sound to leap out and be (un)known.

Lovecraft does not ultimately resolve the tension between the horrifying, human-decentering accursed buzz and the alien mirror of human power in “The Whisperer in Darkness.” At the end of Jack London’s *John Barleycorn*, the famous author appears resolved to take up a delusion he projects onto all living creatures, horse and human alike: the promise of a good life, unfettered by physical vulnerability, mortal weakness, and the pessimism of drinking that indulges and nurtures the nihilistic acceptance of both. His throws in his lot with delusion and the inflation of human power. In *St. Mawr*, D.H. Lawrence formulates a journey away from the intimacy and personality of human life. His model is the singularity of a horse, whose self-assertive wildness makes the animal less an animal than a spirit—not quite a horse at all. By the end of the novel, this spirit seems clearly to embody a subjugating masculine ideal that conscripts the novella’s protagonist, Lou Witt, as its willing and able gendered worshipper: an archetypal Woman devoted to a singular power that looks human after all. Though in “The Whisperer in Darkness” Lovecraft offers up the accursed buzz as a representational limit where something truly and tantalizingly present sketches a nonhuman possibility, the balance of the story decides the case in favor of their cosmic humanity. The aliens from Yuggoth have an anxiety more about their familiarity than about their alienness. Wanting to maintain their alien reputation, they aim to stay camouflaged and concealed. Safer in folklore and legend than the prosaic reportage of an Akeley or a Wilmarth, they can carry on and remain fearsome. If knowledge of their imperial power, their mineral interests, and their cosmic/cosmopolitan leanings were known more widely to human beings, they

might remain frightful, but their stature would be diminished. Only in their obscurity can they be alien, but by the end of the narrative very little about them is obscure at all. They may be monsters, but their appearance is still a triumph of the Same.

## Conclusion: We Have Never Been Outside Culture

In *John Barleycorn*, *St. Mawr*, and “The Whisperer in Darkness,” Jack London, D.H. Lawrence, and H.P. Lovecraft rely on figures of the nonhuman to suggest ways of revising or newly understanding the human relation to its world and its own humanity. The nonhuman becomes a way to imagine new and improved ways of being. It becomes a way to envision alternative positions that orient the human in a world and universe of nonhuman entities. In the simplest terms, each of these writers begins by imagining the nonhuman as a way to escape, transcend, or exceed the human.

For *John Barleycorn*, London’s dray horse represents a figure that, in the name of its own enablement and capacity to live, subscribes to the productive illusion that life is good and suffering unlikely. The dray horse shows what good complicity looks like—complicity with toil, with oppression, with pain, all of which can be ameliorated by inurement and a denial of death. London recommends similar illusions or “vital lies” in the case of human beings. For humans, vital lies mean getting out of the trap of culture, which in London’s case means the trap created by alcohol and its despairing society of drinkers.

The eponymous stallion in Lawrence’s *St. Mawr* suggests that the inexplicability of instinctual animal life—the impossibility of knowing an animal’s interior states of feeling and being—shows a way forward for human beings caught up in the melodrama of “personality.” The personality represents a flimsy social illusion compared to the singular soul that Lawrence imagines to be embodied in both the horse and, ultimately,

the desert of the U.S. Southwest. Lawrence's stallion has no need of a "personality," which, like a costume, is only appropriate in the setting that makes sense of it. The personality represents a social accessory and tool. The Lawrentian soul is more assertive, even violent, as it transcends intimacy and demands fealty rather than socialize itself or socialize with others.

In "The Whisperer in Darkness," Lovecraft writes about the "accursed buzz" of the nonhuman alien. This distortion in sound suggests a thoroughly unidentifiable and authentically nonhuman presence, one that reveals the universe for what it is: a place in which human beings cannot presume to be indigenous. But it also shows that there exists something which exceeds the human being and exceeds familiar earthly lifeforms. Lovecraft's story suggests there are true "others" out there. There exist alternatives to finitude as "we" human beings understand it.

Lovecraft depends on a strikingly consistent set of post-imperial images and ideas to complete the picture of his beings from "Yuggoth." Lovecraft's reach into the imaginary of imperial power shows his alien escape hatch out of the human to be a way right back inside. Lovecraft's aliens are not so alien at all. The "accursed buzz" suggests the possibility of the nonhuman, but Lovecraft expands on it in such a way as to make his alien entities the equivalent of imperial coal barons. Lawrence and London likewise fall short of their nonhuman goals. Lawrence's attempt to use animals as an example of a less social and more self-assertive creature turns, by the end of *St. Mawr*, into an affirmation of gendered (human) archetype. London's vision of sobriety depends not on escaping human finitude and drunkenness but on deluding oneself into thinking neither is real and can be easily remade. London's sober men have not gained an integrity learned from

animals. All three of these writers envision a time beyond their contemporary moment in which a different being can live and flourish, and this different being is part of a recognizable human culture rather than an alternative one.

If we want to see animals that are not allegories of human development, we could start with the fiction of Djuna Barnes, contemporary to Lovecraft and Lawrence and another post-Freudian traveler. To illustrate the point, I want to look briefly at Barnes's short story, "A Night Among the Horses."

"A Night Among the Horses" has the schematic and brutal irony of a Greek tragedy. A man named John, a groom, has fallen into a romance, or anyway a serious flirtation, with a wealthy woman named Freda Buckler. John works for Freda, taking care of her horses. Capricious and tempting, Freda urges him to participate in his own advancement in the world, though she claims responsibility for it. "I'll make a gentleman out of you," she says, continuing: "I'll step you up from being a 'thing.' You will see, you will enjoy it" (Barnes 249). He may be entranced, but John experiences these provocations and urgings as taunts. Not knowing what she wants, he figures that Freda is the "kind of woman who can't tell the truth" (250), though the reader suspects that John or Barnes means to imply something different: that there is no truth at all, that there is only this flirtatious "game without any pleasure" (250). More on the mechanical nature of the game in a moment.

Freda's claim that she will make a gentleman out of John suggests training, as if he is another horse. She believes he will enjoy the discipline because her training will rank him above the inhuman "thing" (or nothing) he is as a common man. He objects that he likes "being common" (250). Still, he does not resist. On he is driven.



In the imagination of her would-be lover (it is not clear when or if the relationship is ever sexually consummated), Freda represents mechanical and hierarchical power. She is Freda Buckler, after all. John thinks that she could only be thought of as “mistress of the house” (249), but she acts it out by way of mechanical, industrialized metaphors. Barnes writes that Freda is a “small fiery woman, with a battery for a heart and the body of a toy, who ran everything, who purred, saturated with impudence, with a mechanical buzz that ticked away her humanity” (249). Here is another accursed buzz. The verb *purrs* in particular suggests the feline sensuality Freda lacks, not less human because animal but instead suggesting that she is mechanized like an engine. This pulverizing, buckling power repels John as it fascinates him.

Freda cajoles John into coming to a masked ball and explicitly asks that he come “just as you are,” that is, as a common “thing,” rather than as the gentleman she has suggested he might become (253). Barnes writes, “‘Come,’ [Freda] said, ‘just as you are, and be our whipper-in.’” (253). By posing as what he is, a trainer of animals (“whipper in”), John realizes that he is a toy not unlike Freda—with the crucial difference that he is a toy to her, a trifle.

The thought of marriage to Freda offers him no comfort. He can only imagine that she would leave him “[n]othing, absolutely nothing, not even his horses” (251). In his mind, he “wouldn’t fit in anywhere after Freda, he’d be neither what he was nor what he had been; he’d be a *thing*, half standing, half crouching, like those figures under the roofs of historic buildings, the halt position of the damned” (251). Freda, in other words, has assured his “thing”-ness. He will not even have his horses, with whom he feels a

connection not at all like the “halt position of the damned.” With his horses, he feels his power and subjectivity, not his subjection.

On the rare occasions when John complains to Freda about how she treats him, Freda taunts him and asks if he’s being “girlish” (252). All the categories she employs (groom, thing, girl) explicitly un-man him. This is not taunting he can endure very well. He nevertheless seems hopeful, for the possibility of somehow becoming a gentleman and having money shores up his self-image as a man.

At the ball, John arrives dressed like a gentleman, yet in excess of what was expected, wearing a top hat and coat. He intends his outfit to be defiant: “he dressed for evening, like any ordinary gentleman; he was the only person present therefore who was not ‘in dress,’ that is, in the accepted sense” (253). By coming dressed up in what, for him, may be a costume, though not for the aristocrats at the ball who don more outrageous attire, John has denied Freda the thrill of regarding him as the groom he is, i.e. a trifling accessory to her and her circle.

If it was intended as an act of defiance or irony, John’s ploy does not work. He feels overwhelmed by his own drunkenness and a “great soft puff-paste of a woman” (women’s bodies seem to incite John’s panic or fear throughout the story) who dances a minuet with him (253). Nothing seems to work; he remains out of his depth, even as he has chosen a simple mask that might protect him or help him blend in, no matter that it defies Freda’s wishes. He soon sees Freda’s mother and her cats, who swarm over her in a surreal image of matronly leisure *in extremis*. These domesticated animals counterpoint the energy and drive of John’s horses. Surrounded by decadence and indulgence, he

escapes through the French doors, breaking, it seems, the glass, and soon finding himself out in the fields “with his horses again” (254).

The horses are “galloping about as though in their own ballroom,” though they do not seem at play (254). John hopes to mount one of “his” horses and make his escape, but he does not think of his appearance, which to the horses is an “abrupt rising out of the dark” (254). The horses trample John to death as he shouts out to them, as he calls after Freda, “Bitch!” (254). Before going under the horses’ hooves, he exclaims desperately that he can “make his mark” on his own and without Freda (255). It is a last unmaning; “surely they must know him—in a moment,” John thinks (254). Having thought of the horses as “his” for all of the story, he now waits for confirmation from them that they indeed recognize him, affirming their bond, i.e. that he and they belong together. They trample him anyway.

In its elevated language, “A Night Among the Horses” is a series of cruel ironies. Giving in to the transformation which Freda is not in any apparent hurry to enact—she wants him, in the case of the masked ball, only for the sake of his being exactly what he is, “our whipper-in”—John mistakes himself for a man who can be common and yet “make his mark.” He assumes that, if he can escape the “game without pleasure” that he plays with Freda, there is a mark to be made. This mistake is driven home by the powerful but in fact oblivious horses, who don’t respond to John when he stumbles to them, shouting in the dark. Carelessly, he steps in their way, expecting to be recognized “in a moment.” They knock him over before trampling him. Though he shouts about his mark, he cannot flag the horses down.

Neither the clout Freda offers, nor the countervailing power of his own self-assertion, borrowed from his comfort with and self-identification among the horses, turn out to be of much use to John. The implication is that he has mistaken for an intimate connection a relative indifference. “His” horses are not his in any essential sense.

Seen in this light, Barnes’s story has the feel of a sarcastic fable about the individual, powerless to assert herself through the mask of culture on the one hand and the sheltering order of nature on the other. Culture, represented by the impulsive yet mechanical Freda, toys with John. Nature, in the form of horses, beckons to him as a refuge, but there is no admission to companionship with them. Neither the mask of culture nor a fellowship with nature can save John.

This is a tempting reading, but it misses key features of Barnes’s dense and metaphorical narrative, especially in regard to the eponymous horses. These creatures are not avatars of a more organic and less machinic nature, poised to redeem their caretaker from his humiliating seduction. First of all, the horses appear machine-like themselves. Their legs as they run around their enclosure rise and fall “like savage needles taking purposeless stitches” (248). Second, the inaccessibility of their thought and feeling is constitutive of how they are portrayed in the story, in which they are constantly galloping or running, never remaining in scene and always escaping it. As a result, John and the reader never see them for long, though John can hear them as they recede and approach. Their hooves “[smack] the turf, as a friend strikes the back of a friend, hard, but without malice” (248). Their intent is not malicious, but that does not mean it is not violent. This accounts for the curious way in which they trample John in the end. It seems vicious, but this is simply the effect of the horses’ casual way with their power. Finally, from the first

paragraph of Barnes's story, its setting—outside, beyond the Buckler house—represents nothing so much as a machine of death, ready to chew up and spit out the unsuspecting John. To wit: "He [John] peered through the thickly tangled branches and saw, standing against the darkness, a grove of white birch shimmering like teeth in a skull" (247). The image is jarring, but as the final sentence of the story's initial paragraph, describing John crawling through the brush with a hat and ornamental cane, it implies his doom. If Freda represents the acculturating force of a mechanized and compulsive society, in which John can only be a trifle or toy, "A Night Among the Horses" does not envision any less destructive and wasteful a power outdoors, away from his mistress's house, where John thinks he can commune with "his" horses as companions or old friends.

The horses do not belong to John at all, no more than he belongs to or with them. In Barnes's story, the divide between nature and culture, such that nature might be an alternative to the pain of the latter, has little meaning. "A Night Among the Horses" shows a nature that offers no relief from a mechanistic or hierarchically organized society. It is not a shelter or nest of "astonishment" (247), as John seems to believe when he finds himself lying in the grass near the horses: "He knew nothing until he found himself in the shrubbery, sighing, his face close to the fence, peering in. He was with his horses again; he was where he belonged again" (254). What John seems to forget is the practical reason for the fence at all; there is a difference between himself and his horses. Neither belongs to the other. That he did not belong to Freda seemed to be the entire reason he escaped her grasp, but now his behavior implies there is a true and natural escape and that his horses offer him a redemptive belonging.

Getting in the horses' way while shouting and waving a cane—"his abrupt rising out of the dark"—John does not register to them. The horses are as agitated by his sudden appearance as they would be by anyone's sudden appearance, implying that they have no personal recognition of him. John expects to be recognized in an extraordinary situation, but the horses' non-compliance with his pleas implies that there is no prior recognition on which he can rely. He is the "thing," perhaps, that Freda said he was, i.e., inconsequential, a nothing. Nature, as represented by the horses, refuses to redeem the cruelty of the culture he has fled.

In "A Night Among the Horses," Barnes conceives of nature and culture on the human side of the universe, rather than being opposed. If anything, the binary of the two is contained within the term "culture" in the first place. The way Barnes writes about them, neither the machinic nor the organic has a clear and definitive role in the world of John's horses, which appear both natural and machine-like. Furthermore, these horses are not characters and barely appear in the story. They gallop in and out of every scene in which they appear, evasive to the end.

If Lou in Lawrence's *St. Mawr* finds something tempting in the power of a stallion's annihilating gaze, John sees nothing at all in the eyes of his horses, for he does not have a chance to look. Barnes suggests there is nothing to look at. In the end, *St. Mawr* indicates a wild power with which Lou Witt can commune in the American desert. In contrast, the eponymous animals in "A Night Among the Horses" run back and forth, in and out, like dogs that refuse to sit still. They refuse to stand in for a power that might seduce human attention with promises of communion, fellowship, or example. Where Lawrence writes that a horse can be a horse in the way an individual man could never be

a man, Barnes hesitates to allow that her horses mean anything about animals at all. It is for this reason that I think Barnes's creatures seem so much *more* like horses than the snorting mythopoetic symbol that is St. Mawr.

Barnes's horses imply that a nonhuman mind cannot be defined. They repudiate their use as symbols in a human scheme of self-assertion. When John goes to the horses, hoping for a welcome from creatures that seem to be part of the self-mastering he imagines for himself, they turn out not to be friends. They cannot help or instruct him and have never really known or recognized him at all.

In *John Barleycorn*, Jack London's dray horse seems to be a mythopoetic symbol like St. Mawr, an avatar not of power this time but of the denial of life's suffering. London imagines that the dray horse tells itself that "life is good" in order to withstand and accept the shattering toil that is its fate. For all the physical pain London attributes to the working horse, this animal embodies an idea no less than the stallion in *St. Mawr*. The situation of the dray horse restates a notion from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*: "If we possess our *why* of life, we can put up with almost any *how*" (33, emphasis in original). Nietzsche adds, as London perhaps would not, "Man does *not* strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that" (33, emphasis in original). English empiricism and rationalism were favorite targets of Nietzsche's. His disdain extended to Darwin as well, for he suggested that species grow weaker, whereas life, concentrated in powerful individuals, is prodigal with its power. London imagines the dray horse in a way that suggests mindfulness of its situation. The dray horse does indeed strive for happiness through its belief in life's goodness. London's dray horse does not suggest Nietzschean power. Though the famous story goes that Nietzsche once threw his arms around a horse being

beaten in the street, one cannot imagine London doing the same. His dray horse seems already too human, too mindful, too necessarily yoked by its *why* (“life is good”) to inspire pleas for intervention on its behalf. London accepts its imagined rationalization of pain. The dray horse is less a horse than the avatar of an all-too-human illusion.

Compared to *St. Mawr* and *John Barleycorn*, it is in a story like “A Night Among the Horses” that horses actually show up, resembling something less allegorical and more concrete than the horse-like objects in the writing of London and Lawrence. Not malevolent and not so much indifferent as differently seeing and differently present, Barnes’s horses elude human attention. They are potentially violent but only consequentially so because John mistook his relationship with them for a relationship at all. Thinking he can be with them, he gets in their way. By trampling him, they affirm not only his mistake but the fact that he assumed they could form any part of his plan to “make his mark.” The horses are not a refuge, resource, or escape.

In this context, Lovecraft at first glance appears like Barnes, for he recognizes the illusion of intimacy between human and nonhuman. This illusion takes shape, for example, in the whispering distortion of sound that tantalizes Albert Wilmarth in “The Whisperer in Darkness.” Wilmarth hears a voice that makes an “accursed *buzzing* which had no likeness to humanity despite the human words which it uttered in good English grammar and a scholarly accent” (Lovecraft 218). The buzz more than any bodily form suggests the completeness of being other than human. Lovecraft’s aliens, after all, do not show up in photographs. It is the tone of their voices that imply something of their unearthly shape. However, the effect of “The Whisperer in Darkness” differs from that of “A Night Among the Horses.”



In Barnes's story, John presumes that the true border exists between himself and Freda, not between him and "his" horses. The horses prove him wrong. Though Lovecraft's tale appears to suggest the same disproof for human connection with an alien nature, it indicates in the end that his monstrous aliens are closer to human than they initially seemed. Despite the elusiveness of the "whisperers in darkness," they do not elude human attention or knowledge at all. They are instead an eerie mirror of familiar hierarchy, domination, and imperial knowledge. Lovecraft's narrator, Wilmarth, realizes that the aliens are on earth for prosaic reasons, to extract minerals in the Vermont countryside, and the imagery of alien life and of Vermont itself represents not alien inscrutability but the ambitions, economic interests, and acquisitive knowledge of imperial powers visiting their backwards post in the wilderness.

Barnes's prose has touches of horror in "A Night Among the Horses," but her story sketches a richer indecipherability than that which Lovecraft implies but does not really develop. Precisely because Barnes's horses resist seeming like anything other than horses, they come across as chilling, distant, and alien. John's voice and words should be familiar to the horses, or at least John thinks so. Neither makes any difference. It is in his indecipherability to the horses that we understand theirs.

It was with a vague aspiration that John sensed his escape from Freda and from his life as a horse groom. Communing with the horses in his parodic hat and coat seemed to represent the first step, however drunken, on his way to that future. For no reason other than they do not see that it is him, the horses cannot or will not abet John's dream of manly uplift or the future in which he will "make his mark." Their power cannot be made to suit the cause for which John wished to enlist their help. It is unclear, of course, what

John really thought they could do, other than help him make a dramatic escape. Their trampling cancels the future in which he could have marked the world. His crisis of masculinity is not affirmed but denied.

In the case of Lawrence, London, and Lovecraft, each writer presumes there is a way to get outside human culture. Whether it is consciously evolutionary, anti-psychological, or the “infinity” of the nonhuman universe, the worlds depicted in the work of these writers consists of something ostensibly nonhuman. Such a nonhuman vision reflects or refracts their understanding of the human being. If these imagined worlds lead in the end to a human world, familiar as ever, Barnes’s story rejects the return of the familiar. Her horses imply, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, that we have never been outside human culture.

In “A Night Among the Horses,” the division between a stultifying culture on the one hand and a redemptive nature on the other, amounts to nothing. There is no refuge and retreat in something natural or animal. John, as a human being, cannot “get out,” so to speak, of the culture in which he finds himself. An image of redemptive “natural” or “animal” life constitutes a part of culture, anyway, precisely because culture may imagine the horse, for example, as its opposite—an alternative to what is mechanized and industrial. Nature and culture, then, are not binary, but united as features of human imagination, which sees relief wherever it is compelled to by a variety of fantasies.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asked, “What is it like to be a bat?” Barnes’s story implies a further question: What is it like to know there is someone there and have no certain way of reaching them? There is something to see besides ourselves when we look at animals—I feel sure of that—but this does not mean we know what it is.

I do not mean to suggest that one should give up on knowing, being with, or writing about animals. On the contrary, one should write about them *more*—without transcendence, without hope for redemption, without the promise that they mean anything other than the unsettling of what we hold to be certain. I find enlightening on this score the work of Donna Haraway, especially where her theoretical scholarship crosses into the territory of science fiction and utopia. Inspiring as well is the question posed by the title of ethologist Frans de Waal’s study, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* As Haraway suggests in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, there is “somebody at home” when we look at animals, but “*who* is at home must permanently be question” (50). She continues, “The recognition that one cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship, is the key” (50). Barnes’s story forecloses the possibility of relationship, yet “A Night Among the Horses” compels me to wonder how we can become capable of reckoning that “somebody” who is “at home” in nonhumans, especially if we can never “reach” them.

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