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The Terror of the Transcendental
A Review of *Roarings from Further Out: Four Weird Novellas* by Algernon Blackwood (2019)

Reviewed by Michael Wheatley

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THE TERROR OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL

Review by Michael Wheatley

Roarings from Further Out: Four Weird Novellas by Algernon Blackwood. Edited by Xavier Aldana Reyes. The British Library, 2019. Novellas.

“What distinguishes Blackwood from other weird writers is not just his interest in the occult and his intrinsic style, but his outlook on life and its spiritual links to nature” (10). So writes editor Xavier Aldana Reyes in his brief but insightful introduction to *Roarings from Further Out: Four Weird Novellas by Algernon Blackwood* (2019). Yet, Blackwood has scarcely received the deification of other Old Weird authors. While contemporary figures such as H. P. Lovecraft and Arthur Machen have been canonised through numerous editions and reprints, Blackwood’s writing has seen comparatively little mainstream attention. Now republished as part of The British Library’s *Tales of the Weird* series, however, this collection goes some way towards redressing the dearth of fiction available from this Weird pioneer.

Blackwood’s ‘intrinsic style’ is one of steady pace, gradual revelation, and a frequent reconceptualisation of the natural world. His characters represent a spiritual select who are attuned to the strangeness of the universe and therefore positioned at the precipice of otherworldly encounters with nature that will either elevate or destroy their souls (sometimes both). As explicated by Aldana Reyes, Blackwood’s work thus reflects his own philosophy, a deeply held belief in “the connection between human beings and the Earth” (9). Indeed, with their thematic interest in nonhuman agency and uncomfortable interconnectedness, the novellas collected herein read remarkably pertinent to the climate anxieties and ecological uncertainty born a century on.

The first story of the collection, “The Willows” (1907), concerns two explorers who become stranded on a small island in the River Danube. As the waters begin to rise, their stay becomes prolonged and they come to realise that they are “interlopers, trespassers” in a region not commonly known to the human (33). The willows that surround them seem to move independently, “rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards” (53). Eventually, the protagonists discover that they have entered the domain of entities entirely beyond their understanding. Perfectly opening the collection, this tale establishes Blackwood’s elemental approach to writing nature. The willows are not an aestheticised image but a “furious” force (23); the Danube moves “with a shouting sound [...] tearing at the sandy banks” (18). If the Weird mode relies upon the presence of an intrusive, unknowable force that destabilises reality, then in this novella nature itself becomes one such hyperobject. The protagonists accept their “utter insignificance before this unrestrained power” (25). Yet, this ferocity is contrasted with an acknowledgement that although nature is violent, it loses none of its splendour: the natural

world remains one of “wonder and magic” (19). As the narrator explains, “mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience” (25). Possessing an optimism rarely found in the cosmic horror of succeeding Weird writers, “The Willows” locates the sublime even in the depths of existential dread.

First published in 1908, “Ancient Sorceries” (1908) follows in curious contrast. An example of Blackwood’s John Silence series (hybrid supernatural/detective stories concerning the eponymous psychological investigator), the plot centres around a remote French village where the inhabitants transform into cats at night. These creatures simply play at being human, an “outward semblance that masked their actual purposes” (93). Reimagining the previous themes of nonhuman agency and the spiritual self, this second novella highlights that although concepts may repeat, Blackwood was rarely wanting for original ideas. Artfully constructed, for instance, the village stands as a testament to Blackwood’s descriptive prowess. Prose such as, “he sat there for some time pondering, bathed in the waves of murmurs and half-lost echoes that rose to his ears,” evokes an encompassing sense of the wistful and the nostalgic (89). And while the story does occasionally succumb to Weird excess, with unfortunate lines such as “the crescendos and diminuendos were so very suggestive of cat-land on the tiles at night,” as with most works of its kind the mood conjured is so palpable that such flourishes are easily forgiven (91). However, in contrast to the inexplicable Weirdness which precedes it, “Ancient Sorceries” does read as rather more routine. At times the plot seems to grind to an almost glacial pace, but most jarring is the manner in which the narrative eventually resolves. Adopting the approach of the supernatural explained, the final four pages devolve into historical background and exposition in order to justify and demystify the earlier events. Abrupt and ultimately lacklustre, Blackwood appears to explicitly request the reader to excuse “this sudden tame ending” (132).

Whereas the previous tales retain a certain timelessness in style, “The Wendigo” (1910) does struggle with its antiquation. The grotesque accents, for instance, threaten to shatter any illusion of suspense from the outset. An early example, where one character exclaims, “he’s just skeered ... skeered stiff about some ole feery tale! That’s all, ain’t it, ole pard?”, veers dangerously close to parody when compared to contemporary prose (145). However, such quirks thankfully subside once the story starts to gain momentum. Once more concerning explorers, this time on a hunting expedition in the Canadian wilderness, the narrative focuses on the mythological figure of the Wendigo. “The Call of the Wild personified,” Blackwood’s Wendigo entices its victims to run alongside it until their feet catch fire and they are thrown from a terrific height (186). Already unsettled by their primeval surroundings, this creature slowly encroaches upon the explorers’ camp. Eventually, one of their number meets this beast “that had survived the advance of humanity” (197). Echoing “The Willows” in its evocation of an untouched environment haunted by an avatar of the nonhuman, “The Wendigo” proves less satisfying. Whereas the willows are a constant, suffocating presence, the Wendigo appears only fleetingly. As such, though descriptions are buoyed by Blackwood’s natural turn of phrase, the pace does drag in the early chapters of exploration and camaraderie. Upon its arrival, however, the Wendigo proves as chilling as any Weird entity otherwise written.

Lending the collection its title, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912) concludes the text. The plot concerns the retired elderly couple, David and Sophia Bittacy. David, feeling a "subtle sense of communion" with trees and the Forest fringing his garden, is contrasted by his wife who fears this fascination (204). As the sentience of the Forest then becomes clear, and its intent to absorb David into itself increasingly insistent, the narrative follows Sophia's journey from fear to defiance to solemn resignation. Rivalled only by "The Willows" as the standout piece of the collection, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" proves at-once horrific and heart-warming. David's transition from his cosy middle-class lifestyle to his true spiritual calling as part of the Forest is perhaps the closest the Weird comes to a happy ending. However, from Sophia's perspective, the loss of her husband to this "alien" force evokes only sadness (274). Though possessing frequent frightening moments, such as David's eyes shining "without recognition [...] [looking] into something beyond," the tale benefits immeasurably from its ambiguity and broadened scope (238). More character focused than previous works, it considers not only on the Forest, but those it affects as well. "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" is, perhaps, that rarest of things. A Weird tale with a heart.

Introducing the collection, Aldana Reyes suggests that "the reputation of early twentieth-century British writer Algernon Blackwood currently resides with his two novellas "The Willows" (1907) and "The Wendigo" (1910)" (7). By devoting half of the collection to these tales, one cannot help but feel that the blinkered scope of Blackwood's legacy has yet to be resolved. The inclusion of some of his equally inventive and exciting short stories, for instance, may have lent further discussion to the thematic parallels of the collection.

However, these four texts do confidently demonstrate the core tenets of Blackwood's oeuvre: nature disrupted, a realm of the soul, a reconfiguration of what we know to be human. Unique among Old Weird authors, and highly influential to the practitioners that followed, the commercial disappearance of Blackwood's fiction has left an unfilled void in the canon of the Weird. While New Weird authors such as Jeff VanderMeer have continued the legacy of ecological Weird fiction, Blackwood's works highlight that this is not a uniquely modern phenomenon but situated within a wider Weird tradition. If this is the beginning of such long-deserved attention for Blackwood, then *Roarings from Further Out* proves the perfect primer.

BIONOTE

Michael Wheatley is a creative writing and practice-based PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. Through creative and critical research, his thesis re-evaluates Weird fiction as an ecological mode that can help us engage with our current climate crisis. His debut collection of short stories, *The Writers' Block* (Black Pear Press, 2019), explores mental health, the creative process, and the perception of the tortured artist. Further creative and critical work has been published in numerous literary journals and online magazines.