

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM

Terror and ecstasy in the works of Arthur Machen

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Introduction

My talk deals with the relationship between terror and ecstasy in the work of the Welsh writer Arthur Machen, who considered these aspects to be deeply intertwined. This correlation is interesting both from the point of view of literary aesthetics, and for the theological and philosophical thought.

But what has terror to do with ecstasy? The two words hint at opposite experiences according to common sense.

Philosophy and the history of religions give us a first idea about their connection.

Rudolf Otto, a German theologian and historian of religions, described the *mysterium tremendum* as an experience of the sacred, of what the man perceives objectively as “other than himself”.

It is a feeling that can burst into the soul all of a sudden, with tremors and convulsions. It can lead to frenzy, to rapture and ecstasy, or throw the man into a frightening, hallucinated horror. The Old Testament, for example, is rich of ways of expressing this feeling: among others, the *emāt* YHWH, the “terror of God” that YHWH can send in the form of a demon who spreads through the man’s limbs, paralyzing him (cf. Es 23, 27). In this sense, it’s something similar to the “panic terror” of the Greek tradition.¹ However, the *mysterium* is not only *tremendum*, but also *fascinans*, and therein lies the profound ambivalence that characterizes the experience of the sacred according to Otto. It attracts, fascinates, and this indispensable attractive force is intertwined with the repulsive push caused by the *tremendum*: the movement towards the *mysterium*, that the trembling creature is driven to make irresistibly, culminates in a sort of bewilderment and exhilaration, that

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1 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (London: Oxford University, 1936), 12–14.

subside in the supreme moment of grace and divine love, which correspond to the bliss and rapture known by the mystique of both the East and West.

In general, the term *mysterium tremendum* describes the reverential and religious awe raised in the man's conscience by the mystery. This disquieting feeling appears in the history of religions as the demonic terror of primeval beliefs; it was then "purified" in the form of "mystic shiver"; and finally, in the highest forms of religion (among which Christianity), it started to mean the awareness of human nullity in front of the god.

The concept of ecstasy in the work of Arthur Machen

In his letter from June 1923 to his friend the writer Frank Belknap Long, Howard P. Lovecraft defined Arthur Machen as a "Titan — perhaps the greatest living author [...] I must read everything of his." Again, in a letter from January 1924 to the same Long, "[...] there is in Machen an ecstasy of *fear* that all other living men are too obtuse or timid to capture, and that even Poe failed to envisage in all its starkest abnormality".²

So, Lovecraft considered Machen as the only author who, at the turn of the twentieth century, marked a key step in the history of the fantastique. His influence was so huge that Machen's work saw and still sees a large number of followers; to mention a few from our age: Stephen King, Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, Ray Bradbury and the movie director Guillermo del Toro, who frequently cites Machen's works in his movies; since 2011 he's also the author of the prefaces to Machen's books in their Penguin Press reprints.

But who was Arthur Machen?

Arthur Llewellyn Jones — this was his real name — was born in Caerleon, in South Wales, in 1863, and died in 1947 in Amersham. In his long life he was a writer, a journalist and an essayist, best known for his tales of the supernatural and the fantastic. He became famous for creating — in his short story *The Bowmen*, published on the *London Evening News* on September 29th, 1914 — the myth of the "angels of Mons", who — according to the story — helped the Britannic army in the battle of Mons, during the First World War. *The Bowmen* became a literary case and a true myth, forcing Machen himself to claim its nature of pure literary invention, without ever succeeding in changing the public opinion on the subject.

Despite his criticism of popular beliefs like spiritism, Machen is fascinated by the mystic experience: he is a visionary, who strongly believes that our perception of the external world is just an illusion, and that everyday

² "H.P. Lovecraft's Favorite Authors", last modified March 29, 2006, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/life/interest/authors.aspx>

life and common objects hide a secret, the key to access the great enigma of existence. The whole universe for Machen “is a tremendous sacrament; a mystic, ineffable force and energy, veiled by an outward form of matter; and man, and the sun and the other stars, and the flower of the grass, and the crystal in the test-tube, are each and every one as spiritual, as material, and subject to an inner working”.³

The worldview of the Welsh writer, together with the ecstatic approach that allows one to see over and through reality, is happily summed up in a passage from the story *The Rose Garden* (1908): “[...] She gazed out, after all, to assure herself that sight and the eyes showed nothing but a glimmering veil, a gauze of curious lights and figures, that in it there was no reality or substance. He had always told her that there was only one existence, one science, one religion, that the external world was but a variegated shadow, which might either conceal or reveal the truth; and now she believed”.⁴

Again, in the third part of his autobiography, Machen further expresses the intentions of his literary work by clarifying a point of particular interest for our research: “This is the weave of my carpet, the sense of the eternal mysteries, the eternal beauty beneath the crust of the common, trivial things; hidden and yet burning”.⁵ In fact, according to Machen, we see the outward appearance of things, without grasping their essence; on the other hand, we could not bear the sight of that essence, we would be instantly knocked out “as Semele after expressing the desire to see Zeus in his divinity”.⁶ Therefore, for Machen, guessing the essence that lies behind the reality of things means getting in touch both with their majesty, which causes ecstasy and rapture, and with the “holy terror” that they emanate.

This idea is expressed very well in the short story with the enigmatic title “N”, which Machen wrote when he was over seventy. The Reverend Thomas Hampole, while looking at the view from the window of the house of one of his parishioners, the mysterious Mr. Glanville, will see an unknown and heavenly landscape. “I was possessed by a degree of rapture and delight such as I had never experienced. A sense of beatitude pervaded my whole being; my bliss was such as cannot be expressed by words. I uttered an inarticulate cry of joy and wonder. And then, under the influence of a swift revulsion of terror, which even now I cannot explain, I turned and

3 Arthur Machen, “The novel of the White Powder” in *The White People and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 80.

4 Arthur Machen, “The Rose Garden” in *Holy Terrors* (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2014), last updated February 27, 2014, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machen/arthur/holy-terrors/chapter8.html>.

5 Arthur Machen, *L'avventura londinese o l'arte del vagabondaggio* (Milano: Giovanni Tranchida Editore, 2004), 64.

6 Arthur Machen, *L'avventura londinese*, 60.

rushed from the room and from the house, without one word of comment or farewell to the extraordinary man who had done—I knew not what”.⁷

In *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) — a semi-autobiographical novel, and one of the the most important works of the Welsh writer — the protagonist has a dream while sleeping beneath some Roman ruins on top of a hill, and is than hit by conflicting sensations: “It was all confused, a procession of blurred images, now of rapture and ecstasy, and now of terror and shame, floating in a light that was altogether phantasmal and unreal”.⁸

It is clear, hence, that the level of awareness that allows one to get a glimpse of the mysterious essence of reality is primarily accessed via fear. Machen uses fear as a mean to reach the highest peaks of perception: his goal is to evoke the ecstatic beauty from the horror and the mysterious elements of everyday life. The everyday world is just a door that opens to a further reality, a “world of the spirit”; hidden behind the veil lies the true dimension of reality, that “totally Other” that urges the man to get out of himself, and at the same time annihilates him. In this sense, Machen’s work can be considered as an attempt to cross the threshold that divides the two worlds.

Machen mentions the ecstatic experience explicitly for the first time in the short story *The White People* (1890). The word ecstasy appears in the first lines of the prologue and is specifically connected to two conflicting experiences, that Machen considers very similar in their effects: the evil (or witchcraft) and sanctity. ““Sorcery and sanctity,” said Ambrose, “these are the only realities. Each is an ecstasy, a withdrawal from the common life.””⁹

Their secret lies precisely in the ability that both of these experiences have to break the laws of nature, albeit in antithetical ways, and to make one withdraw from ordinary life: in other words, ecstasy.

But it is in *Hieroglyphics. A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (written in 1899 and published in 1902) that the writer attempts a clear definition of ecstasy. This essay contains Machen’s literary theory. There, he marks the line between great literature and mere literature, which is summarized in one word: ecstasy. Citing Vincent Starrett in *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin*: “The word ecstasy for Machen is merely a symbol; it has many

7 A. Machen, *N* (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2014), last updated March 16, 2014, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machen/arthur/n/>.

8 Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2014), last updated February 27, 2014, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/machen/arthur/hill-of-dreams/chapter1.html>

9 Arthur Machen, “The White People” in *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, 80.

synonyms”.¹⁰ It means rapture, beauty, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown and withdrawal from common life.¹¹

Machen will work on these themes throughout his work, but the link between terror and ecstasy, that leads to the abyss, finds its most representative expression in one of his first works, and probably his masterpiece: *The Great God Pan* (1894).

The original terror

The Great God Pan tells the story of a peculiar scientific experiment and of its consequences. Through a surgical intervention, where her brain cells are altered, a young woman becomes able of seeing the world that is hidden behind the veil of everyday existence. Machen calls this experience “seeing the god Pan”, the terrifying and mighty power of nature. The woman will die in a year because of the shock, but before that she will give birth to a baby girl who, at the end of the novel, will be revealed to be the incarnation of the god Pan himself, who used her to enter our world.

Un primo dato da prendere in considerazione è il luogo in cui si articolano le vicende del racconto. A first important element is the place where the story happens. The girl — Helen Vaughan — has grown old and settles in London. Machen always felt a deep and ambivalent feeling of attraction–repulsion towards this city. For him London was in fact the living metaphor of the materialist conception that destroyed and banished the old gods. The metropolis is a labyrinth in which one can trace the signs of the cosmic battle between good and evil.¹² However, London is for Machen also a subject of metaphysical study because that same rampant materialism fills it with numerous access roads to another world.

In fact, in *The Novel of the Black Seal*, contained in *The three impostors* (1895), the book of Machen that more than any other is the manual of this “science of the city”, we read: “Yet there struck in on this the thought that matter is as really awful and unknown as spirit, that science itself but dallies on the threshold, scarcely gaining more than a glimpse of the wonders of the inner place”.¹³ London is primarily a symbol of those contradictions

10 Vincent Starrett, *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* (Chicago: 1918), 23.

11 Arthur Machen, *A, Hieroglyphics : a note upon ecstasy in literature* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1913), 24.

12 Federico Basso, “Postfazione” in Arthur Machen, *L'avventura londinese o l'arte del vagabondaggio* (Milano: Giovanni Tranchida Editore, 2004), 132–133.

13 Arthur Machen, “The novel of the Black Seal” in *The White people and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 46.

that make Machen's writing unique, a place where terror and ecstasy mingle inextricably.

Let us now go back to the main character of *The Great God Pan*, Helen Vaughan. Whoever establishes a relationship with her is gradually brought to the ecstatic experience of supreme terror, the symbol of which is Pan. Incarnated in the ambiguous Helen, sensual and terrible at the same time, Pan brings to folly and death his victims, each one representing a different aspect of the man of the modern age. Having renounced to develop his spiritual life, the modern man is (in Machen's thought) completely unable to bear the revelation of god Pan. But why does Machen choose the god Pan?

In Greek mythology, Pan is a powerful and savage god, represented with the legs and horns of a goat, with a human torso and a bearded face bearing a terrifying look. He is considered the Lord of fields and forests, and he protects herds.

The name *Πάν* comes from *paean*, "to pasture", and indeed Pan is a shepherd god. But the same name also indicates "totality". He is also related to the god Phanes, "the one who brings light", whose other name is Protagonos, "the first born". Indeed, Pan is sometimes indicated as the oldest of the gods of the Olympus, and associated to Faun, the spirit of all natural creatures, of the abyss, the depths. The roots of this mythological figure can be found in the Egyptian god Bes and the Sumerian Pazuzu, the god of the winds. In particular, Machen's god Pan is based on the Celtic divinity Nodens or Nuada (the god of the Great Depth or the Abyss). Unsurprisingly, the most notable trace of Nodens' cult in the United Kingdom is an inscription in the Celtic-Roman temple of Lydney Park, on the border between Gloucestershire and South Wales, where Machen was born and grew up.

Pan's name originated the term *timor panico*, because the god got angry with those who disturbed him, throwing terrifying yells and causing uncontrollable fear: *panic*, indeed. The best known myth about this characteristic is the *Tytanomachy*, where Pan saves the gods of the Olympus from the attack of a couple of dragons led by Typhon and Apollo, by throwing a scream which makes them flee.

In general, it is not correct to consider Pan as an analogous of evil or the Devil, as it has often happened in the Christian iconography and theological tradition throughout history. It is better to think of Pan — and this is how Machen uses this symbol, too — as the expression of an ancestral and primeval power that incarnates the archetypal principle of everything. He embodies the original terror, the primeval chaos that preceded God's creation. Pan-Nodens — writes Domenico Cammarota in the appendix to one of the most important Italian collections of works by Machen — "is the stunning revelation of the immutability of the eternal laws that govern our particular plane of existence, the overwhelming vertigo caused by the discovery that

such laws are not by their nature decipherable as “negative” or “positive” for mankind, but basically indifferent and alien to the Being, in front of which the man is alone, and naked”.¹⁴ Indeed, at the end of *The Great God Pan* the two protagonists — who investigate on the murders related to Helen Vaughan — have a revelation of this primeval power in the exact moment when Helen dies: “Here too was all the work by which man had been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed”.¹⁵

On this subject, it would be interesting to study in more depth the English and American literature at the turn of the twentieth century; 1894 is indeed the year of publication of another important work that will have a large influence on the fantastique as a genre and which recalls many themes of *The Great God Pan: The King in Yellow* by Robert. W. Chambers. In this book, consisting of a series of short stories revolving around the figure of the mysterious “king in yellow” and the lost city of Carcosa, the relationship between terror and ecstasy is proposed with great strength, aroused by cosmic forces ready to break into the man’s world, against a background of the United States which (similarly to Machen’s London) have reached the peak of its technical and economic strength.

Terror and the Great War

If *The Great God Pan* contains most of the themes that define the entire writing of Machen, another interesting group of works that develops these same themes are the short stories that the author wrote during and after the First World War in England, such as those collected in the book *The Bowman and other legends of war* (1915) and for which the Welsh writer is best known.

War is an ideal background for Machen’s themes. It is, indeed, a situation where all the rules of civilization fail, a borderline state of horror and fear; and it is precisely this that makes the access to the transcendent easier, as tales like *The Bowmen*, *The Monstrance* and *The Dazzling Light* also show.

The Bowman is a mystical and imaginary variant of the Battle of Mons, the first fight that involved the British Expeditionary Force during the First World War on the Western Front. The British Expeditionary Force, numeri-

14 Domenico Cammarota, “Arthur Machen, Filius Aquarti” in Arthur Machen, *Le creature della terra* (Roma: Fannucci Editore, 1987), 195.

15 Arthur Machen, “The Great God Pan” in *The House of Souls* (North Stratford: Ayer Company Publishers, 1999), 395.

cally small but made up of experienced and well-trained troops, clashed with the German army engaged in the invasion of Belgium and France in the town of Mons on August 23, 1914. The battle ended at sunset on August 24 with the miraculous retreat of the British army, with the help of the cavalry was able to launch a powerful rearguard action successfully concluding the retreat and inflicting at the same time a considerable number of losses to the German army. Stroke by these events, Machen decides to write them down, by adding to the historical truth a theme that was well known in the ancient world and also in the Old Testament: the direct participation of the deities in the men's battles.¹⁶ In particular, Machen links the miraculous retreat from Mons to the equally legendary battle of Anzicourt (1415), which saw the British prevail over the French thanks to the intervention of a body of archers.

Nel racconto di Machen sono proprio i fantasmi degli arcieri di Anzicourt che vengono in soccorso dell'esercito inglese sotto la guida dello stesso San Giorgio. Questi appariranno a uno dei soldati inglesi, colpito da un vero e proprio rapimento estatico:

In Machen's tale the ghosts of the archers of Anzicourt come to the rescue of the British Army under the leadership of the Saint George himself. They will appear to one of the British soldiers, hit by a real rapture: "[...] he felt something between a shudder and an electric shock pass through his body. The roar of the battle died down in his ears to a gentle murmur; instead of it, he says, he heard a great voice and a shout louder than a thunderpeal crying, "Array, array, array!" His heart grew hot as a burning coal, it grew cold as ice within him, as it seemed to him that a tumult of voices answered to his summons. He heard, or seemed to hear, thousands shouting: "St. George! St. George!"¹⁷

The exploration of the war drama continues with *The Dazzling Light*, which recalls a large part of the themes of *The Bowman*. Here, too, Lieutenant Smith is suddenly hit by the transcendent: "There was an odd sensation as if the top of his head were dilating and contracting, and then he says he had a sort of shock, something between a mild current of electricity and the sensation of putting one's hand into the ripple of a swift brook".¹⁸ This vision reveals to him a transfigured world, populated by a large army dressed in shining, unrecognizable armors.

16 Arthur Machen, "Introduzione" in *Gli arcieri e altre leggende di guerra, Il terrore* (Reggio Emilia: Miraviglia Editore, 2008), 19.

17 Arthur Machen, *The Bowman and other legends of the war* (New York-London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 27-28.

18 Arthur Machen, *The Bowman*, 60-61.

The Monstrance is one of the most impressive stories of this cycle. It begins with the unexplained death of Sergeant Karl Heinz who, as if struck by a lightning, dies while shouting “Glory to God!”; it will be the discovery of his diary that will reveal the shocking truth that led the soldier to death. “There is no space here for continuous extracts from Karl Heinz’s diary. But to condense with severity, it would seem that he slowly gathered about himself a complete set of sensory hallucinations. First the auditory hallucination of the sound of a bell, which the doctor called tinnitus. Then a patch of white growing into a white robe, then the smell of incense. At last he lived in two worlds. He saw his trench, and the level before it, and the English lines; he talked with his comrades and obeyed orders, though with a certain difficulty; but he also heard the deep boom of St. Lambart’s bell, and saw continually advancing towards him a white procession of little children, led by a boy who was swinging a censer. There is one extraordinary entry: “But in August those children carried no lilies; now they have lilies in their hands. Why should they have lilies?””.¹⁹

As the diaries of the soldier will reveal, the children had been victims of the carnage committed by Heinz himself in the church of St. Lambart, which was destroyed in the summer of 1915, and whose bells the sergeant felt ringing in his hallucinations.

It is with *The Terror* (1917) that Machen brings his theological reflection about war to completion, by recovering the themes of *The Great God Pan* from a more mature point of view. It tells the story of a small village in the English countryside, shocked by a series of strange homicides that find no evident explanation. Years before Daphne du Maurier’s *The Birds* (1952) — brought to popularity in 1963 by Hitchcock’s movie of the same name — at the end of the novel, the origin of the Terror will be revealed to be a silent insurrection of the animals, who formed a coalition to kill the humans with no pity. The most terrible of all are a swarm of moths that suffocate whoever they meet and show up as a shining cloud that suggest the idea of a divinity in those who see them. The rebellion of animals remains inexplicable and suddenly ceases, but an interpretation comes from the voice of one of the protagonists: the mankind, while putting all its effort in developing refined techniques to kill each other in the world war, has renounced to its role of ruler of the World and of history, thus leaving nature in a primeval state of chaos and anarchy. Once again, in this novel, Machen thinks of terror as of a sort of apocalyptic judgement, where the power of nature revolts against the man, who has become unable to appreciate its transcendental value and thus ends up being completely defeated by nature’s divine power.

19 Arthur Machen, *The Bowman*, 51–52.

To summarize, in Machen's work the man experiments ecstatic rapture by becoming aware of the transcendental and spiritual character of everything; however, this is a negative experience for the modern man. Indeed, by taking him out of his worldly habitat, the *tremendum* and its mystery take the man back to his deepest dimension, his spiritual side, which has become so alien to him that he cannot bear it.

Conclusions

To conclude, the relationship between terror and ecstasy is central to Machen's literary theory. In his works, the man is forced to face the unknown, which throws him in a state of terror such that he is led to madness or even death. Indeed, all of Machen's characters are representative of modern society and they're not spiritually fit to peacefully embrace the mystery and beauty of existence. The cause of this difficulty is to be found in the central role that science, and progress in general, have gained in the modern society. Science is, Machen says, the last place of religious experience in the modern age, and can lead the man to the inexplicable. If, on the one side, science is capable of unveiling the potential of reality and the divine power of nature, it also makes it impossible for the man to get in touch with nature itself in an harmonious way. This modern religious feeling, based on scientific experiments, can't reveal the divine beauty of the Universe, and can only show the unbridgeable distance the divides our world from the divine. And this is where the Arts — and literature in particular for Machen — become central: it's through the arts that the modern man can still be exposed to ecstasy, can avoid the otherwise unavoidable fall into chaos and live on the threshold between our world and the "world of the spirit".

Abstract

MYSTERIUM TEMENDUM. TERROR AND ECSTASY IN THE WORKS OF ARTHUR MACHEN

Within religious studies, terror has often been regarded as the ancillary of religion or, more generally, of the sacred. This study analyzes the relationship between terror and religious experience in the work of one of the most important representatives of fantastique literature at the threshold of the twentieth century, Arthur Machen. In particular, here we want to study the special relationship that the work of the Welsh writer weaves between ecstasy, interpreted as a withdrawal from common life, and terror, that is, the awareness of the terrifying distance that separates man from divinity.

KEYWORDS: Terror, world of the spirit, London, Abyss, God, Panic, materialism, first world war, chaos, dream