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Realms of Shadow and Darkness – Lands of the Elsewhere

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*... the sound of silence, the silence of time..
The light of the darkness. The water of dreams. The water.***
Danilo Kiš, 1985

*... in Poe's work water is death; it is the
substantial doublet of darkness
and the "symbolic substance of death".*

*... fear at the passing of time,
symbolised by change and noise.*
(Gilbert Durand, 1999 [1965])

*What seest thou else,
in the dark backward and abysm of time?*
William Shakespeare, 2010 [1611]

Abstract

A definition of “collective imaginary” can be found in the work of Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Durand, as a place where imagination and cultural symbols meet, a vast sea in which symbols and myths are the deeply hidden sources of the imaginative encyclopaedia (a repertoire of stories and visions) of the social formation we live in. One of the richest among the symbolic and mythical knots is linked to *shadow* and *darkness*, domains of the unknown and of the terrifying – a fertile seed for more than two centuries of storytelling – an expression of the irrational drives and instances which are present in each social subjectivity. My purpose here is that of inspecting the

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transformations and the outcomes of a fiction that has been inspired by such symbols, making a case for a possible connection between the fiction itself and the feelings of disorientation and risk we find in contemporary society. I investigate the processes of re-sacralisation linked to the appearance of new eschatologies, by analysing the work of some authors and film directors in order to compare its content with the sociological research revolving around an emergent and undeniable “re-enchantment of the world”.

Keywords: imaginary, literature, phenomenology.

1. Streams

Roughly a century ago, at the turn of the twentieth century, a movement known as “spiritism” or “spiritualism” made its appearance as the expression of a peculiar atmosphere and awareness. It involved the public opinion, the social gatherings of the rich and the affluent, including aristocratic circles and, inauspiciously, scientific ones. At the root of its birth and expansion, as I speculate, one can identify two phenomena with quite different origins.

The first of these phenomena was the idea – or the hope – that one could communicate with the souls of the departed (Peters, 1999). This idea was a consequence of the success enjoyed by the theories formulated by Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail – also known under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec – a French philosopher and pedagogue who was active in the second half of the nineteenth century and laid out the foundations of spiritism. The whole idea was apparently inspired by some Kate Fox of Hydesville (New York), who claimed to have managed – together with her sisters in the night of 31st March 1848 – to converse with an “unseen presence” (Camilletti, 2020: 34).

Similar events and phenomena made the fortune of swindlers such as Aleister Crowley, Madame Blavatsky and Georges Gurdjieff, all undisputed supporters of the belief in the existence of spheres of reality belonging to the supernatural: who also heralded a syncretic combination of body and mind disciplines, oriental mysticism and esoteric-theosophic lures (such as metempsychosis). A combination destined to make its appearance again and again on the background of counter- and pseudo-cultures, to finally reach us under the label of New Age “philosophies”.

It is worth mentioning that, inspired by that historical period and its imaginative climate, Alfred Döblin wrote a mocking tale (published in 1948) with the title *Reiseverkehr mit dem Jenseits* (1979). Similarly inspired, Woody Allen directed the movie *Magic in the Moonlight* (2014), a comedy in which a “detective of the occult”, posing as a cabaret illusionist – and somehow related to John Silence, the literary creation of Algernon Blackwood (2009) – confronts swindlers claiming to be *mediums* capable of communicating with the dead.

The second phenomenon, which indirectly legitimated – or at least encouraged indirectly – the first, is linked to the development of a specific communication technology: the telephone, a device that made it possible for people to speak at great distances, without seeing each other, communicating – as a matter of fact – with “disembodied” voices (Peters, 1999). Truth be told, the time between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century saw the birth of Modernism and the rapid development of mass media but also the end of any admixture of the supernatural and the rigor of the positive sciences. Science, in these times, was formulating its paradigms, leaving behind any residual metaphysical element, and fully embracing a radical rationalism. The latter found its expression in conceptual architectures such as the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein, the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, the logical atomism of Bertrand Russell, the philosophy of science of Ernst Mach, the quantum theory of Max Planck and so on.

Writers of the fantastic genre, such as the Argentinian Leopoldo Lugones (2001) or the English Arthur Machen (2017) introduced in their stories *modern* “inventions” and “machines”: their heroes caught in the struggle to control the mysterious and preternatural forces surrounding the human sphere. Such works, in which the boundary between science and magic still was still vaguely defined and permeable, offer ample evidence of the turning point at which rational thought was struggling to break through the fog of mystery that was shrouding the human approach to nature, whose supernatural character was on the other hand strenuously defended by irrationalism. It is not even necessary to mention here Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (2003), one of the masterworks of the literature of the late nineteenth century, published in 1897.

Literature of this period – especially fantastic literature – provides convincing evidence of how – in the midst of the development of mass society, of mass production, of modern metropolises – getting rid of the last residuals of irrationality was a mandatory step for a mature Modernity to establish itself. Irrationalism was deeply rooted in the culture of the epoch, as illustrated by the misadventure occurred to Dimitrij Ivanovič Mendeleev, the father of the “periodic table of elements”. The scientist, after being long pressed, was involved in a committee of the Russian technical society of St. Petersburg, with the goal of investigating spiritism¹ in the seventies of the nineteenth century. He later dismissed the committee as the offspring of superstition, and walked out of it (Mendeleev, 1992).

A major role in the development of this atmosphere is played by the studies on electricity and the researches on its applications (by inventors such as Nikola Tesla) picking on the extreme ideas of the “electrical theologians” from the turn

¹ Or “spiritualism”: the two words were interchangeable.

of the sixteenth century (Benz, 1989), and personalities such as Anton Mesmer or, needless to say, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and her *Frankenstein* (2018).

In spite of everything, irrationalism endures, and is nurtured by the spectral appearance of ghostly presences and by the darkness of the world they emerge from to talk with the living – at least in their delusions. And, of course, by the shenanigans of various swindlers who find themselves promoted to advisors of naive rich and powerful people.

In essence, one of the deepest roots of the imaginary, all things related to the *invisible* and the *mysterious*, flows to us like a river that shares its bed with more traditional elements of the sacred – the cult of the dead and the dialogue with them - while at the banks one can find the achievements of modern science and technology. Applications of electricity and mass media: *invisible streams* ranging from electromagnetic waves to “animal magnetism”, from the encoding and decoding of sound waves that takes place in the telephone to signals coming from the afterlife, to culminate in the *trances* of the medium and in the movements of hands over *ouija* tablets.

Such movements send back to *water* and *time*, “superlative symbols of death”, as Gilbert Durand could have said, but even to darkness (1999) and shadows: consistent archetypical figures of the imaginary.

In *Peter Schlemihl's wundersame Geschichte* (“Peter Schlemihl’s Miraculous Story”) by Adelbert von Chamisso (2019), a German fantastic tale from the early nineteenth century, a poor young man sells his shadow to the devil in exchange for a bag full of gold coins that never depletes itself. In doing so, he sentences himself to unhappiness, as he finds himself relegated to the margins of a society that cannot tolerate his weirdness and understands that he has – in his recklessness – inflicted a deep wound to his own sense of identity. The shadow was an integral part of his subjectivity: without one, it is like he did not exist at all.

The tale by Chamisso, published in 1814, is not just a classic of fantastic literature, but also a classic among the literary reflections on the theme of the *double*, as it moved from folk traditions to the imaginary of Modernity (Rank, 1994). As a consequence of the modernisation process, the theme of the *double* became a place where the middle class could experience its anxieties related to the advance of rationality at the expenses of the supernatural and the sacred (Todorov, 1973) or, in other words, to the world loses its magical side (Weber, 2015).

The tale is published in a period in which the West sees the parallel development of both Enlightenment and gothic literature, the two sides of the development of the collective imaginary, a tendency that will find its height in the twentieth century, with mass society (Abruzzese, 1973; Grassi, 2003). One side being the luminous one related to progress, to understanding and

controlling nature, and the other side being the dark and disturbing one, in which mystery endures, and the invisible resists all human attempts to capture its essence.

Shadows lack shape, depth and thickness, appear and disappear: or so it seems to us. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of symbolism and the imaginary, shadow is one of the richest and more polyhedric figures, gaining depth and volume precisely from its lack of shape and substance.

Our shadow, the one we cast, despite being impossible to grasp and difficult to define, still belongs to us, and is a confirmation – like our image in the mirror – that we exist in the world: to lose it, as it happens in the novel by Chamisso, is more disquieting and dramatic than having it.²

Shadows are however also pointing to darkness, to caves, to dark woods, to catacombs and dungeons, to abandoned houses – to the dark corners of our own houses: shadows are what we see projected, deformed and twisted, moving on the walls of victorian mansions that populate mystery and horror tales in expressionist cinema. Disquieting shadows which we perceive having depth and substance, open on dark and unfathomable depths of vertigo and chaos such as the abyss of time: together with water, a manifestation within the imaginary – according to Durand – of the unstoppable descent towards death. The negative mirror image of light.

A sequence of representations of the idea of Shadow, whose origins had to be found at the dawn of Modernity, but keeps changing its face.

Light and darkness are two faces of the imaginary and stand at the base of its divisions, deeply endowed in human culture from its origins, in a tangle of ambiguities resulting from the convergences and analogies Gilbert Durand writes about when dealing with symbols (1999). Elementary units of myth and imaginary, as shown and conceptually arranged by the French anthropologist on the basis of psychoanalysis and anthropology, drawing from the folk lore and the subconscious, abyssal and tangled caches of formless and mysterious impulses. Durand conjures Cronos (1999) and links the ancestral fear of death to time and its flowing. We can therefore take as a reference the proximity of time to water, to caves and to the dark to reflect upon underworlds, shadows, darkness and their meaning in the imaginary in the latest centuries.

On the other hand, the ambiguity of such symbols and their realms is such that, at least in the West, the proximity to caves, darkness, water, time, death, has not been consistent in the development of the imaginary.

The end of the Middle Ages also saw the decline of some of the darkest manifestations of their eschatology: ranging from the apocalyptic wait for the year One Thousand (Duby, Frugoni, 1999; Thompson, 1996), to the sculptures

² In Yiddish, the word “Schlemiel” means unlucky, but also foolish.

of the gothic cathedrals and the dark depictions of the afterlife worlds by painters such as Hieronymus Bosch (Fattori, 2018). A new course emerged in humanism, based on a positive and reassuring interpretation of the same symbols, that became parts of the great scenery of Nature, in a world that was getting better known and represented and less frightful, mysterious or disquieting. Such is the delusion of Humanism, and of Modernity, a result of the scientific and geographical discoveries, of technical inventions, of the new prospective gaze that takes hold in the West.

2. Passages

The “Sacred Wood” of Bomarzo, near Viterbo, is an interesting example of this point of view.³

It was built in the mid sixteenth century by Pier Francesco “Vicino” Orsini, with the intention of constructing physical, inhabitable representation of the concept of reality he shared with his contemporaries. Such representation has meant to be built from inside the cosmos itself and the *idea* of it: a theatre of the world, *the world itself as a theatre*, where the term “theatre” at the time had a range of meaning significantly different from the current one:

During the sixteenth century, in the scientific circles, it was common to use the word ‘theatre’ referring to encyclopaedic manuals making ample usage of illustrations [...]. The book... presents itself as an all-encompassing manual, the theatre of theatres (Rocca, 2012: 149-154*)

Vicino Orsini was inspired by the work of a polyhedric intellectual of his times, Giulio Camillo Delminio, suspected of heresy, author of a book he defined “theatre”:

The goal of Delminio was a text in which the dynamics of the universe could really be put on stage, visualised synoptically. He even tried to create a three-dimensional model of his machine (Rocca, 2012: 149-154*).

The wood of Bomarzo is, in the intentions of its creator, a material representation of a new idea of the cosmos, one that took into account naturalistic observations but also magical elements and the fantasies and legends that came with the geographical discoveries and the achievements of science and technology: clear ponds, shady copses, channels and grottos, clearings and

³ More on the “Sacred Wood” can be found in Bredekamp, Janzer (1985).

amphitheatres populated by nymphs, fish, snakes and giants, mixing the elements of a new encyclopaedia of the world that was still being written.

Despite the tangible risk – in the times of the counterreformation – of awakening the interest of the Holy Inquisition, the goal of Orsini was certainly not that of dabbling in necromancy (the dark magic dealing with the dead) or sorcery, but that of showing the essential unity of all the wonders of the cosmos. Inspired by Epicurus, he meant to represent – in his “theatre” – all the shapes with which *movement*, the driving force of life, expresses itself.

We are facing here an interpretation of the symbols of time and its flowing that emancipates itself from the frightful reference to death, in a reconciliation between the Human and the Cosmos, where the first separates himself from the second to observe it, describe it and ultimately immerse himself in it as its *Master*. It is a time in which the Self begins to move from the porous nature it had in the traditional societies to a buffered dimension (Taylor, 2009), which it acquires as it proceeds along the path of disenchantment of the world (Weber, 1973). Clearly, the world Vicino Orsini puts on stage is still full of fabulous and *wonderful* aspects, populated as it is by the fantastic beasts one could find in the many bestiaries that were circulating together with the reports of the voyages outside Europe, all mixed with demigods from the roman and greek mythologies. This cosmos is not frightening, but filled with a sense of *mystery*, as we are reminded today by the building bodies, the sculptures and the inscriptions inside the Wood: the “leaning house”, the rock that “transforms itself” into a bear as one goes around it:

TU CH'ENTRI QUA PON MENTE
PARTE A PARTE
ET DIMMI POI SE TANTE
MARAVIGLIE
SIEN FATTE PER INGANNO
O PUR PER ARTE

Here the term “inganno” actually means “spell” (Calvesi, 2000, quoted in Rocca, 2012: 487), anticipating the *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes and its “sorcerers” (2003; Schütz, 1995), albeit with a different intent.

If in the masterwork by Cervantes the “sorcerers” are a manifestation of *Evil*, for Pier Francesco Orsini, the inscription is pointing at the wish to surprise by showing the marvels and the mysteries of nature (while carefully avoiding any interest from the Inquisition that, in those times, had little patience or desire

to acknowledge differences between “white” and “black” magic, between *magia naturalis* and witchcraft).⁴

FIGURE 1. Adolfo Fattori, *Ligottiana*, August 2019 (Pollica, Salerno).



Orsini worked in times that saw the full development of the renaissance science: historically wedged between the *Vitruvian Man* of Leonardo da Vinci

⁴ “The boundary between witchcraft – illicit – and natural magic, commonly accepted by the science of the Renaissance, was not a clearly defined one. The main issue was that of establishing at which point the research and the imitation of the divine trespassed into impiety. In all magical activities a demonic shadow reverberates, as they echo the ancient promise of the snake: *erit sicut dei*, eat the fruit of life and you will become gods.” (Rocca, 2012: 489-492*).

(1490) and the heliocentric system of Mikolaj Kopernik (1473-1453), among the first steps of a scientific revolution that, in the seventeenth century, was to radically change traditional biology, chemistry and astronomy (Rupert-Hall, 1976). He was therefore in the middle of a process that would retrace the boundaries of the provinces of the cosmos and the world, putting Man at the centre of it, and starting to exclude the supernatural from the human view of reality. Nature, with its *monstra* and its evidences is for Vicino Orsini in a state of equilibrium, essentially benign, but still holds mysteries and *portentis* to be unveiled, wonders that hide in the dark corners, in the shadows, metaphorically in the grottos and cospes of Orsini's park, to confirm the flexible, ambiguous nature of the symbols the imaginary feeds upon.⁵

An optimistic vision, that was to be found during the entire “scientific revolution” from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century (Rupert-Hall, 1954), passing through Enlightenment.⁶

It is at the height of Enlightenment that one of the great oppositions of the imaginary, the one between *light and darkness*, becomes radical once again: whilst the light of *reason* struggles to banish the darkness of superstition, in opposition, the *sacred* emerges again, in ferocious and demonic forms that take narrative shape in *gothic romance*.

3. Portals

In *Gothic Romance*, the “gothic” novel, the irrational plays a decisive role. It deals with stories that, on a background filled with mystery and supernatural, stage passions, obsessions, interplaying relations and emotions linked to terror and to the sublime, to provide a metaphor or a place for the explosion of desire (Abruzzese, 2007). The term “gothic” results from the circumstance by which such literature is believed to find its origins in the German speaking countries: a medieval connotation is however undeniable, hinting at the architecture and the decorations of the gothic cathedrals that were built across all Europe. In these stories, to thicken the plot, there is an abundance of twists, identifications, false tracks and deceit. Truth be told, the phenomena and the impulses that find expression in the gothic genre are the subject matter of the imaginary for a new generation of female readers, relieved from the domestic obligations, and free to read dark and passionate stories staging the *sublime* (Punter, 1980).

⁵ It seems legitimate to wonder whether Vicino Orsini knew the work of the cleric Opicino de Canistris, who lived between 1296 and 1356, who was author of a fantastic work of fantastic cartography, in which geographical maps of the known world are mixed up with figures of humans, animals and monsters (Piron, 2015).

⁶ Roughly, the period between 1670 and 1789.

If from one hand interiority remains at the center of the narrated events – with all its darkest, wildest and uncontrollable aspects – on the other hand the extreme forces unleashing themselves within the characters and the dark places in which their stories vicissitudes are staged send back to the oldest structures of the imaginary, linked to night, to death, to the *invisible* and to the *mystery*.

The novel that marks the birth of the genre with a follow-up of desires, fears and scandals is *The Monk*, by the Englishman Matthew G. Lewis (2015), published in 1796.⁷

Sex makes its entrance in literature with its violent and diabolical aspects, on a dark and morbid imaginary background, set in places that at the time were still regarded as exotic (southern Europe), and in remote, dark and unfathomable times (the centuries of the Holy Inquisition). *The monk* is the story of Ambrosio, a holy man at the service of Faith, who yields to temptation and discovers the mysteries and pleasures of sex. He kidnaps, rapes and kills a young pure woman, Antonia (who, at the end of the story, will be revealed to be his sister).

Captured and sentenced to death, he strikes a bargain with the Devil, who makes him fly out of prison, and shows him how he plotted and schemed to lead him to perdition. The Devil then drops him to his death, to welcome him (as we can imagine) in the dark abyss of hell. In the protestant and anti-papist northern Europe, the novel – a masterpiece in its own way, and still today a paradigmatic milestone of the gothic – could freely circulate and enjoy an enormous success.

Such a success was due to having set on stage drives and urges that were still imprecisely defined and were linked to sex, death and *desire* in its most wild and uncontrollable manifestations. It was not by chance that the novel was held in high esteem by the surrealists: in 1931 Antonin Artaud published a French version of it (1966).

Gothic, in essence, gives form to a multifaceted operation: the ancient symbols of darkness become tools of Evil, by adoption of a christian mythology. The Devil emerges out of the abysses of the Earth to tempt and damn men and women who, with their cruelty and perversions, are his human incarnation.

Such visions act as metaphors of feelings and emotions that belong to a sphere of deep interior impulses, beginning to emerge strongly in parallel with the processes of individualization. Sexuality expresses itself in new forms – of

⁷ Such was the success of the novel that Lewis was even nicknamed “Monk”, after the protagonist.

both the accepted and rejected kinds – to represent desire, erotic and sentimental drives.⁸

The season of the gothic novel begins with *The Castle of Otranto* (2004) in 1764 and ends in 1818 with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2016).⁹

This genre is a fertile soil for the fantastic literature of the nineteenth century, in which a central role is played by the *hesitation* felt by the protagonist (and the reader) when confronted with events of an inexplicable nature, that take place in the context of a “natural” reality but have all the signs of the supernatural. This is the field of the *disturbing*, on which Sigmund Freud wrote while discussing art (2003); recently, Mark Fisher has discussed it with an evocative argument (2016).

FIGURE 2. Adolfo Fattori, *Tunnel*, novembre 2020, Capo Miseno (Napoli).



⁸ Most of the trivial gothic literature today is been forgotten: works of an extremely low quality, often trespassing in actual porn (see Punter, 1980).

⁹ There are of course remarkable exceptions throughout the entire nineteenth century: germinal works such as those by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) who, as an author, anticipated and incarnated the practices and the contradictions that would later be at the centre of the relation between intellectuals and mass culture (Abruzzese, 1973; 2007). Other examples are *The strange case of doctor Jekyll and mister Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson (2003), published in 1886, and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (2003), published in 1897.

The gothic and fantastic genres are closely related. They follow different paths, but share a common origin: the periodic reappearance of the supernatural with its seductions, the *invisible*, the *mystery*. Increasingly, the domain of *nightmare* and shadows. As written by Mark Fisher "... something cut out of time" (Fisher, 2016: 18).¹⁰

In a guise or another, the manifestation of *Evil* with its many faces remains the founding nucleus. One of the settings for Evil is the *Elsenhère*, continents whose portals are darkness and the shadows.

Horror, nowadays as in the nineteenth century, is born out of this nucleus. Darkness and shadows, openings on unknown and disquieting domains, acting as doors for horror, are interfaces between the natural world and the *invisible*.

Frankenstein, in the nineteenth century, is followed anyway by the development of the fantastic tale, in which it is possible to discern – as metaphors – the doubts that the bourgeois society had on its own capability to draw a map of reality with the tools of economic rationality and science. The doubts on the reality of the supernatural were never entirely dismissed and periodically reappeared – until the end of the nineteenth century: on the contrary, they were destined to find a second wind in the pseudo-scientific ideas we have already mentioned. As Tzvetan Todorov writes in his study of the fantastic tale:

... the intervention of the supernatural element always constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules, and in doing, so finds its justification.

[...]

Whence the ambiguous impression made by fantastic literature: on the one hand, it represents the quintessence of literature, insofar as the questioning of the limit between real and unreal, proper to all literature, is its explicit center. On the other hand, though, it is only a propedeutics to literature: by combatting the metaphysics of everyday language, it gives that language life; it must start from language, even if only to reject.

[...]

The nineteenth century transpired, it is true, in a metaphysics of the real and the imaginary and the literature of the fantastic is nothing but the bad conscience of this positivist era (Todorov, 1973: 166-168).

4. The *Elsewhere*

The gothic novel – with the diabolic (and erotic) connotations it puts on stage – and the fantastic tale – with the doubts on the nature of reality it puts into play – are the raw materials from which the *weird* genre of the twentieth

¹⁰ Italic in the text.

century was to be distilled, a form of *horror* to be spread through the channels of mass culture. The narrative forms change but keep at their root, as a deep nucleus, the symbolic bodies that in the common imaginary refer to death: an approaching darkness, looming shadows, the flowing of time, shifted to an alien *Elsewhere* which cannot be reduced to the human categories. Universes lying outside our space-time *continuum*, from which periodically alien entities trespass to bring death, pain and damnation to humans. Such tales are found in *pulp magazines*, the follow-ups of *dime novels* and *penny dreadful* (Fichera, 2019), low cost and low quality periodicals that still had the merit of spreading the habit of reading and of being channels for new maps of the imaginary for the fiction that was heir to *romance: science fiction, western, erotic, and horror* itself.¹¹

During the first half of the twentieth century – the golden age of such publications – the *horror* and *weird* genres are represented by two great authors: Robert E. Howard and Howard Phillips Lovecraft. The first was the creator of the saga of Conan the Barbarian (and therefore of the sub-genre known as *sword & sorcery* or *heroic fantasy*).

The two share authors a conception of magic and the supernatural: what we, as humans, attribute to the domain of the sacred – and therefore of the *transcendent* and *supernatural* – is the natural reality of other spheres of existence, of other universes, so alien and irreducible to our own that they are for us incomprehensible. A form of *hyper-naturalism* (Fisher, 2016; Harman, 2012) that rejects any temptation and seduction from the domains of the sacred and the religious. A radical phenomenology that is narratively embodied by the idea that the perception we have and the explanations we give for what we cannot understand are the outcome of our search for a *meaning*, which prefers the metaphysical explanations to the rational ones. Shadows and darkness are *portals* through which alien entities come to haunt Earth appearing to us as embodiments of Evil, alternating a supreme indifference towards us and totally alien behaviors. Theorized universes are for Howard a background for the adventures of Conan: for Lovecraft, on the other hand, they are the core of a cosmology and a narrative pillar. The blaspheme pantheon of Lovecraft traces and populates an occult and invisible stage for the characters who are from time to time victims or accomplices – by a logic which results chaotic and unfathomable to humans and regulates the behaviour of the “Great Old Ones”.

¹¹ Another outcome is represented by the extremely fruitful dialogue between authors and readers, which lead to the birth of *fandom* (Fattori A., 2020), to an increasingly direct involvement of the readers in the editorial work, giving a full meaning to the co-production activity of aesthetic goods (Abruzzese, 1973). On the depth and richness of the dynamics between aesthetic creation and “consumer *finish*” refer to (albeit only in the context of audiovisual projects) Tirino, 2020.

In the majority of his stories and novels, as well as in the ideas he wrote as notes in his *Commonplace Book* – a notebook of the daily horror he always carried – but above all in the stories of the *Cthulhu Mythos*, Lovecraft gives birth to a fantastic and monstrous cosmology of ancient “outer” gods, outside of space and time, who slumber in the inter-dimensional spaces. These gods take forms that cannot be reduced to our linguistic categories and have nothing to do with the shapes with which we usually describe reality: matter, light, life, death, colors and geometry do not belong to the universe of the *other* gods. Ancient horrors never fully asleep nor dead, they lumber over what we consider our orderly and immutable cosmos, which is on the contrary constantly under the threat of the horror, annihilation, dementedness and madness, that these ancient and incommensurably evil entities scheme and plot, behind the thin curtain that we – with a naively lacanian lexicon – refer to as “reality” (Lucci, 2016: 64*).

The gods of Lovecraft embody our idea of *Evil* in a sacred, metaphysical sense. They are however totally alien, subject to *different* natural and scientific laws: *hyper-naturalism*, as written by Mark Fisher (2018: 21) and Graham Harman (2012: 22).¹²

This approach found an early and noble forerunner in *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*, 2014) by the Austrian writer Alfred Kubin, published in 1909. The novel tells the story of a painter who is invited by a childhood friend to Perle, a city he has founded, and which was meant to become the capital of a “*Dream Kingdom*”. The painter moves with his wife to Perle, a far away city in a land that becomes more and more alienating, as Perle itself – and its residents are no less extreme...

A place between a horror fair and an actual hell: yet another representation of the houses of Death. Perle is grey and sad, and the couple are less and less sure they made a wise choice. Actually, the city is stage to a fierce battle between the friend of the main character and his adversary: a fight that is destined to become more and more bloody, until the destruction of the city itself and the return of the protagonist to Europe. The confrontation of the two adversaries, Patera – friend to the painter – and Hercules Bell – is explicitly a war between the principles of Good and Evil, and the whole novel servers the idea that the world is an internal stage for the unending conflict of opposite principles, a theme bordering with gnosticism.

¹² For more on Howard Phillips Lovecraft, refer to Fattori A., 2020 (omitted here for brevity).

Despite lying in a narrative sphere which has elements both fantastic and marvellous, the novel shows elements I would like to stress here as heralds to the future genres of *horror*, *weird* and *unhomely*.¹³

These genres create the atmosphere of *The Other Side*: locations are undetermined, lights are pale and undefined, the spectral figures that populate the city are constant reminders of an alien and dislocated Elsewhere, a liminal world at the edges of Shadow.

A similar world is found in the *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo (1994), one of the best novels of western literature, published in 1955, a trip across a liminal, evanescent and nocturnal land. The main character, Juan Preciado, in search of his father, traverses a shadow land in which the living and the dead share space, time and words. As the voyage and the dialogue between the protagonist and the land and its residents progress, the figure of the father becomes more and more a representation of Evil, in a narration mixing dark religious traditions of hispanic origin and what remained of the conceptions of the sacred of the native central Americans.

This land is full of echoes. One would say they were encased within the intervals of the walls or under the stones. When you walk, you feel them treading over your steps. You hear cracking noises. Laughter. Laughter which is by now very old, as if tired of laughing [...] Dawn gradually quenched my memories. Now and then I heard the sound of words, and I was aware of a difference. Because the words I heard until that moment, as I only then knew, had no sound, did not resonate; they were heard, but without a sound, as the words one hears in dreams [...] This is the reason why this land is full of souls; just a wandering of souls of people who died without a forgiveness they will never have, least of all with our help (Rulfo, 1994: 40-51 it. ed.*).

The Mexican region that Juan Preciado penetrates is a place of death – made such by the evil power of Pedro Páramo, who is almost a reincarnation of Kurtz, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness* (2008), the story by Joseph Conrad (published in 1899), of which Francis Ford Coppola gave the deepest and most effective interpretation with *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

The voyage of Pedro Páramo in the evanescent and indefinite domains lying between light and darkness anticipates the hallucinated trip of another Spanish-American writer, the Argentinian Ernesto Sabato. In his *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (*On Heroes and Tombs*, 1991), published in 1961, the main character explores the underground continent of the sewers of Buenos Aires: a long, hallucinatory tale within the tale of a descent into delirium.

¹³ Fisher (2016: 6) translates “*unheimlich*” with “unhomely”, preferring this term to *uncanny*.

On Heroes and Tombs, which contains the “Report on the blind”, is the second volume of a trilogy opening with *The Tunnel* (2001), published in 1948, and closing with *The Angel of Darkness* (1991), published in 1974. The powerful trilogy goes through thirty years of the twentieth century and touches issues such as the horror of individual madness, the collective disaster of war and the foreshadowing of the decline of the contemporary individual as a heir of Humanism.

In *Report on the blind* Fernando, the protagonist, tells of his obsession towards blind people, whom he believes to be the covert masters of the world. Following one of them, through a door inside an apartment in a common building in central Buenos Aires, he finds himself in the underground of the city, an unimaginable dark continent filled with deceiving lights, gloomy shadows, and populated by impossible creatures. Once he has identified the building of which is the entrance – or *one* of the entrances – to the underground world of the blind, Fernando takes place to keep watching it. The moment comes to take action: Fernando decides to get into the building, and to find the apartment that the blind people use.

A voyage in bewilderment and fear, in search of a hidden truth which is linked to one of the figures Gilbert Durand identifies as heralds of darkness: “Since darkness entails blindness, the disquieting figure of the blind person, sometimes reinforced by symbols of mutilation, is to be found in this isotopic lineage” (Durand, 1999: 91).

Fernando undertakes his voyage in the realm of the blind, and it is up to the reader to decide whether this realm is real or just an hallucination.

A circle closes that opened with a metaphor out of the imaginary – the blind man, a “disquieting” figure, the custodian of a hidden esoteric knowledge that gives power: take as example Tiresia the seer,¹⁴ prophesying from the lands of Death. Furthermore caves, rivers and the dark are other supreme symbols of the imaginary of death.

On the other hand, one the core elements of the archaic and traditional cultures that survive to the late modernity is the idea that the thin line separating the natural world from the realms belonging to the sacred is tenuous and impermeable. Accordingly, our world is porous to what comes from the supernatural world. Such ideas are also core elements of fantastic and horror literature and, as we have seen, of literature in general, where gloomy visions out of the depths of the collective imaginary. We can see this with Kubin, who was close to Expressionism and influenced by it, and later was highly appreciated by the surrealists; we find it reading Sabato’s trilogy (also outside of the “black” light of the “Report on the blind”). Another example is found in

¹⁴ Alfred Schütz has written excellent words on the subject (Schütz, 1959).

the work of Bruno Schulz, one of the greatest less-known authors of the first half of the twentieth century. Schulz, a Galician Jew many of whose works were lost in the Holocaust, penned among other things a collection of stories, *Cinnamon Shops*, published in 1933,¹⁵ and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, published in 1938.¹⁶

The world described by Schulz is protean, vague and elusive reality in which what is natural trespasses in an immaterial elsewhere, keeps transforming and metamorphosing into fantastic, magical and indescribable shapes.

Schulz gives to the commonplace things of the social and natural world other meanings, to which he gets by looking at the world through the semi-transparent membrane that envelopes it and keeps us apart from magic: he pierces this barrier in what could be described as an epiphany. He actually visits the “other side” as he visits the sanatorium in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*: an actual trip into the afterlife. This world is populated by disembodied, vague shapes for which the flow of time is undefined and maze-like: in this world he finds – suspended between life and death – his shaman father, who introduced him to the *Elsenhere*.

We are facing here a sphere of existence that looms over the natural world, to which it filters thanks to the porous nature of the latter. One can find himself in this elsewhere unwittingly, by chance or distraction: or, maybe, by *election*. Therefore, in the tale the city splits itself, and it spirals down to corruption and decay, as in *Visitation* (Schulz, 2018). What holds for the exteriors is true also for the buildings, that reveal arcane and disquieting dimensions.

As in *The other side* by Kubin, the protagonist of the stories by Schulz tells in first person and reaches his destination by train.

Incidentally, the train is a “modern” double-faced symbol: an icon of modernization, linked to the development of the factory and the metropolis. And, at the same time, yet another mean of transport in which the perception of movement is removed or at least blurred, taking the traveller out from ordinary reality into an experience similar to that of cinema spectators (Schivelbusch, 2014; Fattori L., 2019), suspended between dream and reality (Albano, 1992). The train occurs as a symbol for travels into a threatening unknown also in more realistic forms of literature, as in Musil, 2014, or Benn, 2009.

To dwell some more in the world of Mitteleuropean culture: we find in the work of Alexander Lernet-Holenia traces of an intuition of another cosmos, which permeates the natural world with its extremities. In *Beide Sizilien* (1950), a story published in 1942 and revolving around the annihilation of a group of

¹⁵ Now in Schulz, 2018.

¹⁶ Now in Schulz, 2018.

veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army, the protagonist investigates the circumstances of death of his comrades and finds himself in parts of his own city that are transformed in strange ways, into threatening and degraded neighbourhoods, as it happens in Schulz and Sabato (Lernet-Holenia, 2017: 91 *et seq.* it. ed.). As the protagonist visits a comrade living outside town, he meets the same irrational transfigurations that were described by Machen (Lernet-Holenia, 2017: 137 *et seq.* it. ed.).

5. Abysses of shadow

My incursions in the general literature of the twentieth century show how the symbols of the imaginary that are linked to the places of darkness and to the trespassing into the domains of death do not solely belong to genre fiction – which finds its *topoi* in North European mythologies – but also to a tradition that can be linked to Judaeo-Christian culture: if Lovecraft makes explicit references to the Anglo-Saxon fiction of the nineteenth century (Lord Dunsany, Arthur Machen), Schulz and Sabato on the other hand are completely *inside* the flow of continental European culture (Fattori A., 2013).

This flow is in fact a deep river, an uninterrupted current nurturing and transporting the symbols of darkness, moving from the archaic cultures to reach us. As is demonstrated by the renewed interest for the *weird* genre and its master, H.P. Lovecraft (Fattori A., 2020) and by the birth of the *New Weird* or, even more, by the success of a writer recognised as the heir to Lovecraft: Thomas Ligotti.

The world of Ligotti is dusty, decaying, degraded and ruined: its dwellers are resigned, crepuscular humans, facing a slow decay or a hopeless, grey and repetitive existence; alternatively, they are the delusional and eccentric accomplices/servants to unspeakable forces. The locations of Ligotti are desolate, filthy, abandoned to neglect and decay and dominated by *shadows*: solid shadows constantly shape-shifting and acting as gates or emissaries of other spaces, other universes, unfathomable and inhuman.

Our world, extending around the places haunted by the shadows evoked by Ligotti, is stripped of the veil covering up its intimate nature and giving us a false if benevolent view. As in *The Red Tower*:

The ruined factory stood three stories high in an otherwise featureless landscape. Although somewhat imposing on its own terms, it occupied only the most intrusive place within the gray emptiness of its surroundings, its presence serving as a mere accent upon a desolate horizon [...] The factory had long been in ruins, its innumerable bricks worn and crumbling, its many windows shattered [...] According to these strictly hallucinatory accounts, the

whole of the Red Tower, as the factory was known, had always been subject to *fadings* at certain times. (Ligotti, 1991: 45-46).

The whole landscape, natural or social, is the stage of a pantomime of sorts in which puppets move about, unaware of the deception they are victims of, within the illusory shapes of a life being probably just dreams.

The natural universe Ligotti describes is a space always on the verge of collapse, about to be tainted by alien entities and that will drag it into their impossible universes. Humans are just puppets, incapable of understanding their own true condition: absolute inconsistency and impotence. Paraphrasing Theodor W. Adorno as he writes on Franz Kafka (1983), we could say that Ligotti's tales are parables with a hidden key.

The key, however, can be found in Ligotti's essay *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010), in which he quotes an obscure German philosopher, Julius Bahnsen:

In his study *The Nature of Evil* (1931) Radoslav A. Tsanoff cites a terse reflection set down by the German philosopher Julius Bahnsen in 1847 when he was seventeen years old. "Man is a self-conscious Nothing", wrote Bahnsen. Whether one considers these words to be juvenile or precocious, they belong to an ancient tradition of scorn for our species and its aspirations. All the same, the reigning sentiments on the human venture normally fall between qualified approval and loud-mouthed braggadocio. (Ligotti, 2010, 13).

Ligotti, a committed anti-natalist (Ligotti, 201 143, 148, 169), claims that the essence of human life lies in suffering and sorrow, due to the irremediable fracture separating illusions and reality. Illusions are borne of having a consciousness, an awareness of the *self* that has lead humankind to the pretentious delusion of having a special status in the universe. Humankind therefore ends conspiring against itself, by nurturing the illusions that urge it to build architectures of the imagination that refer to other dimensions, those of the transcendent, the supernatural, the sacred. One can write of "hyper-naturalism" in the case of Lovecraft and, on the other hand, of "hyper-phenomenology" in the case of Ligotti. We are the only living beings – far as we know, in spite of the supporters of *flat ontologies* (Fattori A., 2020) and *critical life studies* (Colebrook, Weinstein, 2017) – having self-awareness, and this fact forces us to perpetually try finding a *meaning* to reality. Our entire culture is the outcome of this search (Schütz, 1976; Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Bauman, 1992). So are our illusions.

The work of Ligotti is an extreme, narrative form of the considerations of phenomenology, transfiguring the ancestral terror of death into the fates of the

characters of the stories, and turning our hopes and illusions into a destiny of shadow, impotence and annihilation. We are but puppets, at the end of a chain of causes and effects: we are doomed to disappear into the dark abyss in which the shadows of Death dwell, in a dark revisitation of the “re-enchantment” of the world as we are experiencing in this view of late modernity.

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