'Finding Infinity Round the Corner': Doublings, Dualities and Suburban Strangeness in Arthur Machen's *The London Adventure*

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A few pages in to Arthur Machen's 1924 text *The London Adventure or The Art of Wandering*, the narrator professes a 'very special reverence […] of signs and intimations given in odd ways in unexpected fashions, in places and surroundings which are generally accounted unreverend enough'.[1] In many ways, this serves as a manifesto for what follows: an extended meditation, with its own idiosyncratic 'signs and intimations', upon the creative process and the narrator's relationship with London — particularly some of the city's less glamorous and populous suburbs. As well as acting as a vehicle for such ideas, *The London Adventure* also effectively surveys a number of Machen's canonical late-Victorian gothic and decadent works, such as *The Great God Pan* (1894), in light of the intervening period, and the changes wrought by the passage of time. Although the text is sometimes presented as the third volume of Machen's autobiography, following *Far Off Things* (1922) and *Things Near and Far* (1923), the first-person narrator blurs the line between fiction and autobiography, creating a sense of ironic distance between text and reality.[2] *The London Adventure* emerges as an essay that is governed by a series of dualities: between the 'real' Machen and the narrator; between an imagined version of the text and the one we are actually reading; between the often lurid and sensationalist explorations of gothic themes found in his earlier works, and the more light-hearted, self-conscious discussion of similar themes here; and between the world of everyday appearances and a deeper reality that lies, as it were, beyond a veil. This final opposition can be seen as the dominant concern of Machen's fiction, and the guiding theme of a text like *The Great God Pan*, which asserts at the outset that the world as it ordinarily appears is '"but dreams and shadows; the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes"'.[3]

In positing this kind of dualistic ontological structure, Machen was in some ways reflecting the beliefs and speculations of his time; Spiritualism, for example, was flourishing

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[1] Arthur Machen, *The London Adventure or the Art of Wandering* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), p. 13.
[2] Recent publication history illustrates the text's ambiguous status. The most recent reprint, by Three Impostors press (2014), was presented as the third volume of the autobiography; however, in 2017, Tartarus Press published a single-volume text marketed as 'the full autobiography', which omits *The London Adventure*.
[3] Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* (Mineola: Dover, 2006), p. 10.

when *The Great God Pan* was published.[4] While he always viewed such movements with a degree of scepticism (describing 'modern Spiritualism and modern Theosophy' as a 'squalid chapter of back-parlour magic' in an 1899 article), Machen's fascination with notions of a parallel reality remains evident in *The London Adventure*, which appeared at a time of renewed interest in such ideas.[5] However, the text's peculiar tone and structure, along with its ambiguous fictional status, allows him to explore these concerns from new angles. If the gothic is always, in some sense, concerned with the potential or actual re-emergence of a real or imagined past, then Machen's essay suggests a gothicised relationship with the themes and locations of his late-Victorian texts, which echo uncannily throughout *The London Adventure*.[6] The city described in the essay remains one in which 'the real world' lurks beneath the 'dreams and shadows' of appearances, but it is also one in which Machen (or his narrator) is haunted by the vestiges of the fictional London constructed in texts like *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). Paralleled with this temporal distance from Machen's earlier experiences and evocations of London is the narrative's geographical emphasis upon the city's distant, forgotten, and (seemingly) mundane suburbs. These settings allow Machen to explore his guiding themes with a different assemblage of imagery, tone, and atmosphere to that found in a text like *The Great God Pan*, which focuses upon central neighbourhoods such as Soho and Piccadilly. In the following section, I argue that these ironies of temporality, geography, and narrative underpin *The London Adventure*'s approach to Machen's characteristic gothic concerns; the second section examines more closely his depiction of the areas he calls 'London *incognita*', and his emphasis upon the value of defamiliarised experience. Ultimately, Machen suggests, such experience is connected to the fusion of writing, walking, memory, and place found in *The London Adventure*.[7]

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[4] Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell note that Victorian culture was pervaded by 'an intimation that reality might be transfigured by something above and beyond', which they connect to such factors as the 'mysterious powers of electricity, the baffling feats of mesmerists and the apparently real communications from the dead elicited by Spiritualist mediums'. Introduction, in *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–22 (p. 1).

[5] Arthur Machen, 'The Literature of Occultism', *Literature* (18 February 1899), p. 181. As Jay Winter has pointed out, the revival of interest in Spiritualism in this period was undoubtedly 'related directly to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath'. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 77.

[6] In defining the gothic in this way, I follow Robert Mighall, who argues that the 'principal defining structure' of the gothic is 'its attitude to the past and its unwelcome legacies'. Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xix.

[7] In combining these elements, Machen situates himself within a rich tradition of London walker-writers, with antecedents including William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, and Charles Dickens, and inheritors such as Iain Sinclair (whom I discuss in the second section). Studies of this lineage include Merlin Coverley's *The Art of*

'The Two Levels of Life': Blurring Textuality, Temporality and Identity

The London Adventure begins with a description of a suburban setting apparently mundane and forgotten, which despite this — or rather, because of it — conveys a strange and subtly unnerving atmosphere. The text describes 'a certain tavern in the north-western parts of London which is so remote from the tracks of men and so securely hidden that few people have ever suspected its existence'.[8] The fascination inspired by such places, for Machen, lies precisely in their invisibility, which corresponds to the sense of literally invisible realms that exist alongside 'reality'. In addition, their apparent avoidance of the perpetual change that characterises much of the city around them gives a sense of vestigial survival, of a past era somehow persisting within the present. Machen's London is a palimpsest, comprising overlapping layers of these pasts. The tavern is located 'in the leafy quarter once familiarly known as "the Wood"':

> Here are modest residences of stucco and grey brick, built for quiet people in the late 'thirties and early 'forties; their front gardens planted with trees of all sorts and varieties before the period when somebody settled that the only tree for London was the plane. Here and there in these gardens there survives an old gnarled thorn, a remnant, I suspect, of the time when 'the Wood' was really a wood or a waste.[9]

In this single paragraph, Machen alludes to four temporal realms: the 'real' present which has somehow passed by this tavern; the 'remote' world in which the tavern exists; the period in which the surrounding neighbourhood was known as 'the Wood'; and the more distant past, when the area 'was really a wood or a waste'. In doing so, Machen begins his essay by destabilising the reader's sense of temporal solidity, establishing a context in which London's pasts seem to intrude constantly upon its present. Trees enhance the effect: the ghostly 'quiet people' who once populated the district maintain a residual presence through the 'trees of all sorts and varieties' that persist, their diversity an analogue of the neighbourhood's atmosphere of temporal multiplicity. Machen is particularly fascinated by the blurring of

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Wandering: The Writer as Walker (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 2012), which takes its title from Machen's essay; and Matthew Beaumont's *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London* (London: Verso, 2015).
[8] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 5.
[9] Ibid. In a 1945 article, J. P. Hogan identifies this area as St John's Wood, and argues that the tavern's location is on or around Clifton Hill. However, by 1945, the neighbourhood's atmosphere of separateness is apparently no more, and the place that Machen describes now belongs to another layer of the area's past: 'the buses roar up and down the Abbey Road at frequent intervals; and there are no longer "quiet people"'. Hogan's attempts to identify the exact tavern described by Machen fail; possibly, given the factual uncertainty of *The London Adventure*, the 'real' public house did not exist even in 1924. J. P. Hogan, 'A London Adventure in St John's Wood', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/jun/29/archive-1945-arthur-machen-london-pub> [accessed 25 August 2017].

'natural' and 'urban' suggested by the name 'the Wood', and by the persistence of trees like the 'old gnarled thorn' which testify to the area's origin: by exploring suburbia, he suggests, we engage in a kind of time travel, uncovering the persistence of an older world associated with pagan rituals and beliefs within the modern metropolis.

Another characteristic theme established at the beginning of the essay is that of the creative process itself, and the peculiar terror with which it is sometimes associated in Machen's work. *The Hill of Dreams*, a semi-autobiographical novel in which a young Welsh writer living in London becomes increasingly incapable of distinguishing between reality and the fictions of his imagination, is his most sustained exploration of these ideas. For its protagonist Lucian, writing is either 'a miracle or an infernal possession, a species of madness, that had driven him on, every day disappointed, and every day hopeful'.[10] The central gothic threat of *The Hill of Dreams* is the frustration and psychic destabilisation of the creative process itself, and this fear also pervades the opening of *The London Adventure*; moreover, as with the exploration of temporality discussed above, trees and vegetation are used to develop this theme. Sitting in the tavern, Machen is confronted by a man with a 'threatening' manner, who reminds him that the '"leaves are beginning to come out"'.[11] This apparently innocuous remark alludes, we are told, to an earlier commitment of Machen's to 'write a book about London' when 'the leaves were out on the trees, since the green leafage of the boughs made such a marvellous contrast with the grim greyness of the streets'; it consequently causes him to 'shudder' in fear.[12] As well as being residual presences from a forgotten past, trees within the urban environment function in Machen's work as symbols of the creative process: he tells us of a 'fig tree that had somehow contrived to flourish in this arid waste', which is a 'miracle and a delight', and 'the kind of adventure out of which I had agreed to make a book'.[13] We can therefore understand the characteristically gothic blend of terror and wonder with which urban flora is associated here if we recognise its connection to writing itself, which is, for Machen, a process which may be a 'miracle and a delight', but also one that threatens psychic stability. It is noteworthy, however, that he associates the common trees of the neighbourhood with his fear of writing, while the fig tree is described in an unequivocally appreciative tone: 'as blessed as any wells and palm trees in the midst of an

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[10] Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (Mineola: Dover, 2006), p. 212.
[11] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 10.
[12] Machen, *The London Adventure*, pp. 11, 10.
[13] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 12.

African desert', its exotic, alien status within Britain seems to be associated with the positive aspects of the creative process.[14]

At the outset, then, Machen introduces the ideas of multiple overlapping temporalities and of ontological duality. While he hints at the metaphysical reality of parallel realms — particularly later in the essay, where he posits the existence of 'other worlds wholly, or almost wholly, unknown and unconjectured' — Machen also emphasises this sense of ontological instability by referring to his earlier works, and thus stressing a distinction between textual universes and the 'real' world.[15] His fear at the emergence of the leaves, for example, puts him 'very much in the condition of the Young Man in Spectacles' — an allusion to the 1895 episodic novel *The Three Impostors*, in which this figure becomes embroiled in a sinister pagan cult operating within London, ultimately leading to his grisly death.[16] By comparing himself to one of his own fictional characters, Machen begins to efface the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, and between the nightmarish world of his late-Victorian stories and the apparently more benign and mundane present. These boundaries are destabilised further when Machen explains that, in an unidentified 'former book', he has described 'with absolute veracity what strange things I once experienced in chambers in Gray's Inn, in forsaken Rosebery Avenue, in all sorts of down-at-heel and shabby quarters of London'.[17] He may be alluding to the autobiographical *Far Off Things*, but, in the adjective 'strange' and the need for protestations of 'absolute veracity', the passage also alludes to the dramatic supernatural events that characterise his fiction. *The Three Impostors* mentions Gray's Inn Road, and the comment also recalls *The Hill of Dreams*; as Roger Luckhurst notes, Machen 'lived in misery in Gray's Inn Road and Rosebery Avenue between 1895 and 1899, a time of painful solipsism' that is recorded in the novel.[18] The ambiguities here undermine distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, between the narrator of *The London Adventure* and Machen himself, and between the supernatural and the natural. Such confusions are intensified later in the essay, during a

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[14] Ibid. This tree has a counterpart in *The Hill of Dreams*, a 'Syrian fig tree imprisoned in Britain, nailed to an ungenial wall' (p. 219), which is also linked to the pleasures of creativity; Lucian has been suffering from writer's block, and this tree is somehow 'the solution of the puzzle' (p. 219), a source of renewed literary inspiration.

[15] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 61.

[16] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 10.

[17] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 13.

[18] Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors* (Mineola: Dover, 2007), p. 135; and Roger Luckhurst, 'An Occult Gazetteer of Bloomsbury: An Experiment in Method', in *London Gothic*, ed. by Lawrence Phillips and Anne Witchard (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 50–62 (p. 56).

discussion of Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* (a figure based upon Dickens's father, plagued by debt yet stubbornly optimistic):

> In a certain sense, it is probable that Mr Micawber is more real than any of us, infinitely more real than Dickens's own father, of whom he is understood to be a glorified projection. […] [I]t is only the beings of true literature who are pure and without alloy, since their essences are simple and immortal.[19]

The suggestion that literary characters have a more concrete existence than actual people, by virtue of their purity and coherence, reminds us of the complexity of the term 'real' in Machen's work; of his persistent sense that there is a deeper reality behind the world of appearances, whether this refers to other temporalities, textual worlds, or a separate metaphysical realm.

Accordingly, when Machen claims to be presenting an autobiographical essay, we should be aware that it may be guided by unconventional definitions of 'truth' or 'reality': he reminds us that the figure speaking is not Machen himself, but something 'pure and without alloy', a 'being of true literature'. This creates a sense of an uncanny doubling, of a fictionalised version of the author, anticipating the kind of blurring between fictional and non-fictional narrators later used by authors such as W. G. Sebald. Here, Machen repeatedly reminds us of this doubling by distinguishing between an imagined version of the text, and the one we are actually reading. He informs us that 'I had thought of an excellent title. I was to call my book *The London Adventure*', and later refers to 'the book on hand, this famous *London Adventure*'; but this envisioned version is a text that would focus upon descriptions of London, rather than describing the context and process of writing, as the published text does.[20] There is a paradoxical structure operating here; through its emphasis upon creative struggle, the essay stresses the difficulties inherent in writing about the city, but in doing so, it in fact gives us a strong sense of the places described. It is a kind of mirror image of *The Hill of Dreams*; while the novel is a purportedly fictional story that converges with Machen's own experiences, this is a supposedly non-fictional work which undermines its own claims to truth and reliability by implying that the narrator is not identical with Machen himself. *The London Adventure* even explains the moment when his vision of *The Hill of Dreams* coalesced in 1896, as he wrestled with the novel's conception. In the essay, Machen ponders writing 'a tale of a man who "lost his way"; who became so entangled in some maze of imagination and speculation that the common, material ways of the world became of no

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[19] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 39.
[20] Machen, *The London Adventure*, pp. 29, 47.

significance to him'.[21] This description could also apply to the narrative of *The London Adventure* itself, which ventures into increasingly imaginative metaphysical speculations as it progresses.

These erasures of the borders between fiction and non-fiction, and the suggestion that the text we are reading can be distinguished from a Platonic ideal of *The London Adventure*, function in the text to undermine our sense of a stable reality. As in his novels and stories, the notion of a metaphysically separate world that exists beyond the 'dreams and shadows' of outward appearances is at the core of the essay. Machen's long-term fascination with these ideas, as noted above, in some ways reflects his social and cultural context, whether in the late-Victorian period or the 1920s; it is particularly evident in *The Great God Pan*, with its sense of '"a whole world, a sphere unknown"' that lies '"beyond a veil"'.[22] Similarly, however, his refusal to subscribe to the tenets of 'modern Spiritualism' in the late-Victorian period also remains in evidence in *The London Adventure*, which gently mocks the movement:

> one reason for my disbelief in their message is my conviction that the two levels of life, the life here and the life of the world to come, are so utterly distinct. I have read, or rather dipped into, so many books which represent the spirits and souls of the dead as simply containing their life in this world under conditions which are practically reproductions. The young man who on earth was interested in the affairs of the Mount Zion Chapel (Particular Baptist), Beulah Road, Tooting Bec, is still vividly interested in the pious activities of the old congregation.[23]

The humour of this passage, derived from Machen's bathetic juxtaposition of dramatic supernatural language with the mundane particulars of a specific life, exemplifies the essay's ironic, conversational tone. But the passage also demonstrates that Machen has been consistent in his own worldview, and he remains firm in his conviction that there are 'two levels of life', even if they are 'distinct'. Moreover, *The London Adventure* demonstrates his enduring belief that particular places, atmospheres, and architectural forms can be conducive to accessing, or at least momentarily glimpsing, 'the real pattern and scheme of life'.[24]

'Apparitions of Grey Houses': Exploring London *Incognita*

Having established the essay's underlying ambiguities and dualities, Machen now goes on to explore the potential for some of the city's less glamorous and populous suburbs to induce

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[21] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 141.
[22] Machen, *The Great God Pan*, pp. 11, 10.
[23] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 21.
[24] Ibid.

glimpses of this 'pattern and scheme'. Although the metaphysical ideas underpinning his work demonstrate many consistencies over the years, the particular areas of London which Machen sees as conducive to transcendent experience vary from text to text. Moreover, these variations reflect differing structures of imagination, differing ways of gothicising the metropolis; this gothicisation renders the city a threatening, labyrinthine, and mysterious space, whether such threats are presented as real (as with the pagan cult of *The Three Impostors*) or psychological (Lucian's breakdown in *The Hill of Dreams*). *The Great God Pan* exemplifies the former, as forces associated with pagan ritual and decadent sexuality inexorably invade the city's centres of bourgeois wealth and respectability. The gothic threat associated with the mysterious Helen Vaughan is born in the story's opening scene, which takes place in rural Wales. The scene details a neurological operation carried out upon a young woman, Mary, in an attempt to alter her brain in order to render her capable of perceiving the god Pan; she is left a '"hopeless idiot"', but it later transpires that she eventually bore a child of Pan, who grows up to be Helen.[25] The threat that Helen embodies gradually advances upon central London, establishing itself in '"one of the meanest and most disreputable streets in Soho"' before finally conquering the respectable district of Piccadilly.[26] This structure of geographical advancement makes *The Great God Pan* one of the archetypal texts of late-Victorian gothic, which is frequently concerned with the invasion of London's supposedly rational and respectable imperial centre by mysterious forces associated with the city's impoverished districts, or with a more distant realm (consider Egypt in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, or Transylvania in *Dracula*, both published in 1897). As Luckhurst explains of *The Great God Pan*,

> Starting on the wild fringes or margins — in this case the ancient woodland of Gwent — the horror moves steadily towards the imperial metropolis and the centre of fashionable society. Like Count Dracula's move from the Carpathian mountains via Whitby and Purfleet to Piccadilly, the Gothic relentlessly advances on the centres of urban civilization. London becomes a psychic topography, the grid of streets the map of disordered fantasy and desire.[27]

The London Adventure, however, is underpinned by a different structural imagining of the city. The essay is not about malevolent encroachment upon the narrative subject — about external forces advancing upon a centre — but rather about a centrifugal movement, as its

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[25] Machen, *The Great God Pan*, p. 16.
[26] Machen, *The Great God Pan*, p. 54.
[27] Roger Luckhurst, Introduction, in *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics), pp. ix–xxxi (pp. xxix–xxx).

central subject explores the 'unsuspected countries' that lie in London's backwaters and margins.[28] Machen is obsessed with these 'places and regions further afield, places on the verge of London', the areas he refers to as 'London *incognita*'; and while the resulting experiences are not generally concerned with the sense of evil and corruption that pervades *The Great God Pan*, they are often gothic in other ways, attuned to the shadowy presence of histories and realms which coexist alongside the world of appearances.[29]

Memory is one such realm, and *The London Adventure* is, among other things, a journey through Machen's past: when he describes his exploration of these 'unsuspected countries', he is recalling 'the 1895-99 period when I first found out the wonders that lie to the eastward of the Gray's Inn Road, when Islington and Barnsbury and Canonbury were discovered, when Pentonville ceased to be a mere geographical expression'.[30] This fascination with the city's then lesser-known suburbs is barely evident in *The Great God Pan*, but it is a key element of *The Hill of Dreams*, as Amanda Mordavsky Caleb has pointed out. Lucian's neighbourhood 'between Shepherd's Bush and Acton Vale […] reflects an expanded London, one that has accommodated an overflow from the inner suburbs, and was seen as lacking in any value, whether economic or aesthetic'.[31] Even in the 1890s, Machen was already aware of the suburbs' strangely paradoxical qualities, 'both historical and contemporary, at once mundane and exotic'.[32] The London of *The Hill of Dreams* seems to exist in multiple temporalities, a quality that makes the temporal distancing of *The London Adventure* — an imaginative return, among other things, to the period and places in which the novel was written — even more complex. Machen's essay is permeated by the sense of a ghostly past that somehow haunts the present. Recalling his time in the Gray's Inn Road area, he notes that the district has 'the sense of having stayed the dreadful clock of eternity'. It contains 'secret and severed people who have fallen out of the great noisy march of the high road for one reason or another, and so dwell apart in these misty streets and squares of 1850, wondering when it will be 1851'.[33] Himself narrating from the perspective of a kind of ghost — his former self — Machen conjures a district that seems to be populated by spectres, invisible to the world around them, 'severed' from modernity, and oblivious to the passing of time. The intense sense of the past found in certain places is one manifestation of the world

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[28] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 34.
[29] Machen, *The London Adventure*, pp. 34–35.
[30] Machen, *The London Adventure*, pp. 33–34.
[31] Amanda Mordavsky Caleb, '"A City of Nightmares": Suburban Anxiety in Arthur Machen's London Gothic', in *London Gothic*, pp. 41–49 (p. 43).
[32] Caleb, '"A City of Nightmares"', p. 45.
[33] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 134.

'beyond a veil' in *The London Adventure*, a world that does not express the malignity of its counterparts in *The Great God Pan* or *The Three Impostors*, but is nonetheless gothic in its mysterious, haunted qualities.

If the presence of the gothic in *The London Adventure* establishes a different geographical structure to that seen in *The Great God Pan*, it should also be differentiated from another common *fin-de-siècle* gothic dynamic — that is, a protagonist who journeys from the security and familiarity of bourgeois neighbourhoods to discover the dangerous, exotic, and corrupting world of the city's poor districts. Perhaps the archetypal text in this respect is Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Dorian's night-time cab ride to the opium dens of the East End describes a hallucinatory, even infernal metropolitan world, where 'the streets [are] like the black web of some sprawling spider', lined with 'strange bottle-shaped kilns with their orange fan-like tongues of fire'; the 'fantastic shadows' of those who inhabit the buildings seem 'like monstrous marionettes'.[34] As many critics have noted, such representations of the East End (and other poor neighbourhoods) feed off William Booth and W. T. Stead's polemic *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), which rhetorically asks, '[a]s there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England?'[35] The trope of a 'darkest England' existing within London, paralleled to the supposed savagery and barbarism still seen as extant in colonial territories, permeates texts like *Dorian Gray* and *The Beetle*. The suburban territories explored in *The London Adventure* (and also *The Hill of Dreams*), however, are imbued with a more subtle gothic atmosphere, one that gradually emerges from their mundane and quotidian character, rather than from a sense of nightmarish otherness or malevolence. Machen's narrative does not present a subject encountering an intoxicatingly strange and dangerous Other, but rather one alert to the nuances of apparently unremarkable places, whose subjectivity becomes increasingly entangled with them.

Nonetheless, while Machen's narrative does not present these suburbs as threatening, he also occasionally employs the imagery of colonial exploration. Walking from Enfield to

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[34] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2006), p. 156.

[35] William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 11. Relevant critics here include Robert Mighall, who argues that late-Victorian gothic moves both 'outwards to the margins of the Empire, and inwards to focus on the domestic "savages" which resided in the very heart of the civilized world' (see *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, p. 136). Peter Keating comments that novelists now 'travelled to far-flung corners of the East End or peeped into the social abyss to record the behaviour of alien inhabitants' (p. 316); and Alexandra Warwick explains that in much fiction of the period, west London 'exists in the same philanthropic, exploratory but essentially voyeuristic and exploitative relation to the east as Britain to its Empire' (p. 81). Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989); and Alexandra Warwick, 'Lost Cities: London's Apocalypse', in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. by Glennis Byron and David Punter (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 73–87.

Enfield Lock — through an area over ten miles north of central London, that would not be incorporated into the city until 1965 — he feels 'as true an explorer as Columbus […]. For if you think of it: the fact that the region which is to you so strange and unknown is familiar […] to multitudes of your fellow-men is of no significance on earth.'[36] Machen proceeds from this assertion to argue that 'nothing exists vitally, that is, as an object of wonder, surmise, awe, exultation, or mirth in itself'.[37] Places are not inherently magical, Machen suggests, but our experience of them — particularly defamiliarised experience, when we encounter them for the first time, or from a new perspective — can bring about altered states of consciousness. In its blending of the history of place with the acts of walking and writing, *The London Adventure* is a foundational text for London psychogeographers like Iain Sinclair; Enfield is also discussed in Sinclair's *London Orbital* (2002).[38] For Machen, the strangeness of the area is captured by the contrast between Enfield's general desolation and its seemingly random patches of domesticity or speculative development. He writes,

> I had passed […] by sudden apparitions of grey houses built in the early 'sixties when it had dawned upon the mind of some madman that the day of the Wash was at hand and that the time for 'development' had come. These houses appeared with awful unexpectedness; these settlements, of, say, half a dozen houses calling themselves Highsounding Terrace, 1860, manifestly supposing themselves in the first place to be but the nucleus of a whole town of thronging streets, and now standing up a grey island in the desolations of the Wash; waste lands and raspberry bushes and cabbages all about them.[39]

The satirical humour in Machen's tone and language — the 'awful unexpectedness' of the houses, the name 'Highsounding Terrace', the astute awareness of the ironies inherent in the very concept of 'development' — anticipates Sinclair's dense, caustic style. For the latter, Enfield is 'a hive of non-functional balconies, satellite-dishes monitoring dead water', and still a site of delusional property speculation.[40] Sinclair notes that a location of this kind is 'what promotional material describes as a "stylish residential village" […]. What's new is that industrial debris is suddenly "stylish".'[41]

Beneath the humour, both Machen and Sinclair weave a subtle eeriness into their descriptions of such places. The apocalyptic tone in the phrase 'the day of the Wash was at

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[36] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 40.

[37] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 41.

[38] Machen is a recurring presence in texts such as *London Orbital* and *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), and the influence is explicitly acknowledged in Sinclair's pamphlet *Our Unknown Everywhere: Arthur Machen as Presence* (Newport: Three Imposters, 2013).

[39] Machen, *The London Adventure*, pp. 134, 49.

[40] Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 67.

[41] Sinclair, *London Orbital*, p. 68.

hand', the uncanny 'apparitions of grey houses', and the strange juxtaposition of 'waste lands and raspberry bushes and cabbages', all serve as unnerving gothic counterpoints to the passage's ostensibly comic character. Moreover, both authors are fascinated by the occult image of London as a series of concentric circles, and by the idea of a centrifugal energy which drives them to explore these suburban hinterlands. As Caleb notes, the image of London as a series of rings is a key motif in *The Hill of Dreams*, which 'suggests central London as being at the heart of these rings, each representing the outward movement into the suburbs'; however, she argues, the key passages are also 'suggestive of the rings of the outer suburbs controlling and containing London'.[42] *The London Adventure* seems to vacillate between the idea that these areas gain their unnerving qualities from this sense of containment, and its converse — the identification of an atmosphere of entropic dissolution and dispersal — but in both cases there is a sense that Machen, in exploring the city's perimeter, is engaging with occult patterns or energies, with faint echoes of Dante's nine infernal circles. This, of course, is an idea that also underpins Sinclair's book, which narrates a complete circuit of the M25, 'the outer circle. The point where London loses it, gives up its ghosts.'[43] Indeed, the orbital motorway is the ultimate late-twentieth-century manifestation of the metropolitan circuits and margins that fascinate Machen.

The London Adventure, then, feels remarkably contemporary in the way it merges writing, walking, memory, and place, but also in its fascination with areas that are ordinarily overlooked. These 'unknown and unconjectured regions' may be on the city's margins, but they also lie closer to the centre; in fact, they exist everywhere, if we know how to look for them.[44] Machen celebrates 'the faculty of finding infinity round the corner of any street, within five minutes of anywhere', a comment which suggests the essay's guiding principle: to discover the unknown, the strange, the 'infinite', in the apparently mundane or familiar.[45] Shifting our perspective in this way, Machen suggests, might be the key to accessing or glimpsing the 'secret pattern' of things, which 'lurks, half hidden, only apparent in certain rare lights'.[46] Echoing the notion of an 'ideal' *London Adventure* rather than the one we are actually reading — and an ideal author too — Machen uses a version of Plato's Cave to emphasise the point. He writes, '[w]e see appearances and outward shows of things, symbols

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[42] Caleb, '"A City of Nightmares"', p. 46.
[43] Sinclair, *London Orbital*, p. 3.
[44] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 97.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 21.

of all sorts; but we behold no essences […]. We see shadows cast by reality.'[47] However, 'poets catch strange glimpses of reality, now and then, out of the corners of their eyes', and this perhaps expresses the ultimate goal of Machen's writing.[48] In fact, the 'unknown world' is 'about us everywhere […]; the thinnest veil separates us from it, the door in the wall of the next street communicates with it'.[49] The key is to make ourselves perceive the world anew. As he asserts,

> Strangeness which is the essence of beauty is the essence of truth, and the essence of the world. I have often felt that, when the ascent of a long hill brought me to the summit of an undiscovered height in London; and I looked down on a new land.[50]

The keys to accessing this 'essence of the world', then, are literature (the poetry that can 'catch strange glimpses of reality') and a certain kind of defamiliarised engagement with place. *The London Adventure*'s simultaneous writing, walking, remembering, and imagining of the city is therefore an attempt to combine these approaches, situating Machen in a lineage of London walker-writers like Blake, De Quincey, and Dickens, and anticipating the psychogeographical approaches of authors like Sinclair and Merlin Coverley.

The 'unknown world' that Machen strives to engage with is also a matter of introspection, of reconnecting with one's own sense of being in the world. Towards the end of the essay, he recalls his difficulties in writing *The Hill of Dreams* in 1896 (thus presenting us with yet another of the essay's uncanny doublings: Machen describes a writer struggling with writer's block, who is attempting to write a book about the same situation). Wandering the streets of his Gray's Inn neighbourhood, deep in thought, he suddenly realises that he has 'utterly lost the sense of direction. I was disoriented, though I was in a part of London most familiar to me; north and south, east and west had no more any meaning.'[51] The story is in some ways the inverse of Freud's account, in 'The "Uncanny"' (published five years previously), of a walk in 'a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me,' in which he finds himself inadvertently and repeatedly returning to the red-light district, before finally 'a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny'.[52] While Freud experiences the sense that a place which should be strange is somehow unnervingly familiar, Machen realises

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[47] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 70.
[48] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 71.
[49] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 100.
[50] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 127.
[51] Machen, *The London Adventure*, p. 140.
[52] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', trans. by Alix Strachey, in *Collected Papers IV* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 10, 11.

that a place which should be familiar has suddenly become strange. In both cases, however, a certain kind of engagement with the environment has stimulated a disturbing but revelatory experience, threatening the subject's sense of psychic stability, but providing valuable insight in the process. In Machen's case, it provides the inspiration for the key theme of *The Hill of Dreams*, the story of a figure lost in a 'maze of imagination and speculation'.

The London Adventure's multiple dualities and doublings — the parallels between Machen and Lucian, the positing of two *London Adventures* and two authors, the overlapping temporalities — are thus intimately connected to his obsession with metaphysical transcendence. They establish the theme of parallel coexisting realities, but in addition, Machen seeks to undermine the idea of a single, unified identity, because the kind of fragmented subjectivity with which we are presented is potentially more capable of accessing or glimpsing the 'unknown world'. The essay is therefore not merely an account of Machen's own ideas and experiences concerning 'the essence of truth', but an attempt actually to facilitate the emergence of these states of being in the reader. Its destabilisations, multiple layers, and ambiguities regarding fictionality and identity serve as devices that shift or renew our perspective upon its subjects, so that our experience when reading *The London Adventure* in some ways mirrors that of the essay's narrator.

These devices are ultimately, for Machen, ways of creating a renewed sense of the strangeness of London's suburbs, of encouraging these places to disclose their secrets, and to reveal visions of the 'real world' beyond the 'dreams and shadows' of appearances. In addition, with its ironic return to the themes, questions, and period of his late-Victorian works, the essay represents a kind of resolution of Machen's anxieties regarding the creative process and the city itself; while London remains a gothicised space, it is no longer the source of terror and complete psychic breakdown that haunts *The Hill of Dreams*. Although Machen begins by expressing fear at the prospect of imaginatively revisiting this territory, then, his essay ultimately manages successfully to convey a picture of the city and his relationship with it, while also illuminating his other London-set writings.