SHOCKS!:
TRAUMA, DETECTION, AND SUPERNATURALISM IN ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

by

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Abstract

The small but growing body of literary criticism surrounding the fiction of Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951) tends to characterize his work as late Victorian genre fiction or “weird tales.” Indeed, most scholars situate Blackwood among the ranks of “weird fiction” writers like H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, and William Hope Hodgson. This thesis traces an alternative contextual web around his literary oeuvre, analyzing Blackwood’s prose fiction against the backdrop of the intense reinvigoration of supernatural belief during the British Occult Revival. Blackwood’s fiction registers the period’s complex interactions between occult enthusiasm and emerging psychodynamic discourses by consistently positioning the mystical and the psychological as analogues for one another. In this thesis, I focus on Blackwood’s fictional interactions with burgeoning theories of human consciousness emerging during the period, which he explores through an occult lens as well as a scientific register. Rather than cementing a dualism between scientific materialism and supernaturalism, Blackwood’s fiction demonstrates that the period’s knowledge production entails more complex exchanges between these seemingly opposed sides. From his fin-de-siècle psychic detective series John Silence to his wartime stories, Blackwood’s prose fiction displays an overarching concern with the interiority of the human mind and the limits of language. I argue that these underexamined aspects of Blackwood’s writing are best characterized as proto-Modernist, thus positing popular origins to many of the perennial themes of high Modernist literature. My thesis is organized into two sections, interposing the historical event of the Great War as the pivotal moment that occasioned a notable shift in Blackwood’s fiction towards a focus on trauma as the central object of fictional study.
Lay Summary

Short stories by Algernon Blackwood are usually understood as popular fiction from the early 1900s. In this thesis, I provide a more specific historical and literary context that can help us to interpret these stories within their cultural moment. I argue that Blackwood’s fiction reflects the resurgence of occult belief that occurred during the British late nineteenth and early twentieth century, known as the “occult revival.” During this time, new theories of consciousness circulated both scientific and paranormal ideas about the human mind. Blackwood’s stories do not distinguish between psychological and mystical discourses, which shows that in the popular imagination of the occult revival, science and the supernatural were more intertwined than we might have initially believed. Finally, I trace a developing trajectory from Blackwood’s earlier detective fiction to his later post-war stories, arguing that the intervening historical event of the Great War shifted his writing to focus on trauma.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, and independent work by the author, Aveline Hilda Bouwman.
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Introduction: Algernon Blackwood’s (Proto-)Modernism

The work of Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951) is attended by a small body of criticism that generally characterizes his work as genre fiction or “weird tales.” Timothy Jones writes that weird tales seem to exist between literary periods and national contexts, departing from socio-historical contexts to imbue an “unworldly placelessness [that] is one of the distinguishing features of the weird” (160). This study offers a different mode of reading Blackwood’s work, seeking to re-situate his supernatural fiction within the turbulent cultural history of the British early modernist period. While I do not claim that Blackwood is part and parcel a Modernist, his fiction exhibits modernist tendencies in a persistent investigation of interiority and the unknown of the unconscious. An overarching concern with the transformative capacity of language, which extends throughout his oeuvre, further interacts with modernist themes in a way that is unique among contemporary authors of popular fiction. This study (re)examines two eras of Blackwood’s expansive literary oeuvre to show how he occupies a liminal place in a Modernist perspective, staking the Great War—its paradigmatic of “modernity”—as the pivotal moment that registers a shift in Blackwood’s work towards the perennial modernist theme of trauma. This study, consequently, will consist of two chapters organized into pre-war and post-war divisions.

Crucial to this contextual re-situation of Blackwood’s work is an understanding of how modernism in Britain interacted with the historically concurrent “occult revival,” the well-established resurgence of belief in supernatural forces during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This recovery of occult perspective has been variously theorized as a desecularizing religious revival (Oppenheim, Hazelgrove); reconciliation of faith and science (Owen, McCorristine); anti-materialist speculative science (Bramble, Darvay); and, during the Great War, a cultural regression expressive of collective mourning (Johnson, Winter). The cultural prominence of the occult revival is stamped all over the era’s popular fiction, which dealt
significantly in gothic themes of otherworldly beings, arcane arts, spiritual realms, expansion of consciousness, and life beyond material existence. Recent scholarship has shown that, despite the intellectual elitism associated with literary modernism, many of its defining themes have substantial roots in popular fiction. Mark S. Morrisson and Karen Leick point to periodical print culture as a facilitator of “an increasingly intimate exchange between literary modernism and mainstream culture” (Leick 126). Daniel Darvay and Christine Ferguson show how particular genres of popular fiction occupy an unstable position between “high” and “low” literature and are “more allied to proto-modernist works through [their] concern with linguistic transformation, than is typically assumed” (Ferguson 5). Mark Blacklock, finally, posits the explicitly occulted literary theme of higher dimensions as one site at which “highly admired Modernist novelists [find] themselves on equal footing with authors of pulp fictions” (172). In evaluating Blackwood’s “modernism,” this study will thus maintain that reliance on an arguably false dichotomy of popular/literary works to represent the period’s prose output suggests a greater separation between the categories of “low” popular fiction and “high” modernist fiction than actually existed.

Morrisson argues that “the ethos of the occult revival was predicated on a vogue for esotericism. Yet modernity drove the esoteric agenda of occult experiments in subjectivity” (1). As I will demonstrate throughout this study, Blackwood’s supernatural fiction encompasses both directions, and often facilitates the exchange between esoteric knowledge and occulted interiority within his stories. A prominent aspect of this study follows Blackwood’s proto-modernist investigation of consciousness, which throughout his oeuvre is treated as both an occult and psychological space, and in the post-war era of his writing becomes defined by (war) trauma. The unknown territory of the unconscious occupied a liminal space on the threshold of scientific discovery and spiritualist speculation, and to many represented the occult final frontier of human
knowledge waiting to be understood. As such, literary investigations of the mysterious unconscious quintessentially perform border-crossings between popular and modernist fiction, as a proliferation of research on trauma and mental states in the growing field of medical psychology inspired popular discourse with both scientific and supernatural leanings. The intellectual and cultural climate of the “occult revival” produced broad paradigmatic agreements (despite philosophical variance) among medical psychologists, psychical researchers, and the new occultists, who all had overlapping interest in interiority.

In this study, I argue that Blackwood’s frequently intertwined textual engagements with elements of late Victorian supernaturalism, on the one hand, and the modern psychoanalytic unconscious, on the other, are deeply reflective of the strange periodic entanglement of occult enthusiasm and a rapidly expanding scientific and psychodynamic paradigm. Alex Owen in *The Place of Enchantment* argues that such a simultaneity of spiritualist and scientific interests presents “an accommodation with a unifying and transcendental spirituality even as it underscored the self’s multiplicity and contingency” (114). Characterized as a yearning for the re-enchantment of a universe rendered measurable by the scientific materialism dominating philosophical discourse in the early twentieth century, occultism offered its participants a means of reorganizing marginalized belief in the supernatural in a secularizing world. Despite the esoteric nature of the theories of self circulating in occult milieu, the concept of a multiple and layered self was compatible with the general modernist trend towards fragmentation, and both influenced and in turn was influenced by the new psychodynamic model of the divided psyche theorized in the psychological sciences.

In Chapter 1, I examine Blackwood’s 1908 story collection *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary*, which fuses psychical and psychological phenomena within the genre trappings of the detective story, and further plays on the close analogies Sigmund Freud perceived between the
analytic method and detective work (Ginzburg 9-12). As a “psychic detective,” John Silence treats patients who are in need of a psychoanalyst as much as an occult specialist. My analysis of John Silence thus follows Srđan Smajic’s argument in *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists* that within ghostly crime stories, “psychotherapy, demonic exorcism, and detective work are [. . .] versions of each other” (189). I will suggest that while Blackwood indeed appropriates the deductive logic convention from detective tales like *Sherlock Holmes*, wherein all conflict is purportedly resolved through a scientific paradigm, John Silence empathically undermines the underlying scientific ethos of detective fiction (and of psychoanalysis) because the detective work of Silence always validates the mystical discourses and occult forces routinely disproven by less psychic detectives.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to tracing the progression of Blackwood’s literary treatment of the unconscious in the post-war period, where it gains a substantial traumatic dimension in the wake of the Great War. Blackwood’s post-war stories “Confession,” “The Survivors,” and “Elsewhere and Otherwise” in the aptly titled story collection *Shocks!* (1936) are each concerned with perennially modernist themes like trauma, war, and fragmentation. These stories prominently feature traumatized characters who are haunted by a host of symptoms that can be organized under the wartime term “shell shock,” and incorporate elements of the author’s own experience as a wartime intelligence agent. However, these haunted figures of war also see their unresolved trauma create occult phenomena that manifest simultaneously internally and externally, turning them into liminal figures who bear out trauma’s uncanny resignification of the boundary between life and death (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7). The main argument I advance in this chapter is that each of these stories employs supernatural literary themes to dramatize the inadequacy of language in representing mental disruption and fragmentation under the experience of trauma—and the occult.
Chapter 1. “A True Diviner of Souls”: The Fin-de-siècle Occult Detective in Algernon Blackwood’s *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary*

Blackwood’s 1908 story collection *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary* provides an excellent example of the fin-de-siècle “occult detective,” who is a prototype psychoanalyst as well as an inspector of (psychic) crime. John Silence treats patients whose psyches have fallen prey to ghostly possession with his “clairvoyant gift and [. . .] trained psychic knowledge of the processes by which a personality may be disintegrated and destroyed” (Blackwood, *John Silence* 1). While the antagonistic spectral forces John Silence manages to exorcize are the monstrous entities of gothic fiction, these very Victorian horrors thrust into a modern setting tend to latch onto dark, repressed memories hidden within the minds of victims who are always already mentally embattled, creating a synthesis of psychic possession and internal psychological conflict in which old supernaturalism meets modern science. This chapter avers that while the “occult detective” trope demonstrates the period’s confluences between science and the supernatural, Blackwood’s *John Silence* stories uniquely center the interchange between these categories within pre-Freudian psychological discourses. This reading suggests that Blackwood’s detective fiction anticipates certain modernist thematics that come to fruition in his post-war writing, including an investigative probing of human interiority (here through the detective trope) and a budding exploration of the linguistic crises so distinctive of modernist fiction.

1.1 The Occult Detective in Context

Published in 1908, the *John Silence* series advances a turn-of-the-century model of “psychic detective” in John Silence, a psychical and psychological sleuth who acts, in Smajic’s phrasing, as an “investigator of interiority” (*Ghost-Seers* 183). Although he is trained as a medical doctor, John Silence operates as a private detective who specializes in the occult, “for the cases that especially
appeal to him were of no ordinary kind, but rather of that intangible, elusive, and difficult nature best described as psychical afflictions [. . .] It was beyond question that he was known more or less generally as the ‘Psychic Doctor’” (Blackwood 2). Silence showcases his psychical doctoring throughout five stories included in the original 1908 John Silence collection: “A Psychical Invasion,” “Ancient Sorceries,” “The Nemesis of Fire,” “Secret Worship,” and “The Camp of the Dog.” A sixth story entitled “A Victim of Higher Space” was considered weak by the publisher and dropped from the volume shortly before its release, and was published on its own in The Occult Review in 1914 (it was not included in the 1929 or 1942 reprints of John Silence until S.T. Joshi’s 1997 Complete John Silence Stories).

The figure of the occult detective had been developing in Victorian fiction throughout the nineteenth century with early examples being the unnamed psychic physician in Samuel Warren’s Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician (1833) and Sheridan Le Fanu’s Dr. Hesselius in In a Glass Darkly (1872), both of whom applied an “imaginary synthesis of modern material science and spiritualist philosophy to ‘uncanny’ mysteries” (Kayman 45). Psychic detective stories gained significant popularity during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century “occult revival.” Blackwood notes in the author’s preface to the 1942 reprint that it was in fact the publisher’s suggestion to introduce a psychic doctor character to a number of unpublished Blackwood stories on occult phenomena, which would give them cohesion under a single compelling figure—John Silence—and make them publishable as a series.¹ The John Silence story

¹ A prototype of “John Silence” can be found in an earlier Blackwood character by the same J.S. initials, Jim Shorthouse, who appears first in “A Case of Eavesdropping,” published in the December 1900 issue of Pall Mall Magazine and in three subsequent short stories published in The Empty House and Other Ghost Stories (1906): “The Strange Adventures of a New York Secretary,” “The Empty House,” and “With Intent to Steal.” Jim Shorthouse, like John Silence, acts as something of an occult enthusiast, hunting ghosts and other supernatural creatures with varying degrees of competence, although he is never formally introduced as an occult detective and his characterization is not consistent throughout the stories. In “With Intent to Steal,” Shorthouse even has a Watson-esque sidekick who acts as narrator, anticipating Mr. Hubbard’s function in the John Silence tales.
collection was by far Blackwood’s most commercially successful book and stayed in print throughout his life, which attests to the commercial and popular viability of the blossoming “psychic detective” genre. Some popular psychic detectives contemporaneous to John Silence include Bram Stoker’s Abraham Van Helsing in *Dracula* (1897); Flaxman Low from the *Ghosts* story collection (1899) written by mother-and-son duo E. and H. Heron (Kate and Hesketh Prichard); William Hope Hodgson’s Thomas Carnacki, who appears in a number of stories published in *The Idler* in 1910; and Seabury Quinn’s Jules de Grandin, whom he first introduced in 1925 and who appeared in stories in the popular American horror pulp fiction magazine *Weird Tales* until 1951.

As a “psychic detective,” John Silence specializes in catch-all psychical issues without affiliating with any particular stream of spiritualism or creed of occultism. The intensive training required of a psychic detective is alluded to throughout multiple stories in the *John Silence* saga, although it is never concretized how Silence gained his supernatural powers of perception and paranormal abilities to banish the occult forces that threaten his patients’ minds. The doctor’s Watsonian secretary and sidekick Mr. Hubbard, who sometimes functions as the narrator, discloses that Silence “had submitted himself to a long and severe training, at once physical, mental, and spiritual. What precisely this training had been, or where undergone, no one seemed to know [. . .] It had involved a total disappearance from the world for five years” (2). Blackwood’s historical membership in pseudo-scientific and occult societies like the *Society for Psychical Research*, the *Ghost Club*, and the *Theosophical Society* no doubt serves as an inspiration for the covert training and introspective mode of study practiced by Silence. But perhaps the most significant source of ideas for the character would have been Blackwood’s brief but intense tenure as a member of the foremost secret society in England, the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*. As Alex Owen
describes in *The Place of Enchantment*, the *Golden Dawn* brand of occultism taught “how to negotiate the many levels of conscious awareness and recognize the reality of an exteriorized occult world” in order to gain access to a “hidden reality existing beyond but also in relationship with the inner world of the initiated self” (131). Unlike spiritualists, who made use of a medium in order to access outer realities, members of this Hermetic Order worked on self-willed meditative and self-hypnotic techniques “in order to achieve changed levels of consciousness and, ultimately, perfect ‘consciousness of Being’” (Owen 125-126). Blackwood, who reached the highest rank of the first of the three grades of magicianship within the *Golden Dawn* (“Philosophus” or “4=7”), would have been trained as a magician to move between various “levels” of consciousness through ritualized techniques in order to develop latent strata of consciousness and unlock a “magical” dimension of the interior life of the mind. The psychic doctor John Silence has fully acquired such secretive skills of contemplative self-knowledge and utilizes them to know and control the world both natural and supernatural, having gained “complete mastery of a complex magical arcana together with total self-mastery and an indomitable will” (Owen 14).

In an article on “The Queer Occult Explorer of the *Fin-de-Siècle,*” Mark De Cicco describes Silence as a figure who has inoculated himself against occult forces through a process of exposure to the occult that has rendered him partially occulted himself (7). In practice, however, the paranormal powers possessed by Silence appear simply as a deep mode of introspection and intimate knowledge of minds under psychical—and psychological—duress. In interviewing his haunted patients, Silence spiritually attunes himself so that in each case he can be “subconsciously

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2 Blackwood would later denounce the *Golden Dawn* as “narrow-minded.” He also treats the *Society for Psychical Research* with some ridicule in “The Nemesis of Fire,” where the discovery of an ancient Egyptian curse on a forested parcel of land leads to a situation where “some local Research Society actually wrote and asked permission for one of their members to spend a night in the wood!” (167).
very keenly alert and already receiving upon the ultra-sensitive surface of his mind various and vivid impressions” (Blackwood 155). Moreover, his assistant Hubbard finds that in the crucial moments of the master detective’s supernatural problem-solving, “his energies were directed inwards by those incalculable methods and processes he had mastered with such infinite patience and study” (170).

Algernon Blackwood does not provide a cohesive account of his personal beliefs about supernatural phenomena in his autobiography Episodes Before Thirty (henceforth Episodes), claiming that “[o]f mystical, psychic, or so-called ‘occult’ experiences, I have purposely said nothing, since these notes have sought to recapture surface adventures only” (304). Episodes nevertheless describes Blackwood’s frequent attendance of séances as a young man living in Toronto, Canada, and although he remained unconvinced of the possibility of discarnate spirits communicating from beyond the grave, he saw mediums as having the mind-reading ability to detect the unuttered thoughts of the “sitters” (52-53). Blackwood saw spiritualism as one of many avenues into the mysterious unconscious, especially in exploring the possibility of the mind possessing concealed powers to communicate without the mediation of speech. Ultimately, these myriad interests in psychic experience come together in what Owen has also identified as the common agenda of spiritualists, occultists, and psychologists: the mysteries enfolded in the human mind. As Blackwood puts it in Episodes, his primary interest in pursuing occult learning was to discover “any lawful method of extending the field of consciousness, of increasing its scope, of developing latent faculties, with its corollary of greater knowledge and greater powers” (52).³

³ The personal explorations in consciousness detailed in Episodes are largely modeled on those recorded by Thomas De Quincey in his own autobiography Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821). The insistence on a “lawful method” here, can thus be read as a denunciation of opium, which Blackwood had a number of unhappy experiences with.
The *John Silence* story that bears out the theme of “extending the field of consciousness” most explicitly is “A Victim of Higher Space,” a short story not initially included in the 1908 collection.⁴ In this story, the mathematician Racine Mudge is so virtuosic in the study of higher geometry that his consciousness expands to include a fourth dimension, a “disease” which threatens his physical existence as his mind is constantly opened to non-material planes of existence, or “Higher Space.”⁵ John Silence is so impressed by Mudge’s expansion of consciousness—which allows him to communicate telepathically and grasp unfathomable concepts like the unity of all humankind and the non-Euclidian geometrical properties of the multidimensional hypercube known as the tesseract, among other things—that he admits that “it seems almost a pity [. . .] to cure you” (8). Other stories in the *John Silence* series manifest an eclectic range of views on consciousness that are difficult to classify even as they draw heavily on numerous intellectual trends in occultism as well as psychoanalytic and medical discourses. “The Camp of the Dog” exhibits a highly heterogenous mixture of occult terminology in the diagnosis and treatment of a patient who has been involuntarily turning into a werewolf. In his diagnosis John Silence initially uses the classic tenets of “spiritism” as laid out by Allan Kardec in *The Book of Mediums* (1861) to describe the half-materialized werewolf body of his client through the spiritualist concept of the “peri-spirit,” a liminal semi-material “fluidic” substance that bonds one’s spirit and physical body (*John Silence* 374). However, throughout the story Silence also refers to

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⁴ As I have mentioned, this story was not published in the original *John Silence* collection. Although its John Silence character seems consistent with the canonical stories, Mr. Hubbard is not yet fully realized in his prototype Mr. Barker in “Victim.” Barker plays the same role as Silence’s sidekick-*cum*-assistant Hubbard, but is significantly more hapless.

⁵ The term “disease” is used four times throughout the story, but seems to operate only as a metaphor to describe Mudge’s strange condition, rather than a more literalized illness such as can be found in George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” (an obvious precursor for this story). Indeed, Silence immediately gives the diagnosis that Mudge’s psychic predisposition “dates no doubt from one of your former lives” (8), rather than from a previous health concern. Silence also asserts that the “disease” developed because Mudge underwent no formal education (and its “culs-de-sac falsely called knowledge”), which could be read as an intentional contradistinction with Eliot’s Latimer, whose psychic “disease” stems from a childhood illness suffered specifically while attending school. (8)
the werewolf through the rhetoric of a number of alternative occult and scientific discourses without much differentiation, including the Theosophical and neo-Rosicrucian term “astral body”; the concept of “atavism,” prominent in nineteenth-century degeneration theory; the folkloric concept of “lycanthropy,” which is traceable to at least the medieval period; and the gothic theory of the psychological “Double.”

The usage of all of these concepts without nuance between terms, sometimes all in the same sentence, demonstrates the psychic doctor’s broad and comprehensive skill in all manners occult, but also suggests an eclecticism towards mystical and occult ideas. However, Silence also postulates that the werewolf form is a material projection of repressed desires and instincts roused by “the wild life here on this island [. . .] which might quickly awaken his savage instincts—his buried instincts” (365). Silence even proposes that this case of lycanthropy is “a modern example of what [. . .] has always been a profound fact” (362), suggesting that what might be an ancient supernatural phenomenon can take on different historical and culturally contextualized forms. The modernity of this particular case, then, is expressed through a distinctly current parapsychological charge given to the client’s affliction, as Silence aligns the supernatural discourses of the Double, the Passion Body, astral travel, atavism, lycanthropy and the fluidic body with psychological discourses of multiplex personality, wish fulfillment, repressed instincts, and subliminal consciousness. Lycanthropic transformation in “The Camp of the Dog” thus encapsulates the knotty alliance between modernist fragmentation and parapsychological division of the mind, or, in Hubbard’s words, “the pathetic impermanence of the human personality, with its fluid nature, and with the alarming possibilities of its transformations” (378).

1.2 Detective, Occultist, Psychoanalyst
Chris Willis in an article on “Spiritualism and Detective Fiction” observes that the rise of the fictional detective coincided with the rise of spiritualism (60), and Sjrdan Smajic adds the secondary observation that cultural interest in both spiritualism and detective fiction coincided with the development of a psychodynamic paradigm of mind (Ghost-Seers 182-183). However, psychoanalysis and the detective genre shared more than just a historical moment. Freud himself was intensely interested in detective stories, and for him the archetype of detective reasoning was Sherlock Holmes. In his oft-cited essay “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” Carlo Ginzburg evaluates the “peculiar similarities between the activities of Holmes and Freud” (11), arguing that the analytic method proposed by Freud is closely related to the investigative clue-finding undertaken by the fictional detective. Ginzburg suggests that the method of inquiry undertaken by each “investigator” is based on the detection of inconspicuous and covert things that are reinterpreted as signs and symptoms of conundrums both criminal and psychological. The detective-psychoanalyst, then, is “accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations” (Freud, qtd. in Ginzburg 10, emphasis added). Although Ginzburg does not stress the term in his reading of this fragment from Freud, the Standard Edition translator’s somewhat peculiar choice to translate the German verb “erraten” as “to divine” would suggest a secondary parallel between Freud and Holmes: their investigative work utilizes a borderline supernatural mode of detection. The figure who most befits Ginzburg’s comparison, then, is a psychic detective like John Silence, whose discipline permits the diagnosis of a haunting on the basis of psychological symptoms and whose *modus operandi* in detection shares a fluid spectrum with divination.

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6 “Erraten” has the charge of *guesswork* or *conjecture* more so than the esoteric art of *divination* or *prophecy* (Wahrsagung) in the original German sentence: “Ich glaube, sein Verfahren ist mit der Technik der ärztlichen Psychoanalyse nahe verwandt. Auch diese ist gewöhnt, aus gering geschätzten oder nicht beachten Zügen, aus dem Abhub – dem »refuse« – der Beobachtung, Geheimes und Verborgenes zu erraten.”
Even a hero of deductive logic like Sherlock Holmes, who represents the victory of a secular scientific paradigm over supernatural flights of fancy, has developed his faculties of perception so deeply that his powers of observation verge on the uncanny. Here, my usage of “uncanny” follows the Freudian model in “The Uncanny” (1919) to suggest that what produces the paranormal effect of detective work is precisely its unsettling familiarity with “regular” sensory perception (albeit elevated to higher levels), rather than a singularly mysterious or miraculous practice. The fictional detective’s extraordinary observational skill in unraveling the obscurest mysteries approaches the status of a superpower, and, were he placed outside of the self-proclaimed rationalist ethos of detective fiction, Holmes might indeed be understood to possess an occulted “sixth sense” for solving crime. As Smajic claims in *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists*, the turn-of-the-century fictional detective, with his own highly developed sense of “interiority,” is already “a borderline occult figure whose methods often break away from rationalist protocols” (135).

Where the ordinary fictional detective only implicitly utilizes extrasensory perception, his psychic cousin is a “true diviner of souls” who embraces a paranormal mode fully (Blackwood, *John Silence* 356). John Silence never makes reference to the use of logical principles like deductive reasoning, but rather claims that “[i]f you pay attention to impressions, and do not allow them to be confused by deductions of the intellect, you will often find them surprisingly, uncannily, accurate” (159). In this formulation, the use of reason is secondary to the vivid first hunches that may strike the mind like lightning. The mention of the uncanniness of mental impressions further lends an air of the psychical to the cognitive processes, supernaturalizes cerebration, and thus turns the mind into an occulted sphere. For John Silence, there is no difference between inductive reasoning and clairvoyance, conjecture and divination, or empathetic listening and telepathy. Even what Silence casually describes as “merely a little elementary thought-reading” (168) when he
anticipates his patients’ words more closely resembles the deeply sympathetic listening of a well-attuned psychotherapist than the telepathic mind-extraction of a master of Magick. As Smajic suggests, occult practices like clairvoyance, telepathy, and intuition are not just uncannily reminiscent of the detective’s mind-reading powers and miraculous feats of deductive reasoning, but are versions of these practices, and vice versa (Ghost-Seers 181).

To return to the third term in the triangulation between investigative, psychic, and psychological work, I argue that John Silence provides his “patients” with a talking cure as well as psychic aid, fulfilling the role of a prototype psychoanalyst as much as that of an occult specialist. Although the mental malaises his patients suffer from are supposedly of a spiritual nature, in tracing the “primal scene” of their spectral haunting the occult physician often finds that “memories possess [them]” (Blackwood 65). Silence’s signature blend of telepathic insight, trained interiority, and radical empathy grants him a deep insight into his clients’ haunted words, unusual behaviour, and emotional resistance. In the majority of the cases recorded by Hubbard, the first step in Silence’s psychic detective process is an extended interview that closely resembles an intense session of psychotherapy, since the clients are often in a state of shock, confusion, or denial about the invisible yet terrifying forces plaguing them.

In “The Nemesis of Fire,” Dr. John Silence and his assistant Mr. Hubbard investigate a case of a countryside estate besieged by the curse of a mummy and its vengeful “fire elementals,” which have burned down portions of the estate grounds and even scorched to death the proprietor’s brother and his groundskeeper. Even as Silence unearths the “Egyptian” causes of the curse, he also appears to anticipate the virtues of family therapy, of which he provides a form to his clients, Colonel Wragge and his wheelchair-bound sister Miss Wragge, who has become physically paralyzed due to “the shock [. . .] to her nerves” (161) experienced when she witnessed the corpses
slain by the mummy’s curse. Miss Wragge’s psychical paralysis is replicated in a kind of psychological paralysis of speech, rendering her unable to speak of the event whose memory her brother even believes “has mercifully been permitted to vanish from her mind” (161). After she comes out of her nervous paralysis and recovers use of her limbs, the physiological progress has an inverse deteriorating psychological effect most expressly experienced in her speech, which “was quite incoherent and hysterical […] she had recovered the use of her limbs, only to lose that of her memory, and perhaps even of her mind” (204). The relationship between the body and the mind suggested here seems to posit the human as a kind of binary switchboard that registers the impact of the traumatic event either through mental symptoms (her incoherent speech) or physical symptoms (her paralyzed body).

Linguistic stoppages in the speech of patients become a part of the psychic doctor’s method of psychoanalytic clue-finding, as the language his patients use often contains concealed signs and unconscious communications about the nature of their haunting. Peter Brooks in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* argues that the aim of psychoanalysis is to allow a patient to construct an internally coherent narrative about their life. Conversely, a broken, disjointed, and confusing narrative is “symptomatic,” and contains linguistic and thematic clues and motifs that point towards mental turmoil and pathological (mis)understandings. Brooks comments on the closeness between literary narrative and psychoanalytic practice, and turns to detective fiction—specifically *Sherlock Holmes*—to make his case that “psychoanalytic explanation belongs to […] a form of narrative explanation given its most obvious modern realization in the classic detective tale” (48). According to Brooks, the psychoanalyst takes on the work of a detective, hunting for clues that would explain the analysand’s condition. At the end of the investigation, the psychoanalyst-detective “solves” the case by reconstructing the chaotic aftermath of an unrepresentable event back into a
comprehensible, less symptomatic narrative. Assuming the role of this psychoanalyst-detective, the psychic doctor John Silence teases out areas of denial and psychological resistance by paying close attention to choice of words, use of language, and tone of delivery, keenly noting wherever the stoic Colonel “stammered and hesitated with confusion,” “a sense of terror moved between his words” (160) and “something he wished to say [. . .] cost him considerable effort” (158). The haunted analysand Colonel Wragge admits to John Silence that “it’s almost impossible to make a consecutive story for you” (157). Performing what is simultaneously a detective’s investigation and a psychoanalyst’s practice, Silence narrativizes the mystery from the incoherent chaos of clues and riddles provided to him by Wragge to bring psychic and psychological closure both to the untombed mummy and to the disturbed family.

It is not known to what extent Algernon Blackwood—who read German—was versed in Freud at the time of writing the John Silence stories, although by 1907 the research findings of continental pioneers of medical psychology were not widely disseminated in England, which was relatively slow in its acceptance of clinical psychology as a science (Kuhn 157). 7 Blackwood draws more explicitly on the ideas about consciousness advanced by Frederic W.H. Myers, the founder of the Society for Psychical Research, whose work in the field of medical psychology often crossed over into the occult. Prior to the Freudian articulation of the unconscious, Myers introduced his own terminology for a depth psychology of the terra incognita of the unconscious mind, conceptualizing a subliminal realm that would express itself through encoded messages to the supraliminal consciousness (Oppenheim 255-257). Experiments in hypnosis, telepathy, somnambulism and automatic writing proved to Myers “the multiplex and mutable character of

7 The earliest direct reference to Freud and psychoanalysis I have been able to find in Blackwood’s oeuvre is in his 1916 novel The Wave: An Egyptian Aftermath, which as its protagonist features a nerve specialist and “disciple of Freud,” Dr. Kelverdon (10). As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, the influence of Freud on Blackwood’s work becomes more readily observable in his wartime writing, during the height of popularity for psychoanalysis.
that which we know as the Personality of man” (Myers 256), and he came to see conscious existence as but one small portion of multiple streams of consciousness comprising the human mind which might “communicate from one stratum to another stratum of the same personality” (Myers 258). The neurological discourse of multiple and split personality had wide fictional appeal, with perhaps the most famous example being Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde” (1886), which was based on two famous French case studies of dual personality, Féilda X. and Sergeant F., which Myers also discusses. Notably in John Silence, several cases concern “disintegrations of personality,” which are discussed at length in Myers’ posthumously published opus Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death (1903). Vezin in “Ancient Sorceries” realizes that “the stability of his [. . .] personality was at stake” (98) when his normally meek and timid person is swept into passionate and sex-fuelled devil-worship: “I should lose myself, or at least the Self I knew, in some unfamiliar state of consciousness. But I am not a psychologist” (99). Most poignantly, Felix Pender in “A Psychical Invasion,” who pens humorous columns for a living, has his comedic personality so twisted by an ancient spirit that he loses his job because he can only produce macabre horror stories, initiating a kind of dissociative personality which is his opposite.

Although historically speaking Blackwood is drawing more directly on Myers’ work in John Silence, risking slight anachronism I argue that the psychological aid Silence provides should nonetheless be characterized as psychoanalytical in essence. As I have previously noted, the conversations Silence engages in with his patients resemble an intensive session of dialogue-based psychotherapy, in which the doctor simultaneously addresses the psychological and psychic factors comprising their haunting. In an article on the early dissemination of Freud’s writing in Britain, Philip Kuhn notes that even by 1910 there was no uniformly accepted procedure for
psychoanalytic psychotherapy, even amongst early practitioners (164), but the innovation of John Silence as a psychic doctor is undoubtedly that he treats his patients with a “talking cure.” Freud in his early essay “Psychical (or Mental) Treatment” (1890) provides a first formal model for what would become known as the “talking cure”—although this pithy phrase was actually coined by Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim), the subject of Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). In the essay, Freud describes the ways in which “words are the essential tool of mental treatment” (7: 282), but also anticipates the skeptical response his method of treatment would receive. He writes that “a layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and mind can be eliminated by ‘mere’ words. He will feel that he is being asked to believe in magic” (7: 282). As a proto-psychoanalyst of the supernatural, Silence’s cures do indeed require a faith in magic as he draws out the supernatural content Freud only partially admits in his version of the talking cure.

Freud’s ambivalence towards occult matters leaves a complicated legacy on the early development of psychoanalysis during the occult revival. The contemporary literature on Freud’s occultism remains similarly divided, and arguments aligning psychoanalysis on either side of a rhetorical schism between supernaturalism and science often reduce the complexity of Freud’s fraught position on the occult in his cultural moment. Although explicit rhetorical repudiation of occultism can be found throughout his published works (according to Jung’s autobiography he even called it the “black tide of mud” [52]), Freud was also a card-carrying member of the *Society for Psychical Research*, privately believed in telepathy, and even suggested that “[i]f I had my life to live over again I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis” (qtd. in Owen, 5-6). Roger Luckhurst in *The Invention of Telepathy* argues that in its bid for scientific legitimacy, early psychoanalysts were forced to stage an overcompensating public repudiation of
the occult in order to assuage criticism from the established medical sciences. For example, despite the direct and traceable emergence of what would become the “talking cure” out of the therapeutic setting of medical hypnosis, Freud publicly disavowed hypnosis as a less controlled method for accessing repressed content than free association. Analysts such as Jacques Lacan agree that this disavowal more served the purpose of severing psychoanalysis, as a distinct field, from its origins, than promoting the efficacy of one scientific methodology over another: “As everyone knows, it was by distinguishing itself from hypnosis that analysis became established” (273).

Lacan’s admission applies as much to the origin of psychoanalysis in occult ideas as it does to its emergence out of hypnosis. Freud’s sought to prevent a collapse in values with spiritualism in his fledgling discipline’s study of the unconscious by stressing the scientific rigour of the discipline against the “pseudo-science” practiced by occult movements, despite overlapping interests and origins. In “Psychoanalysis and Telepathy,” Freud indeed aligns occultism with “an old religious belief, which [. . .] has been pushed into the background by science [. . .] By contrast, psychoanalysts can deny neither their scientist ancestry, nor their kinship with the representative of science (18: 173). However, in “Freud’s Séance,” Hannah Zeavin argues that in the undeniable reliance of psychoanalysis on occulted notions of mediation, the psychoanalytic method retained a latent supernatural base extending from its origins in late Victorian occult practices like hypnosis and automatic writing (56-58). For example, Freud’s German term for psychoanalytic transference, Übertragung, is semantically simply a reduction of the German word for telepathy, Gedankenübertragung (Zeavin 57). Despite the aspiration to scientific status exemplified in Freudian case studies, Freud recognized all too well the occult connotations of his interpretive work on dreams and, as Alex Owen has noted, “his simultaneous fascination with the occult and vigorous attempts to distance himself from it are matters of record” (5).
1.3 Psychic Detection Between Science and Spiritualism

While the practitioners of the new psychological sciences understood that obtaining scientific legitimacy would necessitate eradicating any trace of occult philosophy from their work, fictional collaborations between occultism and psychoanalysis nevertheless thrived during this era, as demonstrated by the “psychic detective” genre. John Silence retains a radically hybridized philosophy on “borderline” phenomena and mental anomalies without presenting a coherent view on the mind that could be systematized along either scientific or spiritualist lines. As I will argue in this section, Blackwood’s John Silence often bridges the seemingly widening gap between science and the supernatural and obscures the solidifying boundaries of a scientific paradigm by expanding the definition of what can be admitted as a “natural explanation.” In dealing with his more skeptical clients’ wariness of the possible occult implications of the forces besieging them, Silence assumes the role of a materialist by professing to rationalize supernatural phenomena through a scientific paradigm of empirical verification. In “The Nemesis of Fire,” Silence allows his deeply skeptical and stoic client Colonel Wragge to overcome his own resistance to the idea of supernatural phenomena by “waiting patiently for him to choose his own opportunity and his own way of saying” (171). Silence even humours the stolid army man’s visible distress and discomfort around paranormal matters by stating that “I have yet to come across a problem that is not natural, and has not a natural explanation. It is a question of how much one knows—and admits” (173).

In promising a “natural explanation,” Silence here seems to be suggesting an empirical answer to the central mystery of blights of fire scorching the estate, although the solution he finds—an untombed mummy lies reburied under the country house and has unleashed its fiery curse upon the estate—would hardly hold up to scientific scrutiny despite the proof of a material object sourcing the disturbance. Although the psychic detective collects evidence, finds clues, and
investigates the case using the tools of empirical research, the existence of a mummy’s curse, fire-
elementals, and blood rituals go completely undisputed and are taken simply as course of fact. As
Silence informs his skeptical client at the start of his investigation, the special charge of a psychic
detective is not only to collect clues to solve mysteries, but also to know what evidence can be
*admitted* in each case in order to produce a “natural explanation.” Mr. Hubbard indeed finds no
discrepancy between the doctor’s promise to find a “natural explanation” and the supernatural
evidence that he actually collects. Hubbard rather charges Colonel Wragge, who occupies the role
of the skeptic, with incongruity in reasoning, judging that there was something “distinctly pathetic
in the man’s efforts to meet all far-fetched explanations of the mystery with contempt, and at the
same time in his stolid, unswerving investigation of it all” (178-179).

Blackwood’s *John Silence* series displays what Smajic describes as a twofold impulse in
detective fiction both to receive and reject alternative epistemologies, prompting us to regard
modes of perception that appear incompatible with rationalist protocols as “rationalism’s occulted
supplements” (*Ghost-Seers* 181). The scientification of the spiritual during the nineteenth century
produced the perhaps unexpected side effect of a spiritualist movement attempting to rationalize
supernatural phenomena through a scientific paradigm of empirical verification. Thus, even as
scientific discoveries “naturalized” phenomena once attributed only to supernatural agency,
psychical research conditioned a “paranormal mode” in which the natural and supernatural were
no longer mutually exclusive. Whereas fictional detectives like Sherlock Holmes could be argued
to participate in the demystification of paranormal phenomena—after all, the ghostly Hound of
Baskervilles is only a large dog coated in phosphorescent paint—the psychic doctor John Silence
does not only destabilize the reified boundaries of science by crossing the borders of usable
evidence, but also finds rational explanations that are compatible with supernatural phenomena rather than competing with them.

In the context of the psychological “treatment” Silence provides to his patients, mental hallucination and spectral appearance do not oppose one another along the lines of the imaginary versus the supernatural, but rather enter into a composite problem to be solved by an analyst-exorcist. Scholars such as Terry Castle, Jill M. Matus, and Shane McCorristine have explored hallucination as a nineteenth-century literary trope for probing philosophical questions about mental perception and unusual psychological states. In a process that McCorristine terms the “spectralization of mental space” (29), ghost-seeing under the new empirical and medical paradigm that emerged around 1800 was understood to result from the disordered brain or sensorium of the ghost-seer themselves, rather than supernatural beings existing independently from the mind that observes them. The question of whether mental phenomena were supernatural in origin or could be explained through a psychological paradigm emerged as a staple of horror fiction at the turn of the century. In *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary*, Blackwood situates this philosophical question at the center of each featured story. Rather than addressing it along either materialist or non-materialist lines, I argue that, in these stories, Blackwood offers a mode of reconciliation wherein psychological and psychic hauntings serve as analogues to one another.

The patients John Silence treats have all to some degree created their own demons—in some of the cases the resolutions to their hauntings are indeed purely psychological—although for Blackwood, this is not to suggest in a reductive manner that the occult phenomena are not also real. Most prominently in “Ancient Sorceries” and “Secret Worship,” the patients seeking aid are subject to their own imaginative hauntings, although in each case the sources of their “hysterical brooding” (Blackwood, *John Silence* 137) are traced back by Silence to “ancient” causes. In
“Ancient Sorceries,” John Silence treats a train traveller by the name of Vezin who alleges that he was coerced into devil-worship after staying at an inn in a magical town of cat-people, where he was seduced by the attractive young innkeeper’s daughter (also a cat-person). In this story, the “therapy” session between the psychoanalyst Silence and the analysand Vezin functions as a framing device in which Vezin relates the paranormal events that befell him to the doctor. In the final pages of the story which occur outside of Vezin’s narration, the narrator reveals that the resolution of this case study is purely psychological, with Silence concluding that “the entire affair took place subjectively in the man’s own consciousness” (137). Uniquely in this case, Silence is pessimistic as to his ability to treat his client, confiding in Hubbard after the therapeutic session that Vezin is at great risk of being consumed by his “subliminal up-rushes of memory” (139), another rhetorical formulation deeply indebted to Myers’ work on the subliminal consciousness. Silence quickly detects that the episode described to him was only a prolonged hysterical fantasy. Upon investigating the town in question, Silence discovers that Vezin had spent four days confining himself in his inn room and left suddenly without paying his bill. Despite this seemingly conclusive diagnosis of the client’s dissociative delirium, Silence does not dismiss Vezin’s claims about the town as therefore being false on empirical grounds. In fact, he has it both ways. Upon further investigation of the town’s archival records, Silence indeed discovers that his client’s neurotic fantasies were demonstrably the traumatic reminiscences of a past life in which he had been a powerful figure in a devil-worshipping cult in the very same village. Thus, as Silence puts it, “[t]he whole adventure seems to have been a very vivid revival of the memories of an earlier life” (136).

Both modes of explanation—psychological and occult—stand simultaneously in the diagnosis rendered by Silence. The emergence of the past memory of a former life, incurred by the
psycho-supernatural traces the patient experiences during his return to the site of that former life, are clearly evocative of the psychoanalytic concept of the “return of the repressed.” Rather than a fabricated traumatic origin formulated in the mind of the analysand in the course of therapy, for Blackwood this psychological content constitutes the possibility of literally true memories of a previous life. Blackwood even recycles this idea, although more explicitly, in his 1916 novel *The Wave: An Egyptian Aftermath*. The protagonist of this novel, famous nerve specialist and “disciple of Freud” Dr. Kelverdon finds that the “Freudian method” fails him when, during a psychoanalytic session with a hysterical young man, he discovers that what seemed to be infantile neuroses are actually the true remembrances of a past life as an Egyptian prince. Here Blackwood again expands on psychoanalytic ideas to suggest that the human unconscious is still a supernatural space, and symptoms of neuroses may also be simultaneously interpreted as mystical traces of past lives.

“A Secret Worship” furthers this dual understanding of psychic life in its account of a man who falls prey to his own elaborate mental construction, which, despite being pathologically induced, emerges from supernatural events experienced during his childhood. As in “Ancient Sorceries,” train travel in this story emerges as the uncanny technology annihilating space and time to literally transport travelers to the sites of childhood (or past lives’) traumatic reminiscences. In this story, Harris, a silk merchant traveling through the German Alps by train on business, suddenly succumbs to nostalgia as he recognizes out of the window the geographical sites of his childhood stint in a sectarian boarding school. He decides on a whim to pay a visit to the Brotherhood who ran the school where he spent two years as a young boy, but there is lured by the Brethren into becoming a human sacrifice for their devil-worship. Harris is saved at the last moment by John

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8 In an interesting metatextual move, Blackwood here reconstructs a scene from his own childhood, since he, like the protagonist Harris, spent two years as a young boy in a monastic boarding school in the German Alps run by the Moravian Brotherhood, which is undoubtedly the referent of the story’s “deeply religious life of a small Protestant community” whose precise identity Blackwood takes the time to clarify “is unnecessary to specify” (245).
Silence, who happened to have overheard his plans to visit the school and reveals that—like in “Ancient Sorceries”—this episode took place only in his mind and the school was actually demolished years ago. However, Silence also reveals that the rubble of the school is in fact “one of the most haunted places in the world” (287), and Harris could truly have lost his soul—not only his mind—when he visited the site. Despite the events narrated in the story taking place in an unconscious mental delirium, Silence affirms that the neurotic fantasy Harris conjured up is also conjoined to a historical real of supernatural activity, although the fantasy took place in a different realm of consciousness. John Silence, who through a brief conversation with Harris has already gleaned an “intimate knowledge of [his] mind,” describes the process by which a very strong mental fantasy can conjure a genuine situation and experience in the mind with tangible material effects upon the body: “your deeply introspective mood had already reconstructed the past so vividly, so intensely, that you were en rapport at once with any forces of those days that chanced still to be lingering” (289). Here a powerful psychological condition—deep, nostalgic introspection—imagines the past so vividly that it is actually brought into existence when it latches onto a pre-existing supernatural charge in the environment and is elevated to paranormal reality.

For the psychic detective, pathological hallucination is not incompatible with empirical truth where it conditions the boundaries of objective proof to expand in order to admit occulted experience—like the reincarnated memories of a former life or the expansion of consciousness triggered by intense nostalgia. Blackwood’s version of psychic detection leaves open the possibility of confirming the author’s belief in the possibility that supernatural phenomena can coexist with scientific explanations. The “psychic detective” genre thus bridges a dichotomous understanding between science and the supernatural through a tripartite construction of the psychoanalyst, the psychical researcher, and the detective, who are all one person in the figure of
John Silence. As a detective grounded in a rational paradigm of fact-finding, Silence positions supernatural phenomena as having external, materially tangible causes and effects; as a psychical researcher committed to occult reality, he creates an expansive paranormal paradigm through which the supernatural is naturalized and admitted into “natural explanation”; and as a psychoanalyst trained in the unraveling of the unconscious, he finds both supernatural and scientific truth in the neurotic fantasies and unhinged hallucinations of his patients.

1.4 The Colonial Uncanny

Following the sequence of the original collection, the final John Silence story “The Camp of the Dog” (henceforth “Camp”) departs from the usual narrative frame of a conversation or therapy session between Silence and his client. The setting is a remote, uninhabited island in the Baltic sea, the psychic detective not even entering upon it until over fifty pages in. Outside of what might be called civilization, this setting becomes deeply symbolic in its signalling of a return to a “state of nature,” wherein the instincts and passions run wild unrepressed by cultivated sociality. In “Camp,” John Silence’s assistant Mr. Hubbard undertakes a two-month camping adventure on this island with a retired preacher named Timothy Maloney, Maloney’s wife and their teenage daughter Joan, and an indigenous Canadian teenager named Peter Sangree, who happens to be madly in love with Joan. John Silence is soon summoned to the island, however, as the prolonged camping trip goes sour when Sangree begins to nightly transform into a rampaging werewolf. This werewolf form, Silence soon discovers, is the manifestation of his “savage” nature that is triggered by his transgressive desire for Joan and is only half-repressed on the “primitive” island.

This werewolf tale typifies many stories written at the fin-de-siècle that fuse occult themes with the “exotic” colonial to literalize anxiety about racial miscegenation and degeneration through
monstrous transformations (commonly vampires and werewolves). Patrick Brantlinger has called this subgenre “Imperial Gothic,” elaborating it as a mode that dramatizes civilization’s encounter with the “primitive” in colonial contexts. Such an encounter is predicated on an underlying racial science which posits global indigenous groups as living case studies of “primitives.” Atavist narratives such as Blackwood’s “Camp” demonstrate the anxiety that the established boundaries drawn between civilization and “primitivism” can easily fall subject to evolutionary regressions, often by way of a monstrous, transgressive figure whose inherent “primitive” traits instigate these relapses. The plot-driving lycanthropic transformation, in the typical unfolding of the atavist narrative, draws out a character’s inherent “savage” tendencies triggered by a return to a pre-civilized, “primitive” environment. Sangree is described as a morose and sickly young man unsuited to society, but he begins to flourish the moment he arrives on the “primitive” island. As Hubbard describes it, “something in him, hitherto dormant, had awakened to life. Some quality, latent till now had stirred into activity and risen to the surface of his being” (324). When John Silence arrives at the campsite in the Baltic sea, he tells Hubbard that the small islands in this region are still lying in “primitive sleep,” and that in these locations “the passions would run wild, selfishness become supreme, the instincts coarsen and turn savage” (352). Although each member in the camping party is affected by the relaxation of social strictures, it is the young Canadian of indigenous heritage who is most predisposed towards unleashing “savage” passions. In agreement with the colonial imaginary dominating the narrative voice of this story, Sangree is the only

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9 Some other werewolf stories with these underlying themes are Rudyard Kipling’s “The Mark of the Beast” (1890), Clemence Housman’s “The Were-Wolf” (1890) and Eric Stenbock’s “The Other Side” (1893).
10 Atavistic narratives of this kind persist in Blackwood’s later (were)wolf stories, including “Running Wolf,” “The Wolves of God,” “The Valley of the Beasts” (all published in the aptly titled 1921 volume The Wolves of God and Other Fey Stories).
member of the camping party who is conspicuously susceptible towards transforming into a murderous beast.

The imperial investments of Blackwood’s fiction are much underexamined. The latent and overt atavistic narratives presented in a number of his stories, however, are fairly typical of the imperialist anthropological imaginaries advanced by occult groups and practitioners of medical psychology alike. The occult revival fostered the emergence of a deeply ambivalent relationship to the supposed “primitive” beliefs of the colonial Other, often driven by a fetishistic appropriation of what were deemed the “esoteric wisdoms” of subaltern cultures even while reinstating various colonial optics and discourses. Gaura Viswanathan argues that in the colonial context, spiritualism loosened the bureaucratic social framework of colonizer/colonized because “the otherworldliness of the occult offered alternative possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a hierarchical framework (2). Nevertheless, even as these “alternative possibilities” encouraged a cultural and intellectual hybridity, they also functioned to maintain the physical distance of day-to-day encounters, which remained unpalatable to the imperial mindset. A colonial ambivalence is further explored by Kathryn Troy in The Specter of the Indian, who shows how the usage of the “Indian spirit guide” trope in American spiritualist circles was often accompanied by political interest in social reform of American/Indian relations and political support of peace policies and equality. However, the spectral trope also suggests a hauntological understanding of Native Americans as a rapidly dying or (already) vanished race (“Introduction”). The spiritualist imaginary of the ghostified “Indian,” a benevolent spirit once belonging to a deeply spiritual race yet unfit for the advancements of modern (western) civilization, recalls the “Noble Savage” trope that originated from a colonial fantastic imaginary of the indigenous person in a pure, paradisiacal natural state of pre-contact, posited as a fantastical inversion of anxiety-inducing aspects of industrialized Western
civilization. Here the idea of the contemporaneous “primitive man” situated at an earlier stage of evolution is again reinforced, albeit rearticulated in positive terms against the supposed degeneration of industrialized modern society.

Brantlinger’s work theorizes the imperial investments of occultism by pointing out that occultists in some ways operated like colonial adventurers in their dissatisfaction with earthly “frontiers” and their quest to “[open] new frontiers in the beyond” (240). The heterodox production of occult knowledge indeed can be said to be situated at the limits of Empire and scientific materialism alike, drawing its proofs for higher consciousness and spiritual realms from “Eastern” philosophies ranging from Indian Theosophy to Egyptology and the Hebrew Kaballah, as discussed in the above. It must also be pointed out that in this sense occultism does not characterize atavism as negative per se, as it draws from and aligns itself with the esoteric spirituality it detects in the colonial Other precisely because of its perceived “primitive” or infantile modes of belief. Algernon Blackwood, for instance, embraces a form of atavistic “throwback” to the ancient supernaturalism that lies in the “primitive” recesses of human history in his 1938 introduction to the collected work Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood, where he writes a “core of superstition [. . .] lies in every mother’s son of us, and we are still close enough to primitive days with their terror of the dark for Reason to abdicate without too violent resistance [. . .] [t]he true “other-worldly” story should issue from that core of superstition” (xvii, emphasis added).

Algernon Blackwood’s fiction, as well as his non-fiction, thus sustains a colonial ambivalence, simultaneously appropriating and denouncing the colonial Other (most frequently indigenous peoples). In Episode Before Thirty, Blackwood claims that his career as a writer was

11 Here, Blackwood performs an uncannily close paraphrase of Freud’s own formulation of “the uncanny,” which I discuss later in this section.
prophesized by an “Indian spirit guide” during a séance, who told him to “scratch,” which he interpreted to mean “scratch the page,” or write (52). As a self-proclaimed worshipper of Nature, Blackwood would perhaps have identified with the trope of the Noble Savage, and even reports that the spirit guide told him that he “had been an Indian in a recent life” (53). However, his literary depictions and autobiographical descriptions of actual, living indigenous persons, whom he encountered primarily in Canada, unsurprisingly take a rather different tone. In a cruel moment of rhetorical word-play, Blackwood writes that “I had seen Red Indians by the dozen in their pathetic Reservations, and if they did not [. . .] advise me to “scratch,” they certainly made up for the omission by constantly scratching themselves” (79). Even as Blackwood appropriates indigenous creation myths for some of his most compelling stories (most prominently in “The Wendigo”), his fiction thoroughly participates in a paradigm of social evolution in which the colonial Other is indiscriminately associated with esoteric spiritualism lying at an imaginary “earlier” stage of human social evolution.

Although it is most explicit in “The Camp of the Dog,” the colonial gaze that aligns the colonial Other with supernatural “primitivism” through a racialized optic emerges in other John Silence stories as well. In “A Psychical Invasion,” the demonic presence haunting the humourist Felix Pender is described through a racialized and gendered optic as a “woman—large, dark-skinned, with white teeth and masculine features” (21). When John Silence asks Pender to describe her facial expression, he shudders and replies that it is marked by “what I can only describe as—blackness [. . .] the face of a dark and evil soul (27). The daemonic nature of this spectre is constructed as a function of racial Otherness, as her dark skin and emphatic “blackness” visually evokes the dark magic she exercises, while her “masculine features” cross the gendered boundaries of social normativity. In “The Nemesis of Fire,” Colonel Wragge—whose military title was
acquired as a general of the colonial British army in the Indian subcontinent—compares the attacks of fire spirits on his estate to being under siege by Indian rebellion armies. John Silence immediately latches onto the comparison of colonial others to supernatural entities by citing a miscellaneous catalogue of other “primitive” beliefs adjacent to supernaturalism, from “the Yezidis of Syria” to “the Cosmic Deities of savage races” (202). The “Egyptian” theme of this story, too, participates in an orientalist fetishization of esoteric “primitivism” that was part of the renewal of eighteenth-century Egyptomania during the occult revival. As the Victorian cultural anthropologist Georg Ebers put it in his 1878 Egyptological study: “Everyone, high and low, has heard of Egypt and its primeval wonders!” (emphasis added). Blackwood himself wrote a great number of Egypt-themed stories in the years after the publication of *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary*, and, as I have already mentioned, was a member of the Egyptological *Golden Dawn*, which operated out of pseudo-Egyptian temples and presented themselves as heirs to the ancient magical tradition of Isis mythology.\(^\text{12}\)

In these three *John Silence* stories, then, supernatural entities are constructed under a colonial gaze and implicitly take up the racial sciences prevalent in contemporaneous occultism. Insofar as they are also horror stories, Blackwood relies on the affect of “the uncanny,” the sense of unsettling that emerges from the discord between the supernatural and their material correlates. As the concept eludes concise definition, Freud describes “The Uncanny” in his essay by the same title by citing his own *Totem and Taboo*, claiming that the survival of “primitive” beliefs about supernatural entities can generate uncanny effects:

Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our beliefs, and old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny. (17: 246)

Turning towards Blackwood’s stories that utilize a colonial gaze, facets of colonial identity mediate the uncanny in their unclear relation to the supernatural conditions they engender. Are Sangree’s nightly transformations mainly a racist analogue to his aboriginal heritage, or are they the direct manifestation of his racially dual nature that becomes prominent in the absence of the restraints of civilization? Do the other members of the camping party, such as Hubbard, experience some aspect of their own mythical “primitive” ancestry on their primitive island as Blackwood understood himself to have experienced his own “Indian” heritage in Episodes? Or, does nature for these characters provide mere respite from the toils of civilization?

In the perhaps unexpected conclusion to “Camp,” some of these questions begin to be answered. Sangree’s attraction to Joan is revealed to be reciprocated by the primitive ancestral part of her own being, as “the wild soul of the one had called to the wild soul of the other and in the secret depths of their beings the call had been heard and understood” (378). The story climaxes when two “wild” lovers are brought together after a somnambulant Joan meets Sangree in his fully awakened werewolf form, and comes to a sudden psychological awareness of her love for him:

In that sudden awakening had occurred the very psychological climax required to reveal the passionate emotion accumulated below. The deeper knowledge had leaped across and transferred itself to her ordinary consciousness, and in that shock the collision of the personalities had shaken them to the depths and shown her the truth beyond all possibility of doubt. (379)
The rhetoric of “leaping across [. . .] consciousness” and “collision of the personalities” suggests a blurring of identification between Sangree and Joan that recalls Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial ambivalence. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha characterizes such ambivalence as an “analytic of desire” within the binary opposition of colonizer-self and colonized-other that often manifests itself through a mimicry of its opposition, positing a site wherein momentary indistinctions between colonial-self and colonized-other are enacted. The colonial oppositions between Sangree and Joan become intimately congealed when they atavistically share in their primitive “wildness” and “leap together like twin flames” (378). As Bhabha suggests, “it is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles” (63).

1.5 Conclusion: Detecting Proto-Modernism

In psychic detective stories, medical psychology and occultism are already fused, reflecting the discursive cohabitation of the supernatural and the scientific in popular discourse at the fin-de-siècle. Although the genre fiction of this period has only recently been taken seriously in academic inquiry, the detective figure of decidedly popular fiction such as Algernon Blackwood’s *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary* is among the best representatives of the turn-of-the-century confluence between literature and science. With the proliferation of periodical culture, intellectual hierarchies distinguishing between “high” and “low” literature dominated the modernist debate about the merit of detective fiction. However, Christine Ferguson in *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue* suggests that the reliance on an arguably false dichotomy of the period’s literary history suggests a greater separation between the categories of the popular and the aesthetic than actually existed. She argues that popular fiction
like detective stories occupied an unstable position between “high” and “low” literature and were “more allied to proto-modernist works through its concern with linguistic transformation, than is typically assumed” (5). Although the *John Silence* stories do not yet exhibit the stylistic experimentation that would become the hallmark of modernist literature in the face of a failure of language, they nevertheless imbue a proto-modernist ethos through their overarching concern with the mysterious unconscious and its relationship to the limitations of language. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, Blackwood’s later work continues to dwell on questions of linguistic possibilities and limitations, and in the wartime era of his writing begins to take inspiration from modernist experimentation to signal the failure of language in style and grammar.
Chapter 2. “The Undigested Horror of Those Days”: Trauma and the Expansion of Consciousness in Algernon Blackwood’s Post-war Fiction

Peter Leese in *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* situates Great War psychological trauma as “a pathology of modernity” (205). However “modern” the Great War was, however, its immediate social consequence was a resurgence of cultural fascination with the supernatural that reinvigorated rather than reformed Victorian attitudes and practices concerning death and the afterlife, initiating a veritable “wartime epidemic of the occult” (Winter 62). Even as the desire to communicate with the fallen dead reintroduced an occult temperament, the shell-shocked survivors inaugurated a different cultural epidemic of trauma that served as a catalyst for significant changes in medical understandings of human mind and behaviour in Britain towards more psychodynamic theories, of which psychoanalysis was the foremost (Loughran 2-5). Algernon Blackwood’s supernatural post-war stories “Confession” (1921), “The Survivors” (1930), and “Elsewhere and Otherwise” (1936) frequently foreground the liminality of this unsettled zone in which the occult and the psychological cross over by drawing attention to the limitations inherent in literary attempts to represent concepts outside of the threshold of human understanding.

Measuring the distance between *John Silence* and the wartime stories, I argue Blackwood maintains his characteristic simultaneousness about mental and paranormal phenomena, but now specifically locates this within the hyper-modernist context of the traumatized consciousness. In Blackwood’s post-war fiction, supernatural and traumatic experience are articulated through a conception of altered (and alternative) consciousness that retains linguistic incomprehensibility at its heart, thus positing an elaboration of both trauma and the occult as mutual signifiers of higher consciousness lying beyond representability. This chapter unfolds my argument in two stages:
first, I will analyze how the supernatural war fiction of Algernon Blackwood characterizes traumatic wounds as occulted phenomena, tethering new psychoanalytic concepts to multivalent supernatural ideas in order to hypothesize on the nature of consciousness, death, and survival in the mind of the traumatized subject. Secondly, I will demonstrate that these stories center around questions of communicability and explore the shared conundrum of trauma and the occult of taking as their subject matter experiences too haunting to render in language. I argue that this reading offers a way of re-thinking the much contested category of “the unspeakable” in literary trauma theory, which Blackwood’s work recasts as a more universal quality of altered consciousness.

2.1 Liminal Zones: “The Survivors”

During the Great War, the nascent study of trauma existed in a liminal space on the threshold of scientific discovery and philosophical speculation, and was subject to investigations in psychological, mystical, and religious circles alike. In his seminal The Invention of Telepathy, Roger Luckhurst describes the kinds of conjecture on the human mind spurred by the epidemic scale of trauma patients as “nodal points for Modernist investigations of the limits of consciousness,” where “mystical communion, supernatural ‘possession,’ and sexual transference overlay each other” (262). Algernon Blackwood’s wartime fiction bears out the unruliness of this terrain in stories where an unsettled metaphysics always attends fictional interactions with the sciences of the mind. In a culture of reawakening mysticism, these war stories remain invested in occult tropes, reflecting the deep entanglements of the occult and the scientific in the early modernist theorization and subsequent exploration of the unknown territory of the unconscious. An exemplary model for such tangled models of mind can be observed in Blackwood’s “The Survivors” (1930), where the protagonist Lindstrum’s trauma becomes a site for speculation on the limits of space and time and the possibility that traumatic injury would expand consciousness
to gain access to alternative planes of existence. Although “The Survivors” can be characterized as speculative fiction that engages with philosophical questions regarding the survival of the disembodied soul, Blackwood casts these mind-body problems through the lens of trauma discourse. At the opening of the tale, Lindstrum seems to have been the sole survivor of an otherwise fatal bus crash and begins to undergo the traumatic symptoms of this “very severe shock,” experiencing the classic signs of what Freud called “belatedness” (*nachträglichkeit*) through “deficiencies of time and memory” (Blackwood 175). Lindstrum finds himself disoriented after the crash and is unable to communicate with anyone after the accident. Only when he meets a pilot who himself was the sole survivor of an airplane crash does the narrator reveal that both did in fact die and have “survived” only as ghosts.

Anne Whitehead points out in *Trauma Fiction* that rhetorical strategies around describing trauma often draw on an occult register of spectres, haunting, and possession (12-13). Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, his longest sustained written effort on trauma, provides an exemplary case in observing that shell-shocked soldiers give the impression of “being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some “daemonic” power” (18: 21). As in other short stories from the war period I discuss below, Blackwood incorporates this occult register to speculate on the nature of consciousness in trauma. By deploying gothic elements like ghosts, Blackwood interrogates the shifting meaning of survival in a historical period that profoundly reckoned with questions of death and the afterlife in the wake of the Great War. Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* claims that the catastrophes of the war period initiated a veritable “wartime epidemic of the occult” (62), arguing that it was only natural that a cultural fascination with the supernatural deepened in response to the communal loss and bereavement. Grief and the desire for consolation thus reintroduced a series of “older
languages of loss and consolation” (Winter 76) that promised to make possible communication with the fallen, including séances, telepathy, and hauntings. “The Survivors” thus unfolds contemporary discourses about mental shock and trauma that nevertheless mobilize gothic elements like the appearance of ghosts in order to pose several philosophical questions about consciousness, the nature of survival and (dis)embodiment, and the “afterlife”: Is becoming a ghost a mode of “survival”? What kind of consciousness survives in trauma? Is life after trauma a “ghostly” existence?

Trauma theorists attempt to answer a similar set of questions emerging from the principal query of whether trauma is signified by the near encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it. In her important introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth suggests that it is precisely this unresolvable tension within the traumatic encounter that generates the crisis at the center of many trauma narratives. She suggests that “at the core of these stories [. . .] is thus a kind of double telling: the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). The oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of survival* in Blackwood’s supernatural war fiction produces liminal figures who bear trauma’s uncanny resignification of the boundary between life and death. “The Survivors” tells this “incompatible and absolutely inextricable” doubled story (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7) through the liminal figure of the ghost, whose simultaneous demise and survival after an encounter with death becomes a poignant metaphor for the crisis of trauma. In this manner, “The Survivors” plays up the ways in which trauma frays boundaries between life and death, while simultaneously generating trauma’s ambiguity in the question of what it means to be “survivors.”
A nineteenth-century genealogy of ghost-seeing in British literature is traced by Shane McCorristine’s in *Spectres of the Self*, which examines the historical preoccupation with the “philosophical problem of whether apparently supernatural phenomena have any independent existence or are created in the human imaginations” (McCorristine 65). Although “The Survivors” can also be read as a literalization of this question, the story interestingly tweaks this trope by rendering its protagonist as the object of ghost-seeing—the ghost that *is being seen*—rather than the subject who becomes ghost-seer. Whereas the spectral illusions theory—which Blackwood also employs in “Confession,” as I will discuss—posits that ghost-seeing is the outworking of psychological projection or hallucination, “The Survivors” already takes the veracity of spectral presence as a given by positioning a ghost as the narrator. In a fascinating inversion of this theory, Lindstrum’s traumatized perspective thus seems to reverse what can be perceived as life or death when he describes the people around him as “[a]n unreal lot [. . .] Only half alive, these people!” (177).

Although “The Survivors” does not directly concern war trauma, nineteenth-century discourse on technological “shock” (like the transportation accident suffered by Lindstrum) shares continuity with what would become known as “shell shock” in the early modernist period. An extensive body of work by contemporary scholars has demonstrated that the developing medical discourse on psychological trauma in the early modernist period tends to track technological developments with large-scale social effects as “agent[s] and icon[s] of modernization” (Daly 20). Although Victorian concepts of “railway spine” emerged some thirty years before Freud and

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13 Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Ralph Harrington have written extensively about the role of railway accidents in the medical history of psychological neuroses in the late nineteenth century. Tracey Loughran, Peter Leese, and Trevor Dodman examine the development of “technological shock” into “shell shock” during World War I, while Ruth Leys, Roger Luckhurst, John Fletcher and others have made invaluable contributions to the fields of cultural memory in their genealogies of the concept of trauma through the nineteenth- and twentieth century across psychiatric, legal and cultural-political lines.
Breuer considered the matter of “traumatic neuroses” in *Studies on Hysteria* and half a century before the advent of shell shock among the soldiers of the First World War, Tracey Loughran remarks that doctors diagnosing shell shock noted similarities between the symptoms of “war neuroses” and those found in victims of industrial and railway accidents. The neurological model of trauma advanced by nineteenth-century psychologists like Jean-Marcus Charcot, where a fully psychical trauma caused by technological “shock” to the nervous system generates a range of disorderly bodily symptoms that appear belatedly, was largely discredited after his death. Nevertheless, medical practitioners on the frontlines were among the first to establish the link between neurological shock theory and modern war trauma, and immediately assimilated “the nervous and mental disorders of war [. . .] into the diagnostic categories of pre-war psychological medicine” (81). As John Fletcher suggests in *Freud and the Scene of Trauma*, the Great War, with its shell explosions and battlefield traumas, had fully resurrected the medical paradigm of traumatic psychosomatic effects apparently caused by entirely external violent shock impacts (280-289).

In this manner, the prototypical incident of the railroad crash, which caused so-called “railway spine” in the nineteenth century became, with some amendments, “shell shock” caused by shell explosions, itself the most novel and dramatic technological innovation in modern warfare at the start of the twentieth century. As Ralph Harrington succinctly summarizes it in his overview

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*Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is quick to rhetorically divest himself from the recently revitalized “old naïve doctrine of ‘shock’” (35), writing that “psycho-analytic conception of the traumatic neurosis is far from being identical with the crudest form of the “shock” theory” (36). Nevertheless, Freud, himself once a student under Charcot, acknowledges that the epidemic of “shock neuroses” (*BPP* 10) warranted a serious revision to previously established psychoanalytic principles. The “problem of sexuality” was at the forefront of early psychoanalytic discussion on the nature of war trauma, because the “event” of the war seemed incompatible with the methodology of psychoanalysis, which seeks to locate the origins of “traumatic neuroses” in events of sexual disturbance experienced in early childhood. Since soldiers’ neuroses were so obviously developed during the war, they were difficult trace back to sexual aetiology.
of nineteenth-century precursors to trauma, “systematic medical theorization about psychological trauma in the modern West commenced with the responses of mid-Victorian medical practitioners to the so-called railway spine condition” (32). In “The Survivors,” Blackwood portrays his protagonist as having a strong understanding of contemporaneous medical literature on the effects of “shock” on the mind, and, although the story was published in the post-war period, that shock is experienced in the prototypical form of a transportation accident. Lindstrum notes when he easily startles after his bus accident that “this rather violent reaction was nervous and mental, of course—an aftermath of shock” (174). Lindstrum immediately recognizes the subtle differences in his mental experience as known symptoms of trauma, noting that “memory was certainly damaged” (175). Particularly affected is his capacity to grasp the concept of temporality, as he confides that his “sense of time, too, was queer, irregular [. . .] Time and memory were closely related, of course” (175). This experience of time recalls Caruth’s reading of Freudian nachträglichkeit or “belatedness,” the symptomatology of trauma which “appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Unclaimed Experience 61). Caruth argues that the structure of trauma takes place through a paradoxical structure of indirectness, that is, the “bewildering” fact that psychological trauma does not occur in strict correspondence to the body’s experience of a life threat by critical wounding of the body (60). Indeed, as Freud notes, “a wound or injury inflicted [. . .] works as a rule against the development of a neurosis” (BPP 12).

Although he is physically unharmed, Lindstrum thus remains keenly aware of his increased vulnerability to mental damage, noting that “[h]is physical machinery might be undamaged [. . .] but his nerves and mind betrayed a difference somewhere” (174). Here Lindstrum seems to split body and mind in describing his condition, but the reference to “his nerves” separated from “mind”
suggests a more complicated interaction between physical form and psyche. Luckhurst has noted that the symptomatic discourse of “nerves” stalls somewhere between the physical and the psychical as the Victorian mental sciences sought a third term between organic and mental realms, a “switching point where the physiological and psychological converged and conversed in unpredictable ways” (Trauma Question 3). The development of a trauma model in nineteenth-century Britain was deeply entrenched in the somaticist orientation of Victorian medicine, which generated ambiguities in explaining the unique psychological characteristics of trauma symptoms. Harrington emphasizes the inherent vagueness of early British models of traumatic injury, writing that in early medical accounts “it is not clear whether the condition consists in pathological injury of the cerebral and spinal structures, or in the physiological disruption of nerve function” (42). Thus, while Lindstrum asserts that his “physical machinery” is unharmed, his oddly disembodied state unhinged from materiality and temporality betrays the traumatic intercourse between body and mind instigated by damage to the “nerves.”

The unstable boundary between material form and mental space inherent to trauma discourse generates an ambiguity in the question of whether we are to understand the alteration of consciousness in “The Survivors” within a psychological framework as a trauma patient or under mystical terms as a disembodied soul. Although the protagonist initially understands his distorted sense of temporality as a defect and “deficienc[y] of time and memory” (175), he quickly comes to realize that rather than skewing his perception, his new mental condition may indeed give him a broader and more complete grasp of critical metaphysical concepts like the nature of materiality and even time itself: “[He] saw more of everything [. . .] Just as he saw Time as a whole instead of sectionally, so he saw these common objects entirely instead of in broken parts” (177). Lindstrum also finds that he is able to sense certain properties of his natural environment that were
formerly invisible or muted to him: “He gazed at the grass and trees [. . .] the alteration in those common, inanimate things, too, asserted itself [. . .] The trees—well, they were fiery, almost flame-like; the familiar, clipped grass contained some idea of sound, of music” (177). Lindstrum seems to have transcended ordinary understanding of material objects and gained a kind of omniscience about the temporal and material world, although it is unclear whether he gained this ability through disembodiment in death or through his traumatic survival. The narrative seems to simultaneously allow for both readings, as mystical experience and traumatic experience become doubled and nearly interchangeable in the narrative through the liminal figure of the ghost. Here we should also emphasize the significance of the story title’s function in attempting to obfuscate the reader’s recognition of the narrator’s spectral nature, placing the reader in the position of the “ghost-seer” to pose a question about who truly are the “survivors” in this tale: the spectral but omniscient Lindstrum, or “unreal lot” around him, who are alive but bound by the material limitations of human existence?

2.2 Frontiers of Mind: “Confession”

The idea that the psychic experience of trauma could unleash potentially supernatural powers beyond ordinary perception was not Blackwood’s own philosophical innovation. Ideas about the paranormality of traumatic neuroses circulated in occult and psychological circles alike. Blackwood cites American psychologist William James’ “Varieties of Religious Experience” in Episodes: “[O]ur normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about us, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there are potential forms of consciousness entirely different” (qtd. in Blackwood, Episodes 217). On the occult front, Annie Besant (1847-1933), a prominent figure in the Theosophical Society (of which Blackwood was a lifetime member) theorized that mental patients could reach higher states of
consciousness and potentially employ supernatural powers of perception. Besant held that while all but a few “advanced psychologists tended to view anything other than the consciousness of the waking state as “abnormal,” “sub-conscious,” “inconscient,” and necessarily “disorderly,” “the East” (and, by implication, Theosophy) regarded such states as “‘higher than the waking state’ and sought to reproduce them at will” (qtd. in Owen 127). Frederic W.H. Myers, whose early psychological studies posited the existence of a “subliminal consciousness” that would extend the powers of the mind, might have been classed as such an “advanced psychologist” by Besant. As I suggest in the previous chapter, Blackwood’s early work in John Silence: Physician Extraordinary draws upon the parapsychological work of pioneers like Myers, who openly embraced liberal crossings over into the occult, and indeed encouraged the marriage of scientific and psychical inquiry in his organization The Society for Psychical Research, which aimed to pull the occult subjects of clairvoyance and telepathy into the laboratory as objects for experimental science.

Blackwood’s war texts maintain this cultural awareness of ongoing developments in psychology, and seem to draw on psychoanalytic innovations in the study of trauma, although it is impossible to ascertain what specific texts Blackwood may have consulted. Building on the discussion in Chapter One, it should be noted here that even as Freud sought to situate the fledgling discipline of psychoanalysis as a staunchly rationalist “science of the mind,” the psychoanalytic method retained a latent supernatural base extending from its origins in late Victorian occult practices like hypnosis and automatic writing (Zeavin 56-58; Massicotte 93-96). In his 1921 address on telepathy, Freud in a spectacular feat of contradiction claims that “analysts are at bottom incorrigible mechanists and materialists, even though they seek to avoid robbing the mind and spirit of their still unrecognized characteristics” (179). Freud’s phrasing here bespeaks the contiguity of the paranormal and the scientific in psychology in a sentence that, even as it states a
strong physicalist thesis, immediately counters itself by nevertheless attributing an unknown quality to what he declared to be material properties. Other fringe views on psychoanalysis and the occult existed among Freud’s closest collaborators, including Sándor Ferenczi, who came close to denying any differentiation between occult investigation and psychoanalytic method. The characterization of Lindstrum’s newfound powers of perception closely resemble Ferenczi’s belief that traumatic neuroses could unleash supernatural powers to gain occulted knowledge of the world unavailable to the limitations conditioned by ordinary consciousness. Ferenczi was one of Freud’s most prominent followers and a staunch believer in telepathy and other supernatural phenomena, and in his essay “Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child,” describes the traumatized patient as having an “uncanny clairvoyance” (228). He reiterates this view in his Clinical Diary (1932), where in a fragment on the theme of death he elucidates the view that “[i]n the moment of the trauma some sort of omniscience about the world [...] makes the person in question [...] more or less clairvoyant” (61). Luckhurst suggests in his chapter on psychoanalysis and the occult in The Invention of Telepathy that for Ferenczi, shell-shocked patients are “the living dead, touched by occult powers unleashed by the ‘little death’ of trauma” (276). Lindstrum in “The Survivors” is precisely such a figure, who, untethered from ordinary consciousness by the shock-impact of an industrial accident, continues to exist literally in a state of living death as a ghost.

Blackwood was clearly preoccupied with this spectral theme as a medium for exploring trauma in his war texts, as he also employs it in the earlier “Confession” (1921), where he readily embraces the veracity of both occult reality and mental phenomena through another ghostly figure. In this short story, O’Reilly, a Canadian soldier who is under treatment for his shell shock produced by the Great War, is also a victim of “traumatic neuroses.” Although he does not himself turn ghost, his traumatic memories are constantly projected as spectral presences. Under the medical
orders of his psychoanalyst, O’Reilly ventures to navigate on his own to a friend’s house after a prolonged period of confined treatment. The task soon proves to be too much for the recovering patient, for whom the unexpected fogginess creates the perfect conditions for traumatic hallucination that soon turns into ghost-seeing. By the end of the narrative, O’Reilly finds himself engulfed in a murder mystery fraught with ghostly apparitions and uncanny repetitions in which it is to the reader unclear whether the events of the story belong to the trauma patient’s hallucinations or the gothic register of the Victorian ghost story. The traumatised O’Reilly is thus haunted by his own memories; and feels possessed, as by the grip of a spirit, by own horrific inability to distinguish between traumatic hallucinations and real persons.

The shell-shocked soldier O’Reilly, who, like Lindstrum, “knew quite well he had been ‘shocked’” (“Confession,” 3), considers the possibility that his unstable condition might grant him paranormal powers of perception not afforded to ordinary mental states. O’Reilly’s meditation on his mental state is worth quoting in full:

But, in that shock and dislocation, had he not possibly picked up another gear? Were there not gaps and broken edges, pieces that no longer dovetailed, fitted as usual, interstices, in a word? Yes, that was the word—interstices. Cracks, so to speak, between his perception of the outside world and his inner interpretation of these? Between memory and recognition? Between the various states of consciousness that usually dove-tailed so neatly that the joints were normally imperceptible? His state, he well knew, was abnormal, but were his symptoms on that account unreal? Could not these “interstices” be used by—others? When he saw his “figures,” he used to ask himself: “Are not these the real ones, and the others—the human beings—unreal?” (3)
In this passage, O’Reilly speculates that the traumatic hallucinations of the fallen soldiers he sees as a result of his shell shock may in fact belong to a metaphysical reality whose access requires the “shock and dislocation” that would create “gaps,” “broken edges,” interstices,” or “cracks” in the imperceptible constraints typically placed upon the mind. In this way, apparitions originating from an admittedly abnormal mental state could allow the hallucinating agent to witness metaphysical entities that genuinely exists, albeit in a different plane of existence. Here the possibility of genuine mystical experience is, as in “The Survivors,” heavily implicated, although the premise of the tale is similarly reliant on the ambiguity or mystery of whether what appear to be hallucinations are in fact real.

Like Lindstrum in “The Survivors,” O’Reilly in “Confession” stages a rhetorical reversal that re-signifies the boundary between life and death, asserting that the hallucinatory “figures” might be “the real ones” while the “human beings” might be “unreal,” echoing Lindstrum’s claim that the living around him are “[a]n unreal lot [. . .] Only half alive, these people!” (177). The speculative possibility of alternative realities is here advanced as a question of life and death, suggesting a porous distinction between reality and unreality that has become deeply permeable in the experience of trauma. As I have already argued about Algernon Blackwood’s early work in *John Silence*, Blackwood’s short stories tend to position the occult and the psychological as analogues for one other. Blackwood’s characterization of trauma victims, similarly, resists the sharp bifurcation of the occult and the psychological. This characterization falls outside of the scope of traditional literary trauma theory as represented by pioneers like Cathy Caruth, who tend to model literary analysis after a psychoanalytic practice in interpreting literary texts touched by trauma. As Luckhurst summarizes it in *The Trauma Question*, “For Caruth […] psychoanalysis and literature are particularly privileged forms that can attend to [the] perplexing paradoxes of
trauma” (5). As such, readings of ghost stories informed by this strain of trauma theory tend to interpret spectral appearances as extended metaphorical substitutes which perform a mere representation of the psychoanalytic “diagnosis” that they are in fact traumatic hallucinations (not real), even in texts that predate the trauma paradigm. For example, Jill L. Matus argues in *Shock, Memory, and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* that nineteenth-century authors such as Charles Dickens employ the literary conventions of the ghost story as a hermeneutic “to articulate what the nascent study of trauma at this time was not quite yet poised to formulate” (Matus, “Trauma” 416). This reading suggests a progressive narrative of historicizing trauma, in which “embryonic Victorian ideas grew up to become mature Freudian ones” (Matus, *Shock* 11).

Trauma theory tends to trace a secularizing narrative of ghost-seeing, in which the old theological world of apparitions is gradually demystified throughout the nineteenth century to eventual displacement by an explicitly psychological theory of supernatural phenomena. While such an argument for a progressive trajectory of trauma seems compelling, this evolutionary model carries the implicit claim that the arrival of a scientifically valid and internally consistent trauma paradigm supplants the “folk psychology” of spectral projections and ghostly phenomena. Departing from such an account of the “gradual psychologization of the ghostly” (McCorristine 32), I argue that in Algernon Blackwood’s wartime fiction traumatic hallucination does not preclude the possibility of mystical experience, but offers an interpretation of altered states of consciousness not as merely validating pathological symptoms but rather as genuine visionary episodes. While the scientific naturalism of official psychoanalytic approaches would not allow for the possibility of genuine mystical experience, Blackwood’s fictional representation of trauma exists on the fringes of a more orthodox medical paradigm of trauma, and is thus itself situated in a liminal zone between the occult and the psychological. Thus, while writing in the age of Freud,
Blackwood’s representations of trauma do not follow a strict scientific materialism, but rather freely borrow from those “embryonic” Victorian articulations of the fragmented psyche through ghost literature. Blackwood argues that traumatic seeing does not foreclose the possibility of mystical, visionary experience. While the scientific naturalism of official psychoanalytic approaches would disallow the possibility of genuine mystical experience, Blackwood’s fictional representation of trauma is thus itself situated in a liminal zone between the occult and the psychological.

2.3 Returns of the Repressed: “Elsewhere and Otherwise”

Like many British literati during the Great War, Algernon Blackwood enrolled in the military intelligence service rather than taking up combat duties on the front lines. Since he was fluent in German and already spent his winters in the Swiss Alps, Blackwood was stationed as a secret agent in Switzerland under the code name “Baker” in the first year of the war, recruiting agents to establish a reliable information network of people traveling into Germany. Despite his relatively comfortable station at the Hôtel Bonivard on the shores of Lake Geneva, where he decoded secret reports and sent intelligence to London, Blackwood resigned from the Secret Service after only six months. Blackwood wrote in a letter to confidant George Wrong that “[i]t was a beastly job. I hated pretending to be someone else” (qtd. in Ashley 222).

After concluding his service for the War Office, Blackwood was appointed as a searcher for the British Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Department in France, where he started in February 1918. In this position, Blackwood was to daily transpose information and evidence about missing men from the wounded

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15 Blackwood would later fictionalize aspects of his work as a secret agent in “Onanonanon,” a short story originally published in the March 1921 edition of The English Review. In this story, a former Secret Service agent must face his alter-ego, Baker (the same code name Blackwood himself used), who is the personified part of him that is still an undercover agent long after the Great War has concluded. The narrator calls Baker “[h]is hated alias” (250), and treats him as a separate person, “his other self” (252), as though this part of his personality is so detestable that it has split off from his “parent self” (250).
and convalescent soldiers. Blackwood recorded his experiences with the Red Cross in an article published just after armistice in the American Red Cross Magazine entitled “Missing: The Work of a Red Cross Searcher,” which describes the difficulties of interviewing soldiers who were themselves inevitably wounded and often in a state of shock. Blackwood later transferred these skills to his final war station as an undercover reporter for the London Times in a Swiss internment camp for POWs who were unable to fight due to their wounds (Ashley 229). Here and in his work as a Red Cross Searcher Blackwood would inevitably have encountered the impacts of “war trauma” first-hand in questioning and interviewing recovering soldiers who had just come off the battlefield.

During this time, Blackwood also penned his autobiography Episodes Before Thirty (1923), which chronicles years of intense financial hardship, personal betrayals, opioid addiction, and periods of homelessness experienced during his early twenties while living overseas, first in Toronto and then in New York. Reflecting on the process of writing fiction in Episodes, Blackwood traces his writerly impulse to the accumulated trauma of those years within a semi-Freudian conceptual model of repression and belated sublimation:

> It was, perhaps, the undigested horror of those days [. . .] that tried to find expression fifteen years later in writing [. . .] But nothing is ever forgotten, nor is anything finally suppressed in the sense that it is done with. Expression, sooner or later, in one form or another, inevitably crops up. (164)

This trauma-adjacent theoretical expression captures the drive to suppress unintegrated memories and negative affects that inevitably manifest themselves belatedly through symbolic encoding. Blackwood’s autobiography may itself be seen as the result of such a mechanism of the “return of
the repressed,” as this work reflects in startling accuracy of detail on traumatizing events that occurred more than fifteen years prior.16

*Episodes* was written during the Great War, a solemn period for Blackwood that perhaps recalled “the undigested horror of those days” (*Episodes* 164). The writing of “Elsewhere and Otherwise” (1936), a story which opens on the night of the British Ultimatum to Germany (August 4, 1914), can be read as another sublimation of “undigested horror” with a significant incubation period. Blackwood namely reproduces aspects of his personal experience working with POWs in internment camps in “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” whose narrator is captured in battle and spends three years confined in a German prison camp. The narrator seems to function as a mouthpiece for Blackwood when he comments that “[a]ny prisoner who survived the process that stunned, stupefied, brutalised his soul, had in him something unusual [. . .] what happened to men’s minds during those four years lies, of course, beyond easy understanding—by those who never experienced the strains and stresses they were subject to” (Blackwood, “Elsewhere” 40). Given that the 1936 publication date of this story stands in much greater proximity to the World War II British ultimatum letter (1939) than to the World War I British declaration of war, we may retrospectively observe that this “belated” literary treatment of the topic bespeaks a continued authorial fixation with the events of the Great War and its “undigested horror.” The rhetoric of military warfare indeed permeates Blackwood’s theorization of his vocation as a writer, as he likens the accumulation of experience on a writer’s “sensitive, impressionable mind” to combat explosions as “an incessant bombardment, often an intense, terrific bombardment of impressions” (*Episodes* 164).

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16 Throughout *Episodes Before Thirty*, Blackwood refers to a wealth of archival material—mainly articles published in *The New York Sun*—that can be accessed to verify the precise details of dates, actors, and events narrated in the work.
Staging a fictional return to the Great War so relatively long after its historical occurrence can be characterized as a “return of the repressed,” a traumatic pattern of recursion and temporal stagnation that also forms a dominant theme in the story. In “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” an unnamed narrator relates the supernatural events that befall his cousin, Sydney Mantravers, who is a notable figure due to his uncannily youthful appearance. Although Mantravers is over sixty years old by age, by looks he seems to have defied the passage of time and appears to be no older than forty. Indeed, the man is rumoured not to have “aged for years; for a quarter of a century [. . .] he had not changed” (25). On the night of the ultimatum, Mantravers confirms this legend to the narrator, confessing that the remaining 25-year lifespan of a soldier named De Frasne was added to his own after he (unintentionally) enabled this young man to kill himself. Mantravers also reveals that he has been carrying out “personal experiments in higher consciousness” (27) together with his collaborator Dr. Nicholas Vronski, an occult specialist who undertakes “experiments with glands, hypnotism, [and] yoga” (25). Shortly after revealing these matters to his cousin, Mantravers disappears before the narrator’s eyes in the empty house that belonged to De Frasne, supposedly into a higher state of existence that transcends three-dimensional space and time.

Blackwood wrote in the context of a wider cultural interest in the context of other dimensions, and produced a number of other stories exploring the idea of a fourth dimension, including the “The Willows” (1907), the John Silence story “A Victim of Higher Space” (1914), and “The Extra Day” (1915). As early as 1938, literary critic Harlan Hatcher described a “literary fourth dimension,” which he situated in the context of the occult revival and its yearning for the re-enchantment of a universe rendered measurable by the positivist scientific materialism.

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17 Here we may agree with the narrator’s later remark that “memory, apparently, is but a clumsy, ineffective process” (55): In the edition of this story as it appears in the 1936 E.P. Dutton publication of Shocks!, this character is referred to as “Defrayne” three times on first appearance on pg. 27, but each time subsequently as “De Frasne.” I will refer to this character by the more frequent spelling as “De Frasne.”
dominating philosophical discourse in the early twentieth century. Indeed, in 1936, the publication year of Blackwood’s speculative war story “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” some of the best-selling titles in the United States were J.B. Rhine’s New Frontiers of the Mind, Henry C. Link’s The Return to Religion, and Alexis Carell’s Man, The Unknown, all titles which bespeak—albeit from very different vantage points—the immense interest in the superphysical possibilities of the “twilight region beyond our present boundary of knowledge [. . .] into which scientific analysis cannot yet go” (Hatcher 456-457). Whether this “twilight region” was, then, a new spiritual zone, or would eventually be annexed by scientific materialism, was hotly contested. Nevertheless, the (by then ubiquitous) rhetoric of borders and expansion employed in signifying the so-called “frontier of science” suggests a greater separation between the scientific and the spiritual than actually existed. The concept of higher dimensions itself closes a gap between these categories as an idea that originated in experimental mathematics but approached a threshold of mysticism in its conceptual expansion of accepted mathematical theorems about dimensionality.

Mark Blacklock in The Emergence of the Fourth Dimension: Higher Spatial Thinking in the Fin-de-Siècle traces the development of the “fourth dimension of space” as a literary theme with occulted resonances that emerged as a staple of genre fiction at the fin-de-siècle, and became an informing idea for a number of important Modernist writers and artists, including James Joyce. The modernism Blacklock identifies in the concept of the fourth dimension is played out in “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” where it is tied to the modernist concept of war trauma and the stylistic experimentation that would attempt to represents its unprecedented horrors. The temporal disarrangement of Mantravers’ uncanny defiance of age is dramatized in “Elsewhere and Otherwise” on a diegetic level, which registers an unusual mode of recursive story-telling. The narrative opens in a retrospective frame after the events driving the story have already taken place,
and immediately highlights the recursive nature of Mantravers’ multi-dimensional travel in the narrator’s opening statement that “I saw him go, I also saw him return: that is, I saw him disappear and re-appear” (23). Like Mantravers’ uncannily youthful appearance, the narrative development of “Elsewhere and Otherwise” seems to be temporally “out of joint” as it is told within a highly disorderly frame narrative that pulls the story back and forth between different time frames prior to, during, and after the main events driving the tale. Although the narrator promises that events foreshadowed “shall be told in their proper place and sequence” (37), the narrative remains fragmented by a constant barrage of retrospective commentary which suspends any linear or progressive story threads and repeats narrative elements without resolution.

2.4 The Limits of Language: Between Trauma and the Occult

Temporal disarrangement is a key feature of a literary trauma paradigm, since the “belated” nature of trauma resists linear narration and is always reconstructed in a temporally disjointed state. As Luckhurst puts it in “The Trauma Knot,” “no narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way; it has a time signature that must fracture conventional causality” (196). The narrative itself in its mysterious and erratic form thus seems to perform a kind of psychological trauma, presenting the reader with a disjointed, non-linear timeline that is marked by recursive fragments and disturbed grammar. Reiterations of the narrator’s preoccupation with his cousin’s uncanny age-defying looks reappear constantly throughout the first portion of the story, narratively unfolding the way in which the passage of time does not seem to linger on Mantravers’ body. A similar pattern of repetition can be observed in Blackwood’s “Confession,” where time seems to be “out of joint” for the shell-shocked soldier O’Reilly as he becomes obsessed with his own horrific inability to distinguish between traumatic hallucinations and real persons. Different versions of the question “were these figures in the fog real or unreal?” (3) are repeated more than ten times
throughout “Confession,” as it dramatizes the traumatic recursions that are “inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing” (Caruth, *Trauma* 92).

As in “Confession,” the repetitions and temporal breakages registered throughout “Elsewhere and Otherwise” directly result from war trauma, as the narrator’s conscription into war service immediately after Mantravers’ first disappearance “interrupts” his initially sequential telling and pulls him back to the retrospective frame, a move that breaks the narrative flow and is repeated several times before the end of the tale. In this sense, the war acts in this story as an agent of disruption and misdirection, interrupting the narrative’s linearity and dissolving coherence. The narrator claims that “[t]he date of [Mantravers’] going and returning had nothing to do with the War. The Great War, indeed, was almost a trivial item in his strange experience” (45), but it is nevertheless noteworthy that the time of Mantravers’ disappearance is indexed to the exact duration of the Great War in England (he reappears shortly after The Armistice). The traumatic circumstances surrounding Mantravers’ exit and re-entrance into a common plane of existence also coincide with aspects of warfare and military pursuits in England, as the language of military technology pervasively haunts the story and the narrator frames its events with reference to tools of warfare associated with the Great War. Thus when Mantravers reappears in three-dimensional space and time after The Armistice, the narrator describes his sudden reappearance in terms of a shell explosion: “[A] tremendous blow seemed to strike me [. . .] as with some gigantic energy behind it. I reeled at the shock [. . .] I saw the face and figure of Mantravers come rushing at me with the speed and power as of some awful projectile” (55). Here the narrator seems to relive the violent experiences of what must have been his own brief exposure to trench warfare, describing the startling experience as a “blow” and “strike,” and the figure of his cousin as a “projectile.”
Mantravers’ violent entrance greatly disturbs him and triggers a resurgence of trauma symptoms, as immediately following this shock the narrator finds that “memory and consciousness then collapsed together simultaneously” (55).

At this junction, the narrative disintegrates and the telling of subsequent events becomes disturbed and characterized by an abundance of ellipses, stops, and em-dashes in order to represent the effects of the projectile-like shock on the narrator through stylistic means. This “grammar of disturbance” permeates the remainder of the story, as the narrator at various points acknowledges that the story he tells is “uttered with breaks and intervals” (37). Conversations that the narrator is subject to while in an altered state of consciousness are represented in a correspondingly disturbed and fragmentary form, indicating where “the words roared past me like a clap of thunder” (55). Attempts to describe the inner workings of the transcendent powers of mind gained by Mantravers, similarly, are marked with a failure of language signified through a fragmented grammar. The formal disarrangement of this linguistic inadequacy is particularly notable in a passage where Mantravers attempts to explain non-linear temporality to his cousin:

“No, no, how could you? He went on, half to himself. “You’ve never transcended human experience, so you couldn’t. Naturally, you couldn’t. You only know time in a line, as past, present, future. Vronski and I have known it . . . otherwise . . . in two dimensions, two at least . . . A changed consciousness—that’s the trick, you see—can function in a different time . . . elsewhere and otherwise—” (37-38)
Here the narrative disintegrates into a partial representation of Mantravers’ monologue, whose words are disturbed and dissolving as some sentences become elliptical and are fragmented by em-dashes. As I have already suggested, the way in which the fragmented style in the above passage attempts to represent the disruptive nature of trauma is highly reminiscent of the articulation of trauma as a crisis of representation in the classical paradigm of literary trauma studies descending from, among others, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1991), Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996), Marianne Hirsch (1997), and Geoffrey Hartman (1995).

As Carl Krockel points out, while referring to Freud, the trauma theorists mentioned above recruit a poststructuralist paradigm of broken chains of signification to model the repression of memories in the traumatized mind (153-155). Trevor Dodman takes up this model in *Shell Shock, Memory, and the Novel in the Wake of World War I*, arguing that such a “grammar of disturbance” is an act of attempted representation of the traumatic condition. Blackwood’s post-war texts may thus be said to stylistically attempt to “write” the “wound of shell shock, to represent the radical disruptions to the psyche and self” (Dodman 10). Nevertheless, some questions of communicability that come up in Blackwood’s war stories seem to exist beyond the scope of trauma’s “unspeakability,” or at least intersect with language problems created by other phenomena traditionally held to be linguistically inexpressible. Although “Elsewhere and Otherwise” often presents linguistic problems as resulting from a loss of language induced by psychic stress, the story also engages in a more general philosophical discourse about the poverty of language and the incapacity to describe what lies beyond human understanding. In “A Victim

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Recent criticisms published in Michelle Balaev’s *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* have focused on dismantling the centrality of such discursive articulations of the traumatic “unspeakable,” problematizing the theoretical tensions inherent in a poststructuralist conception of trauma (Stampfl 15-22), as well as its incompatibility with contemporary advancements in neuroscience and the specificity required to situate trauma research in an array of social and cultural contexts (Balaev 3).
of Higher Space,” Blackwood’s earlier *John Silence* story about the fourth dimension, Racine Mudge similarly decries the limitations of language in describing the extraordinary states of consciousness he has achieved, asking “how in the world describe what is indescribable?” (9) and confessing that “I seem stupid when I have to describe things that transcend the power of language and are really therefore indescribable” (4). Throughout the narrative, Higher Space is repeatedly described as an experience that “defies description,” “is more than I can put intelligibly into words” and transcends “the possibility of what I can say” (*John Silence* 5).

Stories addressing the nature of consciousness trouble the fictional capacity to express philosophical ideas that challenge the conceptual and linguistic resources available to us. As much as such concerns about the poverty of language can be characterized as traumatic or modernist, in Blackwood’s work they are equally enmeshed in an occult milieu that challenges discursive realism in a metaphysical sense. In “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” the failure of language to sustain a description of what Mantravers experienced “out of the cage we know as life and living” book-ends the story, serving as the concluding note of the central narrative as well as the retrospective first page framing the story, where the narrator admits that “[s]uch experiences apparently seem *uncommunicable in any language at the disposal of humanity*, since they transcend anything humanity has undergone” (23, emphasis added). Here communication is fraught because its capacity to describe material phenomena comes up against inherent limitations of spatio-temporal reality inscribed in language itself. As the narrator puts it, communicating with Mantravers is outside the realm of possibility because “[t]he necessary words have not yet been coined” (23).

This troubling confrontation with the limits of language is consistent with Blackwood’s personal musings on language and mystical experience as he expounds on it in his autobiography, *Episodes*. I have previously cited parts of this passage, and now cite it in full:
My [. . .] conviction [. . .] is that the Mystical Experience known to many throughout the ages with invariable similarity is not a pathogenic experience, but is due to a desirable, genuine and valuable expansion of consciousness which furnishes knowledge normally ahead of the race; but, since language can only describe the experience of the race, that it is incommunicable because no words exist, and that only those who have experienced it can comprehend it (219-220).

In the theory of language at work in his ideas about the “race,” Blackwood interestingly insists that supernatural experience exceeds the ability of language to contain it, “that it is incommunicable because no words exist, and that only those who have experienced it can comprehend it” (Episodes 219-220). Blackwood thus articulates supernatural experience through a conception of altered (and alternative) consciousness that retains linguistic incomprehensibility at its heart. Here we can formulate an allegiance between occult experience and traumatic experience as mutual signifiers of higher consciousness, which recasts “the unspeakable” as a more universal quality of altered consciousness rather than exclusive to the experience of trauma.

In the war stories I have discussed above, the limits of language are approached by trauma and the occult alike. Blackwood’s post-war stories posit an elaboration of both trauma and the occult as lying beyond representability in a move that is “illustrative of the way in which occultism constituted a crucial enactment of the ambiguities of ‘the modern’” (Owen 116). These stories are each in their own way centered around problems of communicability: after his shocking accident, Lindstrum in “The Survivors” wants nothing more than to bear witness to the fact of his (perceived) survival, noting that “he wanted to speak to someone, to tell about his escape; that really was his keenest desire, he discovered. He burned to tell about it [. . .] The need to speak to someone [. . .] became so urgent he could scarcely control it” (176). Here what Lindstrum feels as a “longing to
describe what had happened” (178) echoes what I have described as Blackwood’s own trauma-adjacent description of an unwieldy writerly impulse that actively seeks to overtake the writer in the need to express the “undigested horrors” that lie repressed in the psyche. O’Reilly in “Confession” similarly finds himself burdened with a great “need for expression,” yearning for “someone who would understand” (12). In “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” the reappearance of Mantravers provides a glimmer of hope that the narrator could question him about the most powerful conundrums of life, including love, death, pain, sleep, and of course the Great War itself (69, 72); but before any answers can be extracted, Mantravers disappears again from three-dimensional space: “Before he could satisfy the thousand questions I burned to ask him [. . .] he was gone again, this time, as we say, for good” (23).

Only Lindstrum in “The Survivors”—for whom O’Reilly was perhaps a failed prototype—truly finds a partner in communication, the unnamed pilot who also “escaped” a terrible accident into a ghostly existence. The discovery that Lindstrum’s physical body has in fact died and his survival is that of a ghost is not presented as a sobering end to this tale; rather, he is able to find another “survivor” who immediately identifies him as an equal. The discovery of their new spectral nature occurs when a living family sits down on their bench unawares of their invisible and intangible presence, but the element of horror in this twist ending remains absent as the twin ghosts “resumed their talk as though no one else sat on the bench, continuing it where they had left off, and talking perhaps for hours, perhaps for days, perhaps for weeks or months, or even centuries” (180). Despite his propensity for writing ghost tales, Blackwood expressed a measure of discomfort with the wartime spiritualist revival. In a letter to Wrong, Blackwood writes that in his fiction he sought to “offer an alternative to the ‘return to the dead’ in the current craze for séances which I find so distressing” (qtd. in Ashley, 223). In the final scene of “The Survivors,” Blackwood
thus subtly challenges a received wisdom about coping with loss, reconceiving the popular resurgence of communication with the fallen as taking place between the perished in a new post-mortem state of existence rather than as a function of summoning them from beyond the grave.

2.5 Conclusion: War, Trauma, Communication

Jay Winter argues that the wartime new spiritualists were drawn to the psychic for various reasons, noting that “[s]ome were poets of the paranormal; some meditated on the after-life; others were fascinated by contemporary psychological research” (Sites of Memory 56). As I have shown throughout this chapter, Algernon Blackwood’s speculative war fiction addresses the intersection of all three facets of what Winter identifies as the cultural appeal of the “occult revival,” portraying theoretically sophisticated depictions of war trauma that engage meaningfully with novel theories of the unconscious while simultaneously retaining the supernatural as a legitimate discourse onto itself. “Confession,” “The Survivors,” and “Elsewhere and Otherwise” all prominently feature traumatized characters who are haunted by a host of symptoms that can be organized under the wartime term “shell shock.” These stories address important issues surrounding the communicability of traumatic events and the possibility of language to contain them, but also the question of choosing to represent them, however incompletely, at all. These stories uncannily resignify the boundary between life and death, trouble normative temporality and materiality, and stylistically represent linguistic incomprehensibility under the experience of trauma. Although these are all aspects of a consciousness frayed by the condition of trauma, in Blackwood’s work they are equally representative of a consciousness induced into a supernatural state outside of the limits of language itself. In “Confession,” a shell-shocked soldier finds himself subject to ghostly apparitions that may be interpreted either as traumatic hallucination or genuine mystical experience of extra-dimensional figures. In “The Survivors,” the victim of a transportation
accident himself becomes such a spectre, finding that what could be seen as trauma symptoms are actually the reorientations of higher consciousness. In “Elsewhere and Otherwise,” the wartime disappearance of a man into the fourth dimension defies not only the boundaries of life and death, but also of space and time. In each case, trauma is conceptualized as an expansion of consciousness that provides the traumatized character with elevated senses of perception that reorient the world through an uncanny clairvoyance about its constituent parts to the highest levels of abstraction in temporality and materiality. As Mantravers, the multi-dimensional being in “Elsewhere and Otherwise” explains this reorientation of the world in the expansion of mind: “as consciousness changes, grows, the universe it perceives grows and changes with it” (51).
Conclusion

Written at the *fin-de-siècle* and well into the modernist period, the work of Algernon Blackwood addresses the complex interactions between early Modernist literature and the historically concurrent British “occult revival.” Through close readings of the 1908 psychic detective series *John Silence* and select wartime stories, my study provides an introduction to Blackwood’s unique fictional explorations of human consciousness, which are generative of occult speculation as well as scientific innovation. Inasmuch as Blackwood’s work is representative of the supernatural fiction appearing in the periodicals of the period, these readings also demonstrate how popular fiction interacts in meaningful ways with the same scientific and psychodynamic theories that emerged as paradigmatic of literary Modernism—most notably trauma. I have argued that the disciplinary lacunae we might imagine between popular fiction/culture and the intellectually stratified spheres of modernist literature are crossed by the supernatural fictions of figures like Blackwood. There exists fertile ground here for further exploration of the liminal cultural productions of the “occult revival” and their complex interactions with established literary fields.

This study thus offers some ways to reconceptualize select texts by Blackwood in light of this historical and literary context, which I see as an avenue for reinvigoration of Blackwood studies beyond the category of the “weird” that has long overdetermined it. Much work remains to be done in this regard. Literary critics have barely scratched the surface of Blackwood’s expansive literary oeuvre, which entails 11 novels, more than 100 short stories, several plays, and critically underexamined broadcast radio work. This thesis commences initial interpretations of some of Blackwood’s stories (“Confession,” “The Survivors” and “Elsewhere and Otherwise” have not, as far as I have been able to ascertain, received any preceding critical evaluation). There
also exists significant potential for archival research to establish a list of contents of Blackwood’s personal library, which is not currently available. As I have shown, the portrayals of mental phenomena throughout his fictional oeuvre demonstrate a keen interest in a wide array of psychodynamic theories, although Freud and Jung are the only ones he mentions by name in a number of stories. Luckhurst in *The Mummy’s Curse: The True History of a Dark Fantasy* (2012) also asserts that Blackwood certainly read Freud, although he suggests that F.W.H. Myers potentially poses an even greater influence with respect to the relationship between psychology and the occult (182). This thesis has sketched in broad lines some potential connections, influences, and references in Blackwood’s engagement with the emerging psychodynamic paradigm.

A number of my contextual comparisons show that Blackwood’s work typifies the supernatural fiction that proliferated during the period, rather than offering particularly distinctive modes of engaging with the literary themes endemic to the occult revival. However, I argue that perhaps the most prominent site of distinction offered by Blackwood’s work is a relentless affirmation of mystical discourses as genuine and valid realms of experience, even where psychological or scientific interpretations of the supernatural phenomena present in his stories are offered. Blackwood’s version of psychic detection in *John Silence* and his representations of trauma in the post-war stories thus always leave open the possibility of confirming his belief in the possibility that “Mystical Experience [. . .] is not a pathogenic experience, but is due to a desirable, genuine and valuable expansion of consciousness” (Blackwood, *Episodes* 219-220).
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