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Hell or High Water

The Horror of the Lacanian Real
in Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows"

by

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A. B., Dartmouth College, 1981

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A Professional Paper
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Charles N. Blakemore, Jr.

8 May, 1996
"Here you may satisfy your soul's desire and may commune with the Invisibles; only, to find the Invisibles, you must first be able to lose yourself."

- Algernon Blackwood, "The Old Man of Visions"

Of the Mysterious which often clasps man in its invisible arms, there's not a ray can find its way into this cold heart. She sees only the varied surface of the things of the world, and, like the little child, is pleased with the golden, glittering fruit, at the kernel of which lies the fatal poison.

- E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman"

The Reluctant "Ghost Man"

Critics of his time revered Algernon Blackwood as a poet, a mystic, a master of "fine and beautiful art." (Field, 20) Born a "Hon,"

Commander in the British Empire, a Aleister Crowley's Golden Dawn, host television program a narrator of tales), world white hunter, invested as a Order of the cohort of Order of the of a popular on the BBC (as supernatural traveler, great reporter ...
Blackwood was an early twentieth century media star, our grandparents’ answer to Stephen King. He has suffered a grand diminution over the decades since his death in 1951, yet he is still considered the “foremost British supernaturalist of the ... century” and the “last great British master of supernatural fiction, leaving no clear successor.” (Bleiler in Blackwood, Best Ghost Stories x & vi). And the story under discussion here, “The Willows,” never escapes the onerous tag of ‘masterpiece.’ Seldom, however, has the sobriquet been better earned, especially in this genre where the most famous works require apology or caveat. Few stories in any genre have a more fully realized sense of place or atmosphere. None of the current crop of frissonistes display anything like the fine, almost delicate touch Blackwood employs in developing and sustaining suspense. Subtlety, anathema to the blood-spattered pulpmongers of the nineties, Blackwood exhibits to frightful effect.

Blackwood was an uncommon man. In the 1938 introduction to his selected works, he described the personal roots of his stories, the actual locations and situations where he first felt the “delicious shudder” (an orgasm?) which accompanied each tale’s nascence. “To write a ghost story,” he says, “I must first feel ghostly, a condition not to be artificially
induced.” (BGS, xvii) The “Willows” story was a composite of two incidents on different Danube excursions, yet the theme of “The Willows” springs whole from life; its central concern—the concern also of this paper—regards the ability of men to access the Unknown (“that great realm that lies beyond the world of the Known and the Obvious” (Colbron, 620)), and the advisability of this undertaking. Throughout his work, Blackwood confronted this dilemma, of the undeniable allure of boundaries, of “borderlands... [and] unseen forces, forces kindly, indifferent or inimical, lurking just behind the veil of the tangible” (Field, 20). For Blackwood, that border may lie anywhere, in a house on a busy street, a sleepy French town, an abandoned monastery; most often, however, it will be found in Nature: “[for Blackwood] the preternatural...is usually a deeper aspect of nature, which commonly remains unperceived but which may reveal itself in moments of ‘extended consciousness.’” (Penzoldt, 230). This place, and the characters’ motivation for accessing it, remain constant in Blackwood’s oeuvre; both are well defined by Jack Sullivan:

Blackwood’s heroes are visionaries who feel oppressed by everyday reality and who deliberately seek out other worlds. What they discover usually encompasses both ecstasy and horror, though sometimes only horror. In either case, the “other” reality is as unmanageable as the first, and the character often spends the rest of the tale desperately negotiating a reentrance into what was renounced in the first place. Rarely, however, is there
the slightest verbal retraction of the initial renunciation....[the characters] usually end where they started; the stories read like unresolved circles. (114)

In these characterizations, Blackwood has gone straight to the heart of human psychological motivation. This fearful desire for union with the "something infinite behind everything" (Gilbert, 92) bears an unmistakable resemblance to the impossible quest Jacques Lacan has defined as the paradigm for all human action: the search for, and desired acquisition of, the departed Mother. The tale of "The Willows," which follows Sullivan's schema almost exactly, can be read as a Lacanian battle royale between the forces which Blackwood identified as "human" and "elemental," but which modern psychoanalysis prefers to name the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic is the power of representation and signification, language and civilization. The Real is ... everything. The protagonist of Blackwood's novel The Centaur, when asked to describe his quest, responds: "Far beyond words it lies, as difficult of full recovery as the dreams of deep sleep, as the ecstasy of the religious....Full recapture, I am convinced, is not possible at all in words." (quoted in Gilbert, 92) I myself might lapse into parable, after the manner of that other famous scapegoat and notorious dreamer:
A Parable: Our Little World, Its Doors Blown Off

In the primordial forest, after sating himself on all the women present, the Father orders the cowering Son not to touch the Sisters. Then he and the Mother withdraw into the dark beyond the circle of firelight to wash and to sleep. The primordial Son, hungry himself, frustrated, creeps back into the light from among the trees. He gazes at the scene of repletion, listens to the deep snoring of the Father and Mother, the sighing and moaning of his Sisters, the whining of the Dog recuperating from the kick earned by its curiosity. The adolescent Son tastes what we would recognize as something like hot wire (his people have not penetrated the mysteries of metal) on the tip of his tongue. He feels loneliness, in the midst of his family. He feels the cold of the immense night oozing through the boughs and into his bones. He feels humiliation, anger against his Father’s avaricious capacity, fear of the impossible Male power that could possess so much of the life-force of the Women. He identifies with the Dog, which he kicks away from the fire’s prime spot. As he does, a coyote, or a wolf perhaps, howls an apparent warning. The Son cowers, hunkering closer to the warmth and
The camp of women drifts off to sleep, but he cannot. He watches them dream in the inconstant light. He imagines himself as the bearer of the great staff of plenty – the staff he sees even now separating him from the flesh he desires. He dreams of his Father’s blood on his hands, in his mouth, overpowering the metallic savor of lust. The wolf cries out, and he knows the Father watches ... from somewhere in the dark. He fears him. He hates him. He reveres him, too.

(Adapted from Freud, Totem and Taboo, 175-181)

What We Talk About When We Talk About Real

The rational mind supposes that reality is all we can know, the only world we inhabit. We must trust the evidence of our senses, or else we are truly blind and utterly ignorant. Were this a fact, our list of options (to continue or desist, to be or not to be) would be limited indeed, and Algernon Blackwood’s mystical ecstasy would be no heftier than fairy tale. Fortunately, reality, while limited, is a starting point at most, and at best (or worst) a frame imposed upon the Great Limitlessness of what Lacan has called “the Real,” one of three “orders” or states of being which also
include the “Symbolic” and the “Imaginary.”¹ Lacan, earlier in his career, envisioned the three orders as interpenetrating and dependent, and portrayed their relationship by what he called a “Borromean knot.”

The Real, however, is the pig more equal than knot itself is in fact “noué” or the others, as the the Real, which is, knotted. (Lee, 196-97) Slavoj Zizek of the Real one step further and posits a sort of underlying Real, the deeper, cold current beneath the Symbolic and Imaginary surface, or an “Inside/Outside effect.” To explain he quotes from a sci-fi horror novel by Robert Heinlein, The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag. Hoag, a detective, discovers that our world is an artwork created by ‘universal artists;’ he also learns that outside this aesthetic construction exists the real reality, which he stumbles across after rolling down the window of his car and finding, instead of the urban scene viewed through the window glass, “a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. [He] could see nothing of the city through the vel.

¹. the last will not fall into the purview of this paper.
it, not because it was too dense but because it was — empty.”

Zizek quickly points out that the grey mist, “the pulsing of the presymbolic substance” is the Real, and that it the windowpane, the shell which isolates the perceiving subject in his little, ego-esque box, from which both “reality” (the city streets, buildings, people) and the Real “erupt.”

(Looking Awry, 14-15)² Between “reality” and the Real yawns a gap we can only bridge in fiction, or in those moments Blackwood described as “extended consciousness” and Lacan as “tychic experiences,” of being tuché by the Real. Other things, Real things, that “presymbolic substance” Zizek refers to, however, do not know our restrictions: they are unlimned, undefined, lacking our names and parameters and thus our inabilities. They can touch “reality” and return whence they came. They can excite and impact human space in impossible ways, because they are not limited by reality’s “possible.” There are paths out of the Real, but only one way in: the dead end.

The Real? The definite article misleads the casual reader by suggesting that this place has definition, can be

² recall also Jonathan Harker’s terrible journey through the mist to the Count’s castle at the beginning of Stoker’s Dracula: nothing of the no-man’s-land is visible from the last inn to the actual castle grounds.
partitioned off from the other Orders, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Nonsense. The Real underlies the all. Zizek’s model posits an Imaginary and a Symbolic superimposed atop the Real, in the way a car moves through a mist or a canoe floats on water (bear this in mind). Film dialogue and sound effects are always mixed over an underlying wash of “room tone” (the filmic equivalent of the “sounds of silence”): a recording of an empty room which gives the depth of realism to its overlays. In our parable, the Real darkness into which the Father and Mother vanish is not displaced by the firelight; were the Son to extinguish the fire, he would find the darkness had persisted. Darkness is the steady-state of existence, light the introduced quantity. The Real, that which cannot be, and has not been, represented in symbolic terms – the place or thing which remains unprocessed by the moi of ego – is where one is in the absence of “reality”, if by that term we mean the reality of the sane, well-adjusted social human.

It is also the receptacle from which we draw our signifying objects: our dark and dangerous toy chest, like Pandora’s. The Symbolic and the Imaginary are, after all, completely sterile. Only the Real, as the residence of the Mother, can create. The act of using these objects, of in-
asserting them into our personal, ego-constructed fields, alters their nature; at the moment of their acquisition they partake of consciousness as they are subsumed into the perceptual matrix. As soon as they are abandoned and fall out of the orbit of consciousness, they revert to Real status. Lacan and Zizek define the Real as a “hard kernel resisting symbolization,” (Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 161) a place immune to the symbolic assault of the narcissist in us all which makes us who we are and which demands that the world accommodate our self-image and our desires. That immu-
nity travels sens unique, however; the gushing fertility of the Real accounts for the constant alteration of human plans and designs known variously as “circumstance,” “the act of God” or “luck.” The intrusion of Real objects into Symbolic discourse may have effects happy or sad; but as Other, different things, they inevitably shock and disturb us.

Our lascivious little parable, like all parables, collapses into itself under the merest wisp of contention: science tells us that there was no “primordial human,” only a series of more and more human-like beings which achieved humanity over the vastness of time. But we need the idea of the “first Father.” Identical in its structural integrity to the first chicken or the first egg, the Paternal prototype is
nothing more than a place in an equation, the empty hole meant to be filled with a value or tangible commodity. By itself, the commodity is raw material, of even less significance than the hole, which after all carries an almost unlimited freight of potential. Yet the hole is limited by having the requisite of a definition. It needs to be filled by the commodity in order to function at all. "A" in "A + B = C" is not nihil simply because it has no current value. It is a placesetter with a prescribed function within the equation, a function determined (or created) by the definition itself (it is also, of course, a letter). It needs its context. And it is thereby limited — neither infinite nor nameless. So too is the Father in our lurid fairy tale. He requires us (the "raw material") to account for his existence, and to recount it. And we need him to define ourselves, our past lives and our present desires. The parable is, the story on which rest the foundation of human culture and civilization. When the hole is not filled, all hell breaks loose.

The raw materials themselves (Lacan's *objets petits a*) have an intrusive quality, like a gunshot heard from the street. Granted, they are bound to be different, to seem to belong outside the matrix of consciousness. And, as objects of the inaccessible Real, it would seem they should be inac-
cessible as well. Were that the case, we should have no
genre of supernatural fiction. Yet we are constantly con­
fronted by the Real, seeping through the cracks in our
picket-fence realities. Because these simple objects origi­
nate outside the context of our perception, in the residence
of the holy Other, we invest them with the sublime, super­
natural essential nature of Kant’s Thing-in-itself. Yet be­
because they are Real, have physical presence and occupy space
(no matter how impossible that space may be), they have occa­
sional access to us. We may be momentarily touched (tuché)
by them, which constitutes Lacan’s “tychic experience.” Such
experiences are the propellants and climactic events of all
supernatural fiction.

We must resort to description here, which contradicts
the being-ness of the actual experience. But rather than
throw up the hands and holler, “Quelle bêtise!” let’s peruse
a ghostly example from Lacan: after graduating university,
the young psychoanalyst decided to get out of the cloister
and into the world — to get some dirt under his fingernails.
He signed onboard a Bretagne fishing boat, where he stuck out
like a chimpanzee on the Champs Elysées. He was held in con­
tempt by his shipmates, who recognized a true Other when they
saw one. One day, while out at sea, the fishermen spied a
tin can floating on the spumy waves. "You see that can?" said one unpleasant salt to Lacan as he pointed toward the trash. "Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" But the young man understood this differently. He believed that the can, while it did not see him, was looking back at him. By appreciating this object's power to look, without consciousness, and by identifying himself as an empty object of Otherness to the fishermen, Lacan conceived of an object's capacity to be in terms resistant to subjectivity. While he was no object of desire for the fishermen (unless we chalk their attitudes down to envy), he most certainly was an intrusion of the inexplicable Real into their perceptual matrices, a can floating on their ocean. Lacan goes to great length to deny that this passage is an example of the Imaginary — he states that he is not the projected image, but rather "if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot": the Real object off which light plays. "I, at that moment,...looked like nothing on earth." (FFC, 95-7) Of course, by contemplating the can and relating it to himself, he had removed it from the Real and saddled it with Symbolic baggage. But prior to that action, in the fullness of the first moment of contact, the can was Real. Afterward, it reverted to an image of Oth-
erness, rather than its original, pure Other-being. Epiph­
any, the kiss of the supernatural, is nothing if not evanes­
cent. Which is why the hole always remains.

The events in "The Willows" unfold within the same phe­
nomenological context as Lacan's encounter with the can: an
alien object (the canoe and its occupants) intrudes on a
fixed relationship (the wind, the water and the willows),
disrupting that relationship and causing the loss of integ­

rity throughout the system. Decay and entropy ensue.

Supernatural occurrences — say, hauntings or episodes of
clairvoyance — always function in this manner; their disrup­
tions of the integrity of "normalcy" feel like violations.
They frighten us. Yet, at the same time we are drawn to
these eruptions of Otherness with a perverse energy. Freud
offers the death drive, the need of a being to aspire towards
its own dissolution, as explanation. It accounts equally
well for the continuing popularity of the horror genre. Re­
call that, according to Freud, the sacred and the horrible
are twigs off the same bough. Both are results of fear.

The Willows

one of the chief distinctions of "The Willows" is its
subversion of the standard paradigm of horror fiction: in
this tale, the men are the "supernatural" intruders, the dis­
ruptive alien element. The willows and spirits belong, the
humans do not.
Both have their linguistic roots in “what may not be touched:” taboo, or the Real.

The contrast between “sacred” and “unclean” coincides with a succession of two stages of mythology. The earlier of these stages did not completely disappear when the second one was reached but persisted in what was regarded as an inferior and eventually a contemptible form...so that the [primary] objects of ...veneration turn into objects of horror. (Totem and Taboo, 33)

The headlights of an oncoming car must appear supernaturally divine to a mesmerized deer. We know full well they signal destruction.

La Mère, la mer, la mare, la marque

Nature refuses to fill the hole. She has endowed us with an inchoate, barely determinate randiness, a pansexuality, which is meant to propagate the species regardless of cost, while at the same time instilling in us the death drive, the urge toward self-destruction and abnegation. Yet we have nowhere other than Nature to turn for our satisfaction. The Mother, our great passion, has been displaced into the extime world, the world of the Real, the world outside the intellectual processes of ego – that place unencumbered by consciousness, which I would call “nature au naturel.” We believe the Mother will fill the chasm which gapes between us
and our satiety, but this is a delusion, a radical fallacy. The Real, the Mother’s place, is inaccessible. It’s this very inaccessibility, the emptiness of Eden, that’s the source of our greatest torment. If this begins to sound a bit like Heaven – the place of Heart’s Desire – watch out. *Hic iacet dracones.* Hell’s there, too.

And consider this, as a proposition merely: with hell an empty placesetter, a position in an equation which renders those values inserted in it hellish, we cease to be the creators of our own demons. The equation preexists its values, or rather, it is already. Like the Father, which Zizek says we posit backwards from His observed effects, the infernal equation derives from the need to explain damnation (in an earlier paper, I invoked a Zizekian joke to describe this phenomenon: a painting, “Lenin in Warsaw,” portrays Lenin’s wife in bed with a young Komsomol member. “But where is Lenin?” a visitor asks the museum guide. “Lenin,” the guide answers, “is in Warsaw.” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 159). Lenin is the picture’s object/subject; as an absence, a motive lack, he is a Real object, an object existing elsewhere whose (non)-nature is the engine for the symbolic action of the picture). In truth, the profane and the sacred are identical — even more, they are one. Both are charged
repositories for qualitatively neutral objects – the same, Real objects, the grey mist of Heinlein’s story, or the river in “The Willows.”¹⁴ Put another way, when the tree falls in the forest, it does make a sound. We will never know just what that sound is, but we can infer that air friction, vibrations of trunk and soil, cracking of limbs will create sound in a consciousness-vacuum just as they will before a sentient audience.

We have spent millennia modeling our world, shaping it to please our conception of beauty. Civilization is symbolization, the process by which we continuously attempt to fashion surrogate images of the Mother and thus to capture Her, to extract Her from the surrounding darkness. Our efforts are doomed to failure: the Mother has never existed, any more than has the Father. She cannot exist in any image, a product of the Symbolic; he cannot exist outside the order he established. Still we sense her with longing out there, in Nature, in the Real.

The Real, meanwhile, spews into the Symbolic order a stream of objects which stain the beautifully sculpted contours of our civilized All. This eruption of objects, this

¹⁴ try extracting a piece from a river; you’ll find yourself holding a glass of water, not a glass of river.
constant renewal of the non-sense of the Real, is the structure upon which Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," hangs. Two civilized men set off on a quest for the blessed womb; to their hazard, they very nearly find it. The narrator and his companion, the Swede, intend to canoe the Danube from its source in the Black Forest (a phalanx of black phalli) to its mouth at the Black Sea: from the source to "la mer" (or is it "Mère?") , the mother-sea in all its uterine glory.

The "Black" tag, surely an ill omen, goes unnoticed by the adventurers: they remain ignorant to the end that the object of their quest is herself a perversion, a landlocked sea, a constricted mother. They do not realize until too late that they are paddling straight into the obscene darkness of the Real. A "black mother," a perverse and lustful mother, awaits them, and they have been warned. It will not be the last hint they miss.

Their choice of travel by water is an interesting one. Water constantly refers back to the Mother, to the earliest, prelapsarian life of the womb. It mimics the flow of menstrual blood and fluid, the gush of milk. One floats in a canoe as one does in the amniotic fluid, weightless, careless,
buoyed in near stasis in the midst of life. Their initial experience is idyllic, a peaceful float through pleasant, tame countryside. Wheat fields succeed sleepy villages; animals line the banks like spectators to view the wanderers' passage; cities — Vienna, Orth, Hainburg, Petronel — thrust up out of the banks. Everywhere the travelers sense the familiarity of their surroundings. They feel secure, in their proper place. Even the river they identify as a "Great Personage," (BGS, 4) a soul they can know like their own, a personality to which they have access. Before they have traversed Bavaria, they have engendered the river as female and peopled her with undines (female river nymphs): "...she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun....Much, too, we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted her shores." (BGS 5) They laze in the assurance that they inhabit a human world.

How wrong they are. Clues about the river's unpredictability elude them (they treat as rough play her "developing violent desires" (BGS 4) which will come to appear more like a variety of sado-foreplay). The river grows in strength and "personality" as it rushes toward the "mer" until finally, somewhere between Pressburg and Buda-Pesth, the wishful illusion of a human-natured Nature collapses. At a certain
point, the safe and homey landscape of farms and villages ends — the windowpane rolls down. The travelers enter a flood plain Blackwood describes as a "region of singular loneliness and desolation" (BGS 1) with every square foot of dry land covered in willows bushes — a place so unearthly the paddlers feel they "ought by rights to have some special kind of passport to admit [them]," and that they have come to a place "reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them" (BGS, 2-3) — this spoken from hindsight.

That this boundary between worlds should be a "flood plain" is no coincidence. The swelling Mother has grown too large to be contained within banks. And the swelling accompanies another change: the rising wind. The text fails to name or embody the wind (though it is anthropomorphized, ascribed a voice and a variety of sentience), but the functions it enacts are those of the Father: the invisible prohibition, the cut, the evasion of language and signification. Again and again the narrator refers to the "voice" of the wind

The Vel

5 She's the opposite here of William Blake's "charter'd Thames" (from the poem "London" in the Songs of Experience). 'Chartered,' meaning 'limited' or 'confined,' refers to the Thames's stonework banks: her tamed nature, her human housing.
shouting over them, drowning out speech, rendering communication nearly impossible (in one of his more uninformed moments, the narrator wishes the wind would go down: “I don’t care a fig for the river.” Fool). As a Paternal metaphor, this invisible wind is the last remnant of the civilized world, the final instance they will encounter of a divisor, a Lacanian vel which serves to isolate the men in their hermetic egos. It drives them ashore on an island, a symbolic gesture to reiterate its purpose of barring ingress to the Real and the Mother. Divide and conquer, saith the Father. That is the power behind the paternal prohibition, the counterforce exerted against the death drive of dissolution in the maternal soup. That is why the savior of the individualized soul was a man.

And so the travelers are deposited, “shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater” (3) on what is little more than a sandbar: one acre around, with ninety-percent of that covered in willow-bushes. From the start they recognize it as a false haven, but just how false is yet to be revealed. In a sense, they are safe, though they don’t realize why — and for good reason: they’re suddenly in a psychotic universe, where, as Zizek describes it, the Real is no longer a lack or hole in the Symbolic order but rather an
“aquarium...surrounding isolated islands of the sym-
bolic...the symbolic order [as] white iles flottantes in a
sea of yolky enjoyment.” (LA, 40) For this willowy island,
though surrounded by the water-Mother, has upon it the Fa-
ther’s stamp. Erect phalli like their cousins in the Black
Forest (though stunted by the Mother’s relentless pressure),
these willows have souls, and the uninhabited country is
alive with a sense of presence: “[the willows] went on cha-
tering and talking among themselves, laughing a little,
shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing.” This sentience makes
him uneasy, and he identifies the willows’ response to the
human presence as antagonistic. In a sense he may be right –
the place, after all, belongs to the trees. But only the
willows stand between the men and the rising river: their
roots hold the island together; their branches break the
howling wind. The travelers have achieved sanctuary, though
they barely know it. The narrator remarks about Roman shrines
and sacred groves in the area, but fails to associate these
with protection or safety. Still, he makes some
(subconscious) identification of the actual nature of the is-
land: talking there, he says, is like “talking out loud in
church, or in some other place where it was not lawful.” The
Church, the home of the Father, font of the Symbolic order, offers the threat of salvation.

Therein lies the men’s nearly fatal error, the greatest of a great many. For they fail to realize they are the bone of contention in a war. They identify only one source for the island’ haunting. Two actually coexist, as uneasily as Israelis and Palestinians: the force of the Father attempting to uphold the Symbolic order against the ferocious, voracious onslaught of a Mother who desires and who, being a Mother/Woman and therefore not absolutely subject to the paternal prohibition, can actively Enjoy and seek enjoyment (jouissance). With her lies the travelers’ greatest danger.

It would be extremely difficult to find an instance in literature where the indescribable place of the Real is better described than in “The Willows.” Of course Blackwood cannot literally relate the unrelatable. As in other Blackwood stories dealing with predicaments of place (see, for instance, “The Trod,” “The Pikestaffe Case,” “The Valley of the Beasts,” “The Lost Valley” “Entrance and Exit,” “The Damned,” “A Victim of Higher Space”....ad infinitum.), our contact with the extime remains glancing at best, a tease, like a lover’s smile cast over her shoulder as she leaves. The abduction may, in fact, take place (it does not in “The Willows”), but its
survivors cannot talk about it. But what precedes the event, the building pressure of the Real upon the Subject, causes a terrific disruption of reality. The objects from the Real, which under ordinary circumstances would be easily subsumed into symbolization, overload the system — flood the banks and wash away the levy. Which is precisely what happens next in "The Willows," through what Lacan calls 'anamorphosis.'

Anamorphosis: the process whereby an object seen from a new or different angle reveals its Real nature. Cinemascope and other widescreen film formats make use of a pair of anamorphic lenses, the first to squeeze an image in the recording process, the second to unsqueeze it at the time of projection. Lacan, in his seminar "Courtly love as anamorphosis," describes anamorphosis as:

> a turning point when the artist completely reverses the use of that illusion of space, when he forces it to enter into the original goal, that is to transform it into the support of the hidden reality — it being understood that, to a certain extent, a work of art always involves encircling the Thing. (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 141)

By way of example, he offers Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, a fairly conventional painting which reveals a hidden skull when viewed from "a door located so that you see it in its sinister truth, at the very moment when you turn around to look at it for the last time." (TEP, 140)
The story’s first, mild instance of anamorphosis involves an image of beauty: the waving of green willow leaves in the wind which take on the appearance of sea-swells, “until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their underside turns to the sun.” The next occasion is also the first inkling the men have of their supernatural predicament (and yet another ignored or unappreciated hint from the protective God-the-Father to scamper). Soon after their arrival, the Swede wanders off to gather driftwood for the fire. “By Jove!” he cries, calling for God (not Mary nor Hera nor Diana, in spite of Blackwood’s pantheism). The narrator joins him in time to witness a “black thing” floating downstream. At first the Swede believes it’s a dead body and reacts appropriately with horror. But as the object drifts farther away, “turning over and over in the foaming waves,” they realize it is “an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current.” (BGS 10) Analysis of this obvious anamorphosis reveals a fact central to our proper understanding of Blackwood’s tale. The men dismiss their fearful first impression as mirage or illusion. Reason, the voice of the Father, asserts itself. The symbolizing mind transforms the nightmare vision of the black, Real body into a safe sur-
rogate: a playful, furry animal; an object which belongs, at least according to their human understanding of “normalcy.” Yet, as later becomes plain with the aggrandizing importance of the body and the men’s need to replace it, the power of the Symbolic has decayed. The loss of the body by the Real (due to its transformation by the men into an otter) causes the bereft Mother to seek another object to satiate her desires. She turns her hunger onto the men.

What is this body in the river? If we cannot say precisely whether it is man or otter, can we describe its function? Here the body is the object “a” to the Mother-subject’s arc of desire. It operates in the story as that which Zizek calls “an object of exchange circulating among subjects, serving as a kind of guarantee, pawn, on their symbolic relationship.” (The Sublime Object of Ideology, 182) It’s the lighter in Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train which is lost at the scene of the murder and must be recovered in order to reestablish the social/symbolic structure. In the instance of “The Willows,” the subjects performing the exchange are the lustful Mother, nested in the
Real, and the proscriptive Father—civilization, the world of men. Zizek continues:

[the object] is unique, non-specular; it has no double, it escapes the dual mirror-relation—that is why it plays a crucial role in those very films which are built on a whole series of dual relations, each element having its mirror-counterpart.... [I]t is the one which has no counterpart, and that is why it must circulate between the opposite elements. The paradox of its role is that, although it is a leftover of the Real, an ‘excrement’,...the structure of symbolic exchanges can only take place in so far as it is embodied in this pure material element which acts as its guarantee. (TSOI, 182-83)

The island’s landscape is more a hall of mirrors than a single glass: its thousands of identical, undifferentiable bushes march as far as the eye can see; the men mirror each other, freely exchanging character traits of courage, stability, madness until we begin to misinterpret who is speaking any given passage. When Reason magically alters the body into the otter, the agreement between the Real and the Symbolic shatters. And in a perversion of the normal state of affairs, it is the Father who begins to undergo what Lacan calls aphanasis, or the fading of the subject. The Mother bulks constantly larger.

Almost immediately after the discovery of the body-cum-otter, a man appears in a small boat which “here in this deserted region... was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.” (BGS 10) The narrator, try as
he might, cannot focus properly on the "apparition" gesticulating and trying, vainly, to be heard above the wind's roaring voice. "There was something curious about the whole appearance — man, boat, signs, voice — that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

"'He's crossing himself!' I cried. 'Look, he's making the sign of the Cross!'" (BGS 10)

This strange interloper, even more out of place than the canoeists, must be read as the Father's last ditch effort to shore up his demesne before the rising flood. The figure's failed efforts at signification, whether by shouting or through gesture; his indistinct, questionable appearance and his instantaneous eruption upon and disappearance from the scene; all are clear emblems of the paternal "cut," of the impossibility of bridging the gaps between things. He reflects at once the agency of the symbol and its inability to effectively function. Why should he not cross himself? We need his prayers.

That first night, before the wind dies and the aphanasis of the Father becomes complete, the willows put on an anamorphic show. When they believe themselves unobserved, the trees display "shapes of some indeterminate sort ... forming a series of outlines that shift rapidly beneath the moon,"
(BGS 17) and out of these shifting branches resolve an endless stream of gargantuan bronze-colored figures climbing toward heaven. The narrator believes the beings “personified elemental forces” which inspire him to fall down and worship. Later, in a fit of recidivism, he tries again to explain the encounter away as mirage and optical illusion. He also decides they are evil, though it seems clear they are agents of the Father and in fact pose the travelers no threat. The willows themselves come in for extremely bald demonization, under the force of very little evidence: later, the narrator awakens in fear, feeling “something... pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above.” (BGS 20) This he ascribes to an assault of the willows, but when he goes outside he finds ... nothing. And yet later, the Swede blames the aural assault on the men’s psyches, an indescribable drone something like a distant gong, on the willows. An earlier description of its source strikes me as more likely:

“I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see - to localise it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but within myself....” (BGS 33)

It comes from everywhere, no more from the willows than from himself ... and no less, either. Because within each speak-
ing subject or object of signification, in the hard kernel residing in all of us, lurks the mindless, soulless Real. That is the Mother’s threat, how she seeks to ravish her “victims:” by exposing them as objects — her objects. She will steal their souls.
The wanderers fear most the loss of their sanity, the discriminating consciousness of the "moi." To the lustful Mother they are the objets petits a, the objects of desire and longing, the commodity which may satisfy her hunger.

And what an aggressive hunger. She eats the island away beneath their feet. As they sleep, she eats a hole in the canoe, necessitating another overnight on the island to make repairs. She eats the contents of their provision bag. All this as hors d'oeuvres to the pièce de résistance, the men's intellects. Only then will they make suitable substitutes for the one that got away, the reconstructed body (remember, it was dead and anonymous, reverted to mere object status).

Under her corrosive ministrations, the world becomes "unintelligible" and the death drive asserts its absolute sovereignty: "There are things about us," the Swede says, "that make for disorder, dissolution, destruction, our destruction....We've strayed out of a safe line somewhere."

(BGS 36) The Mother's presence so overpowers them that the anamorphotic becomes the standard mode of seeing: "the ot-
ter...the hurrying boatman...the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character and revealed in something of its other aspect — as it existed across the border in that other region." (BGS 38) Their presumed fate, says the Swede, is worse by far than death, which "involves no change of character.... But this means a radical altera­tion, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by sub­stitution" (BGS 40) — the loss of personality, of "immortal soul" as Blackwood might have it, or of the moi in Lacan’s terminology. They learn that the gong sound signals the proximity of the Mother, and that she finds them by sniffing out consciousness. They resolve not to think, "for what you think happens." (BGS 43) By doing this they effectively dis­guise themselves, hiding their connection with the Symbolic and masquerading as Things, objects without consciousness — a rank impossibility, as it happens, for the very prohibition sets in motion for the narrator a chain of signifiers leading directly to images of civilization and the "soul of ordinari­ness." (Try not thinking about bananas some time) He bursts out laughing at the absurdity of it all. And with a bonechilling cry, the Mother swoops down, perilously close.

lycanthropy; in this case, the one way the hero can get the girl is by letting his hair hang down (literally).
The speed of decay increases. An extremely nasty encounter is averted when the Swede actually swoons and the narrator is distracted by pain to such an extant that the Mother loses the men’s scent. Sand funnels, hollows in the sand which mark the Mother’s passage — holes in the Real if ever there were any — appear more prevalent, and larger. During the night, the Swede’s stability crumbles. He takes it upon himself to offer up his body as the sacrifice, shouting about “going inside to Them” and “taking the way of the water and the wind.” His friend drags him away from the water’s edge, back to the tent. And in the morning they discover their savior, a surrogate: yet another dead body (or is it?) washed up by the river which the Mother accepts as their offering: the River is falling, the gong has stopped. The men feel calm, sane. They examine the body, a drowned peasant which has been caught and landed by some willow roots. But as they go to turn the body, they disturb the invisible, feeding Mother, who rises with a loud hum from the corpse’s chest. The shock of this causes the men to fall over each other and dislodge the body from its sticking place. It floats off downstream, “turning over and over on the waves like an otter.”

Now, my friends, would be a good time to leave.
Blackwood has been accused by critics of resorting to the happy ending. Apparently "The Willows" toes the line here, as the narrator recounts his tale from the land of the living. But just how he and the Swede managed to escape is left to our imaginations, as is so much of Blackwood's wonderful tale: they have no steering paddle, no food, a canoe patched with the proverbial "spit and baling wire," miles to go before they reach even the end of the willows (never mind civilization), and the Body has just anamorphosed into the Otter again (one of Jack Sullivan's "unresolved circles"). This ending, reeking with ambiguity and unanswered questions, does not seem to have bothered any past readers, though I grant that none I have yet encountered have read the story as I have, nor have any confronted Blackwood from a Lacanian perspective. If this paper serves no other purpose, may it succeed in suggesting the felicitous relationship between Lacanian psychoanalytical paradigms and the problems of the supernatural genre.
Works Cited


