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**Middlebrow Mystics: Henri Bergson and
British Culture,
1899-1939**

Helen L. Green

PhD

2015

**Middlebrow Mystics: Henri Bergson and
British Culture,
1899-1939**

Helen Louise Green

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Northumbria at
Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Research undertaken in the Faculty of Arts, Design and
Social Sciences.

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others and that all procedures for ethical approval have been followed.

I declare that the word count for this thesis is: 78545

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Abstract

Middlebrow Mystics: Henri Bergson and British Culture, 1899-1939

This thesis explores the influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy on middlebrow literature between 1899 and 1939. In doing so it engages with the work of Joseph Conrad, Algernon Blackwood and John Buchan as well as critics John Mullarkey, Suzanne Guerlac, Michael Vaughan and Michael Kolkman who, over the past three decades, have instigated a significant interdisciplinary revival and reassessment of Bergson's work. Specifically, this study builds on, yet also extends, the work of literary critics like Paul Douglass, Hillary Fink, Mary Ann Gillies and S.E. Gontarski who since the nineteen nineties have produced extensive studies exploring the impact of Bergson's philosophy on modernism. While each of these studies confirm the considerable impact Bergson wrought on the culture and literature of this period, each limit their focus to canonical 'highbrow' modernist writers. Given the pervasive popularity of Bergson at this juncture, and following the spirit of recent calls in modernist studies for more inclusive, 'flexible and perspicuous' interpretations of the period's literature, this project aims to extend the parameters of existing research to encompass early twentieth century 'middlebrow' fiction in the belief that Bergson represents a significant cultural and ideological bridge between these, too often, polarised literary streams.¹

As such, this study expands on the work of scholars like Nicola Humble, Kate Macdonald, Erica Brown and Mary Grover who, to borrow Humble's term, have sought to 'rehabilitate' and reassess critical perceptions of the early twentieth century's 'middlebrow' writing. Following a detailed explanation of Bergson's philosophy, its place in early

¹ Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

twentieth century British culture and its pertinence to literary studies today, I will move on to discuss key works by Joseph Conrad, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and John Buchan in relation to Bergson's philosophy, placing particular focus on their more mystical aspects and thematic, structural applications. Such an investigation does not aim to negate the unique contribution Bergson made to inspiring, elucidating and supporting the formal innovations of modernism but hopes to emphasise the fact that his ideas resounded far beyond this context, capturing the attention of an unexpectedly broad spectrum of society in often unexpected, unconventional and as yet, under-explored ways.

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Abbreviations

Works by Henri Bergson

CE Creative Evolution

IM An Introduction to Metaphysics

L Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic

MM Matter and Memory

TFW Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness

TMSR Two Sources of Morality and Religion

Key Works Discussed in this Thesis

C The Centaur by Algernon Blackwood

EBT Episodes Before Thirty by Algernon Blackwood

H Hieroglyphics by Arthur Machen

HD Heart of Darkness and Other Stories by Joseph Conrad

HOD Hill of Dreams by Arthur Machen

LJ Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad

MHD Memory Hold the Door by John Buchan

SHR Sick Heart River by John Buchan

Introduction

Background

The past three decades have revealed an increasing movement to redefine literary modernism in much broader, more inclusive terms than those established by modernism's Anglo-American critical tradition.² In the second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011), Michael Levenson observes that today's modernist scholars 'produce increasingly ambitious acts of contextualisation alongside more inclusive histories.'³ As Levenson asserts, this movement is in part a response to the new century's desire to move beyond the 'aging giant' of Modernism: an attempt to step out of the shadow cast by canonical figures such as 'Joyce, Woolf, Stein and Eliot, Einstein and Brecht, Freud and Marx'.⁴ This transition has brought with it a responsibility to challenge and clarify the features associated with the term 'modernism': a designation which, though so evocative and familiar, is likewise tantalisingly nebulous and unstable. Indeed, as the Modernist era fades into the past, it has become increasingly apparent that in order to provide a coherent map of our literary heritage there is a need to embrace, parse and elucidate the complex nuances and interactions of the movement as it vied with its antecedents and contemporary popular writing and culture; movements which traditional critical interpretations of the era have so often placed in opposition to one another.

As Leon Surette speculates in *The Birth of Modernism* (1993), it is only recently and especially so, now we have crossed into and established ourselves in the twenty-first century, that literary researchers have gained the critical distance necessary to meet this challenge.⁵

² A view of 'high' modernism particularly associated with critics such as Hugh Kenner, Donald Davie and Malcolm Bradbury.

³ Michael Levenson, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 3.

The historical turn in late twentieth and twenty-first century literary criticism has revealed that the modernists were not the opponents of tradition, history and mass culture they have been represented to be but rather astute, culturally engaged individuals ‘sharply conscious of their historical entanglements’ and well able to manipulate the commercial marketplace.⁶ Yet, as Levenson notes, such misconceptions (views promulgated by modernism’s ambitious leading figures) persist and are endemic to traditional understandings of the movement. In fact, the widespread acceptance of such mythoi has resulted in what Mary Ann Gillies identifies in *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* as a ‘static view of modernism’, one she believes has dominated and attenuated ‘criticism for much of the middle years of this century’.⁷ In attempting to address this imbalance, Gillies calls for a reassessment of the period, one willing to challenge long-established assumptions about the period and unafraid to contest the modernists’ own accounts of their aims and practice. Gillies contends that such an approach will result in ‘markedly different accounts of the period’, revealing new narratives that will radically unsettle, yet ultimately augment and enrich our understanding of this era and its literature. In association with this effort, Gillies points to the case of Bergson, identifying the philosopher’s recent critical revival as an example of the value of this dynamic new approach.

Seemingly condemned to obscurity in the wake of the world wars, widely effaced from the modernists’ own accounts of their work and outlooks, and eclipsed by the rising popularity of psychoanalysis, anti-idealism, existentialism and general post-war pessimism, the philosopher Henri Bergson is now increasingly recognised as an important, influential figure in early twentieth century culture. Thanks, in philosophy, to thinkers like Gillies Deleuze, P.A.Y. Gunter and John Mullarkey and Michael Levenson, Suzanne Guerlac, Paul

⁶ Levenson, *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2.

⁷ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 188.

Douglass and Mary Ann Gillies in literary studies (among many others), over the past thirty years Bergson's thought has been increasingly explored and acknowledged as a significant factor in informing the modernists' preoccupation with, and aesthetic innovations regarding, time, intuition, memory and subjectivity. Despite these developments, to date, such discussions have remained confined to canonical modernist writers, in particular T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Because of the specificity of this application Bergson has ironically become a figure whose thought, particularly that concerned with time and memory, has become so integral to discussions of modernist aesthetics that it at times appears to further limit the definition of modernism rather than expose its broader cultural and literary connections. Thus in the spirit of inclusivity and dynamism called for by critics like Gillies and Levenson, creating an environment which supported Bergson's own rise from obscurity, this study aims to extend the scope of such explorations to encompass the work of a selection of writers from this era until recently labelled, and as such critically marginalised, as 'middlebrow.'

The impetus for this research originates from a broader critical context which has, due to the efforts of critics such as Nicola Humble, Kate Macdonald, Erica Brown and Mary Grover, seen middlebrow literature increasingly re-evaluated and reconsidered as a valid and valuable field of research. This effort, itself borne out of modernism's newly mobile and inclusive boundaries, has asserted the importance of viewing early twentieth century literature, whether 'modernist' or 'middlebrow', as writing emerging from and responding to a shared historic and cultural backdrop: each equal and important components in building a more nuanced understanding of this complex, transitional era. More than any other figure of this period Bergson, hailed in the contemporary press as the 'people's philosopher', emerges as an invaluable point of reference: a fulcrum linking the intelligentsia to popular culture. By exploring the relationships between Bergson's philosophy and the writing of a selection of

middlebrow writers from this period, this study aims to demonstrate the value of embracing Bergson's ideas in a much more expansive, theoretical capacity than has been attempted previously and of applying these ideas to enhance our understandings of writers falling outside the often cloistered, closed borders of 'highbrow modernism'. I believe this effort will provide a new perspective to discussions pertaining to both Bergson and the underexplored relationships existent between modernist and middlebrow literatures: a new, invigorating viewpoint in fitting with the broad scope of Bergson's contemporary appeal. In writing this thesis I hope not only to bring attention to the critical value of works by a selection of marginalised or 'middlebrow' writers, but also to present Bergson's philosophy and its associated terminology as a valuable tool for bridging, discussing and drawing together these contemporary literary streams: modes of writing too often discussed in isolation, or explored in opposition to one another.

Structure

The initial three chapters of this study will introduce Henri Bergson, chart his reception in academic, middlebrow and popular culture and clarify the central tenets of his thought. Chapter one, 'Bergson and British Culture', considers the special social and cultural circumstances leading to Bergson's unprecedented rise and subsequent fall from fame in the opening decades of the twentieth century. This chapter will provide a contextual backdrop for this study: describing in detail the terms of Bergson's reception in Britain and tracing the complex dissemination and subsequent distortions of his ideas at the hands of the British public and press. In addition to this, it will also provide an introduction and brief rationale for each of the authors to be discussed: specifically Joseph Conrad, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and John Buchan. Within this discussion I hope to establish a clear sense of the cultural ubiquity of 'Bergsonism' at this juncture, stressing that Bergson's ideas resonated not

only with academics and the literati, but also, to borrow the terms of his American admirer George Rowland Dodson, the ‘average thoughtful man’.⁸

Extending from this, the second chapter, ‘Bergson, Modernism and Middlebrow Culture’, maps out the terms of Bergson’s resurrection and reestablishment as a valid academic figure, outlining the various guises this renaissance has taken as well as charting the varied applications it has found in fields as diverse as philosophy, media, cultural and literary studies. Identifying as a starting point Bergson’s radical treatment at the hands of Giles Deleuze in the nineteen-sixties (a presentation Deleuze himself referred to as a form of ‘philosophical buggery’), this chapter describes the tendency, in the wake of this remodelling, to understand Bergson’s ideas in far more secular, systematic and, as such, more academically palatable terms than they originally possessed. While this approach and its enduring dominance has helped to distance Bergson from the accusations of irrationalism that dogged the later years of his career, I will argue (in line with the opinions presented by Suzanne Guerlac in *Thinking in Time*) that the prevalence of this rationalised view of Bergson is at odds with the original, metaphysical spirit of his thought. The widespread melding of Deleuzian and Bergsonian thought by many of today’s researchers has, in important respects, served to mask and impede the exploration of the spiritual facets of Bergson’s thought and therefore has diverted attention from its relevance to the turn of the century fascination with mysticism and the occult. To tease out and address these overlooked ‘irrational’ aspects of Bergson’s thought and their resonance for his contemporary audience will play an important role in responding to Guerlac’s call to ‘delimit Bergson’s thought from that of Deleuze’ so that we might return to a dynamic, authentic view of Bergson- the Bergson Merleau-Ponty

⁸ George Rowland Dodson, *Bergson and the Modern Spirit: An Essay in Constructive Thought* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 1.

described as ‘audacious’.⁹ In keeping with this aim, this chapter outlines the benefits of challenging modern perceptions of Bergson, of revisiting his ideas in conjunction with their original, extraordinarily expansive scope and cultural context. As part of this process, this chapter will also discuss the complex terms of the modernists’ relationship with Bergson, illuminating this discussion with particular reference to the case of T.E. Hulme. This section describes the modernists’ early flirtations with the philosopher and links the modernists’ sudden hostility towards him to his rapid osmosis into popular culture. Focusing on Bergson’s rapid transition from ‘highbrow’, to ‘middlebrow’ culture, this chapter concludes by proposing the value of identifying, comparing and contrasting the thematic, structural and ideological responses his ideas inspired in both modernist and middlebrow writers at this time. Finally, this chapter presents the possibility of deploying Bergson’s ideas and vocabulary in a theoretical capacity comparable to that seen in Freudian psychoanalytical studies of contemporary texts.

The third chapter, ‘Bergson: Key Terms and Ideas’, sets out the key tenets of Bergson’s thought and aims to provide a comprehensive point of reference for the textual analyses to follow. Particular time is given to explaining and exploring the implications of Bergson’s emphasis on intuition as a philosophical method. Within this discussion I will consider the originality of Bergson’s approach as well as the radical implications it held for his contemporaries. In conjunction with this, this chapter will reflect on the importance of acknowledging Bergson’s unconventional aim to create a dynamic, ‘non-systematic’ philosophy: one capable of change, new interpretations and adaptations. This discussion will be followed by a brief consideration of what this ‘open’ approach might mean for today’s researchers as they attempt to identify and analyse the influence of his thought in

⁹ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 175.

contemporary texts.¹⁰ The remainder of the chapter consists of a number of subsections providing detailed explanations of Bergsonian notions of time, memory, self and language as well as thorough discussions exploring his understandings of mysticism, politics and the elusive *élan vital*.

The following four chapters focus on how Bergson's theories and their associated vocabulary can be used to illuminate and present new perspectives on key works by Joseph Conrad, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and John Buchan. Chapter four will consider the ways in which Bergson's thought can be used to support new readings of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*. Today a canonical figure, broadly recognised as a significant modernist or proto-modernist, Conrad might seem an incongruous choice to include in a study so overtly focused on middlebrow writing. As such, this chapter will open with a rationale for his inclusion, commenting on Conrad's own anxieties concerning the perceived tensions between the commercial and the artistic. Through this, I hope to assert the value of recognising and discussing Conrad as an important transitional figure between modernism, romanticism and realism as well as contemporary 'highbrow' and 'middlebrow' literary streams. Having been considered in relation to Bergsonian ideas in a number of studies including Wolfgang B. Fleishman's 'Conrad's *Chance* and Bergson's *Laughter*', Paul Kirschner's *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* and Mary Ann Gillies' *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Conrad serves as a pertinent, tangible link between existing critical explorations of Bergson's importance for contemporary writers and the more marginalised authors discussed. Through an exploration of *Lord Jim*, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which a Bergsonian approach to literary analysis might reveal new ways to understand and appreciate this canonical text. In particular, this discussion will focus on the Bergsonian understanding of the dynamic nature of 'self' and its complex relationship to the rigid

¹⁰ Henri Bergson to the editor of *Le Figaro*, March 7, 1914, in Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1914), 53.

structures and demands of society and even language itself. I will consider how reading *Lord Jim* through the lens of Bergson's philosophy might inform our understanding of Jim's actions both on board the *Patna*, and during the crisis of confidence he faces in the disaster's aftermath.

Chapter five, 'Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur*: Modernism, Mysticism and the Divided Self' will consider Algernon Blackwood's mystical novel *The Centaur*. Both today and amongst his contemporaries, Blackwood has been firmly cast as a supernatural genre writer. Yet, as he himself stated, his fascination was not with ghosts *per se*, but rather the human faculty for perceiving and processing psychical activity, of 'extended or expanded consciousness'.¹¹ Here, I will propose the value of revisiting Blackwood's work in this broader epistemological context describing how this might see him repositioned and set in dialogue with his modernist contemporaries. In particular, this chapter will consider the ways in which Blackwood's struggle to contain and depict mystical experience in writing led him to experiment with unconventional narrative forms comparable to those adopted, albeit for more self-consciously aesthetic ends, by the modernists. This chapter will explore the value of discussing the events of *The Centaur*, specifically the mystical experiences of its protagonist Terrence O'Malley, in the light of Bergson's theories of memory and subjectivity, focusing especially on the Bergsonian onus on the importance of finding balance between the external and subjective spheres.

Like Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen has been long marginalised and viewed predominantly as a writer of supernatural horror. This chapter challenges this stereotype, pointing to the broad range and scope of his writing and charting its complex relationships to the romantic, decadent and symbolist movements as well as to modernism itself.

¹¹ Algernon Blackwood to Peter Penzoldt, in Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 229.

Consequently, I will discuss Machen not as a genre writer, but as a complex transitional figure, one invaluable for revealing important links between modernism and its antecedents. This chapter will consider the ways in which Bergson's ideas might illuminate and guide discussion of Machen's novel *The Hill of Dreams*, centring on the novel's depiction of the conflict existing between the material and subjective worlds and its exploration of the dangers which might arise as a result of neglecting either one of these poles. Stemming from this discussion, the notion of symbols, language and both Bergson and Machen's associations with the Symbolist movement will be explored, emphasising the difficulties faced by those seeking to express the novelty and dynamism of subjective, or more expansively mystical experience, within the essentially static, symbolic structures of language.

The final writer to be discussed, John Buchan, has remained a famous though nevertheless critically marginalised writer. His critical neglect can be linked to the overwhelming popularity of thrillers such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as well as his imperialist connections. Recent studies by Kate Macdonald and Nathan Waddell have sought to challenge these stereotypes of Buchan, repainting him as an astute, culturally engaged individual 'in dialogue' with rather than opposed to contemporary modernist modes of writing.¹² This chapter focuses on Buchan's final fictional work *Sick Heart River*. Written by a bedridden Buchan in the penultimate year of his life, this novel resounds with mystical and spiritual speculations either absent or marginalised in his previous works. Briefly gesturing to Buchan's interest in Bergson's philosophy and describing his light-hearted engagements with Bergsonian ideas in earlier works, the main argument of this chapter will draw substantially on the religious and political ideas expounded in Bergson's final major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, as well as notions of the self and memory from a selection of his earlier works. These ideas, particularly Bergson's stress on the importance of adhering

¹² Kate Macdonald and Nathan Waddell, introduction to *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), 2.

to a creative, open attitude toward mysticism and politics will be used to guide a discussion of this uncharacteristically subjective, spiritual work.

By drawing together this diverse selection of texts by early twentieth century middlebrow writers, works linked by their underlying mystical concerns, I hope to demonstrate the value of employing Bergson's philosophy as a means of drawing together and formalising discussions of their subjective and mystical themes, their ambivalence towards language and preoccupations with memory, dreams and, in conjunction with these, the conflicts between the material and spiritual spheres. In 'Joyce's Matter and Memory: Perception and Memory Events in *Finnegans Wake*' Dustin Anderson observes that while most studies linking Bergson to contemporary literature 'focus on a combination of flux and time', themes particularly pertinent to modernist aesthetics, there remains a largely untapped value in looking beyond these ideas to explore the broader scope of Bergson's philosophy.¹³ Anderson points to Mary Ann Gillies as the pioneer of this more expansive approach, noting the importance of her explorations of Bergsonian memory and intuition on the work of writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad. Taking as a starting point Gillies more expansive appreciation of Bergson's critical potential, this study seeks to extend Bergson's ideas not only in the thematic, ideological sense Gillies demonstrates but also in terms of the types of literature explored.

¹³ Dustin Anderson, 'Joyce's Matter and Memory: Perception and Memory Events in *Finnegans Wake*' in *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* ed. by Paul Ardoin, S.E. Gontarski and Laci Mattison (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 76.

Chapter One

Henri Bergson and British Culture

In *The New Bergson* (1999), John Mullarkey laments that the name Henri Bergson has been too often ‘confined to a hundred opening paragraphs and a thousand lists of names’; this fate is due, in part, to the multi-faceted nature of Bergson’s work.¹⁴ While such versatility opened his thought to a broad audience, it allowed both lay followers and upcoming philosophical movements to appropriate key elements of his thought: to frame his ideas within their own. Consequently, aspects of Bergson’s philosophy appear often unacknowledged in areas as diverse as phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism; even in what Mullarkey terms the ‘philosophical ghettos [of] ‘vitalism’, ‘spiritualism’ and ‘psychologism’.¹⁵ Indeed, philosophers as diverse as Whitehead, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have become the celebrated heirs to ideas, in embryonic form that are Bergsonian in origin. In this, Bergson occupies a singular position in the history of philosophy: one that is enduring yet shadowy. While his legacy is vast and varied, it was the fate of his ideas to persist subsumed within doctrines whose long-term success eclipsed his own. Acknowledging this debt at Bergson’s centennial conference (in Paris, 1959), Maurice Merleau-Ponty reflected that Bergson could be best honoured ‘by admitting that he belongs to everybody’.¹⁶

Mediating Bergson

Perhaps stirred by the success of Gilles Deleuze’s *Bergsonism* (1966), a text integral to reclaiming Bergson from post-war obscurity, recent times have seen an escalating desire both in philosophy and literature to exhume and reassess the philosopher’s influence: to recover

¹⁴ John Mullarkey, ed., *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Maurice Merleau-Ponty at the Sorbonne’ in *The Bergsonian Heritage*, ed. by Thomas Hanna (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 133.

Bergson's living thought from what Leszek Kolakowski considers its position 'as a dead classic'.¹⁷ Mullarkey, a driving force in this revival, highlights a growing awareness that the marginalised position historically allotted to Bergson 'is both unfair to him and irresponsible to philosophy'.¹⁸ Indeed, since the nineteen sixties a number of studies, including Thomas Hanna's *The Bergsonian Heritage* (1962), John Mullarkey's *Bergson and Philosophy* (1999), Suzanne Guerlac's *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (2006) and Michael Vaughan and Michael Kolkman's *Creative Evolution 100 Years On* (2007) have sought to identify and extricate what is essentially Bergsonian from the complex blend of prejudices, myths and entanglements of subsequent philosophy. Though the opinions forwarded in each remain subjective and open to debate, it is due to such efforts that Bergson's influence has become once more 'alive and well'.¹⁹

Attempts to disambiguate Bergson's thought are, however, fraught with difficulty. Deleuze's famous study can be considered a case in point. While the appearance of *Bergsonism* undoubtedly played a major role in Bergson's renaissance, this rebirth was one with a markedly Deleuzian slant. Conceived at a time when academia shifted from phenomenological existentialism to embrace the upcoming trends of structuralism, Deleuze's interpretation of Bergson was undoubtedly a reaction to this philosophical change. While Deleuze's contemporaries increasingly embraced Hegelian idealism, with its emphasis on pattern, structure and ordered universals, Deleuze fought to establish a philosophy that would instead embrace novelty and difference. Bergson's emphasis on change proved an expedient foundation for this aim. As Deleuze irreverently clarifies, his work on Bergson took the form

¹⁷ Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁸ Mullarkey, *New Bergson*, 1.

¹⁹ Michael Vaughan, 'An Introduction to Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*' in Michael Kolkman and Michael Vaughan, eds., 'Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* 100 Years Later' Special Issue of *SubStance* 36: 3, issue 114 (2007), pp.7-24.

of philosophical ‘buggery, or what comes to the same thing, immaculate conception’.²⁰ It constitutes a new philosophy born of Bergson’s ideas, one Deleuze described as a monstrous lovechild, replete with ‘all kinds of decenterings’.²¹ In the translator’s notes to *Bergsonism* Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam observe that ‘Deleuze’s work is characterised, not by a fidelity to any master, but by a series of transformations of concepts borrowed from a range of writers from many disciplines’.²² Like many before him, though perhaps more brazenly, Deleuze used Bergson’s thought as a framework to support the expression of his own ideas: drawing out elements he considered useful, while discarding those disruptive to his budding post-structuralist agenda.

Suzanne Guerlac, an author ambivalent to Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, observes in *Thinking and Time* that Deleuze ‘edited out all those features of Bergson’s thought that might appear “metaphysical” (the soul, life, value, memory, choice), all those features that distinguish the human being from the machine, that suggest an appeal to experience and a phenomenological perspective’.²³ The model of Bergson presented by Deleuze is, therefore, a distinct theoretical system radically removed from the philosopher’s original texts, particularly later works like *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* which explicitly encompass both empirical and spiritual outlooks. Indeed, on some level Bergson expected and arguably courted such explorations of his work; he saw philosophy as ‘capable [...] of indefinite progress’: an ongoing amalgam of the vague but ‘positive truth that each contributes’.²⁴ Acknowledging his own particularly bold departure, Deleuze unashamedly

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Zone Books : New York, 2002), 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 179.

²⁴ Henri Bergson quoted in Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson; An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan, 1914), 53 & 47.

defined his work on Bergson as ‘a renewal or an extension of his project today’.²⁵ In this task, regardless of his critics, Deleuze’s success has been such that, as S.E. Gontarski states in his introduction to *Understanding Bergson Understanding Modernism*, in the ‘twenty-first century [...] our Bergson is Deleuze’s Bergson’.²⁶

It is because of this bias, and in answer to Sanford Schwartz’s call in ‘Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism’ for clarity over ‘which image of Bergson is under consideration’ that I wish to outline the aspects of Bergson of central importance to this study.²⁷ Accordingly, while I recognise the importance of Deleuze’s work in regard to Bergson, for the purposes of this project its status as ‘new Bergsonism’ renders it a potential source of confusion.²⁸ While Deleuze wished to liberate specific Bergsonian ideals from the structures and bonds inherent to the history of philosophy, this project is, conversely, intimately concerned with Bergson in his original historical context. Consequently, I will explore the image of Bergson as it was constructed and understood in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The Bergson presented here is, therefore, both product and victim of his times; a figure inextricably linked to his position in contemporary culture and, more specifically, to the views and prejudices formed in the minds of those his former disciple T.E. Hulme derisively termed the ‘ordinary people’.²⁹

Bergson’s work, as embraced and assimilated by this ‘ordinary’ or ‘middlebrow’ audience, did not survive the transition from academia to popular culture in unadulterated form. Rather, just as in the hands of Deleuze, from the beginnings of his remarkable career Bergson (his thought and character) was subject to a fascinating process of distortion. As

²⁵ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 115.

²⁶ S.E. Gontarski, introduction to *Understanding Bergson Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Paul Ardoin, S.E. Gontarski and Laci Matternson. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 24.

²⁷ Sanford Schwartz ‘Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism’ in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 303.

²⁸ Gillian Rose *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post Structuralism and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 99.

²⁹ T.E. Hulme, ‘Bergson Lecturing.’ *The New Age*. (November 2, 1911), 38.

Suzanne Guerlac observes in *Thinking in Time*, the openness and accessibility of Bergson's philosophy was, and remains, one 'easily borrowed piecemeal and altered by enthusiastic admirers'.³⁰ Bergson enjoyed a success so rapid and extreme that the public demand for knowledge regarding him spurred a frenzy of articles, pamphlets, books and debates. In Britain, even as the first translations of his work became available in 1911, writers as distinguished and varied as Wildon Carr, Édouard Le Roy, Thomas Hulme, Arthur Balfour, William James, Bertrand Russell and Evelyn Underhill flocked to produce summaries, analyses, criticisms and commentaries of his work. While such interest produced a wealth of literature demonstrating the views of Bergson's contemporaries, this deluge, arriving on the heels of the originals, often confused and overshadowed initial readings of the work itself.

Bergson and Literary Studies

In literary studies, concurrent with his revival in philosophy, the past two decades have seen a broadening acknowledgement of Bergson's impact on modernism. As Michael Levenson observes in his introduction to the second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*; 'In the first decade of this century, Modernist studies have at once widened and deepened, an actively engaged community of scholars has produced more ambitious acts of contextualisation [and] more inclusive histories [...] We have more modernism now, as well as more flexible and perspicuous ways of interpreting it'.³¹ Writing on the cusp of such developments, Leon Surette speculated in *The Birth of Modernism* (1993) that 'until the present, modernism has been allowed to write its own history'; this self-scribed history allowed modernists to insist on the autonomy of their art, an assertion in post-war formalism used to suggest its independence from the social and economic pressures of modernity. In contrast, studies over the last two decades have, as Tim Armstrong posits in *Modernism: A*

³⁰ Guerlac, *Thinking in Time*, 10.

³¹ Michael Levinson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

Cultural History, demonstrated persistent efforts to see modernism ‘re-connected to historical contexts’.³² This turn to a more inclusive, cultural exploration of modernism has seen several overviews of the period distinguish Bergson as a vital influence both for his radical understanding of time, and his insistence on the value of intuition. Michael Levenson’s *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984), Malcolm Bradbury’s *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (1991), Leon Surette’s *The Birth of Modernism* (1993) and Leigh Wilson’s *Modernism* (2007), each provide detailed reference to the philosopher, positioning him as a leading figure in defining and supporting the values of modernism. Indeed, in his essay ‘Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns’ (1992) Richard Lehan succinctly positions Bergson as ‘one who undid the notions of mechanism and teleology, undercut both enlightenment and Darwinian assumptions and gave weight to the modernist belief that art is the highest function of our activity’.³³ Extending from this belief, several full-length studies have emerged, focusing exclusively on Bergson’s influence on modernist literature; Shiv Kumar’s *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (1963), Paul Douglass’ *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature* (1987), Mary Ann Gillies’ *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (1996), Hillary Fink’s *Bergson and Russian modernism, 1900-1930* (1999) and S.E. Gontarski’s *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* (2010) each provide compelling evidence of Bergson’s considerable influence on the structural and thematic features of modernism. As Lehan observes, Bergson’s importance at this juncture was such that ‘if the moderns did not have Bergson they would have had to invent him’; indeed, as I will argue, in many ways they did.³⁴

³² Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), x.

³³ Richard Lehan, ‘Bergson and the discourse of the moderns’ in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 311.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 310.

Yet despite this growing awareness, I believe the full scope of Bergson's influence on the literature of this period remains, as Gillies observes 'understudied and underappreciated'.³⁵ Although the studies cited above are thorough and compelling, each maintains an exclusively modernist focus with particular attention given to canonical writers such as Woolf, Eliot, Richardson and Joyce. While this emphasis is valid and Bergson's influence is unmistakable in modernism's fractured narratives, explorations of consciousness and experimental views of time, given the ubiquity of Bergson's fame this 'elitist' focus fails to appreciate the vast influence of the philosopher's work beyond 'high' modernism. Addressing this omission, this thesis seeks to extend the parameters of existing studies to explore Bergson's impact on a selection of writers generally defined as 'middlebrow'. In this task I will necessarily engage with the recent interest shown in middlebrow literature; a trend which has sought to explore and break down what Andreas Huyssen famously termed, 'the great divide.'³⁶ In doing so, I hope to expose and explore the interplay of thematic and structural concerns in both middlebrow and highbrow fiction in the first half of the twentieth century principally in texts suggestive or resonant of a Bergsonian viewpoint.

In *Bergson and British Modernism* (2001), Mary Ann Gillies draws a distinction, pertinent to this study, between academic 'Bergsonian' understandings of the philosopher's work and mainstream culture's '*Bergsonism* - consisting of various corruptions of Bergson's ideas'.³⁷ Given the 'middlebrow' slant of this project, this study will unashamedly deal with various strains of 'Bergsonism' in its contemporary, pre-Deleuzian context. Merleau-Ponty likewise identified these opposing divisions, stating: 'Bergsonism distorts Bergson. Bergson disturbs; it reassures [...] Bergson was a contact with things; Bergsonism is a set of accepted

³⁵ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 166.

³⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), viii

³⁷ Gillies, *Bergson and British Modernism*, 26.

opinions'.³⁸ While this description gives an impression of Bergsonism as a static reduction of the philosopher's views, this was certainly not always the case and, because of its prevalence, deserves further exploration. In some sectors this paradigm of distortion took on a life of its own, extending to some unexpected and fantastic quarters. The era's fascination with what Alex Owen in *The Place of Enchantment* calls, 'a new esoteric spirituality' meant that, for some, the more mystical aspects of Bergson's thought were adopted and integrated into the outlooks of movements like Theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn.³⁹ This connection, though unconfirmed by the philosopher, was for its disciples given credence by his acceptance of the presidency for the Society for Psychical Research (1913) and, furthermore, by public knowledge that he was the brother of leading occultist Moina Mathers (née Mina Bergson). Evidently feeling her brother's ideas were in harmony with her mystical beliefs, in the preface to her husband's translation of *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (1926), Moina optimistically wrote: 'the whole attitude of the thinking world has changed considerably towards occult science and philosophy [...] material science would appear to be spiritualising itself'.⁴⁰ Moina was certainly not alone in subscribing to this unconventional strain of Bergsonism, as Owen notes: 'Bergson's philosophy spoke to an esoteric understanding beyond the purview of "modern science"'.⁴¹ Bergson's emphasis on the *élan vital*, intuition and subjective duration clearly demonstrate what he termed a desire to 'superimpose on scientific truth a knowledge of another kind, which may be called metaphysical'.⁴² Indeed, in this particularly 'mystic' transmutation 'Bergsonism' became for some far more than

³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'The Bergson Centennial at Paris: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (at the Sorbonne)' in Thomas Hanna, ed., *The Bergsonian Heritage* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1962), 135

³⁹ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 137.

⁴⁰ Moina Mathers, preface to S.L. MacGregor Mathers, *Kabbala Denudata: The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and co, 1926), 2.

⁴¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 137.

⁴² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 209.

Merleau-Ponty's imagined set of lifeless opinions, it formed the basis of a lifestyle: one dynamic, colourful and far from conventional.

Bergson himself was acutely aware of the ubiquitous nature of 'Bergsonism'; in a letter to the editor of *Le Figaro*, March 1914, he stated: 'the spread of what men agree to call 'Bergsonism' is due simply to this: the initiated see and the uninitiated divine, that they have here to do with a metaphysic moulded on experience (whether interior or exterior); with[in] an unpretentious philosophy determined to base itself on solid ground'.⁴³ In this, Bergson presents an understanding of 'Bergsonism' considerably more positive and participatory than that of Gillies or Merleau-Ponty. His explicit inclusion of the 'uninitiated who divine' would seem to court non-academic involvement on the basis of intuitive understanding: an invitation which, unsurprisingly, resonated with his mystical adherents. In a speech concerning Aristotle in 1915, Bergson observed that:

When a simple and unique soul borrows the voice of philosophy, the language it speaks is not always understood in the same fashion by all men. To some it seems vague [...] To others it is clear, because they feel and know within themselves all that it suggests. To many ears it brings no more than the echo of a vanished past; but others hear in it, as in a dream, the joyful song of the days that are to come.⁴⁴

As Bergson's disciple Algot Ruhe asserted, this is a maxim which could be 'unhesitatingly applied to [Bergson] himself'.⁴⁵ Such a dynamic and pliable concept of understanding demonstrates, in accordance with Bergson's own philosophy, that the scope of purely intellectual knowledge is essentially limited. The ability to access the fundamental truths of being involves not merely intellect, which for Bergson can only provide 'a translation in terms of inertia', but rather an instinctive sympathy. This faculty, an attribute Bergson defines as intuition, has the potential to 'extend its object and also reflect upon itself [leading us] to

⁴³ Henri Bergson to the editor of *Le Figaro* in Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan, 1914), 52.

⁴⁴ Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan, 1914), 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the very inwardness of life'.⁴⁶ It may therefore be argued that while middlebrow and particularly mystical forms of Bergsonism undoubtedly misinterpret technical aspects of Bergson's philosophy, this distortion is in many instances counterbalanced by an open and enthusiastic accordance with the spirit of his thought.

Bergson, Mysticism and Middlebrow Literature

In the following chapters I will focus on a selection of books written between 1900 and 1939 by Joseph Conrad, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and John Buchan contemplating the ways in which these texts can be linked to Bergson's philosophy. In particular I will investigate the mystical aspects of Bergson's thought: an element often disregarded as 'irrationalism' by critics of his work. I will present detailed readings of texts including Conrad's *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, Blackwood's *The Centaur*, Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* and Buchan's *Sick Heart River*, each chosen for their underlying mystical tenor and apparent assimilation of Bergsonian ideas. In doing so, I will place particular emphasis on Bergson's concepts of the *élan vital*, *durée*, intuition and memory, features of his work openly conducive to mystical connections, elements identified by Owen as having 'clear implications for early twentieth century occultism'.⁴⁷ Alongside these core concerns, attention will be given to some of the more obscure, contentious aspects of Bergson's philosophy; for instance, his suggestions of the latent animalistic tendencies of plants, the possibility of the soul's survival after death and concepts of racial memory. I will consider how these notions proved fertile soil for the often fantastic imaginations of the selected authors and the promotion of their personal beliefs.

While not always explicit, there is convincing evidence that each of the authors presented in this study would have been subjected to Bergson's work at some level and

⁴⁶ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 176.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 4.

thorough rationales for this assumption will accompany each of authors discussed. Of the author's examined each was, at least, a friend, associate, or member of an organization with a keen interest in Bergson's work. In the case of Conrad it was an intimacy with French culture, for Machen and Blackwood an avid involvement in Theosophy and The Order of the Golden Dawn and for Buchan a lifelong interest in philosophy and politics. Certainly the occult connections of Blackwood and Machen would have exposed them to a wealth of publications and discussions concerning the philosopher's work while their membership of the Golden Dawn would have brought them into close contact with Bergson's sister Moina Mathers, the order's high priestess. Indeed, for both Blackwood and Buchan, Bergson's influence is made explicit in their fiction and personal writings. Blackwood's biographer Mike Ashley positions Bergson as a profound discovery for his subject, one who provided 'a structure in which Blackwood could clothe his own thinking'; quotations from the philosopher abound in the chapters of Blackwood's mystical novel *The Centaur* demonstrating the author's clear fascination with Bergson's thought.⁴⁸ The more conformist Buchan betrays a similar, if more reserved, admiration for the philosopher, stating in his essay 'Lord Balfour and English Thought' that 'Bergson has shown us that half the blunders of philosophy are due to the application of the methods and ideals of physical science to spheres of thought where they are strictly inapplicable'.⁴⁹ While Buchan's tales 'Space' and *The Gap in the Curtains* engage explicitly with Bergsonian notions of time (the latter including quotations from *Creative Evolution*), it is rather in the mystical exploration of subjectivity presented in his final work *Sick Heart River* where Buchan's affinity with Bergson's thought is revealed most poignantly.

⁴⁸ Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood* (London: Constable, 2001), 24.

⁴⁹ John Buchan, 'Lord Balfour and English Thought' in *Homilies and Recreations* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1926), 96.

With the ‘middlebrow’ focus of this study in mind, Conrad’s presence perhaps merits specific justification, falling as he does uneasily between ‘high’ and ‘low’ modes of literature. Indeed, as Virginia Woolf stressed, the business of defining the middlebrow is, in itself, ‘no easy question to answer’.⁵⁰ It has been defined variously, and nearly always pejoratively, based on author, consumer, structure and themes. As Nicola Humble describes in *The Feminine Middlebrow*, ‘middlebrow’ is a term which, since its coinage in the nineteen-twenties, has been viewed by academia as ‘a dirty word’, indicative of greed, artistic vacuity and thematic frivolity.⁵¹ In short, the middlebrow has historically been condemned as an emblem of bourgeois self-indulgence and superficiality, something Woolf, in a letter to the editor of *The Times*, defined as vulgarly ‘betwixt and between [...] now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art in itself or life in itself but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power or prestige’.⁵²

While today Conrad is most commonly claimed as a modernist, or at least proto-modernist, it should be remembered that this is a label retrospectively applied. Unlike writers such as Eliot and Woolf, Conrad was not consciously revolutionary in his style or thematic intention. In fact, arguably until the publication of Morton Dauwen Zabel’s *Portable Conrad* in 1947, the author had received little critical attention. Thus in his lifetime and the years immediately following his death Conrad remained, as Michael Gorra notes in ‘Joseph Conrad’, most commonly viewed with ‘faint admiration as an adventure writer and for his early tales of the sea’.⁵³ It was Dauwen Zabel’s editorial notes to Viking’s *Portable Conrad* (1947) that excited the first serious critical interest in the author. Zabel, placing particular emphasis on Conrad’s haunting depictions of ‘the crisis of moral isolation’, a theme

⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 22.

⁵¹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920’s to 1950’s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

⁵² Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, 22.

⁵³ Michael Gorra, ‘Joseph Conrad.’ *The Hudson Review* 59, issue 4 (New York: Winter 2007), 542.

undoubtedly resonant from his post-war standpoint, called for Conrad's work to be brought into 'the highest company the English, and the European novel provides'.⁵⁴ This invitation, marginally anticipating the publication of Leavis's *The Great Tradition*, was met by an overwhelming critical flood in which Conrad finally escaped his reputation as a skilled but mundane adventure writer to be embraced as a modernist pioneer. Additionally, while most of Conrad's career avoided the mass popularity reviled by the moderns, this was by no means his intention. Rather, as Joyce Piell Webster observes in 'Conrad and the Literary Market Place', frustrated by low sales Conrad often strove to 'copy the formula of a popular novelist'⁵⁵ yet, due to temperamental, ideological and artistic aspirations (as well as, Webster argues, potential language barriers), often found this task a challenge. However, novels such as *The Rescue* and *Chance* represent clear attempts to enter this market, with the high sales of *Chance* indicating some measure of success. As Webster notes, 'Conrad always wanted his books to sell [though] his motives were never purely economic'.⁵⁶ Thus for the purposes of this study, just as Bergson will be viewed as far as possible within his own historical context, Conrad will likewise maintain his contemporary guise as a struggling but proficient middlebrow adventure writer.

In addition to this, I feel it necessary to acknowledge the masculine bent of my chosen texts. Though unintentional, this focus forms a distinct contrast with the dominant feminine bias in the majority of 'middlebrow' research. As Humble suggests in *The Feminine Middlebrow*, a large percentage of middlebrow fiction was 'written and consumed by women'.⁵⁷ This was perhaps, as she asserts, because the respected, male dominated, literary movements of the age 'like 'modernism' the 'Auden generation', 'the angry young men'

⁵⁴ Dauwen Zabel introduction to *The Portable Conrad: The Viking Portable Library Series*, ed. by Dauwen Zabel (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), 2 & 3.

⁵⁵ Joyce Piell Webster 'Conrad and the Literary Market Place' in *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by John Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 2.

[left] little space for [female] writers', yet it is also true that the exclusivity of these groupings ensured the neglect of male writers working outside these contexts.⁵⁸ Whilst the middlebrow women's writing that dominated the commercial market was disregarded critically for its seemingly mundane fixation on the romantic and domestic spheres, the taste for adventure, sport, horror and nonfiction favoured by their male counterparts was likewise rejected as base and inane by highbrow contemporaries. Perhaps in reaction to what Kate Macdonald in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950* describes as the threat 'of emasculation'⁵⁹ in what became an overwhelmingly female market, the male middlebrow became increasingly engaged with stereotypically masculine themes whilst highbrow writing tended towards introversion, explorations of consciousness and notably structural experimentation. Thus while the work of Conrad, Buchan, Blackwood and Machen have often at their core deeply mystical and metaphysical themes, these are often framed within narratives of adventure, exploration and exploit: themes designed to sate the desires of a middlebrow audience and ensure commercial success.

While I acknowledge that the Bergson of the middlebrow is often one replete with inaccuracies, occult connections and bizarre distortions, I believe there is a necessity to historicise and engage with the broad scope and multiple interpretations which surround his work. It is only in this way that a full appreciation of Bergson, his times, influence and the individuals inspired by his work can be constructed. As Mullarkey posits, past or present, there is no definitive view of the philosopher, 'the interpretations of Bergson are as multifarious as are his own writings'.⁶⁰ This fact proves a rare point of consensus amongst his many critics and disciples. Bergson himself invited his readers to enjoy a dynamic relationship with his philosophy and while he perhaps underestimated the fantastic scope of

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Kate Macdonald, *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Minerva Read* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

⁶⁰ John Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 4.

what some supporters would discern therein, I will argue that middlebrow literature's often fanciful interpretations of his thought form an inseparable and valid part of his history.

Bergson in Context

The rapid change which characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth century produced forms of cultural expression charged with apprehension and excitement. The growth of industry between the eighteen-seventies and nineteen-twenties, considered in Armstrong's *Modernism: A Cultural History* to be a second industrial revolution, saw the continued expansion of urbanisation alongside the groundbreaking development of 'electrification, integrated transport and communications systems, the rationalisation of production [and] shift to mass production'.⁶¹ Such changes precipitated a faster, more urgent pace of life. The influx of luxury goods, alongside improving wages and the possibility of hire purchase made once extravagant items readily obtainable. As Armstrong asserts, twentieth century Britain began to enjoy an 'economy driven by desire rather than need'.⁶² Associated with this was the explosion of print culture. Radical educational reforms in the nineteenth century meant that by the eighteen nineties nearly ninety-five percent of the British population were literate, thus opening an expansive market for affordable publications. Allison Pease explains in 'Modernism and Mass Culture', that 'the invention of the rotary press and the linotype machine, coupled with lower paper prices ensured that novels, newspapers, and magazines could sell to individual customers in their millions'.⁶³ This burgeoning culture of commercialism, combined with the liberty afforded by the 1884 Representation of the People Act, gave a sense of power to an expanding middle class; a group whose commercial potential was quickly recognised and duly exploited. The landslide

⁶¹ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶³ Allison Pease, 'Modernism and Mass Culture,' *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 198.

victory of the Liberal Party in 1906 confirmed the growing authority of this newly enfranchised fraction of society signalling what Samuel Hynes in *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (1968) identified as the terminus for ‘the rule of established order’.⁶⁴ As Peter Faulkner observes in *Modernism* (1977), the established norms of ‘accepting one’s place, loyalty to authority, unquestioning obedience, began to break down; patriotism, doing one’s duty [and] even Christianity seemed questionable ideas. Man’s understanding of himself was changing’.⁶⁵ Despite superficially improving lifestyles, such radical transformations were inevitably accompanied by an air of anxiety; for many, the experience of modernity was plagued by widespread dependence on technology along with the dissolution and fragmentation of familiar traditions and institutions. Removed from the reassuring cycles of pastoral life, and with science’s destabilisation of religion, many were thrust into a fast moving materialistic culture: subjected to systems and rules that chipped away at their sense of autonomy. As Armstrong insightfully remarks, industrial and commercial success was too often offset by the ‘subordination of the individual to large scale systems’.⁶⁶

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, for the educated, science had firmly usurped literal understandings of Christianity. Moreover, in the influential wake of thinkers like Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), society’s obsession with positivistic empiricism assumed an alarmingly autocratic presence: science became considered as the only basis for assessing ‘truth’. As Enid Starkie describes in her essay ‘Bergson and Literature’, in this period, ‘the dream of thinkers was the discovery of a universal science, a mathematics which would explain everything, and [...] fulfil all the needs of man’.⁶⁷ While traditional religion seemed increasingly remote, many found this prevailing

⁶⁴ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 28.

⁶⁵ Peter Faulkner, *Modernism* (Norwich: Fletcher and Son Ltd., 1990), 14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁷ Enid Starkie, ‘Bergson and Literature’ in *The Bergsonian Heritage* ed. by Thomas Hanna, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) 76.

materialistic bent equally distasteful. To compound this anxiety the rise of Darwinism in the eighteen-sixties put to rest any lingering sense of humanity's uniqueness. Even while such findings proved man to be a highly advanced creature, he remained indubitably an animal, varying from others only in physical and psychological complexity. As a consequence, society was forced to reach an uneasy acceptance of man's insignificance and worse still, what Julia Briggs sinisterly termed his 'bestial inheritance'.⁶⁸

The Craze for Bergson

Amidst this turmoil, society seized hold of an unlikely saviour, pinning its thirst for agency on the frail but charismatic figure of Henri Louis Bergson. Addressing the subject of Bergson's rapid success, his friend and colleague, René Gillouin, explained that the philosophy of recent generations had reached an impasse, one happily shattered by Bergson's radical thought. Gillouin states: 'Bergsonism was vaguely anticipated in the minds of men; in the measure which it took shape we recognised it. And this is why a philosophy so amazingly new has not met with the usual fate of novelties [...] It offers an open way when all other roads are closed'.⁶⁹ With the expectations and hopes of past generations bearing down on him, Bergson's fate was, perhaps, compromised from the start. As Ben-Ami Scharfstein observed in *The Roots of Bergson's Philosophy* (1943), 'as Henri Bergson became the most famous philosopher in the world, he was welcomed with hosannas, and he was roundly damned'.⁷⁰

Today it seems incongruous that one of the most influential celebrities of the early twentieth century should be repeatedly described as 'quiet and unassuming'; yet his

⁶⁸ Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 2.

⁶⁹ René Gillouin quoted in *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy* by Algot Ruhe., 51.

⁷⁰ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Roots of Bergson's Philosophy* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1943), 3.

biographers have consistently attributed these traits to the figure of Bergson.⁷¹ The era's 'philosopher à la mode',⁷² the man whose fame was allegedly the cause of Broadway's first traffic jam, and whose public lectures left society women swooning as they grappled for seats is, paradoxically, the same timid, 'bird-like'⁷³ figure who eschewed public life in favour of contemplative solitude; a man who, according to his biographer Algot Ruhe, lived a life entirely 'free from romantic incident'.⁷⁴ Reiterating this, an admiring William James likewise acknowledged Bergson's existence as outwardly mundane: 'the perfectly routine [life] of the French Professor'.⁷⁵ Yet beyond this veneer of convention, he recognised this austere philosopher possessed an originality and clarity of thought that was 'simply phenomenal'.⁷⁶ The brilliance of Bergson's thought, combined with his talent for lucid exposition was no less than a 'miracle, and he a real magician'.⁷⁷

Thus Bergson is revealed as an intriguing yet essentially contradictory figure. In discussing his extraordinary career, philosophers Thomas Hanna and John Mullarkey each emphasise the 'Janus-faced' aspect of Bergson's work and person.⁷⁸ It is arguably this very quality which honed the dynamism of his thought and secured his fame. In an age of transition and uncertainty, an era itself Janus-faced, Bergson formulated a philosophy that rejected the bleak certainties of determinism and wedded the seemingly exclusive realms of science and mysticism. As his bibliographer P.A.Y. Gunter observes, in his preoccupation with evolution, time, dreams, laughter and the soul, Bergson was indubitably 'in the air'.⁷⁹ Yet more than a mere symbol of the zeitgeist, Bergson's philosophy, despite its post-war fall

⁷¹ Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, 2.

⁷² J. Donaldson, 'Nobel Prize for "Easy Payment" Philosopher', *The Irish Times*, December 1, 1928, 6.

⁷³ A.B.W. 'Philosophers at Oxford' in *Times*, October 6, 1920, 8.

⁷⁴ Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, 1

⁷⁵ William James, *A pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 226.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 226 & 227.

⁷⁸ Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, 3 & Thomas Hanna *The Bergsonian Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) 3.

⁷⁹ P.A.Y. Gunter, *Henri Bergson: A Bibliography* (Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Centre Bowling Green University, 1974), 4.

into obscurity, maintains a relevance still resonant today. As Hanna observes, Bergson isolated and strove to tackle a question that in modern times has become and remains ‘perhaps the only question worth solving [...] How can we understand the nature of the human creature, and his place and significance in the world?’⁸⁰

By elevating the role of common sense and intuition, Bergson’s work reinstated a sense of personal agency and spirituality largely obscured by society’s increasingly rationalistic, scientific bent. In J.T. Davidson’s 1912 critique, Bergson is hailed as a philosopher who, despite flaws, ‘can at least allow the human spirit to live, choose and act; one who lifts from the heart the intolerable burden laid upon it by the cast-iron determinism of modern ‘scientific’ naturalism and agnosticism’.⁸¹ For Davidson, as for many others, Bergson’s thought represented hope and a renewed sense of autonomy. Rather than a complete and closed doctrine, it offered a vibrant, creative philosophy; one, he believed, that affirmed ‘the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and [...] [sought to] determine the relation of one to the other’.⁸² While the philosopher acknowledged this aim as ‘frankly dualistic’, this was not to his mind problematic.⁸³ Rather, he considered these seemingly exclusive aspects of human understanding to be opposing facets of a unified whole: each of equal importance.

The diversity of Bergson’s thought, combined with his clear and deceptively simple, almost simplistic writing style allowed his reputation to move beyond academic circles to be embraced by a broad and fascinated public audience. According to his devotee Édouard Le Roy, Bergson became ‘the thinker whose name [was on] everybody’s lips’; a man whose

⁸⁰ Hanna, *Bergsonian Heritage*, 3.

⁸¹ J.T. Davidson ‘Bergson in England’ *London Quarterly Review* 17, no. 1 (1912): 125.

⁸² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover, 2004), vii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, vii.

work and ideas marked a ‘never-to-be-forgotten date in history’.⁸⁴ As Thomas Hanna notes, Bergson rapidly became ‘one of the rarities of philosophical literature- a smash’.⁸⁵ The 1907 appearance of Bergson’s third and seminal work *Creative Evolution* secured his status and following the publication of its English translation in 1911, accompanied by his celebrated lecturing tours of London, Birmingham and Oxford; it became, in Hanna’s terms, a text ‘like the Bible, known by everyone and quoted by all’.⁸⁶ To extend this analogy, Bergson’s works were for many, like the bible, fundamentally controversial- provoking responses of an extreme and passionate nature. Thus while one *New York Times* piece hailed the philosopher as ‘saintly [...] Europe’s foremost thinker’,⁸⁷ Bergson was simultaneously proclaimed ‘the most dangerous man in the world’⁸⁸ by *Everybody’s Magazine*, a man the incensed Julien Benda ‘would have joyfully killed [...] if in that way his *influence* could have been arrested’.⁸⁹ In his revolutionary marriage of science and spirituality Bergson acquired both widespread admiration and many influential enemies. These opposing tides of dissent and celebration reached their climax in 1914 when, within the space of four months, Bergson celebrated an election to the French Academy while concurrently his works were placed, in the esteemed company of Descartes, Rousseau and Darwin before him, on the Catholic Index of prohibited material. That Bergson’s work should be felt dangerous enough to merit such censorship is testament to the startling power of his influence and charisma.

⁸⁴ Édouard Le Roy, *A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson*, trans. by Vincent Benson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1913), 1.

⁸⁵ Hanna, *Bergsonian Heritage*, 16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁷ ‘Bergson says world needs a new system of ethics,’ *New York Times*, March 10, 1912, 6.

⁸⁸ Walter Lippmann, ‘The Most Dangerous Man in the World,’ *Everybody’s Magazine*, July 27, 1912, 10.

⁸⁹ Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass, *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

Bergson and the Press

The fact that between the years 1909 to 1911 the British press carried over two hundred articles relating to Bergson communicates a sense of the excitement generated by his ideas. The ubiquity of Bergson's reputation was not, as might be expected, limited to academic publications; Bergson's work permeated all aspects of society. The excitement generated by his British lectures and the celebrity crowds they attracted, was assisted by the concurrent explosion of print culture which enabled the swift, prolific dissemination of his work and the many writings concerning it. As Leigh Wilson asserts in *Modernism*, Bergson's ideas, with their insistence on the value of subjective human experience, 'chimed with the intellectual climate of pre-war Britain'.⁹⁰ This sense is crystallised by Bergson's contemporary George Rowland Dodson in *Bergson and the Modern Spirit* (1913); he enthuses:

After a long period of neglect [...] philosophy is beginning to regain the attention of the average man. It is time. We have unduly simplified our lives so that they tend to consist only of business and amusement [...] our greatest need is a clear vision of the only life that can satisfy, a life that is informed and disciplined by science and adorned and ennobled by art.⁹¹

In early twentieth century western culture, Bergson's thought fulfilled a yearning, identified by Lionel Trilling in his 1955 essay on Freud, for a place 'beyond' or away from the reach of culture'.⁹² In accordance with this achievement, in just a few short years this diminutive and retiring philosopher became a household name. *The Hibbert Journal's* publication of Bergson's Huxley Lecture (Birmingham University, May 1911), accompanied by a critical article by Arthur Balfour who praised Bergson for his 'psychological insight, his charms of style [and enduringly valuable] theories', can be regarded as a major catalyst for this rapid rise to fame.⁹³ As Algot Ruhe indicates in *Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*

⁹⁰ Leigh Wilson, *Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2007), 27.

⁹¹ Rowland Dodson, *Bergson and the Modern Spirit* (Forgotten Books, 2012), 1.

⁹² Lionel Trilling quoted in *Modernism* by Leigh Wilson (London: Continuum, 2007), 33.

⁹³ Arthur Balfour, 'Creative Evolution and Philosophic Doubt,' *The Hibbert Journal* 10, no. 1 (May 1911), 1.

(1912), the interest of a figure so esteemed as Balfour ‘made Bergson’s name known to large numbers of people who had never before heard of his importance to philosophy’.⁹⁴ Soon articles referring to his person and works were published anywhere from *The Times* to the new halfpenny, ‘middlebrow’ papers, like the *Daily Mirror* (established in 1896, achieving a record circulation of around 1million by 1911) and the *Daily Express* (established in 1900). *The Times* played an integral role in bringing Bergson’s thought to a wide public audience. Following his lecture series on *The Nature of the Soul* at University College London in 1913, it featured extensive articles translating and summarising their content; such detailed coverage made his philosophy accessible to an enthralled public audience. Sensing this excitement, the middlebrow press followed suit; in a 1924 edition of *The Mirror* an anecdotal article admires the ‘luscious simplicity’⁹⁵ of Bergson’s style whilst in 1937, under the dubious header ‘The twenty-five most famous Jews’, *The Daily Express* hedgingly distinguished Bergson as ‘possibly France’s greatest philosopher’.⁹⁶ Extensive coverage of his career, publications and associated literature filled all sectors of the press, the tone and bias of such material providing an important means of gauging the notoriously fickle tides of public opinion.

The Turn from Bergson

A survey of press responses to Bergson as he rose to attention from 1907 onwards, lends truth to the adage ‘familiarity breeds contempt’; as Bergson’s name became common currency, the animated, respectful tone of early articles often changed to one of mocking familiarity.

Following Bergson’s election to the French Academy in 1914, *The Express* presented a wry report of how the shy philosopher, weary of fame, had chosen to eschew his supporters for the comfort of his ‘ivory tower at Auteuil’, driving them away by ‘lecturing as abstrusely as

⁹⁴ Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, 46.

⁹⁵ ‘Seekers After Truth,’ *The Daily Mirror*, September 22, 1924, 7.

⁹⁶ ‘These are the Twenty-five Most Famous Jews,’ *Daily Express*, October 13, 1937, 12.

possible'.⁹⁷ Whilst this sardonic presentation of Bergson demonstrates little insight into the philosopher's true character, it betrays the way in which, as his career progressed, the popular imagination appropriated superficial details of his life to allow the emergence of a crude media caricature, a representation inaccurate, absurd and ironically resonant of the stilted 'surface personality' the philosopher decried in his work. The establishment of this representation was not merely a tabloid phenomenon; in 1920 *The Time's* A.B.W. frivolously described the philosopher as 'a small, spare man, with the characteristic features of his Hebraic race', a man resembling 'Bellini's Doge Loredano Loredani, in the National gallery'.⁹⁸ Such derision becomes an increasing characteristic of later articles concerning the philosopher. His penchant for privacy, exacerbated from 1914 by chronic ill health, frustrated a press hungry for information; as a result, Bergson's natural reserve was increasingly construed as haughty arrogance. This, accompanied by the philosopher's habit of remaining silent in the face of criticism, believing 'the true statement [was] of itself able to displace the erroneous idea', allowed the rise and perpetuation of ill feeling.⁹⁹ As time passed, Bergson was no longer a mysterious academic to be treated with deference; he was a celebrity and, as such, public property.

Bergson and the Problem of Language

Thus whilst mass exposure won Bergson a widespread following that included 'academics, politicians, writers, artists and even mystics',¹⁰⁰ his fame was, as Mary Gillies suggests 'a double edged sword'.¹⁰¹ For Bergson, success was offset by the miscomprehension, dilution and distortion of his personality and ideas and the invasive criticisms of the press. At the source of such confusion sat the demands of a lay audience whose fervent interest stimulated

⁹⁷ The Carpenter, 'Cabbages and Kings,' *Daily Express*, March 5, 1914, 4.

⁹⁸ A.B.W. 'Philosophers at Oxford', 8.

⁹⁹ Henri Bergson quoted in *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy* by Algot Ruhe, 47

¹⁰⁰ Gunter, *Henri Bergson: A Bibliography*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Gillies, *Bergson and British Modernism*, 8.

the mass production of books and pamphlets which claimed to provide simplified summaries of Bergson's thought. Frequently written by enthusiasts, these publications were intended to provide a foundation for the uninitiated, yet were more often appropriated by fashionable crowds as a crude means to feign knowledge of Bergson. Conveniently succinct, such works enabled the modish amateur to feign understanding of the latest Bergsonian 'buzz words'. In 1912, *The New York Times* highlights this trend; while Bergson is judged a 'philosophical fad [...] [an] irresponsible modern mystic [that all would] see through [...] soon',¹⁰² he is conceded to be a man who, for the moment, the fashionable 'must be able to talk about'.¹⁰³ For this purpose the article dismissively recommends Wildon Carr's 'clever little summary', not for its merits but its modest length and price.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, many of these summaries and analyses proved scholarly and informative and some were even endorsed by Bergson himself. In the preface to his *Philosophy of Change* (1914), Wildon Carr, a respected philosopher in his own right, acknowledged the advantages brought to his work by Bergson's 'friendship and personal communication'.¹⁰⁵ Likewise in *A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson* (1912) Édouard Le Roy (Bergson's successor at the College de France) quotes a letter from the philosopher confirming that his 'study could not be more conscientious or true to the original'.¹⁰⁶ Taken as intended, as a foundation from which to build understanding and encourage exploration of the original texts, such works would have proved invaluable. Yet in isolation, as a short-cut to social kudos, these publications merely offered a muddled, necessarily biased account of the philosopher's ideas.

At the core of such dissemination lay a problem: ironically an issue of central importance to Bergson's philosophy. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson asserts that 'our

¹⁰² 'Henri Bergson,' *New York Times*, May 26, 1912: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007): BR321.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Wildon Carr, *The Philosophy of Change* (London: Macmillan, 1914), vi.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Bergson to Edouard Le Roy, in Le Roy, *A New Philosophy*, 3.

perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas occur under two aspects: the one clear and precise, but impersonal; the other confused, ever changing and inexpressible, because language cannot get a hold of it without arresting its mobility'.¹⁰⁷ The crux of this is that, for Bergson, language is inextricably linked to the social, outer world; in recording, and thus solidifying his thought, his ideas had already relinquished something of their original power. The attempts of others to clarify and define his position indirectly, could only advance the distortion of the original thought; each removal making the idea more static and distanced from its 'living', essentially ineffable essence. Consequently, no matter how masterful any secondary material proved, it was, as Bergson qualifies in his letter to Le Roy, at best a 'rethinking [of] the subject in a personal and original manner'.¹⁰⁸

Underpinning this issue lies the Bergsonian notion of *durée*. As Kolakowski controversially posits, 'we may sum up [Bergson's] philosophy in a single idea: time is real'.¹⁰⁹ While ostensibly this statement appears mundane, with closer scrutiny it exposes the superficial, arbitrary nature of human society, thereby destabilising the fundamental structures on which it operates. In *Time and Free Will*, and throughout his subsequent works, Bergson presents an understanding of experience in which mathematical 'clock time' or *l'étendu*, is radically dissociated from the subjective experience of duration. While Bergson grants that established concepts of 'clock' time provide an important means by which we order and communicate the experience of being, this, for Bergson, does not provide a measurement by which we can establish a comprehensive understanding of reality. For Bergson, true duration is a dynamic blend of inner states driven forward by the mysterious force of the *élan vital*. In this view, the belief that duration is a measurable entity is

¹⁰⁷ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: Dover, 2001), 129.

¹⁰⁸ Henri Bergson, quoted in *A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson* by Édouard Le Roy (Tutis Digital Publishing Ltd., 2008), iv.

¹⁰⁹ Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2001), 2.

essentially flawed, a mistaken ‘projection of time into space’.¹¹⁰ For Bergson this is a flaw so ingrained in human understanding that it permeates almost all established structures in society, particularly in language itself.

Thus when Carr in *The Philosophy of Change* acknowledges his desire to ‘present the fundamental principle and definite doctrines of Bergson’s philosophy [...] [and to] distinguish clearly what is definite and essential from what is vague and only suggestive’, his aim, though valid and useful is, from a strict Bergsonian stance, self-defeating.¹¹¹ The attempt to disambiguate Bergson’s meticulously crafted phrasing shrouds the fleeting clarity of the original thought; it leaves instead, what Bergson terms, its ‘impersonal residue’.¹¹² Bergson’s suggestive, oblique style and what his critics decried as his ‘embarras[ing] [...] device of pictorial representation’,¹¹³ was not a fault, or what one critic termed a ‘histrionic’,¹¹⁴ tendency, but rather a deliberate and painstaking attempt to preserve a sense of his ‘living’ thought from the constraints of language. Bergson wanted his readers to intuit his meaning, to navigate his words and imagery to glimpse an elusive truth therein. Le Roy’s experience of reading Bergson epitomises this aim and suggests an experience deeply reminiscent of mystical exegesis. He states: ‘readers will undergo at almost every page they read an intense and singular experience. The curtain drawn between ourselves and reality [...] seems of a sudden to fall, dissipated by enchantment [...] reality itself, contemplated face to face for the first time, stands fully revealed’.¹¹⁵ This epiphanic experience was one shared by many of Bergson’s enthusiasts, particularly his mystical proponents. As Evelyn Underhill enthused,

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹¹ Carr, *Philosophy of Change*, x.

¹¹² Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 133.

¹¹³ S.V. Keeling, ‘Philosophy in France: Bergson: Some Recent Appreciations,’ *Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4, no. 15 (July, 1929), 381.

¹¹⁴ A.B.W., ‘Philosophers at Oxford’ in *The Times*, 6 October 1920, 8.

¹¹⁵ Le Roy, *A New Philosophy*, 2.

Bergson served for many as an eloquent and insightful ‘mediator between [the mystics’] inarticulate explorations of the infinite and the map-loving human mind’.¹¹⁶

All considered, it is difficult to imagine the existence of this humanitarian member of the French Academy, winner of the Nobel Prize and, incongruously, the dutiful brother of the Golden Dawn’s high priestess as living a life wholly ‘uneventful’. Bergson’s character can, perhaps, be best understood as an instance of still waters concealing hidden depths, as a remarkable personality shaped by an unconventional upbringing in uncertain, rapidly changing times. A notoriously private man, when asked to discuss his life following the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1928), Bergson playfully parodied Descartes’ famous adage stating ‘I have thought and therefore I have lived [...] and you will find [my thoughts] in my work’.¹¹⁷ Extending from this invitation, this study will explore his philosophy contemplating the various and complex ways in which his thought was developed, exploited and expanded through the work of those he inspired as well as how his philosophy might reveal, inform and support new readings of early twentieth century texts.

As a backdrop to this aim, in this opening Chapter I have examined Bergson as he appeared to his contemporary audience: mediated through the popular press, translated and interpreted for a lay audience and constructed as a celebrity. The analyses of British middlebrow writing that follow explore another dimension of the mediation of Bergson. I will argue that his ideas were circulated in and through middlebrow writing, often in explicit ways but also in ways that are less apparent. To present this argument it is first necessary to explain and elucidate Bergson’s ideas, consider the impact his thought had on the formation of modernism, examine the ways in which his influence might have translated into contemporary middlebrow literature and explore the value and scope of applying his ideas in

¹¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, ‘Bergson and the Mystics’, *The English Review*, February 10, 1912, 512.

¹¹⁷ Henri Bergson, quoted in Lansing Warren, ‘Bergson Surprised to Get Nobel Prize,’ *New York Times*, December 2, 1928, 63.

this way. This background will serve to contextualise Bergson and provide a means of detecting his influence on the work of the writers discussed in this study. Arising from this, the following two chapters aim to present the terms of Bergson's current academic resurrection, establish a sense of key Bergsonian concepts and explore the ways in which Bergson's work might have informed British writing not only in terms of its mysticism, but also its formal strategies.

Chapter Two

Bergson, Modernism and Middlebrow Literature

Bergson Today: Bridging the ‘Great Divide’

While recent decades have seen Bergson resurrected as a figure integral to the development of modernism, in his own day his work was disseminated on far more diffuse terms than this focus suggests. Despite this, representations of Bergson as the forgotten progenitor of modernist thought and form prevail, dominating current critical discourses regarding his philosophy and its literary interactions. Since Michael Levenson’s influential reassessment of Bergson’s role in modernism’s formative stages in *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1986), more recent overviews of the era increasingly also acknowledge the importance of the philosopher’s impact on later modernism. In response to this recognition monographs by authors such as Mary Ann Gillies, Paul Douglass and Hilary Fink as well as essay collections such as Paul Ardoin, S.E Gontarski and Laci Matterson’s recent *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* (2013) have comprehensively delineated the ways in which key tenets of Bergson’s thought correspond to and manifest within the work of a series of modernist writers. Indeed, a sense of Bergson’s centrality to today’s understanding of this period is usefully crystallised in Richard Lehan’s 1992 essay ‘Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns’, where the philosopher is distinguished as ‘one who undid the notions of mechanism and teleology, undercut enlightenment and Darwinian assumptions and gave weight to the modernist belief that art is the highest function of our activity’.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Richard Lehan, ‘Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns’ in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 311.

Yet whilst Bergson enjoys this deserved reinsertion into current narratives of modernism, his influence on writing beyond the scope of the movement remains uncharted territory. Considered in the light of Bergson's unprecedented mainstream popularity, this is a fact at once jarring and incongruous. Demonstrating today's proclivity to view Bergson as the sole preserve of modernist studies, Victoria Stewart's article 'J.W. Dunne and Literary Culture' (2008) convincingly positions the former aeronautical engineer and amateur time philosopher J.W. Dunne (for Wyndham Lewis 'the most amusing of the time-romancers')¹¹⁹ as middlebrow literature's counterpart to Bergson. She states that:

Whilst the influence of [...] Henri Bergson's theorisation of time is often cited in studies of modernist writing, Dunne's interface with literary culture has had no sustained analysis. The authors who were drawn to Dunne's work were not the experimental avant-garde, but largely middlebrow authors, writing in a realist idiom, and Dunne's influence is discernible principally in structural rather than stylistic factors.¹²⁰

While Stewart's observations are illuminating, the grounds of this comparison expose a critical culture in which modernist and middlebrow literatures continue to exist in tacit opposition to one another. Bergson, rather than a vital bridge between these poles, is here perceived as a marker from which to gauge and further circumvent modernist avant-gardism: in this perpetuating (rather than challenging) traditional understanding of the 'great divide' between these concurrent literary streams.

The grounds of such assumptions are largely the consequence of a complex critical remodelling of Bergson which has seen his status shift erratically from being the turn of the century's 'philosopher *à la mode*' to, within less than two decades, being one condemned as a romantic 'irrationalist'. Broadly obscured in the wake of the world wars and the subsequent rise of anti-idealism, psychoanalysis, existentialism, structuralism and post-structuralism it

¹¹⁹ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 192.

¹²⁰ Victoria Stewart, 'J.W. Dunne and Literary Culture in the 1930's and 1940's' in *Literature and History* 17, issue. 2 (Autumn, 2008), 63.

has, until recent decades, been Bergson's fate to exist in obscurity. As John Mullarkey defines it, Bergson is 'confined to a hundred opening paragraphs and a thousand lists of names (usually coming between Nietzsche and Scheler)'.¹²¹ This may have remained the case had Bergson not found an enthusiastic if sometimes irreverent saviour in Gilles Deleuze who, as Suzanne Guerlac notes in *Thinking in Time* has, since the mid-nineteen fifties, been largely responsible for promoting and 'etch[ing] the contours of [today's] New Bergson'.¹²² Through Deleuze, Bergson has re-emerged as a philosopher of radical difference, one able to challenge the dominance of materialism, psychoanalysis, Hegelian notions of negation and limitation and crucially the limited, linguistically-centred concerns of structuralism and post-structuralism: ideas which dominated the critical sphere as Deleuze wrote.

Yet while, on the one hand, Deleuze's reconsideration of Bergson has proved the catalyst for a sustained revival of interest in the philosopher, thus allowing Bergson's thought, as Guerlac notes, to cross-pollinate numerous disciplinary borders. These are particularly evident in literary, film and cultural studies. On the other hand, however, Deleuze's systematic approach to Bergson's philosophy, particularly as his thought is developed throughout *Le Bergsonisme* (1966), along with his tendency to negate its metaphysical facets, has in many respects skewed our understanding of Bergson's theories as well as downplayed the importance of their historical, cultural context. Bergson thus emerges as an abstract theoretical muse: rationalised, distanced from the emotive reactions of his contemporaries and, significantly, stripped of the mystical undertones which so fascinated his followers. While such remodelling has helped to make Bergson palatable for an academic audience still prejudiced by historic accusations of Bergson's irrationalism, de-emphasising

¹²¹ John Mullarkey, introduction to *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.

¹²² Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 175.

these core features has created a distorted and, in important respects, impoverished understanding of both the man and the scope and depth of his philosophy.

With the English publications of many of Deleuze's texts appearing for the first time in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineties, thus corresponding to this era's resurging interest in Bergson, it is essential to consider the underlying influence of Deleuze and to exercise caution with regards to how we establish and form our understandings of Bergson. There is a need, as Guerlac stresses, to 'turn *back* to Bergson, in order to delimit [his] thought from that of Deleuze' and indeed that of his many other influential advocates and detractors.¹²³ Such an effort will, as far as is possible, allow us to recapture and reconsider the intentions and implications of Bergson's original texts, their historic context and the nuances of his terminology in a way unprejudiced by contemporary intellectual trends and debates. In this, Bergson's ideas might be explored not as a static 'collection of accepted opinions',¹²⁴ honed to fit today's modern (or modernist) construction of Bergson, but as something, to invoke Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of the philosopher, 'audacious', dynamic and, crucially, open to new interpretations.¹²⁵

Stewart's analysis of Dunne, therefore, more than offering a middlebrow equivalent for Bergson, provides an astute representation of the differing ways in which modernist and middlebrow writers chose to assimilate and present scientific, psychological and philosophical ideas in their work. As such, it provides a useful model for how Bergson's ideas might also be explored in relation to middlebrow literature. In reality it was not only the literary avant-garde who embraced Bergson; like Dunne's, his ideas appealed to a broad mainstream audience. Yet this is a fact largely eclipsed by literary study's insistent focus on

¹²³ Suzanne Guerlac, 'Introduction: Henri Bergson (an Interdisciplinary Conference).' *MNL* 120, Issue 5 (2005), 1091.

¹²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Bergson in the Making' in *Signs*, trans. by Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern university Press, 1964), 183.

¹²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la Philosophie*, trans. by Suzanne Guerlac, in *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 173.

his philosophy as it has materialised in modernist ideas and aesthetics. Middlebrow writers might not have responded to Bergson's philosophy through radical stylistic innovations, but this does not mean that they failed to engage creatively, and in similarly audacious ways, with his ideas. He was after all, as George Rowland Dodson hailed him in *Bergson and the Modern Spirit*, the philosopher who recaptured the attention of the 'average man'.¹²⁶

Indeed, just as Bergson has enjoyed a renaissance in recent decades, so has the status and study of early twentieth century 'middlebrow' literature. As Kate Macdonald has noted in *The Masculine Middlebrow*, the binary categories of modernist and middlebrow, those Andreas Huyssen famously termed 'the great divide', are today increasingly challenged, paving the way for new, more nuanced understandings of early twentieth century literatures, their contexts, interactions and influences. Consequently, this study aims to build further on the work of scholars such as Nicola Humble, Kate Macdonald, Erica Brown and Mary Grover (among many others) who, to borrow Humble's term, have sought to 'rehabilitate' and reassess critical perceptions of the early twentieth century's 'middlebrow' writing.¹²⁷ In short, it supports the growing recognition of early twentieth century literature as, in Macdonald's words, a 'palimpsest of overlapping discourses' rather than clear-cut binaries.¹²⁸ The streams of contemporaneous literature, while divergent in their aims and technique, are nevertheless bound by common historical and cultural influences - a conception of history in itself suggestively Bergsonian.

The reclamation of the term 'middlebrow' over recent decades reflects just this process. Constructed and sustained as a pejorative term for the majority of the twentieth

¹²⁶ George Rowland Dodson, *Bergson and the Modern Spirit* (Forgotten Books, 2012), 2.

¹²⁷ For a detailed account of writers and works contributing to this area of study see Kate Macdonald's introduction to *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Minerva Read*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 2-4.

¹²⁸ MacDonald, *The Masculine Middlebrow*, 2.

century, something Woolf imagined as vulgarly ‘betwixt and between’,¹²⁹ the middlebrow is today increasingly acknowledged as a valuable cultural barometer for identifying and gauging the range of dominant public concerns and interests: combining what Humble identifies in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s-1950s* (2001) as the critically undervalued attribute of ‘textual pleasure’,¹³⁰ alongside what Ina Habbermann’s *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow* (2010) recently recognized as a capacity to provide intellectual ‘sustenance’.¹³¹ Consequently, to fully appreciate the scope of Bergson’s interface with early twentieth century literature and culture, and in order to challenge and explore the perceived boundaries between middlebrow and modernist literature, it is pertinent to address and parse the terms of this shared influence. To do so will help to establish a more holistic, balanced view of this era and the literature produced within it. Such investigation will not negate the unique contribution Bergson made to inspiring, elucidating and supporting the formal innovations of modernism, but will recognise that the impact of his ideas resounded far beyond this context, capturing the attention of an unexpectedly broad spectrum of society in often unexpected, unconventional and as yet under-explored ways.

Moving Bergson beyond Modernism

In order to move beyond the limitations of an exclusively modernist Bergson, it must be noted that although Bergson frequently illustrated his ideas with reference to the arts he never attempted to produce a full scale aesthetic theory.¹³² In reality such ideas present only a small aspect of a broader, immensely varied pool of ideas. They are, rather than a prescriptive

¹²⁹ Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow" *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 22.

¹³⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920's- 1950's: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

¹³¹ Ina Habbermann, *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 35.

¹³² Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, T.E. Hulme reported that during a discussion with Bergson at the Bologna Philosophical Congress (1910), Bergson had stated, ‘when I do write a new book it will probably be on aesthetics and ethics.’ See, Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 19 & 189 and Alun Jones, *The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 208.

model for how art should be produced, intended to allow a tangible point of reference from which to communicate otherwise elusive, abstract concepts; presenting, for example, a conceptual ideal for how an artist might gesture towards fundamentally ineffable phenomena like *durée*. Given this, in attempting to assess the scope and scale of Bergson's influence on contemporary literature it must be considered that, moving beyond a purely modernist focus, many aspects of Bergson's work would, like Dunne's, have proved equally fascinating for their thematic potential: not least his presentation of the arbitrary nature of society and language, the divided nature of the self, the fluid, mystical nature of time and dreams, the perpetual evolutionary struggle against atavism and, in association with this (as described in *Creative Evolution*) the latent potential for vegetable consciousness and animation.

While the comparatively late appearance of Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927), combined with its candid, non-academic style ensured that Dunne avoided the radar of high modernism (by now increasingly exclusive, secular and classical in its concerns), the implications of his ideas, often a more fanciful extension of Bergson's theories (the psychical powers of dream, possibility of clairvoyance and potential for time travel) were, nevertheless, eagerly embraced by celebrated 'middlebrow' writers such as H.G. Wells, C.S. Lewis, J.B. Priestley and John Buchan. Yet it was largely through Bergson that the turn of the century's fascination with time, a phenomenon discussed so critically in Wyndham Lewis' *Time and Western Man*, saw its culmination. By bridging academic and popular culture Bergson, whether he would have approved or not, laid the foundations for both 'highbrow' successors like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre and, later, Deleuze and for popular thinkers like J.W. Dunne, and the influential esotericist P.D. Ouspenski. The broad saturation of Bergsonian thought ensured that the ideas of this latter, less conventional group met with a receptive, fertile middlebrow following. Indeed, testament to Bergson's influence and popular tenure, Dunne draws extensively on his works and terminology, using them as a

sounding post from which to illustrate and scaffold his own findings. The clarity with which this legacy appeared to contemporary readers is made clear in the opening epigraph of Buchan's *The Gap in the Curtains* (1932), a novella inspired by Dunne's theories, as it sets the scene with a quotation from Bergson's most renowned text *Creative Evolution*.

Bergson, therefore, provides a crucial point from which to assess and analyse the terms of the interactions and respective bifurcations between modernist and mainstream literature and culture. Indeed, the absence of critical engagement with this substantial link between these ostensibly independent, opposing currents marks a considerable blind spot in the critical landscape of this era. This is an oversight complicated on one hand by traditional, only recently waning, perceptions of the 'great divide' between modernism and contemporary middlebrow literature and, on the other, by Bergson's rapid rise to fame, his equally swift fall from fashion and the subsequent eagerness of former modernist disciples to distance themselves from each of these phenomena. To acknowledge and explore the terms of this mutual influence might contribute both to today's dawning acceptance of middlebrow literature as a productive, culturally valid field of study as well as to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural history of modernism. As this chapter will emphasise, in this task Bergson's carefully nuanced ideas and associated terminology (each common currency at this juncture) can provide a common vocabulary with which to revitalise, discuss and draw together a diverse, formerly incommensurable, selection of texts.

Bergson, T.E. Hulme and the Modernists

While, as Karen Csengeri notes in her review of Paul Douglass' *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature for Comparative Literature* (1988), Bergson arguably exerted a philosophical influence on modernism 'second only to Nietzsche's', the scope of this influence was very

different in kind.¹³³ While Nietzsche's asystematic and aphoristic style often alienated the lay reader, leaving his work the preserve of academics and intellectuals (a reputedly obscure inspiration for the modernist's highbrow aspirations), Bergson's clear, deceptively simplistic writing style saw him embraced not only by intellectuals, but also an unprecedentedly broad public audience. This phenomenon rapidly came to repel erstwhile Bergsonianians like T.E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot who, eager to distance themselves from the 'eager-hearted',¹³⁴ 'mondaines',¹³⁵ who thronged to Bergson's lectures, dismissed him respectively as a 'bubble soon to be burst',¹³⁶ a misguided 'time-romancer',¹³⁷ and most sinisterly the heretic purveyor of a 'potent ju-ju' of optimism and moral redundancy.¹³⁸

The surprising vehemence of this turn is perhaps best illustrated with reference to T.E. Hulme. Hailed by T.S. Eliot as 'the forerunner [...] [of] the twentieth century mind' set,¹³⁹ Hulme was from his active role in the prominent Poet's Club through to his establishment of its more radical offshoot, the 'secession club', in 1909, a vital and deeply influential figure in the formation of early modernist ideas. Regardless of his own meagre literary output and the contention which surrounds his individual merits, Hulme possessed a charismatic vigour that led Jacob Epstein to describe him posthumously as 'a man like Plato and Socrates', who drew 'the intellectual youth of his time around him'.¹⁴⁰ Whether or not Hulme represents a significant creative force in the modernist movement he was undeniably, as Levenson asserts in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, a dynamic 'intellectual site [...] where intellectual currents

¹³³ K.E. Csengeri, Review of *Bergson Eliot and American Literature*, by Paul Douglass. *Comparative Literature* 40, Issue 4 (Autumn, 1988), 409.

¹³⁴ Thomas Gratton (pseudonym for T.E. Hulme), 'Bergson Lecturing' in *The New Age*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (London: November, 1911), 15.

¹³⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'Imperfect Critics' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 38.

¹³⁶ Thomas Gratton, 'Bergson Lecturing', 16.

¹³⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: 1927), 204.

¹³⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Mr. Middleton Murray's Synthesis,' *Criterion* vi (1927), 341.

¹³⁹ T.S. Eliot, Review of *Speculations* by T.E. Hulme, *Criterion* ii (1924), 231.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob Epstein, introduction to T.E. Hulme's *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read (Edinburgh: Johnston Press, 2007), ii.

converged' and his early advocacy of Bergson ensured the philosopher was well known and much discussed in proto-modernist literary circles.¹⁴¹

Magnetic and voluble, Hulme proved an accomplished spokesman using the pages of *New Age*, public lectures and Cambridge debates, as well as his involvement in various literary coteries to preach Bergson's theories. As Douglass notes in *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature*, in doing so Hulme instigated a broad, dynamic process of dissemination, one arguably absorbed by Eliot in America and promulgated by John Middleton Murry's *Rhythm* magazine from 1911.¹⁴² Tragically abbreviated by the Great War and possibly inhibited by his fiery temperament, Hulme's career brought him into close contact with many of high modernism's central players. Following his death, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis each praised his work and acknowledged their debt to him, and (given the timing of their interactions) tacitly to Bergson's thought. Indeed, works and essays such as Glen Hughes' *Imagism and the Imagists* (1931), Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1986), Gillies' *Bergson and British Modernism* (1996) and Andrew Thacker's 'Hulme, Imagism and Modernist Theories of Language' (2006) convincingly connect Hulme's interest in Bergson to ideas underpinning the Imagist doctrine (a movement of which Hughes claims Hulme to be the founding 'father') and, extending from this, literary impressionism and even Vorticism.¹⁴³

Initially rapt, Hulme enthused that Bergson's philosophy offered 'an end to an intolerable state' freeing him from what he felt to be the intractable 'nightmare' of

¹⁴¹ Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 96.

¹⁴² For further details regarding the role of Eliot and *Rhythm* magazine in the dissemination of Bergson's ideas see Paul Douglass' *Bergson Eliot and American Literature* pp. 3 & 65-67.

¹⁴³ Glen Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists* (California: Stanford University Press, 1931), 9. The interactions of Bergson's thought with artistic movements beyond imagism is explained in detail in the opening chapters of Mark Antliff's *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton University Press, 1992) as well as Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism*.

materialism.¹⁴⁴ The numerous, fervent articles Hulme produced for *The New Age* between 1909 and 1912 make it clear that Hulme's discovery of Bergson was far more than a trivial fad. Indeed, his first confrontation with Bergson in 1907, a reading of *Time and Free Will* on a Dorset hill-top, seemingly effected an epiphanic conversion, producing what he reports as 'a physical sense of exhilaration [...] a kind of mental explosion'.¹⁴⁵ From this moment Hulme made it his business to read not only all of Bergson's work, but anything he could find regarding him. His commitment was such that in 1910 he undertook the full-scale translation of Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1913) and forged a relationship with the philosopher intimate enough for Bergson to provide a reference supporting his 1912 readmission to Cambridge following an embarrassing expulsion in 1904 for what one college document records as, 'over-stepping the limits of the traditional license allowed [...] on Boat Race night'.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, until the onset of 'Le Bergson Boom' in 1911, Hulme was by his own admission an ardent disciple of the philosopher proclaiming his ideas to be 'Heaven-sent'.¹⁴⁷

In short, as Douglass asserts, 'if anyone consciously set out to transmit Bergson to the English speaking world it was T.E. Hulme'.¹⁴⁸ Yet by 1911, just as Bergson reached the zenith of his popularity in Britain, Hulme's attitude underwent a rapid and irreversible change. The terms of this transformation, though more exaggerated than those of other former modernist Bergsonians, are usefully representative of a broader turn against the philosopher. Whilst still completing a series of articles on Bergson commissioned for *The New Age*, Hulme's attendance at one of the philosopher's British lectures induced a sudden and irredeemable crisis of confidence. Covering his tracks with the pseudonym Thomas Gratton, Hulme related this disappointment in *The New Age* in a damning report titled

¹⁴⁴ T.E. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 29.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Document from St. John's College, Cambridge, quoted in Rodger Kimball's 'The Importance of T.E. Hulme' *The New Criterion*, 15, 18.

¹⁴⁷ T.E. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ Douglass, *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature*, 3.

‘Bergson Lecturing’ (1911). Remarkably this crisis, one Hulme describes ‘as a fit of the profoundest blackest scepticism’, occurred even before Bergson took to the stage.¹⁴⁹ For (in common with Eliot’s derisive response to Bergson’s crowds) it was not Bergson *per se* who so offended Hulme but rather the devastating effect of, after passing stringent entry policies, finding his hero’s lecture room packed with ‘a harem’ of women, all with ‘an “Eager Heart” attitude which resembled nothing so much as [...his] kitten when gently waking from sleep’.¹⁵⁰ This spectacle devastated the poet, he lamented that ‘if these were the elect [...] *what were the rejected like?*’.¹⁵¹

Indeed, in keeping with the feminist critique of masculinist modernism offered in Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism* (1991), this overtly gendered attack on Bergson’s audience appears informed by the fear that philosophy and art itself might become feminised by its association with these ‘eager hearted’ females. Such was the vehemence of Hulme’s reaction that in his essay ‘Hulme, Bergson and psychologism’ Jesse Matz speculates that underlying, and even overriding, the frequently cited theories that Hulme’s turn from Bergson stemmed from a combination of complex socio-political factors (including his interactions with Lasserre and Action Française and subsequent fascinations with the various anti-psychologistic positions of Husserl and Moore), lies a deeper, ironically more primitive fear of feminisation. As Matz observes, unsettled by Bergson’s substantial female following, Hulme swiftly ‘reclassifie[d] Bergson’s theories’;¹⁵² while once ‘Bergson’s theory of “intuition” had helped Hulme to define the aesthetics of modern poetry; now [it] be[came] merely a female psychical talent, something innately unreliable and irrational’.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Hulme, ‘Bergson Lecturing,’ 15.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵² Jesse Matz, ‘T.E. Hulme, Henri Bergson, and the Cultural Politics of Psychologism’ in *The Mind of Modernism*, ed. by Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 340.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 340.

As a consequence, despite his knowledge of Bergson's personal discomfort with such crowds, Hulme's first-hand experience of this phenomenon presented an overwhelming attack on his taste for exclusivity and, crucially, his belief in masculine intellectual superiority. This was an impulse that ultimately superseded any personal sympathies with the philosopher; Hulme reports an experience of 'almost physical' revulsion at being grouped alongside four hundred others, nine out of ten of whom were women, each filled with a reverence for Bergson as seemingly profound as his own.¹⁵⁴ This revelation, strikingly visceral in its realisation, engendered a passionate desire for revolt. Hulme describes being struck by the sudden conviction that 'it is not in the nature of truth to be grasped so easily' by so many and, outraged, vowed to prove that not only were all Bergson's admirers wrong, but that Bergson himself was a 'bubble soon to be burst'.¹⁵⁵ From Hulme, being as Epstein notes in his introduction to *Speculations*, an individual 'capable of kicking a theory as well as a man down the stairs', this was no empty threat.¹⁵⁶

In many respects Hulme's response to Bergson's audience embodies what Martin Jay in 'Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism' identifies as modernism's tendency towards 'negative exclusion', a process through which cultural factors:

not only interact and parallel each other through, producing reinforcements, homologies, and elective affinities, but also sometimes interact through repulsions and negations, achieving their fragile definitions by means of abjecting the other.¹⁵⁷

Contemplated in this light, Hulme's rejection of Bergson emphasises an important transitional phase in modernism as it moves away from early allegiances to subjectivist philosophy, psychology and associated aesthetic theories, towards a Classical phase characterised by the anti-idealism and anti-psychologism of thinkers as diverse as Pierre

¹⁵⁴ Hulme, 'Bergson Lecturing', 16.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ Jacob Epstein, introduction to *Speculations*, by T.E. Hulme, *iii*.

¹⁵⁷ Martin Jay, 'Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism' in *The Mind of Modernism*, ed. by Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 352.

Lasserre, G.E. Moore and Edmund Husserl. This was a turn, as Jay explains, central to the development of modernism's characteristic belief in the autonomy of art.

Consequently, as recent scholarship demonstrates, though Bergson's thought is inextricably entwined with modernist ideas its connection to him was until recent decades broadly effaced by a critical construction of modernism that tended to privilege what Eliot defined as the 'extinction of personality'¹⁵⁸ and Pound considered the absence of 'emotional slither'.¹⁵⁹ This had the effect of promoting a decidedly elitist, masculine version of modernism which set itself in opposition to the feminised 'middlebrow' culture which Hulme came to believe had adopted Bergson. Exploring the ways in which Bergson's ideas manifest or resonate within the work of middlebrow literature might invite comparison between the aspects of popular culture and Bergsonian thought thinkers like Hulme reacted against, as well as the elements which tacitly link them and the social and political factors underscoring these.

Perhaps at the crux of this tension lies the modernist emphasis on the dichotomy between romanticism and classicism, a conflict most famously articulated in the criticism of Eliot but which Hulme before him had so passionately communicated in his essay 'Romanticism and Classicism' (1910). Here, Hulme rejected the Romantic belief in human perfectibility and progress, instead acknowledging the 'intrinsically limited' nature of mankind which he felt could only by discipline, order and tradition then be transformed into 'something fairly decent'.¹⁶⁰ In keeping with this realisation Hulme prophesies an aesthetic turn from the romantic's imaginative attempts to grapple with the indefinite and essentially mystical qualities of the 'infinite' to favour instead a 'hard dry classicism' which, through its

¹⁵⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 39.

¹⁵⁹ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect' (1918) in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1968), 12.

¹⁶⁰ T.E. Hulme, 'Classicism and Romanticism' in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the philosophy of Art* ed. by Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.), 111.

simplicity and stylistic reservation, would acknowledge the finite nature of humanity.¹⁶¹

While Bergson is not mentioned explicitly in this context, Hulme's rejection of sentiment, novelty and progress in this essay combined with his emphasis on determinism and restraint is directly at odds with the Bergsonian accent on affect, intuition and creativity and, as such, augurs Hulme's imminent rejection of the philosopher. Key to this divergence is the issue of affect and its place in literature, currently a significant and expanding concern for modernist studies. While in his final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson equates a work of genius not with the artist's intellectual prowess, but with their ability to grapple with the communication of 'an emotion, unique of its kind, which seemed to baffle expression, and yet had to express itself', many modernists with their growing disdain for psychologism would have considered this essentially romantic vision of artistic endeavour vulgar, self-indulgent and, worse still, demeaningly feminine.¹⁶²

Bergson and the Problem of Influence

That such influential figures so vehemently rejected Bergson has undoubtedly complicated efforts to trace and assess the scale of his influence on modernism (or indeed contemporary literature as a whole), yet this is not the only obstacle faced by those engaged in this task. As John Mullarkey explains in *The New Bergson*, (and as the case of Hulme illustrates), the rapid diffusion of Bergson's thought throughout Europe allowed his ideas to be rapidly assimilated and, as he fell from fashion, too often eclipsed by a broad spectrum of other thinkers and their associated philosophical, literary, political and psychological agendas. While the incidence of such dilution illustrates the overwhelming scope of Bergson's appeal, it likewise emphasises the problematic task of unravelling what is authentically Bergsonian

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶² Henri Bergson, 'The Two Sources of Morality and Religion: Morality Obligation and the open Soul' in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings* ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2001), 318.

from what is, for example, existentialist, phenomenological, structuralist or even psychoanalytical. Reviews of Douglass' *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature* reveal the difficulties faced in persuasively tracing this complex lineage. In Peter Lamarque's review for *The Yearbook of English Studies* (1989) Douglass is criticised for making 'gratuitously strong claims about influence' and by K.E. Csengeri for confusing the ideas of influence, analogy and parallelism.¹⁶³ Indeed, each review's major criticism of his work relates to the often indirect, circumstantial origins of the ideas Douglass claims as Bergsonian: as Lamarque observes, 'with a bit of imaginative squeezing and stretching Bergsonian ideas can be found all over the place'.¹⁶⁴

Ostensibly a damning criticism, this comment itself tacitly supports Mullarkey's presentation of the cultural ubiquity and dilution of Bergson's thought. However unsatisfactory such explanations prove for academia's empirical tastes, Bergson was if not an instigator of the early twentieth-century zeitgeist, certainly an eloquent spokesman for a wealth of contemporary concerns. To borrow a phrase tantalisingly overused in connection with Bergson, his ideas and terminology were indubitably 'in the air' at this juncture. Despite its flaws, what Douglass' work clearly depicts is a vivid sense of the complex cultural milieu within which modernism emerged; a janus-faced era which sought to juggle the conflicting currents of positivism, idealism, mysticism, evolutionism, esotericism and primitivism. Within this climate it was, as his bibliographer P.A.Y. Gunter asserts, Bergson's engagement with pertinent subjects like 'biological evolution, the unconscious mind, psychological time, laughter, the nature of dreams [and] the revolt against mechanism' which made his work so fascinating to his contemporaries and for critics today such an important platform from which

¹⁶³ Peter Lamarque, review of *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature* by Paul Douglass and *The Philosophy of T.S. Eliot: From Scepticism to a Surrealist Poetic, 1909-1927* by William Skaff. *The Year Book of English Studies* 19 (1989), 356.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 356.

to explore the early twentieth century mindset.¹⁶⁵ While as Lamarque cautions, Bergson must be regarded as ‘a creature, rather than creator of his times’, this does not negate the fact that he, above all his contemporaries, found a compelling, curiously accessible way of fusing and expressing these divergent streams of thought.¹⁶⁶

As Thomas Hanna asserts in his centennial appreciation of Bergson states:

the genius of Bergson is not to be found in his basic presuppositions; it is to be found in the manner in which he has argued these basic ideas and organised them in an almost audaciously unique manner.¹⁶⁷

Given this talent, it is perhaps in the role of cultural interpreter that Bergson can be most productively applied in the study of the literature of his contemporaries. While an author’s ideas may only relate to Bergson’s thought in indirect, tangential respects, Bergson’s theories of time, memory and self, alongside his carefully nuanced terminology remain an invaluable tool for illuminating and expressing these often recurrent contemporary concerns. To reiterate the terms of two of Bergson’s most influential British admirers, T.E. Hulme and Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill: Bergson’s ‘acute analysis of certain mental processes [...] enable[s] us to state more definitely and with less distortion the qualities which we feel in art’,¹⁶⁸ making him, as Underhill observed, an ‘important mediator between [the artist or mystic’s] inarticulate explor[at]ions of the Infinite and the map loving human mind’.¹⁶⁹

In short, recourse to Bergson’s work and terminology can provide a fresh, chronologically appropriate set of theories and vocabulary through which to view and discuss this era’s literature. Such an approach to Bergson recognises the difficulties which, given the curious twists of his career, inevitably vex attempts to definitively map the genesis of

¹⁶⁵ P.A.Y Gunter, *Henri Bergson: A Bibliography* (Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Centre, 1974), 4

¹⁶⁶ Lamarque, 356.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Hanna, ed. *The Bergsonian Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 7.

¹⁶⁸ T.E. Hulme, ‘Bergson’s Theory of Art’ in Karen Csengeri, ed. *The Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 203.

¹⁶⁹ Evelyn Underhill, ‘Bergson and the Mystics’ in *The English Review*, No. 10, Feb. 1912, 511.

'Bergsonian' ideas. Returning to Bergson's work and focusing on the illuminative potential of his philosophy provides a way of exploring early twentieth century writers and their contemporary intellectual contexts. In doing so, it challenges the notion that modernism was a movement concerned with cultural and philosophical ideas, while popular writing chiefly focused on sentiment and feeling.

Bergson and Moving Beyond Freud

The aims and scope of such an approach might be best compared to the broad application of Freudian thought in literary studies, particularly as it is used in conjunction with modernist texts. Such theories have proved popular, regardless of an author's engagement with or approval of Freud's ideas, because of their ability to engage with, concretise and articulate the often complex, nebulous terms of character or the author's psyche. While this approach has provided an attractive tool for parsing a text and arguably the psychology of its author it has, by its essentially scientific, individualist nature, the disadvantage of closing down the subtle ambiguities which often bring life to a work: in short, one risks missing, undermining or misrepresenting the undercurrents of mysticism and idealism which so characterised the age. As Wilfred Guerin cautions in his *Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 'to see a great work of fiction or a great poem primarily as a psychological case study is often to miss its wider significance and perhaps even the essential aesthetic experience it should provide'.¹⁷⁰ A Bergsonian exploration of literature from this era allows room to explore such facets, using a set of ideas and terminology both familiar and sensitive to the conflicting streams of mystical, romantic and rationalistic thought which interacted during this complex, transitional period.

¹⁷⁰ Wilfred L. Guerin, et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Harper & Row, 1979), 127.

As Mark S. Micale notes in his introduction to *The Mind of Modernism* (2004), until recent decades the study of modernist aesthetics and psychology had been overwhelmingly dominated by psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Freud.¹⁷¹ Whilst Freudian theory was certainly a school of thought with massive cultural importance, it nevertheless represents just one of many models of mind emerging at this juncture. As Micale relates, whilst psychoanalysis has proved the most enduring of these it was, until as late as the nineteen twenties, in reality largely overshadowed by the thought and theories of thinkers like Edward Carpenter, James Frazer, William Fechner, Ernst Mach, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Pierre Janet and Henri Bergson (to name but a few), whose work fascinated artists and intellectuals between the eighteen eighties and nineteen twenties. Exploring the terms of these formerly overlooked cultural influences might challenge accepted assumptions about the meanings and aesthetic intentions of early twentieth century texts, broadening and enriching our understanding of their cultural context and allowing them to be revisited and explored from a variety of new perspectives.

Culturally more prevalent than Freud during modernism's formative stages, re-reading contemporary literature through a Bergsonian lens has the potential to draw out aspects of meaning and scope which may have been underplayed or even distorted by a Freudian approach. Indeed, while Freud provides an invaluable framework with which to analyse and reflect on the psychological concerns of modernism, as with Bergson, many of his ideas have been subject to widespread popularisation and the inevitable misinterpretations such notoriety invites. Further complicating this, psychoanalysis has been and remains a continuously developing discipline that has taken many different and often divergent paths. This makes the process of delineating its core features an ambulant and complex task. Despite this, underpinning each of its incarnations, there is a tendency in psychoanalysis to

¹⁷¹ See Mark S. Micale, 'The Modernist Mind: A Map' in *The Mind of Modernism* ed. By Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 19.

focus on the individual subject and to assume that subjectivity is developed through normative concepts of the family and society. In order to distinguish, clarify and identify the potential merits of using Bergson in a similarly theoretical role, it is useful to summarise the key distinctions between Freudian and Bergsonian views on consciousness, art and the accompanying role of the artist.

Whilst Bergson and Freud both engage with the intricacies of the individual psyche, finding in it forces or drives ostensibly alien to and in conflict with our external social identities, their conclusions regarding the status and function of these mental processes differ radically. For Freud, the ‘unconscious’ presents a realm inaccessible to ordinary introspection, one inhabited by unacceptable desires, traumas and painful emotions and which, repressed, appear alien to the conscious mind. The powerful involuntary action of the unconscious and the often cryptic external symptoms it provokes, in Freud’s view provides clear evidence of our psychic determinism. For Freud, our personalities and behaviours are governed by the shadowy functions of the unconscious making past experience central to the formation of the subject. In this view nothing about behaviour is left to chance, as Charles Brenner expounds in *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis*, ‘in the mind, as in physical nature about us nothing happens [...] in a random way. Each psychic event is determined by the ones which precede it’.¹⁷² Indeed, even incidents in our psychological lives which appear to us as arbitrary, for example the parapraxes (or Freudian slip), reveal to the psychoanalyst a latent unconscious belief, thought, or emotion. Yet for Bergson, while this same psychic ‘residuum’ similarly constitutes and influences our outward personality, it conversely holds the key to agency and free will.

For Bergson and Freud alike, our memory, preserved in its entirety, continuously accumulates as we move through life. For Bergson, this process ensures each moment’s

¹⁷² Charles Brenner, *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), 2.

radical heterogeneity as each instant flows through the next inflected and coloured, but crucially undivided and thus undetermined by the experiences preceding it. Thus, as Suzanne Guerlac observes in her foreword to *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*,

‘we can appreciate in Bergson another way to think unconsciousness, one that does not depend on the structure of repression [...]. In Bergson, differences between consciousness and unconsciousness become subtle and fluid. A function of fluctuations of tension and attention in relation to one another’.¹⁷³

In this view memory functions as an anchor between the practical, divisive functions of the intellect and the unquantifiable subjective realm of *durée* (and by extension the *élan vital*). In this, Bergson takes the origins of the unconscious beyond the individual to an ostensibly mystical, supra-individual source, one which bears comparison to Jung’s later conception of the collective unconscious. Indeed, in many respects the key distinctions between Freudian and Bergsonian approaches reflect and anticipate the better documented break between Freud and his protégé Jung as, in the years leading up to the First World War, Jung challenged and sublimated existing understandings of the *libido* into a dynamic life force (an energy in his own words ‘parallel to that of the Bergsonian *élan vital*’). Through this work, Jung emphasised the creative potential of the unconscious, and formed the effectively spiritual notion of the collective unconscious.¹⁷⁴ These more spiritual modes of thought regard the individual consciousness as merely one facet of a more profound, complex process grounded not in the material, individualised and potentially reductive absolutes of Freudian psychoanalysis, but rather unbounded, timeless and radically creative. This distinction is clarified in *Creative Evolution* where Bergson states:

¹⁷³ Suzanne Guerlac, foreword to *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Ardoin, Paul, S.E. Gontarski, and Laci Matterson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3.

¹⁷⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, ‘The Content of the Psychoses, Part II, 1914’, trans. by M.D. Elder in *Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology*, ed. by C.E. Long (London, 1912) p. 351. Similar comparisons are drawn between the Jungian libido and Bergson’s thought in Jung’s ‘On Psychic Energy’ (begun 1912 and completed 1927), ‘On Psychoanalysis’ (1913), ‘A Contribution to the Study of Psychological Types’ (1913), ‘Psychological Understanding’ (1914) and ‘The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man’ (1934). For a detailed discussion of these parallels see P.A.Y. Gunter ‘Bergson and Jung’ *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Oct-Dec, 1982), pp. 635-652.

What are we, in fact what is our *character*, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived since our birth- nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us pre-natal dispositions? Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act.¹⁷⁵

This issue of volition, Freud's negation of it and Bergson's insistence on it, bears important consequences for the divergent conclusions of these otherwise similar theories. As Valentine Moulard-Leonard summarises in *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters*: 'Bergson does not, unlike Freud, limit the unconscious to the negative residue of consciousness; rather with Bergson it is consciousness that becomes the residue of the unconscious'.¹⁷⁶ In essence, while for Freud conscious life is interrupted and determined by the often unwelcome interjections of the unconscious, for Bergson this outer-conscious realm is only the superficial facade of life: usefully serving life's practical demands, but similarly constraining and limiting the vital freedom of the inner core. While for Freud the rational mind offers a means to palliate the disruptive influences of the unconscious mind, for Bergson tapping into the deeper levels of personality by an effort of intuition might 'give us the key to vital operations', allowing us the radical freedom to 'grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us and indicate the means of supplementing it'.¹⁷⁷ According to Bergson, using intuition (which he defines as 'instinct that has become disinterested, self conscious, capable of reflecting on its object and enlarging it indefinitely') to reach beyond the intellect in this way might allow us to 'recognise that life does not quite go into the category of the many nor yet into that of the one [and] that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the vital process'.¹⁷⁸ To Bergson, using intuition to access such a revelation might bring about the 'expansion of our consciousness [...] introduce[ing] us to life's own domain'. This is in

¹⁷⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 209.

¹⁷⁶ Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the thought of the Virtual* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 165.

¹⁷⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 176.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

marked contrast to Freud's view of life as a realm determined by man's external conditions and his conflicting physical drives towards pleasure or death.

As Deleuze asserts in *Bergsonism*, Bergson introduces the notion of an 'ontological unconscious' over and above the psychological one.¹⁷⁹ It is this, as Keith Ansell Pearson observes in 'Bergson on Memory', 'which enables us to speak of the being of the past and to grant the past a genuine existence'; as such, 'the past is not simply reducible to the status of a former present, and neither can it be solely identified with the phenomenon of psychological recollection'.¹⁸⁰ As Jean Hyppolite asserts in 'Various aspects of Memory in Bergson', for Bergson memory consists (in terms) of 'a synthesis of past and present and with a view to the future'.¹⁸¹ For Hyppolite this is the crux of the radical 'new sense' Bergson imparts to the word memory.¹⁸² The novelty of Bergson's vision is, therefore, that it refuses to regard 'memory [as] a particular faculty that is concerned with repeating or reproducing the past in the present'; rather, memory 'is consciousness itself insofar as this consciousness is creative duration'.¹⁸³ Such a view clashes with prevailing scientific conceptions of memory which regard it merely 'as a faculty of repetition or reproduction', an entity, therefore, posed in opposition to 'invention and creation'.¹⁸⁴ In contrast to matter, which does not remember the past because it repeats it unceasingly and is subject to inexorable scientific laws, as Bergson notes, a being 'which evolves, more or less freely, creates something new every moment.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans by Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 56.

¹⁸⁰ Keith Ansell Pearson, 'Bergson on Memory' in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* ed. By Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 62.

¹⁸¹ Jean Hyppolite, 'Various aspects of Memory in Bergson', trans. by Athena V. Coleman in Leonard Lawlor's *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 112.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2004), 297.

Such a view, both novel and radical in its time, accords with a more intuitive, essentially mystical view of being, one which was increasingly embraced by a public disillusioned with the prevailing streams of materialism and determinism. In this climate the philosophy of Bergson proved a source of hope and fascination for an unprecedentedly broad spectrum of society: rapidly osmosing from academia to mainstream culture, while assuming a particular resonance for the significant minority of individuals involved in the many occult and mystical societies so prevalent at this juncture. Moreover, in this view the artist becomes, as for the Romantics, a sensitive vessel whose heightened intuitive capacity or ‘aesthetic sensibility’ enables them to gesture towards the driving unity or ‘intention of life’: through this heightened state, allowing the communication of otherwise ineffable universal mystical truths. In this the artist is able to regain something of his or her, otherwise diminished status, becoming a figure far removed from the Freudian view of the artist as a subject through whose creations we might discern the presence of repressed traumas and visceral desires or, in Hulme’s terms, a fundamentally limited creature whose nature, being fixed like ‘a bucket’, is inextricably ‘bound to the earth’.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ T.E. Hulme, ‘Classism and Romanticism’, 111.

Chapter Three

Bergson: Key Terms and Ideas

Bergson's 'New Philosophy': Mobility, Creativity and Common Sense

Before attempting to discuss texts in connection with Bergson's philosophy it is essential to identify and elucidate some of the key terms, concepts and paradoxes around which this complex, notoriously impenetrable philosophy revolves. In doing so, it is important to note that Bergson himself took pains to stress that his work was in no way intended as a complete philosophical system: famously remarking 'Je n'ai pas de system' and unashamedly acknowledging that his writings were not coherent amongst themselves.¹⁸⁷ As John Mullarkey observes in his introduction to *The New Bergson*, the truth of this statement is borne out in the changing emphasis Bergson places on the primary location of 'duration' in his work, defined in terms of, 'the continuous present in *Time and Free Will* [and] the eternal past in *Matter and Memory*', as well as his ambivalence towards instinct which he at times aligns to life, at others to death and automatism.¹⁸⁸ Yet, as Bergson's early admirer Wildon Carr astutely notes, for Bergson to behave otherwise would prove fundamentally at odds with his basic supposition that life is a process, mobile and radically creative, with its sense of unity and direction established 'vis a tergo [...] given at the start as an impulsion, not placed at the end as an attraction'.¹⁸⁹

As Carr emphasises, for Bergson 'the universe is not a completed system of reality'; life does not unfold in accordance to a predetermined plan; if this were the case we might

¹⁸⁷ Henri Bergson, quoted in Jean de la Harpe, 'Souvenirs personnels d'un entretien avec Bergson', in *Henri Bergson : Essais et Témoignages* ed. by Albert Béguin and Pierre Thévenaz (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1943), 380.

¹⁸⁸ John Mullarkey, introduction to *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.

¹⁸⁹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 103. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to *CE*.

expect to move towards a greater sense of harmony and order while instead, as the evolutionary process reveals, life grows increasingly complex, diverse and discordant as it progresses.¹⁹⁰ For Bergson's contemporaries this assertion was a radical challenge to western philosophy's pervasive insistence on life's underlying immutability and perfection, one requiring a dramatic reorientation of established philosophic methods and thought. Indeed, Bergson controversially proposed that:

All of the philosophy that begins with Plato [...] is the development of the principle that there is more in the immutable than in the moving, and we pass from the stable to the unstable by mere diminution. Now it is the contrary which is true.¹⁹¹

This seemingly paradoxical position is possible for Bergson because for him unity is not predicated on the stable but rather in the radical, creative movement which he believes underlies all life. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* he states:

if I search in the depth of my being that which is most, uniformly, most constantly, and most enduringly myself, I find [...] a continuous flux which is not comparable to any flux I have ever seen. There is a succession of states, each of which announces that which is to follow and contains that which precedes it. They can, properly speaking, only be said to form multiple states when I have already passed them and turn back to observe their track. Whilst I was experiencing them they were so solidly organised, so profoundly animated with a common life, that I could not have said where any one of them finished or where another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other.¹⁹²

For Bergson, the effort to navigate this flux requires of the philosopher an equally dynamic, flexible approach to their work. Indeed, if life progresses along such mobile, unpredictable lines, then philosophy itself must recognise and reflect this process by first looking within the known, individual self to discover life's fundamental unity and freedom rather than fixating

¹⁹⁰ Wildon Carr, *Henri Bergson: The Philosophy of Change* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1919), 14.

¹⁹¹ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 163.

¹⁹² Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T.E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1912), 25. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *IM*.

on external generalised preconceptions. In short, Bergson's approach leaves no room for the categorical premises of mechanism and teleology.

As Carr reflects, such assumptions have inevitably secured the downfall of past philosophical arguments. He notes:

The difficulty of philosophy is not at the beginning. Start with who we will- Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel- no difficulty arrests us on the threshold, all is easy and familiar; it is only as we advance that the difficulties begin to appear, and only at the end that they seem insuperable. It is not in their beginnings but in their conclusions that philosophers meet those fundamental difficulties which are forever throwing them back on the study of first principles. May we not suspect that in this very fact lies the key to the solution?¹⁹³

At the root of this issue, Bergson and Carr alike identify humanity's reliance on the intellect (for Bergson a faculty naturally inclined to order, solidify and conceptualise experience) observing that, paradoxically, such a faculty 'so successful in dealing with external reality, [is] unfitted to the active life itself which has evolved these concepts in us'.¹⁹⁴ To overcome such an obstacle requires that the philosopher confront what Bergson feels to be humanity's biggest difficulty at the first instance, our analytic, spatialized conception of life. This involves an attempt to move beyond the mind's natural proclivity to translate experience in static intellectual terms requiring that, before embarking on an exploration of any given philosophical issue, a thinker must first grapple with 'a mental effort of extreme difficulty [...] an act of the mind which turns the mind from its own natural bent, turns aside from ready framed concepts, to place itself in the real activity out of which the conception habit has been formed'.¹⁹⁵ This effort requires the close contemplation of the ostensibly stable state of our own subjectivity, a 'thinking backwards'¹⁹⁶ in which we might cast off the clearly delineated surface perceptions inscribed by the material world, cutting through 'the memories which

¹⁹³ Wildon Carr, *The Philosophy of Change: A Study of the Fundamental Principle of the philosophy of Bergson* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1914), 2 & 3.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ F.C.T. Moore, *Bergson Thinking Backwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xi

more or less adhere to [them] and [...] serve to interpret them' and, finally, the motor habits bound to them.¹⁹⁷ As we move inwards, these solidified conceptions are revealed as the 'surface of a sphere which tends to grow larger and loose itself in the exterior world': the outmost periphery of the entity we consider to be our self. As we progress away from this periphery, we approach that which is, for Bergson, most, uniformly, most constantly, and most enduringly [our]self': the state of radical movement and creativity on which all life is founded.¹⁹⁸

In fitting with this radical stance, whilst discussing his own writings Bergson claimed: 'I have produced each of my books in forgetting the others'.¹⁹⁹ Ostensibly flippant, this statement was not intended to undermine or negate the findings of his previous works, but rather to stress the need to address each new issue with an open, unprejudiced mind. This is a method described in detail in the opening chapters of *Matter and Memory*; here, Bergson urges his reader to adopt the position of 'a mind unaware of the disputes between philosophers', a state of forgetfulness which might allow an impartial consideration of the issue discussed.²⁰⁰ As Bergson emphasises, this is ultimately a 'common sense' approach, a view lodged (for many uncomfortably) part-way between the poles of idealism and realism; a stance, as Bergson concedes, too often held 'in small honour among philosophers' (*MM*, viii).

Thus despite receiving criticism for his debt to spiritualist philosophers like Félix Ravaisson, Jules Lachier, Main de Biran and Émile Boutroux whose ideas, as Mary Ann Gillies notes in *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, 'dominated the academies of mid-

¹⁹⁷ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 25

¹⁹⁸ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 25

¹⁹⁹ Henri Bergson, quoted in *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey, 14.

²⁰⁰ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), viii. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to *MM*.

nineteenth century France',²⁰¹ Bergson's position proves in its conclusions far removed from the idealism of his antecedents: not least due to his deep engagement with physics and mathematics.²⁰² While Bergson certainly emphasised the importance of subjective experience, he likewise acknowledged that for the purpose of successful social survival this aspect of life must be carefully balanced against the practical needs of the external world. Indeed, criticisms like that of his one-time devotee T.E. Hulme, who in 1912 scathingly described Bergson's theories as 'nothing but the last disguise of romanticism', are revealed as flawed in the light of Bergson's lifelong commitment to physical science and his sustained emphasis on experiential balance and dualism.²⁰³

In reality, Bergson was no impractical romantic but rather one eager to establish what he described in a letter to the editor of *Le Figaro* (1914) as:

a metaphysic moulded on experience (whether exterior or interior); within an unpretentious philosophy determined to base itself on solid ground; with a doctrine that is in no sense systematic, that is not provided with an answer to every question, and that distinguishes different problems to examine them one by one- a philosophy in short, capable like science, of indefinite progress.²⁰⁴

Bergson believed that it was only through such an approach (one which recognised the value of both empirical and spiritual insights) that we might develop a comprehensive understanding of the human condition.

²⁰¹ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 8.

²⁰² Bergson initially trained in physics and mathematics, winning the first prize in mathematics for the prestigious "Concours Général," an accolade which led to the publication of his solution to a problem by Pascal in 1877. When Bergson subsequently chose to pursue a career in philosophy his infuriated maths teacher famously declared: 'you could have been a mathematician; you will be a mere philosopher.' Quoted in Phillipe Soulez & Frédéric Worms, *Bergson*, (Paris: PUF, 2002), 35.

²⁰³ T.E. Hulme, quoted in Jesse Matz, 'Hulme's Compromise and the New Psychologism' in *T.E. Hulme and The Question of Modernism*, ed. by Edward P. Comentale and Andrzej Gasiorek (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 116.

²⁰⁴ Henri Bergson, letter to the editor of *Le Figaro*, dated from London: March 7th, 1914. In Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1914), 53.

Indeed this aim is made explicit in the opening sentences of *Matter and Memory*

where Bergson candidly states:

This book affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and tries to determine the relation of one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory. It is then frankly dualistic. But, on the other hand, it deals with body and mind in such a way as [...] to lessen greatly [...] the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism (*MM*, vii).

This specific and modest aim is characteristic of Bergson's conviction that philosophy should progress empirically, unfettered by generalised, systematic frameworks: aiming only to 'throw light on some one aspect of very special problems'.²⁰⁵ Indeed, Bergson passionately refuted the claims of critics who rejected his approach as 'anti-intellectual' and anti-scientific, asking:

who can show me, in all that I have written a single line, a single word which can be interpreted in this fashion? [...] all my researches have no other object than to bring about an understanding between metaphysic and science, and to consolidate each by means of the other- after having, in the first instance, distinguished them from one another.²⁰⁶

For Bergson the true anti-intellectual was rather he who:

seeking philosophy to be no more than a systemization of the sciences (that is to say, at bottom, seeking to fill up by arbitrary hypothesis lacunae in our actual knowledge), would guide it gently towards the point where it has no choice other than that between an indefensible dogmatism and a resigned agnosticism- two roads to bankruptcy.²⁰⁷

This individual was for Bergson, through their inflexibility of mind, 'unable to distinguish between the cases where intellect attains reality and those others in which it can do no more than manipulate symbols'.²⁰⁸ A view of this kind is, as Mullarkey notes, born of 'our perennial temptation to think that physical laws are eternal' and our mistaken view that 'the universe must be "coherent"'.²⁰⁹ For Bergson, by embracing this incoherence, by acknowledging that life is an eternally mobile, creative force we might avoid such

²⁰⁵ Henri Bergson, Letter to *Le Figaro* in Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 53.

²⁰⁶ Henri Bergson, *Année psychologique* (1908) in Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 39.

²⁰⁷ Henri Bergson, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (1908), 30.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰⁹ Mullarkey, *New Bergson*, 4.

‘intellectual automatism’ and recognise that, to progress, philosophy must be open to constant adaptation as it is awakened to and called to respond to new issues.²¹⁰ In short, Bergson advocates a model of philosophy which permits no ‘conclusions which, in however small degree, [might] outstrip the empirical considerations on which it rests’.²¹¹

Yet, despite Bergson’s rejection of systematic philosophical doctrines and his emphasis on change and creativity there is nevertheless that which, in *A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson*, Édouard Le Roy refers to as a consistency of ‘attitude, a frame of mind’²¹² which gives coherence to his philosophy. As Mullarkey similarly asserts, ‘Bergsonism is not a chaotic mess: just as his own philosophy replaces the idea of an absolute and original disorder with a theory of different types of order, so there are varieties of order which are recognisably Bergsonian’.²¹³ Key to this coherence is Bergson’s insistence on the idea of *durée* (the radical distinction between interior lived time and the mechanical concepts within which we attempt to frame and translate it) and, in association with this, the necessity of embracing intuition (a faculty Bergson describes as ‘instinct which has become disinterested, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely’) as a philosophical method (*CE*, 25).

The Method of Intuition

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* Bergson carefully expounds his radical approach, stressing that there are:

two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we move around the object; the second that we enter into it. The first depends on the point of view at which we are placed and on the symbols by which we express ourselves. The

²¹⁰ Henri Bergson, ‘Good Sense and Classical Studies’ trans. by Melissa McMahon, in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2002), 349.

²¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Etudes, Revue Fondée en 1856 par des Pères de la Compagnie de Jésus*, 130 (1912), 514. In Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 44.

²¹² Édouard Le Roy. *A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson* trans by Vincent Benson (London: Williams & Norgate 1913),

²¹³ Mullarkey, *New Bergson*, 4.

second neither depends on a point of view nor relies on any symbol. The first kind of knowledge may be said to stop at the *relative*; the second, in cases where it is possible, to attain the *absolute*.²¹⁴

For Bergson, humanity's leaning towards relative knowledge arises from our habitual reliance on intellectual modes of thought: our mistaken attempt to impose methods, rightfully the domain of mathematics and science onto the study of philosophical issues. This tendency, as Bergson's disciple René Gillouin asserted, had, prior to Bergson's thought, led to an impasse in philosophy leaving the discipline 'about fifty years behind the stage of advance reached by the physical sciences'.²¹⁵ The subject's acquired desire to rationalise, contain and mould the phenomena of life into 'inflexible [...] cut and dry methods' veiled the subtle, fluid nature of lived experience and unduly complicated and distorted our understanding of life.²¹⁶

Though key to man's evolutionary success, Bergson notes that intelligence ultimately aims towards action and the preservation of society, its primary function being to attend to life's practical needs: to anticipate, hypothesise and construct practical solutions to pressing problems. Intelligence, therefore, is a fabricating faculty focused on the exploitation and adaptation of inert matter and the construction of easily communicable symbols. This is an attribute which has enabled humanity to develop far beyond its limited physical means, but whose interests ultimately focus outwards towards external forms, social living and physical laws. As such, despite its success in the material sphere, Bergson stresses the danger of applying intelligence to the field of pure speculation, observing that:

fabricating consists in carving out a form in matter. What is most important is the form to be obtained [...] an intelligence which aims at fabricating is an intelligence which never stops at the actual form of things nor regards it as final but, on the contrary, looks at all matter as if it were carvable at will (*CE*, 155).

This tendency, while making mankind boundlessly adaptable to his environment, simultaneously nurtures an 'artificial and provisional' view of life, effacing from our mind

²¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 21.

²¹⁵ René Gillouin, quoted in Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 51.

²¹⁶ Professor Draghicesco quoted in Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 51.

the living essence of an object and, in Bergson's terms, creating the impression that all matter is 'as an immense piece of cloth in which we can cut out what we will and sew it together again as we please' (*CE*, 156). Such a view, looking always outward to the material sphere, robs humanity of an authentic appreciation of life's radical heterogeneity and mobility. It presents instead the illusion of lived time as a homogenous medium, infinitely divisible, within which arbitrary structures, concepts and symbols might be constructed, articulated and stabilised.

The knowledge gleaned from such activity is that which Bergson defines as 'relative'. That is, knowledge derived from the intellectual process of analysis: the mental operation by which we reduce an object 'to elements already known' and relate it to 'elements common to both it and other objects' (*IM*, 24). Though useful, such information is essentially limited and misses what is unique and indivisible in an object. It consists in the reconstruction of a thing by combining a number of static external perspectives: a synthesis which, while satiating practical needs, never presents the essence of an object, merely its impersonal image.

Bergson illustrates this point stating:

Were all the photographs of a town, taken from all possible points of view, to go on indefinitely completing one another, they would never be equivalent to the solid town in which we walk about [...] A representation taken from a certain point of view, a translation made with certain symbols will always remain imperfect in comparison with the object of which a view has been taken or which the symbols seek to express, but the absolute which is the object and not its representation, is perfect, by being perfectly itself (*IM*, 23).

A deceptively simple concept when explained in these terms, our persistent reliance on the intellect has ensured that the notion of 'absolute' knowledge appears to us as something of an enigma, a seemingly unobtainable, mystical entity.

Bergson attempts to clarify and demystify the notion of the 'absolute' using analogies relating to language and movement:

suppose that I wished to communicate the extraordinarily simple impression that a passage in Homer makes upon me; I should first give a translation of the lines, I should then comment on my translation, and then develop the commentary; in this way, by piling up explanation on explanation, I might approach nearer and nearer to what I wanted to express; but I should never quite reach it (*IM*, 23).

He explains further that:

When you raise your arm, you accomplish a movement of which you have, from within, a simple perception; but for me, watching it from the outside, your arm passes through one point, then through another, and between these two there will be still other points; so that, if I began to count, the operation would go on forever. Viewed from the inside then an absolute is a simple thing; but looked at from outside, that is to say relative to other things, it becomes, in relation to these signs which express it the gold coin for which we never seem able to finish giving small change (*IM*, 23).

From this Bergson concludes that an absolute 'can only be given in an intuition, whilst everything else falls in the province of analysis' (*IM*, 23).

Intuition, therefore, reverses the normal working of intelligence, which is always interested and analytic, to bring us instead a simple, undivided impression of the item contemplated. In short, the practice of intuition constitutes an introspective attempt to tap into what Bergson describes as the 'very inwardness of life [...] the simple movement which runs through the lines, bind[ing] them together and giv[ing] them significance' (*CE*, 176 - 177). Though Bergson concedes that such a process cannot allow philosophy 'a knowledge of its object comparable to that which science has of its own', he asserts that the exercise of intuition might, if only for a moment, free the mind of the intellect's predisposition towards spatialised, immobile structures, thereby allowing us to 'grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us' (*CE*, 177).

Though ultimately transient and nebulous in nature, Bergson stresses that such insight could 'indicate the means by which we might supplement' or scaffold the gaps in our understanding of life. In this way, the intellect might come to recognise:

that life does not quite go into the category of the many nor yet into that of the one; that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the vital process (*CE*, 176).

Indeed Bergson speculates that, if nurtured, such an encounter might in time bring about ‘the expansion of our consciousness [...] introducing us into life’s own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation’ (*CE*, 177).

Thus to summarise, as Suzanne Guerlac observes in *Thinking and Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*, Bergson’s privileging of intuition represents ‘a revolutionary gesture’, one which reverses the established ‘hierarchy between epistemology and biology (or life and knowledge) and resituates intelligence as a limited part of the process of life’.²¹⁷ Such an assertion dashes the primacy of rationalism in philosophy, resituating it as a vital but ‘specialized adaptation of the mind’, relevant only to the service of useful action.²¹⁸ Thus whilst science might provide us with a mastery of inert matter it cannot comprehend being as a whole; this is only accessible to us by intuition. Intuition therefore might free philosophy from the impotence imposed on it by the intellect’s assumption that experience can be understood as a series of divided points extended through space, a misconception which only leads to the progressively complex, infinitely elusive task of exploring the movement of a thought [by] indefinitely adding points to points’ (*IM*, 51).

Bergson and Time

As Algot Ruhe notes in *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, Bergson believed ‘that the bearing and importance of a philosophy [should] be measured by the variety of the ideas into which it opens out, and by the simplicity of the principle which sums it up’, adding that there are few doctrines which ‘sustain this test better than [Bergson’s] own’.²¹⁹ In keeping with this assertion Leszek Kolakowski usefully, though perhaps

²¹⁷ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 17.

controversially, states that ‘we may sum up [Bergson’s] philosophy in the single idea: time is real’.²²⁰ While ostensibly mundane and reductive, probed further the implications of this statement reveal a radical understanding of life which challenges the foundations of established understandings (both philosophical and scientific) regarding the nature, conditions and progression of life: in particular holding important consequences in regards to our understandings of language, self and memory. It is, as Kolakowski confirms, a deceptively volatile ‘kernel from which an entire new world picture might be developed’.²²¹

With further scrutiny, this conveniently condensed overview of Bergson’s philosophy presents several key consequences. Firstly, by challenging established understandings of time Bergson fundamentally disrupts the determinist viewpoint. If time is real, that is, a dynamic creative entity within which our lives unpredictably unfold, the future does not yet exist in anything other than potential and thus the notion that we move towards some hidden preordained destiny is exposed as a basic absurdity, just as, as a consequence, our autonomy becomes a foregone conclusion. For Bergson the determinist stance reduces the concept of time to a purely mechanical device, one marking the advance of an imagined ready-made future. Likewise, if time is real, the conceptual tools and measurements devised by physics fail to provide us with access to ‘time proper’.²²² Accordingly, the time of physics cannot correctly be said to be ‘real’ but is rather a useful theoretical abstraction of reality. In its ability to divide and order, this spatialised mechanistic concept proves invaluable for planning and achieving the practical ends of life, though it remains intrinsically incapable of communicating the dynamic, radically heterogeneous nature of inner experience; the time Bergson refers to as *durée*.

²²⁰ Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2001), 2.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, 3.

Bergson clarifies this point in his first full length philosophical work *Time and Free Will*, where he distinguishes these two fundamentally different understandings of time: spatialised mathematical ‘clock time’ or ‘*l’étendu*’ and what he terms *durée*: the ever-changing flow of our subjective consciousness. Whilst Bergson acknowledges that *l’étendu* is necessary, providing the ‘clean-cut distinctions [required] to count, to abstract and [...] even to speak’, he asserts that society’s reliance on this method ultimately limits and objectifies experience, imposing an order and rigidity on life which, through time, blinds us to its vital nature.²²³ For Bergson, this inconsistency arises from man’s habitual confusion of time and space. Real time is not a quantity which can be measured, divided and extended in space but an intensity which must be experienced. We might, for example, wait ten minutes for a bus yet this mathematical demarcation of time is, on reflection, incommensurate with our experience of this event, relating nothing of the flowing thoughts and impressions that came to mind in this period. It is in Bergson’s terms ‘the form which the succession of our conscious states assume when the ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states’ (*TFW*, 100). *Durée* then, unlike *L’étendu*, is radically heterogeneous, unquantifiable and, crucially, ineffable. It is, as Keith Ansell Parson and John Mullarkey stress in their introduction to *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, an entity tantalisingly ‘non-representational’ because it is something which, ‘as soon as we think it [we] spatialize’.²²⁴ Such an understanding of time, therefore, evades symbolic delineations and must be perceived by intuition alone. For Bergson, the intuition of *durée* allows us a fleeting connection to life’s creative source, revealing consciousness to be a continuous progression, an ever changing blend of multiple inner states.

²²³ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover, 2001), 100. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *TFW*.

²²⁴ Keith Ansell & Pearson John Mullarkey, introduction to *Henri Bergson: Key Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 37.

As a consequence, as Gillies observes, Bergson's apparently modest aim to explore the problem of free will precipitates a 'radical reordering' of the world, one which turns

the prevailing view of [experience] on its ear, [by] insisting that when time is accepted as the dimension in which life actually occurs there will no longer be a problem in accepting the fact that free will is an integral part of the makeup of individuals [...] In fact [...] Bergson argues that, by accepting the spatial concept of the world as wrongheaded and the temporal concept as correct, the whole problematic issue of free will is eliminated.²²⁵

This insight can be regarded as the cornerstone of Bergson's philosophy.

Memory and Self

For Bergson, concepts of self and subjectivity are deeply entangled with this confusion; whilst the fundamental or 'profound self' can be associated with the continuous subjective flux of *durée* it is, for the purposes of useful communal life, necessarily overshadowed by a superficial identity. The formation of this social self provides a stable caricature of an individual, one compatible with the requirements of a society whose success and cohesion depends on its members' adherence to shared value systems and the ability to communicate using clear, objective distinctions. Bergson contemplates this identity as the impersonal 'outer crust' of the self; the stilted façade which masks a deeper, ever-changing whole. Whilst this external self supports the useful function of society, it simultaneously impedes freedom, preventing most individuals from realising the full potential of their creative, dynamic being. Accordingly, within society Bergson observes that the majority of individuals function unknowingly as 'conscious automat[a]': alienated from the vibrant inner life and freedom they possess until either startled out of this 'sleep' by overwhelming passions, or fleetingly lulled into to a state of self-forgetfulness, by fine art, literature or music (*TFW*, 168).

²²⁵ Gillies, *Bergson and British Modernism*, 10.

Yet Bergson believed it within our power to challenge these socially imposed restrictions on our freedom. Indeed, for Bergson, it is via a concentrated effort of self-exploration that we might best approach a more comprehensive understanding of reality and begin the effort to see beyond the bounds of the stilted, intellectually validated world. As Bergson notes, ‘there is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time- our self which endures’ (*IM*, 24). Bergson explains that as we delve inwards in an effort of introspection we are first confronted with, ‘as a crust solidified on the surface’, all the perceptions that present themselves to us from the material world (*IM*, 24). Such perceptions appear clear, distinct and, crucially, juxtaposable with one another. These perceptions are closely adhered to by memories which serve to interpret them. Such memories are generally habitual, learned memories cultivated for the purpose of practical ends, and arise automatically in response to external stimuli. Finally, mingling with these exterior impressions are to be found ‘the stir of tendencies and motor habits- a crowd of virtual actions, more or less firmly bound to these perceptions and memories’ (*IM*, 25).

As the mind, focused inwards, becomes increasingly aware of these functions as discrete entities, we are able to recognise them as surface operations, something distinct from the workings of our deeper or profound personality. As Bergson observes, these functions radiate ‘from within outwards [and form] collectively, the surface of a sphere which tends to grow larger and lose itself in the exterior world’ (*IM*, 25). Yet if we explore further, moving from the periphery towards the centre of this sphere, searching ‘in the depth of [our] being that which is most constantly and enduringly [our self we] find an altogether different thing’:

a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows it and contains that which precedes it. These can, properly speaking, only be said to form multiple states when I have passed them and turn back to observe their track. Whilst I was experiencing them they were so solidly organised, so profoundly animated with a common life, that I could not have said where any one of them finished or where

another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other (*IM*, 25).

This is the deeper or profound personality, dynamic and creative, as it exists within and interacts with *durée*.

As such the self is revealed as a curious and complex entity both unified and dual in nature: the static superficial, and ‘profound’ dynamic selves representing opposing poles of a necessary if awkward balancing act, one demanded by a life which must be lived concurrently on subjective and objective plains. This dichotomy is explored in detail in *Matter and Memory* where Bergson emphasises the need to establish equilibrium between these conflicting facets of experience and asserts the vital role memory plays in our understanding of consciousness. To support his explanation Bergson helpfully compares the continuous state of permeation and interpenetration, the essence of conscious experience, to the rolling up of a thread on a ball. He notes that, in the process of life, we are inevitably followed by our past which ‘swells up incessantly within the present which picks it up on its way’ (*IM*, 26). Though a useful comparison, Bergson qualifies this image, warning that such an analogy is flawed for its evocation of lines and surfaces with parts ultimately homologous and superimposable on one another, stressing that in life there are no such identical moments. In the reality of this process it is memory which ensures life’s radical diversity. As Bergson states:

Take the simplest sensation, suppose it constant, absorb it in the entire personality: the consciousness which will accompany this sensation cannot remain identical with itself for two consecutive moments, because the second moment always contains, over and above the first, the memory that the first has bequeathed to it. A consciousness which could experience two identical moments would be a consciousness without memory. It would die and be born again continually. In what other way could one represent unconsciousness? (*IM*, 26)

Thus memory emerges as ‘the intersection of mind and matter’ (*MM*, xii). Following from this, our subjectivity is revealed as the condensation and expression of all ‘the history that we

have lived since our birth- nay, even before our birth since we bring with us prenatal dispositions' (*CE*, 5). Bergson elaborates:

Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act. Our past, then, as a whole is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of tendency, although a small part of it only is known in the form of an idea' (*CE*, 5).

This vital link between subjective and objective spheres is indubitably associated with the physical functions of the mind and body but, as Bergson asserts, it should not be defined or contained by them. Written in response to Théodule Ribot's *The Maladies of Memory* (1881), Bergson sought in *Matter and Memory* to refute Ribot's assertion that neurology's discovery that memory was stationed within a specific part of the nervous system proved it to be a faculty of a purely material nature. In answer to this reductionist stance, Bergson questions the assumption that tracing the source of a phenomenon to a physical location might provide the key to its essence:

That there is a close connexion between a state of consciousness and the brain we do not dispute. But there is also a close connexion between a coat and the nail on which it hangs, for, if the nail is pulled out, it falls to the ground. Shall we say, then, that the shape of the nail gives us the shape of the coat, or in any way corresponds to it? No more are we entitled to conclude, because the physical fact is hung on to a cerebral state, that there is any parallelism between the two series psychical and physiological (*MM*, xi).

Bergson proposes that (as our intuition of conscious experience tells us) the psychical state is an entity much broader than the cerebral state, the latter indicating only that small part of the mental state capable of translating itself into 'movements of locomotion' (*MM*, xiii). He explains this point with reference to players on a stage, noting that even were a scientist to discover the key to psycho-physiology he would glean:

nothing more of what is going on in the corresponding consciousness that we should know of a play from the comings and goings of the actors upon the stage. This is to say, the relation of the mental to the cerebral is not a constant, anymore than it is a simple relation. According to the nature of the play that is being acted, the movements

of the players tell us more or less about it: nearly everything if it is a pantomime; next to nothing if it is a delicate comedy. Thus our cerebral state contains more or less of our mental state in the measure that we reel off our psychic life into action or wind it up into pure knowledge' (*MM*, xiv).

The deeper workings of the consciousness are then of a spiritual rather than physical nature, associated with, but not limited by the workings of mind. Indeed, Bergson asserts that there are 'diverse tones of mental life' and that our psychic life can be lived at different heights, sometimes nearer to action and at others removed from it (*MM*, xiv). These states are ultimately dependent on the degree of our '*attention to life*' (*MM*, xiv). In accordance with this our personality can be understood to expand and contract dependant upon the exigencies of everyday life. Generally narrowed down by action our subjectivity might, released from practical demands, dilate, allowing a perceptive individual to enjoy an expanded appreciation of being. Mark Antliff clarifies this idea in 'The Rhythms of Duration', stating that 'our psychic life is characterised by varying degrees of rhythmic tension or relaxation roughly corresponding to the degree of freedom inherent in a given activity'.²²⁶ Such tension is modulated by what he terms the 'pragmatic designs of our intellect' that acts as an anchor or steadying hand directing attention to action as required.²²⁷ As Bergson observes, the more complex a mental state the more it can be considered 'a dilation of the whole personality' (*MM*, xiv). For Bergson, such extension occurs when the stable personality, 'normally narrowed down by action, expands with the unscrewing of the vice in which it has allowed itself to be squeezed' (*MM*, xiv). Freed in this way, the personality 'spreads itself over a wider and wider surface', bringing it to a fleeting sympathy with life's complex, ever changing flow (*MM*, xiv). Such states can occur when the mind is transported from its

²²⁶ Mark Antliff, 'The Rhythms of Duration' in *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 196.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

fixation on the external world by fine art, music, literature and even the contemplation of nature.

This continual demand for mental readjustment and mobility presents a complex balancing act and, as Bergson observes, individuals cope with this flux in a variety of ways depending on their capacity for reflection and adaptability. The ways in which individuals respond to life can be likened to a spectrum moving from the purely ‘impulsive individual’ who, like ‘the lower animal’ lives only in the present and responds to stimuli automatically as they arise, and the impractical ‘dreamer’ who ‘lives in the past for the mere pleasure of being there’: an individual in whom ‘recollections emerge into the light of consciousness without any advantage for the present situation’ (*MM*, 198). For Bergson the ‘well balanced’ individual falls between these extremes, as they are in possession of a ‘memory docile enough to follow with precision all the outlines of the present situation’ but energetic enough to resist all other appeal. In short, the ‘well balanced individual is one in possession of ‘good sense, or practical sense’ (*MM*, 198): a typically Bergsonian negotiation of opposing extremes.

Bergson and Language

Intimately linked to the necessarily dualistic nature of our existence, throughout his works Bergson emphasises the limitations of language. While its use and expansion is intrinsically valuable for human social development, it is likewise indicative of the subject’s confusion of time and space. For Bergson, in order to function as part of a cohesive society man must necessarily solidify inner impressions for outward communication. Such communication requires the formation of symbols by which to identify specific objects and feelings. In short, language allows intelligence, which is by nature outward-looking and ‘characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life’, to reflect inwards in order to bring into the external

sphere an objective translation of subjective life (*CE*, 156). Whilst the reflective nature of human intelligence has allowed language a degree of mobility, in that it can ‘pass from one thing to another’ extending from ‘a perceived thing, to a recollection of that thing [...and even] to an idea’, this nevertheless remains a process at odds with the dynamic nature of life (*CE*, 159). Accordingly, though words provide a subject with a means of linking inner and external experiences, through this process subjectivity ironically becomes ‘fixed [...] in homogenous space’, deceptively perpetuating the illusion of a clearly delineated, systematic reality (*TFW*, 132). As Bergson states:

In short, the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness (*TFW*, 132).

In the effort to counterbalance this effect, language continuously evolves in the quest for clarity and precision, yet despite this attempt words are for Bergson, by their very nature, doomed to ‘turn against the sensation which gave birth to them’ leaving us with only a ‘shadow’ of the impression they sought to express (*TFW*, 132). Thus, though language has been integral to evolutionary success, words, as a product of intelligence, are at best a flawed method for communicating the inner life; they represent essentially ‘the impersonal residue, of the impressions felt in a given case by the whole of society’ (*TFW*, 133).

The Élan Vital

First described in Bergson’s fourth major work *Creative Evolution*, the *élan vital* is perhaps the most iconic and misunderstood aspect of Bergson’s philosophy. Roughly translated as vital impetus, the term was coined by Bergson in an attempt to acknowledge the fundamentally psychological, spiritual nature of life, as opposed to the prevailing mechanical, logical conceptions of existence favoured by his contemporaries. Appearing for many as a

vague and mystical notion, the idea of the *élan vital* was perhaps unsurprisingly met by Bergson's detractors with criticism and ridicule. Biologist Julian Huxley famously remarked that 'to say that biological progress is explained by the *élan vital* is to say that the movement of a train is "explained" by the *élan locomotif* of the engine'.²²⁸ Yet this literal critique of the term misunderstands Bergson's intention in coining it. Bergson himself acknowledged that to describe the evolution of life in terms of an impetus was to offer little more than an image. However, as Mullarkey and Ansell Pearson discuss, this 'image [was] intended to disclose something about the essential character of life, namely that it is not of a mathematical or logical order but a psychological one'.²²⁹ As Guerlac observes, rather than a concept of rational knowledge, the *élan vital* provides 'an image that invites us to think outside the mechanistic framework of the physical sciences and of static metaphysical categories'.²³⁰ It is the definitive representation of a 'virtual multiplicity', a force pregnant with innumerable, but as yet unrealised, potentialities - intended to emphasise the idea that evolution is not, as Guerlac notes, a conceptual phrase for 'something which happens to life' (a means to an end) but rather 'is life itself, a perpetually contingent movement of differentiation'.²³¹ As such, the *élan vital* represents the ultimate expression of time as duration, that is, 'time as a force [...] which pushes life along the road of time'.²³²

Mysticism, Politics and the Changing Society

The Two Sources can be viewed as the culmination of Bergson's philosophy demonstrating the interactions of his theories as they apply to the subjective, moral, political and religious aspects of life. While, as Gunter notes in 'Bergson and Jung', *Creative Evolution* shifts Bergson's focus from individual psychology to a 'metaphysics on a grand scale', this last

²²⁸ Julian Huxley, *Essays of a Biologist*, quoted in Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, 31.

²²⁹ *Bergson: Key Writings*, 1.

²³⁰ Guerlac, *Thinking in Time*, 7.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³² *Ibid.*

work, intended as a practical response to interwar tensions, looks back from this expansive vista to consider the specific complexities of human life as it relates to the societies which harbour and support it.²³³ Here, as Mullarkey asserts in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, Bergson conducts a study that is ‘primarily a work in socio-biology rather than metaphysics’.²³⁴ Drawing on arguments expounded in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson reemphasises the conflicting tendencies of life, its creative, progressive force and countervailing inclination for repetition and immobility, considering the ways in which these predispositions are exhibited in and impact on the formation of society’s moral, religious, and political infrastructures. For Bergson, society represents a complex entity; while to function effectively it must replicate the unity of a single organism, this need must also balance social exigencies alongside individual freedoms and needs.

As the title suggests, *The Two Sources* formulates two distinct paradigms of society with similarly associated attitudes to morality and religion: the open and closed. Closed society, identified and supported by closed morality and religion, recognises the vulnerability of the individual, promoting social cohesion as a means to secure the necessities of life. Such societies depend, like those of Hymenoptera, on ‘coordination and [...] a subordination of elements’.²³⁵ Yet unlike invertebrates who adhere instinctively to such structures, man’s intellectual nature requires that he applies reason to these social arrangements, at least in the formative stages of social development. To meet this need, and thus safeguard society, such communities function through complex systems of rules and received obligations: conventions which over time become habitual and perfunctory, yet by their very presence strengthen and circumscribe a sense of community. Indeed Bergson notes that even rules of

²³³ Pete. A.Y. Gunter, ‘Bergson and Jung’ in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1982), 638.

²³⁴ Pearson & Mullarkey, introduction to *Key Writings*, 37.

²³⁵ Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans by A. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1935), 100. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *TSMR*.

absurd, totemistic origin can by ‘a kind of reverse action’ support social cohesion ‘solely from the fact of our submission’ (*TSMR*, 14). Consequently obligation, while in the particular appearing to assert and uphold personal freedom, becomes for human society, in its most general terms, a ‘virtual instinct’, an action performed unconsciously in service of the imperative needs of society (*TSMR*, 91).

Such ‘closed’ societies dominate the familiar political sphere, both historic and modern, and while civilisation has rationalised the bases of these structures and produced ever-more expansive frontiers, such groups nonetheless share as their ‘essential characteristic’ the drive to ‘include at any moment a certain number of individuals, and exclude others’ (*TSMR*, 20). For Bergson, the exclusionary characteristic of closed societies renders them fundamentally and dangerously flawed. By their inhibition of personal freedom and innately parochial nature such societies shut down the potential for progress and condemn themselves to unremitting cycles of repetition and, crucially, of war. While we may consider our love of family, love of nation and love of man to be, in essence, one of a kind, broadening ‘out in unbroken progression’, this is not the case for the majority (*TSMR*, 21). Bergson proposes that from the love of family and community to the more abstract love of mankind, we find a difference not of degree but of kind: ‘the whole distance from the finite to the indefinite, from the closed to the open’ (*TSMR*, 61). As such, regardless of the ‘material and spiritual acquisitions of civilisation’, our basic evolutionary drives ‘compose for us an attitude which is that of discipline in the face of the enemy’ (*TSMR*, 21). In short, our primary loyalties to our families and community will instinctively override the more abstract concept of love of mankind. The proof of this distinction is made patent in the event of war where moral norms are subverted to the extent that ‘murder and pillage and perfidity, cheating and lying become not only lawful but praiseworthy’ (*TSMR*, 20). Bergson observes that however

much civilization might attempt to veil man's primitive instincts 'the social instinct [...] detected at the basis of social obligation always has in view [...] a closed society' (*TSMR*, 21).

Yet if there is a tendency to adopt the model of a closed society, how can such cycles be broken and the threat of war be diminished? Bergson considers that, ideally, this possibility lies in humanity's intrinsic capacity for love, a love which, as exemplified by 'exceptional individuals' like 'the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism' and, in its most complete form, Jesus Christ, has the potential to transcend evolutionary limitations and become an open, non-preferential force (*TSMR*, 82). This love, unlike familial or social love which is bound to the entity which attracts it, does not 'yield to the attraction of its object', it is universal; a 'psychic attitude or psychic motion' which, precipitated by an effort of intuition, transcends intellectual limitations to become a vital self-sufficient force (*TSMR*, 27 & 28). This feeling is absolute and, in its openness, it 'shoots beyond' humanity 'to animals, to plants, to all of nature' - encompassing and surpassing all of the particular emotions adhering to possessions, family, friends, and country (*TSMR*, 27). For Bergson, such love is synonymous with mysticism and, like music, immerses our whole being, introducing us to 'unsuspected tones of feeling' - drawing us into a state of responsiveness 'that we may express [...] in action' (*TSMR*, 29). It is, in Bergson's terms, a 'supra' (as opposed to 'infra') intellectual force that allows a momentary glimpse of the dynamic essence of life usually obscured by intellectual habit.

This reflexive call back to action is a defining feature of Bergsonian mysticism. In order to realise the creative potential of mystical insights we must be able to return from 'the zone of pure contemplation', which for Bergson only brings us 'that half-virtue detachment', in order to put new moral knowledge into action (*TSMR*, 51). Without this transition the mystical impulse is isolated, individualised and thus rendered impotent. On this basis, *The Two Sources* presents Christianity as a 'profound transformation' of Judaism, claiming that

the teachings of Jesus brought universalism to a religion that was hitherto essentially nationalistic (*TSMR*, 205). For Bergson Jesus' active example, inherited from the Jewish prophets, provided the impetus required to transcend the 'interval between thought and action', thus enacting a non-preferential love which inspired, not obliged, others to follow suit (*TSMR*, 206).

Mysticism and religion are revealed, therefore, as 'mutually cause and effect' and as such 'continue to interact on one another indefinitely' (*TSMR*, 205). Religion then (like memory) involves an accumulative process. Bergson explains that 'Humanity really understands the new only when it inherits much of the old' (*TSMR*, 204). Consequently, established religion can be considered to preserve and house the remnants of a divine lesson so that subsequent mystics 'might find waiting [...] a humanity which has been prepared to listen to [their] message' (*TSMR*, 204). As such, through the vehicle of religion, mysticism holds the potential to inspire, vitalise and progress religious teachings, aiding humanity and intensifying 'religious faith [by taking its] most crying needs first' (*TSMR*, 205).

This proactive model of mysticism holds the potential to break through destructive cycles in order to open new modes of thought and inspire (progressive) social change. In short, love, in its spiritualised mystical form, might preserve humanity from stasis, allowing man, by fits and starts, to evolve. Unlike most species which, as *Creative Evolution* explains, once created merely 'mark time' turning 'like eddies of dust [...] [back] upon themselves' (*CE*, 128), man's facility for disinterested, creative love might counteract the 'collective halt' of species-hood: in its idealised incarnation, delivering man from 'the necessity of being a species' (*TSMR*, 269). The genius of this seemingly sensational claim is, as Lefebvre and White emphasise, that it constructs an argument whereby human beings hold the potential to

‘transcend the species without departing from animality or biology’.²³⁶ As such, man might become ‘both animal and creator’.²³⁷ As Bergson stresses, though we may need to struggle against biological tendencies and culturally inscribed habits, mankind uniquely holds ‘the future [...] in [its] own hands’ (*TSMR*, 275).

This blending of the political with affect and mysticism in *The Two Sources* was met by many of Bergson’s contemporaries with a combination of indifference, suspicion and contempt. Indeed, written long after the height of his fame, it bolstered Bertrand Russell’s accusations of ‘irrationalism’ and continued the decline of his career which began with the embarrassing mathematical mistakes Einstein exposed in *Durée et Simultanéité* (1922). In many respects the key objections to *The Two Sources* are encapsulated by the views of political theorist Judith Shklar in her essay ‘Bergson and the Politics of Intuition’ (1959). Shklar deems Bergson’s blending of the aesthetic with the political dangerously diffuse and abstract but, more crucially, finds Bergson’s conception of the mystically inspired ‘open society’ a threat ‘to all politics’.²³⁸ She states:

[A mystic] could not be an actor on any political stage which must be necessarily confining. He was, rather, the man who wants to end all politics, to dissolve the ‘closed society’, and to create that ‘open society’ which embraces all of mankind.²³⁹

Yet such criticism miscomprehends the nature of Bergson’s study as normative rather than ontological. Indeed, Bergson anticipates such misreadings in *The Creative Mind* (1932) where he emphasises that ‘a principle of explanation is one thing, a maxim of conduct is another’.²⁴⁰ In short, Bergson does not suggest, as Shklar fears, a form of mystical revolution

²³⁶ Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, introduction to *Bergson, Politics and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ Judith Shklar, ‘Bergson and the Politics of Intuition’ in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. by Stanley Hoffmann (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 333.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

²⁴⁰ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 70.

which might ‘end all politics’.²⁴¹ As Mullarkey stresses, in any attempt to understand the functional implications of Bergson’s ideas, his depictions of the open and closed societies should be understood only as “‘extreme limits’ [...] never found in any actual society in their pure form’.²⁴² Unlike revolutionary theorists such as Sorel, who invoked Bergson to support his belief in violence as a valid catalyst of change, Bergson did not intend his work to be considered an inflammatory ‘justification of instability’.²⁴³ In fact, he emphatically rejects such radical interpretations stating that ‘one might just as well imagine that the bacteriologist recommends microbotic diseases to us when he shows us microbes everywhere’.²⁴⁴

In writing texts such as *The Two Sources*, Bergson’s hope was to raise an awareness of society’s often conflicting natural drives with the aim that politics might concede that the ‘substrate of politics and religion *is* mobility, and that successful institutions must acknowledge and work within reality’.²⁴⁵ Certainly Bergson’s own political actions as a French Emissary to Spain and, crucially, America during the First World War, as a founding member of the League of Nations and president of the League’s International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (UNESCO’s precursor) point to a commitment to political action. For Bergson, the most important implication of his work was that of promoting and guiding society’s progression to more open, cooperative modes of thought by peaceful, gradual means.

Yet writing in 1932, Bergson prophetically recognised the urgency of such efforts. He felt modern society to be on the brink of a dangerous impasse, in which the rapid advancement of the industrial age had rendered the virtual ‘organism’ of society ‘so vast [and] endowed with a power so mighty [...] that it had grown] out of proportion’ to anything

²⁴¹ Shklar, ‘Politics of Intuition’, 333.

²⁴² Mullarkey, introduction to *New Bergson*, 41.

²⁴³ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 70.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Lefebvre and White, *Bergson, Politics and Religion*, 13.

nature could have intended (*TSMR*, 267). For Bergson this phenomenon was, on the one hand, indicative of humanity's unique power as an intellectual 'tool maker' to transcend nature; yet, on the other, an illustration of the precarious nature of a society set off balance: where the 'aphrodisiacal frenzy' for materialism and luxury (for Bergson an intellectual corruption of our instinctive desire for food) obscures and outweighs the spiritual insight required for evolutionary progress (*TSMR*, 256). Bergson clarifies:

In this body, distended out of all proportion, the soul remains what it was, too small to fill it, too weak to guide it. Hence the gap between the two. Hence the tremendous social, political and international problems which are just so many definitions of this gap. What we need now are new reserves of potential energy - moral energy this time (*TSMR*, 268).

Thus while Bergson theorizes a system of 'double frenzy' where he suggests that, pendulum-like, the drive of materialism might naturally be followed by a balancing turn to aestheticism and mysticism, on an immediate practical basis he recognises (in the absence of any catalytic, inspirational mystical figures) the pressing need for concrete and proactive interventions to bridge this divide (*TSMR*, 256). With this in mind, the final chapter of *The Two Sources* shifts from philosophical theory to outline practical political recommendations. Here, in contrast to the dynamic ideas of his philosophy which contemplate life in its most expansive terms, politics draws Bergson back towards the specific issues of contemporary life, forcing him to formulate, what Phillippe Soulez in 'Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political' defines as 'a politics of the in-between' - a policy designed to instigate measured change in ways accessible and palatable to man's intellectual faculties.²⁴⁶ Though this may appear a conciliatory effort necessitated by the 'unpredictable absence' of mystical intervention, it is in fact illustrative of humanity's ability to adapt, using the intellect

²⁴⁶ Phillippe Soulez, 'Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political', trans. by Melissa McMahon in *Bergson Politics and Religion*, ed. by Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2012), 37.

directed by intuition, to take control of its own fate.²⁴⁷ As Soulez asserts, such political practice represents ‘a means of precision, strength, and a step forward’.²⁴⁸

To counter the drive to destruction precipitated by the frenzy of industrialisation and consumerism, Bergson offers the “political method” of the ideal’. Here he asserts that the shared intuition of an ideal, a hypothetical vision of what might be, could provide its adherents with something virtual but practically conceivable to strive towards. He identifies human rights, democracy and diplomatic constructs like the League of Nations as examples born of such efforts. For Bergson, their origins can be traced to ‘an irreducible mystical intuition’, actualised and preserved through their assimilation and crystallisation into political constructs.²⁴⁹ However flawed such entities appear in practice, their existence serves to bridge the gap between mechanism and mysticism: accordingly, they represent a realistic means by which man might evade self-destruction and instigate progress. As Soulez asserts, it is through this method that Bergson has perhaps most usefully contributed to the formulation of a philosophy of action.

As can be seen, despite his insistence on philosophy as a dynamic, non-systematic discipline, one requiring different methods and modes of thinking to those of the physical sciences, there is nevertheless what Ruhe refers to as a ‘certain unity both of process and of consequence’ to Bergson’s thought.²⁵⁰ Central to his novelty and success was his ability to identify and skilfully navigate difficult, seemingly insuperable positions, mapping out a formerly unimagined middle ground along which to progress in both philosophical and practical terms, striving to discover what Gillouin termed ‘an open way when all other roads

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Lefebvre and White, *Bergson, Politics and Religion*, 18.

²⁵⁰ Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 17.

were shut.²⁵¹ Bergson's philosophy is replete with references to life's essentially multiple, often contradictory nature. To survive amidst this flux requires the recognition of life as a multifaceted mobile entity composed of increasingly complex, unpredictable and opposing forces. Evolutionary success requires a species to tap into this movement, to discover the means to negotiate, transcend and embrace life's conflicting currents and bifurcations: the objective and subjective qualities of time, the inconsistencies between thought and language, the necessary mediation between memory and action, of mysticism and society and atavism and progress; in short, to maintain some semblance of balance amidst life's flux, to remain open and receptive to change.

²⁵¹ Gillouin, quoted in Ruhe, *Henri Bergson*, 51.

Chapter Four

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*: Language, Self and Evolution

Conrad: Modernism and the Middlebrow

Though widely regarded as a pioneering figure in modernism, Joseph Conrad's place in the twentieth century literary canon is far from clear cut. While aspects of his work are in his own words 'impressionistic', experimental and replete with psychological concerns they are similarly steeped in romanticism and adventure. As the notorious stylistic break between the *Patna* and Patusan episodes in *Lord Jim* proves, this tension is not limited to individual works but can appear juxtaposed within the course of a single text, often to unsettling and ambiguous effect. Indeed, as Frederic Jameson observes in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Conrad's 'position is unstable [...] and his work unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance [...] floating uncertainly somewhere between Proust and Robert Louis Stephenson'.²⁵² As Jameson continues, 'in Conrad we can sense the emergence not merely of what will be contemporary modernism [...] but also, still tangibly juxtaposed with it, of what will variously be called popular or mass culture'.²⁵³ As a consequence, Conrad emerges as a man, like his era, singularly Janus faced: a complex writer caught fascinatingly 'betwixt and between' literary traditions and their respective ideological and aesthetic sensibilities.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 206.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow", *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 22.

Writing at the turn of the century, Conrad worked in a period where the rapid expansion of literacy and print culture had created a market divided into high and low culture. Unlike for his Victorian counterparts the attainment of both critical and commercial success was becoming an increasingly remote ideal and the literary market a daunting, complex and fragmentary matrix for an author to navigate. This phenomenon was perhaps particularly troubling for a writer like Conrad who, embarking on his literary career late in life at thirty-seven, had formed his literary tastes and aspirations in an era dominated by writers like William Thackeray, Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells, figures for whom acclaim and monetary gain had gone comfortably hand in hand. Instead, as Joyce Piell Wexler notes in ‘Conrad and the Literary Market Place’, as Conrad sought to establish himself as a writer the progressively commercialised world of publishing had engendered the opinion amongst the literati that ‘high sales [...] [were] a sign of mediocrity’ and that publishers were more akin to ‘philistines than [...] patrons of serious literature’.²⁵⁵

The escalating demands of a newly enfranchised readership required the writer, according to Conrad, to tap into and excite the ‘commonplace’ thought of the lay reader, flattering their desire to ‘accord with the thought of those they consider distinguished’.²⁵⁶ Conrad himself oscillated between disdain and an intense craving for public approval. While he abjured the ephemeral concerns and grandiose aspirations of the ‘philistines’ who admired popular authors like Grant Allen, Marie Corelli and Hall Caine (figures Conrad felt to be singularly lacking in style, quality and substance),²⁵⁷ he similarly rejected the avant-garde’s craving for highbrow exclusivity, stating:

²⁵⁵ Joyce Piell Wexler, ‘Conrad and the Literary Market Place’ in *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by John Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77.

²⁵⁶ Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 2 1898-1902*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 137 -138.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

I am sufficiently of a democrat to detest the idea of being a writer of any 'coterie' of self-appointed aristocracy in the vast domain of art or letters. As a matter of feeling - not as a matter of business - I want to be read by many eyes and by all kinds of them at that.²⁵⁸

Often scathing of the popular author's lack of substance, Conrad was simultaneously in awe of their apparent capacity for rapid production, easy style, relentless drama and ability to shape neat happy endings: each of these appearing to him as 'special skills' beyond his reach.²⁵⁹ Driven by necessity, Conrad was not above attempts to emulate aspects of popular writers' themes and manner, though he was often left frustrated in these efforts. In his letters Conrad's friend and agent Edward Garnett recalls an incident in which Conrad threw to the floor a work by bestselling author Guy Boothby announcing, only half mockingly, 'I cannot get the secret of this fellow's manner. It is beyond me, how he does it?'.²⁶⁰ Thus, in many respects Conrad's career can be viewed as an intricate balancing act, one caught uncomfortably between his desire to maintain artistic integrity and the necessity of finding a receptive and sympathetic audience that would both ensure the material means to support his family and sate his need for artistic recognition.

Consequently, Conrad emerges as a liminal figure straddling the imagined, if much contested, 'great divide' between modernist and middlebrow fiction.²⁶¹ In this he proves a valuable figure for supporting the aims of this project. Unlike the other authors in this thesis Conrad, widely accepted as an early or proto-modernist, has been discussed in conjunction with Bergson's philosophy in previous studies: in passing by Conrad experts such as Frederick Karl, Cedric Watts and Ian Watt, and in more detail in Mary Ann Gillies' *Bergson and British Modernism*, Wolfgang B. Fleischmann's 'Conrad's *Chance* and Bergson's

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

²⁵⁹ Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 122.

²⁶⁰ Joseph Conrad in *Letters from Joseph Conrad: 1895-1924*, ed Edward Garnett (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1928), 125.

²⁶¹ Huysen, *After the Great Divide*, viii

Laughter' and most recently in Con Coroneos' *Space, Conrad and Modernity* (2002). Claiming Conrad as a transitional writer with distinct affinities not only to the experimental avant-garde but also contemporary middlebrow adventure writers such as (despite Conrad's hostility to him) John Buchan, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stephenson and Erskine Childers opens the possibility of extending and exploring the relevance of Bergsonian theories within an otherwise unfamiliar, untapped middlebrow context.²⁶² In this Conrad serves as a tangible point of reference, anchoring this study to existing critical discourses while simultaneously gesturing to the broader potential of employing Bergson's ideas as a means to enhance and inform discussions of non-modernist texts.

Conrad and Bergson

Though Conrad's work offers no direct response to Bergson's philosophy, Conrad would certainly, as Frederick Karl asserts in *Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979), 'have had some sense of [Bergson's] impact, which by 1910 was quite intense'.²⁶³ Living and writing in Britain during 'Le Bergson Boom', Conrad could not fail to have encountered the philosopher's thought on at least a superficial basis. The ubiquitous presence of Bergsonism in the culture of this period, in conjunction with Conrad's natural bent for metaphysical thought makes it certain that, whether consciously or not, aspects of Bergson's philosophy were imbibed and assimilated into the author's personal vision of being. As Ludwig Schnauder posits in *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels* (2009), 'throughout [Conrad's] fiction and non-fiction there are numerous explicit and implicit references to [...]

²⁶² In his essay "'A Fraud called John Buchan": Buchan, Joseph Conrad and Literary Theft', Douglas Kerr discusses Conrad's hostility to Buchan and his belief that Buchan's 'The Far Islands' overtly copied key aspects of its plot and themes from Rudyard Kipling's 'The Finest Story in the World.' This essay goes on to discuss the parallels and potential borrowings between Conrad's *Victory* (1915) and Buchan's later novel *The Island of Sheep* (1936). See *Reassessing John Buchan: Beyond The Thirty-Nine Steps*, ed. By Kate Macdonald (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) pp. 141-52.

²⁶³ Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 473.

philosophical concerns²⁶⁴ which demonstrate his active interest in the field. Conrad's familiarity with French culture, an intimacy described by Yves Hervouet in *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (1990) as 'remarkable in its scope',²⁶⁵ as well as his close involvement in the development of Ford's *The English Review*, a publication carrying numerous articles concerning Bergson, are each factors supporting the possibility that Conrad enjoyed, if not an intimate link, then at least a familiarity with the philosopher's work.

In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1981), Ian Watt sceptically notes that 'Conrad was not concerned with any particular philosophy of time: and it is unlikely that he had any knowledge of [...] Bergson, except perhaps of some general notions which were a good deal talked about in the 1890's'.²⁶⁶ Despite this, Watt concedes that Conrad's 'novels express many elements, not only of the historicism but of the psychological subjectivism of the late nineteenth-century thinking about time'.²⁶⁷ As this view demonstrates, even critics doubtful of a connection between the two can acknowledge a marked correspondence between their notions of time and subjectivity. Certainly, Conrad's personal outlook, articulated through his work and letters, exhibits distinct comparisons to key elements of Bergson's thought. As Karl observes in *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad* (1960), 'Conrad saw fictional art as the manifestation of a fluid and ever shifting world responsive to immediate intuition but inaccessible to the intellect'.²⁶⁸ Karl expands on this, speculating that, 'Conrad was in his way grappling with what Bergson called the vital or intuitional part of man's mind'.²⁶⁹

In *Creative Evolution* (1911), Bergson's rejection of determinism emphasised life as a spontaneous dynamic process driven forward by the powerful primal impetus of the *élan*

²⁶⁴ Ludwig Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels* (New York: Rodopi Press, 2009), 79.

²⁶⁵ Yves Hervouet, *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.

²⁶⁶ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 289.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

²⁶⁸ Frederick Karl, *A Readers Guide* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1960), 34.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

vital. With no pre-designed future, life is exposed to the menace of accident, extinction and regression even while its radical freedom simultaneously ensures its ‘infinite richness’ and diversity.²⁷⁰ With its emphasis on primal evolutionary drives and the rejection of predetermination, Conrad’s view (expounded in a letter to his friend Edward Garnett) of a life born from primordial darkness, centred on ‘an eternal something that waves and an eternal force that causes the waves’, is, though darker than Bergson’s outlook, nevertheless one with marked parallels.²⁷¹ Supporting this view, in *The Metaphysics of Darkness* (1971) Royal Roussel observes that for Conrad the ‘primitive levels of existence do not remain present in the structure of our world as vestigial reminders of a departed past, [rather] each is the essential foundation of the succeeding levels of creation’.²⁷² Thus for both Conrad and Bergson life constitutes what Bergson termed the amalgamation of the ‘entire past, including the original bent of [the] soul’. (*CE*, 6) For both, the subject is considered to harbour innate, though latent, tendencies carried forward from life’s most primitive stages. Such tendencies, marked by inertia and counteracted by work and movement, threaten a reversion to bestial and even vegetative states. As Bergson asserts, the animal ‘torpor [...] always [lies] in wait [and man] keeps up [his] role only by effort, at the price of fatigue’ (*CE*, 165). Likewise, for Conrad, apathy, both moral and physical, is ‘the place of decay,’ whilst action brings hope.²⁷³ As Conrad concluded in a personal letter to Garnett: ‘to move is vital - it’s salvation’.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. By Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1998), 123. All subsequent references will be from this edition with page numbers given in brackets and the title abbreviated to *CE*.

²⁷¹ Edward Garnett, ed., *Letters from Joseph Conrad: 1895-1924* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), 143.

²⁷² Royal Roussel, *The Metaphysics of Darkness: A Study in the Unity and Development of Conrad’s Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), 6.

²⁷³ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, ed. by Cedric Watts and Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 52. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with page references given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to *LJ*.

²⁷⁴ Garnett, *Letters from Conrad*, 109.

Conrad, writing and the Bergsonian Self

Whilst many critical texts concerning Conrad register a link between his and Bergson's thought, this has been, with the exception of Gillies, Fleischmann and Coroneos, invariably a passing mention. Gillies, a central figure in reassessing Bergson's influence on literary modernism, provides the most extensive consideration of Bergson's impact on Conrad's work. In her study, Gillies offers a thorough exploration of Bergsonian memory and comedy, yet she rejects the potential of reading Conrad in conjunction with Bergsonian concepts of self on the premise that Conrad 'stops short of direct representations of self and never really eliminates the barrier between subject and object'.²⁷⁵ Though Conrad, unlike many modernist writers, never attempted to communicate subjective experience directly through the use of interior monologues, in *Lord Jim* the fleeting passage of subjective states is nevertheless a central concern.

Gillies bases her assertion on Bergson's ideal, presented in *Time and Free Will*, of:

some Bold novelist, tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, who shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the moment they are named.²⁷⁶

For Gillies this represented an aesthetic which the stream of consciousness writers pointedly 'aimed to achieve'.²⁷⁷ Yet while this statement clearly supports modernism's proclivity for experimental stream of consciousness techniques, its use as a prescriptive yard-mark is limiting and in spirit incompatible with Bergson's desire to create an open, non-prescriptive and non-systematic philosophy. Indeed, immediately following his praise of 'some bold novelist', Bergson clarifies the illusory nature of such art. While he affirms that a text of this

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁷⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover, 2001), 133. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with page references given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to *TFW*.

²⁷⁷ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 23.

kind may allow us to feel as if the author ‘knew us better than we knew ourselves’, he goes on to qualify this by stating: ‘the very fact that he spreads out our feeling in a homogenous time, and expresses its elements by words, shows that he in his turn is only offering us its shadow’ (*TFW*, 133). By embracing this statement as an aesthetic model, Gillies’ critical perspective limits the rich potential that exists in exploring the application of Bergson’s notion of self more broadly and speculatively. Indeed, while falling short of Bergson’s aesthetic ideal, I believe that Conrad’s writing nonetheless demonstrates a clear fascination with the self as an impenetrable, ever-changing and multi-faceted entity: one formed and changed in accordance with personal choices and history.

Notwithstanding her refusal of a fluid Bergsonian concept of subjectivity in Conrad’s work, Gillies’ insistence on the accordance between Bergsonian and Conradian memory tacitly supports the view that Bergson’s notion of the self, in its broader understanding as a dynamic, dualistic and continuously cumulative phenomenon, is one directly pertinent to Conrad’s work. Indeed, Gillies wholeheartedly acknowledges the ways in which, at its best, Conrad’s narrative style demonstrates ‘how much the mind does fashion life and how the recollection of past events combines with present experiences to reveal the essential nature of existence’, noting that ‘like Bergson, Conrad’s present experiences reshape past memories so that past moments are not merely pictures of what happened, but are tinged with the narrator’s current experiences’.²⁷⁸ It is this very process of accumulation and augmentation which for Bergson characterises the self as it develops through time. Indeed, in Bergson’s philosophy memory, consciousness and the self are intimately linked and cannot be discussed in isolation to one another. As Gillies remarks earlier in her study, in a fundamental sense, for Bergson, ‘Self [...] is memory’; it is the vital link between the largely solidified ‘crust’ of the external, social self and the ‘real living being [which] consists of many interpenetrating and

²⁷⁸ Gillies, 167.

constantly mobile selves'.²⁷⁹ Viewed from this more open perspective, Conrad's depictions particularly in texts such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, of a self which oscillates between suppressed instinctive impulses, past memories, current circumstances and the social environment touches on issues that are at the core of Bergson's philosophy. Approached in this way Conrad's explorations of subjectivity can be considered Bergsonian not for their illusory evocations of a character's conscious thought processes, but for their unashamed acknowledgment of the self's inherent divisions, mystery and contingency.

Conrad, Fidelity and Intuition

To support the appropriateness of extending and applying Bergsonian understandings of self and subjectivity to Conrad's work, it is important to consider his personal motivations for writing, as well as how and what he hoped to communicate to his reader. Despite Conrad's ambivalence to the reading public, who he described variously as 'philistines', a 'herd of idiotic humanity' and the unsophisticated dupes of the press, he nevertheless identified his reader as a vital and necessarily active participant in the interpretation of his texts.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as Wexler observes, 'themes of fidelity and solidarity are as central to Conrad's vocation as to his fiction' and although Conrad found that he might attain fidelity in his writing through the application of self-knowledge, sincerity and adherence to his personal standards, he found the pursuit of solidarity in his fiction a far more elusive entity.²⁸¹ As a writer, Conrad had to appeal to an audience so diffuse and alien to him that the task appeared to be, at times, overwhelming. In a moment of intense scepticism Conrad stated:

No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That's my creed from beginning to end - that's my view of life, a view that rejects all formulas dogmas and principles of other

²⁷⁹ Gillies, 18.

²⁸⁰ Joseph Conrad, quoted in Stephen Donovan, *Conrad and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9.

²⁸¹ Wexler, 'Conrad and the Literary Market Place', 79.

peoples making. These are only a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me'.²⁸²

Despite this at times overpowering sense of futility and alienation, Conrad was dedicated to acknowledging this distance between subjects and attempting, in some measure, to bridge it. In this aim Conrad was perhaps driven by the conviction that such an effort might help to ward off the horrifying state of solipsism portrayed by figures like *Heart of Darkness*' Kurtz who in kicking 'himself loose of the earth'²⁸³ appears, as Jacques Berthoud observes in *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (1978), the haunting epitome of one who has 'lost contact with everything outside himself'.²⁸⁴ In this desire to wed the ostensibly incommensurate spheres of the social and subjective self, Conrad's agenda distinctly echoes that of Bergson.

In the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), Conrad states:

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle [of life] the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife [...] he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities; to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities - like the vulnerable body within a steel armour [...]. The artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition - and therefore more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation.²⁸⁵

Thus for Conrad, unlike the traditional philosopher or scientist (who he notes validates their thought with reference to 'our commonsense, to our intelligence'), the artist must appeal to something deeper and more enduring in the human psyche, an observation which uncannily anticipates the distinctions Bergson draws between intellectual and intuitive modes of thought.²⁸⁶ Consequently, despite recurring doubts regarding 'the difficulty, if not the

²⁸² Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 1*, 253.

²⁸³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Stories* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), 94.

²⁸⁴ Jaques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 67.

²⁸⁵ Joseph Conrad, 'Preface' to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), vi.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

impossibility of being understood', Conrad clung tenaciously to this ideal of the artist as the intuitive interpreter of the inner life.²⁸⁷ In fact, as Ian Watt notes in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, Conrad 'seem[ed] to have had no interest in experiment for its own sake'.²⁸⁸ Rather, Conrad's narratives, marked by what Michael Gorra terms, 'elaborate framing [...] [and] persistent violation of chronology', are the result of a committed and desperate struggle to reach out to and communicate with his reader.²⁸⁹ In this, unerringly, Conrad 'shaped his fiction with his reader in mind'.²⁹⁰

Unlike his modernist contemporaries, then, who through stylistic innovations sought to create the impression of our ever-fluctuating interior states, creating for readers a sense of entering into the minds of their subjects, Conrad dismissed such efforts (as, ultimately, did Bergson) as an essentially illusory, indulgent artistry: one ultimately incompatible with his personal vision of fidelity. As Watt posits, unlike the self-consciously highbrow aspirations of many modernists, 'far from flaunting his differences in taste and attitude from mankind at large' Conrad was eager to court and stir his readers' sympathies, in this effort often attempting 'to appear more affirmative and conformist than he really was'.²⁹¹ While this trait was, in part, economically driven, it was also an important aspect of his desire to be appreciated by the 'average man'.²⁹² Thus alienated from the avant-garde's insistence on 'literary, social and ethical innovation' Conrad, in Watt's view, emerges as one 'able to express the problems of his own time with a much more inclusive penetrating understanding

²⁸⁷ Wexler, 79.

²⁸⁸ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1979), 359.

²⁸⁹ Michael Gorra, 'Joseph Conrad,' *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 59: 4 (New York: Winter 2007): pp. 541-571, 542.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Watt, 359.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

than that of his contemporaries'.²⁹³ In this Conrad presents an outlook at once innovative and reflective, but also traditional and historically engaged.

Narrative and Subjectivity

This is perhaps why, as Jameson notes, Conrad's work appears today to mark 'a strategic fault line in the emergence of contemporary narrative'.²⁹⁴ In Conrad's writing there exists a palpable tension created by the enmeshment of aspects of both 'high' and middlebrow culture. Jameson describes this as 'a structural breakdown of the older realisms, from which emerges not modernism alone but rather two literary and cultural structures, dialectically interrelated and necessarily presupposing each other for any adequate analysis'.²⁹⁵ Conrad's adherence to traditional, third person narratives presents a fascinating site from which to explore this bifurcation. Rather than deploying this familiar mode to tell a story to a passive reader, Conrad subverts conventional narrative structures by deploying and using them to suggest the inherent inadequacies of narrative and language (however innovatively used) as a satisfactory means of expressing the novelty and dynamism of the subjective world. Thus by maintaining traditional narrative boundaries between subject and object, Conrad rejects the modernists' 'poetic of interiority' as unsatisfactory and limited in its scope, instituting in its place what Jameson terms 'a poetic of difference'.²⁹⁶ In short, rather than creating an illusion of subjectivity through the use of interior monologues, Conrad's narratives acknowledge the impossibility of entering into and sharing the experience of another's conscious processes. This difficulty is dramatized in texts like *Lord Jim* as Marlow, despite fleeting moments of clarity, repeatedly reflects on the 'fog', 'mist' or 'haze' which inevitably impedes his ability

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Jameson, 206.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

to grasp a distinct impression of Jim. As such, Jim ultimately remains for Marlow a mystery, someone ‘inscrutable at heart’ (*LJ*, 352).

Conrad’s use of conventional narrative forms as a means of expressing this void can be viewed as an attempt to push against the conventions of realism in order to explore and probe the relationships between subject and object, of writer and reader. Conrad does not assume that the reader shares his value system or even his experience of reality; as Wexler acknowledges, ‘in contrast to the Victorian novelist’s assumption of an intimate relationship with readers [Conrad’s] starting point [is rather] the fundamental isolation of the individual’²⁹⁷ Thus from within the third person mode (a form familiar and appropriate to his yarning, seafaring tradition), Conrad frequently unsettles the conventions of this approach by breaking the narrative into a series of chronologically disrupted frames: a trait particularly apparent in canonical ‘Marlow’ texts such *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Chance*. As Gillies observes, Conrad does not merely alternate flashbacks with current experience, as is common in the novel; rather he uses a sophisticated blending of memories with current experiences to develop a pattern that eventually reveals a central truth’.²⁹⁸ These intersecting, multiple views gesture towards some vital but elusive reality otherwise resistant to the ordered, arbitrary structures of the narrative. In fitting with the narrator’s observations on Marlow’s yarning in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s fiction presents a story only part of which is contained within the physical narrative: its essence lying ‘not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which [can bring] it out only as a glow brings out a haze’.²⁹⁹ Applying this maxim to Conrad’s fiction, we can infer that the novel’s broader substance remains subject to the intuitive efforts of the reader who must navigate the narrative’s

²⁹⁷ Wexler, 79.

²⁹⁸ Gillies, 166.

²⁹⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Stories* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), 33. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with page references given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to *HD*.

inevitably incomplete and distanced representations of reality, using these necessarily external coordinates as a scaffold from which might be divined a sense of a text's nebulous, transcendent meaning. Conrad acknowledges this symbiotic relationship with the reader in his letters to Garnett, observing that 'one writes only half the book, the other half is with the reader': for Conrad, it is only through this dialectical process that some measure of authentic sympathy and understanding might be achieved.³⁰⁰

While the progressively complex nature of Conrad's narrative structures might be in part, what Karl identifies as an attempt to find 'in narrative technique some equivalent of the verbal stream of consciousness', it could likewise be contended that Conrad is as concerned with the flow of consciousness as it relates to that which is outside or beyond it.³⁰¹ By rejecting the stream of consciousness mode Conrad's narrative arguably achieves something equally profound - a reflection of the essentially paradoxical nature of an existence which must operate on both external and subjective spheres.³⁰² From this viewpoint, Conrad's narrative techniques might be understood not simply as a linguistic compromise necessitated by what Karl calls his 'peculiar relationship to the English language', but as a means of exploring experience as it flows between object and subject, memory and experience, the past and the present. Viewed in this way, Conrad's narratives can be considered a manifestation of his ideals of fidelity and solidarity as they applied to his understanding of literary craft.³⁰³

As Karl suggests, Conrad's narrative experimentation allowed him to toy 'with Bergson's warning, close to his own sense of things, that the logical mind created continuity where none really existed [...] and that besides this mechanistic impulse, there was another

³⁰⁰ Joseph Conrad, letter to Cunninghame Graham, 5th August 1897, in *Joseph Conrad's letters to R.B. Cunninghame Graham*, 46

³⁰¹ Karl, *The Three Lives*, 744.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

which tried to understand vital phenomena'.³⁰⁴ As such, intuitive figures like Marlow emerge to circumvent and interpret a tale's 'fragile inner core'; a hub of meaning, resistant to logical structures, that 'palpitates according to an [ineffable, primal] mode of existence'.³⁰⁵ This method allows Conrad to gesture towards levels of self and consciousness inaccessible from within the ordered structures of traditional narrative modes. This, to borrow Bergson's terms, suggests to the reader 'that life does not quite go into the category of the many nor yet into that of the one; that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the vital process' (CE, 177). It is in this characteristic, as Con Coroneos suggests in *Space, Conrad, and Modernity*, that the complex narrative form of novels like *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* offer a 'place from which the mystical speaks'.³⁰⁶

Conrad, Marlow and Mysticism

On these grounds, while not overtly mystical, Conrad's work nevertheless betrays a subtle engagement with mystical ideas: flirting with what Leon Surette in *The Birth of Modernism*, identifies as 'occult like themes and topoi'.³⁰⁷ In *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Alex Owen emphasises the ubiquity of mysticism and the popularity of esoteric societies in the eighteen nineties, identifying them as 'one of the most remarked trends of the decade'.³⁰⁸ The pervasiveness of such thought could not have escaped Conrad's attention. Indeed, in the eyes of Arthur Symons, Conrad's narratives are felt to haunt the reader 'by some inexplicable, by some mysterious, [...] occult form of mesmerism'.³⁰⁹ Extending from such assertions, Coroneos draws fascinating parallels between Marlow's shadowy circle of listeners who, in *Heart of Darkness*, 'gather round the

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 743.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁰⁷ Surette, Leon, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and The Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 10.

³⁰⁸ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

³⁰⁹ Arthur Symons, *Notes on Joseph Conrad with some Unpublished Letters* (London: Myers and Co., 1925), 8

storyteller, united in an article of faith' eerily resembling an occult 'session'.³¹⁰ Coroneos points out the 'overtly religious image of Marlow' as Conrad depicts him posed ritualistically 'with the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he [resembles] a Buddha preaching' (*HD*, 10). Such imagery is especially poignant given Marlow's subsequent invocation of the sinister memory of Kurtz. Indeed, Marlow emerges in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* as a form of 'medium', allowing a shady, quasi-mystical connection between the character and reader: mediating between the external public and private subjective spheres. Marlow's fascination with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and Jim in *Lord Jim*, transcends the superficial: Marlow is emphatically interested in assessing the 'state of [their] soul[s]' and in doing so, also his own (*LJ*, 84).

Conrad's Marlow: Intuition, Evolution and the Nature of Self

Bergson stipulated that humanity's evolutionary progress had necessarily relied on the development of mechanical intelligence, a faculty that secured success by enabling social structures and communication, but which had ultimately stunted man's capacity for instinct and sympathy. This division formed a difficulty central to the human condition, namely man's inability to appreciate the dynamic, multiple nature of being. In Bergsonian thought this deficiency is surmountable only by fostering man's latent powers of intuition (a faculty Bergson defines as a disinterested, self-conscious instinct), to him, it is this capacity which holds the key to the 'very inwardness of life' (*CE*, 180): to glimpsing the intricacies of another's consciousness. For Bergson, this ideal exists only in potential, yet the promise of its realisation exhibits in individuals who, like Conrad's Marlow, possess what in *Lord Jim* is termed 'divining intuition' (*LJ*, 156). This aesthetic faculty enables the sympathetic individual to 'break down the barrier that space puts up' between themselves and others. (*CE*,

³¹⁰ Con Coroneos, *Space, Conrad, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 117.

177) It is Marlow's gift for such feeling, his self-confessed lack of 'a discriminating eye for the incidental - for the externals' (*LJ*, 112) of matters which allows him to grasp, however vaguely, an impression of what, for Bergson, 'intelligence fails to give us' (*CE*, 180).

Focusing on *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, two of Conrad's most famous 'Marlow' tales, I will proceed by examining the ways in which these texts demonstrate fascinating overlaps between Bergson's and Conrad's thought: comparisons pertinent for what they reveal about these writers' shared historical and cultural contexts as well as their personal philosophical outlooks. Before discussing Bergsonian notions of time, language and self in *Lord Jim*, I will first consider how Conrad's earlier work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), raises fascinating parallels with Bergson's thoughts regarding the origins and development of life, particularly his unorthodox speculations regarding the plant world's capacity for conscious life.

Heart of Darkness

As *Heart of Darkness* was first published in serialised form for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, the French publications of Bergson's *Time and Free Will* in 1889 and *Matter and Memory* in 1896 had already provoked considerable excitement amongst academics. Bergson's radical, ostensibly mystical treatment of time and memory stirred an already embryonic awareness of ideas relating to human nature, society and its development which were to be tackled more expansively in Bergson's 1907 *Creative Evolution*. As such, though Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* predates the 'Bergson Boom' that preceded the publication of *Creative Evolution* by almost a decade, as Conrad worked on this novel these ideas were nevertheless very much in the air. Within this milieu, dubious extensions of Darwin's theories in the work of Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau had helped to progress an already

insidious fear of degeneration in society.³¹¹ As Cedric Watts notes in his essay ‘Heart of Darkness’, this was an era marked by ‘widespread anxieties about human nature, its origins and its future’.³¹² *Heart of Darkness*’s bold explorations of degeneration and buried primal impulses resonate poignantly with many of the driving concerns of *Creative Evolution*, perhaps lending truth to René Gillouin’s assertion that ‘Bergsonism was [...] anticipated in the minds of men’ even before its crystallisation in writing.³¹³ As Anthony Fothergill asserts in ‘Cannibalising Traditions’ (1996), Conrad was, like Bergson, indubitably a ‘writer of his times’.³¹⁴ His fascination with themes of adventure, colonialism and ‘masculine heroics’ openly affirm this; yet so too do his more oblique engagements with evolutionary, mystical and philosophical tropes.³¹⁵ Thus as Watts explains, *Heart of Darkness*, a novel so often praised as ‘ahead of its times’, is most accurately described as being ‘intelligently of them’, an assertion similarly true of *Creative Evolution*.³¹⁶

Heart of Darkness’s haunting depictions of imperial corruption, man’s latent darker nature and potential for atavism tapped into fears at the very core of contemporary society, ideas which Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* sought to tackle head on. In *The Bergsonian Heritage*, Thomas Hanna identifies Bergson’s chief and most enduring success to be his intimate engagement with what was for modern, post-Darwinian times ‘the only question worth solving [...] How can we understand the nature of the human creature, and [man’s]

³¹¹ Responding to Darwinian theories of evolution, Cesare Lombroso proposed an anthropological theory of criminology based on the premise that criminality was an inherited trait which could be discerned from what he believed were atavistic physical features. In a similar vein, Max Nordau’s controversial work *Degeneration* was published in 1892.

³¹² Cedric Watts, ‘Heart of Darkness’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. By J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45.

³¹³ René Gillouin quoted in Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his life and philosophy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), 51.

³¹⁴ Anthony Fothergill, ‘Cannibalising Traditions: Representation and Critique in Heart of Darkness’ in *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Joseph Conrad After Empire*, ed. Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper (Rondersbosch: University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 93.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

place and significance in the world?'.³¹⁷ Conrad's fiction is, in many respects, driven by a similar agenda and, consequently these texts can be constructively discussed in association with Bergson's theories of evolution, atavism, subjectivity, society and language providing a useful framework through which to discuss and inform Conrad's fearful presentations of man's darker nature. Indeed, Bergson's theories of subjectivity, language and evolution provide a fresh, historically appropriate means of reinvigorating discussions of this canonical text.

In *Creative Evolution* Bergson asserts that each individual carries with them and acts on the entirety of their past, both individual and ancestral. Such memories, carried forward beyond an individual's conscious existence, are manifested as impulses and transmitted 'in the form of tendency' rather than formed ideas (*CE*, 6). Owing to these shared origins, plant and animal life maintain within their makeup residual common traits and, while radically divergent in their current forms (with the animal tending towards mobility and consciousness and the plant immobile unconsciousness), each retain tendencies which 'haunt each other continually [and are] everywhere [...] mingled' (*CE*, 143). For Bergson, then, just as plant life harbours the dormant potential for mobility and conscious thought, animal life exists under the perpetual threat of lapsing into an unconscious state. Indeed, many species are exposed to this threat by a natural inclination to sustain themselves using 'the least possible effort' (*CE*, 121). Where circumstances allow this flaw to prevail, a species becomes vulnerable to the lure of parasitism and risks deterioration into a vegetative state.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow reflects on his youthful voyage to the Congo. Recruited by a Belgian trading company through a connection of his aunt, he begins a haunting journey into the hostile wilds of colonial Africa. As Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan observes in *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, Marlow's voyage is inspired by 'a vague but pressing state

³¹⁷ Hanna, 3.

of ennui, a spiritual coma'.³¹⁸ Between jobs at sea and thus without the focus provided by work, Marlow feels cut-adrift 'from the truth of things' (*HD*, 13), caught in a 'debilitating stasis'.³¹⁹ This is a state Erdinast-Vulcan believes 'fundamentally related to the intellectual unease of the *fin de siècle*'.³²⁰ Marlow's journey, as Joan E. Steiner claims in 'Modern Pharisees and False Apostles', ostensibly resembles a pilgrimage, an attempt to 'escape from the mundane into another dimension of existence'.³²¹ This is a journey, as Erdinast-Vulcan suggests, which aims to seek out 'that lost vitality, the essential wholeness man has lost in the course of his material progress'.³²² This search, which repeatedly reveals devastating scenes of imperial greed and desolation, rather than leading Marlow to a redemptive truth only serves to subvert the very concept of pilgrimage. He is invariably faced not with comfort or enlightenment, but 'horror', stagnation and decay.

Throughout his journey Marlow's only salvation is found in work and movement; it is this alone which offers a resistance to the insidious threat of darkness and torpor. In the Congo, Marlow discovers that it is the dominance established by imperial power, with its greed and materialism, which exposes his colleagues to the threat of degeneration and stasis. Overwhelmed by a desire for ivory and freed from menial tasks by native workers, each of the agents he encounters have fallen prey to an ominous state of inertia. Marlow observes the occupants of his company's Central Station 'strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard [...] wandering here and there [...] like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence' (*HD*, 50). Deeply unsettling, this image presents the 'pilgrims' as senseless automata, eerie and devoid of agency. Their fixation on ivory robs them of independence, binding them to the corruption which surrounds its trade. Ironically, the materialism these

³¹⁸ Dapha Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 91.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ Joan E Steiner in 'Modern Pharisees and False Apostles: Ironic New Testament Parallels in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37, issue 1 (1982), 78.

³²² Erdinast-Vulcan, *Conrad and the Modern Temper*, 92.

men feel has empowered them, has instead enslaved them. For Marlow these men appear ‘unreal,’ their greed portends a deeper corruption, seeming to Marlow like ‘a whiff from some corpse’ (*HD*, 54). Affirming this impression, in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson observes such torpid states to be fertile soil for retrogression where a species, resisting life’s fundamental drive for action, becomes focused ‘only on its own convenience, [falling] into a partial sleep, [and] ignor[ing] almost all the rest of life’ (*CE*, 135). It is in this way a species lays the foundations of its evolutionary downfall. Following this model of regression the ‘pilgrims’ can be viewed as essentially parasitic, sustaining themselves by means of the people and products of a subjugated country. This conquest occurs at a grave cost as the symbiotic process which sates their needs ultimately ties them to their host in a state of submissive dependence: they have become helpless fanatics who whisper and sigh the word ivory ‘as if praying to it’ (*HD*, 51). Mesmerised, they appear to Marlow ‘absurd [...] [tainted by an air of] imbecile rapacity’ (*HD*, 51).

Indeed, the agent’s unconscious wanderings provoke an uneasy humour, suggesting what Bergson describes in *Laughter* (1900) as ‘the mechanical encrusted on the living’.³²³ Trapped in this stupor the pilgrims occupy an existential no man’s land where elements of comedy and horror converge. In *Laughter*, Bergson asserts that laughter fulfils a vital social function by breaking the spell of ‘slumbering activity [...] [and] restraining eccentricity’: it both affirms life and encourages compliance with communal rules (*L*, 17). As such, laughter is provoked in response to our fear of ‘mechanical inelasticity’ (*L*, 13). Identified by Bergson as an essentially social phenomenon, laughter is a response best fitted to the ‘requirements of life in common’ (*L*, 12). However, for Marlow, displaced from his familiar social context, the absurdly comic scene of the pilgrims cannot be confronted or neutralised in this way. He

³²³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1935), 9. All subsequent quotations from *Laughter* will be from this text with page references given in brackets afterwards and the title abbreviated to *L*.

stands alone, a bewildered observer in a place where eccentricity and inertia have become the norm. As Bergson observes, ‘you would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others, laughter [...] stands in need of an echo’ (*L*, 11). This holds true for Marlow. Alienated from the world around him the sense of the comic is tainted by fear and the void which might have been filled by laughter is instead met only by the oppressive ‘mute spell of the wilderness’ (*HD*, 51).

Isolated in this way, Marlow seeks solace in work and activity as if to fend off the growing torpor which surrounds him. He observes his colleagues ‘waiting [...] all waiting’, suspended in an atmosphere of perpetual anticipation, whilst ‘the only thing that ever [comes] to them [is] disease’ and the only activity is impotent bouts of ‘backbiting and intriguing’ (*HD*, 52). These men produce nothing and seem to Marlow corrupt and ‘unreal’, overcome by their environment and cut adrift from the progressive, creative flow of life. In reaction to this degradation, Marlow fixates on the practicalities of repairing his boat. He refuses to be drawn by the petty machinations of other agents and so immerses himself in work, focusing only on the rivets needed to complete his repairs: ‘What I really wanted was rivets [...] to get on with work - to stop the hole’ (*HD*, 55).

The hole to which Marlow refers is not merely the physical damage to his boat but, crucially, the spiritual void perceived in the agents who surround him. References to such inner degradation permeate the novella. Indeed, as Ian Watt observes in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, ‘Heart of Darkness embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt’.³²⁴ Marlow suspects the Central Station manager ‘exists in externals only’, that there is ‘nothing within him’ (*HD*, 49). An unsettling impression reinforced by the manager’s disturbing adage: ‘men who come out here should have no entrails’ (*HD*, 49). In addition, Marlow harbours a notion that this man’s ‘inscrutable smile,

³²⁴ Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 176.

conceals a 'darkness he had in his keeping' (*HD*, 49). Consequently, the manager appears as a mere shell, a receptacle for a darkness which controls and corrupts from within. The indeterminacy suggested by his smile, of which there is something 'indefinable [...] something stealthy [and] unconscious' renders him, despite his unremarkable outward appearance, profoundly disturbing (*HD*, 49). Marlow is plagued by unsettling doubts as to whether the manager is living or is an automaton as while he mimics life, he proves fundamentally devoid of its creative, progressive essence. Indeed, Marlow laments the absence of any 'external checks' which might allay his fears (*HD*, 49). Such themes of uncertainty and suspicion culminate in the final depiction of Kurtz, in whom 'the dark primal secrets of the wilderness [echo] loudly [...] because he [is] hollow at the core' (*HD*, 86). Thus work, by providing 'the chance to find yourself. Your own reality' provides the hope of creating an inner substance, something with which to fill and thus escape the void of inertia and moral erosion that plagues the colonists (*HD*, 56).

Marlow's struggle for moral self-preservation is hinged on his ability to suppress instinctive, primal desires and to seek refuge in 'the surface truths' offered by work (*HD*, 64). Though he feels the lure of the wilderness, recognising in it an enigmatic 'truth stripped of the cloak of time', he refuses, unlike Kurtz, to listen to it 'whisper[ing] things about himself', things which might awaken dormant bestial impulses (*HD*, 64, 86). So instead Marlow labours becoming, from a Bergsonian stance, 'absorbed in the utilization of inert matter', immersing himself in familiar, practical processes in an attempt to ward off primitive lusts (*CE*, 145). In this, Marlow uses his innate faculties of intelligence and movement as a form of defence; thus, 'threatened with torpor [...] [he] rouses [him]self up and move[s] forward' (*CE*, 139). In the challenging environment of the wilderness of the Congo, work allows a means of maintaining balance between the extremes of subjectivity displayed by Kurtz and the unthinking automatism of the other agents.

Evolution, Vegetation and Animation

In contrast to the inertia of the colonists, the wilderness lurks, 'great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing of this fantastic invasion' (*HD*, 51). The pervasive presence of primeval forest and mud throughout the text disturbs by its ability to suggest life's evolutionary beginnings and mankind's comparative transience. It marks a borderland between the recognisable world and the impenetrable darkness which lies beyond. Though silent, the landscape is pregnant with the potential for action, possessed of a 'concealed life' which is 'expectant, mute' and which waits with 'ominous patience' for the passing of western intruders (*HD*, 51 & 61). While the company's agents degenerate into a state of torpor, the vegetation conversely exhibits signs of animation suggesting an unnerving, uncanny shift of evolutionary trends. Indeed, Guerard in *Conrad the Novelist* emphasises the ubiquitous 'menace of vegetation' in *Heart of Darkness*, an observation which in the light of Bergson's evolutionary theories takes on a yet more sinister significance.³²⁵ Guerard notes the resilience and predatory nature of the vegetation as it 'sprouts between the stones' of Brussels, growing up through the ribs of skeletonised bodies in the Congo.³²⁶ It exists as a pervasive, conscious presence, waiting patiently to reassert its dominance. As Marlow approaches Kurtz's station he is struck by a sensation that the vegetation is animate. He describes the 'living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth' being still yet not inert (*HD*, 39). To Marlow they seem unnatural as if in 'a state of trance' (*HD*, 39). Indeed, just as Marlow considers the native occupants of the Congo to be living examples of primitive man, the primeval mud and forest and the darkness they veil assert an even more distant connection: a kinship which predates all human life. This sensation reaches beyond the limits of human intellect. In Bergson's terms it exists as an

³²⁵ Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), 250.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

intuitive glimpse of a remote primordial memory; it can be divined transiently through instinct, but not 'expressed in terms of pure understanding' (*CE*, 173). The feelings of awe the wilderness inspires in Marlow can be attributed to a momentary, epiphanic glimpse of life's 'earliest beginnings' (*HD*, 61).

Indeed, Marlow feels the wilderness threaten to 'bury him in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets' (*HD*, 90). The darkness seems an infinite and forbidding 'womb-tomb' which stands poised, ready to absorb him - to draw him back not only to life's primal beginnings but to the nothingness which preceded life. Marlow relates: 'I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night' (*HD*, 90). This darkness, like Bergson's concept of primal nothingness, is not merely the negation of being, but something infinite, a primal otherness which evades intellectual understanding. It is, for Conrad, a 'thing of inconceivable tenuity', yet a definite entity nonetheless.³²⁷ For Bergson, this 'nothingness' is omnipresent and 'eternally prior' (*CE*, 291). He describes it as the 'substratum or receptacle' underpinning all existence (*CE*, 291). In this view Bergson echoes Roussel's belief that for Conrad, 'darkness lies behind all the distinct forms of creation'.³²⁸ In this, Conrad's concept of darkness resembles Bergson's image of 'nothing' as a canvas on which matter and life are the embroidery. For each, existence represents 'a conquest over nought', a struggle against an alien, primal force incomprehensible to the limited powers of man's intellect (*CE*, 291).

³²⁷ C.T. Watts ed., *Joseph Conrad's letters to R.B. Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 117.

³²⁸ Roussel, 4.

Bergson and *Lord Jim*

Writing of *Lord Jim*, J.H. Stape contemplates the novel as a *bildungsroman*, a form Mikhail Bakhtin defined as the ‘image of man in the process of becoming’.³²⁹ Expanding on this he qualifies the form as one with a ‘double focus, on the protagonist’s outer world, his pre-existing social context, and his developing inner world, which is shaped by various trials and experiences’.³³⁰ For Stape, this depiction of ‘becoming’ presents an exacting literary task requiring the ‘ability to convey with extreme subtlety the fleeting movements of thought and feeling’ combined with an ‘acute sense of social nuance’.³³¹ It is Conrad’s capacity to recognise this dualistic viewpoint, his ability to frame the subtleties of personal experience within the context of external society, which signals his affinity to the Bergsonian outlook. Indeed, while the *Bildungsroman* provides an essentially linear account of an individual’s progression as they move towards the realisation of an innate potential, a Bergsonian viewpoint allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex oscillations between progression and regression amidst which life and individual subjectivity unfolds. While in the *bildungsroman* a character is seen to evolve in response to personal history and environment, Conrad’s view of subjectivity allows for more fluidity between the past and the future by acknowledging these swings and eddies. Indeed, Jim never emerges as a distinct or finished character. He remains throughout the novel multifaceted, indistinct and shadowy, allowing only fleeting moments of clarity to his observers. Conrad’s ability to capture a sense of this movement and dynamism allows him to realise his personal literary aim of transcending the

³²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘The *bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism’, *Speech, Genres and other late Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2004), 21.

³³⁰ J.H. Stape, ‘Lord Jim’ *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

limitations of language, in order to grasp ‘from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life’.³³²

Lord Jim follows its young protagonist as he embarks on a career at sea. Inspired by ‘a course of light holiday literature’ (*LJ*, 47), Jim enters his chosen profession with blinkered, highly romanticised ideals that leave him ill-prepared for the realities of sea life. Following his training, Jim becomes increasingly disenchanted; the imagined existence of voyage and discovery is in its realisation ‘strangely barren of adventure’ (*LJ*, 50). Consequently, Jim retreats from the disappointments of reality, seeking solace in a fantasy world of ‘imaginary achievements’ and ‘valorous deeds’ (*LJ*, 58). Despite his disillusionment, Jim’s genteel appearance and apparent competency allow him to progress quickly and, ‘without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show [...] the inner worth of a man’, he is able to secure a position as chief mate on a reputable ship (*LJ*, 50). This period of stability and success is cut short when, during a storm, Jim is injured by a falling spar. Sustaining a severe wound, Jim requires an extensive convalescence - initially on board and later in hospital. It is this interlude which cements in Jim’s mind a nagging ‘desire to escape’; an escape which, following his recovery, is realised both mentally and physically (*LJ*, 51).

On his discharge from hospital, Jim takes a position as chief mate aboard the *Patna*, an Eastern steamer. Here Jim is freed from the competitive atmosphere of the British home service with its ‘har[d] conditions and sever[e] view of duty’ (*LJ*, 52). It is instead a lifestyle of ‘short passages, good deckchairs and large native crews’ (*LJ*, 52); one which, as Robert Kuehn remarks in his introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Lord Jim*, provides Jim with ‘countless opportunities for self-congratulation as he compares himself to the other

³³² Joseph Conrad, author’s note to *The Nigger of the Narcissus and Other Stories*, ed. by Gail Fraser (London: Penguin, 2007), 4.

officers'.³³³ In this lax environment Jim retreats more completely into a dream world which becomes for him 'life's secret truth, its hidden reality' (*LJ*, 58). This escape into reverie makes Jim increasingly detached from the world of action, leaving him complacent and exposed to danger. Indeed, in the context of Conrad's fear of inertia, Jim's period in hospital can be viewed as the direct precursor to his disgrace on the *Patna*. His enforced inactivity brings him into contact with men determined 'to lounge safely through existence' (*LJ*, 52). This, coupled with his exposure to the 'bewitching breath of the Eastern waters [with their] suggestions of infinite repose' tempts Jim into a life radically detached from the ideals of heroism and duty he aspires to (*LJ*, 52). When the *Patna* strikes passing debris and threatens to sink, Jim, submerged in reverie, is caught unaware and in the ensuing panic jumps ship, abandoning eight hundred sleeping passengers. This act, and his conviction that he should be distinguished from his renegade crewmates, leads Jim into a cycle of self-imposed exile and self-deception which calls into question his fundamental identity.

As Stape observes, Jim's leap from the *Patna*, along with several other episodes in the novel, offers a sardonic presentation of 'humanity's remoteness from instinct'.³³⁴ Jim's acquired values of duty and honour, and his heroic self-image gleaned from education and 'light [...] literature' (*LJ*, 47) render his 'instinctive gesture to save his life' shameful and alien to his idealised vision of himself.³³⁵ Indeed, Jim's jump not only represents a violation of the established codes of seamanship which, as Stape notes, demand 'an emptying out of the private self in order to preserve community', but moreover exposes the deep contradictions existing between arbitrary social ideals and natural, instinctive behaviour.³³⁶ Marlow's depiction of Jim's struggle to 'save from the fire his idea of what his moral identity should be' resonates profoundly with Bergson's notion of the parasitic self, a state imposed

³³³ Robert E. Kuehn, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Lord Jim* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969), 8.

³³⁴ Stape, 73.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

on an individual through the social enforcement of views and conventions at odds with their inner predispositions (*LJ*, 103). It is Jim's rigid adherence to 'the precious notion of a convention [...] [with] its assumption of unlimited power over natural instincts' that forms the foundations of his suffering following the jump (*LJ*, 103).

Bergson holds that, immersed in the immediate demands of society, most are satisfied to believe they act freely and, when roused by flashes of instinct or irrational passions, the majority are content to 'cast back into the darkest depths of [their] soul[s]' feelings which violate their socially viable image of self (*TFW*, 171). Indeed, to function actively in society such conformity is desirable. As a result, the truly free act is exceptional and involves a shedding of the 'outer crust' of personality. It is, for Bergson, an action stemming from 'the whole soul', from the 'fundamental self' untrammelled by external expectations (*TFW*, 167). In these terms Jim's jump epitomises the Bergsonian 'free act' by presenting an incident where Jim, faced with imminent danger, is forced to discard the secure bounds of his superficial personality to act with an immediacy and impulse that cannot be suppressed. It is a moment, in Bergsonian terms, when 'the deep-seated self rushes up to the surface [to burst] through the outer crust' (*TFW*, 169). As Roussel asserts, Jim's jump is a choice, 'an act of terrifying freedom' which carries Jim 'into a realm which transcends, and negates, the structure of belief'.³³⁷ For Jim, this experience results in crisis; his experience of 'pure freedom' appears to him eerie and shrouded in mystery, threatening the dissolution of a stable subject position (*TFW*, 169).

In living by the rules and principles of an occupation for which he feels no true calling, Jim is the victim of 'an education not properly assimilated' (*TFW*, 166). In a career 'whose only reward is in the perfect love of the work' all satisfaction eludes him (*LJ*, 50). This is directly symptomatic of Jim's 'parasitic self', the imprisoning shell of superficial

³³⁷ Roussel, 86.

values which mask and ‘continuously encroach upon’ his natural tendencies (*TFW*, 166). This parasitic self, a blend of education, social and parental expectation is so entangled with his concept of identity that he is unable to recognise the instinctive ‘fundamental self’ which drove his decision to jump. Accordingly, the moment of his jump constitutes what Ghent describes as ‘a shocking encounter with self’, a frightful confrontation with ‘the stranger within’.³³⁸ In fact, in the moment of the disaster, Jim is faced with emotion of such intensity that he ‘lose[s] for an instant the consciousness of [his] personality’ and emerges from this experience, faced with a deep lacuna (*LJ*, 125). The moment of the jump which pulls him into what seems ‘an everlasting deep hole’ is lost to Jim’s conscious memory (*LJ*, 125). Unable to recall the details of this moment at his trial, he states inconclusively: ‘I had jumped [...] [...] It seems’ (*LJ*, 125). In the aftermath of this event Jim clings to his romantic ideals, denying and detaching himself from the underlying self which drove his action. Left traumatised, Jim systematically flees from this experience in a series of subsequent ‘jumps’ which mark his attempts to regenerate his heroic identity and erase a past he deems shameful and uncharacteristic. This, however, proves impossible; as Bergson asserts, our past is inevitably carried forward and forms the essence of our ever-developing, changing self. The *Patna* incident, as Conrad himself noted, represents an event with the potential ‘to colour the whole “sentiment of existence”’.³³⁹ Jim’s subsequent ‘becoming’ transpires in accordance with this past and the *Patna* disaster provides the catalyst for all Jim’s future actions, including his death in Patusan. As Kuehn observes, it is Jim’s lack of ‘capacity for philosophical speculation’, his inability to distinguish the void which exists between the ‘ideal and real

³³⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1953), 229.

³³⁹ Joseph Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’ in *Lord Jim*, ed. by Thomas E. Moser (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 5.

self', which renders him incapable of processing or domesticating his momentary reversion to instinct.³⁴⁰

In a crucial sense, Jim's behaviour following the *Patna* disaster can be viewed as a process of mourning for the 'chance missed', as well as his struggle to deal with the unsettling recognition that his understanding of identity as a fixed and stable entity was merely a façade: a social construct formed in order to control and make tangible something which would otherwise be too fluid and changeable to grasp. In the light of this knowledge Jim's jump into the water becomes a jump into something that can never be fully explained or articulated; it reveals a layer of Jim's being which he does not recognise and has no means to connect with or comprehend. This knowledge denies Jim the possibility of emulating or experiencing the uncomplicated heroism and smooth sequential processes of cause and effect enacted in the 'light literature' he reads. Instead it asserts the fact that existence is mobile and radically contingent. While in Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur* the protagonist O'Malley ultimately submits to this knowledge, finding himself immersed in this flux and therefore erased as a subject, Jim, a more conventional and naive figure, is unable to assimilate this knowledge. His anger and suicidal feelings following the disaster, alongside his denial and sense of detachment from the event, are symptomatic of this grief.

As Bergson observes, choice, unavoidable in a world of flux, inevitably involves loss as it demands the relinquishment of all alternative possibilities - this is 'why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality' (*TFW*, 10). For Jim, whose ideal of self was so central to his experience of being, this loss is felt intensely. As Marlow observes, by jumping from the *Patna*, Jim 'tumble[s] from a height he could never scale again' (*LJ*, 127). Thus even following the success of his 'fresh start' in the wilds of Patusan (a move Marlow hopes will save Jim from self-destruction) where Jim wins the fame and

³⁴⁰ Kuehn, 9.

respect he craves and finds romantic love with Jewel, his life remains haunted by his actions on board the *Patna*. In a sense, Jim's 'becoming' is stunted by this incident; unable to adapt his ambitions to incorporate new desires and hopes he egotistically clings to his fixed, conventional ideals of heroism. Such fixity resembles a state of torpor and is in essence 'a refusal to evolve further in a progressive direction' (*CE*, 109). Consequently, even after finding love and respect in Patusan, Jim 'ignores almost all the rest of life' and is left 'turning in upon [him] self' in the search for absolution (*CE*, 129).

A central aspect of Jim's crisis is his inability to process his decision to jump. This issue might be elucidated by reference to Bergson's concept of *durée* and the radical implications this new understanding of time held for language. Bergson's novel re-evaluation of time had exposed society's accepted understandings of it as a measurable entity to be essentially flawed: a mistaken 'projection of time into space' (*TFW*, 101). For Bergson, this misunderstanding had become so ingrained in human thought that it now permeated all established structures in society, even language itself. In *Lord Jim*, this conflict can be illustrated by Jim's inability to articulate his experience on board the *Patna*. Jim struggles to communicate the objective sequence of events required by the court, lamenting: 'They demanded facts. Facts! As if facts could explain anything!' (*LJ*, 63). Jim is left frustrated; his attempts to describe the event are, in legal terms, deemed 'irrelevant' and he is left stuttering, 'hesitating in his speech' as he struggles to confer the complex horrors of the impending disaster and its seedy aftermath (*LJ*, 65, 66). Confronted with the necessity of articulating the *Patna* episode in clearly delineated terms, Jim becomes increasingly aware that in doing so, he presents an impoverished caricature of real events: a mere 'shadow of reality' (*TFW*, 128). Ultimately, this leaves him with the 'opinion that speech [is] of no use to him any longer' (*LJ*, 67). Words fail to relate the 'delicate and fugitive impressions [perceived] by [his] individual consciousness' (*TFW*, 132).

Throughout his work, Bergson emphasises the social function of language with its provision of ‘well-defined outlines [...] which store up the stable, common and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind’ (*TFW*, 132). For Bergson, as Jim too discovers, language is merely symbolic; it provides a vehicle for externalising experience but in doing so captures and fixes meaning, denying the essential mobility on which, for Bergson, life is founded. As a result, language is viewed by Bergson as the ‘impersonal residue of the impressions felt in a given case by the whole of society’ (*TFW*, 133). At best, for Conrad and Bergson alike, words exist as the spectre of an original idea or experience. Jim’s initial belief that ‘only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things’ (*LJ*, 65) is eroded and, ultimately, exposed as futile. Jim can impart the objective facts in their minutiae, yet these facts, ‘visible, tangible, open to the senses’ (*LJ*, 65), fail to represent the true essence of his experience. Jim’s words merely outline the impenetrable intellectual shell of the event: circumscribing details from a diverse range of views, yet failing to ‘enter into [them]’ (*CE*, 176).

Jim is acutely aware that existing within the outward facts there is ‘something else besides, something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within’ (*LJ*, 65). This ‘something’, which Roussel describes as ‘the dark truth of existence’, stands at the core of Jim’s experience; it resists language and, within the confines of the law, is rendered untenable and incommunicable.³⁴¹ It is the court’s inability to recover this aspect of Jim’s experience which leads Marlow to contemplate the legal process as being ‘as instructive as the tapping of a hammer on an iron box’ (*LJ*, 84). This analogy provides a striking comparison to Bergson’s views on the intellect’s inability to penetrate subjective meaning when he describes it mistakenly going ‘all around life, taking from outside the greatest possible number of views of it, drawing it into itself rather than entering into it’ (*CE*, 176). As Bergson explains in

³⁴¹ Roussel, 85.

Creative Evolution: ‘intelligence and instinct are turned in opposite directions, the former towards inert matter, the latter towards life’ (*CE*, 176). Thus while reason and intellect unfold ‘more and more completely the secret of physical operations; of *life* [they] bring us [...] [only] a translation in terms of inertia’ (*CE*, 176).

This dichotomy between the human faculties of intellect and man’s dormant capacity for intuition, allows a dualistic interpretation of the *Patna* disaster; one intellectual, disinterested and static, the other intuitive, subjective and dynamic. Accordingly, whilst facts condemn Jim, the verdict remains insufficient to sate the curiosity of Marlow or the large audience who await ‘some essential disclosure as to the strength, the power, the horror of human emotions’ (*LJ*, 84). The law fulfils its social function of judgement and retribution yet in doing so misses what is, Marlow feels, ‘the only truth worth knowing [...] the state of [Jim’s] soul’ (*LJ*, 84). It is Marlow’s fascination and grudging identification with Jim as ‘one of us’ which leads him to develop a sympathy that, in turn, allows the reader a more expansive insight into Jim’s behaviours (*LJ*, 53). The understanding which develops between Marlow and Jim, at times, transcends the bounds of language and intermittently, Marlow finds himself ‘able [...] to understand the pauses between [Jim’s] words’ (*LJ*, 124). Despite this however, Jim remains an enigma for Marlow and the reader, a ‘shade’, visible only sporadically ‘through a rent in the mist in which he moved and had his being’ (*LJ*, 76).

As Gillies notes, today discovering whether or not Bergson ‘had any direct influence on Conrad’ is an ‘almost insoluble problem,’ yet reading Conrad through this lens can bring new perspectives to readings of his now canonical texts. A Bergsonian view of *Lord Jim* allows Jim, his jump and his subsequent becoming to be viewed in their full ontological complexity. As such, Jim’s abandonment of the *Patna* can be appreciated as far more than an inconsequential act of cowardice; it is rather, as Conrad intended, an event which fundamentally alters the ‘whole sentiment of existence’ not just for Jim, but for all others

whom his case touches. From both Bergsonian and Conradian perspectives, Jim's experience highlights the complex, often paradoxical nature of human life; a life whose dependence on static arbitrary structures, frequently masks and denies its fundamental mobility.

Viewing Jim's jump and his subsequent crisis in conjunction with Bergson's philosophy allows a study of this event which moves beyond existing discussions which largely explore its personal and social consequences. From a Bergsonian stance, Jim's jump is not simply the precipitant of an identity crisis; rather, it becomes an event metaphysical in its scope. If Jim's jump is not, as Marlow finds, a clear cut act of cowardice, then through his exploration of its personal and moral consequences Conrad seems to be challenging the basic tenets of 'selfhood' as well as the socially inscribed moral framework which supports that view. Therefore, Conrad's modernism thus emerges as one inflected with Bergsonian thought on a number of levels. This correspondence manifests in Conrad's presentation of the self as fluid and dynamic, his understanding of a primal past which remains ever-present and vital, as well as his recognition of the necessity for movement and the dangers he identifies in denying this progressive evolutionary impulse.

Chapter Five

Algernon Blackwood and *The Centaur*: Dream, Mysticism and the Divided Self

Blackwood: Psychology, Self and the Supernatural

In the words of his biographer Mike Ashley, Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951) was ‘no ordinary writer [...] [and] no ordinary man’.³⁴² Various a dairy farmer, traveller, tramp, journalist, artist’s model, war-time secret agent, self-styled mystic and pioneering radio and television personality, Blackwood was a true maverick in both his work and lifestyle. Hailed by H.P. Lovecraft as the ‘absolute and unquestioned master of the weird atmosphere’,³⁴³ in his lifetime Blackwood produced an expansive body of work dedicated entirely to the exploration of supernatural and mystical themes, work he tantalisingly claimed to be ‘more or less autobiographical’.³⁴⁴

Firmly cast as a middlebrow genre writer, Blackwood’s writing has been marginalised by a critical culture, until recent decades, centred on a canonised model of modernism. As a consequence of this bias the work of Blackwood (and many writers like him) has been overlooked, remaining largely the preserve of cult communities with a focus on supernatural and science fiction. Yet even Blackwood himself betrayed discomfort with his familiar moniker ‘the ghost man’, noting this to be an ‘almost a derogatory classification’ that masked

³⁴² Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2001), xv.

³⁴³ H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 34.

³⁴⁴ Ashley, *Starlight Man*, xvi.

the true focus of his work.³⁴⁵ In his foreword to *The Tales of Algernon Blackwood* (1938)

Blackwood asserted that:

My interest in psychic matters has always been the interest in questions of extended or expanded consciousness. If a ghost is seen, what it is interests me less than what sees it? Do we possess faculties which, under exceptional stimulus, register beyond the normal gamut of seeing, hearing, feeling? That such faculties may exist in the human being and occasionally manifest is where my interest has always lain.³⁴⁶

Considered in this broader ontological, epistemological context Blackwood's writing can be seen to occupy an intriguing and paradoxical position within the cultural milieu of the first half of the twentieth century. Here, Blackwood implicitly identifies himself with the philosophical rather than the supernatural, revealing that his overriding interests lie in theories of being and knowledge rather than in ghosts *per se*. Indeed, as George Johnson notes in his 'Review of Mike Ashley's *Blackwood: An Extraordinary Life*', Blackwood's aim in writing 'was much larger and more profound than as a writer of ghost stories'.³⁴⁷ What he sought was not the thrill of fear and horror, but rather 'signs and proofs of other powers that lie hidden in us all; the extension, in other words, of human faculty'.³⁴⁸ Indeed, as Peter Penzoldt notes in *The Supernatural in Fiction*, for Blackwood 'the supernatural means [...] exactly the opposite from what it means to most other authors': in writing of this sphere Blackwood sought, rather than a source of fantasy and titillation, to challenge and extend the boundaries of reality through fiction.³⁴⁹

While taking many guises, this mission was sustained throughout Blackwood's career, seeing him produce works dealing with overtly psychological themes: passions, obsessions and split or dual personalities (notably Blackwood's *The Bright Messenger* (1921) was praised by Henry Miller as 'the most extraordinary novel on psychoanalysis, one which

³⁴⁵ Algernon Blackwood, *The Tales of Algernon Blackwood* (London: Martin Secker, 1938), 4.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ George Johnson 'Algernon Blackwood: An Extraordinary Life', in *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)*, Greensboro: University of North Carolina: 2003, 2.

³⁴⁸ Algernon Blackwood, Letter to Peter Penzoldt, quoted in Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 229.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

dwarfs the subject'), as well as more speculative, psychical works concerned with telepathy, clairvoyance, thought transference and posthumous spiritual survival.³⁵⁰ Perhaps most prevalent amongst Blackwood's themes is his fascination with what he felt to be the powerful living forces of nature. Since his childhood, nature had proved for Blackwood a source of comfort, inspiration and escape from the conflicts and materialism of society. Demonstrating the strength of this feeling Blackwood states in his autobiography *Episodes before Thirty*:

In times of trouble, as equally in times of joy, it was to nature that I ever turned instinctively. In those moments of deepest feeling when individuals must necessarily be alone, yet stand at the same time in most urgent need of understanding companionship, it was nature and nature only that could comfort me.³⁵¹

These tropes are developed to striking and dramatic effect in numerous tales, in particular his famous 'The Willows', 'The Wendigo' and *The Centaur*, where natural powers emerge suggestively to either heal or destroy: often proving a resonant metaphor for, or projection of the psyche. Indeed, much of Blackwood's fiction produces a sense of awe rather than horror; it is this idiosyncrasy which led S.T. Joshi in *The Weird Tale* to label Blackwood as the most 'wholesome and cheerful [of] horror writer[s]'.³⁵² Consequently, even within the genre of supernatural fiction, one in which he is considered preeminent, Blackwood's position has remained curiously incongruous and resistant to classification.

Given his current obscurity it is worth noting that in his lifetime Blackwood enjoyed considerable critical acclaim; as well as receiving a CBE in 1948 and a prestigious Television Society Medal in 1949, he rubbed shoulders with a host of celebrated contemporaries including Ford Madox Ford, Hilaire Belloc, Arthur Conan Doyle, Vita Sackville-West, H.G. Wells, Arthur Machen and W.B. Yeats. Yet, despite such rich and varied connections he was ultimately a private, elusive personality remaining, to the detriment of his reputation, more

³⁵⁰ Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life* (New York: New Directions Books, 1954), 16

³⁵¹ Algernon Blackwood, *Episodes before Thirty* (London: Peter Nevill, 1950), 28. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text, and the title abbreviated to *EBT*.

³⁵² S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), 89.

preoccupied with mystical concerns than the opinions of the literary establishment. Despite this, Blackwood's work is worthy of re-evaluation; indeed, as I hope this chapter will prove, reading Blackwood in relation to Bergson can serve to challenge and destabilise the once dismissive implications of the term 'middlebrow' and in turn enrich current efforts to produce more comprehensive, nuanced understandings of early twentieth century literature.

Blackwood's Creative Mysticism

Blackwood was born into a devoutly religious family. Yet despite the obsessive Evangelism of his parents, he was early in life awakened to the conviction that there existed a 'wider world of religion that was not necessarily limited to Christianity'.³⁵³ In his autobiography *Episodes before Thirty* (1923), Blackwood recalls a family visit from an 'ardent revivalist'³⁵⁴ named Mr. Scott. Scott stayed with the family in autumn 1886 when, at seventeen, Blackwood was on the cusp of adulthood (*EBT*: 28). During this period Scott worked on a treatise warning England that 'Satan was bringing dangerous Eastern teachings to the West' wielding, in support of his claims, a translation of Patanjali's 'Yoga Aphorisms' (*EBT*: 28). An impressionable, curious Blackwood, though terrified of his guest, was fascinated by this forbidden volume and, risking severe reprimand, surreptitiously stole and read it.

In the study of Patanjali Blackwood reports an epiphanic 'sense of familiarity, half of wonder, half of satisfaction' (*EBT*, 29). This affected him profoundly, awakening him to a 'deeper feeling than [he] had yet known': he was left fascinated and thirsty for more (*EBT*, 29). Soon after the 'Yoga aphorisms' Blackwood discovered the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*. These works supported his later interest in Theosophy, but more importantly formed the foundations of his complex, highly individualised form of mysticism. His

³⁵³ Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 19.

³⁵⁴ Algernon Blackwood, *Episodes Before Thirty* (London: Peter Nevill, 1950), 28.

exposure to such writings gave Blackwood the impression of ‘shutter after shutter [opening], letting in glimpses of a radiant and exciting light’ (*EBT*, 29).

Tantalisingly *Episodes before Thirty* takes Blackwood’s history only as far as 1901 and, with no sequel and little documentary evidence surviving this, leaves us six years short of the publication of *L’Évolution Créatrice* and ten years short of its English translation. Tellingly, despite there being no record of Blackwood’s initial encounter with Bergson’s work, the concluding chapter of *Episodes* quotes from Bergson’s essay ‘Dreams’ (1909) to describe the terms of his intimate friendship with the one-time lawyer, mystic and later social drop-out, Alfred H. Louis. In tribute to this significant connection Blackwood quotes Bergson’s observation that ‘our memories, at any given moment form a solid whole, a pyramid, so to speak, whose point is inserted precisely into our present action’;³⁵⁵ Blackwood reflects that ‘on that “point” old Louis still drives through my mind and wields an influence today’ (*EBT*, 301). That Blackwood entrusted such personal sentiment to Bergson’s words demonstrates the strength of his accordance with the philosopher’s thought, whilst similarly the quotation’s origin in one of Bergson’s minor works suggests the depth of Blackwood’s familiarity with his philosophy. Given this, it is something more than conjecture to imagine Blackwood’s reading of Bergson produced a profound and lasting inspiration, comparable to his early confrontations with Patanjali.

Indeed, Blackwood’s biographer Mike Ashley acknowledges that the philosophy of Bergson was for Blackwood ‘like bread and milk’, providing a comprehensive metaphysical ‘structure which he could clothe with his own thinking’.³⁵⁶ Bergson’s thought, along with that of Patanjali, Gustav Fechner, William James, and later the Russian mathematician and esotericist P.D. Ouspenski and his one-time student Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff, forms part

³⁵⁵ Henri Bergson, ‘Dreams’ in *Works of Henri Bergson*, trans. by (The Perfect Library, 2013), Kindle Edition.

³⁵⁶ Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 22.

of an intricate scaffold that shaped and supported what, in *The Weird Tale*, S.T. Joshi defines as Blackwood's mystical 'religion of his own making'.³⁵⁷ Consequently, Blackwood's particular brand of Bergsonism can be viewed as the product of deep, individualised exegesis, one which at times extends and 'distorts Bergson' but which, in doing so, simultaneously maintains a spirit of novelty and intellectual vitality which Bergson emphatically encouraged.³⁵⁸

Modernism and its Mystical Milieu

In many respects 1911, the year of *The Centaur's* publication, marked the zenith of an era Holbrook Jackson defined as the 'mystical revival'.³⁵⁹ The year brought the sensation of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (which by 1942 had achieved an impressive 14 editions), saw the expansive twelve volume reprint of James Frazer's study of religion and magic, *The Golden Bough*, and ushered in the wide-scale explosion of Bergsonism in Britain. While Bergson had long been recognised as an influential force in French and British academic circles, the 1911 English translation of *Creative Evolution*, accompanied by his lecturing tours of Oxford, Cambridge and Birmingham universities that year saw the philosopher, somewhat reluctantly, thrust into the public eye. Bergson's ideas, though complex and wide-ranging, were for many lay followers most remarkable for their accordance with a rising mood of spiritual and scientific cohesion. This demonstrates a mood which since the mid-nineteenth century had been supported by scientists as esteemed as Fechner, Friedrich Zöllner, Alfred Russel Wallace, Alexandr Butlerov, Wilhelm Eduard Weber, Lord Rayleigh and William Crooks. This trend was cemented in Britain by the 1882 formation of The Society for Psychical Research, an organisation which honoured Bergson with its presidency

³⁵⁷ S.T Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 89.

³⁵⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'The Bergson Centennial at Paris: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (at the Sorbonne)' in Thomas Hanna, ed., *The Bergsonian Heritage* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1962), 135.

³⁵⁹ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), 132.

in 1913. Against this backdrop Bergson, championed by influential figures like T.E. Hulme, Evelyn Underhill and Arthur Balfour, became not only the talk of academics and proto modernists, but was likewise enthusiastically embraced in occult and mystical circles, perhaps not least because of his sister's marriage to notorious occultist Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers.

Blackwood, a Theosophist, member of The Golden Dawn and a keen follower of The Society for Psychical Research was a true child of his time and, true to form, a devoted Bergsonian. Indeed, in *The Promise of Air* (1918), despite the surrounding context of war, Blackwood gestures to the promise and popular 'buzz' engendered by this era's newly emerging interest in the human psyche and the unplumbed potential of the subconscious mental realm, having a lay lecturer in the novel state:

There you get the first 'int of this new Aquarian Age, and from the moment we entered it not so long ago, forty years or so this idea of the Subconsciousness 'as showed itself as the key-word of the day. It's everywhere already. Even the scientific men 'as got it. Bergson began with 'is intuition, and professors like Frood of Vienna and Young of Zurich caught on like lightning. William James too, and a 'undred others. Why, it's got down into our poetry and novels, and even the pore old dying pulpits 'ave a smack at it just to try and keep their heads above water. [...] To live by your subconscious knowledge, instead of by your slow old calculating reason, means a new, airy way of living. And it's spiritual, I say, because it stands for the beginning of a new knowledge and understanding, and therefore a new sympathy with each other. With everybody!³⁶⁰

While this quotation comes from one of Blackwood's more whimsical, lesser known works, it nevertheless echoes his hope, more sensitively wrought in *The Centaur*, that humanity was on the cusp of a new age of scientific and spiritual advance.

Considered by the critic S.T. Joshi to provide 'nearly all the tools we need to interpret [Blackwood's] work', *The Centaur* provides a logical foundation from which to explore and clarify such philosophical influences.³⁶¹ For Blackwood, *The Centaur* (1911) was a deeply

³⁶⁰ Algernon Blackwood, *A Promise of Air* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1918), 220

³⁶¹ Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 90 & 94.

personal, difficult novel, an exploration of his lifelong fascination with the idea of extended or ‘expanded consciousness’.³⁶² Yet despite the many complications and frustrations encountered in its production, in later life Blackwood acknowledged the success of his attempt, confiding to his friend and admirer Robb Lawson that he used *The Centaur* ‘to test [...] the value of [his] readers’, feeling it ‘a touchstone of the reader whose approval he cherish[ed] most’.³⁶³

As such, *The Centaur* holds a central position in Blackwood’s work addressing, in the guise of a novel, some of his most intimate philosophical beliefs. On its release, Blackwood was touched to find this novel praised by Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Carpenter and the famous Irish mystic Æ (George William Russell), an associate of both James Joyce and William Butler Yeats. Æ was, to Blackwood’s delight, particularly enthused by this work feeling it strikingly reminiscent of a vision of a Centaur he had himself experienced, and subsequently painted, on the mountain of Ben Bulbin. This correspondence ultimately led to a meeting in which they discussed their mystical experiences, an encounter Blackwood later recalled as deeply inspirational: Blackwood felt Æ’s words to be like ‘a whirlwind, a tornado that rushed me back into the fabulous grandeur of the Caucasus [...] [reawakening] memories of that region’.³⁶⁴ Edward Carpenter (author, socialist and craftsman) was similarly fascinated by the work, stating in a letter to Blackwood: ‘You must have had a severe attack of Earth-passion to be able to write that and describe it so graphically’.³⁶⁵

Indeed, on its publication *The Centaur* was met with substantial critical acclaim. It was hailed by the *The Bookman* as a ‘masterpiece of the new romantic movement’,³⁶⁶ by *The*

³⁶² Algernon Blackwood, ‘Introduction to the 1938 Edition’, in *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, ed. by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), xiv.

³⁶³ Robb Lawson, ‘The Bookman Gallery: Algernon Blackwood’ *The Bookman* November 1917, 49.

³⁶⁴ Algernon Blackwood, ‘The Little People and Co.’, BBC Third Programme, 25th December, 1948 [BBC Written Archives].

³⁶⁵ Edward Carpenter, quoted in *Starlight Man* by Mike Ashley, 34.

³⁶⁶ Sir William Robertson Nicholl, ‘The Centaur’, *The Bookman* (February, 1912), 261.

English Review as ‘a magnificent novel [...] splendidly eloquent’,³⁶⁷ and gushingly by the notoriously guarded *Times Literary Supplement* as a novel able to carry its reader ‘on the crest of a succession of shimmering waves of language, extraordinarily intense and sincere’.³⁶⁸ For *The Bookman* the novel’s engagement with ‘the wildest and strangest of old Greek Myths’ was, in its allusive gesture to the social and religious shifts of the classical period, considered poignantly analogous to the modern struggle to pit spiritual need against the hegemony of materialism. Their reviewer considered that ‘a multitude of persons in Christendom [are] now in a frame of mind similar to the classic pagans [...] robbed of the beliefs of their fathers and unwilling to acquiesce to the vision of annihilation which is all that science can offer them’.³⁶⁹

Thus for its contemporary audience *The Centaur’s* anti-materialist stance, combined with its classical allusions, mysticism and preoccupation with expanded or extended consciousness, engaged with issues at the peak of public interest. That almost three decades later, in 1938, Sir Allen Lane chose to reissue the work as part of his famous Penguin Books series is testament to its enduring resonance. Acknowledging Blackwood’s rare capacity to convey mystical awe H.P. Lovecraft in 1927 praised the novel as ‘truly artistic’,³⁷⁰ while more recently in 1990 S.T. Joshi considered it ‘more than *Episodes Before Thirty*, [Blackwood’s] true autobiography’.³⁷¹ In this, both textually and thematically, *The Centaur* holds a central position in Blackwood’s work, addressing some of his most intimate philosophical beliefs.

For his contemporaries, Blackwood’s vision of an a-temporal classical realm preserved beyond the complexities of modern life offered readers not only a point of

³⁶⁷ *The English Review*, Jan 1912, 367.

³⁶⁸ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 November 1911.

³⁶⁹ Sir William Robson Nicholl (ed.) *The Bookman*, February 1912, 261.

³⁷⁰ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 73.

³⁷¹ S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 94.

reference to, but moreover an escape from the turmoil of modern life: providing what John Buchan in his autobiography *Memory Hold the Door* had described as a space ‘beyond the caprice of time’.³⁷² Yet more than this, *The Centaur* anticipated contemporary literature’s growing fascination with classical motifs and values, ideals which became a central and contentious feature of post-war modernism. As Bahwesh Kumar Jha acknowledges in *Modern English Classical Poetry* (1996), a return to the classical provided writers with ‘new ways of controlling, [...] ordering [...] [and] giving shape [...] to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’.³⁷³ This growing nostalgia, soon to be compounded by war, played out in disparate, often radically opposing ways. Whilst Blackwood invoked the classical as an antidote to modern culture’s dependence on intellectualism and materialism, calling for a renewed era of intuition and affect, for others (T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot among many others) classicism became synonymous with rationalism, order and impersonality - ideals in the political sphere increasingly allied to radical brands of conservatism.

The Centaur: Structure and Subjectivity

Like many of his contemporaries, Blackwood held a profound preoccupation with the nature of the self and the fluid, often inconsistent interactions between the subjective and the external worlds. In what proved a deeply personal novel for Blackwood, the communication of such intensely subjective, mystical themes proved a perpetual source of struggle.³⁷⁴ In the grip of such difficulties Blackwood’s engagement with the work of Bergson provided him with a credible structure and vocabulary with which to frame and dramatise his vision. As a result, the thrilling terms of the protagonist O’Malley’s adventure prove deeply indebted to

³⁷² John Buchan, *Memory Hold the Door* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1940), 67.

³⁷³ Bahwesh Kumar Jha, *Modern English Classical Poetry* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1996), xi.

³⁷⁴ Blackwood to unknown, 29th March 1911 [private], quoted in Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2001), 165.

Bergson's thought. Indeed, Blackwood's extensive, innovative use of Bergson's philosophy not only illuminates the cultural ubiquity of the philosopher's thought, but also its underappreciated, understudied creative potential and applications. Indeed, a brief survey of Blackwood's writing reveals the depth of his engagement with the philosopher; Bergson is mentioned in several of Blackwood's major works including *The Centaur* (1911), *The Promise of Air* (1918), *The Bright Messenger* (1922) and his autobiography *Episodes before Thirty* (1932), while echoes of his key ideas (the divided self, the value of intuition, the arbitrary nature of mechanical time, self and language) are evident throughout his oeuvre. The presence of such references, spanning a period of over twenty years, makes it clear that, for Blackwood, Bergson was an important and enduring inspiration.

The Centaur posthumously relates the mystical experiences of its protagonist O'Malley as he travels from Marseilles, past Greece, towards the Caucasus Mountains. Within a framed narrative which flits between past, present and a seemingly a-temporal mystical 'beyond' the novel depicts the events of a journey both physical and psychical. The unnamed narrator, O'Malley's executor and friend, painstakingly reconstructs the terms of this voyage using vivid memories of conversations with O'Malley as well as accounts from O'Malley's fragmented diaries and manuscripts. The story centres on O'Malley's meeting and consequent friendship with an enigmatic Russian and his son. These individuals intrigue him from first sight by projecting a vivid illusion of 'immense size', a feature O'Malley understands to be a manifestation of their 'extended consciousness'.³⁷⁵ Shunned by other passengers, they are described by Dr. Stahl, the ship's doctor, as '*Urmenschen*': that is, primitive or primeval beings (C, 57). For the visionary O'Malley they become spiritual guides as well as (as Stahl repeatedly warns) a potential threat to his life.

³⁷⁵ Algernon Blackwood, *The Centaur* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1938), 56. - All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text with the title abbreviated to C.

O'Malley recognises in the *Urmensch* a heightened form of his own sense of displacement, what he terms his 'curiously wild, primitive instincts [and] insatiable longing for the wilderness' (C, 10). Under their guidance he is able to access glimpses of a fascinating mystical beyond: a classically inspired utopia free from material trappings in which all possess an intuitive understanding that renders language obsolete. As his bond with these beings develops, O'Malley experiences an epiphanic extension of his personality where he becomes aware of the vast, unchanging power of nature and what he terms the 'transient [...] blatant unreality' of the material world (C, 17). His consciousness of his expanding self develops gradually throughout this journey before reaching a climax in the wilderness of the Caucasus Mountains. Here, in the form of a mystical apotheosis, O'Malley is temporarily freed from the physical world in order to move and dance among what he believes are 'the living prototypes of myth and fable', by implication joining with the mythical centaur of the title (C, 232).

Overwhelmed by this experience, O'Malley longs to accompany his friends to the place they call 'home'. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that this is not a physical but a psychical location, the progression to which would require O'Malley to relinquish his earthly body thereby surrendering the hope of using his mystical knowledge to inspire change and help others. In this desire to communicate his experience and use it to promote change O'Malley enacts a form of mysticism first defined in the work of Christian Mystic Evelyn Underhill and reiterated by Bergson in his final major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), this being that true or complete mysticism must transcend the individual and relay back to useful action. Indeed, this reflexive call back to action is a defining feature of Bergsonian mysticism. Bergson explains that in order to realise the creative potential of mystical insights we must be able to return from 'the zone of pure contemplation', which for Bergson only brings us 'that half-virtue detachment', in order to put new moral knowledge

into action.³⁷⁶ Without this transition the mystical impulse is isolated, individualised and thus rendered impotent.

With its convoluted series of framed narratives punctuated with a diverse blend of philosophical quotations, *The Centaur's* structure was for contemporary reviewers unconventional. A puzzled *Bookman* reporter likened the novel to 'a series of sandwiches', consisting of 'alternating layers of strange beautiful, philosophical romance and of ordinary matter-of-fact atmosphere'.³⁷⁷ Like the mobile Bergsonian consciousness, the novel flits continually and at times disconcertingly between the inner subjective and external material spheres of life, influencing, intersecting and disrupting itself as it bounces between these distinct temporal plains. Constitutionally sensitive to the fluid passage of conscious states underlying and often masked by the practical demands of our outer social lives, O'Malley is swept erratically between a mystical realm in which there exists no conscious passage of time, 'no parts of things [...] no sense of incompleteness or divisions', and what he feels to be the 'tragic' regimentation and material trappings of the external world (C, 215). In his struggle to reconcile these divergent aspects of his existence, O'Malley draws attention to the essentially contradictory, dichotomous nature of the human condition: the dynamic flow of our consciousness as it vies with the arbitrary structures of society. O'Malley's case and, despite the many efforts made to communicate his experiences, the enduring opacity of his character and story stresses Blackwood's conviction that we must engage more fully with our spiritual, intuitive capacities in order to develop and progress as a species.

Published on the heels of Woolf's imagined cultural watershed of 1910, *The Centaur's* proclivity for fragmentation, preoccupation with the interactions between subjective and material spheres and its overt ambivalence to language prove it to be, in many respects, a

³⁷⁶ Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 938.

³⁷⁷ *The Bookman*, 261.

pioneering work anticipating many of modernism's key concerns. Yet Blackwood's unconventional narrative is less a self-reflexive demonstration of artistry than a deeply personal, frustrated attempt to grapple with the difficulties of depicting mystical experience in everyday language. In his struggle to write *The Centaur* Blackwood's personal interest in mysticism in many respects pushed him towards what might be regarded as a strikingly modernist preoccupation with the limitations of language. Contained within a third person narrative, one appropriate to Blackwood's traditional 'middlebrow' ghost story-telling roots and subsequent radio career, *The Centaur* nevertheless strains the conventions of this traditional method to its limits. Blackwood's desire to convey the dynamism of his protagonist's mystical vision of life leads him, in a way reminiscent of Conrad, to break the narrative into a series of overlapping frames. Opening with a conversation between O'Malley and the narrator in which they discuss and introduce the unusual character of the *Urmensch*, the novel subsequently flits between similar encounters and more extended conventional linear descriptions of O'Malley's journey to the Caucasus: events tentatively reconstructed by the narrator from his memories of O'Malley's own tales and disordered personal papers. This already multiple fragmentary narrative is further punctuated by accounts of O'Malley's mystical encounters with the *Urmensch*, elements of the narrative which more closely resemble prose-poetry than conventional prose. Here, the narrative gives way to a series of impression or sensations, characterised by classical allusions, parataxis and ellipses. For example, O'Malley's contact with the *Urmensch* is described as:

An increased manifestation of psychic activity [...] like invisible fingers playing upon an instrument. Notes – powers - in his soul, hitherto silent, rose singing to the surface... His whole being, condensed in the single yearning, pressed through it - drove behind it. The place the companionship, the youth - all, he knew, would prove in some strange way enormous, vast, ultimately satisfying forever and ever, far out of this little modern world which imprisoned him... (C, 77).

As in the work of Joseph Conrad, each of these frames, through the multiple views they provide, gesture towards some vital but incommunicable truth: an elusive reality beyond and resistant to the necessarily ordered arbitrary structures of a conventional narrative and, indeed, those of language itself. Echoing the frustrations which Blackwood himself experienced in translating *The Centaur's* mystical themes into writing, the novel's narrator frequently laments that:

Even in our [...] talks, intimate as they were, interpreted too by gesture, facial expression, and- silence, [O'Malley's] full meaning evaded precise definition [...] [while] in his written account, owing to its strange formlessness, the result was not a little bewildering (C, 106).

Similarly acknowledging this impasse, O'Malley himself repeatedly reflects that:

there are no words, there are no words [...] in me, deep down, it all lies clear and plain and strong; but language cannot seize [it] [...]. If you cannot catch the picture from my thoughts, I give up the whole dream in despair (C, 106).

Thus, in keeping with Marlow's observations in *Heart of Darkness*, Blackwood's *The Centaur* presents a story only part of which is contained within the physical narrative: its essence lying 'not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which [can bring] it out only as a glow brings out a haze'.³⁷⁸ The novel's broader substance, therefore, remains subject to the intuitive efforts of the reader who must sympathetically navigate the narrative's inevitably stilted, incomplete and distanced representations of reality in order to glimpse a sense of some elusive transcendent meaning. To borrow Bergson's terms, such an effort might allow the sensitive reader to, for a moment, 'break down [...] the barrier which space puts up between' themselves and the object of their contemplation.³⁷⁹

In this Blackwood can join the ranks of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence and Ford Madox Ford, who arguably define the emergence of what Peter

³⁷⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Stories* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), 33.

³⁷⁹ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans by F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 133.

Brooker, in his chapter of the same name, defines as ‘Early Modernism’.³⁸⁰ Brooker selects this term in preference to the alternative ‘premodernism’ on the basis that it asserts modernism as a transitional, dynamic process rather than ‘an evolution “upwards” towards an achieved end from which there is then a falling away’.³⁸¹ By ascribing to this view it is possible to identify and discuss a diverse variety of ‘movements *within* modernism’ which, whilst falling outwith the bounds of experimental, ‘internalised’ modernist modes, nevertheless demonstrate clear thematic and narrative responses to the conditions of modernity. Whilst such writers may present a jarring comparison with conventional understandings of ‘high’ modernism it is, as Brooker notes, important to ‘avoid the valorization of this one particular mode and associated moment of writing since, while other fiction may seem to anticipate [it], it may also vary and counter it in ways which extend our understanding of modernism’s rationale and rewards’.³⁸²

Consequently, whilst in many respects Blackwood’s writing stands in contrast to the self-conscious, conspicuous formal experiment of canonical modernist texts, his struggle to portray a changing, radically contingent contemporary reality (one which betrays a distinctly modernist sense of the arbitrary nature of the ‘real’) pushes an otherwise conventional narrative mode ‘into a new form and idiom’.³⁸³ Although the result of Blackwood’s response to this challenge appears at times awkward and convoluted, *The Centaur’s* structural innovations, ‘attempted narrative registration of consciousness’ and ‘awareness of the instabilities shaping and enabling contemporary identity’ distinguish it as an illuminating

³⁸⁰ Peter Brooker, ‘Early Modernism’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* ed. by Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

early modernist work, one which provides an important point of comparison to later more conventional modernist modes and narrative preoccupations.³⁸⁴

Indeed, the interior monologues of modernists such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson perhaps come closest to resolving the aesthetic issues posed by life's inherently dualistic nature. Arguably, these writers realise Bergson's vision of:

Some bold novelist tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, [who] shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the instant they are named.³⁸⁵

There is, nevertheless, an authenticity in Blackwood's struggle to depict O'Malley's trials which rather than emulating Bergson's 'bold novelist', instead acknowledges the inherent paradoxes of human existence which must be lived on both subjective and external planes.³⁸⁶ Supporting this idea, while in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* Bergson stresses that 'no image can replace the intuition of duration', he concedes that 'many diverse images borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their actions, direct consciousness to the point where an intuition can be seized.'³⁸⁷ The multiple narrative viewpoints presented by Blackwood (the impressions of the narrator, of Dr. Stahl and O'Malley himself alongside the thought and words of prominent contemporary thinkers) reflect this Bergsonian awareness of multiple images and impressions. By exploring the narrative possibilities of holding together these diverse viewpoints Blackwood anticipates many of the preoccupations of subsequent modernist writers such as Woolf, Conrad, Joyce and Eliot who, using a variety of methods, - interior monologue, intertextuality, literary impressionism, collage and multiple

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 132.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁸⁷ Henri Bergson: *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T.E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Corporation, 1999), 27.

narrative frames, - came to further expound and develop these metaphysical concerns in their own writing.

Intertextuality, Exegesis and Spiritual Endosmosis

In a personal letter of 1911, Blackwood expressed his anxious struggle to complete *The Centaur*, confessing that while he felt its message ‘flame in [him] with such pain that [he] must get it out’ he often found the expression of its intensely mystical themes ‘far beyond [his] powers’.³⁸⁸ To overcome such difficulties Blackwood chose to incorporate large tracts of paraphrase and quotations from the likes of Bergson, Gustav Fechner and William James into his narrative, a decision met with much critical confusion. While each chapter is headed with epigraphs from a diverse selection of sources including Arthur Schopenhauer, William Morris, F.H. Bradley and Henri Bergson, within the story itself the narrator comes to realise that at times Dr. Stahl is ‘quoting verbatim fragments from [James’ Hibbert Lecture on Fechner] that he had since pondered over till they had become his own’, embedding the thought of these thinkers unashamedly into his own speech (C, 95).

This unusual narrative feature prompted a puzzled reviewer for *The Academy and Literature* to observe that Blackwood was ‘not playing cricket’ by allowing external sources to ‘undertak[e] certain expositions, which it [was] his responsibility to carry through’, adding that for an accomplished writer like Blackwood framing thoughts in his own words should have been ‘no difficult matter’.³⁸⁹ In one respect *The Academy* was correct: should Blackwood have wished to subsume these sources in his own words he undoubtedly possessed the skill to do so. It is therefore fair to speculate that the inclusion of these often extensive quotations and allusions was a measured creative decision, one deserving of further scrutiny.

³⁸⁸ Blackwood to unknown, 29th March 1911, quoted in Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2001), 165.

³⁸⁹ ‘The Centaur’, *The Academy and Literature*, Jan 20th 1912, 80.

In many respects Blackwood's use of the quoted fragment anticipates modernist writer's experiments with collage. T.S. Eliot's appropriation of textual 'fragments' from literary and classical tradition in *The Waste Land* is one example of such a strategy as is, as Stephen Kern notes in *The Modernist Novel*, the use of 'multiple sources [...] literary references, newspaper articles, ads, songs, jokes, posters, prayers [and] hand bills in Joyce's *Ulysses*'.³⁹⁰ Yet whilst modernist collage was born of a creative, life-affirming impulse, one as Kern observes, that aimed 'to bring attention to the actual nature of artistic material and everyday objects', its decontextualisation of familiar objects or phrases simultaneously served to destabilise and alienate our perception of these entities: bringing into question conventional perceptions of the unity of art as well as its creative ownership and integrity.³⁹¹ Indeed, particularly in the wake of the First World War, collagist techniques had been increasingly viewed in this context: considered to suggest and reflect the disjointed, disordered and increasingly fragmentary nature of modern life. Yet Blackwood's use of this technique seems to challenge such assumptions. His use of numerous but accordant quotations points towards a sense of life's underlying unity rather than disruption and alienation. His incorporation of quoted fragments within his text, rather than invoking a sense of clutter, chaos and discontinuity, instead anchor and validate the otherwise fragmentary, incoherent and ineffable thoughts and impressions of O'Malley.

Blackwood's application of this technique might be best understood with reference to ideas presented in psychophysicist Gustav Fechner's *The Little Book of Life After Death*, a work invoked repeatedly throughout *The Centaur* that expressed views strikingly comparable to ideas propounded in Bergson's work. In particular this is demonstrated by those articulated in his acceptance speech for the presidency of The Society for Psychological Research where he suggests that some minds, by a process comparable to endosmosis, might be able 'to

³⁹⁰ Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 177.

³⁹¹ *Ibid*, 178.

communicate without any visible intermedium'.³⁹² Conceived by Fechner following 'a terrific attack of nervous prostration' (one which saw him at the age of thirty-eight cut off from active life for over three years), *The Little Book of Life After Death* celebrates this former atheist's newfound comprehension of faith: an epiphany Fechner believed saved him from despair, precipitated his recovery and completed his formerly materialist, monistic world view.³⁹³ Here, Fechner outlines what he terms a 'daylight view' of life, his belief, as James helpfully summarises, that 'the whole universe in its different spans and wave-lengths, exclusions and envelopments, is everywhere alive [...and] conscious'.³⁹⁴ This is a conception of life, in its emphasis on creativity and dynamism, which has clear parallels with Bergson's *élan vital*, the force defined in *Creative Evolution* as life's progressive impetus. Indeed, in *Bergson: Thinking Backwards* F.C.T. Moore dwells on this correspondence, suggesting that Bergson's engagement with Fechner's conception of 'the world-soul' as he wrote *Creative Evolution* (one he discusses in his correspondence with William James) played an influential role in shaping Bergson's thought.³⁹⁵

Fechner proposes that 'during his lifetime, every man with his influence grows into others through word, writing and deed', suggesting that even after death this influence remains 'still live among us, thinking and acting in us in a shared spirit'.³⁹⁶ As such, the souls of men, whether corporeal or what Fechner considered spirits of the earth's 'collective consciousness', are able to interact and influence the thoughts of others as they 'unite, intersect, and through mutual communication engender thoughts in each other' (*LBLD*, 26). By insisting on the attraction and fusion of likeminded spirits even after death Fechner's

³⁹² Henri Bergson, 'Phantasms of the Living' in *Mind Energy: Lectures and Essays* (Forgotten Books), 78.

³⁹³ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 147.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁹⁵ F.T.C. Moore, *Bergson: Thinking Backwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.

³⁹⁶ Gustav Fechner, *Little Book of Life after Death*, trans. by Mary C. Wadsworth (Boston: Weiser Books, 2005), 13. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text with the author's name abbreviated to *LBLD*.

thoughts, translated to a literary context, can be seen to define and advocate a form of intertextuality.³⁹⁷ By incorporating the concordant thoughts of those he admires, Blackwood materialises Fechner's vision: preserving, honouring and extending the ideas of others through his own writing. In this, Blackwood's narrative commemorates and affirms Fechner's belief in 'kindred spirits [...] merg[ing] together through their common sentiments, while simultaneously, through their differing traits, mutually influenc[ing] and enrich[ing] each other' (*LBLD*, 34). Indeed, Blackwood's success in this effort was acknowledged by Stuart Gilbert in his article 'Algernon Blackwood: Novelist and Mystic' (1935), when he notes that *The Centaur's* extensive use of concordant external sources renders the whole novel 'a magnificent [...] attempt to revive a sense of the consciousness of the earth through the experiences of O'Malley, the protagonist.'³⁹⁸

Presented in Mike Ashley's *Starlight Man* as Fechner's 'spiritual successor',³⁹⁹ Bergson outlined a similar understanding of influence and interaction in the field of philosophy, noting that the advancement of the subject required a dynamic interaction of each philosopher's thought. Bergson imagined this interaction as a system of 'indefinite progress', an ongoing enmeshment of each contributors' vague but 'positive truths'.⁴⁰⁰ Thus by effectively layering the concordant thoughts of so many thinkers, *The Centaur* becomes not merely a site for the communication of Blackwood's personal beliefs, but also an invitation to explore and interact with the broader origins of his thought. As in Henry James, Conrad, Woolf and Joyce, Blackwood refuses to provide the reader with a settled and fixed account of experience, but focuses, rather, on consciousness itself. As a result, Blackwood's *The*

³⁹⁷ Though Blackwood's references are specifically to this work similar ideas were expounded and developed in Fechner's earlier work *Zend-Avesta oder über die Dinge des Himmels und des Jenseits* (1851) – in each of these he focuses on the notion of a transcendent 'world soul'.

³⁹⁸ Stuart Gilbert 'Algernon Blackwood: Novelist and Mystic' *Transition*, 1935, 92.

³⁹⁹ Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 22.

⁴⁰⁰ Henri Bergson quoted in Algot Ruhe, *Henri Bergson; An Account of his Life and Philosophy*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul (London: Macmillan, 1914), 53 & 47.

Centaur resembles the modernist novel by being, as Peter Childs describes the form, ‘less a device for unravelling a story to a reader-as-consumer than a vehicle for conveying mental images to an active intelligence’.⁴⁰¹ Affirming Blackwood’s attainment of this aesthetic, Rob Lawson in his review reports of one reader for whom the novel’s spell was so ‘irresistible [...] that he had to lay down the volume very frequently, in order to escape its overpowering sway’.⁴⁰²

Memory, Balance and the Divided Self

Blackwood again reflects Bergson’s thought in his exploration of self, subjectivity and memory. *The Centaur’s* O’Malley presents a singular personality possessing what the narrator terms a ‘childlike, transcendental innocence’ (C, 19). Depicted variously as a ‘dreamer’, ‘wanderer and outcast’, he finds himself alienated by modernity, feeling that ‘civilization now suffocated, smothered, killed the soul’ (C, 18). Oppressed by the chaos of modernity, we are told he seeks solace in nature, finding it opens to him ‘a noble, gracious life [...] which the petty human world denied’ (C, 18). A man of ‘deep and ever shifting moods’, O’Malley represents a deeply intuitive type whose inherent suspicion of rationalism leads him to indulge an avid passion for ‘things of the spirit’ (C, 11). Indeed, in contemplating nature’s beauty he finds that he can ‘pass into a condition resembling ecstasy’ where ‘the outer world [falls] away like dross’ and from which the return to materiality seems ‘as death’ (C, 10). This mystical faculty at times allows O’Malley to transcend socially inscribed concepts of time and self in order to experience what Blackwood and Bergson alike understood as an ‘extension of consciousness’: a confrontation with pure *durée*.

In an early attempt to clarify O’Malley’s unusual type the narrator speculates that:

⁴⁰¹ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 76.

⁴⁰² Robb Lawson, ‘The Bookman Gallery: Algernon Blackwood’ *The Bookman* November 1917, 50.

Ten men will describe in as many different ways a snake crossing their path; but, besides these, there exists an eleventh man who sees more than the snake, the path, the movement. O'Malley was some such eleventh man. He saw the thing whole, from some kind of inner bird's-eye view, while the ten saw only limited aspects of it from various angles (C, 12).

This idea recalls Bergson's distinctions between the human faculties for intelligence and intuition. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* Bergson posits that there are:

two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first [the intellectual] implies that we move around the object gaining an understanding of it by multiple external viewpoints; the second [intuition] that we enter into it [...] The first kind of knowledge may be said to stop at the *relative*; while the second, in those cases where it is possible, may be said to attain the *absolute*.⁴⁰³

For Bergson the practicalities of everyday life dictate that most people must privilege the intellect over intuitive feelings, yet in this, the majority miss what he terms the *élan vital*: that is, the dynamic, creative 'intention of life'.⁴⁰⁴ O'Malley, however, with his aesthetic sensibility is able to intuit this potential by, in Bergson's words, 'placing himself back within an object by a kind of sympathy'.⁴⁰⁵ It is this faculty which leads him to see his '*Urmensch*' friends as uncommonly large, their appearance of 'massive bulk' proving, on rational reflection, not a physical attribute but 'the expression of some mental quality that reached [O'Malley] psychically'; that was 'felt but never positively seen' (C, 21& 24).

Unlike the majority of individuals who, according to Bergson, are bound by socially constructed, superficial personalities, O'Malley possesses an unusual awareness of his underlying vital self: what the narrator identifies as his 'moving sea of curiously wild primitive instincts' (C, 11). This fluctuating, unstable aspect of his personality, along with his ability to retreat into transcendent states, proves a source of wonder and terror both for O'Malley. While such experience offers 'a way of escape' from the external world, he is simultaneously haunted by a fear that the submission to such freedom could involve what he

⁴⁰³ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T.E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 21.

⁴⁰⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover publications, 1998), 176.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 176.

considers ‘a disintegration or dissociation of his personality, one that might carry with it the loss of personal identity’ (C, 10).

Recognising the potential of such phenomena, Bergson, throughout his works, emphasises the delicate balance existing between subjective experience and the external world of action. In *Matter and Memory* Bergson defines the ‘well balanced’ mind as one characterised by the ‘promptitude with which [it can summon] to the help of a given situation all the memories which have reference to it’.⁴⁰⁶ At the poles of this ideal exist the impulsive being living only in the reactive present and the dreamer who, though immersed in memory, is unable to ‘use this information with any advantage for the present situation’ (MM, 198). In a clear demonstration of such ideas O’Malley, repeatedly defined as a dreamer, must constantly remind himself that attendance to the spiritual world alone could render him ‘a useless dreamer amongst men’, an individual in Bergsonian terms both ‘unpractical and unbalanced’ (C, 148). Despite such fears, O’Malley similarly recognises that to neglect this mystical aspect of himself would leave him ‘crassly limited’ and only ‘half alive’ (C, 148).

The stable individual, therefore, must fluctuate continuously between the inner and external spheres. For Bergson, this range represents what he terms the ‘diverse tones of mental life’ which may be ‘lived at different heights sometimes nearer to action, sometimes further away’ (MM, xiv). The more complex a mental state the more it can be considered ‘a dilation of the whole personality’ (MM, xiv). Such extension occurs when the stable personality, ‘normally narrowed down by action, expands with the unscrewing of the vice in which it has allowed itself to be squeezed’ (MM, xiv): freed in this way the personality may ‘spread itself over a wider and wider surface’ bringing it to a fleeting sympathy with life’s complex, ever changing flow (MM, xiv).

⁴⁰⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 198. All subsequent quotations will be from this edition with the page number given in brackets after the text, and the title abbreviated to *MM*.

Thus, in trance, dream and even the contemplation of beauty, the mind, disconnected from external quantitative measures, is considered to lose what Bergson calls its intellectual ‘balance wheel’, freeing it temporarily to connect with life’s vital flux.⁴⁰⁷ This means that while dreamers experience an expanded perception of inner life, they are simultaneously excluded from coherent external interactions and thus divorced from the active world (*MM*, 174). While such states may be pleasurable and as such often cultivated in the arts, Bergson warns that in many respects ‘dreams replicate insanity’, observing that whilst temporary escape into dream is both normal and necessary, the inability to exit or navigate clearly between subjective and external life is pathological (*MM*, 199).

Accordingly, for psychologically vulnerable individuals like O’Malley the exposure to such states may stretch the stable personality beyond its elastic limit, damaging it irreparably and rendering it unsuitable for useful action. Bergson states that:

An inward disorder, a disease of the personality, can be viewed as an unloosing or a breaking of the tie which binds this psychic life to its motor accompaniment, a weakening or an impairing of our attention to outward life (*MM*, xv).

Blackwood uses this idea to dramatic effect as he impresses on the reader O’Malley’s recurring premonitions of impending ‘inner catastrophe’ (*C*, 11). Indeed, according to his friend Dr. Stahl O’Malley represents a rare type whose hold on the external world seems ‘unusually easy of detachment’ (*C*, 70). Whilst O’Malley recognises that to maintain his grasp on external life he must operate ‘upon an outer and inner plane simultaneously’, both he and his friends fear that ‘some day [...] there’ll be a bursting of the dam’ (*C*, 147, 11).

As O’Malley is drawn further into the mystical sphere of the *Urmensch*, his grip on the external world steadily loosens. He finds that:

⁴⁰⁷ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 126.

As this new state slowly usurped command, the readjustment of his spiritual economy [...] caused other portions of himself to sink into temporary abeyance. While it alarmed him, it was too delicious to resist. He made no real attempt to resist. Yet he knew full well that the portion sinking thus out of sight was what folk with such high pride call Reason, Judgment, Common Sense! (C, 133)

In association with this change O'Malley experiences the stirring of 'tracts of his personality [...] atrophied in most men' which on their awakening produce 'an immense driving push on what Bergson has called the *élan vital* of his being' (C, 114). In this awakening O'Malley anticipates the possibility of a future evolutionary advancement, one, as Bergson asserts in *Creative Evolution*, which might expose a greater understanding of 'life's vital process' (CE, 177). In order to realise this potential, Bergson calls for the recovery of man's latent instinctive drives. He believes these capacities, stunted by humanity's evolutionary reliance on the intellect might, spiritualised by reason into intuition, enable man to 'grasp what [...] intelligence fails to give us' (CE, 176). For Bergson, such development would precipitate 'an expansion of our consciousness [...] [placing humanity] into life's own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation' (CE, 178). As the critic J. Hillis Miller observes, through the communication of such ideas Bergson promoted the discovery of 'a new reality'.⁴⁰⁸ In *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature*, Paul Douglas describes this reality as being 'buried in the old one waiting to be released by the intuitive responses of trained sensitive minds'.⁴⁰⁹

In a near paraphrase of Bergson's evolutionary ideal, O'Malley states:

Reason has done its best for centuries, and gets no further. It can get no further, for it can do nothing for the inner life which is the sole reality. We must return to Nature and a purified intuition, to a greater reliance upon what is now subconscious, back to that sweet, grave guidance of the Universe which we've discarded with the primitive state...spiritual intelligence, really, divorced from mere intellectuality (C, 14).

⁴⁰⁸ Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 11.

⁴⁰⁹ Paul Douglass, *Bergson, Eliot and American Literature* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 10.

Thus, for Bergson and Blackwood alike the future progression of life involves a reconnection with an obscured but latently preserved past. For each, this revival is not a regressive process, but a rediscovery which, combined with existing knowledge, might lend a push forwards towards a perfectible future. For O'Malley such a process would involve the 'sinking down of the modern, exaggerated intellectual personality into its rightful place as guide instead of leader' (C, 14). This feature, which O'Malley calls a 'return to nature', can be closely aligned to Bergson's notion of the 'fundamental self' as, through an effort of intuition, it casts off its 'outer crust' to re-connect with the underlying force of the *élan vital* (TFW, 196). As *The Centaur's* narrator clarifies: 'There was no idea of going backwards in [O'Malley's] wild words. Rather he looked forwards [...] to a state when Man, with the best results of Reason in his pocket, might return to the instinctive life - to feeling with' (C, 14)

For the fascinated Stahl, O'Malley's mystical temperament renders the *Urmensch* dangerous, he fears something 'nameless' might befall his friend: 'something that science could not recognize and medical science could not treat' (C, 61). This fate, at its worst resulting in physical death, would involve the complete dissociation of the consciousness and body; a state as Stahl (and likewise Bergson) notes 'usually labelled [insanity] though in [his] opinion wrongly so' (C, 61). Here, casting off his customary role of the critical scientist, Stahl confesses to O'Malley his belief that there 'exist[s] some vital constituent, a part of consciousness, that can leave the body for a short time without involving death' (C, 61). This faculty, driven forth by intense emotions or desires, he believes can 'channel [...] all the inner forces and desires of the heart stream elsewhere toward their fulfilment in some person, place or dream (C, 60). For passionate and socially alienated individuals like O'Malley, such experience might overcome the desire to engage in outward life and consequently prove permanent - resulting either in 'waking delusions', or in death through 'suicide or unfulfilled yearning' (C, 63).

Whilst this appears a fantastical leap from Bergson's insistence on 'grounded', empirical philosophy, this jump is perhaps not so marked as it seems.⁴¹⁰ In *Matter and Memory* Bergson discusses at length the potential of a consciousness directed by, but not limited to, cerebral functions, asserting that the 'brain indicates only a very small part of the mental state, that part which is capable of translating itself into movements of locomotion' (*MM*, xiii). Hence, whilst it may be possible to view and study the mechanical processes which bring about our outward actions, this reveals little of the corresponding states occurring in an individual's consciousness. It was this ambiguity that led Bergson in his 1913 acceptance speech for the presidency of the Society for Psychical Research to liken the brain to an 'organ of pantomime' on the premise that:

Were any one able to look inside a brain in its full activity, to follow the going and coming of the atoms, and to interpret all they were doing [...] He would know only just what can be expressed in bodily gestures, attitudes and movements [...] the rest would escape him.⁴¹¹

An important consequence of the non-exclusivity of this relationship is that if the mind is only attached to the body in one aspect of its function, we may 'conjecture that for the other part of the mind there is a reciprocal encroachment [...] [that] between different minds there may be continually taking place changes analogous to the phenomena of en-dosmosis'.⁴¹²

This notion has striking implications for those interested in the study of psychic communications, tacitly supporting the view that our consciousness or the soul might in death survive the body. While *Creative Evolution* fleetingly hedges that 'humanity [...] may, in its evolution [...] clear the most formidable of obstacles, perhaps even death' (*CE*: 71) a more definitive statement in Bergson's lesser known essay 'Phantasms of the Living' (1913)

⁴¹⁰ Henri Bergson, letter to *Le Figaro* quoted in Nancy Margaret Paul, *Henri Bergson: An Account of his Life and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 52.

⁴¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Mind Energy*, 79.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 79.

asserts that, 'the more we become accustomed to this idea of a consciousness overflowing the organism, the more natural we find it to suppose that the soul survives the body' in death.⁴¹³

This is a notion of key importance in *The Centaur*. On hearing from Stahl that the mind's 'vital constituent can leave the body', O'Malley feels an overwhelming combination of 'joy and terror' (C, 57). Dr Stahl, a scientific doctor, 'no mere dreamer like himself', can relate objectively to theories of this nature. Stahl validates and concretises O'Malley's mystical beliefs, drawing them from his 'hidden most secret thoughts' back to the surface of his consciousness (C, 58). The fact that, 'in spite of all the forces of education and modern life', such ideas have survived is for O'Malley a confirmation of their indefatigable truth (C, 58). With this knowledge of the possibility of the detachment of the mind and body, an event O'Malley originally imagined as 'an inner catastrophe', O'Malley comes to desire rather than fear 'death'. It marks the threshold between the material superficial world and the enlightenment of the subjective realm. The narrator clarifies that:

O'Malley [...] realised clearly that the change he had dreaded as an "inner catastrophe" simply would mean the complete and final transfer of his consciousness from the "without" to the "within." It would involve the loss only of what constituted him a person among the external activities of the world today. He would lose his life to find it (C, 127).

Whilst O'Malley's burgeoning comprehension of subjectivity has, until this stage, appeared heavily indebted to Bergson (often bolstered by his terminology), it is perhaps in this jump to the afterlife or beyond where Bergson's influence erodes, giving way to views more characteristic of eastern mysticism. Whilst Bergson admitted the probability of the consciousness' survival after death he, an academic sworn to a wholly evidence-based philosophy, he did not speculate as to the nature of this survival. An interview with *The New York Time's* Louis Levine (1914) illustrates Bergson's open but non-committal attitude to

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

such theories, stating that at present ‘the data is not yet sufficient to warrant more than an affirmation of high probability’.⁴¹⁴ Blackwood shows no such caution; his beyond is ‘a gorgeous garden of the primal world’ where ‘the ancient shapes of myth and legend’ live on, dancing with the ‘rhythm of [nature’s] gigantic heart’ (C, 267).

In the light of this, it is possible that a visionary like Blackwood found Bergson’s cautious objectivity on such matters a source of deep frustration. Though Bergson’s philosophy tantalisingly moved towards a vindication of mystical experience, it nevertheless allowed itself to be held in check by scientific objectivity. Blackwood’s dissatisfaction with this approach is perhaps evidenced by his depiction of the ship’s doctor, Stahl. Whilst Stahl in many ways epitomises the sceptical, analytic man of science O’Malley is aware of ‘a hidden Stahl’, energetic, passionate and attuned to the reality of the *Urwelt*. Unguarded, Stahl demonstrates an enthusiasm for mystical thought, yet inevitably falls short of confessing his true feelings, afraid of ‘saying too much [and] betraying himself in the sudden rush of interest and excitement’(C, 154). Whilst O’Malley feels the truth intuitively, Stahl rationalises; in a telling moment of confidence between the two, Stahl suggests that ‘the greatest difference between us is merely that whereas you jump headlong, ignoring details by the way, I climb slowly, counting the steps and making them secure [...] I build scaffolding. You fly’ (C, 85).

Likewise, whilst Bergson champions intuition and betrays striking glimpses of underlying mystical belief, his academic need to communicate a philosophy grounded in fact and capable of withstanding criticism must have seemed, for the passionate Blackwood, a frustrating and paradoxical compromise. Despite this the presence of Stahl, as well as the involved narrator, provides a vital anchor against which to frame, balance and evaluate what might otherwise appear overbearingly abstract and fantastical mystical themes. In *The Centaur*, polarised and frequently at odds, O’Malley and Stahl deeply influence one another,

⁴¹⁴ Louis Levine, *The New York Times*, 22nd February 1914.

regardless of their differences sharing a ‘strange link [which] weld[s] them together in an odd harmony’ (*C*, 167); this notion can perhaps be extended to elucidate the position held by Bergson in Blackwood’s work. Whilst their outlooks ultimately diverge in often radical ways there remains underlying accordance, a mystical leaning which, unlike Bergson, Blackwood as a writer of fiction had the freedom to explore unashamedly and unharnessed by scholarly expectations. In short, Bergson provided a solid foundation from which Blackwood’s imagination could build and extend his own ideas.

Mysticism: Language, Writing and the Difficulty of Communication

Throughout his works Bergson emphasises the limitations of language. While its use and development has been intrinsic to social progress, it is likewise symptomatic of man’s habitual confusion of time and space. For Bergson, in order to function as part of a cohesive society man must necessarily solidify inner impressions for outward communication. Such communication requires the formation of set symbols by which to identify specific objects and feelings. In short, language allows intelligence. It is by nature outward-looking and ‘characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life’, though it brings to the external world an objective translation of subjective life (*CE*, 148). Whilst the reflective nature of human intelligence has allowed language a degree of mobility, in that it can ‘pass from one thing to another’ extending from ‘a perceived thing, to a recollection of that thing [...and even] to an idea’ (*CE*, 159), this nevertheless remains a stilted, divisive process; one fundamentally at odds with the dynamic nature of life. Accordingly, though words provide individuals with a means of linking their inner and external experiences, through this process they become ‘fixed [...] in homogenous space’, perpetuating the illusion of a clearly delineated, systematic reality. As Bergson states:

In short, the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness (*TFW*, 132).

In the effort to counterbalance this effect, language is subject to a continuous evolution. Yet despite this, words remain for Bergson, by their nature, doomed to ‘turn against the sensation which gave birth to them’ leaving us with only a ‘shadow’ of the impression they aspire to convey (*TFW*, 132). Though language has been integral to man’s evolutionary success, words as a product of intelligence are at best a flawed method for communicating the inner life; they represent only ‘the impersonal residue, of the impressions felt in a given case by the whole of society’ (*TFW*, 133). *The Centaur* maintains a similarly ambivalent view of language; a conflict arises, offsetting the inadequacy and arbitrary nature of words against their creative, expressive power. Whilst O’Malley feels it his duty to impart to the world the wonder of his mystical experiences he is constantly frustrated in his attempts, finding ‘the partial symbols of language’ (*C*, 223) to be ‘limiting: destructive even’ (*C*, 215).

Indeed, as Bergson warns, there ‘is no common measure between mind and language.’ (*TFW*, 164) Thus in the attempt to translate ‘what our soul experiences’ we must be content with a ‘translation in terms of inertia’ (*TFW*, 165). For the impulsive O’Malley this is not enough, his desire to bring the enlightenment of his mystical knowledge ‘to the world’ requires a more complete means of expression (*C*, 300). Paralleling Bergson’s hopes for the development of human intuition, O’Malley craves the rediscovery of a communication transcending words, where he can ‘stand in a man’s atmosphere, silent and receptive’, feeling thoughts in their pure form, uncorrupted by language (*C*, 45). Indeed, O’Malley regards conventional, externalised language as a symptom of humanity’s loss of collective unity, a phenomenon indicative of man’s ‘mad self intoxication [...] [and] separateness’ (*C*, 261).

O'Malley's communication with the *Urmensch* (and to a lesser degree his communication with Stahl and the narrator) takes this pure, unspoken form. The *Urmensch*'s 'essential inarticulateness' is indicative of his freedom from the civilised world's arbitrary linguistic constructs (C, 34). He is, for O'Malley, an earlier, innocent form of being, 'a true child of nature', one who understands the uncorrupted language of nature, in which 'every [...] form is a symbol of an idea' (C, 242). Faced with the beauty of this psychic language, modern communication appears to O'Malley as 'broken, partial symbols' which obscure and degrade the essence of the idea they attempt to convey (C, 223). O'Malley comes to recognise the archetypal ideas of language as 'projections of the earth's consciousness' (C, 182). With the guidance of the *Urmensch* O'Malley is awakened to 'the book of nature all about him' (C, 242), able to see with absolute clarity the 'open faces' (C, 182) of common words and the beauty of 'the ideas behind language' (C, 242). Following such an epiphany O'Malley finds the reversion to modern language difficult and painful.

O'Malley finds his attempts to capture mystical or ecstatic experience in writing to be similarly flawed. As the narrator observes, even O'Malley's more successful attempts to record his experiences are marked by incoherence. Yet for the narrator it is paradoxically through the unintelligibility of O'Malley's writing and not his actual words that meaning is conveyed most clearly. Following the excitement of his meeting with the *Urmensch* the narrator remarks that 'a gaping hiatus appears in [O'Malley's] manuscript [where it features] only asterisks and numbers' (C, 245). For the narrator it is this 'very incoherence' which communicates the power of O'Malley's feeling, 'convey[ing] the gorgeous splendour of the whole better than any neat ordered sequence could possibly have done'. Yet despite his ability to impart glimpses of his experiences, O'Malley is devastatingly dissatisfied with his attempts, he finds 'he could not speak of what he knew. Even paper refused it' (C, 260).

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James cites ‘ineffability’ as one of the chief, defining features of mystical experience. For James moments of ecstasy ‘defy expression [and] must be directly experienced, [they] cannot be imparted or transferred to others’.⁴¹⁵ As such, following a mystical experience writing and speech (that is, speech which occurs outside of the ‘absolute present’ of mystical inspiration) are rendered useless. In keeping with this view, following his vision of the Edenic ‘beyond’ of the *Urmensch*, O’Malley is rendered ‘strangely silent [...] [unable to] speak of what he knew’ (C, 260). However, in place of these external modes of expression he finds himself possessed of a new sense of knowledge, which William James refers to as ‘*noetic quality*, [...] a state of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect’.⁴¹⁶ Following his vision O’Malley exclaims: ‘I really do believe and know myself [...] I tell you man it was divine!’ (C, 237) He feels he knows the ‘face of nature’ and has ‘seen “religion” all explained’ (C, 263). However, when he attempts to externalise or rationalise this impression ‘he stammers over it’, finding that ‘the instant words clothe it the flashing glory’ is lost (C, 1260 & 54). Consequently, the necessarily external acts of speech and writing are exposed as fundamentally at odds with the subjective, internal nature of his experience. O’Malley feels compelled to communicate his experience of the *Urwelt*, desiring to ‘go home and give [his] message to the world’ (C, 300). Yet this proves impossible. As predicted by Stahl, O’Malley’s words ‘evaporate in the telling’, becoming the symptoms of a ‘mad campaign’ (C, 300, 302). His words merely reproduce his feelings in an incomplete, degraded form.

Indeed, while Blackwood signals the limitations of language within the novel, he simultaneously reflects the limitations of the novel in the elliptical and fragmented nature of the narrative as it draws to a close. The novel becomes, rather than (as was traditional) a self-contained narrative unit presenting what Kern defines as ‘a character or characters in a

⁴¹⁵ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin Classics, 1983), 380.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*

sequence of events in space and time, framed with a beginning and ending', an expression of the complexity and ambiguity of defining, depicting and containing an exploration of subjectivity within the bounds of a coherent narrative.⁴¹⁷ In this, *The Centaur* anticipates the modernist interrogation of what constitutes reality and how this might be represented, thereby tacitly challenging the traditional remit of the novel as, primarily, a 'storytelling' mode. Blackwood's ambivalence to language, disrupted chronologies, preoccupation with the portrayal of subjective experience and acknowledgement of the unpredictable, transient and ultimately elusive nature of the self each demonstrate his departure from traditional expectations of the novel troubling its status as middlebrow adventure fiction. In this it might be compared to Frederic Jameson's view of *Lord Jim* as a challengingly transitional novel, one in which 'we can sense the emergence not merely of what will be contemporary modernism [...] but also, still tangibly juxtaposed with it, of what will variously be called popular or mass culture'.⁴¹⁸ To reinsert a writer like Blackwood into the literary landscape of the early twentieth century reveals the unexpected fluidity of designations such as modernism and middlebrow, thereby challenging the boundaries of what constitutes and defines a modernist text. A re-evaluation of Blackwood's narrative innovation, engagements with modern philosophy and fascination with subjectivity allow him, regardless of such arbitrary classifications, to be reconsidered as a deceptively complex modern writer. Blackwood's mysticism becomes an unconventional way of exploring and testing key Bergsonian concepts and as such, deserves to be included in accounts of the history of the modern novel.

⁴¹⁷ Kern, *The Modernist Novel*, 2.

⁴¹⁸ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 206.

Chapter Six

Arthur Machen and *The Hill of Dreams*: Symbolism, Solipsism and the Swan-song of Decadence

Machen: Transition, Tradition and Eclecticism

As his biographer Wesley D. Sweetser notes, Arthur Machen's position in the literary canon 'has long been an enigma'.⁴¹⁹ With a career spanning the Victorian 'naughty nineties' until after World War Two, his oeuvre boasts a fascinating miscellany of journalism, satire, autobiography, poetry, literary theory, religious polemic, decadent horror, occult and mystical fiction each rendered in a diverse range of styles and forms. Earmarked by contemporary critics as a promising successor to Robert Louis Stephenson, compared to Arthur Conan Doyle for his skilful incorporation of mystery and science and anticipating H.G. Wells' fascination with the transcendence of time and sinister potential of surgical experiment (as in works such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) and 'The Door in the Wall' (1911)), Machen, perhaps perversely, resisted what might have proved a steady, lucrative career as a thriller writer.⁴²⁰ Indeed, in its range of themes and variety of styles Machen's work resists categorisation, failing to fit comfortably into either popular or 'high' art categories.

Thus, Machen emerges as a fascinating transitional writer: one decadent in style and tone, deeply drawn to symbolism and yet simultaneously ambivalent towards what he perceived as the dangerous solipsism of 'l'Art pour l'Art'. Exploring Machen's work through the lens of Bergson's philosophy adds a new dimension to discussions of his writing,

⁴¹⁹ Wesley D. Sweetser, *Arthur Machen* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), 17.

⁴²⁰ For further discussion of these comparisons see Sweetser pp. 88-92 and Mark Valentine's *Arthur Machen* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995) pp. 26-29.

allowing us to understand his mysticism not as a retreat into aestheticism, but as an attempt to explore the possibilities and complexities of connecting the intuitive mind to experience via art. Such an approach complements modernist studies' current, increasingly expansive understandings of this complex era and contributes to a recent, renewed wave of critical interest in this otherwise marginalised writer. Indeed, though claimed in H.P. Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature* as one of the genre's four 'modern masters' (alongside M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood and Lord Dunsany) and hailed by E.F. Bleiler as 'probably the outstanding British writer of fin de siècle supernatural fiction, highly important historically', Machen's writing has been, until recently, broadly overlooked by critics working beyond the sphere of supernatural fiction.⁴²¹ Yet the recent interest in the associations between symbolism, decadence, romanticism and modernism have seen Machen, along with writers such as Arthur Symons, re-emerge as important transitional figures in the literary landscape of the early twentieth century. This is a connection charted in recent studies such as Nicholas Daly's *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914* (1999), *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, edited by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (2013), Nicholas Freeman's 'Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany' (2010), Andrew McCann's *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (2013) and Kostas Boyiopoulos' 'The Serried Maze': Terrain, Consciousness and Textuality in Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*' (2013), with the final three of these studies dedicating considerable attention to Machen.

Indeed, in his melding of so many ostensibly opposing literary currents, Machen's work can be considered to typify Jessica Feldman's understanding of 'Victorian

⁴²¹ E.F. Bleiler, introduction to H.P. Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 7.

Modernism'.⁴²² In *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience*, Feldman stresses the value of recognising the continuity and organicism of literary ideas rather than (as was customary until recent years) their distinctions and boundaries. She proposes that such an approach might provide a more productive platform from which to explore and unravel what she terms the 'intricate intermingling patterns [...] nuance, detail and plenitude' inherent in the literature and history of this transitional juncture.⁴²³ Indeed, to Feldman the late Victorian and Edwardian proclivity for pragmatism provides a valuable lens through which to re-examine and challenge canonical constructs such as 'The Victorian Novel', 'Romanticism', 'Decadence' and 'High Modernism' by questioning the authority of their 'hard edges'.⁴²⁴

The Hill of Dreams exemplifies the value of this approach; while it exhibits the experimentalism and self-reflexivity characteristic of modernism, it remains saturated with the influence of Machen's Symbolist and Decadent forbears, in particular Wilde and Poe. While Machen celebrates subjectivity, passion, self-indulgence and sin, he similarly (in a gesture to the didacticism of Victorian realism) advises caution. As his biographer Wesley D. Sweetser observes, though Machen shared many common traits with the symbolists and aesthetes 'he remained sane and calm, never quite willing to abandon his Victorian reticence and sense of morality.'⁴²⁵ Affirming the transitional status of *The Hill of Dreams*, Nicholas Freeman observes in *Conceiving the City: London, Literature and Art* (2007) that Machen's preoccupation with and deployment of symbolism in the novel simultaneously 'subvert[s] realist fiction while maintaining its outward appearance'.⁴²⁶

⁴²² Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴²⁵ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 80.

⁴²⁶ Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London Literature and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 197.

Machen's *Hieroglyphics*: Mysticism and Ecstasy as a Literary Theory

Before exploring what initially appears to be the incongruous eclecticism of Machen's work, it is useful to consider some of the ideas he developed in *Hieroglyphics* (1902), his Coleridgean inspired 'cyclical discourse' of literary theory. In this work, Machen sets out to distinguish the qualities which mark true literary art from what he terms 'mere reading matter' - his conclusion, typically oblique, being an elusive literary ideal he defines using the word 'ecstasy'.⁴²⁷ As his devotee, American journalist Vincent Starett, asserts in *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* (1917), for Machen 'the word ecstasy is merely a symbol',⁴²⁸ a potent, loaded term variously representing 'rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, [a] sense of the unknown [and a] desire for the unknown', but foremost signifying a 'withdrawal from the common life and common consciousness' (*H*, 90). It is on this premise that Machen distinguishes art from artifice - the mystic from the material. For Machen, this distinction is not of quality but of kind; while the literature he discards as 'mere reading matter' might be astute, skilfully wrought and intellectually masterful, unlike 'fine literature' it consigns itself to the transient, superficial particulars of existence (*H*, 90). In short, it fails to evoke or suggest what Machen terms the 'eternal things that are in man': life's profound universal truths (*H*, 73). To exemplify such distinctions *Hieroglyphics* controversially foregrounds as artifice works such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, describing these works as, though admirable, merely shrewd snap-shots of the familiar, but ephemeral facade of life. Machen elucidates:

We read the *Odyssey* because we are supernatural, because we hear in it the echoes of the eternal song, because it symbolises for us certain amazing and beautiful things, because it is music; we read Miss Austen and Thackeray because we like to recognise

⁴²⁷ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 74. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *H*.

⁴²⁸ Vincent Starett, *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin*, Kindle Edition, 11.

the faces of our friends aptly reproduced [...] the camera and the soul of man are two very different things (*H*, 51).

By distinguishing art on the grounds of its capacity to precipitate ‘withdrawal from the common [...] consciousness’ Machen provides a capacious and, as Sweetser notes, for many illogical common denominator for associating works as diverse as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Rabelais’ *Gargantua* and Dicken’s *Pickwick Papers* (*H*, 11). Yet for Machen each of these works are inextricably bound by their ability to evoke feelings of ecstasy: in Homer’s case, ecstasy is produced through transcendent rhythms and eternally resonant themes; for Cervantes the depiction of the perpetual ‘strife between the temporal and eternal [...] between ecstasy and the common life’ and for Rabelais obscenity and an engagement with the Bacchanal ‘symbol of the vine’; each of these facets are identified by Machen as characteristic stimulators of ecstasy (*H*, 74, 115).

While such assertions, largely matured during Machen’s time as a reviewer for *Literature* from 1897 to 1898 (the precursor of *The Times Literary Supplement*), were criticised in contemporary reviews as ‘effeminate’, ‘without profundity’ and shamelessly subjective, they nevertheless provide a fascinating key to appreciating the aspirations and motivations underscoring Machen’s own, ostensibly incongruous, body of writing.⁴²⁹ Certainly in important respects the contents of *Hieroglyphics* serve to rationalise what Sweetser defines as the ‘vast range and heterogeneity of [Machen’s] work’.⁴³⁰ Thus whether considering his early Rabelasian comedy *The Anatomy of Tobacco*, his exacting translations of *Casanova’s Memoirs*, the haunting prose poems of *Ornaments in Jade*, the pseudo-journalism of his controversial short story ‘The Bowmen’, or his notorious horror story *The Great God Pan*, the application of this theory foregrounds Machen’s overarching fascination with the artistic potential of altered or heightened states of consciousness: states of passion,

⁴²⁹ Arthur Machen, *Precious Balms* (London: Spurr and Swift, 1924), 37.

⁴³⁰ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 17.

horror, sin, luxury, beatitude and excess. As a consequence, regardless of its relative lack of endurance as an aesthetic theory,⁴³¹ *Hieroglyphics* reveals at the heart of Machen's work and philosophy the deep-seated conviction that 'art is mystical not logical'.⁴³²

In his essay 'Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany' Nicholas Freeman discusses Machen's concept of ecstasy in terms of a counter-modernist configuration of 'epiphany': one describing the same sense of transcendence and heightened subjectivity, yet challenging modernism's more secular understandings of the phenomenon by couching it in a schema of Christian and pagan symbolism. In short, Machen preserves the role of the artist as a sensitive 'seer' interpreting the ecstatic moment as a 'glimpse of the beyond'.⁴³³ As such, for Machen, like the 'spots of time' of his romantic forbears, ecstasy represents a spiritual intersection between mind and matter: one ultimately transcending the individual. Yet while Machen's concept of ecstasy preserves the spirituality inherent to romanticism, it similarly shares the modernist's emphasis on the role played by subjective perception in interpreting such moments. Indeed, as will be discussed, it is the overwhelming subjectivism and innate ineffability of such experience which forms the basis of protagonist Lucian Taylor's tragic decline in *The Hill of Dreams*. His obsessive struggle to translate and communicate such feeling in writing leads him into a dark cycle of solipsism and self-destruction. Further allying Machen to his modernist counterparts is his insistence on the spontaneous, often incongruous, origins of such moments within the context of the commonplace, everyday world. Indeed, particularly in *The Hill of Dreams*, the imposition and juxtaposition of the spiritual on, and with the everyday both affirms its power while simultaneously presenting an uncomfortable, unresolved tension between the spiritual and material facets of life. In

⁴³¹ Though an obscure work today *Hieroglyphics* enjoyed, along with the rest of Machen's work, a revival in the 1920's, particularly in America. Throughout the nineteen-twenties it was used as a core text at Cornell University. See Sweetser, 99.

⁴³² Sweetser, 76.

⁴³³ Nicholas Freeman, 'Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany' in *Literature and Theology* Vol. 24, 3 (September, 2010), 245.

this respect, Machen's rendering of ecstasy in *The Hill of Dreams* can be allied to a Joycean understanding of epiphany, one defined in Joyce's semi-autobiographical *Stephen Hero* as 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself [...] the most delicate and evanescent of moments'.⁴³⁴

Thus it is Machen's emphasis on internal experience, transcendent moments, preoccupation with symbols and fascination with the limitations of language which place his writing in a fascinating, intermediary position between the work of his romantic forbears and modernist successors. In attempting to navigate the intersections and deviations between these movements, Bergson, particularly his theories regarding time and memory, provides a fascinating point of reference. Almost a direct contemporary of the philosopher, Machen, a writer and reporter with a career spanning over forty years, was a culturally engaged individual who socialised with and participated in many of the key literary circles and mystical groups that, in time, came to embrace and promulgate Bergsonism. Machen was an accomplished speaker of French, a close friend of the mystic Evelyn Underhill (one of Bergson's earliest and most influential admirers) and a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn. At meetings of this fascinating collection of mystics, writers and philosophers, he would not only have associated with W.B. Yeats (who met Bergson as early as 1896), but would also have encountered Bergson's sister Moina Mathers, the order's high priestess.⁴³⁵ Given this colourful background it seems impossible that Machen could have avoided 'discovering' Bergson at some stage.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 122.

⁴³⁵ W.B. Yeats recalls meeting Bergson 'when he was but an obscure philosopher' coming to call while he was staying at the Parisian home of MacGregor and Moina Mathers. As Yeats notes, Bergson was 'very well dressed and very courteous' though, frustratingly for Mathers, apparently indifferent to the occultist's magical demonstrations. See W.B. Yeats *Memoirs*, ed. by Denis Donohue (London: Macmillan, 1972), 73.

⁴³⁶ Machen is known to have holidayed in France each year from 1880-1898. His mastery of the French language is demonstrated by his translations of works by Rabelais and Beroald de Verville as well as *The Memoirs of Casanova* as translated and amended by Jean Laforgue. See Wesley Sweetser, *Arthur Machen* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1964), 25.

Why Bergson?

Whether or not Machen read or was influenced by Bergson is in many respects immaterial to the concerns of this chapter. While in *What is symbolism?* Henri Peyre has, with some success, painted Bergson as the key ‘victim’ of a ‘dubious scholarly game’ in which critics indiscriminately, and often anachronistically, formulate ‘analogies and cumbersome hypotheses’ to assert connections between fashionable philosophers and their contemporary literatures, this is explicitly not my aim in drawing comparison between the work of Bergson and Machen.⁴³⁷ That *The Hill of Dreams*, the main focus of this analysis, was written in 1897, a period when Bergson’s reputation was still in its infancy suggests that, rather than drawing directly from Bergson’s work, Machen was enthusiastically absorbing the ideas that were to become so central to modern philosophy and writing in the twentieth century, ideas that Bergson’s philosophy would incorporate, formalise and test in his own writing. Thus, rather than being a case of direct influence, this chapter considers the intertextual relations between Machen’s fiction and literary theory and Bergson’s philosophy. In short, it turns to Bergson as the exponent of a philosophy which provides an invaluable framework from which to describe and parse the literary visions of his contemporaries: particularly those, like Machen, so preoccupied with mystical possibility, the aesthetics of language and form, memory, subjectivity and the dangers of materialism. Accordingly, Bergson is claimed here not as an influence, but rather in a role defined by Underhill in her 1912 ‘Bergson and the mystics’ - as an accessible translator and ‘mediator between’ the often ineffable terms of subjective human experience and ‘the map-loving human mind’.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ Henri Peyre, *What is symbolism?*, trans. by Emmett Parker (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 88.

⁴³⁸ Evelyn Underhill, ‘Bergson and the Mystics’, in *The English Review*, 1912, 511.

Many interpretations of Machen's work, because of his interest in dream, memory and many elliptical, unorthodox representations of sex and death have looked to Bergson's more famous contemporary Freud as a means of exploring and explaining his treatment of such themes.⁴³⁹ Yet while Freud identifies such drives as the repressed impulses for which other behaviours or objects are symbolically substituted they are, conversely for Machen, themselves loaded and elusive symbols through which concealed supra-individual mysteries might be fleetingly suggested. Whilst psychoanalysis finds in the recovery and identification of repressed thoughts and impulses the cause and foundations of subsequent behaviours, for Machen they are themselves merely evidence of yet another realm of consciousness inaccessible and resistant to intellectual analysis. This attitude is perhaps best encapsulated by Machen's views on Casanova, whose memoirs he translated in 1894. Speaking of the adventurer's candid accounts of his affairs Machen reflects: 'the more he reveals, the more deeply he conceals the mysteries. For the fact is all the real secrets are ineffable'.⁴⁴⁰ This mystical sensibility, the notion that external fleshly experience coincides with and in some measure masks a deeper ontological reality, suggests an understanding of experience diametrically opposed to Freud's secular, empirical approach, one which in its fundamentally spiritual essence might be more productively allied and explored from a Bergsonian outlook. Echoing these more mystical modes of thought Machen regarded the individual consciousness as only one facet of a more profound, complex process that was not grounded in the material, individualised and potentially reductive absolutes of psychoanalysis but rather was unbounded, timeless and radically creative. Here symbols are of note not for their relation to an individual's repressed unconscious desires, but rather for their transcendent

⁴³⁹ See, for example, H.S. Darlington's letters of July 11, 1924 (in *The Caerleon Works* Vol. 3) Kostas Boyiopoulos, "'Esoteric Elements": The Judeo-Christian Scheme in Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan' in *Neophilologus*, April 2010, Volume 94, Issue 2, pp 363-374) and Nicholas Lezard's recent review of 'The White People' (in *The Guardian*, 10 January 2012). Lezard notes the Freudian nature of Machen's work and goes so far as to 'wonder if Machen and Freud had been corresponding'.

⁴⁴⁰ Arthur Machen, *Caerleon Edition of the Works*, Vol. 9 (London: Martin Secker, 1923), 77.

aesthetic qualities, their abstract suggestions of inexpressible truths accessible only through intuition. A Bergsonian reading of Machen's work may thus help to unravel the creative impulses underlying his strikingly original approach to form, symbol and language and may help to position this often obscure, incongruous writer - variously a journalist, satirist, symbolist, sensationalist, decadent and arguably proto-modernist - in a clearer relation to his literary contemporaries and cultural milieu.

Indeed, a Bergsonian consideration of Machen's work allows what are often regarded as his Decadent themes and symbolist preoccupations to be scrutinised and challenged. Bergson's emphasis on the importance of balance, that is the navigation and compromise between the subjective and material spheres, challenges and pushes against the notion of '*l'art pour l'art*'. *The Hill of Dreams* reflects this tension; whilst stylistically and thematically it betrays strikingly decadent tropes, its overtly autobiographical status, clear undercurrents of didacticism, self-reflexivity and tacit sense of irony allow Machen to be reconsidered as a transitional writer occupying a fascinating space between the aesthetic-decadent and symbolist movements and modernism.

The Hill of Dreams: A Portrait of the Artist

Although today *The Hill of Dreams* is widely regarded as Machen's masterpiece, on its completion the manuscript was met with unanimous rejection.⁴⁴¹ In his introduction to the 1923 Knopf Edition of the novel Machen recalls the harrowing experience of finding publisher after publisher writing 'long letters in small writing on large quarto paper' imploring him 'not to publish the book because [...] it was so poor, weak and dull that its

⁴⁴¹ Biographies by both Sweetser and Mark Valentine distinguish *The Hill of Dreams* as Machen's 'masterpiece'. See Sweetser's *Arthur Machen*, 46 and Mark Valentine's *Arthur Machen* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995), 49. This view is reiterated by H.P. Lovecraft who describes the novel as a 'memorable epic of the sensitive aesthetic mind' (H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover, 1973) p. 88.

publication would ruin what little reputation [he] had gained before'.⁴⁴² This jocular self-deprecation, written many years after the experience of rejection, only thinly veils the disappointment of a poverty-stricken writer finding a deeply personal and tortuously written work fail to find an outlet. Whilst understandable, Machen's pessimistic view belies the fact that whilst most publishers balked at the novel's explicit depictions of self-flagellation, references to puberty, sexual debauchery and drug addiction many, nevertheless, acknowledged the merit of the novel's strikingly subjective perspective, symbolist attributes and haunting poetic tone. Indeed, it is in this novel which Machen's characteristic tropes of sin, liminality and ecstasy are most poignantly showcased.

In many respects a subversion of the *bildungsroman*, *The Hill of Dreams* vividly depicts the intensity and confusion of a young man's experience of puberty and sexual awakening considering how, at this formative period, the exposure to and imposition of society's prejudices and materialism might inflect, haunt and atrophy the development of a sensitive character. The novel follows the protagonist Lucian Taylor as he grows up in the small Welsh village of Caerleon, built amidst the ruins of an old Roman fort. The son of an outspoken clergyman with a meagre living, Lucian dreams of completing his education and pursuing a literary career. Yet following the death of his mother and the ensuing dejection and poverty of his father, these hopes become increasingly remote. Lucian is ultimately withdrawn from school and subjected to the derision and gossip of the villagers who, manipulated by more affluent and conformist local clergy, come to view the family's decline as evidence of some divine punishment for their unconventional attitudes. Faced with the judgements and parochialism of those around him, Lucian withdraws into a dream world where in his imagination he creates and escapes into fantasies of the village's ancient pagan past. Amidst his torment Lucian falls in love with a local farmer's daughter, Annie Morgan,

⁴⁴² Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 1923), 7.

but has by this time become so self-absorbed and alienated from society that he is unable to express his emotions in a conventional manner. Accordingly, his affection develops into a masochistic obsession where he records his passion in an ornate, highly symbolic book and scourges himself with thorns.

On receiving a modest inheritance Lucian is finally able to escape what Machen described to his publisher Grant Richards as the oppressive ‘bacilli of the village’.⁴⁴³ He then hopes to begin his delayed career as a writer, to ‘turn his soul to healthy activities’, to close ‘his ears to the wood whisper and change the fauns’ singing for the murmur of the streets’ (*HOD*, 117). Yet this escape comes too late. Lucian finds himself haunted by memories of the Welsh countryside, the Roman fort, decadent fantasies and his passion for Annie (who has married another man). Thus beset, Lucian concludes that ‘he could not be human, and [...] wonder[s] if there were some drop of fairy blood in his body that made him foreign and a stranger in the world’ (*HOD*, 167). Lucian’s disaffection leads him towards an increasingly disordered, isolated lifestyle where, frustrated by his inability to write, he withdraws again into a world of dream, drug abuse and, ultimately, premature death.

Though ostensibly promising to trace the formation of Lucian’s character, the novel ultimately depicts its dissolution. While initially Lucian appears a progressive figure, one as Kostas Boyiopoulos notes (in “‘The Serried Maze’: Terrain, Consciousness and Textuality in Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams*’), who exists in ‘a perpetual state of becoming’, the creative possibilities of this mobility are stunted by his growing self-absorption and ensuing inability to differentiate and navigate between dream and reality.⁴⁴⁴ Ultimately this sees Lucian locked in a liminal state of ‘cognitive uncertainty’ in which ‘his identity dissolves and simultaneously re-forms as he is suspended between states: childhood in his native Caerleon

⁴⁴³ Letter, Machen to Grant Richards (1897) quoted in Mark Valentine, *Arthur Machen* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995), 56.

⁴⁴⁴ Kostas Boyiopoulos’ “‘The Serried Maze’: Terrain, Consciousness and Textuality in Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams*’ in *Victoriographies*. Volume 3, Issue 1, (2013), 46.

and adulthood in suburban London, the otherworldly and the intimate, reality and dream, the sophistication of erudite scholarship and the primitivism of the enchanted landscape'.⁴⁴⁵

Thus caught, Lucian is locked in an abortive process of personal and textual recursion - embroiled in an apparently dynamic process which, because of its estrangement from the material world, ultimately only results in stasis. This intense subjectivism, figured in the novel's title as *The Hill of Dreams* alienates Lucian not only from material reality but from himself.

Indeed, the potent subjective themes of *The Hill of Dreams* present a striking departure from Machen's previous fictional works with their notoriously macabre themes and marked Stevensonian style: epitomised by his controversial bestseller *The Great God Pan* (1894). Published by the audacious John Lane as part of his *Keynotes* series, *The Great God Pan* had seen Machen, at the encouragement of Oscar Wilde, move from his early attempts at historical biography, classically inspired poetry and Rabelaisian comedy towards fiction and more contemporary social settings.⁴⁴⁶ Hailed by the *Manchester Guardian* as 'the most acutely and intentionally disagreeable [novel] we have yet seen in English', this work, the first and only of Machen's career to require an immediate second edition, presented the experimental union between an unscrupulous scientist's young charge, Mary, and the pagan god Pan.⁴⁴⁷ Anticipating the chilling clinical experiments presented in H.G. Well's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), as well those in Algernon Blackwood's *Julius le Vallon*

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴⁶ Machen and Wilde are known to have corresponded in the eighteen-nineties and dined together on at least two occasions. This contact was initially solicited by Machen who, after reading a remark which made him feel Wilde would appreciate such an idiosyncratic book, sent Wilde a copy of *Fantastic Tales*, his edited translation of Beroalde de Verville's *Le Moyen de Parvenir*, (a chaotic and obscene pastiche of Rabelais' and Montaigne's books of 'table talk'). Impressed, Wilde reciprocated with an invitation to dinner during which he encouraged Machen to try his hand at fiction. In addition to this, in 1925 Machen told an American correspondent, Munson Haven, that he had avidly read *Dorian Grey* when it appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, July 1890 and was 'a good deal impressed by it.' That Machen began writing *The Great God Pan* around this period makes it likely that *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, and indeed Wilde himself, exerted a significant influence on the writer. Certainly Wilde, who seems to have considered Machen something of a protégé, approved of the novel and on its publication hailed it as 'un grand succès'. For more information see Valentine's *Arthur Machen*, pp. 20-24.

⁴⁴⁷ *Manchester Guardian* (1894), quoted in Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 8.

(1916), Mary's confrontation with Pan is triggered by the surgical manipulation of her brain. This procedure leaves her irretrievably stupefied and, unknown to the reader, with child. Jumping forward in time, the plot reveals the infamies of her unfortunate progeny, the evil but beautiful Helen Vaughn, which include extortion, 'unspeakable' sexual depravity, torture and even murder.⁴⁴⁸ Helen's eventual capture and atavistic dissolution into primeval black slime (a recurring fate for sinners in Machen's fiction) left contemporary readers both horror-struck and enthralled in equal measure. While *The Lady's Pictorial* described it as 'gruesome, ghastly and dull',⁴⁴⁹ the usually liberal *Westminster Gazette* judged it an 'incoherent nightmare of sex and the supposed horrible mysteries behind it'.⁴⁵⁰ Expanding on its disapproval, the *Westminster's* reviewer exemplifies the tendency amongst Machen's critics (later compounded by the ubiquity of Freudian thought) to form judgements on the author's character based on his risqué subject matter, suggesting that the novel represented the troubling vision of 'a man [...] given to morbid brooding over these matters'.⁴⁵¹

The moral outcry that accompanied *The Great God Pan*, a furore Machen playfully downplayed as 'a mild sort of sensation with old ladies', was soon to be compounded by the scandal surrounding the trial of Wilde in 1895 as well as the excitement provoked by the publication of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* the same year.⁴⁵² In this renewed climate of conservatism Machen found himself cast as a decadent reactionary, an unwholesome and embarrassing remnant of the 'yellow nineties'.⁴⁵³ As testament to this fate, *The Three Impostors* (1895), *The Great God Pan's* successor was, to Machen's disappointment,

⁴⁴⁸ Arthur Machen, 'The Great God Pan' in *The Three Impostors and Other Stories*, ed. by S.T. Joshi (Hayward: Chaosium, 2007), 13 & 47.

⁴⁴⁹ *Lady's Pictorial*, quoted in Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 8.

⁴⁵⁰ *Westminster Gazette* (1894) quoted in Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 7.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵² Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 7.

⁴⁵³ Machen took pains to assert his independence from the decadent movement. Despite the fact that he dined with Wilde and had *The Great God Pan* illustrated by Aubrey Beardsely, in an interview in 1945 he stated that he 'was remarkable for hardly knowing any of the nineties men at all'. As Valentine notes, Machen may have believed that such connections caused a 'diversion from the real essence of his work.' See Valentine, 49.

received with a combination of prudish suspicion and, worse still (given what his biographer Mark Valentine describes as Machen's 'perverse relish for the attacks of critics'), indifference.⁴⁵⁴ Consequently, though the late nineties represent Machen's most prolific creative period, in the era directly following the *The Three Imposters and Other Stories* his fiction remained unpublished in book form for over ten years.

Started in autumn 1895, though with a gestation of almost three years, *The Hill of Dreams* followed closely on the heels of *The Three Impostors* and can be regarded as both a response and challenge to contemporary cultural changes, as well as a clear attempt by Machen to establish his own style and independence as an author. Aggrieved by recurrent, though flattering comparisons to Robert Louis Stephenson and Arthur Conan Doyle, in a letter to his close friend, the mystic A.E. Waite, Machen vowed that in this new work he would write no more of 'hanky-panky with the Great God Pan, or the little people, or anything of that dubious sort' and most crucially, would take pains to abandon the 'measured, rounded Stevensonian cadence' which he found so easy to replicate.⁴⁵⁵ Troubled at the prospect of being typecast as a popular sensationalist and anticipating the modernists' distaste for commercialism, *The Hill of Dreams* sees Machen restrain his appetite for the grotesque, exploring instead subtle mystical themes and a burgeoning interest in symbolism, an interest most likely inherited from his love of Edgar Allan Poe, whose 'The Fall of the House of Usher' subtly haunts this novel's themes and narrative.

⁴⁵⁴ Mark Valentine, *Arthur Machen* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995), 30.

⁴⁵⁵ Though Machen felt himself regarded 'a second rate imitator of Stephenson', such comparisons were generally intended as praise by critics (Valentine, 34). The more favourable reviews of *The Great God Pan* compared the novella to *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* while Machen himself openly admitted the similarities between *The Three Impostors* and Stephenson's *New Arabian Nights*. Figures such as Mr. Dyson, who features in *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Impostors*, have been favourably compared to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes - indeed Doyle himself read *The Three Impostors* at the recommendation of Jerome K. Jerome, paying credit to Machen's mastery of horror by stating 'your pal Machen may be a genius all right; but I don't take him to bed with me again!' (Valentine, 44 & Sweetser, 91).

For Machen *The Hill of Dreams* represented a fresh start ‘both as regards matter and manner’, a resolution which saw him, for a time, personally and creatively cast adrift.⁴⁵⁶ In his 1923 introduction to the novel Machen relates the difficulties posed by this radical transition, stating: ‘I had a horrible to do with the sentences in that first chapter. The old rules were gone, the new ones were yet to learn and most vilely I sweated at the task of learning them. The manuscript was a mass of erasures, corrections, interlineations’.⁴⁵⁷ These difficulties which saw him, like his protagonist, Lucian Taylor, alternately ‘mooning’ through the streets of London, or finding himself ‘night after night’ prostrated despairingly at his desk ‘with [only] blank paper before him’, demonstrate the novel’s strikingly intimate mirroring of author and creation.⁴⁵⁸ This parallel is so pronounced that Joshi reflects that ‘it is impossible to determine whether Machen is Lucian or Lucian is Machen’.⁴⁵⁹

Inspired by an introduction to *Tristram Shandy* by Charles Whibley, which presented Stern’s novel as a ‘picturesque’ of the mind’, Machen’s inspiration for *The Hill of Dreams* came by transferring this ‘dictum to another eighteenth Century Masterpiece’ and determining to produce ‘a Robinson Crusoe of the Soul’.⁴⁶⁰ Expanding on this concept Machen states:

I would take the theme of solitude, loneliness, separation from mankind, but, in place of a desert island and a bodily separation, my hero should be isolated in London and find his chief loneliness in the midst of myriads of men. His should be a solitude of the spirit, and the ocean surrounding him from his kind should be a spiritual deep.⁴⁶¹

This notion held a particular resonance for Machen who, feeling himself to be one with ‘experience of such things’, felt this topic would place him ‘on sure ground’.⁴⁶² This aspect of familiarity allowed a welcome point of anchorage for Machen who, as he worked to produce

⁴⁵⁶ Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 7.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵⁹ S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong P.A.: Wildside Press, 2003), 36.

⁴⁶⁰ Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams*, 7.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

The Hill of Dreams, was dually engrossed in the uncertain acts of both literary and self-creation. Indeed, throughout this novel Machen turns to his own experience, borrowing episodes from his past which he refashions and re-develops in novel, often haunting ways. As a consequence, the novel proves deeply autobiographical; Lucian, like Machen, is a young Welsh man with literary aspirations. Each passes a solitary but enchanted childhood in rural towns founded on former Roman settlements where, inspired by their reading and surroundings, they indulge in classically inspired reveries in which the past seems, quite literally, to come alive. Early in life each recognises a vocation for ‘a life of letters’ and, though poverty and family crisis curtail their academic aspirations, they remain committed to this goal. On coming of age each receives a small inheritance and moves to London to pursue a literary career. Finally, in their respective quests to write, each finds himself devastatingly isolated, impoverished and, as Machen would have us believe, exasperatingly ill-equipped to communicate the vivid spectacles of their imagination.

Indeed, in *The Hill of Dreams* Lucian’s struggle is in many respects reminiscent of that of Stephen Daedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); both works contain deeply autobiographical elements and explore the image of an artist trying to find a literary method and theory capable of translating experience. As in Joyce’s novel, Machen’s study of ‘self’ provides the material for an exploration of the formation of subjectivity in and through language. As will be discussed, both works trouble traditional expectations of the novel by their dialectic engagements with the opposing notions of ‘modern’ literature represented by, on one hand, the uncompromising naturalism advocated by writers like Zola and, on the other, the stylised religiosity of Symbolism and aestheticism. Intrinsically, each incorporates, blends and challenges two extreme, divergent currents which underpin the formation of modernism and shape its preoccupation with representations of self and subjectivity. As a consequence, both novels offer an unresolved critique of the function of the novel by

combining and offsetting what David Trotter defines in ‘The Modernist Novel’ as ‘mimesis and poesis’, the opposing elements of realism and aestheticism.⁴⁶³

Fetishism, Art and Literary Martyrdom

Described by Sweetser as a deeply ‘experimental novel, almost esoterically preoccupied with symbols and the inner life’, *The Hill of Dreams* is bound by a series of symbolically loaded incidents, often (as the novel’s name implies) centred around the ruins of the Roman hill fort near Lucian’s home and closely bound to Lucian’s encounters with, or fantasies of a local farmer’s daughter named Annie Morgan.⁴⁶⁴ Dramatic depictions of this ruined fortress punctuate the novel. Indeed, its description dominates the opening chapter where, in the fading winter sun, it appears flanked by ‘queer stunted-looking trees with twisted contorted trunks, and writhing branches’, silhouetted by the winter sunset it appears ‘invested with [...] flames from heaven’.⁴⁶⁵ This vision, subtly heralded by a twelve-year-old Lucian’s sighting of the attractive fifteen-year-old Annie, transmutes the formerly tranquil atmosphere of this pastoral scene into one of chaos and infernal activity. As Lucian looks on, ‘the air changes [...] and a spot like blood appeared in the pond by the gate [...] all the clouds were touched with fiery spots and dapples of flame: here and there it looked as if awful furnace doors were being opened’ (*HOD*, 65).

Three years later, returning from boarding school on summer holiday, Lucian again encounters the fort which since his earlier vision has become a ‘place of desire’ and ‘fascination’ to him (*HOD*, 70). Though access to the fort is forbidden, Lucian finds himself compelled to explore and thus climbs, in blistering heat, towards it through what appears a

⁴⁶³ David Trotter, ‘The Modernist Novel’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75.

⁴⁶⁴ Sweetser, 104.

⁴⁶⁵ Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams* (Seaside, O.R.: Watchmaker Publishing, 2010), 66. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *HOD*.

landscape of stunted ‘twisted boughs’, leprous white stones, ‘abominable fungus’, and odorous ‘black unctuous’ earth (*HOD*, 71). On reaching the centre of the camp, Lucian stumbles into an open glade, one described as a ‘lawn of sweet, close turf [...] from which no shameful growth sprouted’ (*HOD*, 72). Exhausted from his climb, he lies ‘at full length on the soft grass, and [...] [feels] waves of heat pass over his body’ (*HOD*, 72). Awed by his isolation, Lucian begins ‘to dream, to let his fancies stray over half-imagined, delicious things’ (*HOD*, 73). Captivated by his musings Lucian, on impulse, undresses, ‘glancing all the while on every side at the ugly misshapen trees that hedged the lawn’ (*HOD*, 72). As he looks on, the surrounding vegetation seems increasingly animated, producing uncannily grotesque, yet strangely sensual imitations of the human form. He sees:

Faces and twining limbs that amazed him. Green mosses were hair, and tresses were stark in grey lichen; a twisted root swelled into a limb; in the hollows of the rotted bark he saw the masks of men. His eyes were fixed and fascinated by the simulacra of the wood, and could not see his hands, and so at last, and suddenly, it seemed, he lay in the sunlight, beautiful with his olive skin, dark haired, dark eyed, the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun (*HOD*, 72)

In the midst of this vision Lucian feels ‘quick flames now quiver[ing] in the substance of his nerves, hints of mysteries, secrets of life passed trembling through his brain [and] unknown desires [sting] him’ before, over-awed, he passes into a deep sleep. On waking he is beset by ‘a sudden remembrance’ of ‘a visitant’ which brings a ‘flaming blush’ to his cheeks and which ‘glow[s] and thrill[s] through his limbs’ (*HOD*, 73). Caught between dream and waking he instinctively ‘stretches out his arms’ and cries out to this unseen individual entreating the ‘dark eyes and scarlet lips that had kissed him’ to return (*HOD*, 73). This brief description of his visitant prefigures Lucian’s later admiration of Annie’s ‘black hair [...] quivering black eyes’ and lips which seem to him ‘as though they were stained with some brilliant pigment’: features which, viewed from afar in church, bring vague ‘odd fancies’ to his adolescent mind as well as, as the novel progresses, his increasing inability to distinguish between dream and reality (*HOD*, 79). A thinly veiled metaphor for Lucian’s sexual

awakening, this incident might also be considered to signify the novel's broader concern with creativity and the struggles faced in the conception and production of art. Sweetser speculates that Lucian's feelings of 'mad panic, terror, of ecstasy and shame' following his vision 'signify the awakening of the creative impulse'.⁴⁶⁶

Indeed, Lucian's decision to write follows closely on the heels of this vision and this seems to affirm an association between the fort and Lucian's creative aspirations as well as their later embroilment with his masochistic worship of Annie. Both incidents suggest the conflict inherent in navigating between the physical and the spiritual. Following the incident at the hill-fort Lucian becomes increasingly self-absorbed and withdrawn from society, filling his time reading a miscellany of unusual and esoteric books. In fact, in Lucian's imagination the landscape, Annie, his books and the ever-present form of the 'heaped mounds' and 'faerie bulwarks' of the ancient fortress become deeply entwined:

The strange pomp and symbolism of the Cabala [...] the Rosicrucian mysteries of Fludd, the enigmas of Vaughan, dreams of alchemists - all these were his delight. Such were his companions, with the hills the hanging woods, the brooks and lonely waterpools; books, the thoughts of books, the stirrings of imagination, all fused into one phantasy by the magic of the outland country (*HOD*, 83).

Thus despite Lucian's attempts to leave the events of his strange adventure behind 'within the ring of oaks in the mystery of his boyhood vision', memories of that day continuously arise to impress themselves on his consciousness. Regardless of his attempts to rationalise his vision as a strange 'fancy', we are told that 'in his heart of hearts there was something which never faded - something that glowed like the red glint of a gypsy's fire seen from afar across the hills' whose 'flame of delight' shoots up without warning to show 'him a whole province and continent of his nature, all shining and aglow' (*HOD*, 84). Whilst such feelings intrigue and inspire him, Lucian is similarly afraid of this aspect of himself, shying from 'the vision of such ecstasies' and attempting to channel and spiritualise these visceral emotions through the

⁴⁶⁶ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 62.

act of writing (*HOD*, 84). Indeed, feeling the lure of the fort with increasing intensity, Lucian ‘longs to escape’ from its shadow, ‘to set himself free in the wilderness of London [...] [and] be secure amidst the murmur of modern streets’ (*HOD*, 85).

Withdrawn from boarding school due to his father’s poverty, Lucian nurtures his talent for writing, at the age of twenty-three finally submitting a manuscript to a publisher. Following the rejection of his work, Lucian discovers a review of a novel by the same publisher bearing distinct comparisons to his own. On discovering this plagiarism, the fort again becomes the focus of Lucian’s emotional release. As Sondeep Kandola observes in ‘Celtic Occultism and the symbolist Mode in the *Fin-de-siècle* Writings of Arthur Machen and W.B. Yeats’, this final affirmation of man’s mercenary nature, initially met with quiet resignation, soon climaxes in a dramatic, ‘highly neurotic reaction to literary rejection’.⁴⁶⁷ Overcome by his disappointments, Lucian stumbles disorientated through a now hostile landscape transfigured by his mind into an abyss of ‘bristling thorns’, ‘burning pools’, ‘writhing scarlet clouds’ and ‘wet bubbling earth’ (*HOD*, 94 – 95, 97). Wracked by fury he finds himself assailed by the ‘unutterable mutterings of the wind, trees and water’, imagining ‘the earthen gates of the [Roman] tombs broken open’ by the sound of a faraway bugle which seems to him a call to some fearsome judgement (*HOD*, 96). Overwhelmed by emotion, Lucian experiences ‘involuntary muscles working in his face, and the impulses of a madman stirring in him [...] he chokes and gasps for breath’ (*HOD*, 97). In crisis, Lucian feels himself become

the realization of the vision of Caermaen [his Village] that night, a city with mouldering walls beset by the ghostly legion. Life and the world and the laws of sunshine had passed away, and the resurrection and kingdom of dead began. The Celt assailed him, becoming from the weird wood he called the world, and his far off ancestors, the ‘little people’, crept out of their caves, muttering charms and

⁴⁶⁷ Sondeep Kandola, ‘Celtic Occultism and the symbolist Mode in the *Fin-de-siècle* Writings of Arthur Machen and W.B. Yeats’, in *English Literature in Transition*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2013, 508.

incantations in hissing inhuman speech; he was beleaguered by desires that had slept in his race for ages (*HOD*, 97).

This involuntary transfiguration, which Kandola astutely conceives in relation to Lucian's psychological struggle between the 'terrifying materialism represented by the fort and his fantasies of fairyland', can be constructively explored in terms of Bergson's philosophy.⁴⁶⁸ Resembling the Bergsonian 'victim of an education not properly assimilated', Lucian's personality, like the city's 'mouldering' walls, has been progressively overlaid and debased by material values irreconcilable with his inner convictions (*TFW*, 166). Beset by the demands of a society which stifles and impedes his freedom, Lucian is plainly suffocated by the conflicting forces of his social, cultural and even racial inheritance, finding it impossible to blend these disparate influences into a coherent understanding of self. As a dreamer, temperamentally distant from the external world, Lucian's outer projection of self is revealed to be a fragile construct of received behaviours which, unassimilated, fail to blend with or reflect his deeper inclinations, blinding him to the hidden agency and potential of his deeper being. This ill-fitting facade is duly shattered by his emerging fury, leaving him in a state of crisis, cut off from the structuring mechanisms that order experience. Accordingly, Lucian's consciousness is left exposed and unstable as an onslaught of disparate, primal impulses play through him unmediated by the mental 'balance-wheel' of the intellect.⁴⁶⁹ Overwhelmed, Lucian finds himself unable to envision freedom or progress, believing himself trapped in an existence bereft of 'life and [...] sunshine' and faced with an atavistic descent into a fantastic, menacingly visceral Celtic past. Here Lucian experiences a terrifying confrontation with pure freedom, a moment of extreme inner passion in which the restrictive, jarring crust of his outer inhibitions and education are cast off by the 'irresistible thrust' of his 'deep-seated self rushing up to the surface'.⁴⁷⁰ In this moment, Lucian is faced with the radical novelty and

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁴⁶⁹ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. by F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 104.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

permeation of the whole of his history, memories and emotions - all these impressions, usually contained and modulated by the social, external self, are revealed as dynamic, unified and ominously 'tinged with the colouring of all the others'.⁴⁷¹ Lucian recognises that like the Roman city's 'mouldering walls' he too has been shaped, bounded and corrupted by the influences and philistinism of external culture, too often denying the natural tendencies of his inner self (*HOD*, 97).

In the infernal scenes surrounding Lucian, history itself appears to rebel against linear time. His imagined resurrections of the Roman and Celtic past threaten to collapse time by interposing past, present and future in a terrifying vision of eternal torment. Stressing this chilling sense of stasis Lucian finds, as he tries to escape his visions, that 'he had fled for hours climbing and descending and yet not advancing' (*HOD*, 96). While the fragmentary, deeply subjective nature of Lucian's experience is in many respects comparable to the dynamic inter-permeations of *durée*, its haunting sense of fatality, timelessness and unending repetition, (an effect induced by the apparent severance of his 'attention to life'), stands rather in direct opposition to *durée*'s creative flux, seeming prophetically to condemn Lucian to degeneration, stasis and even death.⁴⁷² As in a dream Lucian is locked into a realm of incoherent, disordered memory traces in which he is unable to access any external point of reference to guide, shape or make sense of his perceptions.

Just as these conflicts threaten to overcome and even extinguish Lucian's subjectivity, cutting him off from life's progressive flow, he is drawn back to the corporeal world by the ministrations of Annie, whose 'hand sought his in the darkness' (*HOD*, 98). Annie's touch and soothing voice provide a concrete point of contact amid the turmoil of his inner thoughts. We are told that 'as he felt the touch of the soft warm flesh he moaned, and a pang shot

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁷² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 151.

through his arm to his heart' (*HOD*, 98). He looked up and found that he had only walked a few paces since Annie had spoken; he had thought they had wandered for hours together' (*HOD*, 98). In an important sense Annie pulls Lucian out of himself, reinstating a vital connection with external life and restoring him, for a time, to some semblance of agency and mental balance. As Lucian walks with Annie, he is able to conquer the violent, primitive lusts which assail him. Through this physical contact Lucian finds himself released from the realm of 'infernal eternity' and restored to the creative time of *durée*, where he is once more open to hopes for the future and the potential for progress (*HOD*, 98).

As Sweetser notes, despite this reprieve Lucian is by this time so withdrawn and alienated from society that he is unable to assimilate his feelings for Annie in a balanced, straightforward manner. Consequently, he 'dwells on the psychological sensation rather than on [the] physical fulfilment [of his love...] and instead of adopting normal means of the expression of passion, he scourges himself like an ascetic and limns books in honour of his beloved'.⁴⁷³ In *Popular Literature Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (2014), Andrew McCann notes the tension created by juxtaposing the usually religious practice of limning with the fetishistic drives underpinning Lucian's production of such work. He suggests that 'Lucian writes as a way of living out, of embodying and losing himself in his sexuality', believing his narrative to be 'defined almost entirely by a libidinal impulse and that [in this process] the act of writing becomes imbued with the pleasure of approaching the subject beyond it'.⁴⁷⁴ Yet given Sweetser's assertion that 'sex in itself was not important to Machen'⁴⁷⁵ as the concealed, ineffable mysteries which lie behind it, McCann's notion of writing as a libidinal impulse or 'masturbatory fantasy' might be considered in yet more complex terms. Lucian's dangerously misguided, obsessive pursuit of a form of literary

⁴⁷³ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 105.

⁴⁷⁴ Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 165.

⁴⁷⁵ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 107.

alchemy is, I would suggest, an effort to discover in, or recover from the materiality of language the essence of some ineffable, transcendent esoteric knowledge beneath.⁴⁷⁶ Lucian's pursuit of this ideal, however, only succeeds in consolidating his tendency towards introversion. Thus rather than writing to communicate, his work becomes increasingly obscure and abstruse. Indeed, we are told that 'Lucian hugged the thought that a great part of what he had invented was in the true sense of the word occult: page after page might have been read aloud to the uninitiated without betraying the inner meaning' (*HOD*, 114). As Linda Dowling observes in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, it is in 'such moments of ecstasy [that we see] the transformation of the book into an actual object of worship'.⁴⁷⁷ Lucian decorates the book with ornate private symbols and prostrates himself before it on a bed of brambles, 'pressing the thorns into his flesh' as he reads (*HOD*, 117). Such moments mark the transference and fetishisation of Lucian's feelings for Annie into a series of static occult symbols. As Dowling observes, it is 'at this point it becomes clear that Lucian worships not the pedestrian Annie but the fetishistic book itself'.⁴⁷⁸ Indeed, Dowling considers this self-indulgence to represent Lucian's initiation into the *fin de siècle* cult of style, an embrace of a Paterian notion of literary martyrdom in the quest for art for art's sake.

Lucian continues his tendency for introversion, escaping the cruelty of village gossips by retreating into an all-consuming dream-like state where in his imagination he reconstructs his village's Roman past, 'leveling to the dust the squalid kraals of modern times' (*HOD*, 129). Suggested by his readings in occultism, which reveal the possibility of transferring his plane of consciousness from the external world to an inner realm in which he can 'annihilate the world around him and pass into another sphere', Lucian soon becomes immersed in a fantasy life radically detached from the world of action and from which he only resurfaces as

⁴⁷⁶ McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult*, 165.

⁴⁷⁷ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 155.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

a means to 'return with greater delight to' his personal vision (*HOD*, 126). In the comforting opulence and luxury of his dream Lucian believes he has transcended the petty concerns of the everyday world and mystically elevated his mind to a higher plane of existence. From this vantage Lucian feels he can view humanity 'as one who looks down on a mountain city from a loftier crag' (*HOD*, 127). Viewing reality from 'the hill of dreams' has given him, he believes, a transcendent, even omniscient perspective. However, while this distance seems 'an anodyne', numbing him to and protecting him from the troubles of external life, it simultaneously serves to sever already tenuous ties between himself and society (*HOD*, 106).

From being a sensitive boy deeply distressed by the cruelty and insensitivity of others, he becomes an adult indifferent to his fellow man, seeing them as distant 'insignificant forms' unworthy of his attention (*HOD*, 126). By the time Lucian discovers that Annie has been married to someone else he is so detached from external life that, on hearing the news, he is 'only conscious of amusement, mingled with gratitude. She had been the key that opened the shut palace, and he was now secure on the throne of ivory and gold' (*HOD*, 145). This interruption in Lucian's development proves devastatingly destructive. While in his early adolescence Lucian seems a progressive figure with an innate potential for sympathy and intuition, his ensuing dissociation from mankind allows no constructive outlet for this faculty. Estranged from humanity, Lucian is rendered incapable of feeling sympathy for others and his intuitive capabilities progressively turn inward until, alienated from life, he is left in stasis, isolated and tortured by the unwholesome revelations of extreme self-scrutiny and self-absorption.

Towards a Bergsonian Reading: Machen as a Mystical Symbolist

Bergson's relationship to the symbolist and ensuing aesthetic-decadent movements has been subject to much contention and debate. While Tancrede de Visan in '*L'Attitude du lyrisme*

contemporain' (1911) considered Symbolism 'to reflect the workings of Bergsonian thought to such a degree that to speak of one is to speak of the other,' subsequent studies have deemed this claim to be at best ahistorical and at worst misguided and fundamentally at odds with both the central tenets of symbolism as well as Bergson's philosophy.⁴⁷⁹ Dismissing the associations between the Symbolist movement and Bergsonian thought, Henri Peyre asserts that the symbol represents 'the opposite of intuition, which sets aside symbols and asserts itself at the interior of the object'.⁴⁸⁰ Similarly, Maurice Blanchot points out in *Faux Pas* that the laboured, self-conscious construction of language used by symbolists such as Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé is, in its lack of dynamism and spontaneity, 'the exact opposite to Bergsonian philosophy'.⁴⁸¹ Indeed, on the face of things, Bergson himself appears to echo this sentiment, stating in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* that metaphysics, by privileging the exercise of intuition, 'is the science which claims to dispense with symbols'.⁴⁸² Yet as Wilbur Marshall Urban cautions in *Language and Reality* the context of this statement suggests that Bergson has in mind only 'scientific' symbols', that is, relative, static and thus inevitably spatialized concepts.⁴⁸³ Urban contends that by this uncharacteristic generalisation, Bergson's assertion that metaphysics might dispense with symbols is misleading. He observes:

There is no intuition without expression; no expression without the beginning of representation and no representation which does not involve the symbolic at some point. Bergson himself, in effect, admits this and his own metaphysical language is highly symbolic throughout. He himself gives us a hint as to the kinds of symbolism metaphysics should use. "Metaphysics," he believes "is never fully itself unless it emancipates itself from stiff and ready-made concepts and creates representations that are supple, mobile, almost fluid and are ever-ready to mould themselves on the

⁴⁷⁹ Tancrede de Visan, 'L 'Attitude du lyrisme contemporain' (1911) quoted in Hillary Fink, *Henri Bergson and Russian Modernism: 1900-1930* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 42.

⁴⁸⁰ Henri Peyre, *What is symbolism?* trans. By Emmet Parker (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 88.

⁴⁸¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 114.

⁴⁸² Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T.E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 24.

⁴⁸³ Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 666.

elusive forms of intuition.” To his mind, that language which is nearest to original imagery alone has this character. No image he admits can replace intuition.⁴⁸⁴

Urban concludes that, viewed in this light, metaphysics can be more usefully construed as ‘that activity of the human mind which carries symbolism to its highest point’.⁴⁸⁵ From this perspective, Bergson’s notion of symbolism can re-merge as one compatible with symbolist aims, perhaps not as Suzanne Guerlac notes in *Literary Polemics*, with the more modernist, self-consciously experimental symbolism of poets such as Mallarmé, but certainly the spiritual, ‘explicitly romantic [view of] symbolism championed by Tancrede de Visan’ and demonstrated in the writing of poets like Laforgue and Maeterlinck.⁴⁸⁶

Indeed, in *Bergson and Russian Modernism* Hillary Fink observes that, despite the objections raised against it, Visan’s association of Bergson with Symbolism reveals some useful, ‘very convincing parallels’ between these modes of thought.⁴⁸⁷ These include ‘a reaction against materialism [...] the rejection of overintellectualism and abstraction in favour of the richer more dynamic interior life of the fundamental self [...] and the embrace of intuition as the method of creation’.⁴⁸⁸ Fink concludes that symbolism is therefore ‘in a sense a misleading label’, while it connotes a system of ‘external signs of things that yields only a relative knowledge of the world’, this definition is in fact ‘the opposite of the true goal of symbolist art which is to penetrate the exterior phenomenal world in order to grasp reality in its essence - the absolute’.⁴⁸⁹ It is this transcendent quality which leads Visan to consider symbolism, in seemingly contradictory terms, to be the dynamic ‘creation of a lyric of intuition’.⁴⁹⁰ This mystical, romantic interpretation of symbolism means that, rather than

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 666

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 667.

⁴⁸⁶ Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 220.

⁴⁸⁷ Hillary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism: 1900-1930* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 42.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁹⁰ Tancrede de Visan, ‘L’Attitude du Lyrisme Contemporain’ (1911) quoted in Fink, *Henri Bergson and Russian Modernism*, 42.

presenting an opposition to Symbolist ideologies, ‘the symbolist esthetic, like Bergsonian philosophy is [likewise] that which claims to dispense with symbols’.⁴⁹¹ Machen’s own view of the symbol falls firmly into this category: as Andrew McCann notes, his ‘mystically inclined symbolism orients to the unrepresentable: the sign evokes the alterity that motivates it, but that is always beyond its scope’.⁴⁹²

As Machen wrote, mysticism, symbolism and aestheticism remained very much entwined. Just as Trotter talks about the ‘dialectic between naturalism and symbolism’ which marked the transitional stages of modernism (considering it a particular characteristic of early Joyce), in Machen a similar tension occurs.⁴⁹³ As Trotter surmises, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* demonstrates a fascinating narrative conflict between the naturalist desire for objectivity and the symbolist impulse to aestheticism by sharply juxtaposing, and thus subtly undermining, moments of spiritual transcendence with presentations of poverty and abjection. Trotter concludes that this feature, unresolved as the novel ends, renders the work a fascinating example of ‘modernism in suspended animation’.⁴⁹⁴ *The Hill of Dreams* reflects a similar ambivalence or drag as the literary tide shifts between an inherently mystical model of symbolism and the more secular, relativist guise it assumes in modernism and which is associated with movements such as imagism. In *The Hill of Dreams* Machen seems to at once exalt the symbol through Lucian’s intimate quest for beauty, autonomy and self-expression, even while, ultimately, the surrounding plot condemns its value and suggests its risk. Whilst the whole of the fourth chapter celebrates the luxuriant, decadent beauty of the fantasy world which Lucian creates, his subsequent descent into reclusive poverty and ultimately madness and despair provides a cautionary backdrop. Lucian’s obsessive pursuit of symbolic forms of expression leads him towards an increasingly misanthropic, occult form of

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult*, 151.

⁴⁹³ Trotter, ‘The Modernist Novel’, 75.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

mysticism. He comes to regard the ‘social motive’ of writing as misguided and corrupt, feeling that ‘the love of art’ alone should be his literary goal and that ‘no man should in any way depend on another’ (*HOD*, 146). Shunned by those around him, he comes to the conclusion that ‘human beings were constantly annoying him and getting in his way’; he desires to ‘annihilate the race, or at all events reduce them to wholly insignificant forms’ through occult mystical practices (*HOD*, 126). In this Lucian embraces an understanding of mysticism diametrically opposed to that recommended by Bergson and, indeed, that of Machen’s close friend Evelyn Underhill before him. Both Underhill and Bergson stress the need for a reflexive model of mysticism, one able to relay mystical insight back to broader society so that it might translate it into useful action. For each, without this philanthropic movement the mystical impulse remains stagnant and incomplete, what Bergson terms ‘static’.⁴⁹⁵ As such, Lucian’s refusal to move beyond the self-serving, solipsistic impulse driving his mystical pursuits leads to a state of stasis rather than creativity, it is thus an incomplete, corrupted form of mysticism.

Defined by Madeleine Cazamian, in *L’Anti-Intellectualisme et L’Esthétisme: 1880-1900* (1935), as ‘without doubt the most decadent book in all of English Literature’, *The Hill of Dreams*, as I have suggested, holds a more complicated, ambiguous literary position.⁴⁹⁶ While it embraces the Aesthetic-decadent movement’s emphasis on sensation and symbol over form, the baroque luxuriance of its prose, described by David Punter in *The Literature of Terror Vol. 2* as ‘over-lush’ to the point it becomes at times ‘absurd’, is simultaneously satirised by narrative events which interpose to undermine its transcendent aspirations. As Punter observes, one of the distinctive, yet incongruous aspects of *The Hill of Dreams* is Machen’s ability to ‘describe algolagnic indulgence without losing his sense of the irony

⁴⁹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Two sources of Morality and Religion*, trans by A. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1935), 100.

⁴⁹⁶ Madeleine Cazamian, ‘*L’Anti-Intellectualisme et L’Esthétisme: 1880-1900*’, Vol. 2 of *Le Roman et Les Idées en Angleterre* (Paris, 1935), 260, quoted in and trans by Sweetser, 109.

which results from Lucian's conflict with the real world'.⁴⁹⁷ Whilst Lucian indulges in masochistic rituals, exultantly celebrating his love for Annie by prostrating himself on a bed of thorns where he tastes 'in its acute savour the joy of physical pain', the suggestive solemnity of such scenes is uncomfortably undercut by his concern with the 'difficulty in washing away the blood stains so as not [...] to attract the attention of the servants' (*HOD*, 117). The effect of this juxtaposition between the spiritual and mundane is curiously unsettling. As Valentine observes, 'it is as if Walter Pater's pagan saint, Marius the Epicurean, in the classical Romance of that title (1885), had been brutally transported to the penury and meanness of Gissing's *New Grub Street*'.⁴⁹⁸ Thus, unlike the Keatsian or Swinburnian hero who, as Punter observes, might retreat to a world of beauty or 'a semi-mysical realm of pain', Lucian is denied the dignity and comfort afforded by permanent transcendent withdrawal, remaining inextricably bound to his external environment and open to the scrutiny and judgements of society.⁴⁹⁹ It is this sense of ambivalence and indeterminacy which leads Dowling to refer to the novel as a 'parable of antimonian decadence'.⁵⁰⁰ Lucian's case illustrates that without reference to humanity, an individual's art loses its ability to connect with and inspire the imaginations of others. Stunted in this way, its only recourse proves the destruction of its creator. Joshi emphasises this paradox, noting that there is a sense in which 'Lucian's art compels him to a more and more profound misanthropy. Lucian cannot write coherently because he has lost the desire to communicate to his fellow creatures'.⁵⁰¹ This failure is shockingly asserted in the final pages of the novel when, following Lucian's death, the manuscript on his desk is revealed as only a mass of 'illegible hopeless scribbling [where] [...] only here and there it was possible to recognise a

⁴⁹⁷ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Modern Day*, Vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 24.

⁴⁹⁸ Valentine, *Arthur Machen*, 52.

⁴⁹⁹ Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 25.

⁵⁰⁰ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, 154.

⁵⁰¹ Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, 30.

word' (*HOD*, 210). This unexpectedly didactic gesture towards the futility and dark humour of Lucian's case destabilises the novel's otherwise decadent, aesthetic concerns.

Thus, while *The Hill of Dreams* holds a mirror to a decadent past, it similarly anticipates key traits of literary modernism. An experimental work, the novel is deeply concerned with capturing an impression of the often fragmentary experience of subjective time and memory. Sweetser notes that while the novel's 'almost esoteric preoccupation with symbols and the inner life' resembles that found in Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, its fragmentary structure, particularly as it reflects Lucian's drugged state in the final chapters, is strikingly reminiscent of writers like Proust and Woolf. Like these writers, Machen's narrative follows the fluctuation of the subject's consciousness as, at the evocation of external stimuli, it passes erratically between the objective impression of the present moment as it blends with and provokes deeply subjective flights of memory. Yet whilst Woolf maintains what Bryony Randall in *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, identifies as 'an ongoing oscillation between fluidity and order, difference and sameness', a movement which allows our conscious impressions to be counterbalanced by the reflective capacities of the intellect, Lucian's drugged state precludes this sense of order.⁵⁰² As in a dream, he is left disorientated and isolated as he grapples to interpret the erratic fluctuations of his consciousness. In this, his narrative assumes a dark, chaotic and claustrophobic atmosphere. Lucian hears the rain and wind beyond his window, the sound of which draws him back to childhood memories of the Welsh countryside and his now deceased father. He imagines Christmas with plum pudding while outside the weather rages, yet this impression gives way to an underlying but indefinite sense of fear:

A shudder of fear passed over him [...] and he knew not what had made him afraid. There was some dark shadow on his mind that saddened him; it seemed as if a vague

⁵⁰² Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157.

memory of terrible days hung like a cloud over his thought, but it was all indefinite [...] He shivered and tried to rouse himself and drive away the sense of dread and shame which seemed so real and so awful, and yet he could not grasp it. The torpor of sleep, the burden of the work that had ended a few hours before, still weighed down his limb and bound his thoughts (*HOD*, 208)

This sense of confusion and disorientation builds throughout the final chapter, climaxing in Lucian's death. Still against the backdrop of the wind and rain Lucian's thoughts become increasingly morbid and fanciful:

He strove to rise from his chair, to cry out, but he could not. Deep, deep the darkness closed upon him, and the storm sounded far away. The Roman fort surged up, terrific, and he saw the writhing boughs in a ring, and behind them a glow of heat and fire. There were hideous shapes that glowed and swarmed in the thicket of the oaks; they called and beckoned to him. And amongst them was the form of the beloved, but jets of flame issued from her breasts, and beside her was a horrible old woman, naked; and they, too, summoned him to mount the hill [...] All his life, he thought, had been an evil dream. Truth and the dream were so mingled that now he could not divide one from the other [...] Without, the storm swelled to the roaring of an awful sea, the wind grew to a shrill long scream [...] And then a vast silence overwhelmed him. (*HOD*, 210)

Unlike the outright Decadence of *Dorian Grey's* stunning physical degeneration or Helen's dissolution into smouldering black slime in Machen's earlier horror tale *The Great God Pan*, Lucian's passing is steeped in bathos. After this extensive, poetically indulgent crescendo which, suggesting Lucian's drugged state, thrusts the reader erratically between drug induced flash-backs of Lucian's childhood, his explorations of Roman ruins and confused, debauched fantasies of London in which he seems to see 'dusty figures dance in the orgy, glittering lamps [...] mildewed walls and black hopeless windows' loom before him, his death is crudely undermined by the interjections of his irreverent and unsurprised 'landlady', who derisively mocks him and his work as she prepares for the removal of his body (*HOD*, 208). Lucian leaves no legacy, not even of sorrow or horror, only an illegible manuscript of 'dreadful nonsense' soon to be unceremoniously disposed of (*HOD*, 211). Thus the sensationalism of his final moments are uncomfortably offset and, at the novel's finale,

tainted by a dashing glimpse of realism. Only minutes after Lucian's dramatic death, Machen understatedly writes: 'there was a shuffling of feet in the passage, and the door was softly opened. A woman came in and she stared curiously at the figure sitting quite still in the chair before the desk' (*HOD*, 210). Thus the reader is thrust from the chaotic web of Lucian's disordered dream world (a world Sweetser compares to the intense subjectivism of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*), a sphere where Lucian's attention sways erratically between past memories provoked by external sounds, sights and smells, before veering back to the harsh objectivity of a conventional linear narrative and the mundane, everyday world. This abrupt transition tragically exposes Lucian's self-deception and the consequences of his self-absorption. In this, *The Hill of Dreams* presents a tense, awkwardly ambiguous swan song for the Decadent movement, one which, as Machen's biographer Wesley D. Sweetser observes in numerous respects 'held up the mirror to an epoch'.⁵⁰³ As Dowling surmises:

Thus does Machen's tale portray the dead end of the cult of style. Just as Pater's ideals of Euphuism and the priestly band of scholars represent a privatised, attenuated version of Coleridge's *lingua communis* and clerisy, so Machen's story represents in its turn a last unconscious parodic diminution of Pater. For the implicit distance between artist and barbarians has become an overt and immediately threatening hostility, while the audience of scholars has fallen completely away. Lucian's life of self-curtailment before the implacable page has been existential solipsism. And solipsism has led to the most extreme form of stylistic solecism- a language so perfected in its private symbolism that it will no longer yield its meaning even to the select few, but only to the unique reader Lucian himself.⁵⁰⁴

Thus Lucian's torturous quest for a perfected mode of expression ultimately leads him into a tragically destructive and abortive creative cycle one, to borrow McCann's term, which is ultimately a 'masturbatory' dead end.⁵⁰⁵ Lucian grapples desperately to impart the living essence of his thoughts, initially coming to his desk 'filled with thoughts and emotions, mystic fancies which he yearn[s] to translate into the written word' (*HOD*, 122). Yet after

⁵⁰³ Sweetser, *Arthur Machen*, 109.

⁵⁰⁴ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, 160.

⁵⁰⁵ McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult*, 155.

hours wrapt in the ecstasies of his vision, he invariably comes-to to discover only ‘wooden sentences, a portentous stilted style [and] obscurity’ (*HOD*: 122). The origins of such frustrations are elucidated by Bergson in both *Time and Free Will* and *Creative Evolution*, where he reminds us that the necessity of living a life on both active and subjective planes requires man to embrace systems of compromise in order to progress and maintain ‘balance’. In an important respect language represents the vanguard of this process. While it necessarily solidifies and stunts ‘the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness’, it nevertheless allows us to intuit traces of these impressions and to communicate something of them to our fellow man.⁵⁰⁶ In *Time and Free Will* Bergson elucidates this paradoxical characteristic of language, stating:

‘the letter kills the spirit. And our most ardent enthusiasm, as soon as it is externalised into action, is so naturally congealed into the cold calculation of interest or vanity, the one takes so easily the shape of the other, that we might confuse them together, doubt our own sincerity, deny goodness and love, if we did not know that the dead retain for a time the features of the living’.⁵⁰⁷

Thus, despite its tendency towards staticism and materiality, language preserves and carries within itself the spirit of once pure, vital responses. Like the imagined ‘outer crust’ which surrounds and impedes the deeper, radically mobile echelons of self, language too harbours within its façade of stability a vital essence which it is the writer’s role to invoke, mediate and impart to others.

As such, Lucian’s denial of the communicative function of writing and his refusal to compromise his ultimately solipsistic, artistic ideal form the crux of his downfall. In depicting Lucian’s fate Machen seems, like Bergson, to suggest the necessity of compromise and finding balance between the material, subjective and spiritual spheres. In this he

⁵⁰⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover, 2001), 132.

⁵⁰⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), 127.

advocates a view of art and, more broadly, a model of mysticism comparable to that propounded by Bergson; that is, a reflexive mysticism which aims to return with and communicate new knowledge rather than accept transcendent experience as an end in itself. Subscribing to this socially focused view of mysticism pushes Machen beyond aestheticism: it advocates the need for compromise in order that an artist might respond to the intuitive without succumbing to solipsism. As Machen concluded in his autobiography *Far off Things*: ‘I dream in fire but [must] work in clay’.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁸ Arthur Machen, *Far off Things* (London: Martin Secker Ltd., 1922), 101.

Chapter Seven

John Buchan and *Sick Heart River*: Bergson, Empire and Equilibrium

Buchan and the Twentieth Century Literary Canon

As Kate Macdonald notes in her introduction to *John Buchan: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (2009), Buchan's writing has been 'since his death [...] more often derided than praised'.⁵⁰⁹ Critical attention, though peppered with astute appreciations, has veered from indifference and ridicule to damaging indictments of racism and, in particular, anti-Semitism.⁵¹⁰ Fuelling such views is the popularity of what Buchan fondly termed his 'shockers'. These novels, with their insistent tropes of adventure, evocations of public school camaraderie, patriarchal social values and celebrations of British imperialism have until recently all but eclipsed Buchan's broader, incredibly varied, body of work: writings which include historical novels, exacting biographies, journalism, poetry, short stories, wartime propaganda, political and philosophical essays as well as a twenty four volume, 'blow-by-blow' account of the First World War.⁵¹¹ Indeed, as M. R. Ridley observed in *Second Thoughts* (1965), to 'write off Buchan as a mere writer of thrillers' constitutes 'a serious misestimate' of his talents, a stereotype which has too often clogged 'our appreciation of him

⁵⁰⁹ Kate Macdonald, *John Buchan: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), 8.

⁵¹⁰ In this overarching climate of criticism writers such as his biographers Janet Adam Smith and Andrew Lownie, and critics and bibliographers J. Randolph Cox and Robert G. Blanchard have played a vital role in the attempt to establish and preserve Buchan's reputation as a culturally valuable author. In addition to their work, Kate Macdonald's *John Buchan: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* records an extensive bibliography of writings regarding Buchan.

⁵¹¹ Buchan was a strikingly prolific writer, particularly for someone who, as his son William recalled, wrote only 'in the prescribed hours of work [and] never struck a tap of work after dinner.' In his lifetime, alongside his esteemed and varied career as a barrister, publisher, politician, civil servant and ultimately Governor General of Canada, he produced an *oeuvre* consisting of, as Waddell enumerates, 'over twenty five novels, over fifty short stories, a twenty four volume history of the Great War written as it was unfolding, over ten biographical studies, poetry, assorted military and historical chronicles, and more besides' (Nathan Waddell, *Modern John Buchan*, 1).

as a writer of a different order'.⁵¹² Yet the prevalence of such opinions persist, particularly due to the overwhelming commercial success of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* which, since its 1915 publication, has remained continually in print, inspiring a succession of film and television adaptations. The success of this novel led Nathan Waddell in *Modern John Buchan* (2009) to surmise that:

there is a sense [...] in which *The Thirty-Nine Steps* can be seen as the most inopportune book Buchan ever wrote insofar as it has deflected attention away from many of his more interesting and substantial texts. If it has brought [Buchan] near-universal popular acclaim [...] and sizable financial reward, then it has bedevilled his reputation by providing an easy, because frequently misread, target for those unsympathetic towards its narrative craftsmanship and care, and for critics of Buchan's allegedly anti-Semitic worldview.⁵¹³

As a consequence, for many of today's readers Buchan has become something of a caricature. Reductively dubbed the 'father of the twentieth-century spy thriller',⁵¹⁴ his popular image is perhaps best summarised by Gertrude Himmelfarb in '*John Buchan: An Untimely Appreciation*' (1960) where he is described as 'the paradigm [...] of a species of gentleman now very nearly extinct'.⁵¹⁵ For Himmelfarb, what made Buchan so embarrassing and 'unpalatable' for the modern reader was his proliferation of the idea that:

the good life is a matter of cold baths, rousing games and indifferent sex; the apparent philistinism that put a high premium on success and a low premium on intelligence; an unseemly preoccupation with race and class; and a still more unseemly glorification of nation and empire.⁵¹⁶

Attempting to redress such reproaches and assert Buchan's position as a writer worthy of critical attention Kate Macdonald has, in keeping with the critical milieu which engendered Himmelfarb's opinions, traced today's critical neglect of Buchan to 'the late twentieth-century rejection of imperialism and the influence of [...] historians of the 1960's

⁵¹² M.R. Ridley, 'A Misrated Author', *Second Thoughts: More Studies in Literature* (London: Dent, 1965), 3.

⁵¹³ Nathan Waddell, *Modern John Buchan* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 5.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'John Buchan: An Untimely Appreciation' in *Encounter*, 1960, 46.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

reassessing the causes of World War 1'.⁵¹⁷ This was a fate sealed on the one hand, by Buchan's role as a war-time propagandist (first on the staff of the controversial Sir Douglas Haig from 1915 and from 1917 as head of Lloyd George's newly formed Department of information) and on the other, as an influential figure in Lord Milner's 'Kindergarten'. As a consequence of such roles, Buchan has been repeatedly cast as a purblind Tory complicit with government incompetence, institutionalised deception and imperial cronyism. Yet as Alan Riach remarks in *John Buchan: Politics, Language and Suspense* (2009), while Buchan's work 'implicitly endorses [an] imperial authority' that appears to the modern mind 'inextricably racist and politically reactionary', on closer inspection his political and religious views reveal a more complex, subtle and mobile stance than such perceptions suggest.⁵¹⁸

To further complicate Buchan's position (or lack of one) in the early twentieth century literary canon, his work poses a complex set of problems for an academic establishment that has systematically privileged 'high' modernism as '*the* formal and thematic expression of modernity'.⁵¹⁹ Consequently, as Macdonald emphasised in her *Companion to the Mystery Fiction*, while Buchan received a perfunctory mention in works such as the first edition of *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1940), where he was labelled dismissively as one 'disdained by the ultraliterary', in subsequent editions his contribution is entirely swept under the carpet.⁵²⁰ In fact, in countless overviews of his era Buchan consistently fails to warrant attention, either jarring uncomfortably with studies of contemporary structural trends with their onus on experimentalism or, especially in surveys of war literature, being deliberately omitted for his failure to accord with critics' personal political beliefs. As Macdonald concludes, Buchan's unfortunate image as 'a

⁵¹⁷ Macdonald, *A Companion to the Mystery Fiction*, 8.

⁵¹⁸ Alan Riach, 'John Buchan: Politics, Language and Suspense', in *Reassessing John Buchan*, ed. Kate Macdonald (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 179.

⁵¹⁹ Kate Macdonald and Nathan Waddell, 'Introduction' to *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 2.

⁵²⁰ George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 1039.

cultural indicator of the unfashionable' has left him, until recently, in a longstanding and undeserved critical exile.⁵²¹

While as Waddell asserts, Buchan has been 'confirmed by academic symposia and scholarship as "middlebrow" and by general readers throughout the twentieth century as "popular", "Thrilling" and "beloved"', but to view him exclusively in such terms involves 'serious distortions of both his own life and his literary practice'.⁵²² These labels, however fondly meant, misrepresent the scope of his interests, underestimate his significant engagement with modern culture, and (as a man who left Brasenose College with a first class degree in philosophy) belie his considerable depth of learning. While Buchan was vocal about his ambivalence to literary modernism (denouncing it as rootless, 'shapeless', 'self-conscious rigmarole') and avoided similar experiments in his own writings, he nevertheless remained its engaged and open-minded opponent.⁵²³ He believed, for example that Virginia Woolf was 'as a critic, the best since Matthew Arnold' and though he confessed his personal distaste for Proust's 'hothouse world', he conceded it 'would be idle to deny his supreme skill in disentangling the subtle threads of thought and emotion'.⁵²⁴

The current more expansive critical understandings of modernism make it pertinent to reconsider Buchan not, as his 'middlebrow' label implies, as intellectually subordinate to his modernist contemporaries, but rather as an equal 'in dialogue' with them.⁵²⁵ Regarded in this light, Buchan emerges not as an embarrassing anachronism but rather modernism's fascinating and able antithesis. He engages with the same philosophical currents, historical events and cultural setting, yet assimilating these influences in radically different ways. As

⁵²¹ Macdonald, *A Guide to the Mystery Fiction*, 9.

⁵²² Waddell, *Modern John Buchan*, 3.

⁵²³ John Buchan, *Homilies and Recreations* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1926), 239.

⁵²⁴ John Buchan, *Memory Hold the Door* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1940), 201 & 2. - All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *MHD*.

⁵²⁵ Macdonald and Waddell, *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity*, 7.

Macdonald and Waddell speculate in their introduction to *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity* (2013), if the experience of modernity constitutes what Andrzej Gasiorek claims is ‘a recognition of the world’s radical contingency’ and, extending from this, the process of living through it presents the ‘possibility of re-imagining and re-making life’ as it vies with ‘existential dread’,⁵²⁶ Buchan emerges (in contrast to the high modernists’ emphasis on fragmentation, alienation and ahistoricism) as one who addressed this uncertainty through a relentless emphasis on ‘wholeness and continuity in the face of underlying chaos’.⁵²⁷ Here, however polarised each stance may appear, and however much the established (if contentious) categorisations of ‘modernist’ and ‘middlebrow’ might mask underlying contiguities, these contemporaneous literatures share a pressing concern with the complexities and contingencies of modernity through their engagement with a common cultural moment. In this, the continued study of Buchan as he interacts with and responds to the major cultural influences of his age will not only help to revive and expand an appreciation of an important writer, but will also serve to bolster current efforts to establish a more balanced, comprehensive understanding of early twentieth century literature.

Buchan and Bergson

Of such contemporary influences Henri Bergson can be viewed as a case in point. The fact that Bergson held an enduring interest for so called ‘middlebrow’ writers like Buchan, a skilled philosophy graduate notoriously conservative in his narrative technique, challenges today’s perception of Bergson as a pre-eminently modernist philosopher. I will argue that Buchan, like many modernists, did respond to Bergson, but assimilated his work in very different, more oblique and thematic ways. Building on the work of scholars like Macdonald and Waddell, who through works like *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity* and *Modern*

⁵²⁶ Andrzej Gasiorek, ‘Towards a “Right Theory of Society”?: Politics, Machine Aesthetics and Religion’, in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 149.

⁵²⁷ Macdonald & Waddell, *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity*, 4.

John Buchan have sought to affirm Buchan's significance in this era, I hope that an exploration of the terms of his engagement with Bergson might help to further address the 'conceptual indeterminacy' inherent in terms such as 'middlebrow' and 'modernist', thereby allowing Buchan to emerge not as a literary anomaly, but a writer thoroughly 'imbricated' in modernity.⁵²⁸

Unlike Eliot, who experienced 'a temporary conversion to Bergsonism' following his attendance at the philosopher's lectures in Paris 1910, or T.E. Hulme who became Bergson's passionate 'disciple' from 1907 until the height of his popularity in Britain around 1911, Bergson was never for Buchan an all-consuming (if short lived) passion.⁵²⁹ Yet Buchan's more tempered, detached stance allowed Bergson to retain a more enduring, considered and at times playful interest for the writer. As Janet Adam Smith notes in *John Buchan: A Biography* (1965), works such the short story 'Space' (1911) and *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932) reveal 'Buchan's interest in the works of Bergson',⁵³⁰ particularly his light-hearted engagement with theories of time and memory, ideas Buchan jocularly referred to as 'the alluring fancies of M. Bergson'.⁵³¹ Yet Buchan's repeated association of Bergson's ideas with those of his idol Arthur Balfour in personal works such as *Memory Hold The Door* and his essay 'Lord Balfour and English Thought', suggests that Bergson's theories held a deeper resonance for him than he cared to admit. Indeed, Buchan's major criticism of Bergson seems to be that he felt his most important ideas, particularly his emphasis on intuition, to have been anticipated in Balfour's philosophy some years before, if in a more subtle pragmatic form.⁵³² This affinity did not escape Balfour himself who, through his critical article 'Balfour and

⁵²⁸ Macdonald & Waddell, *John Buchan and the Idea of Modernity*, 6.

⁵²⁹ T.S. Eliot, *A Sermon Preached at Magdalene College Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 5.

⁵³⁰ Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 179.

⁵³¹ Buchan, *Homilies and Recreations*, 143.

⁵³² In his essay 'Lord Balfour and English Thought' Buchan states: 'the popular creed, in the hands of the various schools of realists and Bergsonians, is something not unlike what Lord Balfour has always been saying.' See Buchan, *Homilies and recreations*, 142.

Bergson' (1911) proved to be, along with Hulme, a major catalyst for Bergson's rise to fame in Britain. In many respects Buchan's connection to Bergson can be considered to replicate that which he identified between the philosopher and Balfour himself: a 'friendly but trenchant critic [...] [one] with whom he had many affinities'.⁵³³

Consequently, when Buchan pays Bergson the seemingly backhanded compliment of being Europe's leading '*vulgarisateur*' it is worth noting that this was a quality Buchan believed 'wholly admirable', a proof of modern philosophy's 'honest attempt to descend from the schools to the market-place' (*MHD*: 205). Indeed, this perspicuous, non-exclusionary approach was one Buchan aspired to in his own writing. Buchan disclosed this aim in an address of 1910, where he asserted that:

the new reading public [...] is an intelligent public, a serious public, a public which, if I were a great writer I would far rather write for than for the board ladies who get a weekly box from the library.⁵³⁴

Here Buchan at once distances himself from the figure of the 'great writer', but implicitly identifies himself as a writer aware of the 'intelligence' of the 'new reading public'. He associates his own writing with what critics such as Erica Brown and Nicola Humble have acknowledged as an implicitly gendered middlebrow, but again signals a critical distance from its stereotypical audience.⁵³⁵ Given Buchan's acknowledgement of Bergson's skill as a mediator between important philosophical ideas and the broader public, it is useful to consider his interaction with Bergson on two levels: firstly, as a well-known cultural reference accessible to all levels of his broad readership and, secondly (and more importantly), as a man whose ideas resonated profoundly, if sometimes fancifully, with his own philosophical outlook. Accordingly, as previously mentioned, whilst playful tales such as 'Space' most obviously betray a playful, if superficial, engagement with Bergson's ideas it

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁵³⁵ Humble

is perhaps in two of his final works, the touching memory work of his autobiography *Memory Hold the Door* and the uncharacteristically subjective novel *Sick Heart River*, that Buchan's thoughts on memory, subjectivity and spirituality can be more productively and meaningfully explored as resonant of, if not informed by, Bergson's theories.

Fantasy, Time and 'the alluring fancies of M. Bergson'

Before exploring in detail the relevance of Bergson to Buchan's final works *Memory Hold the Door* and *Sick Heart River*, it is worth contextualising his more whimsical flirtations with Bergson's philosophy with reference to 'Space' and the novella 'The Gap in the Curtain'. In 'Space', an 'erratic genius' named Holland (like Bergson a metaphysician and accomplished mathematician) identifies a 'fourth dimension' of experience directly comparable to Bergsonian *durée*. Increasingly embroiled in this alternative realm Holland retreats from the external world, neglecting his academic duties and exhibiting progressively eccentric behaviours. Deeply disturbed by his subsequent discovery that this dimension is occupied by other 'presences' inexplicably interacting with and influencing his thoughts, the terrified Holland ultimately jumps to his death in the Alps. Leithen, the narrator, concludes that Holland 'had gone so far into the land of pure spirit that he must needs go further and shed the fleshly envelope that cumbered him'.⁵³⁶ Here Bergson's ideas provide a point of flight, a plausible scaffold from which to fashion the fantastic. Such a tale reveals a fascination with the more extreme, speculative repercussions of Bergsonian thought, particularly notions like those expounded in Bergson's acceptance speech for the Society for Psychical research, where he conjectured that 'between different minds there may be continually taking place changes analogous to the phenomena of en-dosmosis'.⁵³⁷ Indeed, Holland's chief horror stems from his encounter with 'other beings- other minds- moving in space besides [his

⁵³⁶ John Buchan, 'Space', in *Supernatural Tales* (Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1997), 316.

⁵³⁷ Henri Bergson, *Mind Energy: Lectures and Essays*, trans. by H. Wildon Carr (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1975), 97.

own]’.⁵³⁸ While Holland acknowledges that such contact is not intrinsically unpleasant, the unpredictable, dynamic nature of these interactions violates his hitherto unwavering belief in materialism. Holland’s inability to explain and rationalise ‘space’ in terms of ‘inexorable laws’ provokes a deep ‘intellectual fear [...] and weakness, a sense of something else, quite alien to Space, thwarting him’.⁵³⁹

Here, Buchan clearly demonstrates his sceptical attitude towards outlooks that seek to reduce human experience to a set of scientific laws. Like Bergson, Buchan promotes the notion that within humanity there exists a capacity for instinct which the course of evolutionary progress has gradually atrophied and overlaid. This is a faculty which, if explored, might reveal a fuller understanding of life and existence allowing us, in Bergsonian terms, to ‘grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us’.⁵⁴⁰ Distinctly echoing ideas Bergson develops in *Time and Free Will, An Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Creative Evolution*, Holland describes his method of accessing ‘space’ as tapping into an instinctive ‘power which man is [increasingly] civilising himself out of [...] A perception of a reality that we are leaving behind us’ as we evolve.⁵⁴¹ Indeed, continuing in almost direct paraphrase of ideas presented in *Time and Free Will* by Bergson, Holland continues:

We think of Space as an “empty homogenous medium” [...] “We take it as a finished product, and we think of it as mere extension, something without any quality at all. That is the view of civilised man. You will find all the philosophers taking it for granted.”⁵⁴²

Just as Bergson illustrates this same concept by pointing out that ‘space is not so homogenous for the animal as for us’ and notes the ‘surprising ease with which many vertebrates, and even

⁵³⁸ Buchan, ‘Space’, 316.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁵⁴⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 177.

⁵⁴¹ Buchan, ‘Space’, 305.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 316.

some insects, manage to find their way through space',⁵⁴³ Holland too notes that 'an animal [...] feels a kind of quality in space. It can find its way over new country, because it perceives certain land marks, not necessarily material, but perceptible'.⁵⁴⁴

Thus 'Space' represents just one, helpfully overt, instance of Bergson's presence in Buchan's work. Yet much of Buchan's writing, particularly his supernatural fiction, demonstrates an interest in psychical phenomena and instinctive faculties which fall beyond the scope of material science. It is striking that this reflective, more mystical, aspect of Buchan's writing most often arises in tales featuring Edward Leithen, a character appearing initially in the short story 'Space', then reappearing regularly in *The Power-House*, *John Macnab*, *The Dancing Floor*, and *The Gap in the Curtain*: a figure who Buchan's wife Susan believed 'revealed more of her husband [...] than in any of his other characters'.⁵⁴⁵ Leithen's first appearance in 'Space' as the prosaic but sympathetic narrator sets the tone for a man who, like Buchan, combined outward reticence with tempered undercurrents of intuition and spirituality. In *The Gap in The Curtain* (1927), Buchan again employs Leithen as a sceptical yet interested participant in an experiment with prophesy. Here Leithen, on a visit to a country-house party, is persuaded to participate in an experiment planned by a Scandinavian Professor named August Moe, who seeks to prove that by inducing certain psychic states it is possible to access a latent ability for clairvoyance. Using quotations from Bergson's *Creative Evolution* and describing a process similar to the 'effort of intuition' described in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Moe plans to enable his subjects to view events which will occur exactly one year into the future as they appear recorded on the pages of *The Times*. Through a series of mental exercises, dietary change and the application of an unnamed drug,

⁵⁴³ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover Publications Inc. 2004), 96.

⁵⁴⁴ Buchan, 'Space', 304.

⁵⁴⁵ Paul Webb, *A Buchan Companion: A Guide to the Novels and Short Stories* (Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1994), 62.

Moe hopes to induce in his subjects a dreamlike state in which attention, usually focused on external stimuli, is turned inwards where it might discover and tap into unplumbed instinctive capacities. Whilst the experiment works for other participants, with varying, often deceptive degrees of success, at the final stage of the experiment Leithen (in many ways the ideal of Bergson's 'well balanced' individual) 'slips out of the spell': called back to the external world by the swoon of his hostess Sally Flambard and his realisation that the mysterious Moe is 'dying visibly'.⁵⁴⁶

As this episode demonstrates, Leithen's open mind allows him to engage in psychical activities yet his overriding rationality provides a solid anchor from which to avoid the danger, experienced by Holland in 'Space' and later Galliard in *Sick Heart River*, of being 'pluck[ed] from [one's] moorings'.⁵⁴⁷ Interestingly, Leithen's final appearance in *Sick Heart River*, as Waddell notes, demonstrates 'a significant thematic development away from [his] first appearance in [...] "Space"'.⁵⁴⁸ Here Leithen, like his creator, is a dying man, face to face with death and without the luxury of retreating into his customary objectivity. While in 'Space' he abstractedly wonders if there is 'any truth in fads like psychical research', in *Sick Heart River* he is forced to explore the mystical aspects of experience head on.⁵⁴⁹

Memory, Death and Subjectivity

With its unrelenting focus on the past and his departed friends, Buchan's autobiography, *Memory Hold the Door*, largely effaces the present from its concerns; Buchan's family life remains untouched, while his dealings with a wealth of living contemporaries, particularly influential figures like Stanley Baldwin and Franklin D. Roosevelt, are conspicuous by their absence. It is, as Buchan relates, 'a journal of certain experiences [...] rebuilt out of memory'

⁵⁴⁶ John Buchan, *The Gap in the Curtain* (Echo Library, 2007), 32.

⁵⁴⁷ Buchan, 'Space', 309.

⁵⁴⁸ Nathan Waddell, *Modern John Buchan*, 115

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

a faculty which, in distinctly Bergsonian terms, Buchan believed expanded and ‘quickened’ as the active possibilities of life, contract with age. In 1939, coming reluctantly to the end of his diplomatic role in Canada because of duodenal ulcers, facing a retirement marred by ill health, Buchan would have felt this phenomenon forcibly. He states:

As we age, the mystery of time more and more dominates the mind. We live less in the present, which no longer has the solidity it had in youth; less in the future, for the future every day narrows its span. The abiding things lie in the past [...] [a past] hurried from us, but also kept in store (*MHD*, 7).

Consequently, in *Memory Hold the Door* and its fictional contemporary *Sick Heart River*, each written in the penultimate year of his life, Buchan positions himself and his protagonist as liminal beings: individuals poised on the threshold of life. However, while *Memory Hold the Door* betrays distinctly Bergsonian understandings of memory, recognising the dualistic nature of experience as both objective and subjective, the self-reflexive musings of its preface acknowledge Buchan’s decision to retain a professional barrier between these spheres. As a consequence, in keeping with his habitual reticence, *Memory Hold the Door* (1940) makes ‘little attempt to tell’ what Buchan considered ‘the unimportant story of [his] life’.⁵⁵⁰ It focuses instead on the ‘impressions made upon [him] by the outer world’, presenting a selection of musings on literature, places and memories of deceased friends. Indeed, Buchan teasingly warns his reader: ‘the lover of gossip will find nothing [here] to please him, for I have written at length only of the dead’ (*MHD*, 8). As the preface explains, the book is in only very limited terms ‘an expression of faith’ and aspires to no personal religious or philosophical insights - though Buchan tantalisingly suggests such a task may be undertaken in some subsequent work (*MHD*, 8).

⁵⁵⁰ Buchan quoted in Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 462.

As hinted, a more subjective work was soon to arrive. This materialised in the form of his final completed novel, *Sick Heart River*. In the autumn of 1939 Buchan's personal secretary Mrs. Killick remarked to his wife that 'his Excellency is writing a very odd book [...] so unlike him, so introspective'.⁵⁵¹ While *Memory Hold the Door* had suggested the gradual shutting down of life as in the approach to death it basks in memory, *Sick Heart River* resists the comfort of reverie, instead exploring the inevitable self-evaluation and complex psychological transitions involved in actively facing the terms of our individual mortality. Hailed by his grandson James as Buchan's 'masterpiece', in this work the familiar figure of Edward Leithen is diagnosed with a terminal case of tuberculosis brought on by his exposure to gas in the First World War. Here Leithen casts off all connections to his former life, both personal and professional, and vows to stave off self-pity by finding a way to 'go down in action with every flag flying'.⁵⁵² After hearing from his old friend Blenkiron about the disappearance of an esteemed Canadian financier named Francis Galliard, Leithen takes the task of finding him as his final challenge, seeing in this quest 'a means to die standing' (*SHR*, 14).

In *Sick Heart River*, perhaps preoccupied with his own failing body, Buchan turns from familiar themes of adventure and physical exploit to explore the intricacies of the inner life. In *Canadian Occasions* (1935) Buchan had articulated the belief that there remained 'no frontiers left on the physical map', concluding that such territory must now 'be sought in the world of the mind and spirit'.⁵⁵³ In the light of such an assertion, *Sick Heart River* can, as Nathan Waddell notes in *Modern John Buchan* (2009), be understood as a 'textual fulfilment' of this stance; in this novel 'mentality itself [...] becomes the great unknown, the final

⁵⁵¹ Lilian Killick quoted in Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013), 350.

⁵⁵² John Buchan, *Sick Heart River* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 14. All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quote with the title abbreviated to *SHR*.

⁵⁵³ John Buchan, *Canadian Occasions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 54.

wilderness to survey and investigate'.⁵⁵⁴ Unlike the frantic, politically charged pursuits of past novels, Leithen's quest here is of a multi-faceted and deeply philosophical nature.

This work's overwhelming subjective focus, unfamiliar territory for Buchan, posed at this late stage of his career a new and complex set of formal issues. At times, Buchan's melding of deeply philosophical ideas alongside adventure motifs more characteristic of his famous thrillers threatens to make the narrative appear arbitrary, self-conscious and even absurd. Indeed, though as E. Morgan claims in *Twentieth-Century Scottish Classics*, *Sick Heart River* is a 'far cry from' such works, there remain aspects of its plot and structure which bear uncomfortable parallels to the novels Buchan jokingly termed his 'shockers': stories intended to compel with little regard for credulity.⁵⁵⁵ Certainly, from a superficial perspective the spectacle of a terminally ill, former MP becoming the self-sacrificing saviour of a distressed financier, his crazed guide and a colony of native Indians promises at best a thrilling but unlikely farce. Yet despite this and the novel's at times overt peddling of imperialist values, its overarching emotion and the subtle intuitive musings of Leithen take it into more mystical realms which prove resonant of Bergsonian philosophy. By framing the complex subject of death and dying in this seemingly incongruous, generic manner, *Sick Heart River* perhaps reinforces Waddell's assessment of Buchan as not only 'a key figure in the evolution of certain types of formulaic written modes, but also one capable of challenging them from within'.⁵⁵⁶ In this work, a bedridden Buchan allowed himself to indulge previously unvoiced disappointments, doubts and fears. Here, under the protective guise of fiction, Buchan finally 'lets his guard down', exploring the complex, sometimes conflicting terms of

⁵⁵⁴ Nathan Waddell, *Modern John Buchan* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 115.

⁵⁵⁵ Edwin Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Scottish Classics* (Edinburgh: Book Trust Scotland, 1987), 2.

⁵⁵⁶ Waddell, *Modern John Buchan*, 2.

his religious and political beliefs as they vie with his developing personality and the complex era in which he lived; an era fascinated with Bergson, mysticism, subjectivity and time.⁵⁵⁷

Like *Sick Heart River*, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) was Bergson's final and arguably most neglected major work. With its fascinating exposition of open and closed social systems, it provides a critical lens through which to re-examine, explicate and even vindicate some of Buchan's attitudes to politics, religion and imperialism, particularly as these opinions are challenged, dissected and evolved in *Sick Heart River*. In this effort I by no means intend an apologia for imperialism, something Bergson explicitly condemns in *The Two Sources*, but rather seek to attempt to examine the philosophical and political complexities of Buchan's writing in relation to empire and identity and to disentangle Buchan's personal motivations and aspirations from modern postcolonial culture's broadly justified antipathy towards the British Empire and its supporters.

Akin to *Sick Heart River*, Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is a work which strikingly illustrates the inherent tensions between the individual, society and spirituality as well as the difficulties, and perhaps impossibility, of wedding philosophical ideals in truly satisfying terms with the immediate, practical demands of life. Both works foreground the most admirable spiritual facets of humanity, yet each, written against the backdrop of the coming Second World War, is simultaneously haunted by an acknowledgement of the precarious, contingent nature of society and the destructive potential of our species. As such, despite Buchan's proclivity for neatly tied conclusions and the ostensible attempt, in spite of Leithen's death, to continue this trait into his final novel, there remains a tension at the heart of *Sick Heart River* that resists such closure. As James Buchan (his grandson) notes in his introduction to this novel, 'nowhere else in his fiction are [Buchan's] conventional attitudes so weak and his heart so strong' (*SHR*, x).

⁵⁵⁷ Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, 463.

As a Calvinist, Conservative and ardent imperialist, Buchan might be imagined to epitomise the attitudes and conventions of the ‘closed’ society. Yet closer inspection reveals that his attitudes to politics and religion were, in true Bergsonian spirit, surprisingly reflective, active and mobile. Unlike Bergson’s early advocate T.E. Hulme, who ultimately rejected Bergson for his insistence on novelty, regarding his philosophy as ‘incompatible’ with conservatism and tradition, Buchan espoused a more moderate, flexible and optimistic political stance.⁵⁵⁸ As Waddell notes, Buchan’s ‘Toryism was far from naively fixed on rigid continuities’.⁵⁵⁹ He was, as *Memory Hold the Door* explains, ‘a Tory in the sense that [...] [he] desired to preserve continuity with the past and keep whatever of the old foundations were sound’, yet he similarly acknowledged that a progressive society must constantly submit even its most coveted beliefs to ‘frequent spring-cleanings’ and always be ‘prepared to jettison lumber’ (*MHD*, 228). In such examples it becomes clear that working within the closed constructs of Empire and Calvinism Buchan’s naturally flexible, receptive nature draws him into unexpected harmony with key aspects of Bergson’s thought, in particular his emphasis on a gradual humanitarian opening of society, an acknowledgement of life’s innate mobility and a belief in aspects of life and spirit which fall beyond the remit of science.

Like Bergson, Buchan’s ostensibly contradictory nature has been much remarked upon. As David Goldie’s ‘Twin Loyalties’ illustrates, the successes of Buchan’s life and career were largely based on his capacity for adaptation, ideological flexibility, and a talent for compromise: he was a proud Scot who became an ‘enthusiastic convert to English culture’, a Calvinist whose religion was through time ‘broadened, mellowed [yet was] also confirmed’, a Conservative whose ‘political faith’ was underscored by an inherent ‘liberality’ and whose initially conventional attitudes to imperialism sublimated through experience to the hope of a world-wide, and potentially voluntary, ‘brotherhood [...] consecrated to the

⁵⁵⁸ T.E. Hulme writing as Thomas Gratton, *The New Age*, volume 10, no. 1, 2 November 1912, 15.

⁵⁵⁹ Waddell, *Modern John Buchan*, 8.

service of peace' (*MHD*, 125). Such tensions and paradoxes are in Bergsonian terms the hallmark of an intuitive balanced individual adapting and creating himself through time. As Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White note in their introduction to *Bergson, Politics and Religion* (2012), for Bergson, human nature and its societies are in essence dichotomous, tending 'towards [both] exclusion, group solidarity and war, and toward love and care that reaches beyond the limited bounds of the social group'.⁵⁶⁰ That Buchan, working within broadly 'closed' constructs such as empire and Calvinism, was able to adapt and ascribe to more open views as he aged demonstrates his progressive, intuitive and open nature. On such evidence Buchan, in many respects, embodies Bergson's maxim that 'to exist is to change; to change is to mature; to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly'.⁵⁶¹

Thus if at times contradictory, Buchan lived a life as Bergson believed the 'well balanced' individual must, navigating vigorously between two plains: the intellectual and the spiritual.⁵⁶² While Buchan's education, particularly his philosophical and legal training nurtured his rational 'tidy mind' and aptitude for 'mental gymnastics' he likewise maintained an unwavering belief in the importance of spirituality: specifically his Christian faith which, for him, transcended academic scrutiny (*MHD*, 38). In a world increasingly bent on scientism Buchan was, while embracing its benefits, a vocal spokesman for its limitations. That human experience might be reduced to a system of scientific causes and effects was a concept Buchan found deeply repellent. Indeed, invoking Bergson to support his views he states:

M. Bergson has shown us that half the blunders of philosophy are due to the application of the methods of science to spheres of thought where they are strictly inapplicable [...] [Science too often] underrates the complexities of human nature [...] [it] turn[s] mankind into automata, motives into a few elementary emotions and the infinitely varied web of life into a simple geometric pattern.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶⁰ Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, introduction to *Bergson, Politics and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

⁵⁶¹ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 7.

⁵⁶² Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 198.

⁵⁶³ Buchan, *Homilies and Recreations*, 96.

Francis Gaillard and the ‘Parasitic self’

The importance of tempering materialism with faith and self-knowledge is an issue at the core of *Sick Heart River*. The financier Francis Gaillard’s breakdown and disappearance, on which the novel’s action is predicated, is precipitated by the suffocating accumulation of social expectations thrust on him by his rising status as a talented financier. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson imagines the accumulation of such inassimilable social debris to form a ‘parasitic self’ which encrusts the inner self and inhibits true freedom. Disillusioned by his outstanding commercial success and oppressed by his young wife’s attempts to ‘mould [him] to her ambitions’, Gaillard is progressively drawn into a sphere of life fundamentally at odds with the rustic past he discordantly severed ties with in his youth (*SHR*, 39). Despite its evident luxuries, this new life impedes and crushes Gaillard’s sense of identity. In what superficially seems ‘a wonderful life’, Gaillard is stifled by successes which seem to him, on reflection, alien, abstract and intangible (*SHR*, 33). He lives in a home which, though beautiful and fashionable, appears to Leithen ‘without tradition or individuality, as if its possessors had deliberately sought out something non-committal, an environment which should neither reflect nor influence them.’ (*SHR*, 31)

In many respects Gaillard exemplifies the dangers of what Bergson terms ‘frenzied materialism’,⁵⁶⁴ and Buchan similarly considered the modern world’s ‘rastaquouère craze for luxury’ (*MHD*, 128). The fast pace of his city life and his belief that money might free him from the narrow horizons of his past, leaves Gaillard in a state of ‘perpetual flux’ with little time for self-reflection (*SHR*, 29). In taking material ambition as its focus, Gaillard’s movement from the tight-knit, parochial communities of rural Canada, instead of opening his

⁵⁶⁴ Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. by A. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1935), 186. - All subsequent references will be from this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after the quotation with the title abbreviated to *TSMR*.

perspectives, only succeeds in imposing a further, more damning form of closure; what Galliard achieves in material terms, he loses in subjective freedom. Amidst the chaos of finance and consumerism Galliard, as his friend Clifford Savory relates, ‘lives such a bustling life’ it seems doubtful whether he ever found ‘time to consider [if he was] happy or not’ (*SHR*, 28). Relentlessly focused on the present and the attempt to anticipate future financial events, he narrows his field of consciousness until it focuses almost exclusively on one limited aspect of external action, ultimately blinding him to life’s dynamism and profundity. In this frenzied effort he essentially becomes a ‘conscious automaton’, increasingly detached from his inner self and ancestral roots: perilously removed from life’s deeper currents (*TFW*, 96).

Galliard, like many members of society, is unaware that his freedom is inhibited in this way until, without warning, he finds himself taunted insistently by memories of his past which occur to him like ‘a lost world crowding in’ (*SHR*, 158). This crisis is in part precipitated by his encounter with his future wife, Felicity, who represents to him ‘a new world very different from the tough world of buying and selling’ and seems to satisfy ‘all the dreams of his boyhood and youth’ (*SHR*, 157). This awakening of dormant emotions and repressed memories of his past forces Galliard to reflect on the series of often mercenary choices that brought him to his current position. He relates that ‘ridiculous little things’ began to distress him such as ‘a tune which reminded him of a French *chanson*, the smell of a particular tobacco which suggested the coarse stuff grown (at his old home in) Clarefontaine’ (*SHR*, 158). Indeed, he becomes particularly troubled by his company’s role in destroying the landscape of his childhood home with an unsightly dam and pulp mill, a landscape which in his thoughts becomes mysteriously interconnected with his feelings for his wife.

Such epiphanies reveal to Galliard the superficiality and rootlessness of his new life. His detachment from his past has attenuated his capacity for progress, rendering his future

similarly remote and uncertain. For Bergson and Buchan alike our past (both individual and racial) forms an integral part of our identity. To discard this past is to limit our appreciation of life and risk personal equilibrium. In *The Two Sources* Bergson states:

Certain aquatic plants as they rise to the surface are ceaselessly jostled by the current: their leaves, meeting above the water, interlace, thus imparting to them stability above. But still more stable are the roots, which firmly planted in the earth support them from below' (*TSMR*, 6).

Here Bergson illustrates two distinct anchors for securing our personal stability. Amidst life's flux, the surface intersections between individual and society offer our most accessible and obvious source of anchorage, yet equally important for our individual growth are the accumulated values which have grown up from our deeper, fundamental self. In Bergson's analogy there is a necessary continuity between these forms of support; the fundamental personality rises to meet the social surface self and each extreme is part of and mutually beneficial to the other. In severing ties with his past Galliard finds himself, even following his marriage, cut adrift and unable to meld with his new sphere of life. In this respect his disappearance can be understood as an extreme example of the Bergsonian free act. It is a crisis or 'boiling over' as the suppressed 'deep-seated self rushes to the surface' to burst through, challenge and destabilize the acquired values of the 'outer crust' (*TFW*, 169).

While Galliard might appear to his acquaintances to have 'become absorbed into [America's] atmosphere', having 'closed and bolted' the door to his past, this is, as Leithen notes, only a superficial phenomenon (*SHR*, 26). Leithen observes that 'the chains of race and tradition are ill to undo, and Galliard, in his brilliant advance to success, had [merely] loosened, not broken them' (*SHR*, 28). His retreat to the hostile Canadian north is thus a form of pilgrimage, a penance for what he considers sins against his past. Foremost it represents an effort to bridge the gap between the spiritual and material, to re-trace and re-establish personal equilibrium by reconnecting with his cultural roots and neglected deeper self.

Accompanied in his quest by the renowned wilderness guide Lew Frizel, Galliard's vulnerable state of mind triggers and facilitates Lew's own suppressed 'madness', a state, as his Brother Johnny reveals to Leithen, characterised by a recurring fixation on a mystical river named the Sick Heart: a location for Lew representing some 'sort of New Jerusalem - the kind of place where everything'll be a' right' (*SHR*, 100). As Lew's obsession takes over, he becomes increasingly frenzied and indifferent to the plight of his trustee, 'seeing nothin' except the trail he's blazin' and somethin' at the end of it' (*SHR*, 93). In his susceptible state of mind Galliard is drawn into Lew's obsession, seeing in it a refuge, an escape from the haunting memories of his past and his dawning horror of the formidable north, a place he believed he could find absolution by conquering. Cowed by failure and self-doubt, Galliard clings child-like to Lew, regressing into an unthinking state of supplication and dependency. Ultimately abandoned by his increasingly crazed guide, when Leithen finds him Galliard is not only desperately weak from exposure, but also deeply traumatised by his experiences.

In his first encounter with Leithen Galliard is only able to produce garbled words in French 'like a litany, repeating [them] again and again' (*SHR*, 94). Having faced abject fear, he has lost touch with both the present and recent life events, as Leithen notes, mentally retreating 'into a very old world, the world of his childhood and his ancestors' (*SHR*, 97). Indeed, as Jan Campbell observes in *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life: Durations of the Unconscious Self*, such tendencies to regression and repetition represent a central feature of trauma. As Campbell stresses, in many respects 'time for the trauma victim is stopped'.⁵⁶⁵ This does not mean that they are unable to identify the passage of external, mechanical time (indeed, they are intensely aware of the protracted duration of their suffering), but despite this awareness they remain, as in a dream, locked into destructive or regressive thought cycles which disconnect them from the external world. They remain, in a sense, trapped in *durée*

⁵⁶⁵ Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life*, 129.

and thus unable to order their thoughts into an intellectually assimilable linear narrative.⁵⁶⁶ In Bergsonian terms, Galliard's experience has precipitated an 'unloosening or a breaking of the tie which binds this psychic life to its motor accompaniment'; his disordered thoughts play out with no relevance or connection to the surrounding world action (*MM*, xv). As Johnny observes, 'a shutter has come down between him and his past life', rendering him 'a child again' (*SHR*, 100). He is, in Bergson's words:

no longer capable of that attention to life which is necessary in order that the inner may be regulated by the outer, and that the internal duration fit exactly into the general duration of things.⁵⁶⁷

In this state Galliard is unable to meaningfully associate and communicate with others and, crucially, is incapable of navigating coherently between his past, present and future. This dissociation of psychic and motor functions is clearly illustrated by Galliard's difficulties in comprehending and communicating with his rescuers. When Leithen addresses him in English Galliard's 'hold on the language seem[s] to slip away' from him, until finally his 'eyes show no comprehension' (*SHR*, 97). As such, Galliard remains locked in a virtual dream-like world governed by fantasy and disjointed memory images: a sphere in which action, time and even language fail to correspond in useful terms to the conditions of the outer world. In this confused condition Galliard seems, as Leithen reflects, 'a mere automaton [...] a waxwork managed by a ventriloquist' (*SHR*, 99).

This disturbing confrontation with what Bergson describes in *Laughter* (1900) as the 'mechanical encrusted on the living',⁵⁶⁸ elicits from Leithen a typically Bergsonian outburst of mirth as he is struck suddenly by the 'lunatic inconsequence of the whole business' (*SHR*, 98). This realisation forces from Leithen 'a bitter laugh' (*SHR*, 98) which, reinforcing

⁵⁶⁶ Jan Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life: Durations of the Unconscious Self* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2006), 129.

⁵⁶⁷ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 196.

⁵⁶⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville, MD.: Wildside Press, 2008), 21.

Bergson's understanding of the laugh as a social corrective for mechanical behaviour, 'frightens [Galliard] into silence': perhaps fleetingly startling his mind back towards external life (*SHR*, 98). The wilderness setting of this incident provides Leithen's laugh with a dark poignancy; for Bergson laughter is an essentially social function, and he notes that we would 'hardly appreciate the comic if [we] felt ourself isolated from others' and stresses that the effect of the comic depends on its passage from one individual intelligence to another: it is a response which 'stands in need of an echo'.⁵⁶⁹ Cut off from society, with only expanses of ice and the raving Galliard for company, Leithen's laughter falls flat, appearing a helpless and desperate attempt to reassert social order and expectations in the midst of nature's uncompromising might.

Campbell notes that for Bergson 'the important thing' in the attempt to cure trauma is the reestablishment of a victim's 'attention to life'.⁵⁷⁰ In keeping with this assertion, Leithen recognises that in order to bring Galliard back to health he must reawaken his interest in life, helping him to conquer his overwhelming fear of the north by, through action, redirecting and reattaching his inner vital thoughts back to the external world. To do this Leithen takes the case of the starving Hare Indians, using their struggle to emblematised the hostilities of the north and creating from it a narrative from which Galliard might face and fight his fears, re-augmenting the virtual with the actual. Leithen states:

This is a war and I obey orders. I've got my orders. In a world where Death is king we're going to defy him and save life. The North has closed down on us and we're going to beat the North. That is to your address Galliard (*SHR*, 193)

Edward Leithen: Action, Stasis and the Narrative of the Chase

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷⁰ Campbell, *Psychoanalysis and the Time of Life*, 129.

Galliard's state of alienation replicates the one Leithen experiences when, as a dying man, he accepts the formidable task of searching for him. Here, the chase, a device Buchan usually felt 'sharpened, intensified [and] idealised' life, ironically effects a form of stasis, allowing Leithen to 'shut out fruitless meditations on his own case' and avoid difficult psychological issues by keeping his mind bound to external action (*SHR*, 52). In anticipation of death, Leithen withdraws both physically and mentally from his former life, his friends and even past memories. He finds he is simply 'not concerned about other things' (*SHR*, 52). Having embarked on what is to be his final task, a means to 'die standing', Leithen's world 'narrow[s] itself to Francis Galliard' and with his field of thought thus contracted, for a time, he ceases to live in any meaningful sense (*SHR*: 52). Indeed, as Leithen nears the Sick Heart River he reflects that his

memory seemed to have become a closed book. He never thought of his past, and no pictures of it came to cheer or torture him [...] every hour he was looking at marvels of natural beauty and magnificence, but they did not affect him. Life now awoke no response in him, and he remembered that some wise man had thus defined death' (*SHR*, 106).

This is an observation directly supported by Bergson's definition of unconsciousness as nothing more than 'a consciousness without memory', a consciousness limited only to the present, with no connection to the past and no hopes for the future.⁵⁷¹ Leithen perceives the world around him, but feels no attachment to it; he exists in a disinterested stupor.

Buchan subtly doubles Leithen and Galliard. They are each, as the physician Eric Ravelston observes, liminal figures bound by a strict 'time limit'; for Leithen, due to his failing body, for Galliard, because of his troubled and deeply unbalanced mind (*SHR*: 38). Trapped in spiritual stasis, they have become self-absorbed and detached from the emotional interactions which render life meaningful, each seeks in extreme action a means of escape

⁵⁷¹ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T.E. Hulme (Cambridge, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 26.

from the troubling, stifling conditions of their subjective worlds. Indeed, it is worth noting that for Buchan subjectivity is defined in relentlessly masculinist terms while the pressures of materialism are in contrast gendered as feminine and stifling. It is, for example, Galliard's wife Felicity's ambition to 'groom him up' and mould him into a 'a kind of national figure' which compounds the panic and alienation that precipitate his flight (SHR, 27). As Bergson stresses, the individual is dependent on and inextricably bound to the society that supports them. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, to stress this point he uses the example of an individual like Robinson Crusoe, ostensibly cut off from all social ties. For Bergson, such a person would soon collapse 'if he had nothing else to cope with his incessant difficulties except an individual strength of which he knows the limitations' (TSMR, 7). Yet in such circumstances, the well balanced individual should prove able to

draw energy from the society to which he remains attached in spirit; he may not perceive it, still it is there watching him: if the individual ego maintains alive and present the social ego, he will effect even in isolation, what he would with the encouragement and even support of the whole of society (TSMR, 7).

Considered in this light, Buchan's decision to locate the action of *Sick Heart River* in the Canadian wilderness becomes poignantly clear. Stripped of material comforts and the supportive structures of society the trio Leithen, Galliard and Lew are faced with the choice of returning to action and reconnecting with society or, by remaining locked in a state of self absorption, facing a tortured isolation, madness and futile death.

After his initial apathy and withdrawal from life Leithen's encounter with the wilderness, which strikes him initially as 'the "intense inane" of Shelley's poem', allows him by degrees to reconnect with his inner self and ultimately experience a mystical reconnection with life (SHR, 57). Removed from the distractions of everyday life Leithen, in what directly corresponds to an intuitive encounter with *durée*, finds that 'in this strange place he was

passing, while still in time, inside the bounds of eternity. He was learning to know himself, and with that might come the knowledge of God' (*SHR*: 78).

Yet as for Bergson, whose conception of mysticism must relay back to action to be complete, Leithen's acknowledgement of God's omnipotence forms only part of his spiritual recovery. As he descends towards the Sick Heart Valley Leithen feels 'above everything his abjectness', he reflects that 'in his own world there were works of man's hands all around to give a false impression of man's power. But here the hand of God had blotted out life for millions of miles and made a great tract of the inconsiderable ball which was the earth' (*SHR*: 116). While this view asserts God's power, it depicts a force alienated from and indifferent to man, Leithen feels himself to be only 'an atom in infinite space' (*SHR*: 116). As he reaches the valley of the Sick Heart, with his journey to it having brought him to the limit of his strength, Leithen initially feels he has reached a sanctuary, an island of the dead resembling that depicted by Arnold Böcklin (a print of which Leithen recalls from his childhood). Here, he feels, is the end of his journey. Having ceased 'to react to life' Leithen feels the 'majesty of God fill his universe' and embraces the idea of death with resignation and 'even sombre gratitude' (*SHR*, 114). Yet in contemplating the serene beauty of the valley Leithen comes to realize that the tempting prospect of a peaceful death has obscured his broader mission to save Galilard. Just as Lew, following his selfish fixation on the river, comes to regard the Sick Heart as the 'temptation of the Devil' and a 'byroad to Hell', Leithen likewise feels that to die in the valley with his duty unfulfilled would constitute a form of damnation (*SHR*, 125). Thus while physical weakness makes him 'crave for immobility' and the release of death, Leithen is spurred on by 'something at the back of [his] mind cry[ing] out against it' (*SHR*: 126). Here Buchan's Calvinism falls into unexpected harmony with Bergson's evolutionary theories. In each respectively, progress must be won through a continual state of

struggle, either against the omnipresent temptation of sin or the counter-evolutionary pull of atavism and inertia.

Following his escape from the valley, Leithen experiences a very different form of epiphany. After collapsing from cold and exhaustion he awakes to find himself comfortably housed in a snow-hole. Here he becomes aware of something new in his condition. He finds:

The fit of utter apathy had passed. He was conscious of the strangeness of this cache in the snow, this mid-winter refuge in a world inimical to man. The bitter diamond air, like some harsh battery acid stung him back to a kind of life (*SHR*, 129)

While Leithen had formerly 'lay passive in all-potent hands' seeing 'only walls and no windows', he here comes to perceive the 'mercifulness behind the rigor of nature', and is impressed by 'a sense of God's mercy - deeper than the fore-ordination of things' (*SHR*, 138). This realization in the transcendent and non-preferential manner of Bergson's mystical love, helps him to 'warm towards common humanity' and ultimately, though still faced with death, to reengage with life (*SHR*, 130).

Enlightened by this new mystical 'psychic attitude' (*TSMR*, 28), the native peoples Leithen initially regarded scathingly as 'illiterate half-breeds' and a 'rabble of degenerate Indians' are transformed in his mind to individuals that matter and must be protected (*SHR*: 167). Thus on discovering the plight of the Hare Indians, who are dying rapidly from a form of spiritual apathy, Leithen is prepared to risk his own recovery to fight for their survival. This impulse, echoing the terms of Bergson's open mysticism, 'is something finer than the duty of kinship' which might have led Leithen home to England as it faced coming war. It rather comes from an intuition 'of the brotherhood of all men' (*TSMR*, 44). Leithen, like the Bergsonian mystic, takes humanity's most 'crying needs first' and dedicates himself to helping the tribe stave off death (*TSMR*, 205). His strength of purpose inspires others to follow his example; it spreads, to use Bergson's terms, 'soul to soul, unceasingly like a

conflagration', drawing those around him into action (*TSMR*, 47). Indeed it is Galliard's discipleship in this task which allows him to overcome his fear of the north and gives him the strength to return to his old life with a renewed, rooted and balanced notion of his identity.

For Leithen, this mission, which is made possible by his newly found awareness of 'open', non-preferential love, allows him to face death without fear and in the knowledge that his legacy, in the collective memory of the Hare Indians as well as Galliard and the Frizel Brothers, will live on, perhaps inspiring and invigorating others in future generations. This awareness of his opened soul and knowledge of his deeper self allows Leithen to see himself as one 'founded solidly like an oak [...] drawing life from deep sources' (*SHR*, 179).

Leithen's encounters with the wilderness and death have enabled him (to return to Bergson's analogy of the aquatic plants) to gain confidence by recognising that his strength is not only dependent on superficial connections with society, but is also drawn from deep within. Having intuited, in his mystical realisation of God's mercy, a love able to 'embrace all of humanity [...] to animals, to plants, to all of nature', Leithen gains a new sense of self sufficiency and autonomy (*TSMR*, 200). This allows him to feel that 'death, if it came, was no blind trick of fate, but a thing accepted and therefore mastered' (*SHR*: 179). Secure in this knowledge Leithen is able to embrace, without regret, formerly repressed memories of his happy past. As he reflects, though he 'had put life away from him [...] it had come back to him in a final reconciliation' (*SHR*, 136).

Contemplating a work such as *Sick Heart River* in the light of Bergson's philosophy can help to shed new light on a complex, in many respects incongruous work, written by a frequently misunderstood author at an intensely vulnerable, poignant phase in his life and, indeed, in world history. Exploring the more mystical facets of Buchan's writing challenges preconceptions of him as superficial writer of lucrative, throwaway 'shockers' and can help to reevaluate the still prevailing view of him as a dogmatic imperialist: one which has too

often overshadowed critical appreciations of his work. Indeed, while certain imperialist assumptions are embedded within the narrative and while women are controversially associated with a stifling materialism that oppresses white men despite their power and privilege, the mystical interpretation of *Sick Heart* adds a necessary complexity to interpretations of Buchan's last novel. While Galliard is restored at the end and Leithen dies 'standing', the underlying causes of the sickness that pervades the novel is attributed to a lack of balance, coherence and progress in society: one precipitated by its obsessive, in Bergson's terms, 'frenzied' pursuit of material progress. Buchan suggests that to counteract this destructive drive, humanity must take a step back from the trappings and superficial desires provoked and promulgated by the commercial world: a sphere for Bergson increasingly 'crushed beneath the weight of its own material progress' (*TSMR*, 176). As Leithen reflects, each of us has our own Sick Heart River that represents our own spiritual hungers, frailties and needs. In order to restore a sense of balance and meaning to life and to open new roads to personal and social progress each individual must 'find his river for himself'; in this effort, facing their fears and, through disinterested personal action, reconnecting with life's rich spiritual facets. In short, re-exploring Buchan's fiction through a Bergsonian lens allows his work to be viewed and re-evaluated in the terms proposed by Alan Riach in 'Buchan, Language, and Suspense'; firstly, 'intensely and closely as literary art [and] [secondly], specifically in terms of his biography [and] the divided loyalties he experienced himself [...] and thirdly in the entire political and cultural moment of his era',⁵⁷² that is, as an important, reflective and culturally engaged individual worthy of critical reassessment and academic respect.

⁵⁷² Alan Riach, 'John Buchan: Politics, Language and Suspense', in *Reassessing John Buchan*, 179.

Conclusions

In writing this thesis I hope I have opened the door for a new, more expansive view of Bergson: a romantic, mystical perspective apparent to his contemporaries but which has since been overshadowed by a variety of events, which among others include the rejection of his ideas following the wars, the associated accusations of irrationalism and romanticism, the effacement of his ideas by the modernists, the appropriation and associations of his ideas with other philosophical and unwholesome political movements (such as nationalism and fascism) and the revival of his ideas through the proto-post-structuralist perspective of Deleuze. In this, my project responds to Suzanne Guerlac's call for a 'return to Bergson',⁵⁷³ that is a return to the original context and spirit of his work, as well as Mary Ann Gillies' for a dynamic 'reassessment of modernism': one which facilitates the rescue of figures like Bergson from the 'intellectual margins' of Modernist studies.⁵⁷⁴ Finally, in association with this effort, this thesis has sought to build on the expanding critical interest in middlebrow literature and provides a model for how such literature might be approached and illuminated by theoretical and philosophical methods like those more commonly applied to canonical writers. As part of this process, this study has aimed to demonstrate the value of revisiting and reassessing the work of well-known authors such as Conrad and Buchan, using Bergson's thought to support valid counter-readings of famous texts. In association with this process, it asserts the value of reinserting marginalised writers such as Blackwood and Machen into the critical narratives of this era. In short, just as Gillies states of her own methodology in the introduction to *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, this study has enacted a process of 'fleshing out'.⁵⁷⁵ It has taken as a foundation the idea that, as Gillies states, the ubiquity of Bergson's thought meant that 'all writers of this period could be considered open to

⁵⁷³ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) p.173.

⁵⁷⁴ Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, 188.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

Bergson's influence' and on this premise builds upon existing studies linking Bergson to modernism in order to illustrate how similar concerns drove, inspired and underpinned the work of the era's middlebrow writers.⁵⁷⁶ Though such preoccupations often manifest in very different ways, I believe that the acknowledgement of these shared cultural influences and anxieties provides a useful link between these too often isolated contemporaneous literary streams. It delivers a valuable means of discussing them in union with one another, thus serving to bridge and demystify the imagined cultural gulf between high and low culture.

I first encountered Bergson not through his growing reputation in the field of modernist studies, but whilst reading Algernon Blackwood's mystical novel *The Centaur*. Coming to Bergson from this mystical 'middlebrow' context impressed on me first and foremost the metaphysical implications of his thought and this was the lens through which I initially read and selected the texts discussed in this study. It was not until I sought out further information regarding Bergson that I discovered his strong association with the modernist movement, particularly its emphasis on time, subjectivity and intuition. Yet the new image of Bergson, as one *New York Times* reporter termed it, as the 'pet of the intellectuals', seemed a very different, cooler and more academic image of him compared to the dynamic, romantic mystical one I had encountered in Blackwood's work.⁵⁷⁷ While, as Richard Lehan asserted in 'Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns', Bergson principally appealed to the modernists as the creator of 'a systematic, rigorous philosophy that gave foundation to the basic [...] tenets of [their] thought'⁵⁷⁸ (the provider of a useful philosophical springboard for their aesthetic innovations), for his broader middlebrow following Bergson was rather a poet or 'magician': one uniquely able to tackle, resolve and communicate the pressing concerns and

⁵⁷⁶ Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, 6

⁵⁷⁷ *New York Times*, May 26th 1912: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007), 321.

⁵⁷⁸ Richard Lehan, 'Bergson and the Discourse of the Moderns', in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 308.

conflicts of his age.⁵⁷⁹ While in many respects these perspectives were not irreconcilable - in each can be traced an ambivalence to materialism, a fascination with subjectivity and emphasis on intuition - in the work of the modernists, Bergson's influence (where it is acknowledged) generally presents in more secular, structural and analytic forms. This distinction, as discussed in the opening chapters of this study, can be traced both in the modernists' own vacillating attitudes towards Bergson as well as the more systematic, secularised image of him embraced by today's critics: one precipitated by his treatment in, and resurrection through, the work of Deleuze. Thus, reading Bergson via middlebrow fiction brings into focus a different, alternative facet of the man best known as the 'philosopher of time' as well as revealing new ways of interpreting and engaging with middlebrow writing.

The constraints of time and length on this particular project meant that I was only able to consider a small selection of middlebrow texts, all by chance from male writers with similarly mystical undercurrents. Given the large number of female middlebrow writers working at this juncture, and the large female following Bergson inspired, it would be a fascinating future project to identify, compare and contrast Bergsonian traits in feminine middlebrow novels: works created by the many 'eager heart[ed]' women who attended Bergson's public lectures and of whom T.E. Hulme proved so scathing.⁵⁸⁰ In this context more could be made of the distinctions between Bergson's treatment at the hands of his male and female middlebrow followers; for example, considering whether the mystical themes demonstrated in the male middlebrow writers discussed might have provided a suitably adventurous, masculine guise for engaging with otherwise 'feminine' romantic, subjective themes.

⁵⁷⁹ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 227.

⁵⁸⁰ T.E. Hulme, 'Bergson Lecturing', *The New Age*, November 2, 1911, 15.

Another area pertinent to this study which might be further explored in a future project is the interactions and importance of finding a balance between the subjective world and external settings: a feature reflective of the challenging relationships Bergson identifies between the spatial and virtual worlds. In each of the texts I have discussed there is an interesting relationship between the protagonists' expanding needs to engage with their subjectivity and their pursuit of, or location in, isolated or wilderness settings. In Conrad's *Lord Jim* the wilderness of Patusan offers a spatial platform from which Jim might either domesticate or escape from the tortured musings of his consciousness in order to recreate or re-balance his perception of self, while in *Heart of Darkness* the wilderness appears to possess a consciousness of its own: one which stimulates, interacts with and influences the darker facets of human nature. In Blackwood's *The Centaur* the Caucasus is offered as an exotic, mystical location, one appearing to offer an escape from the western 'frenzy' for materialism: a place in which, freed from such distractions, man might reconnect with his spirituality.⁵⁸¹ Similarly, in Buchan's *Sick Heart River* the Canadian wilds are a location stripped of, and seemingly impervious to human interventions. They become a battleground for Leithen as he struggles to come to terms with his own mortality: here he can exert, explore and test himself both mentally and physically as he attempts to either 'make his soul' as he intends, or devastatingly lose sight of it.⁵⁸² In Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* the rural Welsh valleys and the mysterious traces of their ancient past form the backdrop for Lucian's escape into a fantasy world. Here, the landscape provides a springboard for his subjective musings, allowing him to rebuild in his mind his village's classical past and erase what appears to him to be its' debased modern counterpart. While the London setting of the final chapters of Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* initially appears to be an exception to this 'wilderness' trope, it must be recalled that Machen intended this work to be 'a Robinson

⁵⁸¹ Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans by A. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1935), 256.

⁵⁸² John Buchan, *Sick Heart River* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 14.

Crusoe of the soul'.⁵⁸³ For Lucian, so alienated from his fellow man, the capital appears, reminiscent of the Professor's view in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, as a 'maze', a wilderness in which he is isolated amidst 'myriads of myriads of men'.⁵⁸⁴ Thus in each of these works wilderness spaces offer the writers a setting free from the distracting, often claustrophobic materialism of contemporary culture. It is within such environments that the characters find themselves able to immerse themselves in, and explore the terms of, their own subjectivity, either attempting to re-establish a sense of equilibrium as in the cases of Jim and Leithen, or demonstrating the consequences of its loss like O'Malley and Lucian.

Given the overt references to Bergson in Blackwood's work, this project initially sought to identify and explore the influence of Bergson's philosophy on a selection of middlebrow novels by Algernon Blackwood, Joseph Conrad, Arthur Machen and John Buchan, texts underpinned by Bergsonian mysticism. Having settled on this course, I spent much time attempting to identify and parse the Bergsonian aspects of the selected texts as well as seeking to isolate and establish links between Bergson and these authors. Though this effort did bring to light a number of interesting connections, (for example, both Blackwood and Machen associated with Bergson's sister Mina Mathers through their membership of the Golden Dawn. Also regardless of Bergson's and Buchan's ostensibly opposing religious and political outlooks, Buchan's essays and biography betray an unexpected admiration of the philosopher). Furthermore, each of these authors had strong connections with France and a fluent understanding of the language. However, over time it became frustratingly clear that despite these intersections finding concrete connections to Bergson, beyond those directly stated in a text, was a near impossible task. Indeed, as John Mullarkey recognised in his introduction to *The New Bergson*, the eventual ubiquity of Bergson's thought meant that over time 'the originality of [his] world-view seemed to lose its distinctiveness as its ideas were

⁵⁸³ Arthur Machen, introduction to *The Hill of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 1923), 7.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

incorporated (mostly without acknowledgement) into other movements - phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism - whose longevity was more secure'.⁵⁸⁵ This widespread dilution and appropriation of Bergson's ideas made it difficult to identify with any authority a particular feature as definitively Bergsonian and, as a consequence, I came to view the scope of this approach as fundamentally limited - inevitably leading to an argument which seemed at best tenuous and speculative.

However, my initial frustration at this seeming impasse was countered by an enduring conviction that, concrete or not, the mystical undertones of these texts betrayed distinctly Bergsonian facets. As discussed in the second chapter of this study, this new perspective led to a more theoretical use of Bergson's philosophy: a view of Bergson which recognised his importance as rather, as a skilful communicator of pertinent contemporary concerns than an instigator of an early twentieth century zeitgeist. From this revised viewpoint, this study makes the case for Bergson as an important, historically appropriate tool not only for guiding discussions pertaining to modernist ideas and aesthetics, but also the themes and concerns of contemporary middlebrow and popular literature. This approach complements the recent critical acknowledgement of middlebrow literature as a valid, culturally important field of study as well as the newly expansive, historically focused methods used today in modernist studies. This provides a framework within which these often polarised literary streams can be drawn together and discussed in relation to one another. As such this thesis supports a view of modernism as part of an evolving literary landscape: a movement born of history and traditions rather than an isolated, rootless phenomenon.

While such a theoretical approach, like critical applications of psychoanalysis, has limitations - it can only offer a necessarily biased, specialised and, indeed, speculative lens

⁵⁸⁵ John Mullarkey, introduction to *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.

through which to read a text and as a consequence cannot engage fully with the complex web of cultural, historical and personal factors at play in any given text - it nevertheless adds a new, underexplored and historically appropriate platform and terminology from which to collate, parse and illuminate a range of seemingly incommensurate contemporary texts on equal terms. Thus, using Bergson in this way allows an element of continuity and parallelism between the traditionally polarised literary streams of modernist and middlebrow literature. Further explored, this may help to challenge and more deeply enrich existing views of this era and its literature.

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