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A Grave for Fish: The Haunted Shore in Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*

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ABSTRACT

The fish that are caught, rarely enough, in an empty and silent sea in Wyl Menmuir's short novel *The Many* (2016), are either diseased—'burned […] with white lesions down the side of each body […] black skin dull and flaked away in patches'—or ghostly—colourless, translucent, 'the outlines of organs visible, shadows in the pale flesh'. The uncanny atmosphere of *The Many* is multilayered, evoked by an elusive ecological menace and an even less tangible sense of entrapment and doom. The run-down state of the isolated fishing village where the novel is set appears to be caused by an environmental disaster, 'a profusion of biological agents and contaminants' in the sea, but the actual cause is never explained. The novel hovers between the ecocritical depiction of a polluted shore and a Gothic sense of claustrophobia and oppression, expressed through the protagonists' dreams and memories as well as embodied in an external agency that keeps the village under constant surveillance. In my paper, I explore the mutual enhancement between an ecological and a psychological Gothic, which Menmuir effects by shifts in focalisation, chronological breaks and the engagement with space. The littoral setting plays a decisive role in the process of disorientation which affects the characters as well as the readers. In a constantly shifting and treacherous environment, sensory perception and memory appear more and more unreliable, until finally the boundaries of personal identity are as much eroded as the very ground beneath the villagers' feet.

'A thin trail of smoke rises up from Perran's, where no smoke has risen for ten years now' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 1). From the very first sentence, the atmosphere in Wyl Menmuir's novel *The Many* is oppressive and sinister, but the actual source of the lurking menace is hard to pin down. Smoke is rising from a house that has been abandoned for over ten years; the sea is unnaturally calm; the fishermen returning with empty nets are taciturn. While none of these

features is in any way implausible or unrealistic, a quickly established sense of doom begins to unsettle the assumptions of realist narrative. When the stranger, Timothy Buchanan, moves into the derelict house that is still referred to as 'Perran's house'—though Perran, a boy from the village, has been dead for ten years—and begins to probe into the village's secrets, he runs into a wall of silence. The novel's other main character, the fisherman Ethan, the most unsociable in a community of tight-lipped men, is haunted by Perran's death, and becomes obsessed with Timothy. Is his hostility due to guilt and loneliness, or is there some other, ineffable cause? An unexplained ecological and economic disaster befell the village, but does this suffice to explain the pervasive sense of oppression? The shore is polluted, but is it also haunted?

As I will show, the novel hovers between the ecocritical depiction of a contaminated shore—and the economic and psychological consequences of the ecological disaster on the village's inhabitants—and a Gothic sense of claustrophobia and oppression, expressed through the protagonists' dreams and memories as well as embodied in an external agency that keeps the village under constant surveillance. In this paper, I explore the mutual enhancement between ecological and psychological horror, which Menmuir effects by shifts in focalisation, chronological breaks, and the engagement with space. Space plays a key role for the novel's Gothic quality: in a constantly shifting and treacherous environment, sensory perception and memory appear more and more unreliable, until finally the boundaries of personal identity are as much eroded as the very ground beneath the villagers' feet. I therefore examine littoral space as a setting that has agency, looking specifically at the bay, Perran's house, and the flooded beach—the breakdown of fixed boundaries and stable grounds in which the novel culminates. While there are no explicit references to, for example, the works of Ann Radcliffe or Wilkie Collins, I regard these 'spatial frames' (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016: p. 24) as situated within the Gothic tradition, marked by isolation, secrecy, and a sense of being haunted by the past. I also draw on Laura White's (2020) concept of 'ecospectrality' to examine a potentially redemptive quality concealed beneath the horror, the possibility of connectedness not only between human agents, but also including nonhuman 'coinhabitants'. However, such a regenerative dimension is only hinted at in *The Many*, and remains overlaid by feelings of isolation and destruction.

The Bay

The littoral setting plays a decisive role in the process of disorientation which affects the characters as well as the readers. As scholars of littoral space emphasise, the most defining characteristic of the shore is its mutability: the constant shifting and changing of the terrain under the impact of the tides, wind and storms, erosion and silting. The atmospheric conditions at the coast undermine the dependability of the senses, and lead to a deeper 'epistemological uncertainty in those who live here', as Jimmy Packham (2019) has argued: 'Knowing and processes of perception and memory become almost tidal in this world, unfixed or unmoored from certainty' (p. 206). The setting on a lonely shore is thus concordant with the Gothic genre, traditionally 'at home in borderlands' (ibid.) and invested in the exploration of transgressions. This epistemological uncertainty of littoral space renders it particularly amenable to critical approaches that devote themselves to the exploration of ambiguity, indecision, hesitancy, and disorientation. Concepts such as Freud's 'uncanny' (2003), Derrida's 'hauntology' (1994), and White's 'ecospectrality' (2020) share an interest in the collapse or erosion of boundaries, not only between different real and semantic spaces (for example the realms of the dead and the living), but between different periods of time. The figurations of the spectre and of haunting signify just such a disruption of chronology, as White suggests: spectres 'resurface across centuries and continents, not only putting vast scales into intimate contact, but also making minute scales perceptible' (p. 2). Of these three approaches, White's is the only one to explicitly foreground the connection between spectrality and the ecological, and therefore lends itself particularly well for an analysis of Menmuir's ecoGothic entanglements.

The Many brings together the elements I am interested in here: the topographical instability and epistemological uncertainty of littoral space, a Gothic sensibility defined by ambiguity rather than downright horror, and the linking of ecological and psychological endangerment. While the fishing village remains nameless, and the location unspecified, personal names and topographical features point to a Cornish setting. *The Many* is thus situated in a tradition of Cornish Gothic, in which the region is associated with cultural marginalisation and economic depletion—following the mid-nineteenth century decline of its mining industry—as well as ecological damage and a threat to health, as Joan Passey (2016) has suggested: 'there is something unsustainable or toxic about the land itself' (p. 24). In Wilkie Collins' *The Dead Secret* (1856), to which Passey refers, it is both the setting and the sense of

haunting (by past offenses) that contribute to the endangerment of physical and mental health, especially of female characters. Even more than the land, it is the sea that is associated with the '[f]ragmentation and disintegration of bodily self and psyche' (pp. 27-28). For Passey, 'the sea is a vital peripheral location for describing disintegration and threat to both self and the self as a larger representation of society', while the shore is a site of transgression and the dissolution of boundaries; the shore is 'the space that isn't quite land and isn't quite sea; the space so hard to delineate, measure, know, is demarcated as dangerous, as where the sea and land ends is where life ends, connecting self to this notion of time as space, and space as time' (p. 28). We find a similar intertwining of spatial and temporal instability, personal disintegration, and narrative fusion of perspectives in Menmuir's novel.

A defining feature of the fishing village in *The Many* is its isolation from the outside world, both in the landward and the seaward direction.[7] The village is barely accessible by road, and Timothy's phone, his only connection to the outside world, keeps losing the signal. The bay where it is located is closed off from the open sea by a line of 'container ships three miles off shore; skeletal for their lack of cargo, idle sentries to an empty coast' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 23). The container ships are empty and unstaffed, and their presence, as so many oddities about the village, is oddly ineffectual, a meaningless bureaucratic act: they were installed as a barrier to control '*fish stocks in restricted zones*' and to contain '*harmful waterborne agents*' (p. 52, emphasis in the original), but of course the water and whatever is in it flows unhindered past the ships. Nevertheless, they seem to form a magic circle enclosing the bay, beyond which the fishermen do not venture. Their presence creates an atmosphere of oppression and surveillance, as experienced by Ethan on his round to inspect his—always empty—lobster traps:

> '[H]e has the feeling of being hemmed in from all sides and a thought rises in
> him that he could break through the line of ships, that he could break one of the
> unspoken rules of the fleet. He suppresses the thought, concentrating instead on
> the body of water in between the boat and the ships, looking for shadows in the
> water. He is close enough to the ships now to feel observed, though he cannot

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[7] An isolated setting is of course a staple feature of the classic Gothic novel, associated, in the works of Ann Radcliffe, with liberty as well as endangerment; in contrast, Matthew Lewis and the Marquis de Sade depict isolated nature as 'a feral place' where the innocent heroine is destroyed (Kröger 2013: p. 20).

recall, even when they first arrived, ever having seen lights or any movement

from the huge, rusting hulls' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 6).

This description of the container ships illustrates Menmuir's ecoGothic aesthetics, namely the blending of realistic description with a muted horror that feeds on allusions and lacunae rather than explicit evocations of endangerment. According to Ethan's recollection, the ships appeared on the horizon without any human agency, unstaffed and unlighted 'even when they first arrived'—ghost ships that close in the bay without practically hindering passage beyond the border they create. Ethan's sense of 'being hemmed in' is equally psychological; as a subsequent scene shows, passing beyond the line of ships is perfectly possible. In fact, not to cross the symbolic barrier is an 'unspoken rule of the fleet' rather than a decree that is enforced. But when Ethan contemplates the possibility of breaking this rule, he immediately suppresses the thought. The continued silent presence of the ships is thus effective on a psychological level, engrafting a sense of enclosure and surveillance. It is also significant that Ethan feels observed although he knows that there is no crew on board the ships. The 'multiple, automatic and anonymous power' (Foucault, 1995: p. 176) of modern surveillance is here taken a step further; Ethan and the other fishermen have internalised the injunction of governmental disciplinary power and obey the 'unspoken rule' not to venture beyond the symbolic barrier enclosing the bay, even if they *know* that the observer's position is empty. The bay is in fact a realisation of Foucault's ideal Panopticon, where the inhabitants are 'caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers' (Foucault, 1995: p. 201).

The inhabitants of the fishing village are thus more or less cut off from their wider surroundings, in a globalised world defined by accessibility and connectivity. They are restricted to fishing in the contaminated bay, and if their hauls are successful at all, the catch is diseased: 'The dogfish look burned, as though with acid, their eye sockets elongated and deep, showing through to the bone at the edges and there are white lesions down the side of each body' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 26). With products such as these, the villagers are isolated on a different level as well: they are cut off from a free market economy. Nevertheless, the inedible fish find buyers, apparently government agents (p. 27). Just like the container ships, these agents, looking 'out of place in the village' and 'at odds with their surroundings' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 27), suddenly appear out of nowhere to buy up all of the fish. While keeping the villagers in cash, this subsidised, closed economy contributes further to the community's

psychological stasis. In its multiple isolation and stagnancy, the village serves as an example of coastal communities which 'offer a particularly salient vision of world-ecological violence' (Campbell & Paye, 2020: p. 8). For Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye (2020):

> 'The novel's aesthetics of enclosure […] reveal that the oceanic "waste frontier" is not just a space filled with inedible fish and toxic water, but a zone bereft of promise, where the coastal "waste population" spend more time in the pub than on the water. […] But from an oceanic perspective, the tale operates as a meditation upon the collapse of coastal futures due to the failure of scientific and infrastructural fixes, as a community chooses to wallow in its own dissolution instead of facing up to its psychological and ecological loss' (pp. 9-10).

The ecological devastation of the sea is thus both the cause of and a metaphor for the village's current social, or rather, *a*social, condition. However, if the collective failure to protect the orphaned Perran from harm, and the subsequent failure to mourn him adequately, is an indication, the community has never been thriving. Its latent xenophobia, brought into the open by Timothy's arrival, reflects the locals' indifference towards nature, their purely economic relationship to the marine 'coinhabitants' (White, 2020: p. 4) of the bay, which they only perceive as more or less profitable merchandise. They are thus not only the victims of a global economy that accepts environmental damage as its premise, but are deeply implicated in its moral and economic structure, as they go on trawling an already depleted and toxic sea. On the macrolevel—the global food industry—and the microlevel—the local practices of the fishing village—this stance is tied to ecophobia. This 'uniquely human psychological condition' (Estok, 2018: p. 1) forms the basis for negative attitudes to nature, encompassing the spectrum of 'fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment' (ibid.). According to Estok, the ecophobic condition frames nature as an antagonist of humankind, and enables not only destructive acts against nature, but also inter-human violence such as terror and war—which in turn serve as metaphors for natural disasters (p. 50). Menmuir's novel depicts such violence, directed at everything felt to be alien, both in the devastation of the bay and in the villagers' attacks against Timothy and his house. However, *The Many* does not stop at an exploration of the ecophobic stance that marks the coastal community. Rather, the novel oscillates between ecophobia and ecospectrality, a concept that

focuses on the ambivalence rather than the abjection of nature. The diseased fish 'that *haunt* their polluted waters' (Campbell & Paye, 2020: p. 9, emphasis added) function as ecospectral reminders of a lost vital connection with the sea, and of a past in which fishing was a communal endeavour enabling forms of agency other than 'reactionary violence and grief' (p. 11). Tentatively, the novel thus also envisages the possibility of cohabitation and reconciliation, among humans as well as across human/nonhuman borders.

This potential is hinted at in a second trip on the *Great Hope*, Ethan's pathetically misnamed boat, during which Timothy persuades Ethan to venture beyond the line formed by the container ships. At first nothing spectacular happens, as Timothy exclaims: 'No one opened fire on us. No monster waiting for us on this side. No chasm opened up, dragging us down to the depths' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 55). Then, however, a weird kind of Miraculous Catch of Fish (Luke 5.1-7) happens. A shoal of fish appear, colourless and featureless creatures that embody the muted horror of *The Many*:

> 'The net, when they raise it, comes up heavy with pale bodies and both men work hard at getting the catch onto the deck. The fish they pull are colourless and long, and their scales, when Ethan lifts some of them with his knife, are translucent. Ethan holds one of the fish up and he sees its eyes are pale too, as though it does not see and has never seen, and it is dull and lifeless, though it has been less than a minute since they raised the net. Beneath the skin, the outlines of organs are visible, shadows in the pale flesh. As he picks up some of the fish, he sees, in some of them, that thick bunches of roe show through the distended skin of their underbellies' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 57).

This second haul is even more disturbing than the previous one, because these translucent creatures elude every categorisation. They do not belong to any known species, they are undead and yet lifeless, strangely immaterial and yet carriers of abundant new life in the thick bunches of roe shining through their transparent flesh. Despite Timothy's disclaimer, these malformed fish are monsters, evoking both horror and hope, as their abundance raises the expectation that the polluted sea may become ecologically sustainable once more.

For a very brief moment, the Miraculous Catch of Fish seems to promise a new start: for the fishing village, as the empty sea fills again with life; for the incipient friendship between Timothy and Ethan. But nothing comes of it. The abundant haul is never again repeated. Timothy's status in the village develops from an outsider met with hostility to a harbinger of new wealth, a 'golden hen' (p. 70), to descend again to a figure of ill portent who becomes the target of increasing anger and violence. The bay thus continues to function as a Gothic space, defined primarily by its closed-in quality. The two men's horizontal course across the surface of the water does not result in their liberation, despite their breaching of the physical and psychological barrier of the container ships. The deep gives them their catch of ghostly fish, but it does not disclose its mystery, or any mystery; the secrecy surrounding Perran's death, haunting Ethan and increasingly also Timothy, needs to be elucidated on land. But in a littoral setting, the land is equally shifting and elusive as the sea.

Perran's

In *The Many*, the topographical fluidity and epistemological uncertainty of littoral space is further reinforced by the narrative structure. Focalisation is closely tied to Timothy and Ethan, themselves highly troubled and unreliable observers. As we follow the story in chapters alternately told from their perspectives, a narrative emerges that is as mercurial as the shore itself. The storyline set in the present is further complicated by italicised sections referring to the past—to Ethan's and Timothy's history, respectively. While offset typographically, the distinction between the present and the past is blurred by the fact that both temporal levels are narrated in the present tense. The 'spatial form' of the text (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016: pp. 5-6) thus simultaneously contributes to elucidation—the cursive insertions partly explain the protagonists' psychological condition—and to a continuing, and even increasing, disorientation, as the differentiation between real and delusory experience, between memory and dream, as well as the differentiation between the characters themselves is eroded. The novel's textual form thus mirrors the tension between a realist and a Gothic narrative that we can also see on the semantic level. The narrative is in flux, and this corresponds to the mutability of its littoral setting.

As its main stylistic procedure, the novel sets up distinctions——insider vs. outsider, the taciturn Ethan vs. the loquacious Timothy, but also the sea vs. the land——and then

proceeds to undermine them. Further accentuating the theme of surveillance, the narrative emphasises acts of sensory perception, especially of seeing which is often connected to watching, even to spying on someone. Through the focalisers' perceptions, the novel constructs an impression of the environment which often turns out to be unreliable or incomplete, determined by a hidden personal history which is only gradually revealed. In the first two pages alone, focalised through Ethan, the fisherman is described as an alert watcher: Ethan 'spots' the smoke coming from Perran's house, 'scans the houses', 'lowers his eyes', and 'looks' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 1-2) again at the rising smoke—the only one of the fisherman to have noticed the anomaly of smoke rising from an abandoned house. However, this attention to the act of seeing is less an indication of Ethan's acuteness than of his obsession with the place, and the boy who used to live there. In the first of the italicised passages, we learn that Perran drowned, partly in result of Ethan's neglect. As the parentless boy served as a kind of guardian figure, 'a good luck charm' in Ethan's words (p. 75), for the fleet, his death is symbolically tied to the fishing village's decline, and a direct cause of Ethan's dejection. For Ethan, 'not moving into Perran's' (p. 2) is another of the unspoken rules of the community, unwittingly broken by Timothy.

As Timothy finds out when he moves in, the house is dilapidated, with 'peeling wallpaper and huge shadows of stains on the walls and ceilings' (p. 11), no central heating, flimsy furniture, and a general sense of desolation—'the shabbiness is far from rustic or endearing' (p. 13). More importantly, the house immediately becomes the focal point of the villagers' observation: 'Through gaps in curtains and stolen glances as they come within sight of Perran's, the village watches Timothy as he passes on his walks and runs, and as he carries out, over the period of several days, the tattered contents of Perran's house' (p. 20). Surveillance is thus not concentrated in a single point, as in Foucault's Panopticon, but dispersed among many observers. At least in the beginning, none of his new neighbours offers any help. Instead, they monitor closely his every movement 'as he runs out and back along the coast road': 'They count the minutes or sometimes the hours he is gone and obsess over where he might be until he returns and talk about him in the café and the pub' (p. 21). In addition to the governmental surveillance symbolised by the container ships, there is also an internal ring of vigilance, focusing on the stranger and emphasising his outsider status, a collective malevolent stance, triggered as much by his sudden appearance one night—like a ghost himself—as by the debased state of the community. Knowing nothing about Timothy, they

imagine him alternately as a saviour and a menace, come to 'hold up a mirror to them [in which] they will see themselves reflected back in all their faults and backwardness' (p. 21).

The only villager who tries not to join this vigilant circle is the one who is most obsessed with the former and the present inhabitant of the derelict house: 'Ethan tries to keep his eyes on the horizon, away from Perran's house, and avoids being drawn into conversation about the incomer, though he follows him more closely than any of the others' (p. 21). As Timothy begins to interact with the villagers, chatting up the fishermen and watching them launching their boats, Ethan—seeing Timothy seeing them—invests the stranger with preternatural meaning: 'Standing up on the sea road, Timothy looks down onto the beach, his collar pulled up around his ears, and Ethan wonders what type of omen this is, what effect the incomer's gaze will have on the trip' (p. 24). For Ethan, Timothy's appearance takes on the form of an 'ecospectral encounter', that is, an encounter that at least potentially uses 'disorientation and disruption of borders of time and space to make environmental threats tangible and to transmit environmental wisdom' (White, 2020: p. 3). Laura A. White here takes her cue from Jacques Derrida's (1994) idea of '*being-with* the other', with the spectre, as a way towards living 'otherwise, and better', or 'not better, but more justly' (p. xviii, emphasis in the original). In this ethical endeavour, the spectre functions as a conduit precisely because it is a stranger to life, an 'other at the edge of life'; only such a border figure can import the 'wisdom' of learning to live, through a 'heterodidactics between life and death' (ibid.). The wisdom of learning to live is also the aim pursued by White through her ecospectral readings. As she emphasises in reference to Derrida, the spectre is not just a figure of fear oriented towards the past, but has a double nature: 'the ghost as both revenant that returns the past to attention and arrivant that announces possible futures" (2020: p. 8). Ecospectrality thus uses the figure of the spectre to highlight the interconnectedness of past and present in the service of an ecologically viable, hospitable future.

While Timothy, by the very fact that he is a stranger, inspires fear and obsessive vigilance, he can also be seen as Perran's revenant. Transiently, he inherits Perran's role as 'a good-luck charm'. As an 'omen' affecting the fishing trip, Timothy may have a good or evil impact on the outcome; and for a short period following the Miraculous Catch of Fish, he seems to take on a positive role. For Ethan, Timothy's occupation of the space left empty by Perran's death, seen at first as an offence, offers the chance of healing the trauma of his own implication

in the boy's drowning. In other words, despite the novel's ecological bleakness, the entangled relations between the two men, the village, and the polluted bay are not exhaustively framed in ecophobic terms, seeing nature as menacing because it is agential (Estok, 2019: p. 41), but temporarily offer the potential of ecospectrality:

> 'Distinct from conceptions of ecogothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia which foreground fear and hatred directed at nature and opposed to models of haunting that aim at the resolution of the past and the exorcism of ghosts, ecospectrality seeks to mobilize the productive potentialities of haunting, with the consequence that instead of attempting to avoid or silence ghosts, texts that demonstrate ecospectrality seek to live with specters in the unstable time/spaces they open, offering this contact as an invitation to inhabit the current moment with awareness of a multitude of coinhabitants' (White, 2020: pp. 3-4).

If Timothy is seen as Perran's spectre, he can bridge the past and the present as well as serving as a connector between the village's inside and outside, its human inhabitants and the nonhuman coinhabitants in the sea. As Ethan overcomes his initial hostility and even makes a symbolic overture of friendship, such a movement across boundaries at least between human beings seems to be possible, and the breaching of the barrier enclosing the bay similarly promises, if not an ecological renewal of the bay, at least a new lease of life for the fishing fleet. However, as discussed above, the resurgence of a new multitude in the sea and therefore, renewed economic viability for the village, remains an anomaly, and the possibility of friendship is literally buried in Perran's garden.

The turn towards a more positive affective engagement between Ethan and Timothy is triggered by Ethan's recognition of the spectral connection between his dead friend and the newcomer. For a brief moment on board the *Great Hope*, Ethan has a vertiginous sense of recognising Perran in Timothy. This moment is truly ecospectral, destabilising space and time, as it is connected to a sense of vertigo prompted by the view of the empty horizon (as they are past the line of container ships), a feeling that 'if the world tipped, there would be nothing to stop them falling for as far as they could fall' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 56). The moment of recognition is marked by resistance—'Ethan observes Timothy and tries not to see Perran in him'—and silence—'neither man questions the other, as though they are each pushing the other

on' (p. 56). This mute bonding, which results in the extension of their fishing trip, immediately precedes the appearance of the shoal of spectral fish, their abundant catch. It is also a tipping point in the relationship between Ethan and Timothy.

As a gesture acknowledging his 'new sensation [about Timothy], one he can't explain to himself' (p. 59), Ethan keeps back some of the fish to deliver them secretly the following night to Perran's, or Timothy's house. However, this mute offering of friendship is not reciprocated, or not recognised as such by Timothy when he opens the parcel:

> 'In the torch beam he sees the translucence of the scales has already started to turn milk white. He looks at the small offering for a while and leaving the fish where they are, he returns to the house, and digs out from his toolbox a trowel, the only tool he has that will do the job. In the darkness, lit only by the light from his kitchen window and the torch, which he lays on the grass next to him, he digs a small grave for the fish beneath the tree furthest from the house, and buries them there, under the tattered streamers which hang from its branches' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 64-65).

Clearly, the gift of dead fish is not enough to establish an enduring relationship between the two men. If the silence they shared on the boat seemed to indicate a bond, now it signifies a fundamental failure of communication. Ethan can only articulate his 'new sensation' through his offering of fish, which in turn Timothy does not accept and consigns to the grave. Instead of being a symbol of new life and positive affect, the fish, not eaten but buried, become a grotesque figuration of death. Shrinking away from the community and rejecting Ethan's mute overture, Timothy finds himself both encircled and isolated; in Perran's house, he 'is profoundly alone' (p. 64). As the potential of the ecospectral encounter fails, each of the two men retreats into his own circle of silence and traumatic memories, as the external events spiral into violence perpetrated by humans and by nature.

Perran's house never truly becomes Timothy's home. As Freud explicates in his seminal essay *The Uncanny*, originally published in 1919, in German etymology the term *unheimlich* merges with its opposite, *heimlich*. The root of both words is *das Heim*, the home, which, as the site of repressed childhood trauma, becomes the true locale of the returned—

spectral—memory: 'The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, "the unhomely") is in some ways a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, "the homely")' (2003: 134). In this sense, Perran's house becomes the spatial frame of Timothy's double alienation: because he is seen as its unrightful occupier by the villagers, but also because the very materiality of the house resists his attempt to make it habitable, homely. Despite his efforts, the house 'is disintegrating under his care' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 69). In addition, the house becomes the site of oppressive nightmares of drowning and suffocation. The first dream takes up the themes of boundary crossing and tipping worlds, as Timothy swims impossibly far down through the regions of the deep seas, passing 'down through the warm and cold streams of the sea's subtle strata, until the light that floods the surface gives way to darkness' (p. 63). The journey across the sea's surface he undertook with Ethan is supplemented by a vertical dive into 'the deepest flooded valleys' (p. 63). But like all of Timothy's experiences in Perran's house, whether awake or dreaming, this dream journey is claustrophobic and nauseating. Timothy keeps retreating to the house as a safe haven against the villagers' hostility, but it is in the house itself, and partly caused by the house's adverse materiality—such as the lack of heating—that he undergoes the most intense physical and mental suffering.

In the second dream, the sea and the house merge into one. The dream begins by again invoking Timothy's role as a saviour, but in a way that strips off any messianic potential: 'Timothy has the feeling he could walk forward onto the water, as though he might be stepping not into something liquid, but onto a solid veneer that only has the semblance of water' (pp. 83-84). Like Jesus, Timothy can walk on the sea (Matthew 14.25-27), but in contrast to Jesus' feat Timothy's stepping out on the water's surface is neither connected to divinity nor to the power of faith, but is much more mundane: 'he steps out and is only partly surprised to find the water does not rise up over his shoes, but remains beneath his feet' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 84). Through this discrete biblical allusion, Timothy's potential as saviour is touched on but then dropped; as in the episode with the Miraculous Catch of Fish, the possibility of redemption remains spectral. The supernatural event has less to do with Timothy, a reluctant and inept Messiah at best, and more with the mutability of water, its 'extraordinary ability to metamorphose rapidly into substances with oppositional qualities' (Strang, 2004: p. 49), namely ice or steam. In this capacity for quick transformation consists, as Veronica Strang argues, the agency of water, its life-giving and destructive potential. Destruction by water, which will materialise in the final part of the novel, is already prefigured here. Timothy's dream

thus does not constitute a fantasy of human mastery over matter or nature (an ecophobic desire); it is rather a quirk of (dream) matter that allows him to walk over (liquid but simultaneously solid) water. This leads to an experience of profound disorientation, until Perran's house— 'though it is Perran's house as a child would render it' (p. 84)—emerges out of the vast empty landscape as a landmark towards which he can run. However, when he reaches it, the house provides only a very precarious shelter; 'the walls are thin—terribly thin' (p. 85), while around the house steep walls rise up enclosing it, and blocking out all the light. Then, another material transformation happens which, from an ecocritical perspective, points again to the transformative and agential quality of water:

> '[Timothy] looks up and out of the window again and he sees that what he had identified as steep walls around the house are actually made of water, an impossibly tall, dark wave. The water seethes and he can see within it the detritus it has ripped away from the ground on its long journey to the small house, and buried far within the wave he can make out some of the forms of the village and the coastline around, contained now within the crushing weight of thousands of tons of water. He sees, within the wave, the long bows of the container ships, weightless in the wave's body, and, though he cannot make them out clearly, he is sure he sees, suspended within its structure, the shapes of arms, legs and torsos too. As the wave approaches at what feels like impossible speed he feels the water draw all the heat from within the house, and the cold that penetrates far within him feels final and complete. Yet despite its speed, the water seems at the same time frozen, or slowed down […]' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 85-86).

As in Timothy's first fishing trip with Ethan, which also refers to Jesus on Lake Gennesaret and where the world seemed to tilt, in the dream the coordinates of the material world are out of kilter. A liquid acts like a solid; in fact, it appears to maintain both aggregate states at the same time: 'despite its speed, the water seems at the same time frozen'. The flat water surface rises up from the horizontal to the vertical to form a steep wall or wave. While tsunami waves of great height are, of course, nothing out of the ordinary, this wave behaves in a weird way in its 'impossible' height and its simultaneous great speed and slowness. Most importantly, the wave obliterates the distinction between the sea and land, as it not only carries along the detritus

it has swept up along the way, but the very 'village and the coastline around'. In the face of this tremendous force, the flimsy and childish house provides no shelter. At the same time, the boundary between the house he is dreaming about and the actual building in which the dream takes place collapses: 'the cold that penetrates far within him', in the dream resulting from the freezing power of the wave, is in fact the real cold of his bedroom, in which Timothy awakes drenched in sweat and severely ill.

To return once more to the concept of ecospectrality, in White's (2020) definition the destabilisation of time and space result in a productive opening up and reaching out, 'an invitation to inhabit the current moment with awareness of a multitude of coinhabitants' (p. 4). *The Many*, as the title suggests, plays with this possibility: despite the dire ecological state of the bay, the sea offers up its abundance of spectral fish. This image of a sea that is not empty but brimming with fish and other creatures is echoed in the dreams, Ethan's as well as Timothy's. However, the plenitude of the sea is less a wish fulfilment than a nightmare. In Timothy's second dream, the sea is replete with objects, but not with generative coinhabitants—rather it carries along detritus, the material traces of death and destruction. *The Many* takes a sceptical stance on abundance: the sea is full, but it is filled with the wrong stuff—toxic waste, unsaleable diseased fish, ghosts and monsters, and 'the shapes of arms, legs and torsos' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 86). For Timothy in particular, the plentiful offerings of the sea denote abhorrence rather than redemption. In a third dream, occurring after his—Perran's—house has been ransacked by the villagers, he sees himself standing by the moonlit sea. But this ultimate romantic trope is subverted into horror as 'they emerge' (p. 111), a 'faceless and featureless' multitude 'pouring out of the sea' (p. 112). It is their number that is shocking and overwhelming, the erasure of their individuality but also the fact that they do have a definite identity: 'Perran upon Perran upon Perran. Timothy knows they are all Perran and that each one of them has within him the potential for infinite variety' (p. 112). As they move towards Timothy, these Perrans are definitely threatening; like the wall of water in the previous dream, 'they block out the light from the moon' until 'the darkness takes him' (p. 112). In another italicised analepsis (pp. 124-128), we learn that Timothy (and his wife Lauren, who is supposed to join him once he has made the house habitable) had a stillborn son, also called Perran. This late disclosure has several effects: it converges Timothy's and Ethan's stories, as both are mourning a boy called Perran; it explains Timothy's own obsession with the mystery of the drowned boy; and it reinforces the spectral connections of the plot, the various identities

merging into each other. However, this network of recollections, rather than supporting chronotopic connectivity, and thus, ecospectrality, remains strangely evanescent. Just as Timothy has lost any memory of his son's features but '*all his memory can return for him is the sight of the crematorium tower*' (p. 122, emphasis in the original), so his sojourn at the fishing village will be erased: 'He has the sensation that when he walks away from the house for the final time, any memory he currently holds of it will fade completely' (p. 133). In the end, the novel renounces the hospitable potential of ecospectrality; instead, it leaves its protagonist suspended between the horror of an excessive multitude and the emptiness of erased memory.

Crumbling Ground

In a grand finale, the sea rises against the land, drowning the beach and obliterating the boundary between the beach and the village. This violent act of nature follows upon the destruction of Timothy's house by the villagers because he did not desist from enquiring about Perran; a final act of inhospitability which forces Timothy to leave for good. The wrecking of the interior is described in terms of a coastal disaster: the living room looks like 'the aftermath of a hurricane' (p. 113). As he is getting ready to leave and throws a last glance at the bay, Timothy sees 'something different' about the village and beach: 'he sees the sea has risen overnight and the beach has been entirely drowned, though there has been no storm and no warning of high tides' (p. 113). The violence wrought upon his house is paralleled by the natural destruction of the shore; it almost seems as if the unleashing of human malevolence, perceived by Timothy as 'elemental somehow' (p. 113), had triggered the sea's retaliation. However, the villagers' violence aimed at, and succeeded in, re-establishing a boundary that had been getting fragile: by destroying his dwelling, they reconfirmed Timothy as an outsider, as a stranger who was denied a place in the community. By contrast, the flood destroys the boundaries between the land and sea, the village and the beach; or rather, everything becomes beach, this in-between, mutable space:

> 'The water has risen above the height of the concrete wall that separates the
> beach from the village. The roof of the winch house is still visible, and sections
> of railing that run along the boundary between the beach and the road poke up
> out of the water. The café, too, is now an island floating in the sea. It looks as

though it has been unhitched from the land and stays where it is only for lack of movement in the water or air. The coast road, too, is under water along the sea front, and the waves lap at the foot of the houses on the other side of the road' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 113-114).

After the flood, the boundary markers separating the beach from inhabited land, and the road connecting the bay to the hinterland, are partly or totally submerged; the buildings important to communal life, the winch house and the café, have been transformed into 'floating' and desolate islands. The destructive agency of the sea, acting without any apparent natural cause, has accomplished in reality what Timothy had been dreaming about: the fusion of land and sea. This coalescence is only the first manifestation of a more profound reconfiguration of materiality, a literal cracking up of the world accompanied by a converse movement, the perceptual fusion between Ethan and Timothy. The deeper implications of these changes are disclosed only in the following chapter, focalised through Ethan.

As the waters fall away the next morning, Ethan takes stock of the destruction. If the demolition of his dwelling appeared to Timothy as inhuman, elemental, and resembling the aftermath of a hurricane, the damage wrought by the flood is described as partly domestic, turning human habitations inside out. At the waterfront café, the door was 'wrenched from its hinges', and 'tablecloths, salt cellars and menus have been dragged out of the building by the retreating water' (p. 116). Interior and exterior are mixed up, the one entangled with the other, as the sea water penetrates into the houses and wrecks the furniture, appliances, and machinery, while dragging bits and pieces out to the sea: 'The cove is littered with plastic bags, polysterene blocks, floating on the oil-slick water, and they are slowly being sucked out through the mouth of the cove with the tide' (p. 117). As in Timothy's dream of Perran's house, inside and outside are inseparably intertwined, just as the various sections of littoral space—beach, village, and sea—are no longer distinguishable, all covered by the same kind of debris. However, as Ethan soon discovers, the damage goes deeper and acquires a metaphysical quality:

'It takes him a while to understand what is wrong with the scene, and at first he thinks he must be mistaken, but as his eyes follow the outstretched cables and ropes down towards the beach, he sees it is no longer the same beach, and the stones that make it up are no longer the same stones. It is as though while the

space remains the same, it has been filled with items that are similar but not the same. He feels as though everything has been replaced by someone who knows this place well, but who has had to reconstruct it from memory. He looks around and the feeling compounds itself and although when he focuses on any one thing—the rocks at the mouth of the cove or the stones on the beach—and they match the image in his memory, he suddenly feels like a stranger in this place' (Menmuir, 2016: pp. 117-118).

While taking place in waking life, the scene has a dreamlike quality. It is uncanny in the truly Freudian sense: as simultaneously *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, secretive, familiar, domestic, and eerie, it 'involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced' (Royle, 2003: p. 1). Both aspects, Ethan's sense of identity and the robustness of his sensory experience, are affected by his perception that the spot he is standing on is 'no longer the same beach'. The subtle realignment of the material world around him, and consequently the alienation of the familiar place, results in Ethan's estrangement, from his native village but also from himself. The change is so impalpable and yet so profound that Ethan begins to doubt his senses. Timothy and Ethan now exchange places: as the former is preparing to leave, the role of stranger falls to the latter. The fairly realistic mode in which the flood and its aftermath are described at first, ultimately shifts into the uncanny as cracks emanating from the sea appear on the ground, and spread across the land and even onto people's bodies: 'Thin black lines that run the length of the beach from where they emerge out of the water, up through the stones towards the concrete wall' (p. 118). The lines proliferate and criss-cross before his eyes until they form a dense network of 'hairline fractures that run and spread throughout the fabric of the whole place' (p. 129), and through the fabric of his body, 'through his muscles and bones and all his tissues until his body is alive with lines' (p. 130). Only Ethan seems to be able to see them, so perhaps they are indications of his unhinged mental state, but perhaps they are 'signs of fissures too deep to contemplate' (p. 129), of a world breaking apart.

Ethan's disorientation is compounded by his isolation from his fellow-villagers, as he fails to communicate the observation nobody else seems to share: 'the words will not form in his mouth and he must keep them to himself, since no one else talks of them either' (pp. 129-130). At the beginning of the novel, his taciturnity was self-imposed; now, his inability to talk is a sign of his isolation and loss of self. Ethan's state can be read as a mental breakdown,

ending with his suicide by drowning—which in turns echoes both Timothy's earlier dive into the polluted bay, and Perran's death (Packham, 2019: p. 216). However, it is the question whether this cognitive and psychological collapse which accompanies the cracking up of the ground—suggesting an apocalyptic ending at least of this corner of the world—is really as ominous as it sounds. If acknowledging the multiple inhabitedness of the world, the vibrancy of matter in Jane Bennett's phrase (2010: p. xiii), is a sign of ecospectrality, then perhaps Ethan's sudden attunement to the hidden sights and sounds of nature indicates not his mental collapse and alienation, but his finding of a new kind of community, albeit only within the nonhuman realm. Yet this possibility never translates into the renewal of the life at the bay, as Ethan is only able to receive, not to transmit the signals from nature.

While Ethan has throughout been associated with vision, he now begins to hear 'a sound coming from the fissures' which he at first tries to block out but then strains to hear: 'And faint though it is, he recognises the sound, recognises it as a voice he knows as well as he knows his own' (p. 130). The voice is never explicitly identified, but it seems likely that this intimately known murmur belongs to Perran, and that its emanation from the ground is conciliatory as Ethan finally bends down to listen to it: 'He puts his ear to the ground and listens and after a while the sound of the waves ceases entirely and he is able to hear the voice from within the cracks clearly then' (p. 131). Ethan now can hear, but as 'there are still no words that form' (p. 131), he struggles to express the intense feeling connected to the voice. The ground beneath his feet has literally shifted and opened up, but whether the earth's murmuring conveys any 'environmental wisdom' (White, 2020: p. 3) or just white noise remains in suspension. In any case, Ethan ultimately fails to articulate whatever he has heard; he not only cannot answer Timothy's question that has been driving the plot forward and which he now remembers, 'Who was Perran?', but even 'the feeling he cannot answer this question is one he is unable to describe' (Menmuir, 2016: p. 131). The novel, which has been offering multiple possibilities of connection throughout, finally ends on a note of isolation for both its protagonists. Timothy, who in the final chapter observes Ethan's dive into the sea 'as though he is both within Ethan's body and watching him from without' (p. 140), similarly fails to articulate his strong feelings elicited by this momentary merging of identities. As he scans the sea for Ethan's body, 'there is nothing', so that he finally 'turns away' (p. 141).

The Many formally mirrors the structural qualities of littoral space. Just as the shore is constantly transformed by the movement of the tides, and sometimes completely made over by sudden storms and floods, the narrative shifts between moments of connectedness, even the fusion of selves, and the relapsing into isolation and silence. The limited storyworld it constructs, consisting of the enclosed bay, village, and shore, is mutable and elusive from the beginning. The spatial and temporal frames themselves are unstable, on a material as well as on a figurative level. The shore is polluted, but is it also haunted? To my opening question, the novel withholds an unequivocal answer. The protagonists' present is saturated with memories of the dead which Timothy, Ethan, and the villagers struggle to both recall and repress. But *The Many* replaces a linear understanding of time implied in the traditional notion of haunting with an entangled, ecospectral depiction of the past, present, and future. The coastal community thus is not the object of haunting by an external agency—from the past, from the outside—but is beset by the menace it engenders within itself. The bay's environmental pollution is the cause but also the metaphor of the villagers' stagnant, backward-looking, xenophobic, and ecophobic mindset, just as the final destruction by the freak flood mirrors the violence and disintegration of the community. However, it is less the threat, and occasional enactment, of damage that gives the novel its Gothic quality, but rather its aesthetic stance of withholding. By offering the reader a criss-crossed network of fine lines without a full articulation of their meaning, *The Many* maintains its enigmatic and disturbing atmosphere. Possible 'solutions', such as the incipient friendship between Ethan and Timothy, fade away, as connections fail to be made and questions remain unanswered. In the end, the reader is left, like Ethan, with the murmuring of a voice emanating from the ground, and like Timothy, with the view of the empty sea.

BIOGRAPHY

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