

<AT>**Walking with the Goat-God: Gothic Ecology in Algernon Blackwood's *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories***

<AA>Michelle Poland

<ABS>**Abstract**

In order to understand Earth's increasingly unpredictable climate, we must accept natural chaos and anthropogenic disturbance as a key component of our ecological and social future. Just as Heidi C.M. Scott's *Chaos and Cosmos* (2014) powerfully demonstrates that a postmodern view of chaotic nature is shown to have been harbouring Romantic and Victorian literary foundations, this article further suggests that chaos ecology also has its roots in the Gothic. Drawing on Algernon Blackwood's collection *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (1912), it tentatively begins to unearth some of the ways in which 'walking with Pan' could be anticipatory of ecological concepts recognised today. By rereading transcendental Pan from the context of a 'Gothic ecology', it explores how Blackwood transforms nature into a supernaturally powerful, inviting and terrifying character. In doing so, it becomes clear that disturbing Pan's garden may have far greater consequences for Blackwood's human wayfarers than for nature itself.

<KW>**Keywords:** Algernon Blackwood, Anthropocene, chaos ecology, ecocriticism, Gothic, Pan, walking

<EPI>We may yet concur ... that Pan keeps on being reborn, in all kinds of strange ways.

—Patricia Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 228.

<FL>In 2016, the International Commission on Stratigraphy considered formalising the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch, one that heralds the combined impact of human-produced and genuinely nonanthropogenic phenomena in the production of ecological catastrophe. Regardless of whether the Commission will ultimately declare a new geologic time frame, the changes that are occurring – including climate change, air pollution, land and water degradation, habitat appropriation and species extinction – have profound consequences for humanity. Science remains unparalleled in its contribution to the understanding of the effects of these environmental shifts, and is essential in our ability to anticipate, mitigate and adapt to changes in the future. Recent scholarship has further highlighted the need to take seriously the instrumental role the arts and humanities have to play in uprooting dominant anthropocentric ideology implicated in the current ecosocial crisis. Johan Rockström remarks: ‘Any profound changes in society would only happen, I knew, if a large enough percentage of citizens were convinced, felt engaged, and believed in something. A deep mind-shift was required for genuine change, and that couldn’t be reached through numbers alone. It had to come from both the heart and the brain’.<sup>1</sup> If the job of the scientific community, with its evidence-based research, testable hypotheses, simplification and abstraction, is to appeal to the rationality of the mind, then the arts have a responsibility to excite the passion of the heart in order to unearth the underlying roots of the ecological crisis. By providing a site of articulation for nonhuman identity, writers and artists are thus uniquely positioned to call forth the ‘deep mind-shift’, one moving away from the confines of otherness and towards a more inclusive *anotherness*.

The Anthropocene is an ecosocially interwoven narrative of change, chaos and interconnectedness. Up until well into the twentieth century, ecological theories favoured a portrait of nature that was fundamentally temperate, balanced and nurturing; its changes

gradual and purposeful. The mainstream ecology of today critiques this classic ‘balance paradigm’ as misleading, reductive and intoxicated with rationalism seeking to blueprint immensely diverse and complex natural systems. Within the past half century, ecological science has departed from these traditional frameworks, turning instead towards a new chaotic model of change in nature, one that navigates between perfect order and random disturbance. In *Chaos and Cosmos* (2014), Heidi C.M. Scott identifies at least three important ideological shifts from balance ecology to the era of chaos ecology. The first finding, she suggests, is that ecological communities are not moulded by ‘synergy and mutualism’ but by ‘chaotic and random’ forces that make changes in climate and landscape difficult to predict.<sup>2</sup> Second, a revision of Darwinian gradualism has demonstrated that evolution is not only based on adaptation, but also chance. In other words, extinction and evolution can be explained more effectively as the result of random environmental disturbances, be it small-scale disorder or far-reaching catastrophe, rather than through, say, interspecies competition or superior adaptations over deep time. Finally, recent human interference is the most significant factor in ecological disturbance, the impacts of which are heightened by the scientific proposal that ‘the background of nature is itself chaotic’. Classical views of an Edenic, balanced natural world that have dominated scientific perceptions since at least the Enlightenment are no longer conducive to understanding Earth’s increasingly unpredictable climate. ‘An accurate narrative vision of the coming centuries and climate’, Scott asserts, ‘requires our acceptance of chaos as a player in future scenarios’.<sup>3</sup>

The real crux of Scott’s thesis emphasises a need for an interdisciplinary approach to our understanding of modern nature, one that takes a distinctively fascinating step towards a viable theory of literary ecology. It claims that a postmodern view of chaotic nature is shown to have lurking Romantic and Victorian literary foundations; eras, of course, that were the

first to reflect upon landscapes dismembered by industrial production. Despite writing under the influence of nineteenth-century British constructs of gradualism, coherency, and balance, the works of authors such as Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells developed conceptual innovations of chaotic nature that certainly resonate with a contemporary outlook. Scott argues that, by demonstrating a kind of embryonic resemblance to theories such as population ecology, random disturbance and climate change, these narratives of interchanging harmony and spontaneity envision a disturbed nature moving downstream. She concludes that these literatures 'are precursors to contemporary chaos ecology because they all insist that natural and anthropogenic disturbance must figure in our understanding of modern nature'.<sup>4</sup>

The final note of Scott's thesis highlights the necessity of 'dislodging a few bricks from the walls between specialized disciplines'<sup>5</sup> and the importance of collaborative research in both understanding interactions between organisms and their habitats and overcoming the imminent environmental crisis. This is not to suggest that ecological aesthetics and environmental ethics are mutually inclusive, but it can certainly be said that to *know* nature is to understand how human impacts, big or small, can irreversibly transform nature, and through this knowledge we might begin to rouse the cultural mind-shift needed for radical change. This brief study, then, intends to dislodge a few more bricks. I take a few steps away from Romantic and Victorian writing and focus attention towards a Gothic volume, Algernon Blackwood's *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (1912), which we will examine through the theoretical lens of the ecogothic. The ecogothic is a new mode of critical inquiry first conceptualised in Tom J. Hillard's essay 'Deep into That Darkness Peering' (2009)<sup>6</sup> and materialising fully in *Ecogothic* (2013), edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes<sup>7</sup>. In a subsequent special issue of *Gothic Studies*, David Del Principe proposes that an ecogothic investigation should take 'a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear'.<sup>8</sup> The

ecogothic is still emerging from its literary pupa, but one clearly important function is to query how Gothicised texts embody the fears, wonders, and chaos surrounding ecological change and degradation within their retrospective cultural and historical moment, ultimately questioning what this might mean for humanity and our earthly home.

Blackwood's extensive creative output reflects his interests in science, a self-proclaimed 'earth passion',<sup>9</sup> and various branches of late Victorian and Edwardian mysticism. Aged seventeen, he developed an increasingly pantheistic view of the world, though it must be stressed that his interest in a wider world of religion was not necessarily a rejection of Christianity. Blackwood was also a devoted walker – walking is a practice that bears close relation to writing; think Wordsworth, after all. In the autumn of 1886, Blackwood moved to a guesthouse situated in a Swiss village called Bôle with two other English boys; this period proved to be a significant one in terms of the influence it had on his work. At night, the young Blackwood would venture out through the pine forests. 'Communion with nature was becoming like a drug to him. "It was a persistent craving," he admitted. Only alone with nature did Blackwood begin to experience a joy, even an ecstasy, which he never found in human relationships.'<sup>10</sup> Encounters with the wilderness on foot offered Blackwood a unique opportunity to engage in new experiences with the nonhuman world; he began to sense that everything around him was 'alive' and that somehow he may be able to communicate with it. Sixty years later, one of the boys who accompanied him to Bôle wrote to his friend to reminisce on their time spent there:

<EXT>I wonder if you remember a long night walk we made, up through the forest by Bôle, on to the mountain. ... [we] climbed for some hours reaching the summit of the mountain about midnight. I think you told us ghost stories to

keep our spirits up. On reaching the summit we made a fire and snatched a few hours rest and were then rewarded by having a magnificent view over the Alps.<sup>11</sup>

<FL>Traversing through the remote corners of nature and telling stories is certainly a description well suited to Blackwood's life. As we shall see, these adventures, coupled with his increasing enthusiasm for mystical studies, moulded and inspired the distinct tales of *Pan's Garden*.

Often 'governed by a very particular interpretation of the relations between "nature" and "spirit", considered in the widest applications of both terms',<sup>12</sup> Blackwood's work effortlessly builds a discourse around a shifting natural world and, regardless of whether this was consciously done or not, experiments with innovative ecological paradigms in a mode apt for testing out radical theoretical scenarios. In his riveting essay, 'Algernon Blackwood: Nature and Spirit', David Punter suggests that many of Blackwood's supernatural tales eminently lend themselves to ecological criticism, but he does so with great caution, if not reluctance:

<EXT>We might indeed say that at the heart of Blackwood's discourse of nature there lies something recognizable in contemporary terms as 'ecology', but I should perhaps say now that in my view 'ecology' is not a word with which we should feel particularly comfortable. There is a standing danger (of which some critics are aware) that it can come to signify a static condition, or at least a bounded, non-randomized one, a possibility that while, obviously, all manner of evolution will continue, nonetheless there is the possibility of

control over the courses it may take. To object to such a concept of control is, of course, to land on the side of the demons.<sup>13</sup>

<FL>He argues that it would be ‘terminologically incorrect’ to think of any of Blackwood’s writing in directly ecological terms primarily because of his uneasiness towards the significance of the word ‘ecology’. The extent of one’s discomfort with the term really is dependent on the kinds of ecological expression or principles being raised. This extract is clearly mindful of a classic paradigm of a balanced, ‘bounded’ and mappable nature; a portrayal that would make most contemporary ecocritics inclined to agree with Punter’s well-founded concerns. Of course, there is a widespread awareness in the field of ecocriticism that models of ecological harmony have long been outdated. In the ground-breaking *Discordant Harmonies* (1990), Daniel B. Botkin challenges the dominant view that nature, if left undisturbed, would return to some kind of pristine origin. ‘We have tended to view nature as a Kodachrome still-life’, Botkin criticises, ‘but nature is a moving picture show’.<sup>14</sup> Particularly in recent years, ‘disturbed’ nature has succeeded traditional perceptions as the nexus for ecocritical concern. We might cite Timothy Clark’s *Ecocriticism of the Edge* (2015) as a recent example which, interestingly, extends the notion of disorder beyond the physical and geological to include the temporal, cultural and political aspects of global environmental issues.

Integral to our reading is the perception of nature as unpredictable and dynamic, rendering humanity powerless in the shadow of its awe-inspiring riots and sensationally terrifying occurrences. This ecology of disturbance would certainly be suited to the ‘narrative chaos’<sup>15</sup> at play in *Pan’s Garden* which sees a radical shift from nature as a stage for human actors to nature as an actor in the production of terror and wonder, horror and delight, and

unadulterated panic, the most chaotic of fears. Punter's hesitation arises out of further concern for the potential anachronistic imposition of postmodern ecological perspectives into the early twentieth-century literary imagination. This line of investigation must be carefully undertaken; however, while it would be overreaching to claim that Blackwood's volume played a causal role in the development of ecological epistemology, we can suggest that it is, at the very least, anticipatory. Blackwood was writing at the advent of the First World War, which made combat a powerful agent of geomorphic change. Devastated landscapes of the Western Front, global acceleration of deforestation and timber harvesting, accentuation of oil production in Mexico for tanks, airplanes and submarines, and wheat farming in the United States and Canada, to name a few examples of the war's environmental legacy, proliferated the story of anthro-nature.<sup>16</sup> The chaos trope can be used to show how writers began reconfiguring their environments in the shadow of looming global warfare, as well as the continuing exponential increase in industrial production. To be sure, there are some intriguing moments in Blackwood's chilling stories that signal natural patterns of interconnectedness, a loss of control, and disturbance in an increasingly disrupted world; moments that refute the common notion of nature as a static, controllable object submissive to our incursions.

We might say that to object to such a concept of control is not to land on the side of the demons, but to land squarely in the garden of the ancient goat-god, Pan. First worshipped by Arcadian shepherds, the Pan motif certainly has a long and vibrant history. He was comic-grotesque little country god in various Greco-Roman mythologies; a malevolent, Satanic figure in some Judeo-Christian contexts; and Renaissance reconstructions equated him with Greek civilisation, its culture and its pagan vitality. Modern myths of Pan are just as complex. The pastoral Pan of Romanticism was benevolent, and often represented the countryside as opposed to the city; some Victorian writers associated him with sex, vulgarity and instinct;



and in the hands of horror writers such as Arthur Machen, Pan adopts a decidedly sinister role, a vision of evil that invokes power through ‘Panic’ terror.<sup>17</sup> E.M. Forster and Blackwood have written stories where Pan motivates the plot in a double fashion, invoking both terror and wonder. In Forster’s ‘The Story of a Panic’ (1904)<sup>18</sup>, Pan is the guide into a profound mystical experience and reveals an inwardly and outwardly compressed world to those characters capable of perceiving it, while others are forced to flee in terror. Patricia Merivale suggests that, however farfetched and however contradictory some of the depictions of the Pan motif are, one figure lies behind them all:

<EXT>Pan ... the god of the rustics, whom they have formed in the shape of Nature; wherefore he is called Pan, that is, All. For they form him out of every element. For he has horns in the shape of the rays of the sun and the moon. He has skin with marked spots, because of the stars of the sky. His face is red, in the likeness of the upper air. He carries a pipe with seven reeds, because of the harmony of heaven in which there are seven notes and seven distinctions of tones. He is hairy, since the earth is clothed and is stirred by the winds. His lower part is filthy, because of trees and wild beasts and herds. He has goat hoofs, to show forth the solidity of the earth, he whom they desire as the god of things and of all nature: whence they call him Pan, as if to say Everything.<sup>19</sup>

<FL>Pan’s unchanging form is the paradox of being made up of ‘goatish earth’ and celestial heavens; an embodiment of the universe, or ‘All’. Such a Pan can be a mischievous feature in an Arcadian description or, like *Pan’s Garden*, he can be transcendental nature in which ‘humanity ought to acknowledge its membership’.<sup>20</sup> As for the fate of the characters found wandering in Pan’s world, they become subject to both Satanic and beatific mystic visions

which demonstrate an awareness of ‘other lives’ that dwell just beyond the veil of consciousness. Thus, Pan has also come to mean the nature ‘out there’ and the nature ‘in here’, identifying with both a physical landscape and an ambivalent inscape. Essentially, to walk in Pan’s garden is to experience a collusion of boundaries, human and nonhuman, inner and outer, and balance and chaos, that falls poignantly in an alternative state between celebration and suffering.

Drawing on ‘The Man whom the Trees Loved’ and ‘The Heath Fire’ from Blackwood’s volume, the following inquiry will begin to unearth some of the ways in which ‘walking with Pan’ could be conducive to, or even proleptic of, the exploration of ecological concepts, specifically the chaos trope. Given what we now know about chaos ecology, the goat-god, Blackwood and his expeditions, we may begin to conceptualise the notion of ‘walking with Pan’ as an opportunity to reassess, through Blackwood’s tales, the complex relationship with our planetary home. In doing so, I build upon the framework for a ‘Gothic ecology’, a promising concept developed by Lisa Kröger.<sup>21</sup> By borrowing some theoretical thinking from Bate’s *Romantic Ecology*, Kröger suggests that the dual nature of the Gothic environment – a source of both pleasure and pain – helps to create a Gothic ecology, which demonstrates a convergence of the human and the natural world. While a Romantic ecology reverences the green earth because it proclaims ‘that there is “one life” within us and abroad’,<sup>22</sup> a Gothic ecology reveals the dystopian aftermath of those societies working diligently to sever that relationship. Such a rereading of Pan leads to important questions: When we step into his wild abode, in what ways does Pan’s nature unveil not only the unsettling presence of otherness but, more importantly, anotherness? What role does chaos and disturbance play in propelling the narrative forward? How might the transcendental ‘experience of hair and hooves’<sup>23</sup> expose the perils, or purchase, of a ‘Gothic ecology’?

Fundamentally, adventures with Pan serve to remind us of what advanced capitalist ‘culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself’<sup>24</sup> – that is, the wonder, horror, chaos and ‘complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves’.<sup>25</sup>

Blackwood’s volume opens with ‘The Man whom the Trees Loved’, a story about David Bittacy, the forest-ranger protagonist who, having spent most of his life roaming the jungles of the Eastern world, continues to care for the inspirited trees of an English wood. He ‘understood trees, felt a subtle sense of communion with them’<sup>26</sup> but, ultimately, the influence which they wield over his life proves too great and he is eventually subsumed into the collective consciousness of Pan’s forest. We should emphasise the significance of the title’s passivity here, for it is indeed ‘the man whom the trees loved’ and not ‘the man who loved the trees’ as you might expect. Dominant presumptions of a static nature are immediately challenged as it suggests that the trees of Pan’s forest are dynamic, creative and responsive. Reflective of Blackwood’s enthusiasm of Eastern wisdom and philosophy, the title signifies agency and subjectivity on the part of the trees, demonstrating that the natural and the supernatural are now one.

It is significant that ‘The Man whom the Trees Loved’ should be the initial story in *Pan’s Garden*, chiefly because the tale expresses an innovative introduction to ecology’s most basic premise: interrelatedness. Neil Evernden explains:

<EXT>To the western mind, *inter-related* implies a causal connectedness.

Things are inter-related if a change in one affects another. So to say that all things are inter-related simply implies that if we wish to develop our “‘resources’,” we must find some technological means to defuse the

interaction. The solution to pollution is dilution. But what is actually involved is a genuine *intermingling* of parts of the ecosystem. There are no discrete entities. As Paul Shepard described it in one of his many fine essays, the epidermis of the skin is “ecologically like a pond surface or forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration’.”<sup>27</sup>

<FL>The discourse of ecology was a severe blow to assumptions of discreteness and the pigeonhole mentality, arguing instead for the individual as a part of, and not something distinct from, the rest of the environment. We may thus contend that the really subversive element in Pan’s garden is one that opens the gate of ‘human self-enclosure’<sup>28</sup> and enters into a radical immersion with the more-than-human world. For the willing wayfarer, Bittacy, this involves a disbandment of physical and spiritual thresholds. Upon each return from his forestry voyages, the narrator notes subtle and gradual transformations in his appearance: ‘his hair was untidy’, like that of a woody crown, ‘and his boots were caked with blackish mud’, resembling a trunk. His mannerisms, too, became entangled with the forest world as he ‘moved with a restless swaying motion’, something similar to a ‘man, like a tree, walking’.<sup>29</sup> Spiritually, of course, he is steadily and disquietingly seduced by the power of the forest canopy; his voice is heard ‘roaring [in] the Forest further out’ by his horrified wife. In the end, Bittacy becomes one with the trees, becomes ‘another’, making it apparent ‘that now, as in the past, the roots of his being are in the earth’.<sup>30</sup>

What seems to me the most interesting here is not necessarily Blackwood’s inventiveness in sketching out a portrayal of ecological intermingling, but the questions it raises about what the pleasure or pain would be if we were to succumb to Pan; that is, to find ourselves exposed to ‘natural’ forces continually undermining our humanness. On the one

hand, the receptive character of Mr Bittacy is emblematic of the recurrent theme of ecological oneness, rejecting the opposition, dualism and isolation inherent to much Western thought. This essential harmony with all things could be identified with a Freudian sense of ‘oceanic’ unity between the self and the world about it: ‘Originally the ego includes everything’, Freud explains, ‘later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed all-embracing – feeling which corresponds to a once intimate bond between the ego and the world about it’.<sup>31</sup> Freud proposed that the boundaries between the ego and the external world are not constant, and identified the present adult’s ego-feeling as a kind of communal and neurotic attempt at willed seclusion. Mr Bittacy’s spiritual transition captures this lost sense of identity because his well- formed and defended ego is re-immersed both outwardly, with the physical world about it, and inwardly, with the primitive force of instinct. Once the ego’s clear, sharp lines of demarcation have been disturbed, he is able to fully engage in a full life, most wondrous.

Conversely, on her excursions into the forest, the strictly evangelical Mrs Bittacy eludes and is excluded from this ‘all-embracing’ feeling: ‘Resist the devil!’<sup>32</sup> she says. Paula Gunn Allen describes the Judeo-Christian perception of the world as ‘a great hierarchical ladder of being ... on which ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man ... a very high one indeed’.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, we can assume that resisting the devil is a metaphor. Just as Adam and Eve were tempted by the snake, Mrs Bittacy is fearful of the consequences of being seduced by Pan, of accepting the knowledge that ‘we humans are not the only beings on the planet’,<sup>34</sup> to quote Blackwood directly. Invariably, she does ‘resist the devil’ and the narrator assigns ‘Solitude’ as the cause of Mrs Bittacy’s demise. It is further poignant that the lone cedar tree – a symbol of picturesque and semi-artificial landscapes – from their garden is left in ruins at the precise moment when Mr Bittacy yields

to the forest. The ‘gaunt and crippled trunk’<sup>35</sup> leaves the reader with an image that evocatively hints at a prevailing motif: Pan’s Earth will discard those who attempt to despoil it. Not only is this tale a rejection of the isolation peculiar to anthropocentric religious dogma, but the tale revels in those moments when the natural state of existence is whole.

Yet this experience of Pan is a far cry from any romantic notions of a nature that is fundamentally balanced or harmonious. In fact, terror is created most convincingly in moments when divisions and polarities are not diffused, but are abruptly reversed in order to demonstrate a new kind of chaotic unity. One example is how the tale disturbs the relationship between the Bittacys and the environment:

<EXT>But what caught her unawares was the horrid thing that by this fact of sudden, unexpected waking she had surprised these other things in the room, beside the very bed, gathered close about him while he slept. ... For wet and shimmering presences stood grouped all round that bed. She saw their outline underneath the ceiling, the green, spread bulk of them, their vague extension over walls and furniture. They shifted to and fro ... Cold seized her. The sheets against her body turned to ice.<sup>36</sup>

<FL>The story climaxes in the wake of the couple’s gradual ‘mental disruption and collapse’, and the forest breaks out in a riot of victorious celebration; branches drumming, trees are wildly tossing their bushy heads, trunks which that had broken loose began to walk, run, and leap, ‘their roots swept trailing over field and hedge and roof.’<sup>37</sup> It is no longer the Bittacys who choose to wander through a seemingly static forest; instead, a malevolent sylvan presence purposefully invades their commonplace reality.

c-five per cent – The novella shows a perverse reversal of the ecocolonial project by depicting the decline of human control as Bittacy is colonized and possessed by the trees. By disordering the subject-object distinction, the assumption that an assault on British woods was a healthy endeavour is put into disarray. Moreover, in September of 1919, the Forestry Act and the Forest Commission came into force. This was committed to developing afforestation, but its justification was built on a foundation of utility, responsible for building and maintaining a strategic timber reserve. A major consideration of ‘The Man whom the Trees Loved’ is how encountering Pan can transform perceptions of the forest from a quantifiable mass of wood into a supernaturally powerful, communicative, unpredictable and nurturing character. Blackwood expresses uneasiness towards the costs of anthropogenic disturbance in an already unstable nature through these role reversals and implicitly suggests that the repercussions of ecological degradation may have far greater consequences for humanity than for nature itself.

Conceptions of a chaotic worldview are a theme further explored in ‘The Heath Fire’.<sup>38</sup> ‘The Heath Fire’ is the story of one uncharacteristically hot September when inexplicably intense heath fires are breaking out in an isolated patch of Surrey. The short story splits roughly into two halves. The first surrounds a group of Englishmen at luncheon, speculating over the mysterious cause of these sudden eruptions. The second follows the artist of the group, Jim O’Hara, who, armed with the conviction that the unusual heat is prompted by a spiritual awakening of the central fires of the Earth, marches into the charred wasteland of Thursley Common searching for answers. As it happens, O’Hara is right. Enamoured by the Sun and fire, he surrenders to the same fate as Bittacy; he becomes one with ‘the heat and fire of the universe itself’ in a moment of wondrous and sublime terror until, at last, the flames claim him.

Before we delve into the mythic eccentricity that dominates the latter half of the tale, I would like to contextualise the blazing calamities introduced in the former half. There are certainly links to be drawn between ‘The Heath Fire’ and specific moments in history, when unusual weather events and apocalyptic hysteria contrast notions of a nature in balanced predictability. ‘There was *panic* in the air in May 1910’<sup>39</sup> when Halley’s Comet threatened to wipe out the Earth’s population. According to Mike Ashley’s biography, Blackwood watched the comet in the predawn hours of 18 May from the deck of a small Mediterranean steamer. In the summer of 1911, the United Kingdom suffered a particularly severe heatwave and associated drought. Juliet Nicolson notes in *The Perfect Summer* that *The Times* had begun to run a regular column under the heading of ‘Deaths from Heat’<sup>40</sup>, and recalls the various socially disastrous effects of the record heat, including the outburst of spontaneous fires along the railway tracks at Ascot, Bagshot and Bracknell, and the gorse on Greenham Common near Newbury. The argument that socioecological mayhem is a pervading theme in *Pan’s Garden* is further augmented when you consider that Blackwood was writing in the wake of actual volcanic cataclysms of Mount Etna, which erupted with striking regularity through the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1908, a combination earthquake and volcanic eruption wiped out the cities of Messina and Reggio, and the earthquake subsequently triggered a tsunami which killed more than ninety-six thousand people. Mount Etna erupted again in 1910 and 1911, the first eruption creating over twenty craters that ejected lava and bombs, together with clouds of steam and ash; it lasted twenty-nine days. During the luncheon, Rennie even makes reference to ‘old Etna, the giant of ’em all, breaking out in fifty new mouths of flame. Heat is latent in everything, only waiting to be called out’.<sup>41</sup>



Instinctively, the group are drawn to conversation that presents, dare I say, ‘rational’ and commonplace suggestions as to the queer circumstances of the fires, such as live coal or engine sparks, and they are hopeful that these events could be written off as purely ‘natural disasters’. However, their uneasiness at O’Hara’s determination that other mysterious forces have a part to play is telling:

<EXT>... the talk became of a sudden less casual, frank, familiar ... Being a group of normal Englishmen, they disliked mystery; it made them feel uncomfortable; for the things O’Hara hinted at had touched that kind of elemental terror that lurks secretly in all human beings. Guarded by ‘culture,’ but never wholly concealed, the unwelcome thing made its presence known – the hint of primitive dread that, for instance, great thunder-storms, tidal waves, or violent conflagrations rouse.<sup>42</sup>

<FL>Some ecocritical scholars have advanced the argument – Kate Rigby’s *Dancing with Disaster* (2015) is probably the most recent and apposite example – that the concept of ‘natural disaster’ is a pervading modern myth of our time. No disaster is ever purely natural because it is inherently forged in the intersection between unfolding, ecological upheaval and human society and technology. ‘The entanglement of ... social relations and natural phenomena, has become veiled’,<sup>43</sup> Rigby observes. That the Englishmen, who the narrator tells us ‘disliked mystery’, are eager to accept the more obvious and unimaginative causes of the fires is symbolic of a broader cultural willingness to keep the veil firmly shut, to keep human civilisation on one side of the fence and Pan’s garden on the other. O’Hara’s claims are unsettling to the men because the type of environment he hints at is wilful, vindictive, and powerfully destructive, and we are an indissoluble part of it. Given that the UK was enduring

spectacularly hot weather, we may speculate that Blackwood was drawing on real conversations being had at the time. 'Guarded by 'culture'', the Englishmen continue to believe that they can predict nature's meanderings and even manage it. The narrator seems to suggest that in the face of 'thunder-storms, tidal waves, or violent conflagrations', it becomes difficult to deny the perilous knowledge that instability, rhythmical movement and dramatic changes of states, perpetuated by circumstances sometimes beyond our understanding, are ordinary aspects of the Earth and therefore of human society. Once again, we find that the story culminates only when O'Hara steps out of the enclosures of human civilisation and into the 'Panic landscape', a space 'where strange phenomena take place, irrespective of human will and power.'<sup>44</sup>

As O'Hara wanders through the 'deep emptiness' of the blackened heather-lands, we are offered a kind of microcosmic glimpse of the powerlessness of man in the face of a fiery, warming and punctuated landscape: 'For fire, mysterious symbol of universal life, spirit that prodigally gives itself without itself diminishing, had passed in power across this ancient heather-land, leaving the soul of it all naked and unashamed. The sun had loved it. The fires below had risen up and answered. They had known that union with their source which some call death . . .'.<sup>45</sup> Though Blackwood could not have had any inkling of future anthropogenic climate change, the idea that sudden weather changes, alarming geological events, climate chaos, and resulting species extinction, were a part of the Earth's planetary history was an unnerving record. Even in the early twentieth century, when gradualism and coherent evolution were popular constructs, this past opened up the possibility that humanity too could one day be extinct. Interestingly, punctuation is used masterfully to reflect a punctuated landscape; note 'death . . .'. Blackwood uses en dashes and ellipses points excessively and they appear at moments when coherence and understanding are lost or overwhelmed. As a

result, the reading becomes slightly haphazard, reflecting the turbulent and mysteriously erratic elements of nature. Writing under the influence of these strange and severe conditions in the UK and throughout Europe, Blackwood may have been coaxed into writing ‘The Heath Fire’ because of the alarming though speculative prospect that our chaotic planetary past may come back to haunt us.

Like the other travellers of Pan’s garden, O’Hara’s mind and body become weakened by the elements around him: ‘he realized then that “within” and “without” had turned one ... He was linked with the sun and the farthest star, and in his little finger glowed the heat and fire of the universe itself’.<sup>46</sup> As the veil of reason and denial is torn back, he finds himself exposed to ‘natural’ and spiritual forces far greater than he can comprehend. His soul ‘passed in fiery heat outwards towards its source’, and he is possessed by a sublime Panic terror which he never recovers from. Two days later, O’Hara dies from a ‘rapid’ and ‘furious’ fever. Invariably, it is the human component that suffers most in many of Blackwood’s curious tales, and therein lies an implicit questioning of the self-appointed position of human supremacy. By sketching out a localised climate shift towards a desert-like ecosystem that exaggerates the conditions of the summer of 1911, it suggests that we must learn, to borrow from Rigby, to *dance* with the instability, chaos, and change intrinsic to the Earth’s past, present, and future. For humanity to continue flourishing, we must not walk detachedly through Pan’s garden, but dance with him.

As the excerpt from Patricia Merivale’s thesis at the beginning of this essay article suggests, Pan *does* keep on being born in all sorts of strange ways. The declaration of the Anthropocene as a new geological era is surely imminent and if we are to develop a constructive approach to solving our ecosocial problems, we must insist that natural chaos

and anthropogenic disturbance figure in our understanding of modern nature. One of the ways ecogothicists can begin to do this is to ask how writers of the past/present sought/seek to communicate and reconfigure the continually changing landscapes of their lifetime and express anxieties about future conditions. In the case of Blackwood's volume, the frenzied, unpredictable, and transcendently elusive myth of the goat-god, Pan, is innovatively and imaginatively employed to question the claim of the paradigm of balance in nature. In his garden, one that is at once alluring and hostile, we find that encounters with Pan collapse the modern-day myth of humanity in isolation from the rest of the earthly forms of life. Often reflective of the unusual circumstances of twentieth-century British social and environmental scenes, Blackwood creates a mystical world that is impressively anticipatory of a postmodern chaotic nature steering between models of balance and cataclysm, and wonder and terror. As we walk with Pan, we are guided seamlessly towards a Gothic ecology, one that serves to remind us that 'the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at *our* peril'.<sup>47</sup>

**Biographical Note:** <BIO>Michelle Poland is a full-time doctoral student researching a thesis on the 'Ecogothic Imagination' at the University of Lincoln. She is Membership Secretary to the Tennyson Society and a Postgraduate Representative on the executive committee of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, UK and Ireland.

#### <HDA>Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum, *Big World Small Planet*, ed. Peter Miller (Stockholm: Max Ström, 2015), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Heidi C. M. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 2-3.

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<sup>3</sup>. Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>. Ibid., 23.

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid., 194.

<sup>6</sup> Tom J. Hillard, 'Deep into That Darkness Peering', in *ISLE 16, no.4 (2009)*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ecogothic*, ed. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup>. David Del Principe, 'European and Italian EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Gothic Studies* 16, no. 1 (2011): 1.

<sup>9</sup>. Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood* (London: Constable, 2001), 173.

<sup>10</sup>. Ibid., 22.

<sup>11</sup>. Letter, Percy Radcliffe to Blackwood, 21 August 1947, in *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup>. David Punter, 'Algernon Blackwood: nature and spirit', in Smith and Hughes, *Ecogothic*, 44–58, here 45.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., 47.

<sup>14</sup>. Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>15</sup>. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 13.

<sup>16</sup>. For further details of the environmental impacts of the First World War, with a useful bibliography attached, see Tait Keller, 'Destruction of the Ecosystem', in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), accessed 24 April 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10371> (accessed 24 April 2016).

<sup>17</sup>. See Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*.

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- <sup>18</sup> E. M. Forster, 'The Story of a Panic', in *Collected Short Stories of E. M. Forster*, introduction by Edward Morgan (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947).
- <sup>19</sup> 'De Deis Gentium' (Ch. XI, sec. I.d.), *Originum*, VIII, in *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1601), 113. Extract and translation sourced from Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*, 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*, 228.
- <sup>21</sup> Lisa Kröger, 'Panic, paranoia, and pathos: ecocriticism in the eighteenth-century Gothic novel', in Smith and Hughes, *Ecogothic*, 15–28.
- <sup>22</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), 40.
- <sup>23</sup> James Hillman, *Pan and the Nightmare* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 1972), 82.
- <sup>24</sup> Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Shepard, 'Ecology and Man – A Viewpoint', introduction to *The Subversive Science*, ed. Paul Shepard and Daniel Mckinley (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 2.
- <sup>26</sup> Algernon Blackwood, 'The Man whom the Trees Loved', in *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 1–99, here 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Neil Evernden, 'Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 92–105, here 93.
- <sup>28</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 122.
- <sup>29</sup> Blackwood, 'The Man whom the Trees Loved', 71.
- <sup>30</sup> Harold Fromm, 'From Transcendence to Obsolescence', in Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 35.

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- <sup>31</sup>. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), 5.
- <sup>32</sup>. Blackwood, 'The Man whom the Trees Loved', 97.
- <sup>33</sup>. Paula Gunn Allen, 'The Sacred Hoop', in Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 241--263, here 246.
- <sup>34</sup>. Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 19.
- <sup>35</sup>. Blackwood, 'The Man whom the Trees Loved', 98.
- <sup>36</sup>. *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>37</sup>. *Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>38</sup>. Algernon Blackwood, 'The Heath Fire', in *Pan's Garden*, 151--162.
- <sup>39</sup>. Ashley, *Starlight Man*, 155. Emphasis added.
- <sup>40</sup> Juliet Nicolson, *The Perfect Summer: Dancing into Shadow in 1911* (London: John Murray, 2007), p.148.
- <sup>41</sup>. Blackwood, 'The Heath Fire', 155.
- <sup>42</sup>. *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>43</sup>. Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 6.
- <sup>44</sup>. Philippe Borgeaud, *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, trans. Kathleen Atlass and James Redfield (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 59.
- <sup>45</sup>. Blackwood, 'The Heath Fire', 159--160.
- <sup>46</sup>. *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>47</sup>. Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, 40. Emphasis added.