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The abcanny politics of landscape in Lucy Wood's *Diving Belles*

ABSTRACT

In a recent article on the eeriness of the English countryside, Robert Macfarlane juxtaposes an official version of English culture, which emphasizes heritage, progress and national unity, with the unofficial versions of 'Englishness' being offered by writers, artists, musicians and filmmakers that emphasize local differences, dispossessed peoples or communities, and historical decay or regression. These themes, according to Macfarlane, are mediated through preoccupations with violence, ruins and the uncanny – the revival of interest in Weird fiction writers, such as M. R. James, being exemplary. This article takes up but also expands upon Macfarlane's argument by focussing on a recent text: Lucy Wood's 2012 collection, Diving Belles. Of interest here is Wood's use of the Cornish landscape that she invests not only with literal spirits and ghosts but also with a Weird-like sense of what China Miéville has termed the 'abcanny', such that her stories hover somewhere between the traditional ghost story, mundane realism and a peculiarly English variant of magical realism. Although there is little overt political content in Wood's stories, this article argues that the abcanny form of her stories, whilst also contesting heritage-based representations of Cornwall, mediates the ambiguous relationship of Cornwall towards the English political heartlands. In this sense, then, Macfarlane's argument can be helpfully developed since, whilst haunted versions of the English countryside can become assimilated into an official model of national heritage, the abcanny landscape remains estranged from such cultural and political appropriation.

KEYWORDS

Lucy Wood
Cornwall
landscape
folklore
Robert Macfarlane
weird fiction

In April 2015, the nature writer Robert Macfarlane published an evocative article in *The Guardian* entitled 'The eeriness of the English countryside'. Commencing from a brief account of M. R. James' supernatural tale, 'A View from a Hill' (1925), Macfarlane suggests that the eerie is already constituted through the landscape and that, unlike Sigmund Freud's now-familiar reading of the uncanny, the eerie is not oriented towards the subject but its object; it comes from the outside and not from within. As Macfarlane writes, the English landscape is 'constituted by uncanny forces, part-buried sufferings and contested ownerships'. It is neither 'a smooth surface or simple stage-set' but rather 'it is a realm that snags, bites and troubles' (Macfarlane 2015: para 7).

As Macfarlane acknowledges, he had partially been led to this conclusion by the late Mark Fisher's writings on hauntology, and in particular, by his 2013 soundscape created with fellow writer and artist Justin Barton, *On Vanishing Land*. (Fisher's last book, *The Weird and the Eerie* [2016], published since this article was first written, effectively expands upon the thesis evoked by Macfarlane.) Macfarlane regards Fisher as belonging to, what the academic James Riley has termed, an 'occulture':

A loose but substantial body of work [...] that explores the English landscape in terms of its anomalies rather than its continuities, that is sceptical of comfortable notions of 'dwelling' and 'belonging', and of the packagings of the past as 'heritage'.

(Macfarlane 2015: para 8)

Besides Fisher and Riley, Macfarlane also cites such figures as the musician P. J. Harvey, the film director Ben Wheatley, novelists such as Paul Kingsnorth, the dramatist Jez Butterworth and artists such as Tacita Dean and James Millar.

Despite the extensive variety of his list, Macfarlane extracts a common denominator in that the writers, artists, musicians and filmmakers are all attempting 'to account for the turbulence of England in the era of late capitalism' (Macfarlane 2015: para 18). In contradistinction to heritage views of the English countryside that tend to emphasize the pastoral and the bucolic, Macfarlane argues that an eerie perspective foregrounds the worked-upon and lived-in histories of the English landscape:

the shared landmarks of this terrain are ruins, fields, pits, fringes, relics, buried objects, hilltops, falcons, demons and deep pasts. In much of this work, suppressed forces pulse and flicker beneath the ground and within the air (capital, oil, energy, violence, state power, surveillance), waiting to erupt or to condense.

(Macfarlane 2015: para 19)

By retrieving such histories, Macfarlane argues, the eerie not only reclaims what England has been but what it might also become.

In this article, I want to extend Macfarlane's argument by relating it to the work of Lucy Wood, in particular to her debut short-story collection, *Diving Belles* (2012). Despite Macfarlane's diverse set of examples, his article is necessarily selective, and the only short-story writers to be cited are the Edwardians Algernon Blackwood and M. R. James, whilst the only mention of Cornwall is a passing reference to Susan Cooper's fantasy sequence, *The Dark is Rising* (1965–77). In spite of their lack of an overt politics, I shall argue that Wood's stories also contribute to this 'occulture', an engagement that

arises from their setting in Cornwall and that county's ambiguous relationship towards the English heartland. To that end, I shall argue that the term 'abcanny' – to describe an alien encounter from without rather than from within – as used by another of the writers cited by Macfarlane, China Miéville, is a more useful epithet for Wood's fiction than terms used by her reviewers such as 'fantastical' or 'magical realist'. In particular, just as Roger Luckhurst has situated the revival of urban fantasy within the 'evisceration of London's democratic public sphere marked out on the physical landscape of the city' (Luckhurst 2002: 539), so I suggest that the abcanny content of Wood's collection mediates the uneven socio-economic conditions of Cornwall: a series of inequalities that haunt not only the political settlement between the county and central governance but also the metropolitan rhetoric of national values and economic progress. In the light of the EU Referendum and Theresa May's attack upon cosmopolitanism at the Conservative Party Conference, 2016, this distinction has arguably become all the more acute.

1. To that end, see also Kate Soper's critique of hauntology as a representative example of Marxist responses to Derrida (Soper 1996: 26–31).

ABCANNY CORNWALL

In his article, 'M. R. James and the quantum vampire' (2008), originally published in the Falmouth-based journal *Collapse*, China Miéville employs the term 'abcanny' to delineate the 'very unprecedentedness' of 'Weird entities' such as H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu from the undead presences of Gothic and supernatural fiction:

The Great Old Ones [...] neither haunt nor linger. The Weird is not the return of any repressed: though always described as ancient, and half-recalled by characters from spurious texts, this recruitment to invented cultural memory does not avail Weird monsters of Gothic's strategy of revenge, but back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself.

(Miéville 2008: 113)

Unlike the uncanny, which is always already familiar – albeit unconsciously – to the victim, the abcanny denotes objects that do not arise from the victim's experience and are irreducibly foreign, alien and radically Other. The horror, then, associated with the abcanny is sublime in that it exceeds and defies all comprehension; the subject's terror surfaces from the collapse of language into non-representation. For Miéville, working within a Marxist critical tradition that he seeks to cleanse of the hauntological gloss supplied by Jacques Derrida and his interpreters,¹ the abcanny effects produced by the Weird offer the most effective artistic means of evoking the equally unprecedented effects of capitalist modernity. In this respect, Miéville returns to Karl Marx's bizarre, fantastical rendering of commodity fetishism:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as it soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

(Marx 1976: 163–64)

Marx's table metamorphosed beyond 'sensuousness', beyond the familiarity of human touch, has no precedent. It is transformed by the novelty of commodification into something 'grotesque', exaggerated almost beyond recognition, so that it assumes an uncanny presence in the world. Thus, when Miéville comments on the dominance of the neo-liberal hegemony, he describes 'the universe' as having become 'an ineluctable, inhuman, implacable, Weird, place' (Miéville 2008: 128).

Nevertheless, as Tony Venezia has observed, despite Miéville's disentanglement of the Weird from the hauntological, they exist 'in symbiotic relation to each other both in terms of their historical moments and in their generative effects' (Venezia 2015: 202). The 'stalled dialectic' that Venezia sees as underpinning Miéville's fiction consists of, on the one hand, the uncanny Weird that, like capitalism, dissolves all pre-existing social relations and cognitions and, on the other hand, the uncanny hauntological that resurrects the ghosts of a displaced modernity despite the Weird. The incompatibility of these mutual terms points to the inherent contradictions endemic in a crisis-fuelled history of combined and uneven socio-economic development. Such a history can be seen at work in the relation of Cornwall to the rest of England that, in turn, has a bearing upon the varied uncanny and uncanny effects in Wood's short fiction.

The relationship of Cornwall to the British Isles is a historically fraught one. Positioned in the extreme south-western corner of the country, Cornwall juts out into the Atlantic Ocean, such that it is bounded on all sides, bar one, by the sea. The River Tamar runs practically from one side of the county to the other, almost severing it from its neighbours. From the fifth century CE onwards, this rocky terrain became a sanctuary for Celts fleeing westwards from the advancing Saxons and, with support from the Danes during the eighth and ninth centuries, Cornwall became an independent nation known as Kernow until its eventual defeat in 838 CE. Yet, well into the sixteenth century, Cornwall retained a sense of its own apartness – Cornish, a Brythonic language with close affinities to Welsh, remained the dominant tongue; the people preserved their own fashion, folklore, rituals, agricultural practices and leisure activities with roots in Anglo-Celtic, rather than Saxon, tradition, whilst the establishment under the English Crown of two special administrations, the Duchy of Cornwall and the Stannary Parliament, conferred upon the Cornish people a unique constitutional status (see Stoye 2011).

Whilst these institutions helped consolidate a sense of regional identity (the Stannary Courts and Parliament were formed, e.g., to protect the interests of the local tin miners), they also fostered a nebulous understanding of Cornwall as a concept – in the terms of Benedict Anderson an 'imagined community' – over and above its geographical presence. The Duchy, for instance, is a legal and economic construct that does not map onto the boundary lines that define the county: over 500km² of land across 23 counties, roughly 0.2 per cent of all UK land, is owned by the Duchy. As such, the Duchy constitutes a legal anomaly. Although a private estate of the Duke, currently Prince Charles as heir to the throne, for the purposes of environmental planning, it is regarded as a public authority. Consequently, the Duchy has the right to veto governmental planning projects on estate land. At the same time, although the Duke receives the net income of the estate's assets (with further anomalies regarding income and corporation tax), he does not possess exclusive property rights and cannot sell-off parts of the Duchy for his own benefit. Instead, he is bound by the Royal Charter of 1337 to protect and

preserve the Duchy, where much of the assets consist of tenanted farmland and properties. For Cornish activists, the Duchy represents a political entity that exists both within and outside the British parliamentary constitution, whilst the headship of the Duke, although harking back to medieval notions of a fiefdom, is constrained by the legal apparatus of the Duchy. This spectral authority, shadowing the centralized rule of Westminster, hints at an imaginative surplus, a realm of fantasy whose roots can be traced back not only to Cornwall's pre-modern sovereignty as Kernow but also its depiction within Cornish medieval folklore, the early Arthurian romances of writers such as Beroul and the historical associations between Cornwall and the mythology of Albion (see also Ackroyd 2004: 107–09).

Yet, on the other side of this myth-making lie the economic realities of the county. Despite talk of a 'south-western powerhouse', the promise of a one-billion-pound injection into the local economy and the close ties between Cornwall's unitary council, local enterprise partnerships and the national government, the fact remains that Cornwall is the poorest region in the United Kingdom. Despite the creation of 19,000 jobs since 2010 (Pescic 2015), Cornwall's average salary of just over £17,000 is one-fifth below the national average. Since the mid-1990s, one-billion pounds in EU grants has gone into the economy, and, yet, in 2011, its measure of wealth was 64 per cent, 8 per cent down from the previous year, placing it on comparable terms with some of the poorest parts of Eastern Europe (Demianyk 2014). Despite a more buoyant national economy, business start-ups in 2014 were only at the same level as ten years earlier whilst, with increasing numbers of self-employed and part-time workers and falling numbers of university students contributing to a decline in local output, productivity in the county reached only 68 per cent as opposed to 79 per cent in 2004 (Cornwall Council 2014). Whilst the council has appealed to Westminster in the hope of greater economic powers, the poverty of the region has also seen a rise in Cornish activism. In 2014, the Cornish were officially recognized by the UK Government as a national minority alongside their Celtic cousins in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The political, economic and cultural ramifications of the county's decision to vote in favour of Brexit are still too early to discern.

Although such activism harks back to the Stannary Parliament as a quasi-mythological model for local governance, what I want to point to in this mixed picture of local politics and economic decline is its abcanny condition. Devolution, if it were to occur, would not be a return to an ancient sovereignty or medieval fiefdom; rather, it would be a new political settlement, unprecedented in the United Kingdom, born out of the uneven effects of capitalist modernity upon the region. The novelty of a devolved Cornwall works against the pattern of 'Cornish Gothic' that Ruth Heholt identifies with Hammer horror films set in Cornwall (Heholt 2015), and which can also be associated with the supernatural tales of such local authors as E. F. Benson and Daphne du Maurier. All of these texts can be arraigned with the hauntological in that they are posited on an uncanny return of the repressed, the undead invasion of *chronos* (rectilinear time) by the revisiting ghouls and phantoms of *kairos* (cyclical time). Such texts are the horrific counterpart to the romanticized depictions of Cornwall to be found in the historical novels of du Maurier, Winston Graham and Kate Tremayne, which – wittingly or unwittingly – feed into the tourist and heritage industries that support the Cornish economy. Instead, Wood's short stories can be seen as being motivated by an altogether different, abcanny sense of temporality.

WOOD'S ABCANNY FICTION

This resistance to the ways in which Cornwall has been figured in the contemporary popular imagination is registered by Wood herself:

Cornwall's folklore has become rather stuck, fixed in many people's minds as something for tourists only, a little bit twee and clichéd – more mermaid tea towels than mermaid-haunted waters. By digging back into the folklore, I hoped to find a way of breathing some new life into it.

(Wood 2012b)

The keywords here are 'new life' – Wood digs back, digs deep, only to move forward and outward. Although Wood acknowledges the influence of magical realism upon her work, she is also inspired by the ghost stories of M. R. James (Janes 2012), in terms of not only the eeriness to be found in seemingly quotidian items and locations but also the plain simplicity that he uses to describe otherwise horrific events. Magic realism is a handy peg upon which to hang Wood's fiction, but it obscures the more tangled routes that her stories explore, threads that bind folklore into 'the real stuff of everyday life' (Wood 2012b) and lend her tales a historicity.

Catherine Taylor, writing in *The Guardian*, has suggestively described Wood as 'a benign Angela Carter' (Taylor 2012). Like her predecessor, Wood reimagines rather than simply retells folktales, but, unlike Carter, she does not expose the mythology as a lie 'designed to make people unfree' (Carter 1997: 38). Instead, she interweaves the folkloric with the mundane so that it becomes difficult to see where one leaves off the other. If for Carter, history is experienced as a fabrication, warped by the myth-making effects of ideology, for Wood, history is received as a lived contradiction in which various, paradoxical states of consciousness are experienced at once. Whereas Roland Barthes influentially argued that myth 'transforms history into nature' (Barthes 1993: 129), Wood's entangled use of myth and the mundane declines from translating the mess of Cornish history into reified nature, a heritage view that would emphasize instead the pastoral and the picturesque. Conversely, Wood's abcanny reimagining of Cornwall is embedded within its historical situation.

In the title story, for example, although Demelza's name invokes Winston Graham's heroine from the Poldark novels, she is no idealized figure but a representative of Cornwall's many self-employed workers, carving a living from its coastline. Her coarseness, though, is undercut by her enigma: 'how I track them is business secrets. [...] Don't bother asking me about it' (Wood 2012a: 11). Such obscurity, however, complements the mystery of Iris's missing husband, supposedly taken by mermaids, who leave behind 'the smell of salt and damp', 'a tiny fish in its death throes', 'two green crabs', bladderwrack and anemones (Wood 2012a: 5–6). The response of Iris and her female friends to their vanishing spouses is one of resignation: a characteristic reaction not only to the privations of financial hardship but also to the unreliability of their menfolk, often away at sea or forced to look for work inland, frequently promiscuous and sometimes violent or abusive. Nonetheless, after nearly 50 years of loneliness, Iris is given a chance at redemption when she goes down in Demelza's diving bell to look for her husband.

What happens next would suggest an uncanny tale in which the husband returns unaged but metamorphosed into a merman, 'winging his way round the wreck' (Wood 2012a: 18). As so often in such narratives, the emphasis falls

upon perception and the inability of Iris – her name now fully ironized – to see him without her glasses: ‘One lens dipped into the water and then they sank completely. [...] Everything mixed together into a soft, light blur’ (Wood 2012a: 18). The obscuring of Iris’s vision raises doubts as to whether the husband truly is a merman or whether his movements are being guided by the strong sea currents.

What is less in doubt however, and which is therefore more unbelievable, is that the husband has not aged: his skin, ‘so thin, almost translucent, fragile and lovely with veins branching through him’ (Wood 2012a: 18), Iris sees perfectly before losing her spectacles. Arguably, what Wood is doing here is making reference to J. P. Hebel’s 1811 tale, ‘Unexpected Reunion’, one of the most celebrated stories in German literature and known to anglophone audiences, especially those versed in short-story criticism, via translations of Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay ‘The Storyteller’. In Hebel’s tale, an old woman encounters the reclaimed corpse of her young fiancé, preserved and embalmed in ferrous vitriol. The meeting is uncanny but Hebel, in his typically understated manner, supplies some form of explanation for its likelihood: ‘the groom still in the flower of his youth; and how the flame of young love was rekindled in her breast after fifty years, yet he did not open his mouth to smile, nor his eyes to recognize her’ (Hebel 1995: 27).

Iris’s husband, too, avoids her gaze, but this denial of recognition serves to undermine the uncanny reunion. Iris perceives ‘something different, something more muscular, more streamlined’ (Wood 2012a: 17) when she first sees her husband but what she covets is his skin. Then, as she leans closer and as if this desire was too much to comprehend, she loses her glasses. The reader can then only assume that Iris’s husband has been turned into a merman that, however unlikely, would explain his youth, but otherwise all definition seeps ‘into a smudgy paleness’ (2012a: 18). The husband, whatever has befallen him, is no longer what he was but, as in Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*, transformed ‘into something rich and strange’ (Shakespeare [1611] 2011: 200), bits of ‘light’ and ‘movement’ (Wood 2012a: 19), incomprehensible; not uncanny but uncanny. This story, then, does not describe a return but a bleary-eyed glimpse into an unknown future embodied by the husband’s metamorphosis.

The title-story’s deliberate placement at the head of the collection sets a pattern for its successors. The eeriness of the Cornish landscape, with its coastline, hills, valleys and stones, not only creates a backdrop for the stories but also permeates them. This interpenetration is witnessed time and again, for example, in the figures of Rita, the young woman in ‘Countless Stones’, whose body is literally calcifying and reassuming the chalk and limestone that compose Cornish soil; the adolescent Gog, in ‘The Giant’s Boneyard’, who fantasizes for himself an enormous exoskeleton whilst playing amongst the bones of whales beached on the shoreline; and lastly, the aged droll teller who, in the final story, regains his confidence in tale-telling by seeking out ‘the stories [...] embedded in the landscape’ (Wood 2012a: 219), specifically the ruins of the tin-mining industry.

What makes these effects uncanny, as opposed to supernatural or fantastical, is the way in which they both rub-up against and throw into sharp relief a material historicity. For instance, Rita’s preparations to get ready before her final transformation into one of the standing stones that line the Cornish cliffs are interrupted by her ex-boyfriend Danny’s injunction to go and see the house that he is buying for himself. Since their parting, Danny has become ‘a partner in the advertising company’ where he works and, as Rita observes, now owns a pair of ‘shiny black shoes, the kind he hated, among

all the trainers' (Wood 2012a: 25). Whereas Danny is economically and – if reluctantly – socially upwardly mobile, thereby embodying the supposedly progressive values of financial and material status favoured by the government in Westminster, Rita has remained pretty much where she was. True, she now owns the 'one-bedroom house' that she had originally rented after her split from Danny, but 'It wasn't the house she had expected to buy, it was cold and small and didn't let in much light, but it was what had come up' (Wood 2012a: 25). If Danny represents the alleged progressivism of the political hegemony, Rita arguably embodies a Cornish society and economy that has not only remained static but which, in real terms, has fallen behind the rest of the United Kingdom. Yet, at the same time, whilst Danny typifies an individualist ethos enshrined in property-owning ('I've got this new job now and I should move somewhere bigger' [Wood 2012a: 26]), Rita is more closely connected to her local community, to a shared culture in which turning into a standing stone is accommodated and understood as an everyday occurrence and to a principle of being neighbourly and looking out for one another:

After a while, somebody would let themselves in and turn off your heating, your boiler. They would tidy things up and sort out the post on the doormat. They would turn off your fridge.

(Wood 2012a: 22)

In contrast, although Danny at the very end of their meeting realizes what is happening to Rita (he 'saw the salt pot out on the table [...] He looked at her feet, imagining the stone inside her boots' [Wood 2012a: 36]), he is unable to help her. His physical discomfort within the dimensions of her home – he has to stoop within the doorway – suggests not only the emotional distance between them, and that Rita's periodic transformations may have contributed to their separation, but that he is now an intruder to Rita's home and the traditional Cornish way of life, where folklore intermeshes with the quotidian, which she embodies. By focussing upon the unresolved tensions between these two ways of being, Wood's use of the folkloric is neither fantastical – where the reader hesitates between two incompatible meanings – nor magical realist, where otherworldly events are accepted as part of everyday life. Instead, her usage is uncanny because the clash of registers evokes the Weirddness, the apparitional breach, which characterizes the social effects of twenty-first-century economics upon local communities and landscapes.

Wood further uses the home as a figure for this breach in a number of other stories. Whereas in other kinds of fantastical fiction, such as the Gothic, ghost story or sensation novel of the 1860s, the home is associated with both the secret theatres of the uncanny and the Freudian family romance, in Wood's collection it serves as an embodiment for this merger of man-made and (super)natural activity. In so doing, Wood's homes are not only sites for the manifestation of repressed desires but also for the possibility of social transformation. For example, in 'Of Mothers and Little People', the daughter's anxiety at revisiting the family home is offset by her discovery that her mother, deserted by her husband for another woman, has throughout her marriage had a secret relationship with an invisible wood spirit. This revelation, which may or may not be the effect of her mother's hand cream that causes the daughter's eyes to 'stream' and 'turn pale green for a second, and then white again' (Wood 2012a: 45), forces her to reassess her mother's identity:

You watch your mother carefully. To everyone else, it looks like she is standing alone, wrapping her arms around herself. What you mistook for sadness is love.

(Wood 2012a: 53)

Far from revealing the hypocrisy or the cruelty hidden within the family home, as in a Gothic plotline, the presence of the mother's spectral lover explains her tranquillity in the face of her husband's adultery. Instead, the empty vases 'bursting with bright leaves' and the ivy magically 'curling over the banister' (Wood 2012a: 46) suggest the vitality rather than the melancholy, which was always present but submerged within the parents' marriage. At the same time, the daughter's estranged perception of her mother forces her to reassess the nature of her work, managing quality assurance for a hotel chain (symptomatic of the tourist industry upon which the Cornish economy relies), and her love-life, 'the neither-here-nor-there' relationship (2012a: 45) with fellow worker, Barnaby, whose existence the daughter withholds from her mother. If the mother's lover hovers on the threshold of vision, then his presence serves to counterpoint the equally liminal conditions of the daughter's work life and personal relationships. To that end, Wood's consistent use of the second person in addressing the daughter (and, by implication, the reader) serves to alienate them both: to isolate, distance and estrange not only the daughter's familial role but also the reader's consumption of the text. This estrangement not only en-Weirds the process of reading but also forces a breach in which the reader's position towards the text is rendered liminal and where the story also complements other breaches tied to changing patterns of work and leisure.

Similarly, in 'Lights in Other People's Houses', the sudden appearance of the reanimated wrecker counterpoints the ephemeral life of Russell and Maddy. Having moved into their rented house some months earlier, Maddy is still in the process of unpacking boxes from her childhood home, a delayed moving-in exacerbated both by their busy work schedules and Maddy's unresolved memories of her parents. Their liminal, transitional state is mirrored by the wrecker; disoriented and clearly out of place, he spends his time scavenging through the remains of Maddy's possessions. His aimless pursuit, as if trying to answer his repeated questions 'Where am I? [...] Where's all the water?' (Wood 2012a: 58), highlights Maddy's own anomie, her inability to part with her parents' belongings, despite her mother charging her with that responsibility and despite the loss of the parental home that gave Maddy's identity its meaning. The wrecker, an outcast from both his society and historical period, also defines himself through his ancestry, but his weighing of the material and symbolic value of Maddy's items only compounds his – and her – melancholy: "'This is a sinking ship,'" he said, looking down at the plate' (Wood 2012a: 63). The metaphor of drowning, literal in the case of the wrecker ('Through the wall, the wrecker drowned again, over and over and over' [2012a: 71]), is reflected both in the rising damp that damages both the possessions and the paintwork of the house and in the crisis management that preoccupies Maddy's job: 'We'll go under if this doesn't work' (2012a: 65). Finally, once the water damage is complete, Maddy exorcizes the wrecker by following Russell's injunction to leave the house only to seek out her own childhood home: 'The wrecker's voice clamoured for attention in her ear but she pushed it aside and it became nothing more than a seagull cawing above her' (2012a: 74). She finds the home to have been totally transformed and inhabited by a new family – life has moved on despite her childhood memories, and Maddy can

now return to her own home, an albeit 'dark house' (2012a: 75), but within which she can uncover her own route into the future.

The pattern in these two successive stories of a supernatural incursion into the home is inverted in 'Notes from the House Spirits' where it is the successive inhabitants who are viewed as trespassers upon the property by the pedantic, uncomprehending ghosts:

They live with only one light on, in the one room they are both in. We straighten their shower curtain to stop it going mouldy. We shouldn't have to do such things.

(Wood 2012a: 138)

The house, bought or rented on the open market and temporarily occupied by otherwise rootless individuals, couples or families, is viewed primarily as a commodity rather than a home. Wood's inversion, by narrating the story from the perspective of the spirits whose 'job' is 'to protect the house' (2012a: 135), reveals the process of commodification to be utterly fantastical:

It's always the same – feet, feet, feet and dirt on the carpet and now everything is being moved, now everything is being changed. There is noise and there is more noise and then there is the worst thing: walls have been taken away and a door.

(Wood 2012a: 143)

Frequently, the narrative converts into a series of lists, the discontinuous objects suspended beside one another in a surreal juxtaposition:

Things left behind in the attic:

A rocking horse with a missing eye.

A plastic skull.

A suitcase stuffed full of receipts and discount vouchers.

A roll of carpet.

A cricket bat and a deflated football.

Four nails and six drawing pins.

A bunch of dry white flowers.

(Wood 2012a: 135)

Although the house spirits' incomprehension at what these items could collectively signify, in contrast with the reader's knowledge, infers the emotional trace of human significance, their ruined and dislocated state gives them a kind of autonomy just as Marx fantasized the table-as-commodity with its own innate consciousness. Their random juxtaposition implies the coincidence of different times and spaces – a feeling heightened by the spirits' own lack of chronological awareness – so that, as with more traditional kinds of ruin, they 'allow us to set ourselves loose in time, to hover among past, present and future' (Dillon 2014: 6).

This Weirder of time and space is given its fullest vent in stories such as 'Blue Moon', where the house is itself a business albeit a nursing home for retired witches, and 'Beachcombing', in which Grandma's house is a cave on the beach, embodying an alternate form of possession, the home as part and parcel of the natural world. Grandma believes her beach existence to be penance for failing to appease the invisible sea creatures, the buccas; the trajectory of the story though, in which she and her grandson climb to a point

where they can survey the whole beach, suggests an opposing psychological movement whereby the human characters are not just figures in a landscape but also agents who interact with that environment: 'They looked out over the beach. It was important to have come this far' (Wood 2012a: 129).

It is the interaction between person and place, rather than some eternal and immutable 'Deep England' in the terminology of the cultural historian Patrick Wright, which Wood seeks to recover throughout her collection and, especially, in the closing story. The seemingly ancient droll teller reluctantly agrees to take a married couple on a tour of the local vicinity. The husband makes an embarrassing faux pas, expecting a receipt as part of the commercial transaction; the wife too eagerly asks, 'We're going to end up at the mines, aren't we?' (Wood 2012a: 210). The satire of the heritage industry, and in particular a kind of ruin porn, is self-evident but Wood's attention is focussed upon the droll teller and his inability to summon-up the stories from a landscape that has been privatized and transformed:

The droll teller tried to picture what had been there before but he couldn't do it. Things had happened there, before the houses were built. He had been at the very centre – now where was he?

(Wood 2012a: 215)

Unlike the urban psychogeographer of contemporary London Gothic, who appears to be at home within the city despite – or because of – its fluidity, the droll teller struggles to make connections from the changed environment: 'the network of alleys' (2012a: 211) and 'the edges of the development' (2012a: 215), like the 'thousands of lines, crossed and re-crossed' on his palms (2012a: 211), so that 'the right story wouldn't come, the parts wouldn't join up' (2012a: 212–13). Unlike the accumulation of past and present times within the capital, which effect a concatenation of lost and found memories in novels such as Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991), this sensation is lost on the droll teller. Instead, he experiences a dawning sense of dread, 'He realised now why the world had become flat and empty. Things were ending' (Wood 2012a: 213), and a profound anomie, a disorientation symptomatic of the underlying horror of Cornwall's political, economic and social marginalization. He concludes that 'He would mash something together' (2012a: 217), just as he has already mashed together a local murder story from a soap-opera storyline, just as Cornwall's history has been mashed-up by its peculiar tale of economic and political governance. But, in finding his way to the ruins of the local tin mines, the droll teller discovers 'more images and memories just out of reach, half-glimpsed and crowding in' (2012a: 222). He relates the tale of a shipwreck, less of a story, more of 'a taste' (2012a: 221), and then with his audience, who have also forgotten their petty quarrel and anxieties for their daughter, sits and waits for inspiration: 'there was shuffling, movement. He could hear the story creeping out of the mine towards him' (2012a: 223). With this final image standing for the creative possibilities of storytelling, Wood concludes her narration.

In 1916, the Russian Futurist poet, Velimir Khlebnikov, observed that 'for tens of centuries, the future smouldered in the world of fairy tales': 'The visionary aspect of fairy tales serves as a blind man's cane for mankind' (Khlebnikov 1987: 263). Likewise, Wood's use of folklore neither romanticizes nor fetishizes a mythic Cornwall that, even in its imagining of a repressed rural past, would only aid the nostalgia of the heritage industry. Instead, her use of folklore constructs an unruly landscape that not only is at odds with the hegemonic

discourse of national heritage but is also more abcanny than uncanny, positing a vicarious future rather than a dead-handed past.

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