Outdoor Gothic

The analysis is of the following paragraph from Algernon Blackwood?s ?The Willows?, first published in 1907. Both ?The Willows? and ?The Wendigo? are available in S.T. Joshi, ed. Algernon Blackwood, *Ancient Sorceries and Other Weird Stories* (Penguin, 2002).

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Wendigo, illustration by Lolpeor (CC BY-SA 4.0 [1]) via Wikimedia Commons [2]

Gothic Literature specialises in confined spaces. The first Gothic novel, Walpole?s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), is full of shadowy cellars and passages. Sophia Lee, in *The Recess* (1773), secretes a couple of Princesses for a generation in a hole in the ground. As Gothic develops, the sense of claustrophobia intensifies. The narrator is trapped in a coffin in John Galt?s ?The Buried Alive? (1821), while in Poe?s ?The Pit and the Pendulum? (1842) the Inquisition constructs a cell whose walls slide inwards to crush him. These inner rooms are, of course, marvellous images of entrapment in the human ?bone-house?, its hidden enclosures and places of taboo.

But one writer of Gothic, Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951), specialises in an alternative terror: wide, inhuman spaces, untracked and uninhabited, but full of the whirr of leaves and the tumult of distant waters: ?woods, you know,? as one victim puts it, ?too big to feel quite at home in ? to feel comfortable in?. Blackwood, one of the stars of the early years of radio, and among the first people to appear on television, liked to pose as the hard-bitten white hunter who had taken on the Edwardian wilderness and survived it, while laying bare for us the apprehensions and sufferings of those who were not so lucky. Like Kipling he numbs our scepticism by seeming to know everything. In ?The Willows? (1907) he steers a Canadian canoe down the Danube, once frontier of the Roman Empire, until he and a dour Swedish friend are lost in a Hungarian wilderness of islands and tributaries, ?willows, winds and waters? ?halfway to the Black Sea.? As soon as the two men enter ?an alien world, a world where they are intruders? both suspect that a shady elemental (i.e. non-human) race of spirits is chattering among the branches and leaves, like an army ?within the leaves, almost?, arboreal spear-points directed at the Western European heart:

> When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere "scenery" could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm.

> I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the willows especially; for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing?but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the horrible. (Joshi, ed., p.29)

In ?The Willows? the Gothic threat is formless. In ?The Wendigo? (1910) it gathers into a shape, a gigantic demon of fire and ice. Woe upon the woodsman who ?sees the Wendigo.?

Margaret Atwood includes the Wendigo, both as a form of madness and a malevolent beast, in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995). She often tells us that Americans, who like ?conventional Gothic?, write about the horrors within, while Canadians, more apprehensive, perhaps, are stirred by the deep spaces, where ?nature white in tooth and claw? is waiting to get you. Though she?s a little suspicious of Blackwood as a ?non-Native?, his is the classic ?Wendigo? story, a bulwark of many ghost story collections. It?s the story of a trek by a gang of Britishers into the ?deep silence? of the Canadian wilderness. Soon the party is ?sniffing the air?, sensing the smell of the elusive twenty-five foot high demon, that ?faint sighing murmur through the tops of the big trees that was almost too delicate to be audible?, drifting down to them from a cleft in the endless sky. Up there, unseen, the creature is waiting, like the threat of death by exposure, ?when the snow comes on the wings of the north wind.? Défago, the expedition?s guide, a French-Canadian, is a morose figure, probably suffering from some form of depression. But everyone in the party is spooked when they hear the cry of the wilderness call out his name in a ?soft, roaring voice . . . that bore in some fashion a resemblance, far-fetched yet recognisable, to the name of the guide: ?*Dé-fa-go*??. Défago answers the call by blundering at high speed out of the tent. His companion hears him moaning that his feet are on fire before the cries die out in the distance. In the morning the tracks of both Wendigo and man are visible in the snow, their combined stride widening to eighteen feet before the tracks cease abruptly, as if the creature had taken to the air. Défago returns to camp a couple of times, but not the Défago wrenched into the wildeness. His mind has been shattered by his ordeal, his skin is ?loose and hanging? like a deflated balloon, with something ?dark and oddly massed where moccasined feet ought to have been.? He lingers a few weeks, but this is merely the work of a big predator teasing its prey. After all, the Wendigo?s smell is very like that of lions.

Blackwood knew a good deal and wrote well about the incarcerated ghosts of France and England, haunting their ?secret and wicked? little houses, scholar?s digs, lonely barns, rooms ?filled with hordes of cats?, even haunted mantlepieces, but his most terrible stories tell of great and fearful solitudes, still partly intact in his time, where travellers threatened with exposure hear the ?Call of the Wild? personified, and come face to face with the Spirit of the Woods.

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