

Accepted for publication in: *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. By S Brewster and L Thurston, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

‘German has a word for the total effect’: Robert Aickman’s Strange Stories

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Simon Hay, writing *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, suggests we can expect any ‘individual ghost story [to give] an account of a specific and irreducible trauma; some specific haunted mansion, murdered count, or interrupted inheritance’ (2011, p. 2). Hay surveys the British form from from Walter Scott through the twentieth century, and concludes that these specific traumas point, more generally, towards an anxious modernity, where the present

has not successfully distinguished itself from its past; indeed, the whole point of the ghost story is that the present *cannot* wrench free of the past and so has not become fully modern. The ghost story, in other words, holds to a model of history as traumatically rather than nostalgically available to us. (2011, p.15).

This is perhaps a fairly common reading of the genre; hidden history uncannily returns and repeats itself. Nevertheless, it’s a reading which struggles to account for a writer like Robert Aickman, who offers narratives that tend to confound this pattern. In Aickman, the source of whatever haunting he describes is usually elided. He is uninterested in accounting for the origins of his ghosts, no ancestral crime is uncovered, nothing as dull as an explanation is offered. Moreover, Aickman’s ghosts emerge in a modern world where precisely the opposite problem to the one described by Hay is considered; the present has been all too easily separated from the past. Continuity and humanity is lost. Modernity threatens to become complete, and it is into this space that ghosts emerge. They are forces which potentially bring disastrous consequences for Aickman’s struggling heroes, but they disturb the equally disastrous power of the present.

It is perhaps apt that Aickman – who has been described as ‘the foremost English ghost story writer of the mid-twentieth century’, and in his role as an editor of ghost story anthologies as ‘certainly the most visible and influential figure in English supernatural fiction of his

generation' (Jones, 2010, p.61) – is an uncertain presence in the history of the ghost story. Indeed, he is weirdly absent from Hay's history. Despite the quality of his work and his importance to the field, Aickman has been less read than he deserves to be. Michael Dirda regards him as 'a neglected master, a superb artist' (2005, p. 237); at the time that Dirda published his essay of enthusiastic recommendation, Aickman was largely out of print. A contemporary reviewer of Aickman's first solo collection of stories, *Dark Entries* (1964), complained that she had been unable to actually read the collection: 'The first of his ghost stories left me cold. The second left me goose-fleshed. I have no intention of reading the remaining four, because I don't enjoy being frightened in this particular way...' (Brophy, 1995, p.2). Aickman, his reputation uncertain, remains half-glimpsed at the corner of the critical vision rather than read in earnest.

Robert Aickman was born in London little more than a month before Britain entered World War I. He was the son of a genteel although struggling architect and designer; his grandfather was Richard Marsh, still famous for authoring the late Victorian horror, *The Beetle* (1897). Aickman details his strained family life in two volumes of memoir, *The Attempted Rescue* (1966) and the posthumously published *The River Runs Uphill* (1986). He was a busy advocate for the conservation and restoration of Britain's canal system, and to this end was involved in founding the Inland Waterways Association, which successfully restored numerous canals and repopularised narrow boating as a hobby. He published two novels, *The Late Breakfasters* (1964) and the posthumous *The Model* (1987). If Aickman is remembered today, it is usually for his strange stories, which appeared in a number of collections and anthologies from 1951 onwards. His first collection, *We Are for the Dark*, was published in 1951 and brought together stories he and Elizabeth Jane Howard had authored. Aickman began publishing his stories more regularly through the sixties and seventies, winning the World Fantasy Award in 1975, and the British Fantasy Society Award in 1981 – the year he died. The prizes are indicative of his stature within the world of genre fandom more than any kind of mainstream literary success. In fact, within his lifetime, his books *Know Your Waterways* and *The Story of Our Inland Waterways* (both 1955) were substantially more successful, in sales terms, than his tales of the macabre. (Crawford 1997, pp. 143-4). Nevertheless, Aickman has enjoyed a substantial cult following, and the original collections of his stories now fetch substantial prices. Thankfully, a series of reprints of some of his

stories was issued by Faber and Faber in 2014, complete with celebrity author endorsements, and should, hopefully, bring his work to wider notice.

In addition to his own writing, Aickman edited and provided introductions for the first eight volumes of the *Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories* between 1964 and 1972. Aickman's anthologies participated in a small boom through the sixties and seventies, where a number of publishers produced edited collections of tales of horror and the supernatural in mass market paperback editions (Bell, 2008, p. 2). Aickman's anthologies – committed to the spectral rather than the gruesome – in some ways mark the passing of an era; in the later seventies, the market and its readership would be bloodily transfigured with the phenomenal success of Stephen King and the explosion in horror publishing through the coming decade (see Hantke 2008; Morrison 1996). Aickman paid attention to the conditions of the field he was contributing to, noting that 'in Britain collections of short stories can hardly be made to sell at all', but also that the ghost story was a special case, for which there was 'an immediate market, even if the collection receives very few reviews, as unfortunately, frequently happens; the magical and the metaphysical being at the moment out of literary fashion.' (1986, p. 209). Literary fashion, expressed in these terms, becomes a byword for callowness. By describing the genre as unfashionable, yet advocating for its magical and metaphysical worth – what could be more important or enchanting? – Aickman claims a contrarian importance for the ghost story.

Aickman's editorship for the *Fontana Books* allowed him to present what amounts to a personal canon of the ghost story, and to locate his own writing within it. Across the eight volumes he edited, his rule was never to include an author more than once, with the single exception of himself; six of his stories were anthologized. This habit necessarily encouraged his readers to understand Aickman within the context of the ghostly tradition he was assembling – although Aickman's stories do not necessarily feature anything quite as simple as a ghost or other familiar Gothicky tropes. Indeed, Aickman felt cramped by readers' demands for the 'compulsorily paranormal' (1986, p. 210). His selections overwhelmingly favour writing from the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries over more recent stories; yet in his view, the ghost story is not really Victorian or Edwardian so much as 'a late romantic form' (1966a, p. 7). Aickman understood the ghost story as sharing in the

prerogatives of Romanticism; this might include its skepticism of scientised accounts of the world, descended from the values of the Enlightenment; its emphasis on the individual, and especially on the subtleties of consciousness and the importance of feeling; and, I think, crucially, for Aickman the ghost story follows the Romantic impulse that imagines the individual sloughing off the deadening effects of the orthodoxies of the social world. These are themes which his stories obsessively return to.

Aickman's introductions further illuminate his view of the ghost story; at the same time as seeing the form as antique, Aickman also believed it met contemporary needs. Although it flies in the face of literary fashion, 'the interest in and demand for ghost stories has never been greater than now' (1966a, p. 7). In the wake of the second world war, Britain entered a period of rapid modernization which it was popularly hoped would be 'democratic, meritocratic and technocratic' (Porter, 1997, p. 131), Aickman fretted that the nation was instead becoming part of 'a mechanistic world, ever more definable, ever more predictable... ever more unsatisfying and frustrating' (1966b, p. 7). There were few consolations available; although 'the reading of a good ghost story' might provide 'the only antidote' to his readers' 'brief and troubled' lives (1977, p. 7). Ghost stories do not just describe breaches of the everydayness of life; they offer this break to their readers. For Aickman, the ghost story potentially gives 'form and symbol to themes from the enormous areas of our own minds which we cannot directly discern, but which totally govern us... Thus, in its way, it brings peace, as Aristotle said of tragedy' (1966a, pp. 7-8). Indeed, English struggles to describe this cathartic peace, this curious feeling, although Aickman felt that 'German has a word for the total effect: Ehrfurcht, or reverence for what one cannot understand. If there is one thing that modern man needs more than anything else, it is that. No wonder there is a big new readership for the supernatural. The phantoms have almost come to serve a social purpose' (1966a, p. 8). The ghost story becomes a response to the encroachments of modernity, encourages a reclamation of a proper sense of mystery that has become deleteriously absent from life. If the standard introduction to the ghost story turns on phrases which tend to the tongue-in-cheek, promising a 'good scare' or similar, then Aickman makes a very different proposition – the ghost story, rather than offering a thrill, offers an opportunity for reflection and psychological, perhaps even spiritual nourishment. Ghost stories treat 'a popular concern that standard education has not so far destroyed, with the things that are of most consequence in life.' (1986, p. 209)

Aickman believed there were only ‘only about thirty or forty first-class specimens [of the ghost story] in the whole of western literature’ (1966a, p. 7), and only perhaps six genuine masterpieces. He identified three of those: ‘The Wendigo’ by Algernon Blackwood, ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ by Oliver Onions and ‘How Love Came to Professor Guildea’ by Robert Hichens (Bell, 2008, p. 2). The three were included in early volumes of the Fontana anthologies. Blackwood’s story ‘The Wendigo’ describes an ill-fated hunting party in the Canadian wilderness. One of their number is taken by the spirit of the title, and the story follows the rest of the party’s efforts to trace the missing man. He cannot be saved, for it emerges that he is transforming into a wendigo himself, following, quite literally, in the steps of the beast he has encountered (1973). Onions’ ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ recounts the nervous collapse of a writer; he moves into an apparently haunted apartment, where whatever spirit haunts it takes the place of the woman who is courting him. He lives in a kind of relationship – or sick torpor – with the spirit and retreats from the world (2010). Hichens’ ‘How Love Came to Professor Guildea’ is the story of an unemotional and rational scientist, whose house becomes inhabited by a spirit that stupidly and relentlessly loves him; this affectionate pursuit leads to the nervous breakdown and death of the Professor (1966). Ghost stories, often enough, offer only a glimpse of the spook; ‘[g]hosts do not permit sustained viewing. They appear and disappear in the twinkling of an eye, or we see them (or think we do) from the edge of vision.’ (Stevens, 2010, p. 11). The three masterpieces Aickman identified are all long stories – as many of his are; but more importantly, the stories do not describe ghosts that twinkle at the edges of things, but rather spirits that become deeply involved in the lives of the men who encounter them. Indeed, the stories hold significant similarities in the ways they treat haunting as a sustained phenomenon that profoundly changes the life of the haunted, removing him from the social world he once participated in. Each of the stories features the development of a profound relationship with something other. In the case of the Hichens and Onions stories, this is understood as something approaching a troubled love relationship. The ghost story describes a kind of demonic marriage – a pattern which recurs in Aickman’s own stories.

‘Pages from a Young Girl’s Journal’ can be read as the story of the consummation of a vampiric romance (1975); the ghost in ‘The Fetch’ might be understood as a substitute for

one of the narrator's wives (1988a). In 'Ringing the Changes', Gerald and Phryne's honeymoon night is interrupted by the dancing dead, who take the place of the expected lovemaking (1964b), while Stephen, in 'The Stains', tries to make a home with the mysterious Nell, which leads to both his obsession and his doom (1990a). Ghostly forces appear to wed Aickman's heroes and heroines.

As Northrop Frye describes it, comedy is the genre which treats love and marriage. His notion of archetypal myths might be a little outdated, but he remains an astute reader of the major narrative patterns. In Frye's reading, comedy needn't be funny or even primarily affective; rather, in describing how people fall in love and marry off, it describes a move

from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law... to a society controlled by... pragmatic freedom [that] is fundamentally... a movement from illusion to reality. Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation: whatever reality is, it's not *that*. (1957, pp. 169-70).

Perhaps the same can be said for the ghost story, as rendered by Aickman. He registers the problems of lives malformed by habit and 'ritual bondage', while pointing towards the lifting of this fixity and arbitrary sorrow through the intervention of supernatural force. Ghosts – or at least the sensation of being haunted by something outside the self – emerge at these moments of potential negation. Some of his stories focus on the problems of 'bondage', and offer only a twinkling of the corrected world, while others press further into a negation of the unsatisfactory 'reality'. Aickman usually lays out the terms of the abandoned illusion – the everyday lives of his protagonists – at length, while the new real is comparatively underdescribed and uncertain. The difference between Aickman's stories and what we usually think of as comedy is that the reality presented in their endings diverges from what many readers would think of as reality at all; and Aickman doesn't offer happily ever afters.

'Into the Wood' is an example of what I mean by Aickman's frequent use of comic narrative patterns in the ghost story. The story follows 'The Beckoning Fair One' and 'How Love Came to Professor Guildea', in that it describes how the protagonist turns away from their everyday life and enters some deeply other and haunted state. 'Into the Wood' does not

depict ghosts as such, but it is, like most of Aickman's fictions, a ghost story. For Aickman, ghostliness and haunting are as important as metaphor as they are as diegetic facts. Nor does the story describe a literal marriage, but rather a significant act of engagement, of turning away from arbitrary and stultifying habit towards something difficult to define that nevertheless negates the problems of the everyday. The story narrates how Margaret Sawyer leaves her husband Henry to join a community of insomniacs in a Swedish sanatorium, some of whom, it is claimed, are utterly sleepless and have been for years. The inmates of the Jambilichus Kurhus might not literally be ghosts, but they exist in a spectral state, not quite properly alive. Margaret is incredulous, exclaiming that the residents 'can't *live* without *any* sleep' but her unwanted friend Mrs Slater insists, 'You can... In a way. You can live here' (1988b, p. 389). Mrs Slater's response prevaricates; this is a life, but only in a way; you can live, but only within the confines of the Kurhus and the surrounding wood. Although exactly what it meant is unclear, these are limitations and differences which distinguish this 'life' from the ordinary. Mrs Slater further suggests there is something disquieting about the residents; 'It is like living with something supernatural: people who are normal come to feel it a shadow on their own lives' (1988b, p. 389). The insomniacs have the power to haunt, as if they were ghosts. Later, they become, at least in metaphor, trolls and vampires (1988b, p. 391, 401), and on her return to the town near the asylum, Margaret finds herself shunned. The local Swedes are able to see that she has changed, even if Henry cannot.

Of course, this is scarcely a conventional comic narrative. Indeed, 'Into the Wood' describes the dissolution of Margaret's marriage. Nevertheless, it replicates Frye's comic pattern, describing an unsatisfactory real and then negating it. Henry is described as distant and consumed in his work. His card says he is an 'Earth Mover', but this is relentlessly ironized in the text, so that his work as a road builder describes him as an intellectually limited and tasteless agent of undesirable development. He, and men like him, are responsible for the 'Cheshire subtopia' that Margaret will soon abandon (1988b, p. 373, 378). Colonel Adamski, one of the Kurhus' inmates, suggests that the 'place of war is now taken in society by motoring' (1988b, p. 427). Henry is a harbinger of the mechanized world and industrial destruction. Margaret's initial stay at the Kurhus, where she allows herself to freely wander in the weird wood that surrounds it, gives her the space to understand that she requires 'the rejection of so many things that her husband... appeared to stand for' (1988b, p. 410). Just as Henry does, the wood quickly and frankly takes on a metaphorical element, as Margaret

reflects that ‘the forest symbolised something that was outside life – certainly outside Henry’s life and her own. And not part of Henry’s inner life either, though it apparently was part of hers...’ (1988b, p. 410). Just as Frye struggles to articulate what exactly is revealed when illusion is dispelled, so too does Margaret. What is better than the life of suburban success Margaret has heretofore led?

The rustling, sunny forest, empty but labyrinthine, hinted at some other answer; an answer beyond logic, beyond words, above all beyond connection with what Margaret and her Cheshire neighbours had come to regard as normal life. It was an answer different in kind. It was the very antithesis of a hobby, but not necessarily the antithesis of what a marriage should be, though never was. (1988b, p. 411).

The terms that Aickman chooses here are strikingly similar to those that Frye uses to describe the process of comedy. The problem with Margaret’s life is that it is full and obvious; the problem with Margaret’s marriage is that it can be described, and it is only secular. The solitary ‘marriage’ offered by the forest can only be described in negative terms. Margaret – along with her readers – might not immediately grasp the answer that is hinted at, but she is changed by asking the question. This change is recognized by the other insomniacs and the neighbouring Swedes. At the end, she retreats to the Kurhus, to wander sleepless, not quite alive, a troll, a vampire in its woods. This is a melancholy liberation, but it is liberation nonetheless. Margaret might not extend her transformation beyond herself – it is not, perhaps, the wider social change we might expect to see in a comedy – although it is worth noting that, in Frye’s account of the term, he allows that there is a type of comedy where the hero ‘does not transform... society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before’ (1957, p. 180).

Aickman offers more complex iterations of this pattern, where weird and haunted states are preferred over the convulsions of the mechanized world. ‘The Unsettled Dust’ features a pair of ghostly manifestations, but in some ways, these are really only counterpoints to the central concern of the story, which is to provide a portrait of a country house, Clamber Court, which has been ‘saved’ by the Historic Structures Fund, an analogue for the National Trust. The story is narrated by a Special Duties Officer for the Fund, Nugent, a petty bureaucrat. Jones has noted Aickman’s ‘monologic’ tendency to offer surrogates of himself through his

narrators and heroes (2010, p. 61), and this is to some extent true of Nugent, who complains of ‘a way of life that seems every day to grow more uniform, regulated and unambitious...’ (Aickman, 1990b, p. 1). This is probably true in many of the stories, although in the case of Nugent, he only occasionally takes this role – he is ultimately derided, painted as an unwelcome guest and an emissary of the mechanized world. However, his remark about the times becomes central to the story; Olive and Agnes Brakespear, the sisters who once owned the house and now live there as tenants, are ‘orphans of the social storm like most of the Fund’s clients’ and struggle to resign themselves to the regulated conditions under which they must live (1990b, p. 5). Aickman was anti-progressive, concerned by the disruptive effect modernity might have on British life, particularly the life of the comfortable middle classes; ‘No one knows where he stands. Pre-supposed new horizons for all are rapidly narrowing to a universal, collectivist, egalitarian tyranny...’ (1996, p. 23).

This concern about dislocation is echoed by the Brakespear sisters. Agnes complains that since “‘...the property was settled on the Fund... we haven’t been able to call our souls our own.... You can’t *live* in a house you no longer own.... The choices, the decisions, the responsibilities are no longer yours....” (1990b, pp. 41-2). The sisters are dispossessed, but in the uncanny position of continuing to reside in the place of which they have been dispossessed. The sisters must submit to having the house opened to visitors every summer, they cannot manage the estate, and these requirements compromise their ability to ‘live’. Nugent, quite uncharismatically, insists that the Fund needs to offer the public the opportunity to ‘[get] into someone else’s home, and [have] the right to poke around inside it’ (1990b, p. 42). The life of the house, in this context, becomes reduced to a show, a performance, and the sisters themselves are becoming immaterial, shadows of the past. An unpleasant inquisitiveness is apparent in Nugent himself, especially after his encounters with the ghostly phenomena which occur at Clamber Court. Nugent sees a spectre that seems to be both within his room and outside on the driveway and, later, an inexplicable cloud of dust. These phenomena might record a dead lover and concealed passion, the emotional history of the sisters; but the story offers no certainties, no simple explanation, despite Nugent’s assiduous, prying enquiries. He is warned by the housekeeper Elizabeth that it is “‘... better to leave private things unspoken...” (1990b, p. 37) The final turn in the story has Nugent searching a locked room in the house that he has no business entering. There, he finds only

Agnes, embarrassment and more of the pervasive dust that, perhaps, signals how the house cannot be properly cared for by the Fund.

The hauntings at Clamber Court work across two separate orders. On the one hand, the ghosts that Nugent sees are the ghosts of the sister's past; they follow Hay's account of the genre as pointing towards specific traumas. At the same time, they do not frighten so much as record the history of the home; as del Pilar Blanco and Pereen, suggest, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, ghosts 'signify the shared memories that render space (structured, disciplined, overseen) habitable as place' (2013, p. 397). In this, they are figures that potentially offer doleful consolation and insist on what Aickman would see as the proper order of the house – emotionally repressed and mournful as it may be – which has been jeopardized by the arrival of modernised ownership arrangements. On the other hand, the more troubling presences that can be detected in the house are those of the 'public visitors in summer... aloof and alien; merely staring in through the bars, and, even then, uncomprehending of everything that mattered' (1990b, p. 21). The sisters endure a kind of scrutiny described by Derrida as spectral: 'the ghost looks at or watches us, the ghost concerns us. The specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law... without being able to meet its gaze' (2013, p. 40). Responding to the sisters' objections to their position, Nugent smiles as he insists that it is his job, and that of his colleagues, to perpetuate the arrangement (Aickman, 1990b, p. 43). He takes pleasure in enforcing the 'law' as a representative of the social and economic forces that have claimed and then opened up the private space of the house to the public gaze. Despite knowing his Meissen from his Nymphenburg – which is to say the interior details of houses like Clamber Court – like the summer visitors, he is unable to fully comprehend or assemble a reading of the sisters' circumstance; he cannot really tell what has happened or what to make of the ghostly phenomena which have become a part of the sisters' lives. The Brakespears remain illegible to him as people, despite his watchfulness.

No social or even personal transformation is achieved in 'The Unsettled Dust'. The Brakespears, the end of the aristocratic line, and Nugent – the new sort of gent – who dispossesses them, are all mired in their circumstance. Nevertheless, as with 'Into the Wood', two distinct worlds are described, one bureaucratic and mechanical in spirit, the other one

unclear, private and preferred. Unlike 'Into the Wood', in 'The Unsettled Dust' the preferred world remains out of reach.

Frye noted that comedy most often closes with some kind of 'party or festive ritual' – usually marriage – that marks the transformation that has occurred, the appearance of the 'new society' (1957, p. 163). This doesn't happen in 'The Unsettled Dust', but curiously, a number of Aickman's stories close with revelry, dancing or singing. Each of these celebrations marks and confirms the transformation of the women and men who are involved with them.

Clarinda Hartley witnesses a weird hilltop witches' sabbat to which she will eventually be welcomed in 'Bind Your Hair' (Aickman, 1964a). Wolves gather in the town square and are understood as the diarist's kin in 'Pages from a Young Girl's Journal' (1975). As noted above, the honeymoon night of 'Ringing the Changes' is interrupted by the dancing dead; and while we never learn what happens to John Trant once his tour of the church concludes in 'The Cicerones', we do know that his guides begin singing. If, as Aickman complained elsewhere, 'life can still be made comfortable; but nothing in sight can make it human – make it worth living' (1986, p. 22), then perhaps even a sufficiently ornate and mysteriously staged death is preferable to enduring the everyday. These might not quite qualify as celebrations, but they do feature elements of gathering, revelry, and ritual. Aickman's introductions to the Fontana books suggest these weird celebrations extend beyond the storyworld. 'As an antidote to daily living in a compulsorily egalitarian society, a good ghost story, against all appearances, can bring real joy. The reader may actually depart from it singing' (1966b, p. 7). The ghost story, for Aickman, provides the opportunity to at least imaginatively escape from a world where the public are too present, a world too populous with Henrys and Nugents; moreover, it provides an opportunity to celebrate that imaginative escape.

Aickman's stories return to this theme of imaginative escape, sometimes so directly they scarcely *feel* like ghost stories at all. Both 'The View' (1964c) and 'The Wine-Dark Sea' (1988c) feature magical islands and mysterious spirits that recall *The Tempest* more than the haunted nooks and crannies of the Victorian ghost story. Yet in some ways, Aickman's concerns are most visible in these stories. In 'The Wine-Dark Sea', Grigg sails to a mysterious Aegean island, where he encounters three mysterious women. Like the sleepwalkers in the Kurhus, there is some question as to whether they are alive or not,

although they are erotically appealing. The women describe themselves as sorceresses, unlike ‘other people in any way’, but, pressed further, are unable to describe what this actually means, for the ‘description would be without meaning. The thing can only be felt, experienced’ (1988c, p. 27). They are representatives of a new society, which Grigg attempts to integrate himself into.

Grigg’s stay is idyllic, an alternative to ways of life he has previously experienced. He agrees with the sorceresses’ complaint that the West is a troubled space where people have forgotten how to truly live and instead seek ‘achievement... knowledge... mastery... even... happiness’ (1988c, p. 28). These, it is understood, are mere distractions and delusions, part of a culture that is ‘stupid... lopsided. All poisoned with masculinity’ (1988c, pp. 28-9). Nevertheless, Grigg is unsure whether he belongs on the isle of romance, for he has been ‘corrupted’ by his everyday life, and he doubts ‘he was capable of redemption from that commonplace existence, even by enchantment’ (1988c, p. 33, 34). But even as Aickman’s idylls clarify the patterns of many of his ghost tales, they retain the sense that escape might be a vexed thing. During his first sleep on the island, Grigg dreams of being consumed by a group of lizards; he notes the ‘gnawing did not exactly hurt: it was quite perceptible, but Grigg felt it as a nervous *frisson* charging his whole body, half painful but half pleasurable’ (1988c, p. 23). This is an experience far from the everyday, but it is not an uncomplicated idyll, perhaps suggesting Grigg’s loss of self, his dissolution into the life of the island, but really, whatever Grigg encounters on the island, the suggestion is that it must be felt and experienced; it cannot simply be interpreted. The meaning of the story remains, at least in part, a mystery. Likewise, it is probably impossible to describe with certainty what Margaret desires, or the state in which the sorceresses live, or the emotional history of the Brakespear sisters. What remains legible is the *frisson*, the muddle of dangerous or spectral forces and private desires that break with the tyranny of the everyday. Beyond this, Aickman’s stories insist, is the unknown, the unreadable.

In the final ‘phase’ of comedy, writes Frye,

social units... become small and esoteric, or even confined to a single individual.
Secret and sheltered places, forests in moonlight, secluded valleys, and happy islands

become much more prominent, as does the *penseroso* mood of romance, the love of the occult and the marvelous, the sense of individual detachment from routine existence. In this kind of comedy we have finally left the world of wit and the awakened critical intelligence for the opposite pole, an oracular solemnity which, if we surrender uncritically to it, will provide a delightful *frisson*. This is the world of ghost stories, thrillers, and Gothic romances...’ (1957, p. 185)

These are the tropes, themes and humours, the tiny communities that Aickman returns to; oracular solemnity is a fine description of the tone Aickman reaches in his various declarations against modernity, and in his strange stories. Frye’s note about uncritical surrender is right too, at least in as far as it describes the way in which Aickman’s stories offer obscure revelation for their heroes and their readers, indeed, preferring revelation to argument and critique. What has been revealed is never described, but then, it couldn’t possibly *be* described, as it is not of the quality of knowing that might be apprehended or articulated by the awakened critical intelligence. The ‘world of wit’ remains a part of the everyday world which must be evaded somehow; we depart from the ghost story singing, but we don’t even know the words. Aickman attempts to bear his readers into secret and sheltered places where both *ehrfurcht* and ghosts might be revealed, felt, engaged and lived with, celebrated, at least for the duration of the story.

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