

“Untamed longings”: Darwinism and Homoerotic Attraction in Algernon Blackwood’s *The Centaur*

Billie Gavurin

Introduction

Algernon Blackwood’s *The Centaur* (1911) is a strange and meandering narrative, as much a philosophical treatise as a novel. This tale of mythic beings that have survived undetected into modernity seems driven less by plot and more by its author’s fervent biophilic spirituality. Littered as it is with quotations from mystic writers, and lengthy explications of Blackwood’s own worldview, it is tempting to dismiss the novel as, in John Bramble’s words, “a mildly programmatic [...] compendium of prewar mythology relating to the Simple Life [and] the *Urwelt*” [95].

But there is significantly more to *The Centaur* than this. The novel in fact reveals a complex interplay between natural mysticism and contemporary science. Blackwood’s centaurs are a threatened and dwindling species, whose fate reflects nineteenth-century developments in the understanding of evolutionary change and ecological succession. The evolutionary isolation of the centaurs finds a mirror in the societal alienation of the novel’s central character, a nature-loving young man named O’Malley, who has long felt himself to be ineffably other than those around him; he finds acceptance and recognition only among the last surviving centaurs. O’Malley’s otherness shares many features with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural and scientific discourse around homosexuality. I suggest that Blackwood’s depiction of the centaur features an over-layering of imagined golden ages; the centaur is linked with both a fictionalised past evolutionary epoch in which centaurs were abundant and unthreatened, and an idealised mythic/Hellenic past in which homosexual attraction might be encouraged rather than condemned. Ultimately, Blackwood draws upon the optimistic evolutionary writings of Edward Carpenter to suggest that future ages may come to respect and even privilege those who are currently “outcast” (Blackwood 4).

Previous critical analysis of *The Centaur* has not addressed the novel’s homoerotic undertones, nor the ways in which these intersect with its Darwinian concerns. I argue that the novel’s synthesis of utopian mysticism, homoerotic Hellenism, and evolutionary science offers insight into the nexus of anxieties and hopes surrounding post-Darwinian conceptions of sexuality at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The Centaur and Evolution at the Fin de Siècle

Before embarking on analysis of the novel, it is necessary to include a brief synopsis of its peculiar plot. The story begins at O’Malley’s first encounter with the titular centaur aboard a steamer ship to the Caucasus. Initially taking the appearance of a human man known only as “the Russian” (Blackwood 34), this stranger is accompanied by a young boy, later revealed to be a fellow centaur, who dies during the voyage. Against the warnings of the ship’s doctor, the skeptical, but curious, Heinrich Stahl (who had previously been tempted by the call of the *Urwelt*, or Primeval World, himself), O’Malley befriends the Russian. He gradually comes to realise that the Russian represents a survival from an earlier stage of life (Blackwood 50); a time when the Earth-spirit “projected portions of herself” into bodily forms such as the centaurs,

which have "long since [been] withdrawn before the tide of advancing humanity" (Blackwood 68). While currently trapped in a human body, the Russian is on his way to recovering his true identity as an Urmensch, or Primeval Man.

O'Malley becomes separated from his new acquaintance when Stahl drugs him with a sleeping draught to prevent him from following the Russian ashore at Batoum. However, they reunite a month later in a remote part of Georgia, and O'Malley follows the Russian into an Edenic valley where the remaining centaurs live. For an unknown period, he lives among them, temporarily taking on their form in a "cosmic experience" of dazzling transcendence (Blackwood 273). After deciding that he must return to civilisation and spread the word of the Urwelt, O'Malley reawakens into ordinary perception and finds himself still standing where he had been when the Russian reappeared. The whole episode is revealed to have taken place within "a fraction of a second" (Blackwood 284). He returns to Batoum, where Stahl informs him that the mysterious Russian died some time previously – the same day, in fact, that he appeared to O'Malley in his true form. Realising that death is the release that will transport him permanently to the Urwelt, O'Malley travels back to England, where he attempts to spread his message of Earth-love to those around him. When this fails, he descends into consumptive disease, confident to the last that death will mean a return "[i]nto myself, my real and deeper self" (Blackwood 344). As O'Malley finally dies, the narrator sees the god Pan, in the guise of a penny whistle playing street musician, appear outside the house to accompany his disciple's spirit to the Urwelt.

Blackwood's novel is, superficially, one motivated by ideas of spirituality rather than science. Its characters talk repeatedly of "spirit[s]", "powers", and "gods" (Blackwood 139), and O'Malley openly dismisses scientific study, telling Stahl that "[i]f you had your way, you'd take away my beliefs and put in their place some wretched little formula of science that the next generation will prove all wrong again" (Blackwood 100). Yet, beneath this preference for the sublime over the scientific, the novel reveals the clear influence of evolutionary theory. As I will argue, Blackwood in fact regarded natural mysticism and evolutionary thought as closely interconnected.

The mythic animal-human hybrid generally had become associated with evolution during the latter half of the nineteenth century; its composite form, incorporating human and animal elements, was often employed to embody concerns surrounding humanity's newly recognised evolutionary proximity to other species. A critical 1860 review of the *Origin of Species* by Andrew Murray draws a direct link between Darwinism and the hybrids of classical culture:

[W]ere the power of variation unlimited and uncontrolled, all species would be confounded, and there would be nothing but an indiscriminate mass of creatures running all into each other, as should be the case under Mr Darwin's theory were it true in fact. Centaurs and mermaids, nay, even dryads, would cease to be impossible fables, and the beauty of creation would be lost in one undistinguishable chaos. (276-77)

In Murray's view, the hybrid forms of ancient myth are an inevitable consequence of Darwin's approach – the logical outcome of a natural world in which species are free to alter and intermingle over time. The fact of these mythic beings' nonexistence, he suggests, is itself proof of the falsity of Darwin's theory. In the opening lines of his 1863 work *Man's Place in Nature*, by contrast, T. H. Huxley famously observes that:

though the quaint forms of Centaurs and Satyrs have an existence only in the realms of Art, creatures approaching man more nearly than they in essential structure, and yet as thoroughly brutal as the goat's or horse's half of the mythical compound, are now not only known, but notorious. (9-10)

Huxley explicitly links humanity's brutal forebears with the therianthrope beings of classical mythology – not to dismiss the truth of Darwinism, as in the case of Murray, but to give a kind of imaginative life to this new scientific theory. Employed both to mock and to bolster the nascent evolutionary hypothesis, mythic hybrids were closely linked with Darwinism in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.

Late nineteenth-century literary and artistic representations of centaurs frequently portray them as beings struggling under harsh evolutionary conditions. Arnold Böcklin's painting *Battle of the Centaurs* (1873) depicts a brutal conflict between centaurs, showcasing, in Marsha Morton's words, "the imagined instinctual life of prehistoric creatures" (77). *Pursued Centaur*, an 1881 etching by Max Klinger, shows a terrified centaur hunted by spear-carrying humans, while Andre Lichtenberger's 1904 novella *Les Centaures* [The Centaurs], set in a fictionalised prehistory, chronicles the eradication of the centaurs as a result of both epochal climate change and species competition with the newly evolved human race. Lichtenberger's text shows the influence of Darwinism in its awareness of the ephemerality of species and the significance of environmental change. His centaurs live alongside real prehistoric species such as aurochs and mammoths and are forced to migrate westwards by the slow arrival of "terrible masses of snow" from the East (Lichtenberger 42). Once, we are told, "innumerable tribes" of them occupied "the distant lands of the Orient" (Lichtenberger 42). As the Earth cools, however, they are continually driven further west, in ever-depleting numbers, seeking warmer climates and more plentiful food. By the end of the novella, they have reached "the occidental extremity of the earth" and can evade death no longer (Lichtenberger 170). While their extinction is hastened by their conflict with the humans, Lichtenberger is careful to remind us that, "it is Nature herself who has struck them down. For years, the fecundity of the centaurs has been diminishing; for years, the rain and the cold have pursued them" (Lichtenberger 170).

Lichtenberger's text is clearly influenced by nineteenth-century developments in evolutionary climatology. Charles Lyell's work *The Principles of Geology*, published between 1830 and 1833, focuses extensively on the relationship between species survival and climate, arguing that, "every great change of climate must be fatal to many which can find no place of retreat, when their original habitations become unfit for them" (287). Lyell speculates that, were a cooling of the Earth to occur, "most of the species [belonging to warmer regions] would become extinct, for there would be no warmer latitudes for their reception" (287). In 1837, the Swiss zoologist and geologist Louis Agassiz first proposed to the Helvetic Society that such an epoch of intense cold *had* in fact previously taken place, during which time a vast ice sheet had covered much of Europe. While initially disputed by other leading geologists, Agassiz's theory gradually gained traction (Krüger 271). At the time of Lichtenberger's writing in the early twentieth century, then, the idea of an ice age was both well-established, and closely connected with species development and distribution. His centaurs live, struggle, and die within an explicitly evolutionary framework.

Blackwood may well have read Lichtenberger's text; we know he was familiar with Böcklin's centaur artworks because they are directly referenced within *The Centaur* (189-90). Whether or not Blackwood had encountered Lichtenberger's novel,

The Centaur shows the obvious influence of the fin-de-siècle trope of the centaur as evolutionary relic threatened by human encroachment and a changing world. Once plentiful, Blackwood's centaurs now survive only in an isolated pocket of population, in "a corner [of the world] too remote for humanity to have yet stained it with their trail of uglier life" (Blackwood 75). An early exchange between O'Malley and Stahl refers openly to the centaurs as an evolutionary relic:

"An *Urmensch* in the world to-day must suggest a survival of an almost incredible kind – a kind, too, utterly inadmissible and inexplicable to the materialist perhaps –"

"Paganistic?" interrupted [O'Malley] sharply, joy and fright rising over him.

"Older, older by far." was the rejoinder, given with a curious hush and lowering of the voice. (Blackwood 59)

Blackwood here links his centaurs with an evolutionary timescale – one "older by far" than any pagan belief system. Mark Payne observes that Blackwood's centaurs evoke "historical ecology, for which all forms of life are to be experienced as vestiges of the scene of their emergence" (241). Blackwood's text is acutely aware of the possibilities suggested by evolutionary science; that in moving through the world, we are, as Payne writes, "*moving through a ruin*: our ordinary life world is the ruin of that other, more real, more life-like life world to which the relic invites us. The book of life is [...] a palimpsest underwritten by its erasures and spoilage" (243). Darwinism proposes the idea of a world in which our currently extant species are vastly outnumbered by those that have lived and vanished before them. *The Centaur* turns this unsettling thought into a narrative of hauntology, where the evolutionary relic ultimately becomes more real, in Payne's words, than the present life world.

The Centaur, then, is a text strongly influenced by contemporary depictions of centaurs as a relict primordial species, threatened by modernity. Surviving centaurs like the Russian, even while they occupy a superficially human form, cannot exist comfortably alongside true humans; they betray a quality "that is essentially [...] *unheimlich*" (Blackwood 58), and that "[repels] human beings" (61), leaving the centaur "in the midst of humanity thus absolutely alone" (61-62).

"That queer heart of his": *The Centaur* and Homoerotic Desire

O'Malley, susceptible as he is to the call of the *Urwelt*, finds himself choked and oppressed by "the thick suffocating civilization of to-day" (Blackwood 43). Much is made of his difference from those around him; he has a "strange passion of [...] temperament" (Blackwood 11) and is described by Stahl as "a very rare and curious [type]" (Blackwood 56). Hardly a page goes by in which O'Malley's personality or behaviour is not at some point described as "strange" or "curious". At one point Blackwood refers, particularly strikingly, to "that queer heart of his wherein had ever burned [a] strange desire" (85). Such descriptions inevitably evoke connotations of latent or coded homosexuality.

Even leaving aside the numerous references to O'Malley's strangeness, it is difficult to read *The Centaur* without entertaining the possibility of such a subtext. Certainly, it is a novel intensely concerned with homosociality. The reader is told early on that "with women [O'Malley's] intercourse was of the slightest; in a sense he did not know the need of them much" (Blackwood 13). The narrator speculates that, "the feminine element in his own nature was too strong" to allow for any involvement with

women (Blackwood 13). This sentiment tallies closely with the contemporary concept of inversion first popularised in the mid nineteenth century by the German writer Karl Ulrichs; the idea, in Henry Havelock Ellis' words, that "a female soul [could] become united with a male body" (2:34). This would, it was believed, lead to a lack of interest in the opposite gender, as seen in O'Malley, and a sexuality instead focused upon those of one's own gender. There is not a single female character of any significance throughout *The Centaur*; instead, its narrative rests upon the close, often emotionally charged, relationships of its male characters.

First, there is the undefined bond between O'Malley and the novel's narrator – the man who claims to have pieced the story together from O'Malley's notebooks and verbal accounts. While we are told next to nothing about the narrator, it becomes apparent through the course of the novel that the two were close friends; the narrator speaks of them lying on the grass together in London parks, talking for hours, returning to O'Malley's flat to cook shared meals, and reminiscing about past camping trips taken together (Blackwood 106). When O'Malley descends into his final illness, the narrator nurses him, confessing that O'Malley is "a close and deeply admired intimate, a man who gave me genuine love and held my own" (Blackwood 335). There is a tenderness to his descriptions of his friend; his "delicate" build, his hands which were "more like a girl's than a man's" (Blackwood 13). Despite this quasi-homoerotic intimacy, however, the narrator's primary response to his friend is an affectionate bemusement. He admits to finding O'Malley's philosophy "hard to understand" (Blackwood 10), and at times despairs at the impossibility of reconstructing his otherworldly narrative: "[H]ow to set it down I swear I know not. [...] The note-books I found in that old sack of Willesden canvas were a disgrace to any man who bid for sanity" (Blackwood 260). While he claims to have experienced glimpses of insight while listening to O'Malley speak of his time with the centaurs – "I caught small scenes of it, set in some wild high light" (Blackwood 235) – he is ultimately unable to grasp it. The narrator's bafflement serves to further demonstrate the extent of O'Malley's alienation from the everyday world; if even this sympathetic friend cannot understand him, O'Malley must be truly isolated.

In sharp contrast to the narrator's incomprehension, O'Malley's relationship with the Russian (and to a lesser extent the Russian's boy companion) is characterised by an electrifying intensity of fellow feeling, often expressed through looks rather than words, as in the scene of their first encounter aboard the steamer:

Their gaze met. O'Malley started.

"Whew...!" ran some silent expression like fire through his brain.

Out of a massive visage, placid for all its ruggedness, shone eyes large and timid as those of an animal or child bewildered among so many people. There was an expression in them not so much cowed or dismayed as "un-refuged" — the eyes of the hunted creature. That, at least, was the first thing they betrayed; for the same second the quick-blooded Celt caught another look: the look of a hunted creature that at last knows shelter and has found it. The first expression had emerged, then withdrawn again swiftly like an animal into its hole where safety lay. Before disappearing, it had flashed a wireless message of warning, of welcome, of explanation — he knew not what term to use — to another of its own kind, to himself.

O'Malley, utterly arrested, would have spoken, for the invitation seemed obvious enough, but there came an odd catch in his breath, and words failed altogether. The boy, peering at him sideways, clung to his great parent's

side. For perhaps ten seconds there was this interchange of staring, intimate staring, between the three of them. (Blackwood 20-21)

This interaction is striking in its representation of a recognition between the men, a sentiment that persists throughout the novel. Their relationship, from that point onwards, is described in terms reminiscent of a proscribed love affair. Within days of this first meeting O'Malley has agreed to share a cabin with the Russian and his boy, feeling that "he [had] accepted a friendship which concealed in its immense attraction – danger" (Blackwood 53). Stahl, who knows O'Malley from previous voyages, warns him that he has observed in his person "certain latent characteristics" which might, "under the stress of certain temptations", become more readily apparent (Blackwood 56). While the doctor is ostensibly referring to the danger that O'Malley might be driven to madness or death by following the call of the centaur, these words are equally suggestive of the "male homosexual panic" that Eve Sedgwick has argued was "endemic" at the fin de siècle (186).

O'Malley maintains an intense, though largely unspoken, connection with the Russian and his companion throughout the rest of the steamer voyage. During his spell among the centaurs in the Caucasian mountains, he finds that their bond has endured: "These two seemed nearer to him than the rest. He felt he knew them and had been with them before. Their big brown eyes continually sought his own with pleasure" (Blackwood 269-70). The ongoing presence of the unnamed boy arguably adds to the impression of a homoerotic subtext. O'Malley initially takes the boy for the Russian's son – and indeed the boy does refer to him as "Father" (Blackwood 157) – but Dr Stahl later reveals that he has encountered the Russian before, and "[t]here was no boy then. He has found him since" (Blackwood 62). Only sixteen years prior to the publication of *The Centaur*, Oscar Wilde had famously defended his relationship with Alfred Douglas through, in Linda Dowling's words, "appeal to a Hellenic ideal" of rarefied love between an older and younger man (3). Thus, while it is important to emphasise that there is no suggestion of romantic or sexual interest between either of the adult men and the boy, the inclusion of a younger male companion nonetheless appears significant in the context of a narrative so concerned both with male love and with the classical past.

It is pertinent here to touch briefly upon the question of Blackwood's own sexuality, if only because the author seems to have had much in common with his protagonist. He, like O'Malley, never married, and seems to have been shy and uncomfortable around women – although, as his biographer Mike Ashley notes, he did maintain several friendships with women in his later life (101). Ashley also highlights a brief and disastrous close male friendship, which Blackwood describes at length in his memoir *Episodes Before Thirty*, and which Ashley argues "reads like an affair and breakup between two lovers" (100). After the distress caused by this relationship and its demise – a topic to which Blackwood devotes nearly half of *Episodes Before Thirty* – Ashley speculates that Blackwood chose to suppress any sexual feelings, remaining entirely celibate (101). Whether or not the author ever consciously entertained sexual or romantic feelings towards his male friends, then, his sexuality is a matter of some uncertainty.

I do not mean to suggest that Blackwood intended *The Centaur* to be a homoerotic narrative. He may have done, or else these dormant aspects of the text may never have consciously suggested themselves to him. The latter is perhaps more likely, given what we know of Blackwood's complex, even self-denying, relationship to his own sexuality. But whether or not Blackwood meant it to be so, a homoerotic tension

exists at the heart of the novel, in uncomfortable tandem with its Darwinian preoccupations.

Golden Ages: Darwinism and Queer Hellenism in *The Centaur*

I have discussed the latent homoeroticism of *The Centaur*'s narrative, and the fact that the novel conforms to the fin-de-siècle literary tendency to present centaurs as a relict species struggling under harsh Darwinian conditions. I will now examine the ways in which these two facets of the text interact. Firstly, it is important to note that, by the late nineteenth century, sexuality and evolution were already regarded as closely connected. Bert Bender observes that fin-de-siècle studies of sexuality were heavily influenced by Darwinism: "Virtually every [...] work on the evolution of sex at that time began by acknowledging Darwin's theory of sexual selection" (77). He highlights as particularly significant Darwin's argument in *The Descent of Man* that the sexual differentiation of human embryos early in their development suggests the existence of a hermaphroditic or androgynous ancestor-species, and thus a latent human predisposition to bisexuality (Bender 77). This theory employs the contemporary belief in recapitulation: ontogeny as mimicking phylogeny. Thus, inversion could be explained by the idea, as Havelock Ellis writes, that "[h]aving succeeded in differentiating a male with full-formed sexual organs from the undecided fetus, [Nature] does not always effect the proper differentiation of that portion of the psychical being in which resides the sexual appetite" (2:229-30). The existence of inverts was believed to be the result of a perceived evolutionary error by which the body of one sex was paired with the psyche of another.

Havelock Ellis' assertion that, in the case of the male invert, "[t]here remains a female soul in a male body" (2:230) is reminiscent of Stahl's words when describing the disparity between the outward appearance and inner essence of the Russian: "His inner being is not shaped [...] as his outer body" (Blackwood 66). The Russian possesses the external semblance of a man, but his soul is that of a centaur. O'Malley reflects of himself that, "his own spirit, by virtue of its peculiar and primitive yearnings, was involved in the same mystery and included in the same hidden passion" as that of the Russian (Blackwood 30). We see, then, that the subtextual dichotomy of heteronormative/homoerotic that exists within the novel may be usefully superimposed on the more explicit species dichotomy of human/centaur. This connection is seen most clearly in the idea of a vanished "Golden Age" (Blackwood 95), a phrase used more than once within the novel, and which I wish to suggest stands at once for a fictionalised earlier evolutionary period in which centaurs were plentiful and unthreatened, and for an idealised classical past, in which homosexual or homoerotic relationships would be sanctioned.

These two real-unreal pasts come together in the figure of the centaur: a being embodying at once evolutionary timescales, and the mythology and culture of Greek antiquity. Blackwood makes it clear that the centaurs of his narrative are the *same* centaurs that populate Greek mythology. Despite his insistence that these figures hail from "long before the days of Greece" (128), he makes numerous references to classical myth throughout the novel, and myth is presented as being significant to the centaurs themselves. As the steamer passes Greece, the three men – O'Malley, the Russian and the boy – hear a strange cry coming from the shore. This seems to be a reference to the famous passage from Plutarch in which an Egyptian sailor passing by the isle of Paxi hears a voice crying out from the shore that the god Pan is dead. In *The Centaur*, however, the cry is one of joy, and prompts the boy to exclaim, "it is his voice! Chiron calls—!" (Blackwood 157). For O'Malley, the reference to Chiron – the civilised

centaur of classical myth, tutor to Achilles and other heroes – functions as a “clue of explanation” as to “the type of cosmic life to which his companions, and himself with them, inwardly approximated” (Blackwood 158). A further link with Greece is drawn when O’Malley joins the centaurs in their hidden valley in the Caucasus; his first response to the sight of his friends’ true forms is to cry out, “Lapithæ...! [...] Lapithæ...!” (Blackwood 257), referencing the famous mythic battle between the centaurs and the Lapiths.

Payne draws attention to the over-layering of evolutionary and classical time within the novel, suggesting that, “[i]n a sublime act of literary haunting, *The Centaur* is possessed by the Greeks’ own sense of the loss of the primordial” (249). Even within classical antiquity, there was an abiding belief in a vanished past epoch during which life had been notably different. Hesiod writes in his *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE) of the earlier races of humans created and destroyed by the gods, including “the godly race of the heroes who are called demigods, our predecessors on the boundless earth” (41). This glorious age was followed by our own, inferior in all ways. Dag Øistein Endsjø notes that, “[h]ow Hesiod operated with various wondrous ages before the present era of toil and grief remained a widespread understanding of man’s origins all through the Greek and Hellenistic era, and even beyond” (46). This heroic age was traditionally associated with the creatures of myth: it was then that Bellerophon had slain the chimaera, that Oedipus had solved the riddle of the sphinx, that Achilles had received his education from Chiron. The Greek idea of a lost time in which ancient humans lived alongside strange beasts meshes well with evolutionary thought, and this over-layering of the Darwinian with the mythic is evident in many fin-de-siècle centaur stories and images.

However, I suggest that there is a further layer of significance to Blackwood’s emphasis on the Greek identity of the centaurs. Linda Dowling has written of the importance of Victorian Hellenism in establishing homosexuality as “a positive social identity”, suggesting that, “Greek studies operated as a ‘homosexual code’” during the nineteenth century (xiii). In 1873, the English critic John Addington Symonds produced a long essay entitled *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, in which he argues that, “[v]ery early [...] in Greek history, boy-love, as a form of sensual passion, became a national institution” (15). This essay gained attention when it was published as an appendix to Havelock Ellis’ influential abovementioned work, *Sexual Inversion* (1897). Havelock Ellis himself observes that, “[i]t is noteworthy that sexual inversion should so often be found associated with the study of antiquity”, demonstrating the degree to which Hellenism and homosexuality were by that time perceived as interrelated (2:21). He concludes that, “the subject of congenital sexual inversion is attracted to the study of Greek antiquity because he finds there the explanation and apotheosis of his own obscure impulses. Undoubtedly that study tends to develop these impulses” (Havelock Ellis 2:21). In employing the centaur – a product of the Greek imagination – as the focus of his homosocial narrative, Blackwood, whether knowingly or otherwise, evokes the possibility of coded homoeroticism.

Page duBois draws a link between the centaur’s position as an evolutionary relic, and its potential to disrupt heteronormative social structures. She notes that the centaur was regarded by some even within antiquity as a relict species: “If their mythical origins are forgotten, the Centaurs represent a species belonging to a stage prior to human evolution [...] a vestigial race, anachronistically present at a historical stage which had superseded them” (68-69). Empedocles, she notes, is said to have developed a proto-evolutionary theory which accounted for mythic hybrids by claiming that the earliest forms of life were physically undifferentiated, appearing like creatures

from a dream (69). As a pre-human life form persisting alongside humanity, the centaur is contrasted with the ideal of "the Greek male youth", who represents "the *telos*, the proper end of both phylogenetic and ontogenetic evolution" (duBois 69-70). The centaur is a bizarre primordial survival, and therefore poses a threat to civic order, as demonstrated by the numerous myths in which centaurs appear hostile or indifferent towards marriage, such as their famous attack on the Lapith king's wedding feast (duBois 28). While the threat here is not specifically associated with homosexual desire – centaurs within classical myth largely pursue women – the centaur's ontological otherness sets it against heteronormativity. For while same-gender relationships were permitted and even encouraged under specific circumstances in Ancient Greece, heterosexual marriage was still regarded as a foundational aspect of society; as duBois writes, "the exchange of women between men of the same kind [...] was culture for the Greeks" (41).

In Blackwood's novel, too, the relict centaur functions as a queerly disruptive force. Its influence is repeatedly set against that of civilisation, with O'Malley believing that, "denial of so-called civilization" is "the first step" towards enlightenment (Blackwood 291). The civilisation that O'Malley so despises is explicitly linked with heterosexual relationships when, aboard the steamer, he recalls his friends back in London: "He pictured his friends and acquaintances there; the men at his club, at dinner-parties, in the parks, at theatres; he heard their talk – shooting [...]; horses, politics, women, and the rest [...]. But how did they breathe in such a world at all?" (Blackwood 167). An interest in women is regarded as merely one facet of the society that appears so suffocating to O'Malley. In another scene, O'Malley remembers an exchange that occurred between himself and two acquaintances in the English countryside:

He was there, he remembered, with two persons, a man and woman whose name and face, however, he could not summon, and he recalled that the woman smiled incredulously when he spoke of the exquisite perfume of those folded corn-sheaves in the air. She told him he imagined it. He saw again the pretty woman's smile of incomprehension; he saw the puzzled expression in the eyes of the man; he heard him murmur something prosaic about the soul, about birds, too, and the prospects of killing hundreds later—sport! He even saw the woman picking her way with caution as though the touch of earth could stain or injure her. He especially recalled the silence that had followed on his words that sought to show them—Beauty.... He remembered, too, above all, the sense of loneliness among men that it induced in himself. (Blackwood 275)

The man and the woman – both insensible to the beauty of the Earth – seem to represent not only the disturbing superficiality of so-called civilised society, but also the heteronormative structures existing at its heart, which O'Malley experiences as alienating and strange.

There is an obvious parallel here with another of Blackwood's works; the 1912 short story "The Man Whom the Trees Loved". This narrative sees a married couple, David and Sophia Bittacy, slowly driven apart by David's fervent (and reciprocated) fascination with a forest that is gradually revealed to be sentient. David, who has always maintained a "tenacious love of nature" (Blackwood 13), is drawn further into his sylvan obsession through a friendship with a compelling young male artist. As with O'Malley and the Russian, the two form an intense and immediate bond, to the consternation of David's wife: "[T]he way the younger man engrossed the older,

keeping him out for hours in the Forest, [...] was not quite to her taste" (Blackwood 20). As her husband withdraws from her, Sophia reflects that:

[his happiness] no longer obeyed the summons of her presence and her love. The woods alone could call it forth; it answered to the trees; the Forest had taken every part of him – from her – his very heart and soul. (Blackwood 51)

Here, as in *The Centaur*, heterosexual structures are shown to exist in opposition to a form of nature-worship that is explicitly connected both with close male relationships, and with ancient pagan belief systems (Sophia Bittacy's faith in a Christian god is repeatedly contrasted with her husband's reverence for the forest). Just as David Bittacy retreats from his marriage in favour of primordial Earth-love, so O'Malley rejects traditional heterosexual dynamics in favour of his bond with the centaur, whose ancient, mythic-evolutionary otherness represents a queer escape from societal convention.

Turning Inward: Memory, Same-Gender Desire, and Internality

O'Malley's cry of "Lapithae!" upon first seeing the centaur in his true form is significant not only in tethering the being to a classical identity. The centaur's response to his words is also notable in evolutionary terms:

The stalwart figure turned with an awful spring as though it would trample him to the ground. A moment the brown eyes flamed with the light of battle. [...] The heritage of racial memory was his, and certain words remained still vividly evocative. (Blackwood 257)

Blackwood's reference to "racial memory" is deeply relevant here. Cannon Schmitt has described how Darwinism, with its focus on evolutionary change as "[i]nsensible, gradual, continuous", gave rise to new ways of thinking about memory (25-26). In positing "a continuum between present and past", evolutionary theory – and in particular recapitulationism – allowed people to conceptualise a kind of "species memory" (Schmitt 26). Thus, "understanding themselves as subjects of evolution [meant] being capable of repeating and, more staggeringly, revisiting in memory a range of pasts [including] that of humans conceived of as a species" (Schmitt 26). The centaur contains within itself the history of its species – as, in one sense, do all of us.

In his evocation of the centaur's internal "racial memory", Blackwood once again draws attention to the preoccupation with internality that pervades the novel as a whole. From the beginning of the text, O'Malley is intensely concerned with questions of inwardness. He is disturbed by a "sense of disunion between his outer and his inner self" and believes that the revelation he craves "would mean the complete and final transfer of his consciousness from the 'without' to the 'within'" (Blackwood 229). His journey is largely an interior one: while he finds the centaurs in the Caucasus, his actual interactions with them seem to take place within his own mind, since when his otherworldly sojourn ends, he finds himself in the same spot where he stood as it began, with no time having passed. Ultimately, he comes to the realisation that:

"the Garden's everywhere! You needn't go to the distant Caucasus to find it. It's all about this old London town, and in these foggy streets and dingy pavements. [...] The gates of horn and ivory are here," he tapped his breast. "And here the flowers, the long, clean open hills, the giant herd, the nymphs, the sunshine, and the gods!" (Blackwood 339)

The Garden is to be attained through introspection, rather than physical travel; there is no need to engage with the outer world, when revelation can be found within.

Again, a connection may be drawn here with the text's homoerotic undertones. The term inversion was employed to describe a reversal – the idea that a person's sexual drive was the opposite of what would usually be expected – but it could also be used to refer to a turning inwards. Inversion was often understood as the inward movement of sexual desire: away from the dissimilar, and towards that which is similar to oneself. In 1895, the critic Hugh Stutfield wrote disapprovingly that, "[r]ecent events" (namely the Wilde trials) had made apparent "the true inwardness of modern aesthetic Hellenism" (835). The same year, having reviewed the manuscript of *Sexual Inversion*, Edward Carpenter – himself an early champion of gay rights – wrote to Havelock Ellis, "I think it [...] will be a first-rate book altogether – tho' I doubt whether you quite appreciate the 'true inwardness' of this kind of love" (quoted in McCracken, 182). This idea of inwardness is evident, too, in a written account supposedly given to Havelock Ellis by one of his subjects: "Inverts are, I think, naturally more liable to indulge in self-gratification than normal people, partly [...] because of the fact that they actually possess in themselves the desired form of the male" (2:162). Havelock Ellis' correspondent suggests that the invert is in some sense attracted to himself: his desire for the homogeneous leads to a turning inwards towards self-love.

Similarly, O'Malley's interest in the Russian and his boy companion is based upon a sense that the three of them are essentially alike. He is aware that, "something in his soul was so akin to a similar passion in these strangers" (Blackwood 32); that, "we belonged to the same forgotten place and time" (49); that, "this man [is] of my kind" (62). There is an almost autoerotic quality to his fascination with the pair, drawing as it does upon his recognition of himself within them. Jonathan Loesberg draws a connection between the fin-de-siècle conception of homosexuality as inward and self-regarding, and its lack of reproductive possibility; homosexual love was believed to represent "a turning inward away from the world, [...] away from outwardly productive and reproductive sexuality" (187). *The Centaur* ends, of course, with O'Malley's complete refusal to engage with the outside world, and his resulting death of a mysterious wasting disease. His doctor describes his condition as "[a]cute and vehement nostalgia, [...] sometimes called a broken heart, [...] in which the entire stream of a man's life flows to some distant place, or person, or – or to some imagined yearning that he craves to satisfy" (Blackwood 340). O'Malley has turned inwards again, rejecting any external stimulus in favour of solipsism. His desire to reach the centaurs through introspection reflects the contemporary idea of the individual as able to traverse evolutionary history by way of memory, returning to an earlier stage of development that is latent within the body.

Martha Vicinus observes that many fin-de-siècle narratives of same-gender desire culminate in the death of their protagonist, "[s]ince love cannot lead to marriage or reproduction" (89). Such narratives imply that death is the logical terminus for homosexual or sexually ambiguous characters; *The Centaur* is no exception. Each of the characters who are drawn to the Urwelt – with the exception of Stahl, who claims to have "saved myself just in time" by ceasing his acquaintance with the Russian (Blackwood 312) – is dead by the end of the novel. We see here, too, a parallel with the fin-de-siècle extinction narratives employed by Klinger and Lichtenberger. These are antiquated beings who cannot thrive in the harshness of early twentieth-century civilisation, just as Lichtenberger's centaurs are gradually obliterated by species competition and a changing world.

O'Malley and the Russian represent, at once, primordial evolutionary survivals and Hellenes adrift in modernity, unable to survive in a post-antique world. *The Centaur* is, as Payne has suggested, a text "sublimely" haunted by impossible memories of both classical and prehistoric time (249); even prior to their deaths, its characters are already ghosts of a kind.

"Urged forward": Evolutionary Hope in *The Centaur*

It is tempting to read *The Centaur* solely as a dispiriting fable, whose ultimate conclusion – that there is no place in the world for sexually and taxonomically ambiguous "outcast[s]" like O'Malley and the Russian (Blackwood 11) – is sadly familiar from fin-de-siècle literature. Yet, the text also leaves open the possibility of a more optimistic reading. The tragedy of the narrative is the fact that O'Malley is a man out of time; a being too archaic to survive in the present day. But as much as O'Malley's primitive nature (Blackwood 18) is stressed throughout the novel, the narrative also suggests that he and the Russian are, in another sense, ahead of their time – and that there remains hope for the future.

Early in the novel, Blackwood begins a chapter with a translated quotation from the eighteenth-century German poet and mystic Novalis: "Mythology contains the history of the archetypal world. It comprehends Past, Present, and Future." (34). Despite the novel's focus on over-layered historic, prehistoric, and mythic pasts, Blackwood appears almost as preoccupied with questions of futurity. O'Malley, the narrator tells us, "looked forwards [...] to a state when Man, with the best results of Reason in his pocket, might return to a more instinctive life" (Blackwood 10). At one point, O'Malley recalls a poem by Edward Carpenter envisaging a more natural future. He claims that Carpenter "looked ahead [...], whereas he looked back" (Blackwood 195), yet O'Malley too spends much of the novel "looking ahead". He and Stahl imagine a coming "perfect man" who will unite "what the race has discarded [and] what it reaches out to in the future" (Blackwood 169). By the time he returns from his stay with the centaurs, O'Malley is convinced that in bringing the message of the Urwelt back with him to the outer world, he will be able to bring about "a new Utopia" (Blackwood 286) – a return to the state in which the world previously existed, with humans living in harmony with the sentient planet.

O'Malley's references to Carpenter are particularly pertinent to my argument. As well as being an advocate for a natural lifestyle, Carpenter was, as noted above, a prominent early campaigner for gay rights. He wrote extensively on homosexuality, characterising it as innate, organic and not, as had previously been imagined by many, symptomatic of any kind of defect or degeneracy. His work *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) went further, suggesting that not only was same-gender attraction natural, it might actually represent a positive evolutionary development:

Though these gradations of human type have always, and among all peoples, been more or less known and recognised, yet their frequency to-day, or even the concentration of attention on them, may be the indication of some important change actually in progress. We do *not* know, in fact, what possible evolutions are to come, or what new forms, of permanent place and value, are being slowly differentiated from the surrounding mass of humanity. It may be that, as at some past period of evolution the worker-bee was without doubt differentiated from the two ordinary bee-sexes, so at the present time certain new types of human kind may be emerging, which will have an important part to play in the societies of the future[.] (Carpenter 11)

Rather than representing a regression, homosexuality signalled a potential progression. Carpenter argues that the "homogenic" temperament (Carpenter 22) – which he believed to be less sensual, more sensitive, and more emotional than that of a heterosexual person – would lead to same-gender attracted people becoming "to a large extent the teachers of future society" (Carpenter 14). This would in turn produce a society less invested in material pleasures and more spiritually pure. Carpenter highlights, too, the idea of Greek antiquity as a time when same-gender love had fruitfully informed the national temperament (68), and, like Havelock Ellis, draws a link between contemporary Hellenism and homosexuality, observing that, "those of the modern artist-writers and poets who have done the greatest service in the way of interpreting and reconstructing *Greek* life and ideals [...] have had a marked strain of this temperament in them" (111).

Carpenter's emphasis on the idea of a future in which those currently marginalised and misunderstood will come to function as our "teachers" is echoed in *The Centaur*, where O'Malley believes that "I'll save the world by bringing it again to simple things! I've only got to tell it and all will understand at once – and follow!" (Blackwood 281). He too wishes to lead humanity towards a future that is less sensual and more spiritual, believing "that the true knowledge and the true reason are within, that they both pertain to the inner being and have no chief concern with external things" (Blackwood 335). It is likely that Blackwood had read *The Intermediate Sex*; we know that he was heavily influenced by Carpenter's work, even claiming in a letter to Carpenter in 1924 that, "yourself, in the framework of the Caucasus, were the inspiration [for *The Centaur*]" (quoted in Ashley 229).

The language employed in describing O'Malley's metamorphosis into a centaur also implies a positive evolutionary progression. When, aboard the steamer, he first feels the change begin to take hold, it is described in terms of vibrant forward motion:

[N]eck and shoulders, as it were, urged forward; there came a singular pricking in the loins; a rising of the back; a thrusting up and outwards of the chest. He felt that something grew behind him with a power that sought to impel or drive him in advance and out across the world at a terrific gait[.] (Blackwood 148)

When the full transformation finally occurs in the Caucasian wilderness, it is depicted in similar language: "he stood there, grandly outlined, pushing the wind before him" (Blackwood 256); "he found himself shot forwards through the air" (258). In the image of O'Malley's body bursting forwards into greater speed and power, we see an accelerated evolutionary development. It is a counterpoint to contemporary literary scenes of rapid devolution such as the one experienced by the half-faun femme fatale Helen Vaughan in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), where the language is that of downward, rather than forward, change: "I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being" (Machen 100). While O'Malley, like Helen Vaughan, is returning to a shape associated with the deep past, Blackwood's repeated references to advancement make it clear that this is a progression, rather than a regression.

Of course, O'Malley's message goes unheeded by the world. The narrator tells us sadly of the "inevitable disaster" (Blackwood 334) of his campaign: "Those jeering audiences in the park; those empty benches in a public hall" (Blackwood 335). Yet Carpenter writes that, "[i]t seems almost a law of Nature that new and important movements should be misunderstood and vilified – even though afterwards they may

be widely approved or admitted to honour" (12). O'Malley's apparent failure does not prove that his mission was fruitless, only that he was, perhaps, a trailblazer for a coming societal change – some future "Happier Year" (Forster 5), like that to which E. M. Forster dedicated his Carpenterian narrative of same-gender love, *Maurice* (written 1913-14; published 1971). To the end, O'Malley remains hopeful that he will reach people "from the other side" after his death; affecting them through the beauty of the natural world, of which he will by then have become a part (Blackwood 337). Even the skeptical Stahl believes that, "the world is not yet ready to listen", suggesting that there may yet come a time when it is ready (Blackwood 331). For now, the public's ignorance is merely a symptom of "the stage they're at" (Blackwood 332).

Conclusion

Carpenter writes optimistically that same-gender love "has had its place as a recognised and guarded institution in the elder and more primitive societies; and it seems quite probable that a similar place will be accorded to it in the societies of the future" (82). We have seen that homosexuality was frequently cast as an evolutionary regression at the *fin de siècle*; a return to a primordial form of sexuality. Carpenter subverts this idea by suggesting that earlier civilisations were in fact more enlightened than his own in terms of their attitude towards homosexuality. In acknowledging and honouring same-gender attraction, future societies would not be regressing, but returning to a superior condition. In *The Centaur*, Blackwood similarly envisages a return to supposedly primitive values that will simultaneously represent a moving forward.

In the evolutionary narratives of the *fin de siècle*, the hunted and relict centaur expresses contemporary anxieties surrounding what it means to be human in a post-Darwinian world. In Blackwood's *The Centaur*, these concerns are layered onto a narrative of latent homoerotic desire, with the centaur threatened by societal alienation and suppression, as well as by dwindling numbers. Yet, as much as *The Centaur* is a story of archaic survivals struggling to endure in an indifferent modernity, it is also a narrative of social and evolutionary hope. O'Malley and the Russian represent both a vanished past, and the promise of a future renewal.

Works Cited

- Ashley, Mike. *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*. Revised ed. Stark House, 2019.
- Bender, Bert. *Evolution and "The Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism*. Kent State UP, 2004.
- Blackwood, Algernon. *The Centaur*. Macmillan, 1911.
- . "The Man Whom the Trees Loved". *Pan's Garden, Incredible Adventures: Two Classic Collections*. Stark House, 2019, pp. 13-61.
- Bramble, John. *Modernism and the Occult*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Carpenter, Edward. *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1908.
- Dowling, Linda. *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. Cornell UP, 1994.
- duBois, Page. *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*. Michigan UP, 1991.
- Forster, E. M. *Maurice*. Penguin, 1972.
- Havelock Ellis, Henry. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*. 6 vols. F. A. Davis, 1901.
- Hesiod. *Theogony and Works and Days*. Translated by M. L. West. Oxford's World's Classics ed. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Huxley, T. H. *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*. New York, D. Appleton, 1872.
- Krüger, Tobias. *Discovering the Ice Ages: International Reception and Consequences for a Historical Understanding of Climate*. Translated by Ann M. Hentschel, Brill, 2013.
- Lichtenberger, Andre. *The Centaurs*. Translated by Brian Stableford, Black Coat, 2013.
- Loesberg, Jonathan. *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida and de Man*. Princeton UP, 1991.
- Lyell, Charles. *Principles of Geology*, edited by James A. Secord, Penguin, 1997.
- Machen, Arthur. *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light*. London, John Lane, 1894.
- McCracken, Scott. "Writing the Body: Edward Carpenter, George Gissing, and Late-Nineteenth-Century Realism". *Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism*, edited by Tony Brown and Thomas N. Corns, Frank Cass, 1990, pp. 178-200.
- Morton, Marsha. "From *Monera* to Man: Ernst Haeckel, *Darwinismus*, and Nineteenth Century German Art". *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms and Visual Culture*, edited by Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer, UP of New England, 2009, pp. 59-91.
- Murray, Andrew. "On Mr Darwin's Theory of the Origin of Species". *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, vol. 4, 1857-1862, pp. 247-91.
- Øistein Endsjø, Dag. *Primordial Landscapes, Incorruptible Bodies*. Peter Lang, 2008.
- Payne, Mark. "Relic|Channel|Ghost: Centaurs in Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur*". *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception*, edited by Shane Butler, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 239-54.
- Schmitt, Cannon. *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages and South America*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California, 1990.
- Stutfield, Hugh. "Tommyrotics". *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 157, 1895, pp. 833-45.

Symonds, John Addington. *A Problem in Greek Ethics: Studies in Sexual Inversion*. UP of the Pacific, 2002.

Vicinus, Martha. "The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?". *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, edited by Richard Dellamora, University of Chicago, 1999, pp. 83-108.