

Maupassant's *Le Horla* and the Cultural-Historical Transformation of the Alien

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Running Head: Transforming the Alien

Abstract

Making sense of anomalous experiences often requires that people experiment with a variety of cultural narrative resources. *Le Horla*, by Guy de Maupassant, tells the tale of a 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual, a lightly fictionalized account of Maupassant's own experiences, who draws on diverse cultural resources to interpret a complex array of highly unusual experiences. The seminal experience of the tale is a vivid account of hypnagogic hallucinations with sleep paralysis (SP). SP experiences have frequently been implicated as sources of traditional narratives of alien spirit attacks and abductions and, more recently, as the experiential foundation of a modern legend of abduction by extraterrestrial aliens. I argue that one effect of the increasing availability and popularization of scientific worldviews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with specific reference to psychology, psychiatry and neurology, provided new and ever-changing grounds and material for explaining bizarre and uncanny experiences. The resulting accounts did not, however, simply replace traditional narrative themes with scientific explanations but often conflated them. These hybridized accounts are often most at odds with mainstream scientific explanations, because scientific accounts change with time but discarded scientific theories often remain sedimented in the cultural tradition.

Key Words: anomalous experience, culture, explanation, narrative, science, understanding

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I sleep—for a while—two or three hours—then a dream—no—a nightmare seizes me in its grip, I know full well that I am lying down and that I am asleep . . . I sense it and I know it . . . and I am also aware that somebody is coming up to me, looking at me, running his fingers over me, climbing on to my bed, kneeling on my chest, taking me by the throat and squeezing . . . squeezing . . . with all its might, trying to strangle me.

I struggle, but I am tied down by that dreadful feeling of helplessness that paralyzes us in our dreams. I want to cry out—but I can't. I want to move—I can't do it. I try, making terrible, strenuous efforts, gasping for breath, to turn on my side, to throw off this creature who is crushing me and choking me—but I can't!

Then, suddenly, I wake up, panic-stricken, covered in sweat. I light a candle. I am alone. (p. 893)

Guy de Maupassant — *Le Horla*<sup>1</sup>

The passage above is from Guy de Maupassant's gripping tale of horror, *Le Horla* — published, in its better known form in January, 1887 (A shorter and very differently structured version of *Le Horla* had been published earlier, in *Gil Blas* on October, 26, 1886 (Cogny, 1970).) The story presents a remarkably thorough and highly evocative account of several phenomena associated with sleep paralysis (SP). Maupassant's story appeared about the same time as some of the earliest reports of SP in the medical literature (e.g., Mitchell, 1876) and details of his account are remarkably consistent with current descriptions of SP (Cheyne, Rueffer, & Newby-

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<sup>1</sup> All selections from *Le Horla* are taken from the Bouquins Collection (Maupassant, 1988). All translations of excerpts from *Le Horla* are by the present author.

Clark, 1999; Hufford, 1982; Hishikawa, 1976). In addition, Maupassant links these experiences to a number of psychological phenomena, such as anxiety, hypnosis, agoraphobia, panic attacks, and other forms of pathology in a manner that is remarkably contemporary. Finally, he makes a connection between these experiences and the notion of alien possession/abduction, also a subject of recent research and speculation (Baker, 1992; Blackmore, 1998; Hufford, 1982; Liddon, 1967; Spanos, 1996).

Unusual and extraordinary experiences have recently been the focus of a psychology of anomalous experiences (McClenon, 1984, 1994; Reed, 1988; Zusne & Jones, 1982). Among the phenomena addressed by this emergent area of research are alien abduction, ESP, incubus attacks, out-of-body experiences, occult experiences, possession, and other unusual and marginalized experiences. Remarkably, Maupassant touches upon almost all of the phenomena that would be covered by a psychology of anomalous experiences.

Maupassant's narrative incorporation of his own anomalous experiences and those of his protagonists in numerous semi-autobiographical short stories vacillates between, and sometimes combines, folk and scientific accounts. Indeed, although many analyses treat *Le Horla* as a masterful tale of madness and a near clinical account of Maupassant's own mental deterioration, the present analysis focuses on his creative use of a broad array of available new and old cultural materials to interpret anomalous experiences. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century new models and modes of explanation were becoming widely available, particularly from the areas of science including physics, chemistry, evolutionary biology, psychology, psychiatry, neurology. Maupassant's writing reveals a fairly broad layman's understanding of recent developments in all these fields (Koehler, 2001).

#### *Anomalous Experience: Cultural Source and Experiential Source Programs*

Hufford (1982, 1988) contrasts cultural and experiential source hypotheses in the context of

accounts of anomalous phenomena. The cultural source hypothesis states that accounts of paranormal and occult have their origins primarily in social structures, stories, and beliefs that stimulate the imagination and give rise to misinterpretations of everyday experiences. The cultural source hypothesis is not usually articulated as a specific thesis but rather constitutes certain implicit presuppositions of mainstream social science (McClenon, 1994). The cultural source hypothesis is largely implicit and inherent in an assumption of cultural primacy at the hard core (Lakatos, 1970) of what has been referred to as the standard social science research program (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). In contrast, the core assumption of the experiential source hypothesis is that particular cultural accounts of anomalous experiences have their source in truly unusual, out-of-the ordinary experiences grounded in physical, physiological, and psychological events that do not depend upon any particular cultural context. In contrast to the cultural source hypothesis, the experiential source hypothesis as I use it, states that, accounts stories, legends, myths, and rumors of anomalous experiences have their origins in universal human experiences based on evolved biological processes. Although anomalous experiences can be interpreted, amplified, and modified with the aid of cultural narratives and explanations, the degree to which this is possible is markedly constrained by culturally universal evolved biological structures and processes.

Specifically, the present experiential source hypothesis is that unusual experiences (i.e., anomalous events that have been lived through) motivate *post hoc* investigative sense making. Essential to this notion of experience is its open-ended hermeneutic, i.e., "that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it and in what can be grasped of its meaning" (Gadamer, 1988, p. 67). The second assumption is that a primary role of cultural traditions is to serve as a resource for explanatory and narrative accounts of experiences that capture our attention such that they are deemed worthy of explanation. The *explanatory* function of cultural tradition is to highlight

conditions, contexts, and processes that potentially predict, prevent, or modify experiences. This works in tandem with the *narrative* role, which is to render experiences coherent by organizing, ordering, and sequencing the events they comprise, as well as incorporating conditions and contexts suggested by causal explanations (Cheyne & Tarulli, 1998). Traditional cultures have ready-to-hand a finite set of explanations that are shared by many, if not all, members. Modern industrialized cultures also have a large and diverse array of explanations and narratives, many of which are fleeting and few of which are known by the majority of their members. In each case, it is a significant task to understand how we sort through, select, and combine our personal understandings of our lived experiences drawing on a vast reserve of cultural material.

#### *Unusual Experiences and their Interpretation*

Entities usually thought to be associated with uncanny experiences have typically been assumed to be not of this world. It is therefore not surprising that accounts of abduction by extra-terrestrial aliens has been considered a modern version of age-old folk narratives of possession and abduction by alien creatures, demons, and witches (e.g., Ellis, 1988). Moreover, the alien abduction experience appears naturally connected with, indeed a historical extension of a slightly earlier UFO lore of sightings of alien craft, both being based on the common theme of extraterrestrial origins (Whitmore, 1995). Scientists, and particularly, popular conveyers of images of mainstream science, such as James Gleick (1996) and the late Carl Sagan (1996), typically inveigh against the anti-scientific nature of such beliefs. It is argued here, however, that it is precisely popular notions of what constitutes scientifically based justifications that have transformed our accounts of the experience of the alien and, perhaps ironically, produced the modern notion of alien abduction. Aliens arriving in fantastic craft from the stars are more in keeping with narratives for a scientific age than are ogres and demons materializing from a metaphysically dubious and archaic spirit world. I shall argue, moreover, that the physical

sciences, again somewhat ironically, provide a means of saving the experience from reduction to mere psychological syndromes of suggestion, false memory, hallucination, and delusion.

Alien abductions are reported overwhelmingly to take place at night when the victim is asleep or about to fall asleep. A crucial telltale sign of authenticity of the experience is the "feeling of presence" in one's bedroom just as one is falling asleep (e.g., Hopkins, 1987). Then there is the almost inevitable paralysis or immobility during which the victim feels "very, very heavy -- as if I weighed ten thousand pounds, or frozen, immobilized," as well as a suffocating feeling during which "You can't breathe, you can't move" (Velez, 1996). Then comes the terror: ". . . usually the first few moments of these experiences involve initial confusion, then shock, fear, terror . . . I was in a pure state of pure panic and terror" (Velez, 1996). Also consistent with the lack of explicit sensory qualities to the auditory and visual hallucinations is the report that aliens communicate through telepathy, bypassing the external senses, and directly entering the mind. "You hear that all in your head. They communicate telepathically. They think at you, and you hear it in your head. Actually, what I hear in my mind -- what I remember hearing in my mind, during hypnosis, is a very soft raspy whisper. Their voices sound like they're whispering in your head"(Velez, 1996). In the course of all of these confusing and frightening experiences abductees are often "floated" up to waiting craft (Hopkins, 1987). The consistency of these features in the literature has been taken by apologists for alien abduction theories as a criterion of genuineness (Whitmore, 1995).

#### *Sleep Paralysis and Associated Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Experiences*

SP is a conscious state of involuntary immobility occurring just prior to falling asleep or immediately upon waking. SP is generally classified as a parasomnia (Thorpy, 1990, Williams & Karacan, 1978) and traditionally associated with narcolepsy (Yoss & Daly, 1957) but has, more recently, been found to be common in non-clinical populations (e.g., Spanos, McNulty,

DuBreuil, Pires, & Burgess, 1995). Although SP is a REM phenomenon (Hishikawa & Shimizu, 1995) with many features remarkably consistent with REM neurophysiology (Cheyne, Rueffer, & Newby-Clark, 1998), SP is phenomenally a borderline state between waking and dreaming. Consistent with this phenomenology, polysomnographic studies report mixed REM and waking EEG components during SP episodes (Takeuchi et al., 1992). Victims are aware of their state and can later describe the experience vividly and provide accurate reports on environmental events during the episode (Hishikawa, 1976; Hishikawa & Kaneko, 1965). People frequently report a feeling of presence that is often described as malevolent, threatening, or evil. The presence is likely to be vaguely felt or sensed just out of sight but thought to be watching or monitoring the victim, often with intense interest, sometimes standing by, or sitting on, the bed. On some occasions the presence will seem to attack, sometimes strangling the victim while kneeling and exerting crushing pressure on the chest. Victims also report auditory, visual, proprioceptive, and tactile hallucinations, as well as floating sensations and out-of-body experiences. People frequently try, unsuccessfully, to cry out. After seconds or minutes one feels suddenly released from the paralysis, but will be left with a lingering anxiety (Cheyne et al., 1996; Cheyne & Girard, 2007ab, in press; Hishikawa, 1976; Hufford, 1982).

SP and its associated hallucinatory experiences appear to be transcultural with numerous cultures having widely known terms, explanations, and well defined narratives associated with this experience (Adler, 1994; Bloom & Gelardin, 1976; Firestone, 1985; Foster, 1973; Fukuda, Miyasita, & Ishihara, 1987; Hufford, 1982; Ness, 1978; Tillhagen, 1969). SP experiences are a likely source of the notion of the traditional images of nocturnal assaults by incubi, witches, mare, spirits, and demons (Keissling, 1977; Roscher, 1900/1979; Simpson & Weiner, 1989), and is likely the original referent for the term "nightmare" (Liddon, 1967). Fuseli's famous painting entitled "The Nightmare," for example, was clearly inspired by SP experiences than by a

conventional frightening dream (Schneck, 1969). One of the most thoroughly studied cultural accounts of SP experiences is that of the "Old Hag" of Newfoundland (Firestone, 1985; Hufford, 1982; Ness, 1978). The "Old Hag" is a very concrete version of an alien presence that sits on the afflicted person's chest while attempting to throttle the helpless victim. The Newfoundlanders' notion of the hag likely had its origins in the British Isles where the notion of the hag or haegtesse is related to that of witches (Simpson, 1973). That the Old Hag experience was also well known during Shakespeare's time is suggested by Mercutio's *Queen Mab* speech:

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,  
That presses them, and learns them first to bear,  
Making them women of good carriage:

*Romeo and Juliet*, I, 4

Clearly it is not the case that all possession, alien abduction, and similar accounts are instances of SP. An alien abduction/possession account does provide, however, a relatively complete and, for some, plausible and satisfying account of that experience. In common with the Velez' accounts cited earlier, numerous descriptions of abduction experiences in the letters to Communion author Whitley Strieber, for example, are difficult to distinguish from experiences presented as accounts of SP with HHEs.

I'd be in bed and very much aware of my surroundings . . . I'd hear music, interrupted by a mechanical type of voice, but I could never remember what was said. I'd feel the mattress depress and the springs pressing down, and I knew someone had sat down beside me. But I was paralyzed, and couldn't utter a sound, swallow, or move in any way. My eyes were open, though I was always facing in the opposite direction from where "the presence" remained. I would be there about ten minutes, it seemed. (Strieber & Strieber, 1997, p. 84-85)

After praying and relaxing the woman describing this experience reports that she suddenly recovered from the episode. Far from eschewing scientific evidence she notes that subsequent EEGs indicated left temporal lobe seizures, but she easily incorporates them into the alien story by seeing them as consequences of abduction.

*Le Horla*

Although cases have been made for literary references to SP by a variety of writers since Shakespeare, including Dickens, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Melville (Cosnett, 1992; Herman, 1997; Schneck, 1962, 1971) these are often ambiguous or incidental references. In Le Horla, however, Maupassant not only presents the most evocative and unambiguous literary accounts of SP, he makes the episode the central event connecting and driving virtually all aspects of the story. Maupassant appears to have been somewhat preoccupied with anomalous sensory experiences even as a young man (Alvaro, 2005). Throughout the 1880's Maupassant had a number of anomalous experiences that troubled him deeply and led him not only to seek medical help but also to intensify his personal and literary explorations of a variety of alternative explanations. Maupassant's conjectures and musings about such experiences appear in his diary and letters, as well as in several short stories written between 1883 and 1890. The latter include, most directly, *Lui?* (1883), *La Peur* (1884), *Un Fou?* (1884), *Qui Sait?* (1890), and two versions of *Le Horla* (1886, 1887). As noted earlier, these are typically considered tales of madness that track the deteriorating mental state of the author as well as his protagonists. It is certainly true that Maupassant entertained the possibility of madness for his characters and for himself. He was, at the same time, struck by his own lucidity in this period, during which he was very productive, a point raised both in his personal correspondence and in his character's ruminations. Upon sending off the manuscript of *Le Horla*, he commented to a friend that people might well think him mad, given its contents, but that he had written it in an entirely sane and lucid spirit.

"In a few days, you will see how all the papers will report I am mad. They can rest assured, indeed, that I am quite sane, and that I knew exactly what I was doing when I wrote this story" (Troyat, 1989, p. 171). This is consistent with the stance of the protagonist in the earlier version of *Le Horla*. "In a little while, you will understand that I am completely sane, lucid, and clear headed as anyone . . ." (Cogny, 1970, p. 47).

*The story*: Maupassant's aliens arrive at the very beginning of *Le Horla* (although this is not at all evident, at the time, to either the reader or the protagonist) in "a magnificent Brazilian three-master, completely white, wonderfully clean and shining" (Maupassant, 1988, p. 891). It is significant, in view of later developments, that the appearance of this ship interrupts some pleasant reflections on his heritage and love for the countryside in which his forefathers had lived and died. Within a few days, however, he is unwell and depressed in striking contrast to his near euphoric state at the time of the passage of the Brazilian ship. In addition to several physical symptoms he begins to develop obsessions with the "invisible," with the limitations of the "normal" senses, and with the resulting inability of humans to comprehend the very large and the very small. Even in these initial philosophical ruminations we are presented with a metaphor mixing the folk notion of fairies and the scientific notion of physical force.

How profound it is, this mystery of the Invisible. We cannot plumb its depths with our wretched senses, with our eyes that cannot perceive what is very small, or very large, or very close, or very far, or see the inhabitants of stars or those in a drop of water . . . with our ears that deceive us, because they convey to us vibrations of the air in the form of sounds. They are the fairies who perform this miracle of changing movement into sound (p. 892).

The theme of this fatal vulnerability—the inherent fallibility of our most fundamental senses—pervades the story and is one the Maupassant had delved into previously in *Un Fou?* Beset by

these ruminations, the protagonist of *Le Horla* develops signs of great agitation, which escalate to a rather serious anxiety attack during which he notes such clinical signs as accelerated pulse rate and pupil dilation. He is overcome with a "dreadful sensation" of immanent threat. His discourse is of constant fear: "I'm afraid . . . but of what? I was never afraid of anything before" (p. 893). His condition is such that he seeks medical advice, leading to a medical regimen of cold showers and potassium bromide. He continues, however, to be filled with keen anticipations of impending doom. "I wait for sleep just as one would wait for an executioner. I wait for it, terrified at the prospect of its arrival, with my heart pounding and my legs trembling" (p. 893). When sleep comes it brings with it a terror that will be named only later.

Maupassant's account of this terrifying seminal experience is an evocative description of a prototypical SP experience (See opening quote). There is a sense of presence; first monitoring, then threatening, finally attacking. These impressions are amplified by sensations of pressure on the chest, of being strangled, and of being paralyzed and mute, unable even to cry out.

The initial episode is followed by nightly repetition of the experience. During this period, he experiences a pervasive sense of presence associated with feelings ranging from vague apprehension to extreme terror. On his walks, he thinks someone is following him, "nearly treading" on his heels. In spite of the extreme proximity of the presence he cannot give it form, cannot fully comprehend the entity that hovers just over his shoulder. He becomes extremely disoriented and suffers episodes of vertigo, panic, and agoraphobia. He does find a brief respite in a holiday to Mont-Saint-Michel. Even here, however, his obsession with that which escapes the normal range of senses is reinforced in his discussion with a monk about legends surrounding Mont-Saint-Michel. After listening to several old stories, Maupassant's character expresses some skepticism regarding the existence of the chimerical creatures of these legends. "If there have been other beings on the earth besides us; how is it," he says, "that we have never actually

encountered them in all this time?" The monk responds by recapitulating the earlier theme of the fallibility of the senses. Evoking a metaphor of the power of the invisible wind, the monk replies, "Can we see even a hundred-thousandth part of what actually exists?" (p. 895).

Shortly after his return home, the nocturnal assaults resume. "Last night I felt that somebody was squatting on me, putting his mouth on mine, drinking my life out through my lips. Yes, I really felt he was sucking my life out through my throat, just like a leech would do" (p. 895). During this period he notices that water is mysteriously disappearing from his decanter on the table by his bed. He vacillates between two hypotheses, which will gradually merge.

Someone had drunk the water. Who? Was it I? Without a doubt. It could not be anybody but me. Then I must be the sleepwalker, I must be living, without knowing it, that mysterious double life which makes us wonder whether there are two beings inhabiting one body, or whether there is some alien, unknowable, and invisible being which occasionally takes over when our spirit is benumbed, forcing our captive body to obey it, just as it obeys ourselves--even more than it obeys us. (p. 896)

Azam, in 1860, had published a famous case of "double consciousness" in a patient known as Félicité. Félicité was reputed to have undergone a number of changes, such as becoming more animated, physically stronger, and quite loquacious during her "crises." A dissociated state exhibited by Félicité was one of the alternating conscious states one of which was aware of events during the other state but this was not reciprocal (Lawrence & Perry, 1988). In the first version of *Le Horla*, Maupassant's protagonist notes that when possessed by this presence his senses, like those of the hypnotic subjects, "have lost their normal aversions and acquired different tastes" (Cogny, 1970, p. 50). Two well-known contemporaries of Maupassant who developed a new literary genre based on dissociation were Poe, in *William Wilson*, first published in 1839

(Clarke, 1991) and Stevenson, first in a play, *Deacon Brodie*, published in 1880, and later in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published 1886 (Geduld, 1983). The distinction between two versions of dissociation, one as two local cohabiting souls, one as an alien soul usurping a captive body, will gradually disappear from Maupassant's character's deliberations.

Another trip, this time to Paris, again restores our protagonist to a semblance of his old self. Distanced from the anomalous experiences and their context, he once again reverts to rational scientific explanations for his "terrors and suppositions" and is seized with amazement at his earlier gullibility and lack of critical good sense. As was the case during the trip to Mont-Saint-Michel, however, events eventually conspire to shift the balance once again, or rather to further muddle the distinction. The incidents this time center on hypnotism. In Paris, he witnesses demonstrations of several hypnotic phenomena. In his description of these phenomena, Maupassant the writer reveals a mixture of scientific and occult understanding. It is, however, a rather conventional and non-occult demonstration of post-hypnotic suggestion involving the protagonist's cousin that leaves him profoundly shaken. It causes him to reflect on the relativity of all experience, and on how easily humans are influenced by their immediate context. "To believe in the supernatural when you're on the island of La Grenouillère would be the height of folly . . . But what if when you're on top of Mont-Saint-Michel? . . . Or in India?" (p. 12).

Shortly after his return from Paris, in a more rational mode, he speculates that some brain dysfunction must account for these hallucinations. He comments also on his apparent lucidity in the face of incredible experiences. Perhaps, he thinks, some mechanisms associated with dreams explain his experiences, including his daytime fantasies. He persists briefly in his scientific analysis of his symptoms, making reference to notions of cerebral localization current at the time.

Similar phenomena occur in dreams, which lead us through the most incredible fantasies, and we never experience any surprise over it, because the mechanisms of verification and control are asleep, whereas the imaginative part of us is awake and functioning. Might it not be that one of the imperceptible keys of the cerebral keyboard has become stuck in my case? Some people, after an accident, find that they cannot remember proper nouns, verbs or letters, or only dates. The localization of mental functions in the brain has just recently been proved. Well, what is so remarkable about my mechanism that distinguishes between hallucination and reality becoming sluggish? (pp. 902-903)

The second half of the 19th century was a time of revival of localizationist notions of cerebral functioning. In the 1860s, Broca's reports of an association between lesions in the left frontal lobe of the cortex and aphasia argued against Flourens's doctrine of the unity of the nervous system (Boring, 1950). Beyond specific localization issues, Broca's work raised the salience of the notion of lateralization. Issues of lateralization were implicated in theories of madness and criminality and the notion arose, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of an uncivilized and immoral right brain at war with a moral and rational left brain (Finger, 1994). This moral and intellectual splitting of the brain was matched by interest in a similar split in the mind of distinct and opposing forces.

Maupassant's protagonist begins to show further signs of agoraphobia about this time. While out walking along the riverbank, he is consumed by a growing apprehension of something preventing him from proceeding. He is overcome by a feeling that he must get home as soon as possible. During his outings, he is overcome by sudden panic attacks. "Then just as I was getting back into my carriage, and was intending to say: 'Drive to the station!' I found myself shouting, in a voice so loud that passers-by turned around: 'Drive me home!'" (p. 904).

His impression grows that an entity has taken possession of him and is sapping his will.

He has become unable to make the simplest decisions and feels he is a helpless spectator who can no longer control his own body. He concludes that his behavior is controlled by an invisible alien just as that of his cousin was controlled by the "alien will" of the hypnotist in Paris. As a literate member of an industrialized society he seeks authoritative guidance from the local library in the learned treatises of one Herman Herestrauss, "doctor of philosophy and theogony," who has written on "all of the invisible beings which haunt mankind or appear in dreams."

In spite of his diligent research, he does not find an immediate answer to his own particular possession. The treatise of the learned doctor does, however, instill, or perhaps simply clarify, certain ideas. These consist of evolutionary ideas about the possibility of the emergence of some new creatures that will be the successors of humans. He then begins to speculate on the possibility of extraterrestrial life in the faraway worlds among the stars. What superior powers must they possess?

One of them, one day or another, will travel through space and come to this earth and conquer it, rather like the Normans in the olden days crossed the sea to subjugate weaker races!

We are so feeble, so helpless, so ignorant, so tiny, we creatures on this whirling speck of mud and water. (p. 905)

Here his speculations reflect Spencerian progressivist notions of evolution prevalent at the time (Gould, 1977). This new entity is contrasted to feeble, archaic humans, representing a new "advance" in evolution up the *scala naturae*, an entity whose "nature is nearer perfection" than our own. *Le Horla* here becomes science fiction, but of a different stripe than that of Maupassant's more sanguine contemporary, Jules Verne, and one guided implicitly by 18th and 19th century *Naturphilosophie* transformed by vague evolutionary notions.

One day he reads an account of "an epidemic of madness, similar to the contagious

insanity that attacked European populations in the Middle Ages" (p. 906), sweeping through Brazil. Here a guiding explanatory scientific metaphor is provided by notion of "contagion" by invisible microorganisms, popularized by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts of the Hygienists and Pasteurizers (Latour, 1988, Perrot, 1990). He reflects back upon the handsome three-masted Brazilian schooner that sailed past his house on the Seine. He imagines that the entity must have seen him, and his house "white like the ship"— and jumped ashore. "Now I know. I can foresee it. The reign of humanity has come to an end" (p. 904). This is a line of thought encouraged by the evolutionary scenarios inspired by the treatises of Dr. Herestrauss. He speculates that Mesmer had merely foreshadowed a glimpse of the power these beings possess. The learned doctors using hypnosis are, he now thinks, like irresponsible children playing with powerful forces that they scarcely understand.

The popular notion of hypnosis as the imposition of the "alien" will of the hypnotist upon the helpless subject clearly reinforced the plausibility of the abduction of the will of Maupassant's protagonist by unknown alien agents. This "abduction of the will" metaphor had been emphasized in the demonstrations of hypnotic and post-hypnotic effects encountered in Paris. It was not only the demonstration of a particular phenomenon, but also of a scientific explanation that seized his mind--or rather a constellation of explanations that had evolved over the preceding century. Hypnotism had attained a status as a marginal but very popular quasi-scientific phenomenon at the time of Maupassant's writing. Hypnotism was, then as now, being explored on the margins of science, tinged with an aura of the occult that rendered its scientific investigation suspect.

Several of Maupassant's short stories refer frequently to Mesmer and the notion of "animal magnetism." The analogy to the effect of magnetism on the "will" of iron bars was already an old and scientifically discredited idea by the time of Maupassant. Mesmer had created

a sensation in Paris back in the 1770's and 1780's with his version of "animal magnetism." Independent scientific investigations of Mesmer's work had revealed little evidence for anything even remotely analogous to magnetism. Mesmer's own abandonment of the use of magnets suggests that he had come to a similar conclusion himself, but was unable to provide a satisfactory alternative explanation for the admittedly dramatic effects he was able to imbue in his subjects. It was likely as much Mesmer's inability to offer a plausible alternative scientific explanation as any doubts about the validity of the phenomenon itself that ultimately led to his disgrace and withdrawal from Paris (Boring, 1950). The scientific investigations of the learned commissions did not, in fact, demonstrate that the mesmeric phenomena lacked validity but simply found that the magnetic theory was not credible (Bowers, 1976). It was not the case, however, that the theory was considered inherently nonsensical or far-fetched. It was, on the contrary, quite in keeping with the scientific temper of the time (Dixon & Lawrence, 1992). It was, nonetheless, very susceptible to empirical disconfirmation – in no small part because it was patently wrong! Without a solid, or even tentative, alternative scientific explanation, Mesmer's effects, it was concluded, could only be stage magic and fraud. Mesmer's flair for drama and spectacle doubtless reinforced consideration of these suspicions. If Maupassant's lay understanding of hypnotism seems confused to us it should not be surprising given this complex mix of conceptual, empirical, and personal factors.

Later, during much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century medical journals ignored hypnosis (in spite of considerable interest and activity by sometimes quite eminent scientists). By the 1860's, however, hypnotism was experiencing something of a revival in France, spearheaded by the work of Charcot at the Salpêtrière. Charcot was widely acknowledged as the preeminent neurologist of his time and his fame was at its height throughout the 1880s. Maupassant had attended some of Charcot's lectures on the subject around this time (Kellet, 1989). Charcot's

lectures were considered social events and were attended by many of the rich and famous and the performances of his hysterical patients were said to rival those of the great opera stars and stage actors of the day (Perrot, 1990). The flamboyant Charcot was himself the model for characters in many novels and plays (Ellenberger, 1970). Moreover, Maupassant knew Charcot personally, having dined with him at the home of Edmond de Goncourt and, on at least one occasion, Maupassant's mother was examined by Charcot himself (Troyat, 1989). Charcot offered a vague but more or less scientifically respectable theory of hysteria that appeared to account for hypnotic phenomena and that was acceptable to the Academy. Hypnosis, as a symptom of hysteria and later as a form of dissociation, was superficially quite consistent, even identical, with a view that different and opposing forces or souls vied for control of the body. Evocative photographs of patients acting out hysteria for the camera gave substance and credence to sensational newspaper stories of the *aboyeuses* and *possédées* and to later forms of mass hysteria that occurred throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France (Perrot, 1990).

Thus Maupassant's rough amalgam of popular and marginalized science, contemporary fads and discredited scientific theories, folk images, tabloid journalism and learned treatises, applied to his own bizarre personal experiences, conjured up a quasi-scientific alien abduction hypothesis. He finds a name for his own particular demon, the "Horla," or rather, imagines that he hears this name spoken by the entity itself. There has been considerable speculation about the manner in which Maupassant came up with that particular name (e.g., Cogne, 1970). Perhaps the most obvious is simply that it is *le hors-là* — the outside-there — a sort of inverted and perverse *Dasien* of utter otherness. This is very consistent with one of the most fundamental aspects of the HHEs accompanying SP, the sense of an evil presence, an alien *other* poised by one's bed waiting to destroy one's body and abduct one's soul (Cheyne et al, 1999; Cheyne, 2001; Cheyne & Girard, 2007a). The very notion of animal magnetism reinforced the evolutionary explanation

of this particular experience. Hypnotism in humans is often conflated with tonic immobility in animals, which has long been referred to as “animal hypnosis” (Gallup & Mazer, 1977; Ginsberg, 1975; Ratner, 1967). Moreover, “In animals, hypnotism appears to result from a kind of paralysis of the will. It looks like a capitulation in front of a superior will” (Lysing, 1892; cited in Laurence & Perry, 1988). Thus, the experience of the alien other, imposing its superior will on a lesser creature, merges easily with the evolutionary trend of thought suggested earlier and Maupassant quickly incorporates all of this into a crude survival-of-the-fittest analogy.

Ah! The vulture has eaten the dove; the wolf has eaten the sheep; the lion has devoured the buffalo with his sharp-pointed horns; man has killed the lion with arrow, spear, and gun; but the Horla is going to do to man just what we have done to the horse and to the cattle: he is going to use us as his property, his servant, and his food, simply by the power of his will. Woe to us. (p. 906)

At this point, confronted with this compelling Spencerian evolutionary narrative, he concludes that there can be little question of opposing the Horla. We humans, he concludes, are too weak and our senses too feeble to even detect, except dimly through intuition, such a superior being—let alone defeat it. Nonetheless, against the force of this argument, he makes one last attempt to destroy the alien. Unfortunately, he manages instead to destroy his home and, in the process, watch his servants perish in a conflagration of his making. After a brief consoling hope that he has also destroyed the alien, his doubts reemerge and he despairs of ever defeating the alien except through his own annihilation. The story ends as the protagonist anticipates his own suicide.

The notions of the physical and physiological plausibility of invisible agents and physical forces acting on bodies and minds, multiple agents in one body, alien control of thought and action through hypnosis, life on other planets, progressive evolution all lend plausibility to the

belief in possession by alien entities. The invisible demons of earlier superstitious ages are resuscitated in this marriage of evolution and hypnosis. In the end Maupassant's protagonist accepts the reality of the alien, not as the product of a psychological process of imagination/suggestion or errant brain processes as he had earlier conjectured, but literally as a bodily abduction by a superior alien species. Psychological and neurological interpretations succumb to those of hypnotic mind control and evolutionary biology.

### *Explanation and Understanding*

The alternation between and intermixing of scientific explanations and narrative interpretations of unusual, surprising, and frightening experiences by Maupassant's protagonist is scarcely unique. In his study of the "Old Hag" SP experiences of Newfoundlanders, Ness (1978) documents the easy and natural alternation between, and mixing of, causal and narrative accounts. A popular explanation for the experience of Haggling is that of blood stagnation. "Old timers say it's your blood standin' still" (p. 17). The condition of blood stagnation is declared, in turn, to result from over-work, fatigue, and stress. "The way I figures it, back in those days [when Haggling was experienced in the lumber camps] everyone punished their bodies, didn't sleep right, or get the proper food" (p. 17). These causal accounts are, in their observable specifics, remarkably in agreement with contemporary psychological and medical opinion regarding the effects of stress and disruption of sleep patterns (Partinen, 1994). Only the details of conjectures about internal unobserved processes differ (e.g., references to blood changes and body fatigue rather than to neurotransmitters and neural architecture). These materialistic explanations coexist easily with occult accounts of conscious and unconscious charms and hexes arising from feelings of hostility. "Ya know there is some people can put it on you, like a charm" (Ness, 1978; p. 18). Different explanations are accepted by different people and even by the same people at different times or even coexist agnostically as plausible alternatives. In one

Hagging account, within a few sentences a fisherman blames stagnation of the blood, his wife, and a kind of stroke (p. 19). The individual residents and victims of Hagging in the community of Northeast Harbour did not create these explanations and narratives out of whole cloth but invoked more or less authoritative accounts from the cultural repertoire to explain their own personal experiences. These authoritative accounts fit the SP experiences so closely that they likely arose as direct interpretations of the experiences themselves. Depending on the mood and predilections of the experient and the fashion of the times, the selection and availability of accounts will vary over time and between communities, though there always seem to be choices available. In contrast to traditional cultures, in mainstream North American culture few victims of SP have prior access to any authoritative accounts relevant to their unusual experiences although the structure of their experiences equally fits the traditional narratives (Cheyne, Rueffer, & Newby-Clark, 1999). Occasionally, psychology or medical students stumble across scientific accounts of SP and are reassured by those authoritative explanations—as was the physician who was reduced to tears of relief when he discovered the affliction from which he had suffered for years described as "idiopathic sleep paralysis" (Hufford, 1982). Most intellectuals are well prepared to accept both the authority and the substance of the explanatory accounts offered in credible scientific sources. Others, like Maupassant's character, Whitley Strieber (1987) among them, either prefer, or are exposed to, more narratively compelling hybrid quasi-scientific extraterrestrial accounts of their experiences. In Strieber's case he was perhaps especially prepared for the sort of account that was presented him. Ellis (1988) compares Strieber's recollection of his abduction experiences to a religious conversion. Ellis describes Strieber as being in "psychological disarray, alienated from his wife, unable to read or write, and suffering from a variety of physical symptoms" (p. 266). These are terms that aptly describe the condition of the protagonist of *Le Horla*. Strieber's case, however, appears to have had a more

positive resolution. Strieber's own Herestrauss, Bud Hopkins, appears to have greatly unburdened him of his anxieties, at least for that period of his life. Strieber's transformation does seem to have the qualities of religious conversion (Ellis, 1988, Whitmore, 1995) and his subsequent activities of researching, collecting, and analyzing abduction accounts seem more like missionary or messianic science than anti-science.

Since alien abduction experiences are typically associated with the onset of sleep, and hence typically followed by sleep, it is tempting to suggest that they will be forgotten or repressed in the morning. Under hypnosis, or the persistent questioning of an interrogator, these would provide raw material for elaboration. This point about hypnosis has been dealt with extensively in the UFO literature by participants on all sides of the issue (Baker, 1997-88; Jacobs, 1992; Klass, 1988), as well as more broadly in the recovered/false memories literature (Spanos, 1996). Nonetheless, the present argument is not that accounts of UFO abductions are false memories, although it is not inconsistent with that view or with the possibility that what we have are often badly reconstructed, misinterpreted, and misattributed accounts (Clark & Loftus, 1996). Rather the present view is that they are often vivid and accurate memories of real and often truly bizarre experiences for which most members of industrialized societies have no immediate and convincing conventional explanation. The *experiences* are entirely consistent with nocturnal assault and abduction. Many elect to deny the evidence of their senses and accept mainstream scientific explanations having to do with psychological suggestion or brain functioning. A few, however, take their experiences at face value and continue to describe their experiences in narratively rich terms with incursions of cultural elements consistent with alien abduction.

#### *Postscript*

Every other time I come home, I see my double. I open the door, and I see him sitting in

my armchair. I know it for a hallucination, even while experiencing it. Curious! If I didn't have a little common sense, I'd be afraid. (cited in Campbell, 1989)

This is not the protagonist of *Le Horla* speaking but Maupassant himself writing to his friend, Paul Bourget. In that letter, he does sound very much like the protagonist of *Le Horla* early on in his experiences. Whether brought on by general paresis from syphilis (Critchley, 1951) and heavy drug use (that are perhaps too much in line with 19th century fabulae of moral turpitude to be above suspicion) or by some familial condition (his brother suffered a remarkably similar fate a few years earlier), Maupassant's condition deteriorated and his hallucinations increased. On New Year's Day, 1892, Maupassant fired several shots at an apparently imaginary intruder in his home, cut his own throat, was committed to an asylum in Paris, and died nineteen months later, on July 6, 1893. At forty-two, he was then the same age as the protagonist of *Le Horla*.

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