

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE II

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## Tentacles from the Depths: The Nautical Horror of D. T. Neal's *Relict*

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### ABSTRACT

In D. T. Neal's novella *Relict* (2013), the action centres around the attempts of the protagonist to escape from a giant octopus which keeps her trapped on an atoll of the Pacific Ocean, after it has devoured her three crew mates. The presence of the creature sustains a constant feeling of horror and despair in an isolated maritime region, which confirms to the protagonist, and the reader, that humanity does not possess the supremacy we have claimed on Earth. Drawing on Timothy Morton's reflections on the fractured relationship between humans and Nature, this article analyses Neal's text as an example of 'Nautical Horror', introduced here as a subset of ecohorror. Nautical Horror, I argue, borrows a sublime maritime background from Nautical Gothic and combines it with a monstrous and horrifying encounter with the nonhuman, ultimately highlighting humanity's lack of control over the powerful forces of a watery wilderness. The final intention of this article is to provide a reference point for further studies on Neal's ecohorror fiction and to encourage the development and theorisation of Nautical Horror and explorations of monstrous cephalopods.

There is never just one tentacle, but many. And yet, the many tentacles always seem to trail off into nothing, into a distant ocean abyss as black as the ink it secretes.

*Eugene Thacker* (2014: p. 150)

In horror narratives, characters who confront monsters experience two stages of horror. First is the distressing experience that comes when facing and, consequently, having to fight the monster if the observer is to survive. The second is an even more devastating moment, when the irrefutable

existence of the monster forces the human viewer to accept that our planet contains more than we could possibly know. Indeed, human knowledge is limited by mobility and accessibility. Even in the twenty-first century, we know that many secrets are yet to be discovered on Earth—secrets lurking, in particular, in the dark ocean depths—but we keep this idea repressed or, at least, to the back of our mind. Consequently, when an experience with the unknown in Nature takes place it triggers an uncanny collapse of (the illusion of) human control over the environment. In D.T. Neal's novella, *Relict* (2013), Paige, the protagonist, illustrates through her experience the occurrence of these two moments of horror in a nautical scenario, in which the horror stems from the immediate threat to survival amidst the hostilities of a watery wilderness and the awful realisation that we are not alone, nor are we in control. This article analyses said novella as a Nautical Horror text, revealing the limited possibilities of humankind to survive when faced with primeval Nature. In doing so, my purpose is to leave a precedent for further studies on both the particular ecohorror branch in Neal's fiction and Nautical Horror more generally, as well as promote explorations of tentacular monstrosity.

D. T. Neal is an American writer. In 2013, he started a branch of 'creature feature eco-horror novellas' (as quoted on his website: [www.dtneal.com](http://www.dtneal.com)) and, so far, he has published three works within this line: *Summerville* (March 2013), a Southern Gothic text where flowers and wasps attack a group of friends; *The Day of the Nightfish* (2020), which renders a violent attack on the crew of a fishing ship performed by several, apparently intelligent, members of the nightfish species; and *Relict* (August 2013). In *Relict*, a group of four sailing companions (two couples), arrive at an atoll to spend some hours of leisure. Soon after their arrival, three of them are unexpectedly killed in turn by a giant octopus that drags them into the lagoon it inhabits at the centre of the atoll. The protagonist, Paige, survives the annihilation of her husband and the other two companions, but the creature keeps her prisoner on a small strip of land where she is separated from the commodities on board the *Affinity*, a ketch inside which the domestic world of humanity can travel around the ocean: '*Affinity* was a prototype, an experimental boat, designed for and capable of transoceanic transit, but she was, most of all, a pleasure boat' (Neal, 2013: p. 85). Paige manages to escape the attacks from the sublime cephalopod, a creature which has lived and survived on Earth longer than humans and other mammals. Indeed, the creature's status as a surviving remnant from distant eras is precisely what provides the title for the text. Determination

allows the protagonist to regain use of some human artefacts, an axe and a shotgun, and even to access the state-of-the-art vessel that the giant octopus tries to keep out of her reach; nevertheless, the creature proves inescapable. It follows her off the atoll, proving its superiority over any human attempt to escape its predatory attack.

My analysis draws on Timothy Morton's theses on ecological awareness in order to examine Paige's experience within the context of the broader conflict between the human and nonhuman animal, building on conversations central to critical engagements with 'Gothic Nature' and laying the foundations for a proposed subset of ecoGothic and ecohorror: Nautical Horror. Neal's novella is scrutinised as an example of said subset, in which the nonhuman world is confirmed as a threatening *other*. I explore Paige's gradual immersion into the events that engender a weird uncertainty which ends up becoming absolute horror when she confronts a monstrous creature that threatens the presence of all human life. Its attack reveals that humans are *not* the masters and owners of the planet, much as we endeavour to convince ourselves otherwise. According to Timothy Clark (2011), our surroundings—which we call 'Nature'—have two main definitions: they can refer either to everything that exists in the universe, thus including humankind, or only to the nonhuman entities around us that we can contemplate, mould, and exploit to our benefit (pp. 6-7). Clark identifies the existence of an 'enlightenment project of the "conquest of nature"' (p. 7) which consolidates the exploitation and devastation of the environment without any consideration 'based on the view that humanity is separate from and superior to it' (p. 23). The first two decades of the twenty-first century, the context in which Neil's novella takes place, shows a planet where this manipulation of Nature for our own benefit is more evident than ever before. We have forgotten to think of ourselves and all other beings on the planet as what Timothy Morton (2010) calls a 'mesh', which 'extends inside beings as well as among them'. Inside it, 'there is no definite "within" or "outside" of beings'. Instead, 'everything is adapted to everything else' (p. 39). Into such mesh, all creatures coexist in a complex network of interlaced links of mutual relationships that emphasise their differences and exist because of them. Morton's view finds echo in Donna Haraway's (2016) proposal on 'tentacular thinking'. She applies the term 'tentacularity' to refer to the interconnectedness of life 'passing relays again and again, in the generative recursions that make up living and dying' (p. 33). The result of our separation from this network has led to the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene (or even the

Capitalocene<sup>1</sup>), a new geological epoch jumpstarted by significant human activity. Having left on the Earth's surface and its atmosphere visible marks of our impact, we seem to have, in Morton's (2016) words, transformed Nature into 'a blank sheet for the projection of human desire' (p. 65). Actually, Morton names our times *Homogenocene*, the age in which 'humans have stamped their impression on things they consider as ductile as wax, even if those things cry' (p. 23). Indeed, we 'consider' our perspective to be the only valid one; from the moment 'agrologistics' started shaping our civilisation, we spawned 'the concept of Nature definitely outside the human' (p. 56), thus creating our artificial world as separate and different from that one.

Nature is neither abandoned nor destroyed by human activities and processes. Morton (2016) argues that anthropogenic activity transforms Nature into a latent form of catastrophe (p. 59), viewed as something separate from our own existence and development on the planet. The result of this transformation is the end of all dialogue between humanity and Nature. Haraway (2016) reminds us that we are not the only important actors on the stage we call Earth, 'with all other beings able simply to react' (p. 55), and that the planet is much wider than our limited anthropocentric view. Outside from it, we would look on a scenario where 'human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story' (p. 55). Although Nature is indifferent towards us, Clive Hamilton (2017) further suggests that we behave towards it as if we were facing an opponent with selfish intentions similar to ours, and thus start a violent competition:

*'Humans are more powerful; nature is more powerful. Taken together; there is more power at work on Earth. A power struggle between humankind and Earth is underway, a tug-of-war in which humans strain to drag the Earth into our sphere of influence while Earth attempts to pull us back into its domain'* (p. 40).

This competition means that the survival of nonhuman entities is more in danger every day as well as our own existence, which requires more technification that increases our isolation from all other forms of life. In *Relict*, even the Palmer Atoll, a fictional isolated piece of land on the Pacific, has

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<sup>1</sup> Jason W. Moore (2016) proposes the use of the term 'Capitalocene' to emphasise that we live in an age where Nature is shaped to serve capitalistic interests (p. 6).

been invaded by the traces of human presence; for example, we are told early on of a sign that reads ‘Palmer Atoll. 10° 28’ N 170° 07’ W. Population 01. Elevation 5.2 feet. DANGER! KEEP OFF!’ (Neal, 2013: p. 13). This tag, which objectifies the atoll as if it were a human possession, expresses the need to leave our footprint on Nature. On the island, this statement of human presence is manifested through the ‘corrugated tin shack’ surrounded by human garbage thrown into the ocean: ‘like bones was plastic of all shapes and sizes, sunbleached. Bottles, mostly, but also netting and other things. Cigarette lighters in great stacks’ (p. 16). After observing this scene, Sebastian, Paige’s husband, emphasises the impact humanity has on Nature, reminding the others that we have turned the sea into our dump: ‘The litter is carried by the currents. There are some places out there where there is just this great swirling mass of plastic garbage, floating out there—a Sargasso Sea of plastics’ (p. 16). To this, Paige adds that ‘People are pigs’ (p. 16), critiquing our disregard for anything nonhuman (ironically through the critical comparison of humans to popularly derided nonhuman animals). The final evidence of infecting human presence is the ‘planking that had been nailed up’ (p. 71) on the grove which serves for Paige as an ultimate shelter unreachable for the kraken’s tentacles, reinforcing the fact that humans need to alter Nature in order to survive. The kraken’s overwhelming power over any other living being on the atoll is the reason why a strange alien nonhuman becomes a monstrous source of horror in Neal’s text.

A key facet of horror is being confronted by creatures that annihilate our faculties and shatter all knowledge, perceptions, and convictions. Eugene Thacker’s (2014) definition of horror reinforces this conceptualisation of the term; for him, ‘horror is the always potential threat of the senses being overwhelmed, of something being sensed that is in excess of the sorting mechanism of the understanding, and the synthetic function of reason’ (pp. 117-118). In this article, the term horror is used to refer to experiences that annihilate reason and freeze the senses, particularly when faced with a monstrous force. When this encounter of fear is connected with environmental concerns, some critics (and Neil himself) have applied the term ‘ecohorror’. Christy Tidwell, Stephen A. Rust, and Carter Soles have previously provided explanations of this genre that are helpful here. For Tidwell (2018), ecohorror applies to ‘narratives in which the central narrative is frequently one of some elements of the natural world attacking humanity’ (p. 115). Rust and Soles (2014) locate ecohorror in texts ‘grappling with ecocritical matters’ where ‘environmental disruption is haunting humanity’s relationship to the non-human world’ (p. 510). Both definitions

define ecohorror texts as those in which the damage made by humans to ecology is responsible for an attack on humanity from natural forces. Building on these ideas, my intention here is to further discussions around what I propose is a significant subset of ecohorror: Nautical Horror. In Nautical Horror, the striking threat from Nature originates specifically in aquatic contexts, such as oceans and waterways, as well as more liminal spaces, including shores, islands, and ships. Foucault (1967) defined the ship as ‘a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea’ (p. 27). Ships allow us to move on bodies of water that we tend to forget are also permanently moving.<sup>2</sup> This notion of a ‘double movement’ evidences the fact that there is always another perspective (or, indeed, something more) emanating from Nature, though we tend to wilfully ignore this and give importance exclusively to our own anthropocentric view.

To differentiate Nautical Horror and Nautical Gothic<sup>3</sup>—another category that has recently caught scholar interest—I consider it essential to indicate that the latter ‘focuses on how the sea is represented in Gothic literature – and on how it is represented Gothically in literature (including non-fiction)’ (Alder, 2017: p 1). Nautical Horror, meanwhile, is a subcategory of ecohorror which borrows a sublime maritime background from Nautical Gothic and combines it with a monstrous and horrifying encounter with the nonhuman. Margaret Cohen (2013) identifies the persistence of viewing the sea as something sublime from the eighteenth century to the present day: ‘Shaped by this Enlightenment view, the aesthetic of the sublime would yield the wild ocean, a terrific domain of uncontained nature, which remains the vision of the ocean that springs to mind when we think of this realm today’ (pp. 116-117). Resonances of this sublime oceanic obscurity appear in Edgar Allan Poe’s early manifestations of Nautical Horror, where the vastness of the ocean causes terrifying experiences. Specifically, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’ (1833) are both obvious examples that precede contemporary narratives of Nautical Horror since they illustrate the struggle for survival against a threatening maritime environment that opposes human will.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip E. Steinberg (2013) points out that the ocean is in constant movement contrary to what we experience with land surface: ‘the ocean becomes the object of our focus not because it is a space that facilitates movement the space across which things move but because it is a space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement’. (p. 165)

<sup>3</sup> Emily Alder identifies an early use of the term ‘Nautical Gothic’ in 1986 when ‘Dennis Berthold used the term to distinguish between the fantastic and the realistic in sea writing’ (2017: p. 1).



While a Nautical Gothic reading focuses on the connections of the ocean and its depths with ‘the unknown, the uncanny, the secret and the secreted’ (Packham and Punter, 2017: p. 28), Nautical Horror emphasises the arbitrariness of the human idea of supremacy over Nature when contrasted with the presence of unescapable monstrous creatures. The resulting encounters evidence the inferior position of humans when we are pitted against both the threatening creatures that emerge from the depths and the vastness of the oceanic waters that challenge the ability of human minds to comprehend size and volume. We label the attack from the ocean and its creatures against our presence on ships, islands, or the coast as a violent irruption of horrifying proportions. Nevertheless, from the perspective located in the sea and its creatures, it is us, humans, who are the intruders that have disturbed and polluted the place they inhabit. From the very moment we turned to rivers and seas to satisfy our excessive need for natural resources, our presence on and under the water has left marks of erosion and pollutants that have become much more evident in the last two centuries. Nautical Horror narratives serve to remind us about the dangers of our insatiable exploitation of aquatic resources as well as the absurdity behind the feeling of superiority over Nature on which we base such extractionism. In the specific case of *Relict*, although it is not a widely known text, I consider that the interaction of oceanic predator and prey that occurs between the monstrous octopus and human characters makes it a relevant example of contemporary Nautical Horror. The creature’s attack makes anthropocentric attempts to claim supremacy over the ocean fail, despite the existence of revolutionary technology such as vessels like the *Affinity* and the presence of multiple residues of human manufacture like the lighters piled on Palmer Atoll.

*Relict* presents two elements I suggest essential for a text of Nautical Horror: first, of course, it must have an aquatic background—in this case, an atoll in the sublime extension of the Pacific Ocean; and second, the presence of a monstrous creature that awakens an annihilating fear in the human characters who encounter it. Horror narratives are recurrently based on an encounter of the human and the monstrous in liminal regions, which include:

‘...two worlds, settings, environments impinge, where crossing (and the resulting experience of horror) is the basic action. Movement (at least in many explicitly

fictional contexts) can be in either direction in these mirror worlds. That is, some spook invades our commonplace reality, or our apparently sane and rational self enters a categorically malign environment' (Salomon, 2002: p. 9).

The doorstep dividing our realm and an alien one is crossed in either or both ways, bringing menaces in the shape of monsters and incoming destruction. In the case of Nautical Horror, those two worlds are the civilised comfort afforded by the stability of the land or on board a vessel versus the unpredictable vast oceanic surfaces and depths, populated by creatures that can easily move in a watery environment into which humans cannot venture for long without artificial aids. Such creatures, better adjusted to their environment, are monstrous only to the human eye: 'That monsters invariably upset and therefore call into question the boundaries of existing conceptual categories tells us something else essential about them: that what is or is not considered monstrous depends on and is defined against prevailing conceptions of the human and of normalcy' (Weinstock, 2014: p. 3). Concerning ancestry, cephalopods have inhabited the Earth for much longer than primates. Octopi fossils as old as 95 million years have been documented (Williams, 2011: p. 61). On the contrary, modern humans appeared only 200,000 years ago (p. 270). Neal's kraken irrupts from the natural environment of its lagoon into the human setting represented by the reduced confines of the *Affinity* from whose portholes Paige 'could see the great barred yellow eye of the octopus peering in, looking at her' (Neal, 2013: p. 84). From the animal's viewpoint, she is just food; from her perspective, the monster is attempting to breach the borders between her artificially created human world and the natural one: 'It was an odd contrast for her, the luxurious appointments inside the cabin of the *Affinity*, contrasted with the monstrosity outside' (p. 85). From her first contact with the creature, Paige is reminded of the struggle for survival in Nature; she sees a 'long, thick, snake-like thing slip out of the water and snatch up' a coconut crab (p. 26). Not long before that event, Sebastian had exclaimed that a crab 'must be the dominant predator on the island obviously. Only in isolated places like this can you have a crab at the apex of the food pyramid' (p. 25). Sebastian's words anticipate the kraken's role as the top of the pyramid towering over them on the atoll. In the end, as Paige and Meg (the other woman in Paige's group) conclude, the creature is just an animal 'playing with its food' (p. 49). When this behaviour makes Paige judge it as 'malevolence incarnate' (p. 48), and Meg describes it as 'evil' (p.54), they emphasise humanity's self-praise in thinking we are the only ones with the right to kill for sport. However,

the cephalopod's superiority over any other living being in the place grants it that possibility as well.

In Western cultures, huge octopi have historically reminded us of our impossibility to dominate either the sea surface or its depths. An example of this is Pierre Denys de Montfort's woodcut, which is described by Williams to depict

‘...a truly monstrous eight-armed, bug-eyed octopus as large as the three-masted ship it was seizing. Three octopus arms entwined the ship's masts like snakes. Two other arms grasped each end of the ship, as though to pull the ship closer to its beak. The other three arms hung there, unoccupied, as though perhaps waiting for sailors to fall into the sea and be eaten’ (2011: p. 204).

Weinstock's (2014) research on the recurring presence of krakens in western narratives concludes that ‘in literature and film, both literally and metaphorically, the kraken slumbers beneath the sea, heralding terror and apocalypse when it awakes or is disturbed’ (p. 364). Haraway (2016) indicates that ‘Octopuses are called spiders of the seas, not only for their tentacularity, but also for their predatory habits’ (p. 55). In Neal's novella, the kraken brings havoc and certain death to any human being who crosses its way. Paige becomes nearly paralysed after her first encounter with its enormous tentacle, which confounds her categories of being and knowing. She wonders about the proportions of the larger body connected to the tip of the limb she witnesses emerging from the water. The very small part she has seen of that bigger body is sufficient to trigger in her a sense of insecurity and dread about her survival in a place where humans are not the best skilled for survival at all. Even though the diary left by Seth, a former occupant of the island, calls it a kraken, Paige insists on calling it a ‘thing’ (Neal, 2013: p. 34). Throughout the story, the creature remains an unknown object without a definite name from a human perspective, thus emphasising its condition as something beyond both human comprehension and therefore our limited ability to control nature: ‘Paige wondered how old the kraken was, how long it had lived at this place, whether it migrated, whether it was alone, or whether there were others, whether it was male or female’ (p. 51).

In addition to being an unknown animal, what overwhelms Paige about the creature is its excessive body, which dwarfs the *Affinity*. Although it is a ‘big boat’, in comparison to it, the octopus is described as ‘massive’ (p. 83). Confrontations with monstrous entities force human reason to realise that the control of Nature is a mere illusion when we are cast into the scenarios where the Darwinian perspective of the survival of the fittest rules. In such places, we become pray for other species that, instead of having forced Nature to adhere to their intentions, remain adapted to it. After having set foot on the atoll, the two men from the boat, Sebastian and his employer, John, who both work for a company that has built revolutionary vessels intended to improve oceanic mobility like the ketch they travel in, are the first two victims of the kraken. In the wild, their knowledge of technology proves meaningless upon facing the creature whose adaptability is emphasised by its ability to change colour. It performs what for Paige seems to be ‘a marvellous transformation like a chameleon, going from that hideously smooth green-black to a lumpy, dusky red’ (p. 48). Later, Paige cannot but recognise the beauty in the colours of the kraken’s body: ‘It had turned itself an inky blue, a beautiful hue that played well to its golden eyes’ (p. 72). A few lines before, she had seen it as a ‘malevolent star’ looking at her from the water’s surface; her change of perspective echoes the division inside humans when recognising the beauty in nature and claiming superiority over it, especially after we identify the presence of nonhumans that could challenge our claim of supremacy.

From the beginning of the story, it is obvious that Paige and her companions have entered a scenario where the idea of humanity as master of the planet is contested. The text starts with the description of ‘overcast skies [that] painted the jungle black. Great rainclouds loomed and desultory drizzle fell as the ketch, *Affinity*, cruised toward Palmer Atoll, a coral comma that punctuated the middle of the Pacific Ocean’ (p. 9). As mentioned above, the ketch is emphasised as a minimal thing when pictured against the unpredictable and overwhelming maritime weather. Besides, the island where they find some remnants of the manufactured environment of humanity is but a microscopic speck in the oceanic immensity that defies the mind when trying to rationalise its surface and abyssal extensions. In the end, the only thing that remains on the boat at the moment it is found by other humans is the tentacle that Paige doubly secured in a cooler inside the freezer. Based on this evidence, the creature is identified as ‘*Enteroctopus giganteas*, a hitherto undiscovered giant octopus’ (p. 99). As a species never before documented, the octopus is a weird

being which challenges the categorisation that we have made of the world to make us feel at home in it. Accepting the existence of the creature becomes undeniable as its tentacle preserved by Paige remains as proof of the accounts in her diary. At that moment, the reader is forced to accept that ‘The weird thing is not wrong, after all; it is our conceptions that must be inadequate’ (Fisher, 2016: p. 15). It is not a coincidence that this limb is preserved by means of technology. The text is filled with references to the artificial commodities provided by human advances available at the beginning of the twenty-first century, primarily the *Affinity* and the shelter on the atoll. The ketch serves as a reminder that, in Paige’s words ‘humans have forgotten to live beyond their artificially created environments’ (Neal, 2013: p. 17). As for the abandoned tin shack at the lagoon, it reminds us how easily evidence of human presence on the planet can fall into ruins when left abandoned at the mercy of natural elements.

The asthmatic condition of the protagonist makes her an example of the artificiality created by human scientific advances; the reader can easily infer her increased struggle to survive, especially on open sea, without her inhaler. Even the ketch proves unsuccessful for venturing into the wild since the emphasis on its characteristics as a pleasure craft rather than suitability for transoceanic voyages, makes its crew easy prey for the creature because ‘the wheelhouse was not fully enclosed above them’ (p. 85). Contrary to Paige, the kraken at the atoll is the master of the place, at the top of the local food pyramid: a role not disturbed by the arrival of humans as the 315 skulls on the atoll, presumably former victims of the creature, seem to demonstrate. Moreover, the creature’s way of marking and arranging those skulls proves its intelligence from Paige’s view: ‘She jumped, seeing a pile of skulls. Human skulls, in a massive stack, all of them clean and white, all of them missing their lower jaws, all of them with a wedge-shaped gouge taken out of the skull’ (p. 74). She is convinced of the monster’s cunning: ‘It’s smart and sneaky’ (p. 91), she says to Monica, the girl who survives the attack on the catamaran on which she and her male partner enter the lagoon thinking the masts from the *Affinity* may correspond to a ship in need for help after a storm. Her ignorance concerning the facts around the ketch’s condition reinforce the limitations of the human perspective, since Monica and her sailing companion would have never thought of the truth occurring in Palmer Atoll before entering it.

Neal's election of an octopus as the monster that causes the weird experience of horror in his protagonist relates to the primeval origins of such creatures. Its presence reminds us of other life forms existed before us and may remain after our departure (extinction). In fact, Paige mentions that Hawaiian 'mythology held that the octopus was the only survivor of a previous, alien world that had been destroyed before the time of man' (p. 58). In addition, we must consider that the octopus seems intelligent according to Paige. Williams (2011) describes octopi's intelligence as 'only logical' and 'for successful predation' though not always recognised by us (pp. 245-246). Hanlon *et al.* (2018) point out that 'Cephalopods certainly process many features that we equate with smartness or intelligence in vertebrate animals with which we, as humans, are more familiar: think of birds, rodents, and dogs' (p. 170). Such intelligence is divided among its eight tentacles since each of them contains a considerable portion of the creature's brain:

'Roughly three-fifths of the cephalopod brain resides not in the central system but in the arms and tentacles. This makes cephalopod arms weirdly independent. Arms and tentacles, at times, seem to be able to make their own "decisions". If an arm separates from the body, which might happen for any number of reasons, it can continue to function for many hours' (Williams, 2011: p. 35).

This multiplicity of independent tentacles and the animal's formless head make 'coherence fall apart once one tries to make sense of the whole creature. Emerging from a lightless ocean depth, the tentacles seem to lead back down to the abyss from which they came, a multiplicity dissipating into a slumberous, slow, and alien depth' (Thacker, 2014: p. 150). Based on said expansion of the brain into the numerous limbs of the creature, I suggest their projection from the water, in Neal's text, represents the multiplicity of possible views that arise from the 'mesh' of interconnections in Nature described by Morton and continued by Haraway's 'tentacularity'. However, our insistence to impose our one-sided view on everything we consider nonhuman makes us ignore the existence of those perspectives. As a result, Paige considers that the kraken is the one putting her life and those of her companions at risk while, from the creature's standpoint, all humans intruding into the atoll are just more preys in the long list under its reach.

In connection with the cephalopod, Neal marks a clear reference for a reader familiar with another Nautical Horror story: After confronting the kraken, Paige thinks of Cthulhu, ‘the octopus-faced creation of H. P. Lovecraft’ (Neal, 2013: p. 58). The reference to *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928) links to the fact that Paige’s experience relates to three pieces of physical evidence: Seth’s journal which she finds in the atoll and extends with her own entries, her single entry left on the *Affinity* without any evidence of her whereabouts, plus the kraken’s frozen tentacle inside the boat. In Lovecraft’s text, the protagonist assembles the notes left by his uncle, plus newspaper clippings and a diary to comprehend the implications of several, apparently isolated, events around the world. Lovecraft’s and Neal’s stories coincide in the presence of three different sources of evidence that make it difficult to deny the existence of the Nautical Horror monsters that provide the title for both narratives. Besides, there is the fact that, in Lovecraft’s story, Cthulhu is presented as a cosmic entity that is much older than any other living being on the planet and that sees humans as an inferior species whose dreams it can control (Lovecraft, 2014: pp. 142-143).

Neil’s octopus embodies our impossibility not only to dominate but also to comprehend the vastness of the sea: ‘It frightened Paige to see this little sliver of land in the middle of absolutely nowhere, surrounded by the deepest, darkest sea and an endless sky...’ (p. 14). We lack the means to establish permanent control over and under the seawater. This occurs because the fluid nature of nautical surfaces and depths makes it impossible to leave a permanent footprint that would claim the waters as human dominions; besides, we cannot restrict the physical movement of nautical creatures as we do with animals on land. In this context, Paige’s plans go wrong two times because she is unable to defend against a creature that rises beyond the artificial adequation of Nature into human designs. When she decides to row with Meg in separate ways using a dinghy and a kayak, the kraken anticipates her plans and removes both ships from shore. Second, her promise to Monica about finding salvation by escaping from the lagoon proves wrong when the tentacles of their enemy grab Monica on open sea, a place where Paige had assumed the kraken would not venture. The horror that arises in these two episodes is based not only on the overwhelming attacks from the kraken but on the cunningness with which it acts. The undeniable intelligence behind the creature’s moves decentres and confounds the human characters who cannot control the situation around them as they did before leaving the apparent security aboard their ships. In the end, Paige’s

story exemplifies the human idealisation of Nature based on a secure approach to the borders of the wild:

‘She’d never thought of it back home; she loved the ocean, loved the coast. But there was in her mind, a distinction between the comfort of the coast, and being here, in this place, far from everything, away from the world. There was no comfort here, only loneliness, emptiness, and lurking fear. She could not deny it. It was different in the boat, because the boat was going places, could travel the world— here, there was no place to go’ (p. 32).

Outside the protection of the ketch, she comprehends that Palmer Atoll is a minuscule piece of land that sooner or later will be swallowed up by the sea level because ‘even the greatest island would one day be drowned by the sea’ (p. 31). While that occurs, it remains a spot isolated from civilisation where a castaway can only attempt to preserve the vestiges of commodities left at home.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear to the reader that Paige is dealing with a case of human-nature confrontation. She considers the *Affinity* as ‘Safety. Sanctuary’ (p. 29) because she sees it as salvation from the threatening ocean concealing the monstrous kraken. When she finally reaches the ship, it grants everything a human being needs to survive in our civilised version of existence: ‘Down here, in the cabin, she had food and water and safety. With the batteries charged, she could run for a long time, she presumed, and [thanks to the possibilities of the radio onboard] just hoped someone rescued her’ (p. 85). Moreover, this place provides her with the weapons that allow her, at least momentarily, to overcome the kraken: ‘Paige slipped the shotgun free and blasted the tentacles at her feet, gratified by the roar of the gun and by the explosion of octopus flesh and blood at the point of impact. She cocked the shotgun again and fired another shot, severing one of the tentacles’ (p. 93). She arms herself with manufactured weapons: ‘Paige slung the shotgun over her back, took the axe in hand, figuring that she’d have a better chance with the axe against the tentacles than trying to blast them with the shotgun’ (p. 87). This scene reminds the reader of the event from the previous day when the hot metal of a washtub made the creature’s arm retract, accidentally burnt. Nevertheless, human power on the atoll is limited, and the



overwhelming quality of sublime Nature is confirmed by the storm that hits before Paige's escape and the final attack in the open sea. Similarly, the ketch ends up providing only relative refuge from the creature's attack.

When confronted with the human dominions represented by the *Affinity*, the kraken looks like an intruder that pollutes the whiteness of the ship: 'Paige pried the writhing tentacle off her leg, saw the green-blue blood splashing on *Affinity*'s pristine white and wooden deck' (p. 93). However, a broader scope reveals humans are the intruders on the atoll they have decided to name Palmer. The tentacular ability of the kraken that allows it to reach out for its human preys is contested in the novel by this reference to the presence of human junk everywhere in the ocean; the previously mentioned 'Sargasso Sea of plastics' (16) has reached every remote oceanic corner of the planet like Palmer Atoll. Similarly to the rest of the ocean, this place has become humanity's junkyard: 'She was amazed and appalled at the amount of litter there was, how people could be so sloppy and slovenly, as careless to just dump things like this into the beautiful ocean. The beautiful ocean that housed monstrosities like the kraken, she had reminded herself' (p. 61). That reflection coincides with Seth's diary entry about the position of the kraken as the rightful owner of the place since it has proven fitter than any other being to rule there, thanks to the predatory tools the evolutionary path has given him. Seth's long stay on Palmer allowed him to observe the situation from both the human view and the natural one:

"It lives in the lagoon", he said. "That's his home. Somedays, safe in my treehouse, I can see it swimming. Beautiful and green-black. Horrible thing, but with monstrous grace... Yesterday it ate a shark that slipped into the lagoon. The shark just slid through the channel, and the thing snatched it up, throttled it. Didn't see what type; didn't matter. The kraken made short work of it—just trashing and splashing and down it went with its prize. And I thought for a minute that maybe, just maybe I could swim for the *Lady* while the thing was busy tearing apart the shark. But then I thought that if something with many hundreds of millions of years of evolution behind couldn't beat the kraken, what chance could I have? I just watched, rooted in place. I couldn't move'" (p. 36).

His confirmation of the kraken as the true lord of the place is recognition of the fact that the creature is disgusting only when scrutinised from a civilised human position. After days of being just another creature trying to survive the beak of the kraken, Seth's perspective oscillates between admiring a superior creature, on the one hand, and fearing an alien-like monster, on the other. As for Paige, the artificial comfort of the human ship does not allow her to anticipate that the creature may leave its apparent home in a final attempt to catch her and Monica. Seth's growing admiration for the kraken is contrasted with Paige's short-term view that makes her consider the open sea as a safe location. She fails to comprehend the kraken's position as the fittest species outside of the artificial comfort of the *Affinity*. From her limited standpoint, the predator is a 'fucking mollusk'. We are told that 'she couldn't believe she was at the mercy of a mollusk, that this was what her life had come to' (p. 92). She speculates the kraken may be an intelligent creature but fails to accept the superiority of the nonhuman over her and the remainders of human technology on the *Affinity*. At the end of her story, this miscalculation is what brings about her ruin. To the end, she insists that no proof exists, beyond her mere speculations, of the kraken's level of intelligence: 'She wondered if, smart as it was, it would have wanted some kind of revenge on her for having taken one of its limbs. There was no way of knowing. She really had thought they were safe' (p. 97). Her final conclusions confirm that the kraken and its actions are beyond human control. Her experience of Nautical Horror—a presumable death at the hands (tentacles) of a giant octopus—confirms we can become overwhelmed by natural forces at any time, despite whatever preparations we might make. In the end, Neal's Nautical Horror, *Relict*, goes beyond shattering our assumptions of human dominion over oceanic waters. It also undermines our faith in technology and progression in shielding us from what we consider hostile and threatening forces, but which are just other species better adapted for survival in the wild. Having analysed the devastating portrayal of humanity in Neal's novel, this article is intended to encourage others to explore similar manifestations of ecohorror experiences in maritime contexts that can be scrutinised as examples of Nautical Horror.

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