

# **The Loss of Self and the Call of the Inhuman: A Philosophical Essay on The Wendigo**

*by Daniel Shilansky*

## **The Wilderness as Philosophical Problem**

When Algernon Blackwood published *The Wendigo* in 1910, he was not simply adding another tale of supernatural dread to the growing literature of the uncanny. He was entering, with remarkable precision, a debate that had occupied naturalists, psychologists, theologians, and men of letters for the better part of a century: the question of what nature, in its most unmediated and overwhelming form, does to the human mind. This was not an idle literary question. It bore directly on some of the most urgent concerns of the age — the nature of religious experience, the limits of rational explanation, the relationship between civilisation and the wilderness within and without the human creature. To read *The Wendigo* without this context is to read it as mere entertainment. To read it with that context is to discover that Blackwood had constructed something far more philosophically ambitious: a narrative that tests, under extreme conditions, the competing theories of his era about what happens when the human self encounters something that exceeds it absolutely.

The debate in question turns on a deceptively simple problem. When a person stands before something vast, alien, and overwhelming — a mountain range, an arctic waste, a primeval forest — and feels not merely fear but a peculiar compound of terror and attraction, of annihilation and exaltation, what exactly is happening? Is this a genuine encounter with something beyond the human, a brush with the divine or the numinous? Or is it a well-understood psychological event, explicable by the ordinary mechanics of the nervous system, the imagination, and the inherited superstitions of the race? The two positions had been hardening against each other for decades, and by 1910 they had produced two distinct and largely irreconcilable vocabularies for describing the same experience.

## The Sublime and Its Inheritance

The older of these vocabularies belonged to the tradition of the sublime. Since Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757, and Immanuel Kant's more elaborate treatment in his *Critique of Judgement* in 1790, European thought had possessed a technical term — the sublime — for the experience of being overwhelmed by something that exceeds the mind's capacity to contain it. The sublime, in plain terms, is the feeling produced by encountering something so vast or so powerful that it initially defeats comprehension, and yet, in that very defeat, produces a strange elevation of spirit. Burke located the source of this feeling in the body's response to danger and obscurity; Kant located it in the mind's discovery of its own rational dignity in the face of natural immensity. Their disagreement matters less than the shared assumption: that the experience of overwhelming nature was philosophically significant, that it revealed something important about the relationship between the human mind and the world it inhabits.

This tradition had flowed steadily into the nineteenth century, shaping the Romantic poets, the landscape painters, and the naturalist writers who followed them. By the time Blackwood was writing, it had produced a rich and widely shared cultural expectation: that wild nature, properly encountered, was morally and spiritually elevating. The great forests, the open seas, the mountain summits — these were places where the human spirit was tested and enlarged. The wilderness was a school of the soul. This expectation was so deeply embedded in educated culture that it had become almost invisible, a background assumption rather than a contested claim. Writers like John Muir in America, and before him Wordsworth and Coleridge in England, had made the redemptive encounter with wild nature into something approaching a secular religion. The wilderness was where one went to recover what civilisation had obscured.

Blackwood knew this tradition intimately. He was himself a passionate outdoorsman, a lover of wild places, and his earlier collection *The Listener and Other Stories* (1907) and *John Silence* (1908) had already shown his deep engagement with the idea that nature harbours forces that exceed ordinary human understanding. But *The Wendigo* does something more unsettling than simply celebrate the wilderness. It takes the inherited vocabulary of the sublime — the terror, the attraction, the sense of something immeasurably greater than the self — and refuses to resolve it in the customary direction. The wilderness in this tale does not enlarge the human spirit. It dissolves it.

## The New Science of the Invisible

Against the tradition of the sublime, and increasingly dominant in educated circles by 1910, stood the explanatory programme of the new psychology. The word psychology itself was relatively new in its modern sense, and the discipline had been establishing itself as a rigorous science throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. The key figures for understanding Blackwood's moment are not difficult to identify. Wilhelm Wundt in Germany had founded the first experimental psychology laboratory in 1879, insisting that mental life could be studied with the same precision as physical phenomena. In England and France, researchers like Henry Maudsley and Jean-Martin Charcot had been investigating the darker regions of mental experience — hysteria, hallucination, obsession — and finding natural explanations for what had previously seemed supernatural.

Most relevant to Blackwood's purposes was the work being done on what contemporaries called suggestion and the unconscious. The idea that the mind contains regions inaccessible to ordinary waking consciousness, and that these regions can be activated by fear, isolation, exhaustion, or the power of inherited belief, had become a serious scientific hypothesis by the 1880s and 1890s. Frederic Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research — an organisation Blackwood was familiar with — had spent years attempting to study these phenomena with scientific rigour, publishing his monumental *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* in 1903. Myers occupied an interesting middle position: he took the phenomena seriously as evidence of something genuinely beyond ordinary consciousness, while insisting on careful empirical investigation. But the more strictly materialist psychologists had no patience for such ambiguity. For them, the visions, the voices, the overwhelming presences that people reported in states of extreme stress were simply the products of a disordered nervous system, the mind generating phantoms from its own stored materials.

This explanatory framework bore directly on the kind of experience Blackwood was constructing. The phenomenon known in French-Canadian and indigenous North American tradition as the Wendigo — a spirit or force associated with the northern wilderness, capable of possessing or transforming those who encountered it — could be explained, from the psychological point of view, as a collective delusion, a culturally transmitted suggestion that took hold of isolated and frightened minds. The anthropologists and folklorists of the period, following the comparative method pioneered by Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), had developed a systematic account of how such beliefs arose. Primitive peoples, unable to explain the forces of nature rationally, personified them; these personifications became embedded in cultural tradition; and individuals raised within that tradition were susceptible to experiencing the personifications as real, particularly under conditions of stress. The Wendigo, on this account, was a fascinating piece of folklore, a window into the psychology of peoples who had not yet achieved the rational mastery of nature that modern science represented. It was not, and could not be, real.

## The Question Neither Side Could Settle

What made this debate genuinely difficult, and what gave Blackwood his opportunity, was that neither side could fully account for the character of the experiences in question. The psychological explanation was powerful and increasingly well-supported, but it had a persistent weakness: it could explain why a frightened and isolated person might hallucinate, but it could not easily explain the specific quality of the experiences reported — the sense not merely of seeing something, but of being drawn toward it, of feeling one's identity loosened and pulled in a direction that was neither death nor madness but something stranger than either. The tradition of the sublime, on the other hand, had a vocabulary for this quality of experience — the terrible attraction, the dissolution of the ordinary self, the encounter with something that exceeded all human categories — but it had no mechanism, no account of what was actually happening when a person felt these things. It described the experience eloquently without explaining it.

William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* had appeared in 1902 and was widely read and discussed in the years leading up to Blackwood's story, had attempted to hold both possibilities open simultaneously. James — the American philosopher and psychologist whose work was accessible, humane, and deeply serious — argued that religious and mystical experiences, whatever their ultimate cause, were real as experiences and produced real effects in the lives of those who had them. He refused to dismiss them as mere pathology, but he also refused to insist on any particular metaphysical explanation for them. The question of whether such experiences put the person in contact with something genuinely beyond the human self was, for James, genuinely open. This was an intellectually honest position, but it was also an unstable one, and it left the central question — what is actually happening when the wilderness overwhelms a human mind? — without a settled answer.

Blackwood's *The Wendigo* moves precisely into this unsettled space. The story is constructed so that both explanations remain available throughout — and so that the insufficiency of each accumulates with every page.

## **The Problem of the Remainder**

The two traditions were not simply competing explanations of the same phenomenon. They were competing accounts of what the phenomenon fundamentally was — of what kind of thing was happening when a human being, alone or nearly alone in extreme wilderness, encountered something that seemed to exceed the boundaries of the self. The distinction matters because it determines what counts as a satisfactory resolution. For the psychological tradition, the phenomenon was essentially a malfunction: the nervous system, deprived of its ordinary social and sensory supports, began generating experiences that mimicked external reality without possessing it. Resolution meant recovery — the restoration of normal function, the reassertion of the rational self once conditions improved. For the sublime tradition, the phenomenon was essentially an encounter: something genuinely other pressed against the boundaries of the human mind, and the mind, after its moment of terror and disorientation, returned enlarged, having measured itself against what exceeded it. Resolution here also meant recovery, but recovery of a different kind — not the repair of a malfunction but the integration of a genuine experience into a deepened self-understanding.

What neither tradition had seriously prepared itself to address was the possibility that the encounter might not resolve at all — that the human subject who entered the experience might not be the human subject who emerged from it, and not because the subject had been destroyed or had gone mad, but because the subject had been replaced by something that was no longer oriented toward human categories of experience. This is the philosophical remainder: the element that falls outside both frameworks because both frameworks are constructed around the assumption that the human self, however tested, remains the ultimate reference point of the experience. The psychological tradition assumes this because its entire apparatus — hallucination, suggestion, nervous disorder — is defined relative to a norm of healthy human cognition that the experience departs from and may return to. The sublime tradition assumes it because the very structure of the sublime, as Burke and Kant had articulated it, requires a subject who survives the encounter and can retrospectively measure what happened. Remove the surviving subject, and you do not have a more extreme version of the sublime. You have something the category was never designed to hold.

## **What the Frameworks Cannot Absorb**

To understand why this remainder is philosophically significant rather than merely dramatic, it is necessary to press more carefully on what each tradition actually claimed. Burke's account of the sublime, developed in his *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1757, located the experience in the body as much as the mind. Terror, for Burke, was the strongest of the passions precisely because it threatened the self's continued existence, and the pleasure of the sublime arose from the experience of that threat at a safe distance — what he called astonishment, a state in which the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other. The crucial word is filled. Burke's sublime is an experience of overwhelming, but the self that is overwhelmed remains present as the vessel being filled. It is shaken, arrested, deprived temporarily of its ordinary operations, but it is not evacuated. The experience happens to someone.

Kant's revision of Burke, worked out in the *Critique of Judgment* of 1790, shifted the emphasis from the body to the rational faculty, but preserved the same fundamental structure. For Kant, the mathematical and dynamical sublime both involved an initial moment in which the imagination failed — failed to comprehend the magnitude of what it confronted, failed to resist the power of what threatened it — followed by a recovery in which reason asserted its own supersensible dignity. The mountain, the storm, the abyss: these were occasions for the mind to discover that it possessed a dimension that nature could not touch, because that dimension was not natural. The terror was real, but it was ultimately instructive. It taught the mind something about itself. And this teaching required, as its necessary condition, a mind that could receive the lesson — a subject that persisted through the experience and came out the other side capable of reflection.

The psychological tradition, for all its apparent opposition to this idealist framework, shared the same structural assumption. When Théodule Ribot, whose work on diseases of the personality was widely read in the 1890s, analyzed the dissolution of personal identity under pathological conditions, he was analyzing a departure from a norm. The norm was the integrated self, the self capable of continuous memory and coherent agency. Pathology was defined as the failure to maintain that integration. Similarly, when anthropologists like Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang examined the folklore of wilderness spirits and possession, they were explaining beliefs that they regarded as primitive errors — errors that modern psychology could dissolve by showing their origin in misinterpreted natural experiences and culturally transmitted suggestion. The explanation was always in the direction of recovery: from error to understanding, from disorder to diagnosis, from the primitive to the modern. The human subject, properly equipped with scientific knowledge, could look at what had terrified earlier or less educated minds and see it for what it was.

Both traditions were therefore humanist in the most fundamental sense. They placed the human subject — whether as the vessel of sublime experience or as the norm from which pathology departed — at the center of their explanatory frameworks. And this is exactly what Blackwood's

narrative refuses to accommodate.

## **The Directionality of the Inhuman**

The specific feature of the Wendigo legend that makes it philosophically intractable for both traditions is its directionality. The Wendigo does not simply overwhelm its victim, as a storm or an abyss overwhelms the observer of the sublime. It calls. It draws the affected person toward it, and what it draws them toward is not death, not madness, not even a loss of self in the ordinary sense, but a transformation of orientation — a reorientation of desire and identity away from the human and toward something that has no use for human categories. The affected person does not cease to exist. They continue to move, to act, to pursue. But what they pursue is no longer intelligible within the framework of human motivation. They are moving toward something, and that something is not a human destination.

This directionality is precisely what the psychological explanation cannot absorb without distorting. Hallucination, as the psychological tradition understood it, was essentially passive: the disordered nervous system generated experiences that the subject received, however terrifyingly. Suggestion was also essentially passive: the culturally primed mind was susceptible to impressions that it then elaborated into apparent perceptions. Neither concept had adequate resources for an experience in which the subject was not merely receiving distorted impressions but was being actively recruited — in which the experience had, so to speak, an agenda that was not the subject's own. To describe this as hallucination was to miss the most philosophically significant feature of the reported experience: that it was not a breakdown of the subject's cognitive function but a replacement of the subject's cognitive orientation. The subject was not failing to perceive correctly. The subject was beginning to perceive from a different position — one that was no longer recognizably human.

The sublime tradition could name this quality more accurately, because Burke's concept of astonishment and Kant's account of the imagination's failure both described experiences in which the ordinary operations of the mind were suspended. But the sublime tradition could not follow the experience to its conclusion, because its conclusion violated the structural requirement of the framework. The sublime required a surviving subject. The Wendigo, as Blackwood constructs it, does not leave a surviving subject in the relevant sense. What survives the encounter is something that was once a human being but is no longer oriented by human purposes, human fears, or human understanding. This is not the enlarged self that emerges from the Kantian sublime, having measured its rational dignity against the power of nature. It is something that has passed beyond the point at which the question of human dignity remains meaningful.

## What Both Traditions Assume and the Story Refuses

Blackwood's *The Wendigo* is best understood not as a contribution to the literature of supernatural horror, nor as a fictional illustration of psychological theories of wilderness experience, but as a philosophical thought experiment that uses the specific structure of the Wendigo legend to expose a shared assumption underlying both the sublime tradition and the new psychology of 1910. That shared assumption is the permanence of the human subject as the reference point of experience. Both traditions, despite their profound disagreements about the nature and cause of overwhelming encounters with wild nature, agreed that the human self was the thing that such encounters happened to — the vessel, the norm, the surviving consciousness that could retrospectively make sense of what had occurred. Blackwood's narrative stages an encounter in which this assumption fails: not because the subject is destroyed, but because the subject is redirected, drawn out of the human orientation entirely, leaving behind something neither the vocabulary of the sublime nor the vocabulary of psychological disorder can reach. The story does not resolve the conflict between its two available explanations. It demonstrates that the conflict, as ordinarily posed, is insufficient — that both sides of the debate share a premise that the experience itself refuses to honor. In doing so, it marks a boundary in the intellectual history of 1910: the point at which the inherited frameworks for thinking about the human encounter with wild nature reached the limit of what they could coherently say.

## The Narrative as Philosophical Instrument

A story that illustrates a philosophical problem keeps it at arm's length. A story that enacts the problem places the reader inside its structure. The difficulty is not described but experienced — felt as a pressure on understanding rather than presented as an object of it. Blackwood's *The Wendigo* belongs to the second category, and this is what separates it from the considerable body of wilderness fiction that preceded it. The story does not tell us that the available explanations fail. It constructs itself in such a way that the failure is reproduced in the act of reading.

The mechanism is formal ambiguity, but ambiguity of a precise and disciplined kind. Throughout the narrative, Blackwood maintains two registers of description simultaneously, and he does so with enough care that neither can be dismissed as decorative or subordinate to the other. When Défago begins to change, the language of possession and the language of psychological dissolution are laid side by side, each internally coherent, each capable of organizing the events into a recognizable pattern, and each quietly insufficient. The reader who reaches for the supernatural explanation finds it supported by enough detail to seem plausible; the reader who reaches for the psychological explanation finds the same. What neither reader finds is resolution. The ambiguity does not thin out as the narrative progresses. It thickens. And this thickening is not a failure of craft but its highest expression, because what Blackwood is preserving — with considerable technical effort — is precisely the remainder that both frameworks would dissolve if given the chance.



## **Défago and the Limits of Available Language**

Défago is the story's philosophical center of gravity, and his transformation is rendered with a specificity that rewards close attention. He is not simply a man who goes mad, nor simply a man who is taken by something supernatural. He is a man who becomes progressively less oriented toward the human world — less interested in it, less legible within it, less anchored to the coordinates of identity that make a person recognizable as a person. The change is not violent in the ordinary sense. There is no rupture, no dramatic break. There is instead a gradual reorientation, as though the needle of a compass were being drawn toward a different pole.

Blackwood's language tracks this reorientation with deliberate oscillation. Défago's eyes, at various moments, are described in terms that belong to the vocabulary of trance, of fever, of religious ecstasy, and of something that has no name in any of these registers. His speech deteriorates not into incoherence but into a different kind of coherence — one that is internally consistent but oriented away from the shared world of the other characters. When he returns after his disappearance, he is recognizably Défago in form, but the recognition produces unease rather than relief, because what has returned is a shape that no longer quite inhabits itself in the expected way. The horror, such as it is, lies not in what has been added but in what has been redirected.

This is where the psychological vocabulary of 1910 reaches its limit. The clinical frameworks available at the time — hysteria, dissociation, the fragmentation of the self under extreme stress — all presuppose that the self in question remains the reference point of the disorder. The self is split, or overwhelmed, or temporarily vacated, but it remains the norm from which the pathological state is measured. What Défago undergoes does not fit this structure. He is not split. He is not overwhelmed. He is, in a manner the story refuses to make fully explicit, recruited — drawn into an orientation that is not his own and that does not present itself as a violation but as a destination. The psychological tradition has no category for a subject who is not disordered but redirected, because redirection of this kind implies that there is somewhere to be redirected *toward*, and that somewhere is not a human place.

## **Dr. Cathcart and the Partial Failure of Reason**

Blackwood provides his narrative with a figure whose explicit function is to contain the experience within the psychological framework: Dr. Cathcart, the physician and rationalist, who accompanies the expedition and who serves as the story's designated explainer. Cathcart is not a fool. He is intelligent, observant, and genuinely committed to understanding what he witnesses. He brings to the wilderness the full resources of the educated mind of 1910 — the new psychology, the physiological account of fear, the understanding of how isolation and suggestion can produce states that mimic the supernatural. He is, in other words, the best available representative of the tradition that would absorb the Wendigo encounter into a clinical narrative.

And he partially fails. This partial failure is the argument's conclusion rendered in dramatic form. Cathcart does not abandon his framework. He does not convert to belief in the supernatural. He continues, to the end, to reach for psychological explanation, and his explanations are not without force — they account for much of what occurs. But there is a residue that his vocabulary cannot reach, and Blackwood is careful to show that Cathcart knows this. The physician's final posture is not confident rationalism but something more uncomfortable: a man who has applied his best tools to a problem and found that the tools work, up to a point, and that the point at which they stop working is precisely the point that matters most.

What Cathcart cannot explain is not the fear, not the dissociation, not the suggestibility of men alone in vast wilderness. He can explain all of that. What he cannot explain is the directionality — the sense that Défago was not broken by the experience but called by it, that whatever happened was not an assault on his identity but an invitation addressed to something in him that responded. The psychological tradition can account for a self that collapses under pressure. It cannot account for a self that turns, with something resembling recognition, toward what is calling it. Cathcart's partial failure is not a personal limitation. It is the limitation of the framework he embodies, made visible through the one case it cannot fully absorb.

### **The Gap the Story Names but Cannot Close**

To situate *The Wendigo* within the intellectual history of its moment is to recognize it as a work that stands at a boundary it cannot cross — not because of any failure on Blackwood's part, but because the conceptual resources required to cross it did not yet exist. The story identifies a problem with precision and holds it open with discipline, but it cannot resolve the problem, because resolution would require a vocabulary for thinking about identity, orientation, and the human that was not available in 1910 and would not become available for some decades afterward.

The problem, stated plainly, is this: both the sublime tradition and the new psychology assume that the human subject is the stable term in any encounter with the overwhelming. The subject may be enlarged, as in the Kantian account, or it may be disordered, as in the clinical account, but in either case it remains the subject — the thing that the experience happens *to*, the vessel that receives what the wilderness delivers. What Blackwood's narrative stages is an encounter in which this assumption fails. The subject is not the stable term. It is the variable. And the experience does not happen to it so much as it happens *through* it, using the subject as a medium for a reorientation whose destination is not human.

To think clearly about this would require, at minimum, a way of conceptualizing identity as something other than a fixed container — as something more like a process, or a direction, or a set of orientations that can be altered without the alteration constituting either growth or pathology. It would require a way of thinking about the inhuman not as the absence of the human but as a positive orientation in its own right, one that can exert a kind of pull. It would require, in short,

resources that the intellectual culture of 1910 did not possess and could not have possessed, given where it stood in the development of philosophy, psychology, and the study of mind.

The work's lasting philosophical interest deserves precision. Blackwood did not anticipate specific later developments — he did not somehow foresee what phenomenology or depth psychology or philosophy of mind would eventually produce. The anticipatory quality is not predictive but structural. The story identifies a gap in the available conceptual landscape with enough precision that the gap remains visible across subsequent intellectual developments, each of which illuminates it from a different angle without quite filling it. The remainder that neither the sublime tradition nor the new psychology could absorb has not, in fact, been absorbed. It persists.

### **Making the Hidden Assumption Visible**

What *The Wendigo* ultimately demonstrates is that the most significant conceptual limits of an intellectual tradition are not visible from within that tradition. They become visible only when a particular kind of experience — or a particular kind of imaginative construction that mimics such an experience — refuses to fit the available categories and cannot be made to fit without distortion. The story is that construction. It is built to refuse.

The philosophical consequence is not merely that the sublime tradition and the new psychology were incomplete — all traditions are incomplete, and this is not news. The consequence is more specific: that both traditions were incomplete in the same direction, that their incompleteness had a shape, and that the shape was determined by a shared commitment to the permanence of the human subject as the ground of experience. This commitment was so deep, so thoroughly woven into the assumptions of the period, that it was invisible as a commitment. It appeared simply as the structure of reality. What Blackwood's narrative does, by staging an encounter that the commitment cannot accommodate, is make the commitment visible — not by arguing against it, but by showing what it cannot see.

A story that makes a hidden assumption visible without resolving what lies beyond it is doing something that philosophical argument, in the ordinary sense, cannot easily do. Argument works within a framework of shared premises; it can challenge individual premises, but it cannot easily step outside the framework entirely. Narrative can. It can construct a situation that the framework cannot process, and hold that situation open long enough for the reader to feel the pressure of what the framework excludes. *The Wendigo* performs this operation, and the work remains philosophically alive more than a century after it was written — not because it answers the questions it raises, but because it raises them in a form that no subsequent answer has yet made obsolete.

*The Loss of Self and the Call of the Inhuman: A Philosophical Essay on The Wendigo* is an independent scholarly essay by Daniel Shilansky.

This essay is also published as the critical introduction to the Heritage Canon philosophical edition of *The Wendigo*, available on [Amazon](#). Heritage Canon publishes Daniel Shilansky's complete series of philosophical editions of classic literature — the full catalogue is at [heritagecanon.com](http://heritagecanon.com).