In this article I wish to propose what might appear an untenable hypothesis, and, through that, to situate an equally improbable, not to say foolhardy, analogy. Put as directly as possible, it is this: in both the formal composition of the novel The Beetle, and the creature ‘born of neither god nor man’ for whom it is named, there are to be discerned structures that, in their singularity, stage analogous models of the perception of London at the end of the nineteenth century.\(^1\) This perceived monstrosity and radical undecidability that underlies the provisional determination of London as monstrous at the end of the century finds its most singular, and most exemplary, figure, if not its countersignature in Richard Marsh’s ‘liminal man-woman-goddess-beetle-Thing’.\(^2\) Far from being some Oriental other, in its radically abyssal and archaic heterogeneity the Beetle offers the reader a concentrated figure of everything in late-Victorian London that serves to focus the anxieties and fears expressed in much fin de siècle literature, in which the late imperial city comes to be aligned with the moral corruption, decay and degeneracy of its fictionalised underworld.

It is not only the otherwise indefinable creature that attains to this condition of radical alterity and ontological instability. As I have already suggested, there are those aspects of Marsh’s novel in its formal

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condition that attain to and signal a protean otherness. In this, the novel itself is excessive beyond hybridity. It presents its narrative through a series of pastiche narratives without a ground or centre, being haunted also by numerous traces of alterity, and moving its narrative along through the frequent display of supplementary statements that offer a critique, directly or otherwise, of the very premises of any stable meaning or identity. In order to pursue such monstrous analogy, one in which relation fragments rather than making connection, I shall turn first to Marsh’s novel and his creature as the provisional embodiment of late imperial phobias, before offering an analysis of mapping and representation of London in *The Beetle*. I do so in order to pursue, and so outline, the multiple overdeterminations of the text, addressing in this manner the particular cultural discourses of *The Beetle* as these together offer a sense of productive disorder that confounds ontology and foregrounds otherness.

**The mesmeric and the city**

Published in September 1897 just two months after *Dracula*, *The Beetle* is a novel in which the various facets of late-Victorian modernity, science, parliamentary democracy, imperial identity, and, most generally expressed, the nineteenth-century investment in the attainability and efficacy of knowledge as a form of power and control are confronted by the non-rational, the inexplicable, the archaic, the other. Taking place in *fin de siècle* London, and almost entirely at night, it brings together the dominant fears and anxieties of the age, as through its narrative it confronts various dissolutions of personal and cultural identity. Thus it exemplifies ‘the post-Darwinian imperial age that is the late nineteenth century’, as Daniel Bivona has it, in which ‘“knowledge” of the alien Other is being produced on a large scale, and occasioning a crisis in the way England looks at itself’.³

As Bivona implies and as is now largely accepted, this alterity is never in any simple fashion external to Englishness. It erupts in numerous places from within that national identity. Moreover, it is arguable that such potentially ruinous fragmentation of identity comes to haunt the very form of the novel itself. The extent to which such a

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