

# Literary Vignettes, Part II\*

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (June 2024)



Weeping Willow –Claude Monet, 1918

*We no longer have any inner voices. We know too much these days; reason tyrannizes our lives. –Robert Musil, The Man Without Qualities*

Essence is the map of heaven and hell.

Man is the physical manifestation and form of essence in time. The destruction of essence brings about the annihilation of man.

As a being that must contend with space and time, man becomes lost in the physical sensations that we encounter in the world. While this is the structure of incarnate human reality, a vagabond state of being can turn sinister. Fortunate is the person that understands this truism from an early age, for what is physical reality but the addition of sensation to an a-sensual soul?

Finding itself aglow in the splendor of differentiated being, reflective human persons become subjects in a physical world. It is more difficult, however rewarding, learning to recognize the human person as a soul. The flesh acts as a barrier between the subject we recognize as incarnate being and that other reality—objectivity—the ‘not-I.’

Blind, unreflective embrace of the not-I turns ominous; existential riddles are the domain of people who perceive the self as a soul. For others, the attenuated values of existential reflection can appear torturous, an affront to ‘oppressed’ proponents of the annihilation of man through transhumanism and other forms of social engineering. The lazy comfort that transhuman nihilism promises is embraced by people who have been conditioned to view free will as a burden.

As a map of heaven and hell, essence, while not calling attention to itself, guides the human person. To attain self-

reflection man needs a map – essence – that sets the human person apart from the physical terrain of sensation—like a sculpture in high relief.

## **Form, Time and Narrative in Fiction and Literature**

While it is easy for us to think of ourselves as physical bodies that occupy space, the passage of time remains more elusive. For instance, we view ageing as a physical characteristic of decay: bodies and objects becoming withered. Rarely do we realize that the culprit of decay is time, not merely the physical properties of decay.

One effective way to appropriate the passage of time, in addition to grasping it intuitively in the lived-experience, is through stories.

Consider Miguel de Unamuno's novel *Abel Sanchez: The History of a Passion*. *Abel Sanchez* is the story of Cain and Abel re-told with the moral/spiritual malaise of modernity as a backdrop.

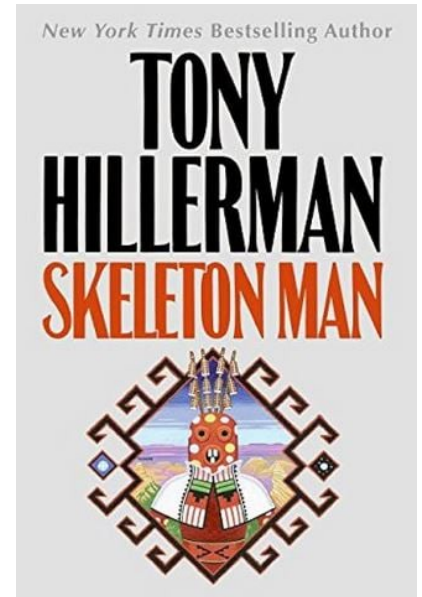
*Abel Sanchez* is a tale of envy, jealousy and resentment. Unamuno's novel encapsulates the passage of time as a lyrical narrative of incarnate souls. *Don Quixote* and *Paradise Lost* are seminal examples of the importance of time and narrative for the human person.

In my book *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*, I describe time in the following manner: "Time suffocates its victims slowly. Its greatest offense is that it leaves no witness...man's greatest weakness is that he has no patience or imagination where time is concerned."

The following three literary vignettes serve as fine examples of the interplay of essence, form, time, and narrative as a map of heaven and hell in fiction and literature.

## Tony Hillerman, *Skeleton Man*

Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, explains to others seating with him during a meal that everything in the Navajo people philosophy of life is interconnected. Universal connections, they call it: “The entire cosmos being an infinitely complicated machine all working together.”



Hillerman uses the interconnected—truly infinite—chain of cause and effect to tie together events separated by decades. He offers a narrative of space and time that brings a strain of magical realism to his literary creations.

Hillerman showcases aspects of the Navajo people view of man and the cosmos. *Skeleton Man's* plot is engrossing, multifaceted, taking its inspiration from a real historical event that took place half a century before. The story is complex, meandering between several interested parties that have a stake in the action—psychologically and monetarily.

Form is the glue that establishes the particulars that Lieutenant Leaphorn identifies in space and time, which he must string together to make them cohesive. While there is an essential thread that links the events in the novel, it is left to Lieutenant Leaphorn's logical and intuitive thinking to uncover. Without form, historical events in the novel remain disconnected sensations that lack rhyme and reason.

*Skeleton Man* takes its inspiration from the 1956 mid-air collision of two commercial airliners over the Grand Canyon: a

DC-7 and Lockheed Constellation. The wreckage was spread from the rim to the bottom of the canyon. There were no survivors. This aviation accident was the catalyst for the creation of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) flight rules.

The fiction component of *Skeleton Man* is about a man who claims to have found a briefcase full of diamonds that belonged to a dead passenger. This becomes the center of a complicated investigation. Is the briefcase that contains the diamonds recovered from the Canyon floor by a Navajo? Or is this merely a local rumor? How this question brings together detectives and family members of people killed in the crash is Hillerman's bag of tricks as a novelist.

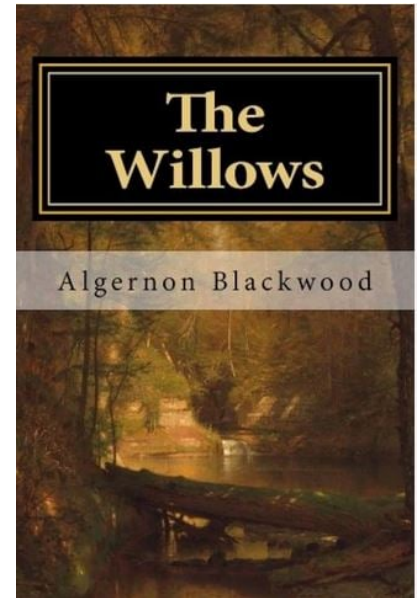
Hillerman does a masterly job of describing the Navajo people (Diné) way of life. This is his forte as a writer based in New Mexico. A truly rugged and unforgiving land, Hillerman stamps the desolate Southwest landscape into the reader's imagination.

Given the fibrous network of cause and effect that Hillerman weaves to make *Skeleton Man* a plausible story, there is no substitute for reading it.

## **Algernon Blackwood: "The Willows" and "The Empty House"**

### **"The Willows"**

Perhaps the site of an ancient pagan massacre or ritual sacrifice, Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" begins as many horror and supernatural short stories, a character relating a tale. Two friends take a canoe trip on the Danube River. The story begins innocuously and slowly builds to a crescendo of supernatural terror. The unseen 'presence' in the willows is more felt than seen, leaving the form of the presence to the imagination. The presence eventually shatters the nerves of the two adult male protagonists.



The protagonists believe that it is advisable not to think about some things because evil can read the human mind. Once something is thought, one cannot unthink it. This is a central angle of the metaphysical plot of "The Willows," a story that H.P. Lovecraft considered one of the best supernatural stories ever written. Blackwood's short stories belong in the company of E.F. Benson's ghost stories and M.R. James supernatural tales.

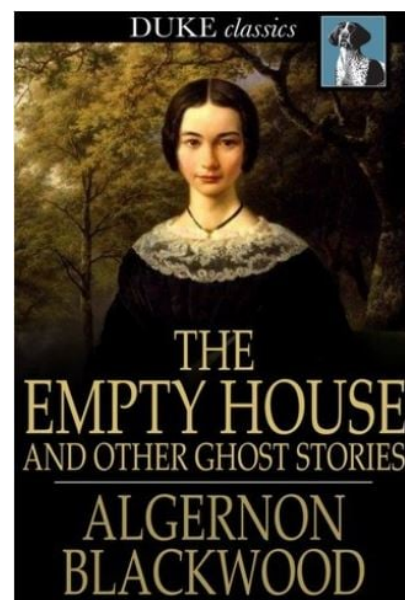
Blackwood creates a claustrophobic mood, even though the story takes place outdoors. This has the effect of making the protagonist wish they had a place to hide: "Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestion; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began to stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm."

The incessant wind torments the protagonists, making them believe they are imagining things. They are warned that no one visits the low-lying islands that are scattered on the winding river because they are inhabited by an evil presence.

At night, the protagonists are accosted by indeterminate shapes that plague them with fear. One protagonist says: “I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region.”

Blackwood delivers the reader to an undetermined past—ancient Roman legions that may have traversed the willows—one protagonist suggests. The author leaves readers with the idea that evil is a force that clings to places, irrespective of the passage of time.

## “The Empty House”



Curious to know what is in an abandoned house in their neighborhood, an old woman and her nephew are nearly killed while trespassing. Through portentous sights and sounds, the empty house re-enacts the murder of a young woman while the two interlopers explore the house.

“The Empty House” begins: “Certain houses, like certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil.”

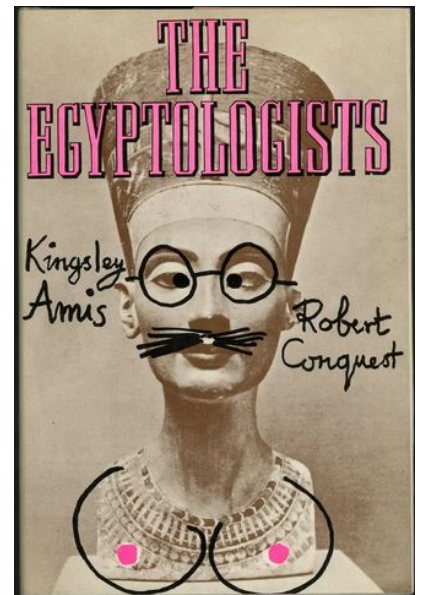
While the sights and sounds in the house are spine-chilling, the anticipation of the horror that lurks around every corner sets the mood. The house seeks justice for a crime. It makes

the two intruders experience a murder and the events that led up to it.

Interweaving place and time, Blackwood's supernatural tale makes the old woman and her nephew witness the murder that took place in the house. A recurring leitmotif of Blackwood's stories: the past occupies a dimension of its own that coexists with the present. The same goes for evil forces that cannot be readily discarded – even in a positivistic era.

### **Kingsley Amis & Robert Conquest, *The Egyptologists***

For all intents and purposes, *The Egyptologist* is a humorous novel. Biting humor is a staple of Kingsley Amis' writing. In *The Egyptologists*, Amis and co-author Robert Conquest, who is best known as a historian of the Cold War, weave a tale of deception, appearance and reality, and miscommunication in human relations. The authors explore staid human nature from a comedic angle. The two writers of this hilarious novel shake readers into the realization that things are rarely what they appear to be.



The authors pose serious questions about life, death, love, marriage and the postmodern world. Sober human concerns, the authors suggest, become less biting and quarrelsome when they assume the guise of humor.

The authors propose that most people lack the moral resolve or patience to remain consistent in their approach to life. This is aided by a lack of convictions. Even more daunting, the authors suggest that most people avoid confronting reality on its own terms. The latter is a heroic act, readers are made to realize. Humor serves as a temporary adhesive bandage that



alleviates disappointment and disenchantment, two of the dominant themes that define Amis' novels.

On face value, *The Egyptologist* is a funny work that has nothing to do with Egyptology. The novel mingles humor with moral frailty. This results in an explosive denouement that exposes human nature. Throughout the novel delusion props up appearances—the basis for hypocrisy—veiling them in the cloth of truth.

The playfulness and zany game-playing of the characters in *The Egyptologist* turns into a sinister 'who-knows-what-about-whom?' The novel has a whodunit mood, for the characters doubt and recriminate each other in order to save their own skin.

\* [Literary Vignettes I](#) appeared in *New English Review* on July 1, 2022.

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay](#), [Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man](#), [Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy](#) and [Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [Philosophy Today](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [Philosophical Perspective on Cinema](#).

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