

## WEIRD FICTION

*China Miéville*

If considered at all, Weird Fiction is usually, roughly, conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic (“horror” plus “fantasy”) often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus “science fiction”). Though particularly associated with the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, the stop-start existence of which began in 1923, classic Weird Fiction predates it: S.T. Joshi (1990) plausibly treats its high phase as 1880–1940. It has had a colossal impact across work in all media, with under-investigated generically problematizing implications. Indeed, Weird Fiction may serve as the bad conscience of the Gernsback/Campbell sf paradigm, and as rebuke to much theorizing that takes that paradigm’s implicit self-conception as its starting point.

The para-canon of Weird includes those associated with or influential on the *Weird Tales* circle, and others with similar concerns (among many others Fritz Leiber, E.F. Benson, Robert Bloch, E.L. White, E.H. Visiak, Donald Wandrei, Frank Belknap Long, Robert Chambers, C.L. Moore, August Derleth, M.R. James, Carl Jacobi). The weird credentials of various authors such as H.G. Wells might be debated, but certain key names recur: among them Clark Ashton Smith, William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and, overwhelmingly the preeminent figure in the field, H.P. Lovecraft. It is this *locus classicus* of the subgenre, what we might consider “Haute Weird,” that is considered here.

In his “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” (1937), Lovecraft describes his desire to “escape from the prison-house of the known” (Lovecraft 1995: 113) and his fascination with “shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or ‘outsideness’” (Lovecraft 1995: 113). The focus is on *awe*, and its undermining of the quotidian. This obsession with numinosity under the everyday is at the heart of Weird Fiction.

Lovecraft, a philosophical materialist, disavowed spirit, and in the absence of such supernature his world-saturating Weird means the strangeness of the physical world itself, as in his astonishing reference in “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) to “an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse” (Lovecraft 1999: 167). Other Weird writers express their cosmic awe differently. Algernon Blackwood in “The Willows” (1907) talks about the “awe and wonder” of “the personified elemental forces” (Blackwood 1973: 7, 18), Hodgson in *The House on the Borderland* (1908) of “commingled awe and curiosity” (Hodgson 2002: 177) in the face of the cosmos. The

same concern is evident in Machen's religiosity, his obsession with "awe" and "ecstasy," his Gnostic vision in "The Great God Pan" (1894) that the perceived world is "but dreams and shadows . . . that hide the real world from our eyes" (Machen 2004: 58).

This permeating numinous bespeaks Weird's relation to the sublime, traditionally conceived as a sense of awe at vasty strangeness such as that of the Alps, the vistas of which provoke "enjoyment but with horror" (Kant 1991: 47). According to Edmund Burke and other theorists of the sublime, the beautiful and sublime are mutually exclusive: at a certain scale, enormity and unrepresentability – "the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight *and analysis*" (Lovecraft 1995: 113, emphasis added) – the sublime appears. The Weird, though, punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from "beyond" back into the everyday – into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc. The Weird is a radicalized sublime backwash.

Machen, in his short story "N" (1936), pilfers the theological term "perichoresis" to describe the intertwining of the heavenly and the everyday, in Stoke Newington. More than the atheist Lovecraft, or spiritualistically maundering Blackwood, Machen brings out how Weird Fiction writers are in a lineage with those religious visionaries and ecstasies who perceive an unmediated relationship with numinosity – Godhead itself.

For many of those religious radicals this is an emancipatory/utopian revolt against a priestly class. However, Haute Weird Fiction performs a backhanded service in reminding that there is nothing intrinsically progressive about the everyday numinous. Indeed, a disproportionate number of its writers have distinctly reactionary aims. Lovecraft's awe, for example, is inextricable – as Michel Houellebecq (2005) brilliantly argues – from a racism so obsessive it is a hallucinogen; and Machen draws on agonized conceptions of a god whose ubiquity makes it totalitarian and/or predatory (as for example in Francis Thompson's astounding poem of devotional terror "Hound of Heaven" (c. 1889)), to depict a numinous so threatening that it operates not as liberation but as discipline, policed with acts of astonishing narratorial sadism.

It is not only in the content that estrangement from the supposedly quotidian is effected in Weird Fiction, but often in its form. Lovecraft's writing is a kind of purple poetry, notoriously parody-able. Of course such language can be done badly, and is not a necessary corollary of Weird Fiction (see, for example, the more robust register of Hodgson in many of his short stories, or Blackwood's melancholy ruminations). However, at its best Lovecraft's (and others') writing achieves affect because of, not despite, its prose, a crime against a certain *au courant* middlebrow minimalism, that will in passing extol barer prose as "spare," as if logo-parsimoniousness were a self-evident virtue; or, even more absurdly, as "precise," as if the word "table" is somehow *more like a table* than a prolix descriptive alternative. (Of course both lush and "spare" prose are words on a page, exactly equally unlike a table, a wooden thing upon which rests my tea.)

One can argue that the frenzied succession of adjectives in Lovecraft, alongside his regular insistence that whatever is being described is "undescribable," is, in its *hesitation*, its obsessive qualification and stalling of the noun, an aesthetic deferral

according to which the world is always-already unrepresentable, and can only be approached by an asymptotic succession of subjective pronouncements. Thus the form of writing is a function of sublime backwash, these baroque stylings a philosophy of militant adjectivalism struggling against a nounism that implies, carelessly speaking of “dog” and “door” as if that were the end of the matter, that such unrepresentable Reals are containable in our inadequate symbolic system. This is not Promethean but myopic. By contrast the careful and precise hysteria of “Pulp Modernist” Weird Fiction looks like radical humility in the face of Weird ontology itself.

The abasement to the Weird that this prose represents is also visible in Lovecraft’s narrative. He is largely uninterested in plot: “Atmosphere,” he says, “not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction” (Lovecraft 1995: 116). His stories are often little more than excuses for descriptions of Weird presences, and what narrative “revelations” there are are predictable. His is a surrender to the *ineluctability of the Weird*, again implying no irruption of strangeness into a status quo, but a Weird universe.

At its best this works as pulp bricolage, where texts concatenate out of scattered scraps, in what looks like a deliberate undermining of “plot.” In Lovecraft’s key work, “The Call of Cthulhu,” there is no story, only the slow uncovering, from disjointed information and discarded papers, of the *fact* of the Weird, an ancient alien creature, Cthulhu, sojourning below the ocean. The story is explicit about its anti-narrative methodology, stressing that “all dread glimpses of truth” are “fleshed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things” (Lovecraft 1999: 140).

The unique physiology of Cthulhu, the famous “monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long narrow wings behind” (Lovecraft 1999: 148), is exemplary of Weird Fiction. One of the most distinct ways in which Lovecraft moots a Weird universe is in his revolutionary teratology. The monsters that inhabit his tales are a radical break with anything from a folkloric tradition. Rather than werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, Lovecraft’s monsters are agglomerations of bubbles, barrels, cones, and corpses, patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna notable precisely for their absence from the traditional Western monstrous. Paradigmatic is Weird Fiction’s obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic, and one which, after early proto-Weird iterations by Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, viralled suddenly in Haute Weird Fiction until it is now, in the post-Weird debris of fantastic horror, the default monstrous limb-type.

Lovecraft repeatedly stresses that his creatures are extraterrestrial and have been hidden among us for eons. This retro-historicization notwithstanding, their alterity is radical, rather than aghastly remembered. The awe that Weird Fiction attempts to invoke is a function of *lack* of recognition, rather than any uncanny resurgence, guilt-function, the return of a repressed. It is thus as much a break from as an heir to traditional Gothic. In “The Willows,” Blackwood stresses that the dread aroused by a serpentine pillar of huge figures “was no ordinary ghostly fear” (Blackwood 1973: 37); while Lovecraft’s *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927) stresses that the “true weird tale” is characterized by “unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces,” rather

than of any “bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule” (Lovecraft 1973: 15). In its interest in the *implacably alien* Outer Monstrosities, Old Ones, and Great Cthulhu, rather than revenant ghosts, the Weird is in opposition to that category for thinking through the history-stained present that, after Derrida (1994), has become known as the “Hauntological.” The Weird, rather, impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum.

Such a literary moment is an expression of upheaval and crisis. This cluster of works resembles an explosion in the timeline of (particularly Anglo-American) fiction. Where the wounds of Weird are discernible before 1880 we may find Weird Fiction *avant la lettre* (arguably, for example, in Sheridan Le Fanu), and after 1940, work which is post-Weird in more than just its dates. (A very few of the truly enormous number of relevant writers are Neil Gaiman, Caitlin Kiernan, Peter Straub, Stephen King, Poppy Z. Brite, Thomas Ligotti, Clive Barker, Katherine Dunn, Hal Duncan, Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Aickman, Grant Morrison, Ramsey Campbell, Michael Moorcock.) Between these outliers there is a sense of defining *trauma* at the heart of the field.

Each Weird Fiction writer has her or (more usually in the haute phase) his own particular mishigas. Machen’s horror, for example, at democracy and the perceived vulgarities of modernity’s “disenchantment” are allied to a prurient misogyny, as evidenced in the grotesque snuff-murder of Helen Vaughan, the awe-tainted sexually provocative woman, in “The Great God Pan.” For Lovecraft, the horror of modernity is above all horror of “inferior” races, miscegenation, and cultural decline, expressed in his protean, fecund, seeping monsters. These particular concerns, though central to understanding particular writers’ work, are expressions of a foundational underlying crisis.

Though Lovecraft’s greatest period of work started around 1924, his story “Dagon” (1919) was key to ushering in his new paradigm, locating the “Lovecraft Event” (Noys 2007) as a postwar phenomenon. The great Weird Fiction writers are responding to capitalist modernity entering, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of crisis in which its cruder nostrums of progressive bourgeois rationality are shattered. The heart of the crisis is the First World War, where mass carnage perpetrated by the most modern states made claims of a “rational” modern system a tasteless joke.

The fantastic has always been indispensable to think and unthink society, but traditional monsters were now profoundly inadequate, suddenly nostalgic in the epoch of modern war. Out of this crisis of traditional fantastic, the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality, Weird Fiction’s revolutionary teratology and oppressive numinous grows. This backwashed horror–sublime is investigated by scientists, doctors, engineers (Blackwood’s John Silence, Hodgson’s Carnacki, Lovecraft’s survey team in *The Mountains of Madness* (1936), the sadistic surgeons of Machen), and it is their very “rationality” that uncovers the radical and awesome monstrous. It is the war of 1914–18 that is the black box, the heart of Weird. In its malevolent Real, and protean new monsters, inconceivable and formless (though possessing

meticulously itemized surplus specificity of form), Weird does not so much articulate the crisis as that the crisis cannot be articulated.

It is noticeable that when dealing overtly with the war, Machen in “The Bowmen” (1914), for example, moves away from his reactionary-ecstatic notion of an unknowable numinous to articulate not Weird but Agincourt archers *messireing* for England, ghosts so unencumbered by historic angst they are embarrassments to hauntology. Elsewhere, as in “The Great God Pan,” Machen conceives folkloric/traditional figures as ways of talking about something *unrepresentable*: whatever the politics of the Weird Fictioneers or their texts, there is in Weird an awareness of total crisis. This leeway for readings against the ideological grain is part of what makes Weird Fiction such an ongoingly fascinating field. When Machen wants to deploy supernatural in the national interest, he articulates neither the radical bad-numinous of Weird nor the returned repressed of Gothic, but, in classic fascist mode, warmed-over mythic kitsch.

The war is bracketed by the Lovecraft Event on one side, and the neglected William Hope Hodgson on the other. His tentacle-riddled *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* (1907), cosmically awed *The House on the Borderland*, and flawed but astonishing post-apocalypse nihil-dream *The Night Land* (1912) are vivid explorations of the radical monstrous and bad-numinous. It is even arguable that in Hodgson’s relative lack of particularizing obsessions (even *The Night Land*’s bumbling S&M fantasy is inoffensive, more like a seaside postcard than like Machen’s misogyny), and in his relative lack of prose facility – absent Lovecraft’s strange but expert purple prose – Hodgson provides a uniquely *uncluttered* insight into Weird Fiction as the literature of crisis. His work cannot be understood without reference to the war in which he died fighting: it is, in John Clute’s phrase, “pre-Aftermath fiction” (J. Clute personal communication, 2006).

Hodgson’s expressions of patriotism were heartfelt but somewhat rote, and unlike Machen, even his war writing never flinched from the insights of Weird, giving his work a different political valence. In the outstanding “The Baumoff Explosive” (1919), written and set during the war and published, poignantly, after Hodgson’s death at the front, the German protagonist is no evil Hun but a saintly man trying to tap into absolute goodness, who is entered instead by what Hodgson, in one of the absolutely key phrases in Weird Fiction, has his narrator suppose is “some Christ-apeing monster of the Void.” As no such entities have been mooted at any point up to or after this supposed “explanation,” the true horror of the story lies in the implication that there is no mummery involved, that it is the Christ itself that speaks with monstrous voice, that Godhead, in the midst of cataclysm, is malevolent. Here is the purest and most affecting humanist expression of Weird Fiction traditional awed horror (far from, say, Machen’s reactionary ecstasy).

In a deeply moving letter from the front, Hodgson refers to his own sunless end-times landscape of *The Night Land*. Nowhere is the constitutive relationship between the war and the Weird made more clear. The piece serves as epitaph not only to Hodgson, but, preemptively, to Weird Fiction itself because this, the field’s single most astonishing evocation of the bad-numinous, engages with and moves beyond Hodgson’s own fiction into *nonfiction*. Formlessness, so brilliantly abstracted

and teratologized in Lovecraft, is here something that was *done*, by humans, and more terrible for that. There is no Weird so Weird as the backwashed bad sublime called Passchendaele.

What a sense of desolation, the heaved-up mud rimming ten thousand shell craters as far as the sight could reach, north and south and east and west. My God, what a Desolation! And here and there standing like mute, muddled rocks – somehow terrible in their significant grim bashed formlessness – an old concrete blockhouse, with the earth torn up around them in monstrous craters and, in some cases, surged in great waves of earth against the sides of the blockhouses. The sun was pretty low as I came back, and far off across that Desolation, here and there they showed – just formless, squarish, cornerless masses erected by man against the Infernal Storm that seeps for ever, night and day, day and night, across that most atrocious Plain of Destruction. My God! Talk about a lost World – talk about the END of the World; talk about the “NightLand” – it is all here, not more than two hundred odd miles from where you sit infinitely remote.

(Hodgson 2005: 384)

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