

## Weird Fiction in the Twentieth Century Gothic

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Any definition of weird fiction in the Twentieth Century is tied to the work of H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). Although the weird did not begin or end with his fiction, he is a key figure because of his theorization of the weird in the long essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927), where he creates a canon of authors who achieve this effect. Although gesturing towards the development of the weird impulse in the nineteenth century and its metamorphosis into the 'New Weird' in the twenty-first, this chapter will focus on the weird as it manifests in the twentieth century, centred around Lovecraft and the magazine *Weird Tales* (1923-), but expanding the definition to include a wider range of authors whose work can be considered to fall within this category. The approach is expansive and aims to avoid a reductive view of the weird as belonging only to Lovecraft and his circle, while of course acknowledging their importance. By necessity of space, not all relevant authors can appear here, but the intention is to give a sense of what is meant when readers and critics discuss the weird. Weird fiction, broadly, is a type of storytelling that attempts on some level to produce the effect of horror and may or may not adhere to Gothic conventions built up over time. In its tendencies to embrace elements of speculative and science fiction, it actively engages with the implications of developments in science while at the same time going beyond and making strange. This very strangeness, the 'weird' in the title, represents a rich seam of imagination that continues to be mined by authors in the twenty-first century, even as they go beyond the perceived limitations and certainly outdated worldviews of some its practitioners, notably Lovecraft himself.

Many of the authors here are American and flourished in the country's culture of 'pulp' magazine publishing. Weird fiction is not limited to the United States in the twentieth

century, but there is a case to be made for it being somewhat of an ‘American Century’ for the mode. Gothic fiction, originating in Europe and coinciding with the growth of the new American republic, hit its stride early in the country, with authors like Edgar Allan Poe not only innovating in the form, but sowing the seeds for what would later be considered as the ‘weird’. As we shall see later with Lovecraft’s posthumous success, the publication of Poe’s compiled *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* in 1902 is a landmark moment in the twentieth-century weird, further built on with the addition of Harry Clarke’s grotesque but irresistible illustrations in the 1919 edition. I want to pick out one Poe story (not included in that collection) as a notable precursor to the weird fiction template: ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ (1845). Poe did elsewhere write on science quite sincerely, in for example *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1848), but it is in this story that we see the marriage of his more usual psychological terror to a more existential sense of the weird, through an exploration of the margins between life and death. The narrator of the story uses mesmerism to put his friend Valdemar, who is dying of tuberculosis, into a trance at the very point of death. He then remains suspended between the states of life and death for months. When the narrator finally decides to revive the ‘sleep-waker’,<sup>1</sup> Valdemar screams that he is dead, although eerily without using his jaw or lips, and collapses into ‘a nearly liquid mass of loathsome -- of detestable putridity’.<sup>2</sup>

Poe’s story illustrates several elements of what would become the twentieth-century weird. Indeed, Lovecraft holds up the tale in ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ as an example of Poe’s ‘permanent and unassailable place as deity and fountain-head of all modern diabolic fiction’.<sup>3</sup> The excess in subject matter as well as adjectives is not the only thing that Lovecraft takes from Poe’s work here. He praises the ‘spiritual’ and ‘supernatural horror’<sup>4</sup> of stories like this, in contrast to those that exemplify the ‘grotesque’, or a psychological ‘terror’.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps curious that Lovecraft, an avowed materialist, would here turn to the

language of the numinous in defining the weird, but it is exactly this ‘violation of the natural order’<sup>6</sup> that he sees as frightening on a profound level. This is in some ways a reformulation of the Gothic romance author Anne Radcliffe’s terror/horror distinction, where she claims that ‘terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a higher degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them’.<sup>7</sup> This theorizing, published in essay form as ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’ (1826) is really a justification of her own style, in contrast to the gory excesses of authors like Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis and his imitators. Lovecraft finds the ‘laboured mechanical explanations’ of Radcliffe to be disappointing in comparison to the sense of sublimity evoked in the course of her novels. ‘The true weird tale’ he writes (in a swipe at the Gothic novel), ‘has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule’.<sup>8</sup> For Lovecraft, the essence of the weird lies in something analogous to the Romantic sublime: that sense of awe so crucial in the formulation of the Gothic, that ‘inspires in its perceivers a new sense of relative insignificance’.<sup>9</sup> Where Kant and Burke saw the sublime as a prime instigator of religious feeling, and the Romantic poets and transcendentalists would move this towards a broader conception of nature, Lovecraft’s conception of the weird is one marked by a profound absence of belief, though still feeling the shock of the decline of faith characteristic of thinkers of the age.<sup>10</sup> This pessimistic worldview is one that would be taken up by authors such as Thomas Ligotti later in the century, and theorised by critics such as Mark Fisher, who see the potential for radical social change, viewing the presence of the weird as ‘a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete’.<sup>11</sup>

S.T. Joshi has crucially claimed that the weird tale in this period does not ‘exist as a genre but as the consequence of a *world view*’.<sup>12</sup> This is certainly valid and goes some way towards explaining how it comes to coagulate as a set of conventions in the twentieth century.

It is tempting to add that it also achieves a certain aesthetic effect, but Lovecraft's own formulation of what qualifies as weird, or as 'a literature of cosmic fear'<sup>13</sup> (he uses these more or less interchangeably) frustrates an effort to strictly categorise. His range of examples, characteristically, draws on folklore, religious traditions, and a kind of speculative anthropology, as well as the authors he praises in the form. At times it seems that all of this is simply a matter of taste, and the weird is simply horror writing that Lovecraft thinks is *good*. Nonetheless, there is a specific effect, not directly mentioned by Lovecraft here, that gives us a concrete example of what he means and can illustrate where the philosophical and the aesthetic come together. Thomas De Quincey's essay 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' (1823), stands alongside Radcliffe's 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' and Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), as one of the key moments in theorizing horror prior to Lovecraft. Here De Quincey obsesses over one moment in Shakespeare's play: the 'peculiar awfulness'<sup>14</sup> he feels when Duncan has been murdered and a knocking is heard. The knocking, De Quincey claims, is powerful because it is concrete and belonging to the ordinary world. Prior to this, a nobleman has murdered his King, a woman has become 'unsexed', and 'another world has stepped in'.<sup>15</sup> The very laws of nature have been temporarily suspended, and it is only the knocking, and the resumption of everyday life, that 'makes us profoundly aware of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them'.<sup>16</sup> For De Quincey, there is a moment of what Lovecraft would call cosmic horror: 'a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space'.<sup>17</sup>

Jeff VanderMeer has characterized the twenty-first century 'New Weird' as involving a 'surrender to the weird' as opposed to having such phenomena 'hermetically sealed in a haunted house on the moors or in a cave in Antarctica'.<sup>18</sup> This is precisely the difference. The twentieth-century weird works within De Quincey's paradigm, where the horror stems from

the creation of a fictional space where what we know to be true about the world is convincingly and horrifically made untrue, even for a moment. This is the achievement of Poe's 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar'. When Valdemar screams 'Dead! Dead!'<sup>19</sup> through a closed mouth and we are utterly uncertain as to his status as living, dead, or something in between, it creates a moment of heightened horror that is followed immediately by the catharsis of his dissolving into liquid matter: a moment that brings a shudder of realisation that the previous months were an 'awful parenthesis' leading up to this event. Nature takes over once again, and we are thrown back into the role of readers encountering a story of scientific curiosity. 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' was presented in several magazines without clarification that it was a work of fiction. As Adam Frank points out, 'while Poe did not seem actively interested in perpetrating "Valdemar" as a hoax, he played with his readers' desires to know whether it was true'.<sup>20</sup> The extent of the potential of mesmerism was not widely understood, and it is here that Poe uses this doubt to create a convincing breach of the reader's rationality. It is in this area of doubt, in the gap between science and the supernatural, that weird fiction finds its most natural home.

In what literary world, then, did weird fiction take root as a force in the early-twentieth century? It was certainly one influenced by the flourishing of landmark horror texts in the *fin-de-siècle* that are widely considered to respond to the transformative scientific and social developments of the era. Indeed, most critics agree that the classic period is roughly 1880-1940, or what China Miéville has termed, 'the locus classicus of the "haute weird"'.<sup>21</sup> Certain names are associated strongly with the earlier side of this period, including Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, and Arthur Machen. As James Machin demonstrates, however, a close examination of contemporary texts by authors now regarded as classics of the 'Gothic' were actually more commonly termed by variations of 'weird', including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram

Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).<sup>22</sup> It is also important to note that Stevenson and Stoker, and many others of their time, regarded these kinds of stories as experiments somewhat aside from their usual output, with Henry James famously describing his (now) much-analysed classic *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), as 'rather a shameless pot-boiler'.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, there existed a confidence in the possibilities of the form to produce psychological depth and a sense that the form belonged to the modern age.

The American folklorist Dorothy Scarborough, in an extended essay that predates Lovecraft's 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' by a decade, discusses in similar terms what she views as the hackneyed conventions of Gothic fiction, filled with 'melancholy birds that circled portentously over ancient castles filled with gloom and ghosts'.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, she claims, 'the present-day artist of the uncanny knows how to strike the varied tones of supernaturalism, the shrill notes of fear, the deep diapason of awe, the crashing chords of horror'.<sup>25</sup> Scarborough's survey of the field covers many of the names that likewise appear in Lovecraft's essay, such as Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, Ambrose Bierce, and Robert W. Chambers, as well as (and perhaps notably) important female authors absent from his list, such as Edith Wharton and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Her conclusion centres on the importance of modernity. Psychology is clearly an important part of this modernity, as shown by the allusion to the uncanny: Jentsch had published his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* in 1906, and Freud's formulation of the subject would see print in 1919. Scientific progress, however, considered more broadly, is highlighted as a harbinger of greater possibilities of terror fiction. 'Science' she writes, 'is revealing wonderful facts and fiction is quick to realize the possibilities for startling situations in every field'.<sup>26</sup> Scarborough's assessment is less overblown than Lovecraft's but as strong a summary of the weird at the start of the twentieth century as any.

This enmeshing of science and the weird in this period is detailed extensively by Emily Alder, who argues that ‘a close relationship with science is essential to the weird’s existence and takes a unique form’.<sup>27</sup> This relationship, Alder argues, is a reciprocal one where science and fiction feed on and reinforce each other. This is a factor characteristic of the age. The late nineteenth century gave rise to a set of practices and attitudes that would have looked strange (or indeed *weird*) to an earlier age. Developing theories in chemistry, biology, and physics in the preceding decades gave rise to an experimental atmosphere where few sacred truths remained certain. An incomplete list here might include discoveries in optics, evolution, and electricity, as well as sound and image recording. Alder points to what is perhaps an inevitable culmination of these discoveries and the attempt to reconcile them with religion: the rise of ‘spiritualist and occult discourses that understood all phenomena as “natural”, just sometimes governed by laws we do not yet understand’.<sup>28</sup> Pointing also to Lovecraft’s somewhat stubborn clinging to the term ‘supernatural’ in the title of his landmark essay on the weird, she points out that ‘for “supernatural” to have any meaning, there must be a “natural” against which to define it, and in weird fiction, there is no distinction’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, such was the mood at the turn of the century that the respected psychologist William James (elder brother of Henry) could claim that, ‘phantasms, haunted houses, trances with supernormal faculty, and even experimental thought-transference, are natural kinds of phenomenon which ought, just like other natural events, to be followed up with scientific curiosity’.<sup>30</sup> James was writing from a stance of dispassionate scientific enquiry, but this very curiosity, in the hand of authors of the weird, leads to terror, despair, and madness.

Lovecraft’s fiction puts into practice the goals he sets up in his theorizing of the weird. Here I will briefly touch on his famous and influential ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928). The monstrous creature of the title usually gets all of the attention, but it is important first to set up what the story does well as a horror narrative, and why it is ‘weird’. Jeffrey Andrew

Weinstock has expanded on the difference between the Gothic and the weird by pointing out that for Lovecraft, ‘a solitary spectral form emerging at midnight from the closet may be scary, but not especially weird’.<sup>31</sup> What does constitute the weird, on the other hand, is ‘the prospect that ghosts are all around us, invisible to most but able to interact with the world and influence our actions’.<sup>32</sup> It is not so much that Lovecraft wants to do away with the supernatural altogether, but merely that he finds the set of conventions built up around their representation to be tired and boring. Weinstock confirms this by concluding that ‘the frisson elicited by the uncanny upending of conventional expectation is the affective terrain of the weird tale’.<sup>33</sup> The first wave of Gothic fiction found a keen readership eager to partake in the pleasurable experience of reading with an awareness and appreciation of genre conventions, as parodied by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), where the protagonist puts herself in a series of awkward social situations by allowing her Gothic novel-influenced imagination to run wild. It is a perpetual irony that revolutionary movements tend to settle into a new status quo, and the weird itself would build up its own set of stale conventions over time. Looking back, however, what enthusiastic writers, critics, and editors saw as the potential for a new direction in horror fiction has its parallels with a broader enthusiasm for a new way of looking at the world that characterized the early twentieth century and has its parallels, in a broad sense, with modernism.<sup>34</sup>

The opening paragraph of ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ speaks directly to the ideas espoused earlier by William James, which we might call a version of logical positivism; that is, that all possible knowledge is in the realm of materialist science and can be explained in these terms. The narrator views the branches of science as something akin to the Indian parable about a group of blind men attempting to describe an elephant by feeling it, each convinced that it is a different kind of creature based on which part they touch. He writes that:



The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.<sup>35</sup>

Curiosity, in this story, comes from a desire to seek the truth, but the truth is a pessimistic one. As with the shock felt in the Victorian age when evolutionary science revealed nature to be truly ‘red in tooth and claw’,<sup>36</sup> the tone and content of ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ suggest that there are things we might rather not know. What is important about this is not just the philosophical world view, but how Lovecraft deploys it to create fear. The story is a layered narrative that draws from the innovations in the Gothic of the late nineteenth century, for example in Stevenson and Stoker, where found letters, clues, and newspaper reports are pieced together to create a story that has plausible deniability yet allows for the possibility that the events have actually transpired. The murder of the narrator’s uncle by a secret cult leads him through an investigation that eventually unearths the supposed existence of a monstrous creature, whose name is constructed of ‘ominous syllables which can be rendered only as “Cthulhu”’.<sup>37</sup> Cthulhu lies in the submerged city of R’Lyeh, where it sends out psychic signals to the susceptible. It is just one of a race of Old Ones: ancient and powerful beings who fulfil the roles of both aliens and gods, and are far from benevolent, wishing only for power and to unleash chaos upon the human race.

The crucial point is how Lovecraft shrouds his monster in ambiguity; the account of the sailor Johansen claims outright that ‘the Thing cannot be described’,<sup>38</sup> while a bas-relief found among his uncle’s possessions, as well as a statue found among the cultists, clearly

represent a bizarre hybrid of human, octopus, and dragon. Its physical form, however, is continually shifting and undefined, and not something that can be simply understood and defeated. As Joshi suggests, Cthulhu's very existence means that we have somehow horribly misconstrued the nature of the cosmos and our place within it; our reaction can only be horror and madness. It is worth noting at this point that this is a key element of distinction between the 'old' and 'new' weird. The newer manifestation, in its 'surrender to the weird' as VanderMeer puts it, has proved fruitful in opening up spaces of exploration from the perspectives of non-white and queer authors, who have been less comfortably situated within the mainstream narrative to begin with. Certainly, Lovecraft's personal anxieties over racial and class identities have been thoroughly examined in relation to his fictional horrors. David Simmons, for example, situates his writing within 'an American tradition ... that seeks to configure alien, and unknowable, others as internal threats to national, political, and psychological stability'.<sup>39</sup>

Whatever the personal or political stance that gives birth to such abject horrors, Lovecraft is not alone in his construction of the composite, strange, yet horrifically real Cthulhu. Joshi sees Lovecraft's work as the culmination of the tradition he identifies, and indeed convincing templates for the eldritch horrors of Lovecraft's weird mode can be seen in previous texts. Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1890), for example, describes an experiment where a surgeon operates on the brain of a young woman, Mary, in the hope of opening up her consciousness to the spirit world. Although he claims success in the experiment, he admits that her mind has been destroyed: 'she is a hopeless idiot. However, it could not be helped; and, after all, she has seen the Great God Pan'.<sup>40</sup> The novella centres around another young woman, Helen, who is later revealed to be Mary's child, fathered by Pan himself. After becoming implicated in scandalous events, Helen kills herself, with her death described in the following way:

I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not farther describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of... as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death<sup>41</sup>

Helen's death prefigures Cthulhu both in the reference to ancient sculptures that depict this monstrosity, and in the indeterminacy that characterises her dying form. Algernon Blackwood, too, produces a similar effect with his novella *The Wendigo* (1910). Here, a hunting party in the backwoods of Northwestern Ontario encounter the wendigo of the title: a creature from the folklore of the Algonquin people. The Wendigo is associated with cannibalism and human possession, and this occurs in the narrative, with the party's guide, Défago, seemingly taken over by its spirit. The wendigo is represented throughout the story primarily by sound, but as Défago stumbles back to the camp there is a visual description of him that suggests the presence of the wendigo while simultaneously avoiding direct representation: 'something like a skin of horror almost perceptibly drew down in that moment over every face, and three pairs of eyes shone through it as though they saw across the frontiers of normal vision into the Unknown'.<sup>42</sup> This horrific vision of something that is both beyond and yet all too real is developed at length in William Hope Hodgson's hallucinogenic account of a man who slips between dimensions in *The House on the Borderland* (1908):

Far to my right, away up among inaccessible peaks, loomed the enormous bulk of the great Beast-god. Higher, I saw the hideous form of the dread goddess, rising up

through the red gloom, thousands of fathoms above me. To the left, I made out the monstrous Eyeless-Thing, grey and inscrutable. Further off, reclining on its lofty ledge, the livid Ghoul-Shape showed—a splash of sinister colour, among the dark mountains.<sup>43</sup>

The tactic used by these authors is to produce horror solely by means of the suggestive power of the written word: to describe the indescribable, and in so doing convey an uneasy sense of dread that is realistic, despite the sometimes-preposterous situations that are conjured up. The weird is simultaneously a *tour de force* of imagination and a mode that aspires to the strictest believability in its tone.

If the crystallization of the weird into a genre is in large part a result of Lovecraft's writing and his association with *Weird Tales* magazine, then this does skew its definition into being associated with a certain style and aesthetic. Lovecraft's tendency towards excess in his prose (a style that his biographer L. Sprague de Camp has referred to as 'pedantically polysyllabic'<sup>44</sup>) and a fondness for deploying multiple adjectives in describing his horrors, has become connected with the mode, and thus the weird often excludes, for example, the ghost story writer M. R. James, despite his inclusion in Lovecraft's list of great practitioners of the form. The publication of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* in 1904 is no doubt a landmark in twentieth-century supernatural fiction, but as Darryl Jones points out, the ghost story exemplified and mastered by James is 'essentially Victorian'<sup>45</sup> in form and outlook, and the style 'straitened, narrow, austere, limited'.<sup>46</sup> While this is by no means a flaw, and indeed many would characterise James as the finer stylist, this represents a traditional divergence between the classic ghost story and the weird, despite the capacity of the former to produce some of the same kinds of affective supernatural terror. It is in some ways a false dichotomy:

James Machin has pointed out that ‘by the 1920s it [the ghost story] was a form *Weird Tales* magazine was actively defining itself against’<sup>47</sup> due its perceived clichéd themes, but despite this insistence on the part of the magazine marketing tactics, ‘it is difficult to find even a single work that fits neatly into any of these post-hoc generic distinctions’.<sup>48</sup> This difficulty in classification extends to the authors associated with *Weird Tales* itself, a problem perhaps inevitable for a publication set up explicitly to be eclectic and distinct from established styles of storytelling. *Weird Tales* included such authors as Seabury Quinn, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert Bloch, and August Derleth, who would notably go on to take charge of Lovecraft’s posthumous reputation, establishing him as a genre writer above all else.

Derleth’s invention of the term ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ to describe Lovecraft’s fantastical ‘universe’ (as it might now be termed) is foundational in the marketing of not only Lovecraft’s work, but genre fiction more generally. Joshi considers Derleth and Donald Wandrei’s founding of Arkham House in 1939 as a move that actively encouraged a ‘cult following’<sup>49</sup> for such work, as opposed to the wider mainstream appeal of earlier fiction, not segregated from ‘literature’ in a broader sense. Joshi identifies a ‘critical contempt’<sup>50</sup> for weird fiction as a direct consequence of this. Joshi’s own editorial work has gone some way to remedy this, although since the publication of *The Weird Tale* in 1990 this has been situated within a wider critical reappraisal of genre fiction in the academy and in the public sphere, connected also to the rise of critical theory. While these are in some ways unhappy bedfellows to Joshi’s ‘consciously antitheoretical position’,<sup>51</sup> they share an appreciation of the philosophical aspects of weird fiction. As Carl Sederholm puts it: ‘An effective weird tale may even leave readers feeling stunned and helpless, unable to process what they know to be real ... Ultimately, weird tales point readers toward fundamental problems of representation and reality’.<sup>52</sup> Although key studies in the philosophical implications of the weird such as

Graham Harman's *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012) and Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) had yet to appear at the end of the twentieth century, critical reappraisals of the mode had been made by authors such as Stephen King in *Danse Macabre* (1981) and Michel Houellebecq in *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (In French, 1991).

This critical reappraisal at the start of the twenty-first century, occurring also alongside the aforementioned rise of the 'New Weird', means that we are now in a position of retrospectively tracking the mode across a range of authors who might conceivably now be placed within the category. The influence and cross-fertilization of the themes and aesthetics of the weird can be seen particularly in comics such as EC's *The Vault of Horror* (1950-1955) and *Weird Fantasy* (1950-1953), and the work of writers like Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, who moved from an exploration of the latent weird themes in Marvel and DC comics to original stories that draw on and expand the weird. Films including John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and the output of David Cronenberg such as *Scanners* (1981) and *Videodrome* (1983) mined weird themes at the same time as the appearance of adaptations and mythos-adjacent titles such as Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981) and Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985). In fiction, the label 'horror' would become dominant as the output of Stephen King and other authors became popular with a wide audience, in addition to the stereotypical 'pimply teenager'<sup>53</sup> that Dale Bailey associates with pulp genre horror prior to the release of Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* in 1977. Although not all horror novels draw on the sensibilities of the weird, there are some notable exceptions. Joshi rightly designates Ramsey Campbell as one of the 'modern masters'<sup>54</sup> of the weird, and a novel such as *The Parasite* (1980), with its evocation of shifting dimensions and shuffling, malformed horrors, confirms this perspective. The writing of Thomas Ligotti is now gaining greater attention, and texts like the collection *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1985) show not just a

thematic and aesthetic debt to the weird but a continuation of the philosophical pessimism that infuses the Lovecraftian tradition.

The writing of Stephen King has not always been classified in terms of the weird, and has been actively excluded from some examinations of the mode, but there is no doubt that King has been instrumental in popularizing it to a new audience. The 1980s HarperCollins Omnibus editions of Lovecraft's fiction, for example, bear a quote from King alongside their lurid cover illustrations, claiming Lovecraft as 'the twentieth century horror story's dark and baroque prince'.<sup>55</sup> The following passage from *It* (1986), to give one of many possible examples, shows a clear continuation of the 'problems of representation and reality' raised through an attempt to describe the indescribable that we have seen in Blackwood's *The Wendigo*, but here evoking the sense of smell rather than sound: 'Smells of dirt and wet and long-gone vegetables would merge into one unmistakable ineluctable smell, the smell of the monster, the apotheosis of all monsters. It was the smell of something for which he had no name: the smell of It, crouched and lurking and ready to spring'.<sup>56</sup> The key feature of a novel like *It* is the way that it simultaneously presents a realistic portrayal of small-town American life (particularly the experience of being an adolescent) and the presence of a supernatural entity, without losing the quality of believability that characterised the earlier weird, despite the outlandishness of the plot. This formula is one that has made King's writing so wildly popular across a large range of readers. More experimentally weird is the writing of Clive Barker, whose preferred term for his fiction is the dark *fantastique*: a French term that is more inclusive than the anglophone separation of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. This is a mode, as Sorchá Ní Fhlainn points out, that aims to 'reconfigure reality'.<sup>57</sup> The inclusion of Barker's 1984 short story 'In the Hills, the Cities' in Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's *The New Weird: An Anthology* (2008), demonstrates the evolution of the mode into something new

once more: something characterised primarily by ‘subversion’,<sup>58</sup> as Barker has claimed as a driving principle.

Weird fiction in the twentieth century, perhaps appropriately, mutated across a variety of forms. It began as a diverse and multi-armed (or tentacled) attempt to refresh established conventions in horror by updating the scenarios of the Gothic and by incorporating new discoveries in science and philosophy. The first part of this distinction is aesthetic, in that the weird often eschews the aestheticization of death into something fearful yet possessing of a certain beauty. In the case of the weird, the horror of the category-slippage of life and death and the dissolution of the body are more open and unresolved. The second part of the distinction is a similarly open narrative structure, defying the usual rational resolution of the classic Gothic novel. The third is a tendency in theme to move away from a representation of the past as something supernatural or barbaric intruding on the modern age, to the modern age itself being intrinsically linked with an assault on rational human agency. Like any generic conventions these flow into one another, but through its association with specific publications such as *Weird Tales* and the posthumous cult status of H. P. Lovecraft in particular, the weird became cemented in the twentieth century as something akin to an identifiable genre, characterised by a blending of science fiction, the supernatural, and horror, and with a pessimistic tone that suggests human beings are helpless in the face of larger forces that are sometimes threatening but at best terrifyingly indifferent. It thrived in comics and cinema, and its traces could be detected in what was more usually termed horror fiction. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, a postmodern mining of the past dug up the weird as a candidate for reinvention, and one to be put to new purposes. It remains somewhat niche, albeit highly recognised in fandom and increasingly in academia. Its influence, however, can be detected everywhere in popular culture from television and film to internet culture. The recognisability of the twentieth-century weird can now be seen in period-set



videogames and roleplaying games that cement its themes and aesthetics. The true form of the weird, however, was never something fixed into a set of conventions, and at the start of a new century it found new life through a generation of authors inspired by its compelling strangeness and capacity to unsettle.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', p. 333.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid. (334).
- <sup>3</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', p. 1067.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 1067.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 1067.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 1083.
- <sup>7</sup> Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', p. 315.
- <sup>8</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', p. 1043.
- <sup>9</sup> Hughes, p. 145.
- <sup>10</sup> Famously summed up by Nietzsche as the 'death of God' in *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85).
- <sup>11</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 13.
- <sup>12</sup> Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', p. 1043.
- <sup>14</sup> De Quincey, 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth', p. 353.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 355.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 356.
- <sup>17</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', p. 1043.
- <sup>18</sup> VanderMeer, *The New Weird: An Anthology*, p. xvi.
- <sup>19</sup> Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', p. 333.
- <sup>20</sup> Frank, 'Valdemar's Tongue, Poe's Telegraphy', p. 635.
- <sup>21</sup> Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939*, p. 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 14.
- <sup>23</sup> Fagin, 'Another Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*', p. 200.
- <sup>24</sup> Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, p. 295.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 295.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 303-304.
- <sup>27</sup> Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 5.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 8.
- <sup>30</sup> James, 'Review of *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, by Frederick W. H. Myers (1903)', p. 204.
- <sup>31</sup> Weinstock, 'The New Weird', p. 179.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 179.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 179.
- <sup>34</sup> A topic that is expansive in its own right but examined in Carlin & Allen, 'Slime and Western Man: Lovecraft in the Time of Modernism', in Simmons (ed.), *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*.

- <sup>35</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', p. 355.
- <sup>36</sup> A common post-Darwinian assertion made famous by Tennyson in his poem 'In Memoriam A.H.H' (1850).
- <sup>37</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', p. 355.
- <sup>38</sup> Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', p. 377.
- <sup>39</sup> Simmons, 'Abject Hybridity', in Simmons (ed.), *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 28.
- <sup>40</sup> Machen, 'The Great God Pan', in *The Great God Pan and the Inmost Light*, p. 15.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 101.
- <sup>42</sup> Blackwood, *The Wendigo*, p. 33.
- <sup>43</sup> Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland*, p. 86, loc. 1671.
- <sup>44</sup> De Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography*, p. 70.
- <sup>45</sup> Jones, *M. R. James: Collected Ghost Stories*, p. xxix.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. xvii.
- <sup>47</sup> Machin, p. 21.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 21.
- <sup>49</sup> Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 5.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 6.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. xi.
- <sup>52</sup> Sederholm, *Twenty-First Century Gothic*, pp. 163-164.
- <sup>53</sup> Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, p. 54.
- <sup>54</sup> Joshi, *The Evolution of the Weird Tale*, p. 8.
- <sup>55</sup> Lovecraft, *H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 1: At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels of Terror*, cover.
- <sup>56</sup> King, *It*, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>57</sup> Ní Fhlainn, *Clive Barker: Dark Imaginer*, p. 9.
- <sup>58</sup> Barker, cited in *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond*, p. 100.

## Key Texts

Barker, Clive, *Books of Blood* (1984/1985). Published in six volumes and then in two omnibus editions, these short stories offer transgressive content beyond the gory body-horror they were first recognised for, having become a key influence on the 'new weird'.

Hodgson, William Hope, *The House on the Borderland* (1908). A highly influential early work of the weird, this novel anticipates hallucinatory and dream-like prose in later horror and Science Fiction.

Ligotti, Thomas, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* and *Grimscribe* (2016). Now published together, these collections of stories establish Ligotti as the inheritor of Lovecraft's mood of philosophical pessimism.

Lovecraft, H. P., *The Complete Fiction* (2011). Lovecraft's fiction, particularly the short stories published in *Weird Tales*, remain central to twentieth-century weird fiction.

Turner, Jim (ed.), *Cthulhu 2000* (1999). An excellent way to experience Cthulhu Mythos stories by later twentieth-century authors of the weird including Ramsey Campbell, Poppy Z. Brite, Harlan Ellison, Kim Newman and others.

## Suggested Further Critical Reading

Fisher, Mark, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016). Fisher's readable and provocative account of the weird and its counterpoint, the eerie (characterized by an uncanny absence), gives new philosophical meaning to weird fiction and specifically its relationship to capitalism.

- Houellebecq, Michel, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991). The transgressive French novelist's extended essay makes a case for the importance of Lovecraft in twentieth-century literary history, focusing on his loathing of humanity and retreat from modernity.
- Joshi, S.T., *The Weird Tale* (1990). The classic study of the weird tale that brought academic attention to Lovecraft and other weird authors, despite Joshi's overt resistance to the academy.
- Machin, James, *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939* (2018). An essential companion to the British and Irish authors who influenced Lovecraft and his peers, before becoming overshadowed by the American scene.
- Simmons, David (ed.), *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft* (2013). A timely collection of essays that situates Lovecraft within wider contexts, making a solid case for the broader consideration of weird fiction within literary and cultural studies.

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