

A NOTE ON THE SELECTION

“THE OLDEST and strongest emotion of mankind is fear,” H.P. Lovecraft writes at the opening of his seminal study “Supernatural Horror in Literature.”¹ Lovecraft’s essay was first published in 1927 in the only issue ever to appear of a little magazine called *The Recluse*, though he continued intermittently to rework and add to the piece for much of his life. “Supernatural Horror in Literature” is a complicated and ambitious work. It is in large part an exercise in historical scholarship: Lovecraft sets out to establish a distinguished pedigree for a branch of literature too often viewed with easy condescension and he finds one that stretches back via Emily Brontë and Dickens through *Doctor Faustus* and the *Morte d’Arthur* to real classic classics like Apuleius and finally (that is, to begin with) to such pseudepigraphical biblical texts as The Book of Enoch (but why not the Bible itself? Job? Or Genesis?) and beyond into the realm of “earliest folklore.” But it is also the tribute of a younger writer to his masters—Poe, Bierce, Blackwood, Dunsany prominent among them—as well as a characteristically bravura piece of prose in which favorite words like “horrible” and “hideous” and “noxious” are flaunted with determined abandon. Most importantly, however, from his essay’s stark initial proposition on, Lovecraft is

1. See S.T. Joshi’s indispensable *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), as well as his critical study *The Weird Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). The author would like to acknowledge his indebtedness to Joshi’s unequalled erudition and expertise in all weird things.

working to discern in the shape of the past a way forward for himself. At once apologia and manifesto, the study offers a new understanding of supernatural fiction, or, as he calls it, the "weird tale." In place of the high camp of the Gothic (as it had come to seem as early as *Northanger Abbey*) or the Hallowe'en trappings of the proverbial campfire story, Lovecraft presents himself as the prophet of a new literature born of and suffused with an ancient aura of insuperable and pervasive foundational fear.

Cosmic horror. "The true weird tale," Lovecraft writes, "has something more than a secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and daemons of unplumbed space." The familiar scenes of daily life fall away to reveal an unthinkable, encompassing alien dimension that threatens to engulf and destroy everything. It may break out of space or out of time, a pastness or futurity suddenly erupting within or descending upon the present. It may break out of the supposed sanctum of the self—the familiar figure in the mirror abruptly proving itself a stranger, a ghost, a mere host to an entity of some unimagined sort. Or it may emerge in the body like a disease, corrupting its tissues and disorganizing its structures, so that it turns pestilent and repugnant, oozing or crumbling away before our eyes.

The tale of cosmic horror reveals the appalling unnatural essence of nature, something positively indifferent or actively inimical to humanity, which, from the vertiginous perspective thus disclosed, find itself everywhere set apart, outside,

undone. There is, as has often been noted, a distinctly gnostic component to Lovecraft's way of thinking, not least in his conception of the writer as an inhuman agent, in communication and possibly in sympathy with those alien dimensions others fear to face. To that extent, the tale of cosmic terror represents a threat, disclosing an unthinkable reality more real than that we know, and its writer is a kind of terrorist, calling the reader to account—an account, however, that can never properly be made, since what we are answerable for and to is, precisely, the unaccountable.

Or so in theory. But of course "we cannot expect all weird tales to conform absolutely to any theoretical model," as Lovecraft sensibly avers. And he recognizes, too, that "much of the choicest weird work is unconscious; appearing in memorable fragments scattered through material whose massed effect may be of a very different cast." (It is curious in this regard that the fascination today with "outsider art" has not been accompanied by a parallel interest in "outsider writing," though a few such texts, most famously Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, composed contemporaneously with many of the tales here, have succeeded in imposing themselves on the public consciousness.) For all that, Lovecraft was adamant in his insistence that the best tales of cosmic horror manifest a particular art, a particularly difficult one indeed since the trick is to describe the indescribable, even the unbearable (something which at times threatens to reduce even the most careful examples of the genre to hysterics). "Atmosphere is the all important thing," Lovecraft declares. Not plot. The story will not proceed to a single horrifying revelation, but instead cultivate a state of ongoing suspense that, even when the story is told, should prove next to impossible to dispel. The story prolongs itself as near as it can to the point of the unendurable. Here again one thinks of the images of deliquescence and decay so

dear to Lovecraft—images of substances literally fallen, slow-motion pictures of dissolution indistinguishable from the stirrings of some hideous new breed of life.

This collection begins with Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle" and ends with Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," presenting a selection of weird tales that have established themselves as classics of the genre. In making it I have been guided to a large degree by the recommendations of Lovecraft himself. Thus one finds Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," Arthur Machen's "The White People," M. P. Shiel's "The House of Sounds," all of which Lovecraft discusses in "Supernatural Horror" and which later he included in a list of favorite weird tales assembled for the magazine *Fantasy Fan*. Walter de la Mare's "Seaton's Aunt" was also a particular favorite. I should say, though, that among the three stories by Ambrose Bierce included here the one Lovecraft liked above all, "The Death of Halpin Frayser," is not to be found. I have chosen instead of that longish story several shorter ones, hoping to represent something of this toughminded, yet elusive writer's unusual range, as well as the influence he exercised on other writers. Thus "The Damned Thing" lurks behind Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," while "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" helped to stimulate Robert Chambers's short story sequence *The King in Yellow* (notable for featuring a range of characters reduced to madness after reading an addictive book entitled—*The King in Yellow*), which is the source of "The Repairer of Reputations." Bierce's story would seem to be a send-up of a communication transmitted in a séance, but, as is often the case in his work, the satirical, the far-fetched, assumes an unlikely life of its own, leaving the reader in doubt as to how to take it, though of course the frantic narrator of the Chambers story takes it very much to heart.

Two of the stories may be thought to have a more tenuous

relation to the central argument of "Supernatural Horror in Literature." Everybody knows of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Lovecraft joins the chorus singing its praises. He doesn't however mention "The Squaw," and it might well be argued that this story is not an example of cosmic horror at all but rather a piece of grisly grand guignol acted out on a historical stage, one that improbably yokes together the Middle Ages, the Wild West, and a couple of—as it turns out quite justifiably—antsy American tourists. But then who is to say that this irruption of inhuman savagery within a historical context that seems almost Disneyfied isn't as cosmic—and telling—an example of horror as any extraterrestrial invasion? Finally there is Henry James, not much admired by Lovecraft, who scolds him for his "proximity and pomposity," though condescending to praise *The Turn of the Screw*. I have chosen, however, the less-familiar later work "The Jolly Corner," for there James pushes the psychological currency of his fiction to a very weird place indeed.²

Lovecraft's disdain for James may in part reflect the antagonism, rapidly widening when he wrote, between writers for popular markets and so-called literary writers. But if there is

2. There are also of course important omissions. Lovecraft writes of William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*:

The picture of a night-black, dead planet, with the remains of the human race concentrated in a stupendously vast metal pyramid and besieged by monstrous, hybrid, and altogether unknown forces of the darkness, is something that no reader can ever forget. Shapes and entities of an altogether non-human and inconceivable sort—the prowlers of the black, man-forsaken, and unexplored world outside the pyramid—are *suggested* and *partly* described with ineffable potency; while the night-bound landscape with its chasms and slopes and dying volcanism takes on an almost sentient terror beneath the author's touch.

Midway through the book the central figure ventures outside the pyramid on a quest through death-haunted realms untrod by man for millions of years—and in his slow, minutely described day-by-day progress over unthinkable leagues of immemorial blackness there is a sense of cosmic alienage, breathless mystery, and terrified expectancy unrivalled in the whole range of literature.

an occasion for issuing this gathering of stories under this cover, it is in hope of contributing somewhat to the subversion of such a distinction. For the works here, long rightly prized by aficionados of horror literature and devotees of Lovecraft, alter our perception of literature and its possibilities. They provide a context, for example, in which James's hypertrophically subtle style may appear to be an efflorescence of the uncanny, and the compulsive, as much as it is an exercise in the high style. Lovecraft duly notes the connection between the weird tale and such varied literary productions as the French *conte cruel* and German *Hausmärchen*, while an affinity may also be seen to exist with Lautréamont and Rimbaud, as well as the surrealists. Or what about a link to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders*? Looking further forward yet, one may find a surprising something of Bierce in Borges (who admired Machen), of Chambers in William Burroughs, and of Shiel in Beckett.

The point of such comparisons is not to justify the writers included here by comparison to others anointed, however reluctantly in some cases, by literary powers-that-be, but simply to suggest that the weird story provides a vantage, certainly as central as any, from which to view the landscape, literary and otherwise, of our time. And as well as satisfying the appetite, the work here does raise some interesting critical issues. In the dark corridors and church basements of the Gothic, one discovers not only specters of primal fear, but the dressed-up, artificially stimulated corpse of feudalism capering in the arms of dubiously enlightened young ladies; here, in a variety of stories spanning the divide between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, stories of exploration, tourism, and invention, one sees a wavering reflection of the Victorian ethos of relentless expansion in that first era of globalization which Karl Polanyi dubbed "the great transformation" (itself a possible title for a further—or ongoing—tale of cosmic horror). Then, too, the sense that there is a secret at

the heart of things, as in "Seaton's Aunt," one that is the particular property of an inscrutably malign elite, continues to enjoy an actual relevance even as it feeds the nightmares of paranoids. For that matter "The Colour Out of Space" might be read as foretelling the poisoned environment of the contemporary world. Which is not to detect there, or anywhere in these pages, some agenda of *bien pensant* rectification and amelioration. One of the things that sets the tale of cosmic terror off from run-of-the-mill literary fiction is that, unnerving though it may be, it is happily devoid of moral reflection, much less a moral.

But no doubt the most important achievement of the weird tale is to have kept something, however mutant, of the mythological, in all its awestruck uncertainty and willful speculative farfetchedness, alive. And yet it is not just the strange doings recorded here that capture and hold the attention. In these stories of, among other things, impossible explorations, treacherous inventions, abortive communications, and inscrutable signs, language itself may be pushed towards a kind of impasse—in, for example, the blurtings and babblings of Machen's possessed girl or the maddening echo chamber of Shiel's "House of Sounds," in the way Lovecraft resorts to the barest, most abstract of nouns, "shape" or "thing," to evoke horror at its most inescapably imposing. The effect of both the mythmaking and the verbal invention may at times seem as nearly clumsy as wildly inspired, and yet that variability, and vulnerability, is crucial to the stories' character and art. Certainly it contributes to what must be the strangest and most memorable of their qualities: their weird compassion. Fear may be our "oldest and strongest emotion," but it emerges from these writers' tellings as something more than that, something bigger than us, and something that puts us in touch with bigger—unimaginably bigger—things. Fear is the cement and solvent of this and every world. Even the gods tremble. One thinks of

Melville's oddly tender aside in *Moby-Dick*, another extraordinary exploration of the depths:

Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

—D. THIN