

Introduction: Old and New Weird

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Rosa, the narrator of Robert Aickman's (2014, 42) short story "The Real Road to the Church," ponders the arbitrariness of our symbolic constructions and concludes: "Conventions are, indeed, all that shield us from the shivering void, though they often do so but poorly and desperately." Although Aickman preferred the term "strange stories" to describe his work (Straub quoted in Kelly 2014, vii), what we prefer to call weird fiction plays with the conventions of fiction to expose us to the "shivering void" and to reveal those conventions as poor and desperate attempts to ward off that void. In so doing, weird fiction generates its own distinctive conventions and its own generic form, but it remains an unstable construction. This unsettling transnational hybrid of science fiction, horror, and fantasy was born in the hothouse of late-Victorian and Edwardian low culture and reached maturity in the "pulp modernism" of H. P. Lovecraft (Sorensen 2010, 501–2). Since then it has led an appropriately discontinuous and mutant existence, tracing its path across cultural forms from pulp magazines to film and from film to the graphic novel and more recently becoming the object of critical attention and even canonization. In 2005 the Library of America published a volume of Lovecraft's (2005b) best fiction, and the voluminous collection *The Weird* (2011), edited by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, constitutes weird fiction as a sustained international tradition.

Although weird fiction is a profoundly hybrid form, central to attempts to define the weird as a genre has been its estrangement of our sense of reality. S. T. Joshi (1990, 118), a leading critic of the weird, has argued that crucial to

We would like to thank John Coulthart for providing the cover image for this issue.

Genre, Vol. 49, No. 2 July 2016

DOI 10.1215/00166928-3512285 © 2016 by University of Oklahoma

weird fiction is its capacity for the “refashioning of the reader’s view of the world.” Carl Freedman (2013, 14) has argued that weird fiction is “fundamentally *inflationary* in tendency,” aiming “to suggest reality to be richer, larger, stranger, more complex, more surprising—and indeed, ‘weirder’—than common sense would suppose.” Nevertheless we should note that weird fiction, as Aickman suggests, can also pursue what Samuel Beckett called the way of “impoverishment” (quoted in Knowlson 1996, 352), reducing our world to a “shivering void.” China Miéville (2009, 510), himself a significant practitioner and critic of weird fiction, stresses the origin of the weird in the experience of “awe, and its undermining of the quotidian.” The Russian formalists argued that such “estrangement” (*ostranenie*) was the defining feature of poetic or literary language in general (Shklovsky 1965), and so weird fiction would appear to be a hyperbolic instance of the literary, which is ironic considering it has often been treated as a subliterary phenomenon of “bad taste” and “bad art” (Wilson 1950, 288). Indeed, mainstream literary criticism has tended to view weird fiction as a literature of ungainly linguistic excess ranging from the fin de siècle floridity of Robert W. Chambers through William Hope Hodgson’s awkward grammatical pseudo-archaisms to Lovecraft’s convoluted rhetoric of unrepresentability.

The very generality of these definitions, as those proposing them demonstrate, requires development through close attention to the material and generic diversity of the weird. To do so we propose and will develop here an initial periodization of the “Old Weird” and the “New Weird.” The Old Weird can be dated between 1880 and 1940, and the term is explicitly articulated with the founding of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in March 1923. Mark McGurl (2012, 542) has remarked on the appropriateness of this pulp origin, with “the *pulpiness* of their original material substrate figuring the rank, rotting mess into which the dignity of even the most acid-free human structures can be expected to collapse.” Lovecraft (1971, 296), as both critic and writer, explicitly adopted, defended, and defined the weird tale as an instance of “*non-supernatural cosmic art*” in his writing of the 1920s. Lovecraft both defined a previous canon of weird fiction, in writers like Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, and Algernon Blackwood, and stimulated a number of younger writers to engage with the weird, including Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, C. L. Moore, and Robert Bloch.

The New Weird, a term M. John Harrison coined in 2003 (Davies 2010, 6), emerged comparatively recently and was established primarily with the fiction and criticism of Miéville. We can, however, trace the New Weird back fur-

ther to the 1980s fiction of Clive Barker and especially Thomas Ligotti. Ligotti succeeded in avoiding the pastiche and repetition that had tended to dominate post-Lovecraftian weird fiction and formulated a new and desolate conception of a fundamentally chaotic universe. This ability to rework Lovecraft beyond the limits of homage is also observable in Michel Houellebecq, Brian Evenson, and other writers of New Weird. Therefore we could define the New Weird as a period from the 1980s to the present that gained its most explicit articulation in the 2000s. While this work often involved nonmainstream publication, we can also see a shift toward more mainstream publishing and, in the work of Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer, away from the short story or novella format preferred by the Old Weird writers to the novel form.

These periodizations are initial points of orientation, and our interest is not in solidifying a canon of the weird but rather in probing the discontinuous and mutational form of the “weird archive” with “its tendency to grow post-humously” (Sorensen 2010, 518). This involves attention to the weird archive as a site of new entanglements and destabilizations of the distinction between high and low culture, the literary and the nonliterary, modernism and postmodernism. It also involves an attention to this archive as a site of generic formation and a site of politics, which exists in continuity but also in rupture between these two moments of the Old Weird and the New Weird. This engages questions of how weird fiction relates to the cultural formations that define its historical emergence and development, both large-scale ones like imperialism, fascism, communism, and Fordism/post-Fordism and smaller-scale ones like the professionalization of journalism and literary criticism. What follows is a necessarily selective initial analysis of the Old Weird, the transitional period, and the New Weird to develop the framework of this special issue.

The Lovecraft Event

Lovecraft’s fiction and criticism constitute an event in the sense of founding the weird and allowing us to grasp the weird as a new generic category. In 1927 Lovecraft wrote his influential essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” which both gave his new definition of the weird and, in a retroactive reading, constituted a weird canon. For Lovecraft (2005a, 107):

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breath-

less 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 the daemons of unplumbed space.

Lovecraft's reading of the tradition allowed him to tease out the elements that constituted weird fiction and to distinguish it from the gothic, with its "secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule."

Jorge Luis Borges (1960, 236) notes, in relation to Franz Kafka, how we can identify Kafkaesque moments in writers before him, "but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality." Borges continues: "The fact is every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (236). Borges himself later wrote a "Lovecraftian" story that he also dedicated to Lovecraft, "There Are More Things," published in *The Book of Sand* ([1975] 2001). In the afterword to that collection Borges (40) refers to Lovecraft as "an unwitting parodist of Poe" and to his own effort at pastiche as "lamentable." In the case of Lovecraft—who is also one of the few writers to be adjectivized with "Lovecraftian"—this modification of the past is carried out *consciously*. Lovecraft is able to come to terms with his own "anxiety of influence," especially, pace Borges, in relation to Edgar Allan Poe and Lord Dunsany. It was around the time of "Supernatural Horror in Literature" that Lovecraft began writing what many readers consider the "great texts," beginning with "The Call of Cthulhu" in 1926 and ending with *The Shadow out of Time* in 1934. In this way Lovecraft modified both the past and the future to create the weird.

Lovecraft's tales of "dread of outer, unknown forces" became identified with the "Cthulhu mythos": the suggestion that the earth was once ruled by monstrous alien beings and that these beings will rule the earth again. In his famous fictional book of "eldritch lore," the *Necronomicon*, Lovecraft (2002, 20) writes: "Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where Man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They reign again." In developing this form of the weird, Lovecraft drew on modern science and on modernism to craft a weird fiction that was "non-supernatural." Lovecraft, a keen amateur scientist and an antiquarian, creates an unlikely "bridging" between an idealized past and a traumatic modernity. In the process he figures a strange "median" position that is at once avant-garde and anterior to modernity.

In “The Call of Cthulhu” (written in 1926 and published in 1928), which we could consider Lovecraft’s (1999, 165–66) manifesto of the weird, he demonstrates this convergence of the currents of modern art and science with an ancestral horror, figured in the description of the home of the monstrous alien Cthulhu, the ancient and alien city of R’lyeh:

Without knowing what futurism is like, Johansen achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the city; for instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs. I mention this talk about *angles* because it suggests something Wilcox had told me of his awful dreams. He has said that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours.

In a key gesture Lovecraft translates the avant-garde forms of modernity—futurism and the mathematical advances of non-Euclidean geometry underlying relativity theory—into objects of horror.

Contrary to his image, which was deliberately self-fashioned, Lovecraft was not simply a reclusive antiquarian obsessed by a heavily idealized New England past. Lovecraft was familiar with the latest forms of science and art, although he generally presents these as traumatic disruptions of order. While Miéville (2009, 510) has noted that in the Old Weird “a disproportionate number of its writers have distinctly reactionary aims,” Lovecraft’s reactionary position remains integrated with a materialist and scientific worldview (Houellebecq 2005, 32). Alain Badiou (2009, 54), discussing the possibility of reactionary responses to revolutionary events, notes that “to resist the call of the new, it is still necessary to create arguments of resistance appropriate to the novelty itself. From this point of view, every reactive disposition is the contemporary of the present to which it reacts.” Lovecraft produces what Badiou calls a “reactionary novelty” (54). This materialist horror is certainly heavily implicated in Lovecraft’s racism. The “material” inscription of “race” in Lovecraft’s biological fantasy, his “nativist semiotics” and “eugenicist epistemology” (Hefner 2014, 657–61), is embodied in his alien beings and their “degenerate” followers.

Lovecraft’s disturbing novelty was not solitary. Instead, his articulation of the weird was explicitly intertextual and engaged with multiple “platforms” of the weird. In his youth Lovecraft was deeply involved in the amateur journalism movement, conducting his own development as a writer in this “weird university” (McGurl 2012, 542). Lovecraft is also renowned for his massive correspon-

dence, which considerably outweighs his published work. In this correspondence he supported and encouraged new writers of the weird, like Smith and Howard. Lovecraft also suggested story ideas and rewrote stories for aspiring writers and worked as a ghost writer, most famously for Harry Houdini. This network of writing also emerges in Lovecraft's writing with his creation of fictional works of occult writing, like the *Necronomicon*, which are acts of what Leif Sorensen (2010, 507) calls "pseudobiblia." Sorensen notes how Lovecraft encouraged a "weird archive" (507) through sharing both these texts and the Cthulhu mythos as a device with other writers.

While formed intertextually and in a network of cooperation, the singular form of Lovecraft's work seemed to stymie innovation and development. Generous in his own sharing of his fictional "universe," Lovecraft's influence often resulted in mere additions to or minor variations on his own practices that convey a surprising sense of formal and thematic limitation. While Lovecraft was the key figure in forming the Old Weird and giving it generic and temporal contours, his work also impeded the development of the possibilities of the weird. The result was a long disappearance of the weird as a generic category.

Weird Transitions

In 1939, two years after Lovecraft's death, August Derleth and Donald Wandrei founded Arkham House Publishers to preserve Lovecraft's work from pulpy disintegration and to give it some longevity by publishing it in hardback. Derleth had corresponded with Lovecraft and wrote works in the Lovecraftian tradition. Controversially, however, Derleth's addition to the Cthulhu mythos turned it away from Lovecraft's cosmic pessimism, materialism, and atheism and recast it in a more Christian framework as a conflict between cosmic evil, the Lovecraftian alien beings, and cosmic good, in the Elder Gods (Derleth 1998, 21). In a more interesting fashion, Derleth also integrated Lovecraft's fictional writings into his own stories as coded evidence for the reality of the Cthulhu mythos. Reading a Lovecraft story, one of Derleth's characters remarks that "this revealing story purporting to be only *fiction*, opens up a vista of undreamed horror, or age-old evil" (24). In this new level of intertextual reflexivity, Lovecraft's fictions become evidence for the truth of his own fictional mythos.

While Derleth's work was vital in preserving Lovecraft's writing, the tendency was already marked for the disappearance of the generic category of weird

fiction and its displacement by the more stable and established generic categories of science fiction and horror. In September 1954 *Weird Tales* ceased publication. It had always led a precarious financial existence and now faced competition from radio, television, comic books, and paperback fiction. Certainly this disappearance of self-identified weird fiction does not mean that it is impossible to identify moments of the weird in the absence of the term. This would be in the style of Lovecraft's own retroactive characterization of weird fiction, not so much "Lovecraft and his precursors" but "Lovecraft and his descendants." McGurl provides one elegant instance of this when he detects a Lovecraftian moment in the seeming opposite of the weird: high American minimalism. Rereading Raymond Carver's "I Could See the Smallest Things," McGurl (2012, 553) notes that this story of a woman woken by the sound of an open gate, going down into her yard and meeting a neighbor poisoning slugs, and then returning to bed having forgotten to close the gate involves the opening of a gate into the darkness and the presence of "those eldritch little contradictions of form, those slimy minions of Cthulhu who feed on the rose bushes next door." While this is a bravura reading, we can of course find many more directly Lovecraftian and weird moments in the period between the Old Weird and the New Weird.

Explicitly Lovecraftian fiction was often hampered by a crippling tendency to pastiche, which revealed how difficult it was to mimic Lovecraft. Instead, the weird is better found in writers who admit no such explicit debt. Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House* ([1959] 1984) effectively plays on the haunted house tradition through psychological horror but also in the embodied form of Hill House. The house has an evil "countenance," which is the result of "a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle" (34). This "material" moment of horror echoes Lovecraft's (1999, 167) "angle of masonry" in R'lyeh, "which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse." Also the avant-garde fiction of William Burroughs, another form of "pulp modernism," has retrospectively been claimed as "Lovecraft's true successor" compared to "the limp pastiches that have so often followed in Lovecraft's wake" (Coulthart 2006; see also Murphy 2009). A parallel case would be the British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard and the role his entropic fictions of psychic disintegration played in "new wave" science fiction and fantasy.

The proliferation of media platforms may have fatally wounded the pulps, but they were also sites for a proliferation of the weird. The weird now found hosts in a number of "fruiting bodies," to use the title of a Brian Lumley (1993) collection of horror stories. In the case of film, Julian Petley (2007, 36) has made

a similar argument: the most successful “Lovecraftian” works are not the direct adaptations of his fiction but those that inhabit the “Lovecraftian aura” of cosmic horror. This includes Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), with its monster and set design by H. R. Giger, and John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), with its polymorphic alien mimic designed by Rob Bottin. (Carpenter’s film is based on the novella “Who Goes There?” [1938 (2011)] by John W. Campbell Jr., which some critics consider to be an indirect sequel or at least an homage to Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* [1936]. Both tales were originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction*.) The early films of David Cronenberg, especially a work like *Shivers* (1975), also engage with body horror and the weird of disease processes. Cronenberg’s (1997, 82) sympathetic attitude to disease as a form of becoming was one of the points of transit into the New Weird.

In music the work of the British postpunk group The Fall referenced Lovecraft and M. R. James in what Mark Fisher (2006) has called their “pulp modernism,” and the British anarcho–death rock band Rudimentary Peni released an extended concept album, *Cacophony* (1987), that drew on and also criticized both Lovecraft’s life and his fiction. Comic books too formed willing hosts for the weird. In 1979 *Heavy Metal* (vol. 3, no. 6) published a special issue on Lovecraft, and Lovecraftian tropes appeared in works like Grant Morrison’s superhero parody *Zenith* (2014), in which the eponymous antihero combats the “many-angled ones” in the British comic *2000 AD* (prog. 535, 1987). Finally, one of the most important ways Lovecraft’s work was sustained was the publication of *The Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game (RPG) by Chaosium in 1981 (Houellebecq 2005, 24). In RPGs people play fictional characters in a universe organized by a game master who presents the various challenges and situations. *The Call of Cthulhu* is set in the 1920s in Lovecraft’s universe and uses innovative scenarios based on various clues that slowly reveal the real horror (the “onion skin” approach). It also uses a “sanity score,” an initial figure representing a character’s sanity that is eroded by contact with Lovecraft’s monstrous beings or with the occult knowledge necessary to understand them. True to Lovecraft’s fiction, the result is a gaming experience in which “success” is relative and a player’s character often ends up insane or dead.

It is evident that the construction of the weird in this period, roughly between the 1940s and the 1980s, is exactly that—a construction. Eclipsed by science fiction and horror, the weird goes under other names, appears marginally, and in the explicit continuations of Lovecraft’s work, in whatever media, is rarely innovative

or successful. As such this construction is vulnerable and subject to the criticism that it is a reactive genre defense that has no substantial identity. Certainly this is problematic, but the hybrid and “pulpy” origins of the weird speak to the difficulty of generic construction in general and of establishing a “definitive” canon for the weird. Miéville (2011, 1115) remarks: “This canon changes. Its edges are as protean, its membranes as permeable and oozing as the breaching biology of Lovecraft’s Dunwich Horror.” In this way the weird suggests the possible subversion or questioning of the “security” of genre, placing us in an uncomfortable and even weird position. Like Lovecraft’s own fiction, especially “The Call of Cthulhu,” we are left searching through equivocal signs and material objects to construct the narrative of the weird.

Black Celebration

The New Weird can be characterized as a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming. In contradiction to Lovecraft’s horror at the alien, influenced by his racism, the New Weird adopts a more radical politics that treats the alien, the hybrid, and the chaotic as subversions of the various normalizations of power and subjectivity. This is already evident in Cronenberg’s films, which explore disease as a site of becoming, for example, in his version of *The Fly* (1986). Barker’s fiction, usually identified with horror and then with fantasy, develops a relation to the monstrous through a transubstantiation and transfiguration of the human. In philosophy Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 1998), also use Lovecraft’s fiction, in particular his more mystical stories influenced by Lord Dunsany, as allegories of becoming and transformation.

Morrison’s short story “Lovecraft in Heaven” (1994) makes explicit the stakes of this reversal. This story concerns the dying Lovecraft, who embodies his cancer as a misogynist fear of what Barbara Creed (1993) calls the “monstrous-feminine.”¹ The story concludes with an exchange between Lovecraft and Professor George Angell from Lovecraft’s story “The Call of Cthulhu.” While the Lovecraft character regards the world of chaos as a nightmare, Angell replies, “Only if you fear it.” And what Lovecraft sees as hell, the nightmare world of his

1. In a letter to Willis Conover Jr. on August 29, 1936, Lovecraft (2015, 389) points out: “By the way—Cthulhu isn’t a *she* but a *he*. He’d feel deeply enraged if anyone regarded him as sissified!”

own fiction, is for Angell “quite the reverse” (Morrison 1994, 18). The narrative concludes when Angell “opens Lovecraft like a door” (18), a door beyond the perception of chaos as horror and into a perception of chaos as possibility. Morrison’s anarchist aesthetic disrupts Lovecraft’s reactionary fear of chaos, embracing the chaos and the richly archetypal resonances of Lovecraft’s antimythology.

While Lovecraft tended to represent the monstrous as a source of horror, his own fiction allows possibilities of reversal and subversion. In *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936) the protagonist is caught up in the “nightmare” of Innsmouth, whose inhabitants have interbred with the monstrous “Deep Ones” over the centuries. While this appears as another instance of Lovecraft’s (1999, 335) racist horror at miscegenation and “degeneracy,” the final revelation that his protagonist is a descendant of one of these unions and is in the process of becoming a Deep One leads to a strange monstrous becoming:

The tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them. I hear and do strange things in sleep, and awake with a kind of exaltation instead of terror. I do not believe I need to wait for the full change as most have waited. If I did, my father would probably shut me up in a sanitarium as my poor little cousin is shut up. Stupendous and unheard-of splendors await me below, and I shall seek them soon.

Similar passages appear in the conclusions of “The Outsider” (1926) and *At the Mountains of Madness*. Paul Buhle (1976, 127) even suggests that this “becoming” could be read as Lovecraft shattering the limits of the human and the possibilities of a new “species being.”

This kind of gesture requires the reversal of Lovecraft, but New Weird has developed this sensibility on its own terms. In Miéville’s Bas-Lag novels the “Remade” are those subject to monstrous physical changes, such as grafting new animal body parts in place of their human ones, as punishment for crimes. The Remade experience spasms of intense and violent self-loathing and form a biological underclass in the city of New Crobuzon. In the novel *Iron Council* (Miéville [2004] 2005) many of them join the revolution against the governing powers of New Crobuzon. Miéville’s sympathetic treatment of the suffering of the Remade obviously engages with embodied forms of racism and sexism and the “biologization” of class. Franco Moretti (1983, 87), discussing *Frankenstein*, notes that “inequality really does score itself into one’s skin, one’s eyes and one’s body.” This is another reversal of the weird, interrogating the new racisms, misogynies, and class violence that characterize the time of the “war on terror,” global financial crisis, and anthropogenic climate change.

While Miéville is an important writer of short fiction, his work has also been one sign of the transition of the weird into the novel form. This was already evident in the work of Barker and could be said to mark the New Weird with the “respectability” of the novel form, at least insofar as this is the dominant form of contemporary literary fiction. This should not be overstressed, as the New Weird also continues the form of small magazine publication and now, with the Internet, various e-zines and forums that replicate something of the Lovecraftian milieu of exchanges of letters, pulp magazines, and small-circulation fanzines.

If this form of New Weird prefers wonder to horror (though Miéville’s descriptions of the Remade are often terrifying), it is Ligotti who has pursued Lovecraftian horror to its end point. In Ligotti’s universe the various alien deities, like Tsalal or Nethescorial, are not so much embodied “monsters” as mere masks for the fundamental chaos and entropy of the universe. In this way they go beyond Lovecraft’s (1968, 156) “daemon-sultan” Azathoth, “that last amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemous and bubbles at the center of all infinity,” because there is *no center*. At the same time, humans are simply “natural-born puppets,” shams or masks that are also really only momentary extrusions of the chaos of the universe (Ligotti 2015, 186). Ligotti collapses the racist logic of Lovecraft’s materialism into a nihilism that saps all life of sense and meaning. Also Ligotti has continued to focus his energy on the form of the tale or short story, which perhaps also accounts for his cult status and his relatively slow emergence as a significant figure. This status was boosted by the use of his nihilist ideas in the first season of the TV series *True Detective* (2014), written by Nic Pizzolatto, which also drew significantly on the Old Weird mythology of Chambers.

The tension in the New Weird between the celebration of chaos and the logic of nihilism has also been evident in the significant philosophical reception and transmission of the weird. In the 1990s the British philosopher Nick Land (2011) and his associates in the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick used Lovecraftian mythology to develop an irrationalist and nihilist philosophy of inhuman becoming. In particular they developed the concept of “hyperstition” to refer to mythologies or concepts that could produce reality in a performative fashion. Lovecraft’s mythology, which had come to be treated as almost “real,” was a signature instance of hyperstition. In the 2000s the new movement of “speculative realism,” which engages with the notion of a reality beyond and before the existence of humans, has extensively used Lovecraft’s antihumanist fiction. There is a similar tension between those who pursue a nihil-

ist reading inspired by Ligotti, in which the “human” is a mere appearance of a neurological substrate (Trafford 2008), and those who see Lovecraft as giving access to a weird world of objects irreducible to humanity (Harman 2008). Graham Harman develops this second argument in his object-oriented ontology and in *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012). Eugene Thacker pursues the nihilist reading in his three-volume Horror of Philosophy series, comprising *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), *Starry Speculative Corpse* (2015a), and *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (2015b).

The intertextuality and hybridity of the weird, its linguistic excess, and its consistent antihumanism ought to mark it as a signature postmodern genre. The characteristics we have enumerated up to this point would seem to resonate particularly strongly with Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984, 81) definition in his well-known distinction between modern and postmodern:

Modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. . . . The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

Like postmodern art and literature, the weird disturbs readers, genres, and history by both what it says and how it says it. Nevertheless, the weird does not disturb by means of the formal strategies that have become conventional in the criticism of postmodern aesthetics, such as proliferating self-reflexivity and blank parody.

In place of *postmodernism*, then, we have adopted the term *pulp modernism* to refer to the emergence of the weird in a fraught dialogue with modernism and also to suggest that contemporary articulations of the weird rely on a complex range of influences and materials that do not sit comfortably in the category of the “postmodern.” Weird fiction’s engagement with both the epistemological and the ontological and its estrangement of *our* world unsettle the terms that have been used, for example, by Brian McHale (1989), to delineate postmodern fiction as an ontological fiction of hybrid worlds. Shirley Jackson ([1959] 1984, 3) begins *The Haunting of Hill House* with the well-known line “No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality.” Rather than the ontological creation of an alternate reality, weird fiction probes this “absolute reality,” Aickman’s “shivering void.” The “postmodern” ultimately seems too

safe a literary category, still too freighted with cultural value to assess the weird, which retains its “pulpy” origin in eroding or even corrupting the “literary” in “literary fiction.”

Weird Angles

This issue aims to map the forms and shifts of the “weird archive” across the Old Weird, the New Weird, and the transition between the two, so it is organized according to the periodization we have just defined. Thus we begin with two articles focused on the Old Weird that examine in more detail the work of Lovecraft and what we have called “the Lovecraft event.” Fiona Price examines Lovecraft’s often-mentioned but rarely analyzed debts to gothic writers like Horace Walpole, Walter Scott, and William Godwin, who provide not only effective tropes of ancestral terror but also a contradictory logic for the defense of racial and class priorities that simultaneously grounds and undermines his social and political conservatism. Lovecraft appeals to the notion of a primordial “Anglo-Saxon liberty” to resolve the “constitutional anxiety” that arises from his fears that race mixing will lead to the decline and fall of Anglo-American civilization, but that liberty is inherently ambivalent. It offers as compelling a rationale for revolutionary social change as it does for antipopulist political reaction. Timothy S. Murphy draws out the antipopulist and antinationalist implications of Lovecraft’s cosmic antihumanism by tracing how his fiction deploys forms of representational inscription—maps, mural sculptures, and writing—to undermine the conceptual and historical basis of the nation-state and its founding people and thereby to delegitimize the international political order and the disciplinary logic of world literature that reflects it, both of which are predicated on the dialectical transcendence of nationalist traditions.

Joe Kennedy’s contribution and an interview with Miéville construct an interpretive bridge between Lovecraft’s genre-defining manifestation of the Old Weird and the discussions of important but underappreciated New Weird texts that follow. Kennedy identifies at the core of the British writer William Sansom’s fiction an irresolvable suspension between epistemological or psychological interpretation, on the one hand, and ontological or metaphysical interpretation, on the other, a suspension that compels the reader to recognize that the incompleteness and inadequacy of those opposed readings are constitutive elements of the weird that render it irreducible to either modernism or postmodernism as those terms

are normally defined. Instead, weird fiction in general and Sansom's work in particular stage the "haemorrhage" of modernist poetics without achieving the new forms of stabilization characteristic of literary postmodernism. In a wide-ranging interview the well-known New Weird novelist and critic Miéville offers an illuminating account of weird fiction's liminal status as a countertradition that problematizes the too-easy critical divisions between science fiction, fantasy, and horror. In doing so, which is to say in driving rationalist positivism toward antihumanist nihilism, the weird generates not only a new teratology focused on the tentacle but also the possibility of an unexpected way out of the postmodern impasse of proliferating irony and complacent self-reflexivity.

The New Weird has been less widely studied than the Old, particularly Lovecraft, and the final pair of contributions to this issue seeks to redress that imbalance. Steven Shaviro draws attention to the Detroit writer Kathe Koja's 1991 novel *The Cipher* to demonstrate how her systematic omission of the conventional themes and formal elements of weird fiction results in an intensified interrogation of the genre's characteristic affects and their visceral embodiments. Such affects, Shaviro argues, are all that remain of the individual human subject under neoliberalism, and the ceaseless, directionless transformations wrought on Koja's characters by their experimentation with the incomprehensible "Funhole" named in the book's title result in no integration of identity or restoration of agency, no redemptive insight, no transcendence of any kind. Benjamin Noys takes up the highly controversial topic of Savoy Books' multimedia character Lord Horror, whose ongoing exploits in both print and graphic novels have been banned for obscenity, the most severe punishment liberal democracy can devise for literature. Through a meticulous analysis of the writer David Britton's, the editor Michael Butterworth's, and the artist John Coulthart's direct engagement with the most disturbing elements of the Old Weird, namely, the virulent racism and flirtation with fascism that it shares with major figures of mainstream literary modernism like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Noys shows how Savoy's work challenges both the normalization and the redemption of the weird presently under way in New Weird writing and the broader culture's complacency regarding the survival and spread of racism and fascism following the apparent defeat of Nazism in 1945. Savoy's version of the weird does not intend to claim a safe, stable, respectable place among contemporary genres but rather to infect and unsettle them, to dissolve the boundaries separating them and produce a condition of generalized weird commensurate with the inherited social toxicity that the present continues to disavow.

The ubiquity and ambivalence of the unbounded weird constitute the point of departure for this special issue, which aims to provide critical tools to help us engage its contagiously protean manifestations. In the words of Lovecraft's (2002, 220–21) invented *Necronomicon*: "The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold the hand that smites. . . . Their hand is at your throats, yet ye see Them not; and Their habitation is even one with your guarded threshold." Perhaps Philip K. Dick (1964, 219), a worthy successor to Lovecraft in the field of pulp modernism, had something like the weird in mind when he wrote of an unsettlingly alien force that is now "out in the open, ranging in every direction. It looks into our eyes; and it looks *out* of our eyes."

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