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Sean Moreland (ed.),
NEW DIRECTIONS
IN SUPERNATURAL
HORROR LITERATURE:
THE CRITICAL INFLUENCE
OF H. P. LOVECRAFT

Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

This collection of thirteen chapters takes as its starting point H. P. Lovecraft's essay of 1927, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (*SHL*), in which the author most axiomatically sets out his paradigms of "cosmic horror" and "weird fiction," models with a vast (if selective) historical antecedence and a tentacular reach into the present of the horror genre, and its likely future. Divided into three sections, the volume focuses primarily on Lovecraft's own reading practices and his ungainsayable, yet controversial, influence on contemporary understandings of the weird.

As John Glover puts it in his contribution to the collection, *SHL* "encapsulates the views that Lovecraft held which dictated the terms of weird fiction's reception for more than half a century."² As anyone even cursorily acquainted with Lovecraft's work will know, a great many of said views amount to a complex of hatreds whose breadth is remarkable, comprising just about every imaginable kind of racism as well as homophobia and misogyny, and whose putative

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2 John Glover, "Reception Claims in Supernatural Horror in Literature and the Course of Weird Fiction," in Sean Moreland, ed., *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature: The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 172.

common root is to be found, as Gina Wisker notes here, in Lovecraft's obsession with "miscegenation."³ However, as Michel Houellebecq argues in his early essay *H. P. Lovecraft, contre le monde, contre la vie* (1991), Lovecraft's prejudice is authentic not only in how it grew to inform the working of his mind, but in terms of being germane to his written output. Houellebecq terms his racism "une authentique névrose raciale," an all-consuming "haine, brutale, de l'animal pris au piège," as distinct from the harbouring of particular racist views commonly found among "l'ancienne bourgeoisie, protestante et puritaine, de la Nouvelle-Angleterre."⁴ Much as one might like to imagine a Lovecraftian mode freed from this hatred, the latter is the essential component of that mixture of fascination, fear and revulsion which comprises Lovecraft's distinctive construal of horror.

To this volume's credit, its contributors are able to show how and where Lovecraft's prejudices were productive, in the sense of contributing to an idiosyncratic theory of horror literature. Sharon Packer's essay, about Lovecraft's ambivalent engagement in *SHL* with Jewish literary traditions, finds a Lovecraft who is intelligent enough to appreciate S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* and Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* at a time (before Gershom Scholem) of general Western ignorance about Jewish mysticism, but will grant a mere half page of his hundred-page essay to the Jewish weird tradition. Similarly, as both Vivian Ralickas and Brian Johnson show, Lovecraft's regard both for Oscar Wilde's writing and for many of his decadent characteristics cannot go without an overdetermined repudiation of Wilde's homosexuality. Throughout, the volume returns to Lovecraft's unabashed aesthetic and social elitism as a paradoxical figure which explains, to an extent, the simultaneous rapacious incorporation and rejection which typifies Lovecraft's engagement with weird fiction's antecedents. Sustained by a belief in his own and his readers' greater than ordinary perceptual sensitivity, but hamstrung by the unrefined level of sensitivity (indeed, the insensitivity) this belief betrays, Lovecraftian elitism has an obstinately delusional quality.

The challenge when approaching Lovecraft's indelible influence is how to square his works' insistence on the subjective and experiential infinitude implied by the "bizarre," as Michael Cisco terms it here—which intimates that apprehensible reality is just a fragment of what might truly be there—with the narrow-mindedness Lovecraft advertised in himself, which is unpacked by Ralickas as a partial Dandyism, by Wisker as a partial Puritanism, and by Johnson as a constitutively "queer" action of setting oneself apart, both in literary and self-presentational terms. Lovecraft's work, as Johnson argues, both affirms, and reveals the "precarity" of the "heterosexual white male subject

3 Gina Wisker, "Speaking the Unspeakable: Women, Sex, and the Dismorphmythic in Lovecraft, Angela Carter, Caitlín R. Kiernan, and Beyond," in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*, 212.

4 Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* (Éditions du Rocher, 1999), 127–29.

position.”⁵ Sean Moreland in this volume sees this precarity as a recuperation of a pre-Romantic, Lucretian “entropic sublime,”⁶ whose consolation, as much as the fear it inspires, lies in its basic understanding of the human as a being whose microscopic significance means it may always undergo extraordinary changes over which it can never hope to exert control. The impasse with Lovecraft is that the believed-in capacity for understanding this is derived from a hierarchization of human society—a procedure whose self-importance departs from its own logic of an enlarged understanding, and whose stupidity departs from any logic whatsoever.

Despite the impressive thematic and interpretive diversity of the collection, a number of the essays here do share many of the same foci in terms of the content of Lovecraft’s essay, to the point that the text under study is frequently reduced to his well-known formulations of “dread” and the “fear of the unknown.” S. T. Joshi’s and Helen Marshall’s contributions are among those which profitably explore other aspects of *SHL*. They address, respectively, the detail of Lovecraft’s interest, as it waxed and waned, in his four “modern masters” of weird writing (Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood and M. R. James); and the resource *SHL* offers for medievalist scholars who tend to pass over the horror of texts such as *The Prick of Conscience*, as though their eventual moral didacticism renders this unimportant.

The volume is relatively broad in its analysis of Lovecraft’s literary and cinematic legatees, taking in texts by Angela Carter, Caitlín R. Kiernan, Stephen King and Thomas Ligotti, important recent anthologies such as Ann and Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Weird* (2012) and Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles’s *She Walks in Shadows* (2015), and movies as varied as *Angel Heart* (1987), *Lake Mungo* (2008) and *The Thing* (1982). However, it more or less entirely passes over engagements with Lovecraft in other media, such as Hidetaka Miyazaki’s *Bloodborne* (2015)—a masterful realization of cosmic horror in interactive form. As Brian R. Hauser notes in the volume, Lovecraft in *SHL* nowhere circumscribes the narrative media he has in mind for the delivery of weird fiction.

At the end of the collection, Brian Johnson contends that *SHL* may best be read as a “critical-historical fantasy,”⁷ which casts the history of literary horror as a kind of propaedeutic to Lovecraft’s own work, with Lovecraft himself the legitimate heir and consolidating force of the weird tradition. It is hard to doubt this, and really it would be more surprising if it were not true. *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature* brings into focus the strange shadows cast by Lovecraft’s grapples with the history of horror, which remain

5 Brian Johnson, “Paranoia, Panic, and the Queer Weird,” in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*, 261.

6 Sean Moreland, “The Birth of Cosmic Horror from the S(ub)lime of Lucretius,” in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*, 36.

7 Johnson, “Paranoia, Panic, and the Queer Weird,” 273.

decisive for the genre's present. It will be a valuable resource for scholars working in the field of weird studies more broadly, offering as it does diverse and persuasive perspectives on the field's titanic and vexatious progenitor. □

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