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THE WEIRD AS CONTINGENCY AND FATE IN THE EMPTY SPACE TRILOGY

ABSTRACT

The paper examines how in his Empty Space trilogy, M. John Harrison uses weird fiction to represent the failure of both human epistemology and agency in dealing with the new and the unthinkable. The unthinkable, according to Eugene Thacker, is the space outside the human, the world-without-us. Following Timothy Morton, the Kefahuchi Tract, an apparently empty space in the universe where weird phenomena distort the rules of physics, is presented in this study as a hyperobject that distorts reality beyond human comprehension. The characters in the trilogy have to accept the contingency, in the sense expressed by Quentin Meillassoux, not only of the universe

around them, of which they are only a part, but of their own Fate, which is as meaningless as a throwing of dice. Out of the frustration of his characters at the discovery of their irrelevance in the face of the Tract, Harrison pushes them to their limits until some of them manage to understand that openness to the Other and acceptance of the irremediable uncertainty of everything are the only possible ethical attitudes to survive in a world of constant change.

KEY WORDS: the weird, contingency, fate, Empty Space trilogy, M. John Harrison

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INTRODUCTION

The Empty Space trilogy, comprised of *Light* (2002), *Nova Swing* (2006) and *Empty Space: a Haunting* (2012) represents for M. John Harrison a return to science fiction after the publication of more realistic novels such as *Climbers* (1989) or *The Course of the Heart* (1992), a novel that mixes realism and mysticism. This return to science fiction, however, presents weird undertones that go back and have traversed Harrison's work since his Viriconium novels (1971–1985). The presence of the weird in the trilogy allows Harrison to explore the limits of human epistemology and human agency through the conundrum represented by the Kefahuchi Tract. The Tract is “a singularity without an event horizon,”² an area in deep space showing spacetime anomalous phenomena, which the instruments of human science cannot explain.

In order to understand this ‘weirdness’ of the Kefahuchi Tract, it is necessary to outline the concept of the weird, which in this paper will take on three main aspects: wrongness, meaninglessness and Fate. According to Mark Fisher, the weird marks the introduction of wrongness into reality: “The sense of *wrongness* associated with the weird—the conviction that *this does not belong*—is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new.”³ If this new opposed to the familiar is present, however, “then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid.”⁴ This means that human epistemology, reliant as it is nowadays mostly on science, is inadequate and its very validity needs to be put into question. This sense of wrongness in the presence of the weird is accompanied in the trilogy, following Christina Scholz's argument, by a sense of meaninglessness: “the characters in Weird fiction come to realise that the universe doesn't make sense, that existence is meaningless.”⁵ The weird questions not only the validity of epistemology as a theory of knowledge, but also the idea that science can help give meaning both to individual lives and to human existence in general.

The Kefahuchi Tract forces human knowledge into encountering the nonhuman, which Eugene Thacker refers to as the “horror of philosophy,” horror not only at the discovery of the limits of human thought, but at the realisation that there is a world completely outside of it: “Horror is about the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable. In so far as it deals with this limit of thought, encapsulated in the phrase of the world-without-us, horror is ‘philosophical’.”⁶ The “world-without-us” exists beyond correlationism, which Quentin Meillassoux defines as the belief that we can

² M. John Harrison, *Light* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 230.

³ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 95-96. All references for this edition are Kindle Locations.

⁴ Fisher, 109-10.

⁵ Christina Scholz, “Quantum fiction! – M. John Harrison's Empty Space trilogy and Weird theory.” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1152.

⁶ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. 1* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 9.

only know objects in correlation to human thought:⁷ any object beyond human understanding is considered as weird. From Meillassoux comes another concept, which helps us understand how the laws of nature in the Tract are not fixed but can change at any time, and that is the concept of contingency, which he explains as follows: “for the truth is that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise, and this applies as much to the laws that govern the world as to the things of the world.”⁸ Human epistemology can attend to what is beyond human thought only after recognizing the need for constant adaptation to the ever changing laws of physics.

The limits of human knowledge entail limits to the human ability to control and manipulate the Tract and its objects. Incapable of controlling an environment they mean to explore, most of the characters come to re-evaluate the reality of their past experiences and, consequently, their own identities. The limitations of human agency extend, for Harrison’s characters, to the impossibility to control a Fate that is ultimately contingent. Fate is, according to Fisher, another aspect of the weird: “The concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?”⁹ If the weird marks the presence of something seemingly out of place/time, the eerie, in contrast, suggests the feeling of a presence when there should be nothing and/or of an absence where there should be a presence.¹⁰ In other words, Fate questions human agency both by distorting causality so that human actions rarely have the expected effect; but also because of the presence/absence of some entity weaving human Fate, which in the Empty Space Trilogy assumes different shapes, as we shall see, but always associated with the causality of the throw of dice. Through the analysis of the Empty Space Trilogy in the pages that follow, we will firstly explore the ramifications of the discovery of the limits of human epistemology in relation to a weird object humans cannot possess; secondly, we will examine how the impossibility for humans to control their individual Fate leads them from the horror of the world-without-us to becoming themselves Other-than-human.

⁷ “By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 5.

⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 53.

⁹ Fisher, 88-90.

¹⁰ “*Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?*” Fisher, 90-91. Emphasis in the original.

CONTINGENCY AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Contingency is the essence of the Kefahuchi Tract, manifested in its constantly changing physics. Human science has to continuously adapt, but often it cannot keep up and has to admit its incapacity to acquire knowledge of the outside object. The Tract cannot be ‘mapped out,’ thought in advance and thus predicted, because its physics changes constantly or, as detective Aschemann, in charge of policing the site in Saudade says, it is wrong: “‘Look at it, so raw and meaningless! The wrong physics, they say, loose in the universe. Do you understand that? I don’t.’”¹¹ Because the weird is beyond human thought, trying to understand the unthinkable is the challenge most of Harrison’s characters face. Fisher suggests that our attraction for the weird has “to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience.”¹² In other words, we are attracted by the new, by that which is not yet part of our knowledge, the object before it undergoes its subjection to human thought and stops being weird. Due to its contingency, however, the Kefahuchi Tract remains ineluctably unknown and, for this reason, beyond human control. It represents, on the contrary, the human longing for the constantly new and what cannot be possessed: “It was the point where the known met the unknowable, the mirror of desire.”¹³ The weird embodies the unattainability of human desire for what we do not know, walking along the limits of correlationalism: where knowledge and human thought fail, human desire continues. Or as Fred Botting suggests: “the Tract not only constitutes the limit of knowledge, it marks out new horizons of fascination and desire.”¹⁴

One way to explain why the Tract is a contingent and unknowable object is to consider it as a hyperobject according to Timothy Morton’s definition: “A hyperobject is a thing so vast in both temporal and spatial terms that we can only see slices of it at a time; hyperobjects come in and out of phase with human time; they end up ‘contaminating’ everything, if we find ourselves inside them (I call this phenomenon viscosity).”¹⁵ The Kefahuchi Tract represents a challenge to human epistemology as a hyperobject because it is beyond the capacity of human science to discern something so vast that it is irremediably outside and weird. The meaning of “hyper-” indicates excess, that is, the hyperobject stands for everything beyond human thought. Morton characterises hyperobjects as viscous, molten, nonlocal, phased and interobjective. They are viscous because they attach to other objects inexorably; molten, because they are so vast that even spacetime liquefies, more contingent than fixed and

¹¹ M. John Harrison, *Nova Swing* (London: Gollancz, 2006), 56.

¹² Fisher, 32-33.

¹³ M. John Harrison, *Empty Space: a Haunting* (London: Gollancz, 2013), 141.

¹⁴ Fred Botting, “Flutter, Fracture and Froth Event, Object and Act of Metaphor in M. John Harrison.” In *M. John Harrison: Critical Essays*, 229-48, ed. Rhys Williams (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2019), 236.

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Penguin, 2018), 129.

consistent; nonlocal, because their totality extends beyond any local manifestation in space and time; phased, because they inhabit more than one dimension; finally, they are interobjective, because they are made of the interactions between objects, they are never one visible object.¹⁶

A perfect example to explore the Tract as hyperobject is presented by the Aleph, also known as Pearlant labyrinth, an experiment that some ancient species set up in order to try and understand the workings of the Tract, which humans discovered and are now studying. It is so viscous that, as we will later see, it attaches itself to Anna, ex-wife of Michael Kearney, one of the first scientists to experiment on the drives that would allow the exploration of the Tract, to her cat, and detective Aschemann's former assistant, with all the three of them becoming one with the Pearlant. Furthermore, as Rig Gaines, member of the governmental group including mostly scientists who are studying the labyrinth, explains: "It wasn't so much what you might find round the next corner,' Gaines said, 'as that you were round the next corner before you knew it was there.' As a result—at the start, anyway—the maze had seemed more like a condition than a system. Its objects had seemed abstract."¹⁷ The labyrinth does not follow a system, and by this Rig seems to imply that it is physics itself that fails as a system, which explains why the objects found in the Aleph become abstract or, in other words, uprooted from any fixed physical law. The maze is a condition in which the observer finds herself, where she can reach her destination without even realising she is there already.¹⁸ As Rig explains, there is no actual centre: "Worse, the labyrinth, clearly some kind of experiment in itself, had been constructed with such exquisite fractality that the term 'centre' could only ever be a distraction."¹⁹ The experience of the hyperobject named Pearlant Labyrinth is so complex—no system, no centre—that disorientation is the normal reaction an explorer would have to an ever changing environment. The fractality of the Aleph is an element of the nonlocality of the Tract, the fact that the labyrinth is a part of the Tract but, at the same time, it does not exhaust its totality: like a fractal indeed, it has the same characteristics of the Kefahuchi Tract at a smaller scale, but in its locality it is only a part of a whole without a central location or 'centre.'

One of the theories about the Pearlant labyrinth is in fact that it is an artefact meant to contain a piece of the Tract. It is studied in the hope it may reveal something about the singularity, but the problem is its multidimensionality, its quantum state:

¹⁶ For a detailed overview of hyperobjects refer to Morton's detailed analysis in Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 259.

¹⁸ Harrison's allusion to Jorge Luis Borges's 1945 story by the same is evident. However, whereas in Borges' story the Aleph is spatial, that is, a point in space in which an observer can see every other point in space, the Aleph in *Empty Space* is also temporal, especially when, as we will later see, it changes into the feminine entity Pearlant, a point in time in which all other points in time can be observed. See Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁹ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 142.

“‘You see it like that, as a series of repetitions,’ [Gaines] said, ‘because we’re catching it in the Planck time. You can’t see it for longer because it’s already in its own future, already something different. The pause between images is lag, as the instrument tracks it quantum to quantum.’”²⁰ Irregular spacetime, Planck time done quantum by quantum are all different “phased” dimensions allowed by the Tract. The human capacity to study and acquire knowledge out of a hyperobject like the Tract is impaired by the limited number of dimensions human science can perceive. The Pearlant is an example of the interobjectivity of the Tract, which means that it is made manifest by the interactions of its objects, including human beings such as Anna and the assistant.²¹

The contingency of the hyperobject is a challenge to epistemology because it changes the very laws of human physics, to the point that anything goes: “Every race they met on their way through the Core had a star drive based on a different theory. All those theories worked, even when they ruled out one another’s basic assumptions. You could travel between the stars, it began to seem, by assuming anything.”²² In a situation where every theory is valid at a certain time and space absolute knowledge is impossible:²³ the object remains irremediably Other and weird for humans. This is a case of what Meillassoux calls an extro-science fiction type-2 world: “By extra-science worlds we mean worlds where, *in principle, experimental science is impossible* and not unknown *in fact*.”²⁴ In a world in which science were completely and constantly contingent, which means that experiments would give constantly different results and thus there would be no causal explanation for events, it would be impossible to have an experience and thereby create a consciousness, because there would be no sense of temporal or spatial continuity or coherence. This is another way to think of correlationalism: an object cannot be known because we cannot experience it, thus triggering the “thought of the unthinkable”²⁵ Thacker argues about, the horror at the discovery of the existence of a world outside consciousness that cannot be witnessed by humans.

Meillassoux, however, suggests that consciousness would be able to survive in a world where the laws of nature do not change so fast or so often that experience does not have time to form consciousness: “Why not accept what logic (the principle of non-contradiction) and experience (present or past) tell us in concert, namely that nothing rules out that the actual world rests on a shifting terrain which could one day

²⁰ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 80-81.

²¹ We will examine this trinity later in more details.

²² Harrison, *Light*, 135-36.

²³ The ‘physics’ of the Kefahuchi Tract does not appear to present a similar situation as modern physics that is trying for instance to assimilate the contradiction of Einstein’s relativity and quantum theory through the String Theory. Harrison seems to suggest that there is no contradiction between theories because the contingency of the Tract means that one theory is valid at a time and in a given space.

²⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, trans. Alyosha Edlebi (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 5.

²⁵ Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 9.

yield under our feet?”²⁶ According to the principle of non-contradiction, “[a]n entity is contradictory only if it is at the same time, and according to the same aspect, *a* and *non-a*.”²⁷ If these two states happen at different times, logic suggests that such a world is possible. In type-2 worlds, contingency is not constant, but the laws change often enough for science to be ineffective: “Type-2 worlds: these are the worlds whose irregularity is sufficient to abolish science, but not consciousness. They are thus genuine extro-science worlds.”²⁸ In these worlds, logic, based on the principle of non-contradiction, and experience, which creates a unitary consciousness when given enough time, allow humanity to survive the inadequacy of epistemology at turning the weird object into an object of correlation.

Giorgio Agamben examines the contrasting relationship between knowledge and experience concluding that science has nowadays taken the place of experience in formulating human knowledge. The tools of science appear more accurate than fallible experience: microscopes, for instance, are external to the individual body, thus more objective and precise, and can see dimensions that the human eye cannot perceive.²⁹ The contingency of the Kefahuchi Tract, however, provides a situation where it is science that is not reliable, thus leaving all authority to the experience of consciousness, that is, the conscious perceptions in time and space of an individual. The scientist Case shows his frustration at the limits of the tools of human science in the observation of the woman/cat entity that has appeared in the Aleph and which refers to herself throughout the novel as Pearlant: “It would be wise to remember that the falling woman was neither falling nor a woman. It was a monster, heavily misrepresented from the data. It was the nearest guess the instruments could make about what was actually going on.”³⁰ There are more dimensions to the constantly phased object Pearlant, constantly moving between woman and cat, than what science can see, in an object that is at the border of even a type-2 world because it changes too often and too quickly for human consciousness to form an experience.

Agamben concludes his analysis by stating that: “experience has its necessary correlation not in knowledge but in authority—that is to say, the power of words and narration.”³¹ Experience has lost its epistemological power in appropriating the outside (substituted by science), but it has replaced it with narration or more precisely in our case, with extro-science fiction worlds beyond science. In this light, the words of Emil Bonaventure about the new explorers of the Saudade site, “‘They never heard of contingency,’ he said, ‘that’s the fact of it,’”³² acquire power through the authority of his experience as an explorer or *entradista* of the event site: he cannot explain what happens there, but he can talk about it. Human epistemology, then, may need to

²⁶ Meillassoux, *Extro-Science Fiction*, 41.

²⁷ Meillassoux, *Extro-Science Fiction*, 9.

²⁸ Meillassoux, *Extro-Science Fiction*, 36.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 19-20.

³⁰ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 268.

³¹ Agamben, 16.

³² Harrison, *Nova Swing*, 63.

concede that the Kefahuchi Tract is beyond human knowledge, which does not merely imply that the hyperobject is irremediably outside the human, but also that the human perspective, according to which the weird object did not belong, has become irrelevant. Just before she dies following her visitation of an event beyond her comprehension, Irene the Mona tells her partner Antoyne: “‘The universe isn’t what we think.’ She reached out a soft hand to Liv Hula, insisting, ‘Nothing here was made for us!’”³³ This is Thacker’s world-without-us, where humans are not at the centre, but a part of the whole, an object amongst others, in what Morton defines as the interobjectivity of the hyperobject.

Liv, the pilot of the ship *Nova Swing*, enters the hold a few pages after Irene’s death and witnesses a confusing scene in which Ed Chianese, a pilot recently returned from inside the Kefahuchi Tract, appears to be having some possibly sexual but definitely physical intercourse with the being known as Sandra Shen, also known as the Shrandar, one of the aliens, who have explored the Tract before humans. Liv is not sure of what she is seeing: “You couldn’t be sure what was happening between them, but white motes the size of clothes moths seemed to be pouring out of her polished little ivory-colored vulva.”³⁴ Liv’s reaction is not only revulsion at the scene that is beyond human understanding, but she also refuses to fully experience the event: “Liv turned and ran before she could be made to look closer, before she could be made to understand more. From that moment, she felt, everything in her life would depend on not interpreting what she had seen there.”³⁵ Liv is horrified by the unthinkable and decides to forsake her human capacity for understanding.

Completely different from Liv, Rig instead accepts the weirdness of the Tract and has somehow appropriated some of its technology: “As an EMC fixer with a satisfyingly broad remit, Gaines occupied various different kinds of space, most of them electronic; although, as he said, some things he did went a little too fast for normal channels. There were actions he could do, assets he had access to, which didn’t seem very physics.”³⁶ Rig almost appears to be a product of the Tract, but in fact he has simply welcomed it. This does not mean Rig knows how the technology he is using works: there is no reverse engineering in the trilogy. As much as he keeps exploring and trying to decode the Aleph, Rig accepts the weird for what it is without relying on understanding. His is an instance of what Daniel Dennett has referred to as “*competence without comprehension*,”³⁷ which reflects our use of, for instance, smartphones: most of us do not know how to make one or how its technology works, but we are able to use it anyway.

³³ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 231.

³⁴ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 255.

³⁵ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 255.

³⁶ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 45.

³⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (London: Penguin, 2017). See for instance, 411. Emphasis in the original.

Vassili Christodoulou offers a different but similar perspective when, basing his analysis of Harrison's trilogy on John Gray's philosophy,³⁸ exposes his misanthropic principle: humans have a need to understand the unknown universe because, alone amongst all animals in nature, they need to give meaning to their lives. Rig, instead, accepts that knowing the workings of the universe is not possible, but his way of living is: "not a way of definitively understanding the universe but of managing and living with its contradictions."³⁹ "Competence without comprehension" and "the misanthropic principle" are both valid descriptions of the only kind of experience possible in a type-2 world made of contingent natural laws, which shapes the form of investigative ethics of detective Aschemann. Aschemann works at Site Crime and regulates the territory of the event site at Saudade, where a piece of the Kefahuchi Tract fell a few years back: not a physical object, but an event twisting the physical laws of a whole area. Even though most of Aschemann's remarks or maxims refer to the profession of the detective, they offer a quite explicit ethics of the contingency as this passage exemplifies: "Uncertainty is all we have. It's our advantage. It's the virtue of the day."⁴⁰

Uncertainty is all there is to life when anything can change without a moment's notice and in those situations experience itself, not only science, needs re-evaluating. It is a means of survival in a type-2 extro-science fiction world, in which science has stopped giving us certainties, and experience requires flexibility. Consciousness then needs to stay explorative, open, ready to adapt and become competent in the next change of natural laws. The uncertainty of contingency creates confusion in most of the characters about who they are, but the weird hyperobject that is the Kefahuchi Tract offers them the possibility to face their Fate.

FATE AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN AGENCY

Fate is commonly considered as the existence of a predetermined path in the life of an individual. Not only does the individual not know her Fate, but when she acts she does not know with certainty whether her actions will lead to the outcome she hopes for or to the complete opposite. So when an unexpected and inexplicable event happens to change our lives, we are at a loss and blame Fate for being capricious or even unfair. This contingency of Fate exposes the limits of human agency in the face of what is outside human control. Because of their inability to impose a necessary outcome to their actions, humans regard Fate with a feeling of eeriness, which Fisher summarises as "a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*."⁴¹ Various Western mythologies have representations of Fate in the form of three women, be it the Moirai or the Parcae

³⁸ Christodoulou refers mostly to John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2015).

³⁹ Vassili Christodoulou, "The Misanthropic Principle." In *M. John Harrison: Critical Essays*, ed. Rhys Williams (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2019), 172.

⁴⁰ Harrison, *Nova Swing*, 27.

⁴¹ Fisher, 735.

in Greek and Roman mythologies respectively, or the Norns in Norse mythology. *Wýrdis* in fact one of the Norns, “that which became or happened:” Fate as that which has already happened, but which, we could add, could have happened in a different way. The Kefahuchi Tract offers its own version of the three entities of Fate, but with male figures playing dice as expounded by Irene the Mona: “Don’t you know, Fat Antoyne, that three old men in white caps throw dice for the fate of the universe?”⁴² The three men appear to fight for the Fate of the universe by giving a meaning to the unknown. If they ever stopped playing, they would be as miserable as humans: “Because,’ she said, ‘they look out into the same unmeaninged blackness as you and me.’”⁴³ Christodoulou has noted that the “unmeaninged blackness” of Irene’s own death is an instance of the impossibility of human control over their individual Fate: “Irene’s cruel, unexpected and meaningless death provides the reader with further evidence for her argument against the reality of personal autonomy.”⁴⁴ The eeriness of the three players of dice stems not so much from their presence or absence, but from the revelation that in comparison to the Norns and other goddesses of Fate who either weave destinies or make sure humans fulfil their destinies,⁴⁵ the players have instead no more control over Fate than humans do. In relying on the chance of a throw of dice to give meaning to the future, the players resemble clairvoyants rather than gods. If, because of the contingency of the Tract, different theories work at particular times for particular species then, as Fred Botting observes, a throw of dice is a valid substitute for a theory of Fate: “A dice game is as good a way of making sense of things as any theory.”⁴⁶ In his analysis of *Coup de dés* (“A Throw of Dice,” originally published in 1898) by Stéphane Mallarmé, Meillassoux combines his idea of contingency to that of chance. The throw of dice proves that “all is chance,”⁴⁷ in the sense that chance is infinite and involves all the possible outcomes at the same time. This entails that chance is strictly connected with Nothingness, i.e., the absence of any meaning: since the throwing of the dice depends on contingency, any resulting outcome lacks any necessary meaning. In this light, Fate as contingency signifies the impossibility to assign any absolute meaning to an individual’s life. The Empty Space, which gives its name to the last novel in the trilogy, is exactly this Nothingness, pre-empted of any human meaning, which allows for any theory or meaning—even nonhuman—at any given time and space to be valid.

In this function of chance as an absence of meaning, the figure of the dice recurs throughout the trilogy,⁴⁸ but it is in *Light* that it acquires its most ominous connotation with the dice that Michael Kearney steals from the Shrandar. The Shrandar is another form of the Norns, assuming three different forms in the three

⁴² Harrison, *Empty Space*, 91.

⁴³ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 92.

⁴⁴ Vassili Christodoulou, 157.

⁴⁵ In Greek mythology, the Moirai are the daughters of Ananke, Necessity.

⁴⁶ Botting, 236.

⁴⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *Le nombre et la sirène* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 36. “Tout est hazard,” in the original French. All translations from this book are mine.

⁴⁸ See for instance, Harrison, *Empty Space*, 107.

storylines of the novel: as the Shrandar in the past and as Dr Haends and Sandra Shen in the future, but they are one and the same entity. The Shrandar is an alien explorer that for centuries has studied the Tract and in the course of the novel appears to try and manipulate human events, or help weaving their Fate. For Michael, however, the Shrandar is the materialisation of his fear of death, which is nothing other than the human fear over a future one cannot control, i.e., one cannot predict nor control one's own death. Believing that the Shrandar, which appears to him as "the skull of a horse,"⁴⁹ is chasing him in order to kill him for the theft of the dice, Michael spends his life throwing the dice and believing that they tell him to kill in order to keep his pursuer away. John Gray observes that the ritual of the throwing of dice does not give Michael any guidance: "Unlike followers of magical cults, who imagine they can climb out of the unknowable by performing nonsensical ceremonies or re-engineering the human mind, Kearney accepts there is nothing he can do."⁵⁰ It would be more correct to state that it is only too late that Michael realises his gesture was meaningless, when he is finally forced to face the Shrandar and the latter asks him: "As a matter of interest, why did you murder all those women?' 'To keep you away from me.' The Shrandar seemed surprised at this. 'Oh dear. Didn't you realise it wasn't working?' Then it said: 'It *hasn't* been much of a life, has it? Why did you run so hard? All I wanted to do was show you something.'"⁵¹ As Michael is affected by the same repulsion towards weird nonhuman knowledge shown by Liv, it is only at the end of the novel that he discovers that the entity he saw as an agent of death was instead an alien wanting to share her knowledge of the Kefahuchi Tract. The dice were not trying to tell Michael how to act but, on the contrary, they were a manifestation of the 'unmeaning blackness' of Fate, suggesting that the outcome of any actions he would take would always be contingent. Affected by human correlationalism and the need to assimilate something that belongs to the world-without-us into human thought, Michael instead attempted to impose meaning onto chance, onto Nothingness without meaning.

Correlationalism also leads us to consider the Other as weird when its behaviour is outside of the laws of human agency as is the case with the apparitions in human form that detective Aschemann observes coming out of the event site in Saudade. The detective asks Vic, one of the guides escorting people to visit the site, for his opinion: "Are they artefacts?' he asked, 'or people? Maybe you can help, Vic, our equipment can't make the distinction. Whatever they are, they don't have any practice at life, literally, they're without praxis. They don't have a grip on reality.'"⁵² As human science cannot explain these manifestations of the event site, Aschemann struggles even to discern whether they are objects or people because the category he utilises is human behaviour. When Aschemann affirms that they have no experience

⁴⁹ Harrison, *Light*, 285.

⁵⁰ John Gray, "The Kefahuchi Tract trilogy: A future without nostalgia," *New Statesman*, October 13, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2013/10/future-without-nostalgia>.

⁵¹ Harrison, *Light*, 287. Emphasis in the original.

⁵² Harrison, *Nova Swing*, 166.

and that, if we take the original meaning of “praxis” as action or accomplishment then they have no agency or causality, he argues that these human-like artefacts have no practice in ‘human’ life. They remind Aschemann that there is a way of living Other-than-human life and he may wonder whether they are mimicking human life in order to replace humans one day.⁵³ As Meillassoux explains about contingency, human correlative thinking is incapable of accepting anything Other-than-human: “*this capacity-to-be-other cannot be conceived as a correlate of our thinking, precisely because it harbours the possibility of our own non-being.*”⁵⁴ Both Aschemann and Michael misunderstand what they cannot understand and assume that the nonhuman is there to replace the human instead of envisaging a possible co-existence of the human and the nonhuman.

As Hannah Arendt surmises in her *On Violence* (1963), human violence is the result of the “severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.”⁵⁵ As Fate is a game of chance that frustrates human agency and the Other appears to be ready to replace humans, Harrison’s characters question whether their actions represent their identities and personal history. The search for the mysteries of the Kefahuchi Tract becomes, in fact, the search for identity in the face of a contingent Fate but, as John Clute observes, “the event is a centre-of-gravity of story greater than any human life-story can withstand, and also a deeply unhuman disrupter of story.”⁵⁶ However, it is this potential of the Tract for disruption that allows these characters to change their status in the course of the trilogy, as John Gray maintains: “Harrison’s Tract appears in the form of unsettling epiphanies, which act to disrupt any meaning that human beings may have found or made. Yet the Tract is far from being only a symbol of senselessness, for it suggests the possibility that humans may find a way of living by falling away from the meanings to which they cling.”⁵⁷ The weirdness of the Tract then, offers the possibility to move beyond the correlation of human thinking, as is the case with Seria Mau, a human, who at the age of thirteen, in order to escape the abuses suffered at the hands of her father, decides to turn into a K-captain: her body is suspended in a tank, while her mind is connected to a K-ship, an alien entity governed by mathematics and technology derived from the Tract.⁵⁸ At the end of *Light*, Seria changes into an angelic being thanks to the help of Dr Haends, another facet of the

⁵³ The New Materialist debate concerning nonhuman, material entities, science and agency eschews the scope of this essay, but the interested reader can refer for instance, to the concepts of quasi-agents and vital materialism in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) or of agential realism in Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

⁵⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 57. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 83.

⁵⁶ John Clute, “10,000 light years from home,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview22>.

⁵⁷ Gray, “The Kefahuchi Tract trilogy: A future without nostalgia.”

⁵⁸ These technologies, never really explained in the trilogy, are another example of ‘competence without comprehension’.

Shrander, who promises her: “Now you can be what you are.”⁵⁹ Seria’s process of dehumanisation, initiated by her father’s dehumanising act, turns her into a weird Other, a contingent being capable of being something and then becoming something else soon after: “She tried out the different things she could be: there were always more; there were always more after that.”⁶⁰ Seria feels joy in her new status, which is first of all, a rejection of the human way of thinking. The possibility of change in the trilogy is always the consequence of the loss of human identity in favour of becoming something else or, as Liv declares at the end of *Nova Swing*: “None of us is anyone any more. We all lost who we were. But we can all be something else.”⁶¹ Liv does not say ‘someone else,’ but ‘something else,’ thus assuming the possibility of becoming something Other-than-human.

The Pearlant embodies the contingency of becoming Other-than-human, while at the same time being an incarnation of the aspect of Fate that is the *Wýrd*, that which has already happened. Both Anna, Michael’s wife, and Aschemann’s assistant become one with Pearlant and get a chance to re-visit what has already happened, their past. Absorbing Anna, her cat, and the assistant, Pearlant becomes, in fact, another form of the trinity of Fate, which symbolises the irremediability of that which has already happened, the *Wýrd*, and which cannot be unmade. In the later part of *Empty Space* Anna falls into the future and enters the entity known as Pearlant, which allows her to visit her past, where however, she is frustrated by the limitations of her agency: “The past was clear enough to see, but you felt as if you were engaging with it from too far away. Sometimes speech failed completely, and Anna could make herself known only in other ways, via the weather, for instance, or showers of emotionally-charged objects.”⁶² Anna has, in other words, turned into the weird object, a manifestation of the interobjectivity of the hyperobject. In her becoming object, Anna incarnates a perverted version of the metaphor according to Graham Harman: “She was reduced to the use of theatre, metaphor, symbols and emotions.”⁶³ According to Harman, in fact, the human individual can never know an object in itself because it is outside human thought, but she can take the place of the object by taking on herself the object’s qualities. In the metaphor of a cypress looking like a flame, Harman explains: “We concluded that the true dose of reality in art comes from the spectator’s own replacement of the metaphorical object (cypress), and consequent alliance with the metaphorical qualities (flame-qualities). This led us directly to the notion of art as primarily theatrical in nature, since the spectator in art necessarily becomes a sort of ‘method actor.’”⁶⁴ In her attempt to communicate with her past self, Anna-Pearlant lets objects replace her feelings, intentions and qualities, becoming the source of a metaphor which her past self, however, fails to understand: all she sees are weird

⁵⁹ Harrison, *Light*, 298.

⁶⁰ Harrison, *Light*, 299.

⁶¹ Harrison, *Nova Swing*, 303.

⁶² Harrison, *Empty Space*, 284.

⁶³ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 284.

⁶⁴ Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* (London: Penguin, 2018), 93.

objects.

Anna is not the only character who fails to communicate with her past self through the Pearlant object. The assistant, whose body has been technologically modified so thoroughly as to make her inhuman, has a similar experience: “All she achieved was to become the object of her own investigation, the mystery she could never solve.”⁶⁵ The assistant realises, in fact, that she is the perpetrator she had been investigating: her punishment for trying to undo the past is to become both object (of the investigation) and a criminal. Whereas Seria Mau is happy with her dehumanisation, the assistant still clings to her humanity: she is frustrated because she does not remember who she was before the operation that turned her into something Other-than-human⁶⁶ and because her own body is a weird object that she cannot understand (lack of knowledge) nor control (limitation of agency), due to a form of epilepsy, a glitch in her body’s programming,⁶⁷ another example of “competence without comprehension.”

As Timothy Jarvis has pointed out, neither Anna nor the assistant want the posthuman change that being part of the Pearlant entails: “But neither Anna nor the Assistant want the becoming.”⁶⁸ Following Deleuze and Guattari,⁶⁹ Jarvis argues that the Pearlant is a place of deterritorialization that never seems to reconnect to a whole, which is a necessity for humans: Anna and the assistant attempt to prevent their past selves from joining the Pearlant, but their efforts at reterritorialization fail. Jarvis also offers a speculative realist reading of the fragmented nature of the Kefahuchi Tract, or what he calls its “Weird materiality,”⁷⁰ comparing it to Meillassoux’s hyperchaos, an absolute that “guarantees only the possible destruction of every order.”⁷¹ If the Pearlant represents the dissolution of order and human consciousness (Anna and the assistant lose their identities in the Pearlant), it is necessary to point out that this does not entail the dissolution of what has already happened, which explains why Anna and the assistant cannot change the past. Chris Pak, on the contrary, considers Pearlant as an opportunity of connection between the different categories of the human, the

⁶⁵ Harrison, *Empty Space*, 282.

⁶⁶ The assistant is aware of being Other-than-human: “Do you know what it is to be like me, your condition is unnameable. It is relieved of all previous contexts. This freedom! My goodness when you’re like me even your piss is inhuman...” Harrison, *Empty Space*, 277-78.

⁶⁷ “You’ve got a Kv12.2 expression problem,” he said. ‘Epilepsy.’” Harrison, *Empty Space*, 245.

⁶⁸ Timothy Jarvis, “‘Sparks in Everything’ or ‘A Tearful Overnight Understanding’ Posthuman Becoming in the Empty Space Trilogy.” In *M. John Harrison: Critical Essays*, ed. Rhys Williams (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2019), 189.

⁶⁹ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Continuum, 2004) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁷⁰ Jarvis, 185.

⁷¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64. In his essay Jarvis quotes a longer passage, whose description reminds him of the description of the Tract. See Jarvis, 185.

animal and, in the case of the assistant, the machine.⁷² According to Pak, the entity is not so much a destruction of order as it is a dissolution of the boundaries between these categories in a state of uncertainty: “The grotesque uncertainty generated by the vacillation between categories is pushed until all boundaries evaporate.”⁷³ The uncertainty Pak refers to is an extreme consequence of the interobjectivity of the hyperobject Pearlant, which consists in the dissolution of the self in the hyperchaos of contingency, where the boundary between the human and the nonhuman melts.

The Pearlant can be seen also as an opportunity to become one with the infinite possibility of Fate when we consider it as a manifestation of chance. As Meillassoux writes, referring to Mallarmé’s attempt to join the infinity represented by Chance, the poet managed to “*take part* in this infinite structure, which allows Chance to be, at the same time, all of the possible options of a throwing of dice.”⁷⁴ Anna and the assistant have a chance to be everything they could have ever been, while at the same time being the only thing they could have ever been: this is what traveling to the past meant for them. The uncertainty related to the weirdness and contingency of Fate in the Empty Space Trilogy generates frustration in the characters because of the limited control they have over the future outcome of their actions, which scares them into seeing the Other-than-human as a presence menacing the human, as it is the case with Michael. Anna’s and the assistant’s attempts at changing their pasts is a symptom of the arrogance of the human correlative thought, as if the past were an object humans can control. The *Wyrd* is a preliminary condition for contingency: what has happened could have been otherwise and it may be otherwise in the future, but to be contingent it has to happen and it cannot be undone after it has happened.

CONCLUSION

Harrison’s Empty Space Trilogy presents in the Kefahuchi Tract a weird hyperobject, which both fascinates and horrifies humans because it is completely outside and beyond their reach, both in knowledge and agency. The Tract exposes a world-without-us, which reminds humans of the possibility of their own contingency, of the fact that not only they are not in charge but they are not even necessary in the universe: everything in the universe is contingent, human and nonhuman. The Empty Space is a space devoid of any meaning humans may attach to it because the Fate of anything in the universe is a result of chance. Frustration at the realisation that our lives are as meaningful as a throw of dice is natural, but the ethical attitude more likely to favour survival is the one suggested by detective Aschemann, and adopted with more success by Rig: acceptance of uncertainty. Rig carries on a life in the Tract,

⁷² Chris Pak, “‘Something that Looked Partly Like a Woman Partly Like a Cat.’ Deliquescence, Hybridity and the Animal in the Empty Space Trilogy.” In *M. John Harrison: Critical Essays*, ed. Rhys Williams (Canterbury: Glyphi, 2019), 197.

⁷³ Pak, 201.

⁷⁴ “*Participer* à cette structure infinie qui permet au Hasard d’être en même temps toutes les options possibles d’un lancer de dés.” Meillassoux, *Le nombre et la sirène*, 121.

which he does not understand but lives anyway, without forgetting the original fascination and desire for the new that the weird represents for humans. Uncertainty ultimately means openness not only to the weird Other, but to the realization that in a world-without-us the human belongs as much as any other object: the human is just another weird Other. This entails that humans are irremediably destined to be part of the hyperobject that is the Kefahuchi Tract, and that any attempts at changing what has already happened and thus their Fate, such as Anna's and the assistant's, are futile.

While following arguments by Christodoulou and Gray on Harrison's insistence on the 'unmeaning blackness' of human actions, this article has tried to show that even in a meaningless universe, the Empty Space Trilogy also offers more positive attitudes. Aschemann, but especially Rig, are examples of characters who have understood that an openness to the uncertainty of Fate and an epistemology of 'competence without comprehension' offer possibilities for survival in a world of ever new and contingent experiences. Other scholars, like Scholz, have made the connection with the Weird, but whereas Scholz explains the weird phenomena through quantum physics instead of contingency, and the fact that observed events change according to the observer,⁷⁵ this explanation still implies a human observer. As I have argued in this paper instead, Harrison shows, through the language of the Weird, that the human perspective is as contingent as any other, and that the limits of human thought and agency open in reality the possibility for humans to understand their real place in the universe as weird beings, living alongside other weird beings. ▣

⁷⁵ Scholz, "Quantum fiction! – M. John Harrison's Empty Space trilogy and Weird theory."

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