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Inner Rooms: A Weird, Ecstatic Cosmology

Daniel Watt

I would like to begin with a short quotation taken from Arthur Machen's 'Hieroglyphics', where he playfully provides us with an examination paper consisting of seven questions. My favourite is number six, which reads, "Faery Lands Forlorn." Draw a map of the district in question, putting in principal towns and naming exports' (138). I do not intend to name the exports of the writers I will explore here, but rather attempt to chart a course, without a map, that might reinvigorate the sense of ecstatic alterity that seems to me so much the spirit of 'The Weird', and thereby 'To toil me back from thee to my sole self!', via a route that wanders as much as it marks the territory.

In recent years philosophical interest in 'weird fiction' has grown, especially in the work of Graham Harman and Eugene Thacker and other thinkers associated with Speculative Realism (and all of its various incarnations), and the nihilistic non-fiction of writers such as Thomas Ligotti. Offering us a re-ordered world—in the face of object-oriented ontology and vast climactic and universal indifference—or a 'malignantly useless' species, most of these thinkers of the weird have had recourse to Lovecraftian cosmic horror to displace humanity. There is not time here to explore these thinkers in detail but their interest in cosmic horror, and questioning of the dominant anthropocentric perspective, offers a useful counterpoint to the inner world of weird fiction that I wish to examine in this essay through three stories in particular;

Robert Aickman's 'The Inner Room' (1966), Daphne du Maurier's 'The Doll' (1937) and Elizabeth Jane Howard's 'Three Miles Up' (1951).

Much has been written of Lovecraft's essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', so much so that it might have become rather obscured in service of other arguments, but it is worth repeating (if only to have it to hand), here at the outset, his statements concerning the type of material that might constitute a weird tale. He writes:

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 breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (426)

Of course, Lovecraft goes on to explain that not every story conforms to this, but that broadly we should look for the weird where these aspects of outer chaos and cosmic terror are most apparent. Indeed he says a page later:

The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the unknown universe's utmost rim. (427)

It is worth focusing on, and remembering, some of these phrases, 'outer, unknown forces', 'daemons of unplumbed space', 'sense of awed listening', 'scratching of outside shapes' and the 'unknown universe's outer rim'. Everything is cast outside of humanity to a threat; a horror that dwarfs the human, that dislocates us from the centre of the universe and returns us to our puny insignificance in the cosmic vastness, toyed and experimented with by minds vaster and crueller than our own. This might induce a gloomy pessimism and perhaps a despairing attitude for those accepting the kind of

materialist perspective that Lovecraft advances. S.T. Joshi in *The Evolution of the Weird Tale*, usefully qualifies Lovecraft's pessimism though pointing to the fact that he later calls himself an 'indifferentist' and is not entirely uncaring when he calls for 'social and economic reform' in the 'wake of the depression of the 1930s' (82)—a little ember of human warmth in an otherwise rather icy, and bleak vision of the world.

But it is still our insignificance that endures. And by various twists and turns, scientific, spiritual, cultural, and not least ecological, we have come, throughout the twentieth century, to confirm this insignificance. And Lovecraft's work has contributed to the elaboration of philosophical positions that, at first glance, might appear even bleaker and nihilistic. Take for example Thomas Ligotti's recent work, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, which declares:

Everywhere around us are natural habitats, but within us is the shiver of startling and dreadful things. Simply put: We are not from here. If we vanished tomorrow, no organism on this planet would miss us. Nothing in nature needs us. ... We have no business being in this world. We move among living things, all those natural puppets with nothing in their heads. But our heads are in another place, a world apart where all the puppets exist not in the midst of life but outside it. And the medium in which we circulate is that of the supernatural, a dusky element of horror that obtains for those who believe in what should be and should not be. This is our secret quarter. This is where we rave with insanity on the level of metaphysics, fracturing reality and breaking the laws of life. (221-222)

Ligotti locates human being as the strangest form of existence, as that which is *supernatural* from the outset. Far from being the form of existence most proper to the world, and perhaps worlds, we are rather the alien form that thinks beyond nature. Ligotti takes Lovecraft's horror of the outside and forces it back inside, by means of a logical sleight of hand that does not find terror in the mass of exterior nothingness, and 'natural puppets with nothing in their heads' but rather in the sentient, existent *thing* we call the human.

Recent work in the field of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism also furthers the understanding of our encounter with the ‘unhuman’. This philosophical ‘movement’, if its different thinkers are such a thing, has sought ways to think the world of things without the human, or the relation to human beings, at the heart of them. It offers a world where the interaction of objects enters a speculative realm—a reflection on possibilities before, and beyond the Anthropocene. It is worth briefly mentioning Dylan Trigg’s recent essay “‘The Horror of Darkness’: Toward an Unhuman Phenomenology’ where he proposes:

The particular configuration of the human body is not an end point in history, but part of a mutating process, which may or may not devolve into another form. The body to be posited in this project is not only anterior to humanity but in some sense opposed to human existence insofar as it destabilises the experience of being a subject by establishing an ‘entirely elsewhere’ within the heart of familiar existence. (116)

Trigg’s essay uses philosophical examples and works through Gaston Bachelard, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida’s work but in many ways the alien body he discusses, the ‘Unhuman’, is one familiar to any reader of horror, science fiction, or the weird; from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through to the *Alien* films we find other modes of being a body calling into question the way *we* become human through *our* bodies.

This destabilised subject is one that might be encountered in other ways, perhaps from deep within the human being, stepping out of oneself, so to speak—an ecstatic encounter. It is worth evoking then, in the context of the stories I am about to explore, the forms of ecstasy that may be useful to an inner cosmology of the Weird. While, again, I will not have time to elaborate in great detail here, these are Martin Heidegger’s *Ekstasis*, Georges Bataille’s notion of ecstasy, as formulated in his study *Eroticism* and Arthur Machen’s exploration of literature as ecstatic, as found in his essay ‘Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature’. Rather crudely perhaps I

will consider each briefly alongside the three stories attempting to resonate their ideas with a particular perspective on each tale.

In Robert Aickman's 'The Inner Room' we find a girl, Lene, who has a dolls' house purchased for her for her birthday. It is procured from a grim toy shop, her father immediately likening it to a 'model for Pentonville goal' calling it 'the most depressing plaything I ever saw' (9). We already know things are not well with this little house, as, perhaps they are will all houses, whether little or large. As the disturbing tale unfolds Lene's brother Constantin, by mathematical calculation, discovers a secret room within the dolls' house. Lene dreams of encountering the house through a wood, in a terrible storm; the dreams multiply as the denizens of the dolls' house seem to occupy the halls of her home. And then, the house is sold by her parents. The story pivots to an event later in her life, and the intervening years are discarded in a brief moment. We read,

It was, as I say, for two or three months in 1921 that I owned the House and from time to time dreamed that creatures I supposed to be its occupants had somehow invaded my home. The next thirty years, more or less, can be disposed of quickly: it was the period when I tried conclusions with the outer world. (29)

She tried conclusions with the *outer world*—all fruitless, disappointing and frustrating. Her brother, Constantin, originally of scientific persuasion, becomes a priest, our narrator tells us, 'I cannot see that Constantin is doing anything but listen to his inner voice ... and mine speaks a different language. In the long run, I doubt whether there is much to be desired but death' (31). It is such a death that, for Heidegger, marks the character of human being, or *dasein*. And it is the process of going beyond ourselves into futurity, through ekstasis, that makes us beings-towards-death. As with so many of Aickman's characters their past seems to seep into their future, dragging them into 'strange' situations that are marked by a sense of both

predetermination and arbitrariness at the same time. Heidegger's thinking moves us towards a way of being that is more authentic than the masked manner in which death is approached in the everyday. This relation to death creates an angst that is not grounded in any particular thing, or experience. It is anxiety without object—an unidentifiable sense of dread that calls us beyond ourselves, and seems to describe that curious quality in Aickman's work of directionless disturbance, without clearly defined, or articulable reason.

Poor Lene seems to move beyond herself in other, and very particular, ways though, her own inner room having been crafted gradually over years, in relation to that 'morbid sort of object' (21). In the final section of the story she is drawn into the reality of her dreams as she encounters the house again, but in the context of the frontality of experience—so from a more grounded phenomenological position. She says, 'I could not see all four sides of the house at once, as I had dreamed I had' (35). We are to take this final encounter with the dolls of her house to be real. There is no dream perspective from which to view things, reality has been pierced by the weird and the story leaves us reflecting, as Lene does, about care for the other, be they a little doll, mother, father or brother. For Lene realises in those final pages that she 'did nothing' for her dolls, they remained in their prison, in a locked spare room, only to emerge from the inside again in an ecstatic, and almost vampiric revelry.

Rather than the coming to life of a doll it is the inertia of the thing that seems so terrible in Daphne Du Maurier's, 'The Doll'. The tale was rediscovered by Ann Willmore, proprietor of Bookends of Fowey, a few years ago, when she tracked down a copy of the collection in which it had originally appeared in 1937, *The Editor Regrets*. The tale was written ten years earlier, when Du Maurier was only twenty. It is a wonderful rediscovery for weird fiction, telling the story of a man obsessed with

an interestingly named 'Rebecca' and his invitation to the room she shares with her life-size doll 'Julio'. We are introduced early on to our diarist's inner world, one in which he has transformed the 'intense, restrained, and soul-less' (15) woman of his madness into a figure that torments his dreams and causes him to 'vomit forth the poison in [his] brain' (14) in a story framed as a discovery by 'Dr. E. Strongman' of sodden pages in a pocket book, discoloured by salt water. It is a fascinating insight into Du Maurier's inner world; but I am initially concerned here with the *room* of Rebecca and her doll which our narrator first acknowledges from external observation, although not the mathematical calculation as the inner room is discovered in Aickman's story. The room in 'The Doll' is something of a boudoir, 'whose walls were draped with some sort of velvet hangings as if to deaden any sound, and long thick curtains were drawn across the window. There was a log fire, but it had burnt very low. Near the fireplace was a divan, covered with cushions thrown anyhow, and the only light came from a small shaded lamp, thus leaving the room in a half darkness' (23). It is at this point that our narrator first encounters Julio and first kisses Rebecca. Understandably, from that point on, in many ways, he is lost. He is lost to the ideal Rebecca he conjures for himself, but also lost to the erotic process of ecstatic self-annihilation that occurs. A useful point of reference here would be the work of Georges Bataille who often explores the nature of sacrifice and destruction of identity, self, and body, in both economic and social terms. As Bataille writes, 'In one sense, [in eroticism,] the being loses himself deliberately, but then the subject is identified with the object losing his identity. If necessary I can say in eroticism: *I am losing my self identity*. Not a privileged situation, no doubt. But the deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest' (31). But whilst, in 'The Doll', he loses himself more and more to a maddening jealousy (mostly concerned with how Rebecca

learned to kiss with the passion and intensity she does) it is clear that no such ecstatic dissolution is occurring in her. The evidence for where she learned to kiss so passionately appears on the face of Julio in a later scene:

And all the time his vile filthy face was looking at me. His eyes never left me, staring with a lifeless, glassy immobility. The wet crimson mouth was sneering – the sleek dark hair hung in streaks across his cheek. He was a machine – something worked by screws – he was not alive, not human – but terrible, ghastly. (29)

Rebecca has dwelt too long with an ecstatic inner experience, a mirror world where her lust grows as those around her fall. 'The Doll' offers us a glimpse through the keyhole to the inner being addicted to self, the doll itself becoming her, the imagined her of the narrator becoming a doll, his mental collapse leaving him in a prison of obsession. There is no vast outer threat, but instead a vaster interior one.

And whilst our nameless narrator gives us a flavour of the Ligottian human being, circulating in its supernatural medium, assailed with the terror of its 'secret quarter', when he says, 'Sometimes I think that my brain cannot hold together, it is filled with too much horror – too great a despair. And there is no one; I have never been so unutterably alone' (14) there remains a shard of self-awareness (the I ... losing ... self-identity), enough to deliver an unreliable and unrelenting narrative tinged with the uncanniness of the doll. As his mind disassembles Rebecca tours the world becoming stronger for, while he needs her exteriority to confirm his subjecthood, with Rebecca it is quite the reverse, she needs the mirror of Julio rather than a human being. She tells him plainly, 'How can I care for you, or any man? Go away, leave me. I loathe you. I loathe you all. I don't need you. I don't want you' (30-31). Recalling Trigg's comments earlier the narrator becomes destabilised by the 'entirely elsewhere within the heart of familiar existence' (116).

And destabilisation occurs in our final story, to similarly devastating effect, as two brothers share a canal trip together, taking on a mysterious passenger along the way, Sharon, whom one of the brothers reflects upon:

‘She has an elusive quality of freshness about her,’ he thought, which is neither naïve nor stupid nor dull, and she invokes no responsibility. She does not want us to know what she was, or why we found her as we did, and curiously, I, at least, do not want to know. She is what women ought to be,’ he concluded with sudden pleasure; and slept. (18)

Elizabeth Jane Howard’s ‘Three Miles Up’ gives us a supposedly meek and servile Sharon and then, within a few pages, turns her into the terrifying Charon that she really is; her docile nature marking her as a denizen of a dead world rather than the world of passions. But the story is not a clumsy one that gives itself up so easily. It offers us an enigmatic, faery or gypsy-like Sharon, who does nothing much throughout, finally disappearing like some ethereal being. Her figuring as death is only hinted at briefly in one encounter with a boy upon the shore.

“Where do you live then?” asked Clifford as they drew almost level with him.

“I told you. Three miles up,” he said; and then he gave a sudden little shriek of fear, dropped the reed, and turned to run down the bank the way they had come. Once he looked back, stumbled and fell, picked himself up sobbing, and ran faster. Sharon had appeared with lunch a moment before, and together they listened to his gasping cries growing fainter and fainter, until he had run himself out of their sight. (30)

The boy sees something horrific in Sharon—a vision of the future. For we have indeed been told before that the village is three miles up. But it is about eight pages earlier and told to us by an old man, not a boy:

He seemed very old. He was leaning on a scythe, and as they drew almost level with him, he turned away and began slowly cutting rushes. A pile of them lay neatly stacked beside him. ... ‘Three miles up you’ll find the village. Three miles up that is.’ (22)

Old man and boy, the same person but reversed. Time finds itself inverted in the endless canal journey of ‘Three Miles Up’, the argumentative brothers vying for the

affections of Sharon, whose revelation is simply death, as revealed in the last paragraph when, ‘a sheet, an infinity, of water stretched ahead; oily, silent, and still, as far as the eye could see, with no country edging it, nothing but water to the low grey sky above it’ (32).

The last few lines have a further uncomfortable aspect, for the diligent, silent homemaker Sharon has departed, Clifford opens the cabin doors, ‘It was very neat and tidy in there, but empty’ (32). We might wonder if the brothers reflected from then on as to whether Sharon really was ‘what women ought to be’?

But what of the ecstatic in this story? There is little by way of personal epiphany, and little but an erotic undercurrent, but there is certainly much of the mystical; its other-worldliness being rather more a human horror than a cosmic terror—the great watery, deadly vastness opening out before the doomed boat. We might be tempted, with Machen, to say, ‘if literature is a mysterious ecstasy, the withdrawal from all common and ordinary conditions—well, I suppose, we had better be mystics when we discuss the subject, and frankly confess that with its first principles logic has nothing to do’ (138-139). Perhaps weird tales show us, more easily than most genres, the mystical heart of literature by leading us back to ourselves, by way of an exteriority, revealing the *inner* unknown and the chaos of the all too familiar assaults of aberrant desire that ravage our being ‘born for death’; tales that offer ecstatic keys to our hidden rooms, dusty closets, and ‘magic casements’ that open upon another *forlorn land* of dolls and doubles. When we look to the strangeness of the heavens and the endless stars it is not the terrifying insignificance of humanity that ‘The Weird’ reveals, but a hall of mirrors wherein the distorted reflections of our odd, supernatural existences flicker briefly and brightly, and then depart.

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