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Weird Fiction and Science at the *Fin de Siècle*

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Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine
ISBN 978-3-030-32651-7 ISBN 978-3-030-32652-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32652-4>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Beth and George

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began not in my doctoral research but in my viva, in the moment when one of my examiners asked why I had (at the last possible moment) removed the word “gothic” from the original title of my thesis, and the other suggested that “weird” might be the elusive replacement I sought. My first thanks, therefore, are to Roger Luckhurst for that spark. At around the same time, Laurence Davies introduced me to the British Society for Literature and Science, in which I found an intellectual home as well as discovering I had been more or less conducting a literature and science Ph.D. without knowing it—I am grateful to all of you, as well as to my supervisors Linda Dryden and Sara Wasson for setting me on the path.

Ten years later, this book is not that thesis. I revisited the work of William Hope Hodgson explicitly through a new lens—weird fiction and science—and found many new companions for him along the way, too, as the following chapters unfold.

Over the 4 or 5 years in which I have worked on this monograph, I have benefited from the help, expertise, and inspiration of a great many people, especially those in the BSLS, in the International Gothic Association, and at Edinburgh Napier University—thank you. The refuge, crucible, café, and comedy zone of G6 and its residents have done, and do, more to keep me going than they probably realise—much love. I owe further thanks to Anne Schwan, Andrew Frayn, Duncan Milne, and Xavier Aldana Reyes for reading portions of the manuscript and for their constructive and encouraging feedback. Any mistakes are,

of course, mine. My thanks, too, for the generous knowledge and enthusiasm of the scholarly and fan communities of Blackwood, Machen, and Hodgson, especially to Sam Gafford and Grove Koger. And, lastly, to Rod, for your irreplaceable personal, practical, and intellectual support.

Edinburgh
March 2019

Emily Alder

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CHAPTER 1

Weird Tales and Scientific Borderlands at the *Fin de Siècle*

Near the end of Terry Pratchett's *Sourcery* (1988), Rincewind the wizard finds himself in the Dungeon Dimensions, a dark realm of "skewed images" and "weird curvature." He observes a number of Things clustered around a hole in the fabric of reality, including one resembling "a dead horse that had been dug up after three months and then introduced to a range of new experiences, at least one of which had included an octopus."¹ Attracted to the warmth and light of the human world, these Things are not ghosts or revenants; they are unrelated to any traditional mythology, individual past, or family history. They are indifferent to human concerns (or those of any other Discworld species). Motivating concepts of good and evil, desire and revenge, or hate and compassion don't apply to them. Their existence, like that of the Discworld itself, might be playfully explained by quantum physics and the possibility of multiple simultaneous realities, but they are also irrational creations whose shapes buckle the scientific logic of evolutionary adaptation, even if understood on a cosmic scale.

The Things of the Dungeon Dimensions parody the mythos of the Lovecraftian weird tale. But H. P. Lovecraft was not the first to manipulate the limits of reality and being in this way. In *100 Best Horror Stories*, Pratchett recounts his 1950s childhood encounters with the writing of William Hope Hodgson (1877–1918), whose *The House on the Borderland* (1908) gripped him with the notion that

outside the shadow-thin walls of the world itself there were dreadful things, looking in and biding their time. [...] it made me believe that Space was big and Time was endless and that what I thought of as normality was a 30 W lightbulb with only fivepence left in the meter *and there was nothing anyone could do about it*. [...] It was the Big Bang in my private universe as sf/fantasy reader and, later, writer.²

As Pratchett's reflections suggest, Hodgson's tales mark an important stage in weird fiction. They develop the groundwork of earlier horror and supernatural fantasies in which he was well read, and to which notions of unstable boundaries to the known world and what lay beyond were nothing new. In Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), Clarke glimpses "a presence, that was neither man nor beast, neither the living nor the dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form," and before that, Robert Louis Stevenson's Henry Jekyll peels away the "fleshly vestment" of material existence to access the states beyond "this seemingly so solid body."³ Earlier still, "all the attributes with which superstition clothes the being of the shadowy borderland that lies beyond the chart of our visual world" surround the enigmatic Margrave of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1861), while the "unearthly," "hideous" voice of Edgar Allan Poe's M. Valdemar, mesmerically suspended on the brink of death, profoundly affects his listeners with the "unutterable, shuddering horror" of whatever lies beyond.⁴ These are all tales of borderland science, using and stretching the ideas and discourses of their time to produce narratives of strange horror, although we might not necessarily call all of them "weird" any more than their authors would have.

As the examples above suggest, the early roots of the weird tale are entangled with those of gothic and science fiction. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a good place to turn and move forward again. *Frankenstein* is an important example of how popular fictional forms such as the gothic romance could work with the wealth of ideas and techniques offered by science. Victor Frankenstein's development of "instruments of life" to infuse a "spark of being" into his lifeless creation positions his efforts within contemporary interest in galvanism, electrochemistry and the possibility that a form of electricity might explain the source of conscious life.⁵ It also places him near the start of a respectable line of borderland scientists in fiction. However, we might label the diverse non-realist

literary styles that followed *Frankenstein*; science is woven into their cultural history, as it is into that of more mainstream Victorian literature. The close relationship of discourses of literature and science, their mutual influences on each other, and their functions in nineteenth-century culture more widely, have been demonstrated in a number of contexts.⁶ This book traces one route through this terrain, examining how, by the *fin de siècle*, contemporary sciences and their borderlands had helped to stimulate a particular variety of speculative fiction, the weird tale.

That said, weird fiction is far from homogenous; a single description is sufficiently elusive for Michael Moorcock to suggest that “[w]hat is left after other definitions are exhausted is the weird story.”⁷ In fact, many of the texts I will be discussing might also be identified as fantasy, as gothic, as horror, as ghost stories, and as science fiction. The ways in which genre writing became organised by writers, publishers, and critics during the twentieth century have made such labels and their conventions familiar, but at the *fin de siècle* they were either non-existent or had little categorising force. The *fin-de-siècle* weird tale sometimes gets lost in the gaps between critical and generic categories, but it rewards examination in its own right and can offer ways to look anew at texts more commonly associated with other modes. Here, I put works like H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, and Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) alongside rich but less well-known stories by Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, and Edith Nesbit for examination as weird tales through their shared interest, one way or another, in *fin-de-siècle* scientific borderlands. Broadly speaking, works by these six writers have either been identified as weird but granted little sustained critical attention, or have attracted considerable critical attention but rarely in the context of the weird.⁸ That situation is now changing healthily, with a number of critical studies recently published, alongside an influx of “New Weird” fictions since the 2000s.⁹ With this book, I contribute an exploration of the weird tale’s development at the *fin de siècle* through its relationships with contemporary science.

The *fin-de-siècle* weird has much to offer our current uncertain political, economic, and environmental moment. Weird tales, though at times reactionary, can offer radical new forms of knowledge—ecological, philosophical, and spiritual, for example—and model new sets of relations between selves and others. Timothy Morton argues that “[e]cological awareness is weird,” “twisted,” and “looping,” a distinct response to our current world.¹⁰ Eugene Thacker has proposed that horror (here more or

less encompassing weird) can function philosophically as a way to meet the challenge of “comprehending the world in which we live as both a human *and* a non-human world – and of comprehending this politically.”¹¹ Other scholars, too, recognise the weird’s capacities to offer alternative, non-hegemonic ways of knowing the world.¹² In what follows, I extend this argument into *fin-de-siècle* scientific borderlands and weird fiction’s often subversive or playful approaches to scientific conventions of the time. The tales I explore expose the limits of certainty in knowledge and of human capacities for mastery, but, importantly, they don’t respond with denial or erasure. Once a weird understanding of the world is out there, there it stays. The stories recognise that human agency and certainty about the present or the future are limited and provisional—which might be a frightening state to confront but is a more desirable, ethical position to take in a frightening world, now as then.

Over the coming chapters, I advance the following arguments. Firstly, weird fiction has its own place in how we understand the relations between literature and science in this period. *Fin-de-siècle* weird fiction, I argue, was often doing remarkably bold work by plunging into some of the same ontological and epistemological quagmires as mainstream scientific philosophy. This is what leads S. T. Joshi to describe the weird as less a genre than “a consequence of a world view.”¹³ Weird fiction is a consequence of the kind of worldview that was itself both a consequence and a driver of scientific change in the late nineteenth century. That worldview, as I will elaborate, is related to those of gothic and science fiction but different to them. The weird is a mode capable of doing different things with scientific culture than gothic and sf; a weird science lens promises productive readings of texts more normally recruited to those allied modes.

Secondly, fictions of borderland science in the British *fin-de-siècle* period (by which I mean, fairly generously, about 1880 to about 1914) form a significant component of the history of the weird tale. Recurring ideas (such as unknowable dimensions, radical teratology, unspeakability) now strongly associated with the weird tale, developed markedly in the crucible of *fin-de-siècle* science and culture (if not necessarily originating in it). Science is not just an interesting lens through which to interrogate weird fiction, but is integral to the emergence of the weird tale as a new mode in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, weird tales speak back to science through their explorations of often similar philosophical or theoretical questions.

At the heart of this book lies the premise that a close relationship with science is essential to the weird's existence and takes a unique form. In many cases, I argue, *fin-de-siècle* science is not made weird by fiction, but was already weird to start with. By "science," I mean not a monolithic discourse or single set of methods, but a tremendous diversity of stances, knowledges, and practices, of which I can only (and shortly will) explore a few. By "weird" I mean—what?

I have already sketched a few traits of the weird, but equally important to it and to the argument of this book is what cannot be outlined or specified. William Hope Hodgson's occult sleuth Thomas Carnacki, explaining weird phenomena to his in-story listeners, wonders whether he is "making it all clear to you"—to which writer China Miéville responds: "No. Not clear at all. These monsters are the opposite of clear."¹⁴ The desire of much nineteenth-century science to observe, know, and reveal nature's secrets conflicts (productively and creatively, for the stories I'll discuss) with the weird's irreducibility and its borderland natural-yet-unnatural phenomena (what I will at times call the more-than-visible world).¹⁵ Roger Luckhurst has suggested that the weird "has no quintessence" but is "always receding out of sight [...] a mongrel that slithers out of reach."¹⁶ For Luckhurst, the weird is wayward; accordingly, "disorientation" offers a better guide than an attempt to map out a straight route. To become disorientated to the weird is to recognise and allow its elusiveness and inversions, to notice it on the peripheries of what can be understood and articulated.¹⁷

One in particular of Hodgson's books offers an extended murky disorientation of this sort: *The Night Land* (1912). In a world deprived of sunlight, the protagonist, X, must navigate across black expanses and negotiate invisible perils that don't make sense. Hidden "Doorways In The Night" exude "queer and improper" sounds that are simultaneously close above his head *and* at tremendous distance "out of a Foreign Place."¹⁸ X knows the sound, yet also knows he has never heard it before. "[Y]ou shall know how it did seem," he tells us

if you will conceive of a strange noise that does happen far away in the Country, and the same noise to seem to come to you through an opened door. And this is but a poor way to put it; yet how shall I make the thing more known to you?¹⁹

Like Carnacki, X asks his readers this kind of question frequently. How shall we make the weird known to us? One answer is to read the notoriously unreadable *The Night Land* (which I recommend nonetheless); another is that the weird is best left *unknown*, although a number of *fin-de-siècle* weird tale characters fail to realise that. This is especially true of scientist characters; in weird fiction, the capacity of conventional science to know the world has limits, because the waywardness of weird realities evades grasp.

In that, there may be a warning to the curious critic.²⁰ If so, what is an author of a book like this to do, as a creator of knowledge, with a mode of fiction that does not want to be known? Fortunately, this book is not *the* account of weird fiction and science at the *fin de siècle*; it is one account—my account—written because all three elements intersect in ways profoundly fascinating to me. It is necessarily selective; I don't discuss maths, or astronomy, for example; my weird authors are all British, and they don't include (though not for the lack of admiration) M. R. James or M. P. Shiel. The task is, as X puts it, not to make the thing known to you, but to make it *more* known.

Here is some of what I know.

KNOWING THE WEIRD

Through *Weird Tales*, which published “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) and many others, the name of H. P. Lovecraft “became virtually synonymous with the weird tale.”²¹ Hence the adjective I have already used: “Lovecraftian.” Yet such was the weird tale's low reputation for many years that the close association may not always have aided either writer or mode. The place of weird fiction in the history of fantastic writing broadly conceived has not always been noticed. In 1977, when Julia Briggs published her landmark book on the ghost story, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, we can in retrospect see the category of the weird lurking in the shadows. Briggs describes how the “traditional” outlook of the ghost story gave way to a “natural successor, science fiction, [...] better suited to an age at once more materialistic and more obviously endangered by its own technology.”²² Weird tales, concerned with rather materialist “ghosts” and responding directly to the changes of a modern age, underlie this shift, and never went away.

The story of the weird's journey from “a fugitive category, a blur in the corner of other genres [...] usually abjected as the lowest form of

culture” to a radical contemporary fantastic mode spawning theoretical elaborations and revisionary literary histories (like this one) has been ably told elsewhere.²³ I draw out the most relevant strands here, not least because the general picture in literary criticism of *fin-de-siècle* non-realist fiction remains mainly that of a privileging of other terminology over the blur in the corner. Aaron Worth, for example, in a recent article, though alluding to Machen’s “weird art,” chooses to call his 1890s tales “horror fiction.”²⁴ Michael Cook’s *Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story*, which examines E. and H. Heron’s Flaxman Low stories, essentially follows Briggs’s terminology of “ghost story” and “supernatural,” while Mark De Cicco proposes a “queer supernatural” to describe *Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Great God Pan*, and Blackwood’s John Silence stories.²⁵ It is not, it seems, a lack of interest in the texts or their culture that marginalises the weird as a category but something about the word itself. Perhaps it didn’t help that Lovecraft (for good reasons) titled an influential survey essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” rather than, say, “Weird Literature.” It probably also didn’t help that Darko Suvin’s strategy in the 1970s for elevating science fiction as a serious mode involved distancing it from irrational, fantastic forms, which were thereby denigrated as less meritorious or valuable, and less politically relevant.²⁶

Or perhaps the problem with admitting the weird lies as much in science as in genre. In *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (1999), Robert Mighall notes an ontological tension between horror and science: “horror fiction has a generic obligation to evoke fear or suggest mystery” while science “attempts to contain fear and offer a rational explanation for all phenomena.”²⁷ Yet not only do *fin-de-siècle* weird tales do *all* these things, they depend on it; they depend, as Timothy Jarvis has argued, on the collapse of the binary distinctions inherent in contrasts between mystery and explanation, or natural and supernatural.²⁸ Weird fiction contests the cultural dominance of positivist science at the *fin de siècle*. Some rethinking of what we think science *is now*, as well as what it *was then*, is going to be necessary in order to escape the clutches of binary categories and the way they appear to fix knowledge, whether of literary modes or of reality.

The word “supernatural” poses a problem in the *fin-de-siècle* context because the premise of such stories is often closely linked to spiritualist and occult discourses that understood all phenomena as “natural,” just sometimes governed by laws we do not yet understand. In the Flaxman Low stories, as Srdjan Smajic points out, the “frontier of knowledge”

extends “so far that *natural* and *supernatural* cease to be useful descriptors.”²⁹ For “supernatural” to have any meaning, there must be a “natural” against which to define it, and in weird fiction, there is no distinction. In the next section, I explore the borderlands of science that, at the *fin de siècle*, were undermining old certainties about the “natural” world and the capacities of scientific knowledge. Here, I make a closer examination of weird fiction’s literary history and explore some definitions of its characteristic tropes and affects, all with an eye to its scientific content and its relations with scientific ways of knowing.

The word “weird” originally is related to the control of human destiny and can be traced to some of the oldest known examples of European literature, including *Beowulf*. “A” weird is thus a fate or destiny, its form (curse, prophecy), or one who ordains it—as do the three Fates of classical mythology and the “wyrd sisters” of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (c.1606).³⁰ This meaning persisted long enough to be used loosely in this way in the title of M. E. Braddon’s murder mystery sensation novel *Wyllard’s Weird* (1885). But “weird” also accrued associations of the fantastic and supernatural, becoming a word suggesting “unearthly, eerie; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; queer, uncanny,” and “out of the ordinary, strange, unusual.”³¹ Weird affects of this kind emerge in Romantic poetry, texturing S. T. Coleridge’s “Christabel” (1797–1800) and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798), while in P. B. Shelley’s *Alastor* (1816) “weird” describes an atmospheric sound.³² The creep towards “weird” as a literary descriptor is therefore visible, but, as James Machin elaborates, its mid-nineteenth-century uses were ambiguous and it can be hard to tell if the noun or the adjective is meant.³³ Luckhurst makes the point that the weird has no “‘lost’ tradition simply waiting to be uncovered. It is not actually there, or only spectrally so”; that spectral tradition is constructed through the weird’s own “pseudobiblia” (it is littered with invented histories and ancient texts) and the tales’ intertextual self-referentiality.³⁴

The weird is something which both is and isn’t really there, appropriately enough. Its literary history, too, is a retrospective creation, beginning in the 1880s. In the late nineteenth century, changing technological and economic conditions of printing and publishing, especially for periodicals, encouraged the production of short speculative fictions.³⁵ In the 1880s, something else happened too. “Weird” started to be paired with “tale” or “fiction” to describe, retrospectively, the work of earlier writers. For example, in 1882, a number of Charlotte Riddell’s best ghost stories were collected as *Weird Stories*.³⁶ In 1885,

E. T. A. Hoffman's "Der Sandmann" (1817) reappeared in a newly translated two-volume collection titled *Weird Tales*, recommended to "those who desire to explore the dark by-paths (*Irrwege*) of the human spirit."³⁷ Similarly, an 1894 Sheridan Le Fanu collection, *The Watcher and Other Weird Stories*, included earlier work such as "Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter" (1839), and one of several late century Edgar Allan Poe story collections appeared under the title *Weird Tales* in 1895.³⁸ One new work in this period was Stuart Cumberland's *A Fatal Affinity* (1889). Bearing traces of Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), and Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1882), it concerns a series of occult murders perpetrated by a mysterious Indian cult and curtailed by the intervention of a "Brother of the Light."³⁹

In the examples given so far, "weird" is used to describe an odd, strange, or fantastic story and to hint at (sometimes) the supernatural, spiritual, or occult. It is being used to describe a diverse range of very different texts—ghost stories like those of Riddell, sensation mysteries like Braddon's novel, uncanny horror tales like Hoffman's "Der Sandmann," occult romances like *A Fatal Affinity*. *A Fatal Affinity*, though, was subtitled "A Weird Story," echoing Horace Walpole's famous presentation of *The Castle of Otranto*'s second edition (1765) as "A Gothic Story," which had more or less initiated a new literary craze. By the 1880s, then "weird" was being used to label a *type of story*, and the project of constructing genres with sets of more or less collectively understood conventions was picked up by 1920s pulp magazines: *Amazing Stories* for science fiction and *Weird Tales* for the weird.⁴⁰ Notably, poems by most of the major Romantic poets featured in *Weird Tales*—William Blake's "The Tiger" (1794) appeared in 1926, for example.⁴¹ *Weird Tales* enveloped most of the long nineteenth century, publishing, in its first decade, verse from Blake to Charles Baudelaire, and short stories from Poe to Guy de Maupassant, Bram Stoker, and H. G. Wells, alongside original new fiction.⁴² The weird tale underwent, like science fiction, a process of enrolment through which pre-existing writing was gathered together under a new label.⁴³

In this, Lovecraft was instrumental. His fiction and his essays worked to draw weird tales together and identify their shared characteristics. In an oft-quoted passage from "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft wrote:

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 or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.⁴⁴

Terrible ontological dread, inexplicable forces beyond human knowing—here, Lovecraft distances the weird tale from the trappings of conventional gothic fiction and ghost stories, suggesting it as something new, distinct, more seriously terrifying. Machin makes the important point that few, if any, definitions of the weird are other than variations on this quotation, which articulates the weird vividly without tying it down.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, for my argument about weird fiction’s relationship with science, it is worth drawing particular attention to a couple of features: the emphasis on the limits of human knowing and the questionable stability of “laws of Nature.”

What makes these qualities distinctively weird, when similar claims could be made of the gothic? In *Gothic*, Fred Botting suggests that

if knowledge is associated with rational procedures of enquiry and understanding based on natural, empirical reality, then gothic styles disturb the borders of knowing and conjure up obscure otherworldly phenomena or the “dark arts,” alchemical, arcane and occult forms normally characterised as delusion, apparition, deception. Not tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity.⁴⁶

Plausibly a “gothic style,” weird also troubles the “borders of knowing.” However, like science fiction it characterises its “otherworldly phenomena” as real, not supernatural. Jarvis suggests that the treatment of borders is what distinguishes weird from gothic: where gothic works to reinscribe borders, weird collapses them.⁴⁷ In their place, the “natural” order of things is not transgressed so much as recreated.

Weird and gothic modes are allied, but as critical lenses they make for different readings of texts. The weird cannot be subsumed into gothic frameworks, as Botting notes by remarking that “Gothic forms and effects are too limiting for Lovecraft’s mode of writing [...] Stories that begin in

gothic guise escalate into fantastic and extreme horrors.”⁴⁸ This is true of much *fin-de-siècle* weird; Hodgson’s *House on the Borderland*, for example, looks gothic and is presented, like Walpole’s *Otranto*, as an authentic manuscript that has been rediscovered and prepared by an editor. It is complete with an oppressive, uncanny building and an unreliable narrator haunted by a past loss, but its bizarre Swine-creatures, time travel sequences, and dreamy cosmic journeys burst that gothic frame. It *is* gothic, but gothic alone is not enough to account for it. This novel is also horror; it is also supernatural; it is also science fiction; in name and content, it is a “borderland” tale: it is weird.

China Miéville, for one, sees such genre bleed as critically valuable, enabling fantasy to provoke questioning of the world rather than retreat from it.⁴⁹ Miéville picks up where Botting leaves off, arguing that weird breaks radically with gothic and is “not just post-it, but is crucially anti-it.” He asks: “If a ghost is the enfigured monstrous of the uncanny, an inadequately batted-down guilt-function, what is Cthulhu?”⁵⁰ To address this, Miéville counterposes the weird to the “hauntological,” which is “the recurrence of that which we know and wish we did not” (and what cannot account for Cthulhu, neither known nor fully knowable).⁵¹ He proposes that the weird is not uncanny but “abcanny”; its monsters are the “teratological expressions of that unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning.”⁵² The weird draws on the past—Old Ones dormant for millennia in Lovecraft’s work, ancient worlds of cults, pagan gods, and “Little People” in Machen’s—but these histories and entities don’t depend on “the return of any repressed” or use “gothic’s strategy of revenge”; instead, the weird “back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself.”⁵³ In the storyworlds of weird tales, things that are new, unknown, and cannot be explained in relation to human concerns are being encountered for the first time, but yet have always existed, abhistories in which time, space, and the past are radically reconstructed in unfamiliar ways.

Weird encounters, then, derive from other times, places, or dimensions. “[T]he one test of the really weird,” Lovecraft continued in “Supernatural Horror,”

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 known universe’s utmost rim.⁵⁴

For this, Lovecraft is credited with introducing “cosmic horror” into speculative fiction, while the affect he describes is visible in many of the works he covers in this essay. Weird entities or events are not caused by human thought or action (although they may be found by them), and they do not operate within moral schema. They are attempts to “think about, and to confront the difficult thought of, the world-without-us,” which is, in Thacker’s formulation, the world with the human “subtract[ed]” from it. Calling it hostile attempts to comprehend it in human terms as a “world-for us,” while calling it indifferent recognises the “world-in-itself,” something that obtains without reference to us. The world-without-us “lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific.”⁵⁵ Yet we are drawn to it because it tells us something about our own limits as we confront it; supernatural horror enables “the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language.”⁵⁶

The Lovecraftian weird universe is a vast, incomprehensible, and indifferent place, without human teleology.⁵⁷ The weird is non-anthropocentric in the sense that its horrors are not punishments or judgements; that would be impossible in the world-without-us and given “that in the real fabric of the cosmos we are but the slightest insignificant thread.”⁵⁸ The original meaning of the word weird has now flipped entirely; rather than facing a ready-woven destiny, Miéville observes, we are confronted with its unravelling: “[t]he fact of the Weird is the fact that the worldweave is ripped and unfinished. Moth-eaten, ill-made. And that through the little tears, from behind the ragged edges, things are looking at us.”⁵⁹ Weird is not a consolatory form; it replaces a fatalistic totality with a cosmos decidedly *not* organised around the fulfilment of human narratives or fantasies. The “evils” of weird fiction are amoral and generalised forces; the narratives are not arranged around a binary of good and evil or according to a moral code. The menacing entities hovering around Hodgson’s Night Land or ushered into human bodies by Machen’s Dr. Raymond in *The Great God Pan* and Dr. Black in “The Inmost Light” (1894), for example, simply are; monsters are “innocently going about the business of being monsters.”⁶⁰ The narratives’ moral judgements may fall on the scientists, but not on the monsters they unleashed (terrible as her acts are, it is not Helen Vaughan’s fault that she is how she is). Science is implicated in this amoral construction of terror and often (as in *The Night*

Land) is explicitly blamed for unleashing it; or rather, a *certain version* of science is blamed, as I'll come to shortly.

One effect of a spreading materialist worldview was to undermine a sense of cosmic teleology, and in the weird, there is no moral guide to replace it, though often it is sought. For Mark Fisher, this effect is "eerie" (a mode he sees as distinct, though related to weird, and which I will for now fold into it), a state particularly bound up with questions of agency and characterised by "a failure of absence" or "a failure of presence."⁶¹ *Fin-de-siècle* sciences regularly generated such failures and produced eerie conditions. The *loss* or failure of presence of a consolatory human destiny, however, doesn't have to mean despair, but may prompt new ways of finding meaning in the world. Weird tales can also be motivated by an urge to convey "the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy."⁶² Implicit in the weird aesthetic is the potential for the phenomena breaching natural law to generate admiration and wonder, even if they might turn out to be insanely terrifying. Machen and Blackwood both understood the normal world to be concealing a miraculous and potentially ecstatic reality and it is only in some of their writings that this turns to horror.

In Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912), for example, Sophia Bittacy struggles against the seductive, terrifying "Collective Consciousness of the Forest" that consumes her husband, experiencing the sound of the trees as "a spell of horrible enchantment. They were so mild, each one alone, yet so terrific in their combination."⁶³ The story sustains an atmosphere of combined dread and awe, juxtaposing the trees' remorseless siege of Mrs. Bittacy's health and sanity with her husband's dreamy wonder and the bliss of tree-being, as they "tossed their bushy heads beneath the clouds with a wild, delighted shuffling of great boughs."⁶⁴ The weird's openness to the possibility of atmospheres that are expansive and uplifting, even while they are also terrible, produces a useful ambivalence. Narratives are sometimes left unclosed, with the mystery only partially solved or explained, purposely leaving room for strangeness in the world, as something worth keeping as part of reality even if it might be better not to get too close to it. Further, at least in Blackwood's scheme, nature itself is an actor and the overturning of human assumptions of supremacy and centrality is a progressive ecological move.

Approaching *fin-de-siècle* weird fictions as tales of possibility and opportunity offers one alternative to what some have seen as a productive but unduly dominant analytical paradigm of cultural anxiety in which popular Victorian fictions are valuable only or mainly for what they can reveal about nineteenth-century culture.⁶⁵ The monsters of gothic fiction can embody troubling concerns over gender roles, class structures, or the workings of the mind, for example, but under a weird lens, horrifying figures like Helen Vaughan or the monstrous animals of Wells and Hodgson can also be viewed as “promising monsters”⁶⁶; innovations and developments, albeit ones for which their contemporary world may not be ready.

When, and they are not always, weird monsters are physically embodied, their shapes are only partially recognisable. Even when looking like hybrids, like Pratchett’s horse-octopus, they are presented as indescribably different, as new corporeal forms rather than recreations of mythical creatures. The weird’s teratology, as Miéville describes it,

renounces all folkloric or traditional antecedents [...]. [T]heir constituent bodyparts are disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic, without mythic resonance. The spread of the tentacle – a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in “Western” aesthetics) – from a situation of near total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture.⁶⁷

The formless disintegration of the dying Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan* and the tentacled weed men and devil-fish of Hodgson’s *The Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig’* (1907) are examples of this radical monstrous.⁶⁸ Later, the “gelatinous” form of Cthulhu with its “writhing feelers,” and the transformed body of Wilbur Whateley, whose “odd” arrangement of tentacles “seemed to follow the symmetries of some cosmic geometry unknown to earth or the solar system,” follow the earlier split from conventional monstrosity.⁶⁹ Tentacles are notoriously prominent in depictions of weird monsters (again like Pratchett’s horse-octopus), and “[t]here is never just one tentacle, but many,” making cephalopods, for Thacker, into the epitome of inhuman alterity while also being anthropogenic creations of biological naming and classification.⁷⁰

Like science fiction, the weird often works closely with whatever are the current dominant knowledge systems, but sits closer to their limits, revelling in rather than avoiding the irrational or implausible. In fantasy

styles, the impossible does not have to be explained: fantasy is “not real,” although, as James and Mendlesohn point out, some fantasy tales may “have originated from the minds of people whose ideas about the location of the boundary between ‘real’ and ‘fantastic’ were different.”⁷¹ One culture’s supernatural may be another culture’s natural, much as nineteenth-century spiritualism explained the existence of a spirit world in rationalised, naturalised terms. As Fisher expresses it, discussing Lovecraft, although “ordinary naturalism – the standard, empirical world of common sense and Euclidean geometries – will be shredded by the end of each tale, it is replaced by a hypernaturalism – an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains.”⁷² Weird insists on the material basis of its world; any supernatural-seeming phenomena in weird fiction are but natural phenomena we cannot yet explain or understand.

For instance, in Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931), a staggering recreation of knowledge and reality is asserted while incomprehensible mystery is simultaneously maintained. The truths of the cosmos to which Wilmarth is exposed bring him “dangerously close to the arcana of basic entity – never was an organic brain nearer to utter annihilation in the chaos that transcends form and force and symmetry.”⁷³ Wilmarth presents what he “learned,” “guessed,” or “was told” as a set of firm truths of which he has been totally convinced, while at the same time these secrets from the edge of sanity remain opaque and withheld from the reader: “I learned whence Cthulhu *first* came, and why half the great temporary stars of history had fired forth. I guessed – from hints which made even my informant pause timidly – the secrets behind the Magellanic Clouds and globular nebulae” (216). “Behind” this screen of language, however, is where the secrets of what, whence, and why remain.

Those secrets depend for their awesome terror both on their suggestion of the cosmos as monstrous on a vast scale and on the inability of language to represent those secrets as anything other than hints and secrets. “No other writer,” Graham Harman argues, “is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess.”⁷⁴ The unknowability of the weird is closely tied to its unspeakability. Monstrosity can be “natural” and yet remain terrifyingly mysterious, a real part of the way the world is and a sign that more remains beyond our understanding. Weird monsters are attempts to represent the truly unknown. Operating under laws we can never properly know, understand, or challenge, the most terrible of weird horrors lie beyond our ability to destroy, although they may be

temporarily contained, evaded, or held off; it is possible to kill Dracula and defeat Sauron, but in his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming. Irreducible terrors, radical embodiments, reconstructed abhistories, and reshaped spaces and materials are all characteristics of weird.

Fin-de-siècle weird narratives may also retreat from such radical confrontations, but they do stage progressive or subversive possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and being, whether wonderful or terrifying, that can't be wholly undone. It has been suggested that weird fiction of the early twentieth century represents a parallel to high modernism: a "pulp modernism," responding to the same cultural crises as high modernism, "shadows the modernist avant-garde and replicates its autocritique of modernity in crisis."⁷⁵ William Touponce argues similarly, that in the stories of Dunsany, Lovecraft, and Bradbury "the experience of the supernatural is linked in complex ways to the experience of society under capitalism."⁷⁶ In this sense, weird tales offer a different kind of worldly knowledge, using genre to produce it. Fisher points out that "to those of us in a globally tele-connected capitalist world," forces that are "not fully available to our sensory apprehension" (like capital) nonetheless have very meaningful agency.⁷⁷ Scientific authority, as we will see, does too.

Weird fiction joins other kinds of writing in the attempt to find ways of understanding and representation to cope (or attempt to cope) with changes and shocks to the social world. In this book, I investigate how weird fiction at the *fin de siècle* offers challenges to forms of hegemony and mastery through its treatments of science, including its uses of radical, weird dimensions discernable within sciences themselves.

SCIENTIFIC BORDERLANDS

In a review of *The Great God Pan*, the *Glasgow Herald* declared that: "Nothing more striking or more skilful than this book has been produced in the way of what one may call Borderland fiction since Mr Stevenson's [...] Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde."⁷⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson died in Samoa in December 1894, and an obituary by Alexander Cargill appeared in a new spiritualist and psychical research journal established the previous year by W. T. Stead: *Borderland* (1893–1897).

Cargill describes Stevenson as "first among the romancers of our time because he dwelt in Borderland."⁷⁹ The "borderland," usually, referred to the spirit world, and Stead expresses complete confidence in it in the Preface to the journal's first volume: