

## Book Review

Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*  
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**L**OVECRAFTIAN. A TERM USED TO describe a story evocative of, or inspired by, the works of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. Given his widening influence in genre fiction, it is also a term increasingly in vogue. But what do we mean when we say that a short story or novel (or even a poem) is Lovecraftian? In his creative, original take on the possible philosophical implications of Lovecraft's fiction, Graham Harman gives us some clues as to what is meant and implied by the term.

For Harman, there are two philosophical approaches to reality. One is to see a harmony and unity in all things. The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers are a good example of this tendency (Anaximenes, one of the well-known Milesian philosophers, believed everything was essentially reducible to the element water). The other direction is to see division, or as Harman puts it, “gaps” in the nature of reality. In contrast

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to a kind of reductionism witnessed in the monism of Anaximenes, he calls this *productionism*, and this is how he understands Lovecraft: “No other writer,” he says “is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the qualities they possess.” (3)

If there is an essential element that captures the term “Lovecraftian” it is this: the idea that reality is a whole lot weirder and more terrifying than it is possible to understand and, even more so, than it is possible to describe. It is what Harman calls the “notion of a purely oblique access to genuine reality.” (262) Instead of a species of representational realism, with Lovecraft we only have nominal access (in so far as it is possible, which it isn’t) to “weird realism”; as Harman puts it “reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurate with any attempt to represent or measure it.” (51)

Lovecraft, Harman argues, is a writer whose style and content form a unity that speaks (almost wordlessly) to the inherently unknowable weirdness of reality. Harman suggests this has larger philosophical consequences: “Through his [Lovecraft’s] assistance we may be able to learn about how to say something without saying it - or, in philosophical terms, how to love wisdom without having it. When it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do.” (51) In order to explore this assertion, Harman analyzes one hundred passages from a selection of Lovecraft’s best-known stories. This is an effective technique and allows him to deconstruct particular passages in detail and slowly develop a rich canvas of Lovecraft’s most characteristic themes and their philosophical relevance.

The first of these passages introduces us to the importance of *time*, particularly a sense of time in the mythos Lovecraft develops that makes all of human history, and the existence of the human species, seem but a glimmer in a cold, eternal and uncaring universe. Haunting as this notion is, an even more arresting discontinuity is the nature of *space* or, more specifically, the incongruous objects that make up this space. Lovecraft is a writer who challenges our basic rational categories and the ability to apprehend the world in a knowable way. Even geometry, the basic shape of space, is subject to uncertainty:

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“Nothing is more Lovecraftian than his repeated vague assaults on the assumptions of normal three-dimensional space and its interrelations [...] could [anything] be more threatening than the notion that something is ‘all wrong’ in the presumed spatial contours on which all human thought and action is based.” (71) In his description in “The Call of Cthulhu” of an “acute” angle that “behaved as if it were obtuse”, Lovecraft offers us the possibility of geometry beyond geometry.

Harman sees as quintessentially Lovecraftian these types of fascinating disjunctions and juxtapositions in his descriptive style. Lovecraft is the purveyor *par excellence* of the bizarre and unknowable. But he does suggest that some beings - those with particular sensitivities and, at times, even animals - can instinctually grasp aspects of the malevolent manifestations of the multiverse he describes through tangential allusions and disjointed cubist pastiche. Harman actually speaks of an asymmetrical form of description in Lovecraft he cleverly dubs “literary cubism.” (234) He consistently characterizes Lovecraft’s style as soaked in allusions, vagaries, incongruity and a general lack of real, true clarity or knowledge. In this manner, Harman builds the case for Lovecraft as a master proponent of “weird” realism.

It is this brief glimmer of insight into the “monstrous nuclear chaos” that Lovecraft puts one in touch with. Harman reminds us that with Lovecraft we enter a weird world where the conventional frameworks of science are insufficient and even inane. Science falls dumb in the face of Lovecraftian forms (which are often “formless”), “color by analogy”, beings that challenge standard biological taxonomies, and objects whose very substance defy clear categorization.

As readers, Harman argues, we find ourselves in a similar place as Dr. Dyer in “At the Mountains of Madness”: “.. it marked my loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature’s laws.” (164) Thankfully, much of this incongruous and inconceivable “weird” reality behind our own is largely concealed from us by our banal perceptions. In this respect, perhaps one of

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Lovecraft's most telling passages is the opening line of "The Call of Cthulhu": "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far." (169) Indeed, as Harman notes at various points, many of the narrators in Lovecraft's stories "live on a placid island of ignorance" - they are generally far more rigidly rational and disbelieving, and also more obtuse, than the reader.

And yet, as rational and as "scientific" as these narrators often are, they are on a parallel path of discovery with the mystics and occultists and eventually catch up with the reader in what usually end up as tragic-comic results. Here again we find another interesting Lovecraftian trope - the idea that the conventional schism between science and superstition (i.e. the occult), rooted in a caricature of Enlightenment virtues, is invalid. Science, in fact, is merely a more plodding approach to grasping brief vignettes of the vast and incomprehensible cosmos. In this respect, instinctual and intuitive insights outpace rational ones. It is in dreams and the realm of the unconscious where true glimpses of the weirdness of reality lie.

There is also some genuine literary critique in Harman's treatment of Lovecraft. He suggests a repetitiveness and dwindling stylistic spark in his analysis of "A Shadow Out of Time," a later story he argues starts to lose touch with the essence of the Lovecraftian in its more obvious and direct tone. As he says: "Lovecraft works best when *hinting*, not when explicitly declaring or blandly listing." (223)

So what, then, does all this have to do with philosophy, and what hints do Lovecraft's stories provide as to our condition in the world? Harman argues that Lovecraft, and more specifically the Lovecraftian style, can provide insight into what he calls "ontography" - thinking that deals with the interaction between objects and their qualities. Harman is a proponent of object-oriented philosophy (OOP), a new wave in philosophy that attempts to deal with the tensions between conventional conceptions of realism and a contemporary idealism heavily

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influenced by structuralism and symbolist views. Essentially, Harman argues that with Lovecraft we have a

reality where there are always incongruities between our descriptions of objects and the objects themselves: “We have repeatedly encountered the classic Lovecraftian gesture in which an entity is described as having certain properties while also being said to resist description by these very properties, as if such details were able to give us nothing more than a hopelessly vague approximation.” (237)

This happens in two distinct directions. One is in a *fusion* - and here the parallel is made with (mis)understandings of “space”. Harman’s quintessential example of this comes from the description of the Cthulhu idol in “The Call of Cthulhu”: “If I may say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing...but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.” (57) Harman argues at various points that rather than a simple chimera-like amalgam of these three qualities that emerges in stereotypical depictions of Cthulhu in contemporary contexts, we are actually at a loss to fully imagine the object, for these descriptors only make up a general outline, which “never quite crystallizes for the reader into a palpable sensual object.” (237) In this respect, we face the same problem with all objects that are ultimately always more than a fusion; always more than a recitation of their various qualities. After all, with a little imagination our list of qualities of even the simplest objects can conceivably extend out to infinity.

The other direction this apprehension of objects moves is towards *fission*, which “splits the usual relation between an accessible sensual thing and its accessible sensual qualities.” (241) These are the disjointed cubist-inspired descriptions of objects Lovecraft offers which carve them up into various qualities that never come to constitute a unified whole. He ties this phenomenon to *time*, noting that “this is precisely what our experience of time involves - the fluctuations of

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numerous qualities around somewhat enduring (but not permanent) objects that remain the same throughout those fluctuations.” (242) This reminds one of philosopher Henri Bergson’s concepts of *duration* and lived time. Bergson was fascinated by the way in which scientific attempts to break time into regular segments failed to fully capture the elusive nature of its particular flow and totality. Only an act of intuition, not reason, allows us to come to grips with time’s ineffable qualities. In this sense, time is an object encased within this elusive state of fission.

Using these categories and further discussions of the “taxonomic fallacy” (i.e. the argument that understanding objects merely in terms of their relations and origins within a given system (social, cultural, economic) is also insufficient), Harman builds a case for both the importance and the ultimately unknowable nature of objects. This then becomes a characteristic of the world itself, and not just our descriptions of it. He thus makes a lateral move from literature to metaphysics: “Irony and paradox cannot be local particularities of literature then, but are an ontological structure permeating the cosmos.” (248)

Like characters in a Lovecraftian tale, Harman argues we live in a world full of “gaps” - of “black holes” - which are produced when we are deprived of access to the real objects that lurk beneath perception. This may be a frustrating limit to some, and can be seen to have meaningful consequences for epistemology and our general understanding of Nature. But if the Lovecraftian paradigm is to be believed in any respect then our lack of knowledge and inability to fully “see” are blessings in disguise. When it comes to the unfathomable cosmos and the objects Lovecraft has seen fit to populate it with, ignorance is bliss.