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Weird Tales – Weird Worlds

The weird tale offers unique opportunities for philosophical speculation [...].

S. T. Joshi

In this essay I occupy myself with two subjects or problems: 1) to what extent narrativity presupposes anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, i.e. some forms of man-centeredness and some type of man-likeness; I will posit that a definition of narrativity cannot be entirely free from anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism (which I will collectively call humanness). To argue this point, I will take a close look at the idea of the weird tale in order to see 2) whether its purported non- or even anti-humanness can be held up as a viable departure from the man-centeredness of traditional narrative art, i.e. the manner in which authors such as Austen and Dickens occupy themselves with life-like and familiar figures and are concerned with issues to which their readers will readily relate and which engage their attention, elicit their emotional involvement, and do not leave them morally indifferent. The weird tale's project (and the philosophy that infuses it) has been to shift emphasis; i.e. to question the supremacy of humanity in the order of things and to reinstitute Nature, or an unknown cosmos, in its place. Our goal here is to examine how viable such a project is; does the idea of narrativity allow this kind of shift of emphasis?

For a definition (and parameters) of narrativity I will go to Marie-Laure Ryan and her succinct listing of elements constitutive of narrativity (or "conditions"). For the idea of the weird tale, I will go to studies by S. T. Joshi, chiefly one: *The Weird Tale* (1990).¹ As exemplary literary

¹ S. T. Joshi has also edited numerous collections of stories by the "weird" authors for Penguin.

material, I will use stories analysed by those authors that Joshi regards as representative for the weird genre; the six chapters of *The Weird Tale* are devoted to the genre's six classic representatives: Arthur Machen (1863–1947), Lord Dunsany (1878–1957), Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951), M. R. James (1862–1936), Ambrose Bierce (1842–1913), and H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937).²

Late 19th-century fiction shows a fascination with Nature, not only because it offered respite from the social and political troubles of the day, but also because of the way it helped to redefine humanity. A Sherlock Holmes story, “The Speckled Band” (from 1892), will help us to usher in some of the issues that have to do with literary representations of the natural world in literary texts and the roles natural – as opposed to human – objects can play in a narrative. This choice may be thought somewhat counterproductive. By definition, a detective story (or, more broadly, a mystery story) excludes the possibility of other than a natural solution to the mystery. In particular cases, however, one is tempted to ask what exactly is meant by “natural.” In “The Speckled Band,” a snake, after (and thanks to) having undergone special training, is used to commit murder. This is an idea that supplies the final solution of the case, but also one that only vaguely presented itself to the mind of Sherlock Holmes. And so, the scene of discovery is here at once a scene of confrontation; the detective and his friend find themselves almost literally groping in the dark (and the reader metaphorically so) before they discover the “natural” culprit, which turns out to be a “swamp adder”: a “creature from India” (“‘It is a swamp adder!’ cried Holmes – ‘the deadliest snake in India’.”³) that has been kept in a safe, has been trained by the human culprit, an evil doctor, to drink milk, to “crawl” up and down a rope, and to respond to the sound of a whistle.⁴

In the story, this odd snake is instrumental in committing what the villain thinks and hopes to be a perfect crime. To Sir Arthur Conan Doyle the snake must have conveyed the idea for a perfect crime-and-

² The most representative tales include: Machen's “The Inmost Light” (1894), “The White People” (1894), “The Great God Pan” (1894); Dunsany's “The Gods of Pegāna” (1905), “Time and the Gods” (1906), and “In the Land of Time” (1906); Blackwood's “The Willows” (1907; according to Lovecraft “almost a model of what a weird tale ought to be” (in a letter), “A Descent into Egypt” (1914; from *Incredible Adventures*; according to Joshi “perhaps Blackwood's finest single work”).

³ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Speckled Band,” in: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 195.

⁴ The snake is un-natural in two senses: 1. it has been trained to perform actions that are the inventions of his human owner; 2. it is of a species that has not been recorded. The second aspect lies outside the fictive world of the short story; within it we are expected to believe that it does exist (Holmes identifies it at the end of the story).

detection story. Yet the idea is not entirely unobjectionable. The reader, accustomed to and led by generic conventions, certainly expected to be supplied with a natural solution of the mystery, but – and here pops up the detective-reader analogy – would not go as far as to *devise* an unheard-of – perhaps un-natural – species (“the swamp adder”),⁵ which is exactly what the author has done. But the swamp adder, no matter how deadly in itself and by nature, as it were, represents the scope of human (both the culprit’s and the villain’s, albeit in different ways) interference in the natural world and the threats that such interference may generate.

“The Speckled Band” may be compared to that famous story about “doctor” Frankenstein and his uncanny experimentation. Clearly, a creature belonging to the order of Nature, no matter how deadly in itself and “by nature,” has sustained here an odd deformation to suit and realise the perverse purposes of its human owner. Sherlock Holmes is convinced – and has no difficulty in convincing us – that a medical doctor (or any natural scientist), when his thoughts turn towards evil, is the most dangerous of criminals.⁶ Conan Doyle does not explain why, but surely the reader can easily figure this out for herself.

The definition of literary weirdness derives from H. P. Lovecraft, who in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* describes the weird tale as a type of “fear-literature.” Lovecraft goes on to say that the genre’s aim is to convey “the true sense of the morbidly unnatural.” “The literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense” has to have in it “a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint [...] 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 dæmons of unplumbed space.”⁷ These and similar statements make it clear that the weird tale is un-natural: supernatural, extra-natural, perhaps even counter-natural. They also express the idea that the weird tale is

⁵ In the words of the Norton editor of the Sherlock Holmes stories: “The identity of the breed of snake termed a ‘swamp adder’ by Holmes – a name by which no snake is commonly known – is debated widely, and no candidate seems to possess all of the characteristics described.” *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), vol. 1, p. 259 (appendix to the story).

⁶ “Ah, me! it’s a wicked world, and when a clever man turns his brain to crime it is the worst of all.” And then: “When a doctor does go wrong, he is the first of criminals.” Holmes is the speaker in both these cases. Conan Doyle, “The Speckled Band,” pp. 189 and 192.

⁷ Quoted in S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1990), p. 6 (“Introduction”). In weird tales, the “brain” would be the mind of the narrator, and thus what matters is what it asserts as a fact.

decidedly and essentially counter-human; its defining movement is away from a man-centred and man-friendly world and towards a nightmarish one, a world inhabited by demons, a world that from our limited perspective is an anarchic chaos rather than a laws-obeying cosmos. A “weird” author steps beyond the reality as defined by, and operating according to, “fixed laws of Nature.” There is, besides, the suggestion that those laws have been *devised* as a “safeguard” against “chaos” and “demons.” In other words, the world that we inhabit (and the idea of Nature in general) is a reflection of human concerns (fears, basically and ultimately), and thus may have little to do with the “unplumbed space,” the “great beyond” out there; they are anthropomorphic in that they reflect, not so much Nature and the laws that govern it, as our anxieties or our despair at not being able to know and govern it. The cosmos may have been explored, but has not been penetrated or “plumbed.”⁸ Weird narratives offer us glimpses into a reality that perhaps is more real than the cosy but insignificant and brittle daylight world that we inhabit.⁹

The principal movement in a weird tale is thus eccentric;¹⁰ a weird author’s goal is to destabilise (perhaps even to undermine and negate) the central position that the human being (humanity) has occupied so far, i.e. as an entity (race) towards whom the cosmos gravitates and whom all things serve. The weird tale is thus programmatically cosmo- rather than anthropocentric; the spirit that animates literary weirdness can be described as counter-anthropocentric, in the ontological sense.¹¹ There are

⁸ “To plumb” is “to examine,” or “to probe” and specifically “to be able to understand something that seems mysterious or perplexing” (adapted from dictionaries made available by the Microsoft word processor).

⁹ As critics have described it, Lovecraft’s stance has involved a denial of the supernatural in its traditional man-centred sense: “the focus of supernatural dread [has been transferred] from man and his little world and his gods, to the stars and the black and unplumbed gulfs of intergalactic space.” Fritz Leiber, “A Literary Copernicus” (1949), quoted in S. T. Joshi, *A Subtler Magic. The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* (Berkeley Heights: Wildside Press, 1999), p. 137. Joshi comments: “by simply having his entities come from some remote corner of the universe, he [Lovecraft] could attribute nearly any physical properties to them and not be required to give a plausible explanation for them” (same page). The question of course remains: What manner of entities?

¹⁰ Eccentricity in its original and etymological sense is related to astronomy; “eccentric” means “out of the centre.” Hence the suggestion of deviation from norm, rule or custom, as in the case of an eccentric person.

¹¹ Hence the term “cosmicism”; see S. T. Joshi, *A Dreamer and a Visionary. H. P. Lovecraft and His Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p. 182. Here Joshi distinguishes the following aspects of Lovecraft’s philosophy: “Cosmicism is at once a metaphysical position (an awareness of the vastness of the universe in both space and time), an ethical position (an awareness of the insignificance of human beings within the realm of the universe), and an aesthetic position (a literary expression of this

no ties of kinship or friendship that bind man and Nature; the so-called laws of Nature, because they are in themselves anthropocentric, will not protect man from the unknown – and possibly sinister – forces (energies, entities, etc.). Because of our irreparable ignorance, we may suspect that those forces may not – will perhaps *refuse* to – obey those laws. The weird tale is a narrative in which we witness (and which recounts) a suspension of the so-called “laws of Nature” as we know it (them). At some point in the narrative we observe Nature’s refusal to play by the rules, so to speak.

In a classic tale of this kind, “The Willows” (1907)¹² by Blackwood, the trees named in the title turn into (rather, turn out to be) sinister, indeed life-threatening, beasts of some sort. This is how the narrator attempts to convey his sense of their uncanniness:

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. Some sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague horror. (section I)

Soon enough, something like an actual assault on the two travellers along the desolate banks of the Danube (the story’s “natural” setting) occurs:

There, in front of the dim glow, something was moving. I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theater – hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede [the narrator’s companion], too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface – “coiling upon itself like smoke,” he said afterwards. [...]

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches.

insignificance, to be effected by the minimizing of human character and the display of the titanic gulfs of space and time.”

¹² An electronic version of the text can be found at the Gutenberg Project website (www.gutenberg.org). This is the source for my quotations.

[...] I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die. (section III)

The element of threat from the unknown forces, lurking in the natural objects that surround the two human protagonists, becomes more and more real, no matter how difficult it is for the narrator – for the reasons that we have already hinted at – to say where exactly the threat resides or what exactly causes him to be terrified. The gradual progress of whatever lurks in nature (“the willows” in this particular case, in their anti-human alliance with the river) to the position of eventual ascendancy – this is what sums up the direction of the narrative; this is where Blackwood is headed, so to speak. To put this differently, the story is devised as an exemplification of one of the protagonist’s beliefs, his intuitions of weirdness, as we might address them. Early in the story, he communicates them to his companion in this manner:

“All my life,” he said, “I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region – not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind – where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; [...]”

What will occupy us for the remainder of this essay is the relation between literary and ontological weirdness, with the latter’s implications for morals. Lovecraft’s definitions expose the ontological and epistemological assumptions of literary weirdness. Again, these two aspects are in correspondence. In terms of ontology, the world – “Nature” out there – is not what we, benighted mortals, think it to be. In terms of epistemology, *because we are benighted mortals*, the world (“the cosmos,” a term Lovecraft prefers to “nature,” perhaps due to its man-alienating tenor) must remain a riddle for us.¹³ For the sake of simplicity and to

¹³ As Joshi sees this, epistemology comes before ontology in a genre that he calls “quasi science fiction,” and which “implies that that the ‘supernatural’ is not *ontological* but *epistemological*: it is only our ignorance of certain ‘natural laws’ that creates the illusion of supernaturalism” (Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 7; Joshi’s emphasis). Joshi uses the

acknowledge the parentage of the idea, I will henceforth refer to this sense of weirdness as “cosmic weirdness.” The weird tale in this way enlarges reality in proportion to the way it diminishes man’s cognitive capacity. The question now is, to what extent the weird tale is like any other tale. Rephrased in the jargon of narrative theory, the question is this: Do tales that contain an element of cosmic weirdness and that depict the manifestation of cosmic weirdness (bring cosmic weirdness to appearance, as we might also put it) conform to some basic principles of narrativity? What exactly is literary weirdness?

Already at the outset we can be more specific about “some basic principles” and narrow the problem down to humanness as an (indispensable?) element of narrativity. A narrative that belongs to the realistic convention is not only man-oriented but also fulfils the basic condition that appertains to the plausibility of the natural world. In the case of a weird tale, the categories of the possible, the probable, the plausible, the verisimilar – i.e. categories that we customarily apply to realistic fiction – fail to apply.¹⁴ The world of a Sherlock Holmes story conforms – and conforms out of principle – to the realistic condition of naturality; the detective’s motto and principal method is to “exhaust all natural explanations” of the mystery.¹⁵ A snake serving as a death-

term “quasi science fiction” to describe “Lovecraft’s work” (p. 9). As distinct from fantasy (represented by Dunsany), the weird tale of the Lovecraftian type has the goal, in Joshi’s phrasing, “to inspire the sentiment of ontological horror” (ibidem). As at least one, perhaps even a major, source of this type of horror, we can name the radical and consistent naturalness of cosmicism, i.e. the elimination of any kind of “supernaturalism.”

¹⁴ As stated in Sherlock Holmes’s maxim, “when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Beryl Coronet,” in: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 268.

¹⁵ “Of course, if [...] we are dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of Nature, there is an end of our investigation. But we are bound to exhaust all other hypotheses before falling back upon this one.” Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 27–28. In this chapter of the *Hound* novella, Conan Doyle addresses the problem of “supernaturalism.” The basic resemblance – with regard to how animate nature is used to commit crime – between “The Speckled Band” and *The Hound* is obvious. The respective culprits have a lot in common; Stapleton is introduced to the reader as a “naturalist” (18). Doctor Mortimer, another man of science, describes himself, self-effacingly, through an allusion to Newton’s often-quoted words: “a picker up of shells on the shores of the great unknown ocean” (p. 8). In the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* we read in Victor’s confession: “I have described myself as always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature. [...] I always came from my studies discontented and unsatisfied. Sir Isaac Newton is said to have avowed that he felt like a child picking up shells beside the great and unexplored ocean of truth.” Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*. The 1818 Text (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 210 (chapter 2). This may illustrate that the idea of “unplumbed cosmos” was not entirely Lovecraft’s invention; however, Lovecraft’s idea

inflicting implement may be an odd thing, but the “swamp adder” is (said to be) a thing of nature, inasmuch as India, “exotic” and remote as it may be (geographically, culturally, and “biologically”) from Western civilisation, is a part of the world as we know it.¹⁶ In a sharp contrast to a typical mystery story of the detective type, the weird tale makes us question our very idea of what is natural; we are made to explore another side of nature, usually, of course, a sinister or openly hostile one, to contemplate (or admit) the possibility that Nature is not a man-friendly habitat. This, on the other hand, in a Sherlock Holmes story is inconceivable, because the investigation only makes sense if the laws of Nature are and remain inviolate. The first and basic rule for the detective is, logically, to exhaust all possibilities of solving the mystery without recourse to supernatural, preternatural or otherwise otherworldly agency: “The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply.”¹⁷

What do we mean when we speak of narrativity and its defining features or functions? Here we shall use a shortcut and avail ourselves of a ready-to-hand definition supplied by Marie-Laure Ryan in her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Ryan names the following eight features (she uses the word “conditions,” which makes explicit the normative aspect of her definition) as constitutive of narrativity (I do not use quotation marks to avoid confusion):

1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.
2. This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.
3. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.
4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
5. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.

of ontological weirdness admits the possibility of a world in which laws of “our” world do not obtain, a world which is no longer Nature.

¹⁶ There is a degree of tension between the two perspectives: ontological and epistemological. What we (readers) regard as natural (located within the system called Nature) depends on our knowledge of the world. To posit the scientific “picture” of the world as a standard for what “we” understand as Nature is problematic: How many readers are scientists?

¹⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Sussex Vampire,” in: *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 73.

6. The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.
7. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.
8. The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience.¹⁸

Some of Ryan's features or "conditions" are not directly related to the issue in hand; others are, or at least seem to be. On the whole, Ryan has made some effort to cleanse her definition of narrativity of suggestions of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Thus, only the last condition (8) is overtly anthropocentric: Stories must be about things that are not indifferent to their readers, an idea that makes the human recipient into something like a hub or axis of narrative gravitation. At the same time, this condition is "pragmatic" and thus extratextual in that it does not concern, unlike all the other ones, the content (in a broad sense of the term) of stories, i.e. what stories should be about.¹⁹ Moreover, depending on the understanding of the unhelpfully broad meaning of the term "meaningful," condition 8 might be seen as a gesture towards an engagement with *moral* issues that readers expect in stories; we do not wish to read stories that leave us morally indifferent to what they depict. We shall return to this possibility towards the end of this essay.

In my opinion, Ryan's effort to avoid explicit humanness is largely misspent. Anthropomorphism peeps out despite the repeated attempts at its concealment. To make this distinct, I rephrase the conditions so as to reveal the assumptions to do with an idea of humanness behind the seemingly "clean" (broader than human) list of conditions:

- a. The story world must be populated by human beings or beings (individuals) that have the basic features of humanity (chiefly: the capacity to act freely, intelligence, and emotional responsiveness; as stipulated below).
- b. Significant events and states of affair that make up the story must be asserted as real and concern (be of significance to and elicit emotional

¹⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 29–30. Ryan groups the conditions into the following four dimensions: "spatial" (1), "temporal" (2 and 3), "mental" (4 and 5), and "formal and pragmatic" (6, 7, and 8).

¹⁹ Condition 7 sounds slightly problematic, because it is not clear who should perform the task of asserting. In my opinion, in order for a story to work, and in particular, in order that it might fulfil condition 8, both the characters and the readers must be sure that it is not (not entirely at least) about imaginary events and agents but ones that are real within the ontological parameters of the fictive world projected by the story.

response from) the human beings that inhabit the storyworld; some of these events must be brought about by these beings acting as free and intelligent agents.²⁰

- c. Significant events must succeed one another (on the plane of “story” or *fabula*) and be connected causally; events brought about by human agency must be part of this causal chain.

To restate the opinion already expressed, this reformulation of the features of narrativity does not do violence to the basic insights expressed in Ryan’s definition. The main purpose has been to remove the ambiguity inherent in the ultimately futile attempt to conceal or perhaps altogether cancel (shut out) the orientation of narrativity to humanness. It should now be obvious that an idea of what it means to be a human being (note the three features in a. above) permeates Ryan’s definition, and it is my belief that it simply makes more sense to accept and disclose it rather than deny and conceal it.

The proposed reformulation (a reinsertion of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism) does not cancel what Ryan has evidently wished to leave as an open possibility; that there can be stories that are not about people but about some other types of beings or creatures; and that we can and do find such stories meaningful (capable of engaging our moral sentiments) and entertaining. I am ready to agree that we need to go beyond “people,” but at the same time I am prepared to insist that we cannot go beyond “human” or – more awkwardly – “man-like.” A fable by Aesop, to reach for a simple but not necessarily simplistic example, is meaningful (instructive) and entertaining because we easily see (a human element) through the veil of beast allegory. A story about the sinking of the Titanic summed up as “ship hits iceberg – ship sinks – people drown” does not meet the condition of purposeful involvement (point b.). If the script for the 1997 film *Titanic* is to supply us with illustrative material, then a summary of it, let alone close examination, will soon reveal that the story *is not really* about the catastrophe. This and similar disaster stories are about human interactions, to which some dramatic

²⁰ What we mean by human agency in the strict and narrow sense of the term is behaviour that is non-habitual. Breathing as different from smoking is habitual and does not involve agency while smoking (even though it is a habit) does. To stop breathing is a decision and thus an instance of agency; similarly to the “operation” that can be described as non-smoking (the decision to refrain from smoking, e.g. by a habitual smoker). It is obvious that we cannot describe agency in this sense to the “swamp adder” or the “spectral hound,” and the murderous actions (largely habitual, reflecting the training at the hands of the culprit) that these creatures perform must be traced back to a human agent to be made sense of, i.e. to be understood as an action, an event that in this sense is unnatural.

events (brought about by “natural” forces, operating beyond human control) serve as a backdrop; they meet the conditions of narrativity only insofar as there is space in them, no matter how small, for emotional responsiveness, intellectual involvement, and goal-pursuing agency. By the same token, a zombie story must contain, besides the usual monsters that have retained only the vestiges of humanity (some sort of blind, dogged purposiveness), human agents and depict interactions between them.²¹ Because of this, a zombie film or story will be quite like a typical disaster film or story; indeed, zombification is usually a by-product of some disaster.

Let us now return to literary and ontological weirdness in order to see if there are areas of possible disagreement between our definition of narrativity and the weird tale. Does this definition admit of weirdness? Does it exclude it? Does it imply an ontology of non-weird worlds and impose limitations on the extent of weirdness permissible in a story? What is the relation (is it one of accord, discord or indifference) between weirdness and humanness? Finally, what are we supposed to do with the moral interest of stories, exactly the aspect that weird authors programmatically ignore?

Our definition of narrativity stipulates that human agency is required as a condition for narrativity; stories must posit individualised and freely acting “existents,” equipped with intelligence and capable of a range of emotional responses. The literary material in hand suggests the possibility that existents represented as other than human are endowed with features of humaneness. Conan Doyle’s “swamp adder” can be interpreted as an extension (instrument, prosthesis) of human agency, which to an extent justifies the otherwise preposterous idea of “enriching” Nature with a species whose only *raison d’être* seems to be to assist in the execution of someone’s evil designs. The story’s villain is the source of the element of unnaturalness; he has trained the snake so as to be able to act through it. To this extent the snake has ceased to be natural, having been warped by a human (inhuman?) proclivity toward evil.

How different is the situation in a typical weird tale such as “The Willows”? For one thing, in “The Speckled Band,” regardless of the element of weirdness inherent in the snake, a person is the centre of

²¹ For precisely the same reasons, the Frankenstein monster, although an early (in terms of literary history) reanimated corpse, meets the criteria of humanness: intelligence, emotional responsiveness, and non-habitual agency. This, paradoxically, makes it possible for him to turn into a monster in the moral sense of the word, i.e. to stifle his benevolence and turn into a fiend (a kind of a psychopath, to use contemporary parlance): “I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery.” Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 111.

agency (and of narrative interest). This is not the case in “The Willows,” where the principal agent is a non-human existent, i.e. willows. In other sample tales, their place is occupied by Egypt, deities of nature, gods from outer space, ghosts and demons. While in a “weird” Sherlock Holmes story human agents (good and evil) shape the course of events, in a weird tale human characters are cast in the roles of victims; are more acted upon than acting (to rephrase King Lear’s line about being “more sinned against than sinning”). For this reason, the weird tale is permeated by animism and may be seen as an expression of (and a relapse into) the childlike belief that inanimate objects are endowed with human features. This, however, does not remove humanness; a childlike world-picture is anthropomorphic and anthropocentric to such an extent that it does not admit of Nature as a reality devoid of human features. But we must not forget about the element that for Lovecraft was constitutive of ontological (and by implication also of literary) weirdness, that of “cosmic dread.” This brings us to the condition of narrativity that, as we have suggested, a definition such as that put forth by Ryan – in a rather miscalculated attempt at objectivity (read: non-humanness) – leaves aside.

The disturbing deficiency of our definition of narrativity is that it excludes the moral dimension. We have already made this observation. This was an important concern for “weird” authors (what Joshi calls Lovecraft’s ethical position, an integral part of his cosmicism). Their comprehensive, liberal or simply open notion of Nature has caused them to disallow unnaturalness. In the words of one of Blackwood’s characters, “There is nothing anywhere – unnatural.”²² In a rephrasing by Joshi, “all phenomena are equally ‘natural’ parts of the cosmos.”²³ This, I think, is what is truly weird about literary weirdness; the response of the reader (as expected by the authors) is inadequate. Lovecraft’s consistent “cosmicism” is, as we have seen, materialistic; there is no room for the supernatural and it is thus logically eliminated. The term “supernormal” has been proposed; as Joshi explains: “It is only our ignorance of certain ‘natural laws’ that creates the illusion of supernaturalism.”²⁴ The weird tale – it would seem – elicits a change of perspective in the reader, which will allow him/her to embrace the possibility that chaos can ultimately be another type of cosmos.

Joshi is right in saying that the weird tale opens interesting opportunities for philosophising, but the manner in which this genre excludes a moral dimension should give us pause. The weird tale makes conspicuous

²² From *Pan’s Garden* (1912), quoted in Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 104.

²³ Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 104.

²⁴ Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, p. 7; already quoted.

the way in which the distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” can be eliminated from our understanding of narrativity. The idea of “cosmic fear” suggests that what weird stories depict is inimical to humanity; fear, however, is an instinctive, and therefore natural, response to whatever poses a threat to life as we know and value it. The idea of the unnatural (as well as that of the inhuman) has thus a significant pragmatic (and, by implication, also moral) function, regardless of how problematic it may sound semantically. The story of the Frankenstein monster, sad as it is, is a story about the human instinctual elimination of all that *looks* inhuman; it is, in other words, a story about our innate anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism.

Ontological weirdness is not really about the laws of Nature, but about moral laws, to the extent to which these correspond to Nature. Morality, however, ceases to make sense if Nature “acts” in ways that to us seem incomprehensible. Weirdness thus seems to be about unnaturalness in the moral sense, and this is simply what we mean by evil. As a point of departure – and a constraint to be overcome – the weird tale posits a close connection (interdependence: kinship, friendliness) between Nature and man; this (romantically) is a source of morality, as in Wordsworth.²⁵ Going beyond Nature, extending its idea (embracing the cosmic and the external or “eccentric”) means going beyond the here and now and the present-day moral constraints. This explains the historical connection between literary weirdness and decadence, with Machen’s Great God Pan²⁶ as a symbol of it and emphasised by Joshi’s connection between Lovecraft and the “Decline of the West.”²⁷

Yet going beyond moral constraints does not entail (in ontological terms) going beyond a human-type of agency (as described); it actually presupposes it. The weird tale is perhaps best defined as an attempt to go beyond the inherent and essential humanness of narrativity, to “plumb” what lies out there. The important lesson is that there is no escape from humanness. The Frankenstein monster is “borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance.” *His* misery consists in the impossibility,

²⁵ In his “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth describes himself as “well pleased to recognise / In nature and the language of the sense, / The anchor of [his] purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being.”

²⁶ “[O]ne of his first works of fiction of this period – ‘The Great God Pan’ (1890) – created a sensation, especially when it appeared in book form in 1894. It shocked the moral guardians of an enfeebled Victorian culture as the diseased outpourings of a decadent mind; [...]” S. T. Joshi, “Introduction,” in: Arthur Machen, *The White People and Other Weird Stories* (Penguin Books, 2011), p. xii.

²⁷ Joshi entitled the copious chapter on Lovecraft in *The Weird Tale* “H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West.”

when alive, to shed humanness. His yearning for interaction (as a cure to insufferable solitude) is perhaps the concealed reason why the story he tells Victor is absurdly long, given the circumstances. We know well that for him there is no escape into a world that is non-human; nor is there any for the weird tale. Childishness aside, the questions are: What meaningfully human aspects do Blackwood's willows, Machen's Pan, James's ghosts, and Lovecraft's antediluvian gods convey? What do the weird tales tell us, not about cosmos, but about us?

Jacek Mydla

Osobliwe opowieści – osobliwe światy

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje temat tzw. opowieści osobliwej (ang. *weird tale*), gatunku opowieści zdefiniowanego po raz pierwszy przez H. P. Lovecrafta i poddanego systematycznemu opracowaniu w publikacjach S. T. Joshiego (np. *The Weird Tale*). W związku z programowym anty-antropocentryzmem opowieści osobliwej, rodzi się pytanie, czy i w jakim stopniu narratywność (*narrativity*) dopuszcza redukcję czynnika ludzkiego. Na podstawie zaproponowanej definicji narratywności wytyczone zostają w artykule granice takiej redukcji lub – innymi słowy – określona zostaje nieredukowalność czynnika ludzkiego (moralnego) w opowieści jako takiej.

Jacek Mydla

Seltsame Geschichten – seltsame Welten

Zusammenfassung

Das Thema des Essays ist sog. seltsame Geschichte (engl.: *weird tale*), eine zum ersten Mal von H. P. Lovecraft definierte und von S. T. Joshi in dessen Publikationen (z.B.: *The Weird Tale*) systematisch erforschte Romangattung. Da ein seltsamer Roman grundsätzlich antianthropomorphisch ist, muss man sich eine Frage stellen, inwieweit die Narrativität (*narrativity*) die Reduzierung des menschlichen Faktors zulässt. Anhand der Definition von der Narrativität wird die Unreduzierbarkeit des menschlichen (moralischen) Faktors in dem Roman an sich bestimmt.