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'Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Thomas Ligotti's Supernatural Fiction'

Roger Luckhurst

Ligotti: the reclusive writer from Detroit, who barely wishes to leave a trace in the world, who was rumoured not even to *exist* for much of the 1990s, and who published only in very limited print runs by specialist horror presses far away from the defining centres of American culture. How did that anonymous, self-styled *poète maudit* end up, thirty years later, one of only a handful of living authors in the Penguin Classics series, given polite if ponderous notices in *The New Yorker*, and praised as the puppet-master behind the modish mumblecore miserabilism of *True Detective* in 2014?

Another problem: isn't the academic essay a quintessentially philosophical format, premised on reason and argument, yet here is a writer that seeks to conjure that which is *unphilosophizable*, in fictions that mock every system of modern thought as a veil of delusion? Ligotti writes in a mode that despises every pretension of the literary world, perhaps especially including acts of academic legitimacy. Ligotti would have it that academics meet on an island of deluded rationalism, in the bureaucratic corridors at the rotting heart of the Vampire Castle. Beyond these walls is only the roar of a cruel and annihilating laughter.

Ligotti's pessimism is meant to be corrosive: to invite you to give up, and instead fall into infinite resignation. His dark enlightenment must by definition cancel itself out.

All I can hope to do is embrace these contradictions and try to situate the striking emergence of Thomas Ligotti's awkward anti-fictional fictions from out of the cultural shadows. To do so I will provide you with four mini-essays that you can call, if you like, 'Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Thomas Ligotti's Supernatural Horror'. At least they will help pass the time in our otherwise meaningless existence.

1. Weird Fiction Redux

Until quite recently, no one much noticed weird fiction apart from a small cabal of readers that revelled in its cultural marginality. Being overlooked was a thorough affirmation of these readers' own exquisite yet sadly misunderstood taste. The small presses and fan-circuits that made this a subculture were exposed to a new level of attention with the brief flurry of coverage that came with the naming of the New Weird in 2003. This was birthed – sort of – by the British writer M. John Harrison and his protégé China Miéville, who clearly modelled its name and transgressive spirit on the 1960s New Wave in science fiction, which was associated with the avant-garde experiments of J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock. Harrison explored the New Weird more as a hesitant question over a new turn in British

fiction ('What is it? Is it even anything?'); Miéville wrote the strident revolutionary manifesto.¹ But these two writers, always restless with genre constraints, tried to smother the new movement in the cot. The name persisted, however, despite their best efforts to kill it off, and the term was definitively transposed to America in 2008 with an anthology of stories and documents, *The New Weird*. It was then retrofitted with an avant-garde, European and high modernist lineage by the same anthologists, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, in *The Weird: A Compendium of Dark and Strange Stories* in 2011. This collection rinsed out most of the pulp origins and influence of the shudder pulps from the 1920s and 1930s, recruiting instead forebears such as Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Jeff VanderMeer's own breakout from genre into mainstream publishing with the Southern Reach trilogy (*Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*) came out in 2014, the same year that Ligotti was outed by Nic Pizzolatto as one of the sources for the antinatalist philosophy toyed with (although eventually discarded) by the lead detective Rust Cohle in the first series of the HBO show *True Detective*.² In the meantime, the tireless critical and editorial work of S. T. Joshi on the weird began to spill out of independent press circuits and into mainstream editions. Joshi's quiet corruption of the Penguin-Random House conglomerate with fictions of the weird started with Lovecraft editions, but he also edited an anthology by Arthur Machen and this created the conditions for Ligotti to have the early collections, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* and *Grimscribe*, reissued in the Penguin Classics in 2015.³

The weird, after the New Weird manifesto of 2003 and the mainstreaming effects of 2014, was resituated, taken to be symptomatic of a new kind of 'genre evaporation', as Gary Wolfe called it. Instead of genre fixity, the culture was marked by mash-ups of science fiction, Gothic, horror, noir and dark fantasy. Wolfe termed this 'recombinant genre fiction: stories which effectively decompose and reconstitute genre materials and techniques, together with materials and techniques from a variety of literary traditions, even including the traditions of domestic realism.'⁴ These were genres whose critics had often worked obsessively to police their boundaries and purify their contents. Early genre hybridisers, such as Miéville, were taking very self-conscious aim at artificial academic distinctions between popular genres. It also meant that they were readjusting the frame and focus of genre histories too. Out into the foreground leapt figures who had long fallen by the wayside as awkwardly interstitial, rendered invisible to purist theorisations of genres, such as Darko Suvin's conception of science fiction as 'cognitive estrangement', an attempt to quarantine and preserve a particular strand of SF from the dangerous mystifications of

¹ 'Harrison, in 'New Weird Discussions: The Creation of a Term', in *The New Weird*, ed. J. and Ann VanderMeer (San Francisco: Tachyon Press, 2008), 317. China Miéville, 'Long Live the New Weird', *The Third Alternative* 35 (2003), 3.

² See Michael Callia, 'Writer Nic Pizzolatto on Thomas Ligotti and the Weird Secrets of *True Detective*', *Wall Street Journal* (2 Feb 2014), <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/02/02/writer-nic-pizzolatto-on-thomas-ligotti-and-the-weird-secrets-of-true-detective/>

³ S. T. Joshi discusses Ligotti in his *The Modern Weird Tale* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001).

⁴ Gary Wolfe, 'Malebolge, or the Ordnance of Genre', *Conjunctions* 39 (2002), 415.

Gothic or supernatural horror.⁵ In the new century, these boundary distinctions collapsed, and texts like Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009) or VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) explicitly thematized this boundary blur. There was finally a place for Lovecraft and his acolytes from *Weird Tales* and the other shudder pulps of the 1920s and 30s. Lovecraft moved from the obscure hack, who was barely able to make it out of amateur publishing circuits into the professional pulps, and increasingly came to be regarded as a central figure of twentieth century American literature. A 'Library of America' edition of Lovecraft, a mark of institutional canonisation, appeared in 2005. Ligotti's trajectory from the margin into canonical acceptance is remarkably similar, although it has been considerably more compressed.

2. Philosophy and Non-Philosophy

The most unlikely element of cultural elevation of the weird has been its embrace by a new generation of philosophers. The French thinker François Laruelle has long argued that the very basis of Western philosophy, from the Greeks to Derrida, needs to be challenged in its presumption that everything can be normalised into its systems of thought. Deconstruction found only false doors, was tricked by fake exit signs. Laruelle has proposed, instead, to attempt to think outside thought, to recognise that there is a ground here of the unphilosophizable, an immanent real utterly resistant to capture by philosophical abstraction, and so exists as the unthought of thought. For Laruelle, to approach this impossible task requires a new kind of writing, which he calls 'philo-fiction', a mutant or hybrid genre. Laruelle proposed that 'science fiction, gnosis, and certain "spiritual" currents ... better resist capture by philosophies and theologies, since they are ferments added to doctrines which, in the end, awaken human struggle from its conformist slumber.'⁶ Non-philosophy will formalize nothing, only be carried out, as Laruelle puts it, as a 'practice of retaliation.'⁷

For a group of English and American thinkers at the margins of philosophy, it is weird fiction and horror that becomes a privileged form of this non-philosophy. In the 1990s, Nick Land and members of his Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, which included Mark Fisher, began to write intense and mildly unhinged horror theory-fictions probably best understood – as they were written – under the influence of amphetamines, with titles like 'CyberGothic' and 'The Origins of the Cthulhu Club'.⁸ The para-philosophical journal *Collapse*, edited by Robin

⁵ Darko Suvin's famous definition is in his essay 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', collected in *Science Fiction: Twentieth-Century Views* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1976), 57-71. Suvin's scientific Marxism has always made him extremely uncomfortable with the 'irrationalism' of the Gothic.

⁶ François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. D. S. Burk and A. P. Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012), 4. For an introduction to Laruelle's thought, with the appropriate warning that it is 'constitutively unintelligible', see Ray Brassier, 'Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of François Laruelle', *Radical Philosophy* 121 (Sept/Oct 2003), 24-35.

⁷ Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia*, 23.

⁸ Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* (Falmout: Urbanomic, 2011).

Mackay, another former member of the CCRU, produced a monumental edition called 'Concept-Horror' in 2008 that opened with Mackay's proclamation that horror allows us 'to live the problem of the rational corrosion of our cherished self-image' in a way conventional philosophy simply could not conceive.⁹ *Collapse IV* contained a short text by Ligotti, in recognition of his philo-fictional mode, and an essay on Ligotti's work by James Trafford, an early indication of his recruitment to Concept-Horror.¹⁰ *Collapse* also included the philosopher Graham Harman's early attempt to propose H. P. Lovecraft as a thinker equal if not more important than his contemporary, Edmund Husserl, the German founder of phenomenology. To counter Husserl, whose work had dominated twentieth century thought and placed it within the horizon of the problem of the subjective apprehension of the world, Harman suggested Lovecraft's use of horror was a pioneering attempt to dethrone anthropocentric conceptions of time and space. Instead, horror provides glimpses of the world of things beyond the subject/object divide. Lovecraft's fiction specifically provided a sense of the cosmic indifference of the universe.¹¹ The real lay beyond the subject/object horizon: a place that no longer 'correlated' with Kantian categorical imperatives: The Thing-in-Itself. This 'weird realism', as Harman coined it, was not focused on the human subject at all but on that which could not be correlated to human frameworks (the critique of 'correlationism' is associated with another French non-philosopher, Quentin Meillassoux, who has also used science fiction as a way of philosophizing without philosophy).¹² 'No other writer', Harman said at the beginning of his book-length study of Lovecraft, 'is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them ... Despite his apparently limited interest in philosophy, Lovecraft as a tacit philosopher is violently anti-idealist and anti-Human.'¹³ This is how a once-derided pulp novelist became a linchpin for what has become known since 2010 as 'object-oriented ontology.'

The allied project of American para-philosopher Eugene Thacker has included a three-volume study, not of the 'philosophy of horror' but, reversing the genitive, of what he calls the *horror of philosophy*. He defines the philo-fiction of horror as confronting the very limits of the capacity of conventional philosophical thought, the objectal *world-without-us* that lies beyond philosophical capture. 'Horror', as Thacker puts it, '*is a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically.*'¹⁴ Just to express how weirdly this weird had been mainstreamed, after Nic Pizzolatto name-checked Thacker as another of his sources for *True Detective*, the cover of Thacker's *In the Dust of This Planet* was used as a

⁹ Robin Mackay, 'Editorial Introduction', *Collapse 4* (2008), 5. The whole edition is available as a download at <https://archive.org/details/CollapseVol.IvConceptHorror/>

¹⁰ James Trafford, 'The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti and the Illusion of Selfhood', *Collapse 4* (2008), 185-207.

¹¹ Graham Harman, 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl', *Collapse 4* (2008), 333-64.

¹² Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Exro-Science Fiction*, trans. A. Edlebi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹³ Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero, 2012), 3.

¹⁴ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. I (Winchester, Zero, 2011), 9.

design by the fashion house BLK DNM and was soon seen stencilled on the back of a leather jacket in a video of rapper Jay-Z and as a T-shirt on the Instagram feed of Lily Collins. The weird was the new rock and roll.¹⁵

In this same cluster of para-philosophical thinkers, Ben Woodard, author of the suitably Lovecraftian study *Slime Dynamics*, also wrote an essay on Ligotti in 2010, claiming him as another of these realists who challenge the illusory correlationist systems of thought that have dominated Western philosophy since Kant.¹⁶ Yet Woodard recognises that Ligotti is less interested in glimpses of the horrifying *outside* that Lovecraft claimed was the core of fear generated by supernatural horror. Instead, Ligotti's focus is on the catastrophic collapse and decay of subjectivity.

Ligotti has crisply identified this contrast himself in an interview:

As a horror writer, my aim is the opposite of Lovecraft's. He had an appreciation for natural scenery on earth and wanted to reach beyond the visible in the universe. I have no appreciation for natural scenery and want the objective universe to be a reflection of a character's subjective world, which is the tendency of my consciousness. In Lovecraft's stories, the outside is not the attraction for me. What attracts me to his work is his consciousness of the outside.¹⁷

Ligotti's obsession with notions of puppetry, masks and clowns, or the *staging* of the real for his narrators as different kinds of 'sideshow' or contrived performances of irrational rationality in deranged workplaces, suggests that Ligotti remains rather heavily invested in the dramas of the subjective condition. Perhaps his philo-fictions actually resist the tendency to fix philo-fiction in the Lovecraftian mode favoured by the weird realists and object-oriented ontologists. This recalcitrance to being systematized, even by earnest young men (and they nearly are all men) who want to pull down the edifice of philosophy, would be entirely appropriate, after all.

Of course, Ligotti has constantly written para-philosophy or philo-fiction of his own throughout his career. Stories can resemble philosophical treatises gone haywire, the intertitles from 'Sideshow, and Other Stories' including subtitles like 'The Abyss of Organic Forms' or 'The Phenomenal Frenzy', as if they mimic procedures of formal argumentation even as they fall into the maw of irrational weirdness. From the beginning, too, his

¹⁵ See Eugene Wolters, 'How a Book on Nihilism Ended up on Jay Z's Back and Glenn Beck's Show', *Critical Theory* blog, November 2014, <http://www.critical-theory.com/how-a-book-on-nihilism-ended-up-on-jay-zs-back-and-glenn-becks-show/>

¹⁶ Ben Woodard, 'Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti and the Weirder of Philosophy', *Continent* 1: 1 (2011), 3-11.

¹⁷ Venger Satanis, 'Devotees of Decay and Desolation', interview now available online at <http://web.archive.org/web/20090524061519/http://www.eldritch-infernal.com/ligotti.html>

collections have often contained overt exercises in meta-commentary on genre, as in ‘Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story’ from *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*. This is a self-reflexive tactic typical of the morbid self-consciousness of weird fiction, and one shared with earlier writers like Lovecraft, who wrote himself into an invented tradition in his essay on *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Arthur Machen, one of Lovecraft’s key influences, also constantly indulged in this self-reflexive commentary, happy to theorize his own marginality and resistance to ‘success’.

Few, however, have attempted a full-scale philosophical treatise like Ligotti. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* comes with the imprimatur of a preface by Ray Brassier, one of the key commentators on the non-philosophy of Francois Laruelle and author of *Nihil Unbound* in 2007, a book that embraced nihilism and negation as a counter-reaction to Enlightenment thought, a riposte to what he ominously calls ‘the potency of reason’.¹⁸ Brassier thus places Ligotti in this network of non-philosophy. Again, it is rather a remarkable symptom of shifting cultural value that such a curious work has found its way from the margins of a specialist Lovecraftian weird publisher, Hippocampus Press, and into the Penguin Classics series in 2018.

We cannot pejoratively use the idea of an ‘amateur’ philosophy when it comes to *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, since non-philosophy precisely wishes to undo the policing of borders undertaken by the suffocating norms of professionalized academic philosophy. But there is a certain disjunction between Brassier’s preface and Ligotti’s text. The latter seems to insert itself, with contented naivety, into two very conventional Romantic and idealist traditions: philosophical pessimism and literary decadence. These in turn will be the subject of my last two lectures.

3. Philosophical Pessimism

Ligotti’s simple, constantly reiterated idea is that, to quote *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, ‘Behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world.’¹⁹ Elsewhere, the older insomniac writer of ‘Sideshow’, reveals:

But this, I’ve found, is the very essence of show business which in fact is no more than *sideshow* business. The unexpected mutations, the sheer baselessness of beings, the volatility of things ... By necessity we live in a world, a sideshow world, where everything is ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous’.

‘By what standard?’ I interjected...

¹⁸ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), xi. For his commentary on Laruelle, see Brassier, ‘Axiomatic Heresy: The Non-Philosophy of Francois Laruelle’, *Radical Philosophy* 121 (Sept-Oct 2003), 24-35.

¹⁹ Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), 54

'By the standard of that unnameable, unknowable, and no doubt non-existent order that is *not* show business.'²⁰

Ligotti's clearest debt in these assertions is to the tradition of German pessimist thought, started by Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* from 1819, and consolidated by Edward von Hartmann in *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* in 1867, after which it became a fashionable movement for a time, if puzzling even to its contemporaries.²¹ Along the way, the tradition produced some inadvertently comical miserabilists, such as Philipp Mainländer, who wrote *The Philosophy of Redemption* in 1876, suffered a catastrophic mental breakdown soon after, and at the age of 34 hanged himself by kicking away a pile of his own just-published book. Mainländer is a key source for Ligotti in *Conspiracy*, the discussion showing in just one sentence how Ligotti can move from a philosophical lexicon into one of Lovecraftian horror:

Ontologically, Mainländer's thought is delirious; metaphorically, it explains a good deal about human experience; practically, it may in time prove to be consistent with the idea of creation as a structure of creaking bones being eaten from within by a pestilent marrow.²²

Ligotti also follows more recent philosophical descendants of the German pessimists, starting *Conspiracy* with an account of Peter Wessel Zapffe's 1933 essay 'The Last Messiah', which tends towards the most extreme version of anti-natalism, the view that humanity has been at best an evolutionary mistake, and that it is better for the human species to die out. It is the torture of self-consciousness that links Zapffe's philosophy and Ligotti's fictions, connections fully teased out recently by Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer.²³ There is clearly also a debt to Book IV of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea*, which contains the German's most despairing formulations about life as 'a weary longing and tormenting, a dreamlike stumbling towards death ... in the company of a series of trivial thoughts.'²⁴ Schopenhauer's account of humans as 'clockwork, wound up and going without knowing why', or the 'delusions of life... as masks and fancy costume, discarded now in the morning, which last night at the carnival, teased and troubled us' have been a strong influence on Ligotti's central devices for his tortured protagonists.²⁵ Suicide is never a properly rigorous

²⁰ Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin, 2008), 39.

²¹ See Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). The pioneering British psychologist, James Sully, produced an excellent survey at the time, which tried to explore the sources of its popularity, *Pessimism: A History and A Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Kegan Paul, 1891).

²² Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, 38.

²³ Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer, 'No, everything is not all right: Supernatural Horror as Pessimistic Argument', *Horror Studies* 8: 1 (2017), 25-43.

²⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea (Abridged in One Volume)*, trans. J. Berman, ed. Bill Berman (London: Everyman, 1995), 204.

²⁵ Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 204 and 246.

pessimism in Ligotti, in full conformity to the founder of German pessimism: it is an act too paradoxically *affirmative* for Schopenhauer, a ‘clumsy experiment’ that precisely fails to eliminate the inhuman will that occupies and animates puppet consciousness.²⁶

The influence of Schopenhauer permeates the whole architecture of Ligotti’s fiction. For Schopenhauer, the world was simply a shadowplay of *Vorstellung*, of ideas or representations, that veil the real forces behind this sideshow. For Schopenhauer that is the instinctual Will, the constantly dissatisfied, striving, insatiable biological species-drive that dethrones individual agency and renders life a movement from one phase of suffering to the next. Pleasure is merely the momentary receding of this monstrous striving. It is a reductive view of world *versus* representation that in the nineteenth century was consolidated by evolutionary biology and a progressive extension of understanding of the realm of what was called ‘unconscious cerebration’ – a constantly expanding sense of the role of autonomic nervous system that operated completely outside conscious subjective agency.²⁷

There are also parallels to contemporaneous occultist thought in this doubled conception of world and representation, truth and illusion, since the whole promise of hermetic and magical traditions is the promise to pull away the veil from the goddess and reveal the reality that lies beneath. To an elite of hermetic seekers, trained in detecting the hidden paths, the mundane *exoteric* world can be opened with the right keys to reveal the hidden, *esoteric* truths.²⁸ This was the kind of promise that the mystic Swedenborg made, and which sent his rationalist contemporary Kant into fits of enraged denunciation (Kant’s attack in 1766, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, is perhaps echoed in the title of Ligotti’s first collection, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*).

Pessimistic thought and occult dualism: the perfect materials for a theory of horror, premised on ghastly revelations of the hidden forces, the malign Old Ones, that lie beyond the consolations of representation, buried under the surface of the world. Indeed, John Clute’s book on horror fiction, *The Darkening Garden*, appeals to the key Swedenborgian notion of ‘vastation’ to theorize the moment of horrific revelation. Vastation, Clute says, is ‘to experience the malaise of the made or revealed cosmos’. Vastation lies at the very limit of what Clute calls the ‘storyable’.²⁹ This explains the classic Lovecraft moment, of course, that blasting horror of facing Cthulhu, but it also fits Ligotti’s fiction that repeatedly stages malicious unveilings that show up the cardboard creakiness of so-called ‘normal’ life.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, ‘On Suicide’, *The Pessimist’s Handbook: A Collection of Popular Essays*, trans. B. B. Saunders (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 157.

²⁷ This term was associated with the English man of science, William B. Carpenter. See, for instance, *The Unconscious Action of the Brain* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1871).

²⁸ For definitions, see Marco Pasi, ‘Occult/Occultism’, in R. Segal and K. Stuckrad (eds), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). For wider discussion, see Alex Owen *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²⁹ John Clute, ‘Vastation’, *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* (Cauheegan: Payseur & Schmidt, 2006), 147-51.

Eugene Thacker's most recent book, *Infinite Resignation*, is a sustained account of philosophical pessimism, and also provides suggestive lines into any study of Ligotti, although he is mentioned only in passing. Pessimism is never a coherent system of thought, Thacker suggests, since this would be too grandiose, too totalizing and affirmative for the pessimist who recoils from any system. Instead, pessimism is often presented in shorter forms – in diary entries, fragments, or aphorisms. Ligotti's short prose forms fit the bill, these dense, static and potent distillations, ruthlessly focused on that moment of dethronement or final annihilating revelation that blasts their protagonists. The lack of system in pessimistic thought perhaps also explains how Ligotti's fiction can at once be recruited by radical non-philosophers and anti-philosophers, even as he seems to write from a stance that is an entirely traditional philosophical position of idealism, albeit one that is inverted.

Thacker also argues that pessimism cannot be political: 'Resistance, rebellion, revolt, protest, and intervention all fall outside the scope of the pessimist world view. The pessimist is the most despised of nay-sayers, a stranger even to abstention [or] refusal.'³⁰ Ligotti's cynical attitude towards all ideologies is consistent with his indifference to the banality of politics as 'sideshow' or *Vorstellung*. But that in itself is, inevitably, a stance that is intrinsically political too, a horizon that it can never hope to escape without falling into naïve self-delusion. Ligotti adopts an avowedly elite and conservative stance that once more flows directly from the nineteenth century and up through Lovecraft (who described himself repeatedly as 'reactionary'). This politics we might see more in conformity to the subject of my fourth and final mini-lecture: decadence.

4. Decadence

In his 1893 essay, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', the English poet Arthur Symons spoke of the French Decadents as offering a 'disease of form', 'typical of a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action.' It was a literature infected by *la Névrose*, embracing its own nervous debility and decay in a prose style marked by 'an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.'³¹ In Max Nordau's 1895 best-seller, *Degeneration*, the twilight of the European races had arrived, symbolised by Decadent art that revealed 'a morbid mobility of mind [that] throws up weird suggestions.' Where Nordau decried this 'pathological aberration of a racial instinct', the Decadents

³⁰ Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 49.

³¹ Arthur Symons, 'On the Decadent Movement in Literature', in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*, ed. S. Ledger and R. Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 104, 105.

embraced this state of decay or decline.³² This late nineteenth-century version of Decadence was presided over by the poet Charles Baudelaire, who modelled his contempt for all bourgeois ethical and social norms on the life and literature of Edgar Allan Poe (Baudelaire translated Poe into French). In the work of later French writers like Karl-Joris Huysmans, the Decadent figure was often the last scion in degenerate family lines, unproductive and useless, living out the *fin de siècle* and the *fin du globe* in rarefied artificial atmospheres and attenuated pleasures that could not hold at bay a suffocating *ennui* for long. His representative Decadent book, *Against Nature* (1884), is the one that corrupts the aesthetics and morals of the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Paul Verlaine remained the fascinating living embodiment of this type until his death in 1896, rotting away in dissolute life in the salons of Paris and London long after his lover, Arthur Rimbaud, abandoned poetry entirely for gun-running in Africa and an early death. Many figures of what Yeats called the 'tragic generation' of the 1890s – Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Aubrey Beardsley, or Eric Stenbock – died young of various abuses, taken as a mark of absolute commitment to the Decadent pose.

The Decadent stance is typically contemptuous of the masses and their cultural forms. Decadent fiction circulated in small presses, often in expensive lavish editions that tried to mark themselves out from the new mass market, which they dismissed as serving up 'literature at nurse', coddled by the moral majority and the censorship exercised by the powerful circulating libraries. Although plainly a market in itself, as many critics have pointed out, Decadent culture was an elite, minoritarian culture, premised on values of scarcity, transgression and rarefaction. They rejected the contained aesthetic pleasures of the merely beautiful, revelling instead in the grotesque and the sublime. No wonder it embraced horror, as Jean Lorrain, the ether-addict, malicious gossip, and corruptor of young men did in his short, Gothic tinged cruel tales of the 1890s and as Huysmans did in his black magic thriller, *Là-Bas* (which has been translated as *Down There* or *The Damned*). In England, the *Keynotes* series, issued by Allen Lane in the early 1890s as a series of calculated outrages to literary taste, included early work by noted weird writers Arthur Machen and M. P. Shiel. The legendary negative reviews of Machen's work in mainstream newspapers and reviews inevitably became a badge of honour, a certification of value and elite taste.³³ This has fed directly into the generation of scarcity value in weird fiction, the field dominated by

³² Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1895), edited and introduction George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 316.

³³ For discussion of Decadence as a late Victorian movement, see Brian Stableford's excellent long introduction to *The Dedalus Book of Decadence: Moral Ruins* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2001), which also has strong selections. There has also been a lot of work on the Decadent movement and its relation to the new commercial market for culture in the late Victorian era. See, for instance, Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) or Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and the Market Place* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). For more recent explorations of the movement, see J. Hall and Alex Murray, *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

small presses, limited edition subscription-only print runs, and an allergy to the democratic networks generated through digital ubiquity.³⁴

In the 1920s, Lovecraft identified with this Decadent aesthetic pose, even as he condemned modern American society as having fallen into cosmopolitan corruption and decay. In his account of himself, Lovecraft was the last descendant of two great New England families, a '99.9% Teutonic', a pure member of the Northern European 'Nordick' races, with an intrinsic ethnic connection to the Gothic. Yet Lovecraft was also a refusenik of both the Protestant work ethic and the American democratic Republic, preferring instead to exist in a dandified imaginary version of the pre-Revolutionary white settlements, in the perfectly preserved colonial streets of Providence, Rhode Island. Lovecraft was a cosmic pessimist, and a writer who complained constantly that his 'nervous exhaustion' left him unable to complete his work to any degree of satisfaction. 'I am only about half-alive – a large part of my strength is consumed in sitting up or walking. My nervous system is a shattered wreck, and I am absolutely bored and listless', he wrote in 1918.³⁵ In another letter in 1921, Lovecraft wrote: 'We live in a decadent age like that of the later Roman Empire.'³⁶

Notoriously, of course, Lovecraft's notion of decadence, of decline and fall, also led him to embrace Madison Grant's ideas of the race suicide of the white races in America. Lovecraft experienced the docks of Red Hook in New York in 1924 not as a cosmopolitan melting pot, but instead as a nightmare vision of corruption, a place rank with the 'stinking viscous slime' of immigrant races.³⁷ This was at exactly the same moment that Madison Grant, the eugenic theorist who complained that the first wave of white 'Nordic' settlers was committing race suicide in America by opening the gates of Ellis Island to immigrants indiscriminately. Grant engineered new immigration laws to preserve the Nordic stock of America's first waves of its genocidal white settlers (laws that Donald Trump's advisers now celebrate).³⁸

Ligotti shares many elements of this Decadent mode. His prose is typically static and sclerotic, highly mannered and artificial. His stories explore extreme mental states and actively embrace perverse logics, occupying the minds of killers and madmen. His philosophical lexicon rarely strays from notions of decay, decline and fall. It has the typical Decadent combination of *ennui* and spleen, the latter term key to Baudelaire's poetics.³⁹ His

³⁴ For commentary, see James Machin, 'Weird Fiction and the Virtues of Obscurity: Machen, Stenbock and the Weird Connoisseurs', *Textual Practice* 31: 6 (2017), 1063-81.

³⁵ Lovecraft to Alfred Galpin (Letter, 27 May 1918), in *Selected Letters*, Vol. 1, A. Derleth and D. Wandrei, eds (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965), 67.

³⁶ Lovecraft to Anne Tillery Renshaw (Letter, 10 Dec 1921), *Selected Letters* I, 159.

³⁷ Lovecraft to Frank Belknap Long (Letter, 21 March 1924), *Selected Letters* I, 333.

³⁸ See Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race, or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Scribners, 1923). Grant's idea of a distinct Nordic race is of course a biological fantasy.

³⁹ Baudelaire's 'The Spleen of Paris', a collection of prose poems, was published posthumously in 1869, where he anticipates Ligotti's sensibility in writing of 'the whole horizon encircling us ... shed/ A day blacker than night, and thicker with despair'.

early story, 'Les Fleurs' surely invokes Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Ligotti elliptically mentions a 'Decadent phase' to one interviewer, citing the impact on him of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892), a slender volume that is an evocative description of a reclusive melancholic driven by his own desolate grief to recreate his dead wife, only to be driven to murder her maddening substitute. Ligotti also has connections to the writer and musician David Tibet (Ligotti played guitar on Tibet's album, *This Degenerate Little Town*, and Tibet has recorded a track based on Ligotti's text, 'I Have a Special Plan for this World'). Recently, Tibet has finally published the collected works of perhaps the quintessential Decadent, Count Eric Stenbock, who died insane, opium-addled and alcoholic in 1895.⁴⁰ The rarity of Stenbock's work, the legendary stories of the man's eccentricities (including travelling with a life-sized puppet that he claimed to be his son), and Tibet's seeming reluctance to publish the original Stenbock manuscripts he owned, all contributed to this contemporary connection of weird fiction to late-Victorian decadence.

Ligotti's own persona is one of being a depressive, anhedonic recluse, managing a bipolar disorder by silence, cunning and exile (and prescribed pharmaceuticals) amidst the wreckage of the American industrial empire, out there in the apocalyptic ruins of Detroit. In Ligotti's writing, there is an intrinsic Decadent disdain for the masses, and for mass culture, and in his theories of what refined supernatural horror might be, it is never all that conventional dreck of Hollywood studios and mass market publishers, but a secret, other, rarefied Decadent strain. By definition, his Schopenhauerian vision of tearing down the veil of representation, pulling off the mask to reveal the skull beneath, is one that grants this as a privilege only to the select few, to the initiates of this esoteric stance. When his ideas approach antinatalism, he also finds himself welcomed by some sections of the alt-right and by the militant anti-feminist incel movement, whose toxic Reddit message boards on occasion cite Ligotti's *Conspiracy* as a source text (I won't reference any here, but a quick internet search will pull up references). This is because they are coming from the same space of antinatalist, pessimistic refusal, and a vision of the inevitable decline and fall of the late empires of the West.

None of this is Ligotti's fault, of course, and I make no judgement about whatever his personal politics. It is quite possible for leftists to recruit Ligotti's dejection to what Dominic Fox has termed a 'militant dysphoria', the depressive's refusal to resist the compulsory wellbeing of the soul hobbled and routinised by corporate work.⁴¹ Ligotti's *My Work is Not Yet Done* could well be one of the best invocations of neoliberalism's demons.⁴² However,

⁴⁰ Count Stenbock, *Of Kings and Things: Strange Tales and Decadent Poems*, ed. David Tibet (London: Strange Attractor, 2018).

⁴¹ Dominic Fox, *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

⁴² See Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018)

when the authorial persona retreats behind a mask in an act of refusal, the orphaned prose that then circulates is unhooked from authorial intention. It then becomes equally available to crazy French post-post-structuralists, the leather-jacketed nihilists of Greenwich Village, pastel-suited object-oriented ontologists, para-philosophers, horror fans, fully automated luxury communists on acid, and right-wing nutters.

There is nevertheless something intrinsic to combining Decadent aesthetics with pessimistic philosophy that makes Ligotti always more of a symptom rather than a cure. Might it be the case that his movement into the mainstream is because he coincides with a pervasive philosophy of *declinism* that is dominant in many strands of contemporary political thought?

In France, the notion of 'declinism' entered the lexicon after the runaway success of books like Éric Zemmour's *The French Suicide* in 2016, or the philosopher Michel Onfay's *Decadence: The Life and Death of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* in 2017. Both are highly conservative attacks on multiculturalism.⁴³ It is no coincidence, either, that Michel Houellebecq, the most significant contemporary French novelist, whose abiding theme is the decline and fall of French modernity, began his career writing a paean to H. P. Lovecraft titled *Against the World, Against Life*. Houellebecq and Ligotti's visions, particularly of the 'battle of the sexes', seem entirely contiguous.

In England, the strand of declinism in Conservative thought embodied by the historian Corelli Barnett (who contends that Britain has been in major decline since 'winning' the war in 1945), or the philosopher Roger Scruton (who published *England: An Elegy* in the year 2000), has moved from the patrician margins of the party to entirely take over the rump of the political right. This view welcomes the referendum decision on Brexit in 2016, not as a triumph for the possibilities of a renewed buccaneering spirit of free-market gangster capitalism, but as a masochistic embrace of self-harm. This is the only explanation for the right's passionate embrace of a self-evident disaster.⁴⁴ In America, the 'America First' nationalism of Donald Trump has merged seamlessly with the more militant and affirmative white supremacy movement. All elements of this alt-right have revived Madison Grant's account of the suicide of the white races.⁴⁵

It may be that we want to affirm, paradoxically, the negations of Ligotti as a rigorous philosopher of horror, who undoes philosophy *with* horror. Horrorism has, after all, also

⁴³ For commentary on French declinism, see Rachel Donadio, 'France's Obsession with Decline is a Booming Industry', *New York Times* (4 Feb 2017), www.nytimes.com.

⁴⁴ See Corelli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London: Pan, 2006) and Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Continuum, 2000). The best study of Brexit as an act of post-imperial masochistic self-harm is Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Apollo, 2018).

⁴⁵ Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

been claimed as a name for an urgent philosophy of our times.⁴⁶ But we also need to confront the uncomfortable realisation that Ligotti has come into the light at exactly the moment when conservative declinism thrives. Ligotti's work might offer a mocking grimace at this political sideshow, but it cannot offer any way out of it other than to provide various modes of conservative, Decadent refusal.

⁴⁶ Adriana Caverero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. W. McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).