S. T. Joshi, *Varieties of the Weird Tale*
(New York: Hippocampus Press, 2017)

This collection of essays by S. T. Joshi, on various exponents of the 'weird tale', includes a number of his introductions to collections of such tales. The combined result is uneven, with potted biographies and general summaries sitting uneasily beside accounts of the historical minutiae of composition that are likely to be of interest – and of profound interest in some cases – mostly to specialists. Thumbnail assumptions and some special pleading need to be skirted in order to get at those passages where Joshi relaxes enough to bring scrutiny to a text or a series of texts, particularly effective in the case of Ambrose Bierce's 'The Death of Halpin Frayser' (1891). Despite the variegated content, a number of coherent themes run across the various entries, and the necessarily jumbled nature of so many narratives generates creatively questionable spaces for the critical reader.

Concerned, perhaps, to encourage a more general reading, Joshi's introduction makes a series of broad proposals, reaffirming his conviction that 'the best weird fiction was "the consequence of a world view" in that it sought to refashion the universe in accordance with the author's philosophical vision' (p. 12). This is most impressively described in a chapter on Lord Dunsany, and his 'Gods of Pegāna' mythos, with its mutant time, aesthetic animism, fearful gods, and sleeping cosmic destroyer. As a result of the popularisation of weird writing and its collectivisation as a genre, various tropes (according to Joshi) have come to stand in for that refashioning of the universe, though he does not consider what virtues, or otherwise, there might be in such repetition or citation. Through the example of Gertrude Atherton, who comes to writing after and through the shock of her son's premature death and her 'wholesale revaluation of her life' (p. 98), Joshi hints at a reading that would position these totalising visions as deeply personal, but does not pursue the theme. Nor does Joshi consider the dynamic between any such refashioning and the startling fictional places and spaces of the genre, in terms of a tension between the local ambience and the general cosmic or world view.

Standing in for a discussion of place is a more general thematic focus on supernatural realism and mimesis as a dominant mode, and of the limitations of H. P. Lovecraft's dictum (his insistence on realistic description until the one moment when the marvellous appears) when discussing the 'sensuous prose' (p. 323) of a contemporary writer like Caitlín R. Kiernan (who is the subject of an inspiring introduction) or Thomas Ligotti, for whom 'the writer is a demiurge, creating a universe that may or may not connect with the "real" world at

his whim' (p. 321). All this begs for a similar discussion of the ambiguity of locus in the many works that Joshi describes, but instead the critic seeks to resolve these efficacious uncertainties as something duller. By depicting Lovecraft's place descriptions as done 'to the best of his considerable abilities' (p.328), and Kiernan's as the functional use of 'rhetorical tools' to help the reader 'grasp the bizarre' (p. 328), Joshi makes the slippage of stable meaning within weird realism more of a technical failure of description than a powerful and uncanny characteristic of it.

Joshi seems, paradoxically, on firmer ground with his descriptions of the '*indefinability* of the "Things"' (p. 153, italics in original) of William Hope Hodgson's stories or of Ligotti's world gone '*awry*', in which nightmare does not reflect but 'has replaced reality' (p. 320, italics in original). Discussing such things in terms of writers doing their best or boiling down reception to a possessive grasp, as readers lay claim to their own reading as objective and final, seems as exaggerated a concretisation as Hodgson's 'gigantic crab' and 'giant rats' (p. 155). This is particularly pertinent, as Joshi cites in his 'Science and Superstition' essay an ecology of horror proposed by Tom Goodsell, a character of Fritz Lieber's: 'Fear is accumulating. Horror is accumulating [...]. Our culture is ripe for infection [...] they'd haunt us, terrorize us, try to rule us. Our fears would be their fodder. A parasite-host relationship. Supernatural symbiosis' (quoted p. 292). And so realism folds back into a real world that it has already infected to render that world ready for it – a postmodern post-truth world of writing and reading, of symbiotic composition and consumption that Joshi seems unwilling to recognise.

A number of Joshi's pieces touch on the success of weird fiction in the context of the decline of orthodox or establishment religions. Once again, he takes his first cue from Lovecraft and the suggestion that supernatural fiction is 'coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it' (p. 16), and then develops this to argue that 'a decline in religious belief would result in the augmentation of a need for *aesthetic* outlets for it' (p. 17). In the last few years, there has been an observable spike in publishing and social-media discussions of 'English eerie' and 'folk horror'. This is, at least partly, attributable to the access to publication available to now-middle-aged critics for whom these sub-genres – in both TV and written forms – represented their childhood introductions to alternatives to scientific materialism and mainstream Christianity. At the same time, technological developments in distribution have made the original products once more available to a mass market. This is opening up such fields to younger consumers and makers; it will be of interest

to enthusiasts for the weird tale to observe the effects, if any, of this, in combination with the political 'chaos magick' in an infected and abject cyberspace, upon the sub-genre.[1] Joshi's description of a barren period for weird writing – 'from 1940 to 1970, only Shirley Jackson [...] and Robert Aickman could be said to have attained genuine eminence' (p. 17) – perhaps constitutes something similar to that experienced by uncanny 'English eerie' fictions between the early 1980s and the millennium, and the nature of these 'dry spells' warrants further critical investigation.

Finally, there is the surprising lack of attention that Joshi gives to the suffocating weight of citation that seems to characterise so much weird writing – at least in his own account of it, which ranges from Atherton's modelling of characters after Henry James to almost everybody's nodding to Lovecraft. Yet there is little attention given here to the paradox that an art that is so apparently intuitive and attentive to the ineffable should repeatedly fall back upon references to its precedents and traditions. In tune with the reflections of Lieber's Tom Goodsell, uncanny fiction has long infected itself, a 'real world' haunting equivalent to M. R. James 'suggesting the pervasiveness of the past's influence on the present [...] in which the present is entirely engulfed and rendered fleeting and ineffectual in the face of the heavy cultural burden of prior centuries' (p. 174). Given this resilience, the weird tale may in future constitute a fecund site for working out some of the meanings of a new political culture in which the present is similarly predatory upon itself.

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[1] See Gary Lachman, *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump* (New York: TarcherPerigree, 2018).