

### M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire *Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or or?*

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#### **0. PROLOGUE: THE TENTACULAR NOVUM**

Taking for granted, as we do, its ubiquitous cultural debris, it is easy to forget just how radical the Weird was at the time of its convulsive birth.<sup>1</sup> Its break with previous fantastics is vividly clear in its teratology, which renounces all folkloric or traditional antecedents. The monsters of high Weird are indescribable and formless *as well as being* and/or *although they are* and/or *in so far as they are* described with an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision; and their constituent bodyparts are disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic, without mythic resonance. The spread of the tentacle – a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in ‘Western’ aesthetics) – from a situation of near total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture.<sup>2</sup>

## COLLAPSE IV

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The ‘Lovecraft Event’, as Ben Noys invaluabley understands it,<sup>3</sup> is unquestionably the centre of gravity of this revolutionary moment; its defining text, Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, published in 1928 in *Weird Tales*. However, Lovecraft’s is certainly not the only *haute* Weird. A good case can be made, for example, that William Hope Hodgson, though considerably less influential than Lovecraft, is as, or even more, remarkable a Weird visionary; and that 1928 can be considered the Weird tentacle’s coming of age, Cthulhu (‘monster [...] with an octopus-like head’) a twenty-first birthday iteration of the giant ‘devil-fish’ – octopus – first born to our sight squatting malevolently on a wreck in Hodgson’s *The Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig’*, in 1907.<sup>4</sup>

There are, of course, honoured precursors: French writers were early and acute sufferers from Montfort’s Syndrome, an obsessive fascination with the cephalopodic.<sup>5</sup> In short order, the two key figures in the French pre-Weird tentacular, Jules Verne and Victor Hugo, produced works –

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1. S.T. Joshi’s periodisation of the golden age of Weird as 1880-1940 is persuasive (S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

2. I have argued this elsewhere: ‘Introduction’ to H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (NY: Random House, 2005); presentation at the ‘Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Theory’ event, London, Goldsmiths, 26 April 2007; ‘Weird Fiction’, in Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2008 [forthcoming]).

3. In his contribution to the ‘Weird Realism’ event in 2007 (see previous note).

4. William Hope Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland, and Other Novels* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 28-29.

5. Named by Reza Negarestani for Pierre Dénys de Montfort (1766–1820), pioneering and dissident French malacologist, author of, among others, the multi-volume *Histoire Naturelle Générale et Particulière des Mollusques* (6 volumes [1-4 only by de Montfort] Paris: F. Dufart, 1801-5), which took seriously the existence of the ‘kraken octopus’ and ‘colossal octopus’, and included still-iconic illustrations.

Verne in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) and Hugo in *The Toilers of the Sea* (1866) – which include extraordinary descriptions of monster cephalopods. These texts, while indispensable to the development of the Weird, remain in important respects *pre*-Weird not only temporally but thematically, representing contrasting *oppositions* to the still-unborn tradition, to varying degrees prefigurations of the Weird *and* attempts pre-emptively to de-Weird it.

Verne reveals his giant squid<sup>6</sup> at the end of a character's careful itemisation of its qualities, qualities which *he* can see, but which we for several paragraphs suppose him to be remembering from descriptions ('Did it not measure about six metres? [...] was its head not crowned with eight tentacles...? [...] were its eyes not extremely prominent [...] ?').<sup>7</sup> The animal thus appears pre-mediated by human understanding, at the end of a long section detailing the history of architeuthology, so that its monstrousness, though certainly not denied, is already defined by human categorisation. Frisson notwithstanding, the Weird, usually implacably Real in Lacanian terms, is preincorporated into the symbolic system.

When he sees it, the narrator Arronax relays the sight with a laborious itemised description interrupted by pedantic asides ('Its eight arms, or rather legs, were [...] implanted on its head, thus giving these animals the name

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6. In fact the animal is, fittingly, slightly evasive of precise taxonomy: it is described as a '*poulpe*', usually translated 'octopus', and as '*calmar*', 'squid'. Though it seems to resemble the latter more than the former, with eight limbs it is lacking the squid's two longer hunting arms. It has also been translated into English as an 'immense cuttlefish', 'devil-fish', and indeed as a 'poulp'.

7. All quotations from Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, translated by William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, revised 2001. Available at: <<http://home.netvigator.com/~wbutcher/books/20t.htm>>).

## COLLAPSE IV

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of cephalopods') and questionable exactitude that can only undermine the 'cosmic awe'<sup>8</sup> which typifies the Weird ('We could distinctly see the 250 suckers in the form of hemispherical capsules [...]'). Arronax carefully uses '*bras*' then '*pieds*' to describe the limbs, rather than his assistant's '*tentacules*': scientism rejects the tentacle. 'I did not want to waste the opportunity of closely studying such a specimen of cephalopod', Arronax tells us. 'I *overcame the horror* its appearance caused me, picked up a pencil, and began to draw it.'<sup>9</sup> Verne mounts a pre-emptive rearguard defence of a bourgeois 'scientific rationality', depicting it as stronger than this new bad-numinous.

Arronax describes his own description as 'too pallid', and says that only 'the author of *The Toilers of the Sea*' could do it justice. The reference is to the extraordinary passage in which Hugo's Gilliat is attacked by a '*pieuvre*' (Guernésiais for octopus), the greatest and strangest of the pre-Weird reveries on the tentacular, and favourite for the title *tout court*. The chapter is a visionary rumination on the horror of octopus-ness. The creature is described in a vomit of aghast and contradictory metaphors and similes: 'a rag of cloth', 'a rolled-up umbrella', 'disease shaped into a monstrosity', 'a wheel', 'a sleeve containing a closed fist', 'birdlime imbued with hate', 'a pneumatic machine' – and on and on.<sup>10</sup>

Though Hugo is far less cited than Verne as an influence on the fantastic genre-cluster with which Lovecraft is also

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8. What Lovecraft calls 'Cosmic alienage or "outsideness"' (H.P. Lovecraft, *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*, 1937. Among many other locations, see: <<http://www.geocities.com/soho/cafe/1131/14notesen.htm>>).

9. Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* [emphasis added].

10. Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, translated by James Hogarth (New York: Random House, 2002), 350-352.

associated, his passage is much closer to *haute* Weird. Hugo counterposes the octopus to the chimera, to underline the former's afolkloric monstrousness. He repeatedly stresses the octopus's taxonomic transgression: it has no claws, but deploys vacuum as a weapon; it eats and shits with the same orifice (supposedly); it swims and walks and crawls; it is – as he stresses with ecstatic Kristevan disgust at the octopus-as-bject – flaccid, gangrene-like, and, 'horrifyingly [...] soft and yielding'.<sup>11</sup> The octopus is problematised ontology.

Hugo is nowhere more Weird than in his admirably clear insistence that octopuses, 'killjoys of the contemplator', demand a *rethinking of philosophy*.<sup>12</sup> There are, nonetheless, what one might archly call 'countervailing tendencies' pulling the passage away from *haute* Weird (it should go without saying that this is genealogy not criticism).

Though distinguished from the chimera, the octopus is identified with the Medusa, demon, and, repeatedly, with the vampire, reacquainting it, if unstably, with 'traditional' teratology. The octopus is obsessively depicted as evil – indeed, such a 'perfection of evil' that its existence is a vector of heresies of a double god, a cosmic parity of good and evil.<sup>13</sup> Although, in a more subterranean moment of French cephalopodia, Lautréamont deploys the octopoid to mock moralism, as when 'legions of winged squid<sup>14</sup> [...] scud swiftly toward the cities of the humans, their mission to warn men to change their ways', a similar problematic is evident in *Maldoror* (1869). Lautréamont's

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11. Ibid., 351.

12. Ibid., 354.

13. Ibid., 355.

14. '*poulpes*' – octopuses, properly.

## COLLAPSE IV

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God is confronted by Maldoror ‘changed into an octopus, clamp[ing] eight monstrous tentacles about his body’, the two now knowing they ‘cannot vanquish each other’.<sup>15</sup> This Manichean tentacular is in sharp contrast with the monstrosities of *haute* Weird, which are impossible to translate into such terms – predatory and cosmically amoral, but not ‘evil’. If they serve any morally heuristic purpose it is precisely to undermine any religious good/evil binary.

Counterintuitively, it is also precisely Hugo’s heady itemisation of the octopus’s dreadfulness that pulls against its Weirdness. Hugo decries the devilfish as unthinkable with what is almost a sermon, that unfolds aghast, yes, but *without surprise*. Hugo’s octopus lurks like a bad conscience, a horror that we *already know* we are inadequate to thinking. By contrast, whether one deems it successful, risible, both, or something else, Lovecraft’s hysterical insistences that *nothing like this had ever been seen before*, that *nothing could possibly prepare anyone for such a sight*, when his Great Old Ones appear, is the narrative actualisation of the Weird-as-novum, unprecedented, Event.

In 1896, the other great early adopter of the tentacular, H.G. Wells, published the first and neglected *haute* Weird text (despite its author not generally being located in the sub-genre, perhaps because of the never-convincing Fabian camouflage draped over his bleak numinous). ‘The Sea Raiders’ tells of *Haploteuthis ferox*, a hitherto-unknown and aggressively predatory cephalopod which besieges the English coast, rising from deep waters to feed on boaters, and disappearing again.<sup>16</sup>

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15. The Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & The Complete Works*, translated by Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), 101, 103.

16. <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Sea\\_Raiders](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Sea_Raiders)>

There is no Vernian rejection of ‘tentacle’: the word and its derivations appearing twenty times in the short piece. There is no moralism – though horrifying, the monsters are predators, not devils. Above all, ‘this extraordinary raid from the deeper sea’ is unprecedented, unexpected, unexplained, unexplainable – it simply is. All that we who suffer this tentacular Event can hope is that they have returned ‘to the sunless depths of the middle seas, out of which they have so strangely and so mysteriously arisen.’

The three decades between the Verne/Hugo/Lautréamont moment and Wells’s saw the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, the so-called ‘Long Depression’ of 1873-1896, the rise of ‘new unionism’, and the ‘new imperialism’ and murderous ‘scramble for Africa’.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly visible, especially in the last, the crisis tendencies of capitalism would ultimately lead to World War I (to the representation of which traditional bogeys were quite inadequate). It is the growing proximity of this total crisis – kata-culmination of modernity, ultimate rebuke to nostrums of bourgeois progress – that is expressed in the shift to the morally opaque tentacular and proto-Lovecraftian radical Weird of ‘The Sea Raiders’.

Like Wells and unlike Lovecraft, William Hope Hodgson was barometric enough to the incipient apocalypse to en-monster it *before* it exploded into the war that killed him. In a stunning letter describing the front, he refers to what he considered his masterpiece, *The Night Land*: ‘My God, what a Desolation! [...] the Infernal Storm that seeps for ever, night and day, day and night, across that most

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17. Simultaneous with the increase of its formlessness and historylessness, its efficacy as placeholder for the unrepresentable, the octopus’s somatic specificity – its spreading tentacles – also saw it increasingly deployed in satire as symbol for the ‘new imperialism’.

## COLLAPSE IV

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atrocious Plain of Destruction. My God! Talk about a lost World – talk about the END of the World; talk about the “NightLand” – it is all here, not more than two hundred odd miles from where you sit infinitely remote.<sup>18</sup> The Weird is here explicitly, in John Clute’s magnificent formulation, ‘pre-aftermath fiction’.<sup>19</sup>

The Weird’s unprecedented forms, and its insistence on a chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe, stresses the implacable alterity of its aesthetic and concerns. The Weird is irreducible. A Weird tentacle does not ‘mean’ the Phallus;<sup>20</sup> inevitably we will mean with it, of course, but fundamentally *it* does not ‘mean’ at all (perhaps Weird Pulp Modernism is the most Blanchotian of literature).

### 1. DEATHMATCH

The Weird, then, is starkly opposed to the hauntological. Hauntology, a category positing, presuming, implying a ‘time out of joint’,<sup>21</sup> a present stained with traces of the ghostly, the dead-but-unquiet, estranges reality in an almost precisely opposite fashion to the Weird: with a radicalised uncanny – ‘something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it’<sup>22</sup> –

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18. William Hope Hodgson, *The Wandering Soul* (Hornsea: Ps Publishing/Tartarus Press, 2005), 384.

19. Personal communication.

20. Which is why, despite the seeming isomorphism of interests and recent inevitable cross-fertilisation, haute Weird is radically opposed to the sub-genre of pornographic ‘hentai’ manga and anime known as ‘tentacle rape’.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994): et, subsequently, very many al.

22. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919). <<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html>>.



rather than a hallucinatory/nihilist novum. The Great Old Ones (Outer Monstrosities, in Hodgson's formulation)<sup>23</sup> neither haunt nor linger. The Weird is not the return of any repressed: though always described as ancient, and half-recalled by characters from spurious texts, this recruitment to invented cultural memory does not avail Weird monsters of Gothic's strategy of revenance, but back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself.

Weird writers were explicit about their anti-Gothic sensibility: Blackwood's camper in 'The Willows' experiences 'no ordinary ghostly fear'; Lovecraft stresses that the 'true weird tale' is characterised by 'unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces' rather than by 'bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule'.<sup>24</sup> The Weird entities have waited in their catacombs, sunken cities and outer circles of space since aeons before humanity. If they remain it is from a pre-ancestral time. In its very unprecedentedness, paradoxically, Cthulhu is less a ghost than the arche-fossil-as-predator. The Weird is if anything ab-, not un-, canny.

This must be insisted upon for the heuristic edges of the Weird and the hauntological – and indeed of other fantastic categories – to stay sharp. Hence the importance of 'Geek Critique', which rebukes, say, Terry Eagleton when he blithely discusses the 'rash of books about vampires, werewolves, zombies and assorted mutants, as though a

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23. William Hope Hodgson, 'The Hog' (1947) <<http://www.forgottenfutures.com/game/ff4/hog.htm>>.

24. Algernon Blackwood, 'The Willows' (1907). <<http://www.Gutenberg.org/files/11438/11438.txt>>; H.P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927). <<http://www.yankeeclassic.com/miskatonic/library/stacks/literature/lovecraft/essays/supernat/supern00.htm>>.

## COLLAPSE IV

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whole culture had fallen in love with the undead’;<sup>25</sup> because whatever the merits of the rest of his argument, *only two of those figures are undead, and they are all different*. Teratological specificity demands attention. And, granting the controversial position that ghosts are teratological subjects, such specificities are nowhere more different and important than between Weird and hauntological.

Eagleton’s sort of cavalier hand-waving is increasingly rare, at least when it comes to the ghostly. Compare Eagleton with Sasha Handley, who points out that ‘to distinguish the particular meanings attached to ghosts’ demands taxonomy, and that her object of study is not ‘anonymous angelic or evil spirits’ but ‘spirit[s] appearing after death’.<sup>26</sup> Some years previously, however, two such perspicacious writers as Julia Briggs and Jack Sullivan as a matter of policy play fast and loose with categories of ghosthood. ‘I am [...] compromising’, Sullivan says. ‘All of these stories are apparitional, in one sense or another, and “ghost story” is as good a term as any.’<sup>27</sup> According to Briggs, ‘the term “ghost story” [...] can denote not only stories about ghosts, but [...] spirits other than those of the dead [...] To distinguish these from one another according to the exact shape adopted by the spirit would be an unrewarding exercise.’<sup>28</sup> I have argued, rather,

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25. Terry Eagleton, ‘Mark Neocleous: *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*’, *Radical Philosophy*, 137, May/June 2006: 45-47, at 45.

26. Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 8.

27. Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), 9. While praising the book in her invaluable bibliography on the supernatural, Jessica Amanda Salmonson takes Sullivan to task for the ‘obscene impression that there were no women writers of ghost stories in England’: <<http://www.violetbooks.com/bib-research.html>>

28. Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber 1977), 12.

that the ‘exact shape’ is of enormous importance.

Briggs and Sullivan are wrong, but their error is not merely personal. While we may sympathise with S.T. Joshi in finding this use of the term ‘ghost story’ ‘irksome’, his deployment of a robust common sense against it – ‘To me “ghost story” can mean nothing but a story with a ghost in it’<sup>29</sup> – does not get at the nature of the problem. Key here is Briggs’s justification of her imprecision by claiming that the term ‘ghost story’ ‘is being employed with something of the latitude that characterizes its general usage’.<sup>30</sup> The imprecision is that of the culture, and it shifts.

A quarter-century before Briggs, ‘reasons of simplicity’ were sufficient for Penzoldt to ‘use the term “ghost story” also for tales of the supernatural that do not deal with a ghost’.<sup>31</sup> Mindful that there is nothing simple about such a decision, Briggs by contrast feels the need to justify her own position at some length: the looseness of usage is changing. A quarter-century after her, the new common sense has become that *ghostly* ghost stories are ‘a distinct literary form’,<sup>32</sup> and when Handley asserts her own position, precisely contrary to Briggs’s, almost as read but *not quite*, she takes a moment to argue it. Clearly the politics of ghostly specificity has shifted markedly, but has not banished all remnants of its countertendency – hauntology is haunted by a pre-hauntological taxonomic indeterminacy.

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29. Joshi, *Weird Tale*, 2.

30. Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 12.

31. Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), 12 n.12.

32. Srdjan Smajic, ‘The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story’, *ELH*, 70:4, Winter 2003, 1107-1136, at 1131.

## COLLAPSE IV

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At this point in history, describing as a ‘ghost story’ a piece about werewolves or vampires, let alone about Shub-Niggurath or similar, would likely be considered false advertising. But it was not always so. In the early twentieth century, the terato-taxonomic membrane least breached today, that between the Weird and the Hauntological, was more likely to be permeated than that between ghosts and ‘traditional’ monsters. The self-styled ‘ghost stories’ of the 1920s might feature, say, giant flesh-sucking slugs (‘Negotium Perambulans’ and ‘And No Bird Sings’, by E.F. Benson).

As Handley points out, a ghost meant to the eighteenth-century English just what it does to us now: a revenant, not some eldritch oozing tentacled thing. At some point after 1800, however, that distinct ghost-ness of the ghost ebbed – temporarily, as it turned out – until by 1910 Hodgson’s *haute-Weird* adventurer Carnacki could without embarrassment be described as a ‘Ghost Finder’ in his battles with Hog-manifestations of ‘million-mile-long clouds of monstrosity’.

It is not so much irony as a constitutive contradiction that it was a few years before that, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, almost precisely in the middle of that trajectory of the de-ghosting ghost, that the key works of what is now vaunted as a *high* ghostly, an *echt* hauntologic, the ‘tradition’ of the English ghost story, appeared.

### 2. ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

The eighteenth-Century ghost was a revenant who tended to moralism and anti-Popish sniping, embodying as dread example lessons about virtue, justice, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

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33. Handley, *Visions*, 16-19.

In the early nineteenth century, the explicitly sectarian character of that moralism had waned, but the instructional nature of hauntings remained.

Cultural production expressed anxiety over the sclerotic arrogance of the Victorian era and its victims, as well as the dominant culture's ideological counterattack, the tendency to increased and cruder moralism. Non-mimetic art tends to express such frictions particularly vividly, and in the nineteenth century we can see the battle for the two souls of the ghost in the fictions of Dickens, versus those of the man he published,<sup>34</sup> Sheridan Le Fanu.

Dickens thinks nothing of jostling together, in 'A Christmas Carol', the ghost of a person, Jacob Marley, with those of various Christmases. To post-hauntological eyes this is a category-error, but Dickens is merely subordinating the specifics of the ghost to his extreme and mawkish extrapolation of the preceding epoch's tendency to morally 'mean' with spectrality. In neither 'The Haunted House' (1859) nor 'The Haunted Man' (1848) are the haunts revenants of the dead, but 'of my own innocence', or a doppelganger who performs a selective mnemectomy so the story can thumpingly moralise that it is important to remember wrong done to us 'that we may forgive it'. Dickens's ghosts are apotheoses of the instructional ghosts of the preceding century – out of time, rearguard in their sentimentality, themselves haunted by the future. They are not so much convincing, morally, as performatively flourished. These are not modern ghosts, but the last, already-dead walking dead of a dead epoch, bobbed about on sticks.

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34. Le Fanu's masterly 'Green Tea' appearing in *All the Year Round* in 1869.

## COLLAPSE IV

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Le Fanu's ghosts, by contrast, in their moral contingency, are intimations of disaster.<sup>35</sup> Even in his more seemingly traditional 'moral' stories, such as 'Mr Justice Harbottle' (1872), the nature of the spectral agents of revenge – their inhuman, de-subject-ed strangeness, and the repeated intimations that they, victims of injustice, are in hell ('pallid [...] secretly suffering [...] glittering eyes and teeth') makes sense according to no moral accounting. In the extraordinary 'Green Tea' (1869), the text's insinuations that Jennings's merciless torment at the hands of the abominable monkey spirit is in some way payback – that he is 'guilty', that he shows 'shame', though for what is unknown – read as morally obscene.

The blurring of the Weird with the ghostly is prefigured in the auditioning of animal spirits as avatars of the monstrous (before the Weird's demand to be considered cephalopod was clear), in the stark and amoral universe, in the protoplasmic formlessness of the dying vampire Carmilla (1872), in the autotelos of the monster (the monkey in 'Green Tea' just *is*). For these reasons it is tempting to agree with Sullivan that Le Fanu, rather than the more-usually-cited James, is the key revolutionary figure in the so-called 'traditional' ghost-story that we can now see was a – Weird-inflected – 'New Ghostly'.

However, while his fiction is if anything more vatic and perspicacious than James's (shades of Hodgson and Lovecraft), Le Fanu is a towering *interstitial* figure. The popular story of his death is so theoretically kitsch on this point that it could have been scripted by a cultural critic. Le Fanu was reputedly a martyr to a recurring nightmare

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35. Sullivan is excellent on this point, and I draw on him here extensively. *Elegant Nightmares*, 32-68.

about being crushed to death by the collapse of an old grand mansion. When discovered dead, a horrified look on his face, his doctor was said to have intoned: 'I feared this. That house fell on him at last.' The story is tenacious, which, in the face of the fact that it is almost certainly untrue,<sup>36</sup> bespeaks its cultural resonance. Le Fanu's problematic is the crisis and coming fall of the house of Victoriana (and of the particular colonial upheavals of fading Protestant Ascendancy), and as such foundational to what followed; but the present of which it is a vivid expression is the fringe of a past, rather than the start of a future. His fiction is of end and failure.

The politics of sensory perception are important. Le Fanu, in his masterwork 'Green Tea', stresses the malevolent inhuman strangeness of the monkey, but also that it was *incorporeal*. This was, in ghost-story terms, not 'New Ghostly' but 'new traditionalism', uniting Le Fanu with Dickens and other pre-Weird, fabular-logic-wielding ghost-smiths. As Victorian ghosts grew more ostentatiously moralistic, they decorporealised. (In earlier centuries they had moralised *and* provided the thrills of physicality: they were often 'thought capable of moving material objects and of inflicting physical harm [...] [and] those who were confronted by ghosts believed that they could inflict material damage by shooting or stabbing the spirit'.)<sup>37</sup>

Central in marking him out as the key figure in this peculiar period, later to be designated the birth of a ghost-nation, Le Fanu's disciple M.R. James's ghosts could be touched, and touch.

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36. Jim Rockhill, 'Introduction', in J Sheridan Le Fanu, *Mr Justice Harbottle and Others* (Ashcroft, BC: Ash-Tree Press, 2004). xii-xv.

37. Handley, *Visions*, 9.

## COLLAPSE IV

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### 3. THE OLD NEW WEIRD GHOSTLY

James is regularly cited as a – or *the* – founder of the ‘tradition’ of English ghost stories. It is commonplace to then wryly point out that James’s ghosts are in fact often not ghosts, but inhuman ‘demons’ of one sort or another.<sup>38</sup> Lovecraft stressed that James had ‘invent[ed] a new type of ghost’, not ‘pale and stately, and apprehended chiefly through the sense of sight’ but ‘lean, dwarfish, and hairy – a sluggish, hellish night-abomination midway betwixt beast and man – and usually *touched* before it is *seen*’.<sup>39</sup> In the rubble of the Lovecraft Event we can go further: the adversaries of James’s stories are disproportionately and emphatically *Weird*.

- Touch and touchability is central. James’s is the horror of the physical universe (a trauma that would trace into the obsessive materiality/ism of Lovecraft’s horror). It is the cloth-ness of the notorious face ‘of crumpled linen’ in ‘Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You My Lad’ that makes it so terrible. James even names one of his late stories ‘The Malice of Inanimate Objects’. The touchability of his ‘ghosts’ is not a return to that of their 18th-century cousins: this is a new (Weird) haptos, with little to do with human somaticism, and everything to do with the horror of matter. The most grotesque moment in ‘The Ash Tree’ is the ‘soft plump, like a kitten’, with which a just-glimpsed giant spider drops off the bed.

- James’s repeated insistence that he is an ‘antiquary’ is not convincing. He is acutely conscious of capitalist

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38. See for example Rosemary Pardoe, ‘MR James and the Testament of Solomon’ (1999). <<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/ArchiveSolIntro.html>>

39. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*.



modernity, and a surprising number of his ‘ghosts’ manifest through it. The demon in ‘Casting the Runes’ bizarrely announces its intent by means of an advertisement in a railway carriage. The attack which the runes occasion is brought down quite amorally on whoever took them last, according to the depersonalised passings-on of bits of paper. The horror is of the universal equivalent in mass commodification: the runes are Bad Money. Most astonishingly, in ‘The Diary of Mr Poynter’, what is haunted is not a scrap of fabric nor the materials with which it is made but *the design upon it*: it is the *copied* design, reprinted with explicitly cutting-edge modern techniques, that is the locus for the apparition. This is the work of hauntology in the age of mechanical reproduction.

• James, like the *haute* Weird, is largely uninterested in plot, subordinating it to his invented strangeness. Unlike Lovecraft, who might simply dispense with it, to present Weirdness in pulp bricolage, ‘flashed out’, as he puts it, ‘from an accidental piecing together of separated things’,<sup>40</sup> James goes through the motions of plot; but i) his narrative arcs are utterly predictable, and ii) he knows this, and repeatedly uses formulations like ‘I surely do not need to tell you ...’ or ‘It will be redundant to conclude...’ or similar. This palpable impatience is underlined by his later increasingly epigrammatic and sparse stories. And like Borges, when he cannot be bothered even with half-hearted narrative, James simply describes his ideas freed of it, as in ‘Stories I Have Tried to Write’.

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40. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’.

## COLLAPSE IV

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• Most important, of his non-ghost ‘ghosts’, a disproportionate number have appurtenances of the Weird, and read now as startlingly teratologically ahead of their time. His apparitions are hairy (‘The Diary of Mr Poynter’, ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’), chitinous (‘The Ash-Tree’), slimy and/or amphibious (‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’), totally bizarre (‘The Uncommon Prayer-Book’), and more than once, *tentacled* (‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, ‘Count Magnus’).

Today’s ghost stories are, overwhelmingly, exclusively hauntological, their figures revenant dead in time out of joint.<sup>41</sup> This tradition misremembers itself into existence. Many of its claimed foundation texts can only be so anointed in an act of heroic misrepresentation. Neurotically insistent on his own status as a ghost-story writer James may have been (the titles of his collections reiterate: *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories ...*, (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919), *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* (1925)); however, though he is often considered to have perfected or inaugurated such hauntological work, it is not, for the most interesting part, what defines James’s *oeuvre*.

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41. Of the sixteen stories in the acclaimed recent collection of ‘new ghost stories’ *The Dark* (New York: Tor, 2003), various innovations of approach notwithstanding, there is only really one story (‘One Thing About the Night’, by Terry Dowling) in which the haunt is not a revenant function of the human (and it is not Weird, but the dark of the collection’s title). Even more telling is *All Hallows*, the journal of the Ghost Story Society, that contains, according to its own guidelines, work ‘in the style of the classic supernatural tale’, listing James as its first exemplar. Of the 23 stories in a recent bumper issue (*All Hallows* 43, Summer 2007), one contains a hint of the genuinely Weird (‘The Reflection’, by S.D. Tullis, haunted both by ghosts and by the ‘wrinkled tentacles’ (253) which may have trapped them in a mirror). For the others, two time-slips and one imp aside, to be a ghost story is, reasonably enough but *innovatively*, and in contradiction to James, definitionally to be a story of a ghost.

Nor, though, did he write Weirid in any straightforward sense. James does not have the visionary abandon of later *haute* Weirid. His use of more traditional ghosts and/or occasional folk-ish figures is repeated alongside Weirid figures that in shortly forthcoming work would be repudiations of them. James's corpus represents an under-one-roof *co-existence* – that would be all but unsustainable at any but that unique fulcrum moment – of what will later be seen to be hauntology and the Weirid, the oppositional dyad.

In this context, the key James story is without question 'Count Magnus'. Here, the 'strange form' from whose hood projects 'the tentacle of a devil-fish' – a Weirid, inhuman, Cthulhoid figure who sucks faces from bones – is the *servant* of 'a man in a long black cloak and broad hat', a malevolent human ghost. This is an astounding crossover, its categoric transgression eclipsing any Marvel-DC or Cerebus-meets-Teenage-Mutant-Ninja-Turtle shenanigans. James creates the ultimate tag-team: *Hauntology deploys Weirid as its sidekick*.

#### 4. JEAN PAINLEVÉ'S QUANTUM VAMPIRE

There is, in 'Count Magnus', and in James in general, no *aufhebung* of the Weirid and hauntological. The two are, I suggest, in non-dialectical opposition, contrary iterations of a single problematic – hence in 'Count Magnus' the peculiarly literal and arithmetic *addition* of Weirid to hauntological (with the latter privileged, precisely because James *is*, fundamentally, somewhat ghostlier than he is Weirid).

Alongside the fantasist's urge to literalise and concretise problematics, modern – particularly geek – culture is characterised by an accelerating circuit of teratogenesis, new monsters endlessly produced and consumed (exemplified in commodity form by the innumerable RPG and video-game

## COLLAPSE IV

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bestiaries; by the coquetry with which films hint at and protect their ‘monster shot’; by Pokémon, which deployed the cultural addiction as its slogan: ‘Gotta catch ‘em all!’). If the contradiction between Weird and hauntological was sublatale, then such drives would surely have led to the monstrous embodiment of any putative ‘resolved’ third term between Weird and haunt.

Nor is it difficult to imagine what such a synthesis would be. The outstanding synecdochic signifier for a revenant human dead is the skull – mind-seat now empty-eyed, memento mori, grinning, screaming.<sup>42</sup> The nonpareil iteration of the embodied Weird is the tentacle, and by suspiciously perfect chance, the most Weird-ly mutable – *formless* – of all tentacled animals is the octopus, the body of which, a bulbous, generally roundish shape distinguished by two prominent eyes, is vaguely homologous with a human skull.

The shapes are ready, and take little to combine: the Weird-hauntological monster is clearly a tentacled skull (see facing page for my own rendition).

Considering the fecundity and vigour of the teratological drive, the symbolic resonance of its constituents and their apparent topological compatibility for easy crossbreeding, the extreme rarity of the skulltopus in culture is mysterious. There are a very few examples, but the pickings are astoundingly meagre.<sup>43</sup> There is clearly something not right about

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42. See for example *The Screaming Skull* directed by Alex Nichol (1958); F. Marion Crawford’s ‘The Screaming Skull’ (in *Uncanny Tales*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911).

43. There is a five-second animation ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly2jNr1\\_nro](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly2jNr1_nro)); an illustration (<http://tachyonmkg.deviantart.com/art/skulltopus-11383138>); a hipster t-shirt ([http://www.HowlingGoodTshirts.com/marketplace/87072931/skulltopus\\_t\\_shirt](http://www.HowlingGoodTshirts.com/marketplace/87072931/skulltopus_t_shirt)); and, most impressively, Becky Cloonan’s cover illustration for



## COLLAPSE IV

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it – the two components may imply one another but are *resistant to syncretis*, and the categorical unease this occasions denies the figure proliferation. The Weird and the hauntological generally relate to each other not by sublation, nor, *pace* James, by addition, but by either-one-or-the-otherness, in a manner suggestive of quantum superposition.



The author, with skull and octopus, yesterday.

Bataille's favourite anarcho-visionary marine biologist, Jean Painlevé, understood this. His 1945 'Le Vampire'<sup>44</sup> contains extraordinary footage of an octopus lasciviously crawling over a human skull very similar to it in shape and

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her comic *East Coast Rising* Volume 2 (Los Angeles: Tokyopop, 2008 (forthcoming)), visible online at <<http://stabstabstab.deviantart.com/art/wrist-hurts-in-color-66012269>>.

44. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjNh0uZCCLc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjNh0uZCCLc)>

proportion. The octopus should, with that oozability of Weird skin, merge with the skull to become a skulltopus. That event is the asymptote of the interaction we see – but of course it does not happen, because it cannot.



Jean Painlevé, 'Le Vampire' (*Science is Fiction* BFIVD17190)

Instead, Painlevé shows us the unstable haptic flirtation of the two *without merger*. Those seconds are fleeting – the intervening years have distinguished the traditions of skull and octopus, and James's ingenious 'Count Magnus' solution would be hard to pull off now – but are the heart of the film (which otherwise pretends to be about vampire bats and ticks). They are the outstanding cultural example of the superposition of Weird and hauntological. We cannot sustain the skulltopus; as close as we can come is Painlevé's skull-and-octopus-interaction quantum vampire.

## COLLAPSE IV

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### 5. NEOLIBERALISM, THE SKULL AND THE OCTOPUS

Hauntology and Weird are two iterations of the same problematic – that of crisis-blasted modernity showing its contradictory face, utterly new *and* traced with remnants, chaotic and nihilist *and* stained with human rebukes. We can see these tendencies of the fantastic pulling at each other in the years since James, who inaugurates their contrary twinned birth, in waves of varying speeds depending on the ideological moment. At times one or other iteration might be dominant, but neither can ever efface the other. Opposed but not separable, the traces of the Weird are inevitably sensible in a hauntological work, and vice versa.

The degree to which one or the other has been stronger has affected the tendency towards their separation as genres of thought and pulp. Since the 1970s their ‘separateness’ has become dominant, not because there is a ‘drive to separate’, but as a corollary of the oscillating efficacy of as-sim-on-pure-as-possible Weird and/or hauntology, for thinking our fraught and oppositional history since the end of Keynesianism, that great Cthulhu-swat and ghostbuster.

In quick and dirty caricature, with the advent of the neoliberal *There Is No Alternative*, the universe was an ineluctable, inhuman, implacable, Weird, place. More recently, however, as Eagleton haunto-illiterately points out, the ghosts have come back, in numbers, with the spectral rebuke that there was an alternative, once, so could be again.

We do not get to choose, however – and why would we want to? If we live in a haunted world – and we do – we live in a Weird one.