

Weird Sublime (Blackwood, Hodgson, Lovecraft)

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Abstract: The paper focuses on a specific kind of sublime, as depicted in several works of “weird fiction”. It is based on excerpts from the books by canonic authors of this genre – A. Blackwood, W. H. Hodgson, and H. P. Lovecraft. To explain the nature of the “weird sublime”, this paper uses the comparison with classic forms of sublime in the theoretical works by I. Kant (*Critique of Judgement*) and F. Schiller (*Of the Sublime*). Due to this comparison, the weird sublime is presented as outwardly bizarre and arbitrary, but in essence moderate type of “the boundary experience” of the sublime.

Keywords: Sublime, weird fiction, disgust, imagination, transcendence

The weird fiction genre (or subgenre) developed in the late 19th and early 20th century. Many weird fiction books feature the elements of supernatural and psychological horrors and science fiction, combined in various constellations, and their protagonists – and, by proxy, readers – are confronted with unfathomable, terrifying and often disgusting phenomena, both natural and supernatural. Yet, despite their bizarre and repelling features, some weird tales let the readers experience not only terror and disgust but also a strange feeling of the sublime. To understand this weird sublime better, it is vital to remember the classic notion of the sublime in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790), together with some of its revisions in Schiller’s “Of the Sublime” (1793). The reference to these concepts should facilitate the understanding of the weird sublime dynamics, and also enable it to demonstrate its outstanding features.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant discusses two types of sublime – mathematical and dynamical. The experience of the mathematical sublime is initiated by the failure of the human imagination when estimating the magnitude of natural existence;¹ the experience

¹ Kant, I., 2007. *Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 81 – 83.

of the dynamical sublime comes from the contemplation of nature as a might one cannot defy.² The negative emotion, caused by the realization of one's inadequacy – “check to the vital forces”³ – is immediately obscured (yet not really obliterated) by a revitalization that brings exaltation, because in the first instance the impression of inadequacy of the sensible, corporeal nature leads to the understanding of the ability to think ideas,⁴ while in the second instance it leads to the understanding of the ability to make free decisions, which emphasizes the idea of human freedom and independence of the corporeal connection to nature.⁵

As for Friedrich Schiller's thoughts, it is vital to refer to his terminological shift in the categorization of the sublime. To emphasize its wholeness, Schiller uses the word “theoretical” for the mathematical sublime, and “practical” for the dynamical.⁶ In the first case, however, he subconsciously emphasizes the possibility of other failures of human cognitive abilities than of those he (like Kant) is writing about. The most important part is, however, Schiller's categorization of the practical sublime into contemplative and pathetic. As for contemplative sublime, the impression is caused by “an object as power” itself;⁷ for the pathetic sublime, the impulse is human suffering, caused by an irresistible outer power.⁸ Thus, by this pathetic notion, Schiller unambiguously places the sublime into the realm of art, especially literature, for only fiction makes elation and suffering mutually compatible.

The new modality of the sublime, presented by the authors of weird fiction, preserves the dynamics of the classic sublime but does not emphasize (at least in an unproblematic way) the faith in non-natural or supernatural identification of man. This essential difference (together with other ones, in mutual coordination) can be demonstrated by numerous examples, but it is sufficient to stick with parts from Algernon Blackwood's novella *The Willows* (1904), several excerpts from William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908), and Howard Phillips Lovecraft's short story *The Call of Cthulhu* (1926). The protagonists

² Ibid., pp. 90 – 91.

³ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 87 – 90.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 91 – 93.

⁶ Schiller, F., 2004. Of the Sublime. *Fidelio* 13(1 – 2), p. 90 – 91. [Accessed: 2024-09-09]. Available at: https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/fidelio_archive/2003/fidv12n01-2003Sp/fidv12n01-2003Sp.pdf.

⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

⁸ Ibid.

of these three canonical weird fiction works are confronted with something radically strange, something that enters the human and natural world from the unknown areas of outer space.

Blackwood's *The Willows* are set in the vacant floodplain in the Danube basin,⁹ "covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes".¹⁰ Two friends taking a river cruise get caught in the bad weather, and thus they experience the power of the "ordinary" earthly nature. Having landed on a flat island in the river (and, therefore, in relative safety that enables contemplation), one of them watches the elements raging. He is overwhelmed by the vastness of the floodplain landscape, strength of the wind, power of the rising river, and, consequently, by the idea of physical endangerment, which is not yet imminent: the "resistless, thundering flood of water" gives him "the sense of awe".¹¹

At the same time, he realizes that his "uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder",¹² evoked by the known nature. That is because he believes that the usual manifestation of the natural power "somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience"¹³. These are phenomena that "stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions" and may even cause exaltation.¹⁴ But the omnipresent willow shrubs cause uneasiness that brings no exaltation at all. The traveler feels he has trespassed the borders of a different world where usual human knowledge and habits are no longer relevant:

[The Willows] made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the horrible.¹⁵

As the protagonist would find out later, the willows are imbued with a distant cosmic life that uses them to get to Earth. That is why the elementary understanding of the world fails when one encounters the

⁹ Compare to Ashley, M., 2001. *Algernon Blackwood. An Extraordinary Life*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, pp. 107 – 108.

¹⁰ Blackwood, A., 2011. *The Willows*. Auckland: The Floating Press, p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

willows, and so does the human ability to classify and categorize – the plants act like animals, they even seem to possess a mysterious kind of reason.

Later in the story, the travelers are confronted with even more conspicuous and menacing phenomena. The protagonist awakens in the middle of the night on the island, gets of his tent, and witnesses a strange event – vague shapes or figures move between the willows:

They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes, within the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens.¹⁶

At that moment, the protagonist reaches to the strange creatures connected to the willow shrubs in an act of primitive worshiping, and escapes his fear for a little while; however, as soon as “the immediate wonder of their great presence” washes away,¹⁷ he is overwhelmed by feelings of terror and helplessness. Following some more experiences, both travelers admit they have reached a strange place where non-human powers enter our world. And yet they clearly see these powers are no ancient gods or natural demons; the creatures are not connected to the human world through tales and myths, and therefore they must be extra-terrestrial, perhaps intelligent, but totally dissociated from people, and strangely connected with plants instead. The human brain, asking for versatility, is suddenly of no use for the protagonists.¹⁸

In the beginning, Blackwood evokes the impression of dynamic/practical sublime, only to destruct it immediately. The protagonists of his story cope with phenomena that cannot be integrated into their sensory horizon, not even by emphasizing the transcendence of human subjectivity. Therefore, the reader cannot experience the impression of the pathetic sublime in the situations when the travelers are exposed to the dangers of the island. That is because these dangers do not have the nature of a spiritless natural power; instead, they evoke the impression of a rational order, largely unfathomable for the human cognitive

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸ Compare to Conley, G., 2013. The Uncrossable Evolutionary Gulfs of Algernon Blackwood. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24(3), pp. 426 – 445.

abilities. The protagonists remotely feel that they could face some sort of bizarre transformation rather than death, but they have but a vague idea of its nature.¹⁹ Thus, the story questions the superiority of man as a rational, therefore super-natural being, and the classic exaltation is rendered impossible.

Similarly confusing is the use of the elements of the classic sublime in Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*. The protagonist, living in a secluded old house in Western Ireland, experiences similar intermingling of worlds like the unhappy travelers in Blackwood's story, only his forays into different planes of reality are much more specific – he reaches very distant places in the outer space, or the distant future of the Earth where there is no more life.²⁰ In his first adventure, his study is suddenly full of glow that turns the wall of the house into some kind of a window to a different world. A scene arises that, under usual circumstances, would clearly make an impression of Kant's mathematical sublime:

[...] I was looking out on to a vast plain, lit with the same gloomy twilight that pervaded the room. The immensity of this plain scarcely can be conceived. In no part could I perceive its confines. It seemed to broaden and spread out, so that the eye failed to perceive any limitations.²¹

In the context of the unfathomability, the vast plain rather evokes confusion and terror. It does not have any understandable connection to the human world and the nearby countryside, so no experience with it can be integrated into human life. Its vastness only strengthens the impression of failure to navigate the universe rationally.

Compared to the Blackwood's story and Hodgson's novel, the destruction of the classical sublime is even more conspicuously depicted in Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu". In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the long-drowned town of R'lyeh rises above the surface, concealing extra-terrestrial beings, seemingly dead.²² But the creatures wake up, which is at first reflected in the dreams of sensitive individuals around the world, including an excentric young sculptor from New England:

¹⁹ Compare to Cisco, M., 2021. *Weird Fiction. A Genre Study*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 278.

²⁰ Compare to Murphy, T. S., 2020. It Might Have Been a Million Years Later. Abyssal Time in William Hope Hodgson's Weird Fiction. *Studies in the Fantastic* 9, pp. 63 – 100.

²¹ Hodgson, W. H., 2009. *The House on the Borderland*. Auckland: The Floating Press, p. 30.

²² Compare to e.g. Nyholm, M., 2021. *Searchers After Horror. Understanding H. P. Lovecraft and His Fiction*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, pp. 114 – 117.

[...] he had had an unprecedented dream of great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror. [...] from some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice; a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound [...]²³

In a sense, sky-flung blocks and monoliths correspond to the formal requirements of Kant's understanding of the mathematical sublime, as their colossal greatness goes beyond the powers of the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. They can also feel like the dynamical sublime, as they refer to the immense power that created them, and radiate the sinister, hidden menace. They are the creations of intelligent beings, not natural phenomena, and therefore do not fit into Kant's definition of the sublime, but they were not created by humans either, and therefore cannot be grasped by human understanding. They are a product of an alien nature, unfathomable for humans. But they destruct the classical sublime by their ominous unfathomability, emphasized, in the excerpt quoted above, by the reference to the chaotic sensation that only becomes sound due to the human imagination. Later in the story, the unfathomability is especially expressed by the non-Euclidean geometry of the buildings in R'lyeh, impossible to grasp, and deadly for human visitors.²⁴

However, there is another aforementioned feature of the weird fiction present in the quotation, hardly ever compatible with the classic sublime: green slime is running down the blocks and monoliths of the lost city that has just suddenly reappeared from the sea. So R'lyeh is not only stunning, terrifying and confusing but also disgusting. And disgust even becomes the most intense emotion in the story's climax: when the sailor escaping the dangers of R'lyeh desperately navigates his ship through the body of the temporarily revived guardian of the city, the monstrous and colossal Cthulhu, there is "a bursting as of an exploding bladder, a slushy nastiness as of a cloven sunfish, a stench as of a thousand opened graves."²⁵ The distance between the man and the disgusting is completely eliminated, and the horrendous impression made by the great Cthulhu strengthens the sailor's realization of the permeability and porosity of his own body.

²³ Lovecraft, H. P., 2008. *The Fiction. Complete and Unabridged*. New York: Barnes & Noble, p. 358.

²⁴ Compare to Harman, G., 2012. *Weird Realism. Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Winchester – Washington: Zero Books, pp. 70 – 72.

²⁵ Lovecraft, H. P., 2008. *The Fiction. Complete and Unabridged*, *ibid.*, p. 378.

All of these four aspects – quoted only in short excerpts here – join forces in *The Call of Cthulhu*, strengthening one another. Thus, the story's protagonists do not experience any exaltation at all; on the contrary, their experiences with the aliens from outer space leads them, via the sight of the human insignificance, to self-abdication. The combination of the external elements of the classic sublime, radical unfathomability and disgusting moments is a typical feature of many weird fiction works. The exalting emotion is eliminated from the story, and even the sensitive reader is denied of the classic impression of the sublime – in their failures, the protagonists do not refer to the human superiority above nature, they rather prove the delusiveness of this idea. Yet we cannot say that the exaltation is entirely missing in weird fiction; it is just more difficult to trace its origins, which is clearly shown by the heated discussions on these topics.²⁶

To identify the nature of the weird sublime, we first need to briefly summarize the motivation of the weird fiction authors. Their work can be explained as a response to the changing understanding of man's place in the cosmic space; this change was driven by the development of sciences in the late 19th and early 20th century. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, humans were no longer unique beings, much more important than all other material existence;²⁷ the discoveries, hypotheses and theories of modern physics, especially the non-classical disciplines, seriously questioned the human faith in the ability to navigate the world.²⁸ Weird fiction can of course be interpreted as a sign of resigned acceptance of this new understanding of the human place in the universe, but it might also be a modest attempt to give a new, more resilient form to the human faith in man's dignity.

The weird stories usually do not feature anything exalting per se, or any reference to exaltation whatsoever, yet the stories are results of free fictional transformation of the human experience of "marginalization" in the big picture; therefore, they are a demonstration of transcendence.

²⁶ Compare to Will, B. A., 2002. H. P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime. *Extrapolation* 43(1), pp. 7 – 21; Ralickas, V., 2007. 'Cosmic Horror' and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18(3), pp. 364 – 398; Houston, A., 2011. Lovecraft and the Sublime. A Reinterpretation. *Lovecraft's Annual* 5, pp. 160 – 180; Moreland, S., 2018. The Birth of Cosmic Horror from the S(ub)lime of Lucretius. In: Moreland, S., ed. *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13 – 42.

²⁷ Compare to e.g. Hurley, K., 2004. *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, materialism, and degeneration at the fin de siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 55 – 64.

²⁸ Compare to e.g. Joshi, S. T., 1990. *H. P. Lovecraft. The Decline of the West*. Berkeley Heights: Wildside Press, pp. 17 – 18.

Due to the rationally controlled artistic imagination, the non-human universe of new sciences becomes the impulse for the experience of the theoretical-dynamical sublime, based on the harmony of the humble awe of the unfathomability of reality, combined with the joy of the ability (as author or reader) to give this experience an aesthetic expression. The weird fiction enables anyone to rise, through terror and disgust, above their limits, whatever origin they are of – not towards the supposed higher nature but above themselves, towards the mystery of the universe in its unpredictability.²⁹

This makes the weird sublime much different to Kant's concept. It may also be "the expression of the boundary experience",³⁰ yet in this case the boundary is not drawn between the sensible and supersensible, but divides the area of Kant's sensible – i.e. the material nature – to a sphere that is easily accessible to man as a sensible-reasonable human being, and another sphere that only reluctantly yields to human understanding, usually indirectly and never in its entirety, which inspires anxiety and provokes human imagination at the same time. In weird fiction, this constellation of emotions creates bizarre avatars of the cosmic unknown,³¹ paradoxically connecting what Kant's understanding of the dynamical sublime keeps separate, i.e. terrifying and exalting. The supersensible – at least in Kant's sense – is denied to man, and he intensely experiences his corporeality in its porosity, often disgusting; thus, the weird fiction aesthetic is different to Kant's, for whom an impression evoking disgust destroys "all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty".³² The most peculiar difference, however, is in the ability enabled by the experience of the weird sublime – the imagination, i.e. the ability that, in case of the classic sublime, fails and gives way to the spontaneity of reason. Therefore, neither the author nor the reader of weird fiction does not put aside their affiliation to material nature, not even in their transcendence, though fancily arbitrary on the outside.

²⁹ Compare to Newell, J., 2020. *A Century of Weird Fiction. 1832–1937. Disgust, Metaphysics and the Aesthetics of the Cosmic Horror*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 13.

³⁰ Pries, Ch., 1933. *Übergänge ohne Brücken. Kants Erhabenes zwischen Kritik und Metaphysik*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, p. 38.

³¹ Compare to Reynolds, B., 2009. Lovecraft's Avatars: Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, Dagon, and Lovecraftian Utopias. *Lovecraft Annual* 3, pp. 96 – 108.

³² Kant, I., *Critique of Judgement*, *ibid.*, p. 141.

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