

Towards Uncertain Horizons:

The Weird, and the Weirdness of *Sisyphean* and *The Sunken Land Begins*
to Rise Again

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Abstract in Norwegian

Denne avhandlingen utforsker “the weird”, en litterær modus og et adjektiv som på norsk kan forstås som “det underlige” eller “det sære”, og de ulike måtene “weirdness” kommer til uttrykk på i to litterære verk fra samtiden. Den vil også kartlegge hvordan og hvorfor *the weird* i de siste årene har vist seg å være et svært relevant begrep i flere fremvoksende felt innen dagens humaniora, inkludert posthumanisme, *postnormal times theory*, *blue humanities* og liminalitet. Det første kapittelet vil fungere som en generell oversikt der jeg presenterer historien og de grunnleggende teoriene om *the weird* som litterær modus, adjektiv og begrep, og videre hvordan det har utviklet seg og endret seg frem mot dagens litterære og teoretiske praksis. Det andre kapittelet er viet en analyse av den japanske forfatteren og billedkunstneren Dempow Torishimas (1970-) mosaiske sci-fi-roman *Sisyphian* (2013), nærmere bestemt *Perfect Attendants*, den første novellen i samlingen. Dette kapittelet setter romanen inn i kontekst med *weirdness* i foregående japansk litteratur, utforsker begrepet liminalitet, og diskuterer *the weird* sitt forhold til språk og virkelighet. Det tredje kapittelet går i dybden på den britiske forfatteren Michael John Harrisons (1945-) mer hverdagslige, men ikke mindre underlige roman *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* (2020). I dette kapittelet introduseres begrepene *blue weird* og *watery weirdness* med mål om å diskutere *the weird* sitt forhold til vann i ulike former. Dette kapittelet diskuterer også samtidens sosiopolitiske og personlige reaksjoner på *weirdness* i sammenheng med Ziauddin Sardars *postnormal times* teori.

Abstract in English

This thesis will explore the infamously slippery literary mode of the *weird*, and the various ways it expresses itself in two works of contemporary fiction. It will also map how the weird as a mode and an attribute has become especially compatible with new and emerging fields and concepts in the humanities including posthumanism, postnormal times theory, blue humanities, and liminality. The first chapter will act as a general overview where I will present the history and foundational theories of the weird as a mode, an adjective and a concept, and further on how it developed and changed towards its current day practice. The second chapter is dedicated to an analysis of the mosaic sci-fi novel *Sisyphlean* (2013) by Japanese author and visual artist Dempow Torishima (1970-), more specifically the first novella included in the collection called *Perfect Attendants*. This chapter contextualizes the novel in the preceding history of Japanese weirdness, explores the concept of liminality, and discusses the weird's relation to language and reality. The third chapter will explore in depth the more quotidian and understated novel *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* (2020) by the British writer Michael John Harrison (1945-). This chapter introduces the concepts *the blue weird* and *watery weirdness* as an extension of Jolene Mathieson's oceanic weirdness. It also discusses contemporary socio-political and personal responses to weirdness in context with Ziauddin Sardar's postnormal times theory.

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Introduction: Defining Weird

The weird is a chimeric mode of literature that initially emerged as a strain of the gothic of the late 1800s that engaged with especially strange topics or narrative techniques. Through the use of the *supernatural* and the *surreal*, the weird often destabilizes settled conventions (i.e. genre, culture, science) and concepts (i.e. *human* and *normal*) to create a sense of an expanded reality that is ambiguous rather than absolute. Both etymologically and functionally, the weird relates to *fate* and *destiny* as it complicates the commonly perceived chains of causality and agency.

When I write *chimeric*, it is meant in the sense that the weird has a similar aspect to the Chimera - the fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology who is a bizarre and grotesque mixture of the seemingly disparate parts of a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. The weird is a genre ripe with such strange, chimeric transformations, not only of the bodily and grotesque kind but also at the level of the conceptual and causal. The appeal of such an unruly mode is that it offers truly extraordinary ideas and perspectives, and a literary space under and to the side of the mainstream wherein readers can experience and give significance to the unknown and the monstrous. While the unknown is a space that can be both exciting and alluring, the most commonly portrayed response to the unknown in weird literature has historically been horror and trepidation. Weird scholar Gry Ulstein makes a similar observation, stating that; “Although comparisons between the weird and the sublime can be drawn, there is a distinction in affect: where the (Kantian) sublime evokes awe and wonder, the weird mainly evokes dread and anxiety.” (Ulstein, 2019, p. 53). We should thus consider

weird fiction as a literary cousin to the horror genre, even if much of the weird written today may not seem particularly shudder-inducing at first glance.

What does the word “weird” even mean? *Weird* is today used colloquially as a synonym for odd, strange, or bizarre, denoting something unusual or abnormal in appearance and behavior. While some use it as an endearing adjective, in a similar sense to *quirky*, it more commonly tilts towards the negative, denoting something unsettling and strange in a mysterious and frightening way (Oxford Dictionary). Before the weird was formalized as a distinct literary genre from the 1920s onwards, it was commonly used in the nineteenth century as an adjective applied to a wide variety of fantastical and speculative fiction (Machin 2018, 10) In England, the word’s etymological origin can be traced through the Middle-English *wērd* back to the Old-English noun *wyrd*, which meant fate, or “the otherwise than humanly appointed order of things”(Bosworth Toller’s Anglo-Saxon Dictionary). It also relates to the Old-English verb *weorþan*, meaning “to come to be”, “to become” or “to turn” (Bosworth Toller’s Anglo-Saxon Dictionary). In the eco-philosophical work *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton connects all of these aspects of the weird through the myth of the Norse deity Urðr (Wyrd), who was one of the Norn sisters (the Fates) who *turned* the spool and *twisted* and *intertwined* the threads of fate that made up the destinies of mankind. “Weird means *strange of appearance*; weirdness means the *turning* of causality.” (Morton 2016 FT 6-7) Weird thus refers to strange turns of events and twisting entanglements of being; the intertwining of seemingly unrelated fates propagated by an outside order of non-human or more-than-human forces beyond the control of any one individual.

A cursory search for “weird” in academic databases reveals only a small handful of results before the late 2000s, but a much greater number of entries beyond the middle mark of the 2010s. This “weird boom” has mainly to do with how the weird’s destabilizing and monstrous aspect was discovered, mostly retroactively through works of “the new weird”, to

be remarkably compatible with posthumanist and ecological thought. The weird, like posthumanism, appears strange and unsettling because it undermines several of the most essential teachings of the secular and humanistic worldview that the majority of modern Western cultures are founded on. It tells us that we are not fully in control of our destinies and that our ideas and concepts will always come short in grasping with a reality and an existence that is far too complex and unpredictable to fathom. The weird illustrates that we are, like the tragic heroes of Sophocles and Shakespeare, simultaneously the victims and the criminals in dark tragedies of fate (Morton 2016, FT 9). Such observations lead to a dark-ecological awareness, which says in its simplest, most common expression: in destroying the environment you are destroying yourself. Immediately imperceptible ecological causality, such as global warming, often appears implausible to the average person, as evidenced by the substantial number of global warming deniers despite the clear evidence presented by empirical science. Global warming itself is a weird concept. The melting of the Arctic icecap pushes cold water currents south to disrupt the north-eastern flow of the Gulf Stream, causing unpredictable weather and temperature in Europe that may lead to cold temperature records rather than a warming as the concept's name suggests. Reports on ecological crises may seem like fantastical stories of cursed magic rather than science, for instance, in the way the felling of trees in the Amazonas weirdly relates to the invasion of jellyfish armies in the waters of the North Sea. In this regard, the modern weird tale reflects the weird world they are written in.

In Torishima's *Sisyphian*, the weird suggests that humanity is not inherently sanctified, but subject like everything else to the powerful and transformative mechanisms of monstrous capitalist systems and unchecked use of technology. In M. John Harrison's *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, the weird illustrates the slow, but inevitable turns of circumstance, and how even the humblest and most minuscule individual fates are affected

and caught up in the watery fabric of deep space and time, as well as in the global web of human-made systems that has made our world more complex and unpredictable than ever. This thesis will be an attempt to map the presence and effect of the weird through contemporary works of weird literature and how they relate to the number of confounding and unsettling issues that face us today.

Chapter 1: The History and Fundamental Theories of the Weird

The Old Weird and The Lovecraftian

Most scholars today view the definite first period of the weird, by some considered a golden age of the genre, as roughly lasting from 1880-1940, emerging from Gothic literature of the Victorian period. (Machin 2018, 9) Until the emergence of the pulp fiction magazine *Weird Tales* in the 1920s, there was however no conscious or unified development of a weird poetics, and it would be most accurate to say that it was historical and literary conditions that created the right environment for weird works to be written and appear organically. The late-stage industrialization, secularism, and scientific advancements of the late 1800s and the fin de siècle contributed to the emergence of radically original literary movements such as naturalism, early modernism, and psychological realism in the high culture, and the weird showcases the same effect these socio-cultural conditions had on certain writers of the low culture of genre fiction such as horror, fantasy, and science fiction. In this early period, we find the Anglosphere weird appearing in the supernatural and spectral fiction of Arthur Machen, M.R James, William Hodgson, and Algernon Blackwood, the science fiction of H.G Wells, and in the dark fantasy of Lord Dunsany and Mervyn Peake. Works from this period are commonly referred to as the “old weird”.

Historically, dread has been the chief feeling connected with the literature of the weird, and the genre’s ties with horror fiction remain one of its key distinguishing features. In a literary context, this has much to do with the ideas and conventions established through the theories and fiction of American writer Howard Phillips [H. P.] Lovecraft (1890–1937), who to this day remains the most influential practitioner and theorist of the weird. His essay

Supernatural Horror in Literature (1927) is considered a foundational text for the theory of the weird, which begins with a quote (informed by Edgar Allan Poe) that has become incredibly widespread and influential not only in weird circles, but also in darker storytelling at large: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft 1927). Lovecraft equating the unknown with fear set the tone for future weird fiction to come, and his short stories infused with his literary ideas and worldview also became the prototype for future authors of the weird to follow, in equal parts to their quality and relative novelty.

A typical Lovecraftian tale is made up of hybrid elements of science fiction, supernatural horror, and fantasy, and is typically set in rural New England or other remote areas of the world. His characters are usually brooding, taciturn academics or artists who come in contact with forces and entities that resist common logic and which are indifferent or even antagonistic towards human laws and interests of their day. These forces may be tentacular monsters of godlike proportions with strange names such as Nyarlathotep or Cthulhu found in tales such as *At the Mountain of Madness* (1936) or *Call of Cthulhu* (1928). They may also be more ambiguous entities, like the meteor in *The Color out of Space* (1927) which infects a New England farmstead with an alien hue that seemingly has the power to mutate and transform its surroundings into the unnatural. When his characters are faced with these threatening externalities, they tend to break down by going mad or entering self-enforced isolation; that is if they are not outright physically eliminated.

I find the most lucid expression of Lovecraft’s foundational theories of the weird to be the following:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breath must be a hint, expressed with a

seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain — a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft 1927)

Lovecraft here defines the weird as a genre that defies convention in order to elicit genuine awe, fascination, and a lasting dread in contrast to mainstream horror fiction which often employs conventions such as the zombie and the vampire, or “secret murder and bloody bones, to elicit momentary, but familiar thrills.” (Lovecraft 1927) Lovecraft’s tales also diverge from fantasy, or to the surreal for that matter, in their relation to realism and to the “outside”. Mark Fisher notes this eloquently in his landmark genre study *The Weird, The Eerie, and the Uncanny* (2016), writing that “Fantasy is set in worlds that are entirely different from ours — Dunsany's Pegana, or Tolkien's Middle Earth; or rather, these worlds are locationally and temporally distant from ours. [...] The weird, by contrast, is notable for the way in which it opens up an egress between this world and others.”. (Fisher 2016, 20) Fisher’s thesis, built upon Lovecraft’s theories, is then that the weird is dependent on the *interplay* and *difference* between the terrestrial-empirical and the outside. The unsettling and awe-inspiring effect of the *outside*, for instance evoked by a monster from an alternative dimension, can not exist without an established *inside* such as a real-life locale and culture. A similar model to Fisher’s is made by the preeminent New Weird writer Michael Cisco in his recent post-structuralist work *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study* (2022). Here he proposes that the weird is dependent on an oppositional relation to the status quo. He goes on to outline two strains of the weird: the major and the minor, which more often than not exist simultaneously in most weird tales. In Cisco’s model, informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of Kafka, the major mode of the weird seeks to affirm the status quo in the face of an external and destabilizing threat, while the minor uses the weird’s destabilizing perspective to oppose and warn against the domineering normalcy of the status quo. (Cisco 2022, 12). When we discuss

relations to the status quo, this is all to say that weird tales must contain a challenge to what is accepted as ordinary and real. In other words, the weird opposes *the normal* in order to reveal the reality that lies beyond it.

Noys and Murphy further supports this argument by writing that weird fiction does not create ontologically alternative realities, but rather probes “absolute reality,” expanding it through the insinuation that its possibilities are infinitely wider and stranger than what we suppose through the normal (Noys & Murphy 2016, 17). This process is also described by Cisco as the production of the supernatural in the reader’s world and the production of supernatural experiences for the reader. The supernatural in a weird context must then be understood as entities or phenomena that challenge the accepted nature of reality, making the very idea of a reality of set and reasoned principles itself ambiguous. (Cisco 2022, 35-36) In other words, the weird probes *absolute reality* and its likely possibilities in order to suggest an “ambiguous reality” of near-infinite possibilities and experiences.

At first, one might also be inclined to read the weird as purely fantastical or psychological due to its frequent use of transformations, monsters, and supernatural elements, but interpreting these devices as merely hallucinatory or fanciful would be yet another attempt at limiting reality within the safe and reasoned bounds that the weird opposes. A weird reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), for instance, should then not (merely) reduce the strange color-phantom in the wallpaper as an allegory or a temporary hallucinatory effect of domestic isolation and patriarchal oppression, but as a possibility of reality; perhaps an entity which implies a constituent relation between the organic and inorganic or the psychological and material that common human understanding is not privy or open to. One alluring aspect of the weird, then, is the promise of an experience or an awareness outside of the ordinary, opening up new and radical ways of seeing and thinking about ourselves and the world around us. The weird’s potential for opening up radical new

vistas might have been what prompted American philosopher Graham Harman to write that “he looks forward to a day when Lovecraft will have displaced Holderlin from his throne as philosophers' most exalted object of literary study.” (Fisher 2016, 24)

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Like posthuman theory, the weird seeks to poke (tentacular, slimy) holes in our conceptions about the human, revealing that ‘human’ and ‘nature’; ‘inside’ and ‘outside’; ‘self’ and ‘other’ – along with so many other (non-Indigenous) conceptualizations – were in fact always already deeply unstable and intricately interwoven. As part of the posthumanist toolbox, then, weird is when the planetary leaks into the individual and becomes crisis – global and personal; personal because it is global: weird is failing to metabolize the dread of being human and recognizing that this failure can be productive (Ulstein 2022)

In a general sense, we can define posthumanism as the study of the breakdown of “the human” as a stable and distinguished category, and the possible conceptual and material futures following such breakdowns. (Badminton 2010, 374) As Ulstein writes above, the weird has like posthumanism from a remarkably early point in literary history poked “tentacular, slimy holes in our conception about the human”, as well as in dichotomies such as organic/inorganic, material/immaterial, natural/artificial and so on. While many posthumanist and weird scholars see the potential for positive ethical, scientific, and

philosophical advancements in the deconstruction of the category of “human”, others, such as Francis Fukuyama, worry that posthuman developments will lead to a slide into moral anarchy, confusion, and disempowerment. (Badminton 2010, 381). Weirdness itself implies neither positivity nor negativity, only uncertainty, amorphousness and complexity. Whether or not the latter are desirable traits is all dependent on framing and context, as well as the intellectual, creative and political alignments of the authors and scholars who employ and study the weird mode.

Let us illustrate the above observation: The field of new materialism, which also can be considered a vein of posthumanism, has found a positively compatible literary mode in the weird as both seek to question our concepts of the material and to question “empirical” binaries such as organic/inorganic, material/immaterial and human/nonhuman. The political project of new materialism is in Jane Bennett’s words “to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” and to distribute agency as far and wide as possible (Bennett, ii). For new materialists, the weird offers a potential emancipatory space in the face of domineering and essentially unsubstantiated human concepts of differentiation which never will or can fully grasp reality. Lovecraft notably makes a new materialist observation in his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*: “Usher, whose superiority in detail and proportion is very marked, hints shudderingly of obscure life in inorganic things, and displays an abnormally linked trinity of entities at the end of a long and isolated family history--a brother, his twin sister, and their incredibly ancient house all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment.” (Lovecraft 1927). This radical conception of materiality, and the awareness of deep, “subterranean” relations between the organic and inorganic in particular, shows remarkable compatibility towards a kind of correlational ethics, which considers entities in the world not as essentially isolated from each other, but rather

interconnected and constituent parts of a complicated network of relations, that would decades later be proposed by post-structuralist thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari, and later adopted by posthumanists and ecological thinkers.

However, it must also be said that some of Lovecraft's conclusions and aims also differ quite heavily from the progressive thinkers of today. While ecological and postmodern philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, were fueled by a hopeful wish to deconstruct concepts such as "human" and "animal" to reach "a kind of emancipatory and affirmative(non)state of fluid motion and identity"(Massumi 1988, xi), we must keep in mind that Lovecraft's skepticism of anthropocentrism was mainly fueled by fear, rejection, and a marked *lack* of a long-term hope for humanity. In his misanthropic and nihilistic vision, he regarded the human or earthly "inside" as insignificant and powerless, under threat by the unknown dangers that might dwell in the vast "outsides" of space, in the abyssal depths of the ocean, and in alternative and spiritual dimensions beyond the human-made veil we call "empirical reality". Lovecraft himself describes his literary interests and intentions as follows: "Man's relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man's relation to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination. The humanocentric pose is impossible to me, for I cannot acquire the primitive myopia which magnifies the earth and ignores the background." (Lovecraft 1921) Lovecraft's cosmic vision is strikingly ecological and posthumanist, but it also expresses an abject rejection and horror (although mixed with fascination) towards outside forces that is incompatible with most contemporary thought in the progressive humanities.

Today, most weird writers actively reject the more indigestible aspects of the Lovecraftian weird, such as its inherent racism and misanthropic xenophobia. On the contrary, modern writers and thinkers may also see, like Noys, Murphy and Ulstein, a space of both political and creative freedom outside of the oppressive walls of "the normal" that

more conventional modes of literature propagates. On the other hand, it is next to impossible to escape Lovecraft's tentacular influence on modern writers of alternative speculative fiction. (Vandermeer 2008) The weird that Lovecraft and other writers of the old weird established is still very much present and engaged with today, and it is not an uncommon stance to feel horror or anxiety towards the strange outside forces that the weird hints at. While authors may skew one way or the other in political questions, the weird itself does not provide easy answers; it merely destabilizes and reconnects in unexpected ways. If it provided answers, it would dispel its atmosphere and breath, and it would simplify and reduce reality; not complicate and expand it. The weird thus tends to avoid moralisation and didactics in favor of ambiguity, conceptual innovation, and interpretative openness. It is because of these qualities that we often must concede to using somewhat vacuous terms when it comes to the weird, such as it being "slippery" and "amorphous"; it inherently resists, as both mode and adjective, settled modes of analysis. These aspects to the weird are simultaneously what makes it into such a fruitful literary mode to explore emerging theories of thoughts and concepts which have not yet been settled. As we shall see in the next section, the weird becomes even slipperier and more ambiguous as it turns into the New Weird, and in the same turn more constructive.

The New Weird

From the 1940s-1970s, there appears to be a relative dearth of notable weird works outside of obvious Lovecraft pastiches. According to the eminent weird scholar S.T. Joshi, it seems that weird works of true originality and quality only appear sporadically in this period, for instance in the alternative, horror-adjacent works of Shirley Jackson and Robert Aickman. Joshi speculates that this dearth may be a result of market forces, as “the pulp magazines, including *Weird Tales*, were in their dying agonies; the emergence of the paperback publishers required voluminous sales to maintain profitability, sales that could only be achieved by more popular genres like the detective story, the romance, the western, and science fiction.” (Joshi 2003, 338-339)

In the same manner that pulp magazines with loose publishing criteria provided a space where stories of wildly different genres could intermingle and mix, and less commercially viable literature and writers with obscure interests could flourish, we can speculate that the nature of the early internet and web forums had a similar effect on the emergence and proliferation of the “new weird” towards the end of the last century. One of the authors whose work we will analyze in this paper, M. John Harrison (1945 -), a British writer and critic of imaginative fiction active since the late 1960s, was central to the largely online formation and conceptualization of the term “new weird”. According to Jeff Vandermeer’s introduction to the early new weird anthology *The New Weird* (2008), the term gained traction and staying power after Harrison opened a thread on the internet forum *Third Alternative* in 2003, asking: “The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?”. (Vandermeer 2008) The aftermath of this thread, deeply engaged with by critics, writers, and readers alike, was a new consciousness of a shift in the Weird of the time. Authors like China Mieville, Jeff Vandermeer, Michael Cisco, Kathe Koja, and Thomas Ligotti were recognized

as writing a kind of new and more urban take on the genre that challenged the ideas of Lovecraft and the old weird.

Vandermeer marks two main impulses that had influenced the “new weird” and separated it from the “old”: The New Wave of science fiction of the 1960s and 70s, and the Transgressive Horror of the 1980s spearheaded by Clive Barker (Vandermeer 2008). The New Wave was a movement, centered around the British sf magazine *New Worlds*, which experimented with the form and content of science fiction in reaction to a perceived “genre exhaustion” in the dying years of the sf “Golden Age” (Broderick 2003, 49-50). Like the weird, the New Wave defied conventions and mixed genres, infusing sf with elements from fantasy, and expanding the thematic and dramatic scope of sf by verging away from a focus on so-called “hard science” into the realms of psychological-, political-, and social science. Noted authors of the New Wave include M. John Harrison (publishing stories in *New Worlds* under the pseudonym Joyce Churchill), Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, J.G Ballard, James Tiptree Jr., and Joanna Russ. I find Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) to be a particularly good example of the kind of New Wave work that left clear marks on New Weird authors such as Mieville. This work is set in a distant future where Genly Ai, a human representative of a galactic federation called the Ekumen, travels to a planet called Gethen in order to observe and convince its inhabitants to join the federation. The Gethenians prove to be a race of ambisexual aphrodites, something which shapes their societies and cultures in a distinctive manner from that of Earth, and most of them thus find the normative human realities and concepts of gender and sex to be weird and even deplorable. The novel radically challenged its contemporary notions of normalcy, particularly those relating to gender and sex, and in a sense it flips the role of inside/outside in the same manner that many New Weird works would later do. It is thus easy to see why Vandermeer regarded the New Wave as the “brain” of the New Weird (Vandermeer 2008), the former infusing the latter with political and

social consciousness, “scifantasy”-hybrid storyworlds, and a deeper and more serious engagement with contemporary science and culture. The weird gained new avenues, then, for a more direct engagement with the alien and the monstrous, most of all by portraying stories told from nonhuman perspectives, in contrast to the Lovecraftian weird that defaulted to a human perspective and a rejection of anything remotely nonhuman.

Mieville’s novel *Perdido Street Station* (2000) is often recognized as one of the most influential work of the New Weird period, not the least because it is one of a few examples of a widely commercially successful work of the modern weird, but also because it set an innovative and qualitative precedent for future weird fiction to come. Rather than being set in a familiar world where weird outside forces threaten the established order, *Perdido Street Station*’s urban setting of New Crobuzon is weird from the onset. The city, part of a wider SF-fantasy world called Bas-Lag, is inhabited by a wide range of co-existing human and non-human citizens that transgresses the tropes of more conventional SF and the predominantly Tolkien-inspired fantasy of its day, the latter being marked by its high frequency of fantasy worlds wherein racial segregation is commonplace. Some of the weirder races of this world, notable in that they take no clear precedent from real world mythology, are *the khepri* with upper bodies of humans and lower bodies of scarab beetles, and *the cactacae* which are a race of cactus-like humanoid creatures adapted to harsh environments. There are also the Remade, a marginalized group which have been horribly transformed through the use of biotechnology as a form of punishment, as well as the Constructs, a catch-all term for citizens created through various mechanical means. These creatures are also weird because they are neither human nor inhuman, but rather something in between. *Perdido Street Station* is highly distinguishable from the old weird in how candidly and unapologetically it blurs conceptual division lines without resorting to painting this blurring in a wholly negative light. It can in fact be said that the novel encourages this blurring, taking

a stance for the positive sides of otherness and diversity that the weird creates through its destabilization of the status quo rather than fearing it. With the work of Mieville and his contemporaries, it thus seemed like authors of weird fiction had slowly started to open up to the weird instead of profusely rejecting it as Lovecraft had: an openness that Mieville emphasized as “a surrender to the weird”. (Vandermeer 2008) In other words, authors now sensed that the weirdness of the world was inescapable and that it would be more productive, both creatively and politically, to interact with weirdness in a more direct and open manner. Some scholars even note a tendency in the new weird to welcome the alien and monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming, giving the genre’s register an occasional hopeful note to play on (Noys and Murphy 125). Yet, I would argue that this new openness to the weird is not such a simple story that it turned weirdness from something horrific and negative to something solely hopeful and positive. It would be more accurate to propose that weird fiction has become more ambiguous and diverse in affect and subject matter than it used to be, more slippery and fascinating than it has ever been.

In this regard, we must again consider the term “surrender” which Mieville used to describe the new weird’s openness to the alien. A “surrender” implies that openness was not necessarily a conscious artistic choice, but rather an inevitable result of outside pressure that had grown too strong to ignore or resist. The alien pressure Mieville refers to might be understood as the awareness of our age’s unique global and ecological circumstances, most commonly referred to in a weird context as *the Anthropocene*. This term was first introduced in 2000 by meteorologist Paul J. Crutzen and botanic Eugene J. Stoermer as a moniker apt for describing the current geological and ecological epoch as distinct due to the influence human activity has had on the planet and the atmosphere. (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The term has long since been widely adopted in the humanities, particularly in ecocritical and posthumanist directions. Timothy Morton connects the term with the weird most succinctly,

writing that the Anthropocene “binds together human history and geological time in a strange loop, weirdly weird.” (Morton 2016, FT 23).

Observing this Anthropocene awareness in Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy of novels, *Economides* and *Shackelford* implies that the anthropocenic perspective involves a reversal of the roles of the human/nature dichotomy of cosmic horror. Whereas Lovecraft’s cosmic horror expresses an “anti-correlational anxiety that the world around us [is] radically independent of our own will and designs.”, the Anthropocene monsters of Vandermeer’s fiction are, on the other hand, embodying the sense that the natural world is *losing* that independence due to ineluctable human activity and influence. (Shackelford and Economides 2023, 11) While an accurate observation, I disagree with the conclusive tone of their following analysis that Vandermeer’s new weird monsters express a “desire for the monstrous as a means of resisting socio-ecological hegemony”. The above statement might be accurate for *Acceptance*, the last entry in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, where some of the characters “welcome opportunities to merge with more-than-human beings.”, but reading the trilogy as a whole, however, there are plenty of horrific elements which inarguably expresses moments of both cosmic “anti-correlational anxiety” and Anthropocene “correlational anxiety”. An example of the former would be the resistance of Area X to adhere to scientific principles, and for the latter the moaning and obviously suffering crocodile/human hybrid that haunts the protagonist of *Annihilation*. While some of Vandermeer’s characters welcome the more-than-human, there are just as many instances where his characters (along with animals and environments) are unwillingly and violently transformed, physically and mentally tortured, or inflicted gruesome acts of violence. While the alien force of Area X opens up the opportunity of the former for some, it more often than not performs the latter. This is because Area X is a colonizer: just like Western imperialists, it creates a monstrous hegemony by

transforming its environment and the human socio-economic hegemony through an overwhelming and violent force of power and influence.

In recent years, the Anthropocene concept itself has come under scrutiny for being too simple of a worldview. It has rightly been charged with dividing the world into a Human/Nature binary where *humanity* is one undifferentiated entity or species when in actuality there are differences of power and agency between class, nationality, and ethnicity, and not the very least between individual persons. It has also been charged with perpetuating an anthropocentric worldview, overstating human importance, and undermining nonhuman agency, all of which is counterintuitive towards the more expanded non-human reality that the weird points towards. As shown earlier, the strength of Vandermeer's fiction, and the new weird movement as a whole, is its ambiguity and its destabilizing force: it is largely irreducible to simple moralistic and political-didactic conclusions, and too slippery to be contained within simple narratives such as the Anthropocene. We must therefore look towards more open and complex concepts that avoid dichotomies and reductiveness whenever we grasp with the weird. As I will later I argue, I believe that concepts such as liminality, which describes in-between states, and postnormal times theory are better fit for this purpose.

Returning to Economides and Shackelford's exploration of what type of horror the new weird leans towards, I think it is also important to ask whether or not the point of the genre ever was to scare or horrify. Mark Fisher writes that it is not horror, but *fascination* that is integral to the concept of the weird, because "Fascination is the affect shared by Lovecraft's characters and his readers. Fear or terror are not shared in the same way;" and that "fascination in Lovecraft is a form of Lacanian *jouissance*[...] a mode of enjoyment which does not in any sense "redeem" negativity: it sublimates it. That is to say, it transforms an ordinary object causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible *and* alluring[...]"

(Fisher 2016 17) S.T. Joshi also elaborates on the function of the horrific in the context of the weird in *The Modern Weird Tale*, writing that “horror fiction is not meant to horrify. This is to say that the primary purpose of weird fiction should not be to send a tingle up one’s spine; that is merely, as it were, an epiphenomenon of the weird. [...]If weird fiction is to be a legitimate literary mode, it must touch depths of human significance in a way that other literary modes do not; and its principal means of doing so is the utilization of the supernatural as a metaphor for various conceptions regarding the universe and human life.” (Joshi 2001 2-3) It would therefore be more apt to propose that the weird more often not is *unsettling* rather than horrific, in the case of a perceived supernatural event because it opposes our settled conceptions about the world. While a horrific event almost exclusively leads to negative and destructive outcomes, often in terms of bodily harm and pain, an unsettling leads into much more ambiguous territory, a space where the outcomes are uncertain. Lastly, I would argue that the realm weirdness mainly occupies is *uncertainty*, and that horror and fascination follow as natural secondary layers within that realm. The cause and nature of uncertainty, including how the weird makes the certain uncertain, is thus what we will mainly focus on in this thesis.

The Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who himself touched upon weird correlational anxiety in his novel *Kosmos*, once wrote that “serious literature does not exist to make life easy but to complicate it.”. (Gombrowicz 1989, 7) In this regard, we can confidently propose that weird literature is one of the more serious literary forms that exist today, and that we therefore ought to take it more seriously than its historical status as outsider genre fiction. As the simple illusion of human superiority and immortality is slowly waning away, we face a more turbulent and ambiguous reality that paralyze and confound us by its weirdness. Yet it is my hope that by daring to tangle with weirdness through the means of weird literature, that we may better be able to handle and accept the uncertainty of the world we live in.

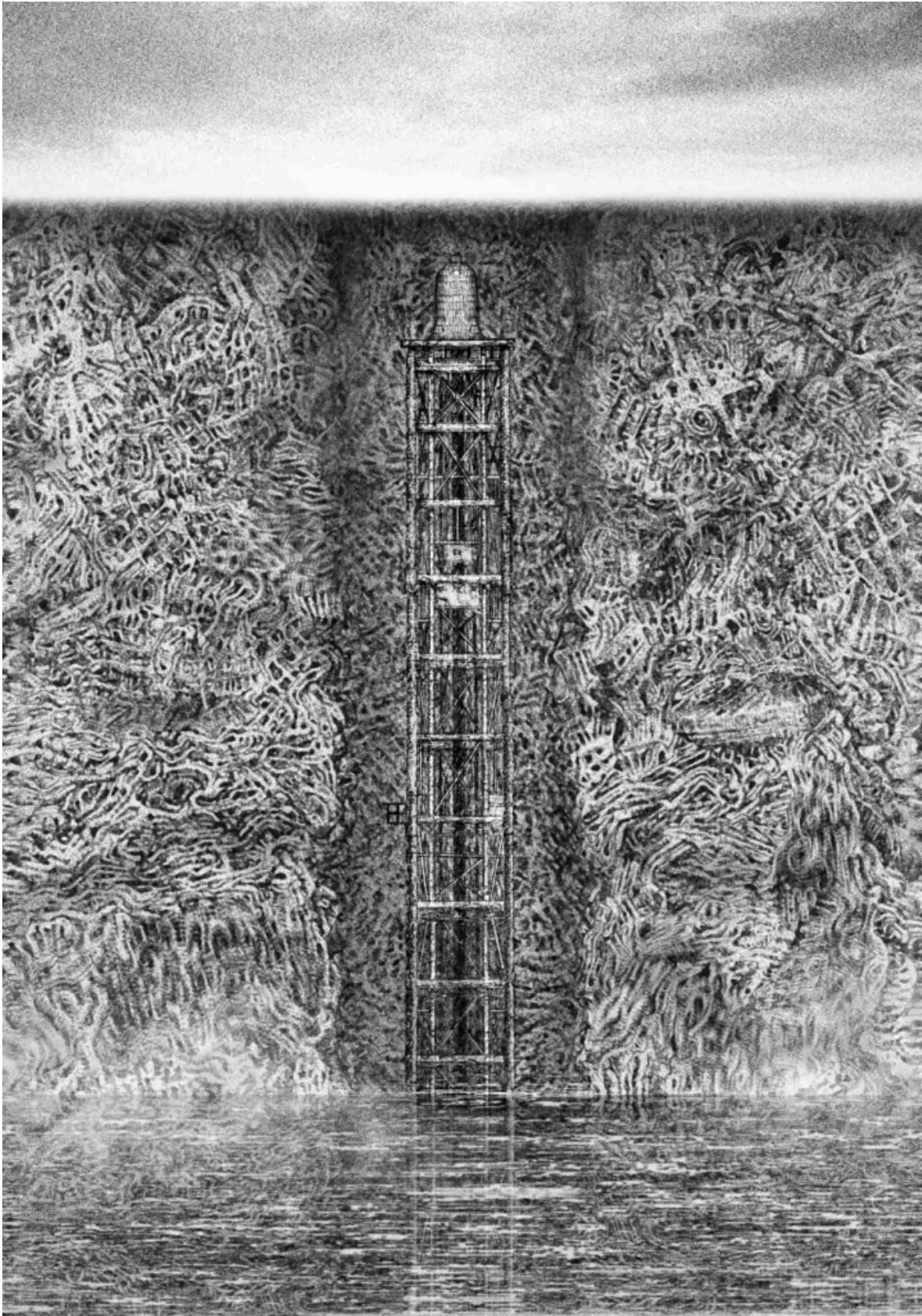
Chapter 2: *Sisyphean (or, Perfect Attendants)*

Sisyphean (2013) is a series of four loosely connected novellas of weird science fiction, also referred to as a mosaic novel by its English-language publisher Haikasoru. It is set in a far-future science fiction world where ecological crises and (post)capitalist systems seem to have transformed humanity, and life at large, into organic tools of production and maintenance. It was the debut work of Japanese writer Denpo Torishima (酉島伝法 - also stylized in English as Dempow) (1970-), until that point working as a professional illustrator and designer with a degree from Osaka College of Arts. The first and titular novella in the series, called *Kaikin no To* (Perfect Attendants) in Japanese, won the 2011 Sogen SF Short Story award for unpublished works of SF, and the completed series won the prestigious Nihon SF Taisho Award in 2013, a feat comparable to winning the Nebula Award in the U.S (SFWJ 2014). Even more impressively he went on to win the award again for its 40th edition with his first full-length novel *Yadokari no Hoshi* (The Star of the Hermit Crab) in 2020, cementing him as one of the most important and critically acclaimed SF writers working in Japan today (Torishima 2024).

There are four novellas contained in the 430-page English volume that makes up *Sisyphean*. The first of these novellas is titled *Sisyphean (or, Perfect Attendants)* and depicts the life of a worker, also referred to as a “subordinape”, whose main task is the assembly and disassembly of synthetic organs. The worker’s boss is the “president”, a faceless creature made out of translucent slime shaped vaguely into humanoid form by a suit of synthetic muscle fiber. The story follows the worker through typical work days where he suffers from absurdly horrid working conditions while being constantly subjected to violence and torment

at the hands of the president. While the worker slowly gains a newfound consciousness of its terrible and absurd situation, this realization suspiciously overlaps with the deterioration of its body and mind, and with increasingly impossible and dangerous demands. To avoid confusion, “*Sisyphean*” will be used to refer to the mosaic novel as a whole, while *Perfect Attendants* will refer to the first novella in the series. *Cavumville (or, the City in the Hollow)*, the second novella, depicts a city situated in the funnel-like hollow of a moon inhabited by people of vastly different outward appearances, ranging from snail-like to almost human. All aspects of its culture and economy revolve around a recurring event called, in a Shintoist vein, “The Descent from Heaven”, where mutilated corpses or barely-living bodies of myriad alien creatures rain down on the city. When someone dies in Cavumville, they usually come back through the process of "revivification", using the material from the Descent from Heaven to repurpose them as new bodies. The third novella is *Castellum Natatorius (or, the Castle in the Mudsea)*, a detective-noir type story set in a world made up of various competing cultures of intelligent insectoids that live within the shell of a giant creature that slowly roams the bottom of a sea of mud. Its protagonist is a beat detective who stumbles upon a conspiracy that hints at a forgotten world outside of the castle. Finally, *Peregrinating Anima (or Momonji Caravan)* might be considered a “weird western” and follows the life of caravans that trek vast, arid landscapes to deliver biomass and livestock from one place to another, set in a world at the brink of a catastrophe called “The Great Dust Plague”. Additionally, the novel includes a one-page prologue, finale, and four “fragments” which act as interludes between the novellas and provide vague, almost myth-like glimpses of the greater, cosmological context that surrounds the stories. Although there are no explicit continuations between the stories, there are subtle hints sprinkled throughout that suggest that they are set in reverse chronological order and that some of the characters are alternate, reborn versions of themselves.

Torishima's prose is dense and highly distinct through its use of neologisms, which in its original Japanese are made up of novel semi-logographic *kanji* compounds with accompanying *ruby text* explaining the compounds' phonetic pronunciations. Because of this, his novel was deemed in Japan to be "impossible to translate" (Torishima 2018). Translator David Huddlestone nonetheless managed this daunting task by translating it to English, and the English version was thus published in 2018 by Haikasoru. It is Huddlestone's English translation that will serve as the foundation for the analysis in this thesis. Aside from text, the novel is also illustrated in grayscale by the author himself, ranging from fog-like abstractions to grotesque and surrealistic depictions of alien lifeforms reminiscent of visual artists such as Zdzisław Beksiński and H.R. Giger:



Sisyphuan, p. 15, Illustration by Denpo Torishima. Depicts the platform on which the worker's sleeping sac is situated. Cliffs of landfill strata behind.

Sisyphian has received near-universal high praise from reviewers and his peers in the West. Michael Cisco writes that “Dempow Torishima has written a unique biological novel of human depth and cosmic scale that belongs among the finest work in the genre” (Haikasoru, cover). Jeff Vandermeer likewise tweeted that “[...]This hits a real sweet-spot for me. I also think that for academics and writers who study things like eco-fiction and the biological in fiction, SISYPHEAN will interest.”. (Vandermeer 2018) Despite Vandermeer’s encouragement, however, *Sisyphian* has garnered little attention in English-language academia thus far. Lejla Kucukalic dedicates a few pages to it as part of a broader overview of biofiction in her book *Biofictions: Literary and Visual Imaginations in the Age of Biotechnology*(2021), and Haralambous, Landragin, and Handa consider its graphemic elements briefly in their paper *Graphemic and Graphetic Methods in Speculative Fiction* (2020). Aside from these two sources, I have only found a handful of reviews to lean on as secondary readings. I must also mention the 2018 interview featured on the Weird Fiction Review blog and the 2024 interview published in the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun. Both have offered invaluable insights into the author's mindset and creative process. Because of the scarcity of sources, however, this chapter will consist mainly of my own analysis, informed by relevant critical theory to support it. Torishima’s work is so dense with novel ideas and methods, and of sufficiently high literary quality, that it can support many thousands of pages of academic text. Within the limited scope of this chapter, which revolves around literary weirdness and posthumanism in particular, I will only be able to scratch the surface of this academic potential. Yet I hope that this chapter might at the very least act as an introductory prompt for other scholars to direct their attention towards Torishima’s bibliography in the near future. In favor of deeper analysis, I have chosen to primarily focus on the first novella of *Sisyphian*, *Perfect Attendants*, which is a perfectly self-contained narrative in its own right. Material from the other novellas will be discussed where seen fit.

The first section of this chapter will place *Sisyphlean* in a wider context of Japanese weird works and within broader Japanese culture as a whole. At the same time, this section will introduce some of the general themes of the work which we will dive into in more detail in the later sections.

The second section primarily deals with the topic of liminality through the concepts of Weird Worlds and Weird Time. It discusses how time and space are distorted throughout *Perfect Attendants* and in the weird genre as a whole.

The third and final section is a broad analysis of the function of language in Torishima's work and how it contributes to the work's overall weirdness. Overall, this chapter will be an attempt to analyze the weird elements present in *Sisyphlean* and how they contribute to the literary qualities of the work, as well as the posthuman socio-cultural context it comments on.

Contextualizing *Sisyphean* and Japanese Weirdness

Although not explicitly and directly influenced by the Western weird movement, Torishima's work takes major inspiration from the Japanese post-war era of pulp fiction (Torishima) which in its way may be seen as an alternative to the Weird Tales era of the American weird and a precursor to the Japanese New Wave movement. At this time, Japanese society was fraught with racial and cultural tensions after their heavy defeat in World War 2, which saw the country effectively occupied by Allied Forces until 1951 through SCAP (The Supreme Command of Allied Powers). Even after the SCAP was officially rescinded, Western, and particularly American, influence on the culture, society, and politics of Japan continued long into the last half of the 20th century. (Capponcelli 2021, 364-365) In a weird, pulpy fashion, American and Japanese cultures intermingled and hybridized, particularly in pop culture and subculture, to convey contrasting feelings of contempt, inferiority, disillusionment, and anxiety with the idolization and fetishization of Western culture. A curious feature of this "strange post-war" period of Japanese pulp fiction was a remarkable early adoption and frequency of posthumanist, transhumanist, and cybernetic themes and motifs which arguably preceded the proliferation of such themes in Anglosphere fiction by a decade or two. One might speculate that this unique posthumanist tilt was in part a literary reflection of the trauma caused by Hideki Tojo's fascist and ultranationalist rule of Japan during its war years. His rule was infamous for dehumanizing and weaponizing its people into proto-cybernetic flesh-metal tools for the state, the perhaps most gruesome example of this being the suicidal kamikaze fighters of the Pacific Theater.

The first of Torishima's major influences I would like to present in this context is Numa Shōzō's five-volume SF series *Kachikujin* or *Yapoo: the Human Cattle* (1956-91) initially published as episodes in the weird fetish-magazine *Kitan Club* (Club of Bizarre

Tales). Torishima mentions this work as a particularly strong influence because of its “word-plays, images of body modification, and so on.” (Torishima 2018) *Yapoo* imagines a racially segregated future where a galactic civilization of white women has returned to earth and, much like the capitalistic systems of *Sisyphean*, used bioengineering to turn the Japanese into *Yapoo* or human cattle, making them function as anything from household appliances, furniture, sex toy, vehicle et cetera. “Yapoo” is itself one of many Torishima-like neologisms in Shozo’s work and references Jonathan Swift’s “yahoo” from *Gulliver’s Travels*, which likewise depicts humans as livestock. It also mixes the American-English derogatory term for Japanese people *jap* with *poo*, as the *Yapoo* are repurposed as fertilizer when they are finished with. While it is a work written for the explicit purpose of pleasure of sadomasochistic fetishists, professor in Japanese literature John W. Treat rightly comments that those reading it for purely “erotic titillation will be frustrated by its chaste discourses on evolution, technology, and interstellar history”. (Treat 2018, 359) Despite the controversial nature of *Yapoo*’s content and its questionable, pulpy origins, critics like Yukio Mishima, himself lauded as one of the most important and controversial writers of post-war Japan, have highly praised it as “the greatest novel of ideas [...] written by any Japanese since the war.” (Treat 2018, 359). Perhaps both purposefully and inadvertently, *Yapoo* is, like *Sisyphean*, an example of minor literature that contains remarkably visionary ideas that sharply criticize not only the specific status quo of its time but also timeless ideas and constructs such as *humanity*, blurring the line between the categories of *human* and *tool*. Treat notes that the world of *Yapoo* was decidedly a posthuman vision: “A generation before Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, which popularized the ambiguous boundary between human, animal, and machine, *Kachikujin* had already mapped such a futureless future.”. (Treat 2018, 357)

It is easy to spot, as Torishima expresses, that *Yapoo* undoubtedly functioned as a major influence on *Sisyphean*. Both share a love for neologisms, depictions of grotesque

body modification, an interstellar futurism that weirdly connects past and present, and a posthuman perspective where humans function as bioengineered tools and bio-material. However, while the similarities are many, we can also learn much about *Sisyphian* by recognizing what it does differently from *Yapoo*. While eroticism and racial tension are major elements of *Yapoo*, for instance, these are only minor or almost absent themes in *Sisyphian*. Numa summarizes the predicament of Yapoos by writing: “The Yapoo will never be anything but the material and the tools for the maintenance and development of human (white) society”, which assigns their subjugation on the basis of racial difference. Of his unfortunate protagonists, Torishima writes the following: “subordinapes dictated from life-forms sampled on countless worlds toiled each according to the standards of the corporatian to whom he belonged”. (Torishima 1). A “corporatian” is another neologism referring to capitalist organizations embodied through interstellar-sized organic mass (corpuspheres): “In stable orbit above a congealed accretion disc in the depths of galactic space, there swarmed untold millions of corporatians, who together formed the immense, nimbotranslucent corpuspheres of which an archipelagopolis was composed.” (Torishima 1)

In Torishima’s world, reproduction, race, and ethnicity have gone from being natural to artificial. Rather than being a result of the slow evolutionary process of natural selection, *Sisyphian’s* workers are bioengineered chimeras whose varied genetic makeup and outward appearance are outcomes of both mutation and intentional design made to fit their specific function as tools for the corporatian they belong to. Being a subordinape is a Sisyphian underclass condition that dooms Torishima’s working class to work endlessly in the service of an uncaring overclass of overwhelming alien forces. Already from the first few pages of *Perfect Attendants*, the above becomes apparent. When the worker awakes from its sleeping sac situated on a metal platform jutting out towards a vast sea full of thrash and predatory fish mutants, it only has two real options: to walk ten paces down the platform that leads to the

door of the synthorgan factory where it works or to jump to its death into the sea far below. Essentially, the worker's only choice is either to work or to die. Although the worker considers other options, they all seem doomed to fail: "Unable to entirely abandon his hopes of retirement, the worker made a visual estimate of the distance to the cliff. Although it looked rather close, he realized belatedly that there was no way he could leap across, and let out a long sigh." (Torishima 16). Towards the end of the tale, it becomes clear that it has no options at all. Once it dies, it will be reborn in a fresh identical body using the same intellect (or soul, if you will). In this manner, the worker will be set to work endlessly, like in the Greek myth of Sisyphus which the English version of the novel takes its name from. Ultimately, the ineluctable fates of the subordinapes are decided for them at birth by their makers and rulers, in a similar fashion to how the gods of Greek myth were involved in the fates of humanity. Built-in biological failsafes, such as a dependency on stationary "sleepsacs" for sustenance and a massively shortened lifespan, means that class mobility, self-determination, and freedom will never be an option for the subordinapes. *Sisyphean* is thus typically weird in that it reflects the horrific aspects of fate: it dispels the notion of individual agency, weaving and entangling our fates into an uncaring and violent alien system that exists above and beyond us, indifferent to our plights and beliefs.

It likewise shows its *new weird* colors through how it ties these weird elements to contemporary social, political, and scientific issues. Whereas Numa's *Yapoo* arose as a fetishistic fantasy responding to American domination and a half-broken Japanese nationalism in the post-war period, Torishima wrote *Sisyphean* as a result of his traumatic experiences as a worker in the late-stage capitalist system of Japan, during and after the global financial crisis of 2008. He had this to say about the initial idea of *Sisyphean*:

“I started writing “Sisyphean,” the title story, in 2010. I think the misery of having to work for a long time at a company that had bad working conditions, coupled with all the turmoil I’d been bottling up because of my commercial illustration and design work, just broke out all at once, like the Great Dust Plague. The barrel burst. And when I looked around me, I saw lots of people suffering from the outrageous demands of their jobs and thought that by using the techniques of SF and fantasy novels, I might be able to make that present situation apparent. So I set out to create a work where the novel itself would function as a work of installation art on the extremities of labor.”(Torishima in an interview with Davies)

The storyworlds of *Sisyphean* may seem extremely alien on the surface due to Torishima’s grotesque and fantastical imagery, yet weirdness arises in how they simultaneously reflect uncannily similar aspects of the capitalistic world we live in today in which exponential profit and growth often supersede the well-being of organic life. Dressing up the familiar in the alien and the weirdly horrific, Torishima has managed to create a work of art that transforms the commonplace into the grotesque and which casts a wonderfully dark and awe-ful light on the modern conditions of labor. In this manner, a weird vision opens up wherein we can view the inside from an outside perspective, or in other words, to view the normal through an abnormal lens. In Torishima’s case, it was only after the fact of his traumatic crisis that he was able to see the suffering that had been ongoing all around him and to which he was previously blind. *Sisyphean* is then an attempt to highlight that even the most outrageous amounts of suffering and absurd demands may be normalized if we are unwilling to question the status quo and venture outside the bounds of familiar conventions. It is no coincidence that the weird became Torishima’s chosen mode of writing as few genres are more apt for deconstructing “the normal” than the weird is.

Torishima’s *Sisyphean* is also not divorced from reality like *Yapoo* is. Nozo himself labeled the world of *Yapoo* as a “utopia utterly divorced from everyday reality” as its violence

and degradation fulfilled the fetishistic fantasy of the sadomasochistic audience he wrote for. (Treat 357). It was never supposed to be a prediction of the future or a reimagining of the present. *Sisyphian*, however, very much adheres to everyday reality by purposely turning it weird. Rather than creating a mere fantasy or allegory, Torishima attempts to imagine a future that seems and supposes itself as both a reflection and a possible extension of the present. The grotesque and horribly absurd alien existence depicted in *Sisyphian* does not merely suppose itself as an imagined dystopia: it seriously proposes that such a future *could* happen or that it might even be a grotesque reflection of the present. At its weirdest, it even distorts time and space until it all becomes one untangled mess without any observable logic or direction. It is once this realization sets in that the opening line of *Perfect Attendants*, which in cyclical fashion is also its last line, gains additional meaning and becomes unsettling: “The date from which the tale is set forth matters little.” (Torishima 13 and 86) In a typical weird loop, the *Sisyphian* far-away-future, which is full of repulsiveness and suffering, might just as well be the reader’s here-and-now.

Unlike *Sisyphian*, *Yapoo* was also never meant as a work of horror despite its grotesqueness and shock value. When Torishima, however, was asked whether or not he was drawn to horror in his interview with Asahi Shinbun, he simply answered “I love it.” and that his work attempts to “depict something called the grotesque, while at the same time deconstructing the grotesque” (Asamiya). In the context of horror and grotesqueness, but also posthumanism, we must survey the works of Osamu Tezuka, considered broadly the father of modern *manga* (Japanese comics), and mentioned as an early influence on Torishima’s writing. (Torishima 2018, 2024) Tezuka’s art style is a unique blend of Disney-style Western comics and older Japanese manga, and his works show a consistent preoccupation with transhumanism and war trauma, perhaps most famously in the West through the comic and animation series *Astro Boy* (Mighty Atom). *Astro Boy* (1952-1968) is a relatively bright and

hopeful tale (although containing undertones of nuclear weapon anxiety) of an android superhero with the emotions and intelligence of a young human boy, which became a pop-cultural phenomenon both in Japan and in the rest of the world. However, it was Tezuka's darker and more adult work that influenced Torishima's transhumanist body horror in *Sisyphian*, specifically the manga series *Dororo* and *Black Jack* (Torishima 2018).

Black Jack (1973-1983) is a manga series following its titular anti-hero character, a surgeon working in the underground of an alternative 70s version of East Asia. Although *Black Jack* was serialized in the children's magazine *Shounen Jump*, it is notable for its highly detailed and somewhat grotesque depictions of human anatomy and speculative biology. The origin story of Black Jack's adoptive daughter Pinoko (a *Pinocchio* reference) is a particularly interesting example of a weird biofictional character as she originated as a teratoid cystoma, a tumor in an infant girl's abdomen. Over eighteen years, it even developed its own brain, nervous system, and organs, considering its host as its sister. The tumor, horrifically and weirdly malignant in how it resists removal through telepathic manipulation and coercion of medical professionals, is finally removed by Black Jack and transplanted into a synthetic body in the shape of a young girl.

There are clear parallels between Pinoko's story and the body-within-body experiences depicted in *Sisyphian*. On a surface level, the dark and fantastical surgical imagery of *Black Jack* seems to be mirrored in the text of *Perfect Attendants*, the latter of which large parts are dedicated to highly detailed, squeam-inducing depictions of synth-organ surgery and alien anatomy. They both also express biological horror through the lens of the *teratological*, defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as: that which is abnormal in growth or structure, relating to *teratology* the study of malformations or serious deviations from the normal type in developing organisms. I would argue that a large part of *Sisyphian*'s weirdness and horror is owed to its vision of a fully teratological storyworld. Abnormality on

its own is not negative, on the contrary, it can be the opposite, but it becomes horrific when it is infused with the teratological aspects of malignancy and mutation. Malignancy makes abnormality, which is an implicit symptom of the weird, potentially fatal, and full of bodily suffering and deterioration. Mutation further makes it unpredictable and uncontrollable, effectively putting one's own development in the weird hands of fate.

Another Tezuka influence is *Dororo* (1967-1969), a tale with obvious parallels to the story and themes of *Pinocchio*, set in medieval Japan where a young warrior's body is destroyed in battle. A doll maker, taking pity on him, reconstructs the warrior as a human-sized doll of wood, metal, and glass. By vanquishing horrifying demons scattered through a land traumatized and ravaged by war and moral decline, the warrior is slowly able to recover his humanity, restoring his body back to flesh piece by piece. Although in some ways a quite traditional moralist narrative of redemption, influenced by Tezuka's Buddhist beliefs, it is still a work that, like Torishima's *Cavumville* and Disney's *Pinocchio*, at times posits interesting posthumanist questions of the role the shape and material of our bodies play in the conception of ourselves as humans. The *Pinocchio* story, which we may in some respects consider a proto-cybernetic tale, was a leitmotif in Tezuka's bibliography and we likewise find traces of it in all of the tales contained in *Sisyphian*. In one section of the story, the worker is tasked with making artificial human bodies for "clients", which are mollusk-like alien life forms without appendages or organs. Like Gepetto, the worker and the president must first turn the client into a "human" and then assist the client in how to act like a proper one, although in Torishima's case, this turns into a series of uncanny scenes of carnivalesque body horror:

"The client stayed with them for about a week, listening to lectures from the president on how to move like a human being. The first time he stood up was three days after his organs had been delivered [...] The client's joints bent backward when he stood erect, and the center of gravity in his

waist was shifted too far to the left, but even so, he set out in an awkward walk [...] The next day, the client made a slow circuit of the company building, and by the time a few days more had passed, he had mastered the art of bipedal locomotion.” (Torishima 64)

The worker himself is functionally a puppet, bioengineered and programmed as a tool to be used and abused by the company president. While the puppet masters of Tezuka tend to be magnanimous like Gepetto in the Disney version of *Pinocchio*, the president of *Perfect Attendants* is more akin to the darker version of Gepetto found in Carlo Collodi’s original “*Le Avventure di Pinocchio*” (1881-83) where he fulfills the role of an abusive and tyrannical father. Collodi’s Gepetto beats Pinocchio with a hammer and burns his feet when being disobedient, and likewise, Torishima’s worker is faced with punishment and torture if it disobeys the president: “Pinching the left ear that was supposed to have been ripped off as punishment for having tried to run away, the worker looked up at the overhanging cliffs of landfill strata [...]. (Torishima 16)

Dororo and *Sisyphean* are also both examples of works that employ weird horror elements to process societal and environmental trauma. In *Dororo*, an exhausted quarry becomes a haunt for granite demons that crush passing travelers to death, and a seaside village the place of massacre as sharks, starving from overfishing and hunted and maimed by fishermen grown desperate by wartime struggle, gains a taste for human flesh. These elements of *Dororo* are clearly influenced by ideas and motifs found in the Japanese nature religion Shintoism, which contains the animist belief that *kami*, which may be regarded as beings that are both gods and spirits, inhabit both organic and inorganic objects all around us.

“The world of Shinto is not an isolated one. It is an all inclusive one. It includes all things organic and inorganic. All nature—man, animals, mountains, rivers, herbs and trees —come into existence by virtue of the *kami*, and their limitless blessings should contribute to the well-being of the

world. The world is not in contrast with nor in opposition to man. On the contrary, it is filled with the blessings of the kami and is developing through the power of harmony and cooperation.” (Ono 1962, 170-171)

As is the case in the war-torn world of *Dororo*, these *kami* may become “impure” and thus malignant to their environment and antagonistic towards humanity if their vessels and domains are treated poorly. A practitioner of Shintoism must thus seek a harmonious relationship with nature rather than attempting to dominate and master it if they want to avoid their mutual destruction. Recalling our discussion in the previous chapter, the Shintoist ecological consciousness in which the lines between humanity and nature are blurred and tightly co-dependent shows a striking compatibility with the blurring of lines between human/nature that posthumanist thinking is also known for, as well as the dark ecological awareness that Timothy Morton describes in his *Dark Ecology*. As we can see in the following passage, Shintoist and Buddhist references, marked in bold, are numerous in *Sisyphlean* and are made especially overt in *Cavumville*:

“They passed by the classrooms of the theology department. Through the windows and the doors they could see students standing in rows, looking downward as if in **meditation**. [...] Their consciousnesses, it was said, traveled from the **magatama** in their brains, passed through **the Divine Gate**, and assembled in the Deilith—**the place of advent for the eight million gods**. The **Shrine Chieftain**, who was also Minister of **the three Imperial Treasures—the Mirror, Sword, and Magatama**—was at the podium, teaching the class in person as he led his students in a **ritual Shinto prayer**. They were using words from **the age of the gods**, which Hanishibe and Narikabura could not even begin to comprehend.” (Torishima 101-104)

One could spend ages pointing out and elaborating upon Shintoist themes and symbolism in *Sisyphean*, but within the scope of this thesis, it will suffice to merely point out one or two of the most relevant examples, the chief of these being the *magatama* mentioned in the quote above. A magatama is a bead made out of green jadestone with deep cultural significance in Japan, the Yasakani Magatama being one of the Three Imperial Regalia said to have been gifted the Japanese imperial line by the heavenly deities. Its comma-like shape has by some representational accounts, as well as in *Sisyphean*, been said to resemble that of a fetus, spirit, or a human soul, and thus been linked with beliefs that they inhabit celestial and spiritual powers (Nishimura 2018, 109). In the *Kojiki*, the foundational 8th-century text of Shintoist mythology, the sun goddess Amaterasu and the storm god Susanoo created deities by chewing and spitting out magatama, implying that a dormant life force lies within them. Such mythology and religious symbolism, which is familiar to most Japanese, is in *Sisyphean* weirdly recontextualized in a transhuman light and thus made uncanny. Throughout all of the tales, the magatama has become a recurring artifact somewhat akin to a transhumanist hard drive. It contains life and civilization which in the face of ecological crises, the most pressing being the mysterious “Great Dust Plague”, have been “translated” into virtual code and information from which life can be translated back into material form. However, Torishima implies that some interstellar alien force of capital, the “corporatians” we mentioned earlier, have used the information stored in the magatamas to create subjugated workers: “What <Gyo> had acquired at auction was nothing more than a large work animal held in perpetual stasis; the jewel concealed within, however, was a civilization frozen in time—a granary filled to overflowing with life’s undiscovered phenovocabulary. Dictating syntax from the jewel he extracted, <Gyo> created subordinapes of manifold purpose, his goal to improve work efficiency.” (Torishima 89)

The magatamas also function as an artificial brain and a vessel for human souls, which can be understood to contain the executive code and information that makes the subordinapes function: “Magatamas govern the intellect and memory of subordinapes like us.” They were not merely memory organs for individuals. They reminded workers in great detail of all kinds of things they had no way of learning by themselves.” (Torishima 75)

In *Cavumville*, humans rely on magatamas for “revivification”. When a person dies, they may come back to life through reattuning that person's magatama with a new compatible body, allowing them to retain memories and skills attained in previous lives. Through the blend of Japanese religious metaphysics and speculative ideas of transhumanism and cybernetics, Torishima manages to create liminal storyworlds that, amongst other realms normally thought of as disparate, merge Shintoist spirituality with posthuman virtuality. In this manner, mythology and ancient history strangely intertwine with pressing issues in our present day and with dark science fiction visions of the future. This blurring of time and space, as well as genre and topic, is a common feature of the weird, and the effect that emerges is an uncanny and dizzying sense that the specifics of time and place are inconsequential, or at the very least cyclical. As we will see in the next section, the cyclical and the liminal seems to be almost a point of obsession for Torishima, something which supports Timothy Morton’s conception of the weird as essentially describing strange loops of causality, such as the ever-turning spool of fate. For now, I hope to have illuminated that *Sisyphian* emerged from a uniquely Japanese branch of weird writing, containing its own intellectual and cultural history which both differ from and share similarities to the Anglospheric weird.

“Winding the coils of an endless loop”: The Liminality of Weird Worlds and Weird Time

The opening paragraph of chapter 1 of *Perfect Attendants* begins with a brief metafictional framing of the narrative that states: “The date from which the tale is set forth matters little; to begin with the awakening of its protagonist is a mere convenience of the telling.” (Torishima 13) The narration then immediately glides into a third-person closed perspective that is used for the majority of the tale, and which here depicts the thoughts and experiences of “the worker” as “he” (later in the tale referred to as “it” or “she”) awakens from his sleep sac. After he awakens, he finds himself in a liminal space; a rusty metal platform that juts out from the side of a cliff of “landfill strata”, high above a sea teeming with strange, predatory fish such as “blood eels”. The worker’s thoughts seem jumbled as his memories are confused and not entirely congruent with his present reality. At one point he raises his hand to nurse an ear he thought was ripped off, but which now is perfectly attached, and at another point his thoughts are interrupted by “the indistinct voices of countless unknown colleagues whispering to one another” (Torishima 14), but which are nowhere to be seen. The entire narrative is fraught with these types of ghostly incongruities between the worker’s cognition (what he thinks and senses) and the world’s reality (what is described or inferred as actually happening in the present), and they only increase in frequency as the narrative develops. Early on then, it is established that we are dealing with a certain degree of unreliable narration, not because the narrator inhabits a conscious psychological bias or an agenda, but because of the protagonist's apparent challenges in orienting himself in his environment and his inability to make sense of his own situation.

The worker’s disorientation can be seen as a result of the kind of leakage between categories that the weird generally enables, as described by Ulstein:

“ Like posthuman theory, the weird seeks to poke (tentacular, slimy) holes in our conceptions about the human, revealing that ‘human’ and ‘nature’; ‘inside’ and ‘outside’; ‘self’ and ‘other’ – along with so many other (non-Indigenous) conceptualizations – were in fact always already deeply unstable and intricately interwoven. [...] As part of the posthumanist toolbox, then, weird is when the planetary leaks into the individual and becomes crisis” (Ulstein 2022)

Perfect Attendants pokes more holes in our conceptions than most weird works out there, and to borrow the accurate words of David Davies, “[*Sisyphian*]’s weird for even weird fiction” (Torishima 2018). We will spend this section highlighting these weird leakages in further detail, firstly by introducing the concept of *liminality*. To borrow Peter Heft’s description: “Liminality, a concept originally proposed in the anthropological domain to examine rites of passage and rituality, is fundamentally an idea about thresholds and grand moments of change.” (Heft 2021, 7) The term itself is derived from the Latin noun *limen*, meaning *threshold*. (Merriam-Webster) In relation to the weird, it is a very useful term for describing the various in-between, transitional states that the weird describes and produces, in the most general terms between the inside and the outside. Although Mark Fisher does not mention the term himself, he essentially refers to the inherent liminality of the weird when he writes that “weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds[...] The centrality of doors, thresholds, and portals means that *the notion of the between* is crucial to the weird.” (Fisher 28)

Perhaps the most well-known and easily identifiable concept of liminality is *liminal space*. While liminal space for some time has been a common concept in the field of architecture to describe throughway spaces like hallways and elevators, it has in recent years been picked up and widely applied in various online circles on platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr to examine the weird and eerie atmospheres of such places both in real locales and in literature and art. In the words of Tumblr user “you-deserve-a-rhink”:

“liminal spaces [...] are throughways from one space to the next. Places like rest stops, stairwells, trains, parking lots, waiting rooms, airports feel weird when you’re in them because their existence is not about themselves, but the things before and after them. They have no definitive place outside of their relationship to the spaces you are coming from and going to.” (you-deserve-a-rhink 2016)

Weird fiction has always been fraught with such liminal spaces. In M.R. James' short story, “the Mezzotint”, an engraving of an initially unidentifiable manor house keeps changing subtly depending on the time of day and who looks at it. At various points, a strange four-legged monster appears in the picture, slowly moving towards the manor until it is seen breaking in. Towards the end of the tale, it is revealed that this eerie scene is related to a dark event that occurred almost a hundred years earlier, where a woodskeeper was unjustly hanged by the lord of that manor. The place depicted in the mezzotint thus becomes a liminal space between art and reality, in the way it responds to its observers as a portal between the location and the past that is depicted and the location and present of the depiction. Another example would be Lovecraft’s short story *The Color out of Space*, where a meteor from outer space opens up an egress between the natural world of Earth and an alien world, turning a woodland farm into a liminal space in transition between the natural and the alien.

In new weird fiction, liminal spaces are even more common, most of all through the trope of “the Zone”, a modern example of which being Jeff Vandermeer’s Area X in *The Southern Reach* trilogy where an unexplained crisis makes a pristine piece of coastline into an eerie containment zone full of weird mutations. “The Zone” was popularized by the Soviet-Russian authors Arkady & Boris Strugatsky’s science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and Tarkovsky’s film adaptation *Stalker* (1979) wherein, like *The Color out of Space*, a meteor lands and begins to inexplicably alter the reality of its surrounding area. Peter Heft describes the trope as follows: “[...]conceptions of ‘the Zone’ are often limited accounts of a singular place where reality is altered. The Zone is a place where the rules of everyday reality

do not apply. The Zone is a place of magic and mystique. [T]he Zone is usually a singular, often unmoving place of anomalous materiality.” (Heft 2021, 2)

The Zone is a trope compatible with the weird because it anchors the outside/inside divide in a specific geographical location - a singular place - where the *difference* between the two domains becomes materially observable. A large part of its popularity must also be attributed to how easy it is to draw parallels between fictitious Zones and “real Zones” such as Chernobyl where the nuclear plant disaster of 1986 made the surrounding area weird and dangerous, the invisible force of radioactive waste turning nature unnatural and inhospitable for humans. Running parallel to the Zone trope, however, is what we will refer to as the “Weird World” trope, found more and more frequently in recent new weird works such as Vandermeer’s *Borne* (2016), Mieville’s *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015), and in *The Sunken Land* and *Sisyphean* as well. Weird Worlds, which might be considered a worldwide expansion of the geographically limited Zones, shroud the entire storyworld in an unlimited atmosphere of liminal weirdness in which reality is altered and unstable. Unlike the alien sf-fantasy storyworlds of new wave sf and the early new weird for instance found in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Mieville’s *Perdido Street Station*, which are clearly set on other worlds on other planets, Weird Worlds are, for the most part, anchored temporally and spatially in the real world of Earth. They are liminal in the sense that they portray an ongoing transition between a familiar world of reality and an unfamiliar one, and weird in that they expand and deconstruct the boundaries of the former.

The most recognizable type of Weird World is probably the post-apocalyptic one where lethal catastrophes of apocalyptic proportions alter the world dramatically. This trope is widely considered to have been established in science fiction in the 19th century by Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) where a deadly disease slowly wipes out humanity until there’s only one person left. The trope later on develops into something resembling its

modern form by Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) - a novel of ecological critique in which an unexplained catastrophe destroys most of urban England and its society, leaving nature to reclaim the land. It was not until the 1950s and 60s, however, after the 1945 nuclear bombing of Japan and amid the nuclear war anxiety of the global Cold War, that such fictions seriously started to proliferate with novels such as Walter Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) and Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) (Booker & Thomas 2009, 53). Because they are usually told from an anthropocentric perspective, I would argue that post-apocalyptic fictions in a literal sense of the term are post-human fictions as well: they imagine worlds *after humans*, in which humanity is displaced as the dominant global species, either through destruction or disempowerment. This type of world often veers into the weird as they confront humans with the break of boundaries set by conventional laws of physics and morals established in a past of relative stability.

Another type of Weird World can be found in certain cyberpunk fiction such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1982) or in biopunk fiction such as Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1983) wherein unchecked scientific and technological advances have transformed the world beyond the limits of the familiar. In cyberpunk and biopunk worlds, human-made entities such as robots and AI advance past the physical and intellectual limitations of humans, which leaves the latter dazed and alienated in the struggle to orient themselves amidst these new and unfamiliar expansions of reality. The worlds of *Sisyphian* may at first glance seem too alien and fantastical to be Weird Worlds, but the numerous references to our world and time, such as the clear Shintoist imagery in *Cavumville* that specifically points back to a Japan in the distant past, clearly anchors the novellas in the same reality as ours. The world of *Perfect Attendants* may, in fact, be understood as a post-apocalyptic post-cyberpunk world - engendered by a catastrophe referred to as "The Great Dust Plague", sweeping clouds of nanodust that destroys and lays

barren everything in their path. Although there are no passages that cast a one hundred percent complete picture of the history of the *Sisyphean* worlds, the most revealing hints are provided to us in the final novella of the volume, *Peregrinating Anima*, which is set three hundred years after the initial plague:

“there was an age when reality was covered over in many layers of an ideal fabric called *Kosmetics* [...] the informational management and patronage they provided let people enjoy lives of incredible—even perverse—convenience. Later, the raw material of nanodust, also known as ‘Yaoyorozu,’ recreated the world in matter, but in the end ... it brought about the unprecedented disaster of the Great Dust Plague ...” (Torishima 358-360)

Piecing together these disparate and bizarre puzzle pieces, we may suggest an interpretation of a world wherein Earth once reached a cyberpunk-like technological posthuman state where material reality became suppressed by layers of virtuality referred to as *Kosmetics*, ultimately becoming a world of cyberspace. Pushing against this cyberspace, however, there existed a force that either consciously or naturally began the reaffirmation of the lost material world, an attempt that was so overwhelming to the virtual world system that it caused major breakdowns resulting in the destructive force of “the Great Dust Plague”. Responding to this crisis, a process called “translation” was initiated - a mix of computer science and biotechnology which allowed the creation of new sub-worlds to continue existing within the transhumanist hard drives of the magatamas. These magatamas were then carried within the bodies of a selection of humans who were turned into the shrimp-like “canvassers”, a life-form more resistant to the devastating effects of the Great Dust Plague than the conventional human body. As seen by the following passage, this translation may have been a trick, however, proposed by the capitalistic powers of the “directors” and the

“corporatians”, who we see in *Perfect Attendants* use the information carried within the magatamas to create “subordinapes”:

“Why are we employed by directors? When did we sign such contracts? What are we getting in compensation? Oh, we remember these things dimly. That we signed a contract, that we received a baptism. But why aren’t these things consistent even in our own memories? What were these directors and humans originally?” Those who are forever damned ... those who long to return ... those who trick us into servitude.” (Torishima 77)

This alien capitalistic force, in turn, seems to work towards the simple goal of material accumulation at the interstellar level - continuing to affirm planet after planet until eventually crashing due to internal systemic instability caused by overflow, after which it will be “reaffirmed” by another “corporatian”, thus perpetuating an infinite cycle of growth and decline.

If all of this sounds weird and confusing, that is because it is. Torishima essentially paints a cosmological picture of a universe that functions somewhat like an infinitely stacking matryoshka doll - the layers consisting of worlds interchanging between material and virtual. These layers are not neatly divided, however, and in a weird fashion, they constantly malfunction and leak into each other, leading to abnormal events occurring at the local level where the novellas take place. The final result is a Weird World of liminality, a space of instability and constant transition that exists at the threshold between material and virtual, and between the influence of competing capitalistic factions. These anomalous aspects are even reflected in the geography and in the synthetic elements that make up the local world of *Perfect Attendants*:

“As they neared the top of the cliff, however, *everything melted together*, growing gradually more *dim and indistinct*. The glossy surface of the ground passed beneath his line of sight and descended to his feet. The worker squinted. Beyond the threads of silver pouring down on him, a vast, bruise-colored expanse of *coaguland* extended for as far as the eye could see, covered all over in *jellymire*”. (Torishima 50)

The “coaguland” is thus described as a land of mud or “jellymire” in which everything melts together and becomes indistinct, in a liminal state between liquid and solid. Beneath this topmost layer of indistinct mud, we also find the “landfill strata”, a geological layer consisting of waste from the past. Not all of the waste is strictly from the past, however, as the landfill strata is described as continually reproducing products in the present from the lingering ideas of the past: “even now, the willy-nilly counterfeiting of all manner of industrial products from the *eidōs* of each one—and the collapse of those goods beneath their own weight—was ongoing.” (Torishima 16)

Again and again, Torishima keeps returning to the typically weird theme of the cyclical - in this case, the cyclical interactions between idea and product, between creation and collapse, and most central of all between past and present. I write most central here as I recognize the great importance of the weird and posthuman conflicts with time to *Sisyphean* as a whole, and how the work contains a sense of liminal time. Due to its traditionally cosmic and beyond-human perspective, the weird has always been a literary mode with a special interest in time. In Lovecraft’s case, this interest expressed itself as an anxiety over the shortness of human life spans and the shallowness of human history in the face of cosmological, geological, and other kinds of nonhuman deep time. Lovecraft furthermore recognized the conflict of time as the most horrific, but also worthwhile pursuit of art:

“The reason why time plays a great part in so many of my tales is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression.” (Lovecraft 1921).

Weird stories tend to treat entities such as ghosts as real and material rather than fantasies, hoaxes or delusions, and in doing so they create a conflict with conventional time. This is seen for instance in M.R James *Count Magnus* (1904) where a supposedly dead nobleman returns to the world of the living through dark alchemical magic, creating a weird sense of wrongness through a break in the conventional boundaries of time as that which belongs in the past returns to the present where it should not be able to exist. It is these kinds of leakages of time that constitute the liminal time conceptions that frequently appear in weird fiction, and very notably so in *Perfect Attendants*.

K.A Nuzum, in her essay on time in monster literature, builds on the work of religious historian Mircea Eliade to map out a human taxonomy of time that spans three categories which proves helpful in regards to this topic: linear or historical time, cyclical or mythic time, and liminal time. Linear time is the most conventional and human concept of time, and is that which has a beginning (a birth) and an end (a death). Cyclical time, on the other hand “is 'indefinitely repeatable' [...] From one point of view it could be said that it does not 'pass,' that it does not constitute an irreversible duration.” (Nuzum 2004, 209) The third category, liminal time, is the hardest to grasp as it represents a break of both linear and cyclical time, a kind of weird infinite time: “[T]he defining element of liminal time [is the] dissolution of boundaries. [...] It is the lack of limits and rules in liminal time that constitute the danger for human beings.” (Nuzum 2004, 210) Adding on to Nuzum’s definition, we will point out that the boundary dissolution of liminal time also constitutes disorientation and confusion for human beings, which includes the disorientation felt by the protagonist of *Perfect Attendants*.

Using the vampire as an example, Nuzum also observes that the denial of life in linear time constitutes a monstrification: “In the temporal period during which we conduct our daily lives, the vampire lies in its coffin[...] It is trapped in a suspended animation of liminal time, without status. [...] At dusk, the vampire awakens in mythic/circular time. Each evening is the same; it awakens, it thirsts, it seeks a new throat and fresh blood. *The vampire does not age, for it does not exist in historic time.*” (Nuzum 2004, 211) Applying a similar analysis to the worker of *Perfect Attendants*, we see that the transformation from human to subordinate also involves a similar monstrification, which may also refer to as a dehumanization as the denial of experience in linear time is a denial of a core aspect of human experience. One way in which the worker has been cruelly denied its humanity in this context is how it has been bioengineered to birth itself when it approaches its death. Towards the end of the first chapter, it is revealed that subordinates are essentially hermaphrodites, capable of self-replication or autogenesis. When a subordinate is close to the end of its current lifecycle, deteriorated by its inhuman work environment, a built-in biological trigger makes them impregnate themselves. Its stomach eventually grows to a gigantic size until it bursts, and in a horrific revelation fit for a Sophoclean tragedy, the womb turns out to become a sleep sac identical to the one the worker resides in between work hours. Out of the sleep-sac-womb clambers a fully-fledged adult, a pristine clone of the worker from which it was born, ready to continue the work of its previous iteration. The old worker, already dying from the violent birth of its successor, is then dissected by the president and discarded down a junk shaft once its magatama is extracted and implanted in the new worker, essentially transferring its soul from an old body to a new one. Although the memories carried within the magatama are supposed to be reset, it seems like this process is partly malfunctioning, causing vague, ghostly memories and experiences from previous lives to haunt the minds of each succeeding worker, jumbling their sense of time and identity. Like the vampire, the worker is thus also denied existence in

historical time through the denial of its proper death, and instead it lives a liminal existence in cyclical time where it is doomed to toil forever, like Sisyphus in the Greek myth. Another layer of tragedy is added on top of this already tragic existence as the worker seems to orient itself in the world off of the assumption that it exists in linear time as the memory of their self-birth is wiped at the beginning of each cycle. Much of the initial weirdness of *Perfect Attendants* is owed to the fact that the narration adheres so closely to the worker's perspective and his sense of linear time which constantly crashes with his actual existence in cyclical and liminal time, breaks which causes a constant barrage of incongruities and confusion.

Another common aspect of many monster myths is that they in a cyclical fashion perform their own creation, as when a vampire is created when a human is bitten by a vampire. A similar cyclical performance is performed by subordinates, as the worker each day awakes from its sleep sac, which essentially is the womb it was born from, to start a new work day. While the worker looks forward to retirement, this will realistically never happen. Thus it is not death, but immortality, mixed with the lack of agency that such a weird fate propagates, that constitutes the horrific and dehumanized existence of the worker in *Perfect Attendants*.

As a whole, *Sisyphian* is a weird weird work because it employs both Weird Time and Weird Worlds, both contributing to create a wholly liminal experience on the temporal and spatial thresholds between categories such as human/nonhuman, linear/cyclical, material/virtual and familiar/unfamiliar. Returning to Timothy Morton's image of the weird as a strange loop of fate full of twists and turns, we can recognize *Perfect Attendants* as a particularly weird loop of a particularly dark post-human fate. The liminal and looping nature of Torishima's tale, and the weird as a whole, is perfectly encapsulated in the final paragraph of the story, which ends with the line that began the story:

"Though the canvassers had been wiped from the plains of coaguland, a reconstituted <World> made up of many parishes continued to exist inside the departed interstellar

spaceships. There the people were menaced by the Great Dust Plague and underwent Translation to become canvassers. They were beginning to wind the coils of an endless loop. If a planet is a suitable cradle, exiles will surely be sent there to reaffirm it. Subordinapes will continue to be made from the magatama. And the date from which the tale is set forth will matter little.” (Torishima 86)

The Weirdness of Language and Reality

I find that the most common first reaction to reading *Sisyphean* is to remark how weird its language is. The world described, and the technical and often made-up vocabulary used in the description of it, may at points read like an alien language - or perhaps like English how an alien would write it. Consider the following sentences, used to describe the exterior of the factory where our protagonist works:

“Skin-board paneled walls that had been able to breathe when they were new now bore the scars of the canvassers’ repeated sales calls. Now covered in scar tissues, the walls could no longer breathe at all.” (Torishima 16-17)

Like most weird fiction, *Perfect Attendants* is typically void of front-loaded exposition; there is little explanation as to what “canvassers” or “sales calls” mean in this context. Although I have not seen the same device used to a similar degree in other weird works, we might refer to Torishima’s (and by extension the translator Huddleston’s) use of language as “weird language”. Weird language refers to the various techniques used to create strange new words or to strangely interconnect words and their semantic content across fields normally thought of as belonging to separate realms, and/or using these techniques in unexpected contexts. The most common weird language technique used by Huddleston in the English translation of *Sisyphean* is the creation of neologisms. According to Collier’s dictionary, a neologism may refer to a new word or expression in a language, such as the portmanteau “subordinape” or a combination word such as “skin-board”, or it may refer to an instance where an existing word is given a new meaning through a recontextualization, such as “canvasser”. (Colliers)

“Canvasser”, which conventionally is a synonym for a door-to-door solicitor employed in a

political context, is in *Perfect Attendants* a type of antenna-like shrimp-humanoid creature that is part of a native rogue faction that opposes the foreign faction which the worker's company belongs to. From the surrounding context of scarred walls, we may then infer that "sales call" in the above quote may be meant in the vein of a physical attack, perhaps with the intrinsic goal of undermining the opponent's political, economic, and territorial influence through "selling" or "canvassing" their own influence.

In *Sisyphian*, weird language is most commonly employed to make terms and phrases belonging to the realm of finance semantically extend to include biological processes and acts of violence in unexpected ways, as with the term "sales call" above. This type of wordplay is most certainly informed by Ambrose Bierce's darkly humorous *Devil's Dictionary* (1911), a satirical dictionary that Torishima states has influenced the techniques he used to create the world of *Sisyphian* (Torishima 2018). Consider for instance the following entry from *Devil's Dictionary*: "LITIGANT, n. A person about to give up his skin for the hope of retaining his bones." In a similar manner to Torishima, Bierce here uses a grotesque bodily image to semantically extend the juridical term "litigant", which normally means a party involved in a lawsuit, to extend into the biological realm. In the way that satires such as Bierce's may open up new intellectual and emotional avenues of perceiving certain topics by looking at them from a skewed perspective outside of their original context, the same can be said of Torishima's weird linguistic approach, which enables us to deconstruct and reassess commonplace terms we take for granted through weird semantic twists. The main difference between the work of Bierce and Torishima, however, is that Bierce's satire is meant to be a *figurative* play of sarcastic exaggeration, while Torishima supposes his semantic twists as a reflection of a *literal* reality. A litigant in *Perfect Attendants* would therefore actually rip off its skin, and the painful and horrific consequences of such an action would be taken seriously by the narrative, as a matter of factual occurrence.

Perfect Attendants may at one level function as a pitch-black satire of modern working conditions, and if read in such a way, one might be inclined to label it an allegorical fable in the vein of *Animal Farm* (1945) by George Orwell. However, as we discussed in the previous chapter, the weird must resist the allegorical if it is to escape the reductionism that imprisons the world within the boundaries of the *natural*. How *Perfect Attendants* manages this task is mainly by insisting on the reality of its storyworld not merely as an alternative to the reader's reality, but also as a realistic expansion of it. In the same way that for instance, the presence of French vocabulary in the English language is a historical marker pointing to a relatively recent cultural and political dominance by the French of the English, the language, and especially vocabulary, of *Perfect Attendants* which mix the semantic realms of capitalism and nature, implies a deep history beyond the text wherein the forces of capitalism have grown dominant enough to mutate the language of our current day.

Lejla Kucukalic succinctly observes that “Torishima’s *Sisyphian* takes a relativist-linguistic perspective on the relationship between language, code, and reality. Language does not simply mark reality: it shapes it.” (Kucukalic 2021, 84) Language itself is then a worldbuilding tool that grounds the seemingly fantastical and strange phenomena and entities of *Perfect Attendants* within a set of conventions that follows a logic that, although weird and often incomprehensible, is consistent with itself and which *could be possible*. In other words, it stakes its existence in a possible frame of time and space that relates to our own. In comparison, the world of *Animal Farm* *could not be* because we know that animals, in the context of the mid-20th century, do not actually possess the language and intelligence to politically mobilize against human oppression, and the author makes no serious attempt at imagining how such an intelligence could be made possible. We thus sense that the characters and the world of *Animal Farm* are *impossible* and that they are merely symbols without a serious claim to a possible existence beyond the allegorical.

Perfect Attendants also employs a relativist-linguistic perspective in that language does not merely worldbuild in the sense of the word as a literary technique, but it is implied that it builds the world within the narrative as well. In a posthumanist bend consistent with the overall slipperiness of the weird, the boundaries between language and reality, and the virtual and the material, are continuously blurred. In this context, we may return to the topic of the magatamas which we already established function as transhumanist hard drives - “a granary filled to overflowing with life’s undiscovered phenovocabulary” (Torishima 89). In chapter 2 of *Perfect Attendants*, the worker’s magatama, which contains all its memories, is found by a disassembler and reinstated in the body of a dead president. The weird merger of the worker’s intellect and the alien body of the president results in a dysfunctional new consciousness that bombards the worker with chaotic and previously unavailable sensory input which includes partial access to the inner chambers of the magatama. This section suggests, through surreal and difficult exposition from which we must make some inferred guesses, that the information within the magatama enables the existence of a virtual world similar to our own that once existed in the past and that each magatama represents an individual “parish” (a piece or section) within that world. We also learn that the canvassers, previously introduced as a kind of shrimp-humanoid monster, may have once been humans who were transformed into living parabolic antennas. Similar to how the internet creates a unified world wide web through interconnecting a vast amount of locally stored information through electrical signals, the canvassers use the information within their magatamas to create an interconnected world through their “Whispering”:

“The worker looked across the parish town, and simultaneously he was looking down at it with a bird’s-eye view. Dimly, he could make out the ghost of the <World> constructed by the web of interconnectivity created by the canvassers’—no, the cherubim’s— Whispering. But without

whisper-leaves of his own, it was only possible to comprehend as a real image the parish with which he himself was affiliated.” (Torishima 78)

The above revelation deals with one of the foundational problems of posthumanism, which is the potential (or perhaps eventual) transformation of humanity from flesh (material) to information (virtuality). In accordance with the relativist-linguistic perspective of Torishima, wherein everything may be observed to at least partially consist of language, we might also word this process as a *translation*. In the sense of a translation, the information contained within the medium of the human body-in-flesh has in *Perfect Attendants* been translated and *inscribed* onto other compatible mediums, those being the magatamas and the canvassers. Katherine Hayles writes that “One way to think about the transformation of the human into the posthuman [...] is as a series of exchanges between evolving/devolving *inscriptions* and *incorporations*.” (Hayles 2000, 280) She builds on her argument by writing that fictions that emphasize incorporation ask questions in the form of competing morphologies - i.e “is it better to be organic flesh or artificially synthetic?” - while fiction emphasizing inscription creates conflict between competing practices of inscription - i.e “is computer code superior to DNA?”. The evolving/devolving dichotomy is then meant in the sense of whether the human-to-posthuman move is a progressive or a regressive development. *Perfect Attendants* is certainly in line with other posthuman fictions in that there is a marked presence of both competing inscriptions and incorporations, and it would not be too farfetched to view the overall horrific tone of the work as suggesting a view of posthumanism as a devolution.

I would argue, however, that Torishima’s fiction veers away from most posthuman fiction, at least in the more conventional realm of science fiction, in several key ways. First of all, the biological cybernetics and alien imagery of *Perfect Attendants* are unique and weird

enough in themselves and manage to successfully avoid the near-future worlds of humanoid cyborgs, the neo-Tokyos, and the humans-within-PCs that at this point have become somewhat tired cliches of cybernetic fictions. The most important difference, however, is that Torishima applies a broader cosmic perspective typical of the weird that largely does away with anthropocentric perspectives and dichotomies such as evolution/devolution. In a delirious moment, the worker sees the following scene unfold before him:

“A man in a suit appeared to his right. He held a can of coffee out to the man in the white coat and spoke:

“With things having come to this point, I find it odd that you aren’t getting registered to be Translated.”

“Double-translation is an imaginary cyclical transaction. You should know that. Here even the magatama itself is nothing more than a concretion that the <World> brought into existence. “

(Torishima 77)

Torishima does not imagine translation as a transfer between one mode of existence to the next either for better or for worse in relation to our current condition. He instead uses a cosmic scale of deep cyclical time where language and reality co-create each other in a weird liminal loop - in a state of “in-between” infinitely:

“[...]a reconstituted <World> made up of many parishes continued to exist inside the departed interstellar spaceships. There the people were menaced by the Great Dust Plague and underwent Translation to become canvassers. They were beginning to wind the coils of an endless loop.”

(Torishima 89)

The Word creates the World which creates the Word which creates the World et cetera et cetera. Torishima seems to express that the word speaks itself, and thus as it was first spoken, it set in motion the spools of the weird fates.

The cosmical perspective proposed above is understandably broad and difficult to completely grasp, and we might thus label it as a nonhuman perspective rather than a posthuman one. However, being human readers following a human-like protagonist, we must not ignore the ineluctably human perspective of *Perfect Attendants*. We must not forget that weirdness most often appears in the liminal space between the reality shaped by the language informed by the physical and intellectual limits of the human, and the ultimately nonhuman world that lies beyond us. I would therefore argue that the weird affect of the story is largely invoked by the inevitable failure of the human attempt at reducing a nonhuman world within the human boundaries of language. To illustrate what is meant by this, we should take a look at the following passage, wherein the more detail Torishima uses to describe the president, the more alien and inexplicable he seems to become:

“The president’s featureless face descended until it was right before his eyes. Within its interior, bone fragments, scales, and air bubbles floated, and a morel-shaped organ of unfathomable function bobbed back and forth with an irregular rhythm, managing to shift its position considerably though wrapped all around with winding, branching nerves and blood vessels. In the midst of a face that almost seemed more plastic than organic, an indentation suddenly began to sink inward. All around the deepening hollow, the face was starting to roil with waves, and then suddenly the hollow deepened and began to vibrate. “GUEVOoOo—UENGuUuUNNuN—GUEPU, VV!” The piercing cry reverberated all through the building.” (Torishima 18)

Notice also the usage of words such as “featureless”, “unfathomable”, and “irregular”, and how these terms underpin the strangeness of the president's anatomy. Descriptors such as

“abnormal” or “irregular” which insists on strangeness, and “unfathomable” or “incomprehensible” which point to a subjective failing of comprehending or distinguishing entities or phenomena in reality, are infamously Lovecraftian and at this point a typical feature of weird writing. Just the term “strange” is in fact used almost 600 times throughout Lovecraft’s bibliography according to my own count. According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “weirdness” is the most common synonym for “indescribability”. “Weird” and “strange” are thus concepts that point to the inherent limits and failures of human language, and terms that we fall back upon when our concepts and categories come short. Instead of being a purely stylistic feature of the weird then, these types of “weird descriptors” importantly support some of the most common themes of weird writing which revolves around the limits of knowledge in the face of an essentially boundless reality. A well-known paradox of Lovecraft’s writing, which extends to most weird works that followed him, is its insistence on the indescribability and incomprehensibility of its weird monsters while simultaneously dedicating paragraphs upon paragraphs on their description. The Lovecraft paradox may be read as a reflection of Lovecraft’s beliefs in the epistemological limits of human language and understanding in dealing with the greater nonhuman cosmos, while affirming that human curiosity and inquisitiveness knowing its own limits still cannot help but try to make sense of the unknown even when these attempts are to our detriment, for instance as self-deception.

Perfect Attendants, being written in the age of the new weird where the boundaries between inside/outside are much more fluid, takes the epistemological view of Lovecraft one step further towards the posthuman. No longer are forces from outer space or alternative dimensions evoking the weird, but supposedly familiar entities such as *presidents* and *canvassers* as well. The fact that the worker finds their own world strange is in itself quite strange as large parts of the narrative seem to describe what for the worker are *regular* work

days. What this suggests is that the worker lives in a weird reality where even regularity is experienced as irregular, a world that has accelerated, through technology and capitalism, past the limits of human understanding. As a whole, Torishima's neologisms, his weird imagery, and the general difficulty of his prose express the failure of our language, and more specifically our categories, in keeping up and adapting to the ever-evolving and interconnected world we inhabit - a world we can not help deceiving ourselves as a human world, but which beyond this deception is and always will be beyond us.

Chapter 3 - The Sunken Land Begins To Rise Again

The Sunken Land Begins To Rise Again is a 254-page novel by the English writer M. John Harrison (1945 -), published by Gollancz in 2020. Its innovative style and content won it the Goldsmiths Prize for 2020, an annual literary award given by the University of London that “rewards fiction that breaks the mold or extends the possibilities of the novel form”. The novel follows two middle-aged characters, Shaw and Victoria, who struggle to settle down and make sense of a contemporary England that is affected by the turmoils of the Brexit debacle. Both live flickering lives, taking up any work they can find in the modern gig economy, and having a sort of friends-with-benefits relationship, they likewise enter and exit each other's lives at the drop of a hat. Shaw, becoming aware that he is going through some inexplicable crisis wherein he is not fully aware of his own actions and feelings, one day stumbles upon a man digging holes in the wet soil of a park by the Thames. The man introduces himself as Tim and explains to Shaw that he is sampling small lifeforms from the water rising up from the mud. Eventually, Tim offers Shaw an IT job aboard a moored lighter near the Thames-Brent confluence, tasking him with maintaining and archiving information for a strange web blog called The Water House. This blog supports, on the basis of Tim's book Journey of our Genes and through evidence and reports that hardly seem connected, a vague conspiracy wherein fish-like features at some point evolved in parts of the human genome, causing groups of fish-humans to exist on the margins of society in various parts of the world. Shaw is also tasked with business trips all across the country, traveling to derelict mega-stores and storage houses to complete seemingly nonsensical transactions on Tim's behalf. Disconnected as Shaw is however, he does not question the nature of his job or react with horror like the protagonists of weird fiction past; he simply lets strange and unsettling

occurrences pass him by with a blank expression. Many readers in today's postnormal world may find Shaw's attitude to be a hauntingly familiar surrender to the weird.

Victoria, the other of the two point-of-view characters in the book, relocates from London to a small "English heritage" town on the river Severn in Shropshire, a county west of Birmingham bordering Wales. Although not mentioned by name, several clues point to the town being a slightly altered version of Bridgnorth in the east of the county. There she takes over the house of her recently deceased mother who, after having moved there, seems to have enjoyed somewhat of a second wind in life before passing from a sudden illness. In a fashion quite typical of older weird tales, such as "The Shadow over Innsmouth" by H.P Lovecraft, Victoria's story seems initially to set up the "urban stranger comes to strange rural town" narrative wherein the protagonist slowly, but surely unravels a deep and dark conspiracy taking place in town. While Victoria stumbles upon clues and events that seem to point towards the same fishy conspiracy that Shaw senses in London, the clues are just too disjointed and strange to make a coherent picture of. The town's history and people are too deep and complicated for a stranger like Victoria to fully grasp, who, with a certain degree of strained self-irony, is adamant about creating a new life in the countryside after a life in the chaotic urbanity of London. As with Shaw, and unlike the academic and explorer protagonists of the old weird, Victoria seems to have enough work with making sense of her own inscrutable life to have the energy or interest to play detective.

On the surface, it may seem to be a much more quotidian work than the overtly alien and grotesque Sisyphean we dealt with in the previous chapter, in which nauseating weirdness and monstrosity oozes out from the very first page. Yet it is, somewhat paradoxically, the simultaneous feelings of unease and recognition evoked by the atmosphere and events in *The Sunken Land* that make the novel such a weird read. It is a novel that manages to sustain throughout a suspended atmosphere of uneasy confoundment as we the

readers are left with just as many unexplained mysteries as the novel's protagonists. Even when the details of the mystery are revealed to us, as with the fish-men conspiracy we outlined earlier, it is as if we are left even more confused as to what to take away from it. Harrison seems to express that the more we know, the less we understand; simply knowing more does not offer resolutions, conversely, it just seems to create more problems. Learning that there might exist an alternative society of fish people in our midst, for instance, does not resolve the greater mysteries of our mothers. Overall, *The Sunken Land* makes for a highly productive subject of study for increasing our understanding of the contemporary weird, and especially for the quotidian weirdness and uncertainty that feels all too common in our current day.

The first avenue we will explore is the weird's relationship to water, as one of the key features of the novel is that it is thematically centered around the aquatic throughout; from its riverside locales to its incessant use of watery and muddy imagery. Secondly, we will attempt to unravel the nature and cause of the epistemological breakdowns (confusion) inherent in the personal experiences that Harrison portrays through his characters through the lens of post-normality.

The Watery Weirdness of the Blue Weird

The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again is a novel that feels like it's dripping off the pages. There is hardly a page in the book that does not contain a description or allusion to water in some way. Perhaps as is realistic for a novel set entirely in England, it is constantly raining, and if it is not there is always a cloud in the distance threatening to break, or a puddle in the street or a pool in the fields that reminds you of the rain's presence. The rivers Thames and Severn are, only after Shaw and Victoria, two of the most featured names in the book, always slithering in the background like serpentine shadows in the wake of our protagonists. On top of this wet stage, there are also unsettling glimpses of the fish people and of other mysterious marine life sprinkled throughout that contribute to turning the novel's watery qualities into something weird and sinister.

Harrison is hardly the first writer to connect the weird with water. Fish-people for instance has at this point become such a pop-cultural cliché of weird storytelling that it is more often than not used as an inside joke rather than a serious literary device. Harrison himself has gone on record to say that this part of the book is based on such a joke:

“One day you catch sight of something happening in the corner of your eye and shrug and think, “How weird!” The next day Brexit is over and done with and your country is being run by fish people and you still aren't getting it. That's the spinal assumption of the book, the joke it's based on.”

(Harrison in Interview with Byrne).

H.P. Lovecraft was the one who really popularized this trope as almost all of his most widely read and influential work contains some form of alternatively humanized beings, more often than not with features resembling marine life. His novella “The Whisperer in Darkness”

(1931) describes an alien crab-like race living in the wooded hills of Vermont, the short story “Call of Cthulhu” (1928) a cult who worships the abyssal squid-like elder god Cthulhu, and most of all “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1931) an alternative, evil society of fish-people hiding in the midst of a rural town in Massachusetts all contributed to the popularity of “the cult of fish-people” trope. Even decades before Lovecraft, what scholars have only quite recently begun referring to in spatterings as the “oceanic weird” or the “maritime weird” was already established and proliferating in the British weird tradition. Lovecraft’s use of fish-people was most likely heavily inspired by Arthur Machen’s “The Novel of the Black Seal” (1895) which Lovecraft praises in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by writing that it “perhaps represent the highwater mark of Machen's skill as a terror-weaver” (Lovecraft 1921).

In this context we must also mention the seminal work of sailor-turned-writer William Hope Hodgson (1877 - 1918) and his Sargasso Sea stories, exemplified by “The Boats of the “Glen Carrig”” (1907) wherein the Sargasso Sea features as a type of maritime weird Zone where reality is altered by abyssal powers and inhabited by strange marine monstrosities. Oceanic weirdness also frequently occurred in the British Gothic from which the weird tradition was born, for instance in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epic poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1796). Even going as far back as the very beginnings of British literature in Beowulf, we find that the link between the oceanic and the supernatural is strongly present as one of the main antagonists, the mother of Grendel, resides in a lair underwater.

The weird and the watery have thus maintained a strong connection in the British literary tradition in particular. An obvious answer as to why may simply be that the UK is an island nation with a rich seafaring history, making coastal and oceanic locations natural settings for British narratives. This answer nonetheless does not feel entirely satisfactory for

explaining the disproportionately large frequency of oceanic and watery locations and imagery present in weird writing from the Old Weird and onwards. It is at this juncture that I would like to turn to concepts found in the “blue humanities” to explore this relationship in more depth. In the words of John R. Gillis, “The emergence of the blue humanities is a belated recognition of the close relationship between modern western culture and the sea.” (Gillis 2013) Responding to the rise of the blue humanities in the early twenty-first century, a small, but not insignificant contingent of weird scholars have attempted to map the relation between the weird and the sea. The first of these we are going to point out is Jolene Mathieson and the concept of oceanic weirdness, which she coined in her 2019 essay *The Oceanic Weird, Wet Ontologies and Hydro-Criticism in China Mieville’s The Scar*. In this essay, she defines the oceanic weird as follows:

"The oceanic weird—the hodgepodge and mutations of fictions that include maritime science fiction, horror, and fantasy—offers us sophisticated, often self-reflective models of wet ontologies that are invaluable to oceanic studies. These models invite the reader to engage with the chaotic tessellations of maritime assemblages through their representations of water, oceanic space, and marine life, their hybrid and often subversive use of discursive genres, and their interdiscursive translations of knowledge in engineering, seafaring, geography, and the marine sciences." (Mathieson 2019, 112)

The oceanic weird as defined above is a useful concept for grasping with the maritime tales of Machen, Hodgson, and Lovecraft, as well as modern maritime weird tales like “The Scar” by China Mieville. David Puntner’s proposal of a nautical weird is also helpful for pointing out the important part that human subjective perspectives play in the emergence of weirdness in such tales:

“‘Nautical’ is itself always an unstable term; although it refers to the oceans, it does so through the lens of the telescope, the apparatus of the sextant, the rhetoric and vocabulary of navigation. It may appear interchangeable with cognate terms like ‘maritime’ or ‘marine’; but ‘maritime’ carries inevitable connotations, not of the sea itself, but of the uses to which the sea may be put – trade, piracy, defence, while ‘nautical’ returns us to the sailor’s perception.” (Punter 2017, 28)

Yet, both Mathieson and Punter’s fixation on the oceanic in particular makes the oceanic weird and the nautical weird not entirely fitting framework for understanding *The Sunken Land* which more than simply the vastness and alienness of oceanic space also thematizes the infiltrative nature of smaller, inland bodies of water such as rivers, pools, and puddles, as well as more elusive forms of water like rain, humidity and gutter water. In this sense, both Mathieson’s and Punter’s concepts are part of a tendency that Steve Mentz, the English professor who first coined the term “blue humanities” (Gillis), describes in 2023 in his book *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*: “Scholarship in the blue humanities and related discourses during the early decades of the twenty-first century has been dazzled by oceanic vastness.” (Mentz 2023, 1) Mentz then goes on to describe recent developments in the blue humanities that have moved past this initial bedazzlement: “As ocean-focused scholarly discourses have been developing, attention has radiated out from oceans to include rivers, lakes, glaciers, and many other forms of water.” (Mentz 2023, 1) Finally, he situates the considerations of both oceanic and non-oceanic forms of water in the blue humanities within a “poetics of planetary water” and a “watery criticism” that holistically attempts to “describ[e] the complex workings of water and imagining ways to change our relationships to it.” (Mentz 2023, 1) Following the cue of Mentz, then, I would like to propose the term the blue weird as an umbrella term encapsulating the study of all types of planetary water in conjunction with the weird, as well as the weird relations between human and water-dwelling life. Although I am sure that watery has been used before as an adjective for weird, I will

from this point on also use the term watery weirdness as a concept to explore the intersecting qualities of wateriness and weirdness that are on display in *The Sunken Land*, as well as the complex workings between planetary water, watery life and the weird.

Before continuing, I must readily admit that this is a bit of a semantic hangup that only (yet importantly) reframes theoretical work that has in large part already been done. Mathieson's textualization of wet ontologies in the context of the oceanic weird, the weird's interest in "slime dynamics, and specifically her definition of hypermaterials, goes a long way to define watery weirdness at large.

"with hypermateriality, I want to "disorientate" Timothy Morton's theory of the "hyperobject." In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World* (2013), Morton theorizes hyperobjects as entities massively distributed in space and time that disturb the human but cannot be fully apprehended. Whether objects can remain discreet as singular entities at this scale and dimension is questionable. [...] Hypermaterials, like hyperobjects, are viscous—just like the properties of H₂O, they are sticky and adhere to all substances and entities they touch, no matter the degree of resistance. They are phased—hypermaterials are situated in but also encompass higher dimensional space, so that they require our focused attention to come into view. And, they are inter-material— complex, dynamic formations forged by the interrelations of more than one material." (Mathieson 2019, 116)

Using the above definition, I would argue that planetary water figure as hypermaterial in *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, disturbing its human characters while simultaneously escaping their full comprehension. There is no single antagonist or phantom that haunts the pages of the novel, like a Mortonian hyperobject, but rather the disconcerting presence of water everywhere at any time, which is, like the weird, too vicious, amorphous and spread out to be grasped or pointed out even as it "sticks and adheres to all substances and entities they touch". Harrison does well in creating a truly weird and watery atmosphere by avoiding

the standard response of personifying the real dangers posed by planetary water in materialized monsters such as sirens, kelpies, draugrs and the like that Mathieson points to being the most common response to such puzzling materialities. (Mathieson 2019, 116)

Instead, Harrison highlights the inherently weird and ghost-like qualities of water. As damp, it sticks invisibly to everything, making its presence known as out of thin air: “Number 17 stood too far back to catch the river’s fogs; nevertheless it always seemed damp.” (Harrison 7)

With time too slow for humans to notice, it has the power to transform and decay: “Shaw struggled to get the window open. River damp had swollen it night after night into its frame.” (Harrison 185)

Like ghosts, it can penetrate walls and other solid materials, destroying it slowly but surely from the inside: “A persistent leak in the bathroom – something to do with the supply to the bidet – dripped through the floor and into the kitchen.” (Harrison 69)

It infuses not only the solid and the material, but even something as ethereal as light: “Wet light shone off the council benches. Dogs hurried about. Restored 1960s motorcycles leaned together in a row, their aluminium fuel tanks dull with beads of water.” (Harrison 175)

All of these descriptions seem inconspicuous and quotidian on their own, something you would expect to find in any novel. However, Harrison’s watery descriptions become strange and unsettling due to their frequency - how they collectively make up a constellation of meaning that insists on the hypermateriality of planetary water, paradoxically so ever-present that all of its various forms and effects become too overwhelming and complex to comprehend, invisible and unknowable even in plain sight. In this sense, the hypermaterial of water becomes weirder than the hyperobject-like Lovecraftian elder gods of the Old Weird, which although inscrutable and slippery at least can be understood as single, distinct entities. Water - always dissipating, reappearing, forming and dissolving bodies, fusing and transforming inter-materially - escapes through its liquidity and nonidentity the solid, but ultimately porous

containers of human concepts and categories. Yet at the same time, water is next to inescapable.

Rivers also plays an important part in Harrison's narrative, as well as in the weird in general. Rivers often symbolize the aspect of deep and beyond-human time, a connection deeply entrenched in the English language as evident in the common use of phrases such as "the river of time" and "the flow of time". Rivers also symbolize borders between worlds. In Greek mythology, the river Styx separates the world of the living from the dead, which we may understand as a liminal space between life and death. In Chinese mythology, the Milky Way is understood as a celestial river separating the heavenly realm from the earth, which through Fisher's model of the weird would constitute a threshold between a cosmological outside world and a terrestrial inside world. This common symbol, found throughout various cultures all over the world, no doubt stems from the fact that rivers constitute natural borders in the landscape, separating uniform space into separated spaces; "this side" and "that side", which depending on allegiances and experiences constitutes human distinctions such as the familiar "near side" versus the alien "far side". There is an inherent weirdness in the way that a few meters of flowing water turn familiar entities close enough to touch into alien Others.

The aquatic flora and fauna of rivers too, as well as its watery dynamics, constitute somewhat of a different world than the land that immediately surrounds it. These otherworldly aspects of rivers are for instance expressed in the weird elements found in the British children's novel *The Water-Babies* (1863) by Charles Kingsley, which is referenced numerous times in *The Sunken Land* as an important text to those in the fish-people cult, perhaps as some kind of utopian ideal. Kingsley's story centers around a young chimney sweep called Tom who falls into a river and is transformed into a "water baby". As a water baby, he must learn to adapt to his new aquatic environment, going on educational adventures guided by fish and caddisflies. These underwater challenges eventually teach the

chimney-sweep to become a better person, and when he ultimately returns to land he is better for it - becoming a renowned scientist as he grows older. Although somewhat of a typical moral tale, it also speaks in favor of a closer relationship between humanity and nature, specifically between humans and rivers. In this sense, it encourages us to brave the weird in order to increase our understanding of it, and perhaps even become better off on the other side of it than we were before. In order to reconcile with Victoria, Shaw tries to write an email by firstly thanking her for the gift she gave him: “Thank you so much for The Water-Babies. From our perspective it’s hard to understand Tom’s world.”. Although somewhat of a vacuous statement, it speaks at least of a realization that everyone has their own perspective and that understanding Others requires effort and interaction, whether that be other people in our lives or other worlds such as the river world of Tom.

Pools also function in *The Sunken Land* as a portal between the human world and the aquatic one. Pearl, a café owner who becomes somewhat of a friend to Victoria in Bridgnorth, seems to seek towards pools as a way of escape from a life of boredom. She is a melancholic and mysterious character who seems ill-fitted in her present as she is always seen looking into the distance; whether it be into distant space as into the rain outside her café window, or into time as her fashion sense stems from eras long gone. It is almost like she seems more at home in the water than on land as she is found frequently swimming in the pools that emerge in the fields after rainy weather, happy and smiling. For Victoria, a person with a long-time aversion to water, Pearl appears both strange and alluring. In one of the more unsettling scenes of the book, Victoria can only helplessly watch from a distance how Pearl disappears into a pool just to never be seen again, with only her clothes remaining along the edges. Even weirder, when Victoria tries jumping into the pool herself, she finds it to only be knee-deep. The pools of *The Sunken Land* are thus given a faerie-like quality, defying the otherwise quite conventional logic that permeates the book.

In line with the overall openness towards the weird that typifies the New Weird, and the leakiness of the weird in general, the watery weirdness of Harrison does not place the aquatic as a separate realm from the terrestrial. Unlike the oceanic weird exemplified in the stories of Hodgson and Lovecraft, where the ocean is treated like an alien world of Otherness set apart from the laws and considerations on land, the blue weird recognizes that the aquatic/terrestrial divide is, like similar dichotomies of human/animal, organic/inorganic, material/virtual, more unstable and porous than we have traditionally believed. A recurring image that openly symbolizes this idea is found in a map hanging above Shaw's desk aboard Tim's lighter, where the continents and the seas are reversed:

“The land was in grey, the sea white. If you looked at it long enough, there before you was a brand-new planet. It featured a sea shaped like the Americas, another sea like the eastern half of Russia. In between them, in the centre of the map, stretched this vast new continent which didn't even have a name. Blink and it was gone. You couldn't get it back. You were left with a featureless map of the world on which someone had marked naturally occurring clusters of a repeating DNA sequence sometimes found on human gene Kv12.2, code which had originated, he read later, ‘more than 500 million years ago in the genomes of sea-dwelling species’ and which played ‘a decisive role in human spatial memory’. Why anyone would map that was unclear: it was an oddly specific way of looking at things, and not one you could navigate with.” (Harrison 138-139).”

This map, which seems to be nothing more than an innocuous prop at first, eventually takes on stranger attributes and a more important role as the narrative develops. An alternative and more complex version of it shows up in Shaw's copy of *The Journey of Our Genes*, with three colors rather than two spattered with abstract symbols and marked by Tim's handwriting with the following text:

“Who hasn’t, at some point in their lives, dreamed of strange organisms? Infestations. Algal mats. Microscopic activity in crustal basalt, detected only via by-product, “perhaps the largest ecosystem on earth”. Not precisely animals. And most often, it has to be said, the kind of things that grow in layers in a drain. They’re soft. I also dream of that wiry, fibrous stuff you get in a bad avocado. In this case it’s a dark red and it runs through everything.” (Harrison 156)

The exact purpose of the map remains unclear and is never fully revealed. The most obvious theories that come to mind is that it maps a potential future where the terrestrial/aquatic switch places. Yet, using the ideas of the watery weird, a more likely theory is that the map purposefully through its use of color blurs the lines of this dichotomy. In this sense, the map is a weird egress into thinking more openly about planetary water in all of its forms and the incomprehensibly complex watery ecosystems within them, and as evident by the focus of Tim’s notes, how these may be linked with the genetic journey of human life. Even so, its exact role remains clouded in dark mystery throughout the book. It seems to frequently change hands between Tim Swann and his sister Annie Swann who works as a medium, and its ownership seems to be a long-contested issue between the siblings. During one of Annie’s seances, where she does nothing more than pass out for a time in a mildly epileptic state, Shaw notices that he is able to make the land and the sea switch places by blinking while looking at the map. At the bloody climax towards the end of the book, however, where Shaw stumbles upon the aftermath of the murder of Tim by Annie aboard the lighter, Shaw notices that he is no longer able to do so - “however he blinked or squinted at the map he could no longer make the land and sea switch places [...] the land was the sea, the sea was the land.” (Harrison 236) If there is anything that is clear, it is that the map is much like the watery blots of a Rorschach test; its meaning depends upon the eye of the beholder. Here one is reminded of the aphorism coined by the Polish philosopher Alfred Korzybski: “the map is not the territory” and the premises of “general semantics”:

“Languages, formulated systems, etc. [are] maps and only maps of what they purport to represent.

This awareness led to the three premises [...] of general semantics: the map is not the territory. no map represents all of ‘its’ presumed territory. maps are self-reflexive, i.e., we can map our maps indefinitely. Also, every map is at least, whatever else it may claim to map, a map of the map-maker: her/his assumptions, skills, word-view, etc. By ‘maps’ we should understand everything and anything that humans formulate.” (Pula on Korzybski 1958, xvii)

The epistemological claims of Korzybski correspond exceedingly well with the weird in general as the latter also tends to question the solidity of human abstractions and their shortcomings in the face of an infinitely wide and deep reality. Although one might be inclined to consider a world map as doing an adequate job of encompassing the world, with its neat geo-political borders and coastlines, it is astoundingly far off from reflecting reality when one considers how much information about the world it does not contain; “no map represents all of ‘its’ presumed territory”. Keeping our discussion only within the watery, a world map, or even satellite imagery of our planet, does not show subterranean waterways and repositories, the near-infinite amount of creeks, puddles, and pools that hide under wood canopy, the bodily fluids contained inside of organisms, the water inside human-made structures et cetera. A world map is only two-dimensional as well - it does not capture the sheer monstrosity of watery depth and volume that make up our oceans, lakes, and rivers. Being only a representation of surface-level geography and location, and marked by a distinctly human perspective, it does not fathom the infinitude of both microscopic and macroscopic life contained within every square cube of all of this planetary water, or as Mathieson puts it more sharply: “In any given one-milliliter-sized drop of seawater, there teems with life upwards of eleven million marine microbes that move, dance, and wiggle, that ooze, leak, and discharge, that reproduce, mutate, get sick, and die.” (Mathieson 2019, 113)

For this reason, one might argue that the Swann's weird map, with its amorphous borders between water and earth, with markers that point out clusters of strange organic life rather than cities, is a more accurate (although still massively insufficient) representation of reality than your standard world map.

The perspective of the watery weird also destabilizes our sense of time - another dimension that maps are poor at representing. In *The Sunken Land*, water is often an unsettling reminder that time is both layered and deep, ultimately beyond the scope of human experience and perception. Both Shaw and Victoria, who both live typically modern, self-involved lives from moment to moment, seem to be in apprehensive relationships to both past and future due to neglectful childhoods on one end and the unstable socio-political climate of Brexitannia on the other. On one of Victoria's many aimless discursions in her new countryside habitat, a ship-like medieval ruin appears as a reminder of both catastrophic past and future, and of the speed and transience of human time. Note especially its dampness as an unsettling sign of impending danger:

“Victoria walked in a confused spiral until she reached the base of the medieval keep. This curious ruin – thrown up in the 1200s by Geoffrey de Lacy, one of Henry III's lesser-known Savoyards, and pulled down not much more than a hundred years later during the Despenser War – featured a single triangular corner of masonry, fifty or sixty feet high and leaning fifteen degrees off the vertical, looking less like architecture than the bow of an unfinished ship: as if its founder had seen into some future of immense sea-level rises, a world in which the hill would become an island, the castle grounds a quay. It was black with damp.” (Harrison 54-55)

The above allusion to water rising is frequently made throughout the novel, as seen in the following examples:

“[...]a faint but definite darkening a foot or two below the gutters gave the effect of a high-water mark forty feet in the air, as if the street had been flooded at a time when it was much lower than the top of the hill.” (Harrison 77)

“He had tried to clean the bath, too, prior to washing some of his underwear in it one Friday night when the house seemed empty. The stain remained, cupric, slimy, recording some mysterious high-water event.” (Harrison 12)

The effect is a suspended atmosphere of doom, of unavoidable watery catastrophes that belong, relative to our protagonists, to the past, present, and future. To the past because the catastrophes began in prehistoric times, to the present because they are ongoing processes, and to the future because they are progressing. The title of the novel, with a particular emphasis on the word “again”, suggests that the rising and sinking of the world is also a cyclical matter of repeating processes. They exist in a monstrous realm of liminal time - outside of the linear time perspective of humans - so old and slow that they are ultimately unknowable and off-limits to the short-lived race of human beings, yet greatly consequential to our present lives and to our survival. Liminal also because the catastrophes are multiple and interconnected, overlapping each other in a disorienting web of events that span far beyond human time and space. The movement of a tectonic plate, for instance, does not happen suddenly in a vacuum; they have been moving, breaking apart, and crashing into each other since the crust of our planet was formed, predating any organic life on Earth. Looking out over the misty river valleys of Shropshire, Victoria, briefly open to the weird perspective of liminal time, senses the old and watery nonhuman powers still working their transformative magic on the world:

Deep beneath, you sensed, the Gorge was still a work in progress; while the Severn – now a contraflow, a river beneath a river – whirled and eddied along with the energy of its own weight and depth. You would always wonder what might emerge from the mist, the future or the past. In the end, she thought, only vast sweeps of time would count, whether you were looking backward or forward – indeed, if you could tell which was which. There were no trees or roads or buildings down there. It was too soon or too late. Victoria imagined a dim light, diffusing thinly across both ancient and freakishly new forms of the landscape, which were strewn about without sense. (Harrison 87)

Whereas Lovecraft and other Old Weird writers resorted to monstrous abstractions that hinted at beyond-human powers in alternative dimensions and in outer space, Harrison, in line with the New Weird and our contemporary age of ecological anxiety, instead highlights the terrifying and weird aspects of the visible, material and real world - “so radically real that it can’t be fully comprehended by the empirical models available to us.” (Mathieson 2019). In this sense, reading *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* is a humbling reminder of the weird reality of planetary water in both time and space, of its unimaginable vastness and volume, and its monstrous non-human powers that we so depend on. We never truly left the water; we are still little swimmers.

Facing Weirdness in Postnormal Times

The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again is largely a novel about epistemological difficulties. More specifically it questions the limitations of the “human” perspective, and how we respond when this perspective is destabilized by the weird and the unexpected. The title of the novel is borrowed from a line in a lecture called *Thought in A Gravel Pit* by the British priest, writer, and professor Charles Kingsley (1819 - 1875). This lecture like *The Sunken Land* also highlights the limitations of human knowledge by framing the short-lived “human world “relative to the much deeper “geological worlds” that preceded it:

“The German Ocean becomes sea once more; the north-western Alps sink again to a level far lower even than their present one; only to rise again, but not so high as before; sea-beaches and sea-shells fill many of our lower valleys; whales by hundreds are stranded (as in the Farnham vale) where is now dry land. Gradually the sunken land begins to rise again, and falls perhaps again, and rises again after that, more and more gently each time, till as it were the panting earth, worn out with the fierce passions of her fiery youth, has sobbed herself to sleep once more, and this new world of man is made.[...]

[...] We pick our steps, by lanthorn light indeed, and slowly, but still surely and safely, along a dark and difficult road: but just as we are beginning to pride ourselves on having found our way so cleverly, we come to an edge of darkness; and see before our feet a bottomless abyss, down which our feeble lanthorn will not throw its light a yard.” (Kingsley 1857)

Although the progressive Harrison and the mostly conservative writers of the old weird like Lovecraft would surely disagree on a great many topics, all three of Harrison, Kingsley, and Lovecraft are, as writers dabbling in the weird, critical of what Lovecraft referred to as the “the humanocentric pose” and what the academics today call “anthropocentrism”. Returning

to the joke he based the book on and the trope of the fish people, Harrison specifically criticizes the belief in human superiority and free will. The fish-people of *The Sunken Land* does not seem to be a separate race or set of beings from humanity at large, not monstrous Others appearing out of a supernatural realm in the cosmic Outside, although they may certainly feel like so at time due to the disinterest of Shaw and Victoria. What they are exactly is elusive and shrouded in a mystery that exists in the background of the novel's narrative. Although these fishy background events are hugely consequential to the lives and environments of our protagonists, much like their attitude towards the rising of the sea levels, they are either too self-involved or too dismissive towards these happenings to ever get close to the bottom of it. They take the passive stance against the weird, which is to simply admit defeat to its strangeness without even as much as an attempt at untangling it, dismissing it because its weirdness is found appalling and uncomfortable.

What the various hints given to us by Harrison suggest to us as readers, however, is that the fish people are an expression of a quality already latent within humanity at large. This makes the decision to avoid the weird a decision to reject crucial aspects of ourselves and our environments, in this case, humanity's close and inherent connection to the aquatic. One might for instance speculate that the appearance of fish-people is a sign that humanity as a species is adapting to the future sea-level rises that the novel frequently alludes to. The above speculation is already foreshadowed as early as the second page of the novel when Victoria tells Shaw of a tribe of fish people in the valleys of Peru, a story she heard from her father: "Perhaps you have seen one. Perhaps we're all fish-people. Of one sort or another." (Harrison 2) Later on in chapter 3, Victoria hands Shaw a strange fish talisman allegedly from Peru as something of a parting gift before she moves out of London. Its strangeness, as well as its realness, disconcerts him however, and although one would normally treasure such

sentimental gifts regardless of one's own taste, Shaw finds it so intolerably disconcerting that he tries to pass it on to his demented mother.

“In fact, he had decided to give it to his mother. The reasons for this he would have found difficult to explain. If you picked the fish up and encouraged the street light to angle off its hand-etched scales, it seemed more deco than Peru, more 1930s than nineteenth century; to confuse matters further, the hallmarks were Spanish. A tiny bashed pentagram indicated, so Google advised him, silver of .915 purity. These failures of alignment between the facts of the fish and Victoria’s narrative of it only seemed to echo a deeper cultural disconnect. There was a curious, halting feel to its aesthetic – as if the artist, in the attempt to kitschify the ethnic product of one culture, had stumbled on evidence of a completely different culture hidden inside it. Under the lamplight the movements of its cleverly articulated body fell just short of sinuous.

It was too like a fish. Its rubbery lips and accusing blue eyes dismayed him, especially when he woke in the night, disoriented by the noise from the room next door.” (Harrison 38-39)

The fact that he passes this talisman on to his mother is a symbolic act of great volume taking into account that Shaw harbors a well of repressed feelings of bitterness and alienation towards her. We learn that he had a turbulent childhood spent moving from one place to another, coast to coast, from one step-father to the next. His main strategy of dealing with this trauma and turbulence throughout his life has been, as it is towards the weird, practicing avoidance, and the same fate is ultimately passed on to the fish talisman. His mother weeps at the sight of it, and it is promptly returned to him by the care home staff. Its next emergence in the novel is a brief one, when Victoria finds it in Shaw’s apartment stowed away on top of a shelf, its luster faded by the Thames air:

‘Oh, and your fish,’ she cried, as if only then remembering she’d given it to him. ‘Your brilliant fish!’

The fish stared solemnly at her from its popped lapis eyes. The Thames airs, Shaw now saw, had taken their toll: its lips were dull, its Peruvian silver flanks darkened with oxides, its body less flexible. ‘How are you two getting on?’ Victoria wanted to know. ‘Still good friends?’

Shaw gave up on the window.

‘I don’t think I’ve got any alcohol,’ he said. (Harrison 86)

Again, Shaw dodges the issue by switching topics and the talisman is not mentioned again until the end of the book. This is in fact one of the very last interactions between Shaw and Victoria in the novel. The fish talisman is an exemplary symbol of what happens when you push the weird aside: it fades into the background. Yet its fading does not make it disappear, its disconcerting qualities and its difficult implications of a “deeper cultural disconnect” do not become void; the fading only makes its mysteries harder to grasp than they were before and the eventual consequences of those mysteries more volatile and fatal once they arise as we have not dared to prepare for them. This is not only an effect seen in weird fiction in connection with eldritch monsters and elder gods; it is also relevant to weirdness on a global scale in regards to complex issues of global warming, refugee crises, and Brexit that, like planetary water, cross both national and conceptual borders. De-weirding these issues through simplification or refusing to engage with them at all does not make them disappear, on the contrary, it exasperates them. Aside from wider socio-political and cultural weirdness, this also holds true for weirdness found in personal relationships. After returning to Shropshire from her last visit to London, Victoria tries writing Shaw an email. Tired and close to a breakdown due to her inability to make sense of herself and her surroundings, she mourns the inability of her and Shaw to truly communicate, finding it weird:

“‘The thing is, I always want to tell you about my life but somehow I never can. Isn’t that weird?’

This time she'd failed because as soon as she got south of the Chilterns her own anxieties had seemed, for a moment at least, reassuringly far away; because Shaw's very listlessness had been demanding enough to catch her attention; but most importantly, perhaps, because neither of them, in the end, would ever be able to tell the other anything. The difference between them was that she understood this and he didn't. Victoria recognised her own impediment but couldn't work around it: Shaw, she suspected, didn't even know he had one." (Harrison 202)

Victoria thus recognizes the weirdness between her and Shaw - the complex underlying barriers of communication between them that may consist of anything from personal trauma to unspoken social norms - but yet finds herself unable to deal with them. While Shaw avoids the weird through a form of passive surrender and has as Victoria suspects become almost unable to recognize it in the process, she instead retorts to approaching the weird with a kind of active and whimsical dismissiveness. Sometimes she even goes as far as masking the true weirdness of her own life and the world by making up her own weird stories. At her very first meeting with Shaw, she made up a story of having seen her first corpse at fourteen years of age to appear more interesting and to mask some of the more depressive circumstances of her adolescence. For the actual weirdness of the fish-people conspiracy that seems to go on around her new home in the Shropshire town, when she does not avoid it as Shaw does, she acts out with a sarcastic dismissiveness that explains it in terms of countryside ignorance: "It's very Brexit up here," she had written on her first night out of London. "Eight pubs in a mile and deep surrounding woods." (Harrison 252) With Brexit as a clear backdrop of the novel, this kind of response brings to mind the dismissiveness of some of the anti-Brexit discourse during the height of the Brexit debacle that also blamed the movement's support on the ignorance of the provincial working class and the elderly generation instead of taking their arguments and their plights seriously. You see this dismissiveness all across the political spectrum, however, as one could certainly charge the populist faction of Boris Johnson with

constructing oversimplified narratives wherein the EU and immigrants serve as the main antagonists against the British economy. A more extreme case could be seen across the pond, where the downturn of the American economy in the last few centuries has, for instance, been attributed to the evil deeds of a shadowy group of elites by the QAnon movement instead of the hugely complex and globally interconnected factors that have actually contributed to it.

As in Harrison's joke or Victoria's story, people all too often scoff at weirdness, putting too much stock in normality. People say "Trump could never become president, that is too outlandish"..." or "England would never leave the EU"...", refusing to take such futures seriously because of their perceived weirdness. Yet when such too-strange-to-be-true events unfold, and so they do more and more often these days, people are shocked, left with "feelings of queasy puzzlement and explanatory collapse" as Harrison puts it (Harrison Interview 2020), in disbelief as to what just happened - or further yet: completely unable to understand what is currently happening. We are not the first to point out these tendencies in recent events and in recent discourse. The epistemological conundrums that Harrison's characters find themselves in, and what it is that may cause them, have much in common with what the British-Pakistani futurologist Ziauddin Sardar describes through his Postnormal Times (PNT) theory:

"It is the primary contention of postnormal times (PNT) theory that in the current epoch, when, as the formula developed in postnormal science discourse states, 'facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high, and decisions urgent' (Ravetz & Funtowicz, 1999), the accepted normal does not work. The basic concepts and assumptions of normality, such as progress, modernisation, growth, development, and efficiency are becoming dangerously obsolete (Sardar, 2009). In fact, the normal has now become the domain of old, dying axioms, thesis, conventions and canons. That there is something profoundly wrong with today's world, that we are heading towards a 'paradigm shift', is fast becoming a common argument and position. " (Sardar 2013, 27)

As we also highlighted, Sardar points out that the normal - our basic and most fundamental assumptions about the world - are becoming increasingly unreliable. He further proposes that it is “the three c’s” - complexity, chaos, and contradictions - that are the main factors driving this move towards the postnormal. Complexity because the workings and issues of a globally interconnected world, accelerating through previously unheard of technological and cultural development, has a staggering amount of moving and complex parts. Chaos because even small local issues or actions of single individuals can have, because of the world’s interconnectedness and complexity, huge and rapidly moving knock-on effects at a global level. The most obvious recent example of this is the coronavirus pandemic that kicked off in 2019, caused initially by the consumption of bat meat at a local market in China. Nationwide quarantines caused weird and eerie scenes previously thought of as exclusively belonging to disaster movies and post-apocalyptic fiction such as Richard Matheson’s “I am Legend” to materialize in “real life”, as the streets of sprawling metropolises all over the world were left almost completely empty of human life as if they had been deserted overnight.

The final of Sardar’s three C’s is contradictions,

“A complex, networked world, with countless competing interests and ideologies, designs and desires, behaving chaotically, can do little more than throw up contradictions—the third of our three ‘c’s. It is the natural product of numerous antagonistic social and cultural networks jostling for dominance. After all, as Newton pointed out, every reaction has an equal and opposite reaction.”

(Sardar 2010, 5)

Contradictions - including paradoxes and events and entities that defy conventional logic - are often what constitutes moments of quotidian weirdness. In discourse for instance it is not uncommon to rely on the word weird, in the sense of explanatory exasperation, to describe

contradictory observations, as in “Isn’t it weird how the cost of living has skyrocketed while the wages have stayed mostly the same”. or “It’s just weird to me how the weather seems to get colder when there’s supposedly a global warming going on”. Victoria’s observation that we highlighted earlier is another example of such a contradiction: ‘The thing is, I always want to tell you about my life but somehow I never can. Isn’t that weird?’. She also spots another contradiction when she visits Shaw’s London room for the first time:

“she paused, hands braced against the doorway, leaning in [...] to study with amused disgust the bed, the beaten old chair and scattered clothes, the uncurtained window.”

‘What?’ Shaw said.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’[...]

Then: ‘Jesus, that bathroom. Why do we all live like this?’” (Harrison 18)

In context, she implies the question of why people of the modern Western world with all of its technological advancements and economic abundance, especially those who are supposed to be part of a middle class with near-unlimited options like Victoria, Shaw, and his yuppie neighbors, decide to live in increasingly squalid and degrading housing conditions. The conditions that feed into all of these contradictions seem arcane to us because of their inherently complex and chaotic attributes, but also, as we discussed earlier, because we rely too much on the conventions and concepts that make up the normal and because we almost automatically disregard and avoid the weird, causing it to be shoved into the background where it becomes harder to access.

As I hope to have illustrated, PNT and postnormality are terms that are highly complementary to “weird” and “weirdness”, the former describing the global conditions that feed into the volatile and unpredictable nature of our current geopolitical climate, and the latter the cognitive and emotional effects that arise at a local and individual level as a result

of this volatility. In other words, PNT may be understood as cause and condition, and global weirding or extreme weirding as pointing to the effects. During the 2010s, the term “global weirding” was attempted to be launched as an alternative to global warming or climate change to describe the highly variable ways that climate change expressed itself on a local level, described by Canavan-Hageman as the following: “The point of global weirding as a cognitive frame was to refocus our attention on the localities within the totality of the global; while global warming is an event the entire planet experiences, it is an event that different locations on the globe will experience in highly variable ways [...]” (Canavan-Hageman 8) John Sweeney further defines “global weirding” in the context of PNT, as well as the launching of the term “extreme weirding”:

"Global Weirding, rather than global warming, is more than just a play on words—it is a prognosis.

[...]global weirding ‘is a fitting moniker for the emerging meshwork of

- increasing technological advancement, dependence, and ubiquity,
- impending ecological catastrophe(s), and
- the transnational drive and reach of postnormal actants.’

[...] In PNT, things we take for granted become uncertain, our understanding of things can become a form of ignorance, and longstanding norms, if not the very idea of normalcy itself, break down before our very eyes. This, if anything, is what is meant by global weirding, and extreme weirding points toward the increasing power of severe phenomena to mutate our sense of being in the world."

(Sweeney 204)

While I have not found evidence that Harrison is explicitly aware of PNT or global weirding, he is undoubtedly one of the authors with the most conscious and experienced relations to the weird living and working today, and in turn also one of the authors who best knows the fragility of normality. As we touched upon in the first chapter, he was crucial to the

groundbreaking British New Wave SF movement in the '60s and '70s, as well as being the person who launched the broader discussion of the New Weird distinction back in the early 2000s. (Vandermeer Although primarily known as a writer of hybrid sf, he has always been a rebellious author and an innovator who has challenged the position of “the normal”, whether that be the socio-political normal or the genres and conventions he has worked within, as well as frequently breaking and reinventing his style as a writer. As recently as 2022, at the age of 76, he released a highly innovative and critically acclaimed work called *Wish I Was Here* that was labeled “a masterly anti-memoir” by Nina Allan of The Guardian as it questions the linearity and coherency of memory, breaking both with the conventions of the memoir and autobiographical genres, as well as his own style as a writer. (Allan 2022). This is why looking towards Harrison’s work, and especially towards *The Sunken Lands Begin to Rise Again*, is incredibly fruitful in the context of PNT, global weirding, and normality. The opening lines of the novel ask in fact very explicit questions about our dependencies on normality: “During his fifties Shaw went through a rough patch. That was how he put it to himself. His adult life had been, until then, perfectly normal. He had been determined on normality. Perhaps that had been the problem.” (Harrison 1)

Shaw’s character arc especially illustrates that to be determined on normality is a recipe for crisis and instability. Normality is in itself not much more than a veil of standards, expectations, and conventions built on fleeting socio-cultural parameters. When normality is somewhat stable, then conforming to it may at least bring some comfort in that it eases the burden of responsibility over one’s own actions, tastes, and opinions. When the fashion changes every week, however, unpredictably and chaotically as it does in PNT, conforming turns away from an easy act leading to comfort and social harmony to an exhausting, expensive, and wasteful endeavor wherein one has no time or sense to enjoy the shrinking rewards of being “in with the times”. Crisis is when our assumptions and predictions fail us,

when the world acts counter to our expectations. Crisis becomes devastating, as it does for Shaw, when we do not expect the unexpected; when we put too much stock in the assumption that the world is “normal” and that our perceived reality is absolute, that the events that occur follow some guided principles or standards, and that all uncertainties can ultimately become certain. Victoria describes Shaw’s predicament accurately in the following passage as being a man who rather than facing his crisis instead attempts to sink deeper into himself where he thinks, tragically inaccurately, that the world has nothing to do with him:

“He would always choose to live that way, next to a shared bathroom with uninterpretable stains: not as an economy but as a way of keeping his head down, dipping below some radar nobody else was primitive enough to detect. But you mustn’t let a person know that’s how clearly you see them. ‘People assume they have a swim bladder,’ she wrote to him, ‘some basic assumption –less about themselves than about the world – that keeps them upright and afloat. Then they find out they haven’t.” (Harrison 202)

Centrally, the novel is about how we deal (and often fail) with uncertainty and crisis, and how we respond to weirdness in context with a normal that is becoming more and more fragile. How do we respond to the posthuman realization that humans are not the masters and the protagonists of the earth, a realization that shatters our old anthropocentric conceptions? How do we respond to the constant reminders that the world is becoming more and more inhabitable to us, that we one day not too far into the future may perish as a species, if not only as a global civilization? How do we respond to the developments of AI and biotechnology that may change the very fabric of the human species, which may change us into variable Others? These are just some of the grander questions in a sea of uncertainty that is PNT, like hypermaterial perhaps so grand that they become invisible when faced with the more pressing and immediate uncertainty that appears in our smaller personal worlds. If the

ocean is turbulent, then it might not be the worst idea to learn how to swim rather than attempting to steady the gargantuan ocean, not to mention to try and contain all of the planetary water that swirls around us. Shaw only realizes his crisis and his passive panic at the end of the novel, when for the first time since they separated he attempts to respond to Victoria's many emails to him:

“‘You were right about me. I was always in a panic.’

He couldn't remember when that subject had come up. He thought it had been early on in their relationship, in some pub. The way he saw the problem now, he told her, was this: before his crisis, he had known too exactly who he was. There was a core to him so coherent it never needed anything exterior to give it shape. He had been so certain of himself he could reject anything or anyone, even someone he liked and wanted, for the next thing that came along. ‘I could always rely on that. But then I wasn't so sure.’ What happens to you, he asked, the first time you lose your balance that way and wonder whose life you're looking at? ‘Maybe,’ he finished, ‘that's what it was always about, not just for me but for everyone. We all were wondering that, for a while, but no one knew why.’”(Harrison 254)

Harrison does not paint his characters and his critique in arsenic tones; he is rather quite sympathetic towards the failings of his protagonists and their difficulty in navigating the weird. The relationship between Shaw and Victoria ultimately and tragically fails because they cannot be transparent with each other, in large part because they fail to accept that the world is changing and because they reject its weirdness, and their own weirdness, in favor of a perceived normal that is dysfunctioning. Shaw only dares reach out to Victoria when he finally realizes the strangeness of his situation and sees himself somewhat for the first time. At that point, however, she has already moved on, broken down by her isolation and her exasperation in trying to make sense of the world. In a scene towards the end of the book that

is both beautiful and terrifying, which encapsulates the uncertain possibilities and ambiguity that resides in the weird, she steps into a portal towards a weird and watery world where the fish people reside. Whatever happens to her there, good or bad, remains a mystery beyond the pages of the book. Shaw, on the other hand, in the very last lines of the book, claims that “As soon as the weather improved, he thought, he would go up there to the heartlands, to the inland cities, and see how she was.”. Although Shaw is more hopeful and open to the world than before, he still fails to realize that there is a possibility that the weather may not improve in a long time and that the heartlands may be sunken by the time it does.

Dealing with uncertainty will never be easy, and being open to the weird is more than a little scary. Yet Harrison encourages us to accept that crisis is, more or less, inevitable and ongoing; that this is “what it was always about, not just for me but for everyone.”. *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* is a heed to give up on our assumptions that we can ever control or understand the world in its fullest, and that we rather should accept its volatility and weirdness with an open and critical eye rather than hide away from it while we passively wait for it to become “normal” again. Perhaps the best we can do is to take an active, but careful role in navigating a world that is, metaphorically and materially, beginning to rise above us again.

Conclusion

What is weirdness? Ultimately, it is that which liquifies the perceived solidity of our assumptions, concepts and expectations. When it fully emerged in the literature of the late 19th century, it predominantly poured out of the genre of horror, likely because that which unsettles us usually tends to scare us as well. Weirdness liquified the horror genre and made it leak into the realms of fantasy and science fiction and beyond until it all became its own kind of genre smudge we could only refer to as “weird fiction”. For Lovecraft and his peers, the weird manifested itself as both a warning and a threat to human certainty and world dominance. Beware it and shun it, they said, lest we go mad and be destroyed. Although they desperately clamoured for the anthropocentric cultural and scientific status quo to remain the same, the writers of the Old Weird could not help themselves, with a certain awful fascination, to acknowledge that humanity was not particularly special or powerful in the grand scheme things. They sensed that there existed far greater and older nonhuman powers in the universe beyond our control and understanding, and as Lovecraft’s laborious prose illustrates, they had difficulties expressing what they sensed in words. Whatever it is, it must be monstrous and exist in outer space, in alternative dimension, in hidden away corners of the earth or at the bottom of the ocean - all in spaces that were, relative to its Western authors, located in a spatial outside.

When the New Weird became aware of itself in the late 20th century, at the dawn of the mass proliferation of the World Wide Web, it was with a kind of awakening to the fact that weirdness was all around us. Whether it always has been is up for debate, but there is no

doubt that this new awareness was helped along by the accelerating complexity of our contemporary globalized world of high tech and information overloads. At this time, weirdness leaked into our cities, our homes, our politics, and our mirrors - in fact into everything. It was, as Ziauddin Sardar and his postnormal times concept points to, as if nothing felt normal or certain anymore. Authors like China Mieville and Jeff Vandermeer recognized that they could not push away the weird anymore and that a surrender to the weird was inevitable, and some even found cause for hope in this fact. Most importantly, however, the New Weird allows us to explore weirdness from the inside out, opening up a literary portal to think creatively about the growing uncertainty that all of us now must deal with, both on a wider socio-cultural scale and in our personal lives. This is why posthumanists, eco-philosophers, postnormalists, and new materialists, among others, have found a compatible literary mode in the weird and in the New Weird in particular: they are all trying to navigate a world of uncertainty, in the wake of the destabilization of anthropocentrism.

Throughout this thesis, I have again and again returned to the conclusion that reality, in dimensions of both time and space, is more expansive and ambiguous than perhaps can ever be fathomed by human minds. It has been the timeless pursuit of human thinkers and dreamers to find somewhere and somehow an absolute truth that can reduce reality down to a manageable size so that we can contain and manipulate it. This pursuit is perhaps deeply motivated by a primordial fear of our environments, for the predators and catastrophes that may await in the darkness beyond our vision. Our response was thus to build the walls of humanity and normality, and whenever something was deemed as not fitting inside these parameters - understood as coming from the outside - it was labeled as weird and promptly discarded to the periphery. This did not mean that the weird ever disappeared. The walls we have built have in recent times proven themselves at best as leaky and at worst as completely illusory. In reality, there are no true waterproof walls; we are all perhaps just in a big wet

soup together with entities separated by nothing more than porous skin and slimy gel-casings. If this is the case, I say that it is about time that we opened up to the weird world that we really live in. The weird world we are a part of.

There are dangers out there, but there is also fruit that we have never eaten and colors we have never seen. Uncertainty is certainly scary, but as *Sisyphian* and *The Sunken Land* illustrates, it becomes scarier, more uncertain, and far more destructive the longer we ignore it. Whenever we sense that something is weird, we should look into it; not necessarily in an effort to normalize it, but simply to acknowledge that it exists. We might not ever be able to unweird it, whatever it is that makes us feel this way, but we can and should get used to it because the world is only getting weirder. Reading weird fiction is constructive because it gives us a head start in this effort. It helps that it is also one of the most fascinating and creative modes of fiction practiced today. Uncertain horizons await, so let us keep our eyes open.

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