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Weird Beyond Description: Weird Fiction and the Suspicion of Scenery

John MacNeill Miller

There is nothing generic about weird fiction. That, at least, is the position most of its defenders have taken since the publication of H. P. Lovecraft's landmark essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927). There, Lovecraft defines the weird in relation not to form but rather to feeling: the weird tale is knowable, he explains, because it generates an affect he calls "cosmic fear" (84). Cosmic fear is distinguishable from other forms of horror because it instills in readers "a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim" (84). Since then, champions of the weird have mostly followed Lovecraft's lead, insisting on the literary legitimacy of the weird while steadfastly refusing to associate it with any particular formal features. Thus in *The Weird Tale* (1990), S. T. Joshi writes, "I am not . . . prepared to define the weird tale, and venture to assert that any definition of it may be

Abstract: This paper uses Algernon Blackwood's weird tale "The Willows" (1907) to argue that the genre of weird fiction is characterized by a disproportionate investment in descriptive modes of writing. The weird tale's fascination with description contravenes narratology and conventional reading practices alike, as both privilege narration over description. Tales such as "The Willows" insist that significant subjects and agents have been overlooked in anthropocentric modes of storytelling and that description itself has been instrumental in this oversight, as scene-setting and other descriptive modes effectively cast such subjects as static backgrounds to more important human affairs. By repeatedly dramatizing the discovery of subjects and agents hidden within apparently static descriptive passages, weird tales offer a critique of anthropocentric modes of storytelling and point the way toward a more ecological understanding of interconnection.

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impossible" (2). This is in part, he maintains, because "the weird tale . . . did not (and perhaps does not now) exist as a genre but as *the consequence of a world view*" (1). It is "an inherently philosophical mode" (11) because it hinges on what Joshi calls "*the sentiment of ontological horror*" (9). While Lovecraft, Joshi, and others circumvent questions of genre by resorting to the terminology of affective modes, James Machin's recent monograph on the rise of British weird fiction during the fin de siècle dodges the genre question in another way: by analyzing the weird sociologically. Drawing heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Machin argues that the weird works as a label that helps admirers lift works of preferred horror, science fiction, and fantasy above the realm of genre fiction and into the honored ranks of literary fiction.[1]

What unifies all these critical accounts of the weird, then, is their insistence that the weird resists description. Each critic finds some way to avoid thorny questions of form and textuality to instead discuss affect or ontology or even sociology. I argue, however, that there is in fact a consistent formal feature that runs through much of weird fiction. Moreover, many critics have already—inadvertently and perhaps ironically—identified what that formal feature is. Simply put, one formal mark of the genre is that, within the confines of the text itself, the weird tale resists description. By this I mean that weird tales resist, defy, or otherwise push back against certain narratological norms that dictate what description does and what its relationship to narration should be. Weird tales are identifiable by the way they linger too long over objects and settings in particular, affording these apparently ancillary elements of narrative a kind of interest and attention that unsettles expectations about who or what matters in the storyworld.

This feature of the weird tale is formal, but it is not merely formal; it also has important political and ideological consequences for an age of ecological catastrophe. By exposing and disrupting the ossified patterns of attention that structure our storytelling—those patterns Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible" (12)—weird fiction makes room for new attributions of agency and ethical significance to previously unrepresented or unrepresentable actors. These actors are overwhelmingly (and often exaggeratedly) nonhuman. In effect, the weird tale expresses an emergent environmental remorse, an anxious awareness that significant nonhuman subjects have been left undervalued or unaccounted for in our anthropocentric representations of the world.

To demonstrate this formal feature of the weird and its ideological consequences, I will zero in on just one weird tale, albeit an iconic one: Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907). Blackwood was, in Lovecraft's estimation, "the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere," and "The

Willows" was the story Lovecraft counted "[f]oremost of all" Blackwood's tales (120). I will intersperse my discussion of "The Willows" with some narratology to clarify how the story resists description, then—after a deeper dive into the narrative and affective structure of the story—I will briefly turn to ecocriticism to think through how such resistance works politically and ecologically.

"The Willows" opens with a meandering five-page description of the Danube, where the narrator and his unnamed Swedish companion have decided to take a canoe trip. Like so much literary scene-setting, these five pages are incredibly forgettable. Their ostensible function is to establish the Danube as a bracing place to experience the wonders of nature. They also help to clarify where, geographically, the story takes place: along a particular stretch of the Danube below Pressburg (modern-day Bratislava) where the river floods out into marshes dotted with willow islands. In other words, slow as they are, these pages perform the typical role of description as laid out by Mieke Bal in her overview of narratology. Descriptions, she observes, are "both practically and logically necessary . . . . [T]hey help the imagined world . . . become visible and concrete" (26). But Bal also notes that such descriptions, while vital, have a vexed relationship to narrative. "Within the realistic tradition, description has always been considered problematic," she explains, because "descriptions interrupt the line of the fabula" (27). Hence the impression of plodding necessity in these opening pages; though they clarify the setting of the story, they do so only by delaying the very narrative they are trying to establish.

This scene-setting is finally broken by a supply stop in Pressburg. There, the canoers brush off a vague warning about the dangers of the marshes downriver before continuing on their way. Shortly afterward they are forced to take shelter in those very same marshes, where rising winds drive them onto a low-lying island shrouded in willow shrubs. Now, with the fateful arrival at the isolated place already described in the opening, and with an ominous atmosphere established by the unheeded advice, it would seem that the story is about to begin. In actuality, this is the moment when anything approaching conventional storytelling ends. What follows is yet another return to scenic description. This description, however, is different: instead of mostly static passages about the river and the willows, a drama begins to develop out of the unsettling instability of the narrator's surroundings.

Part of this instability is empirically explicable. With winds rising, the behavior of the river and the willows is unpredictable, creating a kind of animistic optical illusion. "The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush [of the blown water]," the narrator explains, "while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion

that the island itself actually moved" (Blackwood 22). Soon other elements of the landscape take on a similar indecipherability. Not long after they first survey the island, the narrator and the Swede stare in confusion "at something in the water" (25). Here is the narrator's account:

> A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight. (25)

The black thing provokes horror in the pair, who find it impossible to decide whether they have just seen an otter or a human corpse. When they finally look away toward the horizon, they are met with what appears to be a man in a strangely shaped boat, shouting at them and making frenzied gestures that may or may not be the sign of the cross.

The boatman's appearance is incongruous in more ways than one. From a practical perspective, the weather is far too bad and the day far too advanced for anyone to safely venture out alone on the river; the man in the boat should not be there. But his appearance is also incongruous in that it somehow does not resemble the rest of the landscape; the narrator and the Swede struggle to make visual sense of what they are seeing. "Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say," the narrator remarks, "but, whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition" (25). Later he writes, "the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about . . . . His voice came across the water to us shouting something furiously, but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible" (25). Shortly after the man's appearance—if it really was an appearance—the scenery simply swallows him up: "he seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away down there into the sea of willows where the sun . . . turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to rise, so that the air was hazy" (25-26).

Both of these cases represent some kind of confounding disturbance in the scenic itself, as those parts of the narrative that should provide a static background to human events prove riddled with one or more disruptive entities who make any kind of straightforward storytelling impossible. The trouble only worsens as the wind rises and the night advances. The narrator and the Swede find themselves under some kind of ambush: their tent is crushed, their canoe sabotaged, and one of their paddles stolen in the night. At one point the narrator awakens and experiences a strange encounter among the shrubs

that is as terrifying as it is hard to describe. The rest of the story details the encroachment of the willows on the camp of the two canoers, who find themselves convinced that they are being targeted by something that proves frustratingly non-narratable.

Because the willows are the main adversaries the narrator and the Swede must ward off, it is tempting to see this story as an example of what is sometimes called plant horror or botanical gothic. That is, one might want to class the story among a number of works that began to play up the murky biological boundaries between botany and zoology detailed in Charles Darwin's landmark *Insectivorous Plants* (1875).[2] But the narrator and his companion see the situation differently. The willows themselves are not the danger, they insist. Instead, they realize that "the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us . . . . It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peephole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn thin" (49). "The willows," the Swede decides, "*mask* the others, but the others are feeling about for us" (53). It is not clear, then, whether the willows are malevolent or benevolent from a human point of view; it's impossible to decide whether they are instruments for the others who somehow inhabit and move through them, or sheltering obstructions that disguise the precise location of the canoers whom the others actively hunt.

What makes this whole scenario so disturbing is the haziness of the agents somehow hidden among or within the landscape—the impossibility of concentrating on these entities clearly enough to really cognize what they are and how one might engage with them. This impossibility is repeatedly figured in terms of a screen, a mask, or a veil being pierced, prodded, or otherwise disrupted by these agentic entities—a screen that nevertheless continues to obscure them and make them impossible to comprehend. I would argue that, here and elsewhere in weird fiction, the veil that separates these interpenetrated worlds is nothing other than scenic description itself. Indeed, the narrator almost says as much when one of the otherworldly entities closely approaches him. "I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes," he writes, "like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theatre" (57).

The drop-curtain is a piece of theater technology designed to screen off the agents who work and move backstage during a drama. It is typically painted with scenes that help establish the setting against which the action will take place. (Hence the use of "backdrop" metaphorically for the context in which an idea or an event is understood.) When Blackwood describes the veil as a kind of backdrop, in other words, he is associating the inability to see reality clearly with the representational techniques of scene-setting itself. The narrator comes

to realize, in effect, that the scenic conventions that structure his worldview do not simply provide an account of his environment. The scenery also helps him ignore much of the multiplicity and activity of the world around him, effectively flattening the lively multi-dimensionality of existence into an environment: a single, static tableau that screens a number of actors and agents from view.

This realization suggests one function of description that has gone unmentioned among narratologists: the importance of description as a way of rendering vast portions of existence uninteresting. Indeed, I would argue that the more time the average narrator spends describing something, the less interesting that thing becomes. We acknowledge this aspect of writing when we use truisms such as "Show, don't tell." But it is also indexed in the annals of narratology itself, where description gets short shrift.[3] I have already cited Bal's account of description as an interruption of the storyline (which, for a narratologist, is barely more than a decorous, professional way of saying that description is uninteresting). Setting—that area of every narrative where description reigns supreme—is also notoriously understudied among narrative theorists, despite laments to this effect that date back at least to Seymour Chatman's observation in 1978 that "setting is practically terra incognita" (264).

Rather than echoing this regret yet again, I am suggesting that the inability of scenic description to sustain our attention is not a bug, but a feature of the technique. In a world of endless entanglement and unmanageable complexity, scene-setting provides a method of designating entities that exist but that otherwise do not matter and should not distract us. The fact that most of us quickly forget such passages and typically skip over them in our scholarship is a sign of just how effective such scenery really is at deflecting our attention. Weird fiction like "The Willows," however, resists description by pointing up the ideological function of description as a kind of cloaking device that hides potentially significant, agentic beings. In doing so, weird fiction offers a sort of portal that opens out onto a fuller, richer, and more ecological conception of reality.

Nowhere is this aspect of the genre more visible than in Blackwood's tale, where what really creeps the narrator out is arguably just an accurate view of nonhuman life that suddenly breaks through his anthropocentric perspective. "There was a suggestion here of personal agency," he recalls with a shudder of horror (36). The willows appear to possess "the aspect of purposeful and living creatures" (44). For many of us now, the notion that plants have agency and even purpose is not particularly controversial; that they are alive is undeniable. Yet the narrator is startled by these ideas, and haunted by an unexpected revelation of the willows as "gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves" (22). I don't think I have ever heard a better account of the

hydrological function of trees in an ecosystem—but in the story, this is a terrifying vision conveyed from the great beyond.

To put it another way, what we see in "The Willows" and other weird fiction is a literary realization of what has become a truism among environmental humanists: namely, that ecology reveals a world without background.[4] As Timothy Morton observes, ecological insight means recognizing that "everything is interconnected" and in the resulting world-picture "there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground" (28). The fact that weird fiction treats such a prospect with a sickening sense of dread is not necessarily problematic: it is arguably the most natural response to the realization that you are part of something far larger than you thought, and that you are entangled in complex and even agonizing power relationships with subjects whose significance you are only now belatedly beginning to understand.

When Lovecraft first tried to describe this sort of feeling and the writing that produced it, he imagined the weird was rooted in the fears of a primordial biological past. He also assumed the weird would always be a marginal part of literary production, appreciated only by "the sensitive," a select set of outcasts whose unique imaginative powers isolated them from quotidian society (83). In recent years, however, weird fiction has become increasingly mainstream. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos has been expanded, revised, and commercialized in ways that would horrify him. Meanwhile (to take just one more recent example), Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy—a series of novels about an inexplicably sapient territory in north Florida—was a *New York Times* bestseller; the first book in the series, *Annihilation* (2014), has already been subject to a movie adaptation starring Natalie Portman. This popularity has been complemented by a serious increase in the critical visibility and acclaim afforded to weird tales, which are now the subject of regular scholarship and glowing reviews in the mainstream media.

In sum, we exist in a seemingly paradoxical moment when the weird has become almost ordinary. Lovecraft was obviously wrong about the inevitable marginalization of weird tales. If I am right about the formal importance of scenic description to the weird, then this movement of the weird into the mainstream also means that nonhuman backgrounds are being foregrounded like never before. And maybe, hopefully, this development means Lovecraft was wrong about the nature of weird affects, too. They might not hearken back to some kind of frightful evolutionary past. Instead, they may represent an inchoate response to the others all around us—others that Western writers have only recently begun to see clearly. In that case, weird tales could be among the

earliest affective records of an emerging cultural consensus around the need to create a more open, more equitable, and more-than-human future.

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NOTES

1. Important studies devoted to the weird that avoid formalist approaches to the category include Machin; Fisher; Luckhurst; Miéville; and Noys and Murphy. Miéville's brief but excellent entry highlights the paradoxical centrality of both description and the indescribable to Lovecraft's practice, but does not analyze description's role in the weird more broadly; see Miéville 511-12.

2. On plant horror and the botanical gothic, see Chang; Keetley and Tenga; and Price. For a recent anthology of such stories, see Butcher. See Newell 174-87 for a reading of "The Willows" in terms of plant horror. Camara offers a different ecocritical reading of "The Willows" in relation to planetary and cosmic spaces.

3. See Lukács for a denigration of description that became foundational for twentieth century theory of the novel. For a longer history of the marginalization of description see Hamon. Thoughtful theorizations of description are rare, but some can be found in Barthes; Genette 5-8; and Kittay.

4. For a few recent examples of this claim, see Alaimo 1; Latour 58; and Miller 653.

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