

Singular Agitations  
and a Common Vertigo

Keith Tilford

- p335. *Graft*, ink on paper, 114.3cm x 76.2cm, 2004
- p343. *Chatterbox*, ink on paper, 106.7cm x 76.2cm, 2004
- p347. *Untitled*, ink, marker and eraser on colour plate,  
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58.4cm x 73.7cm, 2004

## On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl

Graham Harman

In a dismissive review of a recent anthology on Schelling, Andrew Bowie accuses two authors of a style he ‘increasingly’ thinks of as ‘continental science fiction’.<sup>1</sup> There is room for further increase in Bowie’s thinking. With his implication that science fiction belongs to the juvenile or the unhinged, Bowie enforces a sad limitation on mental experiment. For nothing resembles science fiction more than philosophy does – unless it be science itself. From its dawning in ancient Greece, philosophy has been the asylum of strange notions: a cosmic justice fusing opposites into a restored whole; a series of emanations from fixed stars to the moon to the prophets; divine intervention in the

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1. Andrew Bowie, ‘Something old, something new ...’, in *Radical Philosophy* 128 (November/December 2004), 46. The review is of *The New Schelling*, J. Norman & A. Welchman (eds.) (London: Continuum, 2004). The targets of Bowie’s censure are Iain Hamilton Grant and Alberto Toscano.

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movement of human hands and legs; trees and diamonds with infinite parallel attributes, only two of them known; insular monads sparkling like mirrors and attached to tiny bodies built from chains of other monads; and the eternal recurrence of every least event. While the dismal consensus that such speculation belongs to the past is bolstered by the poor imagination of some philosophers, it finds no support among working scientists, who grow increasingly wild in their visions. Even a cursory glance at the physics literature reveals a discipline bewitched by strange attractors, degenerate topologies, black holes filled with alternate worlds, holograms generating an illusory third dimension, and matter composed of vibrant ten-dimensional strings. Mathematics, unconstrained by empirical data, has long been still bolder in its gambles. Nor can it be said that science fiction is a marginal feature of literature itself. Long before the mighty crabs and squids of Lovecraft and the tribunals of Kafka, we had Shakespeare's witches and ghosts, Mt. Purgatory in the Pacific, the Cyclops in the Mediterranean, and the Sphinx tormenting the north of Greece.

Against the model of philosophy as a rubber stamp for common sense and archival sobriety, I would propose that philosophy's sole mission is *weird realism*. Philosophy must be realist because its mandate is to unlock the structure of the world itself; it must be weird because reality is weird. 'Continental science fiction', and 'continental horror', must be transformed from insults into a research program. It seems fruitful to launch this program with a joint treatment of Edmund Husserl and H.P. Lovecraft, an unlikely pair that I will try to render more likely. The dominant strand of twentieth-century continental thought stems from the



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phenomenology of Husserl, whose dry and affable works conceal a philosophy tinged with the bizarre. In almost the same period, the leading craftsman of horror and science fiction in literature was Lovecraft, recently elevated from pulp author to canonical classic by the prestigious *Library of America* series.<sup>2</sup> The road to continental science fiction leads through a Lovecraftian reading of phenomenology. This remark is not meant as a prank. Just as Lovecraft turns prosaic New England towns into the battleground of extradimensional fiends, Husserl's phenomenology converts simple chairs and mailboxes into elusive units that emit partial, contorted surfaces. In both authors, the broken link between objects and their manifest crust hints at 'such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age'<sup>3</sup> – or preferably, revive a metaphysical speculation that embraces the permanent strangeness of objects. If philosophy is weird realism, then a philosophy should be judged by what it can tell us about Lovecraft. In symbolic terms, Great Cthulhu should replace Minerva as the patron spirit of philosophers, and the Miskatonic must dwarf the Rhine and the Ister as our river of choice. Since Heidegger's treatment of Hölderlin resulted mostly in pious, dreary readings, philosophy needs a new literary hero.

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2. H.P. Lovecraft, *Tales* (New York: The Library of America, 2005).

3. *Ibid.*, 167. From the famous first paragraph of 'The Call of Cthulhu.'

### LOVECRAFT'S MATERIALISM

In the great tales of Lovecraft we find a mythology centered in New England, but ranging from the Antarctic to Pluto as well. Humans are no longer lords of the cosmos, but are surrounded by hidden monstrosities who evade or corrupt our race, sometimes plotting its downfall. 'The Old Ones', or 'Those Ones', are the disturbing general terms by which these creatures are known. They vastly exceed us in mental and physical prowess, yet occasionally interbreed with human females, preferring women of a decayed genetic type. The least encounter with the Old Ones often results in mental breakdown, and all reports of dealings with them are hushed. But their unspeakable powers are far from infinite. To achieve their aims, the Old Ones seek minerals in the hills of Vermont, infiltrate churches in seaport towns, and pursue occult manuscripts under the eyes of suspicious librarians. Their researches are linked not only with Lovecraft's fictional authors and archives (the mad Arab al-Hazred, Miskatonic University), but real ones as well (Pico della Mirandola, Harvard's Widener Library). Their corpses are carried away by floods, and even the mighty Cthulhu explodes, though briefly, when rammed by a human-built ship. There are also rivalries between the monsters, as becomes clear in 'At the Mountains of Madness'. The powers of the various Old Ones are no more uniform than they are infinite.

This balance in the monsters between power and frailty is mentioned to oppose any *Kantian* reading of Lovecraft. Such a reading is understandable, since Kant's inaccessible noumenal world seems a perfect match for the cryptic stealth of Lovecraft's creatures. His descriptions of their

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bodies and actions are almost deliberately insufficient, and seem to allude to dimensions beyond the finite conditions of human perception. His monsters are not just mysterious, but often literally invisible; they undermine our stock of emotional responses and zoological categories. The very architecture of their cities mocks the principles of Euclidean geometry. A few examples will indicate the style:

When a traveler in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury Pike [...] he comes upon a lonely and curious country [...] Gorges and ravines of problematical depth intersect the way, and the crude wooden bridges always seem of dubious safety. When the road dips again there are stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes [...]<sup>4</sup>

Odd wounds or sores, having something of the aspect of incisions, seemed to inflict the visible cattle [...]<sup>5</sup>

[Wilbur Whateley] would sometimes mutter an unfamiliar jargon, and chant in bizarre rhythms which chilled the listener with a sense of unexplainable terror.<sup>6</sup>

And most compellingly:

It would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe [the dead creature on the floor], but one may properly say that it could not be vividly visualized by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound up with the life-forms of this planet and of the three known dimensions.<sup>7</sup>

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4. *Ibid.*, 370-1. Italics added.

5. *Ibid.*, 375-6. Italics added.

6. *Ibid.*, 379. Italics added.

7. *Ibid.*, 389. Italics added.

At the climax of ‘The Dunwich Horror’, when Curtis Whateley briefly glimpses the formerly hidden creature on the mountaintop, he describes it as made of squirming ropes, shaped somewhat like a hen’s egg, with dozens of legs like barrels that shut halfway as it walks – a jelly-like creature having nothing solid about it, with great bulging eyes and ten or twenty mouths, somewhat grey in color with blue or purple rings, and a ‘half-face’ on top.<sup>8</sup> In the later tale ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, the vast Antarctic city displays ‘no architecture known to man [...] with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of known geometrical laws.’<sup>9</sup> When this dead metropolis is first sighted from the air, the narrator assumes it must be a polar mirage:

There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs; and strange, beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars [...] There were composite cones and pyramids either alone or surmounting cylinders and cubes or flatter truncated cones and pyramids, and occasional needle-like spires in curious clusters of five. All of these febrile structures seemed knit together by tubular bridges [...].<sup>10</sup>

The near-incoherence of such descriptions undercuts any attempt to render them in visual form. The very *point* of the descriptions is that they fail, hinting only obliquely at some unspeakable substratum of reality. It is obvious why this might seem Kantian in its implications.

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8. *Ibid.*, 409-10.

9. *Ibid.*, 508.

10. *Ibid.*, 508-9.

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Nonetheless, the Kantian reading fails. Even if we accepted a metaphysics splitting the world into noumenal and phenomenal realms, there is no question that the Old Ones would belong entirely to the phenomenal. The mere fact of invisibility is surely not enough to qualify the monsters as noumenal. The so-called Higgs boson of present-day physics, assuming it exists, lies beyond the gaze of current particle accelerators. No one has ever witnessed the core of the earth, or the center of the Milky Way which may or may not be home to a massive black hole. Countless other forces must exist in the universe that could be only decades away from discovery, while others will remain shielded from human insight in perpetuity. But this does not make them noumenal: these forces, however bizarre, would still belong to the causal and spatio-temporal conditions that, for Kant, belong solely to the structure of human experience. Let us grant further that the Old Ones may have features *permanently* outstripping human intelligence, in a way that the Higgs boson may not. Even so, this would be the result not of the transcendental structure of human finitude, but only of our relative stupidity. The game of chess is not ‘noumenal’ for dogs through their inability to grasp it, and neither is Sanskrit grammar for a deranged adult or a three-year-old. In ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, the Old Ones even invite humans to become initiated into their larger view of the world:

Do you realise what it means when I say that I have been on thirty-seven different celestial bodies – planets, dark stars, and less definable objects – including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time? [...] The visitors are eager to know men of knowledge like yourself, and

to shew them the great abysses that most of us have had to dream about in fanciful ignorance.<sup>11</sup>

Humans prepare to reach these deeper abysses, neither through Heideggerian *Angst* nor a mystical experience that leaps beyond finitude and reduces philosophy to straw, but through purely medical means: ‘My brain has been removed from my body by fissions so adroit that it would be crude to call them surgery.’<sup>12</sup> The great horror of Lovecraft’s universe lies not in some sublime infinite that no finite intelligence can fully grasp, but in the invasion of the finite world by finite malignant beings. For all the limits imposed on our intellect by Kant, he leaves us reassured that the finite and phenomenal world is insulated from horror, governed and structured by our own familiar categories. Far more troubling is Lovecraft’s subversion of the finite world: no longer a kingdom led by innocuous rational beings, but one in which humans face entities as voracious as insects, who use black magic and telepathy while employing mulatto sailors as worse-than-terrorist operatives.

The Old Ones are anything but noumenal. Noumenal beings scarcely have need of buildings, whether Euclidean or otherwise. Noumenal beings are not dissected on the tables of polar explorers, do not mine for rocks in Vermont, and have no purpose mastering Arabic and Syriac dialects to consult the writings of medieval wizards. They would never speak in physical voices, not even with ‘the drone of some loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an alien species [...] [with] singularities of timbre, range, and overtones [placing it]

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11. *Ibid.*, 468.

12. *Ibid.*

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wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life.<sup>13</sup> Michel Houellebecq, in a brilliant study of Lovecraft,<sup>14</sup> is correct to emphasize his absolute materialism: ‘What is Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electrons, like us. Lovecraft’s terror is rigorously material. But, it is quite possible, given the free interplay of cosmic forces, that Great Cthulhu possesses abilities and powers to act that far exceed ours. Which, *a priori*, is not particularly reassuring at all.’<sup>15</sup>

The terror of Lovecraft is not a noumenal horror, then, but a horror of phenomenology. Humans cease to be master in their own house. Science and letters no longer guide us toward benevolent enlightenment, but may force us to confront ‘notions of the cosmos, and of [our] own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralysing’, and ‘impose monstrous and unguessable horrors upon certain venturesome [humans]’.<sup>16</sup> Confronted with the half-human offspring of the Old Ones, even the political Left will endorse the use of concentration camps: ‘Complaints from many liberal organizations were met with long confidential discussions, and representatives were taken on trips to certain camps and prisons. As a result, these societies became surprisingly passive and reticent’.<sup>17</sup>

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13. *Ibid.*, 434.

14. Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. D. Khazeni, Introduction by Stephen King. (San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005).

15. *Ibid.*, 32.

16. *Ibid.*, 719. From ‘The Shadow Out of Time.’

17. *Ibid.*, 587. From ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth.’

To expand on a passage cited earlier:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position within, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.<sup>18</sup>



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18. *Ibid.*, 167.

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Though ostensibly Kantian on a first reading, nothing could be less Kantian than this passage in its call for barriers to enlightenment, and its placement of ‘terrifying vistas’ not in some transcendent sublime, but in the electrons that form the pulpy torso of Great Cthulhu.

### THE WEIRDNESS OF OBJECTS

The literary critic Harold Bloom shares the following anecdote:

Some years ago, on a stormy night in New Haven, I sat down to reread, yet once more, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* [...] I wanted to start all over again with the poem: to read it as though I had never read it before, indeed as though no one had ever read it before me [...] And while I read, until I fell asleep in the middle of the night, the poem’s initial familiarity began to dissolve [...] Although the poem is a biblical epic, in classical form, the peculiar impression it gave me was what I generally ascribe to literary fantasy or science fiction, not to heroic epic. *Weirdness* was its overwhelming effect.<sup>19</sup>

Science fiction is found not only in ‘science fiction’, but in great literature of any sort. More generally, Bloom contends that ‘one mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a *strangeness* that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncracies.’<sup>20</sup> Although Bloom has little time for philosophy, which he views as cognitively less original than literature, his standard of canonical achievement seems equally valid for

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19. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 24-5. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004). Italics added.

20. *Ibid.*, 4.

philosophical work. If there is one feature that unites the great works of philosophy, it is surely their inability to be fully assimilated, or their tendency to become such a given that we are blinded to their strangeness. Though Plato and Kant can be seen as restrictive establishment figures, their works are saturated with deviant images and nearly fantastic concepts; they exceed all possible interpretation, resist all attempted summary, and appeal to readers of any nationality or political orientation. The education of young philosophers builds on these works as on bedrock. And they come alive only when some gifted interpreter rediscovers their strangeness.

Pressing further, it also seems evident that the strangeness of works comes less from the works as a whole than from the weirdness of the personae that fill them, whether in literature, philosophy, or science. Though Don Quixote and Lear's Fool appear solely in literary works, they are no more reducible to extant plot lines than our friends are exhaustively grasped by our dealings with them. Characters, in the broadest sense, are *objects*. Though we only come to know them through specific literary incidents, these events merely hint at a character's turbulent inner life – which lies mostly outside the work it inhabits, and remains fully equipped for sequels that the author never produced. If a lost Shakespearean tragedy were discovered, dealing with the apparent suicide of the Fool (who disappears without explanation from the existing text of *King Lear*), the same Fool would have to be present in the new work, however unexpected its speeches. The same is true of philosophical concepts, which must also be viewed as characters or objects. While recent philosophy

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insists on precise definitions of every term, a genuine philosophical concept always eludes such precision. We could list the known features of Leibniz's monads in a laminated chart, yet the list includes contradictions, and surely leaves us hungry for more. The same holds true of argon in chemistry or the string in physics. A thing cannot be reduced to the definitions we give of it, because then the thing would change with each tiny change in its known properties, as Kripke has sharply objected.<sup>21</sup> A good rule of thumb is as follows: *unless* a character gives rise to different interpretations, *unless* a scientific entity endures changed notions of its properties, *unless* a philosopher is entangled in contradictory assertions over one and the same concept, *unless* a new technology has unforeseen impact, *unless* a politician's party is one day disappointed, *unless* a friend is able to generate and experience surprises, then we are not dealing with anything very real. We will be dealing instead with useful surface qualities, not with objects. Let 'object' refer to any reality with an autonomous life deeper than its qualities, and deeper than its relations with other things. In this sense, an object is reminiscent of an Aristotelian primary substance, which supports different qualities at different times. Socrates can laugh, sleep, or cry at various moments while still remaining Socrates – which entails that he can never be exhaustively described or defined.

My thesis is that objects and weirdness go hand in hand. An object partly evades all announcement through its qualities, resisting or subverting efforts to identify it with any surface. It is that which exceeds any of the qualities, accidents, or relations that can be ascribed to it: an 'I know

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21. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).

not what', but in a positive sense. Against frequent efforts to dismiss objects as fantasies assembled by humans from a pre-given surface of experienced contents, I contend that reality is object-oriented. Reality is made up of nothing but substances – and they are *weird* substances with a taste of the uncanny about them, rather than stiff blocks of simplistic physical matter. Contact with reality begins when we cease to reduce a thing to its properties or to its effect on other things. The difference between objects and their peripheral features (qualities, accidents, relations) is



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absolute. Though this thesis is deeply classical, it cannot possibly be 'reactionary', since the objects of which I speak resist all reduction to dogma, and in fact are the only force in the world capable of doing so.

### INTENTIONAL OBJECTS

Few will object to the term 'weird realism' as a description of Lovecraft's outlook. *Weird Tales* was the periodical that spawned his career, and 'weird fiction' the term most often used for his own writings. Lovecraft was opposed to realism in the literary sense of James or Zola, their minute descriptions confined to the subtleties of human life. Yet he seems like a realist in the philosophical sense, hinting at dark powers and malevolent geometries subsisting well beyond the grasp of human life. By contrast, Edmund Husserl seems to be neither weird, nor a realist, and even looks like the opposite: a 'non-weird antirealist'. No reader, however emotionally unstable, is terrified by Husserl's works. Even in his life history, the sufferings we find stem from personal and political burdens, not from the family strain of madness that paralyzed the young Lovecraft and destroyed his parents. Moreover, when phenomenology is critiqued or abandoned, this is usually because of its wholehearted idealism. All of phenomenology results from a decision to 'bracket' the world, suspending reflection on real waves, genes, and chemicals in favor of what lies entirely within human consciousness. Ironically, this point has led some to compare Husserl with Kant as well. Here the comparison fails yet again, but for the opposite reason: while Lovecraft's monsters are too shallow to be noumenal, Husserl's intentional objects are too deep to be purely phenomenal.

Husserl often proclaimed his motto: ‘to the things themselves’. Though the phrase is partly misleading, it should be taken more seriously by those realists who find little of value in his thought. The first step is to remember that Husserl’s ‘things themselves’ are obviously not meant in the Kantian sense. His bracketing of nature leaves him with an immanent world of pure experience. Description (not *explanation*, as with realists) is taken to be the sole philosophical method. Furthermore, there is no room in Husserl for real things that might be viewed directly by God and that lie outside the parameters of human access to the world. All of this might seem to lead to a mere flattening of the noumenal into a special case of the phenomenal, as found in Fichte and his heirs. In his ontology, Husserl would seem to belong to the tradition of German Idealism; his own student Heidegger sometimes makes this claim, hinting vaguely that Husserlian phenomenology is the same basic project as Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Some observers might even be seduced by the recurrence of the term ‘phenomenology’ in both Husserl and Hegel.

But despite Husserl’s fixation on the immanent world of appearance, he injects a dose of obstinate reality into the immanence. This occurs through his notion of intentional objects. The principle of intentionality is well-known: every mental act has some object, whether it be thinking, indicating, wishing, judging, or hating. This principle has not been correctly understood. It does not mean that Husserl somehow escapes idealism: his intentional objects remain purely immanent, and must not be confused with real forces unleashed in the world. The trees I perceive, the food I enjoy, or the swindlers I despise, remain phenomenal

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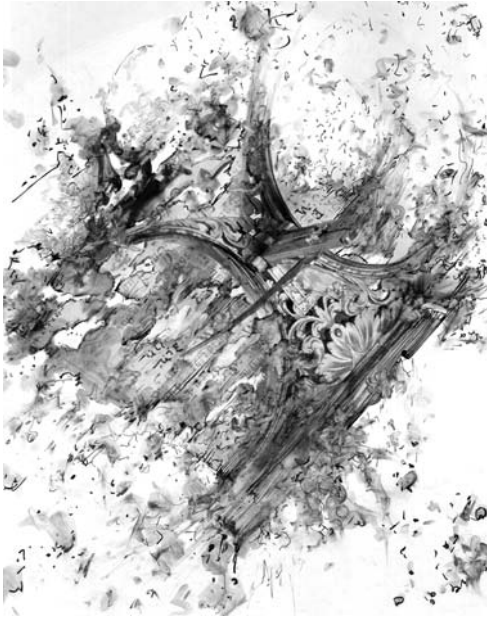
entities. After all, their real existence is bracketed, so that our description of them takes no account of whether they truly exist. Intentionality remains phenomenal. But Husserl's genuine difference from the idealists lies in the fact that intentional reality is made up of *objects*, which play no role at all for Fichte or Hegel. It is said that Husserl would lead his students through painstaking descriptions of a mailbox; perhaps on other days it was lampposts, inkwells, cats, rings, or vases. The point of such descriptions was 'eidetic variation', considering these objects from a variety of angles so as to approach their unvarying *essence* beneath all passing manifestation. The mere fact that intentional objects have an essence should prevent our seeing Husserl as a straightforward idealist, since 'essence' is normally a realist term, linked with the inherent features of a substance apart from all access to it. It is unthinkable that Fichte or Hegel would guide their students through minute descriptions of a specific solid object, since in their current of thinking objects have no stubborn essence of their own. 'Essence', for Hegel, is sublated into the higher unity of the concept, and Hegelians even like to accuse later continentals of a fixation on essence. By contrast, though Husserl brackets the world in order to focus on an immanent field of consciousness, the ego is not entirely master in this immanent realm. Cats and lampposts resist our first approach, demanding patient labours if their essence is to be gradually approached. While the shadows in Heidegger's thought lie buried beneath perception, Husserl's mysteries riddle the field of perception itself. Yet both thinkers allow for secrets to be harboured in the core of the things, and this is what separates them from idealism. Despite their regrettable focus on human reality, Husserl and Heidegger are object-oriented philosophers.

In one sense Husserl's obvious rival is psychologism, which holds that logical laws have only psychological validity. Husserl assaults this position in his massive prologue to the *Logical Investigations*, concluding that logic is objective through its ideal validity within the phenomenal realm. But an equally important rival is British Empiricism. *Logical Investigations II* is a detailed critique of the positions of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. For all the differences between these three classic figures, it is safe to portray them as allied in advance against intentional objects. What comes first for the empiricists are isolated *qualities*, sometimes known as 'impressions.' By contrast, the tradition of phenomenology begins not with qualities, but with phenomenal *objects*. While the British school holds that objects are a bundle produced through the habit of linking diverse qualities together (Hume), or by imagining that hidden powers underlie qualities already seen (Locke), phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty insist on beginning with the total *Gestalt* before any reduction to discrete tones and hues. For phenomenology, the slamming door and the black fountain pen precede their qualities, which gain sense only through a relative enslavement to those objects. Herein lies the greatness of phenomenology, which is more empirical than the empiricists. Experience is not of 'experienced contents', but of objects; isolated qualities are found not in the world we experience, but only in the annals of empiricism.

In *Logical Investigations V*, the rival is Husserl's own teacher Brentano, whether fairly or not. If Brentano held that all mental acts are grounded in some sort of presentation, Husserl twisted the formulation slightly, countering that

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all mental acts are *object-giving*. The difference is subtle, but fateful. A presentation seems to put all its contents on the same footing. To represent a globe or a tower is to witness a specific configuration of colors, textures, shadows, and physical co-ordinates. But if we see experience as object-giving rather than presentational, we shift our focus toward the essential nucleus of the perception, stripping the paint and confetti from its outer shell through eidetic variation. And here we find the crucial difference between Husserl's intentional objects and the real objects of realist philosophers. Real objects, which play no role in the bracketed thinking

of Husserl, subsist apart from their relations to anything else; no reality could be independent if it were generated by efforts to perceive or influence it. In this sense, it seems obvious that real objects must partly withhold themselves from all perception, description, registration, or cataloguing of their traits. A substance simply is what it is, and exceeds the endless summation of qualities that can be ascribed to it. But strangely enough, this is not true of Husserl's intentional objects, where an inverse relation holds. Without belabouring a point made elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> whereas real objects taunt us with endless withdrawal, intentional objects are always already present. A real tree would be deeper than anything that can be said or known about it, but the tree of intentional experience is entirely present from the start – it is always a genuine element of experience, affecting my decisions and my moods. If the real tree is never present enough, the intentional tree is always *excessively* present, its essence accompanied by the noisy peripheral detail that eidetic variation needs to strip away. The real object 'fire' is able to scald, burn, boil, melt, and crack other real objects, while the intentional object 'fire' has a very different function: it merely unifies a shifting set of profiles and surfaces whose various flickerings never affect its ideal unity. Real objects hide; intentional objects are merely weighed down with trains of sycophantic qualities, covering them like cosmetics and jewels.

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22. See 'On Vicarious Causation', in **COLLAPSE II**, and *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

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### THE WEIRDNESS OF HUSSERL

The strangest defect of the books that Husserl published during his lifetime lies in how few descriptions they actually contain. Whatever he may have done in the classroom, one scours his principal works in vain for more than a handful of concrete examples. Husserl seemed content, in his major published writings, with hesitant manifestoes for phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty and Lingis, heirs of greater stylistic gifts, were left to put the method to the test. Consider the case of some massive artifact – say, a hotel complex such as the Nile Hilton, in my adopted home city. The phenomenologist might see it as follows: The hotel is not an arbitrary conglomerate pieced together from flecks of color and sound. What we first encounter is the hotel as a whole, its visible profiles all joined in allegiance to the total reality of the object. Observers may disagree over the exact boundaries of the facility, over where its style begins and ceases to reign, but all will agree that the hotel is present in consciousness as a unit. The various doors, plants, gates, windows, and guards are clearly imbued with a kind of hotel-being, since all would strike us quite differently if stripped from this zone and encountered elsewhere. We now circle the hotel, soaking up the feel of its various entryways: grand entrance in front, dusty two-guard access in back, glamorous terraces when viewed from the south at a distance, and grim windowless façade to the north. We explore the interior, passing from food court to travel agencies to weight room to rooftop lounge, finally knocking on random doors and asking to examine individual rooms. Never in these movements do we see the whole of the Hilton, yet never do we lose the sense of a general *style* to

which the individual scenes belong. It is not important that moths and beetles would not also see it as a ‘hotel’, since we are dealing here not with objective reality, but only with our human *intention* of the hotel as a unified whole. Normally, we make no separation between an intentional object and the surface features through which it is announced. Though we only see one face of the hotel at a time, the presence of hotel and surface seem to be simultaneous, and joined together without fissure.

Yet this intimate bond between object and quality is an illusion, as both Husserl and Lovecraft are aware. Let’s begin with a Lovecraftian version of the hotel. This requires an attempt to mimic his own literary style – a method of reverent parody that deserves to become a staple of philosophy. The following paragraphs might be found in an unwritten Lovecraft tale, ‘The Nile Hilton Incident’:

Though apparently of recent date, the Nile Hilton is built around strange inner corridors of disturbingly ancient provenance. Its membership in the Hilton chain, meant to reassure travelers from the Occident, conceals grotesque legal maneuvers and deviant managerial practices of a purely local origin, and provides cover for a dubious history long expunged from brochures. The doormen are slumped and sullen in a manner atypical of Egypt, while their complexions speak vaguely of a strange admixture of Aztec and Polynesian blood not consonant with the known history of the city.

Unnoticed by the casual witness, the building itself embodies subtle though monstrous distortions of sound engineering principle. Though the outer walls seem to meet at solid right angles, the hue of the concrete departs from accustomed values in a manner suggestive of frailty or buckling. The gaping airshafts are striking for an edifice of such late construction, and

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seem fitted to an age when consumption and leprosy were still in abundance. For unknown reasons, several of the fire escapes would appear to issue beneath the surface of the ground. And though the rear façade displays no evident structural flaws, there is a sense of looming collapse in the area; one arising less from visual clues than from certain peculiarities of sound and odour which the management has refused to acknowledge. It is here that a faint but incessant thumping or scraping noise is combined with a scent joining the aroma of sandalwood to one oddly reminiscent of the corpses of bovines. In response to occasional complaints, the concierge makes ostentatious show of despatching inspectors; yet something in the *rhythm* of his response gives the unwonted impression of deceit.

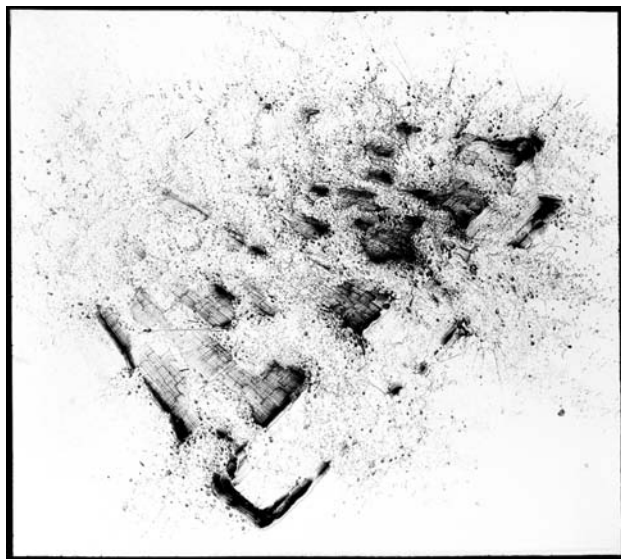
Presumably, Merleau-Ponty was never a reader of Lovecraft. This is unfortunate, since their methods of description have a great deal in common. Although we normally encounter things clothed in a variety of costumes, we pass silently and directly through these garments to the thing as a whole, which seems to imbue them with its spirit. But in Lovecraft, the relation between a thing and its surface is perturbed by irregularities that resist immediate comprehension, as if the object suffered from a strange disease of the nervous system. In real life, an Egyptian doorman is usually found in a cheerful and careless pose, displaying the typical physiognomy of the southern populations of Aswan and Luxor. To describe him instead as 'slumped and sullen', as displaying racial features of distant or extinguished peoples, and especially to call attention to one's perplexity over these aberrations, leads to a breakdown in the usual immediate bond between the doorman and his qualities. A rare fissure is generated between the object and its traits. Although 'Egyptian

doorman' remains a legitimate element of our experience, he is now a menacing kernel that seems to control his outer features like ghastly marionettes, rather than being immediately fused with them. Merleau-Ponty would agree that the durability of concrete is somehow legible in its colour, though the total emotional and perceptual effect of a wall is normally simultaneous and unified. But to suggest that something is amiss in the expected colour of a wall, something that faintly suggests imminent physical breakdown, is to decompose the usual bond between the phenomenon and the outer forms through which it is announced. Language is also able to hint at depth, at real things lying outside all access to them. Surprisingly, this is not the method of Lovecraft, whose materialism gives him a philosophy rooted in the surface, but one in which the relation between objects and their crusts is rendered problematic. His monsters are not deep in themselves, and function in his stories only to disturb the assumptions of human observers. One can imagine third-person tales of the Old Ones battling in outer space, aeons before the emergence of human beings. Such stories would yield more of fantasy than of horror, since we would miss the gradual awareness of human subordination that provides the Cthulhu mythos with its terror. There is nothing inherently compelling about a humanoid dragon with an octopus for a head; any teenager could draw such a thing, while scaring no-one. The horror comes instead from the declared insufficiency of the description, combined with a literary world in which this monster is a genuine player rather than a mere image. The description is horrific only insofar as it undermines any distinct image: 'If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous

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pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be entirely unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.<sup>23</sup> Whatever this 'general outline' may be, the narrator feels that his descriptions are at best 'not entirely unfaithful' to its spirit. But this is the very principle of phenomenological description, whose eidetic reductions never quite grasp the essence of the thing, and which differs from Lovecraft only in its usual avoidance of the theme of existential threat. In both cases, the known link between objects and their properties partially dissolves.



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23. Lovecraft, *Tales*, 169. From 'The Call of Cthulhu.'

While there are palpable similarities between Lovecraft and Poe in their preference for moods of horror, too little has been said about their similarities of style. In both authors we find hesitant and flowery wording that not only paints their narrators as frail aesthetes, but effectively stunts the relation between things and their traits. In Poe's tale 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the narrator describes Roderick as having 'a nose of a Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy.'<sup>24</sup> To claim directly that there is a typical Jewish nose with a specific nostril size, or that the character of a person can be read from structures of the skull, would merely make one a racist and a phrenologist. But Poe's strange appeal to unexpected disproportions of nostril and chin manages to disassemble the complex amalgam of surface and inference that silently accompanies every new face. To say that Roderick can bear no sounds except the music of guitars would merely give an eccentric description, not a horrific one. The terror comes instead through Poe's meandering way of depicting the trait: 'there were but peculiar sounds, and those from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.'<sup>25</sup> Roderick's panpsychist theory of inanimate perception might be just a vitalist platitude if stated in a journal article. Yet Poe surrounds the idea with enlivening obstacles: 'His opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under

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24. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 321. (New York: Library of America, 1984.)

25. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 322.

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certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization.<sup>26</sup> The phrasing should not be dismissed as belonging to a lost era of florid English style; the circumlocution is deliberate, and creates a gap between object and profile that is concealed in everyday experience. The same holds for the narrator's description of Roderick's macabre painting of an underground tunnel, in which 'certain accessory portions of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth'.<sup>27</sup> And finally, Poe's descriptions of music are as impossibly vague as Lovecraft's stunted polar travel diaries. Foremost among Roderick's improvisations on the guitar is 'a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of von Weber'.<sup>28</sup> If a musicologist were to specify the precise distortions of Roderick's melodies in a report commissioned by psychiatrists, or if we heard a recorded version of the music, the effect would be ruined. The point is not to pin down his exact deviations from mainstream musical practice, but to hint that something is terribly amiss in the relation between the music and its exact tones.

In Lovecraft as in Poe, the horror of things comes not from some transcendent force lying outside the bounds of human finitude, but in a twisting or torsion of that finitude itself. The immediate fusion between a thing and its tangible signals gives way to the detachment of a tortured underlying unit from its outward qualities. In similar fashion, cubist painting renders its figures paradoxically

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26. *Ibid.*, 327.

27. *Ibid.*, 325.

28. *Ibid.*, 324.



distinct from the amassing of planes and angles through which they are presented. It is no accident that only certain paintings by Georges Braque seem to approach a notion of what Lovecraftian architecture might look like,<sup>29</sup> and surely no accident that Ortega y Gasset links Husserl with Picasso.<sup>30</sup> That said, we should turn briefly from Lovecraft and Poe to the Husserlian version of cubism.

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29. Among other instances, see Braque's 1908 canvas 'House at l'Estaque', best viewed in conjunction with Lovecraft's description of the Antarctic city.

30. José Ortega y Gasset, 'On Point of View in the Arts', trans. P. Snodgrass and J. Frank. In *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), 129-130.

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What is most disturbing about intentional objects is that they are both *always* and *never* present. Husserl established that the field of perception is made up of objects, not sense data. Yet hotels, museums, and trees require the most laborious work of eidetic variation to free them of all noise, and even this method never succeeds. The hotel is present from the start, yet we never reach a truly exemplary vision of it, free of environmental accident. Nor are these accidents ever directly present. As soon as we shift our focus from the hotel as a whole to the peripheral dance of light along its façade, we have turned sunbeams or moon-rays into our new intentional object, and the eidetic reduction will now be blocked by further shimmering variations that do not affect the beams or rays as a whole. Intentional objects are everywhere and nowhere; they ‘bubble and blaspheme mindlessly’ at every point in the cosmos. Although vividly present as soon as we acknowledge them, intentional objects express their reality only by drawing neighboring objects into their orbit, and these things in turn are only present by enslaving still others. As Merleau-Ponty first observed, the structure of perception is not obvious in the least. There is no such thing as a directly given experience. Even less directly given would be the real objects lying outside all intentional experience, bracketed by Husserl and hence not considered in this article. Just as Lovecraft’s horror has nothing to do with transcendent things themselves, the horror of phenomenology arises even though all transcendent reality is suspended. Lovecraft’s heroes cannot maintain their faith in the familiar contract between things and their properties, since the creatures they encounter are never quite captured by any list of tentacles or strange vocal timbres. A weird

reading of phenomenology (the only possible reading) loses faith not just in the given sense data of empiricists, but even in the clean separation between objects and qualities. What is present is never objects or qualities, but only a fission between one object and the satellite objects bent by its gravitational field, even if everyday perception deadens us to this fact.

Without having even considered the status of *real* objects, we find that intentional objects already have a weirdness that eludes definition. It is often falsely held that phenomena have definite qualitative features, which is the position of empiricism, not of Husserl. It is held even more widely, and just as falsely, that real objects must have definite material features and exact positions in space-time. These views form the apparent motive for recent philosophies of ‘the virtual.’ If real and intentional objects are both somehow actual, both fully enshrined in the world in a manner that could in principle be described, then both seem fully inscribed in a context or web of mutual interrelations. And since true realism requires that things be considered apart from all relations, the only solution would be to shift the scene of realism away from concrete objects and phenomena towards disembodied attractors, topological invariants, or other virtual entities, all of them outstripping any possible embodiment in specific entities.<sup>31</sup>

What this step misses is the already abominable weirdness of concrete objects, whether real or phenomenal. But Lovecraft and Husserl do not miss this point. Though the materialism of Lovecraft and the idealism of Husserl

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31. See especially Manuel DeLanda’s wonderful *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. (London: Continuum, 2002).

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might seem to divide them, these doctrines go hand in hand. For we are never really sure just what an object is. Whether we define it as nothing more than electrons, or as just a shape present in consciousness, we replace the fathomless reality of things with an intellectual model of what their underlying reality ought to be. In this sense, realism tends to oppose the outlooks of Lovecraft and Husserl. Yet in a different sense, they save the weirdness of objects from its neglect by philosophies of the virtual. While such philosophies may deserve admiration for insisting on realism against any idealism or narrowly physical materialism, they are wrong to hold that objects are always utterly specific. Lovecraft (surprisingly) and Husserl (unsurprisingly) remain fixed on a material/phenomenal plane that prevents them from being full-blown metaphysical realists. But at least they grasp the weird tension in the phenomena themselves, always in tense dissolution from their qualities. It is a one-legged realism that misses the genuine hiddenness of things, but a weird realism nonetheless.

