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**Ineffable and Weird Fiction**

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What is the ineffable? If one were to look up the standard definition, they would find that it is generally defined as something **‘**too great, powerful beautiful etc. to be described or expressed.’ Demonstrably relevant to religious traditions, the ineffable is hardly reducible to them. The ineffable is famously evoked by the English Romantic poets of the Eighteenth Century in William Wordsworth’s iconic poem (1850) The Prelude (Second Book)

From Nature and her overflowing soul

I had received so much, that all my thoughts

Were steeped in feeling; I was only then

Contented, when with bliss ineffable

I felt the sentiment of Being spread

O’er all that moves and all that seemeth still;

O’er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought

And human knowledge, to the human eye

Invisible, yet liveth to the heart . . .

While the immanence of the beauty and awe of the ineffable power of nature gave transcendent solace to Wordsworth and his Romantic contemporaries, such cosmological consolation soon seems less assured by a sacramental sentiment. Impacted by modernization and not always apprehended by the mortal soul through the heart’s deep perception, Baudelaire’s intimations of the apperception of the ineffable are more fragmentary and require deciphering divorced from any amiable covenant between the ineffable and the sensible. From Correspondences:

Nature is a temple where living pillars  
Let escape sometimes confused words;  
Man traverses it through forests of symbols  
That observe him with familiar glances.

(Baudelaire, 1857)

By the time of Edgar Alan Poe, the articulation of the relation of our mortal being with that which lies beyond it exploits formalist aesthetic properties, including logic, as pressing one to what might lie beyond symbolic articulation (Lacan, 2006a). Yet Poe’s insights into the machinations of a symbolic construction, rather than depicting events, for example, still evoke the encounter with death and its return (Poe, 2006). The assurance of a confluence between the beyond and what is present has most definitely taken a more severe and even sinister turn. *Intimations of Immortality*, as precarious as Wordsworth may find the eternal, still enjoys recourse to a child’s play or remains still redeemable within nature’s promise. Rather than access to the beyond being thwarted by distractions of (modern) earthly existence, or our becoming immune to the beyond insensible beauty and the infinite within a presence, the ineffable seeks out unfamiliar corridors, as its call in modernity is trampled under the weight of science. As tied to the commons (whether nature or the human through religion) the ineffable is no longer promissory, resident as sacrament in the world by which we are awe struck.

The purpose of our retrospective recap is to examine the shift in the place of the ineffable in culture and to point to the arising of the little-known genre, weird fiction, as a possible symptom in the collective because of the displacement of the ineffable. It is to show that by a careful examination of culture and art, particularly as art gives space for the ineffable, one might gain a window into understanding of the current nature of unconscious anxieties of a culture (c.f. Villela, 2000). It may be difficult to think of unconscious anxieties of a culture, since anxiety typically refers to a body. However, one can at least imagine that impasses and/or encounters that might make one anxious (death, sex, survival of a cultural way of life, authority, etc) may be shifted at a very fundamental level as a result of changes in technology, knowledge production, or accidents of history, to name a few. Science is, of course, one such alternation in the turns of the cultural (Lacan, 2006).

Alongside traditionally culturally elevated theological and poetic explorations, an interest in the ineffable can be surmised in a surprising corner of the Western Mind, if not exactly in the customary lexicon. In company with the usual domains of aesthetic or religious expression, this experience, seemingly entailing a structure denoted, as ‘from beyond’, is an intrinsically human phenomenon. Ineffability appears, in a different guise, as critical to Freud’s (1923) topography of the psyche (conscious, unconscious, preconscious). Deciphering, as a modality of extending the human’s reach into both the repressed and its ‘navel’ also implies a certain respect for the ineffable, (1899). Seen from one perspective, it could be said that the ineffable indexes the fundamental grounds of psychodynamic theory.

For psychoanalysis, quite simply, one part of the mind represses, or in other words keeps ineffable, certain desires from conscious awareness. Moreover, such repressed material is itself linked to primal repression, which is ineffable without recourse. Yet, such repressed desires are presumed to organize and give ‘depth’ to conscious experience, “negation” for Freud (1925/1955) is critical to the judgment of existence and to the creation of the subject/object relationship in the first place. Thus rendering it also essential to understanding the human mind’s intimate connection to the body and thus to embodied existence (lived world) (Freud, 1923). The triad of conscious, preconscious, unconscious would later be placed into tri-part structural model: The Id, Ego, and Super-Ego, but the indirect tie to the ineffable remained, its implications, in a way, entering into a more dynamic relation to psychic life.

Freud would use this later model to cast light on the darker and less rational side of human psychology and existence (Freud, 1919). Everyday examples of such irrational perceptions and affective investments are many: a) the relation to our neighbor as both close and similar companion, and rivalrous and intimate stranger, b) the uncanny as a play of absence and repetition and c) the human attachment to masochism. The prevalence of such less savory behaviors and fears within humans led Freud (1920) toward an articulation of the death drive.

In turn, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would take up these Freudian ideas firstly through articulating the relationship of language to the unconscious formation, explicating the ‘return of the repressed’ (Lacan, 2006a). Out of this initial incorporation of linguistics and a human’s relation to the image, Lacan reframed psychic life in terms of three dimensions: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (Vanier, 2000). He continued to refine these terms and their weight throughout his writings.

To better push our argument forward, definitions are in order, so as not misconstrue what is meant by the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. Jorge (2013) provides some succinct explanations of these registers, which are as follows:

‘The symbolic is the register of the language, the imaginary is the register of the body image, and the real is related to the lack of words or images, it is the thing that bears no possible representation, it is the ‘unthinkable’ (p.5).

What Jorge characterizes as unthinkable can easily be translated as ‘ineffable’. While this paper will touch on all three of the dimensions, its focus, much like Lacan’s later writings, will be on the register of the Real. The reason may be obvious, as an alliance of the uncanny with what Lacan formulates as the Real.

Etymologically speaking the word ineffable breaks into two Latin parts: *in* ‘not, opposite of’ and *effabilis ‘*speakable.’ A better understanding of the word would be ‘the opposite of speakable’ or even ‘that which remains after speech.’ For Lacan, that which cannot be spoken lies within the dimension of the Real; it is ‘the essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, [This is] the object of anxiety par excellence.’ (Lacan, 1991, p. 164). Along with this affiliation between the ineffable with the Real we now add the dimension of anxiety, its place in psychoanalysis, as ‘affect’ is evident.

This final inclusion of anxiety allows the minimal tools to put forward our argument about weird fiction, science, modernity, and religion. With these concepts in hand this paper will explore some perspectives on the rise of modernism, particularly as has been manifest in modern science. Although many who see psychoanalysis as a social lens as well as a clinical one, rightly today have turned a critical eye to neo-liberal politics. With the rise of racist and authoritarian politicians, and rampant social inequality (Layton, 2014), a slight backward glance at some reactions to the rise of modernity may augment current assessment of the fractures in the social covenant, which many find so troubling.

In the main, this paper will follow a certain reading of the decline of religion following the rise of science through the question of the function of anxiety and an exposition of the possibly symptomatic and revealing entrance of a fictional genre, ‘weird fiction’ as the world entered the 20th century. Currently, with a certain return to blood and hearth and a seething anti-intellectualism, it might appear that the cultural wars are the mediating term for the shift initiated by science. But what remains for each pole in such wars is what is unsayable and how one might best “cover” for this unbridgeable gap, if not eternal absence. One cannot fail to consider how what is unspeakable yet tied to speech is germane to what maintains a limit to what can be said, and our disorder around its proper due may indeed have meaning for our traditional forms of civility. i.e. forms of social recognition and reciprocity not defined through identification with the same. Rather what cannot be known about the Other, what cannot be tamed but re-assumed by the role of law broadly meant as limit (Soler, 2006). In terms of humanity’s relentless struggle with the limit on the Symbolic, the political wars of the present may not be so far removed from political and religious wars of the past, the intrusion of scientific knowledge or the claims of nationalism supposing some incarnation of a divine right (Agamben. 1998). However, science does pose its particular challenge to limit the ineffable.

Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age* (2007), outlines the sociological events that occurred that culminated in modernism, which in his view led to a decline of overall religiosity. Humans had substituted reason for grace, and thought ‘that the potentialities we have attributed to God are really human potentialities’ (p. 251). Modernism, and modern science in particular, implicates a suturing of the gap between God and Man; it thus squeezes out the ritualistic, mythic, and aesthetic geographies of, what from every religion and to the poetry noted earlier, offer a way to revere and suffer the ineffable.

Mladen Dolar (1991), utilizing the Lacanian notion of the uncanny—which he differentiates from Freud’s usage in that it is not just a repressed idea coming forward again, but something that could never have truly been spoken —seemingly stumbles on the same territory in terms of speaking of what titrates the ineffable if it is not given to religion or artistic surrogates. Dolar denotes a ‘historical rupture’ that marks a ‘specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity’ (p.7); he, like Taylor, notes a similar shift in the place of the ineffable as society moved into modernism. He notes:

. . . in premodern society the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religious and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic…with the triumph of the Enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place (the exclusion that founded society) was no more…the uncanny became unplaceable; it became uncanny in the strict sense (p.7).

The use of the uncanny here to represent the ineffable is not out of place, as Dolar makes mention that the uncanny is the pivot point ‘around which psychoanalytic concepts revolve, the point that Lacan calls object small a’ (p.6). This is a distinction between the objects that have images and that make up things we want, see, or use, and the object (unspeakable) that “peels” off as we assume the most primitive of speech (here/gone) in order to assume this loss of an enjoyment. This loss (objet a) that we have memorialized in this primitive operation of an utterance, supposes a speaker. It founds the subject who has now founded himself on signifiers that will never integrate into later speaking. The positioning of this subject as a being refers itself to the object. It is the divided subject, who has founded herself on the trauma of loss (condemned to a relation to absence). This inaugurates the change from cry to demand of another, from need to desire. The ineffable cause of desire is originary within but separable from its many sanctioned semblants behind, whether erotic, natural, or sacramental.

Central to this argument is a distinction often missed in much of psychoanalytic thought. The object of desire should be clinically and conceptually differentiated from the object cause of desire as we attempted to briefly explain above. The former image/objects are semblants, images and what one may perceive as the beloved objects which we attempt to possess or appropriate; the cause of desire is irreducible to any of these images or objects. When we look in a mirror and see ourselves, we are operating at the level of image object. When we see our image is not returning our gaze, we have stumbled into the realm of that other object (Allouch, 1977). If the object cause, which is genuinely ineffable to the subject, is privileged, we have a much more fundamental orienting frame in relation to human desire and thus a much more numinous position for the uncanny in modernity as deciphered in fiction, art, or politics. The object cause of desire is not a particular object, like a breast, through which the visual world is libidinalized. Its existence as in the field of the world is linked to the act of separation that constitutes one as a human being and the Other as both barred and lacking. As suggested, it is the result of introducing a sort of fork in the road between need/instinct and demand/love, to create a relationship of desire to the natural and social world. This fork in the road is incredibly important to sustaining a subject and body, but it is precarious.

If the ‘object cause’ emerges from a separation from an enjoyment that is impossible to sustain and can only be absolutely refound in an Other at risk of being absorbed into that Other, it is a fundamentally lost object correlative to a subject who desires. In a sense, it is tied to both object love and identification. The re-assembly of its parts, an absolute Other coupled with an absolute enjoyment, engenders anxiety; the injunction to desire, through a prohibition of this enjoyment which is too close to the real e.g. sex (at one time), drugs (unprescribed), murder, hatred, i.e. any conjunction of the superego and drive enjoyment, suggests that the logic of this object cause is at play. Given the hazards to both the individual and its structural significance in forming a human, the object a and its function is a matter that is always attended to in the organization of community. Thus, it is worth notice that Dolar’s psychoanalytic use of religion as the theatre of the uncanny in society echoes the thoughts of early 20th century theologian Rudolph Otto.

Rudolf Otto was a German theologian who, in 1923, put forward the idea of the Numinous in his explanation of the God and the concept of Holy. In stark contrast to the modernist movement or even some romanticist views, Otto postulated the Holy/God as a non-rational, non-sensory experience, or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self (Otto, 1958). Couple this with Otto’s ideas of the *mysterium tremendum,* a phenomenon which could create a sense of dread or awe, and one creates a recipe for an experience which defies the ability of the subject to verbalize what is in essence an eruption by the Real- the unsymbolizable/primal repressed.

Otto called any encounter with the real as inducing a stupor which is a ‘blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb’ (Otto, 1958, p.26), in other words, the ineffable. This places The Holy (God) firmly in the Real. Examples of this are numerous in holy writ of ‘things which are too holy so speak of.’ From this one can see that the project of modernity, and modern science in particular, is to suture closed the gap inherent to the place of ineffable Real. This was once given to the safekeeping of religion, now to a form of the sayable and thereby knowable, the place held by science and technology. Knowledge reigns supreme in these domains as does a consequent instrumentalization of the human subject. The point of enunciation for a subject is erased as the subject is usurped as a desiring being.

To understand the proposed portents that this suturing holds we must turn to Lacan. This is not an epistemology of the said or of the world, but a question of the saying. In Lacanian theory the saying implied the one who enunciated, establishing the place from which we speak, which reflects the knotting of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. Subjectivity is created when the individual is ushered into the symbolic world through the interjection of Law; the ‘No’ given to the child that they cannot be the imaginary phallic object of the (m)Other, or in less traditional terms, when language is assumed to impose both difference and limit.

We see this once in the “peeling off” of enjoyment in object a, but the process is not fully located in relation to the Other unless we also see its instantiation in phallic terms. The phallic position, regardless of anatomical sex, is purely symbolic, requiring a lack or at least a ‘not.’ This binary operates as pure difference in introducing the subject’s being to language and imbuing symbolism as that which may indeed provide access to the absolute from which we have strayed. Moreover, he (this is the masculine position) becomes separate from being an object for the other and receives the coin of the realm, a signifier. A nomination is accorded and assumed as a position from which to enter into exchange (objects are exchangeable) and reinforce his place as a placeholder. Speech and the body are tied to something that is not present.

Equally, social dependence is divorced from biological need and absolute demand. This of course splits the subject, who no longer harbors the object but must seek it in the Other and is himself put into the mix of language to achieve this bearing in the unthought. The cause of desire now resides in the Other who has spoken of the child. The drama of lack and loss is imperative. This gap is necessary for subjectivity, just as an empty space is necessary to solve a mystic square puzzle, allowing space for movement and exchange. The gap is also salvific, for if there were no gap present the subject would cease to be a subject and return to the status of object, to be consumed/consuming, totally at the caprice the jouissance of the inscrutable Other. The threat of such a consumption, the divesting of one’s place as a subject, creates anxiety.

The Lacanian Other is not always that BIG Symbolic Other, it is the mother tongue, the object that was once the child’s cord of sustenance and immediate relation to the (M)Other. Certain dimensions of the Other (not all, otherwise we would never be able to deal with the repressed) necessarily reside outside of the domain of language in the Real: no words can assure that being that now has slipped from our eyes, mouths, skin, and peeks through the cloud of speech. The lost object is thus ineffable. It is the primary referent around which all symbolic exchange circles, anchoring fantasy qua reality. As was noted earlier, traditionally a subject’s relationship to this place- which functions as a specifically human necessity not inherently reducible to familial coordinates has been made more inhabitable by God, e.g. the unpronounceable name of God in Judaism, whose writing, appearances, and voice offer a semblant that assures subject of a place and of another who desires them (Haddad, 2013). Note that this voice is not purely an object or an expression of desire. It is a voice that emanates from an enigmatic place but one which is promissory. Think of some of the desires in pro-life discourse to be recognized in one’s pure being, or reactions to different religions as matters of differing semblants of the voice.

Conversely, the discourse of empirical materialistic science’s—including those of scientific psychology—goal is to take the unexplained and the unknown and place it into the realm of language, the realm of the Symbolic, placing them in the realms of prediction and control. To paraphrase Fink (1997, p.49), science is in the process of draining the Real. This looks like comfort, as it seems to give humanity a sense of control, but in reality it creates anxiety. The Symbolic in relationship to the Real is not only distorted by scientific knowledge in its unceasing effort to lift the bar off of the Other, but also in its failure to recognize that the place of enunciation entails a gap which admits self-division, a subject, and an appeal to an Other; it is this place which permits of an ethic, and knots God with faith.

If livable ways to deal with lack in the world are compromised then so is our human being, as based in lack, which in turn, as consumer culture sometimes intimates, erases our subjectivity; we are now the objects of science (the gap is erased). It gets rid of the Other as a call and a place upon which to call. This is a delicate dialectic with knowledge, which is not here predictive but rather addresses the place of speaking itself. Thus, it bears little relation to a knowledge that merely objectifies or offers an enjoyment beyond limit. The latter knowledge absorbs the subject leaving the ineffable to the insistent drives rather than elevated to desire. The resultant anxiety can account for what Dolar notes as the response of popular culture to the rise of modernity saying, ‘Ghosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead, etc. flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place’ (Dolar 1991, p.7). While Dolar is specifically pointing to the rise of Gothic fiction, to this we will add weird fiction.

Weird fiction became a way of expressing the horror of becoming an object because it deals with the return of the Real and the inadequacy of humans to deal with rupture. The rupture is in fact the signal of those precarious moments of subjective emergence, the birth of the Other. The rupture marks the Real and is what is being exemplified in this genre, exploring the anxiety that can occur; it suggests where modernism’s relentless suturing of the Real and Symbolic can lead us and demonstrates the breakdown of the position of the subject. When the line between what is a subject and what is an object (of science) blurs, it is what Lacan called the extimaté (Miller, 1994). It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety’ (Dolar, 1991). It is this very anxiety that weird fiction took up.

Weird fiction arose in the early 1900’s and had its golden age in the 1920-50’s, and is the precursor to today’s horror fiction. To roughly define it we will use the definition provided by one of weird fiction’s most notable authors, H.P. Lovecraft:

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 breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there 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 daemons of unplumbed space (Lovecraft, 2008, p.1043).

In other words, the weird fiction author brings the reader to the precipice of the Real, usually by breaking down the reader’s ability to engage in speech, or rather by taking away the speech of the protagonist.

**Conscious vs Unconscious Anxieties: a Note on Lovecraft**

As is demonstrated in the use of the above definition, one cannot speak of weird fiction and not speak of its most famous progenitor, H.P. Lovecraft. With his increasing popularity and the current political atmosphere one cannot talk about Lovecraft without talking about his shortcomings. Lovecraft was, according to his biographers, both critical (Poole, 2016) and apologists (Joshi, 2010) alike, a racist, a xenophobe, a proponent of eugenics, with its accompanying fears of social and ethnic degeneracy, and thoroughly anti-modern. Whether unrepentant, a product of his times and/or circumstance, or otherwise is an argument beyond the scope of this paper, however it does play an important role in his fiction.

His most recent biographer, W. Scott Poole, points out many of Lovecraft’s conscious anxieties, in one example, Lovecraft’s xenophobia, spurred by influx of minority immigrants in his day, is evident in letters written by his ex-wife Sonia Greene saying ‘“he [Lovecraft] told me that whenever we had company he would appreciate it if “Aryans” were in the majority.” She remembered that walks through the “racially mixed” streets of New York often prompted him to frightening fits of rage in which “he almost seemed to lose his mind”’ (Poole, 2016, p.147). These anxieties would find place in nearly all his stories, but would find its paramount in his story *The Horror at Red Hook* which Poole, in regards to its racist prose and themes, states it ‘secretes bile so poisonous it’s as if its author is a wounded creature corned in a lair’ (Poole, 2016, p.146).

While biographers like Poole correctly remark that these conscious anxieties are the inspiration and background on which many Lovecraft’s stories are painted, these are not the same as the unconscious anxieties we are arguing for in this paper. Neither are we speaking of Lovecraft’s use of psychoanalytic principals in his work; Poole (2016) points out that Lovecraft was no stranger to Freud. He even intentionally utilized psychoanalytic concepts in his work such as in the *Picture in the House,* to illustrate the ‘group neuroticism of the Puritans’ as Lovecraft explained it to fellow weird fiction writer Robert E. Howard (p.122). Nor do we seek to argue unconscious motives buried as latent content of the authors in the work. Rather what we are arguing for is a structural notion of unconscious anxiety, embedded in the language itself, as found in weird fiction narratives, wherein the genre’s very existence, as a narrative style, is a symptom of the displacement of the Uncanny.

It is ironic, and perhaps a marker of how truly unconscious it was to him, that Lovecraft’s own devotion to scientific materialism as something to displace/replace religion, as something to repress like a child’s belief in monsters under the bed, returns again and again in his fiction as the reason for his protagonists’ descent in madness. As we have already argued above it is the displacement of a container for the ineffable and the instrumentalization of the human subject by modern science that can create the anxiety, on societal scale, in the subject, an anxiety that Lovecraft, as an anti-modern, felt acutely, but perhaps could not encounter directly in his particular existence (that being an open question).

Indeed, one hallmark of weird fiction is its explicit reference to the ineffable. The authors often use words such as: unutterable, indescribable, unmentionable, unnamable, etc. In these cases, the authors were making use of the ineffable to create a particular atmosphere of anxiety and unease, to cause the horror to resonate deep within the psyche. The Real and the divine as articulated in psychoanalysis and by Lacan (2013) in particular speak to a certain clinical and intellectual context. Yet many of the aforementioned ideas and the role of structurally induced anxieties are excavated from exemplar works of weird fiction. Stories which are contemporaneous with Freud, *The Call of C’thulhu* by H.P. Lovecraft, *The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood, and *The Damned Thing* by Ambrose Beirce each give a different voice and angle to what may also be seen in psychoanalytic thinking.

**Breakdown of the Symbolic Dimension**

As the scientific suture of the Symbolic to the Real occurs, the purpose of the symbolic dimension, which is to create space between the subject and the Real, begins to deteriorate and breakdown. In Blackwood’s *The Willows,* the reader is given a haunting passage right at the beginning before anything overtly supernatural even occurs. The protagonist who interestingly enough remains unnamed (unnamable?), finds himself and his companions in a fen off of the river they were canoeing down, when, due to bad weather they are forced to make a camp on a small sandy island covered in willows. He is ill at ease, but can’t quite put a finger one what perturbs him. He notes that it is not the usual sense of feeling small before such as vastness as a mountain, an ocean or a great forest. He states:

They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt. With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different…A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague terror…*.The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis*, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite...To my companion, however, *I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had* (Blackwood, 1907, p.8 emphasis added)

One can see the breakdown of the symbolic dimension here, as the emotions stirred up in the heart of the well-journeyed protagonist refuse to verbalized, and have set up the portents of anxiety for things to come.

In Bierce’s (1898) *The Damned Thing* the reader is presented with a problem of ineffability. The ineffable is not some vague emotion which the protagonists find themselves unable to articulate, but rather the nominal ‘Thing’ cannot be described because it cannot be seen.

‘I was about to speak further, when I observed the wild oats near the place of the *disturbance moving in the most inexplicable way. I can hardly describe it*. It seemed as if stirred by a streak of wind, which not only bent it, but pressed it down—crushed it so that it did not rise, and this movement was slowly prolonging itself directly toward us.’

During the attack of this ‘thing’ the narrator continues saying:

His right arm was lifted and seemed to lack the hand—at least, I could see none. The other arm was invisible… it was *as if he had been partly blotted out*—*I can not otherwise express it*—then a shifting of his position would bring it all into view again.

The invisibility of the ‘damned thing’ places this creature outside the realm of the symbolic dimension, and like a symptom, can only be known as it interacts with the Imaginary of the body.

In Lovecraft’s *The Call of C’thulhu,* one can see a monumental breakdown of the Symbolic order as language itself fails to provide the gap necessary for subjectivity to occur. The first example is in the name of titular monster itself. C’thulhu, as described by the author, is as close as the human vocal system can get to the name of a being far removed from the sense-making world of Man. Lovecraft does not stop here however; in an effort that draws the reader ever closer to horror, and thus the Real, Lovecraft forces the reader to engage with even larger breakdowns of the Symbolic. After a police raid on a cult’s murderous orgiastic rite, and the subsequent investigation by police and experts, the reader is given this:

What, in substance, both the Esquimau wizards and the Louisiana swamp-priests had chanted to their kindred idols was something very like this—the word-divisions being guessed at from traditional breaks in the phrase as chanted aloud:

*’Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn.’*  
Legrasse [the police inspector] had one point in advance of Professor Webb, for several among his mongrel prisoners had repeated to him what older celebrants had told them the words meant. This text, as given, ran something like this: *‘In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming* (Lovecraft, 2008, p.363).

Here the symbolic order is broken not once but twice. First is the incomprehensible non-sense nature of the chant described as ‘a language not of Man.’ In Lacanian thought, it is no wonder that this is chanted by celebrants during the murderous orgy of in-bred swamp people. For despite it having the appearance of language, it most definitely does not do what the symbolic dimension is supposed to do; which is to bar the subject from complete consumption by jouissance—bringing the person out of the order of the animal and into humanity—but of the rite Lovecraft said this

‘Only poetry or madness could do justice to the noises heard by Legrasse’s men as they ploughed on through the black morass toward the red glare and the muffled tom-toms. *There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other.* Animal fury and orgiastic licence here whipped themselves to daemoniac heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those nighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulfs of hell. Now and then the less organized ululation would cease, and from what seemed a well-drilled chorus of hoarse voices would rise in sing-song chant that hideous phrase or ritual: ‘*Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn* (emphasis added, Lovecraft, 2008, p. 365)

Despite the presence of language, the gap is not established. The cultists are completely under the sway of *jouissance* of the Other, in this case C’thulhu, an inscrutable Other.

The second order breakdown involved in the chant is that even when roughly translated into English it does not take on sense, or double sense, as the Symbolic order should dictate, but still holds onto its inherent non-sense. There are still elements such as R’lyeh and C’thulhu which defy speaking, in much the same way the name of God is unpronounceable for the Jews, but it is also rife with contradiction and paradox. C’thulhu is dead and yet it dreams. C’thulhu is not sleeping but waiting, and we learn later that when the ‘stars are right’ it shall return. These are sure signs that we have impinging on the Real, and Lovecraft is making use of this as an advent for when the rupture by the Real will occur.

How does this apply to the problem of science suturing the gap between the Symbolic and the Real? As modern materialistic science has progressed in its efforts to classify and categorize the visible universe, its vocabulary has become increasingly more specialized. To the average person the language of science used to describe the experiences of the everyday life have become as alien as the cult chants, and the Symbolic begins again to break down.

This experience can be demonstrated with a quick example from neuropsychology, pulled from Wikipedia. This brief sentence describes an area of the brain responsible for regulating our voluntary movements ‘the pedunculopontine tegmental nucleus, is located in the [brainstem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brainstem), [caudal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatomical_terms_of_location) to the [substantia nigra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Substantia_nigra) and adjacent to the superior cerebellar peduncle’. As with the cultists, the presence of language should offer space for a subject to locate themselves. A place for meaning to occur, but when it does not, the average person is left object-ified. Scientific knowledge has replaced C'thulhu as the Other who is slowly draining the person of subjectivity.

**The Trace**

The trace was a theoretical device used by Lacan to describe a presence marked only by its absence (Lacan, 2017). The trace is a part of Lacan’s larger ideas of the sign and signifier, of which a full explanation is outside the scope of this paper; however, a quick examination of the trace does help facilitate understanding when one is dealing with the Real. In general, the trace will be representative of something, such as a footprint in the sand represent the presence of a subject of which one has no knowledge. When the trace is of an object of the Real the trace becomes slippery, as the symbolic realm fails when dealing with the Real.

The science born of modernism is much like Lacan’s example of Robinson Crusoe who has thought himself alone on the island and suddenly finds the footprints of Man Friday in the sand and upon this discovery Crusoe erases them and replaces them with a cross made out of wood. When dealing with phenomenon that seem to defy being languaged, science marks it with a name to insert the phenomenon into language, an empty signifier, or as Lacan (1997) says in Seminar III ‘the signifier is a sign that doesn’t refer to any object, not even to one in the form of a trace, even though the trace nevertheless heralds the signifier’s essential feature. It, too, is the sign of an absence. But insofar as it forms part of language, the signifier is a sign which refers to another sign, which is as such structured to signify the absence of another sign’ (p.167) Examples of this in science would be Gravity or Consciousness, a name given as if it offers explanatory power, but are in fact empty. Traces that deal in the Real are more readily understood through the Imaginary and not in words, rather an embodied experience. This device is common in works of weird fiction to produce the feelings of unease and malaise e.g. the knot in the gut so to speak.

In *The Willows* we see almost the very same example of a trace that Lacan often used, that of the tracks in the sand. After the story’s protagonist has experienced a supernatural event, which shall be examined later, he and his companion, known only as the Swede, continually to find these small hollows or sand funnels around the island. However, nothing is ever seen to make them. In spites of his earlier experience, the protagonist tries to take a skeptical attitude toward these traces, insisting on a natural cause. He continues to try and put it back into the world of sense. When the protagonist asks the Swede, who has become increasingly agitated as the supernatural happenings appear to be escalating, what he thinks caused them he replies, ‘No... I dare not, simply dare no, put the thought into words. If you have not guess I am glad, Don’t try to. They have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours.’(Blackwood, 1907, p. 40).

The Real is felt and the presence of the Other is only noted by the absence of the hollow maker. The very skeptical nature of the protagonist in the face of the traces is a reflection of the thought of modern age’s dismissal of the spiritual. The denial of traces of an impossible reality are not, in and of themselves necessarily remarkable, other pre-modern ghost stories make use of such characters. It is Blackwood’s use of the deterioration of the Swede that adds to the anxiety felt by the reader. The protagonist has, up to the point of the aforementioned quote, continually characterized the Swede as ‘unimaginative.’ However, he is shaken when he sees the man coming over to the other side of the belief. As is often the case in weird fiction, it is this acceptance that will ultimately save their lives. In other words it is giving place to ineffable rather than continually trying to demarcate it into language.

Returning to the weird scene from the *Damned Thing,* the trace is again an integral part of the story’s structure. The protagonist has an experience of seeing the undergrowth of the surrounding wilderness moving as if something large, yet invisible, were passing through it. Of this experience he says:

We so rely upon the orderly operation of familiar natural laws that any seeming suspension of them is noted as a menace to our safety, a warning of unthinkable calamity. So now the apparently causeless movement of the herbage, and the slow, undeviating approach of the line of disturbance were distinctly disquieting(Bierce, 1898, par).

The trace is signaling an apparent break down of the covenants humans think they have with the laws of nature. When the laws appear to be committing a non-sense then this is a sure sign one is dealing with factors of the Real. The corresponding horror felt, is the sense of a subject’s loss of a gap. The protagonist is coming to feel more and more like an object of the Other in which his position as subject is in jeopardy. Nowhere is this more visible, and with a clear lead into the Real’s eventual rupture than in the Lovecraft story.

There are a few examples of the trace in The Call of Cthulhu. The title is the first clue with the emphasis on ‘The Call.’ The calling is picked up by the ‘psychically sensitive’ in the story and illustrates the ineffability of trying to name the source of the trace, but a trace is certainly felt in the body. Of particular note is the passage of the press cuttings:

The number of extracts was tremendous and the sources scattered throughout the globe. Here was a nocturnal suicide in London, where a lone sleeper had leaped from a window after a shocking cry. Here likewise a rambling letter to the editor of a paper in South America, where a fanatic deduces a dire future from visions he has seen. A despatch from California describes a theosophist colony as donning white robes en masse for some ‘glorious fulfilment’ which never arrives, whilst items from India speak guardedly of serious native unrest toward the end of March...The west of Ireland, too, is full of wild rumour and legendry, and a fantastic painter named Ardois-Bonnot hangs a blasphemous ‘Dream Landscape’ in the Paris spring salon of 1926. And so numerous are the recorded troubles in insane asylums, that only a miracle can have stopped the medical fraternity from noting strange parallelisms and drawing mystified conclusions. A weird bunch of cuttings, all told. (Lovecraft, 2008, p.361)

This passage is like a microcosm for the whole of the narrative, the story itself reads like a detective tale, trying to piece together a larger picture from the traces that were left behind, such as awry behavior, to some greater event itself that seems to defy sense and laws of reality.

**The Rupture by the Real**

The apex of every weird fiction story is the culminating moment that the breakdown of the symbolic and the trace have been pointing to; the moment in which the weird grips the reader/protagonist, usually accompanied by an acute sense of horror, or occasional mysticism. In either case the rupture is experienced as completely alien. As the Real is ineffable, it cannot be experienced/expressed in words, and usually relates to trauma registered on the mind and body.

In *The Willows* we are given the rupture rather early in the story and watch as the protagonists are left to deal with its repercussions. To paraphrase, the protagonist begins to see Beings in the willows at night, which defy reality. The protagonist desperately tries to deny their existence, he fails to reassert his understanding of order, saying:

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they must every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. (Blackwood, 1907, p.16)

After witnessing this he almost falls into an ‘absolute worship’ in the presence of these supernatural entities. After this sensation passes and he describes the encounter with a rupture as Lacan typically described it, trauma:

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me, and I began to tremble dreadfully. I took a quick look round--a look of horror that came near to panic--calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realizing how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective (Blackwood, 1907, p.18).

Trauma upon the body is experienced also by the characters in Bierce’s story, as one of them encounters a rupture and meets a terrible fate. This experience also defies speech but most definitely registers on the body, of it the protagonists says:

Before I could get upon my feet and recover my gun, which seemed to have been struck from my hands, I heard Morgan crying out as if in mortal agony, and mingling with his cries were such hoarse savage sounds as one hears from fighting dogs. Inexpressibly terrified, I struggled to my feet and looked in the direction of Morgan's retreat; and may heaven in mercy spare me from another sight like that! At a distance of less than thirty yards was my friend, down upon one knee, his head thrown back at a frightful angle, hatless, his long hair in disorder and his whole body in violent movement from side to side, backward and forward. His right arm was lifted and seemed to lack the hand—at least, I could see none. The other arm was invisible. At times, as my memory now reports this extraordinary scene, I could discern but a part of his body; *it was as if he had been partly blotted out*—*I cannot otherwise express it*—then a shifting of his position would bring it all into view again. All this must have occurred within a few seconds, yet in that time Morgan assumed all the postures of a determined wrestler vanquished by superior weight and strength*. I saw nothing but him, and him not always distinctly* (Bierce, 1898)

One of the ruptures par excellence of weird fiction is found at the end of the Lovecraft story with literal rupture of R’lyeh from the ocean floor and of C’thulhu himself. R’lyeh, the monstrous city, is described in phrases like ‘the geometry of the place was all wrong.’ One sailor is lost when ‘he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn’t have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse.’

Lastly when confronted with C’thulhu himself of the creature Lovecraft (2008) writes

Poor Johansen’s handwriting almost gave out when he wrote of this. Of the six men who never reached the ship, he thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant*. The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.* A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth **a great architect went mad, and poor Wilcox raved with fever** in that telepathic instant? (emphasis added p.377)

As is demonstrated, by the stricken Wilcox, the body is the register on which the Real makes itself known, when ineffability robs man of speech in these culminating moments of horror. The intention is to impart a sense of cosmic dread. The world, as painted in weird fiction, does not give an iota about the symbolic order of Man or maintaining it. Anxiety is the universe’s natural state, if one is not feeling anxious, it because one is simply wrapped up in a delusion of security and sense. To try and denote this, the masters of weird fiction are not using ineffability as a crutch to avoid giving imaginative explanations of the monsters etc. but are instead trying to utilize anxiety to draw us to the Real, as this is where the true emotions of horror and anxiety can be evoked.

Lovecraft himself was a devout materialist, and yet he saw the problematics of the modern scientific endeavor and states it in the introductory paragraph of the story discussed here, saying:

The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up 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. (Lovecraft, 2008, p.355)

Even if and when ruptures by the Real occur within the individual, the modern project of science proceeds undaunted. The ruptures are like bubbles from one of Lovecraft’s stinking miasmas, they appear like momentary flashes and leave traces behind. There is one aspect of the trace that still needs to be mentioned: the aspect of effacement.

A trace made by a rupture can be effaced and replaced, essentially sidestepped, in order to prematurely foreclose the significance of the trace, in effect re-establishing the symbolic order. This is what Lacan (2010), in Seminar VI, says Crusoe does when he wipes out the footprints in the sand and leaves a wooden cross in its place saying:

Robinson Crusoe effaces the trace of Friday’s footprint, but what does he put in its place? If he wants to preserve the place of Friday’s footprint, he needs at least a cross, namely a bar and another bar across it. This is the specific signifier…In so far as I cancel the signifier with the bar, I perpetuate it as such indefinitely, I inaugurate the dimension of the signifier as such (p,71).

In other words, in order to avoid having a confrontation with the ineffable, the modern subject will efface the trace of the unsayable with a word that can itself be put into the chain of meanings of language discourse. Moreover, as Dolar (1991) postulated with the uncanny, this is done to move the ineffable out of any place in modern discourse. Dolar (1991) mentions that pop culture, in this case weird fiction, gives voice to the anxiety felt by such practices of effacement by modernism.

In *The Damned Thing* (1898) this is done when the undertaker, after the post-mortem inquest, refuses the journal of the protagonist’s now dead friend, saying ‘’The book will cut no figure in this matter,’ replied the official, slipping it into his coat pocket; “all the entries in it were made before the writer's death.’’ Yet the reader knows that the journal contains the recently dead man’s suspicions of the existence of the invisible beast. The undertaker, in his restating the obvious, is creating a mark of punctuation to stop the chain of meaning (the signification chain), thus creating a gap for meaning again (reinstating the bar) and keeping the Real, the ineffable, in check. (Thus taking the position of the analyst as he would with a psychotic to keep a fantasy in place.)

The narrator in Lovecraft’s story does something similar with phrases such as ’I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain.’ Or ‘With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again… Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye.’

Effacing the Trace, this delusion of security, is usually how weird fiction authors leave the reader one last lingering horror. They accomplish this in part by breaking the fourth wall and speak either directly or indirectly to the reader and then bring one back to the trace. But the reader is shown the true import of such an effacement of the trace and knows that such foreclosures on the Real can only cause more problems.

So how is such effacement accomplished by modern science? It effaces the trace when it gets to an end of knowledge by leaving a promissory note. A classic example of this again comes from neuroscience and its exploration of the correlates of consciousness. The idea that neurons and neural connections represent the totality of what makes up the human conscious experience is currently one of the most popular theories of mind in the field. As so famously put by Minsky (1986) ‘minds are what brains do’ has taken the correlation of neural activity with conscious experience and insisted that the causal arrow from neuron to experience is the only way it can be understood. Although this remains to be proven, it is asserted that science will get us there in the near future. Consciousness, or subjectivity, is clearly leaving a trace, but given its notorious difficulty in being objectified, modern science has simply effaced the trace and left humanity with an I.O.U.

To conclude, it is hoped that this glance into the literary past is not academic but will find pertinence for the reader in the present, particularly for the use of psychoanalysis as a lens in which to view the social world. By taking a closer examination of fringe art in popular culture at the turn of this century, we may glean some similar insights that emerge through an examination of weird fiction. This is not simply the usual call to bring psychoanalysis to popular culture so successfully presented by Slajov Zizek, but a thinking of how, for example, an academic curriculum can be framed, or social media be researched or be an opening for a kind of address that expects a resistance to suture in the form of desire. Knowing well that psychoanalysis cannot contain itself to the borders of a couch, the contemporary difficulties of Western humanism can be interrogated outside of the orbit of social justice. The uncanny will return, no doubt, and anxiety cannot simply be ameliorated by realizing rights. There are good reasons for an intense attention to projects of justice and human rights. Yet the covenant is not a bargain nor is it justice. It simply gives one a less enslaved relation to the real of *jouissance* and to the effects of alterity on our being human; it offers one a relation to desire.

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