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Under Review



SUPERNATURAL EVOLUTIONS

Unutterable Horror, A History of Supernatural Fiction Volume I: From Gilgamesh To The End of The Nineteenth Century, S.T. Joshi (PS Publishing, 2012).

Unutterable Horror, A History of Supernatural Fiction Volume II: The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, S.T. Joshi (PS Publishing, 2012).

Madame du Deffand, the great eighteenth-century mistress of the *salon* and friend of Horace Walpole, was once asked if she believed in ghosts. ‘No,’ she replied, ‘but I am afraid of them.’ Most of us, had we the wit and the honesty, would probably say the same. There is something deep in human nature which stubbornly resists complete rationality. We know instinctively that reason, and, by extension, science can never explain everything and will never satisfy the spirit as the imagination can. That is why men and women were poets before they were

physicists: it was more essential to them. Reason supplies us with the foundations of a civilised existence, but imagination sets us free to enjoy it.

Hence the paradox of the tale of terror. We are presented with something horrific that in real life would be distinctly unpleasant and yet we derive pleasure from it. This is because it provides a liberation of the mind, a subversion of dull routine. It also familiarises us with the inescapable mystery of death. S.T. Joshi begins *Unutterable Horror*, his study of supernatural fiction, with the first extant work of literature *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which the poet Rilke called an epic about the fear of death. Its essence is that a hero, Gilgamesh, comes to terms with the fact that he must die. In *Gilgamesh*, Homer and Greek Tragedy it is not so much the ghosts themselves that evoke terror as what they have to reveal. They appear either to prophesy doom, like the ghost of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, or to demonstrate the unpleasantness of the afterlife, like Achilles, formerly victim of Patroclus's haunting, in the *Odyssey*. Ghosts who threaten by their mere presence rather than by their message begin perhaps with the younger Pliny's ostensibly 'real life' account of a haunted house in Athens. Joshi traces the supernatural in literature through classical novels by Petronius and Apuleius, to the medieval apocalyptic iconography of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare and seventeenth-century writers like Bunyan and Milton. It is only with the Gothic novel that supernatural (or quasi-supernatural) horror begins to take centre stage. But even Gothic fiction, according to Joshi, is merely a prelude.

Joshi looks on the Gothic novel as a kind of primitive forerunner of the tale of terror which began to flourish in the mid nineteenth century. In the context of Joshi's book as a whole, the perception of Mrs Radcliffe as *Pithecanthropus* to Poe's *Homo Sapiens* makes sense, but it is not quite fair to judge their work on that basis. Joshi is looking for elements in Gothic fiction that are not necessarily there, and perhaps not meant to be. He is, however, perfectly right to say that the early Gothic novelists produced few works of enduring merit, apart from *Frankenstein*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Vathek* and perhaps *The Monk*. I have a softer spot for *The Mysteries of Udolpho* than Joshi, but that is perhaps because I read it at fourteen and was more affected at the time by its romantic than its 'horror' elements.

'The true beginning of weird literature', according to Joshi, is Edgar Allan Poe, and the chapter on Poe in *Unutterable*

Horror is Joshi at his best. It is hard to deny that the modern genre of horror began with Poe, even though he was less influential in England where the weird tale had different roots. On the continent, especially in France, he was a much more important figure. Joshi has read Poe extensively, not only his fiction but his many essays and reviews, from which he has gathered invaluable information about Poe's aesthetic credo.

Poe seems to have been the first person to grasp intellectually the peculiar power of the short story, not least in the horror genre. In his essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' Poe refers to 'the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression', and he made good practical use of the notion. The great majority of his best stories have at their heart a single image of great power: the disintegration of the house of Usher, the bodily disintegration of M. Valdemar, the pit and the pendulum, the maelstrom and so on. 'Unity of impression' is at the root of many later short masterpieces: M.R. James's horrible face of crumpled linen, Blackwood's Wendigo, Professor Guildea's odiously amorous parrot and countless others.

Joshi understandably makes Poe the yardstick for early supernatural horror, but this leads to some distortion. The attack on *A Christmas Carol*, for example, reveals Joshi's chief defect as a critic: he will sometimes castigate a work for failing to achieve what it never set out to do. As a tale of atmospheric terror in the manner of 'The Tell-Tale Heart', say, or Blackwood's 'The Willows', *A Christmas Carol* is not a notable success, but that was never its intention. As a moral fable about redemption, replete with memorable imagery and dialogue, all narrated in Dickens's most brilliant rhetorical prose, it is incomparable. There are flaws, which Joshi points out, but these are irrelevant: there are some works which are like a force of nature and transcend their flaws. Many stories by Poe and Lovecraft, after all, belong to this category.

Nevertheless, the almost universal affection in which *A Christmas Carol* is held must, according to Joshi, be unjustified. Throughout the two volumes of *Unutterable Horror* Joshi is very down on those who, he believes, have overpraised, though he is not wholly immune from the charge himself. Joshi's first principal attack on the over-raters of a particular author comes with J. Sheridan Le Fanu.

Up to a point I agree: Le Fanu was to Poe what Trollope was to Dickens, not nearly such a towering genius, but possessing some virtues that the other writer did not. Le Fanu may not have had the overwhelming visionary force of Poe,

but he was nevertheless one of the pioneers of psychological horror. Admittedly his convoluted sentences with their subordinate clauses tucked inside each other like Russian dolls, make for laborious reading at times. Even in 'Green Tea', one of the few Le Fanu tales of which Joshi approves, the homilies of Dr Hesselius are excessively tedious. But Le Fanu deserves credit for creating in Hesselius the first psychic investigator in fiction, just as Poe's Dupin (no stranger to orotund prosing himself) is the prototype criminal detective.

Le Fanu's stories are of two kinds, though naturally their forms overlap. There are the old fashioned 'Gothic' stories with a strong folk tale element. Several of these feature wicked Irish landed gentlemen making bargains with the Devil. Then there are the more modern psychological tales, set mostly in an urban environment, like 'Green Tea', 'The Familiar', 'Schalken the Painter' and 'Mr Justice Harbottle'. These works contain some striking imagery, and they owe their solidity and to a certain extent their credibility to the fact that they are rooted in a particular time, place and society, often Dublin and the Ireland of the Protestant ascendancy.

This feeling for the atmosphere of specific location is one quality that Poe lacks. We have no idea, for example, in what country the House of Usher is undergoing its decadence; and in this respect Poe is closer to the Gothic novelists than is Le Fanu. Joshi, however, says precisely the opposite, that the 'imprecision of [Poe's stories'] physical and temporal settings . . . is in striking contrast to much of the Gothic fiction that preceded him'. I disagree. From the beginning, Gothic fiction inhabited a world of the imagination. Walpole may have set *The Castle of Otranto* in medieval Italy, but, like Poe, he offered no real historical underpinnings; all he wanted was a picturesque backdrop for his fancies. Otranto is the province of Walpole's dreams and nightmares; its protagonists are wearing period costumes to add colour to the proceedings and to remove them as far as possible from the author's own century and manners. Mrs Radcliffe may have set her scenes 'on the pleasant banks of the Garonne' and in the Appenines, but her languorously described landscapes derive from the painted imaginings of Claude and Salvator Rosa rather than first hand observation. Like Poe she never visited the European settings of her romances. The same applies to Monk Lewis's Spain and Beckford's Arabian Nightmare, *Vathek*. It is no accident that *Frankenstein*, *The Monk* and *Vathek* were written when their authors were eighteen, nineteen and twenty-two respectively.

Like Poe's fantastic tales they are the product of a youthful imagination unfettered by too much experience.

There is a line in American horror literature from Poe through Lovecraft and his circle to Thomas Ligotti, all of whose landscapes are chiefly those of the mind. Unlike M.R. James, a devotee of Le Fanu, they do not allow the strange and terrible to emerge from familiar locations or well documented historical backgrounds. They appear to despise such things. This led Lovecraft in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927) to assert that James 'is an artist in incident and arrangement rather than in atmosphere.' On the contrary, M.R. James is a master of atmosphere, but he allows it to evolve slowly and subtly out of banal and apparently anodyne contexts.

Joshi takes us through the late nineteenth century with admirable concision and erudition, occasionally divagating from the English speaking world to pay tribute to continental masters such as Maupassant, whose 'The Horla' is an outstanding work of psychological terror. He examines the three best known horror novels of the period: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Dracula*, adroitly pointing out their failings as literature. And yet these books manage to transcend their faults. Like the great myths, they have found potent metaphors for some of humanity's deepest preoccupations: our divided natures, and our simultaneous lust for and fear of immortality.

One writer of this period who falls, in my view, unjustly into Joshi's 'over-rated' category is Vernon Lee (*nom de plume* of Violet Paget). Her stories have an extraordinarily rich texture. Significantly, in his brief résumé of Lee's work, Joshi fails to mention three of her very best stories, 'Amour Dure', 'A Wicked Voice' and the bizarre 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' with its superbly ironic 'happy' ending. Vernon Lee was a writer who, unlike Poe and Lovecraft, conjured her atmospheres out of her profound knowledge and love of certain historical cultures, notably Renaissance and Baroque Spain and Italy. Perhaps this is not a method which Joshi finds sympathetic.

When Joshi returns to America he divides writers briskly into an East Coast and West Coast school. Of the East Coast, Henry James is the champion, despite his long residence in England. Many of James's early supernatural tales, as Joshi points out, don't quite work, though, I think 'The Last of the Valerii', not mentioned by Joshi, does. Later on, some of his

most profound stories, such as 'The Beast in the Jungle' and 'The Jolly Corner' are what James called 'quasi-supernatural' which is perhaps why Joshi does not refer to them. Increasingly, however, James's prose became hampered by mannerisms which Joshi, rather oddly, calls 'fussy and simpering' ('ponderously tentative and meandering' would be more apt) and his stories collapse under their weight. *The Turn of the Screw* does not suffer from these problems and is a masterpiece of supernatural horror. Joshi convincingly argues, *contra* Edmund Wilson *et al*, that the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessell are 'real' and not figments of the Governess's imagination. It was the other James, M.R., who wrote that 'it is not amiss sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation: but I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable'. I believe that Henry was deliberately pulling this trick in *The Turn of the Screw*, hence the controversy.

Other East Coasters who receive intelligent attention from Joshi include Edith Wharton (who would *not*, incidentally, have appreciated being called 'Henry James lite') and Charlotte 'Yellow Wallpaper' Perkins Gilman. The West Coasters are headed by Ambrose Bierce and other notable practitioners such as Gertrude Atherton. Altogether, East and West make up a substantial contribution to supernatural literature by America which was to see its culmination the following century in that unconventional East Coaster, H.P. Lovecraft.

Throughout the course of the first volume of *Unutterable Horror*, and some of the second, Joshi substantially follows the outline of H.P. Lovecraft's long essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', and nowhere more so than in nominating the four turn-of-the-twentieth-century masters of supernatural fiction as Blackwood, Dunsany, Machen and M.R. James. With these he begins the second volume of *Unutterable Horror*. His treatment of them is exemplary, both judiciously appreciative and well informed. In their various ways they represent a break from the relatively straightforward supernatural narratives of the past. Both Machen and James were ostensibly orthodox in their beliefs, but through their stories they found a natural liberation from the evangelical certainties of their clergyman fathers. James was one of those conservatives who remains so, not because he is convinced that the old certainties are correct, but because he is terribly afraid they may not be. It is this fear that nourished his imagination. Dunsany and Blackwood espoused more esoteric metaphysical ideas, but all would probably have endorsed James's remark to Shane Leslie at the

close of his life: 'Yes, these things exist, but we don't know the rules.' Lord Dunsany perhaps does not quite fit in with the other three, being more a writer of the fantastic than the supernatural, but Joshi is right to include him because of his great influence on Lovecraft.

'H.P. Lovecraft', Joshi tells us, 'is the inescapable figure in twentieth century weird literature', adding, bizarrely, 'even those writers who have consciously eschewed the Lovecraft influence betray his significance in that very act.' It must be hard, even for a critic of Joshi's acuity, to tell whether a writer has 'consciously eschewed the Lovecraft influence' or simply not thought of him at all. In most cases the latter seems more probable. I doubt, for example, whether Robert Aickman ever gave Lovecraft a moment's consideration. I am all too aware of the extent of his influence on American weird fiction, having, as a reviewer, been delighted long enough by Lovecraftian pastiches, but I do not think he is quite so 'inescapable' on this side of the Atlantic.

Notwithstanding, Lovecraft is a force to be reckoned with and Joshi treats him with the consideration he deserves. Those of us who have learned over the years to respect this writer's gifts while still not finding him entirely to their taste will understand him even more through Joshi's intelligent analysis. One of the reasons why Joshi admires him so much is that Lovecraft devised a kind of metaphysical framework for the phenomena he invented. Lovecraft's horrors are vast, alien and godless, thus satisfying both Joshi's craving for wonder, and his rejection of what he calls 'outmoded religious presuppositions'. Those less convinced by Lovecraft's peculiar brand of materialistic mysticism will not be so enamoured, but they cannot fail to be impressed.

Though there is no denying Lovecraft's imaginative reach, there are shortcomings. Lovecraft confessedly has no interest in what he calls 'ordinary people', believing that to explore human character would divert him from his primary fascination with 'man's relation to the cosmos'. Joshi in an aside towards the end of *Unutterable Horror* writes that 'the portrayal of human character and human relationships . . . is the domain of mainstream fiction'—a very questionable assertion. If Lovecraft had had a gift for depicting human beings as individuals, his work would have been different, certainly, but not necessarily less powerful or horrific. The same applies to the question of his prose style. Having reread him recently I find that the fault of his prose is not so much the common one

thrown at him of 'overwriting', whatever that may mean, as of a lack of variation in tone and pace. Lovecraft himself, an engagingly self-aware writer, knew this. Joshi quotes a letter of his alluding to a story by Henry S. Whitehead which says: 'my story would have had none of the lightness, suavity and humour of Whitehead's, but would have been grim and terrible all through.' Like M.R. James, Lovecraft's artistic success lay in the recognition and, to some extent, the exploitation of his limitations.

Joshi dwells a little too long on various pulp writers of the inter-war period, many of them acolytes of Lovecraft. Joshi is, on the whole, not impressed by their output, so it seems as if they are receiving undue attention. I was amused, though, by some of his dry wit at their expense, in particular his comment about a pulp magazine called *Ghost Stories* which 'featured "true-confession" type stories of the "' married a ghost" sort—a subgenre not very amenable to literary artistry.'

Joshi is nothing if not élitist in his outlook, declaring: 'truly meritorious writing in this field, has always, and should always, appeal to the few.' Despite the uncomfortably moralising tone of the above, this is generally a commendable attitude. It means he gives writers like Robert Aickman—very much an acquired taste, but a taste worth acquiring—their due. On the other hand, he sometimes misses out on some harmless fun. His castigation of Dennis Wheatley is particularly harsh. The absence of political and metaphysical correctness should from this distance in time seem merely amusing. Wheatley's black magic yarns such as *The Devil Rides Out*, which might be described as 'Bulldog Drummond with demons', have tremendous panache. Admittedly, one has to read them first at the age of thirteen, as I did, and, presumably, Joshi did not.

When it comes to popular horror blockbusters Joshi is as hard on their avid readers whom at one point he describes as 'brainless,' as he is on many of their practitioners. He is nonetheless fascinated by the 'best seller', a phenomenon which can truly said to have begun at the turn of the twentieth-century with writers like Marie Corelli whose novel of 1895 *The Sorrows of Satan* is sometimes cited as the first of them.

The first horror best seller of the modern era, according to Joshi, is *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). This, in his opinion, marked the inauspicious beginning of 'the horror boom' which lasted roughly until the early 1980s. Joshi appears to be in real distress about the amount of poor stuff that was not only published but managed to sell in huge quantities. He has few

good words to say about Stephen King whom he memorably describes as 'the 800 pound gorilla of contemporary horror fiction'. I am no King expert but, like Joshi, I have noticed the strong vein of self-pity that infects his work. Self-pity, as Anthony Powell observed, is a leading characteristic of popular fiction; so this may be a key to King's extraordinary success. At one point Joshi writes of King, 'my analysis has passed over in merciful silence some truly dreadful works.' He then proceeds not only to name but describe them in some detail, a magnificent example of *paralepsis*. But King is far from being the worst offender in Joshi's book: writers such as Dean R. Koontz, James Herbert and numerous others are consigned to an even lower pit of *Malebolge*. But all is not bleak: Steve and Melanie Tem, Laird Barron and Caitlin R. Kiernan are in receipt of Joshi's warm and well-merited appreciation.

In such a wide-ranging study as *Unutterable Horror*, there are bound to be omissions and a reviewer can always score easy points by indicating them, but I was surprised by how few lacunae there are in Joshi's survey. It was sad to see no mention of that strange figure 'the Rev.' Montague Summers, who wrote a pioneering study of the Gothic novel—not even in the bibliography—and, in such anthologies as *The Supernatural Omnibus*, revived interest in the Victorian ghost story. Besides writing ghost stories himself (not all that good), Summers was also the model for at least one horror novel villain, Canon Copely-Syle in *To the Devil—A Daughter*. Surely Anne Bridge, author of one of the most perfect short ghost stories, 'The Buick Saloon', deserved recognition? And where is Percival Landon of 'Thurnley Abbey' fame? More regrettable still is the absence of Eleanor Scott whose collection, *Randalls Round* contains some very fine stories in the M.R. James tradition, in particular, 'Celui-la'. Elizabeth Jane Howard is mentioned, but only in passing as the co-author with Aickman of *We Are for the Dark*, though her contributions to that volume are arguably more distinguished than Aickman's; and her husband Kingsley Amis's fine supernatural novel *The Green Man* is passed over. Susan Hill should have been noted, if only for her novella, *The Woman in Black* which became an immensely successful play and later film. In fact after Shakespeare, and some reference to Monk Lewis's theatrical output, drama is omitted almost completely from this survey. The double-act of Erckmann-Chatrian is discussed, but not the most famous manifestation of their work in *The Bells* (adapted from *Le Juif Polonais*). This striking play of supernatural terror was the

great vehicle of Bram Stoker's boss, Henry Irving. (Incidentally, it was most probably Irving's performance as Mephistopheles in *Faust*, rather than his Hamlet or Macbeth, as Joshi states, that was a source of inspiration for *Dracula*.) I was sorry to see no mention of Thomas Lovell Beddoes (*Death's Jest Book* etc) in the discussion of 'weird poetry'. Though Vincent O'Sullivan's output was small he deserves to stand alongside R. Murray Gilchrist, Vernon Lee and Arthur Machen as one of the notable horror writers of the 1890s. A more significant omission is that of Charles Williams, whose series of 'spiritual shockers' (as he called them) written in the 1930s and 1940s have, despite some shortcomings, great depth, subtlety and horrific power. Perhaps novels such as Williams's *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallow's Eve*, or C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* (much influenced by Williams), are too overtly Christian for Joshi, despite the force and originality of their supernatural imagery. Why does Joshi mention Oscar Wilde's delightfully witty supernatural tale 'The Canterville Ghost', but not the most brilliant 'comic weird' tale of them all, Max Beerbohm's 'Enoch Soames', about a very minor poet's bargain with the Devil? It is perhaps understandable that Joshi should have omitted Marie Corelli's astonishingly successful and astonishingly ludicrous version of the Faust legend, *The Sorrows of Satan*, but he might have had fun with it.

The most controversial aspect of *Unutterable Horror* has been the forthright way in which Joshi has passed judgement on writers, particularly those still living. Joshi cares deeply about good writing and is generous whenever he can be, but sometimes his critiques would benefit from an objectivity that makes allowances for his own personal tastes and philosophy. This would apply particularly to writers like Russell Kirk or William Peter Blatty, of *Exorcist* fame, whose religious views are antipathetic to his. Given his views on religion, then, it is ironic that Joshi can sometimes sound hieratic, like a Pope pronouncing excommunication, as when he tells us that one writer's voluminous writing for the pulps 'spelled his complete aesthetic damnation'. However, I was less outraged than some have been by this book because I found myself in agreement with the great majority of his assessments.

Joshi can be as guilty of overrating as those he condemns for this same sin. He is, for example, a passionate advocate of Ramsey Campbell and goes so far as to state that he 'can rank with Poe, Lovecraft, Blackwood and Dunsany as among the greatest weird writers in all literary history'. To say the least,

this is a premature canonisation. Campbell is a very well-liked figure in the genre, but to isolate him in this way is to do what even he would find uncomfortable and unjust.

Elsewhere, Joshi's anxiety to point out when he believes that a writer has been overrated by previous critics may look like a lack of generosity, but overpraise can damage the genre by creating false expectations. Like Joshi I am surprised that two such mediocre writers as Basil Copper and Robert Chetwynde Hayes have now seemingly acquired classic status. Like him, I do not share the current enthusiasm for Joe Hill whose *20th Century Ghosts* was an interesting but decidedly flawed debut.

On the other hand, Joshi has an eye for the still underrated quality of writers such as the late Joel Lane and Nicholas Royle, though Mark Samuels, Adam Nevill, Simon Strantzas and Quentin S. Crisp, to name but four equally deserving of his attention, have so far escaped it. Joshi is refreshingly free from received wisdom; he makes up his own mind, expressing his views with the utmost candour. He seems to take poor writing as a personal affront. Of one venerable but still living horror writer, Joshi comments: 'Never has such a bad writer written so much that has been read by so many. . . . The inherent absurdity of [*****]'s work as a whole will cause posterity to deal with it in its usual fashion, and it will end up in the maw of oblivion where it belongs.' I cannot really quarrel with that particular verdict, but I would have preferred a more temperate expression of it: a touch of humour would not have gone amiss. Joshi sometimes crosses over from blunt honesty into what looks strangely like vindictiveness.

I would advise any reader (as, I am sure, would Joshi) *not* to regard his judgements as infallible. Enjoy his vituperations if you can; attend to his occasional adulations, but do both with a pinch of salt. Find the books Joshi talks about, read them, then make up your own mind. This work, being intelligent, well researched, lucidly written and free from academic jargon, is an invaluable introduction to the genre. It is also a useful reference work and stimulus for debate to those already familiar with it. Above all, *Unutterable Horror* is never dull, and it articulates eloquently the enduring value of supernatural horror in literature.