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THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE by H. P. Lovecraft (Lancer, 95¢)

THE DARK MAN AND OTHERS by Robert E. Howard (Lancer, 95¢)

The republication of these two volumes by contemporaneous writers who worked in very much the same vein (macroscopically) makes it sensible to look at the differences between these writers and their works. Perhaps the differences are too obvious to be fussed over, but to me they are of some interest in themselves.

I am not now and never have been much of an admirer of Lovecraft's work: this volume is the first I have been able to penetrate far beyond the introduction. Indeed, such is my devotion to duty that I read almost all the way through, skipping only the duller passages of The Shadow Out Of Time (which, those familiar with that particular novella will agree, amounts to quite a sizable fraction).

Lovecraft's work is quite adequately dismissed by Edmund Wilson in his essay Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous. It is made plain that one of the greater problems faced by the reader of Lovecraft is that he has no sooner accustomed himself, as it were, to the omniscient conical snails than Lovecraft brings on the invisible whistling octopus. More than this, as so many writers have pointed out, Lovecraft was so unwilling to bring his monsters onstage that one spends most of the story waiting for something to happen: and those who've read one or two of Lovecraft's stories will know exactly what is coming. It is rather as though H.P.L. were more than somewhat constipated and felt obliged to record, in allegorical form, each successful shit. But not all the Lovecraft stories in this volume conclude with the revealing of yet another horrid monster: in The Shadow Out Of Time, for instance, the horror is the discovery of the narrator's own handwriting in a volume buried for thousands of years. This underlines one of the problems faced by the writer of horror stories: that everything but the ultimate horror must be as believable and normal as possible. Writers like Lovecraft ignore this and create faery worlds in which anything can happen and no one cares. Genuine horror stories happen in the real world and, though the object of horror may only manifest itself at the very end, the reader has not been prepared for it. Stories like those of Lovecraft which build up tension from the beginning and which almost seem to rely upon the reader knowing the outcome (and which, moreover, are generally set against one particular fantastic background) can only induce a sort of ersatz intellectual (if that is not too strong a word) horror. Perhaps it would be easier to describe Lovecraft's stuff as 'horror stories for neurotics'.

Not surprising. As Edmund Wilson remarks 'Lovecraft himself, however, is a little more interesting than his stories'. For Wilson, of course, the most important word in the sentence is 'little'. But in his ordinary (?) day-to-day life as recorded by his many friends, Howard Phillips Lovecraft is some-

thing of a giant. It may be Lovecraft's relatively vast correspondence, the influence of his many friends, those friends' recollections of the minutiae of Lovecraft's existence or a part of the International Communist Conspiracy, but Lovecraft the person is certainly made to appear to be of more than passing interest.

I am not so sure that I would be interested in the life and times of Robert E. Howard. But I have tried to read all of Howard's fiction. It's easy to see the difference between Howard and Lovecraft. Fortunately in these two volumes we have the writers describing a similar scene - the destruction of a house by supernatural means. Lovecraft's protagonist has spent a couple of pages examining a particularly loathsome book:

...'As the old man whispered the words 'more the same' a tiny spattering impact was heard and something showed on the yellowed paper of the upturned volume. I thought of the rain and of a leaky roof, but rain is not red. On the butcher's shop of the Anzique cannibals a small red spattering glistened picturequely, lending vividness to the horror of the engraving. The old man saw it, and stopped whispering even before my glance of horror made it necessary; saw it and glanced quickly toward the floor of the room he had left an hour before. I followed his glance, and upheld just above us on the loose plaster of the ancient ceiling a large irregular spot of wet crimson which seemed to spread even as I viewed it. I did not shriek or move, but merely shut my eyes. A moment later came the titanic thunderbolt of thunderbolts; blasting that accursed house of unutterable secrets and bring the oblivion which alone saved my mind.'

(The Picture In The House, Weird Tales, 1924. The 'upheld' is Lancer's error, not Lovecraft's.)

Howard's narrator and his offsider have just fled a house in which a gentleman is just paying the last installment of an HP debt to the devil:

...'Behind us the flames leaped up with a crackling roar as we fled down the hill. Conrad, glancing over his shoulder, halted suddenly, wheeled and flung up his arms like a madman, and screamed, "Soul and body he sold to Malik Tous, who is Satan, two hundred and fifty years ago! This was the night of payment - and my God - look! Look! The Fiend has claimed his own!

'I looked, frozen with horror. Flames had enveloped the whole house with appalling swiftness, and now the great mass was etched against the shadowed sky, a crimson inferno. And above the holocaust hovered a gigantic black shadow like a monstrous bat, and from its dark clutch dangled a small white thing, like the body of a man, dangling limply. Then, even as we cried out in horror, it was gone and our dazed gaze met only the shuddering walls and blazing roof which crumpled into the flames with an earth-shaking roar.'

(Dig Me No Grave, Weird Tales, 1937. I.e. published posthumously.)

There is no need to dwell at length upon the obvious differences between the two treatments: though both narrators do not move, for example, Lovecraft's shuts his eyes. Howard's has already removed himself from the place of danger.

But one must set Howard's description of the burning house also against Lovecraft's handling of the similar scene in The Colour Out Of Space to really appreciate the difference. In The Picture In The House H.P.L. is not so much interested in the description of the action at all (and this is a fairly general characteristic) and one has to find a place wherein Lovecraft is forced to do some description.

'When they looked back toward the valley and the distant Gardner place at the bottom they saw a fearsome sight. All the farm was shining with the hideous unknown blend of colour; trees, buildings, and even such grass and herbage as had not been wholly changed to lethal grey brittleness. The boughs were all straining skyward, tipped with tongues of foul flame, and lambent tricklings of the same monstrous fire were creeping about the ridgepoles of the house, barn and sheds. It was a scene from a vision of Fuseli, and over all the rest reigned that riot of luminous amorphousness, that alien and undimensioned rainbow of cryptic poison from the wall - seething, feeling, lapping, reaching, scintillating, straining, and ~~whizzing~~ malignly bubbling in its cosmic and unrecognizable chromaticism.'

(The Colour Out Of Space, Amazing Stories, 1927.)

This is vastly inferior to Howard's piece, although one could try to offset 'tipped with tongues of foul flame' against Howard's repetition of 'dangle', or 'seething, feeling & Co.' against Howard's 'dazed gaze', and so on. Howard has a particular image to project into his reader's mind, while H.P.L. just has oozy gush (not an unfair description of Lovecraft's writing in general). Lovecraft was short-sighted, as it were, and was unable to clearly visualize (at least at one remove) his horrors: Howard described what he wanted his readers to see.

This difference in attitudes poses an aesthetic question: but let's stay with Lovecraft and Howard.

Howard, unlike Lovecraft, gets a complete brush-off in Dlish's two advent books. And in Damon Knight's IN SEARCH OF WONDER there's a less than perfect review of THE COMING OF CONAN (Gnome, 1953) and one other passing mention. Both critics discuss Lovecraft at least briefly. This discrimination seems difficult to understand, but it must also be remembered that Lovecraft has been published widely in the U.K. as well as the U.S. whereas I think CONAN THE CONQUEROR of Howard's work has been published in the U.K.

Knight doesn't admire Howard's work to any great extent: 'All great fantasies' he supposes 'are written by emotionally crippled men'. The evidence he attaches to this speculation is that Howard was 'so morbidly attached to his mother that when she died he committed suicide'. It seems odd to me to describe such a person as 'emotionally crippled', but we shall have to make do with it as it is the only worthwhile remark made about Howard's work in the review.

THE DARK MAN AND OTHERS doesn't contain the best of Howard's non-hero fantasy: I am inclined to think that Lancer's WOLFSHEAD (1968) which was largely picked from SKULLFACE AND OTHERS is rather better and Dell's BRAN MAK MORN (1969), though largely concerned with the standard Howard heroes, contained a few other yarns of high standard (such as THE DARK MAN.....). Nevertheless THE DARK MAN AND OTHERS shows Howard hard at work on the short fantasy; there are fifteen stories in the 256 pages.

The Voice Of El-Lil is a longish story (in this company) which illustrates one of Howard's weaknesses. The narrator, Bill Kirby is of a 'breed as old as Europe' and so on and so on. This is one of the few stories in THE DARK MAN in which the characters are basically twentieth-century. And Howard can't make them live. Either he can't describe people as they are or he was forced to conform to the pulp standards of his day. Since Bill Kirby ('broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, heavy-limbed, the perfect fighting man, brown-faced, blue-eyed and tawny-haired.') seems rather pulpish, I'd be inclined to hold the latter view. The Voice Of El-Lil is a lost tribe story. Ugh.

Pigeons From Hell is a different matter. In this story Howard works very hard to keep the plot reasonable and believable, builds the tension steadily throughout the story and avoids the mistake of making too many quantum jumps in the acceptability of changes. It's a superior piece of work, and deserving of more recognition than it has had.

The Dark Man and The Gods Of Bal-Sagoth are long pieces about Turlogh O'Brien, a Conan variant (like most of Howard's heroes). No one would notice if the stories were rewritten into Conan form.

People Of The Dark, The Children Of The Night and The Garden Of Fear are all stories in which the protagonist has both a present and a far-in-the-past mind in the one body, and in each case the matter is resolved by the combined knowledge of the two personalities. It is a good gimmick, and Howard was careful to space the stories through three publications.

Then there are a couple of westerns (?), The Dead Remember and The Man On The Ground with a touch of the supernatural which doesn't disturb the mind greatly. And a number of shorter stories, all of them well enough made, but not being particularly scintillating examples of anything, except perhaps Dig Me No Grave which has been discussed above.

The major stories in the Lovecraft collection which haven't yet been mentioned are The Call Of Cthulhu and The Whisperer In Darkness.

I find it difficult to recommend the Lovecraft to anyone. The flatness of Lovecraft's style (as opposed to that variety of vocabulary best found in thesauruses) and the predictability of the action are overwhelming.

But by contrast THE DARK MAN is a good buy. There's a great deal of variety (in quality too, of course) and Howard's genuine desire to make his characters live (even though no such superbeings could ever exist; a remark to be considered on the superhero circuit only) and move about shows through unmistakably in all of the separate stories. Howard's work should be looked at more closely, especially by those who have scorned it in the past.