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A Review of *Nothing is Everything* (2018)

Reviewed by Oliver Rendle

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NOTHING IS EVERYTHING IS REALLY QUITE SOMETHING

Review by Oliver Rendle

Strantzas, Simon. *Nothing is Everything*. Undertow Publications, 2018. Short story collection.

Simon Strantzas' *Nothing is Everything* (2018) is a morosely-engaging short story collection that blends together Weird, New-Weird, and Pessimistic elements while presenting an ambivalent meta-critique of these same sub-genres. Though the tonal transitions between despair, hope, and panic may feel disjointed to some readers, Strantzas' collection uses them – alongside dramatic shifts between reality, fantasy, and surrealism – to enact the epistemological slippage it frequently depicts. As such, *Nothing is Everything* ultimately represents a break from Lovecraftian conservatism and a growing willingness to engage with a radically non-anthropocentric worldview, with Strantzas' protagonists prepared to risk an incomprehensible demise if it means an escape from daily suffering.

Without authorial fanfare the collection opens with "In This Twilight," a cleverly updated, post-modern engagement with the archetypal Weird narrative. Through the philosophical musings of a fellow outcast, music student Harriet finds an escape from her socially-constructed anxiety, loneliness, and fear. Signifying his departure from traditional Weird values, Strantzas supplants eldritch scriptures with colloquial adolescent chatter, replaces Arkham professors with socially inept students, and reframes fraught battles with eldritch monstrosities as relatable, individuated struggles with politeness and propriety. And while Harriet ultimately surrenders herself to an ambiguous, subjectless void – where "all that remained was dark" – this escape from reality is presented as nihilistically therapeutic (28).

Continuing to emphasise the ambivalence of this escape, in "Our Town's Talent" a homogeneous mass of suburban housewives discover that their nuclear family values are smothering the qualities that make them unique. Strantzas' story proclaims that this facade can only be thrust aside by a radically empowered community that has destroyed all prior relationships with the unenlightened. The implied violence and callousness embodied in this revolution, when it occurs, sours an otherwise sweet conclusion, leaving the reader more unnerved by the resultant commonwealth of enlightened individuals than the simulacra of conditioned (im)personalities that preceded it. As such, "Our Town's Talent" indicates an underlying meta-cynicism regarding the Weird escape that Strantzas' own collection glorifies.

Though she similarly rejects mundanity, Samantha, the protagonist in "These Last Embers," is yet to reach the maddening monotony depicted in "Our Town's Talent." By foregrounding the escalating uncanniness that Samantha encounters when returning to her childhood home, Strantzas

presents a surreal confrontation with existential vertigo. Samantha's "cold realization" that her assumed sanctuary is an inaccessible temporal location – not a secluded refuge – constitutes an unnerving cocktail of nostalgia and pain for her, and this ideological disruption is eerily mirrored by the breakdown of the text's realism (51). Once more concluding with carefully maintained ambiguity, Samantha embraces the last beacon of familiarity she has left in her past, ceasing to care whether her desperate departure from reality leads to salvation or destruction.

Even Strantzias' more optimistic tales subvert any potentially uplifting message. In "The Flower Unfolds," for instance, meek office worker Candice rediscovers a sexuality – and a personality – that her corporate career has warped into something unquestionably menacing. When Candice emerges from her depressive routine of mental self-flagellation she is dazzled and sickened by the sudden abundance of emotional and sensual stimulus. Though she does overcome this initial aversion, Strantzias denies his readers the catharsis we would hope to find in Candice's new-found freedom. Instead, the narratorial perspective quickly shifts to the next, similar case of self-immolation, as Strantzias is determined to leave a lingering taste of tragedy rather than triumph.

A stark outlier in the collection, Strantzias' next tale stands out due to its emphatically non-contemporary setting. "Ghost Dogs" features a trio of emotionally and psychologically damaged children, through whom the reader discovers life in a New-Weird, post-apocalyptic shantytown in an organic and disturbing way. For the narrator – as for many young trauma victims – life becomes a stifling purgatory, where violence is commonplace, healthy relationships are unsustainable, and autonomy is only found through masochistic rebellion. By blurring the distinction between the unknowns of childhood and the unknowns of Weird fiction, Strantzias unsettles reality and foregrounds the subjective experiences of fear, doubt, and isolation. Similar to "In This Twilight" and its ambiguous conclusion, "Ghost Dogs" ends with the protagonist escaping her daily suffering through a radical break from reality – and a similar bitter-sweet triumph.

From pessimistic individuality to pessimistic companionship, Strantzias follows "Ghost Dogs" with "In The Tall Grass," the story of rural farmer Heike and her disfigured child, Baum. Physicalised by his dryad-like form, Baum embodies everything that a disabled child can represent to a parent. He is literally natural to his mother – organically inquisitive, free of pollution, and full of the potential to grow and change. However, he is also psychologically demanding and a heavily emotional reminder of her husband's death. Whether the reader tries to interpret Baum's disfigurement as supernatural or "an important autosomal case" of *Epidermodysplasia verruciformis*, Strantzias deliberately confounds both explanations (117). By using the Weird elements of the story to focus, instead, on the self-destructive grief that Heike associates with Baum and her deceased husband, Strantzias emphasises the inevitability of pain in the experience of love.

Furthermore, Strantzias repeatedly demonstrates commendable nuance in his representations of existential anxiety, especially in "The Fifth Stone." Here, the unnamed protagonist epitomises life as described by Thomas Ligotti and Eugene Thacker, where innate philosophical suffering is made bearable by "the yoke of medication" and the "prison" of mundanity (138). As such, the protagonist

can only escape philosophical suffering (here represented as a plague of monstrous and “powerful” forms) by emotionally castrating herself (139). When these cosmic presences develop into a truly existential threat, the positivity imperative and successive anticlimactic life achievements have left her nothing to fight for, undermining both her civic resolve and her will to live. As such, “The Fifth Stone” subverts the archetypal martyr trope, representing a troublingly nihilistic – yet touchingly *human* – twist on the concept of self-sacrifice in Weird narratives, adding another facet to Strantzas’ meta-critique of the sub-genre.

After the bleak finale of “The Fifth Stone,” “The Terrific Mr Toucan” is a comparatively optimistic tale, which brings variety to Strantzas’ collection without dispelling its melancholic tone. The protagonist is an ageing and estranged mother struggling to admit that she wishes her life “had turned out different” (154). Tinged with wistful longing, this particular story associates the unknown with the past, not the future – the Weird here embodied in a stage magician’s distorted vision of a life that she could have had. If the young protagonists in such tales as “These Last Embers” and “Ghost Dogs” are fleeing daily suffering by grasping incomprehensible alternatives, then “The Terrific Mr Toucan” warns us, cynically, that we may regret not making the same choice.

Nowhere is Strantzas’ meta-commentary as self-reflexively critical as in “Alexandra Lost.” Here, an oblivious – or wilfully ignorant – partner, Leonard, and separation anxiety force the eponymous Alexandra on a road trip across upstate New York, specifically to perceive the “vastness” of the ocean (180). Through this sublime experience Alexandra unwillingly confronts her suspicion that she is “adrift in the void of the unfathomable universe,” and though her fate is once more left ambiguous by the use of surreal and abstract imagery, her “excruciating pain” and “horror” are not (174; 186-187). Thus, the reader is ultimately encouraged to sympathise with Alexandra’s suffering rather than the pleasure Leonard feels when experiencing phenomena that are “beyond real” (181). And, as implicit connoisseurs of these same Weird phenomena, Strantzas’ readers must consider the efficacy of how they themselves introduce others to existentialist concepts and texts.

The collection’s finale, “All Reality Blossoms in Flames,” features Mae Olsen, an art-restorer who stumbles from a world of artistic contemplation into a (literal) labyrinth of nearly-perceived monsters and self-doubt. Having blindly traversed this labyrinth she arrives at a nightmare of perfect lucidity, where she confronts the void of meaning in modern life. Sequentially drawing on stylistic elements of Robert Chambers, H. P. Lovecraft and Thomas Ligotti, this last addition ends with the modern world being consumed by a self-destructive cataclysm – a surreal revolutionary act that is repeatedly, explicitly, and ambivalently compared to an act of terrorism. Thus, Strantzas reconstitutes the philosophy of the Weird escape as a timely and divisive political issue, foregrounding the problematic subjectivity of the Weird’s philosophical liberation and providing a suitably meta-critical climax for this self-reflective collection.

In *Nothing is Everything*, Strantzas’ female protagonists are doomed to ruminate on their own ennui or commit to a frantic smothering of their anxieties. Though the limited range of perspectives does undermine the purported universality of cosmic horror – as it always has – the

focus on (loosely) shared experience brings a unifying personality to the collection, turning these aesthetically eclectic tales into a thought-provoking journey through the unknowable aspects of an individual's life. Ultimately, Strantzas' collection suggests an increasing willingness to embrace a liberal view of the Weird escape, less out of true nihilism and more as a judgement on the intolerable routines that (supposedly) constitute our modern lives.

BIONOTE

Oliver Rendle is currently undertaking his PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Gothic Studies, where he researches nihilistic satire, philosophically cynical humour and their relationship to sociopolitical disillusion in contemporary culture. He is a graduate of the University of Glasgow's Fantasy MLitt program, where he specialised in humour theory and existential horror, and he has presented papers on these topics at Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations, Fantastika, and Tales of Terror.