

H.P.Lovecraft – Against the world, against life.

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Preface

When I began writing this essay (around the end of 1988), I found myself in the same situation as many thousands of other readers. Having discovered the stories of Lovecraft at the age of seven, I immediately immersed myself in every one of his works available in French[1]. Later, with a declining interest, I explored those who continued the Cthulhu Mythos, as well as the authors to whom Lovecraft felt close (Dunsany, Robert Howard, Clark Ashton Smith). From time to time, often enough, I returned to the ‘major works’ of Lovecraft; they continued to exercise a strange attraction over me, contradictory to all the rest of my taste in literature; I knew absolutely nothing about his life.

On reflection, it seems to me that I wrote this book like a sort of first novel. A novel with only one character (H.P.Lovecraft himself); a novel with the constraint that all the facts related, all the texts cited had to be accurate; but, all the same, a type of novel. The first thing that surprised me in discovering Lovecraft was his absolute materialism; unlike many of his admirers and commentators, he never considered his myths, his theogonies, his ‘ancient races’ as anything other than pure imaginary creations. The other source of astonishment was his obsessional racism; never, in reading his descriptions of nightmarish creatures, had I supposed that they could have had their source in *real* human beings. The analysis of racism in literature has been focused for half a century on Céline; the case of Lovecraft is actually more interesting and more typical. With him the intellectual constructions, the analyses of decadence play only a secondary role. A writer of the fantastic (and one of the greatest), he pursued racism brutally to its most profound source: *fear*. His own life, in this regard, makes a valuable example. A provincial gentleman convinced of the superiority of his anglo-saxon origins, he never had anything more than a passing contempt for other races. His time in the rougher areas of New York was to change everything. These strange creatures became *rivals*, neighbours, enemies who were probably his superiors in terms of brute-force. Thus, in a progressive delirium of masochism and of terror, came the demand that they must be destroyed.

The transformation, then, is complete. Few authors, including the greats of imaginative literature, have made *so little* concession to reality. For my part, I obviously don’t follow Lovecraft in his hatred of every form of realism, in his heartfelt rejection of every subject touching on money or sex; but I did perhaps, especially in later years, draw some profit from those lines where I read of it having “destroyed the structure of the traditional narrative” through the systematic use of scientific terms and concepts. His originality, in this sense, appears greater than ever. I wrote at the time that there was something “not very literary” about Lovecraft. Since then I’ve had a bizarre confirmation of this. In the course of book-signings, from time to time, young people come to ask me to sign the book. They have discovered Lovecraft through the intermediary of role-playing games or CD-Roms. They haven’t read him, and haven’t any intention to do so. However, curiously, they long – regardless of the texts – to know more about this individual, and the way in which he constructed his world.

This extraordinary power of the creator of a universe, this visionary force probably had too much impact on me at the time, and prevented me – and this is my only regret – from giving sufficient homage to Lovecraft’s style. His writing, in fact, doesn’t consist uniquely of hypertrophy and delirium; there is also with him a delicacy, a luminous profundity that is extremely rare. This is the case in particular with *The Whisperer in Darkness*[2], a short story that I don’t mention in my essay, within which we find paragraphs like the following :

“Besides, there was a strangely calming element of cosmic beauty in the hypnotic landscape through which we climbed and plunged fantastically. Time had lost itself in the labyrinths behind, and around us stretched only the flowering waves of faery and the recaptured loveliness of vanished centuries – the hoary groves, the untainted pastures edged with gay autumnal blossoms, and at vast intervals the small brown farmsteads nestling amidst huge trees beneath vertical precipices of fragrant brier and meadow-grass. Even the sunlight assumed a supernal glamour, as if some special atmosphere or exhalation mantled the whole region. I have seen nothing like it before save in the magic vistas that sometimes form the backgrounds of Italian primitives. Sodoma and Leonardo conceived such expanses, but only in the distance, and through the vaultings of Renaissance arcades. We were now burrowing bodily through the midst of the picture, and I seemed to find in its necromancy a thing I had innately known or inherited and for which I had always been vainly searching.”

We are here at once at the moment when an extreme acuity of sensory perception comes very close to provoking an overturning of our philosophical perception of the world; in other words, we are in the realm of poetry.

Michel HOUELLEBECQ, 1998

NOTES

[1] This was, at the time, not so easy. The situation has completely changed thanks to the publication, under the direction of Francis Lacassin, of three volumes of Lovecraft as part of the ‘Bouquins’ collection (Robert Laffont) [note in the original].

The English equivalent is HarperCollins’ Three-volume *H.P. Lovecraft Omnibus*, first published 1993-4

[2] *The Whisperer in Darkness, Omnibus*, vol. 3, pp 154-235 – The quote is from pp206-7.

Part 1: An Alternative Universe

“Maybe it’s necessary to have suffered a lot to appreciate Lovecraft.”
(Jacques Bergier)

Life is disappointing and full of sorrow. It would be pointless, then, to write more realist novels. In general, we know already what reality has in store for us; and we have not the slightest desire to know more. Humanity itself inspires in us no more than a mild curiosity. All their “writings” in all their prodigious subtlety, their “situations”, their anecdotes...All this does nothing, once the book is closed, except confirm in us a slight sensation of nausea already sufficiently nourished by any given day of ‘real life’.

Now, listen to Howard Philips Lovecraft: “I am so tired of humanity and of the world that nothing interests me unless it involves at least two murders per page, or speaks of nameless horrors emanating from the outer reaches of space.”

Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890-1937). We have need of a supreme antidote against all forms of realism.

When one loves life, one doesn’t read. One hardly goes to the cinema, even. That is to say, access to the artistic universe is more or less reserved for those who are *a bit troubled*. Lovecraft was a bit more than *a bit troubled*. In 1908, at the age of 18, he was the victim of what we might describe as a “nervous breakdown”, and sank into a lethargy that was to last for a dozen years. At the age when his old classmates, impatiently crossing the bridge of childhood, threw themselves into life like a marvelous adventure into the unknown, he cloistered himself in his home, did not speak to his mother, refused to get up all day, shuffling about in his dressing gown all night.

What’s more, he hadn’t even started writing yet.

What did he do? Perhaps read a little. We’re not even sure of that. In fact his biographers agree that they don’t know much and, to all appearances, at least between 18 and 23 years old, he did absolutely nothing.

Then, little by little, between 1913 and 1918, very slowly, things improved. Little by little, he re-established contact with the human race. It wasn’t easy. In May 1918, he wrote to Alfred Galpin[1]: “I’m only half alive; most of my energy is taken up just in sitting and walking; my nervous system is in a state of total disrepair, and I am completely stupefied and apathetic, except when I happen upon something that particularly interests me.”

It is definitively useless to indulge in psychodramatic hypotheses here. Because Lovecraft is a lucid, intelligent and sincere man. A sort of lethargic terror had fallen on him when he turned 18, and he knew its origin perfectly well. In a letter in 1920, he reminisces at length on his childhood. His little train set, with the wagons piled up with packing cases...The slotted box where he set up his marionette theatre to perform. And later his garden, for which he himself had drawn up the plans and designed the paths; irrigated by a system of canals dug with his own hands, the garden took the form of terraces built around a small lawn, with a sundial at the centre. It was, he said, “the kingdom of my adolescence.”

Then comes this passage, which concludes the letter: “I perceive now that I am becoming too aged to feel any pleasure. Unsympathetic times have let their ferocious grip fall on me, and I am 17. Big boys don’t play with doll’s houses and pretend gardens and, full of sorrow, I must cede

my world to a younger boy who lives the other side of the garden. And after this time, I will never again dig the earth or make paths and roads, because the fugitive joy of childhood will never be known again. Adulthood is hell.”

Adulthood is hell. Faced with a position this stubborn, the “moralists” of our time grumble in a vaguely disapproving manner, waiting for the moment to float their obscene subtexts. Maybe Lovecraft really couldn’t become an adult; but what is certain is that he did not want to. And considering the values which rule the adult world, it’s difficult to argue the case. The reality principle, the pleasure principle, competition, permanent challenge, sex and work...nothing to sing Hallelujah about.

Lovecraft knows there’s nothing to this world. And he plays the role of the loser every time. In theory as in practice. He has lost his childhood, he has equally lost his faith. The world disgusts him, and he sees no reason to suppose that things could be presented otherwise, by *looking on the bright side*. He considers all religions equally compromised by their ‘saccharine illusions’, rendered obsolete by the progress of scientific knowledge. In his periods of exceptional good humour, he will speak of an ‘enchanted circle’ of religious belief; but this is a circle from which he feels, anyhow, banished.

Very few will have been at this point of saturation, penetrated right to the marrow by the absolute void of every human aspiration. The universe is merely a chance arrangement of elementary particles[2]. A transitory image in the midst of chaos. Which will end with the inevitable: The human race will disappear. Other races will appear, and disappear in turn. The heavens are cold and empty, traversed by the faint light of half-dead stars. Which, also, will disappear. Everything disappears. And human actions are just as random and senseless as the movements of elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, fine sentiments? Pure “victorian fictions”. There is only egotism. Cold, undiluted and dazzling.

Lovecraft is well aware of the depressing nature of these conclusions. As he wrote in 1918, “all rationalism tends to minimize the value and importance of life, and to diminish the total quantity of human happiness. In some cases the truth could cause suicide, or at least precipitate a near-suicidal depression.”

His atheistic and materialist convictions would not change at all. They were reprised in letter after letter, with an almost masochistic delectation.

Of course, life has no meaning. But neither does death. And this is one of the things that chills the blood when one discovers Lovecraft’s universe. The death of his heroes has no meaning. It brings no relief. It doesn’t bring the story to a conclusion, not at all. Implacably, HPL destroys his characters without suggesting more than the dismemberment of a puppet. Indifferent to their wretched comings and goings, the cosmic fear continues to grow. It expands and articulates itself. The Great Cthulhu arises from his slumber.

What is the Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electrons, like ourselves. The terror of Lovecraft is rigorously materialist. But it is strongly possible, from the free play of cosmic forces, that the Great Cthulhu has at his disposal a force and a power of action considerably superior to ours. Which is not, *a priori*, anything especially reassuring.

In all his voyages in the strange worlds of the unknown, Lovecraft never brings back any good news. Maybe, he confirms to us, there is something hidden, which can sometimes be perceived, behind the veil of reality. But in truth, it is something vile.

It is certainly possible that beyond the limited purview of our perceptions, other entities exist. Other creatures, other races, other concepts and other intelligences. Amidst these entities must surely be some of far superior intelligence and knowledge. But this isn’t necessarily good news. What would we think if these creatures, so different from ourselves, exhibited in some way a

similar *moral* nature? Nothing permits us to suppose a transgression of the universal laws of egotism and wickedness. It is ridiculous to imagine that these beings would wait for us in some far corner of the cosmos, full of wisdom and benevolence, to guide us toward some sort of mutual harmony. To imagine the way they would treat us if we came into contact with them, we should rather recollect the way in which we ourselves treat “inferior intelligences”, rabbits and frogs. In the best case scenario, they serve as *food*; sometimes - often – we simply kill them for the pleasure of it. These are, Lovecraft warns us, the true models for our future relations with “alien intelligences”. Maybe certain particularly fine specimens of the human race may have the honour of ending up on the dissecting table; and that’s it.

And, once more, none of this has any meaning whatsoever.

For humans of the end of the twentieth century, this cosmos devoid of hope is absolutely our world. This abject universe, where fear spreads in concentric circles from the unnameable revelation, this universe where our only imaginable destiny is to be *crushed* and *devoured*, we recognize absolutely as our mental universe. And Lovecraft’s success is already just a symptom of those who want to capture this state of mind in quick and precise soundbites. Today more than ever we can make our own this *declaration of principles* which opens *Arthur Jermyn*[3]: “Life is a hideous thing; and from the background behind what we know of it peer demoniacal hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous.”

The paradox, meanwhile, is that we prefer this universe, hideous as it is, to our reality. In this we are the very readers for whom Lovecraft was waiting. We read his stories in exactly the same sickness of spirit in which he wrote them. Satan or Nyarlathotep, what does it matter, we can’t bear another minute of *realism*. And, let it be said, Satan is somewhat devalued by his prolonged familiarity with the shameful convolutions of our ordinary sins. Much better Nyarlathotep, wicked, inhuman, cold like ice. *Subb-haqua Nyarlathotep!*

We can easily see why reading Lovecraft constitutes a paradoxical comfort for the lost souls of this world. We can in fact recommend it to all those who, for one reason or another, have come to suffer a true *revulsion* for life in all its forms. The nervous shock provoked by a first reading is, in some cases, quite considerable. One smiles to oneself, whistles a tune from an operetta. One’s view of life, however, is permanently modified.

After the introduction of the virus to France by Jacques Bergier, the growth in his readership has been considerable. Like most of the infected, I discovered HPL for myself at the age of 7 through the intermediary of a “friend”. What a shock. I never knew that literature could do that. And, what’s more, I’m still not entirely persuaded of it. There is something *not very literary* about Lovecraft.

To convince oneself of this, one need only consider that a good fifteen writers (including Frank Belknap Long, Robert Bloch, Lin Carter, Fred Chappell, August Derleth, Donald Wandrei) have dedicated all or part of their oeuvre to developing and enriching the myths created by HPL. And not subtly, in secret, but in a completely open way. The filiation is even systematically reinforced by their using the same *words*, which take on an incantatory air (the wild hills to the east of Arkham, Miskatonic University, Irem, city of a thousand columns,...R’lyeh, Sarnath, Dagon, Nyarlathotep...and above all, the unnameable, the blasphemous Necronomicon, whose voice can only be pronounced in hushed tones). *Iâ! Iâ! Shub-niggurath! The goat with a thousand young!* In an era that puts a premium on originality as the supreme artistic value, there is something surprising in this. In fact, to quote Francis Lacassin[4], nothing like this has been recorded since Homer and the epic poems of the Middle Ages. We have here, then, we must humbly recognize, a “mythmaker”.

Ritual Literature

To create a great popular myth is to create a ritual that the reader awaits with impatience, that he rediscovers each time with a greater pleasure, seduced again by a new repetition in a slightly different form, experienced each time as a greater profundity.

Considered like this, things seem almost simple. And yet, successes are rare in the history of literature. It's not at all easy, in reality, to create a new religion.

To understand what's at issue, one must appreciate the strength of that sense of frustration that overran England at the death of Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle had no choice: he was forced to revive his hero. When, defeated himself by death, the author in turn laid down his arms, a feeling of resigned sadness passed over the world. They would have to be satisfied with the fifty or so existing Sherlock Holmes stories, reading and rereading them all tirelessly. Receiving with a resigned smile the inevitable (and rarely amusing) parodies, keeping in their heart the dream of an impossible prolongation of the central core, of the real heart of the myth. An old Indian army packing-case, where, magically, are discovered some unknown Sherlock Holmes stories...

Lovecraft, who admired Conan Doyle, succeeded in creating a myth just as popular, just as vivacious and irresistible. The two men had in common, you could say, a remarkable talent in *storytelling*. Of course. But something else is in play. Neither Alexandre Dumas nor Jules Verne were mediocre storytellers. But nothing in their work approaches the stature of the great detective of Baker Street.

Of course the stories of Sherlock Holmes centre on one character, whereas with Lovecraft we meet not one real specimen of humanity. Certainly, this is an important distinction, very important; but not truly essential. One could compare it to the distinction between theistic and atheistic religions. The truly fundamental character that they share, that which we may properly call *religious*, remains difficult to define – even to approach directly.

Another small difference we might also note – an irrelevance to literary history, a tragedy for the individual – is that Conan Doyle had ample opportunity to reflect on the fact that he was in the process of creating an essential myth. Lovecraft did not. At the moment of his death, he had the net impression that his creation would die along with him[5].

However, he already had disciples. But he didn't think anything of them. He certainly corresponded with young writers (Bloch, Bellknap, Long...) but never advised them strongly to take the same path as he had. He never assumed the position of a master, or a model. He received their first efforts with exemplary tact and modesty. He was a true friend to them, courteous, considerate and kind; never an intellectual mentor.

Absolutely incapable of letting a letter go without a response, unwilling to pester his creditors when his editing work went unpaid, systematically underestimating his contribution to those newcomers who, without him, wouldn't have seen the light of day, Lovecraft comported himself throughout his life as an authentic gentleman.

Of course, he would have loved to have become a writer. But not *at any cost*. In 1925, in a moment of despondency, he noted: "I am almost resolved to write no more stories, but simply to dream when I'm of a mind to do so, without stopping to do something so vulgar as transcribe my dreams for a public of swine. I have concluded that literature is not a suitable occupation for a gentleman; and that writing will never be considered as an elegant art, to which one might apply oneself exclusively and without discernment."

Fortunately he continued, and his greatest stories were written after this letter. But to the end, he remained above all, a "kindly old gentleman, native of Providence (Rhode Island)". And never, absolutely never, a professional writer.

Paradoxically, the character of Lovecraft fascinates us partly because his system of values is entirely opposed to ours. Fundamentally racist, openly reactionary, he glorifies puritan inhibition and quite evidently finds repellent any “open display of eroticism”. Resolutely anti-commercial, he despises money, considers democracy to be pure folly, progress an illusion. The word “liberty”, so dear to Americans, elicits from him only a gloomy sneer. All his life he maintained a typically aristocratic attitude of scorn for humanity in general, together with an extreme solicitude toward individuals in person.

What is agreed is that all those who knew Lovecraft *in person* felt an immense sadness at the announcement of his death. Robert Bloch, for example, wrote: “If I had known the truth about the state of his health, I would have *run* to Providence to see him.” August Derleth dedicated the rest of his life to collating, editing and publishing the posthumous fragments of his absent friend. And, thanks to Derleth and others (but mostly thanks to Derleth), the oeuvre of Lovecraft is now available to the world. It appears to us today as an impressive baroque edifice, terraced with great sumptuous pillars, like a succession of concentric circles around a vortex of horror and absolute wonder.

- First circle, the outer circle : the correspondence and the poems. Only partially published, even more partially translated. The correspondence is, it’s true, impressive: in the region of one hundred thousand letters, some of thirty or forty pages. As for the poems, no complete collection exists today.

- Second circle: consisting of the novels which Lovecraft co-authored, whether the writing was officially conceived as a collaboration (as with Kenneth Sterling or Robert Barlow) , or whether Lovecraft helped the author with his revision work (extremely numerous examples; the importance of the collaboration of Lovecraft varies, sometimes extending to the complete rewriting of the text).

We can also include the short stories written by Derleth from notes and fragments left by Lovecraft[6]

- With the third circle, we reach the short stories actually written by Howard Philips Lovecraft. Here, obviously, every word counts; a collection is published in French and we may hope that more will follow.[6]

- Finally, we can without doubt delimit a fourth circle, the absolute heart of the HPL myth, constituted by what confirmed lovecraftians continue to call, in spite of themselves, the “major works”. I recite the titles for pure pleasure, with their dates of composition:

The Call of Cthulhu (1926)
The Colour out of Space (1927)
The Dunwich Horror (1928)
The Whisperer in the Shadows (1930)
At the Mountains of Madness (1931)
The Dreams in the Witch-House (1932)
The Shadow over Innsmouth (1932)
The Shadow out of Time (1934)

Over the entirety of this edifice conceived by HPL hovers, like an volatile miasma, the strange shadow of his own personality. We can judge as exaggerated, as morbid, the occult ambience that surrounds this person, his acts and gestures, his least writing. But one changes one’s view, I can guarantee, when one plunges into the “great texts”. It is natural that a cult should develop around a man who creates such wonders.

The successive generations of lovecraftians have not neglected this. Now as much as ever, the figure of the “hermit of Providence” is almost as mythic as his own creations. And – what is especially marvellous – every attempt at demystification *fails*. No “sober” biography has succeeded in dissipating the aura of pathetic weirdness that enshrouds the man. Thus Sprague de Camp[7], at the end of five hundred pages, ends up saying: “I do not pretend completely to understand H.P.Lovecraft.”. No matter how you look at it, Howard Philips Lovecraft was truly a *very* peculiar human being.

The oeuvre of Lovecraft is comparable to a gigantic machine for dreaming, of unheard-of magnitude and efficacy. There is nothing tranquil or reserved in his writings; the impact on the consciousness of the reader is of a savage brutality; and it disperses with a dangerous slowness. To undertake further readings has no noticeable effect; except perhaps, eventually, that one ends up asking: *what is it?*

This question is not, in the particular case of HPL, at all offensive or sarcastic. In effect, that which characterizes his oeuvre, as compared to a “normal” literary oeuvre, is that his disciples feel that they can, at least in theory, by the judicious use of the ingredients indicated by the master, obtain equal or even superior results.

No-one has ever seriously considered *continuing* Proust. Lovecraft, yes. And it’s not simply a question of a secondary literature labouring under the sign of homage or parody, but of a real continuation. That makes it a unique case in the history of modern literature.

HPL’s role as *generator of dreams* is not limited to literature, either. His oeuvre, at least as much as that of R.E.Howard[8], in a more insidious manner, has seen a profound renewal in fantasy illustration. Even rock music, generally circumspect with regard to literature, has given him homage – an homage of force to force, of mythology to mythology. As to the implications of the writings of Lovecraft in the domain of architecture or cinema, they are immediately apparent to the attentive reader. It’s a matter, truly, of building a new universe.

Hence the importance of the foundations, and the techniques of construction. To prolong the effects.

NOTES

[1] I do not at present have access to Lovecraft’s letters, consequently some of the quotations throughout this text have been retranslated from the French.

[2] ‘*Particules Elementaires*’ is also the title of Houellebecq’s [2000] novel, characterized by the author’s disdain for the inevitable decadence of the ‘atomised’ Western world.

[3] *Omnibus* vol 2, pp65-76.

[4] One of the editors of the French edition of Lovecraft.

[5] Houellebecq returns briefly to his critical reading of Conan-Doyle in his (2001) novel *Plateforme*, when the (typically disenchanting) protagonist is given a Agatha Christie book as holiday reading:

“In each Sherlock Holmes story, one recognizes, of course, Holmes’ characteristic traits; but, also, the author never fails to introduce a new trait (cocaine, the violin, the existence of an older brother Mycroft, a taste for Italian opera...certain services once rendered to certain European royalty...the first case solved by Sherlock, when he was still a teenager). With each new detail revealed he creates new areas of shadow, and one ends up with a truly fascinating character: Conan Doyle succeeds in elaborating a profound combination of the *pleasure of discovering* and the *pleasure of knowing*. It’s always seemed to me that Agatha Christie, on the contrary, gives too prominent a place to the pleasure of knowing.”

In fairness to Christie, Michel's low opinion of her work is modified – at least, complicated – by the ensuing reading of the (1946) Poirot mystery 'The Hollow'.

[6] Obviously Houellebecq's observations on the translation of HPL into French are not of particular interest to an English-speaking reader, but I've left them in for this preliminary translation.

[7] L. Sprague de Camp, *H.P. Lovecraft – A Biography* New York:Doubleday, 1975.

[8] R.E.Howard, prolific fantasy author and creator of Conan the Barbarian.

Part 2: Techniques of Attack [1]

The surface of the earth today is overlaid with a irregular, dense web of fibres, entirely fabricated by humans.

In this web circulates the life-blood of the social. The transport of people, of commodities, of provisions; multiple transactions, orders to buy, orders to sell, facts to be believed, other, more intellectual or affective, exchanges... This incessant flux continues regardless of humanity, absorbed in the lifeless convulsions of its own activity.

Meanwhile, where the fibres of the web are loosest, strange entities can be uncovered by the explorer 'hungry for knowledge'. Wherever human activity is absent, wherever there is a *blank space on the map*, the old gods crouch, ready to retake their place.

Like in the terrifying desert of inner Arabia, the Rûb-al-Khâlie, where, around 731, a mahometan poet by the name of Abdul Al-Hazred returned after ten years of complete solitude. Becoming indifferent to the practices of Islam, he dedicated the following years to writing an impious and blasphemous book, the repugnant *Necronomicon* (of which a few copies have survived despite the ravages of time), before meeting his end by being devoured by invisible creatures in broad daylight, in the marketplace at Damascus.

Like in the unexplored plateaus of northern Tibet, where the degenerate Tch-Tchos worship in dance an unnameable divinity, which they call 'the Ancient One'.

Like in that vast expanse of the South Pacific where unexpected volcanic eruptions sometimes bring to light paradoxical remains, evidence of a fabrication and a geometry entirely non-human, before which the apathetic and vicious natives of the archipelago of Tuamotou prostrate themselves with strange squirming movements of the body.

At the intersections of their channels of communication, men build giant ugly metropolises, where each, isolated in an anonymous apartment identical to all the rest, believes himself the centre of the world and the measure of all things. But, underneath the excavated earth with its burrowing insects, very ancient and very powerful creatures are waking slowly from their slumbers. They were there already during the carboniferous period, they were there during the Triassic and Permian; they have known the stirrings of the first mammal, and they will know the agonized cries of the last.

Howard Philips Lovecraft was not a theorist. As Jacques Bergier realized, in introducing materialism to the heart of terror and the supernatural, he created a new genre. It's no longer a question of believing or not believing, as with stories of vampires or werewolves; there's no possible interpretation, no escape. No other fantastic world is less psychological, less *discursive*. However, he does not seem to have been fully conscious of what he was doing. He did dedicate an essay of one hundred and fifty pages to the world of the fantastic. But, on rereading, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* disappoints somewhat; to tell the truth, one even has the impression that the book is slightly *dated*. Eventually, one understands why: simply because it doesn't take account of Lovecraft's own contribution to the world of the fantastic. We learn much about the extent of his reading and of his tastes; we learn that he admires Poe, Dunsany, Machen, Blackwood; but nothing that would let us predict that which he himself will write.

The writing of this essay took place in 1925-1926 – so, immediately before HPL began the series of "major works". It is probably more than a coincidence; without doubt he felt the need – certainly not consciously, perhaps not even unconsciously, we might prefer to say *organically* – to recapitulate everything that had been done in the realm of the fantastic, before exploding it all by launching into radically new directions.

In searching for the techniques of composition used by HPL, we might also be tempted to look for indications in the letters, commentaries, advice which he addressed to his young correspondents. But there too the result is disconcerting and deceptive. Chiefly because Lovecraft always took account of the personality of his interlocutor. He always started by trying to understand what the author was trying to achieve; and then, he only offered precise and punctual advice, exactly adapted to the work at issue. Moreover, he often gave recommendations which he would be the first to ignore; he even went so far as to advise “not to abuse adjectives such as monstrous, unspeakable, doubtful”. Which, when one reads his work, is somewhat surprising. The only indication of general importance is found in fact in a letter of the 8th February 1922 addressed to Frank Belknap Long : “I never try to write stories, but I wait until a story wants to be written. Whenever I set out deliberately to write a tale, the result is flat and of inferior quality.”

However, Lovecraft is not ignorant of the question of *procedures of composition*. Like Baudelaire, like Edgar Poe, he is fascinated by the idea of the rigid application of certain schemas, certain formulae, certain symmetries that might permit one to reach perfection. And he even set out a preliminary conceptualization in an unpublished work of thirty pages entitled *The Book of Reason*.

In the first part, very brief, he gives some general advice on how to write a story (fantastic or not). He tries then to establish a typology of “fundamental horrific elements useful in the writing of a horror story”. After which the last part of the work, by far the longest, is composed of a series of notes written sporadically between 1919 and 1935, mostly consisting of just one phrase, and each serving as the potential point of departure for a fantastic story.

With his customary generosity, Lovecraft loaned out this manuscript to his friends, recommending them not to be uncomfortable about using this or that idea as a starting point for one of their own productions.

This *Book of Reason* is, in fact, above all an astonishing stimulant for the imagination. It contains the germs of vertiginous ideas of which only a tiny proportion have ever been developed, by Lovecraft or by anyone else. And Lovecraft shares, in his all-too-brief theoretical section, a confirmation of his elevated idea of the fantastic, of its absolute generality, of the direct connection it has with the fundamental elements of human consciousness (as one “fundamental horrific element” we have, for example: “Everything works, irresistibly and mysteriously, towards a destiny.”)

But concerning the procedures of composition employed by HPL himself, we don’t have any more information. If the *Book of Reason* provides the foundations, we have not the slightest indication of how they are to be assembled. And this is perhaps too much to ask of Lovecraft. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to have such genius *and* an understanding of that genius.

To try to understand more, there is only one method, moreover the most logical one: to dive into the fictional texts written by HPL. Firstly into the “major works”, those written in the last ten years of his life, when he was at the height of his powers. But also into the preceding texts; where one by one the elements of his art spring up, like musical instruments which each in their turn give a brief solo before plunging, reunited, into the fury of a demented opera.

Attack the narrative like a radiant suicide

A classical conception of the fantastic story might go as follows. At the beginning, nothing whatsoever happens. The characters bathe in a commonplace cheery contentment, adequately symbolized by the family life of an insurance agent in an American suburb. The kids play baseball, the wife plays piano a little, etc. Everything’s fine.

Then, bit by bit, almost insignificant incidents multiply and recur in an ominous manner. The veneer of normality cracks open, leaving things open for disquieting hypotheses. Inexorably, the forces of evil make their entry onto the scene.

We must emphasise that this conception no longer delivers very impressive results. One could cite as an ultimate example the short stories of Richard Matheson[2] who, at the height of his powers, takes an obvious pleasure in choosing scenes of utter normality (supermarkets, service stations...) described in a deliberately prosaic and flat manner.

Howard Philips Lovecraft is situated at the antipode of this way of beginning a story. With him, there is no “normality which begins to crack”, no “incidents which begin insignificantly”...All this doesn't interest him. He doesn't have the slightest desire to dedicate thirty pages, or even three, to a description of the family life of an average American. He does actually want to give us information, on anything from Aztec rituals to batrachian anatomy, but certainly not on everyday life.

To clarify the point, consider the first paragraphs of one of the most insidiously successful of Matheson's stories, *Button, Button*[3] :

“The parcel had been left on the doorstep : a cubic box done up with a simple rubber band, carrying their address in handwritten capitals: Mr and Mrs Arthur Lewis, 217 East 37th Street, New York. Norma picked it up, turned the key in the lock and went inside. Night fell.

When she had put the lamb cutlets in the oven, she poured a martini-vodka and sat down to open the parcel.

She found a button fixed on a small box underneath. A glass dome protected the button. Norma tried to remove it, but it was firmly fixed. She turned over the box and saw a folded piece of paper, taped onto the bottom of the little box. She read: Mr Steward will arrive at your house this evening at 5 ‘o’clock.”

Now here is the beginning [attaque] of *The Call of Cthulhu*[4], the first of the lovecraftian “major works” :

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open 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.”

The least one could say is that Lovecraft lets us know how things are going to unfold : On first glance, this is a drawback. Indeed, one can be sure that few people, lovers of the fantastic or not, would be able to put down Matheson's story without finding out what that awful button is about. HPL, on the other hand, always had the tendency to select his readers from the very start. He writes for a public of fanatics; a public that he will finally find, many years after his death.

In a more profound and hidden sense, there is meanwhile a undesirable tendency towards slow exposition in the telling of a fantastic story . Its universality is only revealed after reading many outings written in the same vein. In multiplying events that are more ambiguous than terrifying, one titillates the imagination of the reader without ever satisfying it; one incites it to run its course. And it is always dangerous to set the imagination of the reader at liberty. Because it may well arrive by itself at atrocious conclusions; truly atrocious. And at the moment when the author, after fifty pages of laborious preparation, uncovers for us the secret of his final horror, it turns out that we are a little disappointed. We expected worse.

In his most successful works, Matheson tries to avoid this danger by introducing in the last pages a philosophical or moral dimension so obvious, so poignant and pertinent that the whole of the

story appears in a different light, one of mortal sorrow. It doesn't change the fact that his best texts are the shorter ones.

Lovecraft, though, is quite at home with stories of fifty or sixty pages, more even. At the height of his artistic powers, he needs a sufficiently vast space to put in place all the elements of his grandiose machinery. The gradual staging of paroxysms that constitute the architecture of the "major works" can't be accomplished in a dozen pages. And *The Affair of Charles Dexter Ward* attains the dimensions of a short novel.

As for the "denouement" [*chute*], so dear to Americans, it interests him very little in general. No Lovecraft story is self-contained. Each one of them is an open piece of fear, one that howls. The next story takes up the fear of the reader at exactly the same point, to give it new nourishment. The great Cthulhu is indestructible, even if the peril can be temporarily held back. In his abode of R'lyeh beneath the ocean, he resumes his waiting, sleeping and dreaming :

*"That which is not dead can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die."*

True to his own principles, HPL proceeds with a disconcerting energy that one could call *all-out attack*. And he has a predilection for that variant which we might call the theoretical beginning [*attaque*]. We have cited those of *Arthur Jermyn* and of *The Call of Cthulhu*. All splendid variations on the theme: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here". Recall too those words, justly celebrated, which open *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*[5]:

"I have often wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences – Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism – there are still a certain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permit of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from that life by an all but impassable barrier."

Sometimes he prefers a certain brutality to the harmonious balance of phrases, as in *The Thing on the Doorstep*, of which this is the opening sentence[6]: "It is true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to show by this statement that I am not his murderer." But he always chooses a style opposed to the everyday. And the grandeur of his method never ceases to develop. *The Transition of Juan Romero*[7], a 1919 short story, begins thus: "Of the events which took place at the Norton Mine on October eighteenth and nineteenth, 1894, I have no desire to speak." Although rather flat and prosaic, this beginning [*attaque*] meanwhile has the merit of foreshadowing the magnificent fulguration that opens *The Shadow out of Time*, the last of the "major works", written in 1934:

"After twenty-two years of nightmare and terror, saved only by a desperate conviction of the mythical source of certain impressions, I am unwilling to vouch for the truth of that which I think I found in Western Australia on the night of 17-18 July 1935. There is reason to hope that my experience was wholly or partly an hallucination – for which, indeed, abundant causes existed. And yet, its realism was so hideous that I sometimes find hope impossible."

What's astonishing is that after such an opening he succeeds in maintaining the story on a plateau of building exaltation. But then he had, as even his worst detractors are forced to recognize, an extraordinary imagination.

On the other hand, his characters hold no surprises. And that's the only real fault of his brutal method of attack. Often one wonders, reading his short stories, why the protagonists take so long to comprehend the nature of the horror that menaces them. They appear frankly stupid. And there is a real problem there. Because, on the other hand, if they understood what was in the process of

happening, nothing could stop them from taking flight, in the grip of abject terror. Which would produce nothing but the end of the story.

Does he have any solution? Maybe. One can imagine that his characters, fully conscious of the hideous reality that they face, decide nonetheless to proceed. Such virile courage would be without doubt too little a part of Lovecraft's own character for him to envisage. Graham Masterton and Lin Carter have taken steps in this direction, not all that convincing, it's true. But the thing seems, in any case, possible. One might dream of a novel of mysterious adventures where the heroes confront the terrifying and marvellous universe of Howard Philips Lovecraft with the steadfastness and tenacity of one of John Buchan's protagonists.

Pronounce, without wavering, a great No to life

An absolute hatred of the world in general, aggravated by a particular disgust for the modern world. This summarises Lovecraft's attitude well.

A number of writers have dedicated their oeuvre to elucidating the causes of this legitimate disgust. Not Lovecraft. For him, hatred of life pre-exists all literature. He never turns back. The rejection of every form of realism constitutes the preliminary condition for entry into his universe.

If one defines a writer not by reference to the themes that they treat, but by reference to those they repudiate, then one agrees that Lovecraft occupies a place totally apart. As a matter of fact one doesn't find in his oeuvre the least allusion to two realities whose importance is generally recognized : sex and money. Truly, not the least allusion. He writes exactly as if these things didn't exist. And to such an extent that when a female character appears in a story (which happens in all only twice), one feels a strange sensation of abnormality, as if he had unexpectedly taken it into his head to describe a Japanese person.

Faced with an exclusion so radical, certain critics have quite obviously concluded that all of his work is actually riddled with particularly torrid sexual symbols. Others of a similar intellectual caliber have formulated a diagnosis of a "latent homosexuality" which nothing indicates, either in his correspondence or in his life. Another uninteresting hypothesis.

In a letter to the young Belknap Long, Lovecraft expresses himself with the greatest clarity on these questions, on the subject of Fielding's *Tom Jones* which he considers (alas, with good reason) as the apex of realism, that is to say of mediocrity.

"In a word, my child, I consider this genre of writing as an indiscrete inquiry into that which is most base in life, and as the servile transcription of vulgar events with the gross sentiment of a charlady or a sailor. God knows, we can perfectly well see beasts in any farmyard and observe all the mysteries of sex in the coupling of cows and fillies. When I consider man, I want to look at those characteristics which elevate him to the status of human being, and the details which give his actions symmetry and creative beauty. It's not that I wish to see him expound, in the Victorian manner, false and pompous thoughts and motives, but I like to see his behaviour justly appreciated, by emphasizing the qualities proper to him and without stupidly dwelling on those bestial qualities which he has in common with the first pig or goat to come along."

At the end of this long diatribe, he concludes with an uncompromising formula: "I do not believe that realism can ever be beautiful." Evidently, we have here a matter not of self-censorship provoked by obscure psychological motives, but of a confirmed aesthetic conception. That is a point that it is important to make. Very well.

If Lovecraft returns so often to his hostility to all forms of eroticism in the arts, it is because his correspondents (in general young men, often even adolescents) regularly pose and repose the question. Is he sure that erotic or pornographic scenes can't have any literary interest? Each time, he re-examines the problem with a great deal of goodwill, but his response doesn't change : no, absolutely none.

He had acquired a complete knowledge of the matters in question before reaching the age of eight, thanks to the medical textbooks of his Uncle. After which, he specifies: “all curiosity naturally became impossible. The whole subject took on the character of the boring details of animal biology, devoid of interest for anyone whose tastes were oriented more towards faerie gardens and golden cities bathing in the glory of exotic sunsets.”

One may be tempted not to take this declaration seriously, scenting beneath Lovecraft’s attitude some obscure moral reticence. One would be wrong. Lovecraft knows perfectly well what puritan inhibitions are, he shares them and even occasionally glorifies them. But this is situated in another place, which he always distinguishes from the space of pure artistic creation. His thoughts on the subject are complex and precise. And, if he repudiates in his work the slightest allusion to our sexual nature it is above all because he feels that such allusions can have no place in his aesthetic universe.

On this point in any case, the subsequent course of events gave him ample justification. Certain authors have tried to introduce erotic elements into the fabric of predominantly lovecraftian stories. The attempts of Colin Wilson, in particular, are obviously headed for failure; one continually has the impression of titillating elements bolted-on to gain a few extra readers. And it couldn’t, in truth, be otherwise. The combination is intrinsically impossible.

The writings of HPL aim towards one goal: to put the reader into a state of *fascination*. The only human feelings he wants to hear mentioned are wonder and fear. He builds his universe on them, and exclusively on them. It’s obviously a limitation, but a conscious and deliberate limitation. And no aesthetic creation can exist without a certain voluntary blindness.

To properly understand the origin of Lovecraft’s anti-eroticism it may be opportune to recall that his epoch was characterized by a will to be liberated from “Victorian prudery”; it is during the 20s and 30s that the act of listing obscenities became the mark of an authentic creative imagination.

The young correspondents of Lovecraft were necessarily influenced by this; which is why they insistently questioned him on the subject. And he answered them with sincerity. In the epoch when Lovecraft was writing, we had begun to find it interesting to lay bare the testimonies of different sexual experiences; in other words, to tackle the subject “openly and in all frankness”. This frank and open attitude didn’t stretch to questions of money, banking transactions, the administration of inherited property, etc. It was still the custom, when one broached these subjects, to situate them more or less in a sociological or moral perspective. The real liberation in this regard wasn’t produced until the 60s. It is undoubtedly because of this that none of his correspondents thought fit to interrogate him on the following point: just as little as sex, money plays not the least role in his stories. One finds not the smallest allusion to the financial situation of his characters. This, even more, didn’t interest him at all. In these conditions, one might be surprised that Lovecraft doesn’t have the slightest sympathy for Freud, the great psychologist of the capitalist era. This universe of ‘transactions’ and ‘transferences’, which gives you the impression of having fallen by chance into a board meeting, held nothing to seduce him.

But behind this aversion to psychoanalysis, in fact common to many artists, Lovecraft had plenty of extra reasons to take the ‘Viennese Charlatan’ to task. He found in fact that Freud permitted the discussion of dreams; even repeatedly. Now, Lovecraft knew dreams well; they were in a sense his reserved territory. In fact very few writers have used their dreams in as systematic a manner as he; he classified the materials they furnished, he systematized them; sometimes he was so excited by them he would write a story straight off without even having properly woken up (this was the case for *Nyarlathothep*); sometimes he retained only certain elements, to insert them into the fabric of a story; but whatever he did, he took dreams very seriously.

One should then consider that Lovecraft behaves fairly moderately with Freud, only insulting him two or three times in his correspondence; but he guesses that there is little to say, and that the phenomenon of psychoanalysis will collapse of its own accord. Even so he finds the time to note the essential with regard to Freudian theory with these two words: “puerile symbolism”. One could write hundreds of pages on the subject without finding a more felicitous formula.

Lovecraft, in fact, hasn't got the attitude of a novelist. Hardly any novelist of any description imagines that it is within his capacities to give an exhaustive depiction of life. Their mission is rather to “shed new light” on it; but given the facts themselves there is absolutely no choice. Sex, money, religion, technology, ideology, redistribution of wealth...a good novelist can't ignore anything. And all this must take place within a coherent vision, *grosso modo*, of the world. Obviously the task is scarcely humanly possible, and the result almost always disappointing. A nasty profession.

In a more obscure and more displeasing way, a novelist, in treating life in general, necessarily finds himself more or less compromised with it. Lovecraft doesn't have that problem. One can perfectly well object to him that the details of “animal biology”, which so irritate him, play an important role in existence, and that they even permit the survival of the species. But the survival of the species means nothing. “Why preoccupy yourself so much with the fate of a condemned world?,” as Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, replied to a journalist who had questioned him on the long-term consequences of technological progress.

Unconcerned with presenting a coherent or acceptable image of the world, Lovecraft has no reason to make concessions to life; neither to phantoms, nor to the afterlife. Not to anything that concerns them. All that appears uninteresting to him, or of an inferior artistic quality, he will deliberately choose to ignore. And this limitation gives him energy and stature.

The prejudice of this *creative limitation* has nothing in common, let us repeat, with any sort of ideological “trafficking”. When Lovecraft expresses his dislike for “Victorian fictions”, those edifying books that attribute false and pompous motives to human actions, he is perfectly sincere. And Sade wouldn't have found any more favour to his eyes. Ideological traffic, once more. Attempts to force reality into a pre-established scheme. Cheap rubbish. Lovecraft never tries to show in a different light those aspects of reality that displease him; rather, he ignores them determinedly.

He swiftly justifies himself in a letter:

“In art, it's no good to try to take account of the chaos of the universe, because this chaos is so total that no written text can give even a glimpse of it. I can conceive of no true image of the structure of life and of cosmic energy except as the exchange of simple points moving like spirals with no definite direction.”

But one cannot completely understand Lovecraft's point of view if one considers this voluntary limitation only as a philosophical principle, without seeing that it concerns at the same time a *technical imperative*. Certain human motives have, effectively, no place in his *oeuvre*; in architecture, one of the first choices to make is that of the materials to employ.

Then, you will see a mighty cathedral

One might compare a traditional novel to an old balloon placed in water, which begins to deflate. One is witness to an overall, feeble discharge, a sort of suppuration of moods, which only ends in confused and arbitrary nothingness.

Lovecraft places his hand forcibly upon certain points of the balloon (sex, money...) that he doesn't want to even out. It's the technique of *constriction*. The net result, at the points he chooses, is a powerful jet, an extraordinary efflorescence of images.

What produces the most profound impression on the first reading of Lovecraft's stories are the architectural descriptions of *The Shadow out of Time* and *At the Mountains of Madness*. Here

more than anywhere else, we are in the presence of a new world. Fear itself has disappeared. All human sentiment disappears apart from fascination, isolated with such purity for the first time. Meanwhile, in the foundations of the gigantic citadels imagined by HPL hide nightmarish creatures. We know this, but have the tendency to forget it, on the example of his heroes, who walk as if in a dream towards a catastrophic destiny, compelled by pure aesthetic exaltation. Reading these stimulating descriptions for the first time, we are discouraged straight away from any attempt at visual adaptations (pictorial or cinematographic). Images pour into consciousness; but none of them seem sufficiently sublime, sufficiently immeasurable; none of them approach the magnificence of dreams. With regard to properly architectural adaptations, nothing has yet been tried.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that this or that young man, coming enthusiastically from reading the stories of Lovecraft, should go on to study architecture. He would probably meet with disappointment and defeat. The insipid and dull functionalism of modern architecture, its obsession with simple and plain forms, with using cold and indifferent materials, are too comprehensive to be a matter of chance. And no-one, at least not for many generations, will rebuild the magnificent tracery of the palace of Irem.

One discovers an architecture progressively and from different angles, *one is displaced towards the interior*; there is here something which cannot ever be reconstituted in a painting, nor even in a film; and this is the element which, in a stupefying manner, Howard Phillips Lovecraft succeeds in recreating in his stories.

A born architect, Lovecraft would make a poor painter; his colours aren't really colours; they are more like ambiances, or, to be exact, *enlightenments[éclairages]*, which have no other function than to show off the architectures described by him. He has a particular predilection for the pale glimmerings of a gibbous, waning moon; but he's also partial to the bloody crimson of a romantic sunset, or the crystalline limpidity of an inaccessible azure.

The cyclopeian and demented structures imagined by HPL produce a violent and definitive disturbance of the spirit, more violent even (and this is a paradox) than the magnificent architectural drawings of Piranesi or Monsu Desiderio. We have the impression of having visited, in dreams, these colossal cities. In reality, Lovecraft simply translated, as best he could, his own dreams. And so, in front of a particularly grandiose architecture, we find ourselves thinking "that's pretty *lovecraftian*."

The first reason for the success of the writer appears immediately when one studies his correspondence. Howard Phillips Lovecraft is one of those men, not particularly numerous, who in the presence of great architecture enter a violent sensory trance. In his descriptions of a sunrise over the panorama of the roofs of Providence, or of the hilly labyrinth of the lanes of Marblehead, he loses all sense of proportion. The adjectives and the exclamation marks multiply, the fragments of incantation spring to his mind, his heart is lifted with enthusiasm; he plunges into a true ecstatic delirium.

Here, as one example, is how he describes to his aunt his first impressions of New York: *"I fell into a swoon of aesthetic exaltation in admiring this view – the evening scenery with the innumerable lights of the skyscrapers, the mirrored reflections and the lights of the boats bobbing on the water, at the extreme left the sparkling statue of Liberty, and on the right the scintillating arch of the Brooklyn bridge. It's something even more powerful than the dreams of the legend of the Ancient world – a constellation of infernal majesty – a poem in the fire of Babylon! (...)* All of this happens under the strange lights, the strange sounds of the port, where the traffic of the whole world is concentrated. Foghorns, ships' bells, in the distance the squeals of winches... visions of the distant shores of India, where birds with brilliant plumage are set singing by the incense of strange pagodas surrounded by gardens, where camel-handlers in their colourful robes barter in front of the sandalwood taverns with deep-voiced sailors whose eyes reflect all the mystery of the sea. Silks and spices, strange graven gold ornaments from Bengal, gods and

elephants strangely cut into the jade and the ruby. Oh, my god! If only I could express the magic of the scene!”

Equally, faced with the hilltops of Salem, he would relive the processions of puritans in black robes, severe-faced, with their strange conical hats, dragging towards their pyre an howling old woman.

All his life, Lovecraft dreamt of a voyage to Europe, which he never had the means to accomplish. But if one man in America was born to appreciate the architectural treasures of the Ancient world, it was he. When he speaks of ‘swooning in aesthetic exaltation’, he’s not exaggerating. And it is very seriously that he affirms to Kleiner that man can be compared to a polyp of coral – that his only destiny is to ‘construct vast edifices, magnificent, adamant, so that the moon can shine on them after his death.”

For financial reasons, Lovecraft did not leave America – and hardly even left New England. But considering the violence of his reactions to Kingsport or Marblehead, one might wonder what he would have felt if he found himself transported to Salamanca or Notre-Dame de Chartres.

Because the dream-architecture which he describes is, like that of the grand gothic and baroque cathedrals, a *total* architecture. The heroic harmony of the planes and volumes are felt violently; but also, the bell-turrets, the minarets, the bridges overhanging great chasms are overloaded with exuberant ornamentation, in contrast to the gigantic smooth stone surfaces. Reliefs and bas-reliefs and frescoes cover the titanic vaults which lead from one inclined plane to another, in the bowels of the earth. Many recount the grandeur and the decadence of a race; others, more simple and geometric, seem to evoke disquieting mystical suggestions.

Like that of the grand cathedrals, like that of the hindu temples, the architecture of H.P.Lovecraft is far more than a mathematical play of volumes. It is entirely impregnated by the idea of an essential dramaturgy, a mythical dramaturgy which lends its meaning to the structure. Which renders the least of their spaces theatrical, using the combined resources of the plastic arts, and harnessing to their profit tricks of the light. It is a *living* architecture, because it rests on a vital, emotional conception of the world. In other words, it is a sacred architecture.

And your senses, vectors of unspeakable derangements

The world stinks. The smell of cadavers and rotting fish. A sense of failure, hideous degeneration. The world stinks. There are no ghosts under the tumescent moon; there are only inflated cadavers, black and ballooning, on the point of exploding with a pestilential vomiting. Don’t talk about touching. To touch the things, living entities, is a blasphemous and repugnant act. Their skin bloated with hideous growths, suppurating with putrefying humours. The tentacles suck, their prehensile and masticatory organs constitute a constant menace. *Beings*, and their hideous corporeal vigour. An amorphous and nauseating ooze, a stinking Nemesis of semi-aborted chimerae; a blasphemy.

Vision can sometimes bring terror, but sometimes also the marvelous escape of an enchanted architecture. But, alas; we have five senses. And the other senses converge to confirm that the universe is a thing frankly *disgusting*.

One often remarks that the characters of Lovecraft, pretty difficult to distinguish one from the other, in particular in the “major works”, constitute some kind of projection of Lovecraft himself. Certainly. On the condition of limiting the word “projection” to its sense of a simplification. They are projections of Lovecraft’s real personality a bit like a flat surface may be the orthogonal projection of a volume. One easily recognizes the general form. Students or professors in a New-England university (preferably Miskatonic University); specializing in anthropology or folklore, sometimes in political economy or in non-euclidean geometry; of a reserved and discrete

temperament, long-faced and emaciated; they are compelled, by profession and by temperament, towards the life of the mind. It's a sort of schema, a photofit; and we generally don't get much more.

Lovecraft didn't immediately choose to put in play interchangeable wooden characters. In the stories of his youth, he took pains to depict each time a different narrator, with a social milieu, a personal history, even a psychology... Sometimes, the narrator was a poet, or a man animated by poetical sentiments; this approach brought about some of HPL's most indisputable failures.

Progressively he comes to recognize the inutility of all psychological differentiation. His characters just don't need it at all; a set of sensory organs in good working order is enough for them. Their only function, in effect, is to *perceive*.

One could even say that the deliberate platitude of the characters of Lovecraft contributes to reinforce the power of conviction of his universe. Any psychological trait too marked would have the effect of warping his exposition, attenuating its transparency; we would leave the domain of material sensation to re-enter that of psychological feeling. And Lovecraft doesn't wish to describe to us *psychoses*, but repugnant realities.

Meanwhile, his heroes are sacrificed to that stylistic clause, dear to fantastic writers, that consists of affirming that their tale is perhaps nothing but a simple nightmare, the fruit of an imagination overexcited by reading blasphemous books. It's doesn't matter much, since we don't believe it for a single second.

Assailed by abominable perceptions, Lovecraft's characters act like mute witnesses, immobile, totally powerless, paralysed. They would like to run away, or fall into the torpor of a merciful coma. No way. They stayed rooted to the spot, whilst around them the nightmares gather. Whilst visual, auditory olfactory and tactile sensations multiply and are deployed together in a hideous crescendo.

The literature of Lovecraft gives a precise and alarming sense to the famous slogan "derangement of all the senses[8]." Few people, for example, find the iodine odour of flotsam foul and repulsive; except, without doubt, those that have read *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. Similarly, it is difficult, after having read HPL, to imagine a batrachian calmly. All this makes intensive reading of his stories quite a trying experience.

To transform the ordinary perceptions of life into an unlimited source of nightmares, that's the audacious wager of every writer of the fantastic. Lovecraft succeeds magnificently, by giving his descriptions a touch of loquacious degeneracy that is his alone. We can leave behind, in finishing his stories, those mulatto cretins and semi-mutants which people them, those humanoids with limping, shuffling gait, with scaly and crabbed skin and open nostrils, and rasping breathing; they'll come back into our lives sooner or later.

In the lovecraftian universe, one must reserve a special place for auditory perceptions; HPL didn't appreciate music much, and his preferences in the matter turned towards the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. But in the writing of his tales is manifest a dangerously refined ear; when a character, in placing his hands on the table before you, emits a faint sound of suction, you know you are in a Lovecraft story; at the same time as you discern in his laugh a nuance of *cackling*, or of the bizarre stridulation of an insect. The maniacal precision with which HPL arranges the *soundtrack* of his stories certainly accounts for much, in the most successful among them. I don't speak only of *The Music of Erich Zann*, where, exceptionally, music alone provokes cosmic fear; but of all the others where by subtly alternating visual and auditory perceptions, he makes them merge and, bizarrely, diverge at one and the same time, deftly putting us into a pathetic nervous state.

Here, for example, is a description extracted from *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*, a minor story written on request for Harry Houdini, which contains some of Howard Philips Lovecraft's most beautiful verbal derangements[9]:

“[S]uddenly, my attention was captured by the realization of something which must have been impinging on my subconscious hearing long before the conscious sense was aware of it. From some still lower chasm in earth's bowels were proceeding certain sounds, measured and definite, and like nothing I had ever heard before. That they were very ancient and distinctly ceremonial I felt almost intuitively; and much reading in Egyptology led me to associate them with the flute, the sambuke, the sistrum, and the tympanum. In their rhythmic piping, droning, rattling and beating I felt an element of terror beyond all the known terrors of earth – a terror peculiarly dissociated from personal fear, and taking the form of a sort of objective pity for our planet, that it should hold within its depths such horrors as must lie beyond these aegiphanic cacophonies. The sounds increased in volume, and I felt that they were approaching. Then – and may all the gods of all pantheons unite to keep the like from my ears again – I began to hear, faintly and afar off, the morbid and millennial tramping of the marching things. It was hideous that footfalls so dissimilar should move in such perfect rhythm. The training of unhallowed thousands of years must lie behind that march of earth's inmost monstrosities ... padding, clicking, walking, stalking, rumbling, lumbering, crawling ... and all to the abhorrent discords of those mocking instruments.”

This passage is no paroxysm. At this stage of the story, nothing, to speak properly, is happening. They will get nearer, the things that click, lumber and crawl. You will, finally, *see* them.

Later on, on certain evenings, at the hour when everything sleeps, you will have the tendency to perceive the ‘morbid and multiple stampings of creatures in movement’. Don't be surprised. That was the aim.

Trace the lineaments of a comprehensive delirium

“ Five [...] reddish tubes start from inner angles of starfish-shaped head and end in saclike swellings of same color which, upon pressure, open to bell-shaped orifices two inches maximum diameter and lined with sharp, white tooth-like projections – probably mouths. All these tubes, cilia, and points of starfish head, found folded tightly down; tubes and points clinging to bulbous neck and torso. Flexibility surprising despite vast toughness.

‘At bottom of torso, rough but dissimilarly functioning counterparts of head arrangements exist. Bulbous light gray pseudoneck, without gill suggestions, holds greenish five-pointed starfish arrangement.

‘Tough, muscular arms four feet long and tapering from seven inches diameter at base to about two and five-tenths at point. To each point is attached small end of a greenish five-veined membranous triangle eight inches long and six wide at farther end. This is the paddle, fin or pseudofoot which has made prints in rock from a thousand million to fifty or sixty million years old.

‘From inner angles of starfish arrangement project two-foot reddish tubes tapering from three inches diameter at base to one at tip. Orifices at tips. All these parts infinitely tough and leathery, but extremely flexible. Four-foot arms with paddles undoubtedly used for locomotion of some sort, marine or otherwise. When moved, display suggestions of exaggerated muscularity. As found, all these projections tightly folded over pseudoneck and end of torso, corresponding to projections at other end.’ “

The description of the Old Ones in *At the Mountains of Madness* [10], from which this passage is extracted, remains a classic. If there's one register one doesn't expect to find in a fantastic tale, it's that of the account of a dissection. Apart from Lautreámont who copied out pages from an encyclopedia of animal behaviour, one can find no predecessor to Lovecraft. And he himself

certainly never spoke of the *Chants de Maldoror*. He truly seems to have arrived by himself at this discovery: the use of a scientific vocabulary can constitute an enormous stimulant for the poetic imagination. The content at once precise, dense in its detail and rich in theoretical background, which is that of the encyclopedia, can produce a delirious and ecstatic effect. *At the Mountains of Madness* is one of the greatest examples of this oneiric precision. All the place-names are cited, the topographical details multiply; each scene of the drama is precisely situated by latitude and longitude. One could perfectly well follow the peregrinations of the characters upon a large-scale map of Antarctica.

The heroes of this long short-story are a band of scientists, which allows an interesting alternation of viewpoints: the descriptions of Lake speak in terms of animal physiology, those of Peabody of geology... HPL even allowed himself the luxury of including in their group a keen student of fantastic literature, who regularly cites passages from *Arthur Gordon Pym*. He wasn't afraid to be compared with Poe. In 1923, he still characterized his productions as "gothic horror", and declared his fidelity to "the style of the old masters, especially Edgar Poe". But it's not really so. In forcibly introducing into the fantastic tale the vocabulary and concepts of the spheres of human knowledge which to him appeared the most strange, he was to break out of this tradition. And his first publications in France appeared, totally by chance, in a collection of science-fiction. A way of declaring them unclassifiable.

The clinical vocabulary of animal physiology and that, even more mysterious, of paleontology (the pseudo-archaeal strata of the later Comanchian...) are not the only ones which Lovecraft attaches to his universe. He quickly realized the interest of linguistic terminology. "The individual, with swarthy face, with vaguely reptilian traits, expressed himself with hissing elisions and rapid successions of consonants recalling obscurely certain proto-accadian dialects." Archaeology and folklore are equally, and from the start, part of the project. "We must revise all our knowledge, Wilmarth! These frescoes are more than seven thousand years older than the most ancient Sumerian necropolises!" And HPL never misses his mark when he slips into the tale an allusion to "certain particularly repugnant ritual customs of North Carolina". But what is most surprising is that he does not stop with the human sciences; he begins to do the same with "hard" science; the most theoretical, the furthest *a priori* from the literary universe.

The Shadow over Innsmouth, probably the most frightening Lovecraft story, rests entirely upon the idea of a "hideous and almost unspeakable" genetic degeneration. Affecting firstly the texture of the skin and the mode of pronouncing vowels it goes on to affect the general shape of the body, the anatomy of the respiratory and circulatory system... The taste for detail and the sense of dramatic progression make reading truly gruelling. One notes that the genetic is here used not solely for the evocative power of its terms, but also as a theoretical armature for the story. In the following phase, HPL plunges without hesitation into the hitherto unexplored realms of mathematics and physics. He is the first to have presented the poetical power of topology; to have shuddered at the work of Gödel on the incompleteness of formal logical systems. Strange axiomatic constructions, with vaguely repulsive implications, are without doubt necessary to permit the resurgence of tenebrous entities around which the cycle of Cthulhu is articulated. "A man with Oriental eyes once declared that time and space are relative." This bizarre synthesis of the work of Einstein, taken from *Hypnos* (1922)[11] is merely a timid preamble to a theoretical and conceptual frenzy which finds its apex ten years later in *The Dreams in the Witch-House*[12], where one is compelled to explain the abject circumstances which permitted an old woman of the seventeenth century to acquire "an insight into mathematical depths perhaps beyond the utmost modern delvings of Planck, Heisenberg, Einstein and de Sitter." The angles of her house, where the unfortunate Walter Gilman lives, manifest outlandish qualities which cannot be explained except in the context of non-euclidian geometry. Possessed by the fierce thirst for knowledge, Gilman neglects all his university work apart from mathematics, in which he goes on to demonstrate a genius for solving riemannien equations that stupefies Professor Upham. He

“especially liked his demonstration of the kinship of higher mathematics to certain phases of magical lore transmitted down the ages from an ineffable antiquity – human or pre-human – whose knowledge of the cosmos and its laws was greater than ours.”[13]

Lovecraft commandeers in passing the equations of quantum mechanics (only just discovered at the time of his writing), which he qualifies immediately as ‘impious and paradoxical’, and Walter Gilman dies with his heart eaten out by a rat which, it is strongly suggested, came from regions of the cosmos “entirely unknown to our space-time continuum.”

In his last stories, Lovecraft thus uses multiform sources to delineate a universal knowledge. An obscure memory of certain fertility rites of a degenerate tibetan tribe, the outlandish algebraic qualities of prehilbertian spaces, the analysis of genetic drift in a population of semi-amorphic lizards in Chile, the obscene incantations of a work of demonology compiled by a half-mad Franciscan monk, the unexpected behaviour of a population of neutrinos put into a powerful magnetic field, hideous sculptures never shown to the public by a decadent Englishman...everything can serve his evocation of a multidimensional universe where the most heterogenous domains of knowledge converge and interpenetrate to create this state of poetic trance which accompanies the revelation of forbidden truths.

The sciences, in their overwhelming effort at *objective* description of the real, furnish the tools for this visionary unification which he desired. HPL, in effect, had in sight an objective terror. A terror released from all psychological and human connotation. He wants, as he himself says, to create a mythology which “would even have a meaning for those intelligences of the spiral nebulae composed entirely of gas.”

In the same way Kant wanted to propose the foundations of a morality valid “not only for man, but generally for every rational creature”, Lovecraft sought to create a fantastic realm capable of terrifying every creature bestowed with reason. The two men have many other points in common; apart from their leanness and their taste for sweets, one can point to a little something which suggests their being *not entirely human*. What is beyond doubt is that the “solitary man of Königsberg” and the “recluse of Providence” are as one in their heroic and paradoxical will to pass *beyond* humanity.

Which will be lost in the unnameable architecture of time

The expository style of the scientific observations used by HPL in his later stories responds to the following principle: *the more monstrous and inconceivable the events and entities described, the more the description must be precise and clinical*. You need a scalpel to decorticate the unnameable.

All impressionism is therefore forbidden. It’s a matter of constructing a vertiginous literature; and there is no vertigo without a certain *disproportion of scale*, without a certain juxtaposition of the minute and the unlimited, of the punctual and the infinite.

This is why, in *At the Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft absolutely must tell us the latitude and longitude of each episode. Whilst at the same time he presents us with beings from beyond our galaxy, sometimes even from outside our space-time continuum. He must therefore create a sense of balance; the characters are placed in precise points, but they teeter on the brink of an abyss.

This has its exact counterpart in the temporal domain. If entities from many hundreds of millions of years ago are to appear in our human history, it’s important to precisely date the moments of these appearances. They are so many breakthroughs. To allow the irruption of the unspeakable.

The narrator of *The Shadow out of Time* is a professor of political economy descended from the old ‘extremely wholesome’ families of Massachussetts. Steady, well-balanced, nothing predisposes him to the transformation that befalls him on Tuesday 14 May 1908. On getting up, he suffers from migraines, but despite them goes normally about his business. Then follows the event.

“The collapse occurred about 10.20 am, while I was conducting a class in Political Economy VI – history and present tendencies of economics – for juniors and a few sophomores. I began to see strange shapes before my eyes, and to feel that I was in a grotesque room other than the classroom.

My thoughts and speech wandered from my subject, and the students saw that something was gravely amiss. Then I slumped down, unconscious, in my chair, in a stupor from which no one could arouse me. Nor did my rightful faculties again look out upon the daylight of our normal world for five years, four months, and thirteen days.”[14]

After being unconscious for seven and a half hours, the professor seems to return to himself; but a subtle modification appears to have been introduced into his personality. He manifests an extraordinary ignorance in regard to the most elementary realities of everyday life, conjoined with a supernatural knowledge of facts which took place in the distant past; and he begins to speak of the future in terms that arouse fear. His conversation is permeated by a strange irony, as if the hidden workings of the world are perfectly well known to him, and has been for a very long time. The expressive arrangement of his facial muscles itself completely changes. His family and friends feel an instinctive repugnance for him, and his wife finally demands a divorce, alleging that he is a stranger who has “stolen the body of her husband”.

Effectively, the body of professor Peaslee has been colonized by the spirit of a member of the Great Race, roughly conical beings who ruled the earth well before the appearance of man, and acquired a capacity to project their spirit into the future.

The reintegration of the spirit of Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee into its corporeal shell will take place on the 27 September 1913; the transmutation will begin at a quarter past 11 ‘o’clock and is completed just before midday. The first words of the professor, after five years of absence, will punctually recommence the course of political economy which he was giving his students at the beginning of the story...A wonderful symmetrical effect, the construction of a perfect story. The juxtaposition of “three hundred million years” and “a quarter past eleven” is equally typical. An effect of scale, effect of vertigo. A procedure borrowed, once again, from architecture.

Every fantastic story presents itself as the intersection of monstrous entities, situated in unimaginable and forbidden spheres, with our ordinary plane of existence. With Lovecraft, the delineation of the intersection is precise and firm; it becomes denser and more complicated as the story progresses; and it is this narrative precision which ensures our adhesion to the inconceivable.

Sometimes, HPL employs many convergent lines, as in *The Call of Cthulhu*, which impresses with the richness of its structure. At the end of a night of terrible dreams, a decadent artist sculpts a particularly hideous statuette. In this creation Professor Angell recognizes another example of the half-octopus half-human monstrosity which made such a disagreeable impression on the participants of an archaeological conference in Saint-Louis, seventeen years ago. This specimen was brought to them by a police inspector who had discovered it during an investigation into the persistence of certain voodoo rites which included human sacrifice and mutilation. Another participant at the conference made an allusion to the marine idol worshipped by certain degenerate Eskimo tribes.

After the ‘accidental’ death of professor Angell, attacked by a negro sailor in the port of Providence, his nephew takes up the thread of the investigation. He collates cuttings from the press, and ends up coming across an article from the *Sydney Bulletin* relating the wreck of a New Zealand yacht and the inexplicable deaths of its crewmembers. The only survivor, Captain Johansen, has become mad. The nephew of Professor Angell travels to Norway to interview him; but Johansen has already gone to his death without having come to his senses, and his widow has been left a manuscript in which he relates their meeting in the middle of the sea with an gigantic, awful entity *exactly identical in form to the statuette*.

In this story, in which the action unravels on three continents, HPL multiplies the types of narrative to give the impression of objectivity: newspaper articles, police reports, proceedings of scientific societies... all converge towards a final paroxysm: the meeting of the unhappy companions of the Norwegian captain with the great Cthulhu himself :

“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 abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.”

Between 4 and 4:15, a breach was opened in the architecture of time. And, by the chasm thus opened, a terrifying entity manifested itself upon our earth. *Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn !*

The Great Cthulhu, master of the interior depths. Hastur the Destroyer, he who walks upon the wind, and who one must not name. Nyarlathothep, chaos rampant. The amorphous and stupid Azathoth, who blasphemes and bubbles at the centre of all infinity. Yog-Sothoth, co-regent of Azathoth, 'All in one and One in All'. Those are the principal elements of this lovecraftian mythology which so impressed his successors, and which continues to fascinate today. The landmarks of the unnameable.

It's not a matter of a coherent mythology, with precise contours, contrary to the Greco-Roman mythology or this or that magical pantheon, almost reassuring in their clarity and their finality. The entities which Lovecraft put in place remain shadowy. He resisted articulating their powers and their forces. In fact, their exact nature escapes all human concepts. The blasphemous books which give homage to them and celebrate their cult only do so in confused and contradictory terms. They remain, fundamentally, *unspeakable*. We have only fugitive glimpses of their eldritch powers; and humans who seek to know more will pay ineluctably in madness or in death.

NOTES

[1] *Techniques d'Assaut* ; but *attaquez* and *attaque* are used repeatedly in the following section in the ambiguous sense of 'to attack' and 'to begin (a story)' or 'to set about with great energy', less obviously present in the English 'attack'.

[2] American writer, one of the chief contributors to the TV series *The Twilight Zone*.

[3] Published as a short story in 1970, adapted for TV (with a teleplay by Matheson himself under the pseudonym of Logan Swanson) as an episode of *The Twilight Zone* first broadcast on 7 March 1986.

[4] *Omnibus*, vol 3 pp 61-98.

[5] *Ombibus*, vol 2 pp 36-48.

[6] *Omnibus*, vol 3 pp 302-334.

[7] *Omnibus* vol 2 pp 397- 406.

[8] 'dérèglement de tous les sens' – from Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant* (1871).

[9] *Omnibus* vol 3 pp 464-544.

[10] *Omnibus* vol 2 pp 236-269 (quote from p263-4). Houellebecq has, after this passage '*C'est alors que je me mis à trembler...*', which does not seem to correspond to the English text.

[11] *Omnibus* vol 1 pp 9- 140, quote from pp33-5.

[12] *Omnibus* vol 2 pp 206-214.

[13] *Omnibus* vol 1 pp303-350.

[14] *ibid.* p315.

[15] *Omnibus* vol 3 pp466-7.

Part 3: Holocaust

The twentieth century will perhaps be remembered as a golden age for epic and fantastic literature, a time when the morbid fog of the flaccid avant-garde was dissipated. It has already allowed the emergence of Howard, Lovecraft and Tolkien. Three radically different universes. Three pillars of a *dream literature*, as much scorned by the critics as it was enjoyed by the public.

This is of no importance. Criticism always ultimately recognizes its mistakes; or, more precisely, the critics ultimately die and are replaced by others. Thus, after thirty years of contemptuous silence, ‘intellectuals’ began to incline towards Lovecraft. Their conclusion was that this individual had a truly astonishing imagination (which is necessary, after all, to explain his success), but that his style was lamentable.

This is facile. If Lovecraft’s style is lamentable, one can then happily conclude that style doesn’t have, in literature, the slightest importance; and pass on to other things.

This stupid point of view is understandable, though. It must be said that HPL didn’t partake in the least of that elegant, subtle, minimalist and restrained model that generally receives all the accolades. Here, for example, is an extract from *Imprisoned with the Pharoahs*[1]:

“I saw the horror and unwholesome antiquity of Egypt, and the grisly alliance it has always had with the tombs and temples of the dead. I saw phantom processions of priests with the heads of bulls, falcons, cats, and ibises; phantom processions marching interminably through subterranean labyrinths and avenues of titanic propolyaea beside which a man is as a fly, and offering unnameable sacrifices to indescribable gods. Stone colossi marched in endless night and drove herds of grinning androsphinxes down to the shores of illimitable stagnant rivers of pitch. And behind it all I saw the ineffable malignity of primordial necromancy, black and amorphous, and fumbling greedily after me in the darkness to choke out the spirit that had dared to mock it by emulation.”

Such morsels of emphatic bombast obviously constitute a stumbling block for every educated reader; but one must equally point out that these extremist passages are without doubt those which the true *amateurs* prefer above all. In this register Lovecraft has never been equalled. One may copy his manner of using mathematical concepts, of specifying the topography of each scene of the drama; one can revive his mythology, his imaginary demoniac library; but one can never imagine oneself emulating those passages where he loses all stylistic reserve, where adjectives and adverbs accumulate to the point of exasperation, where he lets loose exclamations of pure delirium such as: *“No! Hippopotamuses cannot have human hands nor carry torches!”* And yet this is the true goal of his work. One could even say that the structures, often subtle and elaborate, of the “major works”, have no other purpose except to prepare the way for passages of stylistic explosion. As in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, where one finds the hallucinatory confession of Zadok Allen, the half-mad nonagenarian alcoholic :

“Heh, heh, heh, heh! Beginnin’ to see hey? Mebbe ye’d like to a ben me in them days, when I seed things at night aout to sea from the cupalo top o’ my haouse. Oh, I kin tell ye’ little pitchers have big ears, an’ I wa’n’t missin’ nothin’ o’ what was gossiped abaout Cap’n Obed an’ the folks aout to the reef! Heh, heh, heh! Haow abaout the night I took my pa’s ship’s glass up to the cupalo an’ seed the reef a-bristlin’ thick with shapes that dove off quick soon’s the moon riz? Obed an the folks was in a dory, but them shapes dove off the far side into the deep water an’ never come up....Haow’d ye like to be a little shaver alone up in a cupola a-watchin’ shapes as wa’n’t human shapes?... Hey?...Heh, heh, heh...”[2]

Lovecraft’s opposition to the representatives of good taste is more than a question of detail. HPL would probably have considered a story a failure if he hadn’t been able, at least once during its writing, to go totally overboard. This is verified *a contrario* in a judgment made on a colleague :

“Henry James is perhaps a little too diffuse, too delicate and too habituated to the subtleties of language to arrive properly at a savage and devastating horror.”

The fact is therefore even more remarkable that Lovecraft was throughout his life the model of a discreet gentleman, reserved and well-educated. Not at all the type to speak of horrors, or to rave in public. No-one ever saw him get angry; nor weep, nor burst out laughing. A life reduced to the minimum, of which all the vital forces have been transferred to literature and to dreams. An exemplary life.

Antibiography

Howard Philips Lovecraft is an example to all those who want to learn how to miss their mark in life yet, possibly, succeed in their work. Although as regards the latter point, the result is not guaranteed. In practicing a policy of total non-engagement with essential realities, one risks sinking into a comprehensive apathy, and not even being able to write anymore; and it was this that held back his progress, many times. Suicide is another danger, with which one must come to terms; thus, Lovecraft always kept near to hand, for many years, a little bottle of cyanide. It could turn out to be extremely useful, depending on whether or not he could make it through. He did make it through, but not without difficulties.

Firstly, money. HPL offers in this regard the disconcerting case of an individual at once poor and disinterested. Without ever being overcome by poverty, he had been all his life extremely penurious. His correspondence reveals painfully that he was forced ceaselessly to pay attention to the price of things, even the most basic foodstuffs. He never had the means to launch into a major purchase, like buying a car, or travelling to Europe as he dreamt of doing.

The large part of his revenues resulted from his work of revision and correction. He accepted work at extremely low rates, even without charge if friends were involved; and when one of his invoices went unpaid, he abstained in general from harrying the creditor; it wasn't dignified for a gentleman to compromise himself with the sordid particulars of money, or to show too lively an anxiety for one's own interests.

Additionally, he owned by way of inheritance a little capital, which he nibbled at throughout his life, but which was too little to be anything more than a minor contribution. Moreover, it's rather poignant to consider that at the moment of his death, his capital has nearly fallen to zero; as if he had lived out exactly the number of years allotted to him by his family fortune (very little) and by his personal capacity to economise (considerable).

As for his own work, it earned him practically nothing. He wholeheartedly believed it unsuitable to pursue literature as a profession. As he wrote: *“a gentleman doesn't try to become famous, but leaves that to the little parvenu egoists”*. It's obviously difficult to appreciate the sincerity of this declaration; it might appear to us to be the result of a formidable mass of inhibitions, but it must equally be considered as the strict application of an obsolete code of behaviour, to which Lovecraft adhered with all his might. He always wanted to be seen as a provincial gentleman, studying literature as one of the fine arts, for his own pleasure and that of a few friends, without care for public tastes, fashionable themes, or anything of that sort. Such a person has no place in our societies; he knew this, but he always refused to take account of it. And, ultimately, all that distinguished him from a true 'country gentleman' was that he possessed nothing; but even so, he didn't want to take account of it.

In a time of furious commercialism, it is comforting to find someone who refuses so obstinately to “sell himself”. Here, for example, is the accompanying letter, from 1923, to the first manuscript he sent to *Weird Tales*:

“Dear Sir,

Having had the habit of writing strange, macabre and fantastic stories for my own entertainment, I have recently been assailed by a dozen well-intentioned friends who press me to submit some of my gothic horrors to your recently-founded magazine. Please find enclosed five short stories written between 1917 and 1923.

Of these, the first two are probably the best. If they be unsuitable, the rest need not be read [...] I don't know whether they will please you, since I have no idea what is required of 'commercial' texts. My sole aim is the pleasure which I draw from creating strange situations, atmospheric effects; and the only reader who I take into account is myself. My models are invariably the old masters, especially Edgar Poe, who has been my favourite writer since early childhood. If, by any miracle, you could envisage publishing my tales, I have only one condition to ask of you: to make no cuts. If the text cannot be printed as it was written, to the last semicolon and comma, I accept your refusal with thanks. But I'm sure I don't risk much in this regard, since there is little chance of my manuscripts being considered by you. 'Dagon' has already been refused by Black Mask, to whom I proposed it under external pressure, as is the case for the enclosed."

Lovecraft was to change on many points, especially on his devotion to the style of the "old masters". But his attitude, at once haughty and masochistic, ferociously anticommercial, did not vary: refusing to type his texts, sending dirty and creased manuscripts to editors, systematically mentioning those who had already refused them... Everything to offend. No concessions. Here once more, he acted against his own interests.

"Naturally, I am not familiar with the phenomenon of love, or only by way of superficial reading"
(letter of 27 September 1919 to Reinhardt Kleiner)

The biography of Lovecraft comprises very few events. "He hardly did anything," this is a *leitmotif* of his letters. But one can still say that his life, already reduced to very little, would have been rigorously empty if he hadn't crossed the path of Sonia Haft Greene.

Like him, she belonged to the "amateur journalist" movement. Very active in the US around 1920, this movement afforded numerous isolated writers, situated outside the circuits of mainstream publishing, the satisfaction of seeing their productions printed distributed and read. This was Lovecraft's sole social activity; it was to introduce him to all of his friends, and also to his wife.

When she meets him, she is thirty-eight, seven years older than he. Divorced, she has one daughter of sixteen from her former marriage. She lives in New York, and earns her livelihood as a manager of a clothing store.

She seems to have immediately fallen in love with him. For his part, Lovecraft keeps a reserved attitude. To tell the truth, he knows absolutely nothing of women. It is she who has to make the first move, and even the following ones. She invites him to dinner, comes to visit him in Providence. Finally, in a little Rhode Island town called Magnolia, she takes the initiative to embrace him. Lovecraft blushes, then goes totally white. When Sonia mocks him gently, he has to explain that it is the first time he has been embraced since his early childhood.

This happens in 1922, and Lovecraft is thirty-two. He and Sonia will marry two years later. Over the course of months, he seems progressively to thaw. Sonia Greene is an exceptionally pleasant and charming woman; in the general view, a very beautiful woman also. And in the end the inconceivable comes to pass: the "old gentleman" falls in love.

Later, after the breakdown, Sonia will destroy all of the letters that Lovecraft sent to her; there only exists a single one, bizarre and pathetic in the will to understand human love by one who feels, in all regards, so distant from humanity. Here are a few brief passages:

*“Dear Mrs Greene,
 The reciprocal love of a man and a woman is an experience of the imagination which consists of attributing to its subject a certain particular relation with the aesthetico-emotional life of that which feels it, and depends on particular conditions which must be fulfilled by that object. [...] With long years of mutual enduring love slowly comes adaptation and a perfect relationship; memories, dreams, delicate stimuli, aesthetics and the habitual impressions of the beauty of dreams become permanent modifications thanks to the influence of each upon the other [...] There is one considerable difference between the sentiments of youth and those of maturity. Around forty or maybe fifty years old, a complete change takes place; love accedes to a profound calm and serenity founded on a tender association before which the erotic infatuation of youth has a certain mediocre and humiliating aspect. Youth brings with it erogenous and imaginary stimuli based on the tactile phenomena of slender bodies, in virginal attitudes, and on the visual imagery of classical aesthetic contours symbolizing a sort of freshness and springtime immaturity which is very beautiful, but which has nothing to do with conjugal love.”*

These considerations may not be false in a theoretical sense; they merely appear a little out of place. That is to say, in the context of a love letter, the overall effect is rather peculiar. Be that as it may, this adamant anti-eroticism wouldn't stop Sonia. She felt herself capable of breaking through the reticence of her bizarre lover. There are in the relations between people some elements that remain perfectly incomprehensible; this fact is especially illustrated in the present case. Sonia seems to have understood Lovecraft very well, his frigidity, his inhibition, his denial and his disgust for life. As for him, who considered himself an old man at thirty, one is still surprised that he could envisage union with this dynamic, vivacious creature. A divorced jewess, what's more; which, for a conservative antisemite like him would seem to constitute an insurmountable obstacle.

One supposes that he hoped to make it work; there is nothing unlikely in this, even if the train of events was cruelly to contradict this hypothesis. As a writer, he could obviously submit to the temptation to “acquire new experiences” concerning sexuality and marriage. In the end, one must remember that it was Sonia who took the lead, and that Lovecraft in some matters was incapable of saying no. But it is perhaps the most unlikely explanation that seems the best: Lovecraft really seems to have, *in a certain manner*, loved Sonia, as Sonia loved him. And these two, so different from each other, but who loved each other, were to be joined in marriage on the 3rd March 1924.

The Shock of New York

Immediately after the marriage, the couple install themselves in Brooklyn, in Sonia's apartment. Lovecraft is to live the two most astonishing years of his life. The misanthropic and slightly sinister recluse of Providence is transformed into an affable man, full of life, always ready for an outing to a restaurant or museum. He sends enthusiastic letters to announce his marriage:

“Two become one. Another person has taken the name Lovecraft. A new family is founded! If only you could see grandpa this week, rising regularly with the dawn, coming and going with rapid steps. And all of this with the long-term perspective of regular literary work – my first real job!”

His correspondents come to visit, the Lovecrafts' apartment is never empty. They are all surprised to discover a young man of thirty-four years where they believed they would find an old disenchanted misanthrope; Lovecraft, at this time, is feeling exactly the same sort of surprise. He even begins to nurture dreams of literary fame, to make contact with editors, to imagine *success*. This miracle was signed ‘Sonia’.

He didn't even miss the colonial architecture which he believed indispensable to his survival. His first contact with New York was on the contrary characterized by wonder; one finds its echo in *He*, a largely autobiographical short-story written in 1925[3]:

“Coming for the first time upon the town, I saw it in the sunset from a bridge, majestic over its waters, its incredible peaks and pyramids rising flowerlike and delicately from pools of violet mist to play with the flaming clouds and the first stars of the evening. Then it had lighted up window by window above the shimmering tides where lanterns nodded and glided and deep horns bayed weird harmonies, and had itself become a starry firmament of dream, redolent of faery music[.]”

Lovecraft had never been closer to happiness than in this year 1924. Their relationship could last. He could find work as an editor at *Weird Tales*. He could...

However everything was to be shaken to its foundations, as a result of a small event heavy with consequences: Sonia was to lose her job. She would try to open her own shop, but the business would fail. Lovecraft would therefore be forced to find work to assure their subsistence.

This task would prove absolutely impossible. He would try, though, responding to hundreds of job advertisements, writing to employers speculatively... Total failure. Certainly, he had no idea of the realities indicated by words like dynamism, competitiveness, commercial sense, efficiency... But all the same, in an economy which wasn't even in crisis at the time, it would surely be possible for him to find some junior position... But no. Nothing whatsoever. There was no conceivable place, in the American economy of his epoch, for an individual like Lovecraft. There is here a sort of *mystery*; and he himself, fully aware of his maladaptation and shortcomings, doesn't wholly understand it.

Here is an extract of a circular that he ends up sending to “potential employers”:

“The notion according to which even a man of cultivation and good intelligence cannot rapidly acquire a competence in a domain somewhat outside his customary field seems naive to me; however, recent events have demonstrated to me in a most distinct manner to what extent this superstition is largely widespread. Since I began, two months ago, seeking employment for which I am naturally, and by virtue of my studies, well-equipped, I have responded to nearly one hundred advertisements without even receiving a chance to be heard in a satisfactory manner – apparently because I cannot give a reference from a previously-held post in a corresponding department of a different firm from that which I am addressing. Thus, abandoning traditional channels, I am finally trying for the sake of experience to take the initiative.”

The vaguely comical side of this attempt (“for the sake of experience”, notably, is nice) cannot disguise the fact that Lovecraft found himself in a truly painful financial position. And his failure compounded his position. If he had the vague consciousness of not being totally in phase with the society of his epoch, he didn't expect, all the same, such a total rejection. Further on, the distress begins to tell when he announces that he is prepared “*in view of custom and of necessity, to start in the most modest conditions, and with the reduced remuneration that is habitually the lot of novices*”. But nothing doing. Whatever the remuneration, his candidature doesn't interest anyone. He is not adaptable to a market economy. And he begins to sell his belongings.

At the same time, his attitude toward his environment deteriorates. One must be poor to really understand New York. And Lovecraft was to discover the other side of the tracks. To the first description of the city in *He*, follow these paragraphs[4]:

“But success and happiness were not to be. Garish daylight showed only squalor and alienage and the noxious elephantiasis of climbing, spreading stone where the moon had hinted of loveliness and elder magic; and the throngs of people that seethed through the flumelike streets were squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them, who could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart.”

We see here manifested the first traces of a racism that afterwards nourished the work of HPL. It presented itself from the start in a banal enough form: unemployed, menaced by poverty, Lovecraft could stand less and less an aggressive and hard urban environment. In addition he

feels a certain aggrievement in considering that immigrants of every provenance are swallowed up without difficulty in the bustling *melting-pot* which is the America of the 20s, whereas he himself, despite his pure anglo-saxon heritage, is permanently in search of employment. But there is more. There would be more.

On the 31 December 1924, Sonia left for Cincinnati, where she has found a new job. Lovecraft refuses to accompany her. He can't bear to be exiled in an anonymous Midwestern town. Anyhow, he has lost faith – and begins to think of a return to Providence. One might find the trace of this in *He*[5]:

“[...] I even wrote a few poems, and still refrained from going home to my people lest I seem to crawl back ignobly in defeat.”

He was to stay, even so, a little over a year in New York. Sonia loses her job in Cincinnati, but finds a new one in Cleveland. American mobility...She comes back home every fifteen days, disbursing to her spouse the money necessary for his survival. And he continues, in vain, his derisory search for work. He feels, in fact, horribly poor. He would like to return home, to Providence, to his aunts, but he doesn't dare. For the first time in his life, it is impossible for him to conduct himself like a *gentleman*. This is how he describes Sonia's conduct to Lillian Clark:

“I have never seen a more admirable attitude, full of disinterested consideration and solicitude; each financial difficulty that I face is accepted and excused as soon as it becomes obvious that it is inevitable...”

A devotion capable of accepting without a murmur this combination of incompetence and egoism, so contrary as it might be to everything one could hope for at first, is assuredly a phenomenon so rare, so close to saintliness in its historical sense, that it is enough to have the least sense of artistic proportion to respond with the warmest reciprocal esteem, with admiration and with affection.”

Poor Lovecraft, poor Sonia. The inevitable would however come to pass, and in April 1926 Lovecraft would leave the New York apartment to return to Providence to live with his oldest aunt, Lillian Clark. He and Sonia were to be divorced three years later – and he would never know another woman. In 1926, his life was to all intents and purposes over. His true *oeuvre* – the series of “major works” – then began.

New York had marked him definitively. His hatred for the “stinking, amorphous hybridity” of this modern Babel, for the “giant strangers, ill-born and deformed, who gabble and shout vulgarly, destitute of dreams, within its confines” did not cease, during the course of 1925, to exasperate him to the point of delirium. One might even say that one of the fundamental figures of his work – the idea of a titanic and grandiose city, in the fundamentals of which swarm repugnant creatures of nightmare – was inspired directly by his experience of New York.

Racial Hatred

Lovecraft had in fact always been racist. But in his youth this racism did not go beyond that which was part and parcel of that social class to which he belonged – the old bourgeoisie, protestant and puritan, of New England. By virtue of the same mindset, he was, naturally, *reactionary*. In all things, whether the techniques of versification or the clothes of young girls, he valued notions of order and tradition over those of liberty and progress. There is nothing original or eccentric in this. It is especially *old guard*, that's all. It seemed obvious to him that anglosaxon protestants are by nature destined for the top place in the social order; for other races (which basically he knew very little of, and had no wish to know more), he felt nothing beyond a distant, benevolent contempt. As long as each remained in their place, and all unnecessary change was avoided, everything would be fine.

Contempt is not a very literarily productive sentiment; it incites more to silence than to the ‘well-turned phrase’. But Lovecraft will be constrained to live in New York; he will know hatred,

disgust - and fear, far richer. And it is in New York that his racist *opinions* will be transformed into an authentic racial neurosis. Being poor, he will have to live in the same areas as those “obscene, repulsive and nightmarish” immigrants. He will pass them in the street, he will pass them in the parks. He will be jostled in the subway by “sneering, greasy mulattos,” by “hideous negroes like gigantic chimpanzees.” He will find them again in the course of his search for employment, and realize with horror that his aristocratic deportment and his refined education, coloured by a “stable conservatism”, afford him no advantage whatsoever. Such values have no place in Babylon; it is the dominion of wits and brute force, of “rat-faced jews” and “monstrous half-breeds that hop and waddle about absurdly.”

It is no longer a matter of the well-bred racism of the WASP; this is brutal hatred, that of the trapped animal made to share its cage with beasts of a different, and formidable, species. And yet, ultimately, his hypocrisy and his good education bore up; as he wrote to his aunt: “*It does not behove individuals of our class to make ourselves conspicuous by our speech or inconsiderate actions.*” After the example of his neighbours, whenever he comes across representatives of other races, Lovecraft grits his teeth, blanches slightly, but keeps his cool. His exasperation is given free rein only in his letters – before being released in his stories. It transforms little by little into a phobia. His vision, nourished by hatred, is elevated to naked paranoia, and higher still, to absolute distraction, foreshadowing the verbal derangements of the “major works”. Here for example is how he recounted to Belknap Long a visit in the Lower East Side, and how he describes its population of immigrants:

“The organic things inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of the earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities. They — or the degenerate gelatinous fermentation of which they were composed — seem'd to ooze, seep and trickle thro' the gaping cracks in the horrible houses ... and I thought of some avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting point with gangrenous vileness, and about to burst and inundate the world in one leprous cataclysm of semi-fluid rottenness. From that nightmare of perverse infection I could not carry away the memory of any living face. The individually grotesque was lost in the collectively devastating; which left on the eye only the broad, phantasmal lineaments of the morbid soul of disintegration and decay ... a yellow leering mask with sour, sticky, acid ichors oozing at eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and abnormally bubbling from monstrous and unbelievable sores at every point ...”

Indiscutably, this is classic Lovecraft. What race could have provoked such derangements? He doesn't very well know himself; at one point he speaks of “italico-semitico-mongoloids”. The ethnic realities in play tend to be erased; anyway, he hates all of them, and isn't interested whatsoever in the detail.

This hallucinatory vision is directly at the source of the descriptions of the nightmarish entities which people the Cthulhu cycle. It is racial hatred that provokes in Lovecraft that state of poetic trance where he surpasses himself in the rhythmical and insane beating out of cursed phrases; which illuminates his later major works with a hideous and cataclysmic glare. The connection appears visibly in *The Horror at Red Hook*.^[6]

The more prolonged is Lovecraft's enforced sojourn in New York, the more his repulsion and terror grows until it attains alarming proportions. As he wrote to Belknap Long, “*one cannot speak calmly about the mongoloid problem of New York*”. Later on in the letter, he declares: “*I hope the end will be warfare -- but not till such a time as our own minds are fully freed of humanitarian hindrances of the Syrian superstition imposed upon us by Constantinus. Then let us show our physical power as men and Aryans, and conduct a scientific wholesale deportation from*

which there will be neither flinching nor retreating.” In another letter, playing the sinister part of a precursor, he foresees the use of cyanide gas.

The return to Providence would not settle anything. Before his time in New York, he hadn't even suspected that foreign creatures could slither down the streets of this charming little provincial town; in some way, he passed them by without seeing them. But his gaze had now developed a painful acuity; and even in areas that he loved so much, he felt the first pricklings of this “leprosy”: *“Emerging from various openings and dragging along the sidewalks, are seen forms undecidable but belonging nevertheless to organic life.”*

However, little by little, the retreat from the world had its effect. In avoiding all visual contact with foreign races, he succeeded in gently calming down; and his admiration for Hitler yielded. Whereas he saw at first in him an *“elemental force dedicated to the regeneration of European culture”*, he came to consider him as an *“honest clown”*, and then to recognize that *“as much as his objectives may be fundamentally healthy, the absurd extremism of his current politics is at risk of leading to disastrous results, and is in contradiction with his original principles”*

Concurrently, the calls for massacre became rarer. As he wrote in a letter, *“Either stow 'em out of sight or kill 'em off”*; and he came progressively to consider the former solution as preferable, particularly in the wake of some time spent in the South, at the home of writer Robert Barlow, where he observed with wonder that the maintenance of a strict racial segregation could allow a white, educated American to feel at ease in the middle of a population with a high density of blacks. Naturally, he states precisely to his aunt, *“they can't let niggers use the beach as a Southern resort – can you imagine sensitive persons bathing near a pack of greasy chimpanzees?”*

The importance of racial hatred in the creations of Lovecraft has often been underestimated. Only Francis Lacassin has had the courage to treat the question honestly, in his preface to the *Letters*[7]. He writes, notably, *“The Cthulhu myths draw their cold force from the sadistic delectation with which Lovecraft surrenders to the persecutions of beings from the stars, of humans punished for their resemblance to the New York rabble that he had abused.”*

This remark seems to me extremely profound, even if false. What is indisputable, is that Lovecraft, as one says of boxers, “a la haine”[8]. But it should be precisely stated that the role of the victim is generally taken in his stories by an anglo-saxon university professor, cultivated and reserved, and well-educated. Very much someone of his type, in fact. Whereas the torturers, servants of unnameable cults, are almost always hybrids, mulattos, mixed-race “of the most base kind”. In Lovecraft's universe, cruelty is not a refinement of the intellect; it is a bestial impulse, which is associated precisely with the benighted stupidity. As to those courteous, refined individuals, of great delicacy of manner...they furnish the ideal victims.

As we can see, the central passion that animates his work is of the order of masochism far more than sadism; which only underlines its dangerous profundity. As Antonin Artaud indicated, cruelty to others only gives the most mediocre artistic results; cruelty to oneself is far more interesting.

It is true that HPL shows an occasional admiration for “great blonde Nordic beasts”, the “mad Viking Celt-slayers”, etc. But it is, really, an admiration from afar; he feels extremely distant from these people and he never imagines, unlike Howard, introducing them in to his work. To the young Belknap Long who mocked him subtly for his admiration of the “great blonde beasts of prey”, he responded with a marvelous frankness: *“You are absolutely correct to say that it is the weak who worship the strong. This is exactly the case with me.”* He knows full well that he has no place in any kind of heroic Valhalla of battles and conquests; unless, as usual, the place of the vanquished. He is penetrated to the marrow by his failure, of his entire predisposition, naturally and fundamentally, to failure. And in his literary universe as well, there is only one place for him: that of the victim.

How we can learn from Howard Philips Lovecraft how to make our spirit a live sacrifice

The heroes of Lovecraft are stripped of all life, renouncing all human joy, becoming pure intellects, pure spirits tending to only one goal: the search for knowledge. At the end of their quest, a frightful revelation awaits them: from the swamps of Louisiana to the frozen plateaus of the antarctic, in the very heart of New York as in the dark verdant valleys of Vermont, everything announces *the universal presence of evil*.

“Nor is it to be thought that man is the oldest or the last of the earth’s masters, or that the common bulk of life and substance walks alone. The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones shall be. Never in the spaces we know, but between them, they walk serene and primal, undimensioned, and to us unseen.”[9]

Evil, with many faces; instinctively worshipped by cunning and degenerate peoples, who have composed dreadful hymns to its glory.

“Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate. Past, present, future, all are one in Yog-Sothoth. He knows where the Old Ones broke through of old, and where They shall break through again.[...]”

The wind gibbers with Their voices, and the earth mutters with Their consciousness. They bend the forest and crush the city, yet may not forest or city behold the hand that smites. Kadath in the cold waste hath known Them, and what man knows Kadath?[...]”

As a foulness shall ye know Them. Their hand is at your throats, yet ye see Them not; and Their habitation is even one with your guarded threshold. Yog-Sothoth is the key to the gate, whereby the spheres meet. Man rules now where They ruled once; They shall soon rule where man rules now. After summer is winter, and after winter summer. They wait patient and potent, for here shall They rule again.”[10]

This magnificent invocation demands several remarks. Firstly, that Lovecraft was a poet; he was one of those writers who had *emerged out of poetry*. The first quality that he manifests, is the harmonious balance of his phrases; the rest only comes later, and with much labour.

Next, one must say that these stanzas to the omnipotence of Evil have an uncomfortable familiarity. Taken as a whole, Lovecraft’s mythology is very original; but it sometimes appears as a frightful inversion of Christian thematics. This is particularly noticeable in *The Dunwich Horror*, where an illiterate peasant woman, who has not known man, gives birth to a monstrous creature, blessed with superhuman powers. This inverted incarnation ends up with a repugnant parody of the Passion, where the creature, sacrificed at the top of a mountain dominating Dunwich, gives forth a despairing appeal: *“FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!”*[11], a faithful echo of *“Eloi, Eloi, lamma sabachtani!”* Lovecraft rediscovers here a very ancient source of the fantastic: Evil, as the issue of a carnal union against nature. This idea fits perfectly with his obsessional racism; for him, as for all racists, the ultimate horror, even more than other races, is miscegenation. Utilising at once his knowledge of genetics and his familiarity with sacred texts, he constructs an explosive synthesis, of an unheard-of power of abjection. To Christ’s new Adam, come to regenerate humanity through love, Lovecraft opposes the “black one”, come to regenerate humanity through bestiality and vice. For the day of the Grand Cthulhu is nigh. And the epoch of his coming is easy to recognize:

“for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom. Meanwhile the cult, by appropriate rites, must keep alive the memory of those ancient ways and shadow forth the prophecy of their return.” This text is nothing other than a dreadful paraphrase of Saint Paul.

We approach here the heart of Lovecraft’s racism, of which he designated himself as a victim, and which dictated who his persecutors were to be. He felt no doubt on the subject: “intelligent

human beings” would be vanquished by “greasy chimpanzees”; they would be pulverized, tortured and devoured; their bodies torn apart in ignoble rites, to the ghastly sound of ecstatic drumming. Already, the veneer of civilization was cracking, the forces of evil waiting “patient and potent”, because they would reign once again here on earth.

More profound than the meditation on cultural decadence, which is merely a superposed intellectual justification, there is fear. Fear is fundamental; it is where disgust finds root; it produces anger and hatred.

Dressed in rigid and somewhat mean costumes, habitually refraining from expressing their emotions and desires, the protestant puritans of New England may occasionally lose sight of their animal origins. Hence Lovecraft accepts their company, even if only in moderate doses. Their insignificance itself reassures him. But, in the presence of “blacks” he is in the grip of an uncontrollable nervous reaction. Their vitality, their apparent absence of complexes and inhibitions terrifies and disgusts him. They dance in the street, they listen to rhythmic music...They speak loudly. They laugh in public. Life seems to amuse them; which is disquieting. Because life is no good[12].

Against the world, against life

Today more than ever, Lovecraft would be a misfit and a recluse. Born in 1890, he appeared already to his contemporaries, in his younger years, an out-of-date reactionary. One can easily guess what he would have thought of today’s society. After his death, it hasn’t stopped evolving in directions that would have made him detest it more than ever. Mechanisation and modernization have ineluctably destroyed the way of life to which he was attached with every fibre of his being (he had, however, no illusions about the possibility of human control over events; as he wrote in a letter, “*everything in this modern world is but the absolute and direct consequence of the discovery of the use of steam and electrical energy on a grand scale*”). The ideas of liberty and democracy, which he abhorred, have spread over the planet. The idea of progress has become an uncontested credo, almost unconscious, which can only bristle at a man who declares: “*What we detest, is simply change in and of itself*”. Liberal capitalism has exerted its dominance over consciousness; marching in time with it have been commercialism, advertising, the absurd grinning cult of economic efficiency, the exclusive and immoderate appetite for material riches. Even worse, liberation has reached from the economic to the sexual domain. All sentimental fictions have been shattered into a thousand pieces. Purity, chastity, fidelity, decency, have become ridiculous stigmata. The value of a human being is measured today by his economic efficiency and his erotic potency: so, exactly the two things that Lovecraft hated the most strongly.

Fantastic writers are generally reactionary, very simply because they are particularly, one might say *professionally*, conscious of the existence of evil. It is rather curious that amongst the numerous disciples of Lovecraft, not one has been struck by the simple fact: the evolution of the modern world has made Lovecraftian phobias ever more present, more alive.

Let us flag as an exception the case of Robert Bloch, one of his youngest correspondents (at the time of their first letters, he was 15 years old), who wrote his best stories when he gave vent to his hatred of the modern world, of youth, of liberated women, of rock music, etc. Jazz was already for him a decadent obscenity; as for rock, Bloch understands it as a return to the most simian savagery, encouraged by the hypocritical morality of progressive intellectuals. In *Sweet Sixteen*, a band of Hell’s Angels, simple described from the start as ultraviolent hooligans, end up carrying out sacrificial rites on the body of an anthropologist’s daughter. Rock, beer and cruelty. It’s a perfect success, perfectly coherent, perfectly justified. But such attempts at introducing the demonic into a modern setting remain exceptional. And Robert Bloch, with his realist writing, his

attention to the social situation of characters, is very much separated from the influence of HPL. Amongst the writers most directly situated in the Lovecraftian movement, none have taken up on their own account the reactionary and racial phobias of their master.

It is true that this path is dangerous, and that it offers only a narrow issue. It's not only a question of censorship and the law. Fantastic writers probably feel that the hostility to all forms of liberty ends up engendering a hostility to life. Lovecraft feels this just as keenly, but he doesn't stop on his path; an extremist. That the world is miserable, intrinsically miserable, miserable in essence, is a conclusion that doesn't worry him in the least; and this is the deepest sense of his admiration for the Puritans: What amazes him about them is that "*they hated life and scorned the platitude that it is worth living*".

We pass over this valley of tears which separates birth from death; but we must stay pure. HPL doesn't share any of the hopes of the Puritans; but he shares their denial. He details his point of view in a letter to Belknap Long (written a few days before his marriage):

"And as for Puritan inhibitions - I admire them more every day. They are attempts to make of life a work of art - to fashion a pattern of beauty in the hog-wallow that is animal existence - and they spring out of that divine hatred for life which marks the deepest and most sensitive soul...An intellectual Puritan is a fool - almost as much of a fool is an anti-Puritan - but a Puritan in the conduct of life is the only kind of man one may honestly respect. I have no respect or reverence whatever for any person who does not live abstemiously and purely"

At the end of his days, he would come to voice regrets, sometimes poignant, before the solitude and failure of his existence. But these regrets remain, if one can express it thus, *theoretical*. He can recollect well enough the times in his life (the end of adolescence, the brief and decisive interlude of marriage) when he could have taken a different path, towards that which one calls happiness. But he knows that, in all probability, he was incapable of behaving differently. And finally, he considers like Schopenhauer, that he "didn't do too badly".

He faced death with courage. Struck by a cancer of the intestine which had spread throughout his body, he is taken to Jane Brown Memorial Hospital on the 10 March 1937. He will behave as an exemplary patient, polite, affable, of a stoicism and courtesy which will impress his nurses, despite very great physical suffering (happily attenuated by morphine). He will perform the formalities of his agonies with resignation, if not with a secret satisfaction. The life which is to escape from its carnal frame is for him an old enemy; he denigrated it, he fought it; he had no word of regret. And he passes away, without incident, on 15 March 1937.

As the biographers say, "Lovecraft died, his work lives on". And in fact we are beginning to give it its true place, equal or superior to that of Edgar Poe, in any case resolutely unique. He sometimes had the feeling, before the repeated failure of his literary production, that the sacrifice of his life had been, all things considered, pointless. We can judge differently today; we for whom he has become an essential initiator to an *alternative* universe, situated well outside the limits of human experience, and moreover of a horribly precise emotional impact.

This man who failed at life, succeeded, finally, in writing. He was ill. He lost years. New York helped him. He, who was so polite, so courteous, had discovered hate. Returning to Providence he composed magnificent stories, vibrant like incantations, precise as dissections. The dramatic structure of the "major works" is of an imposing richness; the processes of narration are pure, innovative, bold; all this would not be enough perhaps, if one didn't feel, at the centre of it all, the pressure of a devouring interior force.

All grand passion, whether it is love or hate, ends up producing an authentic *oeuvre*. One can deplore it, but must recognize: Lovecraft is more on the side of hate; of hate and fear. The universe, which he conceives intellectually as indifferent, became aesthetically hostile. His own existence, which could have been nothing but a succession of banal deceptions, became a surgical operation, and an inverted celebration.

The work of his mature years stayed true to the physical prostration of his youth, transfigured.

Here is the deepest secret of Lovecraft's genius, and the pure source of his poetry: he succeeded in transforming his disgust for life into an *active* hostility.

To offer an alternative to life in all its forms, to constitute a permanent opposition, a permanent recourse from life: such is the highest mission of the poet on this earth. Howard Philips Lovecraft achieved this mission.

NOTES

[1]*Omnibus* 2, p252-3.

[2]*Omnibus* 3, p422-3.

[3]*Omnibus* 2, pp270-282, the quote from p270.

[4]*ibid.* p271.

[5]*ibid.*

[6]*ibid.* p283-309.

[7]The French translation of the letters to 1926, published by Christian Bourgois, Paris.

[8]literally 'he has hate'.

[9]A quotation from the *Necronomicon*;from *The Dunwich Horror*, *Omnibus* 3, p117-8.

[10]*ibid.*

[11]*ibid.* p151.

[12]"*Car le vie, c'est le mal.*"