

**A Mountain Walked or Stumbled:**

***Madness, Apocalypse, and H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu"***

**by  
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“And this madness that links and divides time, that twists the world into the ring of a single night, this madness so foreign to the experience of its contemporaries, does it not transmit—to those able to receive it, to Nietzsche and to Artaud—those barely audible voices of classical unreason, in which it was always a question of nothingness and night, but amplifying them now to shrieks and frenzy? But giving them for the first time an expression, a *droit de cite*, and a hold on Western culture which makes possible all contestations, as well as *total* contestation? But restoring their primitive savagery?”

–Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (M&C 281)

“The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not *behind* it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author.”

–Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (PT 27)

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

–Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (D&OMT 365)

## Foreword to *The Modern Word* Edition of This Essay

“Why study H.P. Lovecraft?” S.T. Joshi begins his essay here at *The Modern Word* with this question, which he then of course goes on to answer. It is, happily, a question I have never had to ask. Thanks to the rigorous dedication of a select few, with Joshi surely lead dog in the pack, Lovecraft has finally begun to receive the critical attention and respect he deserves. To be sure—there is a Modern Library of America edition of his works coming out in early 2005. When I started work on this project in late 2003, while an undergraduate at the University of Florida, I met a Ph.D. candidate who had a book I needed to borrow. He told me I was very lucky to be able to write on Lovecraft, as even five years before then such a choice of topic for a thesis would have been laughed at and dismissed out-of-hand.

This essay presumes Joshi’s question valid and his answers good. It *is* a study of H.P. Lovecraft: a close reading of his short story “The Call of Cthulhu.” It does not attempt to be an exhaustive study of the man, his canon, or even this tale. Rather, it focuses on two specific points: (1) the link drawn between tropes of madness and tropes of the apocalyptic, as evidenced in the story; (2) Lovecraft’s use of textuality and intertextuality in this story, especially to the extent that such use regards the subjects mentioned in (1).

I don’t think you’ll find the essay obtuse, anymore so than you’d find Lovecraft himself obtuse, but the reader is forewarned of a certain academic...tone to the writing and structure of the work. Indeed, in its original form, this project was my senior thesis at the University of Florida. It is offered up here to the interested scholar or pleasure reader of Lovecraft, and/or of apocalypse study in general.

The reader is asked to indulge me at points in my writing where you come across information on Lovecraft that has already been covered by Joshi's essay. Certainly, the lion's share of my citations will direct you to some text or other of Joshi's. However, I chose my background information with an eye toward the arguments I was making, and hope that any repeated details will therefore prove to have been worth reiterating.

Finally, some acknowledgments. There is no question that even in 2003, and even now, Lovecraft study was and is still peripheral or uncommon, if somewhat more legitimate and/or tolerated. I owe, therefore, some debts of gratitude. Dr. Phil Wegner was the second reader of this project in its thesis-form, and his guidance regarding Lovecraft, Foucault, and modernism at large were all enormous boons; to say nothing of the fact that he volunteered his time to me the very semester after his wife gave birth to twins. Dr. Terry Harpold was not only my primary thesis director, but a first-rate professor, mentor, and friend. Over the course of two years he helped me develop my interests and hone my analysis, irrespective of whether or not I was currently enrolled in a class he was teaching. Dr. Nina Caputo taught a class on the history of apocalyptic movements and thought which served as the perfect prerequisite to a project such as this one; she as well expressed continued interest in my work.

It's quite an honor to have my work posted alongside that of S.T. Joshi. As you'll see (if you haven't already), Joshi is the very beating heart of contemporary Lovecraft study. I hope he gets the chance to see this, and I hope he likes it. The same goes for all of you.

## Introduction

In his conclusion to *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault writes that

Madness has become man's possibility of abolishing both man [*sic*] and the world—and even those images that challenge the world and deform man. It is, far beyond dreams, beyond the nightmare of bestiality, the last recourse: the end and the beginning of everything. Not because it is a promise...but because it is the ambiguity of chaos and the apocalypse: Goya's *Idiot* who shrieks and twists his shoulder to escape from the nothingness that imprisons him—is this the birth of the first man and his first movement toward liberty, or the last convulsion of the last dying man? (M&C 281)

Foucault's likening of madness to the apocalyptic, or more precisely, his suggestion that any given case of madness shares a likeness with what is expected of *the apocalypse*, is clearly not a novel idea. Foucault's analogy comes from a long tradition of similar observation; Goya, Doré, and Bosch are three examples from the modern world of painting. From modern literature he also draws some of the best-known: the Marquis de Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille, Artaud.

For Foucault, the perception of a similarity between madness and the apocalyptic event seems centered around the idea that both are forms of encounter with an Absolute Limit. The nature of the wall that one runs up against is ambiguous: linguistic, experiential, existential; perhaps we can fairly say that it contains elements of all of these.

There is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art—the work endlessly drives madness to its limit; *where there is a work of art, there is no madness*; and yet madness is contemporary with the work of art, since it inaugurates the time of its truth. The moment when, together, the work of art and madness are born and fulfilled is the beginning of the time when the world finds itself arraigned by that work of art and responsible before it for what it is. (M&C 288-9)

Foucault draws our attention to a well-established convention, the kinship between madness and artistic production. It seems to be a given, almost a prerequisite, that a degree of madness informs the production of any art. For this reason, perhaps, Foucault's selection of artists and writers calls as frequently on the genuinely mad as on those who depicted or analyzed madness.

The key aspect of this passage is Foucault's opening up of the other ("wrong") side of the barrier between madness and art. Art, he suggests, works not by careening headlong toward the Absolute Limit of madness, (which would be the art's final moment of existence<sup>1</sup>); madness is not art driven beyond its limit. Rather, crucially, *art is madness driven beyond its limit*. For Foucault, art becomes a fisherman, plumbing the depths of madness with a hook and reel, dragging its catch up to the surface and out of the water. That water-line demarcates imperfectly the art/madness boundary: *a permeable boundary*<sup>2</sup>. When the mad thing is pulled through the boundary into art (into our world, it may be said) it is no longer pure madness. It is transformed by the society that receives it— because there are so many more sane than insane, sanity will neutralize madness according to the laws of basic social chemistry. For madness to overcome this fundamental disadvantage (call it being outnumbered; insufficient mass) it would have to be powerful beyond description; the paranoiac's fantasy realized, the threat of LSD crystals in the water supply, some unstoppable force from the utterly Beyond.

That last example brings me back to the apocalypse which, ironically, is perhaps the oldest form of Western speculation/prediction. The apocalypse guarantees (as both promise and threat) the official and absolute end of an existence-as-such. Usually, this event is part and parcel of the predicted conclusion of an existence-at-all. There are apocalyptic visions however (and

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, regarding Artaud, offers this emblematic explanation: "Artaud's madness does not slip through the fissures of the work of art; his madness is precisely the *absence of the work of art*, the reiterated presence of that absence, its central void experienced and measured in all its endless dimensions." (M&C pg. 287)

<sup>2</sup> HPL's "The Call of Cthulhu" will not only reify these concepts in the plot-action, but also, conveniently, it will be specifically concerned with the terms used in this metaphor— the mad thing will rise from the sea.

plenty of them), that imagine all variety of earthly or heavenly kingdoms, redistributions of wealth or reigns of peace, violent retribution, and so on. As Stephen O’Leary writes of the Book of Revelation in *Arguing the Apocalypse*, “many biblical scholars have attempted to discern a single principle that governs the literary and formal composition of the Apocalypse. Such efforts may well be in vain.” (AA 64) Even within that single text, it seems, there are as many kinds of apocalypse as there are aspects and manifestations of madness, from mild neurosis to stark raving lunacy.

As modern science has supplanted and largely replaced religion’s role of providing our basic knowledge of the material world and human existence, the spectre of an imminent apocalypse featuring God as the sole Unmoved Mover has declined as the motivating factor in people’s lives. If people turned away from a Christian Apocalypse as related by St. John the Divine (for example), they did not turn away from apocalyptic thought in general.<sup>3</sup> Especially since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a constant nervous anticipation of the next disaster, and the notion that any *next* might become the *last*. Paul Virilio’s theory of the accident, which he designates as the phantom twin of invention, puts this concern in context. The industrial revolution, specifically, yielded two new forms of accident—the industrial disaster, and, more importantly, the spectre of widespread industrial collapse. Without question, we can say that if global industry collapsed at any given moment, human life would change; probably forever. This, in fact, is more than just overtones—it is, along with global nuclear war (or a

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<sup>3</sup> As Terry Eagleton writes: “to speak of a post-religious age is to speak a good deal too hastily.” (AT 100) This is an incredibly complex issue, the interplay between science and religion, especially in the current cultural climate. Even to approach the question would require substantial digression from the topic at-hand.

super-Chernobyl), a fully realizable and secular apocalypse; the ghostly potential that continually haunts the projects of modernity.<sup>4</sup>

The possibility of the apocalypse ending existence-as-such sustains a link with madness. The end of existence-at-all leaves no question of what the new world will look like—there won't be one. In contemplating the end of existence-as-such one might confront a pure *otherness* or *difference*. For a person to imagine him/herself living in a way utterly alien to what is known is akin to trying to imagine a new color. The task can't be accomplished, because by definition the goal of the project lies outside of the existing field of reference. A color unlike any other color known heretofore could only be described as such: a thing which cannot be described, or only described as *unknown or unknowable*.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft [HPL] uses the example of the new color as the premise for his short story "The Colour Out of Space" (1927). In the story, a group of scientists run up against the limit of their understanding when they analyze a meteor with physical and aesthetic properties never seen before. The meteor does not respond to their tests, and the weird viral colonization it seems to be waging in the region where it has landed proves difficult to counter. Eventually the thing, which turns out to be animate and is described as a gas that "obeyed laws that are not of our cosmos," (CoC 199) goes back where it came from, but how much of that leaving was the result of the human protagonists' efforts is left uncertain. "It was just a colour out of space—," the narrator concludes at the tale's end, "a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the

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<sup>4</sup> Virilio's terms and concepts (drawn largely from *Politics of the Very Worst* and *Crepuscular Dawn*) are especially useful because they direct discussion of the accident toward the prospect and event of its occurrence, which is a cornerstone of apocalyptic thought (and analysis thereof). Moreover, Virilio's mistrust of contemporary technological progress resonates productively with HPL's disdain for modernity.



brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes.”  
(CoC 199)

Notice that HPL’s narrator has not described the entity as *supernatural*. In Lovecraft, this quality is rarely granted to the monsters or forces encountered by his protagonists. HPL is not out to tell ghost stories or religious fables. Even his gods can be located within a concrete, physical system of meaning, albeit a system exponentially more complex and eccentric than that addressed by human “science.”

HPL was frequently autobiographical in sketching his protagonists and using his artwork as a platform for his social, political, and philosophical views. He was mostly published in pulp journals like *Weird Tales* and in amateur publications, such as the journals of the United Amateur Press Association and the National Amateur Press Association, or *The Conservative*, a short-lived newspaper that he founded and produced himself. During his lifetime only one book by HPL was published, a crudely issued edition of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, in 1936; and even of this volume only “a few hundred copies” distributed (CoC xiii). He was notorious for developing protagonists that were almost indistinguishable from one another, or from their author.

HPL protagonists tend to be men of about the author’s age, sharing his New England heritage and love of the Northeastern region. They are dissatisfied with changes they see in the world—especially urbanization, increased immigrant or foreign presence in historically European regions, and a loss of a sense of wonder. Usually they share interests that he had, such as antiquarianism, writing, and regional history<sup>5</sup>. They tend to be chaste; they are young men for whom physical intimacy is never a possibility. One almost gets the feeling they’ve never heard

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<sup>5</sup> A noteworthy departure from his own story is that HPL’s characters have usually managed to find a successful career in the pursuit of their interests.

of sex. In the recent, heavily annotated editions of HPL's work, editor S.T. Joshi provides a footnote when a protagonist expresses a belief or opinion *different* from that of the author.<sup>6</sup> The utility of such an observation should be immediately clear. The kinship of author and character in this canon allows the critical reader to view the protagonist-characters as projections of the author. (Maybe fantastic or intentionally warped projections, but still, all the more for these!)

In "The Colour Out of Space," the narrator recounts events after the fact. He mentions that the area where the horror took place is soon to be buried beneath a new reservoir that is being constructed—"all those elder secrets will be safe forever under watery fathoms." (CoC 173) This is a constantly recurring trope in HPL: that what cannot be safely comprehended or controlled must be buried away; acts of purposeful (naïve?) uncovering tend to lead to accidental moments of *unleashing*. Moreover, the adjective "elder," as used here, foregrounds HPL's typical description of the thing-which-must-be-buried as quintessentially *ancient*. The presence of the elder thing raises the potential for atavism; the act of burying the ancient does not eliminate a sense of urgency—the need to put down an atavism already attempting to emerge. This vigilant urge to keep the undesirable or dangerous subdued is in line with modernity's goal of not destroying itself, of perpetuating itself by confining or excluding that which poses the most virulent threat to its integrity.

A modernity that seeks progress through technology is essentially self-undermining. Every technological "solution" advents a new potential disaster. Virilio explains: "Each time we invent a new technology...we program a new catastrophe and an accident we cannot imagine...*The accident of science is that science is going to destroy itself.*" (CD 146) HPL, most of whose adult life spanned the space between two world wars, clearly envisioned the

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<sup>6</sup> For an example of this, see Note 17 to "The Thing on the Doorstep" in the Penguin critical edition. Regarding a woman's comment that she could do better at grasping certain concepts if she were equipped with a man's brain, the note explains that "this seemingly misogynist sentiment should not be attributed to HPL." (TonD 441)

relationship between scientific technology and society's welfare as one of impending crisis. In the trope of *necessarily buried or repressed knowledge*, one can read a disdainful, reactionary sensibility on the part of the author which is in turn directed at then-new fields of scientific study such as psychoanalysis, and the feelings of anomie and alienation that were beginning to seem like inescapable aspects of modern living. HPL understood the world to be limited by the laws of physics and practical boundaries disclosed by empiricism, but in his writing he enlarged those concepts till they became distorted, forcing the spirit of such theories to undermine the letter, and thus preserving something of the wild and dream-like quality of the world. HPL's body of work is repeatedly marked by bursts of madness and apocalyptic forecasts, more often than not with the former portrayed as a result of confronting the latter, and he portrayed the modernity he lived through as the trajectory of the line that traced their connection.

I begin this project with an axiom: that madness and the apocalypse are often linked because structural elements of each resembles those of the other. Neither concept can be said to be defined by any particular content. In form, however, madness and the apocalypse have an elastic (and, I want to say, metastatic) structure which is what allows them to feature prominently in so many different stories; this is also the constitutive element of their tendency to appear in tandem.

The goal of this project is to describe the engagement of both madness and the apocalyptic as they appear in the fiction of Howard Phillips Lovecraft in the case of his story "The Call of Cthulhu," a surprisingly complex short work. In "The Call of Cthulhu," we will see all the characteristics of a typical HPL story described above, and more importantly, how the form and content of the story work together to uphold the given axiom.

## **“The Call of Cthulhu:” Brief Comments**

Composed in the fall of 1926, “The Call of Cthulhu” is “manifestly an exhaustive rewriting of ‘Dagon [1917],’ and could be said to begin a tendency found frequently in Lovecraft’s later tales whereby he reworks (usually to much better advantage) themes and conceptions utilized in earlier stories.” (CoC 393) The story is a textual and chronological labyrinth, sliding frequently between what the narrator has actually seen or heard and what he has merely read about. This layered textuality, a reliance on stories-within-stories (and more stories within those), is a signal feature of HPL’s fiction. It also makes plot summary difficult.

The text of “The Call of Cthulhu” is introduced to the reader as: “(*Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston*)”. That name, editor S.T. Joshi’s footnote reveals (CoC 394), is derived from a distinguished Providence, Rhode Island family; a line that boasted a man named Francis Wayland who was once the president of Brown University. The story’s epigraph is taken from “The Centaur” by Algernon Blackwood, a British writer whom HPL admired.

Blackwood was something of a mystic. He was interested in an “ ‘expansion of consciousness’ ” that would reveal the “unity of all Nature.” (CoC 394) The implications of Blackwood’s vision are in concordance with some of the tenets or aims of the Theosophy movement, which was popular throughout much of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and is mentioned in “The Call of Cthulhu.” In the notes to “The Call of Cthulhu,” S.T. Joshi explains that “Lovecraft did not believe in theosophy, but found many of its cosmic speculations imaginatively stimulating.” (CoC 393)

Already, before the first word of the story-proper has been read, HPL has laid down a diegetic limit (the reader is not reading a narrative of a fictional world, but a document found in a fictional world, which in that world purports to be about real events), setting the world wherein the story takes place at an ostensible remove. Yet, at the same time, the fictional world is drawn closer to our own by its linkage to historical reality: the implicit reference to the Wayland family, the resonations of the Blackwood epigraph. Though he achieves it with varying degrees of success, this kind of intertextually-sustained verisimilitude is one of the constant aims of HPL's fiction. This is understandable. The most fundamental component of "weird" tales is the irruption of the irrational or the monstrous into the domain of the normal. Naturally, this tends to require establishing a realistic backdrop-world through which the unreal can burst and in relation to which it can stand in contrast.

## **“The Horror in Clay”**

The tale begins: “the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” (CoC 139) And correlation of disparate contents is precisely what is at issue in “The Call of Cthulhu.” The story is divided into three sections, each of which describes Francis Wayland Thurston’s reading of a manuscript or hearing of a story, and then his reaction to it. In the first section, titled “The Horror in Clay,” he tells of the death of a grand-uncle, George Gammell Angell.<sup>7</sup> Of Angell’s death, this is said:

“The professor had been stricken whilst returning from the Newport boat; falling suddenly, as witnesses said, after having been jostled by the nautical-looking negro who had come from one of the queer dark courts on the precipitous hillside...Physicians were unable to find any visible disorder, but concluded after perplexed debate that some obscure lesion of the heart, induced by the brisk ascent of so steep a hill by so elderly a man, was responsible for the end. At the time I saw no reason to dissent from this dictum, but latterly I am inclined to wonder—and more than wonder.” (CoC 140)

Thurston drops the point, however, and continues: he writes that he went to order his grand-uncle’s affairs, and in a locked box discovered some secret papers<sup>8</sup> of Angell’s concerning cults, incidences of madness in the spring of 1925, Theosophy, and Angell’s own experience with a sculptor. Also in the locked box is a

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<sup>7</sup> Another name chosen for its historical resonance: “Angell” from Thomas Angell, a friend of the man who founded Providence, RI. “Gammell” is a variation of “Gamwell,” the last name of an aunt of HPL’s. (CoC 394) HPL’s constant attention to regional history provides another pertinent example of his integration of autobiography into his tales. From here forward I will not be highlighting each instance of these types unless there is particular significance to them. For a full record of historical fact and autobiography in HPL, among other details, see Joshi’s Penguin editions of his work.

<sup>8</sup> Notice the repetition of signs of darkness, blindness, and secrecy in this passage: “negro,” “the queer dark courts,” “some obscure lesion,” “I saw no reason,” and my own description of the “secret papers.” This emphatic linkage of the hidden to the horrific is at the root of the story’s alternating fear-of-looking and urgent need-to-look. I will return to these points later on.

“queer clay bas-relief...a rough rectangle less than an inch thick and about five by six inches in area; obviously of modern origin. Its designs, however, were far from modern in atmosphere and suggestion; for although the vagaries of cubism and futurism are many and wild, they do not often reproduce that cryptic regularity which lurks in prehistoric writing.” (CoC 141)

This, of course, is the titular horror in clay, though at this time Thurston seems unbothered by it, albeit curious.

From this point forward it becomes difficult to tell whose voice is dominant in the narrative.

Thurston describes reading Angell’s papers, specifically “the first half of the principal manuscript” (CoC 142) from the locked box. Angell’s manuscript recounts his being approached on March 1, 1925 by a young sculptor named Henry Anthony Wilcox. (To reiterate: Thurston is writing about Angell’s writing about a story Wilcox has told him.) “Wilcox was a precocious youth of known genius but great eccentricity, and had from childhood excited attention through the strange stories and odd dreams he was in the habit of relating. He called himself ‘psychically hypersensitive,’ but the staid folk of the community dismissed him as merely ‘queer.’” (CoC 142) <sup>9</sup> Wilcox tells Angell of sculpting the piece the previous night, during a dream of strange cities and lost eons. Wilcox suspects his imagination had been set to play by the event of a sudden earthquake, the first in New England in a long time. Thurston writes that Angell wrote that Wilcox told of “an unprecedented dream of great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror.” (CoC 143) Wilcox also remembers a vision of walls covered in hieroglyphics, and a “voice that was not a voice” emanating from below; “a chaotic sensation which only fancy would transmute into sound, but

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<sup>9</sup> This description of Wilcox probably approximates how HPL thought himself looked upon by his community while a young man, or at least how he would have liked them to have seen him.

which he attempted to render by the almost unpronounceable jumble of letters, '*Cthulhu fhtagn*’.” (CoC 143)

“This verbal jumble was the key to the recollection which excited and disturbed Professor Angell,” (CoC 143) Thurston explains. Angell swears Wilcox to secrecy, already beginning to suspect the worst, and has Wilcox regularly recount his dreams of strange Cyclopean cities and the like. On March 23 Wilcox misses an appointment with Angell, who goes looking for him and finds he has been taken ill, still beset with dark dreams and visions of fantastic cities and monoliths; also now of a giant monster. Angell speaks to one Dr. Tobey, who has been treating Wilcox. “He at no time fully described this object, but occasional frantic words, as repeated by Dr. Tobey, convinced the professor that it must be identical with the nameless monstrosity he had sought to depict in his dream-sculpture.” (CoC 144)

Again, I want to draw attention to the diegetic complexity of the story. HPL presents Thurston’s posthumously-discovered papers which summarize the hidden writings of Angell, which in turn describes a conversation held between Angell and Dr. Tobey regarding statements made by Wilcox about his dreams of Cthulhu. This nesting-doll style of narratives within narratives is a common HPL practice. The multiple narrative layers seem to serve a double, and contradictory, function in these stories. By making the stories confusing and difficult to follow they become reflexive, drawing attention to their inherent and primary textuality.

The success of prose fiction, and especially fantastic or weird fiction, is entirely dependent on the ability of the reader to lose themselves in the text. By mentally entering the world in which the story is set, the reader is able to achieve a sort of catharsis: being frightened by the monster or worried the protagonist won’t make it out alive. Part of that catharsis also derives from confronting the monster—from being shown the scary or unnatural or perverse



thing and feeling the tickle of fright or disgust it causes. Such catharsis, of course, is felt on both sides of the reader/author divide. As the reader is tickled or shocked at what they are finally confronted with, so the author is tickled and shocked at the thing he has created and displayed. “The Call of Cthulhu” makes its own job as a weird tale that much harder by keeping the monster vague and at an extreme distance.

Roland Barthes describes author-reader interplay as an act of seduction: “the text you write must prove to me *that it desires me.*” (PT 6) Such libidinally charged language might seem inappropriate in a discussion of HPL, but it is precisely this tension—the urgent calls of the protagonist for the reader to bear witness, counterbalanced with his hysterical insistence that the truth must be covered and hidden—that beats as a heart at the center of this story. Thus, we return to Barthes: “every writer’s motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am.*” (PT 6) In a weird tale the seduction of the reader is centered around building a sufficiently weird thing and then coyly exposing pieces of it, until finally it is fully exposed. This process of looking and then seeing (undertaken by the reader), is balanced by the author’s process of hiding and then disclosing. The narrative effect of creating suspense plays on the reader’s desire to see, effectively piquing it but refusing to satisfy it. The feeling generated by an effectively suspenseful text contains elements of the neurotic—the suspense itself is relished but the desire for the (suspense-ending) payoff also grows. The very emotion of suspense necessitates its eventual resolution. On the authorial side of the text, suspense must be sustained properly and then (with an appropriate degree of intensity, at least as intense as the degree of suspense generated) reward the reader with the story’s climax. The author is the custodian of the text’s anxiety that it will fail either to generate suspense in the reader or to pay it off appropriately. HPL’s neurosis, then, seems to be signaled by an anxiety that he shares with the

protagonist of the frame narrative, Thurston, over whether the horror can actually be shown, or only hinted at. Synthesizing the seduce/repel dialectic, in this text it is the articulation of the anxiety regarding seduction itself that becomes the seductive feature.

Thurston is a man who is basically never in any danger. The reader is told before the tale even begins that Thurston is dead. This is an ominous beginning, and raises certain questions about how or why Thurston died, but such questions are quickly peripherized by the story since most of what Thurston does is shuffle through paperwork or scribble notes. One might be inclined, then, to argue that there are multiple protagonists in the story. Especially since during the first section of the story Thurston has heard about everything after the fact. On the other hand, Thurston's putative primacy in the tale—his name in the explanatory sub-heading, his words framing and opining on the events—seems to signal his special importance. In this sense HPL plays by the rules—he traces the horrors which took place in some distanced reality as they make their way through the diegetic layers back to Thurston himself. HPL's Thurston makes it clear from the outset that *his* vision of the world and sense of comfort-in-reality have been utterly upset, perhaps beyond repair. The remarks are left like bread crumbs forming a trail through the layers; the reader reads on to see the horrors in question transcend the pages and enter Thurston's reality, which on the surface at least seems to share a strong likeness with our own.

The process HPL uses to establish the verisimilitude the story needs to serve its purpose as a goosebump-raiser is roundabout, but it works. Essentially, Lovecraft's text functions here as a conversion narrative. The primary character at each level requires an accumulation of evidence before he will believe what he is being told. When a sub-protagonist reaches some conclusive notion of the horror, his story is interrupted. The interruption comes in the form of a pulling-back

of the narrative scope. The reader is taken back to the frame narrative to see Thurston's reaction to the material that he has been reading.

The concluding portion of the first section of "The Call of Cthulhu" is ominous, but yields little in the ways of direct horror or information. Wilcox's symptoms disappear suddenly on April 2, at just about three P.M. Thurston writes that the first portion of the manuscript ends there, with Wilcox well again but now of no use to the professor, who, the reader learns, had also asked after the dreams of many other members of his community. Of the incidence of strange dreams or visions, Thurston observes:

"Average people in society and business—New England's traditional 'salt of the earth'—gave an almost completely negative result...Scientific men were little more affected...It was from the artists and poets that the pertinent answers came, and I know that panic would have broken loose had they been able to compare notes." (CoC 145)

The opinion expressed at the end of the passage, regarding the potential panic, is clearly attributable to Thurston. As for the categorization of the New Englanders, it is not clear if Thurston is analyzing Angell's notes or whether he is simply repeating a conclusion Angell explicitly drew after reviewing the data he himself collected. In the end, and regarding this analysis, it probably doesn't matter who said what. In fact, as we move through the text in this reading, there will be a number of points where HPL seems to muddle the voices of his main characters. (I will return to this.)

A line is being drawn. It is New England's " 'salt of the earth' " types who are rendered immune to the call of Cthulhu. Next in line are the scientists, who can feel pangs of the strangeness but are largely capable of writing it off. Finally, poets and artists are drawn deepest and in the greatest numbers by the call from the buried deep. HPL is addressing the link between art and madness that has been a mainstay of the modern understanding of the artistic process;

that same link analyzed by Foucault. Like Foucault, in fact, and decades before him, HPL describes art as derived from the realm of unadulterated madness rather than madness as a result of unrestrained artistry. The distinction is one of primacy, no small issue when analyzing a tale concerned so heavily with the ancient, the atavistic, and the intentionally suppressed. Art as a derivative of madness suggests that art carries madness inside it as atavistic potential, like a recessive gene. At the same time, however, in a world that takes some realm of pure madness as a given (moreover, a world where the unrestrained irruption of madness into the domain of the normal is a threat of apocalyptic proportion), art plays an essential role. Precisely because it is a lesser form of madness, art can inscribe madness within a comprehensible system of meaning—translate it, in a way—and thereby perform two functions: first, art participates in the social project of tethering madness down and isolating it so a wider influence can be avoided; second, art recuperates something of comprehensible and transmittable value from a scenario where the irruption of madness into the world is an unavoidable disaster (accident). Consider Roland Barthes' commentary on Bataille—“*‘I write not to be mad,’ Bataille said—which meant that he wrote madness; but which could mean: ‘I write not to be afraid.’*” **(Pleasure of the Text 49)** Within the confines of this story's diegesis the realm of madness has ceased to be a metaphor. Madness is reified in HPL as the many degrees of reality that normally go unnoticed, largely because they are hidden from us. The poets and artists may be the easiest targets of Cthulhu's call, but this is a side-effect of their nature, and beyond their control.

At this point it will suffice to say that if the poets and artists are slaves to emanations from a facet of reality that seems radically eccentric to the familiar world, the scientists are slaves to their own form of madness—the blind pursuit of technological progress. It is this blind

progress and unraveling of mysteries which threatens most directly to unleash eldritch creatures from the other, buried realms of existence.

“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.” (CoC 139)

This semi-apocalyptic vision, which comprises the first paragraph of Thurston’s notes, is reiterated and expanded upon in the second part of the story.

## **“The Tale of Inspector Legrasse”**

The second section of “The Call of Cthulhu” is mostly Thurston’s review of the second half of the Angell manuscript. It begins at a meeting of the American Archaeological Society in 1908. In this section, the source of Angell’s immediate suspicion and fear of Wilcox’s visions is presented in detail. In some twelve pages, between three and five diegetic layers of narrative are presented and much regarding Cthulhu and the Cthulhu Cult is partially revealed. Also, HPL uses this section to veer the story toward religious, rather than scientific direction. This is important to take stock of, as it is a clear indicator of where to look for the emergence of the horror in this particular fictional world.

The second part of the story is also where the mysteries hinted at by the various narrators are explicitly branded as evil. Inspector Legrasse comes to the Archaeological Society meeting in St. Louis bearing a statuette. HPL makes it clear that Legrasse’s find is similar to Wilcox’s sculpture; Legrasse picked his up in a Louisiana backwater “during a raid on a supposed voodoo meeting.” **(CoC 147)** Like the scientists in “The Colour Out of Space,” the archaeologists fawn over Legrasse’s treasure, but between them they can draw no conclusions other than the breadth of their ignorance.

“...They lost no time in crowding around him [Legrasse] to gaze at the diminutive figure whose utter strangeness and air of genuinely abysmal antiquity hinted so potently at unopened and archaic vistas...Its vast, awesome, and incalculable age was unmistakable; yet not one link did it shew with any known type of art belonging to civilisation’s youth—or indeed to any other time. Totally separate and apart, its very material was a mystery...The characters along the base were equally baffling; and no member present, despite a representation of half the world’s expert learning in this field, could form the least notion of even the remotest linguistic kinship. They, like the subject and material, belonged to something horribly remote and distinct from mankind as we

know it; something frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part.” (CoC 148-9)

This is an amazing degree of detail for anyone to have drawn from a cursory examination of an artifact; the degree to which the statuette seems inscrutable actually communicates a crucial datum: its place of origin, apparently, is a quasi-mythical pre-history, a fantastic and mad place in space-time that existed somewhere before as part of a great natural (and inhuman) cycle. For the first time in the story, it seems, this utterly alien timescape has been revealed to the assembled men of science as a component of historical time. Moreover, the implicit characterization of this past-time as evil, when combined with the slyly introduced theosophical tenet that the universe works cyclically (essentially guaranteeing recurrence), suggests that whatever made the statuette—or worse, the represented creature itself—existed at one point, and therefore could exist again.

As it turns out, however, one person present at the meeting knows something about the figurine and the strange characters engraved on it. William Channing Webb, professor of anthropology and “explorer of no slight note,” (CoC 149) tells the assembled men of his travels in Greenland and Iceland, where he “encountered a singular tribe or cult of degenerate Esquimaux<sup>10</sup> whose religion, a curious form of devil-worship, chilled him with its deliberate bloodthirstiness and repulsiveness.” (CoC 149) Shunned even by the other Esquimaux tribes of the region, the cult in question practiced nameless rites and human sacrifice, and worshipped before “a very crude bas-relief of stone, comprising a hideous picture and some cryptic writing.

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<sup>10</sup> HPL’s archaic spelling of “Eskimo.” HPL tended toward archaic spellings. He occasionally went so far as to artificially archaize quotes taken from actual historical documents (see the epigraph to *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*). For the sake of clarity in discussion, I will use the terms HPL has chosen, if for no other reason than his mistaken formulations regarding race ought to be kept in the foreground of this story, which hinges its plot largely on the distinction between pure-bloods and mulattoes, as well as the secret oral histories and similarities of ritual between otherwise disparate cults of “degenerates” around the globe.

And so far as he could tell, it was a rough parallel in all essential features of the bestial thing now lying before the meeting.” (CoC 149)

Excited by this information, Legrasse and Webb compare details of the Eskimo cult and the Louisiana cult. “There then followed...a moment of really awed silence when both detective and scientist agreed on the virtual identity of the phrase common to two hellish rituals so many worlds of distance apart.” (CoC 150)

*“Ph’nlgui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn.”*

*“In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.”*

(CoC 150)

In terms of understanding the way racial formulation works within the narrative structure of this story, this is of monumental importance. Webb and Legrasse explicitly link groups who could not have, and moreover would not have, had contact with one another at any point in modern history, suggesting a perverse out-group homogeneity that summarizes the us/them distinction underlying the revulsion and horror. The different cults, Esquimaux and swamp mulattoes (soon, Cthulhu Cults of Arabs, Chinese, and Mediterraneans will be introduced to the story) all have in common the worship of the Great Old Ones, especially Cthulhu. The implication, then, is that the racially “degenerate” or “uncivilised” cults are somehow descendent from the eldritch monster-gods they worship, and therefore from that archaic (mad) time/place-before-history suggested by the statuette, the wild dreams and visions, etc.

Moreover, the incantation itself reveals two important facts, which Legrasse’s story will expand on considerably. First of all a place is named—R’lyeh—establishing that Cthulhu, the nature of which or whom is not yet established, exists in some physical location. Second, “dead Cthulhu waits” establishes temporality. Returning to O’Leary’s discussion of Revelation: “the



theme of temporal urgency is related to another striking feature of Revelation—its radical dualism. The sense of historical crisis is intensified by the binary opposition of good and evil, forming a dialectic with no room for compromise.” (**ArgApoc 64**) The establishment of a good/evil dialectic is indispensable to conversion narratives, which are wholly focused on inspiring changes in alliance among their audiences. As Legrasse tells the story of the raid on the swamp cult and the subsequent interrogations of the prisoners, the degree of their evil—heretofore mostly hinted at by the creepy artifacts, weird dreams, and alleged blood rituals—and the scope of their agenda will be made brutally clear.

Of the New Testament Revelation, O’Leary writes it is “a complex sequence of epistles, visions, hymns, and exhortations that interrupt and recapitulate each other in a fashion that seems to defy coherent analysis but nevertheless forms a powerful artistic whole.” (**ArgApoc 64**) In HPL’s story, similarly, it is a sort of literary miracle that a coherent tale emerges from the uneven chorus of voices telling it. It is impossible throughout the tale of the swamp cult to assign expressed opinions to particular diegetic levels. This porosity of diegetic boundaries extends to the highest level—it is unclear whether the ambiguity is a result of Lovecraft’s prose-style or of the condition of the received texts upon which the story is purportedly based. Surely, Legrasse himself says that “the region now entered by the police was one of traditionally evil repute, substantially unknown and untraversed by white men.” (**CoC 151**) But of the “huge, formless white polypous thing” (**CoC 151**) rumored to dwell in a hidden lake near the cult’s worship site, we can’t know whom, of the many narrators, offers this stark, resonantly biblical, description: “It was nightmare itself, and to see it was to die. But it made men dream, and so they knew enough to keep away.” (**CoC 151**)

This collapse of individual voice is a fundament of the text's dialectical project. In the in-group category, the reader finds Inspector Legrasse, his men (especially Joseph Galvez), Professors Angell and Webb, the archaeological society, and Thurston. In the out-group there are teeming hordes of racially indistinct and genetically degenerate cult followers. "Degraded and ignorant as they were, the creatures held with surprising consistency to the central idea of their loathsome faith." (CoC 153) Of the dozens of captured cult members,

"only two...were found sane enough to be hanged, and the rest were committed to various institutions. All denied a part in the ritual murders, and averred that the killing had been done by Black Winged Ones which had come to them from their immemorial meeting-place in the haunted wood. But of those mysterious allies no coherent account could ever be gained. What the police did extract came mainly from an immensely aged mestizo named Castro, who claimed to have sailed to strange ports and talked with undying leaders of the cult in the mountains of China."

(CoC 154)

First of all, the capitalization of the "Black Winged Ones" turns the descriptive into a proper name, reinforcing the idea that individuals are ineluctably and primarily defined by membership in group-categories either derived from or evidenced by physiological traits. (Note, of course, that the monstrous creatures are defined by darkness—blackness specifically.) Of the group of captured cult members, only Castro emerges as an individualized personage in the text. At that, he is speaking not from a place of individual perspective but on behalf of the body of worshippers. Additionally, he is speaking not only of his own personal participation in the cult and its rituals, but also of things he either saw or heard from any number of other people while traveling, both generically ("strange ports") and especially in the mountains of China.

Joshi observes that the "mountains of China" is a likely nod to theosophy, which held that mystical Masters lived in the fabled holy city of Shamballah, which they thought to be the center

of the world. From there, the Masters were said to send out telepathic messages to the faithful.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting, however, that another of HPL's mythical lands, the horrible Plateau of Leng, which he described as hidden away in some uncharted and forbidden Asian region.<sup>12</sup> "Old Castro remembered bits of hideous legend that paled the speculations of theosophists and made man and the world seem recent and transient indeed." (CoC 154) The synthesis of the two positions comes in the revelation of Theosophy's naïvete regarding the demeanor and scope of what a cyclical or mystical universe might produce. The real opposition is between those who would search for the arcane and rightfully buried, whether out of malice or misguided wonder, and those who know just enough about what lies beyond the domain of the normal to know that they want to keep it outside of said domain at any cost.

Again, Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* is of value. In HPL, the good/evil opposition has aligned itself with the in-group/out-group opposition, based on a system of division between known versus unknown. The accrual of knowledge in this story, while necessary for the conversion of the protagonists, is not seen as a path toward understanding or a realization of goals. Rather, each piece of the puzzle reveals something more horrible, and characters are pushed forward either out of absolute necessity or weird impulse. Of the noises Legrasse and his men heard when approaching the cult's ritual-in-progress, it is written that "only poetry or madness could do justice..." (CoC 151) That sentence is a statement of opinion presented as fact, and it travels up the chain of diegesis through the members of the in-group: Legrasse to Angell to Thurston to Lovecraft. All the members of the in-group here are Angell's "salt of the earth" types (though not necessarily New Englanders), and they share common convictions, not

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<sup>11</sup> For Joshi's full note, which I have paraphrased, see note 31 to the Penguin Critical Edition of "The Call of Cthulhu." (CoC 397)

<sup>12</sup> Let me be perfectly clear—the heroes in this tale are not theosophists, and neither was H.P. Lovecraft. The naïve naturalism of theosophy is positioned in this story as dialectically opposed to the sinister, shadowy vistas of terror suggested by the various mulatto cults; but only for a short time.

the least of which is that poetry and madness share a common progenitor and that either is perhaps a form of the other. Poetry as a kind of diluted madness or madness as a kind of hyper-poetry, an art so pure it has overshot sensible communication; either way the in-group/out-group opposition has aligned itself with yet another dialectical model: it has drawn a line at the sanity/madness boundary.

The threat of the out-group in HPL is that they are the transhistorical preservers of forbidden knowledge, all of it secret and much of it incommunicable outside of its own idiosyncratic lexicon. The out-group attempts to force an integration, initially of information and later of physically embodied creatures (not the least repulsive of which is the out-group themselves), of that which absolutely *cannot be integrated into the system of existence-as-such*. To attempt the integration (which is what the out-group is always seeking with their incantations, sacrifices, rituals, presence) would be to guarantee the destruction of existence-as-such: the apocalyptic moment, which, not coincidentally, is a scenario which even the most staid of HPL's protagonists can only address in the vaguest terms, and at that with a tone of gibbering fear.

“They worshipped, so they said, the Great Old Ones [*again, the category is conceived as a kind of proper name*] who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea; but their dead bodies had told their secrets in dreams to the first men, who formed a cult which had never died. This was the cult, and the prisoners said it had always existed and would always exist, hidden in distant wastes and dark places all over the world until the time when the great priest Cthulhu, from his dark house in the mighty city of R’lyeh under the waters, should rise and bring the earth again beneath his sway. Some day he would call, when the stars were ready, and the secret cult would always be waiting to liberate him.

“Meanwhile, no more must be told. There was a secret which even torture could not extract. Mankind was not absolutely alone among the conscious things of earth, for shapes came

out of the dark to visit the faithful few. But these were not the Great Old Ones. No man had ever seen the Old Ones. The carven idol was great Cthulhu, but none might say whether or not the others were precisely like him. No one could read the old writing now, but things were told by word of mouth. The chanted ritual was not the secret—that was never spoken aloud, only whispered. The chant meant only this: “In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.”  
(CoC 153-4)

This passage *precedes* the introduction of Old Castro in the narrative, and so stands quite plainly as the message of the out-group as understood by the in-group. Oddly, this may also be the moment of most complex diegetic layering in the story. HPL (1) is writing Thurston’s commentary (2) on the secret papers of Professor Angell (3) who is recounting the tale of Inspector Legrasse (4) who is summarizing a battery of interviews conducted by his subordinates (5) with members of the swamp cult (6) who tell of certain rites and rituals they have conducted at the urging of the monster-priest Cthulhu (7) who has come to earth from Somewhere (8). What this complex narrative machinery points to, however, is that to believe the testimony of the swamp cult is to understand that there are certain *evil things out there* and that they need to be kept *at bay and out of here*.

Of course, to have such a determination (to keep the out-group and its threat on the outside), one must first be *converted* to a belief in the existence of the threat in the first place. Thurston, the primary protagonist, is not yet convinced. He is, however, inspired to something like action.

“The dream-narratives and cuttings collected by the professor were, of course, strong corroboration; but the rationalism of my mind and the extravagance of the whole subject led me to adopt what I thought the most sensible conclusion. So,...I made a trip to Providence to see the sculptor and give him the rebuke I thought proper for so boldly imposing upon a learned and aged man.” (CoC 157)

A single conversation convinces Thurston that Wilcox is innocent of any trickery, but he still thinks the young artist must have been influenced by knowledge of the cult in some way and forgotten about it. Thurston himself travels to New Orleans to see Legrasse and others from the raiding-party.

“The matter of the cult still remained to fascinate me, and at times I had visions of personal fame from researches into its origin and connexions...What I now heard so graphically at first-hand, though it was really no more than a detailed confirmation of what my uncle had written, excited me afresh; for I felt sure that I was on the track of a very real, very secret, and very ancient religion whose discovery would make me an anthropologist of note. My attitude was still one of absolute materialism, *as I wish it still were*, and I discounted with almost inexplicable perversity the coincidence of the dream notes and odd cuttings collected by Professor Angell.” (CoC 159)

This passage is taken from a space of about two and a half pages, wherein Thurston makes the decision to go see Wilcox, speaks with him, draws a conclusion, finds himself continually interested in the Cthulhu cult, and travels across the country to meet and speak with the men whose story he read about in the Angell manuscript. It is strange that so little narrative space would be devoted to what actually happened to Thurston, especially when contrasted with the amount of space devoted to recounting what he read about in Angell’s memoir. When Thurston says that he heard “graphically at first-hand” about the events, “though it was really no more than a detailed confirmation of what my uncle had written,” he is telling the reader something monumentally significant about the way he thinks. Because the story is presented as a document, a found collection of papers, the reader is in a position to wonder at the mindset of the author and, crucially, when the document was written. Thurston’s anxious foreshadowings (and his occasional insertions of complaint regarding how difficult it is to live with what he knows) alert the reader that the papers in question are memoir rather than diary. Just as each diegetic layer of the story tells of an event that is already over and done with, so does Thurston’s *act of writing*

take place *after the fact* of his investigation. His papers are not a chronologically progressive record of or supplement to his process of discovery. This is a signal to the reader that a certain refusal of the evidence has already—prior to the writing—become impossible.

With that in mind, consider now the mindset of a man who, having heard more or less the same account of events told to him first-hand by people who were there and third-hand<sup>13</sup> from a manuscript, *chooses to present to his audience the manuscript rather than his own experience*. Clearly, what we are seeing in Thurston is a curious confidence in the superior value of that which is read over that which is witnessed. It is this belief which will govern the third and final section of the story, wherein Thurston travels the globe only to get the scare of his life from reading yet another dead man's manuscript.

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<sup>13</sup>(Angell's version of Legrasse's version of what the men saw.)

## “The Madness From the Sea”

“If heaven ever wishes to grant me a boon,” begins the final section of the story, “it will be a total effacing of the results of a mere chance which fixed my eye on a certain stray piece of shelf-paper.” (CoC 159) Thurston is visiting a friend (a mineralogist and museum curator) in New Jersey when he notices a photograph of a “half-tone cut of a hideous stone image almost identical with that which Legrasse had found in the swamp.” (CoC 160) The picture accompanies an article from the Sydney Bulletin, an Australian newspaper. Thurston steals the newspaper article, which he includes in his own report. The article tells of some trouble on the high seas: the ship *Emma*’s attack and sinking by an evil crew of half-castes piloting their own ship, the *Alert*. The men of the *Emma* boarded the *Alert* when their own boat was sunk and slaughtered the whole evil derelict crew. Now navigating with the captured ship, the men claimed that they landed on an island where none was known to exist. Of the eight men who survived the sinking of the *Emma* and the subsequent battle, six died strangely on the shore of the phantom island. Johansen, the sole sane survivor, is depicted by the paper as “queerly reticent about this part of his story...” (CoC 161) He was picked up by the ship *Vigilant* and returned to safety. When he was rescued he had in his possession “a horrible stone idol of unknown origin” (CoC 160) that he found onboard the *Alert*. An investigation is promised by the admiralty.

This newspaper article, which catches Thurston’s attention because the dates it gives correspond to the period of aberrant dreaming and madness Angell reported, is noteworthy in that it is the only document Thurston collects that is shown directly to the reader. His goal, it would seem, is for the reader to identify a terrible naïvete in the sensible tenor of the newspaper article. By this point in the story the reader should not need to be told that the phantom island is



likely the lost city of R'lyeh, that the “evil-looking crew of Kanakas” (**CoC 161**) are yet another faction of the degenerate Cthulhu Cult which plagues the globe, and that something happened during the month of March, 1925 the true horror and scope of which can only be guessed at.

Spontaneous conversion, of the kind experienced by Paul on the road to Damascus, tends to be the exception rather than the rule. Even in Luke's Acts, where Paul's story is presented as a functional model of conversion, it works toward converting sympathetic readers by operating in the text as a piece of evidence, one of many presented in Acts and the Bible as a whole. The accretion of evidence throughout the book may well trigger or contribute toward an absolute conversion, but the act of dutifully reading the book until one becomes convinced removes the notion of spontaneity. Here it is important to distinguish conversions *in* text from conversions *by* text. The two are related, of course. Specifically—the conversion-text's project is supplemented and reinforced by presenting a catalogue of conversion narratives as part of the text-proper. Returning to the Biblical example: the text in which one is supposed to believe presents more than what to believe in. The text also presents a model of how to obtain and maintain that belief. By including the newspaper-text, and especially by including it in this place in the story, HPL allows both Thurston and his readers<sup>14</sup> to reach a new level of belief at the same time.

Levels of belief, of course, are the ladder-rungs of any conversion process other than the immediate and total. After presenting the newspaper article, Thurston shares his reaction to it.

“...Together with the picture of the hellish image...what a train of ideas it started in mind! Here were new treasuries of data on the Cthulhu Cult, and evidence that it had strange interests at sea as

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<sup>14</sup> Here “his readers” refers to the reader's of Thurston's text, whomever they might be. HPL of course understands that his readers and Thurston's readers are the same (because Thurston's text only exists dependently—inside of HPL's text) , but within the diegetic world where Thurston has written his account, his readers would not be assumed to be fans of weird fiction; perhaps they would be scientists, executors of his estate, or some miscellaneous discoverer. This touches on a much deeper question which will be tackled later—namely, *why has Thurston written this account in the first place?*

well as on land...What deep and more than natural linkage of dates was this which gave a malign and now undeniable significance to the various turns of events so carefully noted by my uncle?...

“What of all this—and of those hints of Old Castro about the sunken, star-born Old Ones and their coming reign; their faithful cult *and their mastery of dreams*? Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horrors beyond man’s power to bear? If so, they must be horrors of the mind alone, for in some way the second of April had put a stop to whatever monstrous menace had begun its siege of mankind’s soul.” (CoC 162)

For the first time, here, Thurston describes the Cthulhu Cult without putting its name in quotations. This is an important change. Thurston’s acceptance of Cthulhu Cult as a proper name for the group signals his belief in its existence, and its primary purpose for existence. Whatever else the various out-groups might do or believe, they are aligned in relationship to worship of Cthulhu. Thurston has developed a good idea of what they believe. Yet he does not share their beliefs. Thurston sees the significance in the likeness between the three stone bas-reliefs, and recognizes that he may well be on the verge of something huge: the “cosmic horrors beyond man’s power to bear.” Yet, his investigation has not led him away from the world of men, however, as the significant contributions by Wilcox, Old Castro, and the description of the *Alert*’s crew in the newspaper all make clear. If there are cosmic horrors, surely there are those who have the power to bear them, and Thurston knows this. What the line suggests, therefore, is that those who bear the cosmic horror are something other than men. At the very least, it seems, members of the Cthulhu Cult have partially ceded or lost their humanity, either as the result of heritage or willful initiation. The fact that members of the Cthulhu Cult are all portrayed as

biologically degenerate, recklessly miscegenated half-castes and mulattoes, should at this point easily provide its own evidence for and critical evaluation of the opinions of the author.<sup>15</sup>

Of those who have experienced to some degree the effects of this still-vaguely understood cosmic horror, it is only the young artist Wilcox who is a member of Thurston's in-group. HPL has already made it clear that Wilcox's susceptibility was the result of being an artist. In certain ways this makes Wilcox's status as a member of the in-group suspect. To be sure, Wilcox is the only one who is disbelieved outright. Legrasse and his men are believed immediately by Angell, whom Thurston believes without question. Thurston's trip to see Legrasse and his men is portrayed as a mission of validation; he intends to find his uncle's words corroborated and elaborated on, which is precisely what happens. Wilcox is initially disbelieved by Angell, who suspects the sculptor of something like suppressed memories, at least at the outset. Later, reading his uncle's manuscript, Thurston decides that his uncle was incorrect to have believed Wilcox's story or dream-accounts and that the young man ought to be repudiated for playing cruel tricks on an old man. Thurston's initial conclusion is not unreasonable *per se*; surely most people reading a manuscript like Angell's would think the same. Thurston's conclusion *is unreasonable*, as he has believed *everything else* in the Angell manuscript. Surely, of the various characteristics attributed to the personages who appear in the document, Wilcox is

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<sup>15</sup> There may be some confusion here as to whether the "author" I am describing is Thurston or HPL. In a way, it is both. However, a particular distinction is important. The opinions of the narrator Thurston, objectionable as they may be, are validated within the diegesis of the story and therefore the narrator cannot be criticized for being a racist, xenophobe, etc. HPL, on the other hand, can be criticized for holding those same opinions. Because HPL existed in a world where the conspiracy of the out-group was and is a paranoiac's fantasy, the critical reader of his work can view the confirmation of said paranoid fantasies as part of the authorial catharsis at work in the telling of the tale. Regarding, then, the crisis surrounding the telling of the tale itself, one could postulate that HPL was undermining his own fantasy. This is not a topic I am prepared to pursue in this project, however, one seeking to wage such a reading of HPL would do well to look toward later works, when his more radical racist tendencies had subsided (especially *At the Mountains of Madness*).

far from the most suspect. Even Old Castro's statement is taken more or less at face value, though it is considered an admission of belief rather than a recitation of fact.

What can be said of Wilcox to cast either his intent or his sanity into doubt? He is an artist, which places him on the border of at the sanity and madness. In a world where dialectical oppositions seem to cross, this puts Wilcox on the in-group/out-group border as well. Living in such a way, it is clear what easy prey the artists and poets and dreamers of the civilized world make for the siren-song of Cthulhu. And Wilcox does not save himself. He is confined to a bed and monitored for his own safety, treated by Western medical science, and so on. The "salt of the earth" types rise up to try and salvage him for their own, though it seems that had the call of Cthulhu not been silenced, the sculptor would have likely been lost.

Thurston's conclusion that the horrors must be "of the mind alone," is also suspect. He has been converted to a degree, but this unfounded assertion represents that final stage of disbelief, which the final movements of the story will see stripped away from him. Surely Thurston is right to recognize that whatever the Cthulhu Cult is doing works on minds and in dreams. He should have been able to recognize by this point,<sup>16</sup> however, that the processes they invoke have the ability (in fact, the goal) of moving beyond the realm of the mental and manifesting in the physical world. Did not Legrasse and his men find murdered bodies at the worship-site in Louisiana? Did not Wilcox's dreams have him carving sculpture? Did not the newspaper article reveal to him quite directly that the Cthulhu Cult members aboard the *Alert* were *going somewhere* and that they were obviously intent on *doing something*?<sup>17</sup> Like the stray

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<sup>16</sup>I remind *my* reader that I am writing about how Thurston felt at the time he read the newspaper article, rather than how he felt at the time that he was writing about having read it. When I speak of a point in the story, I tend to be referring to the diegetic level at which the action is taking place, because this is the level at which the plot-progression of the story-proper (that is, the story HPL wrote) is taking place.

<sup>17</sup> It is also worth mentioning, though it can't be pursued here, that the distinction between the domain of the mind and the physical world is itself largely irrelevant in the face of a physiological assessment of consciousness and insanity. Furthermore, it would be only natural to view the sort of madness being spread in this situation as a real-

piece of shelf paper that caught Thurston's eye, visual notice of the shrouded or hidden thing is a precursor to every actual encounter. The atavistic returns first as an obfuscated vision, then as the unhindered and fully exposed *thing*. The ability to identify the obscured thing is essential to stopping it before it can be unleashed (note the names of the ships: *Vigilant*, *Alert*).

Thurston himself is so excited by the implications of the newspaper article that he takes a train directly from New Jersey to San Francisco. From there he goes to Dunedin, the port city, where he asks after the cult-members without success. Next he travels to Sydney, Australia, where he studies the stone idol that Johansen found onboard the *Alert*, and determines it possessed of "the same utter mystery, terrible antiquity, and unearthly strangeness of material which I had noted in Legrasse's similar specimen...Shaken with a mental revolution as I had never before known, I now resolved to visit Mate Johansen in Oslo." (CoC 163) Thurston takes care to mention "Johansen's address...lay in the Old Town of King Harold Haardrada, which kept alive the name of Oslo during all the centuries that the greater city masqueraded as 'Christiana'." (CoC 163) Johansen, of pure Nordic descent, lives in the oldest part of the country's oldest city, specifically that part of the city which kept its true name even while the better part of it "masqueraded" superficially as something else. Joshi's footnote (note 44) to the text elaborates: Oslo was first named by Harold III, who was king from 1046-66. It was renamed by King Christian IV in 1624 and was not called Oslo again till 1924. (CoC 398) The matter would be of little interest to us, except that it points toward two key aspects of the tale. First, the year of Thurston's travel being 1926, Oslo's reassertion of its "true" name (and, by extension, its long-lost heritage) is a recent development. Second, Johansen's decision to live in the Oslo-part of town places him spatially in the region of purest heritage: the Oslo-est part of Oslo, the core of

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world problem rather than one of the mind alone, given the very physical-social issue of a substantial increase in the number of raving dangerous lunatics walking around.

preserved truth itself. This establishes Johansen on both the literal and figurative levels as one of the “salt of the earth,” clearly a part of the in-group and living proof of the in-group’s noble heritage.

Arriving late in the story, the in-group’s claim to a pure lineage can be seen as a counter-assertion: a reaction to the perceived degeneracy of the heritage of the out-group. The narrative requirement for Johansen and his pure Nordic bloodline arises only subsequent to the revelation that the out-group exists on a global scale, thus requiring a global tier of the in-group.

Unfortunately, Johansen is dead.

“He had not survived his return said his wife, for the doings at sea in 1925 had broken him. He had told her no more than he had told the public, but had left a long manuscript—of ‘technical matters’ as he said—written in English, evidently in order to safeguard her from the peril of casual perusal. During a walk through a narrow lane near the Gothenburg dock, a bundle of papers falling from an attic window had knocked him down. Two Lascar sailors at once helped him to his feet, but before the ambulance could reach him he was dead. Physicians found no adequate cause for the end, and laid it to heart trouble and a weakened condition.”<sup>18</sup> (CoC 164)

Thurston at this point is reminded of the queer circumstances of Angell’s death. Unlike his elderly grand-uncle, Johansen was in the prime of his life, a robust sailor. Surely he was not a likely candidate for heart trouble, even granting his somewhat diminished capacity since returning from the sea. Thurston notes furthermore that wherever good men who may know too much die inexplicably, one or two representatives of an inferior race (the out-group) are inexplicably to be found nearby. Frightened, suspicious, Thurston realizes his research on the Cthulhu Cult may well have already attracted their attention. “I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me till I, too, am at rest; ‘accidentally’ or otherwise.”

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<sup>18</sup> If there is still any doubt as to the power HPL granted to the textual, note the seemingly minute detail that Johansen was struck by a bundle of papers—killed by a text!

**(CoC 164)** At this point in the narrative one might expect HPL to draw the action out of the diegetic depths and into the primary layer of the story. Instead of pitting Thurston against some derelict half-breed or perhaps granting him a telling glimpse of a creature like that depicted on the bas-reliefs, HPL instead reconfirms his belief in the primacy of textuality itself. “Persuading the widow that my connexion with her husband’s ‘technical matters’ was sufficient to entitle me to his manuscript, I bore the document away and began to read it on the London boat.” **(CoC 164)**

Again I want to stress the poverty of detail concerning the things that Thurston himself has seen and done. The space afforded to the entire journey, from the moment he takes the train out of New Jersey to the moment (months later) when he sits down to read Johansen’s manuscript on the London-bound vessel, is approximately a page and a half. What Johansen saw and wrote about, however, comprises the lion’s share of the rest of the story. Discounting HPL’s presence as the actual author for a moment, and looking toward Thurston therefore as the “author” of the account, one has all throughout the reading noticed a tendency to value written accounts of lived experience over actually-lived experience. This sort of attitude is telling, it suggests—obviously, and as I’ve mentioned—a faith in the written word to transmit experience with no loss of intensity. In a nutshell: this is a world where *there is no literary entropy*. All texts comprehend the complete experience of the events that they document. Nothing is lost through re-transmission.

Either phenomenology’s object of study—the event as such—does not exist in HPL’s fictional world, or else the opposite is true: that the phenomenal event *is* utterly unrepresentable, but that because of the poetic (and, therefore, somewhat mad) excess inherent to language it is somehow transmitted and *felt* anyway. This second choice allows for HPL’s trademark

descriptive flourishes, which are at their most precise and striking when they expound on all that which cannot be seen, known, stomached, or understood. The latter option allows for the reader to accept the story as it is written; to accept Thurston's dawning terror at the knowledge proffered up by wild manuscripts, and for the reader to follow the horrific trace up through that final diegetic layer—into *this* world. Here, the story "Call of Cthulhu" can give us a good jolt and a scare.

All this talk of narrative layering and authorship, however, has neglected an important role played in situations of telling and retelling. At this point in "The Call of Cthulhu," Thurston comes fully into his own as the author by becoming his most overtly proactive *as a reader*. First of all he seizes the text itself. While his claim to be deeply interested in the "technical matters" Johansen has written of is more or less true<sup>19</sup>, and while Johansen's wife can't read the document anyway, there is still no question that Thurston has acted primarily on his own behalf, both out of a dedication to have his questions answered and because he believes his status as a reader, a connection-maker, to be privileged.

The privileged reader understands that certain information is best kept mostly secret. Johansen understood as much when he chose to write his memoir in a foreign tongue. And yet, somehow, Johansen understood that there was a need to tell his story. It would be easy to write this off as *deus ex machina* on HPL's part, but instead what the critical reader should see is that Johansen understood a thing or two about the in-group himself, and that he prepared his story for the eventuality that an appropriate reader might come along either wanting or needing to know what he had refused to tell the papers, the admiralty, even his own wife. Moreover, the Johansen

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<sup>19</sup> Less true in that Thurston doesn't care about anything a Norwegian seaman would consider "technical matters;" more true in that Johansen's premise that his document has to do with "technical matters" is a lie which Thurston merely plays along with because it is a useful untruth.



manuscript is yet another striking example of the narrative tension fueled by the anxiety surrounding the telling of a story, a tension which sustains the effects of the HPL text.

Thurston believes himself to be the anticipated “worthy reader.” So much, in fact, that his powers as a reader surpass Johansen’s as a writer. Certainly, the unlikely prospect that a turn-of-the-century Norwegian-born sailor is able to write at any length, much less in creditable English, requires HPL’s readership to suspend a considerable amount of their disbelief, and this in a story stuffed thick already with secret cults and dream-twisting monsters.

Thurston is critical of the Johansen manuscript.

“It was a simple, rambling thing—a naïve sailor’s effort at a post-facto diary—and strove to recall day by day that last awful voyage. I cannot attempt to transcribe it verbatim in all its cloudiness and redundancy, but I will tell its gist enough to shew why the sound of the water against the vessel’s sides became so unendurable to me that I sopped my ears with cotton.

“Johansen, thank God, did not know quite all, even though he saw the city and the Thing, but I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space, and of those unhallowed blasphemies from elder stars which dream beneath the sea, known and favoured by a nightmare cult ready and eager to loose them on the world whenever another earthquake shall have their monstrous stone city again to the sun and air.” (CoC 164)

The privilege granted to the reader here is paramount. Thurston has actually come out and claimed more familiarity with what Johansen witnessed than Johansen. He has reported that the author whose work he is summarizing did not much understand what he was looking at and couldn’t describe it in detail or with coherence. Nonetheless, Thurston assures us, because of what he knows from other texts he will be able to summarize the poorly-written text and expand on it—he will share with us the reasons that reading the Johansen manuscript filled him with horror and he will tell us the things about what Johansen saw that Johansen did not know were

there. Intertextuality, it seems, both blocks and sustains recognition (the anxious project of exposure) and it is this paradoxical duality of the text (and intertext) that lies at the crux of HPL's use of diegetic interleaving as a narrative effect.

Here we see something even stranger than a world where there is no literary entropy. In this situation the text does more than suffer no loss of intensity; read and evaluated by the appropriate eyes, it actually enjoys an increase in both meaning and in content. There should be no question that a religious or theological tenor underscores moments such as these in the text. Thurston is preparing to tell us about an experience of the Absolute Limit of human comprehension, an encounter with a creature so powerful and evil to look at it would be to gamble with one's sanity; and all this is to speak only of what happens when it appears, to say nothing of what it might intend to actually *do*. Thurston, writing in a world where texts are as engulfing and realistic as anything lived through, has to be keenly aware that his decision to tell his story runs the double risk of filling his readers with the sort of mind-wracking fear that he suffers, and also of putting them in the cross-hairs of the Cthulhu Cult itself.

The Johansen document is the final piece of evidence that Thurston collects, and one is tempted to wonder: if Thurston accepts the validity of the Johansen manuscript—why has he bothered to tell us about any of the rest of it, rather than beginning straight away by presenting and vouching for the Norwegian's story? Just as conversion narratives work by increasing the level of belief till the conversion-point is reached, so then do they build their force by adding to the frame story every smaller tale that has come before their own. Each member of the in-group that has been presented in "The Call of Cthulhu" has told the story of the out-group's secret existence and its terrible threat. In the relating of that story, each man has also told the story of his own conversion to belief in that secret. Thurston, for his part, has followed the same pattern.

Each man that he has written of has passed into and then out of the tale<sup>20</sup> based on whether he has fully expressed his level of belief in the out-group threat. Once a man's contribution to the narrative of Thurston's conversion has been given, that man passes out of the story. The story itself, then, is as much about the *processes* of belief and conversion (and the *things* in which the readers come to believe) as it is about any of the particular men in question.

It is for this reason that Thurston works as he does, largely denying *his* readers direct access to the texts he writes about. Because he is already a convert at the time he begins his memoir, he understands that the most important thing to do is convince his readers of the truth of what he says as efficiently and as quickly as possible. This begs again the question: for whom is Thurston writing? At the end of the story he addresses this issue. After finishing his recount of the Johansen manuscript he tells us

“that was the document I read, and now I have placed it in the tin box beside the bas-relief and the papers of Professor Angell. With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again. I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me. But I do not think my life will be long. As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so shall I go...Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye. (CoC 169)

That last remark, resonating with the full force of HPL's crisis-of-vision trope, threatens to break the textual chain on which the narrative of “The Call of Cthulhu” has relied heavily. On the other hand, as HPL himself writes for an audience, Thurston's desire to hide his own narrative has gone unfulfilled. Recalling the phrase “found among” from the sub-title of the story, the reader should understand that even within the fictional world Thurston's document has

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<sup>20</sup> Which, because this is Thurston's manuscript we are reading, tells us that this rotation corresponds to passing within or without the sphere of the “author's” interest.

been *exposed*. Reading the Thurston document, then, takes on a tenor of voyeurism as the reader is observing that which was not meant to be observed. Moreover, there is an accompanying performative exposure which can be ascribed to both author and protagonist: Thurston who believes he is exposing himself in absolute privacy, and HPL, who is exposing to *his* readers Thurston's ostensibly private act.

It now makes sense to pose again and potentially answer the question that I raised earlier—*why has Thurston written this document?* Surely, Thurston must understand, that in the act of writing the memoir he creates the potential for it to be read. In Virilio's terms: just as the accident generated by the secret is the potential for exposure, the fundamental formal "accident" of the text is that it may be read. Why take such a risk? Recall my introductory discussion of the recuperative function of art in relationship to madness. One can only surmise that Thurston has written for the same reason that Johansen wrote. While it would be better to keep the terrors of the out-group's secrets unknown, confined in an oblivion reserved for "aspects of evil that have such a power of contagion, such a force of scandal that any publicity multiplies them infinitely," (M&C 67) it could become necessary again for the in-group to bear that terrible knowledge for the sake of understanding the enemy well enough to fight it off. There is a tenor of sacrifice to this attitude, as the collected evidence suggests that learning this sort of truth acts as a sort of death sentence. This release of knowledge is constantly portrayed as a last resort, a sort of chemotherapeutic approach that only becomes necessary because easier and better solutions were overlooked earlier on due to an incomplete understanding of the problem, which is essentially that *the out-group's very existence carries with it an active apocalyptic potential*.

That such potential is dutifully exploited by the malevolent out-group is a reasonable enough conceit for the domain of the weird tale<sup>21</sup>, but were to HPL have held that belief in the real world—as others have before and since his time—it would have been a wildly paranoid fantasy with violent implications. It is unlikely that HPL actually thought any of the non-Nordic races were actually evil, though for a long portion of his life he maintained that blacks were less than fully human. Of the Jews he may have been more willing to grant some malevolent cunning, but towards the end of his life (some mere eleven years after completing “The Call of Cthulhu”) he had come to something of a separate-but-equal racial philosophy. In one particular letter from 1933 he wrote at length to a friend about Hitler, criticizing him for an “unscientific extremist” (SL4 247) with regard to Aryan superiority, but commending the man’s recognition of racial difference and desire to maintain a degree of purity within his own borders. In this same letter HPL speaks at length of the defining features of Nordic stock, and his preference for such.

“...*Just this much* of Hitler’s basic racial theory is *perfectly & irrefutably* sound: namely, that no settled & homogenous nation ought (a) to admit enough of a decidedly alien race-stock to bring about an actual alteration of in the dominant ethnic composition, or (b) tolerate the dilution of the culture-stream with emotional & intellectual elements alien to the original cultural impulse. Both of these perils lead to the most undesirable results—i.e., the metamorphosis of the population away from the original institutions, & the twisting of the institutions away from the original people..... all these things being aspects of one underlying & disastrous condition—the destruction of cultural stability, & the creation of a hopeless disparity between a social group & the institutions under which it lives. *Now this has nothing to do with intrinsic superiority & inferiority*...Even *superior* importations can harm our culture if they break up the equilibrium existing between the people & the institutions under which the people live.” (SL4 249)

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<sup>21</sup> The “weird tale” here is a flexible term designed to convey the sense of perversion-of-reality or irruption-of-the-weird that is the unifying trait of a genre which touches at times on the horror, science fiction, and fantastic traditions but which cannot be accurately contained by any one of them.

It is worth mentioning that HPL frequently expressed displeasure that the United States had ever separated from British rule, and occasionally identified—perhaps facetiously—as a subject of the British Crown, sometimes specifically as a Tory. He referred to the American Revolution as an act of treason and sporadically backdated his correspondence to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> HPL had pointed opinions on the ways in which an alien culture’s rise had laid the groundwork for the further chipping away of all that he believed to be the natural and best way for him to live. The early loss of his father to syphilitic insanity; the depletion of his family fortunes that robbed him of a suitable inheritance and forced him into the dank diversity of New York City looking for work, thus forcing the disavowal of his close-held illusions of aristocracy; his marginal success as a writer during his lifetime; he attributed all of these things at least in part to the disappearance of a culture. He mourned deeply for this loss, with some considerable nostalgic longing, despite having never lived in or experienced the loss of said culture in the first place. It was a feeling of being out-of-time that simultaneously made HPL cling desperately to what he had of a heritage—this evidenced in his lengthy and overtly sentimental depictions of New England—and complain often of having been born in the wrong century.

Yet if he looked to the past as a source of lost utopia, he also constructed the past as the locus of all the mind-boggling horror he could imagine. In HPL, it is the imminent end itself which rises up from the past. After killing the crew of the *Alert*, Johansen took command of the

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<sup>22</sup> Two letters to Maurice W. Moe provide emblematic examples of these tendencies. Letter 564, from *Selected Letters IV*, HPL dated “Sept. 18, 1732.” The actual year was 1932. An earlier letter (number 362; from *Selected Letters III*) was dated correctly (“July 27, 1929”) but explained in no uncertain terms—“the nineteenth century never existed so far as I am concern’d—its smugness, affectation, decorum, purposefulness, preciousness, mock-mediaevalism, optimism, hypocrisy, progressivism, inhibitions and so on having rebounded from me as an 1870 rubber ball might rebound from a 1720 brick wall. My spirit is of the eighteenth century—my scientific information and philosophick perspective of the twentieth. Between them yawns a void...” (SL3 9) Note the intentionally archaic spelling HPL uses. Again, I want to stress that these are merely two examples; all five volumes of HPL’s collected correspondence—and the Joshi/Schultz-edited *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*—are filled with this sort of thing.

ship and drove it forward in the direction the cult-members had been leading it.<sup>23</sup> He did so, Thurston reports, out of a sense of curiosity. Soon enough they came upon “a coastline of mingled mud, ooze, and weedy Cyclopean masonry which can be nothing less than the tangible substance of earth’s supreme terror—the nightmare corpse-city of R’lyeh, that was built in measureless aeons behind history by the vast, loathsome shapes that seeped down from the dark stars.” (CoC 165) More than just being the dreaded R’lyeh, the place where Johansen and his crew have landed is obviously the place that Wilcox described to Angell in the opening segment of the story. Thurston reminds us of as much, remembering to mention that “all this Johansen did not suspect, but God knows he soon saw enough!” (CoC 165) To be sure, Johansen and his men do explore a thoroughly alien environment.

After extraordinary encounters with the increasingly more horrifying place they’ve stumbled upon, the men find themselves before a door so large that they wonder how it can exist in their world. The door begins to open. “In this phantasy of prismatic distortion it moved anomalously in a diagonal way, so that all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset.” (CoC 167) It is strange that Thurston would use the word “phantasy” at this point in the story, when he clearly believes in the absolute reality of the events he is relating. One reading might suggest that it is HPL’s misstep, an accidental tipping of the author’s hand (in that it refers directly to the material as fiction). But this does not do HPL justice, and moreover would not be in concert with the meticulous arrangement of the story. What makes more sense is a literal reading—that while R’lyeh and the impossible geometry are real and there, they are nonetheless other-worldly and fantastic. The paradox at the heart of the story is embodied in this

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<sup>23</sup> “There was some peculiarly abominable quality about them which made their destruction seem almost a duty, and Johansen shews ingenuous wonder at the charge of ruthlessness brought against his party during the proceedings of the court of inquiry.” (CoC 164-5)

materialization of Wilcox's dream: *the thing which cannot be is, and yet still it cannot be*. It is *and* it is not.

Such doubleness, of course, is a luxury of the mind of lunatic and the dream-world of the artist. I believe my argument is supported here by HPL himself. The next lines in the story elaborate on what is glimpsed behind the door. "The aperture was black with a darkness almost material. That tenebrousness was indeed a *positive quality*..." (CoC 167) As S.T. Joshi mentioned in note 49 to the text, that "*positive quality*" is borrowed directly from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher."<sup>24</sup> HPL's italics remove the possibility that he was merely trying to incorporate into his own work something that he had been impressed by, perhaps that he wished he'd come up with on his own.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the spotlighting of the phrase points to a desire for inclusion in what HPL doubtless perceived to be the literary tradition's version of an in-group. HPL uses this turn of phrase to integrate himself into the Poe tradition, or perhaps to validate the Poe project. Considering the expanded quotation—"the tenebrousness was indeed a *positive quality*—it is the word "indeed" that makes the capstone of this argument. The word "indeed" could be read at least in part of an affirmation of the previous sentence, a re-enforcement of the practical materiality of the darkness. That is, however, not in keeping with Thurston's narrative voice, and even if this had been HPL's intent, the word "indeed" would have likely begun the sentence in which it appears; furthermore there would have been no cause to italicize "*positive quality*." The word "indeed" in this sentence is affirmative, but rather than only affirming the previous sentence, it is affirming the more general concept that darkness can have a material or

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<sup>24</sup> Poe, as cited by Joshi: "...the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe..." (CoC 398)

<sup>25</sup> HPL was a notorious borrower of premises, plot fragments, concepts, terminology, style, and whatever else he thought could be of use to him. It was a habit he was aware of, and not particularly pleased with. In a 1929 letter he remarked "there are my 'Poe' pieces & my 'Dunsany' pieces—but alas—where are any *Lovecraft* pieces?" (SLII 315)



positive quality to it. In short: HPL is standing up for, validating the work of, and simultaneously falling in line with, his precursor Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>26</sup>

All of this supports the more general argument that literature or art is valuable precisely because it has this referential quality to it. Whether referring to a great author of the previous generation or to a horror rising simultaneously from the depths of the ocean and the bottomless pit of time, the intertextual resonance allows the thing (or, as we are about to see, *The Thing*) to be not only more than it is, but more than that which constitutes its description. As Cthulhu begins to emerge from Its crypt-bed (I capitalize the pronoun for the monster as HPL has done) Thurston pauses in his description of the “gelatinous green immensity” (**CoC 167**) to tell us that “poor Johansen’s handwriting almost gave out when he wrote of this.” (**CoC 167**) Thurston mentions this to remind his readership of his own skill as a reader and interpreter, because most of what he is about to say about Johansen’s experience is obviously not coming from the pen of Johansen.<sup>27</sup> Thurston is utterly clear on this point; it is one of the places in the text where the reader can most easily discern who is saying what.

“Of the six men who never reached the ship, he [Johansen] 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. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth a great architect went mad, and poor Wilcox raved with fever in that telepathic instant?” (**CoC 167**)

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<sup>26</sup> For a much longer and deeper look at HPL’s attempts to validate and/or align himself with Poe in his fiction, there is no better source than his short novel *At the Mountains of Madness*. HPL did not call his story a sequel to Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, but the narrator in *At the Mountains of Madness* mentions having read Poe’s novel and later discovers some of the creatures Poe described in the book to be quite real. The narrator postulates that perhaps Poe knew much more about the world than he let on, and presented certain things he’d seen as fiction for the sake of a public ill-prepared to handle the force of the truth. HPL’s novel also ends on a phrase taken directly from Poe’s novel— a nonsense phrase, in fact: the phonetic rendering of a bird’s call. The phrase, then, has no meaning other than as a reference to Poe.

<sup>27</sup> The detail regarding the handwriting is also important. The monstrosity of the creature sifts through the textual layers by pervading the text itself even at the level of its production: here the words themselves adopt a fearful “tone;” they become timid.

This is the climactic moment of terror in the story. The reader, finally, encounters not only the horror that Thurston has witnessed, but that *he* has witnessed it, and *how*. We have followed the winding path across multiple diegetic layers of text and found the pure event at its core. Moreover, we have taken the path back up, and witnessed for ourselves how the pure terror at the core of the pure event also travels, from place to page to page into new place. To quote the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, author of that ultimately terrible and dangerous text *Necronomicon*,

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

Is it fair to say that Thurston witnessed the horror of Cthulhu’s rise? I contend unequivocally that it is. Given the premise of the function and power of textuality in the story (recall even the seemingly miniscule detail that it was a bundle of dropped papers which felled Johansen), one can imagine how Thurston must have combined what he read—and noticed was left unwritten—in Johansen’s manuscript with the various other documents he had collected, and one can imagine the horror that must have overtaken him. To be sure, immediately after recalling his inexpressible terror at the The Thing, Thurston turns his thoughts back to the mad architect and especially to Wilcox—he realizes that Wilcox’s insanity rose and fell with the rise and fall of the Old One Cthulhu Itself, a force so overwhelming and incomprehensible that even a “salt of the earth” type like Thurston had his mind warped forever merely by reading a less-than-detailed account of the creature. No wonder that an artist, already so hyper-sensitive and queerly susceptible to the calls of the beyond, would have been completely given over to the madness of the creature’s whim.

And yet, in all of that, the critical reader of HPL must stop and take stock. Given the absolute destructive power of Cthulhu, on all levels, how could it be that It is dead in any human

sense of the word? Johansen, it seems, somehow kept his wits about him even as he “swears he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn’t have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse.” (CoC 167) This “misbehaving” angle saves Johansen’s life as Cthulhu devours shipmates Donovan, Guerrero, Angstrom, and then Parker. Only two reach the boat, which they hurriedly try to get sailing.

“Slowly, amidst the distorted horrors of that indescribable scene, she [the *Alert*] began to churn the lethal waters; whilst on the masonry of that charnel shore that was not of earth the titan Thing from the stars slavered and gibbered like Polypheme cursing the fleeing ship of Odysseus. Then, bolder than the storied Cyclops, great Cthulhu slid greasily into the water and began to pursue with vast wave-raising strokes of cosmic potency...Briden looked back and went mad...”

But Johansen had not given out yet. Knowing that the Thing could surely overtake the *Alert* until steam was fully up, he resolved on a desperate chance; and, setting the engine for full speed...the brave Norwegian drove his vessel head on against the pursuing jelly which rose above the unclean froth like the stern of a daemon galleon. The awful squid-head with writhing feelers came nearly up to the bowsprit of the sturdy yacht, but Johansen drove on relentlessly. There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder, a slushy nastiness as of a cloven sunfish, a stench as of a thousand opened graves, and a sound that the chronicler would not put on paper.” (CoC 168)

Johansen’s subsequent rescue is mostly glossed over, perhaps because the reader has already heard it. (CoC 160-1) The seaman’s death is recapped, and then Thurston predicts that he too will probably soon be killed because of what he knows. The story ends. One might reasonably wonder at how quickly and neatly things wrap up; especially given Thurston’s histrionics throughout his writing, and the initially presented fact of his death, which by the story’s conclusion ought to be perfectly clear: he was murdered by cultists.

## Of Immanence and Imminence

In addition to the distinction between the abolition of existence-as-such and existence-at-all, there is another fundamental distinction that can be made between types of the apocalyptic event. In *The Sense of An Ending*, Frank Kermode draws a distinction between immanent and imminent apocalyptic scenarios. The latter are soon to manifest or already manifesting—the period leading up to and including Cthulhu’s rise, for example; the former can be a source of overwhelming concern but are not fixed to a specified approaching date. The New Testament’s Revelation and Paul Virilio’s crisis-trope of the global accident are both good examples of immanent apocalyptic events. The imminent apocalyptic threat may appear at first to be the more dangerous of the two, in that it suggests an unavoidable confrontation will take place, but there is a significant drawback. In short: the imminent apocalypse actually has to deliver. From the moment a date is set or specifics are laid down, the imminent apocalypse has essentially set a limit on its own lifespan (and, more importantly, its use-value as a fantasy of the Absolute Limit). While the New Testament’s immanent apocalypse has remained immanent for some two millennia, belief systems constructed with an eye toward an imminent end have tended to dissipate soon after the specified moment failed to produce the promised (or threatened) apocalypse. The history of defunct sects of Christianity is largely a history of apocalyptic groups who flourished briefly—of failed attempts to make imminent the Book of Revelation’s fundamentally immanent threat. Kermode observed, “time is an endless transition from one condition of misery to another... It is a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, multiform antithetical influx.” (SE 115)

In “The Call of Cthulhu” the crisis *of* the text finally catches up with the crisis *in* the text. The speed and efficacy with which Johansen puts Cthulhu down should cause the reader to reconsider much of what they have been told. In embodied form, once fully exposed, Cthulhu is not half so dangerous as he was made out to be — can the blubbery, trundling mass which Johansen kills possibly be the same creature of whom it was written that to see him was to die? To answer this question, first I want to look at some things Old Castro said in the second section of the story.

“These Great Old Ones, Castro continued, were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape—for did not this star-fashioned image prove it?—but that shape was not made of matter. When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, they could not live. But although They no longer lived, They would never really die. They all lay in stone houses in Their great city of R’lyeh, preserved by the spells of mighty Cthulhu for a glorious resurrection when the stars and the earth might once more be ready for Them. But at that time some force from outside must serve to liberate Their bodies.”

**(CoC 155-5)**

HPL is including the specifics of how the Great Old Ones function, as related by Castro, to set up the climactic sequence in the third section. What is noteworthy about these specifics, however, is that they seem to undermine the operating logic of the text. As I’ve contended, HPL’s project was primarily to enlarge concepts like physics or empiricism so that there would be space within them for the truly weird or irrational to erupt. This description, however, is an uncharacteristic and wrongheaded invocation of millennial astrology. More than just useless as a predictive tool, astrology is illogical because its basic understanding is based on the movements of stars, a movement that is not actually happening in the way that it is being perceived. It is, in fact, an example of the mediation of the real through a (fictional) textual system. Furthermore, this perceived movement is all from the perspective of a being located on the planet earth. While

it makes a degree of sense that the Great Old Ones would have to rely on some external factors to make their world-hopping possible, to suggest that such a factor is the position of stars flies in the face of both common sense and the internal consistency of the presented fictional world. There is another tear in the narrative fabric, it seems, that Cthulhu was both the giver and receiver of the preservative spells. Ascribing Cthulhu a priestly status, which HPL does on at least two specific occasions, suggests an uncannily (and unlikely) human-like social organization of Great Old Ones.

Of course it is the function of a story such as “The Call of Cthulhu” to use a believable (or verisimilar) fictional world to reify and deal with fundamental concerns about the nature of human existence. The story’s success in accomplishing those goals is directly linked to its ability to believably and seamlessly accomplish that reification. HPL succeeds in taking the notion of humanity’s insignificance relative to a nonconscious mechanic universe and localizing it in the life of a given fictional character. In this case, though, he undermines the horror of such a notion by failing to create a sufficiently disinterested universe. Astrology, the reliance on human social structures, and especially the Great Old Ones’ reliance on textual forms (spoken spells, cryptic books, etc.) all contribute to the formulation of a universe that is clearly preoccupied with humankind.

If the pseudo-science in part two sets the story up for a fall, then the brief battle in part three is the dramatization of this collapse. As the story finally climaxes the text itself is thrown into crisis because HPL cannot present what he has promised. Cthulhu, throughout the story, has been forecast as the harbinger of an utter apocalypse of existence-as-such. Therein lies the crisis of HPL’s fictional project. Because the text purports to be a found document, the reader must understand that, whatever else has happened, enough of existence-as-such has remained in tact

that the document itself—Thurston’s manuscript—was not only preserved, but obtained and understood within the standard system of meaning. This, in effect, seems to be the Absolute Limit of the textual form— it is utterly dependent on the systems and structures that allow texts to be comprehended and to carry meaning. The text can point beyond itself toward the unspeakable, and it can even accumulate an excess of meaning, but it cannot transcend its textuality. If the sight of Cthulhu was truly “nightmare itself, and to see it was to die,” (CoC 151) then none of the various documents could have been written. Johansen, of course, would not have been able to stare the creature down as he plowed the *Alert* through His mid-section.

Preserved for eternity by uttered spells, His secrets hidden in the double meanings of passages from the *Necronomicon* (CoC 156), His following sustained by a timeless tradition of story-telling and ritual prayer, Cthulhu is finally revealed to be a fundamentally textual creature. *Textual immanence* seems in fact to be the compositional element that *completes* the creature “not composed altogether of flesh and blood.” (CoC 154) When Cthulhu rises, and takes his share of flesh and blood, He essentially cedes his textuality and thereby the principal of his potentiality. The imminent Cthulhu has a life-span of mere minutes; His power to induce psychological horror collapses under the weight of the new directive to do physical things: eat, chase, swim, and die.

“For an instant the ship was befouled by an acrid and blinding green cloud, and then there was only a venomous seething astern; where—God in heaven!—the scattered plasticity of that nameless sky-spawn was nebulously *recombining* in its hateful original form, whilst its distance widened every second as the *Alert* gained impetus from its mounting steam...

Cthulhu still lives...I suppose, again in that chasm of stone which has shielded him since the sun was young...He must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen

may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men.” (CoC 168-9)

Johansen’s final vision of Cthulhu re-forming makes good on the story’s promise of a climactic moment. Unkillable after all, Cthulhu has merely been put down until the next time the stars are right for Him to rise. His immanence reestablished, Cthulhu regains the full potential of his power to horrify. Thurston’s fear that Cthulhu will rise again utterly neglects the fact that Cthulhu’s actual presence was in many regards a non-event. The creature seems to pose a substantially larger threat from R’lyeh, ministering strange visions and instructions by mental projection to the various miscreants and weak-willed around the globe. Only in His immanence is Cthulhu truly dangerous, and therefore it is no coincidence that the final vision of Him in the text is of His compositional goo settling like poison over and in the water, contaminating and permeating it as He recombines. It is the conception of a pollutant as omnipresent that establishes the apocalyptic threat as immanent. The out-group, Thurston knows, is still active and everywhere. “I know too much, and the cult still lives...His ministers on earth still bellow and prance and slay around idol-capped monoliths in lonely places.” (CoC 169)

If Cthulhu seems reduced by His manifestation in the “real” world it is perhaps because His appearance signals yet another Absolute Limit. By turns seductive and repellant to its readers, guided by an authorial neurosis that is consistent as a pulse, the text fails to make good on its promise to present the monster precisely by presenting the monster. Fully exposed, there is a pornographic character to the spectacle of the revealed (and subsequently penetrated) Cthulhu. The elusive desired thing is stripped of its power by being presented without the obfuscating veils that fuel the desire to expose. It becomes a reflective surface, exposing to the onanist his/her own desires, and this is the true source of horror—the apocalyptic moment of self-recognition that the projective fantasy was constructed to avoid. It is worth ending then, with a



final look at Cthulhu in His nakedness. The supreme horror from beyond the boundary of madness and the abyss of time, the unifier and deity-leader of the global tier of the repulsive out-group, and the harbinger of the end of existence-as-such. Cthulhu is all those things. He is also slow, hideously ugly, easily bested, and bone-white.

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