The Republic of Cthulhu: Lovecraft, the Weird Tale, and Conspiracy Theory

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1. Gods and Monsters

In art there is no use in heeding the chaos of the universe; for so complete is this chaos, that no piece writ in words could even so much as hint at it. I can conceive of no true image of the pattern of life and cosmic force, unless it be a jumble of mean dots arranged in directionless spirals.

— H.P. Lovecraft

Weirdly enough, there is no love in H.P. Lovecraft.

All my stories are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. […] To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.¹

Although Lovecraft on numerous occasions referred to his signature literary conceit as “cosmic indifferentism,”² the contemporary reader immediately recognizes this trope for what

¹ Levy, Lovecraft, 81.
² There is some debate over this term. According to S.T. Joshi, Lovecraft may not have ever employed the term “cosmic indifferentism,” but merely “indifferentism.” Within the secondary literature, however, the term “cosmic disinterestism” is fairly widespread; see below. Joshi, p.c.
is really is: the un-human.³ “The Lovecraftian world cannot be changed or controlled. It is a no-man’s-land in its arid desolation, without love or warmth. It contains no human value or worth since it does not allow anyone to be represented as the immanent ‘I.’”⁴ And in this Universe devoid of an ontologically grounded human “Subject” we are the collective victims of cosmic disinterestism, a purely neutral observation on the part of Lovecraft, “a clinical assessment of the human condition that is simple in its fundamental meaning but difficult enough to truly comprehend that a new kind of writing must be invented for the purpose of its telling.”⁵ The paradox at work here is obvious: how—or even why—can an artist give expression to a view of the cosmos that is essentially antithetical to the Being-Human-within-the-World? Or, to re-frame the issue in terms of authorial voice: why did Lovecraft, with extreme eccentricity, choose supernatural literature as the aesthetic vehicle for expressing his annihilating nihilism, given that he did, for whatever reason, decide to express it? And it is Lovecraft himself, a “Literary Copernicus” in the words of Fritz Leiber, who provides the answer: “I do not think that any realism is beautiful.”⁶

Individuals and their fortunes within natural law move me very little. They are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness. Only the cosmic framework itself—or such individuals as symbolize principles (or defiances of principles) of the cosmic framework—can gain a deep grip on my imagination and set it to work creating. In other words, the only “heroes” I can write about are phenomena.⁷

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³ Thacker, In the Dust of This Planet, 1–9.
⁴ Airaksinen, The Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft, 24. “Lovecraft is a postmodern writer who saw through the existential defense mechanisms of the modern person.” Ibid., 183. See below.
⁵ Martin, H.P. Lovecraft, 16.
⁶ Houellebecq, H.P. Lovecraft, 4.
S.T. Joshi has articulated Lovecraft’s tortuous relation to the literary tropes of realism quite well: “[R]ealism is […] not a goal but a function in Lovecraft; it facilitates the perception that ‘something which could not possibly happen’ is actually happening.”

Personally, I would describe the resultant Lovecraftian landscape as “Miltonian surrealism,” the catastrophic collapse of categories of meaning occasioned by the falling to Earth of a supersensible but inhuman reality, Luciferian in its magnificence but “daemonic” in its effects. In any event, Lovecraft’s ceaseless parodying of “the Real” constitutes the idiosyncratic expression of the author’s commitment to that nebulous sub-genre known as cosmic horror. Although apparently linked to the supernatural theme in literature, Lovecraft’s oeuvre, on closer examination, reveals a meta-narrative that is thoroughly “mainstream” modernist in orientation. And this supernaturally-infused modernism, in turn, betrays an almost nostalgic invocation of the notions of both numinousity and transcendence, an atheistic interrogation and re-conceptualization of “the Holy” that is central but largely underappreciated facet of the literary project of modernism. In truth, the seminal text on the subject of horrific transcendence, Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), reads suspiciously like a compendium of Lovecraftian narrative devices. Operating from a Wittgensteinian premise — “An object that can thus be thought conceptually may be termed *rational*” — Otto turns dogmatic theology on its head by arguing for the opposite axiom: any object that maybe considered real (as in possessing substance) yet lacking “clear and definite concepts” must necessarily be considered irrational; that is, an existential that is shapeless or formless. In theological terms, this anti-formalist insight yields us the category of the numinous which, in existential terms, is subjectively experienced as the “Holy” or the *mysterium tremendum*, the phenomenological core of Religion. A union of light and dark — *mysterium* as a kind of fasci-

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10 Ibid., 12–13.
nation\textsuperscript{11} and \textit{tremendum} as a source of dread\textsuperscript{12} — Otto breaks the “daunting” latter aspect of the Holy down into three overlapping components. The first is “awe-fulness” or “daemonical dread,” the spectral fear induced by the direct and unmediated encounter with an undefinable and hitherto invisible “Wholly Other.”\textsuperscript{13}

It first begins to stir in the feeling of “something uncanny,” “eerie,” or “weird.” It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development of history. “Daemons” and “gods” alike spring from this root, and all the products of “mythological apperception” or “fantasy” are nothing but different modes in which it has been objectified.\textsuperscript{14}

The second is alternatively defined as “energy” or “urgency,” the raw power of psychic transformation and an annihilating, de-personalizing illumination.\textsuperscript{15} Like awefulness, energy is both primitive and visceral, best expressed within the Abrahamic tradition as “the scorching and consuming wrath of God,”\textsuperscript{16} a reservoir of supernatural energy that appears devoid of moral qualities; “It is […] ‘like a hidden force of nature,’ like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near. It is ‘incalculable’ and ‘arbitrary.’”\textsuperscript{17} Significantly, in its “positive” form, it manifests itself as mystic rapture, “the same ‘energy’” as “the scorching and consuming wrath of God” but flowing through different channels (“‘Love,’ says one of the mystics, ‘is nothing else than quenched wrath.’”\textsuperscript{18}) The third, and the one

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 25–40. The signature emotion of \textit{mysterium} is \textit{stupor}, “an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute.” Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 12–24.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 13–19 and 25–30.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 14–15.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 23–24.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 18. In the words of the analytic philosopher Noel Carroll, “Otto’s numen […] defies the application of predicates and even the manifold of predictability itself.” Carroll, \textit{The Philosophy of Horror}, 166.

closest to Lovecraft’s own dramatic concerns, is *majestas*, “absolute over-poweringness,” or, even better, “creature-consciousness”: the “shadow or subjective reflection” of the Self’s abject dependency upon the Wholly Other.19

It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed, by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures. [...] Thus, in contrast to “the overpowering” of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one’s own submergence, of being but “dust and ashes” and nothingness. And this forms the numinous raw material for the feeling of religious humility.20

The “I am naught, Thou art all” is the unique and irreducible core of authentic private religious experience in which the “self-depreciation” of that primordial “element of the *tremendum,* originally apprehended as ‘plenitude of power,’ becomes transmuted into ‘plenitude of being.’”21 Or, to put it another way: personal religious experience is the phenomenological mapping of the anthropological migration from Monsters to Gods. If the numinous truly stands for that “aspect of deity which transcends or eludes comprehension in rational or ethical terms,”22 then Otto’s great work makes intelligible one of the most repressed truths of the Sacred: that the inseparability of religion from horror flows from the primordial “absence of difference” between the Wholly Other and the Monster. Derived from the Latin noun *monstrum,* which is related to the verbs *monstrare* (“to show” or “to reveal”) and *monere* (“to warn” or “to portend”)23, the coming of

19 Ibid., 219–23.
20 Ibid., 10 and 20.
21 Ibid., 21.
22 Harvey, in Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,* xvi. See also A.S. Herbert, cited in Cardin, *Dark Awakenings,* 302: “The word ‘holy’ is primarily not an ethical term, but one indicating the otherness, the incalculable power, of God, his inaccessibility. He is ‘the great stranger in the human world’ […] . Holy expressed the mysterious, incalculable, unapproachable quality of the divine in contrast to the human.”
the Monster is identical to a revelation of a dangerous truth that is incommensurable with orthodox consensus, both social and epistemological. In its existential dimension, the numinous/monstrous is identical with that unsayable-which-induces-dread and which, therefore, lacks a true name; the “nearest that German can get to it is in the expression das Ungeheuere (monstrous), while in English ‘weird’ is perhaps the closest rendering possible.” In its anthropological dimension, God-and-Monster signifies both the iterability between Chaos and Order (the eternally recurrent migrations between cosmogony and chaogony) as well as the radically undecidable (anti-schematic) nature of the primal substance of Being. At the risk of simplifying, it may be said that the greater part of the intellectual edifice of Lovecraft’s oeuvre consists of nothing more than an act of translation of what Beal identifies as “the paradox of the monstrous” into the atheistic tropes of Darwinian biology and Einsteinian physics. What he yields is an utterly “uncanny” synthesis of the archaic with the super scientific, a monstrous cross-fertilization of the transcendental Wholly Other with the materialist Alien.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this bleak atheist awe that makes Lovecraft a kind of bad-son heir to a religious visionary tradition, an ecstatic tradition, which, in distinction to the everyday separation of matter and spirit, locates the holy in the everyday. Lovecraft, too, sees the awesome as immanent in the quotidian, but there is little ecstasy [mysterium] here: his is a bad numinous.

26 Beal, Religion and Its Monsters, 19.
27 Joshi, “Introduction,” xiii. Compare Ralickas on this very point: “In denying humanism and revealing the ostensible unity of the human subject to be a fallacy, I contend that what Lovecraft’s work affirms, albeit negatively, is a subjective crisis specific to the modern condition.” Ralickas, “Cosmic Horror,” 366; see also ibid., 387–88.
Following Otto, we can now see that the central conceit of the Lovecraftian corpus is that his “bad numinous” is *tremendum* with the *mysterium* subtracted out (although it should be noted that Lovecraft does seek a limited re-introduction of “fascination” or stupor in relation to the Wholly Other in some of his last works). Lovecraft himself makes this painfully clear in his semi-confessional work of literary criticism “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927).

The appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity of detachment from everyday life. [...] There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it, and too much a part of our inmost biological heritage to lose keen potency over a very important, though not numerically great, minority of our species.

Typically, Lovecraft grounds the species’s predilection for horror with an atavistic genetic inheritance. “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” The artistic merit of “the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form,” therefore, is guaranteed not by transcendental notions but by profanely material ones: the literary re-enactment of the primal terror of self-awareness.

In particular, “At the Mountains of Madness” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” See Chapter Five, below. Lovecraft, “Supernatural,” 105.

As does Otto. “It may well be possible, it is even probable, that in the first stage of its development the religious consciousness started with only one of its poles — the daunting aspect of the numen — and so at first took shape only as ‘daemonic dread.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 32.

Lovecraft, “Supernatural,” 105. Compare this remarkable passage with Otto on the atavistic relationship between daemonic dread and horror fiction: “This crudely naïve and primordial emotional disturbance, and the fantastic images to which it gives rise, are later overborne and ousted by more
Against the emotional primacy of horror “are discharged all the shafts of a materialistic sophistication which clings to frequently felt emotions and external events, and of a naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to ‘uplift’ the reader towards a suitable degree of smirking optimism.” However, since cosmic horror is the re-visitation of the (un-)holy, it necessarily follows that the highest form of supernatural literature, or “the weird tale,” will necessarily depend upon the successful narrative deployment of the cultural residue of the theological imaginary.

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to a rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.

As Lovecraft’s greatest critic Maurice Levy points out, the overriding aesthetic impulse of the Lovecraftian text is to induce highly developed forms of the numinous emotion, with all its mysteriously impelling power. But even when this has long attained its higher and purer mode of expression it is possible for the primitive types of excitation that were formerly a part of it to break out in the soul in all their original naïveté and so to be experienced afresh. That this is so is shown by the potent attraction again and again exercised by the element of horror and ‘shudder’ in ghost stories, even among persons of high all-round education.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 16. See also ibid., 29, where Otto clearly identifies “the fear of ghosts” as a “degraded offshoot and travesty of the genuine ‘numinous’ dread or awe.” As Stephen King expressed it, in his inestimable EC horror comic book style, horror “invites a physical reaction by showing us something which [that?] is physically wrong.” King, *Danse Macabre*, 22.

33 Ibid., 107.
within the post-theistic reader a sense of that primordial dread that was the hallmark of primitive religious experience, the violent and unmediated encounter with the Wholly Other.\footnote{Levy, \textit{Lovecraft}.}

Therefore we must judge a weird tale not by the author’s intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. […] The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.\footnote{Lovecraft, “Supernatural,” 108.}

Cosmic horror is a paradoxically anti-therapeutical form of catharsis: curative because of the flooding release of psychic tension that it itself creates, but harmful at the same time because of the radical disabuse of human conceit that it involves. As Donald R. Burleson has quite correctly recognized, Lovecraft’s aesthetic is essentially post-modern in nature, a “deconstructive gesture of questioning and unsettling metaphysically privileged systems of all kinds.” The signature feature of Lovecraft’s writing is precisely this “ironically self-understood insignificance” of Being-Human, which, given the essentially anthropocentric nature of Western thought, bestows upon the Lovecraftian corpus a status unique within modern literature.\footnote{Burleson, \textit{Lovecraft}, 158–59.} “In a society that is becoming each day more and more anesthetized and repressive, the fantastic is at once an evasion and the mobilization of anguish. It restores man’s sense of the sacred and the sacrilegious, it above all gives back to him his lost depth.”\footnote{Levy, \textit{Lovecraft}, 120.} For Levy,
Lovecraft [...] creates the strange, he excites fear, by turning the world inside out. For Lovecraft, writing is making of the oneiric and wrong side of things appear, substituting the nocturnal for the diurnal, replacing the reassuring image of the Waking World by the alienating ones of the great depths. The world of the surface has in his work no other raison d’être than provisionally and imperfectly to cover up the abyss.38

Central to Lovecraft’s oeuvre is his highly aestheticized — which is to say, intensely singular — onto-epistemology, a philosophically naïve but dramatically powerful re-presentation of the metaphysics of Schopenhauer39; “Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemonical hints of truth which make it a thousand-fold more hideous.”40 In his pioneering deconstruction of the Lovecraftian weird tale, Burleson identifies as the meta-theme of the oeuvre “the ruinous nature of self-knowledge,” or, more exactly, “the notion that, when we as humans come to look upon the cosmos as it is, we find our place in it to be soul-crushingly evanescent.”41 The other recursive themes are “forbidden knowledge,” “denied primacy,” “unwholesome survivals,” and, most interesting of all, “illusory surface appearances,” the general signification that “things are not as they appear on the surface, below which deeper and more terrible realities are masked.” All of Lovecraft’s plots (insofar as there are any) are occasioned by a traumatic, and traumatizing, cognitive rupturing of the social consensus of reality,42 culminating in the annihilating revelation of an unspeakable dis-joint between human(-istic) phenomena and un-human(-istic) noumena, perfectly suited to the post-theistic aesthetic experience

38 Ibid.
39 See below, Chapter Five.
41 Burleson, Lovecraft, 158; see ibid., 156–57.
42 “At some point, the text breaks down and reveals something which has not been there. A rupture emerges and, along with it, something new, the unknown. The next step is horror which arises from a threat, not to the narrator but to humanity.” Airaksinen, The Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft, 175.
of the weird tale, signified by the obliteration of consciousness and self-awareness, culminating in Lovecraft’s trademark literary gimmick: the primordial scream. This scream is the epitome of the Lovecraftian artistic effect: a radically alienating encounter with the annihilating—or, in Lovecraft’s own terminology, the “brain-blasting”⁴³—nature of the Universe, which in the final instance can only be denoted as the nameless.

But, by a happy(?) coincidence, “the nameless” is exactly the term that I would use to denote the parapolitical.

⁴³ To provide just one typical example: “As I shivered and brooded on the casting of that brain-blasting shadow, I knew that I had pried out one of the earth’s supreme horrors—one of those nameless blights of outer voids whose faint demon scratchings we sometimes hear on the furthest rim of space, yet from which our own finite vision has given us merciful immunity.” Lovecraft, “The Lurking Fear,” 67.