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

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3. From the Sublime:
“The Call of Cthulhu” (1926)

A subterrene voice or intelligence shouting monotonously in enigmatic sense-impacts undescrivable save as gibberish.
— H.P. Lovecraft

We know how very difficult it is to interpret what is not understood.
— Joaquim Fernandes and Fina D’Armada

The architect of the onto-epistemological foundations of what is (laughingly) known as “The Enlightenment,” Immanuel Kant, “doubles” as modernity’s premier aesthetician. This should come as no surprise, as Kant’s entire metaphysical system ultimately serves an end both aesthetic and epistemological: to organize the world in such a way as to make it the grounds for objective understanding and absolute knowledge; in other words, to thoroughly serve “the purposive” — in Heideggerian terms, the reduction of both self and object to “correctness.”

For Kant, the perception of the world (“the transcendental deduction”) requires a synthesis of what appears before us within both time and space. The synthetic project of “pure rea-

1 For an excellent short critique of Kant’s anthropocentrism, see Budd, The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature, 24–89. The entirety of Kant’s aesthetics is predicated upon ontologically privileging Homo sapiens as a rational and autonomous moral agent.
son” requires three operational concepts, or “unities of synthesis”: apprehension, reproduction, and recognition. Within the Kantian scheme, all knowledge and understanding is ultimately anthropocentric, in that all things must be reduced to “units of measure” that are compatible with human understanding (cogito); “A tree [the height of] which we estimate with reference to the height of a man, at all events gives us a standard for a mountain.”2 The categories of pure reason guaranteeing both the unity of phenomena as well as the ontological unity of the perceiving subject constitutes the “transcendental unity of apperception”; “In other words, it is not so much that I perceive objects; it is rather my perception that presupposes the [unitary] object-form as one of its conditions.”4 For Kant, “the real (synthetic) formula of the cogito is: I think myself, and in thinking myself, I think that the object in general to which I relate a represented diversity.”5 Therefore, the operations of the a priori categories of synthetic understanding need to be supplemented by the work of an additional faculty, judgment, which is responsible for subordinating all of the inherent “sensible diversity” of spatio-temporal objects to the operational requirements of the synthetic categories of transcendental reason: “The only use which the understanding can make of these [concepts] is to judge by means of them.”6 From this follow two consequences, one phenomenological, the other aesthetic. In terms of the former, the human body itself is the final source not only of the units of measurement but of the operational constraints of the synthetic categories of pure reason.

This primary (subjective, sensory, immediate, living) measure proceeds from the [human] body. And it takes the body as its primary object. […] It is the body which erects itself as a measure. It provides the measuring and measured unit of

2 Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 118.
3 Smith, “Translator’s Introduction,” xvii.
4 Ibid., xvi.
5 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, cited in ibid., xvi.
6 Kant, cited in ibid., xvi.
measure: of the smallest and largest possible, of the minimum and the maximum, and likewise of the passage from the one to the other.\(^7\)

In terms of the latter, the “lived evaluation” of space-time imparts a necessarily aesthetic dimension to judgment, as the operation of perception is inseparable from the appreciation and evaluation of form, which is the domain of the “aesthetic” properly defined; “All estimation of the magnitude of objects of nature is in the last resort aesthetic (i.e., subjectively and not objectively determined).”\(^8\) And it is the intrinsically aesthetic nature of judgment that gives rise to one of Kant’s seminal concepts: the \textit{sublime}.\(^9\) Although an aesthetic concept, the sublime is not identical with the beautiful; it is, in fact, largely antithetical to it. Whereas the beautiful dwells within the realm of intuition and the immediacy of perception — that is, the natural accordance of the spatio-temporal object with the synthetic categories of \textit{cogito}\(^10\) — the sublime is better understood as a form of sensory trauma, the catastrophic, or chaotic, sundering of the immediacy of perception from the transcendental unity of apperception.

The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it \textit{boundlessness} is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought. […]

\(^7\) Derrida, \textit{The Truth in Painting}, 140.

\(^8\) Kant, cited in Smith, “Translator’s Introduction,” xviii.

\(^9\) Technically, Kant identifies two forms of the sublime: the mathematical, which is concerned with the spatial immensity of the natural world, and the dynamic, which is taken up with the immanency of physical forces. However, as Lovecraft implicitly treats the two forms interchangeably, giving equal emphasis to both the physical scale and the destructive powers of the Old Ones — the inhumanly large \textit{monstrum} is always genocidally destructive — I shall follow suit and treat the Kantian sublime as a unity. See Lyotard, \textit{Lessons on the Analytic}, 98–146.

\(^10\) “Natural beauty […] brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, pre-adapted to our Judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction.” Kant, \textit{The Critique of Judgment}, 102–3.
That which excites in us, without any reasoning about it, but in the apprehension of it, the feeling of the sublime, may appear as regards its form to violate purpose in respect of the Judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty, and, as it were, to do violence to the Imagination; and yet it is judged to be only the more sublime.¹¹

Two aspects of Kant’s notion of the sublime and their relevance to Lovecraftian poetics require comment.¹² Firstly, as we would expect, the Kantian sublime is remarkably, almost viscerally, phenomenological in nature: “Nature is therefore sublime in those of its phenomena whose intuition brings with it the Idea of its infinity.”¹³ Essential to the concept of the sublime is not merely the heightening of the cogito’s self-awareness of the grounding of perception upon the body, but the abject “insult” inflicted upon the anthropocentric unit of measurement: “We call that sublime which is absolutely great. […] That is great beyond all comparison. […] The sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small.”¹⁴ Secondly, the subjective experience of the sublime is not the objective perception of the immediately unassimilable sensible diversity of the sublime object, but rather the traumatic inducement of a crisis of confidence in the witness’s existential faith in the efficacy of judgment.

¹¹ Ibid., 102–3. As the perceptive reader should be aware, this amounts to little more than a secularized version of mysterium tremendum; as Marjorie Hope Nicolson put it, “Awe, compounded of mingled terror and exultation, once reserved for God, passed over in the seventeenth century first to an expanded cosmos, then from the macrocosm to the greatest objects in the geo-cosmos — mountains, ocean, desert.” Cited in Budd, The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature, 66.
¹² For two contrasting accounts of Lovecraft’s treatment of the Kantian sublime, see Will, “H.P. Lovecraft and the Kantian Sublime” and Ralickas, “Cosmic Horror.”
¹⁴ Ibid., 106 and 109. See Lyotard’s commentary on this passage: “The infinite maximization of magnitudes leads to the Idea of an infinite magnitude, always already larger than any measurable magnitude. This magnitude is not numerable by recurrent addition of a unit to itself, however large it may be. It is off-limits to understanding.” Lyotard, Lessons on the Analytic, 113.
True sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the subject judging, not in the natural Object, the judgment upon which occasions this state [...]. Consequentially it is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective Judgment is occupied, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime. [...] The sublime is that, the mere ability to think, which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense.

One of the central artistic paradoxes of supernatural literature is the manner in which the weird tale combines (not always successfully) both subversive and reactionary elements; subversive because ratio is invariably threatened by the dramatically necessary presence of the Wholly Other/Monster, reactionary because the subversive presence is (nearly) always successfully challenged and eliminated. “Traditionally, genre horror is concerned with the irruption of dreadful forces into a comforting status quo—one which the protagonists frantically scrubble to preserve.” Lovecraft is one of the singular examples of the deployment of a counter-trend, largely through subliminal interrogation of alētheia: “By contrast, Lovecraft’s horror is not one.

15 On this point, see the commentary by Lyotard: “It follows from the fact that sublime judgment is reflective, as is the judgment upon the beautiful, that what is at stake is not the knowledge of the object, but the subjective sensation accompanying the presentation of the object.” Ibid., 99.
16 Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 117 and 110. Emphasis in the original. Not surprisingly, Otto established a clear correlation, or a schematic association in “temporal sequence,” between the Kantian sublime and the dualistic nature of the Holy. “Certainly we can tabulate some general ‘rational’ signs that uniformly recur as soon as we call an object sublime; as, for instance, the bounds of our understanding by some ‘dynamic’ or ‘mathematic’ greatness, by potent manifestations of force or magnitude in spatial extent. But these are obviously only conditions of, not the essence of, the impression of sublimity. A thing does not become sublime merely by being great. The concept itself remains unexplained; it has in it something mysterious, and in this it is like that of the numinous.” Otto, The Idea of the Holy, 41; see ibid., 41–49. In the end, Otto refuses to reduce religious experience to aesthetic sensation; ibid., 45–49.
of intrusion but of realization. The world has always been implacably bleak; the horror lies in our acknowledging that fact.”\textsuperscript{18} In Lovecraft’s own words, “[T]he ultimate reality of space is clearly a complex churning of energy of which the human mind can never form any approximate picture, and which can touch us only through the veil of local apparent manifestations which we call the visible the material universe.”\textsuperscript{19}

As should now be obvious, these reflections clearly situate the Lovecraftian narrative within the domain of the Kantian aesthetic. Generically, all of Lovecraft’s tales are variations of the comparatively early work “The Music of Erich Zann” (1921), a text that foregrounds the sublime in a remarkably surreptitious manner.

[Zann] was trying to make a noise; to ward something off or drown something out—what, I could not imagine, awesome though I felt it must be… A sudden gust, stronger than the others, caught up the manuscript and bore it toward the window. I followed the flying sheets in desperation, but they were gone before I reached the demolished panes. Then I remembered my old wish to gaze from this window, the only window in the Rue d’Auseil\textsuperscript{20} from which one might see the slope beyond the wall, and the city outspread beneath. It was very dark, but the city’s lights always burned, and I expected to see them there amidst the rain and wind. Yet when I looked from that highest of all gable windows, looked while the candles sputtered and the insane viol howled with the night-wind, I saw no city spread below, and no friendly lights gleaming from the remembered streets, but only the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance to anything on earth. And as I stood there looking in terror, the wind blew out

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Cited in Martin, \textit{H.P. Lovecraft}, 151.
both the candles in that ancient peaked garret, leaving me in savage and impenetrable darkness with chaos and pandemonium before me, and the daemon madness of that night-baying viol behind me.  \(^{21}\)

Significantly, the transition from the juvenile to the mature Lovecraft, the originating author of what became known as the Cthulhu Mythos, is signified by the transition from the orgiastic to the sublime and the grotesque. I discuss the defining elements of this term in more detail below. By general agreement, the canonical texts of the Mythos include — but may not be strictly limited to — “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), “The Color Out of Space” (1927), “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” (1927), “The Dunwich Horror” (1928), “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930), “At the Mountains of Madness” (1931), “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1932), “The Shadow Out of Time” (1935), and “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936). In what follows, I will have to violate standard academic practice and provide what might be considered an excessive degree of reproduction of the original Lovecraftian texts. I consider this unavoidable: “His writing is so florid that it deserves to be quoted.” \(^{22}\) In the words of one of Lovecraft’s most perceptive critics, Michel Houellebecq, “One might even say that the only reason for the often subtle and elaborate structure of Lovecraft’s ‘great texts’ is to lay the groundwork for the stylistic explosion of these passages.” \(^{23}\) It is simply not possible to re-present the oblique in any terms other than itself. \(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Lovecraft, “The Music of Erich Zann,” 50–51. See Joshi’s comment: “HPL considered the tale among his best, although in later years he noted that it had a sort of negative value: it lacked the flaws — notably over-explicitness and over-writing — that marred some of his other works, both before and after. It might, however, be said that HPL erred on the side of under-explicitness in the very nebulous horror seen through Zann’s garret window.” Ibid., 376.

\(^{22}\) Airaksinen, The Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft, 40.

\(^{23}\) Houellebecq, H.P. Lovecraft, 88.

\(^{24}\) A point is not lost on Harman: “Lovecraft’s major gift as a writer is his deliberate and skillful obstruction of all attempts to paraphrase him. No other
The decisive literary landmark is “The Call of Cthulhu,” published in 1926, in which Lovecraft quite self-consciously presents himself as a conspiracy theorist — or, more precisely, a writer of conspiracy narratives: “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its contents.” With this justly famous opening line, the text clearly establishes itself as a detective story, albeit one of a unique kind: the primary feat of ratiocination will not be the solving of a crime but the “penetrating” self-reflective interrogation of the Kantian aesthetic.

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 so far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of disassociated 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.

It is important to recall that, historically, the emergence of the detective story in the mid-19th century is inseparable from the development of conspiracy theory. The “conspiracy theorist in fact develops out of the classic detective”; conversely, “a conspiracy theory narrative depends on the presence of a conspiracy theorist.” And the conspiracy theorist — the one who perceives (no matter how dimly) and announces (no matter how unpersuasively) the existence of a conspiracy — is, existentially,

writer gives us monsters and cities so difficult to describe that he can only hint at their anomalies. […] [E]ven his own original words are already just the paraphrase of a reality that eludes all literal speech.” Harman, Weird Realism, 9–10 and 54.

27 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 123.
28 Wisnicki, Conspiracy, Revolution, and Terrorism, 18.
29 Ibid., 17.
in the exact same aesthetic dilemma as the experiential subject of the Kantian sublime: in both cases, the nature of the experience is a radical disorientation, as Lovecraft’s narrator clearly attests to. The inability to endure the expansion of consciousness beyond the “correct” human unit of measure is a form of mercy:

That is, avoidance of cognitive dissonance by the compartmentalization and lack of communication between facts stored in the human brain. It is merciful because complete awareness of reality would almost certainly result in mental disintegration and psychosis. […] Faced with the unutterable horror of total realization, Man is overwhelmed by a traumatic level of cognitive dissonance, and to reduce it not only denies reality, but also alters his belief in science, in progress, and in the future.30

Lovecraft’s turn to a highly self-conscious form of conspiracy narrative clearly reflected an irresistible impulse to repudiate the humanistic overtones of the Kantian sublime: “The time has come when the normal revolt against time, space, & matter must assume a form not overtly incompatible with what is known as reality — when it must be gratified by images forming supplements, rather than contradictions of the visible & measurable universe.”31 It should by now be clear why the monstrum — the sui generis, or that thing which is without a species or category — constitutes a source of such profound psychic trauma. Embedded within the encounter with the Monster is the unconscious realization that the price that must be paid in order to fit the Wholly Other into some sort of categorical schema — representing a potentially vast inflation of the total set of classifications to the point of infinity — is the infliction of annihilating violence upon the entirety of our cognitive map.32 It is precisely

32 For Noel Carroll, the cognitive problem of the Monster is the basis of its horror-inducing properties, or its “impurity”; “an object or being is impure
here that the inhumanly large of the sublime meets up with the humanly small of the grotesque: The Thing that is too big to comprehend (literally, “to see”) is phenomenologically identical with the Thing that is too difficult to classify, as each produces their own type of terror and pain — a Burkean form of trauma. The artistic “price” to be paid for this unprecedented heightening of the uncanny effect of cosmic horror, “a kind of secular awe,” is, of course, a corresponding intensification of collapse of faith in the synthetic faculties — an “occupational hazard” of the parapolitical scholar, as Scott’s reflections upon 9/11 make clear: the chaotic irruption of a clandestine reality through a catastrophic event that resulted in the creation of a partly illusory mental space, in which unpleasant facts, such as that all western empires have been established through major atrocities, are conveniently suppressed. (I suspect in fact that most readers will be tempted to reject and forget [parapolitical events] […] as something which simply “doesn’t compute” with their observations of America.) I say this as one who believes passionately in civilization, and fears that by excessive denial our own civilization may indeed be becoming threatened.

This striking similarity in tone between the disoriented Scott and Lovecraft’s post-Kantian protagonist is readily explained by viewing both as a specifically modernist form of hero/narrator; as Art Berman has shown, modern “[a]rtistic self-conception is sheltered inside the modernist mind as a mode of alienation […]. For the modernist artist […] alienation is the most prominent level of self-consciousness, a principle feature of a

if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete or formless.” Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror, 32. “Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge.” Ibid., 34.

33 Ibid., 219, fn. 27.
34 Scott, Deep Politics and the CIA Global Drug Connection, 2–3. I will discuss the parapolitical trauma of 9/11 in more detail in Chapter Five.
personality surcharged with talent (or the supposition of talent) but politically powerless.”35 “The Call of Cthulhu,” no less than Scott’s parapolitical investigations, is pre-eminently a modernist text36; the defining element of literary modernism is an overriding concern (if not pre-occupation) with alienation, subjectivity, and absurdity, with the unifying element the disorientating disequilibrium that flows from a traumatizing cognitive dissonance induced by a “paradigm shift”37 of some sort.

In modernism, the consistent, linear narratives of traditional literature gave rise to forms that reflected the chaos of a fractured culture. Fragmented realities, failed communications, limited perspectives, and complicated histories are common in modernist texts, representing alienating subjectivity as a crucial subject of literary inquiry. […] The concept of “denial of an absolute reality” indicates absurdity because logic depends upon a stable sense of reality. When reality is destabilized, logic is destabilized, and absurdity prevails.38

Hence

[Modernism] is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos […] of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. […] [I]t is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues

35 Berman, Preface to Modernism, 50.
36 Martin, H.P. Lovecraft, 84–90.
37 “Alternating paradigm shifts can be powerful vehicles for conveying concepts of subjectivity, disrupting the world views of traditional thinkers. One of the reasons that forced paradigm shifts are so disruptive is that the movement from one perspective to another is commonly seen as an admission of error in judgment rather than a sign of progress. It is due to this implication of fallibility that institutions tend to resist the dissemination of new information that contradicts the institution’s previous claims and edicts.” Ibid., 138–39.
38 Ibid., 39–40.
when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions.  

By virtue of their modernist pedigree, the Lovecraftian protagonist is invariably a member of the “neurotic virtuosi,” entrapped by their own alienation. Alienation as “the shift from community to isolation, the transformation of the normal world to the abnormal world and accepted reality to an unacceptable reality” qualifies the Lovecraftian narrator as the literary apotheosis of the conspiracy theorist: “Lovecraft’s protagonists are virtually always placed in the position of facing their horrors alone, without consolation or even corroborating witnesses to the reality of their perceptions.” The methodological assumption of parapolitics is not that everything is “really” connected—the extreme, or deterministic, model of conspiracy theory—but that, certain things which would seem to be “separated” are, in fact, connected—appearances to the contrary. Therefore, as we should expect, the remarkably symmetrical tripartite narrative sequence of “The Call of Cthulhu”

39 Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, cited in Martin, H.P. Lovecraft, 38.
40 Invariably a Schopenhauerian. “It is an unfortunate fact that the bulk of humanity is too limited in its mental vision to weigh with patience and intelligence those isolated phenomena, seen and felt only by a psychologically sensitive few, which lie outside common experience. Men of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal; that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them; but the prosaic materialism of the majority condemns as madness the flashes of super-sight which penetrate the common veil of obvious empiricism.” Lovecraft, “The Tomb,” 1.
42 Martin, H.P. Lovecraft, 48.
43 Donald R. Burleson, cited in Dziemianowicz, “Outsiders and Aliens,” 166. This is, of course, consistent with the signature but indispensable narrative technique of weird fiction, which is to “lay the foundation for the reader’s suspension of disbelief by suggesting that the supernatural flourishes in the terra incognita of the rational world […] [by] depriving the narrator of witnesses to corroborate his [sic] experience […]. [The “weird” writer makes] the reader’s belief an important part of the isolating technique.” Ibid., 166.
embodies to perfection the credo (as well as the dilemma) of the investigator of parapolitical phenomena: “That glimpse, like all dread glimpses of truth, flashed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things [...]. I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain.”44 As required by cosmic horror written within the post-Kantian age, the narrator must be mercilessly exposed to the a-holy terror of the sublime, but, to the exact same degree, be inhumanly (sadistically?) denied the salvific effect promised by Kant.45 Stefan Dziemianowicz’s incisive comments on the text are worth quoting in full.

Probably the most important aspect of “The Call of Cthulhu” is the means by which [the narrator Francis Wayland Thurston] pieces together the clues and extrapolates what they imply. He is never an active participant in any of the story’s three episodes. Although he travels to the places mentioned in the three accounts and sometimes interviews survivors, his discoveries mostly confirm what has already been recorded. His is basically a job of armchair deduction, from newspaper clippings that were no doubt read by others but that no one recognized as fitting a pattern. All these stories are described in such realistic, mundane detail [...] that anyone could have verified them had he seen the need to do so. This is Lovecraft’s inversion of the transcendentalist notion that “there are sermons in stones.” He says, in effect, that one does not need to investigate the dark corners of the universe to uncover mind-shattering cosmic truths; they may be evident in the events of the day if one knows the perspective from which to view the right events. The narrator’s despair comes about simply through the realization of the pattern these events fit. In a sense, Lovecraft is expressing his belief

45 See below.
that each one of us teeters on the brink of alienation along with Thurston.\footnote{Dziemianowicz, “Outsiders and Aliens,” 182.}

Consistent with the trope of modernism, in equal parts conspiratorial and anti-Kantian, the first tale of the Cthulhu Mythos cycle “revolves entirely around collaged documentation, being a framed collection of documents put together by the narrator.”\footnote{Martin, \textit{H.P. Lovecraft}, 84–85.}

In the first part of the tale, “The Horror in Clay,”\footnote{Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 123–31.} the narrator,\footnote{In truth, the secondary and absent narrator. The heading immediately under the title of the text reads: “Found among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston.” The real narrator of the tale, the “exo-narrator” in Burleson’s terms, is, in fact, the editor—presumably Lovecraft himself. Burleson, \textit{Lovecraft}, 80.} the nephew of George Gammell Angell, a recently deceased professor emeritus of Semitic languages at Brown University, discovers among his uncle’s possessions a secret file of newsclippings of occultist incidents from around the world that all seem to corroborate the re-emergence of a trans-national underground religious cult centered upon the immanent return/resurrection of an obscene and genocidal atavistic “anti-God,” CTHULHU.

The press cuttings, as I have intimated, touched on cases of panic, mania, and eccentricity during the given period [Spring, 1925]. Professor Angell must have employed a cutting bureau, for the number of extracts was tremendous, and the sources scattered throughout the globe. Here was a nocturnal suicide in London, where a lone sleeper had leaped from a window after a shocking cry. Here likewise a rambling letter to the editor of a paper in South America, where a fanatic deduces a dire future from visions he has seen. A dispatch from California describes a theosophist colony as donning white robes en masse for some “glorious fulfillment” which never arrives, whilst items from India speak guardedly of se-
rious native unrest toward the end of March. Voodoo orgies multiply in Hayti [sic], and African outposts report ominous mutterings. American officers in the Philippines find certain tribes bothersome about this time, and New York policemen are mobbed by hysterical Levantines on the night of March 22–23.50 The west of Ireland, too, is full of wild rumor and legendary, and a fantastic painter named Ardois-Bonnot hangs a blasphemous “Dream Landscape” in the Paris salon of 1926. And so numerous are the recorded troubles in insane asylums that only a miracle can have stopped the medical fraternity from noting strange parallelisms and drawing mystified conclusions.51 A weird bunch of cuttings, all told; and I can at this date scarcely envisage the callous rationalism with which I set them aside.52

The narrative device of enfolded unveiling — the uncovering of a hidden and/or repressed truth through the unravelling of multiple levels of written and/or oral evidence — is one of Lovecraft’s most singular and important contributions to cosmic horror,53 and, because of its obvious parallels with parapolitics and conspiracy,54 needs to be examined in greater detail.

50 I take this as a reference to “The Horror of Red Hook,” which was written the previous year and which, like “The Call of Cthulhu,” demonstrates a pathological anxiety with racialized reverse colonization. See below.
51 A veiled reference to Dracula, a classic example of a horror text that doubles as a conspiracy narrative. See below.
53 “The Call of Cthulhu” deploys “the technique of cut-and-paste in a pulp bricolage, aggregating a sense of dread and awe precisely out of the lack of over-arching plot. The exposition of a monstrous cosmic history, of hateful cults, of the misbehavior of matter and geometry, is all the stronger for being gradually, seemingly randomly, uncovered. […] Lovecraft’s is not a fiction of carefully structured plot so much as of ineluctable unfolding: it is a literature of the inevitability of weird.” Mieville, “Introduction,” xii.
54 “In Lovecraft’s prose collages, the collaged narratives and scraps of information are assembled by characters who only manage to find and fit together enough of the puzzle to become aware that the full picture is beyond their comprehension. In this sense, Lovecraft’s alienating documents are not merely plot devices that introduce new information to the narrators. These
Lovecraft’s type of alienated scholar struggling to comprehend potentially world-changing documentation appears to be unique in “weird fiction.” […] Many of Lovecraft’s narrators must struggle to understand new information through secondary sources alone, drawing attention toward the alienating influence of recorded information itself, removed from the first-hand shock of personal experience. The reader is challenged to scrutinize his or her own perceptions of reality, to face the fact that most ideas of reality are in fact based upon secondary sources.  

In his pioneering deconstructive analysis of Lovecraft, Donald Burleson strictly correlates the epistemological premise of the Lovecraftian tale with the “all wrong”; in aesthetic terms, of course, this means “irreducible to simple, stable terms.” On Burleson’s own count, there are as many as nine layers of “epistemological strands” interweaving throughout the text, each layer manifesting the intertwined representation of both one aspect of the conspiracy as well as the respective narrator’s point of view, the “correctness” of which is fatally impaired by the overwhelming of the cogito by the unsolicited — and unexpected — visitation by the sublime. The total(-izing) effect of cognitive dissonance is multiplied not only by the plurality of the voices of the multitude of (traumatized and disoriented) witnesses but also by the manifestation of the self-same horrific sublime through the full array of artistic representation — literary, plastic, architectural, and musical. Not merely has synthetic unity been ruptured, but the un-mediated otherness of the sublime object (Cthulhu) has “invaded” or “appropriated” all forms of art. This represents an utterly daemonic critique of Kant — one that is, as far as I can tell, unrecognized within documents form collages with their own implicit statements of subjectivity, revealing multiple limited perspectives on certain aspects of reality.” Martin, H.P. Lovecraft, 139.

55 Ibid., 86.
56 Burleson, Lovecraft, 80.
57 Ibid.
“Lovecraft Studies.” The aesthetic faculties, or imagination, are the cogito’s means of establishing the correctness of judgment and subjugating being to reason; if the a-holiness of Cthulhu’s sublimity can be represented as the onto-epistemological foundation of a rival form of artistic expression, then not only is anthropocentric judgment merely finite, it is philosophically nonsensical. It is not merely the case that we are, in the very final instance, incapable of completely understanding the world; it is the case that truth itself is unconditionally anti-human.

Along with the cuttings are two other objects: a clay bas-relief of a weird hybrid animal—“god”58 and a manuscript outlining the association between Professor Angell and the sculptor of the image, the “psychiatrically hyper-sensitive” artist Henry Anthony Wilcox.59

Above these apparent hieroglyphs was a figure of evident pictorial intent, though its impressionistic execution forbade a very clear idea nature. It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body of rudimentary wings;

58 In his important book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), Noel Carroll offers a binary classificatory scheme of the Monster: fusion and fission. “The central mark of a fusion figure is the compounding of ordinarily disjoint or conflicting categories in an integral, spatio-temporally unified individual,” whereas fission divides *monstrum* into separate beings, either spatially or temporally, such as the Were-Wolf or the Shape-Shifter.” Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 44 and 47. Great Cthulhu is Lovecraft’s master-sign of fusion monstrosity; the animal–god’s creator seems to have been addicted to fusion. Operating within the tradition of analytical philosophy, Carroll’s generally impressive work is marred by the same problem as always: the privileging of epistemology at the expense of metaphysics. There is no doubt, as Lovecraft himself magnificently portends, that the Monster is an epistemic “problem”; this problem, however, is a symptom of an underlying difficulty in the nature of Being as such.

but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful. Behind the figure was a vague suggestion of a Cyclopean architectural background.\textsuperscript{60}

Wilcox conveniently offers his own interpretation of his bas-relief, adding an additional layer of self-reflexive communication as a “text-within-a-text”; “He said, ‘It is new, indeed, for I made it last night in a dream of strange cities; and dreams are older than brooding Tyre, or the contemplative Sphinx, or garden-girdled Babylon.’”\textsuperscript{61} This is immediately “cross-correlated” by Thurston, who usefully provides a pseudo-scientific corroboration of Wilcox’s equally mystic/psychotic trance.

It was then that he began that rambling tale which […] won the fevered interest of my uncle. There had been a slight earthquake tremor the night before [February 29, 1925], the most considerable felt in New England for some years; and Wilcox’s imagination had been keenly affected. Upon retiring, he had an unprecedented dream of great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror. Hieroglyphics had covered the walls and pillars, and from some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice; a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound, but which he attempted to render by the almost unpronounceable jumble of letters, “Cthulhu fhtagn.”\textsuperscript{62}

Thurston then adds his self-reflexive commentary of his own estimation (\textit{reor}) of Wilcox’s displaced first-person confession.

When Professor Angell became convinced that the sculptor was indeed ignorant of any cult or system of cryptic lore, he besieged his visitor with demands for future reports of

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 125–26.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 127–28.
dreams. This bore regular fruit, for after the first interview [March 1, 1925] the manuscript records daily calls of the young man, during which he related startling fragments of nocturnal imaginary whose burden was always some terrible Cyclopean vista of dark and dripping stone, with subterrene voice or intelligence shouting monotonously in enigmatic sense-impacts uninscribable save as gibberish. The two sounds frequently repeated are those rendered by the letters “Cthulhu” and “R’lyeh.”

Monumentalism is the architectonic expression of the will-to-totalitarianism. Not only is the Cyclopean one of the primary signifiers of the anti-human Cthulhu (fascism as the “suspension” of democracy) but, in Lovecraft’s conspiratorial narrative strategies, monumental structures are fully capable of inducing that epistemic rupture that is the sign of the sublime. As Houellebecq astutely observes,

Hence all impressionism must be banished to build a vertiginous literature; and without a certain disproportionality of scale, without the juxtaposition of the minute and the limitless, the punctual and the infinite, there can be no vertigo. […] [Lovecraft] wants to create a sense of precarious balance; the characters move between precise coordinates, but they are oscillating at the edge of the abyss.

63 Ibid.
64 Houellebecq, H.P. Lovecraft, 79. See also ibid. at 65 and 66: “For like the great Gothic or baroque cathedrals, the dream architecture he describes is a total architecture. […] H.P. Lovecraft’s architecture, like that of the great cathedrals, like that of Hindu temples, is much more than a three-dimensional mathematical puzzle. It is entirely imbued with an essential dramaturgy that gives its meaning to the edifice. That dramatizes the very smallest spaces that uses the conjoint resources of the various plastic arts that annexes the magic play of light to its own ends. It is living architecture because at its foundation lies a living and emotional concept of the world. In other words, it is sacred architecture.” As Houellebecq laconically remarks, “Howard Phillips Lovecraft was amongst those few men who experience a
As with architecture, so it is with both music and dance. The second part of Angell’s manuscript, “The Tale of Inspector Legrasse,” recounts an earlier—albeit equally second-hand—encounter with the Cthulhu cult. In 1908, Inspector John Raymond Legrasse of the New Orleans Police Department solicits information from the delegates of the American Archaeological Society holding its annual meeting in St. Louis. Legrasse brings with him a small statue of the cephalopod animal–god and recounts his recent investigation of a murderous Voodoo cult.

On November 1st, 1907, there had come to the New Orleans parish a frantic summons from the swamp and lagoon country to the south. The squatters there [...] were in the grip of stark terror from an unknown thing which had stolen upon them in the night. It was voodoo, apparently, but voodoo of a more terrible sort than they had ever known; and some of their women and children had disappeared since the malevolent tom-tom had begun its incessant beating far within the black haunted woods where no dweller ventured. There were insane shouts and harrowing screams, soul-chilling chants and dancing devil-flames; and, the frightened messenger added, the people could stand it no more.

Not at all unlike the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, Legrasse and his men intervene. Not surprisingly, and again not unlike the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, what Legrasse et al. encounter is the “nameless.”

Only poetry or madness [!] could do justice to the noises heard by Legrasse’s men as they ploughed on through the violent trance-like state where they look at beautiful architecture.” Ibid., 65.

This seems to be a constant personality trait of the fascist.

66 Ibid., 136.
67 Ibid., 136–39.
black morass toward the red glare of the muffled tom-toms.\textsuperscript{68} […] In the natural glade of the swamp stood a grassy island of perhaps an acre’s extent, clear of trees and tolerably dry. On this now leaped and twisted a more indescribable horde of human abnormality. […] Void of clothing, this hybrid spawn were braying, bellowing, and writhing about a monstrous ring-shaped bonfire; in the center of which, revealed by occasional rifts in the curtain of flame, stood a great granite monolith some eight feet in height; on the top of which, incongruous in its diminutiveness, rested the noxious carven statuette.\textsuperscript{69} From a wide circle of scaffolds set up at regular intervals with the flame-girt monolith as a center hung, head downward, the oddly marred bodies of the helpless squatters who had disappeared. It was inside this circle that the ring of worshippers jumped and roared, the general direction of the mass motion being from left to right in endless Bacchanal between the ring of bodies and the ring of fire.\textsuperscript{70}

Legrasse’s round-up nets a motley collection of typically racialist grotesques — “examined at headquarters after a trip of intense strain and weariness, the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant types”\textsuperscript{71} — but, more importantly, the first allegedly “true” revelations of the nature of the Cthulhu cult: “They worshipped, so they said, the

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{69} “The statuette is described as being between seven to eight inches in height and of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. This thing, which seemed instinct with a fearsome and unnatural malignancy, was of a somewhat bloated corpulence, and squatted evilly on a rectangular block or pedestal covered with undecipherable characters […]. They, like the subject matter, 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 conceptions have no part.” Ibid., 133–34.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 139.
Great Old Ones who lived ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky.\footnote{72} A hybridity, then, of the supernatural and the extra-terrestrial; one is reminded of Arthur C. Clarke’s famous observation that a sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic. In truth, the Mythos appears to be premised upon a daemonic inversion of Clarke’s dictum: a sufficiently advanced form of magic would be indistinguishable from science.

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 that cult, and the prisoners said it had always existed and always would exist, hidden in distant waters 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.\footnote{73}

“Dead bodies” is an anthropocentric construction; in fact, the Great Old Ones are in a temporary state of stasis, or hibernation, the active/dormant life-phases of the extraterrestrials governed by aeon-spanning astronomical cycles: in other words, temporal units of an inhuman order of magnitude.

These Great Old Ones […] were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape […] 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

\footnote{72} Ibid.  
\footnote{73} Ibid.
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. The spells that preserved them intact likewise prevented them from making an initial move, and They could only lie awake in the dark and think whilst uncounted millions of years rolled by. They knew all that was occurring in the universe, for Their mode of speech was transmitted thought. Even now They talked in their tombs. When, after infinities of chaos, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshy minds of mammals.74

The Great Old Ones suffer a double exile not only in time but in space; their bodies are entombed alongside that of their hierarch Cthulhu, himself enveloped by the walls of his Cyclopean metropolis: “The great stone city of R’lyeh, with its monoliths and sepulchers, had sunk beneath the waves; and deep waters, full of the one primal mystery through which not even thought can pass, had cut off the spectral intercourse.”75

Finally revealed for us is the central conceit of the overarching storyline of Lovecraft’s late period: the Cthulhu Mythos, itself a pun on “chthonic,”76 is premised upon the extra-dimensional covert machinations of a clandestine anti-pantheon, the Cthonoi, whose members include (but are not limited to) SHUB-NIGGURATH THE BLACK GOAT OF THE WOODS WITH A THOUSAND YOUNG; HASTUR THE DESTROYER; YUGGOOTH; TSATHOGGA; NYARLATHOTEP; AZATHOTH; and YOG-SOTHOTH. As Lovecraft makes clear in one of his last stories:

Even now I refused to believe what he [the Whisperer in Darkness] implied about the constitution of ultimate infin-

74 Ibid., 140–41.
75 Ibid., 141.
76 “The irrational in Lovecraft’s tales seems indissociable from the images of the depths. The abnormal, the disquieting, and the unclean are, on the vertical axis of the imagination, always situated toward the bottom, in the zone of the deepest shade.” Levy, Lovecraft, 64.
ity, the juxtaposition of dimensions, and the frightful of our known cosmos of space and time in the unending chain of linked cosmos-atoms which makes up the immediate super-cosmos of curves, angles, and material and semi-material electronic organization [...]. I started with loathing when told of the monstrous nuclear chaos beyond angled space which the Necronomicon has mercifully cloaked under the name of Azathoth. It was shocking to have the foulest nightmares of secret myth cleared up in concrete terms whose stark, morbid hatefulness exceeded the boldest hints of ancient and mediaeval mystics.77

At the end of his career, Lovecraft finally revealed the Great Old Ones as the personifications of what we would denote as “quantum weirdness.” In Houellebecq’s insightful commentary:

These are the coordinates of the unnamable. This is not a coherent mythology, precisely drawn; it is unlike Greco-Roman mythology or this or that magical pantheon whose very clarity and finitude is almost reassuring. These Lovecraftian entities remain somewhat tenebrous. He avoids precision with regards to the distribution of their powers and abilities. In fact, their exact nature is beyond the grasp of the human mind. The impious books that pay homage to them and celebrate their cult do so in confused and contradictory terms. They remain fundamentally unutterable. We only get fleeting glimpses of their hideous power; and those humans who seek to know more ineluctably pay in madness or in death.78

But equally so are the Great Old Ones the mytho-poetic personifications of the clandestine attributes and agencies of the stereotypical conspiracy narrative. As Legrasse’s degenerate informants tell him,

78 Houellebecq, H.P. Lovecraft, 83.
That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom. Meanwhile the cult, by appropriate rites, must keep alive the memory of those ancient ways and shadow forth the prophecy of their return.79

Houellebecq’s comment on this passage is priceless: “This is just a frightening paraphrase of Saint Paul.”80 But it is a heretical inversion of Pauline eschatology that takes us uncannily close to the conspiratorial: Cthulhu’s conspiracy against humankind—the instigation of a global race war waged by the grotesque “lower orders” by means of long-range telepathic suggestion (mind-control-at-a-distance being the coded meaning of the “Call” of the title) is a quintessential theme of the Lovecraftian conspiracy narrative.81 The centrality of the trope of conspiracy is reinforced by the marked similarity between Cthulhu’s degenerate worshippers and the grotesque anarchists treated by G.K. Chesterton in one of the seminal texts of conspiracy literature, The Man Who Was Thursday (1908). The identity-shifting leader of the anarchists, Lucian Gregory, “seemed like a walking blasphemy, a blend of the angel and the ape.”82 And his propensity for the politics of the apocalypse puts him squarely within the camp of the bacchanal negroids of the Louisiana swamps.

79 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 141.
80 Houellebecq, H.P. Lovecraft, 113.
81 One that has proven of remarkable duration; among other things, it serves as the main plot device of the seminal Hammer Studios production Five Million Years to Earth (1967), a film that is strikingly Lovecraftian in its sensibilities.
82 Chesterton, The Man Who Was Thursday, 3.
“My red hair, like red flames, shall burn up the world,” said Gregory [...]. Then out of this unintelligible creature the last thunders broke [...]. “You are the Law, and you have never been broken. But is there a free soul alive that does not long to break you, only because you have never been broken? We in revolt talk all kind of nonsense doubtless about this crime or that crime of the Government. It is all folly! The only crime of the Government is that it governs. The unpardonable sin of the supreme power is that it is supreme.”

Lovecraft’s affinity with conspiracy narrative, in fact, goes far beyond Chesterton; when read closely, it is clear that “The Call of Cthulhu” falls under the literary classification of reverse colonization, placing the text within the same league of other conspiratorial classics such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. A popular sub-genre in late Victorian and Edwardian literature, the reverse colonization narrative was suffused with “the sense that the entire [Anglo-Saxon] nation — as a race of people, as a political and imperial force, as a social and cultural power — was in irretrievable decline.” The generic reverse colonization narrative manifests two overriding concerns: guilt (of the genocidal depredations of imperialism — “all western empires have been established through major atrocities,” in Scott’s words — with the counter-invasion a form of retributive justice) and fear (namely, the overthrow of the decadent master race by the stealth and the feral virility of the colonized peoples). Given his neurotic racism, it is not surprising that guilt is largely absent from Lovecraft’s weird tales. This omission is more than compensated for, however, by the abjectly hysterical (and histrionic) expression of fear; as with the very “best” of the reverse colonization fantasists, Lovecraft is “obsessed with the spectacle of the primitive and the

83 Ibid., 176.
85 Arata, “The Occidental Tourist,” 622.
86 See below.
atavistic.” In Lovecraft, as with Stoker and Wells, a “terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized. Such fears are linked to a perceived decline — racial, moral, spiritual — which makes the nation vulnerable to attack from more vigorous, ‘primitive’ peoples.” And, in truth, the more we examine “The Call of Cthulhu,” the more traces of reverse colonization we can find. From the St. Louis meeting with Legrasse, Angell gains knowledge of two additional facts which are central to both Cthulhu’s conspiracy and the overarching plotline of the later installments of the mythos. The first is that a “forbidden book” is the hermeneutic key to understanding the entirety of the cult: the Necronomicon, authored by the “mad Arab Abdul Al-Hazred” in whose brain-blasting words

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

The Necronomicon stipulates that the center of the Cthulhu cult “lay amid the pathless desert of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars [Persepolis], dreams hidden and untouched. It was not allied to the European witch-cult, and was virtually unknown beyond its members.” This leads to the second vital point: that the Cthulhu cult is truly cosmopolitan, preposterously extending all the way to the Arctic. During the St. Louis meeting, William Channing Webb, Professor of Anthropology, Princeton University, relates to Legrasse and company that an earlier expedition in 1860 to West Greenland had uncovered

87 Arata, “The Occidental Tourist,” 624.
88 Ibid., 623.
89 The master-sign of the Cthulhu Mythos in the form of a diabolic parody of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám, the Lovecraftian tome was clearly inspired by Robert W. Chamber’s equally melodramatic fictitious brain-blasting/insanity-inducing theatrical script, The King in Yellow.
90 Grammatically incorrect; in Arabic, his name should be Abd-al-Hazred. Burleson, Lovecraft, 49. I discuss Al-Hazred in greater detail below.
91 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 142.
92 Ibid.
[a] singular tribe or cult of degenerate Esquimaux whose religion, a curious form of devil-worship, chilled him with its deliberate bloodthirstiness and repulsiveness. It was a faith of which other Esquimaux knew little, and which they mentioned only with shudders, saying that it had come down from horribly ancient aeons before ever the world was made.93

Even more uncannily (or brain-blasting, if you prefer) is the only-just-now recognized fact that the main ritualistic chant of the diabolical Inuits is identical with that of the sub-human negroids of the New Orleans Voodoo cult. To wit:

\[Ph'nglui mglw' nafh Cthulhu R'leyh wgah' nagl fhtagn.\]
\[In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.\] 94

According to Thurston, there then “followed an exhaustive comparison of details, and a moment of 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.”95

It is important to note here an under-appreciated convergence between this text and the earlier weird tale “The Music of Erich Zann”: both rely upon the notion of a “symphonic correspondence” to aesthetically convey the sense of an immeasurable sublime.

It may have been only imagination and it may have been only echoes which induced one of the men, an excitable Spaniard, to fancy he heard antiphonal responses to the ritual from some far and unilluminated spot deeper within the wood of ancient legendary horror. This man, Joseph D. Galvez, I later met and questioned; and he proved distractingly imaginative.

93 Ibid., 134.
94 Ibid., 135.
95 Ibid.
He indeed went so far as to hint of the faint beating of great wings, and of a glimpse of shining eyes and a mountainous white bulk beyond the remotest trees — but I suppose he had been hearing too much native superstition. 96

Lovecraft both supplements and explicates the nebulous and “orgiastic” horrors of the earlier text through the deployment of a series of parapolitical metaphors and images in the latter: specifically, the “global conspiracy.” In other words, by re-locating Zann’s cosmic Other to the material plane but extending it through terrestrial time and space, Cthulhu’s global race conspiracy is rendered tantamount to the sublime: an infinite multiplication of social connections (a “social multitude” that is a form of magnitude) throughout space-time (Providence, Greenland, New Orleans, Norway, New Zealand) yields an alien presence that ruptures synthetic unity — that is, an aesthetic conceit that is affectively identical to the sublime.

It would be both useless and disturbing to repeat all that we concluded; but I may hint that we agreed in believing that we had secured a clue to the source of some of the most repulsive primordial customs in the cryptic elder religions of mankind. It seemed plain to us, also, that there were ancient and elaborate alliances between the hidden outer creatures and certain members of the human race. How extensive these alliances were, and how their state today might compare with their state in earlier ages, we had no means of guessing; yet at best there was room for a limitless amount of horrified speculation. There seemed to be an awful, immemorial linkage in several definite stages betwixt man and nameless infinity. The blasphemies which appeared on earth, it was hinted, came from the dark planet Yuggoth [Pluto], at the rim of the solar system; but this was itself merely the populous outpost of a frightful interstellar race whose ultimate source must lie

96 Ibid., 138.
far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum or greatest known cosmos.\textsuperscript{97}

The conspiracy narrative, through its vital connection with the detective narrative, is thoroughly modernist in its construction. Most indicative of its modernist “prejudice,” however, is the conspiracy tale’s reliance upon Darwinism: “Darwin’s theory was revolutionary […] because although he took up the ‘old problems’ of ‘chance, environment, death, [and] survival,’” he moved away from the “‘leaps’ of the chain of being ‘with its hierarchical ordering of rungs’ and towards the ecological image of the ‘inextricable web of affinities.’ Darwin, in other words, de-centered man in favor of the complex network of nature.”\textsuperscript{98} Understood as an unending proliferation of “inextricable webs of affinities,” the Darwinian imaginary formed part of the modernist vocabulary of the Victorian conspiracy novel that invested it with a determinative albeit subliminal imaginative sense of the sublime.

In their most typical version, conspiracy theory narratives depict a conspiracy that defies genre categorization (e.g., only a foreign invader or revolutionary group) and spatial location (operating in Germany or in London, etc.) because the conspiracy is everywhere, because it has grown to the extent of being generalized, potentially indeterminate, and even beyond the conscious control or knowledge of its conspirators.\textsuperscript{99}

The conspiratorial aesthetic is most clearly put on display in the third part of the tale, “The Madness From the Sea.”\textsuperscript{100} Here, Thurston recounts his reading of the journal of a recently deceased Norwegian ship captain, Gustaf Johansen, the only survivor of an encounter on March 23, 1925, with a mysterious, unchartered island in the far southern Pacific Ocean (S. Latitude 47º9´; W.

\textsuperscript{97} Lovecraft, “The Whisperer in Darkness,” 185.
\textsuperscript{98} George Levine, cited in Wisnicki, \textit{Conspiracy, Revolution, and Terrorism}, 60.
\textsuperscript{100} Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 145–57.
Longitude 126º43´), which turns out to be the prematurely (and only temporarily) re-surfaced city of R'lyeh and a partially awoken Cthulhu, now revealed as the direct source of the concurrent “wave” of psychic distortions experienced by Atkins and the other “sensitives.” Through Johansen we learn that the genocidal arch-priest of the Old Ones is able to leave stasis for a short time because of a localized earthquake that brings part of R'leyh to the surface; in Houellebecq’s memorable summary of this cataclysmic event, “Between 4:00 pm and 4:15 pm a breach occurred in the architecture of time. And through the fissure created, a terrifying entity manifested itself on our earth.”\textsuperscript{101} The imagery here is highly evocative of the conspiratorial presence—exactly as with Walter Cronkite solemnly intoning the precise time and place of the death of John F. Kennedy, the journalistic reportage frames the exact moment of the irruption of the parapolitical into the social consensus of public perception.\textsuperscript{102} And, of course, this unveiling of the parapolitical nameless is identical with epistemological crisis and cognitive disaster: “The very sun of heaven seemed distorted when viewed through the polarizing miasma welling out from this sea-soaked perversion, and twisted menace and suspense lurked leeringly in those crazily elusive angles of carven rock where a second glance shewed concavity after the first shewed convexity.”\textsuperscript{103} In a striking manner, Lovecraft signifies the catastrophic annihilation of “common sense” through the equally violent re-assertion of the antithetical architectonic: “As Wilcox would have said, the geometry of the place was all wrong. One could not be sure that the sea and the ground were horizontal, hence the relative position\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Houellebecq, \textit{H.P. Lovecraft}, 82.
\textsuperscript{102} See Houellebecq on exactly this point. “If distant entities that are several hundred million years old appear in the course of our human history, it is vital to document the exact moments of their appearance. Each point is a rupture. To allow the unutterable to erupt.” Ibid., 78–79.
\textsuperscript{103} Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 153.
\textsuperscript{104} “Under the cover of the theory of relativity […] Lovecraft’s tales are, in a way, only a vast attempt at the dramatization of space, rendered agonizing by his dynamics, and fantastic insofar as its unforeseeable metamorphoses come to trouble the Euclidean order of things. […] The known world, the
of everything else seemed phantasmally variable.”\(^{105}\) (It should be pointed out here that the frequent “name-dropping” of Einstein and the repeated sophomoric references to the Theory of Relativity is a crucial literary gimmick of Lovecraft; in addition to investing his “post-supernatural” weird tales with a veneer of largely erroneous pseudo-scientific respectability, Einsteinian physics served as a useful artifact of popular culture that invests radical post-Kantian metaphysics with a “hip” plausibility that enables the sophomoric “educated” reader to enter more easily into the dramatic landscape of the fiction.\(^{106}\) The noumenal reality of the Great Old Ones is re-presented as the sublime space by their “impossible” architecture, which doubles as Lovecraft’s “rapture” of the a-holy numinous.\(^{107}\)

Two things are of particular note in this remarkable passage, arguably the apex of Lovecraft’s literary career, and both cast further light upon Lovecraft’s sophisticated engagement with Kantian aesthetics. The first is that Lovecraft shows an astute grasp of Kant’s vital distinction between the sublime properly-so-called and the merely monstrous. According to Kant, if “that magnitude of a natural Object […] is great beyond all standards of sense, it makes us judge as sublime, not so much the object, as our own state of mind in the estimation of it.”\(^{108}\) In other words, the sublime, although clearly related to inhuman magnitude,

universe of the charts and maps, is but a negligible part of ‘total reality,’ of that space-time continuum Einstein alone perceived.” Levy, Lovecraft, 52.  
106 “The references to Einstein are there merely to justify crudely and superficially an action whose purpose is the hazardous, hesitant exploration of the utter depths of the psyche. The reader must feel disoriented, lost, and powerless, and what better way to reach this end than to make him enter the thousand and one labyrinths of a delirium […] knowingly controlled? Only when the familiar setting collapses can the fantastic adventure begin.” Levy, Lovecraft, 53.  
107 “It is a well-known fact that disorder is at the very source of the fantastic. This suspension of natural laws can be manifested, as far as space is concerned, only by an alteration of perspective and proportion.” Ibid., 45. The “nightmarish” architectural illustrations of Giovanni Piranesi (1720–88) who, not coincidentally, was a favorite of Lovecraft, are a case in point.  
108 Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 117.
is not reducible to it: rather, the aesthetic truth, sublime, as a highly idiosyncratic instance of the judgment, lies with its transformative capacity of the cogito’s experience of perception.

An object is monstrous if by its size it destroys the purpose which constitutes the concept of it. But the mere presentation of a concept is called colossal, which is almost too great for any presentation (bordering on the relatively monstrous); because the purpose of the presentation of a concept is made hard [to carry out] by the intuition of the object being almost too great for our faculty of apprehension.109

If the monstrous object is of such magnitude (or otherness) as to be objectively irreducible to the unifying effect of judgment, then it is not properly an object of aesthetic experience as such — it signifies the outermost extremity of human comprehension and, thereby, remains inherently unassimilable. But whereas for Kant this represents a crisis of perception, and the end of intelligible aesthetic experience, for Lovecraft this is the entire point: the over-turning of anthropocentrism, the Holy Grail of cosmic horror, through the dramatic violence of alien confrontation and incomprehension. Cthulhu is the master-sign of the “Thing [that] cannot be described — there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.”110

In that sense, Lovecraft is actually much closer to the narrative intuitions of Chesterton than to the more formal philosophical speculations of Kant; compare, for example, Lovecraft’s trauma-

109 Ibid., 123. Compare this passage with Levy’s comment on the literary significance of Lovecraftian monstrosity: “To enter Lovecraft’s fantastic universe is to be brutally dislodged from the familiar, dispossessed of all criteria or systems of reference, violently thrown into an abnormal space amid beings of which the least one can say is that they transgress the common order. The monster plays no negligible role in this basic bewilderment; it surprises, it frightens, it shocks.” Levy, Lovecraft, 55. Both Lovecraft and Kant problematize the issue of scale in a decisive manner.

inducing portrayal of Cthulhu-as-the-nameless with the final description of Sunday offered by Chesterton’s protagonist Gabriel Syme:

As he gazed, the great face grew to an awful size, grew larger than the colossal mask of Memnon, which had made him scream as a child. It grew larger and larger, filling the whole sky; then everything went black. Only in the blackness before it entirely destroyed his brain he seemed to hear a distant voice saying a commonplace text that he had heard somewhere, “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?”

Cthulhu is not sublime in itself; rather, it is the brain-blasting encounter with the Wholly Other/Monster that gives rise to the subjective experience of the colossal within the witnesses. And it is here that Lovecraft inflicts his most decisive parodic twist of Kant: he treats the psychic trauma inflicted by the sublime with the alētheia furnished by the weird tale — and by the conspiracy narrative.

The popular resistance to the conspiratorial notion of governmental complicity in the terrorist massacres of 9/11 that so disoriented Scott is grounded at least as much on aesthetic principles as political or moral — as with the sunken cyclopean city of R’lyeh, the (para-)political geometry of the Deep State “is not right”; the dots of cognition cannot be connected by straight lines precisely because the curvature of space and time are “all wrong.” The signature parapolitical poetics of Scott and his emphasis upon the irrationality of the Dual State are strikingly psychoanalytical in nature, creating (perhaps deliberately) a series of meaningful associations: repression, denial, the unconscious, guilt, transference. Missing though, but synonymous with all of the above, is the notion of dream — precisely that which is the

111 Chesterton, The Man Who Was Thursday, 177.
112 For two well-received accounts of 9/11 as both a conspiratorial act of the Bush administration and a collective exercise in the traumatic inducement of cognitive dissonance, see Griffith, The New Pearl Harbor, and Griffith and Scott, 9/11 and American Empire.
sine non qua of the weird tale.113 Revealingly, “dream” in German is *Traum*, which evokes “trauma”; trauma, in turn, is etymologically derived from the Greek word for “wound,” a rupturing-by-force that serves as sign of combat and violence. If the essence of neurosis is conflict, then every act of repression is a self-inflicted wound; every dream that symbolically announces the presence of the repressed is a signifier of trauma. In terms of Kant’s aesthetic, 9/11, for example, may be considered a “sublime” event.

The effort, therefore, to receive in one single intuition a measure for magnitude that requires a considerable time to apprehend, is a kind of representation, which, subjectively considered, is contrary to [anthropocentric] purpose: but objectively, as requisite for the estimation of magnitude, it is purposive. Thus that very violence which is done to the subject through the Imagination is judged as purposive *in reference to the whole* determination of the mind. The quality of the feeling of the Sublime is that it is a feeling of pain in reference to the faculty by which we judge aesthetically of an object. […] The feeling of the Sublime is therefore a feeling of pain, arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetic estimation of magnitude formed by the Imagination and the estimation of the same formed by Reason.114

In studied contrast, the signature scream of the Lovecraftian protagonist is the traumatic “bodily” realization of the irretrievable loss of the transcendental unity of apperception; the phenomenological expression of the irreparable rupture of the synthetic unities of the faculties of perception.

113 “To our mind, the fantastic is born from the divorce produced between the perfect lucidity of the characters and the dream-images that they encounter. Lacking any more precise criteria, one could almost measure the fantastic by the *degree of consciousness* of the heroes on one side, and on the other the *intensity of the dream-images* that surround them.” Levy, Lovecraft, 13.
That was all. After that Johansen only brooded over the idol in his cabin and attended to a few matters for food for himself and the laughing maniac by his side. He did not try to navigate after the first bold flight, for the reaction [of witnessing the colossus that is Cthulhu] had taken something out of his soul. Then came the storm of April 2nd, and a gathering of the clouds about his consciousness. There is a sense of spectral whirling through liquid gulfs of infinity, of dizzying rides through reeling universes on a comet’s tail, and of hysterical plunges from the pit to the moon and from the moon back again to the pit, all livened by a cachinnating chorus of the distorted, hilarious elder gods and the green, bat-winged mocking imps of Tartarus.115

In this sense, we may consider the Lovecraftian text as a quintessential parody of both Kantian metaphysics and Kantian aesthetics: although the text clearly relies upon the strategic deployment of the unities of synthesis — the Lovecraftian protagonist is the veritable signifier of pure reason116 — the irreversible plunge of the narrator into either madness or suicidal despair works to ultimately frustrate the supremely humanistic objective of the Kantian theory of the sublime, which is the validation of the anthropocentric through the ultimately successful epistemic subjugation of the inhuman magnitude.117 Eternally barred from Kantian transcendence, Lovecraft’s fictional stand-ins are the apotheosis of abjection, defined by Julia Kristeva as existence “at the border of my condition as a living being […] when [the

115 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 156.
116 Harman collectively refers to them as “hardboiled rationalists,” which suggests a correlation with the hard-boiled detective that I want to explore in the final chapter. Harman, Weird Realism, 69.
117 See also Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 125–26: “[T]he irresistibility of [Nature’s] might, while making us recognize our own [physical] impotence, considered as beings of nature, discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of, and a superiority over, nature; on which is based a kind of self-preservation, entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature.” For Kant’s account of the “positive” sublime, see below.
‘I’] finds that the impossible constitutes its very being that it is none other than the abject.”118 I strongly agree with the argument put forward by Vivian Ralickas: the irredeemably abject condition of Lovecraft’s protagonists refutes Will’s hypothesis of Lovecraft’s subscription to the Kantian notion of the sublime. In my opinion, however, Lovecraft’s narrative deployment of the conceit of synthetic unity, albeit in a vulgar form, for purposes of achieving dramatic effect, constitutes a technical appropriation of the Kantian imaginary — even if only for the subversive purpose of parody.119 For what is wholly missing from Lovecraft is any acknowledgment of Kant’s notion of the “positive” sublime,120 the sensation of aesthetic pleasure incurred through the Subject’s (meta-)physical overcoming of the sublime object by subordinating it to the intellectual category of the concept; the “concept of an Object in general can be immediately combined with the perception of an object, combining its empirical predicates [e.g., magnitude], so as to form a cognitive judgment; and it is thus that a judgment of experience is produced.”121 This is a

118 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 3 and 5. For centrality of the abject to contemporary horror literature and cinema, see Cardin, “George Romero’s Living Dead Films as Contemplative Tools,” in Cardin, Dark Awakenings, 241–86. As Cardin convincingly argues, the seminal conceit of horror following Romero’s break-through film Night of the Living Dead (1968) is that the traditionally xenophobic “There’s something out there” has been supplanted by the contemporarily de-centering “There’s something inside me.” The revelation of the un-grounded nature of the self is the quintessential abject, meaning that at present the horror film is wholly Lovecraftian in nature, its two dominant concerns — serial murder (“the slasher film”) and cannibalism (“the meat movie”; “the zombie picture”) lurid filmic displays of abjection.

119 Ralickas, “Cosmic Horror.”

120 The Kantian sublime is a two-fold, or dualistic, sensation: “[T]his feeling consists of two contradictory sensations, pleasure and displeasure, ‘attraction’ and repulsion.” Lyotard, Lessons on the Analytic, 109.

121 Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 162. Hence, the “paradox” of the sublime as aesthetic judgment: “[T]he imagination does not contribute to pleasure through a free production of forms and aesthetic Ideas, but in its powerlessness to give form to the object.” Lyotard, Lessons on the Analytic, 99. See also ibid., 139–40: “Sublime feeling is aesthetic and, as such, only interests, among the powers of thought, the power of feeling pleasure or displeasure.”
form of pleasure and, therefore, an aesthetic sensation properly so called. What Kant identifies as “the regulative Idea of a finality of nature” serves, in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, “to introduce a validation of natural teleology,”\(^{122}\) precisely because the universality of the principle of judgment is itself “the principle of a teleology of nature for freedom”\(^{123}\) — the monstrous object might physically kill us, but we shall die as rationally and morally autonomous agents, which proves our ontological superiority to the Thing. Or, more precisely — mind is capable of recognizing that \textit{monstrum} is the true cause of our subjective feeling of the sublime which by itself re-assimilates the Thing into the “absolute of causality”; “What matters in the formulation of sublime feeling is the sensation that there is a cause to be fearful, a terror that corresponds to ‘this is frightening,’ that is, to a reflective judgment.”\(^{124}\) Man can never be de-centered by nature, but “because there is in our Imagination a striving towards infinite progress, and in our Reason a claim for absolute totality, regarded as a real Idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that Idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense, excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty.”\(^{125}\) In the Kantian view, “Great” Cthulhu should not truly frighten us if for no other reason than we can truly know him for what he is — a \textit{monstrum}, which can be reduced by the mind to nothing more than an extraordinarily large series of smaller mathematical (or spatial) units.\(^{126}\) And, by so doing, we are able to prove, literally, that the Thing’s sublimity is simply something that exists only in our mind. Hence the reason for Lovecraft’s compulsive deployment of the signature phrase “brain-blasting”: with the wholesale annihilation of the synthetic \textit{a priori}, the conditional reassertion of the restorative anthropocentrism promised by Kant\(^{127}\)

\(^{122}\) Lyotard, \textit{Lessons on the Analytic}, 1.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 139.


\(^{126}\) Lyotard, \textit{Lessons on the Analytic}, 112.

\(^{127}\) The regulative Idea of the teleological finality of nature — a quintessentially anti-Lovecraftian concept — serves as the sought-after “bridge” between the
can be eternally preempted. In an equally unconditional manner, Lovecraft repudiates Burke’s more visceral version of the positive sublime, which induces a rehabilitative effect on both body and mind.

Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in [the] relaxed state of the body. The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labor; and labor is a surmounting of difficulties, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in everything but degree. Labor is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs in a state fit for their functions, but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination, and perhaps the other mental powers act.

Terror serves as a precondition for a type of exercise, the exertion of somatic and psychic functions harmonized through the overcoming, either in fact or in imagination, of danger.

Now, as a due exercise is essential to the coarse muscular parts of the constitution, and that without this routinizing they would become languid, and diseased, the very same rule holds with regard to those finer parts we have mentioned; to

theoretical and the practical, “spanning the gulf previously created between the objects of knowledge according to the conditions of possible experience and the realization of freedom under the unconditional of moral law.” Ibid., 1.

In his own reading of Kant, Lyotard has provided a philosophically formal exposition that accords remarkably well with the adolescent but emotionally effective Lovecraftian brain-blasting: the dramatic encounter with the un-nameable object “reveals the degree to which the union of faculties is precarious, almost lost — this is the component of anguish in this feeling. The ‘aptitude’ for Ideas of reason must be developed in order for this perspective of unity to reemerge from the disaster and, to say it simply, for the sublime feeling [i.e., a proper aesthetic sensation] to be possible.” Ibid., 25.

Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 255. Emphases in the original.

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129 Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 255. Emphases in the original.
have them in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree.130

Disease, unfortunately, is the hallmark of inhabiting a landscape of an obliterating cosmic disinterestism. As with Kant, so with Burke; Lovecraft’s implacable literary sense must drive him to the uncompromising negation of any potential grounds for the reconciliation of Man with Nature: abjection is the only “sentiment” that Lovecraft can maintain with full artistic consistency. Not surprisingly, then, by the end of the tale, Thurston is clearly in an abject state: “I suppose that only a single mountain-top, the hideous monolith-crowned citadel whereon great Cthulhu was buried, actually emerged from the waters. When I think of the extent of all that may be brooding down there I almost wish to kill myself forthwith.”131 Presumably he does so; the story we are reading is taken from the papers of the only recently “late” Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston, his uncle, Professor Angell, having been previously killed during a fatal but clandestine encounter with members of the New Orleans branch of the cult.132 The subjective experience of the monstrous has yielded Thurston an abject—that is, incommunicable—sensation of pain and wound.

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. […] 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.133

130 Ibid., 256.
131 Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” 156.
132 Ibid., 145.
133 Ibid., 157.
In other words, both Thurston and Angell have aesthetically migrated from the domain of the para-sublime to that of the wholly grotesque.