

Spectres of Darwin: H. P. Lovecraft's Nihilistic Parody of Religion

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

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Introduction

Thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions. (Job 7:14)

The posthumous critical reception of the works of H. P. Lovecraft has been troubled. For the better part of a century, conservative academics ignored Lovecraft, or at best worried (perhaps understandably so) that to admit a writer like Lovecraft into the Western literary canon would be to admit a barrage of inferior genre-writers, with the result that the distinction between Shakespeare and the latest best-selling hack would be unjustifiably (and indeed ridiculously) obscured. Lovecraft's extra-academic success has in a very real sense sown the seeds of his critical neglect. Yet literary critics ignored Lovecraft at their own peril, paving the way by their silence for what can only be described as a critical coup by leading Lovecraft authority S. T. Joshi, who has over the course of the last quarter-century brought Lovecraft into the limelight of critical respectability. Joshi's impressive career as a freelance literary critic, scholar and editor makes the one-time critical vacuum surrounding the works of Lovecraft all the more surprising. Joshi's 1997 biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, was praised by Joyce Carol Oates and Harold Bloom, and Joshi issued the first Penguin Classics edition of Lovecraft's work two years later. Subsequently comparisons have been made between Lovecraft and more canonically accepted authors (most obviously Poe, the great American influence on Lovecraft, but also Kafka and Conrad), while the very existence of Jorge Luis Borges' Lovecraft-tribute tale, "There Are More Things," attests to the appreciation of Lovecraft by a modern author whose critical estimation could hardly be higher. The controversial French novelist Michel Houellebecq recently had a book entirely on the subject of Lovecraft translated (*H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, 2005). These developments make it clear that one need not be an uncritical populist (such as Colin Wilson, one of the earliest critics to treat Lovecraft seriously, was supposed to be) in order to assess Lovecraft's works. One can maintain the traditional notion of an intellectual-literary hierarchy (a notion Lovecraft defended all his life) and still appreciate Lovecraft's stories; one need not privilege popular culture over literary tradition as a suitable matter for critical examination in order to advocate the study of Lovecraft. In

short, it ought to be clear by now that it is a legitimate project to approach the works of H. P. Lovecraft as literature.

Lovecraft is indeed receiving attention, but this is not merely because of the critical liberation of his works. Lovecraft's unique vision of existential horror speaks directly to the current western intellectual situation, particularly the popular conflict between certain versions of monotheistic religion and the scientific concept of evolution playing out in America and elsewhere. Without Darwin's concept of evolution, Lovecraft's fiction would be thematically unrecognizable; his obsessive fears of human degeneration or reverse-evolution (seen in 1923's "The Rats in the Walls"), subhuman biological beings nevertheless stronger than humanity (in 1917's "Dagon") and the influence of the latter over the former (in 1931's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth") all stem from his interpretation of Darwin.

When Darwin finally unveiled his discoveries in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he became the reluctant initiator of what may fairly be termed a colossal revolution in human thought.¹ Kenneth C. Waters, for example, writes that "the *Origin* elicited a more dramatic shift of thought than that brought about by any scientific treatise of the Victorian or perhaps any era" (117). In the first part of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin argued for natural selection by analogy with artificial selection, an uncontested phenomenon which has led to the rise of all domestic species. According to Darwin, natural selection reflected the fact that nature allowed for different rates of reproduction between differing organisms, just as humans did when breeding animals. The environment exerted pressure on populations, thus resulting in the selection of the best-adapted to current conditions (Hodge 62). This would influence the population, as unsuccessful organisms died without leaving offspring, and successful organisms reproduced more often, leaving more descendants. Prior to Darwin, most biologists felt that adaptation within species had fixed limits (Waters 117), but Darwin proposed that adaptation itself produced species, and that all species could be traced back through time to a single ancestor (Hodge and Radick 3).

¹ In support of the strong wording of this description I cite retired Oxford biologist and public intellectual Richard Dawkins, a contributing expert to the modern understanding of evolution as well as an expert on Darwin himself.

Darwin later explored the biological basis of human traits in *The Descent of Man* (1871), in which he showed that three of those things which humans take for evidence of a “divine spark” in humanity – the intellect (Richards 107), the emotions (111), and morality (99) – are derived from evolutionary development. Darwin also explained the human sense of beauty in these terms with the theory of sexual selection, showing that human beauty served no purpose in itself but was instead related to mate-attraction, like the peacock’s tail (Endersby 69). He gave the example of early human tribes in which the most vigorous men would become chiefs and choose the women they considered most beautiful (Endersby 84). The offspring inherited their parents’ biological template for beauty as well as their “beautiful” attributes. Many persons during Darwin’s time found this “scientific reduction” of prized human qualities emotionally unacceptable.

This is directly relevant to a reading of Lovecraft because he too finds evolution disturbing, both physically (in what he sees as its unveiling of the possibility of human degeneration) and metaphysically (in what he takes to be its implication of materialism, specifically scientific reductionism). These two terms require further explanation before moving on to further analysis. Joshi describes Lovecraft’s materialism as a lifelong adherence to three principles laid out by Hugh Eliot in *Modern Science and Materialism* (1919), which Joshi paraphrases as follows:

- 1). The uniformity of law.
- 2). The denial of teleology.
- 3). The denial of any form of existence other than those envisaged by physics and chemistry, that is to say, other existences that have some kind of palpable material characteristics and quantities. (“Decline” 7)

Joshi adds that Lovecraft felt “that even the revolutionary findings of relativity and quantum theory did not upset them in essence” (7).² This leads directly into the issue of scientific reductionism, which is largely the assertion that as inquiry into a given area increases in sophistication, power, and accuracy, explanations become increasingly reliant on “lower” phenomenon: psychology relies on biology, biology relies on chemistry, chemistry relies on physics, and so forth. This notoriously leaves no room for

² Joshi adds immediately after this passage, “Insofar as a definitive judgment can be passed on the matter, it can be said that Lovecraft is right.” Harris, Dawkins and Dennett, listed in the bibliography, would agree.

vitalistic conceptions of human life, and it has lead many intellectuals (including most of the Spiritual Reactionaries, but being by no means limited to them) to reject scientific reductionism as a deterministic, mechanistic, and even nihilistic enterprise. In “Darwinian Concepts in the Philosophy of Mind,” Kim Sterneley summarizes scientific reductionism (and its psychologically unsettling implications) thus:

Human beings are part of nature. We are primates, mammals, animals. Animals, in turn, are nothing but very complex biochemical systems. So humans are biochemical machines, though extraordinarily complex ones. That complexity ensures that it will rarely be practically possible to predict future human behavior, or explain past human behaviour, through a fine-grained molecular understanding of human bodies. But, in principle, a detailed enough understanding of the physical and chemical processes internal to an agent would suffice to predict and explain all of that agent’s behaviour. A full list of the complete physical, natural facts about an agent is all the facts there are. (288)

For Lovecraft and other thinkers such as Dostoevsky (and perhaps even Nietzsche), a worldview of materialism equates to scientific reductionism, with an attendant denial of free will, vitalistic life forces, immaterial spirits, and so forth. Lovecraft’s materialism, derived in part from his understanding of Darwinian evolution, is well-known; even critics who disagree with this materialism, such as Wilson, admit that his work expresses it. While Lovecraft believes that Darwin destroyed the credibility of religious worldviews (and indeed any worldview other than a materialist one) he intellectually appreciates Darwin’s discoveries, he simultaneously laments the loss of what he considers the emotionally attractive illusions of past ages. In illustrating this point regarding Darwin and scientific reductionism more generally, Lovecraft writes, “Modern science has, in the end, proved an enemy to art and pleasure; for by revealing to us the *whole* sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts, it has stripped the world of glamour, wonder, and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated” (Joshi, “Decline” 91). Thus Lovecraft illustrates that he is as a writer uniquely caught between what he sees as the objective but dissatisfying world of twentieth-century scientific knowledge, and the attractive but intellectually discredited world of western cultural and literary tradition.

Although Darwin gradually lost faith in Christianity over the course of his life, almost all of his predecessors – Lyell, Lamarck, even Malthus – and many of his contemporaries, particularly Wallace, were adherents of some form of religion. Lamarck's concept of animals willingly changing their natures preserves the notion of free will and even the idea of the domination by spirit over body. Lyell had previously challenged Lamarck, arguing that on Lamarck's view man would be categorized as no different from the animals (Hodge 64), meaning this as a challenge to Lamarck to reform his theory. Malthus, himself a theist, with his focus on overpopulation, starvation, and extinction, does not strike a modern observer as a man arguing for wise design and divine mercy. Upon the publication of Darwin's theories, Lyell wrote to Darwin to protest that "The dignity of man is at stake" (Desmond and Moore 475). Yet Lyell, also a theist, contradicted scriptural accounts of the age of the earth with his concept of deep time, based on his famous principle of uniformitarianism. And Wallace, who wrote to Lyell to refute his assertion that there was a divine gap between humans and animals, himself believed in spiritualism (Richards 103). It was only when all of these ideas – Lamarck's transmutation, Lyell's uniformitarianism, Malthus' population pressure – met together in Darwin's thought that a religious understanding of reality became very difficult to justify. Contemporary observers were led to ask what sort of divine design could be based on mindless competition with the inevitable result of eventual extinction regardless of how effectively a given species adapts. Contra religious views, Darwin's explanations of evolution implied a universe indifferent toward humanity and indeed all life. The point is here explained eloquently by Richard Dawkins:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt,

other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference (Dawkins 85).

For Lovecraft, a proper understanding of Darwin's scientific work requires the acceptance of materialism. The fact that many people continued to believe against all evidence that Darwin's theory of evolution was false because it contradicted the biblical account of creation (recall that the Scopes Trial was held in 1926) was for Lovecraft evidence of an irrepressible and dangerous irrationality inherent in humanity. Indeed, Lovecraft's disdain for popular irrationality led him to oppose democracy itself. According to Lovecraft's elitist worldview, only those who have tempered their inherent irrationality with critical thinking and intellectual cultivation are qualified to make political decisions. This is part of the reason for Lovecraft's support for aristocracy (alongside his cultural conservatism, discussed shortly). Lovecraft even felt that civilization itself was endangered by popular irrationality, and often expressed pessimistic visions of the future in both his letters and his fiction. In the fiction, this concern is represented when the bestial masses (sometimes foreign immigrants, other times American "white trash" – Lovecraft used this term) drag down and corrupt sophisticated Anglo-Saxon American aristocrats.

S. T. Joshi's *H. P. Lovecraft and the Decline Of The West* (1990), a full-length critical study dedicated to this theme, explains Lovecraft's fear of western and specifically American cultural decline. In Lovecraft's view, this is caused by immigration (which floods America with uneducated persons), democracy (which empowers the masses politically), and capitalism (which Lovecraft sees as contaminating western culture through the excessive influence of the uneducated) (137). The dystopian end result for Lovecraft was ultimately the collapse of high culture and human reason since he viewed humanity as a whole as having undergone a sort of reverse-evolution, initiating a new dark age.

Lovecraft's cultural views were highly conservative. He often stated that he was born too late; a few brief biographical facts help to explain this outlook. Lovecraft was born in 1890 to a family that prided itself on its aristocratic roots. He was a child prodigy,

devouring classical literature, but he became sullen and reclusive when his family was plunged into poverty and forced to sell their Victorian home. The displacement of traditional Western high culture by twentieth-century economic, social and cultural reality came to occupy a central place in his thought and fiction, and he became an avowed antiquarian. Lovecraft's social and cultural ideal was seventeenth-century New England, which he viewed as the most developed phase of an aristocratic, mainly agricultural civilization prior to the destructive onset of the industrial revolution. He often contrasted this state of society, marked by what he saw as a calm, rational and civilized existence, with his own moment of capitalist frenzy and cultural and political corruption. Contemptuous of America's uneducated masses, he viewed himself as a defender of high culture, and looked back to aristocracy and cultural tradition.

In *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* (1999), Joshi explains Lovecraft's disdain for modern mass culture thus: "In a capitalistic democracy whose citizens are on the whole poorly educated but capable of influencing the production of art by their sheer numbers and their purchasing power, there will inevitably result a cleavage between 'high' and 'low' art, with the latter dominating the market and the available resources of the mass of society" (39). Lovecraft saw the culture of his own time as a double-edged assault on the western tradition; on the one hand, capitalism's influence over culture and its mass-market appeal flooded society with disposable cultural detritus, and on the other hand the modernists rejected the past and advanced an agenda of aesthetic experimentation. As Joshi notes in *Primal Sources: Essays on H. P. Lovecraft* (2003), Lovecraft had little liking for this type of culture:

Lovecraft's disapproval of the general radical trend of modern literature – particularly its abandonment of traditional form and its excessive dwelling on the day-to-day realities of mundane life – comes out frequently in both early and late fiction. "Celephais" (1920) provides perhaps the first example, and pungent remarks are made about modern writers who "strove to strip from life its embroidered robes of myth, and to shew in naked ugliness the foul thing that is reality" (D 83). This theme is refined in "Azathoth" (1922), where we find that "learning stripped earth of her mantle of beauty, and poets sang no more save of twisted phantoms seen with bleared and inward-looking eyes." (D 357) [...]

[This] remark was made just before Lovecraft read the most celebrated and revolutionary of modern poems, *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot[...] The parody "Waste Paper" probably dates to about this time. (133)

As Joshi's quotation of Lovecraft from "Celephais" makes clear, Lovecraft's cultural conservatism is particularly interesting given his acceptance of a strict form of materialism. Reactionary views on politics and aesthetics such as Lovecraft's are more normally accompanied by similarly conservative views on metaphysics (that is to say, a religious denial of scientific reductionism). For Lovecraft however, it is important to overcome one's own emotional biases and follow the evidence wherever it leads, even though this means that traditional ideas have, in fact, been overthrown by mechanization, materialism, and Darwin. Yet Lovecraft still disagrees that this means that traditional aesthetics should likewise be discarded. Describing himself as "a complete sceptic and a thorough conservative at the same time" (Joshi, "Decline" 38), Lovecraft holds that the cultural value of tradition was aesthetically self-evident; that is, he uses the conservative canonical "great texts" argument (perhaps one of the reasons for his appeal to Harold Bloom). In order to explain what he sees as the purely aesthetic perseverance of the western tradition even if its buttressing worldview has lost some of its force, Lovecraft writes: "I believe I am firmly sound in holding the *forms* of antiquity to be more truly capable of preservation than the *beliefs*" (Joshi, "Decline" 38). For Lovecraft, knowledge of the truth shifts with current scientific evidence, but the experience of beauty relies on aesthetic achievements that are much more timeless. Dante and Milton (whom Lovecraft references in his first major story, 1917's "Dagon") can be made philosophically, but never aesthetically, obsolete.

As a nostalgic pessimist, Lovecraft laments the loss of the pre-Darwinian ideas that inspired the western tradition. He repeatedly presents in his fiction situations in which a western-educated major character resembling him is forced to confront the meaninglessness of the universe personified in metaphysical monsters, and finds the experience traumatic. This mirrors Lovecraft's own disappointed transition from the naïve enjoyment of the classical and literary world of his youth to his later understanding of scientific reductionism through evolution and materialism. The fact that much of the literature comprising the Western tradition, prior to what Lovecraft considered the

emergence of vulgar nineteenth-century bourgeois realism, depicts events entirely improbable or wholly impossible from a scientific perspective certainly contradicts Lovecraft's scientific outlook. However, it is absolutely consistent with his literary preferences. Lovecraft's interest in a form of literature which depicts transcendence of the laws of space and time is explained by the author himself in his landmark survey essay "Supernatural Horror In Literature" (1927), and this theme is been continued by Joshi in his genre study *The Weird Tale* (1994) and its sequels.

Lovecraft, a connoisseur of what he called the weird tale, seeks to create works of this kind himself. He creates the illusion of events that transcend the laws of space or time by his adherence to a documentary style that mixes history, science, and legend with ideas of his own invention. Only by making it clear that these events are occurring in the "real" world rather than the unreal world of some fable can Lovecraft create the impression that the laws of time and space are actually being transcended. It is noteworthy Lovecraft should desire to create such an illusion, and to do so repeatedly. This shows that Lovecraft's psychology is dominated by an impulse toward transcendent experiences perhaps similar to that found in religious persons. Indeed, like many a religious believer Lovecraft has little emotional attraction to the belief that scientific reductionism provides the only credible description of reality; the religious notion of a "higher" nonphysical world, absent of all the things he despises (capitalism, sex and the body, loud noise, urban chaos, technological frenzy, advertising) certainly appeals to him emotionally. Despite the deep appeal of non-rational forms of culture (such as mythology) to Lovecraft, he could not believe that any of this reflected anything other than inventions of the human mind.

While critics have acknowledged the significance of Lovecraft's depiction of transcendent experiences in his fiction, there has been little commentary on the psychology behind it, aside from Wilson's early judgment of Lovecraft's commitment to this aesthetic as the escapism of a psychologically damaged recluse. In response to the rather mythical misanthropic image that has grown up around the man himself (in large part due to the interpretation of Wilson, who classifies Lovecraft among a tradition of "romantic outsiders" doomed by their own pessimism), Joshi presents Lovecraft as a basically rational and even friendly (if reserved) person. Lovecraft travelled more than is

generally recognized, to be sure. However, there is no denying that Lovecraft lived a relatively monastic existence: a reclusive autodidact, he was well acquainted with solitude, and he derived a great deal of his human contact through reading – letters (of which he wrote up to 100,000), and of course the similar experiences of solitude described by writers long dead (the Romantic poets, Poe, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in translation).

Wilson's criticism of Lovecraft's style of transcendental psychology is perhaps based on Nietzsche's condemnation of the religious impulse as weak-minded escapism. However, even if one accepts the view that art depicting transcendence is indeed based on an escapist religious impulse, Lovecraft saw (based on his own experience and on the persistence of popular belief in religious claims) that this impulse was ineradicable. In fact, a retreat into the focus on individual psychological experience in the face of scientific laws is characteristic not only of Lovecraft but also of those who condemn it in him: Wilson and Nietzsche are ironically both despisers of scientific reductionism, and are thus far closer in their personal beliefs to actually endorsing vitalism. If the external world was, due to cultural, economic, social, scientific changes, becoming increasingly distasteful to those of a romantic disposition (a group which broadly includes Nietzsche, Lovecraft, and Wilson), a focus instead on the areas these things have not (yet) touched – cultural tradition, subjective experience – begins to make psychological sense.

An intellectual acceptance (and yet emotional repulsion from) Darwin's theory of evolution, disappointment with the illusions lost by commitment to a scientifically materialist worldview, political anti-democracy, cultural conservatism, and psychological transcendentalism – together constitute a sort of "Five Pillars" of Lovecraft's worldview, and all five inform his fiction. Lovecraft inherited these specific concerns from late-nineteenth century reactions to changing cultural, economic, social, and scientific conditions. Prior to explaining what, exactly, it is that Lovecraft supports fictionally on these "Five Pillars", I will explain the intellectual legacy bequeathed to Lovecraft by late nineteenth century thinkers who grappled with the same issues he did.

As historians have coined terms such as "Second Imperialism" and "Second Industrial Revolution" in discussions of the nineteenth century, W. Warren Wagar uses the term "Second Enlightenment" to designate the second half of the nineteenth century

(5), especially those of its aspects touched by the discoveries of Darwin (see also Hodge 65). He then argues that this "Enlightenment" provoked a neo-romantic literary movement, or a "Second Romanticism" (5). With his statement about these latter Romantic writers, Wagar could also easily be describing Lovecraft:

These neoromanticists are as difficult to classify as the romanticists before them: what they exhibit in common [...] is a distaste for the rational and commonplace. They were nearly all spiritual aristocrats, afflicted with nostalgia, pessimism, and anxiety about crime and death... They rebelled against the "facts" of science and the "bourgeois" gospel of automatic progress. They were interested in inner truths, in psychology and religion. They preferred the vital and organic to the physical and mechanical. (7)

Yet the term "neoromanticist" is not appropriate for these thinkers, for it implies a common aesthetic when what they really shared was instead an attitude, an orientation towards the world. Instead, I propose the term "Spiritual Reactionaries" to designate these various "romantics." The Spiritual Reactionaries focused on subjective experience; they attempted to find a way to defeat scientific reductionism, which they saw as nihilism. Lovecraft underwent the same intense search as spiritual reactionaries such as Nietzsche and Dostoevsky did, but he came to the conclusion that scientific reductionism (which he agreed was equivalent to nihilism) was in fact the only credible description of reality. To put it less formally, Lovecraft was the last "Spiritual Reactionary," and he conceded defeat in this intellectual tradition's struggle against the nihilistic.

This acceptance of nihilism, against his own inclinations, fuelled Lovecraft's disdain for those who, carrying out the search with less intelligence or integrity, concluded otherwise. Due to the very similarity between his particular desire for transcendence and that of religious persons, Lovecraft came to feel a strong disdain for religion, especially monotheism. His intense bitterness toward religion resulted from empathy and envy. He condemned religion for committing what was for him the ultimate lapse into emotional temptation at the expense of intellectual integrity – the delusional comfort of anthropomorphism. Lovecraft understood the seductive power of religious thinking; at its centre he recognized a metaphysics which could condemn the physical world that he found banal and repulsive, console him for his worldly failures, and

applaud him for his ideals. For Lovecraft, then, a lack of integrity allowed other individuals to entertain seriously delusions that he himself found tempting.

Lovecraft spent a great deal of time considering the topics of religion and mythology. In explaining his view of the dawn of religious thinking, Lovecraft argues that religions have their origins in dreams (Joshi, "Decline" 25). Many of his stories are inspired by his own nightmares, so many that Lovecraft himself can be considered a sort of inverse religious visionary. The ancient superstition that dreams reflect "another reality" fascinates him. Within Lovecraft's fictional world, the notion that dreams reflect a literal reality merely remote in time or space (or sometimes so remote as to be an entirely different plane of existence) from the general waking human experience is most assuredly true. While the philosophical framework of much of Lovecraft's work is conventionally regarded as science fictional, the presence of dream visions throughout Lovecraft's work makes this view problematic. Many of Lovecraft's protagonists experience nightmares (often caused by "gods") containing new information regarding events remote from them in time and space, information which is later verified as accurate. I propose that the Lovecraft's consistent use of dream visions to provide accurate (within the context of the fiction) physical (and metaphysical) information throughout his stories implies a conceptual unity based on his view of religious thinking, one which challenges conventional interpretations of his work.

Joshi's work lies at the center of a critical orthodoxy regarding the genres and themes of Lovecraft's stories based mainly on the differing existential explanations Lovecraft provides for the abnormal phenomena in his fiction. Joshi has termed "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) a watershed in Lovecraft's fiction, marking his transition from a supernaturalism influenced by Poe, Dunsany and others, to materialism, in which every abnormal element present is explicitly or implicitly justified through science fiction. While there is no debate that H.P. Lovecraft was a materialist, Joshi's statement that "There is never an entity in Lovecraft that is not in some fashion material" ("Weird Tale" 186) places him at a loss to account for the very *call* of Cthulhu (a dream-vision), and dream-visions in Lovecraft more generally. Lovecraft's dream-visions are neither an intrusion of supernaturalism into a realm of science fiction nor a mere literary device. While Lovecraft certainly did invent increasingly elaborate scientific justifications for the

abnormal elements in his stories as he progressed through his fiction-writing career, it is difficult to argue that the point of these explanations is to imply that reality actually makes sense in any way meaningful to humans or indeed to any civilization, no matter how advanced (as Lovecraft's final stories of extraterrestrial scientists show). A major argument behind Lovecraft's fiction is that intelligence exists in the context of a struggle it can only lose, and this contradicts the notion that any type of science could, at least in theory, explain the nature of Lovecraft's transcendent entities and events. In fact, it is the science-fiction justifications themselves – the foundation of an interpretation of Lovecraft's stories as science fiction – which are the mere literary devices, and the dream-visions which form his fiction's philosophical core. Scientific justifications merely serve to allow Lovecraft's readers (who are, after all, living in an age of science) to suspend their disbelief.

It is not scientific materialism, with its notion that a meticulous application of reason will discover explanations which cause existence to make sense to humans, which triumphs in Lovecraft's fiction. Instead, Lovecraft catapults his readers past the limits of scientific knowledge and into a world of religious thinking in which the laws science discovers are at best local and temporary, while inexplicable entities not bound by any human concepts of logic dwarf the very project of scientific understanding. In what follows I propose offering a reading of Lovecraft's work that accounts for the materialism which Joshi and others argue is the crux of Lovecraft's worldview, but which nevertheless stresses the primacy of the author's nihilism.

Scientific materialism and religious thinking were utterly opposed in Lovecraft's opinion, yet the foundational principle of Lovecraft's fiction is that major features characteristic of human religions are in some sense *true*. Consider the following list of features in his works: The sanctity of temples and holy places; the correspondence of dreams, visions, prophecies and omens to reality; the practice of spells and sacrifices; supernaturally inspired books containing information about deities; out of body experience, possession, and remote viewing; the effective practice of rituals, invocations and conjurations. In designing his fiction, Lovecraft *begins* with a cosmos that science has shown not to be anthropocentric (and one which he interprets as nihilistic), and *then* presents as true many features of religion that rely on explicitly non-materialistic

premises. This discredits the idea that Lovecraft's materialism directly informs his fiction. Instead, Lovecraft (like his Spiritual Reactionary predecessors) interprets the meaning of scientific reductionism and materialism to be nihilism, and then presents this nihilism as the philosophical foundation of his fiction, the basic premise in light of which all else must be explained.

Lovecraft's fiction presents readers with a "spirit world" that actually exists but that has as little concern for humanity as the materialistic world described by scientific reductionists (recall Dawkins' statement regarding the indifferent cruelty of evolution, every aspect of which was implicit in Darwin's original theories). For Lovecraft, nihilism must be as accurate a description of any possible metaphysical "spirit world" as it is of the physical one; that is to say, both sorts of world may only be considered in nihilistic terms. In Lovecraft's fiction, humans have naively anthropomorphized this "spirit world," resulting in earth's anthropocentric religions, just as they have anthropomorphized the physical world by projecting humanistic explanations onto natural phenomena (myths typically attribute the states of nature to the actions of anthropomorphic agents). Yet in Lovecraft's fiction, humanistic religious interpretations of this "spirit world" resemble the actual reality as much as human mythical interpretations of the origin and nature of life resemble evolution: that is to say hardly at all. For Lovecraft, to anthropomorphize anything at all is to engage in futile wishful thinking, and therefore it is actually better that the metaphysical, non-materialistic premises of religions are not true; for if they were, humanity would be subject to the "spiritual" equivalents of the predators, parasites, viruses, and diseases which have plagued it throughout evolutionary history. Proceeding from this view, Lovecraft recasts religious ideas for readers equipped with an evolutionary worldview.

Considered most broadly, Lovecraft's work may be understood as parodic. His fiction portrays events which transcend the laws of space and time, and which confirm in the process abstract and absurd ancient doctrines about incomprehensible deities. Lovecraft means for this to make the notion of miracles, that central feature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the one that trespasses most overtly on the territory of science, look ridiculous. For Lovecraft, such a parody also discredits the theology (the most sophisticated form of religious thinking) which is, ultimately, founded on the notion that

at a certain point in human history, one or more beings utterly beyond any possible scientific understanding, intervened in the world in a way which would explicitly violate what scientists believe they know about the way the world works. Forced by his own honesty to accept a scientific view of the universe in which human hopes play no determining part, Lovecraft crafts a literary concession to the things he fears most and presents a mockery of those whose fear forces them to delude themselves regarding the nature of reality. Atop the five pillars of his worldview, Lovecraft places a deeply personal philosophical mockery of religious thinking. The establishment of a nihilistic spiritual dimension, expressed through an extended parody of religion, is the major message and crowning achievement of Lovecraft's fiction considered as a whole.

Chapter 1: Lovecraft's Nietzscheanism and Nihilism

Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. (Luke 12:7)

A western reactionary tradition beginning with Burke, running through Carlyle, and terminating with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche informed Lovecraft's worldview. The common thread running through this tradition is the argument that only tradition can make life seem intelligible or worthwhile. Lovecraft agreed with this argument wholeheartedly, and he nurtured the same political, psychological and philosophical sympathies as his nineteenth-century "spiritual reactionary" forebears, especially Nietzsche. Yet though Nietzsche was a major influence on Lovecraft,³ Lovecraft departed from Nietzsche's analytical outlook through his incorporation into his work of a more advanced understanding of science.

In forming his philosophical worldview, Lovecraft follows the implications of materialism and arrives at atheism before moving on towards a kind of scientific reductionism, a move that Nietzsche, whose atheism was of a very different kind, was unwilling to make. Lovecraft concludes that scientific reductionism is equivalent to nihilism. For Lovecraft, human values are not only without conceptual foundations (as Nietzsche agreed) they are actually nothing more than objectively meaningless technical phenomena wholly circumscribed by the physical minds of individuals. Lovecraft's view of nihilism contains his chief repudiation of Nietzsche, and it is this outlook that forms the foundation of Lovecraft's fiction as well the main object of analysis in this chapter.

In works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche develops a focus on psychology which provides the basis for his criticism of western culture. Aligning himself with a certain type of skepticism, Nietzsche expresses a damning rejection of metaphysical claims and of metaphysics itself. For Nietzsche, metaphysics is simply an ideological projection of biases onto reality, expressed through purely linguistic claims which mistake internal consistency for universal external truth. In contrast, Nietzsche proposes that all subjects be viewed

³ Lovecraft adopted Nietzsche's cultural elitism, disdain for capitalism, rejection of metaphysics and supernaturalism, appreciation for the Greeks, hatred of democracy, and fascination with mythology.

through the filter of human psychology, so that thinkers may become aware of their own biases and limitations. In a parody of metaphysical thinking, Nietzsche writes “the things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* origin - they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the ‘thing-in-itself’ - there must be their basis, and nowhere else” (“Beyond” 200). Such a view, Nietzsche argues, amounts to a bias against life and ultimately a rejection of reality.

In his explanation for the existence of metaphysics, Nietzsche proposes that human reason naturally commits the error of believing that because it is unlike much of the natural (or “lower”) world, it must have been derived from a “higher” world: “we must have been divine, *for* we have reason!” (“Idols” 483). As intuitively plausible as it is for a rational animal to believe that its rationality derives from a greater rationality, this belief can no longer be intellectually acceptable after Darwin, who showed in *The Descent of Man* that human rationality arose from non-rationality. This transforms the “Will to Truth” (including presumably that which drives Nietzsche) from an elite privilege (seeing past the illusion of the apparent world and into a higher metaphysical one) to a mere eccentricity (engaging in abstract logic games which construct fictions rather than discover facts). Nietzsche makes his awareness of this fact clear with characteristic humour: “A curiosity of my type remains after all the most agreeable of all vices - sorry, I meant to say: the love of truth has its reward in heaven and even on earth” (“Beyond” 250). Nietzsche argues that this “Will to Truth” is actually a form of escapism or a “Will to Abstraction”: “Away with the body [...] disfigured by all the fallacies of logic, refuted, even impossible, although it is impudent enough to behave as if it were real!” (“Idols” 480) Nietzsche takes offense here at what he sees as escapist hypocrisy cloaking itself in the robes of received wisdom and objective authority.

Science provides tentative knowledge by making successive discoveries, essentially by building theories from the bottom up. Western religion, on the other hand, relies on the notion of theological revelation, which purports to receive non-tentative knowledge from the top down. Nietzsche recognizes in the increasing influence of science over the culture of his time the loss of a metaphysical guarantor of absolute truth, so that truth can only ever be tentative. Displaying what is often considered a prophetic

vision of cultural instability, Nietzsche argues that this new loss of certainty and conviction threatens the traditional foundations of western religion, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Nietzsche's much-repeated (and oft-misinterpreted) statement, God is Dead, is a diagnosis of his own culture as an empty shell surviving only by inertia. In short, for Nietzsche the core of western civilization had already become nihilism; and he argues that it is only a matter of time before others recognize this (and presumably react violently).⁴ In response to criticism that Nietzsche hastens this destructive realization by publishing works which place the problem on the centre stage, Walter Kaufmann defends the productivity of Nietzsche's ideas by arguing that "to overcome nihilism, we must first of all recognize it" (110).

Upon rejecting metaphysics, universalism, and the abstract notion of truth that marks both, Nietzsche embraces a form of pragmatic relativism. This relativism becomes clear in statements such as "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena" (1886, 275), and "*there are altogether no moral facts*" (1888, 501). Nietzsche claims that every worldview is in some way mythical, and that objective truth is impossible. Hence: "It is *we* alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed "in itself," we act once more as we have always acted – *mythologically*" ("Beyond" 219). Given this relativistic understanding, Nietzsche defines nihilism as the inability to find meaning in life, a sort of cultural sickness created by modern conditions, especially the death of metaphysics without the advent of anything to replace it. While Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics (for him a broad category including religion, philosophy, artistic movements and political ideologies) is complex and can at times seem contradictory, the account I have provided of this criticism is accurate enough to allow me to proceed with an examination of Nietzsche's attempt to defeat nihilism, and of the influence of that attempt on Lovecraft.

Nietzsche's endorsement of a hierarchical elitism is tied to his assessment of the problem of nihilism. Nietzsche attempts to rebuild the notion of the unique worth of

⁴ If one reads the early twentieth century appeal of Fascism and Communism as providing lost moral certainties and the image of dramatic struggles between good and evil in place of equivalent religious features left behind by nineteenth century "progress," Nietzsche's views seem prophetic indeed.

humanity after the collapse of metaphysical support for this view, and arrives at the conclusion that only some humans have unique worth. Lovecraft, rejecting Nietzsche's pragmatic psychological relativism for a scientific reductionism which aims at objectivity, argues that no human has any objective worth whatsoever; yet he still follows (as a matter of personal preference) Nietzsche's notion of a hierarchical elitism of human worth, arguing alongside Nietzsche that aristocracy is the social system most suited to the cultural accomplishment. In fact, both writers despise democracy. Nietzsche claims that aristocracy is natural and has an excellent historical record ("Beyond" 391), while democracy artificially levels an entire society down to universal mediocrity: "Society must *not* exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being" ("Beyond" 392). As both an attack on advocates of democratic equality and an expression of the cultural benefits of aristocratic elitism, Lovecraft writes: "Idealists wanted to raise the level of the ground by tearing down all the towers and strewing them over the surface – and when it was done they wondered why the ground didn't seem much higher, after all. And they had lost their towers!" (Joshi, "Decline" 137). Lovecraft's statement may not be directly drawn from the following statement of Nietzsche's, but the sentiment it expresses is very similar: "[Liberal institutions] level mountain and valley, and call that morality" (1888, 541). Both Nietzsche and Lovecraft champion aristocracy for the cultural accomplishments it bestowed on their age, and as a specific rebuke to what both see as the commercial blandness and mediocrity of post-Industrial western culture.

Both Nietzsche and Lovecraft sort humans according to their similarity to animals, and construct their notions of an intellectual hierarchy by the distance between a given human being and an animal. Most humans, Nietzsche argues, never rise above the level of animals. Kaufmann explains this notion more clearly by providing the following example: "Between a clever chimpanzee and Edison, if he is considered as a technician only, there exists merely a – certainly very great – difference in *degree*" (152). Nietzsche argues that art is a uniquely human practice; Kaufmann explains that Nietzsche, "defied Darwin, as it were, to find even traces of art – which he distinguished from the crafts – or of religion and philosophy among the animals. If a technician is only a super-ape, the same cannot be said of Plato" (175).

While Nietzsche's argument rests on the vitalistic view that artistic ability (inspiration, intuition, imagination) is somehow different in kind from the sort of problem-solving intelligence that chimpanzees display, Lovecraft in stark contrast views the world in terms of scientific reductionism. For him there is no human attribute that is different in kind from what animals display, there are only differences in degree. Nevertheless, Lovecraft's view of western decadence may still be said to derive from Nietzsche's, especially the notion of animal-like humans displacing intrinsically superior aristocrats who are responsible for the cultural hallmarks of a healthy civilization: art, literature, philosophy, architecture, and so forth. Perhaps the most literal depiction of western decline in Lovecraft's fiction occurs in "The Horror at Red Hook," written during what may have been the low point of Lovecraft's life: his failed marriage and failure to find work in New York (1925-1927). In this story, Lovecraft uses New York to symbolize everything that he believes is wrong with America.

One of the most politically disturbing elements of Lovecraft's fiction, at least for the modern reader, is the racism which is quite inseparable from the sort of hierarchy Lovecraft idealizes. This racism is based on Lovecraft's concept of "civilization," a broad notion that entails the mastery of nature, the rejection of instinct, and the pursuit of art and cultural expression for its own sake. Lovecraft felt that persons of Anglo-Saxon descent were responsible for the greatest cultural achievements since the time of Ancient Greece and Rome, and that this proved that they were intrinsically superior. Lovecraft believed that the influence of the masses, both "white trash" descended from peasants and immigrants, would destroy the remnants of English culture in America. As a learned recluse who conducted his friendships (mainly with others like himself) almost entirely through letters, Lovecraft had very little experience with those outside of his own social class (family and acquaintances) and inclinations (colleagues and friends). The contact Lovecraft had with immigrants in New York was almost exclusively with those inhabiting poverty-stricken communities, which did little to combat the stereotypical or vilifying lens through which Lovecraft saw non-whites.

Malone's interest in "the Red Hook matter" is a matter of illegal immigration. Lovecraft paints a vivid picture of America in decline with his description of the district: "Red Hook is a maze of hybrid squalor near the ancient waterfront opposite Governor's

Island, with dirty highways climbing the hill from the wharves to that higher ground where the decayed lengths of Clinton and Court Streets lead off toward the Borough Hall”.⁵ Lovecraft often uses proximity to large bodies of water to indicate an evolutionary stage – the crumbling, vulnerable American houses upon the hills are intended to be understood as embodying a higher state of civilization. Close to the water, at an earlier stage of evolution, is the site of “hybrid squalor.” Red Hook, once a sophisticated settlement, has become “a babel of sound and filth” where primitive persons conspire to drag civilization down to “the darkest instinctive patterns of primitive half-ape savagery”. Lovecraft portrays New York as a doomed symbol of degeneration, a modern-day Babylon of cultural chaos:

From this tangle of material and spiritual putrescence the blasphemies of a hundred dialects assail the sky. Hordes of prowlers reel shouting and singing along the lanes and thoroughfares, occasional furtive hands suddenly extinguish lights and pull down curtains, and swarthy, sin-pitted faces disappear from windows when visitors pick their way through.

As this symbolism makes clear, Lovecraft opposed capitulation to the instincts as intensely as any Christian in spite of his atheism. This is a point of major disagreement with Nietzsche, and it makes clear Lovecraft’s sympathy with the anti-sexual motivations of certain forms of monotheism (though for Lovecraft this was simply replacing physical weakness to temptation with an intellectual form of the same weakness).

What Lovecraft attempts to portray as most offensive in “The Horror at Red Hook” is the notion that the Red Hook mobs are not, in the final analysis, superstitious. Instead, they are actually correct in their conclusions about the nature of reality, because the bizarre deities and supernatural forces that they worship actually exist. An elderly Dutch recluse, Robert Suydam, soon becomes a sort of bishop in this religious movement. Lovecraft portrays him as a corrupt visionary at the head of a mob of bestial degenerates. The police, disturbed by Suydam’s prominence atop a rising wave of religious frenzy, organize raids and capture prisoners. However, the most they can discern from prisoners is that the foreigners view America as a sort of promised land.

⁵ All references to “The Horror at Red Hook” are to the *HP Lovecraft Archive*’s online version (the site is supervised by S T Joshi), no pagination.

Lovecraft implies that the notion of a promised land is absurd given that human history is permeated with violent conflicts over land. For Lovecraft, if the idea of a promised land is true, then the deity or deities doing the promising must desire conflict and bloodshed. In the glimpse at the mob's gods in "The Horror At Red Hook," Lovecraft depicts exactly the sort of beings who promise lands, demand sacrifices, and revel in violence.

When police from several stations descend upon Red Hook, the detective Malone discovers a building containing a chemical laboratory in the attic and a basement full of occult art and books apparently meant for ritualistic purposes. Lovecraft here maps out the human psyche, with science on the highest floor and religion in the basement relying on the subconscious, instinct, and so forth. It is telling that the volumes Malone discovers are in Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew – the languages of monotheism. The raiders force the subterranean rooms to disgorge groups of sinister foreigners, and witness evidence of sacrifices. When Malone breaks into a chamber beneath even the occult sanctuary, he discovers a chaotic void inhabited by malevolent disembodied intelligences ("gods"), whose whispering and mocking laughter disturbs him severely. This confirms that the religious beliefs of the Red Hook mobs are true. In "The Horror At Red Hook," Lovecraft (displaying a great deal of class- and race-based prejudices) employs a strategy similar to Christopher Hitchens' position of anti-theism, expressed in his book *God Is Not Great* (2007). Both Lovecraft and Hitchens argue of violent religious believers that their behavior belies faith in a violent deity, and that therefore life itself would be a terrible thing if their faith in such a deity was well-placed. It is hardly possible to emphasize this point more than by quoting Lovecraft's statement, "Bunch together a group of people deliberately chosen for strong religious feelings, and you have a practical guarantee of dark morbidities expressed in crime, perversion, and insanity" ("Quotations" n.pag).

Malone is permanently disturbed by his experience, and is told by a doctor to leave New York for a "quaint hamlet of wooden colonial houses... an ideal spot for psychological convalescence". Lovecraft's other New York story, "He," also predicts a future in which immigrants have taken over New York and recommends a retreat to Providence. It is clear from the conclusion of "The Horror at Red Hook" that the situation is hopeless: "The soul of the beast is omnipresent and triumphant, and Red Hook's legions of blear-eyed, pockmarked youths still chant and curse and howl as they file from

abyss to abyss, none knows whence or whither, pushed on by blind laws of biology which they may never understand". Here Lovecraft argues that the difference between a savage and a civilized person is that the civilized person understands the fact that he or she has instincts, whereas the savage simply blindly follows his or her instincts. "The Horror at Red Hook" makes clear Lovecraft's strong revulsion for all that characterizes the uneducated masses (instinct, mob psychology, religion) and increases their influence (democracy, immigration). Lovecraft's condemnation of instinct-driven humans as no better than animals justifies his intellectual elitism in the same way that Nietzsche justified his own elitism.

In stark contrast to Lovecraft's condemnation of instinct, for Nietzsche the instincts could be useful and benevolent. The belief that it is better to accept reality as it appears to be and to succeed within this world rather than to reject reality and escape through metaphysics is the core of Nietzsche's conviction that philosophy ought to serve, rather than undermine, life ("Beyond" 201). Since instinct is what propagates life, Nietzsche's value of life extends to a praise of instinct. A criminal, Nietzsche writes, is often simply a strong, natural person whose strength has been converted to sickness by "our tame, mediocre, emasculated society" ("Idols" 549). Nietzsche despises Christianity because he thinks it represses the instincts and that it is psychological escapism ("Idols" 502), whereas in this case Lovecraft is on the side of religion in approving of both the repression of instincts and the impulse toward transcendence. At issue is the nature of the attitude of finding the world insufficient; Nietzsche criticizes this attitude wherever he finds it, whether it is in political ideologies (the utopianism of certain forms of socialism, for example), religion, or artistic traditions like romanticism. In contrast, Lovecraft never criticizes the transcendent impulse itself, only its manifestation in religion.

Nietzsche and Lovecraft each had a problematic relationship to the tradition of romanticism. Critics have considered both writers romantics (Colin Wilson is the most prominent critic of Lovecraft to interpret him in this way). Nietzsche does at times encourage this interpretation ("Beyond" 391), yet Kaufmann insists that Nietzsche was anti-Romantic from the very start (124). Nietzsche's views on Rousseau, an archetypally romantic thinker, reveal his stance on this issue. While Nietzsche recognizes some similarities between his own thought and that of Rousseau ("Idols" 552), he takes pains

to distinguish his thought from Rousseau's. First, Nietzsche's elitism is at odds with Rousseau's populism; Nietzsche argues that romanticism is "Plebeian in the lowest instincts and related to the *ressentiment* of Rousseau" ("Idols" 514). Rousseau's thought, Nietzsche asserts, is based on the false doctrine of equality. Furthermore, Rousseau's moral indignation is anathema to Nietzsche ("Idols" 553) who terms himself an immoralist. Rousseau, Nietzsche asserts, was a repressed, moralizing populist. Nietzsche's stigmatization of "Romanticism, the malignant fairy"⁶ ("Beyond" 208) can be explained by his statement thus: "The main thing about [romantics] is *not* that they wish to go "back," but that they wish to get - *away*" ("Beyond" 207). Nietzsche argues that romanticism resembles religion in its desire for escape and its emphasis on an idealized elsewhere. Yet Nietzsche's rejection of "the psychology of elsewhere" does not extricate him completely from the category of romanticism, as his focus on anti-rationalism, culture, experience, greatness and nobility shows. There can be no doubt that Nietzsche would have condemned Lovecraft's literature as escapism based on "the psychology of elsewhere," as a repressed, transcendentalizing fantasy far too close to the religious thinking it seeks to parody, and yet Lovecraft, though a nihilist, was still enough of a Nietzschean to recognize his own motivations: "You are perfectly right to say that it is the weak who tend to worship the strong. That is my case exactly" (Houllebecq 109).

Whereas Nietzsche sees the history of western civilization as a life-denying detour into abstract philosophy (idealism, metaphysics, Christianity), Lovecraft, despite his admiration of Nietzsche, approves of all the distance that western civilization has placed between itself and instinct. This is best expressed in "The Rats In The Walls" (1924), Lovecraft's story of the rapid reverse-evolution of an American aristocrat named Delapore. Delapore, who narrates, counts among his ancestors a murderous English baron (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 89); he is a widower, the last of his line, his son having been fatally wounded in the Great War (an appropriate metaphor for the historical fate of the European aristocracy). He decides to spend his retirement restoring his ancestral home in England, Exham Priory, whose layers of stone architecture stand for the history of civilization in Britain, from a pre-druidic structure through Druidic, Roman, Saxon all the way to Gothic architecture (89).

⁶ By this I presume Nietzsche to mean "a seductively beautiful but ultimately poisonous myth."

The property has been abandoned for centuries, and local peasants still attach sinister rumours to it; its history is intertwined with morbid medieval folklore. Two pieces of folklore are of particular note. The first is "the belief that a legion of bat-winged devils kept Witches' Sabbath each night at the priory" (94). No subsequent evidence develops to verify this belief. Actual superstition (that is, fear of things that are wholly imaginary) is rare in Lovecraft's fiction, as opposed to "useful" or "adaptive" superstition, which contains a core of truth. It would be possible to dismiss the mention of "bat-winged devils" in this tale as *real* superstition, except for the fact that similar creatures actually appear in other tales such as "The Call of Cthulhu," and are therefore real in Lovecraft's mythology (which derives its internal consistency not from any overall "plan" of a fictional universe but rather from the consistent principles underlying it). This aspect of human depravity encouraged by superhuman beings transforms "The Rats in the Walls" from a tale of human moral monstrosity into a truly weird tale in the sense of its revolving around abnormal phenomena. Lovecraft is never content just to accuse humans of bestiality, but must always also blame the very universe which allows them to exist in such a manner and rewards their conduct with perpetration. For Lovecraft a world in which physical force and sexuality determine the dominance and content of the population of sentient beings is a reprehensible world; he was disgusted by sex and disturbed by evolution.

The second relevant piece of folklore is based on medieval legends about armies of rats. After Delapore's ancestor's murderous acts, Exham Priory lay deserted until rats "burst forth from the castle three months after the tragedy" in a swath of destruction which "devoured fowl, cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent" (94). Delapore pieces together an outline of Exham Priory's past, from prehistoric time through various conquests of England (Roman, Saxon, Danish, Norman), and he traces the stories surrounding it to his own family's possession of the estate in 1261. Here Lovecraft recounts the apparent progress of civilization throughout English history, symbolized by the increasingly elaborate architecture erected on the site. However, he later reveals a core of cannibalism, orgy and ritual on the site through all these ages, symbolizing his disgust with capitulation to the instincts (in which category he notably includes religion). In contrasting the first portrayal with the

revelation of the second, Lovecraft allows his reader to look over the narrator Delapore's shoulder as it were, and thus to be disillusioned alongside the supremely unwitting Delapore when he falls back through rapid degeneration to the bestial nature that has been lurking inside him all along – and, Lovecraft implies, in all of humanity. Lovecraft, himself preferring a cultural hierarchy in which those who can repress or at least regulate their impulses (including religious ones) form an aristocratic elite while varying degrees of animal indulgence equate to corresponding degrees of social and cultural powerlessness, means for his reader to be as disturbed as he is by the notion that animal instincts are in the final analysis irrepressible.

Once Delapore moves into the house he suffers from strange dreams with a recurrent theme: “I seemed to be looking down from an immense height upon a twilit grotto, knee-deep with filth, where a white-bearded daemon swineherd drove about with his staff a flock of fungous, flabby beasts whose appearance filled me with unutterable loathing” (98). Lovecraft's wording is very carefully chosen here: Delapore *seems* to be looking down upon the most bestial behaviour of humanity (cannibalism) from an aristocratic height, but the distance is an illusion and Delapore soon finds himself in the bottom of this very pit. The dreams always end when a horde of rats descend into this abyss, “devouring beasts and man alike” (98) – and the two have indeed been shown to be alike by this point. Delapore soon experiences new nightmares of a cannibalistic feast from the Roman era, implying that his dream-visions can reveal temporally distant events. Upon waking after one nightmare, Delapore hears the scuffling of rats. He follows the descending noise of the rats and discovers a vault even lower than the house's lowest chamber. With this discovery the manifestations cease, a fact which Delapore begins to suspect is because “I had now been shewn the thing which certain forces had wished to shew me” (103), once again implying a metaphysical encouragement for the most bestial of human behaviour as the ghostly or spiritual forces are encouraging Delapore to become a cannibal. Beneath this vault, Delapore finds a place he has seen in his dreams:

A twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see.... There were buildings and other architectural remains... I saw a weird pattern of tumuli, a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a

sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood – but all these were dwarfed by the ghoulis spectacle presented by the surface of the ground. For yards about the steps extended an insane tangle of human bones. (105)

The purpose of this area soon becomes clear. Delapore's ancestors kept a class of humans for food. This practice eventually separated the species of, so that "some of the skeleton things must have descended as quadrupeds through the last twenty or more generations" (106). Here Lovecraft outlines what he sees as the literal possibility of degeneration, in an almost eugenic fear of the possibility of reverse evolution. The division between man and animal is undermined when even English culture – the most advanced and refined culture of the post-classical world in Lovecraft's view – involves cannibalism: "the English building... was a butcher shop and a kitchen... but it was too much to see familiar English *graffiti* there, some as recent as 1610" (106). In confirmation of the illusory nature of civilization, the aristocrat Delapore undergoes a rapid degeneration in which his speech reverts to Middle English, to Latin, to Celtic, and finally to grunting. Then he commits his own act of cannibalism (108). Lovecraft makes it a point of horror here that what has arisen from a bestial condition can revert back to it.

"The Rats in the Walls" occupies a curious place in the body of Lovecraft's tales in that it still displays the strong influence of Poe (with his ambiguous supernaturalism), but uses an evolutionary justification (degeneration) for its central concept. These potentially contradictory factors can be resolved by considering the story in the context of Lovecraft's broader mythology. It, if subtly, embodies the revelation of another reality which vaguely resembles human mythologies. The references to entities such as the Black Winged Ones mean that the de la Poers (the older spelling of Delapore's family name) are not only cannibals, but also wizards; they are the keepers of a tradition which stretches back to prehistoric times and is very possibly the world's first religion. The idea that Delapore's forefathers worship a deity in this tale, while not directly mentioned, is still interesting as Nyarlathotep (an avatar or deity in Lovecraft's mythology) is mentioned. As noted, in Lovecraft's fiction cults are never delusional – their view that the universe is best described by their crude, bizarre and ridiculous beliefs is *always* correct. Lovecraft's godlike beings are actually primitive (when measured according to the terms

with which Lovecraft's protagonists view the progress of human civilization), with their temples, rituals, and focus on astronomy and prophecies.

Romantics tend to idealize the middle ages, noble savagery, and societies seen as less civilized. Lovecraft shares a romantic nostalgia for the beauty of past ages, a focus on dreams, a strong sense of loss, and a bitter antipathy to modernity. However, as "The Rats in the Walls" makes clear, Lovecraft views the Middle Ages as a time of savagery and superstition, a contemptible historical period but a ripe vein to mine for the morbid and debauched imagery of nightmares. Lovecraft's antipathy to tribal cultures and country folk requires little comment; he is anti-romantic in his high estimation of (a certain form of) civilization. As "The Horror at Red Hook" makes clear, Lovecraft views the twentieth century as a time of barbarism; his problem with modern life is not that it is too civilized, but that it is not civilized enough. Lovecraft's assessment of "higher" and "lower" relies on the idea that the further one is from instinct, the better. Darwin's discoveries imply for Lovecraft that there is no vitalistic division between humans and animals, and this is foremost among the causes for Lovecraft's interpretation of science as a disillusioning (if intellectually interesting) form of inquiry. It is Lovecraft's interpretation of science in this way, above all, that leads to his worldview of nihilism.

Nietzsche, in fact, also viewed scientific thinking as one of the major causes of nihilism. Lovecraft's notion of the problems science creates is forcefully expressed in the early story "From Beyond" (1920), while Nietzsche devotes considerable space in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) to critiquing science. Nietzsche explains his view in terms that would sound positively Lovecraftian, were it not for the typically Nietzschean strength-affirmation with which he concludes his observation that "Something might be true while being harmful and highly dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure ...to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified" ("Beyond" 239). When Nietzsche envisions new thinkers who will seek after the most dangerous truths as a test of their own strength ("Beyond" 245), he illustrates a fundamental difference between himself

and Lovecraft. This difference revolves around truth; while both consider it potentially harmful, Lovecraft considers it unavoidable: "The Truth Will Hunt You Down."

Nietzsche argues that "women and artists" tend to reject scientific knowledge because they find it emotionally disillusioning: "Oh, this dreadful science!" sigh their instinct and embarrassment; "it always gets to the *bottom* of things!" ("Beyond" 311). However, this does not mean that Nietzsche views science as an objective process which discovers truth. For Nietzsche, the attempt to justify everything in terms of logic, evidence, consistency, and testability – in short the influence of the scientific method on public thinking – is a symptom of cultural confusion and a crippling lack of confidence. Nietzsche argues that the very idea of objectivity is the result of a sort of intellectual cowardice; the claim to be reporting facts in his view derives from persons wishing to escape scrutiny and accountability for their own beliefs and statements ("Beyond" 320). Nietzsche, with his idealization of inspiration, daring, risk, and conflict, can hardly mask his contempt for science, which he sees as an activity for the English middle-class: "[the scientific man] is not noble ... a type that does not dominate and is neither authoritative nor self-sufficient: he has industriousness, patient acceptance of his place in rank and file, evenness and moderation in his abilities and needs" ("Beyond" 315).

Nietzsche and Lovecraft agree that a scientific worldview, in which everything (down to the hairs upon every person's head, or even further to a level that the biblical canonists could not imagine: the atoms in every person's body),⁷ is equivalent to nihilism. However, without attempting to enter into the complex philosophical issues raised by Nietzsche's views, it will suffice to note that in Nietzsche's relativist view this type of worldview is not inevitable, whereas for Lovecraft objective truth actually exists, and the discoveries of science are the best way to arrive as close to that truth as possible. Lovecraft agrees with Nietzsche that a worldview of scientific reductionism is a nihilistic one, and he argues that scientific reductionism is the only way to truth. To simplify the equation, for Lovecraft there is one truth, and that truth is nihilism.

Lovecraft's "From Beyond," (1920) presents the basic outline of almost all of Lovecraft's stories which directly involve science: science destroys humanity's

⁷ To make the point of the level of scientific precision now available would very much seem beyond the Christian God's counting abilities, one estimate (Jefferson Lab, see Bibliography) places the number of atoms in the human body at 7,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

emotionally comforting illusions and reveals the truth of nihilism. The narrator of this story relates his visit to a former friend, whose scientific researches have isolated him. Having not seen the man, Tillinghast, for ten weeks, the narrator finds him in an ominous state of disorder, and comments: "That Crawford Tillinghast should ever have studied science and philosophy was a mistake. These things should be left to the frigid and impersonal investigator for they offer two equally tragic alternatives to the man of feeling and action; despair, if he fail in his quest, and terrors unutterable and unimaginable if he succeed" (Lovecraft, "Cthulhu" 45). Most successful scientists, Lovecraft maintains, need to be unimaginative positivists, for the subject matter of science (the nature of the real world) directly contrasts the intuitions and wishes of much of the human race (as the popularity of antiscientific beliefs testifies). This is not so far from Nietzsche's conception of patient, ignoble men of science. Yet Lovecraft's above quoted statement in "From Beyond" is a damning one – not to scientists, but to men like himself and Nietzsche. We inhabit a reality, implies Lovecraft, which is of such a nature that the only persons equipped to discover truths about it are essentially emotional robots. Lovecraft implies that sensitivity, imagination, and creativity – the very things Nietzsche put upon a pedestal – are in the reality we inhabit *weaknesses* and not strengths.⁸

For Lovecraft, those with sufficient sensitivity to desire a different sort of reality will be destroyed by the knowledge they discover, and persons lacking the curse of imagination constitute the future of humanity. Tillinghast is warped by what he discovers in the course of his work, which aims to expand human perception. He asks,

What do we know of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them, and can gain no idea of their absolute nature. With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos, yet other beings with a wider, stronger, or different range of senses might not only see very differently the things we see, but might see and study whole worlds of matter, energy, and life which lie close at hand yet can never be detected with the senses we have. (46)

⁸ Consider similar views in the work of Lovecraft's contemporary Kafka, also influenced by Nietzsche.

Tillinghast explains to the uncomfortable narrator that he has finally encountered the planes whose existence he has theorized about, and that he has constructed a machine which will allow both of them to observe other dimensions. When the narrator sees a strange hue appearing, Tillinghast explains: "*That is ultra-violet... You thought that ultra-violet was invisible, and so it is – but you can see that and many other invisible things now*" (47). Lovecraft means to show that science uncovers hidden, counterintuitive facts about reality which strain and disturb the human mind. In fact, these revelations make it clear to humans that their minds are limited in such a way that a countless number of threatening possibilities cannot be ruled out or even understood.

The narrator, under the influence of Tillinghast's perception-enhancing machine, experiences visions which involve mythical symbolism and the impression of "utter, absolute solitude in infinite, sightless, soundless space" (48). Such voids are Lovecraft's way of emphasizing the disillusionment of learning about scientific discoveries such as the inevitable future extinction of humanity and indeed of all life, and the end of the universe itself. They are also a philosophical or scientific restatement of the morbidity which Lovecraft absorbed from Poe, though the decay here is more universal than personal. Tillinghast, the archetypal deranged scientist, soon drops his former friendliness and explains what he has done: "In these rays *we are able to be seen as well as to see.*" (48) He hints that the rest of his house's inhabitants have been consumed, destroyed, or abducted by entities from another dimensions, then warns the narrator that "we're dealing with a hideous world in which we are practically helpless" (48). This world proves baffling and bizarre in the extreme, but the narrator's observations of apparently organic (by his standards) entities that "devour one another" (49) is Lovecraft's way of stating that evolutionary principles, in their cruel arbitrariness, govern absolutely everything – even other dimensions.

The end result of these scientific revelations is the shattering of human ignorance, security, pride, and even sanity. As Tillinghast mockingly asks: "You see the creatures that form what men call the pure air and the blue sky?" (50). He soon launches into a megalomaniacal rant regarding his discoveries, which has led Joshi to argue that the tale is not about the negative consequences of knowledge as such, but instead is concerned with hubris or ill-fated human presumption. The tale concludes with the narrator

destroying the machine and putting an end to Tillinghast's scientific enquiry. Lovecraft, of course, supported science as the most admirable of all intellectual enterprises precisely *because* it required setting aside personal emotions (while still thinking that emotionless persons were best suited to science and that artists were a dying breed). However, it is always tempting to fire upon the bearer of unwelcome news and to "destroy the machine," as Lovecraft's narrator does in defense of his own sanity (particularly as science has been, to a large degree, the engine of the political progress Lovecraft so despised). Tillinghast, the "man of feeling" who has entered into scientific study, disappears, consumed (both metaphorically and literally) by the monstrosity of what he has discovered.

Tillinghast is undeniably a "mad scientist" type, but surely the point of "From Beyond" has nothing to do with his personality (about which, as Joshi asserts, Lovecraft provides almost no information). Instead, the destruction of mind and body in the story is caused by the fact that what Tillinghast has discovered actually exists, as with later tales such as "The Call of Cthulhu" where the real horror is Cthulhu's mere existence. Both Cthulhu and the entities in "From Beyond" symbolize the limitations of human understanding in the face of a sinister and incomprehensible cosmos. Lovecraft places humanity in a sort of permanent hell where threats are infinite and indefinable, death is no escape and birth an inconceivably cruel curse.⁹ When Lovecraft's narrator concludes "I wish I could dismiss what I now have to think of the air and the sky about and above me. I never feel alone or comfortable, and a hideous sense of pursuit sometimes comes chillingly on me when I am weary" (51), he is not commenting on the misuse of knowledge, or science overstepping its boundaries, but simply on his fear of "a hideous dimension in which we are practically helpless."

Lovecraft employs an exaggerated metaphor (the sort of revelation just outlined) to show science's disillusioning power, but it did disillusion him. Both Nietzsche and Lovecraft feel that the real problem with science is that it steals meaning from human life, yet their responses to this problem were radically different. Nietzsche argues that many things about human existence are beyond the explanatory power of the scientific method, and so one has to rely on the ultimately irrational power of one's own will to

⁹ Or as Ambrose Bierce (a major influence on Lovecraft) put it, "The first and worst of all accidents."

meet the modern challenge of finding life meaningful. Lovecraft, however, believes that the scientific method is the best way to establish objective truth, and that the truth is that human life has no meaning at all, regardless of how one considers the issue. "From Beyond" encapsulates how Lovecraft departed from Nietzsche's outlook: exchanging subjectivity for objectivity, Lovecraft saw nihilism as fact, not interpretation.

Lovecraft's fiction may be considered as Nietzschean in that it supports an intellectual hierarchy, espouses an antidemocratic political position, is culturally reactionary, and is even a mockery of religious thinking, if not of the "psychology of elsewhere" which underlies it. However, whereas Nietzsche spent much of his later philosophical career attempting to overcome nihilism, Lovecraft's fiction consistently expresses a nihilistic point of view. The specific point where Lovecraft departs from Nietzsche involves science. Both men agree that scientific reductionism is a nihilistic outlook; and for Nietzsche this is a reason to reject scientific reductionism. Philosophy must serve and strengthen life, not seek abstractions (whether scientific or metaphysical) which interfere with the human ability to live. For Nietzsche, who viewed even the hardest forms of science such as physics ("Beyond" 210, "Idols" 495) with skepticism, there are so many obstacles to objective truth that the concept itself may well be a chimera; and furthermore it is a chimera which attracts persons who, for primarily psychological reasons, wish to revenge themselves on others by means of universalizing abstractions which glorify themselves, promise an escape from so challenging and vulgar a world, and condemn their rivals and enemies. This is the core of Nietzsche's criticism of the "Will to Truth," the "Psychology of Elsewhere," and the pursuit of metaphysics. Taken together, these categories of criticism condemn (in a highly unique way) broad swaths of western intellectual tradition, so that almost nothing remains unscathed.

On this crucial subject, Lovecraft's view is very different. Lovecraft displays a willingness to accept scientific evidence without wrangling with complex philosophical or psychological arguments of the type Nietzsche excelled at; indeed for Lovecraft even sections of Nietzsche's work would have been metaphysics in that they privilege purely linguistic claims over empirical scientific evidence. For Lovecraft, the scientific method, and not philosophy, is the best method of investigating reality and human existence. Even though scientific reductionism is nihilism for Lovecraft as it is for Nietzsche, Lovecraft

feels that, due to the evidence on its side, it is the only outlook an honest and intelligent person can adopt. Truth convincing, objective, and evidentially-supported enough to disregard metaphysical claims to its contrary can be established; and for Lovecraft evolution, materialism and scientific reductionism all fell into the category of truth of this caliber. Lovecraft, much more interested in the idea of objective fact than subjective experience, focuses on the (perhaps for some literalistic) notion that propositions such as "human life has meaning" are either true or not; and that scientific reductionism implies that on an ultimate level, this particular proposition is not true (and nihilism follows). Despite Nietzsche's influence on Lovecraft, then, Lovecraft comes to the conclusion that nihilism is the only credible worldview; that nihilism is merely the truth of human existence and experience.

One may find a hint of, or precedent for, Lovecraft's approach in the following statement by Nietzsche: "There may actually be puritanical fanatics of conscience who prefer even a certain nothing to an uncertain something to lie down on - and die. But this is nihilism and the sign of a despairing, mortally weary soul - however courageous the gestures of such a virtue may look" ("Beyond" 206). If there is one writer whose work expresses "a certain nothing" it is H. P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft combines Nietzsche's reading of the existential hollowness of nihilism with the inescapable scientific reductionism of Darwin and the morbid decay depicted by Poe. The result is a series of stories in which aesthetically sensitive, philosophically inclined protagonists dispassionately investigate reality and discover emptiness, entropy, and evil.

Chapter 2: Sanity, Superstition and the Supernatural

If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? (John 3:12)

Dostoevsky, with his focus on the place of the supernatural in a scientific age, anticipated many of Lovecraft's concerns. In this chapter I will explain the conceptions of modernity and science shared by Lovecraft and Dostoevsky in order to show how these views inform their respective fictions, and I will compare their different reactions to portraying the supernatural in a world dominated by science. In analyzing the role of religious experience in works by Dostoevsky and Lovecraft, I will show that while both writers place potentially supernatural religious experiences on the borders of scientific knowledge, the two writers stand on opposite sides of an important intellectual line. Dostoevsky aims to depict religious experiences that are intelligible in humanistic emotional terms and which, if accepted as true, provide a purpose-driven, moral framework with which to interpret reality. These experiences are subjective in the sense that they cannot be verified or dissected by outside observers, but instead may only be speculated on (so that it is the reader's own assumptions that provide him or her with an interpretation, rather than the author's dictation). This aesthetic and intellectual strategy on the part of Dostoevsky is inherently traditionalist and conservative in that it attempts to preserve a "privileged space" for religious experience, a space which scientific reductionism, no matter how advanced a form it takes, can never fully conquer. In contrast, Lovecraft (despite his deeply conservative outlook) parodically presents a radically anti-traditional, pro-scientific vision of religious experience: he presents experiences meant to be objective in the sense that they are verifiable to outside observers, yet which are utterly unintelligible (and indeed completely destructive) in human emotional terms. Indeed, if these potentially supernatural experiences are accepted as true, the loss of one's sanity is the result. In short, Lovecraft's use of religious experience derives from (and in turn reinforces) his nihilism.

In the 1860s, after a brief career as an anti-government socialist that saw him nearly executed then sent to a Siberian labour camp, Dostoevsky reversed his worldview

from radical socialism to reactionary Christian nationalism. Dostoevsky saw western-style progress coming to Russia and sought to warn “honest Russians” against the spiritual corruption of countries like England and America. Dostoevsky’s contemporary popularity attests to a widespread sense of dislocation and alienation in the later nineteenth century, after decades of industrialization, colonization, urbanization, and immigration. All over Europe, vast swaths of society had been displaced from their traditional communities. Heavy industry had expanded so thoroughly that the second half of the nineteenth century is sometimes termed a “Second Industrial Revolution.” The shift to an industrial economy made the bourgeoisie very rich, and their political power correspondingly ascended. These changes angered not only the socialist left but also the conservative right, as business capital overtook aristocratic wealth and mass culture and secularism began to displace religious authority (Heywood 57). Like Lovecraft and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky hated everything that the word “progress” encompassed, and he feared nihilism as its ultimate consequence.

Dostoevsky’s first major work, *Notes from Underground* (1864), can fairly be described as an assault on progress. The narrator or “underground man” protests that there is something irreducibly irrational behind humans and their experience (Dostoevsky, “Notes” 25). Maria Banerjee describes the underground man as “a survivor of the waning generation of Romantic idealists, [who] lives in spiteful isolation from real life” (xiv). This description sounds not unlike Lovecraft, although different critics disagree about the degree to which “spite” fuels his fiction. When the underground man contrasts himself to the stupid “man of action” (32), he implies that stupidity is a necessary condition for practical success. He even argues, in clear anticipation of some of Lovecraft’s most famous sentiments,¹⁰ that intelligence is a curse, that “every sort of consciousness, in fact, is a disease” (29).

Harriet Murav notes that during the second half of the nineteenth century, “Criminology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology - the study of man in all his relations - became sciences” (40). When scientists began to set standards for behavior, normality became the criteria by which behaviour was evaluated, and an internal change without an environmental cause began to be considered to be the sign of a disorder

¹⁰ The opening of “The Call of Cthulhu” is probably the best example of this.

(Murav 44). For Dostoevsky this outlook entails a denial of human agency, because to consistently seek one's interests, conforming to a series of scientific laws, is inherently predictable to the point of determinism ("Notes" 41).

The point underlying much of what Dostoevsky's underground man says is that without a line of inquiry which science cannot cross, scientific reductionism will leave no room for humankind's most cherished beliefs, including free will (53). According to the underground man, it is the uniquely human ability to act against one's own interests which affirms true freedom: "It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly, that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself - as though that were so necessary - that men are still men and not the keys of a piano" (50). Stewart Sutherland explains, "From *Notes from the Underground* onward Dostoyevsky's novels offer example upon example of characters whose unpredictability is intended in part at least as a metaphysical assertion" (126). Having acknowledged the degree to which science can explain objectively verifiable phenomena in *Notes From Underground*, Dostoevsky cannot contradict scientific discoveries by incorporating explicitly supernatural events into his novels. Therefore from *Notes From Underground* onward, he seeks to make religious assertions that are not incompatible with scientific knowledge but rather which stand outside of it. For Dostoevsky, it is the subjectivity of religious experience that verifies it as supernatural, since if it was natural it would be amenable to scientific reductionism.

Lovecraft, of course, feels that humanity's (and his own) possession of subjective experience or even "fantastic dreams" is no philosophical bulwark against determinism. This is the specific point of disagreement that places Dostoevsky and Lovecraft on opposite philosophical sides: Dostoevsky's vitalism and belief in free will, predicated on the metaphysical importance of subjective experience, is exactly the opposite of Lovecraft's philosophy of "mechanistic materialism" which denies the literal existence of anything that cannot be verified scientifically by an external observer, including free will: "We have no specific destiny against which we can fight - for the fighting would be as much a part of the destiny as the final end" (Joshi, "Magick" 35). Indeed, for Lovecraft the notion that subjective experience entails objective reality is so bizarre and contradictory as to be absurd, since, if true, it implies that sanity itself is an impossibility.

Sutherland's explanation shows Dostoevsky's obsession with the idea of a metaphysical response to nihilism. From Dostoevsky's later works and his biography, it is clear that for Dostoevsky this solution is a reactionary form of Orthodox Christianity. Yet Dostoevsky, a somewhat eccentric religious conservative, never stopped searching for arguments against his own beliefs. In a letter he explains, "As a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it" (Banerjee xi). In "The Grand Inquisitor," the most famous chapter of Dostoevsky's final novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky presented such a powerful criticism of religion that the head of the Orthodox Church in Russia wrote to Dostoevsky in order to ask him what refutation was possible. Dostoevsky responded that the forthcoming next chapter, "The Russian Monk," provided a response by means of "an artistic picture" (Sutherland 97).

In this chapter, Dostoevsky attempts to refute nihilism by showing that it cannot work ethically or socially (Jones 38), rather than attempting to prove God's existence in some objective (or scientific) sense. "The Russian Monk" is named after Father Zosima, a character through whom Dostoevsky means to illustrate the ethical and social benefits of Christianity. Malcolm Jones explains that Ivan and Zosima are meant to contrast the implications of two philosophies, atheism (nihilism) and Christianity: "To Ivan's hatred of the order of creation and his assertion that if there is no immortality and God does not exist, then everything is permitted, Zosima juxtaposes a belief in the efficacy of a life of active love" (21). Dostoevsky makes his contrast here as stark as life and death.

Malcolm Jones explains Dostoevsky's criticism of European Christianity thus: "[Dostoevsky] preached that Europe had long ago sold its soul to the principles of abstract rationalism, legalism, materialism and individualism, which the Catholic Church had inherited from Rome and passed on to Protestantism and thence to socialism, which had inevitably become atheistic" (9). Dostoevsky's argument here is based on a more general observation of the conflict between religion and rationality, the latter represented in its strongest and most sophisticated form by science. Indeed, Dostoevsky even states religion and reason might be mutually exclusive: "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality, the truth were outside Christ, then I would prefer to

remain with Christ rather than with the truth" (Banerjee ix). In a discussion of hell, Fyodor Pavlovich explains (in his peculiar way) that reason sabotages religion:

It's impossible, I think, for the devils to forget to drag me down to hell with their hooks when I die. Then I wonder – hooks? Where would they get them? What of? Iron hooks? Where do they forge them? Have they a foundry there of some sort? ...if there are no hooks it all breaks down, which is unlikely again, for then there would be none to drag me down to hell, and if they don't drag me down what justice is there in the world? (19)

For Dostoevsky, then, once one starts applying reason to religion, the entire enterprise breaks down, and nihilism is the end result. The advance of naturalistic explanations, Dostoevsky notes, threatens belief in supernatural ones. As long as the two types of explanation are treated in the same way (using logic, rules of evidence, and so forth), argues Dostoevsky, religious faith will suffer. In response, he continually attempts to depict human irrationality in vitalist terms (and thus in opposition to its conception by scientific reductionists), and moral choice in opposition to determinism. He portrays religious experience as subjective and unverifiable, beyond the explanatory power of science, and thus preserves an enclave for the soul which ultimately serves as his way out of nihilism. Lovecraft does the very opposite: he takes nihilism as his starting point before proceeding to mock religious experience as a blatant intrusion of the inexplicable into normal reality, a violation of logic and sanity.

As Dostoevsky's heavily Christian childhood was for the most part quite happy, it is certainly possible to see his yearning for religion as the desire for a return to a state of lost innocence. Similarly, Lovecraft's pseudo-aristocratic childhood influenced his opinions for his entire life. Dostoevsky argues that only Christian tradition can make life meaningful and provide people with a moral framework; and therefore that the displacement of religion by science threatens to unleash nihilism both in theory (meaninglessness) and in practice (amoral social chaos). Lovecraft, agreeing with almost all of what Dostoevsky argues, with the important exception of his metaphysical assertions, similarly states that only the western cultural tradition more generally can provide the illusion of meaning and ensure social cohesion. Both argue against social progress and liberalism.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky portrays liberals and socialists as opportunistic narcissists. Miusov, “a Liberal of the type common in the forties and fifties” (5), is the first character to suffer humiliation in the novel. In response to the attention Ivan receives for his ideas, Miusov tries to portray himself as the more humanitarian man by drawing attention to Ivan’s private nihilism. He relays the information that Ivan has explained the nihilistic consequences of atheism in the following way:

There was no law of nature that man should love mankind, and that, if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to a natural law, but simply because men have believed in immortality... if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful... for every individual, like ourselves, who does not believe in God or immortality, the moral law of nature must immediately be changed into the exact contrary of the former religious law. (60)

A fascinating comparison may be made between the “rise of the Old Ones” in Lovecraft’s mythology,¹¹ in which the moral order among humanity is shattered alongside humanity’s useful illusions, and this passage of Dostoevsky’s regarding the consequences of a loss of religious belief.

Ivan Karamazov alone need not be relied upon solely to present this notion, however. Father Zosima, the religious anchor of *The Brothers Karamazov*, says that without Christ “we would destroy each other even down to the last two men on earth” (288). It later emerges that Ivan, (while holding that nihilism is true) desperately desires to believe in a moral order because, like his younger Christian brother Alyosha, he is fundamentally good. In contrast, Dostoevsky asserts, progressive morality is a hollow social pretense; the socialist Rakitin is “a liberal nonentity without any talent” (320).¹² In “A Seminarian Bent on a Career,” Ivan makes a comment about Rakitin which assesses his inner nature and extrapolates from it into the future. Rakitin reports this comment to Alyosha, and it is such a mockery that the mild-mannered Alyosha laughs:

¹¹ See the discussion of “The Call of Cthulhu” especially in Chapter 3.

¹² This is a report of Ivan Karamazov’s comment, but both the immediate and the extended contexts make it obvious that this is Dostoevsky’s personal view of the character Rakitin and of socialists generally.

He was so good as to express the opinion that I shall be sure to go to Petersburg and get on to some solid magazine as a reviewer, that I shall write for the next ten years, and in the end become the owner of the magazine, and bring it out on the liberal and atheistic side, with a socialistic tinge... the tinge of socialism won't hinder me from laying by the proceeds and investing them under the guidance of some Jew, till at the end of my career I build a great house in Petersburg and move my publishing offices to it, and let out the upper stories to lodgers. He has even chosen the place for it, near the new stone bridge across the Neva. (73)

Rakitin vigorously argues against Ivan's idea that atheism equates to nihilism, declaring "His whole theory is vileness! Humanity will find in itself the power to live for virtue even without believing in immortality. It will find it in love for freedom, for equality, for fraternity" (72). Rakitin's atheism is a progressive political position, whereas Ivan's speaks for a philosophical confrontation with nihilism. Although Ivan does not believe in morality, he himself behaves in a decent way. Rakitin, on the other hand, claims that it is possible to have morality without God, yet he consistently acts immorally. He plans to seduce Madame Kokhlakov and marry her, thereby gaining her fortune (558).

Dostoevsky argues that liberalism tries to build a moral system in a world which it views in deterministic terms. Rakitin says to Dmitri Karamazov's face that he believes that Dmitri murdered his father, yet claims that this was not a crime of which he is guilty because he was controlled by the conditions within which he acted. Dmitri reports the conversation: "He wants to say that 'he couldn't help murdering his father, he was corrupted by his environment,' and so on [...] He is going to put in a tinge of Socialism, he says" (557). Not only does Rakitin's plan to write this article conform exactly to Ivan's deterministic prediction of what *Rakitin* will do (write articles with a "tinge of socialism" to advance his career), it also demonstrates the condescending attitude that Dostoevsky feels that the liberals and socialists have for their fellows.

Throughout *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky dwells on the notion that science steals explanatory power from religion. Dmitri, for example, summarizes the idea that the science of neurology undermines the concept of the soul (557). Dostoevsky's epilepsy is now often noted as a contributing factor to his intense religious visions (Jones 75). Dostoevsky, who interweaves mental illness and visionary experiences in his fiction,

must surely have been aware that some of his own religious experiences had neurological causes. However, as a committed Christian Dostoevsky obviously does not rule out his own religious experiences as mere hallucinations, and so he seeks a way to allow for the legitimacy of religious experiences. As a religious writer in the increasingly scientific nineteenth century, Dostoevsky found the problem of portraying the supernatural even in works of fiction to be a difficult one. Ivan Karamazov solves this problem in his own composition, "The Grand Inquisitor," by circumventing the issue: he sets his poem in the sixteenth century and defends Christ's appearance as a medieval convention: "At that time, as you probably learned at school, it was customary in poetry to bring down heavenly powers to earth... the Madonna, the saints, the angels, Christ, and God Himself were brought on the stage" (227). Dostoevsky himself, however, takes another approach: he clouds his apparently supernatural events with ambiguities that the reader may interpret as he or she wishes. Every potentially supernatural event is accompanied by a natural explanation.

In keeping with this method, Dostoevsky presents Father Zosima with a certain mystery, including potentially supernatural insights into the minds and motivations of other characters. Zosima cuts through pages' worth of Fyodor Pavlovich's buffoonery with a single sentence, and accurately assesses his psychological core (35). At the same meeting Zosima quickly gets to the bottom of Ivan's psyche as well: "In your despair, you, too, divert yourself with magazine articles, and discussions in society, though you don't believe your own arguments, and with an aching heart mock at them inwardly" (61). Finally, in a sort of prophecy, Zosima appears to foresee the suffering in store for Dmitri Karamazov, who is later arrested for murder. However, the narrator explains that many of Zosima's insights are based on his extensive experiences with people, and Rakitin mocks Zosima's gesture toward Dmitri saying "If something happens later on, it'll be: 'Ah, the holy man foresaw it, prophesied it!' though it's a poor sort of prophecy, tapping the ground like that" (69). Thus Zosima's insights can be interpreted naturally.

The other major religious character, the young Alyosha, also occasionally displays startling insights. The most suggestive example of this is his statement to Ivan: "You have accused yourself and have confessed to yourself that you are the murderer and no one else. But you didn't do it: you are mistaken: you are not the murderer. Do you

hear? It was not you! God has sent me to tell you so" (570). Here even the atheist Ivan almost believes that Alyosha has supernatural knowledge. However, Ivan regains control and denounces him: "I can't endure prophets and epileptics - messengers from God especially" (570). When Alyosha has doubts after Zosima's death, his faith is restored by a dream of Zosima in heaven. Unlike Lovecraft, Dostoevsky leaves the question of whether this vision accurately represents a literally remote reality up to the reader.

Alyosha and Ivan share the same mother, whose tragic end is described thus: "[she] fell into that kind of nervous disease which is most frequently found in peasant women who are said to be "possessed by devils" (8). She stands in Dostoevsky's work as an admission of the time-honored intimacy linking madness and holiness. Dostoevsky, however, specifically reverses the notion of religion as madness and atheism as sanity, for while the religious Alyosha inherits his mother's spirituality and has no health problems, it is the atheist Ivan who inherits her predisposition to madness. Furthermore, by including the qualifier "said to be," Dostoevsky allows the reader to interpret, if inclined, apparent instances of "possession" among the peasantry as nothing more than superstitious folklore. Dostoevsky's association of holiness with madness in the mother of Ivan and Alyosha allows for the possibility that religious experience is an illusion born of fever. *The Brothers Karamazov* contains an almost explicit example of religious experience brought on by illness: the visions of the eccentric recluse Father Ferapont, who lives only on berries and mushrooms. He sees devils (153), the holy spirit in the form of a bird (154) and a tree as the cross (155). Dostoevsky implies that Father Ferapont's visions might be hallucinations when another monk who is "strongly in favour of fasting" notes that it is "not strange that one who kept so rigid a fast as Father Ferapont should see marvels" (155). Dostoevsky never takes a more concrete position with regard to the actual existence of the supernatural than to emphasize the emotional importance of religious experience for his characters and to consistently allow for the supernatural interpretation of events to stand, should the reader be so inclined.

The most extended potentially supernatural scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* concerns the appearance of a devil to Ivan, notably when he is alone (and only then). Prior to this episode, the narrator informs the reader that Ivan is "on the very eve of an attack of brain fever" (601), sowing seeds of doubt as to whether anything supernatural

really occurs here. A doctor even tells Ivan that “Hallucinations are quite likely in your condition” (602). The devil distracts Ivan with many odd topics; but beneath the frivolity of the devil’s clever conversation lies a deadly serious game of cat and mouse. Ivan is conflicted about whether this devil truly stands before him or he is mad: each possibility is frightening. Ivan insists: “Never for one minute have I taken you for reality... You are a lie, you are my illness” (604). The devil is only too happy to toy with Ivan, agreeing that he is an illusion, and helpfully claiming that any original information he produces comes from Ivan’s subconscious, “So I don’t repeat your ideas, yet I am only your nightmare, nothing more.” Ivan responds, “You are lying, your aim is to convince me you exist apart and are not my nightmare, and now you are asserting you are a dream” (606). Ivan himself is confused and disturbed by the devil, and this either reflects the devil’s goal (if he is indeed real), or Ivan’s own sickness and philosophical apprehensions.

When the devil relates to Ivan an anecdote about a philosopher who arrives in heaven, states that it contradicts his principles, and is sentenced to walk a quadrillion kilometers, Ivan thinks he has finally “caught” the him and proved him unreal, for he himself invented this anecdote at age seventeen. The devil then claims that he deliberately told Ivan the anecdote to make him not believe in him, using reverse psychology (612). Dostoevsky presents a fascinating and potentially circular depiction of supernaturalism here: even if Ivan is sane and the devil is real, the devil’s goal in attempting to confuse Ivan seems to be to drive him insane – creating a “chicken or egg” philosophical dilemma between haunting and madness, and in the process making it impossible to differentiate between natural and supernatural events. Dostoevsky implies here that the truth or falsity of religious experience is actually not decidable for an external observer. Instead, it is beyond the scope of scientific enquiry, and this preserves the possibility that religion is true regardless of scientific advancement.

Malcolm Jones explains Dostoevsky’s presentation of religious experience thus: “There is no way of determining whether the religious experiences of his characters are merely projections of their own ideals, expressed in culturally available images, or whether they reflect a reality which ultimately escapes definition but which human beings try constantly to capture and transmit through such images” (154). Jones’ point on the cultural interpretation of religious experience fits the devil’s appearance to Ivan well, for

the devil appears to Ivan (or Ivan envisions him) in very personal terms. The devil is a sponger, like Ivan's father Fyodor (the target of his rage), and a lackey, like Smerdyakov (the source of his guilt). The devil claims he controls his form (606), so that he could have deliberately presented himself to Ivan in this way. He knows philosophy, and claims it is not his fault that he is a devil:

Before time was, by some decree which I could never make out, I was predestined 'to deny' and yet I am genuinely good-hearted and not at all inclined to negation... I don't meddle in that, I didn't create it, I am not answerable for it. Well, they've chosen their scapegoat, they've made me write the column of criticism and so life was made possible. We understand that comedy; I, for instance, simply and directly demand that I be annihilated. (609)

The devil's idea that he is bound to do what he does by divine decree mocks liberal views that criminals are only the product of their environments. Yet the devil claims that he is a principled moral conservative, and complains that hell has reformed its methods:

What tortures? Ah, don't ask. In the old days we had all sorts, but now they have taken chiefly to moral punishments - 'the strings of conscience' and all that nonsense. We got that, too, from you, from the 'mellowing of your manners.' And who's the better for it? Only those who have got no conscience, for how can they be tortured by conscience when they have none? But decent people who have conscience and a sense of honor suffer for it. Reforms, when the ground has not been prepared for them, especially if they are institutions copied from abroad, do nothing but mischief! The ancient fire was better. (611)

For Dostoevsky, the time of "ancient fire" is long past. In place of the dramatic conflict between good and evil that was the hallmark of medieval Christian conceptions of the universe (represented powerfully by Dante), the modern believer faces uncertainty and absurdity. The devil notes this very fact, mocking Ivan for expecting a medieval devil in the modern age: "You are really angry with me for not having appeared to you in a red glow, with thunder and lightning, with scorched wings ... You are wounded, in the first place, in your aesthetic feelings, and secondly, in your pride. How could such a vulgar devil visit such a great man as you!" (614) Mocking religious belief, the devil then prophesies a godless age: "Extending his conquest of nature infinitely by his will and his

science, man will feel such lofty joy from hour to hour in doing it that it will make up for all his old dreams of the joys of heaven” (616). Many of the arguments that the devil makes to Ivan mirror the scientific arguments of liberals and socialists, and Ivan is left wondering whether his entire apparently scientific, logical age is insane or satanic.

Lovecraft also treats the issues of sanity, superstition and the supernatural as interconnected. Lovecraft’s “The Dreams in the Witch House,” (1932) a story about a sickly student’s encounter with apparently supernatural forces, begins thus: “Whether the dreams brought on the fever or the fever brought on the dreams Walter Gilman did not know” (324). The reader is made aware from the very start of the connection between fever and the supernatural, as with Ivan Karamazov’s demonic encounter. Gilman’s environment exerts a strong influence over his imagination, and knowledge of local history influences his mind (recall Jones’ point on cultural images). The room Gilman is renting once belonged to a woman, Keziah Mason, accused of witchcraft in 1692. Gilman has heard rumours on the subject of witches in Arkham, as well as their companions, “the lesser messengers or intermediaries – the quasi-animals and queer hybrids which legend depicts as witches’ familiars” (344). The most notorious of these familiars is the creature Brown Jenkin, a tiny humanlike rat that can speak all languages (328). Such rumours would upset any person with a delicate imagination, and Gilman, like Ivan Karamazov, is a nervous, sensitive, intellectually ambitious and somewhat eccentric student of science.

Like Ivan Karamazov, Gilman lives a solitary and sickly life of study (324). Like Ivan Karamazov, Gilman is a rigorous rationalist who refuses to give his visionary experiences any credibility. Ironically, while experiencing his bizarre dreams, Gilman is consciously constructing the very theory which legitimizes them as real – travel in the fourth dimension: “There was a discussion of possible freakish curvatures in space, and of theoretical points of approach or even contact between our part of the cosmos and various other regions as distant as the farthest stars or the transgalactic gulfs themselves – or even as fabulously remote as the tentatively conceivable cosmic units beyond the whole Einsteinian space-time continuum” (193). Thus, while Ivan Karamazov’s science delegitimizes his subjective (potentially religious) experience, Walter Gilman’s actual makes his own subjective (potentially religious) seem more plausible as an accurate and truthful vision.

Gilman even believes that it is possible that Keziah Mason escaped from prison in 1692 using fourth dimensional travel: "He had been thinking too much about the vague regions which his formulae told him must lie beyond the three dimensions we know, and about the possibility that old Keziah Mason – guided by some influence past all conjecture – had actually found the gate to those regions" (327). He further theorizes that Keziah could have possibly survived into his own day using this knowledge: "Time could not exist in certain belts of space, and by entering and remaining in such a belt one might preserve one's life and age indefinitely" (202). In complete contrast to Dostoevsky, in this Lovecraft story science does not explain away religious experience but rather actually makes its reality seem far more likely. Gilman's insistence that his dream-visions do not reflect any objective reality only increases as the dreams intensify, and despite his faltering health, he decides against seeking medical help (329). Like Ivan, Gilman arrives at the bizarre theory that he is losing his mind due to his sickness rather than recognizing the reality of his visions (330).

Keziah appears in Gilman's dreams, and Gilman begins to suspect that "in unrecalled dreams he had talked with both Brown Jenkin and the old woman [Keziah], and that they had been urging him to go somewhere with them and to meet a third being of greater potency" (330). This third being is the devil that Gilman encounters. But whereas Ivan Karamazov's devil is talkative and seemingly tries to assault Ivan's sanity (or soul, depending on how one looks at it), the devil Gilman meets is utterly silent:

The evilly grinning beldame [the 'witch'] still clutched him, and beyond the table stood a figure he had never seen before – a tall, lean man of dead black coloration but without the slightest sign of negroid features; wholly devoid of either hair or beard, and wearing as his only garment a shapeless robe of some heavy black fabric. His feet were indistinguishable because of the table and bench, but he must have been shod, since there was a clicking whenever he changed position. The man did not speak, and bore no trace of expression on his small, regular features. He merely pointed to a book of prodigious size which lay open on the table, while the beldame thrust a huge gray quill into Gilman's right hand. (340)¹³

¹³ Gilman is meant to sign the book in his own blood.

Whereas Ivan's devil mocks the very idea of appearing in a traditionally satanic guise, this devil seems to attempt to cloak his association with anything traditionally satanic. Despite this, he (or "it") fails to maintain this impression. He leaves markings behind, and Gilman discovers them when scouring his floor for footprints: "In addition to those he could recognize as his there were some smaller, almost round markings – such as the legs of a large chair or a table might make, except that most of them tended to be divided into halves" (346). This suggests that this devil possesses not feet but hooves. Lovecraft's depiction is very effective, even chilling, for the devil's apparent neutrality seems like a sinister trick – the truth behind which is revealed to all who sign his book.

Gilman's fear of this being is an evolutionary adaptation like arachnophobia (spiders are highly poisonous in Africa); the fourth dimension has its dangers just like the third. "The Dreams in the Witch House" features a minor character named Joe Mazurewicz, who interprets the abnormal activity in Arkham's haunted hills in Christian terms and warns Gilman to avoid the supernatural beings that haunt Arkham at all costs. I thus take Lovecraft to be suggesting that Christianity, despite its plethora of incorrect ideas and illogical concepts, serves usefully as a warning against real dangers. A mythology that attributed to poisonous spiders hostile agency would be adaptively useful.

Lovecraft's science fiction-horror hybrid is meant to imply that behind human myths there lies a greater truth which cannot be understood by human reason. This mythic alternate reality, which Gilman initially perceives through dreams, is actually the fourth dimension. The seemingly supernatural beings, interpreted by the citizens of Arkham as "slaves of Satan," are not connected to any petty human theology but are rather of unknown (and perhaps unknowable) yet sinister origin and motivation. The ceremonies which are termed by the townspeople "black magic" have some bizarre relation to the fourth dimension and the communication with or summoning of entities from "outside." In this context, Gilman's materialism is even more counterproductive than Ivan Karamazov's. Karamazov is never given a chance to conclude whether the devil's visits are real; his final fate is unknown, as Dostoevsky died before he could write the intended sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Gilman however does eventually recognize the truth of his visions: "Between the phantasms of nightmare and the realities of the objective

world a monstrous and unthinkable relationship was crystallizing" (347). Yet Gilman still loses his life (and perhaps his soul) when the witch's familiar tears him apart.

Both Dostoevsky and Lovecraft find madness and the supernatural to be closely connected. Yet it is the atheist Lovecraft who consistently implies that madness is caused by an encounter with supernatural phenomenon, while the theist Dostoevsky always allows a natural explanation for any apparently supernatural phenomenon. The idea that someone who is mentally unbalanced is involved with another plane of existence probably dates back to the Stone Age. Each writer has an interesting use for the idea. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the experience is often negative (Ivan, Ferapont), but can also be positive (Alyosha, Zosima), and the distinction between the two types of experience seems to rely on the mental (or perhaps spiritual) health of the character experiencing the vision (the latter two sick, the former two health). Lovecraft's attack on religion involves a parody of this scheme. As always, Lovecraft starts with a material fact: someone is mentally ill. Lovecraft then follows the premise that this person has been influenced by a supernatural deity and asks what sort of deity causes such dysfunction. Extrapolating cause from effect, Lovecraft arrives at the idea of an inexplicable entity destructive to human sanity.

Both Walter Gilman and Ivan Karamavov reject claims for the supernatural because they are scientifically trained materialists who believe that scientific principles and rules accurately describe everything that exists or which is of any concern to what exists. Euclidean geometry is an example both characters use; both are sure that their Euclidean beliefs accurately reflect a Euclidean reality, and that any realities which do not conform to scientific rules must therefore not interact with the reality which they inhabit, making supernatural claims empirically irrelevant. However, Dostoevsky attempts to reverse the notion of religion as a defense mechanism for emotionally dissatisfied persons, as the Christian Alyosha is happy while the atheist Ivan is miserable.¹⁴ Ivan's rejection of God's world may be related to his unhappy childhood: Dostoevsky's narrator explains that "he grew into a somewhat morose and reserved, though far from timid boy. At ten years old he had realized that they were living not in

¹⁴ It is interesting that both Ivan Karamazov and Walter Gilman are brilliant and miserable materialists, perhaps reflecting a common view by Dostoevsky and Lovecraft that atheism and nihilism are emotionally unsatisfying.

their own home but on other people's charity, and that their father was a man of whom it was disgraceful to speak" (10). Maria Banerjee comments, "In his displacement from a legitimate identity [...] Ivan learned early that his intellect could serve as a protective shield" (85). In other words, it is Ivan who is emotionally biased when evaluating metaphysical claims rather than Alyosha, despite his scientific justifications.

While Ivan is trained in the natural sciences (11) and argues that one should only evaluate what is apparent (Sutherland 25), he largely bypasses scientific explanations that counter religious explanations in order to make a moral counter-argument. This reveals, as Banerjee argues, that the core of Ivan's rejection of religion is moral, and therefore psychological. Ivan claims that any attempt to make sense of the suffering of children "alters the facts," by attempting to privilege something that is not apparent (the reasoning of a higher world) over something which *is* apparent (the suffering itself) (Sutherland 29). While this argument hinges on an empirical principle (evaluate the apparent first), it is based on Ivan's moral assessment of the situation.

Ivan is prepared to recognize that some type of logic beyond human understanding could morally justify human suffering, just as parallel lines could meet somewhere beyond the earth where Euclidean geometry does not apply. Yet he objects to the very fact that this is beyond human understanding: "If it is really true that they [children] must share responsibility for all their fathers' crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension" (225). To an earthbound human, both the "moral beyond" and the "mathematical beyond" will simply fail to make sense. Ivan's arguments are based on the idea that it is impossible for an earthly mind to accept unearthly logic: "I acknowledge humbly that I have no faculty for settling such questions, I have a Euclidean earthly mind, and how could I solve problems that are not of this world?" (216) He tells Alyosha "I must have retribution, or I will destroy myself. And not retribution in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself" (225). Ivan wishes for religion to be natural, not supernatural.

Lovecraft informs the reader on the first page of "The Dreams in the Witch House" that Walter Gilman is studying non-Euclidean calculus. That is, Gilman's area of study is specifically the "beyond" which the earthly (or Euclidean) mind can approach only through abstractions and even then with great difficulty. Ivan's late nineteenth

century positivism ("How could I solve problems that are not of this world?") has been replaced by the perception-pushing uncertainties of early twentieth-century physics, and Gilman feels that it is indeed possible to solve problems that are not of this world. Gilman's dreams represent Gilman himself traveling in the fourth dimension, and he thus enters the non-Euclidean plane about which he has theorized. Lovecraft depicts this plane in baffling terms: "Gilman's dreams consisted largely in plunges through limitless abysses of inexplicably colored twilight and bafflingly disordered sound; abysses whose material and gravitational properties, and whose relation to his own entity, he could not even begin to explain" (328). The result Lovecraft achieves is that Gilman's dream-visions, even though they are literally accurate depictions of the dimension that has inspired human religions, do anything but provide the reassuring metaphysical answers that Ivan attributes to unearthly logic. This plane, ungoverned by earthly logic, is almost impossible for even the brilliant Gilman to understand. In other words Lovecraft mocks the religious notion of the suspension of earthly laws (in miracles for example) by showing that without earthly logic any human can only be helpless and baffled:

The abysses were by no means vacant, being crowded with indescribably angled masses of alien-hued substance, some of which appeared to be organic while others seemed inorganic. A few of the organic objects tended to awake vague memories in the back of his mind, though he could form no conscious idea of what they mockingly resembled or suggested... All the objects – organic and inorganic alike – were totally beyond description or even comprehension. Gilman sometimes compared the inorganic matter to prisms, labyrinths, clusters of cubes and planes, and cyclopean buildings; and the organic things struck him variously as groups of bubbles, octopi, centipedes, living Hindoo idols, and intricate arabesques roused into a kind of ophidian animation. Everything he saw was unspeakably menacing and horrible. (328)

Here Lovecraft presents a very common atheist objection to Christian arguments in favour of the supernatural: granting that the supernatural exists, how can one rule out polytheism (such as Hinduism) or even competing versions of monotheism (such as Judaism or Islam), or even competing versions of one's own monotheism (as the by-no-means trivial disagreements between factions of Christianity attest to). Indeed, in

Gilman's experience, Hinduism seems closer to being correct than Christianity, though both have anthropomorphized actually-existing aspects of the fourth dimension (recall the devil that Gilman encounters). Looming above such details is the fact that Gilman's Euclidean mind is at an utter loss to deal with this non-Euclidean environment. Eventually, he is consumed by it. In Lovecraft's works, science is bad precisely because it reveals the truth of apparently supernatural concepts.

Gilman is not the only three-dimensional being in the fourth dimension: "In time he observed a further mystery – the tendency of certain entities to appear suddenly out of empty space, or to disappear totally with equal suddenness" (329). These objects are three-dimensional objects entering or exiting the fourth dimension, as Gilman himself does several times (334). The implication here is that other humans – perhaps hapless dreamers in severe danger, like Gilman – have also experienced this beyond. The ancient shamanic concept of dreams – a person's spirit literally flying out over the landscape at night – is here employed by Lovecraft. Dreams and nightmares thus actually expose humans to a "hideous dimension in which they are practically helpless," so that it would be better if humans were simply animals rather than immaterial souls inhabiting (but separable from) animal bodies. Humanity has a difficult enough time dealing with physical threats without additionally worrying about metaphysical ones, which Lovecraft takes care to portray as infinitely more threatening than bodily harm could ever be.

The truth in Lovecraft's fiction is that humanity is not alone. Intelligent persons seek a sort of higher meaning for human life, which cause them to strain at the bounds of human understanding in disciplines which propose to seek truth, such as science, religion, and philosophy. What they never realize until it is too late is that by doing so they stumble into an incomprehensible realm of danger so severe that bodily death is to be hoped for (and to be hoped final) and universal suicide might be ethical. Dostoevsky fears a non-humanistic cosmos, that is, one without a God. Lovecraft takes as a fact the indifference of the cosmos to human affairs – and starting from this premise, he finds gods to fear.

Both Walter Gilman and Ivan Karamazov, upon discovering what they believe to be the truth of nihilism, immediately regret their own intellectual explorations. Because Ivan recognizes nihilism as such a danger, he argues that his own views (atheism,

nihilism) are destructive and should be suppressed as much as possible among the public, even if they are true. This idea is later expanded upon greatly by Ivan in "The Grand Inquisitor." The inquisitor is in some ways Ivan's mouthpiece, and he proceeds to defend religion as an institution while condemning it as false. The inquisitor argues that only a few men are able to endure freedom, and that by insisting on freedom Christ forsakes most of humanity. Like Ivan, the Inquisitor protests the incomprehensibility of religion: "Can Thou really have come only to the elect and for the elect? If so, it is a mystery and we cannot understand it. And if it is a mystery, we too have a right to preach a mystery, and to teach them that it's not the free judgment of their hearts, not love that matters, but a mystery which they must follow blindly" (237). The inquisitor's plan is to accept the idea of mystery, indeed to insist on it: "We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon *miracle, mystery, and authority*" (237). The inquisitor's "noble lie" is meant to preserve order and create happiness by guarding the terrible truth from the public.

To this end the inquisitor seeks to craft religion to fit the people: to allow sin, as well as to answer and explain all in consoling terms (238). Above all, the burden of freedom will be lifted: "All will be happy, all the millions of creatures except the hundred thousand who rule over them" (240). The inquisitor admits his atheism, and his moral justification for lying to the masses by telling them that Christianity is true: "Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in Thy name, and beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we shall entice them with the reward of heaven and eternity" (240). Humanity needs a purpose for its existence, even if that purpose is an illusion. This explains Ivan's statement, "I go on living in spite of logic," later repeated by Kafka as the maxim "logic is of course unshakeable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to live" (178).¹⁵ Ivan and his inquisitor, both unbelievers, argue that the truth (that is, nihilism) must be kept from the public at all costs: the illusion of meaning and morality must be preserved.

Lovecraft presents a parallel theme. The reticent investigator Thurston in "The Call of Cthulhu" (1927) makes much the same argument as Ivan's inquisitor. The story begins with the heading, "Found among the papers of the Late Francis Wayland

¹⁵ From *The Trial*. Both quotations are close to Nietzsche's idea that truth may be poisonous to life, and to Lovecraft's statement "All rationalism tends to minimize the value and importance of life." (1990, 110)

Thurston, of Boston" (139), implying that like Gilman this man has been murdered. However, the crucial difference here is that Thurston has had the chance to piece together the manuscript which forms the story ("The Dreams in the Witch House" is narrated from the third person), and he recommends against passing on his knowledge. Thurston's quintessentially Lovecraftian opening statement is a warning against seeking truth:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (139)

Thurston explains that he has deduced through his investigations into occult matters that the truth about human existence is so terrible that it must remain hidden. Lovecraft's "new dark age" may well be a time like the middle ages, ruled by the Church, which inhibits scientific inquiry and kills people to hide the awful truth for the good of all.

Thurston states that he began his investigation with a professor's notes pertaining to a worldwide outbreak of riots, suicides, nightmares and mental illnesses which took place in the spring of 1925. The professor's interest in these events is sparked by an encounter with one Henry Anthony Wilcox, a sculptor who has produced a new work which is an image of a real being that he saw in a vision. The being is later revealed to be Cthulhu; he actually exists, and Wilcox, among with thousands of others worldwide, actually saw him in a nightmare that caused severe distress and eventually madness. The professor's notes summarize his request for records of dreams thus:

Average people in society and business... gave an almost completely negative result, though scattered cases of uneasy but formless nocturnal impressions appear here and there, always between March 23rd and April 2nd – the period of young Wilcox's delirium. Scientific men were little more affected, though four cases of vague description suggested fugitive glimpses of strange landscapes, and in one

case there is mentioned a dread of something abnormal... It was from the artists and poets that the pertinent answers came. (145)

Here Lovecraft implies that aesthetic sensitivity is actually an extra sense which allows for real visions of remote events. In other words, the type of people who experience dreams, visions, nightmares and abnormal experiences (ghostly encounters or alien abductions, say) may happen to be creative, but they are not creating (consciously or subconsciously) or even misinterpreting these experiences, but are rather literally experiencing their own existence interfered with by supernatural forces. The fact that many such experiences appear, alongside competing religious claims) appear to contradict each other Lovecraft attributes to, in a brilliant adoption of religious arguments, the insufficiency of earthly reason to understand unearthly things.

Lovecraft implies that many of the dream-impressions that these men receive relate to things which are beyond earthly order. A particularly effective case is that of an architect who witnesses the non-Euclidean geometry of R'lyeh, symbolizing the breakdown of three-dimensional order that humans rely on: the man is driven mad (146). The second part of the story, "The Tale of Inspector Legrasse" relates the discovery of a cult in the swamps south of New Orleans by Legrasse and his men in 1908, who find the cult in possession of a statuette resembling the modern-day sculpture produced by Wilcox: "Its vast, awesome, and incalculable age was unmistakable; yet not one link did it shew with any known type of art belonging to civilisation's youth – or indeed to any other time" (148). Its material, workmanship and hieroglyphics are similarly unknown.

Later, the cult in possession of this seemingly non-terrestrial, pre-human statuette is found to correspond roughly with shadowy groups elsewhere in the world, and it becomes apparent that these secret sects are the remnants of the world's first religion, which has "come down from horribly ancient aeons before ever the world was made" (149). The "Great Old Ones" - the repulsive, primal deities that these cults worship - demand sacrifices, and witnessing their presence leads to madness. A captured cultist explains Their omniscience: "They knew all that was occurring in the universe, but Their mode of speech was transmitted thought... When, after infinities of chaos, the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by molding their dreams; for only the thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals" (155). Note

also the claim that They can communicate instantly to human beings wholly inside of their heads, without any external measurable transmission that would indicate that the voices that these people hear are real. Thus, for Lovecraft, being devoutly religious is not distinguishable from being mentally ill, except that in the case of the cultists their beliefs are later verified as true; the “Great Old Ones” they worship actually exist.

The explanation for all of this is not supplied by Lovecraft, but scholars have generally understood this story as “quasi science fiction” (Joshi, “Weird Tale” x), implying a materialistic worldview where abnormal phenomena may only be accomplished by the manipulation of matter (that is, through the use of technology). While it true that any sufficiently advanced material technology would be indistinguishable from magic from the perspective of those who did not understand it, most of Lovecraft’s entities are not meant as technologically advanced extraterrestrials. Joshi states, “There is no entity in Lovecraft which is not in some sense material” (“Weird Tale” 186), but this puts him at a loss to account for the very *Call* of Cthulhu (the accurate vision of distant R’lyeh that numerous persons worldwide all see in their dreams on the night that Cthulhu rises from the deep).

Indeed, Thurston repeatedly states that he no longer believes that materialism accurately describes the world of human experience. One such statement is “My attitude was still one of absolute materialism, *as I wish it still were*” (159). The explanation for Thurston’s statement that his attitude has shifted away from materialism, however, can be found in the words of one of the cultists in the story: “These Great Old Ones... were not composed altogether of flesh and blood. They had shape – for did not this star-fashioned image prove it? – but *that shape was not made of matter*” (155 emphasis added). Cthulhu, then, is not an organic entity similar to earthly life that has developed further abilities through technological advancement, but rather something inherently unlike earthly life, with an utterly different range of abilities and motivations. Cthulhu is not an alien – he is a god. Interestingly, the Great Old Ones appear to operate with Nietzschean, amorality, as the same cultist explains the effects on humanity of their return: “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 and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy” (155, emphasis added).

R'lyeh, the sunken city which rises for a brief moment, is described as an invasion of alien physics onto the earth. Wilcox, for example, describes its geometry as "*all wrong*" (158). When the Norwegian sailor Gustaf Johansen actually witnesses the city after it has risen, he notes bizarre contradictions in its form, so that "all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset" (167). Lovecraft implies by the mere presence of R'lyeh that these rules are local rather than universal (and that some laws override others, a very strange idea). There are angles that are acute, but behave as if they are obtuse, and areas which alternately appear concave and convex (167). However, it is not simply the geometry that is wrong, but also optics: "The very sun of heaven seemed distorted when viewed through the polarizing miasma welling out from this sea-soaked perversion" (166). All of this represents a solid, three-dimensional version of the non-Euclidean beyond that which Karamazov and Gilman theorize about, and here the difference between Lovecraft's approach to visions of such a plane and Dostoevsky's is clear. For Lovecraft, one should expect madness rather than consolation from a plane which defies the earthly logic that one is used to.

In Lovecraft's fiction, there is a greater truth, and some madmen, epileptics, and prophets really *do* have contact with "the Beyond." But their state – paranoid, unkempt, suicidal, dysfunctional – reveals what sort of "Beyond" it is. Lovecraft's Thurston is at one with Ivan's inquisitor in believing the public too weak for truth, only in Lovecraft's fiction this is a fundamental weakness of humans as tiny yet egotistical life-forms with limited Euclidean minds, as opposed to the spiritual wretchedness of humanity found in Dostoevsky's works. Yet for both writers, if nihilism is the truth then humanity must choose between the truth and its own well-being. Should nihilism be seen as true by the public, both writers argue, then chaos, cruelty, madness and death would become the rule. Joshi explains that Lovecraft did not argue for atheism in public, because "he had little faith that the mass of people could ever find emotional or intellectual satisfaction in an atheistic conception of the universe" (Joshi, "Magick" 34). Lovecraft explains his elitist views on religion in terms which sounds very similar to Ivan's Inquisitor:

My contention is that religion is still useful amongst the herd – that it helps their orderly conduct as nothing else could, and that it gives them an emotional satisfaction they could not get elsewhere. I don't say that it does either of these

things as well as it used to do, but I do say that I believe nothing else could do them so well even now. (Joshi, "Magick" 35)

Thurston insists throughout his manuscript that the point of his piecing together and passing on the truth is, surprisingly, to repress the truth and to help to hide it. This is confusing and potentially contradictory: why would Thurston explain something that he wants no one to understand? The answer may be discovered by comparing Thurston with Ivan's inquisitor. The inquisitor knows that the truth may only be hidden by systematically discouraging inquiry and promoting falsehoods, and this requires an intellectual elite who know the truth, that is, who know what it is they are seeking to hide. The only way to make sense of the very existence of Thurston's manuscript is to suppose that he wrote the story in order to explain the truth to a presumably small intellectual elite like that of the inquisitor's, exactly so that the truth may be hidden from the public as effectively as possible and so that other intelligent persons will cease inquiring.

Thurston ends his manuscript with what Lovecraft surely means to be a supremely ironic reflection on the inability to escape the truth of nihilism: "Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye" (169). As Thurston is dead, and the reader (whose access to Thurston's explanation of the terrible truth has not been limited by some truth-inhibiting group) is reading his manuscript precisely because Thurston's prayer has not come true, Lovecraft's ending heaps nihilism upon nihilism while mocking the inefficiency of prayer. Thurston's intellectual abilities have indeed been "a disease" in a world where the truth is nihilism, and his humanitarian hopes of hiding the truth have gotten him killed; creativity is a curse which causes its bearer to be susceptible to (true) nihilistic nightmares, and all of humanity is doomed not just to death but to the forcible revelation of this terrible truth by the forthcoming return of the Great Old Ones.

The titular "Call of Cthulhu" is a dream-vision shared by many persons that literally reflects a spatially and metaphysically remote reality, validating in Lovecraft's mythology the notions of trance-vision, spirit-travel, and even prophecy (which in Lovecraft's opinion could only accurately reflect a remote reality if some form of metaphysical dualism is literally true). In "The Call of Cthulhu," then, along with "The Dreams in the Witch House" and many late Lovecraft stories, religious notions of dream-

vision, prophecy, and spirit-travel are revealed as actual phenomena that have been interpreted subjectively by humans due to their inherent incapacity to understand them; human minds collapse as they attempt to comprehend these experiences and the deities behind them. Every character in "The Call of Cthulhu" who encounters Cthulhu or his fellow entities, either in dreams or physically, is either an amoral frenzied savage or suffers madness or death.

Lovecraft's gods are initially detectable only through subjective experience (like real gods), though unlike real gods highly suggestive objective evidence which is enough to convince scientific investigators always comes to light. Yet, for those ahead of their time – for the prophets, the epileptics, the madmen, the messengers from God – the only link to the deities they know to be real is subjective experience, for "Their mode of speech [is] transmitted Thought" (155). As in the case of fervent believers in real religions, once one has been mentally unbalanced by the experience of "receiving these messages," one begins to see motivations behind many things that relate to one's religion. They orchestrate events invisibly and provide hidden messages to those who know them; They will soon return, confirming Their existence and intentions to the severe (perhaps eternal) detriment of all who have not believed in Them. They touch the lives of people in many ways, and once one has been awakened to Their presence one loses the ability to differentiate between chance and Their Will. One descends into a sort of horrible schizophrenia where everything relates to invisible forces, nothing is non-threatening, and evil lurks in every corner. In Lovecraft's parody of religious experience and thinking, this dark delusion is rendered as true.

Chapter 3: His Kingdom Come

Fear before Him, all the earth. (I. Chron. 16:30)

Lovecraft's view of nihilism as an inescapable conclusion given Nietzsche's analysis and Darwin's scientific reductionism, as I've explained in Chapter 1, and his depiction of religious experience as contact with a realm beyond earthly logic and human comprehension, as I've explained it in Chapter 2, help to establish the conceptual background for this chapter's focus on the ways that Lovecraft's fiction parodies religious thinking. In this chapter I offer an analysis of "The Dunwich Horror" (1932), Lovecraft's direct parody of the life of Christ in which a half-"divine" man seeks to bring his "kingdom" to the earth. Lovecraft seeks to show in this story that it is only a form of naïve and arrogant anthropomorphism that allows Christians to consider the Christ story the greatest event in human history. Instead, informed by his understanding of evolution, Lovecraft portrays any such event so simultaneously disgusting and destructive that any responsible educated person would respond by attempting to destroy such a half-human, half-divine "savior," and be justified on humanitarian grounds for doing so. The second part of the chapter consists of an assessment of the relation of Lovecraft's parody of religious thinking to other forms of his fiction, including later novellas such as *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), upon which Joshi and others base their interpretation of Lovecraft's fiction as quasi science fiction.

Lovecraft's celebrated opening passages in "The Dunwich Horror" portray the waning influence of civilization on the Dunwich region. After establishing a background consisting of local legend and folklore, Lovecraft explains that the inhabitants of Dunwich are "repellently decadent".¹⁶ and comments that "The average of their intelligence is woefully low, whilst their annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnamable violence and perversity".¹⁷ All of this is Lovecraft's way of hinting that religious belief is a highly likely possibility in such a place, and should read in the context of his belief that religious belief is best suited

¹⁶ References to "The Dunwich Horror" refer to the *H P Lovecraft Archive's* online version, no pagination.

¹⁷ Compare this description of the rural degenerate "white trash" of Dunwich to Lovecraft's similar description of illegal immigrants in "The Horror at Red Hook"; there are striking similarities.

to uncivilized persons. Lovecraft made his definitive statement on the subject five years before "The Dunwich Horror" with "The Festival" (1927). Joshi explains,

[Religion] proves to be the source of terror in "The Festival," whose culminating scene occurs in what is in reality an exquisite eighteenth-century Church in Marblehead (St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Frog Lane). But Lovecraft sees this Christian edifice as a mere façade for rituals of much older provenance and when the band of townspeople descend robotically down a "trap-door of the vaults which yawned loathsomely open just before the pulpit," we can see... an indication of the superficiality of Christianity's formalization of primitive festivals from the depths of prehistory. ("Magick" 102)

For Lovecraft, who uses the sea to symbolize evolutionary antiquity, the church offers not an ascent to a higher intellectual reality but rather a descent into the most primitive layers of the human mind, manifested in an indulgence in superstitious instincts and fertility rituals. Note Lovecraft's terminology in the following explanation of his views on the matter: "The crude human animal is ineradicably superstitious, and there is every historical and biological reason that he should be." (Joshi, "Magick" 35). Lovecraft explains, "Rationalistic conceptions of the universe involve a type of mental victory over hereditary emotion quite impossible to the undeveloped and uneducated intellect" (Joshi, "Magick" 35). For Lovecraft, civilization is a victory over the instinctive emotions bequeathed upon humanity by nature. Thus, the religious worshippers in his works are (like the immigrants in "The Horror at Red Hook" and the cults in "The Call of Cthulhu") always "crude human animals," and "barbarians."

Lovecraft, whose condemnation of instinct leads him to view paganism (in the sense of a naturalistic religion which focuses on fertility and power) with disgust, deeply empathizes with the type of unworldly Christian ethics which seeks to suppress instinct and focuses instead on spiritual transcendence. Lovecraft, that is, recognizes the similarity between his own disgust with the body and his desire for dreamlike or transcendent experience, and similar features of religion. The difference is that the more civilized one is (the more of a "victory over hereditary emotion" one has), the more one does not require what Lovecraft sees as the false emotional crutch of religious belief:

As for Puritan inhibitions - I admire them more every day. They are attempts to make of life a work of art - to fashion a pattern of beauty in the hog-wallow that is animal existence - and they spring out of that divine hatred for life which marks the deepest and most sensitive soul...An intellectual Puritan is a fool - almost as much of a fool as is an anti-Puritan - but a Puritan in the conduct of life is the only kind of man one may honestly respect. I have no respect or reverence whatever for any person who does not live abstemiously and purely - I can like and tolerate him...but in my heart I feel him to be my inferior - nearer the abysmal amoeba and the Neanderthal man. (Lord, n.pag).¹⁸

Lovecraft uses the term puritan here in the vernacular sense of strict control of instinctive urges, particularly sexual ones; but he differentiates between puritan conduct (to him admirable, given its opposition to instinct) and puritan belief (to him reprehensible, since it is superstitious and thus to him represents a capitulation to instinct). Lovecraft sees repressing the instincts for the sake of later reward as childish and emotional, and argues that this is not really to obtain victory over the instincts at all. He summarizes his view thus: "An irreligious barbarian is a scientific impossibility" (Joshi, "Magick" 35).

Thus, while Lovecraft expresses at the start of "The Dunwich Horror" his actual opinion that it is no surprise that reports of mysterious and supernatural events should emerge from among ignorant and illiterate people, he also follows the premise that such reports are actually literally true. The juxtaposition of these two contradictory factors: the one Lovecraft's actual explanation for religious belief (instinctive superstition), the other a parodic following of the intellectual claims behind religious belief (that normally undetectable entities have plans for the future of humanity and the earth) illustrates Lovecraft's method of writing weird fiction as a mocking thought experiment based on religion as a whole.

The direct parody of Christianity begins when Wilbur Whateley is born in a partially abandoned farmhouse on Candlemas, 1913. His birth is accompanied by signs - noises in the hills surrounding Dunwich and the insistent nocturnal barking of dogs throughout the town. Of Wilbur's mother Lavinia Lovecraft states "she sometimes tried to read the great odorous books which her father had inherited through two centuries of

Whateleys, and which were fast falling to pieces with age and wormholes. She had never been to school, but was filled with disjointed scraps of ancient lore that Old Whateley had taught her". This passage reveals some of the specifics of Lovecraft's view of the uneducated, anti-intellectual nature of American religion. Lovecraft sees American Protestantism, with its disdain for science and reason (recall that the Scopes "Monkey" Trial, in which Protestant evangelicals tried to prohibit the teaching of evolution, took place in 1926), as mere "disjointed scraps" of populist lore with no respect for tradition and no scholarly authority to be found. Thinking religion inevitable, Lovecraft could (and did) admire the Catholic Church as a cultural institution (Joshi, "Primal" 117), so that, at least in "The Dunwich Horror" specifically, it is a particularly American Protestant manifestation of the Christian religion which bears the brunt of his attack, though he criticizes the ideas behind Christianity as a whole. Lavinia Whateley has no known husband, and Lovecraft hints strongly that Wilbur Whateley's is an immaculate conception.

Lavinia's father, Old Whateley, begins a cattle-buying spree, though his property never seems crowded, so whatever god is involved here clearly requires animal sacrifices (as Yaweh does in the Old Testament). Wilbur grows at an alarming rate, begins to talk at eleven months, and displays signs of high intelligence. However, Lovecraft describes his physical appearance as even more bestial than that of the other Dunwich folk, implying that Wilbur's divine parentage makes him more animalistic, not less. Wilbur, fascinated from an early age by his grandfather's old occult books, is known to "mutter an unfamiliar jargon, and chant in bizarre rhythms," a nod to xenoglossy and its association with religious trance. The Whateleys are suspected of lighting great blazes atop a table-like stone which crowns the summit of Sentinel Hill on May Eve and Halloween. Wilbur is "born on Candlemas - nine months after May Eve of 1912," so that he is conceived during the time of year celebrated by the ancients as one of fertility.

When Wilbur's grandfather Old Whateley begins to rebuild his property, Lovecraft's most biting parody of religion begins: Old Whateley is a "demented babblers" who is heir to "disjointed scraps of ancient lore" and he constructs a runway leading to the second floor of his giant barn so that he can march cattle up to be consumed by the invisible presence apparently lurking inside. No one is allowed to see inside the house;

callers never get past the front room. The Whateleys soon attract the attention of state authorities, but manage to continue their activities unobserved.

After Old Whateley's death, Wilbur Whateley (henceforth Whateley) carries on his grandfather's occult activities and finds that he requires access to a different version of the *Necronomicon* in order to resolve textual issues. He travels to Miskatonic University to consult the copy there. To pacify the book's guardian, an educated Anglo-Saxon professor named Armitage, he admits that he is seeking to resolve "discrepancies, duplications, and ambiguities" regarding a "formula or incantation" in his own "priceless but imperfect copy of Dr Dee's English version". Armitage, however, does not trust Whateley and resolves to closely supervise his activities.

Armitage observes Wilbur comparing the two tattered ancient texts in search of a powerful truth about divine beings. In this scene Lovecraft illustrates what he sees as the problem with basing knowledge on scripture. Lovecraft tries to illustrate, through Wilbur's textual comparisons, what he sees as the contradiction of an ancient, fragmentarily incomplete, imperfectly edited book of God. Lovecraft's implication here is that if beings so powerful as to affect the nature of the universe actually existed, it is odd that the only source of information about such beings would be a fragmentary ancient book present in multiple contradictory versions. One might expect to discover the existence of such beings (if indeed they exist) in a modern scientific text, where one can discover many processes with immediate and observable effects on reality. Given the degree to which such beings would influence reality (being credited, among other things, with the creation of the universe as a whole), it would be positively strange for their existence to be largely unknown to scientists, while the assertions of ancient manuscripts regarding the nature of reality are significantly more accurate than current-day science.

However, the *Necronomicon* itself contains a justification for the fact that only it (and similar ancient occult works) can explain the existence of such beings: they are invisible. This begs the question of how one can know which ancient text to believe, since numerous ancient texts exist, and they make largely contradictory claims about the world and the powers that control it. Armitage, spying over Whateley's shoulder, mentally translates the Latin passage the latter is consulting (the longest quotation from the *Necronomicon* in any of Lovecraft's stories). An edited selection follows:

Past, present, future, all are one in Yog-Sothoth [...] He knows where They had trod earth's fields, and where They still tread them, and *why no one can behold Them as They tread*. [...] of Their semblance can no man know, saving only in the features of those They have begotten on mankind; and of those are there many sorts, differing in likeness from man's truest eidolon to that shape without sight or substance which is Them. They walk unseen and foul in lonely places where the Words have been spoken and the Rites howled through at their Seasons.
(emphasis added)

The invisibility of these beings is an important point. It reflects Lovecraft's attempt to portray religious thinking as an almost schizophrenic interpretation of reality, dominated by invisible agents and hidden conspiracies that only believers know are real (and only through dream-visions and interpretations of ancient texts). The passage goes on to explain that while evidence for these beings exists, this evidence can only be found in places inaccessible to humanity such as Antarctica and the bottom of the ocean. The passage elsewhere consists of a combination of pagan earth-cycle imagery, monotheistic notions of a being "beyond all spheres of force and matter, space and time," descriptions of occult forces, and repeated warnings (in time-honored religious tradition) about the power of the entities described.

Whateley then demands to take the book with him, claiming that it would be a "mortal sin" not to let him have it, thus citing the displeasure of invisible deities in order to get what he wants. But Armitage is not so stupid. The degenerate messiah Whateley returns at night and tries to break into the library. Here he is killed by the guard dog, and his true nature is exposed: he is a being only partially human, with animal and alien features. After this description, Lovecraft comments that "He had taken somewhat after his unknown father". The "Dunwich Horror" itself is not, however, Wilbur Whateley but instead his invisible brother, who breaks loose after going unfed for weeks following Wilbur's demise. Amusingly, the first to sight with amazement the carnage caused by the powerful invisible deity is a hired boy named Luther. This deliberate reference to the most famous figure of early Protestantism, Martin Luther, supports the notion that Lovecraft is condemning Protestant Christianity specifically, and that he is doing so because he sees it as a rejuvenation of the worst aspects of monotheism – populism and a

willingness to respond to the emotions of the masses, alongside (and connected to) and the belief in interventionism. In contrast, Lovecraft sympathized with the intellectual hierarchy and cultural tradition of the Catholic Church.

Armitage travels to Dunwich, discovers Wilbur's diary, and decodes it. He discovers that "some terrible elder race of beings from another dimension [...] wished to drag [earth] away from the solar system and cosmos of matter into some other plane or phase of entity from which it had once fallen, vigintillions of aeons ago". This signifies for Lovecraft the return to an initial age of the supernatural that informs mythic thinking, including that which provides the psychological background for monotheism. In this sort of thinking, supernatural forces create and shape the world (as in Biblical history) then withdraw (where after they can only be detected through subjective experience), but will return to end the world (the apocalypse). This forthcoming return of the earth to another dimension or plane of existence is Lovecraft's version of "Revelations." The civilized professor Armitage eventually succeeds in destroying the Dunwich Horror, while his brother Wilbur is killed in a library. Thus, for Lovecraft, religion and literacy are characteristically opposed. If one must pick one or the other, it is clear which side Lovecraft is on.

The Dunwich Horror itself, a colossal monster, is visible only for an instant in the story. It appears far more alien than Wilbur, yet has a face similar to Wilbur's on top of its body, a fact that Armitage explains thus: "It was his twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did". At the moment of its sacrificial destruction on the altar-crowned Sentinel Hill, it screams "FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!" Michel Houellebecq has called this ending a "repugnant parody of the Passion" and "a faithful echo of "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani" (112). If Wilbur's monstrous alien brother has been forsaken by the incomprehensible deity that fathered him, implies Lovecraft, then we are all the better for it, as it is most certainly in the interests of the entire human race to avoid seeing any more of where that came from. In the context of the *Necronomicon* passage which claims that the earth is permeated with invisible forces and dominated by an omnipresent deity beyond the confines of space and time, the possibility that this invisible deity (Yog-Sothoth) can actually hear the death-cry of Wilbur's monstrous brother raises disturbing possibilities. Indeed, the very existence of Wilbur and his brother – both somehow sired

by Yog-Sothoth, who apparently intended for his offspring to bring his “message” of apocalyptic transformation to the world - seems to confirm the claims in the *Necronomicon*.

Lovecraft here makes it clear that if educated, disinterested persons were around at the time of a “deity” impregnating a human female, they would have destroyed any offspring as quickly as possible. As Bruce Lord illustrates in “The Genetics of Horror: Sex and Racism in H.P. Lovecraft’s Fiction,” Lovecraft’s apprehension over sexuality and race is expressed in his fiction in a fused form in which human beings’ breeding with non-human races becomes a source of degeneration and disgust. Lord explains, “In Lovecraft’s vision of humanity in decline, sexual reproduction causes an effect exactly opposite to Darwinian evolution: negative biological traits propagate whilst positive ones become extinct. For Lovecraft, the ‘natural’ act of reproduction is not equated with life, but with degeneration, decay, and eventually death” (n.pag). Lovecraft’s descriptions of the gruesome anatomies of Wilbur and his brother reflect his anxiety about sex, race, animality, interbreeding, degeneration, reverse evolution. These descriptions mix physical details based on insects, humanoids, cephalopods, amphibians, and others. The bizarre and repulsive mixture of traits is Lovecraft’s way of depicting interbreeding between different species as unnatural, even if one of the partners happens to be a deity. This serves to emphasize Lovecraft’s view that a deity has no business impregnating a human female for its own purposes. In the context of the apocalyptic plans laid by the Whateley family (one is tempted to say sect or cult), Lovecraft implies, it is better if deities simply leave humans alone completely.

Lovecraft uses the interbreeding theme elsewhere, most notably in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” where it is the primary theme; yet similar notions are scattered throughout his fiction as a whole. In “The Horror at Red Hook,” for example, the police discover in the underground ruins of a building “small cells, in seventeen of which - hideous to relate - solitary prisoners in a state of complete idiocy were found chained, including four mothers with infants of disturbingly strange appearance. These infants died soon after exposure to the light” (“Red Hook”). The interbreeding between humans and “divine beings” here is similar that found in “The Dunwich Horror.” The motif that the infants die after exposure to light, implying that the non-humans among their parents

can exist only in darkness, is a clever mockery of “The God of the Gaps” argument, an atheist criticism of the tendency of religious apologists to place confirmatory evidence for the existence of the beings in whom they believe past the limits of what scientists currently know – that is, in gaps in current knowledge. Lovecraft always places evidence for the “gods” or entities in his fiction just beyond what the majority of scientists and scholars are able to detect; these beings are conveniently invisible, or if they are visible, they exist only in darkness, so they still cannot be seen. Exactly this theme resurfaces in Lovecraft’s late story “The Haunter of the Dark” (1935), featuring a creature that can only exist in darkness just like the implied creatures in “Red Hook”. The evidence for Cthulhu is on the ocean floor; the evidence for other beings is in undiscovered parts of Antarctica. All of this reflects a constant usage of the “God of the Gaps” argument on Lovecraft’s part, which is present in “The Dunwich Horror” in the *Necronomicon* passage which explicitly claims the gods are all invisible (for a reason only Yog-Sothoth knows none the less!) and places evidence for them in places largely inaccessible to humans.

Lovecraft gives Wilbur Whateley a brother in order to depict the problems with the very idea of divine parentage: since we know (after Darwin and Mendel) how humans (like other life-forms) inherit traits from their ancestors, to what degree would any offspring of a human and a non-human inherit traits from each? Wilbur seems to be a roughly half-human hybrid, while his brother inherits hardly any of his mother’s human attributes. For Lovecraft, who presents evolutionary laws as governing the existence of any possible life forms (including gods), the offspring of a human and a god would not, within an evolutionary matrix, look anything like the offspring of two humans. A messiah cannot claim divine parentage while looking human; and indeed Wilbur Whateley is actually forced to hide what he looks like because, were anyone to see what he really is, the truth of his parentage would be revealed. He is the opposite of a prophet claiming divine parentage (and Christ is not the only example of this claim) and yet looking normal in human terms; instead he looks alien and has to hide his plans precisely because they do reflect a forthcoming world-changing event.

“The Dunwich Horror” (1932) represents a meeting place for fifteen years’ worth of Lovecraft’s thematic obsessions: the anxiety toward race and race-mixing displayed in

"The Horror at Red Hook" (1927), the intellectual hierarchy and disgust for instinct found in "The Rats in the Walls" (1924), the revelation of normally invisible planes and dimensions seen in "From Beyond" (1920), and of the human interaction with them among occult traditions in "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932) and the root of religion in primal rites which appeal to primitive people in "The Festival" (1923), all contribute to Lovecraft's nihilistic parody of the Christ story.

"The Dunwich Horror" is not one of Lovecraft's most successful stories. Lovecraft's method of parodying religious concepts works most effectively when he undermines these concepts by first drawing the reader in to an atmospheric and apparently believable situation without making his intentions explicit. This is why "The Festival" works so well – its first half is among Lovecraft's most aesthetically beautiful and atmospherically impressive writing, and it remains vague and mysterious until Lovecraft finally makes his point (that religion is an inherently primal, instinctive activity). No one is screaming "FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!"

Lovecraft's method in his most successful stories is to slowly draws his readers into a philosophical ambush in which the lurking terror is nihilism and the victim religious thinking. In his most effective work, Lovecraft has the reader agree with his exposition of the absurdity of a given religious concept before any defensive mechanism can cause him or her to reject it. Lovecraft seeks to sidestep the cultural programming disseminated by popular apologetics (a factory of attempts to reconcile science, particularly Darwin, with religion). When Lovecraft's intentions are not initially clear, he successfully presents religious concepts as a thought experiment based on what is known about reality, life, and the universe, which becomes self-evidently ridiculous to the point of inhibiting human sanity. Lovecraft's reader may find him- or herself agreeing that the notion of invisible transcendent entities detectable only through dreams actually existing and influencing human life is a nightmarish one, and that humanity as a whole is very lucky that it is not true, before actually realizing that what Lovecraft has described is exactly his idea of what actual religious beliefs entail. The partial failure of "The Dunwich Horror" arises from the fact that Lovecraft's parodic intentions are clear from the very beginning of the story, and so his readers see the philosophical ambush coming

and too easily understand Lovecraft's version of the concept as an attack on it (which it is), and therefore rationalize defenses against it.

One of the most effective aspects of Lovecraft's parodic approach to religious thinking is his presentation of the idea of an illegitimate or biased scientific denial of evidence for religious propositions. If one believes in a worldview that contradicts the consensus of the scientific establishment (the most notorious current example is creationism, but one could also list "alternative" versions of medicine, archaeology, history, and so forth), one requires a justification for this contradiction. Public advocates of science and skepticism such as *Skeptic Magazine* founder Michael Shermer tend to argue that "alternative" histories (Holocaust denial, conspiracy theories), archaeologies (Atlantis, the theories of Erich Von Daniken), paleontologies (creationism, whether Christian, Islamic, or Native North American), and so forth, are merely emotionally and ideologically motivated denials of hard scientific evidence on the part of self-interested charlatans or insufficiently rational (and therefore easily deluded) individuals). Shermer's book *Why People Believe Weird Things* (1997) includes chapters on all of these subjects.

The scientific method has achieved unprecedented success in discovering facts (or at least highly useful knowledge) about the world precisely because it systematically eliminates human bias; a strong implication of the difference between scientific and unscientific methods of discovering knowledge (and their radically varying track records) is that emotional and ideological tendencies in human psychology often interfere with the ability to discover truth. Many of the above listed "alternative" subjects implicitly or explicitly justify broad human emotional desires (the survival of death by consciousness), intuitions (the belief in an immaterial spirit) or specific ideologies (fundamentalist Christianity, neo-Nazi racism, Islamism, and so forth). Highly notable in the matter of the prestige of science in the modern era is the fact that many nonscientific theories, even creationism, now market themselves in scientific guises. The rise of pseudoscience is essentially the result of humans' difficulty giving up on emotionally or ideologically appealing prescientific ideas even after the rise of the scientific method. This point of view is effectively summarized in a statement by scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov: "Inspect every piece of pseudoscience and you will find a security blanket, a thumb to suck, a skirt to hold" (Asimov, n.pag).

On the other hand, those who wish to reject established scientific or scholarly accounts are essentially forced to believe that the scientific and scholarly establishment is biased (often against their religious sect or type of supernatural beliefs in particular), incompetent, malevolent, or some combination of all three. They are forced to argue that their own beliefs are reasonable and supported by evidence, and therefore that the scientific establishment which won't accept this evidence will not do so not because the evidence is insufficient, but rather because either the scientific establishment itself has a vested interest in keeping things status quo, this establishment is comprised of "dogmatic materialists" or "scientific fundamentalists," or else simply that scientists are *afraid of the truth*.

Lovecraft's fiction encompasses a broad variety of absolutely outlandish claims about the origins and history of human civilization (forgotten human civilizations in the arctic), about archaeology (Atlantis and other lost continents, hidden occult traditions), about physics (fourth dimensional travel, interactions with and voyages into other dimensions), about paleontology (powerful pre-human races and civilization, a whole alternative history of the early earth), and neurology (an immaterial soul rather than the physical brain, strange powers the mind, spirit-travel). Lovecraft would be a first-class crank if he actually believed any of this, a testament to the depth of his understanding of the materials he parodies.

Given that in Lovecraft's fiction these claims are true, Lovecraft parodically follows the pseudoscientists in suggesting that the reasons that the scientific and scholarly establishments (in the fiction) do not accept these claims is that they are incapable of accepting them because they are blinded by their dogmatic materialism. Thurston, in "The Call of Cthulhu," actually admits exactly this (144). In Lovecraft's fiction, members of the scientific and scholarly establishment (such as Thurston in "Cthulhu" or Armitage in "Dunwich"), if they are able to set aside their dogmatic materialism long enough to discover the truth,¹⁹ find this truth horrifying and indeed actively work to repress it, just advocates of pseudoscience do when they claim that the scientific establishment's

¹⁹ Of course, this truth is known outside the scientific establishment – by psychologically crude barbarians such as the immigrants in Red Hook or the inhabitants of Dunwich.

rejection of pseudoscientific claims (such as existence of ESP, psychic powers, prophesy, channeling, reincarnation, and so forth) lack evidentiary justification.

Indeed, in Lovecraft's fiction in true conspiracy theory fashion, the scholarly establishment has been actively restricting access to this knowledge for hundreds of years (one is reminded of allegations regarding secret societies inside the Catholic Church), and the ancient books which contain the truth are actually kept guarded, under lock and key. Lovecraft explains this in "The Festival" (118) and in "The Dunwich Horror" among other places. In "The Call of Cthulhu," he explains that even the authors of these books have had to mask their meanings in metaphors and double-meanings in order to avoid persecution (156). The point that Lovecraft attempts to make with all of this is that in order for a layperson to oppose accounts of reality established by science they must by the very nature of the exercise enter into a paranoid worldview, because if major claims about the nature of reality which contradict those of science are actually true, then the only explanations for the scientific establishment's denial of the validity of such claims are ideological blindness (a foolish and unjustifiable commitment to materialism) or active malice (that is, they know the truth but choose to hide it).

Lovecraft, believing absolutely in the explanatory power of the scientific method, tries to show in his fiction that to believe the former is to essentially believe in a conspiracy on the part of reality itself (or beings which control it) to delude scientists. For Lovecraft, if religious ideas are true, what humans take for laws (whose consistency allows humans to comprehend the world, from the highest level of scientific understanding [gravitation] to the simplest level of intuition [things fall downward]), must be violable by entities beyond human understanding, a situation which necessarily entails significant existential paranoia. As neuroscientist Sam Harris stated in a recent filmed lecture, "If the basic claims of religion are true, science is so blind to this underlying reality, and the laws of nature are so susceptible to supernatural modification, as to make the whole enterprise of science ridiculous" (n.pag). Every time scientists manage to push the limits of the scientific project past its "dogmatically materialistic" limits in Lovecraft's fiction (from "From Beyond" onward), they discover the truth of a series of pseudoscientific or overtly religious claims which contradict much of their previous (materialistic) understanding of the world, to their severe detriment.

In a parodic response to his understanding of religious claims and practices which reveals his intellectual elitism, Lovecraft envisions the truth of religion as the revelation of a ridiculous reality in which those who seem most ignorant (from the perspective of educated scientists and aristocrats) are in fact absolutely correct about the nature of reality. In a debate with the theologian and author Andrew Sullivan, Sam Harris also recently wrote: "You beckon me to a world in which George Bush and James Dobson have an effortless bead on the deepest conceivable truth; meanwhile, 93 percent of the members of the National Academy of Sciences may well be doomed for eternity by their skepticism." It is exactly this sort of a world – one in which scientific inquiry is destructive and intellectual honesty may easily be considered a curse, while living in blind faith and fear is ironically the most reasonable response to reality – which Lovecraft envisions in his fiction.

For Lovecraft, to believe in religious claims also entails believing in a conspiracy on the part of scientists to delude the public, which is also implausible given mechanisms such as peer review, repeatability, and double-blind experimental procedures.²⁰ Of course, in numerous Lovecraft stories, this is exactly the case: and Lovecraft's few sane survivors always argue against passing on the knowledge that they have so disastrously gained. The discovery of the existence of an entity or entities which for human purposes may as well be omnipotent and omnipresent, is never "Good News" – this knowledge is neither positive, nor should anyone be made aware of it. Moreover, if scientists and scholars are actually aware that a given set of religious assertions or pseudoscientific claims are true but represses this knowledge, Lovecraft implies in "The Call of Cthulhu," and "The Dunwich Horror," they are entirely justified in doing so.

In "The Dunwich Horror," Armitage tries not only to hide this truth from the world outside Dunwich, he attempts to remove all evidence of it. Armitage represents Lovecraft's later type of protagonist: the logical intellectual. Over the course of his fiction-writing career, Lovecraft slowly shifts his narrator-protagonists from imaginative artistic characters to dispassionate scientific investigators. "The Horror at Red Hook" (1927), written exactly halfway through Lovecraft's career (1917-1937), features a detective, Malone, whose pragmatic profession masks a distant youth of imagination and

²⁰ This is why it is appropriate to refer to Creationism as a conspiracy theory of the highest order.

dreams. Malone's dual nature is a temporal transition in Lovecraft's fiction: he has aspects both of Lovecraft's sensitive and disturbed early protagonists, and of his later ones who tend to be rational scientific investigators. The former are similar to the characters in Poe's horror stories, while the latter are similar to the investigators in Poe's detective stories.

Lovecraft makes the transition from one sort of protagonist to the other because for him it is more credible to have a non-imaginative, dispassionate scientist discover the truth of the outlandish religious claims inherent in his fictional universe. Should such claims prove true, they would be verified by dispassionate scientists and not by persons with a high level of emotion and a low level of critical thinking; after all, such persons have believed in a variety of competing and incompatible claims throughout history. Perhaps Lovecraft's point here can be reduced to one of Nietzsche's tidy, compressed maxims: "A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything" ("Quotations" n.pag). Of course, while Lovecraft surely agreed with this, his fiction is a parody, in which logical scientists come to share the existential convictions of crude, paranoid, uncivilized madmen (as Lovecraft saw the most fervent among religious believers). As in Poe's "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether" (1856), the inmates appear to have taken over the asylum: in his fiction Lovecraft verifies what he sees as religious nonsense, while consistently belittling and berating scientific sense.

While Lovecraft is most famous for his particular style of horror fiction, he also wrote fiction which tended in other directions, most notably dreamlike fable or fantasy on the one hand and harder science fiction on the other (Joshi views Lovecraft's later work as incorporating an increasing proportion of science fiction, a tendency inherent in Lovecraft's work since at least 1926). I hope to demonstrate that even those unusual stories which may seem to be exceptions to my argument may actually still be covered by it. Lovecraft's dreamlike fantasies, heavily influenced by the Irish writer Lord Dunsany, are perhaps the texts which may seem most obviously to stand outside my argument. They excise most of the more sinister, bizarre, and nihilistic elements that are found in Lovecraft's horror stories. Some of these stories contain reflections on the nature of art and beauty ("The Silver Key," "The White Ship," "Azathoth"), while others represent

degenerates triumphing over civilization in ways that resemble Lovecraft's horror stories ("Polaris," "The Doom that Came to Sarnath").

Joshi has shown that the vast majority of these tales, sometimes taken to be set in a disconnected "dream world," actually take place in the distant past of the same "real world" as Lovecraft's horror stories.²¹ In the horror stories, set in Lovecraft's own time, facts are discovered by impartial investigators who generally employ logic, evidence, and other hallmarks of the scientific method. This eliminates their own biases, and they often discover things which they themselves do not wish to believe in. In contrast, oral tradition, the vehicle of folklore, does not produce stories which are guaranteed to be true; instead it produces stories which people enjoy and find meaningful. The fact that just about everything about stories in oral traditions changes over time, with preferred variants reproducing more often in a sort of cultural selection, is largely responsible for the aesthetic power of works like the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*, works which clearly existed in oral form long before they were written down. While the concept of a hidden truth in such ancient texts surely fascinated Lovecraft, who employs a version of this idea in his fiction by inventing his own "grains of truth" for folklore in such stories as "The Dreams in the Witch House," no one – least of all Lovecraft, would expect to turn to texts like these for accurate records of what transpired in ancient times. Instead, one finds stories which reflect human psychological concerns - which Lovecraft's fantasy stories or fables generally do. Thus, Lovecraft's fables are perhaps best considered as anthropomorphizing scraps of lore and legend reflecting grains of historical truth from the distant and forgotten past.

Joshi's model of Lovecraft's work maps his transition from a producer of supernatural horror to a writer of what Joshi calls quasi science fiction (Joshi, "Decline" 7). For Joshi, Lovecraft's evolution from supernatural horror to quasi science fiction reflects his search for a proper philosophical justification for transcendent phenomena, a search which entails rejecting the supernatural in favour of science fiction explanations. As Joshi puts it:

Lovecraft has, by 1931, renounced pure supernaturalism as a viable outlet for weird writing: the majority of his pre-1926 stories are more or less conventionally

²¹ See "The Dream World and The Real World" in *Primal Sources*

supernatural, and this vein reached its apotheosis in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. But from 1926 on, Lovecraft's work can only be called quasi science fiction – not merely the few stories (“The Colour out of Space,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, “The Shadow out of Time”) generally regarded as such, but nearly the whole of his later work. (Joshi, “Weird” 179)

Joshi's theory receives support from the increasingly elaborate explanations Lovecraft provides over his career for the unusual phenomena which appear in his tales. However, though Joshi admits that Lovecraft's use of science fiction does have “certain dim anticipations” such as 1917's “Dagon” (Joshi, “Weird” 179), he understates the case. The anticipation of later themes in earlier works is not so dim when one takes into account not only “From Beyond,” with its explicit science fiction elements (such as Tillinghast's machine, which provides sensory detection of previously hidden aspects of reality such as ultraviolet light), but also “The Rats in the Walls,” which Joshi considers supernatural horror²² but which includes evolutionary themes that overlap with stories Joshi labels quasi science fiction in ways that are problematic for his classification scheme.

Joshi's candidate for the most important explanatory statement made by Lovecraft regarding his fiction is this: “The time has come when the normal revolt against time, space & matter must assume a form not overtly incompatible with what is known of reality – when it must be gratified by images forming *supplements* rather than *contradictions* of the visible & measurable universe” (Joshi, “Weird” 179). Before moving on to analyze this statement, it is important to note just how telling it is that Lovecraft thinks that there is a “normal revolt against time, space & matter.” His own transcendentalist leanings could hardly be clearer, and furthermore he considers them a normal part of human nature (the most widespread manifestation of which is obviously religion).²³ To return to Joshi's view of Lovecraft, Joshi takes Lovecraft to mean here that any explanations of unusual phenomenon must not contradict what we humans already believe we know; that is, they must no longer be amenable to supernatural but rather to scientific explanations.

²² Joshi terms “The Rats in the Walls” “a model short story but really nothing more than a supremely able manipulation of Poe-like elements” (Joshi, “Weird” 177).

²³ Additional discussion two pages hence.

For Joshi most of the apparently supernatural phenomena in Lovecraft's fiction are not actually supernatural, but are instead actually totally compatible with a scientific-materialist worldview if it is developed to a proper level of understanding. Joshi explains that "science fiction cannot really be thought to be based on science as such, but only *the science of the future*. This is why I call much of Lovecraft quasi science fiction: the implication in his stories is that we may some day be able to account for "supernormal" phenomena, but cannot do so now" ("Weird" 8). Joshi is correct to note that Lovecraft often gestures in the direction of a scientific explanation for abnormal or transcendent phenomena (most notably in "The Dreams in the Witch House"), yet his goal in doing so may be more literary (allowing his twentieth century readers to suspend disbelief long enough to snare them with his versions of religious concepts) than philosophical (presenting such things as actually possible). Joshi clarifies matters further thusly:

Quasi science fiction is a development of supernatural horror in that the real world is again presupposed as the norm, but the "impossible" intrusions are rationalized in some way. It is a more advanced form because it implies that the "supernatural" is not *ontological* but *epistemological*: it is only our ignorance of certain "natural laws" that creates the illusion of supernaturalism. ("Weird" 7)

The existence of entities such as Cthulhu does indeed expose human ignorance. But the boundaries are blurrier than Joshi makes them: the "supplementary/science fiction" nature of Lovecraft's supernormal²⁴ events and forces is present in his earliest fiction, and apparently "contradictory/supernatural" features are present in Lovecraft's work, right to the very end. I am not disputing Joshi's central claim that Lovecraft presents "supplements rather than contradictions" in many of his stories, nor that this tendency becomes more elaborate and explicit in his later works. However there are problems with this claim, which attempts to explain Lovecraft in a manner too tightly restricted and indeed too logical for a mythology meant to belittle human logic. Joshi's statement that "There is never an entity in Lovecraft that is not in some fashion material" ("Weird" 186) makes sense in the context of Lovecraft's own materialism, but it is incorrect for his fiction. It places Joshi at a loss to account for the numerous dream-visions present throughout Lovecraft's work – Joshi simply writes off the phenomena as "supernatural"

²⁴ Joshi's term

when it appears in earlier stories (even the evolution-themed “Rats in the Walls”), but is unable to account for the same phenomenon in appearing in “quasi science fiction” stories including “The Call of Cthulhu,” Joshi’s candidate for the watershed story marking Lovecraft’s transition from supernaturalism to quasi science fiction. Joshi admits that aspects of “The Call of Cthulhu” are problematic for his classification scheme:

Less explicable are certain remarks found in “The Call of Cthulhu.” The narrator goes out of his way to stress his materialism and rationalism, noting the “ingrained skepticism then forming my philosophy” (DH 130), his “callous rationalism” (DH 132), “the rationalism of my mind” (DH 142), and so on. Then all of a sudden we read: “My attitude was still one of absolute materialism, *as I wish it still were*” (DH 144; Lovecraft’s italics). What is Lovecraft suggesting here? I can only believe that he is criticizing any sort of dogmatic or doctrinaire materialism: his own had by this time become modified by Einstein, Santayana, and modern advances in astrophysics. Still, I find these remarks a little bothersome, especially since nothing in “The Call of Cthulhu” need be impossible to harmonize within a system of modified materialism.” (“Weird” 187)

Actually, the worldwide dream-vision of R’lyeh, the actual *call* of Cthulhu, is not accounted for materialistically in the story, and it is difficult to see how it could be. Joshi may be missing the point of Lovecraft’s remarks in this story, namely that one may be able to take Lovecraft’s narrator at face value when he states that he has discovered something immaterial. If this is so, the thesis that Lovecraft accepts and follows the explicitly supernatural (immaterial) premises of religion in his fiction finds significant support. Remarks like this in denial of materialism are found in other late Lovecraft stories, as are dream-visions and other dualistic phenomena which for Lovecraft provide the bases of real religions (e.g. the intuitive belief among early humans that dreams reflect messages from another reality). The fact that these dream-visions represent the transportation of a person’s consciousness as separate from his or her body (with the exception of “The Dreams in the Witch House” which seeks to offer a more “materialist” explanation of the dream-vision phenomenon) verifies the existence of an immaterial spirit in Lovecraft’s fiction, with all of the features that religious believers attribute to the soul. Even the story considered as Lovecraft’s most extended foray into science fiction,

"The Shadow Out of Time" (1935), while displaying the powers of a technologically advanced race to send their minds through time and occupy the bodies of other beings, still implies a massive disconnection between the physical body of a given being and its consciousness, which either is or may as well be immaterial: the beings have bodies absolutely nothing like the human body that one of them takes over, displacing its former occupant. The brain as a physical organ is certainly not involved here.

A strong tendency toward a dualism which creates a philosophical division between a given being's material body and its immaterial mind (with the two apparently separable), is, in other words, inherent even in the most "science fictional" of Lovecraft's stories. This dualism is surely based on Lovecraft's disgust with the body and worship of the intellect, and the religious thinking that he both sympathizes with and feels contempt for as a result. Lovecraft's sympathy for dualism and his disdain for animality (both based on a condemnation of instinct) provide the basis for his resentment towards religious belief, which he sometimes envied as a consolatory metaphysics which could hide the scientific truths he found disturbing. Houllébecq explains, "He saw religions as so many sugar-coated illusions made obsolete by the progress of science. At times, when in an exceptionally good mood, he would speak of the enchanted circle of religious belief, but it was a circle from which he felt banished" (31). This tendency toward dualism is present throughout his work, from the early "Beyond The Wall of Sleep" (1919) to the late story "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1933), which offers an account of possession or "consciousness-switching" through sorcery. In psychological terms, this dualism allows Lovecraft to escape the body and its instincts, to justify the intuitions of his dreams and to live out (in his own view) impossibly transcendent scenarios in an artistic or aesthetic context. In philosophical terms, it allows him to include in his fiction many explicitly dualistic concepts such as spirit-travel, dream-vision, and possession, of exactly the sort that fascinate him in mythology, in religious literature (such as that of Milton) and in weird fiction (such as that of Poe or Blackwood).

If one seeks conceptual unity in Lovecraft's stories, one can easily posit a common conceptual background for his use of recurring dualistic elements. Given Lovecraft's use of religious phenomena (which in his own view relied on implicit or explicit claims of metaphysical dualism) such as dream-vision, and the fact that most of

Lovecraft's protagonists gain their experience of the "beyond" through dreams, Cthulhu's mastery of dreams may imply that this "beyond" is in fact an immaterial realm. Lovecraft employs in his fiction the shamanistic belief that spirits, gods, or other invisible agencies send dreams to humans so consistently that it is reasonable to conclude that dreams in his fiction actually describe an objectively real alternate plane of existence. This plane, as depicted in "From Beyond," "The Dreams in the Witch House," "The Colour Out Of Space" and other stories, has or may have its own, unearthly logic, yet it is so alien that humans cannot comprehend it. Humans can occasionally "see into" or even "slip into" this plane, where things impossible on earth can occur, thus accounting for the numerous apparently physically impossible phenomena in Lovecraft's fiction.

Humans, most notably Lovecraft's numerous sorcerers, sometimes seek to transcend "the galling limitations of time and space" by entering into dealings with beings from the immaterial plane from which these deities send their dreams; that is, by religious practice. Yet the result is always corruption, abduction, insanity or less specified unpleasant things. In creating an immaterial plane that functions in a Darwinian manner (that is, with no moral guarantor but rather quite the reverse: only a cruel and indifferent competition), Lovecraft depicts one more environment from which humans can be attacked. He tries to show that the human desire to transcend the limitations of our own existence is the proper province of artistic experimentation and not representational literalism. His parody of religious concepts illustrates how fascinating he finds these ideas can be, and yet alongside this it also displays what he sees as the degree of naïve anthropomorphism and philosophical incoherence involved in believing that such ideas are literally true.

To depict a fictional realm in which such ideas are true is to violate quite explicitly a great many of the principles and assumptions of science (such as Lyell's uniformitarianism at least to start), and thus of any form of fiction based on scientific thinking, such as science fiction. Thus, the portion of Lovecraft's final work which resembles most closely the science fiction genre (represented perhaps most visibly during Lovecraft's lifetime by H. G. Wells)²⁵ may seem to pose a serious challenge to my

²⁵ Wells' novella *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) expresses a fear of the blurring of boundaries between humans and animals (and reverse evolution) quite similar to Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls"

scheme of Lovecraft's work. Indeed, Joshi, Wilson and others see this handful of highly-developed "science fiction" stories as a culmination moving beyond the existential horror of most of Lovecraft's work and into a form of political or ethical experimentation. Even Wilson, known for portraying Lovecraft as a sick nihilist in the Nietzschean sense,²⁶ sees in these works an abandonment of the pessimism of the earlier works and an illustration of a more mature, responsible direction Lovecraft might have taken as a writer of fiction had he lived past the age of 46.

In works such as "The Mound," *At The Mountains of Madness*, "The Whisperer in Darkness" and "The Shadow Out of Time," Lovecraft presents entities of astounding power as civilizations of extraterrestrials (Joshi, "Weird" 191). These beings often engage in the same practices as humans do (science, architecture, art, exploration), except they succeed far better than humanity could ever hope to. As Joshi notes, the Old Ones in *At The Mountains of Madness* and the Great Race in "The Shadow Out of Time" actually cease to be inexplicable monsters and become representative of a sort of utopian ideal future for humanity itself. They also serve as an expression of Lovecraft's political views. These civilizations are able to pursue scientific inquiry to a much higher level of development than humanity, a fact outlined ingeniously in *At The Mountains of Madness* when human explorers in the Antarctic attempt to dissect dormant "Old Ones" and inadvertently wake them up. The human explorers are killed and preserved in order to be dissected by the Old Ones, who are scientists of a superior capacity. Michel Houellebecq almost certainly had this episode in mind when he wrote the following passage regarding Lovecraft's portrayal of "Superior Intelligences" in his fiction:

In order to imagine how they might treat us were we to come into contact with them, it might be best to recall how we treat "inferior intelligences" such as rabbits and frogs. In the best of cases they serve as *food* for us; sometimes also, often in fact, we kill them for the sheer pleasure of killing. This, Lovecraft warned, would be the true picture of our future relationship to those other intelligent beings. Perhaps some of the more beautiful human specimens would be

²⁶ Wilson's (in the present writer's view) antiscientific views are too complex to get into here; suffice it to say that Wilson accounts for Lovecraft's pessimism in terms of Nietzschean "resentment" because he himself agrees neither with Lovecraft's pessimism nor with Lovecraft's scientific justification of it.

honored and would end up on a dissection table – that’s all. And once again, none of it will make any sense. (33)

If gods of any sort exist, implies Lovecraft, we have the same right to expect merciful or even comprehensible treatment from them as lower forms of life receive from us: that is to say, none.²⁷ Lovecraft repeatedly confirms this view by depicting incomprehensible entities feeding off humans (like Nyarlathotep and the entity in “The Colour Out of Space” do), perhaps manipulating them (through dream-visions), perhaps experimenting on them (as in *At The Mountains of Madness*), or toying with them. While the Old Ones are gods to humanity, *At The Mountains of Madness* is notable in making the term “gods” relative to the eye of the beholder, an important division which Joshi and others take to mean that the concept “god” no longer applies in Lovecraft’s later fiction, and implies only the illusion of godhood from the perspective of an inferior being (“Primal” 102).

Lovecraft also reveals in these later stories much more information about the history of his fictional version of earth (this history being the basis for the alternative archaeology and so forth embedded throughout his fiction). The ruins of the Old Ones’ civilization in *At The Mountains of Madness* contain records of vast periods of earth history almost completely lost to the human race, which possesses by contrast only fragments of folklore (as the interpretation of Lovecraft’s “Dunsanian Fantasies” as anthropomorphized fragments of lore from a time when alien beings lived on earth implies). Lovecraft even makes this notion explicit, implying that texts such as the *Necronomicon* actually represent a human mythology based on these extraterrestrial civilizations. Joshi writes that

What seems to be going on in this novel [AtMoM] is a general “de-mythologising” (see Price) of the myth-cycle evidenced by the fact that the very real barrel-shaped entities are themselves “the originals of the fiendish elder myths which things like the Pnakotic Manuscripts and the *Necronomicon* affrightedly hint about. They were the great “Old ones” that had filtered down from the stars...” (MM 59). Hence not merely Kadath and Leng, of which Alhazred had spoken, but the Old Ones themselves who he had deemed divine,

²⁷ Actually even Houellebecq’s example understates Lovecraft’s pessimism here: surely some humans feel sympathy toward rabbits and frogs, and try to project them. But rabbits and frogs are similar enough to humans not to be driven mad by the mere sight of us.

are all myths and legends – or rather, there were very causes or “archetypes” that gave rise to these myths. How we are to reconcile this with the fact that, in “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (1932), the Old Ones or Ancient Ones seem to have regained their ethereal divinity is anyone’s guess. (“Primal” 102)

The Old Ones apparently possessed a similar level of power to Cthulhu’s ancestors, with whom they fought a long war. As Cthulhu himself has “mastery of dreams,” one may conclude that dream-visions, even spirit travel, exist in Lovecraft’s fictional “real world,” even in his “hardest” science fiction. If Cthulhu’s sort of being is material, and yet he has power over immaterial dreams, then an immateriality still exists even in Lovecraft’s final science fiction. In depicting (in immeasurable antiquity) an entire race of Cthulhu-beings, Lovecraft further dwarfs the human race not only physically, but also in the dream- or spirit-realm, as a single slumbering being of this race proves capable of exerting influence over the minds or spirits of much of the human race in “The Call of Cthulhu”.

While the Old Ones are, from a human perspective, physically horrific and philosophically imposing, Lovecraft places them in the position he reserves for civilization in *At The Mountains of Madness* by showing their intellectual, scientific and cultural accomplishments. Reference to the war between the Old Ones and the Cthulhu Spawn in *At The Mountains of Madness* allows Lovecraft place the civilized Old Ones even more typically in the position he normally places western civilization in in earlier stories: an admirable and doomed bastion of illusory values in a universe whose hostility and vulgarity is symbolized by both the barbaric foreigners who threaten the civilization from without and its own savage lower orders which threaten it from within. Whereas in earlier stories western civilization is threatened by immigrants from without (“Red Hook”) and degenerates from within (“Dunwich”), here the Old Ones’ civilization is threatened by the barbaric Cthulhu Spawn from without and the slave-order of Shoggoths from within. The Great Race in “The Shadow Out of Time” are also threatened by degenerate beings within their own society, called the Blind Ones. Like the Shoggoths in *At The Mountains of Madness*, these beings assume the role of the degenerate masses of humans or even subhuman monsters in Lovecraft’s stories, which is to threaten and corrupt beings more civilized than themselves.

It is one of the great ironies of Lovecraft's fictional universe that the more powerful the entity or race, the more primitive it is (measured in relation to Lovecraft's vision of human history culminating in seventeenth-century England). The defeat of the civilized, scientific Old Ones by the Cthulhu Spawn, with their rituals, spells, tombs and temples, confirm this. They are the "Red Hook hordes" to the Old Ones' civilized New England. Indeed, the Old Ones civilization dwarfs that of humanity, and if they succumbed to barbarians and savages, humanity has little hope.

However, a key element in Lovecraft's stories is also the supra-human – bizarre, incomprehensible "deities" such as Azathoth or Yog Sothoth. These entities (or comparable ones) exist even in Lovecraft's late science fiction. In *At The Mountains of Madness*, the Old Ones are afraid of a place called Kadath. If the Old Ones are the equivalent of frightening, bizarre gods to humans, then whatever manifests itself in Kadath is the equivalent of frightening, bizarre gods to *them*. For every level of civilizational (scientific, artistic, intellectual) achievement Lovecraft creates, he adds an existential level above it which goes unexplained. If the Old Ones are representative of humanity in *At The Mountains of Madness*, they are threatened (as humanity is in Lovecraft's earlier horror stories) not just by internal and external degenerates, but by transcendent demon-deities beyond *their* ability to understand.

Joshi expresses confusion at the remnants of religion found in the alien civilization in *At the Mountains of Madness*: "The Old Ones have not banished religion from their sphere of existence – a curiosity considering their supreme intellectual achievements. Not only do they regard the Antarctic as a "sacred spot" (MM 70), but their city has "great temples" (MM 74) and, "in the decadent days," they "made strange prayers" to the vast mountains of the west representing the "fabled nightmare Plateau of Leng" (MM 70)" (2003, 116). I identify two interpretive possibilities here. The first is based on Lovecraft's understanding of religion in fact, the second on his presentation of religion in his fiction.

The first possibility is that religion exists in the Old Ones' society is that religion is retained as a cultural ornament (which Lovecraft approved of in reality), which gains in appeal as the Old Ones' civilization enters a phase of declining intellectual standards (Lovecraft believed that literacy and scientific understanding – in other words, increasing

intellectual standards – would lead directly to a decline in religiosity). In Lovecraft's actual view (as opposed to his fiction, in which he takes many positions on science, the occult, and so forth when in reality he believed the opposite), religion revolved around needless fears and superstitions which corresponded to intellectual laziness and emotional weakness. If this is the way we are to interpret the Old Ones' religion, there is actually nothing to fear at Kadath, at the Old Ones, despite the fact that their intellectual prowess dwarfs that of humanity, are victims of needless superstition. This civilization, whose control over time and space exceeds human comprehension, simply went through one enlightenment too few, and perhaps failed to maintain social order.

The second possibility is that the religion of the Old Ones contains a "grain of truth" similar to that exhibited by the human religions Lovecraft portrays in his fiction. While Lovecraft deals generally with western religious tradition in his fiction and only rarely ventures abroad to discuss Islam or Hinduism, he displays a consistent attention to select details from western spiritual traditions. The figure of the devil in "The Dreams in the Witch House" is perhaps the most notable manifestation of this attention, though Lovecraft's use of witches and their familiars in the same story shows him adopting details from related folklore. Given that the devil-being, the witch, and her familiar are all real within the context of Lovecraft's story, the story contains the implication that even though Christianity is not true, it still contains a highly adaptable set of beliefs insofar as it tells people to fear and avoid the beings whom they call devils or witches. Like other human religions, Christianity may consist of adaptive superstitions which contain a core of truthful information about beings beyond human understanding. In this interpretation, there *is* something in Kadath, and the Old Ones justly fear it.

This latter interpretation fits more closely with Lovecraft's portrayal of the universe elsewhere in his fiction. Joshi's surprise at the existence of religion among the Old Ones stems from the same cause as his surprise at the anti-materialistic comments in "The Call of Cthulhu" – reading Lovecraft's fiction as a literal reflection of his materialistic, anti-religious views, rather than reading it as a more roundabout literary method of (parodically) expressing his views on the absurdity of religion.

In Lovecraft's fiction, in which bizarre and seemingly nonsensical religious concepts are actually true, rational beings are forced to acknowledge that many things

really exist which seem to them irrational. This seems to be the case with Kadath, which is very likely to the Old Ones as Cthulhu's incomprehensible R'lyeh is to humanity – a place which emanates nightmares. In every other Lovecraft story religion has some truth behind it; if the Old Ones are themselves the origin of the stories of strange gods found in human mythology and religion, there is no reason to believe the case would be any different with regards to the Old Ones' own religion, especially given their superior intellectual powers. The problem is not that the Old Ones are ignorant, it is that no matter how far a civilization advances it is always a given fact in Lovecraft's universe that something nonsensical, nihilistic, nightmarish, and from (the perspective of rationality) wholly ridiculous *must exist*. Why is this? Because Lovecraft's fiction as a whole is a nihilistic parody of religion, and takes as its foundational premise the religious view that there is something so far beyond science and indeed beyond all rationality that the best the human race (or any civilization) can possibly hope to do is take the word of ancient, baffling fragmentary texts for this, prevent too much intellectual inquiry in certain directions, and hope not to attract the attention of any transcendent beings. As is the case elsewhere in Lovecraft's fiction, the problem is not superstition within civilization (as he thought was actually the problem in reality), but rather the fact that these superstitions actually accurately describe reality, however primal and preposterous they may happen to be.

If the empirical truth is that the universe is material and that it is indifferent to human interests, any "higher" truth must accord with this knowledge. Christian apologists begin with the metaphysical conclusion that a benevolent and omniscient deity exists, and then try to fit the apparent cruelty of the world into this conclusion. Lovecraft, on the other hand, accepts what he sees as the mindless cruelty of the world, especially as expressed in evolutionary terms. From this perspective, Lovecraft invents deities with all of the abilities attributed to gods by human religions—and none of the anthropomorphic comforts that he believed Darwin discredited in his interpretation of this (or any possible) reality. Lovecraft's protagonists, like Lovecraft himself, are haunted by spectres of Darwin.

Conclusion

He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Eccl. 1:18)

This study has been written with the intention of engaging with what I see as the core psychological issues (and they are in many cases deeply negative ones)²⁸ in Lovecraft's work, while attempting to avoid the "dark romantic" image that surrounds the man himself (an image not dissimilar to that which surrounds Poe, who similarly wrote morbidly intense prose and died relatively young). It is true that Lovecraft's work is culturally pessimistic and philosophically nihilistic to an almost obsessive degree, and that it is probably this focus on alienation and despair that speaks to modern readers. Lovecraft – to a degree perhaps matched only by Kafka – proved capable of representing in art the degree to which the very existence of humanity is inexplicable, futile, and ridiculous. Yet there is much more in Lovecraft's thought and literary life's work than the psychological undercurrent of disappointment, resentment²⁹ and transcendentalism which motivated him to parody his emotional co-travelers and intellectual enemies, the religious believers of America. Lovecraft's work is obviously relevant to the current context of heated public controversy over evolution, and speaks directly to the fears unleashed by Darwin's theories. However many nuances we may choose to give the issue, Christian institutions have a history of resisting evolutionary ideas, particularly in America. In Lovecraft, one can find a response to Darwin which rather uniquely sympathizes with religious belief aesthetically, culturally and emotionally while simultaneously condemning it intellectually and scientifically. A misanthropic, pessimistic critical outcast like Lovecraft seems the unlikeliest of bridge-builders, but the number of persons anxious about the implications of evolution surely exceeds dogmatic fundamentalists whom no amount of scientific evidence will convince; the core of the issue of the public acceptance of evolution is (however fortunately) a non-scientific one, and here Lovecraft's unique status as a writer with his heart in the humanities and his mind in the sciences (each struggling against the other) can provide a real contribution.

²⁸ Lovecraft's deep pessimism and transcendent leanings are one reason why I believe the juxtaposition of Nietzsche's thought on Lovecraft's fiction sheds light on the psychology of his work.

²⁹ Or Nietzsche's term of resentment

In order to explain what I see as the continuing relevance of Lovecraft's work, I will briefly return to survey the differing responses of his "Spiritual Reactionaries," Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, to what all three writers consider the interlinked problems of evolution, scientific reductionism, and nihilism. The latter, for the purposes of arriving at a definition which covers the views of all three thinkers, has been used in this thesis as a term signifying a philosophical emptiness (meaninglessness) reflected by a cultural one (decadence).

Lovecraft shared his cultural pessimism with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche; all three believed that western civilization as a whole had entered into a potentially terminal cultural decline. All three felt that this cultural decadence was the reflection of a philosophical meaninglessness at the core of the modern western worldview, and all three indicted the power of the utilitarian bourgeois as a primary cause of this problem. Dostoevsky's notion of a solution to both forms of nihilism (cultural and philosophical) was to re-embrace Christianity and other traditional civic institutions, including Russian nationalism and Czarism. Dostoevsky thought that the only way to revitalize human existence with the meaning that the modern age had stolen from it was to return to the worldview of an earlier age. For Dostoevsky, the employment of unfettered reason (manifested in scientific reductionism, utilitarianism, and enlightenment thought more generally) could only lead to moral decline and, eventually, to nihilism. He therefore felt that scientific reductionism must be abandoned.

Nietzsche, despite his status as one of the most reactionary thinkers in the western intellectual tradition (in the sense that he considered much of the past two thousand years' worth of western philosophy to be a mistake), recognized that the problems of the modern age were not amenable by returning to a religious worldview, or indeed to the worldview of any past civilization, even those he himself deeply admired. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explained this problem thus:

The hybrid European—all in all, a tolerably ugly plebeian—simply needs a costume: he requires history as a storage room for costumes. To be sure, he soon notices that not one fits him very well; so he keeps changing. Let anyone look at the nineteenth century with an eye for these quick preferences and changes of the style masquerade; also for the moments of despair over the fact that "nothing is

becoming.” It is no use to parade as romantic or classical, Christian or Florentine, baroque or “national,” in *moribus et artibus*: it ‘does not look good.’ (340)

Nietzsche agreed with Dostoevsky that a worldview of scientific reductionism equated to nihilism, and that modern “progress” in all its forms had stripped western life of the meaning it had formerly had. Unlike Dostoevsky, however, he ruled out religious ideas as a possible solution to the cultural and philosophical crises of modern existence. He did so because he considered religious ideas to be a form of metaphysics, and he constantly criticized anything which he considered to be metaphysics for being a form of psychological escapism. Nietzsche felt less threatened than Dostoevsky did³⁰ by the claims to objective knowledge that science entailed; he considered the very concept of objective truth impossible. This was in part because he privileged cultural, psychological or subjective explanations over those which claimed to be objective or to transcend culture, including science.³¹

Nietzsche concluded that scientific reductionism was not a potentially accurate and objective description of the world in which humans exist (as Dostoevsky worried that it might be), but rather simply a manifestation of the perspective of psychologically weak and uncreative persons. In Nietzsche’s view, a person strong and creative enough would engage with the psychological emptiness and alienation of modern life, without relying on religious ideas or indeed on any external ideas at all; instead he or she would create his or her own justification for existence, thus overcoming nihilism. Despite Nietzsche’s contempt for the transcendent desire which finds expression in religions, he agrees absolutely with Dostoevsky that in order to overcome nihilism (and its manifestation in cultural decadence), scientific reductionism must be abandoned.

Lovecraft, however, believes (with Dostoevsky) that scientific reductionism may indeed yield an objective and accurate description of the reality within which humans exist; though unlike Dostoevsky (who resisted the idea that it was accurate, though he conceded it might be), Lovecraft concluded that it actually was all of this. In Lovecraft’s

³⁰ As discussed in Chapter 2, Dostoevsky constantly rehearsed modern scientific arguments in his works, arguments which he himself felt threatened religious faith such as his own.

³¹ Contrast this to Sam Harris’ statement, “Whatever is true about us isn’t Christian. And it isn’t Muslim. Physics isn’t Christian, though it was invented by Christians. Algebra isn’t Muslim, even though it was invented by Muslims. Whenever we get at the truth, we transcend culture, we transcend our upbringing. The discourse of science is a good example of where we should hold out hope for transcending our tribalism.” (“Sam Harris vs. Rick Warren” n.pag)

view, Dostoevsky's religious solution to nihilism and Nietzsche's relativistic, creative solution to the same were both nothing less than manifestations of an emotional phobia of scientific reductionism, which he himself actually shared. Lovecraft agreed with his "Spiritual Reactionary" predecessors that scientific reductionism had stolen the meaning from life; but for him this was a matter of objective fact and not subjective perspective. In returning to a statement of Lovecraft's which was quoted in my Introduction, I will explain the nature of Lovecraft's departure from his intellectual predecessors. Lovecraft writes that, "Modern science has, in the end, proved an enemy to art and pleasure" specifically because it has revealed "the *whole* sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts." Here Lovecraft reveals his feeling that scientific reductionism provides a literally true description of reality (it revealed the *whole* basis of human thought and behavior), and also that the worldview which it presents is inherently dissatisfying (an "enemy to art and pleasure"). In confirmation of this latter assertion, Lovecraft adds, "it has stripped the world of glamour, wonder, and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated" (Joshi, "Decline" 91). For Lovecraft, then, the idea that human life has value or meaning is an illusion, one which science has destroyed. Lovecraft agreed with the core assertion behind the obsessive works of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, which is that scientific reductionism equates to nihilism.³²

Yet Lovecraft accepted that scientific reductionism did provide a true description of the "*whole*" of human experience. For Lovecraft, nihilism was itself a factual description of reality; he felt that in the end everything about human existence was meaningless, pointless, amoral, and futile. Lovecraft justified this view with reference to the absolute and complete indifference of the universe which had produced humanity. In perhaps his most famous statement he claims that "Human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large" (Joshi, "Weird" 178). For Lovecraft, humans may well have intuitions, ideas, and desires (most especially, the manifestation of all three in the belief that scientific reductionism is not a

³² Both thinkers felt that modernity itself had become nihilistic. They took modern philosophy (dominated by positivism or scientific reductionism) and modern culture (dominated by bourgeois utilitarianism or capitalist reductionism) both to be hollow, empty, and meaningless.

literally true description of the reality within which humans exist), and this is no guarantee at all that the universe will comply to these notions.

Lovecraft, as perhaps the most unwilling scientific reductionist in western intellectual history, dedicated a great deal of thought to the predicament of persons of his own psychological disposition (including religious ones) in an age dominated by the explanatory power of science. While the subjective experience of intangible things is for Lovecraft one of the most fulfilling aspects of human existence, external and therefore verifiable evidence must always take explanatory precedence over internal experience. In Lovecraft's words, "Whenever we investigate the vague claims of those vitalists who speak of the non-materiality, universality, and continuity of life, we find their conceptions basically and essentially *mythological and poetical*" (Joshi, "Decline" 16). Lovecraft, who counts the literary beauty achieved by poetry and mythology among his reasons to live, still argues that one cannot mistake beauty for truth. Always careful to distinguish between scientific fact and cultural perception, he rejects the Nietzschean analysis which results in the conclusion that decadence (a cultural phenomenon) is the parent of materialism and nihilism (for him these are scientific matters):

Progress and sophistication, arch-enemies of all illusion, have destroyed traditions of behaviour as well as of thought; and acting upon a sensitive and heterogeneous world have culminated in an inevitable bewilderment and realisation of futility. One cause may underlie decadence and materialism, but these two are sisters – not child and parent. No civilisation has lasted for ever, and perhaps our own is perishing of natural old age [...] On the other hand, we may be merely passing from youth to maturity – a period of more realistic and sophisticated life may lie ahead of us, filled with cynical resignation and dreams of languorous beauty rather than with the fire and faith of early life. (Joshi, "Weird" 137)

This passage illustrates what Lovecraft saw as the only possible way forward for western culture. Lovecraft was a philosophical nihilist, but he did not give up on the idea that even if human life was *ultimately* without meaning, cultural decadence was inescapable. It took Lovecraft many years to recognize that one cannot expect to solve modern cultural problems by simply turning back the clock (as Dostoevsky quite arguably desired), but he did apply considerable thought to generating a solution to this problem.

Lovecraft believed that the emotionally unsatisfying nature of scientific reductionism would lead to a retreat from the very idea of truth, a movement which would eventually degenerate into a futile free-for-all relativism. Such a crisis of confidence in the project of determining truth is exactly what struck western academia and culture more generally in the last third of the twentieth century, and it is a testament to Lovecraft's insight into human psychology that he predicted it. While it is obvious that numerous factors contributed to the relativism on display in guilt-ridden multiculturalism, new age movements, and academic poststructuralism, what these cultural manifestations have in common is a deep phobia of science which arises precisely because science does not allow people to believe whatever they want. Evidentiary or logical restrictions on belief are also implicitly restrictions on emotions, insofar as emotions rely on beliefs (ie. they possess epistemic content), and insofar as emotionally appealing propositions are significantly more consoling when they are also believed to be literally true (as is the case in religion). Lovecraft, with a keen insight into such matters, even specified that scientific admissions of uncertainty in the face of baffling data would be hijacked by emotionally motivated humanists in an attempt to discredit the scientific project of determining, as objectively as possible, the truth:

Although these new turns of science [Einstein, Quantum Theory] don't really mean a thing in relation to the myth of cosmic consciousness and teleology, a new brood of despairing and horrified moderns is seizing on the doubt of all positive knowledge which they imply; and is deducing that, *since nothing is true*, therefore *anything can be true* [...] whence one may invent or revive any sort of mythology that fancy or nostalgia or desperation may dictate, and defy anyone to prove that it isn't *emotionally* true – whatever that means. This sickly, decadent neo-mysticism – a protest not only against machine materialism but against pure science with its destruction of the mystery and dignity of human emotion and experience – will be the dominant creed of middle twentieth century aesthetes. (Joshi, "Decline" 42)

Lovecraft, then, acknowledges a conflict at the core of human existence: while it is in his view absolutely preposterous to attempt to deny what is manifestly obviously true (scientific reductionism) simply because it is unpalatable, it is also a similarly undeniable empirical fact that people (including himself) find scientific reductionism emotionally

unacceptable. Thus, for Lovecraft, any palliative response to cultural decadence (the only area in which nihilism can actually be battled) must not rely on denial or the circumvention of scientific reductionism.

The similarity between Lovecraft's desire for transcendence and similar desires on the part of religious persons is clear. Lovecraft himself recognized this similarity, and differentiated between the two expressions of this desire in terms of integrity, writing: "Religion itself is merely a pompous formalisation of fantastic art. Its disadvantage is that it demands an intellectual belief in the impossible, whereas fantastic art does not" (Joshi, "Decline" 54). Since neither the scientific understanding of reality nor the human desire for transcendence can be denied, Lovecraft's vision of a response to cultural nihilism centrally includes transcendent art. Lovecraft's own transcendent art is indeed a bitter parody of the desire for transcendence *when not tempered by integrity*, but its very engagement with transcendence illustrates that for Lovecraft, art could satisfy this fundamental desire without offending reason.

Lovecraft expresses his views on his own art in reflexive "art about art" stories such as "The Music of Erich Zann" (1921), "Pickman's Model" (1926), and "The Horror in the Museum" (1932). The latter two tales present artists crazed by their traumatic experience of monstrous nihilism who then fanatically seek to spread this gospel of meaningless destruction. In both cases they accomplish this in an extremely clever and "anti-artistic" manner so that Lovecraft may well be seen in these stories to be criticizing modernism, which he viewed as a fashionable form of cultural destruction which contributed to the ugliness of the modern world and alienation from the western tradition. Most critics consider this view unfair, especially given that Lovecraft was largely on the same philosophical page as many modernists – it was their radical aesthetics that raised his ire. Joshi explains,

We need not rehearse his antipathy to what he considered such freakish artistic tendencies as imagism, stream-of-consciousness, or the recondite allusiveness of Eliot's *Waste Land*, which were all, to his mind, symptoms of the general decline of this phase of Western culture. Avant-garde movements in painting and architecture similarly met with his disapproval. ("Decline" 70)

It is his neglected gem “The Music of Erich Zann,” however, in which Lovecraft explains his own artistic intentions most clearly. The narrator of “The Music of Erich Zann”³³ is an impoverished student of metaphysics³⁴ staying in a strange quarter of an unnamed city. He relates that he once lived on a street called the Rue d’Auseil, but that after leaving the area he has never been able to rediscover it or even find anyone who knows of it. While living on this street, the narrator becomes acquainted with an old mute viol player named Zann. He finds Zann reclusive and paranoid, and notes that Zann plays bizarre music when he thinks he is alone. The narrator eventually discovers Zann in a state of seizure in Zann’s apartment. The mute Zann offers to write a note explaining his situation, and the narrator waits in Zann’s room. This room is the uppermost loft in the highest building in the Rue d’Auseil. From its window a noise emanates, causing Zann to recommence playing with even greater frenzy. The narrator, taken aback, recalls, “I could now see the expression of his face, and could realize that this time the motive was stark fear. He 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.” As Zann’s music grows more desperate, the window’s shutter snaps open and its glass breaks, letting a freezing wind in. Chasing the pages of Zann’s manuscript, the narrator recalls his desire to look out Zann’s window, the only one higher than the wall which encloses the Rue d’Auseil. He steps to the window:

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 gleamed from remembered streets, but only the blackness of space illimitable.

Zann is completely unresponsive and continues to play mechanically, in a trance. As the wind rises and strange shapes enter the room, the narrator flees back to the city, noting: “There was no wind [...] the moon was out, and all the lights of the city twinkled.”

“The Music of Erich Zann” provides a commentary on art and knowledge. In it Lovecraft suggests that the pursuit of truth can only lead to disillusionment. Erich Zann is

³³ All references to “The Music of Erich Zann” are to the *HP Lovecraft Archive*’s online version, no pagination.

³⁴ Note the importance of this field of study, which implies that apparent reality may not be what it seems.

desperately trying to put something – his music, his art - between himself and the limitless threatening black void outside his window. He is compelled to play cheap theatre music in the evenings, but his true art is a desperate attempt to ward off the abyss. Unadorned by art, the window from subjective culture (the arts) to objective reality (the sciences) has no curtains and no pane, and “the foul thing that is reality” (or nihilism)³⁵ either destroys those who are present (Zann), or causes them to flee (the narrator). For Lovecraft, art can create “an emotionally endurable set of illusions as to values and direction in existence” so that we as humans are not “absolutely adrift in a meaningless and irrelevant chaos which has not the least capacity to give us any satisfaction apart from the trifling animal ones” (Joshi, “Decline” 36). Art, for Lovecraft, is the only way to make human life appear significant (even if temporarily or with severe qualifications), and its creation requires an effort worth making. Lovecraft therefore believed that we must replace religion with art.

Lovecraft dedicated his literary career to parodically exposing what he felt were perversions of the human desire for transcendence in the hope of leaving the way open for future writers to fulfill this desire in ways consistent with reason, the rules of evidence, logic, and integrity. The key to a scientifically literate yet emotionally fulfilling future society was, for Lovecraft, not to deny reality by affirming religious orthodoxies but rather to complement reality with art. Lovecraft’s literary career illustrates that even a person with purely materialistic philosophical views could still empathize with, and indeed satisfy, the “normal revolt against time, space & matter.” Few skeptics since Lovecraft have been able to demonstrate legitimate sympathy for religious belief, and this has proved an oversight so grave to scientists advocating as commonplace, obvious, and well-supported a theory as evolution that a statistically significant portion of the world’s population now views anyone who intellectually accepts evolution (as Lovecraft implies of scientists in “From Beyond”) as an emotional robot. Whatever one may think of Lovecraft’s controversial political views, problematic psychology, or much-disputed literary status, his very existence proves that the popular vision of the emotional/moral religious believer versus the logical/dispassionate science-accepter is simply not accurate. Nor need conservative and progressive cultural views fall on their accustomed sides.

³⁵ The quotation is Lovecraft’s, from Joshi, “Primal” 133.

At a time when Francis Collins, the highest science official in the United States of America, argues in public and without evidence (or shame) that an omnipotent and omniscient deity influences reality at the quantum level just beyond what most (secular) scientists are able to perceive or understand (2009), it is an unfortunate fact that Lovecraft's parodic assault on empirically false (or at best unverifiable) and intellectually reprehensible embodiments of the human desire for transcendence is just as necessary as ever. Yet we may still hope that in the future a more mature, intellectually responsible version of western civilization may allow for people to indulge in their transcendent impulses (perhaps aided by science) without making claims about the nature of the universe as a whole based on these subjective (if exquisite) experiences. Lovecraft hoped for "a period of more realistic and sophisticated life," which, if lost to "the fire and faith of early life" and "filled with cynical resignation," could nevertheless produce "dreams of languorous beauty" (Joshi, "Decline 137). It is obvious that the majority of humanity finds a scientific worldview emotionally unsatisfying; and so long as the desire to escape the boundaries of time and space holds any power over human psychology there will be cultural means available for satisfying it. The nature of those channels is a question of prime importance for western civilization. Lovecraft's vision of the vindication of fantastic art in place of religious dogmatism is a profound and unique contribution.

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