

"Escape from the Prison-House of the Known": Reading Weird Fiction in its Historical  
Contexts

by

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Abstract: Weird fiction criticism has been largely focused on either analyzing texts via the biographies of weird fiction authors, or concentrating on the words on the page to a degree that ignores all outside context. Although these approaches are valuable, more utility is to be found in analyzing weird fictions via their specific historical locations. This dissertation demonstrates the validity of this approach by surveying the works of five American weird fiction authors from the Twentieth Century (Lovecraft, Smith, Howard, Bloch, and Ligotti), and giving new interpretations that are based on an understanding of their placement within specific historical milieus (respectively, anti-WWI sentiment, surrealism and the problem of representation, Southern and Southwestern regionalism, pastiche and publishing culture, and metafiction and genre fiction). This survey supports the need for a new critical approach to weird fiction as described in this dissertation, and furthers our understanding of weird fiction by investigating hitherto unexplored perspectives on weird texts.

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad, without whom I wouldn't be here (again).

To my wife, Andrea Dawn Reilly, for all the forbearance she's demonstrated, the pain of distance she tolerated, and the hard work she's done. My love forever.

And to the members of the Burl Hunters Lodge, who know why.

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## **“Entities on the Known Universe’s Utmost Rim”: An Introduction**

### Introduction:

Weird fiction has been one of the most influential genres of the fantastic in the Twentieth Century. Although it has not necessarily weathered the decades well on its own, weird fiction has been a source of inspiration for a large number of authors and artists from all across the genre spectrum. It is not hyperbole to say that in the case of fantastic literature, modern genre fiction would be distinctly different if it were not for the work of weird fiction writers from the first few decades of the Twentieth century. The influences of these authors range from the stylistic to the philosophic; they encompass tropes, motifs, and theoretical positions; they form the basis for wholly new genres. It would be exceptionally rare to find an author of fantastic literature working in the Twenty-First Century who had not had their work shaped, in one way or another, by weird fiction, even if only by a *resistance* to weird fiction’s constructions. It would be ever rarer to find such an author who was not aware of weird fiction and the contributions weird fiction authors gave to the history of fantastic literature. Indeed, it is arguably the case that weird fiction, although potentially a dead genre now, helped define the current conception of the specific generic categories we know as horror and science fiction.

This is largely due to the varied history of weird fiction, and the variety of authorial perspectives that constituted the genre’s early makeup. Weird fiction’s specific history will be discussed later in this introduction, but suffice it to say for now that weird fiction came about during a turbulent period for fantastic literature. This period was well before the rise of the relatively firm genre distinctions that we know today; in the early

Twentieth Century, ‘science fiction’ and ‘horror,’ for example, did not exist as discrete categories.<sup>1</sup> Weird fiction, which contained elements that would in later decades become common qualities within more rigidly-demarcated genres, began as a response to what was seen as the turgid traditions of Victorian fantastic literature. By breaking away from earlier modes of fantastic literature, weird fiction sought to establish unexplored literary territory, giving authors access to a vast array of possible modes of expression in heretofore unconsidered ways. These new forays into fantastic literature proved to be immensely popular among readers; even readers who took umbrage with individual stories or authors still continued to pursue weird fiction across a wide range of pulp magazines, books, amateur journals, and other forms of artistic expression.

And yet, analytic criticism of weird fiction tends to suffer from consistent problems. Even when weird fiction is considered worthy of substantive critical attention, it endures issues that range from misunderstandings, to missteps, to a lack of appropriate historicization, and more. Although solid critical analysis of weird fiction has been done, particularly of authors like Howard Philips Lovecraft and other members of the early American weird fiction period, there is still a distinct lack of critical focus upon how weird fictions are historically locatable objects. That is, few critics of weird fiction have given substantive attention to the milieu of the genre in their analysis of specific texts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Science-Fiction” dates to William Wilson’s 1851 *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject*, but does not carry with it a definition that would adequately describe the discrete genre as it came to be known in the second half of the Twentieth Century. The modern version of the genre’s definition began in the late 1920s, with Hugo Gernsback’s deployment of “scientifiction” in his pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*. Gernsback’s definition, however, described a didactic genre of writing distinct from the “scientific romance” of the Nineteenth Century and “science fiction” as it would come to be defined later in the century (Cuddon 791-92).

<sup>2</sup> Although I do not wish to be simplistic, it should be said that when I refer to “text” in this dissertation I am referring to the physical object of the words on the page, in the published form referred to in my

This has led to unfortunate lacunae in the understanding of weird fiction as a historically important and influential mode of fantastic literature. The most egregious of these lacunae have led to a critical misunderstanding that undermines potentially valuable critiques of the problematic elements in weird fiction writing. In more positive criticism of the genre these lacunae have led to a continuation of mythologizing authors and their works. This mythologizing has accrued over the course of decades, and although certain aspects of it have been understandable, it has, nevertheless, hampered clear critiques of the genre. The history of weird fiction criticism will be discussed in greater detail later in this introduction, but for now it is important to note that this dissertation is intended to

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bibliography. This materialist (potentially reductionist) conception of the text carries with it two problems that should be addressed: first, it assumes that there is a perfected text out there in the world, an ur-text that is necessarily accessible to us. As with any literary creation, there is no singular perfect version of individual weird fiction stories that we can refer back to. Each of the stories analyzed in this dissertation have multiple extant versions, ranging from autograph manuscripts, to edited versions prepared for publication in pulp magazines, to scholarly corrected editions complete with annotations, and more. Wherever possible, I have relied on the best regarded and complete editions of weird fiction stories currently available, but this should not suggest that the view taken herein is that we have any form of access to perfect originals of these stories.

Second, there is a larger question of whether or not we can freely consider texts to be containers of semantic meaning. In brief, this question deals with whether or not we assume there is a distance between the “text” and the “world.” When words on a page refer to an external idea (which requires an assumption that distance exists between text and world), the text can be said to act as a container for semantic meaning if we assume that there is a level of parity between the words and the idea. For example, if we analyze a text for surrealist qualities, we draw a distinction *between* the text and the surrealism that is assumed to exist out there in the world, rather than thinking of the two as operators within the complex thought-form of “surrealism.” Unfortunately, due to the complexity of this question, addressing it in full is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, there are resonances between this question and some traditional motifs within weird fiction itself.

Weird fiction carries a tradition of assuming that texts are, in fact, containers of semantic meaning. That is, in weird fiction stories texts are treated as though they are necessarily accurate reflections of a distanced reality. This reality is almost always distinct from the reality experienced by characters within the stories, and thus the words on the page of texts inside weird fiction stories refer to ideas in the world that are part of a perfected reality outside of humanity’s understanding. These texts are the “dread tomes” which weird fiction authors exchanged with each other to add flavor and background to their individual stories. The most famous is, of course, H. P. Lovecraft’s *Necronomicon*, which is given a high level of accord in every story in which it appears. S. T. Joshi touches on the assumption of the value of semantic meaning in texts when, in *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos*, he discusses the fact that the ontological truth within texts such as the *Necronomicon* is always *assumed* and never proven. Indeed, he argues that there may be no truth at all within these dread tomes; unfortunately, he does not push the issue so far as to question the assumption of texts as containers of semantic meaning altogether.



correct trends that have proven endemic within weird fiction criticism by analyzing the works of individual authors as historically locatable artifacts reflecting aspects of their social and cultural background.

Weird fiction flourished in America during the first half of the Twentieth Century. The luminaries who gave the genre theoretical focus in the decades prior to the Great Depression have become some of the most recognized names in fantastic literature, often eclipsing their contemporaries and standing in esteem with the greats of pre-Twentieth Century fantastic literature. Entire modern genres owe their definition – if not their existence – to weird fiction, and the weird tropes and motifs that were ground-breaking when they were first established, have become part of the common language of fantastic literature today. It is almost impossible to give a critical apprehension of modern fantastic literature without speaking, at least in part, to the influence of weird fiction. This dissertation will highlight the position of weird fiction as a genre crafted by intelligent persons for specific reasons, who, influenced by their time and their place, spurned traditional modes of writing in order to move into new and challenging conceptions of what fantastic literature could do. Throughout this dissertation it will be shown that weird fiction is a genre that necessarily draws upon its historical location for its production. While this could be argued about any genre, it is a claim that has yet to be thoroughly investigated in terms of the weird writers. By establishing themselves within standing aesthetic, political, philosophical, and moral positions, the weird writers put their lived

experiences into their work in a manner whose intentionality<sup>3</sup> is rare to find in fantastic literature. This dissertation will demonstrate the importance of remembering historical location in analyses of the weird by teasing out particular strands of authors' various milieus in the course of analysis their texts as words-on-the-page.

Some of this dissertation will appear commonplace for textual analysis of fantastic literature, while some of it is ground-breaking in studies of weird fiction. This should not come as a surprise: the theoretical basis for this dissertation is simply that weird fiction texts should be read in a give-and-take manner, with emphasis on both modern reading and historical placement of the text at hand. The fact of the matter is that it has been an oversight for critics to not include relevant aspects of history in the various periods of weird fiction's tenure in their analyses, some of which are in accordance with the biographies of weird fiction authors, while others fly in the face of those biographies. Equally, it seems facile to debate that we in the Twenty-First Century read texts from the early part of the Twentieth Century differently than those in the period did; isolating weird fictions from their historical locations, therefore, seems to be an error just as much

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<sup>3</sup> The terms "lived experience" and "intentionality" are sufficiently complex as to require a brief definition of their usage here. I am using the term "lived experience" to denote the factual lives of authors as we currently know them to be, according to biographical works, memoirs, personal letters, and other forms of historical documents. I do not mean to suggest that we have perfect knowledge of the lives of weird fiction authors; rather, I deploy "lived experience" to denote what we currently consider to be biographically accurate based on the best extant sources. These sources are, like all scholarship, in a state of flux rather than stasis – it is entirely possible that they will change over time, as new records are recovered.

By "intentionality" I am referring to moments in works where biographical data indicates that elements of texts are present due to a desire of the author. This does not indicate that those elements are *successfully* deployed within a given text – only that the author wished to place them there. Obviously, I do not suggest that the author is the unchallenged master of their text; it is quite possible to discover interpretations of texts that fly in the face of authorial intentionality. Nevertheless, knowing a given author's intentions for their texts is valuable information, and should not be ignored – even if it is countered by critics on the basis of textual evidence. Both "lived experience" and "intentionality" are heavily coded terms; these definitions should help the reader understand the use I am putting them to, but it is worthwhile to keep in mind that there are other ways they can be deployed in academic criticism.

as over-indulging in biographical readings is. Although this is a simple idea, no critical accounts of weird fiction have as yet taken this approach. Instead, they tend to either isolate texts from their specific historical location, or to analyze them entirely through the biography of their authors rather than the world those authors inhabited. This dissertation attempts to strike the balance between the two positions, bringing new interpretations of stories, or new wrinkles in common interpretations of stories, to light.

The weird fiction authors have often written on the shoulders of giants: their milieus have been filled with inspiring, visionary persons, and far be it from the weird writers to not pull out thoughts from those they admired in the world around them. This dissertation does much the same: it would have been impossible to write without the insightful work of weird fiction critics who have paved the way for current research into the genre. Though this dissertation criticizes some of their efforts, particularly in terms of what has not been done, it should be clear that, like with the work of the weird writers themselves, this dissertation was built atop a mountain of foundational work done by other critics and scholars, and is deeply indebted to those who have gone before.

#### History of the Genre:

The concept of weird fiction dates to the Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu, who deployed the term in order to differentiate his own work from the imagery and motifs of Nineteenth Century Gothic texts. This was the beginning of what I refer to as the “historical weird fiction period.” The term “weird fiction” existed largely as an undeveloped label during his lifetime, but Le Fanu’s weird fictions do differ from the earlier Gothics and the contemporary psychological horror of Edgar Allan Poe: his stories

tended to be presented as impartial or objective accounts of events written by empirically-minded narrators instead of overly-invested or unbiased persons. Equally, Le Fanu's weird fictions usually held an element of indeterminacy, wherein the reader could not easily decide whether events could reliably be of supernatural or natural origin. Furthermore, Le Fanu set his work apart from the Gothics by focusing more upon the construction of a pervasive atmosphere rather than an explicitly detailed plot. This latter innovation would persist in the development of the weird fiction genre over time, leading several authors – most notably H. P. Lovecraft – to insist that atmosphere (or, as Lovecraft phrased is, “a certain type of human mood” [Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II* 177]) is the “great desideratum of weird fiction” (177). Weird fiction achieved a particular form of distinction within the realm of popular fiction by often leaving elements of plot indeterminable by the reader, instead focusing on atmosphere over characterization and prosaic realism.

During the end of the Nineteenth Century and into the early years of the Twentieth Century, weird fiction became a popular genre, with many authors – mostly British and Irish at the time – writing works that they felt too outré for categorization as Gothics, psychological horror tales, or fantastic romances involving supernatural horror. These authors, including M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, William Hope Hodgson and Lord Dunsany, set the tone for those who would follow them in establishing the popularity of the weird fiction genre as one focused primarily upon the

evocation of a particular atmosphere.<sup>4</sup> Weird fiction was not a term lightly used by authors; readers within the period knew of the classification and embraced it eagerly within both the popular press and the flourishing amateur journalism movement. There was, however, still a paucity of strong critical commentary on and about weird fiction as a genre. Very little analysis of the genre or the works it encompassed had been done aside from seemingly standard condemnations of popular literature. This condemnation reached a crest in the late Nineteenth Century with attacks on dime novels, and continued into the Twentieth Century with a general view of pulp literature as work of no literary merit,<sup>5</sup> or “as publishing’s poor, ill-bred stepchild. One glance at their gaudy covers, ugly paper, and endless gray blocks of type was enough to condemn them in tasteful circles” (Server 15). Despite its rather revolutionary function in carving out a form of popular writing unique to the still-early Twentieth Century, weird fiction was left outside of the bounds of robust analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> These early weird fiction authors of the historical period fall outside of the scope of this dissertation for one specific reason: although they are deserving of scholarly analysis, they are not able to be grouped under the schema at play here. That is, there is no sense of a weird fiction *genre* amongst them; the texts of Lord Dunsany are relatable to the texts of Le Fanu via a few shared concepts and a label, but there is no unifying sense of aesthetics that allows for an expectation in production and reception in the same way that exists during the early American period of weird fiction.

As said, the first pioneers of the pre-genre era of weird fiction are worthy of analysis and scholarly critique. Each individual author has, thankfully, come under differing levels of attention in the past few years – the works of Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, and Arthur Machen, for example, have been republished in sorely needed critical editions by Penguin Classics over the past ten years. Equally, interested readers are encouraged to seek out *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by H. P. Lovecraft, and *The Weird Tale* by S. T. Joshi for extended critical chapters on these authors. As it stands, they are necessarily not part of the archive under discussion here.

<sup>5</sup> And carried on into the Twentieth Century with the spurning of popular literature by members of the Frankfurt School and other early critical theorists. Herbert Marcuse, in particular, is responsible for designating pulp fiction as a text outside of the realm of worthwhile analysis, in his 1937 essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture.”

In the first three decades of the Twentieth Century, American authors – following partially in the footsteps of Edgar Allan Poe<sup>6</sup> and Ambrose Bierce – began producing weird fiction of their own. Several were inspired by the North American success of Lord Dunsany, whose weird fantasies were outshone in popularity only by his Broadway plays. Others were taken up with authors from the United Kingdom: M. R. James’ innovations upon the traditional ghost story revolutionized the sub-genre within the U.K. and became influential in the United States, while Algernon Blackwood’s weird fiction vigorously brought the importance of establishing atmosphere over the minutiae of plot to the forefront, and William Hope Hodgson’s highlighting of scientific realism over Gothic supernaturalism became inspirational for young materialist writers. Following from these early weird innovators came the writer who is arguably the best remembered author of weird fiction to date: Howard Philips Lovecraft. Lovecraft (1890 – 1937) established his career early, authoring his first published story in 1918 and continuing to write steadily

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<sup>6</sup> Poe deserves special mention, here. The work of Edgar Allen Poe (1809 – 1849) revitalized the state of supernatural fiction in America during the Nineteenth Century. Best known for writing within the Gothic and psychological horror genres (the latter of which it can be claimed that he invented), Poe was one of the greatest influences on the development of early American weird fiction. H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, for example, were heavily indebted to Poe for their own artistic innovations. This was not always a welcome feature of their work: Lovecraft, specifically, wrote so many Poe-inspired stories that he was once given to opine “there are my Poe stories – alas, where are my Lovecraft stories?” (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II* 315), and swear off any more stories that bore traces of his predecessor’s work.

Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of Poe’s literary works is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Simply, he heavily influenced much of early American weird fiction, but did not himself write weird fiction. That being said, there is much overlap between the genre at issue here and Poe’s psychological horror works: the importance of atmosphere over characterization or plot details, the unworldly or impossible breaks with prosaic reality that his texts often hinge upon, and the usage of lush, idiosyncratic syntax all echo the codified aesthetic techniques that many weird fiction authors would later employ. Poe has, since the rescue of his work by the French, come under intense scholarly scrutiny – and that scrutiny is much deserved. Although the overt connection between weird fiction and Poe remains to be fully explicated, interested readers are encouraged to seek out the essays “On the Literary Influences Which Shaped Lovecraft’s Works,” by J. Vernon Shea, and “Poe and Lovecraft,” by Robert Bloch, both available in S. T. Joshi’s anthology, *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* (1980), among other critical works.

until the end of his life. Lovecraft and his contemporaries constitute what I refer to as the “early American” weird fiction period.<sup>7</sup> His first publication, the short story “Dagon,” was distributed in the amateur press rather than published professionally. Amateur journalism was the first growth vector for American weird fiction; a mode of publication largely forgotten in modern day, amateur journalism was a widespread form of publication in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries whose readership extended into the hundreds of thousands around the globe.

Amateur journalism consisted of self-published newspapers, often nothing more than a few articles, all written by the publisher, and mimeographed for distribution through the postal service. More often than not, amateur journalists would join with a distribution network – an association by and for the amateur press that would serve as a central repository for material to be passed out to members. In the United States the two largest were the National Amateur Press Association, founded in 1876, and the United

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<sup>7</sup> The focus of this dissertation is on American weird fiction authors, as can be surmised from the emphasis I place on the early American weird fiction period. I do not mean to suggest that weird fiction is a *strictly* American genre; many authors from countries around the world have contributed meaningfully to the genre. However, it remains the case that the majority of weird fiction authors have been, since the teens of the Twentieth Century, American. Thus, to allow for a sense of unity within the archive I am submitting to analysis, I have restricted my field to the abundant area of American weird fiction exclusively. This is not to suggest that non-American weird fiction authors are not worth study – it is only to begin this particular conversation by critiquing the works of the majority.

Furthermore, to aid in the aforementioned unity in my archive, I have addressed the milieus of the author’s works from American perspectives. Thus (as will be discussed later in this introduction), the First World War in Lovecraft’s fiction relies on American perspectives on the war; surrealist commentary on art and representation is suggested to be an American phenomenon in Clark Ashton Smith’s weird fiction; the regionalism of the South and Southwest in Robert E. Howard’s stories is necessarily American; the pastiches of Robert Bloch and others is fundamentally linked to American publishing culture and the originally American trend of the “Cthulhu Mythos;” and Thomas Ligotti’s weird metafictional spring out of an American foundation that struggles against its national history while striving towards a more universal stage. This limiting of the archive in this dissertation to American authors and American milieus does not, therefore, suggest that this genre and these milieus have not been expressed in non-American locales – it is, again, only an arbitrary limitation used to begin this particular conversation.

Amateur Press Association, founded in 1895. The impetus behind amateur journalism was little more than a passion for literature in all its forms:

Amateur journalism has been called a means of intellectual culture. It is often described as “a miniature world of letters,” a description both accurate and comprehensive. [...] James M. Beck, in later life Congressman and Solicitor-General of the United States, when an amateur journalist in his youth said: “The love of literature, and not the love of lucre, is the *sine qua non*, the essential characteristic of the amateur journalist. [...] An amateur journalist I would define as a young person who pursues literature, not as a profession, but for the pleasure of so doing.” The impelling motives of amateur journalism are fun, glory and intellectual development. (Spencer 3)

Amateur journalism was not only the domain of youth, however. Lovecraft went on to become president of the NAPA in 1923, when he was thirty-three years old, and he was far from an unusual member due to his age. Equally, Lovecraft was hardly the only member of the amateur press to come to prominence in the early Twentieth Century: Truman Spencer’s history of the hobby lists dozens of prominent authors, politicians, businessmen, and so on, as members in good standing. The focus of amateur journalism publications invariably centered on the interests of their individual publisher. Weird fiction authors, therefore, used their publications or the amateur publications of their colleagues as a venue for distribution of experimental stories, poetry, or works of amateur scholarship on the emergent forms of fantastic literature.



The printing of weird fiction did not remain solely in the domain of the amateur press for long. In 1923, Street & Smith brought out *Weird Tales* magazine under the editorial review of Edwin Baird, and the pulp's first incarnation continued for a remarkable thirty years and 279 individual issues.<sup>8</sup> The decision to publish a pulp magazine that focused specifically on weird fiction was deliberate. One of the two founders of the magazine, Jacob Clark Henneberger, described his intention for the magazine:

Before the advent of *Weird Tales*, I had talked with such nationally known writers [...] then residing in Chicago. I discovered that all of them expressed a desire to submit for publication a story of the unconventional type but hesitated to do so for fear of rejection. Pressed for details they acknowledged that such a delving into the realms of fantasy, the bizarre, and the outré could possibly be frowned upon by publishers of the conventional. [...] When everything is properly weighed, I must confess that the main motive in establishing *Weird Tales* was to give the writer free rein to express his innermost feelings in a manner befitting great literature. (Weinberg 3)

It is clear that not only did the publishers understand that there was a weird fiction aesthetic foundation strong enough to produce a regular magazine, but that there was sufficient readership to make the endeavor financially profitable as well. Although weird fiction was published in a variety of other pulp magazines, most notably the early

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<sup>8</sup> *Weird Tales* ceased its initial run in 1954, but has resurfaced in a variety of forms. The modern incarnation reappeared in 1988, and has published semi-regularly under a variety of mastheads up until the summer of 2013.

Gernsback magazines, *Weird Tales* was the mainstay avenue for weird fiction authors. Once authors like Lovecraft and other early American weird fiction pioneers were presented to the *Weird Tales* readership, it did not take long for the subject matter to become ingrained deep within the popular imagination of the public – and to attract a whole host of new authors invigorated by the success of the genre.

Arguably the most famous of the *Weird Tales* authors were those who became known as the “Lovecraft Circle.” Lovecraft maintained a vast network of correspondents across the globe, writing more than one-hundred thousand letters in his lifetime (according to biographer L. Sprague de Camp, less than one-fifth of these letters survive). Many of these were weird fiction authors, whose intellectual views on the genre they were helping to develop were refined by communicating with Lovecraft; indeed, more than a handful of them became writers solely due to Lovecraft’s influence on their lives. Three members of the “Lovecraft Circle” form the basis of chapters in this dissertation: Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and Robert Bloch. Clark Ashton Smith, who was well known for his richly textured weird fiction stories, was arguably inspired to write fiction rather than poetry by Lovecraft. Robert E. Howard sought to refine the philosophic and regional underpinnings of his fiction – both weird and sword and sorcery fiction – thanks to a lengthy correspondence with Lovecraft. Robert Bloch, who can be considered one of the most successful of the second wave of American weird fiction authors (what I refer to as the “pastiche period” of American weird fiction), was moved to begin a professional writing career while still a teenager by Lovecraft. These authors and many others constituted the vanguard of professional weird fiction writing in America, mostly due to the success of *Weird Tales*.

Unfortunately, the 1930s were a tumultuous time for the weird fiction luminaries. Robert E. Howard committed suicide in 1936; H. P. Lovecraft died from cancer in 1937; Clark Ashton Smith ceased writing fiction almost entirely in 1935; these events signaled the end of the golden age of *Weird Tales*, and a downturn in the production of American weird fiction in general. The market turned towards the shudder pulps, otherwise known as “weird menace magazines,” which broke entirely from the pattern of including the outré or simply supernatural in stories in favor of always relying on a mundane explanation for bizarre events. *Weird Tales* attempted to continue bringing original weird fiction to the market, but as the Depression years moved into the Second World War era, the owners of the magazine switched to substandard materials (sub-standard even for the pulps) – this, among other factors, resulted in *Weird Tales* ceasing publication in the early 1950s. At the same time, however, a new venue for weird fiction arose, and it signaled a fundamental shift in the analytic and popular conception of weird fiction for decades to come.

Donald Wanderei and August Derleth, both contemporaries and friends of Lovecraft’s, began the Arkham House publishing company in 1939 with the express and singular purpose of keeping Lovecraft’s fiction in print. They produced high-quality hardcover anthologies of Lovecraft’s work initially, but quickly branched out into publishing Derleth’s “posthumous collaborations” with Lovecraft (considered “the most disreputable of Derleth’s activities” [Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*, 638]) as well as the works of other authors – first weird fiction writers exclusively, followed by authors from other genres of fantastic literature. This was the moment of what I refer to as “the pastiche weird fiction period,” the third successive era in the history of weird fiction.

Despite their numerous faults, Wanderei and Derleth were instrumental in keeping weird fiction alive and in the public eye through the Second World War and on into the second half of the Twentieth Century. However, their emphasis upon Lovecraft – including the construction of what has become known as the “Cthulhu Mythos,” and the accumulation of mythology around Lovecraft’s personal life – served to confuse the distinction between the stories of Lovecraft (and the authors who exchanged fictional imagery with him) with weird fiction itself. In short, the establishment of Arkham House was the beginning of the era of the pastiche, when the majority of authors working in the weird fiction genre were producing little more than glosses on the “Cthulhu Mythos” with only occasional moments of original weird literary production.

The specifics of the (arguably artificial) sub-genre “Cthulhu Mythos” is beyond the scope of this introduction, but suffice it to say that it became the dominant – if not the only – vein of weird fiction still in mass publication up until as late as the 1980s. That is to say, the careers of weird fiction authors in the pastiche era was, in the main, built out of mimicry of the dominant voice within the *Weird Tales* golden age, to the exclusion of almost all others. Hundreds if not thousands of authors wrote new stories set in a fictional universe that was attributed to Lovecraft by Derleth and other pundits of the history of weird fiction. These pundits had been misled by Derleth’s misreading of Lovecraft, leading to confusion about both the life and work of Lovecraft and the trajectory of weird fiction itself through the early Twentieth Century. Not all of the work produced in the pastiche era was without merit, of course: the noted British author Ramsey Campbell established himself during the pastiche era, as did the subject of the fourth chapter of this dissertation, renowned thriller writer Robert Bloch. Although beginning with what I

conceive of as a “pure” pastiche – little more than mimicry – of Lovecraft’s oeuvre, Bloch pushed the boundaries of weird fiction in the pastiche era in new directions. His later “Lovecraftian” weird fiction, particularly his novel *Strange Eons*, demonstrated not only that there was still life in the weird fiction genre, but that it could be developed from within the pastiche form of the genre as well.

Nevertheless, the confusion of Lovecraft’s writing with weird fiction proper almost guaranteed the death of weird fiction. For decades, authors drawn to the weird fiction genre tended to create variations on Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu Mythos” rather than produce original visions of weird fiction proper. This occurred despite a revolution in academic criticism on Lovecraft and his specific work, which in the 1970s reinvigorated popular interest in weird fiction and stripped away the layers of misinformation that had accrued around Lovecraft since the 1940s. Indeed, if anything, the proverbial re-discovery of Lovecraft focused weird fiction through the “Cthulhu Mythos” in the popular imagination, even as critics of the weird struggled to succeed in separating the two. This was the start of what I refer to as the “modern” weird fiction period, typified by the attraction and repulsion between weird fiction and the “Cthulhu Mythos.” Between the 1980s and the 1990s there were few true “weird fiction” stories – despite, for example, a reinvigoration of *Weird Tales*, the majority of purported “weird fiction” in the period were either pastiches of the “Cthulhu Mythos,” outré science fiction, or simply supernatural horror.

There was, admittedly, the occasional author who resisted the pastiche impulse and wrote entirely original weird fiction that followed the aesthetic impulses of the early American weird fiction luminaries without falling into anachronism or imitation. Thomas

Ligotti is one such author, and his professional career – beginning in the mid-1980s – is the subject of my fifth chapter. These authors were so relatively thin on the ground, however, that many authors of fantastic literature spurned the label “weird” altogether. The reasons for this were varied, but some involved a belief that “weird fiction” and the “Cthulhu Mythos” were now essentially inseparable concepts in the popular imagination. Others argued that the aesthetics of weird fiction simply involved too many problematic elements rising from the original early American period of the genre, most notably racism and sexism.<sup>9</sup> Authors in this vein, such as Jeff Vandermeer and China Miéville, described themselves as inventors of the “New Weird” – a genre of fantastic literature that may not even follow in a linear fashion from weird fiction as it is generally conceived, but nevertheless slips the increasingly difficult aspects of the original genre.

By the early 2000s, however, the “New Weird” was largely a depopulated genre. It never gained the cultural cachet that weird fiction – or even the “Cthulhu Mythos” – had earned, nor did any clear sense of purpose, aesthetic, or philosophy ever arise from the disparate voices that had created the new style. Some still attempt to write in the New Weird vein, but most of the original authors (most notably Miéville) have moved on to other genre interests. At the same time, writers who had largely stuck to the original forms of weird fiction (such as the aforementioned Thomas Ligotti) gained in success,

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted here that many, if not most, of the authors from the early American weird fiction period were undeniably racist, and several of their fictions are unabashedly racist. The works selected for this dissertation are not the most egregious in terms of their racist views, but there are elements of racism in several, particularly in the stories of Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft. Though these elements are explicable, this dissertation should not be read as justifying or otherwise excusing the racist beliefs of early American weird fiction writers. Robust discussions of racism in genre literature are beyond the scope of this dissertation; interested readers can discover more on this subject, particularly in terms of racism in early forms of horror literature, in critical anthologies such as Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy’s *American Gothic: Interventions on National Narrative*.

popularity, and rising critical attention. The proponents of the New Weird argued, in the main, that weird fiction was at least outdated if not simply dead, replaced by slavish devotion to outmoded ideas and historically obscured authors. However, the New Weird did not last longer than a decade, and interest in both weird fiction in general and the Twentieth Century weird fiction authors in specific continued to grow.

As of this writing it is still unclear if weird fiction will continue to reassert itself as the new century progresses through its second decade. There is some reason to think that the genre fragmentation that began in the 1930s has progressed too far to ever give much ground for a genre-blending form like weird fiction. Equally, weird fiction generally requires a form of literature to be *written against*; some style that it can reject in order to claim new aesthetic and philosophic space. I am uncertain if there is any such Twentieth or Twenty-First Century trend that a revived weird fiction can set itself against. Still, it is clear that authors such as Thomas Ligotti, Ramsey Campbell, Caitlin R. Kiernan and others are able to produce fine weird fictions of their own even in the current period. The history of the weird fiction genre belongs to Lovecraft, Smith, Howard, Bloch, and many others. If there is to be a future for weird fiction, there will have to be more authors who are willing to write against the grain.

#### A Short History of the Criticism:

The analytic criticism of weird fiction began with H. P. Lovecraft, as so many aspects of American weird fiction did. Lovecraft wrote several dozen non-fiction essays on literary theory, all of which were far less well-known than his fiction. Among these essays, he wrote several on weird fiction and, to a lesser extent, genre fiction in general.

Lovecraft was not the best of analytic writers – despite being a profound autodidact, he was almost entirely uneducated, and as such his opinions could be quite murky at times. One of the most engaging pieces by Lovecraft is the first critical account of the weird fiction genre, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. He wrote the long-form essay between 1925 and 1927 while living in Manhattan, using the New York Public Library as a resource for texts that would have been inaccessible to him in his native Providence, Rhode Island. Lovecraft conceived of the essay when a friend asked him to contribute a history of weird fiction to his amateur magazine *The Recluse*. After it was published in 1927, Lovecraft edited and expanded it from 1933 to 1934. It has since been published in multiple editions by several publishers, most notably the year 2000 annotated edition from Hippocampus Press. While hardly a robust scholarly treatise,<sup>10</sup> *Supernatural Horror in Literature* is effectively the earliest surviving demarcation of what weird fiction is, over and against other popular literature genres.

By looking at *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, a short article written by Lovecraft in 1933 titled “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” and some of Lovecraft’s letters written over the course of his life, we can see the burgeoning theoretical basis for weird fiction that would inform Lovecraft’s career and that of the early American weird fiction vanguard. First and foremost was Lovecraft’s dedication to atmosphere above any other concern of narrative construction:

Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is *a vivid picture of a certain type of*

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<sup>10</sup> The British author M. R. James reportedly stated that he found Lovecraft’s writing style “most offensive” after reading it (Schultz, *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* 256).



*human mood*. The moment it tries to be anything else it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing. Prime emphasis should be given to *subtle suggestion* – imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail which express shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal. (Lovecraft, *Miscellaneous* 116)

Atmosphere leads to the weird “crux” of a given story, which is the presence of “something which *could not possibly happen*” (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters III* 434) and yet is, in terms of philosophy and technique, a matter of “*supplements* rather than *contradictions* of the visible and measurable universe” (295-96). S. T. Joshi notes that this is a seeming contradiction resolvable only by considering Lovecraft’s maintaining “a methodology of weird writing whereby a background of scientific realism [...] is maintained” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural* 19). This is a deft explanation, since Lovecraft argued that “[i]nconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome, and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story *except* that touching on the one given marvel” (*Miscellaneous* 115). This all suggests that Lovecraft thought the weird tale should represent a new turn in fiction, one which should involve “more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule” (Lovecraft, *Supernatural* 23), spurning the standard tenor of Victorian forms of supernatural horror.

In practice, weird fiction was differentiated by its creators from the majority of pulp fictions that were published alongside them – works that were written for pay first and foremost, with artistry as a secondary concern at best – by this aesthetic belief that they were producing something heretofore unimagined. Weird fictions stories, on the one

hand, were intended to bring a form of the supernatural suspense story into the Twentieth Century by rejecting the didacticism and strict realism that so many Victorian stories relied upon for their artistic impact. At the same time, weird fiction stories were intended to stand against the purported philistinism represented by the workman pulp authors who wrote to spec, sacrificing their ostensible artistic integrity in exchange for (reasonably) steady pay. Among all other concerns, though – the focus on strong realism broken only by the intrusion of the one impossible element, and the rejection of common tropes from the Nineteenth Century<sup>11</sup> – perhaps the most important was the focus put upon developing the atmosphere within a story into a means for conveying the philosophic beliefs of the author. This was a technique mastered by Lovecraft and emulated by the majority of his contemporaries and followers, and in modern day is generally considered by critics like S. T. Joshi to be the hallmark of authors who have made a worthy contribution to the genre. By establishing atmosphere as a primary element of an entirely modern genre, Lovecraft and his contemporaries sought to compose the central works of a broadening canon that would, on the one hand, establish their own personal interests in fiction, and on the other reflect the concerns of the modern world around them.

Following *Supernatural Horror in Literature* there was a lack of analytic criticism of weird fiction. The reasons for this are indeterminate, but perhaps authors in the period thought Lovecraft had already said everything that needed to be said, or were

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that some tropes, particularly some conventional monsters (such as the vampire, the werewolf, etc.), have been deployed by weird fiction writers. When they are used, however, it is done intentionally to run counter to the expectations set by authors of traditional supernatural horror. To take one example, when Lovecraft centers the story “The Shunned House” on a vampire destroyed through an application of sulfuric acid, he demonstrates the distance between his weird tale and the form of the vampire that readers had come to expect from fictions like *Dracula*, *Varney the Vampire*, and other Victorian models.

simply too interested in creating the material to subject it to lengthy analysis. Regardless, until 1940 weird fiction was not a subject of critical analysis outside of the casual letters exchanged between amateur journals or printed in the *Weird Tales* regular fan column, “The Eyrie;” even after 1940, on until the early 1970s, the number of critical works published on weird fiction are vanishingly small. S. T. Joshi summarizes the almost three decade span by simply stating that “the number of academicians or mainstream critics who even discussed Lovecraft [and weird fiction] could be counted on the fingers of one hand” (Joshi, *Epicure* 40). Unfortunately, one of that rare number was Edmund Wilson, who wrote a review of Lovecraft’s weird fiction for the November 1945 issue of *The New Yorker*. For unknowable reasons, Wilson seems dedicated to arguing that Lovecraft was nothing but a hack writer based on the grossest misrepresentations of his stories, and to denigrating Lovecraft's posthumous legacy as the working of a “cult” (Wilson). Sadly, due to his pre-eminence as a literary critic, Wilson’s outlandish condemnation of Lovecraft tainted the upper class and academic perspective of weird fiction for decades to come.

It was not until the early 1970s<sup>12</sup> that critical attention turned back towards weird fiction. Richard L. Tierney and Dirk W. Mosig began working on recovering the truth behind Lovecraft and the weird aesthetics he championed. Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp began focusing on the lives and works of Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Clark

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<sup>12</sup> S. T. Joshi notes, a bit morbidly, that 1971 was the year of August Derleth’s death, and that this, combined with the ongoing publication of Lovecraft’s *Selected Letters* (begun in 1965), might be the main reason for the revived critical interest in that decade (Joshi, *Epicure* 40). Despite the grimness of the suggestion, Joshi may not be far off: with Derleth’s insistence on a misrepresentation of Lovecraft and his thoughts – including his aesthetics of the weird – and his assumed control of the Lovecraft estate, there was little possibility of discovering evidence weighty enough to sustain a critical analysis of weird fiction.

Ashton Smith. Maurice Lévy's doctoral dissertation *Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic* (the first of its kind) passed the Sorbonne in 1969 and was published in 1972. Many more critics followed, and by the mid-1980s it was commonplace to see the same people working on amateur and professional critiques of the weird. David E. Schultz, S. T. Joshi, Donald R. Burleson, Robert M. Price, Robert H. Waugh, Stefan Dziemianowicz, and Matthew H. Onderdonk all published repeatedly in both amateur journals, such as *Lovecraft Studies*, or in more rarified anthology collections of criticism.

A moment of special focus must be made for S. T. Joshi, however. Joshi, born in 1958, has earned the title of foremost scholar of the weird. After finding more than fifteen hundred errors in a published edition of his favorite Lovecraft story, "At the Mountains of Madness," Joshi decided to put together the first textual history of Lovecraft's works. He went on to write and edit dozens of books on Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, Ramsey Campbell, Arthur Machen, and many more. Without a doubt he is the single greatest contributor to the current critical climate regarding weird fiction, and one of the few who has fought tirelessly to reclaim the genre from an analytical ghetto. In 1990, Joshi published *The Weird Tale*, a survey of some of the greatest names in the historical weird fiction period along with a lengthy essay on Lovecraft. The only full-length text to focus on weird fiction as a literary movement since Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, *The Weird Tale* is a ground-breaking piece of scholarship that is still the most commonly referenced critical work in any study of the genre. Joshi followed his survey with *The Modern Weird Tale* in 2001 and *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* in 2004. Broader than his first foray, *The Modern Weird Tale* is interested with how weird fiction has propagated out into the modern period, developing

into the concretized genre of “horror” rather than the “weird” of the early American period. It is a fascinating study on some of the best – and least – known names in post-World War II weird fiction and horror. Additionally, Joshi published the definitive biography of Lovecraft, *I Am Providence*, in 2010.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the current climate of academic criticism of the weird is almost tepid. Although academic interest in the genre is seemingly increasing, with more analyses of Lovecraft, Howard, Smith, Bloch, Ligotti, and all the other weird fiction luminaries being published every quarter, it seems as though Joshi’s prediction in *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* – of there being little for scholars to do but indexing references and ideas exchanged between authors – may be coming true. With the subordinating of philosophical earnestness in the weird in favor of elements of imagery that have been brokered into kitsch, the continued encrustation of horror and science fiction as discrete and unique genres unto themselves, and the determination of new writers to distance themselves from what they consider to be the antiquated aesthetics of the past, there is some reason to believe that weird fiction will not survive at all.

If it does not, there too goes the vibrancy of weird fiction criticism, since up until now it has been commenting on a living literary tradition; one with many permutations and bizarre off-shoots, but such is the nature of an evolving aesthetic form. Weird fiction criticism took a massive breath of life when it came storming back in full force in the

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<sup>13</sup> Since the initial writing of this introduction, Joshi has also published a definitive history of the horror genre (in which he continues to conflate the weird fiction and horror genres): the two-volume *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction*, 2012. Though the work is monumental in scope and deft in its execution, it suffers from the same problems that afflict all of Joshi’s writing on genre fiction. Namely, it is too invested in the biographies of the authors it discusses, and it is too devoted to Joshi’s own purportedly objective aesthetic standards.

early 1970s; though there is still much work to be done, it is possible that now, almost fifty years later, it might be time for the breath of life to be followed by the proverbial last gasp. Personally, I think that there is still challenging and exciting analytical work to be done on weird fiction, but in order to survive I think the critical field must, like the New Weird attempted to do in the first decade of the new millennium, distance itself from its predecessors and find new ways to investigate the historical, early, pastiche, and modern weird fiction texts.

#### Flaws in the Critical Approach:

For all of their successes, there have been consistent problems within the field of weird fiction criticism. The first and foremost difficulty is a contention as to what weird fiction actually *is* as a genre: is it a catchall term for fantastic literature published in the years between 1890 and 1945? Is it nothing more than a prefiguration of the genres we now receive as “horror” and “science fiction”? Is it a robust set of literary practices in production and reception that demarcates modern, Twentieth Century fictions from antiquated Victorian popular literature? Critics cannot seem to decide, and even preeminent thinkers like S. T. Joshi have argued that weird fiction does not “exist as a genre but as *the consequence of a world view*” (Joshi, *Weird Tale* 1). I am not persuaded by his arguments, and am left wondering why the latter excludes the synonymous production of the former. It is almost as though early American weird fiction is partially occluded from scholarly tools and methodology, preventing us from achieving a truly clear analytic understanding of a genre that arguably prospered and withered more than half a century ago. All of which is despite the seemingly clear statements made by

Lovecraft and others of the weird fiction vanguard when they set out to establish the theoretical basis for what they conceived of as a new genre of fiction.

The difficulty critics have with addressing weird fiction seems, in the main, to be due to an encrustation of mythology on the original stories and their authors as they are received today. That is, much of the popular reception of weird fiction has revolved around *the writers themselves*, causing a good bit of misinformation and misunderstanding to affect our analytic understanding of the individual texts. As I explain at length in my first chapter, the critical apprehension of weird fiction has heretofore been caught on two fundamentally mistaken prongs: either critics analyze individual stories through a strict lens of biographic criticism, locking our understanding of the texts to the specific lives of their authors, or they analyze the stories through a worldview predicated on our current understanding of the world. The former is an extreme version of a useful analytic tool; biographic analysis should inform our critical reception of texts, particularly (as in the case of Lovecraft) when we are fortunate enough to have a voluminous amount of information on their personal lives. The latter is perhaps an understandable mistake, predicated on the notion that weird fiction stories can simply be removed whole from their historical location in order to be comprehensible to a critical eye. While this is certainly true, I do not think that these stories can be fully isolated from their time and place without losing fundamental connotations contained within the words on the page; nor can they be entirely reduced to commentary on the lived experiences of their authors. As such, my dissertation seeks to resolve the critical conundrum by taking a middle ground: weird fiction must be analyzed in light of the lived experience of its authors, but not slavishly devoted to supporting biographic minutiae. At the same time,

weird fiction must be approached as though it has some connection to the historical location of its initial production and reception; these stories are not, strictly speaking, timeless, and they should be apprehended as reflective of the milieu in which they were composed.

My dissertation thus analyzes and discusses the importance of apprehending weird fictions as artifacts connected to the time and place of their production and produced through the lived experience of their authors. Though this might appear to be an exercise in authorial intentionality or a needless restriction to historical framing, the fact of the matter is that the only way to counter both the mythologies that have built up around weird fiction authors and the temptation to see the stories as timeless is to come to an understanding of the primary texts as necessarily tied to the milieu of their initial deployment. This does not mean, of course, that an analysis of weird fiction must be bound to a historical context; we are quite capable of working with weird fictions in terms of why they are being read and revisited in the early Twenty-First Century. The angle of approach taken within my dissertation is simply that by treating weird fictions as either fundamentally disconnected from their historical location or as a locus for their author's biography, we have missed a heretofore ripe area of examination for coming to an understanding of the analytic importance of this branch of genre fiction as a means of contextualizing the complexity of life within the period of the early Twentieth Century.

Proposed Response:

This dissertation will, therefore, approach five distinct weird fiction authors and investigate their works for traces of a historical milieu current with the production of said



works. I have chosen to focus the first three chapters on luminaries from the early American weird fiction period, since these authors were the first to develop weird fiction into a reasonably solid set of aesthetic practices. The last two chapters of this dissertation focus on an author from the pastiche period and an author from the modern period, respectively. I felt that it was important to include authors from these two periods in the history of weird fiction, since the stretch of decades between 1940 and 1980 is simply too vast to let go unconsidered, and since the matter of whether or not weird fiction can be said to still exist in these early years of the new millennium is something still up for critical consideration. In this sense, the historicization I work with in my dissertation is two-fold: it is both the periodization of the various weird fiction authors, and the specific milieus that I argue are detectable within the works of those authors.

In some cases these analyses will fly in the face of authorial intentionality, as they do in terms of Lovecraft's attitudes towards the First World War, while others will draw upon what we know of the lived experiences of the authors in order to add depth to new readings of texts. Where authorial intentionality is ignored, it should not be taken as an effort at dismissing the opinions and thoughts of the authors themselves; the knowledge we have of their perspectives on various aspects of life, aesthetics, and philosophy are eminently valuable, but they should not overshadow the possibility of new interpretations of their texts. That is the guiding principle of this dissertation: weird fiction works can and should be read as stemming from specific historical locations, milieus, and schools of thought. They should not, however, be hidebound to the biographies of their authors, just as they should not be unceremoniously uprooted from the soil of their time and place. We as critics can find new avenues into weird fiction, and thus genre fiction itself, but we

must take care to avoid the missteps of our analytic forebears in the process. This dissertation is an attempt to do just that, and the forays that it makes down new roads of critical apprehension of the weird bears promising results.

A Note on Critical Theory and Weird Fiction Criticism:

It should be noted that the three approaches detailed above – two belonging to traditional approaches to weird fiction criticism and the one developed in this dissertation – roughly correspond to three schools of literary analysis: historical-biographical criticism, New Criticism, and New Historicism. Respectively, historical-biographical criticism corresponds to the biography-heavy form of weird fiction criticism that has been popular from the 1940s until the modern day. New Criticism refers to the recent trend of weird fiction critics to use analytic strategies that require atomistic approaches to texts, isolating them from their historical moment. Finally, New Historicism corresponds to my own approach to weird fiction criticism, falling somewhere between the previous two forms of criticism. Although few critics of weird fiction would ever outright claim that their work corresponds to a specific school of literary analysis, there are nevertheless sufficient resonances between weird fiction criticism and said schools that a brief description of them is worthwhile. Doing so will help to establish the place of weird fiction criticism within the broader history of literary analysis, as well as further illuminate the specific techniques used by critics to analyze texts.

The majority of weird fiction criticism has subscribed, in the main, to forms of analysis roughly analogous to historical-biographical criticism. Historical-biographical criticism tends to think of individual texts as mirrors for the world in some fashion,

usually for the author and the author's thoughts (Guerin 22). This form of analysis is more of a methodology than a rigidly defined school, since it was practiced prior to the development of literary analysis as sets of standardized areas of thought. When enacting a historical-biographical analysis of a given text, the critic will consider the text, primarily, in terms of what it can tell the reader about the author or the author's history. As such, authorial intentionality – what a given author *meant* by the act of writing – is of substantive concern over what a text precisely *says*. Under historical-biographical analysis, the text does not so much speak for itself as it does speak for the author who created it. This form of analysis has been popular since antiquity, and only truly began losing traction in the late Nineteenth Century.

Weird fiction critics have tacitly subscribed to the historical-biographical method since at least the 1940s. Fritz Leiber, Matthew H. Onderdonk, and S. T. Joshi have all used historical-biographical methods for their analysis, admittedly often to great effect. S. T. Joshi is the stand-out critic in this regard, since his work on weird fiction authors has spanned a thirty-year career and numerous publications. In his papers on H. P. Lovecraft and his books, such as *The Weird Tale* (1990), Joshi argues that weird fiction is best considered as a representation of the author's personal philosophy or worldview. He writes:

I am convinced that we can understand [weird] writers' work [...] only by examining their metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic theories and then by seeing how their fiction reflects or expresses these theories. In every case we shall see that each writer's entire output is a philosophical unity, changing as the author's conception of the world changes. Much of this

philosophical investigation is a matter of philology – a study of the facts of biography, of nonfictional writings, letters, and the like – but seems a necessary preliminary to the task. (*The Weird* 10-11)

As a result, Joshi gives texts minimal analysis *as aesthetic objects unto themselves* – texts tend to receive approval from Joshi only if they adequately stand in for the beliefs of the authors themselves, expressing the concerns and ideas he has discovered during his admittedly astounding depth of research into authorial biography and philosophy. While this approach allows for an excellent understanding of weird fiction *authors*, it does not necessarily grant for as productive an interpretation of weird fiction *texts* as other approaches might.

Literary critics, seeking to systematize analytic methodologies to give more consistent, replicable, results, revolutionized analysis in the mid-Twentieth Century by developing a theoretical school that completely changed how traditional literary criticism had been enacted. This school, referred to as New Criticism, sought to reverse the trends found in traditional criticism; rather than focusing on the text as a way to understand the author, the New Critics argued that the text should be the only thing of concern to analysis. Whether the text *could* tell a reader about the author was irrelevant, for the reader could never know for certain if the information was accurate. The text could only *be*, and as such it was the words on the page alone that were considered analyzable. For the New Critics, the text was its own meaning, enclosed from the world around it, a thing unto itself. John Crowe Ransom coined the term “New Criticism” for his eponymous book, establishing his hope for an analytic movement that escaped both “psychological affective vocabulary” and “plain moralism” (Ransom xi) in their illumination of texts.

Thus, the thrust of New Criticism was atomistic and overtly restrictive. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley developed two primary New Criticism essays: “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy.” In these essays the two critics delineated foundational principles for New Criticism: critics of a given text cannot be concerned with the author’s intention *for* a text, nor the text’s *emotional effect* upon a specific reader. Put simply, the former is unknowable *from the text itself*, while the latter only gives information about the reader’s subjective response, rather than the text itself. As they put it, the text “is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it” (Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* 5), indicating that there is no necessary connection between an author and a text after the moment of creation. They were concerned with the fact that “the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgments, tends to disappear” (21) when the critic is concerned with intention or effect. On the whole, New Criticism enacts close reading of texts in order to discern how the syntax, imagery, diction, and figurative language operate in a manner as close to objective, almost scientific, standards as possible. Although few weird fiction critics have deployed analyses that resonate with New Criticism, there have been a few. Donald R. Burleson and, especially, Robert H. Waugh, whose *The Monster in the Mirror: Looking for H. P. Lovecraft* (2006) is overtly a set of New Criticism analyses, for example. More weird critics like Waugh have been springing up since the analytical boom of the 1970s, which is perhaps not a surprise since New Criticism was largely *en vogue* academically during that period.

Finally, the critical stance that I have adopted for this dissertation resonates most closely with New Historicism. Established in the 1980s by Stephen Greenblatt, who

coined the term “New Historicism,”<sup>14</sup> this approach to literary criticism is extremely loose in its definitions and practices. Intentionally so, in some ways, as early New Historicists were set against the idea of becoming more rigid in their practices, preferring to leave themselves open to new analytic approaches to texts. Greenblatt has stated:

We had never formulated a set of theoretical propositions or articulated a program; we had not drawn up for ourselves, let alone for anyone else, a sequence of questions that always needed to be posed when encountering a work of literature in order to construct a new historicist reading; we would not be able to say to someone in haughty disapproval, “You are not an authentic new historicist.” The notion of authenticity seemed and continues to seem misplaced, for new historicism is not a coherent, close-knit school in which one might be enrolled or from which one might be expelled. (Gallagher 1-2)

In brief, New Historicism argues for a cultural study of texts – not focusing on the text as an object in the world, exclusively, while avoiding using the text to read the life and mind of the specific author. Instead, New Historicism demands analyzing texts as objects embedded in complex sets of social relations, all of which can be historically related. New Historicism focuses on how and why texts were read in the moment of their production (as well as why they were produced in the first place), and at the same time often considers why they are still read in our own period.

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<sup>14</sup> And has, admittedly, since abandoned it in favor of the term “Cultural Poetics.”

Furthermore, New Historicism tends to avoid canonical texts for their analyses. Though they do not spurn the canon altogether, New Historicists often choose popular or “low” literature for their inquiries, or even texts that would not, traditionally, be considered literature at all.<sup>15</sup> Pulp literature, which constitutes the majority (if not all) of early American weird fiction, and small-press weird fiction, which includes most of the pastiche and modern eras of weird fiction, fit nicely into the expected categories of New Historicism. These sorts of texts allow New Historicists to enact complex analysis of literature often disregarded by more strict schools of literary criticism, such as Marxism (which disregards popular literature altogether) or post-structuralism (which would be concerned with weird fiction, if at all, insofar as it could be isolated from its historical production). Equally, it allows New Historicists to apprehend texts by “their status as evidence of the human capacity to respond, and not merely react, to the social and cultural conditions of the time and place of their production” (White 299). By focusing on the historical moment of a text first and foremost, and by considering texts irreducible to their words on the page alone, the New Historicists allow for readings that reinvigorate texts with new, but persuasive, interpretations.

It is important to note, however, that New Historicism does not entirely divorce itself from any analytic technique. Indeed, New Historicists will occasionally include elements of authorial biography in their analyses, or restrict themselves to extremely close readings of texts in search of new interpretations. This is, I believe, done in order to keep the proverbial toolbox available to New Historicists replete with as many options as

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<sup>15</sup> Railway tickets and diary entries of Nietzsche’s about his umbrella are two relatively good examples.

possible; it also prevents New Historicism becoming a hidebound set of practices that exclude by fiat new contributions to the field based on manipulating more traditional techniques. As H. Aram Veesser argues in his introduction to *The New Historicism* (1989), “every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns,” though by doing so New Historicists “risks falling prey to the practice it exposes” (xi). The use of tools I condemn is something that occurs throughout this dissertation; as I have said elsewhere in this introduction, there are moments where elements of biographical reading are the best method for illuminating new interpretations of texts. Equally, there are moments where considering a text from our perspective over and against how it was read in its own historical moment bears the greatest analytic fruit. In these moments it should be clear that I am attempting to use the tools of the weird fiction critics I have most thoroughly condemned to show how they have slipped from their analytic grasp. I believe that I have run the purported risk with enough care to avoid falling prey to the practices I argue are outmoded.

I think that it is necessary to stress once again that these three areas of literary criticism – historical-biographical, New Critical, and New Historicist – are discussed here simply because they resonate with aspects of the history of weird fiction criticism. As such, they make comprehension of the task of this dissertation a bit clearer for the reader, who might be more familiar with the traditional approaches of literary theory. Most weird fiction critics would consider themselves just that – critics of the weird, and nothing more. Critics such as Burleson or Waugh, who claim membership to one specific analytic school of thought, are vanishingly rare. The overwhelming majority, myself included, for the most part, find it much more important to treat weird fiction criticism organically,



instead of attempting to attach a pre-existing lattice onto the discourse that has built up since the 1940s. Though it may make the discussion in this dissertation clearer to readers unfamiliar with the byways of weird fiction criticism, it should be understood that this tripartite framework is one of convenience more than strict historical or current felicity. This dissertation, and the analytic trends it discusses, are, ultimately, works of weird fiction criticism, rather than works of strict New Historicist, New Critical, or historical-biographical criticism.

Layout of this Dissertation:

I have patterned my dissertation in a five chapter format, with the first three chapters looking at some of the luminaries of early American weird fiction. Each of these figures exemplify what weird fiction came to mean in the early Twentieth Century; though weird fiction was created as a label in the latter decades of the Nineteenth Century, these writers reshaped it into an outright genre more appropriate for the modern climate around them. However, it would be incorrect to state that weird fiction entirely ends with the early American weird fiction period. My fourth chapter analyzes the work of an author whose career covered more than half of the Twentieth Century, mostly during what I refer to as the “pastiche era” of weird fiction. During this era weird fiction had become so pervasive as to constitute a milieu of its own, informing the work of authors in much the same way as other social and artistic milieu had informed the work of early American weird fiction authors. By looking at the work of this bridging author, I will be able to show that a dedication to the pastiche indicates that the genre remained fertile soil even decades after it had fallen out of popular consciousness, post-1940.

Finally, my fifth chapter will analyze the works of one of the current masters of weird fiction, who rose to prominence during the modern period of weird fiction in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. By analyzing this late resurgence in weird fiction I will question whether or not the genre exists as such in the current climate or if it has undergone a shift in tenor, much as it did when Lovecraft codified his definition of the genre in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*.

My first chapter deals with H. P. Lovecraft. To not give Lovecraft a place of prominence would be to do a disservice to him and to misrepresent weird fiction as a genre. As detailed above, the impact of Lovecraft upon weird fiction – and, indeed, speculative fiction en toto – is simply monumental. Though not the only author of merit among his contemporaries – and certainly not the least controversial – Lovecraft earned his recognition by theorizing and implementing innovations in the conceptualizing of weird fiction. His concepts and ideas revolutionized popular literature; modern day fantastic literature would be entirely different if not for his work. In this chapter I have attempted to remove Lovecraft from the mythologies that have been built up around him, analyzing his fictions from a direction that takes his biographical history into account without giving it the place of interpretive mastery. At the same time I recognize that his historical location anchors his stories, but does not overshadow them to the extent of closing them off from our socio-cultural climate. Criticism focusing on Lovecraft, more than any other weird fiction author, has all too often focused on either the minutiae of his life, or abstracts his tales from their historical location altogether. I attempt to rectify this by illuminating the ways in which his stories reflect the milieu of the First World War's impact on the literary culture of America in the 1920s and 1930s.

It should be noted that although I do recognize that, biographically, Lovecraft was distinctly pro-war and convinced of the righteousness of war against German forces, his stories suggest a much more reserved temperament. This attitude is hesitant, seeming to struggle with the horrors of the Great War coming to light post-1918. What has been traditionally ignored in analyses of Lovecraft's fiction is precisely this pervasive cultural sense of the tragedy of World War One. Despite his bombastic endorsement of the Great War, Lovecraft certainly was not ignorant of the tragedy of the conflict, and it is this apprehension that appears in his writing more often than his own patriotic fervor. Tales like "The Temple" and "Dagon" suggest an apprehension of the effectiveness of warfare as a solution to any problems between nations, while subverting the notion of jingoistic nationalism as a healthy reflection of the life of the citizenry. "The Rats in the Walls," meanwhile, illustrates a profound sense of warfare as a reoccurring cannibalistic impulse within humanity itself. And the various Randolph Carter stories suggest that Lovecraft had a strong sense of the tragedy of the veteran, surviving the "war to end all wars" without being able to return to the life lived before the conflict. When subjected to analysis that does not attempt to abstract them from their historical location while avoiding the temptation to remain faithful to the singular limits of biography, Lovecraft's stories present a clear – and haunting – representation of the First World War as an apocalyptic moment in history which has ramifications for every aspect of daily life.

The works of Clark Ashton Smith (1893 – 1961) form the second chapter of my dissertation. Unlike Lovecraft in many ways, Smith had a difficult time with the production of weird fiction. Trained as a poet (mentored under George Sterling out of San Francisco), Smith seems to have always been more comfortable with other modes of

artistic expression than the short story form. His poetry, paintings, and sculpture have been well received, and the subject of no small amount of critical attention, but it is his output of weird fiction that is addressed here. These stories were produced over a shockingly brief period of time, with more than two hundred being written between 1926 and 1935. After this prodigious period Smith turned back to producing visual art, which he stayed with for the remainder of his life. Smith's writing is often noted for its lush and emotive style, with specific (and often odd) elements of construction that reinforce the idea that weird fiction is first and foremost concerned with the establishment of atmosphere rather than following the specifics of plot. It is for this reason that Smith became a figure of some acclaim amongst surrealist artists during and after his lifetime, and in this chapter I analyze certain of Smith's works in order to demonstrate how they carry surrealist overtones and constitute experimental or avant-garde artworks.

Smith's stories occasionally revolve around a problematization of the nature of art as a form of emotive release for the artist and consumer. Forms of common catharsis are often denied in his stories, usually held back in favor of an investigation of how art allows for the consumer access to the dreamlike blending of emotion and fact that surrealism holds as the ultimate expression of psychological life. Often, as in "Genius Loci," this representation of art suggests that the truth of the world is fundamentally unrepresentable in any simple manner. Furthermore, this story and others like it, such as "Nemesis of the Unfinished," suggest that prosaic reality is fundamentally untrustworthy, with true reality residing in a sense of – and artistic representation of – the surreal unconscious. Works such as "The City of the Singing Flame," meanwhile, cast art as a force of both beauty and immolation, whose lure reduces the artist to nothingness even as

they are drawn to its production. Finally, Smith's "A Night in Malnéant" investigates how much artworks are actually able to further the investigation of an emotive, unconscious state rather than serving as only the vehicles of plot. By problematizing art and interrogating the way surrealists and other new schools of artistic theory were questioning the established value of didactic or realist works, Smith embedded his stories within a specific historical context. This chapter considers that context and analyzes Smith's writing from the vantage point of an artist struggling with the changing nature of what it means to produce and receive art in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

The third chapter of my dissertation focuses on Robert E. Howard (1906 – 1936). A contemporary and friend of both Lovecraft and Smith, Howard is noted for not only contributing to the genre of early American weird fiction but also establishing the genre of sword and sorcery fantasy. Howard, however, should not be remembered solely for his contributions to these two areas; he was a prodigious writer who produced dozens of stories in all manners of genre. Notable are his cowboy, boxer, and sailor stories, and these works certainly deserve the critical attention that they have finally begun to receive in the past few years. When it comes to weird fiction, however, Howard took an aesthetic track quite unlike the war anxiety of Lovecraft or the artistic concerns of Smith. Howard's fictions were almost entirely drawn in one way or another from the landscape of west Texas, where he lived for the majority of his life. The influence of growing up and spending his adult life in the oil boom town of Cross Plains cannot be overstated. Howard saw what he thought of as traditional Texan life under attack by the agents of purported Northern civilization, and responded with stories wherein mistaken conceptions of the South and Southwest consistently lead to horrific outcomes.

Howard, like many in the post-Reconstruction era of the South and Southwest, was concerned that an essential way of life was being lost through capitulation to a morality imposed upon the local populations by outsiders. Equally, he felt that corporate interests were bleeding the land dry in the name of expansion and “civilized” American (that is, Northern) modes of life. These two factors together served to corrupt the people and their landscape, and brought forth cultural forces that could neither be fully understood nor controlled. In some cases, such as his iconic “Pigeons from Hell,” these forces are ultimately destructive and suggest that non-Southerners cannot pass safely through Southern environs with which they are unfamiliar. Equally, his story “The Horror from the Mound” portrays a sense of the Southwest as a locus of constant revelation. Populations are always rising and falling in the region, alternating between the civilized and the barbarous, and what is today’s invader might be tomorrow’s native, with the past always threatening to rise and attack the assumptions of the present. Several of Howard’s weird fictions suggest that the region is demarcated in ways that even the locals fail to perceive. In his “Black Canaan,” Howard presents a supernatural horror which can only be confronted by violating social boundaries whose establishment forms the basis of a strict politics of exclusion. This last story is perhaps the most significant of Howard’s weird fiction, though it is one not commonly critiqued or even considered.

By the time of Howard’s death in 1936, and Lovecraft’s passing in 1937, the first generation of American weird fiction authors had been well and truly established. The second stage of writers had begun, which I refer to as the era of pastiche weird fiction. During this period weird fiction had been established as an artistic milieu of sufficient renown to influence the work of younger artists. One of the most successful of these was

the American author Robert Bloch (1917 – 1994), whose pastiche writing is the subject of my fourth chapter. During the periods of the Great Depression and the Second World War, younger authors started coming into the publishing world influenced less by a rejection of Victorian literature in the manner of Lovecraft and his contemporaries than they were directly inspired by the weird fiction vanguard themselves. For these writers weird fiction was the cultural milieu that influenced their work, just as the First World War was for Lovecraft and the surrealist avant-garde was for Smith, and thus their tales largely reiterated weird fictions themselves rather than developing the over-arching social and cultural concerns that had influenced the works of their predecessors. Bloch, who began corresponding with and emulating Lovecraft and his friends in the early 1930s, came to public acclaim later in his career through his murder mystery novels (most notably and successfully *Psycho*). Decades prior, however, he began his juvenile work with a series of pastiches emulating the work of Lovecraft, August Derleth, and others. Significantly, Bloch took the principles and genre conventions of weird fiction and accepted them as givens of modern literature, rather than the revolutionary precepts that Lovecraft laid out in his non-fiction.

By analyzing Bloch's writing we are able to see how sustainable the theoretical basis of weird fiction was after the passing of its luminary authors. The unfortunate fact is that most of the stories of the pastiche era represent nothing more than empty recapitulation of the imagery and motifs of early American weird fiction without the philosophic or artistic basis that drove the genre. Some, such as Bloch, were able to expand upon weird fiction by innovative usage of pastiche forms, but many pastiche authors succumbed to little more than bland copying of the surface elements of the

genre's foundational texts. Bloch's early work, such as "The Dark Demon" and "The Shambler from the Stars," indicate that without the theoretical basis for weird fiction, the genre is not particularly worthy of differentiation from other, more standard forms of genre horror. However, Bloch quickly developed his form of the pastiche into innovative depictions of a particular moment in literary history. "Notebook found in a Deserted House," for example, takes the implications of Lovecraft's weird fiction and seeks to explore new territories without rejecting the literary pedigree supporting the text. Finally, Bloch's late novel *Strange Eons* demonstrates the potential to be found within the pastiche form, since it reveals the failings of the genre while lauding the successes of weird fiction through homage. Bloch stands as an exceptional example within a generation of authors who, having no theoretical background in the whys and wherefores of the genre they sought to produce, fell largely into a pattern of emulation with only rare moments of artistic innovation within their particular milieu. In many ways, my fourth chapter represents the end of early American weird fiction through the example of the well-meaning and entertaining, but still fumbling, contributions of authors whose expansion of the genre came all too infrequently.

It would be a mistake to claim that the passing of early American weird fiction and the rise of pastiche weird fiction ended the genre forever, however. The years of World War II and the atomic age that followed held fluctuations in the popularity and production of weird fiction. Lovecraft's work survived, preserved by Arkham House, a publishing company established by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei. Howard continued to occupy a spot in the public consciousness, but due more to his most popular creation, Conan, than his weird fiction. Smith retired from writing almost altogether,



opting instead for a life of dabbling in the visual arts. *Weird Tales* magazine closed its doors, not returning until the late 1980s when a renewed interest in weird fiction caught the public imagination. This popularity was due partially to an inexpensive line of reprints of Lovecraft's anthologies published in the 1970s, and partially due to the continuing work of younger writers such as Ramsey Campbell, who bridged the pastiche and modern eras. Writers like Campbell came to prominence in the midst of the 1970s, and managed to combine a sense of Lovecraft's philosophical cosmicism with the concepts of psychedelic consciousness deployed in popular media at the time. By doing so, they reinvigorated the flagged weird fiction genre with the artistic expectations of the latter half of the Twentieth Century, over and against the socio-cultural concerns of its original vanguard.

Perhaps the most aesthetically successful of the modern era weird fiction writers is the American Thomas Ligotti. Ligotti, who published for the majority of his career under a veil of personal secrecy, has recently been recognized as a visionary of the genre. Working consistently since the 1980s, Ligotti has brought together the importance of atmosphere primary to early American weird fiction and the aesthetic concerns of his own historical location. By doing so, Ligotti has managed to avoid the pitfalls of pastiche, almost singlehandedly causing a weird fiction renaissance based on the strong theoretical background that informed the work of Lovecraft, Howard, and Smith. Stories such as "Notes on the Writing of Horror" and "Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror" achieve the theoretical aims of weird fiction while representing the concerns of the boundaries between fiction and reality common to metatextual constructions. Equally, Ligotti attempts to restore the philosophical underpinnings of

weird fiction through his deployment of his own worldview in all of his fictions, perhaps most notably “The Shadow, the Darkness,” “Nethescorial,” and “Vastarien.” In all of these stories, Ligotti enacts a remarkable trick by erasing his own history from importance while highlighting what is unique to his personal philosophic perspective. Unlike many of the weaker pastiches produced during and since World War II, Ligotti’s weird fictions do not simply mimic the work of earlier authors; instead they contribute to the body of weird fiction as a sustainable genre (indeed, helping save it from oblivion) by establishing modern concerns as guiding undercurrents beneath the theoretical foundations established in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

#### Conclusion:

Ultimately, whether or not weird fiction is truly sustainable is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Although I have my own personal hopes for the future of the genre, I have to wonder whether or not the artistic merit of the luminaries of the early and latter days can survive the distortion brought about by endless pastiches of little merit. Equally, evolving conceptions of genre alter the expectations of readers and producers alike, calling into question whether or not weird fiction can continue to provide a level of artistic or aesthetic satisfaction for either group. The reason why pastiches exist is relatively plain: weird fiction has largely become a genre of mythology rather than artistic production. That is, the authors of Lovecraft, Howard, or Smith pastiches represent the thought and effort of the weird fiction vanguard as something that can be simply transplanted into the modern milieu without consideration for the soil out of which those authors’ stories grew – authors like Bloch, who utilized the pastiche form to

push the genre into new, self-critical directions, are all too rare. Much as with the critical reception of weird fiction, most individuals involved in the perpetuation of weird fiction as a genre seem more concerned with the biography of the original authors (almost always misunderstood or blatantly false) or the transplanting of the tales' window-dressing to a modern context without consideration for how these stories were very much grounded in a particular historical location.

My dissertation goes to some length to correct the critical mistakes committed in the name of apprehending weird fiction as either entirely contingent on biography or entirely cut away from its historical location, but I fear that there is little to be done about saving the genre from the weight of its own history. If we are to enjoy a new generation of weird fiction apropos for the Twenty-First Century, I believe that we will have to see a new vanguard presenting a new set of theoretical concerns, free from the relationship to the past that once established the genre, but which now only serves as a weight around its proverbial neck. By doing so, this current weird fiction vanguard would have to cut its own place out over and against prior forms of fantastic literature, rejecting the preconceptions and concerns of their weird fiction forebears in much the same way that Lovecraft and his contemporaries rejected the history of genre literature that preceded them. Whether or not this can be accomplished is a question of genre that remains to be written.

## Chapter One:

### “Hideous Things, Not Mentioned in Print”: H. P. Lovecraft and World War I

#### Introduction:

Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890 – 1937) has had an indelible effect on weird fiction and the development of Twentieth Century genre fiction. Few authors, particularly authors of fantastic literature, have travelled the distance from near-obscure during their lifetime to being considered seminal in the construction of genres that blossomed after their death. It can be said without hyperbole that if it were not for Lovecraft's writing, current genre fiction – science fiction and horror most prominently – would be produced and received far differently than they are. For all of that, however, Lovecraft's writing has had a difficult relationship with academic criticism. Amongst his many flaws, Lovecraft was a profoundly racist person, and this justifiably impacts on the modern reception of his texts. He suborned his own advances in the crafting of genre fiction by relying on outmoded syntactical construction to frame his ideas, which distances him from modern reading sensibilities. And, perhaps most importantly to a pulp fiction author, he possessed self-defeating attitudes about the nature of professional writing. Possibly due to him having such a strong and unique personality, critics have often found it necessary to focus their analyses of Lovecraft's writing on elements of his biography. Since the 1970s, this biographical approach has been in order to read against his racist beliefs, or to protect him from the misrepresentations that dogged his memory for decades after his death. As such, criticism on Lovecraft's work tends to be

overshadowed by the man himself, creating a suggestion that his stories should be received solely as an extension of him rather than texts interpretable on their own merits.

Part of the difficulty with this approach stems from a current critical response to early (rather pernicious) misinformation released about Lovecraft and his works by one of his friends, August Derleth. Derleth's misinformation resulted in early criticism of Lovecraft's work that was largely in furtherance of wildly incorrect suppositions; much of the current criticism on Lovecraft is still set up in opposition to these assumptions. Some scholars in recent years, such as David E. Schultz or Donald Burleson, have attempted to analyze Lovecraft's work on the basis of the writing alone over and against any sense of biography. However, this textually atomistic perspective has brought certain flaws of its own to the current lay of Lovecraft scholarship. In particular, the trading of a biographic lens for one of textual isolation has led to current criticism neglecting the historically specific location of Lovecraft's fictions. While analysis of a given set of works should be enacted with the lived biography of the author in mind, since it does contain potentially valuable analytic information, interpretation of texts should not be limited or restrained, within reason, by the surviving opinions of the author. Equally, texts do not spring *ex nihilo* to the page from the minds of their authors – nor are they received as such – and critical analysis of a given set of texts should be mindful of the historical moment of their production. It would be unusual to find critical analysis of the early American modernists, for example, that was either hidebound to their author's biography to the exclusion of what exactly appears on the page *or* disconnected from the historical milieu of the early American Twentieth Century. Following from that principle, it is critically untenable to analyze Lovecraft's fictions purely in terms of the author's life

or as isolated islands of text disentangled from their historical position. Taking either course exclusively, as weird fiction criticism has tended to do, leads to stifling new interpretations of texts based on the words on the page absent authorial biography, or historical location of texts absent modern reception of those texts.

This divide between being either locked into an analytic perspective due to biography, and being focused on the text to the exclusion of everything else, has led to certain silences in the body of criticism on Lovecraft and his work. One such is the near-total neglect of the presence of the First World War in Lovecraft's stories. This is a surprising critical silence, since it would seem *de rigueur* for an author of Lovecraft's age, nationality, and bent towards the macabre to be engaged with representations of the war in their work. As Jeffrey Walsh notes, "the pulp press [...] [supported] American capitalism in exploiting atrocity stories and anti-Teutonic racism; and the media are said to have portrayed the war as a crusade fought in defense of liberalism and democracy" (11). Most American fiction was, in fact, decidedly pro-war in the early years of the conflict and is "imbued with the mystique of violence which vicariously exalts death in battle into a self-evident virtue" (12). Even the socialist writer Upton Sinclair "arrived at a pro-war stance in [his 1918] *Jimmie Higgins*" (Matthews 223), as did his contemporaries Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Alan Seeger, Arthur Train, and Mary Raymond Shipman. Holding to a pro-war stance was hardly unusual, though it may seem strange from the current historical perspective of the First World War as a tragic waste of human life.

As should be expected, Lovecraft was overtly interested in the war and held strong opinions on American involvement. He lamented the war in his letters as a waste

of so-called Aryan life, but considered American intervention a necessary act to aid Britain against their enemies. Several of his essays, beginning with "The Crime of the Century" (1916) deal with the war and present an overtly militaristic stance. These opinions are, I think, what has held Lovecraft criticism back from seriously addressing the simple fact that the war is never unambiguously presented as a good or necessary thing in Lovecraft's weird fiction. Although his stories are rarely set on the battlefield, various literary touchstones "return us to familiar terrain: northern France, trenches, gas, rats, lice, mouldering corpses, incompetent generals, chlorinated tea, and the all-devouring mud" (Ouditt 246), deployed in Lovecraft's texts as echoes of the Great War. These touchstones represent the war as nothing but a site of horror, and evidence of humanity's instability within existence. Throughout Lovecraft's weird fictions, that is, there can be found a condemnation of the horrors of the war and a fear of post-war malaise endured by those who fought, separate from the author's own militarism.

That Lovecraft was in favor of the war – however hesitantly initially – should not suggest that his texts must be read as themselves pro-war if the words on the page do not support Lovecraft's personal beliefs. Lovecraft being pro-war should not be a surprise: his political thought at the time was Anglophilic, and based upon a racist presumption about the destiny of Caucasian peoples, which led him to think that any threat to England should be cut off without hesitation – even if that threat came from another "Aryan" nation. Add to that the fact that Lovecraft was certainly aware of the purported German atrocities that were popularized by the American press. One of his favorite authors, Robert W. Chambers, worked the atrocity stories into his 1915 novel *Who Goes There*:

*Who Goes There* turns on the capture of Kervyn Guild, an American real estate broker of Belgian descent, who [...] was caught up in the opening phases of the War. [...] The novel is melodramatic and the plot wildly fantastic; however, the setting and situation are taken directly from Allied newspaper reports of German paranoia and military harshness. In these stories, the Belgian hostages are all innocent townspeople with families and (General) von Reiter is a representative of the stock in trade Prussian Officer. (Quinn 30)

These stories did not die out – indeed, they “continued to appear throughout the war, and in fact, in order to whip up hatred for the unfeeling and militaristic Hun, they gained a series of fresh redactions when America entered the war [beginning with] a short story written for *Ainslee’s* magazine in the May 1918 number” (42). Ostensibly based upon fact despite their representation in fiction, the atrocity stories filtering in from the European and British press formed the basis for Viscount James Bryce’s committee, which, in turn, produced *The Evidence and Documents Laid Before the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* in 1915. With such a blending of fiction and fact – leaning far more heavily towards the former – it should come as no surprise that Lovecraft, just like a large number of Americans, was convinced of the necessity of the Allied war effort.

In the historical-biographic criticism by S. T. Joshi and others we see Lovecraft's personal pro-war opinions placed in the foreground, occluding any element of his fiction that may run contrary to his personal stance. These biographical analyses of Lovecraft stem in the main from careful study of Lovecraft's surviving letters, where all of his patriotic bombast was freely expressed. For example, Lovecraft wrote of his eagerness to



enlist in the armed forces well before President Wilson signed the draft bill on May 18th, 1917:

Some time ago, impressed by my entire uselessness in the world, I resolved to attempt enlistment despite my almost invalid condition. I argued that if I chose a regiment soon to depart for France; my sheer nervous force, which is not inconsiderable, might sustain me till a bullet or piece of shrapnel could more conclusively & effectively dispose of me. Accordingly I presented myself at the recruiting station of the R.I. National Guard & applied for entry into whatever unit should first proceed to the front. On account of my lack of technical or special training, I was told that I could not enter the Field Artillery, which leaves first; but was given a blank application for the Coast Artillery, which will go after a short preliminary period of defence service at one of the forts of Narragansett Bay. (Lovecraft, *Selected Letters I* 45-6)

Lovecraft's overt pro-war stance, his "consistent opposition to pacifism" (Joshi, *I am Providence* vol. 1 222), should obviously be an element in critical analyses of his fictional work. However, it would be short-sighted to argue that this biographical stance is pervasive throughout his stories to the exclusion of every other possible interpretation; to do so would be to suggest that an author has complete and conscious dominion over every aspect of their writing. It would therefore seem prudent to consider Lovecraft's personal opinions seriously, and observe how his fictions, rooted in particular historical conditions, cleave to and deviate from those opinions. In the case of criticism on representations of World War I in Lovecraft's fiction – by no means an expansive list –

the apparent conclusion is that the stories must themselves be pro-war, just as their author was. Since this conclusion runs contrary to what actually appears on the page, either directly or through inference, the investigation of how Lovecraft's stories present a view on the First World War that runs counter to his own seems an obligation of weird fiction critics.

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, some critics have taken to rejecting biography altogether in favor of approaching Lovecraft's stories from a strong atomistic stance. Whether New Critical in approach or, such as Donald Burleson's groundbreaking study, *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe*, ultimately postmodernist, these critics have made a similar mistake to the critics who sought to reclaim Lovecraft from the misapprehensions of Derleth and others. That is, these critics swing to the opposite extreme and, rather than analyzing Lovecraft more than they do his stories, tend to reject the presence of Lovecraft completely from his own work. While there is a sound theoretical basis for resisting the inclusion of an author's biography in an analysis of a text when, what is germane is how said text is received by current readers, it can be taken too far. What these critics miss with their atomistic stance is the fact that there is no reason to presuppose that historical location did not inform the creation of a given story. Nor should we, as critics, ignore the potential responses of the persons who first read said story, and their own social milieu. Doing so in no way prevents us from coming to a greater understanding of how these works are read in current context; indeed, an approach to Lovecraft's work that balances biography and historical location with a rigorous commitment to recognizing what is demonstrably on the page, even if said

recognition flies in the face of biography, can only serve to increase our understanding of why Lovecraft's weird fiction is still popular today.

This chapter will analyze a selection of Lovecraft's stories for traces of the presence of World War I. I will argue throughout that these stories paint a different picture of the war than the one Lovecraft described in his letters, poems, and political non-fiction essays. His stories reflect a stance that can at the least be described as hesitant to the benefits of the war, if not outright anti-war. Throughout each of the stories Lovecraft repeatedly deploys the notion of the war as a horror – often a cannibalistic horror – that is a looming menace even when it is not immediately present. The war is emblematic of an atavistic tendency within humanity, a degenerative process that is constantly on the verge of starting and consuming everyone. War, and especially the First World War, is represented as though it possessed a devouring will of its own, echoing the existential malaise of Hemingway's World War I fictions, or the physical horror in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon. Placing Lovecraft within the milieu of First World War writers, and giving critical recognition to the influence of the war within his stories, will be a fresh interpretive context for Lovecraft's weird fiction, allowing for analysis which reappraises the weight of his conception and reception across the Twentieth Century.

"The Rats in the Walls" (1923):

The paucity of critical analyses of Lovecraft's short story, "The Rats in the Walls," is notable. Although some critics, such as John Kipling Hitz and P. Paul

Montelone,<sup>16</sup> have produced work on the story, they are few and far between. And fewer still – one at the time of this writing, to be precise – have written on the story in terms of the First World War.<sup>17</sup> Critical silences of this nature are surprising because "The Rats in the Walls" is one of Lovecraft's most popular tales. It has a constant place in almost every anthology of Lovecraft's fiction yet published – I am unaware of any generalized Lovecraft anthology where the story does not appear – and is one of the most referenced Lovecraft stories among fans of genre literature, perhaps second only to "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926). The lack of critical attention to "The Rats in the Walls" as a First World War story is a lacuna in weird fiction criticism, since the text depends upon the Great War: whereas World War I is occasionally deployed as background in Lovecraft's other stories, it thoroughly pervades "The Rats in the Walls." Here the First World War is represented as emblematic of all warfare, the conflict that defines all other conflicts. In the story the war is represented as a wholly human socio-historical construct; instead of presenting the war as an abstracted external menace that is inflicted upon humanity, Lovecraft represents the war as an effect rising from an inherent cannibalistic impulse that haunts human history. This impulse grounds humanity in an inescapable materialist mire, fully responsible for all the traumas that are borne out of an atavistic nature. The cannibalistic impulse at the heart of the human condition is, in Lovecraft, the horror writ

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<sup>16</sup> Hitz' 1998 article "Some Notes on 'The Rats in the Walls'" argues that the "strong suggestion of anti-religious symbolism in the tale" (29) is the aspect most important to critical interpretation, while Montelone's 1995 "'The Rats in the Walls': A Study in Pessimism" argues for a more generalized interpretation that refrains from highlighting the importance of the historical setting. While informative, the lack of consideration of the context of the First World War is disappointing.

<sup>17</sup> "'The Rats in the Walls,' The Rats in the Trenches" by Robert H. Waugh, published in *Lovecraft Annual*, January 1st, 2008. Waugh's article is groundbreaking by focusing on the story's historical setting, but ultimately interprets the text as a generalized anti-war piece, rather than one specifically responding to the moment of the Great War.

large by the First World War. In “The Rats in the Walls,” civilization is a temporary condition that exists only to degenerate into its base animal impulses through the medium of warfare.

The plot of “The Rats in the Walls” is straightforward: it is told in retrospect by the protagonist Walter de la Poer (née Delapore) who has returned to his ancestral home, Exham Priory, in rural England. Though undated, the action of the plot can be assumed to take place between 1918 and 1922. Walter purchased Exham Priory in 1918, “but was almost immediately distracted from my plans of restoration by the return of my son as a maimed invalid” (Lovecraft, *The Call* 91). Walter’s son Alfred was taken “to England in 1917 as an aviation officer” (90), following in the de la Poer tradition of being close to (if not involved in) warfare. That Alfred is maimed late in 1918 is representative of the continuing tragedy of the war, since the suffering of Walter’s son overlaps cessation of hostilities following the armistice with Germany on November 11th of 1918, and continues on until his death in 1921.<sup>18</sup> Now the last of his family, “bereaved and aimless,

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<sup>18</sup> Lovecraft wrote very few veteran characters. Another appears in his serial story “Herbert West: Re-Animator” (1921-22), Lovecraft’s first professional publication. Written as a favor to his friend George Julian Houtain, the editor of the humor magazine *Home Brew*, Lovecraft thought the story worthy of the derision it received after its publication. Told over the course of six episodes, “Herbert West” deals with the search of the eponymous protagonist for a serum that will restore a corpse to life if the body is sufficiently fresh. Each episode is recorded by West’s unnamed friend from the medical program of Miskatonic University, and focuses on their pursuit of an appropriate corpse for the most recent iteration of the serum. Every episode is a catastrophe: in one, West’s experiments upon a man of unusual size releases an insane simian-like creature upon the general public. In another, a virtuous doctor within the community is reduced to babbling madness, destroyed in the eyes of those who lauded his unquestionably good works. And in another West is himself driven to commit murder in order to get access to a corpse of ultimate freshness. Within each section there is an undercurrent of disbelief in any animating force or soul within humans (which matches Lovecraft’s own atheist outlook). Every reanimated corpse comes back to life insane, apparently due to nothing more than a combination of the existential nothingness that awaits us after death, and the mechanical process of oxygen deprivation upon the brain. One of these insane reanimated corpses seeks revenge on West, dragging the now crazed doctor off to a horrible fate in the story’s climax, while West’s amanuensis remains.

a retired manufacturer no longer young” (91), Walter tries to establish a connection with his history by restoring his dilapidated estate. An ancestry tainted by murders and rumors of darker supernatural crimes follows Walter, but in his grief he neglects the storied past of his line. With the assistance of Captain Norrrys, a Royal Air Force pilot and friend to Walter’s deceased son, he succeeds in modernizing the crumbling remains of Exham Priory. He is disturbed at night by the sound of rats scurrying inside of the presumably

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In ‘The Horror from the Shadows,’ section five of the overarching story, the narrator describes how West arranged to enlist for service in Flanders via the Canadian military, deploying to France from Ottawa. West and the narrator serve as battlefield surgeons out of a desire for “nothing more or less than an abundant supply of freshly killed men in every stage of dismemberment” (Lovecraft, *The Call* 71). It is the quality of dismemberment that this section focuses upon. After being beheaded in a plane crash, Major Sir Eric Moreland Clapham-Lee, D.S.O., becomes the subject of West’s experiments at St. Eloi, France, in late March of 1915. His decapitated head is left to rest in a vat of undifferentiated reptile tissue that West uses for sustaining severed body parts, while his torso is injected with West’s current version of the serum. It returns to life and begins gesticulating madly while, unexpectedly, his separated head utters the shout it must have been forming moments prior to its death. At that moment a German shelling attack occurs and the laboratory is completely destroyed, though the doctors and the zombie survive.

Although this section is internally consistent, there is a sense of wasted potential: the grim realities of battlefield dismemberment and amputation were well known by the time of the story’s composition in 1922. Imagery of wartime injury and the cost of those injuries upon the psyche of survivors were well known by the public. What Lovecraft approaches in “Herbert West: Re-Animator” is a portrayal of the horrific potential of battlefield injuries to irrevocably reduce the individual human body from a functioning whole, to one that is – psychologically – less than human. By combining the site of battle, medicine, and weird science, Lovecraft comes close to evoking a dreamlike quality to a scene that could have enhanced the power of something as overwhelmingly traumatic as wartime amputation. The narrator tries and, he claims, fails at describing the workshop when he says that he “should faint if I tried it, for there is madness in a room full of classified charnel things, with blood and lesser human debris almost ankle-deep on the slimy floor, and with hideous reptilian sprouting, bubbling, and baking over a winking bluish-green specter of dim flame in a far corner of black shadows” (74). But the scene does not draw enough from the reality of its purported setting.

West’s First World War laboratory is set back from the trenches, dislocated from the emotional impact that a more direct confrontation with the horrors of the war could have imparted. The reader is left with the impression that there is little difference between the farmhouse in St. Eloi and the Massachusetts farmhouse that serves as West’s base for the latter half of the story. There was a chance for Lovecraft to instill his weird tale with the horrors of the war, thereby enhancing the shock provoked with each section of the narrative. Unfortunately, he fell away from that opportunity and, as a result, failed to highlight the slaughterhouse of the battlefield. Lovecraft instead portrayed a charnel scene that could have been picked up and transplanted into almost any other setting with no real loss to the narrative flow. “Herbert West: Re-Animator” is the closest Lovecraft ever came to directly showing the horrors suffered by those participating in the First World War, thereby instilling his story with a sense of loss through its grand guignol construction of dismembered bodies and the fear of surviving catastrophic disillusion in some manner. Sadly, the text ultimately misses the mark and, though notable for its inclusion of the actual scene of the war, should be regarded as only a minor aspect of the influence of the Great War on Lovecraft’s texts.

solid stone walls of the Priory, despite the fact that there had “been no rats there for three hundred years” (96); after investigating their source he discovers a secret entrance into subterranean caverns hidden beneath a blood stained altar in a sub-basement.

In what can only be a conscious throwback by Lovecraft to the gothic plots antecedent to weird fiction,<sup>19</sup> Walter and Norrys, assisted by professors from a nearby university, descend into the cavern beneath the Priory. They are shocked to discover that the tunnel winds beneath the earth via a human-carved staircase, giving way to a series of subterranean settlements in a valley at the base of the staircase. These settlements consist of buildings that correspond to human eras: starting with the fifteenth century, they stretch off into quasi-human huts before disappearing into the darkness of the valley. Everywhere around the floor of the valley are bones, both of rats and of humanoid creatures that Walter has been seeing in nightmares since moving into Exham Priory. Walter realizes that he had dreamed of this area a few nights prior. In his nightmare he “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). The ruins echo Walter’s nightmare, suggesting that he has tapped into ancestral memory. Upon examination of the settlement the group discovers that the inhabitants of the grotto, presumably ancestors of the de la Poers, extends back earlier than the first Roman occupation of Britain, and that they have inter-bred with at least one non-human species.

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<sup>19</sup> Lovecraft is self-evidently aware of the gothic overtones in the story, since he has Walter dismiss his cat’s picking up the scent of rats as “trite” (96) and akin to “the inevitable dog in the ghost story, which always growls before his master sees the sheeted figure” (96).

The interrelationship between humans and non-human animals implies that these ancestors of modern humanity were responsible for acts of debased cannibalism, their bones “gnawed [...] by others of the half-human drove” (105). The weight of horror is ultimately not on the swarming rats who feasted upon the semi-humans; the horror is that the semi-humans fed upon each other like animals, resulting in the fields of bone littering the floor of the valley. Walter notes that there are some complete skeletons, set “in postures of daemoniac frenzy, either fighting off some menace or clutching other forms with cannibal intent” (105). His mind breaks from the strain of these revelations, and he descends into brutality, delivering a monologue that runs verbally backwards through a process of de-evolution, culminating in a series of grunts and growls:

It must have been the rats; the viscous, gelatinous, ravenous army that feast on the dead and the living.... Why shouldn't the rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things? ... The war ate my boy, damn them all... and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret... No, no, I tell you, I am *not* that daemon swineherd in the twilit grotto! It was *not* Edward Norrys' fat face on that flabby, fungous thing! Who says I am a de la Poer? He lived, but my boy died! ... Shall a Norrys hold the lands of a de la Poer? ... It's voodoo, I tell you ... that spotted snake ... Curse you, Thornton, I'll teach you to faint at what my family do! ... 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust... wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? ... *Magna Mater! Magna Mater!* ... *Atys ... Dia ad*



*aghaidh 's ad aodann ... agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! ... Ungl ... ungl ... rrrlh ... chchch... (108)*<sup>20</sup>

Walter attacks Norrys, wounding and attempting to eat him, before being knocked unconscious by one of the professors. He wakes some time later in an insane asylum, bringing his recollection to the present moment wherein he insists that his story could not simply be the product of insanity despite the fact that he was found “crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrys, with my own cat leaping and tearing at my throat” (108). Indeed, Walter rather fervently – but logically – demands that he is not insane in the slightest, and it was “the slithering, scurrying rats” (108) who are to blame for Norrys’ death.<sup>21</sup> Despite the demolition of Exham Priory during his incapacitation, Walter can still hear the rats moving in the walls; the asylum seems to be alive with them at night.

During Walter's climactic monologue he utters a curse that forms the hinge for the entirety of the narrative. "Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden things?" he exclaims, "The war ate my boy, damn them all... and the Yanks ate Carfax with flames and burnt Grandsire Delapore and the secret..." (108). This utterance,

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<sup>20</sup> S. T. Joshi reports that the Gaelic lines stems from Fiona Macleod’s “The Sin-Eater” (1895) and can be translated as “God against thee and in the face... and may a death of woe be yours... Evil and sorrow to thee and thine!” (*The Call* 384).

<sup>21</sup> Walter’s protestations might be read as an inversion of the conception of shell shock. Celia Kingsbury argues for just this inversion when she writes that “[t]he ‘madness of soldiers’ is almost an appropriate response to what we have come to see as the peculiar sanity of war. The madness is not to be found in those being treated for it” (117). Here it seems that Walter’s calm response to his incarceration has the veneer of sanity, while the witnesses to his crimes describe an insane scenario. While I suspect that Lovecraft knew little of shell shock or its victims – his general attitude towards psychoanalysis was dismissive – it is intriguing that Walter is portrayed as the recovering victim of psychological trauma. The parallel with the recovering shell shock victim is interesting, though perhaps does not lead anywhere particularly insightful. It seems that “[t]he definition of madness is indeed subjective – shell shock is called madness by those who are mad with the urgency of war” (117); Walter is, from the reader’s perspective, likely hopelessly insane – and yet so too are those survivors and doctors who ignore his warnings about the dangers buried beneath the Priory.

given at the height of Walter's degeneration through the history of his family line and the evolution of the human species, brings the story together under the auspices of an overarching nightmare: the terror represented by the Great War. The image of the rats is linked with both Walter, in specific, and the de la Poer family in general, in an echo of Owens' "[n]ot worse than ours the existences rats lead" (Owens 65) in "A Terre," wherein soldiers and the rats that swarm the trenches are analogously linked to one another. In this way, the de la Poer family is emblematic of the cannibalism of the Great War, and through that conflict to warfare in general.

Warfare is represented as a site of horrific eternal recurrence that is tied narratively to a dark secret of the de la Poer family; as warfare reoccurs so does the secret. The secret of the family, which was contained in a letter and burned at Carfax, is presumably the connection between the de la Poer line and their inter-species ancestors, and is a metonym for the propensity towards warfare within humanity, which reaches a climax with the First World War. This metonym allows Lovecraft to take a personal horror – the degeneration that reoccurs within the de la Poer line – and stage it in such a way that it reaches a point of universality, as "the war to end all wars" had become to warfare in general. Warfare as cannibalism, exemplified by the de la Poer family – humans devouring humans in a pattern of cyclic return culminating in the climax of the trenches, and ultimate warfare depicted by the obliteration of the de la Poers. The war cannot be interpreted as a positive series of events, then, despite Lovecraft's personal belief in the rightness of the conflict, since ultimately it is nothing more than an expression of an atavistic impulse lurking within humanity to devour ourselves in a rapture of excess. If there is nothing to look forward to but a thinly veiled nationalist

excuse for a continuing cycle of warfare, the story argues, there is no outcome other than to eat and be eaten.

This cyclic condition is represented by several factors throughout, including the setting of the story as a focus for the pattern of warfare, death, and consumption, which forms the basis of the lives of the de la Poer family. The setting of Exham Priory serves as the location for initial expository information from the de la Poer family history, and for the terrible climax of the plot wherein Walter descends into insanity. It is a crumbling edifice in the county of Anchester, in England, with a number of architectural influences from a variety of historical periods. Walter surveys the linear progression of the Priory's design:

[A]n architecture involving Gothic towers resting on a Saxon or Romanesque substructure, whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders – Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric, if legends speak truly. This foundation was a very singular thing, being merged on one side with the solid limestone of the precipice from whose brink the Priory overlooked a desolate valley three miles west of the village of Anchester. (89)

The Priory represents human history itself jumbled together in a riot of different styles and forms, each layer standing for the culture that came through and conquered – devoured – the preceding culture. It is a fitting home for the de la Poer line, and the link between the two is heavily implied by the ways Walter's climactic monologue descends through a history of human expression in the same manner that the Priory's architecture progresses through the stages of civilization.

The de la Poer family ruptures into violent excess and death during times of stress brought about by warfare, unable to restrain their cannibalistic impulses. All attempts to contain or control the de la Poer atavism are failures: from the initial driving of the family from Exham Priory on or around the Thirty Years' War, "during the reign of James the First" (89), through the American Civil War, when their "fortunes were extinguished and our whole existence changed" (90), and later, when Walter's cousin Randolph "went among the negroes and became a voodoo priest after he returned" (93) from the Spanish-American War, the family inevitably reverts to their bestial patterns. The pairing of the Priory with the de la Poer family line through a sense of the history of civilization suggests that the family's plague is a disease endemic to humanity. There is no distinction, that is, between the de la Poer's propensity towards de-evolution and broader humanity's propensity towards self-destruction via warfare: both are sites of cannibalism. The de la Poer line always collapses into cannibalism and, quite likely despite Walter's complaints, insanity. The history of humanity mirrors the family: every so often civilization will rise up and simply eat itself, justified with self-serving reasoning just as Walter self-justifies his attacks upon the friend and comrade of his son.

Although the story does represent warfare in general as an endemic cannibalistic impulse within humanity, it is important to remember that the genesis for the action of the plot is the First World War. The Great War is represented as the ultimate form of warfare, metonymically expressed by the secret of the de la Poer line, whereas prior wars only caused an eruption of the atavistic impulse without allowing for true understanding. Prior to the First World War, the secret of the de la Poer family is destroyed during the American Civil War, burned before it can be passed onto the next generation of

descendants, and that knowledge is only rediscovered via the trauma of the Great War. What this indicates is that, whereas all warfare is bound up in the cannibalistic impulse of the de la Poers, it is the First World War that is able to return understanding – the conflict that is able to hold a proverbial mirror up to their true natures and force those involved to understand the reality of the situation.<sup>22</sup> All warfare is a cannibalistic expression, represented by the de la Poers' cyclical return to self-destruction. But it is only the trauma of the First World War that can give that cycle ultimate release, and the obliteration of the de la Poer line mirrors the apotheosis of war found in the battlefields of Europe.

It is clear that Walter would not have heard the rats in the walls and fallen prey to his ancestral destiny without the impetus of the Great War. If he had it would have been without even a modicum of understanding of his condition, and what his familial history says about humanity in general. Without the lens of the First World War, the metonym disappears, leaving a rather uncomplicated story of a corruption specific to one particular group of persons for reasons lost to history. The focus upon atavism could not have reached the crescendo that the story demands, and therefore the story would say nothing about the nature of humanity itself. The First World War, the ostensible war to end all wars, contained an unprecedented quality of savagery that shook the peoples of the world. Survivors, both combatants and bystanders alike, were rocked by the trauma of enduring it. Rarely in a Lovecraft story is any one particular sentence definitive or summative, but here "the war ate my boy, damn them all" (108) is a singularly harrowing

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<sup>22</sup> This is what Robert H. Waugh fails to take into account with "The Rats in the Trenches." Although he is quite right to analyze the ways in which Lovecraft is addressing warfare *en toto* with this story, he is too quick to abstract the action of the tale from the battlefield – and specifically the battlefields of Europe, 1914 to 1919.

expression of the truth of the Great War. Warfare, as the de la Poer family shows, makes cannibals of us all, and nowhere was that atavistic impulse towards self-devouring better wrought in all its hideous glory than during the first fully global conflict.

“The Silver Key” (1926) and the Stories of Randolph Carter:

The Randolph Carter stories are one of the rare breaks in Lovecraft's authorial habits. As a rule, Lovecraft avoided writing serial fiction; the only overt example of his use of the form being "Herbert West: Re-Animator" (1921-22), which was written to order for publication in a friend's magazine. Although he would occasionally make use of the same character, such as Albert Wilmarth's appearances as primary protagonist in "The Shadow Out of Time" (1934-35) and later by mention alone in several other stories, Lovecraft had only one reoccurring protagonist: Randolph Carter. The five Carter stories span the length of Lovecraft's career, with "The Statement of Randolph Carter" written in 1919 and "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (co-authored with E. Hoffmann Price) in 1933.<sup>23</sup> Carter can be considered an authorial insert for Lovecraft, allowing him to present his innermost thoughts and feelings on matters within a narrative form. However, it is important to note that although Carter himself often reflects Lovecraft's opinions and fears, the stories within which Carter appears can, when taken as a whole, be read as a rather significant statement about the personal impact of the Great War. This suggests that the cultural tragedy of World War I, and specifically the plight of the veteran, was

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<sup>23</sup> Carter appears in two other stories. The novel *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927) and the short story "Out of the Aeons" (1933), co-authored by Hazel Heald. However, in the former his appearance is only a mention, brief and incidental at best. The latter features Carter directly as a secondary character, but the co-authorship with Heald waters down his presence and Lovecraft's influence on the story is much less clear. As a result, both fictions are unimportant to the discussion here.

having an impact on the composition of Lovecraft's texts. Thus, it must be noted that Lovecraft would likely disagree with the interpretation of Carter argued here; Lovecraft's opinions on the war were simply too nationalist for him to consciously grasp the effects of the war that are worked out in his weird fiction.

Other similarities between Carter and Lovecraft are numerous, however, and should be duly enumerated: Carter is at one point in his life a writer of fanciful works who eschews modern conventions of work-for-hire as inappropriate for a gentleman of imagination. He is deeply involved with the contemplation of his dream life and uses his dreams as a source of inspiration for his creative output. At several points in his life he suffers from nervous collapse and general ill-health. And he espouses several points of philosophy that we know were important to Lovecraft's intellectual and moral development.<sup>24</sup> However, it is possible that Lovecraft did not base Carter solely on himself – there is reason to believe that Carter is a representation of the American poet Alan Seeger, who died in battle during World War I. If this is the case, Carter's past as a veteran becomes more than a note in his fictional biography and becomes a hinge for his interpretation. Under these auspices, the Randolph Carter stories are in effect not simply a vehicle for the expression of Lovecraft's philosophy; they are representative of the Great War's effects upon veterans.

Carter is referred to several times as having served in the French Foreign Legion during the war, entering prior to the beginning of American involvement in April of 1917. This coincides with Lovecraft's personal Anglophilic belief that America should

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that S. T. Joshi argues in the *H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* that Carter is not, in fact, an authorial insert but is instead nothing but a mouthpiece for Lovecraft's philosophical views. I am uncertain of what the precise distinction is between these two things, and why Joshi feels the need to demarcate them.

have entered into conflict significantly earlier than it did in order to support the United Kingdom in their efforts. However, little detail is given of Carter's service prior to "The Silver Key" (1926). There, the text states that Carter fought in the "French town of Belloy-en-Santerre, [...] almost mortally wounded there in 1916" (Lovecraft, *The Dreams* 262). This almost throwaway line carries a vast amount of implied significance: Belloy-en-Santerre was in 1916 one of the sites of the Battle of the Somme, one of the largest battles of the war, with more than one million casualties during its five-month span. Friedrich Steinbrecher, a German officer who was at the Battle of the Somme for less than a week, described the conflict by writing that "[t]he whole history of the world cannot contain a more ghastly word" (Lewis 230) than "Somme." At the time of Lovecraft's writing of the various Carter stories, the Battle of the Somme was considered to be a victory for the Allied forces that came at a staggering cost; it quickly became emblematic for the concept of a war of attrition, a combat decided by inches of ground gained at the relentless sacrifice of soldier's lives.

Belloy-en-Santerre was the place of Alan Seeger's death during the Battle of the Somme. Seeger (1888 – 1916), a member of the French Foreign Legion, entered into the war for the express purpose of protecting France (where he had been living for some time as an expatriate American). He died at Belloy-en-Santerre, killed by machine gun fire after successfully leading his squad on a charge against a German encampment. Lovecraft knew of Seeger's poetic works and admired both his life and death – in 1918 Lovecraft wrote a poem, "To Alan Seeger," as a response to Seeger's own "A Message to America" (whose stance on the war was similar to Lovecraft's throughout most of the



period). Lovecraft wrote approvingly of America's entrance into the war as following in Seeger's footsteps:

But while thou sleepest in an honour'd grave  
 Beneath the Gallic sod thou bledst to save,  
 May thy soul's vision scan the ravag'd plain,  
 And tell thee that thou didst not fall in vain:  
 Here, as thou pray'dst, a million men advance  
 To prove Columbia one with flaming France,  
 And heeding now the long-forgotten debt,  
 Pay with their blood the gen'rous LAFAYETTE! (Lovecraft, *The Ancient*  
 417-18)

The poem is a bombastic tribute to Seeger's work, which insisted that the French "had no love, but no fear, of war" (Seeger 162) and encouraged Americans to "look over here and learn from FRANCE!" (162). There is no mention of Seeger and Carter together at Belloy-en-Santerre anywhere in Lovecraft's stories, which suggests that Carter's emplacement within that specific battle is a reflection of Seeger himself (with the rather glaring difference that Carter did not die on the battlefield after all). Otherwise it would be an unusual omission on Lovecraft's part to avoid including the presence of a literary figure whom he clearly admired and knew was catastrophically present at that same conflict.

Knowing, then, that Carter's military service is, on the one hand not merely a matter of background detail but an integral quality of the character's experience, and, on the other, that said experience is ultimately horrific, the option to interpret the Randolph

Carter stories as representative of negative perspectives upon the war becomes convincing even in light of Lovecraft's own nationalist views. The experience and memory of the war is represented via Carter as an overwhelming trauma that harmed the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical health of those who went through it. Simply, the war was a force that cannot be overcome; it destroyed those who found themselves in its grasp. Certainly this is no shocking revelation, particularly from the modern perspective of the war as inherently tragic and pointless. From an early Twenty-First Century point of view, it is common to think of the First World War as nothing but a tragedy wherein soldiers "were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals" and survivors were "shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences" (Hynes xii). For an avowedly pro-war individual such as Lovecraft, however, a representation of the effects of the war such as this would be unexpected, and should serve to secure his writing a place amongst those post-war fictions that were critical of the war *en toto*. The Randolph Carter stories must be apprehended as a whole for the reader to see the anti-war message most clearly. To that end, the last in the series must be addressed first in order to understand the thematic motion that is retrospectively clear throughout the preceding texts.

The plot of the last Carter story, "The Silver Key" (1926), features Carter as a veteran. Having lost access to "the key of the gate of dreams" (Lovecraft, *Dreams* 252) at the age of thirty (in 1904), Carter spends at least two decades trying to reclaim it through a variety of means (which comprise the stories that preceded "The Silver Key" in publication, but not following the internal timeline of his life as described here). Unable to find satisfaction in anything either worldly or mystical, Carter succumbs to ennui as he

endures his pleasures “slipping away little by little, until at last he was cut off altogether” (252). He abandons all of his worldly pursuits, “having perceived at last the hollowness and futility of real things” (256), and sets aside his career as an adventurer and as a writer. Finally, he returns to the New England of his youth in order to reinvigorate his lust for life. Once there, he eventually finds the silver key, a magical artifact of some undefined sort bequeathed to him by his grandfather. Returning to his familial home in the countryside, he uses it to open a gateway that allows him to return to his youth, living his life all over again from the age of ten years old.

The subtlety and craft of "The Silver Key" are difficult to capture in a simple summary. Suffice it to say that the story is perhaps the single best meditation by Lovecraft on aspects of his personal philosophy, while also presenting a deeply gripping dream-like narrative for the reader to follow. I think, however, that the story can be read in the context of post-war literature via the connection between Carter and Seeger. For based on detail gleaned from "The Silver Key" we find that much of the character detail in the preceding stories can be attributed to two things: one is Carter's loss of his personal dreamscape on or around 1904, and the other is Carter's experience during the war. Tellingly, it is only the latter event which, when Carter remembers it while reliving 1897 after “some traveller mentioned the French town of Belloy-en-Santerre,” causes him to grow discomfited and "turn pale" (262). Out of all his experiences – from encounters with the reanimated dead to harrowing flights from alien gods in a transcendent nightmare realm – it is *only* the memory of the Great War that gives him pause. Perhaps it was the knowledge of the 1916 battlefield waiting for him that caused Carter to lose the

key to dreams in 1904 in the first place, unable to sustain his innocence in memory of the devastation to come.

What "The Silver Key" suggests about the cycle of Randolph Carter stories is that the whole can be read as an examination of the futility of attempting to recapture pre-war innocence. Carter, who we first see in "The Statement of Randolph Carter" (1919), is plagued by a fit of nervous collapse, and is specifically described as having "frail nerves" (Lovecraft, *The Call* 9). This is Carter's first post-war appearance and he is at his weakest in this story, suffering from battlefield trauma that has reduced him to one of the "[m]asks of the lads who were once keen and kind and gay" (Sassoon 102).<sup>25</sup> By the time of "The Unnameable" (1923) he has become a writer of weird fiction and fantasies himself, albeit a not very successful one, whose physical constitution is lacking. Carter's obsession with both his lost dreams and the darker elements of his past are subtextual in this story, replaced with a drive towards historical myths that allow him to mask his own lack of innocence underneath layers of fantasy. Here, as becomes clearer after reading the later Carter stories, he is driven to discover the lost historical horrors of New England and represent them narratively in his dream-like weird fictions.

Reading in retrospect from the point of view of "The Silver Key," Carter's behavior in "The Unnameable" can be interpreted as the portrayal of a veteran unconsciously attempting to allegorize or otherwise fictionalize the trauma of the war – only to discover that the allegories are based on all-too-real facts. He describes himself as being "fond of ending my stories with sights or sounds which paralysed my heroes"

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<sup>25</sup> Quite distinct from how Carter is described in *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*, which, while written much later, actually deals with Carter as he was on or about 1904, given in synopsis at the outset of "The Silver Key."

faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced” (Lovecraft, *The Dreams* 82); this pursuit of representing the unrepresentable speaks to Carter’s mental state. The eponymous unnamable monster attacks, refuting the claim that “even the most morbid perversion of Nature need not be *unnamable* or scientifically indescribable” (86), by presenting itself as an inexplicable force to the helpless protagonists. Metaphorically, the monster represents Carter's traumatic experiences during the war, returning again to cause pain without allowing space for resolution. Faced with an inability to reduce his experiences with the monster and his trauma of the battlefield, Carter is driven towards the search for final peace that occurs in "The Silver Key.”

Before Lovecraft could move Carter into the semi-resolution of "The Silver Key", however, he needed to establish the events that directly precede the stories already written: his quest to reclaim a lost cityscape of fantastic imagining. These events take place in *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1926-27), one of Lovecraft's few forays into the novella form. While written later in Lovecraft's life (the penultimate Carter story written by Lovecraft exclusively), the action of the tale begins in 1904, predating "The Statement of Randolph Carter" by fifteen years. In this story, Carter enters into a fantastic dream-world in order to recapture a city that he considers a paradise. He dreams of the city multiple times, and in each instance it slips from his grasp just as he feels himself most compelled to go there. In a section of some of Lovecraft's finest prose, written in the

tradition of Lord Dunsany, an author quite influential to Lovecraft's craft,<sup>26</sup> the city is described as follows:

All golden and lovely it blazed in the sunset, with walls, temples, colonnades, and arched bridges of veined marble, silver-basined fountains of prismatic spray in broad squares and perfumed gardens, and wide streets marching between delicate trees and blossom-laden urns and ivory statues in gleaming rows; while on steep northward slopes climbed tiers of red roofs and old peaked gables harbouring little lanes of grassy cobbles. It was a fever of the gods; a fanfare of supernal trumpets and a clash of immortal cymbals. Mystery hung about it as clouds about a fabulous unvisited mountain; and as Carter stood breathless and expectant on that balustraded parapet there swept up to him the poignancy and suspense of

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<sup>26</sup> Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett (1878 – 1957) was the eighteenth Baron of Dunsany. He was at the forefront of the historical weird fiction movement out of the United Kingdom at the end of the Nineteenth Century and the start of the Twentieth Century. Beginning with his 1905 publication of *The Gods of Pegana*, Lord Dunsany became immensely popular in both North America and England, producing numerous volumes of fiction, poetry, essays, and plays. He was well known for his poetic style of composition in his prose and the mythopoeisis he deployed in his creation of the fictional world Pegana.

Lovecraft repeatedly stated that Lord Dunsany was, along with Edgar Allan Poe, the chief influence upon his aesthetic development. Many of the stories from Lovecraft's early weird fiction career make this influence overt, reading at times as though they were pastiches of either Poe or Lord Dunsany. By the time he moved to New York in 1924 with Sonia, his new wife, Lovecraft had become uncomfortable with how much of Lord Dunsany's authorial voice was supplanting his own. He began working on *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* in 1926 as an intentional last Dunsany-influenced story. Post-1926 Lovecraft's output noticeably moves away from both Poe and Dunsany, beginning the masterwork period of Lovecraft's career.

Lord Dunsany's popularity cannot be overstated; his immense success can only be accurately compared to that of modern-day authors like Stephen King or Clive Barker. Furthermore, his prose and poetry is a fascinating contribution to historical weird fiction, and it is simple to understand why Lovecraft was so enamored of his work. Perhaps most notably is Dunsany's aforementioned mythopoeic quality – Lovecraft drew inspiration from this for not only his own anti-mythology of pseudo-gods, but also for a form of materialist representations of gods. Lord Dunsany's Pegana stories portray a pantheon of gods who are not gods, but only natural forces perceived to be gods by the inhabitants of Pegana. For Lovecraft, an avowed atheist, Lord Dunsany's aesthetics and philosophic conceptions directly shaped his early work, and informed the underpinnings of his later, greater, weird fiction output.

almost-vanished memory, the pain of lost things, and the maddening need to place again what once had an awesome and momentous place. (155)

The idealization of the city is obvious: its beauty is clear and the mystery it exhibits is enticing rather than menacing, while it is clearly an image of what Carter has lost by presenting him with the sweet “pain of lost things” (155). He is Sassoon’s “prince in a fairy story. / Winter called him far away; / Blossoms bring him home with May” (Sassoon 45). Carter moves through an apparently stable world of dreams in pursuit of the city that is denied him even in his happy fantasies, trying to ensure that “[d]reams will triumph, though the dark / Scowls above me where I go” (45). Over the course of the adventure, perhaps some of the most outright thematically "pulp" work Lovecraft ever did, Carter engages in gripping action. He fights against slavers and monsters, climbs mountains and explores the deepest depths of the world, sails the wide oceans and explores the darkest forests. At every stop he questions those willing to talk with him about the city of his dreams, and where he might be able to find it again. Every character gives him a similar response, however: no one knows where the city can be found. Even Kuranos, a human from Carter's prosaic Earth who has moved physically into the dream world, can do no more than counsel Carter to be careful not to allow his quest to become an obsession, for he will certainly be disappointed with the result.

Finally, Carter ascends to Kadath in the Cold Wastes, the city of the gods of Earth. There he finds only Nyarlathotep, “a tall, slim figure with the young face of an antique Pharaoh, gay with prismatic robes and crowned with a pschent that glowed with inherent light” (Lovecraft, *Dreams* 243). Nyarlathotep is a godlike figure from Lovecraft's other weird tales who is deployed here in a trickster role, trying to use Carter

for his own ends. He knows the truth of Carter's city, describing it as a vision of the Providence of Carter's childhood:

“For know you, that your gold and marble city of wonder is only the sum of what you have seen and loved in youth. It is the glory of Boston's hillside roofs and western windows aflame with sunset; of the flower-fragrant Common and the great dome on the hill and the tangle of gables and chimneys in the violet valley where the many-bridged Charles flows drowsily. These things you saw, Randolph Carter, when your nurse first wheeled you out in the springtime, and they will be the last things you will ever see with eyes of memory and of love. [...] These, Randolph Carter, are your city; for they are yourself. New-England bore you, and into your soul she poured a liquid loveliness which cannot die.” (245-46)

Nyarlatotep offers the city to Carter if and only if he can make obeisant requests before the throne of “the mindless daemon-sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare to speak aloud,” (249) who sits in the centre of the cosmos and rules as a blind idiot god. Carter is horrified by the price he must pay for him to reclaim his dream city, and refuses to ensure that “once more earth's gods rule the dreams of men from their accustomed seat” (247). Throwing himself into the cosmic abyss, Carter accepts that his dream city is nothing more than the idealized memories of his home town in rural New England. Since the town as it was in his youth has been lost to the flow of time, Carter realizes that he must reconcile himself to living in the present day, accepting the world around him for what it is, and rejoice in his memories rather than persist in searching for a time that cannot be relived. Having wrenched himself free from Nyarlatotep's plans, Carter plummets from



the heavens towards the Earth, and at the last moment finds himself waking up from a deep sleep in his boarding house in Boston.

The final Randolph Carter story is "The Silver Key" (1926), whose plot has already been discussed. When taken as a whole, the timeline of Randolph Carter reads something like this: unable to reconcile himself with his current time, Carter seeks out a perfect life for himself. Realizing this perfection only exists in the past, Carter turns his back on dreams and focuses on reality. When the First World War breaks out, he travels overseas and enlists in the French Foreign Legion prior to American entrance into the war. Grievously wounded in battle, Carter retreats home to recuperate. During his time spent healing, Carter develops a morbid curiosity in forbidden lore and macabre histories. However, his mental and physical state is insufficient to support him in his pursuits and leads to his collapse during a moment of great supernatural peril. He later recovers, and takes to creative writing as a means of analogizing terrors that he has learned – both from his own experience and through an investigation into history – are all too real. Finding that the balance between artistic horror and literal horror is too difficult to maintain, Carter again begins searching for a way to retreat fully from the world. He finally manages to do so by reclaiming the silver key. With it, he steps back into his actual past, reliving his life from the moment when it was most idyllic. Although he has attained what he sought so stridently for thirty years prior, Carter's paradise is an imperfect one, due to the knowledge of what awaits him during the Battle of the Somme, years in his future. Carter's life experience becomes a closed loop, with him caught in a cycle of horror and a desperate search to reject the future in favor of the past.

The trauma of the battlefield is, therefore, inescapable. When taken altogether, the Randolph Carter series of stories paint a tragic picture of a man who sought for nothing more than a reclamation of innocence, but found his vitality and psychology forever crippled by his experiences under fire. The ennui of the First World War veteran permeates Carter's stories, with his innocent past lost in the “suspense of almost-vanished memory, the pain of lost things, and the maddening need to place again what once had an awesome and momentous place” (155). His post-war life is spent in a cycle of seeking a reassuring belief in how “all things and feelings had fixed dimensions, properties, causes and effects” (83), but in “The Unnameable” and “The Statement of Randolph Carter” the unrepresentable quality of his experiences makes his trauma inescapable. Finding horror inescapable, Carter is driven, ultimately, to retreat entirely into his past in “The Silver Key,” in a doomed attempt to recapture lost innocence after having “been somewhere he ought not to be; had strayed very far away to places where he had not belonged” (260). *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* is where the whole of Carter’s life is revealed as a cycle, suggesting the First World War as the unexpected defining moment of life that cannot be escaped in favor of a return to a peaceful world.

I do not think that Lovecraft intended his Carter stories to be received in this manner, despite the fact that his political nationalism was becoming much more hesitant and less positive as the Depression grew closer, and he developed the Socialist stance that would last until the end of his life. Nevertheless, Lovecraft’s texts display a character who is undeniably equivalent – if not an outright stand-in – for a real-world figure, linking the context of Carter with the context of the real world. By doing so he allows the whole of that character's history to be interpreted as an expression circumscribed by the

war that he considered so significant. Randolph Carter's presence in Lovecraft's serial stories stands as a haunting image of a person ravaged by the war, uprooted and unsettled to the point where even a literal return to childhood cannot save him. Whatever door the silver key opens, and whatever territory that door leads to, it seems the trenches run beneath it still.

"The Temple" (1920):

"The Temple" is Lovecraft's only story to be set exclusively against the backdrop of the First World War. It is also his only weird tale to entirely involve military members during active engagement. Despite S. T. Joshi's somewhat odd claim that the text contains too many supernatural elements (Joshi, *Encyclopedia* 261), the story remains an interesting albeit flawed example of Lovecraft's middle period. With its depiction of overt hostilities during wartime resulting in unforeseeable dangers, "The Temple" is a representation of humanity trapped in a cycle of eternal reoccurrence where nationalist impulses presage a dark end of civilization. In this respect the text brings to mind both the return through time experienced by Randolph Carter and the atavistic tendencies of the de la Poer clan. Perhaps even more strongly than the Carter stories or "The Rats in the Walls," "The Temple" is a direct warning against descending into the darker temptations of nationalism and jingoistic warfare.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to another of Joshi's claims that Lovecraft "mars the story by crude satire on his German protagonist's militarist and

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<sup>27</sup> Lovecraft overtly rejected didacticism in fiction, thinking that literature-as-lesson constructions were one of the worst offenses of the Victorian period. It is somewhat surprising, then, that he would deliver such a clear warning – despite his own militarism – to his readers who were on the tail end of a grossly unprecedented conflict.

chauvinist sentiments" (Lovecraft, *The Thing* 174), "The Temple" highlights anxieties of putting national interests ahead of moral concerns. Questions of relying on nationalism over morality are presented by Lovecraft through representations of First World War tragedies, further positioning the Great War as a site of horror that had effects beyond its immediate moment.

"The Temple" opens with an epigraph wherein the text is detailed as the contents of a message in a bottle found off the shores of Tahiti, the final journal reports of a German officer named Lieutenant-Commander Karl Heinrich, Graf Von Altberg-Ehrenstein. These entries detail the last days of the vessel under his command, submarine *U-29*, between the times of it sinking a freighter in the summer of 1917 and its own sinking, with all hands lost, in late August of that year. After sinking the British freighter *Victory*, bound for Liverpool from New York, crewmen on the *U-29* recover an apparently Greek or Roman artifact – "a very odd bit of ivory carved to represent a youth's head crowned with laurel" (27) – from a young victim who apparently drowned after the attack on the *Victory*, seeking "refuge on the very ship which had been forced to destroy his own" (27). Some of the crew begin to suffer hallucinations after descending beneath the waves, leading them to madness, murder, and suicide. During these events, the submarine inexplicably becomes crippled. At first it is simply unable to navigate but, eventually, it becomes unable to keep itself adrift. As the vessel sinks, the crew dwindles until the last two servicemen aboard are put to death on Heinrich's orders. Approaching the bottom of the ocean, Heinrich's companion becomes obsessed with the unusual crowd of dolphins that surround the sub. He begs to be released to venture outside, certain that the sinking of the *Victory* has doomed *U-29* and its crew to a watery death. With

resources dwindling, Heinrich gives his assent, privately castigating his fellow officer for succumbing to a weakness brought about by being “only a Rhinelander and a commoner” (32) of low-German birth.

Heinrich resolves to face his death as he feels a German officer should – with aplomb and scientific interest in the never-before-explored surroundings that he finds himself in. On the bottom of the ocean he has discovered the remnants of an ancient civilization, perhaps even the society that spawned the legends of Atlantis. The remnants around him form “an extended and elaborate array of ruined edifices; all of magnificent though unclassified architecture [...] Most appeared to be of marble, gleaming whitely in the rays of the searchlight, and the general plan was of a large city at the bottom of a narrow valley” (33). Heinrich is nearly overwhelmed by a desire to explore the desolate ruins around him; he walks outside the submarine in a diving suit, but the ground proves too treacherous for extended trips. He manages to partially satisfy his interest by surveying the landscape with a fading searchlight on top of the submarine's conning tower. As the batteries of the *U-29* drain completely, Heinrich finds himself trapped in total darkness, and awaits his death from suffocation. But, at the last he realizes that there is light coming in from outside, some phosphorescence shining out of the mouth of a temple that he has not been able to see into. Heinrich describes how he is reminded of “the ivory image whose carving was duplicated on the frieze and columns of the temple before me” (38). Unable to resist the urge to see more of whatever lies outside, he again dons his pressure suit and prepares to leave the *U-29* forever. The narrative ends with Heinrich describing how he will bottle his journal and release it to drift in the currents. There is singing and hideous laughter coming from inside the temple, it seems, and he is

determined to prove it a delusion brought on by oxygen deprivation by dying “calmly, like a German, in the black and forgotten depths,” by donning his “diving suit and walk[ing] boldly up the steps into that primal shrine” (38).

The action that opens the story – the sinking of the *Victory* – is an analogy for the sinking of the *Lusitania* in on May 7th, 1915. The allusions are overt: *Lusitania* itself is the name of a Roman province in what would today be considered Portugal, represented here through the “very odd bit of ivory carved to represent a youth's head crowned with laurel” (27) which is paired with the “largely Hellenic” (34) art and architecture that rests at the bottom of the ocean. The ruins are suggestive of a Roman origin and are linked with the Mediterranean features of the young man who carried the cameo. Equally, and perhaps more obviously, the sinking of the *Lusitania* was carried out by the German submarine *U-20*, a clear basis for the story’s own German submarine *U-29*. The sinking of the *Victory* is described in an unmistakably horrific manner: Heinrich states that the attack is little more than a staged event, and his “camera missed nothing, and I regret that so fine a reel of film should never reach Berlin” (27). The implication is that the attack on the *Victory* serves no purpose other than nationalist propaganda, reinforced when Heinrich justifies the sinking metonymically through the drowned youth by describing him as “one more victim of the unjust war of aggression which the English pig-dogs are waging upon the Fatherland” (27). The story is a form of cautionary weird tale, warning the reader of the unimagined consequences arising as a result of barbaric actions taken in the name of national warfare.

Lovecraft's opinions on the sinking of the *Lusitania* are well documented. His reaction was one of shock and outrage, as was common, and directly reaffirmed his

attitude that intervention in the war was a necessary step for America to take. Lovecraft wrote his political stance out clearly in the 1917 poem "The Crime of Crimes." Here he describes what an affront the sinking of a civilian cruise liner by the German navy actually was, and what it meant for the moral composition of modern nation states:

Craz'd with the Belgian blood so lately shed,  
 The bestial Prussian seeks the ocean's bed;  
 In Neptune's realm the wretched coward lurks,  
 And on the world his wonted evil works.  
 Like slinking cur, he bites where none oppose;  
 Victorious over babes, his valour grows. (Lovecraft, *The Ancient Track*  
 398-99)

It is possible to read "The Temple" as little more than a basic supernatural revenge plot: Lovecraft potentially intended the story to portray an allegorical crew of Germans getting the fate that he felt the actual crew of the *U-20* deserved for their participation in an act of unprovoked savagery. However, it is also possible to interpret the story as a much broader indictment of the corrupt national consciousness responsible for the First World War. The story's implication is, ultimately, not just that one should simply avoid acts of barbarism, but that one should avoid slavish devotion to the idea of a state or a people that occludes the basic precepts of civilized behavior itself.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The short story "Dagon" (1917) also includes a potential fictionalization of the *Lusitania* sinking. "Dagon" contains some implications for its minor representation of the First World War as a conflict that potentially carries with it horrific after effects. An unnamed narrator is set adrift in a life raft after his ship, an American freighter, is torpedoed by a German vessel in the Atlantic Ocean. He passes into a feverish state. When he awakes, he finds himself beached in the middle of a vast expanse of muddy, revolting land.

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He surveys the landscape, surmising from the composition of the soil and the dead bodies of exotic sea life that this land mass must have heaved up from the bottom of the ocean due to a tectonic event.

Using his boat as a navigational marker, the narrator searches for food and shelter from the elements. He stumbles across a deep ravine which he thinks must have been carved by undersea currents. There he discovers an obelisk of non-human design; he initially takes it for a bizarre natural outcropping, but upon closer inspection realizes that it has not only been shaped but decorated with alien carvings. Fascinated despite his shock, the narrator flees when a semi-humanoid creature bearing the characteristics of both humans and sea-life walks through the ravine and proceeds to make acts of worship before the obelisk. As he retreats, the narrator realizes that some of the markings on the obelisk are not carvings after all, but impressions left by the hands of the gigantic creature.

Awaking later, the narrator finds that he has been rescued. However, he cannot recover from his experiences: the knowledge of a wider world beyond the limits of human conception has left him a shell of his former self. He retreats into drug addiction and misery before realizing that he is pursued by some unknown force, bound on ending his life. He sets down his story to paper before, in one of the most preposterous climaxes in Lovecraft's corpus, writing down his shrieks as his window is blocked by the hand of a gigantic figure (presumably the same figure seen worshipping at the base of the obelisk upon the risen island). The story comes to a sudden end.

"Dagon" serves as an example of two minor representations of the First World War. First, the story can be read as an example of an unreliable narrator unhinged by wartime trauma, parsing the horror of his lived experience through an unreal lens in order to give some frame of reference for what he cannot otherwise accept. The narrator questions whether the memories of his experiences are reliable: "[o]ften I ask myself if it could not all have been a pure phantasm – a mere freak of fever as I lay sun-stricken and raving in the open boat after my escape from the German man-of-war" (Lovecraft, *The Call* 6). This idea is never settled; the narrator dismisses the concern by briefly mentioning an undefined "hideously vivid vision" (6) and his otherwise inexplicable fear of the deep sea. For him, this is sufficient to judge his experiences real events and, unfortunately, little is ultimately gained by questioning the reality of those experiences.

Second, as in "The Temple," the brutal actions taken during wartime have unexpected consequences on both an individual and, potentially, a global level. The sinking of an allied ship by German forces at the opening of the action is clearly reflective of the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Through this inference the story can be read as presenting an undercurrent theme of the unintended consequences of wartime acts coming back to haunt the survivors. However, here that reading is thinner and weaker, suggesting that Lovecraft only worked out this theme by writing the stronger "The Temple." For example, though the narrator of "Dagon" does suggest that the semi-human creatures he has discovered might rise up to destroy humanity when he states at the conclusion that he dreams "of a day when they may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind" (6), there is no evidence given that such an event will occur. The narrator is himself presumably killed by one of the ichthyic creatures, but there is no reason to think that these unfortunate circumstances are not limited in their scope.

Although the reference to "war-exhausted mankind" is intriguing, there is no sense of the consequences of the war occurring to those who deserve them. Whereas in "The Temple" the crew of the *U-29* German submarine were guilty of a monstrous act, the narrator of "Dagon" is blameless. To suggest that the war would have catastrophic consequences for the innocent and the wicked alike would be fitting, given Lovecraft's general insistence on a lack of moralism in his writing, but here the idea is not developed enough to specifically represent the war. It seems as though the rising of the island would have occurred with or without the war, and that the fish-like creatures have no reason to spring their potential attack on humanity only when we are exhausted by warfare. As such, though the war does feature within "Dagon," it does so in a minor way. The story can and should be read for the way it prefigured several other works by Lovecraft, and for how the First World War was used as a background element by Lovecraft; but ultimately it says more as an example of experimental fiction by an author working out his own take on weird aesthetics than it does as an example of literary response to the war.



This occlusion is present from the opening of the story when Heinrich rather coolly reports an inexcusable act of murder on the high seas. His crew torpedoed the *Victory*, he says, and permitted the crew to evacuate to safety "in order to obtain a good cinema view for the admiralty records" (Lovecraft, *The Temple* 27). Once the cameras had stopped rolling, however, he "sank the lifeboats with our guns and submerged" (27). This completely unnecessary slaughter is driven by nothing more than Heinrich's cultural chauvinism: he is absolutely convinced of the superiority of the German people, and fervently believes that atrocities like the consigning of innocent civilians to death by drowning are automatically morally right if taken in benefit of the German state. This chauvinism blinds him to his responsibility for his own actions and allows him to believe that "German lives are precious" (29) while non-Germans are treated as little more than grist for his country's militarism. Even members of Heinrich's crew are disposable if they are not the right kind of German; a particularly frightened boatswain is said to "have known better had he not been a superstitious Alsatian" (28). After the *U-29* loses navigation, Heinrich's blindness becomes obvious: he refuses to surface since "[t]o seek rescue in the lifeboats would be to deliver ourselves into the hands of enemies unreasonably embittered against our great German nation" (29). Throughout the story, Heinrich's inability to see his own culpability for the actions he performs is staggering, lost as he is in a "landscape of bladed homes and bloated corpses" where his "words of explanation fall to the ground like brittle and frail autumn leaves" (Dawes 131). The war has made a monster of Heinrich, and it is a monster's role he fulfills – but even monsters, the story suggests, may be destroyed by the consequences of their actions.

Late in the text, Lieutenant Klenze, an officer beneath Heinrich, realizes the magnitude of the horrors they have unleashed in furtherance of the war. He collapses with guilt and begins to "pray in remorse over the men, women and children we had sent to the bottom" (31). Heinrich, however, continues to be blind to the reality of their monstrosity and rejects Klenze's contrition out of hand. He states that he "was very sorry for him, for I dislike to see a German suffer; but he was not a good man to die with. For myself I was proud, knowing how the Fatherland would revere my memory and how my sons would be taught to be men like me" (31). Heinrich goes on to state flatly that "all things are noble which serve the German state" (31). This is one of the most powerful single statements in Lovecraft's corpus, and resoundingly demonstrates the way in which a simple story like "The Temple" might serve as a condemnation of the First World War. For if the action for consideration is something as morally obvious as the unnecessary murder of innocents for the purposes of wartime propaganda, and that monstrous act is excused due to being in service to a particular state, then clearly the idea of blind obedience to the state must be inherently flawed. This idea is distinctly not similar to Lovecraft's own outlook: he believed in the supremacy of strong governance over the masses and was, at times, even a self-proclaimed fascist; it is therefore a powerful claim to find in his writing.

"The Temple" is a critique of the jingoistic belief in nationalist virtue absent any other justification. Furthermore it is a condemnation of the most exceptional power of the state – to wage war – as a veneer over hollow monstrosity. In the figure of Karl Heinrich the state and the individual are hopelessly tangled together, making each complicit in the barbaric acts of the other. For if a man who fervently believes that even the most

excessive evil can be considered righteous if it serves his nation is emblematic of a state represented as a singular combative entity, then there can be no distinction as to where blame should be laid for evil conducted by either the state or the man. Heinrich and the state have been pressed together, the violence of war “shattering the cherished fictions that structure our routines of life” including “the deeper fictions of national purpose, history, and identity; and the still more fundamental fictions of moral clarity” (Dawes 131). He is responsible for his deeds and the representation of his state hangs upon him, while the state is responsible for Heinrich’s monstrosity by perpetuating his belief in the necessity of nationalist survival. The full horror of Heinrich and his participation in the war is only brought to bear when the reader is presented with his self-description as “a Prussian and man of sense” (38) and realizes that ultimately there is no room for difference between the two, resulting in a form of jingoist insanity.

The implication of the ruins beneath the ocean is relatively clear in this reading: they are a representation of what all nations must become over time. Here are the remnants of “a culture in the full noon of glory when cave-dwellers roamed Europe and the Nile flowed unwatched to the sea” (35). This civilization was demonstrably the equivalent of the highest cultures of antiquity, and even after untold centuries beneath the waves their architecture and sculpture are recognizable as “the immediate ancestry of Greek art” (34). Though Heinrich, crippled by his cultural chauvinism, never overtly says so, this submerged society is clearly at least the equal of Germany – he thinks the city “verdant and beautiful” but immediately chides himself for reacting in an “idiotic and sentimental” (34) manner – and his blind adherence to the German *state* precludes him from ever seeing it as the warning that it is. Heinrich, in fact, seems determined to be

nonplussed by the existence of the ruins, arguing that “as one reared in the best *Kultur* of Prussia I should not have been amazed, for geology and tradition alike tell us of great transpositions in oceanic and continental areas” (33). The reader is able to see beyond Heinrich’s nationalist chauvinism, however, and judge his actions and the actions he endorses as moral crimes; to the reader Heinrich’s nationalism is a thing deserving to be forgotten, like the sunken city beneath the waves. The Great War menaces Germany through the metaphoric example of the *U-29* joining the submerged ruins – war crimes like the sinking of the *Victory* condemns the crew, and through them Germany itself, to the fate suffered by other great civilizations of the past.

The story never makes it clear exactly what lies within the temple itself, nor does it go into any explication as to what the force is that survives at the bottom of the ocean. However, I think there is reason to read it as the blind, barely focused power of nationalism itself. The state that exists at the bottom of the ocean is every bit as intangible as the German state that Heinrich devotes himself to. It is also monstrous, demanding sacrifices like Heinrich’s crew much as Germany demands sacrifices such as the innocents aboard the *Victory*, murdered for no saner purpose than its furtherance via meager – and unusable – propaganda. The unreality represented by Heinrich's increasingly feverish descriptions of events as the *U-29* sinks is just as purposeless and unreal as the justifications for war crimes committed by servants of nationalism. Here, then, is the threat implicit in the story: no justification can be made for atrocity that does not buy into an insanity that opens the door to even more tragedy. The message that is encoded in the "daemoniac laughter" (38) heard emanating from the temple at the end of

the story is clear: lay sacrifices at the steps of one's temple, one's nation state, and one risks being destroyed by the insane, impersonal forces governing all.

While perhaps less overtly anti-war as "The Rats in the Walls" or the series of Randolph Carter stories, "The Temple" is nevertheless a powerful cautionary tale of the overarching consequences of carrying out atrocities in the name of national warfare. It is an overt response to one of the great tragedies of the Great War, but is not (as one would expect it to be) a direct endorsement of Allied action against the Germans. Indeed, nowhere in the story is there any real indication that the problems of the First World War could be settled if the Germans simply surrendered to the United Kingdom, or if the Americans just entered into the war and quashed their opponents. Such would be the natural expectation of an author as overtly pro-war and patriotic as Lovecraft, but no paeans to nationalism appear in the text. Instead, the story warns *against* the dangers of blind devotion of an ephemeral state and the far-reaching effects that devotion may have. Like the sunken city, no nation can persist forever, and actions carried out of a jingoistic sense of identity or duty might instead hasten the demise of the state. Barbarous acts result in horrific consequences, carrying doom and death in unforeseen ways for the servants of nationalism. The moral taken from Heinrich's entrance into the temple is an echo of Joseph Conrad's mournful belief that due to the war "[a]ll the past was gone, and there was no future, whatever happened; no road which did not seem to lead to moral annihilation" (178). There are no winners as such in a conflict like the First World War; there is only the dead taking revenge for the dead, making more death, leaving behind only the hollow pretense of the state and the memory of the barbarity it inspired.

Conclusion:

Howard Philips Lovecraft was a compelling and fascinating contributor of American literature in the first half of the Twentieth Century. His weird fiction work was occluded by a persistent layer of mythology for far too long, built up around him and his writing by the well-meaning but nevertheless misguided efforts of his fans and friends. In the decades following the Second World War there has been a strong effort from the critical community to reclaim Lovecraft and his texts from the mythology that surrounds him like so much cruff. Sadly, this effort has often been itself marred by the necessity of keeping Lovecraft the man, as opposed to Lovecraft the legend, in the proverbial picture. As a result, Lovecraft's work – the words on the page – are themselves overshadowed by the life of the man who authored them. We have learned that the reception of texts by readers is an act of ongoing interpretation: the author is rarely, if ever, able to fully anticipate the ways in which their texts might come across to readers who come from different personal contexts. The author is never absolutely in control of the way their texts will be read, in other words, and as such it is a mistake to assume that a body of textual work can be circumscribed by the life of the author.

And yet the assumption that has shaped Lovecraft criticism in the past five decades is that the author's life defines the texts that are left behind. It is only recently that Lovecraft's weird fictions have begun to be isolated from his life, particularly with analyses of Lovecraft's stories like Donald R. Burleson's deconstructionist anthology. The number of these critical analyses are still few in comparison to the number where biography rules over all, however, and the amount of critical time spent on Lovecraft's texts *as texts* first and foremost, cultural artifacts indebted to and reflective of their

historical and social location, has been limited. If we are to increase our understanding of weird fiction both in terms of the history of genre literature in America and in terms of literature that broadens our knowledge of the time of its production, then we must acknowledge that the ghost of Lovecraft does not, by necessity, haunt his pages. It is perfectly acceptable, that is, and indeed a wise idea, to consider what his stories say without biasing our reading by assuming that Lovecraft had total control over every implication in his carefully constructed lines. Equally, however, we must not assume that his texts are totally adrift, cut off from their time and place in the same way that they are cut off from their author. The interpretive act is not a decision to embrace a perfectly blank canvas, after all; Lovecraft's stories may work against Lovecraft's avowed ideals at points, but they are always grounded in the fertile soil of the early American Twentieth Century.

That soil indicates that Lovecraft's stories deserve to be read as standing side-by-side with other authors of historically locatable literature. There is no reason whatsoever, for example, to avoid reading the influence of the Great Depression upon Lovecraft's later works when we would readily accept reading the same in the books of John Steinbeck. We should read Lovecraft for the same anxieties and concerns that influenced the high modernists that emerged in America in the mid-1920s (who influenced Lovecraft to revise his own adherence to esoteric modes of Eighteenth Century literary composition). And we should read Lovecraft's texts for the presence of the First World War, resisting the temptation to draw an arbitrary line between "genre literature" and "high literature" when the same cultural milieu drove the former just as much as the latter. Alienation and ennui brought about by surviving the horrors of the trenches informs Lovecraft's texts just

as it does Hemingway's or Fitzgerald's, albeit to a different degree; the only reason to resist recognizing it is out of a misguided attempt to keep the author and the text on a one-to-one ratio with each other, or a presupposition that genre literature cannot be received as operating on the same level as our canon of great works.

Lovecraft was avowedly and overtly pro-war. He loathed the conditions of the war itself, where "Aryan" men were turned to fight one another, but he never wavered in his belief that the American people should whole-heartedly engage in the war in order to assist the citizens of the United Kingdom in their combative effort. Even after his turn to strong Socialism in the 1930s, Lovecraft never moved from thinking of the First World War as anything but a necessary and just act of response to overweening German aggression. Lovecraft himself enlisted for what he hoped would be front-line service in the American army, but was rejected after his mother convinced a doctor to declare him medically unfit for duty. Despite their author's beliefs, Lovecraft's texts which involve the First World War tend towards painting a different picture of the war years than he ever set down in his letters, essays, and patriotic poetry. Here the war is the domain of monsters, looming and threatening everyone from every faction in an indiscriminate fever of cannibalistic hunger. As in "The Rats in the Walls," the war represents humanity at its atavistic worst. The war is the ultimate conflict which makes the cyclic nature of warfare and aggression impossible to ignore – the beasts of the trenches indistinguishable from the soldiers themselves, devouring everything around them for no meaningful reason other than because they can.

Equally, there is no escape from the war for its combatants. Even if one is lucky enough to survive the conflict hale and hearty, unlike the victims in "Herbert West: Re-



Animator,” there is persistent ennui and dissatisfaction to contend with. It is this condition that Randolph Carter finds himself trapped within: his experiences during the war nearly kill him, then they cripple his psychological and physical stability. Throughout his stories, from "The Statement of Randolph Carter" to "The Silver Key,” the inescapable horrors of the Somme taint Carter's life. The war is the set of traumatic events that cannot be simply lived past; the affective nature of the war is so great that it corrupts even supernatural attempts to escape its reach, perverting what should be a retreat into the perfect innocence of childhood. Even when one's focus is elsewhere, as is Herbert West's focus at St. Eloi, the affective impact cannot be avoided. It always corrupts and pervades despite its unrepresentable nature, as it does when West finds himself increasingly emotionally deadened by his time on the front lines, or when Carter finds he must reconcile himself to terrors that cannot be described. The war, allegorically represented by the survival of West's soldier experiment, returns without fail, and reveals the horrible possibility that the war makes its veterans somehow terribly less than human. West's final abduction into the sepulchral depths beneath his laboratory is, like Carter's reduction to an inescapable cycle of trauma, an expression of the worst fear the First World War instilled in those who fought: no one came back alive from the trenches.

Finally, World War I is represented in Lovecraft's texts as having inexplicable ramifications that cannot be expected or prepared for. The war suggested that we as a species are inherently vulnerable to a seeming psychosis that relegates us to insanity and self-destruction. As with the fate of Karl Heinrich, the protagonist of "The Temple,” the war reveals wholly unprecedented vistas of self-destruction that we will gladly walk into in the name of national pride and irrational beliefs in cultural superiority. The crimes of

brutality that arise in every conflict are magnified, perfected on the battlefields of the purported “war to end all wars.” They spawn echoes which will reverberate into the future, corrupting our efforts at abstract self-protection until they are nothing more than a descent towards final self-destruction. Even the innocents will not be spared from this terrible result, as can be seen in the example of the narrator in “Dagon.” A mirror image of “The Temple,” the text weakly suggests that even the victims who survive an atrocity are doomed by the magnitude of the act that was inflicted upon them. There is no escape for Karl Heinrich, none for the narrator of “Dagon,” none for the society that now anticipates the return of the echoes of the First World War, bouncing back at them from the walls of the future. Whatever looms out of the darkness was wrought by the terrors of the war: a savage animal lying in wait for times to come, the bastard offspring of a conflagration that nearly consumed the world.

Lovecraft, like any given author, is tied to his own historical location. He is indebted to his social milieu and shaped by the facts that surrounded his lived experience. In order to understand the genre in which he worked, critics should approach his stories as though they are grounded in more than just the imaginative products of his impressive mind. Analyses of Lovecraft’s work should demonstrate that his weird fictions were organically mired in the world around him at the time of their composition, even if doing so means reading against Lovecraft's expressed opinions. In order to understand that world and that period, critics must seek to broaden their understanding of the literature that stems from that context. Ultimately, there is no reason to assume that weird fiction is somehow cut off from the totalizing influence of the First World War; no aspect of American media escaped the impact of the war. As will be demonstrated in later chapters,

the historical and cultural location of weird fiction is almost always at issue in the frisson of the texts. In Lovecraft, who overtly rejected the clanking chains of Victorian ghosts, no small amount of frisson is generated by the specter that looms large over so many texts from the early Twentieth Century: the specter of the Great War.

## Chapter Two:

### “The Parchments of New Horoscopes”: Clark Ashton Smith’s Surrealist Weird

#### Fiction

#### Introduction:

Clark Ashton Smith (1893 – 1961) had a short but prodigious career in publishing popular literature. Smith was born in Long Valley, California, and spent the majority of his life in the small town of Auburn living in a cabin with his infirm parents. It was there that Smith wrote the bulk of his works, leaving the cabin only after the death of his parents. Smith abandoned literature almost entirely in 1935, choosing instead to focus on sculpture and other visual arts. Eventually Smith took up residence with his wife in Pacific Grove, California, where he worked at odd jobs until the time of his death at age sixty-eight. Although there are a few memoirs from friends of Smith, there have been no biographies like S. T. Joshi’s biography of H. P. Lovecraft or Mark Finn’s biography of Robert E. Howard. Presumably this is due to the fact that Smith was an intensely private man: very few details about his personal life have survived his passing, and those that are known provide little more than the information given above. One of the few solid facts known is that despite being almost entirely self-educated, Smith showed an intense talent for artistic creation from an early age.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Like his friend H. P. Lovecraft, Smith was originally a poet by preference. His strongest poetic influence was the romantics, most notably Charles Baudelaire. Smith’s first attempts at poetry, published when he was still a teenager, brought him to the attention of San Francisco poet George Sterling, and he was invited to join Sterling’s “West Coast Romantics” group for training. Although Smith’s poetry is notable, and deserves to come under critical analysis, the majority of his poetic production exists on either side of his weird fiction career, and thus falls outside of the scope of the genre literature I am discussing.

Smith is best remembered for his time as an author of weird fiction despite his relatively brief career as a short story author. Between 1926 and 1935, Smith wrote more than one hundred short stories and novellas; an astonishing amount for an exacting author like Smith. At the urging of H. P. Lovecraft, Smith began sending in submissions to various pulp fiction magazines – *Weird Tales* most notably – to alleviate some of the financial stress of his parents’ illnesses. Smith quickly became one of the luminaries within the burgeoning genres of weird fiction, scientifiction, and supernatural horror, with fans throughout the professional and amateur communities. His lyrical composition was instilled with a rigorous choice of diction, which caught the imagination of hundreds of fans across the globe. Despite his fame, however, Smith’s income proved meager – a common complaint among the weird fiction authors, who eschewed the rapid compositional pace of most pulp authors and thus could not garner much from the notoriously tight-fisted magazine editors (whose pay rates rarely went over a penny a word). As a result of this and other reasons, such as the deaths of Lovecraft and Howard in the 1930s, Smith decided to move away from prose fiction as a method of artistic expression. After 1935, he stopped writing short stories almost entirely and returned to poetry, sculpture, and painting, much to the chagrin of the large group of his colleagues and fans.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that, unlike Lovecraft and Howard, there is very little (if any) mythology built up around Smith’s life. Robert Bloch has suggested that this is because there is very little known about Smith’s personal life; an intensely private man, Smith was not known for sharing the intimate details of his day-to-day existence. Most of the memoirs that exist about him come from people who only met him once or twice towards the end of his life (contrast this with the almost innumerable memoirs that came out after Lovecraft’s death, written by everyone from his wife, to childhood friends, to professional colleagues from all across America). To my knowledge, only one pseudo-biography has been published on Smith, and even then (by the author’s own admission) it is more of a sketch than a detailed accounting of the man’s life. This lack of mythology is in some ways a good thing: it is remarkably difficult to overly romanticize or unfairly criticize a life that is unknown.

Smith's narrative voice was, as said, distinct from those of his fellow weird fiction creators. Less anachronistic than Lovecraft and less bombastic than Howard, Smith brought a romantic style to his stories. Unconcerned with the scientific verisimilitude that was gaining popularity in the pulps, Smith penned weird tales where conventional knowledge of the universe gave way to science-denying occurrences. These moments of bizarre imagery reflected emotional states that Smith wished to evoke in his readers, usually involving awe or horror. The creation of atmosphere often came at the expense of forthright plot: in some of his work, such as "A Night in Malnéant," very little can be said to *happen*. Forsaking the more traditional (and occasionally contrived) plot structures of other pulp fiction authors, Smith chose to shape many of his stories as pure evocations of weird fiction's primary dictum: that the proper weird tale is in pursuit of a "certain form of human mood" rather than a narrative of didactic or pure entertainment value. This is not to suggest that Smith completely abandoned more traditional narrative structures, however. Several of his weird fictions follow the pre-existing lines of adventure fiction, but even then – as in stories like "The Eternal World" (1932) – the *impact* of the stories stems from the realism-denying atmosphere surrounding the plots rather than the plots themselves. In this sense, Smith worked at his experimental ideas with the care of a master craftsman.

Smith's weird fiction repeatedly problematizes the prosaic understanding of human lives and the external world, suggesting that if there is any truth in existence it lies in some form of sublimating our sensory apprehension into an emotional, dream-like manner of appreciation. When that sublimation is achieved the result is almost always destructive transformation of the individual, either physically or psychologically. The

surrealist overtones that Smith's works demonstrate are therefore somewhat unusual. Although surrealism "is the individual's search for an ideal absolute through the reconciliation of his opposites" (Weiss 9), and therefore *transformative*, the surrealist reconciliation is rarely a site of horror. Nevertheless, surrealism relies upon a concept of the marvelous, "the unconventional or startling, the hallucinatory, and a transformed metaphysical form of existence" (9). Though surrealism holds that "the marvelous is always beautiful, everything marvelous is beautiful, only the marvelous could be beautiful" (Breton), genre works of supernatural horror such as Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) are specified as typifying the marvelous since it "exalts only that part of the spirit which desires to quit the ground" (Breton) while its fantastic aspects "play a logical role in it, since the critical mind does not seize on them to contest their meaning" (Breton). Smith's weird fictions repeatedly demonstrate surreal overtones in the form of the pursuit of an absolute, the reconciliation of opposites, and a desire to "quit the ground" of prosaic reality without leaving space for elements of the fantastic to be contested. That these propensities result in the combination of awe and horror that early American weird fiction strove to achieve suggests, when taken in light of Breton's lauding of a work of gothic horror, that nightmares are able to give access to the surreal just as dreams are.

It is historically uncommon for pulp fictions to be considered worthy of relation to surrealism or other aspects of the avant-garde.<sup>31</sup> Few theorists of experimental schools

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<sup>31</sup> Though it is not entirely unheard of. Robert Allerton Parker poetically described pulp fictions as "the revolt against the boredom of life imposed by the dictatorship of the Machine" despite being "relegated to the lowly caste of the untouchable" (Parker para. 2-3) in an article that will be discussed later in this chapter.

of art have had time for the pulps: as artworks that were produced for purposes of mass consumption, they are almost de facto relegated to being works of affirmative culture,<sup>32</sup> created for no reason other than to keep the proletariat in its place. Under this conception of popular and revolutionary art, “the truth of a higher world, of a higher good than material existence, conceals the truth that a better material existence can be created” (Marcuse 121) and thus the images and stories of popular art are “a means of subordination and acquiescence. By exhibiting the beautiful as present, art pacifies rebellious desire” (121). Unfortunately, this view of the pulps – weird fiction included – has persisted far longer than is appropriate. Marxist critics like Clement Greenberg (who coined the term “kitsch” in reference to mass produced art), Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger summarily condemned popular art, including the pulps, seeing it as nothing more than tools helping the bourgeoisie to maintain power. Even in recent decades theorists like Andreas Huyssen, who sought to rectify some of the oversights of earlier critics of the avant-garde, have only been able to acknowledge the impact of popular art as potentially revolutionary if it is incorporated into other, newer, forms of art – such as with the pop movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet there is reason to argue that popular artwork such as weird fiction can be analyzed as avant-gardist or experimental texts. To neglect the experimental potential of these stories simply because they were sold for publication in mass produced magazines seems short sighted. There is no reason to think that weird fiction is inherently incapable

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<sup>32</sup> As Herbert Marcuse referred to works of false consciousness in his seminal 1937 essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture.” These works of popular culture exist solely to delude the proletariat with escapist dreams, allowing them to reconcile their poor material conditions with their desire for a better world by giving them access to fantasies which temporarily take them away from daily life. The revolutionary spirit of the proletariat thus quelled, the bourgeoisie remains in control of the masses.



of producing revolutionary or challenging artworks since doing so requires one to judge texts by their category rather than their contents or the effects of their composition and reception; indeed, analyzing weird fictions like Smith's through the lens of surrealist art produces interesting results. J. H. Matthews speaks of surrealism's ambivalent attitudes towards different forms of poetic writing:

The central preoccupation in surrealist endeavor is this: The painter or writer is intent upon providing his audience with a window. Its shape and its conformity to specifications generally considered appropriate to well-proportioned windows are of no consequence to him. What counts is that his window should be so placed as to look out upon something to which surrealist ideals lend importance. Attention must go, therefore, not to the form but to the revelations that form helps make possible. Hence we can best expand our understanding of poetry in surrealism by asking what is visible through the surrealist window. (7)

The weird fiction of Clark Ashton Smith is one such "window." and although its shape does not conform to the critical conception of what qualifies as an avant-gardist work, it remains the case that all that matters is whether or not Smith's window looks out upon a surrealist landscape. Throughout his stories, Smith "takes us to the confines of the improbable" and his "distaste for the habitual and the banal spur[red] him on toward exploration of the impossible" (5). As in the best of surrealist literature, Smith "*provokes* us," his stories giving access to worlds where "what captivates us is the invitation to a change of perspective" (Chénleux-Gendron 110). This is the litmus of the surrealist project.

Surrealists sought “to liberate the unconscious, and to tap its powerful forces” in order to discover the “superior reality (or surreality) embodied by these forms of association [in] the unconscious itself, the exploration of which promised to expand our total awareness” (Bohn 129). As said, theorists of the avant-garde and critics of weird fiction alike have been generally unwilling to recognize that there is a close relationship between surrealism and genre literature, particularly Smith’s weird fiction. Smith sought to “delude the reader into accepting an impossibility, or series of impossibilities, by means of a verbal black magic” (Schultz 126). This delusion is one wherein syntactically represented images of the bizarre or fantastic intersect with images of the prosaic in order to create an impossible, but nevertheless accepted, conception of reality. By encountering this conception, the reader’s understanding of humanity and the world is expanded. This matches the surrealist advocacy of “a search for the attainment of an ‘order beyond’ where both the individual’s inner dream and his world of reality meet. It was a mystic idea of the individual’s attempt to reach a point of dissolving into a cosmic reality, of reaching a visionary ‘Absolute’” (Weiss 2). Put more simply, surrealist works – and Smith’s weird fictions – blend the impossibility of dreams with the known qualities of the mundane world in order to represent the underlying subjective truth of reality. This subjective truth is the surreal, or “surreality,” and access to it expands the consciousness of the individual by giving “them the most agreeable of utopias, indeed all the wide landscape of freedom and even love without constraint” (Josephson 225).

To the surrealists, “reality was at best an illusion and at worst a cruel deception. Conceived of as an intellectual and emotional construct, [reality] was located at the intersection of language and experience. Not only was reality felt to be purely subjective,

but it was believed to be largely imaginary” (Bohn 172-3). Surrealist artists therefore produced works wherein they exposed the unconscious by juxtaposing images of the mundane and the fantastic. These juxtapositions represent a search for an absolute or supreme point “through the reconciliation of [an] inner and outer world, the real and the imaginary, the subjective and the objective” (Weiss 8), and were intended to shock their audience into experiencing the surreal – broadening their sense of existence in a revolutionary manner. This conception of reality as a shifting thing contingent upon the individual is similar to Smith’s own perspective on his writing. He argued that it is “because of this shifting, unstable ground on which the thing called realism stands, that I regard pure, frank fantasy as a more valid and lasting art-expression of the human mind” (Wolfe 21). For Smith, “pure, frank fantasy” was the resistance against realism: his reordering of realistic elements in order to produce fantasy was what allowed his weird fictions to demonstrate surrealist juxtaposition.

Rather than simple escapism, both Smith and the surrealists held that “poetry, dreams and unconscious life contain solutions to the gravest problems of human existence” (Rosemont 24). Smith sought to evoke that unconscious, fantastic life as an antidote against prosaic realism. His stories were “geared to apply to the reader an experiential wrench or jolt, to permit the relief of ‘seeing’ worlds of the imagination – which might otherwise have gone stale along with the hopeless world of *mundanity* – through a new linguistic lens” (Stableford 239). It is in this black magic of “seeing,” among other ways, that Smith’s weird fictions exhibit felicity with the surrealist project. Smith’s weird fictions exhibit a surrealism that “claims to mingle desire with human speech, and eros with human life” and to “overturn the quest for the probable in art by

making an astounding bet on the imagination, presented as the central power of the human mind” (Chénleux-Gendron 2). His stories are glimpses of the power of the imagination and the ways in which contact with surreality are transformative for those who are subjected to them – some of Smith’s protagonists are undone by their experience of the surreal, others go on with little more than an additional sense of ennui, but all are altered, removed from the prosaic confines of their previous lives.

It is my claim that Smith used his own work to look upon “things that lie beyond human experience” (Wolfe 14), specifically to challenge and push the boundaries of weird fiction artworks. Smith’s weird fictions contribute to the ongoing debate about the relationship between art and the praxis of life by representing that relationship as one that is problematic and potentially dangerous. His stories weave the qualities of dreams into prosaic life in order to bring about a heretofore unconsidered sense of reality, usually involving the relationship between art, the artist, and the world of experience. By bringing disassociated elements into his stories, Smith expanded genre fiction by demonstrating that experimental or theoretical art does not require a high art setting. The avant-garde, therefore, can be said to exist within the pulps just as it did other forms of literary expression.

Smith’s work was analyzed along these lines by the surrealist Robert Allerton Parker in 1943 for the avant-garde magazine *VVV*. Parker sought to demonstrate that the pulps should not be excluded from the category of revolutionary art simply on the grounds of their mechanical production or popular consumption. He argued that the pulps reveal “the unending conflict between the conscious craft and the unconscious drives – the controlled versus the uncontrollable” (Parker para. 25). To Parker, Smith’s weird

fictions represent an opportunity, intentional or not, for the oppressed to come to know and participate in the surrealist project. As Parker says at the conclusion of his essay, “the pulps are engaged in the mass production of mass dreams. They mock at the piddling, puny, hypocritical plausibility and credibility of the commercial product of the more honored castes of contemporary letters” (para. 29). They are a literature capable of revolutionary experimentation, working on an uncommon form of surrealism: the unconscious of the purportedly common and the dreams of the supposedly every day.

Parker’s understanding of pulp fictions and Smith’s weird short stories has not been adequately investigated nor explored. Popular fiction has, as said, historically been considered literature that is incapable of revolutionary potential, with weird fiction and other fantastic genres prejudged as outside the realm of the experimental. Nevertheless, as Parker asserts, the reader of weird fiction “experiences a dilation of consciousness, the expansion of belief beyond the boundaries of the credible, release from that disagreeable little patch of experience men know as the plausible” (para. 8). As with Breton’s endorsement of Lewis’ *The Monk*, Parker argues that genre fictions and other mass-produced art works remain capable of surrealism. As he attests, many of the weird fiction short stories of Clark Ashton Smith experiment with representations of art’s power through surrealist modes of expression. Interruptions of the real by dreams or monstrous figures of the unconscious are present in many, if not most, of them. They challenge the reader’s perceptions of their own lives and, through subtle manipulation of juxtaposition, instill thoroughly convincing images of the impossible. By analyzing Smith’s work for evidence of surrealism as a method for questioning the relationship between art and life a

greater understanding of the complex ways in which genre literature, and weird fiction specifically, contributed to the ongoing dialogue of experimental art can be discerned.

It should be noted that, as in the previous chapter, analyses of Smith's work should not be overwrought with biographical criticism. Nor should his stories be substantively removed from the period in which they were written. Although Smith's work is inherently tied to the time and place of its production, we are free to interpret them from the historical context of our own moment. It is simply the case that new interpretations are open to us if we remain invested in considering the texts as located within a specific historical location. That being said, this chapter should not in any way be considered an attempt to lock Smith's writing to its specific historical location *to the exclusion of all other interpretations*; what I am attempting here is, as with Lovecraft, to rescue Smith from being disconnected from his period as though his milieu *does not matter to our understanding of the text*. Though Smith's biography is far more sparse than Lovecraft's, I equally do not want to suggest that his writing can only be understood through the lens of the author's lived experience. It is important to know the details of Smith's life – as scant as they are – but critics should not be hidebound to his biography in the furtherance of analysis. Whether or not Smith entirely *agreed* with the changing theoretical discourse on art<sup>33</sup> is, here, irrelevant – much as the fact that Lovecraft was a

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<sup>33</sup> Smith was not as outspoken about his views on aesthetics as other early American weird fiction authors. Based upon surviving commentaries, however, it is clear that Smith felt that realism had become a restrictive impulse upon literary creation. He equally felt that the elements of fantasy within decadent and romantic literature gave greater insight into the human condition when played off of carefully applied realistic settings and characters. Smith's thoughts on surrealism are unknown, though there is no doubt that he was aware of the movement. In 1951, Smith wrote "Surrealist Sonnet," the only one of his works to specifically reference surrealism:

The lyrebird giblets in the frying-pan  
cheep crisply to the sibilant blue gas.

proud supporter of the war effort in his day-to-day life is irrelevant to an analysis of how the war was represented in his fiction. Smith may have disagreed with avant-gardist attitudes towards art, but the fact is that his work presents weird fiction in a new,

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A Congo mouth gulps a blonde demitasse,  
 then spews on the flowered rug from Isfahan.  
 Rome's red flamingo feathers wave their fan:  
 while stilt-legged craw and stomach sac alas  
 march down beneath aforesaid's blear morass  
 bannered with mildewed naperies of man.

But brandished over stale antiquities  
 still rise the verdant bones of gluttonies  
 flying the parchments of new horoscopes.  
 The sage arachnid from Regulus  
 amid its souvenirs on raddled ropes  
 will haply hang some dried esophagus. (Smith, *Selected Poems* 340)

The poem appears to describe a succession of antagonists drawn from pulp fictions – the being who eats the “blonde demitasse,” the monstrous “stilt-legged craw and stomach sac,” and the horrific empire in the center of which waits “the sage arachnid.” Taken in that manner, the poem functions by reworking rather standard weird figures – the cannibal human, the alien, and the giant spider – into the form of avant-garde art. By titling the sonnet “Surrealist” Smith is, I think, suggesting that these nightmarish beings (or at least their ilk) arise from our unconscious. These creatures lurk beneath the conscious mind, springing forth in art when our dreams are given room to speak. Smith is bringing them to the fore in a surrealist manner in order to highlight just this fact: the continuing interest in weird fiction is due to how the texts evoke figures from our unconscious. The distinction here is that Smith uses surrealism to re-present this link between our art and our dreams, and make it explicit.

It would be remiss not to mention that there is at least a small chance that “Surrealist Sonnet” is a parody. There is a possibility that Smith intended “Surrealist Sonnet” to ape the form of surrealist poetry to mock surrealism in general in the same way that Lovecraft wrote “Waste Paper” to mock the high modernism of T. S. Eliot. Smith was not one to often write satire, but he did occasionally slip into this mode (as in his satire of automobile culture in “The Great God Awto”) even though it did not particularly suit his stylistics. I have been unable to find any commentary on the poem by Smith outside of a reading that he gave for an audio collection of his poetry which was released as “Live from Auburn” (1995). A recording is hardly capable of rendering critical insight, but it should be said that Smith reads the poem with an earnest tone. There is no trace of parody in his reading, nor any sense that the subject matter is meant to be taken lightly. In view of this lack of evidence, I do not think it unreasonable that we should read “Surrealist Sonnet” in a straightforward manner. What remains is to take “Surrealist Sonnet” at face value and treat it as an honest attempt on Smith’s part to overtly compose work of a surrealist mien.

The poem is intriguing, but ambiguous. Smith, whose poetry was almost universally romantic in style, had more ability with romantic verse; his ordinarily impeccable scansion is unsatisfying here. Taken as an earnest attempt at adopting surrealist poetry, “Surrealist Sonnet” is an intriguing example of a poet engaging with experimental art outside of his comfort zone. The poem’s suggestion of a link between the imagery of pulp fiction and the deployment of the unconscious in surrealism is interesting, but not as well formed as it could be in more experienced hands. Despite the potential that the poem is a parody, I think that it should be read as a serious effort at artistic experiment. Smith was no amateur at poetry, and as such it would be an unnecessary lacuna to pass over his one attempt at surrealist poetry without comment. All the same, although “Surrealist Sonnet” demonstrates that Smith was entirely aware of surrealism and the surrealist lauding of his works, it simply is not remarkable amongst the rest of his oeuvre.

experimental form. That alone suggests that weird fiction has a greater level of contribution to ongoing discourse than heretofore explored, and indicates that different forms of analysis should be brought to bear upon these popular works of the past.

“Genius Loci” (1933):

“Genius Loci,” one of Smith’s more plot-driven stories, is also one of his most evocative in terms of its surrealist aspects. An unnamed narrator (almost certainly a stand-in for Smith himself<sup>34</sup>) entertains a guest, Francis Amberville, at his rural California estate. Francis, a sketch artist, works himself into a frenzy attempting to capture on paper the essence of a heretofore unexplored area of land near the narrator’s home. The area is a secluded meadow with a stream and a stagnant pool of water over which a willow tree stands; it is thoroughly unremarkable other than to have been the location where a local farmer happened to die of a heart attack some months prior. And yet despite the completely ordinary appearance of the place, Francis abruptly asserts at the outset that “[t]he spot is evil – it is unholy in a way that I simply can’t describe” (Connors v. 4). He is obsessed with the location, convinced that there is some brooding presence there that disturbs the eye of the viewer, but he cannot capture the sense of it in

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<sup>34</sup> If there is a drawback to the story it is in Smith’s unidentified narrator. An authorial stand-in would be fine, but there is too much wish fulfillment here. The narrator is financially successful at his career as a writer, which contrasts with Smith’s own lack of financial stability under the poor pay rates standard to pulp fiction magazines. There is also the unfortunate deployment of an Asian manservant named Li Sing, who is little more than a Chinese caricature; presumably this is Smith both winding up his own perspective upon success and an unconscious desire to be cared for rather than relegated to the role of caregiver as he was with his parents. While these elements are unfortunate, and in the case of Li Sing overtly racist, they do not lessen the overall impact of the piece as a whole – but they do make the story strain against the authorial insertion. Thankfully, they do not interfere overtly with the surrealist elements of the story qua art and representation.



his art. Desperate, he throws himself into his work, staying later and later in the day at the meadow.

What Francis is driven to do – capture the sense of the place he experiences in his art – is an exercise in frame building. That is, having no referent for his subjective experience of the meadow, Francis is caught in a dilemma where he must attempt to contextualize what he has discovered without the framework that would allow him to do so. Inez Hedges describes frames using readerly examples:

“[R]eading” can be defined as an understanding process in which the reader tries to “match” perceived conceptual structures with conceptual frames stored in memory. If no frame to which the conceptual structures can be matched exists in the reader’s memory, then he or she will attempt to learn a new frame whose characteristics will be hypothetically deduced from the context of the material being evaluated. [...] Literary and linguistic conventions, when seen as frames, produce “default assignments” that correspond to the conventional expectations of readers once the particular frame has been identified. Works in which these default assignments are consistently violated demand considerable cognitive activity on the part of their perceivers, who will be kept on edge wondering whether to discard the frame initially selected or to make modifications on the old frame. (Hedges 38)

When Francis “reads” the meadow, his subjective experience does not match what he assumes is the objective truth of such places. Thus, the frame he experiences defies his cognitive expectations and robs him of his ability to process what he perceives in a way

that leads to understanding. In order to deal with the lack of an appropriate conceptual framework, Francis attempts to make a new frame. The most straightforward “way to construct new frames is to combine two old ones” (39), which he tries to do by blending the spirit and the physical in his artistic representation of the meadow. But the surreal and the real are more easily juxtaposed than they are seamlessly blended, defying Francis’ efforts to construct new frames for his experiences as “a kind of training” (39), leading him to a cognitive dissonance in which his art is unable to represent his subjective experience.

One night he rushes back to the narrator’s home in a fearful frenzy, terrified by how the presence seems to become stronger after dark. Despite the patent impossibility of the idea that the place is somehow akin to a vampire or a predator, the narrator decides to summon Francis’ fiancé Avis to watch over Francis. The narrator hopes that she will help convince Francis to leave his project alone. However, she quickly falls under the meadow’s influence and begins spending more and more time there with Francis. Eventually the pair fail to return to the narrator’s home after nightfall, and against his better judgment he goes to the meadow in order to rescue them. He cannot locate them at first but eventually finds them drowned in the meadow’s pool; although he suspects that Francis thought to commit suicide and decided at the last minute to murder Avis, he cannot be certain of exactly what occurred. He believes that he is almost caught by the meadow when he sees a misty overlay appear throughout it, almost like a superimposed photograph depicting the full scene with, occasionally, the faces of those who have died there. He finds it impossible to accurately describe or represent what he has seen. Using the last of his willpower, the narrator manages to escape from the meadow and alert the

authorities, who retrieve the bodies of Francis and his fiancé from the stagnant pool. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator resolves to avoid the place for as long as he lives in the region, but worries that he will, against all sense of self-preservation, return.

The plot epitomizes the quality of weird fiction whereby the reader is unable to fully ascertain whether or not the sequence of events presented is resolvable to either supernatural or mundane causes. As an effort at meeting the standard of weird fiction set by Lovecraft, it is an unsettling, and perhaps to certain readers unsatisfying, tale. I do not think it is surprising that Smith worried about the salability of the story, thinking that it would be “too subtle for the pulps, and the high-brows won’t like the supernatural elements” (Connors 343). The plot hinges almost completely upon the atmosphere: the careful construction of the meadow and its surrounding environs balances with the occasionally hasty drawing of the character’s psychological responses, while the emotional disturbance of the protagonists is delicately portrayed. Throughout the tale the focus is drawn to the absolute mundanity of the meadow proper rather than the ostensible supernatural elements. It is in fact a location that the narrator has known of for a considerable number of years and never considered noteworthy in any way. No reason is ever given as to why the reader should find it exceptional, nor is there any evidence that it has ever been anything other than a simple meadow in a rural neighborhood, and yet the menace of the place is palpable by the end of the story. Through the layering on of always untrustworthy, but always convincing, character reactions to the sense of place found in the meadow, Smith builds an atmosphere of dread that eclipses the mundane nature of the setting. It is as though two discrete and incompatible worlds are colliding as

the story unfolds, leaving the characters to struggle in the rifts and cracks left by such a merger.

What is fascinating about “Genius Loci” is the way that Smith subtly manipulates the story into interrogating large questions about the nature of artistry. It is implied over the course of the text that Francis is correct: the meadow does perhaps possess a spirit of some form, some kind of elemental or protean truth of its existence. This truth is not accessible on a level of prosaic experience, and it is revealed – or reveals itself – to the protagonists through marvelous means. The inaccessibility of the truth under normal conditions is repeatedly highlighted; the narrator has seen the meadow dozens of times over the years but never encountered anything unusual there. It is only through the irruption of the spirit into the mundane aspect that the truth can be observed – here it is suggested that Francis’ attempts to capture said observation in his art is an example of how “[i]magination erects a bridge to connect desire with the marvelous” (Matthews 46). The overlay of the meadow’s spirit upon its prosaic appearance is the blending of the surreal, the dreamlike truth of existence, into reality. Here the presence of the surreal leaves those who experience it incapable of returning to a world of objective certainty. The experience of the meadow is interstitial, allowing the “‘true world’ or ‘Absolute’ in which both worlds of human experience would meet” (Weiss 143) to bleed into reality in a manner that is fundamentally transformative. This transformative quality is destructive, reflecting the surrealist position whereby they “did not regard reality simply as a point of departure but actively sought to undermine its foundations” (Bohn 172). It is clear that even for the surviving narrator there can be no pure return to the confines of unexploded

reality. Truth, even if it is an impossible truth, has destroyed the blinkered conception of reality.

As Francis discovers, however, the truth – that spirit of the place – evades perfect capture within the confines of his visual art.<sup>35</sup> Francis cannot succeed in his attempt to replicate the spirit of the place on canvas or parchment because his art is a method of representation, and his failure suggests that representation – true, perfect similitude between art and life – is an impossibility. Francis is at best capable of giving his portraits a somewhat romantic air, depicting “the abomination of a strange evil, a spirit of despair, malignity, desolation, [leering] from the drawings” (Connors v. 4) rather than the full inexplicable truth of the place. The meadow’s spirit can only be experienced by the individual in an immediate, transformative manner; art is incapable of mediating the juxtaposition of the spirit and the material to the viewer truthfully. It is interesting that the narrator perceives the true spirit of the meadow during the climax and attempts to write it faithfully in his accounting: it appears before him as “a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines – a phantom projection” (v. 4), suggestive of a superimposed photograph or a film reel projected onto empty air. The meadow, having escaped representation within the boundaries of art, is revealed to be *itself* another representation, and thus fails to contain whatever dreamlike truth underlies it. The meadow can be likened to a backdrop or canvas upon which the truth is displayed but never captured. It is

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the narrator comments at one point that Francis’ visual art has earned him a comparison with the impressionist painter Joaquin Sorolla. There is no way to know precisely how much Smith knew about Sorolla, but it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he was aware of the rejection of impressionism by surrealists due to the focus the former put upon composition and technique over a pursuit of disruption. Equally, the intention of the impressionists to capture particular moments over and against anything else would be unthinkable to the surrealist deployment of the image.

the dissonance between these two positions, the prosaic reality and the superposition, that must war within the perception of the narrator: both cannot be true, but the combined surreality resists being resolved into one neat experience. Art and the impulse towards representation is a pervasive urge across all aspects of reality, it seems, and yet it is one that flees realization.

Francis' visual art is not the only form of human-created representation within the story. The narrator is also an artist – he is a writer, explicitly said to be working on (and struggling with) the final chapters of a novel. He comments at one point that he is a more natural observer of the meadow than Francis since “[i]t should really be more in my line than yours. There ought to be a weird story in it somewhere, if it lives up to your drawings and descriptions” (v. 4). This is rather obviously a nod to the reader, since the whole of the story is relayed by the narrator in first person perspective. He is writing the events as he has directly perceived them, trying to turn the events of his lived experienced into exactly the “weird story” that he predicted. On one level he is successful; the story of Francis and his fate in the pool is a strong example of the genre's potential. But as a representation of life, as a true accounting of what he has experienced, the narrator's story fails. Although his record is evocative, it fails when it tries to depict the impossibilities within the meadow.<sup>36</sup> Note the verbiage that the narrator uses when

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<sup>36</sup> Authorial inserts are not precisely rare for Smith. For whatever reason, he felt comfortable with making the occasional protagonist into a writer of one form or another. One of the more interesting in terms of “Genius Loci” is Francis La Porte, the protagonist of “Nemesis of the Unfinished.” He is a weird fiction author of some repute with a significant problem: he can hardly ever finish the manuscripts he works on. La Porte begins working on new stories as the ideas occur to him, leaving previous works to lay fallow in great piles stacked about his small cabin home. There is reason to think that the idea of the drifting piles of unfinished work was “undoubtedly inspired by the boxes of papers kept at Smiths' cabin” (Connors v. 4) and written into a story idea by Don and Natalie Carter, who took care of Smith while he mended a broken ankle.

simply trying to write of his reaction to seeing Francis' drawings: they are "demonic," an "abomination of a strange evil," the "raucous derision of a thousand birds of ill omen," with "evil conveyed" that is "something wholly outside of humanity" which reminds him of "a vampire, grown old and hideous with unutterable infamy." When the narrator confronts the meadow himself for the first time, however, he cannot "find the open evil that had leered from the pool, the willow, the alders and the cat-tails" (v. 4). His artistic

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In "Nemesis of the Unfinished" La Porte is woken out of a drunken sleep by the sound of several mysterious beings moving about his cabin, going through his papers, and talking amongst themselves. An investigation reveals nothing out of the ordinary, but the next morning he is inspired to finish off an old weird tale of his called "Incomplete Sorceries." Pleased with his completion of the manuscript, he again drinks himself to sleep and is woken by the sound of strange voices in his cabin and something working on his Remington typewriter. The next day he finds that "Incomplete Sorceries" has been rewritten completely in a much darker vein, but is incontestably improved over his draft. La Porte flees from his cabin, only returning after nightfall while drunk once more.

He dreams of some unseen and yet terrible things going through his stacks of unfinished work, and awakes to see something invisible typing at his Remington at an incredible speed. All around his desk are sheets of paper, containing words he never wrote which are filled with images that he had dreamed up but never before consigned to the page. Reeling in fear, La Porte hallucinates that his stacks of unfinished tales have extended up beyond the ceiling, towering into the dark sky beyond. As he stares incomprehensibly he is covered in an avalanche of paper, whole drifts of incomplete stories covering him over. His corpse is discovered three days later, partially buried in sheets of paper, by concerned neighbors. La Porte's hands and face are frozen in a rictus, revealing that he had died while clawing, tearing, and biting savagely at the paper.

"Nemesis of the Unfinished" conveys a sense of disquiet along with its humorous aspects, but is not the equal of "Genius Loci." Again the reader sees the protagonist who is destroyed by the irruption of surreality into reality, but the self-satirical elements prevent the atmosphere from ever reaching the state of bizarre dreams intruding upon daily life that "Genius Loci" has. Furthermore, while La Porte's predicament is certainly tied up in questions of artistry, the question of representation never comes up as it does in "Genius Loci." The thought of a writer destroyed by their work is a terrifying one, especially in the way that Smith renders manuscripts, particularly partially completed manuscripts (an image that every writer dreads), as monstrous here. And the thought of one's work being completed – not to mention improved – by an unknown, unseen entity rather than oneself is harrowing; no writer wants to entertain the notion that they are not responsible for the heights of their careers. But it is not the work itself that is shown to fail at representing the impossible. Instead it is La Porte's own inability to comprehend the truth of his work and the diverse hands that have brought it into being that is at issue, and which leads to his downfall.

While an interesting tale, and well worth considering alongside "Genius Loci" due to the similarities in Smith's construction of his protagonists and the issues which he felt important enough to return to repeatedly, the story is more of a trifle than anything else. "Nemesis of the Unfinished" is a weird fiction that falls just short of the critical interest I am investigating here. The bizarre moments lack the atmosphere of dreams to take them beyond the merely abstractly frightening, and the questions of artistry raised by Smith do not carry the necessary weight to truly call into question the human ability to comprehend reality in all its facets. Instead the story ends on a note of tragedy and a sense of nostalgia. Enough for an interesting and valid weird fiction, certainly, but not enough to rise to the level that Smith's weird fiction is ultimately capable of reaching.

verbiage, inspired by Francis' own visual artistry, cannot actually be used to represent the meadow without immediately experiencing the frame-breaking intrusion of the meadow's spirit into experiential life.

However, this could be due to the influence of Francis' art. The narrator seems to be able to describe the meadow as he superficially perceives it, of course; it is only when faced with the intrusion of the spirit of the place that his discourse breaks down. His artistry breaks down most completely at the conclusion of the story when he is confronted by the same unrepresentable truth that possibly destroyed Francis and Avis. As he moves into the moonlit meadow he attempts to describe it:

The true horror lay in the thing, which, from a little distance, I had taken for the coils of a slowly moving and rising mist. It was *not* vapor, nor anything else that could conceivably exist – that malign, luminous, pallid emanation that enfolded the entire scene before me like a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines – a phantom projection of the pale and death-like willow, the dying alders, the reeds, the stagnant pool and its suicidal victims. (v. 4)

The truth of the meadow is revealed, but that truth is only knowable experientially. It slips the bounds of representation in literature just as it does in Francis' sketches. There is a "malign secret life" (v. 4) to the meadow, but whatever it is proves to stymie the narrator. The confusion of possible and impossible transforms the consciousness of the protagonist – to destructive levels – but it confounds their every attempt to make it effectively *relatable*. This is one aspect of the surreal, however: it is transformative but entirely subjective. It is not something that can be conveyed – it can only be experienced.



When art and life meet in Smith's universes, either art fails or life is marvelously transformed. Representation of the pure surreal, whether it is visual or literary, is impossible, and when it is attempted only destructive results can occur. It is interesting that Smith believed imaginative artworks stem from "an impulse to penetrate the verities which lie beneath the surface of things; to grapple with, and to dominate, the awful mysteries of mortal existence" (Wolfe 33), since it is precisely this impulse which is interrogated, and found wanting, in "Genius Loci." The story is permeated with an atmosphere of menace and dread, the source of which is forever deferred and implacably a matter of pure experience. Attempting to warn of the evils of the meadow's spirit is as impossible as the spirit itself, and the presence of the surreal cannot be settled into something easily confined in description. Metatextually, the text is the story of a series of sketches, and the story does not fail to highlight the subjective distance between itself and the actual experience of the meadow. That experience cannot be moved from the subjective to the objective, and it cannot be understood without the individual being transformed in a horrendous manner. In surrealism, as in the meadow of "Genius Loci", the impossible intertwines with reality, presenting a broader truth than can be discovered in the prosaic world, and defeating at every turn the attempts to turn the bizarreness of the image into banal, mundane realism.

"A Night in Malnéant" (1933):

Foremost amongst weird fiction writers, Smith consistently attempted to weave the substance of dreams into his stories. It was relatively common for authors of the *Weird Tales* set to be fascinated with dream – Lovecraft especially held that dreams were

an exceptional source for aesthetic inspiration. Smith, however, possessed a rare talent for crafting atmosphere so carefully that his stories would read not just as *about* dreams, but have the consistency of dreams themselves. “A Night in Malnéant” is perhaps Smith’s strongest work of dream imagery, wherein he presents an impossible occurrence and its effects upon an individual when the two meet. Here, more than in any other of his stories, Smith exercises his “belief [...] in the omnipotence of the dream” (Breton 122). Written in October, 1929, the story was rejected in its original form when it was submitted to Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird Tales*.<sup>37</sup> It did not see publication until several years later, when Wright grudgingly accepted it in a highly edited form. The story is one of Smith’s personal favorites, despite being a relatively early entry into his weird fiction period. He referred to it (in uncharacteristically stoic fashion) as “one of my best atmospheric” (Connors 338). Surprisingly, however, the story has completely avoided critical attention; I have been unable to locate any analyses of the story at all, which is remarkable due to the text’s elegant construction.

“A Night in Malnéant” is an almost plotless story. Although actions certainly take place, the text is much more focused upon the building of atmosphere than it is standard plotting. This is, as has been said, a general aesthetic quality of early American weird fiction. Unlike the high standard of realism held in the 1920s and 1930s by other genres

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<sup>37</sup> Which came as no surprise to Smith, who said in response to the rejection that “I doubt if any of my work will ever have a wide public appeal, since the ideation and esthetics of my tales and poems are too remote from the psychology of the average reader” (Schultz 315). Smith, like several weird fiction authors, occasionally felt the urge to look down upon the average pulp fiction reader as unable to grasp the artistry that he was producing. While this is unfortunate, it should be remembered that Smith almost always faced rejection and poverty if he submitted anything other than typical pulp fiction potboilers to the magazines. It is easy to imagine that such an editorial attitude against innovation or experimentation would wear on an author of Smith’s talent.

of fantastic literature, weird fiction hinges upon breaks from realism rather than faithfulness to it. Lovecraft described this difference in his treatise on weird fiction

*Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1933):

Serious weird stories are either made realistically intense by close consistency and perfect fidelity to Nature except in the one supernatural direction which the author allows himself, or else cast altogether in the realm of phantasy, with atmosphere cunningly adapted to the visualization of a delicately exotic world of unreality beyond space and time, in which almost anything may happen if it but happen in true accord with certain types of imagination and illusion normal to the sensitive human brain. (61)

The weird fiction critic S. T. Joshi has noted (105) that Lovecraft is almost certainly speaking of Clark Ashton Smith with his reference towards authors casting “altogether in the realm of phantasy.” It is easy to agree, since while Lovecraft can be categorized as the former type of weird fiction author, Smith almost always operated in the latter manner. The surreal qualities of his weird works stems from the ways in which his writing relies upon atmosphere and unreality to function. And it is the readiness with which Smith breaks from prosaic reality to present the interruption of the impossible upon the real that gives his writing such a surreal effect. In surrealism “the whole of man’s symbolization processes is called into question, in particular the relation between man and the perceptual categories that mediate between him and reality” (Hedges 83), and Smith’s fantasies function in a similar manner by breaking mediating boundaries between dreams and life, the surreal and the real, and fantasy and realism.

The story begins with an unnamed narrator writing of how he stumbled upon the fog-shrouded streets of Malnéant one afternoon. He had heard vague rumors about the city, and was drawn there by the sound of “the mortuary tolling of many bells” (Connors v. 1). Wracked with guilt, for “months, or years, I am uncertain which, I roamed from old-world city to city, heeding little where I went, if only wine and the other agents of oblivion were available” (v. 1).<sup>38</sup> He considers himself responsible for the death of the lady Mariel, who had loved him and committed suicide with poison due to his intemperate nature. Since the reader only has his nostalgic perspective to go by it is impossible to determine if he actually bears responsibility for her death. He is struck by the way that the fog obscures the sun and renders the streets eerie while he looks for a tavern. He notices people moving hastily about “as if on some funereal errand that would admit no delay” (v. 1). As night falls the city seems to disappear into the enveloping fog while bells ring in the distance, which disturbs the narrator. They remind him of bells tolling “for the repose of the dead” (v. 1). He asks two veiled women for directions to the nearest inn and they respond: “[w]e cannot tell you. We are shroud-weavers, and we have been busy making a shroud for the lady Mariel” (V. 1). Aghast at what he believes is an ugly coincidence, the narrator stumbles away as the bells ring again. He begs two men for aid, but they respond that they cannot help him as they are coffin-makers and have been busy attending to the lady Mariel.

Lost, the narrator loses a proper sense of time. Despite having wandered for an unknown period since Mariel’s death, he is disturbed as he is “troubled now by the

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<sup>38</sup> The narrator’s uncertainty about time’s duration is important; his reference to it at the beginning of the tale sets up a reinforced atmosphere of timelessness, suggesting an apathetic quality of memory and foreshadowing the confusion of time common in dreams.

monstrous and absurd idea that the Mariel I knew had only just died, and that this fantastic city was in some unsurmountable manner connected with her death” (v. 1). The narrator finds an inn despite his disorientation, but upon inquiry he is told by the innkeeper that all of their rooms and all of their wine have been booked for persons attending the funeral of the lady Mariel. The narrator finds the door of a second inn barred, and is turned away because all of the rooms have been taken by musicians and mourners who will serve at the lady Mariel’s funeral. Chased through the night streets of Malnéant by the sound of ringing bells, the narrator finds himself inside of a cathedral crowded with mourners and priests. They inform him that their services are for the lady Mariel, “who died yesterday and who will be interred tomorrow” (v. 1). They invite the narrator to pay his respects to the corpse, and upon approaching the altar discovers that the body is that of his Mariel. Wracked with an influx of regret, the narrator suffers a realization that “the tides of time were frozen in their flowing” (v. 1), leaving him without release from the emotions that overwhelm him.

Finally he tears himself away and flees “with steps that were both hurried and leaden” (v. 1), only to lose himself in the streets of the city once more. He grows more frantic as the night wears on but is unable to find a way out until the dawn, at which point thin sunlight permits him to locate the city gates. The story concludes with him saying that “[s]ince then, I have wandered long, and in many places. But never again have I cared to revisit those old-world realms of fog and mist, for fear that I should come once more to Malnéant, and find that its people are still busied with their preparations for the obsequies of the lady Mariel” (v. 1). The story is consistently focused upon atmosphere rather than action; the narrator’s blind wandering through Malnéant involves more of a

layering sense of oppression than it does a feeling of satisfactory plot motion. This is likely not an accident, since Smith was aware of Lovecraft's theoretical dictum arguing that weird fiction must be less concerned with being action- or character-oriented in favor of representing human mood. Combined with the dictum that the weird tale must center on something that "could not possibly happen" (Derleth 434) as its crux, it becomes likely that the surreal, dream-like atmosphere of "A Night in Malnéant" is a critical aspect rather than a happy accident.

"A Night in Malnéant's" surrealist overtones stem from the disturbance of time throughout the narrative. The narrator's predicament may be assumed to be supernatural in origin, but there is no immediate support for it being so – Malnéant is, for the narrator, the transformation of his life by the action of denied catharsis. This transformation is insidiously destructive, albeit arguably in the sense that "[s]urrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision" (Dali). Brian Stableford has argued in reference to Smith's weird stories, "[n]o good ever really comes of dalliance with the supernatural. [...] The metempirical order of things is always either hostile or pregnant with doom" (Stableford 166), and the freedom of vision represented by Malnéant clearly appears to fulfill those expectations. The transformative destruction that the narrator endures is emotional: by the end of his time in the city he is unable to take comfort in even the simplest of pleasures. His encounter with the surreal has freed him from his illusions about his life, but it has also followed its tendency "to ruin, definitively, all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of the principal problems of life" (Breton 122). This is not the redemptive or positive change that surrealists hoped would come from an experience of the surreal, but it should

be remembered that surrealism is not always peaceful. Breton described surrealism as “the voice that exhorts on the eve of death and in the roaring storm” (123), while Antonin Artaud argued that surrealism is “the cry of a mind turning back on itself” (Bradley 3); here Malnéant is the exhorting voice in the storm of the narrator’s life, calling him to turn back against himself. The surreal experience with the city can be read as the singular blast which affects the individual in a destructive manner, leaving them stripped of illusion by their transformation.

Time is disjointed throughout the story even before the narrator has realized that its tides are “frozen in their flowing” (Connors v. 1). The narrator is originally unable to remember how much time has passed since the death of Mariel, but for the inhabitants of Malnéant she has only died on the previous night. They are all preparing for her funeral the following day, but that funeral is already occurring. An unspecified period of time has passed between the narrator’s harried night and the time of his storytelling, with the implication being that he cannot tell how much time has passed. Most importantly, the narrator suspects that Mariel’s funeral, as well as the mourning period following her death, is continuously ongoing within the city’s environs. He is aware that this is an impossible twisting of time, and he reflects upon it at the conclusion of the piece:

I knew with a terrible certitude that this one event, the death of the lady Mariel, had drawn apart from all other happenings, had broken away from the sequence of time and had found for itself a setting of appropriate gloom and solemnity; or perhaps had even built around itself the whole enormous maze of that spectral city, in which to abide my destined return among the mists of a deceptive oblivion. (v. 1)

This sectioning off of the event of Mariel's death and funeral represents the screening off of the emotional experience. Without being able to put the past behind him, the narrator cannot possibly recover from the grief he felt for his part in Mariel's suicide. Thus for the narrator the juxtaposition of the real with the surreal results in a perpetual trauma: healing is forever deferred when time has become disjointed, and absolution will always be out of reach no matter how sincere his penitence. Though transformative in the sense that the narrator must confront his full emotional response to Mariel's suicide, the timeless moment of his surreal experience cannot collapse into mundanity by allowing for resolution.

"A Night in Malnéant" is the story of a troubled man encountering the surreal impossibility of a moment of trauma frozen and externalized, held permanent without explanation or possibility of recovery. Malnéant cannot be accurately described as a place, per se, since it is represented as more of an emotional state. It is not a collection of planned streets, sidewalks, arches and thoroughfares that a visitor can walk through. Instead it is an image of experience, of the narrator's unresolved psychological state.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Another of Smith's relatively early stories concerns itself with a reliance upon atmosphere and a deferral of resolution for traumatic emotional states, albeit less successfully than "A Night in Malnéant". Written in 1928, "The Ninth Skeleton" was the first story Smith submitted to *Weird Tales* magazine for publication. Praised by Lovecraft in an unpublished letter (and Lovecraft may simply have been giving gilded encouragement to his friend) for having "a pervasive, haunting atmosphere, and all the magic and coloring of authentic dream," the story is deeply disturbing on a psychological level. As a surrealist work it suffers a bit due to the construction of the writing; Smith was obviously still feeling his way around the short story form, and it shows.

The story is light on plot, but Smith does not abandon the necessities of pulp action in favor of pure atmosphere as he does in "A Night in Malnéant." Herbert, the narrator (and almost certainly an authorial insert for Smith), goes out to meet his fiancé Guenevere for a walk on Boulder Ridge, a spot not far from Smith's actual home in Auburn California. He is walking along a trail through the woods that he has known since childhood when, somehow, the darkening of the sun transports him to an entirely new path. This, of course, disorients Herbert and he realizes that as "incredible as it seemed, that I had lost my way" (v. 1). Sadly, this is all the explanation the reader receives; while an explanation would only hinder



There can be no flâneur in the lanes of Malnéant, for these isolated moments of time are spaces of the mind rather than the physical world. The horror here is of a particularly subjective and personal form, reflecting Smith's predilections for demonstrating the relationship of the individual to time as a site of destruction. As Guillard argues, "Smith's fascination with morbidity must be analyzed within the context of the entire body of his work, which reveals [...] a constant obsession with portraying the struggle against time" (Guillard 217). The surreal collapse of fixed notions of space, time, and experience is fascinating and terrifying at the same time, just as it is destructive and transformative in

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"A Night in Malnéant," the structure of "The Ninth Skeleton" is just thick enough with plot that the reader is left dissatisfied by not having a sense of where Herbert has gone, or how he got there.

Following the new path before him, Herbert stumbles across a clearing amidst the pines that is filled with headstones. All around him is a layer of thick grey dust, disturbed by footprints "that were surely too attenuate, too fantastically slender, to be human, despite their five toe-marks" (v. 1). Herbert quickly learns the source of the footprints when he hears something emerging from the trees behind him; it is a skeleton, which he thinks feminine based on its movement, carrying the skeleton of an infant in its arms. The skeleton walks past Herbert and disappears into the darkness down the path. Seven more skeletons appear just as the first had, and follow the path into the darkness carrying their infant skeletons. Herbert notices that a nearby headstone has an open grave before it just as the last skeleton is disappearing, and all of a sudden a ninth skeleton – this one not bearing an infant's skeleton – appears next to him. It plucks gently at his sleeve twice, attempting to draw him down into the grave. Herbert passes out, and when he wakes he finds himself standing at the rendezvous spot in the prosaic world with Guenevere holding him by the arm.

"The Ninth Skeleton" is a satisfying weird story in that it is obvious that Smith is attempting to structure his work in a particular manner. The atmosphere is carefully constructed, and the surreal, unexplainable menace is well presented, but it is not quite as well arranged as his more practiced hand would produce towards the end of his years writing weird fiction. The image of the purportedly feminine skeletons, complete with infant skeletons, gestures towards anxiety over relationships, commitment, reproduction, and death in an obvious manner (indeed, the implied "relationships equals death" moral is all too obvious) that removes power from it. Although the reader is left wondering how all of this could have happened, it comes across only as a puzzle – though admittedly an insoluble one – rather than an introduction of the impossible. And certainly the skeletons with their syntactically sensual presentation cause the reader to consider their own thoughts on death, intimacy, and family, but not in the surreal, transformative manner that the image of timeless Malnéant encourages.

Altogether it is valuable to read "The Ninth Skeleton" in close proximity to "A Night in Malnéant," "The Ninth Skeleton" serves more to show that Smith was interested in weird fiction as experimental writing and in the surreal image from early in his weird fiction career. And, truth be told, it is a gripping story in the tradition of the weird fiction pulps. But it is most important in the sense that it proves to the reader just how far Smith was able to progress as an artist in the span of one short year. While enjoyable and interesting in light ways, "The Ninth Skeleton" should certainly be read as the early attempt that it is, whereas "A Night in Malnéant" is the nearly flawless expression of talent that it is.

an awe-inspiring manner. By finding his way into Malnéant, the narrator has entered into the realm of the marvelous “recognizable by the revelatory shudder it evoked in those who experienced it” (Bohn 129), and he cannot emerge in the same state as he entered.

The guilt-ridden nostalgia of an individual cut off from time’s arrow, as Malnéant cuts off the narrator, is an arresting image. The story defers a sense of satisfactory conclusion by spurning traditional plot structures – the reader’s satisfaction is deferred in a manner similar to how the narrator’s resolution is denied, his grief arrested by a cessation in the passage of time. In a sense, Malnéant is the image of what Henry James called “the monstrous heritage of antiquity” (James 115): it is the moment of catharsis held up, perverted until what should be an instance of release is made terrible. The height of trauma is crystallized, preserved against all logic of experience and emotional life. And the work of surrealist art is lacking if it does not “present the same hardness, rigidity, regularity and luster on all its surfaces, both inside and out, as the crystal” (Breton 162). Smith’s weird fiction demonstrates experimental conceptions of art through the medium of genre literature, presenting surreal overtones intertwined with his dream-like atmosphere. It is through this atmosphere that the normal course of human experience is disrupted by an impossible halting of the flow of time, destructively transforming the subjective interior life of the narrator into an irreconcilable state.

“The City of the Singing Flame” (1931):

Smith’s weird fiction satisfies the surrealist wish “to avoid considering a system of thought as a refuge; to pursue our investigations with eyes wide open to the external consequences” (Breton 115-16) by presenting the consequences of determined

investigation as sublimely transformative. His “The City of the Singing Flame” is an example of that principle, representing Smith’s dictum that “there is absolutely no justification for literature unless it serves to release the imagination from the bounds of everyday life” (Schultz 123). Here Smith proposes that release of the imagination is an act of immolation: the artist is destroyed by the very impulse that drives them to create. The suggestion that art might be an inherently destructive practice, whereby the old cannot help but be destroyed in pursuit of the new, is centered upon an image of an eternal flame which inspires and ruins those drawn to it. That image provides an examination of the nature of art, experience, and the sacrifices necessary to push the boundaries of both.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike the other stories thus far discussed “The City of the Singing Flame” does have a more traditional pulp fiction plot, but Smith carefully built an otherworldly atmosphere that delineates the whole as necessarily weird. He demonstrates his remarkable but “gentle skill in telling that which is so inhumanely fabulous as to be neither horrible nor farcical, but balances on the razor edge between the shudder and the titter” (Boucher 69), though I would suggest that the balance here is between a shudder and a moment of awe. The story is introduced with a forward by Philip Hastane, a weird fiction author, who reoccurs in several of Smith’s stories. Hastane explains that the meat of the story is taken from a journal left to him by his friend Giles Angarth, an imaginative

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<sup>40</sup> Written in January of 1931, “The City of the Singing Flame” was a commercial success for Smith; the readership of Hugo Gernsback’s *Wonder Stories* were so entranced by it that they demanded and received a sequel, “Beyond the Singing Flame” (June 1931). Smith was proud of the “The City of the Singing Flame,” though it was not one of his personal favorites. However, it has become recognized over time as a hallmark of his style and conception. In every way it is a weird tale that only Smith could have written, and the questions it raises cut to the heart of Smith’s artistic concerns and surrealist representations.

novelist and weird fiction author himself. He has decided to publish the journal despite the fact that he is sure that it will be dismissed as a weird fiction story rather than a factual record. Angarth and a mutual friend, the weird painter Felix Ebbonly, disappeared several days prior.

The journal begins with Angarth describing his journeys through the wilderness of Crater Ridge in an entry from late July, 1930.<sup>41</sup> He is quite taken with the eerie but beautiful qualities of the region, particularly large outcroppings of rock that are scattered throughout the terrain. Angarth stops to examine two side-by-side boulders that are “queerly alike in shape” (Connors v. 2) after discovering a desolate area where nothing grows on the ground. When he passes between the boulders something unusual happens, which he attempts to describe even though “human language is naturally wanting in words that are adequate for the delineation of events and sensations beyond the normal scope of human experience” (v. 2). He passes through a blank gulf that he is unable to represent in words; first he seems to fall down, but then travels sideways or upwards. The stress of experiencing something not intended for human use causes Angarth to pass out. When he wakes he finds himself on an alien plain covered in violet grass with forests of purple and yellow trees in the distance. The landscape ends “in a wall of impenetrable golden-brownish mist, that rose with phantom pinnacles to dissolve on a sky of luminescent amber in which there was no sun” (v. 2). Closer to him, Angarth spots a massive city whose red stone walls and spires stretch impossibly far into the distance and high into the sky.

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<sup>41</sup> Which was quite close to Smith’s own home in reality. The spot was well traveled by him, and he took a souvenir from there for his friend H. P. Lovecraft – an old stone of strange shaping that Lovecraft took to calling “The Unknowable Eikon.”

Since Angarth is familiar with fantastic fiction, he instantly assumes that he has somehow crossed over into another dimension. While considering the city in the distance, he muses that “[u]nlike the heroes in my own tales, who were wont to visit the fifth dimension or the worlds of Algol with perfect *sang froid*, I did not feel in the least adventurous; and I shrank back with man’s instinctive recoil before the unknown” (v. 2). Fearful, he steps between the boulders – plinths in this dimension – and finds himself back on Earth. Angarth returns shortly to the alternate dimension armed with a revolver, and, passing through the forest, he finds a road made of twenty-foot square blocks. Angarth hides as a group of fantastic aliens – ten feet tall and unlike terrestrial human or animal life – pass him by en route to the city. Angarth follows them and becomes aware of music emanating from the city which sounds “piercingly sweet and resembled at times the singing of some voluptuous feminine voice” (v. 2). He claims that he is not sensitive to music, but finds himself bewitched by the song and follows it in a stupor to the gates of the city. At the last moment his will reasserts itself, and he returns home once more.

Angarth finally enters into the city after returning with cotton balls in his ears. The city is beyond his ability to describe; it is wondrous but totally inhuman, filled with “fane-like structures that would have dwarfed those of Thebes and Heliopolis” (v. 2). He discovers that the aliens he had seen are visitors to the city while the actual inhabitants are deaf giants. Again Angarth’s ability to describe what he has seen breaks down, but this time intentionally:

I fear to describe them minutely: for human words would give the idea of something monstrous and uncouth; and these beings are not monstrous but they have merely developed in obedience to the laws of another evolution

than ours, the environmental forces and conditions of a different world. (v. 2)

While it is the case that indescribability is a common trope in weird fiction used to highlight the distance between impossible fantasies and prosaic life, it is rare for an author character to be so moved by an experience that they would seek to occlude it from language. Much more common would be a character's *inability* to describe creatures or events rather than a character who makes a conscious decision to not describe something. However, as has been shown, the surrealist moment in Smith's weird fiction is one of subjective experience rather than representation: Angarth's artistry, being of the rational order, can only break down in the face the surreal, where imagination is expressed "free of the conscious control of reason and conventions" (Lehan 25). He refrains from attempting to constrain the image of the aliens with terrestrial, rational language in order to preserve their impossible difference from prosaic life.

Passing through the exterior facade of a large domed temple, Angarth enters into an underground cavern whose size is sufficient to contain a ring of innumerable alien beings. In the center of the chamber is a massive pit, above which floats a fountain of slowly lengthening flame. Realizing that the flame is the source of the music, Angarth comes to the conclusion that this is a shrine and the aliens assembled therein are worshippers of some kind. He is briefly swept up by a powerful impulse to hurl himself into the fire as both the flame and the music swell, but the cotton balls in his ears mitigate enough of the music's influence to save him. At the zenith of the flame's height, several aliens of all different types throw themselves into it, flaring impossibly bright for a moment before disappearing altogether. The flame recedes after numerous self-sacrifices,

burning at a low level. The music decreases in volume and intensity at the same time, allowing Angarth to flee the cavern. Yet as he rushes out of the city, Angarth is harried by the sound of the music behind him, telling him “of the rapture I had missed, of the flaming doom whose brief instant was better than aeons of mortal life” (v. 2). Desperate, afraid that he will not be able to resist the desire to immolate himself within the flame for long, he crosses between dimensions and returns to his cabin.

At home, Angarth tries to forget his experience in the other dimension and ignore the lingering draw of the flame. He turns to his pending work but finds himself unable to write, despondent over the fact that “[a]nything that I can imagine, or frame in language, seems flat and puerile beside the world of unsearchable mystery to which I have found admission” (v. 2). As with Francis in “Genius Loci,” Angarth is subject to the transformative power of the experience of the surreal, and his artistry – the product of his mind – cannot possibly contain the expansion of his consciousness. He decides to return to the other dimension, bringing along a companion – the imaginative painter Felix Ebbonly – to help keep him safe. The final entry begins with Angarth back in his cabin, alone, proclaiming that he will never write another thing. Angarth recounts how he and Ebbonly went directly to the city. Ebbonly refused to put cotton balls in his ears, stating that he did not “want to deaden any new sensations which I may experience” (v. 2). The pair go to the cavern of the singing flame along with a throng of pilgrims. Angarth becomes entranced by its song as the flame rises to its apex, returning to himself only when Ebbonly breaks away to hurl himself into the fire. Incensed but still horrifically attracted to the flame, Angarth flees for home. His journal completes as the last entry began, safe in his cabin, unable to think of anything other than the city and the flame. The

story concludes with Angarth obsessed with the flame's song of the beauty of immolation, unable to work or take an interest in the mundane world. He resolves that he will return to the city for a final time, giving in to the influence of the singing flame.<sup>42</sup>

"The City of the Singing Flame" can be interpreted as questioning the nature of art via surreal imagery, demonstrating the potential for weird fiction to incorporate experimental overtones. Intriguingly, the story is inherently metatextual: It is a journal,

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<sup>42</sup> "Beyond the Singing Flame" is worth mentioning in brief due to its relation to "The City of the Singing Flame," but it is in truth not a successful sequel to its predecessor. It picks up where the former story left off, with Philip Hastane deciding to follow his friends into the mysterious city (which he discovers is named Ydmos from one of its inhabitants). The city is involved in a war with a dark, menacing city that is somehow moving across the landscape and assimilating Ydmos into itself. He hurls himself into the singing flame, and finds himself in an alien, transcendental world. Ebbonly and Angarth are both there, despite their seeming immolation in the previous story. This third dimension, known as the Inner Dimension, "is hated, as a thing that lures idle dreamers away from worldly reality. It is regarded as a lethal and pernicious chimera, or a mere poetic dream, or a sort of opium paradise" (Connors v. 3). Hastane and his friends try to leave for an even higher fourth dimension, but the darkness of the invading city overtakes them at the last minute. They all awake in the ruins of the temple of the flame, and attempt to escape as Ydmos collapses around them. Ebbonly dies, crushed beneath a falling monolith, and Angarth and Hastane manage to escape back to Earth.

The story fails most significantly because it seeks to explain what the original tale left inexplicable, and no explanation of the marvelous alienness in "The City of the Singing Flame" could be truly satisfying. The atmosphere established by Smith in the original story bursts like a soap bubble in this sequel, and as a result the narrative cannot sustain its broader questions. Furthermore, the image of the singing flame itself is compromised by turning it from the destructive joy of artistic participation and creation into a mere illusion that masks nothing but lethargy. Rather than a pinnacle of creation it is, instead, a lie, and the shift in the image's deployment between stories is jarring. Finally, while "The City of the Singing Flame" has a strong plot, "Beyond the Singing Flame" is nothing *but* plot. It was clearly intended to be a potboiler of a story written for fans of the first and composed at their insistence. Such a motivation for writing – so very different from Smith's original desire for escape and the act of pure imaginative creation – can only harm Smith's otherwise exquisite sense of craft.

Brian Stableford has argued that the sequel is significantly weaker "because the passage through the flame [...] cannot help but be a de-mystification, and hence an anti-climax. The science-fictional imagination [which Smith is playing with in the sequel] is inextricably involved with such de-mystifications and dis-enchantments, because it must deal in pretended possibilities" (161). That is, Stableford believes that the story is an aberration for Smith because the popular demand for the sequel caused him to write it in a popular mode – as proto-science fiction rather than the outright weird tale. This is, unfortunately, the truth; Smith's occasional forays into what we would consider science fiction tend to be disappointing attempts at appeasing the popular imagination, rather than exploring the bounds of his own imagination. "Beyond the Singing Flame" is no different in this respect. The story may be able to stand on its own, as it does have interesting imagery of its own and a vigorous, fast-paced plot. But as a sequel to a weird fiction story of the power and magnitude of "The City of the Singing Flame," it cannot hope to succeed. By dismissing the gossamer impossibilities and atmospheric dreams of its predecessor, it not only falls down in comparison but inherently betrays the beauty and artistic merit of the original as well.



one step removed from the lived experience of its author. It is also a received manuscript, distanced yet again from the immediacy of the surreal experience. And it is also a *published story* both in the narrative universe of the tale and in reality. The story deals throughout with abstraction and the effects that non-representational art might have upon the individual; these abstractions weigh on the protagonist, and makes him weary of his lack of ability at representing experiential truth. Perhaps not surprisingly, the desperation that Smith felt which drove him to write the tale is similar to Angarth's own at the end of the text. Angarth opines:

Now, as I write this, I am wondering why I came back again to the human world. Words are futile to express what I have beheld and experienced; and the change that has come upon me, beneath the play of incalculable forces in a world of which no other mortal is even cognizant. Literature is nothing more than the shadow of a shadow; and life, with its drawn-out length of monotonous, reiterative days, is unreal and without meaning now in comparison with the splendid death which I might have had – the glorious doom which is still in store. (v. 2)

Compare this to Smith's declaration to H. P. Lovecraft in a personal letter that he was driven out of a sense of idleness to write the story, and had a desperate need to find "an imaginative escape from the human aquarium – and, moreover, a 'safety-valve' to keep from blowing up and disrupting this whole countryside" (Behrends 25). Angarth, like Smith, finds himself longing for some imaginative excess that will liberate him from the mundanity that surrounds him. "There are so many good tales that have never been written" (25), Smith complains, and the source of satisfaction is the same for both him

and his character – the surreal image of the flame, which represents the creative impulse and the sacrifice required by art. This duality of the flame is revealed in the distinction between Smith and Angarth. Smith attempts to capture the flame in art, to represent the surreal and thus allow for a restorative transformation in him, while Angarth immolates himself in an attempt to learn of a new artistry. The flame, therefore, is the attraction and repulsion of art in an irresolvable paradox, the knowing destruction and forestalling of destruction that appends to the creative act.

Smith and Angarth are further linked by the presentation of their respective real and fictional lives. Each of them deploy dreams twined with fantasies as erupting into reality in a manner that beggars description if not experienced subjectively. Their experiences are a form of surreal magic, working with the stuff of nightmares in order to try and enact the one thing that they know their art cannot accomplish – accurate representation. They live in a “drab and desolate place whose tedium is barely tolerable” (Stableford 150), the prosaic world absent the surreal where the imaginative is chained by the rational and can only be freed by a giving over of one’s self to the destructive transformation of art. André Breton described the condition of the surrealists still to come as one of a mixture of dreams, mundanity, magic, and reality:

The poet of the future will overcome the depressing idea of an irreparable divide of action and dream. He will hold the magnificent fruit of the tree whose roots intertwine, and he will be able to persuade all who taste it that there is nothing bitter about it. Carried away by the wave of his time, he will assume for the first time without distress the task of reception and transmission of signals pressing towards him from the depths of the ages.

He will maintain at all cost the common presence of the two terms of human rapport, by whose destruction the most precious conquest would become instantaneously worthless: the objective awareness of realities, and their internal development in what, by virtue of a sentiment partly individual, partly universal, is magical until proved otherwise. (Breton 75)

Both Smith and Angarth are this “poet of the future”: Angarth demonstrates the failure of his rational subjectivity by failing to reconcile his art with the experience of the surreal, solved only by transforming himself until he can “hold the magnificent fruit of the tree whose roots intertwine.” At the same time Smith assumes “the task of reception and transmission of signals pressing towards him,” presenting Angarth’s struggle with surreality in order to demonstrate the transformative possibility of art. This is not, I think, distinct from Smith’s previously referenced claim that ultra-imaginative art must “penetrate the verities of which lie beneath the surface of things; to grapple with, and to dominate the awful mysteries of mortal existence” (Wolfe 33). By composing the image of the singing flame, Smith demonstrates the potential of surreal art, and the failure of those who resist a dismantling of the rational order. By *experiencing* that image, Angarth realizes the limits of prosaic representation in the face of the surreal, the impossible, and the dreamlike.

“The City of the Singing Flame” hinges on its central surreal image of the ultimate art juxtaposed with the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. The flame lures those who hear its song into its embrace by convincing them that transformative artistic ability is possible only through a profound suicide – a removal of one’s self from the world of rational order. The flame is, in this sense, the dream of art: it can only be abstracted from,

never accurately presented in any way that is not an immediate participation. There is no way to distill it down to prosaic reality, no way to make the dream concrete. It must be met on its own terms, and the presentation of it in any distanced form is unsatisfying, inaccurate, and removes the ability to rely upon realist aesthetics. “The City of the Singing Flame” is one of Smith’s most successful works, at least in terms of pure popularity. But it is also a story that deserves to be ranked amongst his best aesthetic achievements. The atmosphere of the surreal and the real interacting is finely balanced with the needs of plot, and neither overwhelm each other. The characterizations are broad, but deep enough to allow for the questioning of art and life to come through. And the image, the surreal blast of the flame, is perhaps the most powerful in Smith’s oeuvre. The story sunders the ability to fully trust the drive towards artistic creation while arguing for an experience of the surreal as the ultimate form of artistic satisfaction. Nowhere else in Smith’s weird fiction is the poet of the future and the experience of the surreal made as prominent as they are in “The City of the Singing Flame.” For its surreal elements, its commentary on the transformative nature of art, and its relentless portrayal of the sacrifice of the artist who abandons pure rationality, the story deserves to be critically appreciated as an example of the experimental potential of weird fiction.

#### Conclusion:

In his short story homage to Frank Belknap Long (a good friend of both Lovecraft and Smith), weird fiction author T. E. D. Klein has his aged protagonist opine: “[a]h, Howard, your triumph was complete the moment your name became an adjective” (Klein 137). Amongst the coterie of American weird fiction authors in the early Twentieth

Century very few fates could have been worse than outliving its most famous members. Both Long and Smith survived for decades after the deaths of Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard in 1937 and 1936 respectively, and neither were ever able to fully escape the shadows their friends left behind after their passing. In Smith's case his lack of continuing critical attention can likely be attributed to his decision to almost completely cease writing prose in the late 1930s and the near-total lack of mythology surrounding him. Whatever Smith's reasons were for turning away from the form of literary art that had brought him a modicum of success and recognition amongst his peers, we cannot know them.

In many ways the lack of mythology surrounding Smith is nevertheless a blessing: critical attention on his works tends to not get bogged down on the minutiae of biography. The author is able to disappear in favor of his writing in a way that Lovecraft, for example, has not been able to. Critics are not tempted to read Smith's weird fictions in a way that is necessarily felicitous with his lived experience, because for the most part that life has been obscured from view. There is enough known, in general, of what Smith thought of his work both in general and in specific, and the broad strokes of his personal history are part of the record. But critics are not swamped with the tiniest of details belaying potential interpretations of the texts that he left behind. Equally critics are not required to pluck his stories whole cloth out of their historical moment and treat them as though they were created to be perfectly timeless. There is no way to determine if Smith felt neglected by the fans and critics who swarmed to the likes of Lovecraft and Howard while he lived out his days in relative obscurity. His correspondence, while insightful, does not approach the voluminous amount that Lovecraft produced, and it tends towards

praise and constructive criticism of others more than anything else. Lovecraft may have triumphed with the transformation of his name into an adjective, but Smith's relative obscurity is the critic's analytic blessing.

Smith's precise thoughts on surrealism are not known. It is clear that he doubted the importance of modernism in general after having his initially well-received poetry rejected by an increasingly Imagist Harriet Monroe, editor of the illustrious *Poetry* magazine. It is known that Smith questioned the validity of theoretical schools which were indebted to either broad humanism or slavish realism, since in his estimation any form of art that was purely anthropocentric was little better than navel-gazing. Smith believed that reality was infinitely stranger, and broader, than anything we could imagine. He thought that "the bare truth about the nature of things may be more fantastic than anything any of us have cooked up. [...] Five senses and three dimensions hardly scratch the surface of infinitude" (Schultz 229), and believed that true artistic expression would plumb the depths of infinity – either internal or external – rather than turn back to the petty daily concerns of humans, or the prosaic world which contained them. It is known, in short, that Smith considered his weird fiction experimental, and rarified, but thought of himself as writing against the grain of what was his current context of highbrow theory.

Smith was certainly aware of surrealism as an aesthetic and an artistic movement, and his deployment of surrealist overtones in his weird fictions may have been as intentional as his use of surrealist methods in "Surrealist Sonnet" was. The surrealists were absolutely aware of him; he was the focus of Robert Allerton Parker's

aforementioned VVV essay, and a statement of his<sup>43</sup> was used as a chapter epigraph in Franklin Rosemont's extensive introduction to André Breton's *What is Surrealism?* text. But nothing seems to have come of this awareness other than a vague general praise and an inclusion of him in a list of significant but critically forgotten authors. The fact is that, whether intentional or not, Smith's dreamlike weird fictions are strong examples of how avant-garde movements influence genre fictions. His grappling with the problems of art and the praxis of life, his insistence on pushing the boundaries of what impossibilities might be conceived through the power of literary imagination, and his exceedingly careful craftsmanship of atmosphere and image, all suggest that his stories are rife for critical analysis of the influences and overtones laced throughout them.

This is not to suggest that we should think of there being a strong dividing line between texts that can be considered weird fiction and texts that can be considered surreal or otherwise experimental. Genres are inherently fluid things no matter how hard we strive to cleanly subject them to taxonomy and classification. Smith is likely not the only weird fiction author to derive power and critical importance for his works from experimental elements, and further analytic investigation of weird fiction and the various avant-garde and modernist movements would yield rich results. There is a critical presupposition that weird fiction spurns avant-garde theoretical notions, which is reasonable based on the extra-textual arguments made by weird fiction authors. However, there remains the potential for finding influences of those avant-garde positions in the texts themselves despite the avowed intentions of their authors. Equally, avant-garde

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<sup>43</sup> "The only impossible thing is to define and delimit the impossible" (Breton 116). A later chapter uses a quote from fellow weird fiction author Frank Belknap Long as an epigraph.

theorists have historically tended to disregard weird fiction as a pulpish tool of the bourgeoisie. But, as has been shown in Breton and Parker themselves, these presuppositions are far from universal, and should be exploded through more careful critical work. The presupposition that the weird fiction authors were somehow little more than under-educated traditionalists tied inexorably to outdated modes of expression is equally incorrect; Smith began as an inveterate romantic but ended up producing some of the most clearly experimental, and surreal, examples within his chosen genre. If surrealism insists on the individual being transformed through confrontation with the impossible images of the unconscious, which it surely does, how appropriate it is, then, that the leading surrealist representative amongst the weird fiction authors is the Emperor of Dreams himself, Clark Ashton Smith.



### Chapter Three:

#### “A Pioneer in My Profession”: The Regionalist Weird Fiction of Robert E. Howard

##### Introduction:

Robert Ervin Howard (1906 – 1936) lived his life in small Texas communities.

The Howard family moved numerous times, and after traveling throughout Texas and along the Oklahoma border, the Howard family settled into a small community in Central West Texas called Cross Plains.<sup>44</sup> The majority of Howard’s life was spent in this tiny town on the edge of civilization. Cross Plains became a boom town after the Howards

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<sup>44</sup> Texas geography is a complicated subject due to the size of the state, and the cultures within any particular area. West Texas is often considered to be regionally part of the American Southwest, while East Texas is often considered to be part of the South proper. These definitions are fluid, however: J. Frank Dobie has defined the areas encompassing the Southwest as “Arizona, New Mexico, most of Texas, some of Oklahoma, and anything else north, south, east, or west that anybody wants to bring in” (Dobie). Though humorous, I do not think that Dobie is being unnecessarily flip. “The term Southwest is variable because the boundaries of the Southwest are themselves fluid,” Dobie says, “expanding and contracting according to the point of view from which the Southwest is viewed and according to whatever common denominator is taken for defining it.” Part of the literary tradition of the Southwest is one of ambivalence, particularly towards a strong sense of geographic demarcation since “the vastness of [the Southwest’s] area seems to negate borders” (Busby 434). And yet in fiction the Southwest is consistently demarcated since “the region’s location on the edge of Southern and Western culture and along the long Rio Grande border with Mexico reinforces an awareness of borders” (434). Southwestern fiction – and Texan fiction in general – portrays ambivalence as “the act of being torn, pulled in several directions at once” (434). I do not think a better summation of Robert E. Howard’s weird fiction could be found.

Cross Plains is geographically almost in the center of Texas. As said, it is generally considered to be part of “Central West Texas,” but the fluidity with which Howard wrote his environs indicates that the local culture draws on the Southwestern regionalism of West Texas and the Southern regionalism of East Texas at the same time. As will be shown, Howard wrote both West Texas and East Texas – the Southwest and the South – into his fictions when it was appropriate. This is not problematic, nor do I think it indicative of the idea that “Texas is of minimal value to the understanding of regionalism” (Jordan 21); the fluidity of the Southwest as argued by Dobie suggests that an author so centrally located as Howard would have had little issue validly writing either region, drawing upon his lived experience to do so. One of the primary characteristics of Texan regionalism seems to be the impossibility of defining the inhabited spaces available to the local population. In Robert E. Howard’s fiction, the spaces are broad and overlapping, the regions sharing cultural spaces in complex ways. Cross Plains may, by geography, be in the middle of the state, be in the “Central West” by local convention, and straddle both the Southwest and the South by cultural history all without contradiction. For the purposes of this chapter, Cross Plains – and thus the weird tales of Robert E. Howard – will be discussed in terms of both Southern regionalism and Southwestern regionalism, for to exclude either would be to exclude a significant influence upon the work of the Texan author.

moved there, drawing in interests from all over America due to the propensity for oil in the environs. It was in Cross Plains that Robert decided to reinvent himself, and this dedication to exercise and discipline would inspire Robert throughout the remainder of his short life; not only would he become an avid amateur, but he would translate his interests into the pure physicality and rough adventure that drove the majority of his writings.

The best known of Howard's literary creations is undoubtedly Conan the Cimmerian, a vagabond, fighter, and eventually king of Aquilonia in the pre-historical land of Hyboria. Howard's character was turned into a franchise after his death due to intense popularity of the serial stories he composed dealing with the history and life of Conan and his accomplices. By the end of the Twentieth Century, Conan had been deployed in several narrative forms, serving as the star for movies, video games, role-playing games, comic books and, of course, pastiche stories featuring the barbarian written by people other than his creator. Howard invented several other serial characters than Conan, however: the king of the Picts, Bran Mak Morn, features in no less than six full stories and one poem, while his Seventeenth Century swashbuckling Puritan, Solomon Kane, features in nine stories, three poems, and several fragments, and Kull of Atlantis features in twelve of Howard's stories and one poem. These, his most enduring creations, would have been sufficient to ensure Howard a significant place among American fantasists and within the weird tales pioneers. Unfortunately, just as Howard was becoming a successful and accomplished writer of merit – both within the pulps and

without<sup>45</sup> - his mother died. She had been struggling with tuberculosis for many years, and Howard had remained at home in part to help his father care for her. Wracked with grief over his mother's passing, Howard got into his car outside of the family home, and shot himself in the head. He was thirty years old.

Attempting to categorize Howard as only one sort of writer is difficult if not impossible, despite the surface similarity of his most enduring characters. He began his professional writing at the age of eighteen with a caveman story submitted to *Weird Tales* titled "Spear and Fang." Howard formed an extensive list of publishers willing to accept his tales after beginning with *Weird Tales*. He was desperate to carve out a steady career for himself as a writer, and as such he sought to produce a high volume of material themed to the interests of dozens of particular publications. At the same time, Howard recognized that he could not present one particular tone or style if he wanted to sell a large number of stories: he would have to consistently modify his work to suit the whims of particular editors or the stated direction of magazines. Thus, Howard's standard mode was to attack "the pulp markets like he fought, relentless, unyielding. When a story did not sell, he sent it to another publisher and kept plugging away" (Finn 132). The range of his professional output is impressive – he wrote poetry, weird fiction, standard supernatural fiction, westerns, war stories, boxing stories, voluminous letters, essays, fantasies, and of course his original contribution to the field of fantastic literature, sword and sorcery stories. Howard was adept at crafting compelling fiction in any mode, though

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<sup>45</sup> Howard had attempted to break into more respected literary magazines and forms since the start of his career. He had only just sold a few short stories from his Pike Bearfield series of comic burlesques to *Argosy*, a market of much greater prestige than his standard niche pulp publishers, at the time of his death. Equally, his first book, *A Gent from Bear Creek*, was slated to be published in 1937, a year after his death.

it has been suggested by August Derleth, Don Herron, and others, that towards the end of his life Howard showed more interest in producing non-supernatural westerns than anything else.

This is likely because Howard consistently wrote Texas into his work. The region was an important element to him and, more importantly, his writing. The sweep and scope of Texas, still in part unsettled during Howard's life, colored his worlds of fantasy. The landscapes of Texas, replete with a sense of desolation, menace, and untapped promise, lent a tinge to the emotional construction of many of his tales. Regionalism is hardly unusual amongst the weird fiction regulars; Lovecraft has been noted repeatedly for his obvious love of New England and the ways in which he ties the region into his writing, much as Clark Ashton Smith deployed the California landscape in many of his weird fictions. On the one hand, this is a simple matter of expedience: like Smith, Howard did not travel very far, and thus his immediate surroundings were deployed in his writing out of having no other sense of place to inform his fiction craft.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, however, Howard honestly loved his home, and he could hardly resist the temptation of incorporating the range of what he had known for the whole of his life into the bizarre and deadly worlds he created. The rugged nature of the landscape fitted his view of the individual, and did as much for fostering his personal philosophies as did his

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<sup>46</sup> The few stories Howard set outside of Texas, the Southwest, or the South are rather vague in their construction of place. Stories like "The Black Stone" (1931), which is set in Hungary, and "Dig Me No Grave" (1937), which has no defined location, lack a certain verve due to their being set within locales that Howard was not personally familiar with. While fine examples of Howard's weird fiction, with "The Black Stone" being one of the most popular weird fictions from the early American period, they serve to highlight the comfortability Howard had with his personal location. Put simply, the settings for these stories are vaguely defined, poorly composed, and read more as backdrops for the plot rather than living environments out of which characters and events naturally develop. It seems that without his regional perspective informing his writing Howard was unable to make his work live fully.

reading of Nietzsche or his epistolary conversations with Lovecraft. Regionalist critic Michael Kowalewski, following after Pierre Sansot, notes that rather than asking after the “essence of a place” we should be concerned with “what can one dream about it?” (9). Robert E. Howard wrote his dreams and nightmares of Texas: the land is inseparable from the man and his writing. As such, Howard's unique creation of regionalist weird fictions, so unlike the regionalisms of his contemporaries, will be the subject of this chapter.

Regionalism is defined here as the quality within certain branches of literature to attach special significance to a particular place over and against what might be considered a domineering external society that seeks to surround and subsume the region within its own nationalist definitions of culture, tradition, and history. Put simply, regionalist literature is “committed to asking what place local knowledges have in the construction of a national tradition” and shows “a deep desire to understand what the local is, and what the local does” (Foote 25). It is in many ways an anti-modern mode to adopt, for it especially rejects notions of progress that would require the unseating of local experience in favor of promoting a homogenizing way of life touted by outsiders as necessarily better. Richard Broadhead describes regionalism by focusing on this anti-modern stance:

It requires a setting outside the world of modern development, a zone of backwardness where locally variant folkways still prevail. Its characters are ethnologically colorful, personifications of the different humanity produced in such non-modern cultural settings. Above all, this fiction features an extensive written simulation of regional vernacular, a

conspicuous effort to catch the nuances of local speech. (Broadhead 115-16)

“Backwardness” should not be confused with nostalgia here, however. Southern and Southwestern regionalism is further defined by its rejection of nostalgia just as it rejects the mechanization of life represented by industrialization. Within the South and Southwest, regionalism is especially aware of its own history and the ways in which that history has been distorted to produce unrealistic, romantic depictions of the pre-Civil War era, the Frontier era, etc. Regionalism, dedicated to authenticity of person and place, cannot abide such nostalgic and unreal representations of lived experience, shared culture, and remembered history. As such, nostalgia is often deployed ironically, as a way to highlight the incorrect suppositions of outsiders who attempt to overlay the truth of the region with their own preconceptions in an act of conquering. Above all, regionalism as it is used here signifies the attempt in texts to depict the complex relationship between individuals, immediate social groups, and surroundings, in such a way as to actively maintain that relationship against subversion by non-local interests.

This intra-relationship is in part what J. Frank Dobie has referred to as *querencia*, taken from the Spanish verb *querer*, to love. It is the particular insularity of a place contrasted with what might be perceived as interests working against the local population, the local landscape, the local interest, or some combination of the three. Mark Busby has discussed the region in terms of the Southwest at length:

To understand the region requires knowing a mix of cultures determined by geographical, geological, and biological forces [...] Moreover, it requires recognizing the relationship between the region and the broader

national identity. The harsh Southwestern landscape has historically led Southwesterners to glorify an American individualism long celebrated in our national documents; frontier attitudes have often characterized Southwestern culture. Many of the historical and literary texts demonstrate how Anglo-American settlers entered an unknown world and saw nature as a resource for their singular use. (Busby 433)

Minority cultures, however, questioned “the emphasis placed on individuality instead of community” and in response to the harsh realities of the land decided to “band together in communal, supportive societies” (433). The ambivalence between individual and society, between civilization and savagery, and between the belonging and the foreign, drives a good amount of both Southern and Southwestern regionalism. As will be shown, the push-and-pull of Texan regionalism in the work of an author like Robert E. Howard can lead to changing conceptions of “here” in the desire to demarcate a strong difference between “here” and “there” or “us” and “them.”

The two elements of philosophy and landscape that drove Howard should be appraised together for any critical analysis of his writing – in particular his weird fiction. In general, Howard can be described as a proto-existentialist. Unlike the cosmic philosophy of Lovecraft or Smith, wherein humanity is considered insignificant in the grand scheme of existence, Howard tended to hold to a belief in a world where meaning had to be inscribed by the will of the individual. His characters are almost inevitably self-made persons, choosing the course of their lives with no reference to fate, heredity, or any external condition other than the way they might impose their will upon the world.

Howard was aware of his focus on humanity and how his view set him apart from his contemporaries. In a letter to Lovecraft he said:

It is the individual mainly which draws me – the struggling, blundering, passionate insect vainly striving against the river of Life and seeking to divert the channel of events to suit himself – breaking his fangs on the iron collar of Fate and sinking into final defeat with the froth of a curse on his lips. (Burke)

It was the adversity of the individual that Howard thought important to highlight in his stories rather than the more distanced, cooler sense of awe that Lovecraft wrote into the best of his works. It is not too much to state that “Howard’s concept of a man standing alone against all odds is the main thrust of his fiction” (Rickard 84). This rugged individualism permeates all of Howard’s writing; it most notably defines his sword and sorcery tales, but it is present in all of his works from his burlesque westerns to his weird fiction. Howard was consistently interested in the concept of the individual man set apart from all others, and how such a being would interact with a world that might either bend to his will or react violently and destroy him utterly.

The idea of the world as an inherently hostile place set against the individual is the alternate side of Howard’s personal philosophy. Howard’s work possessed “a continuity through nearly all of his stories: the world is a place of harsh dualities – strength against weakness, barbarism against civilization, and ultimately life against death” (83). The most notable of these dualities in Howard’s weird fiction – and his entire oeuvre – is the nature of civilization and barbarism. During his formative years Howard came to see history as a matter of cycles moving between barbarism and civilization.



Civilization served as a thin veneer over the brutal realities of life, always threatening to descend into the decadence that preceded anarchy.<sup>47</sup> The cycles of history meant that the world could never be a secure place; potential collapse always threatened, and it was only the strong-willed individual who could work against it – or, if arrayed against a corrupt civilization, usher it further on. Howard likely found more grist for his weird fiction in depicting the horrors of barbarism, but he did not shy away from a harsh condemnation of civilization as a set of lies or delusions masking the truth – however horrible that truth may be – whenever he could.

The reason for Howard's distrust of civilization and the idealization of the individual over and against anything else is due largely to the regional climate in which he grew to maturity. Howard moved with his family to Cross Plains in 1919, when he was thirteen years old, and as has been said the town was to become an oil boom town in mid-1920; this turn of events, coupled with Howard's younger experiences with the milieu of boom towns, colored the whole of his adult philosophy and artistic output. The pessimism and skepticism with which Howard faced Cross Plains becoming a boom town was palpably relayed to Lovecraft in a letter of October 1930:

I've seen towns leap into being overnight and become deserted again almost as quick. I've seen old farmers, bent with toil, and ignorant of the feel of ten dollars at a time, become millionaires in a week, by the way of oil gushers. And I've seen them blow in every cent of it and die paupers.

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<sup>47</sup> This belief in the cycle of civilizations is almost certainly one of the reasons why Howard and Lovecraft became good friends after their first volley of letters back and forth in 1930. Lovecraft had read Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and the socio-political philosophy found therein formed the basis for much spirited discussion between the two writers.

I've seen whole towns debauched by an oil boom and boys and girls go to the devil whole-sale. I've seen promising youths turn from respectable citizens to dope-fiends, drunkards, gamblers, and gangsters in a matter of months. (Finn 17)

For Howard the transformation into a boom town was indicative of an unwanted, intrusive presence – non-locals, almost always Northerners or the representatives of Northern interests. When oil was discovered the opportunists would appear and what had once been peaceful, quiet communities would erupt into debauchery, violence, and servitude towards persons who were for all intents and purposes foreigners to the region. This corrupting transformation away from values purportedly inherent to the culture of the region – such as “[p]ersonal honor. Isolation. Self-governed actions” (11) – incensed Howard and influenced how he would view modern society for the rest of his life. To Howard, the ideal days when a man could be a man and meet the challenges of life head-on in a solid (if not fair) fight were gone, replaced with a view of society as something to be geared towards industrial interests.

To these interests the individual existed as part of a mechanized process rather than as self-determined beings, regardless of local culture, tradition, and history. This perception of the oil boom as a period of corruption was widespread, and not limited to Howard or Cross Plains. To the rest of America the oil boom presaged “a radical change in attitudes towards the Southwest, its image transformed from a vast desert wasteland hostile to humans to a beckoning sunbelt” (Busby 433). Following the Spindletop oil strike of 1901 outside of Beaumont in East Texas, oil production became the dominant industry across the state as a whole. This shift displaced traditional industry as wildcatters

– oil prospectors – moved across the state looking for fertile oil fields. Up until the oil boom, cattle ranching, agriculture, and timber were the state’s primary industries and all were put under threat by the industrialization concurrent with the oil business. Although the industrialization and urbanization of Texas brought with it financial success for some sectors of the population, more considered their way of life under threat. The reconfiguration of Texas communities towards catering to wildcatters placed traditional Texas culture into a precarious position, resulting in feelings of resentment against the changing political climate despite the economic benefits it brought to the few. J. Frank Dobie argued that “[p]eople live a good deal by tradition and fight a good deal by tradition also” (Dobie sec. 25), indicating that the reaction against the industrialization of Texas was an understandable, and widespread, response.

The distrust of civilization in Howard’s weird fiction comes from the paradoxical view he had of himself as both a local and a pioneer. He was born, lived, and died in Texas; with no desire to live in any other place, he considered himself not only a local but a local whose way of life was under threat by interests which could not understand his existence. To this extent, Howard’s life can be read as metonymic for the lived experience of all regionalist Texans. At the same time, however, Howard viewed himself as a pioneer – a man on the fringes of civilization attempting to make a way of life within an environment whose nature was necessarily menacing and which hosted a variety of other, perpetually dangerous, cultures. Mark Busby discusses the civilization / wilderness divide as an ambivalence that permeates Southwestern regionalism:

Civilization is associated with the past and with Europe, with society – its institutions and laws, [...] its industrial development, and its class

distinctions. The wilderness that civilization confronts offers the possibility of personal freedom, where single individuals can test themselves against nature without the demands for social responsibility and compromises inherent in being part of a community. [...] The ambivalence of being drawn at the same time towards such opposing forces as civilization/wilderness [...] and numerous others is central to Southwestern legend, and it grows in intensity in the contemporary Southwest as the schism between old and new tears more strongly at the human heart. (Busby 434-35)

Howard, caught between conflicting definitions of civilization and savagery, the frontier and the home, lived this ambivalence, and his weird fiction was heavily influenced by it. The need for and resistance towards community, the distrust of civilization and the settler's impulse, and the desire for success combined with a dislike for decadence, are all sites of anxiety within his weird tales. In Howard's weird fiction, the purportedly civilizing impulse that came with the oil boom was a barbaric imposition, one which corrupted the local communities and attempted to wrest control of the still unsettled natural world around those communities. Industrialization, commonly seen as a civilizing force, became for Howard the barbarian hordes at the gate, threatening the local way of life with their rule.

In this sense, Howard was very much a writer of his time and place: his weird fictions possess overtones of both the Southern Renaissance writers and the Southwestern regionalists. Indeed, it seems self-evident that without Texas, Howard would not have been able to write as compellingly as he did. As Howard biographer Mark Finn puts it,

“[t]he story of Robert E. Howard is the story of twentieth-century Texas” (18), indicating the way that the regionalist local experience, and Texas itself, can be read through Howard’s stories. The region was everything to Howard in terms of the craft of fiction: he depended upon the culture and history of his surroundings, as well as, most importantly, its sense of uniqueness over and against the corrupting influence of industrialization to give frisson to his weird tales. Whether or not Howard was personally aware of the regionalist movements is unknown, but it is clear that he knew that the region was the key to Texas’ ability to forestall corruption. Howard opined on this in a 1931 letter to Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales* magazine:

[T]he Southwest is entering into what I believe will prove to be a gigantic literary boom, and the next generation will see this section of the country fictionalized, dramatized and glorified generally... epics of explorations, conquest and settlement. And certainly the history of the Southwest is right in drama... I shall be glad to see my part of the country come into its own... I feel linked to the country not only by birth but by descent and tradition. (Indick 103)

It is this tradition that helps constitute the sense of the region as something more than a geographic quirk for Howard, for the land and the individual are an inseparable entity. Alien culture rears its ugly head and seeks to dominate the region in an imperialist manner, driving out local tradition and culture in favor of a decadent, ultimately destructive transplanted sense of purpose. The place itself is hostile if not downright deadly, for Howard’s weird stories often reveal that Texas has been colonized many times, creating a repeating interplay of civilization versus barbarism. If the Northerners

have something to fear from the local ways of Southerners or Southwesterners, then so too do the Southerners and Southwesterners have to be wary of even older concepts of the region and its itinerant traditions. The past never stays buried in Howard's weird fiction; the cycles of history always return, and the invaders – however long they have been present – are always caught off guard.

As discussed above, Southern regionalism had an impact upon Howard's weird fiction just as Southwestern regionalism did due to the positioning of Cross Plains within the fluid boundaries of both. The ambivalent perspective shown in Howard's stories is indicative of Southwestern regionalism, as discussed, but it would be remiss to neglect the common forms of Southern regionalism that influenced Howard's weird fiction in similar ways. Southern regionalism is commonly described in the context of what has become known as the Southern Renaissance, which was a conglomeration of authors writing from a shared desire for a preservation of the South and its traditions over and against a Northern totalizing impulse following the end of the Civil War. This preservation had to endure against threats of Northern expansion and nostalgia towards the problematic antebellum past of the region. The Southern Renaissance, and their inheritors the Fugitives and Agrarians, saw a vital way of life in the South that was under threat of destruction – or worse, elision – by those who refused to recognize their home as a viable and distinct set of entities, cultures, and philosophies.

At the same time, the Southern Renaissance sought to escape the trap of romantic nostalgia for the pre-Civil War South, since they knew that such representations were ignorant of what the South had become over the intervening decades. Ben C. Toledano

sums up the view of the Agrarians, perhaps the most strident members of the Southern Renaissance, in the following way:

There grew out of this shared awakening [to the lack of Southern opposition to the Northern polemical writing of the 1920s] a belief that from the South there should issue a counterattack against the forces which threatened a depletion of the whole person in civil society in exchange for the “better life” offered by unbridled industrialism. Davidson [an early Agrarian] drew unfavorable comparisons between paramount economic interests and their enforced mechanical conformity, on one hand, and “the humane freedom of a stable, traditional society” on the other. (Toledano 13)

The Southern Renaissance writers resisted an influx of Northerner colonists who refused to recognize that the South was “culturally distinct in any meaningful way from other parts of the United States” (Jackson 9). The writers argued that the promises of industrialism represented by the expansion of Northern interests would introduce a quasi-imperialist mechanism to daily life. The creation of a sense of the populace as “the masses,” rather than as a collection of individuals, would destroy far more than it would exult. Indeed, they viewed the region as less a limit of geographical boundaries and more as “the boundaries of experience and tradition which have given [the South] a unique identity in the nation” (Spiller 83).

It is not difficult to see Howard’s texts, supported by the author’s dedication to the idealization of the individual – the “whole person” – on the one hand, and his loathing of the negative effects of a colonizing force for ostensible modernity on the other, as

sympathetic to regionalist theory. Howard was not blind to the problems of the past in Texas,<sup>48</sup> and he did not view the pre-Civil War era with anything more than the skepticism it rightfully deserved. As always with Howard's fiction, any given civilization is always on its way towards an inevitable collapse; the romantic, nostalgic representations of the pre-Civil War period were just as subject to the rising up of the forgotten barbaric underbelly as the ignorant Northerners were. For Howard, the civilization on top is always a target, and "[t]he past haunts the present, enriching [Howard's tales] with a conscious regionalism" (Indick 105). There is no escape from the cycle of history, and to Howard, the standard image of society is "orderly and law-abiding on the surface, eaten hollow by graft – by evil" (Knight 128) underneath. Even if he was ignorant of the various Southern and Southwestern regionalist movements, Howard arrayed himself with them by finding purpose in working the region into his stories. That weird fiction could include the works of an author who held to such sets of social, political, and artistic ideals is a remarkable thing, and one well worth critical analysis by weird fiction critics.

As in my previous chapters, the purpose here is to strike a finer balance in a critique of Howard's weird fictions than has been achieved before. Scholarly analysis of Howard's work is second only to Lovecraft's in terms of volume, and yet he is rarely

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<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that despite being disdainful of antebellum pretension, Howard was himself a rather vociferous racist. This element of his personality is often deployed in his weird fictions as a method to garner cheap shocks from ignorant readers who would not know, for example, that Shintoism and Satanism have absolutely no relationship with one another, but who could accept the worst of presuppositions about "Orientals." However, Howard did show a remarkable amount of sympathy to African Americans in several of his weird fictions, suggesting that his racism was not as deeply ingrained as it appeared. Still, racism is something that should not be ignored in Howard's pedigree, just as it should be noted and dealt with critically in terms of Lovecraft.



approached in terms of how his weird fiction functions as a historically located set of creative productions. More often than not his weird tales are lumped in with his other fictions<sup>49</sup> so as to facilitate the analysis of over-arching thematic elements. Analysis of these elements enables critical identification of why Howard's literary creations are still popular *today*, which is admittedly a laudable goal, but not the only approach to texts. Equally, Howard's life is well known and thoroughly researched, and as such no small amount of mythology has accrued over his memory since his suicide in 1936. As a result, many critical accounts of his work get lost in the memoirs of the man rather than devoting enough focus on the works themselves. The fact of the matter is that we know that regionalism was important to Howard, and there is enough of a record of his intellectual life to demonstrate that he held positions similar to – if not exactly alike – the American regionalists to make it worthwhile to study his weird fiction for evidence of regionalist overtones, despite the lack of critical attention to this quality of his texts. To bring in more than this, however, is potentially superfluous to a critical apprehension of the texts on hand and perpetuates a harmful trend in the history of weird fiction analysis.

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<sup>49</sup> Which, to be fair, is somewhat difficult to avoid doing. As has been argued, Howard is almost impossible to categorize one way or another, and the boundaries between one genre and the next are often slippery. Quite often Howard's stories can be classified legitimately as several different specific genres; most of the stories discussed in this chapter are both westerns and weird fictions, depending on the critical lens being used for analysis, while the distinction between some of Howard's sword and sorcery stories and his weird fictions is fuzzy at best. This is not uncommon in works from a Southern or Southwestern regionalist perspective; as Rosemary D. Cox points out in her article "The Old Southwest: Humor, Tall Tales, and the Grotesque" the tropes of horror, comedy, folktale, and western tend to blend together within regionalist writing of particular forms.

“The Horror from the Mound” (1932):

At his best Howard worked layers of meaning into his weird fictions, particularly when it came to the representation of the region. “The Horror from the Mound” is no exception and it is one of his finest examples of the genre. The story was published in *Weird Tales* in 1932 to significant response from readers. It is a hallmark work for Howard in that it showcases not only his commitment to regional writing but also demonstrates that his love for the region he lived in was not biased. Howard’s conception of the cycle of history demands that he avoid tropes common to westward expansion narratives, and he compensates by depicting the current inheritors of the land as, on some level, invaders. The ‘border’ of the region is one of overlapping culture and influence, not strict demarcation as observed by cartographers:

No sharp line of time or space, like that separating one century from another or the territory of one nation from that of another, can delimit the boundaries of any region to which any regionalist lays claim. Mastery, for instance, of certain locutions peculiar to the Southwest will take their user to the Aztecs, to Spain, and to the border of ballads and Sir Walter Scott’s romances. I found that I could not comprehend the coyote as animal hero of Pueblo and Plains Indians apart from the Reynard of Aesop and Chaucer. (Dobie)

No matter who is in current control of a region there is always a history waiting to be unearthed; there is no a priori reason to think that one set of settlers is any less pernicious than those who were sweeping through the region on the edge of the oil boom during the early part of the Twentieth Century. “The Horror from the Mound” makes it clear that

“the region presents itself as a middle space, less extended than the nation and the great space of civilization, but wider than the social group” (Dainotto 490). This middle space is one that holds both promise and punishment for those who ignore the cultural legacy inhabiting the land, be they industrial usurpers or native-born inhabitants who elide the presence of previous societies.

The story opens with Steve Brill, a “true son of the iron-bodied pioneers who wrenched West Texas from the wilderness” (Tompkins 303), working on his new and struggling ranch. His neighbor is Juan Lopez, a life-long resident whose family has inhabited the area since at least 1545. From the beginning the perspective of Lopez is positioned as privileged over and against Brill, though both are equally in danger:

Steve Brill did not believe in ghosts or demons. Juan Lopez did. But neither the caution of the one nor the sturdy skepticism of the other was shield against the horror that fell upon them – the horror forgotten by men for more than three hundred years – a screaming fear monstrosity resurrected from the black lost ages. (303)

The verve of Howard’s best writing is apparent here, continuing throughout the story in his terse style. Noticing that Lopez avoids a particular mound of earth, Brill questions him about the mound and the two share a spirited discussion. Lopez counsels Brill against disturbing the mound, stating that it is “[b]est not to disturb what is hidden in the earth” (305). However, Brill is certain that a passing Spanish expedition headed by Hernando de Estrada centuries prior seeded the area with gold. Lopez assures him that there is no gold, citing a familial tale about one of his ancestors, Porfirio Lopez, who marched with de Estrada,.

The two come to an agreement: since Lopez is sworn not to speak in detail of the story unless it is to a son, he will write it out so that Brill understands why the mound should be avoided. Brill decides to break into the mound while Lopez is at home asleep, and discovers bits of debris surrounding a man-sized central chamber of stone. Having grown more fearful as night had come on, and worried about poisonous snakes within the mound, Brill heads home to fetch a lantern. When he returns, Brill discovers that the chamber has been opened, the stone which blocked its entrance removed, and is empty. Brill decides that Lopez must have taken the treasure after seeing a man-shaped silhouette cross the distance to Lopez' shack, and decides to confront him. A horrible scream emanates from Lopez' shack, debilitating Brill, and as he recovers something inside the building extinguishes the only lamp that shone within. Brill breaks in and finds Lopez dead on the floor of the shack, eyes wide with frozen terror and yet no marks on his body except for four small puncture wounds on his neck.

Taking up the scattered sheets of paper Lopez had been writing on, Brill makes to leave for the nearest town to fetch the sheriff. He is interrupted when he hears his herd of cattle being spooked and driven off his land by something awful – he thinks it may be a large feral cat, something that could have killed Lopez as well. Brill is constantly aware of his surroundings; the mound (which he unintentionally thinks of as a tomb) reminds him that “though the land was new to the Anglo-Saxon, it was in reality very old” (314) and that “[h]ere long generations of men lived and died before Brill's ancestors had ever heard of the land” (314). Again, Brill is positioned as subordinate to the region in accordance with Lopez' perspective. Brill has a claim to the region, and is a native, but his claim cannot elide the cultural traditions that held sway for centuries before him. This

is the regionalism that proclaims that man is “best in his relation to the soil” (Spiller 86), problematized by showing the ways in which a claim to said soil is not necessarily unique or necessarily dominant.<sup>50</sup> The distance between Brill and the true history of his home is

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<sup>50</sup> This notion of a man who is “best in his relation to the soil” is revisited by Howard in the 1933 story “Old Garfield’s Heart.” The story is an example of Howard’s weird fiction containing elements of the western, the supernatural horror tale, and regionalist fiction: an unnamed narrator goes with the local doctor to visit Jim Garfield, “the first white man to settle in this country” (Tompkins 293), who has been severely injured while attempting to break a horse. The doctor discovers that Garfield’s heart is unusually steady and strong while tending to his wounds. Garfield, afraid that he might die, explains that he has survived long past his natural span through being granted a supernatural heart by a Native American friend of his. “It was the heart of a god the Lipans worshipped before the Comanches drove ‘em out of their native hills” (296), he explains, later expanding that “[t]he Lipans were kin to the Apaches, and the Apaches learnt curious things from the Pueblos” (299). Garfield is terrified that if he should die he will be trapped in his body by the immortal heart of a god which he carries within him, and he begs Doc Blaine to cut it out of him if he should ever be so grievously wounded.

Garfield survives his initial injuries, but later is shot in the head after an enemy of the narrator named Jack Kirby comes looking for the narrator at Garfield’s cabin. Sure enough, the heart still beats in his chest even though Garfield is absolutely dead. Per Garfield’s instructions, Doc Blaine cuts open his chest and removes the heart with the narrator’s assistance. Instead of an organ of tissue and muscle, it is “the duplicate of a human heart, but it was slick and smooth, and its crimson surface reflected the lamplight like a jewel more lambent than any ruby” (301). The narrator is tempted to keep the heart for himself, sensing its “cosmic *power*, beyond my comprehension” (301), but is interrupted by the arrival of “an Indian warrior, in the paint, war bonnet, breech-clout, and moccasins of an elder age” (302). Whether this is Ghost Man, the Lipan chief that Garfield had befriended decades ago, or the god of the Lipans themselves is unclear. Nevertheless, the narrator and Doc Blaine immediately fulfill their promise to Garfield – they return the heart, and the figure disappears “like a phantom of the night” (302).

In “Old Garfield’s Heart,” Howard successfully combines the elements of the folktale and the western into this nine page weird fiction. The story underscores the regionalist potential that appears in Howard’s weird fiction (the story is set in Lost Knob, one of Howard’s fictionalizations of his own Cross Plains). Garfield is literally the heart of civilization within the region: the narrator’s grandfather says that “he built his cabin a good fifty miles west of the frontier. God knows how he done it, for these hills swarmed with Comanches then” (293), and yet was not one of the barbarians that Howard admired and feared. Instead of destroying his cultural surroundings, Garfield joined with them. He established the region as his home without attempting to superimpose his traditions upon the ones he found there – such as those of the Lipan tribe, which he befriended. Garfield continued to respect the traditions of the region despite the fact that he believed all of the indigenous peoples had long since died (with, perhaps, the exception of Ghost Man). Garfield is, in effect, inseparable from the region; he has come to represent its lifeblood, its vitality, and is the last inheritor of its traditions old and new.

Though Howard certainly recognized the problematic nature of the white settler image in the Southwest and the South (as is obvious from another of his weird fictions, “The Thunder Rider” [1933]), in “Old Garfield’s Heart” he takes an overwhelmingly optimistic stance on how foreign cultures and traditions might blend to create the vibrancy he saw within Texas. The region is never Edenic in Howard’s texts, but this does not mean that the life of the people cannot be entwined with the rich earth of the soil. Sometimes, as in the case of Garfield, the stories presented an image of civilization as functioning properly, absent the decadence that invites barbarians to the gates of the region. These rare stories are optimistic in tenor despite their weird content, making them ripe for exploration of the regionalist overtones within.

widened when he reads Lopez' document, which contains an extensive tale about de Estrada's company and how they were murdered one by one by Don Santiago de Valdez, a stranger and a form of vampire who traveled with them briefly.<sup>51</sup>

Far too late, Brill comes to the conclusion that he has made a potentially fatal error by opening the mound, for the contents of the man-sized space were de Valdez. The vampire was immobilized by de Estrada's party during their trek across the region after murdering several of de Estrada's men. At first Brill's skepticism leads him to reject the whole situation as lunacy, but he finds himself convinced when "a face glared and gibbered soundlessly at him" (317) from outside his window. Brill's terror should not be misunderstood: he attempts to reject the knowledge he has gained through pure reason, but responds in an animalistic manner to the evidence before him. His reaction underscores how his discovery has repositioned him within the region, since he is no longer the master of the land but a victim of dominant forces he neither understands nor

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<sup>51</sup> It may seem unusual for a weird tale to feature a vampire, since such creatures were a staple of the Gothic fiction and supernatural horror whose tropes and structures weird fiction explicitly rejected. It is important to note, however, that the vampire is not precisely the antagonist in "The Horror from the Mound" though it is of course an adversary. Howard positions *the land itself and its associated history* as the antagonist. The land is a brutal and implacable enemy which is not able to countenance Brill's ignorance of its past – and present – realities. Thus, although the slightly reworked vampire is the immediate threat to health and safety, the tale achieves its true weird atmosphere by refiguring an almost standard "man versus nature" plot. In regionalist tales like this one, the region so colors every aspect of the narrative that it is, as we see here, capable of being a principle character unto itself.

Furthermore, it is the case that weird fiction aesthetics in the early American period deployed monstrous figures belonging to earlier periods of supernatural fiction when those figures could be used in a new or revolutionary manner. Thus the vampire in this tale, and thus the vampire (in all but name) in Lovecraft's "The Shunned House" (1924), where the creature is vulnerable to sulphuric acid rather than crucifixes and wooden stakes. It is, after all, not the ghost (to pick one traditional monster) itself that is the problem for weird fiction aesthetics so much as it is that said ghosts clanks chains "according to rule." In a letter to *Weird Tales*, for example, Lovecraft wondered "why someone had not attempted a werewolf story narrated by the werewolf himself," suggesting again that it is not so much the monstrous figure that was at issue but the way it has been traditionally used (Lovecraft's query was answered by Clark Ashton Smith in 1954 with the late science fiction story "A Prophecy of Monsters"). As such, the deployment of traditional monstrous figures in weird fiction serves to widen the gap between weird fiction and its predecessors rather than recapitulate them.

controls. In a sense he has become the cattle that supports and sustains the region's inhabitants, who have been there for far longer than he and who might have a greater claim to the land. Presently the vampire breaks into Brill's shack and the two fight, with Brill barely managing to incapacitate de Valdez through a few lucky blows. He flees into the night and an overturned lantern lights the cabin ablaze. Brill pauses just long enough to look back and see "the flame of the burning house" and thanks God "that it would burn until the very bones of Don Santiago de Valdez were utterly consumed and destroyed from the knowledge of men" (319).

The regionalist overtones of "The Horror from the Mound" are complex, layered with Howard's personal philosophies and perspectives on his home state. The conception in the text is that the region is striated by its history, invisibly demarcated in such a way that objective ownership is always deferred. Multiple sets of persons and multiple disparate cultures add complexity to the region, while none of them are able to singularly claim mastery over the land. There is an echo of Michael Kowalewski's argument about the region here:

The most fruitful recognition of cultural diversity in the West will be one that complicates our conception of both mainstream *and* marginal cultures – questioning along the way the usefulness of thinking about centers and margins in western writing rather than about interdependence, hybridity, and overlap. (11)

By situating the region as something much more antagonistic than the simple idea of an Eden waiting to be claimed by adventurous persons, Howard's text prepares the reader to confront the idea of Texas as something more meaningful than the site of an "us versus

them” mentality. Within the conception of regionalism Howard presents here there is a tendency “to seek in the past a pattern, to evolve a meaning out of large sweeps of history, converting the pattern of event into myth, and uniting the sense of tragic dignity with the irony of comedy” (Spiller 87) and, on Howard’s terms, horror. There is nothing as simple as an essential truth to the region in Howard’s stories; the strata of the earth are deep and there are always more inhabitants, more invaders still to come. Over the course of the text the reader is shown the ways in which the Native Americans, the Spanish, the Mexicans, and eventually the “Anglo-Saxons” of Brill’s ancestors, have all laid claim to the land at one time. Every one of them has contributed to the construction of the region, but none of them – invader or native – can lay claim to the region as inherently theirs.

Howard represents his philosophy on the cycle of history by using the layering of culture as a regionalist image. No one civilization can remain dominant indefinitely, since “[b]arbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph” (Wagner 65).<sup>52</sup> Whatever culture occupies the region is inevitably only a temporary tenant: civilizations can only

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that on a personal level Howard almost always sided with the barbarians over and against the forces of civilization. In a letter to Lovecraft he said that if he were to be reborn in a previous era he would prefer “to grow up hard and lean and wolfish, worshipping barbarian gods and living the hard barren life of a barbarian – which is, to the barbarian who has never tasted anything else – neither hard nor barren” (Joshi 100). This should come as no surprise given his lived experience. However, Howard saw the industrialization of Texas during the oil boom as evidence of barbarian forces overwriting local culture and society in favor of an external way of life. Rather than representing progress, as the Northerners claimed, these external forces ushered in an era of decadence and collapse within the communities he loved. It was the rough men, the workers and fighters he saw on a daily basis, that he admired for their unwillingness to take on life in other than their own terms. In this respect Howard was a fan of “six-shooter culture at its zenith – the wild and woolly side of the West” (Dobie). These men were the barbarians who had conquered the pre-existing indigenous civilization in the South and Southwest with which Howard empathized – they were the ones who would, he hoped, inevitably stand against the barbarous Northern invaders who had come to conquer Texas, and it was through their influence that the region would be restored. Obviously Howard’s fiction presents a more nuanced approach to the question of barbarism and civilization, particularly in relation to the region as in “The Horror from the Mound,” but it is worthwhile noting his own particular outlook upon the images that he spun into his weird fictions.



come into being, rule for a time, and pass away. In this sense history comes under threat from the region, since the implication is that history and the region operate independently from one another – the region persists while the cycle of history adds and subtracts from its construction. The representation of a dichotomous and symbiotic relationship between history and the region is not unique to Howard:

History itself – complete with modernity’s existential challenges and disappointments – is the victim of erasure here, replaced by the “region,” a kind of homogeneous and ideal space that commands a renewed, and often menacing and reactionary, power of authenticity. (Jackson 5)

Although it should be noted that in Howard the region is not necessarily homogeneous – indeed, it seems to resist homogeneity, as is common to Southwestern regionalism with its disparate overlapping cultures. Nonetheless, the region is menacing and held to be ideal only in the sense that inhabitants like Brill believe it a space to be conquered, made tame, and ultimately reflective of their presence alone. This is at once the space that rejects subjugation by the Northern industrial interests that Howard so loathed, and is unwilling to accept being holistically mastered by the local. History is replaced with the call to conquer the region, and the civilization epitomized by Brill fails to see the cycle spinning around to erase their inscription of what the region means to them.

Thus, both Brill and Lopez are in their own ways dramatizations of a “tragic view of man caught in his nature and the trap of time” (Spiller 94). Howard’s characters are unable to resist playing the role of citizen or barbarian when history turns and the region is rewritten for the next cycle. They represent their culture and traditions, Lopez with his ancestry and Brill with his recent claim to Texan birthright, and thus constitute aspects of

the region rather than the whole. This is why Lopez is presented in a sympathetic and even privileged position throughout the story: Lopez is aware of the fact that his dated claim to the region is tenuous at best and must eventually be usurped by the proverbial barbarian hordes. Brill, unlike Howard, does not see the oil boom as writing on the wall for his civilization, but he is very much a man out of place despite his original perception of himself as belonging. He became a farmer only out of necessity; his ineptitude at ranching is evident from the start of the text. Brill seems to sense his lack of possessive security only late in the narrative, bringing him almost around to Lopez' position:

That broken and desecrated tomb was mute evidence that the land was ancient to man, and suddenly the night and the hills and the shadows bore on Brill with a sense of hideous antiquity. Here had long generations of men lived and died before Brill's ancestors ever heard of the land. In the night, in the shadows of this very creek, men had no doubt given up their ghosts in grisly ways. (Tompkins 314)

Brill, the tragic man caught by his nature and time, comes to recognize that he has no security within the region. Despite being his home, the land his people have tamed, it is not a place of safety and it is not his in any meaningful way. The region has persisted, and though it has been conquered by waves of invaders, it always incorporates what was left behind into its cultural makeup. Thus, even if Brill's civilization is doomed or destroyed by its ignorance of pre-existing layers to the region, even if it "no longer survives as a material, sociospatial reality [...] this does not mean that postsouthern geographies exhibit no sense of place. Nor does it mean that the practice of everyday life is futile" (Bone 51). The region will survive and, as it is occupied by the next wave of

barbarians or civilized invaders, Brill's culture will remain as the monsters waiting to be unwittingly discovered by those who came after.

"The Horror from the Mound" is a complicated story despite being, at its heart, a weird combination of the western and the vampire tale. The regionalist overtones enhance the quality of Howard's weird fiction, providing an atmosphere and sense of character that come from lived experience. Howard knew these people and these places, and that knowledge establishes an authenticity not found in his non-Texan writing. Not only is the verisimilitude increased to a remarkable degree by his authoring of the land and people he knew intimately,<sup>53</sup> but the concerns that he – consciously or unconsciously – found important color the whole of the work and give it a sense of immediacy that a tale more disconnected from the world around him would not have had. "The Horror from the Mound" represents some of Howard's more fatalist impulses; the regional life of Texas could not hold against the industrialized North laying claim to its bounty, and thus civilization must fall to the barbarians. The only hope left in such a context is that no invader can rule forever: their civilization will wither over time and fall to the next wave of hordes. The region will persist, and grow, and incorporate each successive wave into itself in some fashion – be it banal or monstrous – and it will never be truly conquered. It

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<sup>53</sup> This quality of verisimilitude was one of Howard's greatest gifts as an author. All of his stories, weird fiction included, carry an abundance of imagery and phrasing that hinges upon his lived experience of the world. Rarely does it overcrowd the working of his narratives, and it always adds to the craft of his texts. Weird fiction authors, by and large, wrote what they knew out of necessity. It was difficult to present the all-important pseudo-realism that Lovecraft demanded in his treatise on weird fiction without writing from a place of experience; for Howard this place of experience was Texas, and he wrote it into almost every one of his weird fictions. Almost nowhere is this put to better effect than in "The Horror from the Mound:" the story would seem almost ridiculous if it were situated anywhere else or had protagonists other than the rancher and cowboy that Howard created. When combined, as it is here, with his terse syntax and poetic diction, Howard's verisimilitude is worthy of critical attention.

supplants history, holds great promise and menace, and always attracts persons with the dream of a complete life within its environs.

“Pigeons from Hell” (1938):

“Pigeons from Hell” was written by Howard late in 1934 and only published posthumously by *Weird Tales* in 1938, two years after the author’s suicide. No critical account of Howard’s oeuvre would be complete without this piece of compelling weird fiction. In his survey of science fiction and horror *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King referred to the story as “one of the finest horror stories of our century” (King 219) and favorably compared it to the work of William Faulkner. It is one of the most referenced and reproduced of Howard’s horrific weird fictions and undoubtedly a favorite among his fans.<sup>54</sup> Although the narrative is complex it is at the core a strong example of the weird tale’s aesthetic potential – one in which the atmosphere builds throughout, adding to the plot without overpowering it in Howard’s particular style – and in which the reader is left to determine for themselves whether or not the story has any of the actual supernatural within it. More importantly “Pigeons from Hell” showcases some of Howard’s strongest regionalist writing; set in the Piney Woods region of East Texas, commonly thought of as part of the Deep South, the narrative stems from folktales handed down to Howard by his paternal grandmother. Throughout the story the South is depicted as a place whose reality destroys nostalgia and, through the workings of the ignorance of outsiders, may represent

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<sup>54</sup> The story has been adapted to television, appearing on Boris Karloff’s *Thriller* series in 1961. It has also been recreated as a comic book twice: once in 1988 by Eclipse Publishing, and more recently by Dark Horse Comics. The latter was scripted by legendary weird writer and fellow Texan Joe R. Lansdale. Equally, it is almost unheard of to find an anthology of Howard’s writings – aside from the specialized anthologies focusing on one particular serial character – that does not include the tale.

the destruction of the unwary invaders who flock to the region from the North. The image of the decrepit antebellum mansion is, in particular, deployed to great effect as the metonymic representation of Texas and the South and its regional realities against the presuppositions of outsiders.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Howard uses the metonymic image of the antebellum house elsewhere in his weird fiction, but to much lesser effect. In “The Shadow of the Beast” (not published until 1977) the dilapidated manor house is a site of horror and death, first affecting outsiders to the region who buy the property, but then remains as a trap for the unwary thereafter. The story is offensively racist: in a pique of jealousy Joe Cagle, an African American man, shoots and kills the brother of a young woman, Joan. The narrator, Steve, consoles her and swears that he will capture Cagle in order to bring him to justice – and to keep him away from a white woman. Steve pursues Cagle throughout the Piney Woods to what is actually called “the Deserted House,” which he enters despite some warnings from locals more familiar with the place than him. From inside he hears the sound of gunshots and a scream.

Exploring the house Steve finds Cagle, dead of both a beating and fright, apparently alone. Some shadowy thing confronts Steve and chases him frantically through the house. During the chase he is overcome with fear, and to his credit Howard manages to convey Steve’s response to the bizarre situation as a believable set of emotional responses. Just as Steve is about to escape from the house he is physically grabbed and hurled out of a second-story window. He awakes to find Joan leaning down over him, tending to his wounds. Steve consoles her by telling her of finding Cagle’s corpse. When Steve exclaims that he has no idea what happened, Joan tells him of how newcomers to the region had bought the Deserted House and took in a gorilla which had escaped from a passing circus. The creature, rebellious, had to be killed, and shortly after that the owners of the house were themselves killed. Realizing that it was the ghost of a gorilla that killed Cagle and attacked him, Steve sets fire to the house. Certain that the blaze will destroy the ghost, Steve leaves with Joan on his arm.

The story is obvious and, despite Howard’s usually fine composition, internally unfulfilling. Joe Cagle is linked metaphorically to the gorilla, and the warning about how outsiders should view the South is made clear by their dispensation. As in “Pigeons from Hell” the South is a region full of horror for the ignorant outsider, but here the quality of threat the region possesses is linked to race. Joe is, like the gorilla, the beast that cannot be integrated into civilized society. Attempting to do so is an aberration that will cause hardship despite the best of intentions. The region is a site of menace if the races are overly mixed. The house, metonymically standing in for the region, comes to ruin because of the introduction of the beast just as the more literal region of the Piney Woods comes to grief due to Joe’s presence. Howard is unfortunately unambiguous in this story: outsiders might seek integration in one way or another, but doing so is always to the detriment of themselves and the greater South around them. The rage and violence of African Americans is brutal in life and persists beyond death – the only appropriate response is to ensure that it is never part of the equation of the region in the first place.

“The Shadow of the Beast” is notable for being a presumably early attempt at the same regional thrust that exists within “Pigeons from Hell.” The image of the antebellum house is used the same in both stories, and the overall regional setting of the Piney Woods is the same. Like “Pigeons from Hell” the story is based on a folktale Howard was told by his grandmother, one of several set in the Piney Woods. The language and atmosphere Howard deploys in “Pigeons from Hell” is the same as in this story, though without his usual exacting composition. The story is offensively racist, with a bigoted moral underlying its more overt prejudiced trappings. It is a useful example of how Howard’s conceptualization of the region had more than one particular facet, and it is interesting to see the ways in which his storytelling changed between tales. But other than that it is a poor piece of work from an otherwise important weird writer.

The story begins *in media res* with Griswell, a tourist from New England, awakening late at night in an abandoned antebellum mansion that he and his friend John Branner had discovered prior to the beginning of the narrative. Griswell recalls the dream that had woken him up: he and John find the abandoned house and, attracted by its “suggestion of antebellum splendor and ultimate decay” (Tompkins 265), make their way inside to rest for the evening. In the dream, Griswell sees himself and Branner laying before the dark fireplace, and then moves inexplicably into an unrecognized chamber filled with shadows and moonlight. There he spies “a Presence of fear and lunacy” (265) before being abruptly moved back to the main room of the house. He sees something that might be a person, “a dim yellow blur that might have been a face” (266) crouching on the landing of the nearby staircase. Griswell then wakes and finds that the sound of whistling is coming from the supposedly empty second floor of the mansion. He realizes that he is immobilized and unable to help as Branner sleepwalks up the stairs to disappear onto the second floor.

Branner’s footsteps stop at an unknown point upstairs, followed shortly by a horrific scream. Griswell watches in terror as Branner appears on the stairwell, descending with a heavy tread and bearing a blood-covered hatchet in his hand. His head is split open in a gory mess; he is unquestionably dead, and yet he steadily walks towards Griswell. Griswell panics, hurling himself out a window in order to flee. Chased through the darkness by an unknown creature, he stumbles across Sheriff Buckner who is

returning from having taken “a nigger over to the county-seat in the next county” (269).<sup>56</sup> After a harried discussion the two return to the mansion, with Buckner telling Griswell that the house was originally the home of the Blassenville family. The Blassenville’s fortunes diminished after the Civil War due to the loss of their slaves after emancipation. The family dwindled over time until there were only four sisters and one aunt (who had returned to the plantation after spending time in the West Indies) remaining. Although all of the family is remembered as disreputable, the aunt, Celia, is particularly reviled for her abuses leveled at a half-white maid that was in her employ. Three of the sisters disappear after Joan, the maid, ran off and Celia vanished – presumably returning to the West Indies. The youngest sister fled the mansion in terror, convinced that something was prowling the ostensibly empty house, searching for her. After that, the place was abandoned and avoided by the locals.

Griswell and Buckner return to the Blassenville house and find Branner lying in his sleeping roll by the fireplace, dead, with the hatchet in his hand and stuck into the floorboards. An examination of the house reveals his footprints going upstairs, meeting with a set of small “tracks of bare feet, narrow but with splayed toes” (274) at a point covered in blood and brain matter, and the pair flee. Convinced that Griswell is telling the truth about what he has experienced, Buckner takes him to the county-seat to drop off Branner’s corpse before heading out to visit Jacob, an old man who lives nearby the

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that Howard deploys unquestionably racist language throughout the story. It is my suspicion that this is more for the purposes of verisimilitude than it is reflective of Howard’s own racist views; Howard was much more comfortable with displaying his bigotries in his private letters than he was in his professional work. The racism in “Pigeons from Hell” is, therefore, likely to accurately depict the peoples and places that make up the subject matter of the story. Nevertheless, casual racism is deployed throughout the text and is, simply, offensive. I repeat the language as written by Howard out of a sense of felicity to the text, but I do not endorse the prejudiced attitudes reflected thereby.

mansion. Buckner says that “[t]he black people know more than we do about some things” (280), and together the pair force Jacob to speak to them. Despite being in fear of a supernatural punishment for revealing information, Jacob tells them of how one of the Blassenville women came to him from the plantation requesting a potion. This potion would allow her to create a *zuvemie*, a female monster of awful power and longevity driven by a murderous hatred. When asked if the woman who visited him was Joan, the abused maid, Jacob starts as though he had been in a fugue. As he predicted, he is attacked by a serpent while reaching for firewood, and dies.

The two men are convinced that Joan, the maid, has turned herself into a *zuvemie* out of a lust for revenge on the family that abused her. Determined to see an end to the occurrences at the Blassenville mansion, Buckner and Griswell return to spend the night in the hopes of drawing out the creature. They discover a faded diary written by the one surviving Blassenville sister, Elizabeth, highlighting the confusion and fear she endured during her final few nights in the house. Griswell goes to sleep, and has a dream of fleeing from the house: he is terrified to awaken and find that he is climbing the staircase to the second floor. Unable to stop himself, he shouts to Buckner for help but is inexorably dragged up to meet the *zuvemie* face to face. To him “[i]t looked like a woman, but no human woman ever walked with that skulking gait, and no human woman ever had that face of horror, that leering yellow blur of lunacy – he tried to scream at the sight of that face, at the glint of keen steel in the uplifted claw-like hand” (290). Just as Griswell is sure he is about to die, Buckner appears from behind him and shoots the creature. It flees to a secret chamber, and the men give chase. There they discover the *zuvemie*, dead, and three more withered corpses in fancy dress dangling from chains



attached to the ceiling. These they surmise are the three Blassenville sisters who disappeared. Upon inspecting the zuevmbie they realize that it is not, in fact, Joan; she must have slipped the transformative potion into the food or drink of the victim as an act of monstrous revenge, for the zuevmbie was none other than aunt Celia herself.

It is difficult to capture the power of “Pigeons from Hell” in a recounting. Howard presents a fearful atmosphere that mounts throughout; the awakening of Griswell to discover that he is climbing the stairwell in the Blassenville mansion is one of the most terrifying moments in early American weird fiction. The familiarity with which Howard approaches his subject is what makes the piece, for in the hands of a non-regional author the plot would come across as hackneyed or, at least, uninteresting. But Howard uses his understanding of the locale, history, and people of the region to turn the story into an effective weird tale with strong regionalist undertones. For it is the region that is of issue in the text – the region, and the ignorant persons who seek to invade it without knowing the history of the land. Griswell and Branner discover to their detriment that, as the Poetic Society of South Carolina phrased it, “culture in the South is not merely an *antebellum* tradition, but an instant, vital force, awaiting only opportunity and recognition to burst [forth]” (Toledano 9).<sup>57</sup> They represent the Northern invaders Howard decried, who flocked to the South and expected to find either the continuation of the country *as they knew it* or an experience that *matched their preconceptions*.

Either option is impossible, and Howard goes to some length to depict the presuppositions of Griswell and Branner as hopelessly ignorant. Under different

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<sup>57</sup> Though, it should be said, Howard is dealing with this notion of culture in the South as a horrific thing, for reasons that will be explored shortly.

conditions their attitudes would be comical, but Howard makes it plain that this is not a humorous manner. An inability to meet the region *as it is* leads to serious problems for the outsider; ignorance of history and culture can have horrific consequences for the unprepared. Griswell spends a moment ruminating on the errors of his presuppositions while returning to the Blassenville manor:

A scent of decay and moldering vegetation blew on the faint wind, and Griswell grew faint with nausea, that rose from a frantic abhorrence of these black woods, these ancient plantation houses that hid forgotten secrets of slavery and bloody pride and mysterious intrigues. He had thought of the South as a sunny, lazy land washed by soft breezes laden with spice and warm blossoms, where life ran tranquil to the rhythm of black folk singing in sun-bathed cotton-fields. But now he had discovered another, unsuspected side – a dark, brooding, fear-haunted side, and the discovery repelled him. (Tompkins 271)

Griswell (and Branner, one may assume) were attracted to Texas and the South out of a sense of *nostalgia* for a region which likely never existed. Their conceptualization of the South is of the fictionalized, romantic representations of a pre-Civil War era that the Southern Renaissance so despised. Having no understanding of life in the South, they are put into harm's way by their own arrogant suppositions. Howard's regionalism is foregrounded in this story by highlighting exactly how ridiculous – and dangerous – it can be to expect a region with a vibrant culture, tradition, and history to conform to an outsider's expectations. When faced with the South *as it is* rather than *as they want it to be* Griswell and Branner can only respond with awe, horror, and death.

To his credit however, Griswell partially realizes how mistaken his nostalgic idea of the South had been. Towards the middle of the tale he muses that “[h]e was a stranger in a strange land” (276). However, he goes on to think that the “land had become suddenly imbued with black horror” (276). This is patently in error, as Howard is quick to point out, since the horror he has met has been part of the land for far longer than he has been in the region. There is nothing sudden about it: the monstrosity that the Blassenvilles represent has been an element of the region’s culture for an extensive period. Whereas Griswell came to the South hoping to be met by his nostalgia for the antebellum period, he was instead met by the nightmare of the antebellum era. This force sleeps, shunned by the actual inhabitants of the region, but is awakened when the ignorant outsider comes fumbling around what they do not understand. Howard is lambasting the Northern attitude that the South is something they already know, despite not being a part of the culture and tradition that grew up there. The region has its dark underbelly, and the suggestion here is that these forces are capable of returning – to the outsider’s detriment – if those who do not understand them are permitted to behave as though they have mastery over the land.

Perhaps the most telling moment comes when Griswell and Buckner are en route to meet with Jacob. He actively compares the South with his home in the North, exclaiming that “[t]o me witchcraft was always associated with old crooked streets in waterfront towns, overhung by gabled roofs that were old when they were hanging witches in Salem [...] Witchcraft always meant the old towns of New England to me – but all this is more terrible than any New England legend” (280). Here the comparison of the South with the North is overt, and the relief between the two suggests that the differences

are greater than the similarities. Griswell may have been equipped for the weirdness that lay in wait within New England, but he could not hope to be prepared for the realities of the South as it exists. Ransom Tate, a founder of the Fugitive movement, argued that “[t]he language of literature must provide a ‘communion,’ an experience of participation, not mere communication” (Bradbury 120). Howard provides a stark reverse image of that idea; as the story progresses, the reader witnesses how far *from* communion Griswell is. Even when embroiled in the most deep-seated and historic horrors of the region, even when directly observing how the past is forever on the cusp of eruption into the present, Griswell cannot be said to experience participation in any meaningful sense.

Indeed, Griswell, the reader’s point of view character, is a representation of every Northerner that Howard has seen flock to the South. He is every reader of Howard’s work in the universally Northern produced pulp magazines. None of them can be said to be a part of the region, because none of them have that experience of participation. Howard underscores this fact in a straightforward manner – he gives Griswell next to nothing to do over the course of the story. Every progressive action is enacted by a local in one way or another: Celia Blassenville attacks and is the active threat throughout the story, while Jacob is the one who relays information necessary to discover the truth, and sheriff Buckner is the one who finds Elizabeth’s diary, fights Celia, and realizes who the zuembie really was all along. Throughout the weird tale Griswell merely watches, reacts, responds, but does not participate in any meaningful way. He relays the information back to the North through the narrative itself – metatextually he is the “author” of a story prepared and published for a mostly Northern audience in a Northern publication – but by doing so he highlights nothing more than the distance between

himself and the events he has witnessed. Griswell cannot be included in the South, even through action. All he is capable of is watching and attempting to come to some understanding of the truth of the region.

“Pigeons from Hell” is perhaps Howard’s most scathing take on the Northern invaders in all of his weird fiction.<sup>58</sup> The Blassenville manor is the metonymic representation for the dark side of the region’s cultural history, suggestive of qualities of the South which have been left abandoned but persist all the same. The actions of the ignorant are inherently destructive and lead to the threat of death; there is little distinction in Howard’s writing between Northern interests, who transform small towns under the expectation that they will conform to the ideals of Northern values, and the revivification of temporarily buried implements of hatred by Griswell and his outsider kind. Both represent a gross misunderstanding of the South and its manner of life, and this

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<sup>58</sup> As with other of Howard’s weird fictions, “Pigeons from Hell” combines elements from distinct generic categories. Most notably the story can be read to a degree as both a weird tale and as a southern gothic. This is neither particularly problematic nor unusual for weird fiction. Literary conventions of the period tended to be fluid in genre fiction; there is no particular reason, for example, to suggest that Clark Ashton Smith’s outer space stories cannot be read as both weird fiction and proto-science fiction stories. There are, to my knowledge, no other clear examples of weird fiction blending with the southern gothic outside of Howard (though there is an anecdotal crossover between the genres: Tennessee Williams of southern gothic fame published his story “The Vengeance of Nitocris” in *Weird Tales* in 1928, when he was sixteen years old). The one note of “Pigeons from Hell” which would distinguish it from the southern gothic would be the absence of magical realism. Southern gothic fictions tend towards embedding magical elements within an otherwise mundane setting to present the fantastic as a natural part of the narrative, whereas strict weird fiction aesthetics necessitates the singular fantastic element that breaks from the realist presentation in order to emphasize the difference between the two.

The distinction is a fine but important one. Throughout “Pigeons from Hell” the fantastic elements of the Blassenville family are presented as an aberration rather than a natural part of the setting. Though they symbolize the dormant monstrosity of the South’s regional history, they are superficially abnormal. The reactions of the locals, such as Sheriff Bruckner, make it clear that they are a horrific break from realism rather than a subtly magical element of the setting’s realism itself. In all other ways “Pigeons from Hell” meets the generic expectations of the southern gothic, however, and I would have little difficulty with arguing that it can be read as such – so long as specific caveats such as the lack of magical realism were indicated. Generic categories, as said, were fluid in the pulp era, and there is a reciprocal bleed between several otherwise distinct sub-genres of the fantastic. Ultimately Howard’s stories are weird rather than southern gothic, but it is critically interesting to note the potential similarity between the two genres.

misunderstanding comes at a heavy cost. The most active thing Griswell does throughout “Pigeons from Hell” is hurl himself out of a window of the Blassenville mansion in fear. If Howard is, indeed, metonymically representing the whole of the South in the image of the collapsed mansion, then it would seem that he is suggesting – perhaps partially tongue in cheek – that this is exactly what all ignorant outsiders should do: break out as best they can and flee, before the horrible past returns to haunt them.

“Black Canaan” (1933):

The regionalism of Howard is as much about delineation as it is historic cycles. The boundaries of the region are always clearly drawn in Howard’s weird fiction, but the crux of his stories often focuses on the transgression of those boundaries. Horror is the initial result when the region is revealed to be more fluid than firm but, paradoxically, true participation in the region can only be achieved when those fluid boundaries are intra-penetrated by local inhabitants. It is only by accepting the region as it is, rather than how it is demarcated on maps, that actual regionalist belonging can be attained. “Black Canaan” is one of Howard’s strongest examples of the paradox of intra-regional boundaries and their transgression. Written in 1933 and published in 1936, the year of Howard’s death, it has drawn both praise and condemnation for its faithful depiction of Southern regionalism and the racism that Howard saw fit to replicate in the text. H. P. Lovecraft was the first to note that the story is a regional one: in his *Weird Tales* obituary for Howard he noted its “genuine regional background and its clutchingly compelling

picture of the horror that stalks through the moss-hung, shadow-cursed, serpent-ridden swamps of the American far South” (Lovecraft 124).<sup>59</sup>

The story focuses on Canaan, a region deep within the Piney Woods of East Texas, and the demarcations within the region: the towns Grimesville and Goshen, and the House of Damballah, a place of worship for the local black population. Intriguingly, these areas are not borne out of racial segregation; with the exception of the House of Damballah, blacks and whites move interchangeably between them. They are nevertheless unique unto themselves, dangerous to outsiders just as the greater region of Canaan is itself separate from the land surrounding it. As Joe Lafely, a stable hand, says at the outset of the story “[n]o one *outside* knows what goes on in there” (Tompkins 232). More so than in any other of his weird works, Howard’s regionalism in “Black Canaan” demands an understanding of the region as a set of contradictions: stable, yet shifting, impenetrable, but fluid, demarcated, but unitary. Canaan is described by Kirby Buckner, the story’s narrator, as a large triangle of field, swamp, and forest whose limits are set by The Black River, the Tularoosa river, and the Nigger Head Creek:

The trend of Black River is from northwest to southeast; so these three streams form the great irregular triangle known as Canaan. [...] In Canaan lived the sons and daughters of the white frontiersmen who first settled the country, and the sons and daughters of their slaves. Joe Lafely was right;

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<sup>59</sup> Howard, however, thought that the text had *lost* a significant amount of the regionalism he had carefully worked into the text. He complained of editorial concerns that had forced him to alter the story to a significant degree in a 1936 letter to August Derleth, saying that “I cut so much of the guts out of it, in response to editorial requirements, that in its published form it won’t resemble the original theme” (Indick 106). While it is possible that Howard is speaking from the depression that would eventually cause his suicide, he might also have been entirely truthful. Considering the text of his weird tale that we have on hand it would be incredible to think of a *more* regionalist version.

we were an isolated, shut-mouthed breed, self-sufficient, jealous of our seclusion and independence. (232)

But Buckner is contradicted throughout the story. The purportedly monolithic block of Canaan is revealed to actually be a collection of smaller, equally independent, regions. The peoples of Canaan are shown to be far from self-sufficient, with assistance (and, admittedly, corruption) entering into the region from disparate places. And “isolated and shut-mouthed” can hardly be used to describe Buckner himself, who at the story’s outset is in New Orleans, far away from Canaan; he only returns home after a stranger tells him that there is trouble in Canaan. “Black Canaan” is, therefore, a study by Howard in how the region is a meaningful, significant social and cultural creation that seems to be a monolithic entity but is in reality a permeable, unstable, and internally conflicted set of concerns. The region, more than just a geographic location, is not wholly impermeable, and changes depending on the positioning and perception of the individual who experiences it.

The story begins with Kirby Buckner receiving word in New Orleans that there is trouble in Canaan. He rushes home and encounters a strange African American woman in the woods who ensorcelles him with her physical beauty. She calls him by name, claiming that “[a]ll the people of Canaan speak of you, white or black” (234), and has him attacked by three large African American men. Buckner manages to kill two of them and drives off the third, by which time the woman has disappeared. Buckner’s friend Esau McBride appears with a group of riders, hunting for a group of African American men who supposedly killed a local, Ridge Jackson. Suspecting that the men who just attacked him might be the same persons, Buckner explains what happened and is told that the men



Esau is searching for are compatriots of Saul Stark. Stark is a newcomer to Canaan, having moved to the Neck, a smaller area inside of Canaan, from South Carolina.<sup>60</sup> Esau tells Buckner of how Stark is universally disliked amongst the whites of Canaan despite having caused no trouble thus far; there is an aura of menace about him that the locals inherently distrust. Buckner learns that the woman he encountered is most likely the same woman that came to the region with Stark some months prior.

As the group approaches Grimesville, the second demarcation within the region, Buckner ruminates on how the areas are determined not by race, but by class. Grimesville, “the community center of the white population of Canaan” (238), is home to “the rude aristocracy of that backwoods democracy” (238), both white and black, while the outlying areas are the demesne of the independent farmers of both races. Nevertheless, racial tensions rear up when Esau tells Buckner that all of the black inhabitants of Grimesville have disappeared, fled into the woods and beyond seemingly overnight. This causes the pair to worry that an “uprising” is coming:

That word was enough to strike chill fear into the heart of any Canaan-dweller. The blacks had risen in 1845, and the red terror of that revolt was not forgotten, nor the three lesser rebellions before it, when the slaves rose and spread fire and slaughter from the Tularoosa to the shores of the Black River. The fear of a black uprising lurked forever in the depths of that

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<sup>60</sup> This reference to the Neck is the first indication that the region of Canaan is not as homogeneous as has been suggested. Howard deftly continues introducing these smaller and smaller intra-region demarcations without playing their differences up too greatly; it seems that if one is a part of the Neck, or Grimesville, or Goshen, then one is segregated from other inhabitants of Canaan, but are still considered part of the whole. The region, here, is almost fractal in its construction as a result – the boundaries and borders spring up in increasingly fine ways the closer that one looks at it.

forgotten back-country; the very children absorbed it in their cradles.

(236)

Buckner recalls an incident during his grandfather's time when an expedition from Grimesville was ambushed outside of Goshen, the third demarcation of the region, and murdered. Howard is being potentially ironic when he has Buckner offhandedly state that Goshen was then "a rendezvous for runaway slaves" (237), suggesting mitigating circumstances for the ambush. But Howard returns to moral ambiguity when he has Buckner note that Grimesville was devastated in a simultaneous attack.<sup>61</sup> The region is not immune to the specter of the South's prejudiced history despite the fact that the social

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<sup>61</sup> The concept of race-based vengeance is not unknown to Howard, however, and he uses it to great effect in at least one of his other weird stories where his narrative voice is firmly on the side of the oppressed minority. In "The Dead Remember," published in *Argosy* in August 1936, Howard uses a series of letters and witness reports to present an act of violence enacted by a white cowboy against a helpless black family, and the supernatural vengeance that comes back to him as a result. Jim Gordon writes his brother William to tell him that he knows he is going to die very soon. He has gotten drunk while sharing the hospitality of Joel and Jezebel, a black couple living along a cattle trail, and murdered the two of them in a fit of rage. Jezebel tries to stop him, but her musket misfires and he is able to shoot her; as she dies she utters a curse, stating that he will die before the day has rolled around again.

A run of nearly fatal bad luck follows Jim from there until he arrives at Dodge City. He dreams of Jezebel speaking words that he cannot hear, and he hallucinates that the shirt given to him by his brother to use as a cleaning rag has transformed into the red and green checked dress that Jezebel had been wearing when he murdered her. From there the story proceeds through a succession of witness statements concerning the death of a beleaguered, drunken man in Dodge City. Each statement reveals a bit more about the final moments of Jim Gordon's life, and each portrays a distinct yet authentic Texas character. The final report is made by one Tom Allison, who narrates how he met a shadowy woman outside of the bar Jim was hiding in. She directs him to tell Jim that she is waiting for him, and when he relays the message Jim rushes outside with his gun drawn. His pistol bursts just as Jezebel's musket had burst, and he is killed by the backfire. A coroner's report concludes the story by stating that Jim had evidently failed to remove his cleaning rag from his pistol – pieces were discovered in the aftermath, and they came from a swatch of a woman's red and green checked dress.

"The Dead Remember" consists of perhaps the most sympathetic portrayal of an oppressed minority in Howard's weird fiction. Equally, its documentary format makes it a compelling regional tale by way of authentically drawn characters speaking in naturalistic dialogue that reflects the lived experience of the place. It is, however, a rather straightforward and simple tale for all of the skill that Howard put into crafting it. It is noteworthy because of Howard's deft regionalist portrayal of people emerging uniquely and naturally from the culture around them, and because of the overtly sympathetic usage of racially determined vengeance in what would otherwise be an ordinary revenge fantasy. But it lacks the depth and regionalist complexity that makes so many of Howard's other weird fictions worth analysis, and as such it should be considered an example of running themes and patterns in his work more than anything else.

segregation cleaves to economic rather than racial lines; the violence of decades prior constantly threatens the inhabitants with a potential return despite arising from distinct historical contexts, foregrounding the paradoxical stability and simultaneous instability of the region.

Buckner takes part in an interrogation of Tope Sorley, a local to Grimesville who was caught trying to flee the area in the night. Sorley is terrified and unwilling to cooperate despite the threats of his interrogators, until Buckner uses his reputation as a kind and loyal man to get him to talk. Sorley tells the assembled men that Saul Stark is a “conjure man” (239) who wants to slaughter the white inhabitants of Canaan and take over the region for himself. Stark has convinced the local black population to follow him with a mixture of religious reverence and fear of his powers; Sorley himself is terrified that Stark will take revenge upon him for revealing his plans by “putting me in the swamp” (239). Fearing an imminent attack on Grimesville, Buckner heads out to the country to see if he can settle matters himself. Beyond the newly abandoned cabins there is only the empty wilderness until he reaches the Neck, where he finds Stark’s hut. Buckner is about to break in when he remembers “a story of how voodoo men leave their huts guarded in their absence by a powerful ju-ju spirit to deal madness and death to the intruder” (243). Fearing this outcome despite its implausibility, Buckner leaves without entering the cabin. Shortly thereafter he has another encounter with the strange black woman he met at the outset, and she mocks him for being afraid of Stark’s powers.

She appears even more mysterious and alluring to Buckner. He describes her as “alien, even in this primitive setting; she needed a grimmer, more bestial background, a background of steaming jungle, reeking black swamps, flaring fires and cannibal feasts,

and the bloody altars of abysmal tribal gods” (244). It should be noted that she is not being relegated to the status of an outsider due to her race: throughout the story blacks and whites freely mix without concern in Canaan. The woman is an outsider simply because she comes from a place that is not Canaan, and as such she cannot fully participate in the life of the local population. She is a foreigner to Canaan despite the length of time she has spent there, just as Buckner is of Canaan despite having spent a significant amount of time in other environs. This regional exclusivity reflects how “the sheer complexity and variety of regional differences work to place the region at odds with pervasive and highly generic notions of ‘American’ identity” (Jackson 155), since if individuals cannot transplant between regions then there cannot be any sense of unity on a national scale. While the intra-regional borders are permeable with only the semblance of fixity, suggesting the possibility of internal cultural enrichment for the inhabitants, the lines between regions – and between the region and the nation itself – are still firm. What belongs in one cannot cross to the other without aberration.

The woman goes on to tell Buckner how Stark will bring doom down upon the whole of Canaan. He intends to dominate both the black and the white population, and has already conquered the black locals: “[t]hey are his slaves. If they disobey he kills them, *or puts them in the swamp*. For long have we looked for a place to begin our rule. We have chosen Canaan. You whites must go. And since we know that white people can never be driven away from their land, we must kill you all” (Tompkins 245). Once more it is clear that the presumption of the outsider has less to do with racial fidelity and more to do with an imperialist impulse – the belief that the difference of the region can be elided, and the interloper can inflict their will upon it without issue. There is more than a

little of Howard's own thoughts on the Northern interests invading Cross Plains during his lifetime here, allegorized through the lens of race-based violence, but it is interesting that he has chosen to describe Stark as willing to subjugate blacks as well as whites. This indicates that the imperialist impulse is the actual threat rather than the racial difference which the Grimesville inhabitants fear will cause the black population to rise up again. The woman places a conjure on Buckner, telling him that he will be compelled to come to her in "the House of Damballah" at sundown. He will bear witness to Stark disciplining men who have turned against him by putting them in the swamp, and he will then be sacrificed by her in a religious ritual. Afterwards Buckner, too, will be put in the swamp. The woman leaps into the bush and flees while Buckner shoots ineffectually at her.

Trying to return back to Grimesville, Buckner runs into his friend Jim Braxton. He explains to Braxton that there will be an attack on Grimesville tonight, but that he is compelled to go to Goshen. Braxton accompanies Buckner against his wishes, and to their surprise they find the small community of Goshen, home to a mix of blacks and whites, deserted. Buckner declares that the inhabitants must either be dead or in the House of Damballah, the fourth demarcation within the greater region of Canaan. Braxton describes it as "a neck of land in the Tularoosa about three miles west of here. My grandpap used to talk about it. The niggers held their heathen palavers there back in slave times" (253). This is the one subdivision within Canaan that is entirely segregated upon racial lines. However, this subordinate bordering does not denote absolute fixity since the line of demarcation is ultimately a permeable one. Braxton fires at something which Bruckner suspects is the woman in the form of an apparition, but apparently

misses her. The two are attacked by something unknown on their way through Goshen, and Jim Braxton is eventually killed by it. During the attack they cannot determine if it is an animal or a man, since it seems of human outline but moves on all fours and has slick, black skin like the local alligators. Bruckner is chilled when he finds Braxton's corpse and sees that "the marks of strangling fingers showed black on his throat. [...] no human fingers ever left such marks as those" (256). Still compelled, Bruckner proceeds as secretly as possible into the House of Damballah.

From a hidden vantage point he witnesses the Dance of Skulls. Stark, attired like a barbarian chieftain, leads an assembled group of worshippers through an invocation and summons the creatures that had attacked Buckner and Braxton. There are five of them, and they are obviously the remains of what once were men who have been changed by Stark's conjuring. They attend Stark as he works over a bound and covered body at his feet – his next victim to be put into the swamp. But the Dance of Skulls is required, and the woman again appears to fulfill her part in the ritual. It seems that Braxton's bullet did strike true, however, for she is kept alive only by her hatred and her dedication to the ritual's completion. She collapses dead part way through, and Buckner is freed as the crowd of worshippers panic and disperse. Buckner meets with one of the monsters in the water of the swamp and dispatches it while Stark is run down by the four remaining creatures and temporarily immobilized. Buckner confronts Stark and after a brief fight manages to kill him. On the ground he finds Tope Sorley, halfway through being transformed into one of the monsters from the swamp, and he puts him down with a mercy killing.

The story concludes with Buckner victorious, saved “but for the loyalty of Jim Braxton” (262). He reflects on how the events, horrific as they are, have gone largely unnoticed by the locals whom he considers his peers:

The white people of Canaan never found anything on the island except the bodies of Saul Stark and the brown woman. They think to this day that a swamp negro killed Jim Braxton, after he had killed the brown woman, and that I broke up the threatened uprising by killing Saul Stark. I let them think it. They will never know the shapes the black water of Tularoosa hides. That is a secret I share with the cowed and terror-haunted black people of Goshen, and of it neither they nor I have ever spoken. (262)

What is remarkable here is that Buckner has become the first white man to ever set foot in the House of Danballah. He has pierced the barriers between all of the region’s subdivisions, and come away transformed. The experience of the totality of the region binds Buckner to it *en toto*, rather than to one particular demarcated area like Grimesville. His experience has made him into the whole person that is the hope of regionalists; by transgressing the intra-regional boundaries and becoming a full participant within regional life, he has shored up Canaan as a whole, sustaining it against invasion by outsiders. That this metonymic unity, following from the individual to the region as a unit entire, cleaves against rather than with racial divisions is significant. Against all odds and against the tragedies of the past, the region resists being *broken down* in simplistic or easy ways, such as the obvious marker of race. Through Buckner’s experience the region not only avoids corruption by external invaders, it also renews itself as a presence of unique culture and composition against any other regional identity.

“Black Canaan” is a troubling, partially offensive narrative that is nevertheless critically engaging. Howard’s disappointment with its present form has not dissuaded fans and critics from recognizing it as one of his most significant achievements despite its problematic elements.<sup>62</sup> Unlike in “Pigeons from Hell” and “The Horror from the Mound,” Howard presents Texas and the South as a disordered thing that cannot be easily mapped to simple geography. The region is a collection of smaller areas, unique unto themselves, that continue to divide the closer one looks at them. This is not to their detriment, however, since to Howard each of these smaller areas adds their unique strengths to the greater whole. Just as Goshen adds to Canaan, Cross Plains adds to Central West Texas. And, from there, all of the greater regions contribute their unique culture and tradition to the nation as a whole without becoming lost within the overarching culture. It is when an inhabitant of the region embraces the whole as well as the specific, as Howard embraced both East and West Texas, that the local inhabitant becomes the regional participant, emerging to support their cultural life against foreign threats. Fixity within the region is both an illusion, in some senses, and a reality in others. To be a whole person the inhabitant must straddle the breadth of the place; they must accept all of the region and adhere to its qualities and quirks, or else risk saving one element while the others are destroyed.

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<sup>62</sup> Not all critics have condemned Howard for the problematic elements in his weird fiction, however. Rusty Burke is emblematic of the minority – but persuasive – view that “Black Canaan” deploys far more than rank racism. He writes: “guilt over the oppression of blacks, over deliberately depriving other human beings of the very freedom the white Southerner claims so fiercely as his birthright, over systematically depriving an entire race of their very human dignity, plays an important role in the psychic makeup of the white Southerner. When Howard portrays the inhabitants of the old plantation house as autocrats and oppressors, when he names the black settlements ‘Goshen’ and ‘Egypt,’ the Biblical land of oppression and slavery (and calls the white town ‘Grimesville’), when he shows whites fearful of a black uprising, and blacks falling prey to unscrupulous characters who promise liberation, I think he is trying to deal with that guilt” (Burke 21).



Conclusion:

Dr. John D. Clark introduced an anthology of Howard's Conan stories by saying that one should not "look for hidden philosophical meanings or intellectual puzzles in the yarns – they aren't there" (Clark 12). Though certainly a fan of Howard's writing, Clark comes across as so dismissive that one has to wonder why he wished to contribute to the anthology in the first place. Sadly, however, there has been a longstanding view of Howard as little more than a talented hack writer. Certainly ham-handed depictions of his greatest creations, such as the various meager Conan and Solomon Kane films, have not helped correct this misconception. Furthermore it is the case that, as with the pastiches of Lovecraft's weird fiction written by devotees, Howard's weird fiction was followed after his suicide by various attempts to add fan-written pastiches to his robust catalogue of work. This weakened the public and critical perception of Howard's writing to a substantial degree, which I think is entirely unwarranted. Howard undoubtedly had his flaws: his prejudices were varied and his work was often hampered by writing quickly so as to put out as much material as possible. Many of his plots are recycled from either his own stories or from generic weird fiction scenarios, and he was known to rework rejected stories into different genres so that he could send them as fresh submissions to different publishers. Nevertheless, Howard was one of the luminaries of early American weird fiction, and the complexities of his writing should not be discounted just because he wrote for a penny a word in the pulp magazines or because he is best remembered for an unrepentant barbarian in the sword and sorcery milieu.

Howard was first and foremost a regionalist writer. Texas, the South, and the Southwest informed almost every word he put on the page. His representations of Texas as a site of both promise and menace contributed a regionalist quality to weird fiction that has rarely been seen since. Howard realized, in a humble way, that he was providing a new look upon the experience and culture of the region. He discussed this point in a 1933 letter to Lovecraft:

I was the first to light a torch of literature in this part of the country, however small, frail, and easily extinguished that flame may be. I am, in my way, a pioneer. To the best of my knowledge I am the first writer to be produced by a section of country comprising a territory equal to that of the state of Connecticut. [...] I have not been a success, and probably never will be. But whatever my failure, I have this thing to remember – that I was a pioneer in my profession, just as my grandfathers were in theirs, in that I was the first man in this section to earn his living as a writer. (Lord 147)

In Howard's weird fiction, the barbarian is always at the door. Civilization was always threatening to collapse into decadence despite the best wishes of the pioneering locals or the well-intentioned invaders from outside the region. The nostalgia for a regional life that never was formed an ever-present threat which spelled doom for outsiders whose ignorance led them to confuse fantasies and cultural history. Inter- and intra-regional dispute menaced the whole with a weakening of the solidarity that made the preservation of the region so important when faced with assimilation and erasure by broader nationalist perspectives. Howard saw the promise and the problem of life within Texas

and expressed his lived experience of regionalism within his weird fictions. There is no doubt that without Texas there would not be a Robert E. Howard, and without Howard the breadth of weird fiction would be sorely lacking.

## Chapter Four:

### “You’ve read about Him in those books I showed you”: Robert Bloch and the Weird

#### Fiction Pastiche

##### Introduction:

By the mid-1930s there was a stable of first-generation American weird fiction authors who codified the genre’s theoretical motifs, conventions, and themes to suit their aesthetic and philosophic temperament. Through their stories, poems, and assorted works, weird fiction became a part of public consciousness. At the height of their popularity the variety of amateur and professional magazines which published weird fiction could reach circulation numbers of over a million copies per issue.<sup>63</sup> Though there was some resistance to their reconfiguration of supernatural horror, non-supernatural horror, and the fantastic through the lens of the weird (most notably in the letter columns of the pulp magazines themselves), many more readers eagerly flocked to the new genre. Several professional writers began their careers as fans of weird fiction, and it is with those fans-turned-pro this chapter is concerned. The tumultuous war years left their mark upon H. P. Lovecraft’s writing; the complexities of modernist art imprinted on Clark Ashton Smith’s conception of artistry; the continuing development of Texas bred a particular philosophy of resistance in Robert E. Howard; and the work of these authors, in turn, became the milieu that informed the work of aspiring young authors. Weird fiction had become the

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<sup>63</sup> *Weird Tales* only occasionally topped fifty-thousand issues in a printing, while other pulp titles which published the work of the early American weird fiction authors – such as *Astounding Science Fiction and Fact*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Startling Stories* – could regularly reach numbers in the hundreds of thousands, and occasionally broke the barrier of one million issues in a printing.

influence which would give new American writers the structure that organized their narrative creations and influenced the elements they used to redevelop weird fiction as a genre.

Weird fiction, in other words, had become the historical context for second-generation authors. The widespread cultural penetration of weird fiction was such that it was rare for any genre fiction reader to be unaware of at least some of the authors who had forged careers in the first three decades of the Twentieth Century. Their works were popular enough to take a preeminent position in the world of pulp fiction, leading to dozens of magazines printing works from all of the early American weird fiction authors. Those of the first generation, such as Lovecraft, Smith, and Howard, paved the way for weird fiction to take on a generic life of its own: they created an artistic milieu of their own that matched the tastes, expectations, and desires of modern fantastic literature. The second generation of weird fiction writers followed closely after them, sometimes congruently with them, and found fertile soil in the aesthetics of weird fiction. Whereas the First World War was the historical context that informed some of Lovecraft's work, for example, weird fiction became the historical context for authors who were inspired by him and his writing.

Robert Bloch (1917 – 1994) was one such writer. From 1934 to 1937, Bloch, still a teenager, maintained an extensive correspondence friendship with H. P. Lovecraft, whose stories he had discovered in the pulps. Lovecraft served as a literary mentor to Bloch, reading his short stories and advising him on his work even during the months when he was enduring the agony of terminal stomach cancer. It was due to Lovecraft's influence that Bloch sought his first professional publication at the age of seventeen, in

the Winter 1934 issue of *Marvel Tales*. It was the beginning of a career as a professional writer that spanned more than six decades; Bloch was a prolific writer and ardent supporter of genre literature, and was much beloved by the fan community that he helped establish during his early career. Bloch is best remembered as the author of the novel *Psycho* (1959), which brought him to broader public attention through the adaptation of the eponymous film by Alfred Hitchcock. As *Psycho* demonstrates, Bloch developed into the genres of the suspense thriller during his middle period. An attraction to psychology and the figure of the serial murderer resulted in Bloch largely – but not completely – leaving weird fiction behind. However, his tenure as a weird fiction author did color the rest of his oeuvre, leaving traces that he would elsewhere develop into some of his most commercially successful works. Weird fiction as developed by Lovecraft and other prominent figures in the genre was the pool from which Bloch drew inspiration in many ways; it was the milieu which informed and shaped his writing for many years. In effect, Bloch is emblematic of what is perhaps the most critically shunned form of weird fiction text: the pastiche.

The pastiche's standing as a form of artwork has been contested by theorists for centuries. Pastiche arises out of the Italian Renaissance concept of the "pasticcio," a Sixteenth Century term referring to a pie made out of meat and pasta which, when applied to art, suggests a work that is a hodgepodge of elements taken from pre-existing sources. As a form of homage, the pastiche was seen as a valid but inferior form of art. The earliest definition of a pastiche as it is thought of currently dates to Roger de Piles in 1677, here summarized by Ferdinand Brunot:

As to the pastiches, there are “pictures that are neither original nor copies,” but counterfeit works. Their name comes from the Italian ‘*pastichi*, which means paté: because as the things that make up a paté are reduced to one taste, the falsities that constitute a pastiche tend to produce only one truth. (Brunot 718)

It is that sense of the pastiche being neither original nor a direct copy that tends to lend the category a pejorative air, since with “the recycling of pastiche, the old generic intensities are no longer available, and the novel itself risks being reduced accordingly” (Dentith 179). The implication is that a pastiche is not only a borrowing of motifs, themes, and so forth, but a necessary *reduction* of those elements to a bland uniformity; a flattening of the depth of art to produce derivative, simplistic expressions in which nothing true or beautiful is elucidated. However, it is in this same French tradition that the pastiche gains some clout as a potentially valid form for artistic expression: in his *Elémens de littérature* of 1787, François Marmontel begrudgingly points out that pastiches might rise to the level of valid homage despite the fact that the majority “take nothing but the ‘feathers’ of the exemplary work; their pastiches copy merely exterior or weak features” (Hollier 9168). This assessment of pastiche as capable of nothing but homage or the exploitation of surface features has shaped the critical understanding of pastiche ever since.

However, there have been disagreements over the assessment of pastiche as a necessarily degraded form of art. Among the French it was Proust who notably saw pastiche as a form of reading rather than writing; “pastiche as the ideal form of creative critical activity, as *Auseinandersetzung*, [...] the coming to grips of a writer with the

works of revered authors” (Hoesterey, *Pastiche* 9). This sentiment of pastiche as a critical activity, as the investigation of constituent elements within great artworks rather than their mere exploitation, becomes all the more important in the critical assessment of second-generation American weird fictions. Hoesterey argues that the pastiche in the postmodern era is as avant-garde as the various modernisms which insisted upon pure artistic originality since “[p]astiche as art does not insist it *is* culture as modernist art implicitly did, but its ‘allegorical impulse’ makes it art *about* culture” (Hoesterey, “Postmodern” 502). That is, pastiche is a form of artwork that necessarily critiques and investigates pre-existing styles of artistic creation. This assessment runs counter to Frederic Jameson’s work on the pastiche in the postmodern era, which deserves to be quoted at length:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor[.] (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 131)

This is unfortunately a blinkered view, as many critics have pointed out. Contrary to Jameson’s claim that “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead style, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (132), critics like Hoesterey and Margaret A. Rose see the potential for innovation within the pastiche that would not be available if authors



adhered to the modernist drive towards originality. Rose specifically argues that pastiche may sit alongside parody in order to attain “further reflexive powers by being directed towards a critique of modernism itself” (Rose 53). It is with this concept of the pastiche as both imitative and investigative in mind, laden with both homage and critique, that I will turn to the pastiche within weird fiction.

As said earlier, the early American weird fiction authors had created an artistic milieu of their own by the mid-to-late 1930s. They, particularly Lovecraft, encouraged other writers to borrow elements from their work and deploy them in their own stories. This was not done in order to create a shared fictional universe, *per se*, but simply to inspire the creation of new literary works of merit. In reference to Lovecraft’s works in specific,<sup>64</sup> weird fiction critic S. T. Joshi states that this form of borrowing and lending of

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<sup>64</sup> I should make it clear at this point that pastiches of Lovecraft’s works are being used to represent the broader subject of weird fiction pastiches simply because his legacy is the most profound of any of the early American weird fiction authors. Lovecraft’s fictional output changed the loose category of weird fiction, reinventing it as a Twentieth Century genre. Equally, his theoretical works helped fans and authors come to terms with how revolutionary a genre weird fiction could be. It should be clear that all of the weird fiction authors had elements borrowed from their work to be deployed in pastiches of varying quality. It is simply the case that more pastiches of Lovecraft’s work have been written than any other weird fiction author, and that when one thinks of post-World War II weird fiction, one is inevitably lead to think of Lovecraft pastiches. As an example of the influence of other authors, there have been dozens – if not hundreds – of pastiches of Robert E. Howard’s “Conan” works by Lin Carter and the like. However, even at this large number they pale in comparison to the thousands of derivative and pastiche texts that adopt Lovecraft’s particular form of weird fiction.

Lovecraft’s works, commonly – albeit somewhat incorrectly – grouped under the heading of the “Cthulhu Mythos,” are all considered to be weird works – but it should be clear that not all weird fiction texts are “Cthulhu Mythos” stories. In brief, the “Cthulhu Mythos” was borne out of the attempt by August Derleth, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, and others, to systematize Lovecraft’s fictional universes into one coherent whole; this was by and large a failure of an attempt that only works if one purposefully excludes some of Lovecraft’s writings, his philosophies, or misunderstands the very works that are under consideration (as August Derleth did by arguing that Lovecraft intended his representation of human existence as something that could be broken down to a simplistic theme of “good versus evil”). However, once the seed of systemization was planted it was effectively impossible to uproot.

As of the early Twenty-First Century, Lovecraft is one of the most well-known “horror” writers due to the ubiquity with which his fictional creations have been deployed throughout a massive amount of popular culture media. The priest-god Cthulhu, perhaps his most famous fictional creation, has appeared in the form of video games, comic books, children’s cartoons, stuffed animals, a presidential campaign, and

fictional elements was not to suggest the existence of a “static system” but of an “aesthetic construct that remained ever adaptable to its creator’s developing personality and altering interests” (Joshi, *Miscellaneous Writings* 165-66). To be clearer, the early American weird fiction authors shared fictional elements between themselves (Smith’s setting of ancient Hyperborea, Lovecraft’s monstrous priest Cthulhu, Howard’s forbidden tome *Nameless Cults*) and encouraged other aspiring authors to do the same in order to enhance the production of artworks that built off the motifs and themes of weird fiction. By doing so the genre could be expanded through the unique perspectives of new authors and, admittedly, foster a sense of camaraderie within the genre. In short, young authors were enthusiastically encouraged to write stories that were wholly their own investigations of the underlying principles of weird fiction while borrowing the set dressings established by those who had come before them. This opportunity launched

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so forth. And this is just one of his creations – the level of entrance of all of his unique motifs and images into the popular consciousness has been monumental. Lovecraft, as I detail here, did not intend his weird fictions to become systematized or categorized. He thought of his own work as “Yog-Sothothery” (a term drawn from the name of one of Lovecraft’s other alien gods and used to great extent by critics who seek to dismantle the “Cthulhu Mythos” and replace it with a less rigid “Lovecraft Mythos”), and believed that his creations should serve as set-dressing for the broader effect of weird works. But his creations have become an indelible part of genre culture, to the extent that it would be worthwhile to analyze how his imagery has been used to develop kitsch.

It is the quality of kitschiness within pastiches of Lovecraft’s work that most critics of weird fiction object to in one way or another. However, as this chapter will show, it is quite a mistake to judge a written work to be kitsch simply because it is a pastiche. That is a judgment that should be reserved for careful analysis of a given text, not one that is easily leapt to, as many critics of weird fiction do. I stress that Robert Bloch was chosen as the subject of this chapter because his pastiches are extremely well known, are emblematic of the pastiche culture that has risen up around the memory of Lovecraft, and are of enduring analytic interest. They are pastiches of Lovecraft’s weird fiction, that is true, and thus have heavy elements of the Cthulhu Mythos within them. But it should be clear in this chapter that “weird fiction” and “the Cthulhu Mythos” are not necessarily one and the same. Again, not every weird fiction is synonymous with the Cthulhu Mythos, though every Cthulhu Mythos story is (ostensibly) a weird fiction if for no other reason than its reliance on the aforementioned set-dressing of image and motif established by Lovecraft. The existence of pastiches of the Cthulhu Mythos are, in more careful terms, pastiches of Lovecraft’s extended oeuvre of weird fiction. That is how they should be considered, and that is the analytic approach that is being taken with them in this chapter.

more than a few careers and added to the bibliography of many already established authors.

Unfortunately, fans and friends of the first American generation weird fiction writers changed the nature of what was for all intents and purposes a literary game by adopting a zealous perspective on what would and would not be acceptable as weird fiction. Most notably were the efforts of Lin Carter and August Derleth to systematize and categorize Lovecraft's fictional creations into a coherent over-arching pattern; this depended upon a fundamental misunderstanding of Lovecraft's work and philosophies, leading to an artificial concretization of what had heretofore been a loose cloud of ideas.<sup>65</sup> Rather than the freewheeling exchange of concepts that the early American weird fiction authors enjoyed, new writers were expected by fans and publishers to conform their artistic output to delineated lines of acceptable representation of pre-existing forms – and lambasted, often savagely, if they stepped outside the boundaries that had been set for them. This form of authority-laden<sup>66</sup> insistence upon a particular understanding of Lovecraft's weird fiction led to a period of innumerable pastiches that were, in the main, failures due to their lack of internal independence. It is this specific area of pastiche that has led many, perhaps a majority, of critics of weird fiction to take a dismissive attitude towards pastiches of the early weird fiction writers, and a dim view of the authors who create homages within the milieu that inspired them.

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<sup>65</sup> Weird fiction critic David E. Schultz once appropriately described Lovecraft's fictional creations as an "anti-mythology," suggesting that they inherently resist simple categorization.

<sup>66</sup> Derleth and his partner Donald Wandrei claimed for decades – incorrectly but successfully – that they had sole copyright over Lovecraft's works and concepts, as well as sole publishing rights over his bibliography.

It should be noted that this dim view is not entirely undeserved. The distinction of relevance here is between pastiche works that seek to question or expand upon the works that shaped their creation and those works which simply emulate the originals. The latter category of weird fiction pastiches utilizes tropes, imagery, and motifs from previously extant stories without saying anything of particular merit: the *form* is copied, but the *substance* is missing. Along these lines, Gérard Genette states that without the “ambiguous mode” of pastiche, which hangs between “mockery and admiring reference”, imitative works cannot be said to have “escap[ed] the aggressive vulgarity of caricature” (98). This is the form into which innumerable weird fiction pastiches – of Lovecraft and other authors of the early American period – have fallen. Notably, almost all of August Derleth’s weird fictions fall into this category of pastiches-as-caricatures, emulating the original works and borrowing the “set dressing” deployed by Lovecraft (in this specific case) without investigating the works which inspired the pastiche. Following from the worst fears of the pastiche, Derleth’s weird fictions constitute a necessary reduction of the genre rather than an interrogation of it.

A strong example of Derleth’s pastiche work, and perhaps the best example of the emulative weird fiction pastiche, is his novella *The Lurker at the Threshold*, which has been sold since its first publication in 1945 as a “posthumous collaboration” with Lovecraft. The novel, which runs to “some 50,000 words, was based on two very small fragments by Lovecraft, amounting to no more than 1200 words, and it is very unlikely that Lovecraft regarded these as fitting into a single work” (Joshi, *The Rise* 196). What Derleth did was to take entries from Lovecraft’s *Commonplace Book* and write a narrative around them. Suffice it to say that although the surface features are borrowed

whole cloth from Lovecraft – heredity as a site of menace, the alien god Yog-Sothoth, New England regionalism, etc. – Derleth has done little more than produce a hollow shell instead of a complete work. His pastiche mimics Lovecraft without understanding Lovecraft – occasionally literally, since *Lurker at the Threshold* demonstrates Derleth’s fundamental misunderstanding of the philosophy that invigorated the aesthetics of Lovecraft’s weird fiction.

The line between pastiches which are merely copies *of* the originals and those which critically play *with* the originals can sometimes be lost, however. Stanley C. Sargent, a weird fiction pastiche author, has complained that “the very scholars who have gone to such great lengths to ensure Lovecraft receives the literary recognition he deserves tend to dismiss all or nearly all contemporary attempts to continue Lovecraft’s legacy” (Sargent vii). It is clear why Sargent would feel that works of merit are being unduly marginalized: weird fiction critic S. T. Joshi, for example, has stated that dismissing weird fictions for being pastiches of earlier author’s writing is unwarranted since such greats as Jorge Louis Borges have written pastiches of Lovecraft. At the same time, however, Joshi claims that “imitation is, by and large, the province of literary neophytes” and that “Lovecraft’s imitators are really seeking to use Lovecraft’s work as a kind of literary crutch” (Joshi, *Fall* 13). This is a claim akin to Jameson’s argument that pastiche is “speech in a dead language” (Jameson 131), in that it purports to find purpose in pastiche in a vague manner – but thoroughly dismisses the idea of the pastiche as having relevance in-and-of-itself. I think that this position is untenable, particularly in light of Lovecraft’s own thoughts on the matter: in a letter to August Derleth, Lovecraft wrote that “[t]he more these synthetic daemons [his creations] are mutually written up by

different authors, the better they become as general background material! I *like* to have others use my Azathoths and Nyarlathoteps – & in return I shall use Klarkash-Ton’s Tsathoggua, your monk Clithanus, & Howard’s Bran” (Schultz, *Essential* 353). It seems that, not only were the early American weird fiction writers aware of how their work had established a new artistic milieu to influence new author’s works, but encouraged the pastiching of their material by those who followed them.

Pastiche, as argued above, is an activity of both writing and reading. That is, pastiche is a method of critical investigation by which a given author may explore the techniques, philosophies, craftsmanship, and ideas of another author. To suggest that pastiche of the most influential weird fiction writers is nothing more than a reliance on a crutch, or the work of an inexperienced author, is to suggest that there is only one way to approach weird fictions: as a supplicant reader. By accepting the pastiche, on the other hand, the door remains open to distinct critiques of weird fiction that are codified in ways other than academic or amateur non-fiction papers. The pastiche is *participatory*, recognizing (in this case) weird fiction as the milieu informing the author’s artistic production and choosing to join in fully with that milieu. By doing so the pastiche author reflects and modifies the sources of original weird fiction according to their lived experience and philosophical worldview. This does not, of course, mean that any and all pastiches are successes; there are unimpressive pastiches just as there are unimpressive or unimportant original works. However, I do not think it is the place of the critic to winnow the “bad” weird fictions from the “good” ones, as S. T. Joshi and others often try to do with their commitment to what they consider “abstract aesthetic standards” (Joshi, *Fall* 7). Some pastiches suffer from a lack of a craftsman’s expertise on the part of their

authors. Others are not particularly deft in their deployment and re-working of imagery that they are using as homage to previous weird fiction writers. This does not mean that their work is without analytic merit, much less that a given critic's interpretation is the singular acceptable analysis.

So, to Robert Bloch. During his long career Bloch produced some two dozen novels and over four hundred short stories. He did not, by all accounts, consider himself an "artist." To him writing was a matter of craftsmanship that would allow him to earn a reasonable living if he produced a good amount of it on a regular schedule. This conception of the writer as worker – as a "fiction factory," to borrow a term from one of the other *Weird Tales* regulars – lent itself to Bloch's fiction adopting a straightforward, uncomplicated tone that was almost noir in its sparse construction. While he was a teenager, Bloch produced some of his most direct pastiches of Lovecraft's work, and these are for all intents and purposes the efforts of (as Joshi has styled it) a neophyte writer still learning his craft. Few critics have addressed these early works of Bloch, tending to focus instead upon his later psychological horror stories or his crime novels, despite the fact that there are enough of Bloch's pastiche weird fictions to fill at least one anthology and one novel. Even Joshi, whose critical purview is almost exclusively weird fiction, simply states that "they may be marginally better than most of the other material appearing in *Weird Tales*. If nothing else, the verve of their adjective-laden prose and lurid incidents is engaging" (Joshi, "Literary" 15). However, it is important to note that Bloch never fully gave up on producing pastiches, despite having moved on to original fiction of both the weird and the suspense varieties. Indeed, one of Bloch's last pastiches

was the novel *Strange Eons*, published in 1978 – by which time he was anything other than a neophyte author or an author in need of a crutch to support his work.

Over time Bloch abandoned the more expansive imitation of Lovecraft's verbiage and changed "to a spare, lean prose (often seasoned with his dark acerbic wit) that perfectly suited his horrific and criminal themes" (Blackmore). Unlike Lovecraft's stories with their distanced, cosmic air, Bloch's narratives tended to be personal, intimately focused upon the lives of his protagonists. His most common recurring themes both in his early weird fiction and his later crime fiction are of aberrant psychology, familial nightmares, and the random cruelty both the innocent and the deserving can experience in life. His protagonists break from the model of Lovecraft's characters, too, and are rarely the successful, educated, or artistic persons Lovecraft enjoyed writing about. Benjamin Vertlieb touches on Bloch's protagonists in his article on the use of psychology in Bloch's fictions:

Most, if not all, of Bloch's stories involve damaged people. They are misfits living beneath societal radar, outcasts from the mainstream living lives of quiet desperation. Some are overweight and slovenly, while others are isolated and lonely. They are abandoned by their world, left to find solace in unsavory redemption. There is little tolerance for the unattractive or unintelligent in a world of uniformity, and so these discarded souls must reach out in directions normally shunned by polite society. Abnormality attracts its own, and so humanity's refuse finds value in the darker corridors of exploration. (Vertlieb)



Bloch's approach to characterization and plot are distinct from Lovecraft's; in the main, he utilized Lovecraft's imagery as background in order to investigate the potentials of weird fiction as a narrative mode. Lovecraft, in brief, was simply not interested in persons; his pursuit was for the mood and atmosphere that would impart a cosmic air upon his readers. Bloch, meanwhile, was entirely interested in people, and his characters reflect his dedication to human psychology. In his weird fiction pastiches, as in the rest of his fictional output, Bloch turns towards psychology for his horror first and foremost, followed quickly by the aforementioned fear of heredity and the more general cruelty in existence. By moving the narrative lens from where Lovecraft would have placed it, Bloch uses the pastiche form to question Lovecraft's weird fiction. Rather than simply emulate the author, whom he respected and who supported his early career, Bloch uses the pastiche to construct narratives that are neither originals nor copies; they are a reader's play, written to critically investigate Lovecraft's weird fictions to see what, if anything, might be discovered.

This chapter is not intended to prove critics of weird fiction wrong by showing that pastiches of Lovecraft are necessarily stories of merit according to an abstract aesthetic standard. Instead, this chapter should be taken as a reconsideration of the pastiche's place within weird fiction. Rather than treating pastiches as empty recapitulation of previous great works, it seems to me that analytic value would be gained by critics turning towards the pastiches of Lovecraft, Howard, and so on, in order to determine the ways in which weird fiction was itself utilized, challenged, exploited, and lauded as the milieu of a particular generation of authors. Bloch is one such case: his weird fiction pastiches cannot be summarily dismissed as they span decades of work

across periods of original fiction production. If the weird fiction genre of the early Twentieth Century popularized by the first generation of American weird fiction writers met its demise after the Second World War, as is often suspected, it behooves critics to lend their attentions towards those authors who found themselves working from within the historical context of weird fiction and wrote stories that encapsulated the predominant aesthetic trends of their field. If weird fiction in the mode of Lovecraft and his colleagues did pass away, it was arguably resurrected in a new manner during the end of the Twentieth Century. In order to understand that new form of weird fiction, which will be addressed in the following chapter, we as critics must first understand the efforts of the second generation of modern weird fiction writers. As such, an understanding and appreciation of the weird fiction pastiches are of analytic importance.

“The Dark Demon” (1936):

Published in *Weird Tales* in 1936, “The Dark Demon” is an interstitial story for Bloch. It reads as though it is caught between two periods of Bloch’s weird fiction pastiches. On the one hand, it relies on the heavy-handed copying of Lovecraft’s concepts in order to create meaning, while on the other hand, it shows an attempt on Bloch’s part to use the pastiche as a critical exercise; one in which the potentials and problems of the texts he is pastiching are explored or developed. This latter form of pastiche is what Bloch would use in his future weird fiction work. When crafted as more than simply copying the surface features of Lovecraft’s work, Bloch’s pastiches developed into something greater than just “a signifier that has lost its signified [and] thereby been transformed into an image” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 138). The critical distinction

between the two types of pastiche is that Bloch gathered the “feathers” of Lovecraft’s weird fiction, the surface features, and deployed them in order to *link* his stories to a pre-existing tradition rather than just mimic that tradition. Surely the fact that pastiches cannot be described as *wholly* original works does not condemn them to being de facto nothing but images or recreations of prior material. Pastiche like Bloch’s early amateur works rely too heavily on the set dressing to construct his narratives rather than using them to accent an underlying aesthetic philosophy, but this is a matter of *degree* rather than a condemnation of the *category* of pastiches in general. “The Dark Demon” serves as an example of Bloch leaning heavily on the work of Lovecraft in order to construct his pastiche, while at the same time discovering that there are places he can go with his pastiches that might push the genre of weird fiction in new directions.

The story is an accounting of the life and death of Edgar Henquist Gordon, a thinly-veiled representation of Lovecraft himself.<sup>67</sup> The narrator is unidentified but there

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<sup>67</sup> A maneuver that is compensated for by the fact that Lovecraft is mentioned by name in the story. This is actually the second story of Bloch’s to feature a representation of Lovecraft. His first, the early “The Shambler from the Stars” (1935), is entirely derivative of Lovecraft. The plot is a pastiche – really a direct reimplementation – of elements from Lovecraft’s “History of the *Necronomicon*” (1927). The narrator, an unnamed version of Bloch himself, turns to volumes of forbidden lore for inspiration that can fuel his writing. “I wanted to write a real story,” he states, “not the stereotyped, ephemeral sort of tale I turned out for the magazines, but a real work of art” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 26). He stumbles across a copy of *De Vermis Mysteriis* by Ludvig Prinn, Bloch’s own addition to the stable of weird fiction grimoires, but finds that he cannot read it due to it being written in Latin. He decides to consult with his friend from Providence, Rhode Island – the disguised Lovecraft – who is fluent in classical languages.

Initially both the narrator and his friend are reluctant to read too deeply into the dread text. However, as the translation continues they become swept up in the scope of the work and get lost in the forbidden knowledge revealed by Prinn’s book. While making their way through a chapter on magician’s familiars, the narrator’s friend reads a particular incantation aloud. It has the effect of completing a magic spell, and something horrible – but entirely invisible – is summoned. It latches onto the narrator’s friend, lifting him into the air before draining him of his blood and killing him. The narrator sees the creature, now visible from the blood it has ingested, launch itself towards the window and vanish into the sky. He sets his friend’s home ablaze and leaves, but never recovers. He abandons his dreams of writing, and turns to drink and drugs in order to salve the panics that he suffers every night.

Bloch wrote “The Shambler from the Stars” mostly because he was interested in incorporating Lovecraft into one of his stories as a character – and killing him off. Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird*

are enough markers, most notably his relationship to Gordon and his background as an amateur author from Milwaukee, the city where Bloch spent the majority of his youth, to suggest that he is a version of Bloch himself. His stated intention for writing the story about Gordon's last days is to save Gordon's reputation. Despite having a somewhat unsavory reputation Gordon was – according to the narrator – a good man, and his memory does not deserve the fact that “he and his writings have been doomed to oblivion by a world which always ignores what it cannot quite understand” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 61). There are multiple moments of Bloch leaning through the text to speak in a heartfelt manner of his relationship with Lovecraft under the guise of the pastiche. He says that “[w]hat Edgar Gordon did for me in the next three years can never adequately be told. His able assistance, friendly criticism and kind encouragement finally succeeded in making a writer of sorts out of me, and after that our mutual interest formed an added bond between us” (62). It is this bond of friendship that compels the narrator to visit Gordon, dote on him with concern and, ironically, be potentially responsible for his death.

That “The Dark Demon” was written and published in 1936 is most likely unfortunate coincidence, since from a retroactive perspective it is difficult to read Bloch's praise of his mentor outside of a knowledge of Lovecraft's sudden death in 1937 – Bloch

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*Tales*, required Bloch to receive Lovecraft's written permission before allowing the story to be published – which Lovecraft gladly gave, signed in four different languages by a variety of real and invented persons. This was an odd requirement on Wright's part, as Lovecraft had already been incorporated and killed in another story: Frank Belknap Long's “The Space-Eaters” (1928). Bloch's story shows its one-note inspiration, and it is overall a derivative and unsatisfying pastiche, adding nothing while emulating everything. Unlike several of his other pastiches, “The Shambler from the Stars” is nothing more than a copy of Lovecraft, presenting a hollow and uncritical imitation of the works which clearly inspired its creation. The only thing of note in the story is that it sets a precedent for Bloch by beginning a trilogy of stories written between Bloch and Lovecraft wherein each incorporated the other as a character and killed them off.

was unaware of the fact that Lovecraft was even sick at the time. S. T. Joshi has pointed out that Lovecraft had not read the story prior to its publication but that he “warmly commend[ed] it” (Joshi, *Fall* 146) afterwards and that in terms of Bloch’s veiled praise “no doubt he saw clearly its import and was heartened by it” (146). This was typical of the relationship between Bloch and Lovecraft. Clearly, Bloch is exploring the ground that Lovecraft had established for him as his mentor: Lovecraft, after all, did not encourage Bloch “to use his methods and in effect imitate him [but] merely praised what [Bloch] did, and if he made any criticisms they were always couched as suggestions” (Ellis). It is no surprise, therefore, that Bloch would rely on his mentor’s set dressings but, as part of an effort to pay tribute to that mentor, craft a pastiche that seeks to play about with the critical freedom he has as both writer and reader.

Taking a cue from both Lovecraft and Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, Bloch describes Gordon as finding his inspiration for his stories in dreams. Here Bloch reveals his burgeoning interest in psychoanalysis, which would greatly influence his later career. He describes Gordon’s dreams as being “far from the ordinary Freudian sublimation or repression types. There were no discernible wish-patterns, or symbolic phrases. They were somehow *alien*” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 63). Whether or not Bloch is intentionally borrowing from Lovecraft’s well-known disapproval of Freud’s theories of dream imagery is unknown, but I suspect that this is an early note of Bloch’s skepticism about psychotherapy in general that appears in other weird stories of his. This skepticism served as fuel for his later career, combined with the general interest in aberrant psychology that inspired some of his strongest works in other genres. This is an interesting note for Bloch to work within the story, since it presents the reader with a motif – the importance of

dreams – that appears again and again in Lovecraft’s weird fiction, particularly his own homages to Dunsany and Poe, while using it to develop his own authorial weird fiction voice. Gordon claims to the narrator that he is able to fall asleep and begin dreaming with the slightest exercise of willpower, and that these dreams are always lucid. They repeat the same imagery every time: Gordon is transported to strange, alien locales for reasons that are unknown to him. Gordon is, however, “forced to admit that certain of his dreams coincided curiously with descriptive passages in such books as the *Necronomicon*, the *Mysteries of the Worm*, and the *Book of Eibon*” (64).<sup>68</sup>

This insertion of titles from the set dressing library of extant weird fiction is ineffective, and threatens to disappoint the reader since it follows so closely on what was an otherwise deft insertion of motifs into Bloch’s pastiche. That there might be some mention of the *Necronomicon* et al is not in-and-of-itself problematic, but here Bloch drops the titles into his text as though the mere mention of the fictional library is sufficient to either evoke horror in the reader or establish some sense of theme and philosophy. Simply cataloguing names is, I think – and here I agree with S. T. Joshi – not sufficient to do the aesthetic work necessary to create a pastiche that contributes as well as emulates. This is an example of Bloch using elements from Lovecraft’s weird fiction “as if they were mechanical pieces on a board game” (Joshi, *Fall 22*), and it negatively impacts upon the text as a whole. The trend continues when the narrator states that Gordon claimed to know of terms like “Azathoth” and “Yuggoth” (a god and a location,

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<sup>68</sup> The first title, the *Necronomicon*, is the culturally important volume of forbidden lore created and deployed numerous times by Lovecraft. The second, *Mysteries of the Worm*, is Bloch’s addition to the fictional library. The third, the *Book of Eibon* is from Clark Ashton Smith’s weird fiction. It became a part of the authorial game amongst weird fiction writers to create their own dread tomes of horrific knowledge and deploy them within their stories alongside those created by their colleagues.

respectively, in Lovecraft's weird fiction) "prior to the time he knew of their half-mythic existence in the legendary lore of ancient days" (Bloch, *Mysteries* 64). Despite the fact that the narrator is "profoundly impressed by these statements, and finally was forced to admit that I had no logical explanation to offer" (64), the reader is perhaps less than persuaded. Thankfully these moments are brief – such as when the narrator wonders whether or not the dark god Nyarlathotep, another creation of Lovecraft's, is involved somehow.

It is interesting that immediately after the seemingly artificial insertion of Lovecraft's character and text names Bloch would return to representing Lovecraft's personal thoughts. By doing so Bloch seems to be wrestling with his weird fiction influences, as though he realized that there was more to Lovecraft's works than the imagery and wished to "write out" what he invested in his stories. In this case Bloch turns to some of Lovecraft's theoretical texts on the nature of weird fiction itself. In describing Gordon's most recent writing he says:

No longer did he adhere to conventional plot-motivation. He began to tell his stories in first-person, but the narrator was not a *human being*. [...] [H]e argued that a real weird tale must be told from the viewpoint of the monster or entity itself. [...] Then, too, his non-human characters were not conventional ghouls, werewolves, or vampires. Instead he presented queer demons, star-spawned creatures, and even wrote a tale about a disembodied intelligence[.] (64-5)

This is a fascinating strategy for Bloch to take. He has begun by integrating the biography of his mentor into his pastiche, then mis-stepped by presenting lists of names as though

they had inherent meaning to the reader, and finally started again by working from Lovecraft's *non-fiction literary theory* rather than his weird fiction itself. To my knowledge this is the only time in the line of weird fiction pastiches that an author has incorporated Lovecraft's non-fiction into their own work as an element of *plot* rather than an informing subtext or underlying theme. Bloch is developing his creative imagination here, seeing how he might push and develop the weird fiction pastiche while remaining demonstrably in the lineage of previous authors. Amusingly, the narrator dismisses Gordon's efforts to write from an alien point of view by stating definitively that "[t]his stuff was not only metaphysical and obscure, it was also insane, to any normal concept of thought" (65). This is, one would hope, not Bloch's personal feeling on the matter, but it makes narrative sense for his protagonist to remain skeptical of the fictionalized Lovecraft's theories and methods.

The narrator goes to visit Gordon as he is worried about his mental and physical health. He finds Gordon drawn, pale, thin, and remarkably weak. Gordon explains to him that he spends most of his time sleeping and dreaming, and when he is awake he devotes his time to feverishly writing. It seems that Gordon has come to see himself as a messiah figure, though not in any religious sense of the term – this incorporates Lovecraft's own atheism into Bloch's pastiche. Something has been coming to Gordon in his dreams and narrating stories for him to write. He describes this figure to the narrator as "the *Dark One*. You've read about Him in those books I showed you; the Demon Messenger, they call Him. But that's all allegorical. He isn't Evil, because there's no such thing as Evil. He is merely alien. And I am to be His messenger on earth" (66). This is a heavily encoded passage; on the surface it is suggestive of Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in



Darkness” (1931) due to the fact that it is similar to the dialogue of Akeley, a character who came under a similar form of alien influence. But it is also a continuation of the attempt to incorporate Lovecraft’s personal beliefs into the pastiche: like Gordon, Lovecraft believed that evil existed only as an outgrowth of the human perspective on existence rather than as an objective category of existence itself. Finally, the titles used suggest that Gordon is speaking of Nyarlathotep, a god of Lovecraft’s creation, who would become an object of fascination for Bloch in his later pastiches. Again, Bloch’s text straddles the line between pastiche-as-copy and the pastiche of critical play – it is too indebted to Lovecraft’s fiction, but at the same time uses Lovecraft’s personal views to develop ways for Bloch’s pastiche to reconsider weird fiction.

Gordon tells the narrator that the Dark One takes on an awful form in his dreams, looking “like a medieval conception of the demon Asmodeus. Black all over, and furry, with a snout like a hog, green eyes, and the claws and fangs of a wild beast” (67). This is a rather banal description; it is effective enough, but it is hardly something fitting for the cosmic and alien setup given to the Dark One. I suspect that Bloch was having difficulty here adapting Lovecraft’s theoretical *conception* of his gods to the actual *execution* of those gods within the text. Nevertheless, the description is sufficient to disturb the narrator, who leaves Gordon and goes to do his own research. Spending time with copies of Gordon’s writing, the *Necronomicon*, and other unspecified resources on the nature of dreams, he decides that Gordon’s apotheosis – if it is real – will be coming soon. He returns armed, though “[w]hy I pocketed the revolver I cannot say – some inner instinct warned me that I might meet with a violent response” (68). This is all too convenient, but it stands to reason that the narrator would at least be slightly worried for either Gordon’s

safety or his own. He finds Gordon sleeping on his couch and, during lightning flashes, becomes inspired to draw his firearm and shoot Gordon six times before burning all of his new writings along with his collection of forbidden tomes. The narrator concludes by saying that Gordon was “a genius, and a fine man. But he told the truth in his books” (69), because what he saw in the lightning flash was not Gordon but the furry, hog-snouted shape of the Dark One in Gordon’s suit and tie.

“The Dark Demon” is a transition piece for Bloch. It draws heavily on the set dressing of Lovecraft’s weird fictions in much the same manner as his earlier pastiches, dropping references and images into the text as though the signs themselves carry a weight of meaning for the reader regardless of their literary experience. This technique can work, but it lends itself far too easily to parody – specifically “a new degeneration of parody into a blind or unreflective form of imitation” (Rose 51). This is clearly not the direction of Bloch’s text, as evidenced by the inclusion of homage to Lovecraft as his real-world mentor. Equally, however, the story shows an honest attempt by Bloch to begin incorporating more of the theoretical underpinnings of weird fiction into his work. By doing so he opened up space to develop his own particular take on Lovecraft’s themes and philosophies, represented later in his more critical pastiches. The story is an effective experiment, if a bit inconsistent in its internal aims; it is mostly important due to demonstrating how Bloch’s conception of the pastiche changed as he moved from being an amateur writer to a professional. By drawing in aspects of Lovecraft’s personal views to play off against elements borrowed from Lovecraft’s fictions, Bloch demonstrated that he was aware at this early stage of what might be done by navigating an area of literary production where one is neither writing wholly original works nor copies.

“Notebook Found in a Deserted House” (1951):

First published in *Weird Tales*, May 1951, “Notebook Found in a Deserted House” is one of Bloch’s most successful pastiche stories. It is representative of Bloch’s progression from relying on a heavy-handed implementation of surface features of Lovecraft’s weird fiction to a more subtle pastiche focused on characterization and suspense, which he deployed to critically play with the motifs that influenced his weird work. Bloch uses a light touch in terms of elements taken directly from Lovecraft: there are only four terms that are taken from the catalogue of imagery deployed in Lovecraft’s weird fiction, and three of these are places names (“Arkham,” “Kingsport,” and “Innsmouth”) while only one denotes a creature (“shoggoth”). The place names are utilized only for setting inference, while the creature is deployed in a unique manner; none of the fictional library of dread manuscripts common to Lovecraft’s weird fiction are mentioned here, nor are his assorted deities (aside from one oblique reference), and the setting is indistinct enough to be potentially outside of Lovecraft’s New England. Nevertheless, the story is absolutely and demonstrably a pastiche of Lovecraft’s weird fiction. It highlights Bloch’s understanding of the importance of dialect and places characterization and atmosphere in the forefront alongside plot. In short, “Notebook Found in a Deserted House” serves the purposes of pastiche by being entirely indebted to the work of Lovecraft in that it is not wholly original. But neither is it a copy, since Bloch establishes his own authorial voice throughout, and he relies so little on imagery borrowed from his mentor that he has sufficient space to develop his own sense of motif and theme. By doing so he went beyond imitative homages and demonstrated that the

pastiche form can be used to bring to light heretofore unexamined trajectories for a given set of genre influences.

In terms of setting, the story is most reminiscent of Lovecraft's "The Color Out of Space" (1927), though it should be reiterated that the actual location of events is left indeterminate. References abound to "the back hills" and "the forest," but the setting could be anywhere from Lovecraft's New England to Bloch's own Midwest. The similarity to Lovecraft's weird writing stems from the atmosphere of rural isolation and inhuman – but natural – menace that Bloch builds as the text progresses. It is interesting that the location for the majority of the plot, a rural farmhouse miles from the closest small town, resonates almost as much with another text by Lovecraft. Bloch describes the farmhouse as "a little place, old frame house and barn in a clear space with trees all around kind of gloomy-like" (Bloch, *Mysteries* 201). The description of the secluded location of human habitation reads like an allusion to the celebrated opening of Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926):

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. (Lovecraft, *Call* 139)

To be sure there is nothing of the sciences in "Notebook..." but the whole of the text hinges upon the piecing together of "dissociated knowledge" in a locale that violates the

boundaries of “a placid island of ignorance” within a hostile and inhuman environment. The knowledge gained by the story’s protagonist stems from a “deadly light” of illumination – here instantiated in the image of ritual fires upon secluded hilltops – and the results for him, while ambiguous, certainly at least extend to tragedy. This quality of allusion is one of the strengths of “Notebook Found in a Deserted House;” it is unquestionably a pastiche but it does not rely upon the set dressing that Joshi and others have decried as crutches for neophyte authors, nor does it require the reader to be familiar with Lovecraft or his weird fictions.<sup>69</sup> The strength of the pastiche is such that the knowledgeable reader understands that it follows Lovecraft’s weird works as a pastiche must, but expands upon them in a critical manner.

The story opens with an apologia from the narrator: “[f]irst off I want to write that I never did anything wrong. Not to nobody. They got no call to shut me up in here, whoever they are. They got no reason to do what I’m afraid they’re going to do, either” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 199). The text of the story is, as the title suggests, a transcription from a notebook, written in dialect by the barely literate twelve year old boy Willie Osborne. Everything that follows is from his perspective, and insofar as he is aware, he is entirely an innocent, not to blame for the threat that he has come under. The use of dialect is an interesting turn for Bloch to take, as it is unlike any of his previous pastiches. It is immediately reminiscent of Lovecraft’s use of New England dialects, particularly in terms of the dialogue of Zadok Allen in his “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931) –

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<sup>69</sup> According to Robert M. Price, weird fiction critic and editor of *Mysteries of the Worm*, the landmark anthology of Bloch’s weird fiction pastiches, “Notebook...” inspired a young Ramsey Campbell (now a renowned and respected horror and suspense author in his own right) to begin writing Lovecraft pastiches of his own – long before he had even read any of Lovecraft’s weird fiction to begin with.

though the accent is much less exaggerated in Bloch's weird tale. Equally, the form of the recovered manuscript is one that Lovecraft utilized regularly, but is rarely deployed in Bloch's pastiches. Here Bloch uses it to strong effect without descending to some of the unintentionally comedic effects of weird fictions like the conclusion of Lovecraft's "Dagon" (1917). These two elements are effectively combined in the text, enhancing the pastiche's provenance while delineating its standing as a separate work.

Willie describes his life up to this point in brief: he says that he was raised by his grandmother and "don't know where I was born" (199). His grandmother is described as a wise woman figure, since she "knew all kinds of things about the hills and the woods and she told me some might queer stories" about "*them ones* hiding in the swamps [...] and big stones called alters where *them ones* use to make sacrifices to what they worshipped" (199). "*Them ones*" are Willie's term for the inhuman antagonists of the story – he is never presented with sufficient information to know what they are actually called, if anything. After his grandmother's death, Willie is sent off to live with his Uncle Fred and Aunt Lucy in "the very same hills that Grandma use to tell me about so often" (200). At first Willie enjoys a prosaic existence with his relatives, though he is frightened by the forest around their farm, which is seemingly devoid of animal life. He says that "[t]hey was so still and quiet. Gave me the creeps they was so dark and lonesome. Seemed like nobody had ever shouted and laughed or even smiled in them. Couldn't imagine anyone saying anything there excep in whispers" (201). Note that Bloch's focus here is on the expression of human emotion – exuberance and joy. He is taking advantage of the opportunity for critical play in his pastiche to expand the importance of the internal

lives of characters in weird fiction instead of leaving the emphasis on external atmosphere as Lovecraft preferred.

While playing in the woods, Willie overhears something moving through the trees. Since it does not sound like his Aunt or Uncle, and the mailman Cap Pritchett only comes to the house once a week, Willie hides. The creature is never seen, only heard, and Willie is baffled by what it could be based on the sounds it makes. At first he thinks it is an animal of some kind, with the hollow-sounding thuds it makes being hoof beats. But then the creature speaks, in a sense. Willie says that “[i]t’s a voice and it’s not a voice. That is, it doesn’t *sound* like a voice but more like a buzzing or croaking, deep and droning. But it *has* to be a voice because it is saying words. Not words I could understand, but words. Words that made me keep my head down, half afraid I might be seen and half afraid I might see something” (202). He hears a line of dialogue that is an oblique reference to the buzzing voices in Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930) complete with a possible reference to Shub-Niggurath, one of Lovecraft’s deities, and a complete reference to “shoggoth,” a protoplasmic creature in “At the Mountains of Madness” (1931). These are the only explicit references to the surface features of Lovecraft’s weird fiction other than three place names that crop up later in the text. Terrified, Willie emerges from hiding, sure that the creature was not human because “it *was* a thing. No human being can leave tracks in the mud like a goat’s hoofs all green with slime that smell awful – not four or eight, but a couple *hundred*” (202). That night Willie suffers from horrific dreams. Deciding not to tell his Aunt or Uncle, he looks in a history book that they happen to have and comes to the conclusion that Druids might be responsible for calling up “*them ones*” like the creature he overheard.

There is little reason to think that is the case, however, since the explanation is absurd and too convenient for Bloch by this point in his career. I think it more likely that Bloch is again using his pastiche to critically play with the genre; child characters are a rarity in weird fiction, and as such Bloch is taking the opportunity to demonstrate how their lack of experience can, when inspired by fear, lead them to ridiculous assumptions. Again, Bloch is pushing weird fiction towards considering the internal, emotional lives of its characters: that there are cultists becomes impossible to doubt as the story progresses, but Willie's belief that they are Druids – related in some fashion to actual Druids from Europe and the United Kingdom – is nothing more than the tragic attempt of a young man to come to grips with the truly alien and inexplicable. Willie begins to doubt his sanity after Uncle Fred disappears while picking up Cousin Osborne, who is in visiting the family, due to having persistent nightmares. He wonders “[m]aybe it was all in my head – the Druid story and about *them ones* and the voice that said ‘shoggoth’ and all the rest” (206); this brief uncertainty again emphasizes Bloch's focus on his character's internal life. Immediately thereafter, Willie resolves that the disappearance of Uncle Fred and Cousin Osborne is evidence that something supernatural is going on. Ultimately this conclusion is supported by the disappearance of Aunt Lucy, who vanishes during the night as Willie dreams of burglars with cat's eyes taking her away through her bedroom window.

Depression and fear take their toll on Willie – who is, as the reader is perhaps prone to forget, only twelve years old. Unsure of what to do, he remains at the farm for most of a day before, finally, deciding to take his chances walking along the road through the woods to the closest town. Unfortunately, he is met just as he sets out by a strange



young man, well dressed and amiable, walking towards the farm. This man claims to be Cousin Osborne; he says that he sent word that his visit would be delayed by a few days. Willie thinks that the telegram might be on the buggy that delivers the mail once a week and reluctantly goes back to the farm with him. Willie comes to distrust the man after Osborne says that he grew up in Arkham when he is supposed to be from Kingsport, but tells him of the events of the past few days anyway. To a reader unfamiliar with Lovecraft's weird fiction, the slip in place names is reason enough to distrust Cousin Osborne, but to a reader who can identify the points of subtle reference in Bloch's pastiche, the suggestion that Osborne is from "witch haunted Arkham" indicates that he is almost certainly a nefarious figure.

I think that this is actually one of the few missteps Bloch makes in the story. Up until this point the atmosphere in the text has been menacing, brooding, and thoroughly *inexplicable*. For a stranger to show up and throw down a link between the purportedly supernatural activity in the woods and a well-known hotbed of horrible cult acts – as the city of Arkham is actually known amongst Lovecraft's New England characters – comes across as needlessly heavy-handed, to the detriment of the careful construction Bloch has dedicated to his pastiche thus far. However, Willie's opening up to Cousin Osborne despite his distrust is again a strong representation of the emotional life of the protagonist. Willie is, as said, only twelve years old; it is not difficult to imagine a frightened young boy speaking plainly to someone who will listen, especially if the child is already suffering from the effects of extreme isolation. The faithfulness with which Bloch attends to Willie's psychological makeup is striking, and entirely dissimilar from Lovecraft's approach to the internal lives of his characters. Bloch's strong interest in

psychology over the course of his career, which came to prominence in his later suspense novels, is clearly being developed in his middle period. In “Notebook...” he uses the freedom of the pastiche form to develop an insightful and unusual take on weird fiction while working from inside the milieu which inspired him.

Cousin Osborne goes to some lengths to soothe Willie’s fears, but assures him that they will leave together during the following day as soon as Cap Pritchett shows up with the mail. Willie knows that the following day is Halloween, and he is suspicious of Cousin Osborne’s motives for keeping him there as a result since he knows from his grandmother’s stories that Halloween is the height of activity amongst “*them ones.*” Nevertheless, he agrees to stay the night and is eager to leave when Cap Pritchett arrives the following afternoon. Cousin Osborne demands that he remain inside while he speaks with Pritchett, and almost convinces Pritchett to leave by telling him that Willie and his Aunt and Uncle have gone on vacation. Willie comes running out of the house in frustration and though Cousin Osborne makes overtures to Pritchett, Pritchett is adamant that Willie comes alone with him to town. A harried race through the woods follows as night comes on and a vicious storm breaks out. Willie attempts to question Pritchett about what he has experienced on the farm and in the woods, but the storm prevents any meaningful communication between the two. In a tense sequence the mail buggy rounds a bend and runs into the creature Willie overheard in the woods as it squats in the middle of the road. Willie barely escapes, and he flees, confused by the storm and the screams of Pritchett, the horse, and eventually himself.

In a near-hallucinatory sequence, Willie runs blindly through the woods and into the hills. On his way he stumbles across a ritual being enacted up on a hilltop: cultists

surrounded by burning fires of strange colors, tended by a priest who intermittently throws powders into the flames. As Willie hides, they encircle a large white stone altar and begin to sacrifice cows stolen from his Aunt and Uncle's farm one by one. The drumming and the thunder mixed with the smoke confuses Willie, but he is able to see that when the cultists "come up again they had new sacrifices. The smoke kept me from seeing plain, but these were two-legged sacrifices, not four" (215). Though he hides his face as the cultists "chanted and called in a loud voice to something waiting over on the other side of the hill" (215), Willie cannot help but look as the creature he overheard in the woods and dreamed about for days comes in response to the cultists' call. It was "that black, roopy, slimy jelly tree-thing out of the woods. It crawled and it flowed up on its hoofs and mouths and snaky arms" (215). Latching onto a sacrifice bound to the altar, the thing eats or absorbs the screaming victim and though Willie "only watched a minute, but while I watched the black thing began to swell and *grow*" (216). In a blind panic Willie breaks and flees, screaming. He tries to find his way to town, but his horror and the storm disorient him and he ends up circling back to the farmhouse itself.

Not knowing what else to do, Willie boards himself up inside the house and waits through the night. As he prepares to leave in the morning he hears Cousin Osborne outside calling to him and speaking with some unknown persons – or creatures, since Willie hears one of them respond unintelligibly in a horrid croaking voice. At one point Cousin Osborne tells them to "[w]ait until dark. We can use the well if you find the gate. Look for the gate" which Willie knows refers to an old well out by the barn which "must be a sort of entrance to the underground place – that's where those Druid men live. And the black thing" (216). Resigned to his fate, Willie waits for the inevitable conclusion of

events. He begs whoever finds his notebook to “[b]lock up the well and clean out them swamps. No sense looking for me – if I’m not here” (216). Though he knows that he will likely end up sacrificed or converted in some manner, Willie remains stoic about his fate. He says that he wishes “I wasn’t so scared. I’m not even scared so much for myself, but for other folks. The ones who might come after and live around here and have the same thing happen – or worse” (216). This resiliency in a character so young might be forced or unrealistic in other weird fictions, but by this point Bloch has directed so much focus to Willie’s emotional life that it seems perfectly natural for the child to remain worried about others rather than himself. As he hears the cultists beating on the doors of the farmhouse, Willie advises the reader to go to where the altar is on the nearby hilltop. Evidence of the existence of “*them ones*” will be there in the forms of marks left by the creature as it fed – round marks, two feet wide, which he says at last are actually fingerprints. The story ends on a tragic note with an interrupted line: “[t]he door is busting o” (217).

“Notebook Found in a Deserted House” is a compelling piece of work.<sup>70</sup> Bloch wryly notes that the text “is a throwback to HPL-influences tales [but] it bears little

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<sup>70</sup> The same can almost, but not quite, be said about a slightly earlier work of Bloch’s which appears strikingly similar to “Notebook Found in a Deserted House.” In the disastrously titled “The Unspeakable Betrothal” (1949) Bloch presents the story of Avis, a young girl, from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. She finds herself plagued with illnesses which bring on fantastic, compelling dreams. In these dreams, she’s visited by strange aliens who come in through a round window in the ceiling of her bedroom and sing to her in voices that she cannot fully understand. She begs them to take her away with them, but they say that she will have to be changed, physically, in order to do so. Her sickness worsens, however, and her parents send her to a hospital for an extended stay.

While there she forgets all about the aliens who came through the round window in her bedroom, or at least stops caring about them. Her parents board up the window, and the years go by. Avis grows up and marries her childhood sweetheart. He goes overseas to fight in the Second World War, and Avis takes over her family home after the death of her parents while he is gone. Indulging in her independence, she takes the boards off the round window and immediately begins to regress to the mentality of a little girl.

resemblance to [my] earlier works with their ponderous and pretentious polysyllabification” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 256), but in fact his notes of originality blend with a convincing style of dialect and a relentlessly menacing atmosphere to craft a worthy homage to Lovecraft’s weird fiction. Equally Bloch has developed the pastiche sufficiently to push the genre of weird fiction into representing his own critical interest in character psychology, thus using the pastiche form to blend influence and innovation within one text. Few critics seem to give the story much regard, however – S. T. Joshi rather begrudgingly states that it “shows how a tale of basically Lovecraftian conception can be adapted to a very different idiom” (Joshi, *Fall* 154). I am unsure of what conception Bloch is supposed to be specifically adapting here – I highly doubt that Joshi thinks Lovecraft invented stories involving child narrators or weird human sacrifices to monstrous creatures. In his single paragraph of analysis of the story, Joshi raises an interesting complaint: he argues that Bloch’s text features a “rather grotesque misconstrual of Lovecraft’s shoggoth (here interpreted as some sort of tree spirit)” (153-54), which is raised in other analyses as well. This is a point that seems to contradict what

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She begins to sleep in her old bed, and eventually the aliens return. Again she struggles to understand them and begs them to take her with them to beyond the stars. Avis’ husband and doctor find her in a feverish, near delirious state, and attempt to give her treatment. The story ends with the aliens finally agreeing to take Avis with them; they break through the ceiling of her room and, as the doctor and her husband discover, take her body but leave her head behind.

The story is an interesting attempt at creating a pastiche of Lovecraft’s weird fiction by using his set dressing in a light manner, relying on Bloch’s own interest in psychology to carry the weight of the plot. However, choices such as the omniscient third-person narration serves to distance the reader from the internal life of the protagonist in a way that the first-person narrative used in “Notebook...” manages to avoid. Furthermore, the ending of the story comes across as rather hackneyed and forced, especially in comparison to the powerful ending of “Notebook...” While an interesting piece of weird fiction, and further evidence of Bloch’s evolving conception of the pastiche as a viable art form for the weird fiction genre, “The Unspeakable Betrothal” stands most importantly as a test case for later, far more successful, experiments of Bloch’s.

weird fiction critics tend to dislike in Lovecraft's followers who over-systematized the imagery of his weird fictions in their pastiches *and* runs contrary to the stated hope of critics like Joshi for authorial innovations in weird fiction pastiches.

Surely if readers are to cling to an overly-rigid definition of what a "shoggoth" is<sup>71</sup> then they will be making the same mistake as those well-intentioned persons who tried to force Lovecraft's creations into an ill-fitting classificatory system. And, equally, pastiche authors must be given the ability to do more than tell a story that is a "purportedly horrific or exciting sequence of events using [Lovecraft's creations] as if they were mechanical pieces on a board game" (21-2) by allowing them the critical space to use elements of Lovecraft's weird fictions in unexpected, even challenging, ways.

"Notebook Found in a Deserted House" is one of the unusual weird fiction pastiches that suggests that new ground can still be covered by original weird fiction works – even ones that break away from the specifics of early American weird fiction laid down by Lovecraft and his colleagues. As such, it can be read as a bridge between the two eras of the early American weird and the so-called "New Weird" that will be discussed in the following chapter. This work comes late among Bloch's weird fiction pastiches, but the text is all the better for it; by this time in his career, Bloch had matured into a capable and successful professional writer. He does not need to hang onto the moments of specific copying of Lovecraft's works that he deployed in his earlier pastiches, but is still engaged enough in pastiching the weird work of his mentor that he attempts to establish his own

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<sup>71</sup> Which, frankly, seems rather odd to do. Shoggoths, as they are originally shown in "At the Mountains of Madness" (1931), are described as giant, protoplasmic collections of randomly grown (and retracted) body parts, and oily, iridescent spheres. There is no reason that I can think of to definitively claim that shoggoths *could not* appear as they do in Bloch's story.

approach towards psychology and its importance to contemporary weird fiction. Bloch will push his establishment of distinct concerns even further with his last pastiche of Lovecraft's weird fiction – an ambitious, novel length project that did what no other author – even Lovecraft himself – had yet attempted.

*Strange Eons* (1978):

Published in 1978 by Whispers Press in a limited print run, *Strange Eons* is Bloch's last salute to the works of his mentor H. P. Lovecraft. Bloch was an accomplished professional author by the time he wrote the novel; it was a rare turning back towards his early influences at the height of his career. It is explicitly a pastiche; it was also one of Bloch's personal favorites among his works. The novel is constructed in three sections: "Now," "Later," and "Soon." These parts tie the Lovecraftian motif of the end of the world (referred to in Lovecraft's weird fictions as when "the stars are right") into Bloch's interest in the dissolution of the family – or, more precisely, the impossibility of a stereotypically healthy family. As might be expected, aberrant psychologies abound in the novel, allowing Bloch to question conceptions of the stereotypical Lovecraftian protagonist as a laudable (or even functional) personality. And, finally, the whole of the plot involves an end-point to Lovecraft's fictional universe that few authors would consider attempting. As Joshi puts it, the novel "is a grand synthesis of Lovecraftian tales and themes. Bloch fuses elements from the 'Cthulhu Mythos' into a convincing unity" (Joshi, "Literary" 24). By "convincing" I think that Joshi is suggesting that *Strange Eons* gives Lovecraft's weird fiction some of the over-arching coherence that others attempted to apply through strict categorization and systemization. Those

others failed, which presents an interesting theoretical point: if extra-textual attempts at coherence fail by necessity, it is only pastiche – the critical play of reading and writing simultaneously – that can provide some level of success at creating a “convincing unity.”

The novel opens in a manner that is almost banal considering how many times this precise sequence of events has occurred in pastiches of Lovecraft’s weird fiction: a protagonist existing in the ostensible real world finds and is entranced by an object that is, impossibly, exactly like one from Lovecraft’s short stories. In this case the protagonist Albert Keith finds a painting in an art gallery that is indisputably the portrait around which Lovecraft’s short story “Pickman’s Model” (1926) revolves. Keith, being unfamiliar with Lovecraft’s writing, does not recognize its origin, but he buys it anyway to add to his collection of religious and outré art works. Keith’s friend Simon Waverly identifies the provenance of the painting, indicating that Lovecraft is himself a character in the narrative (though he never appears in it, having died as he did in reality in 1937), and the two share a conversation that sounds as though Bloch were himself speaking to the reader:

Keith frowned. “You’ve got a point there. And come to think of it, the painting is too skillfully executed to have been dashed off on impulse as a gag. If it weren’t for the subject-matter, one could say that it was the product of tender loving care.” [...] “Then there’s only one answer. The work was an artist’s *homage*, a sincere tribute. The painting was inspired by Lovecraft’s novel. (Bloch, *Strange* 6)

Bloch is setting the stage for the rest of the novel here. He makes it plain that what follows is a work of homage, an intentional pastiche and therefore neither wholly original



nor copy. It is both a tribute and a singular work, enmeshed within the artistic web of Lovecraft's weird fictions but still apart from it in a fundamental, critical way. The two characters act in a reasonable manner: they cannot believe that the painting is real, since that would mean that Lovecraft's fictions are not in fact fictions but, on some level, accurate representations of the world. As such, they return to the art gallery to see if they can locate the artist, since they know that the painting was part of a lot purchased from a warehouse auction in Massachusetts.

They find that the gallery has been burglarized; the boxes of material that they had hoped to secure have been stolen, the building has been thoroughly vandalized, and the dealer has been murdered. Indeed, he is discovered in a state that is immediately reminiscent of Lovecraft's weird fiction: Waverly recognizes that the position of the dealer's corpse, leaning on the sill of a window with its face eaten off, is the same as a character in Lovecraft's "The Lurking Fear" (1922). The discovery of the gallery owner's corpse is given extra impact by the finding of a piece of paper missed by the unknown burglars. It is a letter written by H. P. Lovecraft to the painter of the portrait, one R. Upton (the eponymous character in Lovecraft's story is named Richard Upton Pickman), praising him for his work and requesting information on where he finds his inspiration. Understandably, this is a shocking set of discoveries and the close linking of fiction to reality sets the two protagonists off on a discussion of Lovecraft as a person and what his interests might have been. They come to the conclusion that Lovecraft must have worked actual occult realities into his short stories, but why this would mean that a random gallery owner, decades after Lovecraft's death, would die in a manner precisely like a character in one of his stories is never explored.

The text is toying with the reader's notion of pastiche, here, after so recently establishing the novel as a whole as an homage pastiche. The manner of the gallery owner's death is pure contrivance – one that resonates with Keith and Waverly on the level of its resemblance to fiction. On the other hand, it is the letter that convinces them that there is some level of rationality, however bizarre, underlying the horrific things they have witnessed. In other words, it is not the copying of fiction but the reconfiguration of reality that is compelling, and the protagonists' response is a critique of the woodenness of characters within Lovecraft's fiction as much as it is a faithful representation of that woodenness. Bloch's pastiche, therefore, is not a slavish replication of previously extant works but a moment of play wherein the author's milieu is examined and pushed in new directions. The deployment of contrivance and the unconvincing manner of the protagonists' reaction reads as a response to the way critics of weird fiction have analyzed pastiches as little more than kitsch lacking significant artistry:

Contemporary usage of the term [pastiche] is overtly abusive, implying that a dearth of creativity has made a new work not only slavishly imitate clichés of its genre, but to do so in such an incompetent manner as to invite derision. The term signals a failure to create art, and if these texts are not a legitimate art form, then they are not parodies or pastiches in the sense [of merit]. (Kemp 101)

But Bloch's pastiche does not simply mechanically deploy elements drawn from Lovecraft; instead, he plays with that expectation. After viewing the murdered body Keith and Waverly do not go to the police, even though what they have discovered is hardly beyond the scope of the authorities. Instead, Waverly departs to do research – as

though he were himself a Lovecraftian protagonist (which, in a metatextual sense, he is) – while Keith goes to a hotel to read through several volumes of Lovecraft’s fiction and non-fiction. By this point the expectation of the two protagonists – and the reader – is that Lovecraft’s fiction is somehow a roadmap or blueprint for real events to follow. And, for a time, that is exactly what they are.

Keith receives a phone call from Waverly, who tells him that a package is coming for him and that he must not open it. After the package – an envelope – arrives Keith receives another call from Waverly who begs him to come to his house for an important meeting. Keith goes and opens the envelope at Waverly’s request, and inside is a map with coordinates to an ostensibly empty piece of ocean in the South Pacific. Waverly attempts unsuccessfully to persuade Keith that all of the evidence they have uncovered suggests nothing more than a hoax perpetuated by Lovecraft, who was to some degree a fan of literary pranks.<sup>72</sup> In an unexpected turn, Waverly attempts to have Keith killed, but is thwarted at the last moment by an earthquake. This sets up another moment of direct copying in the overall pastiche: after the earthquake, Keith finds that Waverly’s body is gone and all that remains is, horrifically, his face and the skin of his hands, each with metal clips attached. This is (as Keith notices) a direct reference to the death of Akeley, a character in Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in Darkness” who was imitated by a monster wearing his face and hands in exactly the same way. The whole affair leads Keith to wonder: “[s]uppose there was a hoax – not perpetuated by Lovecraft, as the whisperer

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<sup>72</sup> Bloch knew Lovecraft’s humorous side quite well: as stated earlier, the friends once wrote a series of interlinked stories where stand-ins for each other were the protagonists, with each plot culminating in the other being killed in increasingly horrific ways. Rather than this being a dark pursuit, both authors viewed the other’s writing as a moment of great fun and light-hearted camaraderie.

had clumsily suggested, but by fanatical and unbalanced followers of his writings?” (Bloch, *Strange* 40). Bloch is speaking metatextually here. The “hoax” in this sense is a coherent or systematic universe from which Lovecraft wrote – such a thing never existed. It exists only because his followers perpetuated, with the best of intentions, a false understanding of his fictional creations. Bloch’s pastiche is inverting that idea: he is not writing within Lovecraft’s philosophy or aesthetics, and as such is not crafting a weird fiction tale in the Lovecraft mode. Instead he is using Lovecraft’s superficial features to create a pastiche of *other pastiches*, interrogating Lovecraftian texts of the pastiche period of weird fiction for the ways in which they have represented the original texts that influenced them.

Keith follows the map to the location indicated, even though he knows that, ostensibly, that location is fictional. The destination is the coordinates for the city of R’lyeh, which rises from the ocean to indicate that the stars are right in Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926). There is an echo of Jean Baudrillard or Umberto Eco here: the following of a map (itself a prop in a narrative) through actual territories to find a fictional location is a well-known bit of play in postmodern texts, usually deployed in order to underscore a disappearance of the “real” in postmodernism. Unfortunately, Bloch pushes the matter aside relatively quickly, since the absurdity of Keith’s efforts is elided by the bizarre experiences he has witnessed. In Tahiti, Keith makes the acquaintance of Major Ronald Abbott, a retired British officer, who joins him in his quest to determine if R’lyeh is real and, if it is, try to stop Cthulhu from rising. From there the narrative is overtly similar to a section in Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu,” with one notable exception: in Lovecraft’s story the protagonist does not fall into R’lyeh and die.

The break from the familiar path of Lovecraft's story is jarring and abrupt – I think meaningfully so. Up until now the major points of action in the plot have rotated around events in Lovecraft stories, but Bloch ends that trend suddenly by having Keith die on R'lyeh. This is the text signaling the reader that the direct lifting and copying of plots from Lovecraft has reached the fullness of its purpose. Beyond this point it would be useless to try and copy Lovecraft's stories en toto, and as such the pastiche must move in a more subtle direction: one wherein the set dressings of Lovecraft's weird fictions are still used, but where a dual attempt is made to go beyond what Lovecraft accomplished with weird fiction while avoiding the pitfalls of the “mediocre imitators [who] take nothing but the ‘feathers’ of the exemplary work” (Hoesterey, *Pastiche* 7).

The second section of the novel, “Later,” introduces Albert Keith's ex-wife Kay Keith as she is being informed of her inheritance upon his death, which is being reported as a drowning at sea due to drunken misadventure. She spends a considerable amount of time thinking about Keith in terms of his psychological makeup and development. While considering his collection of outré art she thinks:

These were toys, not terrors. The kind of thing little boys order by mail from the ads in the back-pages of the comics magazines. Although the masks were authentic rather than plastic replicas, their menace was synthetic [...] [Albert] had enough money to purchase perpetual privacy; here in his hide-away he could surround himself with the symbols of security. If you're afraid to live with people, then live with things instead. Dead things, things that remind you of death but do not threaten your

existence because they can be controlled. You *own* them, and they can't harm you. (Bloch, *Strange* 60-1)

Bloch is again making meta-commentary by having Kay interrogate the stereotypical Lovecraftian protagonist. Almost universally, Lovecraft's characters were men of wealth and familial standing, educated or successful in their careers – usually artists or scientists – who held preferences for the strange or bizarre and a distaste for the common rush of life. Kay indicts this type of protagonist as far from the laudable manner Lovecraft would have presented them in his weird fiction; indeed, Kay is, while sympathetic, unflinching in suggesting that such personalities are fundamentally wounded on a psychological level. And Bloch, in turn, uses Kay's personal insight to level critique upon the tradition of Lovecraftian weird fiction – for the well-intentioned but mistaken pastiche of Lovecraft's work is little more than a collection of dead things that lacks threat and can be controlled. Here Bloch is suggesting that the pastiche of weird fiction must possess as much threat – as much experimentation and potential – as the original weird fiction texts themselves. Just because they are pastiches does not mean they are robbed of power, or are merely storehouses for collections of dead ideas; they must strike their own mark in the midst of their homage, remaining neither wholly original nor wholly copy while achieving some level of artistic merit.

Kay meets Mike Miller, a government operative who is attempting to stop the recent threats to humanity – most notably being the rising of R'lyeh and the awakening of Cthulhu. Mike arranges for Kay, who works as a fashion model, to be sent to the Starry Wisdom Temple to take part in an advertising photo shoot for Reverend Nye, the head of the Temple (and thin facade for the god Nyarlathotep). This is a subtle reference back to

Lovecraft,<sup>73</sup> but the presentation of the Starry Wisdom Temple here is entirely distinct from how he used it. In Lovecraft's story, the cult and their rituals involving the Shining Trapezohedron (an object of occult significance) were strictly background material, spoken of but never shown; here they are spoken of at great length and shown in detail. Equally, in Lovecraft's story the cult was made up of non-white and lower class persons while here it is mixed in both aspects. Kay reflects on this without being aware of Lovecraft:

In the back of her mind she sensed some common denominator here and tried to identify it. Not economic status, surely – some of these attendees were conservatively well-dressed and others were tank-topped street people. Then she realized the single attribute all shared in common; it was youth. A high proportion of the group seemed to be teen-agers, and no one looked older than thirty. (76)

Again the text is addressing the clumsy pastiches which have risen up around Lovecraft's weird fiction. The Starry Wisdom Temple, complete with its nigh-mythological leader Reverend Nye, is a metonym for Lovecraft and his form of the weird; the worshippers are the young who became enamored with his writing, coming from all subsets of society but linked by their adoring reverence – often overwhelming but misplaced – for a man whose work they receive as inviolate. Bloch, through the thoughts of Kay, reveals that as much

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<sup>73</sup> The Church of Starry Wisdom (or the Starry Wisdom Cult) featured heavily in the background of Lovecraft's short story "The Haunter of the Dark" (1935), whose protagonist was a fictional version of Robert Bloch himself (and who met a famously grisly end at the conclusion of the story). This story was itself a sequel to Bloch's "The Shambler from the Stars," and was followed by Bloch's conclusion to the series, "The Shadow from the Steeple," many years after Lovecraft's death.

importance is invested in Lovecraft as a mythological figure,<sup>74</sup> in the end his works are “just show-biz [...] But it worked” (77). They are to be respected and treasured, but not worshipped or held as something that cannot be subjected to play within the confines of the pastiche form.

After the initial witnessing of the Temple service, Kay is invited to an Egyptian museum for a longer photo shoot. She is accompanied by an undercover government agent, but is discovered and captured after the agent is murdered by a follower of Reverend Nye. Kay narrowly escapes but is pursued through a series of underground tunnels in a claustrophobic sequence. Rescued at the last moment by Mike Miller, Kay is escorted to a government base, where she is introduced to a think-tank made up of individuals from disparate sectors of society brought together to combat the threat posed by recent paranormal activity. While Kay is in protective custody, Miller, who has developed a mutual romantic interest with Kay, is seconded to a nuclear submarine sent to eliminate R’lyeh – and hopefully Cthulhu himself – by any means necessary. Kay is escorted by Miller’s replacement, Orin Sanderson, by airplane to a forward action station. Again Bloch uses Kay as a mouthpiece for a less than successful digression on the defense of his fellow pastiche authors. Kay wonders to herself if Lovecraft, and those who followed him, might be a category of special persons. She wonders if “sensitive

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<sup>74</sup> One of the severe issues that arose from the systematization and classification enforced upon Lovecraft’s legacy by August Derleth and others was that such efforts required certain incorrect beliefs about Lovecraft as a person to be established as fact. These incorrect beliefs encrusted around Lovecraft for decades, forming him (like Poe, one of his idols) into a figure of mythology rather than biographical fact. It is only since the late 1970s – coincidentally the period of Bloch’s novel – that critics of weird fiction began working to dismantle the mythology in favor of fact. Unfortunately, their efforts have thus far had only minor impact on genre culture; Lovecraft is perhaps the most perpetually misunderstood author of American genre fiction in the Twentieth Century, to the continued frustration of critics and devoted fans alike.



artists, sculptors and painters in particular, responded to such dreams [of horrific reality] and reproduced their memories in clay or on canvas” (146), and her thoughts are easily transferable to literary pursuits. While a bolstering of the character of weird fiction pastiche authors, who are so often denigrated by critics or misunderstood by fans, might be understandable, the attempt by Bloch to justify the existence of pastiches falls flat here. Indeed, it comes across as a clumsy attempt at whitewashing problematic elements in early American weird fiction, such as racism, misogyny, and expressions of actual psychological impairment.

During the flight, Kay realizes that Sanderson and the flight crew have been mentally possessed by cultists of Cthulhu – presumably Starry Wisdom Temple members. This is another unreferenced callback to Lovecraft’s weird fiction, specifically “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933). The airplane is redirected towards Easter Island, which has been devastated in the recent tidal waves caused by an increase in earthquake activity as R’lyeh rises from the ocean. There Kay is met by Reverend Nye and Major Ronald Abbott, and is made the centerpiece of a ritual designed to appease Cthulhu and his ilk. In an uncomfortable scene reminiscent of *King Kong*, Kay is stripped naked and staked out on the beach. With the last shreds of her sanity disintegrating, she compares herself to Lavinia Whateley, a background character in Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror” (1928). Intriguingly, the two are comparable characters only in general ways: they are both women and they are both used to breed with Great Old Ones, the category of paranatural beings that will return when the stars are right. Other than that they are nothing alike; Kay is active and successful whereas Lavinia is never shown directly in “The Dunwich Horror;” Kay is educated and given a rich internal life whereas Lavinia is

represented as distinctly inferior to the men around her; and Kay is, significantly more horrifically, entirely unwilling for her part in the occult ritual to which she has been consigned. It is unclear whether or not Bloch is trying to play up the problematic aspects of gender relations in Lovecraft's weird fiction and the pastiches that came after him. As with his investigation on psychology and the weird fiction pastiche author, Bloch is too brief and uses too light of a touch to really go far enough into the areas that richly deserve interrogation. The section ends with Kay, helpless, as Cthulhu himself approaches her from the ocean.

The third and final section of *Strange Eons*, "Soon," is a much shorter section. It almost feels like a coda to the reader than a fully developed part of the narrative on its own. That being said, it is internally intriguing just as the previous two sections are, and manages to avoid some of the shortcomings of the second section altogether. The section opens with Mark Dixon, a junior reporter, witnessing the assassination of the mayor of Los Angeles twenty-five years in the future. Shaken but determined to behave professionally, Dixon delivers a factual report to his editor before going to visit Judson Moybridge, the attorney who adopted Dixon when he was an infant. He is also the now-famous author of *The Fall of Cthulhu*, a book which analyzes the events of twenty-five years ago as a moment of mass hysteria and near nuclear catastrophe at the hands of the United States government. He is quite insistent in his claims that there were no supernatural events in the past; it was nothing more than a case of a government cover-up playing into group psychosis. Dixon, confused about why the works of H. P. Lovecraft have disappeared from bookstores, questions Moybridge about his work. He is most interested in a recent string of assassinations carried out by the "Black Brotherhood," a

group who many fear represent a return to the panic of a quarter century ago. Disgruntled by his argument with Moybridge, Dixon goes to visit his girlfriend Laurel Coleman. During their night together a massive earthquake hits California, causing the nearby Parkland Cemetery to be almost uncovered. Taking a presumably safer route through the cemetery while looking for help, Laurel and Dixon stumble across a ghoul.<sup>75</sup> Laurel panics and runs off, only to be discovered by Dixon moments later, beheaded.

Dixon returns to Moybridge's home amidst the chaos of the earthquake and discovers that the house has been ransacked. Exploring Moybridge's safe, Dixon finds only one item, apparently overlooked by the burglars: an audio reel labeled "Excerpts – Necronomicon" (184). He takes this as proof that Moybridge's book is itself a fiction, created to distract humanity from the existence of the paranatural threats that menaced it twenty-five years ago. Dixon finds Moybridge drowned in his swimming pool as he leaves, and is then knocked unconscious by two Deep Ones, humanoid creatures taken from Lovecraft's "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1936). Driven to a location in the mountains, Dixon awakes to find that most of California is now underwater. Floods will soon overtake the house in which he has been placed, as they will the rest of the world except for the highest points. Reverend Nye, now revealed to be the god Nyarlathotep, is there and he informs Dixon that his suspicions about the past were right. The stars had come right, but Cthulhu was weakened by a nuclear bombardment. The only chance for his survival was to see that his lineage was carried on. To that end he mated with Kay Keith and she gave birth to Dixon, who is both the son of Cthulhu and Cthulhu

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<sup>75</sup> A semi-human corpse-eating creature featured by Lovecraft in his weird tale "Pickman's Model" and elsewhere.

reincarnated. In effect, Dixon's body is the new R'lyeh, and now that the stars have come right again it is time for Cthulhu to awaken and begin the rule of the Great Old Ones upon Earth. Dixon transforms, and the novel ends with Cthulhu rising as "mountains trembled, sinking into the sea. Time stopped. Death died. And Great Cthulhu went forth into the world to begin his eternal reign" (194).

"Soon" represents a difficult moment for critics of the weird pastiche. It is, indeed, not an original work, since it depends upon the works of Lovecraft for its very existence. Equally, however, it is not a copy; the sequence of events it deals with is depicted in Lovecraft's weird fiction as a sort of prophecy, but it is never shown or described in a meaningful way. It is only referenced in a rhyming couplet, "That is not dead which can eternal lie / And with strange aeons even death may die," originating in Lovecraft's "The Nameless City" (1921) and "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926). Nor had any other pastiches been set when the stars were right as of the time of Bloch's writing.<sup>76</sup> As such, it is both obviously indebted to the works that it pastiches, and yet not entirely derivative of those texts. In comparison to the first two sections it represents an intriguing movement for Bloch to make: the first section uses an overt and common form of pastiche to critique overly imitative pastiches of Lovecraft as well as play up weaknesses in Lovecraft's compositions. The weird works of Lovecraft are explicitly referenced and their fictionality is confused with the lived reality of the protagonists – playing up the question of where the original text ends and the pastiche truly begins. The second section, meanwhile, seems to be making a pastiche out of Lovecraft's weird fictions in order to

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<sup>76</sup> Several have since, however. One of the most interesting, the short story "Final Draft" (2002), was written by David Annandale, who is now at the University of Manitoba.

comment specifically on the authors who followed his mentor. Kay's rumination on the nature of believers, psychology, and the power of language to affect reality, all seem to be meta-commentary on the nature of weird fiction. The third section takes the overt pastiche of the first section, and the rumination of the second, to push the boundaries of what had been done before. Here a pastiche is created that extends the bounds of the works it homages – neither wholly original nor copy but an exercise used to demonstrate how the critical understanding of influential works can be increased. Indeed, Bloch's focus upon the importance of lineage – of the new cropping up unexpectedly in forms like, but not entirely similar to, the old – seems to be a relatively clear statement about the potential possibilities of the experimental pastiche form.

Readers of *Strange Eons* are, as S. T. Joshi put it, unlikely “to think it a masterwork of literature, but it may be among Bloch's more successful later novels and is certainly a delight to the Lovecraftian” (Joshi, “Literary” 23). There are moments where Bloch's subtext is heavy-handed or overly dismissive of the problematic qualities of early American weird fiction. Equally, there are unwieldy notes of plot and atmosphere that undercut the subtle investigation that Bloch enacts elsewhere. Nevertheless, Bloch's novel presents both a fitting homage to the work of his literary mentor and an example of how the pastiche might be used to develop a fresh perspective on those works. *Strange Eons* is not the pastiche of surface features mechanically deployed as imitative recapitulation; it is the pastiche of critical play created by someone who wishes to both read and write the milieu that has influenced them. As the last of Bloch's pastiches it deserves to be considered on its own merits as well as in relation to Lovecraft's weird fictions. Here pastiche does not sit comfortably as a pejorative label; nor does it wear the

further condemnation of genre fiction which sits “further down the continuum” and is all too often dismissed by critics as “consciously following an established formula, and mixing original creativity with deliberate imitation of textual models” (Kemp, “Pastiche” 103). Bloch has definitively shown through successes and failures within the novel that the pastiche is capable of extensive interrogation and expansion of weird fiction presuppositions.

Conclusion:

The pastiche is unusual for being a literary pursuit that is, as I have said, a dual activity of reading and writing. It is a method by which authors can demonstrate their knowledge of their place in the scope of literary history, show respect for the work of the writers who came before them, and subject genres of fiction to interrogation from the inside out. Commonly denigrated and considered a less worthy pursuit than wholly original writing, the pastiche is thought of, particularly in weird fiction, as the form used by writers who have not yet mastered their craft. Or, even worse, the pastiche can be seen as little more than empty recapitulation – an effort that is thought to be almost anti-aesthetic in its execution. This position is somewhat baffling in the case of weird fiction. Surely the problem is not with the form of the pastiche itself, but with the fact that so many weird fiction pastiches are, simply, poorly executed works. Amongst weird fiction critics it would seem obvious to accept the pastiche as a form of literary production, since early American weird fiction itself was often derivative of the work of previous authors – Lovecraft imitating the composition methods of Lord Dunsany and Edgar Allan Poe being a notable example. And yet the pastiche form is often, as in the criticism of S. T.

Joshi, considered to be demonstrative of works that fail to reach “an independent aesthetic value” and thus fail to rise “above the level of hackwork” (Joshi, *Fall* 14). To claim that this is necessarily so, to argue that “[t]here is no aesthetic value in merely copying another writer, even if that copying occurs on the level of deeper philosophical resonance” (14) seems needlessly dismissive; surely the pastiche, the “hodgepodge” of artistic elements that is neither an original nor a copy, should be judged on the merits of a given work rather than summarily rejected as a *form* based on purportedly objective aesthetic criteria.

By the time of the late 1930s and the early 1940s early American weird fiction had come into its own. The popularity of its first generation producers – authors like Lovecraft, Howard, and Smith – was widespread and profoundly influential. These weird fiction authors were, more often than not, writing in a vacuum by the time of their maturity; they were influenced by authors who came before them, but the central drive at the core of their work was to create something *new*, to redefine the genre of weird fiction in a radical break from the tired and predictable motifs and images of Gothic fiction and Nineteenth Century supernatural horror. They staked out their own literary turf through their fiction and non-fiction, and by the last years of the Great Depression they had successfully established a milieu of their own. This milieu could not help but serve as the historical context for the writers who came into professional life during (and often as a result of) the heyday of weird fiction. Although this period of cultural influence was temporary, it was nevertheless meaningful, and in the years leading up to the Second World War, many authors got their start by pushing at the edges of weird fiction through their devoted pastiches. These pastiches, as I have suggested, deserve far more analytic

attention than they have received from weird fiction critics. They should be subjected to fresh, but rigorous, analysis rather than endure dismissal simply because they dare to participate in a genre-based literary tradition. As has been shown, the pastiche can reveal deep challenges to presumptions within weird fiction, or push the boundaries of what can be done within the genre itself. It would seem logical for weird fiction critics to be intellectually engaged by the chance to revisit works by authors like Bloch in order to carefully turn over the borrowing and creating he deployed within his weird fiction.

Robert Bloch's work ran the gamut of genre during his professional life. He began while still a teenager with perhaps naive recapitulations of Lovecraft's work. Over time his weird fiction pastiches began incorporating his own interests, establishing new modes for weird fiction without cutting them off from their influences. Eventually Bloch's career branched out and he began producing wholly original works, leaving aside his history of pastiches almost entirely. Bloch's pastiche weird fictions demonstrate two important facts about the process of his maturing as a professional writer: he knew where he came from, and therefore knew the standard he wanted to live up to. He also knew the ways his writing could push his influences if he worked from within the confines of the expected. Bloch's pastiches of Lovecraft changed the shape of his work and defined the interests that he would later develop into his most successful crime and psychological suspense stories. But he did "gradually move away from his overwritten, Lovecraft-influenced early style" (Blackmore), which was not unusual since the common claim is that "most authors initially imitate others, their mentors, before developing their own distinctive styles" (Ellis). This is a bit uncharitable, as Bloch recognized the flaws in his earliest stories while still insisting that it was a good thing that Lovecraft's influence



lived on “in the work of so many of us who were his friends and acolytes. Today we have reason for rejoicing in the widespread revival of his own *canon*” (Bloch, *Mysteries* 257).

To Bloch, the pastiche form was a manner for him to have fun, to pay tribute to his mentor and colleagues, and to experiment. Weird fiction was Bloch’s milieu and the historical context of periods of his career, and accordingly it shaped the course of his works. To reject the stories due to their form is, therefore, entirely inappropriate.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **“There is a Greater Blackness”: Thomas Ligotti and the Metafictional Weird Tale**

#### **Introduction:**

Weird fiction may not survive into modern day. I do not say this out of coyness; the fact of the matter is that early American weird fiction operated under certain generic theorizations that do not seem to survive into the current literary climate. The reasons for this, I think, are twofold: first, weird fiction withered in popularity after sub-genres of the fantastic developed more discrete categories like fantasy, horror, and science fiction. These genres, especially horror, overlap the theorization of early American weird fiction in some areas while others have been left to lay fallow. Horror, unlike early American weird fiction, does not have a particularly strong need to place atmosphere over the needs of plot in compositional importance. Indeed, I think that even the briefest survey of modern horror would demonstrate the importance put upon plot rather than atmosphere, possibly due to the confusion between horror and melodrama that informs the most popular works in the genre since the horror boom of the late 1970s. The form of horror most used in the current state of the genre requires a privileged positioning of characterization and a devotion to strong plotting, with atmosphere coming a distant third. This is in direct contrast to early American weird fiction's dictum to compose atmosphere foremost with all other characteristics considered secondary. Furthermore, it seems to me that horror literature, while capable of great originality, lacks the dramatic break from fantastic works of the past that drove early American weird fiction authors to attempt new modes and techniques within their works. Most horror tropes popular in

current fiction – the vampire, the ghost, the serial killer, the zombie, and so on – fail to distinguish themselves from the precursors stretching back over the intervening decades.

A similar second problem has presented itself in terms of maintaining weird fiction as a distinct genre. The themes, motifs, and imagery that were so vibrant in the best of early American weird fiction tales have lost their experimental power in recent attempts at original weird fiction. These elements, which were fresh when deployed by the luminary weird fiction authors, coalesced during the pastiche era of weird fiction and are now often a symptom of routine composition. This affects not only the surface elements of horror, such as the imagery used to inspire awe, but also the philosophical basis of early American weird fiction. An example would be Lovecraft's aesthetic cosmicism: a theoretical position arguing for the depiction of humanity's insignificance when compared to the backdrop of the cosmos at large does not, it seems to me, have the same impact currently that it did in the early part of the Twentieth Century. What this implies is that the generally supernatural (or at least abnormal) elements that typified early American weird fiction – the one break from realism, the thing that "could not possibly happen" in Lovecraft's conception of the weird – have become as routine and expected as the traditional forms of the vampire, the ghost, the devil-worshipper, and other images of fright had become in Victorian supernatural horror. As such, there is substantive reason to agree with some of the weird fiction critics in their argument that the genre has, by and large, fallen into the domain of kitsch rather than challenging artworks.

The evolution of early American weird fiction into culturally familiar kitsch occurred most prominently during what I have called the "pastiche era" of weird fiction.

This period in the history of weird fiction involved the production of works by second (or third) generation weird fiction authors – those who were inspired by the early American weird fiction writers to produce texts of their own. These texts, in the main, reflected their historical context, and thus were often derivative of the weird literary works that came before them. Although there were some wholly original weird fiction works produced during this period, the majority were solidly in the pastiche mode, reconfiguring the surface features of texts by authors like Lovecraft, Smith, Howard, and others, over and over again. Those few who did use the pastiche to make commentary on the genre as a whole, such as Robert Bloch, tended to make it clear that the context informing their works was weird fiction itself rather than a distinct aesthetic movement, a historical occurrence, or some element of modern theory. New developments in the critical understanding of early American weird fiction effectively ended the pastiche era by taking away its legitimization – texts that were based on fundamental misunderstandings of an author’s work could no longer be justified within the community of the genre’s supporters, while the critical work enacted within some pastiches was being done in the non-fictional arena. Although pastiches are still produced today, they are significantly less thick on the ground. The emphasis in recent decades has been much more on whether or not early American weird fiction can be *reinvigorated* in the modern era, giving it the strong theoretical and philosophical basis that it had in the early Twentieth Century.

The potential for what might be termed the third “modern” weird fiction period is analytically interesting. The reinvigoration of weird fiction outside of pastiche suggests that weird fiction might, as a genre, be capable of survival if cut off substantively from its

roots. Since the critical reappraisal of weird fiction during the 1970s, however, it has been struggling to survive. I find myself in agreement with S. T. Joshi, who has argued that “modern weird fiction is, in the profoundest sense, *lifeless* (I mean no pun): it neither utilizes weird themes and situations in an original way nor embodies a distinctive world view” (Joshi, *Modern* 3). Joshi by his own admission tends to confuse the weird fiction genre with the horror genre that postdated it, but he makes a valid point about the lack of critical merit among much of current weird fiction. The fact is that the vast majority of modern weird fiction tales simply revisit the pastiche era without developing the genre into unique expressions of current aesthetics or philosophy.<sup>77</sup> Though as I noted in my previous chapter, there is merit in the pastiche’s ability to critically play within the boundaries of a historically located genre, much of modern weird fiction seems to do little more than successfully copy the surface features of authors who died nearly a century ago. This is not to say that these are bad works, or not worth reading – I do not think that it is the critic’s place to set value judgments of that sort upon texts. It is simply that there is little worth *analyzing* within these stories insofar as I can tell. However well written they may be, they do not *say* very much beyond seeking to inspire chills in the reader through the borrowed imagery of better writers, and as such, more than anything else they suggest that the genre of weird fiction has outlived its aesthetic utility.

I will say more about the lingering death of weird fiction and the potential rise of a new form of the genre, the so-called “New Weird” in my conclusion. In this chapter I will discuss one of the last weird fiction authors whose works could, perhaps, be placed

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<sup>77</sup> S. T. Joshi’s book-length critical project *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* (Mythos Books, 2008) is an excellent study on the seeming inability of modern weird fiction authors to reinvigorate their work without relying too much on elements drawn from the early American weird fiction authors.

in quality alongside the best of the early American weird fiction era. Thomas Ligotti (b. 1953) published his first short story, “The Chymist” in the small-press magazine *Nyctalops* in March of 1981. Since then he has written over one hundred short stories and prose poems, published some fifteen books including a novella, anthologies of short fiction, and an extended essay on his philosophy and worldview. It is this philosophy that, when paired with his aesthetics, makes Ligotti’s work one of the few examples of the potential for the reinvigoration of weird fiction in the modern period. Ligotti’s stories and poems are never *about* the horrific creatures and fantastic settings that he describes. Unlike most of the authors of the pastiche era and more akin to the early American weird fiction authors, Ligotti’s works are created to convey what Lovecraft codified as a “certain form of human mood” first and foremost, with horrific imagery used to represent said mood. For Ligotti, the weird tale is a way to express a philosophical position that holds human existence itself to be a site of horror, governed by an ontological malignancy. The near nihilistic pessimism that informs Ligotti’s work makes Lovecraft’s representations of the insignificance of humanity seem, in comparison, almost saccharine.

By consistently representing his own personal philosophy in his weird fiction, Ligotti has made it difficult to critically separate his biography from his texts in the analytic manner I think is best for authors such as Lovecraft. Ligotti’s stories are intensely personal and consistently reflective of his own attitudes towards life and the world, meaning that removing the author from the words on the page can be difficult to do without sacrificing critical nuance. Thankfully, Ligotti is well known for his reclusive attitude; few within the weird fiction community of fans, critics, and authors have ever met him due to crippling anxiety conditions that prevent him from attending conventions,

symposiums, or giving public readings. Additionally, even if Ligotti were healthy it is unlikely that he would have any particular interest in adopting a public persona – by his own philosophical statements he would most likely think that there was simply no point in being more open to others or seeking after fundamental connections with other persons. I do not wish to appear judgmental of Ligotti's conditions or attitudes, nor do I wish to minimize the mental and emotional health issues he has apparently had for the entirety of his adult life. It is simply a fact that there is little of Ligotti's biography known, and what little is known reinforces the point that his fictions are tailored to present his unique philosophical perspective based, at least in part, upon his various conditions.

So what remains is to look at how Ligotti's philosophical perspective is expressed. As said, his philosophy is at its core a pessimistic one, arguing for a fundamental lack of agency in humanity. Furthermore, Ligotti proposes that there is a necessarily hostile lack of purpose in existence. Weird fiction critic Matt Cardin described Ligotti's philosophy in the following manner:

[W]e can discern three primary themes (although they are certainly not the only three) emerging from a survey of Ligotti's *oeuvre*: first, the meaninglessness – or possibly malevolence – of the reality principle behind the material universe; second, the perennial instability of this universe of solid forms, shapes, and concepts as it threatens to collapse or mutate into something monstrous and unforeseeable; and third, the nightmarishness of conscious personal existence in such a world. (Cardin, "Career" 19)

Ligotti himself sums up his philosophy rather succinctly (if a bit obliquely) in his short story “The Bungalow House” (1995) where his narrator expresses an interest in art which reflects “three stark principles: first, that there was nowhere for you to go; second, that there was nothing for you to do; and third, that there was no one for you to know” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 206). This is a summation of what can only be described as a supreme pessimism in Ligotti’s weird fiction and therefore his philosophy: life is a thing that should not happen, for it has no point, no purpose, and no existential reality other than an illusion of self-consciousness. It would be impossible to discuss Ligotti’s work without engaging with, or at least observing, the total commitment his writing has to his personal outlook.

Ligotti presents his unique worldview so consistently that it can be wearying for the reader. The unrelenting horror of his insane, ontologically malignant fictional universe can flatten out after prolonged exposure even if one is resonant with his philosophy, inspiring malaise more than any other response. I am not certain if this effect of Ligotti’s work can be accurately described as a flaw, per se, but it is worth noting that his unflagging attempt “to portray a wholly nightmarish existence” (Ligotti, *The Hat Rack* interview) can form a barrier around his texts when his oeuvre is apprehended as a whole. Especially when paired with a consideration of his literary aesthetic, which tends towards a lush, almost surreal sense of composition that can overwhelm the reader. Ligotti is too practiced of a writer for this to be accidental: in interviews he regularly cites Lovecraft, Poe, Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, Nabokov, and Borges (among others) as his literary influences and discusses at length the ways in which he often writes in imitation of their particular idiosyncratic styles. This suggests that Ligotti’s aim in his weird fiction



is fundamentally twofold: one, he wishes to produce works faithful to a set literary tradition that attains the status of literary art. Two, his purpose for his weird fiction is to elucidate and explore the ways in which life, fundamentally, is not worth living.

All this is to say that Ligotti's weird fiction can be, at times, difficult to enjoy. The question as to whether or not one should "enjoy" the modern weird works of an author like Ligotti is beyond the scope of this dissertation – although Ligotti has, in fact, claimed that escapist enjoyment is the only reason why one reads anything at all. This is an interesting point for Ligotti to make, for one of the things that comes out strongest both in his weird fiction and his interviews is his erudition. Ligotti is an intelligent and well-read individual who incorporates, in one way or another, everything that he has written into his own texts. That is to say, Ligotti's stories tend to be arrangements that in the main represent his personal philosophy, but also strive to represent the fact that they are fundamentally *fictions* themselves. Several of Ligotti's best short stories operate in this vein, functioning on the whole as metafiction – stories that are about stories, or in some sense self-aware of their own fictionality, set up in "opposition, not to ostensibly 'objective' facts in the 'real' world, but to the language of the realistic [narrative] which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality" (Waugh 11). Of course, metafiction is hardly a new technique for authors to deploy in their fictions, particularly in the historical period of the end of the Twentieth Century with its *fin de siècle* anxiety and various cultural concerns about the nature of ontological reality. But within weird fiction, especially in terms of the early American weird fiction pioneers or pastiche era weird fiction experimenters, metafiction is effectively unheard of.

At its most basic, “metafiction,” as I am using the concept here, refers to texts which “explore the relationship between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction” (3). Metafictional texts draw attention to the relationship between fiction and reality, of course, by making their fictionality plain. In this sense it is clear from reading Ligotti’s weird fiction oeuvre that his texts are seldom about their fictional subjects; instead, they draw attention to the philosophical principles which are represented by those fictional subjects. In other words, they draw attention to their fictionality and serve as commentary on reality as Ligotti believes it exists outside the boundaries of his fictional universes. At the same time, however, metafiction often draws attention to the possible fictionality of the world outside of the text. That is, by demonstrating “how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly ‘written’” (18). The idea that an individual’s lived experience is received linguistically is complex, but pertinent to the example of Ligotti’s weird fiction. When Ligotti deploys a particular image, such as a puppet, that image is meant to be read not just for how it appears as a fiction. It is meant to be read as a representation of Ligotti’s philosophy on consciousness – and also as a tool to underscore the belief that his fiction is, in a sense, *literally true*. Humans are, to Ligotti, only puppets; the fictional image reinforces his philosophy as well as serves to close the distance between the “real” and the “fictional” universes. In this sense, Ligotti’s metafiction “posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions” (19); the concepts of consciousness, meaning, and stability in existence are, in other words, linguistic illusions made plain by the action of Ligotti’s weird fiction.

That weird fictions of any period are so rarely metafiction is an interesting critical point. One would imagine that weird fiction is prime ground for metafictional exploration with the extent to which it has been concerned, through a variety of philosophies, with the nature of truth, the meaning of art, existential reality, and the link between language and effect. Particularly when one considers the mid-to-late century pastiches which, in their devotion to homage, tried to determine why weird texts removed from the current period by decades of cultural shifts still resonated with readers and writers. Yet few if any have produced works like Ligotti's texts, wherein weird fiction is used to philosophically support a necessarily pessimistic perspective via artful arrangements that serve, on the one hand, to render the nightmare of existence into metaphor and, on the other, draw attention to the fictionality of the text itself – to “assault or transcend the laws of fiction – an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form” (Scholes 114). By transcending the laws of fiction, Ligotti underscores the fact that what is actually being discussed is, in some sense, lived experience rather than imagination. He also demonstrates how the techniques of narrative – image, composition, plot, and so on – are only vehicles for the depressing perspectives of the author. There is merit in thinking that authors, for the most part, are interested in representing themselves or their philosophies in the works they produce. But for Ligotti this is the *only* reason he writes: writing is, for him, agonizing to the point of causing actual physical and psychological distress. The satisfaction he gets from it stems from accurately representing his own bleak outlook that ultimately is not, so to speak, worth the price of admission.

This very idea of a “price of admission” is rendered as a metaphor in one of Ligotti's latest works, “The Shadow, The Darkness” (1999), in which he also presents

one of the most concise examples of what could be thought of as a principle of metafiction in his stories. I will open this chapter with an analysis of “The Shadow, The Darkness,” but before I do, it is worth bringing up the scant details of Ligotti’s biography so that it is clear when and how his personal experience of life is mingling with his authorial voice without having to return to these points. Ligotti was born in Detroit, Michigan, and spent his early years in what he describes as an “affluent suburb” outside of the city proper. Although he was a devoted Catholic during his childhood, Ligotti lost his faith, keeping only a continuing fear over sinful behavior that has plagued him for most of his adult life. By the age of seventeen, in 1970, he was heavily abusing both drugs and alcohol. That same year, Ligotti discovered the work of H. P. Lovecraft, whose writing instilled in him the desire to be a weird fiction author himself. He also had a nervous breakdown in 1970, from which he emerged clean of drugs and alcohol but with a newfound passion for writing as a form of release that took the place of substance abuse. After graduating with a degree in English literature, Ligotti took a position with the Gale Research Company in their Literary Criticism department. He worked there for twenty years, intermittently publishing his weird fiction in a variety of small press magazines and fanzines, before retiring from his job and moving to Florida in 2001.

Aside from a scant few innocuous details,<sup>78</sup> this is close to the total amount of Ligotti’s current biography. This is worth noting because it makes him distinct among many (if not most) highly regarded weird fiction writers of any particular period. As I have said, so much is known about the lives of Lovecraft and Howard, for example, that

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<sup>78</sup> Such as Ligotti’s work with the post-industrial music group Current 93, his collaboration on a non-produced script for an *X-Files* episode, and his preference for blockbuster film adaptations of horror novels.

critics of the weird will find their analyses of a given story or set of texts overwhelmed by the presence of the author via the minutiae of their biographies. With Ligotti this overwhelming is never at issue because not enough is known about his background. Paradoxically, of course, there is the matter that Ligotti's intensely personal view of existence and the universe *is* present. It is almost as though Ligotti's philosophical presence elides the necessity for his biographical presence; the abyss that is represented in his stories describes him without actually presenting an image of him as a person. This fits neatly into Ligotti's general outlook since, by his philosophies, there is nobody actually there – just as there is nobody there with anyone else, no actual individual “self” anywhere in existence, only the illusion of such.

This gesture of representing what does not exist or is impossible to represent comes up repeatedly in Ligotti: literature, for example, and more broadly language, obfuscates just as much as it reveals, which is why his weird fictions so often incorporate metafictional strategies. Metafictional texts comment upon the literary tradition to which they belong, laying bare the conventions that support said tradition in order to dislocate from those conventions and question the nature of the relationship between fiction and reality. There is no doubt whatsoever that Lovecraft's weird tales were absolutely fictional, despite the fact that they were tailored in a way to metaphorically represent specific philosophical points. In Ligotti's fiction, however, the distance between his philosophy and his fiction is negligible at best; he deploys the conventions of weird fiction to demonstrate the ontological truth *of* his weird fictions. This does not mean that Ligotti believes that a being like his “Nethescorial” exists any more than Lovecraft would have believed that “Cthulhu” is a real being. The difference is that “Nethescorial” is an

image used to describe how the malignancy it represents is, in Ligotti's philosophy, a fundamental quality of reality. The form of Ligotti's writing is critiqued by the writing itself – the imagery, conceits, and stylistics of weird fiction are used to metafictionally turn weird fiction on its head in order to highlight the lack of distance between itself and a lived experience of the world. Metafiction, therefore, serves to collapse the fictionality of weird fiction by exposing it as a set of generic conceits in order to question what relationship it bears with reality. Ligotti's metafictional technique ensures that the genre, with all of its related conceits and problems, is considered along with his particular worldview, ensuring that there is no distance between the fiction and the philosophy out of which that fiction was born. It seems that for Ligotti, to consider weird fiction is to necessarily consider his philosophies. The two, the unreal and the real, are inexorably tied.

“The Shadow, the Darkness” (1999):

A relatively late story for Ligotti,<sup>79</sup> “The Shadow, The Darkness” (1999) is noteworthy for the ways in which it questions the ability of art to make significant commentary upon existence. It does so by foregrounding the distinctions between a visual artist, Reiner Grossvogel, and an unnamed author who describes a philosophical tract he has envisioned, but never written, titled “*An Investigation into the Conspiracy Against the Human Race*” (Ligotti, *Teatro* 245). The fictionalizations of Ligotti and his

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<sup>79</sup> Due to a protracted period of depression and anhedonism, Ligotti has produced very little new work other than a few poems, a non-fiction long form essay, and spoken word recordings since 2001.

philosophies are immediately apparent: the unnamed narrator, who relays the story in first-person perspective,<sup>80</sup> is potentially a representation of Ligotti himself. Grossvogel, around whom much of the story rotates, details philosophies which are baldly Ligotti's own. Finally, one of the narrator's companions is a philosopher and writer who is already familiar with the ideas espoused by Grossvogel, and perhaps more enlightened than any of the others. It is no coincidence, I think, that eleven years after writing "The Shadow, The Darkness," Ligotti went on to write a long-form essay titled *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010). While that text bears only surface resemblance to the unwritten *An Investigation into the Conspiracy Against the Human Race*,<sup>81</sup> it cannot be accidental that Ligotti named his real text after this fictional one and uses a fictional character to espouse his personal beliefs.

The plot of the text serves little function other than to slowly reveal existence as nothing more than what David Tibet has described as "that terrible place beyond worlds, beyond redemptions, beyond words, where even the silence was ferocious and painful" (Tibet, "Soft" 112). However, the plot should be analyzed because while the vast majority of Ligotti's stories arrive at the same conclusions, they all take different routes to get there. Here the irruption of unreality – or perhaps hyper-reality, the true reality – into prosaic reality occurs through the enlightenment of Reiner Grossvogel, a failed visual artist. The story opens with the narrator sitting at a diner in the "dead town"

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<sup>80</sup> Almost all of Ligotti's weird fictions are told in the first-person. He has repeatedly stated that this is used as a technique to involve the reader in the psychology and perspective of the narrator rather than distracting them with external action.

<sup>81</sup> It is in fact an extended philosophical argument for universal pessimism, voluntary human extinction, and antinatalism – a position which argues that human reproduction is a necessary increase in suffering, and should not be attempted.

(Ligotti, *Teatro* 243) of Crampton with a small group of artists he has known for many years. They are there to meet up with Grossvogel, a comrade of theirs whom they have not seen in some time, to share in a technique he calls “[m]etamorphic recovery” (245) delivered during a “physical-metaphysical excursion” (244) which will ostensibly transform them from the failed artists they currently are into “successful organism[s]” (262). The problem, according to Grossvogel, is that they, like all persons, are trapped by an “*activating force* that sets in motion all the objects, all the bodies of this world” (259) and gives them the “deranged and useless desires to *do* something and to *be* something” (260). As they wait for Grossvogel they share in bitter coffee and stale doughnuts while the narrator recalls the history he and Grossvogel have shared.

The narrator describes in retrospect how he accompanied Grossvogel to hospital after Grossvogel collapsed from gastrointestinal distress during his first public art showing. Delirious from pain, Grossvogel voiced “elaborate utterances about the ‘pervasive shadow that causes things to be what they would not be’ or the ‘all-moving darkness that makes things do what they would not do’” (248). Disturbed by Grossvogel’s ramblings and the wretchedness of the emergency room, which was “not so much a hospital, properly speaking, but more a makeshift clinic set up in an old building located in the decayed neighborhood where Grossvogel lived” (247), the narrator leaves. He attempts to check up on Grossvogel’s condition but is rebuffed by a nurse. Later he is told that Grossvogel has checked himself out, apparently fully recovered. The narrator loses track of Grossvogel until the two run into each other at the art gallery. Grossvogel enlists the aid of a group of artists in taking down his exhibit – described by the narrator as “quite run-of-the-mill specimens of the sort of artistic nonsense that [...] will



occasionally gain a measure of success or even a high degree of prominence for their creator” (251) – so that it can all be destroyed.

An indefinite change has overcome Grossvogel, which the narrator is at a loss to describe fully: it is as though “a subtle but thorough change in the way he looked upon what lay before him” (253). To Ligotti, “[s]uffering imparts more lessons about life than joy” (Ligotti, Göttert interview), and it is for this reason that Grossvogel’s own enlightenment is contingent on his pain. Grossvogel invites the narrator and his friends to attend a showing of his new “radical and revisionary works” (255) at the gallery. There, Grossvogel explains that his collapse inspired realizations such as the fact that “I had no mind or imagination that I could use, that there was nothing I could call a soul or a self – those things were all nonsense or dreams” (Ligotti, *Teatro* 257). He goes on to describe how the lack of a self or a soul means that “he” is only a body:

I realized, in my severe gastrointestinal distress, that the only thing that had any existence at all was this larger-than-average physical body of mine. And I realized that there was nothing for this body to *do* except to function in physical pain and that there was nothing for it to *be* except what it was – not an artist or creator of any kind but solely a mass of flesh, a system of tissues and bones and so forth, suffering the agonies of a disorder of its digestive system, and that anything that did not directly stem from these facts, especially producing works of art, was profoundly and utterly *false and unreal*. (257-58)

This seems to be a metafictional consideration on the role of the weird fiction author-figure. Grossvogel is, initially, akin to a dim view of the likes of Lovecraft, Smith,

Howard, or Bloch: he creates “run-of-the-mill” art that might garner success and popularity for him, but his work is not reality – it is *fictional*. Grossvogel’s awakening allows him to see that his art – metafictionally weird fiction itself – is “false and unreal.” Weird fiction authors, Ligotti seems to be saying, can only produce weird fictions if they are dedicated to the unreal, since in order to produce such works they must first convince themselves that such a being as a “weird fiction author” can exist, rather than the material “mass of flesh” that they already are. It is only the artist that has accepted that they are *not* an artist but simply a body – Grossvogel or Ligotti – who can use the tools of art, of weird fiction, to demonstrate what reality actually *is*.

Grossvogel goes on to describe his discovery that there is an activating force which drives all objects in order to gain sustenance for itself. “This activating force,” Grossvogel says, “is something like a shadow that is not on the outside of all the bodies of this world but is *inside* of everything and thoroughly pervades everything – an all-moving darkness that has no substance in itself but that moves all the objects of this world, including those objects which we call our bodies” (259). His realization left him with a necessary decision: Grossvogel could no longer convince himself that his previous life had been anything but a total waste, and that the only way to escape his current disease-borne agonies was to give up himself. Grossvogel believed that “his only hope of survival was for him to perish completely” (261), requiring his mind and sense of self to die so that his body – purely animated by the shadow, the darkness – would persist through his feat of “metamorphic recovery.” According to his recounting he was successful, and stands before the assembled group as a person without personhood, an individual without a self.

Grossvogel's extended statement is the longest single section in the story, stretching over ten pages out of the thirty-seven total in the *Teatro Grottesco* anthology. Yet there is no sense of Ligotti belaboring the point with his composition despite his repetition of key phrases ("the shadow, the darkness," "activating force," "successful organism," etc). This is likely due to the deep commitment the author has to the ideas espoused; Ligotti's skill as an author carries this clear metaphorical description of his own philosophical pessimism wherein the universe is an ontologically malevolent thing, and humans are driven by unreal desires to attain illusory satisfactions. If there were less ability in Ligotti's writing, or less of a force of (ostensible) truth in the underlying message of the uselessness of identity, the scene would collapse under its own weight. But it manages to be a meditative moment in the text, and neatly delivers the thrust of Ligotti's philosophical weird fiction.

The text is, also, metafictional, employing intertextuality to examine the fictional system of Ligotti's weird fiction. By linking "The Shadow, The Darkness" to several of Ligotti's other works, ties between discrete narratives are created that bring a sense of philosophic and aesthetic unity when his body of work is considered as a whole. This unity does not suggest that Ligotti's weird fictions operate in the same fictional universe, per se, and as such a reader unfamiliar with his other stories will miss the metafictional organization he establishes here. The metafictional quality of "The Shadow, The Darkness" is not harmed by this point; if it can be perceived it reveals the ways in which the fictions are being subverted in order to build philosophic strength, using fictionality to depict reality rather than attempting to convince the reader that the fictions are themselves true. To take one example, Grossvogel's repetition of "the shadow, the

darkness” calls to mind Ligotti’s earlier story “Nethescorial” (1991) with its representation of a pervasive force underlying all of reality as a holistic, malevolent darkness, as well as his later spoken word performance piece “The Player Who Takes No Chances” (2003) with its insistent refrain that “there is a greater blackness”. By first denying the utility of weird fiction to reflect reality in a weird fiction story, and then building a philosophic unity amongst disparate weird fictions, Ligotti is metafictionally arguing for the ability of weird fiction and reality to become indistinguishable on a fundamental level.

After Grossvogel’s monologue is completed he reveals his new artwork to the group. It is a single sculpture, obviously a representation of “the shadow, the darkness” that he has described at length. It is almost impossible to describe clearly, for the narrator finds that it displays a confusion of forms, “a chaotic world of bodies of every kind, of shapes activated by the shadow inside them” (265). Still, the narrator is at least able to denote surface details of the piece:

It might have been anything. The surface of the piece was uniformly of a shining darkness, having a glossy sheen beneath which was spread a swirling murk [...] There appeared to be a resemblance in its general outline to some kind of creature, perhaps a grossly distorted version of a scorpion or crab, since it displayed more than a few clawlike extensions reaching out from a central, highly shapeless mass. But it also appeared to have elements poking upward, peaks or horns that jutted at roughly vertical angles and ended sometimes in a sharp point and sometimes in a soft, headlike bulge. (265)

The sculpture, of which Grossvogel soon produces more than one hundred variations, is labeled “TSALAL NO. 1” (266). This title should be taken in combination with the description of the sculpture, as both tie “The Shadow, The Darkness” to previous weird tales by Ligotti. The appearance of the sculpture is an indirect reference to the story “Nethescorial” (1991), where the same form of ontological menace is discussed as a being of darkness which has been worshipped for centuries. The name of the sculpture, “Tsalal,” is a Hebrew word that refers (according to Ligotti) to an enshrouding or an oncoming darkness. It is also the name of Ligotti’s story “The Tsalal” (1994) which focuses on an eponymous manuscript that is devoted to teachings of a malignant force or being of the same name. This book teaches that “there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved – everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives if we simply gaze through the eyes of the Tsalal” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 177). The similarities between “The Tsalal” and Grossvogel’s monologue are obvious.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “The Tsalal” is a slight reconfiguration of “The Shadow, The Darkness,” and is more than a bit of a failure for Ligotti in terms of representing his philosophy through the surface features of weird fiction. It is, in a minor way, a metafiction commenting again on the nature of weird fiction and its ability to alter the real world through its effect upon its readers, but the story never seems to come together in a way as powerful as “The Shadow, The Darkness,” or even Ligotti’s earlier and less experienced texts. “The Tsalal” is set in the town of Moxton and opens with a group of refugees returning to the town against their will after attempting to flee it. The narrative moves to consider the one person who chose to remain in Moxton, Andrew Maness, who stands in his room overlooking the town while speaking to a book on his desk which bears the title *Tsalal*.

Andrew reflects on a night from his childhood when he had inadvertently brought the shadows of the room to life, causing everything to begin to change in an indescribably chaotic manner. He knows, instinctively, that he cannot stop the changing, and that it is the hallmark of “the end of everything, the infernal apocalypse” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 172). At the last moment Andrew is interrupted by his father, Reverend Maness, who upbraids him for his lack of control and his inability to resist the darkness. He tells Andrew to “read the right words and to always have them in my mind” (176), meaning the words of the Bible, but Andrew grows fascinated with his father’s library of obscure texts – most of which seem to be anthologies of weird fiction. Among them he finds the book *Tsalal*, which is his undoing.

What is significant about these connections between Ligotti's weird fictions is that they, as said, do not suggest that the various narratives are occurring within the same fictional universe. There is no reason to think that the events of "The Shadow, The Darkness" take place within the world of "The Tsalal." This is distinct from the way previous weird fiction authors deployed images and metaphors across multiple texts: Lovecraft, for example, uses Cthulhu in several of his weird fictions, and while Cthulhu is a complicated metaphor for a variety of philosophical points, he is deployed by Lovecraft in order to suggest that the stories all occur within the same fictional universe. In Ligotti's text, however, these intertextual links draw the reader's attention to the fact

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In the present day, Andrew talks to the book again, but also speaks to his father (now long dead) – for he knows that his father was the author of *Tsalal*. "[Y]ou brought your son to the place where he would read your words. This town was the wrong place, and you knew it was the wrong place. But you told yourself it was the only place where what you had done... Might be undone" (177). It seems that Andrew was born of an obscure ritual that was designed by his father – and a group of other pseudo-cultists – to create a person who was capable of seeing past the illusion of reality and manipulating the fundamental force of the universe. But Reverend Maness realized that this force was malignantly evil, and that Andrew would eventually not only call it up but cause it to manifest in the universe en toto, stripping away all illusions about the nature of existence. This would reduce life to a perpetual nightmare, a chaotic insanity where suffering was an infinite absolute.

Aware of the fact that neither he nor his cult members wish "to lose ourselves in the unreal" (184), Reverend Maness spirits Andrew away to Moxton to raise him in a proverbial crucible, always trying to teach him to resist his natural inclinations to summon the Tsalal in the place where that inclination would be the strongest. Tempted to join with the Tsalal and unmake creation as humanity knows it, the adult Andrew flirts with his ability to summon the ultimate blackness. At the end, however, he is overcome with the abject inhumanity, the terrible apex of futility that is represented by (and is) the Tsalal. Using the inhabitants of the town he enacts a ritual taught to him by his father, and over the course of a terrible night unmakes himself, joining with the Tsalal and ostensibly saving the world. Nobody in the town of Moxton remembers Andrew or his father, however, as his memory is stripped along with the flesh taken from his bones, which is the only thing that remains of him, laying secretly at the pulpit of an abandoned church.

"The Tsalal" is perhaps Ligotti's most conventional weird fiction. The conclusion of the piece rings rather hollow; conservative climaxes where equanimity is restored do not sit right with Ligotti's philosophy. Even though it is made quite clear that nothing is being preserved but an illusion – for the Tsalal is the fundamental force that activates and animates all of creation – there is still an apocalypse deferred. It is almost as though Ligotti is desperately trying to metafictionally "rescue" his other stories by showing that there is, at least, one moment where the darkness is not all-encompassing. If that is the case, the story only weakens the rest of his oeuvre. But if it is not, it stands as a mildly interesting metafictional commentary on the rest of his work – and the generally conservative character of much of modern weird fiction and horror – and little else. In either case the story is disappointing qua its function as a story, but successful, in its way, as a metafiction.

that they are reading a *fiction*, one placed amongst other fictions within the author's catalogues of weird texts. This metafictional quality allows a reader familiar with Ligotti's work as a whole to see that the fiction is designed to close the distance between the fictional representation of the real world and the real world itself, which reflects what the author believes to be true. Operating as a metafiction, the text's fictionality is meant to be noticed and shucked like a snake skin, leaving the impact of the philosophic theory behind. The story or the action of the plot is engaging, but it is not intended for the reader's immersion in the sense of a reader suspending their disbelief in order to accept the reality of what they are reading. Instead, the reader is intended to recognize that the text is wholly contrived, *unreal* in a fundamental way, just as our perception of ontological reality is itself contrived and unreal.

This sense of the unreality of fictions becomes important as "The Shadow, The Darkness" continues. As mentioned, Grossvogel goes on to create more than one hundred variations on his original sculpture. He possesses a new drive and ambition, which he credits entirely to the ego-death he suffered at the hospital. Free of a mind or a sense of self, his body is free to achieve the ends of a "successful organism," with his art being nothing more than a faithful representation of what he sees with his eyes. Grossvogel's mind is not present, since it was an illusion he sacrificed in order to survive, and thus his sculptures are ostensibly art without interpretation of any kind: they are reproductions of ontological reality, absent any notion of imagination. Coming into extraordinary wealth and critical recognition, Grossvogel invites his group of failed artist friends to share in his experience of "morphogenic recovery," and the narrator's reflection upon past events catches up with the present. One member of the group, Mrs. Angela (one of two named

characters in the story), complains about the bitter coffee and stale doughnuts before heading to the restroom. The narrator draws attention to the fact that several other people in the diner are showing signs of upset stomachs and doing the same. He feels a pain beginning to form in his abdomen, but is distracted by the fact that their waitress has disappeared, and is then pulled into a discussion with the author of *An Investigation into the Conspiracy Against the Human Race*.

The author reveals to the narrator that his treatise, *An Investigation...* has never been written. He states that although Grossvogel is correct in his belief about “the shadow, the darkness,” his approach with his sculptures has been a “rather showy, and somewhat trivial approach” (Ligotti, *Teatro* 273). The author says that Grossvogel’s transformation was a result of his stay in hospital, which is “an extremely rotten institution” (274). The hospital staff is part of a loose collusion between groups, each of which exists for “the most gruesome goings-on, the true extent of which I’m not sure even those involved with such places realize” (274). They were responsible for Grossvogel’s experience of ego-death during his gastrointestinal attack, but have failed in some manner with him due to the fact that he is still producing art:

“[Grossvogel’s] entire doctrine, if it can even be called that, if there could ever be such a thing in any sense whatsoever, is based on the non-existence, the imaginary nature of everything we believe ourselves to be. Despite his efforts to express what has happened to him, he must know very well that there are no words that are able to explain such a thing. Words are a total obfuscation of the most basic fact of existence, the very



conspiracy against the human race that my treatise might have illuminated.” (275)

He goes on to argue that “[b]ecause of the existence of words, we think that there exists a mind, that some kind of soul or self exists. This is just another of the infinite layers of the cover-up” (275). On a fundamental level this is a savage condemnation of Grossvogel’s practices: although the author agrees with Grossvogel’s philosophy, despite not having had the same ego-death experience, he cannot approve of Grossvogel’s *actions* since they constitute nothing more than yet another layer of obfuscation of the truth of existence. Grossvogel’s new art is no different than his old art and is obscuring the truth through visual language rather than revealing it – just as the author’s treatise would have obscured the truth by trying to illuminate it with written language.

This is another moment of metafiction in the story. The author is clearly a stand-in for Ligotti himself, if for no other reason than the resonance between his treatise and Ligotti’s own eventual *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. Perhaps the largest indication that the author is Ligotti, or a stand-in for Ligotti, is that he has *not* suffered ego-death at this point. Ligotti has often described how a world of humans without egos, minds, or senses of self, would be a paradise of sorts (albeit one that could not be appreciated). He is excluded from this paradise, however, because he has an all-too-convincing sense of self, no matter how unreal the self may actually be. Ligotti espouses the philosophy of the author, and is plagued by the sense of self that the author has. The arguments that the author makes about the failure of words to capture truth is an indictment of the very concept of fictionality itself; his claims mean that the whole of “The Shadow, The Darkness” is a failure, an utter waste, since it cannot possibly reveal

the truth that it espouses on every page. Furthermore, through the intertextuality presented earlier in the story, this failure is ascribed to all of Ligotti's other fictions. Finally, through Grossvogel's metafictional representation of weird fiction artists as a group, the author's / Ligotti's claims indicts the genre itself as a failure for obscuring truth with fictional distractions. The author's claims draw attention to the fact that the reader is only reading a story, and that the story is a necessary failure at its intended purpose. Ligotti, both the author *in* the story and author *of* the story, is a failed artist just as the other characters are, and his story is ultimately a metafictional commentary on the uselessness of his art as a whole. In order to properly serve his philosophy, Ligotti seems to be claiming, he should never have written anything at all.

By the end of the author's discussion with the narrator, they and everyone in the diner is dealing with "abdominal discomfort" (275). The author is aware of what is going on, even though the narrator himself is still oblivious: "[p]retty soon none of this will make any difference. No,' he said in a dead voice. 'It doesn't matter now.'" (276). Everyone in the diner is afflicted with gastrointestinal pain as "a young woman who had worn a uniform as white as gauze" (277) moves around them. This is the waitress who had served coffee and doughnuts earlier; at the start of the story the narrator said how much she reminded him of a nurse in a hospital. That is, it seems, exactly what she is, and "the hospital and all its rottenness had been brought to us" (277), inflicting Grossvogel's original physical pain upon them all so that they are forced to accept his form of "metamorphic recovery" and suffer ego-death in order to survive. The scene is one of chaos: "the shapes of the town outside the windows of the diner were turning all crooked and crabbed, reaching out toward them as if with claws and rising up like strange peaks

and horns into the sky” (276). They are seeing the shadow, the darkness, or the Tsalal, or Nethescorial, or simply reality, which one of them identifies with horror as a “face across the entire sky” (277). The narrator fails at describing the actual moment of recovery, and whether it was assisted by the staff from the hospital or not. All that he can say is that they have become “bodies without the illusion of minds or imaginations, bodies without the distractions of souls or selves” (278).

The story moves to its conclusion. The narrator describes how Grossvogel died shortly after the events in Crampton, “his body used up, *entirely consumed* by what needed it to thrive” (279). Like all of the group of failed artists, the narrator has inherited a large amount of money from Grossvogel’s estate, but this wealth is meaningless. He is caught by the Tsalal, forced to recognize that “[w]hat exists is only this *pulling*, this *tugging* upon all of the bodies of this world” (279). He is driven to success – driven to write the very story that the reader is reading – by an activating force that can only be satisfied by the utter annihilation of everything that purports to exist. Standing at his window and looking out at “black snow falling from a black sky” (280), the narrator considers the failure of his manuscript, his attempt to represent the underlying malignant truth of existence. The implication, for it is never stated directly, is that if he could he would not write and not wish to write. He would rather leave his story unwritten and thus not suffer the paradox of succeeding by failing – for his story must be a failure just as much as Grossvogel’s art was, as much as the author’s *An Investigation...* would have been, and, metfictionally, just as much as Ligotti’s work of crafting both the narrator and the narrator’s story is. The narrator concludes the story by stating that there is no way to

resist or betray the Tsalal that moves his selfless body: “[n]o one could do so because there is no one here. There is only this body, this shadow, this darkness” (280).

“The Shadow, The Darkness” functions as a synecdoche for Ligotti’s entire oeuvre of weird fiction. Paradox and failure fill the pages, consistently drawing the reader’s focus away from the story as a narrative and facing it towards the philosophy that Ligotti expresses in his fictional set-pieces. In its moments of metafiction the story reflects upon itself and the genre to which it belongs self-consciously, calling into question the ability of weird fiction to support a philosophical worldview that fundamentally denies meaning. There is only one element that seems out of place in the story: the nature of gastrointestinal distress as a potential moment of negative enlightenment. While it is true that Ligotti himself experienced this moment in the same manner, the usage of abdominal and intestinal cramps as a metaphor for the painful need for ego-death comes across as too base for the internal ambitions of the text. Perhaps this is intentional, although it would be impossible to tell; by using cramps and diarrhea as the vehicle for awakening, Ligotti might be drawing attention to the *necessary* gaucheness of attempting to fictionalize reality rather than showing the fictionality of reality. Regardless, “The Shadow, The Darkness” stands as one of Ligotti’s most effective weird fictions specifically because it is a failure on its own terms – and metafictionally it points to all of Ligotti’s work as a failure *en toto*. In his attempt to reveal the shadow underlying existence Ligotti has only obscured it further – the nightmare of our lives is hidden by his work, ensuring that its presence-not-presence is beyond the fumbling grasp of our illusory minds, imaginations, and selves.

“Nethescurial” (1991):

“Nethescurial” (1991) is a rare pastiche weird fiction from Ligotti. On the level of metafiction the story is an extended commentary on Lovecraft’s work – specifically “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), of which “Nethescurial” is in part an homage – and the nature of weird fiction writing in general. Although Ligotti is not as explicit here as he is during “The Shadow, The Darkness,” he nevertheless manages to capture his philosophical vision clearly through the use of slow revelation and an ending whose composition carries considerable weight. The fact that Ligotti is entering into a specific literary tradition – that of weird fiction and specifically Lovecraft’s formulation of weird fiction – is not something that Ligotti denies; indeed, it is obvious to anyone who has read both “Nethescurial” and “The Call of Cthulhu” that the former is a metafiction interrelated with the latter. “Nethescurial” is, however, a text that could not have been written during the early American weird fiction era: it is a thoroughly modern text. As S. T. Joshi has noted of Ligotti’s oeuvre in general, “[h]owever much Ligotti draws upon the weird masters of the early part of the century, his work could only have been written by one sensitive to the ambiguities of the *fin de siècle*” (Joshi, “Escape” 140). He goes on to say that unlike in Lovecraft’s texts, which “tries to make the unreal (i.e., the supernatural) real, Ligotti tries to make the real unreal (i.e., everything is ‘supernatural,’ or at any rate unnatural and monstrous)” (143).<sup>83</sup> This distinctive approach allows Ligotti to turn the

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<sup>83</sup> As has already been explicated, this is an element of metafictional texts as well. In terms of metafiction and realism it has been argued that metafiction “converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social construction. It suggests, in fact, that there may be as much to be learnt from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical ‘human nature’ that somehow exists as an essence outside historical systems of articulation” (Waugh 11). Here, however, “positive social construction” are

presumptions within “The Call of Cthulhu” around through a process of slow metafictional and philosophical revelation in a manner that his other stories – even his occasional pastiche – do not.

The presupposition of the story is that the nonsense word Nethescurial has several specific definitions: during the course of the narrative Nethescurial is used as the title of the story, the name of a manuscript, the name of an island or islands, the name of a god, the name of devotees or worshippers of that god, and the name for the underlying animating force of all existence. This smearing or blending of the term, which is unique to Ligotti’s weird fiction, allows the reader to recognize the universality of it both in terms of the author’s general philosophic position and in terms of the story itself as appending to the literary tradition of weird fiction.<sup>84</sup> The term Nethescurial is, therefore, a

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not the metafictional aim, since Ligotti’s goal is to reveal the conventions of weird fiction in order to remove the distance between weird fiction and reality – a reality that is, for Ligotti, nothing more than a malignantly pointless process of pain and alienation.

<sup>84</sup> This blurring effect of terms is a relatively common tactic for Ligotti, as we have seen in “The Shadow, The Darkness” and its metafictionally linked tale, “The Tsalal.” He uses it to great effect in the slightly unfocused story “Vastarien” (1987). In this story Victor Keirion is a seeker after the absolute: he cannot be satisfied with anything less than discovering a “*terminal* landscape” where he can “dwell among the ruins of reality” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 84). Going to a bookstore known for selling obscure and mystical manuscripts, he discovers *Vastarien*, a book “that is not *about* something, but actually is that something” (86). Another patron of the bookshop secretly arranges to pay the bulk of the price for Keirion, hoping that “[t]he book has found its reader” (90). Upon reading it, Keirion discovers that it does not describe but *is*, in some nebulous way, a city called Vastarien, replete with imagery that is both nightmarish and satisfying at once. The narrator describes it as there being “horror, undoubtedly. But it was a horror uncompromised by any feeling of lost joy or thwarted redemption; rather, it was a deliverance by damnation. And if Vastarien was a nightmare, it was a nightmare transformed in spirit by the absence of refuge: nightmare made normal” (88). Keirion begins to spend his days reading *Vastarien* and his nights dreaming of Vastarien.

Over time, however, Keirion’s dreams begin to disappear. Where the city of Vastarien once stood he now sees as a night-shrouded street stretching off into the blackness, leading to a towering human figure. He realizes that this figure is the strange customer who bought the book for Keirion, since he is the only one who could read *Vastarien*. In return, the strange customer has been feeding off of Keirion’s dreams, scavenging the nighttime visions of Vastarien for himself. Horrified by his inability to do anything, Keirion forces himself to resist sleep so as to save his dreams from being stolen – and goes insane. The story concludes with Keirion confined within an asylum, shouting wordlessly (as he has lost his ability to make or understand language) as the attendants drug him with a sedative. Keirion collapses into a restless sleep as the pair puzzle over why the inmate has been allowed to keep *Vastarien*, appearing to them as a book

representation of Ligotti's philosophy, an agent or force within the fictional universe of the story, and a metafictional commentary on the weird fiction tradition as a whole. This is a potentially confusing concept, and in the hands of another writer the story may have been a failure (as opposed to the skillful failure of a text like "The Shadow, The Darkness") or come across as superficial. Ligotti keeps the text under tight control, however, using concise speech to great effect. The story reads as intimate, especially through the use of a language of negation at the conclusion. This negation demonstrates how one might take weird fiction and, through a process of denial, be forced to reconcile oneself with the understanding that even if the elements of the genre are unreal, the underlying philosophy is fundamentally true.

Similar to "The Call of Cthulhu," "Nethescurial" is broken into three distinct sections: the first is "The Idol and the Island," the second "Postscript" and the third "The Puppets in the Park." Ligotti follows the same general movement in the text as Lovecraft did in his: each section progressively moves the narrator closer to a drastic realization. This realization is an evidence-based breakthrough that demands a re-envisioning of the

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filled with nothing but blank pages. Even in his unconscious suffering, Keirion attempts to answer them, but "he was now far from his own words, buried deep within the dreams of a place where everything was transfixed in the order of the unreal; and whence, it truly seemed, he would never return" (93).

"Vastarien" is an interesting metafiction in the sense that it draws a clear schema of what Ligotti would like to do with weird fiction. He would like to produce a story that is not merely a fictional representation of his personal philosophy, but *is* that philosophy itself – a perfect metafiction, in other words, where the pretense of language's necessity is discarded and the thing itself, the fiction, was indistinguishable from the real. This is an interesting concept, and on that level the metafiction works well. However, the plot itself – such as it is – is scant and, in light of the tradition of weird fiction, rather formulaic. A character discovering a terrible truth about the nature of existence within the confines of an old manuscript, and going insane as a result, has been covered by Lovecraft and innumerable imitators so many times that it cannot help but be watered down here. Ligotti makes up for the banality of this repetition in some ways through his use of lyrical prose, but that is not enough to save the work as a whole. "Vastarien," ultimately, is an interesting metafictional commentary on Ligotti and his pursuits in writing, but it does not go as far as it could.

nature of humanity's ontological existence. The conclusion of "Nethescorial" presents a more radical break than is given in Lovecraft's story, however: both narrators are overwhelmed philosophically, but there is no recourse given for the narrator in Ligotti's tale. This represents the limits for Ligotti's writing, since it would be impossible for the reader's world to actually be invaded by the horror within "Nethescorial." Absent "the reader's existential world being transformed into the story world" (Cardin, "Transition" 76), Ligotti's weird fiction cannot actually break through the text into the reader's life. And yet, "that is *exactly what Ligotti is writing about*. He seems almost to be playing a game with the reader's sense of distance from the horrors of the story" (76). This is radically unlike Lovecraft's purpose in "The Call of Cthulhu," which suggests that Ligotti is building off of Lovecraft. Once again he uses the construction of weird fiction to serve as a metafictional springboard for his ostensibly true philosophical position.

The first section establishes that the whole of the text is a long letter written by an unnamed narrator to an unnamed friend. The epistolary form is a significant reference to "The Call of Cthulhu:" Lovecraft's weird tale takes the form of a long document written by the narrator as he investigates a series of documents. Ligotti's story, conversely, can be thought of as akin to one of the documents Lovecraft's narrator discovers. That is to say, the experiences represented in "Nethescorial" are not as removed from the reader as they are in "The Call of Cthulhu." I suspect this is entirely intentional – Ligotti strips one step of distance away from the reader to establish both his position as coming after Lovecraft in the weird literary tradition, and to demonstrate that there is an explicit closeness between the philosophical stance he presents and the lived experience of the reader. This is what Matt Cardin has referred to as the "metafictionally-flavored multiple



framing devices [used] to create the sense of the literary / existential barrier being breached” (Cardin, “Transition” 72). In other words, though it is impossible for a reader of “The Call of Cthulhu” to have their worldview impacted by the existence of Cthulhu, it is entirely possible for a reader to have their belief in an existence that is not a nightmare shaken by the text of “Nethescurial.”

The narrator explains that he has “uncovered a rather wonderful manuscript” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 144) entitled *Nethescurial*. Seemingly a diary or confessional of some kind, the manuscript deals with a man named Bartholomew Gray, who sails to an unknown island named Nethescurial in order to meet with an archaeologist named “Dr. N-” (145) – presumably the name of the doctor is also Nethescurial, though this point is an assumption.<sup>85</sup> The island has “that sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and our fear of it in one sweeping sensation” (145). Here “the real and the unreal swirl freely and madly about in the same fog” (145). This is suggestive, but not emulative, of the way in which Lovecraft describes the city of R’lyeh, which rises from the ocean over the course of “The Call of Cthulhu.” There the ordinary rules of human perception seem subverted, giving the whole of the island a sinister weirdness. I suspect that this lack of emulation is intentional on Ligotti’s part: if the island Nethescurial were represented as directly *inhuman* rather than simply evocative of fear and pleasure, it would be entirely distinct from anywhere else in the world. And “Nethescurial” the story

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<sup>85</sup> It has been argued that the doctor’s name may be “Nyarlathotep” as a reference to Lovecraft’s weird fiction, where Nyarlathotep was a god-figure inimically hostile to humanity. There is no textual evidence for this idea, however, and although the intertextual reference would further cement Ligotti’s metafictional strategy I think it much more likely that the doctor’s name follows the pattern set out in the story proper: he is Nethescurial, as ultimately everything is Nethescurial.

hinges upon Nethescorial the island being fundamentally no different than any other place in the world. Indeed, as the narrator relates later in the story, the island seems to exist in *multiple places* throughout the world, if for no other reason than multiple islands coincidentally sharing the same name. Instead of a direct emulation, the description of these islands seems to reflect the *idea* of R'lyeh and, more importantly, the draw of awe and fear that underlies weird fiction itself.

Dr. N- claims to have found a part of an artifact originally owned by the inhabitants of the island. They worshipped an all-pervasive force that they thought was indicative of the positive nature of life: they believed that “all created things – appearances to the contrary – are of a single, unified, and transcendent *stuff*, an emanation of a central creative force” (147). It was revealed to them, however, that the force they worship – also called Nethescorial – is actually an ontologically evil presence. Unable to persist in their belief, the islanders destroy their idol to Nethescorial and scatter the pieces of it in secret locations throughout the world. Dr. N- has found a piece of the idol, and has dedicated himself to collecting all of them in order to protect them from an offshoot of the islander religion which seeks to make Nethescorial manifest. The narrator mocks the story for its overt familiarity:

[T]he stage is rigidly traditional and the performers upon it are caught up in its style. For these actors are not so much people as they are puppets from the old shows, the ones that have told the same story for centuries, the ones that can still be very strange to us. Traipsing through the same old foggy scene, seeking the same old isolated house, the puppets in these plays always find everything new and unknown, because they have no

memories to speak of and can hardly recall making these stilted motions countless times in the past. They struggle through the same gestures, repeat the same lines, although in rare moments they may feel a dim suspicion that this has all happened before. How like they are to the human race itself! (146-47)

This is a telling moment in the text. The narrator is explicitly castigating the tradition of weird fiction through the vehicle of the story he is reading. And, on a metafictional level, Ligotti is condemning the seemingly endless repetition of narratives without development or expansion in the years since the early American weird fiction era. Here the early American and pastiche eras of weird fiction are exhausted categories: nothing new can be said from within the genre, leaving it bereft of meaning. The fiction cannot say anything about reality, and is merely the stage of a puppet show through which marionettes follow predictable trajectories. This image of the puppet is deployed on multiple levels: first, it castigates weird fiction authors for endlessly repeating literary forms that have been drained of motive power. Secondly, it parodies the characters that inhabit weird fictions, moving as they do in unrealistic ways to fulfill prescribed roles. Third, the reader of weird fiction is also a puppet for, like the narrator, they find themselves satisfied in some manner with the endless recapitulation of weird fiction's exhausted narratives.

Ligotti is not protected from this critique, since he as a weird fiction author is drawing from the same exhausted well by relying on intertextuality with a pre-existing weird fiction. Equally, he is a reader and, due to his insistence on presenting his personal worldview through various authorial stand-ins, a character within his own fictions. Metafictionally Ligotti is establishing weird fiction as an empty category in order to

demonstrate how it might be reinvigorated by a closer connection to reality – even though that reality is ultimately nightmarish. Ligotti is implicating his own philosophy in the preservation of these endless narrative routines, however: puppets are a reoccurring image in Ligotti’s oeuvre, used as a metaphor to signify the fundamental human condition – it is “an incarnation of the hierarchical puppet show of Ligotti’s narrative metaphysics where each being (or simulacrum of a being) is merely the toy of another” (Harris, “Smiles” 1256). In brief, there is no distinction between humans and puppets – they are one and the same. The image of the puppet is deployed because they are a fundamentally true representation of the human condition. They serve the purpose of weird fiction as well, since humans often see puppets as eerie or unnatural. Once again, the tools of weird fiction are revealed, and turned to moving weird fiction away from presenting fictions as true in favor of fictionalizing truths.

This metafictional digression into the exhaustion of weird fiction does not disrupt the narrative flow of the story. Instead it reminds the reader that weird fictions – including the one that is currently being read – recapitulate surface features in pursuit of fictionality, and that the recapitulation has caused the genre to break down after too many repetitions. The narrator’s encapsulation of the manuscript’s conclusion demonstrates the triteness of the plot in his eyes. He simply does not think it is worth recording in any great detail because of its puerile familiarity: Dr. N- and Gray discuss the surviving cult of Nethescurial and the need to find the last piece of the idol, which is hidden on the island Nethescurial. Gray reveals that he has brought all the other pieces of the idol to the island, for he is a member of the Nethescurial cult. He sacrifices Dr. N- to Nethescurial, but “the sacrificial ritual holds some horrific surprises for Mr. Gray (these people seem

never to realize what they are getting themselves into)” (Ligotti, *Shadow* 149). Gray repents his ways, smashes the idol, and flees the island while scattering the pieces of the idol into the ocean.

Though he is nonplussed by the action of the story itself, the narrator admits to being moved by the suggestive atmosphere of the manuscript. He critiques its shortcomings by arguing that “the incidents in the manuscript are clumsily developed, important details lack proper emphasis, impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity” (149). He does admire the description of the cult’s god, however, admitting that “[t]he nature of that pandemoniac entity is very intriguing. Imagine all of creation as a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it” (149). He goes on to argue against the way such concepts are presented in weird fictions, and I suspect Ligotti is making a metafictional point:

The problem is that such supernatural inventions are indeed quite difficult to imagine. So often they fail to materialize in the mind, to take on a mental texture, and thus remain unfelt as anything but an abstract monster of metaphysics – an elegant or awkward schematic that cannot rise from the paper to touch us. Of course, we do need to keep a certain distance from such specters as Nethescurial, but this is usually provided by the medium of words as such, which ensnare all kinds of fantastic creatures before they can tear us body and soul. (150)

This is reminiscent of the author’s arguments qua the impossibility of representing truth in language during “The Shadow, The Darkness.” Here, however, Ligotti is much clearer

in condemning the genre that attempts to represent said truths through metaphors of the monstrous. Weird fictions, he seems to say, are failures simply because they cannot succeed. The monstrous is never convincing within them, never persuasive on the level of truth-value, but nor *could* they be more convincing. Language is simply unable to capture them in a meaningful way. If we take this as a commentary on the closest intertextual reference to “Nethescurial,” Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu,” it is clear that Ligotti is arguing that Lovecraft’s ambition with the monstrous metaphor Cthulhu was a failure – a necessary failure at that – and that whatever power it may have once held has been diluted by constant repetition in weird fiction of that same metaphor. Furthermore, Ligotti is once again condemning the project of weird fiction – to present realistic fictions. As Joshi argued, weird fiction in the Lovecraft vein seeks to make the unreal real – to present a convincing fictional narrative – whereas Ligotti is doing precisely the opposite. He is making the real unreal, eliding the distinction between fiction and reality.

The narrator completes the first section of the story by indicating that he is about to go to sleep, and the second section begins as a postscript to what has come before. He states that after several hours of rumination his previous analysis of the manuscript seems naive, and is only valid from a privileged perspective that he no longer holds since “[t]he distance between me and a devastating evil has lessened considerably. I no longer find it so difficult to imagine the horrors delineated in that manuscript, for I have known them in the most intimate way” (150-51). What follows is the description of a dream or nightmare that the narrator had after retiring for the night. In the dream he finds himself before a desk inside of a large, dark room. On the desk are a series of maps in a variety of languages and styles. Each map is centered on a different island, each of which bears the

name Nethescorial. The narrator instinctively realizes that the islands thus displayed must be the location of a buried piece of the shattered idol to Nethescorial. The desk suddenly transforms into a ceremonial altar, with torch lights flaring up on either side of it.

The narrator realizes that there is a strange object on top of the altar, between the torches. Unlike the rest of the dream, he finds it difficult to remember the object's appearance. It is the depiction of some conglomerate shape, "suggesting a monstrous whole. At the same time these outlines which alluded to both man and beast, flower and insect, reptiles, stones, and countless things I could not even name, all seemed to be changing, mingling in a thousand ways that prevented any sensible image of the idol" (152). This description of the idol is deeply reminiscent of Grossvogel's sculpture of the Tsalal in "The Shadow, The Darkness," suggesting via intertextual reference that the same flaws and problems with the artistic representation of truth append here. That this occurs within a dream is engaging: Ligotti is attaching the failure of representation to the realm of the subconscious as well as art, suggesting that the problem of representation is extant within human minds, or the illusion of minds. Humans are incapable of perceiving or understanding the truth of existence in a meaningful way, just as they are incapable of instilling it within their artworks, suggesting that dreams – which were of significance to Lovecraft's aesthetic process – are as much of a failure as weird fiction. The narrator's perspective shifts, and he realizes that he is within the structure where Gray sacrificed Dr. N- in the manuscript. Several hooded figures approach the altar, and the narrator witnesses a "luminous smoke" (152) drifting out of one of their bodies. This figure shrinks as the smoke extends into the idol until he is "shrunk to the size of a

marionette” (152). One of the other cultists picks up the shrunken man and cuts him open above the altar, leaking out a strangely colored substance all over the idol.

The scene shifts again, and the narrator finds himself in a desolate landscape whose lighting is entirely tinged by the strange color he had seen in the fluid coming out of the shrunken cultist. All around him is “a landscape that might once have been of stone and earth and trees (such was my impression) but had been transformed entirely into something like petrified slime” (153). This slime gives an impression of a confluence of forms, much as the idol had done earlier in his dream, and it is a horror for the narrator to see that it encompasses everything around him. When he notices that he is near a shoreline he realizes that he is on an island, and with the impression that the tide consists of “*inkish* waters” (153, my emphasis) he awakes. An equivalency being drawn between the water and ink is significant: once again the slime, a clear allegory for the transcendent evil making up all things, is surrounded but not touched by ink, the substance used to record language and transmit knowledge. If the island is a pastiche for Lovecraft’s risen island R’lyeh, then again we have Ligotti making the point that the weird fiction tradition has failed to express whatever philosophic truths supported its texts. Reality has not yet been fictionalized – never been *covered*, as in water washing over an island – by the genre. After seeing this image of the island and the waters around him, the narrator awakes.

He writes of his inability to shake off the implications of his nightmare. Reflecting on it, he remarks that “there was an unseen presence, something I could feel was circulating in all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil” (153). This feeling has followed him into the waking world, and the unifying force



“seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole dark world outside. [...] Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was taking on its aspect” (153). Swearing off any further “weird reading matter” (154) – the only explicit reference to the weird fiction genre in the text – the narrator resolves to forget his dream. The text continues with the final section, “The Puppets in the Park,” with the narrator continuing his letter “[s]ome days later, and quite late at night” (154). At first he attempts to laugh off the fears inspired by his nightmare, but it becomes clear that reading the manuscript has had a profound effect upon him. He states offhandedly that he has been unable to eat for some time, since the look and feel of objects has become physically abhorrent. Without seeming to recognize the shift in tone of his words, he claims that he could “feel every damn thing squirming, not excluding my own flesh. And I could also *see* what was squirming beneath every surface, my vision penetrating through the usual armor of objects and discerning the same gushing *stuff* inside whatever I looked upon” (154). This “stuff” is of the same color as the blood and the slime from his dream, and the reader is reminded that the ink of the manuscript had the same color.

Unable to stay in his home, the narrator takes a walk. While in a park he comes across a puppet show attended by many people. He stops to watch the performance, but the puppets abruptly stop their show and turn, slowly, until it seems they are staring directly at him. While unnerving, this could be written off as some accidental occurrence or misunderstanding of the performance. However, the narrator then notices that “the others [in the audience] were doing the same: all of them had turned around on the benches and, with expressionless faces and dead puppet eyes, held me to the spot.

Although their mouths did not move, they were not silent” (155). This is a disturbing scene; the narrator watches as the incongruent, disembodied voices join together in a chant to Nethescurial he had read as an epigraph to the manuscript: “[i]n the rooms of houses... across moonlit skies... through all souls and spirits... behind the faces of the living and the dead” (156). The narrator is forced to admit to the universality of Nethescurial, not simply read of it or dream of it as he had done up to this point. Equally, the linkage between human and puppet is reinforced by being made explicit – the two are indistinguishable from one another, for humans are nothing but puppets for the malevolent force that fills and defines them.

Fleeing home, the narrator gathers up wood to burn the manuscript, noticing now that it is actually signed by Gray and is not a fiction at all. The green ink of the manuscript leads him to think that “the stain of its ancient patina had stayed” (156) with Gray, waiting until it could “crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into” (156). This is a strong twist: Ligotti is suggesting that the manuscript is not part of the exhausted weird fiction tradition, but is an example of the modern weird fiction he seeks to create himself. The philosophies in modern weird fictions like Ligotti’s are *infectious*, passing themselves along to readers despite the fact that the stories are incapable of accurately representing or encapsulating reality. What follows is a climax of negation, rendered powerfully by Ligotti’s prose. The smoke of the burning manuscript will not rise through the chimney. He says that the smoke is not forming into the image of the idol of Nethescurial, nor drawing something out of himself or making him shrink. Finally, he extols a pathetic series of denials:

[N]o shadow falls across the moon, no churning cloud of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth, no shifting cloud of nightmares enveloping moons and suns and stars. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of inky space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all things. *Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation.* [...] I am not dying in a nightmare.

(157)

The effect of this concluding passage cannot be overstated: Ligotti attains more in this paragraph than other weird fiction writers manage in entire stories, if they manage it at all. All the narrator can summon up to reassure himself is a weak refusal to accept both what he is directly experiencing and the implications that such things have for the nature of existence. He, and by implication the reader, is indeed “dying in a nightmare,” for if existence is itself a “transcendent, mystical, ontologically absolute evil” (Cardin, “Transition” 72) then all human perception and experience is that of a terrifying dream. Ligotti’s representation of *Nethescurial* as, in some sense, a massive deformed crab, is a metafictional reference to the cetacean appearance of Cthulhu in Lovecraft’s story, and is a minor flaw here – why would a transcendent, ontological evil have any shape at all? Nevertheless, the representation does serve to remind the reader how distanced the impact of Cthulhu, and similar monstrosities across the history of weird fiction, has been from both characters and readers. No such distance exists here – it is only the necessary

failure of language that prevents “Nethescorial” from infecting the reader in the same manner as the narrator, and even then the disturbing impact of the story is lasting.

“Nethescorial” is one of the most powerful stories in the history of weird fiction. Not only does it present a clever plot, but it attempts at every turn to show how the action of the story is subservient to the atmosphere and, ultimately, the philosophic position of the author. Ligotti’s philosophic pessimism takes on a palpable quality throughout, and is deployed to underscore exactly how and why inept weird fictions have failed to say anything of importance over the course of their regurgitated narratives. Equally, however, Ligotti critiques the very best of weird fiction by showing how the reader is protected in some ways, shielded from the philosophy breaking from the bounds of the text and being truly altered; Cthulhu and other monstrosities seem, to Ligotti, to be able to go *just so far* but not any further. Ligotti is not exempt from this critique: by referring back to his other stories and using a metafictional perspective to link his work as a whole to the greater body of early American weird fiction, Ligotti implicates himself in the failure of the weird fiction genre. Although he attempts to represent his philosophies through language, through deployment of metaphor and image, he cannot succeed in his task.

“Nethescorial,” being a written document, is in the language of puppets – and for Ligotti, the puppet cannot ever comprehend the malignant force holding its strings.

“Nethescorial” more successfully evokes the awe, fear, and shift in perspective that Lovecraft and others attempted to draw forth with their weird fictions. Whether Ligotti’s failure is a good or bad thing for the reader, however, I am not certain. It would be distinctly horrible to have definitive proof of, as the narrator is, dying in a nightmare.

“Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story” (1985):

Written in 1985, “Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story” is an attempt on Ligotti’s part to write an absolutely, obviously metafictional story. The shift between the tutorial on the writing of horror and fictional presentation of horror, which the story hinges upon, is abrupt, and disorienting for the reader.<sup>86</sup> The story’s concern with

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<sup>86</sup> It is, however, more successful than another metafictional story also published by Ligotti in 1985. “Professor Nobody’s Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror.” The story is just as the title promises: a series of transcribed lectures delivered to a classroom of students by the never-described “Professor Nobody.” It is a strong example of Ligotti’s metafictional conceit since it is a fictional representation of his theories of weird fiction, horror fiction, and personal pessimist philosophy. The problem is that it is *nothing but* that representation – there is no plot to speak of here, no action of any real kind. I suspect that Ligotti was attempting to evoke the weird in “Professor Nobody’s Little Lectures...” through a menace that is always threatened but never arrives. If this is the case, he would be placing this story in the emulative or commentary tradition of Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) and R. H. Barlow’s “The Night Ocean” (1936), but it is frankly impossible to tell if this was Ligotti’s intention with the story. There is an unsettling tone that moves throughout the piece, but it is so unlocalized – or, rather, so singularly expressed through meditations on Ligotti’s personal philosophy – that it is difficult to argue that it is emergent from the text on the page and not the worldview supporting that text.

Each of Professor Nobody’s lectures cover a different aspect of supernatural horror. The first, “One Whole Night in a Haunted World” discusses the quality of suspension of disbelief in horror, and thus an introduction of doubt into the reader’s individual worldview. The second, “Morbidity,” discusses the psychology of one who would be attracted to the ideas within supernatural horror, ultimately suggesting that they are no different than anybody else prone to using their time “exactly like everyone else uses theirs: all up” (Ligotti, *Songs* 204). The next two sections are both on the nature of pessimism and supernatural horror. The first argues that images within texts should be read as such rather than as representative of some real-world equivalency – the vampire should be the vampire, not a metaphor for humanity extended beyond natural limits. The second of these two sections contains one of the best encapsulations of Ligotti’s philosophy on life and writing: the logic of supernatural horror is “a logic that is founded on fear; it is a logic whose sole principle states: ‘Existence equals nightmare.’ Unless life is a dream, nothing makes sense. For as a reality, it is a rank failure” (206). On a metafictional level, Ligotti is again pointing towards the fact that the representations of the unreal in his fictions should be read as nothing more than elaborations *on the real*. To Ligotti, existence does equal nightmare – there is no distance between the fictional universe of Professor Nobody’s lectures and the real world other than our basic human inability to ever truly understand the nature of existence.

The final section, “Sardonic Harmony,” goes over how supernatural horror allows one to escape from the affirmations required by daily life. This is a relief of a sort since those affirmations – “reproduction, revolution in its widest sense, religion in any form you can name” (208) – are desperate, even pathetic, illusions masking the fundamental brutality and absurdity of existence. “Supernatural horror, in all its bizarre construction, enables a reader to taste a selection of treats at odds with his well-being” (208), and yet we return to it again and again because our lives are nothing but nightmares of horror and insane terror. “[W]e willingly consume the terrors of the tomb... and find them to our liking” (209). The story concludes with Professor Nobody wishing his class “[g]ood luck on the final” (209), which resonates in such a way as to suggest that it is Ligotti, here, who is wishing the reader good luck on the remainder of their lives and their “final” – the confrontation with blackness and annihilation that we all must ultimately face.

fictionality of narratives demonstrates that relatively early in his weird fiction career Ligotti had a sense of his work's place within literary traditions, and had a desire to comment upon those traditions. The story has been paid little attention by weird fiction critics: I have been unable to locate any substantive analyses of the work, and it passes unremarked in most surveys of his oeuvre. As Alessandro Sheedy has pointed out, however, "Notes..." demonstrates "weird fiction's obsession with archives" in the sense of Derrida, and that here "archives are conceived as the vehicle for an abysmal encounter between the human and nonhuman [by] manifesting a 'hidden world' of textuality" (Sheedy, "Excavating"). A metafictional mapping of the archive of weird or horror fiction, "Notes..." attempts to illuminate the ways various takes on genre writing are always "already a step closer to romance and allegory, to the metafictional, than most genres" (Langan, "Metafictional" 143). "Notes..." is both analysis and example at once, underscoring Ligotti's consistent attempt at critiquing the ways weird fiction functions in order to chart his philosophy across a mode of language that is, at best, a beautiful failure at representing the universal.

"Notes..." begins with an introduction by the fictional author Gerald K. Riggers who excuses his inability to produce a long-awaited discourse on the writing of supernatural horror stories. He proposes to "sketch out the basic plot, characters, and

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"Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror" is an interesting take on metafiction, however much it might be less than successful as a story on a subjective level. The narrative, such as it is, comments on itself and the genre to which it belongs. Furthermore, it interrogates and disrupts the readers of said stories, including the reader of the present story. Due to Ligotti's philosophy coming through his usual stylistic composition, the reader comes away with his own particular affirmation: "[I]f it is something that is inflicted on living things, and it is a mad burden" (Harris, "Smiles" 1262). Unfortunately, the lack of plot as such harms the metafiction, much as the turn of plot in "Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story" harms the work as a whole. Ligotti seems to be attempting much clearer metafiction in these stories, to degrees of success and failure, but it is not until later in his weird fiction career that he is able to stand the balance between commentary and fictionality that make up the truly insightful weird metafiction.

other features of a short horror story” and then “offer suggestions on how these raw elements may be treated in a few of the major styles which horror writers have exploited over the years” (Ligotti, *Songs* 100). The abbreviated story is told in broad strokes: Nathan, a man who “intensely believes that one’s personal possessions should themselves possess a certain substance, a certain quality” (101) is wearing a pair of new trousers while going to meet with a young woman, Lorna, whom he wishes to impress. These trousers appear to have the quality of “magicality, timelessness, and profundity” (102) that Nathan seeks in all of his belongings. En route to meet Lorna, Nathan’s car breaks down, and while he repairs it, a group of thieves steal a coat which belonged to his father. He chases after them, noting that his legs feel odd – and have felt strange since he put on the trousers that morning. Following the thieves into an abandoned building, Nathan collapses. Unbeknownst to him, the previous owner of his trousers died while wearing them, and now that he has worn them for a sufficient amount of time his legs have become “the putrid members of a man many days dead” (103). Nathan dies as the corruption spreads throughout his body, and his last thoughts are regrets over how Lorna will be disappointed that he never met her as agreed.

The story shifts into its second section: “The Styles,” wherein the narrator breaks down how Nathan’s story can be told from three distinct modes of supernatural horror. They are “[t]he *realist* technique, the *traditional Gothic* technique, and the *experimental* technique” (104). Beginning with the realist technique, the narrator describes how an author “wielding the hollow proofs and premises of his art, must settle for merely *seeming* to smooth out the ultimate paradox” (105) of making the unreal seem real. What follows is a clear lampooning of the conservative horror of the likes of Stephen King: the

narrator suggests including prosaic description, including brand names, into the story so that it feels more real to the reader, and using tricks such as “italics as the submerged chanting of Nathan’s underminer” (105). The narrator stresses that Nathan must uncover the reason for the supernatural occurrence in the realist supernatural horror story as well as fall victim to it so that the reader’s need for explanation, however tenuous, is satisfied. To that end he suggests that Nathan discover that the trousers were made in some foreign land, “which clarifies many mysteries, while also making them even more mysterious” (106), and couple that with the discovery of a winning lottery ticket in the pocket. When Nathan, being scrupulous (and thus underscoring the basic conservative conceit of this form of horror fiction), finds the previous seller, he discovers that they were, indeed, worn by a dead man for several hours. These two facts link together in the mind of the reader, though “Nathan forgets all about the irregular background of his beautiful, almost new trousers” (107), and Nathan proceeds to his untimely end.

Moving onto the traditional Gothic technique, the narrator argues that this form has several advantages over the realist technique. In a traditional Gothic, “isolated supernatural incidents don’t look as silly [...] as they do in a realistic one, since the latter obeys the hard-knocking school of reality while the former recognizes only the University of Dreams” and “a Gothic tale gets under a reader’s skin and stays there far more insistently than other kinds of stories” (108). In this version, Nathan is more obsessive and Lorna is a representation of an Ideal that he seeks. The narrator states that “[c]ontrary to the realistic story’s allegiance to the normal and the real, the world of the Gothic tale is fundamentally unreal and abnormal, harboring essences which are magic, timeless, and profound in a way the realist Nathan never dreamed” (109). After



delivering a brief discourse on the flavors of Gothic stylistics, the narrator represents the death of Nathan in an appropriately Gothic fashion, full of hyperbole and hysterical prose.

The narrator quickly moves on to the experimental technique, which he rebuffs as an impossibility. The experimental writer, he says, “is simply following the story’s commands to the best of his human ability” (110). He dismisses the technique abruptly by arguing that “literary experimentalism is simply the writer’s imagination, or lack of it, and feeling, or absence of same, thrashing their chains around in the escape-proof dungeon of the words of the story” (110-11). There is no escape from language, the narrator theorizes, and as such no text can ever be truly experimental – it is always constrained by the medium of the telling.

In the experimental mode, Nathan’s story is constructed using two distinct narratives, each traveling through time in different directions, “each narrated in alternating sections which take place in parallel chronologies” (111). One narrative stream begins with Nathan’s death and moves backwards, while the other starts with the death of the original owner of the trousers and moves forwards. “The stories converge at the crossroads of the final section where the destinies of their characters also converge, this being the clothes store where Nathan purchases the fateful trousers” (111). Nathan bumps into the woman who has just sold her dead husband’s trousers, and in an ironic twist she extols Nathan to “[l]ook where you’re going” (112). This, and each of the preceding sections, ended with the refrain that a given technique “[is] easy, now try it yourself” (112). The narrator begins a new section, titled “Another Style,” where he tries to explain that he had wanted to write Nathan’s story himself using a new technique. He

says that he “wanted to write this horror tale in such a fashion that its readers would be distressed not by the personal, individual catastrophe of Nathan, but by his very existence in a world, even a fictional one, where a catastrophe of this type and magnitude is possible” (112). It is difficult to read these passages without hearing Ligotti’s voice through the narrator’s words, describing his own attempts and failures at writing weird fictions, as when he ends the short section by saying “I couldn’t do it, my friends. It’s not easy, and I don’t suggest that you try it yourself” (113).

It is at this point that the story turns abruptly, and the metafiction becomes stark in its clarity as the story shifts from style guide to full fiction. The final section is called, appropriately enough, “The Final Style,” and the narrator here argues that the proper style for horror stories is the personal confession: “manuscripts found in lonely places” (113). The narrator confesses that his name, Gerald K. Riggers, is one of several pseudonyms and that his real name is Nathan Jeremy Stein. The story he has been fictionalizing through a variety of techniques is based off of his own lived experience, although in reality Lorna is only a woman across the hall who recently rebuffed Nathan’s overtures of love after an intimate encounter. Writing still in the confessional mode, Nathan says that “now he knows, as he never knew before, how weird he really is, how unlike everyone else, how abnormal and unreal fate has made him. He knows that supernatural influences have been governing his life all along, that he is subject only to the rule of demonic forces” (115). Nathan writes at length of his pathetic desires, still in second person form, before deciding that he needs to go to bed. At this point the narrator shifts subtly, somehow, and for a time the reader cannot be certain if the speaker is still Nathan, if it is a dissociative personality within Nathan, or if it is some other entity altogether.

The pretense of this being a written manuscript, one of the original narrator's "manuscripts found in lonely places," (113) must be discarded at this point due to the narrative now consisting of ongoing action narrated in first-person. The alteration of the story from style guide to personal confession was done with enough care to seem reasonable, but the sudden turn from *written document* to (purportedly) *actual events* is too abrupt and strains the metafiction. It is also substantively confusing for the reader – which is itself not necessarily a flaw, of course, but I do think that Ligotti could have teased out this revelatory moment slightly more, thus giving it the full force it deserves. The narrator – who now calls himself Norman – has a confrontation with Laura, presumably the basis for Lorna, who is returning a pair of trousers that Nathan had forgotten at her apartment when she rebuffed him. Norman describes himself as a writer to her, and she expresses her distaste for the works of Harold Wickers, whose books fill the apartment. Norman kills Laura, and goes to the bedroom to confront the *actual* Norman. Norman the author, who uses pseudonyms to the extent that his identity is confused; he is "Norman or Nathan, Harold or Gerald" (119). The murderer, formerly Norman, is now simply "I" from this point forward, although Norman refers to him alternately as "Mr. Madness" and "Dr. Dream" (120).

The narrator reveals the severed head of Laura to Norman, who bolts from bed and begins to go insane. His fracturing mental state is not belabored or even commented on, however; Ligotti leaves it up to the reader to discern the breaking of Norman's mind with a single line of dialogue – "Whooo are you?" (119) – with the protracted "who" being an indication of Norman's instability. It is interesting that a language-based turn is being used to denote Norman's insanity, since Ligotti is violating his presumption of

language being unable to denote anything here. Norman protests that he must be dreaming, and tells the narrator to go away; the narrator responds simply by asking Norman if he always goes to bed with his trousers on. The trousers, whether they be the ones Laura gave to the narrator or the ones from the fictionalized examples of Nathan's experience, are tight on Norman and he cannot remove them. The narrator tells Norman to "[r]ot your way back to us, you freak of creation. Rot your way out of this world. Come home to a pain so great that it is bliss itself. You were born to be bones not flesh" (120). Norman is dissolved by the trousers, causing him to writhe in agony and give an insane monologue. The narrator transforms into something like a demonic form, scoops Norman up in his arms as he writhes "like a wounded insect, making sounds like nothing in human memory" (121). Together they fly out into the night sky, and the story ends with the narrator saying that he "had never tried this before. But when the time came, I found it all so easy" (121).

"Note on the Writing of Horror: A Story" is a complicated attempt at a fully metafictional story. The majority of the story, the sections of exegesis on generic form, is an insightful look at the restrictions and presuppositions of various styles of supernatural horror and weird fiction. None, particularly the realist technique – which receives the most scorn from Ligotti – are appropriate for the task of writing horror by any litmus other than pure financial success. The unnamed technique in "Another Style" is represented as Ligotti's own particular take on weird fiction, a wrinkle in the form theorized by the early American weird fiction writers. The shift to a confessional technique is appropriate, however, since many weird fictions are written in the confessional style – from Lovecraft's "Dagon" (1917) to T. E. D. Klein's "Black Man

with a Horn” (1980). But still, Ligotti makes a potential misstep with his climax and denouement, even though both are written deftly enough. It is entirely likely that the end of the story is intended to be a parody of the impossible conclusion of “Dagon,” for example, or the existential chill at the end of “Black Man with a Horn” – I am inclined to think that Ligotti is lampooning confessional weird fiction here, with the figure of the second narrator taking on the appearance of a rather traditional demonic being instead of Ligotti’s normal nightmare of darkness. But it is a failure of Ligotti’s metafictional collapse that the reader is, ultimately, unable to determine how the story is meant to be received, or the underlying philosophy decoded.

#### Conclusion:

Thomas Ligotti is perhaps a transient figure in the history of weird fiction. As of this writing he has stated repeatedly in interviews that he has ceased to read fiction, and no longer feels the need to write anything but the occasional non-fiction piece or prose poem.<sup>87</sup> I cannot say that Ligotti’s retirement from writing weird fiction would be an entirely bad thing, for in truth I do not particularly *like* his writing. I do not want to be mistaken: Ligotti is a talented and imaginative author whose works over the past few decades stand prominently above other modern weird writers. In terms of composition and simple talent, Ligotti is easily the equal of any of the early American weird fiction writers, and perhaps is capable of surpassing them as authors. But for all of that, Ligotti succeeds at Lovecraft’s dictum that weird fiction should produce a “certain form of

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<sup>87</sup> It should be noted that Ligotti has published a short new anthology of stories just prior to the publishing of this dissertation. *The Spectral Link* was published by Subterranean Press in late June of 2014.

human mood” *too well*. His outlook on life is unwaveringly bleak; his perspective on the nature of existence is profoundly nihilistic. Because his writing is done with such skill and attention to language, one cannot help but come away from a survey of his work with a profound psychological disturbance. It is a well-known effect of his fiction for a reader, such as myself, to come away from Ligotti’s anthologies with a dark depression overtaking them. For all of this, however, it remains that Ligotti is one of the few writers who consistently writes weird fiction within the direct line of literary tradition between the modern period and the first half of the Twentieth Century.

I agree with weird critic Darrell Schweitzer when he argues that Ligotti’s “stories are not painful, self-pitying cries; they are *appreciations* of the absurdity of existence. [...] This attitude is consistent throughout the whole body of Ligotti’s work, whose dominant characteristic may be therefore described, not as *horror* or *fear* but truly dark and terrible laughter” (Schweitzer, “Corporate” 132). This holds especially true for Ligotti’s metafiction. For his philosophy to be correct – and Ligotti’s fiction exists only as a way to express his personal philosophy – the entire literary tradition of weird fiction must be a useless, and therefore a horrifically absurd, thing. Again and again his metafiction tells us that writing, much like anything else, is a pointless exercise doomed to failure. Art cannot capture the stuff of life, and can barely begin to describe the arch-malevolence that *stuff* actually consists of. This, like every other aspect of Ligotti’s oeuvre, is an intensely personal reflection, one that gives nothing more than what Ligotti believes to be the fact of the matter – and of course failing to really do that much, since to Ligotti it is impossible to even know another person. Why he chose to write so many metafiction, or at least stories with metafictional elements, is a part of his biography that

has been thus far withheld from critics. Suffice it to say that he has succeeded in both establishing himself as a leader of the modern weird fiction genre, and, through his metafictional conceits, the most mocking critic of the effect of weird fiction as a mode.

In the years following the Second World War, weird fiction seemed to flounder. Without the persistence of vision brought to the genre by the early American weird fiction authors, few works were contributed to the genre's pedigree that constituted an expansive, or at least equivalent, manner of their predecessors. Most of the stories to appear fell into the ranks of the unoriginal pastiche, saying nothing new and only recapitulating what had already been said – and often said better – by the original establishers of the genre. Some of these pastiches, such as several of Robert Bloch's stories discussed previously, or the deeply disturbing British weird fictions of Ramsey Campbell, rose to the level of original works that took the surface features of previous stories and incorporated them to say new things. Still, between the end of the 1970s and the start of the 2000s it was uncertain if weird fiction could even survive as a genre, having largely collapsed into the more discrete genres of horror and science fiction. Few writers contributed meaningfully to weird fiction, though some certainly did. Thomas Ligotti is one of those writers, and his work, replete with the notion of an absurd, pointless existence over and against Lovecraft's mere insignificance of humanity, may very well be the death knell for the genre as a whole. Simply, his metafictional denotations denote him as one of the best – and only – “new cartographers of horror, mapping the genre's blank spaces with each story he writes” (Langan, “Metafictional” 143). If the early part of the Twenty First century was the end of the fourth weird fiction era – and those writers who have recently promulgated the idea of a “New Weird” genre certainly claim that it has

ended – then it is difficult to imagine a better, bleaker, conclusion for the genre as a whole than the shrieking, laughing, unreal works of Thomas Ligotti.



### **Conclusion: The Challenge of the Weird**

When H. P. Lovecraft described the attitudes of those interested in reading and writing weird fiction as having “a burning desire to escape from the prison-house of the known and the real into those enchanted lands of incredible adventure and infinite possibilities which dreams open up to us” he believed that he was addressing a desire amongst artists and fans that was “as old as literature itself” (*Miscellaneous* 113). As with most aspects of Lovecraft’s attitudes towards weird fiction, I have little reason to doubt his veracity here. I find it amazing that a genre which attracts so many persons suffering from various levels of disaffection – or at least disinterest in the prevailing attitudes of their times – would define itself by straining against the constraints of what had preceded it while carving out a space for itself in heretofore unexplored territories. Perhaps weird fiction grows best when it is potted in the soil of dissatisfaction: dissatisfaction with the political, cultural, aesthetic, or popular milieu that the individual finds themselves unwillingly enmeshed in. Lovecraft thought that weird fiction would appeal only to a small percentage of the population (perhaps out of a sense of ego on his part and a desire to belong to a rarified class); how surprised would he be, then, to discover that in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century popular culture interest in weird fiction is more prevalent than ever before.

Of course, most of this interest is due to the critical misapprehensions of Lovecraft and his fellow early American weird fiction authors that persisted for decades after his death. The tragedy here is that these misapprehensions were made popular by persons who had the genre’s best interests at heart. August Derleth, Donald Wanderei,

Lin Carter, and others can be taken to task for the astounding amount of misinformation they released upon an unknowing audience, but it should also be remembered that without their work weird fiction would, in all likelihood, be remembered only vaguely – if at all – in our time. Currently weird fiction is, in the main, the province of kitsch. I do not say this in a judgmental or scornful tone – the popularization of weird fiction, and Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu Mythos” in particular, has opened up all sorts of enjoyable and entertaining avenues of outré expression. But it remains that, aside from the popular culture whirlwind that is weird fiction in 2014, the only supporters of the genre that remain are the die-hard fans and fans-turned-critics who refuse to let their beloved weird tales disappear without a fight.

The current state of affairs is not exactly unexpected, however. Weird fiction has always had a problematic and storied history. From its conception by Le Fanu the weird story was, when written from a theoretical perspective, an oppositional construct. That is, weird fiction was throughout the historical and early American period best defined by what it was *not*. For Le Fanu, weird fiction was not the Gothic. For Lovecraft and many of those within his early American circle, weird fiction was not a continuation of the Victorian fantastic, or more specifically the Victorian supernatural horror. As such, the early American weird fiction authors were writing against a sense of overused imagery and the concurrent reliance upon the two prongs of strict realism or overt sentimentality (both of which required a focus, in Lovecraft’s view, upon individual characters that was much too tight to be of any value). This particular defining element of the genre kept up with weird fiction well into the pastiche era; if weird fiction were anything in the 1950s through the 1980s, it was *not* simply more entries into the generic categories of science

fiction or horror. This has left weird fiction critics with the unenviable job of determining what, exactly, weird fiction *is*, since the theoretical definitions adhered to by Lovecraft and those within the Lovecraft circle – a rejection of purportedly exhausted imagery for the monstrous, a focus upon atmosphere over and against anything else, and a constant wash of realism upon every element of a story barring the one break from prosaic reality – can be difficult to discover in all the varied voices of weird fiction writers who have appeared in print over the years.

Whether or not all of these elements are sufficient, in their summation, to describe the intricacies of a genre – something that lives not only in the conception of fictional works but in its reception – would require a cataloging of weird fiction that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Certainly not all of the elements were strictly adhered to: far be it from the weird fiction authors to allow rigid theoretical discourse to stand in the way of rampant creativity (or, perhaps sadly more often than not, penny-a-word creativity). Lovecraft worked with the image of the vampire and the ghost; Howard deployed werewolves and vampires; Smith had his numerous exhibitions of all of the above, with animated skeletons besides. Perhaps this inability to remain strictly in-line with the theory underlying the early American weird fiction period is what led to the pastiche era, when generic elements – the set dressings of the early American weird fiction era that I have described – became overly codified and the stories shifted, in the main, from being about an underlying set of philosophical or aesthetic concerns to being about the trappings which were heretofore used to represent those concerns.

The majority of the stories of the pastiche era were written after weird fiction almost came to oblivion in the wake of the Second World War, and the genres of the

fantastic rose up out of the early Twentieth Century to ossify into what we know today as the science fiction and horror genres. I suspect that the difficulty of defining what weird fiction *is* by what it *is not* only grew when so many pastiche works contributed little more than recapitulation while the more calcified horror and science fiction genres saw creative works that emerged from within well-defined constraints. In a critical article on the work of Ramsey Campbell, T. E. D. Klein muses on the problems of pastiches of Lovecraft's weird fiction:

I suspect that for many of his readers, Lovecraft's life has become as fascinating as his tales; and, knowing as we do of the man's eccentricity, the loneliness, the suffering, the beliefs he held so deeply, that the very name "Lovecraft" above a story seems to stamp the work with a kind of sincerity, the sense of its being an artifact, that gives him the advantage over all his disciples. [...] What this means is that the best of the pastiches – i.e., the most faithful – were unaccountably the worst. One might almost conclude, in fact, that as a literary form, the pastiche is [...] therefore, in the words of the adage, like a woman; the more beautiful, the less faithful; the more faithful, the less beautiful. (88-9)

Klein's comments are, perhaps, a bit unfair (not to mention terribly sexist), but there is a nugget of truth to them. By entrenching themselves in replication of the advances made by the early American weird fiction writers, the authors of the pastiche era condemned themselves to a spiral of diminishing returns until they were producing little more than empty shells of previously daring works. To be sure, the pastiche authors – as typified by Robert Bloch's better stories – could push the genre into new territories, kicking and

screaming all the way. But these interrogating authors were in the minority, and it is a surprise that the genre was not washed away altogether by the continuing repetition of Howardian or Lovecraftian imagery without an ounce of the aesthetic and philosophic foundation that made Howard and Lovecraft greats in the first place.

What seems clear is that at its best weird fiction of any era functions in much the way that any other genre of the fantastic does: it requires innovators, those who have something to say on a level deeper than simply providing the reader with emotive responses (such as spine tingling, revulsion, etc). It requires a certain sense of opposition; it cannot be writing done to support popular ideas of individual or community security, and it cannot be written from a basis of well-known and accepted metaphor. And it requires intense creativity, the likes of which are difficult to identify and impossible to predict. Of course, these broad brushstroke assertions are necessarily vague and inadequate for truly encapsulating the depth and breadth of a literary genre. So the question remains: what is it that made weird fiction function, and can it persist today? My fear is that if weird fiction is not properly dead as a genre, then it is perilously close. There is simply too much cruft on the genre, left over themes and imagery from the early American weird fiction period, to allow for the innovation and sense of defiance to pervade modern weird works. The reasons for this are innumerable varied, though I think that forefront of the list would be the aforementioned over-codification of the genre. Collecting disparate works and collating them under the guise of affective similarity, for example, has reduced the power and impact of the individual works themselves and spawned generations of writers who produce texts that only touch on the surface features, the kitsch, of the genre rather than the central possibilities.

This is effectively why authors since the early 1990s have attempted to codify a “New Weird” genre, one which understands its place in literary history as a descendent of historical weird fiction and is thus distinct from both modern science fiction and horror genres, but still stands as a distinct entity from the original genre that spawned it. Following from the New Wave movement amongst science fiction authors, which blended fantasy and science fiction in order to intentionally break away from the Golden Age of science fiction that persisted into the 1960s, the New Weird sought to combine factors in order to revitalize weird fiction away from both the historical form of the genre and the generic expectations of the current literary climate. These factors, broadly speaking, were a sense of experimentation – the “weird” sense within early American weird fiction – brought about by mixing genres and a reliance upon an explicit representation of the grotesque in order to bolster a sense of transgressive terror. Jeff Vandermeer defined the New Weird in his introduction to an eponymous anthology of short fiction:

New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy. [...] New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects – in combination with the stimulus of influence from New Wave writers or their proxies [...] New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but not always overtly political. As part of this awareness of the modern world, New Weird relies for its visionary power on a “surrender to the weird” that isn't, for example, hermetically sealed in

a haunted house on the moors or in a cave in Antarctica. The “surrender” (or “belief”) of the writer can take many forms, some of them even involving the use of postmodern techniques that do not undermine the surface reality of the text. (Ann Vandermeer *The New Weird*)

I think it is admirable of Vandermeer to attempt to codify the New Weird on a theoretical level, but there is too much disagreement over what precisely constitutes the New Weird to make any such definition workable. Vandermeer himself catches authors such as Thomas Ligotti, a noted weird fiction author discussed in this dissertation, as well as Michael Moorcock, a fantasy author of great repute, in his conception of the New Weird, and I think that is a woeful failure of his formulation. Furthermore, authors such as China Miéville, whose *Perdido Street Station* (2000) is generally considered a flashpoint for the New Weird’s genesis, see the New Weird as necessarily tied to particular political stances. This is, obviously, a radical shift from the relationship between early American weird fiction and its relationship to prosaic reality.<sup>88</sup> For Miéville, the New Weird was a way to render his overt Marxism into metaphors that, when deployed, would constitute a distinct political argument intended to persuade the reader to his particular brand of Socialism. This is an obvious break from Vandermeer’s definition of the New Weird authors, and led to disagreement within and fracturing of the burgeoning genre.

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<sup>88</sup> Though it should be noted that early American weird fiction authors cannot be said to have always kept their politics out of their fictions. Robert E. Howard wrote of his regionalism from a political as well as a cultural perspective, arguing for local governance over and against the intrusive, and ignorant, Northern interests. Lovecraft, equally, found himself becoming a soft Socialist towards the end of his life and, inspired by the hardships of the Great Depression, wrote increasingly in his fictions of an egalitarian philosophy that emphasized his personal political positions.

This lack of focus of strong theoretical basis for the New Weird runs throughout definitions of the genre. Robin Anne Reid, for example, has argued that there is a general consensus amongst authors of the genre that New Weird fictions “subvert clichés of the fantastic in order to put them to discomfiting, rather than consoling ends” (Reid, “Women” 2009). Of this definition I can only point to the lack of precision used and suggest that the same thing can be said of all forms of subversive horror – including the early American weird fiction genre. The lack of true consensus, despite Reid’s claim, reflects argumentation over what the New Weird exactly *is* by those ostensibly producing it, and has led to proclamations of the death of the New Weird running almost simultaneously with the birth of the sub-genre. I think this desire to generate a new genre, to work from the center of unexplored territory, is indicative of the risk to modern weird fiction as a viable source of experimental or even expansive writing. Perhaps it is because of the fact that the number of pastiche authors outnumber the innovative writers working within the current state of weird fiction that the genre has ceased to offer much in the way of new insights on the human condition, which once so excited the imaginations of both writers and readers. I am not certain what the fate of weird fiction will ultimately be; the small number of innovators will continue to produce weird fiction while the pastiche authors will recapitulate the ideas and imagery of the historical weird to the applause of the genre's popular culture adherents. But I do think that this failure to be able to predict the future of weird fiction grows necessarily from an inability to critically understand the past of weird fiction.

Critics of weird fiction have, in the main, fallen into one of two camps: either they have analyzed weird fiction through the lens of biography (that is, an author’s given



stories are analyzed in terms of the author's specific lived experience) or by isolating them from their specific historical location (that is, treated texts as timeless in order to bring modern sensibilities to bear upon them). There are certainly critics of weird fiction who have escaped one or both of these traps, but they are rare both in terms of popularity and number, in comparison to the weird critics who are obsessed with either authorial biography or treating texts as though the context of their composition is irrelevant. For example, the pre-eminent weird critic working today is undoubtedly S. T. Joshi. His contribution to the scholarly study of weird fiction, and the critical attention upon H. P. Lovecraft in particular, is unquestionably profound. And yet his theoretical works on weird fiction, most notably his book length projects like *The Weird Tale* (1990), *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* (2004), and *The Modern Weird Tale* (2001), turn on the presumption of "objective aesthetic criteria" and a needlessly strong focus on the biography of the authors under consideration. As a result, his theoretical texts, while illuminating, tend to read more as reviews rather than actual critical studies of either particular works or of the genre to which they belong. Furthermore, his essays on H. P. Lovecraft have become so intertwined with biography<sup>89</sup> that I think Joshi can no longer see the texts as independent entities existing outside (or at least alongside) Lovecraft's lived experience.

While biography is a valid form of analysis to take, it is certainly not the only one; and analyses become untrustworthy when a critic puts too much emphasis on the history of the author over and against evidence drawn from the text. This is precisely

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<sup>89</sup> Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, since Joshi has published the definitive biographies of Lovecraft: an early work, entitled *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (1996), and a two-volume masterpiece, entitled *I am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (2010).

what is at issue with H. P. Lovecraft's stories: if we were to go by his biography alone we would never imagine that his texts reflect any of the anxiety and malaise common to the cultural makeup of the post-World War I period. Equally, this anti-war element of Lovecraft's stories – over and against the pro-war bombast of his personal life – would slip past critical attention if we were to rip his texts entirely from the claws of history. For to do so would suggest that texts are isolatable from their particular historical location; that is, the erroneous idea seems to be that if we are to turn away from the author's biography, we will have to ignore the historical location of weird fictions altogether. Certainly, this is valid in some ways, since weird fictions exist in that reception space of interaction and interpretation between reader and physical object – I do not see much of the historical location present in Donald R. Burleson's post-structuralist study *Lovecraft: Disturbing the Universe* (1990), for example, nor should I. But analyses like Burleson's are relatively rare amongst critics of weird fiction, and the analytical trend is to avoid the question of historical period entirely if one is interrogating a text from any position *other* than that of biography. This is, I think, just as much of a mistake as looking at weird fictions *exclusively* through the lens of biography.

For although the author does not stand as a tyrant over the interpretation of their work, and thus we can analyze weird fictions over and against the limits of their author's biography, these works are not simply the sum of how they are received *now*. Rather, they are historically locatable documents full of the presumptions and conditions of the milieu within which they were composed. As such, it is beholden upon critics of weird fiction to understand the social and cultural milieu that informed weird fictions, even if said milieu runs entirely contrary to the stated positions of the authors themselves. This

crops up again and again in weird fiction: the anti-modernist stance of many of the early American weird fiction writers does not rule out the possibility of modernist (or other avant-garde) influences upon the genre. Clark Ashton Smith's texts are replete with surrealist overtones and images, and yet we know little of his thoughts on modern artistic movements other than the fact that he was aware of surrealism as an artistic movement and admired the French decadents. Going by the standards of many weird fiction critics, we would therefore have to assert that these overtones are incorrect, based on the author's lived experience, or ignore them altogether in favor of recognizing only interpretive elements that have persisted into current decades.

This is a blind spot within critical discourse of all eras of weird fiction, I think, especially when we are dealing with elements that we know were worked into an author's texts by their own statements. As said above, the author is not a tyrant over their texts, but when they give clear indication that they have attempted to work a particular element of their milieu into their stories, then it should be beholden upon critics to analyze their weird fictions for said element. It is a surprise to me, then, that so few critics of the weird have analyzed Robert E. Howard's texts for the regionalism that, by his own admission, formed a central part of not only his personal philosophy but also his choice of narrative development. The same thing could be argued about many other weird fiction authors, of course – it would be impossible to avoid the amount of work done on Lovecraft's New England regionalism, for example. But for Howard's sense of the South and Southwest to slip through the cracks, for the political and social worldview that so informed his philosophies to go relatively unexplored in criticism of his weird fictions, is a bizarre thing to me. Howard's work, his Conan and weird stories in particular, seem to be

routinely removed from the historical location of their writing in favor of, again, focusing on aspects of the author's biography or holding the stories as timeless artifacts over and against the pastiche works that followed in his footsteps.

It should be clear that I do not believe that the pastiche weird fictions deserve quite as much scorn as they tend to receive from critics. While it is true that many of them are, on a subjective level, badly written, the same can be said of much of early American weird fiction outside of the work of the luminaries.<sup>90</sup> Or, indeed, texts from any number of genres across literary history. I think it is much more valuable to consider the fact that as time wore on weird fiction became less of an experimental genre and more of a milieu unto itself, one with calcified rules, structures and, most importantly, boundaries. This perspective, which does not seem to be one held by the majority (if not all) of weird critics, would allow for analysis of pastiche works in terms of the unspoken assumptions of their genre without getting into disputes over the applicability of purportedly objective standards of aesthetic quality. Furthermore, it would allow for the critical recognition of those pastiche works which were nevertheless innovative in the ways their borrowed elements were arranged and deployed, causing the floundering genre to benefit from a process of internal interrogation. The weird fiction of Robert Bloch certainly falls into both camps of pastiche, and I suspect it is the case that his more innovative work is of analytic interest. But it is nevertheless true that even when the boundaries of weird fiction are not being pushed by the pastiche, they are still being

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<sup>90</sup> And even they are not exempt from this, of course. Not every Lovecraft, Smith, or Howard story is a masterpiece, though the quality of individual texts is up to subjective debate. Cf. S. T. Joshi's contentious comments on the ostensibly objective lack of quality in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" in his *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2008).

*explored*; that is, pastiches allow for the continued investigation of weird fiction's limits to see what has been done with it in the past and, more importantly, what the genre *means* in the era when it has become a pervasive milieu.

Perhaps it is only in the latter days of weird fiction, the modern period, when the pastiche has become an element of critical scorn and, indeed, largely achieved the level of kitsch, that the genre can either be revitalized or die off. Such a thing would not be unprecedented; as has been said, early American weird fiction could not fully survive being dissolved into the more discrete genres of science fiction and horror. It was only through the pastiche form that the genre survived at all, I think, and yet it seems that since the early 1980s it has become increasingly difficult for authors to find ways to reinvent the genre without reiterating it. Some authors have succeeded, as in the case of Thomas Ligotti. These authors truly revivify the weird fiction genre without, in the main, relying on the forms that preceded them. These authors write from a position that privileges a historic perspective, in many ways: their milieu is no longer that of weird fiction, as it was for the earlier pastiche writers, allowing them to see something meaningful in the oppositional theorizations of early American weird fiction. Taking that analytic perspective, they use techniques such as metafictionality to create works within the genre without falling back upon conceptions or philosophies that better served decades long past. Of course, this is not always a comfortable thing – and I do not think that weird fictions like those of Ligotti could ever be sanely described as “comfortable.” But should weird fiction *be* comfortable? Early American weird fiction was decidedly oppositional in its theorization, conception, and reception. And a primary criticism of weird fiction pastiches is that they lack a certain edge or challenging undercurrent that

lifts their texts above the level of mere spine-tingling works of horrific affect, despite the fact that they are clearly defined by the ways in which they do *not* belong to other genres.

Perhaps this is the main reason why weird fiction has risen again in the form of the “New Weird.” Current weird authors reject – perhaps rightfully – the forms, conceits, and preoccupations of early American weird fiction as outmoded for their purposes. And they certainly have little to no truck with the concept of pastiching the foundational works in the genre. But they still feel that weird fiction has something to *do*; that is, there are productive grounds that can be explored within weird texts that would lie fallow if they remained within the demarcated territories of current genre fiction – horror, science fiction, weird fiction, fantasy, and so forth. I suspect that the New Weird is not as tenable as it perhaps was when it was originally theorized at the end of the Twentieth Century, especially now that many of its predominant authors, such as China Miéville, have foresworn the genre as being little more than a marketing label. Certainly it never seemed to have the forthright theorization of early American weird fiction, even though much of that theorization came in the form of letters between working colleagues. I would balk at including authors such as Ligotti, Clive Barker, or Michael Moorcock in with the New Weird writers, despite the claims of what theorizations *do* exist. Simply, these authors work within genres and are received as part of genres that do not lend themselves well to the stated purposes of the New Weird. Ligotti, if he can be labeled at all, is certainly producing modern weird fiction, innovative but still mindful of where it fits within literary history, while Barker writes fairly conventional horror, and Moorcock has generated numerous texts of fantasy and science fiction.

Regardless, if there is to be a future for weird fiction, be it a continuing development into the New Weird, or as a shoring up of its boundaries as a discrete genre unto itself, it can only come about due to the efforts of the writers themselves. It seems to me that weird fiction authors are drawn to the genre out of a deep-seated need to speak to some element of their perspective on life and existence. For some of these writers, the creation of pastiches are sufficient; the imagery and philosophies of Smith, Howard, Lovecraft and others suffice for them, and they are content recapitulating the work that precedes their own. Thus they have the satisfaction of placing themselves within a reassuring literary – and, perhaps more importantly, intellectual – tradition. For other authors, such as Ligotti, the writing of weird fiction is simply the only form of artistic work that they feel compelled to do. These latter authors, I think, will form the basis of whatever revolution still might occur in the history of weird fiction, though I suspect that their few numbers will mean that the genre will retreat back to its recumbent place within the small press and fan magazines.

To be sure, if weird fiction survives it will not, ultimately, be due to the analytic work of critics. I do nevertheless find it fascinating that the greatest critical proponents of weird fiction tend towards being writers and artists themselves, even though this occasionally leads to works of non-fiction or fiction that are lacking in quality due to inexperience.<sup>91</sup> Hopefully, however, the somewhat provisional acceptance of Lovecraft,

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<sup>91</sup> Intriguingly, weird fiction has recently been deployed as a tool for scholars outside of literary analysis. Graham Harman's book-length work, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012) is an example of how speculative realists (a current branch of philosophy that moves against post-Kantian ideas) make use of weird fiction. In this text, Harman uses close reading techniques – he explicitly refers to his methodology as New Criticism – to show how selected weird fictions by Lovecraft are emblematic of what he refers to as “object oriented philosophy.” Harman, like others of the speculative realist movement in

Howard, Smith and other early American weird fiction authors within the academy will continue now that a solid foundation for scholarly investigation of the genre has been established since the 1980s. I think this investigation can lead us in unexpected directions (as the best of weird fiction often leads its readers). The fact of the matter is that weird fictions present a wealth of opportunity for study in a variety of fields; genre, certainly, but also history, psychology, epistemology, gender studies, politics, and philosophic inquiry all resonate within weird fiction. If nothing else, the texts themselves provide us with an unparalleled window into the period of a century gone by. A study of genre fiction, when well-enacted, allows us to further our understanding of not only the texts themselves, but also the times in which they were produced and received. By reading the work of Howard, Smith, Lovecraft, Ligotti, and Bloch, for example, we come to an enlarged understanding of why things were written across the century, why they were read, and indeed why they persist to be read today.

This dissertation was composed and enacted in order to identify and work against the critical trend to lean overly on authorial biography or isolate weird texts entirely from their historical location. Neither approach quite captures what I see as a deep source of meaning within weird fiction of all eras. These stories were written and read, and continue to be written and read, because they encapsulate views that are considered important. It behooves us as critics, then, to consider why they were created, why they were read, and why they persist decades after the deaths of their individual milieu. I have worked the most with early American weird fiction because of the fact that this period

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philosophy, brings a fresh take to weird fiction, while relying on the same analytic trends that I have outlined here.



was seminal – all eras following it built upon the foundation that was constructed in the first decades of the Twentieth Century. In addition, this seemed to be the era where the influence of milieu was of the greatest importance. The stories of the early American weird fiction era were written, consciously or unconsciously, to reflect aspects of life that were given meaning by innumerable authors and readers. It is in the works of Lovecraft, Smith, and Howard, therefore, that we can most clearly see the benefit of both setting aside biography *and* keeping historical location in mind when turning our analytical efforts to texts. We are able to tease out threads that reveal heretofore unexplored meaning within the stories, and interpretatively come to greater understanding of why, perhaps, these stories have continued to have impact in later years.

That early American weird fiction itself became a milieu is, I think, a remarkable thing. This is not an unheard of movement within the temporal growth of genres, however: It would be difficult to argue, for example, that high fantasy of the Tolkien model has not become a milieu unto itself. But unlike with high fantasy, the pastiche weird fiction era came about after the popularity of early American weird fiction had already begun to substantially wane, if not disappear almost altogether. This suggests that pastiche weird fiction authors saw in early American weird fiction something worth preserving over and against the upswing in popularity of more conservative, or at least generally more conventional, works of outright horror and science fiction. I think it is important to come to a greater critical understanding of the pastiche in genre theory, to further our insight into the homage and the ways in which genres are capable of becoming an artistic milieu unto themselves; especially when these milieus inspire the creation of innovative pastiche, as in the case of Robert Bloch, which is why I elected to

include a chapter on the weird fiction pastiche and Bloch in specific. Not only did Bloch's verve for the pastiche lead him to adopting a career as a writer, but the pastiche mode allowed him to question presumptions and assumptions that had held over from the early American weird fiction era into the pastiche era. As critics, we should give more credence to the pastiche rather than dismiss it out of hand or, as some weird critics do, think that it in-and-of-itself suggests a dearth of possibility for the genre as a whole.

It is important to not make critical assumptions about the ultimate death of genres, however, which is why I considered it important to include a chapter on what may very well end up being latter-day weird fiction. Again, milieu is at the heart of works of Thomas Ligotti, but it is an intensely personal form of milieu, reinvigorating the aspect of personal philosophy that informed early American weird fiction without the recapitulation that so typified the pastiche era. Ligotti's works underscore the importance of taking historical location into account while avoiding the trap of assuming that weird fictions can only be interpreted through their author's lived experience. In Ligotti's work we see a continual destabilization of the distance between fiction and reality. His stories are constructed in such a way as to make their artificiality, their fictiveness, unavoidably plain. By doing so, Ligotti prevents weird fiction from persisting as the simple object of gentlemanly entertainment that the likes of *Weird Tales* readers often found within texts. The effort to treat weird fiction metatextually is profoundly discomfiting when the subject at hand is Ligotti; his philosophic outlook is so nightmarishly drear that one is left yearning for a way to shore back up the walls between fiction and reality.

Unlike with the lives of Howard, Lovecraft, or Bloch, so little of Ligotti's biography is known that it becomes effectively impossible for us to view his work

through the lens of his lived experience; yet at the same time, his philosophy and aesthetics are entirely dependent upon the historical location of his artistic production and the specificity of his existence. This underscores the necessity of my dissertation's project – if we relied entirely on biographic criticism *or* an ignoring of historical context, it would become impossible to resolve the metatextual subtleties within Ligotti's oeuvre. Thankfully, it is possible, with careful attention to detail and the interrelationships between texts, to ferret out critical connections that previous analytic paradigms would have ignored entirely. In the case of each author I have dealt with, I believe that I have shown the necessity for resolving my contention that we must move away from the weird fiction critic's preoccupation with biography or historical isolation, but with Ligotti it is most plain: if there is a way "out" for weird fiction, it will be through the developments of the modern period. To them, therefore, we should be devoting significantly more attention.

It is clear that much more work needs to be done on weird fiction and genre theory. The analyses that have been put forth thus far, both by the scholarly and amateur communities, have provided us with a solid foundation from which to build a robust interpretive understanding of a genre that has influenced all modern genre fiction but has itself suffered from a paucity of necessary attention. Especially given that the concerns and challenges faced by the early American weird fiction writers seem to be cropping up again, driving writers and other artists to try and codify a theoretical New Weird fiction. The oppositional stance within theorizations of disparate genres does not seem to be going anywhere, nor does the need to break from the past's comfortable modes of fiction seem to be deflating in the least. By furthering our critical understanding of weird fiction,

we are able to develop greater insight into historical periods, genre fictions as modes of deep expression, and the intersection between readers, writers, and texts. The history of genre is a difficult beast to work with: there is little to grasp onto in an area of literary production that is as changeable as the tide. Nevertheless, we as critics should turn our attention to the tasks that are the most difficult, because it is in those areas that we are able to discover the richest rewards. Weird fiction of all eras is a particularly rich vein of interpretive understanding; one that, in the main, remains unplumbed, and awaits nothing more than our careful investigation to yield up its treasures.

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