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The Negative Mystics of the Mechanistic Sublime: Walter Benjamin and Lovecraft's Cosmicism

Jeff Lacy and Steven J. Zani

In recent years, a small but significant number of H. P. Lovecraft's critics have begun to address the question of language in his fiction. Language has always been an issue with Lovecraft's detractors, and anyone familiar with his criticism knows the legacy of critiques of his verbosity and ambiguity. Lovecraft's early antagonistic reception in the world of critical scholarship was no doubt due in part to his deliberate affect of language and perhaps in part to the generally low opinion of "weird" fiction held by many critics. But it is less our intention to address those old discussions here than to help advance the front of a new one. In John Langan's postmodern, language-oriented article, "Naming the Nameless: Lovecraft's Grammatology," he delivers the argument that "Lovecraft's language in fact embodies the ideas that drive his fiction" (27). For the new inheritors of the Lovecraft critical tradition, language is the essential question of Lovecraftian texts, and the critical process of this generation should manifest itself in attempting to understand how that language operates. To that end, this essay offers a view of Lovecraft's texts through the ideological lens of Walter Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin is a Frankfurt School Marxist whose influence extends, among other places, to translation studies. Benjamin's account of translation, published in his article "The Task of the Translator," is (in)famous in translation studies for its own verbosity and obscurity. In it, Benjamin challenges the traditional notion of translation (i.e., the transmission of information in a different language), stating, "a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential" (69). To Benjamin, the essential qualities of a work of literature are "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'" (70).

Thus, rather than imparting information or giving the same content as the original, the act of translation—in the Benjaminian sense—should do something else: seek out the "pure language" that is only hinted at by the original text. "Pure language" is, in essence, a sort of Platonic ideal of what the author of the original text meant but inadequately described in the text's limited content. The translator, then, follows the cues of the original text to apprehend that pure language and point to it using the literary tools available in another language.

For Benjamin, the process of translation is useful because it opens up a question of the limitations of language. In sum, he argues, "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (80). The problem of translation—how to "say" the same thing in a different language—becomes a manifest question of the meaning behind the texts themselves. In the words of Ian Almond, "what Benjamin initially calls 'the echo of the original' is actually the voice of the translator" (190). When attempting to translate a text, restating the intention of the original author is impossible since the translator can only (re)state a conjecture of what the original author's intention *might have been*, based on a reading of the original text. The actual meaning of the text is something of an indeterminate, understood only by virtue of a number of doublings and redoublings that occur when a message is expressed, received, and understood. As Benjamin notes, the translated text is a growth from, an echo of, or a tangent to the original text. Following Almond's argument, the original text has a similar relationship the author's own inspiration or intent—besides acting as a point of origin, there is not necessarily any direct correlation of the author's intent and the original text.

This idea is especially applicable to Lovecraft criticism, where critics often "translate" his epistolary statements into his fiction. As Benjamin indicates, however, translation from one mode of expression to another "liberates the language" from the limitations of the original. This liberating project is what goes on in Lovecraft's fiction, or, at the very least, in the process of trying to figure out what that fiction means. Lovecraft's fiction, delivered by narrators who recollect fragments of texts and who speak of unspeakable things, deliberately enacts a process of indeterminacy in translation, leading readers to a different relationship to language and, hence, to Lovecraft's version of

a mystical truth. As we shall see, truth in Lovecraft's fictional universe is always revealed as a mystical truth with a negative twist; it is a truth whose meaning is nonmeaning.

II

> Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large.
>
> —H. P. Lovecraft, Letter to Farnsworth Wright (*SL* 2.150)

> Horror in Lovecraft is essentially cosmic indifference. It is the realization that there is no purpose to the universe.
>
> —David Clements, "Cosmic Psychoanalysis: Lovecraft, Lacan, and Limits" (6)

Lovecraft himself and numerous critics agree that one of the major themes in his fiction is the revelation of a philosophy of cosmic indifference. Critics also note the importance of Lovecraft's nonfiction (especially "Supernatural Horror in Literature" and "Some Notes on a Nonentity") and his copious letters as sources of supplementary information to help understand his fiction. Lovecraft foresaw the challenge his themes might pose. In a letter to Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales* at the time, Lovecraft comments, "I presume that few commonplace readers would have any use for a story written on these psychological principles" (*SL* 2.150). A review of Lovecraft's critical reception, "Lovecraft Criticism: A Study" by S. T. Joshi, addresses the complaints of several early critics for whom this presumption proves true. This lack of understanding may have more to do with Lovecraft's prose style, however, than the shortcomings of "commonplace readers." For instance, whereas Finnish critic Timo Airaksinen frankly admits that Lovecraft is a "problematic stylist," several of Lovecraft's defenders, such as James Arthur Anderson, take it upon themselves to demonstrate "that much of what are mistakenly perceived to be flaws in Lovecraft's work are really essential components of his overall theme and meaning" (Airaksinen 3, Anderson ii--iii). Likewise, in an article titled "Lovecraft and Adjectivitis: A Deconstructionist View," Donald R. Burleson attempts to explain how Lovecraft's apparent misuse of adjectives—often discussed by

Lovecraft's detractors—is actually an effective literary device. Suffice to say, then, with so much controversy over its effectiveness, that Lovecraft's fiction is challenging at best.

Compared to his fiction, however, Lovecraft's nonfictional texts are very straightforward, explanatory, and declaratory—such as the "fundamental premise" comment in the above epigraph. Little wonder, then, that Lovecraft's defenders often find it necessary to cite his nonfiction and his letters to help make their cases. For example, both Timo Airaksinen and S. T. Joshi make testament to the importance of encountering Lovecraft's ideas in his nonfiction to properly understand his fiction. According to Airaksinen, "Lovecraft . . . develops a comprehensive literary theory, a personal philosophy, and a metaphysics which he follows in his fiction. . . . Without knowledge of this background philosophy, to discover what he is writing about is difficult" (3). S. T. Joshi claims that Lovecraft's essays and letters provide "invaluable information on the understanding of Lovecraft's thought and, hence, his fiction," that Lovecraft's "world view is worth examining in some detail so that we can then see how precisely and systematically the fiction is an expression of it," and that "[the] failure to read Lovecraft's letters has in particular caused problems for certain critics" ("Decline" 170, 171, 229).

When critics employ his letters and nonfiction to understand his fiction, they are in effect employing a method of translation, but it is not a Benjaminian translation. The intent of this intertextualism is to interpret the content of Lovecraft's fiction as if it were a translation of the ideas expressed in his nonfiction—what Benjamin might call an attempt to understand the transmission of information, i.e. to understand what really *is not* essential to the work. If Lovecraft's fiction and nonfiction say the exact same thing in a different way, there would be no point in reading one after reading the other. One could simply read Lovecraft's letters or "Supernatural Horror in Literature" to "get" his cosmic philosophy and not trouble with his complex and problematic fictional texts. This is assuredly not the case, however; surely there is some value in the differences between Lovecraft's modes of writing. Lovecraft's fiction expresses his philosophy differently than his nonfiction. The qualities that make Lovecraft's fiction so challenging are exactly those same qualities that, in Benjamin's opinion, are essential to the literary work: "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic' " (70).

According to Benjamin's principles, Lovecraft's fiction should be

able to stand well apart from his nonfiction. Perhaps, by employing a Benjaminian method, readers may be able, as S. T. Joshi suggests, "to forget this body of peripheral material and read again the stories as stories" ("Decline" 229). In Benjaminian terms, Lovecraft's (and, for that matter, any author's) work attempts to enact a revelation of "pure language." If one reads his fiction as such a process, that reading, as such, is not much different from any number of other recent postmodern critics of Lovecraft. However, applying Benjamin allows one to dismiss Lovecraft's nonfiction as the apparent origin of meaning for his fiction, and replaces this author-centered, intertextual critical view with a more language-oriented methodology that explains just why Lovecraft's fiction is worthy of critical attention in the first place without the need to "supplement" of Lovecraft's additional texts and explanations.

III

Of the supposed "problems" or "flaws" of Lovecraft's writing, the one that may be most responsible for hindering the comprehension of his cosmic themes is the misunderstood outlook of his narrators. Despite Lovecraft's claim that "scene, mood, and phenomena are more important in conveying what is to be conveyed than are characters and plot," the character of his narrators are of key importance in his fiction ("Some Notes on a Nonentity" [*MW* 562]). Deborah D'Agati touches on this idea in her article "The Problems with Solving: Implications for Sherlock Holmes and Lovecraft Narrators." Lovecraft's narrators tend to be very rational. As they encounter the uncanny, they conduct "a search dictated by rational inquiry" (57). Some readers criticize Lovecraft's narrators for being too logical, claiming that the narrators seem to possess an unrealistically tenacious hold on logical but implausible explanations for uncanny events rather than concluding that the supernatural is at work. As D'Agati explains, however, the narrators have no reason not to expect logical answers—in their empirical and materialist worldviews, supernatural explanations are just not a thinkable option. The narrative voices of these empiricists are often so appropriately dry and objective that readers may forget that there is, in fact, a character with a particular worldview narrating the story.

To be fair, reader expectations also play into this quandary. Upon

encountering a Lovecraft story, especially if it is contained in a context such as an issue of *Weird Tales*, the reader understandably expects the uncanny, unnatural, and weird to occur. One may assume that the readers of *Weird Tales* and its ilk in fact *want* to read about aliens, ghosts, monsters, and whatnot. Indeed, such elements would be *the whole point of the story* to most readers of weird fiction. However, since readers of weird fiction assume, expect, and want the presence of supernatural entities and paranormal forces, the appearance of such entities or forces is not as shocking and horrible to the reader as they are to the unsuspecting narrators. As D'Agati notes, "Lovecraft's narrators are stunned because they find the opposite of what they expect" (59). Because of this discrepancy in expectations, many readers have been unable to easily identify with Lovecraft's narrators and thus fail to understand the mystic quality of the narrators' tales. To be sure, Lovecraft writes fiction in the language of the mystic; his narrators encounter what lies outside of the mundane sphere of human experience and attempt to explain the unexplainable, describe the indescribable, and name the unnamable. In short, his narrators experience the ineffable and struggle to communicate it.

Lovecraft's stories, then, express cosmic indifference via illustration and demonstration, as opposed to the version of cosmicism present in his letters and nonfiction, where he reveals his philosophy in simple declarations or explanations. As Fritz Leiber states the case, readers of Lovecraft's fiction encounter "*confirmation* rather than revelation" (56; emphasis in original). Thus, Lovecraft's fiction, in a sense, is what Airaksinen calls a "sacred" text: "The vision is apocalyptic but at the same time liberating, just like the touch of holiness must be. . . . The Lovecraftian text robs the world of its meaning, yet forces his reader to cling to it, as the only road to salvation" (217–18). Lovecraft's stories, then, often "fail" to adequately express his cosmicism because what he is attempting to do, in fact, is relate a mystical experience, or at least what would pass for a mystical experience in his mechanistic fictional world, which is somewhat different from mystical experiences in our world.

Epistemologist Bimal Krishna Matilal explains the mystic viewpoint as follows: "'Mysticism' has been loosely used for an assortment of views. The salient feature of these views is that they envision an integrated picture of the cosmos and promote a special type of human experience that is at once unitive and nondiscursive, at once

self-fulfilling and self-effacing" (143). Christian philosopher William P. Alston defines as mystical "any experience that is taken by the subject to be a direct awareness of (what is taken to be) Ultimate Reality or (what is taken to be) an object of religious worship" (80). Thus, the mystic experience is a confrontation with reality such as it is, typically an event perceived as a coming to terms with universal totality or connection. The experience is self-fulfilling because it provides a sense of place and purpose, and self-effacing because it does away with individual identity as one connects with the sublime. Didier T. Jaén's article on mysticism in fantastic literature discusses the mystical experience as a kind of unsettling confrontation with the cosmos which forces a new understanding of its laws and rules. For Jaén, this confrontation originates in "disquieting art": "The disquieting art object forces or presumes in the spectator a revision or reconsideration of the everyday laws of nature" (110).

These definitions of mysticism put Lovecraft's fiction well within the mystical paradigm. In regard to Jaén, consider the numerous examples of "disquieting art" found in Lovecraft. To name but a few: the wild viol playing in "The Music of Erich Zann," the idol and strange architecture in "The Call of Cthulhu," and the mural sculptures in *At the Mountains of Madness*. Just as Jaén states, these art objects influence Lovecraft's narrators to reconsider their understanding of the world.[1] The narrators eventually apprehend what Alston terms "Ultimate Reality." In Lovecraft, this Ultimate Reality is "a single truth, a terrible truth from the human point of view: namely, that mankind is but a tiny insignificant speck, without hope and without meaning. The more we learn, Lovecraft says, the smaller we become" (Anderson 166). While the notion of mysticism in Lovecraft falls in line with Jaén and Alston, it diverges from Matilal's definition at this point. As the quote from Anderson notes, Lovecraft's mystical experience is indeed self-effacing; the narrator's sense of self is suitably sublimated. The difference, also illustrated by Anderson's quote, is that Lovecraft offers no self-fulfillment. It is because of this distinction that Lovecraft's narrators are *negative* mystics. Lovecraft's narrators become chagrined instead of fulfilled, despondent instead of hopeful, disillusioned instead of content.

1. By the same token, Lovecraft's work in itself is disquieting art, forcing readers to reconsider their worldview.

Reading mysticism into Lovecraft is by no means entirely new. Bradley A. Will and Richard E. Dansky, for example, both explore Lovecraft's inside/outside cosmology in some detail. Lovecraft's "inside" is the limited realm of human experience; the "outside" is the cosmic. Lovecraft often refers to the cosmic as the "beyond," which is apropos since it is actually what is beyond human ken. This cosmology is also characteristic of mysticism: "[the] world as we know it is a delusion that hides the true nature or state of things, or else it is no delusion at all, revealing *all* there is, if only we could see. The mystic thus learns to see the world in this double perspective" (Jaén 107). This is exactly what happens to Lovecraft's narrators. Will's article "H. P. Lovecraft and the Semiotic Kantian Sublime" compares Lovecraft's cosmic vision with Kant's description of the apprehension of the sublime. Kant concludes that encountering the noumenal (or sublime) sphere results in a sense of awe and wonder for that which is greater than ourselves. Lovecraft's version of the noumenal sphere—the cosmic—is "mechanistic and material" rather than spiritual, but it is mechanistic beyond human comprehension (Will 16). Dansky, in his article "Transgression, Spheres of Influence, and the Use of the Utterly Other in Lovecraft," discusses Lovecraft's fictional universe in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's epic (immutable) and novel (mutable) spheres and how Lovecraftian narrators transgress between the two.

Lovecraft's fiction, then, consists of narrators attempting to express their version of a mystical truth, to discuss in the human sphere that which lies beyond it, to approach the limitless "pure language" within the limits of language. Going back to Benjamin, the only way to understand such content is to understand that it cannot be translated, to understand that it attempts an approximation of the ineffable, of what lies outside of comprehension altogether. This untranslatability is obviously a crucial element in Lovecraft's work. Furthermore, psychoanalytic critic David Clements argues that a narrator struggling to express the ineffable is not just an element of Lovecraftian fiction but is rather precisely what defines a work as weird fiction:

> the narrator cannot *entirely* repress the knowledge gained in the tale. He will therefore turn to writing this story. Writing is Lovecraft's solution as well; it allows Lovecraft to both express the absolute truth of cosmic indifference while simultaneously reveling in a *jouissance*.

> This is the special mixture that results in weird fiction. (10; emphasis in original)

Thus proceed a great number of Lovecraft's narrations. They are expressions of cosmic indifference that reveal what expressing things with dry, critical—one might say indifferent—language cannot, primarily the fact that a true revelation of cosmic indifference is something that is so totally antithetical to normal human conception, and hence so horrifying, that it cannot be stated dryly or critically. The mystical experience, in short, is one to which one cannot be indifferent, objective, and critical.

Quite often, a Lovecraft narrator offers a cautionary tale and a salvation narrative all in one. Unlike traditional mystical and/or sacred writings, however, the salvation lies entirely in avoiding, not embracing, the forces that provide a transcendent meaning to the world. The difference between Lovecraft and, say, St. John of the Cross, then, is that while their texts have the same purpose structurally—they offer a new ontological vision of the world and humanity's relation to it—one structure is the negative image of the other. John (or Teresa of Avila, or any other traditional mystic) urges belief in order for the reader to gain admittance to God's infinite love and compassion. Lovecraft's narrators, too, urge belief, but it is a negative belief—a belief in a godless universe that bears infinite indifference to humanity's actions. In the world of Lovecraft's fiction, the positive belief that one lives in a world where one's motives and proceedings are substantive lays the foundation for horrific peril when the narrative of self-importance comes undone. The stories prove to the characters that not just faith, but reason, too, is false and the narrator is damned both spiritually and logically.

In the mystic tradition, to be enlightened—to learn of the "big picture" of the cosmos—is to be saved or to be one with the universe. However, in Lovecraft's fiction, to be enlightened is to be damned to hopelessness. In order to believe that one is saved or at one with the universe, one must maintain ignorance of the cosmic reality. Lovecraft's narrators often pine for such ignorance, which in this case is literally blissful. Ignorance is the only path to salvation. "Consciousness, then, is fundamentally based on denial. It is in this sense that our everyday world, our daytime world of consciousness, is a buffer, a blanket of merciful ignorance" (Clements 28). The offering

of salvation emphasizes Airaksinen's opinion that Lovecraft's fictional texts have sacred qualities. However, the stories expose the audience to truths that should remain hidden and, thus, the audience is damned by the very text that would offer salvation. If the purpose of traditional mystics is to spread the gospel,[2] or "good news" of what they have known, then the Lovecraft's narrators should endeavor to keep their mahspel,[3] or "bad news," to themselves.

If these stories are, in effect, the mahspel expressing the negative mystical experience of the narrators, then it should be obvious that Lovecraft's fiction creates a much more potent and nuanced vision than his nonfiction. According to Alston,

> no *statements*, not even rough, imprecise ones, are possible with respect to mystical experience or its objects. In mystical literature, language is limited to evocative or expressive uses. Mystics should be understood as saying what they do in order to *evoke* in the hearer some faint echo of the mystical experience and/or to *express* that experience or their reactions thereto. (82; emphasis in original)

This is exactly why it is a mistake to equate the ideology found in Lovecraft's letters with the "meaning" of his fiction: rational, explanatory prose can offer nothing but rational, explanatory comprehension. Lovecraft's fiction, in contrast, does something very different and Lovecraft's narrators offer something more because, in short, Lovecraft does not have the same kind of mystical experience that his narrators do. Lovecraft himself comes about his cosmic philosophy based on information within the human sphere. His narrators come to similar, but subtly more profound, conclusions by acquiring information from outside the human sphere. They offer absolutely bleak and nihilistic revelations that come from having confronted the outside of rationality. Lovecraft's letters and essays, which by their genre classification as nonfiction hold an implicit assumption of truth and presence of meaning, can only build up that which his negative fiction tears apart by archaic and obscure language, hints, and suggestions. To put this argument another way, it is a mistake to translate the message of Lovecraft's letters into his fiction because reason is everything and serves as the solid basis of the cosmicism in his nonfiction, but

2. From the Old English *god*, meaning "good," and *spell*, meaning "tale."
3. As above, but formed the Old English *mah*, meaning "bad."

reason is paradoxically nothing and everything in his fiction. In his fiction, while the story serves to probe that rationality is nothing, the message of the negative mystic is that rationality is indeed everything, for it is all one has left to which to cling.

IV

> No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (69)

> My object is such pleasure as I can obtain from the creation of certain bizarre pictures, situations, or atmospheric effects; and the only reader I hold in mind is myself.
>
> —H. P. Lovecraft, Letter to Edwin Baird (*MW* 506)

Perhaps it is impossible for a critical attempt to accomplish the same thing as the fiction it criticizes. At best, all that a critical essay—such as Lovecraft's own "Supernatural Horror in Literature" or the one you are now reading—can offer is the transmission of content, the inessential. That being said, however, what can be done in an essay is attempt to understand how Lovecraft's stories go beyond mere content. They point to the outside of content, which is where Benjamin's translation project seems best suited with Lovecraft, particularly since critics have proclaimed Benjamin's own project an ambiguous and ineffable one:

> Thus readers cannot use "The Task of the Translator" as a secondary reference at all, since what it says at any given point is always provisional, and often contradicted elsewhere in the text. To read Benjamin is too hard for anyone to sustain. . . . His writing cannot be narrativized, organized and applied and worked out onto a literary text. As such, it is completely unusable as a theoretical basis for establishing a critical reading. (Fréche 105)

Benjamin's "unusable" methodology works well with Lovecraft, however, not just because of the apparent symmetry in critical frustration that arises from reading them (a fairly standard trait in postmodern writing, after all), but because invoking the language of Benjamin's translation allows us to stop looking for meaning in either the Love-

craft "mythos" that has sprung up around his works, or in the apparent connection(s) of those works to the worldview espoused in his letters and essays. Instead, we can look at the fiction in and of itself, in the function and structure of its language.

One aspect of Lovecraft's fiction that virtually asks to be read in light of Benjamin is its apparent audience. Looking strictly at the text itself, then, who is Lovecraft's apparent audience, and what does it mean to be not the "intended reader" so often discussed in critical works, but rather to be exactly who we are—some person who, according to the interior structure of the work itself, is an incidental reader who has come upon a text not addressed to them? This shift in critical perspective, if it is not already clear, reveals that Lovecraft's texts often, and not coincidentally, mirror themselves in structure and content. To wit, a narrator slowly and shockingly discovers that his own projects and values are meaningless, while those who receive that narration similarly find that the message is not even intended for them, revealing their own lack of consequence or relational value.

Both Benjamin and Lovecraft, then, purport that a text is not really written for its receiver; only it is Lovecraft who deliberately enacts this message in his fiction. This structure is best revealed with a look at what Lovecraft considered "my best story," the novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (*SL* 4.24). The text begins out of necessity, "I am forced into speech," and the rest of the narrative contains the same frantic urgency implied by those first words, not unlike the urgency of a preacher exhorting his congregation to become saved, for it becomes eventually clear that salvation is at stake in the narrative (*MM* 3). The explicit goal of the narrator is that his story will be read by those who have control over future expeditions to the Antarctic, expeditions that would be disastrous for mankind. However, regardless of when or how the reader first comes upon Lovecraft's story, that reader is assuredly not one of those expedition organizers. The effect is striking, and one that seems to have been overlooked by a number of critics in the history of Lovecraft's reception. Not only does any given reader learn of mankind's ineffective and inconsequential position in the scheme of reality, she learns about it by virtue of a narrative structure that similarly displaces her from being capable of effecting that truth.

Hence, again, the subtle but significant difference between traditional mystical writing and Lovecraft's negative mysticism is evident. Mysticism offers a displacement of identity and, through that very

displacement, the possibility of a future reconciliation with sacred meaning. It invokes a "pure language" lost to history—"In the beginning was the Word"—that promises the "pure presence" of a future reality. The negative mystic, however, reveals that "pure language" is ultimately only a "pure absence," a referential structure that is always only revealed in an abridgment. In *At the Mountains of Madness,* the narrator states that his story is such an abridgment, noting, "[the] full story . . . will shortly appear in an official bulletin" (*MM* 61). Likewise are the sculptured walls of the alien city an abridgment of an ancient race's history. The translation is but an echo of the original, and as with traditional mysticism, reconciliation with the sacred is always only a promised future event. In the negative mystic experience, however, those who truly glimpse the truth (and not just its sketches), such as unhappy Danforth in the narrative, reach only eventual madness. Revealing that Danforth has seen something that "he will not tell even me," the narrator evokes signs of absence rather than presence (*MM* 33).

Lovecraft's circularity in language and structure is significant, too. Airaksinen discusses Lovecraft's circularity at length, stating that the circularity emphasizes the sacred quality of Lovecraft's texts and that Lovecraft's "major stories are circular such that the snake always eats its own tail, creating the perfect form, a circle, which cannot be doubted or criticized. The form of the text is a holy mystery" (218). It is worth mentioning another detail that emphasizes this combination of circularity and negativity: even the very identity of the *Mountains* narrator, just like Danforth's secondhand vision, is revealed only as a secondary textual admission. That is, the reader discovers the narrator's name, Dyer, not from the primary source of the narrator himself, but as an aside written in a letter within the narration, as Dyer is admonished for "having tried to stop" the fateful trip (*MM* 22). The narrative, told by a man whose name we know only from the writings of another, gives a preliminary sketch of a race of beings that he himself understands through their artistic productions. When Dyer and Danforth finally both see their pursuer in only a "half-glimpse," a "flash of semi-vision," it is discovered that even that fateful, final vision is but a shoggoth (*MM* 99). As a beast of burden of the Old Ones, the shoggoth is yet another "manufactured" production, rather than a revelation of the thing itself (*MM* 62).

Within Dyer's narrative we have yet another detail that reinforces

the negative truth of the next. The negative mystic produces a tale of desire, but always of negative desire. As Dyer—who is revealed in the text as a man *against* the Antarctic project both during and after the initial event—urges that further expeditions not go ahead, he reveals an attitude that is the ultimate negative position: he wants for something *not* to occur rather than an active positive event. Negative mysticism reveals the signs and symbols of an outside of human availability, but those who receive the message are urged to be content solely in the sign itself, to dwell within an absence that substitutes for a presence, since the coming of that presence would invalidate all meaning whatsoever. This language of negation and deferral is an element that, in an extended sense, is present in a great number of texts that precede Lovecraft, and are part of a tradition that he exemplifies and maintains.

Perhaps it is because of Lovecraft that we can now better understand just how a novel such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* operates. In the gothic Romantic tradition, as in Lovecraft, there are countless epistolary revelations, stories within stories, and secondhand narratives. But besides this distancing of the narrator from event, there is another element of Romanticism that is present in Lovecraft, correspondent with the negative mysticism argued here. For every nineteenth century poem and novel encouraging an encounter with the moral truth of nature and the positive influence of powerful feelings (which is to say, texts that encourage the apotheosis of a mystical encounter) there are cautionary tales in novels, plays, and poems (such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel," Joanna Baillie's *Orra,* among many others) that reveal the madness and despair that will result from such an event.[4]

In response to extreme emotion and the encounter with the unknown, Lovecraft's narrators offer negation and deferral. In fact, the entire text itself is offered as that exact deferral; Lovecraft's narrators are not without their own tools of recuperation, tools designed to offer an alternative for living in relation to madness. Constantly in the text of *Mountains,* Dyer offers a barrage of seemingly irrelevant facts and figures. It may seem odd that the narrator would be so specific,

4. For a much more thorough account of Lovecraft and Romanticism addressing at least some of the concerns listed here, see Donald R. Burleson's "Lovecraft and Romanticism" in *Lovecraft Studies* Nos. 19/20 (1989): 28–31.

for example, in providing directions to a place he does not want anyone to visit: "Latitude 82°, E. Longitude 60° to Latitude 70°, E. Longitude 115°," yet this citation is but one example of many in the text (*MM* 70). Besides repetitive references to locational directives, Dyer makes use of geological language for descriptions, "Jurassic," "lower Eocene to upper Cretaceous," "Pleistocene," "Pliocene," "Comanchian," et al (*MM* 52, 60, 64, 69, 71). There is no necessary purpose for including these details. In fact, if the purpose of the narrative is to discourage investigation, giving specific locations and tantalizing, groundbreaking geological information is highly inappropriate. This "evidence," however, can be understood as an effect of the negative mystic impulse. While a traditional mystic eschews the world of reality in favor for a Platonic world of eternal forms, trading the world of man for the world of God, the negative mystic embraces physical details and rational construction as the only possibility of salvation. The reliance on such details in what Roland Barthes calls "presenting the discourse of the real";[5] the text proclaims its own evidential reality and offers that as the authenticity of its meaning (142). Why these details are "negative" is that they act as the focus for a narrator who is attempting to concretize and organize his world. They are the structural referent and binary opposite to the world of madness and dissolution that is embraced in the mystical arena.

V

By using negative mysticism as a paradigm for understanding Lovecraft, and addressing these issues of "translation" in the search for sacred writing, we can perhaps explain, as well, some of the history of Lovecraft's reception. Glen St. John Barclay is a fine example of a critic who understands Lovecraft's negative mystical narrators all too well, and perhaps in some perverse sense is one of the few people who actually "reads" Lovecraft correctly—because, unlike most Lovecraft fans and critics, he is truly horrified by what he has read. Barclay writes:

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5. The article that addresses this function that is the most correspondent with a reading of Lovecraft is Barthes' "Textual Analysis of Poe's Valdemar," a reading of the Poe short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." Poe uses detail to a similar effect in the story.

> Lovecraft is in fact an essentially tragic and ineffectual figure, possessed of virtually insane prejudices, and almost totally alienated from human sympathies or human experience, who contrived with the aid of a limited imagination to construct thoroughly artificial images intended to be horrific, but lacking any element of physical or psychological credibility to make them convincing. The fact that it is still possible to talk of a Cthulhu Mythos at all is due far less to Lovecraft's own efforts, than to those of three men without whose interested endeavors Lovecraft himself would be the most unlikely ever to have achieved publication. (91)

Barclay's reaction to reading the work is to produce a desperate frontal assault on all aspects of Lovecraft's abilities as a writer. His frenzy reveals that he has encountered the "pure language" that is the goal of the narration. Like a post-Antarctic Dyer, he urges his reader to discontinue his projects, and marshals a great deal of "evidence"—Lovecraft's poor imagination, insanity, prejudice, etc.—to support his work. After reading Lovecraft, Barclay has, in effect, become a Lovecraftian narrator!

Even some of Lovecraft's admirers act like his characters. Take, for instance, readers such as August Derleth, who obviously admire yet misinterpret Lovecraft's work. As Robert M. Price discusses in "Lovecraft's 'Artificial Mythology,'" Derleth and others seek to establish a pantheon of gods based on Lovecraft's fictional entities and, further, to write more stories to flesh out the background "mythos" of this pantheon, "so that Lovecraft's tales have become merely source documents, raw materials for the systematicians' art" (247). The characters of Lovecraft's fictional world, often informed by ancient texts such as the *Necronomicon*, "see the Old Ones as gods or devils . . . because they refuse to see the terrible truth that the Old Ones are simply beings that do not care about humans" (249). The alien entities are just that: alien entities. Both the writers of texts such as the *Necronomicon* and the more modern cultists and investigators in Lovecraft's stories "cannot face the terrible human-minimizing implications of the existence of the overshadowing aliens and take superstitious refuge in religion, deifying the Old Ones as gods" (249). Like Dyer in *At the Mountains of Madness* (and Barclay), Derleth and his ilk attempt to counter, intentionally or unintentionally, the negative mysticism implied by Lovecraft's texts. The counter to negative mys-

ticism, naturally enough, is mysticism. So where Lovecraft's characters fixate on gods and devils, Derleth, et al., likewise fixate on a fictional pantheon to catalog and systematize. The reason for their devotion can bc understood as a following of the mystical impulse, albeit a misguided one.

Corresponding to the original argument on translation, it is interesting to note that, according to Price, Derleth's misinterpretations begin when he attempts to translate Lovecraft's nonfiction into his fiction. Or, in this case, what he thinks is Lovecraft's nonfiction. As Price discusses in his article, Derleth bases much of his interpretation of Lovecraft on the now infamous but misappropriated "black magic" quote, where supposedly Lovecraft says his stories are "based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who, in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled." Derleth receives this "quote" second-hand through Harold S. Farnese, who evidently passed on his own translation of Lovecraft's themes. In a sadly vicious cycle foreshadowed by Benjamin's theories, Farnese thinks he ascertains the "pure language" of Lovecraft, communicates this to Derleth, who then reinterprets Lovecraft in light of it. This progression, with the chicken ever coming before the egg, further illustrates the dangers of reading any text as an interpretation of another.

Unlike Lovecraft, we do not have the skill to reveal the pure language of the Real, so it seems unlikely that anyone will read this article and become Barclay, or even Derleth, nor would we urge them to do so. Today, the task of the Lovecraft critic is to think about the limits of Lovecraft's fiction, not to critique his supposed limitations as a writer. In doing so, we will understand what it means to encounter the endpoint of our own thinking, our own projects. The result is a cruel revelation of an inherently meaningless world. But to think otherwise, as Lovecraft's negative mystics tell us, would be to rush headlong towards the mountains of madness without even knowing that we journey there.

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