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## **Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos**

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### **Abstract**

*Fiction dans le désert du réel: la mythologie Cthulhu de Lovecraft*

En partant d'une note de Mircea Eliade (1976), cet article qui porte principalement sur l'œuvre de fiction de H.P. Lovecraft entend marquer que l'existentialisme nihiliste a connu, sous certains de ses aspects, un prolongement au sein du milieu "holiste" et occulte depuis les années 1960. Dans un essai long et pénétrant paru en 1991, l'écrivain français Michel Houellebecq a mis l'accent sur le nihilisme radical qui sous-tend les écrits de Lovecraft. Or, le présent article veut montrer que la perspective radicalement "désenchantée" qui sous-tend l'œuvre lovecraftienne n'est nullement incompatible avec le fait qu'il utilise certains thèmes tirés de l'histoire de l'ésotérisme occidental, non plus qu'avec le fait que, depuis les années 1960, des occultistes ont embrassé avec un grand enthousiasme son univers de fiction.

Selon la perspective de l'auteur, la suite d'histoires racontant la "quête de rêve" (*dream-quest*) du protagoniste Howard Carter, d'une part, et les histoires d'horreur fondées sur la "mythologie Cthulhu", d'autre part, sont les deux aspects d'une même médaille, en ce sens que cette suite représenterait le désir de Lovecraft de "fuir la réalité" pour un monde de rêves, tandis que ces histoires d'horreur suggèreraient que derrière l'écran vide et prosaïque de la réalité désenchantée se cache une réalité plus profonde encore, faite d'horreur pure. Dans sa partie finale, l'article traite de ce phénomène surprenant qu'est le "chaos magick" lovecraftien, avec ses rituels d'invocations de divinités ou de démons lovecraftiens. Ces invocations ne sont pas l'expression de quelque croyance naïve selon laquelle les entités de Lovecraft existeraient réellement au lieu d'appartenir à la fiction; elles sont plutôt l'expression d'un refus bien plus radical, "postmoderne", de la distinction même entre fiction et réalité. Et pourtant, les magiciens du chaos ne peuvent pas toujours s'arranger pour maintenir cette position de façon constante; sous leur déconstructionisme radical on peut voir poindre ici et là, en effet, une aspiration romantique, celle d'un ré-enchantement du monde.

### **Keywords**

Lovecraft, Howard Phillip; Houellebecq, Michel; Cthulhu Mythos; Horror; Chaos Magick; Existentialism

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There was a tendency in those hungry for practical results... to call upon spirits of terror and compulsion; to move Acheron in despair of bending the gods. There is always a sort of dim idea that these darker powers will really do things, with no nonsense about it... And it is their faith that the only ultimate thing is fear and that the very heart of the world is evil. They believe that death is stronger than life, and therefore dead things must be stronger than living things.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In a well-known article published in 1976, Mircea Eliade devoted some pages to the 'unexpected and incredible success'<sup>2</sup> in the 1960s and 1970s of the French magazine *Planète*, and of the bestselling book written by its two editors Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, *Le Matin des magiciens* (1961). Eliade argued that the success of Pauwels and Bergier's book and magazine could only be understood as a reaction to the French cultural milieu of the late 1950s, dominated by what he called the 'gloomy, tedious, and somehow provincial' atmosphere of existentialism.<sup>3</sup> *Planète* had 'the effect of a bombshell' because its entire orientation was so completely different:

... what was new and exhilarating for the French reader was the optimistic and holistic outlook which coupled science with esoterism and presented a living, fascinating, and mysterious cosmos, in which human life again became meaningful and promised an endless perfectibility. Man was no longer condemned to a rather dreary *condition humaine*; instead he was called both to conquer his physical universe and to unravel the other, enigmatic universes revealed by the occultists and gnostics.<sup>4</sup>

Although there is much truth in Eliade's analysis, it might easily have the effect of obscuring the other side of the coin, which will be the main focus of this article: the *continuation* of (elements of) existentialism within the very kind of

<sup>1</sup>) Chesterton, 'War of the Gods and Demons'. Chesterton is referring to the war between Rome and Carthago, with Carthago and the worship of Baal or Moloch standing for absolute evil. Reading his description of Hannibal ("the Grace of Baal") marching towards Rome, one realizes that it must have been among the direct inspirations for Tolkien's picture of Mordor versus Minas Tirith in *The Lord of the Rings* (Chesterton's influence on Tolkien and C.S. Lewis is well known), and his general description of Carthago and its Moloch cult looks like a direct model for Lovecraft's ancient civilization of the "Old Ones", on which more below.

<sup>2</sup>) Eliade, 'Cultural Fashions', 8.

<sup>3</sup>) Eliade, 'Cultural Fashions', 10.

<sup>4</sup>) Eliade, 'Cultural Fashions', 10.

occultist and holistic milieu represented by Pauwels and Bergier's publications. I will discuss that theme at the example of the American writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and his reception by occultists since the 1960s.

## 2. Contre le monde, contre la vie

Largely due to the influence of Pauwels and Bergier, who were fascinated by Lovecraft and published many of his stories in their magazine, Lovecraft's so-called "Cthulhu mythos" has come to play an important role in the esoteric imagination since the 1960s,<sup>5</sup> as will be seen; but quite interestingly, it has proved no less fascinating to readers whose perspective could not be further removed from anything esoteric. As a particularly clear example, I will begin with the French writer Michel Houellebecq, whose 1991 essay on Lovecraft remains one of the most perceptive analyses of the man and his oeuvre. Houellebecq became famous as a novelist a few years later, and is now arguably the most successful (and controversial) writer in contemporary French literature.<sup>6</sup> His 1991 essay is subtitled "Contre le Monde, Contre la Vie", and emphasizes how Lovecraft's fiction is based upon his radical rejection of the world and of human life in general:

He [Lovecraft] finds the world disgusting, and he sees no reason to suppose that things might present themselves differently, *by taking a better look at them*. . . . Few persons have been so strongly impregnated, permeated to their very bones, by the absolute nullity of all human aspiration. The universe is but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles.<sup>7</sup> A mere phase of transition towards chaos, which will finally engulf it: the human race will disappear. Other races will appear, and disappear in turn. The heavens will be glacial and empty, traversed only by the feeble light of half-dead stars. Which, too, will disappear. Everything will disappear. Human actions are as free and empty of meaning as the free movements of the elementary particles. Good, Evil, Morality, Feelings? Nothing but "victorian fictions". Only egoism exists. Cold, intact, and brilliant.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Colavito, *Cult of Alien Gods*, 130ff. on the differences between the French and the American reception of Lovecraft's oeuvre. Of great importance for that French reception is the fascinating volume on H.P. Lovecraft published in the series "Cahiers de l'Herne" (Truchaud, *H.P. Lovecraft*). Cf. furthermore the recent French collective volume *H.P. Lovecraft* (2002).

<sup>6</sup> On Houellebecq, see the excellent study by van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq*, and id. (ed.), *Michel Houellebecq*. A biography of Houellebecq was recently published by Denis Demonpion (Demonpion, *Houellebecq*).

<sup>7</sup> This motif became central to the novel which made Houellebecq famous: *Les particules élémentaires* (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 17-18 (all translations from Houellebecq are mine).

The antecedents of this perspective are of course well-known. In a famous essay, Hans Jonas interpreted gnosticism as a predecessor of modern existentialism and nihilism, and mentioned Pascal as the first herald of existentialist *Angst*: ‘Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces that I do not know, and that do not know me, I am afraid...’<sup>9</sup> No less evocative is Jonas’s quotation, in the same essay, from Nietzsche’s poem “Vereinsamt”:

Die Welt—ein Tor  
zu tausend Wüsten stumm und kalt!  
Wer das verlor,  
was du verlorst, macht nirgends halt.<sup>10</sup>

Jonas argued that the existentialist experience of *Geworfensein* is essentially the same as the ancient gnostic experience of having been “thrown” into an alien and indifferent world of blind matter, and therefore saw a direct connection between gnosticism and modern nihilism. The main weakness in his otherwise brilliant essay is that he interpreted the experience of alienation as the very essence of gnosticism, thereby ignoring the fact that whereas for the existentialist no escape is possible, the gnostics<sup>11</sup> in fact believed that by means of a salvational gnosis they could overcome this world and return to their spiritual “homeland”.

Lovecraft believed no such thing, nor did he play on spiritual beliefs in his fiction.<sup>12</sup> Instead, by taking the existentialist/nihilist perspective one step further he lifted Pascal’s fear to a new level, and in the process created a new kind of horror fiction. In a way, this extra step could be seen as a reversal of the gnostic posi-

<sup>9</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, 68 (Lafuma ed.; = brunshvicq ed. 205), quoted in Jonas, ‘Epilogue’, 322 (the translation differs from mine). Pascal’s complete text reads: ‘Quand je considère la petite durée de ma vie, absorbée dans l’éternité précédant et suivant, le petit espace que je remplis et même que je vois, abîmé dans l’infinie immensité des espaces que j’ignore et qui m’ignorent, je m’effraie et je métonne de me voir ici plutôt que là. Qui m’y a mis? Par l’ordre et la conduite de qui ce lieu et ce temps a-t-il été destiné à moi?’. Interestingly, Jacques Bergier, in his contribution to the *Cahiers de l’Herne* volume, quotes the same passage (Bergier, ‘H.P. Lovecraft’, 122).

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, “Vereinsamt”, quoted in Jonas, ‘Epilogue’, 324. The lines could be translated approximately as follows: ‘The world—a gate / to a thousand deserts mute and chill! / Who once has lost / what you have lost stands nowhere still.’

<sup>11</sup> Here I do not go into the important question of whether, on the basis of current research, one may still speak about “the gnostics” at all (see notably Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*; King, *What is Gnosticism?*; and for a condensed discussion of the problem, cf. Hanegraaff, ‘Gnosticism’).

<sup>12</sup> For a useful short overview of Lovecraft’s philosophy, including his radical materialism and his rejection of ‘the primitive and irresponsible myth of “spirit” or immaterial soul and of any teleological concept’, see Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 29-50; cf. Joshi’s *H.P. Lovecraft* for a book-length discussion of Lovecraft’s philosophy.

tion. There *may* indeed be a “beyond”, but it has nothing to do with a spiritual realm of goodness, truth and beauty; on the contrary, behind the empty and meaningless world of material reality, there lurks something even *worse*. As formulated by Houellebecq:

From his travels in the doubtful worlds of the unspeakable, Lovecraft did not return with good news. Yes, he tells us, perhaps something hides behind the veil of reality, and can sometimes be glimpsed. Something revolting, in fact.

It is possible that beyond the limited domain of our perception, other entities exist. Other creatures, other races, other concepts and other intelligences. Among these entities, some are probably much superior to us in terms of intelligence and knowledge. But that is not necessarily good news. What is it that makes us think that these creatures, so different from us, have some kind of *spiritual* nature? There is no reason to assume a transgression of the universal laws of egoism and malice. It is ridiculous to imagine that, on the margins of the cosmos, beings full of wisdom and good will are waiting for us to guide us towards some kind of harmony.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary. Lovecraft has begun several of his stories with programmatic statements about the essential horror behind the screen of the visible:

Life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemonic hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous.<sup>14</sup>

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... have hitherto harmed us little; but one 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.<sup>15</sup>

Before taking a closer look at Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos, let us note that we have now already touched upon no less than four different perspectives:

1. An optimistic and holistic view of man “at home” in the universe, and actively participating in spiritual evolution, here mentioned with reference to *Planète*.
2. Pascal’s and Nietzsche’s pessimistic existentialist view of man’s homelessness in a wholly indifferent universe.

<sup>13</sup> Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> Lovecraft, ‘Arthur Jermyn’. All my quotations from Lovecraft refer to the easily accessible three-volume paperback edition: Lovecraft, *H.P. Lovecraft Omnibus*, here abbreviated as HPLO. This quotation: HPLO II, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (HPLO III, 61).

3. A traditional “gnostic” view which likewise experiences the material universe as alien and indifferent, but claims that we can escape from it to a spiritual “beyond” of harmony and light.
4. Lovecraft’s fiction, based on the suggestion that there is indeed such a “beyond”, but it is inhabited by a horrific world of unmitigated evil.

By the end of this article, we will consider yet a fifth possibility.

### 3. Lovecraft’s Dream-Quest

Contrary to many of his admirers, Lovecraft<sup>16</sup> was a radical materialist who saw all religions (including esotericism or occultism of any variety) as self-evident delusions. He does not ever seem to have been tempted to embrace any kind of religious or spiritual belief. On some level of his personality, however, he appears to have experienced the disenchantment of the world as deeply painful and disappointing, and in this regard it is interesting to first look at his sequence of “Randolph Carter” stories. This protagonist, in many ways an alter ego of Lovecraft himself, is presented as an extraordinarily gifted dreamer. “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” narrates Carter’s long and adventurous travels through the land of dreams, in desperate search of the secret that will enable him to enter the marvellous city he has beheld three times in his dreams, and which he can never forget. He finally reaches the castle of The Great Ones, ‘outside the ordered universe, where no dreams reach’, the place where abides

the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes; to which destable pounding and piping dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic Ultimate gods, blind, voiceless, tenebrous, mindless Other Gods whose soul and messenger is the crawling chaos Nyarlathotep.<sup>17</sup>

When he finally meets Nyarlathotep face to face, he learns from him that his dream-city is nothing but ‘the sum of what you have seen and loved in youth’. To find it back, ‘you need only to turn back to the thoughts and visions of your wistful boyhood’.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The foremost modern Lovecraft specialist is S.T. Joshi. Among his many writings, see especially *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life; A Subtler Magick; H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*; and (ed., with David E. Schultz), *Lord of a Visible World*.

<sup>17</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath’ (HPLO I, 365).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* (HPLO I, 484).

But it seems that Carter does not succeed, for in “The Silver Key” we read what happened to him years later:<sup>19</sup>

When Randolph Carter was thirty he lost the key of the gate of dreams. Prior to that time he had made up for the prosiness of life by nightly excursions to strange and ancient cities beyond space, and lovely, unbelievable garden lands across ethereal seas; but as middle age hardened upon him he felt those liberties slipping away little by little, until at last he was cut off altogether...

He had read too much of things as they are, and talked with too many people. Well-meaning philosophers had taught him to look into the logical relations of things, and analyze the processes which shaped his thoughts and fancies. Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreaming, and no cause to value the one above the other. Custom had dinned into his ears a superstitious reverence for that which tangibly and physically exists, and had made him secretly ashamed to dwell in visions. Wise men told him his simple fancies were inane and childish, and even more absurd because their actors persist in fancying them full of meaning and purpose as the blind cosmos grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something and from something back to nothing again, neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness.

Having lost the key, but not his desire to escape from everyday reality, Carter turns to the dark mysteries of the occult. “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (in fact an almost literal transcript of one of Lovecraft’s own dreams)<sup>20</sup> and “The Unnamable” refer to ‘weird studies’ of ‘strange, rare books on forbidden subjects’, nightly visits to graveyards and horrific encounters with unspeakable monsters. “The Silver Key” describes this period of his life in the most negative of terms:

...he cultivated deliberate illusion, and dabbled in the notions of the bizarre and the eccentric as an antidote for the commonplace. Most of these, however, soon showed their poverty and barrenness; and he saw that the popular doctrines of occultism are as dry and inflexible as those of science, yet without even the slender palliative of truth to redeem them.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, when Carter is fifty-two, his grandfather tells him in a dream about a silver key hidden in an antique box by one of his ancestors. He actually finds the

<sup>19</sup> See Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life*, 410 for this implied chronology: at the time of the “Dream-Quest” Carter is presumably in his twenties; at the beginning of “The Silver Key” he is thirty; after this follow the events described in “The Statement of Randolph Carter” and “The Unnamable”; and “The Silver Key” describes how he finds the key back at fifty-four.

<sup>20</sup> Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life*, 230.

<sup>21</sup> Lovecraft, “The Silver Key” (HPL O I, 493).

key, drives back to the region of his childhood, and there finds himself magically transformed into a nine-year old boy: 'The trees and the hills were close to him, and formed the gates of that timeless realm which was his true country.'<sup>22</sup> The adult Carter vanishes into that realm, and is never heard of again.

What we find in the Randolph Carter sequence is a radical dualism between the enchanted world of dream, and the disenchanting world of reality; and hence the process of growing up is described as a painful process of disenchantment. While Lovecraft himself kept to the "adult" view of seeing dreams as illusionary, his alter ego describes the dream world as ultimately more real than mere "reality". Hence it is not just that Lovecraft's fiction fulfills a role of "compensation" for the dreariness of everyday life; in addition, one of his main protagonists functions as a fictional compensation for his own positivist worldview, for Carter draws the conclusion that Lovecraft himself never drew in his own life: that 'there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreaming, and no cause to value the one above the other'.

#### 4. The Cthulhu mythos

Lovecraft's lasting fame is based not on his many fantasy stories set in an imaginary dreamworld, but on his stories of fantastic horror that unfold within a prosaic and naturalist setting. In most of these stories the main personality, always male and mostly solitary, discovers a glimpse of something that "should not exist", and yet does. Lovecraft has repeatedly emphasized the centrality of such a radical break with the expected and imaginable: 'the crux of a *weird* tale is something which *could not possibly happen*'.<sup>23</sup> The sense of dread and horror results from 'a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space'.<sup>24</sup>

The so-called "Cthulhu mythos" central to most of Lovecraft's mature horror fiction<sup>25</sup> is based upon the idea that in very ancient times our earth was inhabited by a race (or several races) of intelligent beings who are utterly alien to anything

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (HPLO I, 499).

<sup>23</sup> Lovecraft, *Selected Letters, 1929-1931*, 434, here quoted according to Joshi, *A Subtler Magick*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (HPLO 2, 426).

<sup>25</sup> In this article I restrict myself to Lovecraft's own stories, but it must be noted that the Cthulhu mythology was developed further by a circle of befriended writers (the so-called Lovecraft circle) already during his lifetime, and has kept developing in the work of many writers ever since. Note also that the term "Cthulhu mythos" was invented not by Lovecraft but by one of the members of the Lovecraft circle, August Derleth (see Harms, 'H.P. Lovecraft and the *Necronomicon*', 17).



known to science, or imaginable by the human mind. Sometimes it is suggested that these beings, whose culture and civilization was highly developed and whose science was superior to ours, in fact created the human race by artificial genetic experiments, to provide them with slaves. In several of Lovecraft's stories, the protagonist discovers the remains of a gigantic city that was built by these monsters, and the final horror comes when he discovers that *they are not dead*. In other stories, it becomes clear that these monstrous beings did not originate here on earth, but have arrived from far-away stars, being able to survive in interstellar space:

The blasphemies which appeared on earth, it was hinted, came from the dark planet Yuggoth, at the rim of the solar system; but this was itself merely the populous outpost of a frightful interstellar race whose ultimate source must lie far outside even the Einsteinian space-time continuum or greatest known cosmos. . . .

The main body of the beings inhabits strangely organized abysses wholly beyond the utmost reach of any human imagination. The space-time globule which we recognize as the totality of all cosmic entity is only an atom in the genuine infinity which is theirs. . . .

There are mighty cities on Yuggoth. . . . The sun shines there no brighter than a star, but the beings need no light. . . . Light even hurts and hampers and confuses them, for it does not exist at all in the black cosmos outside time and space where they came from originally.<sup>26</sup>

The beings are often described as "fungous", even as regards their means of reproduction; and they were able to invade our world by traversing interstellar space in the form of spores.<sup>27</sup> They lived on earth in ancient times; they are still lurking in secret places; and they are waiting for their chance to return to earth, 'when the stars are right', and regain their former dominion. In many of Lovecraft's stories, the protagonist discovers horrific "blasphemous cults" of human beings who worship the "Great Old Ones" as their gods and are secretly preparing their return; and in stories like "The Dunwich Horror" or "The Case of Charles

<sup>26</sup>) Lovecraft, 'The Whisperer in Darkness' (HPLO 3, 179-180, 196, 213).

<sup>27</sup>) Cf. Lovecraft's long poem 'Fungi from Yuggoth', and see e.g. 'At the Mountains of Madness': 'The beings multiplied by means of spores . . . but, owing to their prodigious toughness and longevity, and consequent lack of replacement needs, they did not encourage the large-scale development of new protophallia except when they had new regions to colonize' (HPLO I, 87; and cf. 'The Whisperer in Darkness', HPLO III, 195, 217). The idea seems to have originated with Nobel Prize winner Svante Arrhenius' theory of panspermia, first proposed by him in 1907, and was taken up by Olaf Stapledon in his science fiction novel *Last and First Men* (1930), from where Lovecraft could have picked it up (I wish to thank Matthew Rogers for this information). Psychedelic author Terence McKenna could be indebted to either Stapledon or Lovecraft for his notorious idea that psychedelic mushrooms have their origin beyond our solar system, having arrived here by means of spores that have traveled through space.

Dexter Ward”, we learn how certain individuals are systematically working to “open the gate” to the other-dimensional ‘spaces between the stars’ and, by means of ‘unspeakable’ rituals and horrible incantations, to allow the demonic entities who are lurking there to enter our world again. If successful, it is implied, they will unleash a reign of horror too terrible to imagine.

Information about these demonic beings and about how to invoke them is available in a number of rare “forbidden books”, the contents of which are so shocking that people have gone insane merely by reading them. Among the many titles mentioned by Lovecraft we find quite some books that actually exist (e.g. witchcraft manuals such as Joseph Glanvil’s *Saduscismus Triumphatus* or Nicolas Remy’s *Daemonolatreia*), but these are mixed with invented titles including Ludwig Prinn’s *De Vermis Mysteriis*, von Juntz’s *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, and of course the most famous one by far: the *Necronomicon* written by the mad poet Abdul Alhazred.<sup>28</sup> As is well known, many readers over the years have refused to believe that the *Necronomicon* was invented by Lovecraft, insisting instead that he must have been revealing occult truths under the guise of fiction; others have played upon and amplified such beliefs by creating intentional mystifications (for example by publishing book reviews of the *Necronomicon*); and over the years, quite an amazing number of *Necronomicons* have been written and published.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, among the most fascinating aspects of the Cthulhu mythos is its pantheon of nightmarish demonic beings, somehow representative of the “Great Old Ones” or equivalent races described in the novels.<sup>30</sup> Most frequently mentioned are Shub-Niggurath (‘the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young’), the “crawling chaos” Nyarlathotep, the daemon sultan Azathoth, Yogsothoth (the ‘key and guardian of the gate’ through which the “Great Ones” broke through to our world), the toad-like Tsathoggua, and of course “great Cthulhu” himself.<sup>31</sup> As could be expected, there have been many attempts to give

<sup>28</sup> According to the Lovecraftian mythos, Abdul Alhazred died in 738 in Damascus (devoured alive in broad daylight by an invisible monster), and his book was originally titled *Al Azif*. It was translated into Greek by a Byzantine scholar known as Theodorus Philetas in 950, and from Greek into Latin by Olaus Wormius in 1228.

<sup>29</sup> On the details of this phenomenon, see Harms & Gonc, *Necronomicon Files*.

<sup>30</sup> To my knowledge, the relation of these “demons” or “gods” to the great mass of monsters that have lived and are still living on earth is never really clarified by Lovecraft. The monsters in general are venerated as “gods” by certain secret cults, but the beings specifically mentioned by name would seem to have a special status.

<sup>31</sup> The Wikipedia internet encyclopedia is particularly useful for information about all these entities: the entries are clearly all written by the same author, and provide excellent overviews of how these beings are described by Lovecraft, with references to the relevant stories and passages.

pictorial form to them, as one will discover by typing in any of these names in the google search machine and click on “images”.

### 5. Western Esotericism

Already during Lovecraft’s own lifetime, some of his readers were convinced that his stories were more than fiction, and in fact contained valid occult knowledge. Thus, in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft speaks with a mixture of amusement and irritation about a marginal member of the Lovecraft circle, William Lumley:

He is firmly convinced that all our gang... are genuine agents of unseen Powers in distributing hints too dark and profound for human conception or comprehension... Indeed—Bill tells me that he has fully identified my Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep... so that he can tell me more about ’em than I know myself.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly Lovecraft found this ridiculous, and he would have been amazed (and probably worried) to see how many occultists would come to hold similar views especially from the 1960s on.

The extent of Lovecraft’s familiarity with Western esoteric traditions is a somewhat controversial issue among specialists. John Wisdom Gonce III, to whom we owe the most thorough discussion to date, argues that while Lovecraft’s knowledge of esotericism was certainly much more limited and superficial than imagined by some of his occultist admirers,<sup>33</sup> yet it was more serious than one would conclude from authoritative specialists like S.T. Joshi. Apart from a simple lack of familiarity with the field, these scholars tend to underestimate the importance of esotericism, firstly because they personally share Lovecraft’s mechanistic/materialist worldview<sup>34</sup> and have trouble perceiving “the occult” as something that should be given much weight, and secondly because too much emphasis on the occult might throw an unfavourable light on Lovecraft and thus work against their agenda of getting him recognized as one of the great American

<sup>32</sup>) Lovecraft, *Selected Letters* IV, 271, as quoted in John Wisdom Gonce III, ‘Lovecraftian Magick: Sources and Heirs’, in: Harms & Gonce, *Necronomicon Files*, 99.

<sup>33</sup>) Similar conclusions are drawn by Menegaldo, ‘Le méta-discours ésotériste’. Note that Gonce speaks of “the occult” rather than “esotericism”.

<sup>34</sup>) Joshi is in fact a militant atheist and skeptic: see his *God’s Defenders*, which includes a chapter on G.K. Chesterton, whose name is absent from Joshi’s books on Lovecraft.

authors of the 20th century.<sup>35</sup> A further problem in evaluating Lovecraft's debt to esotericism is the fact that he may well have been the most prolific letter-writer in history (estimates of his total output run between 75.000 and 100.000 pieces of correspondence), and nobody has an even remotely complete overview of all his correspondence.<sup>36</sup>

Taking into account these limitations, Gonce provides us with a list of main influences on Lovecraft regarding "the occult": *The Arabian Nights*—which he first read as a child, and which kept fascinating him throughout his life—provided him with many stories of medieval Islamic magic; from an early age he was fascinated by the pantheon of classical mythology; among contemporary writers with occult interests who influenced him are Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, Sax Rohmer, and various authors associated with French Decadent literature, such as J.K. Huysmans; much information about "primitive magic" and witchcraft he took straight from E.B. Tylor's articles on magic and demonology in the 9th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Margaret Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*; and among the esotericists, occultists and historians of magic and demonology with whom he was somewhat familiar are notably Eliphas Levi, Montague Summers, Grillet de Givry, Lewis Spence, A.E. Waite, H.P. Blavatsky, Scott-Elliot, Nicholas Roerich, and Aleister Crowley.<sup>37</sup> Many other authors relevant to esotericism are mentioned here and there in his stories, but mostly these are clearly just cases of name-dropping. One of the best examples is "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward", where we learn how the library of Ward's sinister ancestor Joseph Curwen was described by a visitor:

Mr Merritt always confessed to seeing nothing really horrible at the farmhouse, but maintained that the titles of the books in the special library of thaumaturgical, alchemical, and theological subjects which Curwen kept in a front room were alone sufficient to

<sup>35</sup> Gonce, 'Lovecraftian Magick', 85-86. Joshi's 708-page biography of Lovecraft is extremely thorough and detailed, but Gonce notes that nevertheless, 'in spite of all his careful research, Joshi overlooks Lovecraft's letter to Clark Ashton Smith asking for source material on the occult, and ignores his subsequent studies of historic grimoires... In the same book, Joshi devotes three pages to the theft of Lovecraft's suits from his New York apartment!'

<sup>36</sup> As explained by Gonce ('Lovecraftian Magick', 87), only a small percentage of his letters has survived, even less of them have been published, the five published volumes of *Selected Letters* have been heavily abridged and censored by August Derleth, and most manuscript letters are spread over a variety of university and private libraries.

<sup>37</sup> But although many occultists since the 1960s have seen Crowley and Lovecraft as closely related, in fact Lovecraft seems to quote him only very rarely: Menegaldo found no more than a single reference in a letter (Menegaldo, 'Méta-discours ésotériste', 266 nt 12).

inspire him with a lasting loathing. . . . This bizarre collection . . . embraced nearly all the cabalists, demonologists, and magicians known to man; and was a treasure-house of lore in the doubtful realms of alchemy and astrology. Hermes Trismegistus in Mesnard's edition, the *Turba Philosophorum*, Geber's *Liber Investigationis*; and Artepheus' *Key of Wisdom*; all were there; with the cabalistic *Zohar*, Peter Jamm's set of *Albertus Magnus*, Raymond Lully's *Ars Magna et Ultima* in Zetzner's edition, Roger Bacon's *Thesaurus Chemicus*, Fludd's *Clavis Alchimiae*, Trithemius' *De Lapide Philosophico* crowding them close. Mediaeval Jews and Arabs were represented in profusion, and Mr Merritt turned pale when upon taking down a fine volume conspicuously labelled as the *Qanoon-e-Islam*, he found it was in truth the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. . . .<sup>38</sup>

This passage is an excellent example of how and why “the occult” is important to Lovecraft as a writer. In an earlier article published in *Aries* I argued that our perception of Western esotericism as a more or less coherent tradition is in fact the historical result of what I call the “Grand Polemical Narrative” of Western culture.<sup>39</sup> Starting with the invention of monotheism, and continuing through Christianity and the Enlightenment, Western culture has been defining its own identity by creating an imaginary domain of the demonized “other” that represents and contains everything “we” consider unacceptable and incompatible with our own basic values. The construction of identity always takes place ‘by means of telling stories—to ourselves and to others—of who, what and how we want to be’;<sup>40</sup> and such stories can only be told by simultaneously construing an “other” who represents whatever we do *not* want to be. In other words, the concept of “Western esotericism” is itself a fictional product, and must not be confused with the reality of the historical currents associated with it. By the 18th century, the long cumulative process in which Western culture had been construing and re-construing its complementary “other” had resulted in the existence of a space in the collective imagination that contained everything we nowadays associate with the field of “Western esotericism”: this is where modernity vaguely but consistently locates a variety of “pagan superstitions”; the entire domain of witchcraft and demonology; heresies like gnosticism; occult sciences like astrology, alchemy and magic; the mystical speculations of theosophical and kabbalistic hermeneutics; the “enthusiasm” of “irrational cults”; and various real or imagined “hidden traditions” or secret societies inspired by and connected

<sup>38</sup>) Lovecraft, ‘The Case of Charles Dexter Ward’ (HPLO 1, 160-161).

<sup>39</sup>) Hanegraaff, ‘Forbidden Knowledge’.

<sup>40</sup>) Hanegraaff, ‘Forbidden Knowledge’, 226.

with such ideas.<sup>41</sup> This entire domain in the collective imagination is clearly a fictional product: any historian of Western esotericism knows how far the historical reality of all these various currents is removed from how they appear in the popular imagination.

It is from this very reservoir of “the other” in the collective imagination of Western culture, and of Enlightenment culture more in particular, that Lovecraft drew his basic materials. All his stories linked to the Cthulhu mythos rely for their effect on the presence in the reader’s mind of obscure chains of association grounded in the Grand Polemical Narrative. The “unspeakable” monsters, and the rituals in which they are venerated and invoked, are constantly referred to as “abominations” and as “blasphemous”, “unholy”, “unhallowed” or “godless”: terms that do not presuppose any religious belief on the part of the author or the reader, but are effective simply because they invoke the feelings of horror inspired by pagan deities and demonic beings in the minds of traditional Christian doctrine.<sup>42</sup> The same goes for various other “esoteric” elements: in the above quotation from “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward”, the mere spectacle of “occult” books, filled with “forbidden” secrets, and involved in “dark” traditions such as magic or alchemy, is enough to inspire feelings of fear and “loathing”. Lovecraft plays upon popular perceptions of such domains, but raises them to an extreme degree: whereas some conservative Christians might feel uncomfortable and even somewhat afraid in being confronted with “occult” grimoires, the characters in Lovecraft’s stories go literally insane merely by leafing through the *Necronomicon*, and while missionaries or explorers might react to “pagan”, “superstitious”, “primitive” or “barbarous” rituals with feelings of revulsion and disgust, those who behold the Cthulhu rituals in Lovecraft’s stories are touched to the very core of their being by the “unspeakable” horror of it all.

<sup>41)</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff, ‘The Study of Western Esotericism’, 513; and idem, ‘Magic V’, 741, on Western esotericism as a “waste-basket” category in which scholars in the wake of the Enlightenment dumped everything that did not fit the relatively neat categories of “religion” and “science”. And see idem, *New Age Religion*, 382 for some examples of how concerned scholars imagine this dangerous “other”: Christoph Schorsch discussed New Age as ‘die Rückkehr zum Dunkel der eingeschränkten Bewusstheit, zum muffigen Dünkel spiritistischer Ratifikationen und zur undurchdringlichen Nacht, in der die Gespenster umgehen’ (o.c., 223) and Gottfried Kuenzlen ‘kann und will es nicht glauben, dass ein gnostisch-esoterischer Verschnitt, dass Okkultismus, ja Obskurantismus, dass heidnisch-magische Versatzstücke, dass wabernde Mythologismen als neuen Kulturmuster öffentliche Kraft gewinnen’ (o.c., 38). Such statements go back to the mid-1980s and I am cautiously optimistic that nowadays most scholars will find them merely amusing.

<sup>42)</sup> Chesterton’s picture of Baal worship in the chapter from which I took the quotation above this article, is a case in point.

Not only does Lovecraft play upon the various “others” of monotheism and Christianity (paganism, magic, demonology, witchcraft and so on), he does the same with those of modern rationality and science. The “alterity” of the monsters and what they stand for is raised to an extreme degree by a systematic emphasis on its complete and utter incompatibility with anything known by means of the senses or reason, understandable by logic, or expressible in discursive language. Thus in “The Colour Out of Space”, a spot of land is infected by an alien influence that makes its presence felt, among other things, by a colour ‘unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum’: it was ‘almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all.’<sup>43</sup> In various stories we hear that the aliens emit a stench that defies description but inspires an unspeakable horror. Elsewhere, the “alien” and “unnatural” nature of the horror derives from a radical transgression of geometry. Thus in “The Call of Cthulhu”, we hear of a geometry that is ‘abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours’;<sup>44</sup> and particularly strong examples are found throughout “The Dreams in the Witch-House”, where we read about ‘lines and curves that could be made to point out directions leading through the walls of space to other spaces beyond’, and even about ‘alien curves and spirals of some ethereal vortex which obeyed laws unknown to the physics and mathematics of any conceivable cosmos.’<sup>45</sup> And finally, there is the chilling effect of “barbarous” and almost unpronounceable words:

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn<sup>46</sup>

Ygnaiih... yhnaiih... thfthkh'ngaha... Yog-Sothoth... Y'bthnk... h'ehye n'grkd'lh...  
Eh-y-ya-ya-yahaah—e'yayayaaa... ngh'aaaa... ngh'aaa... h'yuk... h'yuk...<sup>47</sup>

OGTHROD AI'F  
GEB'L—EE'H  
YOG-SOTHOTH  
'NGAH'NG AI'Y  
ZHRO!<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Colour Out of Space’ (HPLO 3, 242-243).

<sup>44</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (HPLO 3, 93).

<sup>45</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dreams in the Witch-House’ (HPLO 1, 306, 329).

<sup>46</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (HPLO 3, 74).

<sup>47</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Dunwich Horror’ (HPLO 3, 150-151).

<sup>48</sup> Lovecraft, ‘The Case of Charles Dexter Ward’ (HPLO 1, 300-301).

Some scholars might be tempted to draw parallels here with the “barbarous names” and apparently meaningless strings of vowels known from mystical liturgies and magical formulas of late antiquity, but my point here is another one: if discursive language stands for rational, civilized discourse and communication, “unspeakable” words spoken by intelligent beings evoke associations with the sub-human, barbarous, archaic, irrational and demonic “other”. In this instance too, Lovecraft succeeds in creating horror effects by drawing from the popular “imaginary” of the occult as created by the Grand Polemical Narrative.

## 6. Lovecraftian Chaos Magick

At the time of his death, Lovecraft was unknown to the general public, and admired only in a small circle of readers and fellow-authors. But from the 1960s on, and largely in the wake of Pauwels and Bergier’s publications, not only did he become one of the most influential writers of horror literature, but he also laid the foundations for a range of new developments in popular culture, occultism, and alternative spirituality. To understand this latter phenomenon, it is essential to emphasize (in contrast to Eliade’s interpretation referred to above) the *continuity* of existentialist/nihilist perspectives within the countercultures represented by a journal like *Planète*. It seems to me that Houellebecq has, again, noted the essential here. Having described Lovecraft’s cosmos—ruled by fear and malice, populated by monstrous beings, and without even the tiniest suggestion of anything moral or good, let alone spiritual—he writes:

For us as people of the end of the 20th century, this cosmos without hope is absolutely our own one. This abject universe, where fear is piled up in concentric circles up to the unnameable revelation, this universe where our only imaginable destiny is that of being *pulverized* and *devoured*—we recognize it absolutely as our own mental universe.

But the paradox is that we prefer this universe, hideous as it may be, over our reality... Satan or Nyarlathothep, whatever—but we cannot stand one more minute of *realism*. And frankly, Satan has become a bit devalued by his endless connections with the shameful detours of our ordinary sins. Compare that with Nyarlathothep: cold, evil and inhuman as ice. *Subb-haqqua Nyarlathothep!*<sup>49</sup>

When Houellebecq calls Lovecraft’s cosmos and mental universe ‘our own one’, of course he means that, at the very least, it is *his* one: all his own novels are permeated by the same extreme spiritual desolation and hopelessness which he

<sup>49</sup>) Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 21-22.



highlights in Lovecraft. Nevertheless, it seems to me that he is essentially right in how he explains the core reason of Lovecraft's popular appeal. In his own novels, Houellebecq shows with merciless precision how and why the day-to-day "reality" of his protagonists becomes so empty of any meaning and purpose as to be virtually unbearable. Imprisoned within a wholly impersonal and inhuman system of global economics—a "social" reality as blind and indifferent as Pascal's cosmos—, his protagonists are desperately looking for "the possibility of an island";<sup>50</sup> something, anything, that will provide them a momentary refuge from "reality" (including that of their own egoism and lovelessness). Houellebecq's "islands" are mostly erotic, whereas Lovecraft's are located in dreams and the imagination, but their foundation is the same.

I would argue that post-1960s occultist appropriations of Lovecraft, known as "Lovecraftian magick", have this same foundation as well: these particular types of contemporary esotericism are not really based upon the 'optimistic and holistic' outlook described by Eliade in his article of 1976, but are much closer to an "existentialist" and nihilist perspective that has given up on finding any deeper "meaning", "truth" or "purpose" in either material or social reality, and therefore looks to the imagination as the only remaining refuge or route of escape.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, we will see that on the basis of this dualism of reality versus imagination, these Lovecraftian occultists develop a perspective that is neither gnostic in a traditional sense (i.e., based on the dualism of our material world against a spiritual world of harmony and light), nor fully in line with Lovecraft's fictional concept of the dualism between 'the normal human world and the infested Outside'<sup>52</sup> (i.e., neither option 3 nor 4 of the list on page 89, above).

The phenomenon of "Lovecraftian Magick" appears to have originated in 1972, as a result of two books published in that year: *The Magical Revival* by Kenneth Grant, and *The Satanic Rituals* by Anton LaVey, which could be seen as representing its theoretical and its practical side respectively. It was Grant who

<sup>50</sup>) Thus the title of Houellebecq's latest novel.

<sup>51</sup>) Such an interpretation does not need to carry pejorative connotations, for reasons eloquently formulated by J.R.R. Tolkien. R.J. Reilly discusses the issue of "escapism" in his wonderful (and strangely forgotten) study of Tolkien and the other "inklings", and describes how the English author responded to those who criticize fantasy literature as "escapist". Tolkien refused to interpret "escape" as a bad thing: "The word, he thinks, has fallen into disrepute because its users too often confuse 'the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter': Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it" (Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 79, as quoted in Reilly, *Romantic Religion*, 207).

<sup>52</sup>) As felicitously formulated by Davis, 'Calling Cthulhu', 61.

was responsible for the “Lovecraft/Crowley Axis”: the strong link that now exists in the popular occultist imagination between Lovecraft and Aleister Crowley.<sup>53</sup> Grant is aware of Lovecraft’s materialism and rejection of the occult, but believes that as a fiction writer he had unconsciously been tapping into the same “inner planes” that had been consciously explored by Crowley; and hence he has developed his brand of Lovecraftian magick in the context of the so-called Typhonian OTO linked to Crowley’s legacy.<sup>54</sup> As for LaVey, his book contained the first three examples of occultist “Lovecraftian rituals”, including invocations of Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath and Cthulhu: the “Ceremony of the Nine Angles” and the “Call to Cthulhu”, both actually written by Michael Aquino, plus “*Die elektrischen Vorspiele*”, apparently based upon a book called *The Emerald Tablets* published in 1948 by hollow-earth believer and Lovecraft-fan Morris Doreal.<sup>55</sup> Ever since, Lovecraftian magick has been a significant dimension of the “darker” types of magickal occultism, and of Chaos Magick in particular.

Specialists agree that the “grandfather” of Chaos Magick was the English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), whose ‘hardcore Surrealist theurgy’<sup>56</sup> sought to access the powers of the subconscious mind by means of transgressive sexual and mind-altering techniques, and laid the foundations of what has been called a “postmodern shamanism”.<sup>57</sup> Contemporary Chaos Magick, popularized in particular by Peter J. Carroll’s *Liber Null and Psychonaut* of 1987, is based upon a radical rebellion against ‘the tyranny of reason and its ordered universe’,<sup>58</sup> and against the dualisms of all traditional systems of morality in general.

Chaos magicians advocate a radical epistemological and moral relativism. [They] “invest belief” in self-invented or fictional cosmologies—Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos being a case in point—in order to undermine those culturally-indentented categorical distinctions which separate the “real” from the “unreal”.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup>) Gonce, ‘Lovecraftian Magick’, 102; cf. Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 60.

<sup>54</sup>) On the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) and its various offshoots, see Pasi, ‘Ordo Templi Orientis’.

<sup>55</sup>) Gonce, ‘Lovecraftian Magick’, 111. Gonce also quotes an internet newsgroup message by Aquino, in which he states that LaVey often used the incantation from Lovecraft’s tale ‘The Horror at Red Hook’ at the beginning of ceremonies.

<sup>56</sup>) Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 60.

<sup>57</sup>) On Spare, post-structuralism, and Chaos Magick, see Lee, “Memories of a Sorcerer”.

<sup>58</sup>) Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 61.

<sup>59</sup>) Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 20.

Hence the motto of Chaos Magic, “Nothing is true, everything is permitted”, which is directed not only against the values of mainstream culture but against the pretensions of traditional occultist orders and traditions as well. The occultist traditions of modernity are no exception to the deconstructivist/postmodernist maxim that ‘all systems of knowledge are socially constructed and culturally biased’, so that ‘no one belief is more true than any other’;<sup>60</sup> hence, Chaos Magick’s interior logic ‘creatively erodes the distinction between legitimate esoteric transmission and total fiction’.<sup>61</sup>

For today’s Chaos mages, there is no “tradition”. The symbols and myths of countless sects, orders, and faiths, are constructs, useful fictions, “games”. That magic works has nothing to do with its truth claims and everything to do with the will and experience of the magician. Recognizing the distinct possibility that we may be adrift in a meaningless mechanical cosmos within which human will and imagination are vaguely comic flukes... the mage accepts his groundlessness, embracing the chaotic self-creating void that is himself.<sup>62</sup>

Against such a background, the radical refusal to distinguish between fiction and reality makes it possible for Chaos magicians to invoke, and allow themselves to be possessed by, demons and deities that they know have been invented by Lovecraft: the objection “they don’t exist, for Lovecraft made them up” has no power, for it presupposes the very distinction they reject. A preference for precisely the kinds of beings described by Lovecraft—entities that have come from other-dimensional ‘spaces between the stars’—fits very well with the importance to Chaos Magick of Spare’s concept of “Kia”, described as “the space between the worlds”, or the “neither-neither” realm beyond the duality of objectivity and subjectivity (and hence beyond the duality of fiction and reality as well).<sup>63</sup> Rituals of Lovecraftian Chaos Magick use any transgressive technique available to allow Kia to manifest itself, including drumming, chanting, psychoactive drugs, sexual techniques, and the emotional arousal created by contemplating ‘horrific or grotesque imagery’.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Houston, ‘Chaos Magic’, 55.

<sup>61</sup> Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 59.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 56. Cf. Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 32, about how a member of his group described the Old Ones as “fluctuating indeterminately between states of existence and non-existence”: ‘Surely in the hyper-reality [of the Old Ones]... terms like “existence” and “non-existence” are pretty much a meaningless bunch of wank... that which doesn’t live cannot die and exists as a nightmare or dream “exists”’.

<sup>64</sup> Davis, ‘Calling Cthulhu’, 57.

Among the many more or less informal Lovecraftian and Chaos Magical groups we find e.g. Peter Carroll's Illuminates of Thanateros, the Autonomatrix, the Covenant of the Ancient Ones, the Temporary Autonomous Zone,<sup>65</sup> the Bate Cabal, Michael Bertiaux's Confraternity of Oblates of the Monastery of the Seven Rays,<sup>66</sup> the Miskatonic Alchemical Expedition (also known as AshT ChOzar Ssaratu),<sup>67</sup> the Temple of the Vampire,<sup>68</sup> the Esoteric Order of Dagon (named directly after a cult mentioned in Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth"),<sup>69</sup> and an anonymous group referred to in the literature as the Hunters of the Dark. About the latter we have an interesting first-hand account based on participant observation, from which one gets a nice impression of how Lovecraftian magick works in practice.<sup>70</sup>

The author of this article, Justin Woodman, states right at the outset that Lovecraftian magick is a reaction to 'the alienating consequences of modernity'.<sup>71</sup> The Hunters of the Dark consisted of eight men, the author himself included, who after a series of preparatory discussions began conducting spirit possession rituals in 2000. At the occasion of the fourth ritual, the members met at night in a woodland area north of London, and dressed in black robes. The group members chanted invocations to Shub Niggurath, while a group member called Damien was in the center of the circle and got into an altered state of consciousness by means of hyperventilation. Eventually a ritual conversation ensued between the group members and Shub Niggurath, speaking through Damien:

[Alan] Who are you?

[Damien/Shub Niggurath] Dirt and leaves and soil.

[A] Shub Niggurath, Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young, will you answer the questions of those who call you forth?

[D/SN] Ask

[A] Tell us your secret word.

<sup>65</sup> See the short discussion of these four groups in Houston, 'Chaos Magic', 58.

<sup>66</sup> See the section "Cthulhu Voodoo: Michel Bertiaux", in Gonce, 'Lovecraftian Magick', 113-115.

<sup>67</sup> See the section "Sects, Drugs, and Rock 'n Roll: The Miskatonic Alchemical Expedition", in Gonce, 'Lovecraftian Magick', 117-118.

<sup>68</sup> Discussed in the brief section "Bloodsuckers for Cthulhu: The Temple of the Vampire", in Gonce, 'Lovecraftian Magick', 118.

<sup>69</sup> See section "The Spawn of Grant: The EOD", in Gonce, 'Lovecraftian Magick', 115-117; and Day, 'Shadow over Philistia' (with caution: statements such as the one on p. 37, according to which the O.T.O. is the continuation of Weishaupt's Illuminaten order, do not inspire confidence in the author's reliability).

<sup>70</sup> Woodman, 'Alien Selves'. See p. 43 nt 44 for the pseudonymous nature of the groups' name.

<sup>71</sup> Woodman, 'Alien Selves', 13.

[D/SN] What are you to me? I am my will. What is it to you? I have nothing to share with you... Your... your workings are not me. You are [pause] you are products. You are not me.

[Rob] Shub Niggurath, how should we serve you?

[D/SN] To do, to act, to serve my will, my [pause] not my will.

[R] Not your will?

[D/SN] My will is the sound of the trees, of the rivers, of the grass, the sound of the soil is my will. My will is not you...

You may serve me by being what is truest to you, by doing your truest nature, your truest will. Finding that for yourself, you may serve me.<sup>72</sup>

Frankly, the ritual conversation is mildly amusing. The horrible, unspeakable, unnamable, blasphemous “abomination” Shub Niggurath of Lovecraft’s fiction seems to have turned into a soft and Romantic pagan nature god (‘my will is the sound of the trees, of the rivers...’), who apparently cannot think of anything really shocking or transgressive to ask from his devotees, and therefore merely repeats the most obvious of all things in this context: Crowley’s maxim “do what thou wilt”. As if the Haunters could not have thought of that themselves. Even more disappointing is Nyarlathothep’s New Ageish advice in another ritual quoted by Woodman: ‘*Seek for me within*’.<sup>73</sup> One cannot help being reminded of Tanya Luhrmann’s remarks about the Chaos Magicians she met in London: ‘They reminded me of boys boasting of wild sexual exploits: far too well behaved and nervous to kiss a girl they claimed they should have raped’.<sup>74</sup>

Far more interesting than the rituals themselves is the countercultural philosophy behind them, which reflects a radical rejection of “the world” and everything it stands for. Still, here too, one detects a strong nuance of Romanticism completely absent from Lovecraft himself, or from contemporary Lovecraftian nihilists like Houellebecq. In describing his Chaos Magicians, Woodman speaks of ‘the incursions of chaos—the violation of established cultural codes and categories’, radical threats to ‘our entire system of thought and, by implication, the society which generates it’, and the need ‘to embrace madness as a radical metamorphosis of awareness’ that ‘confers total autonomy from the values and judgments of society at large’;<sup>75</sup> but he also notes that

In contrast to Lovecraft’s bleak nihilism, the group held that... an “apocalypse” [of consciousness] would force the human species to abandon its petty moral, ethnic, religious

<sup>72</sup> Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 23 (emphasis in original).

<sup>74</sup> Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 97.

<sup>75</sup> Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 26-27.

and national differences, and make the evolutionary quantum leap into an “extraterrestrial” mode of existence.<sup>76</sup>

*This* kind of hoped-for transformation of consciousness, it should be noted, does not seem to be intended in a fictional mode, but as something that should take place *in the real world*. In other words: in spite of all the talk of radical epistemological relativism, “embracing darkness” and chaos, and transgressing all moral and societal norms and values, these Chaos Magicians seem to hold at least some beliefs about a possible future evolution of consciousness that will transform society and create a “better” world.

## 7. Conclusion: Fiction and Contemporary Nihilism

Does this mean that Eliade was right after all? Does even the “dark” phenomenon of Chaos Magick belong on the side of the ‘optimistic and holistic’ counterculture, over against the existentialist nihilism of Lovecraft himself or contemporaries like Houellebecq? Rather, it seems to me that if we attempt to apply such distinctions too radically and consistently, we find that they break down: radical pessimism is possible neither logically nor psychologically without at least a remnant of optimism, and the reverse. It is more useful to think in terms of a scale of gradations between two theoretical polarities. To put the attitudes of Chaos Magicians, Lovecraft, and even Houellebecq in perspective, it may be useful to compare them to the truly radical nihilism represented by Nietzsche’s “last man”:

‘Wehe! Es kommt die Zeit, wo der Mensch keinen Stern mehr gebären wird. Wehe! Es kommt die Zeit des verächtlichsten Menschen, der sich selber nicht mehr verachten kann.

Seht! Ich zeige euch den *letzten Menschen*.

“Was ist Liebe? Was ist Schöpfung? Was ist Sehnsucht? Was ist Stern?”—so fragt der letzte Mensch und blinzelt.

Die Erde ist dann klein geworden, und auf ihr hüpfet der letzte Mensch, der Alles klein macht. Sein Geschlecht ist unaustilgbar, wie der Erdflöh; der letzte Mensch lebt am längsten.

“Wir haben das Glück erfunden”—sagen die letzten Menschen und blinzeln.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Woodman, ‘Alien Selves’, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (‘Woe! The time comes, when man will no longer give birth to a star. The time comes of the most contemptible man, who can no longer have

Houellebecq is the only one among those we have discussed, who comes somewhat close to what Nietzsche describes here. Most of Houellebecq's protagonists (including, I am convinced, Houellebecq himself) are deeply *Romantic* nihilists, who suffer because they desperately want to find something to love. It is only in his most recent novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, that we actually do encounter Nietzsche's last man: a future race of clones, genetically created to be happy and live forever. They suffer no pain or discomfort and are living what looks like a life without any purpose or direction; but they are not conscious of being unhappy, for the very concept of meaning is alien to them. Interestingly, there is a Lovecraftian connection here as well: in Houellebecq's novel, the breakthrough to genetic immortality is made by a scientific sect called the Elohim, and based upon the UFO religion of the Raelians: a radically non-metaphysical and scientific new religious movement whose belief that humanity itself was artificially created by aliens happens to have its ultimate origins in... Lovecraft's fiction.<sup>78</sup>

Provided that we look at oppositions such as optimism versus pessimism or world-affirmation versus world-rejection in terms of polarities rather than strict dualisms, we may conclude that the popularity of Lovecraft in modern and contemporary esoteric/occultist contexts reflects not a sunny, optimistic and holistic belief in a meaningful evolutionary universe, but an apparently widely-felt sense of nihilism, world-rejection and profound pessimism about what in the popular movie *The Matrix* is called "the desert of the real":<sup>79</sup> consciously or not, Lovecraftian magick is ultimately rooted in Houellebecqian soil. In all the cases discussed in this article we are dealing with a Romantic nihilism, which finds a

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contempt for himself. / See! I show you the *last man*. / "What is Love? What is creation? What is nostalgia? What is star?"—thus the last man asks, and blinks. / The earth then will have become small, and on it there hops around the last man, who makes everything small. His race is inexterminable, like fleas; the last man lives longest. / "We have invented happiness" the last men say, and blink').

<sup>78</sup>) About Lovecraft as the origin of the so-called "ancient astronaut theory" (associated with Erich von Däniken and a whole range of similar authors), see Colavito, *Cult of Alien Gods*, which also shows how Pauwels and Bergier served as the crucial mediating link. About the Raelians, see Palmer, *Aliens Adored*. Interestingly, although in Houellebecq's novel the religion's leader is killed and his "resurrection" as a clone is described as a hoax, the Raelians appear to appreciate the largely sympathetic way their religion is portrayed (in sharp contrast with the anti-cult perspective of the French media) (Schofield, 'Cult backs New Houellebecq Novel').

<sup>79</sup>) The directors of *The Matrix* adopted the formulation from Jean Baudrillard's essay "Simulacra and Simulations". There now exists a small library of studies about the philosophical backgrounds of *The Matrix*. For an excellent discussion of its "gnostic" character, see Flannery-Dailey & Wagner, 'Wake Up!'.

measure not only of emotional satisfaction, but (paradoxically) even of “meaning”, in the very radicality with which it rejects “this world” as meaningless. The significance, from such a perspective, of “imaginary worlds”—such as virtual realities, fantasy role playing games, or psychonautic traveling—in popular occulture requires much more research than is currently available, and might teach us something significant about contemporary society in general.<sup>80</sup> Lovecraft’s Cthulhu myths would be an excellent focus of such research.

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<sup>80</sup> I am thinking here along the lines of Tanya Luhrmann’s analysis of how occultist realms of the “reified imagination” function as a counterpart to the experience of disenchantment (for further reflection on that point, see my ‘How Magic Surved the Disenchantment of the World’, *Religion* 33:4 [2003], 357-380).



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