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# “Cthulhu Gnosis”: Monstrosity, Selfhood, and Secular Re-Enchantment in Lovecraftian Occultural Practice

## Introduction

The term “occulture” constitutes a useful heuristic in the study of contemporary esotericism for interrogating the dynamic synthesis between popular culture and the occult (Partridge 2014, 116); one area in which this synthesis is perhaps most evident is in the incorporation of the “Cthulhu mythos” – a key element of the literary output of Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890 – 1937) – within diverse aspects of contemporary magical theory and practice. Focusing on anthropological fieldwork amongst practitioners of Lovecraftian-influenced Chaos magic in the UK, I want to suggest that the proliferation of Lovecraftian-inspired themes in contemporary occult practices - specifically as they are consolidated in encounters with monstrous otherness in the experience of “Cthulhu Gnosis” – are both symptomatic of modern forms of (re-) enchantment, and salient to practitioners’ own experience of selfhood in the context of modernity.

## 2.The Cthulhu Mythos and Lovecraftian Occulture

H. P. Lovecraft has become one of the most lauded and controversial figures in the field of contemporary supernatural literature – his most enduring literary creation being the “Cthulhu mythos”: a mythology forming a loose background to many of Lovecraft’s tales of “cosmic horror”, whose nomenclature is derived from one of Lovecraft’s best-known tales, “The Call of Cthulhu” (2002a). The story predicts humanity’s eventual extinction with the awakening of Cthulhu, one of a species of monstrous, extraterrestrial cephalopods who came to Earth hundreds of millions of

years, and who is imprisoned in a deathless sleep in the alien city of R'lyeh, which lies somewhere beneath the Pacific Ocean. Other canonical tales of the Cthulhu mythos - including "The Dunwich Horror" (Lovecraft 2002b), "The Whisperer in Darkness" (Lovecraft 2002a), and "At The Mountains of Madness" (Lovecraft 2002b) – feature similar beings which breach traditional genre norms in their non-anthropomorphic nebulosity, idiomatic tentacularity, and – most importantly – in their extraterrestrial or interdimensional rather than *supernatural* provenance. These include: the globular transdimensional dimensional entity Yog Sothoth; Azathoth who is described as an "amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the centre of all infinity" (Lovecraft 2005, 249); and "the Crawling Chaos" Nyarlathotep who inhabits "a thousand forms" (Lovecraft 2005, 248). Arrayed alongside these cosmic entities – sometimes collectively referred to as the "Great Old Ones" - are lesser alien species such as the crinoid Elder Things who first colonised the Earth billions of years ago, and the semi-crustacean Fungi from Yuggoth who, prior to establishing an outpost on Pluto, warred with Cthulhu and the Elder Things during the formative epochs of our planet's prehistory (Lovecraft 2002b, 305). This hidden account of prehistoric alien interventions is encoded in several dire esoteric texts, including the fabled *Necronomicon* (supposedly written by the "Mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred in Damascus during the 8$^{th}$ Century CE [Lovecraft and Conover 2002, 103-107]).

The overall trajectory of the Cthulhu mythos reiterates that of "The Call of Cthulhu": that the return of monstrous alien beings – often aided by secretive human cults - will precipitate humanity's demise. This eschatological narrative frames the central philosophical theme of the mythos: that of human insignificance in a vast, uncaring, and unknowable cosmos.

Lovecraft's fiction did not, however, attain wide popularity during his own lifetime; rather, the republication of his fiction in paperback during the 1960s and 1970s led to a revitalised interest in the Cthulhu mythos against the backdrop of a burgeoning Euro-American countercultural and occultural milieu (Lachman 2001: 39-58). Along with Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, Lovecraft is thus included within the creative fusion of occultural ideas informing Kenneth Grant's influential Typhonian trilogies, which first appeared in the early 1970s (Grant 2010); around the same period, the San Francisco-based Church of Satan incorporated elements of the Cthulhu Mythos into its *The Satanic Rituals* (LaVey 1972), and 1977 saw publication of one of the most popular occult iterations of Lovecraft's work: an edition of the *Necronomicon* - edited by the mysterious "Simon" - which further sought to synthesise and systematise the work of Lovecraft, Grant and Crowley in relation to the magic and mythology of ancient Sumer and Mesopotamia. This version of the Necronomicon continues to be published in a widely-read paperback edition, and constitutes a common point of entry into Lovecraftian occulture (see for example Harms and Gonce 1998).

My own encounter with Lovecraftian occulture in occurred during anthropological fieldwork conducted amongst UK-based Chaos magicians in the early 2000s. A relatively modern body of esoteric theory and practice, Chaos magic appeared in the United Kingdom during the late 1970's, where its key principles were first articulated in the writings of Peter Carroll and Ray Sherwin (Duggan 2014, 91; Evans 2007, 356); it has subsequently been identified as an aspect of "Left Hand Path" magical practice (Sutcliffe 1995) in its focus on transgressive self-deconditioning and self-deification (Granholm 2013, 213). A focal point of Chaos magic is the use of altered states of consciousness as the means of transforming

awareness and facilitating *gnosis*. In *Liber Null & Psychonaut* (Carroll 1987), one of Chaos magic's foundational texts, *gnosis* is often expressed as an unmediated experience of reality as *Chaos*: the inchoate, indeterministic and amoral life-force seen to form the ontological foundation of both cosmos and self.

The ontological uncertainty and decentering of human exceptionalism which underpins Chaoist cosmology often leads practitioners to advocate a radical epistemological and moral relativism: in the absence of absolutes, practitioners posit the necessity of adopting a Nietzschean attitude of self-affirmation and self-creation, seeking to employ *gnosis* and transgressive magical practice to bypass socio-cultural conditioning. Crucially, Chaoist cosmology often delineates reality as the product of perception and belief, emphasising the practice of *paradigm shifting*: purposely investing belief into a given magico-religious or mythological system to demonstrate that it is belief and not the system itself which is seen to produce magical transformations. Chaos magicians have, therefore, regularly participated in magical practice situated within self-evidently "fictional" worlds. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu mythos do, in fact, figure early in the history of Chaos magic, with key texts such as *Liber Null & Psychonaut*, *Liber Kaos*, and journals such as *Chaos International* including articles and illustrations relating to the magical application of Lovecraft's work (see for example Carroll 1992, 147-151). This is unsurprising, given the anti-humanist and nihilistic resonances between the Cthulhu mythos and Chaos magic (Davis 2016, 497).

## Reason and Enchantment in Lovecraftian Occulture

Lovecraft employed the monstrous beings of the Cthulhu mythos as a means of encoding a *transformative* experience of existential horror: their existence reveals

human insignificance in meaningless and *materially disenchanted* cosmos. Central to Lovecraft's artistic aims was, therefore, the production of a type of secularised "weird fiction":

> "The time has come when the normal revolt against time, space & matter must assume a form not overtly incompatible with what is known of reality - when it must be gratified by images forming supplements rather than contradictions of the visible & measurable universe. And what, if not a form of non-supernatural cosmic art, is to pacify this sense of revolt […]?" (Lovecraft 1971, 295-296).

Lovecraft biographer S.T. Joshi concludes that this statement "may be the most important theoretical utterance Lovecraft ever made" (2010, 780); it is also one which foregrounds a crucial issue in the study of Lovecraftian occultures: how a materialistic and atheistic mythology denuded of supernaturalist trappings is reconciled with an esoteric worldview (see for example Hanegraaf 2007, 106-108). Michel Houellebecq notes, however, that Lovecraft's rationalism was circumscribed by a "hatred of the world in general, [and] aggravated by an aversion to the modern world in particular" (2005: 57); Colin Wilson further contends that Lovecraft was, in fact, at "war with rationality" (1976, 1). Lovecraft's "most important theoretical utterance" does indeed evidence a "gnostic" sensibility – one which he admits as foundational to his personal and literary aesthetics: "Time, space and natural law hold […] suggestions of intolerable bondage, and I can form no picture of emotional satisfaction which does not involve their defeat" (1971, 220).

In this respect Lovecraft's fiction foregrounds tensions in occultural responses to the rationalising and disenchanting project of Enlightenment modernity: on the one hand, producing the romantic, anti-materialistic, and explicitly gnostic magical revival of the nineteenth century; on the other, registering an affinity *with* modernity's epistemological foundations. If a stratum of mystification *is* evident within Lovecraft's secular cosmology, contemporary Western magical subcultures have, conversely, also incorporated into their own discourse and praxis some of the rationalistic values of Enlightenment modernity. As Paul Heelas (1996) suggests, in their detraditionalised rejection of hierarchical clericalism and the authority of external religious revelation, contemporary occultures partially situate themselves within the epistemic field of Enlightenment rationalism; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz also contends that the postmodern aspects of contemporary esotericism constitute an application of the Enlightenment critique of religion against its own "cult of Reason" (1985: 93); Anthony Giddens similarly argues that "[m]odernity institutionalises the principle of radical doubt" (1991, 3) as an intrinsic characteristic of Enlightenment critical reason. These standpoints are famously mirrored in the opening paragraphs of "The Call of Cthulhu", whose narrator notes that:

> "The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality […] 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" (2002a, 139).

Whilst demythologizing supernaturalist tropes (Price 1990, 81-83), the mythos thus synchronously underscores reason's capacity to dissemble its own significance. Whilst possessing highly advanced scientific knowledge far surpassing that of humanity, some of the alien inhabitants of Lovecraft's secular cosmos nonetheless instantiate "superstitious" religious behaviors: in "The Whisperer in Darkness" and "At the Mountains of Madness", the technologically-adroit Fungi from Yuggoth and Elder Things respectively make ritual obeisance to other, less-fathomable alien monsters which presumably lurk beyond their own means of rational comprehension - thus their remains an ambivalence surrounding the category of the "supernatural" in Lovecraft's work, where even the most "secular" of his alien races are given to abandoned ecstatic worship of monstrous cosmic abnormalities.

These entanglements of reason and enchantment are common to both Lovecraft and some contemporary occultures, evidenced in the way both have sought a re-enchantment of modernity through a fusion of science and sorcery. Many of the esoteric practitioners who I encountered throughout my research, for example, tended to treat "New Age" or "mystical" exegeses of quantum theory (such as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters,* and Danah Zohar's *The Quantum Self*) as authoritative "scientific" discourses validating the existence of alternative realities. In his tale "The Dreams in the Witch House" (2005), Lovecraft in fact prefigures these occultural expositions by entwining the witchcraft lore of 17$^{th}$ Century Puritan New England with the principles of Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics, such that the witch Keziah Mason and her familiar Brown Jenkin are able to "magically" employ non-Euclidean geometry for opening portals to inhuman, hyperspatial realms - wherein they also conduct child sacrifice in honour of Azathoth and Nyarlathotep.

The entrenchment of Lovecraft's fictional worlds and monsters in a modern, quasi-rationalised notion of the "supernatural" is central, therefore, to understanding the occultural fascination with the Cthulhu mythos: as Nachman Ben-Yehuda notes, contemporary occultism

> "offers a unique blend that traditional religion does not have - what may appear as an alternative "scientific" paradigm coupled with a "scientifically" controllable belief system...The adherents of the occult seek answers that can integrate both science and religion" (1989: 254).

It is precisely this liminal space between reason and enchantment which Lovecraft inhabits within the structure of current occultural thought: the Cthulhu mythos has garnered wide appeal because it articulates a comparably modern, rationalized and technologised reframing of the supernatural to that found within esoteric milieux. As Erik Davis notes,

> "Lovecraft constructs and then collapses a number of intense polarities – between realism and fantasy […] reason and its chaotic Other. By playing out these tensions in his writing, Lovecraft also reflects the transformations that modern occultism has undergone as it confronts the new perspectives of psychology, quantum physics, and existentialism" (2003, 139).

Thus does the atheist and materialist Lovecraft sit comfortably in the contemporary occultural imagination alongside such iconic figures as Helena Blavatsky and

Aleister Crowley: all three, in their varied ways, sought to reconcile ancient myth with scientific modernity (Harms 2004: 39).

## Foundations of Fictional Practice: Re-Enchanting Modernity

Lovecraftian occulture is a term employed by Phil Hine and myself (2016) to describe the interplay between the Cthulhu Mythos and a variety of modern esoteric and paranormalist narratives, wherein the mythos is treated as emblematic of an authentic occult reality; Lovecraft himself birthed this occulture when referencing of elements of genuine Western esotericism within his tales (citing John Dee as a translator of the *Necronomicon*, for example), unintentionally misleading some of his early readers into the belief that the mythos constituted an authentic and historically-extant mythological system (Harms and Gonce 1998, 40-41). The exponential proliferation of the Cthulhu mythos across many seemingly unconnected media platforms continues this process today: cross-references to the *Necronomicon* in literature, film, comics, and video games ratifying its status as an “authentic” occult tome. Contributors to contemporary Lovecraftian film and literature such as Richard Stanley, Don Webb, Richard Gavin, Scott R. Jones and Donald Tyson, whose creative engagements with the Cthulhu mythos have also informed the production of non-fiction works (see for example Jones 2014; Tyson 2008; 2010) exploring Lovecraftian themes in the context of their own esoteric practice.

*The Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game (rpg) has also played a hugely important role in popularizing Lovecraft and the Cthulhu mythos since the 1980s. Role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* are largely played out through the imagination and shared dialogue of the players who interact with the “virtual” world of the game through fictive characters or alter-egos. In *The Call of Cthulhu* rpg, these alter-egos

are pitted against the alien of Lovecraft's fiction – forces more likely to be defeated through the recitation of an incantation discovered in some ancient tome than by the use of conventional weaponry: the most important skills which in-game characters can possess are academic and magical: the ability to read Latin or Sanskrit, to ferret out an obscure book of esoteric lore, or to enact an occult ritual often proving decisive within the game world. The *Call of Cthulhu* rpg thus offers experiences resonant with those encountered in contemporary magical practice, where the imagination is valued as a means of interacting with and entering fantastic otherworlds. Engagement with the imaginal, and the development of participants' abilities to sustain realistic visualisations do in fact constitute central aspects of magical practice (Ivakhiv 1996: 244): by using the imagination as a psychic gateway, otherworldly realms and beings are experienced by magicians as living realities. Indeed, this idea finds its expression throughout the history of Western magic (Faivre 1994, 12-13; Sutcliffe 1995, 117): in the mnemonic practices of Renaissance magic (Yates 1966), the work of 19th Century magician Eliphas Levi (1995, 43), as well as in contemporary forms of online "Technopaganism" (Crow 2014, 160).

In her journalistic study of North American neo-paganism, Marion Adler also found that the religious views of many practitioners "were part of a general visionary quest that included involvement with poetry, art drama, music, science fiction and fantasy." (Adler 1986: 22). This was, indeed, a recurrent motif in the narratives provided by the practitioners of Chaos magic and Lovecraftian occultism I interviewed - virtually all of who had played *The Call of Cthulhu* rpg. One such individual - a member of Lovecraftian occult order "The Haunters of the Dark" (see below) - thus remarked "as a child, I was very keen on role-playing games. I still am, but now I call it 'ritual'"; Robert - a Thelemite, Chaos magician, Satanist and

Lovecraftian magician - similarly informed me that his early engagement with the literature of the fantastic (especially his reading of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) facilitated his entry into esoteric practice: "initially it was somewhere that I'd just escape to, then actually realised that you could actually utilise that world, that it actually did exist".

According to Cohen, Ben Yehuda, and Aviad (1987), both occult and science-fiction subcultures have emerged as "elective centres" (see also Woodman 2004, 39; Saler 2012, 18) in response to modernity's decentering of meaning. Such centres become important as relativised and highly personalised loci of religious significance which provide "modern society with both a new mythology and a new form of transcendence" (Cohen, Ben-Yehuda & Aviad 1987: 331). Victoria Nelson (2012), Jeffrey Kripal (2011), and Michael Saler (2012) similarly recognise how speculative fictions offer forms of religiosity and re-enchantment in ways commensurable with the consumerist and secularised aspects of modernity – for Saler, the Cthulhu mythos specifically epitomises modern engagements between imagination and rationality in ways which seek to both "reconcile modernity and enchantment" (2012, 22) and to "re-enchant modernity while retaining its disenchanted perspective" (2012, 136).

## Developing Fictional Practice: Reading and Dreaming

Late in 1999, I had the opportunity to research "The Haunters of the Dark" (HotD): a Lovecraftian magical order, initially consisting of seven male Chaos magicians of diverse ages and backgrounds. Due in part to my knowledge of Lovecraft, and because I already knew some members of the group through my prior anthropological research, I was invited to join. From early in 2000, the group met

twice monthly in a pub in central London to discuss Lovecraft's work, and to develop a set of working practices for magically exploring what the members perceived as the transformative power of the Cthulhu mythos.

Aside from these twice-monthly discussion groups, between October 1999 and February 2000 the group conducted their magical work "on the astral plane"; they did not meet physically, but attempted to forge - via visualisation techniques and lucid dreaming - an "astral temple": an imaginal space which would function as the means of connecting the group to the hyperdimensional beings of the Cthulhu mythos. Dane - one of the younger members of the group and a psychology graduate - envisaged the temple as a vast, pyramid-like structure which existed outside of four-dimensional space-time, suggesting that we should attempt to visualise it in explicitly Lovecraftian terms as having been constructed from the "strange angles" and non-Euclidean geometric principles typically encountered in Lovecraft's tales. The group also formulated a glyph for use in scrying and pathworking (see below). This consisted of a circle with three wavy, tentacular lines projecting from the lower part of its circumference. The circle also had a large black dot at its centre, which Dane felt could be used in visualisation exercises as a kind of "black-hole" or gateway leading to the astral temple - and as a means of contacting the Great Old Ones. It was agreed that each evening members of the group would visualise the glyph before sleep, with the intention of projecting their discarnate psyches through it and in to the astral temple, where, in states of lucid dreaming, they would explore and map its interior.

Dreaming plays a significant role in Lovecraft's fiction – specifically as the means of accessing the worlds of the Cthulhu mythos, or for communing with the Great Old Ones. This element of the fiction not only directly informed the HotD's

magical practice but has, indeed, been foundational to the construction of esoteric practice within Lovecraftian occultism more generally (see for example Grant 1994b, 149-50; Hine 1997, 34-35). Lovecraft's admission that several of his stories had their basis in vivid dreams has also been used to legitimise the "reality" of the Cthulhu mythos, specifically in the claim that Lovecraft maintained an unconscious connection with a very genuine realm of occult, alien horror (Grant 2010, 102-103; Levenda 2013, 13).

Reading Lovecraft was itself deemed a magical act by the HotD. Alan - one of the older members of the group and a civil servant by profession - emphasised the importance of HotD members refamiliarising themselves with the Cthulhu mythos by reading key stories and passages each night before sleep; here the anticipation was again that Lovecraft's nightmarish images would produce relevant dream experiences. Dane suggested that this might also begin to subtly alter the group's everyday perceptions at an unconscious level, and thus informed another of the HotD's core practices known as "Cthulhu gnosis" (see below). Members of the group would also immerse themselves in key stories which dealt with specific Great Old Ones in preparation for possession rituals involving those entities.

Similarly, the very first form of collective esoteric practice in which the HotD participated (and which occurred early in 2000 in a room above an occult bookshop in central London) took the form of a "pathworking" (a form of guided meditation, often involving visualised encounters with otherworldly beings) based on Lovecraft's fiction. In this instance, one of the group lead the others other through the realm of Kadath to the vast, onyx bastion of Lovecraft's Outer Gods, where they encountered "the crawling chaos" Nyarlathotep in human form; to this end, the entirety of the pathworking was built around the narrative of Lovecraft's novella "The Dream Quest

of Unknown Kadath" (2005) in which the protagonist Randolph Carter similarly confronts Nyarlathotep. The pathworking was preliminary to the group's first possession ritual, which also involved Nyarlathotep.

Due to his archaic literary style, Lovecraft's fiction is sometimes deemed to have an "incantatory" quality (see for example Luckhurst quoted in Sederholm and Weinstock 2016, 30); reading the stories of the Cthulhu mythos was thus seen by the HotD as generating hypnogogic and dissociative effects, which could be employed for accessing worlds otherwise deemed alien to human consciousness. Dane explicitly viewed such experiences – specifically in relation to rituals of possession employed by the HotD - as occultural iterations of culturally-legitimised dissociative states facilitating entry into other "realities" experienced when engrossed in a book or a film (Woodman 2004, 38). Dane went on to state

> "if someone asks me "why do you let yourself get possessed", I'd say at least with possession by a spirit or a deity, you know what to expect, you know from the nature of the entity what it's going to be like."

In this respect, a close reading of stories relevant to a specific Lovecraftian entity prepared participants involved in possession by that entity for a relatively "controlled" experience of monstrous otherness.

## Monstrous Immanence: Selfhood and Cthulhu Gnosis

Confrontations with monstrousness frame aspects of Lovecraftian magic as a means of negotiating an encounter with modernity experienced as itself monstrous and

alienating (see also Woodman forthcoming b), engagement with Lovecraft's fictive universe providing the means for an internalized reconciliation with - rather than an escape from - the uncertainties of everyday life in the 21st century. Mat, a Chaos magician who was employed as a curator in a London museum thus informed me that his compulsion to undergo possession by “monstrous” and “demonic” entities was precisely because of his fear of losing control to forces which might be otherwise overwhelm him in his day-to-day life. Through these acts of possession, fear and paranoia were confronted, managed, and transformed into a source of empowerment.

Whilst alien otherness is often presented as a central source of horror in Lovecraft’s work, this is also subverted in tales such as “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (2002a) and “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (2005), wherein the self-identification of Lovecraft’s protagonists with the monstrousness of the Cthulhu mythos is cause for an almost mystical *ecstasis*. “In Through the Gates of the Silver Key” specifically, Randolph Carter (Lovecraft’s fictional alter-ego) enters a hyperdimensional realm to participate in an act of mystical self-identification with Yog Sothoth - a being described as a “congeries of iridescent globes…stupendous in its malign suggestiveness” (Lovecraft 2007, 230) but who is also “coexistent with all time, and likewise coterminous with all space…an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self” (Lovecraft 2005, 281). Carter’s understanding that he is but a facet of the cosmic totality that is Yog Sothoth thus effects - in fictional terms - a partial resolution of the gnostic trajectory of Lovecraft’s work; in fact, Carter’s brief experience of transcendence is subverted as he is horrified to discover himself trapped in the monstrous, hybrid body of the alien wizard Zkauba who, like Carter, is also a facet of Yog Sothoth.

Originally penned by E. Hoffman Price under the title “The Lord of Illusion” (Joshi 2010, 840), “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” was later re-written almost in its entirety by Lovecraft, but retaining overtly occult and Theosophical sentiments provided by Price. In many respects, the tale constitutes a foundational text of contemporary Lovecraftian esotericism, emphasising themes which have become central to its theory and practice: that, through an identification with fundamentally alien and non-anthropocentric viewpoints, “the local aspects of an unchanged and endless reality seem to change with the cosmic angle of regarding” (Lovecraft 2005: 284). Thus the employment of imaginal delvings into Lovecraftian hyperspatial realms via trance and other altered states of consciousness are treated by practitioners as generating transgressive and liberating perspectival shifts. Importantly these reorientations are, as Randolph Carter realizes, precipitated by a kind of Nietzschean transition from a human to a post-human condition in which he has become as one with alien monstrousness. This first manifests in Lovecraftian magical praxis in the work of Kenneth Grant, wherein the Outer Ones (a term Grant borrows from Lovecraft to denote the Great Old Ones) are both actual, external entities, but which – following the non-dualistic teachings of Advaita Vedanta which are also central to Grant’s work (Bogden 2016, 328-329) - also exist as part of a continuum of consciousness and thus inhabit or are part of “the ‘hidden’, ‘concealed’ or repressed aspect of our psyche which it is vital to explore in order to reach gnosis or spiritual enlightenment” (Bogden 2016, 326). In this sense the “Great Old Ones” are rendered within Lovecraftian occultures not as alien outsiders, but as an alien immanence – such that occultural enactments of Lovecraft’s fictive universe rest on a process of “becoming alien” or “becoming monstrous” (see also Woodman 2004; forthcoming b). This is expressed not only through acts of possession, but also

through magical/imaginal shapeshifting practices involving themes of hybridity and the crossing of species-boundaries which are commonly encountered in Lovecraft's tales. Phil Hine delineates one such ritual: a guided visualisation exercise wherein participants imagine themselves transforming into the Deep Ones (fish/frog-like humanoids) of Lovecraftian fiction (Hine 1997, 39-40; see also Woodman 2004, 25-26, for a similar ritual enacted by the HotD), also noting that

> "In the magick of the Old Ones, the theme of transfiguration is very much related to the initiation of the outside spaces. In "Becoming the Beast," the magician is deconstructing the boundaries of his ego, and stepping back from his cultural conditioning" (Hine 1997, 26).

Via shapeshifting practices Lovecraftian magicians thus seek to make visible and attain knowledge of the "monsters" of the psyche - conceived of as the socially-inculcated and unconscious fears, desires and habits which shape practitioners' personae; as with other forms of Chaoist and Left-hand Path praxis, interactions with the monstrous formed for the HotD (and other Lovecraftian occultists) the locus of a project of self-transformation.

In the context of Lovecraftian magical practice, the dissolution of the boundaries of the self which Hine notes are most powerfully affected through rituals of possession, in which Lovecraft's chaotic Great Old Ones invited to take habitation of otherwise stable bodies. The following ritual litany was developed in the early stages of the HotD's formation, and used as the framework for inducing possession by one of Lovecraft's Great Old Ones:

> “On this night, we the Haunters of the Dark gather to perform the Primal Sabbat of the Old Ones. From the Gulfs of Space, and from the Wells of Night, we call forth that which is without form and remains forever shrouded in the most awful mystery. From Black Cosmic Abysses, and from the Primordial Slime which dwells in the unplumbed depths of all being and consciousness, we call forth the Sabbat Goat: Shub Niggurath, whose will is the sound of the trees, of the rivers, of the grass, the sound of the soil.
> Let the Old Ones come forth from the nighted abyss! Through primal interstices, we call upon Yog Sothoth, that which guards the threshold to witness our rite!
>
> Halla-el-la. Ygnaiih, ygnaiih thflthk’ngha Yog Sothoth y’bthnk hehye ngrkdl’lh Eh-y-ya-ya-yahagh-e-yayayaa ngh’aa ngh’aa h’yuh h’yuh.”

Elements of the language of the ritual were drawn directly from Lovecraft’s work, including the incantations formed from Lovecraft’s fictional alien languages: repetitive chanting of these “barbarous words of evocation” (Grant 2010, 104-123) was intended to bypass rational thought, with a view to facilitating an “openness” to possession by the non-rational forces of the Cthulhu mythology. Typically, early forms of Lovecraftian ritual practice have mapped the Cthulhu mythos onto traditional esoteric symbolic frameworks and classificatory systems. Kenneth Grant, for example, sought to establish associations between Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones and the Sephiroth the Kabbalistic Tree of Life (Grant 1992, 124). Indeed, the above ritual was initially constructed in terms of typical pagan “opening rituals” which evoke the four classical elements. Later exegeses of Lovecraftian magical ritual and

practice have problematised this in relation to the fact that Lovecraft's monstrous entities typical transgress anthropocentric categorical boundaries and classificatory systems. In this respect, the Cthulhu mythos is, as Stephen Sennitt notes, "an especially useful magickal equation in that it strives to go beyond anthropocentricism, pushing back the conceptual limits which we place on reality" 2007, 98).

These concepts increasingly informed the praxis of the HotD: early in its history, the group found it difficult to compartmentalise the Cthulhu mythos within the framework of ritual practice: members increasingly reported events occurring outside of group rituals (including unsolicited dreams, as well as spontaneous visions and altered states of consciousness) that added depth to their experience of the "reality" of the Great Old Ones. Similarly, the HotD's ritual practice began to take on a more unstructured, ad-hoc character, by which the group also sought to replicate and mirror the "mindlessness" and bacchanalian character of ecstatic rituals found in some of Lovecraft's tales. Such rituals were conducted in liminal urban spaces, or isolated rural spots, and employed repetitive drumming and dancing (as well as the consumption of alcohol) to induce altered states of consciousness by which, in the words of another of the group's ritual litanies, participants would "become one with the Old Ones".

The perspectival disruptions evoked by identification with monstrous Lovecraftian alterity within such rituals were central to what the HotD came to describe as "Cthulhu Gnosis"; similar experiences have variously been referred to within the Lovecraftian occultural milieu as "the Necronomicon Gnosis" (Grant 1992, 39-45), "gnosis of the Great Old Ones" (Hine 2007, 22), and "Black Gnosis" (Jones 2017) – all of which emphasise an encounter with the forces of the Cthulhu mythos

disruptive of the egoic self, and facilitating an expanded awareness of reality beyond that of the bounded individual. In this respect, Stephen Sennitt claims that Lovecraft's Great Old Ones thus constitute a

> "symbolic language to describe the shadowing-forth of otherwise incomprehensible entities. It is via such successful invocations that an absence of the sense of individual self leads to a wider understanding of reality. When the vessel is made empty the void is filled with something "other"" (Sennitt 2007, 95-96).

Notably, the Great Old One Nyarlathotep – who in Lovecraft's fiction often manifests in human form - is a key figure in Lovecraftian esoteric rituals (see for example Vincente 2016), functioning as an intermediary between humanity and the transformative, chaotic otherness of the wholly alien Great Old Ones:

> "Nyarlathotep clearly is a "gateway," a means of ingress, into the gnosis of the Great Old Ones. That it appears malevolent and misleading is unsurprising, given the "blindness" of human thought-processes. Its chaotic presence threatens the carefully-guarded security of the rigid ego, and its insistence on duality (the Aristotelian either/or) and linear consciousness." (Hine 1997, 22-23)

Nyarlathotep was thus the first of the Great Old Ones invoked by the HotD when they instigated a series of ritualised possessions by Lovecraftian entities. Becoming

monstrous through embodying alien otherness within such rituals thus marks a transgression of the Western notion of the Cartesian self: a culturally-forbidden stepping across the thresholds and boundaries into the hinterlands of structure, precipitating heterogeneity, amorphousness, chaos and anomaly; this is certainly the case in Lovecraft's fiction, for whom for the "revolt against time space and matter" remained framed by the certainties of one of the authoritative Enlightenment principle of the bounded, autonomous self:

> "my wish for freedom is not so much a wish to put all terrestrial things behind me & plunge forever into abysses beyond light, matter & energy. That, indeed, would mean annihilation as a personality rather that liberation. My wish is best defined as a wish for *infinite visioning & voyaging power*, yet without loss of the familiar background that gives all things significance" (Lovecraft 1971: 214).

In this particularity, Lovecraft's gnostic sensibility is crucially different to the advocacy of ego-loss found within some aspects of Lovecraftian occulture: for Randolph Carter, stepping across the threshold of order and structure in search of "the untrammelled land of his dreams and the gulfs where all dimensions dissolve in the absolute" (Lovecraft 2005, 271) leads only to a site of detestable hybridity which is, in the extremity of Lovecraft's racialised worldview, a source of abject horror.

This experience of distress and horror is, however, subject to a positive valuation for many Lovecraftian occultists. For the HotD possession by Lovecraft's Old Ones was *initiatory* into Cthulhu Gnosis: it actively destabilised categorical boundaries and socially-circumscribed modes of thought upon which "consensual

reality" was built, causing them to dissolve; the experience of the primordial Old Ones manifesting *within* human consciousness enabled practitioners to cognize and imagine their social worlds anew – albeit in often strange and horrifying ways.

In this respect, the expansion of awareness beyond the egoic self not only involved a recognition of that self as a social construct, but also facilitated an experiential realization that the self-other division - fundamental to the Western, Cartesian notion of the self – was an illusion. For Scott R. Jones, this is an aspect of Lovecraftian "Black Gnosis" which has the potential to make one "more compassionate…because you're identifying more with others" (Jones 2017; see also Woodman 2004, 31). Phil Hine similarly notes, in relation to the magical inculcation of "the gnosis of the Great Old Ones" within a human world view, that if "you work from this perspective, then of course you are going to see humanity as ants, but it is also likely that you will get a new insight into your own complex of desires, attitudes, and motivations." (1997, 10).

For the HotD, Cthulhu Gnosis was principally and experientially produced through the employment of the Chaos magical practice of paradigm shifting: the intentional cognitive restructuring of one's worldview and reinterpreting of experience through the adoption of a new (and sometimes arbitrarily chosen) set of beliefs. This is broadly equivalent to what Tanya Luhrmann (1989: 312-315) calls "interpretive drift": the process by which magicians become "progressively more skilled at seeing new patterns in events, seeing new sorts of events as significant, paying attention to new patterns" (Luhrmann 1989: 312). For members of the HotD, Cthulhu Gnosis constituted the end result of this process, whereby they not only came to internalise a nihilistic Lovecraftian worldview, but to interpret everyday events considering this – specifically coming to view the everyday world as a thin façade overlaying a more

terrifying and “carnivorous” one - in which human activity was revealed as mindless and insignificant, and in which humanity itself was rendered monstrous (see Woodman forthcoming b). Most notably, the sense of the Cthulhu mythos as a “genuine” apocalyptic reality lurking behind the everyday was reified in September 2001, when members of the HotD visited Dunwich: a small village on the East Coast of Britain which shares its name with a village and region in Lovecraft’s work. On the way to the village, the group encountered a road sign displaying the image of a leaping frog. Whatever its meaning, in the context of Cthulhu Gnosis this was construed as unnerving and portentous - given that the purpose of the visit was to contact the frog-like Deep Ones of Lovecraftian lore. The group also hoped to raise a manifestation of Cthulhu off the nearby coast. The apocalyptic “ramifications” of this ritual - at least interpreted in the light of Cthulhu Gnosis - became apparent two days later when the World Trade Centre was destroyed in a terrorist attack at the behest of a “Mad Arab”.

## Cthulhu Gnosis in the Monstrous Metropole

In his emphasising of the strangeness of a cosmos revealed at the extremities of reason, Lovecraft’s fiction further effects a kind of secular and materialistic (if horrifying) re-enchantment of the world - leading China Mieville to brand him as “a kind of bad-son heir to a religious visionary tradition, an ecstatic tradition, which…locates the holy in the everyday” (Mieville 2005, xii-xiii). For the HotD, the perspectival shifts which Cthulhu Gnosis precipitated were similarly enacted in relation to their everyday urban surroundings. An enumeration of the symbolic power of the topographies of the everyday – specifically the power of landscape to suggest otherworldly cosmic realms, and the use of non-Euclidean geometries and inhuman

architectures as portals to those realms – constitute recurrent themes in the Cthulhu mythos; as such, they are themes central to both his gnostic sensibility and his aesthetics of the weird, which Lovecraft expressed in terms of

> "a strange sense of adventurous expectancy connected with landscape and architecture and sky-effects [....] the sense of marvel and liberation hiding in obscure dimensions and […] reachable […] through vistas of ancient streets, across leagues of strange hill country, or up endless flights of marble steps" (1971, 100).

Lovecraft's fiction thus resonates with notions of "sacred landscapes", "sacred architecture" and "sacred geometries" similar to those encountered in contemporary esoteric cosmologies, and which have become central to Lovecraftian magic in terms of locating appropriate locales for ritual practice:

> "A key element in understanding the power of the Great Old Ones is their relationship to landscapes. […] the Great Old Ones manifest into our world through "gateways," […] often in wild, lonely places. Places which are entangled with local myth and folklore […] Such places need not be located far from the haunts of men. Subterranean tunnels—disused mineshafts, abandoned power stations and the like can also carry this sense of timeless brooding" (1997, 36).

For the HotD, Cthulhu Gnosis was explicitly construed using Lovecraft's principle of adventurous expectancy as a means of reifying late modernity's urban

landscape as a monstrously occult terrain – one populated by the teratologically fabulous beings, and anomalous zones perceived by practitioners as interpenetrative with the non-Euclidean “Outside” of Lovecraftian fiction. In this respect, Cthulhu Gnosis was typically utilised for managing experiences of urbanised alienation produced through the groups engagement with the workaday world (Woodman forthcoming b). Pre-existing occultural beliefs regarding London’s built environment also informed this aspect of the HotD’s magical practice: for example, the Centre Point office building - standing on the sorcerous intersection of crossroads formed by Oxford Street, New Oxford Street, Charing Cross Road, and Tottenham Court Road in central London – had come to occupy a liminal, folkloric space within the metropole’s occult imaginary. Not only did a number of pubs familiar to London’s pagans and ritual magicians stand within walking distance, but the ground upon which Centre Point stands was supposedly cursed by Aleister Crowley (Greenwood 2000, 3) - a belief probably inspired by the rumour that, in November 1949, Crowley’s protégé Kenneth Grant participated in a disastrous magical ritual at a house then existing on the site (Grant 1994a, 122).Grant further claimed Centre Point as a physical manifestation of the “Portals of Inbetweeness” (Grant 1994a, 126): thresholds to chaotic and intrinsically alien universes and “zones of Non-Being” (Grant 1994a, 129) inhabited by Lovecraft's monstrous Great Old Ones. Members of the HotD regularly integrated these pre-existing beliefs into the construction of Cthulhu gnosis via their ritualised and explorations of urban spaces and deemed to be particularly “Lovecraftian” in mood and demeanour – such as a derelict hospital which formed the focal point of the group’s rituals for several months prior to the building’s eventual demolition.

The HotD’s perambulations through the London landscape not only

resembled pathworkings in their Lovecraftian re-imaginings of the urban landscape, but often incorporated short breaks during which the group would participate in actual pathworking exercises (usually at locations deemed to be resonant with an aura of strangeness and Lovecraftian horror - including sites in the East End of London associated with the crimes of the infamous Jack the Ripper).

Noting that the entrance to Tottenham Court Road underground station lay directly beneath Centre Point, one member of the group speculated that it could be utilised as a gateway to interdimensional realms – including the “Ghooric Zone” (another of Lovecraft’s literary inventions). The London Underground also presented an image of chthonic Lovecraftian tentacularity coursing through the underbelly of the capital: a potent symbol of the hidden occult powers which secretly governed the city. Such imaginal reconfigurations of the urban landscape often involved creative interpretations of Euclidean space and human architecture as having inhumanly Lovecraftian and non-Euclidean features - a view of metropolitan modernity made monstrous. Indeed, Lovecraft’s own contempt for the mediatized cultures of mass consumption was such that the industrialized and mechanized centres of urban modernity were often rendered monstrous in his writings (see for example Haden 2013); in “The Call of Cthulhu”, the architecture of R'lyeh is depicted in weirdly futurist and cubist terms, and as monstrous in its capacity to (literally) consume one of the unfortunate humans exploring the city (Lovecraft 2002a, 119-120). By the early 2000s, the HotD had engaged in explorations of various dilapidated occult and folkloric urban sites throughout London, constructing a complex narrative involving the existence of a monstrous Lovecraftian entity lurking within the crypts beneath Freemason's Hall near Covent Garden (and not far from the Centre Point building). Indeed, such narratives were not uncommon amongst the London’s ritual magicians,

especially in relation to rituals undertaken within liminal and heterotopic urban zones (the cellars of squatted buildings, abandoned factories, cemeteries, and alternative/fetishist nightclubs). Rick, a Chaos magician in his mid-thirties who was one of my initial contacts with the London occult community, told me of an occultist he once knew who attempted to evoke a horrifying Lovecraftian entity within the basement of a disused building - and who went insane as a result; Gerald Suster (a well-known author and key figure in UK occult circles prior to his death in 2001) similarly informed me of an ever-growing “casualty-list” of magicians who had trafficked with the inhabitants of these zones; *Hecate’s Fountain*, Kenneth Grant's (1992) personal account of his exploration of Lovecraftian occultural practice, is replete with dire examples - often replicating Lovecraft’s own florid literary style - of the mental dissolution, mysterious disappearances and strange deaths of those unwarily engaged in ritualised and imaginal encounters with the fictive monsters of the Cthulhu mythos. Notably, such accounts often replicate key narrative tropes from Lovecraft’s work, where the reader is presented with secondary evidence (whether in the form of an oral account, letters, diaries, or newspaper clippings) of an occult investigator who disappears or goes insane after discovering some unnameable horror which is hinted at and never described. Comparable stories recounted within the social networks of Lovecraftian magicians are similarly folkloric in nature: often relayed orally, and rarely supported by concrete evidence. In this respect “legend-tripping” or ostension (Ellis 1991) - the performative re-enactment of a story, myth, or legend rather than it’s oral retelling - played an important role in the explorative urban practices of the HotD, in which evocative local narratives and elements extracted from Lovecraft’s fiction were embodied in ritualised form or by means of collective visualisation practices.

## Concluding Remarks

Michael Saler notes that contemporary forms of speculative fiction respond to the recognition that our experience of the real world is one built on “contingent narratives that are subject to challenge and change. Imaginary worlds […] have trained their inhabitants to question essentialist interpretations of the world” (2012, 21). In this respect, it is unsurprising that fictional worlds have increasingly come to inform contemporary forms of religiosity and spirituality in the increasingly mobile and fluid context of globalised modernity; that such fictions - as Saler also notes – function as a means of re-instantiating the marvellous and fantastic within that modernity is especially significant in relation to the proliferation of the Cthulhu mythos in both occultural and pop-cultural domains - constituting as it does a mythology salient to the secularised aspects of modernity, and a means of reshaping and aligning of occult practitioners' selfhood to the (sometimes) alienating experiences of its urban topographies and social landscapes, via a transformative encounter with monstrous otherness.

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