

INTO THE SIGHTLESS VORTEX OF THE UNIMAGINABLE: NYARLATHOTEP OR THE TRAJECTORY OF THE LOVECRAFTIAN SIGNIFIER

MARIANGELA UGARELLI RISI
Johns Hopkins University
mugarell1@jh.edu

Enviado: 21-06-2022

Aceptado: 4-12-2022



ABSTRACT

Fantastic, speculative, and fantasy fiction share an appropriately uncanny relationship with psychoanalysis. Lovecraft and his semantic tentacles immediately come to mind. Indescribable, ineffable, unimaginable, Lovecraftian monsters appear, on the surface, as a perfect placeholder for Lacanian Real. Following this model (shallow / depth), exemplified by Lacan's seminar on «The Purloined Letter», «The Call of Cthulhu» has been often used as a parable for the Real. This text argues that Cthulhu cannot represent the real, at least, not anymore. It has become exhausted as a signifier, overrepresented in contemporary pop culture. In its stead, Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, like the Real, cannot be pinned down due to its very nature. The Crawling Chaos or the God of a Thousand Faces travels in the same way as the signifier does: on one side its shape is permanently changing (Y-axis) but, at the same time, it crawls along the x-axis.

KEYWORDS: Lovecraft; postmodernism; psychoanalysis; speculative fiction; weird fiction.



Hei! Aa-shanta 'nygh! You are off! Send back earth's gods
to their haunts on unknown Kadath, and pray to all space
that you may never meet me in my thousand other forms.

Farewell, Randolph Carter, and beware;
for I am Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos!

The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath

From the entrails of a dog-eared stack of pulp magazines to the Parisian stage of the famous seminars, Lovecraft and Lacan appear at first glance to belong to opposite poles of academic labor. In the depths of the ocean or absorbed by an opaque cosmic cloud, H. P. Lovecraft has been, for the most part, a rightfully rotten and unsavory morsel for academia: a genre author with an embittered character more horrifying¹ than his cosmic terror; reasons abound to shun one of the fathers of contemporary science fiction. In recent years, nonetheless, the threads of academic investigation have staged a close encounter with Lovecraft's creations, producing specialists, and abundant work on an author shunned as part of genre canon,² Houellebecq, Boris Noys, and Mark Fischer are but a fraction of the names that have engaged with the author and his work in a serious fashion.

Even so, the shadow of the author and his horrible history seems to always be looming and not a single fruit can be taken from the eldritch tree without a second thought. It is no wonder that Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble*, describes the ushering in of the Chthuluscene;³ a new era where the non-human, the «tentacular», and «diférance» reign, whilst deny-

1 It is well-known that H.P. Lovecraft was a racist bigot, a fact that has been used on occasion to analyze his work.

2 S.T. Joshi is one of the most important of them; his name accompanies most of contemporary publications of Lovecraft's work be it as editor or writer of prologues and complementary essays. Jeff Lacy's «The Negative Mystics of the Mechanistic Sublime: Walter Benjamin and Lovecraft's Cosmicism» is also a product of this resurgence and an interesting exploration.

3 Haraway attempts to distance herself from HPL, stating that the scientific nomenclature from which she takes the word, *Pimona chthulhu*, evokes «Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Medusa, Spider Woman, and all their kin are some of the many thousand names proper to a vein of SF that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced—namely, the webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact» (Haraway, 2016: 101). Stating that Lovecraft could not have imagined the «webs of speculative fabulations» or «science fiction» which he himself fathered is less factual and more a political statement.

Notwithstanding, Haraway employs multiple terms and turns of phrase that seem to be inspired directly or indirectly by HPL. Haraway writes in a note that «Lovecraft's dreadful underworld chthonic serpents were terrible only in the patriarchal mode» (2016: 174); however it seems that «terrible» might be too strong of a word for what was, to a great extent, understood as a joke. Lin Carter points out in *Lovecraft: A Look Behind The Cthulhu Mythos* that «Nobody (...) took the Mythos seriously (least of all Lovecraft)» (Carter, 1976: 97).

ing any influence from the prince of Providence. Haraway distances herself from him by stating that «These real and possible time-spaces are not named after SF writer H. P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial- nightmare monster Cthulhu» (2016: 101). In his article, «H.P. Lovecraft's Philosophy of life and its narrative execution», Thies Münchow refers to Lovecraft's character and how it reflects negatively on his work, stating that «The modern reader is caught and ashamed of her /his inclination to the poetical yet intellectual world of such a person» (Münchow, 2017: 39). Yet the cult of HPL remains strong and the recent explorations of his texts and ideas have opened a playing field where Lovecraft meets the famous French psychoanalyst. How does the uncontested king of *Weird Fiction* circle back to Lacan? Twisted as it may seem, the choice isn't arbitrary. Floating around in cosmic flotsam, Lovecraft's fiction hides a conceptual network that structurally resembles the present paradigm of post-structuralism regarding modern epistemology, hermeneutics, and particularly semiology and the value of the signifier.

Has Lovecraft, within his universe of cosmic horror managed to concoct a paradoxical signifier that resists capture? To explore this idea, we will attempt to escape the switching of signifiers in Lacanian analysis or the shallow /depth model as we describe the trajectory of the signifier within Lovecraftian fiction. For this purpose, both the Lacanian and Derridean notions of the signifier will be explored, using as an anchor not the popular Cthulhu but the obscure (in comparison) Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos as the closest analogy of the Lacanian signifier. In short, this piece is an attempt to prove that the traces drawn by HPL in his stories depict a surprising understanding of the workings of language and semiotics, an understanding through which Lovecraft was able to create a sign to represent the void left by the impossibility of a true signifier, a god of a thousand faces.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft's faith in cosmic horror was not a mere aesthetic choice but a methodological one, based on a genuine belief in the power of fiction to elucidate the questions posed by philosophy; particularly, ontology and metaphysics. Lovecraft states in a letter to Frank Belknap-Long:

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- as well as gratify the cognate sense of curiosity? (Lovecraft, 1997: 1).

Lovecraft distinguished himself and his circle,⁴ the group of writers, admirers, and protégées who surrounded his surly character, as an intellectual elite chosen to perform and understand what he terms in this letter the «normal revolt against time, space & matter» in the form of «cosmic art». The call of the horror story as metaphysical understanding, the «genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form», is to be performed and enjoyed only by a select group, an aristocratic class of creator-hermeneuts, authors with both sensitivity and time to respond to rappings from outside. Nonetheless, «the sensitive are always with us...», he states in the same letter. (Lovecraft, 1997: 1)

Lovecraft was, however, painfully aware of how daunting the challenge of employing the «weirdly horrible tale» as a tool for revolt «against time, space and matter» truly is and perceived his «dream phantasy & Yog-Sothothery», as far removed from the «delicate and precise technique» he demanded, «so that a crude old-timer like myself would never be likely to excel in it»⁵ (Lovecraft, 1997: 276). The division Lovecraft, then a seasoned author, proposed of his own works is quite clear in the letter: the first kind of stories engage in «non-supernatural cosmic art», science-fiction or prospective fiction⁶ whereas the second type, derisively labeled «Yog Sothothery», refers to the Cthulhu mythos, those «overtly incompatible with what is known of reality». More important, however, is how this relates to the phenomena described by David Cal Clements as «avoidance of correlation» in his thesis about Lovecraft and Lacan entitled *Cosmic psychoanalysis: Lovecraft, Lacan, and Limits*. This term expresses the phenomena depicted in most Lovecraftian fiction, most visible in the stories that relate to the Cthulhu mythos: what is behind the veil of Maya, the Real, is incomprehensible to the human mind to the point that it would drive it to madness: «The truth about the world is too disturbing to be accepted» (Clements, 1998: 93). Lovecraft appeared unsure as to whether this second, superior, more mature form of cosmic horror could truly partake in «frank» Yog-Sothothery or not. For Lovecraft, poetry appears to be the ideal playing field for such creatures as it is closer to a crystallization of dreams. This idea is fundamental to our central thesis. The Real is inherently forbidden and beyond the limits of understanding

4 August Derleth and Robert Bloch formed part of this group which continued adding stories and lore to the Cthulhu Mythos even after Lovecraft's death. Many stories have been written about Lovecraft's characters by this circle as well as by contemporary authors (such as those collected in S.T. Joshi's *The Nyarlathotep Circle*). This paper will be concerned only with those texts written by Lovecraft himself.

5 When writing this letter, Lovecraft was 41 years old. By then, he had been publishing fiction for more than a decade.

6 Lovecraft mentions he got closer to this objective with «The Color Out of Space» and considered «The Whisper in the Darkness» a relapse.

in such a way that even grasping one of its fragments would be unfathomable to consciousness. The Symbolic acts like a shield to what would otherwise be incomprehensible for the sake of being the very definition of outsideness; a structure surprisingly like that proposed by Lacan.

Connecting Lovecraft's work to concepts such as the conscious and its relationship to the unconscious is anything but accidental. The quote from Lovecraft's letter to Belknap-Long continues as follows: «and sometimes a curious streak of fancy invades an obscure corner of the very hardest head; so that no amount of rationalization, reform or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney corner whisper or the lonely wood» (Lovecraft, 1997: 1). This is one of many elements in his work which prove that Lovecraft's failed attempts to gain university admission did not deter him from contemporary academic discoveries, even though his knowledge of them appears to be for the most part superficial. HPL mentions his distaste for Freud's theories in more than one of his letters, (as in the fragment quoted above) but both his essays and, particularly, his fiction appear to have been heavily influenced by them or operate on the playing field instituted by the Austrian father of psychoanalysis. In one of his earliest stories, «Beyond the Wall of Sleep», the narrator begins by saying:

I have frequently wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance of dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences—Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism—there are still a certain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permits of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from that life by an all but impassable barrier (Lovecraft, 2016: 206).

From the fragments gathered and the representation of the psyche presented in the Lovecraftian paradigm, it appears HPL was aware of some Freudian concepts and the epistemological weight put by Freud upon dreams. Lovecraft also comments in his text on Supernatural Horror: «There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind», thus accepting some of the tenets of psychology as to contest others.

Genre fiction's courtship with psychology is, notwithstanding, anything but a one-sided affair as psychology has employed texts considered

«genre» to explain or illustrate a wide variety of its points. In his sixth seminar, Lacan explains the concept of repetition automatism through what he deems a «fable»: «a fable is as appropriate as any other story for shedding light on it—provided we are willing to put the fable’s coherence to the test» (Lacan, 2004: 12). In Freud’s tradition, of using the fantastic to explain *Das Unheimliche*, Lacan chose «The Purloined Letter» by Lovecraft’s «most illustrious and unfortunate fellow countryman» Edgar Allan Poe (Lovecraft, 1997: 75). In this seminar, Lacan employs the story to explain his theory, a fact that is not concealed but often forgotten. The parabolic or allegorical function of the story in the seminar clarifies the switching positions and movement of the Other, the Subject, and the Analyst and how these positions change, forming a reiterative pattern. Each character has a position within the structure from which they waltz off to the next, describing the pattern of repetition automatism that Lacan seeks to exemplify. Each element of the story becomes a part of the explicatory machine. In the Lacanian fable, the King takes the position of not seeing, the Queen is the one who supervises the first position and the third, the minister, can see the complete picture. The gaze is the generator of the three positions: «This glance presupposes two others which it assembles to provide a view of the opening left in their fallacious complementarity (...). Thus, three moments, ordering three glances sustained by three subjects incarnated in each case by different people» (Lacan, 2004: 10). The rotation and movement of the subjects within this scheme replicate the crawling of the signifier, which always remains unattainable.

Lacan describes the signifier within this seminar as follows: «For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. Therefore, we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes» (Lacan, 2004: 17).

Even though Lacan does provide other models and examples in the application of his theory, this is probably the most oft-cited example and the most repeated as a template to perform a Lacanian analysis of a Lovecraftian text.⁷ This exercise has been performed by a few scholars, employing Cthulhu as the «real imaginary», or even expressing that Cthulhu represents or is the Real.

Cthulhu is undoubtedly the most well-known of Lovecraft’s characters

7 Rabaté argues the same point about the Seminar on the Purloined letter, together with Lacan’s analysis of Hamlet. The first seems most relevant to Lovecraft as profound psychological development does not characterize his protagonists. Benjamin Noys argues, however, that the «most gothic» of Lacan’s seminars is the XI and, thus, uses it as a model. The reasoning for this innovation seems to be particular to the thesis presented in his text.

and has rightfully drawn the most attention. Nonetheless, even though the most potent quote of the story speaks of an indescribable monster, Cthulhu is described in enviable detail. From the start, the reader is made aware that the creature, the «Horror in clay», as depicted in a terracotta statuette, is «gigantic», a monstrous being different from known animals. This is considerable information that gets explored further in the following section with the description of the statuette made in Cthulhu's image:

It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. This thing, which seemed instinct with a fearsome and unnatural malignancy, was of a somewhat bloated corpulence and squatted evilly on a rectangular block or pedestal covered with undecipherable characters. The tips of the wings touched the back edge of the block, the seat occupied the center, whilst the long, curved claws of the doubled-up, crouching hind legs gripped the front edge and extended a quarter of the way down toward the bottom of the pedestal. The cephalopod head was bent forward so that the ends of the facial feelers brushed the backs of huge fore paws which clasped the croucher's elevated knees (Lovecraft, 2002: 148).

When the encounter with Cthulhu finally occurs in the diegesis, Wilcox, the protagonist, describes the appearance, action, and type of movements of the beast at great length: «only Briden and Johansen reached the boat, and pulled desperately for the *Alert* as the mountainous monstrosity flopped down the slimy stones and hesitated floundering at the edge of the water» (Lovecraft, 2002: 167).

These descriptions do nothing but gnaw at the idea of Cthulhu as the Real or acting as the Real, pulling it further away from plausibility. Lacan clearly states in the first seminar «The real is what resists symbolization absolutely» (2004: 66), an excess of reality that escapes the order of the symbolic. Cthulhu, from his birth in «The Call...» appears to be not the best candidate to represent such a concept nor its trajectory.

Chris Laliberte's «The Real in R'lyeh: On Lacan and Lovecraft» hinges completely on this idea stating plainly that Cthulhu «acts as the Real» (Laliberte, 2013: 1). The relationship between the elements in the story is, then, defined according to the fixed, structuralist scheme of deploying Lacanian signifiers, like a net, over the text. Knowing the definition of the Real and how unfit Cthulhu would be for it, the term «imaginary real» appears as an apparent lifeboat for this explanation.

As Benjamin Noys points out in his thought-provoking essay, «The Lovecraftian event», Žižek's notion of the «imaginary real» is often the one brought up concerning Lovecraft:

Lovecraft's fiction constantly delineates and it does so through the concept Žižek identifies as the «imaginary Real», in which we find «a kind of image that endeavors to stretch imagination to the very border of the unrepresentable».⁸ Although Žižek draws on the Gothic for these images, lamentably he never mentions Lovecraft (could we call this a «Lacanian slip»?). This is surprising because Lovecraft provides a very precise fictional formalization of this «kind of image» that reveals the impasses in the imaginary, through his singular renderings of the real.

This is precisely the reason why Lovecraft's writings appear as such a fecund field for analysts of the Real. Lovecraft's bestiary is commonly described with words that fall into the semantic field of the indescribable. Isn't this precisely what the Real is supposed to be? Under this logic, however, as Noys himself inadvertently suggests, there would be almost no need for analysis, as the term «imaginary Real» would swallow virtually all of Lovecraft's fiction, at least those categorized as cosmic horror. Furthermore, wouldn't this definition encompass at least a piece of all Texts ever produced?

Moreover, sectioning off «The Call of Cthulhu» as just a story without considering the status of the titular monster as a household name in contemporary pop culture fails to recognize that it is now impossible to think of Cthulhu without having a fixed image of what it looks like, crystallized even further than what the already quite rich description allows in the text. From gracing the silver screen as a greenish kaiju to plastic collectibles, stuffed toys and virtually every type of memorabilia, Cthulhu has burst both text and fandom to become a household name, recognizable amongst the likes of Dracula and Frankenstein's monster, a signifier tired of signifying the un-signifiable.

The titular monster from «The Call of Cthulhu» can still be read as a metaphor nonetheless, but for the misrecognition of desire as a drive that becomes exhausted in the retroactively understood *événement* of the encounter with the monster. The text that results from it is a description of the master discourse of scientific discovery; what the Big Other desires the Real to be: something that, paradoxically, can be described as indescribable. Even after performing the exercise, the results seem unsatisfying. Isn't this scenario re-

8 Žižek, «Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!» (2006).

ducing the story to a Lacanian boil? The widely criticized «surface/depth model» proves the applicability of the theory to the object but tells us little else about the text analyzed. On the contrary, Jean-Michel Rabaté states in *Lacan literario: la experiencia de la letra*:

Esta es la razón por la que el estilo de Lacan —hecho de polifónicos ecos verbales y niveles heterogéneos de conceptualización— no debería ser simplificado ni abolido, juega un papel esencial en un discurso que intenta mimar la opacidad del inconsciente mientras nos deja flotar sobre un denso océano de palabras a las que convoca como un médium. Sobre todo, esta complejidad debería ser utilizable de tal manera que resulte *gozada* (Rabaté, 2007: 22)

Lacan's model is structured around the idea of the unconscious as language, an idea that is itself built upon linguistic axioms. These may prove to be a more useful playing field in which to study Lovecraft through Lacan as similar ideas are floating around in HPL's mythos. Jacques Derrida argues that Freud cannot help but use writing as a metaphor to explain the workings of the unconscious since thought is structured like language. Perhaps the same can be said of HPL and his work, texts filled with linguistic observations and affirmations, even a language of their own.⁹ David Cal Clements goes beyond these simple statements in his thesis¹⁰ by stating: «In both Lovecraft and Lacan there is no beyond. There is nothing outside of the symbolic order. And yet there is a limit. The subject is always perched on that limit. The human is a creature trapped inside of language, but always wanting out» (Clements, 1998: V).

When honing our scope to the linguistic structure of the unconscious and its movement, Derrida becomes an inevitable point of contention. Although denied by Derrida, there is an undeniable similarity between what is proposed by both him and Lacan. Inspired by Jakobson's poetic function, the processes of metaphor (y-axis/selection) and metonymy (x-axis - combination) become the guiding elements to follow the signifier's trace. To escape the game of switching signifiers and literature-as-fable, it is fundamental to re-connect the Cthulhu Mythos and the Lovecraftian cosmos, together with its paratexts. For this reason, «The Call of Cthulhu» is a signifier that has become obsolete. Cthulhu is tired of signifying and must go back to his eternal sleep,

⁹ R'Iyeen

¹⁰ One of the few theses written about Lovecraft and Lacan or about Lovecraft at all, Cal Clements' text does not fall into the trap of the depth model and provides interesting insight on HPL and contemporary theory.

giving way for the lesser-known members of Lovecraft's menagerie of monsters to rise from the depths of R'lyeh and unknown Kadath.

Auguste Dupin, Poe's pioneer detective states, in response a mischaracterization of the owner of the titular «Purloined Letter», «You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect». The fantastic story as a form has a long history of dealing with this relationship and supposed tension or opposition, where the fantastic and the scientific appear to be at odds. The fantastic can provide an alternative version of events or can be what is beyond the reach of the rational. In Lovecraft, however, science and (particularly non-Euclidean) mathematics are almost a necessity for the Real to be approached. This is the case of the «arch-dreamers» that encounter inter-dimensional space monsters in Lovecraftian lore.

One such arch-dreamer, Walter Gilman, protagonist of «The Dreams in the Witch House» (one of the stories in which Nyarlathotep is featured), attributes his cosmic dreams to «his studies in mathematics and folklore» (Lovecraft, 2009: 22). Being a «dreamer» in the Cthulhu mythos is a quality attributed to scientists rather than poets: his protagonists are, instead, both scientists and dreamers. This allows for the creation of a diegetic plane where verisimilitude of the reality presented wanders in the limits of dream logic instead of a realistic diegesis broken by the fantastic event.

Lovecraft's stories are, however, dreams and not dreams. As Derrida makes clear when writing about Freud's Mystic Writing pad, «dreams are constructed like a form of writing» (1978: 88), made of condensations and displacements «already performed» in hieroglyphs (1978: 88). A dream, by its very nature, cannot be narrated as it simultaneously condenses and displaces. A linear narrative description of them is a falsification of their very nature. How does this translate to the Lacanian model? Is all literature, by force of being inherently symbolic a dream in itself? and would the narration of these scientist-dreamers, be Poe's dream within a dream? Following this logic, the monster cannot be the imaginary Real as it would only be a part of it, the dream narrative is already a cathexis that cannot be arbitrarily disarticulated. In its representation, dream reality is architecturally structured over some familiar elements to the theorists of poststructuralism: dream-logic, hieroglyphs, and mathematics. These elements lead us to an ideal similar to the conclusion just yielded: Lovecraft's dream-descriptions / dream-narratives are an attempt at representing a dream but, by being Symbolic and bearing a nar-

rative structure, not close to the Real element of dreams. Thus, it is in the multiform and protracted nature of a single trace where we can find something that resembles a dream, not in the purported descriptions of dreams penned by Lovecraft but in the kaleidoscope of epithets, contradictions and different textual forms that follow a single, unique trace.

In relation to the idea of writing and «trace» we must address Lovecraft's Book, the Necronomicon, and its author. One of the less cryptic entries in HPL's dictionary of portmanteaus, the name of the feigned author of the Necronomicon,¹¹ Abdul Alhazred, contains an important clue in deciphering the bestiary contained in his book. Abdul Alhazred often referred to as the «mad Arab» is, literally, a servant (the literal translation of Abdul, the slave of) «Al-haz-red», «all has read». It can be inferred therefore that his madness has been caused by having completed the impossible task poised by Borges¹² in his «Library of Babel»:

También sabemos de otra superstición de aquel tiempo: la del Hombre del Libro. En algún anaquel de algún hexágono (razonaron los hombres) debe existir un libro que sea la cifra y el compendio perfecto de todos los demás: algún bibliotecario lo ha recorrido y es análogo a un dios (Borges, 2017: 114).

Having looked directly into the Aleph, Alhazred can merely translate what he has read into the Necronomicon, he is a slave to the knowledge he has read. This is particularly important within Lovecraftian lore as within it «to be enlightened is to be damned to hopelessness. To believe that one is saved or at one with the universe, one must maintain ignorance of the cosmic reality» (Lacy & Zani, 2007: 73). The all-knowing figure who created the book, must be transformed into a madman or a god. Abdul Alhazred, a mere mortal, is converted into the first but Lovecraftian lore abounds in representations of gods who can, within fiction, possess and bestow said knowledge; in other words, those who are able to move it.

In «Horror of the Real: H. P. Lovecraft's Old Ones and Contemporary Speculative Philosophy», David Peak analyzes several of Lovecraft's monsters within the paradigm of postmodernism and states that «Indeed, only that which exists beyond thought, within the vacuous unknown, can instill true horror» (2020: 164). He mentions Cthulhu's significance in particular by

11 The (un)holy book of the Cthulhu Mythos, whose contents would drive its reader mad.

12 Mark Fischer found a clear association between the two in *The Weird and the Eerie* going so far as to state that «Perhaps we can also anticipate a time when the pulp modernist Lovecraft displaces the postmodernist Borges as the pre-eminent fictional explorer of ontological conundra» (Fischer, 2016: 28).

asserting that «the significance of Cthulhu is that the representation embodied by the Mythos is the impossibility of representation» (2020: 176) This statement is crucial, as this is Cthulhu's significance and the intended reception of the figure but not necessarily the impact the figure has nowadays.¹³

As demonstrated above, Cthulhu has lost its appeal as a stand-in or emissary of the Lacanian real. However, Lovecraft's ample pantheon presents an array of creatures better suited for this role out of which we have chosen Nyarlathotep, the God of a Thousand faces. As their epithets suggest, this choice has been made through the analogous faculties of this Eldritch God, which will be analyzed below, taking into particular account the prose poem that bears his name.

Nyarlathotep is the first god HPL created. In addition, Will Murray in «Behind the mask of Nyarlathotep» points out that it is the first to appear in more than one Lovecraftian story. Nyarlathotep appears as a character in six of Lovecraft's works: in «The Rats in the walls» (1924), as a faceless god in the caverns of the center of the earth; in *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath (TDQ)*¹⁴ (1926-1927), as a pale alien-like pharaoh who attempts to trap Randolph Carter; in the twenty-first sonnet of the thirty-six-poem cycle *Fungi from Yuggoth* (1929-1930); and the stories «The Dreams in the Witch House» (DWH) (1933) and «The Haunter of the Dark» (1936).

The texts in which Nyarlathotep manifests are complete or partially dreams; in fact the homonymous prose poem is said by S.T. Joshi to be «mostly a direct copying down of a dream» (Joshi, 2011: 9). Randolph Carter, Walter Gilman, and Robert Blake¹⁵ are all protagonist scientist/mathematicians but also dreamers and it is through the first that they can meet Nyarlathotep in the second.

Even though he is the God of a Thousand Faces, Nyarlathotep usually appears in Lovecraftian fiction in the form of an anthropomorphic pharaoh. As Peak suggests, «he is a horror of infinite shapes and innumerable forms, the thing to which we assign human features so as to comprehend» (2020: 176) More importantly in «The Dreams in The Witch House», he is described as «black». Considering Lovecraft's well-known racism (and guided by other

13 Justin Mullis further analyses the phenomena of the Lovecraftian fandom and mythos, spearheaded by CthulhuCon in his article «Playing Games with the Great Old Ones: Ritual, Play, and Joking within the Cthulhu Mythos Fandom». Within the Cthulhu Mythos fandom, the figures of Lovecraft himself and Cthulhu are the most stable and recognizable.

14 A short novella purposefully unpublished during Lovecraft's lifetime. Lovecraft saw this piece as writing practice to improve his perceived difficulty with stringing a coherent plot.

15 Protagonists of the stories in which Nyarlathotep appears most prominently.

quotes in the text), it has been said that Nyarlathotep is described as a black man understood as of African descent.¹⁶ However, in DWH, Lovecraft states that Nyarlathotep appears in this iteration as «a tall, lean man of dead black coloration but without the slightest sign of negroid features, wholly devoid of either hair or beard and wearing as his only garment a shapeless robe of some heavy black fabric» (34) which clarifies this point.¹⁷ It becomes evident that what Lovecraft wants to evoke is the lack of light or the saturation of the color, not a blank but a black slate, not the possibility of meaning but all meaning at the same time; in other words, blackness as related to the color, the void. In Kadath, Celephaïs, and other cities of Lovecraftian lore, the construction materials, objects, etc. are all the same color: black. This is also true even in the Celephaïs, a mining town in which the most productive mineral is onyx. This city is described in TDQ constantly glistening and shining even through its blackness. A darkness that produces light, two contradictory ideas that make it impossible to pin down a single explanation. In a nutshell, the essence of Nyarlathotep.

Haraway describes the beings of her new era as «Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, dig- its, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair» (Haraway, 2016: 10). This could easily be the description of many Lovecraftian creatures, despite Haraway herself, but applies most directly to Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos. A contradiction that is «ancient and up to the minute» with tentacles and feelers, this monster appears to combine the elements of postmodern semiology.

Crawling is the primordial movement of Nyarlathotep. A verb turned adjective, Nyarlathotep is, in first place, a moving «chaos», indescribable in form by nature. Nonetheless, as previously stated, one of his faces acquires the Symbolic form of a pharaoh, as to be comprehended by the arch-dreamer. The link between Nyarlathotep's name and depiction with Ancient Egypt is profound and crucial. The descriptions given for Nyarlathotep's appearance in «The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath», the most detailed, are reminiscent of Amarna-style Egyptian art, in particular the representations of the pharaoh Akhenaton. Lovecraft describes him as «tall, slim figure with the

¹⁶ He is said to have come from Egypt, after all.

¹⁷ References to a «Negroid» in the story as reports from the characters within it who catch a glimpse of Nyarlathotep, are probably an intentional ruse to confuse the reader. The fact that in this single occasion Lovecraft isn't constructing a negative African American character does not negate his horrendous track record. It can be even proposed that Lovecraft purposefully did not want one of his Outer Gods to manifest as of a race to which he devoted the most despicable side of his personality.

young face of an antique Pharaoh, gay with prismatic robes and crowned with a golden pshent that glowed with inherent light». The elongated and exaggerated features of this specific style of Egyptian art would be coherent with the character, as these features make anthropomorphic depictions less realistic and «other», even «alien-like». These features distinguished depictions of the royal family from those of other individuals.¹⁸

In addition, Nyarlathotep's epithets circle back to Ancient Egyptian mythology. The Crawling Chaos and God of a thousand faces is said to be the «soul and messenger» of the Outer Gods. Taking apart this phrase, one of his many reiterated epithets, soul on one side and messenger on the other, we obtain an apparent contradiction about space and therefore time. Nyarlathotep is the I, the confirmation of being of the Outer Gods whilst being at the same time himself and, not only this but, as himself, in a hierarchically inferior position to those he is. Furthermore, Nyarlathotep is their «messenger», the one that speaks for them by actually being them and is them by speaking for them. Similarly, ancient Egyptian belief placed a fundamental role upon the word and names. Jan Assman states in his book *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*: The Egyptian concept of the world rested on an unusually firm belief in the binding power of symbols (34) and «the magic of writing made it possible to make meaning visible and to preserve it» (Assman, 2005: 33). In the Book of Going Forth by Day¹⁹ where the transition from life to death is described, the moment in which the deceased is transformed into a new life is «a matter of writing and magical recitation, for which Thot, the scribe, ritualist, and magician, was responsible» (Assman, 2005: 33). This power was shared by Thot's priests, as Mircea Eliade states: «el poder del rito y del verbo que poseían los sacerdotes se debía a que aquellos eran imitación de la hazaña primordial del dios Thot, que había creado el mundo por la fuerza de su Verbo» (Eliade, 2001: 29).

Nyarlathotep's name also carries an important symbolic and semantic significance. The first source cited by Lovecraft for the name is Lord Dunsany's Alhiret-Hotep who, according to Robert M. Price, was one of the most important elements in Lovecraft's mind (as well as Dunsany's character Myrnarhitep from *The Sorrow of the Search*) when he dreamt up the name. More important, nonetheless, is the brief text written by Dunsany of the same title: «And Mung stepped from behind him, making the sign of Mung, saying:

18 Other «faces» of Nyarlathotep have been created by the Lovecraftian Circle, contemporary writers, and visual artists.

19 Egyptian *Book of the dead* or Papyrus of Ani.

“Knowest thou All things, then, Alhireth-Hotep?” And Alhiret Hotep became among the Things that Were» (quoted in Price, 2006: 3). Moreover, Nyarlathotep’s name resembles that of pharaoh Imhotep. The suffix -hotep signifies «coming in peace» a stark contrast to Nyarlathotep’s most common epithet, «The Crawling Chaos». A contradiction even in his name, Nyarlathotep is shown to be a slippery signifier from the start. This is the most obvious way to dissect the name albeit not the only one. A possibility only granted by the name as written, the name of the god of a thousand faces contains the name of the Egyptian god of writing so favored by Derrida, Thot.

In addition, the consonant clusters, the length of the name itself, and its unfamiliarity make its spoken pronunciation indeterminate. Like Poe’s Ligeia, the name is also purposefully chosen for its difficult pronunciation²⁰. It is no wonder that the names favored by HPL for his alien creations are riddled with unpronounceable sounds and consonants devoid of phonetic or even phonic value: Yog-Sothoth, Cthulhu, Shub Niggurath, R’lyeh, and Nyarlathotep.

The fact that Lovecraftian names can only be fully apprehended in writing not only links them to Derrida but also further to ancient Egypt. Proof of this link is the writing found in unknown Kadath and R’lyeh. Both are described as «hieroglyphs» in both «The Call of Cthulhu» and «The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath». Thot, the Egyptian god of writing embodies this complex notion explored by ancient Egyptians. Derrida touches upon this point in his comment on Freud’s Mystic Writing Pad, noting the precursory quality of writing before the spoken word for a multitude of reasons. Hieroglyphs, by nature, are intended to be read both from left to right and right to left, in some cases even top to bottom and bottom to top. Not chained to the teleological structure of a sentence, hieroglyphs demand a different type of engagement from the reader, one that can combine illustration, iconographic symbols, and phonetic symbols as well as those that reinforce reading but have no phonetic or phonic value on their own. In Derrida’s words «A certain polycentrism of dream representation is irreconcilable with the apparently linear unfolding [spacing: diastem and time becoming space] of pure verbal representations» (Derrida, 1978: 217).

It is necessary to return to the two epithets mentioned, epithets without an originator or origin, The Crawling Chaos, and the God of a Thousand Faces. Both appear repeatedly throughout the texts accompanied by others such as a «horror of infinite shapes» and «million» shapes. According to Jakobson’s

20 From the author’s perspective

known Prague thesis, the poetic function «projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection [metaphor] into the axis of combination [metonymy]». This epithet would coincide with the Y axis, the space of the metaphor. The signifiers slide from one to another as Nyarlathotep changes his external appearance, showing himself in various ways, usually as an anthropomorphic pharaoh. These manifestations, however, do not cease to be contradictory: where in «Dreams in the Witch House» he is pure black, in «The Dream Quest Of Unknown Kadath» he appears almost transparent.

The crawling chaos, on the other hand, is Nyarlathotep's most common epithet which accompanies his name constantly. There is no attempt made by Lovecraft to explain it. The quality that defines him the most is his movement, a «crawling chaos». Sliding down the x-axis, combined with the y-axis of transformation into chaos the movement of the signifier is replicated. It is unreachable both in space and time, with the Subject subjected to give it unending chase. Quoting Lacan «For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. Therefore, we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes» (2004: 17).

A similar path can be discovered in Nyarlathotep's prose poem, which begins as follows:

«Nyarlathotep... the crawling chaos... I am the last... I will tell the audient void...» (Lovecraft, 2002)

From the strange, alien, nature of the first sentence, disconnected from the rest of the text, the qualities of this monster are suggested. We do not know (and never get to know) the last of whom the first-person narrator / poetic «I» is, or why is he in an «audient void». How does he know the void is audient? Even though not a contradiction, being «the last» and the act of «telling» belong to distinctly separate semantic clouds as telling requires at least one listener. This type of back-and-forth rhetoric, tracing, erasing, and retracing will be seen throughout the entirety of the poem. The trudging of the ellipses, which cut but allow the continuation of the phrase, are an appropriate representation of the movement of something described as «the crawling chaos». Haraway's ideation of *différance* as a crawling motion appears again, showing that it is a landmark of Lovecraftian lore.

The narrator / poetic «I» begins his tale by recalling the time just before the arrival of Nyarlathotep to the city represented in the poem, «the terrible city of innumerable crimes»: «I do not recall distinctly when it began, but it

was months ago». The indeterminate time also has the same type of relationship with the latter part of the phrase «but it was months ago» which gives a sense of temporality, however vague. This can prove to be even more erratic than just stating an indeterminate time because the sense of superposition or contradiction is left behind these clauses, in a way that cannot be pinned down. Before the arrival of the Outer God, «people went about with pale and worried faces» and «the stars swept chill currents that made men shiver in dark and lonely place». Omnipresence is a quality of the textual fabric. *Il n'ya pas d'hors-texte*, writes Derrida in his *Grammatology*. Even before the «physical» arrival of Nyarlathotep, he is already there, the textual tentacles of the monster can reach even «lonely» places; there is nowhere to hide from the Text and the horrifying realization that there is nothing outside of it, nothing that can be understood by the human mind.

The place where Nyarlathotep «comes out» from, Egypt («who he was, none could tell, but he was of the old native blood and looked like a Pharaoh»), although semantically crucial, due to its relationship to Egyptian beliefs and hieroglyphs, is but one puny face in the cosmic dimension of Nyarlathotep as Text. We already know of Nyarlathotep as the crawling chaos and god of a thousand faces, reasons to question that he comes from the physical place named Egypt. This is only one manifestation of the signifier, an attempt to crystallize its endless trajectory into a fixed place and a fixed shape. His alien or other quality is furthermore made clearer «he had risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries, and that he had heard messages from places not on this planet». As the pure, unattainable signifier, Nyarlathotep contains and captures messages that cannot be registered by human language or other symbols. His speech, due to its otherness, takes speech away from his audience «He spoke much of the sciences of electricity²¹ and psychology and gave exhibitions of power which sent his spectators away speechless» (Lovecraft, 2002: 11).

«Into the lands of civilization came Nyarlathotep, swarthy, slender, and sinister, always buying strange instruments of glass and metal and combining them into instruments yet stranger». The pathways described combines both the y axis (inwards, into the lands...) as well as the x (swarthy, slender, and sinister); through the very stylized anaphoric sibilance as well as the repeti-

21 Will Murray in «Behind the Mask of Nyarlathotep» collected in S.T. Joshi's *Dissecting Cthulhu: Essays on the Cthulhu Mythos*. argues that this first image of Nyarlathotep was inspired by reports on Nikola Tesla's electrical feats that Lovecraft could have had access to. It is also true that Lovecraft himself mentions Tesla in one of his letters to his friend and colleague Frank Belknap Long.

tion of «and» which pushes the sentence forward. These two pathways result in a vector impossible to apprehend, always sliding away and changing permanently. The «instruments yet stranger» to which the texts refer are proof of the symbolic power of Nyarlathotep as the crawling «true» signifier, producing simulacra of signs, objects that appear on the Symbolic as new instruments, machines distinct from each other. Furthermore, Nyarlathotep's knowledge outside of that which is apprehensible by language or symbolic code and, also, the danger of this knowledge is also made clear as the god «prophesied things none but Nyarlathotep dared prophesy» (9). The images projected by Nyarlathotep are evocative of Borges' «El Aleph»:

...saw the world battling against blackness; against the waves of destruction from ultimate space; whirling, churning; struggling around the dimming, cooling sun. Then the sparks played amazingly around the heads of the spectators, and hair stood up on end whilst shadows more grotesque than I can tell came out and squatted on the heads (Lovecraft, 2002: 9).

This passage reiterates the de-centering or lack of origin suggested by Derrida concerning the signifier, as well as the empty trace left by its trail. Blackness, waves of destruction from ultimate space suggest chaos as that of Hesiod's *Theogony* (χάος) and a further battle against said chaos (Hermann Gunkel's *Chaoskampf*). The fight against chaos is, in this case, the fight for order, for the ability to understand, in other words, to capture that which is unattainable in an intelligible signifier. After the dazzling spectacle, the spectators wash onto the street and the poetic I continues to finish the prose poem:

As if beckoned by those who had gone before, I half floated between the titanic snowdrifts, quivering and afraid, into the sightless vortex of the unimaginable. Screamingly sentient, dumbly delirious, only the gods that were can tell. A sickened, sensitive shadow writhing in hands that are not hands, and whirled blindly past ghastly midnights of rotting creation, corpses of dead worlds with sores that were cities, charnel winds that brush the pallid stars and make them flicker low. Beyond the worlds vague ghosts of monstrous things; half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath space and reach up to dizzy vacua above the spheres of light and darkness. And through this revolting graveyard of the universe the muffled, maddening beating of drums, and thin, monotonous whine of blasphemous flutes from inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time; the detestable pounding and piping whereunto dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic, tenebrous ultimate gods—the blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles whose soul is Nyarlathotep (Lovecraft, 2002: 9).

The condensation of meaning in this final paragraph builds upon the repetitious saturation of signifiers that stacks upon the symbolic nature of Nyarlathotep. A «vortex of the unimaginable», a system of differences «spheres of light and darkness» «screamingly sentient, dumbly delirious» a system of différences, things that are not themselves «hands that are not hands» and sliding signifiers «sickened sensitive shadow», Nyarlathotep is the closest *objet petit a* that can reach the idea of tracing the signifier that Lovecraft ever constructed. The idea of the «vortex» being present in this passage is also highly significant. Returning to Pike's idea of the indetermination as the primordial quality of the Lovecraftian monster as well as the fact that they are usually lateral to the story, the cortex generated by the *objet petit a* dictates the actions and reflections in the story, even when it appears to not be its principal axis.

Quoting Cal Clements «Cosmic indifference corresponds to the lack in the Other, the horrific realization in psychoanalysis. Both are traumatic realizations that at the heart of the daytime world lurks an abyss, the yawning blackness in the night sky» (1998: 15) Nyarlathotep is an attempt to represent the absence produced in the birth of the signifier by following its movements, a snail trail that leads into the open mouth of nothingness.

WORKS CITED

- ASSMAN, J. (2005): *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Cornell University Press, New York. <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801464805>>
- BORGES, J. L. (2017): *Ficciones*, Debolsillo, Barcelona.
- CARTER, L. (1976): *Lovecraft: A look behind the «Cthulhu mythos»*, Ballantine Books, New York.
- CLEMENTS, D. C. (1998): *Cosmic psychoanalysis: Lovecraft, Lacan, and limits*, Ph.D. State University of New York at Buffalo.
- DERRIDA, J. (1978): «Freud and the Scene of Writing», in *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- ELIADE, M. (2001): *El Mito del Eterno Retorno: Arquetipos y Repetición*, Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires.
- FISHER, M. (2016): *The weird and the eerie*, Repeater Books, London.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1972): *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- HARAWAY, D. J. (2016): *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham. <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373780>>
- JOSHI, S. T. (2011): *Dissecting Cthulhu: Essays on the Cthulhu mythos*, Miskatonic River Press, Lakeland, Florida.

- LACAN, J. (2004): «Seminar on the Purloined Letter», in *Écrits*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London.
- LACY, J., & S.J. ZANI (2007): «The Negative Mystics of the Mechanistic Sublime: Walter Benjamin and Lovecraft's Cosmicism», *Lovecraft Annual*, 1, pp. 65-83.
- LALIBERTE, C. (2013): «The Real In R'lyeh: On Lacan and Lovecraft», *With Caffeine and Careful Thought*, 1 (1), pp. 1-5.
- LOVECRAFT, H. P. (2002): *The Call of Cthulhu and other weird stories*, Penguin Books, London.
- (2009): *At the mountains of madness: And other weird tales*, Barnes & Noble, New York.
- (2016): *The Complete Fiction: H.P. Lovecraft*, Chartwell Books, New York.
- LOVECRAFT, H. P., & A. W. DERLETH (1997): *Selected letters: 3*, Arkham House, Sauk City, Wis.
- MULLIS, Justin (2015): «Playing Games with the Great Old Ones: Ritual, Play, and Joking within the Cthulhu Mythos Fandom», *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 26 (94), pp. 512-530.
- MÜNCHOW, T. (2017): «Transgressing the Myth — H.P. Lovecraft's Philosophy of Life and Its Narrative Execution. An Essay», *Disputatio Philosophica: International Journal on Philosophy and Religion*, pp. 38-49.
- NOYS, B. (2007): «The Lovecraft Event», *Academia.edu*. [Unpublished]. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/548596/The_Lovecraft_Event>.
- PEAK, D. (2020): «Horror of the Real: H.P. Lovecraft's Old Ones and Contemporary Speculative Philosophy», in *Diseases of the Head: Essays on the Horrors of Speculative Philosophy*, Punctum Books, California.
- PRICE, R. M. (2006): *The Nyarlathotep Cycle: the God of a Thousand Forms*, Chaosium, Oakland.
- RABATÉ, J. (2007): *Lacan literario: La Experiencia de la Letra*, Siglo XXI, Ciudad de México.
- ŽIŽEK, S. (2006): «Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!», *Critical Inquiry*, 33, pp. 185-211.
- (2008): «Problemas con lo real: Lacan como espectador de Alien», in *Cómo leer a Lacan*, Paidós, Buenos Aires.