

THE WEIRD AND THE INEFFABLE
H. P. LOVECRAFT'S INVERTED THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the Lovecraftian weird through the analysis of two, deeply intertwined, themes of his writings: the parody of religion through the construction of an inverted theology, and the ineffable as the attempt to express the unknown. In §1, the character and philosophical outlook of Lovecraft will be presented, with a particular focus on his atheism and his consideration of truth; §2 will explore the unique brand of terror-fuelled escapism which Lovecraft associates with weirdness; §3 will delve into the Cthulhu Mythos as an anti-mythology, before §4, in which the omnipresent theme of ineffability is discussed in relation to mysticism.

1.

Lovecraft was a relentless atheist. His hostility towards religion is at times so bitter that it may appear even a bit vulgar. He himself, in a letter to his friend and fellow weird fiction writer Robert E. Howard, admits that, though technically an agnostic, he would rather be classified as an atheist (*SL IV.57*). Of course, there is a calculated side to this statement: while impossible for him to definitely prove through rational means the inexistence of a God or many gods, by the very same rational metrics, it is so unlikely that such entities exist, that he feels confident enough to conclude in favour of atheism. However, a clear dose of disdain emerges from that declaration. According to Lovecraft's own account, this sentiment came about already in his childhood, when at age 9, enchanted by the mythological tales of the Greeks, the Romans and the Norsemen, he «tried experiments in pretending to believe each one, to see which might contain the greatest truth» (Lovecraft 1952a, 21). Clearly, Lovecraft is not convinced that it is possible to exclude *a priori* the existence of a divine entity in the sense that monotheistic religions (and particularly Christianity, which he was the most familiar with) had intended it. The vastness of human ignorance, a factor which he never fails to consider, makes illegitimate any attempt to reach definitive knowledge of anything. At the same time, however, he does find it extremely unlikely, a consideration which is based on the very same scientific standards through which he diagnosed humanity's limits. Thus, while he cannot rule out the possibility of an ultimate divine reality, Lovecraft feels legitimized to assert that any belief in it goes against the most reliable (although still modest) source of knowledge, i.e., human reason as applied in science. Such an attitude, between the cynical and the scientific, manifested here in its embryonal state but characterized all of Lovecraft's life. In fact, together with his fascination for religions and mythologies, he developed from an early age a passion for astronomy: «the most poignant sensations of my existence», he writes, «are those of 1896, when I discovered the Hellenic world, and of 1902, when I discovered the myriad suns and worlds of infinite space» (Lovecraft 1952a, 22). The combination of the two resulted in the radically dichotomic conception of the world which seemed to inform his views: science and logic, on the one hand, religion and superstition on the other, with the additional notion that the former had the ability to explain and dissolve the latter. He considered pseudo-sciences as insufferable as religions: an example of that is the

polemical attacks Lovecraft launched against the astrologer Joachim Friedrich Hartmann, who attempted to present astrology as a legitimate scientific discipline (Joshi 2013, ch.6). Lovecraft's passion for science even came to influence his writing choices, as he tried to make last-minute edits in order to keep the texts updated with the most recent scientific discoveries.

However, Lovecraft was not completely monolithic in his thinking: Initially, he rejected any form of apologetics, a topic often touched upon during his correspondence with Maurice W. Moe, a friend of his who, instead, was extremely religious. In an effort to mitigate Lovecraft's intolerance, Moe argued in favour of religious beliefs on the grounds that, independently of their truth or falsity, they contributed to maintaining social and moral order (*SL I.62*). This pragmatic and almost cynical approach to the question of faith, which Moe evidently designed to appeal to his friend's outlook on life, was nonetheless refuted by Lovecraft. The reasoning behind this rejection has rather deep philosophical implications, at least in terms of understanding Lovecraft's theoretical ideals. His explicit *desideratum* is the «distinction between dream life and real life, between appearances and actualities» (*SL I.62*): if we were to consider things independently of their relation to truth, he argues, the boundaries between dream and reality would dissolve. In true Nietzschean fashion, Lovecraft later came to recognize the social function of religion, which he judged at least «still useful amongst the herd»; other notions, requiring a deeper intellectual challenge, were reserved for the few, since «[a]gnosticism and atheism mean nothing to a peasant or workman» (*SL II.310*).

Unlike Nietzsche, however, he never renounced the intrinsic value of truthfulness, and never abandoned the aim of objectivity. The German philosopher, whom Lovecraft started reading after the war, had a strong influence on his thought (confirming and sharpening what already was there rather than changing it). What he admired about Nietzsche was his method: the ability to acutely deconstruct human illusions and religion in particular (*SL I.134*). Nietzschean genealogical deconstruction of metaphysical and religious beliefs is thought of as an almost scientific method of de-mythologization. Lovecraft's interest is not only methodological, however. Let us take, as a primary example, the famous *incipit* of Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die (Nietzsche 1990, 79).

Lovecraftian writings, both fictional and non-fictional, both public and private, are filled with similar considerations about the insignificance of human life in the endless void of the cosmos. This idea, informed by his knowledge of science and astronomy, in particular, is the ultimate source from which all tenets of Lovecraft's personal worldview stem. Against religious teleology, he upholds a form of causal determinism which he grounds in the inexorability of natural laws, which bind humanity in a meaningless and yet inescapable destiny: «[t]he only cosmic reality is mindless, undeviating fate—automatic, unmoral, uncalculating inevitability» (Lovecraft 1952c, 24). The fate Lovecraft has in mind is scientific (or so he considers it) and should not be confused with the one provided by the mythological concept of divine Providence, for «all notions of special relationships and names and destinies expressed in human conduct must necessarily be vestigial myths» (*SL II.261*). The rejection of such myth in favour of mechanistic materialism results in what he calls *indifferentism*: a rejection of both optimism and pessimism, since, in different ways, «both schools retain in a vestigial way the primitive concept of a conscious teleology» (*SL III.39*). Human life is so tiny, so petty and so miserable that the universe, in its immensity, can only be indifferent to it. Yet, he does not conclude from the fleeting and precarious nature of humankind, the vacuity of knowledge. That is because the

insignificance of humanity's very existence, together with its many struggles and few joys, is predicated upon the notion of absolute and eternal cosmic truths. Humanity is to be considered a pitiful thing exactly because it is indeed a fact that there is, all around it, an uncaring if not hostile universe, which stretches so far that not a single conscious being could comprehend it. To Lovecraft, it is undeniably *true* that humans have no purpose, it is a *fact* that their hopes and efforts are vain in the face of a blind and cold cosmos. To, then, get rid of the concept of truth altogether, would not only be contradictory but, more egregiously, would open up the door for hope, it would represent the possibility of contesting the reality of the universe. In this, Lovecraft is perhaps more disciple of Schopenhauer than of Nietzsche.

The kern of Lovecraftian pessimism is the battle which sees on opposite sides truth and hope: «[h]ope», he writes, «becomes a despot, and man comes at last to use it as a final argument against reason, telling the materialist that the truth cannot be true, *because it destroys hope*» (Lovecraft 1952b, 13). The irreconcilable rupture between hope and truth is deployed to refute idealism but has many deep ramifications, especially when connected with the aforementioned mechanicism. Think of Epicurus's famous stance against determinism:

For it would be better to follow the stories told about the gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosophers. For the former suggests a hope of escaping bad things by honouring the gods, but the latter involves an inescapable and merciless necessity (Epicurus 1994, 31).

The Greek philosopher finds the idea of being subject to blind necessity so repugnant that he would rather restore the religious superstition he so adamantly fought (Frede 2011, 13-14). Yet, Lovecraft's reaction to truth is inadmissible. As Ted Honderich notes, «your response to determinism in connection with the hope would be dismay. If you really were persuaded of determinism, the hope would collapse» (2002, 94). But if the choice between dream and reality, between myth and science, is ultimately a choice between hope and dismay, one must opt for the latter. Unsurprisingly, the attack on idealism is ultimately an attack on Christian beliefs, for he considers idealistic philosophy just a poorly concealed attempt to justify Christianity. Not only that but Christianity itself is reduced to the legacy of a primitive and non-scientific understanding of nature (Lovecraft 1952b). Both his relationship with Nietzsche and the establishment of a genealogical connection between mythology, religion and idealism resemble some of Rudolf Carnap's ideas. In a seminal article, in which he compliments Nietzsche for his non-metaphysical and quasi-scientific approach to philosophical critique, Carnap's analysis distinguishes three ways of understanding the word "God". In a *mythological* way, it is used to denote a certain being that is the subject of some religious belief; in a *metaphysical* way, it is used to refer to something non-empirical of some philosophical relevance; finally, the word "God" is used in a *theological* way, which «falls in between its mythological and its metaphysical usage» (Carnap 1996, 16). Those three uses, Carnap then argues, are connected in the way Lovecraft himself suggested: «[p]erhaps we may assume that metaphysics originated from mythology» and continues «[w]hich, now, is the historical role of metaphysics? Perhaps we may regard it as a substitute of theology on the level of systematic, conceptual thinking» (Carnap 1996, 28).

From a philosophical point of view, Lovecraft neatly fits into the temperamental profile of a "tough-minded" individual, as theorized by William James (1922, 12): he is materialistic, pessimistic (in the indifferentist way), irreligious, fatalistic and a sceptical empiricist. Yet, his personality and his philosophical convictions seem at odds with his literary production. Two deeply intertwined questions arise: why did a man who held reality and the scientific truths regulating it in such high regard, choose to create a literary world that constantly subverts them? And how come he found no better way to express himself than to create a mythos and, as a result of that, a corresponding theology?

2.

Lovecraft himself seems well aware of the oddity of his character and the contrasting elements composing it: «I should describe mine own nature as tripartite, my interests consisting of three parallel and dissociated groups – (a) Love of the strange and of the fantastic. (b) Love of the abstract truth and of scientific logic. (c) Love of the ancient and the permanent» (*SL I.110*). Yet, it will become more and more clear that those “dissociated” elements find themselves in an organic and coherent cohabitation inside the Lovecraftian opus. The key to understanding this paradoxical balance is, of course, the elusive notion of weird. Thankfully, the author is willing to shed some light on the reasons behind his literary choices, offering a precious starting point for the present analysis in his essay *On Writing Weird Fiction*:

I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis (Lovecraft 1937, 7).

The choice of weird fiction is presented here as a direct response to the materialistic mechanicism Lovecraft elaborated throughout his life, not in the form of an alternative to it, but merely as a reaction. The oppressive nature of determinism is explained in relation to two constitutive features of human beings according to Lovecraftian anthropology: (1) our inability to come to terms with the fact that we are merely cogs in a machine which dictates our every action through the inevitable application of eternal laws of nature; (2) our unquenchable thirst for knowledge which is fated to be constantly frustrated by the staggering limitations of our own epistemic capabilities in the face of the unlimited breadth and complexity of the cosmos and its laws. Those two points are, of course, connected the same way two shackles are connected by a chain: not only are we humans forever trapped in certain unavoidable patterns and limitations, over which we have no control whatsoever, but our intellects are so powerless that it is even precluded to us the possibility to understand the nature and the extent of such limitations. Leaving aside the actual question of free will, a philosophical labyrinth which we shall not enter, we are left with an extremely bleak picture of human existence. Lovecraft’s wish to defy through imagination what, in his eyes, is an undisputable reality may appear, at first glance, an occurrence of one of the most common traits of fantasy, namely escapism. However, one would greatly struggle to attach such label to stories of psychological torture, mental trauma and cosmic despair, like the ones in question. The only possible route of escape from the unstoppable mechanism of the cosmos, in which humans take part only as purposeless cogs, is to venture into the unknown. In other words, if what determines humanity’s servile and unfree state are the laws of nature themselves, as in the physical determinism embraced by Lovecraft, the only way out is to suspend them, to violate their dictates. In a private letter, this thirst for liberation echoes the twofold nature of the Lovecraftian anthropological profile, manifesting, on the one hand, as «a sense of impatient rebellion against the rigid and ineluctable tyranny of time, space, and natural laws – a sense which drives the imagination to devise all sorts of plausible hypothetical defeats of that tyranny», while, on the other, as «a burning curiosity concerning the vast reaches of unplumbed and unplumbable cosmic spaces which press down tantalizingly on all sides of our pitifully tiny sphere of the known» (*SL IV.70*).

To satisfy these desires, however, means not only to subvert the world in its core but to shatter our already frail understanding of it: natural laws are all we humans know, have ever known and will ever know, wanting to reject them means longing for the absolutely extraneous. In recent years, the idea of distorting and violating laws of nature, thereby questioning even their

lawfulness, has entered the philosophical discussion through the work of Quentin Meillassoux, which many started to associate with Lovecraftian horror (van Elferen 2016, 89-90; Willems 2017, 22-25; Peak 2020, 174). By rejecting the principle of sufficient reason, the French philosopher elaborates a model of cosmic contingency he calls hyper-Chaos, which is «capable of anything, even the inconceivable» (Meillassoux 2008, 64). Meillassoux, however, is aware of how terrifying such a picture of the universe might be and presents it in strikingly Lovecraftian terms:

If we look through the aperture which we have opened up onto the absolute, what we see is a rather menacing power – something insensible, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything, of realizing every dream, but also every nightmare, of engendering random and frenetic transformations, or conversely, of producing a universe that remains motionless down to its ultimate recesses, like a cloud bearing the fiercest storms, then the eeriest bright spells, if only for an interval of disquieting calm (Meillassoux 2008, 64).

This vividly poetic picture aptly reflects the writer's vision of a world where the unchanging laws of nature are challenged. It follows, then, that there is no sentiment better equipped to express the so passionately yearned human freedom than horror, «because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions» (Lovecraft 1937, 7). Of course, this is true of one particular kind of fear, the sentiment of horror that emerges when confronted with «the unknown or the strange», i.e., the weird. «The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear», he writes, «and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown» (Lovecraft 1927, 23). The weirdness of weird fiction thus stands in a sophisticated system of relations, suspended between the cold scientific reality and the black abyss of the unknown:

The crux of a weird tale is something which could not possibly happen. If any unexpected advance of physics, chemistry, or biology were to indicate the possibility of any phenomena related by the weird tale, that particular set of phenomena would cease to be weird in the ultimate sense because it would become surrounded by a different set of emotions. It would no longer represent imaginative liberation, because it would no longer indicate a suspension or violation of the natural laws against whose universal dominance our fancies rebel (*SL* III.434).

In his weird stories, Lovecraft does not fully give up realism but chooses instead to constantly threaten reality itself: non-Euclidean and impossible geometrical distortions disfigure the world, light and shadow suddenly stop obeying the laws of physics as science and experience have conceived them, and indescribable colours are introduced, so extraneous that the word “colour” itself is inadequate (Harman 2012, 86-100). The subversion of natural laws is hellish and deeply unsettling, but, as Lovecraft explained, it could not have been otherwise: the previous contraposition should then be revised, it is not about choosing between dream and reality, but between reality and nightmare.

3.

Through these nightmarish fantasies, we can at last approach the paradox of an atheist's mythology. One of Lovecraft's more long-lasting contributions to the world of fiction, and what constitutes an important part of his legacy, is, in fact, the so-called *Cthulhu Mythos*. The Cthulhu Mythos is a sort of literary mythology which originated in the works of Lovecraft, through a vague yet coherent system of references between different texts, and was incorporated by many of Lovecraft's friends and epigones. It is therefore both a fictional mythology, as in a mythology

which exists inside a single fictional story or a single fictional world, and a meta-fictional mythology, as in a mythology shared by multiple stories and fictional worlds, continuing to spread far beyond its initial circle. Lovecraft encouraged the expansion of his “black pantheon”, as he calls it (*SL* V.16), initiating one of the most remarkable mythopoetic experiments in the history of contemporary literature.

It is important to note that the cult of the Great Old Ones should not be taken seriously even in the fictional context in which it is presented. As Price (1991) rightly points out, the Great Old Ones are not gods but extra-terrestrial entities emerging from the depths of space, aliens blind to the faith and the desires of humans. «Their latter-day worshippers are pitiable fools for attributing deific properties to them» (Joshi 2003, 192) and while of course, those who worship these alien entities are in some way in contact with a reality which remains completely hidden from the rest of humanity, this awareness (too weak and incomplete to be called knowledge) is more of a curse than a blessing.

It could be argued that the cultists are moved by self-interest and passions such as greed. Think of the villagers in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, who gather in the Esoteric Order of Dagon to recover from economic decline: in exchange for gold and abnormally abundant harvests of fish, they accept to breed with the Deep Ones, ocean-dwelling humanoids with fish-like features. This cult, ultimately linked to that of Cthulhu, the one that the Deep Ones venerate and serve, is somewhat reminiscent of the ancient pagan cults for harvest. It is, at least initially, explicitly directed towards a material gain. The same could be said of the cult of Yog-Sothoth, a being whose alien nature is so emphasized that it presents striking similarities with the mystical descriptions of divine entities:

It was an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self – not merely a thing of one Space-Time continuum but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence’s whole unbounded sweep – the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike (Lovecraft 2008, 903).

Despite these abstract and almost mystical traits, which remind us of Neoplatonic and Christian ideas of monism and transcendence (Guérard 1984), Yog-Sothoth is often time involved in human matters. Old Whateley from *The Dunwich Horror* is said to be a practitioner of dark magic, having experimented with its forbidden power since his youth. In the story, magic is not simply identified with ritualistic practices or expressions of a (perverse) spirituality: it is a concrete and real thing which produces, though in mysterious and inexplicable ways, consequences on the world, such as the prodigious and horrific growth of Wilbur, Whateley’s nephew and Yog-Sothoth’s son. The image of a human woman bearing the children of a god may be interpreted as a distortion of the Christian doctrine of the immaculate conception; the birth of monstrous creatures could however suggest that the inspiration might have been Greek mythology, in which Gods, taking the form of non-human animals, seduce and impregnate women, who then birth hybrids. This is even more evident in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, in which Joseph Curwen, a ruthless alchemist and necromancer, uses his powers to curse his own descendants and ensure his resurrections. The religious undertones are yet again obvious: in order to perform his dark incantations, Curwen experiments on human beings, a nod to the practice of ritualistic human sacrifice; the word “sacrifice” itself ties etymologically with the idea of *sacrum*, i.e., a rite offering something to a godly figure (in this case probably Yog-Sothoth, whose aid he invokes by chanting his name). Be it a collective need, as for the folks of Innsmouth, or a personal egoistic desire, as for Old Whateley and Joseph Curwen, it seems that the alien gods do in some way answer the prayers of humans.

Yet, the shadow of deterministic forces remains inescapable. In the Lovecraftian universe, even vile passions such as evil and greed are a luxury that humans cannot access, for to act in a morally evil way could tacitly imply that some form of choice took place. Instead, humans are

often victims of the inscrutable manipulations of forces beyond their reach and wind up manipulated into serving their untouchable alien overlords. In *The Call of Cthulhu*, monsters far more ancient than humanity reach into weaker minds to create vessels for their obscure machinations: «When, after infinities of chaos, the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals» (Lovecraft 2008, 367). Thus, already among the first men, were born cultists, worshippers of what was there before humanity and is destined to outlive it. If human wants and needs are ever to be considered, then, is only in as much as they serve as another instrument of manipulation and control. In *The Whisperer in Darkness*, for example, creatures from outer space called Mi-Go, who appear to serve an array of Lovecraftian deities whose names they chant and venerate in the isolated woods of Vermont, lure the protagonist, Albert Wilmarth, by impersonating another human. Through technologically advanced prostheses, they were able to reproduce in every minute detail the face and hands of their previous victim, Henry Akeley, attempting to trick Wilmarth into believing in a benevolent race of space creatures who bring technological gifts to humans. The being hiding behind the synthetic contraption is likely supposed to be Nyarlathotep, a malignant “deity”. To him is dedicated a very interesting chant: «To Nyarlathotep, Mighty Messenger, must all things be told. And He shall put on the semblance of men, the waxen mask and the robe that hides, and come down from the world of Seven Suns to mock...» (Lovecraft 2008, 683-684). The idea of a god-like being taking the appearance of a human to spread his cult seems to parody the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, according to which God was made flesh in the trinitarian person of Jesus Christ. Leiber (2001, 10-11) notes that Nyarlathotep could be a stand-in for several human vices and weaknesses, but that simply makes for an even sharper mockery. Instead of a god made flesh as the only way to gift his wisdom to mortal ears, the reader is faced with extra-terrestrial beings so distant from anything human, that they need an intermediary even to achieve evil. But the changeling powers of Nyarlathotep could also be related to a distortion of Jewish and Christian angels: in fact, when it shapeshifts into human form it does so in the guise of a messenger for the Lovecraftian deities (Joshi 2015, 169). Its role of messenger (ἄγγελος) synthesizes the “daimonic”, in the Greek sense, and the demonic, in the Christian sense, for he is placed in between humans and “gods” as a medium for the otherwise incomprehensible will of the latter. This comparison should not surprise anyone familiar with the visions of the prophet Ezekiel, as they are presented in the Bible (Ezekiel 10:1-22): the creatures of the celestial hierarchy described there, such as the cherubim, with four faces and four wings, or the ophanim, floating wheels with eyes all over, would easily fit in most horror stories.

However, I do not believe that even manipulation sufficiently explains the baffling phenomenon of humans dedicating their lives and their sanity to things so blind to their fate that, if they ever decide to reclaim earth as their own, would erase the entire human race in the blink of an eye. Again, Price is right to say that they are not gods, and yet they are god-like in some crucial and relevant aspect: those seemingly contrary statements are, instead, coherent, for they are not gods, and they are god-like for the very same reason. These beings cannot be defined as gods in as much as “god” is a human concept and no human concept could ever apply, let alone satisfyingly describe, what is by its very nature wholly non-human. In this sense, the foolish attempt to become an ally of those things is nothing but a desperate effort to rationalize this uncompromising Otherness. Think of the reaction of Robert Olmstead, when he realizes that he himself is destined to become a hybrid creature such as those infesting Innsmouth. Tortured by suicidal thoughts, he finally breaks and accepts his destiny in a deranged mania, in which he fantasizes about the wonders and glories awaiting him in the lair of the Deep Ones. There is no enlightenment in encountering these non-human realities: the stories of Lovecraft are full of these broken minds, unable to withstand the horrifying truths lurking outside the common human understanding. Such is the case of poor Robert Blake in *The Haunter of the Dark*, who has

a nervous breakdown after witnessing mind-bending visions, described by Lovecraft with his unparalleled ability for cosmic horror:

Before his eyes a kaleidoscopic range of phantasmal images played, all of them dissolving at intervals into the picture of a vast, unplumbed abyss of night wherein whirled suns and worlds of an even profounder blackness. He thought of the ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose centre sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws (Lovecraft 2008, 1013).

Azathoth is among the most caustic and merciless parodies of religion that can be found in the already deeply anti-religious works of Lovecraft. The Lord of All Things, which resides at the centre of the universe, is a blind and idiotic amorphous being, asleep and unaware of the infinity upon which he reigns. Similarly, in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, the mighty Other Gods are described as «blind, voiceless, tenebrous, mindless» (Lovecraft 2008, 410). The depiction of a foolish god is a clear symbol of the meaninglessness of the infinite cosmos, which eternally persists with no end or purpose (Joshi 2016). Accordingly, in the context of the story, a similar truth is enough to shatter one's sense of reality, at which point joining the cult of these beings is but a last attempt to make sense of a senseless world. Religion thus functions in these stories just like Lovecraft thought it functioned in everyday life: as a coping mechanism used to cloak in a veil of ignorance the human mind, an excuse to avert the gaze from the endless, pitch-black sky.

What Lovecraft has created is an anti-mythology, something that resembles myths in its language and structure, while being completely devoid of any of the etiological and eschatological significance that characterizes them (Münchow 2017, 48). It can never explain anything, neither why humanity exists nor where it should find purpose, but only functions as a way of confronting the reader with the thought of the unexplainable. And yet, it is exactly the repulsive inaccessibility, this invincible Otherness which renders even the concept of "God" completely useless, that elevates the Ancient Ones to godhood. They are not divine in any positive, affirmative sense: even to call them evil or malignant is an inappropriate humanization, for it charges of moral significance acts of blind amorality. However, in a negative sense, when "God" is utilized for lack of a better word, not to denote or to describe, but merely to confess one's failure to comprehend, the word regains its significance.

4.

Ineffability appears as a bizarre concept: one cannot speak of the ineffable and yet, by this very admission, one is saying something about it. More accurately, then, one should consider that the term 'ineffable', though seemingly referring to something, is used to indicate the speaker's inability to describe that thing. To describe something by presenting one's own failures is the strategy at the basis of the *via negativa* of apophatic theology, which, as opposed to cataphatic theology, considers God beyond determination. While being closely connected to ineffability, rather than focusing on the inability to speak of something, the notion of apophasis derives from the Greek ἀποφάναι (to deny, to speak off) and indicates a refusal to speak, for the inaccuracy of human language would make it unworthy of God. At the same time, coming from the latin *ineffabilis*, a composite of *in* and *effari*, the ineffable (what-cannot-be-said), shares in the latin verb *fari* (to say, to speak), a common origin with words like *infandus* (unspeakable, monstrous), *nefans* (wicked), *nefarius* (execrable, abominable), all of which are formed by negating *fari* (de Vaan 2008, 231). The inability to utter words is therefore closely linked both to the awe felt in the presence of the divine and to the deep terror that defeats any human linguistic and cognitive capacity. The reverse is also true: not only terror can obfuscate and paralyze the mind, rendering

any attempt at expressing oneself impossible, but, by inverted correspondence, the encounter with something that cannot be spoken of or comprehended is terrifying, for it humiliates every faculty of the human mind and leaves unarmed and defeated. Both those aspects of the ineffable seem to coalesce in the weird. As an adjective, *weird* is often used for lack of a better term, when what one was hoping to describe resists every other word. The use of the word is therefore strikingly similar to that of 'ineffable', but also presents the additional feature evoking the unmistakable sensation of unease which constantly associated with the attempt of describing the indescribable. The weird, in this sense, is the phenomenal, experiential correlate to the ineffable, the texture of the unspeakable.

Not just as a mere parody, then, but as a serious literary project, Lovecraft has captured the essence of apophatic theology and made it his own. Thus, the fear of the unknown taken to its extreme starts manifesting as the *mysterium tremendum* of religious experience, the awful dread of an overpowering magnitude (Otto 1958, 12-23). The defining feature of Lovecraftian weird fiction is «the attempt to construct knowledge, often crucial knowledge, through language, an attempt that is hindered, often fatally, by lack of adequate linguistic and therefore representational resources» (Langan 1999, 41). In order to realize, as an author, the paradoxical of representing the unknown, Lovecraft assigns to the protagonists of his stories the equally paradoxical task of experiencing the incomprehensible. Many examples of this can be found in the Lovecraftian opus, but one should suffice to sum up the struggle of the narrating protagonist:

What happened then is scarcely to be described in words. It is full of those paradoxes, contradictions, and anomalies which have no place in waking life, but which fill our more fantastic dreams, and are taken as matters of course till we return to our narrow, rigid, objective world of limited causation and tri-dimensional logic (Lovecraft 2008, 895).

The two elements at play here are what Dante calls in his *Convivio* “le due ineffabilitadi”, the linguistic failure to describe, on the one hand, and the cognitive failure to comprehend, on the other (Ledda 1997, 128). But more than that, reality itself seems not enough to convey an experience, which nonetheless is itself a part of reality. Unspeakable words are needed to describe an unreal reality: a conflict which once again humiliates the human mind, in the face of «the paradoxical realization of the world’s hiddenness as an absolute hiddenness» (Thacker 2011). The contradictory poetics of the ineffable, which pervades every aspect of Lovecraftian weird fiction, can only be compared to the struggle of the mystic, who, as a finite being, cannot and, at the same time, must speak of an infinite God:

[...] the splendor of God’s nature is unspeakable. God is a word, an unspoken word. Augustine says, “All scripture is vain. If we say God is a word, He is spoken; if we say God is unspoken, He is ineffable.” Yet He is something, but who can utter this word? None can do so but He who is this Word. God is a word that utters itself. Where God is, He utters this Word – where He is not He does not speak. God is spoken and unspoken (Meister Eckhart 2009, 152).

If the mystic uses the aesthetic ineffable of poetic imagery to convey the supernatural ineffable of their own ecstatic experience, weird fiction relies on the horrifyingly weird to remind the reader of the unsettling gap between their knowledge and what stands outside of it. In both cases it is impossible to establish an explanatory relationship between the text and the idea that it expresses, there are simply two kinds of ineffable experiences related by means of analogy (Pektaş 2006, 94-95). The alien entities are so alien that the only possible way to talk about them is to admit one’s failure to grasp their being. That is due, however, to the weird ontological status of the Lovecraftian deities, which is reminiscent of other definitions of the divine but cannot be reduced to them. In the doctrine of Epicurus, gods are spared the sufferance and the struggle of earthly livelihood in virtue of their atomic constitution: because their atoms are so thin that they are impassible, and the compounds they are made of are eternal, they live a blissful and painless

existence, untouchable and nonetheless material (Giannantoni 1996, 22-27). The more radical model of divine transcendence, inherited by Christian theology from its neo-platonic roots (Ledda 2015, 263), translates into God's aseity, i.e., its property of being absolutely by itself (*a se*) and from itself (*ex se*; Williams 2013, 96). Neither of those models adequately captures the unique brand of cosmic indifference which characterizes the Ancient Ones. Unlike the Christian God, they occupy the very same universe as humans. They might need messengers and cultists to interact with earthlings but are nonetheless alien life forms whose way of existing is very much grounded in the cosmos. At the same time, however, a satisfying materialist account of their existence is impossible, for they seem to always inevitably escape any human understanding. «They had shape», tells us Old Castro, «but that shape was not made of matter» (Lovecraft 2008, 367), attempting to describe what no human mind could ever picture. They are distant and indifferent, yet they do not roam the Epicurean *intermundia* nor do they stand absolutely outside the world: they exist in a liminal space between the known and the unknown, constantly phasing between the two like a flickering light. Morton (2013, 64) compares the ontological weirdness of the Lovecraftian monsters to his hyper-objects, for they evade the standard conceptualization of objects and, this way, they force us to realize our insignificance.

This is another of Lovecraft's twists on mysticism. Whereas the mystic is elevated by their mystical experience, for it lets them briefly break out of the boundaries of mortal life and exist, for a moment, conjoined with God, the "Lovecraftian mystics" find only terror in their otherworldly encounters. Mystical experiences are often characterized by feelings of deep horror: to lose oneself in the infinity of God is a frightful experience, for the mystic is called upon to witness the dismembering of their own consciousness. Horror might even be considered not merely a simple byproduct of the mystical experience, but an essential part of it, as it is through the intensity of horror that one is able to abandon their mortal state. In these cases, however, fear is but a mode of God's Love: the humiliation of the human mind and the corporeal senses is necessary, because it is by discarding them that one can access, although only negatively, to God's infinity. The mystic's spirit is ignited, even if by burning terror, and they return to the earthly dimension with their senses sharpened and their spirituality deepened (Baumgartner 2021, 14). The prostration terror brings is a precondition, as it channels the self-emptying process (*κένωσις*) through which one abandons all their humanity to mystically join what absolutely transcends all that is human. Think of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, where the anonymous author utilizes the horror metaphor of darkness to represent God's unknowability: one must wait lost amidst the darkness of their ignorance, intensely loving and desperately begging for God, because only in this way will God hear their plead: «you are to step over it resolutely and eagerly, with a devout and kindling love, and try to penetrate that darkness above you. Strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love» (Anonymous 2002, 68). Lovecraftian mystics, on the other hand, experience a horror that achieves nothing beyond horror. Similarly, the reader is never inspired, never elevated by the tales, but simply *weirded out*, i.e., repulsed by the strangeness of the experience, taken aback as if returning to those very human limits they tried to escape. If for mysticism as traditionally intended horror is a starting point, to the weird mystic of Lovecraft it is the only possible end.

In the mystical ecstasy, where the subject is caught in a quasi-orgasmic state of euphoria, coinciding with the mysterious but totalizing experience of being outside of oneself, the conscious mind dissolves as it is reunited with the One. Lovecraftian mysticism, instead, takes the ego death experience and transforms it into an «element of terror beyond all the known terrors of earth – a terror peculiarly dissociated from personal fear, and taking the form of a sort of objective pity for our planet» (Lovecraft 2008, 286). Such mystical voyages appear to be cautionary tales about the horrors lurking in the shadow of human ignorance. No words could better express this feeling than the famous opening lines of *The Call of Cthulhu*:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age (Lovecraft 2008, 355).

Here, our conceptual failures are presented as a way of salvation, as a virtue, while, instead, the burning curiosity which animates our rational and scientific mind is almost a vice, a promise of an unwanted fate. The accounts of these tragic and traumatizing experiences are often explicitly presented as efforts to dissuade anyone else from taking too far their thirst for knowledge. From this emerges an underlying tension between two instincts. On the one hand, a moral compulsion to inform, like the one moving the narrating protagonist of *At the Mountains of Madness*, who prefaces his tale by declaring: «I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why» (Lovecraft 2008, 723). On the other, the need to forever hide the forbidden knowledge to prevent others from experiencing the same fate, like in the paranoia-driven words of Francis Thurston: «If I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye» (Lovecraft 2008, 379). Lacy and Zani call this phenomenon Lovecraft's "negative mysticism", because those who experience it «become chagrined instead of fulfilled, despondent instead of hopeful, disillusioned instead of content» (Lacy & Zani 2007, 71). Not all the victims of knowledge, however, are so lucky to keep a final shred of sanity: in the world of Lovecraft, madness is the most likely consequence of knowledge. A notable example is the mad poet Abdul Alhazred, a character clearly inspired by the Islamic tradition of Sufi mysticism, who is recognized as the author of the horrible and forbidden *Necronomicon*. References to this fictional work of perverse and mind-warping magic are scattered throughout the Cthulhu Mythos, yet no significant part of it is ever revealed. Only fragments and stories surrounding it sometimes resurface, as a reminder that terrifying truths are lurking in the unknown and whoever will be so unlucky to encounter them, just like those who dare to read the forbidden words of the *Necronomicon*, will lose their mind.

The weird is the aesthetic of the ineffable. This means, in the first place, that the literary genre of Weird Fiction, especially as it was developed in the Lovecraftian tales, is concerned with the age-old problem of expressing what-cannot-be-said through allegorical means. In the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius writes «the Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences but, as I have already said, it does so not for the sake of art, but as a concession to the nature of our own mind» (1987, 148). In the same vein, Schopenhauer links together the mystical and the artistic aspects of religion: «a symptom of this allegorical nature of religions is the mysteries, to be found perhaps in every religion, that is, certain dogmas that cannot even be distinctly conceived, much less be literally true», which are «the only suitable way of making the ordinary mind and uncultured understanding *feel* what would be incomprehensible to it» (2011, 185-186). Now, this passage suggests that religious mysteries use ineffability merely to pander to the commoner's inability to comprehend certain philosophical truths, as if a finer mind would not require the aid of allegorical poetry to venture into the depths of reality (Vanden Auweele 2017, 459-461). From Lovecraft's perspective, on the other hand, human intellectual faculties are inherently incapable of reaching outside very narrow limits and the artistic form is not simply useful, but inevitable. Schopenhauer has nonetheless captured the crucial element that relates the arts to the mystical, that of feeling and perception. In the quoted passage, Schopenhauer writes that the allegorical formulation of the mysteries makes truth sensible, perceivable (he writes *fühlfbar zu machen*): to say that the weird has an aesthetic role, then, is to say it has to do with αἴσθησις (perception, sensibility). The word 'mystery' itself, from which 'mysticism' derives, is an interesting clue. Used originally in

reference to the secret religious practices of Greco-Roman antiquity (τὰ μυστήρια), preserves up to this day the theological meaning of hidden divine truth, together with the more mundane meaning of ‘not yet explained’. For what concerns the horror genre, however, ‘mystery’ assumes a more specific and codifiable meaning as a particular sensation: «Terror suggests the frenzy of physical and mental fear of pain, dismemberment, and death. Horror suggests the perception of something incredibly evil or morally repellent. Mystery suggests something beyond this, the perception of a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence» (Thompson 1974, 3). To Lovecraft, as we already established, nothing is more frightful, nothing inflicts a deeper wound in a human’s sanity, than the mystery of the unknown. Weirdness brings forth this mystery and pervades the reader’s mind but brings no resolution. In this regard, Lovecraft always stayed rigorously true to the principles of apophatic theology, according to which we can be aware of this irreparable absence «but only in that sense in which we can be conscious of the failure of our knowledge, not knowing what it is that our knowledge fails to reach» which is «not the same thing as being conscious of the absence of God in any sense which entails that we are conscious of what it is that is absent» (Turner 1995, 265).

Such mystery cannot be solved, for that is the nature of the unknown. No deeper understanding awaits the Lovecraftian reader, nothing lies beyond the uncontested bleakness which reigns over the literary and philosophical world of Lovecraft: truth is despair, freedom is fear, knowledge is madness. Ignorance is the only way out, but not even the mind-numbing powers of religion are of any help. Art appears to be the only thing capable of momentarily suspending the otherwise unstoppable mechanism of the universe, but this weird mystical experience comes at the price of an alienating terror: «When we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted Outside – we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold» (SL II.150).

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