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Chthonic powers: T.S. Eliot and H.P. Lovecraft

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Chthonic powers: T.S. Eliot and H.P. Lovecraft

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CHTHONIC POWERS: T.S. ELIOT AND H.P. LOVECRAFT

By

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Contents

Introduction: Two Men Out of Modernity.....	2
Different Voices and Other Gods.....	9
The Cosmic Shore.....	30

Abbreviations

CC: *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, H.P. Lovecraft

CPP: *The Complete Poems and Plays*, T.S. Eliot

LVW: *Lord of a Visible World: An Autobiography in Letters*, H.P. Lovecraft

MW: *Miscellaneous Writings*, H.P. Lovecraft

NCE: *The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism* (Norton Critical Edition)¹

SP: *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*

WLF: *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*

¹ The Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land* contains a variety of source texts, essays, and annotations which I make use of; rather than citing these individually I will in simply cite *NCE* along with the appropriate page number

Introduction: Two Men out of Modernity

The primary aim of the present study is to demonstrate a particular cultural phenomenon: that of two writers of far removed literary circles nonetheless demonstrating a kinship of sensibility and aesthetic material in their works. One of these men is Howard Philips Lovecraft, a pulp science fiction author and amateur journalist, the other is Thomas Stearns Eliot, a modernist poet. That they were far removed from one another in life and readership there can be no doubt. Certainly the differences in the two men's society divide them: Lovecraft missed out on formal higher education and participated in the amateur press, while Eliot attended Harvard and become a recognized poet. Likewise, Lovecraft purported to have become skeptical of the existence of god prior to the age of five (*MW* 533) and remained an atheist for the whole of his life, while for Eliot religion was of prime importance. Yet these differences notwithstanding, there are a number of parallels in their lives and writings. Born only two years apart, Lovecraft in 1890 and Eliot in 1888, both trace their lineage to old New England families (*LVW* 4; Ackroyd 15), and it was in 1917, the year *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published, that Lovecraft began producing the nearly continuous stream of short fiction which lasted until his death. As such, these authors' most productive periods appear in near-alignment, writing at the same time, at roughly the same age. That they were both influenced in a manner by the French Symbolist movement unites them further, supplying their writing with a common reservoir of symbols and images from the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud. Keeping all of these similarities in mind, I will demonstrate the manner in which Eliot and Lovecraft, contemporaries as they were in time and born of a common literary and cultural heritage, occupied a similarly common imaginative space. Upon

investigation, seemingly drastically divergent texts as the modern poem *The Waste Land* and the pulp-prose “The Call of Cthulhu” appear as different configurations of kindred experience. Eliot’s often stark verse bears more closely to the present and the real, but never without inclination towards the mythic and cosmic which characterizes Lovecraft. Lines of Eliot’s writing could very easily be adapted as titles for Lovecraft’s tales; while Eliot’s “Prufrock” asks whether he might dare to “disturb the universe” (46), so many of Lovecraft’s protagonists find themselves in the midst of its disruption.

It was in a 1951 essay by Eliot on the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, to whom he and Lovecraft both owed much, that Eliot contemplated that,

the indefinite elaboration of scientific discovery and invention, and of political and social machinery, may reach a point at which there will be an irresistible revulsion of humanity and a readiness to accept the most primitive hardships rather than carry any longer the burden of modern civilization. (“From Poe” 342)

This hypothesis, albeit followed by the qualification that he held “no fixed opinion” on it, reflects almost identically the sentiment professed by the narrator of Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” in the story’s first paragraph:

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 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. (CC 139)

This mutual imagining, if purely fictitious or speculative, highlights their arrival at a common understanding of the place and nature of humanity. By examining their texts in tandem we are able to understand these authors in a somewhat unconventional, but

ultimately revealing manner. In regards to Eliot, for example, I will demonstrate the presence and significance in his writing of strange gods, as well as a cosmic perspective that is easily overlooked. For Lovecraft, on the other hand, this reading demonstrates the manner in which his writing was as distinctly a response to modernity as that of anyone we might call a “Modernist.” In this the present study is but a part of a greater attempt to recognize and understand what exactly that artistic movement was, for as any cultural movement its beginning, end, and character are not definite: all we may say in any certain terms is that it happened.

Towards the development of modernist art Lovecraft is often abrasive, in one essay stating that “the aesthetic generation of T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Ben Hecht, Aldous Huxley, James Branch Cabell, and all the rest ... knowing that life has no real pattern, either rave, or mock, or join in the cosmic chaos by exploiting a frank and conscious unintelligibility and confusion of values” (*MW* 110). Indeed, towards Eliot he was especially incredulous: while vocally critical of many modes of Modernism, it was *The Waste Land* that so bothered him as to move him to parody, producing “The Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance” (*Ancient* 252). Yet he in turn displays a certain respect for such works: in 1924, two years after producing this satire, he called Joyce’s *Ulysses* a “significant [contribution] to contemporary art” (*MW* 242). That Lovecraft exhibited such a dramatic ambivalence towards the traditional modernist canon in his own work while sharing its thematic concerns and material makes him an ideal subject through which to study the development of modern literature. As Edmund Wilson states in *Axel’s Castle*, one of the first works to identify this movement,

one must guard against giving the impression that these movements and counter-movements necessarily follow one another in a punctual and well-generalled

fashion ... one set of methods and ideas is not completely superseded by another; but that, on the contrary, it thrives in its teeth—so that, on the one hand, Flaubert's prose has learned to hear, see and feel with delicate senses of Romanticism at the same time that Flaubert is disciplining and criticizing the Romantic temperament[.] (10-11).

No author, then, may be seen as the embodiment of a movement, so much as working independently within its context. Thus in considering Lovecraft here I am looking at him as a member of the same context as Eliot, and by so doing attempting to identify the character of this context. In the broadest sense of my discussion this context is modernity, but in particular respects it may be more specific, such as the Massachusetts coast, reading of anthropological texts, or literary heritage.

Regarding heritage, perhaps the foremost mutual influence lies in the figure of Edgar Allan Poe. Lovecraft was greatly influenced by Poe, devoting a chapter to him in his 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in which he traces the history of "a literature of cosmic fear" (27). This section he begins adamantly: "In the eighteenth-thirties occurred a literary dawn directly affecting not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole; and indirectly moulding the trends and fortunes of a great European aesthetic school" (54). The school referred to is, undoubtedly, the French Symbolist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, the influence of which was central to Wilson's examination in *Axel's Castle*. In this work as well Poe's foundational role is emphasized, with Wilson calling his critical writings "the first scriptures of the Symbolist Movement" (12). The Symbolists, and the subsequent Decadents, played a well-documented role in the development of several prominent modernist writers, and

were highly regarded by Lovecraft as well, who in his story "The Hound" established their writing as an impetuous towards morbid exploration:

The enigmas of the Symbolists and the ecstasies of the pre-Raphaelites all were ours in their time, but each new mood was drained too soon of its diverting novelty and appeal. Only the somber philosophy of the Decadents could hold us, and this we found potent only by increasing gradually the depth and diabolism of our penetrations. Baudelaire and Huysmans were soon exhausted of thrills, till finally there remained for us only the more direct stimuli of unnatural personal experiences and adventures. (*CC* 81)

Thus in this regard Lovecraft was drawing on the same literary influences as Eliot, who included verbatim lines of such poets as Baudelaire and Laforgue in some of his most prominent poetry. While this particular commonality will not be discussed in depth here, it is a significant one, also enmeshing Lovecraft with other prominent modernist figures such as W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound.

It is important to note here that while I will look primarily at his prose, Lovecraft did, in fact, write a considerable amount of verse. This work was largely conventional in form, unlike that of Eliot, as Lovecraft advocated an adherence to metrical regularity (*MW* 205). His efforts in this area he regarded with doubt himself, writing in 1921 of his early attempts published in amateur journals,

I unfortunately possessed the delusion that I could write verse; a delusion which caused me to alienate my readers by means of many long and execrably dull metrical inflictions. An old-fashioned style at present out of favour added to the completeness of my failure (*MW* 451)

What is interesting to note here is that although his method of writing poetry varied wildly from that of Eliot, his justification for this method aligns very well with Eliot's own understanding of meter. In his 1915 essay on "Metrical Regularity," Lovecraft justifies his adherence to established forms of verse by invoking scientific knowledge:

Science can likewise trace the metrical instinct from the very infancy of mankind, or even beyond, to the pre-human age of the apes. Nature is in itself an unending succession of regular impulses. The steady recurrence of the seasons and of the moonlight, the coming and going of the day, the ebb and flow of the tides, the beating of the heart and pulses, the tread of the feet in walking, and countless other phenomena of regularity, have all combined to inculcate in the human brain a rhythmic sense which is manifest in the most uncultivated, as in the most polished of peoples. (*MW* 205)

The idea of an inherent "rhythmic sense" as he illustrates it here was similarly arrived at by Eliot, who utilized scientific knowledge in his thought as well. In a 1923 essay titled "The Beating of a Drum," Eliot advises literary critics to study "such books as 'The Origin of Species' itself, and 'Ancient Law,' and 'Primitive Culture'" and proceeds to hypothesize the use of such texts in understanding the qualities of archetypes such as, in this case, the Fool in Elizabethan drama. His argument here is largely Darwinian in origin, following "the theory of the development of tragedy and comedy out of a common form," on the basis of which he reconsiders "such abstractions" of civilization (11). He argues that superseding the abstractions of form is an essential rhythm, identified by Aristotle as the common element of poetry, music, and dancing (12). This conception of rhythm, existing prior to the form which embodies it, Eliot illustrates: "an unoccupied person, finding a drum, may be seized with a desire to beat it; but unless he

is an imbecile he will be unable to continue beating it . . . without finding a reason for so doing" (12). This image of a primitive person beating a drum is echoed in Lovecraft's earlier essay, where he wrote that "Savages shew [the metric sense] in its simplest form while dancing to the sound of primitive drums" (*MW* 205). Thus we see that although they utilized their understanding of it in very different ways, the two authors shared a conception of an inherent rhythm which precedes form.

It would seem then that Lovecraft's adherence to metrical regularity was based upon his own classicist perspective. In a 1914 letter he writes that he "[o]nce privately tried imitations of modern poets, but turned away in distaste. Their vocabulary and technic alike seem utterly strange to an ancient like myself" (*LVW* 65). Although setting himself opposite the modern poets, his classicist inclination further solidifies his similitude to T.S. Eliot. For Eliot too was a classicist, most dramatically declaring so in 1929 when he wrote that he was a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (Ackroyd 174). Perhaps one of the most important essays of his career was, in fact, his 1919 "Tradition and the Individual Talent," wherein he argued that a man is compelled to write "with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (*SP* 38). That Lovecraft shared a similar conception may be evidenced in a 1923 essay in which he criticizes those "steeped in the orthodox English literature of the middle nineteenth century rather than immersed in the universal stream which knows neither time nor country" (*MW* 236). In both of these formulations there is conceived an order to literature which transcends a single, present generation. Here I would note that it is conceivable that Lovecraft may have arrived at this idea through Eliot, although there is no evidence that

he read "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and may well have come to it of his own formulation.

Interestingly, in his study *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*, Leon Surette connects Eliot's conception of tradition with "occult notions of a secret tradition," in that it maintains a tradition which subsists "independently of official institutions and dogmas" by way of individuals (38). This is particularly significant in that although neither Lovecraft nor Eliot participated in the occult, both utilized it to some degree in their imaginative work. If, as Surette argues, the occult influence played a defining role in conceiving the character of modernist writing, then it would follow that Lovecraft fell just as much in line with it as T.S. Eliot. The presence of the occult in their writing will become all the more relevant in the following section, wherein it will play a key role in my comparison of Eliot's 1922 *The Waste Land* and Lovecraft's 1926 "The Call of Cthulhu," two of the authors' most recognized works. These texts, read in tandem, provide a compelling view of how the two authors experienced modernity and how they coped with it in literature. We discover a concern particularly with the strange, which for both is manifested imaginatively out of mythical material.

Different Voices and Other Gods

It is telling that in his criticism of T.S. Eliot's landmark poem *The Waste Land* Lovecraft called it "a practically meaningless collection of phrases, learned allusions, quotations, slang, and scraps in general" (MW 233), for it was a collection of "scraps in general" that would make up the text of his own 1926 short story "The Call of Cthulhu." This text, featuring easily the most popularized of Lovecraft's imaginings, is in fact

atypical of his work in terms of narrative structure. The story is related in the first person by Francis Wayland Thurston, who takes almost no role in the narrative action, instead relating to the reader various documents, artifacts, and accounts associated with the "CTHULHU CULT" which his deceased uncle, Professor George Angell, had researched privately prior to his mysterious death; the death of this 92 year old "authority on ancient inscriptions" is markedly unattributable to any visible disorder (140). The assorted fragments inform the reader in the first part of the story of the production of an ancient bas-relief by a contemporary artist accompanied by an eruption of strange dreams the world over; in the second part of the arrival of a strange idol at a meeting of the fictional "American Archaeological Society" seventeen years earlier and the recollections shared there; and in the third and final part of the disastrous voyage of a group of sailors. As such the story is not bound to one particular setting or character but through these fragments invokes such diverse locales as New Orleans, New Zealand, Greenland, and Lovecraft's native Rhode Island. This fragmentation of narrative is not simply a device to allow for use of such diverse regions, but is integral to how the story is to be understood. It begins, "[t]he 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" (139). Thus, from the start, the story is concerned with incomprehensibility and the finiteness of the individual perception. In this the tale resembles T.S. Eliot's "scraps," where he adopted the "Voices of Society" rather than a single individual (*NCE* 72). This is made all the more evident by the earlier title of *The Waste Land*, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," adapted from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel which presents the reader with disparate London lives that gradually

cohere. The incoherent and incomprehensible are essential to both texts, and it is in their common significance, as well as in the scraps they share, that a comparison of the two begins to become viable.

Similar to the manner in which Lovecraft locates his narrator in his native city of Providence, Eliot makes London central to his poem. The city is evoked either by reference to specific landmarks or the use of native dialect in each part of the work excepting part IV, "Death By Water," the shortest segment of the poem. In "The Burial of the Dead," for example, Eliot writes that "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many" (61-62) and in "The Fire Sermon" the speaker apostrophizes "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" (176). Through allusions such as these, he establishes London as a central space of the poem, even while the whole is disparate, containing references to events, places, or myths far removed in time and space. Thus both authors use a city they had lived in and known intimately as the space from which textual disparity is presented. This is not to say, necessarily, that in either case the respective cities serve a unifying function in themselves. Although Lovecraft's narrator is situated in Providence, the city's particular atmosphere does not enter into this text and could be exchanged for any university town. Eliot's use of London in *The Waste Land* is of more significance, but the lines which evoke it are no less fragmentary than any other portion of the poem. London is an important space for the work, and it could very well be argued that it is the primary space, but it is not removed from the "scraps" and does not serve any framing function. These cities of great importance to their authors are incorporated into their fragmentary texts, but only as relative spaces among others. If there is unification present in either text, it is in how their respective fragments are read. In this the fact that both works share common

sources for their fragments is of the utmost relevance and further suggests the importance of a linked reading.

In introducing his notes on *The Waste Land* Eliot directs the reader to two source texts in particular: Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. These are both referred to by him as works of anthropology, but what is significant about them in particular is their concern with the origins of ritual and myth. While *The Golden Bough*, a landmark work, offered a euhemeristic elucidation of religion, rooting its myths and rituals in the acts of the natural world (*NCE* 30), Weston's book is a more curious case. In his *The Birth of Modernism*, Surette evidences that Weston's study, while scholarly in execution, was based in a belief in the occult, notably drawing upon the thought of theosophist G.R.S. Mead (234-235). Unlike Frazer's study, which bases myth in the material world, *From Ritual to Romance* is based on the "hypothesis" as Surette explains it, "of a wisdom secretly maintained from remote antiquity by societies and enlightened individuals" (234). He shows that of this understanding there can be little doubt, citing Weston's participation in the theosophical "Quest Society" lectures (233) and a claim made in an her earlier work *The Quest of the Holy Grail* that "readers of romances, unacquainted with the Grail literature in general but familiar with 'occult' tradition and practices, should invariably detect this [initiation] element in the story" (240). Eliot's selection of these two works as elucidative sources for the reader of his poem is echoed in Lovecraft's story. In this case the narrator finds among the papers of his late uncle "references to passages in such mythological and anthropological source-books as Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Miss Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*" (142). The latter of these is, like Weston's text, a scholarly work which claimed the existence of an occult tradition. In this case the

tradition is that of an underground witch-cult that had its origin in a pre-Aryan race. S.T. Joshi notes that this text is “regarded by modern scholars as highly unlikely,” but was received by the author with enthusiasm, as it “perfectly meshed with some of Lovecraft’s own *literary* tropes” (CC 385). Just as Eliot in his notes shares two works of anthropology, one *The Golden Bough* and the other mixing the subject with the occult, as elucidative of his fragmentary text, Lovecraft does so for his narrator.

In Lovecraft’s case, the significance of the occult element is readily apparent: the idea of a secret tradition, which may only be understood by the initiated forms the basis for his own Cthulhu cult. In one passage an incarcerated member of the cult describes the cult’s origin:

those first men formed the cult around small idols which the Great Ones shewed them; idols brought in dim aeras from dark stars. That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. (155)

The narrative action of Lovecraft’s story is centered on that point when “the stars came right again” and imaginative minds the world over were visited by visions, the “call” signified in the story’s title. In Eliot’s case, however, the significance of the occult is less clear. Leon Surette notes that the significance of *From Ritual to Romance* has proved problematic to critics of *The Waste Land*, writing that “[t]he mainstream critical consensus, then, has underplayed Weston’s relevance to the poem even in the face of Eliot’s headnote” (236). He attributes this in part to a lack of understanding of the theosophical nature of Weston’s text, which led scholars to accept it as “a standard folkloric study belonging to the Frazer school” (234). In his own assessment, Surette hypothesizes that “Weston’s arguments for a lost mystery religion – like the Grail legend

itself and the tarot pack – provided Eliot with a framework that was as factitious as the Odyssey was for Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (274). He writes that due to Weston’s regard of the Grail legend as an exoteric representation of an initiation rite,

we do not need to choose between a Grail motif and an initiation motif, but can see them as exoteric and esoteric aspects of the same sacred mystery – a mystery, moreover, which Weston tells us is not known to the authors of the Grail stories and therefore need not be known to the author of *The Waste Land* either. (269)

Thus, if we are to imagine Eliot’s use of the Grail legend by way of *From Ritual to Romance* as analogous to Joyce’s use of *The Odyssey* in *Ulysses*, then the unknown esoteric portent of the deliberately fragmented and exoteric poem may be seen as playing a unifying role. This conception of the poem would then impart a similar framework to that of “Cthulhu,” where the fragments discovered by the narrator exoterically develop into an understanding of an esoteric event.

There can also be exhibited a parallel narrative function of the esoteric, in that both texts introduce a portent of doomed sailors in their first part by way of a vision. Eliot introduces “Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante” (43) in “The Burial of the Dead,” wherein she declares “Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor” (46-47), anticipating the scene of the fourth part of the poem which describes “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead” (312). Lovecraft, on his part, introduces as the inciting incident of Professor George Angell’s investigations a contemporary artist who produces a seemingly ancient bas-relief during a dream of

great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror. Hieroglyphics had covered the walls

and pillars, and from some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice[.] (143)

The city referred to here is later revealed to be “R’lyeh” (155), risen from the ocean floor, upon which a group of unknowing sailors find themselves in the final part of the story, “The Madness from the Sea,” and the “voice that was not a voice” is that of Cthulhu, the strange god they encounter there. Thus in “Cthulhu” the significance of the vision is clear, but to have an idea of such significance in the case of *The Waste Land* we must recourse to Ezra Pound’s editing. Pound advised Eliot to remove the bulk of “Death By Water” but asserted: “Phlebas is an integral part of the poem; the card pack introduces him, the drowned phoen. sailor. And he is needed ABSOlootly where he is” (*WLF* 129). That Eliot followed this counsel suggests that he agreed with Pound’s reasoning. In both cases the initial vision is integral, forming the basis for later textual events.

There is no reason to believe that either Eliot or Lovecraft believed in occult concepts to any degree, with Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican church isolating him from such belief (240) and Lovecraft thoroughly considering himself an atheist and a mechanistic materialist (*MW* 129). They each, it seems, utilized theosophical thought to depict their respective conceptions of modern reality. As Surette concludes,

Weston provided Eliot with a framework that permitted the interpenetration and overlap of Christian, classical, and medieval legendary material in an ‘ordered’ if not orderly manner – which interpenetration yields a rhetorical structure that mimes the confused spiritual state of modern man and (most probably) of the author of *The Waste Land*. (278)

Even were we to take Surette’s argument for naught, and suggest that Eliot read Weston without knowledge or acknowledgement of her theosophical thought, it remains that

The Waste Land was received as esoteric in nature by readers. One early essay on the poem is titled “The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot” (North 156), but not for any perceived involvement with the occult: “the esotericism of ‘The Waste Land’ is different: it is deliberate mystification. For the structure of the poem is loose: it is full of interstices” (157). Another early review states that “only the pundit, the pedant, or the clairvoyant” will be aware of the poem’s “meaning, plan, and intention” (156). In and of itself, *The Waste Land* garnered a reputation of being esoteric; even were it not for Eliot’s reference to Weston’s book as a hermeneutic device, the poem’s fragmented form marked it as such.

The conception of a unified meaning esoterically hidden behind the exoteric was not exclusive to the occult, though, and was perhaps representative of a more widespread fantasy. That *From Ritual and Romance* and *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* were presented as serious anthropological studies is at first striking, but in looking closely at the methodology of the Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* it becomes apparent that the two subjects were at this time highly compatible. In her essay “The Case of the Missing Abstraction: Eliot, Frazer, and Modernism,” Jewel Spears Brooker explains that Frazer “was one of those scientists who extended Darwin’s thesis (evolution) and Darwin’s method (comparative study of fragments) into the social sciences” (544). As such, Darwin’s concept of a common ancestor for humanity becomes transmuted into “a common ancestor for all religions.” In neither the case is this ancestor present or readily apparent. Brooker explains that

Just as the common parent of the human species exists only as an abstraction, only as an intellectual construction built up from surviving fragments changed in the process of evolution, the common parent myth exists only as an abstraction.

If one should find widely scattered fragments of pottery . . . he would be led to realize the whole, the original, as an abstraction. (547-548)

This anthropological process of constructing a parent myth as an abstraction is nearly identical to the search for an esoteric truth by an occultist. Indeed, when read in tandem with Surette's summation that "[t]he occult scholar is typically engaged in an effort to recover an ancient wisdom that survives only in scattered fragments and in the practice of marginalized or secret societies" (50) it seems inevitable that these two contemporaneous bodies of knowledge would intermix as they did in the texts cited by Eliot and Lovecraft.

What is more, Brooker connects Frazer's methodology, of identifying unity in an abstraction from fragments, with what Eliot termed the "mythical method" (*SP* 178). This method, elucidated after *The Waste Land's* publication in a 1923 review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot called "a step toward making the modern world possible for art" (*SP* 178). Foremost Eliot is singling out here Joyce's "parallel to the *Odyssey*, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division" (*SP* 175), but Brooker makes clear that there has been no consensus on what exactly the import of this method is outside of *Ulysses*, particularly in reference to *The Waste Land* (540-543). In considering Eliot's claims that the mythical method "had the importance of a scientific discovery" and was made possible by "Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology and *The Golden Bough*" she proposes that it follows from the method of Frazer and thus

solves the chaos-unity dilemma by allowing the co-existence of surface chaos and subsurface unity. Unity derives neither from sequence nor from abstractions

shared by a culture, but from an abstraction selected by an artist and constructed collaboratively with individual readers. (549)

This explication, when applied to *The Waste Land*, works almost exactly parallel to Surette's hypothesis that Eliot utilized *From Ritual to Romance* in the same manner that Joyce did the *Odyssey*. In either case exotericism is the primary factor, with an implied or indirect unity arising from the work as a whole.

Lovecraft, in a similar manner to Eliot in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," identified a method of overcoming the problem of modernity in another contemporary Irish author, Lord Dunsany. Superficially quite different from a writer like Joyce, Dunsany was distinctly a fantasist, imagining places, myths, and gods with made up names like Pegāna, Skarl, and Yoharneth-Lahai (Dunsany 5). Yet in him Lovecraft saw the solution to the problem posed by modernity just as Eliot saw it in Joyce. In his 1922 essay "Lord Dunsany and His Work," Lovecraft writes that the fantasist

is in this way both a conservative and a modern; a conservative because he still believes that beauty is a thing of golden rememberings and simple patterns, and a modern because he perceives that only in arbitrarily selected fancy can we find fixed any of the patterns of our golden rememberings (*MW* 105)

This statement is akin to the sentiment of Eliot in his later essay; the juxtaposition of conservatism and modern sensibility that Lovecraft identifies in Dunsany is alike in its substance to the "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (*SP* 177) that Eliot identifies in *Ulysses*. All the more important, however, is the method identified by Lovecraft by which this juxtaposition is achieved. That he understands the "arbitrarily selected fancy" to be the only way past patterns may be "fixed" in Dunsany's writing is not only reminiscent of the occult search for a hidden tradition in the

disparate, but also of the methodology of the Darwinian approach to anthropology. As Brooker writes, “[t]he unity of *The Golden Bough* does not depend on the chronological or logical arrangement of Frazer’s fragments . . . With minimal or no damage to his thesis, he could rearrange them, or he could throw some out and/or add others” (549). Likewise, just as Frazer attempted to conceive a “common parent myth” as an abstraction, Dunsany imagined his fantasies as preceding all others. A passage from the first pages of his 1905 book *The Gods of Pegāna* tells that “[b]efore there stood gods upon Olympus, or ever Allah was Allah, had wrought and rested MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI” (8).

All of this considered, it appears that Lovecraft’s regard for Dunsany operated parallel to Eliot’s regard for Joyce in their respective attempts at “making the modern world possible for art.” Although each incorporating very similar regard for the role of myth and how myth may have been apprehended, they nonetheless chose highly divergent methods: Eliot drew his explication of the “mythical method” in direct opposition to the narrative method in which Lovecraft wrote (*SP* 178). Later in his essay on Dunsany Lovecraft writes that art

will be saved, if at all, by the next and last step of disillusion; the realization that complete consciousness and truth are themselves valueless, and that to acquire any genuine artistic titillation we must artificially invent limitations of consciousness and feign a pattern of life common to all mankind – most naturally the simple old pattern which ancient and groping tradition first gave us. (110)

Thus he takes recourse to established forms and methods by means of invented limitations. By becoming thoroughly disillusioned, Lovecraft argues, one may enjoy again “old ideas, atmospheres, types, situations, and lighting effects in a deft pictorial

way; a way tinged with affectionate reminiscence as for fallen gods" (111). This method, combined with "a cosmic and gently satirical realization of the true microscopic insignificance of the man-puppets" is that by which he is able to imagine Cthulhu and other fantastic imaginings. While Eliot in poetry is able to utilize the exoteric to imagine with the reader the esoteric, as in *The Waste Land*, Lovecraft ventures to play with the esoteric in his disillusioned imagining of it.

Yet myth as it were was indispensable to both, functioning as a substantive aspect of their theories. This is betrayed in one instance by their common claiming of the mythically-minded poet Yeats as representative of the methods they advocate (*SP* 177, *MW* 111), but yet more distinctly by the clear mutual importance of Homer's *Odyssey* to them. While Eliot praises Joyce's use of the epic in his review, Lovecraft asserts that throughout the work of Dunsany "one may trace the inspiration of the *Odyssey*" which he notes is "of much vaster genius than its more martial antecedent, the *Iliad*" (105). In both men's formulation of how to use myth in the modern age, this particular epic was foremost in mind. A retelling of that story had, in fact, made for one of Lovecraft's first juvenile attempts at writing, entitled "The Adventures of Ulysses; or, The New Odyssey" (*MW* 450). The final section of "The Call of Cthulhu" bears a distinct resemblance to a chapter of the epic, featuring a group of sailors who are sent off course, attacked, and arrive on an alien island inhabited by a monstrous being. Lovecraft goes so far as to compare his Cthulhu directly to the Cyclops encountered by Odysseus. As the sailors attempt to escape the island, "the titan Thing from the stars slavered and gibbered like Polypheme cursing the fleeing ship of Odysseus. Then, bolder than the storied Cyclops, great Cthulhu slid greasily into the water and began to pursue" (168).

Were it not for the editing of Ezra Pound, *The Waste Land* too might have featured such a narrative as the last section of "Cthulhu." Draft versions of "Part IV. Death by Water" were much longer than what was ultimately published, featuring a long section which relates the story of sailors at sea who come upon a strange monument. Just as the crew of Lovecraft's story were thrown off course by "that earthquake-born tempest which must have heaved up from the sea-bottom the horrors that filled men's dreams" (164), the sailors of Eliot's invention were blown off course by a gale ushered in with "an unfamiliar gust" (59). In this instance too the gale is accompanied by horrific dreams; the speaker recounts seeing women who sing as the sirens featured in *The Odyssey* and being

Frightened beyond fear, horrified past horror, calm.

(Nothing was real) for, I thought, now, when

I like, I can wake up and end the dream. (59)

The horror of the dream cannot be avoided, however, as the following lines reveal a strange construct in the unknown region the sailors have entered:

Something which we knew must be a dawn—

A different darkness, flowed above the clouds,

And dead ahead we saw, where sky and sea should meet,

A line, a white line, a long white line,

A wall, a barrier, towards which we drove.

My God man theres bears on it.

Not a chance, Home and mother.

Where's a cocktail shaker, Ben, here's plenty of cracked ice.

Remember me. (61)

The speaker's description of the sight is fragmentary, giving the barest impression of the scene, noting only the wall's immenseness, color, and the markings upon it. In much the same manner, Lovecraft's narrator observes such a fragmentary relation in the manuscript left by the Second Mate Johansen:

instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs (165)

Another particular shared by the two narratives that must be noted is the “different darkness” marked by Eliot's speaker, for the vault that holds Cthulhu is “black with a darkness almost material. That tenebrousness was indeed a *positive quality*” and that darkness “actually burst forth like smoke from its aeon-long imprisonment, visibly darkening the sun” (167). The representation of darkness is nearly identical between the two texts, furthering the similitude suggested by their narratives. This is significant as it highlights commonalities both in sources and in intention. For their part both writers were ultimately indebted to Homer, but neither so without mediating influence. Eliot disclosed that in writing this section he was “rather inspired” by the Ulysses Canto in *The Divine Comedy*, in which the hero of *The Odyssey* tells of his last voyage, on which he died in a storm on approaching Purgatory (*WLF* 128). Interestingly, in writing of this passage in 1929 Eliot declares that it had “the quality of *surprise* which Poe declared to be essential to poetry” (*SP* 213). For the comparison at hand this statement is significant not only due to Lovecraft's deep admiration of Poe, but also because in describing the darkness at the risen city of R'lyeh as a “positive quality” he was in fact borrowing directly from that author's “The Fall of the House of Usher” (*CC* 398). Thus we see Eliot

and Lovecraft hark back to the horror writer in reference to very similar scenes, each having in mind an effect of shock or terror. If we accept Eliot's connection of the draft version of "Death by Water" with Ulysses' approach of Purgatory, or take the "long white line" where "sky and sea should meet" as something cosmic in proportion, then it becomes clear that both scenes present a terrifying confrontation of an individual with an imposing manifestation of a divinity that is foreign to them.

It is in the shock and terror involved in this confrontation that the two authors diverged most from the occult material that they variably drew upon. For the participant in the occult its portent would undoubtedly be seen as positive, initiation into the esoteric giving access to ancient wisdom (Surette 7). Yet neither Lovecraft nor Eliot's texts present us with such optimism. Lovecraft writes early in his tale, "[theosophists] have hinted at strange survivals in terms which would freeze the blood if not masked by a bland optimism" (139). Instead his speaker is met with alien gods, strange and distant from mankind. Even the name "Cthulhu" is meant to be totally alien: in explaining the its pronunciation Lovecraft writes in a 1934 letter:

...the word is supposed to represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an *absolutely non-human* word. The name of the hellish entity was invented by beings whose vocal organs were not like man's, hence it has no relation to the human speech equipment. The syllables were determined by a physiological equipment wholly unlike ours, *hence could never be uttered perfectly by human throats* (395)

In the essay "H.P. Lovecraft: Myth-Maker," Dirk Mosig argues that Lovecraft's "pseudomythology," manifest in his creations' variable re-appearance throughout his stories, "was *not* a reaction against his austere and parsimonious materialistic

philosophy, but instead formed the natural outgrowth of the same" (106). He writes that the author's "Old Ones" were not simply good or evil but "inimical to man, in the same way that man would appear to be inimical to ants, should these get in his way" (107). Eliot, in his manner, introduces a strange god as well, in the form of the Thunder in "V. What the Thunder Said," lifted from a fable found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (CPP 54). This is not a cosmically alien deity as in Lovecraft's text, but certainly one culturally remote from the predominantly Christian Europe of the early 20th century. That its remoteness is critically so is made distinct by the violent, grotesque nature of the lines which precede its introduction, such as "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (374-377) and "There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home. / It has no windows, and the door swings, / Dry bones can harm no one" (389-391). Notably, in *The Waste Land* the message of the Thunder is only accessible through interpretation. It only presents one syllable, "Da," which is the root of the words "Datta," "Dayadhvam," and "Damyata" which follow (NCE 18-19). Respectively meaning "give," "compassion," and "control," their meaning is instructive, but the inhuman Thunder only sounds "Da." What is more, Eliot does not provide a translation for any of these terms within the text of the poem, making them appear entirely alien to the majority of readers not familiar with the ancient language of Sanskrit. Thus these gods summoned into text by Lovecraft and Eliot were indeed strange, manifestly foreign and outside of their author's native tradition.

In both cases, though, some biographical knowledge shows that these gods were actually intimately known by them. In a 1922 essay Lovecraft confesses, "[b]y my thirteenth birthday I was thoroughly impressed with man's impermanence and insignificance, and by my seventeenth ... I had formed in all essential particulars my

present pessimistic cosmic views” (MW 536). The cosmic horror of Cthulhu was derived from his own regard of the universe, brought into perspective by his study of astronomy. Eliot, on his part, had dedicated himself to the study of Sanskrit at Harvard, gaining a degree of intimacy with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy (Ackroyd 47). The deities in the “The Call of Cthulhu” and *The Waste Land* were invoked of their author’s own studies, as if shocked by their own revelation. In each case I would hypothesize that the reaction in their writings was brought on by the striking relativity of their knowledge. Contained in the realization of the vastness of space and time for Lovecraft was the relative smallness of mankind, and in the investigation of Sanskrit for Eliot there was the realization that the relative complexity of Indian philosophers made “most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys” (*After Strange* 43). This is not to call the two men relativists; in fact they were more likely just the contrary. These self-described classicists exhibited momentous shock at their realizations. A most dramatic example of this may be seen in Lovecraft’s reaction to the eclipse observations which proved Einstein’s general theory of relativity:

...it removes the last hold which reality or the universe can have on the independent mind. All is chance, accident, and ephemeral illusion – a fly may be greater than Arcturus, and Durfee Hill may surpass Mount Everest – assuming them to be removed from the present planet and differently environed in the continuum of space-time. There are no values in all infinity – the least idea that there are is the supreme mockery of all. All the cosmos is a jest, and fit to be treated only as a jest, and one thing is as true as another. (MW 119)

Such a total revaluation of the nature of physical reality shocked Lovecraft into a heralding in of new gods in his fiction, gods whose existence was beyond prior

imagination. In a period where reevaluations of this type were multiple, with the recognition of relative existence of many human beliefs and institutions, occultism and Darwinian anthropology attempted to find a relief, a hidden unity within a disparate reality. That Lovecraft as well as Eliot utilized this analogue, in each case in a perverted form, is understandable. In their works we see a kind of vision within multiplicity, pointing toward a strange omniscience that has a disruptive revelatory power.

The concept of strange gods appears as something of a motif in both authors' works. We see this device used additionally by Lovecraft in "Nyarlathotep," "The Other Gods," and *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, among a number other stories, while Eliot returns to it most distinctly in "Journey of the Magi" and "The Dry Salvages." In observing these instances it is important to be aware of these two men's theories of culture, which were in fact quite complementary. In both cases there was an understanding of different cultures as being fundamentally so, with an individual raised in one being unable to fully adapt to another. In his aptly titled series of lectures on "orthodoxy" and "heresy" in literature and culture "After Strange Gods" Eliot states in regard to "Brahmin and Buddhist thought," that his "only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European" (44). In much the same manner Lovecraft wrote in a 1935 essay "Heritage or Modernism: Common Sense in Art Forms," that "nothing has value, direction, meaning, or relevance save in connexion with that fortuitous jumble of experiences, beliefs, and customs constituting each observer's local inheritance" (*MW* 191). It is key to note here that these statements were made only two years apart, thus at roughly the same point in their careers, in both instances in reference to modern artistic developments, and with consideration of those concepts associated with the strange

deities of their earlier writings: the Thunder and Cthulhu. For Eliot the alien impression he received of Subcontinent writings forms the basis of his assertion, while for Lovecraft it is the “eternal and indifferent cosmos” that determines “there can be no such things as *value, purpose, direction, or meaning, or even interest, except in a strictly local and relative sense*” (190). Thus in each instance these authors thought of culture neither as absolute, nor as being so trivial that one could be easily exchanged for another. The circumstances surrounding an individual’s growth and development, as arbitrary as they may be, were seen as being of primary importance.

A striking example in Lovecraft’s fiction of the alien quality impressed upon him by other cultures, and how that quality was enmeshed with the alien quality of modernity, may be found in “Nyarlathotep,” a 1920 prose poem. This short work telling of a portentous figure arriving out of Egypt and conducting presentations which individuals are invariably drawn to, exhibits multiple parallels to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In the first full paragraph of this text, which Lovecraft claimed to have written before fully waking (CC 369), he creates a distinct sense of both cultural and cosmic disruption, writing that

The general tension was horrible. To a season of political and social upheaval was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all-embracing, such a danger as may be imagined only in the most terrible phantasms of the night. (31)

He concludes this paragraph with the summation that “everyone felt that the world and perhaps the universe had passed from the control of known gods or forces to that of gods or forces which were unknown” (31). So here the unrest of human society and government becomes apiece with that of the material world, evident in the intuitive

apprehensions of the immediate populace, evoking again the apprehension of strange gods. The setting of this text is a city, unnamed but evocatively described as “the great, the old, the terrible city of unnumbered crimes” (32), thus reflecting the “Unreal City” invoked in the first and third parts of *The Waste Land*. The two evoked but unnamed cities become all the more comparable when considering an earlier draft of the poem beginning with an account of a man wandering a city by night, attempting to get a prostitute and having an altercation with the police (*WLF* 5). Eliot even originally used the word “terrible,” as in Lovecraft’s text, rather than “unreal” (9). Thus it is clear that the two texts play with a similar evocation of the city, but all the more significant is the manner in which Nyarlathotep enters into this city. He is distinctly an outsider, coming “out of Egypt” and telling that he “had risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries” (31) thus signifying an ancient eastern tradition entering into the west. In this he serves a somewhat similar role as the Thunder as non-western tradition that enters *The Waste Land*, but all the more he calls to mind Madame Sosostris, whose name likewise is derived from several rulers of ancient Egypt (*NCE* 40). But Nyarlathotep is also distinctly modern, at the same time representing recent advances of thought and technology: “always buying strange instruments of glass and metal and combining them into instruments yet stranger. He spoke much of the sciences—of electricity and psychology—and gave exhibitions of power that sent spectators away speechless” (31). Thus he at once presents the manifold forces of modernity which critically affected Lovecraft and Eliot, namely science and the recognition of other cultural traditions, and enacts a transformation on the populace. After being driven out of Nyarlathotep’s presentation the narrator cannot see the city in the same manner, recounting that amongst the crowd “[w]e swore to one another that the city *was* exactly the same, and

still alive" (32). The grotesque imagery which follows is of the same kind as that Eliot uses in "What the Thunder Said" prior to the appearance of the Thunder. In this last section Eliot invokes:

Murmur of maternal lamentation
 Who are those hooded hordes swarming
 Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
 Ringed by the flat horizon only
 What is the city over the mountains
 Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
 Falling towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal[.] (367-376)

Utilizing much of the same imagery Lovecraft writes "[w]hen we gazed around the horizon, we could not find the third tower by the river, and noticed that the silhouette of the second tower was ragged at the top," recalling the "falling towers" of Eliot, and upon entering into the vortex which appears, "half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath space" (33) evoking same unrealized quality of the "city over the mountains" which Eliot's speaker cannot grasp. The utter confusion and ominous quality of these respective passages make for a similarly violent impression on the reader, and their context appears much the same. "Nyarlathotep" thus encapsulates the violent reaction to the relativity of modernity exhibited by Eliot and Lovecraft, organizing this reaction into a distinct narrative form.

The Cosmic Shore

It is important to keep in mind that for all of the shock of modernity that has been heretofore illustrated, an understanding of the relativity of individual existence was not shirked away from by either writer. Lovecraft and Eliot maintained far more sophisticated relationships with their knowledge than simple repugnance. For all of the importance the latter attached to tradition, he was careful to note that tradition was not “immovable” and warned of the danger of thinking a certain condition of living “capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of aiming to stimulate the life which produced that condition in its time” (*After Strange* 19). Likewise, while Lovecraft wrote in a 1919 essay that “the world is but a grain of dust in existence for a moment” (*MW* 138) he did not resort to despair but upholds the importance of truth in itself, calling it “the only object worthy of the quest of an enlightened mind” (139). Although expressing shock at relative existence in their imaginative writings, these two authors accepted and internalized it. The acknowledgement of a larger and ultimately ungraspable state of existence was just as much a part of their literature as was the reaction of the individual to it. In his essay “Lovecraft and the Cosmic Quality in Fiction,” Richard Tierney elaborates on what Lovecraft, in a 1930 letter to Clark Ashton Smith, referred to as the “cosmic quality” (*LVW* 213) in fiction, which he notes “was not primarily an intellectual position nor a philosophical outlook, but rather, a feeling or mood that could be evoked in rare people by even rarer passages in literature” (191). In his own words, the author described the feeling as

the sincere and burning curiosity and sense of awe which a sensitive minority of mankind feel toward the alluring and provocative abysses of unplumbed space and unguessed entity which press in upon the known world from unknown

infinities and in unknown relationships of time, space, matter, force, dimensionality and consciousness. (*LVW* 213)

This quality, I will argue, is apparent in Eliot's writing as well as Lovecraft's. As here Lovecraft asserts that only a "sensitive minority" may experience the sensation, a passage from Eliot's 1936 "Burnt Norton" maintains "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (44-45). That *Four Quartets*, the four poems of which this is the first, are concerned very much with "unknown relationships," may be exemplified in the lines which follow: "Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (46-48). That these poems are at times religious or mystical in character is no bar from the materialist Lovecraft's understanding; as Tierney notes, the author in fact "equated the cosmic outlook with mysticism," in one instance using the phrase "mystic inclination" interchangeably with the "cosmic quality" (192). In discussing this quality in Eliot I will look primarily at "The Dry Salvages," the third poem in *Four Quartets* and perhaps the most similar of all his writings to those of Lovecraft in terms of thematic content and material. However, I will first turn to earlier respective examples of this sensibility in "The Fire Sermon" of *The Waste Land* and a 1919 prose poem by Lovecraft titled "Memory."

These are two texts that present to the reader post-human spaces, thus calling to awareness the transience of humankind in the cosmic timeframe. The first stanza of "The Fire Sermon" begins with images of the natural world, making clear that there is no human presence in this scene: "The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf / Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind / Crosses the brown land, unheard" (173-175). That the wind is unheard makes clear that there is absence of people in this scene; presumably even the speaker is not present. Eliot's passage suggests a desolate

environment, a “brown land” without foliage. Lovecraft, in “Memory,” instead presents an environment full of foliage in his setting of “the valley of Nis”—which, in the poem by Poe he borrowed the name from, is said to mean “the valley of unrest” (Poe 72)—writing that “[r]ank is the herbage on each slope, where evil vines and creeping plants crawl” (*MW* 30). Yet here too humans are absent; the brief, five paragraph text features primarily an exchange between “The genie that haunts the moonbeams” and the “Daemon of the Valley” who calls himself “Memory.” Lovecraft describes this foliage as overturning human ruins made foreign by the passage of time: “twining tightly about broken columns and strange monoliths, and heaving up marble pavements laid by forgotten hands.” While he presents the ruins of humanity’s endeavors in the midst of an overwhelming flora, Eliot emphasizes the absence of more transient remains in his waste land: “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights” (177-179). The latter poet includes mythical elements in his poem as well, although again in a converse manner. While for Lovecraft the Genie and the Daemon reside in the human absence, Eliot’s speaker repeatedly declares that “The nymphs are departed” (175, 179). Here humans are made mythic, rather than myth appearing in their absence as in “Memory,” and their absence is thus mourned; the speaker declares in this same passage, “[b]y the waters of Lemn I sat down and wept” (182). “Memory” too contains a sentiment of loss, but in a more ambivalent manner. The Daemon here tells the Genie that the beings which created the ruins which surround them “were like the waters of the river Than, not to be understood. Their deeds I recall not, for they were but of the moment. Their aspect I recall dimly, for it was like to that of the little apes in the trees,” and the text concludes, “the Daemon looked intently at a little ape in a tree that grew in a crumbling

courtyard.” For the mythical Memory the presence of our species is but of a moment, and our absence is met not with mourning but with contemplation.

This is not to say that Eliot was any less concerned with the cosmic scale of time in writing a mourning of human absence. The perspective of his text is concerned with transience foremost. The title of this portion of the poem, “The Fire Sermon” is an allusion to a sermon of Buddha of the same name in which all things are conceived of as being on fire, a state of chemical reaction which is never static. A translation of this sermon reads, “mind-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the mind are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, that is also on fire” (*NCE* 54-55). In this the concern is with the transience of experience itself, not of a species, but this sentiment lends itself to that of the texts here discussed in that all is, as the daemon Memory considered mankind, “of the moment.” Another allusion in the first stanza of “The Fire Sermon” appears in the line “But at my back in a cold blast I hear” (185), which Eliot attributes to Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress” (*NCE* 23). This too contributes to the thematic importance of transience, the full statement from which it was derived reading “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near” (North 11). This is again concerned with the experience of temporality. If it seems then that Eliot’s speaker mourns the absence of the nymphs, then it is for the poet’s concern with the way in which the cosmic passage of time is experienced by the individual.

In both Lovecraft and Eliot’s respective scenes there is a central river: in “Memory” the fictional Than and in “The Fire Sermon” the Thames. Rivers make for a compelling symbol in the illustration of temporality and the cosmic, as they are at once a

relatively constant force and always in a state of change. Eliot's speaker refrains three times "Sweet Thames, run softly," imitating the river's constancy and intimating its changing flow. The Daemon Memory recognizes the river as, like humans, "not to be understood," for Lovecraft tells us that Than's "waters are slimy and filled with weeds. From hidden springs it rises, and to subterranean grottoes it flows, so that the Daemon of the Valley knows not why its waters are red, nor whither they are bound." In this the river it is a particular instance within the cosmos, like human life, that is ineffably affected by the procession of time.

Something of this conception is apparent in Eliot's 1941 "The Dry Salvages," wherein he writes "[t]he river is within us, the sea is all about us" (15). In this later poem, the individual river is subsumed into the greater and older ocean. The sea becomes representative of the cosmic scale of time, carrying with it "hints of earlier and other creation: / The starfish, the hermit crab, the whale's backbone" (18-19). This understanding of the sea is akin to that exhibited in numerous stories by Lovecraft, including "The Call of Cthulhu," in which the "earlier and other" Cthulhu sleeps beneath the ocean. The association of the ocean with deep time is evident as early in Lovecraft's career as 1917, when he wrote "Dagon," one of his first forays into short fiction as an adult. In this narrative the protagonist finds himself alone upon an expanse of seabed that has risen to the surface, "exposing regions which for innumerable millions of years had lain hidden under unfathomable watery depths" (CC 2). The "innumerable" and "unfathomable" are arrived at most distinctly in Eliot's contemplations, writing of a cosmic scale of time in the rhythm of the sea:

The tolling bell

Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried

Ground swell, a time

Older than the time of chronometers, older

Than time counted by anxious worried women[.] (37-41)

Thus the ground swell, sounding through the tolling bell on the sea, suggests a constancy of time beyond normal conception, which “is and was from the beginning” (48). Cogitating on the import of this understanding, Eliot confronts the conventional constructions of time’s progress, writing that with age it seems

That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—

Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,

Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,

Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past. (87-91)

He finds the past not to be a progression, implying an ever improving condition and an ever more inferior past. The “superficial notions of evolution” likely refer to its understanding as a “survival of the fittest” – which Surette, in his discussion of the Darwinian understanding of history, notes “was reluctantly adopted by Darwin only in later editions of *The Origin of Species*” (44) – rather than a survival of the best adapted to a particular environment. In the latter, more sophisticated understanding, the past is not seen as a progression so much as being akin to, as Eliot describes earlier in the poem, “[y]ears of living among the breakage / Of what was believed in as the most reliable” (60-61). Lovecraft had been deceased for several years when “The Dry Salvages” was published, but one of his last works, the 1935 novel *The Shadow out of Time*, evidences that late in life he was concerned with time in much the same manner. The narrator of this tale describes his experience of having his consciousness exchanged with a member of a Pre-Cambrian race, which he is only able to recall in dream. Here

too time is not seen as a progression: we are told a most learned species existed 150 million years ago (362) and that human civilization will be superseded by “the mighty beetle civilization” (360). Even human intellect, signified by the other minds the “Great Race” chose to abduct out of time, is shown to be eclectic across history. While held in the past, the narrator spoke with such far-removed persons as, among others,

Yiang-Li, a philosopher from the cruel empire of Tsan-Chan, which is to come in A.D. 5000; with that of a general of the great-headed brown people who held South Africa in B.C. 50,000; with that of a twelfth-century Florentine monk named Bartolomeo Corsi[.] (*Dreams in* 359)

As did Lovecraft in this instance, Eliot presented a conception of history that is not progressive, being marked only by change, in “The Dry Salvages,” evidencing an awareness of a deep, cosmic time.

This common awareness is, of course, made possible by the scientific knowledge available to the two authors and their individual understanding of it, but there is another mutual influence here also. “The Dry Salvages” is, like the three other parts of the *Four Quartets*, based upon a place of importance to Eliot. He informs the reader in an introductory note that the poem’s title is derived from a rock formation off of the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts. This city is located in the midst of the country of Lovecraft’s fiction. In the surrounding area of Massachusetts would have been located his fictional towns of Kingsport (CC 384-385), Arkham, and Innsmouth (CC 410) which appear throughout his fiction. Eliot had in fact intimately known this region, having spent his summers from 1893 onward with his family in Gloucester, a fishing port off the Cape Ann coast (Ackroyd 22). Growing up he would have known much the same New England atmosphere as Lovecraft, on whom the area’s influence cannot be

underestimated. In 1927 he wrote of his native city of Providence, located southward along the seaboard, “that is Old Providence, the town that gave me birth and in which I have lived all but two of my thirty-six years. I am it, and it is I” (*LVW* 200). Places known familiarly were certainly of the utmost importance to these two writers, and those along the New England coast quite apparently so. With this knowledge there can be little doubt that this shoreline provided them with the atmosphere and images with which to capture the import of a cosmic understanding.

It should come as no surprise then that Eliot also invoked the Dry Salvages in the draft version of “Death by Water” (*WLF* 55). Here too nautical images derived from the coast are invoked in the approach to a strange monument. That the sea delivers the individual to the marker of a different belief, as it does in the work of Lovecraft, is reflected in *The Dry Salvages* when Eliot writes “[t]he sea has many voices, / Many gods and many voices” (24-25), a line originally intended for “Death by Water” as well (*WLF* 57). In this phrase the understanding of the sea as representative of the cosmic is further solidified: the ocean is that in which all of the relative gods exist. Certainly this is the case in the works of Lovecraft, who demonstrates a multiplicity of gods in the sea quite literally not only in “The Call of Cthulhu,” but also in “Dagon,” *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, and “The Strange High House in the Mist” among other stories. *The Dry Salvages* itself exhibits a multiplicity of gods: in it the river is thought to be a god (1-2), “Death” is called the god of the bone (85), and Krishna is mused upon by the speaker (126). If he and Lovecraft were shocked by the portent of relativity, then it was in the cosmic—the quality of which is elicited by the ocean—that this relativity was possible and able to occupy their imaginations all the more thoroughly.

In the fifth segment of *The Dry Salvages* Eliot highlights the absurdity of attempting to know the cosmic through superstitious means. He lists in ten lines such activities as “[t]o report the behavior of the sea monster” (189), to “fiddle with pentagrams” (195), or “[t]o explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams” (198) and concludes that “these are usual / Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press: / And always will be” (198-200). Writing off these falsities, he draws attention to the immense unknown which surrounds us in space and, most significantly in this poem, time. It cannot go without notice that such things as he lists here are the material of much of Lovecraft’s fiction. That Lovecraft did not believe in them there can be little doubt, though, as he writes them off wholesale in just the same manner as Eliot in a letter to a superstitious reader shortly before his death. In this 1937 epistle he directs this fan to a number of scientific texts and concludes:

But don’t think that I’m not interested in fantastic speculations about the universe and life, even if I don’t believe them. Indeed, they are all the more interesting—like the shadowy dreams I write about in my weird stories—because I don’t believe them. (*MW* 520)

For Lovecraft such speculation was ripe for imaginative inspection, allowing a means for writing about the unknown, which was his concern. He in fact began his expansive essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” by stating, “[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (25). Eliot, in the second part of his poem, touches upon something of the same idea; he invokes “[t]he backward look behind the assurance / Of recorded history, the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror” (103-105). That here he invokes a “primitive terror” in the unknown past, which recorded history can only

attempt to explain for us, makes it clear that he identified the horror of that which cannot be understood in just the same manner as Lovecraft. All the more intriguing in this respect, though, is a particular passage near the end of the poem:

Here past and future
 Are conquered, and reconciled,
 Where action were otherwise movement
 Of that which is only moved
 And has in it no source of movement—
 Driven by daemonic, chthonic
 Powers. (221-228)

Although this is a strikingly elusive passage, the speaker appears to locate a driving force behind perpetual movement in “daemonic, chthonic / Powers.” In this Eliot seems to again associate, like Lovecraft, the horrific with the unknown, signified by the daemonic and the chthonic. The latter of these signifies “dreaded deities of the underworld” in Greek myth (“Chthonic” 41) and is striking in its similar spelling to Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu”². All of this considered, we can see Lovecraft and Eliot reflect one another in the manner in which they are affected with a certain terror at the unknown cosmos.

Thus it seems that their corresponding shock at the relativity unveiled by modern knowledge derives from their inability to know it, to comprehend it as familiar. This is not to say that they shirked away from relativity or the cosmic; although classicists by nature they each adamantly attempted to understand the new perspective granted them.

The Dry Salvages, like *The Waste Land* before it, is not a condemning poem but a

² This particular is curious, as although he provided his own alien etymology, it is hard to imagine that Lovecraft, who claimed to have learned the Greek alphabet in his youth (MW 534), would not have been aware of the similarity. Perhaps this was a source for the name which he did not share, or was not aware of himself.

thoughtful one. The passages of shock and horror are part of a more intricate exploration of ideas. Similarly, the supernatural horror of Lovecraft's writing is but a means toward exploring the vast cosmos which so fascinated him. Although their texts may seem to reproach modernity, they are rather reacting to the realization that the world of the generations that came before them was falling apart in the wake of a much grander conception beyond simple comprehensibility. The world we live in is formed of this conception, and it cannot be abandoned. We are now thoroughly modern, and for that reason we should listen to these voices bound in books: the larger world which Eliot and Lovecraft realized is ours now, and we may yet benefit from their musings.

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