



# LOVECRAFT

A

Symposium

SAXTON  
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H. P. LOVECRAFT: A SYMPOSIUM

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## PREFACE

This discussion was recorded at the 24 October, 1963 meeting of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society (LASFS). To achieve clarity I have added several phrases in square brackets and eliminated various redundancies, along with the "uhs," "ahs," and other non-communicative aspects of speech. Certain utterances which were rendered intelligible by the speaker's inflection and tone of voice, and which become ambiguous when transcribed literally have been rewritten and also enclosed in square brackets.

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## SYMPOSIUM ON H. P. LOVECRAFT

SAPIRO: To start, I'll summarize a couple of Lovecraft's stories on a common theme, which we can call psychic displacement or demoniac displacement. First, The Colour Out of Space. In this story, members of a New England family are controlled by a sentient gas liberated from a fallen meteor, and this sentient gas eventually drains their vitality, and causes insanity and death. Then The Haunter of the Dark. In this story, the consciousness of a writer, Robert Bloch, or Robert Blake, if you want to call him that--is forced to merge with that of an alien presence which inhabits an abandoned church. In "The Whisperer in Darkness," there is a scholar whose brain is removed from his body and imprisoned in a cylinder. This story is an example of what August Derleth refers to as Lovecraft's mask motif, where the face of an acquaintance or relative serves merely as a mask for the alien personality underneath. Then, of course, there's The Shadow Out of Time; and let me mention one more, The Thing on the Doorstep. In this story, the detached soul of the murdered Asenath Waite seizes the body of her husband, whose own consciousness, in turn, is translated to her body, which is buried in the cellar.

Psychic displacement, of course, is not original with Lovecraft: It has an old and honorable lineage in the weird tale. But Lovecraft seems to have had a special affinity for this theme, so I might open with the question: Why was he drawn to this particular theme? Mr. Bloch, since one of these stories was written after you, you should have some personal knowledge of this.

BLOCH: I think Lovecraft was particularly attracted to this theme because he realized that there is nothing more horrible than to find the unfamiliar when you expect the familiar, Lovecraft was always seeking the ultimate in horror. To personalize it, he thought that the displacement of identity of someone familiar to you would be the most shocking and terrifying possibility. Lovecraft was very analytical: He didn't write without a great deal of premeditation, and I believe that he was inclined to delve to the full in search of elements which would trigger the emotions of fear and revulsion.

LEIBER: I think that in this question of displaced identity--or exchanges of souls, as it would have been called by most writers of that time--we come very close to the deepest sort of metaphysical problem: how our consciousness, how this vivid picture of reality in my mind that seems to extend out into space--and into time, by way of memory--how this picture of reality can exist in the material world, the world we know about through bumps and knocks, the world that has been described by science as the bumps and knocks that a number of

LEIBER (continued)

people have agreed upon. What consciousness is and how it exists in the world is eternally a puzzle, and I think that Lovecraft tended to go to these ultimate points for basing his stories and tying them down.

And the very fact that he avoided the Christian cosmology made his points even more acute, because he didn't take the easy out, [used by] so many writers of ghost stories and supernatural fiction, of setting the story against an all-religious background that provides an easy explanation at the end.

COX: I might remark about what Mr. Bloch says. Lovecraft does not use the theme of ego displacement purely as a subject of horror. For instance, in The Shadow Out of Time the effect is one of fascination rather than horror. Here he uses the scheme of putting his narrator in the body of a creature of an alien race, and therefore provides a method of giving a picture of this alien society and world.

BLOCH: There is one other possibility: that with Lovecraft, as with me, fascination and horror are synonymous.

LEIBER: In some of his stories, particularly the later stories, the so-called monsters, actually highly intelligent members of other species, become--to me, at least--the sympathetic characters. The Old Ones at The Mountains of Madness--who, after having been in suspended animation for millions of years, awake in a howling blizzard [to be] attacked by savage dogs, with one of them being vivisected by a human scientist--the way they face this situation and fight their way out--Lovecraft himself in that story has one of the scientists say, "By God, whatever they were, they were men!"

So without making the old suggestion that the author feels himself to be the monster, I would suggest that there is the possibility, at least, that Lovecraft's sympathy went out to them. The monsters at the end turn out to be scholars above everything else, who spend their lives doing things like carrying the brains of other scholars around the universe with them in metal canisters in order that these brains could see and talk about and hear the explanations of everything there was in the universe.

SAPIRO: Mr. Bloch said that for Lovecraft, fascination and horror were synonymous. I think you almost might say that this is the key to all his writings. Lovecraft was an antiquarian; for example, he liked to date his letters two hundred years back, and expressed preference for living in the 18th century. His antiquarianism was a special in-



SAPIRO (continued)

stance of his desire to escape from "the galling tyranny of time, space, and natural laws."

But, on the other hand, you have his deep aversion to such a liberation, his conception of "the stark, outrageous monstrosity of any departure from nature." You remember Lewis Padgett's The Fairy Chessmen, in which a fellow grasps a doorknob, and the doorknob winks at him. This is the sort of thing, I imagine, that Lovecraft would envisage as uniquely horrible--the perversion of natural laws. It seems to me that Lovecraft's attitude was strictly ambiguous; this desire for escape and at the same time his aversion to it.

LEIBER: Well, this ties in to what we were talking about before. I can't help but feel that the brains in the cylinders in The Whisperer in Darkness represent to some extent a scholar's utopia, and yet the brain of the one Earthly scholar, Henry Akeley, that does speak from one of these cylinders speaks in a frightened and horrified way. There is a conflict there, and it runs through the story.

SAPIRO: Let me open another topic: [Lovecraft's] actual beliefs, which were in the stories, versus those things which were only literary conventions. In "The Thing on the Doorstep" he says: "A soul like her's is half detached, and keeps right on after death as long as the body lasts." Now, Lovecraft did not believe in a soul and he did not believe in any kind of post-mortem survival, so this is one case where his actual beliefs do not coincide with the beliefs one might infer from the story.

Not only this, he used phrases like, "if heaven ever wishes to grant me a boon," or "if there be a hell," or "what it is, only God knows." Lovecraft called himself "an atheist of Protestant ancestry"; he believed in neither heaven nor hell nor God. So I'd like to ask: Is it possible to separate in Lovecraft's writings the things that he believed from the things which were merely fictional conventions?

COX: Obviously, some of the phrases he used are purely literary conventions; his repetition of certain phrases, which he's been much blamed for, are primarily, I think, an indication to the reader of the way in which the story is to be taken. That is, the story is not supposed to be taken with a great deal of seriousness. He repeats words like "eldritch" and "unhallowed" and "blasphemous" to tell the reader that the tone of his story is not meant to be serious.

LEIBER: He wrote many of his stories in a vivid first person: generally the narrator was explaining himself or writing a

LEIBER: (continued)

document explaining what had happened to him or making one of those pleas that a certain area not be investigated for fear of what would be discovered. With this sort of first person I don't think we can take the remarks and interjections as belonging to the author. In any case, an atheist scholar or scientist will still use expressions like "great god" and so on, and "gad" that runs through Pickman's Model. He'll use them as emotional expressions without meaning any belief by them.

In my short correspondence with him one of the first things that came up, I remember, was that I made some rather complimentary remarks about Charles Fort's books, saying something to the effect that these books showed that scientists didn't know everything and that there was lots of information that scientists were deliberately disregarding because they couldn't figure out any good explanation. He came back with a rather hot defense of the scientist; he pointed out that he was a materialist himself and that the scientist had to demand that recorded events be confirmed in the most detailed way, that if a thing be seen that you describe how an experiment could be set up to produce the same effect again. He assured me that although Fort's books, his collections of newspaper and magazine clippings, were very interesting and great background material for the writer, they weren't to be taken seriously in the way of a refutation of scientific theory. I just cite that as an example of his thoroughgoing scientific approach to life outside of his stories.

SAPIRO: Let me quote Sam Moskowitz: "Lovecraft was so knowledgeable and interested in the sciences, it became increasingly difficult for him to write a weird tale that was not plausibly and in most cases scientifically explained." So certainly science influenced him more and more. In view of this I'd like to read a quotation from him which to me has always been rather puzzling:

"Modern science has in the end proved an enemy to art and pleasure; for by revealing to us the whole sordid and prosaic basis of our thoughts, motives, and acts, it has stripped the world of glamour, wonder, and all those illusions of heroism, nobility, and sacrifice which used to sound so impressive when romantically treated."

("Lord Dunsany and His Work," Marginalia, 138)

So it seems here that Lovecraft's attitude would be that science was a detriment to fiction.

LEIBER: A detriment to fiction? I understand him to say it's a detriment to art and pleasure simply by taking away illusions, revealing that the universe is a machine, and that



## LEIBER (Continued)

the actions that we feel are noble or idealistic are, after all, the actions of a machine that is run by physics and chemistry, I mean physiological chemistry of the human body. Illusions like the idea of indwelling spirits, the sort of thing that would add charm to mythology and the earlier religions, that there were beings, some perhaps frightening and some benign in the objects around us, in sticks and stones and trees--well, science takes this away--and it says that any idealistic impulse is still based on chemical reactions in the nerves, in the glands; and this is a difficult thing to face up to.

BLOCH: I believe that Lovecraft indicated in that statement and in his work that he was a very practical realist. He faced what he thought was his objective view of reality and at the same time realized that in order to write a story he would have to present his own picture of the cosmos in a fashion to produce terror in his audience, and he did so.

I don't think it is always accurate to say that a man's work is necessarily a prefiguration of his own personal attitudes and beliefs. There's a great tendency today to feel that any reader by virtue of having purchased, borrowed, or stolen a book, can use it to indulge in a parlor psychoanalysis of the author. So many people who have discussed Lovecraft think of him as an eccentric who more or less believed in the strange cosmos he created, and this is not the case.

LEIBER: I would second that. In the majority of his stories, especially his later and longer stories involving what has come to be called the Cthulhu Mythos, he invented an alternate world superficially like our world but different in that there was evidence, available to certain scholars, that there were other forces, other beings, operating in the world by various secret methods, that this proved that witchcraft had a real material background, and so on. I don't think that any one but a seriously realistic writer would have made such a point of inventing this alternate world.

RUSSELL: Must the realistic writer always describe the physical world around him? Isn't a fantastic writer--a science-fiction writer or any writer of fantasy--trying to be realistic as possible in trying to create by his scribblings in the minds of his readers a vision of reality that will be as real to them while they're reading his scribblings as their world will be when they open their eyes to what is beyond that page?

SAPIRO: Mr. Bloch has remarked on the attempts of critics to give a parlor psychoanalysis of Lovecraft, and this leads into another topic: Lovecraft's obsession with heredity and racial degeneracy. In The Lurking Fear the inhabitants are a "degenerate squatter population"; then The Call of Cthulhu where the prisoners conducting these secret rites "all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type." In The Dunwich Horror the natives [are] "repellently decadent, having gone far along that path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters," and then, of course, you have that famous "Innsmouth look," which is the most well-known manifestation.

In his article, "Shadows over Lovecraft" [Fantasy Commentator, II (1948), 237-246] Dr. Keller says: "Heredity is an important factor in many Lovecraft stories, and is always of a degenerative type....In such descriptions Lovecraft gives many excellent case histories... duplicated in actual life...studies of patients bearing the stigma of hereditary syphilis." Dr. Keller points out the significance of the demise [of Lovecraft's father] being attributed to an advanced stage of paresis, Keller's thesis [being] that this obsession with his own heredity from his father was more or less evident in all of Lovecraft's stories. He says: "There was a constant repetition of this theme song--the terror of heredity, the mental and physical degeneration..the ultimate, unavoidable end. Lovecraft not only wrote this song again and again but he lived it, under shadow from which he could not escape." ①

BLOCH: I would say that Lovecraft again was investigating the sources of fear. Some of these, of course, a writer will find within himself, and he will attempt to prefigure them and see whether or not these are common sources. And I think fear of decay--physical decay and decadence ascribable to hereditary traits--is a very common one. Undoubtedly it was brought forcibly to his attention by the case of his own father, but I don't believe it was by any means an obsession. I think he merely used a very common theme. It's a theme which you'll find in the writings of many men whose fathers were not victims of paresis. That, I think, is the point: It is so easy to take almost any statement of a writer and find some personal problem which it may exemplify, without realizing that the same problem is basic and endemic to the entire population.

COX: I'm afraid that I will probably expose myself as a parlor psychoanalyst. It seems to me that something along the line of Dr. Keller's article must be true. Dr. Kenneth Sterling had a letter in the Fantasy Commentator [III (1951-2), 153-154] some time after the Keller article in which he pointed out various errors which Dr. Keller had made. He said that Keller's ideas of syphilis and so.



COX (Continued)

forth were taken over from the 19th century, that he was not up on modern research and study. However, the point, of course, is not what the actual mechanics of the transmission of syphilis is, but simply what Lovecraft believed. It seems to me that his stories express this theme so predominantly that it must have had some personal relevance to him.

LEIBER: It had a relevance, yet, but the theme--the theme of decay--is the theme of death, and it is universal. Although Lovecraft used that particular theme often--the theme of a degenerate population, in The Shadow over Innsmouth, The Lurking Fear, He, and to a lesser extent, in The Dunwich Horror--I don't feel that Lovecraft was obsessed in the sense that his judgment as a realist and as a creative artist was impaired.

After all, we could make the same statement about Arthur Machen. Machen wrote The Novel of the Black Seal about degenerate Pictish cave-dwelling beings in the Welsh hills, The Great God Pan about a woman who was the child of Pan and a mad mother, and who brought to the people she came in contact with an influence that caused them to reverse their evolution. In The Novel of the White Powder a powder is developed that is the basis of the wine of the Sabbath; and this does the same thing to the people who drink it: it degenerates them in a matter of weeks; they literally go back through various savage stages to the primal ooze. Now I don't recall hearing about any particular influences of a parallel sort in Machen's family life.

RUSSELL: We might have if fantasy fiction had been as important in his time as it is in ours, but anyway I agree with everything you said. This does not, however dispose of the question of whether Lovecraft was a totally conscious artist in everything he wrote. Now, I think he was very largely a conscious artist, as Mr. Bloch said, but I think that in his choice of subjects he was not. This is a question we really ought to take up, but I don't know if we can because there isn't enough evidence.

It doesn't seem to me that Lovecraft would be the sort of person who would be terribly influenced by the appearance on the stands of a given type of magazine. He made his living by revising other people's stuff. Am I right, Bob?

BLOCH: To a great degree. Also, Lovecraft had a very low opinion of his work. When Farnsworth Wright rejected a story he would generally circulate it throughout the Lovecraft circle and say: What's wrong with it?--what can I do to

BLOCH: (Continued)

improve it? He was modest to the point of insecurity about the value of his writings.

RUSSELL: Did this continue to the end of his life?

BLOCH: Yes. He was constantly striving to improve his style and to study market needs--he really did--within his field.

RUSSELL: Did he say anything about the changes in his style that occurred toward the end of his life, that is during the 1930s?

BLOCH: He said that he was trying to write with a greater scientific objectivity. He was drawing away from his earlier work, which had been largely of a more poetic cast. You know, of course, that he wrote The White Ship, which was a Dunsanian tale, before he ever read any Dunsany.

RUSSELL: Did he explicitly renounce that type of story?

BLOCH: He didn't write anything similar to it, I believe---

RUSSELL: After the early 20s?

BLOCH: --That's right. I'd say that Through the Gates of the Silver Key, which he wrote in collaboration with E. Hoffman Price, probably was the last story which contained any elements of this sort of thing.

RUSSELL: [Were they contained in] The Dream Quest of Unknown Kaddath --which was never published [in his lifetime] --which apparently he never submitted?

BLOCH: Yes, and I would say [he was right not to submit it] because he realized it was an inferior product.

SAPIRO: About Lovecraft and Farnsworth Wright--Lovecraft mentions Wright's "incurable dislike of any subtlety in a story. He wants everything spoiled by a diagram," and then Lovecraft continues, "No, I certainly wouldn't give in to his demand for a flat, explained ending. I'd rather not place a story than twist it to his mold." [Letter quoted in The Acolyte I (Fall, 1942), 4-5]

So could it be that Lovecraft did have some appreciation of the worth of his own stories--that he realized that Farnsworth Wright had limitations himself?

LEIBER: I would say that although he was very doubtful about the worth of his own particular stories--easily shaken by what he considered aesthetic judgments in general. A contrived ending on a horror tale, the idea of building up



LEIBER: (Continued)

an atmosphere of supernatural horror and then explaining it was just a dream or a mechanism that waves the white sheet, offended his artistic sense.

RUSSELL: In his essay on the writing of weird fiction Lovecraft objects to the bald description of simple facts in a weird story, the flat description of what exactly happens, what the man does, what he sees, and so on. In other words, he objected to the naturalistic approach toward the writing of a weird story. This was what he hated because it did not create in the reader's mind that aura, that atmosphere, that buzzing inside the subconscious which he felt was necessary to create fear.

Lovecraft had read [M. R.] James, and knew that in a weird tale you have to start with very slight adumbrations of something spooky and then build with larger ones and slightly larger ones...

SAPIRO: I'd like to ask very bluntly: Does Lovecraft really scare anybody? I read his stories [because] I enjoy the way he uses the English language, but he doesn't scare me one bit. In line with this I'd like to read a criticism from Anthony Boucher:

"I will maintain to the death that the only true horror is that of understatement (I am basically an M. R. James man); and it annoys me, as a theorist, that both Poe and HPL managed to attain horror by explicit overstatement. For even HPL's cryptic, allusive manner is not true understatement. He simply makes nameless and indescribable and unmentionable into very definite connotative namings and descriptions..."

(The Acolyte, II (Summer, 1944), 29)

Mr. Cox, would you say that Lovecraft scares you at all?

COX: No, I wouldn't. In my case anyway, there is not a word of horror in Lovecraft. He is fascinating, one of my favorite writers--but for actual fear, no. In fact, I don't know very many people who ever said they were frightened by Lovecraft. Mathew H. Onderdonk once had an article in Fantasy Commentator in which he spoke of the horror that Lovecraft inspired in him; but in writing about it, he uses these same words, "blasphemous," "unholy," and so on, so I gather he's just playing at being frightened.

LEIBER: I guess I must be a bit out of the ordinary, because Lovecraft did frighten me when I first read him. The first story I ever read by Lovecraft was The Colour Out of Space in Amazing--and that story really spooked me. It affected me and frightened me at the same time, as a boy of around seventeen.

LEIBER (continued)

About this business of using words like "eldritch," "nameless," it has to be remembered that these words were used along with very explicit detailed descriptions; they were an added mist of color that he put on his story. It's like a painter doing some kind of final spread on top of everything else, sort of filling up the empty spaces in the mosaic. He did get these very general words like "strange" and "weird" and "horrible," but they didn't stand along: there was always explicit description with them, and I think he used them for a kind of musical quality.

Lovecraft did use overstatement, admittedly. Writers, even quite versatile writers, get wedded to certain ways of telling stories, and it's rarely that they break completely free. It's rare that a man who writes by way of extremes, almost a kind of overstatement, will decide to change and go in for understatement. It would have been extremely strange if someone like Lovecraft had been able to tone down his stories to the point where he was writing things that were only meant half or a quarter seriously, say like John Collier's stories, which had a persistent humorous element. I don't think that writers, even the hard-working writers, make changes to that degree. Lovecraft gambled his creativity from the start on the Edgar Allen Poe sort of story and that is why he stuck to it.

COX: There is a lot of humor in Lovecraft, in a story like Pickman's Model, for instance. It's submerged, a little bit below the surface.

RUSSELL: This is just irony underneath the surface.

LEIBER: You mean, in the sense of--

COX: Grim humor.

LEIBER: It has a little such. You get characterization a bit like Marcuand's pictures of some Bostonians.

COX: In his descriptions of Pickman's paintings there was humor.

DAVID FOX (from the floor): In a story like The Shadow Out of Time the thing that makes it horrible--if it is--is Lovecraft's persistent effort to make it seem that way. The protagonist is back to a rather fascinating civilization, and [his] main reaction is to keep harping on the gloomy horror of the place, where I'm sure that an intelligent anthropologist (say) would be delighted for this opportunity to study an alien civilization. But you either had to be horrified or you weren't a Lovecraft character.



JACK HARNESS (from the floor): Lovecraft can frighten. The first I read was the [very effective] Dunwich Horror. But after I read more Lovecraft and more of the Lovecraft school I reached the saturation point.

RUSSELL: This must be especially true when you read stories of the Lovecraft school, as well as a Lovecraft story. Then you're getting into the branches going out from Lovecraft.

BLOCH: I think that Mr. Leiber answered the question best by citing his own personal example and putting his statement in the past tense: this story did frighten me. And I think this is important. This is where Mr. Leiber and myself have a certain small advantage. We were actually around at the time the stories were being written, at the time they actually were appearing.

I think it might help to consider what that world was really like, that world of the middle and late 20's and early 30's, in terms of the reader of that date, teenage or adult. Anyone interested in fantasy fiction in those days could read Edgar Allen Poe; he could read M. R. James, Machen, and one or two other writers. But as of that time there were not in print in this country half a dozen contemporary anthologies of horror stories.

There were no magazines containing such stories as a steady diet except for Weird Tales; the radio program Lights Out didn't get under stride until the mid 1930's. There were a few motion pictures, a few stage plays, but by and large the average citizen would find exposure to that type of material almost exclusively in Weird Tales. Also, science-fiction had not yet come into its own. There were not very many stories of lost races, of alternate universes, of other worlds developed in anything except the pseudo-Gernsbackian-Ray Cummings style, with A. Hyatt Verrill's ant-worlds of the late 1920's.

So many of the themes have become commonplace to all of you: you've read hundreds, even thousands, of such stories; you've read dozens or hundreds of pocket books which didn't even exist in those days; you've read hard cover anthologies; you've been exposed to radio, television, and motion pictures embodying these concepts time and again. You live in a different world.

You live also in a world of much greater sophistication. At that time the average adolescent or post-adolescent had not traveled more than several hundred miles in any direction from his or her home; only one family in six owned an automobile; and there was a much lesser degree of knowledgeability. Anthropology per se was a

BLOCH (continued)

much more mysterious subject, as were the Antarctic and Arctic regions. There were still strange places on the Earth which the white man had never explored and still many avenues of scientific investigation which had not reached the general public, [of which] less than three percent had attended college or university.

Now, against this background, with Weird Tales, as perhaps the only exemplar of this type of fiction, Lovecraft's work exerted a very strong influence. The things he talked about were strange, were novel, were mysterious. The whole concept of a cosmology in which evil forces controlled the universe was very fresh, and some of his characters and characterizations were quite shocking. Today, when one reads Lovecraft, one reads him with echoes of countless science-fiction, television, and motion picture images in his or her mind. But at the time, I can assure you, most of the people I knew that had met, the word of Lovecraft for the first time were quite frightened by it.

AL LEWIS (from the floor) The very first time I read The Shadow Out of Time it scared the pants off me. I was fourteen or fifteen at the time. To me [what] created the atmosphere of horror were the very basic things, the certainty of death and the insignificance of the human race. Humanity was just an incident, not the master of creation, not the pinnacle of evolution. The great climax, of course, is the final scene down in the catacombs of the Australian desert--this is one of the few real horror stories I ever read.

BLOCH: My point is that Lovecraft's stories were written long before John W. Campbell explained the mysteries of life in his editorials.

LEIBER: That particular story, The Shadow Out of Time, was the most extended and systematic imaginative effort that Lovecraft made to give body and substance to the idea of mankind being only an incident. He had several stages of recollection there, where the narrator remembers talking with Nug-Soth, magician of the dark conquerers who were to come in 5000 A.D. and then jumps back to the great-headed brown people who ruled Africa in 50,000 B.C. [He] gives you a feeling of the mutability of the human race--and then goes on with detailed explanations of how, after mankind, a race of beetles, a coleopteroid race, develops on Earth; then there is a migration, I think, to Venus and finally to Mercury of different races sort of joined together because the Great Race had taken [their] minds over--and he slips in, just is one sentence, something that is extremely terrifying, and one example of



LEIBER (continued)

understatement in Lovecraft: He says, "The fate of the human race affected me so much that I won't set it down here."

SAPIRO: Let me come back to this list of people with whom the scholar discourses (I'm reading a passage out of The Shadow Out of Time): "I talked with the mind of Yiang-Li, a philosopher from the cruel empire of Tsan-Shen, which is to come in 5,000 A. D.; with that of a general of the great-headed brown people who held South Africa in 50,000 B. C."--and then he goes on: "I talked with the mind of Nug-Soth, a magician of the dark conquerors of 16,000 A.D.--"

LEIBER: Sixteen thousand?

SAPIRO: --yes. The point is that none of these entities belong to the Cthulhu mythology, [and] I think that the story could have gotten along just as well without it. Did he bring it in [elsewhere in the story] because he felt he was obliged to all the other people who had used it?

LEIBER: I don't know. I don't think that he felt bound by that particular mythology. How about that, Bob?

BLOCH: I don't at all, because there were many times that he departed from it, as in some of the stories written almost contemporaneously, like In the Vault and Cool Air. He used it when it seemed a propos.

ANON. (from the floor) Mr. Bloch, how much influence did Lovecraft's writing have on your own work?

BLOCH: A tremendous influence. I consciously imitated him for several years, as did Henry Kuttner and a number of other, then-neophyte, writers. He criticized my writing and helped direct it through correspondence in a four year period.

I have many times gone on record as saying Lovecraft was my literary mentor, as he was for so many others. It's interesting to see just how much of the work of Donald Wandrei and Frank Belknap Long was not only derivative of Lovecraft but in some cases written by Lovecraft. In The Horror from the Hills the whole Roman dream sequence was Lovecraft's. It was very common in the group to circulate stories before they were submitted, and you get a sort of congruity of references to the mythos in terms of general styling.

ANON.: Do you still feel yourself strongly influenced by Lovecraft?

BLOCH: No, I do not. I haven't written a Lovecraftian story since about 1945, with one exception. That was a story called The Shadow in the Steeple, in which I disposed of Mr. Leiber.

DAVID FOX (from the floor): Wasn't this sort of a handy thing to have? When you people had the mythos built up, you've conceived a language [the readers] have been trained to understand. All you do is mention Cthulhu or Azathoth or one of the other horrors, and there is no explanation needed.

BLOCH: Yes, that terminology could almost be considered as a sort of professional fancyclopedia.

SAPIRO: However, to an outsider this gives a very unfavorable impression. Some of you have read Edmund Wilson's article. He mentions the Lovecraft circle, and says, Well, they're just a bunch of cultists. I think one of the criticisms Edmund Wilson had in mind [was that] this is sort of an incestuous relationship, not entirely healthy.

BLOCH: Regarding this incestuous in-group publishing, which Wilson probably was not aware of, we--I use the term loosely for members of the Lovecraft circle--were writing supernatural fiction for only one market, Weird Tales. There were no other markets. At that time there was not the remotest possibility that anybody would reprint any of these stories, except, perhaps, for the Not at Night series, published in England.

We were writing to audiences that were pre-conditioned. We were writing for this specific audience and this specific market. I don't think there was a conscious affectation: It was a delight in furthering a vehicle which already had an audience and for which there was a definite demand at the time. If these stories were created for a larger audience, then I think complications would have come in.

The way to set Mr. Wilson straight is to reorientate his frame of reference. Many of the so-called Lovecraft circle were not writers exclusively for Weird Tales. Frank Belknap Long, Donald Wandrei, August Derleth were writing widely in many markets, and in none of their non-Weird Tales stories did they utilize the Mythos or the Lovecraftian technique; and this was true of Henry Kuttner when he got into the group. So it was not a self-conscious cult. As a matter of fact, it wasn't really called the Lovecraft circle by any of the people who corresponded with Lovecraft. (2)



- LEIBER: We were moved by his simple generosity. My later memories are of the large amounts of really good advice he gave me. I'd say something in a letter about thinking of writing a novel set in Roman times. Back would come four or five pages of good advice on how to prepare a novel set in the times of Republican Rome, a longer and shorter bibliography of books that I should read for background. Lovecraft was a writer in the old sense of the word, of a man who wrote a great deal and who had taken some sort of an oath of Aesculapius suitable for writers rather than doctors, who felt called upon to teach a pupil that came to him. It was something I'm still very grateful for.
- BLOCH: I think, strangely enough, that in their peculiarly different ways both Avram Davidson and Edmud Wilson would have found a good deal of affinity with Lovecraft, had they known him personally. You see in him many of Avram's attributes and eccentricities and his widespread general knowledge. He had much of Edmund Wilson's objectivity, and I think he knew probably as much about Marcel Proust and a few other contemporary writers as Wilson did--although he didn't reveal it in his weird fiction.
- LEIBER: I would like to say that I think Lovecraft posthumously became a symbol of something that he wasn't in reality--for science-fiction writers rebelling against the Weird Tales influence, and it's an indication of how strong that influence was that there was such a passionate rebellion. To some of the very young science-fiction writers of the time it was convenient to make Lovecraft stand for the superstitious interpretation of reality--which was anything but Lovecraft's own view--the monstrous, the unclean interpretation of reality, as opposed to the straight-forward, scientific sort of sociologically bedded approach. As a result they would point at Lovecraft and criticize or merely shout Nyeh!--or satirize, as Phil Strong did. He sort of set the note of using Lovecraft as symbolizing the superstitious old fashioned horror and science-fiction story.
- BLOCH: I think there's another link in that chain. That's August Derleth. August Derleth became the spearhead of the forces that set out to perpetuate Lovecraft's works in definitive form, and I think that when August Derleth took off on science-fiction and said it was very definitely a branch of fantasy, this was what enraged the science-fiction writers and readers per se.
- BOB LICHTMAN (from the floor): Don't you think Derleth did Lovecraft a disservice by bringing out all the old unfinished things of his?

BLOCH: I would say Lovecraft's work must stand or fall by virtue of those stories he completed himself, presented for publication, and had accepted for publication. This is true of almost any writer.

There are some pretty ridiculous things in print regarding writers, their laundry lists and their menus and their carping letters to their publishers, which don't do any of them any particular service. I agree in part that perhaps a greater share of the material would not have been approved by Lovecraft himself. ③

LEIBER: But I think it's testimony to the interest in the man. When a writer becomes of sufficient interest, why then all his stuff does get looked up and published.

SAPIRO: I'd like to ask one more question before they kick us out. It's a question I'd like to ask Mr. Bloch to satisfy my own curiosity about Lovecraft's ideas on the unification of time. Lovecraft says that:

The commonest form of my imaginative aspiration..is a motion backward in time, or a discovery that time is merely an illusion and that the past is simply a lost mode of vision which I have a chance of recovering...

Now, Mr. Bloch mentions Lovecraft and Proust. Of course, this was Proust's greatest obsession also--the conquest of time--which he did by his theory of essences, as in that famous incident of the madeleine dipped in tea. I should like to ask how Lovecraft regarded Proust.

BLOCH: He thought that Proust was a very fine stylist. He mentioned him to me because I happened to be reading Proust at the time, and any writer that I was interested in he was likely to comment upon. But he didn't bring him up in regard to his own theory of time. He just had a great sense of tradition and a great affinity for the past: He was an antiquarian; he loved New England; he loved to journey to the still remaining relics of a previous age when life was gentler and kinder.

THE END



## FOOTNOTES

1., p. 6 We have no evidence to show that Lovecraft was ever aware of the real cause of his father's death. We learned of this only by consultation of the record. We do not know, through any written or spoken word of Lovecraft's, that he knew. He was but eight when his father died, and his references to Winfield Scott Lovecraft's death in letters extant do not include any awareness of his father's syphilis and/or paresis. He has written that his father "was seized with a complete nervous breakdown." But there is nowhere, to my knowledge, any reference to his father's syphilis and paresis, and his reference to his father is always in a hazy context--"my image of him is but vague." The point, however, is moot; it can be argued that he knew but never publicly admitted it, and that the profit of that knowledge lies in his rather strict moral code and his abhorrence of anything at all abnormal in sex.

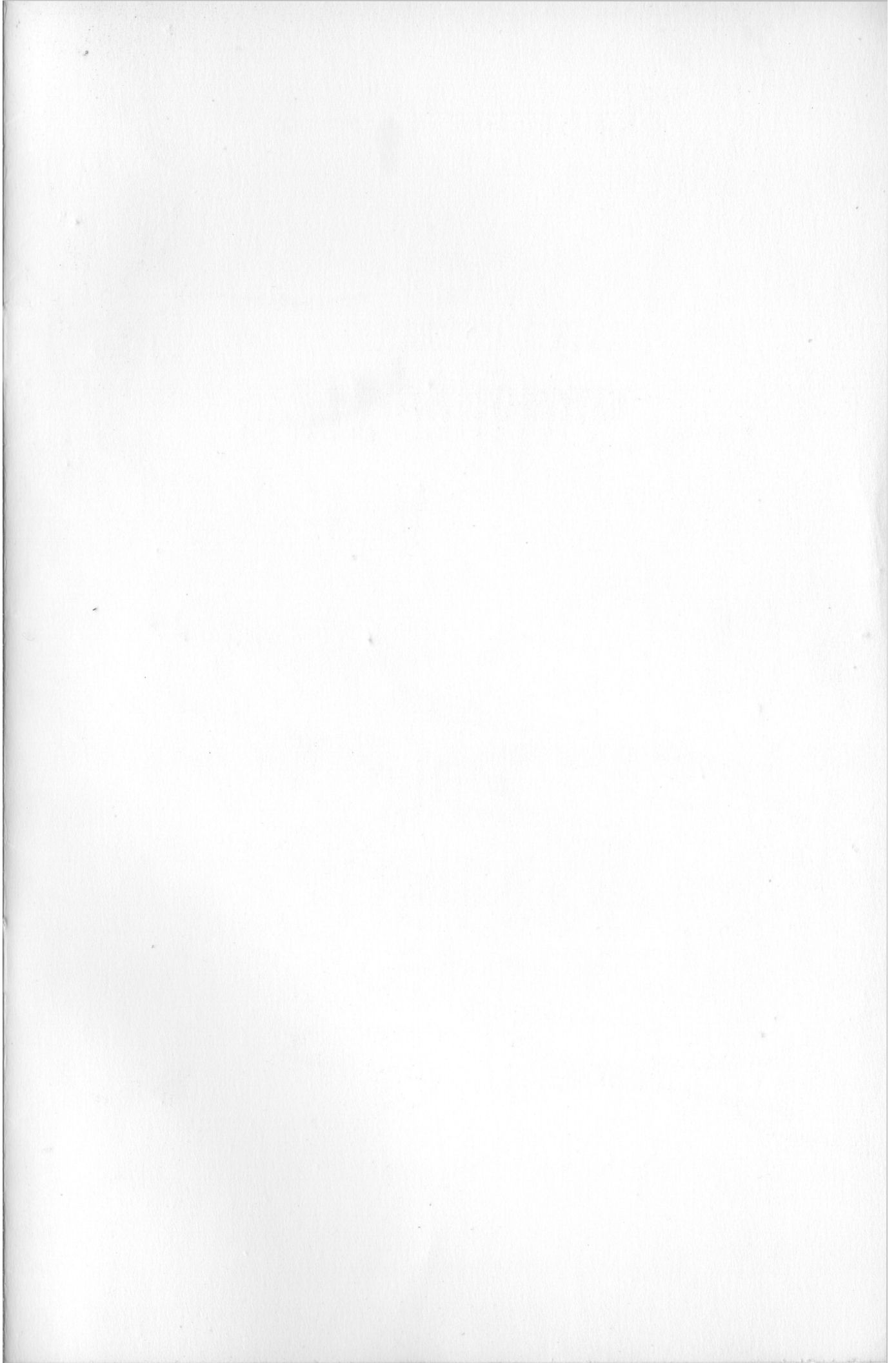
--August Derleth

2., p. 15 No one seriously accepts Edmund Wilson's "Lovecraft circle" because he made reference to a mythical sycophantic cult group similar to the Baker Street Irregulars. The only real Lovecraft circle--in the sense that Lovecraft was actively a part of any circle of friends--was very probably the old Kalem Klub, and there was nothing sycophantic about that. The term "Lovecraft circle" came to be used to describe both the writers who furthered the Cthulhu Mythos, and also those people who corresponded regularly with Lovecraft. Thus, today, when reference is made here at Arkham House to "The Lovecraft circle," such reference is always to those people who remain from the small group of Lovecraft's regular correspondents--among them Bob Bloch, Frank Long, Fritz Leiber, Don Wandrei, Duane Rimel, and myself. --August Derleth.

3., p. 16 Here at Arkham House we would be the first to admit that Lovecraft would certainly not have wanted a good deal of what he wrote put into print--and this includes not only his juvenilia, but also some of the stories prized by his readers, and his correspondence. Of his earliest stories he saved only The Beast in the Cave, The Transition of Juan Romero, and The Alchemist as of more merit than those pieces he destroyed. Such earlier pieces as were reprinted were found in the possession of a collector, in manuscript form. Their printing by Arkham House was in limited edition only, with no reprint in any form, specifically for collectors.--August Derleth.













ERRATA:

P.1, line 13: Change to "manuscript."

P.3, line 23: Omit apostrophe in "hers."

P.6, lines 15-16: Change hyphenation to "hered-itary."

P.8, Between the 2nd and 3rd lines (counting from the bottom) insert the line: "...editorial disapproval--he wasn't at all weak as far as..."

The corrected passage should read:

"I would say that although he was very doubtful about the worth of his own particular stories...easily shaken by editorial disapproval--he wasn't at all weak as far as what he considered aesthetic judgments in general."

P.10, 12th line from bottom: Change to "Marquand's"

P. 10, 6th line from bottom: Insert "taken" between the words "is" and "back."

P.15, line 15: Change to "Edmund."

P.17, at start of second footnote: Change to "p.14."

NOTICE:

This symposium is being mailed to subscribers of INSIDE (now The Riverside Quarterly) as a reward for their patience in awaiting the third issue, now five months overdue. Copies also are being sent to readers of HAUNTED, the critical review for weird fiction, and Shangri L'Affaires, official publication of the LASFS, which sponsored the discussion.

In addition, copies of the symposium are being sold at two dollars apiece, with all profits being given to the LASFS club-house fund.

Apology is required for the advertisement in a September amateur journal that the third INSIDE was "now" ready for distribution. This announcement had been prompted by a communication received in August from the editor, Jonathan White, who said that he would try to print the magazine during that month. But shortly after, the editor hurried from town, thus causing a delay in publication of his magazine. Nevertheless, responsibility for the original announcement is entirely mine, since White had stated only that he would try to issue the magazine on time.

In any case, I shall try my hardest to print issue Three before this month (March) has elapsed.

Leland Sapiro  
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