

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: SOME NOTES ON A NONENTITY

FOR ME, THE CHIEF DIFFICULTY of writing an autobiography is finding anything of importance to put in it. My existence has been a quiet, uneventful, and undistinguished one; and at best must sound woefully flat and tame on paper.

I was born in Providence, R.I.—where, but for two minor interruptions, I have ever since lived—on August 20, 1890; of old Rhode Island stock on my mother's side, and of a Devonshire paternal line domiciled in New York State since 1827.

The interests which have led me to fantastic fiction were very early in appearing, for as far back as I can clearly remember I was charmed by strange stories and ideas, and by ancient scenes and objects. Nothing has ever seemed to fascinate me so much as the thought of some curious interruption in the prosaic laws of nature, or some monstrous intrusions on our familiar world by unknown things from the limitless abysses outside.

When I was three or less I listened avidly to the usual juvenile fairy lore, and Grimm's *Tales* were among the first things I ever read, at the age of four. When I was five the *Arabian Nights* claimed me, and I spent hours in playing Arab—calling myself "Abdul Alhazred," which some kindly elder had suggested to me as a typical Saracen name. It was many years later, however, that I thought of giving Abdul an eighth century setting and attributing to him the dreaded and unmentionable *Necronomicon!*

But for me books and legends held no monopoly of fantasy. In the quaint hill streets of my native town, where fanlighted Colonial doorways, small-paned windows, and graceful Georgian steeples still keep alive the glamour of the eighteenth century, I felt a magic then and now hard to explain. Sunsets over the city's outspread roofs, as seen from vantage-points on the great hill, affected me with especial poignancy. Before I knew it the eighteenth century had captured me more utterly than ever the hero of "Berkeley Square" was captured; so that I used to spend hours in the attic poring over the long-s'd books banished from the library downstairs and unconsciously absorbing the style of Pope and Dr. Johnson as a natural mode of expression. This absorption was doubly strong because of the ill-health which rendered school attendance rare and irregular. One effect of it was to make me feel subtly out of place in the modern period, and consequently to think of *time* as a mystical, portentous thing in which all sorts of unexpected wonders might be discovered.

Nature, too, keenly touched my sense of the fantastic. My home was not far from what was then the edge of the settled residence district, so that I was just as used to the rolling fields, stone walls, giant elms, squat farmhouses, and deep woods of rural New England as to the ancient urban scene. This brooding, primitive landscape seemed to me to hold some vast but unknown significance, and certain dark wooded hollows near the Seekonk River took on an aura of strangeness not unmingled with vague horror. They figured in my dreams—especially those nightmares containing the black, winged, rubbery entities which I called "night-gaunts."

When I was six years old I encountered the mythology of Greece and Rome through various popular juvenile media, and was profoundly influenced by it. I gave up being an Arab and became a Roman, incidentally acquiring for ancient Rome a queer feeling

of familiarity and identification only less powerful than my corresponding feeling for the eighteenth century. In a way, the two feelings worked together; for when I sought out the original classics from which the childish tales were taken, I found them very largely in late seventeenth and eighteenth century translations. The imaginative stimulus was immense, and for a time I actually thought I glimpsed fauns and dryads in certain venerable groves. I used to build altars and offer sacrifices to Pan, Diana, Apollo, and Minerva.

About this period the weird illustrations of Gustave Doré—met in editions of Dante, Milton, and *The Ancient Mariner*—affected me powerfully. For the first time I began to attempt writing—the earliest piece I can recall being a tale of a hideous cave perpetrated at the age of seven and entitled *The Noble Eavesdropper*. This does not survive, though I still possess two hilariously infantile efforts dating from the following year—*The Mysterious Ship* and *The Secret of the Grave*, whose titles display sufficiently the direction of my tastes.

At the age of about eight I acquired a strong interest in the sciences, which undoubtedly arose from the mysterious-looking pictures of *Philosophical and Scientific Instruments* in the back of Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary*. Chemistry came first, and I soon had a very attractive little laboratory in the basement of my home. Next came geography—with a weird fascination centreing in the antarctic continent and other pathless realms of remote wonder. Finally astronomy dawned on me—and the lure of other worlds and inconceivable cosmic gulfs eclipsed all other interests for a long period after my twelfth birthday. I published a small hectographed paper called *The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy* and at last—when sixteen—broke into actual newspaper print with astronomical matter, contributing monthly articles on current phenomena to a local daily, and flooding the weekly rural press with more expansive miscellany.

It was while in high-school—which I was able to attend with some regularity—that I first produced weird stories of any degree of coherence and seriousness. They were largely trash, and I destroyed the bulk of them when eighteen; but one or two probably came up to the average pulp level. Of them all I have kept only *The Beast in the Cave* (1905) and *The Alchemist* (1908). At this stage most of my incessant, voluminous writing was scientific and classical, weird material taking a relatively minor place. Science had removed my belief in the supernatural, and truth for the moment captivated me more than dreams. I am still a mechanistic materialist in philosophy. As for reading—I mixed science, history, general literature, weird literature, and utter juvenile rubbish with the most complete unconventionality.

Parallel with all these reading and writing interests I had a very enjoyable childhood; the early years well enlivened with toys and with outdoor diversions, and the stretch after my tenth birthday dominated by a persistent though perforce short-distance cycling which made me familiar with all the picturesque and fancy-exciting phases of the New England village and rural landscape. Nor was I by any means a hermit—more than one band of local boyhood having me on its rolls.

My health prevented college attendance; but informal studies at home, and the influence of a notably scholarly physician-uncle, helped to banish some of the worst effects of the lack. In the years which should have been collegiate I veered from science to literature, specializing in the products of that eighteenth century of which I felt myself so oddly a part. Weird writing was then in abeyance, although I read everything spectral that I could find—including the frequent bizarre items in such cheap magazines as *The All-Story* and *The Black Cat*. My own products were largely verse and essays—uniformly worthless and now relegated to eternal concealment.

In 1914 I discovered and joined the United Amateur Press Association, one of

several nation-wide correspondence organizations of literary novices who publish papers of their own and form collectively, a miniature world of helpful mutual criticism and encouragement. The benefit received from this affiliation can scarcely be overestimated, for contact with the various members and critics helped me infinitely in toning down the worst archaisms and ponderosities in my style. It was in the ranks of organized amateurdom that I was first advised to resume weird writing—a step which I took in July 1917, with the production of *The Tomb* and *Dagon* in quick succession. Also through amateurdom were established the contacts leading to the first professional publication of my fiction—in 1922, when *Home Brew* printed a ghastly series entitled *Herbert West, Reanimator*. The same circle, moreover, led to my acquaintance with Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Jun., Wilfred B. Talman, and others since celebrated in the field of unusual stories.

About 1919 the discovery of Lord Dunsany—from whom I got the idea of the artificial pantheon and myth-background represented by “Cthulhu,” “Yog-Sothoth,” “Yuggoth,” etc.—gave a vast impetus to my weird writing; and I turned out material in greater volume than ever before or since. At that time I had no thought or hope of professional publication; but the founding of *Weird Tales* in 1923 opened up an outlet of considerable steadiness. My stories of the 1920 period reflect a good deal of my two chief models, Poe and Dunsany, and are in general too strongly inclined to extravagance and over-colouring to be of much serious literary value.

Meanwhile my health had been radically improving since 1920, so that a rather static existence began to be diversified with modest travels giving my strong antiquarian interests a freer play. My chief delight outside literature became the past-reviving quest for ancient architectural and landscape effects in the old colonial towns and byways of America's longest-settled regions, and gradually I have managed to cover a considerable territory from glamorous Quebec on the north to tropical Key West on the south and colourful Natchez and New Orleans on the west. Among my favorite towns, aside from Providence, are Quebec; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Salem and Marblehead in Massachusetts; Newport in my own state; Philadelphia; Annapolis; Richmond with its wealth of Poe memories; eighteenth-century Charleston; sixteenth-century St. Augustine; and drowsy Natchez on its dizzy bluff and with its gorgeous subtropical hinterland. The “Arkham” and “Kingsport” figuring in some of my tales are more or less adapted versions of Salem and Marblehead. My native New England and its old lingering lore have sunk deep into my imagination, and appear frequently in what I write. I dwell at present in a house 130 years old on the crest of Providence's ancient hill, with a haunting vista of venerable roofs and boughs from the window above my desk.

It is now clear to me that any actual literary merit I may have is confined to tales of dream-life, strange shadow, and cosmic “outsideness,” notwithstanding a keen interest in many other departments of life and a professional practice of general prose and verse revision. Why this is so, I have not the least idea. I have no illusions concerning the precarious status of my tales, and do not expect to become a serious competitor of my favorite weird authors—Poe, Arthur Machen, Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, Walter de la Mare, and Montague Rhodes James. The only thing I can say in favour of my work is its sincerity. I refuse to follow the mechanical conventions of popular fiction or to fill my tales with stock characters and situations, but insist on reproducing real moods and impressions in the best way I can command. The result may be poor, but I had rather keep aiming at serious literary expression than accept the artificial standards of cheap romance.

I have tried to improve and subtilise my tales with the passing of years, but have

not made the progress I wish. Some of my efforts have been cited in the O'Brien and O. Henry annuals, and a few have enjoyed reprinting in anthologies; but all proposals for a published collection have come to nothing. I never write when I cannot be spontaneous—expressing a mood already existing and demanding crystallisation. Some of my tales involve actual dreams I have experienced. My speed and manner of writing vary widely in different cases, but I always work best at night. Of my products, my favorites are *The Colour Out of Space* and *The Music of Erich Zann*, in the order named. I doubt if I could ever succeed well in the ordinary kind of science fiction.

I believe that weird writing offers a serious field not unworthy of the best literary artists; though it is at most a very limited one, reflecting only a small section of man's infinitely composite moods. Spectral fiction should be realistic and atmospheric—confining its departure from nature to the one supernatural channel chosen, and remembering that scene, mood, and phenomena are more important in conveying what is to be conveyed than are characters and plot. The "punch" of a truly weird tale is simply some violation or transcending of fixed cosmic law—an imaginative escape from palling reality—since *phenomena* rather than *persons* are the logical "heroes." Horrors, I believe, should be original—the use of common myths and legends being a weakening influence. Current magazine fiction, with its incurable leanings toward conventional sentimental perspectives, brisk, cheerful style, and artificial "action" plots, does not rank high. The greatest weird tale ever written is probably Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows*.

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