Lovecraft at the Automat

J. M. Tyree

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In his 1945 memoir *Black Boy,* Richard Wright describes how as a child he became addicted to the pulp fiction supplement of a racist white newspaper. What Wright loved was reading a "thrilling horror story" in the magazine section of a Chicago paper "designed to circulate among rural, white Protestant readers." There is no reason to suspect that Wright was reading H. P. Lovecraft—in fact, the habit was probably acquired before Lovecraft began to publish. But Wright's sense of shock and recognition when the awful truth dawns on him parallels the feelings many readers have when they discover the racism that manifests itself in Edgar Allan Poe or Lovecraft. Wright's discovery of a cartoon in the newspaper claiming that "the only dream of a nigger is to be president and to sleep with white women" can be set alongside some of Lovecraft's more vile meditations, expressed in letters to friends, on "the mongoloid problem in Brooklyn" or his sensation of brushing past "hideous negroes that resemble gigantic chimpanzees" in the city subway.

From Poe on down, there has always been something more or less reactionary about the genre of horror fiction. Its underlying fear of otherness often morphs into literal nightmares of alien beings and unnatural monstrosities. Consider, for example, the Slavic blood contagion from "The East" depicted in Bram Stoker's *Dr acula* (1897), a political aspect of the story that has been mocked in Guy Maddin's remarkable black-and-white film *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2004). Lovecraft, who briefly self-published a one-man newspaper called *The Conservative*, deliberately modeled his politics as well as his art on the pro-Southern, patrician, racist views of Poe. In his long personal essay *H. R Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life,* the contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq puts it this way: "Horror writers are reactionary in general simply because they are particularly, one might even say *professionally,* aware of the existence of Evil." Stephen King tried to explain something similar in his nonfiction book on horror fiction and film, *Danse Macabre.* King describes his own generation growing up in the 1950s as "fertile seeds of terror ... we had been raised in a strange circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism, and national hubris." Evil with a capital E cannot be redeemed or explained, not with the liberal's technique of blaming a monster's upbringing; it must be put down, by force.

In Lovecraft's astonishing 1931 novella, *At the Mountains of Madness,* a race of elder beings who have established a great city in the remote interior of Antarctica is destroyed when a formless wormlike species they had enslaved for aeons rises up and overwhelms them. Both Houellebecq and the British novelist China Miéville have noted the fact that Lovecraft's description of these ex-slaves bears a striking resemblance to his depiction of the supposedly faceless, formless, multi-tentacled immigrant hordes that he encountered on a visit to Manhattan's Lower East Side: "monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal ... slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of windows and doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnameabilities." Yet no literal trace exists of the human models in the story, which makes it possible for a teenager

to read Lovecraft for the sake of mere adventure, as Wright evidendy did when he reveled in his magazine supplement.

This leads us to a few more tangled questions, though. Why did pulp writing of this kind inspire Richard Wright so *positively* very early on? And, reflecting more broadly, what exactly might the role of pulp be in a literary education? What is it about pulp—both crime and horror—that makes it seem so classically American? And indeed, what is one to make of the acceptance of a writer like Lovecraft as a quite respectable member of the American literary "canon," at least if one is to judge by the recent Library of America, Penguin, and Modern Library "definitive text" editions of his work?

Wright's description of his pulp adventures recalls a childhood experience that's almost universal amongst readers:

> When I returned home at night, I would go to my room and lock the door and revel in outlandish exploits or outlandish men in faraway, outlandish cities. For the first time in my life I became aware of the life of the modern world, of vast cities, and I was claimed by it; I loved it ... The cheap pulp tales enlarged my knowledge of the world more than anything I had encountered so far. To me, with my roundhouse, saloon-door, and river-levee background, they were revolutionary, my gateway to the world.

Lovecraft and Wright shared this early love for the outlandish, particularly for "outlandish cities," such as the one depicted in *At the Mountains of Madness.* Both writers also happened to have lived in the less-outlandish city of New York before World War II; and, as it happens, both wooed local Jewish girls while they were there.

Lovecraft's Brooklyn sojourn began in 1924, when he moved there to be with his new wife, Sonia H. Greene, a department-store executive with a comfortable apartment just south of Prospect Park, which she enjoyed using as a gathering place for a group of intellectual friends. The basic details of their life together are known largely thanks to the research of S. T. Joshi, who undertook the first scholarly studies of the author in numerous essays and books.[1] Lovecraft and Sonia had first met in Boston in 1921 at a conference for amateur journalists and had married on March 3, 1924. One indication of how Lovecraft regarded the possibilities that opened up for him in this marriage may be gleaned indireedy from his novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward.* The narrative features an aristocratic and immortal antiquarian wizard, Joseph Curwen, a sort of latter-day Dr. Faustus who managed to survive the Salem witch trials, and whose marriage Lovecraft places on the calendar on March 7, only three days later than his own. Lovecraft observes of Curwen that just after his wedding "he seemed more

[1] The quotations from Lovecraft's correspondence in this essay are from H. P. Lovecraft, *Letters from New York,* edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Nightshade Books, 2005). Because of the untrustworthiness of other sources, details about Lovecraft's life are derived from Joshi whenever possible.

like a normal citizen than at any other time," treating his young bride with "extreme graciousness and consideration."

Lovecraft and Sonia, who was a widow and an older, successful businesswoman at the time of their marriage, appear to have had a real intellectual bond and a sincere friendship, but their physical intimacy is a murky area. Lovecraft's correspondence of the time, particularly his long, meandering letter to his favorite aunt, Lillian D. Clark, informing her of the wedding after it had already taken place, suggests that the marriage was at least in part a "maturely logical and thoroughly common-sense solution" to practical financial problems. But it was also clearly the culmination of a desire on his part to cast off his "helpless hermitage for a more active life." In this letter, with the strange mixture of grim jocularity and poignancy that pervades Lovecraft's correspondence, the author goes on to suggest that for him marriage is the only alternative to a life of gentlemanly poverty followed by suicide. Despite his unsentimental appraisal of his situation, his real affection for Sonia is clear: Lovecraft's visits to New York, starting in 1922, had had a "revivifying" effect, introducing the isolated writer to an excitable and engaging group of metropolitan friends among whom Sonia was a leading influence.

From the time that he had met her, he had begun to believe that an aristocratic gentleman of leisure ought to do more than yield to Baudelairean ennui and "uninspiring seclusion." Thus "our benevolent angel S. FI. G. stepped into my circle of consciousness and began to combat that idea with the opposite one of effort, and the enjoyment of life through rewards which effort will bring." Sonia—"S. H." in Lovecraft's letters—represented a surprising new phase of sociability for the writer in New York, "vigorous, understanding, and sympathetic literary companionship— the companionship which adds to an enlivening energy ..." The popular myth of Lovecraft as a lifelong shut-in was never more false than during the early stages of his courtship with and marriage to Sonia, during which time New York seemed to him like a very attractive and exciting place, full of stimulations conversational, cultural, historical, and topographical.

Sonia's apartment was at 259 Parkside. When Lovecraft initially moved in, he had already placed his first stories in *Weird Tales.* Sonia had been working at the Ferie Heller department store, according to Joshi making $10,000 a year—five times the average income for an entire family of the day. An executive in millinery, she quickly moved to start her own hat shop on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue and gave every indication of being able to provide both for herself and for the impractical literary gentleman she had married. It was not a marriage of convenience, but Lovecraft did seem to view it in a somewhat similar fashion to one of those old-fashioned English matches between run-down gentry and a rising member of the business class-^with the exception that in this case the more familiar gender roles were reversed.

Things began to go wrong with eerie rapidity, a sign of Lovecraft's seemingly endless store of dreadful luck. Lovecraft decided not to relocate to Chicago for a job editing a new magazine associated with *Weird Tales.* Sonia's new business venture abrupdy went bankrupt, causing a financial crash that would eventually undo the marriage. At

age thirty-four, the unskilled Lovecraft couldn't find even menial work in New York, despite expending shoe leather and entering into a number of unsuccessful schemes and projects (according to Joshi, he even tried out as a "lamp-tester"). He was ultimately compelled to put his furniture up for sale, although there were few buyers; in Houellebecq's apt phrase, he "was inadaptable to the market economy."

Under the severe strain, Sonia's nerves broke, recalling the sort of "money madness" that had accompanied extreme reversals of fortune earlier on in New York's Gilded Age, or presaging the Depression soon to come. What Lovecraft called "the disintegration" of their household now began—they would lose their apartment and become increasingly estranged. Sonia wound up in a country rest house in New Jersey, then moved out to Ohio to secure employment, later on reestablishing herself in her old line of work. Initially, she went to great lengths to visit Lovecraft in New York after they were separated, spoiling him with meals out and theatrical entertainments. Ultimately, in 1929, after he had gone back to Providence and stayed there for three years, Sonia pressed Lovecraft for a divorce.

Before leaving New York, however, Lovecraft relocated to a one-room apartment at 169 Clinton Street in Brooklyn Heights (his rent there seems to have been paid by his aunt Annie Gamwell). In that neighborhood, he was to spend the most miserable period of his life, in close proximity to the immigrant lower depths of Red Hook, cultivating hysterical prejudices that were doubtless exacerbated by Lovecraft's tendency toward mental illness and what must have seemed like the inexplicable unfairness of his sudden misfortune. At Clinton Street, the landlady refused to heat the apartment properly, magnifying out of proportion Lovecraft's longstanding physical terror of cold. His bed was a fold-out couch that Lovecraft never folded out, unless Sonia was visiting. Lacking a proper stove, he resorted to the unsavory canned food of the era and cooked A&P spaghetti over a Sterno. He also frequented the city's allnight Automats, describing to Lillian how the system worked in a letter of November 4–5, 1924. In another letter written the following spring, on April 11, 1925, he laid out with mock bravado the details of an eight-cent homemade meal involving bread, cheese, and Heinz beans. May 1925, probably the writer's low point, saw thieves break into the apartment to steal Lovecraft's suits and a friend's radio equipment. Even then, however, Lovecraft's response was a grim attempt to be humorous: in a letter to Lillian, he drew a cartoon of himself roaming the streets in a costume composed of his own hair. Unlike his idol, Edgar Allan Poe, who in letters often displayed a manipulative and bathetic self-pity when at his most desperate, Lovecraft insistendy assumed an air of dignified nonchalance. At a time when he was avoiding company because of his humiliating lack of proper clothes, he still tried to entertain Lillian with his little cartoon and his notes on finishing "good oP Joe" Conrad's *Lord Jim.*

Contrary to the widely held conception of Lovecraft as a friendless recluse, in New York he cultivated a closely knit group who shared his passion for books, antiquarianism, weird fiction, and long city walks. Lovecraft actually spent much of 1924 and 1925 in seemingly constant motion between the dwellings of various members of the

so-called Kalem Club, which got its name from the coincidental fact that the entire group seemed to consist of people whose names began with one or another of the letters K, A, L, E, or M. Members included George Kirk, owner of the Chelsea Bookshop and editor of Ambrose Bierce; Arthur Leeds; Lovecraft protégé Frank Belknap Long; poet Samuel Loveman; and the author of young adult fiction Everett McNeill. At first glimpse, New York, for Lovecraft, was "a dream-thing," as he described the view from the Harlem Biver viaduct on an initial visit to the city in May 1922. (Even after his hard times began, Lovecraft still regarded Manhattan's skyline as a fantastical thing of "Dunsanian beauty," which from him was high praise indeed.) The city's bookstalls, particularly on Vesey Street and Fourth Avenue, became constant haunts. One of Lovecraft's obsessions involved tracking down every last vestige of colonial housing and architecture left in the city, including hidden warrens of old buildings suggesting "secret cities within cities" that would form the basis for his first New York story, "He." A letter of September 29–30,1924, about an "all-day jaunt to elder regions" of Staten Island and New Jersey nicely reveals Lovecraft at his most cheerful: "Whoopee! The past for me!" As his financial problems deepened, however, one senses that these long walks became less a carefree pastime and more a way of staving off the humiliation of unemployment with some sort of activity.

In New York, Lovecraft was introduced to Hart Crane, who lived in the same Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, and he came close to meeting Allen Tate, who was then freelancing for *The Nation* and other magazines during his own four-year New York residence. Lovecraft visited the Fordham cottage of his "master," Poe, in the Bronx. He read Melville, pondered the neglected reputation of Hawthorne, added the Elizabethan dramatist John Webster to his library, and often argued or walked till dawn with his friends. Lovecraft had good taste: after attending a performance of *All God's Chilian Got Winjjs*, he argued that Eugene O'Neill was an important playwright, and in his notes on Conrad he sets him apart from other, more transitory figures as a writer likely to endure. Lovecraft was also a good friend, solicitous, generous with his time, thoughtful, sincere, modest, unmanipulative, and remarkably (perhaps detrimentally) uninterested in social climbing, flattering, or getting an advantage. Without modification of his own racist views, he developed a longstanding and close relationship with James Ferdinand Morton, a Harvard-educated amateur journalist who advocated complete race-equality and held other so-called "repellent ideas," and who was later to marry an African-American woman.

Lovecraft's early experience of New York, so different from his later sense of it, is a familiar rendition of a young person's initial brush with a great world-city, in which stimulation seems endless, and one immerses oneself in the perennial illusion that the minute-by-minute doings of the metropolis are of great significance. A letter to Lillian about one of his early city visits, written from the comfort of Sonia's Parkside apartment on September 13–16, 1922, indicates how uncharacteristically happy this place and these people made him: "Would that you could be here to participate in the ceaseless round of pleasant activity & intellectual encouragement which has for the

time wholly banished my ancient melancholy!" When he had left New York behind, traumatized and impoverished, Lovecraft claimed that he had "never mentally dwelt anywhere else" but Providence. At the time he wrote this, it was an accurate reflection of his feelings, but when it came to the author's intellectual development, the claim simply wasn't true. As his friend W. Paul Cook once remarked of Lovecraft, "He came back to Providence a human being"; moreover, in the view of Joshi and David E. Schultz, New York gave Lovecraft "something of the cosmopolitanism he professed to despise." This judgment, particularly when counterbalanced against the reactionary accounts of New York that appear in Lovecraft's fiction, invites detailed exploration, because in a number of crucial ways the experience of the city was formative in the conception and development of his art.

As a writer, Lovecraft drew from a solitary but deep well, and his own neuroses, prejudices, mental illnesses, and ailments gave rise to a universalized philosophy about the fundamentally evil nature of the universe. The strange and silly name he assigned to his famous undersea monster, "Cthulhu," appears to contain the beginnings of the word "chthonic" and most of the word "thule." Simply put, the name implies that we've been suffering since before the beginning. Lovecraft's aesthetic was essentially a less subtle and developed version of Conrad: beneath the surface layer of civilization lay the moral abyss depicted in *Heart of Darkness (*1899). Like Conrad, Lovecraft used Western culture to represent the thin surface beneath which horrors writhed, horrors projected and magnified in putatively primitive locales. In this sense, as commentators have often noted, both Conrad and Lovecraft were early explorers of what Carl Jung, in an attempt to differentiate his theory from Freud's individualized conception of the unconscious, would come to call the collective unconscious. In both *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927) and *The Rats in the Walls* (1923), Lovecraft would use the Conradian conceit of a deep descent down through the historical layers of humanity's development via a literal physical journey. A May 25,1925, letter to Lillian about *Lord Jim* (1900) notes that up to that point he had only read "the shorter and minor productions of Conrad." "The Rats in the Walls" reads in places like a kind of pulp fiction version of *Heart of Darkness.*

To the Conradian notion of traveling into "the horror" by moving backward in time, Lovecraft added the idea that the essential evil underlying reality could burst forward from anywhere, unexpectedly: in a rundown seaside town ("The Shadow Over Innsmouth," 1931), in the character of a long-lost relative *{Charles Dexter Ward),* up in the lonely hills of Vermont ("The Whisperer in Darkness," 1930), or—in his most brilliant depiction of random, motiveless, expanding blight—with the sudden appearance of a meteor ("The Colour Out of Space," 1927). For Lovecraft, evil is a substance: dark matter that is spreading through the universe in general and human

life in particular. When one encounters or unleashes evil, it's Game Over for humanity and all trivial human pursuits. It is curious to observe how many of Lovecraft's stories involve a fear of contamination or attack by water ("Innsmouth," "The Horror at Red Hook," "Colour," "Cthulhu," etc.), unusual in that water is the source of all

life on earth. This suggests a fundamental link between these things; as Houellebecq puts it, for Lovecraft "life is itself evil." Even here, Lovecraft seems to have derived his notions from Conrad, or to have drawn significantly on a vision he sees himself as sharing with a contemporary. Reading *Lord Jim*, Lovecraft remarked, "To Conrad surfaces have ceased to have an intrinsic significance—he is at one with the weariness and eternal pain and horror of seas and winds and skies."

Like all good writers, Lovecraft—who is, after Poe, the most memorable and important American writer in the surprisingly enduring pulp terror genre—used his defects to his advantage. The list of his New York horror stories is small, including "The Horror at Red Hook" (1925), "He" (1925), and "Cool Air" (1926), but each evokes a central feature of urban life, the sense of the unspeakably terrible thing going on just down the block or in the adjacent apartment. In the classic and wonderful "Cool Air," for example, the narrator discovers that one of his eccentric neighbors on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan keeps his rooms frozen, by means of an elaborate air-chilling contraption, because he has in fact died years earlier and is keeping himself animated artificially. "He," on the other hand, contains in its opening paragraphs the basic elements of Lovecraft's racial hysteria:

> My coming to New York had been a mistake; for whereas I had looked for poignant wonder and inspiration in the teeming labyrinths of ancient streets that twist endlessly from forgotten courts and squares and waterfronts to courts and squares and waterfronts equally forgotten, and in the Cyclopean modern towers and pinnacles that rose blackly Babylonian under waning moons, I had found instead only a sense of horror and oppression ... Garish daylight shewed only squalor and alienage ... the throngs of people that seethed through the flume-like streets were squat, swarthy strangers ...

Joshi and Schultz, in their edition of Lovecraft's New York letters, call this passage a "virtual abstract" of the author's perspective on the entire period, a compact inventory of the repeatedly recycled phrases and conceptions Lovecraft used time and again to describe the city.

"The Horror at Red Hook," one of Lovecraft's most explicitly racist short stories, literalizes the "problem" brought up in the initial passages of "He." In it, a group of devil-worshipping, child-snatching Kurds smuggles evil beings and presences into Brooklyn from the seaside docks through a network of elaborate tunnels running beneath the streets. The tunnels open into the basements of particular buildings, leading down into strange crypts filled with horrors that are—what else?—unspeakable. The story begins not in New York but in Rhode Island, where a former Brooklyn police officer suffers a mental breakdown triggered by the sight of tall buildings made of brick that accordingly "convey a touch of the urban."

To be frightened of a building material seems like an odd conceit, but the idea is pursued by Edgar Allan Poe, Lovecraft's model, in the witty series of 1844 New

York Dispatches entitled "Doings of Gotham." There he describes how the whole island of Manhattan "will be densely desecrated by buildings of brick." Of Brooklyn, Poe said, "I know few towns which inspire me with so great disgust and contempt." Moreover, Poe's visionary or phantasmagoric 1831 poem, "The City in the Sea"—a likely source for both of Lovecraft's best-known works, *At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Call of Cthulhu"—describes a ruined underwater city, horrible rather than rich and strange, a place where "Death has reared himself a throne." For both Poe and Lovecraft, the ancient remnants of these Ur cities are neither *Kubla Khan-typc* fantasias nor *Ozytnandias-s*tyle reminders of human transience—they are active sources of doom that may erupt in the future and release the fury of Hell itself, like dormant supernatural volcanoes.

Lovecraft's unstable policeman, Thomas F. Malone, has been sent out to live in a quaint New England hamlet and forbidden even to venture into larger villages where he might see brick buildings that would remind him of his shocking experiences in Red Hook. That neighborhood, with its "squalid" houses, "rookeries," and "nests of disorder and violence," is a kind of topographical and architectural embodiment of what is feared: "a horror of houses and blocks and cities leprous and cancerous with evil dragged from elder worlds." And not just the slums themselves, "a maze of hybrid squalor," but the "seas of dark, subde faces," the "oriental" nightmare of an exotic, teeming port. (In another Lovecraft tale, "Pickman's Model," a character develops a corresponding phobia of subways.) So "The Horror at Red Hook" ¿rin fact Red Hook itself, or, more precisely, a neurotic race fantasy turned into a supernatural monstrosity by imaginative hyperbole. *Resident aliens* become the worshippers and handmaidens of actual and literal *alien beings.*

As in Frazier's *The Golden Bough,* a work that exerted a deep influence on a host of early twentieth-century writers and artists, Lovecraft's central conceit is that of "survivals," evidence amongst supposedly primitive cultures or backward populations (i.e., non-Western, non-white, or peasant folk) of ancient forms of unwholesome pagan religions that predate Western civilization. In a letter from the New York period containing a rather explicit artistic confession, Lovecraft declares, "To me there is no subject in literature so fascinating as chronological disarrangement." He would repeatedly put this predilection to better use—in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,* for example. But his code-phrases for such persistent anxieties in "The Horror at Red Hook"—"secret continuity," "primordial tradition," clandestine systems of "assemblies and orgies descending from dark religions antedating the Aryan world," etc.—are not ambiguous. He was factually correct about the existence of a community of Kurds around Boerum Hill—there is a Kurdish Library Museum at Park Place and Underhill. The strange combination of vileness and otherworldly mystery Lovecraft attributes to the Kurds of Brooklyn, however, is in essence a recapitulation of some of the most pernicious anti-Semitic myths: child kidnapping and human sacrifice. By the time that this swirl of hatred is mixed with anti-black slurs, as in the depiction of "an Arab with a hatefully negroid mouth," one almost feels that Lovecraft is frantically pressing

every hot button simultaneously in a compulsive frenzy of xenophobia. A comment by Houellebecq seems accurate: "The ethnic realities at play had long been wiped out; what is certain is that he hated them all and was incapable of greater specificity."

In addition to his horror of miscegenation, Lovecraft felt an intense hatred for mixed and hybrid forms of culture that cities in general and New York in particular represent, embody, sustain, and champion. The obvious virtues of cultural cross-breeding and syncretistic urban culture simply escaped his consciousness. The "gumbo" of American styles of early jazz being developed in cities across America around the same time, including some of the twentieth century's greatest music, proved of less than zero interest to him. The notion of a relatively peaceful multi-ethnic cosmopolis and *city of refuge* to which all are welcome was utterly foreign to Lovecraft's way of thinking; instead, it was the "white colonialism" of New Jersey that attracted him, as did his imaginary conception of "Southern colonial villages and plantations."

Lovecraft seemed to have no awareness that New York was just reaching one of its cultural high-water marks, and that one of the main reasons for its rich cultural ferment was precisely the kind of mixing that he loathed. The cultural historian Ann Douglas suggests the overall atmosphere of this period in the subtide of her study *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s.* "A good part of New York's cultural preeminence and power in the 1920s," Douglas notes, "came from the simple fact that New York was chief mecca to the hundreds of thousands of Negroes emigrating from South to North in the Great War years," the so-called "Talented Tenth" of self-styled "Aframericans." The year 1927 marked the appearance of the first batch of recordings by Duke Ellington and his orchestra for OKeh Records in New York, including "Black and Tan Fantasy," to give just one example amongst myriad comparable cultural developments.

Lovecraft's parting shot at the city, in a letter of May 1,1926, to Frank Belknap Long from his new lodgings in Providence, contains a parallelism between the personal and the political: while "America has lost New York to the mongrels," he himself has "lost 1924 & 1925." An earlier outburst after a visit to Philadelphia, in a letter to Lillian of November 17–18,1924, sums up Lovecraft's worldview in this period of his life:

> I regretted the departure, for Philadelphia has an atmosphere peculiarly suited to old gentlemen like me. None of the crude, foreign hostility & plebeian hustle. A city of real American background—an integral & continuous outgrowth of a definite & aristocratic past instead of an Asiatic hell's huddle of the world's cowed, broken, inartistic, & unfit.

Attentiveness to the exact nature of Lovecraft's racism, hardly uncommon for its time, brings out an underlying attitude similar to that of a reactionary English settler in Africa or India, a kind of colonial Toryism clinging to outmoded Victorian values and viewing polite society as a sort of thin crust of civility necessary to keeping down the savagery of most of the rest of the world. Indeed, Lovecraft made a habit of

frequently inserting the phrase "GOD SAVE THE KING!" into his letters to his aunts, as if he had not yet accepted the historical outcome of the Revolutionary War, never mind the Emancipation Proclamation or the immigration policies that, beginning in the nineteenth century, swelled New York's population so drastically with the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses. (A closer look at the last line of Lovecraft's outburst above may suggest something like a parody of the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, a belitding of the most dearly held American conceptions of progress, welcome, and new beginnings.)

Despite the idiosyncrasy of his royalism, however much of an affectation it might have been, Lovecraft's views on race were far from unconventional. He also moderated his expression of them in print during his mature period, as in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,* where he takes awkward pains to display an air of patrician kindness toward the black family who live next door to the protagonist in Providence. Doing odd jobs around the neighborhood and remaining courteously and incuriously invisible during the removal of eldritch arcana from the house they are renting, "old Asa and his stout wife Hannah" are presented as decent neighbors, although judging the novella quasi-integrationist would be absurd.

Lovecraft's anti-Semitism, although virulent, had a loophole. His love of "old days and old ways" was so great that he surrendered completely to exoticism when he encountered the Jewish community of the Lower East Side around Rivington Street in late September 1924* In their "absolutely unassimilated state," with their beards, skullcaps, Hebrew bookstalls, and what Lovecraft vaguely refers to as their "general costumes," *these* Jews are ancient enough and picturesque enough to be inoffensive. The rant that follows in his letter about the visit includes bizarre and revealing claims that the "Rivington-Streeters are altogether different, and when they depart from the Semitic type, the variation is toward the Aryan rather than towards the Asiastic." China Miéville makes a strong case that Lovecraft's anti-Semitism is made even more distasteful, not less so, by the fact that Sonia was Jewish, and, to judge from scattered evidence in Lovecraft's letters, apparently not fully naturalized as an American at the time of the marriage. In the end, in locating the source of his revulsion, for Lovecraft it all boiled down to "East versus West."

Lovecraft's view of immigrants and foreigners was an extreme form of what was in fact a widely held reaction, with many manifestations considered commonplace if not in fact altogether respectable. A comparison with Henry James makes this reasonably clear. Having grown up in New York and then having gone on to absorb so much of the Old World as an adult, James had his nostalgia for the past rudely interrupted by a brush with contemporary reality. Upon returning to his native city after a long period of residence abroad, in collecting his impressions in *The American Scene* (1907), James found, to his distaste, that the New York of his childhood had vanished into a blaring, crowded, modern metropolis. As Colm Tóibín has put it, in an essay published in *The New York Review of Books,* "James's writings about New York disclose, more than anything, an anger, quite unlike any other anger in James, at what has been lost to

him, what has been done, in the name of commerce and material progress, to a place he once knew." Tóibín also notes that James's "horror" of immigrants makes "for some of the most uncomfortable reading in his entire opus." One sees in James's account of the city a curious failure of imagination. The fire escapes of the New York ghettos bring to his mind "the speciously organized cage for the nimbler class of animals in some great zoological garden ... a little world of bars and perches and swings for human squirrels and monkeys."

In *The American Scene*, James also makes a point of noting how "one tumbles back into the streets in appalled reaction from *them* ..." Fretting over a "sense of dispossession" and discouraging the "unwary" from visiting Ellis Island, James pines for "the luxury of some such close and sweet and *whole* national consciousness as that of the Switzer and the Scot." That is to say, an unmixed, homogenized, white culture. Throughout his account of his return to his native land, James is alarmed and haunted by the "affirmed claim of the alien."

S. T. Joshi has documented in detail Lovecraft's great admiration for Oswald Spengler's treatise *The Decline of the West*, one of the most popular and influential philosophical works of the early twentieth century. Like Spengler, Lovecraft loathed the concept of the "world city" and was appalled by "decadence" in art and architecture. Like a number of other admirers of Spengler, Lovecraft also admired Hider—at least at first, although he developed ambiguous feelings later, eventually wound up a Roosevelt supporter during the Depression, and didn't live long enough to see the outbreak of World War II. His descriptions of what he despised about Red Hook, however, might have resonated with what a Nazi urban planner named Max Karl Schwartz once bizarrely called "the Jewish spirit" of "multistory buildings."[(2)] Similarly, the kind of topography Lovecraft found healthy is reminiscent of Schwartz's delusional plans to revitalize bombed-out German cities with a "true urban landscape" of houses, gardens, and forests. As previously noted, in "The Horror at Red Hook" Lovecraft's police officer character has been sent away from Brooklyn to convalesce in a comparable "quaint hamlet of wooden colonial houses," having promised "never to venture among the brick-lined streets of larger villages ..."

What is one to make of such gestures of avoidance and escape? How can they possibly bring readers into a larger sense of experience and serve to provoke the imagination? And yet, "My gateway to the world," is how Richard Wright identified pulp, and there are a great many kids whose lifelong love of reading starts with writers like Lovecraft. There is a curious poignancy in Wright's generosity and gratitude to such stories that implies an essential role for them in his overall intellectual growth. Could we borrow or adapt this notion from Wright for a more judicious reading of Lovecraft? It is almost as if pulp fiction, by hinting at the possibility of other worlds, whether real or fantastic, cannot help but liberate a young mind hungering for something dif-

[(2)] Schwartz's statement (and more about "Eco-fascism") can be found in Mike Davis, *Dead Cities* (The New Press, 2002), p. 383.

ferent from the everyday reality in which it is confined. Certainly the curious desire that young writers feel to copy Lovecraft's stories does not come from a fixation on their explicit or submerged prejudices; it seems to come instead from a desire to create art suggesting hidden dimensions and extraordinary circumstances lurking invisibly in the creases, cracks, and corners of our humdrum world. As Joshi and others have noted, in Lovecraft's best tales, like "The Colour Out of Space" and "The Whisperer in Darkness," evil becomes less and less personalized and sociologically locatable and more and more amorphous, metaphysical, and extraterrestrial in nature.

Another misconception about Lovecraft relates to the extraordinary creative outburst he experienced once he left New York. It is easy, but misleading, to view the city as a yoke that he had to throw off before he could begin to achieve maturity as a writer. Chronologically, it is true that what Lovecraft's admirers call "the great texts" were created during a very precise phase of his career, from 1926 to 1934, when he was back living in Providence after his miserable and botched period in New York. Lovecraft's passion for Providence, that ancient town of slavers and rum, that "universal haven of the odd, the free, and the dissenting," would fuel the exceptionally strange Hawthorne-like novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward,* whose early chapters contain magnificent and almost untransformed documentary accounts of working one's way through the historical layers of the city.

But the idea that "the great texts" had nothing whatsoever to do with New York and burst fully formed from Lovecraft's head once he had cleared the city limits is belied by the evidence of his correspondence. If one focuses exclusively on the process of composition, it is not surprising to discover that Lovecraft didn't have the time or the energy to write "The Call of Cthulhu" until the summer of 1926, when he had been safely back in Providence for several months, and was no longer spending his days worrying about finding work or becoming depressed by the "turmoil and throngs of N.Y." But what in retrospect appears to be a májor breakthrough actually occurred a year earlier, in August 1925, after an all-night episode of walks and travels in Manhattan, Staten Island, and New Jersey. This pivotal experience is documented magnificendy by Lovecraft himself, in the collection of his New York letters edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz.

August 10, as described afterward in a letter of the 13th to Lillian, began rather bleakly. Lovecraft woke up late, and after feeling "swamped" by letter-writing, which ate up the afternoon and evening, found himself overcome by writer's block. Making an attempt at "fictional composition," Lovecraft was not "able to produce anything— being bored with the sameness, regularity, colourlessness, & poison-like quality of the usual round & scene." He went out for a night walk to relieve the sense of oppression, starting in Chelsea and working his way south to Greenwich Village, where his old colonial haunts and architectural survivals always cheered him. Among "Georgian knockers" and "steep gables, dormers & gambrel roofs," Lovecraft recovered his composure, putting a tiny stray kitten into the pocket of his coat for a spell, so that it poked its head out while he walked.

Then came his "Greenwich peregrinations," including Abingdon Square, Grove Court, Milligan and Patchin Places, Gay Street, and Sheridan Square; he then ventured south along Hudson to Canal; then over to the East Side under the Brooklyn Bridge; then back to "New" Chambers Street and Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan; then down to the Battery. At each stop came meditations on "the old days": vanished colonial buildings, observations on the city's royal past under George the Third, and other typical Lovecraftian comments on the ugliness and dispiriting nature of the present. Here Lovecraft faced a moment of decision, which in his letter he renders as a sort of life-choice:

> It was now five in the morning, & I had so fully thrown off melancholy by my free & antique voyage, that I felt exactly in the humour for writing. The clouds were dissolving, & another day was done. Should I drag it away in New-York, & lose the keenness of my mood, or keep on in my dash for liberty—gaining fresh strength as I kicked aside the irritating fetters of the usual?

Lovecraft went on to board a ferry bound for Staten Island and then eventually crossed over to New Jersey, reaching a favorite destination, Elizabeth, by 7 a.m. It is at this point that something happened: Lovecraft bought a dime composition book and sat down to write in Scott Park after the end of his all-night excursion. "Ideas welled up unbidden," Lovecraft wrote, "as never before for years, & the sunny scene blended into the purple & red of a hellish midnight tale—a tale of cryptical horrors among tangles of antediluvian alleys in Greenwich Village ..." This was the short story "He," of course, in which Lovecraft most notoriously directed his antipathy against the city itself.

But the bottle had been uncorked, and its contents were overflowing. In the same letter, Lovecraft notes that by the night of the 12th he was overcome with the feeling that he "had much to write." He had an idea for a "new story plot—perhaps a short novel," one which he had to get down in "skeletonic detail while it was fresh." Having spent several hours putting down the story's "complete development scheme in full," Lovecraft felt, with a remarkable degree of artistic self-confidence, given his situation at the time, that the writing itself would come easily; he promised his aunt a typescript as soon as he managed to get "He" and "The Horror at Red Hook" out of his system. The entire episode could stand as a defining moment for Lovecraft, in the sense that it represented a decision to leave the city of New York—both physically and metaphysically—even while he was still in it. It is important to notice that he evidendy "needed" to be in New Jersey before he started to write.

Henry David Thoreau, who spent a little-known and miserable period in 1843 tutoring in Staten Island, once remarked in a letter that New York gave him "something to hate—that's the advantage it will be to me." Although the similarities between them are otherwise minimal, Lovecraft, like Thoreau, loathed the many-headed crowd, in

which individuality seemed to be imperiled. But there is another biographical similarity between the two writers, at least as regards the matter of New York. Their writing about the city was inextricably bound up with their feeling of revulsion toward an urban scene they had no wish to understand. And in New York, both writers discovered not only what they hated, but what they loved: in Thoreau's case, Concord and the possibilities of natural wilderness, and in Lovecraft's case, colonial Providence and the survivals of the past. Interestingly, both writers started on the first literary productions of their maturity while sunk in urban unhappiness. Perhaps it was a matter of imagining another world to inhabit besides the one they found themselves in.

In the end, the claim of Joshi and Schultz that Lovecraft's period of living in New York gave him "something of the cosmopolitanism he professed to despise" is a difficult one to assess completely. Certainly it is not the case that living in New York made Lovecraft any more positively disposed toward the *idea* of cosmopolitanism, in the sense of a tolerant multi-ethnic metropolitan culture in which syncretism and mixing creates new art forms—like jazz, to use the most obvious example from the era. And yet the conclusion appears far more accurate when it is considered primarily in biographical terms. Prior to his departure for New York, Lovecraft was leading what Joshi and Schultz call the "fossilized" existence of a hermit, but after leaving the city and returning to Providence, he did not go back to his old ways. The biographical interpreters are convinced that "his firsthand taste of metropolitan life, with the intellectual, cultural, and social stimulation it had provided, resulted in a permanent deepening and broadening of his horizons." Indeed, the last ten years of Lovecraft's life were what Joshi has called "the time of his greatest flowering, both as a writer and j this period, Lovecraft traveled a good deal up and down the East Coast (including a visit to Canada), and wrote his most compelling short stories and novellas. He also came back to New York several times, including visits in 1926, 1928, and during the Christmas season of 1932. Staying with the parents of his younger friend and protégé Frank Belknap Long, he spent his time in a dizzying range of social activities that recalled the earliest visits he had made to the city, in 1922, two years before he had moved there to live with his new wife, a woman who had a good job, sexual experience, a lively intellectual circle, and an apartment of her own.

J. M. Tyree
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