Modern Enchantments:
The Canny Wonders and Uncanny Others
of H. P. Lovecraft

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"Secondary Worlds," the "Ironic Imagination," and the Cthulhu Mythos

From the late eighteenth century through the present, "modernity" has been described as "disenchanted." Romantic writers claimed that the modern world was devoid of that sense of delight and astonishment at the wonders, marvels, and mysteries they believed had been intrinsic to the premodern world. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Max Weber codified these sentiments in his well-known phrase, "the disenchantment of the world" (155), by which he meant the removal of magic and meaning from life through the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization, transforming modern existence into "an iron cage of reason" (*Protestant* 181). Historians have usually characterized contemporary reactions to this discourse of disenchantment as a rejection of the secular and rational tenets of Western modernity. [1] This widespread "revolt against positivism" led individuals to embrace aestheticism, Eastern religions, the occult, spiritualism, and the instinctual "will."

In recent years, however, scholars have begun to reexamine responses to the discourse of disenchantment, providing counter examples of specifically modern forms of enchantment that reconciled rationality with marvels and secularism with a sense of wonder. [2] In this essay, I intend to focus on one of the varieties of modern enchantment: the highly detailed imaginary worlds that are literally inhabited by their fans, individually and communally, for extended periods of time. J. R. R. Tolkien dubbed these fictional creations "secondary worlds" (36). As A. O. Scott observed in *The New York Times,* "today there are hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people whose grasp of the history, politics and mythological traditions of entirely imaginary places could surely qualify them for an advanced degree" (B26).

The scope of this imaginative habitation is new, I want to argue,

emerging in its characteristic form in late-nineteenth century Britain and America. There have been fads for fictional characters since at least the eighteenth century; Richardson's Pamela, Goethe's Werther, and Dickens's Little Nell come immediately to mind. But these were of limited duration and extent, not comparable to the ongoing, widespread, and even scholarly – at times Talmudic – immersion in such secondary worlds as those of Sherlock Holmes, Middle Earth, Star Trek, Star Wars, and so on.

These secondary worlds are inhabited through the "ironic imagination," which itself emerged in its characteristic form in the late nineteenth century. Reading has always been characterized by a certain degree of ironic distance, but by the "ironic imagination" I mean something else. The ironic imagination, as I define it, is related to Coleridge's explanation that we experience fiction in an enlightened age through "the willing suspension of disbelief." But those who use the ironic imagination do not so much willingly suspend their disbelief in fictional characters or worlds, as willingly believe in them with the double-minded awareness that they are engaging in pretence. The ironic imagination is a form of the modernist "double consciousness" that is found not only in many of the high modernist works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also in the mass culture of the same period. Further, these mass cultural expressions, while ironic, are not meta-fictions; that is, they are not so highly self-conscious about their artificial status that they inhibit the possibility of imaginative immersion.

The *fin-de-siécle* is synonymous with aestheticism, the turn by elites to the autonomous realm of art in response to the discourse of disenchantment. But during this period the mass public was also presented with virtual worlds of wonder they could inhabit without relinquishing their reason. The new genre of children's literature that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century had trained a generation to enjoy a non-didactic form of play in fictional worlds of fancy, and when this generation came of age it did not want to relinquish such immersive delights. Beginning in the 1880s, authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Arthur Conan Doyle crafted fantastic romances that appealed to adults as well as children. These works were presented in realist form – including foldout maps, photographs, and color illustrations made possible by new printing technologies of the 1880s – that facilitated the reader's immersion into fabulous environments that were nevertheless cohesive, coherent, and couched in the language of science.

At a time when many Victorians enjoyed increased leisure and an ever-expanding mass-consumer culture, suspicions of adults who indulged their imaginations diminished significantly. The findings of contemporary psychologists and philosophers contributed to this trend. Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, and Stephane Mallarmé pointed to the necessary interface between reason and the imagination in the construal of reality,

extolling the fictive aspects of existence. In 1911 the philosopher Hans Vaihinger published a manifesto of "Fictionalism," *The Philosophy of "As If"* in which he discussed the prevalence and utility of fictions in science and in everyday life.

Thus, by the early twentieth century, adults in addition to children were enabled and encouraged to inhabit fantastic geographies of the imagination without relinquishing their reason. One of the earliest of these rationally cohesive secondary worlds is that of the Cthulhu Mythos, created in the interwar period by the American writer of "weird fiction," Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937). Arguably it was Lovecraft who did more than any other to associate the secular and scientific understandings of the cosmos with the wonders and terrors once evoked by the supernatural. [3] He was a secular materialist who consciously intended to re-enchant the world through the ironic imagination. He hoped his fictions would evoke a sense of "adventurous expectancy" that redressed the routinized existence of modernity, and his best stories do induce a sense of wonder at the marvels and mysteries specific to a scientific worldview.

Lovecraft invented several New England towns that were prey to devastations by non-supernatural monstrosities from outside the realms of known space and time. His locales, extraterrestrials, and the ancient tome of "forbidden lore" recording past visitations by these entities and the means whereby they might be summoned again (the *Necronomicon*) were invested with such verisimilitude that other artists appropriated them for their own uses. Indeed, it is precisely the detailed verisimilitude of Lovecraft's fantastic universe, the "virtual reality" of his secular mythos for the modern age, which has contributed most to his long-lasting appeal. He created a cosmos amenable to imaginative habitation, a distinctly modern form of rational enchantment that has burgeoned in the twentieth century. An enthusiastic antiquarian, he compiled voluminous notes and drawings from his own researches into New England history, and his stories reflect actual geographical settings and historical events. As he worked out the plots for his tales he fashioned detailed maps of his fictional towns, provided his characters (including the nonhuman ones) with extensive genealogies, and even noted the chronologies – down to the hour – of when events happened. His prose may at times have been florid and his pacing glacial, but his narratives still captivate by their convincing realism, which applies not only to the small New England towns he created, like Arkham and Innsmouth, but also to the alien entities that beset them. "As against romanticism I am solidly a realist," he wrote to a correspondent in 1930. "My conception of phantasy, as a genuine art-form, is *an extension rather than a negation of reality*. Ordinary tales about a castle ghost or old-fashioned werewolf are merely so much junk" (*Letters III* 196).

Escaping from mundane reality by immersing oneself in tales of

cosmic invasions may not sound particularly "enchanting," but Lovecraft maintained that the unknown elicited wonder as much as fear, and most of his protagonists find the admixture irresistible. The narrator of "The Lurking Fear" has a harrowing encounter with a horrible creature, and while he "experienced virtual convulsions of fright... that fright was so mixed with wonder and alluring grotesqueness, that it was almost a pleasant sensation" (*Omnibus 3* 365-66). Better the devil you don't know than the devil you do, explains another wonder-besotted character as he eagerly pursues a potential horror after dark: "to my soul nothing was more deadly than the material daylight world" (*Omnibus 2* 276).

Indeed, the notion of "escape" is even more problematic than that of "enchantment." [4] Lovecraft believed that both the "real" and the "imagined," while conceptually distinct, were inseparable in terms of everyday experience. As a self-professed materialist and aesthete, he believed in the primacy of sensations, which were evoked by intangible ideas and images no less than by concrete reality. Thus all conscious experience was, ultimately, subjective: and if this phenomenological perspective were accepted, one could never truly escape from, or to, the imagination; at best one consciously shifts from a consensus "reality" to a more subjective "virtual reality." Many of his protagonists wonder if they have dreamed the fantastic events they narrate, and they usually discover that there is only a fine line between dream and reality, one often effaced in ordinary experience. The narrator of "The Tomb," for example, admonishes the reader that "men of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal; that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them" (*Omnibus 2* 18). Lovecraft boasted that he did not "have the maniac's or religious mystic's tendency to *confuse* reality with unreality" but he did have "the cynic's and analyst's inability to recognize any difference in *value* between the two types of consciousness-impacts, *real* and *unreal*. I know which are which, but cannot have any prejudice in favour of either class" (*Letters III* 125).

Thus Lovecraft demarcated the real from the imaginary, but in practice found that the two interpenetrated, rendering both realms equally habitable, equally "rational." On the one hand he maintained that his fictions were realistic, with the exception of the single "marvel" that was at best a remote possibility in reality. On the other hand, in his "real" life, he fancied himself an eighteenth-century gentleman, an image crafted from his empathetic readings in the period. He was highly conscious of the constructed, artifactual aspects of lived experience no less than fiction; ultimately all conscious existence for him, "actual" or "virtual," was grounded not merely in the imagination but in a specifically "ideational" or ironic imagination (*Letters V* 310). In his eyes this ironic double-consciousness made him a

genuine modern, unlike those literary modernists who thought they could speak for, and perhaps recover, an essential past. Like T.S. Eliot, for example, Lovecraft valued tradition and considered himself to be a royalist and a classicist. But he took pride in his ironic awareness that these allegiances were imaginary, and therefore more authentically "modern" than the essentialist claims of certain modernists:

> I object to the feigning of artificial moods on the part of literary moderns who cannot even begin to enter into the life and feelings of the past which they claim to represent.... I feel I am living in the 18th century, though my objective judgement knows better, & realizes the vast difference from the real thing. The only redeeming thing about my... remoteness from reality is that *I am fully conscious of it,* hence... make allowances for it, & do not pretend to an impossible ability to enter into the actual feelings of this or any other age. (*Letters III* 309)

At once a realist and aesthete, an enthusiast of modern science and imaginary wonders, and a believer in modern disenchantment and its re-enchantment through the ironic imagination, H. P. Lovecraft was, in the words of Vincent Starrett, "his own most fantastic creation" (Cannon 427). He has been studied as the most influential American horror writer since Edgar Allan Poe,[5] but I am interested in him and his work because they exemplify the ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adults used the ironic imagination and secondary worlds to re-enchant the modern world without compromising the rational and secular tenets of modernity.

Enchantment has always had the positive meaning of "to delight" and the negative meaning of "to delude" [6;] modern enchantment is not immune from the latter merely because it brings rationality and irony into play. In a world that has become more global and interdependent, and that provides an increasing percentage of its population with the means and the encouragement to indulge their imaginations, the "social imaginary" looms larger in peoples' lives and is less stable than it was in the past. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues,

> Until recently, whatever the force of social change, a case could be made that social life was largely inertial... and that fantasy and imagination were residual practices, confined to special moments or places. In general, imagination and fantasy were antidotes to the finitude of social experience.... [A]s the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on a new force, this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of possible lives offered by the mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social

lives for many people in many societies. (53-54)

The virtual realities of the imagination are usually means to an end, and arguably that end is most often one of personal gratification. But they may also affect social practice, in which others ought to be treated, ideally, as ends in themselves. Can the ironic imagination do justice to the claims of the personal and the social, the private and the public? Richard Rorty presents an optimistic view of the powers of the ironic imagination to recognize and respect human difference as well as solidarity. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he contends that the

> processes of coming to see human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially the novel…. That is why the novel, the movie and the TV programs have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress. (xvi)

Inspiring rhetoric, but how might this work in practice (if, indeed, it works at all)?

Lovecraft, certainly, prided himself on his imaginative depiction of others – that is, extraterrestrials. They were undeniably "other," painstakingly imagined. But when it came to imagining human beings, for most of his life Lovecraft upheld the racist stereotypes and prejudices of his white, middle-class, Protestant upbringing. Lovecraft's fear of the "other," for much of his life, expressed his own fear of his status as a marginal man, an "outsider" socially, economically, and psychologically. His early story "The Outsider" was a first person narrative of an individual who, after living alone for his entire life, leaves the stark confines of his castle and enters another dwelling where he encounters a grotesque monstrosity, from which others flee in terror. The lurid punch line reveals that the narrator encountered this horror within "an unyielding surface of polished glass" (*Omnibus 3* 18).

Lovecraft's own fears of the horrific desires and emotions he worked so hard to contain were projected onto other "Outsiders." Those who were not "Anglo-Saxon" – especially blacks and recent immigrants – were as frightening to him as the minions of Cthulhu, but received less imaginative investment. At the end of his life he did drastically change his political, and many of his social, views. Nevertheless, by the time he died at forty-seven, shortly after discovering he had cancer, he still maintained that blacks were biologically inferior to other "races" and that immigrants ought to assimilate to the "Anglo-Saxon traditions" of North America. To what extent did the ironic imagination extolled by Rorty and cherished by Lovecraft help or hinder him when it came to imagining the Other? This essay begins to address this question, arguing that one of the most important

legacies of Lovecraft's life and fiction is how he came to terms, not just with disenchantment, but also with difference.

Lovecraft's Geographies of the Imagination

For most of his life, Lovecraft the cosmic visionary lived a provincial existence in Providence, Rhode Island. He was born there in 1890, the only child of Winfield Lovecraft, a traveling salesman, and Sarah Susan Philips, daughter of a prominent local businessman. He was proud of his parents' genteel status in the city and their English ancestry, but elements of the Southern Gothic were intermixed with this Yankee heritage. His father began to exhibit dementia from syphilis when Lovecraft was two and died insane in a mental asylum when the boy was seven. His mother was a high-strung, possessive woman who remained a domineering figure in his life until she too died in an asylum in 1921. Lovecraft was largely self-educated; his attendance at elementary and high school was sporadic due to unspecified illnesses, and a nervous breakdown prevented him from attending Brown University. He continued to live with his mother, and then with his two aunts after her death, while he eked out a marginal living revising the writings of others and occasionally selling one of his own stories to pulp magazines such as "Weird Tales" and "Astounding Stories." (He boasted that as a "gentleman" he did not write for the market but rather for his own aesthetic satisfaction, an attitude that condemned him to penury.)

His contact with other people, like that with money, was at arm's length. He joined an amateur press society in 1914, in which he exchanged essays and stories with other members and developed friendships through correspondence. He also attracted a devoted following when he began publishing in the pulps. Many of those who became his regular correspondents developed an enduring affection for him without ever having met him. After his mother's death he felt freer about traveling to meet some of these epistolary friends, although trips were limited because he never had much money, preferred to venture forth at night and sleep during the day, and couldn't abide temperatures below seventy degrees. Certainly his boldest attempt at personal intimacy occurred when he married Sonia Greene in 1924, living with her for a year in New York. He had met her through the amateur press society in 1921 and they continued to see each other during some of Lovecraft's infrequent trips away from home. Enthralled by his intellect, Sonia was willing to support his literary endeavors with her own income; he appreciated her energetic devotion to his needs, especially as he was recently bereft of his attentive mother. She said she loved him, and he replied that he was "fond" of her; their wedding night was spent retyping a manuscript he had lost earlier that day. The year in New York was trying for both of them. Sonia's heroic devotion to Lovecraft did not prevent her from objecting to his anti-Semitic and xenophobic comments, which he did not censor even though his wife was a Jewish immigrant from Russia. (In

her memoir she recalls Lovecraft ranting about the "alien hordes" polluting New York. "When I protested that I too was one of them, he'd tell me I 'no longer belonged to those mongrels. *You are now Mrs. H.P. Lovecraft of 598 Angell St., Providence, Rhode Island!*'" [Joshi 368].) Sonia had instigated the relationship and did her best to preserve it, but the couple's incompatibilities led Lovecraft to return to his aunts' Providence home in 1925, and to later file for divorce.

Next to Providence, Lovecraft felt most at home in his mind. He began to read when he was two, and as a child loved fairy-tales, classical mythology, and the Arabian Nights; later he developed passions for horror fiction, modern science, and history (especially that of classical Rome and the neo-classical eighteenth century). These interests led him to yearn for the enchantments of the past but not to renounce the present, no matter how disenchanting modern thought might be. Science, he lamented in an essay of 1922, "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" (*Writings* 109). Nevertheless, he was proud to remain "a sort of hybrid betwixt the past and the future – archaic in my personal tastes, emotions, and interests, but so much of a scientific realist in philosophy that I cannot abide any intellectual point of view short of the most advanced" (*Letters II* 306).

Indeed, he retreated to his imagination not only as a way to escape the tense dynamics of his personal life, but also because he believed the imagination was the only way to re-enchant modernity without denying its tenets. As a youth he had rejected his family's Protestant religion and identified himself as an agnostic who acceded to the "mechanistic materialism" and cultural pessimism held by many thinkers during the last third of the nineteenth century. In this "age of standardization, and decreased variety and adventurousness," he wrote, "[a]ll sensitive men have to call in unreality in some form or other or go mad from ennui. That is why religion continues to hang on even when we know it has no foundation in reality" (*Letters III* 139). Lovecraft turned to a form of imagination that frankly acknowledged its unreal nature – the ironic imagination – and that never lost sight of the rationalist and secular creeds of modernity. Defending himself against the charge that he was inconsistent in being "a complete agnostic and materialist on the intellectual side, and a confirmed fantasiste and myth-weaver on the aesthetic side," Lovecraft responded, "The reason *I want* to write about circumventions of time, space, and natural law is that *I don't* believe in such! If I *believed* in the supernatural, I would not need to create the aesthetic illusion of belief" (*Letters V* 352).

Lovecraft combined seemingly antithetical strands of late nineteenth-century thought, such as realism and aestheticism, in his quest to create virtual worlds of the imagination that he could inhabit. He began to circulate

short stories to members of his amateur press association during the war years, many of which were reminiscent in style and content to the stories of Poe, whom he admired greatly. These were fledgling efforts, but his works began to elaborate their own distinct cosmology after he discovered the fantasy fiction of Lord Dunsany in 1919. In his life Dunsany was many of the things Lovecraft wished he could be – British aristocrat, scholar, fighter, writer – and in his creation of an autonomous fictional universe that could be inhabited imaginatively, Dunsany provided a model for what Lovecraft would attempt to do.

Lovecraft read Dunsany's early, interlinked fantasy stories that revolved around an invented cosmology, which began with *The Gods of Pegan*□ (1905) and continued in several other volumes published through the First World War. Dunsany's tales appealed to Lovecraft because their fantastic visions were nevertheless logically coherent and self-reflexive about their own status as aesthetic constructs. Lovecraft later compared Dunsany's works to the fairy-tales of another Irish aesthete, Oscar Wilde. Both used exotic imagery to transport their readers to imaginary worlds of beauty and desire that were in pointed contrast to sordid realism, while maintaining "a certain humorous doubt of their own solemnity and truth" (*Writings* 107). Dunsany created an autonomous aesthetic realm that both alluded to and mocked traditional religions and myths; adults could appreciate the playfulness of the individual stories while immersing themselves within the carefully wrought universe they created. It was precisely this combination of an ironic detachment toward and the immersive reality of a virtual world of wonder that so inspired the young Lovecraft:

> [Dunsany's] main work belongs to what modern critics have called the "literature of escape"; the literature of conscious unreality created out of an intelligent and sophisticated conviction that analysed reality has no heritage save of chaos, pain, and disappointment. He is thus a conservative and a modern; a conservative because he still believes that beauty is a thing of golden rememberings and simple patterns, and a modern because he perceives that only in arbitrarily selected fancy can we find fixed any of the patterns which fit our golden rememberings. He is the supreme poet of wonder, but of intelligently assumed wonder to which one turns after experiencing the fullest disillusion of realism. (*Writings* 104-05)

Lovecraft wrote several fantasies influenced by Dunsany, but he had to admit that they were derivative, lacking the subtleties of their progenitors. In crafting these early works, he was influenced by *fin-de-siécle* aestheticism as well as by Dunsany. Like the symbolists, whom he admired, he attempted to evoke fantastic images and associations that would create moods of "adventurous expectancy," a liberating escape into the imagination from

the deterministic laws of time and space, "the indefiniteness which permits me to foster the momentary illusion that almost any vista of wonder and beauty might open up, or almost any law of time or space be marvelously defeated or reversed or modified" (*Letters III* 123-124). But his attempts to emulate the styles of the aesthetes didn't satisfy his need for plausible imaginative alternatives to reality. It was not just that his work was derivative of others and lacked their stylistic power; it was that Lovecraft himself was too rational, and too enraptured by science, to turn away from the known to the unknowns represented by fantasy. When he was most under the influence of the aesthetic movement, between the late nineteen-teens and early nineteen-twenties, he had disparaged science as inimical to art and pleasure, but this was a youthful pose he soon abandoned. Since childhood he had loved science, and as an adult the explorations and discoveries of astronomers, physicists, geologists, and biologists continued to captivate him. Science might reveal a deterministic universe stripped of meaning or purpose, but it still dealt in mysteries; the explorations of the universe and the human mind stimulated in him a profound sense of wonder. He realized that his own work would have to be realist in execution, its marvels and wonders plausible extensions of known reality rather than contraventions of reality.

Thus, in the mid-twenties, Lovecraft shifted from writing baroque fantasies and more traditional horror stories to writing tales of "cosmic fear" that dismissed the supernatural and fully embraced the rational. He continued to enjoy fantasy as a genre, particularly admiring those fantasy worlds, like Dunsany's, whose internal cohesiveness and detail lent them verisimilitude. He also continued to defend aestheticism, arguing that art's purpose was to evoke sensations and moods that would transport its audience out of a disenchanted world; in 1929 he wrote that he belonged "to the wholly aesthete-pagan tradition of Keats, Poe, Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire… Art for art's sake is our only motto" (*Letters II* 276). But, as he also wrote to another correspondent in the same year,

> You are fundamentally a *poet*, & think first of all in symbols, colour, & gorgeous imagery, whilst I am fundamentally a *prose realist* whose prime dependence is on building up atmosphere through the slow, pedestrian method of multitudinous suggestive detail & dark scientific verisimilitude. Whatever I produce must be the somber result of a deadly, literal seriousness, & almost pedantic approach…. I have to see a thing or scene with clear-cut visual distinctness before I can say anything whatever about it – then I describe it as an entomologist might describe an insect. Prose realism is behind everything of any importance that I write – a devilishly odd quality, when one stops to think about it, to exist in conjunction with fantastic taste & vision! (*Letters III* 96)

Apart from fantasy, he admitted, his favorite writers were the realists: Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, and Proust. He quite literally lived for flights of fancy, but was proud of being able to inhabit two worlds – that of mundane reality, and that of the ironic imagination – simultaneously. He felt sorry for those who refused or were unable to make this distinction, such as the Theosophists and Spiritualists, because they were incapable of reconciling modernity with enchantment. The enchantment they fled to was of the deluding sort, clouding their reason; his detached, ironic form of enchantment was compatible with rationalism and secularism, and thus was one of delight rather than bewitchment: "Much as I'd like to live in a cosmos full of my favorite Cthulhus, Yog-Sothoths, Tsathogguas, and the like, I find myself forced into agreement with men like Russell, Santayana, Einstein, Eddington, Haeckel, and so on. Prose is less attractive than poetry, but when it comes to a choice between probability and extravagance, I have to let common sense be my guide" (*Letters III* 449)

Lovecraft now brought aestheticism and realism together in his conception of the form of literature that would replace supernatural fiction in a rational and secular age. This might appear paradoxical, as aestheticism is often understood as a reaction against realism; contemporary critics such as Edmund Wilson argued that the two modes were antithetical.[7] Lovecraft, however, felt he was best able to evoke aesthetic moods of fear and wonder by accepting realist conventions, while eschewing the genre's implicit moralizing.

His new literature of "cosmic fear," Lovecraft argued in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1929), would no longer depend on the supernatural, which had been rendered superfluous by science. If supernatural tales of vampires, werewolves, ghosts and the like continued to affect modern readers, that was an atavistic response explained by physiology: attractive due to ingrained memory traces of our primitive fears of the unknown. And despite the ostensible subject of the essay signaled by its title, Lovecraft very quickly dropped the term "supernatural" and replaced it with "cosmic fear" or "cosmic terror," which more accurately describe the sensations he hoped to evoke in his own work.

The purpose of this literature of "non-supernatural cosmic art" (Joshi 488-89) was to induce aesthetic moods: "A serious weird tale is, necessarily, not so much a chronicle of events as simply a picture or crystallization of a certain human mood," he maintained (*Kuttner* 14). Alongside his antiquarian pursuits, Lovecraft found such fiction to be his primary means of attaining the desired mood of "adventurous expectancy," "the impression of *liberation* & *strangeness*" that countered the routines and constraints of a disenchanted age (*Kuttner* 17). Cosmic, weird fiction, in fact, was primarily a literature of mood, since it was inherently fantastic and thus could tell us little about reality. Its protagonists tended to be awe-inspiring phenomena

or concepts, not human beings, and its aim was to provide the reader with an illusion of freedom from the iron cage of deterministic laws.

Such aesthetic aims could only be attained by the strict use of realism, for modern readers would no longer accept the extravagances of conventional romance. By the 1880's traditional romance was widely associated with the mawkish and unreal; the genre of the "New Romance" created by Verne, Haggard, Stevenson, Kipling, Wells, and others embedded their "romantic" voyages within naturalistic narratives.[8] Lovecraft maintained that cosmic fiction did not ignore facts or contradict reality, as conventional romance (and religion) did, but supplemented them. A successful tale must be realist in every detail, with the sole exception of the marvel at its core – and even that, ideally, ought to be a plausible extension of reality rather than its negation. Lovecraft claimed he got a

> big kick... from *taking reality just as it is* – accepting all the limitations of the most orthodox science – and then permitting my symbolizing faculty to *build outward* from the existing facts; rearing a structure of *indefinite promise and possibility*.... But the whole secret of the kick is *that I know damn well it isn't so*.... I'm probably trying to have my cake and eat it at the same time – to get the intoxication of a sense of cosmic contact and significance as the theists do, and yet to avoid the ignorant and ignominious ostrich-act whereby they cripple their vision and secure the desiderate results. (*Letters III* 140)

Edgar Allan Poe also wrote stories and literary hoaxes that played with the interface between reality and illusion, and this ironic double-consciousness was exactly what Lovecraft aimed for. As he explained to a friend in 1930, cosmic fiction must be "devised with all the care & verisimilitude of an actual *hoax*. The author must... build up a stark, simple account, full of homely corroborative details, just as if he were actually trying to 'put across' a deception in real life – a deception clever enough to make adults believe in it. My own attitude in writing is always that of a hoax-weaver. One part of my mind tries to concoct something realistic and coherent enough to fool the rest of my mind & make me swallow the marvel" (*Letters III* 193). The marvel becomes "real" to the imagination and stimulates sensations of wonder. Since consciousness itself consists only of sensations, the imagined marvel is experienced as if it were real; fantasy is "an art based on the imaginative life of the human mind, *frankly recognized as* such; and... as truly related to natural... psychological processes as the starkest of photographic realism" (Joshi 318). Thus realism and aestheticism combine to create a modern form of enchantment that is not, in Lovecraft's view, qualitatively different from the traditional enchantments offered by religions and myths; it is simply more compatible with a secular, rationalistic world view, honoring reason in its ironic spirit of play.

Lovecraft's cohesive secondary world of aliens who intrude upon small New England towns was unplanned initially. (The phrase "Cthulhu Mythos" was applied to his stories only after his death.) He adopted his realist approach in the mid-nineteen twenties, and he found himself referring to the same set of creatures, towns, and artifacts in different stories; as he became conscious of this he decided to impose some consistency on this developing "artificial mythology" (*Letters IV* 70). He was influenced by the artificial mythology created by Dunsany, and he also enhanced the reality effects of his tales by alluding to the same forbidden book or frightening being from story to story, a technique he borrowed from *fin-de-siécle* writers of weird fiction, including Robert Chambers, Ambrose Bierce, and Arthur Machen. (He also included references to their fictional creations, creating a wider shared network among secondary worlds.)

Such intertextual links among his stories gave them cohesiveness and, in the case of his references to works by other writers, could serve as ironic winks to readers in the know. Lovecraft also accentuated the virtual reality of his imagined universe by steeping his stories in his own antiquarian research, which included visits to many New England towns. Arkham, Innsmouth, Dunwich and his other fictional locales were all based on places he had visited: "I take pains to make these places wholly and realistically characteristic of genuine New England seaports – always being authentic concerning architecture, atmosphere, dialect, manners and customs &c" (*Letters III* 433).

Lovecraft also took great pains with the names of his alien entities to enhance their verisimilitude. He asserted that some of the names reflected the cultures of those humans who first recorded their encounters with the entity in question – thus "Nyarlothotep" was the name coined by ancient Egyptians. Other names of aliens found in the *Necronomicon* reflect the language of its original author, the "mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred. (Lovecraft playfully claimed the *Necronomicon* was a translation of the "original" Arabic text, *Al Azif-azif*, perhaps consciously alluding to Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"*.) As he explained to a friend, "Thus when I cite the name of some wholly non-human thing supposed to be mentioned in the *Necronomicon*, I try to have the *foundation* of the word absolutely unearthly and alien, yet give it an outwardly *Arabic* aspect to account for the transmitting influence of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. Typical *Necronomicon* names are *Azathoth, Yog Sothoth, Shub-Niggurath*, etc." (But, he added, in one of his stories he "cited" an Aztec document that indicated the extent of the cultural transmission of these alien terms – Yog Sothoth had become Yog-Sototl [*Letters IV* 387-387].) Names like "Cthulhu" were simply an approximation of the sounds made by alien vocal apparatus, for he strived to include "details &... imputations of geometrical, biological, & physico-chemical properties definitely outside the realm of matter as understood

by us" (*Letters II* 316). Some critics complained that these names sounded silly, but Lovecraft countered that "a coined word which has been shaped with great care from just the right associational sources" could be effective, evoking sensations like symbolist poetry (*Letters IV* 388).

Lovecraft's realist means were thus enlisted for aestheticist ends – the creation of an artificial pattern of symbols and allusions that would evoke sensations of wonder, modern enchantment attained through "the old game of blindman's buff with the mocking atoms and electrons of a purposeless infinity" (*Writings* 110). The "artful deception" of his invented universe allowed him to live in two worlds simultaneously:

> Thus my wish for freedom is not so much a wish to put all terrestrial things behind me & plunge forever into abysses beyond light, matter, & energy. That, indeed, would mean annihilation as a personality rather than liberation. My wish is perhaps defined as a wish for *infinite visioning & voyaging power*, yet without loss of the familiar background which gives all things significance. (*Letters III* 214)

His friends observed him living capably in both worlds. One noted the "amused twinkle in his eye" as he discussed his mythology or tried to approximate Cthulhu's guttural dialect; another remarked that "he had it all spelled out; he drew maps, and locations of the cities. You'd think he was drawing a map of Rhode Island" (Cannon 389-90).

Other writers and readers began to use and disseminate Lovecraft's secondary world, creating the "consensual hallucination" of virtual reality.[9] Literary creations attain virtual life in the mind through skilful narrative art, but they can also attain virtual life by appearing in other tales; they attain a degree of autonomy by transcending the limitations of any particular story.[10] For example, Lovecraft began to insert references to the *Necronomicon* into the weird tales he drafted for his revision clients, and he subsequently received letters from readers who wondered if the book could be real, because they had seen it mentioned by disparate authors. He also encouraged other writers to refer to his creations, as "our black pantheon acquires an extensive publicity & pseudo-authoritativeness it would not otherwise get" (*Letters V* 16). Several of his fellow writers for "Weird Tales," including Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith, emulated Lovecraft by creating their own secondary worlds replete with forbidden tomes, marvelous entities, and cohesive backgrounds. Lovecraft was pleased that they mutually cited each other's "pet daemons" so as to construct "a convincing cycle of synthetic folklore," for "this pooling of resources tends to build up quite a pseudo-convincing background of dark mythology, legendry, & bibliography – though of course none of us has the least wish actually to mislead others" (*Letters V* 16).

The repeated intertextual references among the "Lovecraft Circle"

gave the Mythos a life of its own. New volumes of stories, as well as films, role-playing games, computer games, comic books and other forms of mass culture continue to mine Lovecraft's imaginary universe, while remaining true to the parameters he established. His has become one of the many fantastic secondary worlds currently available for the ironic immersion characterizing modern enchantment.

Embracing the Innsmouth Look: The Ironic Imagination and Difference

Lovecraft resorted to the ironic imagination as a way to re-enchant the world: but while he was able to find the delight, surprise, and wonder associated with "enchantment," was he able to avoid its potential to delude and overwhelm? Escaping through one's imagination to a secondary world, one both thrilling and safe, can also have a stultifying effect. Freud maintained that wish-fulfillment, the "omnipotence of thought," often outweighed the reality principle: one remains nested in a comforting cocoon of unchallenged assumptions, never evolving to meet life's complexities or demands. In the 1940s Edmund Wilson castigated what he considered to be the regressive character of much popular culture, following up a famous diatribe against Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts with even more scathing remarks about the secondary world created by Lovecraft and his friends:

> The "Cthulhu Mythos" and its fabricated authorities seem to have been for [Lovecraft] a sort of boy's game which he diverted his solitary life by playing with other horror-story fanciers, who added details to the myth and figured in it under distorted names.... the Lovecraft cult, I fear, is on even a more infantile level than the Baker Street Irregulars and the cult of Sherlock Holmes. (289-90)

It is ironic that Wilson, one of the earliest celebrants of the symbolist movement, was unaware of Lovecraft's own aestheticist aims, but he wasn't incorrect about the potential for mass culture to be a soporific rather than a stimulus to life. In theory, the ironic imagination should provide a counter-weight to the allures of mass culture, by inculcating the detached perspective necessary to maintain a double-conscious habitation of the real and the imagined, and an open-minded inquisitiveness toward other possibilities of being. Lovecraft did claim that this stance enabled him to remain detached and responsive to difference. But in practice, he was a close-minded bigot for much of his life. He lavished attention on his fictional others from outer space, but they remained monsters: and for most of his life actual "others" – nearly anyone not born "Anglo-Saxon," but especially blacks, Jews, and recent immigrants – were no less monstrous in his view.

In imagining these others, Lovecraft fell back on the widespread prejudices and stereotypes he encountered during his upbringing. These

prejudices were exacerbated by his anxieties about his own liminal status in a period of rapid social and economic change, as well as his unstated fear that he, too, might share a hereditary disposition to the "degeneracy" that landed both of his parents in an asylum. His early poems and stories are filled with racist images, and his letters in the nineteen-teens and twenties, while often sparkling with wit, generosity, and erudition, also often inveighed against the incursions into "Anglo-Saxon culture" of other "racial" groups. Lovecraft enjoyed provoking others with his ironic poses, and thus his xenophobia may, at times, have been exaggerated in his letters to particular individuals. Nevertheless, his cultural chauvinism was marked through the 1920's. He sincerely believed, as he wrote to a friend in 1926, that "to permit or encourage [immigration] is suicide – as you can clearly see in that hell called New York where a chaos of scum has raised a stench intolerable to any self-respecting white-man" (*Letters II* 71).

Lovecraft clung anxiously to Anglo-Saxon culture because he believed culture remained the only source of stability amidst the flux of modernity. Like many conservatives, he turned to the continuity of tradition as a refuge against the forces of change; borders and boundaries must be enforced to counteract modern anomie, isolation, and homogenization. Hybridity of any sort terrified him: most of the horrors in his fictions are described as "hybrid" or "fluid," lacking boundaries or clear definitions. Cthulhu dwells in the sea; the New England seaport of Innsmouth is overrun by fish-like aliens who interbreed with humans, producing a degenerate population characterized by "that Innsmouth look"; "The Thing on the Doorstep" was once human, but is transformed by the story's end into a "liquescent horror" by an evil sorceress.

Critics are understandably attracted to explaining Lovecraft's fiction in terms of his sheltered existence and peculiar psyche. While this approach can be reductive, there is no doubt that part of his intolerance for the foreign stemmed from his apprehension that he too was an "Outsider." He could not avoid occasional admissions of hybridity, as when he confessed to being "a sort of hybrid betwixt the past and the future" (*Letters II* 306). But for much of his life he prided himself on his cosmic disdain for mere humanity and refused to imagine others outside of his narrow social and cultural experience; boundaries ratified his own fragile sense of status. When it came to blacks, whom he regarded as biologically inferior, he insisted on the "colour-line" to prevent miscegenation and enthused about the Ku Klux Klan (Joshi 70).

This sad history of prejudice would seem to belie Lovecraft's claims to following reason wherever it led without preconceptions, as well as the potential of the ironic imagination to embrace difference as it enables immersion in contingent worlds. Yet his fans may find some comfort in the fact that Lovecraft did change many of his views in the later twenties

and thirties. Whereas people tend to become more conservative as they age, Lovecraft became more liberal; in his words, he went from being a reactionary conservative to a socialist who admired Norman Thomas (*Letters V* 324). He attributed these changes in large degree to his open-minded attitude towards considering new evidence from new circumstances (*Letters III* 401).

Lovecraft's shift in attitudes during the thirties was indeed remarkable, given his own anxieties and the indoctrinations of his upbringing. Although he continued to maintain racist views about blacks until his death and to insist that minority cultures assimilate to the dominant culture, he also began to uphold a more tolerant attitude toward cultural difference. He suggested there should be a split between the public sphere, in which certain norms apply to all for the purpose of co-existence, and the private sphere, in which individuals should be left alone to pursue their own aestheticist projects of self-creation. His view was similar to what Richard Rorty has advocated as an "ironist" stance: as Lovecraft explained, "All that anyone of us has to bother about is to obey such practical laws as are generally agreed upon, to be true to the traditions of beauty as perceived through the lenses of one's own personality, and to leave others free to follow their visions as one follows one's own" (*Letters III* 156). Such a position testifies to the ironic imagination's potential for entertaining other possibilities and challenging self-gratifying illusions of homogeneity.

But Lovecraft's example also suggests that the ironic imagination, when nurtured by books alone, may be insufficient to imagine other possibilities. Throughout his life, he read works that ratified his own prejudices against blacks, for example, and remained complacently oblivious to the scientific and literary texts that challenged his racist ideas. In the thirties, he was to find that interventions from outside the secondary worlds of fiction – unpredictable discussions with other individuals who held different perspectives – were necessary to contest the gratifying illusions fostered by selective reading. Late in his life Lovecraft acknowledged ruefully "the picture one gets from books is unreal and distorted" (*Letters V* 18). Looking back on his development, he attributed many of his changing views to the salient influence of the amateur press association, where as a young man he was forced to articulate and defend his beliefs in print (*Writings* 452). As he continued to widen his circle of correspondents, and to travel more often, he found himself reassessing his own opinions and beliefs, to question what he had once taken for granted: "Books make one credulous and extravagant and soft-headed if not temper'd by sound, brisk, argument" (*Letters III* 206).

His political views also shifted remarkably in the early thirties as a result of the social and economic effects of the Depression. Before his death in 1937 he had abandoned his affected eighteenth-century "Tory" views to embrace Roosevelt's New Deal, although he continued to believe in the

necessity of an intellectual aristocracy to preserve cultural standards within a democratic society. Rejecting many of his earlier deterministic biological beliefs, he accepted that people were as influenced by nurture as nature. In a 1934 letter arguing for the equality of the sexes, he noted "many qualities commonly regarded as innate – in races, classes, and sexes alike – are in reality results of habitual and imperceptible conditioning" (*Letters V* 64). It is his greater tolerance for difference that most impresses one about his writings from the late thirties. In the last year of his life he expressed a sense of shame about views he had maintained only a decade before:

> There was no getting out of it – I really *had* thrown all that haughty, complacent, snobbish, self-centered, intolerant bull, & at a maturer age than anybody but a perfect damned fool would have known better! That earlier illness had kept me in seclusion, limited my knowledge of the world, & given me something of the fatuous effusiveness of a belated adolescent when I finally *was* able to get about more... is hardly much of an excuse.... It's hard to have done all one's growing up since 33 – but that's a damn sight better than not growing up at all. (*Letters V* 407-08)

When he had alien entities invade the quiet New England towns in his fictions of the twenties, these entities were monstrously "other": like immigrants, a threat to the traditional society Lovecraft held dear. But in the thirties, he accepted that others were necessary for human maturation: "We act first & instinctively with *the sort of people whose tastes and background are like our own*. Only with difficulty & in mature years are we generally able to think & act independently of our hereditary-culture-milieu -- & all too few of us can achieve this independence" (*Letters V* 333).

Lovecraft had not achieved complete independence, but he had come far and his more capacious imagination is reflected in some of the stories he wrote in the thirties, including "At The Mountains of Madness" (1931) and "The Shadow Out of Time" (1934) (*Tales* 137; 275). In "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1931), the narrator visits the fishing-village, which has been shunned for decades by its neighbors because of the peculiar people – resembling fishes – who live there, and who are rumored to be engaged in vile practices. Indeed, Innsmouth has had a history of miscegenation, one of the most horrible acts in the Lovecraftian imaginary: first with the Africans and Chinese, who came to the town as laborers, and later with fish-like aliens, who have dwelt below the sea for millennia and who wish to colonize the land. The narrator learns that in the mid-nineteenth century, these creatures established themselves on land by mating with the population of Innsmouth. After several harrowing adventures the narrator manages to escape Innsmouth, but not before he discovers that he might not have come to it by chance. His experiences trigger repressed memories; in a dream he recalls the undersea world of the creatures, envisages his

grandmother inhabiting this realm of "marvels," and learns that "I would never die, but would live with those who had lived since before man ever walked the earth." Awakening, he stares at himself in the mirror and is forced to acknowledge the truth: part of his ancestral line was from Innsmouth, and he indeed bore "*the Innsmouth look*."

But whereas the narrator of Lovecraft's 1921 story "The Outsider" had screamed in horror when he encountered his monstrous form in the mirror and remained hopelessly isolated from others, the narrator in this 1931 story accepts his hybrid nature. Indeed, this nature becomes a source of wonder and provides him with the ability to transcend the oppressive laws of time and space, those "iron cages" of existence that Lovecraft had sought to escape through the ironic imagination:

> The tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them. I hear and do strange things in sleep, and awake with a kind of exaltation instead of terror.... Stupendous and unheard of splendours await me below, and I shall seek them soon.... [I] shall go to marvel-shadowed Innsmouth... and in that lair of the Deep Ones [I] shall dwell amidst wonder and glory for ever. (*Omnibus 3* 463)

Rather than capitulate to fear and self-loathing, the narrator is willing to descend into the depths, psychically as well as physically, and join a community defined by difference and the amorphous plasticity represented by the sea. Lovecraft's repeated use of "marvels" and the promise of immortality, his lifelong desiderata, suggest an optimistic interpretation of this narrative, as does the fact that it was written while he was becoming more tolerant of difference in others, and perhaps within himself.

In his last years of life, Lovecraft's greater tolerance for difference in his fiction was matched by a greater outgoingness; he traveled more often to meet correspondents and to see new places. The limits on him now were more financial than psychological – his detached, at times misanthropic, attitude faded as he realized the pleasures of interpersonal contacts and the novelties of travel. Wonders and marvels, he was discovering, could be found in the everyday and not just the imaginary. His frequent avowal that "life has never interested me so much as the escape from life" seemed no longer to be the case (Joshi 579). He had enchanted modernity through inhabiting his imagination, and while that did provide him with an antidote to cultural pessimism, it ultimately proved limiting in its solipsism. He had escaped the iron cage of reason only to find himself in a funhouse mirror of fancy, whose distortions, while diverting, remained multiple versions of himself.

This is not to say that by the time of his death H. P. Lovecraft was a different man: such dramatic transformations are rare, except in pulp

fiction. While he had become more tolerant of alterity and social democracy, he retained aspects of his earlier racism and elitism. His readers should recognize, however, how far he had developed when he left the confines of his imagination, and recognize also how those confines themselves began to stretch to incorporate his more vigorous interchanges with reality. The ironic imagination had provided him with the means to render enchantment compatible with the rational and secular tenets of modernity though it had proved less effective in warding off the beguiling potential inherent in enchantment. For remediation of that particular danger, Lovecraft required direct encounters with other peoples and places. This suggests that his earlier distinction between the private sphere of aesthetic self-creation and the public sphere of social justice cannot be a rigid one; the two must be permeable. We need to inhabit both spheres simultaneously, just as we attain a distinctly modern form of enchantment through the cohabitation of geographies real and imaginary.

Notes

1. See H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* and J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason.*
2. See James Cook, *The Arts of Deception*; Simon During, *Modern Enchantments*; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul.*
3. See Fritz Leiber, "A Literary Copernicus" in Peter Cannon, ed., *Lovecraft Remembered.*
4. See Yi Fu Tuan, *Escapism.*
5. See Joyce Carol Oates, Introduction, *The Tales of H. P. Lovecraft.*
6. The OED, for example, lists as meanings of "enchant": "...to hold spellbound; in a bad sense, to delude, befool" as well as to "delight, enrapture."
7. "[I]t seems difficult to combine symbolism with the inventories of naturalistic fiction or the discussion of public affairs." Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials*, 176.
8. See Michael Saler, "Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c.1890-c.1940."
9. William Gibson used the phrase "consensual hallucination" when he coined the term "cyberspace," and I have adopted this phrase for my use of "virtual reality." See Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 1.
10. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 84-85.

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