

## **On *At the Mountains of Madness* —Enveloping the Cosmic Horror**

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### **Abstract**

As the culmination of H. P. Lovecraft's late style in delineating the cosmic horror, *At the Mountains of Madness* poses several questions, the most interesting of which may concern the story's narrative efficacy in evoking horror that has been presented in the form of science fiction or, to be more precise, in scientific realism. The pivot of this narrative revolves round the novelette's central sections (7 and 8) where a genealogy of the sentient entities that precede humans' earthly emergence is recorded. Whether the genealogical enveloping of the cosmic other can summon up the cosmic horror as is textually intended, and what function the enveloping plays against the backdrop of the story as a whole—these will be the main concerns of this paper.

**Key Words:** horror, science, supplementarity

## I

H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* is one of his longest works, at around 50,000 words, which would have made it suitable for publication as a single-volume novelette. Yet ironically, by the time of Lovecraft's death in 1937, only one book with his name stamped on cover had been published (Joshi, 1999: 264). *At the Mountains* is a work whose history as an artifact has witnessed another irony that might well pique one's interest in the intersection between horror tales and science fiction. At the end of March, 1931, Lovecraft finished the novelette after an intense month of writing, but the submission of the work to *Weird Tales* in the same year did not yield good results. The scientific encyclopaedism therein might have overwhelmed the magazine editor, and have been taken as too much a diversion from the magazine's primary concern with the supernatural horror. Lovecraft must have been proud of this work, for the rejection of his manuscript he later described as causing so strong a self-doubt as to "end my effective fictional career" (Derleth & Turner, 1976: 224). As it happens, the work was not published until 1936. Yet, instead of appearing in *Weird Tales*, it found its way to another magazine to which the novelette's overwhelming scientific details would be more than welcome. Serialized from February through April, 1937, in *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, *At the Mountains* made its first appearance only a year prior to Lovecraft's death in 1937.

It is no small issue that *At the Mountains* was first published in a pulp magazine of science fiction rather than in one dedicated to supernatural horror, to which Lovecraft had devoted himself for quite some time. While the generic term of "science fiction" as we know today is believed to have been invented in America in 1929, the label "SF" came to occupy a corner of the cover of published books only after the World War II (Pringle, 1985: 9, 13). Not until then did the general reading public, not just fans, start to regard a certain group of works with particular features as falling under a particular generic rubric. In 1923, there was no science fiction, but only "scientification"

as Hugo Gernsback baptized the term in a special issue of *Science and Invention* wholly devoted to fictional works of and concerning science (Scholes & Rabkin, 1978: 36). In the same year the inaugural *Weird Tales* was issued, with Gernsback's start of *Amazing Stories* following shortly after in 1926. The American pulp reading market at this time was roughly divided between scientifiction and the supernatural horror<sup>1</sup> due to the powerplay between these two magazines, the leaders in their respective fields. Science fiction and supernatural horror tales, were two strong literary currents outside of mainstream literature of the era. While the horror genre, thanks to having Edgar Allen Poe as its precursor, suffered less from "pulp-ness," the burgeoning science fiction genre has to carve out its own traditions destined to suffer greatly from juvenile proclivity in thematization, characterization, or style.

When Lovecraft's *At the Mountains* was published in *Astounding Stories*, science fiction was about to witness the dawn of its own golden age, thanks to John W. Campbell's taking office as the editor of *Astounding Stories* in 1937. After Lovecraft's 1936 appearance in *Astounding Stories*, the big four of SF's golden age appeared in its pages: Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Alfred E. van Vogt, and Theodore Sturgeon—all of whom made their debut in the magazine under Campbell's auspices. Though it is arbitrary to claim Lovecraft as the precursor of SF's golden age, it may not be too much of a stretch to view Lovecraft's appearance in *Astounding Stories* as anticipating the way in which Campbell would re-mold science fiction as less juvenile, but and better in techno-scientific details, story development, and writing style.<sup>2</sup> In the light of Lovecraft's scientific erudition in

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<sup>1</sup> These two literary forms had parallels with two other generic writings: Western adventure stories, and the heroic fantasies of sword and sorcery like the well-known tales of John R. R. Tolkien.

<sup>2</sup> In Judith Merrill's words, Campbell's influence on SF development has "two immediately noticeable effects: better stories and more and better speculative development . . . [a] third effect . . . one I do not believe Campbell was looking for, and may not have noticed when it arrived—better writing" (1971: 67).

story and his self-conscious style, *At the Mountains* somehow met the coming-into-being standard that was to mark SF's golden age. Ironically, the novelette that was not pulpy enough for *Weird Tales* to be published as a horror tale bore enough (renewed) pulp-ness for *Astounding Stories* to accept it as science fiction.

Historically speaking, *At the Mountains* was not Lovecraft's first works to appear in science fiction magazines and, unsurprisingly, not the first to be rejected by *Weird Tales*. The September 1927 *Amazing Stories* saw the publication of Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," which Sunand T. Joshi identifies in his annotation to the story as "the first of Lovecraft's major tales to effect that union of horror and science fiction which would become the hallmark of his later work" (Lovecraft, 1999: 399). Turned down by both *Weird Tales* and *Argosy* (another magazine devoted to romantic adventures), "The Colour Out of Space" somehow found itself much to the liking of the editor of *Amazing Stories*, who was at the time, Hugo Gernsback. Gernsback did not hesitate to show his admiration for the work: "Here is a totally different story that we can highly recommend. . . . The theme is original and yet fantastic enough to make it rise head and shoulder above many contemporary scientifiction stories . . . [y]ou will not regret having read this marvelous tale" (qtd. in Moskowitz, 1963: 255). This was quite an event and, according to Sam Moskowitz, sent "the signal to Lovecraft that he no longer belonged in *Weird Tales*" (1963: 255).

It was around this time that Lovecraft seriously considered the possibility of marrying horror to science. In a letter dated July 1927, Lovecraft laid bare his current thematic concern in his creative writings: "Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large" (Derleth & Wandrei, 1968: 150). Taken together with Lovecraft's statement in another letter written four years back that "[w]ho ever wrote a story from the point of view that man is a blemish on the cosmos, who ought to be eradicated?" (Lovecraft, 1995: 139), the 1927 letter, which was occasioned by the submission disappointment of "The Call of

Cthulhu” to *Weird Tales*, already made clear Lovecraft’s intention to direct his writing efforts to a cosmic indifference that would drive anthropomorphism from the center of this literary genre. Though Lovecraft never gave up trying to terrify his readers, the conventional design of the supernatural horror fell short of his demands. His lasting interest in science and knowledge of the field naturally gave him an incentive to break free of the towering shadow of Poe and shake off the influence of the Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany, with whom his dissatisfaction had been growing over the years. In short, a small body of Lovecraft’s later works (to which *At the Mountains* belongs) manifests a writer’s efforts to strike a cord of originality by uniting science and horror.

## II

In the light of the development of Lovecraft’s writing career, there would be little amazement at the change of Lovecraft’s conception of the weird tales, a change that finally articulates itself in the same year as he finished *At the Mountains*. Among Lovecraft’s 1931 letters, one finds two occasions where conventional weird tales—based mostly on supernatural horror—have undergone a certain conceptual shift in an attempt to grasp the import of scientific realism. At one such occasion, Lovecraft expresses his ideal of weird tales by pointing out the genre’s “crux” as discussing “something which *could not possibly happen*.” The “possibility” in question is set against the backdrop of an opposition between reality defined by science and the transcendence deployed by the imaginary. Lovecraft goes on thus:

If any unexpected advance of physics, chemistry, or biology were to indicate the *possibility* of any phenomena related by the weird tale, that particular set of phenomena would cease to be *weird* in the ultimate sense because it would become surrounded by a different set of emotions. It would no longer represent imaginative liberation, because it would no longer indicate a suspension or

violation of the natural laws against whose universal dominance our fancies rebel. (Emphases original; Derleth & Wandrei, 1971: 434)

To be exact, this passage is not only about the aesthetics of weird tales, but also the epistemological possibility of human knowledge and affectivity as delimited by scientific materialism. Once the line has been drawn, as Lovecraft here strongly suggests, weird tales are intended for that which lies beyond the limits of possibility. It is truly a statement that pushes the weird tale to the limit as the genre has now been asked to put into the human system of signification what cannot be signified by the (scientifico-structural) system itself. In short, the “imaginative liberation” can be achieved in weird tales because, as Lovecraft understands it, the genre is and should be a task that sets out to realize the possibility of the impossible—that is, to make happen what “could not possibly happen” within the realm of human episteme. If there is anything truly *outré* about weird tales, it would be the very radical nature of language against itself to make possible the impossible, and of the imaginary not only against scientific materialism but, even more so, against scientific imagination (which, in the final analysis, is always predicated on a reality as humans understand it in rational terms).

Yet one finds in another of Lovecraft’s letters, dated in the same year a passage which seems to say otherwise and which, if put in a contextual reading, effects the very generic trajectory to be followed by Lovecraft’s major works in his later period. There, “a suspension or violation of the natural laws” that lies at the core of the “imaginative liberation” has been toned down to such an extent that “supplements”—rather than “contradictions”—to “the visible and measurable universe” become the pronouncing factor of the signifying representation of the genre in its revolt against the scientifically graspable reality. Then came the often quoted announcement of Lovecraft’s that “what, if not a form of *non-supernatural cosmic art*, is to pacify this sense of revolt—as well as gratify the cognate sense of curiosity?” (emphases original; Derleth & Wandrei, 1971: 295-296).

It is, no doubt, the “cosmic art” with which Lovecraft’s later works are concerned, an art where a temporal perspective gains certain grandeur that not only manifests the advent of cosmic entities long before human beings, but suggests their survival even long after the demise of human species. Yet the part of the “non-supernatural” that will pique one’s curiosity is that which must come to terms with the weird tale based on some supernatural horror, and how a conceptual change is made to shift from “suspension or violation of the natural laws” to supplementing a universe built on them. Put simply, though it becomes only clearer that around 1931 Lovecraft started a serious thinking of introducing science into his tales of horror, the question remains in what way the epistemological supplements to the natural laws can contribute to horror in full affectivity.

No doubt a certain tension arises in the interchange between science and horror which Lovecraft consciously attends to in his later works. For one thing, if science fiction (or fictitious science as textually represented) can be taken to be “a form of fantastic fiction which exploits the imaginative perspectives of modern science” (Pringle, 1985: 9), there is and must be a strong current of rationalization working to gauge the value of an exchange between metaphorization and materialization so that a signifying process might be rendered meaningful on its own terms. Either knowledge or pseudo-knowledge is construed therein to incorporate the initially unexplained phenomena into the epistemological circumference of science, which may redefine its ever-expanding contours to incorporate the knowledge. On the other hand, if horror should be left undefined and inconclusive to cause unresolved—and thus more terrible—fear to become “all the more real to us in our imagination” (Search, 1959: 13), the exchange value between metaphorization and materialization has to be forfeited so that a real horror—not a reality, no matter how horrible it is—can thus be evoked or suggested, rather than become materialized. The concern here would have little to do with expanding metaphorical configurations, but may have more to do with metonymic chains of eternal substitutions without reference to, and in contradiction to, any modes of reality that are definable in

scientific terms. The tension in question is between the knowable and the unknown, between reality and the real, and, by extension, between metaphor and metonymy.

Of the utmost importance, then, is the way one would take to read this tension. This is the key to understanding Lovecraft's later fictional writings, not as artifacts, but as works of art that express certain originality set apart from the writer's previous supernatural horror tales following Poe's examples or Lovecraft's dream-cycle stories modeling on Lord Dunsany's. Only by unraveling, however partially it may be, the significance of the "non-supernatural cosmic art" can Lovecraft's later works with their express orientation towards "scientifiction" be appreciated for their achievements in terms of generic crossing and extension. One noteworthy Lovecraftian critic offers a plausible reading of such a tension, which serves well a good point of departure for a more critical scrutiny of the issue. As the year 1931 is replete with enough epistolary evidence to be singled out in Lovecraft's writing career, Joshi reads the tension into a change of aesthetic concern in the writer that aims at striking a middle ground between weird tales that are "too non-supernatural" and those, "too supernatural" (1999: 152). The latter category refers to tales revolving around conventional supernatural entities such as ghosts, vampires, werewolves and the like, all of which, interestingly, almost never appear in Lovecraft's tales.<sup>3</sup> The former, on the other hand, approximates tales of psychological suspense that touch upon the manifestly supernatural, which tends to being "illusory" or misperceived (Kerr, Crowley, & Crow, 1983: 2), whether they are explained or left unexplained in the end. This category is, in a way, akin to the conception of "the uncanny" in Tzvetan Todorov's understanding of the fantastic, wherein "the literature of horror" is specifically aligned with "the uncanny" as the reader or the character has resolved the "hesitation" in confronting supernatural events by keeping intact natural laws that allow for suggestive explanations (1975: 33, 42, 47).

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<sup>3</sup> Ghosts, for example, are never used by Lovecraft (Joshi, 1999: 150).

Since the middle ground Joshi brings forth from Lovecraft's conceptual change is consciously kept at a distance from both the fantastic (too supernatural) and the uncanny (too non-supernatural), a reasonable doubt could be entertained as to whether Lovecraft's artistic maneuver is intended to invoke "the marvelous." This could be the case because, first, Todorov's schema has this latter category, considered the same as the uncanny in terms of their being equally non-fantastic, with the sole difference that "the marvelous" keeps the supernatural accounted for by the laws of nature after they have been renewed or supplemented (1975: 42); and, second, Lovecraft's scientific materialization corresponds well to Todorov's "scientific marvelous" whereby "the supernatural is explained in a rational manner, but according to laws which contemporary science does not acknowledge" (1975: 56). Yet this middle ground is not as stable as it seems. Given the textual orientation of Lovecraft's later works of "scientifiction," it could be argued that they are not exactly of "the marvelous" as there is always something that cannot be brought *to* knowledge (that is, cannot be *ac*-known) no matter how thoroughly supported the natural laws. Neither are they of "the uncanny" as the introduction of scientific realism and rationalization avoids most suggestions of misinformation or misperception. Nor are they of "the fantastic" in its pure state of being, for there is little "hesitation" on the reader and the character in deciding the definite uncertainty of the horror (a whole line following here of around 20 words has been deleted for clarity). It is in view of this generic failure in pigeonholing Lovecraft's "scientifiction" that *At the Mountains* can be read as an exemplary text that lays bare the tension raised by Lovecraft's conscious mix of science with the supernatural horror.

### III

*At the Mountains of Madness* tells the story of an encounter of an Antarctic expedition team with ancient civilizations previously unknown to humans. Such an encounter with the unknown naturally

holds the affective power to induce fear which, as Lovecraft sees it, is not only the “oldest and strongest emotion of mankind,” but also central to a weird tale in its link to uncertainty, danger, and malignity (Lovecraft, 2005: 105-106). This fear of the unknown would have the novelette generically tied to horror fiction. Yet the work is also of the period in which Lovecraft has developed his late style in mixing or replacing the impressionistic suggestiveness of horror regularly seen in his earlier works with scientific realism or, as some critics argue, with materialistic fantasy in his late years.<sup>4</sup> Two aspects of his life are brought together to realize the efforts in developing his own voice: his love in writing about horror (or fondness of terrifying the reader) and his long-term passion for astronomy and other science-related subjects like geology, biology, paleontology, and, for sure, the Antarctic continent.<sup>5</sup> And it is the scientific aspect of *At the Mountains* that addresses the question of how horrifying a story would be if wrapped in scientific realism that may be insidiously suggestive of an unknown something cast away by natural laws being extended or supplemented. A story as such may suffer from the tensions produced by the seesawing between the horrific and the scientific, or between the laws of reality and the real horror. A dissatisfied outcome could be a

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<sup>4</sup> The period spans roughly from 1926, the year when his famous “The Call of Cthulhu” appeared, to 1935, when Lovecraft finished writing “The Shadow Out of Time.” Lovecraft died in 1937, only one year after the first publication of “The Shadow Out of Time.” Around six works of horror science fiction, apart from some other horror tales, were written during this period.

<sup>5</sup> Lovecraft’s first published works are a few letters submitted to the *Providence Sunday Journal* and the *Scientific American* in 1906 on subjects of astronomy when the writer was sixteen (Joshi, 1999: 20, 245). In a more direct relation to *At the Mountains*, the Antarctic explorations made by Scott Amundsen and others in the early decades of the 20th century never failed to arrest Lovecraft’s unremitting attention (Lovecraft, 2003: 420) and Admiral Byrd’s 1928-1930 expedition lies too behind the early part of *At the Mountains* (Eckhardt, 1987: 35), which situation encourages Joshi to term the novelette “the final and triumphant product of a lifetime’s interest in the Antarctic” (2003: 187). Lovecraft obviously did not construe the story’s scientific aspect on a whim.

horrible story with neither horror nor science, or a story not horrifying at all due to suggestiveness being entirely disposed of by scientific materialization. The issue here is the textual capacity of *At the Mountains* in turning the tension to narrative and aesthetic benefits, so that science, instead of warding off horror, actually enhances its affectivity.

Certain critical observations may yield a different perspective by reading into the story this particular tension observations such as: whether the work (as can be said the same of Lovecraft's other pieces of "scientifiction") should be placed in a different category of horror because what it intends is "intellectual shock" built on the "conceptual horror," rather than emotional fright due to supernatural horror (Dziemianowicz, 1995: 34-35); the considerations that push Lovecraft to resort to an "impressionistic" style at the end of the story, a style which is in contradistinction to his later one and can only be found in "Lovecraft's 'Dunsanian' stories" (Cannon, Eckhardt, Mariconda, & Van Calenbergh, 1996: 2); or the significance that underlies the observation following his own words—"I am fundamentally a *prose realist*" (emphases original; Derleth & Wandrei, 1971: 96)—that Lovecraft is "the only fantasy/horror writer who considered himself a prose realist" (Cannon et al., 1996: 10). In this respect, the genealogical enveloping of the cosmic horror in the central parts of *At the Mountains* deserves critical attention because in those places the textual site is so constructed that horror and science are not only allowed to meet, but also kept apart. It, in fact, claims for itself a site where the tension grows to such a scale that the moment science envelops horror to rationalize almost all metaphorical configurations of the unknown, the real horror starts developing from science and into endless metonymic chains that forever swerve off, or at best swing around, some impossible referent.

Basically, sections 7 and 8 of *At the Mountains* relate the history of intelligent entities named the Old Ones who came from an obscure planet long before the life forms of either humanity or other organisms ever appeared on Earth. The "history," as comprehensive as it could be, comprises almost every salient aspect of the Old Ones'

civilization: the way these entities travel between stellar systems, the class system and government type their social structure depends on, commercial activities including the use of currency among cities they built undersea or on land, as well as their strongly suggested religious belief in what is sacred and what they fear the most. One particular aspect of this history stands out as holding a special place in Lovecraft's horror science fiction taken as a whole: the history of the Old Ones' military conflicts with other extraterrestrial entities coming to Earth. Of these latecomers are familiar faces like Yuggoth, Shoggoth, Cthulhu, the Mi-Go, and the Great Race, all of which are, in one way or another, dealt with by Lovecraft in other tales belonging to his late period. While those races are scattered in different tales without connections, the history of the Old Ones for the first time brings them all together, weaving them into a coherent story.<sup>6</sup> What Lovecraft intends here seems no less than an attempt to complete a mythos, or a mythic history, of ancient alien civilizations, thus securing a genealogical envelope for the cosmic other who not only predates long before humans, but will also remain long after.

Put into a narrative framework of pseudo-socio-anthropological reports on ethnic groups, these two sections would have their scientific marks more explicitly expressed if one reads them against earlier sections where the expedition team, composed of people from various scientific backgrounds (geology, biology, physics, engineering, meteorology, and paleontology), provides detailed anatomical descriptions of the specimens that have been accidentally found and, shortly after, carefully dissected and studied. The physiology of the

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<sup>6</sup> Yuggoth and the Mi-Go appear in "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1930); Shoggoth, in "The Mound" (1930); Cthulhu, no doubt, in "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926); the Great Race, in "The Shadow Out of Time" (1934). As all dates referred here are of the time of writing rather than that of publication, it is not difficult to tell the temporal relation these works (including *At the Mountains*) have with the creative concern of the writer in his late period. The dates in question are culled from Mariconda's research (1995: 40-44) and further checked out with Joshi's editions of Lovecraft's stories for minor modification (Lovecraft, 1999: 392, 401; Lovecraft, 2004: 445).

Old Ones, as one reads on, is linked to their collective mentality, their psychic power of hypnotic control, as well as their linguistic or vocal features—all of which are determined by the way their organs are arranged and deployed inside and around a bodily form that is utterly non-human. In the light of Lovecraft's other works of horror science fiction, *At the Mountains* appears to be a strikingly deliberate attempt to make itself not only a work among works, but *the* work of works. It is a work that sits at the center of a textual nexus where other works of Lovecraft's horror science fiction converge, and to which those works constantly refer for either coherence or continuance. Separate works will have as their backdrops this history of the Old Ones, not only to participate in a larger or more grandeur corpus, but also to derive meaning, in the mytho-historical sense, better articulated through this relational significance of intra-textuality. By detailing the anatomy of ancient alien entities and the sociality of the civilizations they built, *At the Mountains* draws a genealogical line of sight that brings the various alien races into alignment, following which all that was alien and invisible suddenly becomes visible and observable, and thus available to disciplinary studies and writing systems, and finally makes themselves, if not already known, at least knowable. However, if all that is about the cosmic Other has been brought into light, what night is left there for horror to grow?

Coming thus to the front is the question of how to read the genealogical enveloping of the cosmic other, as well as the relation of this envelopment to the horror with which Lovecraft has always been concerned. This enveloping might be treated as an attempt to confront alterity in scientific terms, practicing an exorcism to dispel the horror caused by the unknowability of the cosmic other. The discursive potency, at least in the Lovecraftian context, can be taken as what effects this exorcism. Unlike exorcism, which generally wards off evil by casting it back into the realm of its origins, the discursive exorcism of *At the Mountains* is meant to bring the unknown within the bounds of human knowledge, rendering what was previously beyond the signifying potency open to discourse. Through this discursivity, the new writ of epistemological runes will be made possible in

rationalized supplementarity modifying the natural laws of an otherwise drab reality. The anomaly outside of the human system is thus incorporated into that system to be contained, tamed, and, if not entirely familiarized, at least likely to become so in the future. It is then of little surprise that Lovecraft's horror science fiction would be quite self-defeating a task. What is at stake is human ignorance at the intellectual level which has little to do with horror, but more to do with curiosity. In fact, the expedition team is more than once driven by curiosity to push its members farther and farther into the beyond, only to turn this yonder into that which is possible to discourse on in human terms (otherwise the novelette would have not gain its existence in the very first place). If there is any leftover that remains horrifying after this exorcistic enveloping of the cosmic other, it is the "cosmic indifference" to which Lovecraft attends. The anthropocentrism will be threatened and at last replaced by those ancient aliens, which prove to be superior to humans in almost every aspect. What is really horrifying, therefore, lies not in the fear of the unknown, but in the fearful understanding that humans will never survive as a species once those entities come back to omnipresence. The horror, if any, is not of what is unknown and yet is definitely out there lurking always; rather, it is of the end of human existence as it is framed by what is knowable. Horror of this kind would be self-defeating because one can choose to willfully disregard or ignore it entirely as it is already so enveloped by the human system that a solution, even an emotional one, will never look strange or radically alien to the system itself.

Another way of reading the envelopment in question is to treat it not as an end of horror, but as a step in a larger process of maintaining momentum. A close reading of the story shows that Lovecraft may not be entirely unaware of the possible outcome that horror could have been offset by too much scientific realism. A horror tale the length of *At the Mountains* not only suffers the difficulty in maintaining horror always in a heightened state, but is fraught with the danger that the intended horror will continuously thin out as the story drags on. However, the sections before 7 and 8 do fare quite well in using scientific realism to heighten the sense of suspense and

the feeling of impending horror to come. Here Lovecraft's narrative strategies hardly fail a notice. They should be regarded as a meticulous work of design that uses an array of certain and clear narrative moves only to heighten the affect of the final uncertainty.

The narrative moves taken to convey the story need be clear and certain to satisfy the demands of scientific realism. The expedition team is composed of scientists and graduate students who set out to collect fossil samples in the Antarctica with the aid of the newly designed drill in order to acquire greater knowledge of the Earth's past. The story's narrator, though not identified therein, is believed to be the Professor William Dyer of the Geology department at the Miskatonic University (Joshi in Lovecraft, 2003: 421). The Miskatonic University is a fictionalized institution, like Lovecraft's invented town, Arkham, around which many of Lovecraft's stories are set. Professor Dyer, who is fully present in another of Lovecraft's horror science fictions, "The Shadow Out of Time," is here only mentioned as the "I." The appearance of these two factors, locale and character, add to the already manifest intra-textuality of *At the Mountains* that is built on cross-references between the Old Ones and other cosmic entities in Lovecraft's stories. As a scientist, Dyer's narration is strongly commanded by factuality, certainty and clarity. When the criteria fail in being properly met, the demand for factuality acts as fuel to the flame of "undying human curiosity" which is "to spur . . . [one] ahead on the same age-long pursuit of the unknown" (Lovecraft, 2003: 275). It is this "pursuit of the unknown" in the name of factuality, or factual supplementarity, that sets the basic tone of Dyer's narrative. And the motive of Dyer's relating the narrative, as one learns shortly after, is the horror encountered when the unknown is enveloped by factual supplementarity while exceeding it at the same time.

The reason that envelopment and excess—or that which science can supplement and that which it does not—coexist in the story is the manifest involvement of the two horrors visited on the expedition team and reader. The first horror has its portent right after the expedition team arrived at the Antarctic continent where they found,

with the help of the new drill, a few Archaean slates marked by triangular forms that suggest “some bulky, unknown, and radically unclassifiable organisms of considerably advanced evolution” (Lovecraft, 2003: 254). As the slate samples indicate a time at which no life-forms higher than the unicellular could have possibly existed, the findings challenge the generally acceptable frame of scientific explanations. Certain excess of something more than scientific factuality is set to work here spurring human curiosity. In view of the team’s scientific predilection, the aroused curiosity will naturally mobilize all of the team members’ efforts and knowledge to channel the excess back into the frame, or to modify the frame for the excess to be proper to, that is be made property of the frame itself. Underlying human curiosity is a drive of scientific realism that strains to dispel the unknown through factual supplementarity. Lake, the team’s biologist, answers this drive of supplementarity more eagerly than others and, shortly after, successfully has a sub-team organized and equipped for an impromptu exploration. It is from here on that, generically speaking, the story steps over the subtle line that divides weird tales from science fiction.

There is no lack of suspense in the descriptive detail of Lake’s exploration to arouse a sense of hesitation that, essential to weird or supernatural tales, hints at the fantastic. Lovecraft realistically and craftily builds this suspense on the transmission of shortwave radio exchanged between Lake’s exploration camp and Dyer’s main site—realistically, because shortwave radio is not only the best, but likely the only applicable, communication channel given the present circumstances of the Antarctic climate and the distance involved; craftily, because the transmission itself is made of sound that, in its exclusion of other sensory aids and inputs, dictates a vocal modulation so highly compressed that gaps and lacunae will inevitably erupt and interrupt to create the needed blanks where the suspense can be let stand. Though there is little doubt that “[m]ost of Lovecraft’s tales . . . develop by way of incremental detail” (Oates, 1997: xiii), the detail of the human vocal exchange both here and in one of Lovecraft’s earlier stories serves a good measure to the subtle shift of narrative weight

from suspense marked by hesitation to suspense countered by supplementarity. It is a shift, generally speaking, that inches its way through the domain of weird tales and up towards that of science fiction.

In 1919, Lovecraft finished a tiny piece of story, almost a direct transcript of a dream, entitled “The Statement of Randolph Carter.” The story is simple, telling of an experience Carter and his friend, Harley Warren, have of descending into an ancient crypt, running up against the unnameable horror, and returning later with the mysterious and horrifying loss of Warren. The story commands interest because, parallel to the short wave radio, “a portable telephone outfit” (Lovecraft, 1999: 9) is used to bring to effect a sense of suspension, if somewhat too straightforwardly. The story’s climax comes at its end with a vocal exchange through the “telephone outfit” between Carter, on the surface, and Warren, descending into the abyss, and reaches its pinnacle of suspense when Warren asks Carter to seal the crypt and run for his life without any explanation. Following Warren’s last message, we hear “a cry that gradually rose to a shriek fraught with all the horror of the ages” (Lovecraft, 1999: 12). Then a voice issues from the telephone outfit for the last time, driving home the final horror: “YOU FOOL, WARREN IS DEAD!” (capitalization original; Lovecraft, 1999: 13).

Compared to the vocal transmission in “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” that in Lake’s exploration displays a nature of different sort. Gaps and lacunae in radio or radio-like transmissions are still there, contributing to the suspense essential to suggestions of something unknown and, presumably, horrifying. In the former case the blank interference of gaps and lacunae is left as such without any perceptive efforts or even interpretive possibilities to be brought back into cognition, thereby maintaining the unknown as an object and, in turn, intensifying its horrifying affect. By contrast, the interference in the latter case is somehow overcome. While the transmission still reeks of suspension, the unknown, instead of remaining an object, only incurs and increases cognitive fervor (or intellectual curiosity) to finally become something knowable, or something whose objectivity

has to undergo cognitive mediation to be as it is. There is no lack of suggestions of horror lurking in Lake's camp (dogs barking for no reason, gale about to come cutting off the communications link, and the long silence when the connection should have already resumed). Yet greater than the insinuation of horror is the strong cognitive effort (which will only be getting stronger thereafter) to realize and familiarize the unknown in geological, biological, and physiological terms; to know it almost to the point of scientific erudition. Though up to this point one does not lose the expectation of something horrible to come (the answer to the silence of Lake's camp is still suspended), the affective intensity is intertwined with, and inevitably diluted in, the factual supplementarity of scientific realism.

By the time Dyer finally has the main team ready to travel to Lake's camping site for further investigation, some scientific deduction has been completed with data collected from Lake's dissection of other samples of the unknown species. Respiratory, nervous, and reproductive systems, as well physiological features and layout, have been inferred.<sup>7</sup> Even a "provisional name . . . 'The Elder Ones'" (Lovecraft, 2003: 266) has been assigned. In tandem with the suggested horror, a clearer image of the unknown species comes into form to allow human perception. Though the investigation of Lake's camping site unravels further hints of something horrific (human and canine bodies mangled, one dog and one man missing, research samples corrupted), there is nevertheless such an intellectual attraction of the unknown that not only is the affection of horror seriously paled, but more burning the urge is enlivened seeking cognitive access to the

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<sup>7</sup> One example of the scientific encyclopaedism can be culled from how the alien reproductive system is depicted: "It reproduced like the vegetable cryptogams, especially the pteridophytes, having spore-cases at the tips of the wings and evidently developing from a thallus or prothallus" (Lovecraft, 2003: 266). Similar lexical patterns that are heavily laden with scientific nomenclature abound in *At the Mountains*. It should be of small wonder that readers comfortable with weird tales will find themselves shied away from the story, whereas those who feel most at ease with science fiction should find the story much to their liking.

unknown through factual supplementarity: “In spite of all the prevailing horrors we were left with enough sheer scientific zeal and adventurousness to wonder about the unknown realm beyond those mysterious mountains” (Lovecraft, 2003: 279). The urge finally drives Dyer and one graduate student, Danforth, into a sixteen-hour adventure to the “realm beyond” where the “sheer scientific zeal” finds its horrifying satisfaction.

The envelopment of horror in factual supplementarity reaches its peak in sections 7 and 8. As the starting phrase of the section 7 indicates, the sweeping exploration of Dyer and Danforth over the area and its “Cyclopean” architecture and sculpture finally unfolds to them “[t]he full story” (Lovecraft, 2003: 294, 299) of the unknown species, which has been revealed as the Old Ones.<sup>8</sup> The story can be said to be “full” because it is comprehensive enough to give off not a flat image of the Old Ones as individual samples with mere physiological layout or anatomical features, but a hologram-like figure of a race with its own history (much grander than that of all earthly life-forms) and civilization (with all its subsets of social class, economy, culture, technology, and military rapport). The horror in question and the affect of suspension it caused have at least up to now been resolved and almost fully explained away. Sections 7 and 8 have successfully reported in clear and certain details on the previously unknown species. Here can be remarked a double movement of the narrative in confronting the horror and exorcising it at the same time. One leads to a site of intra-textuality where all the cosmic entities that appear elsewhere in Lovecraft’s corpus have been correlated in a

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<sup>8</sup> The copious details of the Old Ones’ architecture in these two sections witness another narrative device Lovecraft regularly uses in incurring the affect of horror. It has been observed that “the terrifying embodiment of cosmic alienage” in Lovecraft’s fiction constantly draws on the “non-human architecture” (Evans, 2005: 118). The copulation between horror and the architectural space can be further related to “transgression” (Lévy, 1988: 48) that Lovecraft has instilled into the non-geometrical and almost irrational architectural symbols (thus Cyclopean) of the Old Ones. It is transgression involving the threshold-crossing (Salomon, 2002: 9) that entails the horror of contact or the contact of horror.

history of coherence and continuity which retroactively imparts those entities with the relational significance at the level of Lovecraftian mythopoiesis. Another movement, though equally mythopoetic, is more historical-like in the sense that humans are not the center of, yet central to, a history that has been factually supplemented by the ancient aliens.

The movement can be understood as conjecture in its double sense (Webster's, 1983: 277). While the fictional narrative finds itself on mere "supposition" to construct a mythos or a mytho-history, the narrative movement pushes open a textual site that "throws together" (*com* plus *jacere*) not only different ancient aliens, but human beings and cosmic others. This throwing-together weaves a Lovecraftian grand narrative that connects ancient aliens' separate stories at the genealogical and intra-textual level, yet it at once links humans to cosmic others to such a degree that anthropocentrism is disrupted and displaced at the historical level. Under the disguise of pseudo-genealogical and historical reports, "the full story" of the Old Ones makes a conjectural thrust of the "cosmic indifference" that renders humans trivial and irrelevant and will finally put an end to the human history. The thrust, however, is pushing forward to the humans' end by pointing backward at the human origin as the story implicates that the human species might be another byproduct of the genetic technology the Old Ones have harnessed into producing their slave class, the Shoggoth, which later becomes the race's Frankenstein other.

One effect of this double movement that translates what is experientially posterior into its being historically anterior is the suspension released, the horror exorcised, and the unknown made comprehensible, all by the factual supplementarity of scientific realism. The relief is so great that Dyer even comes to feel intimacy and sympathy with the Old Ones, as humans may in the final analysis share the same destiny: "poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last—what had they done that we would not have done in their place? . . . whatever they had been, they were men!" (Lovecraft, 2003: 330). The "full story" of the Old Ones would thus read like an anticlimax that ends all possible horrors thereafter. Yet this is far from being the end

of the story itself. The real horror does not stop at the Old Ones, nor does it find its end in later sections where Dyer and Danforth flee from the hunt of Shoggoth to run for their lives. Both the Old Ones and Shoggoth have already been fully explained and supplemented in human terms that their manifestation, at least after sections 7 and 8, may be horrific to certain extent, but lacks the potency of truly horrifying. The “final horror,” as is named in the story (Lovecraft, 2003: 338), is not the horror qua the Old Ones, but the horror that even the Old Ones “had shunned and feared” the most (Lovecraft, 2003: 339).

It is here in the final horror that the unknown qua the cosmic other retains its radicalness, its radical unknowability, and defies all supplementary efforts of scientific realism. Since this horror already falls outside the system of the Old Ones in the first place, the human system as is supported by the signifying chain of supplementarity will be totally at a loss to appropriate something (the final horror) that should have been but is never there in what has already been appropriated (the Old Ones). It is the horror of horror that lies not only beyond the rim of human comprehension, but even beyond the comprehension of all the cosmic others that, thrown together, have already been made known. If the cosmic horror commands the first layer of *At the Mountains*, which finds a temporary end in the genealogical and scientific enveloping of the cosmic other (as composed of the Old Ones and Shoggoth), the second layer of the story is enforcing a development or even an escape of horror from science. Hence looming quite large an Other of the (cosmic) other qua the horror of horror.

A difference can therefore be observed between the story’s dealing with the Old Ones’ Frankenstein horror and the final horror in its radicalness. In the former case, one finds a somehow amusing analogy between “a vast, onrushing subway train” (Lovecraft, 2003: 335) and Shoggoth running after Dyer and Danforth: “South Station Under—Washington Under—Kendell—Central—Harvard. . .” (ellipsis original; Lovecraft, 2003: 334). Yet in the latter, “disjointed and irresponsible things” abound:

“the black pit’, ‘the carven rim’, ‘the proto-shoggoths’, ‘the windowless solids with five dimensions’, ‘the nameless cylinder’, ‘the elder pharos’, ‘Yog-Sothoth’, ‘the primal white jelly’, ‘the colour out of space’, ‘the wings’, ‘the eyes in darkness’, ‘the moon-ladder’, ‘the original, the eternal, the undying’, and other bizarre conceptions” (Lovecraft, 2003: 339). While both can be said sharing a metonymic nature by which supplementary efforts command the happening of the signifying chain repeat itself almost ad infinitum, there is a certain madness permeating the latter case. The analogous relation between terminal names a subway train passes by and Shoggoth hunting is of simile in nature where all terms, including Shoggoth with all its factual supplements, are put in *praesentia* to call forth the affect of panic. Since Shoggoth at this point is not entirely unknown, the metonymic chain would suffer no danger of losing that of which it is a substitute. As a result, the analogy thus constructed gives off certain logicity that can be understood, i.e., be rationalized. In a sense, this narrative gesture to what was previously unknown but has now become explicable meets the demand of scientific realism. The horror is gone, and only panic left.

On the other hand, if Nietzsche can be trusted regarding his observation that “[l]anguage has within it, however, an illogical element, the metaphor . . . [whose] principal force brings about an identification of the nonidentical” (qtd. in Derrida, 1979: 83), the latter case is metaphorical in nature where all fragments presented there are revolving around that which is in *abstentia*. Since that of which the fragments are substitutes is forever lost and escapes all recuperative efforts of supplementarity, no logicity can ever be resolved and the signifying chain will have the destiny of protracting for lines without any possibility of securing a relation of identity in the system of human signification. It is a madness of metaphorization that can be captured only in endless metonymic chains. There is no panic with respect to the resolvability of the issue of life and death when confronting something knowable, but the horror that is too radical to rationalize and explicate. Following from this radical horror will be madness only, of which Danforth is one manifestation, a madness one

can never escape because there is no-(such-)thing one can escape from. This is the radicalness of horror that will have to forfeit any enveloping terms, and can only be suggested in the illogicality of metaphor, in the failure of metaphORIZATION, and in the madness of impressionistic concatenation of broken images, verbal fragments, and cracked vocal notes. There is the horror beyond horrors as an Other beyond the other. Not together with, not apart from, nor in addition to, but simply beyond.

#### IV

If *At the Mountains* can be read as an exemplary text, the argument should be understood in a few terms which the above discussion is hoped to render readable. Generically speaking, the novelette can be said having as its nature the hybridity residing in several areas of the in-between. It is partly science fiction, the emerging genre in which Lovecraft found a niche for the late years of his writing and for the individual distinction he always hoped for from Poe and Dunsany. It is partly a weird fiction, for the scientific realism that has been upscaled almost to excessive erudition in the novelette's first half is contributing to the affect of horror that resides outside the rim of any epistemological efforts in scientific terms. The more scientifically realistic the first half appears, the stronger the anticipated affect of the end of the horror novelette. The narrative movement is meticulously orchestrated to draw a trajectory running from emotional fright mixed with intellectual curiosity, through conceptual shock, then to emotional fright of a different order. Or one can read the movement as swinging from the fantastic to the marvelous, and back to the fantastic that, however, has been reinscribed in (the failure of) scientific gist and colored (or tainted) by the uncanny (in view of Danforth's madness). It is therefore no mere coincidence that the novelette's publication history would parallel the development of this generic hybridity.

Textually speaking, *At the Mountains* is construed as the work of works wherein a history of relation and significance is imparted on ancient alien entities that are a prominent presence in Lovecraft's other works. The novelette should welcome an intra-textual reading that helps bring together not only other alien entities to write a mytho-history, but other stories to inscribe a Lovecraftian corpus. In terms of style, what Lovecraft has displayed is scientific realism that, however, comes to be overwhelmed at the story's end by the impressionistic writing for a good reason, because the scientific reason is finally proved incapable of revising itself good enough to integrate into its epistemological framework the horror in its radicalness (and its affect as well). Without scientific realism mapped out so much in detail, the horror will never know its exteriority. Yet without the encounter with the horror in concern (or horror at different degrees), scientific rationalization would never come to meet the lack interior to it that disrupts the relation of identity and finally erupts into the form of madness.

It then may not be too gratuitous to remark that the cosmic other cannot be unreservedly enveloped in scientific terms and has to develop into the radical horror thereafter because the meet with the other outside science is in the end an encounter with the horror inside of and inherent to language. It is a chaotic state of madness that disregards any of categorizing, differentiating, and rationalizing efforts of signifying chains, a horror that is radical enough not only to drive the urge of the ever-expanding factual supplementarity of scientific realism and rationalization, but to condition the very possibility of such supplementarity. It is the condition to which *At the Mountains* could be read as opening itself.

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## 論《於瘋狂之山》：封印宇宙恐懼

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### 摘 要

《於瘋狂之山》為美國恐怖小說作家勒孚克萊夫特晚期描寫宇宙恐懼之代表作。該作品以科幻小說處理恐懼主題的敘事模式，或確切言之，以科學性寫實主義描摹恐懼的嘗試，引人深思作品是否有效誘發恐懼之感受性。《於瘋狂之山》共為十二節，其中七、八兩節可謂科學性寫實主義淋漓發揮之所。此二節翔實記錄了遠古於地球人類物種肇始，便已存在之諸外星智慧生命體的系譜。本論文處理之中心議題，即為此嘗試封存宇宙他者的書寫印記，能否召喚宇宙恐懼，及從作品整體的文本性觀之，此一封印的功能與意義為何。

**關鍵詞：**恐懼、科學、補遺性