WEIRD REALISM: LOVECRAFT AND PHILOSOPHY

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Preliminary Note

All citations of Lovecraft stories refer to the collection: H.P. Lovecraft, *Tales*. (New York: Library of America, 2005.) Each reference consists of a two-word abbreviation followed by a page number. For example, (CC 167) would refer to page 167 of "The Call of Cthulhu" in the Library of America volume. Abbreviations for the individual stories are as follows:

CC "The Call of Cthulhu"
CS "The Colour Out of Space"
CW "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward"
DH "The Dunwich Horror"
HD "The Haunter of the Dark"
MM "At the Mountains of Madness"
SI   "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"
ST   "The Shadow Out of Time"
WD "The Whisperer in Darkness"
WH "The Dreams in the Witch House"

All of these stories refer to one another to an unusual extent, giving them the flavor of a loosely assembled novel told by diverse narrators of barely differentiable personality. But for simplicity's sake, Part Two will focus only on the eight most commonly recognized "great tales," as plausibly listed by Michel Houllebecq in his wonderful book on Lovecraft.[1] Yet his list coincides only partially with my own taste. For instance, "The Shadow Out of Time" strikes me as unworthy of Lovecraft's mature talent, while I remain rather fond of "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward."

Through the writings of Heidegger, the poems of Hölderlin have become a staple of analysis in continental philosophy. The present book makes an analogous case for elevating Lovecraft to the philosophical stage. Lovecraft can be dismissed as a pulp writer only under the presupposition that *all* writing about otherworldly monsters is doomed to be nothing but pulp. But this would be merely a social judgment, no different in kind from not wanting one's daughter to marry the chimney sweep. There can be good and bad "weird" writing, just as we find both excellent and banal naturalist fiction. Strong and weak elements sometimes co-exist in the same Lovecraft stories, but at his best, he is a major writer who also deals with philosophical themes of emerging interest.

For many readers, Lovecraft is a discovery of adolescence. I myself never read a word of his stories until reaching the age of thirty-seven. Whether this colors my interpretation with the ripeness of maturity, or with stolid bourgeois mediocrity, is a question for each reader to decide by experiment.

Lovecraft and Philosophy

A Writer of Gaps and Horror

One of the most important decisions made by philosophers concerns the production or destruction *gaps* in the cosmos. That is to say, the philosopher can either declare that what appears to be one actually two, or that what seems to be two is actually one. Some examples will help make the then more vivid. In opposition to common sense, which sees nothing around us but a world of norm everyday entities, Plato created a gap between the intelligible forms of the perfect world and th confusing shadows of opinion. The occasionalists of the medieval Arab world and seventeenth centu Europe produced a gap between any two entities by denying that they exert direct influence on or another, so that God became the only causal agent in the universe. The philosophy of Kant proposes gap between appearances and things-in-themselves, with no chance of a symmetry between the tw the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known.

But there are abundant examples of the opposite decision as well. We might think that horses a one thing and atoms are another, but hardcore materialists insist that a horse is completely reducib to physical atoms and is nothing over and above them. In this way the supposed gap between hors and atoms is destroyed, since on this view there is no such thing as a "horse" at all, just ato arranged in a certain pattern. Instead of atoms, we might also claim that the whole world is made water, air, fire, or a gigantic and indeterminate lump. In ancient Greece these were the variou tendencies of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Alternatively, we might hold that there are individu objects on one side and the various qualities of those objects on the other. David Hume denounced th gap, reducing supposed unified objects to nothing more than bundles of qualities. There is no su thing as an apple, just many different qualities that occur together so regularly that through force habit we begin to call them an "apple." And as for Kant's gap between appearances and things-i themselves, the German Idealists tried to destroy this gap by calling it incoherent: to think of thing in-themselves outside thought is meaningless, for given that we do think of them, they are obvious an element of thought. The destruction and production of gaps can easily coexist in the sam philosopher, just as black and white co-exist in the same painting. For example, if Hume is a *destroy of gaps by holding that objects are nothing more than bundles of qualities, he is also a *producer gaps through his denial that we can prove causal relationships between objects (this latter point is inheritance from the occasionalists he so admired). Nonetheless, there is generally a dominant tone every philosopher favoring one technique or the other. Since those who destroy gaps by implodi them into a single principle are generally called *reductionists,* let's coin the word *productionists describe philosophers who find new gaps in the world where there were formerly none.

If we apply this distinction to imaginative writers, then H.P. Lovecraft is clearly a productioni author. No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess. Despite his apparently limite interest in philosophy, Lovecraft as a tacit philosopher is violently anti-idealist and anti-Humea Indeed, there are times when Lovecraft echoes cubist painting in a manner amounting almost to parody of Hume. While Hume thinks that objects are a simple amassing of familiar qualitie Lovecraft resembles Braque, Picasso, and the philosopher Edmund Husserl by slicing an object in vast cross-sections of qualities, planes, or adumbrations, which even when added up do not exhaust th reality of the object they compose. For Lovecraft, the cubists, and Husserl, objects are *anything b bundles of qualities. In parallel with this tendency, Lovecraft is anti-idealist whenever he laments th inability of mere language to depict the deep horrors his narrators confront, to the point that he often reduced to hints and allusions at the terrors inhabiting his stories. The present book will consid

numerous examples of both sorts of gaps in Lovecraft's writings. But while Lovecraft is a writer of gaps, he is also a writer of horror, and the two should not be conflated. One could imagine a very different writer who used Lovecraft's staple techniques for other purposes–perhaps a sensual fantasist who would place us in a world of strange and indescribable pleasures, in which candles, cloves, and coconut milk were of such unearthly perfection that language would declare itself nearly powerless to describe them. A literary "weird porn" might be conceivable, in which the naked bodies of the characters would display bizarre anomalies subverting all human descriptive capacity, but without being so strange that the erotic dimension would collapse into a grotesque sort of eros-killing horror. We will see that while the stylistic production of gaps augments Lovecraft's power to depict monstrous horrors, the horrors themselves must occur on the level of literal content, not of literary allusion. Lovecraft as an author of horror writes about horrific content (monstrous creatures more powerful than humans and with no regard for our welfare), while Lovecraft the author of gaps is one who could have flourished in many other genres featuring many different sorts of content.

It should be obvious to readers of my previous books why Lovecraft, when viewed as a writer of gaps between objects and their qualities, is of great relevance for my model of object-oriented ontology (OOO).[2] The major topic of object-oriented philosophy is the dual polarization that occurs in the world: one between the real and the sensual, and the other between objects and their qualities. These two will be described in greater detail below. One involves a "vertical" gap, as found in Heidegger, for whom real objects forever withdraw behind their accessible, sensual presence to us. The other is a subtler "horizontal" gap, as found in Husserl, whose denial of a real world beyond all consciousness still leaves room for a powerful tension between the relatively durable objects of our perception and their swirling kaleidoscope of shifting properties. Once we note that the world contains both withdrawn real objects with both real and sensual qualities and fully accessible sensual objects that are also linked with both real and sensual qualities, we find ourselves with four basic tensions or gaps in the world. These gaps are the major subject matter of object-oriented philosophy, and Lovecraft's constant exploitation of these very gaps automatically makes him as great a hero to object-oriented thought as Hölderlin was to Heidegger.

In 2008 I published a widely read article on Lovecraft and Husserl.[3] Having recently reread the article, I find that I am mostly happy with the ideas it develops. Nonetheless, it also makes two proposals that I now see as unfortunately one-sided. First, the article holds that there is no Kantian "noumenal" aspect of Lovecraft, and asserts that Lovecraft should be paired solely with Husserl as an author confined to the phenomenal plane even if he produces strange new gaps within that plane. Second, it strongly downplays the importance of the fact that Lovecraft is a writer of horror and Husserl (though more "weird" than most people realize) is not a philosopher of horror. My fresh reservations about these two points are in many ways the engine of the present book. First, Lovecraft must be read not as a Husserlian author, but as jointly Husserlian-Kantian (or better: Husserlian-Heideggerian). This places him closer to my own position than either Husserl or Heidegger taken singly. And second, horror as the specific content of Lovecraft's stories must be accounted for, despite the fact that he is also an author of *gaps* that might be stylistically incarnated in numerous different genres other than horror. In short, the tension between style and content now becomes very important. In our efforts to fight the overly literal reading of Lovecraft as just a portrayer of scary monsters, we must also acknowledge that those monsters are his almost exclusive subject matter in a way that is true neither of Husserl nor of the vast majority of fiction writers. In this first part of the book I will show why this presents a problem; in the concluding third part, I will try to provide a partial solution, one that goes hand in hand with the fact that Lovecraft works along *two* separate axes of gaps, not just one. In the longer second part I will examine numerous passages of Lovecraft in detail, thereby setting the stage for the concluding argument.

When one of our friends speaks ill of another, the effect is awkward and painful. The situation different when the two friends in question are both admired authors: here, the dispute is oft fascinating. One of my favorite literary critics is Edmund Wilson, but Wilson does not share m admiration for the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. His dismissive assessment begins as follows:

> I regret that, after examining these books, I am no more enthusiastic than before. The principal feature of Lovecraft's work is elaborate concocted myth… [that] assumes a race of outlandish gods and grotesque prehistoric peoples who are always playi tricks with time and space and breaking through into the contemporary world, usually somewhere in Massachusetts.[4]

Like a sharp college quarterback mocking the Dungeons & Dragons games of his less popul hallmates, Wilson continues:

> ["At the Mountains of Madness" concerns] semi-invisible polypous monsters that uttered a shrill whistling sound and blasted th enemies with terrific winds. Such creatures would look very well on the covers of the pulp magazines, but they do not make go adult reading. And the truth is that these stories were hackwork contributed to such publications as *Weird Tales* and *Amazi Stories*, where, in my opinion, they ought to have been left.[5]

If Wilson were alive today, he would be appalled to find his long-projected Library of America serie tainted by the shared presence of Lovecraft.[6] Yet there is a problem with Wilson's approach, since an of the unchallenged classics of world liter- ature can also be reduced to literal absurdity in the san way as Lovecraft. Consider what a severe critic might say about *Moby-Dick*:

> The hero of the book is a bipolar one-legged skipper who cruises the world from Nantucket with a team of multi-eth harpooners. The climax comes when a scary, evil white whale (the object of their hunt) swims around the ship so fast th everyone is sucked into a whirlpool–everyone except the narrator, that is, who somehow survives to tell the tale. When reflecti on such inanity, I marvel once more at the puerile enthusiasm of Melville's admirers.

Even Dante might be converted to the ludicrous in similar fashion:

> The plot of the work is visibly cracked. An Italian poet, age thirty-five, is lost in a forest. He is sad and confused and pursued several ravenous African animals. At this point he happens to run into the ghost of Virgil, in whose company he enters a cav issuing into Hell. There, they meet scores of demons and observe a drooling Satan chewing the heads of three historic villai They then descend Satan's body and climb a giant mountain in the Pacific Ocean where people are forced to push boulders punishment for minor sins. Virgil is then suddenly replaced by the dead sweetheart of the Italian poet's childhood years. T Italian and his late muse (we are not told whether she carries a lollipop or a teddy bear) magically fly past all the planets finally see Jesus and God. And appropriately so, I might add: for if this is the future of poetry, then only these Divine Persons c save us.

Any literature, even the greatest, is easily belittled by such a method. The mere fact that a work of a can be literalized in this manner is no evidence against its quality. Wilson gets away with it i Lovecraft's case only due to the continuing low social status of science fiction and horror compare with mainstream naturalistic fiction; by contrast, no critic would be allowed to offer such ru handling to Melville or Dante. But there are only good and bad works of art, not inherently good an bad *genres* of art. As Clement Greenberg puts it: "One cannot validly be for or against any particul body of art *in toto*. One can only be for good or superior art as against bad or inferior art. One is n for Chinese, or Western, or representational art as a whole, but only for what is good in it."[7] By th same token, one cannot be for or against all naturalistic novels, science fiction, horror, Western romance novels, or even comic books, but must learn to distinguish the good from the bad in each these genres–which is not to say that all genres are equally filled with treasure at all moments

history. Lovecraft, Chandler, and Hammett emerged from the social slums of pulp. Even Batman and Robin may find their Tolstoy in the twenty-fourth century, once their Metropolis is reduced to vine-covered ruins. Wilson cannot refute Lovecraft's value with mocking phrases such as "invisible whistling octopus,"[8] for there is no inherent reason why such a creature could not inhabit the greatest story of all time, just as the aforementioned poem about a middle-aged Italian walking through Hell and flying to see God is possibly the greatest ever written.

The present book will have much to say about the sort of literalizing attempted by Wilson. Let us use "paraphrase" as our technical term for the attempt to give literal form to any statement, artwork, or anything else. The problem with paraphrase has long been noted by literary critics: by twentieth-century "New Critic" Cleanth Brooks,[9] for example, whose line of reasoning we will consider near the end of this book. What Wilson misses is that Lovecraft's major gift as a writer is his deliberate and skillful obstruction of all attempts to paraphrase him. No other writer gives us monsters and cities so difficult to describe that he can only hint at their anomalies. Not even Poe gives us such hesitant narrators, wavering so uncertainly as to whether their coming words can do justice to the unspeakable reality they confront. Against Wilson's blunt assertion that "Lovecraft was not a good writer," [10] I would call him one of the greatest of the twentieth century. The greatness of Lovecraft even pertains to more than the literary world, since it brushes against several of the most crucial philosophical themes of our time.

The Inherent Stupidity of All Content

The problem with paraphrase is discussed with typical humor by Slavoj Žižek, when he teases t[...]
Shakespeare Made Easy series of editor John Durband. As Žižek informs us, "Durband tries [...]
formulate directly, in everyday locution, (what he considers to be) the thought expressed [...]
Shakespeare's metaphoric idiom–'To be or not to be, that is the question' becomes something like[...]
'What's bothering me now is: Shall I kill myself or not?'"[11] Žižek invites us to perform a simil[...]
exercise with the poems of Hölderlin, so piously revered by Heidegger. Hölderlin's oracular lines *W[...]
aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch ("But where danger is, the saving power also grows") [...]
transformed with grotesque wit into this: "When you're in deep trouble, don't despair too quickl[...]
look around carefully, the solution may be just around the corner."[12] Žižek then drops the theme [...]
favor of a long series of dirty jokes, but by then he has already made the same complaint lodg[...]
against Wilson in the previous chapter: literal paraphrase can turn absolutely anything into banality.

Žižek takes up a related topic elsewhere, in his commentary on Schelling's *Ages of the World*. Th[...]
passage in question concerns "the inherent stupidity of proverbs," and is too wonderful not to quote [...]
full:

> Let us engage in a mental experiment by way of trying to construct proverbial wisdom out of the relationship between terrestr[...]
> life, its pleasures, and its Beyond. If one says "Forget about the afterlife, about the Elsewhere, seize the day, enjoy life fully he[...]
> and now, it's the only life you've got!" it sounds deep. If one says exactly the opposite ("Do not get trapped in the illusory a[...]
> vain pleasures of earthly life; money, power, and passions are all destined to vanish into thin air–think about eternity!"), it al[...]
> sounds deep. If one combines the two sides ("Bring eternity into your everyday life, live your life on this earth as if it is alrea[...]
> permeated by Eternity!"), we get another profound thought. Needless to say, the same goes for its inversion: "Do not try in vain[...]
> bring together eternity and your terrestrial life, accept humbly that you are forever split between Heaven and Earth!" If, final[...]
> one simply gets perplexed by all these reversals and claims: "Life is an enigma, do not try to penetrate its secrets, accept t[...]
> beauty of its unfathomable mystery!" the result is no less profound than its reversal: "Do not allow yourself to be distracted [...]
> false mysteries that just dissimulate the fact that, ultimately, life is very simple–it is what it is, it is simply here without reason a[...]
> rhyme!" Needless to add that, by uniting mystery and simplicity, one again obtains a wisdom: "The ultimate, unfathomab[...]
> mystery of life resides in its very simplicity, in the simple fact that there is life."[13]

Beyond the entertainment value of this passage, it may be one of the most important things Žižek h[...]
ever written. While the annoying reversibility of proverbs provides a convenient target for his comic[...]
analysis, the problem is not limited to proverbs, but extends across the entire field of literal statemen[...]
Indeed, we might speak of the inherent stupidity of all *content*, a more threatening result than th[...]
limited assault on proverbial wisdom. Žižek overlooks this broader problem because his remarks a[...]
overly guided by the Lacanian theme of "the Master." As Žižek puts it: "This tautological imbecili[...]
[of proverbs] points towards the fact that a Master is excluded from the economy of symbol[...]
exchange… For the master, there is no 'tit for tat'… when we give something to the Master, we do n[...]
expect anything in return…"[14] Stated more simply, the implicit Master who utters each proverb do[...]
so in a lordly manner apparently immune to counterargument. But once we consider the actual verb[...]
content of a proverb, devoid of the Master's tacit backing, all proverbs sound equally arbitrary a[...]
stupid.

Now, it might be assumed that we can settle the issue in each case by giving "reasons" for why on[...]
proverb is more accurate than its opposite. Unfortunately, all reasons are doomed to the same fate [...]
the initial proverbs themselves. Consider the following argument between a miser and a spendthri[...]
The miser cites the proverb "a penny saved is a penny earned" while the spendthrift counters wi[...]
"penny wise, pound foolish." In an effort to resolve their dispute, they both give reasons for the[...]
preference. The miser explains patiently that in the long term, cutting needless losses actually accru[...]

more wealth than an increase in annual income; the spendthrift objects that aggressive investme
opens up more profit opportunities than does penny-pinching cost savings. The intellectual deadloc
remains, with neither able to gain ground on the other. In the next stage of the dispute, both speake
produce statistical evidence and cite various economists in defense of their views, but the evidence o
both sides looks equally good and no progress is made. In the ensuing stage, both combatants hire va
teams of researchers to support their positions with crushing reams of data. The miser and th
spendthrift are now locked into what is essentially an endless version of *Shakespeare Made Easy*
turning their initial proverbs into a series of ever more detailed statements, none of them directly an
immediately convincing. Neither of them claims any longer to be the Master, as in the initi
proverbial stage; both realize that they need to give evidence for their claims, yet both fail to establi
those claims decisively. The point is not that the miser and the spendthrift are "equally correct." Whe
it comes to specific questions of public policy, one of them may be far more right than the other. Th
point is that no *literal* unpacking of their claims can ever settle the argument, since each remains a
arbitrary Master for as long as he attempts to call upon literal, explicit evidence. There may be a
underlying true answer to the question, assuming that the dispute is properly formulated, but it ca
never become directly present in the form of explicit content that is inherently correct in the same wa
that a lightning flash is inherently bright.[15]

The same holds true for any dispute between philosophical theses. For example, to argue betwee
"the ultimate reality is flux" and "the ultimate reality is the stasis beneath the apparent flux" risl
stumbling into Žižek's bottomless duel of opposing proverbs. It is true that in different historic
periods one of these philosophical alternatives is generally the cutting edge while the other is th
epitome of academic tedium, just as three-dimensional illusionistic painting was fresh as the dawn
Renaissance Italy but crushingly banal in Cubist Paris. There is no reason to think that an
philosophical statement has an inherently closer relationship with reality than its opposite, sinc
reality is not made of statements. Just as Aristotle defined substance as that which can suppo
opposite qualities at different times, there is a sense in which reality can support different truths
different times. That is to say, an absolutism of reality may be coupled with a relativism of trut
Žižek's comical translation of Hölderlin's poem turns out to be stupid *not* because the original poe
is stupid, and *not* because the translation misunderstands Hölderlin's advice, but because all content
inevitably stupid. And content is stupid because *reality itself is not a content*. But this requires furth
explanation.

The most important moment of twentieth century philosophy came in 1927, when Heidegger raise[d] the question of the meaning of being. While this question might sound so pompously obscure as to b[e] fruitless, Heidegger makes genuine progress in addressing it. What we learn from all of his thinking [is] the insufficiency of presence, or presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). From the age of twenty-ni[ne] onward, Heidegger transformed the phenomenology of his teacher Husserl, who tried to preserv[e] philosophy from the encroachments of natural science by insisting that all theories must be grounde[d] in evidence presented directly to the mind. Heidegger's counter-claim is that most of our interactio[ns] with things *is not* with things presented to the mind, but rather with items silently taken for granted [and] relied upon. Entities such as chairs, floors, streets, bodily organs, and the grammatical rules of o[ur] native language are generally ignored as long as they function smoothly. Usually it is only the[ir] malfunction that allows us to notice them at all. This is the theme of Heidegger's famous too[l-] analysis, found in his 1919 Freiburg lectures[16] but first published eight years later in *Being an[d] Time*.[17] I have written about this analysis frequently,[18] and indeed, my own intellectual career h[as] been nothing more than an attempt to radicalize its consequences.

As is often the case in intellectual history, the tool-analysis can be pushed further than Heidegg[er] himself ever attempted. Most of his readers hold that the analysis establishes a priority of unconscio[us] praxis over conscious theory, so that explicit theoretical awareness emerges from a shadow[y] background of tacit everyday "coping." What this reading misses is that coping with things disto[rts] them no less than theorizing about them does. To sit in a chair does not exhaust its reality any mo[re] than visual observation of the chair ever does. Human theory and human praxis are both prone [to] surprises from sudden eruptions of unknown properties from the chair-being of the chair, whic[h] recedes into the darkness beyond all human access. Pushing things another step further, it must b[e] seen that the same holds for inanimate entities, since the chair and floor distort one another no le[ss] than humans distort the chair.

Here we can see the reason for the inherent stupidity of all content that emerged from Žižek['s] attack on proverbs. No literal statement is congruent with reality itself, just as no handling of a tool [is] the same thing as that tool in the plenitude of its reality. Or as Alfred North Whitehead puts it: "It [is] merely credulous to accept verbal phrases as adequate expressions of propositions."[19] The meaning [of] being might even be defined as *untranslatability*. Language (and everything else) is obliged to becom[e] an art of allusion or indirect speech, a metaphorical bond with a reality that cannot possibly be mad[e] present. Realism does not mean that we are able to state correct propositions about the real worl[d.] Instead, it means that reality is too real to be translated without remainder into any sentenc[e,] perception, practical action, or anything else. To worship the content of propositions is to become [a] *dogmatist*. The dogmatist is someone who cannot weigh the quality of thoughts or statements exce[pt] by agreeing or disagreeing with them. If someone says "materialism is true" and the dogmatist agree[s,] then the dogmatist salutes this person as a kindred spirit no matter how shoddy his or her reasonin[g,] and the dogmatist equally denounces the one who says "materialism is false," no matter how fresh a[nd] insightful the basis for this statement may be. The dogmatist holds that truth is legible on the surfa[ce] of the world, so that correct and incorrect statements–perhaps someday formalized and determinab[le] by a machine–comprise the arena where truth is uncovered.

Yet this is precisely what Kant renders impossible with his split between appearances and thing[s-] in-themselves. As Kant sees it, the problem with dogmatic philosophy is not that it believes in th[e] things-in-themselves (so does Kant himself). Instead, the problem is that the dogmatist wishes [to]

make the things-in-themselves accessible through discursive statements. In this way Žižek's assau[lt]
on ~~proverbs should be viewed as a jesting younger version of Kant's famous antinomies, in whic~~[h]
positive propositions about various metaphysical issues are placed side-by-side on the page and show[n]
to be equally arbitrary. Yet the mistake made by Kant, and even more so by his German Ideali[st]
successors, is to hold that the relation of appearance to the in-itself is an all-or-nothing affair–th[at]
since the things-in-themselves can never be made present, we are either limited to discussions of t[he]
conditions of human experience (Kant) or obliged to annihilate the very notion of things-i[n-]
themselves by noting that this very notion is an accessible appearance in the mind (German Idealism[).]
What few have noted is that both attitudes abandon the mission of *philosophia*: a love of wisdom b[y]
humans who at all times both have and do not have the truth. The inability to make the things-i[n-]
themselves directly present does not forbid us from having *indirect* access to them. The inhere[nt]
stupidity of all content does not mean the inherent impossibility of all knowledge, since knowledg[e]
need not be discursive and direct. The absent thing-in-itself can have gravitational effects on t[he]
internal content of knowledge, just as Lovecraft can allude to the physical form of Cthulhu even whi[le]
cancelling the literal terms of the description. Instead of representational realism, Lovecraft works [in]
the idiom of a *weird realism* that inspired the title of this book.

Further ancient and contemporary support can be found for this approach. Despite t[he]
condemnation of rhetoric by Socrates and Plato, Aristotle saw fit to teach his students rhetoric for ha[lf]
of the school day. This was not a cynical concession to the regrettable corruption of our fello[w]
humans, but stems from the fact that rhetoric is the indispensable art of the background lying behi[nd]
any explicit statement. Rhetoric is dominated by the *enthymeme*, a proposition that need not be state[d]
since it is already known to one's audience. If we say: "Obama will be in the White House two yea[rs]
from now," no contemporary reader of this book needs an explanation that this means that Bara[ck]
Obama will be re-elected in 2012 as President of the United States, whose official residence in the ci[ty]
of Washington is called the White House. These further inferences can be taken for granted, just [as]
Heidegger showed that most of the tool-beings in our vicinity are taken for granted. Rhetoric is the a[rt]
of the background, and if philosophy is not the science of the background, then I do not know what [it]
is. Aristotle pursues similar insights in the *Poetics*. Jacques Derrida is simply wrong[20] when he claim[s]
that Aristotle wishes to enslave all figurative meanings to a single literal meaning for each wor[d.]
What Aristotle defends is not a single literal meaning for each word, but the rather different notion [of]
a single univocal *being* for each thing. Aristotle is by no means a defender of literal paraphrase, as ca[n]
be seen from his admiring tributes to poets and his view that metaphor is the greatest of all huma[n]
gifts.

In more recent times, the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan is the little acknowledge[d]
master of rhetoric and the secrets it conceals from literal visibility. This always happens through som[e]
background medium: for McLuhan, all arguments over the good and bad content of televisi[on]
programs miss the fact that the medium of television itself alters our behavior and lifesty[le]
irrespective of what content it depicts. This is why for McLuhan "the medium is the message[,"]
whereas the usual assumption is that "the content is the message." This view takes on its most extrem[e]
form in McLuhan's infamous statement that "the content or message of any particular medium ha[s]
about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb."[21] In important la[te]
work conducted jointly with his son Eric,[22] McLuhan frames this idea in terms of the classic[al]
Trivium, as a defense of rhetoric and grammar as opposed to the dialectic of explicit surface conten[t.]
While the dogmatist is a dialectician in this classical sense, the artist and the lover of wisdom a[re]
rhetoricians. This is not from some devious desire to seduce the unwary, but from recognition that th[e]
background is where the action is.

We have already noted several instances of failed awareness of the tacit background of our action[s] and utterances. In perception and action we fail to exhaust the deeper reality of the things with whic[h] we are engaged. German Idealist philosophy holds that there is no more to things or thoughts tha[n] their ultimate accessibility to reason. In dogmatic assertions it is assumed (contra Whitehead) th[at] verbal propositions can in principle exhaust whatever they describe. These phenomena are strikingl[y] similar to *academic art* as defined and denounced by the great art critic Greenberg. In his Sydne[y] lecture "Modern and Postmodern," he states it as follows: "Academicism consists in the tendency [to] take the medium of an art too much for granted."[23] McLuhan would be pleased by these words. Th[e] point is neither to take the medium for granted (like academic art), nor to believe falsely that th[e] medium can be made explicit (like dogmatic philosophy), but rather to generate content that has a[n] oblique or allusive relation with the background medium that is effective nonetheless.

Along with academic art, Greenberg speaks frequently of its trashy younger sister *Kitsch*,[24] th[e] lowbrow imitation that offers a tasteless execution of high art's hard-earned technique. One obviou[s] form of Kitsch in literature would be *pulp.* Here too the background medium is largely taken f[or] granted. If you wish to submit a story to a pulp Western magazine, simply throw in a dozen cowboy[s,] a few gunfights, a rodeo, a love interest, some cattle rustling, a stagecoach, a few stereotypic[al] Mexicans and Indians, and other stock elements of the genre. Pulp detective writing will sure[ly] include a hard-boiled hero and a number of criminal villains, with occasional murders sprinkled [in] along the way. Pulp horror and science fiction will consist of the arbitrary postulation of new monste[rs] and planets, each equipped with amazing qualitative features designed to stun the reader with th[e] novelty of their *content*, while merely adopting the banality of the established framework of the genr[e.] There is even a kind of pulp philosophy, in which the rational materialist hero (generally a first-perso[n] narrator) slays hordes of irrational alchemists, astrologers, witch doctors, vitalists, and Christians. Th[e] dogmatist is a pulp philosopher. Although I am unaware of any comments by Greenberg on th[e] writings of Lovecraft, it is unfortunately easy to imagine him reacting in much the same way a[s] Edmund Wilson: "And the truth is that these stories were hackwork contributed to such publication[s] as *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*, where, in my opinion, they ought to have been left."[25] But if w[e] define pulp as fiction unaware of its medium, there is a problem with any dismissal of Lovecraft as [a] pulp writer: namely, Lovecraft was by no means unaware of his medium, as one of his key theoretic[al] works makes clear.

The most frequently cited essay by Lovecraft is probably his "Supernatural Horror [in] Literature,"[26] a detailed survey of the genre that earned surprising praise from Edmund Wilson as "[a] really able piece of work."[27] But of greater interest for us here is Lovecraft's biting four-page polem[ic] "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction."[28] In this essay Lovecraft speaks in almost Wilsonian tones [of] the horrible quality of most work in this genre: "Insincerity, conventionality, triteness, artificialit[y,] false emotion, and puerile extravagance reign triumphant throughout this overcrowded genre, so th[at] none but its rarest products [including the novels of H.G. Wells] can possibly claim a truly adu[lt] status."[29] Most such stories contain "hackneyed artificial characters and stupid conventional even[ts] and situations… [that are] a product of weary mass mechanics,"[30] and are filled with "stock scientist[s,] villainous assistants, invincible heroes, and lovely scientist's-daughter heroines of the usual trash [of] this sort."[31] And in a final wonderful litany, Lovecraft denounces further clichés of the genre such a[s] "worship of the travelers as deities," "participation in the affairs of pseudo-human kingdoms[,"] "weddings with beautiful anthropomorphic princesses," "stereotyped Armageddons with ray-guns an[d] space-ships," "court intrigues and jealous magicians," and best of all, "peril from hairy ape-men of th[e] polar caps."[32] All of these examples establish that Lovecraft is perhaps an even more acerbic critic [of] pulp literature than Wilson himself, and that as an author he is fully aware of the minefields [of]

banality that one must scrupulously avoid.

And yet, Lovecraft pivots in a direction that Wilson never attempted, but that Greenberg would surely have approved: "The present commentator does not believe that the idea of space-travel and other worlds is inherently unsuited to literary use."[33] For there is just one essential fallacy that leads interplanetary writers into pulp banality, and "this fallacy is the notion that any account of impossible, improbable, or inconceivable phenomena can be successfully presented as a commonplace narrative of objective acts and conventional emotions in the ordinary tone and manner of popular romance."[34] As he explains two paragraphs later: "Over and above everything else should tower the stark, outrageous monstrousness of the one chosen departure from Nature."[35] There follows the most important passage in the essay:

> The characters should react to it as real people would react to such a thing if it were suddenly to confront them in daily life, displaying the almost soul-shattering amazement which anyone would naturally display instead of the mild, tame, quickly-passed over emotions prescribed by cheap popular convention. Even when the wonder is one to which the characters are assumed to be used, the sense of awe, marvel, and strangeness which the reader would feel in the presence of such a thing must somehow be suggested by the author.[36]

In other words, the mere deviant *content* of other worlds is not enough to be credible. If Zartran the half-alien hero slays the enemy on distant ice-planet Orthumak with an argon-based neuro-degenerator, and then marries the princess inside a volcano while wearing heat-resistant triple neonozone fabrics, and if all this is stated as a matter-of-fact event, then what we have is nothing but a cheap novelty of "unprecedented content." Ten thousand rival pulp writers can then try to invent even more unprecedented species, weapons, chemicals, and incidents. The clichés cannot be eliminated by simple variation: replacing the stock mad scientist with a sane and goodhearted dog-man scientist, and dropping all weddings in favor of heroes who reproduce via gelatinous spores, would not address the deeper cliché at work. Namely, the true banality of most interplanetary fiction is the idea that simple novelty of content is enough to produce genuine innovation. What Lovecraft argues instead is surprisingly similar to Greenberg's vision for modern art: the content of an artwork should display some skillful relation with the background conditions of the genre. To innovate in science fiction, we cannot simply replace New York and Tokyo with exotically named extra-galactic capitals, which is merely trading a familiar content for a bizarre but comparable one (Greenberg's critique of surrealism is similar). Instead, we must show the everyday banality of New York and Tokyo undercut from within, by subverting the background conditions assumed by the existence of any city at all. Rather than inventing a monster with an arbitrary number of tentacles and dangerous sucker-mouths and telepathic brains, we must recognize that no such list of arbitrary weird properties is enough to do the trick. There must be some deeper and more malevolent principle at work in our monsters that escapes all such definition. That is the manner by which Lovecraft escapes all pulp, all Kitsch, and all academic art: by systematically debilitating content, all to the greater glory of the background enthymeme. In Lovecraft the medium is the message.

A dogmatic acquaintance of mine once objected to the Lovecraftian monster Cthulhu on the ground that "a dragon with an octopus head is not scary." But that is not exactly how Cthulhu is describe[d]. Lovecraft's first description of a Cthulhu idol runs as follows: "If I say that my somewhat extravaga[nt] imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, *I shall n[ot] be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing*… but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it mo[re] shockingly frightful…" (CC 169; emphasis modified). The fact that the t-shirts and fantasy painting[s] of the world depict Cthulhu straightforwardly as a dragon with an octopus head is not Lovecraft['s] fault. If he had written: "I looked at the idol and saw a horrifying monster that was part dragon, pa[rt] octopus, and part human caricature," we would simply be in the realm of pulp. But capitalizing on t[he] indirect character of literature as opposed to painting or cinema, Lovecraft *hints* at an octopoid dragon while also suspending that literal depiction in three separate ways: (1) he downplays it [as] merely the result of his own "extravagant imagination"; (2) he evasively terms his description "n[ot] unfaithful to the spirit of the thing" rather than as dead-on correct; (3) he asks us to ignore the surfa[ce] properties of dragon and octopus mixed with human and to focus instead on the fearsome "gener[al] outline of the whole," suggesting that this outline is something over and above a literal combination [of] these elements. Any practiced reader of Lovecraft knows that this sort of de-literalizing gesture is n[ot] an isolated incident in his stories, but is perhaps his major stylistic trait as a writer. It is what I ha[ve] called the "vertical" or allusive aspect of Lovecraft's style–the gap he produces between a[n] ungraspable thing and the vaguely relevant descriptions that the narrator is able to attempt.

A different sort of example is found in "The Dunwich Horror" when the three professors observ[e] the decaying corpse of Wilbur Whateley on the Miskatonic Library floor: "It would be trite and n[ot] wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe it, but one may properly say that it could n[ot] be vividly visualized by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound up with t[he] common life-forms of this planet and the known three dimensions." (DH 389) So far, we have [a] "vertical" gap resembling the one found in the description of the Cthulhu idol, and this is the sort [of] case where I am now willing to concede a "noumenal" element in Lovecraft's style. The sentence ju[st] quoted could have been ruined if Lovecraft had adopted either of two extreme alternatives. If he ha[d] said simply that "no human pen can describe it," we would have one of the cheapest tricks of bad pu[lp] writing and shallow thinking. If he had tried instead to shock us with monstrous detailed descriptio[n] alone, we would also have veered toward pulp. Instead, we find a disclaimer that neutralizes the initi[al] cliché by calling it "trite and not wholly accurate," but which then delves into a descriptive effort th[at] is nearly impossible to visualize in literal terms anyway: "Above the waist it was sem[i-] anthropomorphic; though its chest… had the leathery, reticulated hide of a crocodile or alligator. T[he] back was piebald with yellow and black, and dimly suggested the squamous covering of certa[in] snakes. Below the waist, though, it was the worst; for here all human resemblance left off and she[er] fantasy began…" (DH 389) Here we have something different: a "horizontal" weirdness that I wou[ld] not call allusive but rather "cubist," for lack of a better term. The power of language is no long[er] enfeebled by an impossibly deep and distant reality. Instead, language is overloaded by a gluttono[us] excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing. Again there is reason to be impressed with Lovecraft['s] technique. The explicitly described image is difficult enough to visualize, but becomes all the more s[o] when this elusive description is further qualified as "dimly suggestive" of a snake and its "squamou[s]" covering, a word that even educated readers will probably need to look up in the dictionary. And the[n] comes the crowning transition, telling us that while all of this might have been intelligible enoug[h]

what comes next will enter the realm of sheer fantasy.

Let's take another example of the "horizontal" kind, shifting from zoology to architecture—anoth[er] field where Lovecraft excels at obstructed description. In "At the Mountains of Madness," Profess[or] Dyer and his party are flying across Antarctica towards the campsite of Professor Lake, which the[y] will soon discover to be utterly annihilated. En route they witness what Dyer terms a "polar mirage[,]" though it later turns out to have been a disturbing projection of an actual hidden city. Dyer describes [it] as follows: "The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to huma[n] imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions [of] geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie." (MM 508) Edmun[d] Wilson would dismiss such descriptions as of low literary quality, but here we must disagree, for th[e] simple reason that the passage is highly effective. "Vast aggregations of night-back masonry" is [a] perfectly suggestive and frightening phrase, if somewhat hard to visualize accurately. The "monstrou[s] perversions of known geometrical law" would be impossible to film or paint, but this phrase has [a] powerful effect on the reader, who can sense the metaphysical darkness of any place where suc[h] perversions are permitted to exist. The final element, "the most grotesque extremes of sinist[er] bizarrerie," might well be dubious in isolation. But here the only weight it bears is to sum up Dyer['s] personal anguish after the real literary work is already completed by the first two elements of th[e] sentence. "Sinister bizarrerie" is the rhetorical cherry on the sundae, after the sundae itself w[as] purchased through the labors of night-black masonry and perversions of known geometrical law.

This is the stylistic world of H.P. Lovecraft, a world in which (1) real objects are locked [in] impossible tension with the crippled descriptive powers of language, and (2) visible objects displa[y] unbearable seismic torsion with their own qualities. An account such as Wilson's, which immediatel[y] advances to a literalizing mockery of the *content* of the stories, overlooks Lovecraft's primary trait [as] a writer–a gift that Lovecraft (though Wilson misses this) shares with Edgar Allan Poe. Normally w[e] feel no gap at all between the world and our descriptions of it. But Lovecraft unlocks a wor[ld] dominated by such a gap, and this makes him the very embodiment of an *anti-pulp* writer. And this [is] the grain of truth in the descriptions of Lovecraft as a Kantian writer of "noumenal" horror. It is tru[e] that this description becomes dangerous if it leads us to overlook Lovecraft's materialist and utterl[y] non-noumenal side. As Houellebecq puts it: "What is Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electron[s] like us."[37] But if Houellebecq's statement is true in the negative sense that Lovecraft's monsters a[re] not spirits or souls, they are also not just electrons, any more than Kant's things-in-themselves a[re] made of electrons.

Lovecraft is not simply a pulp writer who tries to force our credence with mere declaration[s] concerning the amazing properties of alternate otherworldly creatures. Instead, he is almo[st] disturbingly alert to the background that eludes the determinacy of every utterance, to the point that [he] invests a great deal of energy in undercutting his own statements. In this way, Lovecraft's pros[e] generates a gap between reality and its accessibility to us; this is the "Kantian" side of his writin[g]. Nonetheless, as described in my 2008 article, there is something else going on in Lovecraft th[at] involves a new gap within appearance itself. In order to understand this, we should briefly review t[he] misunderstood greatness of Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology.[38]

Earlier, we discussed Heidegger's attempt to radicalize phenomenology. Whereas Husse[rl] grounded philosophy in a description of how things appear to consciousness, Heidegger noted that w[e] usually deal with things insofar as they *do not* appear. Essentially, Heidegger is accusing Husserl [of] idealism, and scientistic philosophy often makes the same accusation against him with even great[er] harshness. Nor is the charge unwarranted. Although Husserl speaks endlessly of how the intentionali[ty] of consciousness means that we are always already outside ourselves, aiming at objects in the worl[d], these objects still have no reality except as the correlate of some consciousness. To speak of entiti[es] interacting without a potential conscious observer would strike Husserl as absurd. But whi[le] phenomenology is certainly an idealism, this very idealism contains the seeds of Husserl's greatnes[s]. For whereas earlier members of the Brentano School had tried to distinguish between an obje[ct] outside consciousness and a content inside it, Husserl's idealism left him no alternative but to collap[se] *both* object *and* content into the sphere of conscious awareness. And with this step he arrived at t[he] chief insight of his career, rarely or never acknowledged as such.

The empiricist tradition, by which Husserl's mentor Brentano remained deeply influenced, trea[ts] objects as arbitrary bundlings of qualities. To observe a banana is really just to observe such qualiti[es] as "yellow," "long," "soft," and "sweet." Since these are all that we encounter directly, there is n[o] reason to speak of an underlying object called "banana." This word is simply a nickname for [a] collective assembly of directly encountered properties. Now, since this empiricist view of thing[s] apparently limits itself to what is directly accessible to consciousness, it might seem like the ve[ry] height of phenomenological rigor in Husserl's eyes. But this is not the case. In the *Logic[al] Investigations*, Husserl departs from Brentano with understated radicalism, telling us it is not true th[at] experience is of "experienced contents." Instead of content, what we experience primarily is *objec[ts]*, such that specific perceptual content always remains subordinate to these objects. When I observe [a] dog named Woody, he is always seen from a specific angle and distance, either barking or calm. B[ut] what I am looking at is the dog Woody, not Woody as seen in a specific, highly determined fashion. [If] Woody begins to run or bark, I do not say that he is now a closely related object with mere "fam[ily] resemblances" to the former Woody. Instead, I say that Woody the dog has changed some of h[is] features while still remaining Woody.

This is what Husserl calls an "object-giving act," and it is not just an intermittent event amo[ng] many others in our conscious life. He explicitly asserts that experience is made of object-giving ac[ts] rather than of specific, determinate contents. Note that this is the sort of argument one would normal[ly] expect from a philosopher of individual substances such as Aristotle, but with one crucial differenc[e]. Whereas Aristotle speaks of individual things quite apart from human contact with them, what Husse[rl] has in mind is a rift *within* the experiential realm, one that holds good even for imaginary entities th[at] have no reality outside my encounter with them. To hallucinate a unicorn is an object-giving act [as]

well, even if there is no real unicorn in the outer world. The crack smoker's fantasy unicorn is alwa[ys] seen running at a specific speed with a greater or lesser degree of aggression, yet these qualities ca[n] shift from one moment to the next without the unicorn becoming a different thing. Now, it might b[e] asked how one can prove that the unicorn appears as the same unicorn, or Woody as the same Wood[y.] The answer is that since we are not dealing here with anything real, hidden, or withdrawn, but on[ly] with objects of immediate experience, then we ourselves are the judges.

For Husserl, what we have are intentional objects viewed in different specific ways at differe[nt] moments, according to various adumbrations (*Abschattungen*). These shift at every moment, meani[ng] that along with the Heideggerian tension between hidden real objects and their accessible surfa[ce] features, we have a separate Husserlian tension between completely unhidden intentional objects a[nd] their swirling rainbow-like surface of qualities. It is often mistakenly claimed that Husserl[s] intentional objects withdraw behind their adumbrations just as Heidegger's tool-beings do, but this [is] incorrect. In fact, no Heideggerian withdrawal is possible at all in Husserl's philosophy. To intend [a] Rhode Island state flag means that I am already in direct contact with the flag as an object [of] experience, acknowledging its reality in the realm of experience; the specific qualities of the fl[ag] encountered at any given moment do not hide the flag as a unitary object, but exist as something extr[a] encrusted on its surface.

Due to the sterile flavor of the term "intentional," as well as a widespread misunderstanding th[at] takes this term to mean "pointing outside" the sphere of consciousness,[39] it is better to rename t[he] intentional sphere as the "sensual" realm. What we found in Heidegger was a tension between *re[al]* objects and *sensual* qualities, with the appearance of a real hammer lurking somewhere behind t[he] hammer-qualities that we experience. What we have just seen in the case of Husserl's adumbrations [is] a different tension between *sensual* objects and *sensual* qualities, with the flag of Rhode Islan[d] remaining what it is for us despite all flapping variations in the breeze of the Providence water-fro[nt.] And here we have the two major axes of Lovecraft's literary style: the "vertical" gap betwee[n] unknowable objects and their tangible qualities, and the "horizontal" or "cubist" gap between a[n] accessible object and its gratuitous amassing of numerous palpable surfaces.

But Husserl is also aware of a strange additional tension between *sensual* objects and their *re[al]* qualities. This becomes clear from the phenomenological method itself, which works by way [of] "eidetic variation." For instance, if we want to discover the truly essential features of the experienc[ed] flag that make it a flag rather than a towel, and a Rhode Island flag rather than that of Iowa [or] Maryland, we can either observe its numerous variations over time to determine which features a[re] truly crucial and durable, or (what is more likely) vary its features in our minds through imaginatio[n.] What we are left with at the end of this process is not the adumbrations, which are merely accident[al] qualities of sensual objects. Instead, what we end up with are the truly pivotal qualities of the thin[g.] But these qualities are not themselves sensual, since no specific appearance of the flag at any mome[nt] can ever fully live up to them. Husserl tells us that such qualities can only be known intellectually, n[ot] in sensual form. And while Husserl does think that they can be grasped directly in "essenti[al] intuition," we in the twenty-first century have long been to school with his rebellious pupil Heidegge[r,] and are therefore aware that the non-sensual always withdraws into the shadows of bein[g,] untranslatable into any sort of human access.

To summarize, Heidegger gives us a tension between real object and sensual quality. Husserl give[s] us the normal case of tension between sensual object and sensual quality, as well as the case [of] theoretical comportment in which we try to discover the real qualities of a sensual object. It must no[w] be asked if there is a parallel tension between real objects and their real qualities. The answer is ye[s,] though because such a tension occurs entirely on the level of withdrawal, it remains inaccessible to [us] in any manner except allusion. Leibniz is aware that monads must be unified, but also that they mu[st]

have many traits if they are not to be interchangeable with all other monads in a featureless identity so-called bare particulars.[40] Xavier Zubíri also discusses this tension between the real thing as a ur and the same real thing as a systematic plurality of features.[41]

We now have four basic tensions in our map of the world, which could be expanded to ten if w did not confine ourselves to object/quality pairs. Yet four will suffice for the purposes of the prese book. In *The Quadruple Object* I considered these tensions within the framework of what I call "ontography."[42] In that book I tried to show that Heidegger's tension RO-SQ can be termed "space Husserl's SO-SQ can be called "time," Husserl's SO-RQ can be dubbed "eidos," and the RO-R tension of Leibniz and Zubíri can be named "essence." But since this book is concerned more wi literature than with metaphysics per se, it is not important to remember these terms specifically. W need only take note that Lovecraft is a writer who is strangely attuned to all four of the basic tensio of ontography, and that this suffices to make him the poet laureate of object-oriented philosophy.

As mentioned, the German poet Hölderlin has been the dominant literary hero of recent continent
philosophy. This is largely Heidegger's doing, since it was he who repeatedly gave lecture courses
Hölderlin's hymns and treated him as a figure of staggering significance for philosophy. What make
Hölderlin so great in Heidegger's eyes? The philosopher addresses this question openly at t
beginning of his essay "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry":

> Why choose *Hölderlin's* work if our purpose is to show the essence of poetry? Why not Homer or Sophocles, why not Virgil
> Dante, why not Shakespeare or Goethe? Surely the essence of poetry has come to rich expression in the works of these poe
> more so indeed than in Hölderlin's creation, which broke off so prematurely and so abruptly. That may be so. And yet I choo
> Hölderlin, and him alone… because Hölderlin's poetry is sustained by his whole poetic mission: to make poems solely about t
> essence of poetry. Hölderlin is for us in a preeminent sense *the poet's poet.* And for that reason he forces a decision upon us.[43]

A similar question might be asked in connection with Lovecraft. If we are looking for philosophic
depth in a writer of fiction, then why not Cervantes or Tolstoy, Joyce or Melville, Mary Shelley o
Dostoevsky? Why not even Poe, who is Lovecraft's canonized literary ancestor? Our answer is simil
to Heidegger's response on the question of Hölderlin, but with the following twist: I am not makin
the Heideggerian claim that Lovecraft writes stories about the essence of writing stories, but the eve
more extreme claim that Lovecraft writes stories about the essence of *philosophy*. Lovecraft is t
model writer of ontog- raphy, with its multiple polarizations in the heart of real and sensual object
For this reason, as I wrote in the 2008 article: "In symbolic terms, Great Cthulhu should repla
Minerva as the patron spirit of philosophers, and the Miskatonic must dwarf the Rhine and the Ister a
our river of choice. Since Heidegger's treatment of Hölderlin resulted mostly in pious, drea
readings, philosophy needs a new literary hero."[44]

We have already discussed Lovecraft's tendency to undercut his own literal descriptions,
primary method by which he escapes falling into a pulp literature unaware of its own backgrou
conditions. We have also seen that he does this in more than one way. At times Lovecraft does it b
splitting a thing off as a dark, brooding unit in distinction from its palpable qualities. This happens f
instance when the sailor Parker is bizarrely "swallowed up by an angle of masonry… which was acut
but behaved as if it were obtuse." (CC 194) As a general rule, anytime we run across a passage
Lovecraft that is *literally* impossible to visualize, like this one, we are dealing with this first kind
tension between a real object and its sensual qualities, so reminiscent of Heidegger's tool-analysis. A
other times, there is the "cubist" tension between sensual or non-hidden objects and their sensu
qualities that pile up in disturbing profusion. A good example is found in "The Shadow Ove
Innsmouth" when the narrator first encounters the repulsive local bus driver, who is mostly likely on
of Innsmouth's fish-frog-human hybrids: "This, I reflected, must be the Joe Sargent mentioned by th
ticket-agent; and *even before I noticed any details* there spread over me *a wave of spontaneo
aversion that could be neither checked nor explained*." (SI 597; emphasis added) While this mig
initially seem like a vertical allusion to depths of reality lying far beneath all language, it is followe
with a detailed list of the various problematic features of Sargent's physical appearance. While to
long to quote here in full, suffice it to say that the passage resembles the labor of Husserl or Picasso
analyzing the multi-faceted surfaces of a blackbird that is *not* withdrawn from all experience, b
simply encrusted with a multitude of sensual planes.

Another good example occurs in Lovecraft's description of the witch's familiar known as Brow
Jenkin: "Witnesses said it had long hair and the shape of a rat, but that its sharp-toothed bearded fac

was evilly human while its paws were like tiny human hands… Its voice was a kind of loathsom[e] titter, and it could speak all languages." (WH 658) Although Brown Jenkin is not unvisualizable in th[e] way that an acute-obtuse angle is, the little monster hardly qualifies as an empiricist "bundle [of] qualities," due to the unsettling range of traits it unifies. Indeed, Brown Jenkin might even be read as [a] parody of Hume's empiricism, in which we sense that beyond its mass of qualities, there must b[e] some vile underlying unit holding all these grisly features together. An additional case occurs in "A[t] the Mountains of Madness" concerning the distant city distorted via polar mirage:

> There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarg[ed] and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs; and strange, beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles [of] multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars with each one overlapping the one beneath. There we[re] composite cones and pyramids either alone or surmounting cylinders or cubes or flatter truncated cones and pyramids, a[nd] occasional needle-like spires in curious clusters of five. (MM 508-9)

No other figure in world literature is able to make such outbursts work so effectively. Here as wi[th] cubist painting, there is a clean separation between the multiple facets the thing displays to the out[er] world, and whatever organizing principle is able to hold together the various monstrous features.

There is also the second Husserlian case, in which a sensual object is in tension with its *re[al]* qualities. While far rarer in Lovecraft than in Husserl, it occurs in his stories whenever scientists ent[er] the scene and have trouble classifying the features of a given object despite all their analytic labo[r]. We return to "The Dreams in the Witch House," where the object retrieved by Gilman from [a] supposed dream baffles a scientific expert:

> One of the small radiating arms was broken off and subjected to analysis, and the results are still talked about in college circle[s]. Professor Ellery found platinum, iron, and tellurium in the strange alloy; but mixed with these were at least three other appare[nt] elements of high atomic weight which chemistry was powerless to classify. Not only did they fail to correspond with any know[n] element, but they did not even fit the vacant places reserved for probable elements in the periodic system. (WH 677)

The fact that we are not dealing here with any mysterious withdrawn object, but with a perfect[ly] accessible one whose *features* are withdrawn from scrutiny, is emphasized by Lovecraft's witty touc[h] of informing us that there is *a public museum exhibit* in Arkham devoted to the object. A simila[r] incident already occurs in "The Colour Out of Space," when fragments of the meteorite are tested b[ut] lead science to a dead end, despite the use of state-of-the-art glass beakers, silicon, borax bead test[s], anvils, and oxy-hydrogen blowpipes. (CS 344)

That leaves us with the fourth tension between a real object and its real qualities. Such momen[ts] are most evident in Lovecraft's fiction whenever there is talk of outermost regions of the cosm[os] ruled by deities or forces so bizarre that an empty proper name is all that can be used to designa[te] something for which no tangible qualities are available. For instance, again in "The Dreams in th[e] Witch House," we read that Gilman "must… go with them all to the throne of Azathoth at the centr[e] of ultimate chaos… to the throne of Chaos where the thin flutes pipe mindlessly… [He] had seen th[e] name 'Azathoth' in the *Necronomicon* and knew it stood for a primal evil too horrible f[or] description." (WH 664) Here the final phrase lets us know that we are dealing with a real [but] indescribable object, while the thin and mindless flutes are sufficiently inconceivable that we ca[n] interpret them as dark allusions to real properties of the throne of Chaos, rather than liter[al] descriptions of what one would experience there in person.

A college classmate of mine once asked a witty faculty member to explain the philosophy of Richar
Rorty. The response was as follows: "Basically, you debunk everything, and what you're left with
pragmatism and American democracy." Here we have yet another version of critique throug
literalizing. But even if it might be disputed whether this is a fair summary of Rorty's intellectu
career, the proposed summary is so devastating that Rorty's caliber must be frankly measured by th
extent to which his work is able to escape it.

We also find that *jokes* are highly vulnerable to literalizing, which almost always ruins ther
Consider the following simple joke, rated as the favorite of the Belgian populace in a survey som
years ago (the favorites of other nations were far worse): "There are three kinds of people–those wh
can count, and those who can't." This mildly humorous remark can be ruined in at least two differe
ways. One way is to transform it into a literal statement devoid of all paradox: "There are *two* kinds
people–those who can count and those who can't." Here we have a banal classification, not a jok
Another way of ruining the joke is to spell it out in excessive detail: "There are three kinds of people
those who can count and those who can't. And the funny thing is, the person telling the joke obvious
can't even count properly himself! Did you notice that he said three kinds of people but only gave tw
options? The joke is on him!" This feature is one that jokes share with magic tricks: among th
international fraternity of magicians we find the credo that the secrets to tricks must never be share
with outsiders. In similar fashion, scantily clad bodies are usually more tantalizing than complete
naked ones–a nudist colony filled with candid sex talk would hardly be more arousing than th
everyday world of clothed innuendo.

But there are other ways besides literalization to ruin statements, jokes, magic tricks, eros,
anything else. Let's consider a typically well-written passage from Nietzsche, who might be th
greatest literary stylist in the history of philosophy (his chief competition would surely be Plato
Writing of Shakespeare in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche exclaims: "What must a man have suffered to hav
such need of being a buffoon!"[45] Here we have a fine sample of Nietzschean prose–crisp, concise, an
delightfully paradoxical. But imagine that Nietzsche were a boring literalizer who did not know whe
to stop. In that case he might have written as follows: "What must a man have suffered to have suc
need of being a buffoon! For although we might expect the contents of Shakespeare's writing to be
direct reflection of his personality, modern psychology teaches the contrary lesson. For in fact, wh
people write is often the *opposite* of what they are feeling inside. In Shakespeare's case, the clownin
in his comedies may actually be an effort to counterbalance painful personal experience with a
outward show of good cheer." Unless this person is a schoolteacher trying to make things plain fo
children, he is the bane of social conversation, tediously spelling out points that are already clear t
everyone. He is the equivalent of Žižek's trite reducer of Hölderlin: "the solution may be just aroun
the corner."

But to be allusive is not the sole aim of a writer, and transforming allusion into literal statement
not the only way to ruin a brilliant remark. Along with the bore just described, we can add oth
personae capable of leading Nietzsche's remark into ruin.

- The Simpleton: "How happy Shakespeare must have been that he played the buffoon so often
  (Here the twist of paradox is destroyed in favor of a facile correspondence between an author
  life and work.)
- The Judgmental Resenter: "What must a man have suffered to have such need of being a buffoo

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