

EDITED BY
SEAN MORELAND

NEW
DIRECTIONS IN
SUPERNATURAL
HORROR
LITERATURE

*The Critical
Influence of
H. P. Lovecraft*



New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature

Sean Moreland
Editor

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The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft

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This book is dedicated to Caitlín R. Kiernan and Thomas Ligotti, who have opened holes in the world that can never be closed, and to the late, greatly lamented David G. Hartwell, whose editorial vision helped shape the course of horror literature in the late twentieth century and who did so much to promote and refine it.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Critical (After)Life of *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

Sean Moreland

In 1925, writer and publisher W. Paul Cook (1881–1948) invited his friend and fellow amateur journalist H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) to write a historical and critical survey of supernatural literature. Already an avid reader, and increasingly an accomplished writer, of such fiction, Lovecraft committed to this task with an ambitious course of reading including acknowledged classics, less well-known historical works, and many contemporary fictions of the strange and supernatural, most of them by British and American writers. His research and preparation was such that it took Lovecraft nearly two years to submit the manuscript to Cook for publication.¹

The initial, and only partial, first publication of the essay occurred in 1927, in what turned out to be the sole volume of Cook's journal, *The Recluse*. Lovecraft's most ambitious and influential critical work, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (hereafter *SHL*) would reach only a handful of readers at this time. Nevertheless, by the end of the twentieth century, *SHL* was widely recognized as exerting an unparalleled influence over the development and reception of Anglophone supernatural, horrific, and weird literature. The essay's core critical concepts continued to evolve

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in Lovecraft's later career; one trajectory of this development, Lovecraft's changing assessment of the "titans" of early twentieth-century weird fiction, is detailed by S. T. Joshi's chapter in this volume. During Lovecraft's lifetime these critical concepts would reach a wider audience than the essay itself due to their embodiment in his fictions and exposition via his voluminous letters, many of them to an epistolary circle of writers who adopted and adapted his critical framework through their own writings, as John Glover's chapter elaborates.

SHL itself would posthumously reach a wider audience with its publication by Arkham House, first as part of *The Outsider and Others* (1939) and then as part of *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* (1965). Even at that point, few could have predicted how its critical and popular influence would continue to grow, with Dover publishing an inexpensive paperback edition in 1973 to a greatly expanded readership. *SHL*'s public profile rose with the onset of the mass market "Horror Boom" of the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1981, it received a belated endorsement in Stephen King's biographically inflected survey of horror, *Danse Macabre*, which suggested, "If you'd like to pursue the subject [of earlier supernatural fiction] further, may I recommend H. P. Lovecraft's long essay Supernatural Horror in Literature? It is available in a cheap but handsome and durable Dover paperback edition." King's immensely popular writings, as Alissa Burger's chapter explores, did much to renew public interest in Lovecraft's work in general.²

In 1987, influential editor and anthologist David G. Hartwell more forcefully emphasized *SHL*'s importance to the development of modern horror. His seminal anthology *The Dark Descent: The Evolution of Horror* describes Lovecraft as "the most important American writer of horror fiction in the first half of" the twentieth century, as well as "the theoretician and critic who most carefully described the literature" with *SHL*, which provides "the keystone upon which any architecture of horror must be built: atmosphere."³ Hartwell rightly singles out atmosphere as *SHL*'s most important idea, as expressed in one of the most widely cited statements in the essay. Atmosphere, Lovecraft insists, is the "all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot, but the creation of a given sensation" (23). The "true weird tale" (22) creates an "atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces," with "a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject," of "a malign and particular suspension or defeat" of the laws of nature (23).⁴

Because of its insistence on atmosphere, Hartwell claims *SHL* is “the most important essay on horror literature.”⁵ This assessment has been echoed many times since. In *More Things than Are Dreamt of: Masterpieces of Supernatural Horror* (1994), James Ursini and Alain Silver state, “Lovecraft’s fame rests almost as heavily on his work as a scholar as that of a writer of fiction,” due to his “now classic” survey of the field. They locate *SHL*’s importance in its “expansive analysis of supernatural horror and fantasy contrasted with the condescending tone of earlier essayists.”⁶ Cumulatively, such estimates reinforce S. T. Joshi’s claim, in the preface to his annotated edition of *SHL*, that it is “widely acknowledged as the finest historical treatment of the field.”⁷

Lovecraft took supernatural fiction very seriously, and was among the first critics or theoreticians to do so consistently. He saw it as a crucial literary tradition with significant cultural value, deeply rooted in the evolved nature of humanity and tied to the state of society, and therefore eminently worthy of close study and focused aesthetic appreciation.

SHL reflects its author’s historical and cultural moment, his enthusiasms, prejudices, and anxieties, as much as his insights and capacity for rigorous thought. It is Lovecraft’s most sustained attempt to reconcile what a 1927 letter describes as his own “parallel natures”:

The world and all its inhabitants impress me as immeasurably insignificant, so that I always crave intimations of larger and subtler symmetries than these which concern mankind. All this, however, is purely aesthetic and not at all intellectual. I have a parallel nature or phase devoted to science and logic, and do not believe in the supernatural at all – my philosophical position being that of a mechanistic materialist of the line of Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius – and in modern times, Nietzsche and Haeckel.⁸

Hardly a disinterested survey, *SHL* is Lovecraft’s attempt to think through feeling, situating his “purely aesthetic” cravings intellectually by providing a historical account of a literary form defined through an objectification of affect. Both descriptive history and prescriptive canonization, it opens with the resounding statement, “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown,” (21) and then proposes that its ability to evoke this emotion is the standard whereby the “literature of cosmic fear” should be judged (23). *SHL* explains the appeal of supernatural and weird fiction across history and cultures by presenting Lovecraft’s “intimations of larger

and subtler symmetries” as an elementary, “if not always universal” (21), aspect of human psychology. The appeal of supernatural fiction is linked to what Lovecraft elsewhere calls “the most ineradicable urge in the human personality,” which is the desire “for ultimate reality.” This desire is “the basis of every real religion” and philosophy, and “anything which enhances our sense of success in this quest, be it art or religion, is the source of a priceless rich emotional experience—and the more we lose this experience in religion, the more we need to get it in something else.”⁹ Lovecraft sees supernatural literature’s chief value as its provision of such a rich emotional experience in the form of “atmosphere.”

Lovecraft also took atmosphere very seriously. Like the notion of a “structural emotion” or dominant tone developed by T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Lovecraft’s atmosphere derives to a large extent from Poe’s aesthetic criterion, the “Unity of Effect.” Atmosphere offers a sense of expansion, a “feeling of magnification in the cosmos—of having approached the universal a trifle more closely, and banished a little of our inevitable insignificance.”¹⁰ However, atmosphere also takes on, in William F. Touponce’s words, “the primary meaning of historical authenticity in Lovecraft’s aesthetics.”¹¹ Atmosphere is Lovecraft’s refuge against the culture-corrosive maelstrom of modernity, offering an eminently Eliotic “sensation of a sort of identification with our whole civilization.”¹²

Lovecraft took civilization very seriously, too. In the same letter, he claims to care not about individual human beings, but *only about civilization*, by which he means “the state of development and organisation which is capable of gratifying the complex mental-emotional-aesthetic needs of highly evolved and acutely sensitive men.”¹³ Such men are *SHL*’s ideal readers, with “minds of the requisite sensitiveness” to appreciate the serious atmosphere of the true weird tale (20). Despite the universality of some of *SHL*’s insights and the expansive audience it has found since its first publication, it is evident that Lovecraft envisioned his audience of “acutely sensitive,” and sufficiently serious, readers as defined along gender, class, and racial lines, as many of the contributions to this volume examine.

The racial politics of Lovecraft’s atmosphere are prominent in *SHL*’s typological approach to the supernatural literature of different cultures. While justifying Lovecraft’s claim that the “literature of cosmic fear” (22) is a trans-cultural, almost universal, human phenomenon stemming from a “profound and elementary principle” (21), his brief discussions of non-

Anglo-Saxon examples emphasize their insufficient seriousness and cosmism. For example, “In the Orient, the weird tale tended to assume a gorgeous colouration and sprightliness which almost transmuted it into sheer phantasy. In the West, where the mystical Teuton had come down from his black Boreal forests and the Celt remembered strange sacrifices in Druidic groves, it assumed a terrible intensity and convincing seriousness of atmosphere which doubled the force of its half-told, half-hinted horrors” (24).

This contrast suggests the close kinship between “atmosphere” and what would have been called, by the Gothic writers of the previous two centuries, the sublime, a kinship this volume’s first chapter develops in detail. Indeed, Lovecraft’s contrast re-stages the Burkean distinction between powerful, masculine sublimity and delicate, feminine beauty. It aligns the former with the Western cultural imagination, with its Teutonic seriousness, and the latter with its Oriental counterpart, sheer, sprightly, and not so serious. This is a ubiquitous trope of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalism, and hardly unique to Lovecraft. Yet here it reveals a hierarchy of literary form, establishing that the seriousness, intensity, and atmosphere of the “true” weird, with its cosmic orientation, elevates it above the merely decorative diversions of “sheer phantasy.”

It also suggests the belief in racialized cultural incompatibility that leads to Lovecraft’s elsewhere-stated desire to “get rid of the non-English hordes whose heritages and deepest instincts clash so disastrously with” those of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans—especially the more serious and sensitive among them.¹⁴

The criterion of atmosphere becomes in this and related passages a means of suggesting the superiority of the “mystical Teuton” in the realm of literary supernaturalism. Passed over quietly by most of the plaudits above, this aspect of *SHL* must be reckoned with by writers and scholars who admit the importance of Lovecraft’s critical legacy. The need to do so is especially important in light of how Lovecraft’s critical legacy continues to influence the course and conception of horror, weird, and supernatural fiction in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer do so, at least to a degree, in the introduction to their epic compendium *The Weird* (2011). Important for its international scope and commitment to going beyond the work of Lovecraft and the Anglo-American pulp tradition, *The Weird* is nevertheless grounded in *SHL*’s definition of weird fiction:

A “weird tale,” as defined by H. P. Lovecraft in his nonfiction writings and given early sanctuary within the pages of magazines like *Weird Tales* (est. 1923) is a story that has a supernatural element but does not fall into the category of traditional ghost story or Gothic tale, both popular in the 1800s. As Lovecraft wrote in 1927, the weird tale “has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains.” Instead, it represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane—a “certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread” or “malign and particular suspension or defeat of ... fixed laws of Nature”—through fiction that comes from the more unsettling, shadowy side of the fantastical tradition.¹⁵

This suggests the difficulty, or perhaps impossibility, of working with the weird as a historically informed mode of expression *without* wrestling with Lovecraft’s critical legacy. An awareness of this is evident in the VanderMeer’s claim that “the Weird is the story of the refinement (and destabilization) of supernatural fiction within an established framework,” a framework that *SHL* did much to establish. However, they also oppose the *Weird* to this (or to any) singular tradition: it involves “the welcome contamination of that fiction by the influence of other traditions.”¹⁶ The phrase “welcome contamination” is a quiet critical rejoinder to *SHL*’s cultural politics of racial exclusivity.

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of *SHL*’s importance, and the problems its influence poses, the essay has not received much in the way of sustained critical attention. In S. T. Joshi’s words, scholars of both Lovecraft and weird fiction broadly “have not made as full use” of Lovecraft’s essay as they could.¹⁷ The chapters in this volume begin to rectify this, variously deepening and broadening the critical dialogue surrounding *SHL* by examining its achievements, limitations, and influences. They do so using a variety of conceptual and methodological approaches and, in some cases, by pushing *SHL*’s critical concepts in directions Lovecraft could not have foreseen and would not have approved.

The essays in the first section, “‘The Oldest and Strongest Emotion’: The Psychology and Philosophy of Horror” explore *SHL*’s conceptions of fear, horror, and the cosmic. My chapter, “The Birth of Cosmic Horror from the S(ub)lime of Lucretius,” turns to the vexed question of cosmic horror’s relationship with the sublime. Focusing on the adjective “cosmic,” I argue that the classical materialist poetics of first-century BCE Roman poet Lucretius are a major source for Lovecraft’s modernist muta-

tion of the sublime into *SHL*'s cosmic horror and his later ideal of a "non-supernatural cosmic art." Mathias Clasen turns to evolutionary psychology to examine *SHL*'s achievement with "The Evolution of Horror: A Neo-Lovecraftian Poetics." Clasen analyzes *SHL*'s attempt to produce a naturalistic account of both the emotion of horror and the seductive appeal of supernatural horror fiction, demonstrating that many of Lovecraft's claims for the psychobiological basis of horror are eminently compatible with contemporary social scientific models of human nature and culture. Sharon Packer's chapter, "Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, Freud's *Future of an Illusion*, Watson's Little Albert and *Supernatural Horror in Literature*," engages with the history of psychology, considering the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis and the behaviorist experiments of John B. Watson on Lovecraft's conception of fear and horror. Packer also critically considers Lovecraft's appreciation for aspects of Jewish mystical literature, and particularly *SHL*'s praise of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, despite his infamously anti-Semitic views. Rounding out this section while anticipating the concern of the essays in the second is Alissa Burger's "Gazing Upon 'The Daemons of Unplumbed Space' with H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King: Theorizing Horror and Cosmic Terror." Burger looks back on Lovecraft's concept of cosmic horror and its relationship to hierarchies of affect through its reception and adaptation by the most popular living writer of supernatural horror, Stephen King. King's *Danse Macabre* builds on Lovecraft, while casting a long shadow of its own over late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century horror and supernatural fiction, and Burger charts Lovecraft's critical influence not only in a number of King's stories, but also in their cinematic adaptations.

The essays in the second section, "A Literature of Cosmic Fear: Lovecraft, Criticism and Literary History," focus on *SHL*'s historical and critical claims. Helen Marshall moves back beyond the eighteenth-century Gothic, examining *SHL*'s elliptical treatment of horror in the Medieval period. Despite Lovecraft's evident disdain for and relative ignorance of the culture of the late Middle Ages, Marshall finds his essay useful for reframing the penitential poem *The Prick of Conscience* as an early example of the "literature of cosmic fear." Vivian Ralickas turns to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, via Lovecraft's interest in the philosophical and aesthetic movement of Dandyism. Examining Lovecraft's relationship with Epicureanism and Dandyism as modes of aestheticized, elitistic masculinity, Ralickas provides a detailed account of how these movements framed *SHL*'s engagement with writers including Baudelaire, Gauthier,

and Wilde. S. T. Joshi's "Lovecraft and the Titans: A Critical Legacy" focuses on Lovecraft's prescience as literary critic, re-examining his assessment of five of the early twentieth century's most important writers of weird fiction, M. R. James, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and Walter de la Mare. Joshi closely traces Lovecraft's shifting critical views of these writers, focusing particularly on how his developing conception of cosmicism affected his estimation of their respective achievements. John Glover's "Reception Claims in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* and the Course of Weird Fiction" provides a detailed analysis of both Lovecraft's own critical writings and those of his early champions, many of whom were also his epistolary interlocutors and friends. Glover concludes by examining Lovecraft's relationship with the shifting definitions of "horror" and "weird" fiction over the last quarter century, opening the field that will be further explored by the essays in the third and final section.

The essays in "The True Weird': (Re)defining the Weird" work with and through *SHL*'s often nebulous and even contradictory conception of the weird in a variety of ways. Returning to some of the concerns raised by the essays in the first section, but from a very different perspective, Michael Cisco's "Bizarre Epistemology, Bizarre Subject: A Definition of Weird Fiction" reads Lovecraft's philosophy of horror in resistant and creative ways via Kant, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. Cisco uses *SHL* and related writings as philosophical instruments in order to work out an original, experiential theory of the bizarre. With "Women, Sex and the Dismorphmythic: Lovecraft, Carter, Kiernan and Beyond," Gina Wisker provides both a feminist critique of Lovecraft's essay and an examination of how a number of important contemporary women writers of weird fiction have adapted and transformed elements of Lovecraft's writings. To this end, she examines short fiction by Angela Carter, Caitlín R. Kiernan, and a number of contemporary writers whose work is featured in Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles's groundbreaking anthology *She Walks in Shadows* (2015, released in the US as *Cthulhu's Daughters*.)

Brian R. Hauser turns to Lovecraft's influence and critical relevance for film studies with "Weird Cinema and the Aesthetics of Dread." Hauser explores the applicability of the adjective "Lovecraftian" to a number of contemporary films, while examining the reflections these films offer of Lovecraft's aesthetic and critical principles, by drawing on contemporary studies including Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016.) Finally, Brian Johnson's chapter, "Paranoia, Panic, and the Queer Weird," brings

this volume full circle with a return to the psychology of horror via a historicized account of Lovecraft's Freudian intertexts, which become part of a wide-ranging examination of the relationship between the shifting connotations of the words "queer" and "weird" through the twentieth century. Johnson's penetrating analysis of the ways homophobia shaped Lovecraft's cultural context provides a deeper understanding not just of his writings, but also his troubling exemplarity in twentieth-century sexual politics.

NOTES

1. Readers interested in a more detailed account of the essay's biographical context and publication history should consult S.T. Joshi's "Introduction" to *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), 9–20.
2. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1983).
3. David G. Hartwell, *The Dark Descent* (New York: Tor Books, 1987), 5.
4. For a cogent discussion of the significance of this conception, its roots in Lovecraft's reading of Poe, and its evolution in his later critical writings, see S.T. Joshi, "Poe, Lovecraft and the Revolution in Weird Fiction," (paper presented at the Ninth Annual Commemoration Program of the Poe Society, October 7, 2012), <http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctrs/pl20121.html>
5. Hartwell, *The Dark Descent*, 85.
6. James Ursini and Alain Silver, *More Things than Are Dreamt of: Masterpieces of Supernatural Horror* (Limelight, 1994), 61.
7. S.T. Joshi, "Preface," *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, edited by S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), 7.
8. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II*, 160.
9. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II*, 301.
10. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II*, 300.
11. Touponce, 59.
12. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II*, 300.
13. H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters Volume II* (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1971), 290.
14. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters II*, 292.
15. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, "Introduction," *The Weird* (New York: Tor Books, 2011), xv.
16. *The Weird*, xvi.
17. S.T. Joshi, "Preface," *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, edited by S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), 7.

SECTION I

“The Oldest and Strongest Emotion”:
The Psychology of Cosmic Horror



CHAPTER 2

The Birth of Cosmic Horror from the S(ub)lime of Lucretius

Sean Moreland

COSMIC HORROR: A TERRIBLE SUBLIME

...vapour chill

The ascendance gains when fear the frame pervades,
And ruthless HORROR, shivering every limb ...
Lucretius¹

In an exchange with scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, China Miéville locates Lovecraft within a “visionary and ecstatic tradition,” part of a “break” in that tradition contemporaneous with the First World War. This break is the shattering of representation that gave rise to modernist literature, “a kind of terrible, terrible sublime.”² This chapter contrasts what *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (SHL) calls cosmic horror with earlier uses of the term, examining the pre-modern aesthetic sources Lovecraft synthesized with early twentieth-century anxieties in expressing this terrible sublime. Lovecraft identified with the first-century BCE Roman poet Lucretius,³ whose epic poem *De Rerum Natura* (DRN) was crucial to his subversion of the theological and sentimental humanist

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foundations of the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Victorian discourse on the sublime. Lovecraft read the Roman writer through his own racialized sexual and political anxieties in ways that continue to shape modern weird and horror fiction and contemporary philosophical appropriations of his writings alike.

GHOSTS AND GOULDS: COSMIC HORROR BEFORE LOVECRAFT

Can I not fling this horror off me again,
Seeing with how great ease Nature can smile,
Balmier and nobler from her bath of storm,
At random ravage?
Tennyson, "Lucretius"

As Brian Stableford notes, "the notion of 'cosmic horror' is closely associated with Lovecraft."⁴ However, although Lovecraft's writing, and *SHL* in particular, popularized and re-defined cosmic horror, which would become almost exclusively associated with him by the late twentieth century, Lovecraft did not invent the phrase, already in circulation nearly a decade before his birth, nor was he the first to conceive of the affective concept it described. Horror writer Thomas Ligotti looks back to the writings of French scientist and Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal for an early modern, and contrapuntal, conception. Pascal

wrote of his a sense of being 'engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me; I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread' (*Pensées*, 1670). Pascal's is not an unnatural reaction for those phobic to infinite spaces that know nothing of them.⁵

The Enlightenment saw a proliferation of writings about the affective intensity evoked by the scalar abysses of the world viewed through the complementary lenses of the microscope and telescope. Consider this passage from *The Book of Nature*, a collection of lectures by British physician, philosopher, natural theologian, and the Romantic period's most influential translator of Lucretius, John Mason Good:

What is the aggregate opinion, or the aggregate importance of the whole human race! We call our selves lords of the visible creation: nor ought we at any time, with affected abjection, to degrade or despise the high gift of a rational and immortal existence.—Yet, what is the visible creation? By whom peopled? And where are its entrances and outgoings? Turn wherever we will, we are equally confounded and overpowered: the little and the great alike are beyond our comprehension. If we take the microscope, it unfolds to us [...] living beings, probably endowed with as complex and perfect a structure as the whale or the elephant, so minute that a million millions of them do not occupy a bulk larger than a common grain of sand. If we exchange the microscope for the telescope, we behold man himself reduced to a comparative scale of almost infinitely smaller dimension, fixed to a minute planet that is scarcely perceptible throughout the vast extent of the solar system; while this system itself forms but an insensible point in the multitudinous marshallings of groups of worlds upon groups of worlds, above, below, and on every side of us, that spread through all the immensity of space.⁶

Published in 1826, Good's description of cosmicism resembles Lovecraft's a century later, but for its emphasis on "creation," and the concluding sentence this word anticipates: "and in sublime, though silent harmony declare the glory of God, and show forth his handy work."⁷ Good spent much of his intellectual life desperately attempting to reconcile Christianity with both Lucretius's atomic materialist vision and that emerging with nineteenth-century scientific developments. Throughout his writings, the word "sublime" reminds readers of the presence of a divine creator, and the unique relationship this creator has with humanity. His tendentious translation of Lucretius interjects the word sublime frequently in order to reinstate the divine significance of the human figure, in effect subverting the Roman poet's depiction of humanity as merely one among countless species of perishable material phenomena, emerging via a procession of undirected collisions at the atomic level.

Good's description is but one dramatic example of the "turn" characterizing most accounts of the sublime from the early Enlightenment through the late Victorian era. In this turn, horror, a paralyzing affect marked by a freezing sensation, one often occasioned by the vastness and unknowability of the universe, is melted into a sensation of awesome elevation, usually by a theistic intimation of our privileged position within that universe. It is within this discourse of affective theology that "cosmic horror" existed prior to Lovecraft.

The earliest use I've found of the phrase itself is part of a journalistic description of the period leading up to the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883: "We could feel that some cosmic horror was impending long before the catastrophe took place, and I fancy that other sensations of a like nature are in store. We hear from one part of Asia of atmospheric phenomena which disturb numerous and delicate people."⁸ From its first recorded appearance, nearly a half-century before Lovecraft adapted it, the term "cosmic horror" was associated with an *atmosphere*, in the most literal sense, one that "delicate" people were especially responsive to, and one involving a disturbing intimation of threatening immensity. This usage derives from the idea of "cosmic emotion" developed by English mathematician and philosopher, William Kingdon Clifford, who in turn derived it from English utilitarian philosopher, Henry Sidgwick.⁹ Clifford defines what he means by the term in his 1877 essay, "The Cosmic Emotion":

By a cosmic emotion—the phrase is Mr. Henry Sidgwick's—I mean an emotion which is felt in regard to the universe or sum of things, viewed as a cosmos or order. There are two kinds of cosmic emotion—one having reference to the Macrocosm or universe surrounding and containing us, the other relating to the Microcosm or universe of our own souls. When we try to put together the most general conceptions that we can form about the great aggregate of events that are always going on, to strike a sort of balance among the feelings which these events produce in us, and to add to these the feeling of vastness associated with an attempt to represent the whole of existence, then we experience a cosmic emotion of the first kind. It may have the character of awe, veneration, resignation, submission; or it may be an overpowering stimulus to action.¹⁰

Clifford points out the admirable synthesis of these two forms in a sentence by Immanuel Kant, which has been "perfectly translated by Lord Houghton":

The two things I contemplate with ceaseless awe:
The stars of heaven, and man's sense of law.¹¹

Clifford's cosmic emotion is a version of the Kantian sublime influenced by Herbert Spencer's progressivist evolutionary views. Clifford calls it "the cosmic emotion," rather than specifying *what* emotion it is, because "the character of the emotion with which men contemplate the world, the temper in which they stand in the presence of the immensities and the

eternities, must depend first of all on what they think the world is.”¹² In other words, whether the cosmic emotion is awe or terror depends on how “the world,” *reality*, is understood, an understanding that changes drastically with historical and cultural context and the development of scientific knowledge: “Whatever conception, then, we can form of the external cosmos must be regarded as only provisional and not final, as waiting revision when we shall have pushed the bounds of our knowledge further away in time and space.”¹³ Clifford’s cosmic emotion influenced William James, whose *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) presents it as a natural legitimation of religious belief. Ligotti notes the contrast between James and Lovecraft in this regard: “In both his creative writings and his letters, Lovecraft’s expression of the feelings James describes form an exception to the philosopher-psychologist’s argument, since Lovecraft experienced such cosmic wonder in the absence of religious belief.”¹⁴

Clifford’s ambiguous “cosmic emotion” was resolved by American lexicographer, physician, and natural theologian George M. Gould into “cosmic horror.” Gould’s formulation was popular in medical, philosophical, and theological literature from the mid-1890s through to about 1910, first occurring in 1893: “I have learned that many another sensitive despairing soul, in the face of the glib creeds and the loneliness of subjectivity, has also and often felt the same clutching spasm of cosmic horror, the very heart of life stifled and stilled with an infinite fear and sense of lostness.”¹⁵ Gould continued to refer to cosmic horror in his later writings, associating it with a supposed pathological inability to recognize divinity in nature. His 1904 essay “The Infinite Presence” states: “Only for a short instant, at best, will most persons consent to look open-eyed at any clear image of fate or of infinity,” since “the freezing of the heart that follows, the appalling shudder at the dread contemplation of infinity, which may be called cosmic horror, is more than can be endured. If those stars are absolutely and positively infinite, then there is no up or down, and they knew no beginning, will have no ending. With any such staring gorgon of fatalism the surcharged attention is shaken.”¹⁶

However, Gould asks, “Why may not this cosmic horror be turned to cosmic pleasure? It is at best not bravery or athletic prowess, and at worst it is a psychic want of equilibrium, a morbid metaphysics.”¹⁷ Gould concludes that those who exercise a moral intuition of the infinite experience cosmic horror as the first stage on a journey to ecstatic elevation: “The horror is from disuse of the innate power, and the sublimest pleasure may be found in excursions into the infinite.”¹⁸ For Gould, cosmic horror is

only a base material that “man’s sense of law” sublimates by affective alchemy into an elevated “ceaseless awe,” the inability to reach such “sublime pleasure” he equates with “a morbid metaphysics.” This is a medico-theological recapitulation of the Kantian sublime that Lovecraft turns on its head.

A MORBID METAPHYSICS: LOVECRAFTIAN COSMIC HORROR

I have encountered no evidence that Lovecraft had firsthand knowledge of Gould’s writings, which he would have scorned. Yet Lovecraft’s conception of cosmic horror can be best understood in contrast to Gould’s. Where Gould’s cosmic horror exemplifies what Miéville calls “the nostrums of a kind of late Victorian bourgeois culture,” Lovecraft’s conception becomes, also in Miéville’s words, “the most pure and vivid expression of that moment” when such nostrums become “unsustainable.”¹⁹

While the primary inspirations of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror are works of supernatural literature, including those by Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson, their work is demonstrably shaped by Romantic and Victorian natural theology. Good’s *Book of Nature* was an important source for Poe’s cosmic tales and philosophical ruminations. *SHL* places Hodgson “perhaps second only to Algernon Blackwood in his serious treatment of unreality,” with *House on the Borderland* called “perhaps the greatest” of his works (59; see S. T. Joshi’s chapter for an account of the evolution of Lovecraft’s cosmicism as criterion). This novel describes an affect that as clearly echoes Addison’s account of the sublime (described below) as it anticipates Lovecraft’s cosmic horror:

There was no need to be afraid of the creature; the bars were strong, and there was little danger of its being able to move them. And then, suddenly, in spite of the knowledge that the brute could not reach to harm me, I had a return of the horrible sensation of fear, that had assailed me on that night, a week previously. It was the same feeling of helpless, shuddering fright.

The most direct and detailed literary source of *SHL*’s conception of cosmic horror is Blackwood’s “The Willows,” described as the “foremost” of his fictions for the “impression of lasting poignancy” it evokes (66.) “The Willows” details “a singular emotion” closely related to, but distinct

from, natural sublimity, in which “delight of the wild beauty” mingles with “a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm” that “lay deeper far than the emotions of awe or wonder,” and “had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me.”²⁰ The only difference between this description and Gould’s cosmic horror is that Blackwood’s affect involves a simultaneous commingling of horror and awe, rather than the resolution of the former into the latter by a sublime turn. Lovecraft consistently follows Blackwood in presenting cosmic horror as a “sense of awe” “touched somewhere by vague terror.”²¹

The simultaneous fusion of Lovecraft’s version of cosmic horror and the sequential fission of Gould’s are reflected in their respective diction. Where Gould is consistent in using the phrase “cosmic horror” throughout his writings, Lovecraft’s phrasing varies widely. In *SHL* alone, Lovecraft refers, seemingly interchangeably, to “cosmic panic,” “cosmic terror,” “cosmic horror,” and “cosmic fear.”²² As Stableford notes, “Lovecraft’s fascination with the adjective ‘cosmic’ is clearly evident” in *SHL*, but the adjective is “used there in a sense that is rather different from the connotations eventually acquired by ‘cosmic horror.’”²³ Like Clifford’s deliberately unspecified “cosmic emotion,” *SHL*’s recurring use of “cosmic” modifies a variety of emotions, a vacillation more revealing than terminological consistency could be. These verbal compounds serve three closely related functions in Lovecraft’s writings, and especially in *SHL*.

First, they distinguish between Lovecraft’s use of “cosmic” and the traditional teleological and providential connotations *cosmos* carried over from Greek philosophy. Lovecraft’s compounds move from the lofty or mystical connotations of “cosmic” in its Stoic or neo-Platonic uses to what he called “cosmic indifferentism.” This philosophy is grounded, as S.T. Joshi explains, in

mechanistic materialism. The term postulates two ontological hypotheses: 1) the universe is a “mechanism” governed by fixed laws (although these may not all be known to human beings) where all entity is inextricably connected causally; there can be no such thing as chance (hence no free will but instead an absolute determinism), since every incident is the inevitable outcome of countless ancillary and contributory events reaching back into infinity; 2) all entity is material, and there can be no other essence, whether it be “soul” or “spirit” or any other non-material substance.²⁴

For Lovecraft, the cosmic follows a dynamics of descent, back to the body and its physiological states. Mathias Clasen notes that Lovecraft was among the first theorists of horror to consistently apply “a natural basis for the appeal of horror stories” by recognizing that “people are biologically susceptible to superstitious fear.”²⁵ The accuracy of this recognition is explored in more detail by Clasen’s chapter.

Second, Lovecraft’s phrasal compounds differentiate between the emotion they signify and its “mere” physiological equivalent, a distinction more fully explored by Michael Cisco’s chapter. The latter emotions are the provenance of the “externally similar but psychologically widely different” literature of “mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome,” and this is *not SHL*’s domain (22). Where “fear” is a simple, instinctive response to a perceived threat, “cosmic” suggests a component of cognitive disruption, an epistemic shock, the intrusion of “the unknown.”

Third, Lovecraft’s insistent vacillation between terror, horror, panic, dread and fear ambiguates these emotions, unsettling the hierarchized differentiation of terror from horror first popularized by Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, building on philosopher Edmund Burke, toward the end of the eighteenth century. Radcliffe claimed that horror paralyzed and froze the faculties, a description echoed by Gould’s account of cosmic horror a century later. Terror, on the other hand, stimulated the imagination, awakened the senses, and involved the sublime. This aspect of Radcliffe’s distinction anticipated Kant’s account of the sublimation of terror via the intuition of moral reason, an account reframed by Gould’s formulation, one that has maintained a centuries-long influence. It is, for example, echoed by Stephen King’s *Danse Macabre* (1981), as Alissa Burger’s chapter details. Yet the collapse of Radcliffe’s Burkean hierarchy, part of the rhetorical work done by *SHL*’s lexical transitions, was a crucial part of Lovecraft’s break from his Romantic and Victorian precursors.

“TO RESUSCITATE THE DEAD ART”: HOWARD LOVECRAFT, RE-ANIMATOR!

For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain “the sublime”
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—
Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” (1920)