

“IN THE MIDST OF BLACK SEAS OF INFINITY”: THE UNDOING OF THE AMERICAN
DREAM OF H. P. LOVECRAFT

by

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to examine the writing of H. P. Lovecraft as a reflection of the anxieties around the notion of the American national identity in his era. Rather than simply a product of cosmic pessimism, I argue that Lovecraft's writings reflect his anxieties around the state of America itself. By first examining Lovecraft's skepticism of American foundational myths and self-conceptions in "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" and "The Dunwich Horror," followed by an examination of his fears of an encroaching globalization and modernization that threatens the very idea of what it means to be an American as reflected in "The Call of Cthulhu" and "At the Mountains of Madness," I argue that Lovecraft's works reflect his own terrors of the instability and insubstantiality of the nation itself in the face of a rapidly changing modern world.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite his famous existence as an attic-dwelling recluse, H. P. Lovecraft is widely regarded as a foundational figure of the genre of cosmic horror. When not dismissed as puerile pulp fiction, his works are noted for their suggestion of human inconsequentiality in a vast and uncaring universe; as Donald Burleson explains, Lovecraft's stories focus on characters "realization...of their helplessness and insignificance in the scheme of things—their terribly ironic predicament of being sufficiently well-developed organisms to perceive and feel the poignancy of their own mote-like unimportance" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 12). Though this perspective is certainly enough to evoke a sense of existential dread, in its vast scope it ignores the more immediate societal and political implications of his work. Rather than a human in a void, Lovecraft was an American at a time of national upheaval; likewise, rather than speaking universally, his works can be read as a depiction of an American ideal coming apart at the seams, its claims to an established history and deserved futurity challenged by an uncaring, indifferent world.

The American identity about which Lovecraft was concerned was the product of a long process of idealization. Though physically large, the United States was a youthful nation relative to the European countries against which it was defined. As such, rather than seeking a definition from history, the nation was defined rather by the ideals that it sought to represent. As Arthur Mann explains, the process of American self definition beginning in the 1760s sought to represent a country that, "unlike the Old World, which the founders homogenized into a bundle of evils, [...] stood for liberty, opportunity,

religious pluralism, a balanced and representative government, and a better tomorrow for everyone” (72). The American identity was founded on a necessary sense of possibility, well articulated in James Truslow Adams’ *The Epic of America*. The American dream, the ideal on which Truslow suggests America was founded, was a

“dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement [...] a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (404).

It is a national identity defined by the achievement of potential; as Nicholas Guyatt explains, the idea of a providential, successful “destiny for the United States had become thoroughly entangled with the process of narrating American history. This had the virtue of strengthening ideas of America’s mission, especially beyond its own shores, but made it much harder for Americans to see their past clearly;” (326) whether by the divine mandate of providence or individualistic drive, the dominant American self conception was one of a boundless future and limitless potential.

Though this ideal seemed to be confirmed by the radical economic growth and success of the nation in the 1920s, the period in which the majority of Lovecraft’s works were published, Lovecraft rather saw this period as one of profound hubris that was already in the process of being undermined. Rather than embodying a golden age or a utopic future, Lovecraft saw a nation at risk; as Faye Ringel observes, Lovecraft’s “sense of the decadence of his own culture mirrors the late nineteenth century fears of the decline of Anglo-Saxon civilization” (271). Though Ringel’s observation is certainly poignant, it understates the scope of terror Lovecraft suggests: to Lovecraft, the nation’s thriving was not any indication of future success, a confirmation of providence, or mere disdain at a culture of material excess. Rather, he depicted a nation whose identity was

founded on myth rather than fact, whose optimism was truly just a result of ignorance of an uncaring and threatening world. He showed the nation changing unsustainably, liable to fall victim to the very progress it pursued. His short fiction reflects his view that America was not special enough to thwart its inevitable swallowing by an uncaring world. Lovecraft depicted an America in decline, unsupported by providence or potential and rapidly declining as it sought to move forward.

In the second chapter of this thesis I examine how Lovecraft shows the fragility of the American national identity through the dissection of its myths of providence and potential. Centered around two visions of America, John Winthrop's idea of the shining city on a hill and Cotton Mather's puritanical nation beset by devils, I examine how Lovecraft challenges the vision of America as a nation predestined by God and preserved by providence. Through his reconceptualization of the founding of a nation in "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" and his vision of an already corrupted and imploding isolationist society in "The Dunwich Horror," I show how Lovecraft's works parallel and criticize ideas of American exceptionalism, reflecting his view of America as neither unique nor divinely destined, but susceptible and ultimately doomed as all nations are.

In the third chapter I move from these roots to an examination of Lovecraft's view of his contemporary American society. Drawing from Lovecraft's own racist and isolationist opinions as well as nationalistic ideas of the time, I examine Lovecraft's depiction of a nation in the process of being either made indistinct, if not outright destroyed, by globalization in "The Call of Cthulhu," highlighting the racism and fragility of the national identity. This section concludes with an examination of the dangers and limitations of modernization and technological progress, showing how, in

Lovecraft's vision, America's commitment to expansion and advance may be the source of its undoing.

CHAPTER 2: A LIMITED PROVIDENCE: AMERICAN FOUNDATION
MYTHS, “THE DOOM THAT CAME TO SARNATH,” AND “THE DUNWICH
HORROR”

Despite the brevity of its existence relative to some other nations, the United States of America is a nation strengthened by the depth of its self-narrativization. Rather than simply an exemplar of a nation formed from revolution, America in its own self-conception is one that is almost transcendently ordained. It is steeped in creation myths; whether as the underdog of a great war against an empire or the chosen nation of the Christian God on earth, the nation conceptualizes itself in myth. This self-defining creation of folklore is part of the nation building process; as Tim Evans notes, “[f]olklore implicitly claims a transcendent ‘realness’ for an author’s ideology... folklore-bearing cultures are often situated in opposition to threatening and ‘inauthentic’ others, such as an imperialist regime, mass culture, or immigrants who disregard an existing cultural order” (“A Last Defense” 99). The folklore and founding myths of America as a nation watched over by god and defended by its worthy people lend a credence to its visions and claims, the nation made more real by its mythic origin.

For Lovecraft, however, these myths and, in particular, their frailty drew into question the necessity of the existence nation itself. Rather than tacitly accepting these myths of nationhood, Lovecraft, a noted antiquarian fascinated with the origin of cultures (Timothy Evans “Tradition and Illusion” 177-180), saw them as a flailing against the darkness of a great and ultimately indifferent world. By dissecting these myths, closely examining the tenets and finding them lacking, Lovecraft picks apart the American claim to exceptionalism. If the nation is not a project of a watchful God’s will and is simply

another fledgling state, after all, the idea of a manifest destiny can hold no water; the nation is simply another blip of existence that will fade as surely as those that came before. In this chapter, I examine Lovecraft's disassembling of two of the foundational myths of the American nation in John Winthrop's notion of a "shining city on the hill" and Cotton Mather's beleaguered but resilient nation "beset by devils." Lovecraft's rejection and undermining of the preordained country will be demonstrated by analyzing the fragility of American power, culture, and providence emphasized in the pseudo-biblical narrative of "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" through the challenging of American self-historicizing, the highlighting of resilient, pre-colonial cultures, and the limitations and weaknesses of national power. Further, I will examine how the corrupted landscapes, crushing insularity, and anti-individualism implicit in American culture as represented in "The Dunwich Horror" reflect how these myths simultaneously stifle and weaken the nation itself through the misrepresentation of American virtues, the paradoxical demands for individualism and societal conformation, and the smallness of the city on the hill against a wide and indifferent world.

2.1: Fragile Foundations

The fragility of the ideal of an exceptional America presented in Lovecraft's fiction arises in part from the tenuous foundations of the nation itself. The United States is ultimately a nation without historical precedent, hanging in a space of cultural isolation; though the severing of its colonial ties defines the nation's individuality, it also forces it into a position of strangeness. As Piotr Szpunar observes, America's claim to being hinges solely upon its existence rather than any grounded, historical foundation: "a nation with no historical claim to land must first take it; any claim to a non-imperialist

exceptionalism is belied by a ‘century of conquering republicanism on the North American continent’” (185). There is a troubling lack of roots to this formulation of nationhood; in defining itself by the fact of its conquest of its territory, it can only claim to currently occupy a space, leaving open the potential of a future without it and emphasizing the temporality of the nation itself. Defining the nation by its ability to conquer and colonize makes its presence more abstract, defined not by permanent place but by immediate control.

In Lovecraft’s work, the doomed city-state of Sarnath parallels this attempt to establish legitimacy through conquest. Only shortly after claiming the lands of Ib from its initial inhabitants, the new city “sent forth conquering armies... and in time there sat upon a throne in Sarnath the kings of all the land of Mnar and of many lands adjacent” (16). Sarnath is established in a similarly tenuous position as its American analogue; it is not defined by any cultural foundation or transcendent ownership but by temporal power, by the kings of other lands that pass through and assert their ownership. This transient, temporal power is, ultimately, subsumed by a pre-existing one. As the story concludes, all that remains is that which was before Sarnath, the narrator observing that “though they found the vast still lake itself, and the grey rock Akturion [...] they beheld not the wonder of the world and the pride of all mankind... where once had dwelt fifty million of men now crawled the detestable water-lizard. Not even the mines... remained” (19). Founded only on physical power, the Sarnathian empire is able to collapse entirely; even the mines, carved of stone, collapse, the land itself resuming its shape in the absence of power. The lack of foundation and temporality of dominance challenges the permanence

of American nationhood, undermining the idealized vision of the nation in Lovecraft's work.

The fragile foundations of the American nation suggested in this story is further highlighted by the presentation of a persistent and challenging indigeneity. Though primarily viewed as a completed conquest, Lovecraft positions the American landscape as a dominantly white-colonial one shared with a lingering and inevitable pre-existing force. What came before, whether it be the Indigenous¹ presence that occupied the continent before imperial expansion or the simple wildness of the land itself, is not defeated but merely displaced. At the heart of the threat in Lovecraft's story is not an invasion but, as Paul Buhle explains, the "rediscovering [of] something terrible and arcane... more threatening because in another sense it was known already... The hideous beings under the surface of human civilization's superficial conquest of Nature and of its own nature" (124). This depiction of an indigenous threat can be seen in the very description of the fish folk that inhabited the lands before Sarnath's founding. Though they are described as hideous, the narrator refuses to categorize them as alien; they are simply "[v]ery odd and ugly... as indeed are most beings of a world yet inchoate and rudely fashioned" (15). The monstrous other is what is most natural, a product of the world; in this conception it is the settler who becomes alienated, belonging less than these primal figures. Indeed, Lovecraft suggests that the very culture that is placed over the pre-existing primal is susceptible to a regression into this original form. The

¹ I have capitalized Indigenous when referring to the original human inhabitants of North America; however, when referring to Lovecraft's racist characterizations, I intend indigenous (lower case) only to function adjectively. I do not want to equate the caricatures of Lovecraft's rough allegory with the real Indigenous peoples of North America. It is precisely Lovecraft's racist equation of these two categories that I would like to analyze.

temporary nature of the unnatural culture is proven in the resurgence of the primal gods. After the fall of Sarnath the culture of the native Ibites returns, as the primal idol of the Ibites “was subsequently worshipped beneath the gibbous moon throughout the land of Mnar” (20). The imperial, modern-looking culture collapses into a primal state as soon as the natural order reasserts itself; as Darryl Catherine observes, the “regression into a pre-civilized state of being signals the horrific dissolution of personal and social identity” (47). This conclusion also implies that imperial identity becomes susceptible due to its ultimately alien nature. The natural world is not inert and dominatable but persistent and inevitable, culture acting only as a fragile veneer over a primal truth. The youth and unbelonging of society make its permanence untenable, reflecting the true fragility of an idealized American nation.

This threatening and undefeatable natural world calling for a return to a previous existence, contrary to the relatively alien concept of the American nation, calls into question a fundamental principle of the American exemplary ideal: the notion of providence. The idea that America itself was preordained to exist as an exemplar of progress attempts to concretize the otherwise arbitrary nationhood of the country. As Nicholas Guyatt explains, the narrative that “Americans had crossed the ocean to defend ‘sacred freedom’ and had prospered without Britain’s involvement... was enthusiastically adopted... to exaggerate America’s autonomy and its claims to a distinct role in God’s scheme” (86). It was an appeal to a higher authority, an attempt to celestially justify and secure an American identity in an old and established world. It is telling that the people of Sarnath seem to perform this very action in their own society. In addition to their aforementioned use of justifying force, the people celebrate “the feast

of the destroying of Ib,” an attempt to canonize their existence and honor “the shades of those who had annihilated the odd ancient beings... and their elder gods” (18). In addition to appearing to be a brutal recreation of the celebration of Thanksgiving, this ceremony appears to be an invocation of providence; the Sarnathian people attempt to reject the history of their home, elevating their success to an inevitability. However, this claim of superiority, the attempt to vindicate their victory and permanence, is undercut by the destruction that immediately follows. Sarnath’s doom comes on the night of this feast, the celebration disrupted by the return of the inhabitants of Ib (19); the city and its purpose are lost within the space of an evening. Rather than an abstract, external “ideal to which all nations, irrespective of their history and culture, should aspire” (J. Andrew Kirk 244), the city is shown to be purely material; providence is denied as the empire and its worth collapses with its physical form. The ideal of providence is undercut by the temporality and materiality of nationhood, challenging the idealized idea of America.

In the absence of the providential preservation of American nationhood, the endeavour to preserve American culture itself is rendered impossible. The values upheld and embodied by American culture, rather than being some transcendent ideal, are only valuable in the context of its citizens. Cultural ideals offer no objective security, possess no intrinsic worth beyond their meaning to the culture itself. Tradition is merely another subjective facet of existence; as Evans notes, “tradition [is] an illusion. Traditions give meaning to our lives-but they have no meaning in a cosmic or scientific sense, only such meaning as we choose to give them. They won't protect us from an indifferent cosmos or from the evil within ourselves” (“Tradition and Illusion” 191). Indeed, the meaning of a culture is written into the forms that culture takes, meaningful only internally, as can be

seen in the narrator's descriptions of the city of Sarnath itself. The nature of Sarnath is that of obscurity. Its houses are made of "some stone no longer known among men," its architecture lost as "no other city had houses like them (17). Even structures of stone of notable quality are made meaningless in the absence of the constructor's culture; there is nothing of culture that survives the loss of its people, emphasizing its impermanence.

2.2: Empire and Indigeneity

This threat is made all the more poignant in the context of the founding of America itself. It was a nation founded on the destruction of other nations, and it was only existent due to the functional extermination of other nations. The totality of destruction was a necessary part of the creation of the settler colonial America in itself. As Mary E. Stuckey notes, the "erasure [of Indigenous societies that] allows non-Indians to claim the continent, which is understood as being 'empty' prior to conquest. The empty continent thus becomes a blank slate onto which 'American' history can be written" (232). The colonial American claim to the continent, and with it the nation itself, depends upon the deletion of all that came before. This intentional erasure is clear in the totality of the destruction brought upon the original owners of Ib by the Sarnathians. Not only are the Ibites slaughtered, but their bodies are pushed "into the lake with long spears... [a]nd because they did not like the grey sculptured monoliths of Ib they cast these also into lake" (16). The conquest of the country is only completed by the complete erasure of the Ibites, and of the monolithic indications of their culture that came before the Sarnathians symbolically drowned with the people. Though beneficial to establishing the claim of nationhood, this erasure, as Lovecraft shows, masks the fragility of the claim by obscuring the past. The doom that does come to Sarnath, after

all, is clearly foretold and ignored. The warning, carved into an altar in the very center of Sarnath, is forgotten as “many centuries came and went, wherein Sarnath prospered exceedingly, so that only priests and old women remembered what Taran-Ish had scrawled upon the altar” (16). By erasing the memory of Ib from their society, the Sarnathians obscure the threat to their nation; their attempt to solidify their nation through erasure only renders them vulnerable.

The attempt to erase the Indigenous other as a means of establishing national identity is ultimately undermined by the impossibility of total erasure. The very existence of a multiplicity of national identities in the space of the American nation renders the notion of providence less certain. Guyatt explains that “[w]hite Americans disagreed over whether god sought the incorporation of indigenous peoples within Euro-American settlements, the replacement of Indian communities with white communities, or the effective segregation of Native Americans from whites” (178). The presence of an Indigenous other, even one that may be erased, fundamentally complicates the claim of providential ownership. If the lands were meant for the colonial American nation, why would there be a pre-existing group in that space, especially one that, as Reginald Horsman notes, was “viewed as a stumbling block to civilization... despised because they had tried to remain” true to their own cultures (103-4). The persistence of the Indigenous other and the impossibility of its erasure can be seen in the depiction of the return of the Ibites. The narrator describes the return of the former owners of Sarnath being preceded by “shadows that descended from the gibbous moon into the lake, and the damnable green mists that arose from the lake to meet the moon... shroud[ing] in a sinister haze the towers and domes of fated Sarnath” (19). The native Ibites emerge from

nature itself, their being pushed into the water doing nothing to eliminate their presence as they are resurrected by the water and land itself. Indeed, the use of “fated” seems to directly address the uncertainty about the implications of an indigenous presence in providential thought; while Sarnath has a fate, it is not the narrative of success they uphold, but rather one determined by the Ibites they attempted to ignore.

Perhaps most damning to the idea of a permanence of an idealized America is the inevitability of dissolution and the cyclicity of empire. It is not only impermanence that threatens the ideal of the American nation, but a historic precedent of succession. Such observation is evident in Lovecraft’s depiction of the American landscape; as Evans notes, Lovecraft “was particularly gifted at drawing comparisons between regions, noting differences and similarities in cultural forms from one region to another” (“Tradition and Illusion” 178). Rather than a distinct formation, America is simply another iteration, vulnerable to destruction and cultural disintegration. We see this understanding of the cyclicity of culture in the makeup of Ib. As the narrator observes, the Sarnathians “did not like the grey sculptured monoliths of Ib... they cast these also into the lake... wondering from the greatness of the labour how ever the stones were brought from afar, as they must have been, since there is naught like them in the land of Mnar” (16). It is telling that even the ancient race of the city of Ib implicitly has progenitors; just as they are consumed by the Sarnathians, so too may, and will, the Sarnathians be consumed, as they are simply another instance of culture. This cyclicity is written into the very formation of America; such was the fate, after all, of the English societal dominance that defined the nation’s founding. As Nicholas Guyatt observes, the fear of the ephemerality of empire is clear in the struggles of England: “as they gained an

empire and then lost its American annex, Britons struggled to comprehend God's purpose in these events" (3). America itself is proof of the lack of stability in nationality. America owes its existence to the fracturing of another nation; it is itself evidence of the fragility of nationhood. This is pointed to in the final description of what is known of Sarnath. The narrator observes that, long after its destruction, Sarnath sought by "only the brave and adventurous young men... who are no kin to the men of Mnar" (19). The entirety of Sarnath's lineage is gone, leaving only an utterly foreign people to explore and take its place. The permanence of culture is undone by the observable cyclical and impermanence of culture, challenging the ideal of an expanding and inexhaustible America.

2.3: Mather and American Virtue

Lovecraft's exposition of the weakness of the American foundation myth is not limited to the undermining of its position as example of empire but also extends to the weakness woven into the fabric of the nation itself. A second pervasive narrative positioned the nation as beset by challenges, preserved only by its innate connection to God and the virtue of its people. As Cotton Mather observes in his assessment of the nation, the European settlers of what would become the United States are "a people of God settled in those, which were once the devil's territories if we get through [the devil's attempts], we shall soon enjoy halcyon days" (Mather, qtd. in Madsen 19). The nation is preserved by the moral strength of its people, their inherent virtue thwarting the threats brought to the surface by its very existence. Indeed, as Mather goes on to observe, it is just this moral elevation of the American people that brings the devil to their doorstep: "Where will the Devil show most Malice, but where he is hated, and hateth the most"

(12). Mather's vision is of a city whose shine brings it into a grave and constant danger; rather than being a universal moral imperative, America is a last bastion of morality and goodness that must shore its borders and wall itself in to retain its God-given existence, relying on the intrinsic good of its people.

In "The Dunwich Horror," however, Lovecraft points out that this narrative relies on an inherent goodness that is fundamentally absent from society. This criticism can be seen in his depiction of the Dunwich community. The narrator notes that "the natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along that path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters... [t]he old gentry... which came from Salem in 1692... are sunk into the sordid populace so deeply that only their names remain as a key to their origin" (266). In connecting the community of Dunwich directly to the puritanical communities of the seventeenth century progenitors of the nation, salvation by intrinsic purity is denied; the people of Dunwich have not cataclysmically failed, but followed a well-trod path to desolation, and even the gentry is not spared by name or title. Indeed, as Setha Low explains, this closed model breeds degradation. Rather than maintaining a connection to a divine standard, isolation becomes the standard itself, as "social isolation is transformed into moral expectation, and becomes a yardstick by which residents measure the social order and safety" (41). This corruption through isolation can be seen in the relation of Lavinia Whateley, one of the Dunwich "gentry," to her child. The narrator observes that despite the horrible nature of the child, "she seemed strangely proud of the dark, goatish-looking infant who formed such a contrast to her own sickly and pink-eyed albinism" (267). Her adherence to her family blinds her to its nature, with

her worth defined only by the continuance of her line. Rather than preserving the nation, isolation renders it susceptible to degradation.

This isolation does not only prevent the corruption of some great providential ideal but renders the isolated nation vulnerable in its impenetrable insularity. Internal threats are not addressable as they are normalized by the indivisibility of the community; though to an external observer fundamental flaws and existential risks would be evident, they are invisible to the closed community more interested in maintaining immediate cohesion. In such close communities, as William B. Swann Jr., et al. observe, “the boundaries that ordinarily demarcate the personal and social self become highly permeable,” such that “aspects of both the personal and social self can readily flow into the other” (442). The individual self becomes less distinguishable from the communal mind, making threats to the individual less obvious and more potent. This cloaking of individualized threats in the isolated community can be seen in the failure of the Dunwichians to recognize the danger in Wilbur Whateley. Though his monstrosity develops as the story progresses, the narrator notes that “[p]ublic interest in the Whateleys subsided after most of the country folk had seen the baby, and no one bothered to comment on the swift development which that newcomer seemed every day to exhibit” (269). Though the child rapidly becomes less human and more empowered, the townsfolk write the child off as a member of the community, the very source of their destruction ignored to preserve the old family’s place in the community. This isolation actively rejects beneficial external influence. As Matthew Strahack notes, “[t]hose who represent an alternative to [the community’s] particular configuration are violently cast outside of its boundaries” (229), pushed out by the will to preserve an isolation that itself

is ultimately destructive. The limitations of the group that seeks to oppose the danger in Dunwich highlights the danger in isolation. The narrator observes that, as a committee prepares to engage the Dunwich problem, “[o]pinions were divided as to notifying the Massachusetts State police, and the negative finally won. There were things involved which simply could not be believed by those who had not seen a sample” (288). Though the ostensible reason for not contacting the police is their disbelief in the strangeness of the monster in Dunwich, this is in fact another example of the town’s insularity; the committee refuses help based on their perceived insight, limiting their ability to affect any change and ultimately dooming the mission.

Inevitably, as Lovecraft shows, this insularity lends itself to a fundamental fragility. The American society’s strength is undermined, as Buhle writes, by “the dawning of popular awareness of the rest of world-historic experience - from the anthropological and journalistic stories of non-industrial societies gone or about to be destroyed” (119). For Lovecraft, the world is full of examples of nations that crumbled under their own weight; no matter the strength of their internal values, they could not resist the greater world, disappearing in all ways beyond their memory in the nations that outlived them. Against this backdrop, the strength of American society appears within a long history of societies, all of them susceptible to a greater and inconceivable external reality that overwhelms the cosmically inconsequential communal strength. Indeed, Mather himself notes the susceptibility of even America to insular self destruction, noting that “[i]f the Holy God should any where permit the Devils to hook two or three wicked Scholars into Witchcraft, and by their Assistance to Range with their Poisonous Insinuations... what Country in the World would not afford Witches, numerous to a

Prodigy” (17). The values of the nation, no matter their strength, are values that have been shown to be susceptible to corruption, the nation not saved purely by its virtue.

This intrinsic weakness is represented by Lovecraft in the annihilation of the Dunwich community. The monster that comes to Dunwich destroys not just property, but also the community itself; as the narrator notes, “[t]here were... monstrous prints, but there was no longer any house... [t]he Elmer Fryes had been erased from Dunwich” (285). This family is defined as one of the original families, a lineage that traced itself to the aforementioned Salem origins of the town. The monster, an avatar of external force, completely destroys the family, not simply killing but erasing them, thereby allegorically erasing one of the oldest and ostensibly strongest roots of the American society. The greater external reality exists as an inexhaustible force opposed to the necessary finitude of the insular American society, limited in its power by its manifestly limited physical existence. It is just this incomprehensible externality that is the fuel of the horror of Dunwich itself. As Armitage explains, the creature brought forth by Wilbur “grew fast and big from the same reason that Wilbur grew fast and big – but it beat him because it had a greater share of the outsideness in it” (297). The outside force acts as a counterbalance to providence; external forces act utterly impartially, empowering not that which preserves the community but rather that which destroys it. The infinitude of external reality consumes the necessarily limited American cultural form, a boundless chaos overwhelming a limited order, challenging the conception of a permanent American culture and undoing the possibility of preservation by providential isolation.

2.4: Isolationism and Individuality

Finally, this model of protective isolation undercuts the notion of individualism that such restriction is intended to protect. In demanding a resilient and closed society, individual freedom is curtailed. The rigid societal form undermines the principle, as Claude S. Fischer explains, of “American voluntarism... [which] combines the autonomous self and commitment to (covenant with) freely formed groups,” reliant upon the ideal that “[g]roups must be voluntary if they join together autonomous selves; members must be autonomous for a community to be voluntary” (369). Such necessary autonomy is not allowed in the Matherian notion of a nation beset by evils and undermined by seductive forces; individuality, and with it the individualistic ideal of the free nation, is intrinsically – and paradoxically – at odds with the rigidity of the idealized American nation. The underlying threat that preserves this isolation, after all, is that of exclusion. As Deborah Madsen explains, the American national ideal is maintained by the “fear of experiencing once again the sanctions imposed by the demands implicit in the exceptionalist American mission... acutely aware of the exclusion that awaits as punishment” (22). The individual has no true autonomy, rigidly bound by the tenants and beliefs of the American society; if the boundaries are tested, the individual is ejected, the national construct itself disallowing the assertion of radical freedom and democracy idealized in American self conception.

The arc of Wilbur Whateley in Lovecraft’s story reflects this repressive structure. Despite his described preternatural intellect and physical prowess (274-275), Whateley’s fundamental differences in both appearance and behaviour from the Dunwich community lead to his being “soon disliked even more decidedly than his mother and grandsire” (270), resulting in his being roundly ignored and avoided by the

Dunwich community. This lack of attention ultimately allows him to perform the rites that create the monster that decimates the town; the undoing is wrought by the very exclusion that, if avoided, could have allowed intervention. The preservation of American culture through isolation constrains the freedom idealized at its core, ultimately leading, as Lovecraft suggests, to its undoing.

This closure does not only fail in its suppression of the individualistic ideal of American existence, but also fails to address the scope of the terrain on which it is located. The land is not simply conquered, or even conquerable, but is inundated with forces antithetical to the establishment of an American state. The presence of American culture only adds another layer onto a space; as Catherine explains, settlement does not overrun the force of the natural because such power “exist[s] as discrete loci in the nation’s physical terrain... a liminal phenomenon existing ambiguously” (38). The establishment of American settlement does not shake off or resist the “devils,” as Mather termed them, but simply creates a tenuous coexistence; the world can only be suppressed temporarily, always existing at the fringes, creeping slowly back to the fore. Lovecraft presents this unconquerable pre-existing force in his portrayal of the land on which the town of Dunwich itself is founded. The terrain of Dunwich is defined by intangible power, as “trees of the frequent forest belts seem too large, and the wild weeds, brambles, and grasses...attain a luxuriance not often found in settled regions” (264-5). The land itself resists the American endeavour; despite settlement, it remains overgrown and natural, as fields and homes fail to take root, leaving the people only to “give reasons for avoiding the locality” (265). As Mather notes, “While we are in this present evil world, We are continually surrounded with swarms of those Devils... We can set our

foot no where but we shall tread in the middle of most Hellish Rattle-Snakes” (53). The earth itself is fundamentally plagued by evils, the scope of corruption simply too large to be meaningfully resisted by the singular American nation.

The external is both the cause and solution to the destruction that is wrought on the idealized American settlement. Though the creature, as previously discussed, is composed of an abstract quality of externality, the solution is bound in the invoking of the external as well. The professors who ultimately halt the horror do not find their solution in their own abilities but in “the arcana of Thrithemius... Giambattista Porta... and such fairly modern authorities as Blair, Von Martin, and Kluber.” (286) The names and titles in their variety of languages suggests a mish-mash of cultures and knowledges not contained in the American experience; the solution is not contained in the evangelical puritan wisdom that defines the country but in the resources granted by, and demanded by, a larger world. The power of the larger world is irresistible and overwhelming to the fledgling nation, which is shown to be small and vulnerable against the power of the greater world.

The idealized version of the founding of America at the root of the national identity, as Lovecraft examines, is based on tenuous grounds. The notion of providence thought to be confirmed and reinforced by a history of conquest and colonial success is marked with uncertainties, the ideal tainted with questions of impermanence, indigeneity, and isolation that undermined the nation from its onset. Lovecraft’s criticism of even these early notions reflect a cynicism towards the national endeavour, suggesting a fragile identity that has the potential to crumble. Though a time of success, the era of his writing highlights these weaknesses and perhaps even bears the signs of a nation in

decline. The America of the 1920s was one thrust against an indifferent and powerful world, a nation that, by Lovecraft's estimation, was losing itself, as I will discuss in the next chapter, to what he saw as a brutal cosmos.

CHAPTER 3: MOVING FORWARD INTO OBLIVION: FEARS OF GLOBALIZATION
AND TECHNOLOGY IN “THE CALL OF CTHULHU” AND “AT THE MOUNTAINS OF
MADNESS”

3.1: The Melting Pot

Though the ostensible source of terror in “The Call of Cthulhu” is the titular great Old One, the appearance of the creature itself is fleeting and scant. As Donald Burleson explains, Cthulhu is a figure that appears only briefly and uncertainly: “the portrayal of Cthulhu in low relief suggests his disinclination to appear... Cthulhu is couched in a background from which we only imagine his emergence” (82). Rather, the monster’s power is revealed through the corruption of the soul of humankind; through the exertion of its psychic influence, Cthulhu orchestrates societal upheaval, invading the global psyche to bring about the downfall of society in “a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom” (214). This notion of a global societal upheaval, of the undoing of humanity through humanity itself, reveals the author’s own terror spawned by the globalization of his own nation. In the aftermath of a world war, the America of the 1920s was shifting; previously held ideas of race, national identity, and individuality were rendered unstable in a nation now inexorably tied to a wider international community. For Lovecraft, such radical change marked the beginning of the end of the traditional American national narrative.

It is easy to see the fear of such fundamental societal change in the plot of “The Call of Cthulhu.” The story begins with the narrator, the late Wayland Thurston, taking up an investigation begun by his great-uncle Angell into the enigmatic Cthulhu cult. He notes that Angell was visited by a young artist who produced a sculpture of a creature

with “a pulpy, tentacled head... and grotesque, scaly body” (204) that came to him in a dream. The artist falls into an inexplicable sickness, a fever and madness during which time he is only able to produce two words, “‘Cthullhu’ and ‘R’lyeh’” (206). Though the artist’s madness ceases as suddenly as it manifested, Angell discovers that this madness and the alien figure at its heart was experienced simultaneously across the globe by artists and aesthetes of countless nations. As Angell’s investigation continues, it is discovered that this figure is at the center of a cult that reaches from indigenous tribes in Greenland to a human-sacrificing swamp cult in Louisiana (210). This cult is dedicated to the resurrection of a Great Old One, an extradimensional species that ruled the earth long before mankind, from its tomb-city in the sea to resume its reign over the world, destroying mankind in the process. Ultimately, this being does make its brief return; investigated by the crew of a Norwegian merchant vessel, Cthulhu rises from its ancient tomb until it is struck by the ship, driving the Old One back under the sea and condemning the crew to madness. The narrator closes the story by accepting the inevitability of this being’s return, hoping only that he will not be alive at the time (225). Through this worldwide conspiracy to bring about the end of that world, Lovecraft is able to express his own anxieties of the world closing in and suffocating America.

At the heart of the cult, the proxy antagonist of the story, is the described threat of racial intermixture. Lovecraft’s racist understanding of racial mixing is well documented; he declares in a personal letter that “[a]ny racial mixture can but lower the result” (*Selected Letters I* 17), emphatically stating his belief in the deteriorative effect of interracial relationships. His sentiment reflects the mainstream thought of America in the 1920s. As non-white Americans, having been exposed to European race relations

radically different to those in America, returned from the first world war, Thomas F. Gossett notes that the “Americans of the older ethnic groups were more and more intent upon holding the line against the rise in status of ethnic groups they believed to be inferior” (370). This attempt to preserve racial purity was perceived not simply as a defense of societal stratification, but of humankind itself; Gossett goes on to observe that “biologists regarded it as axiomatic that race mixture... would lead to ‘disharmonies’... to mix them led to physical, mental, and emotional deformities... and therefore intermarriage with them would have ‘dysgenic’ effects” (378-9). Human degeneration through racial mixing was considered inevitable, its effects unpredictable and ultimately dangerous to the population of the country itself. This belief, and Lovecraft’s positioning it as a profound danger to American identity, is shown in his portrayal of the Louisianan Cthulhu cultists. The non-white group is described as much by its acts of human sacrifice as by the mixed nature and character of its adherents. As much as their actions are painted as horrific, their very nature is prioritized as generative of their actions; they are defined as “hybrid spawn” and “mongrels,” their actions attributed as much to their makeup as to their psychic corruption by the Great Old One (212-213). In defining the cultists by their racial composition, Lovecraft links racial mixing to the apocalyptic ends of the Cthulhu cult. Lovecraft suggests racial mixture in America as a source of the nation’s undoing, emphasizing his perception of the breaking down of American national identity.

Further complicating this matter of the muddling of the Anglo-Saxon American identity held as traditional is the influx and influence of immigration. The surge of immigration to America following the first world war was viewed not as an indication of

the exemplary nature of America, but rather as a threat to the constitution of the nation's people. As David J. Goldberg explains, "[t]he idea that Europe wanted to make the United States a 'dumping ground' for its 'scum' and 'vermin' became commonly accepted, and many old-stock residents believed the nation was about to become a cesspool" (153). Rather than undergoing "Americanization" by, as Berkson explains, "divest[ing] themselves of their old characteristics... complete[ly] taking over... of the American type, obliterate[ing] all ethnic distinctions" (129), Lovecraft emphasizes the fear that the multiplicity of cultures flowing into the nation would simply resist, collapsing the integrity of the national identity through invoking a damaging multiplicity. Resilience, after all, is the greatest of Cthulhu's powers, as can be seen in the failed attempt to destroy the creature. When the sailors fleeing the Old One turn their ship on the creature, the monster is saved by its indistinctness: "the scattered plasticity of that nameless sky-spawn was nebulously *recombining* in its hateful original form" (Lovecraft's emphasis, 224). In this, Lovecraft posits the impossibility of any form of Americanization; the original form of the monster simply reintegrates, the original identity of the alien monster being too great to be undone. In rejecting the American monoculture, Lovecraft suggests, the disparate identities brought by immigration disrupt the stability of the nation itself. This ruining of identity can be seen in the nature of the apocalypse the Cthulhu cult seeks to bring about. The destruction of a singular order is the key to destruction; the world's end would come as soon as "mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil... all the earth would aflame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom" (214). Without an ordering structure there is only chaos; the promise of the hybridity and multi-nationality of the Cthulhu cult is freedom to the point of destruction, one that cannot be contained by

moralistic bonds. “The Call of Cthulhu” reflects what Lovecraft sees as the danger of the multiplicity that is coming to define America in his time, emphasizing the downfall of American national identity.

To Lovecraft, it was not only that the mixture of races and influx of immigration were contorting and undermining the American national identity, but also that the so-called Nordic races themselves were in the process of degradation. Rather than the crafters of civilization he posits the Anglo-Saxons to be, the post war period saw the American conception of Europe shift from originator to supplicant grifter. As America thrived, the nations of Europe foundered and proved unable to pay what America was owed; as Goldberg writes, “[s]tung by the reluctance of the English and the French to pay their debts, Americans viewed their former allies as ingrates who should be left to fend for themselves” (37). Relative to America, the nations of Europe showed a profound weakness, a susceptibility that undermined Lovecraft’s conception of the Nordic foundation of civilization. We see the weakness Lovecraft suggested in the Anglo-Saxon race as the old seats of this blood are infected by the old God. Among the various events across the globe are “a nocturnal suicide in London... [t]he west of Ireland... full of wild rumour and legendry, and a fantastic painter named Ardois-Bonnot hangs a blasphemous *Dream Landscape* in the Paris spring salon” (207-8). It is important to note that the specific locations Lovecraft notes are the capitals of their respective nations; even the hearts of the nation from which the Anglo-Saxon stock was drawn are undermined, emphasizing the insufficiency of race alone to preserve national character. Lovecraft goes on to suggest that this corruptibility is inherent, as can be seen in his description of the Norwegian town from which the crew that confronted Cthulhu came. The narrator

explains that the surviving sailor lived in the “Old Town of King Harold Haardrada, which kept alive the name of Oslo during all the centuries that the greater city masqueraded as ‘Christiana’” (221). In describing the city as masquerading as Christiana, Lovecraft suggests a prevailing and resilient paganism; even in Norway, the place he described as the most Nordic of the European nations, primeval forces have deep roots, as civilization is only a thin veneer over a more original chaos. It is just these chaotic tendencies that lead to the destruction of American society in Lovecraft’s work; as Faye Ringle notes, “invented texts such as the Necronomicon represent survivals of medieval superstition that have been transmitted to the New World by puritans who... have mastered forbidden arts” (269). Lovecraft posits the Nordic “race” central to his American culture as corruptible and inherently flawed, reinforcing his perception of a crumbling national identity.

3.2: National Disillusionment

The story’s pessimism towards the ideal of an enduring nation is in part a reflection of the national mood. Despite economically thriving, the cost and brutality of the first world war challenged the endless potentiality at the heart of the American dream. As Goldberg explains, “the prewar faith in democracy, inevitable progress, and rationality had not survived the four years of bloodletting” (39); the idea of a world that could develop endlessly was cut short by the collapse witnessed in Europe as empires pulled apart. This pessimistic turn is paralleled by the destruction of the narrator’s hope in any kind of solution to the menace of Cthulhu. Though he begins believing that “the second of April had put a stop to whatever monstrous menace had begun its siege of mankind’s soul” (220), this hope is ultimately crushed; faced by the unstoppable beast

and his global cult, the narrator finishes the story wishing only for a painless death before the inevitable undoing of all of the world's nations (225). The posthumous nature of the narrative seems only to confirm his hopelessness. The choice of April second as a day of false hope seems to confirm the parallel; it is on that day in 1917 that Woodrow Wilson asked to declare war on Germany, the day in which America was drawn into the disillusioning war. The war emphasized the impermanence of nations, suggesting a fragility contrary to the expansionist ideal of a destiny that can be manifested. As Lovecraft himself observed, “[l]ife and light – both are forms of energy manifest only through material media. Destroy the medium in either case, and the energy is irreclaimably lost in transformation to other forms” (Lovecraft, *Letters* 120). This universal fragility of being is reflected in the narrator's assessment of Cthulhu. He states that “[w]hat has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of man” (225). Cthulhu, emblematic of chaos and destruction, is paradoxically the only constant, the creations of mankind entropically moving towards the stable oblivion that the elder god represents. Lovecraft highlights the impermanence of creation proven by the first world war, highlighting his perception of the American endeavour as doomed.

The realization of the limitation of potential brought about by the first world war is not the only indication of the crumbling of American society. Rather, Lovecraft reflects a nation that is questioning and undermining its own values. The 1920s marked a division of the country along the lines of morality. Rather than adhering to a collective sense of right, as Esmond Wright notes, “[t]he older, rural, and small-town America, now fully embattled against the encroachments of modern life, made its most determined stand against cosmopolitanism, Romanism, and the skepticism and moral

experimentalism of the intelligentsia” (220). Tradition was being challenged by calls for change, highlighting a dissatisfaction in the moral structure of the nation itself. As the women’s suffrage movement rapidly expanded (Goldberg 53) and calls for the fair treatment particularly of non-white workers became more openly voiced (Gossett 370), it became increasingly clear both that the current American societal ideal could not account for all Americans, and that those structures could no longer stand unquestioned. Indeed, the opposition to tradition became mainstream in itself; as Goldberg notes, the younger generations “took special delight in defying a law they identified with puritanism... many people rejected Victorian notions of propriety” (56). Lovecraft reflects this growing division, and the danger inherent in it, in the path through which Cthulhu’s image spread. Cthulhu’s psychic influence did not affect what the narrator describes as “[a]verage people in society and business – New England’s traditional ‘salt of the earth’,” but rather spread through “the artists and poets” (207), the creatives who exist outside of the “traditional” folk. The former allow the cult to expand; they infect the world with their madness, their knowledge of Cthulhu and the doom that follows him spreading through them into society. The change they bring is irreversible; as the narrator observes, “[e]ven the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison” (225). The typical images of renewal and rebirth associated with spring and summer are tainted; the new brings with it only the promise of undoing. Lovecraft shows the spread of social division to be both inevitable and unstoppable, highlighting the doomed nature of the American national identity.

It is not only the growing division that Lovecraft suggests is threatening to pull apart a singular idea of America, but also the backlash towards isolation in the face of

these changes. In the wake of calls for radical social reform and the influx of immigration, there was a growing obsession with what Goldberg describes as “[o]ne hundred percent Americanism,” (42) a push towards absolute adherence with the traditional American identity. The movement fostered an environment of collective suppression of individualism: “[i]n a nation uneasy with its ethnically heterogeneous population, any hint of the desecration of the flag could bring instant punishment” (Goldberg 42). This obsessive traditionalism was itself destructive; enforcing pure tradition impedes society, as the potential for growth and expansion is lost to the desire for protection. Lovecraft shows the danger of this restriction of progress in the death of Professor Angell. The narrator is not killed by the cult, but, as the narrator suspects, “because he knew too much, or because he was likely to know too much” (217). The professor is destroyed due to his search for the atypical; written off as mad by his society, he is rendered vulnerable to attack, his work towards the root cause of the Cthulhu cult lost. In focusing on the maintaining of the appearance of society at the cost of individual progress, the society itself falters. It is this aesthetic focus that allows Cthulhu, the central avatar of destruction, to continue unopposed. As Burleson notes, “we never quite get ‘down to’ Cthulhu, but only to his long handed-down effects... it is not Cthulhu who rests as a presence within the concentric circles [of narrative], but his image” (80-81). The focus of the investigation is not on the Old One itself but on its appearance, disallowing any solution beyond maintaining the veneer of civilization. Indeed, the ineffectuality of surface-level maintenance is emphasized in the appearance of Cthulhu. Though we see the “single mountain-top, the hideous monolith-crowned citadel” (222) in which it was buried, the vast majority of both the creature and its temple remains submerged; the physical creature, though imposing, is only a fraction of the

danger it suggests. The investigation of the physical creature is hopeless because its power is ultimately immaterial; addressing the aesthetic only masks the oncoming, unstoppable danger. The suppression of progress and focus on the aesthetic rather than substance of American culture renders it vulnerable, reflecting Lovecraft's own lack of hope for the future of American society.

3.3: Modernization and Annihilation

The rifts Lovecraft perceived in the fabric of the American social structure were, to his mind, only part of the inevitable undoing of an American national identity in the modern world. It is modernity itself that he depicts as contributing to the oncoming doom of the nation. Rather than be inspired by the rapid advance of technology and production allowed by modernization, as Evans explains, Lovecraft's "fiction grew out of an antimodernist ideology, a horror at what he perceived as the loss of tradition and the disintegration of American culture in the face of... [the] scientific chaos of the twentieth century" ("Tradition and Illusion" 177). This position is reflective of the common mentality of the America of the era. As Thomas D. Taylor notes, the 1920s was "the first moment in which people actually believed themselves to be moderns, inhabiting modernity: a contemporary state, not one being striven toward" (426). Modernity in this vision is not a vague idea but an ideal, a state of progress idealized in America. While this progress ostensibly promised growth, Lovecraft suggests this moment signifies a loss of control; in throwing itself into the pursuit of modernity and scientific advancement, America gave itself over to a rapid drive toward destruction.

Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" reflects this fear of unchecked advancement. The narrator, an unnamed geologist, describes his experience as part of an

Antarctic expedition on the behalf of Miskatonic University. While the given purpose is a fairly typical endeavour to secure ice and geologic samples, the true motivations are far more radically progressive; though the narrator downplays Professor Lake's "wild hopes of revolutionising the entire sciences of biology and geology" (430), his initial enthusiasm for the ground-breaking exploratory tools and scientific equipment brought with them belies the collective drive for profound change. This hope seems to be attainable upon the discovery of a collection of strange barrel-shaped organisms buried in the Antarctic ice at the base of previously undocumented mountains (437).

However, the ecstasy at the potential of this discovery immediately turns into disappointment when Lake disappears, turning swiftly into fear as the narrator discovers Lake's camp destroyed and its inhabitants either killed or vanished. Despite this grim omen, the narrator presses further into the mountain range, seemingly driven equally by the search for the lost professor and his own scientific curiosity. It is in this strange place that the expedition's aims are utterly torn apart. In the mountains he finds an abandoned city belonging to Elder Beings, a race that came to the world long before humankind, defined by a technology radically in advance of that expedition. As he tracks deeper into the city, he discovers that the city was undone by its own scientific creations, a number of which remain in the depths of the city. The result of this revelation is madness; the narrator flees, abandoning both the city and his expedition to ruin, swearing only to warn against future endeavours to expose this revolutionary past; to him, such advancement can only lead to destruction, the only outcome madness.

The destruction here is not the common science fiction trope of science gone awry. Rather, Lovecraft seems to suggest that destruction is woven into the nature of

scientific adventure itself. Science is pushed forward by the taking apart of nature in an attempt to understand it, which requires the invasion and deconstruction of what is at hand. It is not a process of making but of unmaking; the progress demanded by modern society requires undermining the foundation on which modern society itself is built. This destructive force can be seen in the invasive nature of the technologies that inspire and allow the expedition. The narrator speaks excitedly about “Pabodie’s drilling apparatus... unique and radical in its lightness, portability,” joyfully describing the “dynamiting paraphernalia... for bores five inches wide and up to one thousand feet deep” (423). The scientific tool is not defined by what it can find but by what it can destroy, the scientific marvel capable only of destroying under the pretenses of exploration. The entire trip is described in these destructive terms; the scientists “push[] through the ice” (426) and carve into the land itself with “phenomenally rapid borings and blastings... sink[ing] bores and perform[ing] dynamiting at many places where no previous explorer ever had” (428). The exploration can only progress in the wake of destruction, their scientific progress paralleled by the destruction it necessitates. As Ernest Braun observes, “science progresses unidirectionally... in a single direction on its own terms” (30). The destruction, however, moves in both directions, as can be seen in the seemingly scientific destruction of Lake’s camp. The narrator observes that the destroyed scientific instruments were “tampered with by winds that must have harbored singular curiosity and investigativeness” (447). The destruction previously described cleanly and scientifically is made horrific in context. The dismantling of the camp is just as intentional as the drilling and dynamiting but, lacking the human element, it is revealed for what it truly is: destruction. Lovecraft shows what he sees as the destructiveness woven into the scientific progress central to American modernization and

advancement, highlighting the danger it poses to the modern America that pushes it forward.

In addition to its inherently destructive aspect, Lovecraft also emphasizes science's capacity to deceive. The intention of scientific progress to enrich and inform through the expansion of knowledge is undercut by its manipulability; while able to be presented as a purely beneficial force for society, technological progress is merely more able to be spun as wholly good, appearing purely positive by manipulating the message and distilling the truth to an optimistic but incomplete narrative. The optimism of scientific progress, as Randall Patnode argues, has "less to do with the future than they do with our sense of past failures," (305) reporting advancement as simply an improvement over past weaknesses rather than representing the complexities and dangers of the future. This deceptive aspect of scientific progress can be seen in the narrator's description of the manner in which reports of the expedition were tampered with. He admits to tampering with the totality of the truth of the expedition, recalling moments in which he sent "instructions about toning down the day's news for the outside world" (442), hiding from the world the monstrosity and danger uncovered in the expedition and retaining the image of an "epoch-making" (439) expedition. Though they make an effort to discourage further exploration (449), the true danger of the expedition is buried; the sanctity of progress is retained at the cost of the exposition of the potentially catastrophic downfalls.

It is this control of the message that allows the forgetting of the destructive potential of technological advancement. Scientific optimism ignores, as Sofie Onghena explains, the fact that "the same scientific and technical progress that had promoted

civilization in the 19th century made possible the destructive and merciless war machine of the early 20th century” (281). This forgetting of the danger that comes with progress can be seen in the destruction wrought by the creations of the Old One’s themselves: the shoggoth. The narrator describes the shoggoth as a race of beings created to serve the Old Ones that “acquir[ed] a dangerous degree of accidental intelligence,” (473) culminating in a rebellion. Though the Old Ones suppressed the uprising, they made the fundamental mistake of abandoning the creatures as they transitioned to the land, their “usefulness on land [was] hardly commensurate with the trouble of their management” (473). This disregard ultimately proved disastrous to the Old Ones; as the narrator discovers, the city itself was overcome by the creatures, the last thing he hears in the city being the “eldritch, mocking cry” of a shoggoth, “the imitated accents of [its] bygone masters” (499). In disregarding the danger posed by their own advancements, the Old Ones doomed themselves, destroying themselves with the products of their own progress. Lovecraft highlights the danger posed by trusting progress unchecked, seeing the blind faith in scientific progress adopted as a manifestation of exceptionalism as a hallmark of the doom coming to American society.

Lovecraft emphasizes that the blind trust in technological advance in American society is not just a danger to the scientific products themselves, but also to individual autonomy, which is lost to technology itself. The simplification of labour afforded by industrialization was to Lovecraft “an inevitable sequel of scientific and mechanical discovery” (315). However, rather than acting as a boon to society, Lovecraft suggests such dependency on technology fosters weakness in the general populace. It creates an outsourcing of ability; as Gernot Bohme observes, “[t]echnological objects and

technological products play an ever greater role in our lives and... large swathes of practical activity are delegated to technical experts” (22). This correlation of technological dependency and fragility can be seen in the downfall of the Old Ones themselves. Apart from their eventual annihilation at the hands of the shoggoth, the Old Ones record a time in which they were forced into the sea by a technologically advanced race, the Mi-Go (473-4). Of particular note is the narrator’s observation that “[t]o fight these beings, the Old Ones attempted, for the first time since their terrene advent, to sally forth again into the planetary ether; but, despite all traditional preparations, found it no longer possible to leave the Earth’s atmosphere. Whatever the old secret of interstellar travel had been, it was now definitely lost to the race” (474). The Old Ones’ focus on their planetary development cost them an ability inherent in their race; as they placed their faith in their scientific prowess, they relinquished their fundamental abilities, costing them their empire above the sea. Lovecraft depicts technological dependency resulting in the weakening of society itself, indicating an oncoming threat to a modernizing America.

3.4: An Inevitable Undoing

In addition to the dangers that technologies themselves pose to the ever-modernizing America, Lovecraft also emphasizes that, ultimately, such progress offers no true protection from the uncaring and overwhelming world that surrounds the still-fledgling nation. Though the rapid advance of technology seems infinite, appearing to reinforce the expansionist ideals of the American national narrative, its capabilities are ultimately limited; the speed and power of even the most modern technologies is not limitless, as Braun observes: “[r]apid innovation carries an increased risk of total

failure... While progress on an entirely new technology is comparatively easy, rapid and cheap at first, it becomes increasingly difficult as the technology approaches its limits of perfection... the law of diminishing returns operates without pity and without regard for human desire” (192-3). The power of technology is worldly and finite, offering no real promise of protection against a limitless universe.

Technology’s inability to offer real protection can be seen in the death of Professor Lake. The character is imbued with optimism in the power of modern technology – as previously mentioned, Lake is the one who suggests the revolutionary potential of the expedition. It is emphasized that the professor and his technological powers are undone by the world itself. He is robbed of voice as his radio technology fails under the power of the storms that buffet the mountain range (442-3); against the winds, the metal structures and airplanes that signal unrestricted movement prove “far too flimsy and inadequate” (446); indeed, all that remains complete in the camp are the bodies of the men and dogs, all signs of technology scattered and lost to the snow. It is of note that this chapter attributes destruction to the natural rather than supernatural world; the camp is not destroyed by a rival force, but by the uncaring world itself. Even the most powerful tools of scientific progress are rendered ineffectual and limited against the endless force of nature. Indeed, the finitude of the world itself revealed by technology highlights technology’s limitations. As Fricker notes,

“technological development was effectively unfettered since the perceived benefits outweighed the adverse effects, and the world was seen as infinite. Now, paradoxically, when the enormous advances in science and technology promise infinite potential the world has become distinctly finite, and the resources are severely depleted and degraded” (536).

Technology is limited by nature, unable to transgress the limits imposed by the finite world it seeks to control, making the very endeavour of control doomed to failure. Lovecraft shows technological advancement to be unable to ensure the continued existence of the nation, depicting America as ultimately finite and doomed.

In addition to this insufficiency of potential, the ultimate unknowability at the end of scientific endeavour limits its capability to sustain the American national project. Though able to probe and explore, Lovecraft posits that the infinite of the universe prevents any finality in the attempt to understand and control existence. No matter how far the modernizing project may bring the country, there is always an unguessable future out of the reach of understanding. This fundamentally unknowable future can be seen in the defeat of the Old Ones by invading cosmic forces. Despite the narrator's acknowledgement that the Old Ones' "scientific and mechanical knowledge far surpassed man's," (469) even their society was unable to predict the doom that was to come to them; though their recording of history is expansive, the narrator makes a point to note that their annals failed to mention many advanced and potent races of beings (474). Despite their technologies far beyond that of humankind and their deeper understanding of the universe, even the Old Ones are unable to predict or defend against the future; no amount of scientific progress can avert Society's being overtaken by the infinitude of the universe. The radical scientific development of the Old Ones reflects how little such progress indicates any greater chance of survival; as Abel Alves notes, their advancement asserts how easily "the indifferent, inexorable forces of the cosmos which blindly produced Homo sapiens... will finally unknowingly destroy them again" (75); while intellect is "more highly developed in Homo sapiens," it is also "clearly

present to a lesser degree in the rest of the animal kingdom” (76-77), and it is therefore just a manifestation of present circumstance rather than any indication of the future.

This futility of engaging with a vast and unknowable universe seals the fate of America. Not capable of offering any meaningful protection for the nation, all that scientific advancement and modernization offers is a glimpse at the inevitable end of all things. In learning more about the nature of the universe through scientific exploration, what is ultimately revealed is the true smallness and inconsequentiality of the single nation; as Ellen Greenham observes, “[t]he human apocalypse of its place in the universe is immanent... by disturbing the known order... the revelation becomes visible,” (142) the human understanding of their own importance undermined by the scale and indifference of the universe. The probing of the universe only highlights the smallness of humankind’s impact and presence, further diminishing the very idea of a persistent nation; if all the world is universally next to nothing in terms of importance, how much less is a single nation? When faced with this existential smallness, it is telling that the reaction to this truth is deliberate ignorance and madness. After being chased from the city of the Old Ones by a proto-shoggoth, the narrator, despite his scientific intentions, deliberately buries the potential of the advanced race, deciding that “[c]ertain things... were not for people to know and discuss [and] it is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth’s dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone” (502). Rather than offering hope, the greatest discovery promises only oblivion; the pursuit of science, for the narrator, only reveals that extinction and destruction are at the end of scientific progress. To Lovecraft, the belief in endless existence relies on the ignorance of the fact that, as Patricia MacCormack explains, “the

human is nothing more than its own fantastical myth” (“Lovecraft through Deleuzio-Guattarian Gates”), the truth of an indifferent and uncaring universe revealed by science only proving the finite nature of human endeavour. America’s place at the forefront of progress means that it is thrust up against the knowledge of oblivion; in its pursuit of progress, its inevitable undoing is assured.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Lovecraft's existential pessimism certainly includes his own home country. An impartial universe far larger, older, and fuller than the world itself reduces the claim of nationhood, for any nation, to meaninglessness. However, despite the superficial claim of concerning itself with the fate of the world, the Lovecraft mythos clearly reflects the uncertainty that underwrites the United States itself. For all the claims to divine mandate and evidence of progress and potential, Lovecraft reemphasizes that the nation is ultimately founded on myth and hope, both of which, as is eminently clear through his works, are insufficient to stave off the entropic undoing of all creation. Lovecraft's writing reflects the anxieties around the collapse of his vision of the American national identity and character, reflecting fears of a nation that is fundamentally changing in its character. The inherently racist, xenophobic vision of a colonial settler nation not uncommon in Lovecraft's own time could not stand, as Lovecraft himself observed. Through his own recreation of a founding myth in "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" and his reflection on national insularity in "The Dunwich Horror," Lovecraft challenges and pulls apart the notion of providence, emphasizing the youth and vulnerability of the nation, the lack of solid claim to the land on which it exists, and the inherent corruption that marked the nation from the very beginning. Lovecraft sees that this fragile foundation is tested in the America of his own time, as is clear in his anxieties over the changing racial and cultural makeup of the nation and the onset of globalization in "The Call of Cthulhu" and his fear over the limits and implications of scientific and technological progress in "At the Mountains of Madness."

There is much to be gained from the examination of Lovecraft's work as a product of his era. Though certainly racist and xenophobic, his views were not

uncommon, reflecting the tensions around what it meant to be an American in an era of radical change, both technological and societal. The destruction Lovecraft describes, after all, is always a marker of shifting power. Whether it moves into the hands of the beings that came long before the settlers in his home state of New England or falls to radically new visitors from as close as the old world or as far as the farthest reaches of the cosmos, his stories are often concerned with a coming reconstruction of the nation and the world. Lovecraft's probing of the dark corners of American ideology provides many opportunities to delve into the mind of a changing nation struggling to hold on to, or perhaps finally reject, its mythic original identity. Though tempered by the certainty of a coming and unavoidable doom, Lovecraft's fears help illuminate the heart of a growing nation.

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