The Geography of Horror: Lovecraft’s (Re)construction of New England

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This region represents an alternative version of New England where fictitious towns such as Arkham and Kingsport exist nearby real places like Salem or Boston. Chaosium, the role-playing game publisher that has created the famous *Call of Cthulhu* series of games, describes Lovecraft Country as “a land located in the northeast of Massachusetts. The most important portion stretches along the Miskatonic River valley, from Dunwich in the far west to where it enters the Atlantic Ocean between Arkham, Kingsport, and Martin’s Beach” (Ross and Appel, *Dead Reckonings*, qtd. in “Lovecraft Country”).

Lovecraft’s stories are not all located in this half-imaginary realm, but a large bulk of the author’s output is either set in one of those fictional towns or mentions one or more of them while occupying a different setting. Those New England stories were mostly written in the later phase of Lovecraft’s short life and career, showing the evolution of his purpose and concerns. The present essay will be mostly based on the ten stories which take place in either of Lovecraft’s fictional towns, as well as on two other stories—a short novel and a short story—set in Providence and in Vermont, two real places but which echo the important sense of place and the stakes associated to space that can be found in the stories of the Miskatonic cycle.

How does Lovecraft’s appropriation and reconstruction of New England serve the purpose of horror and to what extent does it express the author’s philosophical and aesthetic concerns? The re-construction of reality in the stories follows a twofold path:

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4. How does Lovecraft’s appropriation and reconstruction of New England serve the purpose of horror and to what extent does it express the author’s philosophical and aesthetic concerns? The re-construction of reality in the stories follows a twofold path:
the re-appropriation of the past through the exploration of New England's historical and cultural roots, and the re-location of horror, which is inextricably linked to place. By creating those fictional places, Lovecraft makes the horror of New England visible—a horror which ultimately stands for the horror of reality itself.

**Re-construction of Reality**

### A. A Geography Inspired by Reality

Even though he never left the North-American continent, Lovecraft is known for having been a keen traveller after an early period of reclusiveness. His meagre financial means were mostly dedicated to purchasing paper for his time-consuming correspondence and for travelling, sometimes on his own, others to visit friends. He soon became very familiar with New England, with a marked preference for colonial towns. Other than his beloved birthplace, Providence, he was particularly fond of towns such as Elizabeth (NJ), Portsmouth (NH), and Marblehead (MA), which he visited for the first of many times in 1922 and which would always hold a dear place in his heart. 1922 also marked Lovecraft's first trip outside of New England: he went to New York, where he would later live for a brief and miserable time before moving back to Providence. He would go as far north as Quebec, and as far south as Florida, with many other trips along the eastern coast of the US, and a never-ending quest for hidden colonial gems.

The influence of such trips is quite obvious when reading Lovecraft and has been commented upon by the author himself in his many letters. Here follows a brief history of the appearance of his main fictional towns: “The Terrible Old Man” (1920) introduces the town of Kingsport, but the passing reference becomes a fully developed setting in “The Festival” (1923). Kingsport is a clear transposition of Marblehead and will also be the setting for his “last avowedly Dunsanian tale” (Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* loc. 2836): “The Strange High House in the Mist” (1926). The second fictional New England town created by Lovecraft is famous Arkham, first introduced alongside the Miskatonic Valley in “The Picture in the House” (1920). Arkham is later mentioned in numerous stories, and is part of the main setting again in “Herbert West–Reanimator” (1922), “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), “The Dunwich Horror” (1928), “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1930), “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1932), and “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933). Lovecraft wrote many times that Arkham was inspired by Salem, and the various descriptions of Arkham as “full of witch legends” (“The Colour Out of Space” 595), “legend-haunted” (“The Dreams in the Witch House” 859), “witch-cursed and legend-haunted” (“The Thing on the Doorstep” 920) are a plain confirmation. The third major fictional New England town is Innsmouth, featuring prominently in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” a coastal lugubrious town meant to represent Newburyport, MA. There are also countless minor villages or landmarks that are scattered through the various stories, with such evocative names as Devil’s Hop Yard, Cold Spring Glen, Devil Reef, Hangman’s Brook, etc.

Even though the correspondence between fictional and real towns is clearly documented, this does not prevent Lovecraft from mentioning both counterparts in different stories, and sometimes even in the same one. The inspiration from reality may be extremely strong but the Miskatonic region remains a fluctuant space that...
sometimes replaces the reality of new England, sometimes overlaps it, and sometimes coexists to its side. This mingling of reality and fiction is confirmed by the many references to other landmarks of New England: Boston, Bolton (although the Bolton the author describes is sometimes different from real-life Bolton and might have been coalesced with Lawrence, MA [Pearsall loc. 1581]), Narragansett Bay (RI), Haverhill (MA), Harvard (MA), Augusta (ME), Portland (ME), etc. So much so that it is not always clear what is real and what is not: when Lovecraft writes in a letter that fictional Dunwich is situated in the Wilbraham area in southern Massachusetts while the beginning of “The Dunwich Horror” states that the town is in “north central Massachusetts” (Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 15434), the reader is left confused and lost in a liminal world. As Joshi writes in his biography: “Lovecraft has, in other words, mingled topographical impressions from various sites and coalesced them into a single imagined locale” (I Am Providence loc. 15441). The uncanny familiarity of the Miskatonic region is, of course, a potent vehicle for the emergence of the fantastic, as Maurice Lévy observes while commenting on the physical and topographical reality of Lovecraft’s world: “it is well known that the truly fantastic exists only where the impossible can make an irruption, through time and space, into an objectively familiar locale” (36-37).

B. The Devil’s in the Detail

In order to achieve such objective familiarity, Lovecraft delves into his personal experiences and his memories of the places he has visited. Joshi notes “the keenness of perception that allows him to absorb to the full the topographical, historical, and social features of regions that many of us might heedlessly pass over” (I Am Providence loc. 9498). The incredible level of detail that he gives in his written accounts to his aunt Lillian and in his travelogues can also be found in the precision of the topography of the layout of his fictional land and towns. The examples could fill a single volume, but a part of the description of Kingsport as the narrator sees it for the first time in “The Festival” suffices to illustrate the point:

Then beyond the hill’s crest I saw Kingsport outspread frostily in the gloaming; snowy Kingsport with its ancient vanes and steeples, ridgepoles and chimney-pots, wharves and small bridges, willow-trees and graveyards; endless labyrinths of steep, narrow, crooked streets, and dizzy church-crowned central peak that time durst not touch; ceaseless mazes of colonial houses piled and scattered at all angles and levels like a child’s disordered blocks . . . (263)

Lovecraft’s fictional towns are always similarly rife with detailed descriptions of mansions, houses, churches, and official buildings, often situated in identified streets whose layout is so precise that some Lovecraft fans have had no trouble mapping them out (see Appendix 2: map of Innsmouth). The houses described in “The Festival,” “The Dreams in the Witch House” and The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, to name but a few, are exact representations of colonial houses to be found in Salem or Providence. The historical background of his Miskatonic region is similarly inspired by real elements of history and by an incredible taste for detail: for instance, the floods that open “The Whisperer in Darkness” actually happened in Vermont in 1927 (Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 16362); not to mention the innumerable references to the witch trials in Salem and to various events in the history of the region’s settlement. The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is set in Providence but it shows the same mingling of fiction and reality down to an incredible level of detail, once again confusing the reader regarding what is real and
what is not. As Joshi notes, Lovecraft found inspiration in a book called *Providence in Colonial Times* which he used to add historical characters and events to an otherwise entirely fictitious story (Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 14229). When the precise history of Arkham is revealed through various stories, the reader is left to wonder if the terrible typhoid epidemic of 1904 actually happened somewhere in New England.

**C. A Multifarious Process**

The same technique and purpose can be seen in the way Lovecraft brings together other elements of fiction and reality: the recurrent Miskatonic University is cited alongside Harvard or Princeton, while the library it holds is similarly listed among prestigious libraries of the world. Journalists from the fictional *Arkham Advertiser*, *Arkham Gazette* and *Aylesbury Transcript* cover strange events with peers from the real *Boston Globe*.

More famously, the dreaded *Necronomicon*, a fictional book written by the non-less fictional Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, is frequently referred to amidst a list of various occult or forbidden books, some of them real, others invented by Lovecraft or by his young admirers and then incorporated in his own fiction. In a funny twist of fate that Lovecraft would have enjoyed, a lot of readers and enthusiasts of the occult still believe that the *Necronomicon* is a real volume.

Scholars have repeatedly noted the strong autobiographical dimension of Lovecraft’s characters (for example, the narrator of “The Whisperer in Darkness,” an amateur student of New England folklore, and the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” who celebrates his coming of age with a tour of New England’s antiquarian sights), but biographers have also found certain resemblances with his closest friends or with fictional characters written by others (see Joshi, *I Am Providence*, for more detail, loc. 17168 and 18671). The various borrowings from reality and the transformations that Lovecraft operated on them all point to the author’s deep attachment to his native New England and to the past that defines it.

**Re-appropriation of the Past**

**A. The Quest for Origins**

Lovecraft is indeed famous for his attachment to his land and to the past—he half-seriously liked to pose as an 18th-century English gentleman, used long s’s and British or archaic spelling in his correspondence, and frequently complained about his inadequacy to the present. He wrote in a 1920 letter:

> I should describe mine own nature as tripartite, my interests consisting of three parallel and dissociated groups—(a) Love of the strange and the fantastic. (b) Love of the abstract truth and of scientific logic. (c) Love of the ancient and the permanent. Sundry combinations of these three strains will probably account for all my odd tastes and eccentricities. (qtd. in Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 723)

He was convinced that time was his greatest enemy, something to “defeat or subvert” (Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 728). He showed an early interest in genealogy and was, from a very early time, passionately devoted to his birthplace in Providence while constantly striving to preserve his English heritage. The colonial past, mostly visible through its
architecture, left a strong impression on him when he was only three, if we are to
believe him: “When I was 3 years old I felt a strange magic & fascination (not unmixed
with a vague unease & perhaps a touch of mild 

fear) in the ancient houses of
Providence’s venerable hill . . ., with their fanlighted doorways, railed flights of steps,
& stretches of brick sidewalk” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 703).

The world he discovered instantaneously drew him in and fascinated him until his
death: “it was a magic, secret world, & it had a realness beyond that of the home
neighbourhood” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 717). It is probably this sense of
“realness” that he sought above all else on his numerous trips throughout New England
and that he also tried to reconstruct in his writings. The contemporary world felt too
artificial to him and nothing but the colonial era could give him emotions as intense as
the one he felt when discovering Marblehead for the first time in 1922:

I did not know until an hour before that I should ever behold such a place as
Marblehead, and I did not know until that moment itself the full extent of the wonder
I was to behold. I account that instant . . . the most powerful single emotional
climax experienced during my nearly forty years of existence. In a flash all the past
of New England—all the past of Anglo-Saxondom and the Western World—swept
over me and identified me with the stupendous totality of all things in such a way
as it never did before and never will again. (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 9891)

It is no wonder then that, especially as time moved forward, Lovecraft would
increasingly include New England in its fictional and real forms in his writing. Many of
his characters share his keenness for the past and for the region: in “The Picture in the
House,” the narrator gets stranded in a forest outside of Arkham while on a trip for
genealogical research; the narrator of “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is on a tour of
New England’s antiquarian landmarks and is also doing genealogical research; and in
“The Whisperer in Darkness,” Wilmarth experiences an emotional rush while driving
through an old town—something reminiscent of many of Lovecraft’s letters: “It
drowsed like the older New England cities which one remembers from boyhood, and
something in the collocation of roofs and steeples and chimneys and brick walls formed
contours touching deep viol-strings of ancestral emotion” (701). The character who
most resembles Lovecraft in his ardent love for his land and in his need to reconstruct
the past is Charles Ward, from The Case of Charles Dexter Ward. Just like the author, Ward
comes back to Providence after an extended period abroad—it was New York for
Lovecraft—and the vision of his birthplace stirs up intense emotions of joy in him. It is
the same attachment that caused Lovecraft to write to his aunts, upon returning home
from New York:

My life lies not among people but among scenes—my local affections are not
personal, but topographical & architectural . . . It is New England I must have—in
some form or other. Providence is part of me—I am Providence . . . Providence
would always be at the back of my head as a goal to be worked toward—an ultimate
Paradise to be regain’d at last. (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 13271)

The words “in some form or other” and the idea of a “goal to be worked toward”
suggest a parallel between Lovecraft’s quest for the past and his reconstruction of it
through his fictional vision of the land. Each of his short stories may be seen as a
repeated attempt at progressing in this quest, the short format encouraging this
constant progression through repetition of the act of reconstruction.

Maurice Lévy highlights the fact that the impression of belonging is a primordial
notion in Lovecraft (36) and that his landscapes and ancient houses are “the privileged
terrain of a mythical quest . . . where [the author] searches for his own identity” (43). This is also why his genealogy enthusiasts keep stumbling upon old men who, by virtue of some dark magic, keep living through the centuries, hidden in the age-old houses of Kingsport, in the decaying cottages of New England backwater around Arkham, or waiting to be resuscitated by their descendants in Providence. The ancestry of the characters is full of necromancy and witchcraft, and ties them to the land they are investigating and to the past they are discovering. As Joshi comments about “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” this story is centred on “the inexorable call of heredity” and reflects the words that Lovecraft once wrote to James F. Morton: “the past is real—it is all there is” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 17205).

B. Imagining the Past

However real it may be, the past remains a reconstruction whose process is elaborated through the psyche of the author and of his characters. When Wilmarth reaches the small town in Vermont mentioned above, the emotion he feels from the presence of the past is supplemented by an intimation of the fantastic: “I could tell that I was at the gateway of a region half-bewitched through the piling-up of unbroken time-accumulations; a region where old, strange things have had a chance to grow and linger because they have never been stirred up” (“The Whisperer in Darkness” 701). The past is inexorably linked to magic because it conjures up old rituals and ancestral beliefs. As Lévy claims, the fantastic needs the presence of the past in order to emerge because it feeds on myths. What Lévy calls a dreamed-up world (monde onirisé) is what can be considered Lovecraft’s work of reconstruction and re-appropriation. New England’s rich occult history and Puritan philosophical and moral background give Lovecraft the perfect soil from which to grow his Miskatonic Country. A fierce atheist and determined materialist, Lovecraft did not believe in magic, in monsters and in witchcraft, but he knew that those beliefs were part of the land he loved. Through his act of reconstruction, they gain an actual power that they lack in reality, a discrepancy that makes Lovecraft ironically write in “The Dunwich Horror”: “these tales, of course, are obsolete and ridiculous; because they come down from very old times” (636).

The analysis of the exploration of the depths and abysses as metaphors for the exploration of the past will not be developed here, other scholars like Maurice Lévy having taken up this task before. Instead, attention will be given to the precise tools used by Lovecraft to resuscitate the past in the stories of his Miskatonic cycle. Architecture being a source of constant enjoyment for Lovecraft, houses and mansions feature prominently in his recreated towns and are powerful accessories for conjuring up the past. In “The Terrible Old Man,” the eponymous character lives in “a very ancient house” with “dusty panes,” an “aged and neglected place.” “The Picture in the House” goes much further and describes in detail the horrific place in the woods: “a time-bartered edifice,” an “antique and repellent wooden building which blinked with bleared windows,” “furnished in the barest and most primitive possible way,” “rich in relics of the past” (125-26), without a single object dating from after the Revolution. “The Festival” features a house “with an ancient peaked roof and jutting second story, all built before 1650,” and the narrator can see “from the diamond window-panes that it must have been kept very close to its antique state” (263). The whole of Kingsport is called “archaic” (401) and in “The Strange High House in the Mist,” and the house itself is a 17th-century cottage, complete with “lattice windows with dingy bull’s-eye panes”
(404). In “The Colour Out of Space,” Ammi Pierce’s cottage is described as “fearsomely archaic” (596) and Nahum Gardner’s farm was probably built before 1670. Dunwich is the oldest village of the area, with buildings erected before 1700. As aforementioned, those places are usually inhabited by ancient men whose age is impossible to tell and who are often preternaturally kept alive. To emphasise their old age, Lovecraft even came up with a dialect that many of those elders speak in the backwoods of New England. The dialect is so ancient that the narrator in “The Picture in the House” thought it had been “long extinct.” According to Joshi, Lovecraft knew that the dialect was no longer used in his days but he reconstructed it from the “Yankee dialect” found in James Russell Lowell’s *Biglow Papers* (1848-1862) (Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 8486). Here is an illustration from “The Dunwich Horror”:

“I dun’t keer what folks think—ef Lavinny’s boy looked like his pa, he wouldn’t look like nothin’ ye expeck . . . I calc’late her man is as good a husban’ as ye kin find this side of Aylesbury; an’ ef ye knowed as much about the hills as I dew, ye wouldn’t ast no better church weddin’ nor her’n.” (637)

And obviously, the many references to witchcraft and to various occult or mystical movements and rituals (like for example the reference to the rituals by the Pocumtuck Indians in “The Dunwich Horror”) constitute other manifestations of Lovecraft’s reconstruction of the past: by merging his own monsters and mythology to beliefs actually existing, Lovecraft achieves the same overlapping of fiction and reality which serves the purpose of keeping the old world alive by resuscitating and rejuvenating it.

C. Reconstruction and Preservation

Reconstructing the past for Lovecraft can be associated with two tenets of his philosophical thought: preserving civilisation, and safeguarding sanity. Explaining to their full extent Lovecraft’s philosophical and political beliefs would take up too much space here, but one of the central elements can be boiled down to the uttermost importance of civilisation. Lovecraft regarded New England and its rich history as one of the symbols of a civilisation inherited from the motherland, England, and from his beloved 18th century. However, modernisation and the machine age, capitalism, together with rampant immigration, constituted for him major threats to the model of civilisation he loved and admired. In his ideal world, art is encouraged and cultivated, men develop their intellect, good manners and a gentlemanly attitude prevail. When Wilmarth enters the remotest parts of Vermont in “The Whisperer in Darkness,” he is told to set his watch back an hour because the area has not adopted yet the daylight-saving time scheme. As he does so, “it seemed to [him] that [he] was likewise turning the calendar back a century” (700), something which must have resonated deeply in Lovecraft’s own psyche. The constant need to move forward while looking back is a thought he expressed after his return from a two-year soul-crushing stay in New York: “Continuous growth from the past is a sine qua non—in fact, I have long acknowledged archaism as the chief motivating force of my being” (qtd. in Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 13456). And yet, Lovecraft’s stories are set in a realistic contemporaneity that is also a celebration of his rational, scientific, materialistic mind and philosophy. This tension is what Chantal Foucrier analysed as an important tenet of the literature of utopia:

Could the literature of “No-Place” be the focal point where the difference between memory and anticipation resorbs? . . . [Utopian stories] explore the Edenic dream of a return to Nature and, by contrast, the cult of civilising progress. At the same time as it reactivates the regressive myth of the Golden Age, the classic utopia
prophesies the reign of science and the Enlightenment’s age of reason. (30, my translation)

23 Admittedly, Lovecraft’s spaces are not utopias, but they definitely reflect this in-between status and also allow Lovecraft to create an idealised space of altered present.

24 His spaces can also be seen as means to preserve more than civilisation: the whole of humanity’s sanity. Chantal Foucrier observes that utopias from Antiquity had the purpose of naming and mapping the void of the unknown oceans, while all utopias have always given a primordial role to time: they describe lands that used to be inhabited by a primitive humanity and represent the ideal of returning to one’s roots and origins, thereby exorcising the future and warding off death (33-37). Something similar can be found in Lovecraft’s reconstructed New England: as a cynical materialist, he developed very early a nihilistic vision of the world in which man invariably appears as an insignificant speck in the universe. Writing of an alternate reality, and more particularly in the fantastic mode, represents a means to at least temporarily establish an anchor of fixity: by mastering the world he creates and by infusing it with elements of an immutable past, he manages to temporarily maintain for his characters the illusion of a world of permanence.

25 However, the fantastic is necessarily dual, as Lévy highlights when he writes that “in a society which becomes every day more numbing and repressive, the fantastic is both a means for escape and the mobilisation of dread” (120). Lovecraft’s dreamlands of a reconstructed New England can only be read through their inherent duality, something which became obvious to the author very early: “Lovecraft is who he is because of his birth and upbringing as a New England Yankee. The need to root his work in his native soil became more and more clear to him as time went on, and it led to his gradual transformation of all New England as the locus of both wonder and terror” (Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 14317).

Re-location of Horror

A. Duality of New England’s Heritage

26 As an atheist endowed with a strongly rational mind, Lovecraft always considered the Puritan era an age of darkness. Joshi writes that it was particularly Massachusetts, due to its history, that clustered Lovecraft’s repulsion for Puritanism (see Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 706). Lovecraft’s comments on that early period of American history are numerous, like the following unabashed hyperbolic jabs: “Bunch together a group of people deliberately chosen for strong religious feelings, and you have a practical guarantee of dark morbidities expressed in crime, perversion, and insanity”; “Verily, the Puritans were the only really effective diabolists and decadents the world has known; because they hated life and scorned the platitude that it is worth living”; or the more sober: “to my imagination the 17th century is as full of macabre mystery, repression, & ghoulish adumbrations as the 18th is full of taste, gayety, grace, & beauty” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 8440, 10085). The narrow-mindedness and rigidity of the Puritans was first truly mentioned and used in Lovecraft’s fiction in “The Picture in the House,” a seminal tale for his New England stories. The text reveals that, two centuries earlier, a group of Puritans animated by a “gloomy and fanatical belief” isolated themselves from their peers to go live in seclusion in the backwoods of
Arkham: “By necessity practical and by philosophy stern, these folk were not beautiful in their sins. Erring as all mortals must, they were forced by their rigid code to seek concealment above all else” (124). Besides this particular population, the “regular” people of his New England also number superstitious villagers or incredulous and narrow-minded self-important men, like Dr. Hasley in “Herbert West–Reanimator,” a man displaying the “chronic mental limitations of the ‘professor-doctor’ type—the product of generations of pathetic Puritanism; kindly, conscientious, and sometimes gentle and amiable, yet always narrow, intolerant, custom-ridden, and lacking in perspective.” Those men are “generally punished by general ridicule for their intellectual sins—sins like Ptolemaism, Calvinism, anti-Darwinism, anti-Nietzscheism, and every sort of Sabbatarianism and sumptuary legislation” (186).

In Lovecraft’s fiction, the promised land of the settlers is first transformed into a land of nightmare. Cavin Gallaghan’s Lovecraft’s Dark Arcadia offers an interesting analysis of what he calls the Anti-Arcadian imagery in Lovecraft’s fiction. For Callaghan, Arkham is an inverted Roman caricature of Greek Arcadian myths, and Lovecraft transforms “nymph-haunted Arcadia into witch-haunted Arkham” (13), and the heavy use of the sylvan world as a macabre place recalls the likes of Hawthorne, Machen and Blackwood (17). The wildness of the land and the lurking bacchanalian rituals in various stories remind the reader of the pagan rites of Pan and of satyr-haunted forests (21). The reference to Hawthorne is important—the parentage has been noted and analysed by many critics: the same attachment to New England is obvious and the mystical and dark aspects of the land can be found in the two authors’ works. Lévy mentions the dark heritage of New England Puritanism as a tool to create a world with “historical profundity” (14) while Burleson notes the same “sentient nature of place” (281). Lovecraft himself was aware that the history of the region was a fertile soil for weird fiction, as he observes in his famous essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”:

This additional fund proceeded . . . from the keen spiritual and theological interests of the first colonists, plus the strange and forbidding nature of the scene into which they were plunged. The vast and gloomy virgin forests in whose perpetual twilight all terrors might well lurk: the hordes of coppery Indians whose strange, saturnine visages and violent customs hinted strongly at traces of infernal origin; the free rein given under the influence of Puritan theocracy to all manner of notions respecting man’s relation to the stern and vengeful God of the Calvinists, and to the sulphureous Adversary of that God. . .; and the morbid introspection developed by an isolated backwoodsmen’s life devoid of normal amusements and of the recreational mood . . .—all these things conspired to produce an environment in which the black whisperings of sinister grandmas were heard far beyond the chimney corner, and in which tales of witchcraft and unbelievable secret monstrosities lingered long after the dread days of the Salem nightmare. (1070)

The opening paragraphs of “The Picture in the House” are famous for establishing for the first time the horror inherent to the region: after enumerating a list of “strange, far places” that the “searchers after horror” usually seek—Egyptian tombs, exotic mausolea, ruins of the Antique world, etc.—the narrator adds as an unexpected conclusion: “but the true epicure in the terrible, to whom a new thrill of unutterable ghastliness is the chief end and justification of existence, esteems most of all the ancient, lonely farmhouses of backwoods New England; for there the dark elements of strength, solitude, grotesqueness, and ignorance combine to form the perfection of the hideous” (124). The choice of lexicon operated by the narrator (“true,” “chief,” “most of all,” “perfection”) emphasises the superlative essence of horror that is to be found in
those remote New England forests. In “The Festival,” it is the whole town of Kingsport which now becomes the locus of horror but it is similarly associated to an idea of ancestral doom coming from the depths of the ages: “I shivered that a town should be so aged and maggoty with subterraneaus evil,” and Lovecraft uses his famous adjective-laden style to sprinkle his story with phrases such as “primal rite,” “immemorial ocean,” “primal rite of the solstice,” etc. (266-67). In this story, horror is bred by the past of the region, a past that goes even further back than the time of the settlers. Legends are so deeply rooted there that the rumours concerning the weird Innsmouth folks are said to be “tales such as only old-time Yankees can devise and repeat with proper awesomeness” (922) in “The Thing on the Doorstep.”

Joshi interestingly notes that it was only after his disastrous stay in New York that Lovecraft would finally be able to “internalise” New England and to treat it “with both sympathy and horror” (Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 8455). Consequently, after 1926, his prose gets subtler and more dual in its evocation of New England horror, as can be seen from the opening of “The Colour Out of Space,” considered by many as a refinement of the introduction to “The Picture in the House” quoted earlier:

West of Arkham the hills rise wild, and there are valleys with deep woods that no axe has ever cut. There are dark narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically, and where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. On the gentler slopes there are farms, ancient and rocky, with squat, moss-coated cottages brooding eternally over old New England secrets in the lee of great ledges; but these are all vacant now, the wide chimneys crumbling and the shingled sides bulging perilously beneath low gambrel roofs. (594)

The setting described by the narrator evokes at the same time an almost pastoral scene with its “gentler slopes,” and “moss-coated cottages,” but the “hills” and the “glens,” which normally conjure up a peaceful and gentle image of Nature, “rise wild” and are “dark” and “narrow.” The cottages themselves are far from what a pastoral poem by Spenser or Marlowe could describe: they are “brooding” and are now empty shells abandoned by their dwellers. Adverbial syntagmas such as “not . . . ever,” “without ever” and “eternally” express a hyperbolic vision of time in which space will always supersede man.

The sublime also irremediably seeps into the description of those wild New England vistas and conveys a sense of awe and terror at the same time, while the use of extreme impressions of height or depth—illustrating Lovecraft’s predilection for words like “cyclopean,” “abyss,” “aeon,” “vistas,” “cosmic,” all conveying a sense of immensity—highlights the unnaturalness of those places. The following examples confirm this point:

It was a scene from a vision of Fuseli, and over all the rest reigned that riot of luminous amorphousness, that alien and undimensioned rainbow of cryptic poison from the well—seething, feeling, lapping, reaching, scintillating, straining, and malignly bubbling in its cosmic and unrecognisable chromaticism. (“The Colour Out of Space” 614, my emphasis)

The nearness and intimacy of the dwarfed, domed hills now became veritably breath-taking. Their steepness and abruptness were even greater than I had imagined from hearsay, and suggested nothing in common with the prosaic objective world we know. The dense, unvisited woods on those inaccessible slopes seemed to harbour alien and incredible things, and I felt that the very outline of the hills themselves held some strange and aeon-forgotten meaning, as if they were vast hieroglyphs left by a rumoured titan race whose glories live only in rare, deep dreams. (“The Whisperer in Darkness” 702, my emphasis)
The profusion of adjectives—a well-known characteristic of Lovecraft’s writing—is often reinforced by the combined use of enumerations. The second example quoted above also features an alliteration (“dwarfed, doomed”) which, along with the comparative form of “greater,” serve to further emphasise the strange power held by the hills over the narrator. The reader is faced with descriptions that are intensely coloured by the author’s choice of words which shape their reception: by placing such a strong emphasis on the emotional and visual impact elicited by those landscapes, Lovecraft clearly steers the reader towards the field of uncanny horror.

The duality of space, inspiring both wonder and terror, is echoed by the dichotomy of its people: in Arkham, the characters are often dignified and rational intellectuals, professors, doctors, seekers of knowledge, but as soon as one leaves the comforting areas of civilisation, progress slowly disappears and the population of the wildest and most isolated zones of the Miskatonic region harks back to the primality and the dark magic of the land: an immortal cannibal in “The Picture in the House,” a mixed race of humans and fish-gods in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” inbred and decayed families practising forbidden rituals in “The Dunwich Horror,” etc.

By reconstructing such a lore-laden region, Lovecraft adds his own layers of rituals and magic to densify the mythical backdrop of New England. There is an effect of superimposition of the fictional over the real, the former never completely concealing the latter, instead complementing it. As Lévy observes, Lovecraft writes on a setting strangely familiar and fabulously faraway, where a dream-topography is superimposed on the real topography. Geographic space is substituted by a malefic space. The landscapes, the cities, the dwellings of New England lose their pleasant, picturesque, diurnal aspect, to become lunatic sites, nocturnal images, degraded images of a demented dream. (41)

More than a replacement, it can be argued that Lovecraft operates a requalification of existing spaces and the beliefs associated to them through addition. For instance, in “The Colour out of Space,” no legends have been reported since the witch trials, two centuries of peace and quiet that a strange meteorite shatters when it crashes in Nahum Gardner’s farm in 1882. The following couple of years and their dreadful events have since been called “the strange days” by the people of the area and are to be added to the dark history of the region. The same phenomenon can be observed in “The Dunwich Horror,” in which the narrator tells us that the region was shunned two centuries earlier because of witchcraft and Satan worship, but the events referred to as “the horror” in 1928 have added another reason for avoiding and forsaking the place. And of course, the gods or entities of the Cthulhu Mythos add another layer to the history of religion and occultism of the region (and in the rest of the world).

B. A Sense of Place and Reality: Lovecraft’s Aesthetic Theory

Lovecraft’s fiction is often divided into chronological and thematic, aesthetic or genre-associated phases. The stories analysed here are aesthetically linked to what Joshi calls the periods of decadence and of cosmic regionalism (I Am Providence loc. 10560), while they belong to various subgenres of the fantastic, from gothic horror to a union between the fantastic and science-fiction. They all have in common the particularity of having been written after Lovecraft’s so-called Dunsanian period. Joshi writes that the discovery of Lord Dunsany helped Lovecraft develop his style and his cosmicism, while
at the same time “derailing that quest for topographical and historical realism which would ultimately be the hallmark of his work” (I Am Providence loc. 5997). It indeed took Lovecraft some time to leave the realm of fictional dream lands he had created at the beginning of his career and to transfer the power of his vision to the real world, thus effecting “a transition from pure fantasy to supernatural horror” (Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 13757).

This shift originated from a conscious evolution of Lovecraft’s aesthetic theory of the fantastic, which he generally called the weird. As early as 1921, Lovecraft wrote in his series of essays In Defence of Dagon that all fiction can be divided into three categories: the romantic, the realistic, and the imaginative; the third one being an association of the best features of the first two, namely the call to emotions and the “principle of truth—not truth to fact, as in realism, but truth to human feeling” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 10874). Lovecraft’s insistence on the strong emotional impact a fantastic story should have can be linked to Poe’s famous unity of effect, praised by Lovecraft and scrupulously respected in his short stories. The uttermost combination of the “romantic” and the “realistic” will become even more clearly stated in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” where he writes that a true weird tale is to be judged on the emotional level of dread it triggers in the reader (1043-44), and that, besides the option of complete “phantasy” à-la-Dunsany, “serious weird stories are . . . made realistically intense by close consistency and perfect fidelity to Nature except in the one supernatural direction that the author allows himself” (1086). Because it takes place in reality, or an extremely close alternate version of it, the horrific event is, Lovecraft argues, all the more intense for the reader, thereby eliciting a high level of emotional response.

Of course, we may wonder how much, if at all, this act of reconstruction, which is an act of creation, tampers with the reality that it is based on. No matter how much Lovecraft used real references for his fictional New England (towns, events, people, architecture, etc.), the product of his writing is a work of art, meaning that it is and remains artificial. The ornate style that he favoured—the purple prose that certain critics vocally dislike—necessarily applies a colouring filter to the scenes that he describes. The examples quoted before, with their heavy use of adjectives and hyperbole and their complex syntax, sometimes give to the reader the impression that he is watching a painting more than reading a realistic description of a true (or truth-inspired) place. Lovecraft’s reference to painters (Salvator Rosa, Henry Fuseli, Gustave Doré, Sidney Sime, Nicholas Roerich, etc.) in many of his stories further adds to this impression. However, the layer of unreality that Lovecraft’s writing superimposes over a plain and straightforward description only enhances the uncanny dimension of the scene. The following example is taken from “The Colour Out of Space”:

Upon everything was a haze of restlessness and oppression; a touch of the unreal and the grotesque, as if some vital element of perspective or chiaroscuro were awry. . . . It was too much like a landscape of Salvator Rosa; too much like some forbidden woodcut in a tale of terror. (595)

It is precisely the touch of the weird, of the abnormal, of the misplaced, suddenly noticed in a perfectly known and familiar setting, which elicits a response of dread in the viewer and in the reader. It is because the commonplace has been invaded by “the unreal and the grotesque” and has become “awry” that it is now unbearable, as confirmed by the double use of the quantifier “too much.” Lovecraft’s style aptly represents this incursion of the abnormal into the normal: his overly ornate and dense
prose looks out of place, or at the very least unexpected for a writer of his time, thus shedding a blanket of opacity over the text that is similar to the envelope of dread surrounding the places which are supposed to feel familiar and comforting.

In his essay “Outsiders and Aliens: The Uses of Isolation in Lovecraft’s Fiction,” Stefan Dziemianowicz writes that Lovecraft likes to isolate his characters inside familiar places, “suggesting that the supernatural flourishes in the terra incognita of the rational world” (340). He goes on by stating that Lovecraft started introducing characteristics of seclusion and isolation in his settings rather than in his characters’ psyches, adding that “in the stories set in his imaginary towns of Arkham and Kingsport, Lovecraft began to associate out-of-the-way places with abnormal phenomena,” but “only slightly off the beaten path,” “remaining in the realm of the familiar” (344). As a result, the narrator of “The Picture in the House” starts experiencing uneasiness and discomfort while browsing an ancient tome, *Regnum Congo*, and watching engravings of exotic places and unfamiliar cultures. The one illustrating a butcher shop offering human parts particularly sets his nerves on edge, but the horror of remote and exotic Africa is superseded by a horror closer to home: the owner of the book and of the isolated cottage in which he has found shelter is an old man who has discovered the key to immortality by practising cannibalism himself.

**C. Cosmicism**

This focus on the horror of places and history stems from Lovecraft’s philosophical thought, which can be summarily described as a mixture of nihilism and cynicism associated to a strong cosmic view of the world, thus resting on a deep awareness of the insignificance of man in the history of the universe. This led him to explain: “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them. . . It is man’s relation to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination” (qtd. in Joshi, *I Am Providence* loc. 10913). The point here is not to detail Lovecraft’s philosophical and ethical position, but it is important to understand how his cosmicism also helped him construct his aesthetic theory of the fantastic, as demonstrated by the following statement:

> To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. These must be handled with unsparing realism, (*not* catch-penny romanticism) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-haunted Outside—we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold. (qtd. in Joshi, *Lovecraft and a World in Transition* loc. 2955)

This comment was meant to assert the need for a specifically alien rendition of alien elements: extra-terrestrial entities must not think in terms of human psychology, must not be motivated by human desires, and even their names are supposed to be almost impossible to pronounce for someone with a human vocal cord apparatus. Still, Lovecraft’s version of New England precisely showcases both aspects, being at the same time an example of “unsparing realism” and “shadow-haunted Outside.” Consequently, they are places that can be located on the alternate map of New England, that can be travelled to from the likes of Boston or Salem, that can be objectively described as being part of the same cultural background as those other towns, sharing the same
architecture, the same historical figures, the same bloody past. And yet, they are at the same time resolutely other because they are the stages on which the strange and the horrible happen. It is precisely because of this hybridity that the narrators almost always feel instantaneously, and without any rational cause, repulsed by those places. In “The Picture in the House,” the narrator stumbles upon an “antique and repellent wooden building,” a house which “impressed [him] unfavourably the moment [he] espied it” (125). In “The Festival,” the narrator writes: “when I sounded the archaic knocker I was half afraid. Some fear had been gathering in me, perhaps because of the strangeness of my heritage, and the bleakness of the evening, and the queerness of the silence in that aged town of curious customs” (264). The Dunwich country is described as follows: “without knowing why, one hesitated to ask directions from the gnarled, solitary figures spied now and then on crumbling doorsteps or on the sloping, rock-strown meadows. . . . When a rise in the road brings the mountains in view above the deep woods, the feeling of strange uneasiness is increased. . . . When the road dips again there are stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes” (633-34). Upon arriving at Innsmouth, the narrator “glimpsed a long, black line scarcely rising above the water yet carrying a suggestion of odd latent malignancy.” He then adds: “As I looked, a subtle, curious sense of beckoning seemed superadded to the grim repulsion” (818). The reader will have to wait for the end of the story to understand this unexpected “sense of beckoning” which inexplicably rises alongside instinctive disgust. All those characters are struck by a repulsion that they cannot totally comprehend because it spurs from elements that are normally too familiar to create that sort of emotional response. And yet, it is precisely this strange familiarity, the uncanny that emanates from those places and those people, which, when they become the locus of some unknown horror, multiply the emotion of terror in the characters. This idea of a hybrid space can be paralleled with Lovecraft’s realisation that he should abandon the pure supernatural and instead, base his weird fiction on “supplements rather than contradictions of the visible & mensurable universe” (qtd. in Joshi, I Am Providence loc. 16802).

Lovecraft’s fiction can be seen as a revolt against the fixed laws of space and time, albeit a knowingly doomed revolt: his philosophical stance did not allow him to believe that his challenges to reality could in any way be taken seriously. Yet the fantastic provides a temporary, even though short-lived, escape from the crushing reality induced by his nihilism. By transforming, altering, reconstructing his beloved New England, Lovecraft found an outlet to express in a condensed mode all the wonders and horrors that were associated to the land where he was born, grew up, and died. His vision stems from a very personal attachment to New England and transcends it to reflect his thoughts on the whole of the universe.

For a work meant to take on such boundless dimensions, it is therefore not surprising that Lovecraft’s followers perpetuated it, added their own layers and landmarks to the Miskatonic region, upgraded on the original pantheon, and finally even included Lovecraft himself as a character (this first happened when Lovecraft was still alive, in Frank Belknap Long’s “The Space-Eaters,” in 1927). The master finally joined the cohort of the avatars of himself that he had created—rational genealogists, travellers in search for antiquarian sights, sober professors and intellectuals—and achieved the same status as his reconstructed land: somewhere at the border between the real and the fictional.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Biographical information throughout this paper derives from Joshi, I Am Providence.
2. “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” for example is set in Innsmouth but mentions Newburyport, while “The Dunwich Horror” mentions both Arkham and Salem.
3. “Fantastic” is used in the sense meant by Todorov in The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article s’attache à mettre en lumière les liens existant entre géographie et histoire, temps et espace, fiction et réalité dans les nouvelles de Lovecraft appartenant au cycle dédié à la Nouvelle-Angleterre, particulièrement au travers du rôle joué par les villes fictives ancrées dans la réalité de cette région. En analysant à la fois le texte fictionnel et des données biographiques, cette étude souhaite montrer comment l’horreur en tant que concept esthétique et philosophique a évolué dans l’œuvre et la pensée de Lovecraft vers un locus intrinsèquement lié à une profonde conscience de l’espace. En (re)construisant la Nouvelle-Angleterre comme une réalité alternative, Lovecraft a employé ce nouvel espace comme une ancre de stabilité et un seuil métaphorique vers le vide cosmique.

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