

H .P. Lovecraft's Quest for Harmony*

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In his attempt to contend with what he considers to be a meaningless existence¹ and ultimately to expand his own consciousness, H. P. Lovecraft examines the mind, probing its unconscious realms. He envisions unconsciousness and all the illusions and dreams which complement our waking reality as part of an all-encompassing cosmic order which he equates with a state of harmony. In Lovecraft's view, the timeless, multi-dimensional state of harmony which exists on the rim of consciousness and beyond the wall of sleep can be perceived by a sensitive mind. The perimeter of our existence is silhouetted in moments of consciousness and it is up the conscious mind to find paths to harmony. Lovecraft's fiction and non-fiction reflect his absorption with the search for paths to harmony.

To Lovecraft, the best way to find harmony and its different states remains the placid merging with one's dreams and illusions; dreams and feelings which have gone before the present conscious and unconscious existence provide a mould that shapes all existence. These unconscious illusions do not totally discredit the external manifestations of consciousness, including the values of good, evil, beauty and ugliness. On the contrary, these values become the "ornamental fruits of perspective," and provide linkage to similar instincts in our fathers, although finer details of being differ from race to race and culture to culture.²

This view of values and their relation to dreams does not explain the relation of dreams to perspective or which type of dreams, in the view of Lovecraft, are the best avenue into the states reflected in harmony. Hence, understanding the relationship dreams bear to waking reality becomes necessary. Lovecraft himself states in a letter written in 1918 that he recognizes a distinction between dream life and real life, between

appearances and actualities. He continues by expressing a wish to know whether in the state usually called "unconsciousness" one is actually asleep or awake. He questions whether the environment and laws which affect man are external and permanent or the transitory products of one's own brain.³ Eleven years later in his short story "The Silver Key," published in 1929, Lovecraft's narrator states that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference between those images born of "real" things and those born of inward dreamings. Most importantly, there does not seem to be any cause to value one of the supposed bases of images more than the other. Lovecraft repeats the same statements later in his Some Current Motives and Practices published in 1936.⁴

These ideas are further documented in a story in which Lovecraft's narrator probes the importance and validity of dream visions. In a letter of February 11, 1930, Lovecraft expounds the same statement made by the narrator of this story.⁵ Within "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," the narrator rejects the "puerile symbolism" of Freud which reduces man's dreams to no more than faint and fantastic reflections of waking experiences.⁶ The speaker believes there still exists a number of dreams whose mystical and ethereal character suggest no ordinary interpretation. These visions are just that, visions or glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, but separated from that life by some sort of barrier. Even more significant, man lost to terrestrial consciousness can make himself aware of that superterrestrial consciousness and thus may find himself sojourning in another life. This other uncorporeal life contains visions: slight and indistinct after waking, yet no less real. From blurred memories of dreams, man may infer a great deal, though up to this point prove little. Lovecraft guesses that within dreams, life, matter, and vitality, as the earth knows such things, are not necessarily constant, and time and space as comprehended by man's waking self will cease to exist. Lovecraft carries his belief in dreams one step further when he asserts in one of his letters that the dream-vision surpasses the material life in truth-value.⁷ Within these dreams, man can experience a lofty freedom that will put him outside mankind and the universe. This freedom relates to Lovecraft's concept of harmony--a true godlike inspiration.⁸

In his view, out of the whole montage of dreams, the most accurate are those from childhood. The dreams, of children, says Lovecraft, are fresh and new within the mind.⁹ Perhaps only half formed, nevertheless they are

nearest the consciousness out of which man is born. Yet, in adulthood, these same dreams become dulled and made prosaic with what Lovecraft believes to be the poison of life.¹⁰ Thus, not surprisingly, several of Lovecraft's characters attempt to return to the dreams of their childhood. In The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath,¹¹ for example, Randolph Carter is carried back in time, though the use of his dreams. In the course of his journey, he relives visions of Providence, Salem, Concord, and various streets of his childhood. The character Kuranos in the story "Celephais"¹² is also carried back to the places of his childhood. In these two pieces, Lovecraft shows that all gleaned visions come from childhood dreams.

Childhood dreams are not the only key into the unknown. The silver key, another symbol Lovecraft uses in his fiction to symbolize the key into the unknown, is covered with mystical writing that looks something like hieroglyphics. The stories "Through the Gates of the Silver Key"¹³ and the "Silver Key,"¹⁴ two of the principal works dealing with this symbol, describe characters attempting to decipher the key so as to go be able to go into the unknown state. In each, gaining the code is the only method by which one may decipher the writing. It is interesting to note that within each story the code may be obtained by travelling through dreams back into childhood.

Lovecraft provides still other keys to the unknown. In "The Call of Cthulhu" and "Billington's Wood,"¹⁵ The speakers come in contact with bas-reliefs covered with either strange and cryptic prehistoric writing or curious Runic-type writing. In "Billington's Wood," there are also concentric circles with rayed lines, inscribed on various stones and copied in windows. Both the concentric circles and the bas-reliefs, when viewed in the appropriate light, reveal a picture of some strange figure, similar to conceptions of the Christian devil, surrounded by "winged things" and other creatures from Kadath. Lovecraft's idea of circles seems to parallel the description of magic circles drawn by Richard Cavendish in The Black Arts.¹⁶ Cavendish describes the magic circles as usually containing concentric circles. He adds that when a mystic drew circles for the purpose of evoking evil forces, he included a triangle, which can be seen as similar to the lines Lovecraft describes.

In The Lurker at the Threshold Lovecraft again includes circles, this time of stones, Druidic in nature. The stones also bear designs, "curiously antipodal" to the triangles, of a star which has inscribed within it a pillar of

flame, rather than rayed lines. The malignant window in this selection becomes a lens, prism, or mirror reflecting vision from another dimension or dimensions. The window has also been designed to reflect obscure rays that operate on vestigial and forgotten extra senses. There is even the clue that the construction of the window may be beyond the work of human hands.¹⁷ The scenes to be viewed through the circular window with its rayed lines are somehow a reflection of the possible horror on the other side of consciousness. There appears a hideous face similar to Azathoth, the blind idiot god, and a landscape completely alien to anything any person has seen. Surely non-terrestrial, the land looks dresdfully pitted and torn, the sky frightfully filled with strange and baffling constellations one of which, says Lovecraft, bears a resemblance to the Hyades. The constellation seems so close that it appears the group of stars have moved closer to the earth by thousands of light years. The viewer in addition can see movement in the alien heavens: amorphous beings, grotesque octopoid representations, things that fly on black rubbery wings and drag clawlike feet.¹⁸

As Lovecraft delves into horror, though, his visions and his view of horror itself become more and more complex. The views through the windows become confused with the "nethermost abysses of the human soul,"¹⁹ and as the evil visions settle over the house in which the viewer is standing, the viewer becomes locked within an inner struggle. The narrator suggests the name given to the struggle as "schizophrenia" but claims it to be an incorrect label. The term "schizophrenia" suggests changeability in moods. This, however, limits man. Lovecraft contends that the force of "evil" in such struggles is merely the hugeness of the human mind unrealized.²⁰ There is no split personality; there is a personality which exceeds dimensions of time and space in an extra-terrestrial state. This state exists yet we cannot see it. And, it enables man to be carried to a double state; in actuality, beyond this world: in essence, within the mind. Lovecraft carries these extended metaphors and analogies throughout his work. The narrator finally says that a step against the horrible creatures viewed through the window, is a step against "self-interest." To step against the actuality of the view through the window means stepping against one's self because the view is also directed within.

The unknown state can be best approached through dreams while the keys, windows and stones are the appropriate external talismen to help carry the dreamer within; yet other means to achieve the consmos remain. For the

most part, these means take the form of rites adapted and sometimes invented by Lovecraft for use in his fiction. One of the principal rites is the use of black magic which can carry the performer into the state of harmony. One such rite is that of voodoo. "The Call of Cthulhu"²¹ has hints of voodoo rites multiplying as a result of various dreamers' delirium. Within "The Tale of Inspector Legrasse,"²² the inspector of the title stumbles on a voodoo cult practicing rites inherited from a dark sect unknown to the Inspector. He discovers, though, that this dark sect is infinitely more diabolical than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles. And out of the wildest dreams of mythmaker and theosophist which Inspector Legrasse can discern, within these malevolent rites in the black haunted woods, comes the name "Cthulhu" and the place "R'lyeh". The significance of these names will be discussed shortly. The importance of the rites stems from their power to carry man into the most fantastic unknown and the state of harmony.

Voodoo is only one means though. In The Lurker at the Threshold, sorcery, "a conniving with the Devil," is used to summon "Nyarlathotep" and "Yug Sotot." Hand in hand with the sorcery comes the admonition, "One is not to open the door which leads to strange time and place, nor to invite Him who lurks at the threshold, not to call out to the hills without the proper locks and guards."²³ In "The Dreams in the Witch-House,"²⁴ Lovecraft makes another reference of the "Him" who rules all time and space from a black throne at the center of chaos.

In "Beyond the wall of Sleep"²⁵ Lovecraft makes use of yet another form of mingling with the unknown: possession. A better word for this state might be multi-consciousness. In this tale the speaker comes in contact with consciousness of another man's sleep and discovers that this consciousness has been freed to wander vast spaces and times, and has indeed broken through to the multi-dimensional state of sleep or the real self of which the waking self is totally unaware. It was through the "insanity" of the speaker that he was able to communicate with this other consciousness.

Various other rites are practiced throughout the stories. In "The Narrative of Winfield Phillips," one finds good examples of the verbal codes Lovecraft uses. Strange phonetic words are employed to summon Yogsothoth: "Ia. Ia. N'ghaa, n'n' ghai. Ia, ia. N'ghai, n-yah," and so forth.²⁶

Most of the rites invented by Lovecraft for use in his fiction are performed by Charles Dexter Ward in The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward. And Lovecraft here introduces many of the documents he invented for use in his rites. Some of the books, like of Evill Sorceries Done in New England of Demons in No Humane Shape, were created for use in summoning most general forces. Most important to Lovecraft's work, however, is his invention of the "secret" or apocryphal books headed by the dread Necronomicon of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. The Necronomicon, one of Lovecraft's brilliant inventions, is mentioned in most of his stories, containing shuddering hints of the Great Old Ones who lurk just behind the consciousness of man. These gods manifest themselves from time to time. In brief, the Necronomicon originally entitled Al Azif, was written approximately A. D. 730 at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred, "a man poet of Sana, in Yemen," who is said to have flourished during the period of the Ommiade Caliphs. Its history is purported to be as follows:

Translated into Greek as the Necronomicon,

A. D. 950 by Theodorues Philetus.

[Note one of the pen names Lovecraft uses here.]

Burnt by Patriarch Michael A. D. 1050 (i. e. Greek text... Arabic text now lost).

Olaus Wormius translates Greek to Latin, A. D. 1228.

Latin and Greek editions suppressed by Pope Gregory IX, A. D. 1232.

Black letter edition. Germany, 1400?

Greek text printed in Italy, 1500 - 1550.

Spanish translation of Latin Text, 1600?²⁷

To supplement this creation, Lovecraft added the fragmentary records of the "Great Race," the Pnakatic Manuscripts; the blasphemous writings of the minions of Cthulhu, the R'lyah Text; the Book of Dzyan; the Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan; and the Dhal Chants. Most of these books, within The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward, are mentioned throughout his other works.

Many people believed the Necronomicon actually did exist. Such belief prompted various hoaxes. One such hoax, for example, was advertised by Walter Baylor in The Antiquarian Bookman:

Alhazred. Abdul. The Necronomicon. Spain, 1647.

Calf covers rubbed and some foxing, otherwise very nice condition. Many small woodcuts of mystic signs and symbols. Seems to be treatise (in Latin) on Ritualistic Magic. Ex. lib. stamp on front fly leaf states that the book has been withdrawn from the Miskatonic Univ. Library. Best offer.²⁸

Miskatonic University is another Lovecraft creation where Charles Dexter Ward and other characters found many of the dread books.

Next to the Necronomicon, the other works mentioned irregularly leave only the suggestion of mystical writings. For these writings, Lovecraft transcribed his own versions:



Y'AI 'NG' NGAH
YOG - SOTHOTH
H'EE - L'GEB
F, AITHRODOG
UAAAH



OGTHROD AI'F
GEB'L - EE'H
YOG - SOTHOTH
'NGAH'NG AI'Y
ZHRO

The two archaic symbols above the writing consist of the "Dragon's Head" on the left (used in almanacs to indicate the ascending node) and the "Dragon's Tail" on the right (the descending node). Lovecraft suggests that the incantation on the right brought horror.²⁹

Also, from the "John Hay Library" comes this strange writing.³⁰

Coxymp 2Gghdy Gt
Cody 9sp f ppsg dm dypym
WZ qhga h h h h h
C q a h z p o f o r h m

Lovecraft's view of dreams brings up some interesting considerations. Much like William Wordsworth, Lovecraft sees the child as nearest the immortality surrounding him, out of which he is born and must suffer a "strange" death, strange in that through death there will be some return to immortality, and a transfiguration of consciousness. Yet, in his conceptions, Lovecraft fails to consider certain questions. As man grows older, in whatever concept of time one might consider, it is natural for memories to become distorted as the person and his experiences change. Certainly dreams, though they perhaps remain unchanged, must also suffer some distortion merely for being a part of a total consciousness; as the mind shapes itself, it moulds all experiences into the latest shape. It follows that the dreams will be no more in focus than waking reality, and all consciousness and unconsciousness accept no standard but subjectivity. These questions, however, fail to consider an even more basic inconsistency.

In Lovecraft's view of dreams man can somehow separate the mind from its creations by pausing to step back and look at the "actualities" within dreams. In other words, the dreams exist autonomously if the mind can detach itself enough to objectively consider the dreams. However, this view is inconsistent with the view that the mind defines. Lovecraft illustrates that imagination and dreams are personal and an extension of the waking consciousness one knows. He also states that the mind defines. The logical reduction of these two statements is that the mind defines the imagination and dreams; these have to be a creation of the mind as they are an extension. In considering dreams, the mind, in essence, turns to what it has created, or itself.

One could argue that dreams and imagination may be shaped by experience and are not the same as experience. But all of these creations shaped within the mind, whether experiences or a sort of consciousness, are a projection, something the mind has chosen out of itself. If one accepts this as true, then the actuality appearing in the dreams must be a projection of "thought." The study of such dreams, then, becomes as futile a sign into the unknown as waking reality. Lovecraft in essence attempts to define through defining the original definition: a faulty tactic.

In another light, Lovecraft states that actuality of dreams can be defined apart from the essence of self yet also states that all we know of the mind comes from its own definition, through dreams in this case. As Yests asks,

can we know the dancer from the dance? Can we separate the mind from its creations and then define those creations from within, subjectively? If not, then the mind becomes the experience it chooses and can no longer judge these in any way. Man becomes no closer to his essence than the experiences the mind chooses, and these experiences become clouded by the mind that creates them.

The only conclusion to be drawn from this dilemma seems to demand that the mind somehow must analyze itself since this is all it can be certain of perceiving; moreover, it must employ the only standard it has, itself. Lovecraft contends that dreams constitute a reality existent apart from waking reality, but ultimately cannot cope with the perceived reality. He confronts the wall of external projections and seems to be beyond into greater levels of consciousness, yet in his contention he stumbles over the basic premise that the mind in essence defines all consciousness, or is the same as all consciousness.

Due to Lovecraft's preoccupation with unknown and his view of man's attempt to achieve this state, one may ask whether or not Lovecraft found satisfaction in his perceived answers resulting from his quest for the state of harmony. Throughout most of his writing he expresses the view that man should be content searching for the answers to existence through truth with the aid of non-emotional imagination. Yet in the course of his letters, he also states that it is better not to seek the underlying truths of life.³¹ Occasionally he adds that man should glide over the surface of life as a summer wind and die before ever awakening to the realities of existence.³² Lovecraft's contempt for man affects his writing. In fact, he rejects man, literature, scholarship, aspiration, and all of what he terms the sickly show.³³ This rejection also affects his fiction.

Lovecraft's absorption with seeking these paths to harmony grows out of his need for a system that will incorporate his seemingly contradictory contempt for man and man's sense of purposelessness on one hand, and Lovecraft's desire to seek answers to existence with the aid of non-emotional imagination and truth (or "the pleasure of pure reason as found in the perception of truths"³⁴) on the other. The paths to harmony also complement the state of harmony since the paths represent both a means by which to reach the state and (in the case of dreams and illusions) part of the total conscious and unconscious mind of man which constitute part of the state.

Notes

1. In his letters, Lovecraft expresses the view that the universe is an isolated cosmic intelligence outside time and space (H. P. Lovecraft: Selected Letters, eds., August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City, Wisconsin, 1965), p. 172. A letter dated May 3, 1922) where existence is an endless and purposeless chain, beginning and ending nowhere (Selected Letters, p. 132. A letter dated May 13, 1921). Since no such thing as an end to any chain of being can be expected, the "chain of appearances" becomes as much a part of fate as the result and thus man must discover that no one state can be any more natural than any other; no life has any meaning or central principle which can be imposed upon it (Selected Letters, p. 133. A letter dated May 15, 1921).
2. "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," Weird Tales, July 1934.
3. Selected Letters, p. 63. A letter dated May 15, 1918.
4. H. P. Lovecraft, Some Current Motives and Practices (n. p., 1936).
5. Selected Letters, p. 114.
6. "Beyond the wall of Sleep," Weird Tales, March 1938.
7. Selected Letters, P. 89. A letter dated September 27, 1919.
8. Ibid., p. 305. A letter dated February 7, 1924.
9. Ibid., p. 119. A letter dated June 11, 1920.
10. Ibid., p. 308. A letter dated February 7, 1924.
11. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" (New York, 1970).
12. Marvel Tales, May 1934.
13. Weird Tales, July 1934.
14. Ibid., February 1928.
15. Ibid.
16. (New York, 1968), pp. 237-239.
17. "Narrative of Winfield Phillips," 1945.
18. "Manuscript of Stephen Bates," 1945.
19. Ibid., p. 143.
20. H. P. Lovecraft, Notes and Commonplace Book Employed by the Late H. P. Lovecraft (Lakeport, California, 1938), P. 30.

21. Weird Tales, February 1928.

22. H. P. Lovecraft, The Cthulhu Mythos (New York, 1971).

23. "Billington's Wood," 1945.

24. Weird Tales, July 1933.

25. Ibid., March 1938.

26. "Narrative of Winfield Phillips," 1945. Lovecraft says Lord Dunsany had a direct influence on his writing (Selected Letters, p. 243. A letter dated July 30, 1923). August Derleth believes Lovecraft was influenced by: Poe's Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, the "Yellow Sign" in The King in Yellow by Robert W. Chambers, Ambrose Bierce's An Inhabitant of Carcosa and Arthur Machen's The White People (August Derleth, H.P.L.: A Memoir (New York, 1945), P. 74).

In At the Mountains of Madness, some of Lovecraft's characters shout "Tekeli-li, Tekeli-li," which reflect the same words in Poe's Narrative of A. Gordon Pym.

The creatures called "dols" in Machen's fiction become "Dholes" in Lovecraft's The Dream-Quest of the Unknown Kadath.

27. Selected Letters, p. 49. A letter dated February 10, 1917.

28. August Derleth, "Introduction," The Dunwich Horror (New York, 1069), P. 18.

29. The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (New York, 1941), P. 109.

30 Ibid., p. 124.

31. Selected letters, P. 43. A letter dated January 31, 1917.

32. Ibid., p. 68. A letter dated June 8, 1918.

33. Ibid., p. 314. A letter dated February 20, 1924.

34. Selected Letters, p. 87. A letter dated September 14, 1919.

*The works of H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), a popular twentieth-century occult fantasy writer, remain in constant demand. "The Cosmology of H. P. Lovecraft" (Bulletin of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 8 (1985), pp. 37-49), discusses and describes the state of harmony, i. e., cosmology, presented in Lovecraft's fiction and non-fiction. This paper further explores Lovecraft's cosmology by discussing the means by which one might reach the state of harmony.