

Egyetemi doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei

CONFRONTING THE “BOUNLESS AND HIDEOUS UNKNOWN”: SCIENCE, CATEGORIZATION, AND NAMING IN H. P. LOVECRAFT’S FICTION

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1. Aim of the Study

The dissertation analyzes the fiction of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, concentrating on the strategies of the text employed in dealing with the unknown. The “unknown” is defined as the primary anomaly addressed by the Lovecraftian text through various scientific, cognitive, and linguistic tools, which tools are studied in four separate, if overlapping, chapters in the dissertation.

The dissertation is justified on at least two accounts: First, Lovecraft himself is currently a spectral figure in literature, still hardly recognized as part of the American canon even though he is established by academics and fans alike as the sole representative of a pivotal moment in the evolution of popular literature—the birth of modern horror and science fiction. The study declares the importance of Lovecraft’s work, which is becoming increasingly evident from the Library of America edition of his tales (2005) and the gigantic body of criticism that has been accumulated since the 1970s. Second, I look at Lovecraft’s oeuvre in a novel way and make an effort to join a rather fresh critical discussion of Lovecraft, heralded by monographs by Donald R. Burleson and Timo Airaksinen as well as essays primarily by Kieran Setiya. This critical strain concentrates on cognitive and linguistic aspects of Lovecraft’s fiction.

Early critical work on Lovecraft dealt chiefly in autobiography in the fiction, poetry, essays, and correspondence, often attempting an “armchair psychoanalysis” of the author. This resulted in certain widespread and axiomatic contentions, such as that the man is identical to his work; his work is identical to his dreams; and finally, his work, dreams, and personality are chiefly the product of, and an honor to, his hometown, Providence.

My dissertation strives to go beyond the contention that Lovecraft recreated his life in his fiction and, conversely, reiterated his fiction in his life. In my study I provide a view of the

Lovecraftian text as a *semi-autonomous entity* that produces and reproduces conceptions of science and language as it is embedded in a specific cultural context. This context, the “will to knowledge,” as defined by Michel Foucault in “The Discourse on Language” (1971), has guided Western thought at least since the inception of modern science with Francis Bacon. My aim is to trace this “lifeline” of the will to knowledge, together with its ambiguities and its paradoxes, in the Lovecraftian text. In my study I employ the central idea of paradigms and paradigm shifts in the sense that the philosophy of science supplies: the “unknown” is viewed from a perspective of science supported by the idea of paradigm shifts originated by Thomas S. Kuhn.

2. Methodology

My analysis involves a twofold investigation of Lovecraftian thematics and language, in which I call to my aid four major bodies of criticism and theory: 1) the theories, or “philosophies,” of the literary modes of the Gothic, the fantastic, horror, and science fiction; 2) Lovecraft studies, a fully evolved discipline that involves the biographical and critical study of Lovecraft and his writings; 3) the philosophy of science, including notions on empiricism, induction, paradigm shifts, and scientific language; and, finally, 4) the philosophy of language, including various ideas on the creation and operation of concepts and categories, the cognitive-linguistic tools of analogy and metaphor, and so forth. Other areas consulted include the philosophy of the sublime by way of Burke and Kant, phenomenology as reinvented by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and experientialism as defined by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson—some as evidence, others merely as heuristics.

A major point of departure in method involves staking out my invention, the semi-autonomous *Lovecraftian text*, which I specify along the lines of certain periods in Lovecraft’s life and thought that roughly serve as foundations for the evolution of his style

and themes—periods such as his “exile” in New York in and his return to his hometown, Providence. The bulk of what I understand as the Lovecraftian text was thus produced roughly between 1924, the year of Lovecraft moving to New York, and 1936, the year of his death, and received a special boost in 1926, when he returned to Providence. The Lovecraftian text is characterized by a certain self-created mythology, a cosmicist perspective, and a language that is simultaneously quasi-scientific and metaphorically excessive: in these tales the author finally fuses his philosophical views (cosmic pessimism and the idea of a mechanistic universe) and the image of alien races from beyond the known universe, mostly through the creation of a special and horrific mythology.

The dissertation does not include analyses of Lovecraft’s “early fiction” (1905-21), “Poesque” stories, and mythic-oneiric Dunsanian tales, as these all embody different attitudes to fantasy/the fantastic, the Gothic, and the weird tale. Furthermore, due to the uniformity of the Lovecraftian text as defined in this study, no chronological order of the tales is observed: thematics and the linguistic tools with which the author equips his narrator-protagonists comprise the main foci of scrutiny.

Lovecraft’s voluminous correspondence provides some additional information on his views and work method. Yet, even if out of the estimated 100,000 letters written by Lovecraft 10,000 have survived, I avoid exploiting them as premises or evidence for my thesis and only make use of them to supplement my arguments: I sample them for the author’s consenting or dissenting views on various points of his own fiction. Lovecraft’s essays and contributions to periodicals are handled in the same way.

I consult all secondary material not having to do directly with literary theory—such as the various writings on the philosophy of science and the philosophy of language—in accordance with the idea of discourse as summarized by Michel Foucault in “The Discourse on Language,” first used in *The Order of Things* (1966) and later propounded in *The*

Archaeology of Knowledge (1969). My underlying assumption throughout this study is that discourse, or—more precisely—the discourse of science and epistemology, finds its way into the Lovecraftian text, which in turn reflects the discourse of knowledge of its time as a form of representation itself: the Lovecraftian text exists alongside the discourse of natural science and epistemology and is thus infused with the ideas carried in those legacies of knowledge while also influencing them. I assume, therefore, that the Lovecraftian text is embedded in a specific context, the epistemological discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I launch my dissertation with the literary theories of the nature of the fantastic, the gothic, and horror fiction (represented in the dissertation by Tzvetan Todorov, Eric S. Rabkin, Kathryn Hume, Rosemary Jackson, Roger B. Solomon, Kelly Hurley, Noël Carroll, Dani Cavallaro, and others), which—in addition to identifying the scope of the Lovecraftian text—help specifying the Lovecraftian *weird tale*. The *weird* is a category that is capable of condensing the major genre-specifics of horror, the gothic, the fantastic, and even those of science fiction. These theories also clarify the confrontation of the protagonist with the anomaly, or what I call the *supramundane* after Bradley Alan Will. This supramundane effect or event establishes the site of the fantastic in the Lovecraftian text: different loci of *fantastic confrontation* between the protagonist and the supramundane are created such as the “double city,” the “nether regions,” and the “double protagonist.”

The supramundane also inevitably ushers in the scientific dimension of the Lovecraftian text, including the establishment of the protagonist as a scientist on the basis of a weak definition of science adopted from Peter Medawar. The confrontation motif is analyzed with respect to the Lovecraftian scientific paradigm as a set of the protagonist’s tools for interpreting unknown phenomena of the universe, a uniform—empiricist, materialist, and rationalist—vision of reality. The confrontation motif involves the scientific paradigm and its

radical refutation and disintegration. The dissertation makes great use of Thomas S. Kuhn's idea of *paradigm change*, which opposes the view of science as a gradual accretion of knowledge. I point out the ambiguous attitude of the Lovecraftian text to science and empiricism, which implies that the dominant paradigm is suitable for detecting the supramundane phenomenon but not for meaningfully interpreting the anomaly on its own grounds. In this failure the Lovecraftian enterprise subverts its own premise, which is depicted in all of Lovecraft's tales through an *incomplete paradigm shift*.

The confrontation motif and the incomplete paradigm shift have reverberations in language as well, therefore, the second half of the dissertation extrapolates from the premise that language not only reflects but also produces the empiricist-materialist paradigm and even controls the epistemological processes. I demonstrate the implosion of the notion of a privileged “specialist” language and show that any attempt at a conceptual-linguistic representation of the supramundane anomaly—from classical to prototype categorization, from precision to vagueness—necessarily ends in failure. My arguments are based on the ideas of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mary Hesse, Eleanor Rosch, George Lakoff, Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke, John R. Taylor, George W. Grace, Richard Boyd, and Kuhn himself.

The Lovecraftian protagonist's experience of the anomaly and his gestures of naming, categorization, and analogy all flow back into the paradigm that conditions the perception of the anomaly. The Lovecraftian disruption of this circular process is pointed out in the final section of the study, where I detail the dynamics of various conceptual-linguistic processes converging on a Lovecraftian rhetoric or “style.” I analyze the relationship of quasi-scientific categorization and analogy to poetic metaphor and metonymy, corroborated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's as well as Lakoff and Mark Turner's ideas on conceptual metaphor and experientialism. Tracing the ambiguous metaphor, I turn to Paul Ricoeur's notion of the *living metaphor* (*la métaphore vive*) as the embodiment of rhetorical as well as ontological tension.

The ontology of this tensive metaphor explains not only the ambiguity in the protagonists' attitudes to the central anomaly, but it also justifies the view of Lovecraftian text as "text become monster." This monstrous text is created in the disintegration of linguistic processes, where the conceptual impact of the indescribable and unnamable overflows into the world of representation via the confrontation motif and, despite the success of the excessive metaphor, brings about the demise of language and epistemology. Here I also make use of J. Hillis Miller's idea that mapping and representation are kindred activities, through which I connect Lovecraft's regionalism and gothic-cosmic locales with his tropes.

The dissertation, furthermore, exploits the titanic inventory of Lovecraft criticism, represented here chiefly by the work of S. T. Joshi, Donald R. Burleson, Kieran Setiya, Timo Airaksinen, Peter Cannon, Maurice Lévy, Fritz Lieber, Dirk W. Mosig, David Ashby Oakies, Peter Penzoldt, Robert H. Waugh, and Bradley Alan Will.

3. Major Findings

In my investigation of the implicit discourse of knowledge in the Lovecraftian text, I disclose certain trademark Lovecraftian props, devices, and specificities. These are: 1) *regionalism* coupled with *cosmicism*, 2) a scientific worldview comprising *empiricism* and *experientialism*, 3) a *quasi-mythos*, and 4) a style wrought with both *flowery* and *dry quasi-scientific language*. These aspects of the Lovecraftian text buttress my main argument in the dissertation: namely, that *the Lovecraftian text is utterly ambiguous, exhibiting on both the thematic and linguistic levels the coexistence of, and vacillation between, the topoi of creation and revelation, of mapmaking and map-reading*. This ambiguity, first observable as a paradoxical dialectic, manifests itself in the Lovecraftian text's dealings in the fantastic and horror, science and art, conceptualization and categorization, as well as analogy and metaphor.

In my study, the specific elements of the Lovecraftian text are further broken down into the following components, or *ground rules*: The fantastic in the text appears as both transgression and some horrific *interstitiality*, that is, the aesthetics of “the between,” resulting in absurd and paradoxical categories of nature—ultimately, the human—that are between and beyond categories. Yet, the Lovecraftian text belies its obsession with defining these endlessly “re-categorized” natural and human realms through observation, measurement, prototype categorization, and naming, and by applying both conceptual and poetic metaphor.

I find, nonetheless, that whatever the ground rules may be, the Lovecraftian game itself subverts all possibilities of resolution, disclosure, or repose: a failure that is inherent in the Lovecraftian conflict. The Lovecraftian text is hesitant, advocating an absurd stance where knowledge is both successful and dysfunctional. The special vision of the Lovecraftian text traces the edges of conceptual structures: Lovecraftian language can say the unsayable and write the unwritable by applying indirect linguistic processes: negation, silence, metaphor, and metonymy, all conjoined in the ecstasy of excess. The “unknown,” which manifests itself through this matrix of negative representation at the threshold of words and this negative philosophy at the edges of things, manages to acquire form and mass: it becomes a word, a thing. The negative aspect of the Lovecraftian text is also apparent in its scientific constructs: through paradigm shifts, existing knowledge is negated, broken up, and monstrously reconstructed to represent the anomaly. Due to its preoccupation with fissions and fusions, the Lovecraftian text presents the underside of the disciplines of biology (through interstitial categories of the human), physics (through distortions of space and time), and astronomy (through the account of an alien and unknown universe).

The Lovecraftian text also asserts that science and literature are kindred disciplines, and the indirect specification of the unknown involves a poetic recreation of language. The discourse of horror has a kind of genealogy similar to the “will to knowledge.” Modern

horror—which has existed since the Age of Reason proper or at least since the more narrowly understood Enlightenment—is something utterly different from horrific imagery in the *Odyssey* or the Book of Job, and takes as its emblematic figure the character of Faust. The dissertation allots a symbolic place to the Lovecraftian text in this history of horror. Apart from aesthetic reasons of Lovecraft’s significance, such as the fusion of near-Romantic poetics with materialist-empiricist premises as well as the daring and at the same time critical use of the new sciences of Einstein and Planck, I argue that 1) Lovecraft processes the epistemological problems of both British and American Gothic horror, fantasy, and “scientifiction,” and that 2) other writers came to Lovecraft and took all or some of his ideas and techniques. In this, the Lovecraftian text is metatextually also the locus of a philosophical paradigm shift in the world of popular literature, and Lovecraft’s figure looms as a paradigm shifter.

4. Related Publications

a. Journal Essays

- “Knowledge in the Void: Anomaly, Observation, and the Incomplete Paradigm Shift in H. P. Lovecraft’s Fiction.” *The Lovecraft Annual* 2 (2008): 165-92.
- “The Innsmouth ‘Thing’: Monstrous Androgyny in H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Thing on the Doorstep.’” *Gender Studies* 3.1 (2004): 179-87.
- “Naturalizing the Supernatural: H. P. Lovecraft and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror.” *British and American Studies* 9 (2003): 85-91.

b. Review

- “The Age of Lovecraft Is Not Over Yet” (Review of the *Lovecraft Annual* 1 and 2, ed, S. T. Joshi). *HJEAS* 14.2 (2008): 445-49.