

## INTRODUCTION

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(WARNING: THIS INTRODUCTION DISCUSSES KEY ELEMENTS  
OF THE NOVEL'S PLOT.)

In a much-quoted homage, Stephen King once described H. P. Lovecraft as the twentieth-century horror story's "dark and baroque prince." And this is a prince who wields old-school, feudal power: like few other writers before or since, Lovecraft fundamentally defined the shape of his chosen literary field. If anything, in fact, the label "prince" is inadequate. When one considers the canonical nature of Lovecraft's texts, the awed scholasticism with which his followers discuss his cosmology, and the endless recursion of his ideas and his aesthetics by the faithful, an alternative analogy presents itself: Lovecraft is horror's pope.

But without diminishing the man's peculiar genius, we must see Lovecraft as a product of his time. We can make sense of him, and his astonishing visions, only to the extent that we understand him as defined by the specific horrors, concrete and psychic, of the early twentieth century.

### 1. THE SURRENDER TO THE WEIRD

Genre writers, it is often claimed, are uninterested in characterization, theme, or nuance, and instead vulgarly subordinate everything to the

exigencies of plot. This, of course, is nonsense. In fact, many genre writers don't do plot either.

H. P. Lovecraft is the towering genius among those writers of fantastic fiction for whom plot is simply not the point. For Lovecraft, the point is the weird. Nowhere is this more clear than in the outstanding *At the Mountains of Madness*, described by one preeminent Lovecraft scholar as "a triumph in almost every way."<sup>1</sup> The question concerning Lovecraft is not whether he can or cannot do plot, but whether or not plot and narrative arc are the elements that drive his art.

This is not to say that Lovecraft's stories are clumsy in their craft. Some, like "The Statement of Randolph Carter," move tightly and precisely, evoking growing foreboding as the protagonist listens to radio reports from a companion penetrating the horrors of a tomb; others, like the canonical "The Call of Cthulhu," deploy the technique of cut-and-paste in a pulp bricolage, aggregating a sense of dread and awe precisely out of the *lack* of overarching plot. The exposition of a monstrous cosmic history, of hateful cults, of the misbehavior of matter and geometry, is all the stronger for being gradually, seemingly randomly, uncovered.

In the case of *At the Mountains of Madness*, the initially sedate unfolding of the story, in its careful scientific tone, builds pace brilliantly, inexorably hooking the reader in. But though what story there is emerges with astonishing power, Lovecraft's is not a fiction of carefully structured plot so much as of ineluctable unfolding: it is a literature of the inevitability of weird.

"My reason for writing stories," Lovecraft says, "is to give myself the satisfaction of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Story is not the point: the point is wonder, which for Lovecraft goes hand in hand with horror, because, he claims, "fear is our deepest and strongest emotion."

He believes this because in his "mechanical materialist" vision, humans mean nothing. The wonder of the vastness is inextricable from the horror of our own pointlessness. "[A]ll my tales," he once wrote, "are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large."<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, it is precisely this bleak atheist awe that makes Lovecraft a kind of bad-son heir to a religious visionary tradition, an ecstatic tradition, which, in distinction to the everyday

separation of matter and spirit, locates the holy in the everyday. Lovecraft, too, sees the awesome as immanent in the quotidian, but there is little ecstasy here: his is a bad numinous.

The wonder and dread are achieved by his career-long depiction of an indifferent universe in which humans are, at most, inquisitive grubs, powerless next to the pantheon of monstrous deities: Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, and their kin. In *Mountains*, it is somewhat less godlike creatures—the Old Ones—whose remains have been found beneath the ice. Next to those other behemoth powers, even the Old Ones are pygmies, although they are still effortlessly able to dispatch humans.

Traditionally, genre horror is concerned with the irruption of dreadful forces into a comforting status quo—one which the protagonists frantically scramble to preserve. By contrast, Lovecraft's horror is not one of intrusion but of realization. The world has always been implacably bleak; the horror lies in our acknowledging that fact. It is the sheer truth of this universe, concretized in the existence of its monstrous inhabitants, which explains why Lovecraft's protagonists are so unheroic: there is no muscular intervention that can save the day. All we can do—as the narrator and Danforth do in the Antarctic mountains—is turn and run.

*Mountains* makes it uniquely plain that Lovecraft's interest in the weird subordinates the bagatelles of simple "events." In narrative terms, the story is astonishingly straightforward, and such "revelations" as it contains are telegraphed fairly clearly. In place of narrative intricacies, we are treated to an astonishing several-page description of the Old Ones that are dug up from under the ice, creatures which mock the Linnaean schema and the preconceptions of history. In this obsessive act of description, Lovecraft deploys the childish passion for making up monsters to depict a scientific methodology presiding over the collapse of its own predicates.

This is taxonomy as horror.

## 2. THE GREAT WAR AND THE (UN)REMEMBERED TENTACULAR

The psychotic chimerism of Lovecraft's monsters is well known—his creatures are described by reference to gorillas and octopuses, to fungi

and insects, to starfish and barrels and beetles and rotting cadavers in endless combination. As often as not, they are described as “undescribable.” This is more than sheer teratological exuberance, however: it is an assault on conventional reality. Usually, this impossible physiology is barely glimpsed, by characters who sensibly flee the scene. It is in *At the Mountains of Madness* that, uniquely in Lovecraft’s canon, one of his monsters actually submits to the scientist’s gaze (and the vivisector’s scalpel).

The specifics of this grotesquerie were, in the day, utterly new to the genre. Lovecraft resides radically outside any folk tradition: this is not the modernizing of the familiar vampire or werewolf (or garuda or rusalka or any other such traditional bugbear). Lovecraft’s pantheon and bestiary are absolutely *sui generis*. There have never been any fire-side stories of these creatures; we have neither heard of nor seen anything like them before. This astonishing novelty is one of the most intriguing and important things that can be noted about Lovecraft, and about the tradition of weird fiction in general.

Crudely, one might point to the early twentieth century’s sudden literary proliferation of the *tentacle*, a limb type largely missing from western mythology, as symptomatic of this sea change in the conceptualization of monsters. There are partial precursors in some of H. G. Wells’s creatures and in the cowled hunter of M. R. James’s story “Count Magnus,” and later superb examples in the works of William Hope Hodgson, E. H. Visiak, and others. Of these writers, however, Lovecraft remains utterly preeminent.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this shift to new imaginary fauna, and of the change it brought about in fiction of the fantastic. To understand the efflorescence of what must be thought of as a “revolutionary monstrous” (and without understating the originality or genius of Lovecraft and his contemporaries), it must be understood as a phenomenon of its time.

The fantastic has always borrowed enthusiastically from premodern folklore, fairy tales, and myth, of course. Fantasy as a genre is a modern literature, however, born primarily out of the Gothic, a kind of bad conscience of the burgeoning “instrumental rationality” of capitalist modernity. “The dream of reason,” as José Monleón persuasively points out (quoting the title of Goya’s famous picture), “brings forth monsters.”<sup>4</sup> In essence, for fantasy to be fantasy, to break down the bar-

riers that were keeping the irrational at bay, society first had to construct those barriers and thoroughly embrace the supposedly “rational.”

Yet at the beginning of the twentieth century, belief in the rational suffered a massive blow on the charnel fields of the First World War. Here were the rational, modern, capitalist powers, expressing their supposedly rational interests with an eruption of mechanized human butchery unprecedented in history. The scale of the psychic and cultural trauma of the First World War is vast—perhaps even “undescrivable.” The war smashed apart the complacencies of “rationality” and uncovered the irrationality at the heart of the modern world with a savagery that eclipsed any fantasist’s nightmares. How, then, could the genre known as fantasy present anything that could compare with such horror? Certainly, its stock of werewolves and effete vampires were utterly inadequate to the task.

Fantasy responded nevertheless. At the low end of culture, in the pulp magazines (such as *Weird Tales*), weird fiction shared with Surrealism a conception of modern, orderly, scientific rationality that was in fact saturated with the uncanny.

This new “scientific” uncanny informs Lovecraft’s attempt to embed his horrors in an accurate (or at least plausible) cosmology, chemistry, geology, biology. He uses theories that were, at the time, cutting-edge (the discussion of plate tectonics, for example, was still very much a live issue). In this story and elsewhere, then, Lovecraft pilfered from science. (Science is now, in fact, repeating the favor: one recent nonfiction account of a paleontologist’s sojourn in Antarctica is titled *Mountains of Madness*<sup>5</sup>.)

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the core science of his materialist horror is biology, with that grotesque, meticulously reported anatomy lesson, that precise itemization of the impossible.

There is, however, a paradox in the weird bodies Lovecraft imagines. Though his conception of the monstrous and his approach to the fantastic are utterly new, he pretends that they are not.

“Arrangement reminds one of certain monsters of primal myth,” says the scientist Lake as he first examines the creatures he has found under the ice, “especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon*.” In fact, *The Necronomicon* is a book Lovecraft invented in his fiction, and in citing it, the author refers to a supposed body of folklore and literature that does not exist. In doing so, he actually seems to undercut the orig-

inality of his own creations. Given that it is precisely the implacable unfamiliarity of these monsters that is one of the most potent sources of their uncanny affect, this seems to be a perverse move.

There are, however, reasons for the maneuver. As his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" makes plain, Lovecraft is acutely conscious of the horror tradition, particularly the Gothic. A key technique of Gothic, with its revenants, skeletons, ghosts, antique places, and mythical monsters, is the notion of haunting. With the archaeological unearthing of the remains of the Old Ones, Lovecraft taps into that "traditional" horror, of the moment of unburial, the return of the repressed. This of course requires him to assert that something was buried in the first place. Hence Lovecraft's peculiar maneuver of positing something profoundly, brilliantly new, then stroking his chin and saying "That reminds me of . . ."

Lovecraft is pulled to do this in part by the "scientism," the materialist articulation, of his vision, which embeds horror in material reality. Though a key driver behind this new form of weird was the specific political/cultural apocalypse of the war, in its own aesthetics a materialist "scientific" weird implies a universe that has *always* been monstrous and implacable. Lovecraft's uncanny, in other words, expresses this radically new crisis precisely by depicting an eternal and unsympathetic uncanny.

This is the paradox in this utterly new kind of fantasy. In expressing the "supernatural" in materialist terms, Lovecraft will not use the standard figures of supernature, with all their mythic baggage. But his materialism means it is not just in his creatures that horror lies, but in the material reality of which they are part—and that awe-ful reality is eternal. Lovecraft's radical innovations must seem to have resonated for eons.

### 3. "GREAT GOD! THIS IS AN AWFUL PLACE."

Robert Falcon Scott (Scott of the Antarctic) recorded the sentiment above in his diary as a way of describing Antarctica. It may be that the misspelling is apocryphal, but it is nonetheless apt.

The Antarctic has long been an invaluable setting for not just the awful but the awe-ful, and thus the awesome. Apart from its literary usefulness as a far-off, inhospitable place that isolates any and all visi-

tors, it offers the stark symbolism of being a great blank space, a continent-wide white screen on which the human mind can project its fears.

From a young age, Lovecraft was fascinated by the Antarctic. As a child he avidly followed journeys of polar explorers, and he was an aficionado of Antarctic fiction. The most obvious of the influences on *At the Mountains of Madness* is the story he explicitly refers to throughout: Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1850), a peculiar, rambling, brilliant work of maritime adventure and mythicized southern pole. Lovecraft takes from Poe his bizarre giant birds and the cry "Tekeli-li," which is incomparably more terrifying the second novel around.

However, we know that when he was very young, Lovecraft also read and enjoyed a vastly inferior polar work, W. Frank Russell's *The Frozen Pirate*. This forgettable piece is interesting for one important reason: its narrative revolves around cryonics, freezing a pirate for fifty years. (He wakes, of course.) Add to the continent's blankness this preserving power of the cold, thus allowing our supposed atavistic and repressed anxieties to be put on ice, and the Antarctic becomes almost vulgarly overdetermined as a site for psychically anxious fictions.

Eight years after Lovecraft's work, something else was pulled up out of the ice in John Campbell's 1938 story "Who Goes There?" which spawned two films, 1951's *The Thing from Another World* and 1982's *The Thing*. But first and best, it is Lovecraft, in the pages that follow, who took Russell's theme of icy preservation and produced an astounding reconfiguring of earthly history, as well as some respectable alien-caused carnage.

It is banal to point out that landscape in literature very often functions symbolically, raising questions of psyche and culture. The list of obvious examples is long—the moors of *Wuthering Heights*, the crashing seas of *Moby-Dick*, the jungle in *Heart of Darkness*. Here the snows perform that role, and to make the act of uncovering the social unconscious absolutely clear, Lovecraft literally digs down into his psychic landscape.

The symbolism of this plot device—recovery of the preserved from below the surface—would be clear even without the technophile descriptions that Lovecraft adds; with them, it becomes almost camp. As Victoria Nelson puts it, "[t]he narrator is a geologist who has brought

to the Antarctic a remarkable new drill that can go to unplumbed depths. . . . [H]e is an explorer of unconscious strata of the psyche, or put in a way Lovecraft might not have approved of, a psychoanalyst."<sup>6</sup> That stands, so long as it is understood that it is not merely one person but society which is here undergoing analysis.

#### 4. DECADENCE, OLD ONES, AND THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

Lovecraft was notoriously not only an elitist and a reactionary, but a bilious lifelong racist. His idiot and disgraceful pronouncements on racial themes range from pompous pseudoscience—"The Negro is fundamentally the biologically inferior of all White and even Mongolian races"—to monstrous endorsements—"[Hitler's] vision is . . . romantic and immature . . . yet that cannot blind us to the honest rightness of the man's basic urge . . . I know he's a clown, but by God, I like the boy!"<sup>7</sup> This was written before the Holocaust, but Hitler's attitudes were no secret, and the terrible threat he represented was stressed by many. (Lovecraft's letter was written some months after Hitler had become chancellor.) So while Lovecraft is not here overtly supporting genocide, he is hardly off the hook.

Two things are sometimes adduced to excuse him. One is that it was "the time"—people were just "like that" back then. This is an unacceptable condescension to history: people were emphatically *not* all like that. The other offering is the fact that Lovecraft, despite the pride with which he claims "I became rather well known as an anti-Semite,"<sup>8</sup> was married to Sonia H. Greene, a Jew.

This latter is sometimes claimed as a kind of mitigation by paradox, as if an inconsistent prejudice is less bad, rather than, say, more confused and just as bad. The fact of Lovecraft's Jewish wife and friends excuses his foul racist drivel not one iota.

What it does accomplish is to help make clear what kind of racist he was: at least with regard to Jews, Lovecraft was open, as he explained to Sonia, to the possibility of their being "well assimilated."<sup>9</sup> (He was in fact wildly inconsistent on this possibility, but let us take him at his word to his wife.) This is a cultural, rather than biological, racism.

The same was not true, of course, as regards other ethnic groups, particularly blacks. Lovecraft's hysterical terror of miscegenation re-



curs throughout his work. Obviously, this weighs heavily on the modern reader. It is unconvincing to suggest that his racism is extrinsic to his major work. Not just the overtly racist work like “The Horror at Red Hook,” but central and justly celebrated pieces like “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” or “The Dunwich Horror” locate the horror, the awe, the very stuff that makes Lovecraft great, inseparably from his paranoid terror of mixing the races.

Happily, there is no contradiction between despising a writer’s politics and admiring the very art they helped create. Discussing *Journey to the End of the Night* by Céline, a writer whose racism, nihilism, and uncompromising use of language make him an interesting comparison with Lovecraft, Leon Trotsky described how the politics which make him an enemy also make him a great writer with an unflinching eye, a “receptivity of the objective world.”<sup>10</sup> Lovecraft has not so much the steady gaze of objective nihilism as the transmogrifying vision of hysterical nihilism, from which his racism is inextricable.

The very race-inflected nihilism we vigorously repudiate is simultaneously a central engine for what we admire in Lovecraft’s art. Without ever excusing the racism itself, the French novelist Michel Houellebecq has brilliantly and provocatively argued that Lovecraft’s “hallucinatory vision is directly at the source of the descriptions of the nightmarish entities which people the Cthulhu cycle. It is racial hatred that provokes in Lovecraft that state of poetic trance.”<sup>11</sup>

The specifically racist elements of Lovecraft’s anxieties are less obvious in *Mountains* than elsewhere. This is largely a reflection of two factors. One is the change in the focus of Lovecraft’s politics at the very end of the 1920s, just before *Mountains* was written.

After years during which, as Lovecraft himself put it, he “used to be a hide-bound Tory simply for traditional and antiquarian reasons,”<sup>12</sup> at this time, in the aftermath of the financial collapse of 1929, Lovecraft came to believe that “laissez-faire capitalism has actually come to the end of its rope,”<sup>13</sup> and he became a socialist, advocating some social programs and government control of the economy. His was, however, a tremendously patrician “socialism,” which dislodged neither his racism nor his social elitism.

The other, linked factor underlying *Mountains*’ less histrionically racialized politics is its sharp focus on one overwhelmingly important inspiration: the philosophy of Oswald Spengler.

In 1918, Spengler, a German philosopher, published the first volume of his magnum opus, *The Decline of the West*. Spengler's basic thesis was of a cyclical civilizational history. "High cultures" pass through stages like organisms: birth, development, a maturity of cultural flowering, then the slow decline through urban civilization to senescence, decadence, and death.

Like weird fiction itself, Spengler's portentous vision was a scar caused by the wound of early twentieth-century cataclysms. His worldview was enormously influential. Hitler was an admirer, as were the right-wing theorist Julius Evola and the wack-job high priest of American "intellectual" fascism, Francis Parker Yockey. But Spengler's model had a wider cultural impact. Relatively mainstream figures such as the historian Arnold Toynbee and the writers Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller drew upon his ideas.

So, crucially, did H. P. Lovecraft, who read the first volume in translation in 1927. When discussing *At the Mountains of Madness*, the importance of Spengler's *The Decline of the West* cannot be stressed too highly. (Indeed, S. T. Joshi places Spengler at the center of his discussion of Lovecraft's political and philosophical ideas—his book on the topic is entitled *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*.) The very setting, that enormous, impossible city, is utterly Spenglerian, recalling the "civilization" phase in his cycle, when culture passes beyond its high point and its upheavals occur in burgeoning megalopolises.

"It is the Late city that first defies the land, contradicts Nature in the lines of its silhouette, *denies* all Nature," Spengler says. "It wants to be something different from and higher than Nature. These high-pitched gables, these Baroque cupolas, spires, and pinnacles, neither are, nor desire to be, related with anything in Nature. And then begins the gigantic megalopolis, the *city-as-world*, which suffers nothing beside itself. . . ." In turn, Lovecraft describes the unbelievable sprawl and scale of the Old Ones' city, "stretched nearly to the vision's limit," a "Cyclopean maze of squared, curved, and angled blocks . . . which cut off all comfortable refuge," the "unhuman massiveness of these vast stone towers and ramparts," as embodying "some fiendish violation of known natural law."

For Spengler, the city-as-world exists in a vampiric relationship with the country around it. Where once the city was thrown up by the country, "now the giant city sucks the country dry," relentlessly se-

ducing the population until the city is full and the country is devoid of human life. In Lovecraft's story, the dynamic of the city's parasitic rise and fall is rendered aesthetically, with a vivid image of a dark city surrounded by country that has been sucked so dry it is bone-white, bled of all color.

As the narrator navigates the vast stone corridors, he literally walks through the architecturalization of Spengler's cyclical history. In the bas-reliefs that he and Danforth are able (however improbably) to decipher, we read a fantasticated representation of *The Decline of the West*.

The oldest domestic structure the narrator finds "contained bas-reliefs of an artistry surpassing anything else." By contrast, the later art "would be called decadent in comparison." This is an obsessive concern. It was this jeremiad about "decadence" that Lovecraft took, above all, from Spengler.

"It is my belief," he wrote to Clark Ashton Smith in 1927, "[and] was so long before Spengler put his seal of scholarly proof on it—that our mechanical and industrial age is one of frank decadence."

In this short novel, the words "decadent" and "decadence" and their derived forms are repeated twenty-one times. Toward the end of the story, there are near-casual references to surfaces "sparsely decorated with cartouches of conventional designs in a late, decadent style." The narrative of the Old Ones' cultural decline from a high point of classical perfection to an explicitly Byzantine self-conscious decadence, then on to a decadence which did not even have the mitigation of self-knowledge, has by now become accepted wisdom.

## 5. SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

The resonance with the rise and decline of human culture is made explicit not only in historic comparison, but in the narrator's actual sympathy with the Old Ones and his claiming our kinship with them. "[T]hey were not evil. . . . They were the men of another age and another order of being. . . . Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn—whatever they had been, they were men!"

This is a brilliant and surprising maneuver, which allows the Old Ones to occupy two precisely opposed positions in the story. At first they are the monsters, the murderers of humans, the source of our fear; by the end of the book, they have become projections of our-

selves, and when we find them brutally murdered in turn, they are now the victims of monsters, and our identification with them is seamless and complete.

Underlining the tragic nature of the narrative is the fact, stressed by Lovecraft, that these were Old Ones from an early stage of their culture. When we read of their execution of sketches “in a strange and assured technique perhaps superior . . . to any of the decadent carvings . . . the characteristic and unmistakable technique of the Old Ones . . . in the dead city’s heyday,” there is a sadness, for these poor nobles displaced into a city marking their compatriots’ decline—a city of deculturated “*fellabeen*,” in Spengler’s terminology. Ultimately they suffer an even worse fate.

It is with this that Lovecraft departs from, or perhaps adds to, “classic” Spenglerianism.

As the story gradually asks us to identify with the Old Ones, Lovecraft describes their government as “evidently complex and probably socialistic.” This could come only from the Lovecraft of the 1930s, who had come to see “socialism” as “probably necessary.”<sup>14</sup> This flurry of apparent “leftism,” however, does not put him out of kilter with Spengler. Lovecraft has merely replaced his faith in an “aristocracy” with one in some kind of culturally trained technocracy—a different elite, but an elite sharply differentiated from the masses just the same. He does not advocate democracy, grassroots or otherwise, but an “oligarchy of intelligence and education.”<sup>15</sup>

At the heart of Lovecraft’s elitism—including his “socialism”—was a visceral mistrust of and antipathy for the masses. Lovecraft believed that reforms were necessary in order to forestall an alternative that appalled him.

“Something must be done,” he says. “The old system . . . leads absolutely nowhere except to a suffering bound to breed violent and disastrous revolution,”<sup>16</sup> and “the need of legal change, if we are to avert a revolution, is pretty manifest today.”<sup>17</sup> In short, Lovecraft was a “socialist” precisely because of his loathing of revolution. This pathological hatred is the horizon of the novel.

“I’m no Bolshevik!” Lovecraft insisted,<sup>18</sup> a fact made clear in his vicious 1919 essay “Bolshevism.” Even after he had moved to the left and become a critic of capitalism, he excoriated the “total *cultural* disruption”<sup>19</sup> of the Russian Revolution. His fear is of revolution’s supposed

degradation of “culture.” Race is still firmly evident in this concern, and here it can be seen how it segues into class, the other key axis on which this hatred of revolution is articulated. The uprising of the masses is something Lovecraft views with evident terror. This is because he both views such masses as racially inferior (“sub-human Russian rabble” in the case of the Bolsheviks), and loathes them precisely *because* they are masses. There is little more contemptible and terrifying to this elitist. It is with this in mind that we can make sense of the sudden switch in our allegiance vis-à-vis the Old Ones, and the uncovering of a fate worse than (cultural) death.

Lovecraft locates the most telling clue to his ultimate nightmare in a sudden, “supremely radical” change in the carvings. “We realised, of course, the great decadence of the Old Ones’ sculpture at the time of the tunneling. . . . But now, in this deeper section . . . there was a sudden difference . . . in basic nature as well as in mere quality . . . involving [a] profound and calamitous degradation of skill.”

A few pages later, one of the perpetrators of that “degenerate work” appears. It is, of course, not an Old One, but a Shoggoth.

We have learned the story of the Shoggoths over the course of the novel. They are, simply, slaves, created by the Old Ones and bred to be beasts of burden. There was a time when they were “uppity,” and a war of subjugation was fought. They were defeated. But that was then. The story of that abortive revolt can serve no purpose other than to explain the final confrontation of the book, its ultimate horror. In the abyss into which our protagonists literally descend, they face the murderer of the Old Ones, and it is a slave that has turned. The Shoggoths are, literally, revolting.

What can this mean but that the Shoggoths have triumphed? The first revolution was a dress rehearsal, like the 1905 Russian revolution. At some point between then and now they tried again, and succeeded. The Shoggoth’s “shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles” is the logical extension (literally *ad nauseam*) of Lovecraft’s dehumanizing, subhumanizing vision of the masses. Is it a coincidence that the Shoggoth stares at the narrator with “myriads of temporary eyes”? That it is compared to a subway train, a working-class, ethnically heterogeneous conveyance? The Shoggoth is a mass presence, various, multicolored, refusing to behave.

The Shoggothian qualities of the ethnically mixed working class

are made absolutely overt in Lovecraft's description of a visit he paid to New York's Lower East Side. "The organic things inhabiting that awful cesspool could not . . . be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal . . . slithering and oozing . . . in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities . . . I thought of some avenue of Cyclopean and unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting point with gangrenous vileness, and about to burst and inundate the world."<sup>20</sup> Out of what but precisely such Cyclopean vats could the Shoggoths be fashioned?

The Shoggoth is a hysterically hallucinated coagulum of the victorious insurgent masses. It is one of Lovecraft's most astonishing creations, and is nothing less than the pulp-artistic pinnacle of class terror. Its advent provides a magnificent ending to *At the Mountains of Madness*, in which the evolution of his politics and the expression of his familiar themes are refracted through his literalized radical uncanny into a vivid expression of the alien and the alienated. By taking us to the beginning of prehistory and ends of the earth, Lovecraft lays bare the pathologies and anxieties at the heart of industrial modernity.

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## NOTES

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8. Joshi, p. 55.
9. Joshi, p. 222.
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