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A “Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight”:
The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft’s
At the Mountains of Madness

*It is precisely space which, filled with atmospheric air,
linking things together and destroying their individual closedness,
gives things their temporal value and draws them into the cosmic interplay of phenomena.*
(Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*)

Introduction

In the very first pages of the treatise *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1926), H. P. Lovecraft defines the weird tale as “something [based on] more than secret murder, bloody bones or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule” (*Collected Essays* 84). What sets a genuine horror narrative apart from not just the unimaginative and “immature pulp charlatan fiction” (177), but also the aesthetically superior works of the Gothic canon, is the presence of a

certain *atmosphere* of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces [...]; and there must be a *hint*, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular *suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature* which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (84; emphasis added)

Hence, according to Lovecraft, weird literature must abide by three fundamental criteria: ambiance of pure terror, allusiveness of language,

and annihilation of the principles that structure reality. More abstractly, these three “As” are connected with thematic, rhetorical and philosophical strategies. For instance, “atmosphere” concerns spatiotemporal settings, characters, plot, and subject matter of a story, while “hint[s]” relate to Lovecraft’s narratorial technique deployed to present events and “unknown forces” to the reader. The allusiveness is linguistically signaled by a considerable use of hedging¹ and adjectives such as “unknown,” “indescribable,” “indefinite.” This technique is diegetically articulated through overtly cautious narrators, which take their time to disclose their findings, thoughts and impressions about the otherworldly phenomena encountered during the story’s progression. Finally, the “defeat of the laws of Nature” responds to a more profound, authorial intention to trigger an epistemological reframing of the world as we know it. Synonymous with weird fiction, claims Lovecraft, is “literature of cosmic fear” (84), the only one capable of nurturing the “illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever [*sic*] imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces” (176).

But Lovecraft’s cosmic attitude reaches well beyond the limits of an ecstatic contemplation of the ever-expanding universe. Referred to by Lovecraft scholars as “cosmicism”, this view entails a vigorous reaction to the generally held centrality of mankind in the whole cosmos, whose vastness made the author relegate “the entire history of the human race to an inessential nanosecond in the realm of infinite space and time” (Joshi 371). The writer turns to terrifying inexplicable phenomena, non-Euclidean spatiality and aeon-old temporality because of the pessimistic realization of “man’s impermanence and insignificance” (Lovecraft, “Confessions” n. pag.), which simultaneously leads to the author’s lack of literary commitment to the short-sightedness of anthropocentrism. What is of interest to Lovecraft, instead, is not so much the occasional employment of motifs and devices typical of conventional supernatural stories, as the coherent interaction between the ordinary and the extraordinary (Harman 24). In a letter accompanying the (re)submission of his possibly most well-known tale, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), to the editor of the magazine *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft remarks that “to achieve the essence of

real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that [...] all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind have any existence at all" (*Selected Letters* 150). He then adds that "only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities" (150) suggesting that the surfacing of disturbingly unexplainable agencies must be met at once with terror and incredulity. Increasingly intent on exposing the futility and bewilderment of mankind vis-à-vis the unknown, Lovecraft abandons the preternatural sensationalism of his earlier stories, such as "From Beyond" (1922) or "The Horror at Red Hook" (1926), to produce what I would call "neosupernatural parascientific² fiction" – a literary mode defined by the efficacious interplay of (dreadful) unnatural phenomena and science-oriented veracity. The prefix "neo" designates a different kind of supernatural literature, one that is still concerned with barely explicable, bizarre events and creatures, but whose manifestations Lovecraft now attempts to contextualize within a sufficiently accurate scientific framework.

Building on these premises, this study aims to analyze *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), a fictional first-person account of an Antarctic expedition that uncovers the existence of a billion-year-old, technologically advanced alien species. Interrogating the persistent oscillation between linguistic over-description and referential ambiguity in Lovecraft's longest story, while assessing its evident but idiosyncratic indebtedness to E. A. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), I argue that *At the Mountains of Madness* dwells on conceptual, chronological, spatial, as well as textual complexity to establish a connection between form, content and readerly experience. I draw on Graham Harman's weird realism theory and Joseph Frank's seminal notion of literary spatiality to posit that the story's thematic apparatus, labyrinthine discourse, and intertextual dynamics concur to elicit in the readers a growing sense of disorientation.

Written in 1931 but published only five years later due to a rather unfortunate editorial history (Joshi 873-74; Yi Lee 2), *At the Mountains of Madness* tells the story of an exploratory mission to Antarctica that ends in disaster. Structured as a cautionary report against an upcoming similar expedition, the novel follows a group of scientists and technicians led by the geologist William Dyer (the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator),

whose primary goal is the extraction of a few “deep-level specimens of rock and soil” (Lovecraft, *Tales* 481). A series of excavations separately conducted by Lake (a biologist) and Atwood (a physicist) results in the astonishing discovery of a subterranean cave and an incredible amount of fossil formations, on which Lake would later comment that it “will mean to biology what Einstein has meant to mathematics and physics” (497); but a few drilling operations later, Lake’s side-project unearths fourteen far more staggering specimens, resembling nothing of the prehistoric organisms then known to man:

Objects are eight feet long all over. Six-foot five-ridged barrel torso 3.5 feet central diameter, 1 foot end diameters. Dark grey, flexible, and infinitely tough. Seven-foot membraneous wings of same colour, found folded, spread out of furrows between ridges. Wing framework tubular or glandular, of lighter grey, with orifices at wing tips. (499)

However, the unexpected radio silence from Lake’s camp following the excavations prompts the narrator to arrange a rescue flight to the biologist’s base. What Dyers and the rest of the crew find is beyond description: the makeshift laboratory is devastated, the barrel-shaped fossils are missing, and everyone except one member of the team, Gedney, has been gruesomely killed. Wanting to investigate the mystery of the missing colleague, and the vanished half-plant, half-animal specimens, Dyer and graduate student Danforth decide to fly over the nearby mountain range, where they discover a gigantic maze-like city made up of “colossal, regular and geometrically eurhythmic stone masses” (523). In one of the city’s buildings, they chance upon Gedney’s corpse, the beheaded bodies of some of the exhumed specimens (the Elder Things), a group of clueless albino penguins, and, finally, a shape-shifting monster – a shoggoth – that furiously chases after the fleeing geologist and his assistant. The novel ends with Dyer detailing the rushed flight back to Lake’s camp and Danforth’s delusional cry “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” (586).

As indicative of the general evolution of the narrative as it is, this synopsis does not reflect the rifts between story and discourse levels, the encasement of secondary tales within the main narrative framework, and the

abundance of conceptual digressions – all elements that situate the novel among Lovecraft's most structurally and thematically complex works. But *Mountains* may also be reasonably considered one of the most representative endeavors of Lovecraft's neosupernatural literature, for it combines the author's trademark (para)scientific speculation and supernatural entities, while distancing itself from the more ordinary horror aesthetics of his early fiction. Indeed, Lovecraft's stylistic evolution was so evident that, as Chia Yi Lee writes, "[t]he scientific encyclopaedism therein might have overwhelmed the editor [of *Weird Tales*], and have been taken as too much a diversion from the magazine's primary concern with the supernatural horror" (2). Tales centered on oneiric sceneries, traditional monsters and unrealistically centennial humans progressively give way to narratives such as *Mountains* that are informed by chemistry, biology, physics and non-Euclidean geometry, on which the narrators rely to interpret the multifaceted unknown. To enact his innovative take on weird literature along with what I previously conceptualized as his threefold aesthetic dictum of atmosphere, referential indirection and epistemological subversion of reality, Lovecraft builds his novel upon intertextuality and spatial-verbal disorientation.

The Intertext of *At the Mountains of Madness*

Lovecraft's network of intertextual references is extensive throughout his oeuvre: "Herbert West: Re-animator" (1922), a story about a necromantic scientist obsessed with bringing corpses back to life, is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845); "The Horror at Red Hook" and "He" (1926) are Lovecraft's attempts to reimagine the vocabulary and imagery of American urban Gothic; the epigraph to "The Call of Cthulhu" is a passage from Algernon Blackwood's occultist novel *The Centaur* (1911), while "The Colour Out of Space" (1928) hints both at Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907) and Ambrose Bierce's supernatural tale "The Damned Thing" (1893). Lovecraft's embraced anxiety of influence, though, is particularly evident with Poe, something that he made no efforts to conceal in various of his non-

fictional writings. For instance, Poe is the only author to whom Lovecraft dedicates an entire chapter in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, while in a letter to his colleague and correspondent J. Vernon Shea, Lovecraft indicates one specific story, “The Outsider” (1926), that bears unambiguous traces of Poe’s dark imagery: “It represents my literal though unconscious imitation of Poe at its very height” (Johnson 13). Despite Lovecraft’s honest claim, “The Outsider,” albeit indisputably indebted to Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842),³ is certainly second, in terms of imitation, to *Mountains*, arguably Lovecraft’s not only most intertextual work, but his most explicit homage to Poe. Set in Antarctica, founded on the discovery of a subterranean cave and a long-abandoned Cyclopean city occasionally explored by strange penguins, with a character hearing and shouting the chilling words “Tekeli-li,” *At the Mountains of Madness* is heavily based on Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Designed similarly to its literary successor, *Pym* is also structured as a travelogue, features a narrator who is very reluctant to reveal to the public his bizarre, near-fatal adventures, and relies on an exotic spatial setting.

To make sure his “too obvious source” (*Tales* 586) of inspiration would be identified, Lovecraft cites Poe’s work twice: first, when the narrator expresses his fascination for the text in connection with his graduate assistant Danforth’s own penchant for weird literature in the first chapter of the novel: “Danforth was a great reader of bizarre material, and had talked a good deal of Poe. I was interested myself because of the Antarctic scene of Poe’s only long story – the disturbing and enigmatical *Arthur Gordon Pym*” (486). The second mention of *Arthur Gordon Pym* occurs in the penultimate chapter, at the moment in which Dyer realizes that the sound he and Danforth had just heard is nothing but the mysterious “Tekeli-li” cry referenced by Poe in his novel:

Of course common reading is what prepared us both to make the interpretation, though Danforth has hinted at queer notions about unsuspected and forbidden sources to which Poe may have had access when writing his *Arthur Gordon Pym* a century ago. It will be remembered that in that fantastic tale there is a word of unknown but terrible and prodigious significance connected with the Antarctic and screamed eternally by the gigantic, spectrally snowy birds of that malign region’s core. “*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*” (577)

Curiously enough, when Dyer comments on Danforth being "a great reader of bizarre material," he is referencing the young assistant's correct assumption⁴ that the Antarctic volcano Mount Erebus was the inspiration for Poe's poem "Ulalume" (1847), of which part of the second stanza is quoted in Lovecraft's novel: " – the lavas that restlessly roll / Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek / In the ultimate climes of the pole – / That groan as they roll down Mount Yaanek / In the realms of the boreal pole" (485).

This seemingly isolated quote is in fact the first occurrence of Lovecraft's pragmatic deployment of intertextuality: "Ulalume" is here mentioned not merely to set the stage or provide an adequate ambiance for the novel, but to tap into the same geopoetic context (in this case, Antarctica) that informs Poe's ballad. The emphasis placed on the novel's setting contributes, in turn, to lend overall credence to his fictional apparatus, an aesthetic desideratum of the utmost importance to Lovecraft, as he points out in the essay "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction" (1934): "we should work as if we were staging a hoax and trying to get our extravagant lie accepted as literal truth" (*Collected Essays* 179). And "staging a hoax," I contend, is the major function of the Poesque intertext underlying *Mountains*, since *Pym* is known to be Poe's "attempt to convince the public that his imaginary voyage was a record of fact" (Cecil 232), as can be read in the novel's preface:

Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement, more particularly in regard to that portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean, was Mr. Poe, lately editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a monthly magazine, published by Mr. Thomas W. White, in the city of Richmond. He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1007)

Having a story accepted as a collection of actual albeit extravagant facts is the goal that orientates Lovecraft's reliance on hesitant and inherently sceptic narrators, and is consistent with his ambitious project: to offer to the public a somewhat scientifically sound and emotionally accurate representation of epistemologically adverse (neo)supernatural but profoundly material horrors.

Several other points of contact may be noted between *Pym* and *Mountains*: Antarctica is a major place of interest in both novels, constituting the central setting in Lovecraft's text; both make extensive use of very specific cartographic coordinates to compensate for the remoteness and the then relatively uncharted Antarctic continent; and, although differently in degree, both narratives draw on absurd, baffling phenomena as an alternative explanation to the mysteries of an otherwise ordinary reality. The preternatural aspect of both novels is indeed grounded within a framework of scientific accuracy that frequently results in informational overload. In Lovecraft's novel, the vocabulary in Lake's updates on the freshly disinterred fossils is strikingly meticulous – "a vein of Comanchian limestone full of minute fossil cephalopods, corals, echini, and spirifera, and with occasional suggestions of siliceous sponges and marine vertebrate bones – the latter probably of teliosts, sharks, and ganoids" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 495) – and seems to echo the accurate, though less technical, digressions on the life and habits of seabirds in the fourteenth chapter of *Pym*:

Penguins are very plenty, and of these there are four different kinds. The royal penguin [...] is the largest. [...] The chief beauty of plumage, however, consists in two broad stripes of a gold color, which pass along from the head to the breast. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1117)

Most importantly, Lake's enthusiastic conviction that his findings would revolutionize long-held scientific tenets recalls Pym's confidence "in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements" (1044), a plea to credibility that would be reaffirmed later in the novel:

I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention (1134).

Yet, contrary to the generally shared belief that *Pym* did influence *At the Mountains of Madness* (Navroth 192; Ringel 270; Wijkmark, "Poe's Pym" 86-87; "Review" 91), S. T. Joshi maintains that

the casually made claim that the novel is a 'sequel' to Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* deserves some analysis. In my view, the novel is not a true sequel at all [...]. It is not clear that *Pym* even influenced the work in any significant way. (874)

While I would agree with Joshi that *Mountains* is not an outright sequel to *Pym*, it is equally impossible to deny the thematic and formal organization that Lovecraft's novel owes to its predecessor, especially the hoaxing trope, which, as I argued earlier on, also acts as an essential structuring principle in *Mountains*. By constructing the narrative as a meticulous journal (another cardinal aspect that the novel shares with *Pym*) Lovecraft is, albeit only metaphorically, committed to deceiving the public, with particular attention paid to reducing what horror literature scholar Terry Heller terms "aesthetic distance" (n. pag.), an interpretation of Edward Bullough's classic notion of "psychical distance" (n. pag.). The conceptual core of said principle consists of "putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self," in order to appreciate it "objectively," and is used most effectively when the artist performs an "utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance" (Bullough n. pag.). Filtering Bullough's concept through the lens of horror fiction, Heller argues that "it seems to be in the nature of a tale of terror to threaten aesthetic distance," which works best "when it involves the readers in it as completely as possible without their forgetting that it is a work of art and interacting with it as if it were reality" (n. pag.). Thus, Heller's ideas seem to overlap with Lovecraft's aim to have "our extravagant lie accepted as literal truth" (*Collected Essays* 179), to which end he creates a narrator manifestly reluctant to discussing his bewildering experience, as the very first lines of Dyer's report demonstrate:

I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the Antarctic [...] and I am the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain. Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 481)

This passage is uncannily similar to Pym's words in the preface to his narrative:

One consideration which deterred me was, that [...] I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess [...]. Another reason was, that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous, that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be [...], I could only hope for belief among my family, and those of my friends who have had reason, through life, to put faith in my veracity. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1007)

Lovecraft takes great pains to counteract the supernatural element of the novel, and the skepticism of both his actual audience and Dyer's fictional readership. Compared to others of his stories, such as "The Call of Cthulhu" or "The Colour Out of Space," in which the (questionable?) narrators function as resonators of past events actually experienced by different characters,⁵ *Mountains* is structured as the objectively assembled account of someone who witnessed the events in person. This pattern is evident for nearly the entirety of the novel's third and fourth chapters, where Dyer makes it unquestionably explicit that he does not want to share with the rest of the world the horrors that his team had witnessed during the expedition, and that he is "forced into speech" to warn against future explorations of a similar kind:

It is only with vast hesitancy and repugnance that I let my mind go back to Lake's camp and what we really found there [...]. I am constantly tempted to shirk the details, and to let hints stand for actual facts and ineluctable deductions. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 514)

Before the geologist takes courage to describe the conditions of what was left of Lake's camp, he reveals that the "tremendous significance lies in what we dared not tell – what I would not tell now but for the need of warning others off from nameless terrors" (510). Only after a reiterated attempt to hide the truth from the public does Dyer "break through all reticences at last – even about that ultimate nameless thing beyond the mountains of madness" (514). Dyer's reluctance allows Lovecraft to take a distance from the trend of pulp literature that he so vocally criticized, which is the lack of coherent psychological reactions to the uncanny. In Dyer, Lovecraft also finds a character through which that "hoax" can be

convincingly delivered both to the fictional (textual) audience of Dyer's reports, and to the actual (extratextual) readership that Lovecraft hopes will accept his narrative extravaganzas as "literal truth."

A Spatiality of Madness

To have the novel accepted as "literal truth," disorient his audience and deploy his cosmicist philosophy, Lovecraft also relies on particularly accurate descriptions as well as desolate and intricate spatiality. A still fairly unexplored continent between the World Wars (Navroth 190), Antarctica provided the perfect geographical context for Lovecraft's literary and metaphysical speculations. Considering Lovecraft's appreciation of *Pym*, his long-standing fascination with the Antarctic regions and the poles in general (191), and his manifest outrage at a *Weird Tales* story published in 1930 that poorly dealt with a similar topic (Joshi 870), it is no surprise that the author saw in the South Pole a captivating opportunity for one of his most conceptually innovative narratives.

Because Lovecraft prioritized the atmospheric element of a story over characterial relationships and crude facts, after the initial suspense generated by Dyer's hesitation regarding the ensuing report, the author presents the reader with an unsettlingly sublime landscape:

Through the desolate summits swept raging intermittent gusts of the terrible antarctic wind; whose cadences sometimes held vague suggestions of a wild and half-sentient musical piping, with notes extending over a wide range, and which for some subconscious mnemonic reason seemed to me disquieting and even dimly terrible. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 485)

Here it is possible to appreciate Lovecraft's trademark indirect description, a technique that object-oriented ontologist Graham Harman describes as "an allusion to something beyond the bounds of perception and language" (66). Harman pinpoints in Lovecraft a convergence between two distinct phenomenological tensions: a vertical axis between an unknown entity and its nebulous, perceivable properties; and a horizontal one correlating

an object to its numerous sensible qualities (88). The gusts of wind that “sometimes” recalled with “vague suggestions” a distant music, and “which for some subconscious mnemonic reason seemed” disturbing to the narrator (Lovecraft, *Tales* 485), relate to the former relationship. This referential uncertainty operates as an appropriate rhetorical mechanism to suggest unknown entities, phenomena and landscapes that elude the efficacy of traditional denotation. Another manifestation of this linguistic concealment occurs when Dyer and Danforth set out to fly over the mountains West of Lake’s laboratory. Faced with a barely describable vista, Dyer recounts:

Our sensations of tense expectancy as we prepared to round the crest and peer out over an untrodden world can hardly be described on paper [...]. The touch of evil mystery in these barrier mountains, and in the beckoning sea of opalescent sky glimpsed betwixt their summits, was a highly subtle and attenuated matter not to be explained in literal words. (486)

The geologist’s inability to put matters into “literal words” parallels his reluctance to disclose the unnamable discoveries made by Lake. The narrator’s increasing hesitation to discuss the details of the expedition, along with his incapacity to render with words the uncanniness of those mountains, signal an epistemological turn from the nebulous descriptions of those “desolate summits.” While at first Dyer struggles to lexically encapsulate the sublime, as in a sort of romantic contemplation of an object “cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal” (Bullough n. pag.), he later surrenders altogether to the unrepresentable. Lovecraft thus shifts from suggestive evocation to (openly admitted) verbal deficiency. To counterbalance this tendency to allusion and elision, the author starts, hereafter, supplementing the narrator’s loss for words with passages of ultra-realistic descriptiveness, which result in the same syntactic frenzy previously displayed by Lake in his five-page-long reports of the fossilized aliens.

The paradox inherent to such linguistic hypertrophy, however, is that, rather than eliciting clarity in the reader’s mental images of the scene, it only generates confusion. A look at the verbal representation of the primordial city discovered among the mountains should suffice to show this:

The nameless stone labyrinth consisted, for the most part, of walls from 10 to 150 feet in ice-clear height, and of a thickness varying from five to ten feet. It was composed mostly of prodigious blocks of dark primordial slate, schist, and sandstone – blocks in many cases as large as $4 \times 6 \times 8$ feet – though in several places it seemed to be carved out of a solid, uneven bed-rock of pre-Cambrian slate. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 524)

Following this list of oddly specific dimensions – Dyer and Danforth are still observing this part of the city from inside their airplane – the geologist adds that although the general shapes of the buildings are “conical, pyramidal, or terraced,” there are also “many perfect cylinders, perfect cubes, clusters of cubes, and other rectangular forms, and a peculiar sprinkling of angled edifices whose five-pointed ground plan roughly suggested modern fortifications” (524). Harman sees in Lovecraft’s complementary amassing of features and topographical specifications the literary application of the horizontal gap between things and their multiplying qualities:

Here we have something different: a “horizontal” weirdness that I would not call allusive but rather “cubist,” for lack of a better term. The power of language is no longer enfeebled by an impossibly deep and distant reality. Instead, language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing. (26)

Harman equates this abundance of characteristics and details in Lovecraft’s fiction with cubism in light of the latter’s groundbreaking defiance of classic notions of perspective via the representation of an object’s aspect as if it were seen simultaneously from multiple viewpoints (33-34). I would argue that Lovecraft’s descriptive over-accuracy is an intrinsically bound-to-fail response to supplement the undecipherability of reality and prompt a simultaneous appreciation of its manifold essence. At the level of content and diegetic flow, Lovecraft’s voracious and dizzying descriptions appear to go towards what Joseph Frank would describe as the “spatialization of form” (“Spatial Form I” 231) in literature. Drawing on Ezra Pound’s poetic conception of the image, Frank claims that, to interpret the manifestation of scattered referents and meanings, they

must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously; only when this is done can they be adequately understood; for while they follow one another in time, their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship. (229)

Frank here suggests that the disjointed “word-groups” of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* – a clearly different work in terms of genre, theme, and composition from *Mountains* – may be made sense of only if the reader somehow rereads or mentally reconstructs the textual fragments of the poem, ignoring their temporal succession in favor of a more visual – hence spatial – appreciation of the text. Lovecraft, instead, privileges an “excess of surfaces” textuality (Harman 26), which goes beyond Eliot’s fragmentary poetics referenced by Frank. Indeed, the descriptions used by Lovecraft have “a total effect not reducible to a sum total of architectural sub-units” (125). However, there is a stronger connection between Frank’s theory and Lovecraft’s aesthetics. Modern(ist) literature, Frank writes, is striding towards and embedding itself in space as a consequence of the reduction of the literary work of art’s perceived temporality (“Spatial Form III” 651). Relying on Worringer’s aesthetic theory in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), Frank argues that the spatial turn of modernist literature depends on the artist’s “condition of disequilibrium with nature” (650): “man [...] no longer feels able to cope with the bewildering complexities of megalopolitan existence” (648). Lovecraft was certainly affected by such disharmony with the cultural, social and spatial milieu, as the explicitly racist and grotesque depictions of New York’s urbanscape in “The Horror at Red Hook” and “He” demonstrate. But it is in *Mountains* that Lovecraft’s method of (re)presenting a weird fictional universe enacts the disillusioned artist’s breakaway from naturalism. By verbosely focusing on the spatial deformations of the novel, Lovecraft foregrounds space as content (the mountains, the structure of the Elder Ones’ city, the interiors of the edifices), but also employs spatialization as a linguistic technique that calls for a readerly effort to grasp the multi-faceted reality displayed through the novel’s abundant descriptions. Furthermore, the overall spatial complexity of the city is mirrored on a smaller but equally detailed level by the labyrinthine structure of its edifices. For instance, the building into

which Dyer and Danforth enter after landing at the mountains' foothills is "a continuous maze of connected chambers and passages," with "rooms [...] of all imaginable shapes and proportions, ranging from five-pointed stars to triangles and perfect cubes," which measures "about 30 × 30 feet in floor area, and 20 feet in height" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 534). The same building is later described (again) as an "aeon-silent maze of human masonry" (538), a miniature but specular image of the city earlier referred to as a "stupendous stone labyrinth" (528), a "maze of stone-shadowed twilight" and a "labyrinthine town" (531).

Lovecraft's accumulation of spatial elements can also be seen at work in the moment when Dyer and Danforth decide to venture towards an abyss that previously discovered carvings hinted at, and into which the Elder Ones had fled:

As we threaded our dim way through the labyrinth with the aid of map and compass – traversing rooms and corridors in every stage of ruin or preservation, clambering up ramps, crossing upper floors and bridges and clambering down again, encountering choked doorways and piles of debris, hastening now and then along finely preserved and uncannily immaculate stretches [...] – we were repeatedly tantalised by the sculptured walls along our route. (558)

Here Lovecraft masters the technique in two ways: he first reconstructs within the space of a parenthetical segment (a textual spatialization in itself) a narrative sequence that must have lasted at least a few hours, but which is exhausted very rapidly at the level of discourse; and then he interrupts the narrative flow to create suspense and set the mood for Dyer and Danforth's successive finding of Gedney's corpse. Moreover, this succession of movements and locations allow Lovecraft to emphasize the complexity of the Elder Ones' cityscape at the level of language. In other words, the use of a notably convoluted syntax and the amassing of descriptions referring to the same object, circumstance or space, function as a signifier of the novel's content.

Lovecraft's technique does not apply exclusively to spaces. Another example of his over-descriptive technique can be witnessed in the crucial scene where the geologist and his assistant are chased by a furious shoggoth:

It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train – a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. (581)

The reader again is burdened with the accumulation of descriptive clusters, which aptly displays Lovecraft's attempt to bridge the "gap between an accessible object and its gratuitous amassing of numerous palpable surfaces" (Harman 30).

In a final twist of cosmic horror, Danforth takes one look at a more shocking sight – mountains far higher than the madness ones: "I have said that Danforth refused to tell me what final horror made him scream out so insanely – a horror which, I feel sadly sure, is mainly responsible for his present breakdown" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 585). After a series of lengthy, cubist, incredibly descriptive passages, Lovecraft suddenly goes back to verbal reticence for one last moment of unutterable terror – so unutterable that the novel ends by sparking only conjectures about what Danforth may have seen on the flight back to the camp: another shoggoth? An intratextually quoted "colour out of space" (586)? A monster with five dimensions? These are just a few of the entities that the irreversibly traumatized Danforth rambles on about, leaving the disoriented reader to guess what to make of the assistant's scream of Poesque origin "Tekeli-li." The sharp return to allusiveness ultimately signals the surrender of human knowledge to that final horror's "radical unknowability", which "defies all supplementary efforts of scientific realism" (Yi Lee 22).

Conclusion

With this study, I have attempted to illustrate how Lovecraft turns to intertextuality, analyzing the tension between allusiveness, a – sometimes excessively – descriptive language, and spatial over-accuracy to represent the unknown and perplex the reader in *At the Mountains of Madness*. While

drawing extensively upon the exotic and sublime imagery of Antarctica hinted at in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Lovecraft appears to be more fascinated by the compositional principle underlining Poe's novel: the hoax device. To substantiate this shared aura of deception, Lovecraft borrows key motifs from *Pym*, thus giving new life to specific elements of Poe's storyworld, and making them as real and reliable as the historical figures Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen, both repeatedly mentioned in Lovecraft's novel. At work in *Mountains* is a "remotivation" (Genette 325-30) of Pym's hesitations and tepid drive for knowledge into Dyer and Danforth's undying curiosity and hyperbolic reluctance – a typically Lovecraftian syncretism at play in his neosupernatural fiction. The reader is confused by the liminality of the narrative, positioned on the threshold between reality and fiction, in the same way that the protagonist and deuteragonist are puzzled by the albino penguins and the "Tekeli-li" cry, which were believed to be the mere product of Poe's creativity. To harmonize the different components of a weird story (the conceptual, the stylistic and the spatial-temporal setting), Lovecraft complicates his prose and the spaces within which it is embedded. Mixing different temporal dynamics, while foregrounding its overly detailed and maze-like spatiality, Lovecraft moves, albeit unknowingly, towards the direction of coeval arts, that is, "a direction of increased spatiality" (Frank, "Spatial Form III" 650). Such scenery defies not only the principles of standard architecture, but also those of linguistic referentiality and imagination, which is Lovecraft's ultimate purpose. His literary obsession with bizarre geometry aligns with the "crisis of representation" (Blacklock 1111) discussed by Frank when he theorizes about the non-realistic, spatial turn of the modern artist, disillusioned by the complexities of the twentieth century between the two world wars (Frank, "Spatial Form III" 648). Meaning-making can only be possible when "the piecing of dissociated of knowledge" (*Tales* 167), as Lovecraft wrote at the beginning of "The Call of Cthulhu," finally takes place, leaving the characters (and the readers) more cognitively disoriented (more) than they are terrified.

Notes

¹ Just to list a few examples, *At the Mountains of Madness* alone features 92 inflections of the verb “to seem”; the asteroid in “The Colour Out of Space” “appeared to promise both brittleness and hollowness,” causing later in the story a “phosphorescence [which] appeared to stir furtively in the yard near the barn (Lovecraft, *Tales* 345-346, 351); and in “The Call of Cthulhu”, the bas-relief of the titular creature “seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive” (169).

² I am here using the term “parascientific” instead of the more negatively connoted “pseudoscientific” to emphasize Lovecraft’s aspiration to a science-like fictional discourse rather than a commitment to divulge theories of dubious scientific value.

³ Like its predecessor, “The Outsider” is set in a castle, from which the guests of a party flee following the vision of an “inconceivable, indescribable and unmentionable monstrosity” (Lovecraft, *Tales* 231).

⁴ Thomas Ollive Mabbott argues that Poe’s use of the adjective “boreal” in the nineteenth line of “Ulalume” to denote the South hemisphere was partly influenced by contemporary French, in which the needle of the compass pointing to the South was indeed called “boreal.” Mabbott goes on to claim that Poe’s source of inspiration for Mount Yaanek in the second stanza was Mount Erebus, discovered by British polar explorer Sir James Clark Ross in 1840 (Poe, *Poems* 419, nn. 16-19).

⁵ In “The Call of Cthulhu” the main narrator (I) tells the story found in his uncle’s journal (II), which contains another character’s account (III), which features an anecdote told by a secondary character (IV). In “The Colour Out of Space” the story is second-handed to the reader by an observer who had heard the verbal account of the events from a senile narrator.

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