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Title:

Losing our Humanity: The Lovecraftian Sublime and Its Paralysis of Anthropocentrism

Thesis Chair: Dr. Rachelle Smith

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In this thesis, I argue that any attempt to connect Lovecraft's work to contemporary posthuman and/or ecocritical theories must acknowledge his nihilism and proceed cautiously. The thesis first outlines two models of the sublime: the humanistic sublime, particularly as conceptualized by Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant; and the Lovecraftian sublime, shown through fictional works of Lovecraft like "The Colour out of Space" and *At the Mountains of Madness*. Contrary to the life-affirming humanistic sublime, the Lovecraftian sublime nullifies meaning, value, purpose, and action. Lovecraft's atheistic materialism lends his work to posthumanist and ecocritical study in the sense that they all share ontological beliefs, but the connection stops there, because ethics, I argue, are not compatible in the cosmos that Lovecraft conceptualized. Formulating ethics in a Lovecraftian framework (something he himself struggled to do) seems yet another misguided attempt to return to humanistic principles, even if unwittingly. Therefore, while a posthumanist or ecocritical reading of Lovecraft's work can be warranted, I maintain that nihilism cannot be a locus for anything resembling humanism. In the annihilation of value and meaning, Lovecraft's work is a powerful check against anthropocentrism. However, we are still left with the question of where to go from there. If the Lovecraftian sublime brings us to a realization of hopelessness, then we must continue asking: Why Lovecraft? Why now? Thus, I close this study with more questions than answers, because rather than serving as a source of practical or moral advice, Lovecraft's work calls us back to the drawing board altogether, forcing us to reconceptualize who we are, what we are, where we are, and what the future may hold.

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft, cosmic horror, the sublime, materialism, posthumanism, ecocriticism, ontology, ethics, nihilism

LOSING OUR HUMANITY:

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Many like to believe that they are the authors of their own stories, but I firmly believe that each and every chapter of my story has been a collaborative effort. To my family: Without you, I have no pages. To my partners in crime, almost all of whom have been at my side for a decade or more, and to my partner in love, who I'm convinced has been at my side for just as long: Without you, I come unbound. And to my beloved musicians, game developers, filmmakers, authors, acquaintances, cooks, and everyone and everything in between: Without you, my world is a wasteland. I doubt I can ever repay the debt that I owe to all of you, my "co-authors," but I hope I have done—and continue to do—my best, so that I may prove to you that your time and energy have not been wasted on me.

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Introduction

I could probably point to the exact day that I consciously decided to start reading H. P. Lovecraft, and yet I cannot say how long Lovecraft lurked in my cultural unconscious. In high school, I showed my junior year English teacher a short story that I had been working on, and one of his first comments was that my writing reminded him of Fyodor Dostoevsky's. I went from believing that literature was a chore to spending entire school days with *The Brothers Karamazov* in my hand. I read Dostoevsky voraciously, eager to learn how I could have anything in common with such a writer. Something very similar to this happened in my first year at Emporia State University, too, when my Creative Writing instructor told me that my writing reminded her of H. P. Lovecraft's. But this time there was a difference: unlike my reading of Dostoevsky, I took my interest in Lovecraft in a scholarly direction. When I first began researching Lovecraft in 2016, I assumed that there would not be much scholarly work pertaining to him. However, as the semesters have gone by, I have learned that Lovecraft is not only accessible to academia, but that, in fact, his work is receiving more attention than ever. At both a personal and a scholarly level, I was naive. I could not see just how colossal Lovecraft was in the realms of popular culture and academia.

Throughout my life, I have played many video games, watched a good deal of film and television, and listened to thousands of hours of music. Still, it never occurred to me that Blizzard's famous video game franchise, *World of Warcraft*, was paying such direct homage to Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu" and other stories with their various Old Gods. It never occurred to me that *Bloodborne*, a game developed by FromSoftware, was

making such a direct nod to Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" with its fishing hamlet and monstrous fish-people (and Old Gods, too). It never occurred to me that Ridley Scott's films, *Alien* and *Prometheus*, were so indebted to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* with their doomed expeditions and revelations of cosmic horror. In terms of music, there has been a recent burgeoning of mixes on YouTube whose titles incorporate the names of various creatures and places derived from Lovecraft, and the purpose of the music seems to be to communicate an eerie sense of cosmic dread. And long before the days of publishing music on YouTube, Metallica came out with their *Ride the Lightning* album, which closes with a song called "The Call of Ktulu." Board games, plush dolls, video games, albums, movies: if you can dream of any sort of cultural artifact, it is likely that there is a Lovecraftian variant. He has become nearly impossible to ignore. But for all of his posthumous fame, it seems that there is still a reluctance to acknowledge some of the most elemental aspects of his life and work. His racism, for instance, which was extreme even by the standards of his own day, is especially pronounced to audiences today. Furthermore, the toxic side of Lovecraft not only problematizes his popularity but also his value to scholars. Yet these are just a couple pieces of the whole paradoxical puzzle of Lovecraft.

H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) resisted categorization in his life and in his work, weaving in and out of genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and poetry. He denied placement among certain movements of his day, allied himself ideologically with almost no one, and harshly critiqued and questioned authors of both the past and the present. But what of *our* present? The study of Lovecraft has been growing ever since his

death with the efforts of August Derleth, Donald Wandrei, Clark Ashton Smith, and other friends. And since the 1970s especially, with the efforts of S. T. Joshi, David E. Schultz, and many others, Lovecraft scholarship continues to grow. As it has grown, more and more theories have been applied to his work, and as my research has shown me repeatedly, Lovecraft's work brings many concepts together: *posthumanism*, *the sublime*, *ecology, ontology, epistemology, ethics*. At times, I read these terms and ignored their repetition. Again and again I glossed over them, until I realized that there is clearly a conversation that Lovecraft's work warrants—one that I investigate in this thesis, and in which I put forth an argument of my own. I argue that the tales of H. P. Lovecraft subvert certain ecocritical notions like the apocalypse (extinction of life, especially as a narrative that is meant to motivate change) and ecophobia (human fear and/or hatred of nature, leading to harmful attempts at conquering and controlling it). In this subversion, Lovecraft undermines any desire to make meaningful change in the world we inhabit. Ethical intentions bespeak an underlying humanism, the critique of which unites ecocritics and posthumanists. But when those intentions are brought to Lovecraft's work, veiled behind ontological agreement, it becomes clear that the utility of Lovecraft to posthumanists and ecocritics is severely limited by the nihilism that is inherent to his work. This nihilism achieves its potency through what I call the Lovecraftian sublime, which amounts to a denial of life in the face of the overwhelming cosmos. Therefore, the Lovecraftian sublime is the mechanism through which nihilism is realized, through which cosmic horror is achieved; in the denial of life, there is the denial of humanity, of meaning, of value, of action, making even ecocriticism and posthumanism seem

anthropocentric by comparison. Rather than provide answers or lessons, the work of H. P. Lovecraft can cause us to reconsider the value of life, the purpose of humanity, and the nature of the universe we inhabit.

Chapter 1 is entitled "The Lovecraftian Sublime" and has the primary goal of distinguishing the Lovecraftian sublime from other, more humanistic models of the sublime that historically have been proposed by philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. In the chapter, I observe a positive, life-affirming sequence of events in the humanistic sublime: in bearing witness to the awesome might of nature, a human observer will realize the greatness of God or of human reason itself. However, the Lovecraftian sublime (which I observe through works of Lovecraft like *At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Colour out of Space") takes the life-affirming encounter with the majestic or the awe-inspiring and suggests, instead, that our triviality ought to instill in us a sense of existential dread. I argue, then, that the Lovecraftian sublime inverts the humanistic sublime and that this dis-anthropocentric function is how Lovecraft becomes associated with the similarly antihumanist stances of some posthumanists and ecocritics.

Chapter 2 is entitled "The (Post)Human Struggle against Lovecraft's Nihilism," and in it I argue that the application of posthumanist theory to Lovecraft's work is limited by its nihilistic tendencies. Scholars like Brian Johnson suggest that Lovecraft's work is precursory in some way to more contemporary theories of posthumanism, materialism, and ecocriticism, all of which tend to take ethical directions. In this chapter, I argue that to do so is to forget that in Lovecraft's sense of infinite space and deep time (i.e., cosmic time, which goes beyond that of our species, our planet, or even our galaxy), no action is

meaningful or impactful beyond the scope of humanity. This nihilism can be observed in Lovecraft's fiction and nonfiction, both of which speak about the meaninglessness of human action and the degree to which human extinction seems logical. In examining Lovecraft's nonfiction, I reveal contradictions in his own philosophical development, which should ultimately testify even more to his instability. I hope to have made clear, by the end of the chapter, that when it comes to Lovecraft and his work, ethical philosophies are incompatible. Therefore, ascribing a precursory status to him is problematic.

Chapter 3 is entitled "The Limitations of Reading Lovecraft Ecocritically," and in this final chapter I argue that Lovecraft cannot be useful to ecocriticism because his nihilism is resistant to the ethical activism that drives some ecocritical analysis. Moreover, extracting meaningful lessons from Lovecraft's work is futile in the first place: through applying ethical or activist critical approaches to such works as "The Colour out of Space," we can see that the approaches themselves possess humanistic principles. Notions like ecophobia and the apocalypse depend on human agency to have any critical effectiveness, and while that may be effective with some texts, it is clear that in the cosmos of Lovecraft there is no room for human agency whatsoever. Therefore, whatever Lovecraft may have in common with posthumanism, ecocriticism, deep ecology, etc., it seems that his nihilistic sublime is the threshold that creates incongruency. As extinction becomes more of a possibility, I argue that Lovecraft's cosmic horror may present the non-values that are needed if we truly wish to move away from anthropocentrism. Having reached this conclusion, I believe that there is still much work to be done. I am not yet satisfied with how *human* is defined, nor with how *nature*

is defined, and I want to continue learning about new ways to conceptualize these. To that end, Lovecraft has much to offer. However, I look forward not only to exploring my present reading at a deeper level but also to expanding my knowledge of both literature and theory.

At a time when our minds are increasingly occupied by nihilism, environmental issues, depression, anxiety, and so on, the source of Lovecraft's popularity is hard to locate. In Lovecraft's work, the survival of the species and the survival of all other biodiversity is not a concern. In Lovecraft's work, the value of our species is next to nothing. In Lovecraft's work, it is logical for us to become extinct. All evidence, then, should point to a complete rejection of Lovecraft's work in modern times, when we are trying to imagine ways to survive ecological catastrophe or keep on defending the sanctity of our lives and our values. Lovecraft's work gives voice to the nihilism that undermines humanistic hope, making one of the most horrifying aspects of his work the revelation that nihilism and humanism are on crash courses with each other—and that it will not be humanism that endures. This denial of life is the essence of the Lovecraftian sublime, and it is the reason why Lovecraft is relevant to the discussion of posthumanism and to certain strains of contemporary ecological discourse. The work that remains to be done by scholars of Lovecraft's work is, I believe, no longer the work of deriving ethics or tracing some sort of philosophical lineage, but rather of understanding what correlation, if any, exists between the malaise of our current cultural moment and the popularity of Lovecraft's work. Beyond this thesis, what I hope to see answered—and what I hope to help answer—is *why* Lovecraft and *why now*.

Chapter 1: The Lovecraftian Sublime

The sublime, as employed in the cosmic horror of H. P. Lovecraft, performs a crucial role as a catalyst for reconceiving humanistic assumptions about our existence, our purpose, our abilities, and our actions. This section of the thesis describes what is meant throughout by the term *sublime*, demonstrates how the sublime appears in the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, and examines how Lovecraft's inversion of the humanist sublime can necessitate a revisiting of humanistic assumptions. Essential in discussing cosmic horror is ontological thinking, the purpose of which is to outline and inform our idea of what nature is as well as our idea of what *we* are. In short, cosmic horror (or Lovecraftian horror) involves characters who experience something so awe-inspiring or overwhelming that their ability to comprehend the event is trivialized. Thus, in cosmic horror, epistemological questions (e.g., how we know what we know, how we can acquire certain knowledge, should we seek knowledge) are also important. As will be discussed more in the second chapter, cosmic horror casts doubts on human agency, on the human conception of what is natural, and on how we ought to conduct ourselves as beings who exist within a material world that is indifferent to us. In order to understand how these doubts are reached, we must first grapple with one of the trademarks of Lovecraft's fiction: what Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock calls the "revolutionary antihumanist sublime" ("Afterword" 234). This antihumanist sublime will help to further illuminate the depths of Lovecraft's nihilism and the impossibility of reading his work along humanistic lines.

Terror is sublime, and the sublime is terror. These two terms are intertwined because, as Edmund Burke states, terror is "the ruling principle of the sublime" (131). If one experiences something large and overwhelming and awe-inspiring—in other words, sublime—Burke argues that some degree of terror will be felt in the subject. From Burke's analysis, then, we can deduce that an object striking our sensations will, in turn, also strike our mind; provided we come away from the encounter safely (or observe it from a place of security), then we would be forced into a corner of uncertainty. In such a corner, questions might arise concerning how or why we are here, what constitutes life, what our relationship is to the universe, how we know what we know, how we can be certain of what we know, and so on. The sublime encounter ought to shake our beliefs—or it would, at least, in the hopelessly indifferent cosmos that Lovecraft conceived. In the case of many of his predecessors, however, we are scarcely forced into any kind of corner when confronted with the sublime and/or terrible. Before conducting a closer examination of Lovecraft's work, then, it is worth piecing together an outline of the sublime as it has been conceptually developed by a small handful of the much more humanistic thinkers who came before him: Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant.

Longinus primarily discusses the sublime in a rhetorical sense, exploring its constituent parts and how it can be employed to good effect in art. As W. Rhys Roberts argues, the five sources of sublimity in Longinus's thinking can be condensed in the following way: "you must think greatly; feel deeply; shape your thoughts and language effectively; choose words beautiful in themselves and in their associations; arrange your

words and thoughts with dignity and impressiveness" (126). These sources of sublimity ought to imbue a text with a great variety of things according to Longinus, but some of the most notable qualities include transcendence of time, place, and reader—the text's message is clear among all circumstances of audience (Longinus 70-71). To achieve such a grand and noble form of art is, as Longinus suggests, to approximate "the majesty of God" (102). God creates, and so do we. God fashions magnificent things in nature, and so can we in art. This hint at divinity, albeit small, is Longinus's contribution to establishing the power of the human in an aesthetic and rhetorical sense. Furthermore, he establishes a close link between that which is natural in art and that which is art in the natural: "art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when she contains art hidden within her" (90). Thus, Longinus makes early connections between the sublime and nature, because there is, at least in his time, already an assumption about the inferiority of the mortal human being before the far more vast and majestic forces of God and nature. Yet in the artist's divine ascent (102), Longinus also assumes that humans can imitate greatness and replicate the grandeur, the nobility, the ineffability of God and nature. As will be observed, this is primarily a matter of rhetorical prowess in Longinus's view. Such considerations will be useful, but the aim of this chapter is not strictly to consider the sublime at an aesthetic level; a more philosophical (and not so much rhetorical) look at the sublime, built upon the work of Burke and Kant, reveals the core issues of ontology and epistemology alluded to previously.

Burke expounds on the subject of the sublime at length in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. One of the primary

effects of the sublime "in *nature*," Burke claims, is "astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (130). Burke continues to state that the sublime is not merely a thought that we meditate on after the fact, but that which "anticipates our reasonings" and "hurries us on by an irresistible force" (130). The sublime from the Burkean perspective functions, then, as a sort of catalyst for reflection. We do not look upon a mountain or a vast ocean and immediately begin to meditate on what a sublime experience it is; in that moment, we feel only the suspension of thought and the surge of emotion, of wonder, of terror. Even Longinus maintains that "an exhibition of passion" has its greatest impact when it is "inspired by the occasion" rather than being "studied by the speaker himself" (Longinus 88). The moment, whether experienced in person or composed by the artist, must possess an overflow of sensation—not a patient and rational examination. This is the phase of the sublime experience that can be dubbed a variety of things, such as arrest, paralysis, suspension, etc. No matter what it is labelled, however, this halting of the rational mind is a state that must be noted when discussing the Lovecraftian sublime—for that state is, after all, the one in which most of Lovecraft's characters reside during their strange encounters.

One question that must be addressed is what constitutes a sublime experience in the first place. According to Burke, the terror of the sublime may be brought about by a sort of power differential, by a limit to our comprehension, by an overwhelming of our sensory organs, and more. Burke argues that whatever possesses power is capable of causing pain, making it especially frightening because "pain, in its highest degree, is

much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure" (138). It is imperative in Burke's discussion of power that the creature or entity or environment be superior, because "pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior" (139). Thus—if we picture Burke's example of the "gloomy forest"—it possesses sublimity because, as we stand in its midst, we stand inferior. The dark forest, the towering mountain, the ocean stretching seemingly to infinity—these are scenes of nature which render their experiencing subject inferior not only because of their sheer magnitude but also because of their potential to endanger us and the fear that accompanies such a difference of power. Burke argues that in the case of animals, as soon as their "strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime" (140). The same is true of the environment, as even Longinus mused more than a millennium before Burke that "what is useful or necessary men regard as commonplace, while they reserve their admiration for that which is astounding" (Longinus 101). Small rivers, streams, and lakes are within the grasp of humans; bodies of water such as the Atlantic ocean and the Nile river are not quite as easily conceivable. A stripping of power from the object results in a negation of its sublimity, and it follows from this that if the subject can envision a way to master the object, then the gap of power is closed (perhaps even flipped)—and if this occurs, then there is no longer such terror. One of the best ways to strip something of its power, then, is to understand it and to identify ways in which it is perhaps not so superior to humanity as initially assumed in the moment of terror. In this sense, the seeking of knowledge is a kind of defense mechanism. However, it is the need to strip power from the object through epistemological means that is most likely to create an obstacle for the subject;

and it is almost never the case in a work of horror that the shattered subject emerges superior—especially not in Lovecraft.

Those who make attempts at understanding the creatures of the cosmos, or perhaps space itself, are met with either death, dark transformation, or a descent into madness. In one of Lovecraft's longer works, *At the Mountains of Madness*, the narrator, Dr. William Dyer, recounts the story of his expedition to Antarctica, where he and a graduate student named Danforth had delved into a dead city located in the midst of the world's largest mountains. They are not the sole members of this expedition but are part of a crew of scholars from the fictional Miskatonic University. Four of the expedition members are men from the university (Lake, Pabodie, Atwood, and the narrator, Dyer), and they are accompanied by "seven graduate students from Miskatonic and nine skilled mechanics," making for "sixteen assistants" and twenty members in total (Lovecraft 461). Lake's crew leads part of the expedition well before Dyer and Danforth, being the first to meet with disaster. Prior to Dyer and Danforth discovering the ruins of Lake's crew, though, Lake flies near the mountain range and remarks over the radio, "'You can't imagine anything like this. Highest peaks must go over 35,000 feet. Everest out of the running'" (470). The size of the mountains is no small detail here, of course, because their vastness proves to be awe-inspiring, overwhelming, and in some sense sublime. Even the phrase "mountains of madness" itself occurs nine times throughout the tale, suggesting an inextricable causal relationship—witness this vast scene of nature as it is enmeshed with the cosmic and expect to come away with a shattered psyche. More to the epistemological concern, though, the scale of these mountains symbolizes an ambition

and an excitement on the behalf of a curious expedition, and if there are mountains larger than Everest, then there are surely mountains to be found even larger than those. There is, in other words, always a frontier. The thirst for knowledge is quenched only momentarily in the discovery of that which is majestic beyond comparison, because there must be something further beyond.

As with much of Lovecraft's fiction, that *beyond* is much closer than the characters ever expect, and the discovery of the mountains is soon followed by the dreadful discovery of a dead city, constructed by extraterrestrials long before the time of humanity. By the time Dyer and Danforth arrive at Lake's camp, the crew is mostly missing and/or mutilated. In their continued exploration, Dyer and Danforth have a run-in with one of the alien creatures depicted in the hieroglyphs of the city, a "shoggoth," which Dyer describes as a "shapeless [entity] composed of a viscous jelly," resembling "an agglutination of bubbles" (531). That which possesses definite shape or form more easily adheres to a rational, mathematical understanding. But this "shoggoth" in no way conforms to the laws of nature understood by these men, and it is for this reason that the creature takes on a sense of sublimity. Part of why vastness is sublime for Burke, for instance, is because the totality of the object not only eludes human comprehension, but sometimes even freezes it. So while the "shoggoth" may not possess vastness in a quantitative sense, its nonconformity does produce the same effect, which can be seen as Dyer and Danforth's rational processes grind to a halt with just a momentary glance:

> Our exact motive in looking back again was perhaps no more than the immemorial instinct of the pursued to gauge the nature and course of its pursuer;

> or perhaps it was an automatic attempt to answer a subconscious question raised by one of our senses. In the midst of our flight, with all our faculties centred on the problem of escape, we were in no condition to observe and analyse details; yet even so our latent brain-cells must have wondered at the message brought them by our nostrils. (Lovecraft 565)

The rational mind here undergoes a suspension in the face of terror, just as it would if faced with a foreboding forest or an unfathomably deep ocean. So while the occasion for sublimity is different, the effects are similar. Both Dyer and Danforth come away from the confrontation alive, but certainly not without trauma; Dyer remarks that "Danforth will never be the same again," and that the horror of his encounter with the shoggoth must be "mainly responsible for [Danforth's] present breakdown" (571). So begins Danforth's descent into madness. The humanist sublime projects a sense of purpose and breathtaking wonder upon the experiencing subject; Lovecraft's does nothing but instill a pessimism and a paralyzing dread.

Whether it be in the horror of Lovecraft or those who were influential to his work, like Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood, knowledge-seeking is not portrayed as a worthwhile activity. This is, as Marco Pasi terms it, a *negative* epistemology—one which inverts "positive confidence both in the human capacity of knowing the other reality and in the desirability of such knowledge" (74). Not only is it unlikely that we *can* grasp things beyond our understanding (sublimities), but it is unlikely, as well, that the acquisition of such knowledge should benefit us. For Lovecraft, it does not. The very first

paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu" portrays Lovecraftian negative epistemology most clearly:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft 139)

The acquisition of knowledge can only lead to madness, just as the slightest intimation shattered Danforth's mind in *Mountains*. The sublime, then, is repeatedly brought forth as a reminder of our frailty: if our understanding of the universe is always finite, then there will always be some degree of rejection to human mastery. It is the human limit of contemplating the infinite that makes the sublime possible in the first place, especially when we are talking about Lovecraft's inversion of the humanist sublime.

To understand how the humanist sublime is inverted, however, we must return to the basic structure of sublimity as it was outlined by the humanist thinkers mentioned previously—Kant in particular, because his notion of the sublime is especially imbued with Enlightenment humanism. To a greater extent than Longinus or Burke, Kant discussed the sublime at a meticulous and mathematical level, ensuring that his aesthetic considerations would not be unmoored from his more mechanical, philosophical method.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, he states that the sublime possesses its quality of being overwhelming because of a certain measure, a quantity, a magnitude. For instance, Kant states: "*the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small*" (47). Our more natural faculty, imagination, cannot comprehend the totality of the object in question. But, as Kant goes on to explain, that which is big is not automatically sublime; in fact, it is not even the object itself that is sublime in the first place. According to Kant, it is the experiencing *subject* upon whom sublimity depends: "[I]t is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective Judgement is occupied, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime" (47). Thus, in order for something to even be constituted as sublime, it requires an experiencing subject. The leap from Burke is not large: if there is no human to experience the terror, no human to imagine the difference of power, no human to fail abjectly in his or her comprehension of the object, then there can be no sublimity.

This requirement of humanity seems to be one of the only reasons that Lovecraft includes humans in his stories at all, as he spends very little time on character building. Even Lin Carter, a respectful and admiring reader of Lovecraft, cannot help but critically remark, in *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos*, that "[Lovecraft] has no ability at all for creating character, or for writing dialogue" (xiii). It seems, rather, that his characters are primarily there as vehicles through which terror is reached. As opposed to characters of more optimistic fiction, who might persist despite their flaws, the characters of Lovecraft's work seem merely to exist in order to showcase human vulnerability. This, along with technical weaknesses of Lovecraft's work, such as "stilted, artificial" prose,

and diction that's "overwritten, verbose, and swimming in adjectives" (Carter xiii), would likely bar Lovecraft from reaching the artistic sublimity of which Longinus spoke. However, there is something particularly intriguing about diction in Lovecraft's work, especially the ways in which humans are lexically limited. Longinus's concept of sublimity presupposes human capability: in other words, it is assumed that with enough noble diction and proper arrangement of words, humans can create art so sublime that they are "[raised] near the majesty of God" (Longinus 102). Kant fashions a similarly anthropocentric notion of unbound humanity, as will be observed later. But there are conflicting claims here: if the sublime is a great passion inspired by a natural occasion, presumably vast or out of human comprehension, how can we then proceed to precisely represent it through language? The incomprehensibility of the sublime ought to bring with it a sense of ineffability. Words are the output of a presumably rational mind; and if reason is temporarily frozen by the sublime, then words themselves should inevitably fail. To add to the epistemological barrier that Pasi suggests, then, we may also imagine in Lovecraft's cosmic horror a rhetorical barrier, which is described by China Miéville as the "inevitable failure of the representation of the unrepresentable through language" (Weinstock, "Afterword" 233-34).

The "pole" of Lovecraft's work that Miéville dubs "the numinous, the 'Real,' the sublime," is, as Miéville importantly notes, "completely beyond representation" (231). This semiotic shortcoming is especially evident when, in stories such as "The Colour out of Space," the speechlessness of scientists and other onlookers is coupled with a frustrated demand of the narrator: "Do not ask me for my opinion. I do not know—that is

all" (Lovecraft 198). After all, what is to be said if there are no words to describe it adequately? What justice can words do to an event that eludes comprehension altogether? The "stilted" prose that Carter criticized becomes more than just a technical weakness, too, because Lovecraft's abundance of adjectives is a "nerdy itemization of exact specificity" or "excess exactitude" that actually, according to Miéville, "adds up to something beyond representation" (Weinstock, "Afterword" 232). Thus, in both cases (nondescription or hyper-description) Lovecraft still arrives in the same spot, and the awe-struck subject is met once again with the symptoms of a sublime experience: incomprehensibility and ineffability. This is also the intent, of course, behind Lovecraft's strangely constructed names of gods and time-lost cities and incantations: they are not meant to sound like anything humans would know, let alone be able to physiologically utter.

Aside from diction, another significant factor in the rhetorical and aesthetic achievement of sublimity is the engagement of the audience. In Longinus's view of the sublime, the figure "in which a writer . . . converts himself into" the person about whom the author is writing is crucial; and, equally as important, the author should employ actively engaging language by directly addressing the reader (93). The majority of Lovecraft's fiction is written in first person and often in an epistolary format, wherein the reader is being directly addressed by a narrator who has since died, been driven to madness, or both. This is one of Lovecraft's methods for pulling in the reader, and it can be observed in several of his works. As a small sample, he utilizes direct addresses in "Dagon": "When you have read these hastily scrawled pages . . ." (1); in "The Statement

of Randolph Carter": "I repeat to you, gentlemen, that your inquisition is fruitless" (7); and also in "The Colour out of Space": "Do not ask me for my opinion" (198). Lovecraft's use of dialogue is scarce, and when it does occur, it seems to be between the narrator and the audience rather than between two characters. It could be argued that this minimal use of dialogue (a shortcoming by Lin Carter's judgment) is actually a way of keeping the reader imprisoned, as it were, inside the mind of the narrator, which allows the reader to absorb the narrator's terror more intimately.

As for Longinus's point regarding the conversion of the writer into the subject—this is achieved not only through Lovecraft's insistent use of first-person narration but also via namelessness. In *An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia*, S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz conveniently compile a list of Lovecraft's unidentified narrators; it should be noted that the list (not even described as a completely exhaustive one) includes thirty-eight stories, "The Colour out of Space" among them (182-86). This element of namelessness makes it more difficult for the reader to ascribe an identity to the narrator—and coupled with the frequent loss of sanity in Lovecraft's narrators, the unease at the heart of Lovecraftian horror becomes amplified. Therefore, even if the confrontation with the sublime is layered under high-flown words, it remains the case that through Lovecraft's narrative choices, he builds an experience of mounting dread that echoes out from the hearts and minds of his narrators and into the reader. The basic pattern of sublimity, then, at least through the rhetorical/artistic framework set out by Longinus, seems in part to be met by Lovecraft. Additionally, if we follow the Burkean model of sublimity, where the sublime is fundamentally rooted in terror, then it should

also suffice to say that Lovecraft is drawing from the same well as Burkean sublimity. However, there is still much more to be said on Kant's theory of the sublime and the subject's role therein.

As I argue above, Kant places the entirety of the sublime's power in the subject. He elaborates by stating that sublimity "does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind" (61). The sentence could cease there and it would seem fair enough as an outright subjective claim, but Kant reaches further: Sublimity resides solely in our mind "in so far as we can become conscious that we are superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us" (61). Our imagination is what trembles in the face of nature, by Kant's thinking, while our rational faculty recognizes in itself no shortcomings whatsoever. So-called sublime objects "raise the energies of the soul" and provide us "courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature" (58). In other words, the terror that the sublime ought to create in us instead inspires a sense of might and mastery. In measuring ourselves against objects of such magnitude, "in our mind we find a superiority to nature even in its immensity" (58). These claims border upon hubris, and yet there is some irony in Kant's notion of the sublime: human imperfection is integral to his own humanistic theory. We cannot reach a recognition of our supposed rational superiority without first feeling inadequacy toward an object, implying that the existence of our own sublimity is dependent upon, and thus testament to, our epistemological limitation. The initial strike of fear owes to the subject's inability to comprehend the object in question. So, in Kant's theory, the object itself possesses no special quality outside its magnitude. And yet it is simultaneously true in this logic that

humans, with all their unbound freedom and capacity to imagine, reason, and moralize, must inevitably encounter mental barriers.

It is hard to ignore Kant's repetition of the key phrase, "in our mind," which rather underhandedly insists on the primacy of the subject, all the while failing to mention the other side of the binary: our body. The issue in Kant's neglect of the body is evident when we consider that, in reality, there can be no mind without a body—that being a subject depends upon first being an object. The separation of the rational from the imaginative is an abstraction that can be built only atop idealism, taking for granted not only human coexistence with the natural but also the coexistence of the natural *within* the human. As some posthumanists or materialists might tend to do, we must recognize the reality of our embodiment. The mere acknowledgment of our ontology throws Kant's consideration of human capability into question, for even if we were to triumph "in our mind" over Mt. Everest, the mountain before us still would not have moved an inch. If we could restrict the faculty of imagination to a detached, so-called natural side of ourselves, then perhaps it would be possible to localize the fear as a limitation of an inferior side of ourselves, which would even further elevate the rational side of ourselves; however, the faculties are intertwined, just as we are with the nature around us. This awareness of materiality will become especially important in the chapters to come, but for now it is worth stating simply that the Lovecraftian sublime's inversion of the humanist sublime is helped along by a philosophy of the world that is, among other things, materialist.

By imbuing the sublime with a glorification of the human individual, Kant makes clear his anthropocentric starting point, and one of the assumptions therein is that, in our confrontation with the sublime, we emerge not only as sane as we were before but are also granted insight into our *own* greatness. Vivian Ralickas, noteworthy here for her work on the aesthetics of Lovecraft and cosmic horror, valuably points out that the subject in the Kantian sublime comes equipped with "an awareness of our moral vocation, which, in Kant, places us above nature" (365). Furthermore, the Kantian and Burkean sublime both imply the necessity of a "consolatory understanding of the human condition" or "subjective reconstitution" in order to alleviate the initial pain and fear of the sublime encounter (365). If this "reconstitution" were not in place, then we would be stuck forever in that initial state of suspended reason, fully given over to terror and the ensuant dread of existence itself. Reconstitution is only possible if the subject can be convinced of his or her (potential) mastery over the object. That shift of power, from object to subject, is what enables a passage from terror to triumph. But this ascribes an interesting role to the object itself, because that which cannot hold power over the human cannot terrify, cannot prove sublime. In the case of Longinus, Burke, and Kant, the object is primarily located in nature, and specifically a version of nature which is almost exclusively terrestrial. But by Lovecraft's time, forests and mountains could be leveled by humans far more efficiently; thus, where those may have been objects of sublime consideration in previous millenia, their power came to be eclipsed by explosives, machinery, and other destructive human inventions. No scene of terrestrial nature could hold much influence over the human, because, in line with Kant's thinking, rationality

did come to conquer all. The sublime terror attributed to power differentials was no longer possible once humans could instrumentalize nature with the efficiency of the industrial era, which takes us right back to Longinus and Burke: whatever can be made commonplace or resourceful ceases to hold power over the human. The victory of rationality here, then, affirms the humanist sublime; therefore, whatever fear one might have of terrestrial nature in today's world can be ameliorated by the very real likelihood of human triumph. But as soon as reconstitution seems within our grasp, cosmic horror emerges again to remind us that the resourcefulness of Earth cannot be extended to the cosmos. Lovecraft's eye is turned to the cosmos, because that is where we lack mastery (particularly in his time). So long as we can keep a strictly terrestrial perspective, we can feel secure—but Lovecraft's work permits no such perspective.

If we locate *the cosmos* as nature, as object, then we stand face-to-face once more against that immeasurable sense of totality, of infinity. When faced with infinity, our finite epistemology will, by definition, always fall short. So, if our attempts at cognition are frozen in the face of infinity, then so too must be our passage into that warm state of Kantian and/or Burkean reconstitution. And since the backdrop of Lovecraft's work is very frequently a cosmic one, the more idealistic phase of the sublime experience becomes, quite literally, unthinkable. In confronting the sublime terror of a lightless and unending *outside*, we remain in perpetual arrest. And if anything at all is to occur after this arrest, for Lovecraft it is "insanity, death, or the embracing of [the human's] miscegenated and no longer human condition" (Ralickas 365). Lovecraft's oft-quoted sentiment from "Supernatural Horror in Literature" is that "[t]he oldest and strongest

emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (*H. P. Lovecraft Archive*). Humans do know much about Earth, giving us little to fear, by Lovecraft's own logic. However, Lovecraft's concern is not Earth: he rejects terrestrialism in favor of cosmicism, ensuring that the fear of the unknown remains potent. In a letter to Farnsworth Wright, dated 5 July 1927, Lovecraft explains that "when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-haunted *Outside*—we must remember to leave our humanity—and terrestrialism at the threshold" (150). With a turn such as this, it rapidly becomes apparent how little we know and, thus, how much more we have to fear.

The question arises, then, of just how applicable the term *sublime* is to Lovecraft. At what point does the sublime get mistakenly conflated with terror outright? To review: for sublimity to be possible at all in the Kantian perspective, the subject must remain in control and employ that Kantian sleight of hand where awe is swapped out from the object's physicality and is placed, instead, into the subject, or the human's own mental capacity and potential for standing strong in the face of terrible nature. As Ralickas puts it, Burke's theory of the sublime is rounded out by "the subject's imagination [partaking] in the ascending movement of the phenomenon in question," which serves as a "life-affirming notion of the absolute" (364). Both of these assume an ultimately positive interaction with the sublime, where any "subjective crisis would be resolved through an affirmative turn towards culture, reason, an ordered universe, and a unified, autonomous sense of self" (Ralickas 386). But in the cosmic world of Lovecraft, one that is atheistic, mechanistic, materialist, and indifferent, that same "subjective crisis" cannot be resolved

if it is confined to a "universe [that] erodes culture, subverts reason, champions chaos, and destroys the integrity of the human subject" (Ralickas 386). Therefore, it does not seem appropriate in light of Ralickas's argument to apply the word *sublime*, in its humanist sense, to the work of Lovecraft. Yet Ralickas also acknowledges, as I argue here, that "[c]osmic horror" shares "the same source as the sublime" (367). The source is a potent concoction of awe, dread, mystery, and majesty—but through axiomatic differences, the Lovecraftian sublime takes its antihumanist turn, inverting those otherwise sanguine phases of the sublime spelled out by his humanist predecessors.

For a better sense of this complex relationship between the sublime, nature, agency, epistemology, ontology, etc., I turn to Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space." In this story, the influence of the cosmic upon the human mind is clear. The "colour," whose properties are never discerned by the scientists of the story, is believed by them to be a small meteorite. During a lengthy series of tests, "the college scientists [are] forced to own that they [cannot] place" the meteorite (Lovecraft 176). The explanation, instead, is that the meteorite is simply "nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside" (176). The fragment of the meteorite that they are studying is unresponsive and proves impossible to comprehend; even worse is the reaction among the less scholarly farmers of Nahum's family. Nahum's wife "had spells of terrific screaming, and he and the boys were in a constant state of nervous tension" (182). His son "Thaddeus went mad" eventually (183), and so too did the rest of the family, one by one, as Nahum resorted to locking them in the attic. All this was at the mere sight of the "colour" as it sat at the bottom of the well, in addition to the consumption of the water and vegetables which it

seemed to have tainted. This, then, is the standard Lovecraftian subject's descent into madness, which is indication enough of the tremendous power of the cosmos; even a small piece of those outer dimensions is enough to jeopardize the human psyche completely. In observing the failure to comprehend the meteorite, compounded with the utterly shattered minds of those whom it tainted, it remains clear that, at least in Lovecraft's universe, the great cobblestone fortress of rationality is, in fact, a meager castle made of sand. And once again it is evident that while the function of the humanist sublime might be to fortify and glorify, the function of the Lovecraftian is to wash away.

The issue of comprehension is still greater when the "colour" truly activates. As it begins to erupt from the well, the scientists and Ammi (the character who has lived to tell this tale to our unidentified narrator) gather to witness the spectacle:

> [I]n one feverish, kaleidoscopic instant there burst up from that doomed and accursed farm a gleamingly eruptive cataclysm of unnatural sparks and substance; blurring the glance of the few who saw it, and sending forth to the zenith a bombarding cloudburst of such coloured and fantastic fragments as our universe must needs disown. (196)

Especially interesting is the narrator's use of the word "disown," which rather boldly assumes that because the occurrence is inhospitable to humanity, it ought not to exist anywhere at all. The meteorite is dubbed "unnatural" as well, which reveals yet another assumption: if it does not fit the human definition of natural, then it is not of nature. This conception of the natural is important, because it reminds us of the anthropocentrism that is inherent to the very concept of *natural* itself, i.e., that what is natural is what can be

used by us, what can be looked upon as pleasant by us, what adheres to the laws we have theorized, what can demonstrate that our imagination is subordinate to our reason—what can, in short, reaffirm our position at the center of the stars. Whatever fails to do any of the above is unnatural. But the real potency of the Lovecraftian sublime comes in its forceful recognition that human imagination, not reason, is correct after all. Worse, the object whose power we fear cannot be anything other than *naturally* occurring.

The narrator, the scientists, and Ammi are all in absolute horror and (as the above passage implies) possibly feel contempt for that which they cannot comprehend. What this failure of cognition highlights is the deep-seated self-absorption of its spectators, who are afterward "[t]oo awed even to hint theories" (196). This state of paralysis marks this as an encounter of the sublime sort. The bursting forth of the "colour" especially qualifies as *initially* sublime in the Burkean sense of the word, because Burke emphasizes the sensory overload often associated with the sublime. Furthermore, the scientists' inability to comprehend the object, however modest it is in size, causes them to relegate its origins to other dimensions. Even the narrator is forced to conclude that "It was just a colour—but not any colour of our earth or heavens" (197). By possessing an extra-dimensionality, the "colour" lies outside the realm of human cognition, thereby halting human attempts at mastering it. And if human agency is trivialized in the face of the object, then the subject deems it a blasphemy that not only humanity must reject, but that indeed the entire "universe must needs disown."

The introduction of cosmicism into the subjective experience (especially as it is illustrated in stories like "The Colour out of Space") is one of Lovecraft's methods for

dissolving binaries, and with this dissolution there emerges a need to revisit long-held assumptions rooted in humanism. For instance, ordinarily we limit our conception of what is natural to that which is *terrestrial*, the error of which should immediately become obvious if we simply ask where the "Nature" of Earth comes from in the first place. If the "natural" is that which occurs in nature, then we must also define nature itself. If a meteorite possesses "unnatural" properties that the "universe must needs disown," then we should wonder whether or not the universe itself is unnatural. The obvious answer for anyone with a remote sense of interconnectivity (or, perhaps, with a materialist leaning) is that humans, animals, all of Earth, and all of what we might call "Nature," are an extension of that great outside. Putting Lovecraft under the lens of sublimity forces this expansion of perspective, which is why I maintain that the Lovecraftian sublime opens a pathway to re-conceptualization, to a renewed awareness of our limited notions of ontology and epistemology. With the Lovecraftian sublime, the human is defamiliarized, disabled, and decentered. Rather than proceeding in anthropocentric fashion, these rejections offer avenues toward understanding ourselves along less human lines. It should not seem out of place at all, then, that some Lovecraft scholars have located their discussions in the contemporary thoughts of new materialism and posthumanism, which, along with their ethical suggestions and importance to ecocriticism, are the matters of the chapters to come.

Chapter 2: The (Post)Humanist Struggle against Lovecraft's Nihilism

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Lovecraftian sublime is an inversion of the humanistic sublime, both of which begin with an awe-inspiring scene or object of nature. In the humanistic model, that object is an occasion for reaffirming our position in the universe, our significance, and the worth of our knowledge-seeking. The subject in the Lovecraftian sublime, however, submits to the terror of the object, denying the importance of the human within the cosmos and suggesting that knowledge cannot and should not be sought. A relationship between subject and object, then, is fundamental to each theory of the sublime; however, in order to analyze that relationship, one must first be able to define what the subject and object themselves are, which is how our consideration of the Lovecraftian sublime leads us into the domain of ontology.

Binaries like theism/atheism and idealism/materialism contain opposing views on what constitutes reality, and their varied notions of ontology foster further theories of epistemology, aesthetics, morality, and so on. For instance, positing God into an ontological framework is likely to have moral, aesthetic, and ethical ramifications, and if God is removed within an atheistic, mechanistic worldview—as in the case of Lovecraft—then those same considerations are likely to undergo a shift. Therefore, in entering a posthumanist discussion of Lovecraft, we must begin at the ontological level, where both Lovecraft and posthumanism participate in a worldview characterized by materialism, atheism, and a defiance of humanism. Reading Lovecraft under a posthumanist lens reveals these commonalities, which is why some scholars consider him a precursor to posthumanist thought. However, the overlap stops there, as Lovecraft and

posthumanism diverge in the ethical conclusions that stem from their shared ontological premises. It is upon recognizing this divergence that I argue for a more cautious reading of Lovecraft, because—as evidenced by his letters, his essays, and his fiction—any conclusions that attempt to sidestep his underlying nihilism are incomplete. Therefore, through Lovecraft's construction of a meaningless, chaotic, material world, humanistic thinking is once again rejected. Since this rejection occurs along essentially ethical lines, we must also recognize that ethical interpretations of Lovecraft, whether blatantly humanist or purportedly antihumanist, are bound to encounter his nihilistic barrier. In the end, Lovecraft's nihilism trivializes the ethical basis of human endeavor, making an application of posthumanism to Lovecraft viable only if it acknowledges that ethical conclusions are doomed from the start.

Part of what makes a posthumanist reading of Lovecraft at all possible is his view that the human species is not central to anything but itself. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Carl H. Sederholm, in their introduction to *The Age of Lovecraft*, ascribe four crucial elements to the current scholarly understanding of Lovecraft: "*1. The Awareness of Apocalypse 2. Antihumanist 'Decentering' of Mankind's Pretensions to Grandeur 3. Posthumanist Questioning of the Status of the 'Human' 4. Ironic Disavowal*" (34-38). The second and third elements of this list are directly tied together by Lovecraft's "undoing of human exceptionalism," which is often established through a deconstruction of the human identity, or of our cherished status as an evolved, "discrete species somehow distinguishable from other terrestrial life" (36). This tendency of Lovecraft's fiction is where the association with posthumanist thinking begins, because his fiction

"realigns the human as part of a vast system of life, one that is deeply connected to other species and the planet more broadly" (36). One might imagine how such thinking could lend itself to more ethical treatment of the world around us: in the blurred boundaries of posthuman ecology, harming the environment is the same as harming ourselves. This begins—as does Lovecraft—with the ontological premise that humans are composed of matter and that we are not (and never have been) special compared to our surroundings; if this is accepted, as it often is within posthumanist ecological discourse, then we can arrive at "more humane and ethical modes of existence" (Weinstock 37). This comparison of Lovecraft to posthumanism appears logical, considering that they both hinge on similar opinions about humanity; what seems dubious, however, is the thought that we can conduct ourselves in "more humane" or "ethical" ways while still operating within Lovecraft's antihumanist ontological framework. Thus, an examination of their shared ontological presuppositions also must be accompanied by an examination of their widely differing ethics.

Like cosmic horror and the Lovecraftian sublime, posthumanism has the goal of destabilizing humanity's ostensible position at the center of being. When dealing with posthumanism, literary critics of Lovecraft's work do not always adequately define the term, which, because of its varied meanings, certainly warrants more explicit definition. I define posthumanism here in the following way: it is a movement away from traditional distinctions of human and nonhuman, instead viewing them as always continuous, in flux, and in relation. In this sense, posthumanism is characterized by expansions of ontology, subjectivity, morality, ethics, and so forth. This is a philosophical definition,

neither to be confused with posthumanism as a time after humans nor with the anxiety of humans being taken over by artificial intelligence. Think of posthumanism here, then, as after *humanism* (not human beings). And while not identical to posthumanism, the term *antihumanism* is also useful here, since it denotes a critique of humanism (which is where philosophical posthumanism and antihumanism converge). Primarily, the theoretical foundation for my usage of the term *posthumanism* relies on the work of Cary Wolfe and N. Katherine Hayles. Wolfe's posthumanism calls for an increased sense of "specificity" towards the "human and its characteristic modes" of communicating and making meaning, and this specificity is made possible by de-emphasizing the rational faculties that humanistic thinking tends to hold so dear—what Wolfe calls the "ontologically closed [domains] of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on" (xxv). Should we fail to overcome our self-obsessed rationalism, we are bound to accept the same old anthropocentric perspectives which, in the increasingly complex new millennium, are becoming less and less defensible. Instead, Wolfe suggests that we ought to begin with the acknowledgment that the human being has always been interwoven with the material world, thereby allowing us to achieve greater specificity and "rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience" by "acknowledging that [the human being] is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality" (xxv). To begin formulating more ecologically sound ethics, as Wolfe hopes to do, we must understand ourselves and the ways in which we are deeply interdependent upon the material world around and within us. The famous Cartesian

adage is inverted in the posthuman model: it is not that we think, therefore we are, but rather that *we are, therefore we think.*

Hayles is consistent with Wolfe on many points regarding posthumanism, and her concept of the posthuman makes a similar movement away from humanism. Similar to Wolfe, Hayles brings consciousness into the discussion: she explains that the "posthuman view" negates the notion of "conscious agency," maintaining instead that "[m]astery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures" (288). By emergent structures, Hayles means that consciousness is the sum of our nonhuman parts—that, in the first place, it is the interaction of nonhuman materials which gives rise to what we would call humanity. Consciousness, then, is order emerged from chaos. This assumes, too, that we could even call consciousness more orderly than chaotic. Regardless, Lovecraft himself was no stranger to chaos, as can be seen in some of his earliest philosophizing: "According to all evidence we can command, we came from chaos and will return to chaos; drifting in a blind mechanical cycle devoid of anything like a goal or object" ("Life for Humanity's Sake" 46). Chaos is ever-present in his fiction as well: whether in the form of a grotesque creature (*At the Mountains of Madness,* "The Dunwich Horror," "The Shadow over Innsmouth"), a bizarre object from outer space ("The Colour out of Space"), or an extra-dimensional anomaly ("The Dreams in the Witch House," "From Beyond"), there is almost always something in Lovecraft's fiction that defies human attempts at ordering the universe along rational lines.

The chaotic and "blind mechanical cycle" to which Lovecraft refers is best understood at the cosmic level, but this does not mean that humanity is unaffected by it. Indeed, the chaos of the cosmos is evident in the posthuman view, as Hayles states that "[i]n the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (3). This is to say that human beings are not distinct from their surroundings; rather, we are continuous with matter, with technology, with virtuality. It follows from this that a rigid, orderly definition of *human* can no longer be effectively formulated along binary lines. Moreover, even though something resembling order has emerged among the human species, it remains the case that our roots are located in chaos. Speaking generally, advances in quantum physics (almost all of which have occurred after Lovecraft's time) suggest that we are more than just evolutionarily and planetarily rooted in chaos, but that we are indeed surrounded and composed by it. Again, Lovecraft could not have known this, nor could he have embedded it into his fiction or his philosophy. But we can look at his materialism as a basis for understanding the world along far less rigid lines, and though his brand of materialism might not be as compatible with the physical understanding of the universe that we possess in the twenty-first century, it is nonetheless sophisticated enough for his own time and studies. Regardless of how his scientific understandings hold up, it is still the case that materialism is influential both to the development of Lovecraft's cosmicism and to the formation of posthumanist thought.

The physical workings of the cosmos and of its organic life are important to Lovecraft, as they are to posthumanism. To get a sense of where these overlap, I want to see how these ideas hold up in one of Lovecraft's more overtly posthumanist stories, "Cool Air." Here the narrator reveals to the reader that he is scared of cold air, and this is because of an encounter he had one summer with a man who discovered a way to cryogenically preserve himself, consciousness and all, despite being "dead" for the last eighteen years. The narrator tells us that, at first, he noticed a strange dripping coming from the ceiling of his apartment, the smell of which was discomforting (Lovecraft 131). He then inquires to the landlady, Herrero, about the tenant above, and she tells him that the tenant is Dr. Muñoz. The narrator suffers an unfortunate heart attack one day, but, having learned of Dr. Muñoz's talents, seeks out the aid of the doctor and is given a glimpse into his theories, which are very suggestive of the posthumanist notion of human-nonhuman interwovenness:

> [W]ill and consciousness are stronger than organic life itself, so that if a bodily frame be but originally healthy and carefully preserved, it may through a scientific enhancement of these qualities retain a kind of nervous animation despite the most serious impairments, defects, or even absences in the battery of specific organs. [Dr. Muñoz] might, he half jestingly said, some day teach me to live—or at least to possess some kind of conscious existence—without any heart at all! (Lovecraft 133)

This rather ambitious twisting of posthumanism calls into mind Cary Wolfe's criticism of transhumanism. According to Wolfe, transhumanism focuses on carrying humanity

onward through disembodied forms (e.g., uploading our consciousness to a machine), which, as Wolfe argues, borrows "directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment" (xiii). By insisting upon our embodiment in a material form and the lack of boundaries that are in place, we can proceed to transcend humanity and even, quite possibly, mortality; in other words, it is possible for strains of posthumanism such as transhumanism to veil humanistic dogma behind notions of materiality.

The irony of Lovecraft's (pre)posthumanist doctor in "Cool Air," however, is that he has been set up to refute that transhumanist impulse—so just when humanism seems to enjoy the last laugh, Lovecraft silences it once more. Dr. Muñoz did speak of "will and consciousness" being "stronger than organic life itself," but as the story unfolds, the doctor's machines malfunction, the temperature that he requires to survive is thrown off, and he mysteriously melts into a "dark, slimy" fluid (137-38). Dr. Muñoz's former dependency upon the human heart is eliminated, but is replaced by a dependency upon different materials, as his final note reveals:

> "The end," ran that noisome scrawl, "is here. No more ice—the man looked and ran away. Warmer every minute, and the tissues can't last. I fancy you know—what I said about the will and the nerves and the preserved body after the organs ceased to work. It was good theory, but couldn't keep up indefinitely." (Lovecraft 138)

Dr. Muñoz only postponed his decomposition, which speaks not only to the biological limitations of the human body, but also to our inability to become incorporeal by simply

asserting our will or consciousness. In light of this, the failure of the doctor's "theory" seems to be the Lovecraftian way of resisting transhumanism and, by extension, humanism. Even if you could transcend "humanity" by material manipulation, it is still the case that your existence and your consciousness are built atop nonhuman foundations—just as they were from the start.

In some sense, then, Lovecraft's fiction anticipates posthumanism through its denial of those most beloved possessions of humanistic frameworks, such as the ability to distinguish ourselves from the material world, the primacy of consciousness, and so on. Therefore, while the word *posthumanism* did not even occur for the first time until three years after Lovecraft died (*OED,* "post-humanism, n."), it is not difficult to see how the two are associated. However, an important flaw emerges in comparing posthumanism to Lovecraft, and that is in their differences in tone; despite their both sharing a movement away from humanism, it seems that Lovecraft's expression more closely resembles antihumanism than it does posthumanism. In the case of his fiction, there is something fundamentally horrific, maddening, or otherwise fatal associated with the recognition of our decentered position—and in the case of his letters and essays, this same recognition is coldly communicated as a fact which should seem plainly obvious, and which fosters an attitude of indifference within him. For example, in a letter to Natalie H. Wooley, written 2 May 1936, Lovecraft says, "Actually, organic life on our planet is simply a momentary spark of no importance or meaning whatsoever. Man matters to nobody except himself" (240). He goes on to explain the physiological and psychological processes of the human body, the human brain, etc., laying out for Wooley a mechanistic model of humanity as

"a machine of a very complex sort" (240-41). The tone here is matter-of-fact, which is not the same as the horrified tone of his fiction. Nonetheless, it certainly is not expressive of any sort of optimism, as ethical posthumanism often is. Therefore, one of Lovecraft's key departures from posthumanism is not in his understanding of materiality, but rather in how he employs that understanding in his rejection of ethics and hope for humanity.

Lovecraft's adherence to materialism is a connection to posthumanism that cannot be overstated. Materialism, a predominantly scientific view, maintains that the universe and its inhabitants are fundamentally composed of matter and operate along mechanistic lines, rather than according to invisible ideals. Materialism proves immeasurably important in Lovecraft's development as a writer, and just as he and materialism go hand in hand, posthumanism likewise has many of its roots in materialism. The ontological foundation of materialism provides some posthumanists (and Lovecraft) with much different notions about who we are, what we are made of, and how to interpret or conduct ourselves within our environment. This revised definition of humanity is important, considering one of Wolfe's criticisms of humanism: its "fundamental anthropological dogma" has to do with the construction of the human itself, an identity that is "achieved by escaping or repressing not just [our] animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (xiv-xv). In other words, formulating a humanistic philosophy—morals, ethics, and all—first requires a definition of what constitutes the human; and this definition, as Wolfe argues, tends to understate the importance of the nonhuman within and around us. Humanity is inextricably tied to and embodied within

these areas that Wolfe mentions (nature, biology, evolution), and these are understood along scientific, material lines. With the realization of our materiality foregrounded, posthumanism is allowed to thrive.

The antihumanist, scientific, or otherwise indifferent tones in which Lovecraft expressed his materialist beliefs are not shared by Jane Bennett, who, in her book *Vibrant Matter*, fashions her own materialist philosophy into something much more practical and ethical. Additionally, for the purposes of this chapter, Bennett rounds out the theoretical framework in which modern scholars seem to situate Lovecraft most often. For instance, such scholars as Brian Johnson conclude that "[Lovecraft's] materialist ontology" could potentially be seen as a philosophical, albeit "phobic" precursor to "the new materialism of Jane Bennett" as well as "the sanguine ethical posthumanism of contemporary ecological theory," which Johnson attributes to Cary Wolfe (101). This means that the ground upon which Bennett and Wolfe construct their ethics is the same ground that gives rise to Lovecraft's horror. Yet, as I argue, the commonality of Lovecraft to Bennett and Wolfe is greatly limited by their different ethical formulations.

Crucial to Bennett's materialism is her notion of *vitality*, which is "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (viii). Bennett's point here is that action is not solely the domain of humans or even of animals, but also of non-sentient, nonhuman, material "things," i.e., "quasi agents." Take as a comparison the meteorite from Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," which has no distinctly human quality whatsoever, cannot be

understood by the Miskatonic University scientists, and is ultimately dubbed unnatural: it possesses "*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 6). Through Bennett (and through Bruno Latour, to whom she attributes credit) we can see the meteorite of Lovecraft's story as an *actant*, or "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman" (Bennett viii). She elaborates further to say that, from the vital materialist perspective, "Agentic capacity is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types," which is to say nonhuman ones (9). Most importantly, the recognition that humans are not the only agents in the universe is also part and parcel to Lovecraft's cosmic horror, further linking Bennett's vital materialism to Lovecraft's work and uniting them in their critique of humanism.

As I argue, the posthumanists, materialists, and Lovecraft all overlap in their ontological presuppositions, which cannot be emphasized enough. In his essay "The Materialist Today," written in May 1926 (just a few months after "Cool Air"), Lovecraft briefly discusses a few of physics' most important conservational principles:

> Now, although the sum of energy in the universe is (speaking without reference to the very recent discoveries in intra-atomic physics and chemistry) virtually indestructible, we see very clearly that it is most eminently subject to transformations from one form to another. . . . Nothing is *lost*, but all is *changed*. (Lovecraft 75)

Lovecraft's keen awareness of the science of his day was important for his fiction and philosophy, but these insights are equally useful to the posthumanist, since they provide

the scientific basis for viewing consciousness (indeed, the entire human species) as an assemblage of nonhuman things giving rise to the momentary phase of being that we call *human*. Lovecraft maintained his materialist understanding of humanity through the end of his life, as the aforementioned letter to Natalie H. Wooley reveals: "[Man] arises through certain typical chemical & physical reactions, & his members gradually break down into their constituent parts & vanish from existence" (240). An important feature of this excerpt and the above passage is in what Bennett would describe as a movement "away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans" (112)—which is to say that Lovecraft removes humanity from its position at the apex of the hierarchy. For Bennett, this decentering of the human paves the way for more ecological approaches to our politics. However, Lovecraft does more than just remove humanity from its position: he obliterates the hierarchy altogether. In his view, "everything, including infinity itself, is trivial" ("Letter to August Derleth" 220), which trivializes any and all action whatsoever when considered in deep, cosmic time, and in the vast, infinite reaches of space.

This interplay of materialism and cosmicism had been developing in Lovecraft's philosophy from an early age, and his fiction would hardly be the same without it. He explains in his autobiographical essay, "Some Notes on a Nonentity" (23 Nov 1933), that science had fascinated him since around the time he was eight years old, which was when he began to explore images of scientific instruments in the back of a dictionary (208). Afterwards, he picked up chemistry, and then geography, and finally—the greatest

breakthrough for him—astronomy ("Some Notes" 209). The expansion of ontological perspective that ensued from this last discovery would have an inestimably large impact on his work, because prior to his fascination with the cosmos, Lovecraft had very little concept of "man's place in Nature" or of "the structure of the universe" ("Confession" 147). But by the time he was in his late teenage years, Lovecraft seemed to have shaped his newfound sense of space into the "essential particulars" of his "present pessimistic cosmic views," and of course these particulars would come to include things like "[t]he futility of all existence," "scant faith in the world's betterment," and "immeasurable pity for man's eternal tragedy of aspirations beyond the possibility of fulfillment" ("Confession" 147). Had Lovecraft never encountered science or lost his childlike spirituality, he would never have arrived at his "cynical materialism" (145). Here we run into a very similar point of departure as before: while Lovecraft's personal philosophy and fiction might both possess an ontological basis similar to posthumanism or materialism, Lovecraft shaped it into something much more bleak.

Wolfe and Bennett fashion many of their theories into ecological ethics, but Lovecraft's conclusion is in no part ecological: "Nothing matters—all that happens happens through the automatic and inflexible interacting of the electrons, atoms, and molecules of infinity" ("Materialist" 76). What is one to do with such a realization? For Bennett, it culminates in the ecologically-minded acknowledgement that "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself," which Bennett calls an "enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest" (13). For Wolfe, a realization of the mechanistic material world ought to lead to greater

self-knowledge and an adjusted, ecologically sound morality from there. But according to Lovecraft, "[i]t is most sensible just to accept the universe as it is, and be done with it" ("Materialist" 76). This is the refusal on Lovecraft's part to formulate an ethics upon what I argue is a materially-informed nihilism. (Surprisingly, this sense of ethical resignation was a recent development for him when he wrote "The Materialist Today" in 1926.) The complicated system of Lovecraft's ethics necessitates a reluctance in designating him as any kind of precursor for posthumanism and, as was suggested from the outset of this chapter, Lovecraft's precursory status in the posthumanist discussion stops at ontology.

Since ethics figure very importantly into the frameworks of posthumanist thinkers like Wolfe and materialist thinkers like Bennett, and because Lovecraft is often associated with posthumanism and materialism, we must also consider the attitudes and ethical directions that he took in tandem with his notions of reality. Even with scientific materialism dominating his mind, Lovecraft wavered between pessimism and a kind of half-hearted optimism. In July 1918, just one year after Lovecraft wrote some of the earliest fiction of his adult years, like "The Tomb" and "Dagon," we might even say that Lovecraft was hopeful:

> Life and mankind have their place in the natural plan, however infinitesimal that place may be; and the laws of Nature are too obvious and well-defined to warrant a feeling of futility and unrest. The essential reality and rationality of our aspirations and moral code should, notwithstanding the revelations of Science, be apparent even to the most thorough materialist. ("Time and Space" 31)

It seems unlike Lovecraft to suggest a plan of any kind, because to do so would suggest the existence of a *planner*. Anything vaguely theistic (let alone humanistic) at this point in his life ought to come off as un-Lovecraftian, especially considering that he himself claims, in his autobiographical pieces, to have lost all semblance of theism before he was a teenager. Then, in a letter to Reinhardt Kleiner written in September 1919 (one year after "Time and Space") Lovecraft circles right back: "I have never been able to soothe myself with the sugary delusions of religion; for these things stand convicted of the utmost absurdity in light of modern scientific knowledge" (86). Clearly Lovecraft's views are at odds: on the one hand, he states that feelings of futility are unwarranted, while on the other, he is quick to defend his "acceptance" of being "an inconsequential atom" (87). To be an atom—and an inconsequential one at that—is to have no effect; and if you cannot effect any lasting change whatsoever upon the world around you, then all of your actions are futile by definition. Therefore, Lovecraft paradoxically retains a kind of vestigial humanism in the face of his oppressive nihilism.

These traces of a system of ethical values, albeit a sparse one, primarily come from a short span of years (1918-1920). The placement of this time-span is important, because it is situated at a point in Lovecraft's life when he seemed the least cynical and, interestingly, when he had not yet produced the majority of his cosmic horror. In the same letter to Reinhardt Kleiner cited above, Lovecraft states that "the only legitimate aim of humanity is to minimise acute suffering for the majority, and to derive whatever satisfaction is derivable from the exercise of the mind in the pursuit of truth" (87). This statement includes two important elements—the first of which is utilitarianism, and the

second of which is Epicureanism. Here I mean utilitarianism in its most general sense as the minimization of suffering for the maximum amount of people. And by Epicureanism, I mean that much milder version of hedonism which advocates for an individual's pursuit of virtue and mental pleasure (also valuing the avoidance of fear and pain). Both of these are evident in the statement above, but it can be shown that they persist throughout a number of his other nonfiction writings. However ethical they might be, though, they still sit precariously at the edge of nihilism.

Lovecraft's utilitarianism can be observed in his essay, "Life for Humanity's Sake," which was written within about one year of his letter to Kleiner: "We can do nothing save try to make life tolerable for the greatest number of persons" (46). And his Epicurean pursuits seem evident at least as far back as 1918 (a time when Lovecraft considered himself merely "half alive") because he claims that the only thing that rescued him from "[entertaining] any suicidal designs" was, as he tells Alfred Galpin, his interest in such things as "science, history, philosophy & literature" (18). But Lovecraft's utilitarianism and Epicureanism are more alike than they initially appear: in the case of his utilitarianism, humanity's purpose in persisting is tied to a pursuit of minimizing suffering; in the case of his Epicureanism, Lovecraft's personal reason for continued living is tied, also, to a pursuit of the things that make life most tolerable. These are not differences of kind, but of degree. What is most important here, though, is observing an ethical philosophy—Lovecraft's own—that evades nihilism. Certain outliers of his writings might even convince us that his self-professed indifferentism is simply a front: consider, for example, his enthusiastic declaration, "Let us adopt the soundest motto of

all—Life for Humanity's Sake!" ("Life" 46). And there is something rather humanistic, too, in his insistence that humanity's "devotion to the ideals it has always pursued" should not be discouraged ("Time" 31). This version of H. P. Lovecraft, then, seems firm in the belief that life is worth living, even if only for the enjoyment of things like nature, art, and truth-seeking.

A deeper look, however, will reveal that the barriers separating Lovecraft's ethics from his nihilism and his life from his fiction begin to dissipate and overlap so as to become nearly indistinguishable. Lovecraft's fictional story "Ex Oblivione" (late 1920/early 1921), written only a few months after the much more sanguine essay, "Life for Humanity's Sake" (September 1920), is a short piece that ultimately expresses a weariness with the world and a desire to escape that world. The narrator's life is characterized by "ugly trifles of existence," which "began to drive [him] to madness" in a manner similar to what "torturers" do to their victims (Lovecraft, "Oblivione" 86). To escape this, the narrator slips into his dreams and enters various fantasy lands, full of beauty, the valleys of which were "golden," the winds "soft," the rain "gentle" (86). All of the adjectives build a tone of tranquility, which is obviously in contrast to the torture of everyday life. The narrator finds a closed gate recurring in his dreams, through which he intends to pass; when he finally takes an unspecified drug one night, he finds the gate in his dreams "ajar," allowing him to enter, "expectant of the glories of the land from whence I should never return" (87). But this was not as he expected:

> [A]s the gate swung wider and the sorcery of drug and dream pushed me through, I knew that all sights and glories were at an end; for in that new realm was neither

> land nor sea, but only the white void of unpeopled and illimitable space. So, happier than I had ever dared hoped to be, I dissolved again into that native infinity of crystal oblivion from which the daemon Life had called me for one brief and desolate hour. (Lovecraft, "Oblivione" 88)

Escape and suicide are then intertwined, just as drug and dream, reality and misery. For the narrator to reduce his misery in this scenario, he slept, dreamt, and ultimately "dissolved" into that fantasy world which, in truth, was no fantasy at all but actually just the cessation of consciousness. (How the narrator could even communicate this story after the fact is a different matter, of course). And yet the escape achieved happiness. In the previously-cited letter to Alfred Galpin, Lovecraft mentions that suicide seems less of an option in light of his scholarly interests, which serves his basic sense of Epicureanism. However, the narrator of "Ex Oblivione" has no such reservations, and in his own pursuit of happiness, suicide is the most logical action.

Before examining too many connections between Lovecraft's fiction and nonfiction, however, I want to provide one more example of Lovecraft's narrators' resorting to suicide. Written in September of 1922, "The Hound" is another such story. In this tale, (yet another) unnamed narrator provides a story in the form of a suicide note. He tells of his grave robbing exploits, which are carried out by him and his accomplice, St. John. They start a museum of sorts, "a blasphemous, unthinkable place," which is "far underground" and contains a large number of "unmentionable treasures" (Lovecraft, "Hound" 81-82). As one might expect of Lovecraft's fiction by this point, the narrator and St. John are tempted by a treasure hunt that far exceeds their abilities. These kinds of

ambitions never turn out well, whether they are for knowledge or for treasure. In the end, they succeed in finding the treasure: a coffin containing "an amulet," which has a "curious and exotic design" of canine imagery (84). This design links the treasure to the "baying of some gigantic hound" that they keep hearing, and it is ultimately this creature that hunts down St. John and tears him apart (83). The amulet is returned to the coffin, where the skeleton that they saw is "not clean and placid as" before, but instead "covered with caked blood and shreds of alien flesh and hair" (88). As the creature stares "sentiently" at the narrator and once more releases "a deep, sardonic bay as of some gigantic hound," the narrator runs in fear and hysteria, finally resolving to "seek with my revolver the oblivion which is my only refuge from the unnamed and unnamable" (88). This was written within about one to two years of "Ex Oblivione," seeming to suggest that suicide was well on the mind of Lovecraft. But more than this, we are given another rendition of escapist suicide: rather than face pain, death, or the horror of the "unnamed and unnamable" (i.e., semiotic or epistemological limitation), the narrator resorts to suicide.

Around the times that "Ex Oblivione" and "The Hound" were written (late 1920/early 1921 and September 1922, respectively), Lovecraft justifies the continuation of his own life along Epicurean lines, which seems to indicate that suicide was on his mind, but scarcely considered. It may be that, in a cathartic manner, both of Lovecraft's narrators carry out the deed that he could not. Either way, this separation becomes a little less pronounced when observing the lexical overlap between his fiction and nonfiction. At the end of "Ex Oblivione," examined above, we see that the narrator happily fades

"into that native infinity of crystal oblivion from which the daemon Life had called me for one brief and desolate hour" (Lovecraft 88). Aside from the suicide itself, we are also provided here with an observation about the nature of existence, similar to Lovecraft's own ideas of ontology. This is the "one brief and desolate hour," temporalizing and trivializing human existence itself, and this concept of time had been with Lovecraft for quite a while, as he employs similar language a couple years earlier in his essay "Time and Space": "An hour ago we did not exist; in another hour we shall have ceased to be" (30). His awareness of time and space, which he learned from astronomy and materialist thought, seems to have bled into all of his writing, fiction or not. Suicide seems yet another option for narrators in Lovecraft's stories, as well as for himself. It is rarely, in other words, construed as a tragedy, but instead a remedy. Lovecraft himself did not require the remedy, because he claims that his mental pursuits keep him happy enough. His narrators, however, do not have any such privilege.

The defeatism that characterizes his fiction seems to contradict what he writes in some of his nonfiction, such as "Life for Humanity's Sake." Here and in other aforementioned essays and letters, Lovecraft hints at an ethics (which may be interpreted as a sort of sliding scale between utilitarianism and Epicureanism). But Lovecraft's contradictory nature is even more apparent upon considering the chronological location of "Life for Humanity's Sake" (September 1920), which was written after "Time and Space" (July 1918) and before "Ex Oblivione" (late 1920/early 1921) and "The Hound" (September 1922). Of these last three, the first is an essay and the other two are stories, but all are dominated by an ontological belief about the triviality of humanity in the midst

of deep time and a limitless cosmos. And, by contrast, in "Life" Lovecraft talks of "real ethical philosophy" and "the common good," seeming ultimately to affirm life and humanity ("Life" 46). This sequence suggests a back-and-forth motion—a vacillation between the compulsion to live and the gnawing, often suicidal voice of nihilism. However, there is a key detail regarding "Life for Humanity's Sake" that needs mentioning: before Lovecraft eagerly exclaims "Let us adopt the soundest motto of all—Life for Humanity's Sake," he gloomily reminds the reader that "We are all negligible, microscopic insects of a moment; waifs astray in infinity, born yesterday and doomed to perish tomorrow for all time" (46). Lovecraft speaks in terms of days rather than hours here; nevertheless, we see the same attention to temporality and, thus, to humankind's triviality. Attentiveness to the cosmic timeline also leads some posthumanist ecologists to posit that the human is an inhabitant of an Earth that will long outlive the human, further decentering us and causing us to develop a more specific understanding of ourselves, of the world around us, and of the more ecologically ethical approaches we must adapt. However, environmental concerns are scarce in Lovecraft, marking a clear boundary between his ethics and those of some modern ecocritics and/or posthumanists. For now, though, it is safe to conclude that Lovecraft's sense of deep time (time framed by the cosmos rather than by humans, species, or even planets) is foundational to his antihumanist and/or posthumanist leaning; most importantly, though, it feeds the nihilism that so heavily and so often overshadows his rudimentary ethical principles.

There is, then, at least one crucial consistency to note in Lovecraft's personal philosophy: his attempts at formulating even the most minimally humanistic values are always couched in nihilism. Nihilism is no soil in which to grow humanistic principles, and the progression of Lovecraft's life—with his dreary outlook containing fewer and fewer exceptions—reveals this incompatibility. In his essay "Nietzscheism and Realism," written in October of 1921 (not long after "Ex Oblivione" or before "The Hound"), about five months after his mother died, Lovecraft appears far more somber. Since this is an essay and not a piece of fiction, Lovecraft appears less dramatic with his words, but bleak all the same: "All human life is weary, incomplete, unsatisfying, and sardonically purposeless. It always has been and always will be; so that he who looks for a paradise is merely a dupe of myths or of his own imagination" ("Nietzscheism" 71). For the narrator of "Ex Oblivione," life felt like torture; and for Lovecraft, the life of not only himself but indeed all of humanity is deemed weary. In "Ex Oblivione," to make an exit from life was enjoyable; in "The Hound," to seek suicide was to escape from the reality of human limitation; and in Lovecraft's essay "Nietzscheism and Realism," logic itself is the justification:

> It is good to be a cynic—it is better to be a contented cat—and it is best not to exist at all.
>
> Universal suicide is the most logical thing in the world—we reject it only because of our primitive cowardice and childish fear of the dark. If we were sensible we would seek death—the same blissful blank which we enjoyed before we existed. (Lovecraft 71)

Once again, Lovecraft's sense of time creeps back in at the end of this excerpt, which refers back to the hours and days mentioned previously and, of course, demonstrates that his awareness of humanity's insignificance was far from waning. Really, Lovecraft's misanthropy seems to be even more potent than before because it has been coupled with the suggestion of suicide—and not just suicide for Lovecraft, this time, but indeed the suicide of the entire human species. He does still produce something minimally ethical by the end of this essay, though, referencing Arthur Schopenhauer and the belief that "[p]essimism produces kindness" (71): it is in facing reality's suffering that the necessity of kindness becomes evident. Still, it is difficult to take Lovecraft's mention of kindness seriously when it occupies only the last couple paragraphs of an essay that largely eviscerates humanistic notions of value, purpose, and the pursuit of happiness.

The entire ethical scale of Lovecraft's philosophy examined previously—from his individual fulfillment of interests, joys, and truth-seeking, to his broader vision of humanity pursuing the most happiness for the most people—seems, just as with the humanist sublime, to undergo an inversion. According to Lovecraft, moral good simply means "conditions we happen to like," and "it is just as sensible to assume that all humanity is a noxious pest which should be eradicated" ("Nietzscheism" 70). Likewise, the "mitigation of suffering" for the majority—a vision that characterized Lovecraft's utilitarianism—comes to be seen as "more or less trivial" (70). Lovecraft tells us, therefore, that the human species is better off seeking death and that its pursuit of happiness is, when seen more coldly, actually just a futile attempt at staving off a mercilessly harsh reality. And in the place of his Epicureanism, Lovecraft not only

provides an outright rejection—"I ceased my literal adherence to Epicurus and Lucretius, and reluctantly dismissed free-will forever in favour of determinism"—but also offers more and more hints that he himself might be better off seeking death:

> I no longer really desire anything but oblivion, and am thus ready to discard any gilded illusion or accept any unpalatable facts with perfect equanimity. I can at last concede willingly that the wishes, hopes, and values of humanity are matters of total indifference to the blind cosmic mechanism. Happiness I recognise as an ethical phantom whose simulacrum comes fully to none and even partially to but few, and whose position as the goal of all human striving is a grotesque mixture of farce and tragedy. ("Confession" 148)

Not only does Lovecraft discard his ethics here, he also establishes even further lexical similarities to his more suicidal narrators. Over and over we see the word *oblivion*: Lovecraft has a "desire" for "oblivion" in his autobiographical, nonfictional "Confession" (148); in the fictional stories "Ex Oblivione" and "The Hound," we have one narrator who achieves happy dissolution into "oblivion" ("Oblivione" 88) and another who, "with [his] revolver," actively "seeks" his "oblivion" ("Hound" 88). And oblivion is an interesting choice, because it does not only connote suicide in Lovecraft's context, but also frequently comes with the implication of *forgottenness* (*OED*, "oblivion, n."). In Lovecraft's view, the death of the self is nothing to lament, nothing to dramatize; you are simply forgotten, as the rest of humanity is to the cosmos. Or, seen from a slightly different angle: neither you nor humanity are worthy or capable of being remembered in the final analysis.

Many collapses characterize Lovecraft's life, such as in his health, in the death of his mother, in the war that befell his cherished Europe, in the space that separated his life from his fiction, and especially in the attempt to uphold an ethics bracketed by nihilism. The boundaries between author and narrator are, in most cases, clearly defined, and to suggest otherwise is often presumptuous. But in the case of Lovecraft, those boundaries appear thin at best. Nearly all of the ethical notions that Lovecraft expressed were turned on their head, and this should come as no surprise: a materialist, atheist, cosmic ontology will inevitably struggle to support even the most elementary humanistic doctrines. But if the lines separating Lovecraft's personal philosophy from his fiction are tenuous ones, as are the lines separating his ethics from his nihilism, then his subsumption into posthumanism becomes problematic. On one hand, it is understandable, since at an ontological level posthumanism is usually concerned with "chaotic dynamics" (Hayles 288); on the other hand, it is questionable, since ethics (posthuman or otherwise) require stable values or codes. Here, then, is more reason to be cautious in designating Lovecraft as the site for any critical approach that is inclined toward valuing humanity or ethics.

With this, I want to return to the list of elements in Lovecraft scholarship that Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock describes, a couple of which, to repeat, are "*Posthumanist Questioning of the Status of the 'Human'*" and "*Antihumanist 'Decentering' of Mankind's Pretensions to Grandeur*" (34-38). Weinstock is clearly correct when stating that "[f]or Lovecraft, humans are neither distinct from other animals nor proudly sitting on top of the evolutionary ladder," which is clear from the materialist influences on Lovecraft's philosophy and very much applicable to both of the elements that Weinstock

describes (37). Yet he also points out that Lovecraft's atheistic materialism, which, as I argue throughout this chapter, was very closely connected with his nihilism, "now finds an enthusiastic audience among those who see" his decentering of the human "as central to more humane and ethical modes of existence" (Weinstock 37). Lovecraft himself made an attempt at formulating a basic sense of ethics, and it is not clear that it prevailed over his nihilism. Therefore, centralizing a *humane ethics* by first decentralizing *the human* is not only oxymoronic but probably also self-defeating. It is puzzling, then, that any strain of posthumanist thought should share the same ontological "realization" as Lovecraft yet arrive in starkly contrasting ethical positions. Lovecraft also tried to maintain racism and antiquarianism while simultaneously claiming that the world is absent of any real value, which not only compromises his reliability but also goes to show that ontological agreement does not necessarily imply ethical agreement. Posthumanist readings of Lovecraft are, therefore, even further complicated by all of his contradictions: if he wavered between value and non-value, life and suicide, ethics and indifferentism, then we have all the more reason to believe that his ontological position (robust though it might be) cannot provide stability to any ethics that follow.

It does not feel presumptuous, at this point, to say that Lovecraft resists classification as a posthumanist more than he warrants it. Yet this does not make Lovecraft irrelevant for a modern conversation surrounding posthumanism, materialism, humanism, nihilism, and so forth. Really, the failure to categorize him warrants *more* conversation, as we might begin to ask, If Lovecraft and the more ecologically-minded posthumanists/materialists are alike in their decentering of humanity, then how can they

arrive at different moral codes? Are our systems of ethics and/or morals not dependent upon ontological claims? Is Lovecraft's struggle for (or against) meaning evidence for the existence of meaning? Or, to the contrary, is this struggle actually a testament to the inherent absence of meaning in the universe? Since there are shared features between Lovecraft and these newer developments in philosophy, it seems as though an examination of the former can help us perform a re-examination of the latter. And because these newer developments are being utilized in a number of discourses, including ecocriticism, it is just as important to re-examine the cross-breeding that occurs between posthumanism and environmentalism and what these might look like when read through the Lovecraftian lens.

Chapter 3: The Limitations of Reading Lovecraft Ecocritically

To review, the Lovecraftian sublime is an inversion of the humanistic sublime, negating affirmations of life and of humanity's right to live in this world. Knowledge, purpose, and meaning are undermined by the nihilism of the Lovecraftian sublime, because Lovecraft's system of ontology does not allow for the existence of God or for the worth of human existence, value, or knowledge-seeking. In Lovecraft's fiction, what the encounter with the vast or the monstrous instead does is cause its observer to feel trivialized, reinforcing hopelessness and confirming any doubts the observer might have regarding human endeavor, including the worth of human action. In a nihilistic model of the sublime, value is assigned to no person, entity, or thing, making all actions feel useless—and therefore all ethics, too. This, as I argue, is the problem with aligning Lovecraft's fiction to any philosophy that culminates in ethical conclusions and is, therefore, also the point where we must revisit value, existence, knowledge, actions, and perhaps even the significance of Lovecraft's work as the subject of philosophical consideration or literary criticism.

The humanistic sublime begins with an observer and circles back to an affirmation of life, and the Lovecraftian sublime begins with an observer and circles back to a denial of life. In both models, the sublime depends on the ontological starting position. Since Lovecraft begins with materialism and a pervasive sense of nihilism, it should make sense that his inverted sublime logically leads him right back to such things as non-value, non-existence, and non-action. But what of the ontological belief itself? What is the world in which both of these models of sublimity are staged? The simplest

answers might be nature, the environment, or Earth. As the thing from which not just humans but indeed all organisms rise, nature is an indispensable piece of this entire discussion, making an ecocritical approach useful. The first ecocritical concept that I will analyze in the context of Lovecraft's work is *apocalypse*, which I will define, for now, as a cataclysmic event in which all life (as we know it) faces extinction. Another ecocritical concept that will prove useful in my analysis of Lovecraft's work is that of *ecophobia*, which I borrow from Simon Estok. In simple terms, ecophobia is an irrational fear (and hatred) of the natural world that we use, wittingly or not, to justify our conquest of the environment (Estok 208). Both apocalypse and ecophobia will be explored at greater length below, but not with the purpose of demonstrating their existence in Lovecraft's work: I argue that they are, instead, examples of ecocritical concepts that "malfunction" when applied to cosmic horror. In attempting to read Lovecraft's work through these ecocritical lenses, it is clear that such an analysis depends on human agency. But since Lovecraft's work is so nihilistic, it is difficult to find any place for human agency or ethics altogether. So just as a posthumanist reading of Lovecraft fails to draw stable ethical conclusions, an ecocritical reading of Lovecraft similarly fails to teach the reader any useful lesson about how to treat the environment or understand our own behaviors. However, the difficulty in extracting a lesson from Lovecraft's work also illuminates the possibility, I argue, that (posthuman) ecology is just as liable to committing the same anthropocentric mistakes that it purports to undo.

After analyzing Lovecraft along (posthumanist) ecocritical lines, I will widen the scope of my discussion to include other authors, namely Algernon Blackwood, as well as

analyses conducted by other scholars, such as Sara Crosby, Michelle Poland, and Patricia MacCormack. Doing so does not mark a departure from Lovecraft but rather an extension of the same problems that plague posthumanist ecological discourse, e.g., climate change, the definition of the human, ecologically ethical ways to conduct ourselves, and so on. In Blackwood especially, there is an overt attention to the environment as an intersection for the natural and the supernatural, the terrestrial and the cosmic. That blurring of boundaries is closely connected to the discussion of Lovecraft and posthumanism, making Blackwood's work a useful addition here. I argue in the previous chapter that utilizing Lovecraft's ontological foundations as a starting point for ethics is an approach that warrants scrutiny, but that same desire to link ontology to ethics occurs in the context of Blackwood's and Poe's work, too. In closing the chapter (and the thesis), I will argue that Lovecraft's work occupies a unique position in current conversations, especially as our culture grows increasingly obsessed with climate change and apocalyptic scenarios. If we truly are accelerating toward our demise, as Claire Colebrook argues, *and* we are the ones behind that acceleration, then it is indeed strange that we should be asking questions of how we will survive rather than if we should (201). If so many people refuse to hear the "voices that accuse us of an existential worthlessness" (201), as Colebrook says, then it should seem especially ironic that Lovecraft's work is as prominent in pop culture as it has ever been. His work is antithetical to anything resembling humanism, making his recent popularity all the more ironic and puzzling. Ultimately, Lovecraft's work provides no clean morals, no takeaways, no advice as to how we ought to live or protect the life of the planet. We can only come away with more questions. But rather than being precluded

from a discussion of the environment or of the human species, Lovecraft's cosmicism takes us into exactly the kind of nihilistic territory that we must occupy if we are to re-evaluate ourselves and our world along not-so-human lines.

The term *posthumanism* and its many variations frequently occur alongside the term *ecology* and, of course, the variations that come with that. Jane Bennett's vital materialism is given impetus, for instance, because "to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (Bennett 10; emphasis in original). Experiencing the relationship of humanity to nonhumanity is described by Bennett as horizontal rather than vertical here, because understanding that relationship is (supposedly) meant to flatten and delegitimize the hierarchies that we impose on our environment. Attributing agency to matter and viewing it, to use Bennett's terms, as vibrant or vital, is to approach what I would argue is a posthumanist position, largely because this attribution is based on a rejection of dualistic notions. To bring Cary Wolfe and N. Katherine Hayles back into the discussion, consider that Wolfe wishes to "describe the human" along more specific lines by seeing us as "human *animals*" and acknowledging our coevolution "with various forms of technicity and materiality" (xxv). Hayles, on the other hand, maintains that "[i]n the posthuman" view, humans are not essentially separate from their environment or even the computers that they develop (3)—that, in short, subjectivity or "self-will" cannot "be clearly distinguished from" objectivity or "an other-will" (4). A dissolution of dualistic thinking is what provides the basis for all three of these thinkers, and, in much the same

way that Lovecraft and his work reject idealism in favor of materialism, posthumanists tend to reject a disembodied view of the human in favor of an embodied one.

Before considering the ways in which posthumanism and ecology cross over, I want to expand the posthumanist notion of embodiment. Hayles states that "[t]he body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviors at every level of thought and action" (284), which is to say that we have always been the products of this planet. Additionally, this is Hayles's counterpoint to the transhumanist desire to transcend our materiality and disembody ourselves. According to Bennett, we are always the products of our environment, even as we speak, and so is everything else: "I am a material configuration, the pigeons in the park are material compositions, the viruses, parasites, and heavy metals in my flesh and in pigeon flesh are materialities, as are neurochemicals, hurricane winds, E. coli, and the dust on the floor" (Bennett 112). To recognize oneself materially is to remember that "you" come from Earth. To recognize oneself in a bit more of a Lovecraftian sense, however, is to remember that even Earth comes from somewhere (i.e., the cosmos) and that you, by extension, also come from that infinity. The character Crawford Tillinghast (of Lovecraft's story "From Beyond," written in 1920) channels this view:

> "What do we know," he had said, "of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. . . . With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos. . . . I have always believed that such strange,

> inaccessible worlds exist at our very elbows, and now I believe I have found a way to break down the barriers." (79)

Tillinghast goes on to explain the limitations of human sensation, providing details to the narrator about a machine that he will use to "overleap time, space, and dimensions, and without bodily motion peer to the bottom of creation" (79). This is to say that anything considered "outside" natural law is, in fact, already surrounding us. The cosmos is *out there* and *right here* all at once; we merely lack the senses to detect it. Similar views are implicit to other of Lovecraft's works, like "The Call of Cthulhu" and *At the Mountains of Madness*, where cosmic monstrosities are among us, hidden in unexplored pockets of our terrestrial home. Tillinghast's suggestion only differs slightly by maintaining that the extraterrestrial is in our immediate presence. In either case, the cosmos is much closer to home than we realize. Once Tillinghast's machine is operational, the narrator describes "every known thing" as being uncomfortably close to "whole worlds of alien, unknown entities," lapsing "into the composition of other unknown things, and vice versa" (83). The whole fabric of reality is a patchwork, the elucidation of which is the goal of posthumanist theory and Lovecraft's fiction alike.

The realization of interwovenness itself seems sublime, because it is marked by an awareness of how vast the outside is to humanity, which might then lead to a questioning of one's entire being (values, actions, and all). The recognition of vastness makes a paralyzing nihilism seem logical, which is precisely how the Lovecraftian sublime operates. Even the *inside* seems vast upon closer examination, as Bennett explains:

> My "own" body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is "a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria. . . . They are helping to moisturize the skin by processing the raw fats it produces. . . . The bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least 100 times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome." The *its* outnumber the *mes*. In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are "embodied." We are, rather, *an array of bodies* . . . (Bennett 112; emphasis in original)

Bennett puts the word *own* in quotations to suggest that we do not possess our bodies, which makes sense if we accept her notion that, in fact, we are outnumbered by things considered nonhuman. This is the crux of philosophical posthumanism and materialism: humanism is not a tenable position if, in reality, the traditional concept of the "human" itself is not tenable. After all, what are consciousness and reason without a brain? And what is a brain without oxygen or blood? And what are these without cells, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, and so on? It is no wonder that Lovecraft "dismissed free-will forever in favor of determinism" ("Confession" 148), because in this ontological framework, everything we proudly cherish as a species is seemingly diminished by the nonhuman "agents" that, paradoxically, have nothing and yet everything to do with us.

Assigning value to all life, both human and nonhuman, is not just the tendency of Jane Bennett, but also of deep ecology. At least two assertions are core to deep ecology, as noted by Greg Garrard: firstly, *all* life, human or not, has innate value or worth; and

secondly, human and nonhuman life cannot flourish unless we reach a population smaller than what we currently have (Garrard 23-24). In believing that all things have value, we reach something akin to Bennett's belief that, "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (Bennett 12-13). Conversely, when value is not assigned to matter, "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter" is allowed to persist, further "[feeding] human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (Bennett ix). This does not sound too different from another belief of deep ecology that Garrard explains: "the origin of environmental crisis" is in "the dualistic separation of humans and nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture" (Garrard 24), which would explain why the posthumanist tendency to dissolve dualism appeals so much to some environmentalists. Bennett's mention of "instrumentalized matter" also calls to mind Simon Estok's notion of *ecophobia*, which is "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world," rooted (as *-phobia* implies) in a fear of nature (Estok 208). Just as a reduction of power leads to a reduction of sublimity in the life-affirming, humanistic mode, the view of nature as instrumental or resourceful can also reduce its power over us and thereby give us a greater sense of security. In other words, ecophobia is all about control. According to Estok, ecophobia is comparable to other forms of discrimination: "[C]ontrol of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in western culture, implies ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism, as rape implies misogyny, as 'fag-bashing' implies homophobia, and as animal exploitation implies speciesism" (208). In the same article, Estok mentions the activist impulse that exists at the core of

ecocriticism and other environmental discourse, and it is with that impulse and the knowledge of ecophobia that we can, in theory, begin to repair the damage that we have done to the environment, just as the knowledge of racism or misogyny can aid in the effort to repair the damage done in those respective domains. I want to avoid discussing ecocriticism in overgeneralized terms here, but we can at least note that some kind of ethical activism drives many of its analyses.

Posthumanism and materialism, then, are inextricably tied to the deep ecological mission of preventing damage to the environment, meaning that if Lovecraft warrants a conversation of the first and second, then he is bound to force a conversation of the third. Brian Johnson gives us a glimpse into this chain of correlations: "Lovecraft's *'posthumanist'* tendency to decenter human identity by reconnecting it to often troubling or defamiliarizing images of nonhuman nature makes his poetics of the *materialist* grotesque a suggestive precursor to the new *ecological* materialisms" (105; emphasis mine). All three terms appear. And although Patricia MacCormack does not employ those exact terms, she does imply the same underlying ontological belief: "Materiality, animality, life, and reality are part of the vast connective tissue collapsing all thought and, by doing so, opening it out into infinity" (206). Thus, in terms of the ontological premises and their similarity to Lovecraft's own beliefs, there does not seem to be anything disagreeable about these scholars' statements. But as we might expect from Lovecraft's incongruence to posthumanism, more ecologically-minded thinkers also diverge from Lovecraft in significant ways. Bennett seems parallel to Lovecraft when she states that "There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an

interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity" (31); where she departs from Lovecraft, however, is in her sentiment that "today this mingling has become harder to ignore" (31). By being "harder to ignore," Bennett does not simply mean we should be more aware, but also that we should attempt to revise our policies and give greater recognition to nonhuman actants. Would Lovecraft recognize this "mingling" and, as with Bennett, choose to pursue a more ecologically sensible ethics? This question will first be addressed through Lovecraft's nonfiction, and afterward through an analysis of his fiction in the context of deep ecology and the notion of the apocalypse.

As Johnson notes, "Lovecraft's pessimistic posthumanism was not overtly concerned with anxieties about ecological catastrophe" (106), making it difficult to examine his work along ecological or ethical lines. The question of whether or not Lovecraft would pursue "more humane and ethical modes of existence" (Weinstock, "Introduction" 37) in today's world is highly speculative, but given the analysis of Lovecraft's ethics conducted thus far, it is reasonable to assume that Lovecraft would not care much either way. Such is nihilism or, as Lovecraft might prefer, indifferentism:

> Contrary to what you may assume, I am *not a pessimist* but an *indifferentist*—that is, I don't make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process. ("Letter to James F. Morton [1929]" 483; emphasis in original)

That is to say that even though our conscious processes might emerge from nonhuman forces, it does not mean that those forces necessarily "care" in the ways we do. Lovecraft continues in the same letter to remark on the foolishness of both pessimists and optimists:

> [B]oth schools retain in a vestigial way the primitive concept of a conscious teleology—of a cosmos which gives a damn one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitos, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy. (483)

Perhaps humans can be justified in seeking ecological alternatives or developing better systems of ethics, but it is clear that, for Lovecraft, it makes no difference and is certainly not part of any divine plan or "conscious teleology." Additionally, in the above passage he performs the same sort of horizontalizing move that Bennett refers to, placing humanity neither first nor last among his list of mammals, insects, vegetation, and dinosaurs; rather, humans are among all other biota, as if to suggest we are all the same in the mechanistic and meaningless cosmos. But despite how much his work resists an ecocritical reading, it is nevertheless fruitful to pursue the speculation: how does Lovecraft's work hold up when analyzed through an ecocritical lens?

A significant ecocritical lens is the common theme of apocalypse, which is becoming increasingly relevant as our understanding of environmental damage and climate change grows. First, I want to offer a brief conceptual outline of the apocalypse as it is considered by some ecocritics, such as Greg Garrard, J. L. Schatz, and Gabriele Dürbeck. Garrard splits the apocalypse into two modes: comic and tragic. Comic here means "open-ended and episodic" and suggests the existence of a "real but flawed" sense

of "[h]uman agency" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 95). We created the apocalypse and we can fix it. Tragic apocalypse, on the other hand, is "predetermined and epochal," yet somehow still tied to notions of guilt (95). We are actors and have "little to do but choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil" (95). But even guilt implies some sort of human agency, which is why Dürbeck characterizes apocalyptic narratives as "punitive," explaining that they "typically contain the idea that the catastrophe is some kind of punishment by a divine entity . . . or, more secularly, the result of nature taking revenge" (Dürbeck 1). Theistic or not, humans seem to be able to conjure some kind of narrative that, although negative, nonetheless reinforces our effectiveness as agents. Garrard notes that post-apocalyptic scenarios without humans nonetheless "involve the survival of at least one privileged or unfortunate human," and this "survivor bears witness to the aftermath of a cataclysm that can hardly be read as anything but a *judgment* upon humanity" (Garrard, "Worlds" 40; emphasis in original). Punishment and judgment go hand in hand, and so it would seem that the apocalypse and human agency, likewise, go hand in hand. Through post-apocalyptic narratives, Garrard extracts the following lesson: it is a "world with *far fewer* of us that we should seek to imagine, and to achieve" (59; emphasis in original). Here we feel the reverberations of deep ecology, and Schatz seems to be on board with the utility of such narratives, arguing that "it takes images of planetary annihilation to motivate people into action after years of sitting idly by watching things slowly decay" (21). In other words, if we can take the apocalyptic narrative seriously, then we will be motivated to stop behaving in such ecologically destructive ways.

This brings us back to Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," which is perhaps the best example of an eco-catastrophe at work in his fiction. Other works of Lovecraft (such as *At the Mountains of Madness*, "Dagon," or "The Shadow out of Time") have little to do with environmental havoc, at least not in the same way that "Colour" does. In the first chapter, I analyzed this story as it pertains to the Lovecraftian sublime, but it is worth reviewing its basic elements. In the story, a meteorite crashes on a small farm, utterly confounding the locals and the nearby university's scientists; the meteorite corrupts the livestock, vegetation, and the psyches of the family whose farm it landed on (181-84); it launches back into space, leaving one small piece behind; and ultimately, "the blasted heath" is left desolate, the "blight" creeping onward each year (171, 198). With the farm being inhospitable, the livestock and vegetation disintegrating, and the people going mad, it is safe to say that the meteorite created some kind of catastrophe. Suppose that the meteorite were a full-scale asteroid or meteor: it seems reasonable to say that the same properties would have been amplified, greatly increasing the scale of the catastrophe to such a point that it might be considered an apocalypse. For now, though, we will treat the event as a microcosm or symbol of the apocalypse.

Within the narration of the story, there is little speculation as to why the meteorite came or what it means in terms of "*judgment*" (Garrard, "Worlds" 40). The meteorite simply *is*. The narrator even states near the end of the story, "Do not ask me for my opinion" (Lovecraft 198). The narrator withholds interpretation, which is both similar and dissimilar to the popular approach of apocalyptic narratives that Dürbeck describes: that of the "'shipwreck with spectator'" (Dürbeck 2). On one hand, we have a "distant

spectator" who can "enjoy the sublime immensity of nature's catastrophic eruptions" (2-3). On the other hand, the meteorite is not "an object of contemplation" in the sense that the narrator can philosophize about it (2). Moreover, the narrator's refusal to offer an opinion suggests either that he does not have one, or that he more likely has a disgust for the event with which he is still grappling. None of this implies punishment. Moreover, "The Colour out of Space" scarcely fits any of the functions of the eco-catastrophic narrative as they are defined by Dürbeck:

> (i) as a "sensorium for what goes wrong in a society," (ii) as "a medium of constant cultural self-renewal" counteracting economic and political discourses, and (iii) as "symbolic space of expression and (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses." (Dürbeck 3)

We can rule out the first purpose, because nothing went wrong (at least not that the narrator or any other characters explain) to bring about the meteorite. Second, the meteorite might counteract discourses, but it is not for a renewal of any kind. If anything, the meteorite symbolizes the opposite: decay. The third and final purpose that Dürbeck provides seems, frankly, too vague for us know if Lovecraft fits it. (Or it is likely, too, that I do not fully comprehend Dürbeck's definition.) In any case, Lovecraft only leaves us with ambiguous conclusions about the meteorite, and while the event is ecologically catastrophic, its pairing with Lovecraft's cosmic indifferentism deprives it of any potential meaning (and prevents any course of action from being effective). The humans are helpless before the tremendous and inconceivable powers of the meteorite, hence the farmer's family's going mad (183-84) and the narrator's relief in knowing that the

"blasted heath" will soon be turned into a reservoir: "I shall be glad to see the water come" (199). The impotence of the humans in the story makes it difficult to view the event as apocalyptic in the comic sense.

Yet the tragic apocalypse seems inapplicable, too, because no one is being punished or judged, the meteorite has no discernible purpose or motive, and we are still left helpless against an eco-catastrophe that could not possibly have been avoided. The narrator does speculate that "[i]t must all be a judgment of some sort" (185), but this speculation is limited by the farmers' good-natured Christian lives, for which they ought not be punished (185). In that sense, this apocalyptic scenario would be somewhat tragic. However, it is later concluded that the meteorite "obeyed laws that are not of our cosmos" (199), making a divine, purposive judgment seem unlikely; such a judgment would presumably be issued forth from a deity that reigns over an ordered universe, meaning that if the meteorite does not obey the same cosmic laws that the narrator upholds, then the meteorite also cannot be traced back to a divinely ordained judgment. Either way, human agency is nowhere to be found. And without that crucial element, there seems to be no apocalypse in ecocritical terms. What this reveals about the theme of apocalypse is that it often demands human involvement, from our agency in preventing it, our guilt in bringing it about, or the activist lessons and practical knowledge we can derive from it. The apocalypse, ironically, depends on the very anthropocentrism that its proponents (like Schatz) are trying to dismantle.

Could we still consider "The Colour out of Space" a story of ecophobia? The scientists and farmers did attempt to keep it under control and understand it. Additionally,

ecophobia does imply fear, which is in abundance as the Lovecraftian sublime takes shape once more. The observers of the meteorite are paralyzed with fear and awe, which should by all means be suggestive of ecophobia:

> Not a man breathed for several seconds. . . . [T]here was a general cry; muffled with awe, but husky and almost identical from every throat. For the terror had not faded with the silhouette, and in a fearsome instant of deeper darkness the watchers saw wriggling at that treetop height a thousand tiny points of faint and unhallowed radiance. . . . It was a monstrous constellation of unnatural light . . . and its colour was that same nameless intrusion which Ammi had come to recognise and dread. All the while the shaft of phosphorescence from the well was getting brighter and brighter, bringing to the minds of the huddled men a sense of doom and abnormality which far outraced any image their conscious minds could form. (Lovecraft 193-94)

The encounter with the vast, the incomprehensible, the "nameless," the powerful—this is the mark of both the humanist and Lovecraftian sublime. But in the encounter described in the passage above, what room is there for an affirmation of life or for the Kantian suggestion that we are, in fact, superior to nature? Such assumptions rest on the ability to control nature (i.e., the meteorite), and here there is neither a control of the object at a tangible level nor a control of the object at an epistemological level. The scientists and farmers fail at every point, helpless against this miniscule foreign object of the cosmos. The scientists conclude that the meteorite was "nothing of this earth" and that because it is "dowered with outside properties," it must be "obedient to outside laws" (176). It

cannot be instrumentalized and it cannot be understood, leading to the anthropocentric fallacy that "[i]t wasn't right—it was against Nature" (192), which is predicated on total human understanding and mastery of nature in the first place. None of this is permitted in Lovecraft's tale: there is no human agency to be found, as the ecocritical notion of the apocalypse seems to require, and there is no success on the part of humans to instrumentalize or control nature, thereby denying the possibility that it is a tale of ecophobia. Just like apocalypse, ecophobia requires an assignment of harmful human agency to the underlying problem, and since any ecological damage incurred in "Colour" is not brought about by humans, it is clear that Lovecraft's eco-catastrophe only employs anthropocentrism for the purpose of dismantling it. This also closely mirrors the Lovecraftian sublime and its tendency to utilize human characters for the sole purpose of denying life, rather than affirming it. Most importantly, though, it seems that forcing an ecocritical reading of "The Colour out of Space" illuminates the limitations of such an analysis on the basis of its own terms. That is, the ecocritical notions of apocalypse and ecophobia do not prepare the reader to grapple with Lovecraft because even they—with their mission of combatting anthropocentrism—ironically seem humanistic by comparison to his seething antihumanism.

To some extent, then, conducting an ecocritical reading of Lovecraft helps us to see the difficulty of escaping humanistic positions. Buried under such notions as the apocalypse and ecophobia is a logic that depends on human agents in the first place, suggesting that it was with our abuse of free will that the environment reached a state of crisis at all. The use of these subtly humanistic notions is, of course, in reaching an

ecologically-oriented sense of ethics. But an ethical sensibility itself implies something faintly humanistic: we must create, improve, and/or preserve a way of life; or imbued ecologically, we must create, improve, and/or preserve a world in which to conduct that life. If we accept this basic concept of ethics, then we must ask: A way of life for whom? A world lived in by whom? The assumption, of course, is humanity. And thus, to some extent, ethics are designed *by* humans *for* humans, undergirding ethics (knowingly or not) with anthropocentrism almost by default. The inevitable drive for self-preservation, often masquerading as ethics, undermines the antihumanist efforts of certain strains of posthumanism and posthuman ecology. This proclivity for ethics appears in Lovecraft, too, as I argue in the second chapter, but with the exception that he continually lapses back into nihilism, contradicting his ethical propositions with statements about the futility of all being, the nonexistence of meaning, and the logicalness of our species ceasing to exist. In some cases, Lovecraft himself refused to have anything remotely "ethical" associated with him:

> About my own attitude toward ethics—I thought I made it plain that I object only to (a) grotesquely disproportionate indignations and enthusiasms, (b) illogical extremes involving a reductio ad absurdum, and (c) the nonsensical notion that "right" and "wrong" involve any principles more mystical and universal than those of immediate expedience (with the individual's own comfort as a criterion). ("Letter to Woodburn Harris," 288-89)

This echoes Lovecraft's earlier Epicureanism, i.e., the desire to attain individual happiness as a supreme value through mental pursuits, but with the difference that

Lovecraft here is explicitly discussing ethics; prior to this, most of his ethical statements were couched in nihilism without providing a direct signal that he was going to address ethics as such. He goes on, however, to establish his non-ethical position further:

> I have a marked distaste for immoral and unlawful acts which contravene the harmonious traditions and standards of beautiful living developed by a culture during its long history. This, however, is not *ethics but aesthetics*. . . . I am an aesthete devoted to harmony, and to the extraction of the maximum possible pleasure from life. (289)

Lovecraft refuses to commit himself to anything ethical, which is exactly the sort of noncommitment that exists within "The Colour out of Space." The eco-catastrophe is neither a sign of humanity's guilt nor an indication of humanity's capacity to reverse the destruction. It is merely a spectacle. It is *just* a part of the process of the universe that humans be destroyed or remain alive. Things *just* are. "It was *just* a colour out of space—a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it" ("Colour" 199; emphasis mine). One would find about as much remorse in a human who has unknowingly stepped on an ant. The main difference is that, in the case of Lovecraft's fiction, it is most often humans who are the ants.

Much of what I argue about Lovecraft can also be observed in the cosmic horror of Algernon Blackwood, from whom Lovecraft drew a great deal of inspiration. More important to the analysis I am conducting here, however, Blackwood's fiction treats nature in greater detail than Lovecraft's does, all the while containing the same key elements, such as the blurring of binaries (human/nonhuman, cosmic/terrestrial,

natural/supernatural) and the overwhelming sense of triviality that humans feel in the presence of nature or the cosmos. This is to say that analyzing Blackwood does not mark a full departure from Lovecraft in the least, but instead expands the scope of posthumanism and ecocriticism as they have been applied thus far to Lovecraft. I have said much here already of Lovecraft's tendency to dissipate borders, but Lovecraft himself observed the same of the "genius" Blackwood, who "records the overtones of strangeness in ordinary things and experiences" and "builds up detail by detail the complete sensations and perceptions leading from reality into supernormal life or vision" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural"). Lovecraft goes on to note the proximity of the weird to the normal, the supernatural to the natural, mentioning an "unreal world constantly pressing upon ours," and how "relatively slight is the distinction betwixt those images formed from actual objects and those excited by the play of the imagination" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural"). Thus, there is a sense based solely on Lovecraft's description of Blackwood's works that the cosmic, imaginary, natural, and human are blurred together (or, if not blurred, then very thinly veiled). Blackwood was, in the eyes of Lovecraft, an important contributor to the genre of horror. But more to our purpose, Blackwood's attention to nature is much more overt than Lovecraft's, which makes Blackwood's fiction valuable to the present discussion of posthuman ecology.

One of Blackwood's most famous works is "The Willows," published in 1907. The story, simply put, is one in which two travelers (the narrator and his friend, known as the Swede) canoe down the Danube, a river in Europe that eventually takes them into some marshes just outside of the Hungarian town of Pressburg, which is situated between

Vienna and Budapest (Blackwood 17). They come "aground" in these marshes, surrounded by willows, occasional sunlight, and the winds of the night (17-19). In reality, none of this sounds out of the ordinary. These are all, at first glance, perfectly natural occurrences. However, the narrator and the Swede begin to perceive this seemingly normal place as a paranormal one, sensing that the forces of nature there are unlike anything they have felt previously. Worse, these forces (and particularly the willow trees) seem hostile to them (29). The willows are anthropomorphized throughout the story, implying their agency:

> [The willows] made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the horrible. (Blackwood 29)

This echoes Bennett's suggestion about vibrant matter and the "capacity of things . . . to act as quasi agents" (Bennett viii), since human agency is clearly not unique in these marshes. All throughout "The Willows," the narrator characterizes nature similarly to the above passage, attributing vitality to the wind, the trees, the water, and so forth. We are led to believe that these are not just hallucinations.

One of the most interesting parts of the above passage, however, is the narrator's suggestion that the willow trees have a lineage completely unlike that of the human species, which would separate them from us and possibly the rest of nature as humanity

understands it. Nevertheless, the narrator attributes agency to the willows, which parallels them to humanity even as it distances them. The term *agency* explicitly occurs at later points in the story, particularly once the narrator and the Swede grow more and more unsettled, at which point the narrator senses "a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility" (36). Eventually, this suggestion of agency leads the narrator to believe that the willows do not operate according to laws of nature or human understanding:

> [H]ere was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a "beyond region," of another scheme of life, another revolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into their world. (Blackwood 50)

This conclusion is similar to the one reached by the narrator and the scientists in Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," deeming that which is outside our understanding to be unnatural, hostile, and so on. The notion of *outside* is especially important here too, since, in Cary Wolfe's words, "[t]he sublime is rendered as a kind of absolute outside to human existence" (217). In the models of the sublime discussed thus far, that *outside* "emerges as a product of the human subject's conflict with itself, a symptom of the Enlightenment subject running up against its own limits," as Cary Wolfe explains (217). This is the case for both Kant and Lovecraft, with the difference that the former is

life-affirming and the latter life-denying. The experience is “terrifying” because its existence is outside of the human (Wolfe 217). This is evident in “The Willows,” as the narrator suggests that the supernatural “experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all” (Blackwood 50), which not only demonstrates the element of sublimity in the story, but also takes us back to the anthropocentric fallacy: if humanity does not, cannot, or should not know it, then it must be unnatural. The entire outing “was a new order of experience” and, interestingly enough, an “unearthly” one at that (50). But how is it possible for an experience to be “unearthly” while occurring on Earth? One possibility is that a mingling of the supernatural and the natural is tantamount to a mingling of the cosmic and the terrestrial. Anthony Camara, for instance, observes in “The Willows” the “turning [of] a microscope towards nature,” which simultaneously results in “Blackwood [turning] a telescope towards the universe” (Camara 44). This means that the outdoors for Blackwood “is continuous with an even greater outdoors,” which can be none other than “the starry expanses and abyssal depths of space” (44). Therefore, the dissipation of the border dividing the natural and the unnatural is analogous to the dissipation of the border dividing the cosmic and the terrestrial. In cosmic horror, a terrestrial concept of nature cannot suffice: to cope with the terrible sublime, we require an expanded concept of nature.

Blackwood’s tale suggests not only a fear of nature, but also a total submission to that fear. Thus, while there may be fear, the absence of mastery or malice on the part of the two men means that ecophobia is not such a viable concept here. Perhaps, then, we ought to consider its opposite: ecophilia. I borrow this term from Matthew Taylor, who

argues that the notion of ecophobia is incomplete. Ecophilia, as an intense love and reverence for nature (and therefore protection of it) represents, on the one hand, ecophobia's virtuous opposite; on the other hand, Taylor argues that ecophilia is "an extension of the same problem under a different name," because it too can "lead to domination" (354). Taylor illustrates this with examples from Thoreau and a broader discussion of Romanticism, claiming that the "holistic interconnectedness" of ecophilia is more often than not "subordinating the natural world to an occasion of the self's realization" (355). Where Taylor's argument gains even further traction is in regards to the emergence of posthuman ecological materialism, which, similar to the Romantics, tends to approach "the nightmare of an all-colonizing subjectivity" (359). Where the works of Lovecraft and Blackwood imply that we are an extension of nature and the cosmos, the ecophilic Romantic may be inclined to reverse that notion and say that nature and the cosmos are extensions of *us*. This is made possible through "[dissipating] the borders between self and world by abandoning" dualistic binaries "in favor of hybrid relations and dynamic human-nonhuman assemblages" (359). Here, the theories of Bennett and Wolfe are echoed once again, which allows the ecophilic Romantic view to be rallied behind the ethical theories of Bennett's materialism and/or Wolfe's posthumanism. However, Taylor argues that such theories could result in an ambiguous embedment within nature which, because of its enormous uncertainty and subjectivity, could incline humans to lay claim to nature (359). The erosion of the border separating human and nonhuman looks at first to be love, but, by Taylor's logic, has a potential for

instrumentalization and destruction equal to ecophobia. Thus, non-hierarchical approaches also bear a responsibility to avoid anthropocentrism.

Taylor analyzes ecophilia and ecophobia by juxtaposing Romantic texts with the horror of Edgar Allan Poe, but his analysis does still include the threads that are common to the discussion of Lovecraft, e.g., posthumanism, materialism, and ecology. Therefore, Taylor's argument remains pertinent to the present discussion of Blackwood and Lovecraft. He argues, for example, that Poe turns the subjectivist possibilities of the Romantics (and posthuman ecologists) into horror. The collapsing of boundaries between human and nonhuman, between self and environment, can produce "a fear that would recognize the self's integration into its environment without the ability to overcome it" (Taylor 362), which is parallel to the Lovecraftian sublime in that the self is annihilated without any hope of "subjective reconstitution" (Ralickas 365). Thus, part of what makes the fiction of Poe, Blackwood, and Lovecraft horrifying is the obliteration of the self. From this perspective, the fear linking the sublime and cosmic horror seems to stem less from posthumanism and more from *antihumanism*. The "loss of individual subjectivity," in fact, could be celebrated in some strains of posthumanism, antihumanism, and ecocriticism alike, because it "[precludes] reactionary, destructive attempts at mastery" (Taylor 362). What Taylor suggests, though, is that liberating ourselves from the human-nonhuman binary instead represents the dissolving of the human into dark obscurity, chaos, and powerlessness (360). Therefore, an expanded concept of nature cannot circumvent the despair of the Lovecraftian sublime or its broader category of cosmic horror. Sara Crosby agrees with Taylor when it comes to ecophilia and ecophobia

(as to their ineffectiveness or destructive capacities), but she concedes that the "narratives of ecophobia and ecophilia" do provide a "pro-active course of action or ethical model of identity" (Crosby 514). This echoes the activism inherent to a large portion of ecocriticism and reminds us, also, of the ethical responsibility that tends to accompany an ecocritical analysis. Interestingly, though, Crosby finds a third approach in Poe: that of the "ecological detective [who] militates against the irrational hatred of nature without demanding that humans embrace nature," preferring, instead, to maintain a "critical distance that plays to humanity's strengths and recognizes its limitations" (523). Even with such bleak representations of our position within the environment, Crosby still makes it seem possible to derive a practical mindset or proactive approach.

It seems that some scholars can extract lessons from Blackwood, too. Michelle Poland provides one such lesson, stating that Blackwood reminds us of "ecology's most basic premise: interrelatedness" (61). By keeping the reader aware of such principles, Blackwood teaches the reader that "repercussions of ecological degradation may have far greater consequences for humanity than for nature itself" (Poland 63), which sounds nearly identical to Bennett's "enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest" (Bennett 13). It is apparent, then, that nearly any take on nature can provide us with a lesson or some kind of inspiration for proactivity. Nature is horrifying? We should let it be. Man tries to understand and control nature? We should avoid doing so because it will harm nature (and, in turn, harm us). A didactic approach to these texts, mingled with some degree of posthuman ecology, always seems to produce a lesson, a value, a course of action. Some even argue that Lovecraft's rejection of human primacy can be functional.

Patricia MacCormack, in her article "Lovecraft's Cosmic Ethics," states that Lovecraft "collapses the alien and the terrestrial, just as he collapses dream and reality, flesh and earth/space, and the within/without" (MacCormack 207), not unlike what Blackwood does in "The Willows." The moral from Blackwood might be that humans tamper with the environment at their peril, but MacCormack argues that Lovecraft's collapse of binaries has a utility, too. Through all of his nihilism and cosmic horror, "[his] stories can be liberatory" (199), because "the destruction of the privileged subject of the white male" allows for the "liberation of all lives as unique emergences" (204). MacCormack sees a virtue in "giving away [the] self" and "becoming particle in a collective eco-cosmic plane" (202), both of which characterize the fiction of Lovecraft and Blackwood. In this way, cosmic horror opens a gateway into new ethical territory.

MacCormack's analysis of Lovecraft is not a far cry from Brian Johnson's in the sense that it ascribes a precursory status to Lovecraft. Where Johnson argues that Lovecraft shares an ontological platform with the ethical posthumanism and materialism of Wolfe and Bennett, MacCormack argues that Lovecraft's annihilation of the privileged subject "opens up the very possibilities of ethical alterity" (204), i.e., the possibility that ethics can be generated and made viable through *otherness* rather than exclusively through dominant powers. These are both rather optimistic interpretations of Lovecraft—ones that I do not believe can be upheld within the rules of Lovecraft's own universe, so to speak. If the dominant subject is destroyed, it is because the entire hierarchy is destroyed; should any person or thing try to assume a new position at the apex of that hierarchy, it will be impossible. Perhaps, then, the first move is not to extract

a lesson, not to derive a value, not to consider a course of action. What good are lessons, values, or actions if, in the end, they do not matter anyway? What is their validity if they have been illusory from the start? It may very well be that all things are possible in a Lovecraftian framework—but even so, they do not matter. In terms of analyzing Lovecraft, then, the first move ought to be back to the drawing board, as it were, so that we can re-examine our perception of nature, our position within it, and our theoretical frameworks. Until then, we may have to accept the possibility of impossibility: perhaps there is no room for meaningful change in Lovecraft's incomprehensible, indifferent, abjectly meaningless universe.

It could be that change and meaning should not be goals at all—that the most authentic takeaway from Lovecraft is that there is no takeaway. In that case, we ought to follow his own advice and simply "accept the universe as it is, and be done with it" (Lovecraft, "Materialist" 76). Or is it possible, after all this deliberation, that Lovecraft's nihilism is the most ecological stance of them all? Emmanouil Aretoulakis argues along these lines, stating that "[a] real ecology, therefore, most probably the dark version of it, would stress the need to stop emphasising (the importance of) the environment through didactic and moralistic injunctions" (Aretoulakis 187). Such posthumanists as Cary Wolfe make the move toward a "postanthropocentric view," which "flirts with deep ecology," according to Aretoulakis (188). The two (posthumanism and deep ecology) are united in their decentering of the human, but as Aretoulakis argues, neither of them is "devoid of anthropocentrism" (188). This becomes clear, too, in applying them to Lovecraft's work. Dark ecology, to use Aretoulakis's term, does not forget that "even the

faintest trace of human interference might have an impact on the future of the planet" (188), but it also "does not forget that in order to do justice to the question of ecology, it must avoid becoming an actual, palpable, politics" (189). In his nihilistic treatment of the cosmos and of humanity, Lovecraft pays little explicit attention to the environment as such, and it is this model that dark ecology seems to approximate most closely. This would be problematic for those that seek action in the here and now, and thus the Lovecraftian ontological model does not seem likely to accommodate those who wish to take a political stand in the present day. Hence, Lovecraft gives us more questions than answers.

It is worth asking, though: What have our actions and our politics accomplished? How do proactive approaches align with their missions in reality? As we learn more of our effect on the world around us, we also learn more of how close we are to extinction. Even if Lovecraft did pass away decades before posthumanism emerged, before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, or before many of today's environmental activists were even born, the prospect of human extinction gives him currency nonetheless. Thus, in closing this final chapter, I want to consider Lovecraft in the context of Claire Colebrook and her contributions to these contemporary conversations. Colebrook does not seem concerned with the extent to which humans have caused climate change, but rather the end result. With extinction becoming a reality, Colebrook points out that it is "[p]recisely at the moment of its own loss [that] the human animal becomes aware of what makes it human—meaning, empathy, art, morality" (12). At one end we have those who are saddened at this prospect and who make "moral proclamations regarding our falling away

from the activity of human reason," while at the other end there are those who revel in "the posthuman celebrations that there is no such thing as 'man' and that we are really always already at one with one web of life" (20). Put simply, this is a picture of humanism and posthumanism as extinction draws near. Colebrook points out, just as Aretoulakis, that we would be foolish to think that "we have abandoned human myopia once and for all" (24), whether that takes the form of deep ecology, posthumanism, or humanism outright. And I argue that the use of Lovecraft as a philosophical precursor to more ecological ethical systems is a return to that same "human myopia" that Colebrook and Aretoulakis criticize.

Notions of environmental protection are often meant to protect a world *for* us, just as ethics are designed *for* us. Colebrook reinforces this, arguing that "twenty-first [century] climate change rhetoric" has the concerns of "viability, sustainability, and the maintenance of humanity" (113). This is the tendency to ask questions of how we will survive (masked by falsely righteous questions of how we will protect "our" world), which Colebrook sees as a strange phenomenon: "Now, when the actual end of man approaches . . . [w]e ask *how* we might survive, adapt, mitigate or even trade our way into the future; we do not ask whether there is a future *for us*" (204). Colebrook explains that humanity once asked questions of how to tolerate existence or how to justify the ways of God, given the harshness and violence of reality; now, Colebrook argues, "it is not the horror of existence that tortures humanity but a humanity that can do nothing other than destroy itself and its milieu, and all—perversely—for the sake of its own myopic, short-circuited and self-regarding future" (199). In other words, we no longer seek an

answer that justifies the world to us, but rather what justifies us to the world. In the face of nihilism (and Lovecraft), then, going back to the drawing board seems to be the next step. The present moment is no exception:

> Nothing defines the concept of reaction formation better than the present: everywhere there is evidence of the nonviable and unacceptable modus of human life, and yet the one notion that is unacceptable—incapable of being heard—is that human life has no value. This is not to say that—being without value—what has come to be known as humanity ought to extinguish itself, but rather to say that what is left of the human needs to confront the absence of value. (Colebrook 205)

If there is no value to life, as Lovecraft himself maintained, then there is nothing to judge about an apocalyptic scenario. Scenes of catastrophe, like those in "The Colour out of Space," are neutral. There is nothing to judge, nothing to change. There is no takeaway. In that concept of deep time, that concept of infinity, that concept of meaninglessness, humans are just another tiny cog in a cosmic machine. It is *that* notion that haunts us. Lovecraft is a "[voice] that [accuses] us of an existential worthlessness" (Colebrook 201), meaning that our survival is, for him, an exercise in futility. Alternatively, from both his fiction and nonfiction, we might guess that Lovecraft would have been indifferent: it would make no difference to him whether we did or did not survive, because it would not matter beyond any terrestrial scheme. The question of *should* we survive would scarcely be permitted in Lovecraft's view, too, because it implies a judgment, a value, or possibly even a teleology, which we know is unsupported in Lovecraft. Regardless, his status as a voice of "existential worthlessness" in our present moment provides us with another

paradox, because his work is more popular than it has ever been, and yet the message of his fiction is completely antithetical to the human desire for self-preservation. The meaning of this cannot possibly be pursued at length here, but such a strange irony stands out as yet another testament to Lovecraft's remarkable status in the contemporary realms of popular culture, philosophy, literary criticism, film, and so much more.

No matter what questions we pursue from here, it seems that they far outnumber the answers. Whether we analyze Lovecraft's work from the angle of posthumanism or ecocriticism, it is clear that such discussions inevitably lead into ethical (oftentimes anthropocentric) territory, where his cosmic horror seems unable to dwell. Through the mechanism of the Lovecraftian sublime, we are reminded of our insignificance, and any attempts to accommodate that nihilistic identity with knowledge or with action appear as yet more anthropocentric fallacies—as the final gasps of humanism and hermeneutics, made in last-ditch efforts for us to feel, despite all evidence to the contrary, still somehow significant in the face of the cosmos.

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