ZAA 52.3 (2004): 231-242 ©

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The Darker Islam within the American Gothic: Sufi Motifs in the Stories of H.P. Lovecraft

Abstract: This article has two purposes: in the first section, the socio-political place of Islam as *topos* in the stories of Lovecraft – the various Daemon-sultans, Oriental figures and Arab sages we encounter in his work – is examined, given the already extant research available on Lovecraft's own reactionary, racist views. The article examines the possibility that Lovecraft's dark Cthulhu gods, with their secret, subversive plan to invade our human reality, is actually a resurrection of a familiar Christian Urangst of the Terrible Turk at the gates of Vienna; this time, however, re-enacted against a background of New England, rather than Tours or Lepanto. In the second section, we consider a single tale of Lovecraft's, "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," from a Sufi perspective, seeing how the various references to the Guide Lovecraft calls the *Umr at-tawil* can be placed and re-interpreted in the context of Islamic Mysticism.

> Medieval Jews and Arabs were represented in profusion, and Mr Merritt turned pale when, upon taking down a fine volume conspicuously labelled as the *Qanoon-e'-Islam*, he found it was in truth the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, of which he had heard such monstrous things whispered some years previously […]
>
> "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," 161[1]

The moment is a curious one; Mr Merritt, perusing a library of somewhat daunting esoterica (demonology, magic, cabala), suddenly muddles up his sacred and profane in a most Oriental fashion, thinking to find a "fine volume" of monotheistic religion in his friend's library, but actually discovering its arcane inverse, "the forbidden *Necronomicon*" in its place. Inside one Islam, Lovecraft's Englishman finds another – not the acceptable Orient of Avicenna and Averroes, the High Islam of geometry and learning, but a darker *Morgenland* lying much closer to madness and monstrosity.

In fact, Lovecraft's "mad Arab," whose work (we are always told) explains and elucidates some of the universe's darker truths concerning the monstrous,

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[1] H.P. Lovecraft, *Omnibus 1: At The Mountains of Madness* (London: HarperCollins, 1994). Unless otherwise stated, all references will be to this edition. Special thanks to Burcu Ozdemir for her help in the preparation of this article.

secret Elder Things and their primordial history, is a central text alluded to in almost every major story of Lovecraft's. From "The Dreams in the Witch House" to "At the Mountains of Madness," at least some passing reference is made to the Muslim elucidator of Lovecraft's universe. In some stories, such as "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," the Arab's book is actually proferred as a help and guide, an Oriental aid to control and command forces whose provenance is also clearly non-Western. Despite Lovecraft's real-life, notoriously racist views on "beady-eyed, rat-faced Asiatics,"[2] the author's inherent racism did not prevent him from placing an Arab as one of the key epistemological sources of his world-picture.That the source of such arcane knowledge might be Eastern should come as no surprise – indeed, Orientalists abound in Lovecraft's stories, protagonists whose level of awareness of the darker cosmic reality of this earthly illusion coincides almost always with some kind of Oriental experience. The elusive Joseph Curwen of "Charles Dexter Ward," for example, had made "at least two voyages to the Orient" before returning to his New England parish,[3] the books in Harley Warren's library, we are told, are mostly in Arabic (354), whilst "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" begins with de Marigny's excessively oriental office – Boukhara rugs, turbans and hieroglyphic-inscribed clocks.

The Arab's *Necronomicon* is the *Urtext* which lies at the heart of Lovecraft's fictitious universe. In over sixty stories and novellas, written for the most part during the Twenties and Thirties, Lovecraft unfolds his fantastic ideas of an ancient alien race, lying hidden and dormant beneath the illusion of contemporary life, to manifest their effects on present-day humanity inexplicably in moments of madness, bizarre occurences and monstrous visitations. There is something curiously apophatic about the horror we find in Lovecraft, one which never quite manifests itself but, rather like the God of the *via negativa*, is all too often *alluded* to or *induced* from its peripheral, secondary effects. The horror in Lovecraft's stories is consequently a horror of the possible, the almost-manifest, a grotesque fascination with the potentially imminent:

> […] but I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and space, and of those unhallowed blasphemies from elder stars which dream beneath the sea, known and favoured by a nightmare cult ready and eager to loose them on the world whenever the earthquake shall heave their monstrous stone city again to the sun and air.[4]

Of course, the sociological implications of such hidden mythologies of the lurking unnameable have already been fleshed out by numerous commentators – Clive Bloom, perhaps, showing most effectively the connection between Lovecraft's work and his conservative, reactionary politics, revealing a writer whose "personal traumas are […] the social traumas of the group from which they

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2 Cit. in Clive Bloom, "This Revolting Graveyard of the Universe" in Brian Docherty, ed., *American Horror Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1990), 63.

3 Lovecraft, *Omnibus 1*, 159.

4 Taken from "The Call of Cthulhu," in H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 1999), 164.

emerged."[5] What this brief essay will attempt to do is articulate some of these ideas concerning Lovecraft's ideological/textual anxieties in an Islamic context. Such an interpretative gesture is by no means exaggerated – a number of moments in the Lovecraftian *oeuvre*, quite apart from the "mad Arab" and his *Necronomicon*, seem to cite a clear origin for the followers of the Cthulhu elder Gods:

> Of the cult, he said that he thought the centre lay amid the pathless deserts of Arabia, where Irem, the City of Pillars, dreams hidden and untouched. It was not allied to the European witch-cult, and was virtually unknown beyond its members.[6]

The idea of an alien race, lurking on the edge of civilization, waiting to rise up in the Orient and take over our reality is by no means unfamiliar. In many ways, Lovecraft's tales re-enact in a New World setting the ancient European fear of the Terrible Turk, looming before the gates of Vienna, waiting to storm in and enslave all of Christendom – only this time the landscape of New England, rather than Tours or Lepanto, forms a backdrop to the conflict.

Lovecraft's gesture – that of directly locating the Orient as a source of arcane knowledge and distinctly unwholesome *sophia* – is also by no means recent; the linking of the Arab Orient with sorcery and demonology goes back to at least Porphyry, and certainly early medieval Christian responses to Islam saw the Islamic East as a place of profane magic and unholy arts.[7] The stereotype offered by Lovecraft's "mad Arab author of the *Necronomicon*" also exists in its positive, though more esoteric version: the common Rosicrucian belief (Lovecraft was fond of attributing the translation of the fictitious Necronomicon to John Dee) that Christian Rosencreutz had obtained the essentials of his wisdom from the Arab East. Here, Arabs are seen not so much as spawners of Satanic heresies but rather as distant sages, offering alternative sources of wisdom.

The false cover of the Islamic book Mr Merritt takes down from the library – conventional religion on the outside, dark secret truths on the inside – epitomises the dilemma of Islam in Lovecraft's stories, and its problematic proximity to the dark reality of Cthulhu. In many ways, the two possible genealogies available for Lovecraft's "mad Arab" – on the one hand, a positive Rosicrucian understanding of the Arab Orient as a place of Enlightenment and learning, juxtaposed against a medieval Christian demonisation of the East as a spawner of Satanic arts and unholy heresies – reflect the ambiguities of Lovecraft's use of the Islamic Orient. Through a detailed Sufi study of some of the mystical motifs in "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," we shall try to articulate this dilemma in clearer terms. Exactly what place does the *topos* of Islam – its minarets, its Ara-

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5 Bloom, 68.

6 Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, 156.

7 See John C. Lamoreaux, "Early Christian Responses to Islam," 10-11, in John V. Tolan, ed., *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2000). As late as the seventeenth century the term 'Averroist' would always have some immoral, un-Christian connotation (see, for example, Leibniz's remarks on "those Averroists and certain wicked Quietists who imagine that the soul is absorbed into and reunited with the sea of divinity" – from the Preface to Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* [London: Cambridge UP, 1997] 59).

bic, its daemon-sultans – have in the Lovecraftian oeuvre? Is it just another version of the aesthetic Orient, alongside the "Hindoo idols" (311) and Buddhist temples, just another colour on Lovecraft's palette of exotica? Or is there something specific about Abdul Alhazred and his feared entity the '*umr at-tawil* (the Most Ancient), something which suggests – at least in one story – an exclusively Islamic understanding of the Cthulhu mythos, and the multi-dimensional travel the protagonists seem to embark upon?

There is no doubt that an endebtedness to standard Orientalist images lies in Lovecraft's work, particularly in the bizarre science-fiction fantasy "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath," whose landscape appears to feature nothing other than ruined temples, minaret-filled cities, Oriental shopkeepers and crescent moons. When the protagonist Carter meets merchants in turbans who "took only gold and stout black slaves" (374), it is difficult not to think of Arabs as the intended race-type. When the narrator speaks of the "Basalt pillars of the West," beyond whose "ordered universe […] the daemon-sultan Azathoth gnaws hungrily in chaos" (377), it is equally hard not to see Lovecraft's Spengleresque race-views coming to the surface once more, this time in a fantasy map where the ordered West forms a familiar territory for Carter – and the final frontier for an east which profers nothing other than "awful voids" and "hellish dancing" (377).[8] Like many writers in the Orientalist genre before and after him (Byron, Poe, Borges,[9] Barth), Lovecraft's storehouse of images has an early childhood acquaintance with the *Arabian Nights* as its origin, an influence Lovecraft often referred to and one whose effects were to persist throughout his *oeuvre*. And yet any attempt to read Lovecraft's deamon-sultans and Arab sorcerers as modern resurrections of medieval Christian stereotypes of Islam quickly become problematised not merely by the author's own rejection of Christianity, but also by an enthusiastic appreciation of what he clearly considered to be a more Romantic faith. In recollection of his own Sunday school experiences as a child he writes:

> The absurdity of the myth I was called upon to accept and the sombre greyness of the whole faith compared with the Eastern magnificence of Mahometanism, made me definitely agnostic […].[10]

And in another letter, somewhat in the manner of the Byron who claimed to have converted to Islam in Istanbul,[11] he declares:

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[8] See S.T. Joshi's *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1990) for a philosophical treatment of Lovecraft which considers, amongst other perspectives, Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* as a possible context for reading Lovecraft's work. See also F. Rottensteiner's slightly negative review essay of the above, which throws doubt upon how much philosophy Lovecraft actually knew first-hand from primary sources ("Lovecraft probably only knew the really first-rate minds from the writings of others") – in *Science Fiction Studies* 19 (1992), 117-20.

[9] For more on Borges' preoccupation with Islam in his stories, see my "Borges the Post-Orientalist: Images of Islam from the Edge of the West" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.2 (Summer 2004): 435-59.

[10] Cit. in L. Sprague de Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography* (First Ballantine Books Edition, 1976), 22.

> At one time I formed a juvenile collection of Oriental pottery and objets d'art, announcing myself as a devout Mohammedan and assuming the pseudonym of "Abdul Alhazred" – which you will recognise as the author of that mythical *Necronomicon* which I drag into various of my tales […]. (letter to Edwin Baird, February 3, 1924)

"[D]evout Mohammedan," "Eastern magnificence": despite the tone of self-parody and provocative exaggeration, there is something disconcertingly paradoxical about Lovecraft's adoption of the Islamic Orient. On the one hand, there is a Christian form and provenance, if not a Christian content, to such motifs as the daemon-sultans and Arab sorcerers, a Christian origin underlined by Lovecraft's persistent use of the word "unwholesome" to describe any religious site connected with them ("The dead temples on the mountains […] could have glorified no suitable or wholesome gods" 379). In Lovecraft's very secular borrowings from Christian imagery, age-old associations of the Muslim Other with madness, terror, monstrosity and apocalypse (Luther, we will recall, saw the Turks as unconvertible and a sign of the end of the age[12]) would preserve the impression of a fairly conventional use of Islamic motifs in the Western literary text. On the other hand, a standard Saidesque dismissal of Lovecraft as just another Orientalist caricaturist would overlook three subtle yet significant points: first of all, that Lovecraft's disavowal of his own faith – its "sombre greyness" and "absurdity" – and even his aesthetic privileging of Islam over Christianity forces us to reconsider his use of mad Arabs and encroaching Forces in a different light. Secondly, that the central role of the Orient and Abdul Alhazhred certainly discounts any marginalization of Islam in Lovecraft's texts – on the contrary, in a slightly perverse parody of Christendom's reliance on Avicenna and Averroes for its knowledge of Aristotle, practically all of Lovecraft's invariably Anglo-Saxon protagonists have to refer to Arab science (albeit not logic or algebra but necromancy) in order to understand their situation. In other words, there is an epistemological dependance of the West on the Orient. In a sense, this also leads to the third problem with any straightforward dismissal of Lovecraft's stereotypes: that of the ambiguous status of the "Old Ones" in Lovecraft's stories, monstrous forces which certainly provide horror and terror in abundance, but which also enjoy a superior status – in terms of knowledge, intelligence, age and power – with respect to "puny, war-exhausted mankind."[13] In many ways, this ambiguity provides one of the most enigmatic aspects of Lovecraft's fiction, a simultaneous elevation and belittling of American identity. Moments of indulgent nostalgia for the AngloSaxon landscape (when Randolph Carter is king of the other-dimensional kingdom of Ooth-Nargai, we are told he would still give "all the thousand minarets of Celephais for the sleepy homely

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[11] Byron, returning from his Turkish travels in 1810 is reported to have said: "I was very near becoming a Mussulman." See Muhammad Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism* (London: L.B. Taurus, 1994), 224.

[12] See R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965), 27, 105.

[13] From "Dagon" in H.P. Lovecraft, *Omnibus 2: Dagon and Other Macabre Tales* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 17.

roofs of the village near his home"[14]) lie interspersed with pseudo-messianic hopes "for a glorious resurrection [...] of mighty Cthulhu [...] when the stars and the earth might once more be ready for them."[15] What Lovecraft does, in effect, is mix his tropes; talking about the return of the "Old Ones" as a restoration of some primordially Aryan state of affairs,[16] but using a very Lutheran vocabulary concerning the "Turk at the door" in order to express them. The Old Ones as a lurking, vile, unspeakable menace ("unspeakable" in the most psychoanalytical sense of the word[17]), but also as the return to a former state of prehuman glory, a bizarre, almost cosmically Rousseauistic yearning for one's ultimate racial origins. In this understanding of Lovecraft's texts as an attempt to return to something Bigger and Other than oneself, it will be useful to look at one of Lovecraft's most Oriental pieces, "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," in an attempt to understand what manner of appropriation Lovecraft's texts actually make of an Islamic- and specifically, a Sufi-vocabulary.

"Through the Gates of the Silver Key": A Sufi Interpretation

> Carter, he said, had told him that this key had come down from his ancestors, and that it would help him to unlock the gates to his lost boyhood, and to strange dimensions and fantastic realms which he had hitherto visited only in vague, brief and elusive dreams. (506)

Although the only Arabic term in "Through the Gates" is the name for Abdul Alhazhred's demonic entity '*Umr at-tawil* ("The Most Ancient One" – in Arabic literally 'the longest life'), the story of the absent Randolph Carter – and the worried meeting of his colleagues who attempt to decide whether to enact a will or not at his demise – is strewn with Sufi motifs: not just terms such as gate (*maqam*), mystery (*sirr*), veil (*hijab*), guide (*hud*), loss of identity (*fana'*), but also such ideas as the radical unspeakability of God (*tanzih*), the world as illusion (*hayal*) and the central significance of dreams (*ru'ya*). Certainly, Carter's trip through time and its multiple dimensions is no religious quest in any conventional sense – and yet one of the most surprising aspects of Lovecraft's text is the way the author deliberately implicates the Islamic Orient, and in particular a

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[14] From "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath" in *Omnibus I*, 424.

[15] Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu*, 155.

[16] The ethnic implications of this awareness of ancestral identity are interesting to follow in Lovecraft. Note, in particular, the oddly mystical way he talks about the landscape of his native Vermont in "The Whisperer in Darkness": "[…] an unspoiled, ancestral New England without the foreigners and the factory smoke […] There would be odd survivals of that continuous native life […] which keeps alive strange memories, and fertilises the soil for shadowy, marvellous and seldom-mentioned beliefs." *Call of Cthulhu*, 239.

[17] Lévy has already written on the psycho-sexual, repressed nature of Lovecraft's horrors: "The Lovecraftian monster […] is less frightening than repugnant. His attributes seem singularly vivid. He is characterised in a specific fashion by his *viscosity* (he is gummy, sticky and in occasions secretes greenish humors), his *inconsistency* (he is soft, flabby, gelatinous), the intense *stench* that he releases […] and his swarming *multiplicity*." Maurice Lévy, *Lovecraft: A Study in the Fantastic*, trans. S.T. Joshi (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988), 60.

series of key terms from the Islamic mystical tradition, in order to narrate this tale of an explorer who tries to go back in time and recover "the lost boyhood for which he had never ceased to mourn" (513). In many ways, the age-old Edenic associations of the Orient – of the Morgenland with metaphors of birth, origin and renewal – may explain why Lovecraft's most Oriental of tales is also the story of a man who wishes to return to his childhood.

Lovecraft's 1932 tale, a collaborative piece with E. Hoffman Price, is immersed in the Orient from beginning to end. Whether it is (as we have already seen) the decorative excesses of De Maigny's office, with its Turkish carpets and hieroglyphic clocks, or the figure of De Maigny himself, "distinguished Creole student of mysteries and Eastern antiquities" (509), or even the absent protagonist – Randolph Carter, clearly a cross between the famous Egyptologist Howard Carter of the 1922 expedition and the Victorian explorer Richard Burton. "Through the Gates" is also one of the few Lovecraft stories to actually feature an Oriental character – the Swami Chandraputra (really Carter in disguise), whose "bushy black beard, Eastern turban and large white mittens gave him an air of exotic eccentricity" (510). However, what is most striking about Lovecraft's story is the way it connects its tale of multi-dimensional travel, sometimes indirectly, sometimes quite explicitly, with the language of Sufi mysticism.

In the most standard versions of Sufism, the soul (*nefs*) embarks upon a journey – a journey not really of departure, but rather of return (*ruja'*), a return to the divine source from which it came. Because this source is utterly transcendent (*tanzih*), beyond all names and attributes, the soul has to gradually leave the world of multiplicity and return to God through a series of stations or levels (*maqam*), slowly shedding its identity before it can render the veil aside and join in union (*ittisal*) with the divine One (*al wahd*). Once the individual soul has realized its latent divinity by returning to its provenance, it acquires the joyful, ultimate knowledge – that (to paraphrase Ibn 'Arabi) all is in the One, and the One is in all.

What we see in Lovecraft's story is actually a dark rendering of the above vocabulary. The meeting and union with an unknown and ineffable deity in Lovecraft is no joyful culmination of the soul's journey, but rather an experience filled with risk and danger. One of the longest passages from the Necronomicon ever quoted in a Lovecraft story appears in "Through the Gates," where Abdul Alhazhred warns his readers of the perils that await any who try to inquire too much into the origins of the species:

> "And while there are those," the Mad Arab had written, "who have dared to seek glimpses beyond the Veil, and to accept HIM as guide, they would have been more prudent had they avoided commerce with HIM; for it is written in the Book of Thoth how terrific is the price of a single glimpse. Nor may those who pass ever return, for in the vastnesses transcending our world are shapes of darkness that seize and bind. […] all these Blacknesses are lesser than HE WHO guardeth the Gateway: HE WHO will guide the rash one beyond all the worlds into the Abyss of unnamable devourers. For He is 'UMR AT-TAWIL, the Most Ancient One, which the scribe rendered as THE PROLONGED OF LIFE." (517)

There are a number of Sufi echoes in this passage – first and foremost being that of the Veil (*hijab*). In Sufism, veils are often seen as temporary signs which, in an attempt to dilute, diffuse and even hide the unspeakable magnitude of God, 'stand in' for the deity. As one thirteenth century Sufi thinker, Ibn 'Arabi, puts it:

> The Prophet said: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to remove them, the glories of His face would burn away everything perceived by the sight of His creatures" […] while these veils exist, they prevent us from seeing Him in this mighty nearness.[18]

What is interesting is how Lovecraft carries over into his own work this religious idea of the overwhelming truth, a truth so extraordinary, so intense that it requires a veil to preserve the sanity of the observer. To rend this veil aside – as Carter does in the story – is indeed to risk madness. This has probably been one of the most well-known features of Lovecraft's stories – the more his protagonists learn about the Old Ones, the more they see/hear/read of their monstrous truth, the closer they come to losing their minds. So many classic Lovecraft stories end in this madness – characters who end up as sobbing or hysterically giggling heaps for having looked one second too long or read one passage too far. It should come as no surprise that 'madness' (*majnun*) also has a place in Sufism, usually to describe what happens when a soul tries to acquire more knowledge of God that it is spiritually prepared for. And yet the consequences of such madnesses are rarely as sinister in Sufism as they are in Lovecraft – the familiar Sufi suspicion of rationality as that which keeps us from truly seeing God (mystics such as Ibn 'Arabi often punned on the root meaning of the word 'reason' ['*aql*], which in Arabic can also mean 'chain' or 'fetters') would lead them to see intoxication, madness and confusion as allowing them to glimpse a Divine which eludes all rational understanding.

In many ways, this darker re-iteration of the unspeakable forms part of a general strategy in most weird fiction – taking the conventional idea of God as something which transcends any name or thought, and converting its ineffability into a malevolent mystery, "a horror beyond all human conception or calculation" ("Charles Dexter Ward," 181-82). The idea that one might need a Guide in order to find this unspeakable truth also has its echoes in Islam. One of the most common names of Allah is "He Who Guides" (*al-hud*), and in many Sufi writings the idea of guidance (*hiddaya*) is a divine one – God guides the truth-seeker as they progress through the stations, sometimes taking him farther, sometimes holding him back, as He sees fit. Ibn 'Arabi writes:

> What God does is to give some of His servants enough of the light of guidance so that they can walk in the darkness of the secondary causes […]. The veils of the secondary causes are lowered down and will never be lifted, so wish not for that![19]

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[18] Taken from Ibn 'Arabi's *Futuhat al-Makkiyah* II.159.11, Cit. in William G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 364.

[19] Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 179 – from section III, 249.

Lovecraft's Guide, the alien entity who is leading him through multiple dimensions towards "the unknown and formless cosmic abyss beyond the Ultimate Gate" (526), displays a similar concern for the welfare of his travelling human escort. At several points the 'Umr at-tawil warns Carter that he may always go back if he wishes: "I am ready to show you the Ultimate Mystery, to look on which is to blast a feeble spirit, yet before you gaze full of that last and first of secrets you may still wield a free choice, and return if you will through the two Gates with the Veil unrent before your eyes" (529). In both cases, knowledge not only brings with it responsibility, it also becomes associated with terror – at least for those who are not prepared to deal with it. And it is in the nature of this 'it' – what Lovecraft's Guide calls "that last and first of secrets," what Sufis call the *sirr al-sirr* or "Secret of secrets" – that "Through the Gates" offers its clearest associations with the Sufi tradition. What the *'Umr at-tawil* leads Carter to, in effect, is selflessness – or rather, the awareness that he is infinitely selved, a component piece of billions of other selves, human and inhuman, throughout the infinite universe. The realization is not a happy one.

> He knew that there had been a Randolph Carter of Boston, yet could not be sure whether he […] had been that one or some other. His *self* had been annihilated. No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of *identity*. Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings – that one no longer has a *self* – that is the nameless summit of agony and dread. (527)

"His self had been annihilated." Lovecraft's tale, it could be said, conceals a much starker horror than the usual versions of the unspeakable we encounter – no nameless things in crypts or fungi from Yuggoth, but rather the much greater horror of the illusion of identity. Carter's quest for the "Ultimate Mystery," his desire to draw back the final Veil, leads him to the anguishing discovery that his 'Carterness' has been nothing more than an illusion, a dream, a trick all along. The passage offers a rather mystical moment – Carter discovering that he is part of the universe, and that the universe is part of him. There are also some interesting political implications in Lovecraft's repeated political emphasis on the horror of losing one's Bostonian, Anglo-Saxon identity; for a writer as convinced of racially-structured hierarchies as Lovecraft, the idea of being "no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings" clearly skirts close to the unspeakable. And yet, Lovecraft's racial-political worldview to one side, what is most interesting about Carter's Ultimate Mystery is that it replicates almost exactly the Sufi notion of *fana'* (annihilation of Self) and *hayal* (illusion).

In Sufism, the soul carries within it a secret – the secret of its divinity, of its heavenly origins. This secret is cloaked by God under the guise of selfhood: "God prevents the real secret from being known, namely that He is the essential Self of things. He conceals it by otherness, which is you."[20] In effect, God is the

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[20] From the *Fusus al-Hikem*, trans. as "The Bezels of Wisdom" by Ralph Austin (New Jersey: Paulist, 1980), 133.

secret of the self, a secret many unenlightened souls go through their whole lives without discovering. What Carter experiences, as he crosses the threshold that the '*Umr at-tawil* leads him to, runs in approximate parallel to the Sufi description of the final (re)joining of the soul to God:

> Through being joined (*ittisal*) to God, man is annihilated (*fana'*) from himself. Then God becomes manifest so that He is his hearing and sight […]. God is nothing of these organs until they are burned up by His being, so that He is there, not they.[21]

Just as the individual soul loses control of its hearing and sight as God takes them over, so that the believer becomes one of the millions of God's omnipotent organs; similarly, Carter realises with horror as he feels his identity slip away from him that he is one of billions of Carter facets, without an original. Ironically, the metaphor of burning – the idea that the unveiled divinity "burns away" the individuality of the soul so that it may participate wholly in its re-absorption without any hindrance – also takes place in "Through the Gates," as the nameless Being which Carter finally encounters addresses him "in prodigious waves which smote and burned and thundered" (528). In both cases, this notion of hidden, unknown, unearthly origins lying buried within the shell of the familiar accounts for an analogous understanding of illusion in the Sufi/Lovecraftian universes. The Ibn 'Arabi scholar Izutsu begins his study of the Arab thinker with a key passage from the *Fusus al-Hikem*:

> The world is an illusion; it has no real existence. And this is what is meant by "imagination" (*hayal*), for you just imagine that it (i.e. the world) is an autonomous reality quite different from and independent of the divine Reality, while in truth it is nothing of the sort […]. Know that you yourself are an imagination. And everything you perceive and say to your self, "this is not me", is also an imagination. So that the whole of existence is imagination within imagination.[22]

"The world is an illusion." The unenlightened consider things to be independent and rooted in themselves, while their God is utterly transcendent and separate from the 'reality' around them; those who truly have *gnosis*, however, have comprehended the truth of the matter – that everything in existence, including their own selves, is in effect God, an extension of the divine. Similarly, Carter undergoes a mind-expanding realization of our everyday conceptions of dream and reality as the Guide leads him across the threshold:

> Though men hail [the world] as reality, and brand thoughts of its many-dimensional Original as unreality, it is in truth the very opposite. That which we call substance and reality is shadow and illusion, and that which we call shadow and illusion is substance and reality. (531)

Carter, like so many of Lovecraft's protagonists, has been able to grasp this Platonic truth because of his innate curiosity – a curiosity born of skepticism towards the world of the everyday: "Had his whole quest not been based on a faith

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[21] Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 328 – from section III, 298.

[22] T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Taoism and Sufism* (Tokyo, 1967), 1.

in the unreality of the local and the partial?" (532). It is in this refusal to accept the quotidian not as something in itself, but as a signpost towards a higher reality, that the two vocabularies share a common hermeneutical ground. Critics such as David Vilaseca have already examined the metaphysical implications of this desire (to use Vilaseca's words) for "a hidden, transcendent truth beyond language and understanding."[23] What is of interest to us, however, is how such mystical terminologies and motifs in Lovecraft's stories lead not to divine union with a God of Love and Mercy (as they do in their original traditions), but rather to an altogether more ambiguous, at times even monstrous state of affairs. In "Through the Gates" the Old Ones appear relatively benign, but in stories such as "Charles Dexter Ward" the world appears, at best, to be a mendacious illusion innocently covering over something far more malevolent: "the farm was only the outer shell of some vast and revolting menace, of a scope and depth too profound and intangible for more than shadowy comprehension" (172). The illusion of the reality of the world is maintained through an ignorance – in Sufism, it is ignorance of the fact that we are all, in some way, God, and that everything we see is connected to Him. For Lovecraft, the nature of this cosmic illusion is darker but structurally the same – an unawareness of our true origins. In stories such as "The Whisperer in Darkness," the "vast masses of uninformed laymen" have no idea of the cosmic origins of man's prehistory and the "pits of primal life" from whence he emerged.[24] Indeed, in some places Lovecraft even suggests mankind has been a clumsy error or plaything for these entities – in "At the Mountains of Madness," for instance, where we read of "the Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake" (39).[25] The illusion of homely, everyday domestic life lies like a veil across the unspeakable truth of Lovecraft's universe – for the minority of truth-seekers who push too far, a darker reality soon comes to the surface.

So Mr Merritt picks up a book which, at least according to its outside cover, appears to be a holy, religious text on the faith of Islam, only to discover the arcane *Necronomicon* lying inside it. Even Islam, it would appear, belongs to the inside/outside, surface/reality dichotomy which pervades Lovecraft's universe; even Allah, it should be remembered, is dismissed by the agnostic Lovecraft alongside Christ and Jehovah as "the little Earth gods" whose "tinsel emptiness" provides "their petty human interests and connections – their hatreds, rages, loves and vanities" (530). Any exhaustive study of the place of Islam and the Islamic Orient in Lovecraft's work would have to extend well outside the scope of

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[23] David Vilaseca, "Nostalgia for the origin: Notes on Reading and Melodrama in H.P. Lovecraft's "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," *Neophilologus* 75 (1991), 487.

[24] Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu*, 239, 214.

[25] Oddly enough, in Sufism there is also a tradition of believing in the purpose of mankind to function not as a joke but certainly as a form of solace and comfort for the Creator – as in the famous Sufi saying: "I was a hidden treasure that yearned to be known, so I created Men in order to be known by them." For more on this, see Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), 94, 112-14.

this essay – there lies yet to be explored, for example, the central significance of dreams in both Islam and Lovecraft. In the Koran, prophets often receive messages from God in the form of dreams (*ru'ya*), and the interpretation of dreams in Sufism was a science as important as scriptural exegesis. When we read in Lovecraft of "the First Gate, where '*Umr at-tawil* dictates dreams to the Ancient Ones" (531), or indeed any of the moments in practically every Lovecraft tale where dark cosmic forces make their presence felt in the dreams of the protagonists, it is difficult not to have the Islamic echo of this motif in mind. The prohibition of representation in Islam – and how this has its counterpart in the infrequent depiction of the Old Ones and their creations in Lovecraft's texts ("[…] for Shoggoths and their work ought not to be seen by human beings or portrayed by any beings," 125) could also be examined, not to mention the much more textual question of Lovecraft's Orientalist predecessors. Given Lovecraft's admiration for Beckford, Moore and Poe, one wonders why the representation of Islam in their works did not have more effect on Lovecraft's own treatment of the faith. Certainly, the influence of Lovecraft's childhood reading of the *Arabian Nights* can certainly be seen in "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath" and its daemon-sultans. However, the humour of the Orient in texts such as Poe's "Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade," the romance of the Orient in Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, not to mention the essential *morality* of Islam we find in Beckford's *Vathek* […] none of these previous representations of the East appear to have had any visible effect on the make up of Lovecraft's own Orient. Indeed, the only feature which seems to persist in this essentially Romantic genealogy of texts is the extra-normal place allotted to Islam – unsurprisingly, in the work of a science-fiction/horror writer such as Lovecraft, any mention of a monstrous, supernatural, invasive reality was always going to have such unconscious, socio-cultural connotations.