

Ec'h-Pi-El Speaks

An Autobiographical Sketch By

H. P. LOVECRAFT



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Illustrations by Virgil Finlay



Published by Gerry de la Ree — 1972

Design — Bob Lynn/Tony Raven, Waldwick, N.J.

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Preface

This is the longest autobiographical piece by Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) yet published. Written in July of 1929, it runs to more than 3,000 words.

In 1963, under the Arkham House imprint, the late August Derleth published H. P. Lovecraft's "Some Notes on a Nonentity", which he described as the longest and most formal account of his life Lovecraft ever put together.

Actually, "Some Notes on a Nonentity", written in 1933, contains only 2,000 words of Lovecraft. To it, in italic notes, Derleth added some 1,400 words of his own, attempting to interpret and expand on Lovecraft's rather sketchy information.

Since in each instance Lovecraft was writing on the same subject - his own background and tastes - there is a general similarity between the two documents. But this autobiography is presented as the author wrote it, and without unnecessary notes or other padding.

The illustrations used are by the late Virgil Finlay, himself a correspondent of Lovecraft's shortly before the author's death. Lovecraft was a great admirer of Finlay's work in the pages of "Weird Tales", and it seems only fitting that some of this fine artist's previously unpublished drawings should enhance this volume.

GERRY de la REE
October, 1972



Lethe.

H. W. Fowler 1933

As for myself and the conditions under which I write — I'm afraid that's a rather unimportant subject, since in plain fact I am a very mediocre and uninteresting individual despite my queer tastes, and have hardly produced anything worth calling real literature. However — here are a few data.

I am a prosaic middle-aged creature about to turn 39 on the 20th of next month — a native of Providence, of old Rhode Island stock on my mother's side and more closely English on my father's side. I was born on what was then the Eastern Edge of the settled district, so that I could look westward to paved streets and eastward to green fields and woods and valleys. Having a country-squire heredity, I looked east oftener than west; so that to this day I am three-quarters a rustic.

At the present moment I am seated on a wooded bluff above the shining river which my earliest gaze knew and loved. This part of my boyhood world is unchanged because it is a part of the local park system — may the gods be thanked for keeping inviolate the scenes which my infant imagination peopled with fauns and satyrs and dryads!

My taste for weird things began very early, for I have always had a riotously uncontrolled imagination. I was afraid of the dark until my grandfather cured me by making me walk through vacant rooms and corridors at night, and I had a tendency to weave fancies around everything I saw. Very early, too, began my taste for old things which is so strong a part of my present personality.

*Providence is an ancient and picturesque town, built originally upon a precipitously steep hillside up which still wind the narrow lanes of colonial times with their carved, faulighted doorways, iron-railed double flights of steps, and tapering Georgian steeples. This dizzy, ancient precipice lies on the route between residence and business sections, and from infantile glimpses of it I acquired a fascinated reverence for the past — the age of periwigs and three-cornered hats and leather-bound books with long *S*'s.*

My taste for the latter was augmented by the fact that there were many in the family library — most of them in a black windowless attic room to which I was half-afraid to go alone, yet whose terror-breeding potentialities really increased for me the charm of the archaic volumes I found and read there.

Weird stuff always captivated me more than anything else — from the very first. Of all the tales told to us in infancy the fairy lore and witch and ghost legends made the deepest impression. I began to read fairly young — at four — and Grimm's Fairy Tales formed my first continuous reading. At five I read the Arabian Nights, and was utterly enthralled. I made my mother fix up an Arabian corner in my room — with appropriate hangings, lamps, and objects d'art purchased at our local "Damascus Bazaar" — and I assumed the fictitious appellation of Abdul Alhazred; a name I have ever since whimsically cherished, and which I have latterly used to designate the author of the mythical Al Azif or Necronomicon.

At about six I turned to Graeco Roman mythology, led gradually by Hawthorne's "Wonder Book" and "Tanglewood Tales" and by, a stray copy of "The Odyssey" legend in Harper's Half-Hour Series. At once I dismantled my Bagdad corner and became a Roman — turning to Bulfinch's "Age of Fable" and haunting the museums of classical art here and in Boston. It was around this time that I first began my crude attempts at literature. I was literate on paper — with printed characters — as soon as I could read; but did not attempt any original composition till around my sixth birthday, when I painfully acquired the art of writing in script. Curiously, the first stuff I wrote was verse; since I had always had an ear for rhythm, and had very early got hold of an old book on "Composition, Rhetorick, and Poetic Numbers" printed in 1797 and used by my great-great grandfather at the East Greenwich Academy about 1805.



"At five I read the Arabian Nights, and was utterly enthralled. I made my mother fix up an Arabian corner in my room — with appropriate hangings, lamps, and objects d'art purchased at our local "Damascus Bazaar" — and I assumed the fictitious appellation of Abdul Alhazred . . ."

The first of these infantile verses I can remember is "The Adventures of Ulysses"; or, "The New Odyssey", written when I was seven. This began: "The night was dark, O reader hark! and see Ulysses' fleet all homeward bound, with vict'ry crown'd, he hopes his spouse to greet. Long he hath fought, put Troy to naught, and levell'd down. But Neptune's wrath obstructs his path, and into snares he falls."

Mythology was my life-blood then, and I really almost believed in the Greek and Roman dieties — fancying I could glimpse fauns and satyrs and dryads at twilight in those oaken groves where I am sitting now. When I was about 7 years old, my mythological fancy made me wish to be — not merely to see — a faun or a satyr. I used to try to imagine that the tops of my ears were beginning to get pointed, and that a trace of incipient horns was beginning to appear on my forehead — and bitterly lamented the fact that my feet were rather slow in turning into hooves! Of all young heathen, I was the most unregenerate. Sunday school — to which I was sent when five — made no impression on me; (though I loved the old Georgian grace of my mother's hereditary church, the stately First Baptist, built in 1775) and I shocked everybody with my pagan utterances — at first calling myself a Moham-medan and then a Roman pagan. I actually built woodland alters to Pan, Jove, Minerva, and Apollo, and sacrificed small objects amidst the odour of incense. When, a little later, I was forced by scientific reasoning to discard my childish paganism, it was to become an absolute athiest and materialist. I have since given much attention to philosophy, and find no valid reason for any belief in any form of the so-called spiritual or supernatural.

The cosmos is, in all probability, any eternal mass of shifting and mutually interacting force — patterns of which our present visible universe, our tiny earth, and our puny race of organic beings, form merely a momentary and negligible incident. Thus my serious conception of reality is dynamically opposite to the fantastic position I take as an aesthete. In aesthetics, nothing interests me so much as the idea of strange suspensions of natural law — weird glimpses of terrifyingly elder worlds and abnormal dimensions, and faint scratchings from unknown outside abysses on the rim of the unknown cosmos. I think this kind of thing fascinates me all the more because I don't believe a word of it!

Well — I began to write weird tales at the age of 7½ or 8, when I had my first glimpse of my idol Poe. The stuff was very bad, and most of it is destroyed; but I still have two laughable specimens done when I was 8 — "The Secret of the Grave" and "The Mysterious Ship". I didn't write any really passable tales till I was 14. When between 8 and 9, my whole tastes took an abrupt turn, and I became wild over the sciences — especially chemistry. I had a laboratory fitted up in the cellar, and spent all my allowance for instruments and textbooks. In these whims I was much indulged by my mother and grandfather, (my father having died) since I was very sickly — almost a nervous invalid.

When 7 I took up the violin, but abandoned it in boredom 2 years later and

have never since had a good musical taste. I could not attend school much, but was taught at home by my mother and aunts and grandfather, and later by a tutor. I had brief snatches of school now and then, and managed to attend high school for four years — though the application gave me such a nervous breakdown that I could not attend the university. As a matter of fact, I never had any decent health until eight or nine years ago — though now, oddly enough, I seem to be developing into quite a lean, tough old bird!

My youthful science period proved of long duration; though I carried on literary attempts at the same time, and also played much like any youngster. I was not interested in games and sports, and am not now — but liked forms of play which included the element of dramatic impersonation; war, police, outlaw, railway, etc. From chemistry I gradually shifted to geography and finally to astronomy, which was destined to enthral me and influence my thought more than anything else I ever encountered. I obtained a small telescope, — which I have still — and began writing voluminously on the heavens. I still have some of my old mss., and a hectographed copy of my juvenile periodical "The Rhode Island Journal of Astronomy". At the same time my curious antiquarianism began to get more and more emphatic.

Living in an ancient town amidst ancient books, I followed Addison, Pope, and Dr. Johnson as my models in prose and verse; and literally lived in their periwigged world, ignoring the world of the present. When I was 14 my grandfather died; and in the financial chaos ensuing, my birthplace had to be sold. This dual deprivation gave me a tinge of melancholy which had hard work wearing off; for I have very strong geographical attachments, and worshipped every inch of the rambling house and park-like grounds and quaint fountains and shadowy stable where my youth had been spent. It was long my hope to buy back the home "when I became rich" — but before many years I saw that I utterly lack the acquisitive instincts and ability needful for monetary success.

Commercialism and I can't get on speaking terms, and since that gloomy year of 1904 my history has been one of increasing constriction and retrenchment.

Till the death of my mother we had a flat near the old home. Then came ill-starred excursions into the world, including two years in New York, which I learned to hate like poison. Now I have a room in a quiet Victorian backwater on the crest of Providence's ancient hill, — in a sedate old neighborhood that looks precisely like the residence section of a sleepy village.

My elder aunt — in frail health and unable to keep house — has a room in the same dwelling; and since both she and I retain as much as possible of the old family furniture, pictures, and books; (the rooms are very large) there is still much of the old home atmosphere hereabouts.

Knowing I shall never be rich, I shall be very contented if I can hang on here the rest of my days — in a quiet place much like my early scenes, and within walking



Virgil
Finlay

"... my mythological fancy made me wish to be — not merely see — a faun or a satyr. I used to try to imagine that the tops of my ears were beginning to get pointed . . . and bitterly lamented the fact that my feet were rather slow in turning into hooves!"

distance of the woods, fields, and river-banks where I roamed in childhood. My principle remunerative occupation is the professional revision of prose and verse for other writers — a hateful task, but more dependable than the hazards of original writing when one does not produce popular and easily saleable work.

I do my own tales whenever I get the chance, which isn't as often as I'd like. Whenever possible, I take my writing out in the open in a black leatherette case — sometimes to my beloved wooded river-bank, and sometimes to the wilder countryside north of Providence. My one purely recreational hobby is antiquarian travel — visiting other ancient towns and studying examples of Colonial architecture. My lean purse makes my excursions sadly limited, but even so I have arranged to cover quite a little historic ground from Vermont to Virginia during the last few years.

The first stuff I ever had printed was a regular monthly series of astronomical articles in a local daily. I was sixteen when these began, and I surely felt important. Meanwhile I was beginning to doubt my fictional ability, and was turning to verse. At 18 I decided I couldn't write stories, and burned all my tales save a few grotesque infant experiments and two of my later things — "The Beast in the Cave" and "The Alchemist". I am not sorry for this, for the stuff really was detestably immature. What does make me feel ridiculous is the serious way I took my verse-writing at this period — for in cold truth I never was or will be a real poet!

My illusions persisted because at that time I was a semi-invalid and much of a recluse, so that I did not receive a wide array of salutary criticism. Then — at 24 — I joined an amateur literary society whose activities were conducted by correspondence; and thereby secured some highly valuable encouragement and critical suggestions. I wish that organization were as vigorous today as then — but unfortunately it has become moribund beyond all ordinary powers of resuscitation. My ambitions, which had dropped from science to literature when it became clear that my health would not permit of the arduous application of astronomical or chemical research, now became further clarified; and I was made to see little by little that prose and not verse was my rightful medium. At the same time the most conspicuous 18th century eccentricities began to drop away from my style.

In 1916 I let one of the amateur editors in my literary group print one of the two tales which I had saved from the holocaust of 1908; and was immediately thereafter told by a friend that weird fiction was my one and only real forte — the one and only point at which I had any chance of making an actual contact with genuine artistic achievement.

I was half incredulous at first, for I had distrusted the worth of my tales; but upon persuasion decided to try again after my 9-year fictional silence. The results were "The Tomb" and "Dagon", written respectively in June and July of 1917. I half-feared that my rustiness in story-telling would make these new attempts worthless, but was soon assured that they greatly surpassed the 2 surviving tales of my youth.

Then I started in earnest, producing a vast number of new stories of which I have saved about 7/8. I had no idea of a steady professional market till "Weird Tales" was founded — and I still doubt if any other periodical would stand regularly for my stuff.

It doesn't look so bad beside the unutterable junk forming the bulk of "W.T.'s" contents, but I fear it wouldn't stand very high considered as literature — beside such real literature as the work of Poe, Machen, Blackwood, James, Bierce, Dunsany, de la Mare, and so on. The highest honor I've so far received is a three-star mention and biographical note in O'Brien's "Best Short Stories of 1928" — based on my "Colour Out of Space".

Well — that's about all there is to me! Not much, but you see how garrulous a vain old man becomes when someone gives him provocation for talking about himself!

That's the kind of guy I am — a cynic and materialist with classical and traditional tastes; fond of the past and its relics and ways, and convinced that the only pursuit worthy of a man of sense in a purposeless cosmos is the pursuit of tasteful and intelligent pleasure as promoted by a vivid mental and imaginative life. Because I believe in no absolute values, I accept the aesthetic values of the past as the only available points of reference — the only workable relative values — in a universe otherwise bewildering and unsatisfying.

Thus I am an ultra-conservative socially, artistically, and politically, though an extreme modernist despite my 39 years in all matters of pure science and philosophy. Loving the illusory freedom of myth and dream, I am devoted to the literature of escape; but likewise loving the tangible anchorage of the past, I tincture all my thought with overtones of antiquarianism.

My favourite modern period is the 18th century; my favourite ancient period, the verile world of unspoiled republican Rome. I can't get interested in the Middle Ages — even the magic and legendry of that dreary era seems to me too naive to be really convincing.

Turning to my love of getting out of the real world into an imaginary world, I tend to prefer night to day when not in the open country. Accordingly my hours are fearful and wonderful at home — usually up at sunset and to bed in the morning.

I am seldom out late — but seldom up early! In winter I virtually hibernate, for I am abnormally sensitive to the cold. Even a little coolness knocks me silly! On the contrary, I don't know what it is to be too hot — I begin to tighten up at 95 in the shade!

All told I am pretty much of a hermit, as I was in youth. Most of my literary associates — a congenial "gang" some of whose names you'll recognise from W.T. tables of contents (Frank Bellnap Long Jr., Donald Wandrei, Clark Ashton Smith, H. Warner Munn, Wilfred B. Talman, August W. Derleth, etc., etc.) — live in other localities, and I'm getting too old to enjoy conversation on other than my favourite topics.

Old age claimed me early. Temperamentally I'm about the same as I was 20 years ago, and as I'll be 20 years hence if I'm alive then. As for writing — I usually know what I want to say before I start a tale, but often change the plot midway if the actual penning suggest some new idea. I do all work in long hand — I can't even think with a cursed machine in front of me — and correct very minutely.

The extreme rapidity with which I write matter not destined for publication gives place to a very slow-moving caution when I table a piece of seriously intended prose. I pay great attention to details, including rhythm and tone-colour; though my aim is for the greatest possible simplicity — the art which conceals art. I usually spend about three days on a tale of medium length — in sessions of varying duration. I don't like to break the train of thought, so don't let any other task interrupt.

I never write except when the inward demand for expression becomes insistent. Nothing excites my contempt so much as forced or mechanical or commercial writing. Unless one has something to say, he had better keep quiet! I have a commonplace-book in which I jot down weird notions and plot germs for later use, and also have a file of weird newspaper cuttings as a possible source of ideas and colour-touches. A few tales I have founded on actual dreams — my own being very weird and fantastic. In youth I had more nightmares than I do now — when at six I used to encounter quite regularly a frightful species of dream-demons which I named "night-gaunts". I've used them in one of my tales. I do my best writing between 2 A.M. and dawn.

What I dread most is typing my Mss., for I abhor the sight and sound of a machine. I can't get anyone else to do it for me, since nobody can read my Mss. in their scrawled, interlined, and repeatedly corrected state. Sometimes I can't decipher them myself!

Now I guess there isn't much more to be said about either the would-be author or his effusions!

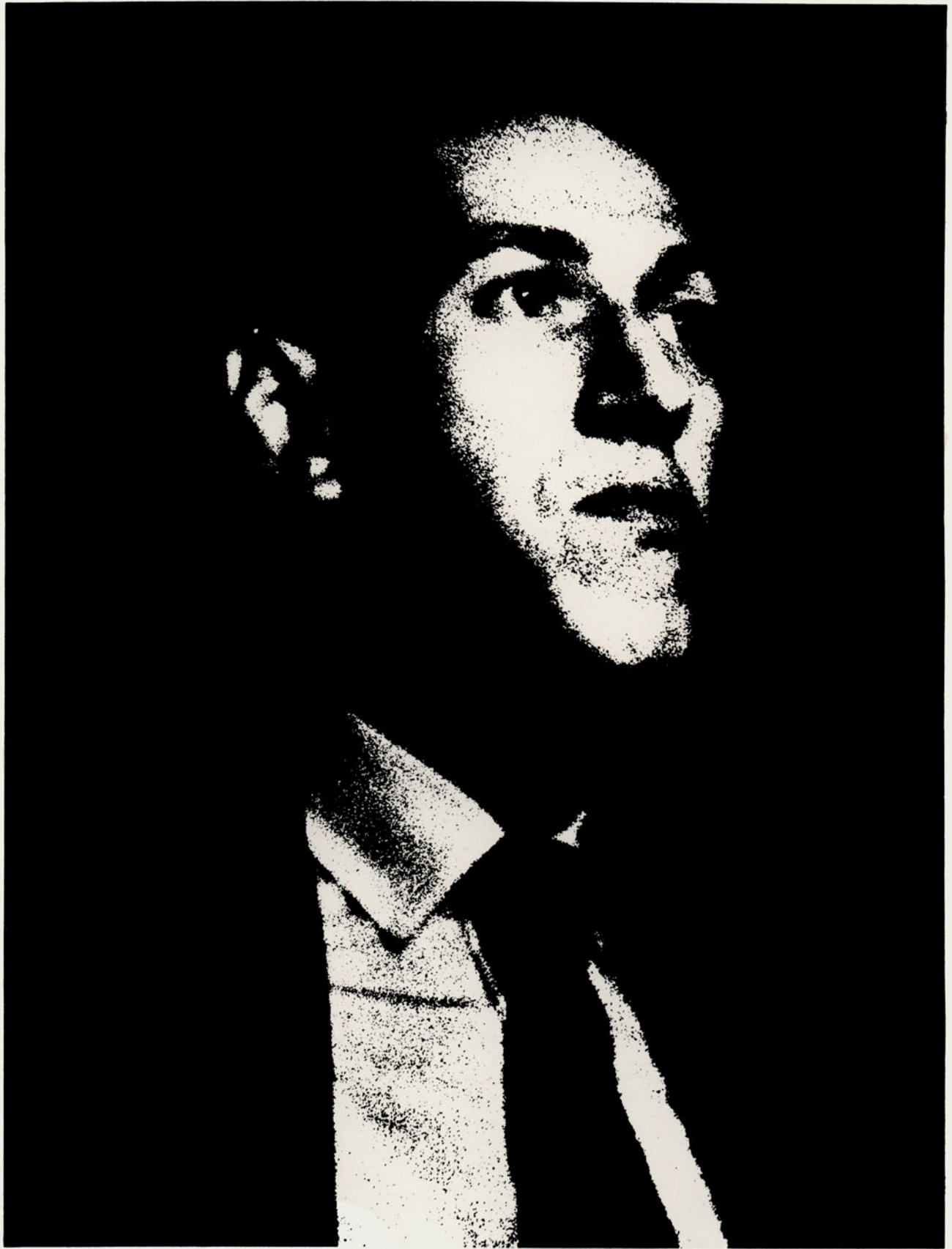
Finally, I must apologise for this present flood of senile garrulity! This is the way old age gets when given occasion to recall bygone days — especially when the environment is unchangedly suggestive of the past as is this wooded river-bluff.

But the west is blazing red with a departed sun, and above the ancient treetops the thin silver sickle of a young moon is troubling. I must get home . . .



Mordane.

Bel. Friday 73



*H.P.L. addressing THE KALEM CLUB
Photograph by Wilfred Talman*

*Five hundred copies of "Ec'h-Pi-El Speaks . . . An
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