

NYARLATHOTEP

By H. P. Lovecraft

Annotated by David Haden with 3,500 words of footnotes.

Prepared for Mr. Lovecraft's 121st birthday, 20th August 2011.

“Nyarlatotep” (1920) is a dreamlike prose-poem that moves seamlessly from Providence, New England, via Egypt to a modern quack magic or spiritualist show in a large city, then passes out into a moonlit night-walk in that same city, encountering aspects of the post-apocalyptic and the alienage of modern life. It then moves to a moor, which becomes a trackless immensity, and finally ends amid a horror-haunted void. Through all this threads the magician-like character of Nyarlatotep.

The leading Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi suggests the work was probably written in December of 1920, and possibly it helped to fill an overdue edition of the Lovecraft-edited amateur journalism publication *The United Amateur* that appeared in early 1921¹.

Nyarlatotep appears as a character several times in Lovecraft's later fiction. See Robert M. Waugh's excellent and nuanced discussion of the subsequent appearances of Nyarlatotep in Lovecraft's works². For the use of Nyarlatotep by other authors, see Robert M. Price's Chaosium anthology³, and S.T. Joshi's *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos*⁴.

¹ S.T. Joshi (Ed.), *The Call of Cthulhu and other weird stories*. Penguin Modern Classics. p.369.

² See Part III of “Landscapes, Selves and Others” in David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (Eds.), *An Epicure in the terrible: a centennial anthology of essays in honor of H.P Lovecraft*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991.

³ R.M. Price, *The Nyarlatotep Cycle: Stories about the God of a Thousand Forms*. Chaosium, 2006.

⁴ S.T. Joshi, *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos*. Mythos Books, 2008. Also Daniel Harms, *The Cthulhu Mythos Encyclopedia*, Elder Signs Press (3rd Edition, 2008) for appearances in games, etc.

Nyarlathotep⁵ . . . the crawling chaos . . . I am the last . . . I will tell the audient⁶ void . . .

I do not recall distinctly when it began, but it was months ago. The general tension was horrible. To a season of political and social upheaval⁷ was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all-embracing⁸, such a danger as may be imagined only in the most terrible phantasms of the night⁹. I recall that the people went about with pale and worried faces, and whispered warnings and prophecies which no one dared

⁵ An Egyptomaniac like Lovecraft had surely read William Wilshire Myers's *Hotep: a dream of the Nile* (1905) and must have known that Hotep was a common 'appended' name for ancient Pharaohs. Dunsany also used it in *The Gods of Pegana* (1905) for his false prophet Alhithoth-Hotep. Hotep appears to have meant 'united with the gods' (the latter meaning given in Heinrich Karl Brugsch's *A History of Egypt under the Pharaohs*, 1881).

'Nyar' is Hebrew for letter (paper), which would also fit with the general later idea of Nyarlathotep as a 'messenger' or faceless 'blank page' upon which the other gods can write (this meaning is given in *Colloquial Hebrew*, Routledge, 2004). The word 'nyar' was in current use in the 1920s, since it was used in the title of at least one US-published Hebrew novel of the time. Possibly this meaning of 'letter' was what Lovecraft's mind was playing on when he dreamed that he had a letter from Loveman telling him to go and see Nyarlathotep, which S.T. Joshi gives as the genesis of the story — perhaps Loveman or some other Jewish acquaintance had told Lovecraft that Nyar was Hebrew for letter (paper).

'Lath' is very ancient Hebrew and seems to have meant something like 'trust' — for example in the Akkadian 'tukult' which in its ancient Hebrew form became the first part of the name of the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser whose name meant "my trust (is) the heir of Esharra" (see John Huehnergard, *The Appendix of Semitic Roots*, Appendix II).

Nyar-lath-hotep would thus mean something like 'letter/message that is trusted of the gods'. It is also interesting to note how close 'tukult' is to Cthulhu. There has been some scholarly debate about the extent Lovecraft may have raided dictionaries of ancient languages, possibly those such as Akkadian, for the names of his deities.

⁶ "Audient" is a word that implied attentive listening and was used in connection with a young boy preparing for baptism. Its use here sets the tone for the contrasting uses of noise and silence.

⁷ This perhaps reflects the end of what was then called The Great War, later called the First World War or World War One. The lost men marching in "narrow columns" later in the story also seem to reflect something of the popular imagery of the war.

⁸ The year 1919 was that of the dreadful Influenza Epidemic, which swept the world and seemed to have especially claimed the young of about Lovecraft's age. The disease infected 28% of all Americans, killing over 25 million people worldwide.

⁹ Lovecraft vividly remembered his childhood nightmares, in which he had been tormented by the horrifying "night-gaunts". See S.T. Joshi, *I Am Providence*. Hippocampus, 2010. p.34.

consciously repeat or acknowledge to himself that he had heard. A sense of monstrous guilt was upon the land ¹⁰, and out of the abysses between the stars swept chill currents that made men shiver in dark and lonely places ¹¹. There was a daemonic alteration ¹² in the sequence of the seasons ¹³ — the autumn heat lingered fearsomely ¹⁴, and everyone felt that the world and perhaps the universe had passed from the control of known gods or forces to that of gods or forces which were unknown ¹⁵.

And it was then that Nyarlathotep came out of Egypt ¹⁶. Who he was, none could tell, but he was of the old native blood and looked like

¹⁰ Those who could not serve in the military (Lovecraft tried to enlist, passed, but then was failed via his family) often felt guilt after the war. So did some of those who fought and survived, while their fellow soldiers had died.

¹¹ Lovecraft the keen amateur astronomer, fascinated by the silent immensities of space, would have been aware of the raging scientific debate about “the aether vs. relativity” which would overturn millennia of set beliefs about the heavens. This debate was stirred up particularly by reports of Einstein’s paper “Ether and the Theory of Relativity” (1920). The undermining of ‘aether’ theory began at the turn of the century with the experiments of Michelson–Morley, but acceptance then took decades, coming first in the USA. It is also relevant to the auditory and “audient” nature of “Nyarlathotep” since Spiritualists were upset by the new ideas. Relativity threatened to erase the long-standing idea of an invisible ‘aether’ which was deemed by Spiritualists to aid transmission of spirit voices / sounds to the living in their seances.

¹² i.e.: an alteration inspired by demonic supernatural forces.

¹³ For a similar alteration of the seasons, see William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream...*

“The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts / Far in the fresh lap of the crimson rose, / And on old Hiems’ thin and icy crown / An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds / Is, as in mockery, set: the spring, the summer, / The childing autumn, angry winter, change / Their wonted liveries, and the mazed world, / By their increase, now knows not which is which:”

The human agricultural and seasonal calendar had long been shaped and punctuated by the movements of the heavens, and so to disturb this could only be the work of malevolent gods.

¹⁴ Autumn is the British word for the American ‘fall’, and was then in common use in New England. In July 1911 a deadly eleven-day heat-wave struck New England and killed 380 people. Temperatures were up to 106 degrees F., and New York City reported another 211 people dead. The summer of 1919 had also been very hot (“brutally hot”) and trying.

¹⁵ Much of the scientific orthodoxy on space and time was beginning to be seriously overturned in the late 1910s. See note 35 for a fuller discussion.

¹⁶ Lovecraft had a life-long passion for all things Ancient Egyptian, and read widely on the topic.

a Pharaoh ¹⁷ . The fellahin ¹⁸ knelt when they saw him, yet could not say why. He said he had risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries ¹⁹ , and that he had heard messages from places not on this planet ²⁰ . Into the lands of civilisation came Nyarlathotep, swarthy, slender, and sinister, always buying strange instruments of glass and metal and combining them into instruments yet stranger ²¹ . He spoke much of the sciences ²² — of electricity and psychology ²³ —

¹⁷ The name for the class of ‘divine’ rulers of Ancient Egypt.

¹⁸ Fellahin — common peasants, also sometimes claimed as the “hidden Jews” of Egypt. See Gil Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient*. Stanford University Press, 2006. p.54.

¹⁹ This seems to imply that he arose in Ancient Egypt, but being immortal he survived to the present day. S.T. Joshi suggests this would place Nyarlathotep at around the 22nd Dynasty.

See also Robert Buchanan’s magnificent “The Devil’s Case” (1896), in which he describes the Devil giving his account of his work as a teacher and builder in Ancient Egypt...

“Then I taught them hieroglyphics, / Mystic shapes and signs and letters, / Where the story of the Ages / Written was on brass and stone; / Then the busy Ants of Egypt / Raised the Pyramids around them / Shaping colonnades and pylons / For the sepulchres of Kings. / Thus I taught them architecture, — / How to hew the rocks and fashion / Monuments that stand for ever In despite of God and Time. / Nay, to mock the mute Almighty, / the mystic Sphynx invented, / Silent, impotent, impassive. / Gazing on a million graves! / Numbers, too, I taught the people, — / How to measure Earth and Water, / By the stars and their progressions / Guide the floods and count the seasons.”

²⁰ See William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*...

“There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st / But in his motion like an angel sings, / Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins; / Such harmony is in immortal souls, / But whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

This references the then-common concept of ‘the music of the spheres’. It recalls Pythagoras and the belief in the mystical relation between mathematics and music and planets in their motions. Also the astronomer/astrologer Ptolemy of Alexandria, who closely related ‘the harmonies of the spheres’ with the states of thought in man.

²¹ Perhaps symbolic of the ways in which alchemy, astrology, astronomy, mysticism and early science were all co-mingled together in the early modern period. They only really separated toward the end of the period of the Enlightenment in the 18th century.

²² Again, see Robert Buchanan, “The Devil’s Case” (1896)...

“I’m the father of all Science [...] / I, the Devil, am transcendental — / Wise in all the ways of knowledge / Even down to metaphysics.”

²³ The use of ‘science’ here is probably meant to be read with irony. Electricity was still seen by many as semi-magical and dangerous. Psychology was a very new ‘science’ and with a shaky claim to be such. Both were then widely associated with charlatans and quackery.

and gave exhibitions of power which sent his spectators away speechless, yet which swelled his fame to exceeding magnitude ²⁴ . Men advised one another to see Nyarlathotep, and shuddered. And where Nyarlathotep went, rest vanished; for the small hours were rent with the screams of nightmare. Never before had the screams of nightmare been such a public problem; now the wise men almost wished they could forbid sleep in the small hours, that the shrieks of cities ²⁵ might less horribly disturb the pale, pitying moon as it glimmered on green waters ²⁶ gliding under bridges, and old steeples crumbling against a sickly sky ²⁷ .

I remember when Nyarlathotep came to my city ²⁸ — the great, the old, the terrible city of unnumbered crimes ²⁹ . My friend had told me

²⁴ Will Murray has suggested the electrical showmanship of Nikola Tesla as an inspiration here, as explained in *Lovecraft Studies* No. 25, Fall 1991. pp.25-29. S.T. Joshi calls this a “plausible conjecture”, although it seems Lovecraft never saw Tesla in person. Given the earlier allusion to Shakespeare, one might also suggest a vague dream-merging of Oberon and Prospero?

²⁵ Lovecraft here introduces the first of the sounds associated with cities. Possibly this relates to the screams of shell-shocked soldiers, returned from the First World War? But then it is elided into the more general alienation of the lived experience of the modern large industrial city.

²⁶ “The moon methinks looks with a watery eye” also “salt green streams” — *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Green is the colour associated with the Moon by astrologers, in the sign of Cancer. The Moon also has obvious control over water, in the form of the tides.

²⁷ It was at around this time that a combination of light pollution and airborne particulates meant that the starry sky could no longer be seen clearly in most cities and large towns. There is also an obvious ‘crumbling of religion’ symbolism here, in... “old steeples crumbling”.

²⁸ Edison was commonly referred to as “The Wizard of Menlo Park”, and his Vitascope presentation had come to Providence when Lovecraft was six years old. It played to virtually the entire town for a month, twelve hours a day. See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: the American screen to 1907*. University of California Press, 1994. p.125.

Yet a subway entrance is mentioned later in the story. Lovecraft knew Boston, which from 1901 had the first active subway in the United States, and. But Boston had only a basic three-station subway. For this reason I am inclined to think that “Nyarlathotep” reflects more of Lovecraft’s ‘dream New York’, a “great” city he had not yet visited but whose subways he would certainly have read about. Loveman, whose letter apparently inspired the story, was based in New York.

²⁹ On 9th September 1919 the whole of the Boston police force deserted their posts, leaving the city virtually defenceless. See: Francis Russell. *A City in Terror: Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005. There had also been vicious and sustained race riots in 1919. See Jan Voogd. *Race riots and resistance: the Red Summer of 1919*. Peter Lang, 2008.

of him ³⁰ , and of the impelling fascination and allurements of his revelations, and I burned with eagerness to explore his uttermost mysteries ³¹ . My friend said they were horrible and impressive beyond my most fevered imaginings; that what was thrown on a screen in the darkened room ³² prophesied things none but Nyarlathotep dared prophesy, and that in the sputter of his sparks ³³ there was taken from men that which had never been taken before yet which shewed only in the eyes ³⁴ . And I heard it hinted abroad that those who knew Nyarlathotep looked on sights which others saw not ³⁵ .

It was in the hot autumn that I went through the night with the restless crowds to see Nyarlathotep; through the stifling night and up the endless stairs into the choking room. And shadowed on a screen, I saw hooded forms amidst ruins ³⁶ , and yellow evil faces ³⁷ peering

³⁰ S.T. Joshi states that this refers to Samuel Loveman, Lovecraft's friend, giving a letter in which Lovecraft says the story came to him a dream of receiving a letter from Samuel Loveman telling him to go and see Nyarlathotep. See S.T. Joshi, *I Am Providence*. Hippocampus, 2010. p.370.

³¹ Curiosity and its fatal or maddening consequences is one of Lovecraft's key fictional themes.

³² The adolescent Lovecraft was an avid visitor to the early silent cinema. Possibly he saw films such as Edison's 1910 one-reel adaptation of *Frankenstein*.

³³ Brander Matthews' short story "The Kinetoscope of Time" (1895) suggests seeing sparks may have been a part of the early experience of looking into early 'peephole' film machines...

"infinitesimal sparks darted hither and thither, and there was a slight crackling sound. I concentrated my attention on what I was about to see ..."

³⁴ Again, this may relate to the male viewing of erotic pornography in coin-operated 'peephole' kinetoscopes. Manhattan was the location for the first peepshow kinetoscope parlor in 1894, set up by the showman and inventor Thomas Edison.

³⁵ Unlocalised and chaotic, and ultimately ungraspable by the rational mind, Nyarlathotep might almost be the very god of the theory of Relativity. Einstein's book *Relativity, the special and the general theory; a popular exposition* had been published in 1920, with good reviews in the major publications such as *Nature*. "Corpuscular structures" of matter and the unknowable intersections of their outlines with "spacetime geometry" were then really hot topics, as was the ability (or not) of the rational mathematical mind to grasp the "fundamental structure of the external world". All these are actual phrases that appeared in discussions of the time.

³⁶ Lovecraft seems to imply that evil occultists lurk behind superficially harmless mysticism.

³⁷ The late 1900s were the high point of non-white immigration to America, and a vigorous and sustained public debate about illegal immigration was going on at the time Lovecraft was writing.

from behind fallen monuments. And I saw the world battling against blackness; against the waves of destruction from ultimate space;³⁸ whirling, churning; struggling around the dimming, cooling sun³⁹. Then the sparks played amazingly around the heads of the spectators, and hair stood up on end⁴⁰ whilst shadows more grotesque than I can tell came out and squatted on the heads. And when I, who was colder and more scientific than the rest, mumbled a trembling protest about “imposture” and “static electricity”⁴¹, Nyarlathotep drove⁴² us all out, down the dizzy stairs⁴³ into the damp, hot, deserted midnight streets. I screamed aloud that I was not afraid; that I never could be afraid; and others screamed with me for solace⁴⁴. We swore⁴⁵ to one another

See Joel S. Fetzer, *Public attitudes toward immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Lovecraft was especially concerned about the ‘yellow’ Asiatic races. For the assumed links between race and the occult in America, see Susan Kay Gillman, *Blood talk: American race melodrama and the culture of the occult*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

³⁸ General relativity theory had long predicted the existence of gravitational waves in space.

³⁹ Scientists did not yet know of nuclear energy and at that time they believed that the Sun was gradually cooling. This led to the sort of pessimism for the future that can be seen in the early scientific romances of H.G. Wells, among many others.

⁴⁰ “Spiritualism was largely predicated on the new discovery of electricity” — *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America: Volume 2*, 1990. p.770.

⁴¹ Houdini was back in the USA by July of 1920 and had set up home in New York City. He quickly announced his desire to stop performing for a year, and to devote himself instead to exposing the fraudulent nature of spiritualism. This was widely reported and would have presumably greatly endeared the man to Lovecraft. Lovecraft later met him and worked with him in exposing astrologers and spiritualist charlatans.

⁴² Archaic 18th Century spelling of ‘swear’.

⁴³ Lovecraft’s fear of fainting must have led him to be very wary of long flights of steep and dimly-lit stairs, such as those found at subway entrances or in cinemas.

⁴⁴ Hillel Schwartz states that... “To be ‘spiritual’ around 1900 was, in the most nondenominational of senses, to be receptive, contemplative, inwardly quiet. It was, in the most nonscientific of senses, to be attentive to ‘vibrations’ emanating from other hearts, other beings, other times.” In: “Noise and Silence: the soundscape and spirituality” (paper given at the *Realizing the Ideal* conference, Korea, 1995). The bodily loss of control of sound here thus seems to indicate a loss of spiritual communion as well as simple mass panic.

⁴⁵ Archaic 18th Century spelling of ‘drove’.

that the city was exactly the same, and still alive ⁴⁶ ; and when the electric lights began to fade ⁴⁷ we cursed the company over and over again, and laughed at the queer faces we made.

I believe we felt something coming down from the greenish moon⁴⁸ , for when we began to depend on its light ⁴⁹ we drifted into curious involuntary formations ⁵⁰ and seemed to know our destinations ⁵¹ though we dared not think of them. Once we looked at the pavement and found the blocks loose and displaced by grass, with scarce a line of rusted metal to shew ⁵² where the tramways had run ⁵³ . And again we saw a tram-car ⁵⁴ , lone, windowless, dilapidated, and almost on its side. When we gazed around the horizon, we could not find the third tower by the river, and noticed that the silhouette of the second tower was ragged at the top ⁵⁵ . Then we split up into narrow

⁴⁶ For Lovecraft on a ‘dead’ New York, see the New York short story “He” (1925): “this city of stone and stridor is not a sentient perpetuation of Old New York as London is of Old London and Paris of Old Paris, but that it is in fact quite dead, its sprawling body imperfectly embalmed and infested with queer animate things which have nothing to do with it as it was in life.”

⁴⁷ Lovecraft would have read of the frequent large-scale electrical power failures that affected Philadelphia in 1919 and 1920. David E. Nye, *When the Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America*. MIT Press, 2010. p.19.

⁴⁸ See Note 61 for a discussion of green moons.

⁴⁹ Green is the colour of the moon in astrology, in the sign of Cancer. Possibly the following phrase “curious involuntary formations” might then indicate the houses of the zodiac?

⁵⁰ Again, this evokes the astrological signs of the zodiac, which one is born into without choice.

⁵¹ Again, this hint of predestinations seems to indicate being duped into believing in astrology.

⁵² Archaic 18th Century spelling of ‘show’.

⁵³ The recalls a string of early British science fiction ‘after civilisation’ poems and stories, which show ruined cities in great detail. For more information see my anthology: *London Reimagined: an Anthology of Visions of the Future City* (2010). For the American experience see George Allan England’s *The Vacant World* (1912), and chapter 6 of Nick Yablon’s *Untimely ruins: an archaeology of American urban modernity, 1819-1919*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

⁵⁴ An early form of bus on rails set into the street, which was then transitioning from steam and horse-drawn power to overhead electricity cables.

⁵⁵ Boston has a river outlet to the sea, the River Charles. Possibly the three towers, one ragged, reflects something of a real place? I know of no scholarship on the matter, but I do not have access to sets of *Lovecraft Studies*, *Lovecraft Annual*, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, etc.

columns, each of which seemed drawn in a different direction ⁵⁶ . One disappeared in a narrow alley to the left, leaving only the echo of a shocking moan. Another filed down a weed-choked subway entrance ⁵⁷ , howling with a laughter that was mad ⁵⁸ . My own column was sucked toward the open country, and presently felt a chill which was not of the hot autumn; for as we stalked out on the dark moor ⁵⁹ , we beheld around us the hellish moon-glitter of evil snows ⁶⁰ . Trackless, inexplicable snows, swept asunder in one direction only, where lay a gulf all the blacker for its glittering walls. The column seemed very thin indeed as it plodded dreamily into the gulf. I lingered behind, for the black rift in the green-litten ⁶¹ snow was frightful, and I thought I

⁵⁶ In Robert Buchanan's magnificent "The Devil's Case" (1896) the narrator is flown by the Devil... "O'er the silent lamplit City"...

"Over plains where ghostly armies / Came and went, and smote each other, [...] /
Over silent legions waiting / For the nod of moon-struck rulers; [...] / Shrieks of men
and wails of women / Fill'd the air with lamentation [...] / Like strange forms reflected
darkly / In the glass of a Magician"

⁵⁷ "I cannot see a well or a subway entrance without shuddering." — H.P. Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear" (1922).

⁵⁸ On 1st August 1918 a then-new subway shuttle system opened in New York, and there was a violent riot and stampede to get out of the new station. See Meyer Berger & Pete Hamill, *Meyer Berger's New York*. Fordham University Press, 2004. p.102.

On the opening of the subway system in New York: "Indescribable scenes of crowding and confusion, never paralleled in this city. [...] a deadly, suffocating, rib-smashing subway rush which began at 7 o'clock tonight. Men fought, kicked and pummeled one another [...] grey haired men pleaded for mercy, boys were knocked down and only escaped by a miracle from being trampled underfoot. The presence of the police alone averted what would undoubtedly have been panic after panic, with wholesale loss of life." — *New York Tribune*, 28th October 1904.

⁵⁹ Again, Robert Buchanan's "The Devil's Case" (1896)... "On the lonely Heath of Hampstead I awaken'd". A heath is sort of moorland, like the heath where Macbeth met the witches.

⁶⁰ Lovecraft grew faint in low temperatures, and as a consequence feared the ice and cold. In 1918... "Climatic conditions during the winter were more severe than had been experienced in New England for many years" — *Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture 1918* (1919).

⁶¹ The 'green moon' was adopted as a symbol by poets such as Lorca and Al-Bayati in the 1930s and 40s, although they cannot have influenced Lovecraft nor were they influenced by him. Such green and blue moons are associated with volcanic eruptions, caused by dust in the atmosphere, and were especially noted in the Autumn after Krakatoa erupted in 1883. Their rarity presumably gave rise to the popular saying "Once in a blue moon". It is possible that green moons had a similar saying in the America of the 1910s, as in this comment from *Furniture World* magazine

had heard the reverberations of a disquieting wail as my companions vanished; but my power to linger was slight. As if beckoned by those who had gone before ⁶², I half floated between the titanic snowdrifts ⁶³, quivering and afraid, into the sightless vortex of the unimaginable.

Screamingly sentient, dumbly delirious, only the gods that were can tell. A sickened, sensitive shadow writhing in hands that are not hands, and whirled blindly past ghastly midnights ⁶⁴ of rotting creation, corpses of dead worlds with sores that were cities, charnel ⁶⁵ winds that brush the pallid stars and make them flicker low ⁶⁶. Beyond the worlds vague ghosts of monstrous things; half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath space and reach up to dizzy vacua ⁶⁷ above the spheres of light and darkness ⁶⁸. And through this revolting graveyard of the universe ⁶⁹ the muffled, maddening beating of drums, and thin, monotonous whine of blasphemous flutes from inconceivable, unlighted chambers

(Vol. 50, 1919) talking of post-war shortages... “In other words furniture is just about as obtainable as green moons — as we all know.”

⁶² Lovecraft must have commonly heard or read such phrases immediately after the Great War.

⁶³ New England had especially deep and heavy snowfall of the winter 1915-16... “The heavy snowfall of the winter 1915-16 in New England has occasioned renewed interest in the subject of previous snowy winters. Snowdrifts with a maximum depth of 15 to 40 feet were reported.” — *Monthly Weather Review*, Vol. 45, 1918.

⁶⁴ Robert Buchanan, “The Devil's Case” (1896), which features the Devil as a scientist-magician in Egypt, has... “Everywhere Disease and Famine / Held their ghastly midnight revel”

⁶⁵ Charnel house — a place or crypt for the storing of bones from dead bodies.

⁶⁶ See my earlier note on the light and atmospheric pollution which dimmed the night stars.

⁶⁷ Vacua — space completely devoid of any matter.

⁶⁸ Classical antiquity believed in rings of mixed light and darkness between the earth and the heavenly aether above, colour being formed as a secondary quality from the interaction of these.

⁶⁹ The whole story seems to be Lovecraft's prescient anticipation of the disenchantment in the face of scientific advances in astronomy and astrophysics, and the collapse of religion.

beyond Time; the detestable pounding and piping⁷⁰ whereunto dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic⁷¹, tenebrous ultimate gods⁷² — the blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles whose soul is Nyarlathotep.

⁷⁰ Commercial radio broadcasting of music and voice had begun in America in 1920. The same year saw a public battle between competing commercial systems RCA and General Electric, for patents to transmit signals into homes. On 20th November 1920 Westinghouse began a general radio broadcasting service. No doubt some of Lovecraft's correspondents experimented at this time with home-made crystal radio sets. Lovecraft would later enjoy twiddling the knobs to seeing how distant an overseas station he could pick up. Soon the homes and hearths of America would be filled with new types of 'spirit voices' from their radios, and would increasingly pass...

“from the control of known gods or forces to that of gods or forces which were unknown”.

...with the consequent move away from the 'skeptical' fact-checking print-based culture, to the 'believing' huckster-credulous aural and visual mass cultures that existed from the 1920s to the arrival of the mass Internet around at the end of 1995. The contrast of noise and silence in "Nyarlathotep" seem to me to be very prescient (albeit in a dream-like manner) of this fundamental shift in the culture from around 1920 onwards, and the dangers it presented in terms of the rise of demagogues. This is linked in the story with the rise of the 'mob mind', those urban masses who act in a semi-hypnotised manner. The "mob mind" was a popular concept and talking point around 1919-1920. E.A. Ross's best-selling book *Social Control* (1901) had suggested that people were increasingly subject to a primitive "suggestibility" in crowded modern cities. In 1919 Ross's student Robert Gault published *The Psychology of Suggestion*, drawing heavily on Ross's ideas and the concept of the mob mind, and this was no doubt reviewed in publications Lovecraft might have read. One might also point to Gustave le Bon's *The Crowd* (published in America in 1896) which had argued that an individual who is too long in a crowd... "finds himself in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer".

⁷¹ See again the similarities to Robert Buchanan's "The Devil's Case" (1896)...

“Huge as some primaevial monster / Crawl'd He in the Vedic ooze. / Mystical, uncomprehended, / In their shadowy shrines He brooded,”

⁷² “ultimate gods”. Here Lovecraft anticipates his mythos of cosmic gods and beings other than those of Earth. They appear again in his *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1927)...

“that last amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the centre of all infinity—the boundless daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud, and who gnaws hungrily in inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond time amidst the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin, monotonous whine of accursed flutes; to which detestable pounding and piping dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic Ultimate gods, the blind, voiceless, tenebrous, mindless Other gods whose soul and messenger is the crawling chaos Nyarlathotep.”

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