

The annotated “**The City**” (1919)¹

a poem by ‘Ward Phillips’²

with an introduction and annotations by David Haden.

Produced for the 100th anniversary of

H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic mythos in November 2019.

¹ *The City* — A poem originally published by H.P. Lovecraft’s friend Paul Cook in his amateur publication *The Vagrant* No. 10, dated October 1919. The exact date of the poem’s composition is unknown, but other data points show it was certainly between May 1918 and October 1919. Lovecraft was later under no illusions about the literary quality of most of the verse he had produced from 1914-1918, although it and other like it usefully provided seed ideas that would later germinate in his best fiction.

² *Ward Phillips* — the poem was not credited to Lovecraft, since he used the pseudonym ‘Ward Phillips’, Phillips being Lovecraft’s middle name. ‘Ward Phillips’ also makes a later appearance as a character in Lovecraft’s fiction, in “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (written 1932-33)... “Phillips, the Providence mystic, was lean, grey, long-nosed, clean shaven, and stoop-shouldered.” This Phillips is deemed to have visited the Dreamlands and... “heard many strange and significant things in Ulthar”.



Trouvelot, "The Great Nebula in Orion" (1875-76), here seen with my rectification of the angle.

THE CITY

It was golden and splendid,
That City of light;
A vision suspended
In deeps of the night;
A region of wonder and glory, whose temples were marble and white.

I remember the season
It dawn'd on my gaze;
The mad time of unreason,
The brain-numbing days
When Winter, white-sheeted and ghastly, stalks onward to torture and craze.

More lovely than Zion
It shone in the sky,
When the beams of Orion
Beclouded my eye,
Bringing sleep that was fill'd with dim mem'ries of moments obscure and gone by.
Its mansions were stately

With carvings made fair,
Each rising sedately
On terraces rare,
And the gardens were fragrant and bright with strange miracles blossoming there.

The avenues lur'd me
With vistas sublime;
Tall arches assur'd me
That once on a time
I had wander'd in rapture beneath them, and bask'd in the Halcyon clime.

On the plazas were standing
A sculptur'd array;
Long-bearded, commanding,
Grave men in their day—
But one stood dismantled and broken, its bearded face batter'd away.

In that city effulgent
No mortal I saw;
But my fancy, indulgent
To memory's law,
Linger'd long on the forms in the plazas, and eyed their stone features with awe.

I fann'd the faint ember
That glow'd in my mind,
And strove to remember
The aeons behind;
To rove thro' infinity freely, and visit the past unconfin'd.

Then the horrible warning
Upon my soul sped
Like the ominous morning
That rises in red,
And in panic I flew from the knowledge of terrors forgotten and dead.

“The City” as prism

The poem is something of a ‘prism’ that can be understood differently by different readers. Here is my tabulation and summary of different possible readings:

War	Personal	Astronomical	Mythic	Cosmic	Psychoanal
Civilisation = a ‘city of light’.	City of light = home and Providence.	A young astronomer recalls his first sight of the great Orion nebula.	The mythic youth Orion seeks the sun, place of light.	City = man’s knowledge as stable and eternal.	City of light = enlightenment attained after personal acceptance of one’s own eventual death.
War = a tiresome and maddening winter.	Winter = personal exile from his old home and its way of life.	The time of observing was the deep winter.	He is blinded, and thus can no longer pursue the sun.	A troubled young man’s discovery of such eternal truths and certainties.	Winter = allegory for old age and death.
Our civilisation now = a beautiful but dead city.	Beautiful city = he finds solace in poetry, architecture and art.	He admires the intricacies of the nebula, and notes how much it resembles a city between gray drifted hills.	The blind Orion is lured by Diana (dawn) into the sunless beauty of the pre-dawn forest rides.	He venerates the ancestors who have so painstakingly discovered this great knowledge and passed it on.	Fallen statue = the old self that was shattered on facing death.
A defaced statue suggests grave ongoing risks (strikes, communism).	Statues = the venerable ancestors, and more recent male relations who had taken the place of his mad father.	He explores other constellations of men, with his telescope.	He enjoys the landscape and its perfect hunting. He hunts every creature to perfection.	But now... science shatters such settled certainties, with great waves of geological time and evolution; a new science which talks of relativity; and new astronomy which shows man’s true place in the universe.	Final horror is = related to the statues being shaped clay, and this evoking ideas of the primordial cycle of evolution ? (Mosig).
The smashed statue = the narrator. He has and never will have a place among the statues of these great men.	Fallen statue = his father?	But cosmic iciness and a fearful sense of vast time-scales invades his soul.	The gods are angered that a mortal has been raised up in such a way.		
The narrator cannot face his shame at surviving the war, and flees the statues and the city.	Lovecraft is terrified that he — like his mother and father — will go mad. He flees such thoughts.	He feels shattered by such cosmic revelations.	A sudden scorpion-sting kills Orion, yet in honour of his hunting prowess the gods then raise him to the eternal stars as a constellation. But in this form he must forever flee the dawn.	The young poet flees from any further cosmic insights into the nature of time.	
		He flees from such unsettling visions, into the first daylight of morning.			

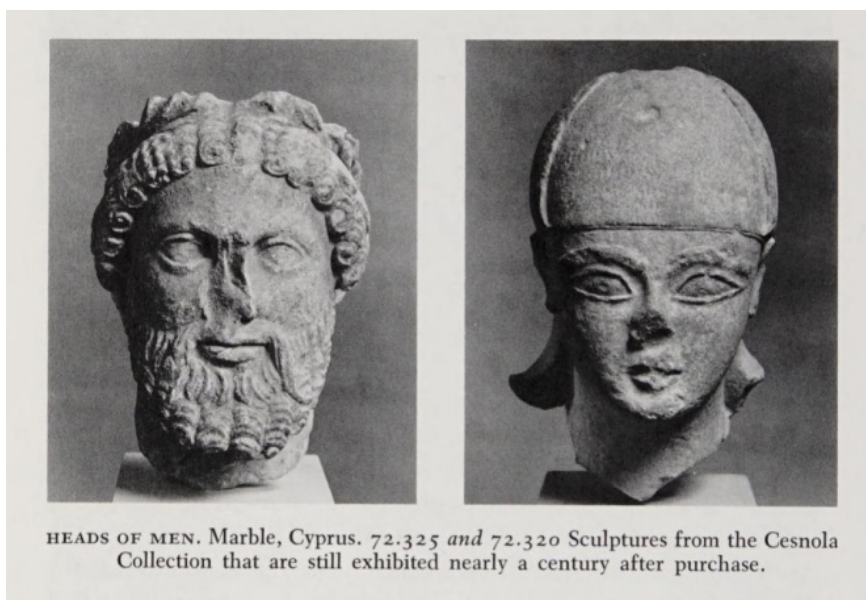
Timeline:

26 th April 1915	Dr. Franklin Chase Clark, Lovecraft's uncle, dies.
31 st December 1916	Phillips Gamwell, Lovecraft's beloved young cousin, dies young.
Early summer 1917	America enters First World War, Lovecraft attempts several times to enlist in units going to the front in France.
July 1917	Lovecraft writes "Dagon".
Midwinter 1917/18	Record-breaking bitter cold, meaning good skies for observing with telescopes.
May 1918	Lovecraft dreams of the shining city of 'The City'.
Sometime in 1918	The story "The Tree" plotted: ancient city, destroyed statue.
Early summer 1918 ³	The story "Polaris" written as an initial response to this dream-city. Arctic setting, ancient city.
Late summer 1918	Lovecraft's mother "breaks down", and he does likewise. He does "nothing" for "two months". ⁴
September 1918	Lovecraft was by now likely recovering from his breakdown. He had probably given up his Ladd Observatory work for good by this point.
October 1918	Cold months begin, and killer influenza becomes rampant in the USA. In Boston, deaths run at 200 a day, mostly young adults in the prime of health. Brown University barricaded with armed guards.
November 1918	Armistice declared in the First World War, fighting ends.
Midwinter 1918/19	Living alone with his mother in their apartment, Lovecraft likely endures the approaching final stages of her madness. Beyond his front door, the third wave of the killer influenza epidemic strikes. In Russia and Boston, an equally virulent revolutionary ideology strikes.
January 1919	Lovecraft's mother taken away by one of the aunts.
March 1919	Lovecraft's mother placed in a mental hospital.

³ *Lord of a Visible World*, page 68.

⁴ *Ibid.* This appears to be confirmed by the timeline for his writing of new poetry, tabulated in his published poetry collections.

- Spring 1919 Writes “Beyond the Wall of Sleep”, concerned with hospitals and madness and star-beings. Influenza epidemics fade, after killing at least 50 million around the world.
- Midsummer 1919 German war fleet is scuttled at Scapa Flow — the formal end of the First World War. Designs drawn up for memorial statues to the fallen from the armed services.
- Late summer 1919 War memorial statues and cenotaphs begin to appear in public places.
- Autumn/Fall 1919 Likely period in which “The City” was written. Lovecraft is in Boston during the infamous Police Strike, and probably visits the Museum where he would see:



Stone heads on permanent display at the Museum in Boston. Both faces are damaged and one is bearded.

- October 1919 ‘The City’ published.

INTRODUCTION

The poem “The City” is a short early work by H.P. Lovecraft. It dates from the very end of the First World War, having first being substantially dreamed and then recounted to Maurice W. Moe in a letter of early May 1918. The dream was probably written out as a poem in the Autumn/Fall of 1919, with certain small changes. The poem’s opening setting is Providence in a bitter midwinter, most probably evoking the record-shattering cold of December-January 1917/18, yet the glowing city the poem describes is 1,300 light years from Earth in the Orion Nebula. The narrator travels these cosmic distances and despite an initially benign encounter with the city... horror ensues. The poem is thus one of those small keyholes of light through which we can glimpse the emergence of some of Lovecraft’s most enduring themes. We may also glimpse aspects of his personal anguish during 1917-19.

“The City” as war poem and as personal poem

The poem is easily read as the lightly cloaked sentiments of a poet who had wished to serve in the recent war, and who had tried to enlist in front-line forces several times, but who did not actually go away to war — and thus at the point of victory must face his feelings of guilt and shame.⁵ While the poem can also be read as having oblique links to Lovecraft’s domestic life, in its public form its meanings were shaped by the poet and by his readers at a key time in history — when the dust of the Great War had finally settled,

⁵ *guilt and shame* — Lovecraft attempted to join several units of the National Guard, and then the U.S. Army, and had registered for the draft, but for various reasons he was deemed unfit to serve. Each time he left the house his mother implored him not to try to enlist again. Lovecraft was left with acute feelings of his “utter uselessness” at a time of national peril.

and when the silent stone statues to the fallen were first appearing in the public squares and plazas of the nations.

Lovecraft was also well aware of another perilous political situation in which our civilisation found itself in 1919. The very same public squares and plazas that honoured the war dead were increasingly apt to become arenas for statue-toppling ‘red’ mobs (anarchist and syndicalist, socialist and communist).⁶ In this context the possible political resonances of the poem’s mutilated statue — still standing among the respected noble elder men yet “dismantled and broken, its bearded face batter’d away” — would not have been missed by the anxious and alert reader of late 1919.

Most war memorials were erected by late 1919 and featured fine figurative stone-carving of soldiers, and all but the great national cenotaphs were organised and funded at a very local level in district, town and village and with no formal national guidance on style or approach. The one difference in “The City” is that Lovecraft’s statues are venerable and bearded, which the soldier statuary of the First World War almost never is (unless Sikhs or similar native forces). Again, this might be read one of two ways: i) one might interpret the bearded statues in “The City” as indicating the men that the lost generation *would have become* had they survived the First World War; or ii) one could see the statues as representing the bearded men of his family who Lovecraft had known in his youth, many of them highly accomplished in the fields. With the statue with the smashed face representing Lovecraft

⁶ *mobs* — it appears that Lovecraft was an eyewitness to the police strike in nearby Boston, New England...

“Last fall [autumn 1919] it was grimly impressive to see Boston without bluecoats [police], and to watch the [armed] musket-bearing State Guardsmen patrolling the streets as though military occupation were in force. They went in pairs, determined looking and khaki-clad, as if symbols of the strife that lies ahead in civilisation’s struggle with the monster of unrest and bolshevism [i.e.: socialism/communism]” — Lovecraft letter to Belknap Long, 11th November 1920.

himself — who (he feels) now has no right to stand among either body of men.

Historical and political context can thus throw some light on the poem. But today much of the poem's elusive and enduring allure derives from Lovecraft's personal life, which he has evidently deeply interwoven into it.⁷ This tight interweaving of personal autobiography with the sweep of vast and cosmic forces would become a hallmark of his later fiction. Over this combination an additional glamour and mystery is then cast, by the deft use of ancient star-myth and modern astronomy in tight combination. Again, an element Lovecraft later used in his fiction. It should be noted that these stellar elements were also things dear to Lovecraft's heart, and are not to be

⁷ *personal life .. interwoven* — in the 1970s Dirk Mosig attempted a short Jungian psychoanalytical analysis of "The City". This appeared as his "Poet of the Unconscious", *The Platte Valley Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 1978, pages 60-66. It was reprinted in the fanzine *Paragon* (May 1980) and later collected in the book *Mosig at last: a psychologist looks at H.P. Lovecraft* (1997). It was also available in Italian as "Poeta dell'inconscio" in *Il Re in Giallo* 5 (1979), and in Spanish as "Poeta de lo Inconsciente" in *Revista El Pendulo* No. 1 (1979).

The essay opens with...

"I had read H. P. Lovecraft's haunting poem "The City" several times before, but each time its hidden meaning had eluded me. I had felt strangely stirred after each reading, as if the words had touched something deep..."

Lacking any biographical or war context, or more than superficial knowledge of the myth and lore of Orion, Mosig eventually supposed the opening references to winter to be a poetic allegory of human old-age. Thus the poem was unlocked for him as being purely personal, about the young Lovecraft coming to terms with the prospect of his own eventual death. The bearded statues then represent both hereditary and racial memory. The fallen statue represents the husk of Lovecraft's own earlier and transcended psyche, shattered by the realisation that he also will one day die. There is something in this simple Jungian explanation, yet Mosig's lack of biographical and mythic context means that its psychoanalytic certainties can only partly be matched with what we now know. Having set up this framework of psychic integration and shining transcendence, Mosig then rather struggles to explain the final horror felt by the poet. He suggests the horror arises because the stone of the standing statues suddenly evokes the primal sentimental ooze and clay from which the stone once formed, and thus the cycle of death and the past animalistic nature of mankind in evolutionary terms. Again, there is something in this, in terms of the relatively recent popular understanding of the theory of evolution and animal origins in 1919. But Mosig does not mention such context. To entirely overlook such matters — along with the entire First World War — seems to me to illustrate one of the fundamental weaknesses of taking an ahistorical Jungian approach to literature.

understood as mere idly-added curlicues of poetical convention.⁸ Further, Lovecraft links this star-myth and modern astronomy with his personal fears — such as the apparent fleeting insignificance of ‘the human’ among an indifferent universe of astral coldness and amid the dark aeons of ‘deep time’.

The obvious topical status of “The City” as a cloaked war poem — one written from a civilian and slightly post-war perspective — may help to explain why it was later published in *Weird Tales* magazine in July 1950. In an immediate post-war atmosphere, with the U.S. Armed Forces finally back home and settled after the war, it would have had added resonance — especially for the non-combatants who were neither fallen nor veteran, and must now come to terms with their new status. While also perhaps suppressing feelings that they had ‘shirked’ during the war and ‘had not done enough’, while others laboured and died.

Swinburnian borrowings

Lovecraft’s choice of poetic form would also have spoken to the sensitive dreamers among his reading audience. The more well-read and less conventional poets among them would have noted the Swinburnian metre of “The City” as being borrowed from the then-famous “Hertha”⁹ and the readers of his public criticism in amateur journals would perhaps also recall Lovecraft’s publically stated fondness for Swinburne’s pagan sentiments. After reading Lovecraft’s poem they would also have recalled the matter of

⁸ *poetical convention* — It was once though proper to make nearly all poetry about the stellar heavens in *some* way.

⁹ *Swinburne .. Hertha* — In *I Am Providence* S.T. Joshi identifies the poem’s metre as Swinburnian, noting...

“[Lovecraft’s other similar poems of the period and] “The City” (*Vagrant*, October 1919), which adapt the metre of “Nemesis” — itself derived, of course, from Swinburne’s “Hertha””.

The poet Swinburne being one of mid Victorian England’s most accomplished technicians of both metre and poetic musicality, harnessed to a 19th century pagan vision. As reconstructed and envisaged by Swinburne, Hertha was a chthonic Germanic goddess and the primal life-tree from which all gods (including God) were formed.

Swinburne's "Hertha", and thus the Victorian master's slightly later transmutation of this pagan figure into the more refined but still terrifying pagan deity of Apollo. Some would have then noted that Lovecraft was following Swinburne's lead in both his poem's cosmic setting and his cosmic terror which he evokes at the end of the poem...

"By turning Apollo into a natural element that literally travels the sky millions of miles away from the poet, Swinburne ensures the physical distance required to shield the poet from the god's searing presence." [and thus shield the poet from] "the terror associated with Apollonian revelation" [this being something that] appears throughout Swinburne's Apollonian poetry."¹⁰

Still other of Lovecraft's more informed readers would have made the connection between the astronomical and the mythic Orion, and thus seen a link being forged with Lovecraft's own vision of an Apollonian male ideal.

Lovecraft's 1918 dream

We know that the poem "The City" has its origins, in large part, in a dream Lovecraft had in the unexpected night-warmth of early May 1918. This came after a bitter winter of record-breaking cold in Providence, and the springtime change of temperature may have been unexpected. Lovecraft had many strange dreams, but this night-dream he deemed especially notable. Lovecraft recounted it in a letter to his friend and correspondent Maurice Moe...

¹⁰ *Swinburne's Apollonian poetry* — see Yisrael Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo: Myth, Faith, and Victorian Spirituality*, Ashgate, 2013. While Swinburne writes a loose mythopoeic environment, "we cannot conclude that the Apollonian poems form a coherent or even evolving mythopoeic system, or that Swinburne had any desire to create one" — from Nick Freeman, "Swinburne's Apollo: Myth, Faith, and Victorian Spirituality", a 2014 *Review 19* review of Yisrael Levin's book on the topic. Nevertheless, here is one possible trigger for a first fledging Lovecraft proto-mythos, with Lovecraft perhaps thinking "what if?" — as he began to cluster several works around the idea of the dream-city ("The City", "Polaris", "Beyond the Wall of Sleep").

“Several nights ago I had a strange dream of a strange city — a city of many palaces and gilded domes, lying in a hollow betwixt ranges of grey, horrible hills. There was not a soul in this vast region of stone-paved streets and marble walls and columns, and the numerous statues in the public places were of strange bearded men in robes the like whereof I have never seen before or since. I was, as I said, aware of this city visually. I was in it and around it. But certainly I had no corporeal existence. I saw, it seemed, everything at once; without the limitations of direction. I did not move, but transferred my perception from point to point at will. I occupied no space and had no form. I was only a consciousness, a perceptive presence. I recall a lively curiosity at the scene, and a tormenting struggle to recall its identity; for I felt that I had once known it well, and that if I could remember, I should be carried back to a very remote period — many thousand years, when something vaguely horrible had happened. Once I was almost on the verge of realisation, and was frantic with fear at the prospect, though I did not know what it was that I should recall. But here I awaked...”¹¹

A little later in the letter, a few more hard details emerge. The dream-city was “very silent, very ancient”.¹² The poem “The City”, most likely written many months after the above dream, and differs from it in certain respects:

- the setting of the poem is deep in a bitter winter, rather than the unexpectedly balmy entrance of the Maytime;
- it is a vision encountered within the ancient constellation Orion;
- mention of the dream-city’s “domes” are omitted;
- the statues are not specified as having weird “unearthly” robes;
- one of the bearded statues in the city is broken and its face battered away, the damage presumably by violence rather than a tumble due to extreme age — and thus implying that such damage was

¹¹ *Selected Letters I*, page 62.

¹² I should note here that at this point Lovecraft was wholly unaware of the work of Lord Dunsany, so there is no possibility of influence in terms of the description of the dream city.

perpetrated by unknown beings that may yet still lurk somewhere in the apparently ‘abandoned’ city.

The dream city in “Polaris”

Evidently inspired by aspects of the same dream, the opening setting of Lovecraft’s “Polaris” (written 1918, published 1920) draws heavily on it. But in contrast to the dream and the poem, in this short tale the dreamer is able to actually converse and then live among the bearded men in the prime of the city. Lovecraft places this city in the high Arctic at the cold dawn of the last great Ice Age (c. 24,000 BC). Polaris also adds a small detail that further connects this dream-city to the similar but far more substantial city in “The Shadow Out of Time”. In “Polaris” the dreamer remarks on...

“the long hours I gave each day to the study of the Pnakotic manuscripts¹³ and the wisdom of the Zobnarian Fathers” in the archives of the city —

¹³ *Pnakotic manuscripts* — the original Pnakotic manuscripts are deemed to have then passed into the Dreamlands from the city archives of city of Olathoë in “distant and frozen Lomar” in the Arctic. They were carried into the Dreamlands for safekeeping, circa 24,000 B.C, when the city was over-run. In the Dreamlands a last full copy of the texts was kept at Ulthar (*Dream-Quest*). The lore-masters of Ulthar found “frightful parts of the Pnakotic Manuscripts which are too ancient to be read” (“The Other Gods”), yet they preserved the strange manuscripts for they “told much of the gods” and later scribes thus added further fragments of lore relating to the strange Gods of Earth, while making marginal notes on their own activities — such as the attempt by one Sansu to climb their sometimes-visited mountain in the Dreamlands and actually see the Gods (who are exiled from Earth, but sometimes come down to dance upon a certain high peak in the Dreamlands, a peak that presumably rises to a point outside the forbidden zone). Some of these later Dreamlands additions seem to be found partially useful to later seekers after locations in the Dreamlands, such as Randolph Carter.

In the modern period partial copies may physically exist as ancient fragments, likely to be those “parts of the text of the frightful Pnakotic Manuscripts” which somehow survived directly from “that aeon-distant world” when the Great Race has its city on Earth in prehistory (“The Shadow out of Time”). Modern mystics make “claims of having read such monstrous and half-fabulous books as the prehistoric Pnakotic fragments” (“The Horror in the Museum”). But if complete books exist and what meanings they might contain is debatable, as in tone the texts are deemed “cryptical” (“Through the Gates of the Silver Key”) to modern eyes. Though enough can be read to known they mention “Tsathoggua” the toad-deity (“The Whisperer in Darkness”, the

which “Polaris” names as Olathoë and deems it be in the terrible and high Arctic wastes.¹⁴

In the Orion Nebula

In the story “Polaris” the dream-city is a living city in the Arctic past. What then are we to make of “The City” placing of the ancient dream-city in the constellation of Orion? At a mundane level this may be explained by the fact that that this is, in part, a personal poem and that in his late boyhood Lovecraft was a keen astronomer. He owned his own high-quality telescopes and had access to the large 12” telescope in the dome at Brown University. Soon after writing “Polaris” he most likely realised that the connection of the dream was not necessarily with the Arctic. He would by then have made the connection between his cramped position in bed on awaking from his 1918 dream, and his cramped position at the telescope at Ladd — a position that

supposed ‘deity’ possibly just mis-translation for the Old Ones) and that they “affrightedly hint about” “fiendish elder myths” and “the old Pnakotic whispers about Kadath in the Cold Waste” — these are recalled in *At the Mountains of Madness*. *Mountains* also suggests the vast age of the fragments, saying that... “a few daring mystics have hinted at a pre-Pleistocene origin for the fragmentary Pnakotic Manuscripts.”

¹⁴ *Olathoë* — a city where, incidentally, the sensitive singer Iranon (Lovecraft’s “The Quest of Iranon”) claims to have “dwelt long”. The “Zobnarian Fathers” are perhaps implied to have been the priests of the kingly line mentioned in the later “The Shadow Out of Time”, in which the protagonist talks with... “a king of Lomar who had ruled that terrible polar land 100,000 years before the squat, yellow Inutos came from the west to engulf it”. Which would have the city Olathoë existing under kingships from at least circa 124,000 B.C. (Middle Pleistocene: giant animals including mammoth herds — human with spears and hand-axes — polar ice-sheets extending far south, compared to today) until it was overrun 24,000 B.C. at the onset of the last great Ice Age.

An early draft of the later “The Shadow Out of Time”, mentioned to Clarke Ashton Smith, had Lovecraft musing that the men of Olathoë would play the part of what later became the time-travelling and personality-transferring Great Race. But evidently that did not fit with a desired Australian desert setting, nor with the growing market demand for ‘monster’ science-fiction. In order to bring his Arctic city to the distant deserts of Australia and in the modern period, presumably something dramatic was needed. A pole-switch of the Earth (caused by a magnetic-field flip) would be the obvious choice, thus switching a former ‘Arctic’ to the ‘Antarctic’, though I can see nothing in “The Shadow Out of Time” which hints at this.

caused a permanent change in his physical frame. He wrote in a letter that it... “resulted in a permanent curvature perceptible today to a close observer”.

As an avid and regular astronomer until 1918, he would have been well aware that an extraordinary vision of a cosmic ‘shining city between ranges of grey, horrible hills’ could famously be seen in the constellation of Orion. Indeed, in his poetic multi-page stream-of-consciousness recounting of memory-impressions from his childhood and youth, given in a letter to his good friend Morton, Orion is placed close to “nightmares, daemons”...

“... the moon, Orion, observatories, nightmares, daemons, grey jagged mountain-peaks, unknown valleys ...”¹⁵

He would also have known this constellation by eye. The Great Nebula in Orion can also be seen, dimly and faintly, by the naked eye. For the benefit of those somehow unfamiliar with this constellation, here is Lovecraft’s own November 1906 local newspaper column on astronomy. He concisely describes for a rural American public how to note and observe the winter-constellation Orion in the night-sky ...

“Among the stars a multitude of very beautiful groups is in sight. Orion is high in the southeast, and no one can mistake it, as its great size and bright stars both serve to make it a most conspicuous object. Attention is called to the row of three brilliant stars in its centre, variously called the “belt”, “yard”, “kings”, etc.; also the line of faint dots below it [the ‘sword’ on the ‘belt’], which contains the famous Orion nebula.”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Selected Letters* III, page 141.

¹⁶ *Collected Essay 3: Science*.



*Trouvelot, “The Great Nebula in Orion” (1875–76), here seen with my rectification of the angle.
Here necessarily reproduced without the colours of space. The shape may thus recall for some
Lovecraft’s “The White Ship”.*

As one can see above, a powerful telescope does indeed reveal to the imaginative a ‘shining city’ among grey drifts of what can be likened to bare mountains.

The “shining mists” of the Great Nebula are also deemed to be a cosmic destination known to the interstellar traveller in Lovecraft’s cosmic story “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” (written October 1919), a tale likely written around the time of the composition of “The City”...

“We shall meet again — perhaps in the shining mists of Orion’s Sword, perhaps on a bleak plateau in prehistoric Asia. Perhaps in unremembered

dreams tonight; perhaps in some other form an aeon hence, when the solar system shall have been swept away.”¹⁷

Lovecraft’s early pairing of “the shining mists of Orion’s Sword¹⁸ [and] a bleak plateau in prehistoric Asia” might even be evidence that he considered the two places connected, even at this early date of 1919, by some form of dimensional interpenetration? My take on such interdimensionality for Lovecraft’s places is found in my note on “*What does Danforth see at the end of Mountains’?*”, in discussing Kadath and Antarctica...

“Kadath is the place overseen by the ‘Other Gods’ (“they are great and mindless and terrible, and lurk in the outer voids”) and they apparently toy with the old gods of earth who have exiled themselves to the immense mountain (and possibly found themselves trapped there by the ‘Other Gods’?). This aspect of the Mythos obviously evolved over time, and Lovecraft left it rather tangled. Lovecraft seems to suggest Kadath is not wholly ‘in’ our Earth, although it is deemed to be on an immense mountain in “the cold wastes”. It appears to be part of an other-dimensional space (‘Dreamland’ in the Randolph Carter tales) that intersects and opens into our world at a few rare points (such as the *Rue d’Auseil* in “Erich Zann”). It also appears to be a place from which the malign ‘Other Gods’ cannot currently reach any further into our earth, except via their emissary Nyarlathotep.”¹⁹

Lovecraft’s development of the dream-city initially led him, in “Polaris”, to attempt to tie the city to his beloved Arctic region, and to give it a name —

¹⁷ *We shall meet again* — One might, rather ambitiously, suggest the famous final speech in the movie *Blade Runner* owes something to the farewell death-battle speech in Lovecraft’s “Beyond the Wall of Sleep”...

“I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.” (*Blade Runner*)

¹⁸ *Orion’s Sword* — The “shining mists of Orion’s Sword” had a Virgil Finlay illustration in *Weird Tales* for March 1938.

¹⁹ *Tentacii* blog, 6th April 2011.

Olathoë.²⁰ That the city is to be located in the Arctic on Earth from around 130,000 B.C. until 24,000 B.C. is however no bar to its “ancient” and “silent” form being somehow translated elsewhere at or after its fall. Recall, for instance that the Pnakotic manuscripts were deemed in Ulthar to have been sent or carried into the Dreamlands at the fall of the city. Might a dream-impression of the city itself also have been carried entire into the Dreamlands at around the same time?

Yet that seems unlikely, because we must recall that Lovecraft knew that he was not viewing the Orion Nebula in the far-future, but (due to light-speed), in the distant past. The Nebula began forming some two million years ago, by earth reckoning. Such matters were known in scientific circles by 1919. Recall now Lovecraft’s original 1918 dream vision of the city’s statues being “in robes the like whereof I have never seen before or since”. Do we then have in the dream an ancient relic city of alien spacefarers, in what appear to be protective spacesuits? If so then we might further imagine them as ancient astronauts, arrived on earth from Orion and erecting Olathoë in the Arctic, as a copy of their icy space-city which they have left behind in the stars — where its strange plants continue to bloom among the silent ruins and where it may sometimes be visited in dreams by rare dreamers. It may be that, perhaps thanks to the space and time-travel of the Great Race and others, Olathoë exists simultaneously in several variants — i) its shining but abandoned original in the Orion Nebula, ii) its recreation in the Arctic on Earth in ancient times, which was then peopled by the Great Race with

²⁰ *Olathoë* — Neither Joshi or Klinger can pinpoint the source for this. I suggest it is most probably from the Bible, where *Olath Tamid* is ‘a continual burnt-offering’, with a never-dying flame — Exodus, 29:42. This would translate literally as ‘continual light in ascending smoke’ with implications of pleasantness and sacredness — and *olath* then perfectly fits with the effulgent appearance of the dream-city in the Orion Nebula. *Oë* appears to be Old Dutch for ‘eyes’, but was more likely known to Lovecraft as the —*oë* ending of the names of many Egyptian princesses, such as *Arsin’oë*. Again, perhaps, those who read the poem and related works as being partly about Lovecraft’s mother may see here a continuation of the female subtexts around the shining city.

enhanced men before being abandoned in the Ice Age, and iii) an inter-dimensional shadow-fragment of the Arctic city preserved via the Dreamlands.

The reader may object here that such sleek spacesuits were not a thing being contemplated in 1919, and assume a heavy and lumbering ‘armoured diving suit’ conception of such suits. Yet if we look at the spacesuit in Lovecraft’s boyhood favourite writer Garrett P. Serviss, and particularly at his space adventure *Edison’s Conquest of Mars* (1898), then we see just such sleek “air-tight dresses” proposed for men of the future, and that these are “employed by the earth’s warriors when they reached a point beyond the atmosphere of this planet”.



Edison’s Conquest of Mars (1898): The “air-tight dresses” for men in space, “employed by the earth’s warriors when they reached a point beyond the atmosphere of this planet”.

THE CITY

It was golden and splendid,
That City of light;
A vision suspended²¹
In deeps of the night;²²
A region²³ of wonder and glory, whose temples were marble and
white.²⁴

I remember the season
It dawn'd on my gaze;²⁵
The mad time of unreason,²⁶

²¹ *suspended* — the surface meaning is obvious, but the choice of word also resonates with the fact that Lovecraft's night-sky vision was 'suspended' by this time, partly due to his failing eyesight but also due to his lack of facility with the mathematics required for advanced astronomy work.

²² *deeps of the night* — like the traditional Christian view of Heaven, his city is a high city of light — but here it is empty and disused and surrounded by vast gulfs of cosmic darkness. In Lovecraft's original 1918 dream the city's golden splendour also endures... "betwixt ranges of grey, horrible hills", much as brightness at the centre of the Great Nebula of Orion does (see picture on previous pages).

²³ *region* — this implies vastness and recalls what is described as the "vast region" encountered in the 1918 dream that inspired the poem. In the ancient world a large city might indeed have covered a "vast region"... "The ruins of Memphis hold a half-day's journey in every direction." — Abd-ul-Latif, given in: Emile Isambert, *Itineraire descriptif, historique et archeologique de l'Orient* (1881), page 1009.

²⁴ *glory ... marble and white* — Lovecraft here appears to evoke classical Ancient Greek architecture (aided by a faint echo of the well-known phrase 'the *glory* that was Greece') while the colour and texture evoked also foreshadows his revealing of the poem's seasonal setting of "Winter". However, his dreams were generally of Ancient Roman statuary and faces.

²⁵ *dawned .. my gaze* — See my subsequent note on the blind Orion — "his sight would be restored if ever he reached the seat of the rising Sun" at dawn, etc.

²⁶ *unreason* — one thinks here of the widespread and violent Bolshevik agitation and terrorism of summer and autumn/fall 1919 in America, but the lines of the poem indicate that this is Lovecraft's memory of the first time the city was seen — and thus they must place the memory earlier in time. Let us consider some framing dates. Lovecraft's failed attempts to join the armed forces clustered in May 1917. According to Lovecraft (*Lord of a Visible World*, page 68) his mother had a breakdown late summer 1918 and Ken Faig Jr. suggests that she likely declined badly from November 1918. By 1918 his visits to the Ladd Observatory had recently ceased. His mother was taken

The brain-numbing days²⁷
When Winter, white-sheeted and ghastly,²⁸ stalks onward to torture
and craze.²⁹

away by one of Lovecraft's aunts in January 1919 and then her mental hospitalization was in March 1919.

My feeling is then that the "mad time of unreason" and "Halycon" (see later note) most likely imply the Christmas of 1917-18, at which point the aunts might not yet have strongly intervened. Lovecraft was then living alone with his increasingly neurotic mother in a cramped apartment at 598 Angell Street, and his mother was teetering toward outright madness. With men leaving Brown for the forces, over Christmas more time might also have been available to Lovecraft on the big 12" telescope at Ladd and he may have been glad to escape his mother for long nights of calm observing of the distant heavens. Evidence from visitors, such as Cook, show that Lovecraft was often nocturnal in this period — sleeping during the day so he could observe at night.

My surmise on this date was then supported by discovering the fact that December of 1917 in Providence featured record-setting cold weather, not equalled again until 1956/7 (*Climatological Data, New England*, 1957). At a local university... "rumor swept the campus in December, 1917, that the College would be forced to close until warmer weather" (*The University of Rhode Island*, 1967). The grip of the cold deepened into the holiday period and into the New Year... "Nighttime temperatures around New England were consistently below 0°F for the twelve-night period from 26th December [1917] to 12th January [1918]." (*New England Weather*, 2005). Despite recent tampering with the long-term climate record, such data points remain inconvertible in the historical record. Lovecraft's poem "A Winter Wish" is from this moment in time, and it echoes the movement of "The City" from bitter winter to a more welcome and Halcyon environment.

One also assumes that such weather gave superbly clear skies for star-gazing into features such as the Orion Nebula, if only one could reach the Ladd observatory through the ice and snow and then stay warm during the night. That may have been somewhat difficult, as there was then a coal famine and the electric power was cut to only "twenty percent of normal" from "New England to Ohio and all the way to Alabama". (Martin V. Melosi, *Urban Public Policy: Historical Modes and Methods*, Penn State Press, 1993). But one assumes that Brown had some 'pull' in terms of acquiring such things locally.

²⁷ *brain-numbing* — Lovecraft usually felt unwell and could faint in cold temperatures. But more likely this refers to the period when his mother broke down and which he later had a sort of partial amnesia...

"My mother broke down [circa late summer 1918], and I partially broke down as a result of the shock. For two months I did nothing — in fact I can hardly remember what I even did during those two months" (*Lord of a Visible World*, page 68)

²⁸ *white-sheeted* — this recalls the ending of the 1918 dream which inspired the poem. Lovecraft awoke to find himself "cramped" in "too much bedclothing" for the unexpected warmth of early May. He has thus inverted the original element of his dream from heat to cold, inversion being a common technique that he would often later use when developing the outlines of a new piece of fiction. However, that would be the *personal* meaning, and perhaps also linked with the activities of his mad mother who was hospitalized in March 1919. The *general* meaning — for unacquainted casual reader — would simply be the traditional look of spectral 'bedsheet' ghosts.

More lovely than Zion³⁰
It shone in the sky,³¹
When the beams of Orion³²

²⁹ *torture and craze* — this seems to step beyond a simple description of the bitter winter of 1917/18, even considering his physical dislike of it. Here we may perhaps glimpse the *modus operandi* of his mad mother in the later stages of her madness. Lovecraft's wife Sonia recalled that she had alternated between love and hate for her son.

³⁰ *Zion* — the ancient heavenly city of the Bible, to be built first on earth and later in heaven. Psalm 87:2-3: "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God." In the Old Testament, Zion is often evoked obliquely "as an afflicted and travailing woman", and in Ezra 9:38-10:57...

"The son represents the period in which the first glorious temple was on Zion [on earth]. The woman passes through two phases and this is an allegory of Zion passing through two phases: from an earthly Zion to a heavenly one [built by God]." — Kim Huat Tan, *The Zion Traditions and the Aims of Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

This has obvious relevance to Lovecraft's increasingly difficult relations with his afflicted mad mother at this time, but if Lovecraft knew of this 'glorious son / afflicted mother' aspect of Zion must now remain unknown — unless it can be found in some letter I have not seen. However, this may all be moot — as the statement of the poem is clearly that the heavenly city the poet visits in Orion and describes in the poem is not *the* heavenly city of the Bible.

³¹ *shone in the sky* — the 'Angels of Mons', a key British supernatural event of the First World War and with much more patriotic significance in 1919 than today, is fleetingly brought to mind by such a phrase.

³² *Orion* — the famous and well-known winter-time constellation in the shape of a stepping man, with its belt of stars. Those who knew their mythic lore would instantly make a connection to the next line of Lovecraft's poem. For Orion was blind. Some readers may unfamiliar with the basics of the myth, so here is my gist...

Orion was deemed to be a giant youth and an impulsive hunter. He was an earthly being, but also a primal son of the dynamic Sea and the fertile Earth. He was blinded due to his youthful lust, but he believed that his sight would be restored if ever he reached the seat of the rising Sun. The huntress goddess of the dawn fell in love with the blind Orion and took him into the sky to hunt in her perpetual pre-sunrise dawn-lands. From which place he would never reach or see the earthly sunrise. Presumably his hunting skill is so superlative that he can hunt even while blinded, and possibly the goddess values him partly because he loves her for herself and not for her visual beauty (which he cannot see). He of course stays too long in the pre-dawn sky. His hubris in chasing the title of 'the greatest hunter' leads him to try to hunt everything. Including, fatefully, even an attempt to hunt the sacred doves of the Pelaiades (a very ancient star cluster). He has clearly outstayed his welcome. This dove-hunting, and the apparent elevation of an earth-dweller to the heavenly realm angers the gods. The gods cause Orion to be killed, with either the goddesses' own arrow or a scorpion-sting. But Orion had indeed proven himself to be 'the greatest hunter', so the gods are charitable and place Orion in the night sky as the famous constellation of stars, where he is forever a hunter facing the

Beclouded³³ my eye,³⁴
Bringing sleep that was fill'd with dim mem'ries of moments obscure
and gone by.

Its mansions were stately
With carvings³⁵ made fair,
Each rising sedately
On terraces rare,³⁶

constellation of the Bull with the Pelaiides flying above its back, while Orion is also being circled by the She-bear (The Great Bear). Orion must stride across the cold winter night sky, and by sunrise he has vanished from the sky. Thus he can never again enter the pre-dawn sky-lands. In return for his immortality in the sky he must forever work as a truly free man to the full extent of his powers, against fearsome odds — the bull and the bear and the gripping cold of winter.

Lovecraft's poem "Nemesis" (1917) would seem to fit the mythic Orion quite neatly, though there is a comment by Lovecraft to the effect that to the conventional mind it would be about reincarnation...

"It presents the conception, tenable to the orthodox mind, that nightmares are the punishment meted out to the soul for sins committed in previous incarnations — perhaps millions of years ago!"

³³ *beclouded* — this evokes the observation of the Great Nebula in the constellation Orion through an astronomical telescope, something Lovecraft most likely saw both in his own telescopes and in the large 12" telescope at the Ladd Observatory. As a boy he did indeed damage his once-keen eye-sight in all-night and repeated observations made at home, mostly of the Moon and Venus. His later contorted night observations at the Ladd Observatory also permanently kinked his neck...

"So constant were my observations [at Ladd], that my neck became much affected by the strain of peering at a difficult angle. It gave me much pain, & resulted in a permanent curvature perceptible today to a close observer." (letter to Rheinhart Kleiner, 16th November 1916).

Most likely the "very cramped posture" in which he found himself in bed, when he awoke from the 1918 dream, had turned his dreaming mind toward the cramped viewings through the telescope. Hence the dream's cosmic 'shining city' arose, a version of that gazy 'city' to be glimpsed in Orion.

³⁴ *my eye* — we imagine here the eye-piece of a telescope, but 'peeping through' at a beautiful garden landscape was something Lovecraft also enjoyed. His friend Belknap Long remembering that peeping at hidden gardens through iron grilles in walls (fence knot-holes were also common at that time) was one of his special 'small pleasures' while out walking. Something similar occurs in "The Outsider"... "there came to me the purest ecstasy I have ever known; for shining tranquilly through an ornate grating of iron ... was the radiant full moon".

³⁵ *carvings* — one of Lovecraft's favourite pleasures as an antiquarian in New England was to encounter the finest mellow wood carving, beautifully fitted into a colonial domestic interior.

³⁶ *terraces* — the view from Prospect Terrace, Providence was, of course, a favourite Lovecraft place and one with deep significance in his memory of early childhood and his mother. Especially when the city and sky burned with a fine sunset.

And the gardens were fragrant and bright with strange miracles
blossoming there.³⁷

The avenues lur'd me
With vistas sublime;³⁸
Tall arches³⁹ assur'd me

³⁷ *blossoming* — flowers are obviously implied here, of alien type but sweet-scented. This is a sensual addition from Lovecraft's 1918 dream, which as recounted lacks any mention of foliage. One suspects these strange blossoms are a replacement for his dream's equally curious... "robes the like whereof I have never seen before or since" on the statues. During Lovecraft's time as an active astronomer the possibility of plants living off the Earth was actively debated in public, for instance via Lowell's claims of plant life on Mars and his book *Mars as an abode of Life* (1909). In a later story based around the ideas in "The City" and other early works, "The Shadow Out of Time", the idea of the strange garden is vividly developed...

"The omnipresent gardens were almost terrifying in their strangeness, with bizarre and unfamiliar forms of vegetation nodding over broad paths lined with curiously carved monoliths. Abnormally vast fern-like growths predominated; some green, and some of a ghastly, fungoid pallor. Among them rose great spectral things resembling calamites, whose bamboo-like trunks towered to fabulous heights."

³⁸ *vistas sublime* — the reader is thus aware that this is a 'considered' city rather than a rambling and *ad-hoc* one. A city made by people like Lovecraft, calm rational people who appreciated fine architecture framing even finer views and glimpses of elegant gardens. Gardens that here seem dreamlike versions of the medieval *hortus conclusus* or small enclosed garden — which in Christian symbolism was tied to Mary, mother of Christ. If this poem is partly about his mother then this could be seen to have some resonance, as she was after all a Christian — even if her son was not a believer. Such gardens were often later associated in fairy-tale and painting with females who had fallen asleep due to some magic spell or are otherwise suspended in time (*Sleeping Beauty* et al). Again, there is the potential here for seeing a link with Lovecraft's mother in the asylum. Yet there is also the possibility that here is it (perhaps) the *statues* who are in a dreamlike suspended animation and may wake — since in "Polaris", for instance, it becomes possible for the dreamer to talk and study with the statues as with living men.

³⁹ *tall arches* — Lovecraft was an immensely learned if mathematically-crippled student of architecture as it existed before the modernism of the 1920s. The presence of an arch in an ancient city was for him, as for others, a key visual assurance that its builders had attained and sustained a basic level of civilisational achievement. On this point see my essay on "H.P. Lovecraft and Great Zimbabwe", in *Lovecraft in Historical Context: the fifth collection* (2014). The arch is noted in his later fiction, such as in his evocation of the city in "At The Mountains of Madness"... "The builders had made constant and expert use of the principle of the arch, and domes had probably existed in the city's heyday." and... "We cannot yet explain the engineering principles used in the anomalous balancing and adjustment of the vast rock masses, though the function of the arch was clearly much relied on." This would reassure his more knowledgeable readers that the city being explored was not one made by rude barbarians. Also note "The Shadow Out of Time"...

"I would seem to be in an enormous vaulted chamber whose lofty stone groinings were well-nigh lost in the shadows overhead. In whatever time or place the scene might be, the principle of the arch was known as fully and used

That once on a time⁴⁰
I had wander'd in rapture beneath them, and bask'd in the Halcyon
clime.⁴¹

On the plazas were standing
A sculptur'd array;⁴²
Long-bearded, commanding,⁴³
Grave men in their day—⁴⁴

as extensively as by the Romans. There were colossal round windows and high arched doors”

⁴⁰ *once* — the fairytale ‘once upon a time’ reference is obvious. But note also that the theme of an identity-struggling amnesiac returning to such an abandoned city, and seeking for something in it that he had forgotten, would be taken up again to great effect in Lovecraft’s “The Shadow out of Time”.

⁴¹ *Halcyon* — a period of weather quite calm and still. The capitalisation is a conventional archaism, and does not indicate a place. Specifically, ‘Halcyon Days’ were those fourteen annual days of becalmed weather which were deemed by pagans and early Christians alike to occur on seven days either side of the winter solstice, and which in the ancient Mediterranean sea had some basis in the actuality of the weather and sea. Thus the poem’s midwinter setting seems to have another small point of anchorage in the text.

There is a potential political subtext here. In “The Halcyon Moment of Stillness in Royalist Poetry”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44, 1981, it is suggested that Royalist English poetry evokes this period of calm to suggest conflict behind, but also conflict ahead and at the national scale. In 1919 Lovecraft was of course a staunch pro-British Royalist aware deeply aware of the English tradition in poetry, and also of the new looming conflict with communism.

⁴² *sculptur'd array* — as stated in my introduction, by Autumn/Fall 1919 many statues to the fallen of the First World War had been or were being erected in public squares and plazas. Some may see the faint possibility of the idea of ‘sleep paralysis’ during dreams. Yet this is rather undermined by the next line, which firmly ties the figures to memorial statuary.

⁴³ *long-bearded* — the Greeks and many other ancient peoples deemed that they would ‘see the gods’ in their night-time dreamworld, a historical fact of which Lovecraft as a student of dream-lore would have been well aware. The beards indicate that these are not to be understood as statues of very young warriors. As he grew older Lovecraft generally favoured the Roman...

“the Roman features (which of course have no living representatives today), as displayed in the realistic portrait statuary of the republican age, produce in me a profound feeling of stirred memories and quasi-identity. I have the curious subconscious feeling not only that *people around me once looked like that*, but that *I once looked like that*. ... Nor have I ever quite ceased to have Roman dreams of the most puzzling vividness and detail.” (letter to Galpin, 13th December 1933).

But here in the poem the beards do seem to evoke the Greeks rather than the Romans. Before the Emperor Hadrian, among the Romans to be a beard-wearer was to be a barbarian.

But one stood dismantled and broken, its bearded face batter'd away.⁴⁵

In that city effulgent⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *grave men* — the line might be read, in a 'war poem mode', as meaning 'men who had been destined for the grave'. One should also recall that the boy Lovecraft believed his father to have been in what is implied to have been some sort of a catatonic coma in the madhouse, unable to speak — and thus in form somewhat comparable to a statue. Lovecraft said that he was never taken to visit his father.

⁴⁵ *face batter'd away* — Lovecraft had not at this time read H.G. Wells's famous *The Time Traveller*, in which the headless statue of a Faun is encountered in the darkness of the far-future forest. Lovecraft had encountered some of the Wells stories in anthologies and magazines but he appears to have regarded Wells the novelist as a tendentious canting socialist (which he was by that time), and was thus unaware of the author's earlier and far less political 'scientific romances'.

Lovecraft may have known the famous story told of the boyhood of Michelangelo, and how the sculptor was discovered by his future patrons when he boyishly sculpted from snow the missing head of an "antique headless faun" statue.

Yet it is not the head but the *face* that is missing in Lovecraft's poem, and my feeling is that here we have an obliquely political mask for a deeply personal element. Most likely this underlying personal meaning is the neurotic self-hatred of his own ugly and scarred face, something apparently deeply inculcated in Lovecraft by his mother...

"As late as February 1921, only a few months before his mother's death, Lovecraft writes to his mother of a new suit that "made me appear as nearly respectable as my face permits." School friend "Harold W. Munro testifies that as early as his high school years Lovecraft was bothered by ingrown facial hairs ... Munro speaks of "mean red cuts" ... these cuts came from his using a needle and tweezers to pull out the ingrown hairs. This [was a] recurring ailment". (S.T. Joshi, *I Am Providence*).

His deformed 'long jaw' appears to have become obvious in adolescence and, according to some of his friends, it even grew in prominence as he aged. There was also his slight spinal deformation due to his observatory work which occurred at around the same time, surely adding to his belief that he was now "hideous" and deformed. As for 1919 we are talking here, of course, of the period before the death of his mother partially released him from such things and briefly set him free to marry and enjoy New York City.

⁴⁶ *effulgent* — lustrous light, usually on a large scale, that shines intensely or brilliantly outward. A word often found employed in theological evocations of the grandly numinous. Example: "in the effulgent city of God, whose foundations even are placed in the sacred mountains" (Bull of Pope Pius IX, 1868). A decade later there is remarkable example in a deep review of a key book on 18th century thought. It anticipated a somewhat science-fiction scenario, namely a future in which religion has been swept away by reason...

"It is probable that at some future day an historian will arise who, with broad and sweeping brush will depict the *Decline and Fall of [the] Theological*, as Gibbon did of Imperial Rome. He will need to be a large-hearted generous man, capable of sympathetic appreciation of men and opinions which his reason condemns. That once effulgent city of God, which, like a "dome of many-coloured glass," [Shelley, *Adonais*] over-arched Europe, will be his subject. In

No mortal I saw;
But my fancy, indulgent
To memory's law,
Linger'd long on the forms in the plazas, and eyed their stone
features with awe.⁴⁷

I fann'd the faint ember⁴⁸
That glow'd in my mind,
And strove to remember
The aeons behind;
To rove thro' infinity freely, and visit the past unconfin'd.⁴⁹

Then the horrible warning⁵⁰
Upon my soul sped
Like the ominous morning
That rises in red,⁵¹

perfect calm, neither hating nor loving, but with kindled imagination, he will paint its remote splendour, its palaces and temples, and angels hovering with purple wings, and then the gradual fading of the glorious pageant passing by slow degrees into common day. One could wish the book were written and that we could read it." (*MacMillan's magazine*, 1877).

⁴⁷ *no mortal I saw .. awe* — the faint implication here is that the statues are not of mortals, but gods. This would again suggest to the attentive reader that the poem's setting is not in Zion, city of the Judaeo-Christian God, but the ethereal dream-city of the pagan gods of the ancient world. Yet the reader of 1919 would certainly have seen a connection with the statues then being erected to commemorate the war dead.

⁴⁸ *ember .. glow'd* — again, another subtle reminder of the winter setting. But note that in the later stage of his quest for the rising sun, the giant Orion had standing on his shoulders the primal fire-being Cedalion. Thus, if a poet talks of a 'glowing embers' in a knowing poem on Orion then we are entitled to ask if this is another attempt to evoke the myth. Cedalion stands on the shoulders of the giant Orion, and with his far-sight he tries to guide Orion to find the ever-elusive seat of the rising sun. In his guiding role Cedalion symbolises 'the flame of knowledge', guiding impulsive and blind humanity through its historical adolescence. This is an inversion of today's understanding of the common phrase 'standing on the shoulders of giants' (which arises from a literary culture of transmission). We are in a pre-literary world and the lustful adolescent giant is impulsive/blind — and it is the inventive 'bright spark' who stands atop him who has the intelligence and far-sight.

⁴⁹ *visit the past* — there is a faint foreshadowing here of the time travelling of the Great Race in "The Shadow Out of Time".

⁵⁰ *horrible warning* — horrible warnings are of course a common theme of Lovecraft's later work, and are often associated with the uncovering of hidden or suppressed knowledge of cosmic mysteries and horrors. By who or what is the narrator warned? It is possible the warning comes from within, as a moment of inner half-realisation, rather than implying that the narrator is not alone in the city. For the latter type of warning to be possible, one would have to assume a Cthulhu-like mental 'sending' being undertaken by some other unseen entity in the city.

And in panic I flew from the knowledge of terrors forgotten and dead.⁵²

⁵¹ *red* — Lovecraft had been a boy astronomer but also a boy meteorologist, complete with well-equipped roof-top weather station of his old home. Here he alludes to the well-known folk weather-lore saying... “red sky at night, shepherd’s delight / red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning”, of the sort he would have encountered in the old almanacs that he collected all his life.

⁵² *knowledge of terrors* — note the speed of the realisation. The poem’s narrator is warned just in time, and flees from the *very possibility* of discovery — he does not discover something and *then* flee from what he has found.

At first glance the metaphor of the slow ominous red sunrise does not quite match the word *sped* — which implies a sudden discovery. For a better tonal match, *sped* might have better read *bled*. Yet *like* is used, so there is not actually a physically red sunrise going on. Obviously a sunrise would be superfluous to an eternal city of effulgent light in the depths of space. Thus, *sped* is the correct choice.

Here we encounter a key idea from Lovecraft, that some lost knowledge is better left forgotten and unknown, since there is a strong risk that discovering it will: i) bring personal madness; and ii) perhaps summon terrors “forgotten and dead” from out of the lost aeons. The line of course evokes the famous passage in *Call of Cthulhu*: “the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents”, etc. But it also evokes the ending of “The Shadow Out of Time”, which shares the poem’s setting of an ancient abandoned super-city and beings who can travel across the stars by mental projection. This sentiment also relates to Lovecraft personal atheism, that “We need not look up to imaginary idols in the empty sky” and if we do so as moderns then we risk devolving through warfare into a new “primitive selfish savagery” made all the more horrible by perverted science (Lovecraft, “Life for Humanity’s Sake”, 1920).

Finally, recall that the mythic Orion is forever doomed to stay in the winter night sky, and is impelled to flee before the sun rises. The narrator appears to share in this fate, and the attentive reader — primed by all the other Orion references in the poem — may then wonder if the poet has somehow gazed and stayed too long and thus has *become* the aeon-benighted Orion, he who is now doomed to vanish from the sky so quickly when his beloved dawn approaches. Here again is another aspect of the risk facing the modern man, who may in his hubris come to believe that he has become the god-like ‘superman’ at last — only to be swept away by vast and indifferent cosmic forces.