# Lovecraft, Decadence, and Aestheticism
## by James Machin

H. P. Lovecraft has been regarded widely as a writer of 'cosmic indifferentism', a nihilist whose weird fiction finds its register of horror in the revelation that human existence is essentially meaningless.[1] The typical Lovecraft tale—'The Call of Cthulhu' (1927) perhaps being the exemplar—begins with the curious inquiry into mystery of the doomed protagonist/s, and culminates in the discovery of malignant non-human agency, the existence of which shatters the human assumption that the universe is somehow calibrated towards human aspiration or wellbeing; that there is a fundamental, anthropocentric *telos* to the cosmos. Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock have described this as an 'antihumanist undoing of human exceptionalism', a philosophical stance that has led to Lovecraft being described as possessing an 'absolute hatred of the world' tantamount to philosophical nihilism.[2] In this respect, Lovecraft has been seen as the wellspring (or perhaps 'sickspring' would be more apt) of an austere pessimistic (or, to use Lovecraft's preferred specificity, 'indifferentist') strain in contemporary horror and weird fiction, which incurred notably into mainstream consciousness with the inclusion of anti-natalist discourse and weird aesthetic of the first season of the HBO series *True Detective* in 2014.[3] Its writer, Nic Pizzolatto, certainly acknowledged the influence of Lovecraft, and Lovecraft's contemporary heir apparent in terms of gloomy, ascetic naysaying, Thomas Ligotti (1953–), who 'describes his own brand of weird fiction, and weird fiction in general, as constituting a strategy by which to spread pessimistic ideas.'[4]

According to this—certainly not unjustified—view, Lovecraft can be seen as a typical product of a preceding era in which the known bearings of religious and humanist certainty have been obliterated by advances in scientific knowledge, and associated literary 'premonitions of modernity'.[5] I will demonstrate below that Lovecraft's literary roots in the fin-de-siècle, and especially the associated literary movement that became known as Decadence, are very evident in his writing. I will then go on to argue that regardless of his reputation as a nihilist, pessimist, indifferentist, or some intersection thereof, another aspect of Decadent writing— the aestheticism of Walter Pater—can inform an interpretation of Lovecraft's worldview that transcends existential pessimism, and resolves an apparent contradiction in Lovecraft's fiction: why should the writing of a convinced pessimist so frequently hit a register that is more accurately described as ecstatic and visionary, rather than downbeat and nihilistic?

Lovecraft emerged as a writer in the pulp milieu of the early twentieth century, and critics including China Miéville, Mark Fisher, and Benjamin Noys, have situated him convincingly as a modernist, albeit a 'pulp modernist'.[6] However, as I have argued elsewhere, Lovecraft and various *Weird Tales* contributors and editors considered themselves to be part of a longer literary tradition, rather than part of a post-war *avant garde*. As Roger Luckhurst has argued, Lovecraft's celebrated essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' was an

act of self-conscious canon formation; an invention of a 'weird' tradition in American, British, and European letters, spanning centuries, from which Lovecraft implicitly saw himself as emerging.[7] Key in this tradition was Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849). Due to both Poe's overriding and formative influence on Lovecraft, and Poe's seminal influence on what became literary Decadence, Lovecraft's writing fits almost seamlessly into that same, more specific, tradition. As well as providing a platform for contemporary weird fiction, *Weird Tales* reprinted work by Baudelaire, Gautier, Arthur Symons, and others, and Lovecraft conceived of this Decadent tradition as a preferable alternative to the standard 'English nineteenth century' canon, citing authors such as 'Walter Pater, Lafcadio Hearn, Arthur Symons, Arthur Machen, Wilde, Gautier, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé' as his, alternative, 'titans' of the period.[8] Indeed, he not only allied himself with Decadence, but also co-opted his circle of correspondents and writers, including, for example, Frank Belknap Long and Samuel Loveman:[9]

> We belong to the wholly aesthete-pagan tradition of Keats, Poe, Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire, & so on, hence may seem a trifle bizarre from the standpoint of the milder Tennyson-Browning-Matthew Arnold &c. tradition […] Art for art's sake only is our motto […][10]

—'Art for art's sake' being the Anglophone version of *'l'art pour l'art'*, the aestheticist doctrine originating in the early nineteenth-century philosophy of Victor Cousin, disseminated by 'French Romantic and Symbolist poets', and popularized at the fin de siècle by Oscar Wilde.[11]

## Lovecraft and Decadence

One can schematise Lovecraft's relationship with decadence into three different, though related, streams. The first is the manifestations of decadent style, aesthetic, and worldview in some of Lovecraft's earlier fiction; more traditionally Gothic, yet also quieter and less cosmic in scope. This decadence emerges from Lovecraft's intense valorisation of Poe and its conscious influence on his work, an influence that was shared by decadent writers of the Baudelaire tradition and writers of supernatural tales more generally—traditions both shaped by Poe's legacy, and engaged with by Lovecraft, who was keenly aware of this cross-pollination:

> [Poe's] elevation of disease, perversity, and decay to the level of artistically expressible themes was likewise infinitely far-reaching in effect; for avidly seized, sponsored, and intensified by his eminent French admirer Charles Pierre Baudelaire, it became the nucleus of the principal aesthetic movements in France, thus making Poe in a sense the father of the Decadents and the Symbolists.[12]

The second is a more historically and culturally calibrated decadence of Lovecraft's later fiction (for example, 'The Mound' (1930), *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931), and 'The Shadow Out of Time' (1936)); the contemplation of grand sweeps of

history, on a cosmic scale, often science-fictional, and the rise and fall of human and non-human civilizations alike. These two aspects of Lovecraftian decadence have been connected by Brian Stableford, for example, who encapsulates both in the following comment in his 1998 study of literary decadence:

> Lovecraft made extravagant, if belated, use of such Decadent tropes as hereditary degeneracy, ultimately formulating a strange cosmic perspective which made such degeneracy a condition of the universe. […] Lovecraft's aesthetic theories were thoroughly Decadent […][13]

The third aspect, while perhaps gestured towards in previous criticism, is what I hope is a more original commentary on the resonances that Lovecraft's fiction and worldview has with the aestheticism of Walter Pater, which was popularised by Wilde and came to be intimately entangled with literary decadence.

Carolyn Burdett has argued that while aestheticism and decadence continue to be contested terms, it is still possible to distinguish the former for its emphasis on 'the elevation of taste and the pure pursuit of beauty' and the latter for its narrower focus on a 'set of interlinked qualities' including 'the notion of intense refinement; the valuing of artificiality over nature; a position of *ennui* or boredom rather than of moral earnestness or the valuing of hard work; an interest in perversity and paradox, and in transgressive modes of sexuality.'[14] Dennis Denisoff notes that both terms were also used interchangeably to 'condemn almost any artwork that displayed innovations in aesthetic philosophy, subject or style', especially those that also challenged social and political norms.[15]

As suggested by these definitions, both aestheticism and decadence had a performative aspect, usually transgressive, this being one of the reasons why both were controversial movements in their time, with 'decadence' being used as a pejorative by the movement's critics, reclaimed by its proponents, before finally falling out of favour after the Wilde trial. This continuing slippage or looseness in meaning of the terms has led to apparent contradictions in writing about Lovecraft's relationship with both, made resolvable by identifying the more specific sense in which either term is being employed in any specific instance. For example, Vivian Ralickas has written recently on the influence of decadence on Lovecraft's 'deportment, political view, and fiction', though through the lens of Lovecraft's performance of an associated 'Dandyism', described as a 'strategic appropriation of certain crucial aspects of British gentlemanliness pivotal to the Dandy persona'.[16] However, Lovecraft's biographer S. T. Joshi writes of the 1926 story 'The Silver Key': 'It is rare that Lovecraft so bluntly expressed his philosophy in a work of fiction; but "The Silver Key" can be seen as his definitive repudiation […] of Decadence as a literary theory.'[17] Joshi's comment here, and Stableford and Ralckas's identification of Lovecraft's distinctly decadent literary lineage, are resolvable if we acknowledge—as we should—that decadence is a capacious enough term to encompass, on the one hand, the sort of bohemian, amoral lifestyle of the type Lovecraft detested, and a distinct aesthetic of the Poe tradition, which he adored. This is an apparent, though not actual, contradiction that Lovecraft himself identified in a letter of 1930:

> Parts of Huysmans' *A Rebours* and *La Bas* could have been modelled in a way more pleasing to Anglo-Saxons without any subtraction from the substance or proportioning […] I don't consider either my own distaste, or Br'er Joris-Karl's possible carelessness or poor taste or difference of nationality, of sufficient importance to read the riot act about! […] many of these definitely diseased minds have produced much material of the highest artistic value […] Writers I'd call morbid are D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, Huysmans and Baudelaire. Yet every one is an indispensable figure in the expression and interpretation of Western Europe between 1850 and 1930.[18]

Ignoring the conflation of decadence and modernism for the purposes of this essay, Lovecraft is clear that, in his opinion, decadent writers can be 'morbid'—with that word's implication of pathological or physiological decadence, or what Symons described as a 'spiritual and moral perversity', rather than morbid subject matter—but nevertheless aesthetically successful and productive in their morbidity.[19]

Conversely, Lovecraft exploited the aesthetic potential of decadent morbidity in his own fiction, while making regular use of the word 'decadent' as a pejorative in his correspondence when discussing what he perceived as the cultural, political, and racial decline immanent in Anglo-American modernity: '[New York City] has moved past the zone of civilisation into that of definite decadence—being rotten, as it were, before it is ripe';[20] '[…] Protestantism itself— as a supernatural faith—will decline because of the graduation of its thoughtful members to philosophic atheism or agnosticism (& of its thoughtless members to decadent and disorganised drifting) […];[21] 'Democracy means decadence—the triumph of the machine over the individual.'[22] Lovecraft's use of decadent tropes, and the word 'decadence', in his fiction, is similarly pejorative, yet freights many of his texts with one of the following calibrations of decadence—related to but not identical with the 'three streams' identified above—or more often some mix thereof:

1) a Gothic aesthetic and Poe-like atmosphere replete with familial decline, rot, decay, and the tomb;
2) the notion of decadence as atavistic, physiological 'degeneration' or 'zoological retrogression', inspired by writers influential on Lovecraft including Arthur Machen and H. G. Wells, and contemporaneous evolutionary, scientific, and pseudoscientific discourse of the type popularized by Max Nordau (1849–1923) and Wells;[23] and
3) using decadence as an *ur*-narrative on an explicitly cosmic scale, engaging with the sublime register in its contemplation of the aeon-long waxing and waning of remote alien civilisations, and of the vanishingly insignificant contingency of human history within this context.

Combinations of these various 'decadences' are already in place in earlier stories such as, for example, 'The Lurking Fear' (1923), which relates the discovery by the

protagonist—a local investigator—of the slow decline and atavistic degeneration of the Martense family in the Appalachian Mountains. The seventeenth-century patriarch, Gerrit Martense, was 'a wealthy New-Amsterdam merchant', and the family's decline is a synecdoche for the decadence of the whole region:[24]

> The place is a remote, lonely elevation in that part of the Catskills where Dutch civilisation once feebly and transiently penetrated, leaving behind as it receded only a few ruined mansions and a degenerate squatter population inhabiting pitiful hamlets on isolated slopes.[25]

Due to their extreme isolation and indulgence in cannibalism, the Martense family eventually become so degenerate as to lose their humanity. The protagonist describes one as a 'filthy whitish gorilla thing with sharp yellow fangs and matted fur' and 'the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground.'[26] However, when describing the inhabitants of the surrounding region as 'mountain decadents', the protagonist is clearly not suggesting that they are Baudelaire-reading exquisites.[27]

There is therefore a fourth type of deployment of the word 'decadence' by Lovecraft, indicated by its capitalisation in, for example, 'The Hound' (1922), where he is clearly writing about 'Decadence' as an artistic and literary movement:

> […] St. John and I had followed enthusiastically every aesthetic and intellectual movement which promised respite from our devastating ennui. The enigmas of the Symbolists and the ecstasies of the pre-Raphaelites all were ours in their time, but each new mood was drained too soon of its diverting novelty and appeal. Only the sombre philosophy of the Decadents could hold us, and this we found potent only by increasing gradually the depth and diabolism of our penetrations. Baudelaire and Huysmans were soon exhausted of thrills, till finally there remained for us only the more direct stimuli of unnatural personal experiences and adventures.[28]

Joshi has argued convincingly that in such fervid passages Lovecraft is writing "at least partially with tongue-in-cheek", and that his treatment of 'the Decadents' is knowing and wry rather than an earnest attempt to recapture the hothouse atmosphere of fin-de-siècle letters.[29] Nor was Lovecraft unique in this combination of an appropriation of the Decadent style with a willingness to treat it with irreverence: Dennis Denisoff has observed that:

> […] even contributors to the Aesthetic or Decadent movement—such as Richard le Gallienne, Vernon Lee, and Walter Pater—voiced displeasure at some of their qualities [and] late aestheticist and decadent works such as Aubrey Beardsley's drawings and Ada Leverson's short stories imply that the movements had in fact fallen into self-parody.[30]

A similar admixture of Decadent tropes is found in the 1926 story 'The Silver Key', which is predicated on an affective aesthetic response of the protagonist, Randolph Carter, who is alienated in adulthood from an idealised 'dreamland' accessible in his youth:

> He walked impassive through the cities of men, and sighed because no vista
> seemed fully real; because every flash of yellow sunlight on tall roofs and
> every glimpse of balustraded plazas in the first lamps of evening served only
> to remind him of dreams he had once known, and to make him homesick for
> ethereal lands he no longer knew how to find.

He tries to recapture this visionary state through a variety of means which, as
with 'The Hound', offer a condensed iteration of and *homage* to the adventures of
Huysmans' protagonists, who though a sequence of connected novels, seek to cure
their existential ennui through a sequence of aesthetic, dissolute, satanic, and
then redemptively Catholic, explorations and experiences:[31]

> It was after this that he cultivated deliberate illusion, and dabbled in the
> notions of the bizarre and the eccentric as an antidote for the commonplace.
> Most of these, however, soon shewed their poverty and barrenness; and he
> saw that the popular doctrines of occultism are as dry and inflexible as those
> of science, yet without even the slender palliative of truth to redeem them.
> [...] So Carter bought stranger books and sought out deeper and more
> terrible men of fantastic erudition; delving into arcana of consciousness that
> few have trod, and learning things about the secret pits of life, legend, and
> immemorial antiquity which disturbed him ever afterward.[32]

Like Huysmans' central character des Esseintes in *À rebours* (1884), Carter has
the means to 'live on a rarer plane', decorating and furnishing his 'Boston home to
suit his changing moods; one room for each, hung in appropriate colours, furnished
with befitting books and objects, and provided with sources of the proper
sensations of light, heat, sound, taste, and odour.'[33]

Despite the misgivings towards the movement identified by Joshi,
therefore, Lovecraft borrowed from its literature enthusiastically and
unapologetically. Max Beerbohm's account of Decadence in the leading journal of
the British manifestation of the movement, the *Yellow Book*, tracks on to
Lovecraft's own fiction almost seamlessly: for Beerbohm, Decadence has
implications of 'marivaudage, lassitude, a love of horror and unusual things, a love
of argot and archaism and the mysteries of style'.[34] This neatly sums up Lovecraft's
prose style, antithetical to what Roger Luckhurst has described as 'orthodox
creative writing [...] dominated for years by the model of Raymond Carver's
minimalism, which demands the erasure of all adjectival intensifiers and clausal
repetitions', but still the result of 'a conscious aesthetic choice' by Lovecraft, and
one for which he had an adroitness far beyond that of his parodists.[35]

## Lovecraft and Aestheticism

One of the writers that Lovecraft includes in his alternative list of literary 'titans',
compiled in reaction to the dominant 'Arnoldian' canon, is Walter Pater. It is Pater
that I would now like to focus on, since (as I will argue) the influence of Pater's
exposition of aesthetics—with its 'momentous, and potentially redemptive, ethical
implications' beyond the demesne of the metaphysical and religious—can be

clearly delineated in Lovecraft's fiction and worldview.[36] Pater's atheism, or at least religious doubt and agnosticism, pervades much of his writing and contributed to contemporaneous controversy surrounding his work and its influence. It also dovetails with and evidently shaped Lovecraft's own worldview. For example, Marcus Aurelius' long exposition of stoicism, influenced by Heraclitus, contains many pre-echoes of Lovecraft's own 'ethics of diminishment, the undoing of human pretence and self-aggrandisement' in the context of deep time and deep space:[37]

> Bethink thee often of the swiftness with which the things that are, or are even now coming to be, are swept past thee: that the very substance of them is but the perpetual motion of water: that there is almost nothing which continueth: of that bottomless depth of time, so close at thy side. Folly! to be lifted up, or sorrowful, or anxious, by reason of things like these! Think of infinite matter, and thy portion—how tiny a particle, of it! of infinite time, and thine own brief point there; of destiny, and the jot thou art in it […][38]

This civic address by the Emperor continues for several pages in this vein; his rumination on the 'the sepulchral inscriptions of all peoples and times', their testimony to the futile 'striving' of the multitudes, which afterwards 'dissolved again into their dust', and his conclusion that we are 'creeping through life' on a 'tiny space of earth […] a pigmy soul carrying a dead body to its grave.'[39] However, if, as previously discussed, Lovecraft's worldview is similarly indifferentist, there is an ecstatic or visionary register in his writing which belies the nihilism or pessimism of which he is often accused. Miéville has argued that this ecstatic register places Lovecraft in a 'tradition […] of a number of the ecstatic religious poets of the Middle Ages and later' in the tradition of Julian of Norwich (c.1342– c.1416).[40] He associates this valence of Lovecraft's writing with a 'simultaneous striving for and inevitable failure of the representation of the unpresentable through language' located in modernism.[41] Miéville also concurs with Houellebecq's observation that Lovecraft's pathological racism occasionally manifests itself as a hallucinatory, 'poetic trance', associated with an 'ecstatic collapse of the subject position' that can manifest itself in his writing.[42] I will offer a third account of the ecstatic in Lovecraft's writing, predicated on Paterian aesthetics, of which Lovecraft was a keen enthusiast. Before I do so, however, I should provide some examples of Lovecraft's ecstatic register.

The basic plot of 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' (1931) is almost irresistibly amenable to readings that gloss it as a crude metaphor for Lovecraft's hysterical horror of racial miscegenation, with its associated horrors of atavistic degeneration, and the corruption of the 'pure' Nordic or Anglo-Saxon ascendancy. Hence, the protagonist investigates an isolated sea port on the New England coast, and finds the inhabitants physically and morally degenerate, and of course 'decadent', corrupted over centuries by their interbreeding with a grotesque humanoid fish-like species of abyssopelagic and possibly alien provenance.[43] However, when the protagonist, at the denouement, discovers that his own family

originate in Innsmouth and that he, himself, also carries its taint, his reaction turns from abject self-destructive horror to ecstatic wonder:

> So far I have not shot myself as my uncle Douglas did. I bought an automatic and almost took the step, but certain dreams deterred me. The tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them. I hear and do strange things in sleep, and awake with a kind of exaltation instead of terror. I do not believe I need to wait for the full change as most have waited. If I did, my father would probably shut me up in a sanitarium as my poor little cousin is shut up. Stupendous and unheard-of splendours await me below, and I shall seek them soon. *Iä-R'lyeh! Cthulhu fhtagn! Iä! Iä!* No, I shall not shoot myself— I cannot be made to shoot myself!
>
> I shall plan my cousin's escape from that Canton madhouse, and together we shall go to marvel-shadowed Innsmouth. We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory for ever.[44]

In this specific passage, it is difficult to locate racism as the animus, since even if the stream-of-consciousness were specifically calibrated by Lovecraft to demonstrate the protagonist's insanity-as-response to the revelation of his racial 'impurity', the result for him is 'wonder and glory for ever' rather than abjection. Regardless of the crude irrationality of Lovecraft's racism, his literary expression of it is no blunt ideological instrument; horror and revulsion frequently elide with transcendent awe.

This sense of transcendent awe and the sublime, as well as Lovecraft's Epicurean enthusiasm for aesthetic experience, is similarly discernible in his nonfiction, manifesting itself in the ecstatic register of his responses to weird fiction in 'Supernatural Horror in Literature'; in, for example, his descriptions of the sublime 'altitudes of sheer spiritual fright' of Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and the 'wild domed hills, archaic forests, and cryptical Roman ruins of the Gwent countryside' Lovecraft encounters in the work of Arthur Machen, and especially in Lovecraft's consideration of Poe:[45]

> And in the prose there yawn open for us the very jaws of the pit— inconceivable abnormalities slyly hinted into a horrible half-knowledge by words whose innocence we scarcely doubt till the cracked tension of the speaker's hollow voice bids us fear their nameless implications; daemoniac patterns and presences slumbering noxiously till waked for one phobic instant into a shrieking revelation that cackles itself to sudden madness or explodes in memorable and cataclysmic echoes.[46]

This level of fervid intensity may be unusual in most literary criticism, but is encountered as regularly in Lovecraft's celebrated essay as it is in his fiction.

Mark Fisher astutely points out that in 'Notes on Writing Weird Fiction' (1933), Lovecraft's own emphasis is on 'vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy' rather than horror.[47] Lovecraft goes on to further define these 'impressions', which through his fiction he seeks to

visualise 'more clearly and detailedly' with an emphasis on their aesthetic affect. They are to be conveyed by 'certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images encountered in art and literature' (p. 175). Here, Lovecraft is conceptualising his writing practice in distinctly Paterian terms, privileging his subjective responses to fleeting 'impressions, images, sensations' and the 'poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake'.[48] Lovecraft refers to reading Pater several times in his correspondence. He makes passing reference to re-reading *Marius the Epicurean* in a letter of 1 August 1924.[49] In a letter to Elizabeth Toldridge, dated 8 March 1929, Lovecraft comments, 'Walter Pater writes in prose, but much of what he says is equivalent to poetry. *Marius the Epicurean, The Renaissance,* & *Greek Studies* will give the cream of his genius—especially the first named.'[50] Barton Levi St Armand connects Lovecraft's enthusiasm for Paterian aestheticism to Lovecraft's famously unhappy sojourn in New York, 1924 to 1926:

> It is no accident [...] that Lovecraft spent the days of his so-called New York Exile reading such works as Wilde's *The Critic as Artist* and Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* [...] for the Decadents and Aesthetes opened up for him a world where he could escape the dread realities of the present.'[51]

Houellebecq cites Lovecraft's time in New York—specifically the acute perception of his own failure in the context of the city's dynamic and thriving immigrant communities—as the catalyst of an intensification of Lovecraft's certainly extant bigotries into a 'hallucinatory' intensity bleeding into his fiction.[52] However, once again, the convulsive, febrile racism evident in, for example, the New York-set 1925 tale 'The Horror of Red Hook', can be contrasted with another, very different, response to the city discernible in 'He' (1925):

> Coming for the first time upon the town, I had seen it in the sunset from a bridge, majestic above its waters, its incredible peaks and pyramids rising flower-like and delicate from pools of violet mist to play with the flaming golden clouds and the first stars of evening. Then it had lighted up window by window above the shimmering tides where lanterns nodded and glided and deep horns bayed weird harmonies, and itself become a starry firmament of dream, redolent of faery music, and one with the marvels of Carcassonne and Samarcand and El Dorado and all glorious and half-fabulous cities.[53]

He imbues the metropolitan cityscape with a sublime, ecstatic visionary wonder, a palimpsest of the real and the irreal, urban architecture being one of the key conveyances of Lovecraft's aesthetic ideal, even to the point of ameliorating his violent antipathy to religion:

> Religion would be gloriously justified if it had never done more than evoke the Gothic cathedral and the painting of Renaissance Italy. It is only Protestant Puritanism which tries to choke off art and absorb the feelings that ought to go into an appreciation of beauty, but even Puritanism hasn't held that pose very vigorously since the 17th century. The most beautiful thing in Providence is the steeple of the 1st Baptist Church, put up in 1775;

and if you saw the half-finished Baptist Church on Riverside Drive, New York, you would have a new revelation of what soaring, pinnacle Gothic loveliness can be.[54]

The key artistic virtues for Lovecraft are, then, to be found in aesthetic harmony: 'So far as I am concerned—I am an aesthete devoted to harmony, and the extraction of the maximum possible pleasure from life.'[55] A surprising claim, perhaps, from a writer so frequently caricatured anhedonic and ascetic. However, in this letter of 1929, Lovecraft explicitly articulates his Paterian philosophy, one evidently informed by Pater's infamous 'Conclusion' to the first edition of his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), in which Pater argues for the primacy of the subjective aesthetic response over other religious, metaphysical, or ethical concerns. Especially resonant with Lovecraft's own worldview is Pater's assumption of the fleeting ephemerality of human life, as demonstrated by scientific materialism, and what Pater calls the 'tremulous wisp' of the sensorium, 'constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is *real* in our life fines itself down.'[56] This conviction of Pater's, 'this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity', also carried with it an 'ideological threat' in 'the book's assertion that "no fixed principles of either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain", as [John] Wordsworth had phrased it'.[57] Once again, Lovecraft follows Pater's lead in his assertion that his own 'marked distaste for immoral and unlawful acts which contravene harmonious traditions and standards of beautiful living' is 'not *ethics but aesthetics*' (italics Lovecraft's own).[58] So Pater writes of Marius, 'Yes! there were the evils, the vices, which he avoided as, essentially, a failure in good taste.'[59]

As Matthew Beaumont points out, the controversy over Pater's 'Conclusion' was exacerbated when 'Decadent [Oxford] undergraduates, their enthusiasm sharpened by the older generation's indignation, sloganized its statements on aesthetics and used them as a rough guide to ethics'.[60] Of course, the assumption was that free of the constraints of a religious moral framework, only amoral hedonism could ensue, rather than Lovecraft's *aesthetic* appreciation of what he regarded as correct behaviour. Again, this moral conception, predicated on aestheticism, free from entanglement in what he regarded as fallacious metaphysical notions of good and evil, is explicitly articulated in Lovecraft's fiction:

> But when he came to study those who had thrown off the old myths, he found them even more ugly than those who had not. They did not know that beauty lies in harmony, and that loveliness of life has no standard amidst an aimless cosmos save only its harmony with the dreams and the feelings which have gone before and blindly moulded our little spheres out of the rest of chaos. They did not see that good and evil and beauty and ugliness are only ornamental fruits of perspective, whose sole value lies in their linkage to what chance made our fathers think and feel, and whose finer details are different for every race and culture.[61]

Moreover, Lovecraft cited aesthetic contemplation as not only a rare source of pleasure in the face of a universe devoid of meaning, but also as the font of meaning itself. Writing to August Derleth in 1930, Lovecraft explains why suicide is not of interest to him, despite his committed position of cosmic indifferentism, claiming that the reasons he would not consider it are:

> […] strongly linked with architecture, scenery, and lighting and atmospheric effects, and take the form of vague impressions of adventurous expectancy coupled with elusive memory—impressions that certain vistas, particularly those associated with sunsets, are avenues of approach to spheres or conditions of wholly undefined delights and freedoms which I have known in the past and have a slender possibility of knowing again in the future.[62]

Lovecraft continues in this Paterian vein to speculate about the possibility of a 'heightened perception which shall make all forms and combinations of beauty simultaneously visible' to him. His thinking here resonates with the ending of his 1927 story 'The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath', in which Randolph Carter's visionary pursuit of an oneiric 'marvellous city' culminates in his realisation that his 'gold and marble city of wonder' is 'only the sum of what [he has] seen and loved in youth', i.e. the aesthetic beauty of the old Boston skyline, and it is this aesthetic reengagement with the 'beauty and light' of his childhood home that redeems him.[63] As Kate Hext writes of Pater's aesthetic response to 'deep time': 'Thus does art save the individual from the apparent meaninglessness of a single life under the conditions of modernity. For even if all is nothing in the end, it is at least made meaningful by the beauty of its passing.'[64]

Although these moments of beauty and awe in Lovecraft's writing are easily overshadowed by his engagement with the horrific, and with physical and philosophical threat, their consistent presence in both his fiction and non-fiction reveal a deep commitment to not only the tropes of literary Decadence, but also to ecstatic Paterian aesthetic uplift. Lovecraft's claim that aesthetic contemplation of architecture, art, and literature provides a meaning for existence overriding any other does more psychological heavy lifting than it is usually given credit for: for Lovecraft, this aesthetic philosophy was no mere sop, or occasional poultice, for existential ennui and despair. It was the bedrock of his expressions of robust enthusiasm for consciousness and its consolations, and his commitment to 'the extraction of the maximum possible pleasure from life'.

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