Proceedings of the First International Colin Wilson Conference

University of Nottingham
July 1, 2016

Proceedings of the First International Colin Wilson Conference

University of Nottingham
July 1, 2016

Edited by

Colin Stanley

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Proceedings of the First International Colin Wilson Conference

Edited by Colin Stanley

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8172-4
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8172-2

CONTENTS

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Rowan Wilson for the photographs of the various speakers and for the video recordings of the papers.

Introduction

First International Colin Wilson Conference
University of Nottingham
Friday July 1st 2016

Colin Stanley

When the *Colin Wilson Collection* was opened at the University of Nottingham in the summer of 2011, it was agreed among those present that there should be a Conference to discuss his work. 2016 was mooted as an appropriate date because it coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of his first (and still most famous) book *The*

Outsider, which has never been out of print since publication day in 1956 and now been translated into over 30 languages.

Sadly, in the meantime, Colin Wilson (who was too ill to attend the opening) died on December 5th 2013. Since then I have been assisting his widow, Joy, to sort his papers and manuscripts in preparation for their transfer to the archive. Much of this has been achieved and the University now not only holds copies of all his printed work but also a significant amount of his manuscripts, letters, journals and assorted papers along with a digital copy of the handwritten manuscript of *The Outsider*.

As it happened 2016 turned out to be an exceptional year for Colin Wilson and studies of his work. In January, Paupers' Press published Nicolas Tredell's *Novels to Some Purpose: the fiction of Colin Wilson*. In May, Cambridge Scholars published Colin Wilson's *Collected Essays on Philosophers*. This was followed by Nigel Bray's *Bargaining With the Devil: the Work of Colin Wilson in a Cultural Context* in June and my booklet *The Writing of Colin Wilson's 'Adrift in Soho'*. In September my study *An Evolutionary Leap: Colin Wilson on Psychology* was released by Karnac Books and Gary Lachman's major biographical study *Beyond the Robot: the life and work of Colin Wilson*, by Tarcher/Penguin; the latter coinciding with a new edition of *The Outsider* with an Introduction by Lachman.

It was appropriate that all of the above-named presented papers at the First International Colin Wilson Conference on Friday July 1st. This was held at the King's Meadow campus of the University of Nottingham where the Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections (and therefore Colin Wilson's archive) is housed. Among the special guests were Joy Wilson, her daughter Sally, sons Damon and Rowan and granddaughter Rosa, all of whom were taken, by the Manuscripts staff, behind the scenes on a tour of the archive

store before the Conference got underway. Curiously, King's Meadow was previously the home of ITV's Central Studios and it was there, on a cold night in March 1995, that I, and my wife Gail, met Colin Wilson himself in the lobby. He had invited us to be in the audience at a live programme of psychic phenomena, hosted by David Frost, entitled 'Beyond Belief'. Colin was one of the experts employed to explain the mysteries which unfolded during the course of the programme. In a wonderful example of synchronicity the programme was broadcast from the very auditorium which now holds his archive.

The first paper was presented by Simon Brighton, a writer and musician who collaborated with Colin Wilson on a CD of music and spoken word entitled *A Giant* which celebrated the work of T. C. Lethbridge. He had also contributed an essay on *The Philosopher's Stone* to *Around the Outsider*: *essays presented to Colin Wilson on the occasion of his 80th birthday* a festschrift, published by 0-Books, in 2011. For some years Simon has been working on a project to digitise Colin's journal which he had recorded onto hundreds of cassette tapes over the years. The delegates were treated to many fascinating audio extracts from these journals during the paper.

Professor Stephen R. L. Clark, emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool, who had written an essay on *The Mind Parasites* for *Around the Outsider*, presented the next paper on a writer about whom Colin Wilson had much to say over the years: H. P. Lovecraft. His enlightening paper contained many quotes from Lovecraft and also touched upon Colin Wilson's ambivalent attitude to the author's work.

After a short coffee break, Lindsay Siviter, who, as a trained historian, has worked in various museums around the UK including Scotland Yard's famous Black Museum and is considered to be an expert on Jack the Ripper, took the

delegates on an entertaining chronological guide to Colin Wilson the 'Ripperologist' (a term he, apparently, coined).

The final paper in the morning session was delivered by Nigel Bray. His paper, based on a section of his newly published book (mentioned above), intriguingly entitled 'Colin Wilson and 'Dread of Being'', included an analysis of the author's important ideas on depression, boredom, and how we can overcome them.

Before lunch a specially prepared trailer for the forthcoming film of Colin Wilson's novel *Adrift in Soho*, directed by Pablo Behrens for Burning Films, was shown.

During the lunch-break delegates were invited to view a display of interesting items from the archive which included early versions of Colin Wilson's first novel *Ritual in the Dark*, the actual handwritten manuscript of *The Outsider*, various signed first editions, newspaper and journal articles and other treasures.

The afternoon session was inaugurated by Nicolas Tredell whose contribution to *Around the Outsider* was an essay on *Ritual in the Dark*. His fascination with this under-rated novel was reflected in his paper 'A Ritual for Outsiders: philosophy and narrative in *The Outsider* and *Ritual in the Dark*'.

David Moore who runs the blog 'Ritual in the Dark: essays and reflections on the work of Colin Wilson' (https://ritualinthedark.wordpress.com/) presented the next paper which he entitled 'The Light Barrier: Existentialism and the occult in Colin Wilson's science fiction'. In this paper he argued, very convincingly, that *The Mind Parasites* and *The Philosopher's Stone* formed the link between Colin Wilson's new existentialism and his writings on the occult.

Gary Lachman gave the penultimate paper. His many books on the occult, mysticism and psychology have made him well-known throughout the English-speaking world and he contributed the essay on *Poetry & Mysticism* to *Around the*

Outsider. He chose to talk about Colin Wilson's 'Faculty X': the sense of the reality of other places and other times. His paper drew much discussion among those gathered.

Finally, George C. Poulos, an independent researcher from Australia, whose main interest is in transcendent states of consciousness and who provided the essay on *Beyond the Occult* for *Around the Outsider*, delivered the last paper. He chose, not surprisingly, to speak on Colin Wilson's transcendental theory of evolution in an attempt to provide a link between recent scientific research and Colin Wilson's ideas.

The proceedings concluded, many of the delegates retired to my house near Trent Bridge to continue the debate fuelled by some good wine. It was here that the guest of honour, Joy Wilson, was presented with a framed artist's caricature of her late husband. The following day there was a meal for the speakers and special guests at a local restaurant.

Details of the holdings of the Colin Wilson Collection and Archive can be found at:
Colin Wilson Archive:
http://mss-cat.nottingham.ac.uk/DServe/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=CWA&pos=1
Colin Wilson Collection:
http://mss-cat.nottingham.ac.uk/DServe/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=CWC&pos=13

THE COLIN WILSON AUDIO PROJECT

SIMON BRIGHTON

I first come across Colin Wilson in the early 1980s, while living in a Balham bedsit; on moving into this accommodation there were two books left on the mantelpiece, *The Dice Man* by Luke Rhinehart and Colin Wilson's *The Occult*.

After my mother moved down to Cornwall in 1996, I decided to use her proximity to Colin Wilson as an excuse to get in touch and sent a short letter of introduction. I was amazed a little while later to receive a phone call and an invitation to visit. After the initial trip and subsequent visits I got to know Colin and his family well.

Around 2001 I worked with a group of musicians put together by Julian Cope, called 'The Sons of TC Lethbridge'.

The first project for the band was a double CD entitled *A Giant* which comprised of Lethbridge-inspired music and Colin Wilson reading a selection of his own writings concerning Lethbridge.

To record the narration I visited Colin in Cornwall. While chatting Colin remarked that he kept an audio diary "almost every day" and that prompted a discussion about possibly archiving the diary to preserve the tapes and the content. At the time Colin was not against the idea but couldn't see how it could be achieved.

In 2014, after Colin Wilson's death, I visited Colin Stanley in Nottingham. Colin happened to have one of the diary tapes which he played. Reminded of the idea of archiving the audio diary I asked Colin to speak to the Wilson family with a view to commence 'backing up,' cataloguing and preserving the audio diary. The family agreed and were happy that this should happen.

In early 2014 I visited Gorran Haven to collect what proved to be the first batch of tapes; there would be several more batches as further tapes were found tucked away around the house and the number of cassettes ultimately would be over a thousand.

For transferring the tapes I used a Tascam porta-studio, and recorded both sides at once into high quality MP3. This procedure meant that 3 hours of audio could be transferred in 40 minutes. At present the archive consists of over 2000 hours of audio. Many of the tapes were jumbled up and some had been damaged in a small fire which occurred when the telephone lines were struck by lightning and the phone by the bed exploded causing the bed to catch on fire and the tapes above to melt. Luckily the actual tape could be extracted and played.

Along with the diary, Colin kept recordings of his talks, radio interviews and interviews he did with others. Consequently

there is a mixture of subjects within the audio archive, 95% is the audio diary.

Colin Wilson's first consistent use of a recorder to create a sequential audio diary appears to be in 1982 (this date is understandably provisional as there may be earlier tapes not found yet in the large house, chalets and storage cabins that comprise the Wilsons' residence) when he took to using a hand held cassette recorder to put down some ideas for the book on Jung that was to become *C. G. Jung: Lord of the Underworld*. Consequently the first series of tapes are labelled 'Jung 1, 2, 3,' and so on up to 'Jung 57' at the end of 1985; beginning in 1986 Colin decided to just add the date. The last tape is for March 2011.

The first tapes were kept for the intention of working through ideas, capturing thoughts and insights that might be fleeting but significant. Over the 30 years the diary evolved into a more discursive account of the goings on around Gorran Haven and the trips and holidays the Wilsons took: more of a typical diary. Colin shows resourcefulness in recording, often making entries driving to the supermarket, on the train or on holiday.

Throughout the diary Colin returns again and again to his main theme of how to defeat or at least control 'The Robot' the essential part of us that takes over experience and shades our perceptions. How do we challenge the tendency to sink into inertia and pessimism when all around there is evidence that the world is fascinating and meaningful?

After the conference I handed over to Colin Stanley a drive which contained the 160 gigabytes of the audio content of the project, the Audio Dairy will eventually be available through the Nottingham University Colin Wilson Archive.

Editor's Note: much of this paper consisted of audio and visual clips. I would advise students to access the YouTube recording at:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTgByjnbJ87qVyAfb9jsUuu-xx8AcmP9W

LOVECRAFT AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

STEPHEN R. L. CLARK

Abstract: Colin Wilson supposed that H.P. Lovecraft believed himself to be writing horror fiction, and was ignorant of the excited wonder that at least his later stories evoked. I suggest that Lovecraft was a more self-conscious artist than Wilson thought, and that his narrators do not necessarily represent his own opinion and feeling. A recent novella by Ruthanna Emrys attempts a reconfiguration of Lovecraft's universe, with the devotees of Cthulhu recognized as an oppressed ethnic and religious minority, and their religion more realistic than most anthropocentric cults. "What our religion tells us" so her narrator says, "the part that is a religion, is that the gods created life to try and make meaning. It's ultimately hopeless, and even gods die, but the effort is real. Will always have been real, even when everything is over and no one remembers." I shall attempt to examine this vision and the notion that we can 'create meaning', even or especially in a world that is both alienating and – after many ages –

doomed. Work by Tolkien, Stapledon and Buchan as well as Wilson provides useful comparisons and contrasts.

Weird Style and the Outsider

Almost everyone who writes about H.P.Lovecraft's work begins by noticing and rebutting Edmund Wilson's notorious misjudgement, that Lovecraft wrote silly stories about 'omniscient conical snails' and 'whistling invisible octopuses', in an overloaded style[1]. Lovecraft's style, of course, is not to everyone's taste – any more than any other author's – but it was not amateurish nor ill-considered. He suffered a little from the need to fill the pages of *Weird Tales* and the like, as well as from editorial interference with some of his best stories, but his work is in general carefully composed and subtly written. The bulk of his stories in fact are written, deliberately, in an unemotional and careful style, with exactly the 'prosaic objectivity' that Wilson praised in other writers: though this did not stop Wilson's sneering at the detailed – exactly, 'prosaic'– descriptions of alien species[2]. It is only when his narrators have to confront matters wholly outside the ordinary frame of our own species-limited perception that he deploys the familiar round of adjectives: horrible, awesome, blasphemous, unhallowed, eerie, eldritch and the like.

> Any criticism of Lovecraft, after making these observations [about his style], should go on to note that his stories are, for the most part, carefully written, and that their objectionable qualities—the over-loaded and too-insistent adjectives, the ludicrous touches which don't quite make us laugh, the italicized last sentences—are not so much lapses as intentional literary devices. Lovecraft is not nodding when he writes them. Rather, he is deliberately employing the jargon and stilted mannerisms of a kind of writing so specialized as to be almost his personal creation, his task and pleasure being the extension and elaboration of a few conventions (that is,

> phrases, characters, settings, and ideas repeated from story to story) into a self-conscious genre or tradition. He means these words, such as Wilson particularized, these phrases and ideas, to be loved and relished for their own sakes. Judged seriously, they must be considered faults of taste; but Lovecraft did not mean for them to be judged seriously.[3]

Oddly, Wilson praised one story, 'The Colour out of Space', which depends in part on suggesting an unimaginable colour outside the familiar spectrum, by much the same deliberately chosen adjectives, because he can pretend that the story is 'really' about radiation sickness (as it very obviously is not). Wilson neither liked nor understood the tradition of 'weird stories', and therefore missed the real force of Lovecraft's work, his serious attempt to place our normal concerns within the picture of an immensely larger and humanly unmeaning cosmos as well as his playful use of the imaginings of other contemporary weird writers, from Arthur Machen to Robert Howard. To be fair to Wilson, he was also put off by the cultish fanfic composed by Lovecraft's followers – as some similarly ignorant critics are put off Tolkien's own writings by his imitators[4].

But how else can we suppose that anyone should write about what is, by hypothesis, outside the frame of ordinary life? Any attempt to go outside the usual framework must be fumbling, a matter of gestures rather than banal description. After all, even our own intimacies are often beyond our grasp!

> Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest. … Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of them, in all their tones and semi-tones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. He believes that an ordinary civilized stockbroker can really produce out of his

> own inside noises which denote all the mysteries of memory and all the agonies of desire[5].

Lovecraft was groping to describe both unfamiliar feelings compounded of terror, dread, curiosity and (imagined) objects beyond ordinary taxonomies (vegetable, animal, mineral) and geometries. He was even, at times, attempting the same task as Plotinus in his attempt to describe what lies before or behind all form!

> We in our travail do not know what we ought to say, and are speaking of what cannot be spoken, and give it a name because we want to indicate it to ourselves as best we can. But perhaps this name 'One' contains [only] a denial of multiplicity. This is why the Pythagoreans symbolically indicated it to each other by the name of Apollo, in negation of the multiple [that is, *A – Pollon*: Not Many].[6]

Lovecraft called the ultimately indescribable Somewhat Azathoth instead, disclaiming any association with beauty, intelligence or meaning. To that I shall return.

Even those critics willing to take his work more seriously still often feel obliged to notice his racism, anti-Semitism, snobbery, disgust with physical entanglements, and offer psychoanalytical or sociological explanations of his life, his narratives and images, as though there could not possibly be any 'rational' or even 'rationally comprehensible' explanation of the stories, or his life. There may be something to gain from such speculations, but I shall largely ignore them here, as I shall also ignore the minutiae of Lovecraft's life as a reasonably dutiful son with an insane father and very difficult mother, autodidact, struggling scholarly author of pulp fiction, voluminous correspondent, and kindly adviser of many younger writers. I shall also turn aside from *Edmund* Wilson to consider instead what *Colin* Wilson did with Lovecraft's

work, and what else can be done: in the rest of this essay 'Wilson' always means Colin Wilson. This will require me to recant some of my own past judgments!

I remarked some years ago that 'Lovecraft, notoriously, did not understand the actual attractions of the stories he composed. His stories are full of 'elder races', vastly extended lives, buried cities, threatened awakenings, and all these are supposed to kill us with horror – whereas in fact they simply give us a welcome sense of age and distance. [Colin] Wilson's genre stories are attempts to do this better, and not to succumb to nihilism, to the thought that nothing 'we' do matters, or that ungovernable horrors lurk beneath the surface of our lives'[7]. This is still something I would partly endorse – except that I now suspect that Lovecraft knew rather more about what he was about than, following Colin Wilson, I supposed.

Wilson's critical remarks about Lovecraft's style and story-telling knowhow[8], seeming to endorse the earlier literary judgement, led August Derleth to challenge Wilson to try and do better himself – a challenge he took up in 'The Return of the Lloigor', *The Mind Parasites*[9]*, The Philosopher's Stone, The Space Vampires,* 'The Tomb of the Old Ones*'* and his four or five volume *Spider World*. These stories, though they employ some elements of the Mythos, are actually and openly directed to an entirely different end than Lovecraft's, to the dream of human *victory* over demons. Oddly, Wilson had already, at the beginning of his own literary career, written something closer in its moral to one of Lovecraft's lesser stories – 'The Outsider'! In Lovecraft's story the narrator, having lived as long as he can remember in an otherwise deserted castle among old books and decaying hangings, can no longer bear his isolation. He tells how he climbed with enormous effort up the highest ruinous tower to catch a sight of light, discovers to his joy that he has clambered out into the world of trees and happy streams described in his library and

makes his way to the lighted house where a party is continuing. Bursting into the party he is surprised and frightened that something else has apparently entered with him, a frightful presence that sends the party screaming away and himself deserted. Then he sees for himself something 'compound of all that is unclean, uncanny, unwelcome, abnormal, and detestable. It was the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and dissolution; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation, the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world – or no longer of this world – yet to my horror I saw in its eaten-away and bone-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more.' Trying to fend off the horror he touches its hand – and is compelled to flee in panic terror, unable either to join the party or to retreat back down into his library.

> Now I ride with the mocking and friendly ghouls on the night-wind, and play by day amongst the catacombs of Nephren-Ka in the sealed and unknown valley of Hadoth by the Nile. I know that light is not for me, save that of the moon over the rock tombs of Neb, nor any gaiety save the unnamed feasts of Nitokris beneath the Great Pyramid; yet in my new wildness and freedom I almost welcome the bitterness of alienage.[10]

In touching the horror's hand, of course, he has found that he was only touching a mirror.

Are we ourselves to be horrified? Is not this a happy ending of sorts? The narrator, alienated from merely human company, after all, finds friends of a sort amongst the ghouls, who are doing no particular harm to anyone! He is reconciled, after a fashion, with his alienation and with the impossibility of an *ordinary* fellowship. Human Society and the pretty

landscape that surrounds it still is only one element in a much larger cosmos, whose inhabitants no longer need to worry about human norms. Wilson's Outsider is also reconciled to being rejected by a society in which he has only residual interest – and perhaps Wilson himself was not overwhelmingly disturbed by the rejection of his own second book (however unreasonable and unfair that rejection).

The idea that Lovecraft did not understand the appeal of his own stories can't easily be maintained. On the contrary, he understood and used the emotions that he depicted in his narrators and that he expected to arouse in his readers. Writing in his short survey of earlier 'weird' literature – one heartily and rightly praised even by Edmund Wilson – he remarks

> Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse. With this foundation, no one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear.[11]

Embracing the Wider World

But of course it is Lovecraft's *narrators* (and his immediate auditors) who are likely to use words like 'blasphemous', 'unholy', 'eldritch' and so on. And even his narrators are also – to their cost – motivated by adventurous curiosity. They want to *know* what is going on, and are altogether changed by their discoveries: they are scientists and scholars who are not wholly disconcerted when they realize how small and insignificant merely *human* affairs must seem in the light of the larger cosmos. They may – with good reason – be cautious

about awakening powerful aliens from sleep, but they do not think those aliens *evil* in themselves. They may rather admire their characters and intelligence. Consider the 'conical snails' that Edmund Wilson mocked: remote cousins in their blend of animal and vegetable of my favourite sea-slug, the nudibranch *Elysia viridis,* they also look like descendants of swimming snails or 'sea butterflies', *Thecosomata*. These 'Old Ones' are roused from millennial hibernation in the Antarctic, and responsible for the death and dismemberment of the humans who had, unintentionally, awoken them:

> Poor devils! After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being. Nature had played a hellish jest on them - as it will on any others that human madness, callousness, or cruelty may hereafter dig up in that hideously dead or sleeping polar waste - and this was their tragic homecoming. They had not been even savages - for what indeed had they done? That awful awakening in the cold of an unknown epoch - perhaps an attack by the furry, frantically barking quadrupeds, and a dazed defense against them and the equally frantic white simians with the queer wrappings and paraphernalia ... poor Lake, poor Gedney ... and poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last - what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! What a facing of the incredible, just as those carven kinsmen and forbears had faced things only a little less incredible! Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star spawn - whatever they had been, they were men![12]

Lovecraft's personal distaste or hatred or contempt was directed at those of *human* descent whom he regarded as 'degenerates' or 'barbarians', whether these were Dutch, Italian or African. Certainly he was a racist and eugenicist – in common with very many of the more respected intellectual and civic authorities of his time and place[13]: his psychology

was not, at the time, so odd as to need impertinent psychological explanation. Maybe he disapproved in his own person of racial miscegenation – but his narrators' horror when confronted by the confusion of biological taxa is not his own: the Darwinian revolution has as its core a recognition that biological taxa are not natural kinds. 'Hippopotami should not have human hands and carry torches … men should not have the heads of crocodiles', his fictional Houdini exclaims in a story ghost-written for Harry Houdini himself[14]. But Lovecraft's point was, exactly, that they might, that our particular sort of life is not a cosmic norm.

> Now all my tales are based [he wrote] on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. These must be handled with unsparing realism, (not catch-penny romanticism) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-haunted Outside—we must remember to leave our humanity—and terrestrialism—at the threshold.[15]

He attributed many crimes and vices to 'degenerates' – wilful ignorance, promiscuity, callous cruelty, cultish worship of inhuman powers, cannibalism and so forth – but at least they were a little less inclined to take human civilization and intelligence for granted. At least they knew – or in his stories at least they knew – that civilized humanity, intelligent

humanity, is both transient and parochial. In the New England of his imagination Miskatonic University is the home of scholars and secret, unread or uncomprehended texts, while only a few miles away are unlettered peasant-farmers[16] who are directly acquainted with the worlds about which the scholars only read. Foreigners – and this may include even *English* foreigners of impeccably aristocratic lineage[17] – are likely to have been contaminated by a cult of the inhuman: they need to break away from this, but not by forgetting or refusing to believe that there *are* inhuman powers. The point is rather – I shall emphasise it further in a moment – that we are not to worship them.

I spoke a moment ago about the 'friendly ghouls' that Lovecraft's Outsider comes to live amongst, and also of Lovecraft's 'playful' use of other writers' imaginings. Perhaps it seems unlikely that he could be playful, or think of having fun. Some readers and critics are content to find him desperately serious, whether in evoking fear or in directing our attention to a wider world. But he could, after all, be both: both serious and playful. Consider another late story, often characterized simply as 'science fiction' rather than as 'weird fiction' (though the distinction is moot): 'The Shadow out of Time'[18]. In this Lovecraft's narrator has to make sense of the strange dreams and half-memories dating from a five-year period in which he seemed to be (literally) out of his mind, directed by another, very intelligent and very peculiar personality – rather as Olaf Stapledon's Last Men inspect and influence the minds of their own immensely remote ancestors[19]. Piecing them together he concocts a narrative in which his primary personality had been transported to an earlier epoch, to inhabit a creature something like a giant, walking mollusc. The ruling intelligences of that epoch were conducting, he imagines, a survey of all available intelligences throughout earth's history by taking the place of

selected creatures in the different ages. Someday they will (someday they already have) migrated en masse to inhabit the bodies of the great beetle civilization that will dominate the earth after humanity's extinction. The narrator, despite his having been thus victimized, is treated kindly (he recalls) and able both to record his own history for the great library, and to talk to other intelligences brought into that era.

> There was a mind from the planet we know as Venus, which would live incalculable epochs to come, and one from an outer moon of Jupiter six million years in the past. Of earthly minds there were some from the winged, starheaded, half-vegetable race of palaeogean Antarctica; one from the reptile people of fabled Valusia[20]; three from the furry pre-human Hyperborean worshippers of Tsathoggua; one from the wholly abominable Tcho-Tchos[21]; two from the arachnid denizens of earth's last age; five from the hardy coleopterous species immediately following mankind, to which the Great Race was some day to transfer its keenest minds en masse in the face of horrible peril; and several from different branches of humanity. I talked with the mind of Yiang-Li, a philosopher from the cruel empire of Tsan-Chan, which is to come in 5,000 A.D.[22]; with that of a general of the greatheaded brown people who held South Africa in 50,000 B.C.; with that of a twelfth-century Florentine monk named Bartolomeo Corsi; with that of a king of Lomar who had ruled that terrible polar land one hundred thousand years before the squat, yellow Inutos came from the west to engulf it[23]. I talked with the mind of Nug-Soth, a magician of the dark conquerors of 16,000 A.D; with that of a Roman named Titus Sempronius Blaesus, who had been a quaestor in Sulla's time; with that of Khephnes, an Egyptian of the 14th Dynasty, who told me the hideous secret of Nyarlathotep, with that of a priest of Atlantis' middle kingdom; with that of a Suffolk gentleman of Cromwell's day, James Woodville; with that of a court astronomer of pre-Inca Peru; with that of the Australian physicist Nevil Kingston-Brown, who will die

> in 2,518 A.D.; with that of an archimage of vanished Yhe in the Pacific [see Derleth "Black Island"]; with that of Theodotides, a Greco-Bactrian official of 200 B.C.; with that of an aged Frenchman of Louis XIII's time named Pierre-Louis Montagny; with that of Crom-Ya, a Cimmerian chieftain of 15,000 B.C.; and with so many others that my brain cannot hold the shocking secrets and dizzying marvels I learned from them.

There are two features of this narrative that should be clear – as well as the rather odd absence of any *female* characters! First, that despite the narrator's 'shock' at all these revelations, they are fascinating rather than horrid or terrifying – or if there is terror involved it is no more than an understandable caution in the face of powers not open to human persuasion. But second, Lovecraft is not drawing here on any *scientific* speculations about what other creatures might in our past or future inhabit and control the earth or other planets, nor is he even *making them up* from scratch to fill a systematized cosmos. There is a sense – to which I shall return – in which Lovecraft was doing something not altogether different from Tolkien: devising a new pseudo-history, a new mythology, even a new language, to fill a gap in our collective imagination. But Lovecraft did not create the 'Cthulhu Mythos' that Derleth and others have devised. Tolkien wrote that he wanted to devise a world and a history in which the phrase '*elen sila lumenn' omentielmo'* could be an everyday greeting[24]. Maybe Lovecraft had a similar ambition for his deliberately unpronounceable catch phrase '*ph'nglui mglw'nafh C'thulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn'*, but I doubt if there was ever a real language anyone could learn. The phrase, however ominous in the stories, is deliberately playful. So also are the other seemingly solid references to ancient texts and peoples: the references are solely to contemporary fantasy, his own and others. The narrative, in

short, that his narrator devises – and the others that Lovecraft composed for other imagined narrators – could be considered just such *obviously* made-up, literary fictions, a set of in-jokes, homage to Lovecraft's friends[25].

In-jokes that is, except that in the denouement of the story our narrator joins an archaeological expedition that has uncovered ruins with subtly similar carvings to those he has (or so he thinks) imagined. Deep amongst those ruins he finds, one night, the ancient library to which he had perhaps contributed – and writings in English, in his own hand. Or else, of course, this too is a delusion: he panics on hearing noises of a sort that his sometime hosts (if they existed) greatly feared, and loses the documents in his flight up to the light. He can console himself that the whole thing was an hallucination, though his readers, playing along with Lovecraft, recognize that he is wrong!

Am I entitled to conclude that Lovecraft himself *welcomed* the possibility that there were, that there are, very many wildly different species with whom we could, in principle, have conversations? The Great Race at least, even if it ignores any imagined rights to life or liberty in the individuals and species it displaces, is engaged in gathering knowledge, carrying the past on into the very distant future.

> After man there would be the mighty beetle civilisation, the bodies of whose members the cream of the Great Race would seize when the monstrous doom overtook the elder world. Later, as the earth's span closed, the transferred minds would again migrate through time and space - to another stopping-place in the bodies of the bulbous vegetable entities of Mercury. But there would be races after them, clinging pathetically to the cold planet and burrowing to its horror-filled core, before the utter end.[26]