Chronicles of Brunonia

Walking Upon Hollow Earth: The Juvenilia of H.P. Lovecraft

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Though much has been written about Providence's strangest literary figure, H. P. Lovecraft, little of it considers the precious documents from his childhood. This historical narrative weaves together scholarship, juvenilia and status life details to illustrate the origins of Lovecraft's fascination with the archaic and abject.

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Howard Phillips Lovecraft, born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1890, was a literary outsider. He produced countless written works of fiction and non-fiction with meager recognition among amateur contemporaries during his hermetic life. Only after his death in 1937 was he acknowledged as one of the greatest authors in horror, fantasy, and science fiction. His tales of "cosmic terror" are narcotic and fascinating for many, but for others they are stilted attempts at rendering the weird. Regardless, his work continues to be used as a spectral torch for musicians, authors, and filmmakers peering into the dark. Yet, even Lovecraft's greatest fans have overlooked the childhood treatises and heroic epics that glow at the center his creative imagination.

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Moving quietly along the stone walk on the outskirts of Providence in 1896, Susie walked up the soft incline of Angell Street. Her back slightly bowed, careful to not pull the delicate arm of her son, Howard, who tramped along the uneven path at her side. Looking down at him, his flaxen banana curls catching the wind and the late afternoon sun, the sylvan setting appeared near perfect in her mind, which couldn't resist drifting, thinking, *We have already lived three years with Winfield in the hospital, and our son has grown so much without him, without a father. It can't be good. I hope it won't be too much longer.*

It was the second time that Howard Phillips Lovecraft had been to the Banigan estate, a lavish manor and sprawling grounds built by Joseph Banigan, a recent Irish immigrant and self-made industrialist in the production of rubber. Howard had often played with his three boys in the nearby wood and open field. Though he didn't much like their rough play and delirious games, he was excited

to be invited to their home. He had dressed for the occasion in shiny, black ankle boots, multi-buttoned sailor trousers and a white open necked blouse with a limp, lace collar. As they reached the gravel carriage entrance, merely two houses from their own, Howard demanded that his mother release his 6-year old hand and allow him an unfettered entrance. His defiance and independence were becoming more common, and she was becoming more pliant to his will.

Under the sentry of gargoyle-figured corbels, the weighty door inyawned. The autumn air and the two guests wafted into the high ceilinged foyer and were lead to a cavernous sitting room. The tediously ornate baroque furniture, looming portraiture, and cluster of adults and children and servants made the grand room small to young Howard. He moved slowly to his mother's skirt, but was intercepted by the youngest Banigan boy. "Do you want to come play Spin the Platter?" he inquired with upraised eyebrows. "Well, we'll have to play it in the pantry, but it's great fun. I mean…" Howard's nose crumpled at the thought of playing any sort of game that had no substantive content, no narrative, no relation to history! "Have you ever played it before?" the boy continued with good intention. "You just take a tin cake pan and spin it while everyone stands in a circle and then someone's name is called and they have to catch the pan before it falls." Howard's face failed to mask his irritation at the thought of playing such an infantile game. Without waiting for an answer the boy walked toward the sound of clattering metal and raucous laughter while Howard ambled toward the cool volley of adult voices.

“It’s absolutely unthinkable. What reason would a child, a *child* mind you, have to poison her family? Celia Rose is merely the victim of modern times, the product of poor rearing. I can’t imagine…”

“Balderdash!” Mrs. Banigan rested her tea cup at the interruption from her husband. “I can’t see how you can say that. I just can’t see how… For God sake she killed them, one after the other, with rat poison!” Pipe in hand, Mr. Banigan pointed at the headlines in the *Providence Journal*. Celia Rose had killed her mother, father and brother in a crime and trial that fascinated the nation and dominated the news for more than six months. “Now the lawyers are seeking an acquittal on the grounds of insanity. The courts should come down on her like all wrath!” He returned the pipe to his mouth, took two furious puffs, and leaned back on the divan.

“With all respect, Mr. Banigan, I think we should turn our conversation to some lighter subject,” said Susie, finally noticing Howard on the periphery, standing stiff and wide-eyed, as if trapped in the room’s wainscoting. He stood arrested between adult conversation and childish play not knowing where to turn. “Darling, why don’t you find a book and settle here by the fire?”

Among the endless shelves of books that fenced the room, Howard was drawn to an atlas-sized gift-book with a green cloth cover and gilded lettering. It leaned against the marble mantle overhead and was brought down to him by his mother’s eager hand as he waited on the bearskin rug. The book rivaled Howard in weight and size. His slight, pale fingers traced the imprinted title, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner with illustrations by Gustave Doré*. Each turn of the page revealed hellish pictures of a corpse-ship with ragged sails under a waning moon,

death fires dancing and dead men rising from their putrescence. Howard was helpless to resist its spell. Raised up on aching elbows, his mind traveled on the deck of the spectral ship through turbulent seas full of rotting serpents and carried by demons on the black wind — a horror he wished to never return from. There was nowhere to return to among the adult banter or scattered, aimless children. Howard hoped to remain in the timeless grip of this fascinatingly bleak and strangely comforting world — the feeling of being outside the limits of everyday life, the wide horizon of the imagination.

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Hours after midnight the lamp light still burned in Howard's room. Ever since his grandmother died earlier that year, in 1897, Howard battled to stay awake, to stay away from the nightmares, the rubbery, face-less deformities that would appear and change shape against the backdrop of his eyelids. In these hours his imagination was his only refuge to the creeping darkness. He would create altars to Athena or reconstruct elaborate Roman amphitheaters or scan the woods beyond his window for dryads and satyrs or just listen to the sound of night becoming day.

He heard his grandfather, Whipple Phillips, mounting the stairs before his silhouette filled the door. Howard had lived with him, his mother and her two sisters, Lillian and Annie, ever since he could remember, ever since his father was seized with a paralytic stroke and confined to Butler Hospital. Whipple leaned into the room. The creases of his face exaggerated in the long, solitary light and his breath labored after climbing three flights to Howard's room. Hunched over his desk, Howard paused and looked at him without turning his head.

“Are you having one of those nights again Howard?” He took one more breath at the door, and then carefully placed his foot among wood block buildings and cardboard homes, then placed the other between miniature tree lined streets and battle scenes of lead soldiers poised against other lead soldiers. In this way, he moved across the room to where Howard sat at his desk scratching, dipping, scratching with his pen. “Are you still battling those night-gaunts?”

“As you can see Grandfather Whipple, I’ve decide that the best thing to do is stay up. I’ve decide that I shall not sleep. However if they come again, I shall draw them when I wake, to bring them out of the dark. See.” Whipple leaned over, careful not to hit his head on the slant of the gabled roof. “This one I saw earlier,” the silvery pitch of Howard’s voice was steady and serious. The paper was a mess of black lines etched with careful precision to reveal a barb-tailed creature with outstretched wings and six horrid mouths. Beneath this page were several more winged, black terrors, and Whipple was struck dumb by the boy’s manifest nightmares, which the family had dismissed as merely a childish fear of the dark.

He rested his spotted hand on the crown of his grandson’s head. “Let’s not think any more about your night-gaunts. Come sit with me for a moment, and we’ll talk about your latest poetic endeavors.” The old man’s knees and the joints in the cane-backed rocking chair creaked as he sat. Howard nestled into the hollow of his body that smelled like cedar and the pages of leather bound books and thought about where to begin. His most recent piece was going to be an epic, an epic for young-people.

“Aunt Lillian and mother have shown me the most remarkable book. You must already know it, the *Odyssey*. Aunt Lillian’s library has a copy that is much smaller than the others I’ve seen, and I would like to rewrite the poem for young folks. I have already completed a first draft, about 88 lines.”

“What parts of the story did you decide to omit?”

“Well, I’ve decided to skip the first four books, the ones that tell of Telemachos’ adventure. I found those dull, since what really matters is his father’s journey home. And I’ve reorganized the whole story in order, from the moment they sail for Troy to their final return to Ithaca. It’s really much better that way. Don’t you agree?” Whipple didn’t hear the child’s query as his thoughts mixed with fatigue. He eyes fixed on the kerosene flicker as he thought of Howard’s father a quarter of a mile away in a sanitarium, thought of how it had been since April, 1893, four years ago, that he had become violent and delusional in a Chicago hotel, how they had kept the boy in the dark, and how his ignorance helped him to imagine his father as Odysseus on an epic journey home. “Grandfather, don’t you agree?”

“Well, of course,” consented Whipple absentmindedly.

“Let me read you the first stanza. Hand me the papers just there on the night stand. Keep in mind this is just a first draft.

The night was darke! O readers, Hark!

And see Ulysses’ fleet!

From trumpets sound back homeward bound

He hopes his spouse to greet.”

* * *

But his father never did return home. Though Winfield's convulsions and violent outbursts became lest frequent, his mental condition continued to deteriorate. He would frequently scream down the corridor at the ward accusing the guards and nurses of stealing his watch and poisoning his food or boasting of his many friends and well formed muscles. But by July of 1898, this once immaculate figure now dressed in a backless gown, his skin milky and loose on his frame, passed from one convulsion to another. The spasms ended on the 18th and the phone rang in the Lovecraft's clapboard house a quarter of a mile away. The doctors were unable to tell Susie exactly what killed her husband.

It was Monday afternoon before the phone rang. As the boy and his grandfather rounded the corner of Angell Street and Elmgrove, Howard ran ahead and up the steps of their home, looking more boyish now with his short hair cut, though his figure was still lanky and frail. He was spurred on by the excitement of reading the newest edition of his favorite western dime novel, *The Dead Square Sport's Double; or, Dare Deverell's Life Hustle*, which was already opened as he threw himself on the parlor couch. Just above him on the second floor, Susie reordered the mass of ringlets centered on the top of her head, and then took out an amber bottle of arsenic from behind the bathroom mirror. She took one small spoonful daily. Satisfied that the powder had curbed her appetite and added a rosy glow to her translucent pallor, she turned to join her sisters and father out on the veranda.

The usual glittering summer afternoon was bleached and muted by the thick, humid New England air. Howard began to itch and sweat on the velvet cushions and the thin pages of pulp warped in the dampness. Deadwood Dick

was just about to uncover the Indian's plot to attack a dusty western outpost when the boy abandoned his book and headed for the cellar, almost knocking into Aunt Lillian as she crossed the foyer with four glasses of lemonade.

The July heat had not permeated the dark hollow below the house and the cool air felt silky on his face. In the cement cellar room, Howard could hear the voices of his family above and outside, as he surveyed the site of his latest fascination, his chemistry lab. Most of the beakers and bottles strewn across the table were salvaged from the set that Aunt Lillian had acquired years ago at boarding school. He quickly took account of all the supplies he would need for his first experiment: potassium, water, a glass bowl. Overhead Whipple barked about McKinley's resistance to go to war with Cuba, a diatribe that his daughters had become weary of since the USS Maine exploded in the Havana harbor at the beginning of the year. Susie, looking for an opportunity to escape the trap of his pedantic rambling, quickly rose when the phone rang. Beneath her footsteps, Howard began his experiment and filled the glass bowl with water. The phone rang. Then he broke off a quarter-sized piece of chalky potassium. The phone rang. And dropped it into the center of the bowl, which violently and instantly erupted into a ball of fire. As Howard shielded his eyes against the blaze, Suzie steadied herself against the balustrade, and a gauzy veil of incomprehensible loss fell over the family.

And after a while the fire went out. After a while the earth was full of his father and they began to forget. And after a while the incessant memory of the phone ringing faded into the crazy sameness of Susie's manic drone. Through the din and dirt, Howard curbed entropy by mixing chemicals in the cellar room and

writing up his findings at his littered desk on the third floor. He measured chemical reactions, fusions and breakdowns, created explosions, wrought-iron and nitrous oxide. It was safer to concern himself with the tangible, natural elements under his control, in contrast to the nameless and unknowable force that tore down the walls of his family. The relationship between things in a Petri dish was namable, knowable — different from the relationship between fathers and sons, sons and mothers — and yet invisible and instantaneous. Howard followed in dream-like pursuit of an explanation. During this time he wrote "The Art of Fusion", "Magic and Electricity", and "A Good Anesthetic", three titles in a series of handwritten treatises on chemistry. In each awkward, slanted line, Howard inscribed upon his world a search for new understanding, a demand for answers to the unexplainable. His hand acted as the catalyst for perceivable change and the scribe for embodied truth in a miniature universe surrounded by glass.

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Of course the story doesn't end there. Sometime later that year Lovecraft suffered the first in a series of debilitating nervous breakdowns. Some Lovecraft scholars claim that he was cold-blooded, possibly suffering from a disease known as poikilothermism, which causes the victim's body temperature to rise and fall with the temperature of the surroundings. Regardless of the nature or severity of the disorder, this young author continued to write prolifically, always keeping in mind an audience for his work. Most booklets and manuscripts were marked with copyright information and a retail price; the publisher, sometimes noted as "The Science Co." or "The Knowledge Office", was

merely his home address, and the cost, sometimes written as 50¢, then crossed out and replaced with 10¢, then 5¢, was often never collected. Even as Lovecraft reached out to a public audience, his literary work and repeated family tragedies made everyday, adolescent life feel distant and inconsequential. His emotional indifference was deemed "snobbery" and earned him the nickname "Lovely" by high school. Only after his letter to the editor appeared in the Providence Journal Sunday Edition *on August 12, 1906 — a letter that fiercely denounced the then popular hollow earth theory as "figments of imagination" and an "untenable" hypothesis — was the nickname changed to "Professor".*

Though the ideas in these early writings appear disconnected and fragmentary, Lovecraft held them in tension throughout his life, turning them over and over, and weaving them into his mature works of fiction. However, much of his juvenilia were destroyed in a cathartic fit during 1908. In what remains, it is clear that at an early age Lovecraft sought to supplant his world of solitude and distance with the comforting strangeness of the imagination. Hellenic epics, archaic language, charts of the stars and the North Pole, and attempts at alchemy populated his bleak surroundings and fulfilled his enduring and childhood wish to be released from the ordinary. This ecstatic and profound rebellion against impermanence and time, this wish written in small, round letters and staged in bedrooms and basements, this magic was most potent in his childish mind. This magic is what remains.

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