

**Conveying the Ineffable: The Communication Methods of H.P. Lovecraft**

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### **Introduction: Ineffability and Lovecraft**

Language, a fundamental element of the human experience, allows us to transport information, mental images, emotions, and even abstract concepts from one consciousness to another. Through the written word, an author can convert their ideas into the form of a novel, hoping that their readers, separated by both time and space, will construct a mental landscape with similar topography. The intersubjective transference of meaning through language, while capable of astounding things, is by no means perfect; the landscape may be altered by the chasm of reading comprehension or flooded by the liquidity of language and its bottomless interpretations, as discussed by Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and numerous other theorists in the fields of philosophy, linguistics, and psychology. Despite these well-documented limitations, the ability to transmit information from one mind to another in an understandable, digestible way serves a vital function in human society, let alone in the field of literature. Words act as the building blocks of communication, allowing us to convey ideas, intentions, questions, and emotions to those around us; they serve to educate, transmitting knowledge from the older generations to the younger, from the experts to the laypersons; and they even play a role in the functioning of our own mental processes, as explored in the field of cognitive linguistics, a converging branch of linguistics, cognitive science, and neuropsychology.

While all language finds itself limited by its social construction, its meaning derived from shared definitions attributed to sounds, symbols, and signs, one of its more profound challenges lies in the conveyance of the ineffable, the transmission of concepts that have few analogues for comparison and that defy traditional means of explanation. Whether due to the abstract nature of an idea, the elusive essence of a sensation, the sublimity of an emotion, or the jargon-laden language endemic to many scientific fields, this linguistic barrier presents a significant challenge

to authors, particularly those producing work in genres that frequently involve concepts situated beyond the realm of human experience, such as science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, and horror. For such authors, the ability to successfully gesture towards an abstract concept or impart traces of an otherworldly sensation grants a depth to their texts. While ineffable concepts remain semantically inexpressible within the bounds of language, their nature—their very ineffability—can itself become an expression of their otherworldliness, empowered by the descriptive struggle to render them effable.

In this senior project, I will examine how the ineffable is conveyed, both conceptually and textually, through the authorial lens of one of the most influential and provocative figures in the horror genre: H.P. Lovecraft. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1890, Lovecraft uses descriptive language to embrace the unknowable, recognizing it not only as a linguistic challenge to overcome, but as a tool that can evoke a sensation of existential dread when wielded properly; he confronts his readers with concepts that teeter on the edge of understanding, too alien to fully comprehend yet comprehensible enough to feel wholly alien. In his essay “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction” (1933), he outlines this approach to the ineffable:

One cannot, except in immature pulp charlatan-fiction, present an account of impossible, improbable, or inconceivable phenomena as a commonplace narrative of objective acts and conventional emotions. Inconceivable events and conditions have a special handicap to overcome, and this can be accomplished only through the maintenance of a careful realism in every phase of the story *except* that touching on the one given marvel. This marvel must be treated very impressively and deliberately—with a careful emotional ‘build-up’—else it will seem flat and unconvincing. (Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing” 103-04)

Beyond a critique of “immature pulp charlatan-fiction,” here Lovecraft presents his own approach as a structural treatise on how to craft a compelling, understandable narrative using elements of ineffability. While the emphasis here is centered on storytelling, Lovecraft’s awareness of this “special handicap,” of the linguistic limitations posed by the “impossible, improbable, or inconceivable,” extends to the formulation, syntax, and descriptive language of his texts. In his meticulously outlined writing process, special consideration is given to these elements, with the fourth step dedicated to “paying attention to vocabulary, syntax, [and] rhythm of prose” among the broader, text-wide concerns such as “proportioning of parts” and “niceties of tone” (“Notes on Writing” 102). This indicates measured, purposeful technique on the syntactical level, employed by an author with a distinct awareness of the challenges posed by ineffability.

The subgenre of weird fiction is where Lovecraft situates his body of work, an alchemical mixture of horror, science fiction, and fantasy that reached its heights in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in part through the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, first published in 1922. The magazine was a frequent home to Lovecraft’s short stories and other weird fiction. In his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927), a work that examines the historical influences of weird fiction, Lovecraft defines the subgenre, noting its inherent relationship with the unknowable:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and

particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.

(Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror" 14)

To Lovecraft, it is the foreign and elusive presence of the "unexplainable dread," the "unknown [force]," and the "unplumbed space" that characterize weird fiction. These concepts defy quotidian description and challenge the limits of comparative language. The "secret murder, bloody bones, [and] sheeted form clanking chains according to rule" are, to Lovecraft, woefully inadequate concepts to challenge the "fixed laws of Nature." Just so, his own presentation of those traditional motifs are comparatively basic, using simple, disyllabic words and rudimentary adjective-to-noun pairings in phrases such as "secret murder" and "bloody bones." The rest of the definition, meanwhile, is rife with multisyllabic words and complex syntax, including a semicolon, a dash, and dense descriptive language, all in the form of a single sentence that suffocates the first in length. In both his definition and in that definition's syntax, Lovecraft displays one facet of his approach: that weird tales and their ineffable subject matter require a more robust, poetic use of language, with an intricate syntactic flow rich with multisyllabic adjectives.

Though Lovecraft places himself in the realm of weird fiction, the dark, miasmic incomprehensibility of his work has since given rise to an offshoot more directly connected to his canon. This subgenre is cosmic horror, colloquially referred to as Lovecraftian horror in direct reference to Lovecraft's stylistic influence (Prohászková 133). Cosmic horror stems from Lovecraft's approach to the ineffable and the incomprehensible, concepts used throughout his canon to challenge the anthropocentric beliefs of humanity and assault the notion that humankind

is capable of recognizing and understanding even a fraction of its cosmic surroundings. In describing his predisposition to weird fiction, Lovecraft elaborates:

I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis. (“Notes on Writing” 99)

Lovecraft’s aim to achieve that “illusion,” that sensation of “violation,” is the thematic principal that ultimately separated his works from the bulk of weird fiction, placing them within the subgenre of cosmic horror. The dread of cosmic horror stems from a primal sense of powerlessness and insignificance, from the recognition of our place within the void, and so the horrors of Lovecraft’s texts are often beyond the scope of humanity, infinite and unknowable in their form, their purpose, and their motivation. This is the core motif of the Cthulhu Mythos, the collective works surrounding Lovecraft’s most famous creations: the Great Old Ones, entities that exist beyond the conceptions of humankind. These cosmic beings are featured in many of his works, beginning with “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928). While the Great Old Ones and other eldritch entities in Lovecraft’s canon aim to exist “beyond the radius of our sight and analysis,” they must also exist on the page (“Notes on Writing” 99). In describing them, Lovecraft employs various techniques to both identify them as inherently unknowable yet provide a descriptive foundation from which the reader can form some predictable level of understanding.

Present throughout Lovecraft’s exploration of weird fiction is a deep reverence for Edgar Allan Poe, an author who, for Lovecraft, is responsible for “the modern horror-story in its final

and perfected state” and whose influence “affect[s] not only the history of the weird tale, but that of short fiction as a whole” (“Supernatural Horror” 49). Poe, too, was a native of New England, born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809. Though separated by nearly a century, their shared propensity for dark, haunting themes and their approach to descriptive language place them in the same profane pantheon, one that works to expose the horrors of both the unknowably inhuman and the appallingly human. Lovecraft asserts that many of Poe’s works transcend the Gothic tradition with which he was associated, citing “[t]he raven whose noisome beak pierces the heart, the ghouls that toll iron bells in pestilential steeples, the vault of Ulalume in the black October night, the shocking spires and domes under the sea, the ‘wild, weird clime that lieth, sublime, out of Space—out of Time’” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 51). The dark sublimity and otherworldliness of these elements, to Lovecraft, are the hallmarks of weird fiction. The same reverence and association occurs on the level of formulation and syntax, with Lovecraft expounding on Poe’s technique as “lyrical phantasy almost narcotic in essence—an opium pageant of dream in the language of dream, with every unnatural colour and grotesque image bodied forth in a symphony of corresponding sound” (“Supernatural Horror” 53-4). The influence of Poe is distilled here through Lovecraft’s own use of descriptive language, defining “lyrical phantasy” and its pageantry through deeply poetic formulation by linking the disparate concepts of color and sound in mixed metaphor; he embodies what he admires, actively applying it to both his essays and his stories. Like Poe, Lovecraft dresses his descriptions in intricate, fluid syntax, filled to the brim with adjectives and complex punctuation marks. This is the influence of Poe’s “lyrical phantasy,” a dense, poetic formulation that Lovecraft uses as one of his tools to gesture towards the ineffable, to eke towards the infinite and describe the indescribable.



Lovecraft's use of robust descriptive language, rife with multiple clauses, multisyllabic adjectives, and complex syntax, has been the primary focus of previous analysis in its approach to the ineffable, including that of Roger Luckhurst, Professor of Modern Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. In his introduction to Oxford World Classic's anthology, *The Classic Horror Stories* (2013), Luckhurst responds to Edmund Wilson, a prominent literary critic at *The New Yorker*, who critiqued Lovecraft's prose for its dense use of adjectives, which resulted in "bad art" (Luckhurst xx). In Lovecraft's defense, Luckhurst asserts that "[t]he power of the weird crawls out of [Lovecraft's] sentences *because* of [his] awkward style" (xx). He continues, "Conceptually, breaking open the world requires the breaking open of language and the conventions of realism" (xx). To illustrate this, Luckhurst presents an excerpt from Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" (1927), a short story in which a meteorite produces colors that defy description. Lovecraft writes, "No sane wholesome colours were anywhere to be seen except in the green grass and leafage; but everywhere were those hectic and prismatic variants of some diseased, underlying primary tone without a place among the known tints of earth" (Lovecraft, "The Colour Out" 62). Here, what Luckhurst identifies as effective in conveying a sense of ineffability is Lovecraft's seemingly inappropriate use of the adjectives "sane," "wholesome," "hectic," and "diseased," none of which are typically applied to color, thus insinuating its alien nature. Luckhurst asserts that "the brokenness of the language is a logical consequence of trying to describe an absolute otherness, a colour for which no human language exists, thus prompting [a] convulsion of adjectives to catch the impossible" (xx). While I agree that this stylistic approach is certainly a major factor in Lovecraft's portrayal of the unknowable, I contend that additional, deeper insights into his effectiveness can be gleaned from his application and empowerment of innate concepts and fundamental categories of descriptive language. "[G]reen,"

"prismatic variants," "primary tone," and "tints" are all foundational terms within the vocabulary of color, an intrinsic, common aspect of human awareness that Lovecraft deliberately chooses to challenge both thematically and descriptively. In illustrating a hue that does not exist, he invokes both the rainbow of the "prismatic" and, simultaneously, the singular, fundamental concept of a "primary tone," all while comparing it to something as inherently familiar as "green grass." I argue that these elements serve as the foundations for Lovecraft's description, as well as its effective display of ineffability. To illustrate my claims as additive to Luckhurst's assertions, the following is the same excerpt, edited so that the offending adjectives are removed: "No [recognizable] colours were anywhere to be seen except in the green grass and leafage; but everywhere were those prismatic variants of some underlying primary tone without a place among the known tints of earth." Devoid of those "convulsions of adjectives" (Luckhurst xx), poetically alien as they are, the ineffability and otherworldliness of the color remains effective. This opens a window for an expanded examination of Lovecraft's approach, one that considers both his robust descriptive language and the thematic vocabulary that supports it.

In my senior project I identify three separate categories of descriptive language used by Lovecraft to evoke the ineffable and analyze how they are employed. I summon similar devices found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, both poetic and structural, for textual comparison and to illustrate Lovecraft's stylistic heritage, as well as philosophical treatises from Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger that contain elements on the accumulation, recollection, and understanding of knowledge. In the three body chapters, I examine Lovecraft's manipulation of innate concepts to describe the extraordinary as recognizably ineffable, to approach abstractions in understandable terms and, conversely, to elevate the mundane. Each chapter deals with a foundational category of descriptive language, including geometry (shapes, angles, planes), scale

(measurements of distance and time), and sensation (human senses, impressions, and emotions), as well as the use of paradox to purposefully upend them. Throughout, I also analyze Lovecraft's approach to language itself, including his use of italicization, through which he empowers words or phrases, imbuing them with an implied meaning beyond their traditional definitions. As formatting is integral to my analysis, all quotes within this project feature original emphases from the source material unless otherwise indicated. Finally, I consider Lovecraft's application of foreign languages, both the real and the fictional, including that of the Great Old Ones, the structure of which is purposefully incomprehensible for both the characters and the reader.

Though many of H.P. Lovecraft's texts feature similar themes of indescribability, primarily using the Great Old Ones of his canon, this project limits its scope to two of his most influential works. The first is "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), a first-person narrative that follows the account of Francis Wayland Thurston, who uncovers a series of strange occurrences after reading the notes of his recently deceased granduncle. The journey leads to an abhorrent revelation as Thurston learns of the existence of Cthulhu, a Great Old One beyond quotidian description. Wracked with the blasphemous knowledge that humanity is insignificant, Thurston curses his revelation and pleads for a return to ignorance. The second text is "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936). A novella that follows a scientific expedition to Antarctica, it also features themes of human inconsequentiality and the raw, unfathomable scope of Lovecraft's creations. The academic lens of the narrator, William Dyer, a professor and geologist, contrasts the pinnacles of human knowledge against the unreachable realities of what is unearthed: a city of incomparable scale that predates earthly life and upends all logical notions of humanity's origins, as well as its dreadful inhabitants and what lies beyond.

## Chapter One: Geometry

As an expression of spatial awareness, geometry acts as one of the fundamental building blocks of human perception. Similarly, the mental associations between basic shapes and the words attributed to them are common characteristics of simple descriptive language, used to convey mental images of physical objects or features: a square with softened edges, a circular hole in the wall, and a triangular stack of books being some straightforward examples. Though some finer details may differ in each mental image, the descriptions themselves are digestible, inoffensive to the rationality of observable space. In most cases, the textual purpose of geometric language is limited to forming these understandable images, allowing the reader to gain a reliable, predictable sense of an object or location. Robust descriptive language may use these building blocks in complex, poetic ways that widen the gap of understanding, with two readers forming two wildly different conceptions, but the fundamentals are generally unchallenged; a square remains a square, an identifiable and understandable concept, no matter how small its part in a greater description. One form of ineffability, then, lies in the moments when a square is not a square, when geometric language faces a paradoxical impossibility of humankind's innate spatial understanding. Another appears in the struggle to apply geometric language, nowhere near limitless in its vocabulary, to objects that defy traditional expressions of geometry.

The innate spatial understanding of geometry and the common language that surrounds it is mainly Euclidian in nature. In Euclidian geometry, geometric shapes are defined through the use of planes. Between any two points is a single straight line, that line extends in two opposite directions, and equidistant parallel lines never meet. Those lines, or axes, can then be used in reference for relational terms such as up, down, left, and right. A circle, meanwhile, is comprised of 360 degrees and its parts, or angles, are described as right (meaning 90 degrees), acute

(meaning less than 90 degrees), or obtuse (meaning more than 90 but less than 180 degrees).

These innate aspects of geometry are of such importance to the basis of human understanding that the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), declares them to be the only forms of knowledge that “must be pure” (176). He asserts that “all geometrical principles, e.g., that in a triangle two sides together are always greater than the third,” are “derived *a priori* with apodictic certainty” (175). The term *a priori* refers to cognitions that are “clear and certain for themselves, independently of experience” (Kant 127).

Anything beyond Euclidian geometric expressions is considered non-Euclidian and thus geometrically complex, obeying different rules both functionally and conceptually. For example, two straight, vertical lines on a spherical object, though parallel at the equator, will intersect at the poles, defying Euclidian geometry and the basic idea that two ends of a line will never meet. While some terms for non-Euclidian geometric shapes can be reliably interpreted, such as spherical or conical, others, like elliptical or hyperbolic, contain far more geometric complexity and are considerably more difficult to conceptualize. This divergence between Euclidean geometry and non-Euclidean geometry serves as a barrier, separating innate spatial understanding, rich with descriptive language, from what lies beyond, where even the basic rules that define the common shapes are both challenged and challenging.

Lovecraft frequently undermines Euclidean geometry in order to express the alienness of cosmic horrors that defy innate understanding. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Narrator Thurston recalls the testimonial of Henry Anthony Wilcox, a sculptor who had dreamt of a haunting, impossible city as a psychic symptom of Cthulhu’s great awakening. In his first narrative recollection, Thurston says, “He talked of his dreams in a strangely poetic fashion; making me see with terrible vividness the damp Cyclopean city of slimy green stone—whose *geometry*, he

oddly said, was *all wrong*” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 208). Though brief and relatively non-descriptive, this testimony prepares the reader to consider the implications of geometry. Narrator Thurston characterizes the statement of “*all wrong*” as odd, yet, for the moment, provides no more clarification, despite having supposedly understood the nature of the city with “terrible vividness.” This plants the conceptual seed in the reader that geometry can somehow be wrong, despite there being a distinct lack of immediate explanation; it conflicts with the *a priori* understanding that geometry is a fixed, comprehensible aspect of reality and leaves the reader without clarification. Lovecraft uses this as a primer for the ineffability of geometric wrongness, introducing it momentarily and allowing it to sit, unexplained, as the narrative continues down an ever-darkening road.

The otherworldly haze of Wilcox’s ambiguous description is later used by Lovecraft in order to shroud the narrative in the unknowable. When Narrator Thurston finally returns to the geometric weirdness of the city, he does so through the tale of Gustaf Johansen, a sailor whose ship ran aground atop it—the otherworldly, once-submerged necropolis R’lyeh, tomb of Cthulhu. Narrator Thurston quickly connects Johansen’s testimony to that of Wilcox, describing it as follows:

[H]e dwells only on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces—surfaces too great to belong to any thing right or proper for this earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs. I mention his talk about *angles* because it suggests something Wilcox had told me of his awful dreams. He had said that the *geometry* of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours. (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 217)

In this excerpt, Lovecraft revives the concept of geometric wrongness and, through Narrator Thurston, begins to expand upon it as something “abnormal” and “terrible.” His mention of “vast angles,” while possibly referring only to scale, also insinuates angles greater than natural conception, beyond the 360 degrees inherent to Euclidian geometry. Lovecraft’s use of the words “spheres and dimensions” is particularly notable here due to their similar polysemous nature; they both have multiple definitions, some of which relate to the subject of geometry. The surface of a physical sphere is non-Euclidian in nature, but it is relatively common and intuitively comprehensible in appearance. However, the word “sphere” can also refer to spheres of influence, spheres of expertise, and, on a far broader scale, the celestial spheres, cosmological and theological concepts used in reference to planets, stars, the universe, and the fabric of reality woven in between. This allows the single word of “sphere” to offer various meanings, some simple and physical, some abstract and conceptual, and some of cosmic significance. Similarly, “dimensions” can suggest the basic, universally understood measurements of three-dimensional space: the height, width, and length of an object. It can also refer to those that lie beyond, including dimensions that are inconceivable, or even alternative planes of existence. By placing these similarly polysemous words in close proximity to each other, Lovecraft draws attention to the potential implications of those “spheres and dimensions;” he empowers them within the context of Narrator Thurston’s description, employing basic geometric terminology to hint at the far greater, more existentially troublesome nature of the city of R’lyeh.

The importance of Narrator Thurston’s complex geometric language has been substantiated by prior scholarly analysis, including sections of “Higher Spatial Form in Weird Fiction” (2017) by Mark Blacklock. Blacklock examines the excerpt and analyzes the presence of specific terminology, particularly in its approach to spatiality and its use of the term “non-

Euclidean” to invoke a sense of alienness. Blacklock explains that “both  $n$ -dimensional and non-Euclidean spaces were favoured Lovecraft tropes” (Blacklock). The term “ $n$ -dimensional” refers to dimensionality that is beyond three-dimensional, with  $n$  being an unspecified qualifier. These concepts are fundamentally complex and unintuitive, and according to Blacklock, Lovecraft “worked directly with the crisis of representation set in chain [by them]: indeed, that crisis in representation was precisely what he determined to place on the page in order to confront his readers with unknown and dreadful forces” (Blacklock). Blacklock’s assertion—that Lovecraft purposefully employs the concept of non-Euclidean geometry to invoke a “crisis” and “confront” his readers—is directly evidenced by Lovecraft’s consistent and specific use of the term and its underlying tenets to denote the abnormality of Narrator Thurston’s description.

But beyond his use of complex, non-Euclidian geometry, which is the primary focus of Blacklock’s analysis, Lovecraft also conveys ineffability by introducing paradoxes and contradictions into the more basic, Euclidean concepts, wielding the fundamentals of geometry against themselves. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” Narrator Thurston relays more of Johansen’s testimony, saying, “Johansen swears [a crewmate] was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn’t have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 219). By the laws of Euclidian geometry, the principles of spatial arrangement most innate to forming mental images, a single angle cannot simultaneously be both acute (less than 90 degrees) and obtuse (more than 90 degrees and less than 180 degrees). Here, Lovecraft presents the reader with a geometric paradox, a breakdown of description that provokes a sudden feedback in the imaginative landscape. The attempt to visualize an angle that is both acute and obtuse, by their own definitions, is an impossibility, and that impossibility lends itself both to a deeper consideration of the description and, for some, the



sense of eerie unbelonging that defines Lovecraft's canon. In illustrating the same eldritch city of R'lyeh, Narrator Thurstan describes "angles of carven rock where a second glance showed concavity after the first showed convexity" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" 217-8). Like acute and obtuse, the opposed geometric concepts of concavity and convexity are offered as an example of the impossible, a contradiction in description that is nevertheless presented as fact. While differing in its specific employment of language, using geometric concepts rather than mixed metaphor, this technique has a similar final effect to what Luckhurst attributes to a "convulsion of adjectives," that being the "breaking open... [of] language and the conventions of realism" (xx). However, as shown, Lovecraft can achieve this effect without the use of inappropriate adjectives. Instead, Lovecraft presents geometric terms that have widely understood and innately conceptualized definitions, the linguistic building blocks of the "conventions of realism," and then "break[s]" them by introducing strict contradictions.

Lovecraft's technique of destabilizing the reader's fundamental notions of geometry is similar in execution to an excerpt found in Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson." When describing the Elizabethan mansion of his childhood school, Narrator Wilson says:

There was really no end to its windings—to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable—inconceivable—and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity. (Poe, "William Wilson" 12)

Like Lovecraft, Poe breaks the innate sense of space held by both the narrator and the reader by challenging core Euclidian concepts, namely left and right, “lateral branches,” and up and down, “ascent and descent.” Poe presents the notion of lateral directions—a Euclidian axis—as inadequate when confronted by hallways that are “inconceivable” and “[return] in upon themselves.” He also explicitly notes that the building is only “two stories,” yet the “three or four steps” found between its rooms were enough to confuse Narrator Wilson’s sense of elevation. This implies that his innate spatial awareness was somehow challenged by the architecture of the mansion, lending it an otherworldly quality. Notably, Poe never mentions the presence of windows, fireplaces, or other identifying markers that would have realistically allowed William Wilson, and thus the reader, to differentiate between the first and second stories and undermine the weirdness of the environment. The building is instead reduced to its geometry, with “subdivisions” and “branches” rather than simple rooms and hallways. This presents the mansion as more of a spatial construct than a house; it focuses the attention of the reader on the effects of its peculiar geometry, unnerving and surreal, rather than its role as a familiar, comprehensible structure. Combined with Poe’s focus on geometric language is his qualification that geometry can surpass the limits of understanding, both elements shared by Lovecraft. Poe densely packs Narrator Wilson’s description with the prefix *in-*, meaning *not*, through his use of “incomprehensible,” “innumerable,” “inconceivable,” and “infinity.” Each sets a limit on human comprehension and serves as a repeated, inescapable reminder that the mansion’s architecture is beyond the pale of rational understanding, yet Poe wields only basic geometric concepts such as up, down, and the lateral left and right to describe it. This sublime empowerment of geometry illustrates Poe’s stylistic influence on Lovecraft, who carefully approaches and presents “impossible, improbable, or inconceivable phenomena” (Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing” 103).

While Lovecraft employs more abstract subject matter in the form of the Great Old Ones and their wildly alien nature, Poe's influence can still be felt, its subtle traces etched into the ineffable geometry of R'lyeh, tomb of Cthulhu.

Luckhurst's observations about "convulsions of adjectives" (xx) are comparable to Lovecraft's own views on Poe's "lyrical phantasy" ("Supernatural Horror" 53); each is concerned with poetic flair, the complex dressage that alters the structure of descriptive language and calls attention to its sublimity, yet neither accounts for the power of basic geometric language. The mansion of "William Wilson," for all of its complexities, extracts its otherworldliness more from its geometric terms than its gothic formulation. Yet it succeeds in challenging the reader's sense of spatiality, of understanding. This is mirrored by much of Lovecraft's robust approach to geometry. For all of its poetic presence, all of its lyrical complexity, the ineffability of Lovecraft's descriptive technique owes a great deal of its gravity to the empowered presence of its structural, geometric foundations.

## Chapter Two: Scale

While the notions of geometry serve a primary role within descriptive language, providing textual presence to objects and environments, they rely on the similarly foundational concepts of scale to then contextualize them within the reader's mental landscape. The word "square," for example, while innately identifiable in its qualities, is an abstraction that carries no physical presence due to its lack of quantification. By adding the indefinite article of "a" to the square, creating "a square," a basic element of scale has been brought to the concept: numerical value. The same is true for other scale-based adjectives of measurement, such as three squares, a large square, or a twelve-inch-wide square. These elements of scale provide a frame of reference through which a reader can quantify and form a reliable, consistent understanding. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant introduces a similar observation while commenting on a fundamental Euclidian notion: that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. He dissects and analyzes the concept of a short, straight line, saying "my concept of **the straight** contains nothing of quantity but only a quality. The concept of the shortest is therefore entirely additional to it, and cannot be extracted out of the concept of the straight line by analysis." (Kant 155). While "straight" is a geometric concept which has an innate, universal meaning, it lacks the substance—the frame of reference—provided by scale. The lone notions of "straight" and "square" are thus non-relative and entirely qualitative. Kant asserts then that the quantification must come from beyond pure geometry. In most cases, these additional descriptive elements are used in relation to familiar metrics such as relative impressions (short, wide, big), basic measurements (inches, miles, meters), or numerical values. These common and recognizable representations of scale are intuitively compared to analogous experiences in the reader's daily life, providing yet another building block for conveying information.

Though often conceptualized as a separate aspect of reality, time is linked to space—to geometry—by the same linguistic framework of scale. This aspect of time’s place within descriptive language, as well as greater dimensional conceptions like time-space, are explored in-depth by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in one of his later lectures titled “Time and Being.” Heidegger asserts that, when presented on its own, the word time is conceptualized as “the distance between two now-points of calculated time, such as we have in mind when we note, for instance: this or that occurred within a time-span of fifty years” (Heidegger 14). He continues by asserting: “The dimensionality of time, thought as the succession of the sequence of nows, is borrowed from the representation of three-dimensional space” (14). Here, scale applies to time in much the same way as geometric space, quantifying an abstract, purely qualitative concept so that it can be conceptualized.

The linguistic link between time and space illustrates the importance of scale as a shared building block of description. When quantified by units of measurement that are intuitive to a reader’s experience, such as miles, minutes, or months, scale can be a comfortable, relatable element of a text that brings otherwise abstract concepts into focus. When such measurements range beyond the human experience, however, scale can confront us with the boundaries of our limited conceptions, applying dimensions and quantities and timespans so vast that they instead obscure the mind’s eye, reminding us of what Lovecraft calls the “infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis” (Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing” 99). This confrontation between the reader and scale is a central theme within Lovecraft’s work, one so profound that it defines much of his influence on the subgenre of cosmic horror (Prohászková 133). The quantification of time in particular was of great interest to Lovecraft. When discussing effective elements of horror, he explains: “The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales

is that this element looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. *Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression” (Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing” 99-100). That “[c]onflict with time” is ultimately an expression of ineffability, a limitation on human understanding, conveyed in Lovecraft’s works both thematically and through the specific application of descriptive scale.

Lovecraft’s haunting approach to scale within “The Call of Cthulhu” begins in its first paragraph, a profound, influential passage that establishes the existentially dreadful themes of his Cthulhu Mythos. Narrator Thurston, tormented by the revelation of the Great Old Ones, begins his narration with a terrifying philosophic conclusion:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 188)

Lovecraft’s decision to immediately call into question the scale of human perception and knowledge, to place it “in the midst of black seas of infinity” that contain “terrifying vistas of reality,” is one that contextualizes Narrator Hurston, the characters of the story, and even the reader as infinitesimal, inconsequential, and dreadfully oblivious. Neither Narrator Thurston nor Lovecraft claim to know the true extent of this cosmic scale; it is simply too vast, too unfathomable, and so ineffable that even “dissociated knowledge” risks driving the human mind

beyond the precipice of sanity. However, through the course of the narration, it is revealed that these incalculable seas of time and space, far beyond our understanding and outside of descriptive means, are inhabited by entities known as the Great Old Ones. These eldritch beings owe a great deal of their fearsome, alien presence to Lovecraft's use of cosmic scale, which is established at the very beginning of the story.

In "The Call of Cthulhu," the otherworldly presence of the Great Old Ones is empowered directly through Lovecraft's use of scale, particularly via their unsettling, metaphysical relationship with time and death. When discussing the testimony of a man named Castro, whose travels to China uncovered ancient legends of Cthulhu, the Great Old Ones, and their cults, Narrator Thurston relays a disturbing poetic couplet, allegedly taken from a book titled the *Necronomicon*, a fictional text of Lovecraft's own invention: "That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange eons even death may die" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" 206). This passage relates to the Great Old Ones being, according to these same legends, incapable of true death; that "although They no longer lived, They would never really die" (205). This also places them beyond the realm of understandable, quantitative time. The Great Old Ones, and by extension Cthulhu, are described in terms of the "eternal," so removed from innate notions of time that they exist on a chronological scale in which "even death may die." Descriptively, this upends one of the fundamental benchmarks of humanity's relationship with linear time: death. Death serves as a common, quantitative endpoint in chronological scale, a certainty that all humans share, connected by life in direct opposition to birth. The words death and birth are empowered by this notion, extending linguistically to encompass quantitative endings and beginnings well beyond the scope of human existence, such as the death of a star or the birth of the universe. This conceptual link between birth, death, and time is completely upended by

Lovecraft's presentation of the Great Old Ones. If they exist on a chronological scale where "even death may die," then they not only belong to a time that has no quantitative endpoint, they enter a chronological framework where the end itself can be ended, a qualitative description of scale that invokes the realm of the ineffable. The couplet is punctuated by Lovecraft's use of the word "eternal," which appears to conceptually match the metaphysical concept described by Augustine, a theologian and philosopher of the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. In book XI of his autobiographical *Confessions*, Augustine muses at length on the idea of God's eternal word, which he credits with the creation of the world, and the concept of time. He states that God's word "is not an utterance in which what is said passes away that the next thing may be said and so finally the whole utterance be complete: but all in one act, yet abiding eternally: otherwise it would be but time and change and no true eternity, no true immortality" (Augustine 11). Like Augustine, Lovecraft appears to define the eternal as something beyond the quantitative conceptions of time. Just as Augustine asserts that the eternal word of God cannot be described through notions of beginning and end, of "what is said pass[ing] away," Lovecraft describes the Great Old Ones as being eternal, entirely beyond the principles of life and death.

Another technique used by Lovecraft to impart a sense of ineffable scale within "The Call of Cthulhu" is through various combinations of mathematical jargon, explicitly stated limits of quantification, and measurements of time. The word *jargon* means the vocabulary inherent to a particular profession or field of study, with definitions that are generally unknown to the average reader. After recounting the story of Cthulhu's awakening, Narrator Thurston declares that "[a]fter vigintillions of years great Cthulhu was loose again" (Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" 219). Vigintillions is the plural form of vigintillion, a word indicating a one followed by sixty-three zeros. Though a vigintillion is ultimately a quantitative number, smaller than unquantifiable



concepts such as infinity, it is empowered by its role as specialized jargon. The word *infinity*, for all it represents, is known by a far larger readership than vigintillion, making it linguistically more accessible. While functionally finite by comparison, the mathematical jargon of vigintillion is not only well beyond the average vocabulary, lending it an element of the unknown, the number it represents transcends human conceptualization; it exists in the liminal space between the understandable and the abstract. This affords the word a descriptive power capable of dissociating Cthulhu, to whom Lovecraft applies it, from any understandable scale of time. It calls direct attention to itself, accentuating the scale that it implies. While the word “years” is concrete, retaining a connection some familiar metric, a vigintillion years is entirely conceptual, turning that same metric into something wholly alien. Pluralizing it, then, into “vigintillions of years” allows Lovecraft to push even deeper into the ineffable, implying that even the jargon itself, something linguistically limited to a scientific field, is incapable of expressing the actual span of Cthulhu’s imprisonment.

Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” is rife with its own empowered use of scale, particularly to express the otherworldly size of the eponymous mountains. When William Dyer and his expedition first fly towards the undiscovered range hidden deep within Antarctica, Narrator Dyer describes the first glimpse: “The sailor Larsen was first to spy the jagged line of witch-like cones and pinnacles ahead, and his shouts sent everyone to the windows of the great cabined plane. Despite our speed, they were very slow in gaining prominence; hence we knew that they must be infinitely far off, and visible only because of their abnormal height” (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 39). Both the narrator and the crew are scientists, Dyer himself being a geologist, yet he describes the mountains as “infinitely far off,” which they all “knew,” and that their height was “abnormal.” This use of descriptive scale is unscientific, conflicting with

Narrator Dyer's expertise through the use of irrational measurements (infinity) and subjective judgements (abnormal) that offer no frame of reference or comparison. The reader, then, is left with only an impression of sheer vastness—that the mountains must somehow be too large to describe. This primer of scale is similar in narrative technique to the geometric wrongness employed by Lovecraft in "The Call of Cthulhu," introducing the reader to a conflict in descriptive language early in the text without offering immediate explanation.

Later in the story, after the abstract grandiosity of the mountain range has settled into the minds of both the characters and the reader, Lovecraft reintroduces scale to evoke a shudder of existential dread; he reveals that, beyond those abnormal mountains, others loom, eclipsing them both in size and in ghastly prominence. Narrator Dyer describes his traumatic impressions, having witnessed them while fleeing in a plane:

“[T]hese cryptic violet mountains could not be much less than 300 miles away; yet none the less sharply did their dim elfin essence jut above that remote and snowy rim, like the serrated edge of a monstrous alien planet about to rise into unaccustomed heavens. Their height, then, must have been tremendous beyond all known comparison—carrying them up into tenuous atmospheric strata peopled by such gaseous wraiths as rash flyers have barely lived to whisper of after unexplainable falls. (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 120)

Lovecraft's earlier establishment of scale, having described the first, already abnormal “snowy rim” in terms of sheer and terrifying vastness, allows this new revelation of a haunting, looming shadow even farther beyond to become one of the novella's most profound horrors. These new peaks are not simply abnormal, they are “cryptic,” “alien,” and “tremendous beyond all known comparison.” While Lovecraft's use of this robust descriptive language enhances the outlandish

nature of these mountains, offering what Luckhurst describes as a “convulsion of adjectives” (xx), the existential otherness of their scale owes a great deal of its potency to Lovecraft’s conceptual primer: the first range of mountains, which had been described in terms of the infinite. Imagining an impression that—through association—lies beyond infinity pushes outside the absolute limits of conception, illustrating an effective use of scale-based terminology to evoke a sense of sheer ineffability.

Another, substantial section of “At the Mountains of Madness” is spent with Narrator Dyer recalling his exploration of an immense, abandoned city that dwells in the shadows of the first mountain range. This city was seemingly constructed by entities known as the Elder Things, an ancient race that, while otherworldly in their capabilities, were well beneath Cthulhu’s Great Old Ones, themselves fearful of what loomed within the second mountain range. Throughout his descriptions, Narrator Dyer makes frequent use of scale to invoke the vastness of this discovery. According to his testimony, which is backed by his narrative authority as a geologist, aspects of the city and its architecture are “incalculably gigantic” (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 59), with “unhuman massiveness” (56) or “massiveness and deadness and remoteness” (87). Lovecraft uses these descriptors to translate the scale of understandable cities and familiar architecture present in the reader’s mental landscape to a new and discomfiting level. The city’s structures are “unhuman” in their size and in their scale, “incalculabl[e]” in ways that, while they remain understandable thanks to their association with urban spaces, maintain a dreadful connection to the alien. This use of scale also plays into the Lovecraftian method of invoking cosmic horror; it assaults our intuitive sense of anthropocentrism, the belief that human beings are a central entity in the universe and its understanding. This is further examined by David McWilliam in “Beyond the Mountains of Madness: Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror and Posthuman Creationism in Ridley

Scott's *Prometheus* (2012)." According to McWilliam, "Lovecraftian cosmic horror is, at its core, about the process of unraveling human epistemology, fundamentally challenging our anthropocentric understanding of the universe" (McWilliam 530). The scale of a contemporary city is juxtaposed by Lovecraft against the sheer immensity of that which Dyer discovered, invoking the sense that humanity is inherently limited, our knowledge and our understanding of ourselves and the universe woefully inadequate. This end result, which McWilliam describes as a challenge to "our anthropocentric understanding of the universe," is achieved in part through Lovecraft's deliberate approach to scale. Though the actual dimensions of the ancient, labyrinthine metropolis are never provided to the reader, remaining ambiguous throughout William Dyer's misadventures, the sense of scale remains an effective foci for the existential horror of its mere existence. This is made even more effective when explored intertextually, as the *Elder Things*

### Chapter Three: Sensation

Sensations, both the physical and the emotional, are yet another category of basic descriptive language. In the case of the physical, the experience of our surroundings is often contextualized through the five primary human senses: touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Though spatial awareness and sense of time are sometimes combined with the primary senses, I consider the language associated with them to belong more to the previous categories of geometry and scale, which deal with *a priori* concepts in addition to those that result from organic stimuli. For example, the idea of a triangle and its Euclidian geometry, per Kant, is “clear and certain for [itself], independen[t] of experience” (Kant 127). The geometric certainties of what constitutes a triangle are innate to the very concept, logically self-evident according to the rules of Euclidian space, whether or not the triangle is physically present or seen via the sense of sight. A bright red triangle, however, introduces two descriptive concepts that are neither geometric nor spatial, relying wholly on the singular sense of sight: luminosity and color. Whereas Kant considers “cognition independent of all experience and... all impressions of the senses” to be the benchmark for *a priori* knowledge, *a posteriori* knowledge is that which is sourced from “experience,” including the five senses (Kant 136). Sensational language, per this delineation, categorizes descriptive elements linked directly to the physical body. The associated organs react to the stimuli of the world around us and provide the brain with sensory data that is then composited into a general awareness of our surroundings. Linguistically, sensational language serves a similar purpose. For touch, descriptions of pain and pleasure, hot and cold, allow the reader to understand or even empathize with what the characters and narrators experience using terms that are understood through that singular sense.

Because physical sensations are understood *a posteriori*, experienced directly through sensory organs rather than conceptually through reason, they bear a somewhat different relationship with ineffability. Most notably, physical senses have defined limits, dictated by the biological capabilities of the human body and the physics behind the stimuli that act upon it. This includes conditions such as colorblindness, which alters perceptions of color to varying degrees. While a straight line can be conceptually infinite in length, an expression of both geometry and scale, an object cannot be similarly understood as being infinite in its coarseness, redness, loudness, pungency, nor sweetness. This illustrates the linguistic and cognitive differences between these categories of descriptive language. One way that sensational language can tread upon the ineffable, then, is by breaking the descriptions with mixed metaphors or seemingly inappropriate adjectives, as described by Luckhurst in his analysis of “The Colour Out of Space” (Luckhurst xx). In the text, Lovecraft describes the strange hue of the meteorite as “diseased” and “hectic,” attributes that are generally unrelated to color (Lovecraft, “The Colour Out” 62). This challenges the conceptions of color by introducing outside vocabulary, resulting in an impossibility of description. However, this is not the only technique that Lovecraft employs. As was shown in my earlier response to Luckhurst’s analysis, ineffability can effectively result from sensational language itself, independent of mixed metaphor and inappropriate adjectives. Examining these techniques alongside Lovecraft’s other approaches to sensational language, both thematically and linguistically, offers a more holistic understanding of its empowered presence within his otherworldly canon.

In presenting the Great Old Ones, entities that are meant to be beyond the scope of human conception, Lovecraft gestures towards their ineffability through the medium of language itself, upending the two senses most associated with communication: hearing and sight. In “The

Call of Cthulhu,” Narrator Thurston describes the dreams of Wilcox, a sculptor whose unconscious state is acutely affected by Cthulhu’s great awakening:

Upon retiring, [Wilcox] had had an unprecedented dream of great Cyclopean cities of titan blocks and sky-flung monoliths, all dripping with green ooze and sinister with latent horror. Hieroglyphics had covered the walls and pillars, and from some undetermined point below had come a voice that was not a voice; a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound, but which he attempted to render by the most unpronounceable jumble of letters “*Cthulhu fhtagn.*” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” 192)

The passage begins with an easily understood, simply established use of sensational language that grounds the description in an element of the familiar: “green ooze.” Compared to many of Lovecraft’s adjective-noun pairings, this is fairly straightforward, reminiscent of the “bloody bones” that litter more ordinary horror tales (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 14). This simple foundation then leads to the presentation of visual language in the form of “[h]ieroglyphics.” Notably, these hieroglyphics are left unexplored, mentioned only in passing as if they were relatively mundane. Instead, Lovecraft moves on to “a voice that was not a voice.” This description is a direct contradiction, an upending of our innate understanding of communication, and it marks the first quasi-interaction with the Great Old Ones within Lovecraft’s canon. The first instance of “voice” indicates some form of language, some transmission of information with a definitive source. The addendum, however, insinuates that the “voice” emanates through some indescribable medium, some mode of horrible otherness that assaults the very concept of the spoken word, our sense of hearing, and even the scientific principles of sound. Lovecraft’s choice to use the same word in repetition rather than describing a voice that was inaudible,

psychic, or otherwise strange weaponizes the word *voice* against itself. This alienness is reinforced by the description that follows, that the “voice” was “a chaotic sensation which only fancy could transmute into sound.” Here, Lovecraft clearly differentiates between the voices of the Great Old Ones and those of humankind. Even the concept of sound is humanized, alienated by the nature of Cthulhu’s voice so much so that any attempt to apply it would be an act of “fancy,” of flighty imagination. Ultimately, the “chaotic sensations” are so ineffable that Wilcox’s attempts to write them down result in an “unpronounceable jumble of letters” and the phrase “*Cthulhu fhtagn*.” This fictional language, italicized throughout Lovecraft’s canon both to emphasize its presence and reinforce its foreign, unknowable nature, is composed in a way that defies easy pronunciation by English standards. The phonemes generated by the letter combinations of *cthu*, *lhu*, and *fhta* are unintuitive to a native English reader, and without a common reference, any attempt at spoken pronunciation could differ wildly between individuals, which Lovecraft textually refers to as a “verbal jumble” (“The Call of Cthulhu 192). This initial description of Cthulhu’s voice introduces the Great Old Ones and their ineffable nature by offering recognizable, human elements in the forms of audible speech and visual language, then separating from them, departing into something dreadfully alien.

Wilcox’s testimony offers another mention of this same peculiar method of communication, one similar in its structure but subtly different its nuanced approach to sensational language. In recounting Wilcox’s testimony, Narrator Thurston describes “fragments of nocturnal imagery whose burden was always some terrible Cyclopean vista of dark and dripping stone, with a subterrene voice or intelligence shouting monotonously in enigmatical sense-impacts un-inscribable save as gibberish. The two sounds most frequently repeated are those rendered by the letters ‘*Cthulhu*’ and ‘*R’lyeh*’” (Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu 193). This



passage begins similarly to the previous one, with a simple adjective-noun pairing of “dark” and “stone,” reminiscent of the “green ooze” (192) and the “bloody bones” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 14). Other adjectives are outright repeated, like “dripping” and “Cyclopean,” the latter of which denotes a form of irregular, ancient stone masonry “found on Crete and in Italy and Greece” (“Cyclopean Masonry”). This repetition, separated by a single page, establishes a sort of normalcy and effability; the stone is “dark and dripping” and the architecture is “Cyclopean,” consistent and understandable, if not foreboding. What follows, however, is another mention of the “voice,” this time alternatively described as an “intelligence.” A voice is intuitively connected to the perception of sound, of audible communication. An intelligence, however, is less physical, more conceptual and psychic. By equating the two and insinuating that, in this instance, they are somehow synonymous, Lovecraft offers a different approach than the “voice that was not a voice” (192). Here, the voice transcends sound and enters the realm of intelligence, of abstract consciousness. This mode of communication is so removed from our familiar sense of hearing that its shouts are described as “enigmatical sense-impacts.” The adjective “enigmatical” itself refers to something incomprehensible, something that defies understanding. The nuance, however, lies in the hyphenated word “sense-impacts.” Here, Lovecraft’s use of hyphenation conveys the ineffability of Cthulhu by presenting a newly created word, one that grasps beyond the limits of the five senses. Notably, it does so through the use of sensational language. The word *sense* is broad, encompassing all of the human senses. The word *impact*, meanwhile, generally refers to the sense of touch. By combining them, hyphenating them into “sense-impacts,” Lovecraft gestures towards a mode of communication beyond sensory limits. It is an admission by Wilcox, Narrator Thurston, and ultimately Lovecraft that the limited vocabulary of the English language is entirely ill-equipped to convey the true medium of the “voice.”

In “At the Mountains of Madness,” Lovecraft uses sensational language to establish an early description that serves as context for a later, more existentially horrific revelation. First, when discussing the scent of a series of inhuman corpses excavated by members of his team, Narrator Dyer remains minimally descriptive, simply saying that it was “pungent” despite the “unbelievable antiquity” of the bodies (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 48). This vague notion serves to impart a sensory understanding of an intense odor, perhaps putrid or otherwise related to their age, but is otherwise left ambiguous. This, again, serves as a primer for ineffability, similar to the early introductions of geometric wrongness in “The Call of Cthulhu” or infinite scale attributed to the mountains in this text. Once Dyer begins his exploration of the seemingly abandoned ancient city, the sensation of smell, often associated with memory, returns to a horrible effect. At the start, Dyer and Danforth begin detecting the same vague odor of the inhuman corpse. They choose to continue delving deeper into the city ruins out of a sense of morbid curiosity. It is then that they begin to detect another smell, one that culminates with a dreadful revelation: “It was during that pause that we caught—simultaneously this time—the other odor ahead. Paradoxically, it was both a less frightful and a more frightful odor—less frightful intrinsically, but infinitely appalling in this place under the known circumstances... For the odor was the plain and familiar one of common petrol—every-day gasoline” (Lovecraft, *At the Mountains* 95). The easily understood smell of gasoline is elevated in terror by the context of the passage. While described as “plain” and “familiar” and “common,” it is also “frightful” and “infinitely appalling” due to its presence in an ancient city that, until this point, the narrator had believed to be abandoned. Lovecraft leans into this comparison by including the notion that gasoline is not “frightful intrinsically,” that the intuitive human understanding of the relatively mundane odor renders it powerless on its own. However, by contrasting the sensation with that

of an otherworldly corpse and placing it in a context where it, itself, becomes the weird, he empowers it to convey an alien meaning that it would otherwise lack.

This technique of contextualizing mundane sensations to embody extraordinary meaning is again applied by Lovecraft in “At the Mountains of Madness” to the sense of hearing. During his exploration of the city, Dyer encounters a noise that triggers an immediate and overwhelming fear in him. As Narrator Dyer explains:

What we heard was not the fabulous note of any buried blasphemy of elder earth from whose supernal toughness an age-denied polar sun had evoked a monstrous response. Instead, it was a thing so mockingly normal and so unerringly familiarized by our sea days off Victoria Land and our camp days at McMurdo Sound that we shuddered to think of it here, where such things ought not to be. To be brief—it was simply the raucous squawking of a penguin. (Lovecraft, “At the Mountains” 103)

The sound of a penguin, a sensation that is “mockingly normal and so unerringly [familiar]” to a pair of Antarctic explorers, is transformed into something ghastly not only by the context, as it was for the smell of gasoline, but by Lovecraft’s inclusion of the alternative. He presents the squawking as a sort of relief, but includes what it may well have been, given the realities presented by the text: a “buried blasphemy of elder earth” and its “monstrous response.” This serves both to maintain the cosmic atmosphere of the text and to elevate the simple sound of a penguin as the core source of horror. It is, in a way, a stark reversal of the “convulsion of adjectives” that Luckhurst identifies (xx). Lovecraft waxes poetic in the first sentence, densely packing it with six separate, multisyllabic adjectives: “fabulous,” “buried,” “elder,” “supernal,” “age-denied,” and “monstrous.” Four of the six words are trisyllabic, with one being hyphenated,

offering a complexity of formulation that “break[s] open... language and the conventions of realism” (Luckhurst xx). The final sentence, however, contains only two adjectives, “brief” and “raucous.” Yet it is the latter that is presented as existentially terrifying, simply by virtue of its mundanity in the face of the ineffable, its presence “where such things ought not to be.”

### **Conclusion: Techniques and Scientific Communication**

H.P. Lovecraft's approach to the ineffable through the descriptive categories of geometry, scale, and sensation, as well as through his command of robust, poetic language, runs at the core of the Cthulhu Mythos. His techniques allow the cosmic horrors of his texts to embody the ineffable, to be recognizably beyond quotidian description despite their presence on the written page. They slumber beneath vast, labyrinthine catacombs that dreadfully defy the three dimensions, rife with impossible shapes and paradoxical angles; they speak in voices that are not voices, eliciting colors that are not colors; and they even transcend the intrinsically, inescapably human concepts of beginning and end, of life and death. Reliably conveying that sense of ineffability is what empowers the Great Old Ones and the other eldritch entities of Lovecraft's canon. Semantically, their ineffable nature outright defies true, holistic understanding; their fictional existence is so abstract and alien that the vocabulary to fully describe them does not exist. Lovecraft does not seek to overcome this linguistic barrier and render the Great Old Ones wholly effable. Not only does their abstract nature render this a virtual impossibility, it would ultimately rob them of their existentially dreadful position, one that "lurk[s] ceaselessly behind life in time and in space" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 216). Lovecraft's cosmic horrors must exist in "terrifying vistas of reality" so inhuman, so indescribable that the mere "piecing together of dissociated knowledge" would either drive humanity "mad from the revelation" or cause us to "flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age" ("The Call of Cthulhu" 188). The Great Old Ones, then, exist in a liminal space between their true, ultimately ineffable nature and the reader's understanding that they are, indeed, ineffable. Lovecraft's poetic formulations and his use of geometric, scale-, and sensation-based descriptive language are what allows him to strike this nuanced balance.

For all of the density, intricacies of syntax, and complicated subject matter that seem ever-present in Lovecraft's prose, his works have managed to remain accessible to a large readership. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock expands on this in his essay "St. Lovecraft," in which he explores the literary merit of Lovecraft's works, their posthumous success, and their profound impact on contemporary popular culture. Weinstock notes that, "whereas the writers of the so-called American Renaissance were celebrated by a coterie of intellectuals, Lovecraft has been taken up by both the ivory tower (still grudgingly) and popular culture (avidly). Put another way, while generations of college students have had to be convinced that *Moby Dick* is worth reading, Lovecraft and his work sell with or without an academic seal of approval" (Weinstock 108). Despite the complex, indescribable entities that define his canon, Lovecraft's works remain accessible, understandable enough to both maintain the otherworldly nature of their cosmic horrors and also evoke ineffability in ways that attract a consistent readership. While I agree that Lovecraft's robust, convention-breaking style—per Luckhurst's analysis—is an important factor in his overall success, I assert that it is his empowered use of geometry, scale, and sensation that allows him to bridge the academic divide, achieving the widespread acclaim referenced by Weinstock. Many of Lovecraft's "convulsions of adjectives" (Luckhurst xx) contain unconventional, multisyllabic words that many readers may not know. For such readers, the uncommon vocabulary can be paradoxically effective, reinforcing the ineffability of Lovecraft's horrors by virtue of unfamiliar words. The concepts of geometry, scale, and sensation, however, are virtually universal, and the vocabularies surrounding them are far more common and comprehensible. Lovecraft's nuanced use of these building blocks extends the range of his cosmic horrors, stoking dreadful conflict in the most familiar concepts.

The relationship between successful conveyance of information and ineffable, abstract concepts is an integral aspect of science communication, a modern field defined in the article “Science Communication: A Contemporary Definition” as “the use of appropriate skills, media, activities, and dialogue to produce one or more of the following personal responses to science (the AEIOU vowel analogy): Awareness, Enjoyment, Interest, Opinion-forming, and Understanding” (Burns 183). The related aspect is “Understanding,” the successful conveyance of complex, scientifically oriented ideas to the general public. Within the scientific fields, jargon is developed by qualified experts, rendering otherwise inexpressible, niche concepts effable. Understanding the nuances of that jargon, however, may take years of dedicated study, a high degree of scientific literacy, and a holistic understanding of an entire vocabulary of similarly specialized terminology. To confront this limitation, science communicators study the accumulation of knowledge and explore various means to convey scientific principles. NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, frequently hosts courses on science communication. In the “2019 Science Communication Course,” the questions posed to potential applicants were, “As a scientist, are you having trouble connecting with your audience? Are you worried that the message of your science isn’t getting through to people in the most effective way?” (Kovo). The program continues by stating, “It is up to us, as scientists and engineers, to build a compelling narrative and communicate more effectively to the public, media, and even our own colleagues” (Kovo). The premises that these scientists and engineers aim to communicate, specifically within the complicated fields of astrophysics, astronomy, and aerospace engineering, deal with principles that may occur on a cosmic scale, well beyond the average person’s conceptions.

These limitations of scientific expression are addressed directly by Immanuel Kant in his extensive treatise *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Science* (1783). Early in the text, Kant expounds at length on the unique communicative challenges presented by science, saying:

To approach a new science – one that is entirely isolated and is the only one of its kind – with the prejudice that it can be judged by means of one’s putative cognitions already otherwise obtained, even though it is precisely the reality of those that must first be completely called into question, results only in believing that one sees everywhere something that was already otherwise known, because the expressions perhaps sound similar; except that everything must seem to be extremely deformed, contradictory, and nonsensical, because one does not thereby make the author’s thoughts fundamental, but always simply one’s own, made natural through long habit. Yet the copiousness of the work, insofar as it is rooted in the science itself and not in the presentation, and the inevitable dryness and scholastic exactitude that result, are qualities that indeed may be extremely advantageous to the subject matter itself, but must of course be detrimental to the book itself. (Kant, *Prolegomena* 12)

In this passage, Kant explains that approaching and understanding an unfamiliar branch of science can conflict with an individual’s existing vocabulary and sense of understanding, their “putative cognitions already otherwise obtained.” The “expressions” that “perhaps sound similar” yet “seem to be extremely deformed, contradictory, and nonsensical” are jargon, the words and phrases that hold nuanced meanings within specific scientific fields. Kant notes that this acts as a barrier to authorial intent, stating that these jargon-laden phrases do “not thereby



make the author's thoughts fundamental." To Kant, both "dryness and scholastic exactitude" are admittedly useful for those with the appropriate expertise, but risk alienating a larger readership, implied by his statement that they "must of course be detrimental to the book itself." Kant claims to willingly accept this trade, stating that he "set[s] aside the enticement of an earlier, favorable reception for the expectation of an admittedly later, but lasting approval" (*Prolegomena* 12). His texts are rife with jargon, extremely complex syntax, abstract concepts, and incredibly dense prose. Per Kant's own admission, those who devote themselves to the study of philosophy are his target audience, and so their background, expanded vocabulary, and philosophically honed cognitions offer them a greater chance at parsing out his intended meaning. In contrast to this, Kant offers two philosophers that he believes do the opposite, increasing accessibility through their presentations: David Hume and Moses Mendelssohn. He says, "It is not given to everyone to write so subtly and yet also so alluringly as *David Hume*, or so profoundly and at the same time so elegantly as *Moses Mendelssohn*" (Kant, *Prolegomena* 12). Kant admits that he could only match their more stylistic, approachable prose if he were to "sketch a plan and... commend its execution to others" (12).

Kant's description of the inherent challenges of science communication, as well as his assertion that well-crafted prose can help broaden understanding, illustrates the importance of stylistic, nuanced descriptive language. H.P. Lovecraft's techniques in communicating ineffability, of gesturing towards the unknowable, walk that same linguistic line, albeit to an entirely different destination. Where philosophy and science communication seek to penetrate the ineffable and render it effable, Lovecraft aims to convey ineffability for its own sake; his attentiveness towards the indescribable stems from a desire to explore it, to expose it, to wield as a tool to plumb the dreadful depths of cosmic horror. Through his prose, he immortalized his

determination to “[n]ever have a wonder taken for granted” (Lovecraft, “Notes on Writing” 104). However, in his fight to grasp at the unexplainable, Lovecraft treads upon the understandable. The result is an authorial style that expresses the ineffability of his horrors in a comprehensible way. In this, Lovecraft exposes the descriptive power of geometry, scale, and sensation, providing unexpected insights into the foundations of human communication, conceptualization, and, ultimately, understanding.

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