

FANTASY COMMENTATOR

...covering the field of imaginative literature...

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C O N T E N T S

EDITORIAL:

This-'n'-That	A. Langley Searles.	102
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ARTICLES:

The Lord of R'yleh	Matthew H. Onderdonk	103
An Appreciation of William H. Hodgson	A. St. John Adcock	113
Calling All Crack-Pots!	Thomas S. Gardner	115
"Very Much in Demand"	Thyril L. Ladd	122
Forgotten Creators of Ghosts - II	A. Langley Searles	126

VERSE:

Dark Cavalier	Margaret Widdemer	118
Sudden Light	Dante Gabriel Rossetti	130

REGULAR FEATURES:

Book Reviews:

Fast's <u>Out of This World</u>	Harry Warner, Jr.	112
Gawsworth's <u>Strange Assembly</u>	Harold Wakefield	120
Tips on Tales	Thyril L. Ladd	119
Acknowledgements	the staff	130
Thumbing the Munsey Files	William H. Evans	131

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The Lord of R'lyeh

A Discussion of the Supreme Contribution of Howard Phillips
Lovecraft to the Philosophy of the Weird Tale

by
Matthew H. Onderdonk

I

To the uninitiated, it may appear a curious fact that the most avid readers of supernatural literature usually have no belief in the reality of the categories of human experience therein described. They peruse it for the unique and untold enjoyment obtained: fundamentally it is a medium for entertainment. A few of the best works in the genre may cause a deepening of the spiritual insight, but generally the net result never directly affects their actions or the daily decisions they must make in carrying out the tedium of existence.

It seems equally true that among the host of writers in this field a substantial majority admit to an agnostic attitude towards the verity of these same convictions. These authors are, almost without exception, very sensitive and extremely learned in the lore of the unseen, but they have likewise a strong distaste for the naive and credulous outlook which would accept these credos as the revealed truth.

If we care to seek an explanation for this sometimes perplexing state of affairs, the most likely conclusion that appears would seem to be that those really steeped in the occult, and to whom the nearness of the other worlds is a matter-of-fact daily occurrence, are entirely too close to the whole matter to gain a proper perspective. To these, the supernatural is too real to be a satisfactory medium for mere literary expression. Stories in this domain must of necessity appear insipid and puerile to them; hence, such believers usually have no true critical appreciation of the art.

After all, if you are actually convinced that you can communicate with the deceased via spiritualism, or if you really believe you are able to invoke demons or gods and propitiate them if necessary---all by the use of the proper spells and incantations---it is small wonder that a barley-water version of the real thing provokes only amusement or boredom.

We reach, finally, the rather intriguing paradox that, in the main, the great majority of spectral stories are written by unbelievers for the delectation of other unbelievers---equally fervid in their heretical views. The fundamental problem of why some people since the dawn of time have been obsessed with the unknown and the unseen, and why so many have had such a passionate interest in reciting and listening to spectral ballads and later in history in reading a n d writing about the supernatural, is a tremendous and profound question. However, since it is clearly beyond the scope of the present article, we regretfully abandon it and concentrate attention directly on the chosen subject-matter.

II

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was a rationalist. There can be little doubt of this, not only from consideration of his own published works, but from the casual testimony of friends and acquaintances. In view of what has been said above, that alone should provide no barrier to our understanding of why he could also be a writer of fine supernatural tales. When we dig deeper, however, and note that he asserted he was a mechanistic materialist in philosophy, we may again wonder a little. For this same man, not content with works of more conventional form such as the superb short story "The Outsider," and the magnif-

icent novel "The case of Charles Dexter Ward," progressed further and created in literary form a new family of gods and associated lore which we have come now to know under the general title "The Cthulhu Mythos."

Here would seem to be a basic contradiction. If "mechanistic materialism" means what it implies, it would indicate a conviction that man's psychical faculties as well as his physical ones---are all the attributes of his world and the universes around him---are uniformly governed by immutable and inviolable mechanical laws, some of which we have already discovered and labeled "science." In short, man and the universe are equally machines; and machines have no power of choice: they must obey the laws which regulate their actions. To such an adherent, it would require an impossible wrench to the intellect to postulate powers of any sort which could modify, reverse, or set aside these blind mechanical laws or any part of them merely to satisfy some whim of the gods or supplication of mankind.

Now, the most immediate conclusion which might be drawn in the case of Lovecraft is that his literary creation of a new pantheon was simply a grim, ironic jest; a bold nose-thumbing at conventional religious concepts; a credo that any man may construct his own family of gods to suit his own tastes and inclinations; a dictum that each man's pantheon has equal validity because in reality none of them has any intrinsic meaning. Those who know anything of Lovecraft the man, however, and who are aware of his genuine erudition, must cast aside immediately such ideas. A man of his character, learning and intellectual integrity was utterly incapable of such shallow posturing, such sophomoric sniping at fundamental and ultimate human questions.

Here was Lovecraft's dilemma as this writer sees it, and here is how he resolved it, according to the best thought and meditations of this same humble seeker after truth: Lovecraft had an innate predilection for the weird and the supernatural since early childhood. Next, he professed an intense nostalgia for the vanished eighteenth century and all it implied (and surely the eighteenth century was a veritable apotheosis of mechanistic materialism in science and philosophy!). Finally, he had a complete awareness of twentieth century science and the speculations arising therefrom: he well knew the terrifying new vistas it had opened up to the human mind. So the query is: how to reconcile these diverse elements?

In the fires of genius flaming in his brilliant intellect he was able to reinterpret eighteenth century mechanism in the light of twentieth century relativity and indeterminacy, and then to integrate these new basic concepts of science with the best elements surviving from age-old supernaturalism. The crowning touch was the added glamour of the weird, which like a gossamer sheen envelops the best of all his tales.

By accomplishing this remarkable feat, he created (as all genius must) something new and unique in the world's storehouse of original ideas. In his case it was a new kind of weird tale that had elements of science-fiction artfully and inextricably woven into the deeper currents of the unseen and the Outside. The result was neither science-fiction, nor weird fiction, nor supernatural fiction, but something different from all of those: in short, a Lovecraftian tale. The supreme resulting achievement? What we formerly called the supernatural was no longer so: it had now become merely the supernormal.

III

The conflict between science and religion is one of mankind's oldest wars. It probably started when one of our earliest ancestors found a new and better way of hunting and killing, or a new kind of food, drink or amusement that conflicted with the authority of the tribal priests. This inevitably led to the

institution of taboo against this particular action. Thus the weight of the supernatural gods (with which the tribal priests were of course on the closest of terms) was thrown behind the ukases of these holy men.

An uninhibited analysis of medieval history inevitably leads to the conclusion that a great deal of the persecution of the so-called "witches, wizards, warlocks and alchemists" by the church and state was prompted by a deadly fear of the unorthodox findings which some of these persons might have chanced upon in their gropings into the unknown.

Of course the classic example of true scientific spirit being throttled by ecclesiastical authority is the case of Galileo, which we all know by heart. No new words need be added to what the verdict of history has finally written on this shameful episode of human stupidity.

With the tremendous upsurge of scientific inquiry and invention in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the terrific upheavals of our own revolution and that of the French people; the spread of democratic ideas; the breaking up of the family unit of economy through the introduction of the factory system in the Industrial Revolution---is it any wonder that philosophy began to proclaim the Age of Reason? Voltaire and Diderot; Franklin and Paine; Hume, Dalton and Adam Smith were the new prophets. The mechanical principles of Galileo and Newton in astronomy and physics were confirmed in chemistry by Lavoisier. Laplace introduced his famous nebular hypothesis. Galthus capped it all with his essay on population in 1798. Since Lovecraft tried to immerse himself in this eighteenth century and felt he was really an outsider, stranded in space and time, who really belonged in that turbulent era, is it any wonder that he professed himself a mechanistic materialist?

The old conflict reached its apogee with Darwin and the publication of his Origin of Species in 1859. The doctrine of evolution seemed to cut the last props from under the already shaky edifice of supernatural gods and established religion. Darwin, Huxley, Drummond and many others were all participants in that last great battle.

Today, we know that the mechanistic philosophy of life is hopelessly inadequate and outdated. The old-fashioned conception of science indeed made it absolutely irreconcilable with religion and the supernatural. If the universe and man alike are ruled by absolute, immutable laws there is an inevitable clash in any reasonable mind when it tries to envision at the same time the existence of a power which can at will set aside or operate at variance to these laws. Present-day science in its ultimate conceptions spills over into the realm of metaphysics---it is unavoidable. In the last analysis, the complete validity of our scientific knowledge is seriously open to question.

Einstein and relativity; Planck and the quantum theory; Bohr and Compton and the later investigators whose electronic research shows that ultimately the heart of the sub-atomic particle may be only pure energy; Heisenberg and Schrödinger and the principle of indeterminacy; Millikan and the cosmic rays; the modern interpreters like Jeans and Eddington; Dunne, with his serial time and serial universe---all these combine to show us that our final knowledge of the worlds around us is, to say the least, still very incomplete.

The principle of indeterminacy may indicate that our scientific "laws" in their ultimate conception are really more statements of probability: statistical rules based on averages. The principles of relativity seem to show that while our picture of reality in our own space-time may be accurate enough for most practical purposes, it could be utterly at variance with the reality we might deduce from the same sort of tests and observations in another space-time. What pictures of reality might appear to the inhabitants of other galaxies or other dimensions of space and time brings us to the final conclusion that there may be no such thing as Absolute Reality.

Granting this, there is no reason why we should be slavishly bound to strict scientific law in our broadest conceptions of the universe, and the door is thus left open for a renaissance of personal faith in the supernatural based on our individual intuitions and inclinations.

Now, Lovecraft was cognizant of all that has been sketched in the lines above, but he also realized that we live in a world in which heat, light, gravitation, electricity, etc., do seem to follow definite laws of action that remain quite stable from day to day. Unless we are to abandon all reason, we must take this fact into account. After all, the modern reader of his stories would be bound to have a fair scientific background: this reader couldn't tolerate very many of the old-fashioned Gothic trappings of the ghost, werewolf and vampire par go. It takes a first-rate artist today to make us grant even a half-hour's credence to these relics of yesterday, and after that we dismiss the tale with a shrug and a smile. Clearly, a new approach and wider horizons are required.

Lovecraft was possessed of an enormous spirit of sensitivity and almost boundless imagination, so it seems quite probable that he shrank from the full implications of a universe governed by mere blind force, particularly with his intuitive feeling for the weird and the unseen. So, therefore, I venture to suggest that his brilliant mind resolved all of these difficulties by a new concept of the spectral tale; a synthetic attitude into which grew inevitably the mythos of supernormal, scientifically-conceived gods and associated lore to take the place in literature of the simon-pure supernatural and more strictly poetical gods of our past days.

I think we can sense this immediately upon the first perusal of his best works, although realization does not come until after meditation and considerable rereading. The atmosphere of a clear rationalism overhangs all of the story-telling; something of the mechanistic belief survives in the concept of Fate as ruling the action of both man and gods. Neither of these, however, subordinate a complete grasp of present-day scientific and philosophical outlook. mingled throughout is the sense of terror from vast, unsoon things and psychological horror of the creeping menace of unimaginable entities from outside.

The objection may be made that the finished product is only pure horror; that the creations of the mythos are almost universally malignant, or, at best, indifferent towards man's fate. This cannot be avoided: all the main currents of the supernatural in the past have had the prime effect of making us uncomfortable. A scientist of today can conceive the universe as peopled by blind forces which have no concern with the human race, but for the purposes of literature this attitude is too static, too dead: we must have conflict of purposes and emotions to make a story. We must personify these forces in some manner to make them intelligible to the reader, and we are forced to make them inimical to mankind's aspirations and progress in order to have the interesting elements of struggle and survival. If we postulated all the powers of the galaxies as simply united in working towards our objectives, the outcome would be merely a lazy complacency of mind, even granting that we could hurdle the patent absurdity and puerile infantilism of such an idea. It could not be expected that a modern scientific integration with the supernatural would help to flatter us to any extent when we consider the utter vastness of our present conceptions of space and time, and man's paltry insignificance in the midst of it.

IV

Science-fiction had already seen most of its best days when Lovecraft began seriously to write: he was just a couple of decades ahead of the bulk of the writing world in sensing this fact. Of course the reason for this beginning of decadence was, ironically enough, that legitimate science had almost caught up

with the best visions of our "scientifiction" writers. This type of story in the past had always had a punch because it was so breathlessly futuristic: it related of times so far ahead that readers in this ordinary world were filled with heady inspirations and dazzling dreams of the great scientific Utopia to come. Now, the products of research bid fair to outstrip the finest imaginings of our visionaries in literature. Just one instance: we can no longer be expected to read wide-eyed about rocket trips to other planets when modern armies, in conducting military operations, are already on the very fringes of that stage of development. The fictional prophets have been vindicated, of course, but unfortunately they stand in danger of being superceded by the news items in our daily papers! Perhaps not immediately---today---but the shadows are on the horizon, and unless we discover a few new geniuses of the stature of the early H. G. Wells, it would appear that the writing of "scientifiction" will continue its steady decline. We are doomed to be progressively bored and annoyed by the stale rehashing of ideas that once seemed daring and eon-distant in the first quarter of this century. Of course, some may say: What of Olaf Stapledon? Unfortunately, in this writer's present estimation, Stapledon---at least in his two most significant works, Star-maker and Last and First Men---has not written fiction in any true sense of that word. These volumes are crammed with magnificent ideas and concepts, but they read like history texts---albeit very fantastic ones! They will undoubtedly be prime source-books for future writers; granting the emergence of new geniuses to elaborate portions of this material into colorful and dramatic story form, we may yet have a renaissance of science-fiction; let us all hope so! Incidentally, Stapledon's treatment of the superman theme in Odd John is excellent, and may well point the way towards future elaborations he intends to make of his master works. And Sirius, his latest novel, is an able delving into psychological subtleties from a most unexpected viewpoint. Stapledon may well tell the whole tale of cosmic history in readable form if given time.

Another dark portent in the minds of thinkers, however, is the beginning of a sad loss of faith in science as the final arbiter of human progress and welfare. Unless and until war and human greed are conquered, it does not seem that piling more and more gadgets and conveniences on us will help to cure the fundamental faults of human nature. We come inevitably to the distasteful conclusion that a man of the future subsisting on vitamin pellets, week-ending on Venus or Mars, and arming himself with atomic disintegrators or cosmic-ray guns would be even less pleasant to live with than a twentieth century human being unless there were a concurrent improvement in his cooperative abilities and basic nature. The present-day revelation of collectivism in all the horrors of its several forms makes us shrink from the vision of a scientific Utopia, a regimented bee-hive of civilization in which all life would be conducted on the latest principles of research, and wherein we would all have to live as supermen---whether we wanted to or not. Wells must bear a large share of the blame for attempting to foist this unpalatable concept of a brave new world upon us in his later works. The optimists, of course, brush all these doubts aside with light-hearted assurance that man will become better as his world becomes more and more scientifically controlled: but history has thus far not justified their faith. We have made the world infinitely smaller, but the main result has been to bring the other fellow just that much closer to our bomb-sights.

However that may be, in Lovecraft's view the decline and fall of old-time science-fiction seemed not too far distant. He revived and rescued the best elements of it by marrying them to the older concepts of the supernatural and the weird, and today, of course, we recognize the resulting synthesis as the Lovecraftian attitude.



The writer hopes that this discussion will provoke plenty of thought, discussion and controversy; certainly everyone should think for himself on all of the aspects involved. Hence, no attempt will be made at too exhaustive an analysis of any one phase; many of the confirmed Lovecraftians who may have the patience to read this article will have decidedly different opinions, and that is all to the good. If these words can help only in suggesting some new lines of thought on the subject of Lovecraft's genius its purpose will have been nobly fulfilled.

Let us now consider how rational and scientific an aura surrounds much of the apparently wild and fantastic events in his works; and let us note precisely why his stories satisfy our intuitive love of the supernatural, yet do little violence, in their fictional medium, to our scientific background of knowledge.

In "Dagon" we have the most concise and perhaps the best expression of the whole Lovecraftian credo. The account is factual and circumstantial; the idea of a submarine upheaval in the ocean's floor is plausible. That such an event might produce evidence of a lost race does not seem impossible. Our credulity is strained, of course, when we get intimations that the "people" must have been a pre-human race of aquatic men who worshipped a fish-god, but by then the story's spell has captured us. Over it all hangs the awareness of the terrible and acknowledged antiquity of the earth and man's tenuous sinecure thereon. The final horror (if it is not really the narrator's own madness) is certainly little enough license to allow the writer of such a splendid tale.

The whole comment might with even greater certitude be made on that key-stone of the whole mythos: the longer, more definitive, and among the greatest of Lovecraft's stories, "The Call of Cthulhu." Here, a complete city is hewed up from the ocean's floor; unholy and son-cursed R'lyeh wherein lie great Cthulhu and his minions, lord of the waters and his cohorts---perhaps only hibernating for the nonce. In this same story we learn the details from varied sources of the ancient and shocking cult of Cthulhu which has existed in obscure corners of the world since earliest pre-human ages. Since we do know vaguely of mysterious cults that have lurked in the background of human history since earliest antiquity, the evidence as it is unfolded has a certain air of verisimilitude. Cthulhu and his followers are material beings (of a very peculiar sort, it may be granted) and they do not seem to be all-powerful, else they would not remain dreaming in their slimy prison. The air of bland factuality and cosmic horror is nicely balanced; the tale cannot but impress the critical reader.

We hear more of Dagon in "The Shadow over Innsmouth." Clearly, Dagon, one of Cthulhu's entourage, was worshipped by the degenerate aquatic-human hybrids who infested and ruled accursed Innsmouth.

The tremendous adventures of Randolph Carter as detailed in the splendid episodic novel---"The Silver Key," "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" and "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath"---are fine conceptions of events in other dimensions of space and time which are surely not too basic an improbability a fiction in the light of our present-day speculation on relativity and serial time.

In a tale almost as detailed and circumstantial as the works of Defoe, "The Whisperer in Darkness," we have one of Lovecraft's supreme horror stories. The which yet has a certain amount of quasi-scientific background---enough photo-

graph on the opposite page is that of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, taken at the age of 64 years. It is in that superb creation, "The Shadow out of Time," however, that Lovecraft really rose to the heights. Here we have the finest exposition of our planet's terrifying age; we have a rational discourse on relativity; the time-displacement angle is handled in a masterly fashion; and above all we have almost the ultimate zenith in physical terror and psychological horror. This tale is far from being the most popular among readers,

but after long consideration, this writer cannot but place it at the top: it appears to meet all possible requirements and tests.

Dulled a little in effect by its length, perhaps, but almost as great in its own way is the novel "At the Mountains of Madness." The acknowledged evidence of one-time tropical climate at the poles is used to bolster a magnificent and frightening account of the discovery of the ruins of a pre-human civilization of unimaginable antiquity in the Antarctic. Behind hitherto-undiscovered mountains, incredibly high, lurks this vast hulk. Within its dead walls is sculptured the history of a mighty race and its decadence and final downfall. The fact that underground there are---capable of being revived by heat---remnants of the creatures that destroyed this elder race is not too scientifically implausibly (as fiction) in the light of what we know today about quick-freezing, hibernation and the innate toughness of some lower species of animal life.

There is even a very thin scientific justification for the events in the series of horror-episodes entitled "Herbert West: Reanimator," although the quality of this writing is definitely inferior to much of Lovecraft's best.

Aside from all that has just been written, however, it would appear that the basic reaction which occurs in the reader's mind is the final and most important point. When we think of Azathoth as ruling all space and time at the center of Ultimate Chaos, we do not experience the same feeling as did we when confronted by the vague, spiritual entities of an older supernaturalism. We feel somehow that Azathoth is explicable in terms of modern astronomy and physics. He seems no more to our rational, scientific minds than the misty ghosts and purely spiritual forces of a past age. It is perhaps worth repeating that this is the leitmotif of Lovecraft's peculiar art, the core of his philosophy of the weird: that all these vast and mysterious aspects of the universes around us should be regarded in the light of the supernormal rather than the supernatural. It is perhaps even better exemplified by our feeling towards the physical monstrosities, the blasphemous abnormalities of structure, appendage, etc., as encountered in so many of the mythos tales. We feel that these strange and abhorrent creatures are not mere nightmare denizens of the Pit (as in old supernaturalism) but rather conceivable products of a process of biological evolution that might have taken place in an utterly alien cosmos under conditions which an earth-dweller could scarcely comprehend.

Only a few suggestive examples have been given from the mass of Lovecraft's work; whole books could easily be written if and when a definitive critical analysis were attempted. Some of the most popular stories such as "Pickman's Model," "The Colour out of Space," "The Dunwich Horror," "The Rats in the Walls," "The Music of Erich Zann," "The Temple," "The Thing on the Doorstep," and others have not been specifically referred to merely because it is felt that confirmed Lovecraftians, if they feel that the ideas and opinions herein expressed may provide a slight trace of a new and fresh viewpoint, may like the intellectual entertainment of re-analyzing some of these tales for themselves. It would seem that enough has been cited to give those who are interested an opportunity to trace down evidences of confirmation or rebuttal should they feel so inclined.

VI

The importance of Lovecraft's style has been a point of some discussion among its devotees. Of course, the similarity to Poe's was immediate and self-evident: Lovecraft himself admitted that Poe and Dunsany had the greatest influence on his writings. We readily discern the same Poesque elements of morbidity, extravagant phraseology, melodramatics and somber atmosphere. However, while Poe was without doubt an infinitely greater writer in a strict literary sense, we can say that Lovecraft had an imagination equally as fertile; in addition he had the benefit of three generations of scientific research and the philosophical speculation arising therefrom. These same generations an almost complete revolution

in our conception of the universe; they opened up endless vistas for the human mind to explore, and they could not help giving Lovecraft material to draw upon of which Poe could never have dreamt.

Lovecraft's works can be characterized by saying that they are a blend of Poesque style, Dunsanian fantasy and contain a dash of Wellsian scientific realism—but this conveys nothing without a consideration of the catalyst: the genius of Lovecraft's total cosmic viewpoint. This causes all the elements to combine into that superb compound: the Lovecraftian story. This compound gives off the characteristic, peculiar aura that we all recognize: that creeping horror of the menace from Outside.

The Lovecraftian influence is most noticeable in the mood reflected in the reader's mind. That is why his stories can be reread countless times and still appear fresh and interesting. Characterization is negligible; devices and mechanics of plot are far from unique; yet again and again we are drawn back by the description and the atmosphere. Obviously, those who reread him must enjoy the moods engendered; upon each new perusal the old mood is recreated, yet each time it is never quite the same. Sometimes one aspect seems highlighted; sometimes it seems foreshortened and another facet is emphasized. The stories are thus a teeming source of countless, varied moods and never seem stale, lifeless, or too familiar.

What of Lovecraft's influence on the future of the weird tale? We know that so far his work has had a very definite bearing on some of the writings of August Derleth, Donald Wandrei, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Robert E. Howard, Hazel Heald, Henry Kuttner, Robert Bloch, Zealia Bishop and others. Certainly we can trace an apparent Lovecraftian influence in the two fine novels of William Sloane, To Walk the Night and The Edge of Running Water; both of which deal with menace from the Outside: the first, of an alien intelligence possessing a human body, and the second, the tremendous, dark forces lurking beyond the barriers of our familiar dimensions.

Lovecraft's brilliant and revolutionary idea of integrating the most worthwhile elements of a decadent science-fiction with the best concepts of the supernatural and the weird would seem to be enough to guarantee an indelible impression being made on the minds of all future writers in the genre. In addition, however, he left the superb concept of the mythos to which several writers have already made additional contributions. When Lovecraft died, the mythos was admittedly incomplete; unquestionably had he lived only a decade longer he would have deepened and widened its scope to a tremendous extent. Certainly no future writer in this domain of literature can afford to be ignorant of the mythos with its pantheon of supernormal gods who are more acceptable to a generation with a modern scientific background than the older, Gothic, purely supernatural deities and powers of darkness and light. Filling in the gaps and extending the sweep of the mythos should provide an inspiration for at least those select few who are capable of carrying it forward.

Finally, as if this were not enough, he left a considerable reservoir of basic plot-material for future writers in the associated lore of the mythos and in the dark portents hinted at in "The Ancient Track" and "Fungi from Yuggoth," which should be limited in development only by the imagination and ingenuity of a generation yet to come.

Think of the stories that yet remain to be written about witch-cursed Arkham, and degenerate Innsmouth! And since R'lyeh presumably will not rise again from the ocean floor until eons have passed and the stars are right once more, what is to prevent us from making a submarine expedition to its cyclopean, slimy-green ramparts in the Pacific deep? Inspiration for mythos tales lies all around us; even the writer of this article has a fairly complete mental synopsis of a gripping story based on an unusual local character and his very mysterious

(concluded on page 114)

The Lord of R'yleh---concluded from page 111
habitation which derives directly from influence of the Lovecraftian viewpoint.
In conclusion, this same writer awaits with the keenest of anticipation
that momentous day when some hardy Latin scholar decides to take up the fabled
Olaus Wormius edition of the forbidden book, and brings forth to the startled
world a translation of the Necronomicon---unabridged and unexpurgated---into Eng-
lish blank verse!