

Titanic, mysterious, forgotten: cities in Howard Philips Lovecraft's stories

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Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890–1937) was an American writer of horror stories, combining elements of science-fiction and fantasy (Clute – Grant, 1999: 596–597), sometimes also labelled as horrific fantasy (Waggoner, 1978: 60–61). Though his oeuvre may seem trifle compared with that of other writers – just a few dozen short stories and novelettes or novellas, definitely drawing upon E. A. Poe's story-form but taking it to a more elaborate dimension – his writing left an indelible imprint on American speculative fiction due to his rich, original imagery rendered in a highly artistic language. Since he was an author of "weird stories" published in pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s – these rarely being treated by scholars with due care and interest – their linguistic aspect may have often been overlooked or even disparaged (Waggoner, 1978: 60–61), but seldom appreciated¹. Unjustly: his superb command of English, manifesting itself in his extremely vast repertoire of vocabulary, notably adjectives and nouns, and the uncanny ability to come up with ravishing, striking collocations and phrases, and his mastery of handling long, carefully honed sentences make him an outstanding advocate of literary English at its finest. Should a wave of barbarians sweep across any English-speaking territory wiping away the native culture, H. P. Lovecraft's tales would doubtless be among the basic readings for the natives to preserve or restore their ethnic and linguistic identity – task usually left outside America to epics and hefty realist or historical novels.

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Lovecraftian cities are often malformed and monstrous, because they are marked by isolation and decay – or simply forgotten. The monstrosity characterises chiefly the

¹ See the discussion of Lovecraft's oeuvre in *H.P. Lovecraft. Against the World, Against Life* by M. Houellebecq, McSweeney's Books, 2005.

areas built up by the Elder Race. Here, the constructions are sometimes like caricatures of themselves due their immensity and grotesque shapes. An important element of the description of the ‘other’ space is its location off man’s track. There are submersed cities (*The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Temple*, *The Shadow Out of Time*), ice-bound ones (*At the Mountains of Madness*), alien ones (*The Whisperer in Darkness*, *The Shadow Out of Time*), or – despite their existence within the boundaries of human civilisation – strangely isolated from it (*The Shadow Over Innsmouth*) – partly or totally.

The forgotten, disused, hidden – and, thus, menacing and mysterious – spaces are a significant atmosphere-building element in horror fantasy. They convey the duality of space, breaking it down to ‘this’ and ‘the other’ worlds. The ambivalence-of-space model rests on the principle of the existence of “on one hand, the sphere of rationality [...]; on the other hand [...] the realm of ‘otherness’ – *numinosum* – of what escapes human understanding” (Aguirre, 2002: 17). The isolation in which some of Lovecraftian cities exist is a kind of threshold separating the human reality from the non-human one: bearing the seal of otherness, the metropolises belong in the man-hostile sphere. To some extent, the geographic divide acts as a bridge spanning the sphere of ‘normalcy’ and the sphere of ‘preternaturalness’. The border between the two becomes crossable only after a courageous or explorer-type protagonist resolves to overcome the difficulties and venture into the forbidden land. The protagonist also happens to be simply translocated to a foreign territory where, against his will, he sees ‘alien’ constructions.

Michel Houellebecq concludes that “the rejection of the realist form is a prerequisite for entering Lovecraft’s world” (Houellebecq, 2007: 60). This rule is especially true for the submersed and lost-in-time-and-space cities built by the Old Ones that used to inhabit the Earth. The metropolises lie hidden in inaccessible areas, so their proper exploration is impossible. This can be seen in the story *At the Mountains of Madness* in which explorers in the Antarctic find traces of an ancient civilisation. They discover a vast, labyrinthine city, concealing the history of its builders. The incredible volume of its architecture is most astounding: “the incredible, unhuman massiveness of these vast stone towers and ramparts [which] had saved the frightful thing from utter annihilation in the hundreds of thousands – perhaps millions – of years it had brooded there amidst the blasts of a bleak upland” (Lovecraft, 2001a: 284). This and other cities’ monumentality hints at the horrors and evil they harbour and becomes a visual document of the might and awe that the Old Ones inspire in modern people – as can, for instance, be found in the following passage from *The Call of Cthulhu*, in which the narrator describes the emergence of a sunken city from the ocean’s depths:

Johansen [...] dwells [...] on broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces [...]. Johansen and his men landed [...] on this monstrous Acropolis [...]. ... twisted menace and suspense lurked leeringly in those crazily elusive angles of carven rock ... [...]. The odour arising from the [...] depths was intolerable [...] (Lovecraft, 1999: 165–167).

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, the narrator finds that “there was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blasphemously archaic stonework” (Lovecraft, 2001a: 294).

Titanic cities are built mainly of stone, complemented by wood and sometimes metal. The rich ornamentation includes bas-reliefs and frescoes – which usually tell some part of the story of the ancient race, thus having not only aesthetic function. The protagonists' interest is caught – especially in *At the Mountains of Madness* – by the uniqueness of the technique used to make the ornaments:

In delicacy of execution no sculpture I have ever seen could approach it (Lovecraft, 2001a: 294),
says the narrator and adds that

The minutest details of elaborate vegetation, or of animal life, were rendered with astonishing vividness despite the bold scale of the carvings (Lovecraft, 2001a: 294).

The explorers are also drawn to the figure of pentagon, the most prominent in the bas-reliefs, paintings, and architecture. Similar fascination and admiration is exhibited too by the protagonist of the story *The Nameless City*, thus emphasising the high quality of the ornamentation which he sees in the lost metropolis:

This hall was [...] a monument of the most magnificent and exotic art. Rich, vivid, and daringly fantastic designs and pictures formed a continuous scheme of mural painting whose lines and colour were beyond description (Lovecraft, 2005b: 36).

As can be seen, a frequent motif in Lovecraftian narrative is the protagonists' realisation of how different the architectural constructions and their ornamentation are. The cities, referred to as titanic, crossing the boundaries of human imagination, make seeing them a traumatic experience, void of any aesthetic impressions, inspiring fear. In *The Thing on the Doorstep*, the protagonist mentions "elusively coloured and bafflingly textures objects like nothing ever heard of on earth, whose insane curves and surfaces answered no conceivable purpose and followed no conceivable geometry" (Lovecraft, 2001: 349). This geometric strangeness affects the assessment and becomes a signal of danger and queerness. The gap between the 'normality' of the protagonists and their experiencing of the existence of an 'other' world is sometimes a result of the differences between the laws of physics at work in the two realities. The earthly principles of spatial existence differ from those "on other worlds, and in different space-time continua" (Lovecraft, 2001: 349). This peculiar geometry disturbs the viewing experience, thus becoming another tool for implanting fear. The unusual shapes present the viewer's eye with a dissonance which the psyche cannot cope with. Therefore, the sight of the titanic cities is a traumatic experience for the protagonists. The exclusion of the monstrous constructions from the realm of the principles of standard space-time geometry transports the viewer far away from the 'normal' world. As the narrator's description goes in *At the Mountains of Madness*:

[...] a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination [...] embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws (Lovecraft, 2001: 271).

The uniqueness of the existence of the lost metropolis' constructions dims the protagonists' perception. The 'otherworldliness' of the place they see manifests itself chiefly in unusual, impossible to interpret shapes. The buildings seem to exist in an extraordinarily glimmering and ambiguous fashion:

There were geometrical forms for which an Euclid could scarcely find a name – cones of all degrees of irregularity and truncation; terraces of every sort of provocative disproportion; shafts with odd bulbous enlargements; broken columns in curious groups; and five-pointed or five-ridged arrangements of mad grotesqueness (Lovecraft, 2001: 289).

Describing the forgotten city, the narrator mentions “endless variety, preternatural massiveness, and utterly alien exoticism” (Lovecraft, 2001: 289). The richness of forms at the same time attests the high level of technological development and the forgotten city’s creators’ extraordinary scope of aesthetic purpose. Although they are alien and dangerous to people, their art – now buried in ice and normally inaccessible – commands respect and holds a fascination for the viewers who stand in awe of it. The fear-laced observation becomes one of the chief components of the description of the titanic constructions. In Lovecraft’s narrative, seeing monstrous settlements is always combined with fear and admiration. Stricken by the eeriness of the landscape, the protagonists always feel the same and their accounts tend to be vastly similar. Their mental condition is best illustrated by a passage from *At the Mountains of Madness*:

To form even a rudimentary idea of our thoughts and feelings as we penetrated this [...] maze [...] of masonry one must correlate a hopelessly bewildering chaos of fugitive moods, memories, and impressions (Lovecraft, 2001: 296).

The architectural design of the lost cities is, thus, a source of the protagonists’ unending bewilderment. What is more,

[...] reading those descriptions at first inspires, but then discourages one from any attempt at visualisation (either painterly or filmic). The images re-emerge in the conscious mind, but none seems sublime or monumental enough, none can live up to its oneiric original (Houellebecq, 2007: 68).

Human imagination is limited by the laws of nature of the human world, so one cannot step outside them. This narrowing down of the field of view makes full perception of the ‘alien’ art impossible and disturbs the viewing logic. Those “Cyclopean, mad structures imagined by Lovecraft cause a violent and irreversible shock in the reader’s mind [...]. We get the impression that we have already visited those titanic cities in our dreams” (Houellebecq, 2007: 69), which makes the protagonists’ emotions become part of the reader’s experience. The aesthetic impressions ranging between delight and fear (the state of being overwhelmed by the form) are a reflection of the proposition that “beauty sits atop the hierarchy of the paradigm of aesthetic assets” (Tarnowski, 2007: 370). Experiencing beauty consists in affirmation and involves man’s cognitive capacity. An important element of the cognitive process is the emotional attitude to the observed reality. The inability to accept fully what they see gives the protagonists cognitive discomfort: not only can they not maintain objectivity when confronted by the monstrous constructions, but they increasingly succumb to the illusion of danger (rightly or not). Seeing alien metropolises, Lovecraft’s protagonists lose their confidence, because they are unable to develop a bond with the creation they see. The reader’s imagination gets incited by the emotively suggestive visions, which contributes significantly to the formulation of a negative assessment of the urban landscape. The abnormal architectural forms suggest a profound relationship between the degeneration of form and the viewer’s mental state.

Monstrosity is among the most important features of the horror-space, a construction element of the atmosphere of danger. Houellebecq also points out that

[...] descriptions of architecture are likely to make the biggest impression on us when we read Lovecraft's fiction for the first time [...] We come face to face with an utterly different world. Even fear disappears. All human emotions are gone except fascination which never before has taken on such a definite form (Houellebecq, 2007: 67).

The extraordinariness of the architectural structures erected by the Earth's prehistoric inhabitants stems from the strangeness of aesthetic experience and from different functions of the monumental constructions. In *The Temple*, when comparing the architecture of ancient human civilisations with that of the city on the ocean floor, the narrator states that

The art is of the most phenomenal perfection, largely Hellenic in idea, yet strangely individual. It imparts an impression of terrible antiquity, as though it were the remotest rather than the immediate ancestor of Greek art (Lovecraft, 2001: 34).

The highest form of aesthetic expression - which, according to the protagonist, is exemplified by Hellenic art - did not reach such finesse as the builders of the sunken metropolis had. Greek art turns out secondary to the art of the submersed city. That is why the narrator declares the underwater constructions to be "of immense magnitude" while all the ornamentation - "of inexpressible beauty" (Lovecraft, 2001: 34). The ideal of art is here more than equivalent to monumentality overwhelming with beauty and implying the superiority of the builders' creation (an object) over the content (life). Feebleness and transience of any kind of being become the *leitmotif* of this 'alien' yet beautiful architecture which "neither age nor submersion has corroded" (Lovecraft, 2001: 34).

Also, according to Houellebecq, Lovecraftian architecture is characterised by grandeur similar to that of "vast cathedrals and Hindu temples" (Houellebecq, 2007: 71). Its descriptions focus the reader's attention on the multitude of details, shown in a kaleidoscopic manner, suggesting the object's vitality. The dynamic descriptions allow the reader to explore the fictitious space and to experience all its elements empathically. Lovecraftian architecture is

[...] totally saturated with the idea of the eternal mystic drama which gives the buildings their sense, which gives a theatrical dimension to each particle of this space, which draws on the riches of all arts, which uses the magical play of lights for its own purposes. This is living architecture for it originates in the living and emotional concept of the world" (Houellebecq, 2007: 71).

In exactly the same way it is perceived by the protagonists who, seeing it, give in to fascination and stand in awe of it, in a manner similar to that of a mystic experience. This is the "sacral architecture" (Houellebecq, 2007: 71) whose function is to offer such aesthetic and spiritual experience. This "architecture from a dream [...]" is - as is the architecture of Gothic or Baroque cathedrals - a total kind of architecture" (Houellebecq, 2007: 71), which means that its aesthetic aspect is meant to affect the viewer's mind in a particular way.

A separate territorial category is exemplified by the terrifying - because it is so degenerated - eponymous town in the story *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. The isolation,

based on remoteness (“The place always was badly cut off from the rest of the country by marshes and creeks”; Lovecraft, 1999: 272) – so typical of horror fiction – complements here the impression of decay and decline the town produces on the protagonist. It is degenerated and dying out because there are “more empty houses than there are people” (Lovecraft, 1999: 270). The decline of the infrastructure serves as another element completing the image of a decaying, “bad” town, because it makes keeping in touch with others impossible. The disintegration of the bond with the outside world, characteristic of the locals, suggests the deep-rooted need of isolation and withdrawal from the civilised world. Teeming with life long ago, now Innsmouth gradually disappears. “Once they had quite a few mills, but nothing’s left now” (Lovecraft, 1999: 271) after the town was swept by a strange epidemic which considerably reduced the population.

The description of the town as seen by the protagonist fits the spatial patterns found in horror fiction. This is a landscape of deserted, decaying buildings. „In his description of Innsmouth [...] the author emphasises the revolting fishy fetor hanging thick all over the place” (Has-Tokarz, 2006: 478), portent of danger. The atmosphere of decline produces in the protagonist not only a feeling of repulsion but also of mystery and fear. Destruction becomes one of the major characteristics of the protagonist/narrator’s account. The town’s description focuses on the dilapidated buildings, showing the specific otherness of the area: there are crumbling houses, collapsed roofs, yards overgrown with weeds, deserted streets, and “here and there the ruins of wharves jutted out from the shore to end in indeterminate rotteness, those farthest south seeming the most decayed” (Lovecraft, 1999: 282). Even the “inhabited houses” suffer from neglect, “with rags stuffed in the broken windows and shells and dead fish lying about in the littered yards” (Lovecraft, 1999: 282). The specific, off-putting appearance of the inhabitants only intensifies the protagonist’s negative impression, who concludes that “these people seemed more disquieting than the dismal buildings, for almost every one had certain peculiarities of face and motions which I instinctively disliked” (Lovecraft, 1999: 282).

Apart from titanic cities (sunken, undiscovered, alien) and isolated ones, like Innsmouth, there are ordinary ones with forbidden districts, marked by miasma and degeneration. These are usually depopulated areas, inhabited by socially and mentally degenerated individuals on the fringes of society. Such enclaves of decadence signal an entrance to a forbidden quarter, stepping beyond the ‘normality’ border. They serve as an antechamber of the nightmare awaiting the transgressing protagonist. This is best exemplified by *The Haunter of the Dark* where the surroundings of the cursed church are shown as being degenerated, because they are raved by their gradual decline.

Desolation and decay hung like a pall above the place, and in the birdless eaves and black, ivyless walls Blake felt a touch of the dimly sinister beyond his power to define (Lovecraft, 1999: 341).

This characteristic passage from the living zone into the decaying one is a serious warning. The protagonist ventures into a menacing territory with his eyes open, yet he does so even though he sees symptoms of devastation, thus provoking his own undoing. At the same time, this cursed, degenerated area serves as a bait for the adventure-hungry

protagonists. Their determination to cross the boundary between the two worlds points to their self-destructive leanings – substitute for suicidal tendencies. The encounter with that 'other', 'alien' world incites in them a desire to experience it further. According to the protagonist of *The Haunter of the Dark*, "there was a terrible lure about the blackened fane which was not to be resisted" (Lovecraft, 1999: 342). The crossing of the cathedral's threshold frees the forces of evil. "Even then he could not be sure that he wished to enter that haunt of desertion and shadow, yet the pull of its strangeness dragged him on automatically" (Lovecraft, 1999: 343).

The decay-marked urban space is also exemplified by the slums in the *The Horror at Red Hook*, where the drab scenery functions as an important atmosphere-building element: it makes the tension rise and signals the presence of 'otherness' and danger. The varied ethnicity of the 'evil' district's inhabitants adds to the meticulously created atmosphere of 'non-identity'. That is why Red Hook is

[...] a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries to answer the lapping of oily waves at its grimy piers and the monstrous organ litanies of the harbour whistles. [...] From this tangle of material and spiritual putrescence the blasphemies of an hundred dialects assail the sky. Hordes of prowlers reel shouting and singing along the lanes and thoroughfares (Lovecraft, 2005: 119–120).

To the narrator this ethnical multitude is equivalent to chaos and endemic otherness. He confirms the oppressiveness of Red Hook slums' existence, saying that "policemen despair of order or reform, and seek rather to erect barriers protecting the outside world from the contagion" (Lovecraft, 2005: 120). The hustle and bustle of the place serve to hide ancient evil which is gradually deforming the area and its inhabitants. The protagonist, Malone,

[...] found in this state of things a faint stench of secrets [...] He was conscious [...] that modern people under lawless conditions tend uncannily to repeat the darkest instinctive patterns of primitive half-ape savagery in their daily life and ritual observances (Lovecraft, 2005: 120).

This seeming normalness conceals dark, hideous secrets, i.e. ancient customs and bloody cults which the modern people have long tried to forget. Slums have been identified as the breeding grounds of evil forces or an infernal region which has to – for the time being, at least – give in to modern civilisation.

An important element of the protagonists' wanderings in those lost or degenerated cities is the motif of finding one's way through a labyrinth. It signals that the protagonists have got lost and now the territory has advantage over them. Being one of the structural features of horror space, this labyrinthine quality is closely linked with the creation of atmosphere of danger and anxiety. Thus, the abandoned titanic cities are mostly a tangle of dark corridors and shadowy narrow streets – which is best exemplified by *At the Mountains of Madness*. A complicated architectural design makes difficult the exploration of *The Nameless City*. The slums in *The Horror at Red Hook* are, too, characterised by a labyrinthine layout – as is the district around the accursed church in *The Haunter of the Dark*. The descriptions also create the atmosphere, suggesting the mysteriousness and the impossibility to identify fully the explored area. According to Agnieszka Izdebska, labyrinths in such stories function also as

[...] images of imprisonment or entrapment [...] these are spaces with no Theseus and Minotaur, but with the hunter and his prey, the oppressor and the oppressed" (Izdebska, 2002: 35).

This is best exemplified by *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Nameless City* where the protagonists, lost in vast spaces, only seem to be exploring them and eventually they are forced to run for their lives, chased by monstrous creatures.

Among important elements of Lovecraftian extraordinary cityscapes are edifices built for religious purposes – accursed churches and other places of worship which (similarly to titanic cities) both fascinate and terrify. There is the accursed church in *The Haunter of the Dark* and there is the temple in *The Nameless City* whose “altars [...] suggested forgotten rites of terrible, revolting, and inexplicable nature” (Lovecraft, 2005: 32). Within the slums in *The Horror at Red Hook* there is a church in which forbidden rites are observed. The place has definitely been deprived of its sacredness, since “priests throughout Brooklyn denied the place all standing and authenticity” (Lovecraft, 2005: 123) – because of the weird and abominable rites performed there, accompanied by “shrieking and drumming” (Lovecraft, 2005: 123).

Lovecraftian cities are full of mysteries. In them there are sometimes degenerated, monstrous, evil, or simply extraordinary constructions. A few descriptions of the titanic cities mention also minarets – a characteristic feature of Islamic architecture. The description of Cairo in *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs* is very much like the atmospheric visions of monumental, labyrinthine cities built by the Old Ones. Lovecraft’s trademark vividness of spatial design is paralleled by the complexity of multidimensional descriptions. The abundance of detail reflects the complexity of visions resulting from the meticulousness of descriptions. The cities – titanic, cyclopean, lost and discovered, isolated or degenerated – are an indispensable feature of the fictitious world. The events take place in a setting which becomes part of the world contaminated by ancient evil and functions as if it is one of the chief protagonists in some of Lovecraft’s stories.

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Streszczenie

Przestrzenie zapomniane, wycofane, ukryte, a przez to groźne i tajemnicze, stanowią ważny element nastrojotwórczy w fantastyce grozy. Realizują one bowiem zasadę dwudzielności przestrzeni, warunkując jej rozpad na „tę” i „tamten” świat. Świat w opowieściach Howarda Philipa Lovecrafta konstruowany jest właśnie według tej zasady. Istotnymi elementami scenerii stają zapomniane tytaniczne miasta. Ich architektura, będące przedmiotem bezustannego zdumienia bohaterów, poddana jest prawom nieistniejącym w ludzkim świecie, budząc grozę i fascynację jednocześnie. Obok miast tytanicznych (zatopionych, nieodkrytych, pozaziemskich) i wyizolowanych, jak Innsmouth, istnieją także metropolie ludzkie, w których pojawiają obszary zakazane, naznaczone miazmatami zła czy wynaturzenia. Z reguły są to na wpół wymarłe, częściowo opuszczone przez mieszkańców terytoria, zasiedlane przez jednostki zdeformowane społecznie i psychicznie. Takie enklawy rozpadu sygnalizują wkroczenie w obszar zakazany, przekroczenie progu „normalności”. Ważnym elementem peregrynacji bohaterów po ukrytych lub zdegenerowanych miastach, staje się motyw błądzenia w labiryncie. Jest on sygnałem zagubienia, przewagi terytorium nad eksploratorami. Sceneria wydarzeń staje istotnym elementem prezentacji świata skażonego przez pradawne zło, pełniąc niejako rolę bohatera (czy współbohatera) niektórych utworów.