

Contemporary Ideas about Lovecraft & the *Necronomicon*

By Richard Kaczynski

FOR SALE

Alhazred, Abdul. *The Necronomicon*. Spain, 1647. Calf covers rubbed and some foxing, otherwise very nice condition. Many small woodcuts of mystic signs and symbols. Seems to be a treatise (in Latin) on Ritualistic Magic. Ex. lib. Stamp on front fly leaf states that the book has been withdrawn from the Miskatonic University library. Best offer.

THE ABOVE offer by Walker Baylor in the 1962 *Antiquarian Bookman* is but one of the many want-ads and classifieds advertising *The Necronomicon*. Supposedly an invention of H.P. Lovecraft, *The Necronomicon* has appeared on booksellers' lists (some more authentic than the above) since the 1930s, and this—coupled with the paperback publication of not one but three different books claiming to be the dread *Al Azif* of Lovecraft's fiction—has given pause to many people. Is *The Necronomicon* real? And, if so, does this mean that Lovecraft knew more about the occult than he was letting on?

Neither of these questions is likely to be answered to everybody satisfaction. This article, however, will review some recent arguments and ideas regarding Lovecraft's occult knowledge, especially regarding *The Necronomicon*.

LOVECRAFT AND THE OCCULT

Lovecraft was a skilled narrator whose stories painted worlds of unimaginable horror. His characters stumbled in and out of black cults worshipping even blacker gods, and encountered sorcerers casting unspeakable spells. Given this preoccupation with cult and the occult, one might suspect Lovecraft had more than a passing familiarity with the supernatural. Several authors have argued this point, their final verdicts usually coming down to "guilty by association." Despite its circumstantiality, the evidence is compelling.

Most obviously, Lovecraft's own works should be consulted. As any good writer can attest, you write about things you know. I would be stupid to have a brain surgeon as a character in a novel as I know nothing about brain surgery, and Lovecraft would have been a fool to write about something he did not know. *The Call Of Cthulhu* shows his fascination for geography, just as *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is the product of a man

enamoured of antiquities and linguistic archaisms. Since he does a good job writing about the occult, we can safely conclude Lovecraft knew something about the subject.

The real question, then, is how much did Lovecraft know about the occult? If we can believe Robert Block's tongue-in-cheek description of Lovecraft in *The Shambler from the Stars* as a man whose "Long years of occult experience had sharpened his intuition to an uncanny degree" and in *The Shadow from the Steeple* (with some friends) as "professional writers and students of the supernatural or the supranormal," then we can assume this knowledge was substantial. Since the remainder of Block's characterization is accurate, we can also assume a degree of accuracy here.

In fact, some of H.P. Lovecraft's friends were students of the supernatural or supranormal. Arthur Machen, whom Lovecraft admired for his horror story *The Great God Pan*, was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society which flourished at the turn of the century in London. His correspondent Algernon Blackwood was also a member. This organization taught ritual magic (including the system of John Dee, about which more will be said later) and claimed to possess an ancient Arabic manuscript *The Veils*

of *Negative Existence*. It is not altogether unlikely that Machen or Blackwood—in their correspondence with Lovecraft—divulged sundry tidbits of magic. For that matter, Lovecraft, who lived at a time when the proliferation of secret societies was at its peak, may have encountered one of these organizations himself.

Evidence suggests that Lovecraft's exposure to secret societies may have begun with his father. Colin Wilson, in his introduction to the Corgi Books edition of *The Necronomicon*, asserts that Winfield Lovecraft (Howard Phillips's father) was a Freemason; in fact, he was an Egyptian Freemason, a tradition steeped in hermetics and magic. Furthermore, he possessed two extremely obscure texts on magic, upon which HPL may have based his *Necronomicon*. He may have even possessed *The Necronomicon* itself. Wilson argues that, during the time Lovecraft's father was invalid, he may have inadvertently exposed Howard Phillips to the mysteries.

Kenneth Grant, the head of an international occult society called the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO, formerly run by the magician Aleister Crowley), unequivocally states Lovecraft knew in detail the Mysteries. In his books, he draws parallels between the Cthulhu Mythos and the OTO's teachings. He insists Lovecraft had "direct and conscious experience of the inner planes" and had "established contact with non-spatial entities." Grant even demonstrates Lovecraft had definitely heard of Aleister Crowley. However, any significant knowledge possessed by Lovecraft was not a conscious acquisition from any books, but unconscious information gleaned from the world of dreams and an unwritten

tome in mankind's collective unconscious.

Retrospectively, we see Lovecraft had ample opportunity for exposure to the occult: His friends, father, and favorite authors were learned in these matters. Furthermore, he lived at a time when secret societies were immensely popular. It is clear from his writing that Lovecraft was familiar with such secrets, but whether this knowledge came from active involvement or unconscious revelations is unknown. In all probability, both are partly responsible for his knowledge.

THE NECRONOMICON

By now, everyone knows the supposed publication history of this book: Written in 730 A.D. by Abdul Alhazred and entitled *Al Azif*, it was translated into Greek in 950 A.D. with the title *Necronomicon*, followed by a Latin translation of the Greek in 1228 A.D. by Olaus Wormius and several subsequent editions in English, Latin, and Spanish. In this time, the volumes were subject to ecclesiastic suppression and burning. At first glance, this seems to be a fairly complex history for a hoax; however, it was probably not difficult for a historian and bibliophile of Lovecraft's ilk to invent such a history. But, despite Lovecraft's and Derleth's contentions that *The Necronomicon* is fictitious, booksellers have continued searching for copies, and three different versions have recently been printed.

The first of these was a facsimile edition of the original Arabic, discovered by Lin Carter while researching ancient cities for a book he was writing. In Baghdad, he purchased the manuscript from a government official and brought it to America, where linguists said it was gibberish. In 1973, a facsimile edition entitled *Al Azif* was published by Owlswick Press in hope that someone would decipher the work. It turns out the book's language is not Arabic, but Duraic. At present, however, there has been no successful translation of the text. Three Arab scholars reputedly died inexplicably while trying to translate this manuscript.

In 1977, Schlangekraft put out an English version of *The Necronomicon*. Fr. Montague Summers, an unorthodox priest who wrote many books on demonology and witchcraft, presented a copy of the Greek *Necronomicon* to

the editor to translate and publish on the condition that the original manuscript not be given up for public inspection (!). The editor remarks that his possession of the text caused him "fearful hallucinations, physical incapacities, and emotional malaise." The book is a mixture of familiar Cthulhu mythos entities and Sumerian deities, along with an editorial warning that experienced magicians found "there are no effective banishings for the forces invoked in the *Necronomicon* itself." The whole nature of the book—it was sold through comic magazines with a free crystal ball, the original manuscript is unavailable for public inspection, and the editor remains anonymous—casts serious doubt on the book's authenticity. Experimentation, however, has proven the text to contain potent magic.

In 1978, another book entitled *The Necronomicon* was published, this time by Neville Spearman. It began with an examination of Dr. John Dee's unpublished manuscripts in the British Museum library. At this point, it will be useful to digress and describe Dee's contribution to magic.

Dee was court astrologer for Queen Elizabeth and he, with Edward Kelley as his clairvoyant, contacted a spirit who communicated to them the rudiments of the angelic language Enochian. This was done by constructing, according to the spirit's instructions, large tabular grids, within the squares of which were placed letters of the Enochian alphabet. While gazing into a crystal, Kelley would identify a tablet and call off a row and column number matching that pointed to by the spirit in the vision; these Dee would use to locate a letter on the actual tablets and write it down. By this methodical process were thirty Aethyrs and eighteen Calls (powerful evocations of entities outside this world) given in reverse (because even writing these spells called up unsavory creatures). This language has its own grammar and syntax, and is doubtlessly authentic. Dee was a scholar of unquestionable principles who never published his manuscripts or attempted to capitalize upon them, and Kelley, although a rogue, couldn't possibly have concocted a new language, memorized 48 evocations in reverse, and memorized the position of all the thousands of letters on every tablet. Enochian was never intended to be a hoax.

Among Dee's manuscripts was a peculiar piece entitled *Liber Logaeth*, a collection of 101 grids containing letters and numbers written in Kelley's hand as dictated by the spirit in 1583. David Langford, a cipher expert, wrote a computer program to analyze these tablets on the assumption they contained an elaborate code. The program is sophisticated, and guesses the true value of letters according to letter frequency in English, resemblance to real words, and a series of other iterative processes. The result shocked the cryptologist: These tablets, when deciphered, contained *The Necronomicon*!

This is where questions arise: Given three different editions claiming to be *The Necronomicon*, which one is authentic? Are any of them authentic? For that matter, does there exist an authentic copy? I will assume the answer to this last question to be a "yes," and examine the various possibilities this suggests.

First of all, one of the published editions may be authentic. If not, this does not rule out the book's existence. Friends who own occult bookshops have assured me they've seen—albeit very rarely—old copies of *The Necronomicon* come into the store. It is not unlikely that such a book could remain generally unknown all these years; now-classic 15th-century magical texts such as *The Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage* and *The Key Of Solomon* were unknown until translations of the single known copies were published at the turn of this century. A good many books on magic are every bit as obscure as *The Necronomicon* is supposed to be.

Furthermore, even if there is no such book answering to the title *Necronomicon*, this may not rule out its existence per se. Lovecraft wrote fiction—changing the names to protect the innocent, so to speak—and it is generally known that Miskatonic University was based on Brown University, Arkham is really Salem, Kingsport is Marblehead, and Innsmouth is Little Neck. Would it then be unsurprising that *The Necronomicon* is the pseudonym for an equally ominous real-world grimoire? Colin Wilson believes this may be the case. In his introduction to the 1978 *Necronomicon*, he examines several other occult books with a similar history as Lovecraft's book, some of which were in the possession of his father, the Egyptian Freemason.

Another possibility is postulated by Kenneth Grant. In drawing parallels between Lovecraft's mythos and the ideas of other occultists, he insists that Lovecraft was perpetuating an occult tradition; this, however, is not a written or oral tradition, but one that can only be accessed through dreams. Grant believes *The Necronomicon* is a real book, but one that can only be read and studied through the use of unconventional senses (or magic).

That Lovecraft gained his inspiration from dreams is well known. In one letter, Lovecraft wrote, "Nyarlathotep is a nightmare—an actual phantasm of my own, with the first paragraph written before I fully awaked." In fact, Lovecraft even admits the name "Necronomicon" came to him in a dream. He prided himself on his vivid nightmares, and culled the monsters and plots of his stories from these nocturnal images.

To prove Lovecraft's inspiration was his dreams is simple; to show these dreams were real is another matter entirely. One must rely upon parallels between Lovecraft and his contemporaries, and the success of other magicians who use sleep to gaze into the pages of this unwritten tome (namely Austin Osman Spare, Aleister Crowley, and Soror Andahadna). Grant suggests Lovecraft's poems indicate he knew he was dealing with more than just phantasy when it came to the Cthulhu Mythos, and Lovecraft himself wrote

in one of his letters about another myth cycle, "All this sounds amusingly like the synthetic mythology I have concocted for my stories, but (E. Hoffman) Price assures me it is actual folklore. . . ." Anyone who wants to know about the details of these parallels and the theory in general is advised to consult Grant's books, particularly *Outside the Circles of Time*.

The dramatic upshot of all this—if *The Necronomicon* is real—is that this means the entities and monsters are real. I don't necessarily mean to imply Cthulhu is literally asleep at the bottom of the ocean. At the very least, this means people have worshiped these monsters in one form or another. At the very most, the creatures may be magical powers of infinite age.

The *Cthulhu Companion* put out by Chaosium has an article on the etymology of some of Lovecraft's mythos names. (For instance, note that the name Yog-Sothoth closely resembles that of the dual Egyptian god Sut-Thoth.) Another article in the same book draws parallels between the Cthulhu Mythos and Mesoamerican religion. The editor of the 1977 *Necronomicon* outlines similarities with Sumerian religion, just as Grant compares it to the system of others. In fact, Dagon is a name appearing in actual mythology. That the creatures of the Cthulhu Mythos were once worshiped (in one form or another) is fairly clear.

In addition, these entities are still worshiped by various occult groups. *The Satanic Rituals* by LaVey, although consisting largely of pirated drivel, has the Ceremony of the Nine Angles supposedly written in the same language as *The Necronomicon*. Bertiaux, a Chicago adept, claims he has contacted the Deep Ones, and magicians in Ohio are currently evoking the Great Old Ones. So, regardless of the reality of the mythos, people are conjuring these powers and claiming results.

CONCLUSION

The mysteries of Lovecraft's past are still unknown. The reality of *The Necronomicon* is still unestablished. Either or both are possibilities, and the enterprising Keeper will find a way to work these tidbits into a contemporary campaign. However, the truly curious should bear in mind the following: Only recently has Lovecraft's involvement with various radical social groups come to light (see *Lovecraft's Book* by Richard A. Lupoff), and a secret like studying (or even practicing) the occult may be buried even deeper. And, when renowned authorities on magic insist *The Necronomicon* is real, such claims deserve attention. It is a mystery which the reader—and the *Call Of Cthulhu* player-characters—will have to solve for themselves. □

BOOKS

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the books are for ages 10 and up. For adults and older teens I would suggest reading the Data Bank but not the Data File hints in the back of the book. Those clues can make things a bit too easy to figure out. I would suggest to history buffs they test themselves by not reading either of the Data sections.

All in all these book adventures do exactly what they set out to do. They entertain while teaching you a little bit of history (in a painless way) and they work your brain. I enjoy this series a great deal. The physical production and graphics are first rate. There is not a lot of replay, but it usually takes over an hour to finish a book. At \$1.95 per book that is not a bad gaming value. I am looking forward to upcoming releases. □

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