H.P. Lovecraft once wrote that the true weird tale must convey “a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”). No tale achieves such expression with greater thoroughness than Lovecraft’s most celebrated work, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in which a young anthropologist follows clues hidden in the dreams of artists to the discovery of a terrible and ancient deity. This primordial entity, this “outer, unknown force,” possesses many aspects reminiscent of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Real. Lorenzo Chiesa understands the Real as an unattainable, unfathomable, and indescribable thing at once within and outside the scope of human symbolism (Chiesa 126). Since Cthulhu acts as the Real, and only the mind of the artist has the ability to communicate with Cthulhu, a Lacanian reading of the text suggests that the artist’s sensitivity and exposure to the Real alienates him from the less sensitive majority, and creates in him a desire to reconnect with them through art.

As the concept of the Real, even for Lacan, presented itself in a nebulous form, I must first offer a stipulative definition of the Real for the purposes of this discussion. Chiesa introduces the Real as “undifferentiated matter as it is before the advent of the Symbolic,” and claims that the psychoanalytic Real sits “at the limits of reality [...] all the formations of the unconscious” fall within this “Real-of-the-Symbolic,” or Wirklichkeit (Chiesa 126-127). The Real, then, applies to
anything which exists either in an entirely objective state of existence, which transcends the subjective filters of human perception, or rests purely within those filters as something perceivable, but without any tangible form or substance. While the Lacanian Real can be defined in many other ways, this argument concerns only the transcendent Real and the Real-of-the-Symbolic.

In this story, Cthulhu acts as an avatar for the transcendent Real. The language used to describe the deity’s resting place conveys his nebulous nature:

[…] a coastline of mingled mud, ooze, and weedy Cyclopean masonry which can be nothing less than the tangible substance of earth's supreme terror—the nightmare corpse—city of R'lyeh, that was built in measureless aeons behind history by the vast, loathsome shapes that seeped down from the dark stars. There lay great Cthulhu and his hordes, hidden in slimy green vaults and sending out at last, after cycles incalculable, the thoughts that spread dreams of fear to the sensitive […] (“Call of Cthulhu” 165).

R'lyeh's location includes “mingled mud, ooze, and weedy Cyclopean masonry,” things devoid of, or irregular in form. These details suggest that the residents, the masons of the city, possess these same vague qualities, described as merely “shapes.” The city has a “measureless” and “incalculable” chronology, even given a paradoxical situation “behind history,” a physical placement in relation to an abstract concept. The beings themselves lay “hidden” within the city, or “seeped” from the “dark” stars, shapeless and in obscurity. If this shapeless place is the “tangible substance” of Cthulhu, then Cthulhu himself must have no true shape. Since Cthulhu and R'lyeh are synonymous in substance, and the city defies description and measurement, Cthulhu, therefore, transcends the limitations of human perception and in this way reflects the concept of the Real.

While Cthulhu itself represents the transcendent Real, its communication with humans falls within the Real-of-the-Symbolic. Lacan defines language as the ultimate symbol, as well as the source of significant alienation, for “language already exists before [the subject's] birth” and “his relations with other human beings are necessarily mediated by language” (Chiesa 37). The subject can never fully understand language because language predates him. Thus, he can never say “exactly what he means to say” (38), and a language barrier presents the
speaker with significant alienation, for no amount of clarification will convey the intended meaning. Lovecraft’s text goes a step beyond even this extreme with a cultic chant: “Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn” (“Call of Cthulhu” 150). In the story, Professor Webb assembles the phrase “in Roman letters as best he knew how” (149), and Lovecraft himself stated that Cthulhu is meant to “represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an utterly non-human word” (“Explanatory Notes” 395). First, this phrase represents the Wirklichkeit in that the meaning is twice removed from the speaker, and is thus above his understanding due to the nature of language and the need for translation. The chant is also representative of the “Real-of-language” at the level of the letter (Chiesa 128), for the guttural phonemes, whether written or spoken, are too base for the human tongue to capture (“Explanatory Notes” 395). Therefore, a subject such as the artist, who can decipher both meaning and speech, situates himself simultaneously above and below the rest of humanity, and suffers the ultimate alienation as a result.

The story marks the artist as possessing a particular sensitivity to Cthulhu's call, which inevitably leads to his alignment with the Real-of-the-Symbolic. The text describes how when “the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams” (“Call of Cthulhu” 155); one must keep in mind that “the manifest unreality of dreams” falls within the Wirchlichkeit (Chiesa 127). The “sensitive” ancient tribesmen to whom the text refers parallel the “artists and poets” whom the narrator consults during his inquest, those who reported an “acute fear of the gigantic nameless thing” seen in their visions (“Call of Cthulhu” 145). What both the tribesmen and the modern artists have witnessed, what has inspired horror in them, is Cthulhu, the transcendent Real. The artist's innate sensitivity to the transcendent Real therefore allows him to communicate within the Real-of-the-Symbolic, and in fact this extrasensory perception leads to his becoming an artist in the first place.

Just as the concept of the Real holds many meanings at once, this entity embodies at least one other signified: the Thing. Lacan conceptualizes the Thing as “a transcendent lack which is the primordial object as always-already lost for the subject” (Chiesa 133). It is inextricable from the transcendent Real in that the Thing is a hole in the Real, the loss of what one never possessed, but forever seeks to reclaim. The inclusion of the Thing brings with it one final concept: the
objet petit a. The a, too, is an “always-already lost object,” but differs in that it is a “lack-of-the-Symbolic” and thus “accessible to the Symbolic” (133). The object a acts as the tangible surrogate for the true object of desire, the intangible and thus unattainable Thing. Cthulhu, therefore, acts as signifier for both the transcendent Real and the Thing, and this synonymity introduces the object a.

Those who witness Cthulhu's physical form or hear his call in their dreams are invariably transformed by the experience. Lacan defines man in his natural state as a “being of language (parlêtre),” and as such one whose perception is limited to the Symbolic, as “for the parlêtre there is nothing beyond the parlêtre” (Chiesa 137-138). The being of language can never identify what existed before himself, nor can he truly know what will exist beyond him, for “the Thing,” referring here to Cthulhu, “cannot be described—there is no language for [...] such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (“Call of Cthulhu” 167). It is this incomprehensibility which—when the parlêtre touches the transcendent Real—results in a terror so profound that it reverberates through to the unconscious and relocates the perceptions of the parlêtre to the border between the Real and the Symbolic. This irrevocable alteration proves too great a strain for some, such as the sailors who “perished of pure fright” at the sight of the Thing (167), and those overcome with “panic, mania, and eccentricity” (146) in the weeks preceding Cthulhu's awakening. Those whose constitution allows them to endure exposure to the transcendent Real remain altered and become attuned with the Real-of-the-Symbolic. Consider the sculptor, Wilcox, who considers himself “‘psychically hypersensitive’” while “the staid folk [...] [dismiss] him as merely 'queer’” (142). The transformation which makes the Wirklichkeit accessible to the artist also alienates him from the parlêtre. As the latter cannot fathom what lies outside of the Symbolic, the exposure of the parlêtre to the Thing therefore leads to one of two consequences: madness or alienation.

In order to resolve his alienation, Wilcox must reconcile Cthulhu (the Thing) with the “staid folk” (the parlêtre), and to do this he sculpts. According to Lacan, the Thing is in essence “a void, a nihil,” and he argues that “authentic creation can only be symbolic creation ex nihilo,” or out of nothing (Chiesa 136). Thus, when an artist such as Wilcox creates a work inspired by Cthulhu (the Thing and, therefore, a nihil), he engages in the “authentic creation” of a symbol
in an attempt to recover what is lost. Chiesa quotes Lacan as saying that “the Thing which is forever lost can only be ‘refound’ in another thing, object a” (135). This need drives Wilcox's creation of the Cthulhu sculpture: it is his object a, his attempt to replicate the Thing in a form the parlêtre can perceive. As it is only a symbol, the statue does not induce the same visceral reaction as the true Real, rather it offers a “general outline of the whole which [makes] it most shockingly frightful” (“Call of Cthulhu” 141), and after the statue provides a tangible symbol for Wilcox's dreamscapes, the narrator “admit[s] both his genius and his honesty … [then takes] leave of him amicably, and wish[es] him all the success his talent promise[s]” (158). The creation of the object a allows the artist to reconnect with the parlêtre, and it is the desire for this reconnection which initially drives him to artistic endeavours.

The desire to create comes from the desperate need to provide the Real with some tangible form, to shape what is by definition shapeless. If the artist can successfully resolve the paradox which exists between the scope of human perception and the Real, he may also reconcile himself with the parlêtre, and therefore solve the problem of his alienation through reacquaintance with the Symbolic order.

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