

‘A half-choked meep of cosmic fear’: Is there esoteric symbolism in H.P.Lovecraft’s *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*?

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‘A tale of paths between the spheres, dim corridors leading to equally dim and conjectural lands of elder myth ...’

Introduction

H.P.Lovecraft (1890-1937), an American writer of ‘horror’ fiction in the tradition of Poe, has been claimed by many modern occultists to be one of their own, a truly occult author with a good knowledge of magical lore, even if - suggests Kenneth Grant - gained unwittingly by a ‘natural adept’. They include Aleister Crowley’s heir, Grant and his followers in England; Michael Aquino, Anton La Vey and Michael Bertiaux in the

USA; and Wolfgang Muller in Germany, who dubs Lovecraft ‘The Alchemist of Providence’, and sees him as an adept of the highest rank.

I have always found this intriguing but unsubstantiated, feeling that these occultists were reading into Lovecraft things that he would not have been aware of, and indeed would have denied any knowledge of. John Gonce (2003, p 85) discusses the apparent reluctance of Lovecraft scholars to consider HPL’s knowledge of the occult, leaving a lacuna in which occultists can wildly speculate. In what follows I shall suggest that a reading of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* raises the intriguing possibility that Lovecraft was aware of the symbolism of occultism; in a discussion following the analysis I shall consider how well substantiated that claim may be.

The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, according to August Derleth (1966, p 7), ‘was very probably conceived and written ... sometime in the early or mid-1920’s, but ... it was evidently never extensively revised’. It was never revised, or considered a commercial proposition – ‘it is composed under no illusion of professional acceptance’, wrote Lovecraft in a letter on 19 December 1926. As a result, we are able to study the original imagery of *The Dream-Quest*. S.T.Joshi’s chronology (1980, p 37) dates its writing more precisely, and later, from autumn 1926 to 22 January 1927. This puts it just after *The Call of Cthulhu* and just before *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, part of what Burleson (1983, pp 115-160) calls the ‘Homecoming Burst of Creativity’ - the creation of the Mythos by Lovecraft, back home in Providence from New York, from 1926 to 1928. That period certainly shows also Lovecraft’s literary interest in the occult: *The Call of Cthulhu* begins with a voodoo cult in Louisiana,

while in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* Lovecraft uses some cabbalistic incantations and the lunar nodes known as the Dragon's Head and Tail.

The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath is a strange and yet seminal text in that it pulled together many themes begun in earlier short texts of the 'dream-cycle' - *Polaris*, *The White Ship*, *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, *The Cats of Ulthar*, *Celephais*, *Nyarlahotep*, *The Other Gods*, *The Hound*, *Pickman's Model*. These texts are generally thought of as belonging to the period in which Lovecraft was influenced by the Irish fantasy writer Lord Dunsany, whose writings were popular following the success of *The Gods of Pegana* in 1904. If S.T.Joshi's chronology is correct, it contradicts the common perception that this Dunsanian 'Dreamlands' period was over and done with before Lovecraft began work on his 'Mythos' cycle.

As a fantasy story, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* – to adopt the terms used by Clute and Grant (1997) - takes the form of a Quest for a Dark Tower, the haunt of a Dark Lord (in this case, Nyarlahotep). As Wetzel (1980, p 84) points out, while the world of *The Dream-Quest* is a dream-world explored by the sleeping Randolph Carter, it is also an afterworld, where one might meet the dead (as one sometimes does in dreams too), with both an Elysium and a Tartarus, where Carter meets, for example, King Kuranos and Pickman the ghoul, respectively. Wetzel compares *The Dream-Quest* to the ancient Greek otherworld, with which Lovecraft was familiar through his reading; Dante also comes to mind - perhaps the illustrations of Gustave Dore to Dante and Milton, which impressed so Lovecraft as a child (letter of October 24, 1936). In terms of the Cabalah, Tartarus or Hell is represented by *Olam ha-Qlippoth*, the

world of empty shells or demons; and in some of the more unpleasant spots of Carter's dreamland the *Qlippoth* do indeed seem to appear.

An esoteric reading of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*

Unlike Dante, Carter had no Virgil in the text of *The Dream-Quest* to guide him around the Dreamlands, which include sites that may be described as infernal, purgatorial and even paradisaal. We may perhaps be justified in seeing Carter's journey as a sort of pilgrim's progress, into the sleeper's subconscious mind, through various vicissitudes, temptations and dangers, until he achieves true knowledge and reaches his own private paradise. But Carter was the persona of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who may not have been composing as freely as we might suppose: in the analysis that follows, we see Carter following the Paths between the Sephiroth of the Tree of Life of the Cabalah. This gives a structure to the universe of *The Dream-Quest*, whether it is seen as the inner space of the subconscious mind, the outer space of the ascent to and return from Kadath, the interior of the Earth, or the other world of the after-life - for it can be all these things. There is, however, one major anomaly immediately obvious in this case: because it is giving a structure to the underworld, or the subconscious, the Tree of Life is growing upside-down. As Denning and Phillips (1988, p 100) say, 'a progress from the Malkuth to the Kether of the qliphothic Tree ... is really a descent ... It does lead to the Abyss.' Where the Qliphothic forces outweigh those of the Sephiroth, their attributes distort the usual character of the Sephira affected. To cite Wetzel (1980, p 84) again, 'It is in the novel, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1926), that the Hell of H.P.L.'s Cthulhu Mythos is fully described and made the locale of a story.'

There is one other peculiarity which might be explained by the author's psychology, not unrelated to the previous breakdown of his short-lived marriage: there are no women, no goddesses, no females at all, not even apparently among the animals. All the paths of the Tree of Life linked to Tarot cards depicting female figures are somehow avoided, or not mentioned. There is, however, another explanation for this, whether a conscious or unconscious reflection of his personal situation. As Epstein wrote in 1969, 'An ever-functioning system of opposites, mediated by harmony, rules over the mental and physical universe, whose new creations emerge from their fusion. Balance and harmony through creation are perpetuated by means of sex. Equilibrium is thereby equated with love, and love is personified in the female form of the Shekinah, or the mystery of God's everlasting presence ... It is the absence of the Shekinah that denotes the presence of evil ... if a man cuts himself off from God, the Shekinah will leave him to Satan, who will drag him further into the pit until he suffers the torments of hell in his life. In this case the Sephiroth are reversed and form instead a "tree of death" whose roots emanate from the Kelipah (*i.e. the Qlippoth*)' (p 26-7 – my italics).

The journey begins on Earth, 'the waking world', which is the Sephira of Malkuth, or Kingdom. Carter is desperate to revisit and freely wander a marvellous city he has glimpsed thrice in his dreams, and prays in vain to the tyrannous, 'hidden gods of dream that brood capricious above the clouds on unknown Kadath, in the cold waste where no man treads. Finally, ... Carter resolved to go with bold entreaty whither no man had gone before, and dare the icy deserts through the dark to where unknown Kadath, veiled in cloud and crowned with unimagined stars, holds secret and nocturnal the onyx castle of the Great Ones. In light slumber he

descended the seventy steps to the cavern of flame and thinking shrewdly on his course, he boldly descended the seven hundred steps to the Gate of Deeper Slumber and set out through the Enchanted Wood' (*Dream-Quest* p 107).

The cavern of flame and the Gate of Deeper Slumber appear to be but way-stations on the Path between the Sephiroth of Malkuth and Netzach. The 70 and 700 steps may be a clue: Netzach is the seventh Sephira. In his *Sepher Sephiroth*, Aleister Crowley (1912) gives the following equivalences in Hebrew gematria: 70=Night; 700=The Veil of the Holy; 770=going forth, all of which, particularly the last, seem to be appropriate. Netzach is related in its symbolism to the planet Venus, and the Roman Venus is a typical example of the deities, usually goddesses, representing nature, life and fertility, which are typical attributes of the character of Netzach. The Enchanted Wood, inhabited by Zoogs (animals by name and nature), is thus appropriate for this zone, as is the colour green of the trees and mossy stones, for green is the colour of this Sephira. In the wood is a stone circle, suggesting that the Zoogs are perhaps the *Qlippoth* of Netzach, the *Seirim* or Satyrs.

Carter parleys with the Zoogs, accepting a gourd of moon-tree wine, 'grown from a seed dropped down by someone on the moon.' The reason for this reference (the word *moon* appears thrice here) is that the Path between the Sephiroth of Malkuth and Netzach is traditionally allocated to the Tarot trump The Moon, the image of which - a path between two towers - may also have suggested to Lovecraft the Gate of Deeper Slumber. The card depicts drops of dew falling from the moon, which may have suggested "the seed dropped down by someone on the moon". The Hebrew letter associated with the Path between Malkuth and

Netzach is Qoph, meaning ‘the back of the head’, and is particularly relevant to Carter’s dreaming. As Case (1947, p 175) wrote: ‘This is the part of the skull which contains the ... medulla oblongata ... The cells of this organ remain awake when the rest of the brain is asleep ... Sleep is the function assigned to Qoph. Sleep is the period ... during which the cells of the body undergo subtle changes which make the advancing student of occultism ready to experience and understand facts and phenomena concealed from ordinary men.’

Carter leaves the Enchanted Wood, leaving Netzach on the Path to Hod, the next Sephira. ‘At noon he walked through the one broad high street of Nir ... and soon afterward he came to the great stone bridge across the Skai ...’ (A glance at the diagram of the Tree will reveal the broad road crossing the river below: the Path from Netzach to Hod, which passes over that from Yesod to Tiphereth, represented in the story by the River Skai. Hod (or Splendour), related to the planet Mercury, is represented by Ulthar in the story. Carter heads for that “venerable circular tower” which crowns Ulthar’s highest hill - the Path he has just taken is allocated to the Tarot trump of The Tower. There he confers with the old priest Atal, who advises him to see the mountain of Ngranek in the isle of Oriab, where there is a great carved face, perhaps bearing the features of the gods. Not knowing how to get there, he advises Carter to follow ‘the singing Skai under its bridges down to the Southern Sea’, to the port-city of Dylath-Leen. ‘Then twilight fell, and the pink walls of the plastered gables turned violet and mystic ... and sweet bells pealed in the temple tower above’: violet is the colour of Hod on the King Scale, and the bell is regarded as a suitable, although not exclusive, symbol of Mercury.

As he admired the pleasant scene, Carter 'swore that Ulthar would be a very likely place to dwell in always, were not the memory of a greater sunset city ever goading one onward' (*Dream-Quest* p 113). This temptation recalls the fact that, according to Denning and Phillips (1988, p 129), 'in its qliphothic ... aspect, Hod becomes the sphere of Samael, the Tempter of Eden.'

In the morning Carter joins a caravan of merchants, 'and for six days they rode on the smooth road beside the Skai ... the placid river': in terms of the Tarot, Temperance, which depicts an angelic figure standing beside a river (a road running off into the distance). (To get to this path, Carter presumably retraced his steps along the Tower path to the bridge of Nir, but Lovecraft does not dwell on this, getting him there in one short paragraph). 'On the seventh day a blur of smoke arose on the horizon ahead, and then the tall black towers of Dylath-Leen, which is built mostly of basalt. Dylath-Leen with its thin angular towers looks in the distance like a bit of the Giant's Causeway, and its streets are dark and uninviting' (*Dream-Quest* p 113). This is the next Sephira, Tiphereth or Beauty, related to the Sun: but here, on the inverted Tree, there is neither sunlight nor beauty. Perhaps Lovecraft has left us a clue, however: Tiphereth is the sixth Sephira, and basalt forms hexagonal, six-sided columns, as on the Giant's Causeway in Ulster. Moreover, the journey took six full days. The 'thin angular towers' may even suggest the acute angles between the many Paths that meet here.

Eventually one of the black galleys docks, bringing rubies from an unknown shore, and Carter tries some moon-wine on one of the merchants who came aboard it. He is hoist with his own petard, however, for after a sip of wine from a ruby bottle he loses consciousness, 'and as

Carter slipped into blackness, the last thing he saw’ - but he awakes to find himself alive and fairly well on the deck of the galley. This *little death* is not surprising when one sees that they are sailing along the Path of the Tarot trump Death, past ‘the charnel gardens of Zura.’ Moreover, according to Sturzacker (1971, p 90), ‘On this path the student or initiate is in the sphere of the “dark night of the soul” commenced in Temperance’. A ship is visible in the background of this card in the Rider-Waite pack, as are two pylons framing the setting sun in the background, which might account for this:



‘before the day was done Carter saw that the steersman could have no other goal than the Basalt Pillars of the West’ ... which wise dreamers well know are the gates of a monstrous

cataract wherein the oceans of earth's dreamland drop ... and shoot through the empty spaces toward other worlds and other stars ...' (*Dream-Quest*, p 116).

The ship has now turned on to the Path of The Star, marked by a female figure pouring water from two jugs, and also by one large star and seven other stars. Carter 'soon saw that the helmsman was steering a course directly for the moon', and the Path of The Star leads directly to Yesod (or Foundation), the fifth Sephira, which is related to the moon. According to Sturzacker (1971, p 61), 'This path is the link between the "waters above the firmament" and the "waters below the firmament" of Genesis.' Carter finds the moon to be inhabited by creatures variously described as 'a sort of toad, toad-things, or toadlike moonbeasts', the toad being linked in magical symbolism with the moon. The toadlike moonbeasts may represent the Gamaliel, or obscene ones, the Qliphoth of Yesod. (Carter is then rescued by the cats of Earth and Ulthar, who spirit him back to Dylath-Leen on a furry bridge of cats, the second time Lovecraft sends him there in a few words).

Carter is once again able to take ship for the Isle of Oriab, 'and for two days they sailed eastward.' They are following the Path of The Devil on the Tree, but no reference is made to it until Carter reaches his destination. There he sees a wall-drawing in which there is 'a crowd of little companion shapes ... with horns and wings and claws and curling tails', which leaves little doubt of the source of his inspiration. The Devil card depicts not only a large traditional devil with all the attributes mentioned above, but also two smaller companions sporting horns and tails too.



The story continues: 'But on the third day they turned sharply south'; having sailed east and turned sharply south, they are now following the Path of The Hanged Man, which provides us with an origin for one of Lovecraft's most startling images. The ship drifts over the ruins of a sunken city, clearly visible in the moonlight: '... and Carter did not blame the sailors much for their fears. Then by the watery moonlight he noticed an odd high monolith in the middle of that central court, and saw that something was tied to it. And when after getting a telescope from the captain's cabin he saw that the bound thing was a sailor in the silk robes

of Oriab, head downward and without any eyes, he was glad that a rising breeze soon took the ship ahead to more healthy parts of the sea' (*Dream-Quest*, p 123).

The Hanged Man of the Tarot is also hanging upside-down, and, although it is from a tree or cross, the Golden Dawn title for the trump is *The Spirit of the Mighty Waters*: it is linked astrologically to the element Water, and also to Neptune. Oddly enough, T.S.Eliot also represents the Hanged Man by a drowned sailor in the *Death by Water* section of *The Waste Land* (1922), raising the question of a possible common source.

Carter then arrives at the port of Baharna in the great isle of Oriab, where mount Ngranek rises jagged and snow-crowned in the distance. This is the next Sephira, Geburah, representing strength or severity, and related to the planet Mars. Ngranek is an extinct volcano, "thinly covered with ... ash trees", upon which a great carved face gleams red in the sunset. Carter has a good, curved scimitar in case of any trouble. Fire, the god Volcanus, the ash-tree, the colour red and the sword are all attributes of Mars / Geburah, as are the rubies carried by the black galleys on which Carter first attempted to sail here.

'As the ship drew into the harbour at evening the twin beacons Thon and Thal gleamed a welcome, and in the million windows of Baharna's terraces mellow lights peeped out quietly and gradually as the stars peep out overhead in the dusk, till that steep and climbing seaport became a glittering constellation hung between the stars of heaven and the reflections of those stars in the harbour' (*Dream-Quest*, p 124).



Lovecraft's description of Baharna may owe something to the Tarot card of The Chariot, which represents the next Path he attempts to take: a glance at the card shows towers on either side, perhaps the origin of the twin beacons, while the chariot is covered by a hanging awning made of cloth covered in stars. As in the background of the card, the city rises 'in great stone terraces.' Moreover, a mighty warrior in his chariot is also the magical image of Geburah. On the card the chariot is drawn by two sphinxes with zebra-striped head-dresses, which may account for the fact that Carter hires first one and then another zebra for transport. The first zebra is killed during the first night, 'with its blood all sucked away through a singular wound in its throat ... and all around on the dusty soil were great webbed footprints' - signs perhaps of the *Qetebim*, or Destroyers, the Qliphoth of Geburah, 'the pestilence that walketh in darkness'.

In the face carved on the far side of mount Ngranek Carter recognises the features of sailors he had seen (in previous dreams) in Celephais, and he decides to retrace his steps, via Dylath-Leen, the Skai, and Nir to the Enchanted Wood (i.e. via Tiphereth to Netzach), and from there northward along the river Oukranos to Thran, and thence to Celephais. A glance at the Tree will show that he could have taken a Path straight from Oriab / Geburah to Thran / Chesed. The reason why he did not is perhaps because the card linked to the Path to Chesed, Strength, features a lady dominating a lion: as noted above, Lovecraft has avoided feminine figures. Another reason may be that it is apparently the occult wisdom that, according to Sturzacker (1971, p 23), 'The foolish rise from Hod to Geburah only to fall back', so that Carter's progress at some points resembles a game of snakes and ladders. The question is academic, in

any case, for Carter is whisked away from mount Ngranek by night-gaunts, which take him to the Abyss which lies between and below the Sephiroth.

As they flew over it, 'far below him he saw faint lines of grey and ominous pinnacles which he knew must be the fabled Peaks of Throk. Awful and sinister they stand in the haunted disc of sunless and eternal depths' (*Dream-Quest*, p 131). This 'haunted disc of sunless and eternal depths' is the hidden, occulted Sephira of Daath (Knowledge). 'As the band flew lower the Peaks of Throk rose grey and towering on all sides, and one saw clearly that nothing lived on that austere and impressive granite of the endless twilight.' Carter is deposited in the Abyss of the vale of Pnoth below the Peaks of Throk, but a rope-ladder lowered by his ghoulish friends enables him to climb up to the top. There the ground is scattered with gravestones and other sepulchral monuments filched by the ghouls, 'and Carter realized with some emotion that he was probably nearer the waking world than at any other time since he had gone down the seven hundred steps from the cavern of flame to the Gate of Deeper Slumber' (*Dream-Quest*, p 133). Daath has a close relationship with Malkuth: in Cabbalist lore, but for the Fall, the Sephira of Malkuth would be in the position of Daath. If we imagine hinges at Hod and Netzach on the diagram of the Tree of Life, we can see how Malkuth could be easily swung up into the position of Daath. It seems that Lovecraft envisaged a three-dimensional model here: Malkuth above Daath, and Daath below the general level of the dreamlands, in 'the grey air of inner earth.'

Carter and a few companion ghouls surface in the city of the giant Gugs: 'they were in a forest of vast lichened monoliths reaching nearly as high as the eye could see ... and seen through aisles of monoliths,

was a stupendous vista of cyclopean round towers mounting up illimitable into the grey air of inner earth' (*Dream-Quest*, p 135). They make their way to the biggest tower: 'this was the central tower with the sign of Koth, and those stone steps just visible through the dusk within were the beginning of the great flight leading to upper dreamland and the enchanted wood.' (Lovecraft also speaks of the sign of Koth 'above the archway of a certain black tower standing alone in the twilight' in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*). They climb the spiral staircase of the Tower of Koth, and emerge through the exit, covered by a great stone slab in the Enchanted Wood. No Path corresponding to this route is visible on the Tree, but, according to Hulse (1994, p 333), there are also sixteen invisible paths running between the Sephiroth. The companions seem to have joined the one running from Inquanok / Binah to the Enchanted Wood / Netzach, which is linked to a Tarot Court card, the Queen of Cups: it may only be coincidence that *kothon* is Greek for a drinking cup. Lovecraft may give us a clue later, too: when Carter finally reaches Inquanok / Binah, he finds that 'on a hill in the centre rose a sixteen-angled tower greater than all the rest ... the Temple of the Elder Ones ... nothing was more splendid than the massive heights of the great central Temple of the Elder Ones with its sixteen carven sides' (*Dream-Quest*, p 152-3).

Back in the Enchanted Wood, Carter parts from the dog-like ghouls, 'shaking the paws of those repulsive beasts'; thinks sadly of the zebras he hired in 'far-away Oriab so many aeons ago'; and helps to forestall an attack by the Zoogs on the cats of Ulthar - all of which is perhaps appropriate in the realm of Netzach, relating to 'natural' animal life. He leaves the Enchanted Garden this time by way of 'the singing river

Oukranos', through a flowery paradise: 'Carter heard only the murmur of the great stream and the hum of the birds and bees as he walked onward under an enchanted sun.' This Path is linked to the Wheel of Fortune - '*the Lord of the Forces of Life*' - which is related to the element of water; the descending serpent on the card may also have suggested the winding river. The divinatory meaning of this card is 'good fortune and happiness', so it is appropriate that 'A blessed haze lies upon all this region ... so that men walk through it as through a faery place, and feel greater joy and wonder than they ever afterward remember' (*Dream-Quest*, p 142). It is also linked by some, such as Zain (1994, p 144), with the planet Uranus: remove the *k* from Oukranos and one has *Ouranos*, the Greek original of Uranus. In Greek Cabalah, according to Barry (1999, p 253-4) *Ouranos* has a value of 891; add the *k*, which has a value of 20, and 911 is the value of the words for *axle*, *wheel*, *joy*, *grace*, and *bloom of youth* - all highly appropriate here.

As the sun sets, Carter sees the white towers and gilded spires of the city of Thran, galleons of cedar anchoring at its marble wharves: cedar is an attribute of Chesed, or Mercy, the next Sephira, which Thran represents. Carter does not linger, but boards a galleon bound for Celephais the following morning. They continue down the river, past the perfumed jungles of Kled, to the port of Hlanith on the Cerenerian Sea. They are taking the Path from Chesed to Chokmah, which is related to the Tarot trump of The Hierophant, or High Priest: it is linked to the astrological sign of Taurus, and among its attributes are naturally bulls and all other bovines, plus the Taurean quality of strength. Carter goes ashore, and not surprisingly sees *ox*-carts, and *bull's*-eye panes in the tavern windows; while Hlanith is noted for its rugged granite walls and

oaken wharves, and 'is prized for the solid work of its artisans' (*Dream-Quest*, p 145).

From there they sail across the Cerenerian Sea for two nights and two days. 'Then near sunset of the second day there loomed up ahead the snowy peak of Aran with its gingko-trees swaying on the lower slope, and Carter knew they were come to the land of Ooth-Nargai and the marvellous city of Celephais.' This is the Sephira of Chokmah, or Wisdom. Lovecraft had previously written of Celephais and its wise ruler, King Kuranos, in *Celephais* (1920), and in both that piece and in *The Dream-Quest* he mentions the turquoise temple of the deity Nath-Horthath: turquoise is one of the gem-stones attributed to Chokmah. 'On the following day Carter walked up the Street of the Pillars to the turquoise temple and talked with the High Priest': the High Priest refers back to the Path just travelled from Chesed to Chokmah, that of the Tarot trump of The Hierophant, or High Priest. Carter also visits the Lord of Ooth-Nargai, King Kuranos, with whom we may link the Path of The Emperor, which connects Ooth-Nargai / Chokmah with Dylath-Leen / Tiphereth. The Emperor is enthroned, just as Kuranos 'sat pensive in a chair'; the throne is decorated with rams' heads, and Carter, after leaving the turquoise temple, had 'sought out the market of the sheep-butchers' (*Dream-Quest*, p 146).



The colour violet is attributed to this Path, and in both texts (*Celephais* and *The Dream-Quest*) Kuranos, who was previously a dream-quester like Carter, meets with S'ngac, a being in the form of a violet-coloured gas. This Path is also related to the element of Air, and Kuranos is also Lord of the Sky around Serannian, where he reigns 'in the turreted cloud-castle of sky-floating Serannian.' Likewise, Chokmah is related to Uranus as the sky or heavens, the primeval god of Greek myth rather than the modern planet: according to Bias (1997, p 17), 'Chokmah is ... the Sphere of the Fixed Stars ... Uranus as the Starry Heaven'. Carter followed the River Oukranos most of the way from Netzach to Chokmah: as mentioned above, remove the *k* and one has *Ouranos*, the Greek original of Uranus.

'One starlit evening', a ship from Inquanok puts in: the sailors' faces resemble the face carved upon mount Ngranek, and, although excited by this, 'Carter did not hasten to speak with the silent seamen. He did not know how much of pride and secrecy and dim supernal memory might fill those children of the Great Ones'. The word *supernal* is an interesting choice: the three highest (or in this case lowest) Sephiroth are known as supernal, and Carter is about to sail from one of them, Chokmah, to another, Binah. (The word is also used in the opening paragraph: 'a fanfare of supernal trumpets', and towards the end: 'supernal Kadath in its cold waste'). The fact Carter is now in the supernal regions is symbolised in the story by polar symbolism and Poe-like reminiscences of Arctic exproation: 'night came with gorgeous stars, and the dark ship steered for Charles' Wain and the Little Bear as they swung slowly round the pole ... Each day the sun wheeled lower and lower in the sky, and the mists overhead grew thicker and thicker. And

in two weeks there was not any sunlight at all, only a weird grey twilight ... ' (*Dream-Quest*, p 151). There seems to be some inconsistency here: the ship should be westering, too, if our interpretation is correct, and yet Inquanok appears 'to the east' ... perhaps, as in polar regions, the compass has become unreliable! More to the point, it may be that the ship took a long, curvaceous, route, rather than sailing straight across along the Path of The Empress, since the latter is (of course) never mentioned in any way.

After a voyage lasting twenty-two days (the number of the Tarot trumps and the visible Paths), they reach the black onyx city of Inquanok, with the sixteen-angled tower (the number of the invisible paths) of the Temple of the Elder Ones. Although the Path just taken (or avoided) is that of The Empress, it is not surprising, in view of Lovecraft's exclusion of the feminine from this text, that Inquanok is ruled by a Veiled *King*. Inquanok represents the Sephira of Binah, which is related to the planet Saturn - as are onyx and the raven, which are mentioned several times, while black is a colour related to both Binah and Saturn. As would be appropriate to Saturn, the planetary god of the seventh day, there is septenary symbolism: the Temple garden has seven gates, seven lodges, seven doors, seven paths, and seven columns of bowl-bearing priests. Binah is known as the Great Sea, and its symbols include the cup, the chalice, the well: In the garden of the great central Temple of the Elder Ones 'there are fountains, pools and basins ... all of onyx and having in them small luminous fish taken by divers from the lower bowers of ocean' (*Dream-Quest*, p 151).

But 'always to the east ... rose the gaunt grey sides of those topless and impassable peaks across which the hideous Leng was said to lie'. Carter

hires a yak and proceeds north into the area of the onyx-quarries: Leng / Kether lies north-east from Inquanok / Binah in our scheme. He sees only the miners and an occasional raven, but is pursued and abducted by a 'squat slant-eyed trader of evil legend' who had spied on him in Dylath-Leen and Inquanok, 'leading on a noxious horde of leering Shantaks to whose wings still clung the rime and nitre of the nether pits'. The Shantak-birds - huge, horse-headed scaly flying beasts that lurk in caves in the mountain-sides - are a form of Qlippoth. According to Denning and Phillips (1988, p 103), 'The Cohorts of the Qlippoth beyond the Abyss are collectively known as the Sataroth, or Concealers ... the Sataroth have been compared to huge, foul, voracious birds brooding on the slimy and fog-covered steepes of an unscaleable cliff'.

Mounted upon a shantak, Carter and his captor fly over 'that haunted place of evil and mystery which is Leng ... finally they came to a wind-swept table-land which seemed the very roof of a blasted and tenantless world'. Seeing 'a squat windowless building, around which a circle of crude monoliths stood ... Carter surmised from old tales that he was indeed come to that most dreadful and legendary of all places, the remote and prehistoric monastery wherein dwells unaccompanied the High-Priest not to be described, which wears a yellow silken mask over its face'. The High-Priest represents The Magician, the Tarot trump related to the Path just taken, from Inquanok / Binah to Leng / Kether; its symbolic colour is yellow. Kether is the topmost Sephira (polarity having changed), and thus may be seen as the 'very roof of a ... world'. In the normal Tree of Life, Kether is the Crown, the fountainhead of all good; here, in this infernal Tree, it may fairly be described as 'that most dreadful and legendary of all places.' Instead of light, we have a windowless

building, which is encircled by monoliths: a point within a circle is a symbol of Kether. 'There were no lights inside', so, ironically, a lamp, which is also a symbol of Kether, is mentioned several times in this episode, being much needed in the prevailing darkness (*Dream-Quest*, p 161).

Carter escapes from his captor and reaches Sarkomand, the city of dreadful night on the coast of Leng. Here he meets up again with the ghouls, and together they defeat more of the moonbeasts. The ghouls and their night-gaunt allies agree to escort him on the final stage of his journey from Leng to Kadath, 'approaching unknown Kadath either through the desert of carven mountains north of Inquanok, or through the more northerly reaches of repulsive Leng itself.' Crossing the Great Abyss to the Supernal Sephiroth changes polarity, so that what was formerly 'south' is now 'north', as Lovecraft makes abundantly clear: 'Everything focused toward the north; every curve and asterism of the glittering sky became part of a vast design whose function was to hurry first the eye and then the whole observer onward to some secret and terrible goal of convergence beyond the frozen waste that stretched endlessly ahead' (*Dream-Quest*, p 180).

As they fly north, they pass a range of mountains, carved into shapes by no human hand: 'All in a great half-circle they squatted, those dog-like mountains carven into monstrous watching statues ... It was only the flickering light of the clouds that made their mitred double heads to move ... There they squatted in a hellish half-circle ... sinister, wolf-like and double-headed' (*Dream-Quest*, p 179). Soon they notice to their horror – 'bringing to the lips of the ghouls a half-choked meep of cosmic fear' - that these gigantic beings have got to their feet and are paralleling

their course. This striking image of Lovecraft's has a cabalistic origin: as Waite (1924, p 256) makes clear: 'Thaumiel, the doubles of God, said to be two-headed and so named, because they pretend to be equal to the Supreme Crown. This is properly the title of the averse Sephira corresponding to Kether.'

It also becomes clear that Kadath cannot be located on the Tree, since Leng was apparently located in the utmost Sephira of Kether. Kadath must then be identified with the next element, the Ain Soph Aur, 'the Limitless Light, the Radiant Darkness' in the words of Bias (1997, p xxii): but once again in this inverted Tree it is the opposite: 'a realm of eternal night', as Lovecraft takes pains to emphasise:

'At length a lone pallid light was seen on the skyline ahead, thereafter rising steadily as they approached, and having beneath it a black mass that blotted out the stars. Carter saw that it must be some beacon on a mountain, for only a mountain could rise so vast as seen from so prodigious a height in the air ... Higher and higher rose the light and the blackness beneath it, till half the northern sky was obscured by the rugged conical mass ... No mountain known of man was that which loomed before them ... Scornful and spectral climbed that bridge betwixt earth and heaven, black in eternal night, and crowned with a pshent of unknown stars ... Ghouls meeped in wonder as they saw it' (*Dream-Quest*, p 182).

The description plainly shows that Kadath is no earthly mountain, but is, like Mount Meru, the great mythical mountain in the north which represents the polar axis, here conflated with the Ain Soph Aur, on the

edge of infinity: hence the increased power of the writing, striving to express what is inexpressible except in the language of symbolism.

Discussion

The above analysis of *The Dream-Quest* seems at first sight to indicate that Lovecraft was familiar with some of the symbolic structures of modern magic: the Tree of Life of the Cabalah, with the system of mapping the Tarot (specifically, the Rider-Waite pack) on to the Paths of the Tree, and with some of the associated symbolism: attributes such as colours, animals, plants, stones, artifacts, astrological signs, and numbers. In addition, he appears to have been cognisant with the system of gematria (i.e. the numerical values) of both Greek and Hebrew letters, and also with the *Qlippoth*, the demons of the Cabalah.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that such an interpretation is inevitably based on a selective reading of the text, choosing what fits and omitting from consideration what does not. Are we simply seeing pictures in the fire, shapes in the clouds, canals on Mars? It could be argued that the Tree of Life and its modern occult accretions form a poetic model of the universe which naturally includes everything, so it is not surprising if we find what we are looking for. Structuralist interpretations of this kind are now seen as problematic, in that many possible structures can be deduced from a reading of a text. Positing the existence of any one structure within some material can influence the interpretation and hence its outcome.

In response it could be argued that some of Lovecraft's most arresting images appear to have an esoteric origin: the Hanged Man / drowned

sailor, and the mountainous two-headed Thaumiel, for instance. In addition to such isolated images, there appears to be a fair amount of consistency in the overall structure (which we have identified with the Tree and Tarot), as when Carter's ship sails east and turns sharply south, on to the Path of the Hanged Man. True, there is not always a total fit, but the story can be mapped onto the structure to quite a large extent – how large is a matter of opinion.

Some might object that the bleak mechanistic and materialistic view of the universe which Lovecraft espoused in his letters contradicts the theodicy, the providential cosmology implicit in the Tree of Life as a poetic structure of the universe. Our interpretation, however, postulates an inverse, Qliphothic version of the Tree, in which the universe can indeed be seen as one bereft of providence, order, meaning, love and hope - until Carter (and Lovecraft) are rescued by a return to their roots in New England - Carter in Boston, and Lovecraft (of course) in Providence.

Another objection to such a Cabbalistic interpretation is that it could be applied to any science fiction or fantasy novel. Perhaps we should take two other Quests for Dark Towers as the closest candidates for comparison: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Stephen King's series *The Dark Tower* (I have not yet finished studying the final two volumes). The results are intriguing, but much less convincing than for *The Dream-Quest*. In Tolkien, for example, the Elven-kings have three rings, the Dwarf-lord seven; mortal men have nine, the Dark Lord one: twice ten, the same number as the sephiroth on a double Tree of Life, one normal and one infernal. King has a structure reminiscent of the Tree - a Beam that the companions follow towards the Dark Tower,

which at one point crosses an Abyss, and he also has an idiosyncratic and partial version of the Tarot. Various locations can be tentatively mapped onto the Tree, especially the lower sephiroth, but with many question marks. Tolkien's city of Minas Tirith and King's City of Lud may be seen as the equivalents of Dylath-Leen on the sephira of Tiphereth, for example. Minas Tirith was originally Minas Anor, the Tower of the Sun, while Lud is at one point associated with the rose-pink colour of Tiphereth (on the King Scale!). It is difficult, however, to map either text on to the Tree very consistently or convincingly. This may be due to the complexity of these multi-volume epic-romances, with many journeys by different characters. It would seem, however, that neither author was following the same magical pattern that we suggest Lovecraft was; this not surprising, for why should a good Catholic like Tolkien or King, writing a generation or two later, be expected to do so? It might be better, in any case, to regard the mythopoetic structures that they do have as their own *cabbalas* or symbolic systems.

While many works of fantasy and science fiction can be analysed along different lines - psychoanalytical, apocalyptic, sociological, archetypal - they do not all yield to a Cabbalistic interpretation as well as *The Dream-Quest* does. Some do not seem at all fruitful, whatever the level of analysis: much fantasy appears to be literary whimsy only - not that there is anything necessarily wrong with that. An interesting comparison can be made with Brian Lumley, who seems to follow Lovecraft's geography of the Dreamlands pretty faithfully in his *Dreams* series, but appears to have no esoteric awareness or resonance: except for the following quotation, which suggests he might unwittingly have stumbled upon the possible Cabbalistic structure of *The Dream-Quest*: 'A tale of

paths between the spheres, dim corridors leading to equally dim and conjectural lands of elder myth ...' (1978, p 10). Unless, of course, Mr Lumley knows more than he is letting on ... Another comparison could be with Lovecraft's mentor Poe, who displays a similar apparent contradiction, between the author of *Eureka* and the author of his fiction.

If we grant that *The Dream-Quest* may contain a possible Cabbalistic structure, more than other texts, the question arises as to why Lovecraft, if he knew what he was doing, never (to our knowledge) admitted to it, and instead usually maintained an attitude of scepticism and even ignorance towards such matters. This is a major objection to our hypothesis, and one that is perhaps ultimately unanswerable until some other evidence may be found to support or refute it - unless, of course, you agree with Kenneth Grant (2002, p xxix): 'It sometimes happens that non-Initiates are used by the Outer Ones as vehicles for the revelation of hidden knowledge in a manner inexplicable to those so chosen, which they cannot explain to themselves or others ... Such a situation was exemplified in the case of H.P.Lovecraft's persistent refusal to admit of any value attaching to his tales other than of a purely imaginative kind.' It might also be pointed out that Lovecraft, the anti-Semite who married a Jew, was quite capable of maintaining a double standard. In the meantime, some further rebuttals can be offered, as follows.

One is that an author can have a literary interest in using esoteric material without necessarily being a believer or a practitioner. It is undeniable that Lovecraft had such a literary interest, if nothing else, as displayed in *The Call of Cthulhu*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, and *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, to mention only a few. Part of the growing academic

interest in the occult has been an increasing recognition of the number of modern authors who have used the esoteric as a source of inspiration and imagery - perhaps for the very reason that they do *not* 'believe' in it, but can use it freely and imaginatively. In this literary context, Lovecraft's apparent knowledge of the occult would not have been not unusual: parallels may be found with Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood, who had been members of the Outer Order of the Golden Dawn, and whom Lovecraft regarded as his masters in the art of 'weird' fiction. Another influence with an interest in the occult was Sax Rohmer, whose *Romance of Sorcery* (1914) may have been a source on the history of magic for Lovecraft, while *Batwing* (1921) could have influenced *The Call of Cthulhu*.

Such authors need not be practising occultists, however; the esoteric has been mentioned (by Materer, 1995) in connection with T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D., Robert Duncan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and James Merrill, among modernist poets. Modern novelists include John Cowper Powys (see Krissdottir, 1980); Malcom Lowry (see Epstein, 1969); Zola, Verne, Breton, Proust, Mann, Hesse, Joyce, Meyrink, Lindsay Clarke, Yourcenar, Eco and Butor (see Meakin, 1995).

One might also conjecture that Lovecraft, having used this material in *The Dream-Quest*, abandoned it as too constrictive, and thereafter developed his own 'mythos' in his fiction. A parallel might be drawn in this case with W.B.Yeats, a former member of the Golden Dawn, who likewise developed his own 'mythos', published as *A Vision* in 1925. Communicated via his wife's automatic writing, the sources said, 'We have come to give you metaphors for poetry', which Yeats used thenceforth. And, of course, a parallel to that is the channelling of *The*

Book of the Law to Crowley in 1904, following his wife's prior communication. (Did Mrs Lovecraft have a hand in *The Dream-Quest*? Perhaps it is not impossible that Sonia knew something of the Cabala or the Tarot). Interestingly, Crowley had, like Yeats, given up on Golden Dawn style magic before receiving *The Book of the Law*: 'All that he had attained, he abandoned. The intuitions of the Qabalah were cast behind him with a smile at his youthful folly; magic, if true, led nowhere' (Crowley, 1936). One might tentatively draw a parallel with Lovecraft: if our hypothesis is right, he too might have said his farewell to the Golden Dawn style of magical symbolism in *The Dream-Quest*, and thereafter developed his own mythos in his fiction, as did Yeats in his poetry and Crowley in his magick. In that sense, if no other, Kenneth Grant (1972, p 114-7) would have been right to draw attention to the parallels between Crowley and Lovecraft.

(As noted above, Joshi's chronology (1980, p 37) argues against a water-tight distinction between the Dreamlands and the Mythos fictions; nevertheless, one clearly follows the other).

Lovecraft's letters shed some light on his attitude: for example, on October 9, 1925, Lovecraft had written to Clark Aston Smith asking for help, as he was "appallingly ignorant", in finding sources of material on magic. But this can be taken two ways: at that date, he was ignorant - but he was also interested. (Smith's reply no longer exists, but perhaps he came up trumps, as it were, by sending some unusual material that was later returned or lost - but this must remain mere conjecture). We have to bear in mind, however, that Lovecraft's published correspondence is only a small proportion of the total, and the *Selected Letters* were often abridged by August Derleth - some might say censored

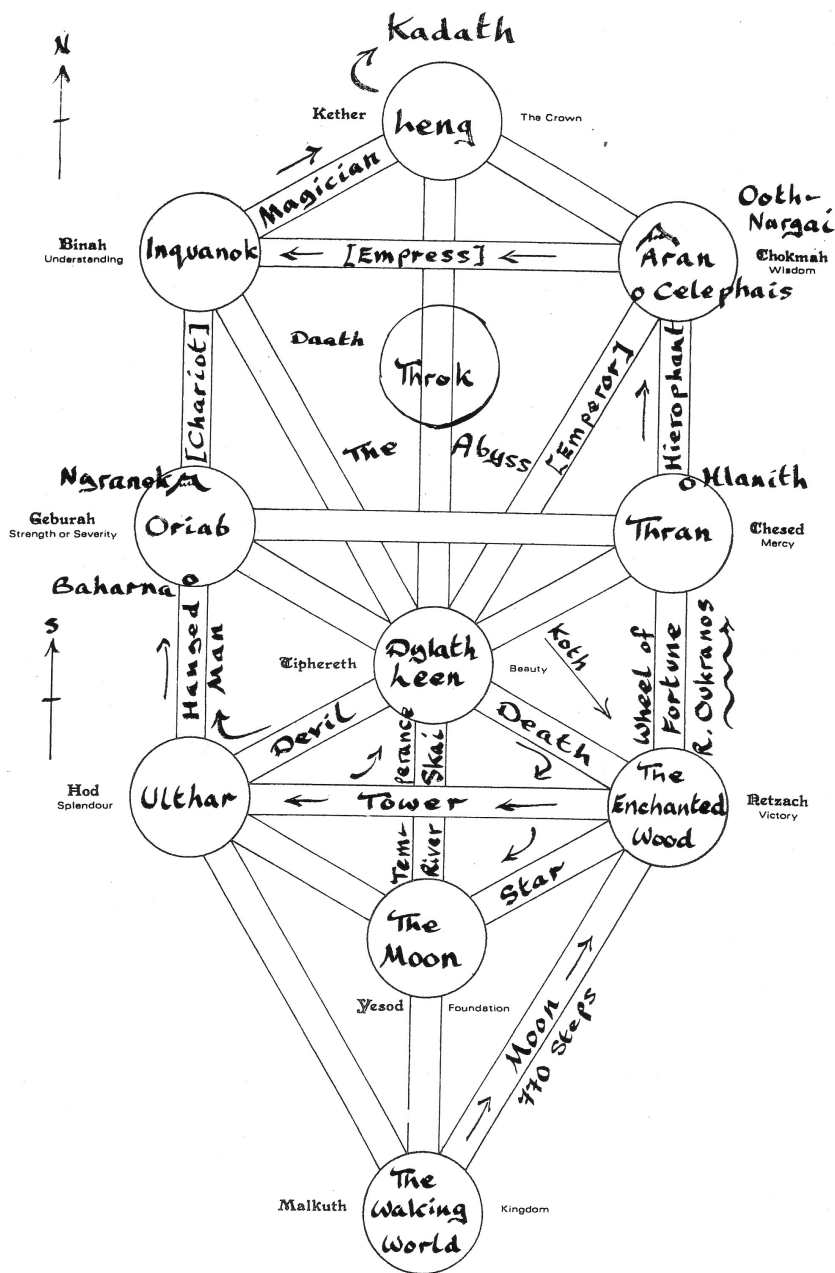
(Gonce, 2003, p 85). Moreover, they lack many of Lovecraft's accompanying illustrations: Derleth himself, in his introduction to the first volume of the *Selected Letters* (1965, p xxii) states how 'sometimes he drew signs of cabalistic ritual or magic.' Needless to say, however, we cannot rely on the notional support of unpublished and perhaps non-existent letters by Lovecraft; but it is to be hoped that further research among any remaining unpublished papers may shed further light on this matter.

If we accept that Lovecraft had some knowledge of the esoteric, the question remains as to the source. Lovecraft is often said to have derived his esoteric knowledge from one book in particular, Lewis Spence's *Encyclopaedia of Occultism* (1920), which he owned. While Lovecraft was no doubt familiar with this work, a glance reveals it could not have supplied him with all the details mentioned above. While this knowledge can easily be gained today by a visit to almost any large bookshop, this was not so in the 1920s. Lovecraft could have learned some of it from only a few published sources, such as rare privately printed books, or the journal or correspondence course of an occult society. Lovecraft, however, read widely and omnivorously from his childhood onwards, with a great interest in many subjects, one of which the occult became; as a result it is difficult to be certain how much he read in a subject, and how much he knew. Lovecraft certainly improved his knowledge with time; in the 1930s he had several books on the occult in his library, and was able to advise fellow writers. (Gonce, 2003, p 12-15)

Hulse (1994, p 272, 280-1, 352-6) outlines the development of the Tree and the Tarot Paths as a combined symbolic structure. In 1856 Eliphas Levi made the first connection between the Cabalah and the

Tarot, followed by Papus in 1889. In Britain, S.L. MacGregor Mathers developed it in his *Book T* for the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1887. The attribution of the Tarot trumps to the Paths of the Tree was given to members in the Fourth Knowledge Lecture, as may be seen in Regardie (1986, p 71). The details of this were released by Aleister Crowley in his *Liber 777* in 1909, and his periodical *The Equinox* (1909-14), both privately printed. One V.N. (Victor Neuberg?) published the Golden Dawn system in *The Occult Review* of May 1910. In the same year A.E. Waite's *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1910) described the Tarot, while his *The Holy Kabbalah* (1924, incorporating earlier works) described the Tree, and some of the Qliphoth, but neither mapped the Tarot onto the Tree. Waite also wrote on the relationship between the Cabalah, the Hebrew alphabet and the Tarot in his introduction to Knut Stenring's translation of the *Sepher Yetzirah* in 1923. In the United States, Harriette and Homer Curtiss revealed much symbology of the Tarot in relation to numbers, the Cabalah, the Hebrew alphabet, etc., in their *The Key to the Universe* (1919) and *The Key of Destiny* (1923).

It is therefore possible that Lovecraft may have seen something stemming from the British Golden Dawn tradition, or a parallel American one, which he was able to use in *The Dream-Quest*. This is assuming, of course, that the premise is granted that there is, within this text, more than meets the eye at first sight; and that the eye of the beholder is not too biased.



Notes on the illustration(s)

The blank chart of the Tree of Life, on which I have drawn my map, is supplied by the Sorcerer's Apprentice, 6-8 Burley Road, Leeds LS6 1QP, to whom are due many thanks for permission to reproduce it.

The illustrations of the Tarot cards are from the original 1910 line drawings that appeared in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* by Arthur Edward Waite, which is in the public domain.

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