Motifs
ISSN : 2726-0399

2 | 2017
Matérialité et écriture

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Brad Tabas

https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=352

DOI : 10.56078/motifs.352

Référence électronique
Brad Tabas, « Reading in the Chtuhulucene: Lovecraft, New Materialism and the Materiality of Writing », *Motifs* [En ligne], 2 | 2017, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2017, consulté le 10 août 2024. URL : https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=352

Reading in the Chtuhulucene: Lovecraft, New Materialism and the Materiality of Writing

Brad Tabas

PLAN

TEXTE

Giving Life Back to Matter

1 The traditional take on the theme of the materiality of writing asks about the meaning of the material that supports human-made signs. It considers the importance of the dark side of the signifier; of all that one does not take into account when one sees a sign as a sign. It might consider the ways in which written words present one with multiple possible significations, the ways in which the fact of a text's having been written haunts readers' engagements with that text. Traditional theorists of the materiality of writing might remind us that this materiality really does have a signification, that paper and pixels really do convey meaning. This view might aim to argue that traditional semiotics overlooks the "material" of the signifier, chiding it for recognizing only the "form." Critics of this persuasion might reproach one for failing to confront the "paradox of materiality," the realization that the moment when one feels that one has grasped the matter of the signifier, this turns out to be only another signifier, only another meaning of that object for that subject. Perhaps it also, proceeding past this trap, encourages one to reflect on what Bill Brown calls the

"materiality effect," the phenomenological reality of that which is called the material.[1] But what investigations into the materiality of writing do not do—at least not traditionally—is challenge one to think about the material that makes up texts as anything other than passive inanimate stuff offered up to the autonomous meaning-making activity of the reading subject.

2 This is no surprise, since the assumption that material things are mere passive stuff is dominant within the anthropocentric western tradition, becoming ever more pervasive over the course of the modern era.[2] Recent New Materialist thinking, however, has begun to question the idea that matter is inanimate, devoid of vitality, agency, and most importantly, expressiveness.[3] Drawing on work by philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour, it has shown that even activities like the natural sciences, which 'in theory' have generally presupposed matter's lack of agency, have always "in practice" relied on the agency of material objects. Put somewhat more strikingly, Latour's extensive studies of science in action have shown that modern science utterly depends upon the agency and activity of animate material things while all the while denying this same principle.[4] What this means is that all material, whether we want to admit it or not, is "vibrant" (to take up Jane Bennett's term), that is to say that all things, from dead rats to plastic bags and melted ice cream cones, can enter into relations and become actors in collective, even political, dramas.[5]

3 Matter is not only capable of agency: it is capable of expression. It is not us who bestow signification upon inert material objects, but rather it is the action of materials themselves that makes them matter to us. As Bruno Latour puts it, it is only because "objects or materials act" that "we can speak of them as having signification."[6] All objects, then, insofar as they are actors, are also meaning makers. For Latour, this makes the human beings and scientists that produce discourses about these objects thereby "translators."[7] The geologist Jan Zalasiewicz offers a lovely example of how the role of scientist as translator might function in his *Planet in a Pebble*. This book, which essentially explores what an analysis of the material composition of a pebble can tell geologists, reveals that an "ordinary pebble" is "a capsule of stories," stories "packed tightly," so tightly, indeed, that the entire history of the planet can be found inside.[8] Perhaps more inter-

esting still, at least from the viewpoint of vibrant materialism, is Peter Wohlleben's work, *The Secret Life of Trees*. This book explores not only what trees can tell us, but far more strikingly, what trees can tell one another. According to Wohlleben, they mutter to themselves about much more than we would normally imagine, even going so far as to express pain and memories. Putting these kinds of insights into a larger theoretical framework, the ethnologist Eduardo Kohn has undertaken what he calls an "anthropology of the forest," demonstrating the ways in which all of the entities within the rainforest—from rocks and rivers to humans and jaguars—form an interactive nature-culture that functions by means of bi-directional symbolic exchanges. [9]

4 All of this calls for a rethinking of the problematic of the materiality of the signifier. Recognizing the expressive vitality of matter implies that we ought to think of the material supports of any form of written matter or even elements involved in the act of reading—paper, pixels, inks, chairs, broadband cables and so forth as active, animate, and signifying, contributing something meaningful to the expression of the text. It demands that we shift our attention away from the meaning-bestowing subject and towards a more ecological and interactive approach to the notion of reading, for the acknowledgment of material vitality implies that all meaning making occurs within a mesh of ecological entanglements. Yet how to go about shifting our account of reading away from the transcendental reading subject seems unclear. Anything that focuses on the reading of the sign will automatically tend to occult the actions of the other within the medium that is the reading subject, thus perpetuating the unthought repression of the activity of matter that has dogged both the ideologies of modernity and the majority of approaches to the materiality of writing up to this point.

The Writing of Matter

5 The solution to the above problem proposed by this paper involves a radical refashioning of the question of the materiality of the signifier. Instead of focusing on the materiality of writing, we will explore *the writing of materials*, the ways in which material things come to expression in works of art, literature, and natural science. Such an

altered perspective guarantees that we acknowledge the vibrancy of materials since it takes the agency of objects as one of its basic presuppositions, the exact opposite of what is the case when one begins by presupposing that reading is an activity carried out by a transcendental subject. Such a rethinking of the question, of course, would only be interesting if it did allow us some insight into the older ways of framing the relationship between reading and materiality. This, as we will see, is the case, though the nature of this contribution will only become clear later on in our discussion.

6 Shifting our focus from transcendental readers to entanglements of writing materials implies puncturing the modern myth of textual genesis. After all, the idea of the alienated genius precisely implies a separation between the artist and the surrounding world.[10] That said, our choice of dramatizing the compositional role of materials in no way implies that we see the human writer as a mere transparent conduit. Despite the acknowledged importance of non-human material actors, and despite the rightness of Vicky Kirby's claim that "nature does not require human literary skills to write its complexity into comprehensible format," all human writing does imply the activity of a human medium.[11] The mediation of the human actor is not without consequence or relevance for our thinking about reading and writing since, like any medium, the human medium also has a message, a specific way in which it attunes any articulation that passes through it (an attunement that of course itself depends upon the constitution of that human actor, given that human beings, like all other beings, are not sovereign entities, but rather are themselves composed of networks of symbionts and material inter-actions.) As we have noted above, one might wish to think of this mediation as the enaction of a translation. Like all translations, the mediation provided by humans involves suppressions and repressions, unjustified elaborations or amplifications. Examining these elements by dramatizing the event of writing can lead us to insights into the kind of material media that human beings indeed are.

7 What we are proposing, in other words, is to take a look at writing and materiality from what might be called a weird perspective. The late great German cultural theorist Friedrich Kittler stunningly brought to light the ways in which Wittgenstein's typewriter co-authored his late style, leading him from relying on traditional rhet-

oric to developing his telegraphic aphorisms.[12] As Nietzsche himself summarized this co-writing: "our writing tools are also working on our thoughts."[13] But unlike Kittler's researches, what follows is not focused on one single technical medium but rather on the interactions between material media. This approach is more ecological, focusing on the broader and more complex interactions between various material actants and a human actor within a particular place and in a specific text: H. P. Lovecraft and the city of Providence R.I. in "The Shunned House."

The "Chimney-corner Whisperer," Transcorporeality and the Theory of Horror

8 I have chosen to discuss Lovecraft's story for a quite specific reason: its explicit engagement with the voices of material things, both the ways in which things speak to us—as well as the ways in which they don't. It is this engagement with the incomprehensibility as well as the volubility of matter that steers me towards a focus on horror fiction and away from what might seem a more evident alternative—nature writing. After all, nature writing, like science itself, explicitly presents itself as a product of the dialogue with things. One might even understand the aim and name of the genre as precisely suggesting that it offers us nature's writing. Emerson, for example, writes of becoming a "transparent eyeball" in *Nature*, with the phrase suggesting perfectly the idea that the nature writer brings the unmediated voice of nature to the reader.[14] Yet there is a sense in which this optimism regarding our ability to translate the voices of things is blinding. It prompts us to forget how rare and even misleading such cases are, obscuring the fact that nature and objects are intrinsically other, not just *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, but—to borrow a term from Frédéric Neyrat, "denaturing," capable of resisting our best attempts to make sense of them.[15]

9 Horror is, in any case, the dark twin to nature writing. In America, both horror fiction and nature writing emerge out of the Puritan belief that nature constitutes a regime of signs, a "book of nature" written by God and announcing the providential designs for humankind.

Thus, for example, when William Bradford, in a dark moment, described America as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men," he was precisely lamenting a reading of the book of nature that would provide the mood for the proto-horror genre known as wilderness gothic, a reading in which the voice of nature was garbled or terrifying, with the path to salvation unclear. [16]Of course, knowledgeable readers will also see that within his pessimism there is a tropological optimism; namely the suggestion that because he finds himself in the wilderness, then he must narratologically and allegorically be on his way to the land of milk and honey. Learning to see the writing of the world in this way—as a field of "prospects"—would obviously inform Emerson's and Thoreau's concepts of nature writing. Yet it also accounts for the strong pastoral strain in nearly all American horror writing, such that the resolution of almost all horror fictions (including "The Shunned House") involves a return to an Arcadian world in which the voices of things once again become comprehensible. My point here, however, is not to show that horror fiction is like nature writing because it is derived from the same worldview. I want rather to suggest something that may be surprising to readers who think of horror as mere fiction, and Lovecraft as a mere spinner of myths—namely the degree to which horror writing, like nature writing, has historically emerged out of a practice of interacting with speaking things.

10 Lovecraft brings this point out clearly in many of his writings on horror. In his marvelous "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft claims that the source of all horror fiction is to be found in phenomena like "the chimney-corner whisper" the speech-like but barely articulate utterances of ordinary material things. [17] Alluding to the vision of the material as inanimate within the western tradition, he also suggests that such whispers constitute "rappings from outside," moments when the dogma that would resign the material to mute inertness is shattered by its irrepressible reality (he goes on to clarify that these events are the source of the "oldest and strongest kind of fear," the "fear of the unknown"). [18] The fact that the voice of the chimney corner is a whisper ought to be read as implying that a close attention to things is necessary for writing and appreciating horror, and elsewhere Lovecraft amply confirms this suggestion. At the beginning of "The Shunned House," for example, he reproaches Poe for not pay-

ing enough attention to the world around him, noting that during his time in Providence his illustrious forebear was many times "obliged to pass a particular house on the eastern side of the street," but despite this repeated passage, he did not even "notice" this house that "outranks in horror the wildest phantasy of the genius who so often passed it unknowingly."[19] This point should serve to moderate our reception of the claim, staunchly defended by Houellebecq, that Lovecraft is anything but a realist.[20] While it is clearly false to imagine Lovecraft as a writer interested in describing the mundane details of the everyday with a Zola-like precision, it is equally false to deny that Lovecraft the writer was wholly disengaged from real encounters with, and attention to, the world around him.[21] In fact, Lovecraft's cosmicism demands a highly attuned attention to the weirdness of the contours of the real, and he writes in a weird realist style adapted to this demand.

11 More than merely listening closely to the voices of things, however, it seems that the condition of writing horror involves a kind of merging with the material. As Kenneth Hite has noted, the recognition of the "thin-ness of boundaries" is one of the central themes "spanning all of Lovecraft's work."[22] Lovecraft's tombstone, for example, reads: "I am Providence." On my reading, what Lovecraft is here intimating is that as a horror writer he dwelt in a state of awareness that being is what the critical theorist Stacy Alaimo has described as "trans-corporeality."[23] Trans-corporeality is the notion that all human corporality is "always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" always "inseparable from the 'environment.' For her this is a way of recognizing that we are surrounded by an animate world as opposed to a world of lifeless things, a world full of "interchanges and interconnections" as opposed to "inert empty space." Being open to this transcorporeal world is horrifying, since it reveals to us the "often unpredictable and unwanted actions" of bodies upon one another. Restated, and placing our emphasis not so much on the notion of action, but on Latour's insistence that every action is also an articulation, we can thus acknowledge that the city of Providence *is* Lovecraft the horror writer because as a writer he engaged in constant dialogue with this city, but also because he is the city, and the city is because of him, in the sense that both are co-compositions, co-articulations.

Haunted House Ecology

12 The idea that humans are entangled in a material dialogue with things is rendered present to us from the opening descriptions of "The Shunned House." Lovecraft carefully mentions the external details of the house, mixing together architectural observations with suggestions that the physical objects around the house express symptoms of a sort of malady: a "mangy lawn," "rheumy brick walls," a "wormy triangular pediment," "barren, gnarled and terrible old trees, long, queerly pale grass and nightmarishly misshapen weeds."[24] He precisely notes that the birds know how to read these signs, for in this place "birds never lingered."[25] He notes as well that there were no ghosts and no apparitions that appeared in the house, but rather effects that seem more material: "people who came into contact with this place seemed to become ill, displaying various degrees of anaemia and consumption."[26] He also notes that it was the "dank, humid cellar" that was most repulsive, for it was there where one could spot "white fungus growths" which sprang up in "rainy summer weather," thereby suggesting that the signs seen elsewhere are the visible results of interactions with something potentially located much deeper.[27] One is tempted to classify this sort of description as ecological, even to read into this text something like haunted house ecology.[28] But ecological or not, what is clear is that the house is characterized by a kind of conversation and "intra-action" between various noxious elements, with a kind of central locus underground in the cellar, an element that produces signs of abnormality in the objects that surround it.[29] Human beings are not omitted from this material conversation, though this does not necessarily happen at the level of their minds, but rather at the level of their bodies, or, in terms that are once again alien to Lovecraft's vocabulary, on the level of their cognitive or biological matter, which in turn becomes possessed by this, showing up in consciousness as an aftereffect of more primordial material conversations.

13 At the midpoint of the text, Lovecraft theorizes this material interactionism more explicitly, using terms that can help us to grasp the above-described elements as material expressions, weirdly predicting much later discoveries regarding that most basic of living scripts,

DNA. Attempting to explain the reasons behind the house's disorder, Lovecraft writes:

> One might easily imagine an alien nucleus of substance or energy, formless or otherwise, kept alive by imperceptible or immaterial subtractions from the life-force or bodily tissue and fluids of other and more palpably living things into which it penetrates and with whose fabric it sometimes completely merges itself. It might be actively hostile, or it might be dictated merely by blind motives of self-preservation. [30]

14 As speculative as this kind of writing then was, and as distant from any methodology aligned with human experience and the conscious human dialogue of material actants, Lovecraft here almost perfectly describes how we now know viral DNA to function.

15 Our DNA, which we know to be a textual code composed of nucleotide sequences T (thymine), A (adenine), G (guanine), and C (cytosine), is essentially read by the organism, telling the organism what compounds (further DNA scripts) it ought to produce. When a virus enters our system, it literally interferes with this process of DNA transcription, causing the viral DNA to be read in combination with the host DNA, and producing new and affected scripts. The altered micro-scripts that emerge generate changes in the whole organism, which we are able to read as the macro symptoms of illness. [31] Interestingly enough, recent research has shown that the effects of viruses upon hosts are not to be restricted to purely "physical" symptoms. [32]Like the uncle in "The Shunned House" who seems to be possessed by this thing, rabies DNA possesses dogs, producing dogs that don't wag their tails and prance with joy upon seeing their masters, but who seek to bite them instead. This kind of change of comportment is hardly restricted to animals. According to Nicky Boulter, an infectious disease researcher at Sydney University of Technology, people infected with toxoplasmosis are literally possessed by this disease:

> Infected men have lower IQs, achieve a lower level of education, and have shorter attention spans. They are also more likely to break rules and take risks, be more independent, more antisocial, suspicious, jealous, and morose, and are deemed less attractive to women. On

> the other hand, infected women tend to be more outgoing, friendly, more promiscuous, and are considered more attractive to men compared with noninfected controls. [33]

16 All of this comportment serves the purpose, we might note, of preserving the rabies DNA in existence, or passing on the toxoplasmosis virus to future hosts.

17 No known virus leads good ol' Yankees to speak demotic French, but it would be peculiar to claim that Lovecraft's materialism amounts to straight Realism, or that his horror is simply applied science *à la* the hard SF of a writer like Gregory Benford. The important thing here is that all of this gives us a good sense of how we ought to understand the material semiotics of the alien voice of the chimney corner, as well as the general vision of material speech in Lovecraft. As we have seen, Lovecraft thinks that horror is a product of the fear of the unknown. But the unknown here is not that which is strictly speaking outside of our knowledge—it is known to us as unknown. A perfect metaphor for this is the encounter with speakers of a foreign tongue (and this is perhaps why the possessed uncle begins to speak French, and certainly one of the reasons that so many commentators have felt it necessary to acknowledge the deep seated importance of the racial other for Lovecraft's thought). [34] We know that the other's utterances have a meaning—we just don't know what it is. We might say that Lovecraft leads us to recognize that there are meaningful interactions going on at the level of the objects within the house, and that exploring the house is akin to trying to voyage into a dangerous foreign land. This foreign language can be the audible language of material interaction, but it might be merely a level of symbolization existing at another strata of reality, one that has been revealed to us by science, but one that we could never hope to grasp in conscious experience. [35] In any case, it is not insignificant that despite the varying historical narratives that inform us about the causes of the distempers associated with the house, it is finally via a material interaction—via the spilling of sulphuric acid into a hole dug in the basement of the house—that the thing is finally banished.

The City and the City

18 In China Miéville's novel, *The City and the City*, two towns, Beszel and Ul Qoma, occupy the same space and time. Materializing a speculation from string theory, Miéville narrates how the occupants on each side of this doubled time-space overlook the being of their others even as they occasionally bump up against their uncanny doubles. Drawing on this image of the city and the city, let us now shift our attention from the one "city" (the Lovecraft that is Providence) the other "city" (the Providence that is Lovecraft). In so doing we will deepen our appreciation of the degree to which "The Shunned House" emerges out of a negotiation with, between and among *things*. We will also, and with some difficulty, suggest that even the so called city is in fact somehow multiple; including a real and deeper city ignored or unthought beneath the town as it is ordinarily thought to appear.

19 What sort of town was Providence at the moment when Lovecraft wrote this tale? It was—in a way—(at least) two cities. On the one hand, Providence in the early 20th century was a busy industrial hub. It was home to highly polluting factories of various sorts, from foundries and textile works to companies devoted to the highly toxic process of making jewelry (these included Gorham Manufacturing Co. —Lovecraft's deceased father's employer.) The textile manufacturers discharged chemicals associated with the making of dyes, the leather and metalworking factories discharged heavy metals and toxic compounds used to clean machines and treat materials, and the woodworking companies dumped varnish, solvents and paints into the Providence River. This led to frequent fish-kills and to clearly miasmic conditions along the banks of the river. The groundwater and soils around Providence flowed full with chemicals, including heavy metals such as lead, silver, cadmium and other compounds toxic to humans and fatal to aquatic animals. As a result, Rhode Island is host to one of the highest concentrations of superfund sites in the nation. Air pollution was also a major problem in Providence. Indeed, the problem was so acute that Providence was on the forefront of cities looking to control and regulate air pollution. Providence was, in short, a modern city, and like most modern cities it was obsessed with zoning, with setting up separations, with hiding the visible evid-

ence of pollution (early air quality regulations mostly dealt with when and where, not if, factories were allowed to emit fumes), and with effectively managing its own modernization. [36]

20 This obsession with zoning, of course, was aimed a protecting the 'other' Providence. This Providence was (and is) a verdant traditional New England town. The East Side of Providence, where Lovecraft was born and lived almost his entire life, retains a pastoral character. It is striking to note that in his non-fiction as well as fictional writing about his hometown Lovecraft almost always writes of Providence as a kind of pastoral oasis—albeit a threatened one. Of 454 Angell Street, the house in which he was born, we read: "This spacious house, raised on a high green terrace, looks down upon grounds which are almost a park, with winding walks, arbours, trees, & a delightful fountain." [37] Elsewhere he dwells on the almost miraculous persistence of Arcadia around certain residences despite the encroaching urbanization of the city: "Only three doors away is a little white farmhouse two centuries old—long overtaken by the growing city and now inhabited by an artist who still preserves a tiny patch of farmyard..." [38] In general, when Lovecraft writes about the domestic spaces in old Providence he seems to suggest that they are places of pastoral harmony, spaces in which humankind can at once dwell among men and in union with nature.

21 Yet the modern does penetrate into Lovecraft's pastoral idyll, and when it does so it comes (quite literally) with the force of what Leo Marx has called the "machine in the garden," the technical object that in American literature has been used to "suggest tension as opposed to repose," "a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety." [39] This is particularly clear, for instance, in the following lines drawn from "The Street," a text that has often been derided for its racism, but whose rewriting of Ovid's *The Four Ages* nevertheless offers interesting insights into the ways in which Lovecraft aligned technological modernization with decline and the corruption of the pastoral condition:

> In time there were no more swords, three-cornered hats, or periwigs in the Street. How strange seemed the inhabitants with their walking-sticks, tall beavers, and cropped heads! New sounds came from the distance—first strange puffings and shrieks from the river a mile away, and then, many years later, strange puffings and shrieks

> and rumblings from other directions. The air was not quite so pure as before, but the spirit of the place had not changed. The blood and soul of their ancestors had fashioned the Street. Nor did the spirit change when they tore open the earth to lay down strange pipes, or when they set up tall posts bearing weird wires. [40]

22 Here we are but in the Age of Iron, so all is not awful, but what is most striking is not only that the technologies are seen negatively, depicted with the same adjectives typically used to brand the most horrifying entities ("weird" and "strange") but that they are also, and more to the point, represented as animate beings that speak, albeit incomprehensibly, via fear-inducing "shrieks" and "rumbles." It is as if the macro-condition of the pastoral is one in which man can dwell in communion and happy dialogue with a nature that makes sense to men, while the entry of the machine unleashes voices that are not only unharmonious and shrill, but which literally spout forth incomprehensible mutterings, the known unknowns that inspire horror. [41]

The Groans and Moans of Technical Objects

23 Rather than dwelling upon Lovecraft's usage of the metaphor of the machine in the garden, I want to draw our attention towards the ways in which Lovecraft treats the technological object or machine as that which speaks—only not to us—and the way in which his engagement with this inarticulate invasive monster plays out in the writing of "The Shunned House." First, however, it is important to focus our attention on precisely the uniqueness of Lovecraft's position, for it goes against the dominant dogmas within western thinking on technics. Lewis Mumford, for instance, in his *Technics and Civilization*, highlighted the vanquishing of the myth of animate materiality as crucial to the development of the modern technical world. [42] In other words, we tend to take our ability to technically master materials as proof that they are inanimate, without will of their own. As Heidegger has made clear in his celebrated "tool analysis," most of our interactions with technical objects precisely imply a forgetting of their independent presence, and the assumption that they are wholly submitted. Yet as he also points out, technical objects occasionally and hor-

rifyingly remind us that they have independent being when they get out of hand—for instance by breaking.[43] At such moments, we recall that tools precisely do have an independent being, the nature of which we had been ignoring all along. As several media-studies-inflected pieces on Lovecraft have noted, one of the author's fascinations lay in precisely reminding us of this independent being by giving voice to media like telephones and phonographs.[44] This is perfectly exemplified, for instance, in the following passage from "The Thing on the Doorstep":

> It began with a telephone call just before midnight. I was the only one up, and sleepily took down the receiver in the library. No one seemed to be on the wire, and I was about to hang up and go to bed when my ear caught a very faint suspicion of sound at the other end. Was someone trying under great difficulties to talk? As I listened I thought I heard a sort of half-liquid bubbling noise —"glub...glub...glub"—which had an odd suggestion of inarticulate, unintelligible word and syllable divisions. I called 'Who is it?' But the only answer was 'glub...glub...glub-glub.' I could only assume that the noise was mechanical; but fancying that it might be a case of a broken instrument able to receive but not to send, I added, 'I can't hear you. Better hang up and try Information.' Immediately I heard the receiver go on the hook at the other end.[45]

24 All of this makes Lovecraft's depiction of the technical object as incomprehensibly rumbling all the more perceptive, since he is suggesting that they speak even before they break, that they are perhaps, outside of our attention, but at a deeper strata of reality, plotting their revenge against us.

25 But where do we find technological objects in "The Shunned House"? They literally lie underneath it, they support it, binding it to the rest of the city, as we discover in the culminating moment of the text:

> All along the hill people tell of the yellow day, when virulent and horrible fumes arose from the factory waste dumped in the Providence River, but I know how mistaken they are as to the source. They tell, too, of the hideous roar which at the same time came from some disordered water-pipe or gas main underground—but again I could correct them if I dared. It was unspeakably shocking, and I do not see how I lived through it. I did faint after emptying the fourth carboy,

> which I had to handle after the fumes had begun to penetrate my mask; but when I recovered I saw that the hole was emitting no fresh vapours. [46]

26 Note that it is not the purportedly monstrous thing but the "disordered water pipe or gas main underground" that lets out the "hideous roar" here. Note too that even though this is a feature of fiction, it does correlate with the material realities of the city in which Lovecraft lived, a city in which the older pastoral city was increasingly connected to a new, modern, city of factories and machines. Doubtless the "disorder" might stem from the suggestion that this technical object was actually acting in some way that was unforeseen and so creating all that happened before, not obediently carrying waste away underground to be disposed, but perhaps leaking that waste into the land around the house, perhaps contaminating the environs rather than, as would be supposed, purifying them and rendering them inhabitable for human life. Yet the pipe would here be both disordered and reassuring, since here its voice was brought to the fore, as voice, as animate thing, and not merely forgotten, or repressed, beneath the domestic sphere of the house.

27 These roaring machines that coauthor the text reveal a great deal about the medium that is Lovecraft. The philosopher Hans Blumenberg has theorized that the origins of myth lie in an encounter with what he calls the "absolutism of reality," a reality that cannot be grasped conceptually, and so must be held at a distance, seen as it were through the intentionally distorting lenses of myth. [47] Something similar is at work here. The voices of technical objects amount to an encounter with reality in Blumenberg's sense precisely because they speak a language that we do not understand, one that is absolute in being cut off from us, utterly alien. In doing so they open an abyss of possible meanings, a sublime multiplicity of horrifying possibilities. Crucial to their horror is the fact that there is no reason they must speak to us, no reason that we must have access to their terms. The tale of Etienne Roulet, like all myths, redeems because it reconfigures the universe in terms that promise to make sense to us by bringing its voices back to humankind. It opens to us the possibility of thinking that there is a moral order underlying the universe, opens the possibility that we can enter into dialogue with that moral order, that we can make sense of it and master it, and that our actions (pouring acid

in holes and so forth) can reduce enigmas to transparencies, transforming seemingly malignant places back into paradigms of pastoral harmony in which animate materials dwell together with humankind. There is, after all, a fragile version of this fantasy that is expressed at the end of "The Shunned House":

28 The next spring no more pale grass and strange weeds came up in the shunned house's terraced garden, and shortly afterward Carrington Harris rented the place. It is still spectral, but its strangeness fascinates me, and I shall find mixed with my relief a queer regret when it is torn down to make way for a tawdry shop or vulgar apartment building. The barren old trees in the yard have begun to bear small, sweet apples, and last year the birds nested in their gnarled boughs. [48]

From the Writing of Matter to the Materiality of Writing

29 We have set out to rethink the way in which we talk about the materiality of the text. The aim was to replace dominant conceptions of the material as inanimate and inexpressive with a conception of materiality that would allow us to understand matter as both animate and signifying. In order to do this, we shifted our approach to thinking about the materiality of the signifier, thinking not about the reader reading the sign, but about the role of material actors involved in the creation of written material. This allowed us to think about material conversations, both about their transparencies and their points of breakdown. Now it is time to wend our way back from the alternate viewpoint that has thus far occupied us towards the more traditional viewpoint utilized when speaking about the materiality of the signifier.

30 This is more easily done than might first appear. Deconstruction has long recognized that reading is an active process that fully engages the reader, to the point that Paul De Man has spoken of an "impossibility of reading," with this suggestion implying that the text is always, to a certain extent, re-written or recreated as a result of a reader's decisions when confronted by the ambiguities of the text. [49] As a result, reading and the act of writing come closer to one another, since both are creative, and reading itself is always a form of composition,

of actively putting together the meaning of a text via decisions prompted by its points of unreadability. Deconstruction tends to think about unreadability in terms of words with multiple levels of meaning or with regards to points at which interpretative decisions may radically alter our sense of what is at stake within a text. It is within the framework of these double binds or points of unreadability that deconstruction places the phenomenon of the material. But we might just as well configure these points of unreadability or of encounter with the material effect as moments in which encounters between material actors co-engender the action of "writing" the reading. Thus we can rethink deconstructionist accounts of the materiality of the text from an ecological point of view that would leave way for the actions and expressions of vital material agents. Fully understanding the materiality of the reading/writing process thus demands that we reflect upon the tendency of material actors to recall to us J. Alfred Prufrock's mermaids by "sing[ing] each to each" but unfortunately "not to [us.]" Confronted with this buzzing world of both natural and technological speech, all reading/writing thus also includes overwriting or repression, the creation of fictional or mythical explanations that conceal the gaps inevitably confronted within each act of reading. The double binds of the text are thus evidence that readers/writers are entangled within the weft and webbing of a dynamic and ecological process in which collections of textual matters and material readers dance a round. To read is, in final reckoning, a parliamentary proceeding involving multiple agents, and its output is writing; be that writing configured on paper or just within our neural networks.

31 It is worth adumbrating why we do not habitually see reading in this way. As we have seen, the encounter with the material other that speaks, but does not speak to us in any clear way, terrifies. This horror brings about a kind of distance-taking coupled with a poetico-mythical overwriting. The myth that currently dominates us, the tale of reading in which the book is purely passive, is thus precisely a response to the active but inscrutable voices of our writing materials. The desire to repress the horrifying expressive materiality of things is hardly limited to reading—Western Civilization is built upon the same repression, and this is one of the causes of our broadening environmental crisis. It is for this reason that it is so urgent to rethink our re-

lationship with the materials and technologies that have rendered Western Civilization's flourishing possible. As so many have hinted, confronting the environmental crisis requires us to open ourselves to the world around us, acknowledging and entering into political alliances with the material agents that are both within and around us. Admittedly, opening ourselves to this dappled world is terrifying, which is why Donna Harraway found it fit to call our current age not the Anthropocene but rather, and following Lovecraft, the Chthulucene. As she explains, this name calls to our attention the "diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more," the many monsters with which we must learn to live by grafting them into our mythic understanding of ourselves, our worlds, even our engagement in the act of reading. [50]Without a doubt, this essay has offered us a kind of road map to reading in the Chthulucene, a way of thinking about reading that forces us to confront the horrors of the "old ones." Re-imagining our world or even the act of reading in this way can hardly be seen as joyous, because it renders everything rather difficult and even overwhelmingly demanding. Yet as Timothy Morton has recently insisted, we must learn to accept and not be overwhelmed by the horror of the Anthropocene. [51] We must form a new life, a new way of being within the web of material actors. Re-thinking reading in terms of the vibrant materiality of the material signifier may be only one small step in this process, but it is also a movement beyond the denial and repression that have up to the present been dominant.

NOTES

1 See Brown, Bill, "Materiality," in W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2010, 49-63.

2 On this, see Bruno Latour's work, as well as Shapin, Steven and Simon Schaeffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump : Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*, Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1985.

3 A number of recent monographs and edited volumes have recently been published dealing with this movement. Dolphijn, Rick and Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism : Interviews & Cartographies*, Anne Arbor, Mich. : Open Humanities Press, 2012, Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms : Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham, North Car. : Duke University Press, 2010, as well as Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2014, all offer solid overviews of the current discussions.

4 See Latour, Bruno, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris : La Découverte, coll. L'armillaire, 1991.

5 See Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, North Car. : Duke University Press, 2009, esp. 4-19.

6 Latour, Bruno, *Face à Gaïa : Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, Paris : La Découverte, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2015, 94.

7 On this point see *ibid.* 88. Also Latour, Bruno, *Politiques de la nature : comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*, Paris : La Découverte, 2004, 99-109.

8 Zalasiewicz, Jan, *The Planet in a Pebble : A Journey into Earth's Deep History*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2010, x.

9 See Kohn, Eduardo, *How Forests Think : Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 2013.

10 Admittedly, the idea of the artist as isolated genius has been undermined over the last few decades. Marxist and new historicist approaches to literature have often been predicated on the presupposition that the author is dead, if these same approaches have accomplished this by situating the transcendental subject at the level of the society, thus once again effectively occulting the role of material agents.

11 Kirby, Vicky, *Quantum Anthropologies : Life at Large*, Durham, North Car. : Duke University Press, 2011, 87.

12 See Kittler, Friedrich, *Grammophon Film Typewriter*, Berlin : Brinkmann & Bose, 1986.

13 Nietzsche to Peter Gast, 1882. Quoted after Kittler, Friedrich, *Grammophon Film Typewriter*, *op. cit.*

14 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature*, in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte, New York : Library of America, 1983 [1836], 132, 1.

15 See Neyrat, Frédéric, *La part inconstructible de la Terre : critique du géo-constructivisme*, Paris : Seuil, 2016.

16 Bradford, William, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Boston : Wright and Potter, 1910 [1630-1651], 94. Quoted after Purdy, Jedediah, *After Nature : A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2015.

17 Lovecraft, H. P., "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Eldritch Tales : A Miscellany of the Macabre*, London : Orion, 2011, Kindle Locations 6705-6706.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Shunned House," *Necronomicon : The Best Weird Tales of H. P. Lovecraft*, London : Gollancz, 2008 [1937], 233-253, 233.

20 See Houellebecq, Michel, *H. P. Lovecraft : contre le monde, contre la vie*, Paris : Flammarion, 2014, Kindle Locations 54-56.

21 We might want to separate here the style of realism and the notion of reality. Lovecraft is—as Graham Harman has argued—a weird realist. This means that he is quite far from a realist writer like Zola, one who accepts that language can simply and unproblematically expose the real. As Harman has shown, many of the eccentricities of Lovecraft's style can be attributed to his desire to describe a real that is only attainable through metaphor. For Harman, then, it is Cezanne or Picasso who is a realist—not Courbet. See Harman, Graham, *Weird Realism : H. P. Lovecraft and Philosophy*, London : Zero, 2012, 50-52.

22 Hite, Kenneth, *Tour de Lovecraft : The Tales*, Alexandria, Virg. : Atomic Overmind Press, 2008, 83.

23 Alaimo, Stacy, *Bodily Natures : Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington : University of Indiana Press, 2010, 2.

24 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Shunned House," *op. cit.*, 234.

25 *Ibid.*, 234-5.

26 *Ibid.*, 234.

27 *Ibid.*, 235.

28 I admit the unlikelihood that Lovecraft would have used this term himself (even though it is well documented that Lovecraft read—and was deeply influenced by—the work of Ernst Haeckel, the inventor of this very term). See Joshi, S.T., *I Am Providence : The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft*, New York : Hippocampus, 2010, Kindle Locations 7100-7103.

29 The term intra-action is derived from Barad, Karen, *Meeting the Universe Halfway : Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, North Car. : Duke University Press, 2007.

30 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Shunned House," *op. cit.*, 245.

31 On DNA, viruses, and texts, see Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2010, Kindle Locations 1137-1138. See also Morton, Timothy, "The Liminal Space between Things : Epiphany and the Physical," in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, *op. cit.*, 269-280.

32 It is important to note in passing that it is not just viruses that shape the brain, but every interaction with material things that forms both the brain and our cognition. This has been one of the major lessons of contemporary cognitive science. See, for example, Carr, Nicolas, *The Shallows : What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, New York : Norton, 2010, Noe, Alva, *Varieties of Presence*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2012, Malafouris, Lambros, *How Things Shape the Mind : A Theory of Material Engagment*, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2013.

33 Quoted after Ackerman, Diane, *The Human Age : The World Shaped by Us*, New York : Headline, 2014, Kindle Locations 4250-4255.

34 These include, among others, Houellebecq, Michel, *H. P. Lovecraft*, *op. cit.*, Sederholm, Carl H., "H. P. Lovecraft's Reluctant Sexuality : Abjection and the Monstrous Feminine in 'The Dunwich Horror,'" in Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Weinstock (eds.), *The Age of Lovecraft*, Minneapolis : Univ. of Minnesota, 2016, 133-148, Mayer, Jed, "Race, Species, and Others : H. P. Lovecraft and the Animal," in Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Weinstock (eds.), *The Age of Lovecraft*, *op. cit.*, 117-132.

35 The metaphor of the knowledge of atoms is literally the one grasped by Lovecraft. As Hans Blumenberg has written, modern society is split between what he calls its world models and its world pictures (*Weltmodelle* and *Weltbilder*), the two being in tension within the modern age. He has in mind the results of advances in particle physics and the science of relativity, though one might very well speak about the difference between scientific understandings of climate and our lived experiences of our lifeworlds. See Blumenberg, Hans, "Weltbilder und Weltmodelle," in *Schriften zur Technik*, ed. Alexander Schmitz and Bernd Stiegler, Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 2015, 126-138.

36 See Tarr, Joel, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink : Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective*, Akron, Oh. : University of Akron Press, 1996.

37 Letter to Reinhardt Kleiner, 16 November 1916, cited after Joshi, S. T., *I Am Providence*, *op. cit.*, Kindle Locations 703-709. The letter continues in the same vein : "with rolling meadows, stone walls, cart-paths, brooks, deep woods, mystic ravines, lofty river-bluffs, planted fields, white antient farmhouses, barns, & byres, gnarled hillside orchards, great lone elms, & all the authentick marks of a rural milieu unchanged since the 17th & 18th centuries… My house, tho' an urban one on a paved street, had spacious grounds & stood next to an open field with a stone wall… where great elms grew & my grandfather had corn & potatoes planted, & a cow pastured under the gardener's care."

38 Letter to Bernard Austin Dwyer, June 1927.

39 Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1964, 16.

40 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Street," in *Eldritch Tales : A Miscellany of the Macabre*, *op. cit.*, Kindle Locations 1814-1819.

41 On the notion of known unknowns, see Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought*, *op. cit.*, Kindle Locations 561-563.

42 Mumford, Lewis, *Technics and Civilization*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2010 [1934], x.

43 See Heidegger, Martin, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübigen : Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001 [1927], 66-88. See also Harman, Graham, *Tool-Being : Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago : Open Court, 2002.

44 See, for example, Steintrager, James, "The Eldritch Voice : H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Phonography," *Sounding Out !* 6 August 2015, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/08/06/the-eldritch-voice-h-p-lovecrafts-weird-phonography/, page accessed 15 December 2017.

45 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Thing on the Doorstep," in *Necronomicon*, *op. cit.*, 644.

46 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Shunned House," *op. cit.*, 252-253.

47 Blumenberg, Hans, *Schriften zur Technik*, *op. cit.*, 15.

48 Lovecraft, H. P., "The Shunned House," *op. cit.*, 253.

49 de Man, Paul, *Allegories of Reading : Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 1982, 245.

50 Haraway, Donna, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene : Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6.1 (May 2015), 59-165, http://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol6/6.7.pdf.

51 Morton, Timothy, *Dark Ecology : For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York : Columbia University Press, 2016.

AUTEUR

Brad Tabas
ENSTA Bretagne