

The Cross Plainsman

A Collection of Robert E. Howard Studies

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People of the Howard Circle



A Letter from Ech-Pi-El to Klarkash-Ton
27 August 1932

Part One: Letter #1: Lovecraft's Library, "The Tale of Liberation," and More
THE CROSS PLAINSMAN / People of the Howard Circle #1 / REHupa Mailing #165
A Critical Examination of Three Letters from Ech-Pei-El to Klarkash-ton

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In a short letter to Clark Ashton Smith postmarked August 27th, 1932, Howard Phillips Lovecraft covers a lot of ground -- at least by suggestion, and some of it quite intriguing -- as well as attaching a

list of the contents of his personal library of imaginative literature. This letter resides in the Special Collections area of the Library of Northern Illinois University, as do two others that will be discussed in forthcoming issues of "People of the Howard Circle" as a regular feature of THE CROSS PLAINSMAN. It, like the others, is an autograph letter signed ["Ech-Pei-EI"] in Lovecraft's somewhat cramped but distinctive style. To my knowledge, the contents of these letters have been researched but not yet critically discussed in any published form. In any event, they offer some interesting insights upon HPL and his perspectives regarding the circle of writers who formed the "regulars," the nucleus of creative talent represented in WEIRD TALES in the early 1930's.

The letter begins with HPL stating that he had already posted his own copy of [William Beckford's EPISODES OF VATHEK](#) to CAS. Evidently, some of the members of "the group" [Cook and Warton are mentioned] had presented the idea that conclusions or revisions of Beckford's EPISODES might be done by members of the circle. HPL suggests that CAS would be "really well fitted" for such an endeavor, and adds that he would "wager that [Farnsworth] Wright would publish the episode with your ending - & perhaps a brief explanatory introduction."

Early in the second paragraph we have an announcement of what may be, from a critical perspective, the most important thing in this letter:

"-- here's that list of the weird items in my library that I promised some time ago to send you."

And following that: This modest collection isn't as impressive as it might be -- being especially weak in Blackwood."

This last comment re-emphasizes the value HPL placed upon the work of [Algernon Blackwood](#), who, as is clear from this letter and other sources, was the writer of weird fiction that Lovecraft most admired and certainly one of the great influences upon the creation of his own weird literature.

In the short third paragraph, Lovecraft writes that he is glad that [Farnsworth] Wright accepted CAS's "Torturers," that he hopes that Wright will reconsider CAS's "White Sibyl," and that:

The rejection of the Ice Demon was a calamity, for we need a few tales in which the weirdness takes other than stock forms."

Unfortunately, Lovecraft does not elaborate on what he might have considered "stock forms" to be, but a critical examination of Smith's "Ice Demon" seems to beckon with an eye toward contrast of it's content with typical WEIRD TALES inclusions [more on this for a later essay].

In paragraph four, we see further evidence (as if any were needed) of HPL's antisemitism:

"I'm hanged if those damn kikes aren't brighter & more sensible in many ways than the publishers controlling *Astounding* and the technologists in charge of *Amazing*! Really, there is little doubt but *Wonder* is the most generally interesting of the scientifiction magazines

Here the other significant items to note are his preference of *Wonder* and HPL's use of the term "scientifiction," in keeping with Hugo Gernsback's early name for the genre.

In the fifth short paragraph, Lovecraft states his hope that ". . . Price can make his projected trip -- which depends on financial developments. I think you'd find him very interesting, even though his literary attitude has come to develop something of a Babbittesque slant." [NOTE: I am trying to find out if Price made this visit to CAS, any fellow REHupans know of this?]. This passage also illustrates HPL's awareness of the

"literary" acceptance of Sinclair Lewis. His antipathy for "realistic" fiction and the what he here calls the "Babbitesque" is touched upon below.

The most important statement in the sixth brief paragraph is HPL's reassertion [earlier made in SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE and elsewhere] that: "I consider "The Willows" the greatest weird story ever written." There is no question of the influence of Blackwood upon Lovecraft -- and also little debate that "The Willows" must stand as at least one of the greatest weird tales.

Almost certainly the most significant passage of this letter is the longer passage in paragraph seven which is evidently a response to a query from CAS regarding the relative merits of "phantasy" (as HPL habitually spells the word) and realism. This paragraph is worth quoting in its entirety:

"As for phantasy versus realism -- it certainly is a damned complicated question, & there is no doubt whatever but that many writers go too far in neglecting to consider the challenge of the unknown -- the mystery of unfathomed time & space that presses in on us from all sides. I don't know that I completely agree with Machen's position -- for it is as easy to be as disproportionate in one direction as in the other -- but I do think that Blackwood has as definite a place in literature as has Dreiser. Regarding the non-absolute nature of reality -- we of course understand that we know only what the accidental equipment of our senses permits us to know, yet there are certain fundamental probabilities & consistencies which form a fairly coherent proximate empirical, or working reality. These probabilities, I'd tend to say, ought to be heeded in tales dealing primarily with human beings. The tale of liberation -- i.e., the weird tale -- ought to deal primarily with phenomena, amidst which the inhabitants of this planet are purely incidental. I hope Wright will print your letter, for the subject certainly needs an airing."

Lovecraft's interest in the "mystery of unfathomed time & space that presses in on us from all sides" is quite well documented and understood. Those malevolent and external forces that crack through the walls of the "known" or perceived reality of the senses are the common subject of HPL's own weird fiction and the basis for the cycle of the Cthulhu Mythos. Interestingly, his philosophical world view is hinted at in the tone of this passage through a few key word choices. Viewing reality as "non-absolute," but, more especially, as viewed through the "accidental equipment of our senses" goes a long way toward demonstrating Lovecraft's agnosticism and skepticism. That our senses might not be "accidental" or that there might be an "absolute reality" simply poorly or rarely perceived by our imperfect (but nonetheless amazing) senses is not considered here. There seems no room in HPL's world (or universe) view for any other sense or intuition but the physical, nor for any leap of faith. He establishes himself fairly clearly as both a materialist and a subjectivist with his pronouncement upon "proximate empirical, or working reality." This is where I see the great divergence between what has been called "Dark Fantasy" -- that which Lovecraft calls "Supernatural Horror" -- and what we may, conversely, call "Bright Fantasy" -- that of George MacDonald, Kenneth Grahame, A. A. Milne, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and their followers. The former is almost always written from the agnostic or atheistic perspective (except occasionally in the literature of the Occult where, often, the presentation of the forces of "The Enemy" implies in and of itself the presence of the Deity), the latter is consistently theistic and, as in the case of those just mentioned, consistently Christian. It is the difference between Lovecraft's "proximate empirical" and accidentally perceived reality and the objective reality of the theists. But more of this for later discussions.

Also, from Lovecraft's perspective, tales of this "working reality" are the proper stuff of tales about people -- tales in the tradition of Henry James written with character as the center, perhaps? He is maintaining that tales about the doings of people in this working reality are the stuff of realism. The specific supernatural "phenomena" then is the working center of the "tale of liberation." The

implication in this marvelous phrase and interesting distinction is that the liberation is from this perceived, "proximate empirical, and working reality" is the goal to be achieved in the weird tale. This he has stated elsewhere, and quite clearly in the introduction to his seminal essay on Supernatural Horror. That this "liberation" must always be horrific and dark was a defining element in Lovecraft's character and philosophy and a limiting element to his fiction.

Regarding the letter alluded to from CAS to Wright, it seemingly is a letter on the same subject of "phantasy vs. realism." [A Query to my Fellow REHupans: I do not happen to have copies of WEIRD TALES from the Autumn of 1932. Does anyone know if a letter from Smith appeared in these (or any) issues regarding the phantasy vs. realism question?]

In the eighth and final paragraph, Lovecraft briefly mentions a Tuesday "start for Boston," stating that "Wednesday Cook and I expect to see the Eclipse from Newburyport or Portsmouth. Then -- if Pegana's Gods favour -- Montreal & Quebec!" I am still trying to discover if HPL made this late August/early September excursion to the Boston area and/or Canada. It certainly shows HPL's continued interest in his old loves of astronomy and cosmology. The reference to Pegana also illustrates HPL's acknowledged debt to Lord Dunsany.

He signs the letter --

"With every good wish, & hoping the Episodes of Vathek won't disappoint you.
Yrs in the mystery of the old ones --
Ech - Pi - El."

-- the last being his usual way of writing HPL (the jury is still ought among Lovecraftians whether his was pronounced simply as the English way of saying these letters or more as "Ek-Pie-El" or . . .? It is also in keeping with the salutation for his friend of the pen, "Klarkash-Ton.")

There are then appended the pages listing Lovecraft's personal library at the time [August 1932. Interestingly, the special collections area at Northern Illinois University has several volumes that were part of this personal library. My perusal of several of these so far has left me with the impression that, sadly, HPL did not mark in his books. I was hoping to find enlightening marginalia or notes, but none discovered thus far. The quest continues.]. This listing covers five full pages and the very top of the next of three leaves of paper [The letter being entirely written upon stationery from the New Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans in HPL's cramped, though distinctive, hand]. The listing is divided into five sections, two of them ("II" and "III") numbered with Roman numerals.

I append here the list of books in the 1932 HPL collection:

Weird etc. Items in Library of H. P. Lovecraft (double underlined)

[Note: All the names in the list below are single underlined, the texts are not. I have also comma-separated the titles of texts where they appear in separate lines in the original.]

Andreyev, Leonid - Red [Laugh?] , Seven Who Were Hanged

Arlen, Michael - Ghost Stories

Astor, John Jacob - Journey to Other Worlds

Austin, F. Britten - On the Borderland

Beckford, William - Vathek, Episodes of Vathek

Benson, E. F. - Visible & Invisible, The Man Who Went too Far (short)

Beraud, Henri - Lazarus

Bierce, Ambrose - In the Midst of Life, Can Such Things Be?, [Mark + Hangman's Daughter?]

Birch, A. G. - The Moon Terror

Blackwood, Algernon - John Silence, [Jimbo?]

Bligh-Bond, Mary - [Avernus?]

Buchan, John - [The Runagate's? Club]
 Bulwer-Lytton, E. - [Zamoru?], Strange Story, House + Brain
 Busson, Paul - The Man Who Was Born Again
 Chambers, Robert W. - The King in Yellow, In Search of the Unknown
 Clive, Leonard - The Dark Chamber
 [Cowan?], Frank - [Reir's Love?]
 [d'Aureirely, Barbey?] - Story Without a Name
 de la Mare, Walter - The Riddle etc. UNCLEAR WHICH OF THESE FEW BELONG TO WHOM
 [De Aulle? De Quille?], James - The Connoisseur etc., Ms. Found in a Copper
 Cylinder, Doyle, A. Conan - Tales of the [Terrible] + the Unseen
 Dunsany, Lord - Gods of Pegana, Time + the Gods, Dreamers' Tales, Sword of
 Welleran
 [second page, Dunsany continued]
 Dunsany, contd - Book of Wonder, Last Book of Wonder, Tales of Three
 Hemispheres, Fifty-one Tales, Chronicles of Rodriguez, King of Elfland's
 Daughter, Five Plays, Plays of Gods + Men, Plays of Near + Far
 Forbes, Esther - A Mirror for Witches
 [Fongue, LeMotte?] - [Undine?, Siutram?]
 Gautier, Theophile - [Morte Amoreuse?], Avatar
 Haggard, H. Rider - She
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel - Seven Gables _ short stories
 Hearn, Lafcadio - Kwaida
 [Hugo?], Victor - House of Iceland
 Jackson, Charles L. - Gold [Point?] etc
 James, Henry - The Turn of the Screw
 James, M. R. - Ghost Stories of an Antiquary, More Ghost Stories, A Thin Ghost
 + Others, Warning to the Curious
 [King?], Basil - The Spreading Dawn
 [third page, headed Roman numeral "II"]
 Kipling, Rudyard - Phantom Ricksaw, Mark of the Beast, + then short stories
 LeFanu, J. Sheridan - House by the Churchyard
 [Level?], Maurice - Tales of Mystery + Horror, Those Who Return
 London, Jack - The Star Rover
 MacDonald, George - Lilith
 Machen, Arthur - House of Souls, Hill of Dreams, Three Impostors, [Shining?]
 Pyramid, The Terror (in Century Mag.)
 McKenna, Stephen - The Oldest God
 Marryat, Capt. - The Phantom Ship
 Marsh, Richard - The Beetle
 M*crime*, Prosper - The Venus of Ille
 Merrit, A. - The Moon Pool (in magazines)
 Pain, Barry - An Exchange of Souls
 [Pattee?], [Foulasines?] - House of the Black Ring
 Poe, Edgar Allan - Complete Tales and Poems
 Quiller-Couch, A. - Wandering Heath, Noughts + Crosses, Old Fires + Profitable
 Ghosts
 Radcliffe, Ann - Udolfo
 Reeve, Clare - The Old English Baron
 Russell, W. Clark - Flying Dutchman, Frozen Pirate
 [Savile?], Frank - Beyond the Great South Wall
 Shelly, Mary - Frankenstein
 Shiel, M. P. - Prince Zalesh etc.
 [end of page three]
 Smith, Clark Ashton - The Star-Treader, Odes + Sonnets, Ebony + Chrystal,
 Sandalwood, others in MSS. + magazines
 Stevenson, R. L. - Jekyll + Hyde + other items
 [Tokosig?], Signe - The Last Devil
 Verne, Jules - From the Earth to the Moon, Off on a Comet (in mag)
 Wakefield, H. R. - They Return at Evening, Others Who Return
 Walpole, Horace - The Castle of Otranto
 Webster, J. [Provand?] - The Oracle of Baal

Wells, H. G. - The First Men in the Moon, War of the Worlds, Time Machine, Island of Dr. Moreau [last three by Wells all marked by a bracket and "in magazines"]
Wilde, Oscar - Dorian Gray, Fairy Tales
Wiflarde, Dolf - Stories of Strange Happenings
[end of page four - the fifth page begins with "III" and then "Magazine Files" underlined]
Weird Tales - Complete to date
Strange Tales - " " "
Amazing Stories - 1926-7
[then there is a line across the page, and a new unnumbered division begins entitled "Anthologies"]
Tales from the German (Hoffman, Hauff, etc.)
Lock + Key Library, 12 vols
Masterpieces of Mystery, 3 vols [undoubtedly the great Dorothy Sayers-prefaced edition]
Best Psychic Stories - French + Scarborough
Selwyn + Bount "Not at Night" Series [followed by brackets meaning to include the following:] Not at Night, You Need a Night Light, Gruesome Corpses, By Daylight Only, Switch on the Light
Not at Night - Asbury (pirated Am. Edition)
Tales of Mystery (Extracts from Radcliffe, Lewis, + Maturin - Ed. by George Saintsbury)
Beward after Dark - Harr*
Creep by Night - [Hammett?]
Omnibus of Crime - Sayers [I believe the same as Masterpieces of Mystery, only the British version of the same]
Devil Stories - [Rudwin?]
[then another horizontal divider line across most of the page, followed by the section designation "Folklore" underlined]
Arabian Nights
Curious Myths of Middle Ages - Baring-Gould
Age of Fable - Bulfinch
Myths + Myth-Makers - [Fishe?]
Haunted Houses - [Flammarion?] Magician Among the Spirits - Houdini
Haunted Houses + Family Legends - Ingram
Theory of Pneumatology - Jung - Shilling
Miracles at [Knock?] - [MacPhilpin?]
Demonology + Witchcraft - Scott
Encyclopedia of Occultism - [Spence?]
[end of page five - page six has only one entry and one heading "Treatises" underlined]
The Tale of Terror - [Birkbend?]

[NOTE: My plan is to find as many of these online as e-texts -- or at least references and to these online and link to them when the Online CROSS PLAINSMAN is published (which will follow the mailing distribution for #165. Many of these texts are now public domain and accessible as e-texts.)

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