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Horror in Seneca's *Thyestes* and Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu"

There are no grounds for establishing a direct literary tradition between the twentieth-century American writer of horror—H.P. Lovecraft—and the Stoic philosopher of Julio-Claudian Rome—L. Annaeus Seneca. Lovecraft himself writes only passingly of Seneca in his survey of Roman writers to praise his eminence in Latin letters of the Silver Age ("Literature of Rome" 29), and, in his brief appraisal of classical writers of the 'weird,' notes only specific incidents in the works of Pliny the Younger, Petronius, Apuleius, and Phlegon of Tralles, making no mention of the sanguinary dramas of Seneca ("Supernatural" 85). Yet, as these instances manifest, Lovecraft was clearly aware of and broadly acquainted with classical literature and culture and acknowledged it as the basis of the contemporary Western culture with which he fervently identified. (It is worth noting, too, that the foremost scholar of Lovecraft's life and works, S. T. Joshi, is a graduate from the Department of Classics at Brown University [Joshi, "S.T.Joshi"].) Moreover, as a professed conservative, Lovecraft's conscious incorporation of traditional motifs and aesthetic values into his own work is a strong basis for a mutually illuminating comparison of Lovecraft and Seneca.

What makes this mutual illumination more compelling than simply a too general commonality of tradition is that, despite the major differences in their ostensible world views, both men in practice appealed to a similar aesthetic of cosmic horror, and furthermore used similar devices in developing that aesthetic. In this regard, Seneca's play *Thyestes* and

Lovecraft's seminal short story, "The Call of Cthulhu," may be taken as effective embodiments of the authors' peculiarities and similarities.

The literary remains of Seneca may be divided into two broad categories, being his philosophical writings (including his letters and essays) and his dramas. Generally, the underlying purpose of both categories was to teach Stoic doctrine and to edify the reader morally (Hadas 3-4), and Seneca does not undertake an explicit exposition of the underlying physical reasons for his ethical system. It should be noted in contrast that, in the Old and Middle Stoa, physics was an indispensable instrument for explaining the Stoic philosophy of virtue, because, through all the Stoa, 'the Stoics were teachers of philosophy, appropriating scientific theories and forging from them a world view that would conform to the latest scientific researches' (Hahm 39). Even if he did not explicitly resort to physical justifications for his ethics, however, it is clear that Seneca was well versed in the basic cosmological and physical models advanced by his Stoic forebears, and many of the allusions he makes in *Thyestes* strongly imply an awareness of at least the basic precepts of the Stoic physic, namely of the continuum (roughly, the absence of vacuum, or the continuity of all matter [Sambursky110]) and the *ekpyrosis* (or 'Conflagration'). Surely the more outstanding example in *Thyestes* is of the *ekpyrosis*, which is the destruction of the universe by fire so that it can be reborn to repeat itself *ad infinitum* (Hahm, 185). The conversation between Tantalus and the Fury at the beginning of *Thyestes* suggests that one should expect a conflagrative cataclysm by play's end, and lines 105 through 121 are rich in imagery of fire descending upon the earth's surface. Although it does not actually occur within the play, *ekpyrosis* is yet frequently invoked in the form of lightning bolts showering upon the earth and rivers and seas retreating underground (e.g., 1085-1086).

However, these examples do not show merely that Seneca was cognizant of the Stoic physic, but also that he felt it to contribute in some way to his morally didactic dramas—assuming, that is, that their inclusion was not simply a matter of stylistic flourish. In other words, the effectiveness of *Thyestes*—its ability to teach the Stoic moral that Seneca wanted it to—relies not on Seneca’s arranging and re-proportioning certain elements of an already existing narrative, but on his addition to that narrative of these seemingly stylistic devices. If the exaggeration of violence and gore be the most immediately remarkable feature of Seneca’s interpretations of *Thyestes*, and one discount the possibility that Seneca was somehow perverted, then it is safe to conclude that the superaddition of violence was intended for some unstated purpose.

The motive behind Seneca’s use of these devices is, however, obscure, and it strikes one as contradictory that the Stoic advocate of *apatheia* and *ataraxia* should not only portray high passion in his characters, but that he should also appeal to the passions of his viewers (or listeners or students [Tarrant 13-14]) as well. On this subject, Glenn Most associates the violence in Seneca and other Neronian writers with the carnage that was then a frequent public spectacle at the Roman Colosseum, which often featured displays of men and animals in combat with one another. For the Stoic spectator, a man defeating an animal would have been a graphic affirmation of the elect place of man in the universe, above animal and below god (Most 404). The constant possibility that the animal could defeat a man, however, would have meant that, in every such spectacle, there was also the risk that human supremacy would be called into question. Most proposes that, ‘for the Stoic, such spectacles could provoke revulsion for their rupture of the discontinuity between rational man and irrational animal,’ suggesting that unreasoning men are in fact no better than animals (Most 404-405). With this observation, the metaphor in *Thyestes*, uttered by the Messenger, likening Atreus slaughtering Thyestes’s

children to a lion slaughtering its helpless prey, leaps to mind: *Silva iubatus qualis Armenia leo / in caede multa victor armento incubat...non aliter Atreus...* ('As the maned lion in an Armenian wood, a victor in much slaughter, attacks the herd... Just so, Atreus...', 732 f.), and again, earlier in the same account, to a tiger (708). One can not, of course, know Seneca's mind, but, based on Most's suggestion, one could argue that Seneca's use of violence, especially bestial violence, was intended to disconcert the Stoic viewer's notion of universal order so as to reaffirm it. As Milton's *Paradise Lost* reaffirms the faith in God through a subtly tragic portrayal of Lucifer, so, perhaps, Seneca reaffirms one's faith in the Stoic order by graphically illustrating its overthrow.

The theme of overthrow permeates *Thyestes*. The conventional sense of overthrow or downfall (*casus*) clearly applies to the successive usurpation and overthrow of Atreus and Thyestes, and, to a degree, in Atreus's desire to "overthrow" his brother's apparent equanimity in exile. Seneca further develops this theme by expanding the scale of overthrow to a cosmic level. Indeed, the play begins with Tantalus, who had knowingly affronted the gods, rising from the underworld. He proceeds to introduce the play's first references to the ancient monsters and giants that had attempted, as myth relates, to overthrow the Olympian order, referring to the *poena Tityi* ('punishment of Tityus,' l.9). The image of the enemies of the Olympians arising from the underworld is sustained at greatest length by the Chorus that begins at 789, which asks *numquid aperto / carcere Ditis victi temptant bella Gigantes? Numquid Tityos / pectore fesso renovat veteres / saucius iras? Num reiecto / latus explicuit monte Typhoeus?* ('Surely the defeated Giants are not launching wars from their open prison of Dis? Surely wounded Tityus is not renewing the ancient fury in his tired breast? Has Typhoeus uncoiled his flank from [beneath] his mountain?,' 804-811). Day is overthrown by night as Phoebus turns back his chariot *medio Olymbo* ('in midday,' 789-792). The shooting star that crosses the sky as Atreus

prepares to sacrifice Thyestes's children is, as Tarrant notes, both a reference to the shooting star that portends Caesar's death in Vergil's *Georgics* 1.488 and an inversion of the portent granted to Anchises in the *Aeneid* 2.692-97 (Tarrant 191, n699). Atreus, through his inversions of morality, is closely associated with all these symbols of overthrow, as in *Fas est in illo quidquid in fratre est nefas* ('What is wrong against a brother is right against him,' 220); and furthermore in his blasphemy against the Olympians, as in *fiat hoc, fiat nefas / quod, di, timetis* ("let it be done, let the crime be done which you, O gods, shall fear," 265-66), and when he dismisses the gods (*dimitto superos*, "I send away the gods," 888).

As these examples illustrate, Seneca connects Atreus's moral outrage with the overthrow of the higher Olympian order and, possibly, to the end of the world in Stoic *ekpyrosis*. However, Seneca, especially in the last Chorus, so expands the images of the collapsing cosmos, that it seems he is either overemphasizing his moral point (basically, by saying again and again that the sky is falling), or, more subtly, that he is attempting to produce an aesthetic effect with feelings of dread and horror. The example of cosmic overthrow that is most reminiscent of the cosmic horror of Lovecraft is offered by the Chorus at 828-884, which at great length describes the collapsing cosmos, saying, for example, *Solitae mundi periere vices; / nihil occasus, nihil ortus erit* ('The accustomed cycles of heaven have perished; there shall be neither setting nor rising,' 813-14), and *non succedunt / astra nec ullo micat igne polus, / non Luna graves digerit umbras* ('The stars do not rise, nor shine the heavens with any fire, nor dispels the moon the heavy shadows,' 825-26). For the Stoic, the cosmos is divided between place and void, place being, as defined by Chrysippus, that which is occupied by matter, and void being that which, although capable of holding matter, is yet empty. Void, for the Stoics, was infinite, whereas Aristotle had seen void as merely the margin of nothingness into which the cosmos expands during *ekpyrosis*

(Hahm 105-106, and Sambursky 43). Moreover, the Stoics conceived of the cosmos—the spherical body of finite matter at the center of the void—as a living, and therefore rational, being, animated by a ‘world soul’ which was ‘the heat of the cosmos’ (Hahm 174). The void, therefore, in addition to being a necessary corollary of the finitude of matter, is also more symbolically the absence of rational existence. The fundamental Stoic alignment with rational continuum surely makes the following lines from *Thyestes* all the more dreadful: *trepidant, trepidant pectora magno / percussa metu: / ne fatali cuncta ruina / quassata labent interumque deos / hominesque premat deforme chaos* ('How our breasts tremble, struck by great fear, lest all should topple, shattered, in fatal ruin, and again chaos press upon gods and men,' 828-32).

Seneca is not simply painting the collapse of the cosmos in Stoic terms; he is painting the collapse of the Stoic cosmos. For Stoics, *ekpyrosis*, although destructive, is none-the-less part of a natural regenerative order, and is the final realization of the rational ‘world soul’ before the process begins anew (Sambursky 107). Seneca’s final Chorus depicts a collapsing cosmos with no hint of redemption: *Non aeternae / facis exortu dux astrorum / saecula ducens dabit aestatis / brumaeue notas...* ('Nor with the rising of his eternal torch will the lord of the stars, leading the ages, give the signs of summer and winter,' 835-38), and *ibit in unum / congesta sinum turba deorum* ('Into a single abyss will go the heaped-up host of gods,' 843-44).

Thus, in *Thyestes*, Seneca, who was concerned primarily to inculcate ethics and virtue, drew heavily from the model of the cosmos posited by the Stoic physic. However, unlike the earlier Stoics, his use of physics was not as an *explanation* of his ethic, nor even its logical foundation; rather, Seneca uses *Thyestes* to *undermine* the Stoic physic, thereby creating an aesthetic effect of fear and dread. This effect shall be discussed further with Lovecraft’s literary technic.

Amongst writers of horror, Lovecraft is distinguished for his comprehensive world view. Like

Seneca's, Lovecraft's views were largely derivative; however, while not advancing any notably original view, he was at least, as Joshi remarks, original in his choice of influences (*The Weird Tale*, 170-71). In the tradition of the Cynics, Old Stoics, and Epicureans, Lovecraft rejected metaphysics and professed himself a materialist. It must be observed, however, that Lovecraft placed himself explicitly in the Epicurean tradition (171), advocating, in the face of an infinite universe in which the earth is infinitesimally insignificant, a life of seclusion and self-improvement. 'The only cosmic reality,' he writes, 'is mindless, undeviating fate—automatic, unmoral, uncalculating inevitability. As human beings, our only sensible scale of values is one based on the lessening of the agony of existence. That plan is most deserving of praise which most ably fosters the creation of the objects and conditions best adapted to diminish the pain of living for those most sensitive to its depressing ravages' ('Nietzscheism and Realism' 70). That praiseworthy plan was, for Lovecraft, the elaboration and exposition of his world view through the medium of horror fiction.

His essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," is more an exercise in literary criticism than in the exposition of a comprehensive world view; however, it offers a basis for judging horror fiction that is useful for a comparison of Seneca and Lovecraft. Lovecraft writes that 'We must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. If the proper sensations are excited, such a "high spot" must be admitted on its own merits as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is later dragged down.' He differentiates this real horror or weirdness from the 'externally similar but psychologically widely different' literature 'of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome.' He concludes that 'The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with

unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim' (84). Hence, one may conclude that Lovecraft's appreciation of the 'weird tale,' as he calls it, is not constrained by specific doctrine, and it is instead an aesthetic appreciation. While an aesthetic necessarily implies an underlying system of values, and these values in turn an underlying reason, Lovecraft did not write "The Call of Cthulhu" so as to didactically articulate his reasons, but rather to imply them through his aesthetic. Therefore, one may dismiss certain differences between the ostensible beliefs Lovecraft and Seneca held about the physics of the universe, and instead look to the similar means by which they sought to articulate their respective views.

To this end, one may observe the similarities in some of the plot devices they used. Both, for example, feature the summoning of monsters that have long been imprisoned deep in the earth. In *Thyestes*, as mentioned, these monsters include the Giants and, most notably, Typhoeus, whose awakening is accompanied by tremors throughout the play. In "Cthulhu," earthquakes foretoken the awakening of the Great Old Ones, 'who lived, ages before there were any men, and who came to the young world out of the sky. Those Old Ones were gone now, inside the earth and under the sea,' and who will awaken 'when the stars are ready' (139).

Also, both *Thyestes* and "Cthulhu" mediate their underlying horror through a messenger. Although in *Thyestes* one sees Thyestes unwittingly eating his children, and Atreus reveals their severed heads, the actual deaths of Thyestes's children are not shown, but rather related by the unwilling Messenger. Similarly, "Cthulhu" shows Cthulhu's emergence from his cave, but does so through a participatory narrator who unwillingly functions as a sort of messenger through his narrative frame. Finally, this narrator, while striving to maintain objectivity, can not help making an observation reminiscent of *Thyestes*. Remarking on Cthulhu's disappearance after, as the

narrator witnesses, his island sinks into the ocean, he says that Cthulhu ‘must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or else the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise’ (154). Similarly, in *Thyestes* the Chorus observes *ima permuat levis hora summis* (‘fickle time exchanges the lowest for the highest,’ 588).

Besides certain narrative and stylistic devices, however, “The Call of Cthulhu” encapsulates the broader view Lovecraft held of the cosmos and man’s place in it. As Joshi writes, ‘it is his first truly “cosmic” work and one in which many of his principal concerns...are adumbrated’ (177). The opening paragraph of the story, although unusually direct in voicing Lovecraft’s cosmic view, is worth quoting in full, for the similarities with *Thyestes* are compelling.

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (125)

For Lovecraft, a materialist, the most horrific prospect conceivable was that the knowledge produced by scientific inquiry would ultimately show the cosmos to be incomprehensible to man. He feared, in other words, that materialism would lead to its own undoing. It is in this respect that one can detect a broader affinity between Lovecraft and Seneca, as each, convinced of his own materialist world view, yet dwelt on the obliteration of that world view.

These similarities should only be taken so far, of course. Seneca, after all, was not writing horror short stories for publication in pulp magazines, but tragedy, and as such his literary inventiveness was constrained by different conventions and objectives. However, by Aristotle’s definition in *Poetics*, a tragedy elicits in the audience pity and fear. Pity, as he explains in

Rhetoric 2.8, is fear that the misfortune of another may befall oneself. *Thyestes* certainly fits the mold of the traditional Greek tragedy, both in form and in its ambiguous portrayal of its eponymous character (Tarrant 43); it is more distinctively Senecan, however, in the explicitness of its violence and the cosmic extent of its calamity. It may be said, then, that, while writing in the tragic mode, Seneca is stressing the element of fear more than would other tragedians.

Thus, one may observe that the actuating force for both *Thyestes* and “The Call of Cthulhu” is what each author most fears: for Seneca, passionate rage leads Atreus to summon a host of hellish beings, and the play’s end is the collapse of the cosmos, possibly without Stoic *ekpyrosis* and continuation of the cosmic cycle; and Lovecraft torments his readers with the prospect of human science uncovering its own insufficiency. It should in fairness be observed that Lovecraft and Seneca are not unusual in deriving inspiration from fear, nor are they unusual in doubting themselves. One could say, for instance, that Lucretius, in *De rerum natura*, was attempting to dispel others’ fear of death, and that this objective surely presupposed that he himself either feared or had feared death. One could further propose that the human condition is fundamentally one of fear, and that we would fain die but for the ‘dread of something after death.’ However, even if fear be the source of all human emotion, human art does not in the main linger so near its source as do Seneca and Lovecraft. This, at the very least, they have in common.

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