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# 'Love of Knowledge is a Kind of Madness': Competing Platonisms in the Universes of C.S. Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft

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# 'Love of Knowledge is a Kind of Madness': Competing Platonisms in the Universes of C.S. Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft

## **Abstract**

Though they often gesture in his direction, few contemporary philosophers or writers engage Plato's ideas. Yet C.S. Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft, two relatively uncelebrated authors of science-fiction fantasy (in academic circles, at least), treat Plato's notion of human enlightenment extensively. The two authors seem to agree with Plato's premise that knowledge is possible. While they concur that the metaphorical journey outside the cave is feasible, they differ on the benefits of such an ascent. Lewis is reassuring to his readers; like the Neo-Platonists to which he links his trilogy of science-fiction fantasy, he theorizes that the outside of the Platonic cave is the realm of God, in which humble humans find the salvation and love they merit. Lovecraft, however, seems convinced that the cosmic realm of the Old Gods, so oddly reminiscent of Plato's realm of the forms, has but one lesson for seekers of enlightenment: it is better not to ascend too far up the proverbial ladder of knowledge.

## **Additional Keywords**

Lovecraft, H.P.—Knowledge of Plato; Lewis, C.S.—Knowledge of Plato; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy--Sources

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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“LOVE OF KNOWLEDGE IS A KIND OF MADNESS”:  
COMPETING PLATONISMS IN THE UNIVERSES  
OF C.S. LEWIS AND H.P. LOVECRAFT

GUILLAUME BOGIARIS

THIS PAPER AIMS TO SHOW THAT SEVERAL OF C.S. Lewis's and H.P. Lovecraft's works, specifically Lewis's novels *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) and *Perelandra* (1943), and Lovecraft's stories "The White Ship" (1919), "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" (1927; pub.1943), "The Silver Key" (1929), and "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1934) can be read as interpretive commentaries on some of Plato's most famous myths, namely the *Republic's* allegory of the cave; the myth of the metals; the myth of Gyges; the myth of Er; and finally Diotima's concept of the ladder of knowledge (from the *Symposium*).

I argue that both authors (Lewis and Lovecraft) seem to agree with the fundamental Platonic tenet that reality is more than what it seems to be, in that the desire for knowledge can act as a spark leading to a successful ascension towards the divine or the supernatural. I take this to be intentional on Lewis's part and partially incidental on Lovecraft's. Both authors engage Platonism from a place of relative agreement, but eventually differ as to the meaning and possible benefits of the Platonic quest for knowledge. Over the course of its analysis this paper contributes to discussions about the reception of Platonism in mythopoeic literature, debates the philosophical sympathies of the authors studied, and the relevance of comparative studies of Lewis and Lovecraft, and reveals new aspects of the political theory of each author.

Lewis's character's ascent leads to the confirmation of neo-Platonic theology: the world is indeed made for us, but the ascent (and the enlightenment it brings) is only really possible because of the presence of a sentient and active God, who is not simply a disembodied, disinterested Idea of the Good. In Lovecraft's differing interpretation, however, the ladder leads to some knowledge, but that knowledge leads to danger and madness. Contrary to Lewis, Lovecraft's answer to Plato is that the world, although indeed made, was not made for us; there are questions with answers it is better not to seek. The proverbial exterior of the cave, in Lovecraft's terms, is a place where human beings find only terror, and where the mind takes refuge in madness in a last-ditch effort to save itself. The only reasonable course of action for the

Lovecraftian hero who has caught a glimpse of this reality is to return to the realm of men before it is too late.

### LEWIS'S PLATONIST CONNECTIONS

Lewis's space trilogy tells the story of Elwin Ransom, a Cambridge philologist who finds himself summarily kidnapped and carried to Mars (known as Malacandra to its inhabitants) by Weston (a physicist, also an academic) and Devine (a nondescript simpleton motivated by greed) (Sick 154). Lewis places himself in their universe; the end of *Out of the Silent Planet* and the beginning of *Perelandra* reveal to the reader that the author is a friend of Ransom who put his literary talent to the service of his friend by chronicling his adventures on Mars and Venus (also known as Perelandra).

Lewis, as he inserts himself in his novels, signals to his readers that they are, at least in part, about Platonism. The last two chapters of *Out of the Silent Planet* recount a fictitious correspondence between Lewis and Ransom. According to Lewis's make-believe, they had been writing to each other for a long time regarding philological subjects and eventually came to discuss the interplanetary adventures of Ransom, which Lewis then decided to chronicle in the form of the three novels.

These final chapters of the first book of the trilogy have for their subject, according to the author, "the real and practical purpose for which this book has been written" (*Out of the Silent Planet* [OSP] 152). Far from telling us directly why the book was written, these chapters give an account of how Ransom decided to share his incredible story with Lewis. According to the story, while Lewis was researching the 12<sup>th</sup> century neo-Platonists, he stumbled upon the word *Oyarses*. Puzzled as to its meaning, Lewis then turned to Ransom, a senior philologist, to help him figure it out. It just so happened that *Oyarses* and its associated declension *Oyarsa* are also words in "Old Solar," the universal and godly language spoken by all the non-terrestrial inhabitants of the universe. (Untainted by sin, the rest of the universe did not have a Tower of Babel moment.)

*Oyarsa* happens to be the title of the higher-order *Eldila*, a caste of largely benevolent, invisible godlike beings who exist independently of time and space. They populate the universe doing God's bidding. The *Oyarsa* in particular are the select few *Eldila* who rule over the planets of our solar system. According to the novel, Ransom was so surprised at Lewis's mention of *Oyarses* that their sole mention (since Lewis was already a friend) prompted Ransom to invite him over for a weekend and tell him the whole story of his interplanetary travels.

There is a coating of fiction surrounding this account of the book's origins. Still, Lewis is telling his readers rather clearly that *Out of the Silent Planet*

is at least in part the product of a study, or of a revisiting, of Platonism and neo-Platonism. Not only does Lewis take us back to classical Greek philosophy with his mentions of both the neo-Platonists and Aristotle in this chapter, but he also tells us that the 12<sup>th</sup> century neo-Platonists communicated or exchanged, at least in part, in the language of God. This indicates what the book is really about—an allegorical retelling of a Christian truth that Lewis, like the neo-Platonists, feels Plato had grasped (at the very least fractionally). In other words, Lewis's book was born over the course of an inquiry into the work of medieval scholars whose endeavors were largely the rehabilitation-slash-Christianization of Plato. The author modestly casts his novel as a product of this tradition.

Further confirming this point, Lewis and Ransom agree to present Ransom's adventures as fiction (*OSP* 154)—the novel *Out of the Silent Planet*. They do so because Ransom feels that this approach will reach a wider public and that the truly attentive readers will be able to catch hints from the narrative that will cue them into the real message of the book (*OSP* 153). About this I have two things to say.

First, this is extremely reminiscent of the agreement between Socrates and Adeimantus at the end of Book II of the *Republic*. Before they launch into an inquiry on the nature and structure of the city in speech, *Kallipolis* (the best city), both Greeks agree that despite its fictional nature (i.e. despite its status as a noble lie, or a myth) it has the power to point to a fundamental truth of human life. By pretending his fictional story is actually a true tale disguised as a lie, Lewis makes his characters the 20<sup>th</sup>-century versions of Socrates and Adeimantus, and perhaps projects himself as a successor to Plato. This becomes clearer when the novel, as we will see below, takes its protagonists to a sci-fi version of *Kallipolis*.

It is also worth noting that Lewis echoes another idea that derives from Socrates's and Adeimantus's conversation about myths. Like the two Greeks (Plato, *Republic* 382c), Lewis tells his readers that the mythical/fictional nature of the story may point to the truth. Ransom realizes on Venus (*Perelandra*) that "our mythology is based on a solid reality than we dream: but it is also an infinite distance from that base" (*Perelandra* 201; Sick 152). Despite our myths being superficially inaccurate, Ransom's adventure confirms the Platonic insight that they are crafted to make palatable complex truths otherwise incomprehensible to men: "Ransom at last understood why mythology was what it was—gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility" (*Perelandra* 201).

Second, without wanting to generate controversy over interpretation, it seems there is a direct invitation here to unpack the metaphors and the story of *Out of the Silent Planet*, or at the very least assume that the whole adventure is philosophically loaded. Even to those unsympathetic to such interpretive methods, this proposition should not sound too far-fetched. Lewis's tendency

for heavy-handed, not-so-subtle symbolism is common knowledge, if not the stuff of jokes amongst lovers of fantasy literature, as any reader of the Chronicles of Narnia will know. As such it should not be controversial for us to accept Lewis's invitation and try to unpack the deeper meaning of his work.

#### **RANSOM'S ANABASIS**

Elwin Ransom's trip to Malacandra has all the accoutrements of a metaphor for enlightenment. Specifically, his trip to Mars is presented as a symbolic retelling of a trip outside Plato's cave. Although the allegory of the cave is certainly well-known to most readers, allow me to briefly sum it up for the sake of the parallels I wish to draw below. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato has the character of Socrates describe to Glaucon an "image of our soul in its education and want of education" (*Republic* 514a). This image is, like *Kallipolis* and the myth of the metals, another one of those superficial lies that carries a substantial truth. In this case the truth is that citizens are chained inside a dark cave, a metaphor for our state of double-ignorance. Double-ignorance meaning here that we ignore the truth about Justice, the Good, etc., all the while thinking that in fact we know about it. One of the many points made throughout the allegory is that the illusion of knowledge is partly due to the manipulation of a second caste of cave-dwellers, presumably (but not exclusively) politicians, sophists and artisans (see Plato, *Apology of Socrates*), who project images of the above philosophical concepts for the rest of the cave-dwellers to behold with the aid of puppets, i.e. man-made renderings of these concepts.

Eventually, one of the cave-dwellers is forcefully freed from his shackles and starts the long and arduous trek uphill towards the light (an *anabasis*, ascent, an important figure of speech of the *Republic*). First he encounters the puppeteers on their parapet and sees that they project, with the aid of a fire, the images he saw all his life. Going past them, the newly freed cave dweller eventually reaches the outside of the cave where he is blinded by the sun. The sun is a Platonic image of the Good, through which we know everything else in the world (because it sheds light on everything). The freed cave-dweller eventually acclimates himself to the outside of the cave to the point where he can see things as they are and eventually behold the sun/Good itself. The story culminates with his return into the cave (the *katabasis*, or descent, another important trope of the *Republic*) where he decides to tell his fellow men about the outside, eventually to be scorned and put to death, so great was the upset he created when attempting to help/educate his brethren.

Not coincidentally, the fictional Ransom seems to have taken this lesson about the tension between the philosopher-educator and the city to heart; this is why he proceeds cautiously and demands of Lewis that he present the

story of his adventures as fiction, peppered with narrative clues aimed at the truly attentive reader.

Returning to the beginning of Ransom's adventures, Lewis's tale finds him erring by himself in the dark English countryside, lost and without a place to stay. He eventually enters by infraction onto an estate called The Rise at the prompting of a nearby mother. She is desperate to find her son who works at The Rise and should have returned home by then. Ransom goes there and finds the boy visibly distressed and in the company of a man called Devine (who happens to be one of his former schoolmates, a person he disliked profoundly) and Weston, a physics professor and proprietor of the domain. Ransom is eventually drugged, knocked unconscious, and dragged by force into what we will later find out is a spaceship. Thus Ransom, forcefully unshackled like our Socratic cave-dweller, begins his own *anabasis*.

Much like what the cave-dweller experiences after his sortie, the sun immediately blinds Ransom in his first moments outside his usual environment (in this case, outside of earth, in space). While the cave-dweller initially needs to avert his eyes and look at the ground, Ransom is lucky enough to also have a buffer: darkened glasses lent by Weston until he gets used to the blinding light. After a few days, our hero starts to truly experience elation at his ascent:

He had read of 'Space': at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, the cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now—now that the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it 'dead'; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. [...] No: space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens [...]. (*OSP* 28)

Ransom's trip away from the Earth continues to mirror that of Socrates's cave-dweller in that time brings acclimation to the Sun's light, and this acclimation brings enlightenment. Former opinions are shed in favor of direct observation, which translates into true knowledge. Over the course of this process, Ransom comes to the realization that the ancients were right whereas we, science-obsessed moderns, are wrong.

As the three space travellers prepare to land on Mars (Malacandra), Ransom comes to the ultimate Platonic realization. Whereas he had previously "thought of planets, even of the Earth, as islands of life and reality floating in a deadly void" (*OSP* 40), he now thinks of them as interruptions of actual reality, i.e. the living heavens bathed in sunlight out of which he is now sadly being pulled. His descent into Malacandra awakens Ransom to the fact that planets are metaphorical caves in the Platonic sense, and his knowledge of Earth makes

him rather unenthusiastic at the prospect his descent. But, unbeknownst to him, he is about to begin another, more meaningful ascent.

### **KALLIPOLIS IN SPACE**

The spaceship eventually lands and Ransom learns that Weston and Devine plan to offer him in sacrifice to the *Sorns*, which at this point the reader (like the hero) is led to believe are the sole sentient inhabitants of this planet. Seeing from afar their tall, lanky, and menacing forms, Ransom flees with his kidnappers in hot pursuit but successfully eludes them. He eventually comes to a pond where he witnesses a giant otter-like creature (named Hyoi, as we learn later) going about its business whilst talking to itself. At this moment begins the real adventure, that of Ransom's service to God, or Maledil, which unfolds in the other two books of the trilogy.

Unlike his first one, Ransom's second *anabasis* is more of a trip up the ladder of knowledge than a literal trip upwards. It an ascent such as the one described by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. In the dialogue, the priestess describes to Socrates how, motivated by the powerful need (and resourcefulness) created by love (*eros*) (Plato, *Symposium* 203b),<sup>1</sup> individuals can ascend to contemplation of the divine. According to Diotima, as long as it is *eros* that is felt, the ascent is possible: if someone loves a beautiful boy, for example, then it is likely that they will go from love of the beautiful boy to love of beautiful bodies, to love of the beautiful, to love of beauty, and finally love of the Good which sheds light on (and allows for the knowledge of) the concept of beauty.

This is exactly what happens to Ransom. As soon as he hears the creature speaking to itself in articulate language his *eros* for knowledge takes over: "The love of knowledge is a kind of madness" (*OSP* 55). Ignoring danger, already imagining his contribution to linguistics, Ransom leaps out of hiding to attempt to communicate with the creature, which we soon learn is a member of the species called the *Hrossa* (sing. *Hross*). Through the *Hrossa* Ransom will begin his acquaintance with Martian society, which is hierarchically (and geographically) layered in a way that mirrors almost exactly that of Plato's *Kallipolis*, i.e. in three castes with the gold-souled philosopher-rulers at the top, the silver-souled honor-loving military class in the middle, and the bronze-souled labor class at the bottom (*Republic* 414d-415c). On Malacandra, as in *Kallipolis*, all resources and food are held in common.

Ransom gets most closely acquainted with the *Hrossa*, who live in tribes and seem to be the "auxiliaries" or "silver-souled" members of this interstellar *Kallipolis*. Not coincidentally, the *Hrossa* live geographically in-between the

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the *Symposium* is the only work of ancient philosophy mentioned in Lewis's essay "On the Reading of Old Books" amongst his "must-read" classics.



other two races of Malacandrians. They possess a rite of passage marking the most valiant amongst them that consists in killing a great aquatic beast called the *Hnakra*. They are *thumotic* (spirited and honor-loving) in nature: a caste of warrior-poets who value honor and poetic expression, uninterested in the systematic pursuit of knowledge. They are as valiant in hunting as they are sensitive in their art, and regularly engage in chanting rituals reminiscent of the account we have of ancient Greek recitations of Homeric poetry.

From Hyoui (the *Hross* Ransom first encounters) and his *Hrossa* brethren Ransom learns that Malacandrian society is comprised of three species. The other two groups of *Hnau* (the Old Solar word for sentient creatures) are the *Sorns* (or *Séroni*) and the *Pffltriggi*. The *Séroni*, who live at the highest elevation possible on Malacandra (so high that oxygen is extremely scarce), are the logo-centric caste of Martians. Clearly Lewis's equivalent of the gold-souled guardians of *Kallipolis*, the *Séroni* are the keepers of Malacandrian history and knowledge, and are generally understood to be the scientific and scholarly caste. They are humanoid in appearance, although much taller and slenderer than humans.

The *Pffltriggi*, bronze-souled denizens of Malacandra that they are, live all the way down the bottom of Mars. They work solely with their hands (of which they have many), either in mines held in common or in forges, crafting tools for the *Séroni* and works of art out of the stones and metals they mine. The *Pffltriggi* are also the shortest of all Malacandrian species, and their society is the only one on Mars that is matriarchal (*OSP* 157). Kanaberaka, the only *Pffltriggi* with whom Ransom interacts, informs him that their women are responsible for keeping their society focused on work. According to him, the emphasis each caste places on heterosexual relationships is inversely proportional. The *Pffltriggi* make "the most account" of their women, whereas the logo-centric *Sorns* make "least account" of them (*OSP* 116).

But Malacandra differs from Plato's ideal city in one important respect: the logo-centric class does not rule Malacandrian society the way that the gold-souled guardians rule *Kallipolis*. Malacandra is ruled by yet another type of *Hnau* (found throughout the universe), an *Eldila* called the *Oyarsa*. As mentioned above the *Eldila* are benevolent invisible beings in the service of God (Maledil) who populate the entire universe. Whereas Plato had stipulated in his reinterpretation of the myth of Gyges (*Republic* 359c) that sentient beings reveal their truly awful, unjust souls in the absence of visibility or of other's gazes (Gyges finds a ring of invisibility and immediately uses it to murder his King and bed his Queen *sans* witnesses), it is the very invisibility of the *Eldila* that reveals their goodness. They are in fact reverse-Gygeses; with all their powers and without any means for other *hnau* to hold them accountable, the *Eldila* are still entirely benevolent and selfless.

The humans of Earth, however, are quite literal Gygeses. The *Oyarsa* of Mars reveals that Earth and its population are invisible and inaccessible to the *Eldila* on account of having been overtaken by an evil *Oyarsa*. This *Oyarsa* has corrupted humans over time until they have started to believe all laws could be broken, and that every one of them was "a little, blind *Oyarsa*," meaning a smaller, self-governing imitation of God (*OSP* 138). Some terrestrial *Eldila* are thought to have remained good. A scholar has proposed that Lewis suggests Socrates's *daimon* to have been one of those (Sick 153).

It is in the difference in ruling between *Kallipolis* and Malacandra that Lewis situates himself most saliently with respect to neo-Platonism. To Lewis the Good is God, therefore sentient and with agency of His own, and thus it makes sense that His closest supernatural agents, the *Eldila*, would rule instead of the merely intellectually superior caste. To Lewis, Plato's *Kallipolis* is only a correct image of humanity's most perfect social organization in a world where man has not fallen. Through Malacandra, Lewis suggests that *Kallipolis* is a divine (and fictional) vision of a sinless humanity.

This is further confirmed by the characters of each member of the trio of humans (Weston, Ransom, and Devine) who eventually find themselves before the Martian *Oyarsa*. Each of the three represents a corrupted version of the classes of Malacandra/*Kallipolis*. Devine is a corrupted bronze-soul—he is strictly interested in one mineral, gold, for material gain. Weston, the physicist, used to have a love of knowledge but now sees its pursuit as strictly instrumental in a quest for human survival (*Perelandra* 89). The *Oyarsa* of Mars admits that Devine is too simple (he feels only greed—he is pure need) to be saved and should simply be annihilated, but that if Weston were his *Hnau*, he could be cured on account of his higher complexity (*OSP* 139). In *Perelandra*, when Weston becomes completely evil, we see him entirely devoid of knowledge and intellectual interest (his only Platonically redeeming quality)—we are told his evil is akin to the maliciousness of a particularly stupid child (*Perelandra* 128); this is consequent with the story, a Platonic fiction where knowledge leads to God.

Ransom is a bit of an exception to this point as he is initially as corrupt as the other two but comes to be redeemed by his adventure on Malacandra and his pre-existing religious sensitivity (*OSP* 49). There is little doubt that Ransom is an "auxiliary" silver-soul of sorts. He feels most at home in the society of the *Hrossa* (*OSP* 155). Not only that, but he is a *Hnakrapunt*, a title reserved for the most valiant among them (*OSP* 82). Furthermore, his status as a physical knight of God is confirmed when, after he fails to confront evil by way of (his) reason, Maledil quite clearly sends him a sign that he was supposed to beat it physically all along (*Perelandra* 146-7).

This is not without symbolic meaning. Lewis is suggesting through Ransom and the *Hrossa* that it is easier for the silver-souled to attain salvation in our day and age. A preliminary indicator of this is that the *Hrossa's* language, which happens to be Old Solar, is the official language of Malacandra, but also of God and the universe. This is because, according to Kanaberaka, the knowledge of the *Séroni* can be translated in any tongue, and that of the *Pfifltriggi* is only used to communicate mundane matters. But the *Hrossa's* songs and poems rely on Old Solar, the language of God, to have their intended impact. Their art, dependent on this Godly medium, is therefore intimated to be one of the most valuable things on Malacandra (*OSP* 114).

Ransom, as a humanities scholar, has just enough of the love of knowledge necessary and of the *Hrossa's* artistic sensibilities to begin an ascent of Diotima's "ladder of knowledge" without partaking in the arrogance that resulted in Weston's downfall. Students of the natural sciences, to Lewis, actually end up farther from God because of both scientific skepticism and a tendency to see knowledge as purely instrumental (Sick 151). In doing so they devalue the humanities, as the character of Weston so often exemplifies through his condescension towards Ransom, the Malacandrians, and unscientific knowledge. Lovecraft makes a similar point, although less religiously loaded, in his tale "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," although to Lovecraft the end of the voyage does not come with a Godly invitation to re-center our intellectual attention on the correct disciplines. It ends with a terrifying warning against the perils of a curiosity that can only bring grief to humankind.

#### KNOWLEDGE UNTO MADNESS

Lovecraft's engagement with Platonism is much more subtle than Lewis's. Lovecraft does not anchor his Dream Cycle (the cluster of novellas discussed in this article) clearly within the Platonic tradition as Lewis did through his fake correspondence with Ransom. There are however some clear indications that the Dream Cycle engages ancient philosophy. The first story of the Dream Cycle is "The White Ship," written in October 1919. According to Lovecraft's biographer S.T. Joshi, "Lovecraft's tale is meant to be interpreted allegorically or symbolically, and as such enunciates several central tenets of his philosophical thought" (*I am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft* I.339).

"The White Ship" is the story of Basil Elton, the keeper of a lighthouse. Basil embarks on a journey to the dream world on a white ship, accompanied by an old bearded man in robes. They visit a number of strange lands and wondrous cities and eventually end up in Sona-Nyl, a land outside time and space where there is neither suffering nor death. After spending some time there Elton grows restless and insists they press on (against the wishes and warnings

of the old man) further to another city called Cathuria, a place Elton believes to be even better than Sona-Nyl (Joshi, *I Am Providence* I.338). Unfortunately, that turns out to be dramatically incorrect. They find only a "monstrous cataract [dropping into] abysmal nothingness," in which they fall (qtd. in Joshi, *I Am Providence* I. 338-339). Elton awakes on the platform by his lighthouse to find the ship gone forever.

What is interesting about this story is that its plot is largely a condensed version of "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath." The protagonist starts from a place of relative comfort and goes into the dream world, thrives, and decides to press onto an elusive goal against the warning of allies clearly more knowledgeable than he is on the subject. "The White Ship," to Joshi, is also an allegorical retelling of the "folly of abandoning the Epicurean goal of *ataraxia*, tranquility (interpreted as the absence of pain)" (*I Am Providence* I.339). This first tale of the Dream Cycle, which is essentially an embryonic version of the one analyzed later in this article, has been received by scholars as an expression of sympathy for Epicureanism, an ancient Greek school of thought initially pitted against Platonism: the very school of thought that would later be famously promoted by Lucretius in his poem *De Rerum Natura*, and draw the ire of eminent neo-Platonists such as the ones Lewis links himself to in *Out of the Silent Planet* (Kraye 103).

We know, thanks to Joshi's meticulous scholarship, that Lovecraft was familiar with *De Rerum Natura*, and that he had studied Epicurean materialism and identified with it (*The Weird Tale* 171-173). So at the very least, Lovecraft's writing, insofar as his Epicurean sympathies influenced it, has a relationship to Platonism by way of the *via negativa*: Epicureanism *de facto* implies some disagreement with Platonism. As we will see later, while there is some room for compatible Epicurean and Platonist readings of Randolph Carter's adventures, it is more accurate to interpret them in terms of "pessimistic" Platonism (Lewis's being by contrast "optimistic"). What is even more interesting is that Joshi links Lovecraft's Epicureanism to his reverence for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish fantasy writer Lord Dunsany (48). Joshi interprets the "Dream-Quest" to be Lovecraft's deliberate act of departure from Dunsanianism and the beginning of his "cosmic phase" (183), or "cosmicism."

It is worth noting that the "cosmicism" characteristic of the dream world has already warranted rapprochements between Plato and Lovecraft (Harman 2) in the literature. Other authors have listed Plato's *Republic* as a philosophical influence behind "The White Ship" (Smith 10). This is highly plausible since the story is about ignoring Epicurean precepts. Perhaps Joshi went a little far in his assessment that Elton was a fool to abandon *ataraxia*: he does get shut out of Sona-Nyl, but in the end he does not end up much worse

than he was at the beginning of his story.<sup>2</sup> One might even argue is he better off for having lived the adventure and learned his place in the world (as Randolph Carter will).

Moving on to the “Dream-Quest”: Randolph Carter, the protagonist of the short stories discussed in this article, is arguably the most expert dreamer of the whole Lovecraftian corpus. Carter shares some traits with the early Ransom, such as a propensity for the humanities (Carter is a writer) and a certain ambivalence about both revealed religion and experimental sciences (Lovecraft, “The Silver Key” [“Silver”] 194-5). Carter learns very early in his life about the illusive nature of the waking world and the existence of the dream world. Unfortunately, polite society shuts down his propensity towards the dream world early on, and he loses the key to the gate of dreams. For a while Carter is successfully repressed into normality. He first turns towards religion but eventually grows disillusioned with it: “it wearied [him] to see how solemnly people tried to make earthly reality out of old myths which every step of their boasted science confuted [...]” (“Silver” 429).

Turning to science appalls Carter even more: “[Scientists] did not know that beauty lies in harmony [...]. They did not see that good and evil and beauty and ugliness are only ornamental fruits of perspective [...]” (“Silver” 430). The illusion of knowledge is no worse amongst the scientists than the religious crowds. Scientists are in a sense worse, since “all Nature shrieked of its unconsciousness and impersonal unmorality in the light of their scientific discoveries.” To Carter, scientific curiosity and religious fervor are only variations of the same malady that drives humans to seek, unhealthily, the illusion of certainty. Scientists and the faithful miss that life has no purpose other than that what men dream into it (“Silver” 430).

The Lovecraftian imperative to dream purpose into one’s life would be misinterpreted if it were to be taken as some manner of prosaic existentialism. Carter quite literally dreams himself into a world governed by real supernatural entities (whose influence extends well beyond the dream world into ours) where real actions have real consequences. Carter’s dreaming is no mere superficial call to escapism by the author. Rather, it can be read as a reinterpretation of the allegory of the cave (like Lewis’s space trilogy), except one where the truth beholden outside the cave is that the world is not meant for us at all and where is it safer and smarter to stay within the cave’s confines.

One thing that supports this interpretation is that there is divine/transcendental Truth in the Lovecraftian world. Divine entities like the Great Old Ones, or Elder Ones Azatoth and Yog-Sothoth, are clearly on top of

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<sup>2</sup> It is also unclear in Joshi’s argument how Elton’s return to his initial situation fails to qualify as a type of *ataraxia*.

the chain of being. Their powers seem boundless; we are told they have supernatural consciousness. They do not, however, interact purposefully with humans in the sense that they care at all about us or require our attention in the manner of the ancient Greek gods. Their will is terrifyingly arbitrary. It is often intimated that it is better to avoid notice by the Elder Ones lest their stirring end up annihilating us all. Yet Yog-Sothoth reveals to Carter that there is Truth in that world; all beings are one facet of the fabric of existence and as such constitute a higher being, which Yog-Sothoth claims to be himself.

Lovecraft's dream world has in common with the outside of the cave that it is more "real" than the waking world, which is the metaphorical interior of the cave. Many narrative indicators confirm this. For example, dying in the dream world means death in the waking world, but one can die in the waking world and stay perfectly alive in the dream world. Such is the case of the ghoul once known as Robert Pickman, or King Kuranos of Celephais, who was once an Englishman from Cornwall. This in itself is indicative of a departure from Epicureanism. Epicureans, unlike Platonists, believed human souls died along with their earthly bodies, effectively ending existence (Kraye 104).

More importantly, as was mentioned above, the presence of the Great Old Ones, godlike celestial beings who are simultaneously corporeal, incorporeal, and the very fabric of the universe,<sup>3</sup> is more readily felt in the dream world. While they sometimes appear, intervene, and are represented in the waking world—such as are Plato's forms in the cave—the Great Old Ones are definitively present in the dream world; so much so that one can get to places where beholding (one of) their physical manifestation is possible. Their agency is more direct in the dream world and only there can they really be beheld.

Returning to Carter's story: it begins with him dreaming of a beautiful city atop Earth's dreamland. Seized by the wondrous nature of the place, Carter sets out to find it. But as soon as he departs the lower gods manifest their displeasure with his quest by withdrawing the visions of Kadath from his dreams ("The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" ["Kadath"] 107). Nevertheless he persists and begins a descent into the world of dreams. Displeased with his defiance, the Elder Gods send Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos (who is their lackey but also a supernatural being), in pursuit.

Carter finds out that Kadath is the dwelling-place of Earth's young gods—with this revelation Kadath becomes not merely a fancied destination but also ones that promises contact with the divine. (And so for a moment there is a dangling possibility that Carter's quest is substantially similar to Ransom's in that respect.) From this, Carter infers that since the gods often mingle with humans, Kadath must be closest to places where people share most traits with

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<sup>3</sup> They bring to mind the image of an inverted, horrifying trinity.

the gods. In order to find such a place Carter must first find out what said gods look like, which he does by ascending the hidden side of the peak of Ngranek, where the gods chiseled a great image in their likeness. Getting there proves to be tough but Carter manages it on account of his being an expert dreamer.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing on his quest, Carter meets a fellow dreamer, Kuranos, who now inhabits dreamland full-time as the king of Celephais (a city in the dream region of Ooth-Nargai). Kuranos is one of the few other expert dreamers. He once made it all the way to the abyss where he beheld the Great Old Ones Azathoth and Yog-Sothoth and came back with his sanity. Although eventually Carter will accomplish that as well, at this point in the story's timeline Kuranos has already done so, while Carter has not. In other words, the king is more knowledgeable than Carter, although Carter seems not to realize this. Kuranos, in spite (or because) of all his knowledge, has become rather disillusioned with the dream world and is now fashioning his realm to look like the English countryside of his youth. Kuranos reminds the reader of Achilles and Odysseus in Plato's myth of Er: he wants to a return to the *status quo ante*, to a life before he sought adventure. He suggests that Carter abandon his quest and enjoy the places of his youth (in this case Boston and New England) while he can (Kuranos cannot return to Earth because his earthly body is dead) ("Kadath" 149). Carter ignores this advice and continues on.

Plato's myth of Er, the last fable of the *Republic*, can be useful to unpack the meaning of this episode of Carter's adventures. In it a man named Er has a near-death experience and comes back to life. As he does, Er tells his friends of his experience in the afterlife. In it, Er witnessed various men, including epic heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus, choose their next lives one after the other. To Er's surprise, the heroes choose uneventful, quiet lives completely at odds with the epic adventures they led until their deaths. Er also notes that foolish men choose adventure and risk. The heroes return, so to speak, to the *status quo ante*. Er's philosophical lesson is that the mark of the wise man is his ability to choose a life more in harmony with virtue, a life alien to the adventurous lives the epic heroes had led. Er is cast as privileged to have learnt this information early, without having had to endure the hardships that led Achilles and Odysseus to that same realization (*Republic* 614a-621a). As we will see, this is the lesson Kuranos tries to impart, unsuccessfully, on Randolph Carter, who will have to learn it on his own.

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<sup>4</sup> This is one of the many instances where the reader witnesses that in Lovecraft's world imagination has world-fashioning powers and thus matters more than knowledge or virtue ("Kadath" 129). For comparison, we are told that the men of dreamland who are most similar to those of our world are all traders and artisans concerned with the most material aspects of life. Everyone content with our reality seems to be a bronze-soul to Lovecraft.

Carter, seeker of knowledge, ignores at that moment of his life the most important lesson of all. His friend Kuranos has not only gone as far as anyone can in this enhanced reality of the dream world: he has gone so far as to gaze upon the highest Gods who make up the fabric of reality. Kuranos warns Carter that the lesson he learned from his travels throughout the dream world, this enhanced reality where Gods dwell, is that the waking world is better. In this sense, Kuranos is metaphorically telling Carter that the lesson gleaned from his travels outside the Platonic cave is that it is better to be inside of it. Carter is deaf to this advice.

Our hero eventually does reach his destination, although not in the way originally planned. After helping a contingent of ghouls defeat a common enemy, Carter enlists the help of their flying steeds, giant bat-like creatures called Night-Gaunts who are not beholden to Nyarlathotep (there are few such creatures in the dream world), to fly him all the way up to Kadath. There Carter meets Nyarlathotep, as known as the Crawling Chaos, who figured that the easiest way to catch our seeker of forbidden places was to wait for him at the end of road. It is worth noting here that the pinnacle of Carter's ascension is an encounter with a personification of chaos. We are far from the divinely ordered world that awaited Ransom at the end of his own quest.

Nyarlathotep reveals that Kuranos was more correct than Carter knew. Kadath is not a city but consists only of the castle in which they currently find themselves, and that the city Carter had dreamt to be Kadath was in fact Boston, as he remembered it from the perspective of his youth. Unfortunately, Carter's dreams were so enticing that the younger gods have now deserted their home—the castle where Carter and Nyarlathotep are at this point in the story—to go enjoy Boston for themselves. This is an annoyance to the Great Old Ones and therefore an annoyance to Nyarlathotep. The Crawling Chaos makes a deal with Carter: he will be allowed to leave despite his transgression (seeking Kadath despite it having been very clearly forbidden to him) if he is to find the younger gods in Boston and send them back to Kadath. Carter agrees, but upon flying away realizes Nyarlathotep (who really does not need anyone's help to accomplish his tasks) has tricked him and is actually sending him into the abyss where Azathoth is waiting to inflict some god-knows-what horrifying punishment upon him. Risking it all, Carter jumps from his flying steed and awakes abruptly in his Boston home.

Carter's ascent, which is successful, lands him straight back into the world of men, in the place where he grew up and lived all his life. Carter's trip's great lesson is that forbidden knowledge and forbidden places are forbidden for a reason: the metaphorical outside of the cave indeed exists, but it is not a place made for man. Carter seeks the home of the gods and realizes what he has indeed been warned of the whole time: the home of the gods is precisely that,



but also exclusively that. As such man will find it unsuited to his needs, unlike his actual home, where he should have stayed all along. Even if ultimately lacking in poetic grandeur or nobility, humanity has a place within the great chain of being. Its so-called yearnings for loftier goals are misinterpretations of the fact that it is indeed better off where it is. We are in the cave because the outside is not for us.

#### THE PLATONISMS OF LEWIS AND LOVECRAFT

This paper attempts to make two contributions. The first one is that despite their dissimilarities, Lewis and Lovecraft both engage Platonic philosophy from a place of relative agreement. Lewis seems to think, along with most Renaissance neo-Platonists, that Plato was correct save for the fact that the Good is indeed God, and as such He rules over human society, not the Goldsouls or those most acquainted with the Good. Lovecraft appears of the opinion that Plato was indeed right, save for the fact that our ignorance of the Good is somewhat blissful. The purpose of the world may well be maddening and horrifying to us on account of both its inscrutability and our insignificance.

Both authors warn us against conformity and scientific skepticism. Carter loses the key to the gate of dreams (the sole access to the world that really matters) because of societal pressure, and sees that the devout and the skeptics are two sides of the same coin. Ransom sees the otherwise well-meaning physicist Weston (who, after all, only sought to further human advancement) descend into noxious condescension and fall prey to evil because of his inability to recognize the obvious divinity of Maledil and his *Oyarsa*. The Platonic goldsouled in these stories become least likely to attain enlightenment on account of their attachment to reason or *logos*.

The second contribution is more of a critical one. Literary circles traditionally prioritize Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Lovecraft's *Arkham Cycle*, when they examine these authors at all. As they do so, and perhaps because these groups of novels are different from the ones treated here, scholars often examine Lewis in comparison to Tolkien and Lovecraft to Poe. These pairings are certainly invited by the fact that the *Chronicles of Narnia* are works of medieval-inspired fantasy, and the *Arkham Cycle* belongs to the genre of New England Horror novellas. My argument here implies that, at least with respect to the themes of Platonism, ancient Greek thought and man's relationship to the divine, comparative studies of the Lovecraft and Lewis, however unorthodox, can help shed light on their work.

And so, in conclusion, let me attempt to begin this task. It does not suffice to say that Carter should have stayed home and that therefore the ultimate import of the Lovecraftian *Dream Cycle* is a lesson about the dangers of knowledge we were not meant to obtain. It is true that Carter's only critical

discovery is that he should have stayed home. But it matters that this lesson is precisely a function of the fact that Plato was correct, and that reality consists of much more than it appears to from our perspective. The outside of the cave, in this case the dream world, where the presence of the Great Old Ones is more readily felt, does indeed entertain a deeper relationship with reality and the fabric of the cosmos than the somewhat insulated world of men. But only danger, madness, and disappointment await us there.

In the Lovecraftian world the cave is a place where human beings interact with the portion of reality they can manage. The puppets and shadows Plato (and Lewis) dismiss as confusing representations of vital concepts that humans should seek to transcend by escaping their metaphorical prison become, in Lovecraft, the maximal share of reality we can absorb. Our god(s), for example, are actually few amongst many, youngest of all, and there are many indicators that their powers pale in comparison to that of the other divine entities of the dream world. In fact the Great Old Ones seem to treat them like unruly children. Carter knows and agrees with the fundamentally Platonic and Aristotelian precept that beauty lies in harmony. Lovecraft's point, *contra* Plato, is that this harmony cannot be found in the world of ideas, outside of human society. Because of their limited perspective and abilities, humans find only chaos and danger there. Carter returns to his city not out of choice, like Plato's cave-dweller, or moral obligation, like Ransom who is sent back by the Martian *Oyarsa*/Maledil. He leaves the dream world to preserve his physical and mental safety.

Plato, the neo-Platonists, and Lewis after them, imagined the real world to be a better, more complete and wholesome version of the clumsy misrepresentations humans fashion for themselves inside their sheltered communities. As a result of being thrown into the unknown, Ransom learns that the universe is a divinely ordained place where any movement made by man to transcend his lowly predicament will lead to better ordered worlds, each and every one of them thriving under the watchful, loving eye of God. Lovecraft turns that presumption on its head by positing the real world, the outside of the cave so to speak, to be an entirely different—and chaotic—place.

A telling example of this becomes evident when the two ascents of Ransom and Carter are put side to side. Both Lewis and Lovecraft reverse the expectations of their readers. Ransom rises into the great cold vacuum of space and, counter-intuitively, finds it full of life and wonder; Carter surfaces into a dream world bustling with life and finds only danger and death. His many ascents, be it to the moon, to Ngranek, to the castle, and so on, lead ever closer to the Crawling Chaos. In fact almost every ascent of Carter's is immediately followed by a literal fall. The entire dream world seems to be organically telling Carter to come back down.

Just as much as Lewis's Platonism is optimistic, Lovecraft's Platonism tells us about his pessimistic prognostic for humanity. Contrary to Ransom who expects danger and continuously finds safety in worlds uncannily well-equipped to sustain human life, Carter's dream world, a world more real than ours in many ways, is critically unsuited to human flourishing. So much so that it is one where humans have to compete for survival alongside countless other species, most better adapted to it (like cats!), all of this under the indifferent eye(s) of indescribable horrors: timeless, all-powerful, and terrifying entities who simultaneously lord over all and compose the very fabric of the existence. Carter—like Kuranés before him—learns the most important lesson of all: humanity holed up inside the "cave" for reasons of survival, not intellectual and political domination over our peers. Although we have forgotten it, humanity's move inside the cave may have once been a strategic choice, and not the tragic consequence of a series of critical errors, *pace* Lewis.

*Contra* Plato and Lewis, who think the cave hinders true enlightenment because it was made for man and by man, Lovecraft has his characters learn that the cave is in fact the best of all places for humanity, for that very reason. Quite literally, we can live (read: survive) there, and almost strictly there. We can imagine Lovecraft's world to be one where the original traveller to the dream world came back with strong advice for his brethren never to try and go out again, a lesson humanity internalized over time. This explains the social reflex that discouraged young Carter's early dreamer tendencies. Kuranés learnt that same lesson before Carter, yet failed to persuade him of it. Since there are communities of humans inside and outside of the dream world, and because the dream world is actually more real than ours, we can conjecture our society to have originally come from there. Yet the reason why they sought shelter outside the dream world has obviously been forgotten, as the examples of Kuranés and Carter testify. Reality is not safe for us, says Lovecraft to Plato and Lewis, yet apparently we are doomed to forget that fact from time to time.

Although Carter ends up learning Kuranés's lesson on his own, the old king's failure to convince his friend reminds us of Socrates's inability to discourage one of his disciples, Xenophon, from leaving for Persia with Cyrus's expedition (another famous *anabasis* that goes sour and ends with its protagonist back in the homeland from which he started). Both Carter and Xenophon are deaf to the pleas of their teachers, but ultimately end up wiser and away from danger in the end (both after facing several obstacles and brushing with death).

In the end, the conjunction of (a) Lovecraft's relative agreement with Lewis (and Plato) about the existence and accessibility of the proverbial cave's exterior and (b) his disagreement with them about the desirability of reaching that very exterior, while clear, is not entirely incompatible with Joshi's Epicurean reading of the Dream Cycle. Lovecraft's work may well be an

invitation to embrace Epicurean *ataraxia*, symbolized by Carter's ultimate return home and Kuran's sadness not to be able to. Perhaps we should embrace *ataraxia* precisely because of the hostile nature of the real world, not because of the impossibility of acquiring true knowledge.

It would be dishonest not to admit that an Epicurean reading of the myth of Er, with which the novels of the Dream Cycle share important narrative similarities, can also support Joshi's interpretation. The value of *ataraxia* certainly seems to be part of the lesson Er learns from Odysseus and Achilles in Book X of the *Republic* as he witnesses the epic heroes choose quiet, uneventful lives. From that angle, however, the meeting of Joshi's argument and mine is more dependent on the compatibility between Platonism and Epicureanism than it is on the content of Lovecraft's work. Ultimately what is clear is that Lovecraft thought that our persistent, insatiable curiosity in the face of obvious peril would not be our salvation, in spite of what Lewis sustains. It will be our doom.

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