

# Teratonymy: The Weird and Monstrous Names of HP Lovecraft

CHRISTOPHER L ROBINSON

*HEC-Paris, France*

Lovecraft's teratonyms are monstrous inventions that estrange the sound patterns of English and obscure the kinds of meaning traditionally associated with literary onomastics. J.R.R. Tolkien's notion of linguistic style provides a useful concept to examine how these names play upon a distance from and proximity to English, so as to give rise to specific historical and cultural connotations. Some imitate the sounds and forms of foreign nomenclatures that hold "weird" connotations due to being linked in the popular imagination with kabbalism and decadent antiquity. Others introduce sounds-patterns that lie outside English phonetics or run contrary to the phonotactics of the language to result in anti-aesthetic constructions that are awkward to pronounce. In terms of sense, teratonyms invite comparison with the "esoteric" words discussed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, as they diminish or obscure semantic content, while augmenting affective values and heightening the reader's awareness of the bodily production of speech.

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## Text

Cult author H.P. Lovecraft is best known as the creator of an original mythology often referred to as the "Cthulhu Mythos." Named after his most popular creature, this mythos is elaborated throughout Lovecraft's poetry and fiction with the help of three "devices." The first is an outlandish array of monsters of extraterrestrial origin, such as Cthulhu itself, described as "vaguely anthropoid [in] outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind" (1963: 134). Then there is a clandestine, worldwide cult devoted to the worship of these creatures, which certain humans consider as gods. Finally there is a fictionalized geography based in New England, which serves as a backdrop to a cosmic struggle for survival.<sup>1</sup> Linguistic invention plays a central role in the creation of this nightmarish universe, as the author himself acknowledges:

If I were writing an “interplanetary” tale it would deal with beings organised very differently from mundane mammalia, and obeying motives wholly alien to anything we know upon Earth — the exact degree of alienage depending, of course, on the scene of the tale; whether laid in the solar system, the visible galactic universe outside the solar system, or the utterly unplumbed gulfs still farther out — the nameless vortices of never-dreamed-of strangeness, where form and symmetry, light and heat, even matter and energy themselves, may be unthinkably metamorphosed or totally wanting. I have merely got at the edge of this in “Cthulhu” where I have been careful to avoid terrestrialism in the few linguistic and nomenclatural specimens from Outside which I present. (1968: 150–151)

The complete and absolute estrangement implied by an alien linguistic paradigm is repeatedly emphasized in “The Call of Cthulhu” and other stories, where the names and utterances of extraterrestrial origin are characterized as being undecipherable or unpronounceable.<sup>2</sup> As Robert M. Price notes, “[m]any entities and items of the Cthulhu Mythos are tagged with epithets like ‘not-to-be-named,’ ‘the unspeakable,’ ‘the unnamable,’ ‘unaussprechlichen.’” Underscoring the formidable problems of pronunciation to which the names of these creatures give rise, he concludes that such “adjectives are deserved in more than ways than one” (1987: 47).

*Cthulhu*, “the name without which one cannot even discuss the Cthulhu Mythos” (Price, 1987: 47), and which has generated the most commentary by the author and his readers alike, is emblematic in this respect. Lovecraft explains that

the word is supposed to represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an *absolutely non-human* word. The name of the hellish entity was invented by beings whose vocal organs were not like man’s, hence it has no relation to the human speech equipment [. . .] The syllables were determined by a physiological equipment wholly unlike ours, *hence could never be uttered perfectly by human throats.* (1976b: 10–11)

The author intended the name to be unpronounceable (or nearly so) because it is supposed to involve a production of sounds that are foreign to human speech — which to his mind amounts to the same thing as being inhuman. *Cthulhu* and other names such as *Pth’thya-l’yi* or *S’ngac* are thus fitting for the creatures and places that bear them. Dan Clore observes, for example, that Lovecraft’s names convey “a sense of the enormous, dark, gelatinous monstrosity that characterizes the entities described in his works” (1998: 36). To leave the matter at that, however, is to risk repeating a simple commonplace in literary onomastics — that a name must “sound right” for the person, place or thing that bears it (Finke, 1995: 67) — and to miss a rich opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of traditional studies of names in fiction. For Lovecraft’s teratonyms are not only names that designate monsters and their hellish abodes, but onomastic constructions which are in and of themselves monstrous in sound, form, and sense.<sup>3</sup>

## A question of style

These names are “fitting,” then, not just because they fit the creatures that bear them, but also because they fit into the teratological style of the nomenclature of which they are a part. J.R.R. Tolkien argues that all languages possess a “style” (1984: 190). This concept provides a useful framework for discussing the aesthetics — or, in Lovecraft’s

case, the anti-aesthetics — of invented names, and the various emotions and sensory impressions they evoke. The style of a language is found in its phonology, morphology, and even orthography. For a logophile these elements give rise to the sensual pleasures of vocal production, hearing, and sight. Sensitive speakers also take pleasure in the ways that the sound-patterns of a language are linked to a conceptual universe by way of linguistic convention and other historical, geographical, and social factors. These elements may give rise to impressions such as the “antiquity and alien remoteness” that Tolkien perceives in ancient Greek (1984: 191), or to an appreciation of the synchronic and diachronic relations between English and Welsh, affinities born of the geographical proximity and philological continuity of the two tongues (194). In the conclusion to his essay, Tolkien underscores the role of affect in aesthetic appreciation as he discusses how a speaker’s sense of distance from or proximity to a language creates powerful emotional, even filial, or kinship ties. In adapting his concept of style to the study of invented names in fiction, one must begin with the fact that speakers take their “cradle tongue” as a point of reference in their perception of linguistic aesthetics (190). It will be necessary to determine how the style of a nomenclature diverges from, or to the contrary, conforms to the idiom of the text — which is to say, the language in which a story or novel is written.

The play of distance and proximity are evident in Lovecraft’s namecraft. His teratonyms employ various techniques of linguistic estrangement, and this distance from English is enhanced by way of a contrast with the personal names of an idealized urban New England.<sup>4</sup> These latter constructions contribute a touch of local-color to his fiction, and as the term “local” suggests, they draw upon a (falsely) comforting sense of proximity. This includes direct personal links with people and places the author knew first-hand. For example, the name of the narrator’s uncle in “The Call of Cthulhu,” George Gammell Angell, recalls the author’s own uncle Edward Francis Gamwell, while Angell is the name of the street where Lovecraft was born and grew up.<sup>5</sup> Then, the name of Richard Upton Pickman, the demented artist in “Pickman’s Model,” is derived from a certain Prof. Upton the author knew as a child (Joshi & Cannon, 1999: 219). Even when there are no intimate relations involved, names may point to noted New England personalities. The name of the narrator of “Cthulhu,” Francis Wayland Thurston, combines that of Francis Wayland, a popular president of Brown University (which Lovecraft always dreamt of attending), with that of Robert Lawton Thurston, a prominent New England industrialist who contributed to the scientific and cultural advancement of the region (Joshi & Cannon, 1999: 173). In a discussion of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Michel Grimaud remarks that the eponymous hero’s name evokes the social world of Boston Brahmins (1993: 9). Similar observations can be made concerning the names of Lovecraft’s heroes. The author explains that the name of Prof. Frank H. Pabodie, one of the participants of the ill-fated Antarctic expedition in *At the Mountains of Madness*, is meant to be “typical of good old New England stock, yet not sufficiently common to sound conventional or hackneyed” (1976b: 228). This and similar constructions thus carry social connotations of that particular caste which was so dear to the author, and to which the majority of his hapless heroes belong. Moreover, the fact that Lovecraft frequently employs the tripartite form in full, and that the middle is almost always a doubled family rather than Christian name, broadens the capacity of these

constructions to create a network of kinship relations throughout his mythos stories, as with the following:

Edward Derby  
|  
Nathaniel Derby Pickman  
|  
Richard Upton Pickman

The reappearance of *Upton*, *Pickman*, *Derby*, and others throughout Lovecraft's oeuvre creates the sense of a closed social milieu, a small world that stands in stark and comforting contrast to a vast open universe teeming with hostile entities.

The names of Lovecraft's city dwellers contrast with those of his rural inhabitants. Intended to evoke "backwoods rusticity" (Joshi, 1997: 65), these constructions combine familiar English surnames with biblical first names that have fallen out of fashion in modern times. The members of the Gardner family in "The Colour Out of Space," for example, are called *Nahum*, *Thaddeus*, and *Zenas*. The hybrid constructions blend Lovecraft's grudging admiration for an ancient and hardy stock of English origins with his aversion to their cultural backwardness, geographical isolation, and consequent degeneration. In "The Dunwich Horror," he makes specific reference to names as he observes how

the natives are now repellently decadent, having gone far along the path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters. They have come to form a race by themselves, with the well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding. The average of their intelligence is woefully low, whilst their annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnamable violence and perversity. The old gentry, representing the two or three armigerous families which came from Salem in 1692, have kept somewhat above the general level of decay; though many branches are sunk into sordid populaces so deeply that only their names remain as a key to the origin they disgrace. (1963: 157)

The quaint-sounding names of rustic New Englanders such as Zechariah Whateley or Ammi Pierce thus create a sense of historical, cultural, and onomastic distance from the more modern-sounding names of urban characters as they point back to an elder period of American history. An era that holds, not only for readers of Lovecraft, but also of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Arthur Miller, an aura of dark mystery linked with witch-hunts and other forms of religious terror and repression.

This distance remains within the limits of American history and language, however, and is thus mild compared to the otherworldly impressions created by Lovecraft's teratonyms. Taking increasing distance from the English of the texts in which they appear, the mock foreign and extraterrestrial sonorities of these names fall into two categories. The first borrow or imitate the sounds and forms of foreign and ancient languages. The second introduce patterns that do not appear to be associated with a specific foreign idiom, but nonetheless lie outside of or run counter to the ordinary sounds and forms of English. *Nyarlahotep* provides a good example of the first type. Appearing in numerous tales, this is the dreaded name of "the crawling chaos" that serves as an emissary to the Outer Gods inhabiting dimensions of space

and time unknown to human science (1999: 31). As George T. Wetzel observes, its construction combines the prefix *nya-*, found in the names of gods from several African tribes, with the suffix *-hotep*, which terminates the names of several deities in Egyptian mythology (1980: 82).<sup>6</sup> Then, Will Murray suggests that the names of the evil twin gods Nug and Yeb are derived from the pair of Egyptian gods Nut and Geb (1984: 56). In this case, there are no precise formal units involved, but rather a phonetic pattern or template.

These and other invented vocables draw upon real historical and linguistic models, not so much in the interest of creating a touch of verisimilitude, as of heightening a sense of estrangement. The author himself draws attention to this point when he explains that some of his constructions are meant

to suggest — either closely or remotely — certain names in actual history or folklore which have weird or sinister associations connected with them. Thus “Yuggoth” has a sort of Arabic or Hebraic cast, to suggest certain words passed down from antiquity in the magical formulae contained in Moorish and Jewish manuscripts. (1976a: 386)

Names in Lovecraft’s fiction that appear to fit into this group include *Yaddith*, *Azatoth*, *Buzrael*, *Yog-Sothoth*, *Shub-Niggurath*, *Nug-Soth*, *Yig*, *Yogash*, *Shaggai*, and *shoggoth*. His reference to the “magical formulae contained in Moorish and Jewish manuscripts” points to kabbalism as a major intertext of the mythos, and the Semitic ring of these names can be tied into this esoteric tradition, which Lovecraft frequently cites. In “The Horror at Red Hook,” for example, the decadent scholar Robert Suydam, leader of a murderous witch cult in the slums of New York, is also the author of a pamphlet on the “Kabbalah” (1965: 250). At one point in the story, a detective investigating the cult comes across some telling graffiti:

The writing was in red, and varied from Arabic to Greek, Roman, and Hebrew letters [...] One frequently repeated motto was in a sort of Hebraised Hellenistic Greek, and suggested the most terrible daemon-evocations of the Alexandrian decadence: “HEL • HELOYM • SOTHER • EMMANVEL • SABAOth • AGLA • TETRAGRAMMATON • AGYROS • OTHEOS • ISCHYROS • ATHANATOS • IEHOVA • VA • ADONAI • SADAY • HOMOVSION • MESSIAS • ESCHEREHEYE.” (256)

What the detective reads is in fact a quotation that Lovecraft copied verbatim from the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, having found it to be a “relic of ancient rituals” representative of Jewish kabbalism and European black magic in general (Joshi & Cannon, 1999: 144). The sounds of the vocables in the litany are echoed in the author’s invented names, notably the *-ai* in *Shaggai* or the *-oth* in *Yuggoth*, *Azatoth*, *Yog-Sothoth*, *Nug-Soth*, and *shoggoth*. Thanks to their likeness with highly connoted pre-existing vocables, the sounds and forms of Lovecraft’s “weird”-sounding kabbalistic inventions acquire cultural associations of place and time — what the author himself refers to as decadent antiquity — and also sinister connotations of an esoteric philosophy linked in the popular imagination with demonism and black magic.

In constructing such names, Lovecraft does not make a learned and systematic use of Semitic phonology the way that Tolkien (a linguist by profession) employs Finnish, Welsh, or Greek in the forging of his elvish languages Sindarin and Quenya (Noel,

1980: 5). Rather, these constructions are based upon the aural impressions made by vocables associated with esoteric medieval and foreign nomenclatures. This point is underscored by the name he gives to the scribe responsible for recording the blasphemous *Necronomicon*, Abdul Alhazred.<sup>7</sup> Describing this invention as “a linguistic monstrosity,” S.T. Joshi points out that the *-ul* of *Abdul* is a cognate of the *al-* in *Alhazred*, and that “a more correct (but perhaps less charismatic) rendering would have been *Abd-el-Hazred*” (1997: 130). His reference to the charisma of the erroneous construction indicates that linguistic accuracy matters less than the aural impression that such names make and the sentiments they stir. Likewise, the sensory impressions created by Lovecraft’s monster names are based, not upon a precise knowledge of the languages or nomenclatures that serve as models, but rather upon sounds and forms — such as *nya-* and *-hotep* in *Nyarlahotep*, *-ai* in *Shaggai*, or *-oth* in *Yog-Sothoth* and others — that English-speakers perceive as being characteristic of the idioms and nomenclatures in question.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these names appear in the evil tome *Necronomicon*, and Lovecraft explains that those of a Semitic cast are meant “to account for the transmitting influence of Abdul Alhazred” (1976a: 387). In other words, they represent transliterations of vocables of extraterrestrial origin. The originals would have been foreign, not simply to English, but to all human languages. Be that as it may, the creation of a sense of linguistic monstrosity is necessarily achieved by way of a distance from the idiom in which his stories are written, and this becomes clear with the second category of teratonyms, which are not meant to conform to any known human tongues. In these constructions, the namesmith employs strategies of estrangement that work on three different levels related to individual sounds, sound combinations, and overall word-forms.<sup>9</sup> At the first level, we find consonant clusters or consonants represented by digraphs that are rare or absent in English, as in *Mtal* and *Mthura*. There is a marked predilection in these combinations for nasal forms, as in the *Vale of Pnath* and the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, *Gnoph-Keh* and *Gnorri*, the *Bnazic desert* and *Mnar*. Aspirated forms are also favored, as in *bhole*, *Rhan-Tegoth*, or *Dho-Hna*. At the second level, consonants and semi-vowels are strung together into clusters that are entirely foreign to English patterns, as in *S’ngac*, *K’n-yan*, and *S’gge’ha*. Other constructions take sounds that are common in English, but place them in patterns or positions that run contrary to its phonotactics. For example, *Pth’thya-l’yi* repeats TH in succession without the insertion of a vowel. Then, a number of Lovecraft’s inventions begin a syllable with a consonant cluster that more typically falls at the end of words. Hence, sounds that are easy to pronounce in terminal positions, such as the PTH in *depth*, NTH in *ninth*, RL in *gnarl*, NK in *ink*, or NG in *sing*, become strange and difficult when put into the initial position of a syllable as in *Pth’thya-l’yi*, *Y’ha-nthlei*, *R’lyeh*, *N’kai*, and *Mt. Ngranek*.

At the third level, that of the overall word-form, constructions do not necessarily violate any rules concerning sound combinations, but nonetheless sound awkward and alien in the context of English, as with the following: *gug*, *shantak*, *Bokrug*, *Ghatanothoa*, *Kynarth*, *Kamog*, *daroh*, *Athok*, *buopoth*, *Celephais*, *Tcho-Tcho*, *sifcligh*, *skorah*, *tukah*, *ugrat*, *voonith*, and *zoog*. The anti-aesthetics of these teratonyms invite comparison with those of the Black Speech in *The Lord of the Rings*. Of all Tolkien’s invented languages, this monstrous idiom is the furthest removed from

the English used to “translate” the speech of the Hobbits. As T.S. Shippey observes, it is “entirely alien, marked off by its use of grammatical suffixes (*durbatulûk*), its apparent post-positions (*burzum-ishî, Saruman-glob*), its constant back-vowels and consonant clusters (*Lugbûrz, Nazgûl, Ufthak, Gorbag, Uglûk, etc.*).” To an English reader, such names will sound “thick, guttural, clumsy” (1979: 304). As with Tolkien’s “entirely alien” constructions, Lovecraft’s teratonyms rely on sounds and patterns, such as a preponderance of low and back vowels, that speakers perceive as dark, heavy, ugly, hostile, etc. (Clore, 1998: 35).<sup>10</sup> To this we can add consonants that are perceived as harsh and grating. Taken together, these sounds result in combinations that most English speakers will find awkward to pronounce and even unsightly to read. For constructions such as *S’gg’ha, Pth’thya-l’yi*, or *Y’ha-nthlei* employ bizarre spellings, atypical hyphenation schemes, and other typographical peculiarities that reinforce the strangeness of their sonorities.

### Sense vs. sensibility

The estrangement of English phonetics and morphology in their construction foregrounds the sensory forms of Lovecraft’s teratonyms and heightens their affective import, while consequently obscuring their semantic values. This is not to say that the question of meaning should be dismissed altogether, but rather that the types of meaning teratonymy generates cannot be neatly paraphrased in the conventional terms of symbolism, etymology, and paronomasia. Rather, these monstrous names compare with the “esoteric” variety of nonsense words discussed by Jean-Jacques Lecercle. Taking his inspiration from Gilles Deleuze, Lecercle divides neologisms into two types, the portmanteau and esoteric (1985: 104). The first variety blends the sounds and forms of two vocables and consequently melds their meanings. Lovecraft provides a good example with *Gilman*, a realistic surname found in “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and several other tales. The name can be read as a combination of *gill* and *man*, and paraphrased as “gill-man” or “a man with gills.” Given that the name is one of a prominent family in the town of Innsmouth, where the inhabitants breed with sea monsters and develop gills, *Gilman* is a fitting pun. As this example illustrates, portmanteau words combine clearly identifiable source vocables, and draw upon neatly defined meanings of these words. Esoteric words, in contrast, invite multiple and uncertain analyses of their source words. As a consequence, Lecercle argues, “meaning proliferates, and is no longer obtained by the combination of fixed units” (66). In ordinary practice, of course, literary critics attempt to contain this excess proliferation by restricting their glosses to meanings that make sense within the context of the fiction. The problem with Lovecraft’s teratonymy, however, is that it perturbs such efforts, both inviting and resisting the familiar types of interpretive strategies.

*Cthulhu* once again proves emblematic for purposes of illustration, as it lures readers into pushing discovered associations too far, or into pushing too far in the discovery of associations. Donald Bursleson, for example, notes that the beginning of *Cthulhu* resembles that of *chthonic*, derived from a Greek word meaning “earth,” and which is frequently associated in literature with the underworld (1990: 83). This seems like a reasonable analysis. Unfortunately, he then goes on to construct a flimsy



interpretation of the text based upon etymology. As Burleson himself notes, a strict etymological reading of this lexical association suggests that Cthulhu lies beneath the earth, and/or that the monster is made of the same substance as man, which is to say, earth. In fact, the creature is an extraterrestrial that resides beneath the sea. The explanation given for these discrepancies is that “the text waxes playful at the etymological level” (83). This, however, is an unconvincing manner of dismissing an apparent contradiction between name and text, and his comment only serves to underscore how Burleson pushes the association between *Cthulhu* and *chthonic* to excess.

He also goes much too far in seeking out resemblances between the name and other linguistic forms. For example, he argues that *Cthulhu* resembles combinations of the French words *côté-lu* and *côte-yeux-lu* (84–85). To say that these associations lack cogency is an understatement. First of all, they are not in the least, as he claims, “phonetically close transcriptions” (84). Rather, it takes a stretch of the aural imagination to hear any resemblance in these sequences of French words to *Cthulhu* as it is pronounced either by English or French speakers.<sup>11</sup> Another problem is that the combinations of words do not work syntactically. In both the combinations of words he has given, then, Burleson has simply imposed English structures on isolated foreign vocables (a procedure the French call *calque*), resulting in nonsensical strings that are entirely arbitrary.<sup>12</sup> What he reads into the associations of French words is likewise far-fetched:

In *côté-lu* [...] we find the suggestion of sideways-reading, that which is read sidlingly, indirectly. Indeed we find that Cthulhu is “read” only through much sidling motion through multiple frames of narration. Yet we do “read” him, see him. But we see him from afar; he is beneath the waves while we are on the shore. *Côte*, “shore,” “coast,” gives us another transcription: *côte-yeux lu*, that which is read with shore-eyes. This underscores the distancing of the telescoped narrative frames, while, as we have seen, the borders of those frames nevertheless flicker in and out of existence, oscillating between the mutually antithetical functions of separating and bonding. (84–85)

Now, the pertinence of these Derridean concepts to the story is not in question. What Burleson says elsewhere about reading against the grain, multiple and shifting frames of narration, the play of presence and absence, or the deconstruction of binary oppositions in Lovecraft’s fiction is convincing enough. What remains unconvincing, however, is how he reads these ideas into the name, and this is due to the far-fetched associations he draws up with a string of French words that do not work from a syntactical point of view, and that do not resemble the teratonym from a phonetic point of view. In sum, Burleson demonstrates an acute case of what Umberto Eco calls over interpretation.<sup>13</sup> With the association of *chthonic*, he twists the facts of the text to fit his reading of the name. With his pseudo-French combinations, he stretches the form of the name to fit his desired reading of the text.

In all fairness, Burleson is not entirely at fault here. As stated above, teratonyms invite even as they resist this kind of analysis. Hence, as Burleson suggests, *Cthulhu* does indeed conjure up the word *chthonic*, derived from an ancient vocable frequently linked with the underworld. But to dig too deeply and rigorously into etymology is bound to lead to a specious interpretation. For Lovecraft’s invented vocables acquire



semantic values within a field of liminal signification, where meanings are vague, suggestive, insubstantial, and emotionally charged. The resemblance with *chthonic* calls up vaguely nefarious associations, and that is all. Yet, this is enough, as a useful metaphor will help to demonstrate. Linguists often speak of the relationship between the two aspects of a sign, the signifier and the signified, as one of transparency: readers look through the material substance of the written word (the signifier) to see the meaning that lies behind it (the signified). When confronted with a teratonym, however, the reader looks through the name as if through a glass darkly, and this murkiness incites the apocalyptic imagination into a riot of images, sensations, and feelings. The names of Lovecraft's monsters are constructed, not upon the solid foundations of etymology and lexical association, but rather upon a semiotic phantasmagoria. Hence, the estranged sounds and form of *Cthulhu* are sufficiently opaque to resist an interpretation based upon a normative hermeneutics, and yet they let through just enough murky light to invite an imaginative and emotive response that is as vague as it is expansive. Attempting to clarify or illuminate the meaning of the name beyond that simply diminishes its affective import.

Within this penumbra of signification, the sensory forms of the vocables are brought to the fore, heightening the speaker's awareness of the corporality of speech in a horrific manner. This point is brought out in Lovecraft's varying instructions on how to pronounce *Cthulhu*:

The actual sound — as nearly as human organs could imitate it or human letters record it — may be taken as something like *Khlul'bloo*, with the first syllable pronounced gutturally and very thickly. The *u* is about like that in *full*; and the first syllable is not unlike *klul* in sound, since the *h* represents the guttural thickness. The second syllable is not very well rendered — the *l* being unrepresented. (1976b: 11)

Other comments gathered by Price indicate that the “best approximation one can make is to grunt, bark, or cough the imperfectly formed syllables *Club-Lhu* with the tip of the tongue firmly affixed to the roof of the mouth” (47). Or even that the name should be whistled, and that the “noise made in this way is not really like speaking, but is more like the sound a man makes when he tries to imitate a steam-whistle” (48). In attempting to pronounce *Cthulhu* following these instructions, the vocal production of speech is pushed to the limits: the efforts to reproduce the sounds will involve grunting, barking, coughing, or whistling. These strange articulations require an exaggerated, unpleasant, even painful use of the vocal apparatus that can hardly be ignored.<sup>14</sup> An even more extreme example is found in the mysterious place name *Nbhnggr*: applying the author's instructions for *Cthulhu* that an *h* represents “guttural thickness,” an English speaker's attempt to enunciate the sounds will result in a tense, low growl.

If to a lesser degree, any of the vocables which lie outside or run contrary to the patterns of English will promote a heightened awareness of the physical production of speech. For the sounds and forms of *Nyarlathotep*, *Yog-Sothoth*, *S'ngac*, *Pth'thya-l'yi*, or *R'lyeb* will provoke a short pause, even a prolonged moment of experimentation in the reading of a text, during which the reader seeks the right pronunciation and accentuation for the name — while perhaps also relishing its “taste,” as Tolkien would say (1984: 192). What we are dealing with in teratonymy, then, is much more than uncovering the hidden meanings of a name, or analyzing what makes a name

right for a horrific creature. Rather, these monstrous names urge the critic to move beyond familiar conventions and explore lesser-known aspects of namecraft to focus on the aesthetics of linguistic invention, which covers both the vocal sensations to which the style of the names give rise, and also the emotions that these sensations arouse.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Joshi identifies books such as the *Necronomicon* as the second “device” (1999: xvii), but it makes more sense to give priority to the cults that have produced the blasphemous tomes and that practice the lore and rituals found in them.
- <sup>2</sup> In the terminology of Angenot, the names of the Cthulhu mythos, together with bits and pieces of invented languages that appear in these stories, represent an absent semiotic paradigm (1979: 12–13). Even when relatively few, these forged vocables serve as a manifestation, synecdoche, or suggestion of a semiotic paradigm that is absent, yet coherent. And this paradigm is intimately linked with the hypothetical reality of Lovecraft’s imaginary universe.
- <sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, “teratonym” is an original coinage that combines the prefix *terato-* with the suffix *nym*, derived from the Greek words for “monster” (*teras*) and “name” (*onoma*).
- <sup>4</sup> Lovecraft’s fiction and correspondence point to deep affective ties with the social, cultural, and geographical heritage of his native New England, and this fierce attachment to his own milieu is coupled with a pronounced case of xenophobia. For sensitive discussions of this topic, see the studies by Lovett-Graff (1997) and Houellebecq (1999) listed below.
- <sup>5</sup> Joshi and Cannon note that *Gammell* is a variant spelling of *Gamwell* (1999: 175).
- <sup>6</sup> Murray argues that *Nyarlathep* is modeled after two names found in Irish writer Lord Dunsany’s imaginary pantheon: *Albireth-Hotep* and *Mynarthitep* (1991: 26). While Lovecraft was an admirer of Dunsany, Wetzel’s observations concerning the presence of African and Egyptian morphologies in *Nyarlathep* is supported by the persistent link in the author’s fiction between the deity it designates and ancient Egypt.
- <sup>7</sup> The author adopted this name as a nom-de-plume when a child under the spell of the *Arabian Nights*. While it is uncertain whether he created it himself or was given it by an adult, the fact that Lovecraft retained the name in his mature fiction allows it to serve here for the purposes of illustration.
- <sup>8</sup> Whether that perception is linguistically accurate is of little importance. As Krueger writes of the African-sounding names in Murray Leinster’s “Sand Doom,” “I am in no position to evaluate whether these names actually occur in some African language or in more than one, or how accurately they may reflect the possibilities actually found. If they sound ‘African’ to the reader, their purpose is served” (1966: 208). The same can be said of Lovecraft’s attempts to imitate Semitic and ancient Egyptian names in the forging of his teratonyms.
- <sup>9</sup> These levels follow a scheme drawn up by Valesio in his discussion of “phonological admissibility,” which attempts to account for why certain neologisms work in a given language, while others do not (1973). Only in the case of Lovecraft’s anti-aesthetics, I have turned things around, to assess why these forged vocables possess such low levels of admissibility within English.
- <sup>10</sup> Clore himself notes that the tone-colors he uncovers in Lovecraft’s “neocognomina” are not the only elements in creating the impressions that these names make, even if they “undeniably add to the atmospheric effectiveness of the tales” (1998: 34). This is an important caveat. Scientific studies of sound symbolism show that the perception of semantic and affective values associated with phonemes depends heavily on context and suggestion. Fónagy best sums up the matter when he states that the latent tendencies of individual sounds cannot be put into action with words in isolation, but must be brought out by the text or context in which the sounds and words appear (1979: 83). In the case of teratonyms, these tendencies are foregrounded — over and beyond the simple fact that they designate monsters — by the same factors that have shaped the styles of the nomenclatures, such as their cultural associations and anti-aesthetics.
- <sup>11</sup> The French words *côté-lu* and *côte-yeux-lu* are pronounced /kotely/ and /kotzjøly/, respectively. In the latter, the silent final vowel of *côte*, when followed by the semi-vowel /j/ in *yeux*, requires an elision or the interposition of a soft Z. Contrary to English, moreover, there is no accentuation of syllables in French. Hence, neither of the “transcriptions” proposed by Burleson corresponds to the pronunciation of the name typically heard from readers: /kɑˈθu:lu:/ (see note 14 below). Even the usual French pronunciation does not correspond to these strings of words. Unlike English speakers, the French have little difficulty with the KT cluster, and thus do not

separate the two consonants to interpose a vowel. Rather than pronounce the first syllables along the lines of *coté* or *côte*, they articulate /kt/ followed by the vowel /y/ to result in something like /ktyly/. While the repeated /y/ is identical to that in *lu*, as Burleson suggests, it is distinctly different from the /e/ in *coté* and the /o/ in *yeux*.

<sup>12</sup> Contrary to English, modifiers in French follow their object rather than precede it, which requires putting *lu* before, not after *côté*, and both *lu* and *yeux* before *côte*. Moreover, both strings of words require the introduction of the prepositions *de* or *par*, as in *lu de côté* or *lu par des yeux de la côte*. Finally, it is necessary to place the article *la* before *côte*, otherwise the latter would be understood as

the side of a torso or the ribs. These grammatical elements are not easily dispensed with.

<sup>13</sup> Eco explores this problem at length in *The Role of the Reader* (1984) and *The Limitations of Interpretation* (1994).

<sup>14</sup> Of course, most readers cheat by inserting a vowel between the two initial consonants, assimilating the first H into the digraph TH and dropping the final H. The result is something along the lines of “*kub-THOO-loo*,” which the *Call of Cthulhu* game book characterizes as “the easiest, though not best way to say it” (Petersen & Willis, 2005: 24). Indeed, the informed reader of Lovecraft would not miss out on trying to utter the name as intended, even if not every time it appears in the text.

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## Notes on contributor

Christopher L. Robinson directs English studies and chairs the Languages and Cultures Department at HEC-Paris. His current research into onomastic invention focuses on how writers experiment with and experience language, especially in terms of gender, childhood, affect and the body. His previous publications include articles on Ursula K. Le Guin, Kathy Acker, and Willa Cather.

Correspondence to: Christopher L. Robinson, CREA, Department of Languages and Cultures, HEC-Paris, 1 rue de la Libération, 78351 Jouy en Josas CEDEX, France. Email: robinson@hec.fr