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She-Devil Otherness and the Last Hieroglyph:
Reclaiming the Cosmic in Clark Ashton Smith's "Zothique Cycle"

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Abstract

In this essay I propose that both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's system of androcentric commerce and Luce Irigaray's "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" are elements as pervasive as the dying star trope in Clark Ashton Smith's "Zothique Cycle" through a feminist critique of "The Black Abbot of Puthuum," "Morthylla," "The Charnel God" and "Necromancy in Naat." To this end, I expose the materialistic foundations of Clark Ashton Smith's "Zothique Cycle" by re-examining the author's claim that cosmicism is the predominant literary philosophy at work in his short stories, and by raising issues of racial hybridity and female otherness throughout the cycle. Finally, I consider the Freudian death anxiety in "The Weaver in the Vault" and "The Last Hieroglyph" to demonstrate the means by which Smith transcends his material foundations in order to achieve the cosmic otherness of the genre.

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Clark Ashton Smith's weird fiction is characterized by its otherworldly sublimity, its Romantic fascination with an inhumane cosmos, its desire to transcend the confines of literary realism, and its flirtation with the ineluctable horror that results from a love affair with the macabre. As a category of literature, weird fiction is a liminal genre occupying a space between science fiction and fantasy. Smith believed he was the late beneficiary of a genre in incubation since the middle of the nineteenth century and that he represented the last vestige of "purist" imaginative literature (Smith Letter Oct. 1930). Smith adhered to a "cosmicist" view of the universe, and fashioned himself uniquely gifted with a "sense of [...] cosmic strangeness and mystery" (SL. 24 Oct. 1930). Among other things, "cosmicism" consists of an appreciation for the occult mysteries, an obsession with eschatology, a "disenchantment with the social world," (SL. 24 Oct. 1930) and a disdain for scientism and modernism (SL. 27 Sept. 1937). Beyond these attributes, "cosmicism" emphasizes the supreme insignificance of humanity through the employment of indifferent, god-like alien entities and preternatural experience beyond the capacities of human sensation.

"Cosmic" moments in the "Zothique cycle" are those transcendent moments that reach beyond the material conditions of the narrative. These moments do not occur in each individual

story of the cycle, and so we have to consider the cycle as a whole, and likewise each story as uniquely apposite to the conceit of the whole. When Smith does achieve the “cosmic,” it is not because his protagonists struggle against alien invaders, she-devil otherness or the incomprehensible. These others are determined by fate in the same way as the protagonists. Once both the protagonist and the other are reduced to struggling caricatures of themselves, the hierarchy that differentiates them dissolves, their desires equalize, their suffering becomes universalized, and Smith achieves the “cosmic.”

Scholarship on the weird fiction writers’ aesthetic and stylistic preferences owes much to the writers’ correspondence. In these letters, Smith names *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Vathek*, and the fairy tales of Christian Andersen and Countess Marie d’Aulnoy as important in his formative¹ years. While Smith was a prolific poet, he wrote various “oriental” romances for pulp magazines early in his writing career (SL. 21 Oct. 1952). Despite Smith’s numerous complaints about the critics’ lack of nuance (SL. 11 Jan. 1923) in determining his influences, Smith indicates that Poe was his utmost source of inspiration several times in his letters and essays (SL. 11 July. 1950). In addition to Poe, the French Romantic and Decadent poets Baudelaire, Gautier, and novelist Flaubert, as well as the French Symbolist poet Mallarmé, influenced Smith’s poetics stylistically. George Sterling, who belonged to Ambrose Bierce’s circle of West Coast Bohemians (who were themselves inspired by the French Decadent Movement) is credited with having first introduced Smith to these French poets (St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers).

¹ Notably, he was not educated beyond grammar school (“An Autobiography of Clark Ashton Smith” 42).

Following Sterling's suicide, H.P. Lovecraft implored Smith to return to fiction.² Thus, between 1926 and 1935, Smith produced most of the "Zothique cycle." He wrote about the premise for Zothique in a letter to H.P. Lovecraft in 1931.

This primal continent seems to have been particularly subject to incursions of "outsideness"—more as, in fact, than any of the other continents and terrene realms that lie behind us in the time-stream. But I have heard it hinted in certain obscure and arcanic prophecies that the far-future continent called Gnydron by some and Zothique by others, which is to rise millions of years hence in what is now the South Atlantic, will surpass even Hyperborea in this regard and will witness the intrusion of Things from galaxies not yet visible; and, worse than this, a hideously chaotic breaking-down of dimensional barriers which will leave parts of our world in other dimensions, and vice versa. When things get to that stage, there will be no telling where even the briefest journey or morning stroll might end. The conditions will shift, too; so there will be no possibility of charting them and thus knowing when or where one might step off into the unknown. (SL. 15-23 Feb. 1931)

For all its "antiquity," "demonism," and "sorcery," (Murray) the "Zothique cycle" is unified by a single image—that of Earth's blood-red star, bloated with age. In almost all of Smith's tales from this cycle, the sun's deathless glare is a reminder of Earth's inevitable doom. But Smith's oppressive star, "dim and tarnished as if with a vapor of blood" ("The Dark Eidolon" 128) is a trope, the styling of which precedes Smith by approximately three decades in the work of writers such as William Hope Hodgson in *The Night Land* (1912) and H.G. Wells in

² See Smith's correspondence with H.P. Lovecraft after 1922.

The Time Machine (1895). In the final chapter of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveler witnesses the slow death of the Sun:

At last, some time before I stopped, the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat, and now and then suffering a momentary extinction. The sky was no longer blue [. . .] North-eastward it was inky black, and out of the blackness shone brightly and steadily the pale white stars. Overhead it was a deep Indian red and starless, and south-eastward it grew brighter to a glowing scarlet where, cut by the horizon, lay the huge hull of the sun, red and motionless [. . .] I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs; all contributed to an appalling effect [...] So I traveled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth's fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away. (Wells 75)

Through the dying-star trope and the encroaching of various alien entities upon Zothique, Smith shows that the omnipresence of celestial phenomena signifies the unknown. In this way, Smith intends to oppose the “tyranny of the homocentric” by emphasizing “ultrahuman” experience in his science fiction (“Fantasy and Human Experience” 14). In the following critique, he issues a caveat against the didactic tendency that arises from work overly intimate with the socio-political:

Wells, when he wrote the marvelous *Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, and other fine fantasies, had in him much of the artist, perhaps a little of the poet. These, however, have been progressively smothered and drowned out by the growth of the pedagogue, the utilitarian “humanist.” (“Fantasy and Human Experience” 14)

Smith believes that his protagonists, unlike H.G. Well’s Time Traveler, whose journey underscores social-class inequalities, venture to other worlds in order to escape the “human equation” (SL. 16 Nov. 1930). “The Planet of the Dead,” for example, bridges the gap between Smith’s distinctly science-fiction stories and his fantastic ones. In many ways, “The Planet of the Dead” is a precursor to the “Zothique cycle.” In this tale, the human astronomer Francis Melchior, “had an intuitional grasp of the heavenly immensitudes, a mystic sensitivity toward all that is far off in space” and awakens as the poet Antarion on the planet Phandiom after gazing longingly into the heavens through his telescope, the instrument to which he has devoted most of his earthly existence. Smith’s science fiction differs from other pulp writers of his time in that it readily admits the supernatural and often values a departure into the fantastic over naturalistic explanations: “I would vastly prefer to write tales of the supernatural and the purely fantastic like ‘Averoigne.’ This pretense of being scientific gives me a pain. The mythology of science is not one that intrigues me very deeply” (SL. 21 Oct. 1930). For Smith, exactly how Melchior is transported to the dubious reality of Phandiom is unimportant. Instead, Smith focuses on Antarion’s love affair with Thameera, the atmosphere of Phandiom, and the looming dread that anticipates the death of the “blood-red sun” which illuminates the necropolis of Saddoth. Smith offers no apologies for the inexplicable: “[...] my own standpoint is that there is absolutely no justification for literature unless it serves to release the imagination from the bounds of every-

day life” (SL. Oct. 1930). In “The Planet of the Dead,” Melchior accomplishes exactly this kind of escapism, hovering between his death on Phandiom and his life on earth. When the displaced astronomer re-awakens on earth “[he] is still a little doubtful as to which is the real dream: his lifetime on earth, or the month in Phandiom below a dying sun, when, as the poet Antarion, he loved the superb and sorrowful beauty of Thameera.” According to Smith, escapism is not a regression into the ideals of Romanticism but a desirable “mental and sensory evolution” in the “adumbration or foreshadowing of man's relationship—past, present, and future—to the unknown and infinite” (“The Philosophy of the Weird Tale”).

In order to accept Smith’s claim that “‘human interest’ is not in the least essential” (SL. 26 May 1912) to his work, we would have to consciously ignore those material conditions and economic systems which give his work “imaginative life” and render it “as natural & scientific—as truly related to natural [...] psychological processes as the starkest of photographic realism” (SL. 16 Nov. 1926). When Smith writes of those individuals who have retained a sense of the “cosmic,” he concludes that his work can only be appreciated by the “plebs and the spiritual patricians.”

Popular education has effectively killed anything of the sort in the middle-classes; and the only people who retain it are the ignorant, or those who have the spark strongly enough to survive the snuffing-out influence of relative knowledge: so, as you say, the field narrows down to the plebs and the spiritual patricians. (SL. 24 Oct. 1930)

Here he indirectly acknowledges the existence of certain material conditions that must necessarily exist in his work in order to generate the kind of appeal that crosses socioeconomic boundaries. In other words, there is no getting “*outside* the human aquarium” (“Fantasy and

Human Experience” 14) without first creating one out of which to escape. Materiality and androcentric commerce³ frame Smith’s “cosmic” narrative, and by transcending them he achieves the “cosmic.” The thematic struggle of the “Zothique cycle,” then, is not so much a deferring of the material for the “cosmic” as it is a struggle to transcend the material in order to *reclaim* the “cosmic.”

The traffic in women⁴ constitutes one of these conditions. The other is materiality itself, that is, materiality as it is implied by a philosophy of Materialism, and materiality in the broader, more visceral sense of the physical. Tracing the material in Zothique starts from the outside in—from the celestial to the terrestrial—via the dying-star trope. Whenever we are being reminded of the “dim sun and sad heavens where the stars come out in terrible brightness before eventide” (“The Empire of the Necromancers” 44), we are being reminded of the mortality of the cosmos and the universality of death.

The nature of the gods serves to emphasize this point. In the “Zothique cycle,” we encounter three deities: Thasaidon, “lord of seven hells” (“The Dark Eidolon” 128), Vergama, the god of fate, and Mordiggian, an eater of the dead. Of the three, Thasaidon is never made incarnate. Instead, he is depicted as a hidden, oracular force that communicates with his worshippers through fetish objects.⁵ Unlike Mordiggian and Vergama, Thasaidon is a demon of desire, which “Man’s heart enthrones [...]” (128). He represents the impossibility of classical freedom in a universe determined by fate, and the absurdity of human desire within such a universe. In Zothique, the gods offer a limited kind of freedom, one in which the human agent possess the ability to *desire*, but not the ability to carry out his desires as actions. The agent only

³ As Charlotte Perkins Gilman used this term in *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture*.

⁴ As the term is used by Gale Rubin in her essay “The Traffic in Women.”

⁵ In “The Dark Eidolon,” Thasaidon’s oracle is a gigantic statue of an armored figure wielding a mace and seven silver lamps “wrought in the form of horses’ skulls.” The aspect of the oracle differs only slightly in “The Isle of the Torturers,” “The Garden of Adompha,” and “Xeethra.”

has classical freedom insofar as his desires are in accordance with the way in which fate has determined his actions. This kind of fatalistic compatibilism necessarily entails determinism, which in turn entails Materialism. Thasaidon's gifts of demonic power, therefore, only serve to frustrate the discontented, who want above all else to circumvent their fates.

Despite the inherent futility of desire, existence without desire is an "evil greater than death" ("Empire of the Necromancers" 51). When Mmatmuor and Sodosma resurrect the dead inhabitants of Cincor in "The Empire of the Necromancers," we learn that the dead possess a dim awareness of their bond of servitude, and that by being so enthralled, they are doubly determined, first by fate and second by the desires of other men:

Dumbly they obeyed the dictates of their tyrannous lords, without rebellion or protest, but filled with a vague, illimitable weariness such as the dead must know, when having drunk of eternal sleep, they are called back once more to the bitterness of mortal being. They knew no passion or desire, or delight, only the black languor of their awakening from Lethe, and a gray, ceaseless longing to return to that interrupted slumber. (49)

But the undead rulers in "The Empire of the Necromancers" Ileiro and Hestaiyon are not fated to remain Mmatmuor and Sodosma's servants, and so by way of prophecy they uncover the means to overthrow the necromancers. Fate and desire, coupled in this way, are represented by fetish objects: two tablets containing the prophecy, a key, and a sword.⁶

Fate, like the gods, is neither unjust nor indifferent to desire. Instead, the most powerful forces in Zothique, which reign over both the terrestrial *and* the "cosmic," are also the most *humane* ones. In "The Charnel God," the Mordiggian permits Phariom to rescue Elaith from his charnel house, while his priests devour Abnon-Tha and the offending necromancers. In "The

⁶ Relics of this sort serve the same purpose in "The Isle of the Torturers" and "The Dark Eidolon."

Dark Eidolon,” Thasaidon refuses to aid Namirra in destroying the empire of Xylac solely because Namirra has a personal vendetta against Prince Zotulla.

I will not aid you in this vengeance you have planned: for the emperor has done me no wrong and has served me well though unwittingly; and the people of Xylac, by reason of their turpitudes, are not the least of my terrestrial worshippers [. . .] For the ways of destiny are strange, and the workings of its laws sometimes hidden; and truly, if the hooves of Zotulla’s palfrey had not spurned you and trodden you under, your life had been otherwise, and the name and renown of Namirra had still slept in oblivion as a dream. (140)

All these desires are subsumed by the struggle against determinism. The journey of the boy-goatherd in “Xeethra” is an allegory of this struggle. Heedless of his uncle’s admonitions, Xeethra unwittingly descends into Thasaidon’s netherworld, “seduced by [the promise] of un beholden marvelous things.” Within this realm “was an Eden of untasted delights,” a “sound like the hissing of many small serpents” and a “red luxuriant fruit,” all of which intimate the Fall (4-5). When Xeethra “devours one of the fruits” (6), he is, like Adam, enchained by the carnality of the flesh and then expelled from the garden by “figures [...] clad in black armor, lusterless and gloomy, such as demons might wear in the service of Thasaidon, lord of the bottomless underworlds” (7). Xeethra’s subsequent transformation, from the identity of the goatherd to King Amero, suggests both the substance dualism implied by the Resurrection⁷ and a loss of innocence: “[...] he was perplexed by a queer and unwonted vagueness in regard to his own identity: somehow it was not Xeethra the goatherd... but another... who had found the bright garden-realm and had eaten the blood-dark fruit” (7). When Xeethra is transformed by desire, he allegorically enters the realm of the flesh, which, being subject to causality, represents the

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 15:35-49.

material world. Xeethra-as-King-Amero is alien to the identity of Xeethra-the-goatherd in that Amero does not represent Romantic pastoralism but worldliness and the “ancient pomp of royalty” (7). Once King Amero makes a pact with Thasaidon to restore his long forgotten kingdom Calyz, King Amero restores the system of androcentric commerce, transforming “wildness and sterility” (13) into “long nights of debauch” (19). The obscene revelry that precedes the fall of King Amero’s kingdom is the same revelry that precedes every doomed king in Zothique.⁸ The motif most likely descends from Edgar Allan Poe’s allegory, “The Masque of the Red Death” and the death anxiety that accompanies Prospero’s downfall, which arises out of his cognizance of the disconnect between human desire and fate. The death anxiety manifests itself first as a hyperawareness of mortality and then as carnal indulgence. This is reinforced by the judgment Thasaidon casts upon Xeethra after his crisis of identity: “There is no need to take your soul [...] Remain here with the lepers, or return to Pornos and his goats, as you will: it matters little. At all times and all places your soul shall be part of the dark empire of Thasaidon” (23). Does the “dark empire” refer to the material realm, with its fatal desires? How do we reconcile the crisis of identity in light of the story’s epigram: “Subtle and manifold are the nets of the Demon, who followeth his chosen from birth to death and from death to death, throughout many lives” (4)? To what extent can we make the distinction between the soul and the body in Zothique, given the premise for substance dualism suggested by Xeethra’s allegory? These are all pressing questions of “human interest” that, despite their homocentrism, touch upon the “cosmic.”

The material foundation of Smith’s cycle rests on the same “sex-demented republic” he vigorously criticized in his essay “On Garbage Mongering” (12). A close reading of several of

⁸ For specific examples see: “The Death of Ilalotha,” “The Planet of the Dead,” “The Witchcraft of Ulua,” “The Dark Eidolon” and “The Empire of the Necromancers.”

the tales reveals that the presence of a terrestrial economy of androcentric commerce, centered on the traffic in women, is just as pervasive in Zothique as the dying-star trope. Through it, Smith attributes to women an otherness equal to that of Zothique's "yellow people" ("Isle of the Torturers" 223-224) and monstrous "negroes." In Smith's cycle, otherness is a negative characteristic that limits the characterization of women to one of two categories—angel-women or she-devils.⁹ The woman "other" becomes either a commodity or a threat to the production of women as commodities. Likewise, racial otherness, to a lesser extent, demonizes blacks and orientalizes¹⁰ Asians, so that its victims are barred from participation in androcentric commerce and thereby disempowered. In the introduction to the *Tales of Zothique*, Smith paints a clear picture of the races comprising Zothique:

Zothique, as I conceive it, comprises Asia Minor, Arabia, Persia, India, parts of northern and eastern Africa, and much of the Indonesian archipelago. A new Australia exists somewhere to the south. To the west, there are only a few known islands, such as Naat, in which the black cannibals survive. To the north, are immense unexplored deserts; to the east, an immense unvoyaged sea. The peoples are mainly of Aryan or Semitic descent; but there is a negro kingdom (Ilgar) in the north-west; and scattered blacks are found throughout the other countries, mainly in palace-harems. (Murray)

Women in Smith's tales are marginalized by the twin "angel-monster" typology with remarkable consistency. Smith characterizes the angelic female by her inarticulateness, passivity, and deathlessness. "[The angelic female] has no story of her own" (815) write Gilbert and Gubar, because her sole purpose is to contribute to the greatness of men.

⁹ In "The Madwoman in the Attic," Gilbert and Gubar typify the female other as "angel" or "monster."

¹⁰ As the term is defined in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

In her “contemplative purity,” the [angel-woman is] a living momento of the otherness of the divine [. . . .] whose death, thought Edgar Allan Poe, “is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.” [...] Whether she becomes an *objet d’art* or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desire, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. (817)

In Smith’s “The Charnel God,” for example, Elaith, the traveler Phariom’s “girlish wife,” (106) is mistaken for dead by the Priests of Mordiggian because she is paralyzed by an epileptic coma. The plot involves recovering Elaith from Mordiggian’s charnel house before the necrophagus Priests and their dark god devour her along with the other corpses. As the ultimate subordinated female identity in Smith’s cycle, Elaith represents Smith’s token angel-woman, who inhabits both the world of the living and the dead. In fact, the only woman whose beauty equals Elaith’s in “The Charnel God” is Arctela, a dead noblewoman who is sealed up alongside Elaith in Mordiggian’s charnel house: “Her beauty, warm and voluptuous even in death, differed from the blond pureness of Elaith as tropic lilies differ from narcissi” (113). When the necrophilic antagonist Abnon-Tha attempts to raise Arctela and Elaith from the dead (inadvertently awakening Elaith from the coma), Elaith and Arctela become somnambulistic parallels, Elaith making an “ineffectual effort to arise from the couch,” and Arctela “mute and submissive before [...] the will of the necromancer” (124).

The men who control androcentric commerce pursue angel-women either to possess them or recover them from thieves. Like Phariom, Yadar in “Necromancy in Naat” pursues his wife Dalili in order to recover her from slave traders. Yadar finds Dalili early in the story, but she is

now a member of the necromancers' undead legion in Naat. Under the thrall of the necromancers, Dalili can only respond to Yadar's inquiries "somnolently, in a toneless, indistinct voice [...] like one bemused by some heavy drug, as if echoing his words without true comprehension" (29-30).

The reason why Smith depicts angel-women as somnambulists is exactly the same reason why Edgar Allan Poe finds the death of the angel-women "the most poetical topic in the world." Angel-women are "pure exchange value" (Irigaray 807) in androcentric commerce. The woman Beldith, masquerading as a lamia in "Morthylla,"¹¹ literally fashions herself after the dead in order to satisfy the necrophilic desires of the story's protagonist, the poet Valzain. Valzain's "longing for things beyond the material world" (158) is a longing coterminous with Smith's literary aims as a writer of weird fiction, but when Valzain reveals the nature of this longing, it becomes paradoxical.

"In the drums of slumber," mused Valzain. "I have clasped succubi who were more than flesh, have known delights too keen for he waking body to sustain. Do such dreams have any source, outside the earthborn brain itself? I would give much to find that source, if it exists." (159)

In other words, Valzain longs for *supernatural* carnality, and the oxymoron only contradicts Smith's claims about his own work. Once Beldith is exposed as "little more than a harlot," (164) she is no longer a source of exchange value, and Valzain loses interest in her.

The term "exchange value" in this context comes from Luce Irigaray, who, in her essay "Women on the Market," codifies the systems of exchange involved in androcentric commerce. "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (799). In this

¹¹ That "Morthylla" most likely derives from *mortuus* (Latin for dead) is compelling when we consider the context for deathlessness suggested by the nature of the angel-woman.

system, women are exchanged exclusively by men, because their bodies, “through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible” (799).

In still other words: all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men [. . .] Which means that the possibility of our social life, of our culture, depends upon a ho(m)mo-sexual [sic] monopoly? The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men’s needs/desires, of exchanges among men. (800)

Irigaray is suggesting that “heterosexuality [is] just an alibi for the smooth workings of a man’s relations with himself, of relations among men” by indicating that a metaphorical “ho(m)mo-sexual monopoly” is the result of the exchange of women among men (800). The wizardly kings of Zothique and their male subjects, like the proprietors of Irigaray’s “ho(m)mo-sexual monopoly,” are the chief participants in this exchange economy. And on a *dying* Earth, where not only resources but life itself is rare, the patriarchal impulse to maintain control over the means of sexual reproduction is amplified. Thus, virgins become commodities and she devils—the embodiment of patriarchal fear.

“The Black Abbot of Puthuum” brings together both the feminine otherness of the angel-woman and the racial otherness of blacks in a single narrative. “The Black Abbot of Puthuum,” like all of Smith’s Zothique stories, is situated within the context of a patriarchy and features the adventure of male protagonists. Zobal and Cushara set out alongside a corpulent eunuch named Simban to purchase Rubsala, a “young maiden of celestial beauty who had been seen among the

pastoral peoples beyond Izdrel” (168) for the “captious lust of [the] sated” (189) King Hoaraph. Almost immediately, we are informed of their “long and lusty amity broken only by [...] the division of a wine-skin or the apportioning of a wench” and the sacredness of this amity, that “many a libation [they poured] to their friendship.” Symbolically, Cushara and Zobal constitute the phallic “soldiery” circumscribing the propriety of Hoaraph’s sexual economy in Faraad. The only identities ascribed to the two men are those of the “archer” and the “pikebearer” respectively, their virility in “savagery,” and their “common hardihood and [...] fealty to the king” (167).

Simban accompanies these men as the “chief purveyor to Hoaraph’s well-replenished harem” (167). Like black slaves and she-devils, eunuchs people many of the kingdoms in Zothique. Simban is empowered to participate in androcentric commerce because he is a eunuch, and throughout “The Black Abbot of Puthuum,” he is subtly attributed an otherness equivalent to that of all the angel-women in Smith’s stories. When we encounter the “cronelike grandmother” (168) with whom Simban haggles to obtain Rubsala, the grandmother is empowered to participate in exchange among them. This is because she is a mother and cannot benefit from the exchange in androcentric commerce. “[Mothers] maintain social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the [Patriarch], only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him” (Irigaray 807).

Rubsala possesses all the characteristics of Smith’s angelic-women: “pale as the petals of white poppies” (168), she is valued for her “demure silence” (170) and limited in capacity for human agency and expression, which is restricted either to the reciprocation of masculine desire, pronounced hysteria or the necrophilic deathliness of Sleeping Beauty.

The three departed with the still drowsy Rubsala ere the village could awaken about them [. . .] she cried out in a voice whose sweetness was made shrill by alarm (168) [. . .] Rubsala had ceased her outcries, as if overcome by exhaustion or resignation [. . .] Simban was nigh dead from fright and fatigue; Rubsala drooped in her saddle (172) [. . .] She wore an air of mingled fright and confusion, like a sleeper who has just awakened from some atrocious nightmare. (188)

Rubsala's value as a commodity increases when the two warriors invest in her: "In order for a product—a woman—to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) [sic] her" (Irigaray 805). The impulse "to accumulate [women], to be able to count off [their] conquests, seductions, possessions" (801) as Hoaraph desires to do in continually expanding the capital of his harem, typifies the soldiers' gaze, which is "rapt in amorous revelries" (169).

The exchange-economy in "The Black Abbot of Puthuum" is only reinforced and complicated by the transgressions of its antagonist Ujuk, whose hybrid identity couples racial otherness with female autonomy. He is the product of the "great negro" (181) abbot Uldor and his "unholy union" (183) with a succubus. A storm of illusory assailants, blanketed in impenetrable blackness, besets the protagonists on all sides almost immediately after Rubsala is obtained from the pastoral Izdrel. This sorcerous evocation foreshadows the arrival of Ujuk, who is described as having

[...] rows of discolored teeth whose incisors were like those of a wild dog. His enormous unctuous jowls were creased by the grin into folds of amazing number and volume; and his eyes, deeply slanted and close together, seemed to wink perpetually in pouches that shook like ebon jellies. His nostrils flared

prodigiously; his purple, rubbery lips drooled and quivered, and he licked them with a fat, red, salacious tongue [...] Moreover, they had now noted the excessive and disagreeable length of the dark nails on his huge hands and bare, splayed feet: nails that were curving, three-inch talons, sharp as those of some beast or bird of prey. (174)

The kind of racial monstrosity accomplished here is matched only by its equally lavish display in “The Dark Eidolon,” wherein the Emperor Zotulla encounters the necromancer Namirrah’s bestiary of lamias, chimaeras, dog-headed devils, and a “curious being with the full-fleshed lower limbs and hips of a great black woman and the clean-picked bones of some titanic ape from thereupward,” (145) or in “The Isle of the Torturers,” which is home to an assortment of people whose “small and slaty [sic] eyes were set obliquely beneath lashless lids [and whose] thin lips, which smiled eternally, were crooked, as the blades of scimitars” (223).

Ujuk represents the threat female autonomy and racial hybridity pose to “the father-man[’s] reproductive power” and the father’s capability to “[mark] his products with his name, [which stems] from the very origin of private property and the patriarchal family, [and] social exploitation” (Irigaray 801). Women who are “killed into art” (Gilbert and Gubar 812) as monsters rather than angels constitute the other half of the twin typology. Monstrous women are just as common as angel-women in Smith’s stories—they represent “the author’s power to allay his ‘anxieties’ by calling [the source of his anxiety] bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’” (819).

Because this threat is as specious as it is symbolically intangible, Ujuk’s kind are multiple yet homogenous and wholly incoherent as entities possessing any inherent individuality.

When Cushara and Zobal survey the monastery of Puthuum, their observations of Ujuk's brethren confirm these fears:

They were all of unusual bulk and stature, and their features possessed an extraordinary likeness to those of Ujuk, from whom, indeed, they could hardly have been distinguished [. . .] The similarity extended even to their curved and talon-like nails of inordinate length [. . .] And these monks, like those encountered in the courtyard, were gross ebon-black simulacra of their abbot, resembling him precisely in every feature and member. (175)

In light of this, it comes as no surprise when Zobal learns that Ujuk's simulacra depend on Ujuk for their existence.

What about the "great negro" Zobal encounters beneath the monastery? His greatness, the narrator tells us, is the result of his "aspect of incredible age" and the fact that he has "lain there for centuries" bearing witness to his offspring's unspeakable crimes. "More than a thousand years ago," says Uldor, "I came with my monks to Yoros from Ilcar, the black empire of the north. The emperor of Ilcar had driven us forth, for our cult of celibacy, our worship of the maiden goddess Ojhal, were hateful to him" (182). Uldor's suffering in the present, by contrast, results from his submission to the temptations of "succubi, fair but baleful, lamiae with the round soft bodies of women" (183) and his subsequent imprisonment in the tomb by Ujuk, the offspring of his supernatural consort. In the context of androcentric commerce, Uldor's greatness derives from his sexual forbearance, his willingness to exempt black otherness from the exchange economy, through celibacy. If not for autonomy of women, those she-devils and lamiae who, by definition, control their own sexuality, Zothique would be cured of otherness via the posterity of the "Aryans."

Smith's closing scene in "The Black Abbot of Puthuum," which depicts the attempted-rape of Rubsala by the "fouly bloated form of Ujuk" (187) benefits readily from that "field of clinical analysis and sex-physiology" most reviled by Smith ("On Garbage Mongering" 12). Returning from Uldor with a talisman and the knowledge necessary to slay Ujuk, Zobal finds Cushara unable to defend Rubsala against Ujuk's harassment, because the monster has sealed the door to her bedroom with the illusion of an impregnable wall. Thanks to the formerly celibate monk's sage wisdom, Zobal is able to enter the vaginal portal separating the two men from their precious commodity. They have good reason to make haste, because, after all, "once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to [...] private property, [and] is removed from exchange among men" (Irigaray 808).

"The Black Abbot of Puthuum" concludes with Cushara and Zobal drawing lots for Rubsala's affections after Zobal decides, "that thou and I tonight have met and conquered such perils as were not contracted for in our services to Hoaraph" (189). The coinage of their employer Hoaraph, which Ujuk spilled amidst the bloody remains of Simban, is unfit for this kind of "sortilege." They choose to draw lots with Ujuk's talons, because, perhaps, Hoaraph's coins remind them that by stealing Rubsala from Hoaraph, they are abrogating the authority of the patriarchal father. Reciprocating masculine desire, Rubsala chooses one of the warriors as her mate, "pouting prettily [...] she flung her arms about the neck of Cushara" (190).

It is clearly undeniable that androcentric commerce factors strongly in the constitution of Smith's "The Black Abbot of Puthuum." Such an exhaustive reading is necessary to qualify what might seem to be at first a quixotic desire to refute the assertions of the author. But the economic system herein described is not restricted to this tale—in fact, a careful analysis of further tales, which the space of this essay does not permit, would only reinforce the reading. Moreover,

Smith's stories are not devalued by being subjected to this kind of interpretation. When it is revealed that the weird tale *is* in fact "so preoccupied with the anthropocentric," the effect is a better understanding of how the "Zothique cycle" *functions* textually, not a "[forfeiture of] some of its highest and rarest values" (Smith, "The Tale of Macrocosmic Horror" 18-19).

One way by which Smith causes materiality to hinge into the "cosmic" is through the equalization of the human protagonist with the alien other by means of an assignment of the death anxiety to that other. Like the soldiers of "The Black Abbot of Puthuum," Yanur, Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch start out as "three of the king's hardiest henchmen" ("The Weaver in the Vault" 81) and are sent by the king Famorgh of Tasuun on a deadly mission to acquire an artifact from the fallen kingdom of Chaon Gacca in order to increase the wealth of the king's harem.

And surely I must deem that Famorgh has inherited the madness of his forefather, Agmeni [. . . .] Harlots and sorcerers swarm in the palace of Famorgh like charnelworms; and now, in this princess Lunalia of Xylac whom he has taken to wife, he has found a harlot and a witch in one. He has sent us on this errand at the prompting of Lunalia, who desires the mummy Tnepreez for her own unhallowed purpose. Tnepreez, I have heard, was a great wizard in his time; and Lunalia would avail herself of the potent virtue of his bones and dust in the brewing of her philters. (83)

After the three warriors speculate as to the nature of Chaon Gacca's demise and the corpses missing from its tombs, they come upon Tnepreez's tomb. It is here that the three warriors, buried by an earthquake, encounter the Weaver, a mysterious entity that emerges from a chasm beneath the city to feed upon the dead. Only Grotara, the youngest of the warriors, survives the earthquake, but he is trapped beneath rubble, unable to escape the tomb. Smith describes

Grotara's enfeeblement in morbid detail, embellishing his slow transformation from a virile youth to an insensate savage: "After that, there were ages of fever, thirst and madness, of torment and slumber, and recurrent struggles against the massive block that held him prisoner. He babbled insanely, he howled like a wolf; or, lying supine and silent, he heard the multitudinous, muttering voices of ghouls that conspired against him" (93). Grotara's madness arises from the death anxiety, which the presence of the Weaver merely exacerbates, for the warrior realizes that the Weaver is necrophagus once it devours his dead comrades. Grotara ultimately characterizes the Weaver as zoëtic, "alive and aware" "blooming and perishing," (93) even beautiful.

The globe had grown enormous. It was flushed with unclean ruby, like a vampire moon. From it issued palpable ropes and filaments [...] like the weavings of a spider. Thickly and more thickly they multiplied [...] till he saw the sanguine burning of the globe [...] It bloomed with ghostly blossoms, and foliages that grew and faded. (93)

The Weaver's initial appearance, as a cold "baleful opal" (92) suggests the dying star trope, a signifier of death. As a visitor from an unknown netherworld, the Weaver's presence emphasizes Grotara's mortality. Yet a closer reading reveals the Weaver's hidden, animal nature, its feminine, generative power, and its dependence on the flesh to survive. The Weaver feeds on Grotara's body with the same animal lust Grotara adopts in his death throes and the two are equaled when they both become subject to this desire.

The situation in "The Tomb-Spawn" is the same, though the "cosmic" other is physically merged with its terrestrial cousin. The story's action is prefaced by an account of the legend of the wizard-king Ossaru, who allied himself with an alien being called Nioth Korghai. Korghai served Ossaru in exchange for sacrifices during its lifetime, and when the alien "sickened with a

strange malady” (191), Ossaru permanently bound himself and his servants in its tomb. Naturally, the male protagonists of the story, two merchant-boys named Milab and Marabac, happen upon the remains of this tomb, fulfilling the prophecy of its discovery.

The effect of foreshadowing the tale in this way is to heighten tension, as the fear of the unknown is replaced with an intense dread of the boys’ fate long before they come upon Korghai’s lair. At this point, they are already divested of their peoples’ riches, having encountered the Ghorii in the desert. It is thirst that drives them toward the sound of water among the ruins of Ossaru’s temple. Smith is preparing his protagonists for an encounter with the “cosmic” other, and he does this by reducing them to their basest desires: “between them they possessed only a handful of dried apricots and a water-bag that was three-fourths empty” (195). When the boys finally witness Korghai, Milab’s gesture echoes the image of Thirlain Ludoch’s burnt-out torch in “The Weaver in the Vault,” which Grotara witnesses in the tomb of Tnepreez:

[...] having neither noose nor candle, he tore a strip from the hem of his hempen burnoose, and lit the slow-burning cloth and held it aloft at arm’s length before him. By the dull, smouldering [sic] luminance thus obtained, the jewelers beheld more clearly the thing that bulked prodigious and monstrous, rearing above them from the fragment-littered floor to the shadowy roof. (197)

Both images echo lines Smith wrote in a letter to H.P. Lovecraft about the future of fantasy.

When the novelty of modern discoveries, etc., has worn off, it seems to me that people must go back to a realization of the environing, undissipated mystery, which will make for a restoration of the imaginative. Science, philosophy, psychology, humanism, after all, *are only candle-flares in the face of the eternal*

night with its infinite reserves of strangeness, terror, sublimity. (SL. Oct. 1930, emphasis added)

What happens in the “The Tomb-Spawn,” however, is not exactly a reduction of the human in light of the “cosmic.” Milab and Marabac discover that Nioth Korghai and king Ossaru have merged into a single entity, and beholding its horrifying aspect, they attempt to flee past a protective barrier that binds the undying creature to its tomb. The horror of the entity, despite its cuttlefish beak and tentacles, derives principally from its transfigured humanity, its “abhorrently groping hands,” “stumbling human feet,” and the “kingly greybeard” (198) of its doubled-head. Korghai-Ossaru reaches out to the boys with the same sentiment of horror from which they flee. “Least of all did they remember the storyteller in Faraad and the tale he had told them [. . .] The enormity that was both man and star-born monster, the name-less amalgam of an unearthly resurrection, stiff [sic] lumbered on and did not pause. With the hands that Ossaru who had forgotten his own enchantment [sic] . . . it entered the zone of death and dissolution” (198). Induced by the same primal terror as the boys, Korghai-Ossaru follows them toward eradication, circumscribed by a barrier that, in its commonality, reduces all to the death anxiety.

In 1934, Smith completed “The Last Hieroglyph,” which was first published in *Weird Tales* in 1935. Though generally regarded as the cycle’s thematic high point, “The Last Hieroglyph” was not the last story in the series.¹² In a letter to Robert H. Barlow, however, Smith wrote that “The Last Hieroglyph” should “form the concluding item of my Zothique series, if this series should ever appear in book form” (Murray).

The published version of “The Last Hieroglyph” includes a preface that demystifies the origins of the god of fate, Vergama. The preface renders the god preeminent in the cosmogony of Zothique: “...he was coeval with life and death, and was the first and the last of the uncreated

¹² Smith wrote more than a fourth of the cycle between 1936 and 1948, concluding with “Morthylla.”

gods.” Vergama identifies himself as “Destiny,” and we are told early in the story that “throughout the whole continent of Zothique, [Vergama] was deemed the most powerful and mysterious of the genii, and was thought to rule over the heavens as well as the earth” (77).

“The Last Hieroglyph” is about the destinies of Nushain the astrologer and his companions, Mouzda the Negro slave, and Ansarath, Nushain’s dog. What is unique their association is that rather than establishing a hierarchal relationship between them (man-slave-dog), Smith establishes a *triangular* one, in which the relations between characters are not so much a matter of difference as they are a dependency.

When, as often occurred, he found himself still at a loss regarding the significance of some heavenly conjunction or opposition after pouring over his books, he would consult Ansarath, and would draw profound auguries from the variable motions of the dog’s mangy tail or his actions in searching for fleas [. . .] Regarding [the augury] closely, the dim eyes of the astrologer were troubled by a sense of something unfamiliar in its configuration... These remarkable novae, which Nushain could discern only as three reddish blurs, formed a small equilateral triangle. (201)

That Mouzda is a mute, one-eyed Negro becomes relevant when we learn that Nushain has “dim eyes,” and depends on his slave’s vision to complete his augury. Figuratively, the slave and the master share a single eye, which fixes upon a single destiny. In the same way Mouzda and Nushain are linked, the dog and the mute slave are linked, one sharing the canine voice of the other. This is why the dog and the slave draw together in trepidation when the first of Vergama’s heralds visits Nushain, just as they draw together at the sides of Nushain when the three confront Vergama. The suggestion that these characters “were sensible to the weird uneasiness felt by

their master,” that they “shared it palpably” (203) and that despite these feelings they followed their master faithfully toward the throne of Vergama, points to the universality of the death anxiety and the binding essence underlying their triangular hierarchy.

As the three guides lead Nushain to Vergama, they chastise Nushain for resisting the destiny he himself has prophesized: “It would seem, O Nushain, that you have doubted your own horoscope... However, even a bad astrologer, on occasion, may read the heavens aright” (210). Nushain’s journey, like Xeethra’s, is allegorical, in the sense that he passes from the material world through the uncreated world to his destiny: “Time and space were surely outpassed during that voyage; and as if he had gone beyond mortal existence...” (211) The three guides preside over an eschatology that lies somewhere between Platonic idealism and substance-dualism. When Nushain passes through the decaying realm of the first guide out of Ummaos “it seemed to Nushain that he passed through boundless catacombs in which were housed the mortality and corruption of all the ages” (208). The emphasis on decay perhaps indicates the transcendence of the body. On the merman’s barge, Nushain traverses a “gray limbo of uncreated things” (212) before he is thrust through the purifying fires of the third guide. While Limbo and the fires of purgatory have their obvious parallels, Vergama’s ash-covered dominion does not. It is here that Nushain completes the metaphysical journey in order to confront a being whose cosmic nature, ironically, is contingent upon Nushain’s especial familiarity with it—the embodiment of Destiny, and the utmost source of the death anxiety.

As if to affirm the journey’s universality, Vergama remarks, “all men must make at one time or another, in one way or another” (215). In very clear language, he gives an account of Zothique’s cosmogony.

In my book... the characters of all things are written and preserved. All visible forms, in the beginning, were but symbols written by me; and at the last they shall exist only as the writing of my book. For a reason they issue forth, taking to themselves that which is known as substance... It was I, O Nushain, who set in the heavens the stars that foretold your journey; I, who sent the three guides. And these things, having served their purpose, are now but infoliate ciphers, as before.

(216)

In the final transformation of Nushain and his companions into Platonic forms, the Zothique cycle, also, is transformed into a “cosmic” narrative. The triangular hierarchy collapses into a single continuum of parallel desires. The pleading figures of the dog Ansarath and the Negro slave Mouzda are reduced to caricatures of themselves, mere hieroglyphs, “cowering close beside [Nushain, they] crouched near to [their] master, appealing as if for protection” (217). Nushain becomes “symbolized,” the last hieroglyph of the death anxiety, in a remarkable passage which concludes with Vergama’s turning of the page.

Once more the weird sighing arose, and a cold air played upon Nushain as he ran; and he paused midway in the vast room as if a wall had arrested him. Gently the air breathed on his lean, gaunt figure, and it lifted his graying locks and beard, and it plucked softly at the roll of papyrus which he still held in his hand. To his dim eyes, the room seemed to reel and swell, expanding infinitely. Bourne [sic] upward, around and around, in a swift vertiginous swirling, he beheld the seated shape as it loomed ever higher above him in cosmic vastness. Then the god was lost in light; and Nushain was a weightless and exile thing, the withered skeleton of a lost leaf, rising and falling on the bright whirlwind. (217-218)

Smith's Zothique cycle closes with a kind of transcendence that simultaneously confirms the immortality of ideas and inverts Platonic idealism. Yet while Nushain and his companions are returned to that book of immutable ciphers which is the essence of all things, the implication is that the body corporeal is *written* into existence, and that the art of imitation is not secondary to the forms. Hence, the material *precedes* the "cosmic." The idea that the lie is closer to the truth is something that Smith believed, and we find it exemplified in "The Last Hieroglyph."¹³

¹³ "Weird, fantastic writing, by its emphasis of the environing cosmic wonder and mystery of things, may actually be truer to the spirit of life than the work which merely concerns itself with literalities, as most modern fiction does." (Smith, "The Validity of Weird Stories" 23).

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