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Charles Brockden Brown, George Lippard, H. P. Lovecraft, and the Urban Underworld

Abstract

This study aims to examine the Gothic representation of the city in Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn *(1799-1800), George Lippard's* The Quaker City *(1845) and H. P. Lovecraft's short story "He" (1926). Whereas Brown and Lippard employ rhetorical strategies typical of the European Gothic tradition for a critical exposé of the urban milieu of antebellum Philadelphia, Lovecraft evokes a preternatural topography comprised of underground passageways, secret halls and labyrinthine streets to reveal New York's underbelly in the 1920s. Drawing on both the notion of spatial proximity (Luck 2014) and the reciprocal relationship between space, plot structure, and meaning, I argue that, although substantially different in style, philosophical subtext and social context, the depictions of urban spaces by the three authors share a profoundly anti-urban rhetoric, which, operating as a deforming lens, fragments the American city into a confusing network of horrors.*

Keywords: *Charles Brockden Brown, George Lippard, H. P. Lovecraft, urban Gothic, weird fiction*

1. Introduction

Although the United States began to witness a staggering urbanization process starting from the 1820s (Morse 1975, 6)—particularly between 1820 and 1870 (Goldfield 1990, 27; Warner 1972, 84)—18th-century American writers were already aware of the impending urban expansion and, as Heather Roberts points out, they looked at it as a plagued phenomenon imported from the Old World, in stark contrast with the rhetoric of an "American exceptionalism rooted in the nation's supposed pastoralism" (2007, 288). The increasingly developing metropolitan milieu "seemed to many contemporary observers to hold more peril than promise" (Roberts 2007, 287). Indeed, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) Thomas Jefferson had already eloquently argued that

> the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manner and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution. (1984, 291)

Fostered by economic, social and sanitary crises that were the results of a rapidly expanding industrialization, this sentiment of urban distrust proved to be fertile ground for the proliferation of texts that drew on the aesthetics of Gothic discourse to map America's nascent 'urbanophobia.' More generally, the Gothic would be in fact instrumental in the foundation of a national literary spirit aiming to emancipate itself from the mere importation and emulation of European prototypes. As Leslie Fiedler puts it, "the images of alienation, flight, and abysmal fear possess [American] fiction. Until the gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as the novel lasts, the gothic cannot die" (2008, 143). Combined with a shared antipathy toward the city, the American Gothic paved the way for the production of "a distinctive new literary form that transform[ed] the embryonic skepticism of Bradford and Jefferson into a fully realized cartography of urban terror" (Luck 2014, 125). Replacing "Gothic castles and chimeras" (Brown 1998, 641) with historically and geographically familiar settings—as Charles Brockden Brown states in the preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799)—urban Gothic framed the underside of the Republic's alienating cityscape within a wide array of discursive practices and media (penny newspapers, criminal biographies, novels, short stories, ...) that appealed to the reader's recondite fears of the urban environment (Roberts 2007, 289). Coherently with the trend that saw "the more popular fiction of the day explor[e] the imaginative terrain of the country's new capitalist cities" (Roberts 2007, 287), urban spaces were thus refigured as part and parcel of a modern inferno with claustrophobic buildings, underground passageways and maze-like streets haunted by crime, filth and disease.

This study proposes to explore the materially and metaphorically disorienting topography of urban Gothic in Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845) and H. P. Lovecraft's short story "He" (1926). The structure of the essay follows the chronological order in which the three works were published. It analyzes specific textual segments to illustrate the Gothic rendering of physically and figuratively entrapping urban loci: starting with Brown's novel, it then turns to Lippard's book to finally address Lovecraft's tale of preternatural city horror. It primarily relies on the notion of spatial contiguity (Luck 2014) and the reciprocal relationship between space, plot structure and meaning to contend that, albeit substantially different in style, philosophical subtext and social context, the localities represented by the three authors share an eminently anti-urban rhetoric, which,

acting as a distorting lens, fragments the American city into a confusing network of horrors.

2. *Arthur Mervyn*: when contagion and urban dread unite

Summarizing *Arthur Mervyn* is an enterprise of its own due to its multi-layered, convoluted plot, which essentially (and aptly) reflects the irregular and deceitful spatiality where the novel is set. At the beginning of the story, the eponymous protagonist is found by Dr. Stevens "reclining against the wall at a few paces distant" (Brown 1998, 233) and bearing unmistakable signs of yellow fever, an epidemic of which was ravaging Philadelphia in 1793. At Dr. Stevens's insistence, Arthur recounts his adventurous experience through a narrative flashback that occupies the totality of the first part of the novel, offering thus a meticulous explanation of how he ended up near the doctor's house. After being forced out of the family's farm by his father, Arthur sets out on his journey to the city, hoping to "apprentice [himself] to some mechanical trade" (1998, 250). At this point, Arthur, now penniless, is hired as an assistant by the arch-forger Welbeck, who tricks the poor, hopelessly naïve Mervyn into burying a man that the villain previously killed in a duel. Aimlessly wandering through the deceptive streets of the city, a yellow-fever-ridden and exhausted Arthur "[sinks] upon the ground" (1998, 426), where he attracts the attention of Stevens. Now more confident and perfectly healthy, Arthur manages to right the wrongs in which he participated, and the story concludes with him happily (and opportunistically) securing a marriage with the virtuous widow Achsa Fielding.

The distorted spatiality displayed in *Arthur Mervyn*, which would be accentuated in Lippard's *The Quaker City*, is paralleled by what Stacey Margolis refers to as the "unpredictability of life in 'the walking city'" (2012, 360), exemplified by the various instances that see Mervyn frustratingly move around the city "at random" (Brown 1998, 322; 329; 335; 357; 379). Early in the novel, the protagonist makes his antipathy toward the urban side of Philadelphia explicitly clear:

> I saw that the city was no place for me. The end that I had had in view, of procuring some mechanical employment, could only be obtained by the use of means, but what means to pursue I knew not. This night's perils and deceptions gave me a distaste to a city life. (1998, 271)

The spatial incoherence of the novel may also be said to antagonize the reassuringly symmetrical grid system devised by William Penn and implemented by his trusted surveyor, Thomas Holme, as part of a nationwide—though utopian—urban project (Mann 2016).

The "spatial proximity" (Luck 2014, 132) of the city functions as a metaphoric and material

double of the disjointed structure of the novel, in which stories and anecdotes are embedded into other sub-stories (Margolis 2012, 354), as Lodi's emblematic four-level narrative seems to show—here Lodi (the son of an Italian merchant) recounts his father's story to Welbeck, who discloses it to Arthur, who in turn tells it to Stevens, acting as the final link of such complex diegetic chain (Brown 1998, 310-16). These textual arrangements "underscore the alarming density of the modern city" along with "the claustrophobic profusion of bodies and buildings that seem to leave no room for individual security" (Luck 2014, 132).

The Gothic subterranean imagery of turn-of-the-century Philadelphia's cityscape complements and reinforces the urbanophobic rhetoric inherent in the spatial as well as bodily proximity of the novel. The first noteworthy incident of the book occurs when the protagonist, after falling victim to Wallace's trick, finds himself locked in the room of a stranger's house. To avoid being discovered, Arthur decides to step into a closet, which he dramatically describes as a claustrophobic, pitch-black space:

> This chamber, it was manifest, did not belong to my companion. I put up prayers to my Deity that he would deliver me from these toils. What a condition was mine! Immersed in palpable darkness! Shut up in this unknown recess! Lurking like a robber! (Brown 1998, 263)

The semantics of confinement and breathlessness are touched upon again by Mervyn's verbally vivid recollection of his experience within another recess: "My breathing became difficult, and I saw that to remain here ten minutes, would unavoidably produce suffocation. My terror of intruders had rendered me blind to the consequences of immuring myself in this chearless [*sic*] recess" (1998, 423). Occasionally associated with instances of psychological intimacy, the recess is here reconfigured as a physically suffocating space, as an objective correlative of Arthur's tottering psyche.

Arthur Mervyn also draws on Gothic images and tropes to fictionalize historical events such as the outbreak of yellow fever—which Brown himself contracted—and the financial crisis, events that devastated Philadelphia at the turn of the century. As Charles Ostrowski argues,

> the spread of habits of gambling, licentiousness, and greed that began in major commercial centers with the speculative crisis of the 1790s is figured as a serious threat to the continued prosperity of the United States. Brown's harrowing accounts of the yellow fever epidemic serve the purposes of both a gritty realism and a kind of allegory on the subject of political economy. (Qtd. in Weinstock 2011, 64)

Both the yellow fever epidemic and the so-called "Panic of 1792" provide Brown with an

opportunity to turn an ordinary tale of social criticism into an American narrative of urban terror; hence, it is fitting that, while still resorting to classic Gothic motifs such as trap doors and (premature) burials, the settings into which these tropes occur are profoundly urbanized. Consider one of the most cited passages of the novel, in which Arthur, while roaming through the streets of the city, overhears a conversation between two corpse carriers—whose faces were previously described as "marked by ferocious indifference" (Brown 1998, 357)—in the act of loading a coffin into a hearse:

> "And I thank them with all my heart; but, damn it, it wasn't right to put him in his coffin before the breath was fairly gone. I thought the last look he gave me told me to stay a few minutes." "Pshaw! He could not live. The sooner dead the better for him; as well as for us. Did you mark how he eyed us when we carried away his wife and daughter? I never cried in my life, since I was knee-high, but curse me if I ever felt in better tune for the business than just then. Hey!" continued he, looking up, and observing me standing a few paces distant, and listening to their discourse, "what's wanted? Anybody dead?" (1998, 357)

Here Brown, I propose, turns to the paradigmatically Gothic device of premature burial (a trope which would be consistently used by Edgar Allan Poe in his fiction)[1] in connection with the indifference of the corpse carriers to voice a subtle but firm critique of the general disinterestedness of the ruling class towards the socially marginalized Philadelphians. Indeed, by the second half of September of 1793 (the year in which the story is set), "nearly all authority had fled, and the economy had collapsed" (Foster, Jenkins and Toogood 1998, 90), leaving the stricken residents at the mercy of poorly coordinated volunteers. It is not surprising, then, that Bush Hill—an estate that was occupied by then Vice President John Adams, and later turned into a makeshift hospital (Foster, Jenkins and Toogood 1998, 90)—echoed the city's initially disastrous response to the fever outbreak. Merging again graphically Gothic imagery with historical events,[2] Brown, through the words of Wallace, depicts the Philadelphian hospital as an authentic medical nightmare:

[1] "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Black Cat" (1843), "The Premature Burial" (1844), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) are among Poe's most known tales that center on the classic device of premature interment.

[2] This is how Wallace is described by Arthur in his recollection of his first encounter with Susan's fiancé: "If an apparition of the dead were possible, (and that possibility I could not deny), this was such an apparition. A hue, yellowish and livid; bones, uncovered with flesh; eyes, ghastly, hollow, woe-begone, and fixed in an agony of wonder upon me; and locks, matted and negligent, constituted the image which I now beheld" (Brown 1998, 380).

> The atmosphere was loaded by mortal stenches. A vapour, suffocating and malignant, scarcely allowed me to breathe. No suitable receptacle was provided for the evacuations produced by medicine or disease. My nearest neighbour was struggling with death, and my bed, casually extended, was moist with the detestable matter which had flowed from his stomach. (1998, 386)

The indifferent attitude towards the sick is also explicitly embodied by the hospital staff, described as insensitive individuals who "neglect their duty, and consume the cordials which are provided for the patients, in debauchery and riot" (1998, 386).

Most of these passages thus far quoted are taken from the first volume of *Arthur Mervyn* simply because it is in the first part of the story that the author's anti-urban sentiment is more vocally manifested. However, that does not imply a complete reversal of Brown's agrophile rhetoric (first book) in favor of what appears as odd advocacy of the city (second book), as Michael T. Gilmore argues (1994, 654). Nevertheless, Mervyn appears to radically change his views in the second half of the novel—"[i]f cities are the chosen seats of misery and vice, they are likewise the soil of all the laudable and strenuous productions of mind," says Arthur (Brown 1998, 494). In the urban Gothic discourse, Brown essentially finds a reliable, functional set of textual strategies to portray the chaos that he saw in Philadelphia at the time that he published the novel. The mysteries of the American city and the Gothic aesthetics complement each other in *Arthur Mervyn*, whose plot parallels the maze-like fabric of the city's topography. This structural equivalence also elicits a sort of metafictional effect, for the attentive reader is motivated to reflect on the artificiality of the story as such and the coincidence between form and content. However, it is with Lippard's *The Quaker City* that the elaborate structure of text and cityscape symbiotically interlock to produce an extravagant exposé of urban corruption and squalor.

3. The vicious underworld of *The Quaker City*

If a synopsis of *Arthur Mervyn* proves challenging due to the complexity of the book, a list of the plot points of Lippard's multi-narrative *The Quaker City* requires an even more demanding effort. Originally published as a series of ten installments (Emerson 2015, 102) and set in antebellum Philadelphia, *The Quaker City* tells multiple loosely interconnecting stories that namely revolve around the seduction scheme of Mary Arlington by the lascivious con man Gus Lorrimer and his equally indecent friends. The *locus horridus* in which Lorrimer plans to lure Mary is the eponymous Monk Hall, a mansion where "the broadcloth gentry of the Quaker City guzzle their champaigne [*sic*] two stories above" (Lippard 1995, 220), while Devil-Bug, the

palace's abominable keeper, "entertains the thieves and cut-throats of the town" (1995, 220) with inebriating spirits and opium. The seduction plot continuously overlaps with imprisonments, murders, forgery plans and even an attempted (semi)incestuous rape by the reverend F. A. T. Pyne, being a patent, hyperbolic metaphor of coeval cleric hypocrisy. The novel reaches its final resolution with Mary's brother Byrnewood, who, having vowed to avenge the moral staining of his sister by Lorrimer, fatally shoots the seducer.[3]

Adhering to Brown's dismissal of the tropes and symbols belonging to the European Gothic tradition, Lippard populates the building neither with "the sadistic aristocrats of Radcliffe's novels," nor with the "debauched Catholic monks imagined by Lewis," but with "corrupt bankers, merchants, editors, and preachers of contemporary urban America" (Roberts 2007, 292). Blending political satire with a classically Gothic set of images and devices—secret passages, subterranean vaults, physically deformed characters—*The Quaker City* epitomizes the so-called (sub)genre of city mysteries, a mode comprising a constellation of texts that foreground expositions of social inequity and urban squalor. The origin of this literary genre can be traced back to the publication of *Les Mysterès de Paris* by Eugène Sue (1842), a serialized novel pervaded by a "biting class critique that championed the poor and attacked the rich" (Luck 121). But what sets *The Quaker City* aside from the rest of more naturalistic urban exposés, is the novel's nightmare-like "pressurealistic edge" (Reynolds 2015, 40). The most representative moment in the narrative of this darkly visionary aspect is featured in the chapter "Devil-Bug's Dream," where the corrupted villain dreams of rapidly changing supernatural scenarios that befell the city of Philadelphia and its turned-to-living-dead inhabitants, such as the following battle between two divisions of dead soldiers fighting in coffin boats:

> As Devil-Bug standing on the roof of the palace, gazed round in wonder, the river became the scene of a strange and awful spectacle. The waves were suddenly crowded by a fleet of coffins, tossed wildly to and fro, each coffin borne upon the surface of the waters like a boat, with the foam dashing over its dull dark outlines. And in each coffin sate [*sic*] a corpse, with the death-shroud enfolding its limbs and waving along the blackness of the night, while it urged its

[3] The novel takes its cue from Singleton Mercer's 1843 revenge murder of Mahlon Hutchinson Heberton, who had seduced and raped Mercer's sister Sarah. Mercer was eventually acquitted of all charges thanks to an insanity defense strategy (University of Richmond 2020). For a gender-oriented analysis of Lippard's work particularly through the motifs of seduction and fraternal masculinity—a reading which unfortunately exceeds the scope of this essay—see Dana Nelson's *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Man* (1998). In the chapter on the relationship between manhood and early gynecology (1998, 135-175), Nelson asserts that *The Quaker City* "could arguably be read as a temperance or male-purity jeremiad" (1998, 145), in which the nation's growing concerns with moral and bodily indecency are "transferred to the sexuality of women" (1998, 142).

> grave-boat merrily over the waters, over the faces of the dead and over the fluttering folds of each death-shroud. (Lippard 1995, 381)

The phantasmagoric imagery of this passage can also be found in the description of Philadelphia that haunts Devil-Bug's nightmare:

> Then the long line of houses began to sink into the earth, slowly, slowly, inch by inch like ships at sea, with the waves creeping over their decks. Then from the earth burst streams of vapor, hissing and whirling as they sprouted upward into the blue sky. (1995, 391)

The loosely arranged and changing spaces of Philadelphia are at the very heart of the novel's urban structure, which acts as a spatial pattern subtending not only dreamlike panoramas but also more ordinary scenes: "On the opposite side of the way, a mass of miserable frame houses seemed about to commit suicide and fling themselves madly into the gutter" (1995, 48). Matching disorienting topography with vertiginous diegetic complexity even more exhaustively than Brown did in *Arthur Mervyn*, Lippard establishes a peculiar isomorphism between text, story, spatiality and extratextual context, thus reminding his readers "that immoral spaces harbor and even groom immoral citizens" (Unger 2009, 334). I want to add that Lippard, somehow pioneering characteristically postmodernist techniques, textualizes an inescapable feeling of disorientation that is embodied in the readers' experience. Here too, as I have previously argued about Brown, is a peculiar sort of ante-litteram metafictionality, in that the readers' feelings may easily reflect those of specific characters, not just in terms of empathic identification:

> Could the old proprietor have risen from the grave, and desired to pay another visit to his friend, the Devil, in the subterranean chambers of his former home, he would have had, to say the least of it, a devil of a time in finding their way. (Lippard 1995, 48)

Not only does this quote signal the subtle rupture of the aesthetic distance that prevents the readers from consciously realizing they are dealing with a work of fiction; it also announces the constant sense of spatial aimlessness that they undergo while navigating through the pages of the novel.

Mirroring Philadelphia's "spatial deviance" (Unger 2009, 320), the labyrinthine structure of Monk-Hall contributes to amplifying this feeling of disorientation. According to the rumors surrounding the history of the manor, the first owner, unhappy with the mansion's original three-story configuration, decided to build three additional sections below the level of the

ground:

> This was calculated to stir the curiosity and perhaps the scandal of the town, and as a matter of course strange rumors began to prevail about midnight orgies held by the godless proprietor in his subterranean apartments, where wine was drunken without stint, and beauty ruined without remorse. (Lippard 1995, 46)

Naturally enough, these subterranean chambers constitute the ideal site for the classic trope of premature burial, which triggers a crippling sense of anxiety in the chapter "The Pit of Monk-Hall," where Devil-Bug, after descending "into the lowest deep of the pest-house" (1995, 305), sets out to bury Byrnewood alive, a scene that is clearly reminiscent of one of the several occurrences of attempted premature burial in *Arthur Mervyn*.[4]

Another point of contact between Brown and Lippard (and partly Lovecraft, as it will be shown in the next section) is the graphic use of imagery connected with viral pathology. Though disease and the related semantics play a minor role in *The Quaker City,* compared to the function that they have in *Arthur Mervyn*, the fear of contagion can also be read as a result of the notion of extreme contiguity. As Chad Luck points out, "[u]rban space constricts and threatens to pull the reader into close confines with the source of disease, or crime, or violence" (2014, 132), an idea that thoroughly shapes Poe's classic tale of disease "The Masque of the Red Death."[5] In the chapter "The Dissecting Room," this can be witnessed through Byrnewood, acting here as a voyeuristic point of view for the reader to attend a gruesome autopsy of a small-pox victim:

> From head to foot, along the trunk and over each limb, that corpse was all one cankering sore, one loathsome blotch. Features on the face there were none; brow and lips and cheek were all one hideous ulcer. The eye-balls were spotted with clotted blood; the mouth a cavern of corruption; the very hair was thick with festering pollution. It was the corpse of a man who had died from that terrible of all diseases […]—the small-pox. (Lippard 1995, 441)

[4] Consider the moment in which Arthur shockingly realizes that he is being taken away by a group of coffin carriers "ready to replace and fasten the lid of the coffin as soon as its burden should be received" (Brown 1998, 386). The phobia of premature internment was so widespread even outside Gothic literature that culminated in the formation of the London Association for the Prevention of Premature Burial in 1896 (Meier 2019).

[5] The connection is even less surprising in light of Lippard's well-known admiration of Poe (De Grazia 1973, 6)—after the latter's death, Lippard penned a laudatory obituary in which he describes him as "a man of genius—a man of high honor—a man of good heart." Lippard concludes the piece condemning as an act of cowardice the derogatory death notices of Poe by other critics (Rufus Wilmot Griswold's must have been among these), who "now spit upon his grave" and "strik[e] the cold forehead of a corpse" (Lippard 1849, 2).

Replete with morally edifying sensationalism, *The Quaker City* is Lippard's literary battle against the corrupted values of the elite of Philadelphia. More theatrically and, perhaps, more convincingly than Brown (Wyld 1956, 6), Lippard inflects his most known and commercially successful work with socialist fervor and Gothic motifs to portray the kind of urban dread that is common to both Brown and Lovecraft. By positioning most of the action within the underground apartments of Monk Hall, Lippard turns reality upside down, giving it a carnivalesque twist. By "carnivalesque" I am not exclusively referring to "the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other signs" (Ivanov 1999, 100) employed in the novel,[6] but more to the general principle of subversion that underlies carnival tradition. Exploring its effect upon literature in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963)—what he terms "carnivalization," or "the determining influence of carnival on literature"—Michael Bakhtin holds that the participants in carnival, "a syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort," act out a simulation of life "drawn out of its usual rut," that is, a "'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world'" (1984, 122). Ambivalence, eccentricity, debauchery and parody are governing principles of carnival, whose images and tropes are profoundly "dualistic," in that they juxtapose "blessing and curse […], praise and abuse, youth and old age, *top and bottom*, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom" (1984, 126, emphasis added). Not only does Lippard tap into the above dualities in terms of morality, narrative structure and linguistic tropes, but also materially capsizes the characters and their actions in the novel: trap doors open beneath the feet of incautious characters all the time; Devil-Bug orchestrates his suicide by having his own body crushed by a massive boulder pushed down into the pit of Monk-Hall; and, most importantly, immoral banquets, orgies and other criminal activities all take place in the underground chambers of the mansion.

If Lippard draws on these downward trajectories to strengthen a politically motivated phobia of Philadelphia's urban spaces, with Lovecraft, urban terror undergoes a radically supernatural treatment resonating with occultism and xenophobia.

4. "He" and the "teeming labyrinths of ancient streets" of Lovecraft's New York

The exposition of social injustice typical of the works described above entirely disappears in Lovecraft's weird fiction, which is based instead upon "[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" (Lovecraft 2004a, 84). One of the stories that best manifests the interaction between "unknown forces" and the writer's (racially determined)

[6] David S. Reynolds argues that the novel "forcefully challenges monologic language" with its juxtaposition of black humor, powerfully ironic and metaphoric images, different dialects and even urban slang (2015, 50).

urban anxiety is "He." Written in 1925 and published a year later in the magazine *Weird Tales,* "He" recounts one of the unnamed narrator's "sleepless night walk[s]" (Lovecraft 2005, 148) through the streets of Greenwich Village, New York, when an equally nameless man "came upon [him] at about two one cloudy August morning" (2005, 148), and offers to accompany the narrator through the secret alleys of the neighborhood. After a very confusing tour of the district's oldest lanes and interstices, the cadaverous-looking guide finally takes the narrator to an 18th-century manor. Here, the man tells the unnamed protagonist about ancient rituals performed by the indigenous Americans who once lived in the area where now rises the house, and motions him to a window through which, clearly by some sort of black magic, a series of preternatural horrors appear. Awakened by the narrator's desperate screams, the spirits of the defunct natives suddenly appear in the form of a shapeless, viscous form that swallows the magician and drags him away. The tale ends with the narrator, seriously injured but still alive, managing to crawl out of the ruins of the collapsed building.

"He" shares numerous traits and textual devices with *Arthur Mervyn* and *The Quaker City*: the fictionalization of the city as a dreadful source of terror; the arrangement of the streets as a disorienting patchwork that—both figuratively and literally—defies the characters' (and the readers') sense of direction; the use of typically Gothic imagery and semantics. In regard to the first aspect, Lovecraft's take on the literary representation of the American urbanscape denotes a reversal of the logic that underscores Brown's and Lippard's attitude toward the city. While the two Philadelphian authors, siding with the lower classes, fight the city as a place that harbors and elicits social inequity (almost as if urban spaces were inevitably destined to do so), Lovecraft hates it because of the presence of "shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them" (2005, 147). In other words, from Lovecraft's viewpoint, it is New York's heterogeneously multi-ethnic population—treated as "convenient scapegoats" for his psychological frustration (Joshi 2013, 656)—that ruins the otherwise soothing atmosphere of the city.[7] Consider the author's deplorable comment voiced by the narrator (acting in effect as Lovecraft's mouthpiece) early in the story:

[7] Lovecraft's take on urban crowds appears to partake of Gustav Le Bon's social theory as voiced in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896). Here Le Bon paints a clearly reactionary (and misogynistic) picture of crowds—he compares their "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason" to characteristics that were associated with "inferior forms of evolution," including "women, savages, and children" (2001, 20)—suggesting that the masses were determined to dismantle "society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization" (2001, 9).

> I saw at last a fearful truth which no one had ever dared to breathe before—the unwhisperable secret of secrets—the fact that this city of stone and stridor is not a sentient perpetuation of Old New York as London is of Old London and Paris of Old Paris, but that it is in fact quite dead, its sprawling body imperfectly embalmed and infested with queer animate things which have nothing to do with it as it was in life. (Lovecraft 2005, 148)[8]

Regarding the city's puzzling topography, there are several instances in which the narrator progressively loses his grasp on those spatial coordinates that earlier on proved to be a sufficiently reliable reference for his insomniac walks. Starting with the very first description of New York, whose "teeming labyrinths of ancient streets […] twist endlessly from forgotten courts and squares to courts and squares and waterfront equally forgotten" (Lovecraft 2005, 147), Lovecraft's *flâneur*, after having "squeezed through interstices, tiptoed through corridors, clambered over brick walls, and once crawled on hands and knees," eventually loses "every hint of geographical location [he] had managed to preserve" (2005, 150). The protagonist's almost cherished sense of disorientation suggestively resembles Arthur Mervyn's random city wanderings—"I resumed my feet. I knew not where to direct my steps" (Brown 1998, 335)—as well as Lorrimer's piece of advice to Byrnewood:

> [Y]ou see, the entire arrangements of this place may be explained in one word—it is easy enough for a stranger […] to find his way *in*, but it would puzzle him like the devil to find his way *out*. That is, without assistance. Take my arm Byrnewood—we must descend to the club room. (Lippard 1995, 53, emphasis in the original)

The ending part of "He" is Lovecraft's final tribute to the inability to identify one's own location within the entangled streets of New York: "Reports could state no more than that I had appeared from a place unknown, at the entrance of a little black court off Perry Street" (2005, 157). While retracing in real life the narrator's precise steps would prove quite difficult, Joshi argues that Lovecraft must have had in mind "what is now labelled 93 Perry Street, an archway that leads to a lane between three buildings" (Joshi 2013, 658-659). Indeed, there is an article on the

[8] A comparison between this passage and a similar outburst contained in one of his thousands of letters illustrates the autobiographical aspect of some of his tales: "Ideas welled up unbidden, as never before for years, & the sunny actual scene soon blended into the purple & red of a hellish midnight tale—a tale of cryptical horrors among tangles of antediluvian alleys in Greenwich Village—wherein I wove not a little poetick [*sic*] description, & the abiding terror of him who comes to New-York as to a faery flower of stone & marble, yet finds only a verminous corpse—a dead city of squinting alienage with nothing in common either with its own past or with the background of America in general. I named it 'He'" (Lovecraft quoted in Joshi 2013, 657-658). Houellebecq also notes that "unemployed, threatened by poverty, Lovecraft had more and more trouble tolerating the hard and aggressive urban environment" (2008, 102).

website *Scouting New York* entirely dedicated to this still-standing "backhouse" in the West Village, which is "filled with all sorts of backyard apartment buildings hidden from the street" (Carr 2013). Here is a picture I took last year of the house at the address that Joshi and Carr refer to:

Fig. 1: 93 Perry Street, New York, NY 10014. This is the building that inspired Lovecraft's short story

Finally, as far as typically Gothic images and motifs are concerned, in this story Lovecraft's horror aesthetics takes a marvelous turn, as Todorov would put it.[9] Whereas Brown and Lippard resort to the awe-inspiring semiotics of disease and hasty burials to reinvigorate the readers' taste for the macabre within their fundamentally educational novels, in "He" Lovecraft exploits the supernatural to the fullest, designing an authentically infernal scenario that paralyzes the narrator with terror. The scene in which he gets to witness the magic conjured by the ancestral sorcerer represents but a hint of that cosmic, aeons-old otherworldliness that would become

[9] According to Todorov's definition of the fantastic (here meant as a literary genre), the marvelous is one of the two ways in which the element of uncertainty can eventually be resolved (the other being the uncanny). In the words of Todorov, "the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (1975, 25). If the uncanny is the genre where "the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described," the marvelous is instead the literary category in which "new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena" (Todorov 1975, 41).

central in stories such as "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) or "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928):[10] "I saw the heavens verminous with strange flying things, and beneath them a hellish black city of giant stone terraces with impious pyramids flung savagely to the moon, and devil-lights burning from unnumbered windows" (Lovecraft 2005, 154). The lexicon employed to describe such scenery enacts what the philosopher Graham Harman labels "cubist weirdness," a mechanism whereby "language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing" (Harman 2012, 30). Such visual-lexical density accompanies the story's sinuous spatiality, partly reminding the readers of the equivalence between form and content of Brown's and Lippard's novels, with the main difference residing in Lovecraft's manifest objective of developing simultaneously dreadful and sublime literature. In the author's own words:

> I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination at best—one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law […]. These stories frequently emphasise the element of horror because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion. (Lovecraft 2004b, 175-176)

5. Conclusion

The Gothic mode provides Brown, Lippard and Lovecraft with the essential toolkit to shape their respective philosophies of urban social life into an aesthetics of darkness and corruption. *Arthur Mervyn* and *The Quaker City* were primarily written to expose—albeit graphically and sensationally—the political, moral and sexual debauchery of Philadelphia; "He" is Lovecraft's remedy to package and contain within supernatural fiction an incessant frustration informed by racism.

The most apparent point of contact between the three texts lies in the depiction of the American city as an ontologically negative place; but it is possible to identify another, more vibrant aspect common to the two novels and the short story: a sense of (meta)textual confusion prompted by the distorted topography of the urban environment with its confusing labyrinths, subterranean vaults and secret alleys. The readers, puzzled and intrigued at once, are encouraged to trace the steps of the characters to presumably real locations.[11] With its latent enigmas and convolute spatiality, urban Gothic is a genre that brings to the fore a prerogative of Gothic fiction at

[10] These two stories exemplify a genre that I described elsewhere as "neosupernatural parascientific fiction," an innovative synthesis of unnatural phenomena and scientific verisimilitude (2022, 149).

[11] A classic instance of such an investigative approach can also be located in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840).

large—a genre "marked by an elaborate, darkly lighted *architectural* setting that creates fear and apprehension in the characters who inhabit it. (Also the reader)" (Cassuto 2017, 156, emphasis added). Thus, urban Gothic favors a particularly active participation of the readers who, finding themselves aesthetically (and empathetically) close to the characters' entrapment in the recesses of both mind and space, are requested to locate a way out of those mazes, hopefully in a more successful way than their fictional counterparts.

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