Prosthetic Pasts: H.P. Lovecraft and the Weird Politics of History

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Writing to August Derleth in 1931 H.P. Lovecraft turns to the recurring theme of his “addiction to the 18th century” and “sense of natural placement therein.” In a home filled with Victorian lumber, his choice was: “What, pray, but go with candles and kerosene lamp to that obscure and knighted aerial crypt – leaving the sunny downstairs 19th century flat, and boring my way back through the decades into the late 17th, 18th, and early 19th century by means of innumerable crumbling and long-s’d tomes of every size and nature” (Derleth 1959, xxxviii). His journey from the prosaic and clearly defined space of the “flat” to the gothic attic is at first sight conventional. Alongside “crypt” and “candles,” even the fussy ejaculation of an old-fashioned gentleman, “pray,” contributes to the atmosphere. The “nighted” attic is a feudal space. It is odd, then, that the first “tome” on Lovecraft’s antiquarian reading list is Joseph Addison’s and Richard Steele’s *Spectator* (1711-12) – a periodical championing sociable rationality in which Addison proclaims that while there may be such a thing as witchcraft, he can “give no credit to any particular instance of it” (452). Lovecraft ignores such skepticism, creating an eighteenth century that is altogether more ancient, more feudal than might be expected. The era that, particularly after Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764), relied on a sense of critical distance in order to invent the gothic is itself gothicized. Alongside this motif, Lovecraft faintly invokes greater chronological distance. “Boring back” into “crumbling” books, he investigates geological time. His “kerosene lamp” signals exploration of more scientific horrors extant in the deeper past.

In this passage both Lovecraft’s experimentation with time and his creation of an oddly feudal eighteenth century indicate his debt to the period. Influenced by eighteenth-century historiography, Lovecraft’s fiction gives an uncanny and distorted echo of the constitutional anxieties expressed in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gothic and historical fiction. In his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927), Lovecraft names Horace Walpole as “the actual founder of the literary horror-story” (2005, 112). The “cosmic fear” that, Lovecraft contends, has always existed gains a more “formal” manifestation, in the work of, amongst others, Walpole, Clara Reeve, William Godwin and Walter Scott (2005, 108, 112). Perhaps because of the distance between eighteenth-century gothic and Lovecraft’s cosmic preoccupations, perhaps because, as S.T. Joshi states, the initial sections of the essay were based on critical works by Edith Birkhead and Dorothy Scarborough rather than on the original texts, the relationship between Lovecraft’s fiction and these earlier works has been more assumed than explored (Joshi and Schultz, 2001, 256). In *Gothic* (1996), for example, Fred Botting only remarks briefly that Lovecraft’s work rationalizes the “mystical world of occult lore, popular … with Bulwer-Lytton and Machen” (103). While the influence of Lovecraft’s near-contemporaries, notably Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood and M.R. James, on Lovecraft’s work is not to be underestimated, this article reads Lovecraft’s weird fiction in relation to his historically-minded eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century precursors. As Lovecraft draws on the British past to legitimize his ideas about the American polis, the concern with liberty expressed in these earlier writings reverberates to destabilize his racist vision.

Although Lovecraft’s interest in antiquarianism is well-established, it has primarily been explored in relation to his New England context. Writing in 1959, August Derleth emphasizes Lovecraft’s passion for his New England “antiquarian haunts” (vi). For Tim Evans, Lovecraft’s interest emerges from the “folklore and tradition in the United States of the 20s and 30s” (100). There, however, Evans finds it combined with a fear of “miscegenation” (100). Whereas Derleth had implied that the connection between Lovecraft’s racism and antiquarianism is accidental (foreigners “happened” to be the despoilers), Evans associates Lovecraft’s attitudes with the “nativism … commonly linked to historic preservation” (Derleth vi; Evans109-110). However, antiquarianism has a longer, more complex political history and a more substantial link to constitutional anxiety than these accounts suggest. In “A Weird Modernist Archive” Leif Sorenson suggests that Lovecraft distinguishes between the “happy antiquarian” and the “shuddering anthropologist” confronted “with collecting the fruits of cross-cultural contact in the present” (512). Yet Lovecraft’s antiquarians are ill at ease with their culture, led inevitably by their archival pursuits into deep concern about their own origin and that of their nation. While Lovecraft’s racism is emphatically his own, the unease concerning the source of political legitimacy and its connection to the figure of the antiquary can be traced to the historiographically-engaged works of Walpole, Godwin and Scott.

The eighteenth century vectored its political thought through ideas of history and precedent. While gothic writers like Matthew Lewis constructed a (sometimes tenuous) distinction between civilized present and feudal, oppressive past, Walpole, Godwin, Reeve and the historical novelist Walter Scott wrote novels that probed the way the past was understood in order to rethink the political system. Described by Georg Lukács as the first historical novel, and concerned with ancestral tradition and usurpation, Walpole’s *Castle of* *Otranto* manifests political anxiety about the change from a Stuart to Hanoverian monarchy in Britain (19). Worried by the specter of royal absolutism, Walpole interrogates how tradition might underpin (or undermine) the balance of power in Britain. Aware that there was no written constitution, the historical and gothic novelists who followed him attempted to reshape the past in order to invent the modern commercial nation. After the American and French Revolutions, they were interested in the political role of the people as well as that of the monarch and aristocracy. Their use of historiography to re-imagine the nation, and their search for an antiquarian or scientific figure to mediate such re-imaginings, find a distorted echo in Lovecraft. Although the United States had the written constitution Britain lacked, the Johnson-Reed immigration act of 1924 suggests another, related anxiety, one concerning the constitution or make-up of the people and the impact of that population on government.

Albert Johnson’s foreword to Roy L. Garis’s *Immigration Restriction: A Study of the Opposition to and Regulation of Immigration into the United States* (1927) begins: “The United States of American, a nation great in all things, is ours today. To whom will it belong tomorrow?” (vii). The potential brevity of a particular type of American history, the thinness of colonial tradition, is evident here. Johnson’s question seems not only to destabilize the future but to be haunted by the past, more specifically, by the issue of America’s earlier possessors. “All Americans, except the Indians, are in some sense immigrants,” Garis admits (ix). When Lovecraft turned to the Anglo-Saxon past, he was attempting to address this anxiety through the creation of an alternative tradition. In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004) Alison Landsberg talks about the creation of “prosthetic memory” which “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative,” allowing that individual to “suture himself or herself into a longer history” (2). Lovecraft’s fiction examines the possibility of using prosthetic memory to legitimize an Anglo-centric and racist view of the American people and their political order. Like his eighteenth-century precursors, he explores the idea of Anglo-Saxon liberty and experiments with stadial history. When these resources prove inadequate, Lovecraft searches for a figure whose activities will mediate the relation of the past and present. Godwin had thought that the historian could become a scientist of radical social change who would allow the people to be imaginatively reshaped; in contrast, Scott proposed the antiquary as potential protector of the status quo. These ideas find their correlatives in Lovecraft’s work. Yet, for Lovecraft and his hapless protagonists, inherited paradigms prove slippery. As a result of the radical and progressive potential of past traditions, Lovecraft’s fiction is haunted, despite itself, by a fear of the consequences of racism and oppression.

Lovecraft and his Forebears

In a highly anti-Semitic early letter to Rheinhart Kleiner Lovecraft suggests that the “Teutonic” culture of England was benefitted by the Latinate influence of the “Norman Conquest” (2005b, 50-1). Here Lovecraft sketches his disagreement with a certain type of ancient constitutionalism – the idea that Saxon liberties were damaged by the Norman Conquest (known as the theory of the Norman Yoke). In its various forms, ancient constitutionalism was a key influence on eighteenth-century British political thought. As J.G.A. Pocock notes, “throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, every major piece of either historical or legal thinking involved, if it did not consist in, the adoption of an attitude towards the “ancient constitution”” (233). This notion took various forms but in general involved an appeal to the Anglo-Saxon past as a time when common law was established and the legal prerogatives of king, lords and people determined. A tool to discipline any monarch or minister who seemed too absolutist in his approach, the myth of ancient liberties was also important in shaping the gothic tradition that influenced Lovecraft. Horace Walpole, who slept with a copy of the Magna Carta above his bed, was well aware of it. Once used against the Stuarts, the ancient constitution was later invoked against King George II and his first minister, Sir Robert Walpole, the author’s father. During the French and Indian War (1754-63) (which diminished French holdings in North America), the same motif was also used to attack King George III. The Hanoverian monarch was alleged to have absolutist ambitions not befitting his much-vaunted Saxon heritage. Horace Walpole was caught up in the row (Mowl, 1996, 171-2).

Combining what Lovecraft calls Walpole’s “sprightly and worldly” tendencies, the author of *Otranto* uses the supernatural to address the resultant constitutional anxiety (Lovecraft, 2005, 112). Manfred’s family, like that of George III, has ruled for three generations before Theodore (like Charles Edward Stuart), a representative of the original line, returns and eventually displaces him. But Theodore, a peasant, who shows “vigour … decently exerted” is now also the representative of the people’s ancient liberties which Manfred may erode (Walpole, 1998, 21). The Stuarts are, in a cunning rhetorical hijacking, the true guardians of Saxon liberty. But the old dynasty proves hard to re-establish. In *Otranto* written fragments of proof have to be supported by physical remains (the giant helmet) and supernatural manifestations (the foot and leg seen by the servants in the castle’s gallery) of grotesque and insistent materiality. This is a sequence Lovecraft later extends and further literalizes. Contaminated manuscripts and historical artifacts lead to the physical remains and ultimately to the actual re-animation of ancestors (as in the posthumously published “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” [1941]) – or, in Lovecraft’s cosmic fiction, reveal the existence of alternative dynasties far more alien than the Stuarts.

In *Otranto* when the ghostly Alphonso, Theodore’s ancestor, finally appears in giant form on Theodore’s accession, he destroys the castle. For both Walpole and, in a different context, Lovecraft, the previous dynasty proves dangerous. Writing to Robert Bloch on the 2 November 1935, Lovecraft admits (though with the disgraceful addition of the adverb “amusingly”) to the enormity of “our repeated treaty-violations, slaughter, & land-thefts in connexion with the Indians” (2015, 158). Although he offensively suggests there was no alternative to this dispossession, his admission of Native American priority undercuts the myth of a North American society based on “unbroken traditions” upon which he earlier insists (2015, 158, 63). The falsity Lovecraft detects at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon myth of political legitimacy generates a double anxiety within his weird fiction. As well as being faced by the return of dispossessed (such as the “Indians” in “He” [1926]), the colonists lose their point of difference from later waves of immigrants (1999, 124). In Lovecraft’s early story “Dagon” the sea-faring protagonist glimpses a “vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome” monster, representative of a species that may eventually drag “puny war-exhausted mankind” “down in their reeking talons” (1999, 5, 6). While Paul Buhle finds the story’s closing line reminiscent of the Surrealist André Breton, the final exclamation “God, *that hand!* The window! The window!” also recalls Manfred’s terrified servants, faced with their ancient ruler’s dismembered body: “The helmet! The helmet!” (127; Lovecraft 1999, 6; Walpole 1996, 18). “Dagon” is at once original inhabitant and, the racist slur in the title suggests, immigrant. In an extended polis, it will be the people who are replaced rather than (as in *Otranto*) merely a royal dynasty; Johnson’s question, “To whom will [the United States] belong tomorrow?” and the ghostly interrogative “To whom did it belong yesterday?” shape Lovecraft’s appropriation of the motif of the dispossessed heir.

Lovecraft’s constitutional concerns are wider and his antiquarians more anxious than Walpole’s in part because he inherits the even greater political uncertainties generated by the American and French Revolutions. Writing at the time of the American Revolutionary War, in *The Old English Baron* (1778) Clara Reeve had attempted to correct Walpole’s more extravagant fears concerning the British constitutional order. In this imaginary of the ancient constitution, Reeve’s baron and virtuous peasantry exist within a fixed social system of pre-determined Anglo-Saxon prerogatives. More challenging uses of the narrative had also begun to emerge – in his 1774 *American Independence the Interest and Glory of Great Britain* John Cartwright, for example, defended the American colonists’ desire for representation and self-government, positing for “every Englishman” a “constitutional inheritance” of “liberty” predating the Magna Carta (39). The significance of the idea of ancient liberties, not for the monarch or aristocracy but for the people, was explored both by the Society for Constitutional Information which Cartwright founded, and by writers of gothic and historical fiction. Nominally written by “the people,” the American constitution repeats this challenge to hierarchy. The narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberty on which Lovecraft wishes to build his prosthetic history contains a potential for radical populism that alarms him (as a 1921 letter to Derleth suggests, Lovecraft’s attachment to the Anglo-Saxon past was far more conservative – “God save the King!” is his repeated apostrophe) (1965, 1: 156). For Lovecraft, the people are rebellious as well as polymorphous. It is no coincidence that the protagonist at the end of “Dagon” is threatened by the return of “a hand,” the Victorian dead metaphor for laborer.

Lovecraft’s anxiety about the return of the oppressed is intensified by his use of stadial history. Faced with the difficulty of imagining the commercial nation in terms of Anglo-Saxon liberty, in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century historical and gothic novelists had turned instead to the stadial history of the Scottish Enlightenment. Stadial historians like William Robertson and Adam Ferguson saw the past in terms of stages, primitive, feudal, and commercial, in which government, the mode of economic organization and the manners – and art – of a society all coincided. This mode of thought also influenced Edward Gibbon, whose work Lovecraft greatly admired (Bloch 2015, 88). While S.T. Joshi has remarked upon the impact that reading Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* had on Lovecraft in February 1927, Gibbon’s more distinguished influence was of longer standing (Joshi 1990, 134-5). As early as 1915 Lovecraft remarks in a letter to Rheinhart Kleiner on the importance of Gibbon to his style (2005 15). Whereas Spengler offered a cyclical account of the history of seven supposed *Hochkulturen*, Gibbon’s scholarly and thoughtful account of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) had already shaped Lovecraft’s thought. Although Gibbon was too detailed in his approach to be considered a stadial historian, Nathaniel Wolloch remarks that the historian did use a simpler “two-stages” model which “differentiated between primitive, vagrant societies and more advanced sedentary ones” (2011, 95). In this and other manifestations, this widely influential mode of thought made it possible to imagine a society’s development in terms of progress – or decay. It is no wonder that this appealed to Lovecraft, who remarks to Alfred Galpin in 1921 that he finds the idea of “one-direction progress in an eternal universe” “absurd” (1965, 1: 156).

From the debates around stadial history, Lovecraft inherits both a feeling of inevitability and a sense of political charge. It is tempting to trace a racialized version of a two-stage model in Lovecraft’s juvenile poem “On the Ruin of Rome”: “Whither hath gone, great city, the race that gave law to all nations,” the speaker asks, to reply in the next stanza “Dead! And replac’d by these wretches who cower in confusion…” (Lovecraft, 1984, 33). The “base Italians,” as Lovecraft refers to them a few lines later, formed 8% of the population of Rhode Island by 1915 (Lovecraft, 1984, 33; Judith E. Smith 1985, 11). Further, their links with radicalism have been traced by Paul Buhle (1987, passim). Lovecraft’s fear was of revolution as well as of de-evolution. In the late eighteenth century, another age of revolution, the stadial paradigm had struggled to account for the process by which change from one stage to another occurred: in his *History of America* (1777) William Robertson refused to talk about the “British colonists” because “a new order of things must arise in North America”; no explanation for the American Revolution is forthcoming (v). In the stadial model, if all aspects of society, the economic, the governmental and the cultural were attuned in each stage, not only the impetus for change, but also the space for individual agency seemed to be absent. This element of the inexplicable and abrupt is magnified in the shifts of stages and species that occur in Lovecraft’s fiction.

The sense of powerlessness and inescapability caused by the scale of stadial history is realized in the work of William Godwin, a factor which perhaps draws Lovecraft to him. Mentioned in “Supernatural Horror,” Godwin’s novel *Caleb Williams* (1794) explores the individual’s struggle against such seemingly inevitability. Although the workis “non-supernatural,” Lovecraft suggests that its story of “the fate of a servant persecuted by a master” has “many authentic touches of terror” (2005a, 123). This terror is caused by Caleb’s inability, having discovered his master’s secret, to escape Falkland’s power – power that is the result of hereditary social advantage. Falkland is also trapped by the force of history, his initial crime in part a result of exposure to the outdated and distorted feudal code of honor. Although Lovecraft finds *St Leon* somewhat less satisfactory,Godwin’s 1799 novel further historicizes the terror generated by the failure of individual agency. The titular hero gains the secret of the philosopher’s stone and, as Lovecraft puts it, the “elixir of life” (2005a, 123). Becoming, through his immortality, a kind of living witness to history, the alchemist and scientific experimenter eventually turns to social experiment in an attempt to lessen human suffering, economic struggle and warfare. He fails, and yet in *The Enquirer* (1797) Godwin suggests a mass of such individuals, each of whom is historically and scientifically educated in isolation, could facilitate progress. Such a mass would allow hierarchy to be replaced by equality and government with self-government.

While Godwin and Lovecraft share a sense of horror at historical determinism, it drives them in different directions. In his philosophical work *An Enquiry into Political Justice* (1793) Godwin suggests that mankind was capable of “perfectibility” (1793, 1: 4). “The moral qualities of men are the produce of the impressions made upon them,” he argues, suggesting that these “impressions” (physical rather than metaphorical) could be shaped to allow “vice” to be “extirpated from the world” (1793, 1: 18). Although Godwin suggests the “task” would be of “slow progress and hope undefined,” Lovecraft still finds this moral endeavor to manipulate the physical world “Utopian” (2005a, 123). “Materialism,” he observes in a 1921 letter to Alfred Galpin, is undeniable, and the “resolving of the atom” “interesting”: “but that it constitutes any affirmation … for the notion of human personality as something apart from physical organization, is quite unthinkable” (1965, 1: 156). Not only is there no soul separate from the physical but, he informs Frank Belknap Long in May 1922, “Amidst this … drama of infinite time and space, everything terrestrial and human” shrinks “to insignificance,” until, he writes to James F. Morton, a year later, even “Right” or “Wrong” seem “primitive conceptions” (1965,1: 172,1: 207). Where Godwin imagines that the material and the sensory can be shaped to facilitate progress, Lovecraft sees physical forces operating on a scale that makes any intervention irrelevant. Even when, after the Great Depression, Lovecraft shifts political position to countenance more social and political intervention, his fiction expresses his continued doubts regarding mankind’s improvement. Like the scientist in “Herbert West – Reanimator” (serialized Feb-July 1922), who is forced by his former creations through a “centuried wall” to a “subterranean vault of fabulous abominations,” Lovecraft’s scientists are often dragged back into a past that undercuts the idea of improvement (1999, 80). What Lovecraft calls “herd” will not progress (Lovecraft 1965, 1: 207).

Aware of Godwin’s attempt to rewrite history in terms of the progress of the people, Sir Walter Scott had deployed antiquarianism to manage and restrict such radical reinterpretations of the past (Price 2016, 000-00). In so doing, he uncovered as many tensions as he obscured. “An antiquarian of lifelong enthusiasm,” Lovecraft finds the historical investigators of his fiction plagued by similar difficulties (Lovecraft, 2015, 24). In Scott’s *The Antiquary* (1816) (one of the Scott novels owned by Lovecraft), Oldbuck, the title character, defends the aristocracy against the trickster, Dousterswivel, who, like Godwin’s St Leon, claims alchemical powers (Joshi and Michaud, 1980, 65-66). Through quasi-scientific, quasi-magical experiments, Dousterswivel asserts his occult knowledge of the past (particularly the location of buried treasure) and tempts Sir Arthur Wardour to risk everything through ill-conceived speculation. Oldbuck exposes Dousterswivel and in so doing, implies the end of fallacious and experimental histories, such as those offered by Godwin and other radical thinkers. Instead of an emphasis on history as progress towards a political community in which each individual has rights, Scott’s *Antiquary* proposes a more conservative model of political identity based on the nation.

As a bulwark of political community, however, the idea of the nation proves problematic, not least because of invasion and other conflicts over territory. Therefore, in both *The Antiquary* and *Ivanhoe* (1820) Scott presents the struggles between Picts and Saxons, Scots and English, Celts and Saxons, and Saxons and Normans, as squabbles long over for all but the historian. A sense of perspective is used to construct a feeling of national unity. Yet the maneuver is not completely successful. Far from concealing difference, the antiquarian’s parchments and fragments reveal a troubled history of contested ownership and appropriation. Oldbuck becomes connected with“invasion” and “insurrection” from the “conflict between Agrippa and the Caledonians” to the present (2002, 61, 41). Trying but failing to provide political harmony, Oldbuck foreshadows not only the antiquarian narrators of M.R. James’s fiction but also Lovecraft’s embattled historical investigators. Scott, however, has an easier time shaping the composite United Kingdom than Lovecraft, with his racism, has in imagining the political community of the United States. When Lovecraft turns to a prosthetic history for comfort, choosing “Old England,” his antiquarians discover something “uncomfortably far back”: they gain no reassurance (1985, 2: 411).

Prosthetic Pasts and Antiquarian Failures

Only in his earliest fiction can Lovecraft assert the spiritual integrity of Anglo-Saxon liberty. His early story *The Street* is one of the clearest expressions of the narrative of ancient liberties in his oeuvre. Its opening is reminiscent of the works of Algernon Blackwood (whom Lovecraft did not, however, encounter till 1920): “There be those who say that things and places have souls,” Lovecraft’s narrator remarks, “and there be those who say they have not. I dare not say, myself, but I will tell of the Street” (1985, 2: 391). While in Blackwood’s works, the wilderness is haunted, in Lovecraft’s fiction it is a man-made structure which is mysteriously infused with uncanny spiritual presence. As the ‘path trodden by bearers of water’ becomes a street of houses constructed of ‘oaken logs’, the people who process the wilderness sit round their ‘gigantic hearths’ and speak of ‘very simple things’, traditions of the ‘Blessed Isles’ from which they travelled (1985, 2: 391). Lovecraft constructs a colonial semi-pastoral, a kind of Georgic where the Anglo-Saxon spirit is at once imported and authentic, somehow older than the wilderness it displaces. In *Otranto* Alphonso, Theodore’s ancestor, haunts the castle, after his original right to rule has been usurped by Manfred. Here, oddly, the presentation of “Old England” and its traditions means that, not the Native Americans, but the colonizers occupy Alphonso’s position of legitimacy and priority.

Having established the supposed legitimacy of Anglo-Saxon political tradition, Lovecraft uses stadial history to suggest that tradition’s inevitable decline. With his references to the “young men,” later “clad in blue,” and later still in olive (1985, 2: 392-94), Lovecraft suggests that change, from primitive settlement to commercial modernity, occurs on a scale beyond the individual human agent. In the stories that mention Cthuhlu, he will further exaggerate this sense of powerlessness and individual irrelevance. Yet, despite *The Street*’s quality of allegorical inevitability, change is driven by particular, broadly identifiable groups of actors – by immigrants involved in the struggle for legal and constitutional rights. Lovecraft’s statement that the Boston police strike of September 1919 “prompted the attempt” at composition is well known (Joshi and Schultz 2001, 254). Nonetheless,the “blue coated police” who “had grown tired of law and order” are only part of the malaise (1985, 2: 396). After referring to the advent of railroad or canal (1835) and the construction of the gas works (1847) in Providence, Lovecraft bemoans the arrival of those whose “accents were coarse and strident, and whose mien and faces unpleasing” (1985, 2: 393). The half-buried chronology implies that Lovecraft is referring to events of the 1840s and 50s, when Providence had seen a nativist reaction to the number of Irish immigrants, a reaction aggravated in part by a debate about the extension of the franchise and by fears about a “perceived threat of inundation by foreign paupers” (Loiacono 180). Predictably, Lovecraft echoes that nativist position.

For Lovecraft, though, the precipitous decline of the street begins after the Civil War, as “new kinds of faces appeared” (1985, 2: 393). In the run-up to World War I, Providence, an industrial center already showing signs of decline, had experienced labor unrest, in part as a result of regressive employment tactics introduced by employers looking to escape unionization in New York. As George Goodwin and Ellen Smith note, “beginning in 1909, and accelerating in 1911-1912, a new series of strikes by new immigrants, unskilled workers, shook the country, including Rhode Island” (97). During the tailor’s strike of 1911, the Industrial Workers of the World held meetings in “Yiddish, English, and Italian,” while the May 1917 strike of jewelry works at Ostby and Barton in Providence involved the mobilization of Jewish and Italian workers against regressive labor practices (98). Lovecraft occludes such local reasons for labor unrest. Decline is associated with discontent caused by both the Russian Revolution and immigration. Earlier in the story “the young men” “clad in blue” had been whole if without individual agency; here, a more extreme fragmentation of identity and a more sinister lack of individual volition is implied: the “swarthy, sinister faces” are somehow connected with “the brains of a hideous revolution” which drive on “many millions of brainless, besotted beasts” (1985, 2: 393-5). These “brains” seek domination: an “evil few” (separated from the mass but hardly individualized) “plotted to strike the Western land its deathblow” (1985, 2: 394).

The tendency to see immigration as a threat to liberty is explored by Paul Buhle in *Italian-American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island*. Arguing that “studies of American society” ignored how “a great wave of class organization” was driven by “new immigrants” in the 1910s, Buhle suggests that Polish and Italian peasants were seen as inculcated in a feudal system of subordination that prepared them for unionization (271). In this narrative, instead of feudalism and “subordination” being generated, as one might expect, by the industrial magnates and the demands of industrial work, it is connected with the organized struggle. This association between despotism and migrant communities is present in Johnson’s foreword to *Immigration Restriction*: “instead of a nation descended from generations of freemen … we have a heterogeneous population no small proportion of which is sprung from races that throughout the centuries, have known no liberty at all, and no law save the decrees of overlords and princes” (Garis 1927, vii). Johnson racializes the ability to understand liberty (freemen are “bred” to knowledge of “liberty under law”) (Garis 1927, vii). At the same time, he disguises the unease concerning labor unrest that drives his fear. When he suggests these new citizens lack the freeman’s skill at “self-government,” his choice of expression is meant to point primarily to the supposed moral inadequacy of the migrants, but it also hints at his unease about the possibility of another form of rule, that provided by organized labor (vii).

Repeating this paradigm in “The Street,” Lovecraft imagines a new, corrupt tradition competing with the old. The oral tradition by which “children would listen and learn of the laws and deeds of old, and of that dear England” is transmitted through family and positioned as organic, connected with “till[ing] the fields” and “subdu[ing] the forests” (1985, 2: 391). In contrast, the “handbills and papers” are “printed in many tongues and characters” (echoing the internationalism of the meetings and publications of the Industrial Workers of the World). These mechanized productions of a dismembered and dehumanized body operate against “the soul that was bequeathed through a thousand and a half years of Anglo-Saxon freedom, justice, and moderation” (1985, 2: 395). While the eighteenth-century and Revolutionary period had seen uses of the myth of ancient constitutionalism to protect the prerogatives of not only the aristocracy but the people against the monarchy, Lovecraft denies any such application of the idea. Workers’ struggles have nothing to do with liberty.

Nonetheless, in Lovecraft’s battle to police the meaning of liberty, the opposition between the two sets of texts and practices is not so easily maintained. Echoed in vague terms in print media and repeated to children who “had never seen or could not remember” England themselves, the inherited, almost organic knowledge Lovecraft wants to associate with New England is a prosthesis that disguises a brutal amputation. Those imagined colonists, in “subdu[ing]” (the word is curiously suggestive) not only the woodland but also its inhabitants, are themselves part of sequence of displacement and exploitation (1985, 2: 391). When the street collapses, in self-destructive revenge against its Bolshevik inhabitants at the end of the story, the resultant “ravages” recall the results of Alphonso’s final appearance in *Otranto* (1985, 2: 397). In Lovecraft’s narrative the ghost of Anglo-Saxon tradition that lingers after the street’s annihilation is an attractive one, consisting of Washingtonian rose bushes and moonlight. However, a resistant reading indicates that even supposedly legitimate traditions may prove destructive.

In its construction of two competing traditions and in its depiction of a struggle for resource against a stadial background, “The Street” foreshadows the preoccupations of Lovecraft’s later fiction. The early tale “The Alchemist” also contributes to this portrayal of competing traditions. First, it has a certain frankness concerning the class struggle that shapes such competition. Second, it adds two figures, the antiquarian and scientist, who, in Lovecraft’s mature work, attempt to mediate the relation of past to present and so to interpret human political life. Published in 1916, the tale owes a debt to the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe (compare, for example, the use of prepositional phrases to open sentences, “Of ..” with Poe’s *Ligeia*, “Of her family – I have surely heard her speak”) (Lovecraft 1985, 2: 373, 377; Poe 1984, 262). Yet, although the story’s cursed owner of a decayed property recalls the “House of Usher” (1839), the narrative also brings to mind *The* *Antiquary*. The Count, Antoine, who pores “over the ancient tomes that filled the shadow-haunted library of the chateau” combines Sir Arthur Wardour’s aristocratic indigence (the Frenchman’s “name” prevents “the pursuits of commercial life”) with Oldbuck’s antiquarian single-mindedness (1985, 2: 373, 372). Both Antoine, in trying to save his own life, and Oldbuck, in protecting Sir Arthur, struggle to maintain the status quo, resisting the redistribution of property. Both also struggle against an alchemist, one who claims occult knowledge of the physical world. Fighting against such superstition or pseudoscience, each benefits from his antiquarian training.

In terms of its class politics, however, Lovecraft’s account is less reassuring than Scott’s. While *The Antiquary* tries, often light-heartedly, to support an existing aristocratic order and to moderate fears of social experiment from below, “The Alchemist” is more pessimistic about both the upper and lower orders. Sir Arthur Wardour has an ancestor called “Hell-in-Harness” but, if this sobriquet hardly inspires confidence, at least the knight’s identity and misdeeds remain shrouded in comic mystery. Antoine, as sole survivor of the familial line, carries an ancestral guilt that is still well-remembered: “idle tales of the dread curse upon [his] line that were nightly told and magnified by the simple tenantry as they conversed in hushed accents in the glow of the cottage hearths” (1985, 2: 373). A darker version of the oral repetitions of *The Street*, these tales suggest a wariness of the European aristocratic tradition. True, Lovecraft’s prosthetic history of Anglo-American legitimacy is not brought into doubt – Antoine is French and the narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberties does not apply. However, his tale still reflects the ancient constitutional preoccupation with upper class abuse of the law. In search of his missing heir, Godfrey, Count Henri summarily kills the peasant alchemist, Michel. This act of injustice leads the peasant’s son, Charles le Sorcier to utter the curse: no heir of the Counts de C– will reach a greater age than Godfrey.

What might be read as a gothic narrative of aristocratic sin, fairly standard amongst Lovecraft’s British precursors, is complicated because, as representatives of the lower orders, Michel and his son are as unsympathetic as their feudal French adversaries. Dousterswivel’s promises were lies but Michel Mauvais has discovered the “Elixir of Eternal Life” and, as a result is, like Godwin’s St Leon, “suspected of the most hideous practices” (1985, 2: 374). Rejected by the peasantry, the aspirant pair of scientist magicians produces an alternative tradition. Their perverted family line, of which the unnaturally long-lived Charles is the only representative, both mimics and successfully undermines the aristocracy. Like Dousterswivel, who may have Jacobin or Jacobite friends, or the radical social experimenter St Leon, these alchemists represent a revolutionary threat to the social order. Thus Antoine must defeat them, re-establishing the tradition. Yet perhaps this too involves mimicry. The protagonist’s comment on his own considerable age (he “first saw the light of day, ninety long years ago”), constitutes a hint that he has himself gained Charles’ alchemical knowledge of the elixir of life, that he is able to perpetuate his feudal rule indefinitely (1985, 2: 372). Scientific radicalism is quashed and the labor of the lower ranks re-appropriated to support continued aristocratic dominance. In later stories, the threat to the social order will be greater. Here, though, maintenance of the aristocratic status quo also appears unpleasant, particularly given that the castle once formed “one of the most dreaded and formidable fortresses in all France” (1985, 2: 371). As the location of this story suggests, as much as Lovecraft hates the international working class, he also fears the oppression that drives revolution.

Both “The Street” and “The Alchemist” see an emerging battle between social classes, between traditions and between different ways of mediating the past. In “The Alchemist,” the antiquarian urge momentarily triumphs over the more radical, quasi-scientific narrative of change. Yet Antoine’s antiquarian researches have also pointed to ancestral crime. The morbid threat that the antiquarian impulse represents to humankind is further explored in “Polaris”, a story which pre-empts some of the cosmic developments of Lovecraft’s most well-known works. “Polaris”contains a stadial narrative but one in which the idea of progress is undercut. At the same time, the antiquarian, aware of historical change, is blamed for not preventing alteration. Catapulted into a dream world that (seemingly) turns out to be the real one, defending “Olathoe” against “the Inutos, squat, hellish yellow fiends” out of the west, the narrator shows a racial and cultural pride that one might imagine Lovecraft would endorse (1985, 2: 33). However, he also reveals that his own people, the “tall, grey-eyed men of Lomar” are themselves descended from invaders. Compelled by climatic change, their ancestors moved southwards and “valiantly and victoriously swept aside the hairy, long-armed, cannibal Gnophkehs that stood in their way” (1985, 2: 33). The swiftness with which these changes – form Gnophkehs to Lomarians to Inuto – are outlined by the narrator ironizes the terms of racial condemnation that the protagonist employs. Like the Inutos, the Lomarians are invaders whom other races may have in their turn seen as barbarians or “fiends”; moreover, the “traditions of their ancestors,” in that place at least, are thin (1985, 2: 33).

In Scott’s *Antiquary* the title character at once reveals and attempts to minimize a painful pattern of invasion and displacement. This process of distancing is dramatized in the opening chapter of *Ivanhoe* (where the fallen druidic stones that block the stream give rise only to a “faint murmur” of protest in the landscape; the Celts have been pushed aside by Saxons, who in their turn are oppressed by Normans) (Scott 2008, 28). In “Polaris”, in contrast, the first-person narrator is not acceptant but fiercely partisan, endorsing a narrative of racial struggle. Yet not only does his knowledge of history and abridgement of it undercut such partisanship, but his antiquarian efforts themselves are linked with betrayal. Though weak, the narrator has “the keenest eyes in the city, despite the long hours [he] gave each day to the study of the Pnakotic manuscripts” (1985, 2: 33). This study of mysterious, written prior traditions seemingly makes him vulnerable to the influence of the “Pole star” and leads to him sleeping at his watch post (1985, 2: 34). The evidence of displacement, of invasion, of prior civilizations (and in this case prior species) that antiquarian studies involve, gives a perspective that weakens immediate loyalties. In line with this, “The Doom that came to Sarnath” (1920) and “The Temple” (1925) both demonstrate anxiety concerning the sustainability of the idea of racial superiority. The historical activity that, for Lovecraft, should generate meaning unwittingly reveals its absence.

While “The Tomb” (1917) suggests that the antiquarian risks being possessed by the spirit of the oppressive Tory past (a threat literalized in “Charles Dexter Ward”), the failure of antiquarianism to disguise either class- or race-based oppression is articulated most fully in “The Rats in the Walls” (1924). Writing to James F. Morton in 1923, Lovecraft remarks that the “only reason I don’t save like hell” to visit “Old England” is “that I simply couldn’t come back, once I saw the ancient glories and monuments of my race”; as “a son returning to his fathers” Lovecraft would require the resources to settle “in archaic dignity” (1965,1: 210). Written in August and September of the same year, “The Rats in the Walls” recasts this imagined trip and the ancient constitutionalism found in “The Street” in the darkest terms. After the death of his son as a result of World War I, Delapore, the narrator, returns to the British ancestral home that his forebear, Walter de la Poer, left under a cloud in the reign of James I. While de la Poer’s name and destination (Virginia) humorously reference Lovecraft’s own literary precursor, Poe, the nobilary particle suggests a Norman origin later confirmed by the narrator: “Gilbert de la Poer” was granted the site of Exham Priory by “Henry the Third” in 1261 (1999, 92). The family’s Norman origin is potentially suspect when read in relation to the narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberty. The theory of the Norman Yoke had suggested that the Norman invasion represented a break with the ancient constitution, while the Magna Carta was sometimes seen as reinstituting this. According to Lovecraft’s chronology, then, the de la Poers found favor with the King at the exact moment he attempted to increase the power of the crown by using a papal bull to set aside the Provisions of Oxford and to undermine the Magna Carta (events that in 1264 would lead to the Second Barons’ Revolt). As royalists these nobles are connected with the disruption (or even the removal) of the ancient liberties of the Anglo-Saxon constitution.

Yet Lovecraft insists that it is only after inheriting the estate that the de la Poers are tainted by a perverted cult. As Walter Delapore’s antiquarian studies reveal, throughout the Saxon, Roman and “Druidic or Cymric” periods, this cult’s members have bred humans with their genetic forebears to produce cattle (1999, 89). In *The Time Machine* (1895) H.G. Wells had imagined that upper-class parasitism on the workers would drive an evolutionary process in which the descendants of the laborers would feed off their decadent erstwhile masters. Here (in an arrangement that also recalls Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) the upper ranks’ exploitation of the poor has been literalized in cannibalism and re-imagined as a deliberate and cruel process of on-going de-evolution. The myth of ancient liberties is shattered. Moreover, with the “voodoo” practices of Delapore’s Virginian cousin, Randolph, upper-class contamination has spread to America (1999, 93). The narrator (who, like Lovecraft, has a cat offensively named “Nigger-Man”) only comes close to accepting the possible consequences of such autocratic perversion in his final crazed ramblings. “Carfax” is burnt by the “Yanks” as a consequence not only of civil war but of slavery, oppression and the dark rites linked to it (1999, 108). When the narrator bitterly enquires: “Why shouldn’t rats eat a de la Poer as a de le Poer eats forbidden things?” he hints at the potentially revolutionary consequences of oppression (1999, 108).

The Alchemy of Revolution

In “The Rats in the Walls’ the antiquarian solution to the instability of the category of “the people’ finally and spectacularly fails: return to origin only reveals oppression. What, then, of the possibility of scientific progress, of a successful struggle with material conditions that (for Godwin at least) had offered the possibility of a wiser “people’? As China Miéville notes, in the early 30s Lovecraft began to shift to a “tremendously patrician ‘socialism’” (Lovecraft 2005a, xix). Supposing free-market capitalism had run its course, he began to believe some kind of political intervention towards progress was possible. In a 1936 letter to Natalie H. Wooley Lovecraft talks about the possibility of a “*scientific social vision & coöperation*, with the rational happiness & balanced development of men, individually & collectively, as its sole object” (2015, 211). In “At the Mountains of Madness” (written in 1931 and serialized in 1936) this political shift means that Lovecraft’s scientist is a more positive figure than the rebellious alchemist of his earlier story. Nonetheless, the progressive impulse is still shown to be fruitless. The tale’s frozen wastes recall, amongst other fictions, *Frankenstein* (1818)*.* While *Frankenstein* has been construed as Mary Shelley’s less than optimistic reply to William Godwin’s struggle for radical progress, oddly enough it is possible to read “At the Mountains of Madness” as a reply to both.

In her 1831 preface to *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley mentions Erasmus Darwin, who in his letters had proposed a “resemblance between the action of the human soul and that of electricity” (Shelley 1993, 195; King-Hele 1999, 302). Creating life from the material world, Shelley’s scientist embodies Godwin’s political struggle against the physical conditions that constrict individual development. In Shelley’s rewriting, though,the revolutionary project fails. The scientist fashions a new kind of creature only for the neonate to experience neglect and oppression. The creature, whose body is a composite, has been read as representing the “misunderstood revolutionary impulse” or experience of “alienating labour” (Sherwin 890). Largely stimulated by his appearance, his mistreatment suggests that while biology is not destiny, mankind persists in treating it as such. Angered by such ill-usage, the creature threatens the older species. Thus the once-progressive scientist, Frankenstein, cannot allow his creation to mate. Lovecraft curiously translates and transforms this picture of the revolutionary subject driven to attack his creators. Through his artic inhabitants, some of whom are as discontented as Frankenstein’s creature, Lovecraft sketches a process of stadial decay and dispossession that endlessly repeats, a process which his scientists cannot prevent.

In “At the Mountains of Madness,” the Old Ones’ external battle for territory is paralleled by an internal struggle for resource. Inevitably for Lovecraft this revolutionary struggle is also a racial one. In a 1934 letter to Natalie H. Wooley Lovecraft suggests that it would be “wiser” if the Nazis let “the Jew” “lose himself in the German people” (Lovecraft 2015, 200). Yet, despite having been married to a Jewish woman, Lovecraft makes the further anti-Semitic suggestion that such assimilation would not work “in Poland or New York city” (Lovecraft, 2015, 201). In “At the Mountains of Madness” assimilation misfires. Created by the Old Ones out of manipulated matter (as Frankenstein had presumably made the creature and as the de la Poers had twisted genetic stock), the shoggoths are constructed by their masters as a racially-distinct underclass that nonetheless has a “tough plasticity,” an imitative (or assimilative) ability to take on any shape (Lovecraft 2005a, 64). Godwin had suggested that control of material conditions, whether physical or economic, could impact upon social progress: he speaks, for example, of the “crimping house” of labor as a constriction on individual development that could be avoided (Godwin 1797, 16). Writing with an awareness of eugenics and from a racist perspective, Lovecraft’s insistence on the materiality of domination is more literal: laborers are specifically bred to manipulate matter on their master’s behalf. In this imaginary, racial and class disadvantage become indistinguishable. However, such domination, even when apparently naturalized, cannot last. When the Old Ones lose control of the physical materials that depict their history, they also lose control of the shoggoths. The “tough plasticity” that had modelled other materials now labors to organize itself (2005a, 64). Although the socialistic Old Ones are at once less monstrous and more sympathetic than their hideous progeny, the reason for the shoggoths’ increasingly “stubborn volition,” for their rebellion against servitude, is understandable, even horribly homely (2005a, 91).

Unsurprisingly, the resultant revolution does not lead to progress. Lovecraft renders the decadence of the new order visible through his once-prized motif of tradition. The shoggoths’ impoverished mimicry of the Old Ones’ artefacts demonstrates, as clearly as their language, that they have “*no voice save the imitated accents of their bygone masters*” (2005a, 97). While this phenomenon reflects Spengler’s idea of pseudomorphosis (where a young culture becomes cast in the shape of an older, dominant one), the idea also recalls Lovecraft’s earlier work. Just as Charles le Sorcier produces a distorted echo of aristocratic lineage in “The Alchemist,” the underclass labors to become what it has displaced. What lingers here is Lovecraft’s belief that the feudal structures of Eastern Europe echo in the Bolshevism and organized labor of the present. However, there is also a clear admission that one tradition may resemble another, that the oral inheritance of Anglo-Saxon liberty, for instance, is not ultimately that dissimilar from the polyglot pamphlets of “The Street”. All humans are descended from the same cells that made the shoggoths. In this context, the scientists’ “mural-deciphering” notebooks emphasize the shared ancestral urge to copy (2005a, 75). Blank fragments of “trail-blazing” paper indicate mounting decadence and uncertainty (2005a, 75). Tradition will continue to be recycled but the paper’s emptiness also offers little clue about who will write upon it. The question “To whom will [America] belong tomorrow?” remains unanswered by those who pose it. Unrecognized, our shoggoth descent, our capacity for rebellion and for dominance, persists within our very selves. Given this, the prosthetic of tradition never heals. It merely repeats, in ever more decadent form, the oppressions of the past.

Prosthetic Perspectives

Discussing the American Declaration of Independence, Jacques Derrida notes that “We the People” form an authorial body only brought into being with the text itself: they “do not exist as an entity, it does not exist, *before* this declaration *as such*. The signature invents the signer” (49). In Lovecraft’s work, this “signer,” once brought into being, is a shifting and anomalous identity whose changing signature puts pressure on the terms of the declaration and constitution at large: law and government are both affected by (in Derrida’s phrase) the “coup de force” of a continually reinvented people. As such, Lovecraft’s weird fiction demonstrates the gothic’s consistent use as a site to work through constitutional anxiety. The gothic (and in some cases the historical) writing of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century had been concerned with the transition from monarchy to oligarchy to modern nation. By recreating history, by reimagining the balance between crown, aristocracy and commons, the genre’s authors tried to reshape the state. Writing a hundred years later in a country where the concept of the “people” is constitutionally central, Lovecraft finds that concept’s relation to territory (always problematic) under pressure, from international Bolshevism, from immigration and from expansionism. Hence the fear of dynastic usurpation expressed by Horace Walpole in *Otranto* is repeated in Lovecraft’s fiction on a larger scale, no longer concerning a single ruling family but a “race.”

Haunted by a fear of mass usurpation, by the threat of a “people” who are no longer who they once were, Lovecraft attempts to find solace in the myth of Anglo-Saxon liberty – and superiority. Yet Walpole and the gothic writers of the 1790s had shown that the narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberties could be hijacked, used by one dynasty against another or by the people against both monarch and aristocracy. As much as Lovecraft would like to found American identity on this myth of racial and political origin, both its potential radicalism and its malleability come to haunt him. Although Lovecraft tries to use it to hide the brutality of colonialism towards individual settlers by giving the Anglo-Saxons a spurious priority, the attempt fails. Founded on the idea of liberty, ancient constitutionalism calls attention both to the plight of America’s original inhabitants and to the potential legitimacy of the demands of newer groups of immigrants. Even as Lovecraft attempts to distinguish old liberty from new subversion, he instead reveals a continuity of oppression that justifies revolution. In “The Rats in the Walls” antiquarian investigation into the Anglo-Saxon past reveals not liberty but a culture of inequality, in which racial difference is constructed by the rich that they may feed on the poor.

Worried by the failure of prosthetic history, concerned by his inability to defend his racist position convincingly, Lovecraft struggles to gain – and maintain – perspective. In a curious way, the tensions in his work repeat, on a cosmic scale, Scott’s own experiments with historical vision. In both *The Antiquary* and the introductory material to *Ivanhoe* the antiquarian tries to supply distance in order that past immigration, invasion and struggles over resource can be deemed all but irrelevant. Since hostilities are consigned to history, the composite peoples of the United Kingdom will find their political expression, not through a narrative of individual rights, but through the nation. However, particularly in *Ivanhoe*, the detail in the body of the text suggests that the struggle for resource and against oppression is fierce and on-going. Lovecraft confronts a similar difficulty. Even when the failure of the prosthetic narrative of Anglo-Saxon liberties leads him to construct a cosmic pre-history, to give a wider perspective, as soon as any detail is given, all that is revealed, over and over again, is the reason for revolution. “Barrel-shaped,” with “wings” and “tentacles,” the Old Ones are versatile and composite, their bodies Lovecraft’s imaginary of the polis formed by early English and Dutch colonists (Lovecraft 2005a, 19). Yet these originary “people” themselves create the oppressed underclass that will eventually replace them. “A shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, fairly luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming,” the Shoggoths supply an amorphous, and hideously dynamic vision of the reinvented body politic; they form a once-mistreated mass that will, through labor, push to its revolutionary destination (Lovecraft 2005a, 67).

Lovecraft cannot suppress the detail that makes revolution seem likely. What he can do is exploit the perspective generated by stadial history to breed a curious kind of political indifference. Having accepted that older and new traditions of liberty are the same, he contends that, from a cosmic distance, it is possible to see that their outcomes are similar too. In a revolution one oppression replaces another: “socialistic” behaviors, like those of the Old Ones, always rely on a mistreated underclass which will, eventually, seize resources and become master in its own right (Lovecraft 2005a, 62). In these maneuvers, Lovecraft’s fiction combines the late eighteenth-century sense of the word “revolution” as breakage with its older meaning, of political return. He adds, too, a perverted awareness of stadial decay. In this racist vision, which draws on Spengler, the cycles of revolution also lead to de-evolution. The progressive scientist, the alchemist who superstitiously believes that history can be rewritten is, even after Lovecraft’s shift in political belief, as wrong as the antiquarian who attempts to construct a narrative of Anglo-Saxon political legitimacy. “At the Mountains of Madness” suggests that another kind of “specialist” is necessary (Lovecraft 2005a, 3). Combining the gothic evocation of political oppression with the shifting distances of history writing, the author of weird fiction produces a message concerning upheaval and displacement which is oddly at once as pacifying as Oldbuck’s and far more horrifying. The revolutionary fight against oppression comes to seem understandable but also inevitable and pointless. In the face of political violence, the only dubious comfort that remains is the “che sarà sarà” offered by the cosmos.

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