

Big Nothings

by Edith Lyre

My favourite Lovecraft novella is *The Shadow Out of Time*. It's about a group of people, a civilisation rather, who every few billion years or so will replace their bodies with the bodies of another group in the distant future, i.e. their minds travel through time, but not their bodies. They do this before every extinction-event. In this way, they survive. Question for me's whether any remember what they were, at first, before these big, multi-era leaps forward. Last Lovecraft knows they were conical crustacean-folk, next (inevitably) their bodies will be human. Then? Lovecraft describes their government as 'fascist' and 'efficient.' Here's a drawing.

The underlying cosmic humour runs that this, in Lovecraft's mythos, is 'the Great Race': every other race has an equivalence to and exchangeability with the featured (*the Yith*). In his frustration with the cosmos, the absurdity of his own gangling, animal body, Lovecraft has sought to express himself through descriptive metaphor. His *Yith* are a visual permutation of Cassandra's ὅτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ: a chaos of limbs and animal parts thrown together out of infuriated



indifference. Like Lovecraft, French critic and novelist Michel Houellebecq (Keith Gessen writes in *NY Mag*, v. 11753) ‘imagines [in *The Elementary Particles* (1998)] that humankind will die out and be replaced by a race of post-humans who will, for one thing, lack gender and therefore be safe from sexual competition.’ It is in writing *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991), that Houellebecq first contemplates this prophecy, suggesting a libidinal origin to Lovecraft’s horror, i.e. in his making ‘not a single allusion to two of the realities to which we generally ascribe great importance: sex and money. Truly not one reference. He writes exactly as though these things did not exist’ (57).

Be imaginative: extend some libidinal trace out of Lovecraft’s writing, in *The Shadow out of Time*, ‘Their actions, though harmless, horrified me even more than their appearance—for it is not wholesome to watch monstrous objects doing what one has known only human beings to do.’ He then goes on about them stacking shelves with books, but there’s a nervous energy in the air now. It doesn’t take long before he simply *has to* elaborate: ‘They had no sex, but reproduced through seeds or spores which clustered on their bases and could be developed only under water.’ Warhol and Lovecraft had the same problem. Look at Warhol go:

Sex is nothing. (183, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*)

Sex is the biggest nothing of all time. (Probably apocryphal, but “sex is nothing” and identical sentiments are expressed in Chapter 12 of *Philosophy*.)

Sex is nostalgia for sex. (39)

It’s the long life-spans that are throwing all the old values and their applications out of whack. When people used to learn about sex at fifteen and die at thirty-five, they obviously were going to have fewer problems than people today who learn

about sex at eight or so, I guess, and live to be eighty. That's a long time to play around with the same concept. The same boring concept. (30)

Hard to credit, how he keeps getting away with it, how often he gives up the game. For example:

Whenever people and civilizations get degenerate and materialistic, they always point at their outward beauty and riches and say that if what they were doing was bad, they wouldn't be doing so well, being so rich and being so beautiful. People in the Bible did that when they worshipped the Golden Calf, for example, and then the Greeks when they worshipped the human body. (70)

Or getting re-invites to parties when he acts like this (Ondine, *The Warholstars Chronology*):

I was at an orgy, and he [Warhol] was, ah, this great presence in the back of the room. And this orgy was run by a friend of mine, and, so, I said to this person, 'Would you please mind throwing that thing [Warhol] out of here?' And that thing was thrown out of there, and when he came up to me the next time, he said to me, 'Nobody has ever thrown me out of a party.' He said, 'You know? Don't you know who I am?' And I said, 'Well, I don't give a good flying fuck who you are. You just weren't there. You weren't involved...'

Warhol was an ironist (obviously). When he said things like 'the most beautiful thing in Tokyo is McDonald's; the most beautiful thing in Stockholm is McDonald's; the most beautiful thing in Florence is McDonald's; Peking and Moscow don't have anything beautiful yet,' he was joking (71, *Philosophy*). It is the natural inclination of an ironist to oppose themselves: i.e. to, in exact contrariety to Lovecraft's style, focus with comedic obsession on one's object of spite, rather than — per

Lovecraft — drape it in shadows and have it flutter, haunting at the edges (the two artists are saying more or less equivalent things about ‘sex and money,’ only, you might say, by opposite methodology).

Thinking back to *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* returns us to the trouble of how to express oneself, when one has no personhood. Why, Sugar Plum Fairy asks Andy Warhol (344, *a*), do you avoid yourself?

Andy Warhol: What?

SPF—I mean you you [sic.] almost refuse your own existence. You know-

Uh—it’s just easier.

SPF—No, I mean I *like*, I like to know you (*talking*

very quietly) I always think of you as being hurt.

Well I’ve been hurt

so often so I don’t even care anymore.

The dear. Andy and his friends get in this predicament often, snagged on the dilemmas of their own selfhoods and realities, the relationalities therein and -of. Across pages 116-118, his friends Edie Sedgwick (Taxine) and Ondine break into lengthy discourse about what happens when one departs out of one, into another, manner of self-being — and then about the moral troublesomeness of being ‘special,’ as opposed, Edie Sedgwick puts it, to one of ‘those masses of auto mechanics’ (116-8):

Taxine— ...it’s all a matter of of you’re the the the 99th dimension.

[Ondine—]Yeah

T—And I’m at the 99th percentile but not the 99th

dimension so that we do correspond but...

Probably.

T—There’s one like I have one step more to go and that’s when I give up. But we have to, we just adjust, my dear, that’s all. You know what what that step is and that is acceptance.

...

T—Ondine, you're whole dimension... with the people. I know what you mean, but, no, but, that, don't you understand it's a slow and painful process, which removes you from that which you are from and places you into that which you are...

...

T—It's just that there are not many, there're not many people that are special. There are one or... There are a few, yes, there are more more than me. There's...

...

T—And that's, that's undeniably... and and yet most people, most of those masses of auto mechanics would never understand. And they can't.

T—They can't, I know it ... T—And yet I'm sitting there screaming and I just can't. ... They're going to have to [understand]... T—That's why I'm screaming, but they have to, even if I don't matter, they will. Well, watch them scream, watch them scream. They're going to have . . . T—There'll be a war or something that'll change the dimension of their understanding.

'A slow and painful process, which removes you from that which you *are from* and places you into that which *you are*...' is Cassandra's whole condition, the painful process the Fall of Troy. Edie Sedgwick, in my opinion, is naïve to expect war. She hasn't acquired Lovecraft's, Warhol's, Cassandra's cosmic pessimism: nothing will change; no one will be saved. The darkness of their prophecies is not in any rising smoke or flooding blood, but piecemeal annihilation, a *sinking*, not a *fall*, executed without protest or barely even attention. Look at Warhol in his mirror... 'I'm sure I'm going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?' (7, *Philosophy*).

Meanwhile Cassandra didn't need a mirror. If I were Cassandra, and not Warhol, my nothingness would trouble me more, when I couldn't escape my reflection. What is it, what is it, what's that? Whose body is it? Warhol had all day to walk around, like Sugar Plum Fairy says, avoiding himself, sealing up his face and slouching in corners, the world at a distance, survive as



Self-Portrait 1967

nothing but a pair of eyes, popping from an irrelevant and exchangeable head. Cassandra — a! — always at both sides of the room, of the glass, watching in, watching out. Problem of *don't look at me!* a fresh pain when it's you looking at yourself, and when neither you nor yourself are *anybody*. Don't look at who? you ask yourself, not breaking eye-contact with exactly who you shouldn't be looking at. Yourself, yourself, yourself. *Otototoi popoi da!* — in Latin this time.

Last night (1 June '18), in the shower, I asked the guy with me (who I'd slept with, now, four times) if he could tell me his name. We'd been talking about sound, 'house noises,' and when I explained I'd move my Playstation 4 to my bedroom and play music from it when men came over, he said, 'So if your housemates hear music they know not to disturb you, and it drowns out the noises. They know A.D.'s in there with a guy,' and I said, '*Ee dee*,' then I laughed, brushing soap from my eyes, pushing back taller than him against the tiles of the shower.

'Oh now we can do this. You realise?'

He poked one of my bruises, a little apprehensive: 'Mm?'

'We can tell each other our names. A *first name basis*,' I laughed. '*Edi* [my Grindr handle] is short for Edith. I've never known yours.'

He had to think. 'You're right. I assumed.' Then he told me.

On Grindr [c. June 2018], my profile pic's of me, reduced to orange bra and knickers displayed with hummingbirds and maples in water-colour style, staring with a bored smirk at the lens of my iPhone-camera, body texta'd in lipstick with the names of the four men and one trans woman I'd slept with that fortnight, each of their names encircled with a lipsticking of flowers or a love-heart. Men ask me what the words say, and I don't understand. They can see the words fine. When I answer them, they change the subject. Every time it's a mystery. Sometimes (I mean the photo's public, so I'll say the name), they ask, *Who's Luke?* and what do they expect? *Oh, Luke Newchild? A fund manager for Southmake Real Estate. He works at 90 Overton Rd, Arcadia Park. He lives in the same suburb at 3/33, Bath Ave. We slept together on the 10th of February. He was at my house for one hour, five minutes from approx. 5.11 pm to approx. 6.16 pm. He stayed too long. All I'll say is, A guy, or if I'm annoyed, A guy I slept with.*

'They know not to listen when there's music playing,' he mused.

'That, and it's muffled. Any sounds mix with other sounds so you can pretend it's not happening. They can pretend. The mix of indistinct sounds can mean whatever you like. It's less distracting. Like I've always found quiet sex more distracting, when you're trying to sleep, than the roaring noise-mass of a lot of cities. Have you been to New York?'

He said only to Asia.

'I have to go to Asia,' I said, drying my face.

How did Warhol, the gay celibate, sleep when people were having sex in his apartment, in his factory, in the half-thousand other apartments he'd sleep in, through all which, purportedly, his celibacy was kept intact? He abused obesity-meds to get high, and endured awake for days on end. But sometimes, without a doubt, he was forced to excuse himself: lie eyes bright in the dark, in the room next over, luxuriating in the sensation of his god's presence. Sign of the cross. Right-left the Byzantine way. He attended every week, even if, he says, 'I never feel that I do anything bad' ('Lee', *Interview* magazine). Out one wall, the familiar rattle of Midtown; out the other, deeper in his apartment, the howlings of the elder gods (the non-gods: the malevolent somethings or

nothings, whichever, it's getting hard to keep track; regardless, when he says, 'I think about nothing, how it's always in style; always in good taste; nothing is perfect — after all, B, it's the opposite of nothing' (8, *Philosophy*), it's obvious, here at least, that one or the other of these opposed *nothings* is God). But next door was 'the biggest nothing of all time.' And it was keeping him awake. Trapped. Forcing him to wait. His dark-room and prints were through that space, and he didn't want to trespass. *I never do anything bad.*

'B went on for such a long time about all her 'creams' that I asked her, 'Don't you like to have people come in your face?' (10-11):

'Does it rejuvenate?'

'Haven't you heard about these ladies who take young men to the theater and jerk them off so they can put it all over their face?'

'They rub it in like face cream?'

'Yes. It sort of pulls it tighter and makes them younger for the evening.'

'It does? Well, I use my own. It's better that way.'

Acting like this, posing questions contoured like remarks, helped him withstand critical scrutiny. Andy Warhol, celibate and Christian conservative, clinging for dear life to his status in a community described by sex-positivity and marginalisation. Rolling side to side, alone in bed, he could mix together the sounds of either room, and in asking B these questions, could trust the house-noises posed him no threat — were only follow-ons from his own remarks. Safe. Safe in the dark with God.

Who remembers Cassandra's dark sanctuary, the temple of Athena? On schedule, after Troy fell, she made duly to Athena's statue, as scheduled and foreseen, and embraced and wept against it, again, per the schedule of her prophecy. Why did Athena and the other gods allow Ajax to rape Cassandra, in Athena's own temple? I could ask, too, why Cassandra went, knowing all

fate? Through a weird Trojan faith, i.e., that the gods cared? The war mattered? From Troy's ruins there could possibly spring something *to change the dimension of understanding*? She'd hoped her foresight was in error, she'd misunderstood, justice would intervene. Hoped *in all* the whole meaning, whole import of the crisis weren't already writ and known. She was wrong, that's all. Faith misplaced. When Ajax raped Cassandra, he bumped the marble Athena, against whose hip Cassandra cried. The statue fell.

What discussions followed between Ajax and the other Greeks aren't important, really. Cassandra was made useful, as she had to be, and assigned to Agamemnon's concubinage. Sometimes, when nothing sticks together, the cosmos looks formless, sometimes, you grab one thing you know the name of and find another thing with the same name. You hold them together in either hand, count them: One in my left. One in my right. You put them down and lay them together. Two on top the table.

You hold them in either hand again. You lay them on the sheets. Repeat until you're sure it works the way it used to: One and One still make Two.

But other times, when nothing sticks, the cosmos looks formless, you sink. That's all you do. It goes like that because when you open your eyes, there's nothing you know the name of. What can you grab two of? Nothing touches anything else.

Speak. But Greek's the only language left, and the only Greek you know is *Paradínomai*. *I surrender*.