

# Derrick's Ritual

By Alan Gullette

It's unfair that you should call me mad, Bennett — plenty other people have stranger prejudices than mine. And once I explain my experience with Arthur Derrick, you will understand my reason for turning down the invitation. Wasn't it apparent? A critic receives an invitation to a private dinner for two from a woman "writer" whose work he has just denounced — a woman rumored to leave her home only in the late evening, and whose so-called "novel" is entitled *The Lure of the Vampire*. A friendly consultation? Never! Her plan was all too apparent.

All creative people seem to get too involved in their work. Take artists, for instance. Richard Upton Pickman — the Boston bizarrist who is frequently acclaimed to have surpassed Sime, Doré, Goya, and even his contemporaries Roerich and Clark Ashton Smith — is said to have begun associating with the ghouls and other fiends he depicted in his art. Clearly, that's going too far!

Then there are actors — Bela Lugosi is a prime example. He became so obsessed with his role as Dracula that he developed a taste for raw meat, and late in life requested to be buried in the cape he wore in his films! The majority of actors live in a world of make-believe, you will agree.

And finally, there are authors. H. P. Lovecraft, the Providence eccentric so often compared to the great Poe, portrayed himself in several of his Randolph Carter stories — something many authors do. Or look at the genius Poe himself: his life was every bit as dreary as his fiction. All these examples serve to bolster my argument, the point of which is this: not only does the creative artist adopt his surroundings and atmosphere to his work, but he also adapts the atmosphere of his work to his surroundings.

How did I arrive at this theory? Why did I drop Derrick as even a remote friend, and why have I not since accepted the company of weird fiction writers? I'll tell you.

As you know, Arthur Wilmarth Derrick is considered one of the finest weird fiction writers of this century — in addition to his reputation as publisher and premier critic. (You also know his work under the pen name of Steven Grendle.) He invited me to visit Sac City, Wisconsin and see his small publishing firm — small, indeed, but unexcelled — the venerable Dunwich House, which has made the work of authors such as Lovecraft (and Derrick himself) more readily available. Ostensibly, we were to discuss the prospect of his publishing a compilation of my reviews and critical essays. But I knew that he would also take issue with the severity of my devaluation of his most recent Dunwich House volume — a lapse in quality infinitely rare among his unparalleled output.

Now, it occurred to me that Derrick might present me with an ultimatum: either retract my review (at least tone it down), or have no compilation published under the honorable imprint of Dunwich House. As much as I wanted such a collection to be published, I intended to refuse such a compromise of my critical standards: in my mind, the one honor outweighed the other, and I was prepared to dig in my heels and do battle. If Derrick considered my opinions worth reprinting, he would have to accept them as they were.

Thus prepared mentally for our encounter, I wired Derrick on the nineteenth of October to accept his invitation and reveal my plan to leave Providence midday October the twentieth.

Calculating a two-day drive, I would arrive on the morning of the twenty-second after stopping two nights along the way. But I finished arranging things at my end earlier than expected and set out early the next morning by motorcar.

I made excellent distance that first day and stayed the night in some small town outside Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. Traversing an equal number of miles the next day, I arrived in Sac City around nine o'clock on the evening of the twenty-first of October. Despite this early arrival, I made straight for the famed Dunwich House, trusting that Derrick would have my accommodations prepared. But as I pulled up to within view of the house, I saw that there were no lights on and feared that Derrick had retired for the night.

There was nothing to do but return to the city and spend the night in a hotel. I drove some fifty feet farther along the main road and pulled off on a dirt road in order to turn around. The dirt road ran adjacent to Derrick's large side-yard and was separated from that open space by a four-foot barrier of vegetation. As soon as I pulled off the main road and paused to shift the motor into reverse, I heard a very faint but unmistakable *whining* sound. This I feared at first to be the radiator or other malfunctioning organ of the over-worked engine. I killed the lights and engine, but the sound continued. Emerging from the car, I stepped around to the front of the car and was about to raise the hood, hoping the source of the problem would thus become manifest... but I never completed this project.

Whether it was that I could now see above the vegetation bordering the dirt road, or that I could now tell, from my elevated stance, that the almost musical whining noise came definitely from some source apart from the engine, I do not know; but I stopped where I was, beside the motorcar, and traced the sound to its true source.

The quasi-musical whining increased steadily in volume and changed variously in tune, until it became undoubtable that the exact cause was a flute or similar wind instrument. This piping was of a monotonous, undulating, and shrill quality which gave me cause to shudder. As the cacophony accelerated in tempo and grew louder, the direction whence it came was revealed. The source of the hellish and obscurely festive sound was none other than Arthur Derrick's Dunwich House, standing some fifty feet away in the darkness yet clearly visible above the row of short trees and bushes.

Not for a moment had this monstrously revelatory and virtually damning fact lingered on my mind before my attention was drawn to a caliginous figure emerging stealthily from the side door of the house. Clad in black robe and cowl, had he not been carrying a burning candle I could never have been certain of his identity — but as matters stood, I could easily discern *the grotesquely illumined facial features of Arthur Derrick*.

Bearing the candle, Derrick walked across his moonlit side-yard to a table which bore two black candles. These he lit and I could see more clearly that the highly decorated table was more properly termed *an altar*, covered with a white cloth lavishly embroidered with arabesque runes and nameless allegorical characters. The tall black candles were held by brazen candlesticks which stood two feet from either end of the table and two feet apart from one another, the table being roughly six feet long by three feet wide.

In the centre of the table between the candlesticks was a rather large book, opened to the middle leaves. If closed, the book would have measured some four inches thick, eleven in width, and fifteen in height. Derrick consulted the volume, turning the undoubtedly ancient leaves with great care. Suddenly he stopped, looking closely at the top of the page to which he had turned. Then he slipped a small notebook from a pocket beneath his robe and, flipping through this, appeared to double-check the page and passage he must have previously noted and selected for the occasion — whatever that may be. Returning to the large book, he read the passage over to himself,

then withdrew several singular items from a compartment or drawer beneath the cloth that covered the altar.

These most singular and peculiar items were: a short, straight, wide dagger; a strangely familiar lamp (which I now believe to have been the fabulous Lamp of Alhazred, probably left to Derrick by the late Ward Phillips); a small, golden cup, empty; a leather pouch; a curious-looking pencil-sized white rod (which, indeed, I initially took to be a pencil); and a stone or metallic disk, along with a candle smaller than those arranged upon the altar-top.

Now Arthur Derrick went through a confusing and almost maddening ritual of quasi-magic. First he set Alhazred's lamp neatly beside the book and adjusted it at the top. Then he took the curious pencil-sized rod and held it above the wick of the lamp. This rod he appeared to *twist* somehow, and when he had removed it, the lamp was alight! Now the table was brightly illuminated. Derrick placed some reddish powder from the leather pouch into the golden cup, and taking this, the disk (which appeared to be covered with hieroglyphic or runic symbols), the dagger, and the smaller candle (which he lit with the lamp's flame), he proceeded to the centre of the open space between the altar and the wall of vegetation behind which I stood. As soon as I saw him move toward me, I stooped low behind the shrubbery to avoid detection, though I had no trouble seeing the events that followed.

Derrick placed the disk in a shallow, circular indentation in the soil, already cleared of grass, and knelt down before it. Then, after glancing momentarily at the cloudless sky and the starry voids beyond, he rearranged the disk — presumably to align its hieroglyphs with predefined celestial coordinates.

All this time the absurd piping or howling had continued unnoticed, my focus given to observing the obscure goings-on; now it terminated, thus calling attention to itself. The precise instrumentation of this music was never revealed, nor how it stopped and started, and one can only wonder...

Next Derrick recited several incoherent phrases and, scooping some of the reddish powder from the cup with the short dagger, sprinkled this to the left of the disk. As he did this — the very instant the powder slid from the tilted blade — a wicked flash of heat lightning energized the atoms of the atmosphere... yet, as I have said, *there were no clouds to be seen in the night sky*. Powder was likewise distributed to the right of the disk, following a chant very similar to the first and followed in turn by another silent flash of heat lightning. Then Derrick, pausing for a moment, recited a long, seemingly *special* chant, and distributed the powder directly onto the disk of metallic stone. Again lightning flashed, but through some inconceivable, inexplicable cosmic dislocation of time and space, *the lightning froze for a full five seconds!*

You can't begin to think how I felt, Bennett, out there alone with a man or thing who could escape the known laws of science and nature, and control the elements themselves. But let me continue — if I can.

As I said, it was as if time had stood still. Then the very air was rent with an enormous clap of thunder that vibrated down into my very bones. With a grotesque, evil smile of self-satisfaction, Derrick arose and returned to the altar, where he set aside the powder receptacle, candle, and knife and studied once again the book. Ah, the book! I can only guess which of the countless forbidden books it was, but I am sure that it was one of those listed hazardously in the Roman Catholic *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

Now comes a difficult but necessary part of my narrative, Bennett; it explains why I did not go to a hotel that night nor to Derrick's house the next day, and why I have never since accepted an invitation from a weird-fiction writer. I'll tell you.

Derrick, as I have said, returned to the altar and read once more from the forbidden tome. Again he chanted aloud, and the lamp's flame, it seemed, leapt with the recital of a certain word or name, "Cthugha." (The name seemed oddly familiar at the time, and I now know it as the entity that formed the basis of Derrick's story, "In the Wood of N'gai.") Now he recited a chant not unlike that which accompanied the distribution of powder upon the disk. A single, powerful bolt of lightning struck the disk and made me jump halfway out of my skin! After this, an eerie, ghastly glow radiated from the disk, highlighting its runic carvings. At times I almost thought this radiation to be a *flame* — such were the nuclear qualities of the aura. As I watched, Derrick yet again consulted the alien volume on necromantic rituals and more unspeakable things.

Now came the unexpected climax of the hellish ritual and of my narrative. The weird piping was heard again, emanating from somewhere near the house and rejoining the *mélange* of eldritch sensations. The music seemed to interact with the abnormal leaping of the lamp's flame and the varying intensity of the evil glow from the metallic disk, with the effect that all three moved or acted with the tempo of Derrick's voice.

It was now around half-past nine — I did not bother to consult my wristwatch, horrified as I was by the uncanny ritual and its implications — and a cool breeze stirred up. Suddenly, Derrick paused in his recital and gazed at the stars above the trees. I saw by looking myself that Formalhaut was up, just below Mars in the south. Then, in a tongue far more guttural than the one employed in the earlier portions of the ritual, he uttered a potent chant of impossible quasi-syllables that I cannot *and dare not* repeat. He actually screamed these unpronounceable sounds with arms raised in the air, then stood there with eyes fixed on the disk in the centre of the open space — stood with hideous *expectation*.

Nothing happened, but the tension nearly broke me! What could happen next, I wondered? Derrick stepped from behind the altar and strode quickly to a spot roughly between altar and disk; then he screamed the invocation again, arms raised to the stars, eyes on the disk. Remaining there, he uttered the blasphemy a third and final time, arms raised and eyes now trained on the evil star Formalhaut.

An abrupt, blinding flash of light from a doubtful source, an ear-bursting shriek, and there stood upon the aeon-ancient, curvilinearly hieroglyphed metallic plate *a huge, amorphous though frightfully anthropoidal, pulsating breath from hell!* The colloidal, semi-gaseous, already Cyclopean fire-being did not stop growing or changing, and seemed to be on a retro-evolutionary track of rapid orthogenesis, through it never moved into any class or category of life or quasi-life known to man!

I cannot blame my heart for skipping a few beats in that mind-blasting, cataclysmic moment. But as soon as I had recovered from the momentary paralysis brought on by unprecedented terror, I plunged into my motorcar, ignited the engine, threw the car into reverse, and spun out off the dirt road in a cloud of dust. No longer caring whether Derrick saw me, I returned the way I had come — this time with pedal pressed firmly to the floorboard and tires squealing on the pavement.

I left in the hurry that I did not only to flee the monstrous fire-entity, but also to escape the holocaust which I knew would follow in its wake. For I had read Derrick's "In the Wood of N'gai," and in a flash I remembered that his chant called forth Cthugha from Formalhaut to destroy the Wisconsin countryside! But then I thought, why?

This puzzled me: why would Derrick want to wreak destruction upon himself and Dunwich House and the Wisconsin city he loved so much? Then another thing crept up in my mind: some difference — impossible to ascertain — between the chant that Derrick had included in his dark ceremony that night and the one used in his story for the popular horror magazine, *Tales of the Weird*.

Eventually — once I felt that I was at a safe distance — I took one last, apprehensive glance back at the house. I saw no raging conflagration or destructive holocaust among the woods. *What I did see was the prodigious fire-entity rearing high above the treetops.*

Then the realization hit me. Derrick had not summoned Cthugha from distant Formalhaut to destroy his wood or his house or himself — he called it to unleash its heretical powers upon the world! Perhaps the stars were “right.” Perhaps it was time for the Great Return promised to take place in Alhazred’s *Necronomicon* and actually described in the final chapter of the R’lyeh Text and in similar manuscripts. Perhaps this very moment, on other parts of the globe, Cthulhu was being called up from sunken R’lyeh in the South Pacific; Yog Sothoth and Tsathoggua called up from their lightless abodes within the earth; and Hastur, Shub-Niggurath, and other, nameless entities were being assembled by Nyarlathotep, the Mighty Messenger, with the help of human allies; and together they would reign malignly over the earth and reenslave her unsuspecting denizens...

I am sure now that the chant in Derrick’s story was far different from the one I heard that night. In his weird tale, Derrick had merely guessed at the potent chant, mimicking Lovecraft with an essentially harmless jumble of consonants. But now he must have found the real thing, and the anathema he bravely uttered was none other than the companion to the invocation which calls Zhar from Arcturus: the command of ’Umr At-Tawil. Together they made up the Unholy Couplet, thought to be lost forever with a fragment of the Pnakotic Manuscripts of the Lomarians — but apparently found, and included unawares in some ancient tome, a copy of which Derrick had that night. This couplet had undoubtedly been sought through untold aeons of man’s shadowy history — probably sought after as avidly as the Holy Grail — by those worshippers and followers of the Great Old Ones who wished destruction and vengeance upon the omnipotent Elder Gods...

But something went wrong. Perhaps the incantation was wrong, perhaps the ceremony was ill-performed. Or perhaps its malign efficacy was superseded by the benign intervention of some other force, and the fearful return of Cthugha quelled by some greater power... We may never know.

Thus ends my narrative, Bennett. I got home safely, and within a few days had heard of the death of Arthur Wilmarth Derrick, and of the mystery surrounding it as well as the annihilation of Dunwich House. Destruction by what? Why, Bennett! Didn’t you read the papers? It was by fire...

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