

## LETTER ONE

# Prayers

The prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who prays.

—Søren Kierkegaard (*Upbuilding* 22)

Dear Scott,

I trust this note finds you well. I open this communication between us with the hope that we do not misunderstand one another. For the moment, let's keep this writing a secret, strictly between us.

Lovecraft's protagonists find themselves "forced into speech" ("At the Mountains of Madness," *Tales* 481). They do not so much will it as find themselves thrown into a conversation. As members of the human family, they seem to owe a debt of "warning" to certain others (481): "Now I must formulate some definitive statement—not only for the sake of my own mental balance, but to warn such others as may read it seriously" ("The Shadow Out of Time," *Tales* 719). Indeed, the warning sometimes involves an admonition to any or all *not to read* the story or to prevent the story from more broadly circulating: "if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye" ("The Call of Cthulhu," *Tales* 196). While Lovecraft narrators often encounter the limit of their ability to describe (the unsayable or the apophatic), they are never silent. They continue to babble even when they doubt their words have a clear referent.

Indeed, all of the time they are writing they also are praying: "*Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript*" (196). These are prayers for a particular kind of reader: a family member, a trusted confidant, or

an attorney, who will be trusted to judge whether the secret should be protected or transmitted. “But I must tell my son what I saw or thought I saw, and let him use his judgment as a psychologist in gauging the reality of my experience, and communicating this account to others” (“Shadow,” *Tales* 783). These are prayers directed toward the other and in the hope that the other is “sane” and will remain so as they read the pages. These are prayers, most generally, that the narrator might be heard precisely as intended. And all of this because writing and communicating is always excessive and always threatens to take one to the brink, the nonplace, of madness.

I want to begin with prayer as a way of provoking a conversation that tests the limits of the current understanding of Lovecraft. Today, those who have the most at stake in curating the Lovecraft archives are also the quickest to assert that H. P. Lovecraft was a card-carrying atheist and enemy of religion—a firm “materialist.”<sup>1</sup> If these scholars are correct, then prayer should have no real place in his corpus, other than something to be criticized and satirized.

I have my doubts, of course, and wonder whether another reading of Lovecraft is possible. Such a reading will remain interested in Lovecraft’s voluminous letters but will not seek to read the literary texts as mere extensions and elaborations of his epistolary opinions. So why do Lovecraft’s protagonists pray, and what might this mean?

Scott