



**Disturbing the Ant-Hill:
Misanthropy and Cosmic Indifference in Clark Ashton Smith's Medieval Averroigne¹**

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Clark Ashton Smith—unlike the more famous H.P. Lovecraft—engaged with the medieval as a setting for his fiction. Lovecraft admired classical Roman civilization and the eighteenth century, but had little time for medieval themes. As Brantley Bryant has related, Lovecraft wrote contemptuously that the Middle Ages was a period that “snivel[ed] along after real civilization faded.”² Smith, however, has a more complex and curious relationship with the medieval. It is not necessary to admire the Middle Ages to be preoccupied by it—Ernst Robert Curtius devoted a great deal of his scholarly life to studying a period that he considered derivative, its achievements reflections of a superior Classical tradition.³ Lovecraft actively vilified the medieval, but Smith basked in its literary poetics and textures while being indifferent to historicism. In this essay, I explore a medieval world created with a fleshed-out topography and fully-formed cultural context serving as a backdrop for bizarre and hideous themes of weird fiction in the face of human insignificance.

The literary preoccupations that draw many to the study of the past are difficult to discern in Smith's stories, which reveal an intriguing series of queer motivations. His work painted a picture of a human race that was ineffectual, cyclical in its achievements and ultimately irrelevant in the face of larger forces. Smith's attitude to literature was borne of a deeply stubborn misanthropy amplified by a life in threadbare Depression-era California, where he found himself eking out a living as a struggling pulp writer, socially isolated and underpaid for his poetic and literary endeavors.⁴ Lovecraft believed that the human drive towards science and knowledge was part of

¹ This article is indebted to the efforts of Boyd Pearson, creator of the Clark Ashton Smith website *Eldritch Dark* (<http://www.eldritchdark.com/>). Pearson's tireless gathering of Smith's corpus from a variety of printed primary and secondary sources—stories, letters, prose, and much more—and the maintenance of an excellent bibliography is an impressive scholarly achievement.

² Brantley Bryant, “H.P. Lovecraft's ‘Unnameable’ Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, eds Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113–128, here 114.

³ C. Stephen Jaeger, “Ernst Robert Curtius: A Medievalist's Contempt for the Middle Ages,” *Viator* 47, no. 2 (2016): 367-379, 10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.111238.

⁴ The Depression has an adverse effect on the pulp fiction market, with many magazines closing or moving to more infrequent publication schedules. *Weird Tales* was no exception, and was suffering from financial difficulties by 1935.

a linear achievement, but would put humanity into conflict with previously unimagined cosmic horrors that would make nonsense of it all. Robert E. Howard felt that civilization was a lie that barbarians told each other to feel humane. Smith, however, believed that the only meaningful quality that existed in the world was the trans-corporeal and trans-human imaginative force for which poetry was the catalyst. In this schema, the past was a rich tapestry of detail in a meaningless void and Smith developed his own unique form of *contemptus mundi* through which to channel his creative medievalist energies.⁵

Born in 1893 in Long Valley, California to a poor farming family and a long-time resident of Auburn, California, Smith was always an outsider and a fantasist. A precocious autodidact with minimal schooling and a reportedly eidetic memory, he is rumored to have read through the dictionary word by word on multiple occasions. Smith started writing stories at age 11 and continued throughout his teenage years.⁶ He came to the attention of his literary world at an early age due to the sheer force and weirdness of his poetics, their dripping and lurid vocabulary. Initially discovered by the poets Ambrose Bierce and George Stirling, Smith gained some early poetic fame for his 1911 poem “Ode to the Abyss,” with several San Francisco papers hailing him as “the boy poet of the Sierras.”⁷ Later, Lovecraft was so impressed by the brooding depiction of the “grotesque and arabesque” in Smith’s work that he sent a letter to introduce himself in 1922. “I have tried to write short stories [and] sketches affording glimpses into the unknown abysses of terror which leer beyond the boundaries of the known,” he wrote rapturously, “but have never succeeded in evoking even a fraction of the stark hideousness conveyed by any one of your ghoulishly potent designs.”⁸ They remained enthusiastic literary friends until Lovecraft’s death in 1937, part—together with Howard—of the “big three” authors of the *Weird Tales* magazine.

Smith lived a hermetic and austere life without gas or electricity, barely surviving from the proceeds of his writing and a series of menial laboring jobs. Studs Terkel’s famous oral history of the Great Depression is filled with episodes of political awakening and yet Smith emotionally disconnected from the frenetic fast-moving world of the New Deal and its politics.⁹ Despite his dissatisfaction with the world in which he lived and disdain for its comings and goings, it was the Depression and the infirmity of his ageing parents—whom Smith nursed until their deaths—that spurred him to produce his greatest work, out of financial necessity.¹⁰ In fact, Smith may never have written prose

At one point, the magazine owed Robert E. Howard \$800 (over \$14,500 in today’s money) for Conan stories that had been published six months earlier. Smith’s *Averoigne* stories were published at the height of this period, and he too struggled to claw back what was owed. Deke Parsons, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the Birth of Modern Fantasy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 96.

⁵ To summarise an opinion of Steve Behrends, Lovecraft was interested in the sheer scale of the cosmos (which makes humanity insignificant), and yet the scope of Smith’s cosmos came from his disinterest in, distance from, and dislike for humanity. See Steve Behrends, “Clark Ashton Smith: Cosmicist or Misanthrope?” in *The Dark Eidolon: Journal of Smith Studies*, 2 (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1983).

⁶ Steve Behrends, *Clark Ashton Smith: A Critical Guide to the Man and His Work, Second Edition* (Rockville, MD: Borgo Press, 2013), 12.

⁷ S.T. Joshi, “Introduction,” in *The Dark Eidolon and Other Fantasies*, ed. S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 2014), ix-xxii, here x-xi.

⁸ “Letter from H.P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, August 12, 1922,” *Selected Letters of Clark Ashton Smith*, eds. David E. Schultz and Scott Connors (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 2003), 109. *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/y9tu79o3>.

⁹ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

¹⁰ Brian Stableford, “Clark Ashton Smith” in *St James Guide to Fantasy Writers*, ed. David Pringle (Detroit MI: St James Press, 1996), 529-530

at all unless pressed to do so by his poverty—he considered himself a poet forced to write for crass commercial reasons.¹¹ After the death of his mother in 1935, Howard in 1936 and both his father and Lovecraft in 1937, Smith lost his motivation—financial urgency and copious encouragement from his colleagues had kept him going.¹²

Smith's tales spanned human time and exceeded it, from the pre-history of Hyperborea to the dying Earth of Zothique, millions of years in the future; Averoigne was his foray into the Middle Ages. A product of the 1930s, the tales of the cycle were mesmerized by the texture of medieval culture—Western and Eastern—and yet treated it with a strange ambivalence, sketching out its turmoil, poetic expression and cultural exoticism. His portrayal of the Middle Ages was tinged with tropes from the Cthulhu mythos, filled with the oddities, human cruelty and insanity of his broader corpus. He devised a series of Averoigne stories between 1930 and 1941 in *Weird Tales: The End of the Story* (1930); *A Rendezvous in Averoigne* (1931); *The Maker of Gargoyles* (1932); *The Holiness of Azédarac* (1933); *The Colossus of Ylourgne* (1933); *The Mandrakes* (1933); *The Beast of Averoigne* (1933); *The Disinterment of Venus* (1934); *Mother of Toads* (1938); and *The Enchantress of Sylaire* (1941).¹³ Another story, *The Satyr*, was not published until 1948. The bulk of these stories were written in the early 1930s during Smith's most productive period, but he continued to publish them into the 40s and 50s. He later published Averoigne poetry in 1951 and a series of outlines for further stories survive in his papers.¹⁴ Smith's medievalism was macabre and lurid, beautiful and horrifying, and has found a devoted following in the decades since his death.

Smith cited some of his favorite stories as Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death," both examples of lavish medievalism accompanied by a colorful, often lurid backdrop.¹⁵ His literary imagination was also gruesome for, as L. Sprague de Camp put it, "nobody since Poe has so loved a well-rotted corpse."¹⁶ The medieval content that he created was derivative in some senses, but luridly original in others. Steve Behrends phrases it well, suggesting that "Smith might be likened to a maker of fine carpets . . . who, to insure the sale of his product at times employed conventional patterns, but whose delight came from the rich color of his thread and the delicate perfection of his weave."¹⁷ Like nineteenth-century parody such as the "tender" camp of Victorian burlesque, in which medieval slapstick was accompanied by lavish historicist set pieces, his short stories are a merciless pillorying of medieval culture, but with lavish historical details—he was a poet and a misanthrope and these two qualities defined his prose.¹⁸ Unlike the romantic history of the nineteenth century, Smith cared little for national myths, bloodlines, patriotism, or nostalgia. His history was, as Carolyn Dinshaw has put it, made of "temporalities that are not laminar flows of some putative stream of time, not historicist, not

¹¹ L. Sprague de Camp, "Sierran Shaman: Clark Ashton Smith," in *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976), 207.

¹² Sprague de Camp, "Sierran Shaman," 207.

¹³ Ryan Harvey, "The Fantasy Cycles of Clark Ashton Smith Part I: The Averoigne Chronicles," New Epoch Press, last modified 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/y8zltw8r>.

¹⁴ Harvey, "The Averoigne Chronicles."

¹⁵ Douglas Roubillard, "Clark Ashton Smith," in *Supernatural Fiction Writers, vol. 2* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 875-881.

¹⁶ Sprague De Camp, "Sierran Shaman," 206.

¹⁷ Behrends, *Clark Ashton Smith*, 22.

¹⁸ Louise D'Arcens, *Comic Medievalism: Laughing at the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 182.

progressive or developmental in the modern sense.”¹⁹ As a consumer and reproducer of history, of literary ornament, Smith embodied the queerness that Dinshaw explores in *How Soon is Now?*, a man out of sync with linear time or the norms of his society, cut off culturally and spatially and dwelling alone in a world of linguistic texture and imagination.²⁰ In his own words, he was “a fantastic, eccentric, impractical, improvident devil: that well-nigh fabulous being, a poet.”²¹

Smith read the cycles of history and the institutional arrangements of pre-modernity through a lens of affected worldly ennui. He once described the US of the 1910s as a “pseudo-republic, built mostly of paper, and mortared with ink” and claimed that “I think the motor-car should be the symbol of American civilization, with the motto, ‘speed, dust, noise, and stink’.” His misanthropy colors his writing and his opinions of current affairs. After airing xenophobic remarks about European immigrants in America, he ends his thoughts by writing that “I suppose that the social upheavals of the ant-hill are of importance to the ants, too. But all colors will look alike in the night of Death.”²² Issues such as race, economics and politics seem to arouse little emotion save bemused disaffection. Smith’s dilettante resignation at the state of the world privileged a sense of romance, poetry and mystery over history, fact, or culture; in a 1930 letter to Lovecraft Smith writes that: “when the novelty of modern discoveries, etc., has worn off, it seems to me that people must go back to a realization of the environing, undissipated mystery, which will make for a restoration of the imaginative.”²³

The core of *Averoigne* is a dislike, even hatred, for the overwrought bureaucracies of medieval religion, derived from a wider dislike of all human organized activity—Smith often expressed his disbelief in “cockeyed Utopian schemes.”²⁴ His medieval world is elaborate and complex, but ultimately a lie that superstitious fools tell themselves in order to survive in a world of bizarre mysteries—a historical expression of a wider human folly. In all things, he was a dogmatic contrarian and cultural cynic. In a 1912 letter to George Stirling, Smith responds to the socialist idealism of the time with the downbeat aphorism that “the thing called civilization, as the history of the past shows conclusively enough, is only a dog chasing its own tail....”²⁵

In *Averoigne*, too, medieval culture chases its own tail. Civilization exists, but seems pointless in the face of supernatural horror. Chivalry is invisible and yet the baser motivations of his medieval characters are nurtured and confected in lurid detail. Ribaldry and prurient interest in medieval sexuality feature prominently, for they serve to ridicule the pious sentiments of the medieval faithful.²⁶ He is disinterested in depth of characterization: the people of *Averoigne* are like bad actors trapped in an American Renaissance fair and unable to comprehend that they are part of a

¹⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), xv.

²⁰ Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 4.

²¹ Behrends, *Clark Ashton Smith*, 11.

²² “Letter to George Stirling from Clark Ashton Smith, May 26, 1912,” in “My Dear Friend: Letters of Clark Ashton Smith to George Sterling,” *Mirage* 10 (1971): 63-70. *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/ydbhtklw>.

²³ “Letter to H.P. Lovecraft from Clark Ashton Smith, October 1930.”

²⁴ “Clark Ashton Smith – An Autobiographette,” *Eldritch Dark*, last modified October 26, 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/yda6ujmb>.

²⁵ “Letter to George Stirling from Clark Ashton Smith, April 28, 1912,” in “My Dear Friend: Letters of Clark Ashton Smith to George Sterling,” *Mirage* 10 (1971): 63-70. *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/y7sr9oyf>.

²⁶ Smith made efforts to cater to the Gothic eroticism that was prevalent in the pulp fantasy and science fiction of the era. For an excellent study of the carnivalesque Gothic erotics of *Weird Tales* authors, see Timothy Jones, *The Gothic and the Carnavalesque in American Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015).

giant joke at their expense—Smith simply did not care enough about their motivations to delve deeper. It was enough that they *looked* medieval, *sounded* medieval, were afflicted by existential terror and expressed pious revulsion, and then died when attacked by occult horrors. His anthropology has the feel of a child with a magnifying glass who delights in tormenting insects—an apt analogy given his ant-hill worldview.

The demons, witches, monsters and pre-Christian forces beyond the safe city lives of Averroigne provide ample adversaries for the human population of his medieval world. His monstrous imaginary was built on vivid imagery and exotic oddities. Jeffrey Cohen famously proposed that monsters ask us why they were created: Smith's monsters were created to shatter the frame of a logical, explicable Middle Ages, to make nonsense of culture.²⁷ Averroigne is a world of incursions, with supernatural horrors easily crossing the threshold into the human domain. In Smith's more cosmic work, humans are transported to strange places beyond their understanding. In Averroigne, the strange comes to the humans. The world that the monsters invade was built on fairy stories and myths, but also absorbed the orientalism of texts such as the *Arabian Nights*, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and William Beckford's *Vathek*. Smith was a voracious reader of medieval(ist) tales, but was attracted to their esoteric and bizarre motifs rather than a sense of history—a painting of a Sciapod survives in his artwork and his poetry is filled with bestiary-derived wonders.²⁸ Inspired by his readings in the oddities of the pre-modern, Smith wrote his own tale of Sir John Mandeville, a homage to its darker and more macabre elements:

This tale was suggested by the reading of 'The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Maundeville', in which the fantastic realm of Abchaz and the darkness-covered province of Hanyson are actually described! I recommend this colourful fourteenth-century book to lovers of fantasy.²⁹

In this Mandeville “fan fiction,” Smith relates an untold tale of Sir John in which prayers to God do not avail him and our intrepid medieval knight flees in terror from the dread kingdom of Abchaz, having been chastised by the power of necromancy. The language of the story is an admiring homage to the *Travels* and yet shows contempt for the Christianity that frames the original. He saw the Gothic aesthetic in the medieval, but also understood it through his own lens. As Dinshaw has shown in her treatment of Mandeville, medievalists are drawn to the queer temporalities and orientalist possibilities that it presents—Smith drew deep from that well in search of medieval content and then recreated it in his own prose.³⁰ Like the original medieval episodes of Mandeville's travels, Smith's tale served as a canvas for desires.

Located in a backwater corner of medieval France and ignored due to its peripherality to medieval life, the defining feature of Averroigne is a road from Paris running North to South and bisecting the province, a passage from somewhere to somewhere that is itself nowhere. A tribe of Gauls called the Averones gave the region its name, its first settlers. Then the Romans came, and eventually the Church, who built their cathedrals and monasteries on existing druidic sites. The

²⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25, here 20.

²⁸ “Gallery of Clark Ashton Smith Art,” *Eldritch Dark*, <http://www.eldritchdark.com/galleries/by-cas/p/a/5>.

²⁹ Clark Ashton Smith, “The Tale of Sir John Maundeville (aka. The Kingdom of the Worm),” *The Fantasy Fan*, October 1933, *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/y8egjpa>.

³⁰ Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 73-104.

great Cathedral of Vyones, completed in 1138, was the crowning achievement of Christianization. Lovecraft helped Smith to craft a pre-history for the province, describing it as “a sort of ‘Arkham country’ of 800 years ago.” In the mingled Smith-Lovecraft prehistory of the region, its taint is partially explained by the dark practices of the Averones, worshippers of the Great Old Ones of the Cthulhu mythos. Their dark knowledge was preserved in the Book of Eibon, also known as the *Liber Ivonis* or Libre d’Eibon, a dark tome that had its own reception history, popping up in translation to plague the medieval mind with dark sorcery.³¹ Despite the building of detail, Smith was not drawn to the past by a desire for exact historical accuracy, preoccupied more with the texture of history than its literal truth. He saw the past as a realm of the imagination, not a locus that could be empirically studied.³²

The Middle Ages of Averogne is a place akin to the medieval Languedoc presented by the fevered imaginations of those who incited and participated in the Albigensian Crusade—a seemingly peaceful and God-fearing corner of Christendom with an established ecclesiastical presence and yet harboring pagan deviance beneath the tranquil surface.³³ Instead of Cathars, however, Averogne hides Lovecraftian horrors in every darkened crevice. As a resentful Satyr puts it in *The End of the Story* (1930), “the power of Christ has prevailed like a black frost on all the woods, the fields, the rivers, the mountains, where abode in their felicity the glad, immortal goddesses and nymphs of yore. But still, in the cryptic caverns of earth, in places far underground, like the hell your priests have fabled, there dwells the pagan loveliness, there cry the pagan ecstasies.”³⁴ The setting has a feel of the medieval and begins with medieval people contentedly living their industrious lives, but Smith’s ideas emerge like his monsters and the beam of the magnifying glass begins to burn the bugs.

For the uninitiated medievalist in need of an analogy for Smith’s medievalism, imagine a *vita* in which a Saint encounters a monster, and the monster promptly eats the Saint and then mocks God without consequence. Then imagine ever more imaginative forms of humiliation dished out in story after story. Anti-clericalism is the defining feature of the setting. *The Beast of Averogne* (1932) is a salient example. Murder comes to the Benedictine Abbey of Perignon in 1369 following the appearance of a baleful red comet. The bodies of monks are found slaughtered in the night, spines wrenched from their backs and drained of their marrow—a plot that is equal parts H.P. Lovecraft and Umberto Eco. Our genre expectations come into play. Who will the murderer be? Perhaps the monks can solve the mystery. But no, the authorities of the abbey can do nothing as the rampage continues, including the abbot, Theophile:

Each night, since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before Christ on the silver

³¹ Fritz Leiber and H.P. Lovecraft: *Writers in the Dark*, ed. Ben J.S. Szumskyj and S.T. Joshi (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2003), 64.

³² Behrends, *Clark Ashton Smith*, 68.

³³ The rhetoric of ecclesiastics reporting Simon de Montfort’s crusade that appears in Malcolm Barber’s seminal work has a familiar ring, and it is likely that Smith had the Languedoc in mind when creating Averogne. See *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014 [2000]).

³⁴ Clark Ashton Smith, “The End of the Story,” *Weird Tales*, 1930, *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/yanmrrv3>, n.pag.

crucifix; and oblivion steeps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn.³⁵

Ultimately, only sorcery—and not God—can combat sorcery. There is no William of Baskerville to crack the case, nor is there a holy man to vanquish evil. The religious figures of Averoine are the butt of countless cosmic jokes, straw men faced with threats beyond their power and understanding that they can only lash out at ineffectually. The Church and the medieval society that it oversees breathe a sigh of relief when evil is defeated by the sorcerer Luc le Chaudronnier—accomplished by means of a ring imprisoning an ancient elemental daemon—and seek to cover up the evidence of its lack of authority over the supernatural. The story ends decisively and with indignity when it turns out that Theophile is the beast, having been possessed by an ancient evil from the stars and forced to transform at night—an amalgam of *Bisclavret* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The solution is to admit human powerlessness and cover up the incident:

They who read this record in future ages will believe [the story] not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could ever have prevailed upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies.³⁶

Balking at the Lovecraftian precipice of madness, the Church peddles superstition and naïve belief in the saving power of holiness, while true evil makes a mockery of its institutions. In many ways, Smith's stories are like an inverse *vita*, revealing the non-existence of miracles and weakness of holy men and women. *The Holiness of Azédarac* (1933) deepens the mockery of religious men: an evil sorcerer from the wild pre-Christian era travels through time to the twelfth century and uses his powers to gain a position of influence within the Church, setting himself up as a pre-eminent Bishop as a shield to hide his depravities from prying eyes. When Brother Ambrose, a young and pure-hearted monk, learns of the Azédarac's true nature, he is disposed of by being displaced in time, sent back to the pre-Christian past. By the end of the story, one of the few good men in Smith's tales has surrendered to a sordid affair with a sorceress and Bishop Azédarac has become Saint Azédarac, adored as a paragon of virtue by all of Averoine.

Smith, not content to simply dismiss the Church, resorts to comedic blasphemy. In *The Colossus of Ylourgne* (1934), an episode unfolds that is darkly amusing and profane in equal measure. In the year 1281, the city of Vyones is plagued by a spate of corpse abductions and suspicion falls on the evil Nathaire, who “had travelled in Orient lands, and had learned from Egyptian or Saracenic masters the unhallowed art of necromancy, in whose practice he was unrivalled.”³⁷ Nathaire and his disciples flee the city as suspicion at their behavior grows and make a lair in the abandoned castle ruins of Ylourgne. Averoine quakes in fear and the powers of man and God are ineffectual:

The consternation [of the people] increased a hundredfold when it became plain that even the most liberal sprinkling of holy water, the performance of the most awful and cogent exorcisms, failed utterly to give protection against this diabolic ravishment. The Church

³⁵ Clark Ashton Smith, “The Beast of Averoine,” *Weird Tales*, 1933, *Bibliowiki*, https://biblio.wiki/wiki/The_Beast_of_Averoigne, Ch 2, n. pag. As published. Draft versions of the story available on *Eldritch Dark*.

³⁶ Smith, “The Beast of Averoine,” Ch 3: n. pag.

³⁷ Clark Ashton Smith, “The Colossus of Ylourgne,” *Weird Tales*, 1933, *Eldritch Dark*, <https://tinyurl.com/y8lcnog7>, Ch 1, n. pag.

owned itself powerless to cope with the strange evil; and the forces of secular law could do nothing to arraign or punish the intangible agency.³⁸

The nearby Cistercian abbey observed strange lights and fiendish sounds coming from the ruins at night and “they crossed themselves with new fervour and frequency, and said their Paters and Aves more interminably than before. Their toil and austerities, also, they redoubled.”³⁹ After Theophile, a brother of the abbey, breaks his neck while in a drunken stupor, his corpse rises from the dead and, to the horror of the monks, scampers from the monastery. Two brave Cistercian monks, Bernard and Stephane, win permission from their abbot to investigate the dark happenings within Ylourgne. Venturing into the depths of the castle, they find a scene of depraved necromancy, with a cabal of sorcerers going about their dark business accompanied by an army of undead servitors. Filled with pious zeal, the monks rush forward, crosses at the ready. Their holy protection is proved to be useless and they drop their crucifixes in panic. A morbid farce ensues, in which “... cadavers took up the crosses of hornbeam that had been dropped by Stephane and Bernard; and using the crosses for bludgeons, they drove the monks in ignominious flight from the castle...”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the evil of necromancy is purged from Averoigne—not in time to stop the rampage of the eponymous colossus, a zombie giant powered by the souls of Nathaire’s disciples—but only by the efforts of Gaspard du Nord, a man who is simply a more law-abiding necromancer himself. As the story puts it, “[Gaspard] knew that there was no alternative: sorcery could be fought only with sorcery.”⁴¹

Medievalism is often understood as arising out of passion for the medieval, a love of detail and of cultural nuance. It can also be seen as a tool of rhetoric, the shaping of the past, present and future through the appropriation and reconfiguration of medieval people, places, objects, or ideas. For others, it is a fantasy of purity and power that forms the basis of a national myth. It can be participatory, drawing in gamers and reenactors. As Daniel Kline puts it, “returning to the Middle Ages ... is an attempt to re-enchant history with the nostalgia for a lost origin, a stable and nurturing community.”⁴² It is personal, despite any rhetoric of objectivity.⁴³ For Clark Ashton Smith, none of these motivations are entirely relevant: he was indifferent to historical accuracy, ambivalent about characterization, cynical about culture and contemptuous of politics. Averoigne was not stable, its origin was even more horrific than its present, its enchantment was murderous rather than magical and nobody would want to be part of its community. And yet, as Kline asserts, it is still a return to the medieval, a participation in its imaginative substance. It *has* to be personal. Just as Curtius could hold the Middle Ages in small esteem and yet study it avidly, so too could Smith draw on the rich imagery of medieval myth and legend, its visual and material culture, but only to create a canvas for his “ghoulishly potent designs.”

Smith’s rough treatment of medieval society was a symptom of his wider disaffection with the human condition. His literature dips in and out of temporality, queer in a Dinshaw-esque sense like few other writers. For Smith, even more so than Lovecraft, humanity is unprepared for what

³⁸ Smith, “The Colossus of Ylourgne,” Ch 2: n. pag.

³⁹ Smith, “The Colossus of Ylourgne,” Ch 2, n. pag.

⁴⁰ Smith, “The Colossus of Ylourgne,” Ch 3, n. pag.

⁴¹ Smith, “The Colossus of Ylourgne,” Ch 8, n. pag.

⁴² Daniel T. Kline, “Participatory medievalism, role-playing and digital gaming” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D’Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 75-88, here 77-78.

⁴³ Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo and Bradford: ARC Humanities Press, 2017), esp. 6.

threatens it in a vast cosmos. More so than Howard, Smith saw civilization as a lie that humanity tells itself, inevitably moving towards entropy and cyclicity. In this world, all that matters are pure opulence of style and audacity of descriptive language: he has become known as “The Emperor of Dreams” for good reason. This rationale boils beneath the seemingly historicist surface of “medieval” Averroigne, waiting to erupt. As Smith put it himself, “why this thirst for literalism, for nothing but direct anthropological data, which would proscribe the infinitudes of imagination, would bar all that can lift us, even in thought, above the interests of the individual or the species? Does it not imply a cosmic provincialism, an overweening racial egomania?”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Clark Ashton Smith, “On Fantasy,” *Eldritch Dark*, last updated October 28, 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/yaqm38vb>.