

THE CTHULHU PRAYER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

April Meetings of The Providence H.P. Lovecraft Friends' Group — Faust Was There!

APRIL 14, 2002 — Like noxious weeds or pesky fungus, the Lovecraft folks just won't go away. Twice in April, writers, artists, composers and others who are fans of the writing and mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, America's greatest horror writer, gathered to honor the Old Gent, and to share their common interests in the arcane, the weird, and yes, the perverse.

On Sunday, April 10, CPS member and friend Carl Johnson mounted his highly-publicized annual gravesite ceremony at Lovecraft's grave in Swan Point cemetery. A crowd counted at 110 persons attended, many in response to the advance notices in *The Providence Monthly*, *The East Side Monthly*, and other media. HPL's grave, and the great spreading beech tree behind it, were decked with black balloons, a bat, a spider, a vulture and a black owl. A large Cthulhu statue, glazed with an disquieting green marbling, lurked next to Howard's stone.

Highlights of the commemoration included Keith Johnson as "The Bird of Ill Omen," singing in Latin (he was not struck by lightning even though he used the banned *Tertia Diabolus* during his *a cappella* chant). Carl Johnson read passages from "The Colour Out of Space" and actor John Los read the climactic pages of "The Statement of Randolph Carter." Five readers divided up the stanzas of Brett Rutherford's "At Lovecraft's Grave," poem: Brett Rutherford, Hal Hamilton, Christian Tobler, Carl Johnson and Keith Johnson.

The large crowd lingered after the ceremony and several journalists plied the participants and audience alike with questions. The Monday, April 8 issue of *The Providence Journal* contained a two-page write-up of the event. Many of the audience members were dressed with Goth colors and extravagance, and there were enough amulets and strange hair-dos to alarm the ever-watchful security guards. Crows and unpredictable winds made their usual appearances.

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Eugene Delacroix' famous lithograph of Mephistopheles. The Devil has just had a meeting with God and has secured God's permission to tempt Faust. The opening scene is reminiscent of The Book of Job, where a similar deal is struck about the upright Hebrew. The difference here: Faust is an embittered old scholar who has come to believe in nothing. Goethe's *Faust* has inspired hundreds of paintings and drawings since its publication in 1808.

Faust and Mephisto: The Devil's Art & Music

by BRETT RUTHERFORD

Most people today manage to have a college education without ever reading Goethe's *Faust*. More may have encountered Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*, based on the same medieval legends, but unless one makes a specialty of German Romanticism, it is easy to evade reading the later, colossal German drama, published in two parts in 1808 and 1838. This is a shame, since *Faust* is one of the key documents of the Romantic quest.

Faust is revolutionary for a number of reasons, relating to both the hero Faust, and his companion-nemesis, the devil Mephistopheles (Me-Fausto-Philos = companion of Faust). The name Faustus means "lucky," and the play *Faust* is about a medieval scholar/sorcerer who makes a deal with the Devil, who becomes his travelling companion. Almost every tale or film involving deals with the Devil is derived in some way from *Faust*.

Goethe did not invent Faust in 1808, nor did Chris Marlowe in 1604. There was a real Johannes Faustus, who died in 1540. This Faust, a doctor, astrologer, alchemist, seducer of women and boys, and scoundrel, claimed the Devil was his "crony." His adventures, and his descent into Hell to satisfy the contract with the Devil, were described in print in 1587 in the German *Faustbuch*. This reached English readers in 1592 and inspired Marlowe's play 12 years later.

The Faust story also found its way into puppet plays performed all over Europe. The characters of Faust, Mephisto and the innocent Gretchen became widely known even to children through these hair-raising presentations. The Devil was often depicted as a sarcastic, bawdy character, and Faust's seduction of Gretchen was always done to the accompaniment of sarcastic and caustic comments by the Devil. So far from being a religious allegory, the Faust story includes anticlerical and pagan elements.

In the hands of Goethe, the Faust story leaps to a new level. His Faust does not bargain with the Devil for money or power -- he is already an old man and has seen through all the folly of human ambitions. What this Faust wants is youth and a chance to experience something — anything — so profound that he will "cry out to the fleeting moment, Stay, thou art lovely!" This Faust is the first Hippie — the first man in literature to declare that experience, for its own sake, is the highest value.

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During the ceremony, Carl Johnson presented Brett Rutherford with a special Cthulhu statuette, sculpted by Richard Sardinha. The surprise award was given to honor BR's founding of the Cthulhu Prayer Society and this newsletter.

One other highlight of the event was the burning of several thousand dollars of Chinese joss money — sending royalties to Lovecraft in the Beyond.

Nearly 30 of the participants went off to dinner at an unspeakably bland eatery on North Main Street.

On Sunday, April 14, the Society gathered once again at 11:30 am at the Union Station Brewery in downtown Providence for the ninth Cthulhu Prayer Brunch. The managers of this micro brewery, famed for its excellent cuisine, waived the usual restrictions on chainsaws, spectral presences, and pets so that all could be comfortably seated at our tables, replete with squids and other Lovecraftiana.

Two "okroid entities" demanding admittance, however, were turned away because of their dark green excretions, and they had to content themselves with brunching at the nearby Rira Irish Pub, where they were mistaken for off-duty sanitation workers.

Activities for the survivors of brunch included a trip to Brett Rutherford's crumbling manse on Hope Street, where an entertainment based on Goethe's *Faust* was presented. All had a Devil of a good time.



Faust, now turned into a suave Don Juan, accosts the innocent Gretchen on her way from church, while Mephisto stands in the background. Thus begins the most famous romance in all German literature.

FAUST AND MEPHISTO

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At the price of his soul, Faust demands that Mephisto carry out his every wish to stage a succession of more and more intense experiences, the first of which is to seduce the most beautiful young girl in the village, the virginal Gretchen.

If this seems banal, remember that Faust is a desiccated 80-year-old scholar who has never married. After the Gretchen episode is behind him (a pregnancy, a birth, poisonings, a swordfight, and an execution), Faust roams off to a Witches' Sabbath, then flies back to an alternate universe-ancient Greece where he meets and marries Helen of Troy.

Goethe ended Part One of *Faust* with the sad ending of Gretchen's story — seduced, abandoned, and put to death for poisoning her mother and infant with drugs intended to keep them asleep during Faust and Gretchen's nocturnal frenzies.

Decades later, Goethe, more fond of Faust than of any other of his creations, extended the adventures and even managed to rescue Faust, at the last possible moment, from the jaws of Hell.

For those of us interested in mythology (and all religion is mythology), Faust presents a unique universe. It's a Medieval setting, yet Mephisto goes to Heaven in the first scene and makes a bargain with God to contend over the soul of Faust. That fellow named Jesus is not even in the picture. It's the sort of world where demons can enter a church to torment a guilty pregnant girl and no one seems to notice.

Goethe takes the institution of the Church with its angels and holidays, and mixes it all up with Satanism and Greek and Roman myth into one wild stew. The English, confounded by their religious disputes, could never have written such a play — and Marlowe's Faust spends a great deal of time whimpering and praying and trying to get God to intervene and break the awful bargain. Goethe's Faust is his own man.

Goethe's Mephistopheles is depicted as a cynical "man of the world" who already knows that everyone will do the worst things in their nature, given a chance. He calls Man a vain grasshopper, makes lewd jokes around the young lovers, mocks the townspeople at the country inn, and leads the witches in their sabbath with glee. He boasts, "I am the Spirit that denies."

What Faust Inspired

Although the play of *Faust* is a great read for those who don't mind reading a play in verse, it's not necessary to read the German play in order to appreciate the remarkable works of art — musical, theatrical and artistic — inspired by *Faust*. For those who wish to read it first-hand there are caveats. There are many translations which contain only Part One, ending with the death of Gretchen and the flight of Faust and Mephistopheles.

Bayard Taylor, the New England poet, produced the most renowned 19th century version of *Faust*. He dutifully translated even the most difficult passages in Part Two. His style is stodgy by today's standards and he was not able to convey the earthiness of the original, owing to censorship laws of the day.

My own favorite modern edition of *Faust* is an abridged version prepared for BBC Radio by poet Louis MacNeice. Here is a real poet translating a fellow poet with clarity and a lack of fussiness. For reading *Faust* aloud, this is still my first choice. This was published by Oxford University Press in 1951.

If you want a more nearly complete *Faust*, with pithy, clear English and a left-hand-page German text to go with it, the Walter Kaufmann *Faust* is the definitive one to have. It's available in paperback from Anchor Books. Kaufmann's notes are also the most thorough.

Because of its sheer length and technical demands, you are not likely to see *Faust* on stage. At our April 14 program in Providence, however, I am pleased to share some recorded music and video excerpts that will provide some idea of the immense influence *Faust* had on Western art and ideas.

Our selections will include:

Settings of Gretchen's songs by Schubert, and in the opera by Gounod.

Settings of Mephistopheles' "Song of the Flea" by Beethoven and Mussorgsky.

Excerpts from Gounod's French opera *Faust*.

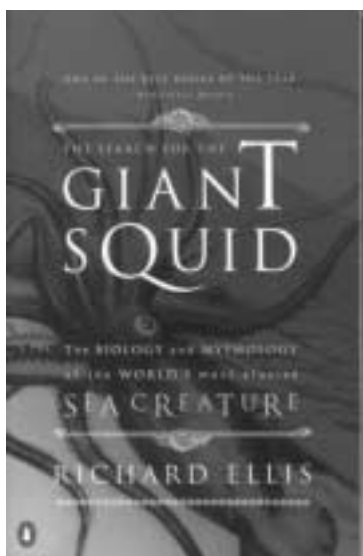
Electrifying moments from the Berlioz oratorio-opera, *The Damnation of Faust*.

The Devil's own opera -- Boito's opera *Mefistofele*.

Franz Liszt's orchestral masterpiece, The Faust Symphony.

The last scene of *Faust* cast for 1,000 performers in Gustav Mahler's Symphony Number 8.

Excerpts from F.W.Murnau's silent film of *Faust*. (Yes, that's the director who made *Nosferatu*!)



Our most-talked about book last summer was Richard Ellis's *The Search for the Giant Squid*, which presents all the known sightings of the elusive monster, and a great overview of the biology of the squid family. We think all lovers of the weird will want to own this Penguin book, if only for the very Lovecraftian passage below:

"Squids are not part of our world, not elements of our consciousness. They are endowed with features — hooks, claws, suction cups, lights, beaks, a mucous coating, multiple appendages — that we rarely encounter in the more familiar terrestrial creatures. They live out of sight, underwater, at depths we cannot plumb, in numbers we cannot imagine. Their strength, their competence, and their predominance in their oceanic habitat have inspired some authors to classify them as an alternative form of intelligence on the planet. Their unfamiliar shape, with a cluster of arms at one end, eyes in the middle, and a tail at the other end, has only added to the impression that they are alien creatures from an unknown world — which is exactly what they are."

The giant squid, growing to lengths of sixty feet, is truly the Lord of the Deep.

Now, just what is its relationship to Cthulhu? We wait, and wonder.



Gretchen haunted by demons and Gretchen in madness — line drawings for *Faust* by Harry Clarke.



Rhode Island actor Carl Johnson as H.P. Lovecraft.
Photo: Keith Johnson

THE OLD GENT'S FRIENDS

Independent scholar **Victoria Nelson** was in town in March, delivering a talk at the Providence Athenaeum about Lovecraft's and Poe's Antarctic novels, and a second talk for the Rhode Island Humanities Forum about Lovecraft and the various levels of "believers" who have also sprung up around his writing (including literary hoaxes such as the published *Necronomicons*). We dragged the poor lady off for dinner and acquainted her in more detail with the non-horrific doings of the Cthulhu Prayer Society. A pleasure to meet this brilliant scholar and hear her provocative ideas. We hope to continue a long correspondence with her in distant Kali-fornia.

From New Jersey, **Ben Indick**, a member of the neo-Kalem club that meets occasionally in New York City, continues to send us his charming personal 'zine, titled *Ibid*. In a recent issue, Ben spoke upon behalf of good old **August Derleth** and reproduced several Derleth letters to demonstrate the Young Gent's manner and style. It has become fashionable to bash Derleth in retrospect and to take him to task for his Lovecraft "completions" and for own his take on the mythos created by Lovecraft. We will never forget that August Derleth founded Arkham House to publish Lovecraft, and that he published many fascinating books whose likelihood of profit were slender indeed. And as much as we love HPL, we're suspicious of folks who regard his writings as some kind of *gospel*.

CPS member **Keith Johnson**, in addition to donning raven feathers for the April HPL gravesite ceremony, also photographed our own Swan Point visitation and reading in March. See top photo at right.

Brett Rutherford has added about ten minutes more to the script for *Night Gaunts*, which is now typeset and ready for a second printing. We are trying to resolve some copyright issues so that this play might be produced commercially — but it is now difficult to figure out who controls anything in HPL-land. BR also has a new book in the works, the oft-delayed *The Gods As They Are, On Their Planets*, which is being illustrated by **Pieter Vanderbeck**. Finally, BR has just completed a dramatic monologue, *Carlota, Empress of Mexico, at the Chateau de Meysse, 1927* — an extended mad scene with the octogenarian Carlota remembering the doomed Mexican Empire, her husband's death by firing squad, and her own

fight with emperors, popes, poisoners and Mexican cultures. Not your average soap opera. The monologue, written in blank verse, was directly inspired by a print by Providence artist **Riva Leviten**, which BR insists contains numerous references to the adventures of Carlota. This is the second Leviten-Rutherford art-poetry "collabora-



tion." BR has also returned to fiction writing at last, and has completed a short story based in Providence, "The Readings at Blighted Corners."

Picture gallery, just to show that people come to see us, and live to tell. Top photo: those willing to be photographed at the Lovecraft beech tree during our march visitation and reading. Second photo from top: New Yorkers **Resone and Circe** visit *chez* Rutherford and pose with the mysterious black enamel Bat Box, contents unknown. Third photo from top: celebrants at the Baba Yaga tree at Rutherford's place, enjoying gifts, good conversation and Slavic food and music for the Russian Christmas day. Fourth photo from top: summer visitors **Tom Jones, Kleber Freitas and David Messineo** joined us and enjoyed the panorama of ghoulish Fox Point from our deck. Photo at left: **David Messineo**, visiting poet from New Jersey, reads from his book, *American Gothic*, at last summer's HPL gravesite visit.