

Ulf Houe, “The Protoplasmic Imagination: Ernst Haeckel and H.P. Lovecraft.”
***Configurations* 30.1 (2022): 47-76.**

Ulf Houe’s “The Protoplasmic Imagination: Ernst Haeckel and HP Lovecraft” explores the similarities and differences between these two figures’ conceptions of protoplasm: a now-disproved biological substance which was popular in theories of evolution from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As Houe points out, there is only a weak continuity between this cellular substance believed by figures such as GH Lewes to be “the threshold of that dark region where Animal Will begins”, and our contemporary usage of the term *protoplasm*, which designates the living contents of a cell (*The Physical Basis of the Mind* 43-44). Against the more recent usage’s rather specialized designation, the former had a more pronounced metaphysical role – being, as it was sometimes assumed to be, both immortal and the smallest unit of life – in theories of science, pseudoscience, parascience and spiritualism. It appeared in prominent places as late as the 1930s in works such as *The Science of Life* (1929-30) by HG Wells, Julian Huxley, and GP Wells. Yet, despite its once popular status, protoplasm remains surprisingly understudied by scholars in the field of Literature and Science (as are the works of Lovecraft), thereby making Houe’s intervention a welcome one.

Houe’s article relies on Gillian Beer’s model of ‘two-way cultural’ traffic between literature and science to reconstruct the intellectual relationship between Lovecraft and Haeckel, the German naturalist, who is perhaps best remembered for popularizing the theory of biological recapitulation at the end of the nineteenth century. Houe traces the ways in which Haeckel’s conception of protoplasm both directly (Lovecraft read and quoted him in at least one letter) and indirectly informed Lovecraft’s thought. With reference to both Lovecraft’s fiction – specifically, *The Colour Out of Space* (1927) and *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) – and personal correspondence, the article puts forward the notion of ‘protoplasmic horror’, which is characterised by an aesthetic drawn from the aspects of the substance itself: its formlessness, dissolution, and its ontological insecurity. Furthermore, Houe’s analysis effectively establishes the scientific interests of Lovecraft and makes a good case for seeing him as a neglected figure in our understanding of how American writers engaged with developments in evolutionary biology.

Yet, there remains the question of whether Lovecraft is drawing exclusively on Haeckel in his conception of protoplasm and from precisely the intellectual background that Houe provides. An early section of Houe’s article uses the thought of both Immanuel Kant and Charles Darwin to demonstrate that a key aspect of Haeckel’s thinking about protoplasm was as an alternative to nineteenth-century saltation theory, or the fact that “at some point there has to be a mediation between the mechanical and the purposive, a jump, so to speak” (51). From this perspective, protoplasm is seen as the intermediate term between late-nineteenth-century vitalist and materialist theories of evolution. In order to more clearly secure Lovecraft’s role in “making evolutionary thought possible”, perhaps more attention could be placed on the wide (and not strictly-) scientific interest in protoplasm in the first decades of the twentieth century (76). One contemporary well-read examples can be found in the work of C Lloyd Morgan, who, in *Emergent Evolution* (1927), discusses the term with respect to the neo-vitalist theories of Henri Bergson.

As Peter Bowler has noted in *Science for All* (2009), in the early decades of the twentieth century, scientific theories won popular success to the extent that they

offered answers to other pressing questions, especially those having to do with the reconciliation of science and religion (96-113). Conceptions of protoplasm often tangled scientific, popular scientific and pseudo-scientific threads, especially as they offered evidence of immortality and answers to many long-enduring questions about the nature of life itself. Given this state of affairs, one also wonders whether Lovecraft drew solely on scientific definitions of protoplasm. His fantastical *oeuvre* suggests he may have drawn on contemporary theories of related substances, such as ectoplasm, another now-disproved substance which Christine Ferguson has seen as part of “spiritualism-as-hereditary-monomania” in *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848-1930* (82).

Such possible expansions of Houe's provocative article show us the breadth of the ‘protoplasmic imagination’, as well as potential for studies of it to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between scientific and para-scientific discourses in the early twentieth century.

Daniel Ibrahim Abdalla
University of Liverpool