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Edgar Allan Poe: The Fall of the Masque

Faculdade de Letras

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Edgar Allan Poe: The Fall of the Masque

by

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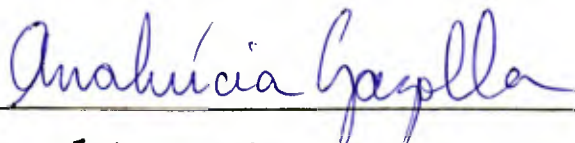
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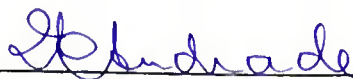
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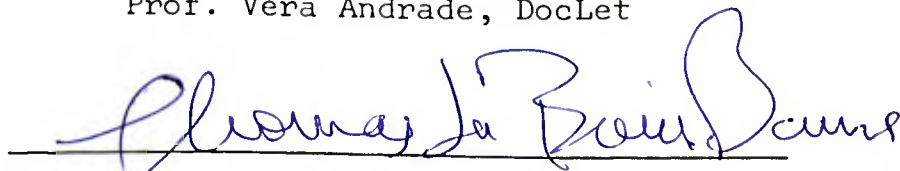


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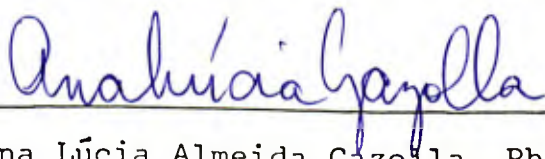


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## Abstract.

This dissertation is a study of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death," as representative tales of the Gothic and, by extension, of the fantastic mode. It has two axes: one is a survey of critical theories on the fantastic and its main manifestation, the Gothic, in an attempt to distinguish the constituents of the mode and to apply them to a reading of Poe's tales. The other axis is centred in one of such constituents, an esoteric substratum which underlies both texts and is fundamental to Poe's metaphysics as expressed in his aesthetics. Finally, the specular construction of the texts is examined, as well as the use of intertextuality and the ideological questions projected in terms of a theory of knowledge.

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Introduction

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.

Shakespeare



The fantastic, among all literary modes, seems to be the one which best explores the complexities of the relationship between man and his environment. It is generally more realistic than realist literature, even though relying on a primary falsehood. The fantastic text is often more psychological than the psychological novel, notwithstanding the presence of overlapping realities and their own laws, which prevents a purely psychoanalytical approach. Such paradoxical condition can be explained by the fact that this is a fictional mode which taps its material from the interaction between the Self and the World, the Self and the Other and the Self and the I. By so doing, the fantastic is able to probe into historical, sociological and psychological depths, always profiting from a multiplicity of possible readings and, conversely, never allowing for a unilateral, exclusivist search of a single meaning.

As the fantastic deals with human perception of reality, it has as various manifestations as varied is the relationship man holds with the universe. The Gothic, one of such manifestations, deals mainly with the limits imposed on the individual by society, his fellow citizen or by himself. Any transgression of these limits seems to be eventually repressed, so as to confirm the norm prevailing within a given *Zeitgeist*. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this very reason, Gothic fiction is a means by which man can assess his limits and endeavour to stretch them. Rather than an escapist literature, as Gothic is often considered, it attempts to analyse the elements of paranoia, taboo and barbarism as the other side of officially accepted behaviour.

Whenever Gothic is surveyed, Edgar Allan Poe stands out as a milestone of this polemic field. He was a remarkable craftsman of the intricacies which underlie man's recollection and perversion of received opinions on reality and abnormality. His work is an enormous contribution of Gothic fiction, as well as to

literature in general, in terms of narrative technique, subject matter and literary theory. Poe's masterly use of accumulating suspense, of facts and details that intertwine so as to provoke a single effect and of the successful achievement of such unity, make him an obligatory reference for criticism, whether it be favourable or unfavourable.

Poe's texts are important to literary studies, I would suggest, due to the various features they have inscribed in themselves, such as a theory of the tale and a philosophy of composition. In addition to being excellent weird tales which have become a paragon in Western literature, they prove to be a source of interest for nowadays scholars. The modernity of Poe's texts lies in the presence of constitutive elements privileged by contemporary criticism. From the use of one of such elements, *mise en abyme*, emerges a specular construction that fills the texts with duplicating images, with the disturbing presence of the double and with an effect of loss of origin and end. Also, Poe resorts to fictional texts and to Biblical and esoteric traditions and thus generates a web of intertextual references. This destroys the classical illusion of a unified meaning, for intertextuality opens the way to a plurality of readings, all of them possible and none demanding exclusiveness. Such complex construction prevents Poe's texts from fitting into any single theory of the fantastic. As paradigmatic of Gothic and, by extension, of the fantastic, the texts allow for a problematising reading of the theories when these are applied to their analysis. In my dissertation, I will confront the traditional line of critical theories on the fantastic, which consider the text as a final product presented to the reader, with the more contemporary ones, which privilege the deconstruction of textual production, the decentring of the subject and the exposition of ideological contradictions.

To read Poe's texts from a strictly historical standpoint is equivalent to reducing them to lesser and ineffectual tales of horror. Their elaborate weaving of inextricable elements of structure and content demand an exploratory critique that can account for their multifaceted and problematic nature. Reductive criticism looks for the unity of the work, for its coherence and its ordering voice. Thus it eliminates any contradiction underlying the text and closes it to diverse approaches from different stands. As this kind of criticism is unable to examine the text from a distance, that is, as it repeats the same relations held in the work, it fosters the ideology which produces the text and is, in turn, produced by it. It is then not surprising that critics who follow this line of approach find themselves baffled by the impossibility of reducing Poe's texts in order to adjust them to their largely Procrustean theories.

Exploratory criticism, on the other hand, looks for the manifold potentialities behind and beyond the signifyind code. Using a discourse that does not try to reproduce that of the text, this kind of criticism is thus able to expose ideology, to show it hidden in the silences of the literary product, to recognise the various layers of meanings and to point the many possible entrances to the text. It is then successful in escaping the resistance of Poe's works to reductions, including his own, and in revealing the fertile plurality of plausible readings of his fiction.

In this dissertation, I shall approach two of Poe's tales from both the reductive and the exploratory stands. In the first instance, I shall compile a definition out of the works of the critics examined and apply it to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death." According to this definition, the two tales are a perfect sample of Gothic production: they display a collision of a natural and a supernatural world which causes a "monster" to appear. Eventually, the "monster" is

destroyed and the natural laws prevail once more, eliminating any suggestion of exception.

In the second instance of my analysis, I shall approach Poe's tales as texts which permit the recovering and uncovering of the ideological discourse that constitutes them and, simultaneously, is constituted by them. The work of Irène Bessièrè, of an exploratory line, will provide the theoretical ground for this study. Bessièrè's is a comprehensive examination of the fantastic in that she discusses not only the structural and thematic aspects of this mode, but also philosophy, esoterism and magic, which she considers important objective data. Her study, when applied to the appreciation of Poe's fiction, allows for a fruitful assessment of his project of the Gothic. One example is Bessièrè's mention of the esoteric tradition as constituting one of objective elements to be taken into account in the study of his works. This is one aspect very rarely brought forth and which I shall privilege in this dissertation, since Poe's use of esoterism (with various religious and philosophical implications) is, in my opinion, one of his most interesting contributions to the corpus of Gothic production.

The complex metaphysics that form the backbone of Poe's aesthetics can be traced in almost all of his weird tales. Among them, "The Fall of the House of Usher" seems to be a compilation of the author's most successful achievements. In this tale, elements such as the primordial unity and its subsequent split, the attraction and repulsion of the divided parts as forces moving the universe, and the reinstauration of unity through annihilation, as well as a theory of arrangement and effect, are foregrounded, unobtrusively and most convincingly. This theory of arrangement elicits Poe's resorting to intertextual elements as a source of fictional matter. In addition, specularisation transforms "The Fall of the House of Usher" into a kaleidoscope of arcane motifs

and structural devices that revolve round a paraxial line that links the eye of the implied author to that of the implied reader as both look at the text.

The practice of intertextuality and the wide use of symbols and inversions also generate the kaleidoscopic effect produced by "The Masque of the Red Death." With elements from Shakespeare's The Tempest and the Bible, Poe weaves a tapestry of grotesque design that results in a byzarrer and original product. Moreover, through the deconstruction of the relations of the Self and the real, the author manages to bring about an effect of defamiliarisation that leads the reader to questioning the text itself. I chose "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a means to examine and discuss Poe's project of the Gothic, which seems to me complex, problematic and irreducible to unilateral and historicist readings.

One other aspect to be considered is that Poe introduces an ideological paradox in those two texts. He shatters the reader's referential by the decentring of the organised voices of the texts and by making the reader aware of possible other realities in which the ordering voice is that of an individual, not that of an external authority. As Poe does so, he submits to the reader, in those two tales mentioned, an alternative ideology via a literary mode which is recognised as normative and reactionary by most of the critics who dealt with the question of the fantastic. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I shall discuss this problem in those tales to assess their ideological (in the sense of reproducing ideology) or counter-ideological nature (as a possible reversion or rupture of the prevailing cultural norms).

Critical Theories on the Fantastic

Thou shall not read the Bible for its own prose.

W. H. Auden

## 1. In a maze of labels: fantastic and Gothic

The fantastic being a literary practice which works with human concepts of the real, its study shall advance a problematization of the relations man has with his environment. As the fantastic questions the norm which regulates the life of the individual by presenting what has been repressed, its criticism may be able to expose the constraints imposed on man the individual as well as on man the mass by a reactionary universe. In other words, to practice the criticism of the fantastic may be a means by which to problematize ideology, to reveal its doings and undoings.

Criticism requires parameters against which to analyse a literary work, lest the critical practice turns out to be an exercise on degrees of empathy between reader and text. When it is a fantastic text, then a clear statement of parameters becomes imperative, for such kind of text is problematic by its own nature. Also, under the broad concept of "fantastic," labels like "Gothic," "cloak and dagger," "sword and sorcery," "marvelous," "imaginary," "fairy tales" and "uncanny" find shelter and form a blurred mass of undefinable contours. To complicate things, publishing houses, if not the authors themselves, have crossed these terms and added others to produce misnomers such as "Gothic marvelous," "Gothic fairy tales," "fantastic marvelous," "Gothic space opera" and so on.

Due to the lack of clearcut boundaries in this field, most critics seem unable to differentiate between fantastic and Gothic, so that they often superpose or substitute one term for the other. Thus one usually finds theories and definitions which seem to be about two different objects, when in fact they deal with the same material. The reciprocal also holds, that is, one finds studies that aim at diverse objects but use the same terminology. In order to discern matters in this maze and find some workable material,



I shall suggest that the fantastic is a literary mode of which the Gothic is a manifestation. My concern will be the Gothic, or literature of terror, or horror fiction, labels which I take to be synonymous.

The appearance of the Gothic can be traced as early as the eighteenth century, when a group of writers purposefully chose to engage in a type of literary production which emphasises terror. Due to reasons that will be discussed further on, the Gothic survives until today as its constitutive elements recur in contemporary literature and cinematography.

As a result of its clearly ascertainable origin, the Gothic was first approached from a historic standpoint which attempted to locate it in a temporal axis. Criticism later evolved to a sociological approach that attributed the emergence of this fiction to the stifling constraints imposed on man by social, moral and political precepts of a given culture, in a given period.

Following the wider historical and sociological lines of approach, criticism of the fantastic narrowed its focus with the application of psychological theories to its object of study. This resulted in the assumption that horror fiction is a means to gain access to the unconscious mind and its repressed material and, by extension, to fathom what has been silenced in a society.

With the convergence of these three lines, the fantastic came to be seen as an artistic form which aimed at engendering the subversion of an established order, that is, as presenting the disruption of organised reality.

A more contemporary line of criticism states that the fantastic, by questioning the rational notions of a culture in a determined epoch, problematizes the relation of the Self and reality. This accounts for its surprising complexity: although it is a mass literature, it is not a massifying practice. As it relies on

different interpretations of what is real, the fantastic precludes any possibility of establishing canons of reception and interpretation.

The study of the development of the four tendencies will make it possible to assess the evolution of literary criticism in the twentieth century. It will be rewarding to perceive how literary scholarship departed from a looser historical approach and arrived at a nuclear view of horror fiction that rescues it from the accusation of being an escapist entertainment and places it where it rightly belongs. No longer thought of as a gratuitous flesh creeper, fantastic literature is finally and deservedly evaluated as an aesthetic expression of man's puzzlement face to a frightening and apparently mischievous universe.

## 2. Eighteenth century England and the Gothic

The first consistent literary expression of what is now called horror fiction appeared in England at the end of the eighteenth century. These manifestations were labeled Gothic fiction, a term which came by analogy with the barbarous invaders from Northern Europe - the Teutonic or Germanic tribes. The Goths, as they were known, annihilated the reigning order and established the dominion of savagery.

In literature, as David Punter explains, "Gothic" usually refers to a group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s and which share a set of characteristics, namely,

an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense.<sup>1</sup>

Early criticism recognised these novels as a trend in the history

of culture, that is, as an outgrowth characteristic of a widespread flow of ideas and attitudes within a bracketed period of time. This line of criticism adopted a historical approach, attributing the genesis of Gothic to a reaction to certain cultural changes that occurred in England.

The first Bourgeois Revolution of the Western civilisation, the so-called English Revolution, which comprehended the Puritan Revolution of 1640 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, unleashed a process of great social, political and economical transformations. This uprising movement, of world-wide influence, culminated in the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The transition from feudalism to capitalism was greatly accelerated. Under pressure of the Puritans, the English monarchy confiscated the properties of religious orders and eventually gave or sold part of the land appropriated, speeding the redistribution of landed property. The ascension of the gentry and the mercantile bourgeoisie, the most benefited classes, set off the social and political equilibrium, dislocating the aristocracy and threatening the monarchy. This political crisis brought about the end of the Absolutist State, as the King had his powers greatly circumscribed by a Puritan-influenced Parliament.

Predictably, these transformations did not occur without enormous social disturbances. King Charles and thousands of citizens were killed in a civil war that left a wake of blood and misery deeply engraved in the memory of the Englishmen. The feeling of guilt engendered by such destruction and bloodshed made the present a much uncomfortable time in which to live. The past was then identified with a paradise from which man had been expelled on account of his sinful revolutionary assaults against a God-appointed monarchy. But the past corresponded to the Absolutist State, recently defeated by the Puritan mercantile

bourgeoisie. The ruling class felt that it was necessary to counter this reactionary nostalgia.

According to the "official" view, the present was associated with the concepts of order and progress, fundamental to the smooth running of the machinery of capitalism. In the Century of the Lights, these two concepts were given the broader philosophical denomination of Reason. On the other hand, the past was repudiated as a dark period of history, when chaos, mysticism and barbarism raided England. Due to little knowledge of history in the eighteenth century, this dark age was identified with the period spanning from the Middle Ages to about 1750. England, under this ideological view established after a tide of suffering and uncertainty, was a fertile ground for the germination of horror fiction. Using the material at hand, it presented mainly oppositions between the old-fashioned and the modern, the barbarous and the civilised, old English barons and the cosmopolitan gentry, the English and provincial and the European or Frenchified; the archaic, the pagan and the values of a well-regulated society.<sup>3</sup>

While the "official culture" was that of a rationalism towards scientific progress, the popular taste indulged in stories from the absolutist period, tinged with a heavy hand of sentimentalism. Gothic fiction, as it fulfilled the expectation horizon of the masses, created an ideological paradox. As the horror novels portrayed a return to the past, the subtext, by implication, preached a regression to the Absolutist state and to "chaos." By doing so, they subverted the ideology of the Revolution, which had overthrown the monarchy and instated a new order. Thus, Gothic fiction realised the subversion of subversion; that is, it counteracted the revolutionary sway of the time.

This is a highly debated point when the fantastic is analysed. Is it a literature of subversion, as it goes against the prevailing order? Or is it a normative, reactionary literature,

as it preaches the return to a previous *status quo*?

Or yet, is it a literature that subverts order just to assert the norm? These points will be dealt with later on as the political and ideological aspects of fantastic are discussed. There is, however, a point which seems to be accepted by those who have studied horror fiction: the basic component of early Gothic novels was an attempt to recapture history. It is in the past previous to the social convulsions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the English novelists of the Enlightenment period found their paradise lost.

### 3. Earlier criticism: the historical approach

The attempt to recapture history, as displayed by the eighteenth century novels of horror, led most of the critics of the four decades of the twentieth century to consider the Gothic as a historically circumscribed phenomenon and, as such, a minor literary activity. Either they dismissed it without further consideration or they adopted an overdefensive standpoint. Edith Birkhead, whose The Tale of Terror, from 1921, is the earliest study of any importance to the field, is an exception, because she does not commit herself to either tendency.<sup>4</sup> Since she was not concerned with proving any particular point, nor with analysing the popularity of Gothic novels, Birkhead produced a major introduction to the best texts. She provided evidence that, although the authors of the first eighteenth century novels had very rarely resorted to supernatural elements, the same could not be said of the authors of chapbooks and of German tales translated into English. It was this kind of mass literature that fostered the emergence of the Gothic and it is in the context of this provenance that the Gothic needs to be approached - not as product of the "accepted" culture but as an offshoot of popular

expression.

Apparently to confirm the "official" derision of the Gothic novels, Jane Austen satyrised them in Northanger Abbey. Her book provided Michael Sadleir with material for his The Northanger Novels: A Footnote to Jane Austen, which he wrote in 1927 and where he traced all Gothic novels mentioned by Austen and commented on the social importance of horror fiction.<sup>5</sup> Sadleir's suggestion is that the Gothic defies, though sometimes unsuccessfully, the established conventions of eighteenth century social life and literature. His was the first try to identify subversive undercurrents in the Gothic.

Eino Railo's The Haunted Castle, although not dealing with political themes, represents an important contribution in that it gives rise to questioning why the so-called Gothic elements are characteristic of horror fiction, once they appear elsewhere, for instance, in Jacobean drama.<sup>6</sup> His listing of Gothic themes and settings revealed them as recurring in diverse literary fields. This indicates the importance of thematology in the approach to the fantastic, for, as a literary mode, it is not restricted by generic and historical categorisation.

Although Railo's exclusive concern with themes precluded a more comprehensive approach which would include questions of narrative technique and of ideological considerations, his work represented a significant advance in the studies of the fantastic.

The Popular Novel in England: 1770-1880, written by J.M. Thompkins in 1932, also contributed enormously to the research of the Gothic.<sup>7</sup> After meticulously examining the whole gamut of English fiction published in that period, she proved an important thesis: it was the Gothic fiction that had brought complexity of plotting into the predominant sentimental novels of the age. While these presented just a series of episodes and events related only by a nuclear moral argument, horror fiction relied on suspense and

release as a capital fictional mechanism.

If Thompkins's book foreshadowed the possibility of approaching the fantastic not only from socio-cultural and thematic stands but also in terms of formal developments, this notion escaped Montague Summers. As he tried to enumerate every existing Gothic text, Summers fell into the trap of cataloguing. In addition, his The Gothic Quest, from 1938, is a tenacious attempt to contradict Sadleir's assertions of the subversive tendencies of the Gothic and to prove it to be an essentially conservative, "aristocratic" form.<sup>8</sup> This was an unsuccessful attempt, but the point was not without validity and was often revisited later on.

It was only twenty years after the printing of The Gothic Quest that another work helped clear the relation between Gothic novels and their age. Devendra Varma's The Gothic Flame carries a definition of the fantastic in literature as "the surrealist expression of those historical and social factors which the ordinary chronicle of events in history does not consider significant."<sup>9</sup> As he ascribed the adjective "surrealistic" to fantastic, Varma contradicted Summer, who had denied Surrealist authors their claim that Surrealism derived its essential ideas, its symbolism and sentimental forms from Gothic novelists.<sup>10</sup> To back his adjectivation, Varma cites the grotesque contrasts of Walpole's light and shade and colour and line, Radcliffe's sound and silence and the Schauer-Romantiks's melange of sweetness and horror.

He divorces form from matter as he separates *what* horror novels tell from *how* they tell it. Such procedure is doubtlessly bound to fail when one approaches these novels, which, owing to their hermetic nature, defy any blunt analysis. Should his malapropos be overlooked, Varma's definition deserves praise for its implication that horror fiction may represent those areas of the world and of consciousness which are normally kept in the dark. In other words, he opens a possibility to consider this

kind of fiction as one made of silence, of negation and of repression. This is a qualitative turn in criticism, which then ceases to consider Gothic as a historically limited entity, defined on socio-cultural, formal and psychological grounds and starts to understand it as built in relation to rational precepts. In other words, the continuous questioning of reality that is essential to the fantastic is finally recognised and forecasts the elaboration of theories that approach it as a literature of the unsaid and of the unseen, of want and of void.

Even though the bulk of early criticism appears as a set of attempts to reduce the fantastic, or its primordial manifestation, the Gothic, to a literary expression confined within a very narrow lapse of time, it contributed somehow to illuminate one's perception of it. A major contribution was the realisation that horror in itself can be time-bound: what frightens a society at a certain point of time is not likely to have the same effect on another group of people living in a different *Zeitgeist*. To this one may add that viewpoint which identifies subversive tendencies in the fantastic, no matter how objectionable this may sound. Also worth mentioning are those theories that claim that the fantastic should be assessed under the light of its contribution in general, that is, the development of suspense and plot, as well as the expansion of the thematic corpus. And, finally, Varma's definition represented a breakthrough in the theoretical studies and anticipated the critical contribution of scholars such as Irène Bessièrè and Hélène Cixous, who define the fantastic via its relation to the real.

#### 4. Society and its fears: the socio-cultural approach

Varma's stand seems to echo Friedrich Nietzsche, as the German philosopher stated that "underneath this reality in which we live



and have our being, another and altogether different reality lies concealed."<sup>11</sup>

Such recondite side would be composed of the scariest fears which haunt society and the individual, and, in turn, are violently repressed. Varma pointed out that the Gothic novel was an outcrop of a very specific social context and, as such, expressed, in subtle and complex aesthetic manifestations, the *Zeitgeist* of eighteenth century Europe as revolutions broke out.<sup>12</sup> It depicted, in literary form, the mental and emotional disruptions which came on the wake of the French Revolution and ensued the Industrialisation of Britain.

As it is, this relation is a pervading one and exists as a primal reaction of man to its environment. Mick Farren claims that it is possible to know a culture by analysing its fear fantasies:

Primitive cultures will tell tales around the fire about the evil that lurks in the dark places of nature: the demons, goblins, ghosts and maling spirits; all the nameless supernatural horrors of dark forest or fog on a bare mountain. More developed societies will circumscribe their more sophisticated terrors within the realm of fright entertainment: speculative fiction, horror movies and ray-gun operas. What both cultures do is process their fears and try to make them manageable by transforming menacing reality into drama and symbolism.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, it seems a practice common to all mankind: man will turn adverse situations into subject matter and thus create an illusion of control of reality. Fear is mainly provoked by the unknown, so, as fear is fictionalised and vulgarised, it becomes less effective.

The nature and degree of man's awareness of those fears have undergone fundamental transformations, as societies developed into their contemporary stage. Instead of natural forces, fantastic

threatens man with social fears and taboos. Menace may come under the guise of bureaucratisation, institutionalisation, the alienation of the individual from power and control over his own life, the conflict between the individual and a dehumanised environment. Unrestrained, mad scientism\* threatens to annihilate not only mankind but the entire creation on the planet, and even the planet itself. And, to culminate, as Punter adroitly points out, there seems to be a new creation "in social relations of fiction: the reader who is assumed to be insane."<sup>14</sup>

I would suggest that fantastic can be seen as an experiment on the limits of reality, which helps explain the recurrence of the madman as central character of Gothic texts. His effectiveness as a disturbing hero lies in his double statute: he is both similar to and different from the reader who considers himself to be sane. He looks as if he were a common man, but his madness sets him off as the Other, that which must be excluded as an anomaly. The threshold between sanity and insanity, however, is very tenuous and can be easily trespassed: he is just like me and I may become like him. Such proximity helps the identification of the audience with the madman - it is with him that the reader establishes his dialogue, which eventually leads to the reader assuming that he is as mad as the character.

Such components of attraction and repulsion seem to be an antinomy housed in the very nature of the fantastic under the guise of a paradoxical relation between narcissism and alterity. The narcissistic element functions as a bait, because flattering to the I, but, at the same time, it is frightening because the I can be recognised in the Other, and vice versa.

\* A term coined by G. B. Shaw to indicate "the slavish adulation of the scientist and the doctor plus the instantaneous public acceptance of any doctrine alleged to be scientific." Donald Heiney & Lenthil H. Downs, Contemporary British Literature, 2 vols. (Woodbury: Barron, 1977) 2:177.

As recognition takes place, the reader is menaced with exclusion, which enhances the effectiveness of madness as theme, because the mere idea of outsidership is in itself an overpowering source of fear. Hélène Cixous pushed Punter's notion of the reader assumed to be insane a step further. She considered death to be a very important element in the relation held between reader and the fantastic text. Death, she states, is a

Signifiant sans signifié. Secret absolu, nouveau  
absolument, que devrait rester caché, car s'il se  
manifeste à moi, c'est que je suis mort: seuls les morts  
connaissent le secret de la mort. La mort nous connaît;  
nous ne la connaissons pas.<sup>15</sup>

The madman is deranging because I may become like him, but even more distressing is the dead man: if I identify with him, it means I am dead too, and that is infinitely worse, for if I am mad I am excluded, but if I am dead I cease to be. Worse than chaos, which is disorder pre-existing order, non-existence is the final difference, the negation of cosmos and chaos. Cixous made a point here which need be properly evaluated, for it may prove to be far more important to the theory of the fantastic than Freud's concept of *Unheimliche*, which will be discussed later on.

As the reader is put in an ambiguous situation with regards to fears within the text, he is invited to share in the doubts that pervade the apparent story. He is immersed, then, in an atmosphere of abnormal suspicion, which characterises the Gothic as a literature of paranoia.<sup>16</sup> Writers of horror fiction create supernatural landscapes to express and comment not only social decay but on mental desintegration as well. If horror is time-bound and finds resonance only in the culture where it sprang from, it is only when it finds an echo in the individual that horror fiction reaches its point of greatest intensity and effectiveness.

## 5. The uncanny and the double: the psychoanalytical approach

The first text of importance to try to identify the source of unrest inside the individual was Freud's "Das Unheimliche."<sup>17</sup> The German word *unheimlich*, translated into English as "uncanny," means, literally, "unhomely," that is, what is not suggestive or characteristic of a home, or also, what is not simple. It was Jentsch, in 1906, who first called *unheimlich* that category of the frightening which refers to that which is known and familiar since long.<sup>18</sup> He attributed the feeling of *unheimlich* to intellectual uncertainty, implying that the uncanny would be something that one does not know how to approach.

This struck Freud as incomplete, and after a linguistic survey of the term, he found out that *unheimlich* is an ambiguous adjective that belongs to two different levels of meaning: it means either what is familiar and agreeable or what is hidden and keeps itself out of sight. Applying this to his clinical observations, Freud proposed that, first,

se a teoria psicanalítica está certa ao sustentar que todo afeto pertencente a um impulso emocional, qualquer que seja a sua espécie, transforma-se, se reprimido, em ansiedade, então, entre os exemplos de coisas assustadoras, deve haver uma categoria em que o elemento que amedronta pode mostrar-se algo reprimido que *retorna*.<sup>19</sup>

This category of frightening things would be the uncanny, and it seems irrelevant whether what is uncanny now was, in itself, originally frightening or carried any other affect.

Second, he submitted that, if this is the secret nature of the uncanny, the term *unheimlich* can be understood better, for this uncanny is nothing new or alien, but something that is familiar and long settled in the mind, and which was excluded from the mind through the process of repression.<sup>20</sup> Or, the

uncanny is something that should have been kept secret and occult but came to light.

It can be argued that the uncanny is just one facet of the fantastic, that not everything that has been repressed is uncanny, but it must be acknowledged that Freud opened a view from which the question of the I and the Other can be perceived in the heart of the fantastic. Very often, the hero of the weird tale, lonely and self-divided, embarks on an insane pursuit of the Absolute and during his journey he meets a stranger who seems to be himself reflected in a mirror. The relationship between the two is enhanced by a preternatural identification: either the hero becomes unable to tell the I from the Other, or the Other is substituted for the I. There is a duplication, a division and an exchange of the I that forces it to re-evaluate itself according to this new reality.

This duplication, or the theme of the double, was analysed by Otto Rank in 1914.<sup>21</sup> He claimed that the "imortal" soul was the first double of the body, and a safeguard against the annihilation of the I, an energetic negation of the strength of death. The idea of duplication as a defence against destruction, which originated in religious thought, has evolved into a part of the mind that observes and criticises the I: the "conscience." This may account for texts like Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson," the archetype of the double in literature, in which the protagonist is faced with a friend or a stranger, who, much to the hero's distress, is his symmetrical counterpart, his homologue and, yet, radically different. The hero then struggles with his familiar ghosts; if victorious, they are exorcised, if defeated, he succumbs, and more often than not, dies.

Freud's and Rank's psychoanalytical approaches found echo in present day critics, like Jean Bellemin-Noël, for example, who

takes Freud's "Das Unheimlich" as a point of departure to study the fantastic.<sup>22</sup> Bellemin-Noël defines fantastic literature as that in which the question of the unconscious emerges. It would be a fiction that presents in written language, perfectly disguised,

un fantasme exactement semblable à ceux que présentent dans la psyché individuelle la rêverie diurne, le rêve nocturne, le délire du psychotique et les symptômes verbalisés de la névrose.<sup>23</sup>

Fantastic fiction, according to him, creates another world with words which do not come from our world - which belong in the *Unheimliche*. But, as it is, this other world could not exist elsewhere: it is down there, it is "this," hidden and unperishable, and it is so *heimlich* that it cannot be recognised as such. The fantastic, he concludes, is the place of the absolute difference, where the I can be effectively proved to be the Other.

## 6. Against Freud's "Das Unheimlich"

Unlike Bellemin-Noël, Héléne Cixous refuses Freud's interpretation of *unheimlich*. To begin with, she accuses him of manipulating Jentsch's original concept and, in turn, being trapped by it.<sup>24</sup> She sees Freud placing himself in a position of rational confidence towards the horror text (here, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman"), and by doing so, imposing upon it a positive unity - he "closes" its open structure. Cixous denies this fixity by proposing that the fantastic must be interpreted in its relation to the real.

The uncanny, she points out very perceptively, can only exist in relation to the familiar and the normal, that is, in a tangential position, as it is always on edge of something else. It is a relational signifier, "car l'*Unheimliche* est en effet

composite, il s'infiltré aux interstices, il affirme le baïllement où l'on voudrais s'assurer de la jointure."<sup>25</sup> Cixous's interpretation corresponds to and develops Varma's theory of the fantastic as a literature of void, defined only by its relationality. Rather than acknowledging it as a merely displaced sexual anxiety, as Freud seems to imply, she considers it to be a rehearsal of an encounter with death, the purest absence. The highest degree of *unheimlich* is achieved through this relation with death, for there is nothing better known and stranger to the human mind than mortality.

Death derives its overwhelming horror from the fact that it has no image in life - once its representation is impossible, it mimes, through this impossibility, a reality of death. It is a void made visible by borrowing man his fears and delusion with which it provides itself with a form. A clear example, and one which makes Cixous labyrinthine definition understandable, is Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," where a mummer appears wearing the guise of Red Death. Upon taking his mask off, the courtiers behold nothing, for it was a void tenanted by clothes.<sup>26</sup> When they realise that Red Death was mimicking itself by wearing man-made garments, the presence of the void is acknowledged and death holds sway.

It may be interesting to revisit Punter, who, like Cixous, rejects Bellemin-Noël's reading of "Das Unheimlich. He refuses the interpretation of uncanny as a return of repressed material; he mentions that Freud was perfectly aware that we cannot know the unconscious: "his claim was that we *can* know that things 'rise to consciousness,' and that it is therefore reasonable to hypothesise a hinterland whence these things emerge."<sup>27</sup> Punter's own assertion is that fantastic literature deals with those "areas of socio-psychological life which offend, which are repressed, which are generally swept under the carpet of social and

psychological equilibrium."<sup>28</sup> His approach is based on concepts of paranoia, of the barbaric and of taboo, as expounded in his The Literature of Horror, which owes a significant deal to Freud's Totem and Taboo.

Whether or not one agrees with Freud's use of the adjective *unheimlich*, whether or not one accepts the uncanny is the I, it is undeniable that horror fiction depends on a large amount of material tapped from the unconscious. For it is there that the most powerful and primitive human emotions lurk, merely waiting for the fitting moment to gain control over the rational mind. The awakening of such emotions seems to be a side-effect of this fiction located in the horror end of the fantasy spectrum.

#### 7. The concern with effect: fear and hesitation

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who is both a legend among his peer writers and an acknowledged fantasy expert, states that fear is the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind, "and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."<sup>29</sup> Even if he recognises that much of the best horror work is unconscious, Lovecraft maintains that the cardinal factor is atmosphere, "for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation."<sup>30</sup> The true horror tale, then, is that in which an effect of dread, of contact with unknown universes and powers, is created.

This preoccupation with effect can be found also in Todorov's approach to the fantastic. "The fantastic," contented him, "lasts only as long as a certain hesitation," and thus defined it in terms of effect excited both in the reader and in the character, who must decide whether what they experienced was "real."<sup>31</sup> Following a derivative line that has its source in Freud's definition of *unheimlich*, Todorov abandoned classifications and definitions based on themes; rather, he



struggled to circumscribe and then describe a *discours fantastique* within what the fantastic has as original. One of his shortcomings, however, was the reluctance to apply psychoanalytical theory as well as a relative lack of attention to the broader ideological implications of weird fiction. His is a short-sighted literary theory which relies on the impressions provoked on the reader as an individual and which never questions the relations between the text and the world, between the reader and the world, or between the reader and the reader himself as a cultural and original product.

Furthermore, he asserted that the fantastic had been corralled by science-fiction and finally slaughtered by psychoanalysis.<sup>32</sup> This is to know nothing of the subject matters of the fantastic. Had he cared to read Lovecraft, who antecedes him for three decades, and there would have found that

though the area of the unknown has been steadily contracting for thousands of years, an infinite reservoir of mystery still engulfs most of the outer cosmos, whilst a vast residuum of powerful inherited associations clings round all the objects and processes that were once mysterious, however well they may now be explained.<sup>33</sup>

Horror, for Lovecraft, can be affected on two levels, the "outer cosmos," as science gathers data about an ever expanding universe, with mysteries and puzzles that will demand still some more years of analysis and research, and the surrounding microcosmos of our daily life, which, as familiar as it may seem, is a constant source of uncanny feelings. As an example of what Lovecraft states, Stephen King has already sold something around thirty million copies of his horror novels, which have as *décor* the American suburbia. Or, if the movies may bear witness, the films produced by Steven Spielberg, which are all located in the same

suburbia or deal with an alien visitor or both at the same time, occupy the top ten places in the list of the biggest audiences ever. These two examples, from different media, suffice to prove that Todorov's thesis is wrong and that fantastic is alive and well, thank you, notwithstanding science-fiction and psychoanalysis. Or perhaps, thanks to both.

#### 8. Fantastic literature: subversion and disruption

It cannot be denied that the horror tale succeeds when it triggers an unsettling fear in one's mind and that one hesitates for long before deciding that it was all fiction. But fiction or not, it has resulted in the formulation of a misleading proposition that underlies the critical statements of Louis Vax, Roger Caillois, Jean Bellemin-Noël, Raymond Rogé, Jean-Baptiste Baronian and Rosemary Jackson: if the fantastic operates on both social and individual levels and if it can set off such a powerful emotion as fear, then fantastic literature may have enough strength to subvert an established order. These authors claim that fiction in general presents the imaginary as real, whereas horror fiction, moreover and simultaneously, casts a shadow of doubt over this kind of reality and lodges it in its fictitious statute via a certain kind of subversion.

In the 1960s, Vax and Caillois defined this subversion as the irruption of extraneous elements in a well-regulated world. For Vax, these elements are the imaginary terrors that fantastic art must introduce in the heart of reality, and which are represented in the text by the fact that the monster and its victim embody twin parts of our Selves - our unavowable desires and the horror that they inspire.<sup>34</sup> The fantastic character is the man who has forsaken his human side to join the Beast, and the horror he awakes in us is the only thing we share with him. Vax concludes

that the fantastic is the equivocal presence of man within the beast or the beast within man.<sup>35</sup> Or again, it is the unsettling recognition of the I in the Other, of the Other in the I.

As he equaled the fantastic to the irruption of malevolent forces into the world which had excluded them, Caillois pointed out that

le fantastique est la rupture de l'ordre reconnu, irruption de l'inadmissible au sein de l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne, et non de substitution totale à l'univers réel d'un univers exclusivement miraculeux.<sup>36</sup>

It follows that the fantastic exists not because the number of possibles is infinite, but because, however large, it is limited. There is no fantastic where there is nothing countable nor fixed, that is, where the possibles are undenied and uncountable. For if at any moment anything can happen, then nothing is surprising, nothing is *unheimlich*. Fantastic art presupposes reality, if only to ravage it.

Vax criticised and corrected Caillois in a later work, where, substituting the notion of *inexplicable* for that of *inadmissible*, he suggested the necessary function of rationality and the essential reciprocity of antinomical terms:

Pour s'imposer, le fantastique ne doit pas seulement faire irruption dans le réel, il faut que le réel lui tend les bras, consente à sa *séduction*. Le fantastique, tout fantastique, quoi qu'il soit, est évident. Mieux *naturel* ... Le fantastique aime nous présenter, habitant le monde réel où nous sommes, des hommes comme nous, placés soudainement en présence de l'inexplicable.<sup>37</sup>

The 1970s saw the publishing of the works of Jean Bellemin-Noël and Raymond Rogé, who continued to explore the relationship between fantastic and reality as essential and, at the same time, paradoxical, because subversive.

Bellemin-Noël states that the fantastic does not lead us to

believe the real so that we eventually recognise the imaginary, but, through a false realism (a "realism of falsehood"), it makes us accept as imaginary what actually is the real that we refuse to validate.<sup>38</sup> As it is, the fantastic relies strongly on a play of veiling and unveiling reality. To occult is very important as the *mise en scène* of desire includes and repeats an interdict without which desire cannot be. The fantastic is, according to him, a literary practice in which an interdict is transgressed, as desire overflows the unconscious mind.

A similar structure was found in the fantastic by Rog e, who saw it as a cause-effect sequence beginning with an ambition, or desire, blocked by an interdict which is transgressed. Once this takes place, a curse must ensue as a means to restore order and as an admonition against further violations.<sup>39</sup> Such view may account for the perennial success of the undead in horror fiction. The undead (or *revenant*) has a double status of dead and living that defies the most fundamental of the human laws, that of finitude, based on a linear conception of time that says that a moment past can never return. The *revenant* breaks the ordered sequence as it defies death and returns among the living. This causes an impossibility - the co-existence of two mutually exclusive worlds. On another level of perception, it can be said that the I only exists in its difference from the Other, in a process of contrast, differentiation and individualisation. Likewise, the category of living exists in opposition to the category of dead. When the horror tale presents the Other as part of the I, and by analogy, the dead as belonging in the living, a metaphysical order is subverted, a taboo is transgressed and fear is generated.

Jean-Baptiste Baronian and Rosemary Jakson partake in the thesis that the fantastic is a literature of subversion, an idea which they eventually recognised as being erroneous.

Even though accusing Caillois of creating a number of misunderstandings by concealing many aspects of the fantastic, Baronian acknowledges his debts to the French critic. He agrees that the dreams of all *fantastiqueurs* share one reason of being: they unveil less the unknown side of an individual and the abysses of the human mind than the pathetic and unsettling presence of a nameless reality and of a broken order.<sup>40</sup> Baronian infers that the quest of the horror tale would be perfectly reasonable: to recover this order that the platitude of everyday life prevents one from seeing and understanding. But by doing so, fantastic literature recaptures the past, when the previous reality was enforced, and thus becomes a reactionary way in which to cope with reality.

Following another lead, Rosemary Jackson endeavors to demonstrate that the fantastic subversion operates on both the structural and the thematic levels.<sup>41</sup> She examines it from a Marxist stand, relating the texts to the conditions of their production, to the particular restrictions against which fantasy protests and from which it is generated. Her first conclusion is that

fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.<sup>42</sup>

Then Jackson proposes a process which will de-mystify the way fantasies are read and will, she hopes, reveal the truth behind texts which work upon us, without our being aware. "In the end," she quite naively adds, "this may lead to real social transformation."<sup>43</sup> After a hundred pages struggling to support her thesis, with the help of a myriad of authors, Jackson surrenders herself to evidence and laments that the horror tale is used as *panem et circensis* to dilute revolt against a dominant

ideology. Much to her distress, she concedes that if on the structural level it is a revolutionary mode, on the thematic level, fantasy serves, rather than subverts ideology.<sup>44</sup>

However mistaken the approach to the fantastic as a literature of subversion can be, it still holds some valuable points. Firstly, it shows that horror fiction is not concerned with the "dark side of human soul" or any similar fanciful notions, but with the relation between man and the engulfing order. The authors above mentioned caught a glimpse of what fantasy is really about, but were unable to see below the surface. Had they probed some fathoms deeper, they would have understood that behind a facade of a literature of subversion hides a literary practice which experiments with the limits of reality as it is perceived by man.

It is undeniable that once the notion of real is investigated the question of ideology must arise. If not all the authors of the period ranging from 1960 to 1980 who were mentioned above go as far as Jackson to suggest that fantasy can overthrow an established order, they all agree that, in the world depicted by the fantastic text, there is always a transgression, immediately followed by a punishment. Nevertheless, only Baronian and Jackson perceived this as a constitutive trait of the fantastic, which they denounced as normative.

One other point to be inferred from the works of the critics above is the relational character of the fantastic. Contrary to what Vax and Caillois hint at, the fantastic does not have its "being" as a separate entity. It exists only "in relation to" a referential of logic and reason against which it exerts its presence and its might. This does not mean that the fantastic is illogical or irrational; rather, it means that it is born out of the opposition of two mutually exclusive realities.

The relational character of the fantastic may indicate that if it tries to change anything, it is one's perception of reality,

its components and its limits. And that, by modifying one's reference - the real as it is apprehended, the fantastic alters one's awareness of the Other and, eventually, of oneself.

#### 9. The poetics of uncertainty

I could not wish for a better support to my thesis than Irène Bessièrè's Le Récit fantastique, now considered the state of the art of the studies on the fantastic. She claims that the *récit fantastique* supposes a narrative logic, thematic and formal, which, surprising or arbitrary for the reader, reflects under the apparent play of pure imagination, the cultural metamorphoses of the reason and of the communal imaginary.<sup>45</sup> The *récit fantastique* is its own motive power, like any literary discourse, and thus the semantic description should not assimilate it to testimonies of, or to meditations on, extra-natural facts, nor to unconscious discourse. It is oriented from within by a dialectic of constitution of reality and of de-realisation proper to the creative project of the author.

The *récit fantastique* uses socio-cultural frames and forms of understanding which define the domains of the natural and the super-natural, of the trite and the strange, not to conclude on any metaphysical certainty but organise the confrontation of those elements of a civilisation relating to the phenomena which escape the economy of the real and the super-real, whose conception varies according to the *Zeitgeist*. Thus, to Bessièrè, the horror tale represents, under aesthetic forms, the intellectual debates of a given period - it is a perception essentially relative to the convictions and ideologies of the time.<sup>46</sup>

Bessièrè argues, also, that the fantastic, in its discourse, originates from the dialogue between the subject and his own beliefs and their inconsequences.<sup>47</sup> It is linked to the

components and to the argumentation about the statute of the subject and the real. The true fantastic then supposes the record of objective data (religion, philosophy, esoterism, magic) and their deconstruction. According to the times, the fantastic is read as the other side of the theological, illuministic, spiritualist or psychopathological discourses. Moreover, it exists only through these discourses which it deconstructs from within.

The strange asserts its presence via the recollection and confirmation of what is commonly accepted; the fantastic only through the recollection and perversion of received opinions on reality and on abnormality.<sup>48</sup> The discourse of the fantastic presents a simultaneity of realities with their own statutes. This invalidates the psychoanalytical approach to the fantastic, for it is not a study of the construction of the I, but of the deconstruction of the relation of the I with reality. As it checks the referential of the I, the *récit fantastique* becomes a de-centered text and the signifiers fluctuate, thus preventing any point of view to prevail. The I needs the illusion of conquest of chaos, but as in the fantastic there are multiple orders and no chaos, the I loses its role of organiser and thus ceases to be the source and origin of meaning.

It is under the sign of an ideological ambiguity that the fantastic operates, as, in the form of a case, it tells of our essential misery and our essential perplexity, the arbitrariness of every reason and every reality. But it also suggests the continual temptation to join a superior order, which will provide a fixed reference. To mix case and riddle, as the fantastic does, is to procede from the ineffectiveness of a code (reason, socio-cognitive conventions) to the effectiveness of another which does not belong to us yet - that of our masters.<sup>49</sup> This explains why the fantastic mixes uncertainty with the conviction that cognition is possible: one needs only be able to



attain it. The case exists only because the riddle cannot be solved. There is a case and a riddle to be solved, but as the rational rules do not apply, it becomes necessary to guess the answer. As it is guessed, there is no referential against which to check the validity of the solution. It follows that each interpretation is unique, without a possible confrontation with a pattern. Bessièrè, later contradicted by Rosemary Jackson, goes as far to say that a literary discourse works under an ideology, but offers no other to substitute the prevailing one, that is, it is not a subversive weapon with which to overthrow order. Its literariness and its linguistic signification are its sole concern. As a consequence of this and of its very nature, the horror tale marks the extreme of the individual reading, private, without express justification nor communal function, because it depends on the reader's own view of reality and of himself. Bessièrè claims that the fantastic

confirme la solitude du lecteur, circonscrit sa liberté au domaine de l'imaginaire, et achève la rupture de la littérature avec le réel. Par rapport à l'ensemble de la culture, il paraît totalement insignifiant; il doit être traité comme l'indice des comportements intellectuels et esthétiques atomisés, multiples et disparates: sa lecture devient l'exercice de la separation, de la différence.<sup>50</sup>

Although the fantastic depicts the relationship between the Self and reality, as a literary practice it can not afford the real to intervene in its domain. In other words, the fantastic world must not be accepted as real for the *récit fantastique* relies on a primary falsehood that cannot, and must not, be mistaken for real. As it brings together terror, restlessness and fantasy, the discourse of the fantastic aims to settle the limits of the individual, according to cultural data. Rather than

subvert literary forms, as Rosemary Jackson wants, it introduces a duplicity that causes the intervention of the reader so as to ensnare him better with aesthetic effects, clearly emotional, of collective hauntings and of socio-cognitive frames. Like Baronian and Jackson eventually concluded, Bessière asserts that rather than a discourse of subversion, the *récit fantastique* in that order, which represents the illegal not to refuse the norm but to confirm it: in introduces the strange only to establish censorship more effectively.

This duality seems to be an inherent trait in horror fiction and tells of its antinomical nature, as

il doit allier son irréalité première à un réalisme second. L'événement narré est privé de toute possibilité interne - il devient fantastique par la superposition de deux probabilités externes: l'une rationnelle et empirique (loi physique, rêve, délire, illusion visuelle) qui correspond à la motivation réaliste; l'autre rationnelle et meta-empirique (mythologie, théologie de miracles et des prodiges, etc) qui transpose l'irréalité sur le plan surnaturel et qui, par là-même, la rend concevable à défaut d'acceptable.<sup>51</sup>

To approach the fantastic from psychological and emotional stands is to reduce it to elements which, though necessary to the narrative, are external to it (supernatural, strange etc) or to misinterpret its genesis. Propositions which state that the weird tale indicates an immanent or natural fantastic, or that it analyses the dark face of the human soul, or that it constitutes a mode of exploration of the unconscious, or yet that it is a blend of strange and marvellous, suggest a primary antirationalism. On the contrary, "it seems more pertinent to link the fantastic to a research, undertaken from a rationalistic point of view,

into the forms of rationality."<sup>52</sup>

The fantastic dramatises the constant distance between the subject and reality, which explains its always being associated with the theories of cognition and the beliefs of a period. More often than not, the fantastic is the only available expression of the equilibrium of the subject, fruitlessly searched for in the concrete. The truth of the individual is neither in the rule nor in the transgression, but in an image of himself which does not belong to the social world.

Even though the *récit fantastique* may be linked to cognition, the interpretation of the hero is identified to a recognition of signs, never to a knowledge of himself. Rather, horror fiction conveys the déconstruction of the I as it is in its nature "to progress like a void in expansion," to use Bessièrè's words.<sup>53</sup> This progress is confirmed by indexes that can be received from verisimilitude and which turn impossibility into an image of plausibility. The fantastic hides an impotence to find words capable of expressing the here and now and the desire the present carries. It is a literature of want, and as such, the only one to correspond to the development of a psychology of the individual.

These points made by Bessièrè are an invaluable reinforcement to my own ideas not only because they systematised my thesis, but also because they illuminated some aspects which were unclear to me. As I consider her theory the most comprehensive of all those examined, I shall use it as the theoretical ground from which to study the texts of Edgar Allan Poe.

The analysis of Poe's texts will serve to check Bessièrè's and my own thesis and, if it be the case, re-evaluate them. For now, I will state that the fantastic probes not only the relation of the I and the world, or of the I and the Other, but also, and moreover, that of the I with the I. It is not a literature of

cognition, as might be assumed from what has been said, because it does not propose a solution for the human condition. Owing to its very nature, the fantastic is able only to deconstruct; if it comes out with an answer to the riddle, it will become fixed and lose its relational characteristic.

If it loses its fluidity, the fantastic will not produce fear, for fear arises not because the unknown is met, but because man's rationality cannot account for it, which ensues the loss of the illusion of control. Likewise, as the I can be recognised in the Other, fear springs unrestrained, because this necessarily leads to undifferentiation. If the I is coincident with the Other, and the Other can be coincident with reality, it follows that the I and the universe are but one single unity. This may be a truism for Eastern civilisations, but is the scariest realisation Western man can think of. No other burden is too heavy to bear when it is understood that if undifferentiation is attained, silence will prevail, for nothing is left to be said. If undifferentiation is reached, there is no I-Other struggle, there is no Other, there is no I.

Here lies the overpowering effect of the fantastic: as it foreshadows the final victory of entropy, it goes against the natural order of the universe, which is to expand and evolve forever.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Punter, The Literature of Terror (London: Longman, 1980).
- <sup>2</sup> José J. de Andrade Arruda, A Revolução Inglesa, Tudo é história 82 (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984).
- <sup>3</sup> Punter 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Edith Birkhead, The Tale of Terror (London: n.ed., 1921), as quoted in Punter 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Sadleir, The Northanger Novels: A Footnote to Jane Austen (Oxford: n.ed., 1927), as quoted in Punter 16.
- <sup>6</sup> Eino Railo, The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism (London: n.ed., 1927), as quoted in Punter 16.
- <sup>7</sup> Joyce Marjorie Sanxter Thompkins, The Popular Novel in England: 1770-1800 (London: n.ed., 1932), as quoted in Punter 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Montague Summers, The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel (London: n.ed., 1938), as quoted in Punter 17.
- <sup>9</sup> Summer, The Gothic Quest, as quoted in Devendra P. Varma, "Quest of the Numinous: The Gothic Flame," Literature of the Occult, Peter B. Messent, ed., Twentieth Century Views 155 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1981) 48.
- <sup>10</sup> Devendra P. Varma, "Quest of the Numinous: The Gothic Flame." Literature of the Occult, Peter B. Messent, ed., Twentieth Century Views 155 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1981) 48.
- <sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random-Vintage, 1967) 34.
- <sup>12</sup> Varma 46
- <sup>13</sup> Mick Farren, "Spotting the Demons; Getting to Know a Culture by Its Fantasy Fears," Heavy Metal Nov. 1981:18-19.
- <sup>14</sup> Punter 374.
- <sup>15</sup> Hélène Cixous, "La Fiction et ses fantômes; Une lecture de l'*Unheimliche* de Freud," Prénoms de personne (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 31.

- 16 Punter 404.
- 17 Sigmund Freud, "O 'estranho,'" Uma neurose infantil (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1976) 275-314.
- 18 Freud 277.
- 19 Freud 300.
- 20 Freud 301.
- 21 Otto Rank, El doble (Buenos Aires: Orion, 1976).
- 22 Jean Bellemin-Noël, "Notes sur le fantastique; Textes de Théophile Gautier," Littérature 8 (1972): 3-23.
- 23 Bellemin-Noël 6.
- 24 Cixous 13-38.
- 25 Cixous 25.
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- 27 Punter 292.
- 28 Punter 405.
- 29 Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature, introd. E. F. Bleiler (1945; New York: Dover, 1973) 12.
- 30 Lovecraft 16.
- 31 Tzvetan Todorov, "The Uncanny and the Marvelous," Literature of the Occult, Peter B. Messent, ed., Twentieth Century Views 155 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1981) 17.
- 32 Tzvetan Todorov, Introdução à literatura fantástica, Debates 98 (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1975) 169.
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- 34 Louis Vax, L'Art et la littérature fantastiques, 4th ed., Que sais-je? 907 (Paris: PUF, 1974).
- 35 Vax 33.
- 36 Roger Caillois, Au cœur du fantastique, Cohérences aventureuses, Idées 359 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 174.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Vax, La Séduction de l'étrange (Paris: PUF, 1965) 88, as quoted in Irène Bessièrre, Le Récit fantastique; La Poétique de l'incertain, Thèmes et texts (Paris: Larousse, 1974) 49.

<sup>38</sup> Bellemin-Noël 22.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Rogé, Récits fantastiques, Textes pour aujourd'hui (Paris: Larousse, n.d.).

<sup>40</sup> Jean Baptiste Baronian, "Nouveau fantastique: tradition et mutation," Le Fantastique aujourd'hui, Jeannine Monsieur and Jean Baptiste Baronian (Abbaye de Forest: Centre International du Fantastique, 1982) 22.

<sup>41</sup> Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> Jackson 3.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson 10.

<sup>44</sup> Jackson 180.

<sup>45</sup> Bessièrre 10.

<sup>46</sup> Bessièrre 11.

<sup>47</sup> Bessièrre 12.

<sup>48</sup> Bessièrre 14.

<sup>49</sup> Bessièrre 24.

<sup>50</sup> Bessièrre 26.

<sup>51</sup> Bessièrre 32.

<sup>52</sup> Bessièrre 59.

<sup>53</sup> Bessièrre 233.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" and  
"The Masque of the Red Death" as Gothic tales



The boundaries which divide Life from Death  
are at best shadowy. Who shall say where  
the one ends, and where the other begins?

E. A. Poe

## 1. Two Gothic tales and a definition

E. A. Poe's Gothic tales seem to fit all the theories of the fantastic. In fact, when confronted with either the earlier or the more contemporary studies in the field, Poe's horror fiction stands as a perfect example of fantastic literature. To confirm the validity of this statement, I shall confront two of his tales with a definition of the fantastic which contains elements from most of the works examined in the previous chapter. I chose "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" as the tales of Poe's which I consider the most accomplished products of his literary creation in what refers to the fantastic. Scarcely any study of this mode fails to make a reference to both of them as models of this kind of literature. Indeed, these two Gothic tales fulfil any requirements made by theoreticians as regard to the constitutive elements of the fantastic. In order to deal with only one definition, I have worked parts from most of the traditional scholars of the fantastic into an operational concept. I shall add a structural formula and three internal criteria of the Gothic - the notions of taboo, barbarism and paranoia, so as to complete such concept.

This analysis according to earlier canons is not the major concern of the present study, even though it appears in initial position. The present chapter will serve chiefly to apply the theories previously examined and, through the use of a general definition based on them, assess their shortcomings and their merits. Although this will prove to be a somewhat reductive analysis of the two tales, it will serve as an introduction to the more elaborate approaches to be developed later on. The final part of this chapter will present a comment on Irène Bessièrè's approach to Poe's fiction. Her analysis will provide the starting point for the discussion which constitutes the central concern of this dissertation. As I shall have applied most of the theories of

the fantastic in the present chapter, in the next I shall depart from them and try to bring some personal insights to the study of Poe's texts and by extension to the fantastic.

Traditionally, the fantastic has been defined as a literary mode which presents two mutually exclusive worlds in collision. As these worlds - one natural and rational, the other supernatural and irrational - collide, there irrupts a "monster," that is, a vampire, a double, an undead, a ghost or any other deregulation of the natural laws. The "monster" is realised through a set of motifs and introduced via an elaborate narrative technique. Its final destruction serves to confirm the norm of nature and to guarantee the character and the reader, by extension, that all's well again in the everyday world.

The character who witnesses the apparition of the "monster" is faced with a double dilemma: on the one hand, he is unable to decide whether it is natural or supernatural; or better, if the "monster" can be explained by natural or supernatural laws. On the other hand, the character is overwhelmed by a feeling of an unfamiliar familiarity, a feeling of the uncanny: although the "monster" seems alien yet there is something recognisable in it. Both the hesitation and the uncanny rely on a suspension of belief and disbelief that must last long enough to provoke fear in the character and in the reader.

This definition of the fantastic applies to the Gothic as well, for, as already mentioned, most of the authors who follow this approach do not separate the fantastic as mode from the Gothic as one of its manifestations. Raymond Rogé, for instance, uses his structural formula to any text he considers fantastic, without verifying whether he is pushing things too far or not.<sup>1</sup> According to him, a fantastic text must follow this structure: *ambition - avertissement - transgression - malédiction*.<sup>2</sup> When a text does not fit his theory, Rogé dismisses it as belonging to *genres voisins*.<sup>3</sup>

If the French critic differentiates only between *fantastique* and *bizarre*, the British David Punter claims an opposition between merely tame supernatural and true Gothic. So as to distinguish between them, Punter employs what he considers internal criteria: paranoia, barbarism and taboo. In a "paranoiac fiction," as Punter puts it,

the reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story.<sup>4</sup>

This sounds as a perfect description of Poe's works and, in fact, Punter considers him one of the most important contributors to paranoiac fiction.

The other two criteria emerge in different forms: in the case of barbarism, as the fear of the past or "the fear of aristocracy which provides the basis for the vampire legendry," or in the case of taboo, as preoccupation with those "areas of socio-psychological life which offend, which are suppressed, (...) in the interests of social and psychological equilibrium."<sup>5</sup>

Having established the parameters of the following analysis, I shall now apply them to Poe's tales and, at the same time, I shall draw a comparison between both texts so as to demonstrate that the same elements may appear under diverse guises.

## 2. Space and Time

According to the definition above, the fantastic depicts two worlds in collision. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the natural and rational world, although this is not clearly stated, is located in some nebulous European country at a time which resembles the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, in "The Masque of the Red Death," action takes place in an unidentifiable European kingdom during what may be assumed to be the medieval period.<sup>7</sup> By obliterating the most fundamental of human references, the chronological and spatial ones, Poe partly destroys the possibility of a rational explanation, for reason cannot operate without a referential system. Thus, the supernatural world occupies a privileged position in Poe's tales, for these take place in a dream-land, "Out of SPACE - out of TIME."<sup>8</sup>

[The supernatural world is represented in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as "a constitutional and a family evil," that is, a curse that runs in the family and affects its members' nervous system (235). Roderick has inherited "a morbid acuteness of the senses," whereas his twin sister Madeline suffered from "affections of a partially cataleptic character" (236).] A disease is also the supernatural element in "The Masque of the Red Death:" "No pestilence had ever been so fatal, so hideous," as the plague which devastated Prince Prospero's dominions (269). As a result of the superiority of the supernatural world, the House of Usher and Prospero's State are annihilated.

It is interesting to notice that not only the supernatural but also the natural world is conveyed via fantastic, or, more precisely, Gothic motifs. The European past is a recurrent motif in the early American Gothic, as represented by the works of Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Poe. These authors, Punter claims, created a version of the original Gothic, or better,

a *refraction* of English: where English Gothic has a direct past to deal with, American has a level interposed between present and past, the level represented by a vague historical 'Europe', an often already mythologised 'Old World'.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of time and space dislocated reappears now and then in

early horror fiction and helps build a universe of mythical coordinates.

The attempt to recapture the past, as displayed in the "historical" Gothic, is in direct relation with one of the central Gothic themes - the past as threatening. It may appear in different forms: as one's own crimes committed long ago that now demand expiation, as a previous ruler's abuse of authority being revenged by a plague that devastates the country, or as a forefather's misdeeds whose consequence falls on the heads of the descendants. This last version is what Punter calls "perhaps the most prevalent theme in Gothic fiction - the revisiting of the sins of the fathers upon their children."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, not only in Gothic fiction, but also in many folk tales, there appears to exist a punishment, usually a plague, which is a revenge of an offended deity upon an innocent people. Very common in Greek mythology, this pattern is central to Christianity - mankind must pay for the sins of Adam and Eve against Yahweh, even though Christ offered himself in expiation for their fault.

[This pattern of crime and expiation may be recognised in both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" if one considers Roderick's and Madeline's diseases, as well as the Red Death, to be a form of punishment for some fault. This could be theirs or their forbears', committed at a certain time in the past. Such hypothesis is not so far fetched as it may appear at first sight: Roderick says he suffers from a family malady, while the Red Death has blood as "its Avatar and its seal" (269). In addition to their present crimes, Roderick and Prince Prospero would be already doomed as a result of past misdeeds.]

Poe's relation to the past, as it appears in "The Fall of the House of Usher," is at least ambiguous. If one of its components is a longing for a time when aristocracy ruled, the other is an attitude of repulsion towards this same aristocracy, which is seen as decaying. Such paradox may result from Poe's being a North

American Southerner, living in the aftermath of the Civil War, when the ruined South underwent a conflict between the yearning for a peaceful past and the hatred for the atrophying aristocracy which had brought about the war. If, as seems likely, Poe's aristocrats defy all the codes of social behaviour, causing a social anxiety, then that anxiety has a clear historical dimension: threat to convention was seen as coming partly from the past, out of memory of previous social and psychological orders.

From the collision of the yearning for and the hatred of the past, a "monster" is born in "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." The "monster" is the past itself brought back; but instead of a golden promise, it has rotted down to a gloomy threat.

Indeed, this seems to be the backbone of Gothic fiction: Punter states that the Gothic is a literary practice

in which the attractions of the past and of the supernatural become similarly connected, and, further, in which the supernatural itself becomes a symbol of our past rising against us, whether it be the psychological past - the realm of those primitive desires repressed by the demands of closely organised society - or the historical past, the realm of a social order characterised by absolute power and servitude.<sup>11</sup>

If this is true, then "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" are perfectly representative of Gothic fiction, for these tales among other things, present the theme of the past coming to haunt and destroy the characters.

### 3. A Gothic trio: the ruin, the haunted house and the undead

A major part of the motifs in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" bears a relation to the theme of the past as threatening. Along with those of the curse and of the

European Middle Ages, in "The Fall of The House of Usher" there are those of the ruin, the haunted house and the undead.

The melancholy House is located in "a singularly dreary tract of country," with "vacant eye-like windows," reflecting itself in "a black and lurid tarn," and its "principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity" (231-33). One immediately visualises the mansion as a ruin, a symbol of the decaying old order. "A ruin," states Michael Sadleir,

expresses the triumph of chaos over order .... Creepers and weeds, as year by year they riot over sill and paving stone, defy a broken despotism; every coping stone that crashes from a castle-battlement into the undergrowth beneath is a small victory for liberty, a snap of the fingers in the face of the autocratic power.<sup>12</sup>

Again there appears the rebellious feeling against the former aristocratic rule, now falling to pieces.]

In European usage, "House" means family, noble descent, lineage. It has the same meaning in "The Fall of the House of Usher", where the appellation "House of Usher" seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the mansion" (232). The reader is made fully aware of a link with the past, of ancient customs kept alive in the present, of a close dependence of the house on the family. As a matter of fact, when the last of the Ushers dies, the House cracks open and submerges into the tarn. This is another Gothic motif, that of the vampire house which needs the blood of the family to stand. Here, two motifs are merged - the haunted house and the vampire.

The vampire has sprung up as an object of middle-class fantasies. He is not a mythologised individual but a mythologised class. He is dead yet not dead; he requires blood because blood is the business of an aristocracy, the blood of warfare and the blood of family. The vampire, then, stands for that inassimilable aspect



of the past which one rejects because one is unable to cope with.

When discussing what he calls a Bad Place, or the habitat of ghosts, author Stephen King states that its appeal lies in the fact "that the past *is* a ghost which haunts our present lives constantly" and he wonders "if the haunted house could not be turned into a kind of symbol of expiated sin."<sup>13</sup> Actually, this is what Poe did in "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the final destruction atones for any sin committed.

In addition to the aspect of habitat of ghosts, the haunted mansion of the Ushers is also a vampire, as it absorbs the anthropomorphic characteristics of its tenants. It has "vacant eye-like windows" and "minute fungi spread over the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled webwork from the eaves," which resembles Roderick's "cadaverousness of complexion" and "hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity" (231-34). The House has "sucked" not only Roderick's appearance but his living conditions as well: when he perishes under the embrace of lady Madeline, it immediately succumbs.

The vampire condition of the House is enhanced as it serves as a tomb for the living Madeline and drains life out of her. In much the same way as when a vampire bites his victim and transforms him or her into an undead, blood-sucking creature, the House partly contaminates Madeline. She is not a vampire *au complet*, a fact which has eluded some critics; her only vampiric attribute is that of being an undead, a *revenant*.<sup>14</sup>

The undead, one other Gothic motif, is the embodiment of the past which refuses to pass away. By his own statute, the undead breaches the fundamental laws of life and death: mutually exclusive worlds, he brings them together in himself. And, if life can be equated with past, then the undead manages to force the past into the present. His refusal to die makes him even more menacing, for he knows the secrets of the past and of death and may use them to derange the world. Madeline, returning from her

tomb, knows all there is to know and thus becomes a menace to Roderick, because his desires and fears are no longer a secret. He eventually collapses when faced with his sister. She may be considered a symbol of his unavowable desires, or merely a result of the curse that punishes the Ushers; what matters is that Madeline will not die and comes back to torment Roderick.

Between the two brothers there is a violent relationship. Roderick does not consider it possible to go on living after Madeline's death, as his love for her is immense. But this is not quite so, for he buries her alive. Roderick's feelings towards Madeline have a dual aspect of love and cruelty, of attraction and repulsion. She is her brother's twofold object of desire, in that she represents his suppressed impulses towards Eros and Thanatos. Befitting a Gothic tale, Eros takes the face of incest and Thanatos that of fratricide.

As mentioned earlier, when Madeline is made a victim of the vampire House, she assumes some vampiric characteristics. It happens that the vampire is also a double-faced symbol: if on the one hand he is a transgressor of the laws of mortality - an undead, on the other hand he is a catalyst for repressed tendencies to emerge in the light of day. In his second aspect, the vampire represents sexual liberation *in extremis*, which in "The Fall of the House of Usher" comes to be the incestuous love of Roderick for Madeline.

While in "The Fall of the House of Usher" exaggeration of fraternal love and hate seem to be the motor actioning the plot, in "The Masque of the Red Death" omnipotence is the presumable trigger element. Prince Prospero vainly attempts to escape death by abandoning his subjects to their fate and enclosing himself in an abbey to escape contagion. Death, however, will not be stopped by castled walls. At the twelfth stroke of midnight (also a Gothic motif), he has his final encounter with the Red Death. Whereas Roderick meets death in the person of an undead, Prince Prospero faces death itself

under the guise of a plague. Ironically, he had tried to escape the disease, but, unaware, he carried it with him everywhere he went. If one would consider, as suggested above, that the plague is a punishment for sins committed, then, once again, there appears the theme of the past as menacing and inescapable.

#### 4. Feelings of persecution

If Madeline and the Red Death can be interpreted as the fear of the past rising against Roderick and Prince Prospero, they can also be thought of as their respective exacerbated feelings of persecution. Indeed, action in "The Fall of the House of Usher" moves towards a climax that is reached when Roderick calls the Narrator "Madman" (245). His cry is the key to the tale: he knows he is neurasthenic but now he has managed to convince the Narrator of his, Roderick's, own morbid fears.<sup>15</sup> The Narrator firmly believes that Madeline stands in the open door and he flees, not before "witnessing" her vengeance. In a similar way, in "The Masque of the Red Death" the plot is developed in an escalation of effect that culminates with the final encounter between Prince Prospero and the Red Death. He had abandoned his subjects to their own fate and fled with a thousand courtiers to the security of a castellated abbey, in a desperate attempt to escape death by contagion. In his voluntary exile, Prince Prospero's personality undergoes a transformation. Once "happy and dauntless and sagacious" (269), he eventually acts wildly, "maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentarily cowardice." (273). His fear of dying goes on a crescendo until the mummer confronts him and scares him dead. Yet, when the courtiers pull off the mummer's mask, they find nothing behind it.

The scene of Roderick's cry and of the unveiling of the Red Death are "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" respective "monsters." Suspense has been piled up in a

spiralling progression towards these two scenes so effectively that the reader, for a moment long enough, suspends his judgment and believes, together with Roderick and the Narrator and the courtiers, that the "monsters" are real. Poe's technique of narration is well known - all the details are put to work towards a single aim so that when the climax is reached, a unity of effect is attained, through, and supported by, an effect of unity. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," there are the poem read by Roderick - "The Haunted Palace," the books with weird-sounding titles, the storm and, the most important of them, the story of the "Mad Trist." This tale foreshadows, in a counterpointing manner, what is going to happen and, by so doing, amplifies the final effect of fear.

Likewise, the fact that Prince Prospero's courtiers were but his own ghosts - "a multitude of dreams" (271), "an assembly of phantasms" (272) - is a clue that the Prince's end will be a confrontation with the greatest of his own fears. As in "The Fall of the House of Usher," in "The Masque of the Red Death" every textual element points to a sole effect. Whereas in the former tale Poe used a story to advance the narration and increase the emotion, here he used a clock whose chiming produced a devastating impression in Prospero's maskers. The clock is every bit effective as it displays what the Prince dreaded most - the passing of time. Whenever the hour sounded, his life was shortened, until the fatal twelve strokes which marked the end of the day and of his life.

Along with unity of effect, amplification of emotions and foreshadowing, one other narrative technique employed by Poe is worth mentioning - the use of narrator. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick summons his only personal friend, whom I have been calling "Narrator," to assist him in a period of distress. This friend becomes a witness of all the events and survives to tell them. In addition to being the narrator, he serves to

introduce a final element of the definition provided above, that of the uncanny, of a feeling of an unfamiliar familiarity.

## 5. The uncanny

As the Narrator enters the House of Usher, he perceives objects around him which "were but matters to which, or to such as which, [he] had been accustomed from his infancy," and yet, he muses, "while [he] hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this - [he] still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stitting up" (233). This sensation of an unfamiliar familiarity felt by the Narrator was called *unheimlich* by Freud (uncanny), a term which was discussed in chapter 1.<sup>16</sup>

While in "The Fall of the House of Usher" the uncanny is explicated by the Narrator, who is also a character, in "The Masque of the Red Death" it is not so. Prospero's tale is told by a barely perceived narrator who sounds as if he has gathered it from other sources and not as if he had witnessed it. Although the narrator does not point any unfamiliar familiarity, he gives the reader some clues in his description of the courtiers. As mentioned above, they were but Prospero's dreams and phantasms and, since nobody or nothing could have entered the abbey, so was the Red Death's mummer. One could then say that, although Prospero could not recognise it, the Red Death was his own fear of dying, which he thought he had left outside the abbey's "strong and lofty walls" (269).

Poe's use of the narrator and the feeling of uncanny were the last two items of the definition of the fantastic which I have been working with which were left to examine. The present analysis has not been an exhaustive one for two reasons: first, there is always the possibility of a different reading, which implies in other data and another approach and, second, this is not the main

concern of this dissertation, as already stated. This chapter is a sample of a traditional approach to a Gothic text, based on a definition I have compiled from various authors. This analysis will serve as a foil to the next chapters, where I shall attempt at a problematising exam of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death." To conclude the present chapter, I shall apply Rog e's structural analysis and Punter's internal criteria to Poe's tales, as well as add some comments on Ir ne Bessi re's approach to them.

## 6. Structure and internal criteria

Raymond Rog e, in his R cits fantastiques, presents four tales which he has divided "en plusieurs moments: les entr es, les avertissements, les transgressions, les mal dictions et la mort."<sup>17</sup> One of these tales is "The Masque of the Red Death," which he analyses as follows:

*L'entr e*: the first two paragraphs, which depict a bloody situation and the precautions taken by Prince Prospero and his courtiers to escape the Red Death.

La transgression est d j  partiellement accomplie: "d fi   la contagion"; le "monde ext rieur s'arrangerait comme il pourrait". Le crime d'orgueil et d'ego sme est d j  commis, et en un certain sens l'avertissement a d j   t  donn : la peste est un fl au de punition et d'avertissement.<sup>18</sup>

Immediately, Rog e's formula seems faulty: warning and transgression happen at the same time in the opening (*l'entr e*) of the tale, thus altering the order of the structure. Nevertheless, the functions are there and can be promptly recognised.

*L'avertissement*: no part of the text is a proper warning, says Rog e: "la peste elle-m me joue d'entr e ce r le, en m me temps que

celui de châtiement."<sup>19</sup>

*La transgression et l'aventure qui s'en suit...*: the transgression being already committed, it needs only to take it to its climax - "a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence" (MRD 269).<sup>20</sup>

*La malédiction et la mort*: as mentioned earlier, the plague is at the same time warning and punishment - "double aspect qui ne doit pas tellement surprendre, puisqu'il est courant d'utiliser les châtiements des uns comme avertissement pour les autres!"<sup>21</sup>

Following this model, I shall try to analyse "The Fall of the House of Usher" briefly and verify whether it fits Rogé's theory. In the Ushers' tale, there are at least two levels of reading to which this structural formula could be applied. If a reading of "The Fall of the House of Usher" similar to Rogé's reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" is made, then this would be the result:  
*L'entrée*: the first two paragraphs, which display the conditions of both the House and Roderick. [But it will take some more paragraphs until Roderick's ambition is revealed: to escape death caused by "the grim phantasm, FEAR" (FHU 235).] *Rede me*

*L'avertissement*: as in "The Masque of the Red Death," no part of the text is a proper warning, but Roderick's disease is in itself a warning and a punishment. Also, "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between" he and his sister which would prevent him from outliving her (240).

[*La transgression*: even though Roderick knew that Madeline was cataleptic, he buried her in a subterranean vault. This brought about his death, for he was aware he would follow her soon.] *LEHON*

[*La malédiction et la mort*: as expected, Madeline had been buried alive and Roderick knew it. She returns to avenge herself, or so his hallucination goes, and to fulfil the curse that hung over the House of Usher.] *18/12/00*

On another level of reading and with an attempt to improve Rogé's formula, "The Fall of the House of Usher" could be seen as fitting in the following structure:

↳ *odeganda*

parental relation overvalued	social code enforced	parental relation undervalued	social code transgressed
Roderick loves Madeline	incest is forbidden	Roderick buries Madeline alive  Madeline kills Roderick and herself	fratricide is committed  suicide is committed

As Roderick loves Madeline but cannot have her because of a social code (prohibition of incest), he buries her alive, breaching another social code (fratricide). When Madeline returns and kills Roderick and herself, the House of Usher is also finished. The order followed in the schema above is very similar to Rogé's, that is, Roderick's love for Madeline is the ambition and the prohibition of their relationship is a warning against disaster. Roderick's burying her alive is a transgression which engenders his death, which, in turn, is a transgression on Madeline's side and which, consequently, must be punished with death too. Once they cannot outlive each other, each fratricide is, in itself, a suicide.]

The socially disruptive behaviour of Roderick and Madeline is what Punter called one of the internal criteria of the Gothic text - the concept of taboo. Indeed, what are incest and fratricide but social interdicts or taboos? A second internal criteria and one which seems to be the theme of both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" is the notion of barbarism, represented by the fear of the past and by the fear of the apparently immortal aristocracy which is the basis for the vampire myth. Closely related to this view of the past as menacing is the abnormal feeling of persecution felt by both Roderick Usher and Prince Prospero. Poe plays so deftly and subtly with their paranoia that he conducts the reader into an



ambiguous situation: are these fears within the text product of deranged minds or are they of supernatural origin?

#### 7. A conclusion and a departing point

This ambiguity seems to be at the very heart of the fantastic, or at least as far as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" are representative of this literary mode. In fact, from what was shown in this chapter, both tales are perfect examples of fantastic, or more precisely, of Gothic fiction. They fulfil all the requisites of the definition presented at the beginning of this chapter and, therefore, totally justify their choice as working material. But, if "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death" can be proved to be authentic Gothic tales by the application of the mentioned definition, this definition can be confronted with them and some of its faults will stand out.

To begin with, the earlier view of the fantastic, as explained above, presupposes it as an entity with proper existence, that is, it claims that the "monster" is a being generated by the clash of two mutually exclusive worlds. Actually, the fantastic seems to be situated exactly in between two universes - it exists in the gap, by default. The event occurs on this kind of zero-gravity zone between two rational systems, where the laws of neither can be applied. Thus, the fantastic offers a privileged standpoint from which to question the rationality of both worlds.

One other walk point is that the "monster" depends on a hesitation and on a feeling of the uncanny, which transfers the fantastic from the text to the reader. Thus, the author is exempt from any responsibility if his text does not work: it is the reader who does not recognise it as fantastic. Here, a paradox rises, for if the "monster" is an autonomous entity, then it cannot depend on the reader. And also, the "monster" is not always

destroyed so as to soothe the reader into believing that his world is a safe place once more. Modern fantastic tends to let the "monster" loose and, sometimes, it tends not even to punish the transgressor. At the end of the twentieth century, when reality is as ever increasing threat, an eventual normative restoration of the natural laws will hardly comfort any reader.

A final point to be discussed here is the habit of relating fantastic to irrationality. Probably because it deals with things better left unsaid, this literary mode, and mainly its chief manifestation, the Gothic, has been considered a means by which to assess "the dark side of the human soul," to use a battered cliché. This position caught on and improved with the advent of psychoanalytical theories, which are put to use by critics that see the fantastic, and its authors, as suitable subjects. Yet, as later criticism has demonstrated although the fantastic can provide a glimpse into the formation of the psychology of the individual, it is not a door to the unconscious of the character, nor of the author and even less of the reader.

More contemporary studies of the fantastic avoid this trap and denounce such position to hinder the development of literary theories. Irène Bessièrre, one of the scholars to warn against these incongruencies of traditional approaches, proposes that the fantastic, basically and fundamentally, deconstructs the rational beliefs of a historically determined period.<sup>22</sup> Her work, shown in the previous chapter, is brilliant and clarifies many a shadowy aspect of the theories of the fantastic. When Bessièrre focuses on particular writers, however, her book is not very elucidative about how the fantastic, in an author's fiction, deconstructs any rational belief. As a matter of fact, vagueness seems to be a common currency among the critics I know of who work with the concept of deconstruction. Bessièrre, who is no exception, alludes to the "play of oppositions" in Poe's fiction but does not point out where it springs from nor to what use he puts it. She does not

advance anything, for, as early as 1958, Rudolph Otto had already said as much when he discussed the "harmony of contrasts" in the Gothic.<sup>23</sup>

The same goes for this statement: "Le fantastique repose, chez Poe, sur un procès constant de néantisation d'origine culturelle, il formalise, au plan littéraire, l'ambivalence nationale qui, selon l'écrivain, ne désigne aucun futur."<sup>24</sup> Bessière stops here and does not offer any examples or evidence of what she claims. It is up to the reader to try and guess what she means by that.

Bessière's insights, however, dwarf her faults and confirm the excellence of her work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, her study will provide the starting point to my next discussions of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Masque of the Red Death." To be more precise, the following chapters originated in this statement:

Le fantastique de Poe repose sur quelques conceptions scientifiques (aujourd'hui datées) qui assurent la motivation réaliste (astronomie, fluides) et sur de nombreuses références ésotériques qui introduisent la méditation surnaturelle. Mais il est exactement constitué par une visée de conscience qui, saisissant antithétiquement le quotidien, le déréalise, et dont les éléments de la narration sont l'illustration.<sup>25</sup>

I believe that here Bessière shed some light on how to approach Poe's fiction from a position seldom tried. His aesthetics, as I shall demonstrate further on, are based on esoteric tradition, a fact which seems very rarely dealt with by critics of his work. In addition, and partly deriving from this, his is an alternative *visée de conscience* which dismantles everyday life.

These will be the guiding ideas of the next pages, where I shall also evaluate whether Poe's choice of medium in which to vehiculate his ideas determined an ideological paradox or not. And, at the same time, I shall verify the ideological or counter-

ideological character of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and  
"The Masque of the Red Death." .

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Raymond Rogé, Récits fantastiques, Textes pour aujourd'hui (Paris: Larousse, n.d.).
- <sup>2</sup> Rogé 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Rogé 125-49.
- <sup>4</sup> David Punter, The Literature of Terror (London: Longman, 1980) 404.
- <sup>5</sup> Punter 405.
- <sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1938; New York: Random-Vintage, 1975) 231-45. All subsequent notes will appear between parentheses in the text.
- <sup>7</sup> ---, "The Masque of the Red Death," Complete Poe 269-73. All subsequent notes will appear between parentheses in the text.
- <sup>8</sup> ---, "Dream-land," Complete Poe 968.
- <sup>9</sup> Punter 189.
- <sup>10</sup> Punter 52.
- <sup>11</sup> Punter 53.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Sadleir, as quoted in Devendra P. Varma, "Quest of the Numinous: The Gothic Flame," Literature of the Occult, Peter B. Messent, ed., Twentieth Century Views 155 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1981) 48.
- <sup>13</sup> Stephen King, Danse Macabre (New York: Everest, 1981) 253.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Lyle H. Kendall, Jr., "The Vampire Motif in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" College English March 1983: 450-53.
- <sup>15</sup> John S. Hill, "The Dual Hallucination of 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Southwest Review 48 (1963): 396-402.
- <sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, "O 'estranho,'" Uma neurose infantil (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1976) 275-314.
- <sup>17</sup> Rogé 15.

18 Rogé 18.

19 Rogé 32.

20 Rogé 53.

21 Rogé 63.

22 Irène Bessière, Le Fantastique; La Poétique de l'incertain  
Thèmes et textes (Paris: Larousse, 1974).

23 Rudolph Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. John W. Harvey  
(New York: Oxford UP, 1958) 31, as quoted in S.L. Varnado, "The  
Idea of the Numinous in Gothic Literature," Literature of the  
Occult, Peter B. Messent, ed., Twentieth Century Views 155  
(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1981) 59-60.

24 Bessière 135.

25 Bessière 135.

Elements of Gnostic Tradition

Know thyself.



Poe's basic plot seems to be the struggle of man to enlarge his awareness of the multiple levels of reality. Against a unidimensional view of the real, he seems to propose another perception which depends on at least three composite relationships: that of the I with the World, that of the I with the Other and that of the I with the I itself. If man recognises that his life is based on his sensorial perception of reality and that it may mislead him, then he will be able to re-evaluate the image of the world he has built for himself. Once man sees through his misconstrued conceptions, he will be able to understand the true relationships held in the universe and thus will allow his Self to emerge.

Man, in Poe's metaphysics, is a fallen creature who has forgotten his previous higher state. He suffers from what Colin Wilson defines as *narrowness of consciousness*:

It is as if you tried to see a panoramic scene through cracks in a high fence, but were never allowed to look *over* the fence and see it as a whole. And the narrowness lulls us into a state of permanent drowsiness, like being half anaesthetised, so that we never attempt to stretch our powers to discover their limits. With the consequence that we never discover their limits.<sup>1</sup>

This lethargic state is the prison most of Poe's heroes seem to be trying to escape. They find themselves trapped between sleep and wakefulness, both of which are unsatisfactory states of mind. One because it is an irrational limbo over which man has no control; the other because it means the subjection to the rationalistic, positivistic laws that have governed man's view of the world since the eighteenth century. It is in this unfavourable situation that man has to learn about himself and the universe that surrounds him.

The universe which houses Poe's characters is an imperfect

creation, subject to the forces of attraction and repulsion, of unification and separation. Under these drives, the Poesque cosmos is submitted to a cycle of creation, destruction and creation again. In Eureka, Poe states that

In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation.<sup>2</sup>

He claims that the origin of decay is the divided nature of the Universe and of man. A result of this division is that earth is a fallen planet on which man erected his abode. Upon man's own fall, he forgot his divine origin and, consequently, has been caught in the "Now - the awful Present - the Existing Condition of the Universe."<sup>3</sup> Thus, in Poe's tales, his heroes seem to embark on a desperate quest of Truth, which, when attained, will allow them to regain their former higher state. The primal Self, longing for his lost divinity, wages a war against the external world, against his earthly body and against the "blind" rational mind.

It is not surprising that a fundamental concept in Poe's work is that of circumscription. Most of his protagonists fight to escape some kind of enclosure, more often than not depicted in terms of entombment alive. Although they apparently choose to live in claustrophobia-inducing spaces, these represent the constraints the Poesque man has to destroy in order to free himself. On a spiritual level, the ego finds itself entrapped by the rational limits of everyday logic, and the only alternative it can find is that of the irrational realm of dreams. The Self, however, does not want this solution, because it is the opposite of rationalism and the Self's main purpose is not mere denial, but a deeper and broader consciousness. It wants a total vista of reality and this includes rationality and a-rationality. Any kind of knowledge is useful and even necessary to the enlightening

that will free the Self.

The concept of circumscription finds physical expression in the buildings that house Poe's characters. According to Richard Wilbur, there is always an aura of remoteness hanging around them - if they are not actually removed from civilisation.<sup>4</sup> Such distanciation tells of a retreat of world consciousness, that is, man is isolated within himself and cannot perceive any other reality which is not his own. These remote lodgings hide a tottery structure, indicative of man's inability to cope with his interior life. Master of reason as he may be, his spiritual self is a shambles, which is reflected in the crumbling conditions of the buildings. Their decomposing state indicates that the Self needs to get rid of the rational structure in order to free itself from the material body and the material world.

The effect of enclosure is enhanced by the location of the buildings. To use one of Poe's lines, they seem to be "out of TIME, out of SPACE," in a limbo where no sun light can ever penetrate.<sup>5</sup> In fact, most of his settings are illuminated by a glow, not by any direct light. When it comes from the sky, it comes not from the sun but from the moon. For Poe, the sun equals direct knowledge and the moon indirect knowledge and intuition. It is not via direct contact with reality that man will achieve cognition of his true, spiritual Self; it is by dedicating himself to an oblique approach of the universe that gnosis will be attained.

Poe's metaphysics may sound "insane" because it asks for the repudiation of everything human and earthly.<sup>6</sup> But, in truth, his metaphysics and aesthetics preaches that inevitable annihilation must precede new creation. Out of the chaos in which the old order is submerged a new one will be born. Such ideas are not new; in fact, they exist since pre-Christian times. They probably originated in Asia and were taken to Greece, where they were adopted by philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato. It is possible

to find in their works conceptions such as the cyclic recreation of the universe, the link of decadent beings, the world as sensorial illusions and matter as prison of the soul. These philosophical thoughts form the ground of esoteric mysticism, as, for example, Kabbalah, Mithraism, Alchemy, Hermeticism, Emanationism and Gnosticism. Poe is reputed to have known all and followed their precepts. Indeed, his metaphysics is a rendering of the above conceptions in pseudo-scientific language. Likewise, his aesthetics gives a remarkable impression of being the Gnostic creed applied to artistic matters. Therefore, I suggest that Gnosticism, a mystery religion, may be a key to understanding Poe's work, and I find it necessary to summarize the aspects I will use to subsidize my reading of the texts.

Gnosticism was born together with Christianity and, according to Wilson, is a similar expression "of the human craving to escape the futility of human existence."<sup>7</sup> John Ferguson defines it as a Mystical theosophy emerging in Syria and Egypt in the second century AD. Before that we can discern similar tendencies, but nothing systematic. Gnosticism blends together strands of thought from the East, from Mesopotamia, Persia and even India; from Greece, especially Platonism and some Hellenistic speculation; and from Judaism and Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

A world-rejecting religion, it espouses a thorough-going dualism: God stands in opposition to the world, which was formed by an anti-god (who is identified with the Old Testament Yahweh). Alongside the God-world dichotomy, are three others: spirit-soul (*pneuma-psyche*), light-darkness (deriving from Zoroastrianism), life-death. Gnostic systems commonly have a complex mythology of a cosmic fall, the imprisonment of the soul in matter, and the emergence of a saviour.<sup>9</sup>

The soul needs liberation, and liberation comes from *gnosis*, revealed knowledge, as contrasted with *pistis*, mere faith. Gnosis, more specifically, means the absolute knowledge which envelopes everything and it explains everything by the principle of emanationism.

Emanationism is a doctrine opposed to that of creation somewhere in-between pantheism and theism.<sup>10</sup> Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists use the term "emanation"

to describe the generation of the world from the Ultimate. Thus the sun radiates light while itself remaining unchanged and undiminished; so that heat is an emanation from fire, cold from snow, perfume from a flower, the river from the spring.<sup>11</sup>

Emanationism, then, preaches that from the immutable first principle spring, like light beams, less perfect beings from which come even lesser beings, in a continual chain of deterioration.

This sequence of decay is translated in the basic belief that the world was not created by a Supreme Being, but by a deranged and conceited demon (or Demiurge). The real God is above creation and even existence, as given to man to know. He dwells in the realm of Pleroma, or the mystical Plenitude. Once there occurred a split in the Godhead, which was ensued by a Fall. The result of this fall was a Demiurge (or *archon*), who is the 'God' of the Old Testament. The Demiurge created the Universe and Time, a counterpart substitute of eternity, and is totally ignorant of the Divinity from which he was fallen, believing himself to be the only God. This stupid demon created six more archons, who in turn helped him create man, "whose state is doubly tragic because he is trapped in a world created by a deluded God."<sup>12</sup>

But not everything is lost for man. Something in him rejects this fake reality and longs for its true place. A Gnostic sect, the Ophites (from the Greek *ophis*, serpent) claims that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was actually an agent of divine

goodness who gave man forbidden knowledge so that he could start his hard struggle to save his soul. Man is in a prison of mediocrity, but because of the wise, Promethean serpent, he has a chance of escape through knowledge. Man's true place is the Divine Light, and by the use of his will, intellect and intuition, he will eventually achieve freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Gnosticism is a secret and esoteric doctrine, and preaches that knowledge must lead to a hidden God. It is similar to Hermeticism or *pagan gnosis*, an occult doctrine of knowledge that accepts the possibility of cognition of the truthful I and of its organic equilibrium.<sup>14</sup> Another Gnostic sect, the Manichees, state that all that belongs to the spirit (*pneuma*) is good, while everything material is evil. Sex thus is bad because it prolongs the evil of procreation. A dying man, on the other hand, is lucky because he is escaping this world and his physical constraints.<sup>15</sup>

Liberation requires a liberator: in Gnosticism "he is often seen as Christ, but because of the evil in matter the Gnostics tend to distinguish between the spiritual Christ and the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>16</sup> Man is a being endowed with a divine spark, fallen in the world of matter, estranged and needing to be awakened by a divine call so as to be restored to his highest state. These points will be developed in the discussion of Poe's tales below.

One other important aspect to be pointed out is that, as explained by C.G. Jung, there seems to exist a relationship between the Gothic liberation of the soul and the process of individuation. The Swiss psychologist stated in his Psicologia da religião ocidental e oriental and Aion; Estudos sobre o simbolismo do si-mesmo that Gnosticism explained the I as an exponent of a comprehensive totality, the Self.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Jung recognises a remarkable parallel between the Gnostic doctrine and psychology.<sup>18</sup> According to him, the Gnostics, who were rather psychologists than heretics, made the activity of

thinking their trademark, and the knowledge of what they were living, their ultimate aim.<sup>19</sup> As Jung's works are an invaluable help to clarify the process of interaction of the I with reality, I shall use them to highlight Gnosticism and its relation to "The Fall of the House of Usher" in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Although Poe's tales depict the destruction of everything earthly, it is futile to condemn his texts as pessimistic, as it is a misunderstanding to see Gnosticism as an eschatological doctrine. Both claim that there is a fundamental dualistic component of attraction and repulsion in everything that exists. From unity comes emanation, followed by annihilation, which leads to an eventual return to unity, following a cycle that may be considered a dialectical search for truth and knowledge. Horror is perhaps just a mask which Poe uses to hide from his readers that "Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale."<sup>20</sup>

I believe that in his intertextual use of Gnosticism Poe has contributed to enriching the fantastic mode and the Gothic manifestation. Here lies, in my opinion, the most fertile question to explore, and it came to constitute the central issue of my study.

## Notes

- 1 Colin Wilson, The Occult (London: Granada, 1971) 13.
- 2 Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka, The First Part of the Nineteenth Century, vol. 2 of American Literature, ed. Carl Bode et al., 3 vols. (New York: Washington Square, 1973) 102.
- 3 Poe, Eureka, American Literature 104.
- 4 Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," Poe; Collection of Critical Essays, ed. and introd. Robert Regan, Twentieth Century Views 63 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1967) 39.
- 5 Edgar Allan Poe, "Dream-land," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1938, New York: Random-Vintage, 1975) 968.
- 6 Wilbur 119-20.
- 7 Wilson 219.
- 8 John Ferguson, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) 68.
- 9 Ferguson 68.
- 10 Marguerite-Marie Thiollier, Dictionnaire des religions (1966; Verviers: Marabout, 1982) 213.
- 11 Ferguson 54.
- 12 Wilson 260.
- 13 Wilson 260.
- 14 Thiollier 167.
- 15 Wilson 259.
- 16 Ferguson 68.
- 17 Carl Gustav Jung, Aion; Estudos sobre o simbolismo do si-mesmo, trans. Mateus Ramalho Rocha, vol. IX/2 of Obras completas de C. G. Jung, 18 vols. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1982) and Psicologia da religião ocidental e oriental, trans. Mateus Ramalho Rocha, vol. XI of Obras completas de C. G. Jung, 18 vols. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980).
- 18 Jung, Aion 337 and 350.
- 19 Jung, Aion 308.
- 20 Poe, "Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales," The First Part of the



Nineteenth Century, vol. 2 of American Literature, ed. Carl Bode  
et al., 3 vols. (New York: Pocket-Washington Square, 1973) 85.

House and Mirror

All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.

E. A. Poe

## 1. Introduction

"The Fall of the House of Usher" can be read either as a Gothic tale or as a Gnostic parable.<sup>1</sup> On one level it is a story of actions not in accordance with normal standards, of mental derangement with delusion of persecution and of behaviour prohibited by social customs. On the other level it is a mystic text which tells of a Fall, in images borrowed from esoterism, philosophical and religious writers and collective symbology.

Esoterism being a well-known interest of Poe, it seems only natural that it should be present in his works. Of all the esoteric religions, Gnosticism appears as his prime choice, and its notions of classical Greek philosophy on the one hand, and its components of Greek, Near Eastern and Egyptian mythology, Christian dogmata and Jewish Kabbala on the other hand, form the other side of the tapestry of Poe's horror fiction. Through a combination of textual and subtextual elements, symbols and images and narrative devices he managed to weave an intricate labyrinth into which he invites the reader, who, in turn, must search for indices to find his way out.

My reading of "The Fall of the House of Usher" will aim at bringing forth some of the elements Poe used in its composition, and I shall privilege the narrative devices and symbols which bear any relation with Gnosticism. This, as already stated, will be the major reference that will guide my analysis. To help clarify the Gnostic subtext that underlie's Poe's tale, I shall employ Jung's works on the psychology of religion. His insights will serve to demonstrate that "The Fall of The House of Usher," as a Gnostic parable, seems to depict the building up of the psychology of the individual.

## 2. The door in the mirror

The central image in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is the mirror, the symbol of symbolism, which functions at the same time as door and key to the text. It will be found everywhere: the lake, the house and the Ushers are mirror shards that transform the whole text into a kaleidoscopic pitfall. As the Narrator approaches the House of Usher and looks at the "black and lurid tarn," what he does is described in occultism as scrying, that is, gazing for a long time into any kind of crystalline surface to induce a semitrancelike state, in which knowledge is attained.

In the first paragraph of the tale, the Narrator reports that he had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, "and found himself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher." (231). Trying to analyse the "sorrowful impression produced" on him by the combination of "the particulars of the scene," he reined his horse

to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay unruffled by the dwelling, and gazed down - but with a shudder even more thrilling than before - upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant eye-like windows.

(231)

This vision caused on the Narrator "an utter depression of soul which he could compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium" (231). Like many passages in Poe's tales, this one above may be a Biblical reference or, at least, bear some relation with the Bible. I would like to suggest that it is possible to draw a parallel between the Narrator's view of the House of Usher and Jacob's dream.

After leaving Bersabeth, Jacob arrived at a certain place,

where he slept, for the sun had set already. He dreamt of a stairway to heaven and upon waking, he was afraid and said: "Este lugar é terrível! Nada é menos que uma casa de Deus e a porta do céu" (Gen 28:10-19). Both Jacob and the Narrator share a feeling of fright and are terrified by unearthly visions: the stairway to heaven and the reflection of the House. Following the parallel, the House of Usher would be a *bêth El* (house of the Lord) and the tarn, as will be developed later, would function as the stairway, that is, as a means of access. Although the textual elements are not enough to confirm the analogy, the symbolism of the door and of entrance can be readily recognised.

Biblical and Gnostic mythology equates the door with Christ, as in John 10:9, where the Son says

Eu sou a porta.  
 Quem entrar por mim será salvo;  
 entrará e sairá  
 e encontrará pastagem.

Also, Christ claims that, "Eu sou o caminho, a verdade e a vida; ninguém pode ir ao Pai, senão por mim (John 14:6):" If a door is an attribute to Christ the Redeemer, and if a mirror can also be a door, then, the tarn, which functions as a mirror, may be an allusion to Christ. This hypothetical relation between Christ and water is backed in John 4:10, where Christ calls himself the "living water" or *aqua doctrinae*. According to Hippolytus, in Elenchos, V,9,18s, this water corresponds to the Euphrates, the fourth river that flows in Paradise, and into which everything created, that is, nature, must be plunged in order to assimilate its own essence, for this water provides the creature with everything that is proper to it.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Christ may be a source of individuation, for he, as *aqua doctrinae*, "provides the creature with everything that is proper to it," that is, everything that relates exclusively or distinctively to the creature. I shall develop the relation between Christ and individuation, as seen in

Gnosticism, further on. Presently, I would like to suggest that the association tarn-mirror-door-Christ may be one means of approaching and analysing "The Fall of the House of Usher."

### 3. Gnostic symbols of the Self

An observer with a scrutinising eye, says the Narrator, might perceive a fissure in the front wall of the House. This crack moves "in a zigzag direction," from the roof to the waters of the tarn. Poe makes it similar to a serpent by describing it with a verb of movement and an adjective evocative of the reptile's motion, as well as by introducing it in an unexpected place and by making it stealthy. The zigzagging motion, the unexpectedness and the stealthiness are attributes of the serpent, which is an aquatic being, like the fish, and both are compared with the Son in early Christian tradition (John 3:14, for instance). Jung points out that the popular identification of Jesus with these cold-blooded animals are due to the fact that, like them, he came mysteriously from unknown and somber depths. He adds that both "são, com efeito, símbolos populares empregados para designar movimentos ou experiências psíquicas que emergem, de forma surpreendente, assustadora ou salvadora, do fundo do inconsciente."<sup>3</sup> The fissure, as will be explained further on, foretells the frightening cognitive experience the Narrator will undergo within the House.

To the two Gnostic symbols of the Self which have been examined, the water and the serpent, another must be added. The Logos, the third symbol, is represented by the Narrator, who articulates thoughts and concepts and expresses unconscious material via a conscious product, the narration. References to Logos as creator can be found in many parts of the Bible, but mainly in Genesis, which relates the Christian cosmogony. The notion of the Logos preexisting creation, that is, as the

*dynamis* of the thought and the word appears in John 1:1,  
 No princípio era o Verbo  
 e o Verbo estava com Deus  
 e o Verbo era Deus.

If the Logos is a power of creation and if, in "The Fall of the House of Usher," it is an attribute of the Narrator, then, in a certain way, the Narrator could be considered the creator of the tale. Indeed, it is he who tells it, it is through his words (logoi) that the story of the Ushers come to be. Thus, the Narrator is, at the same time, creator and creature, Yahweh and Adam, the subject and the object of the text. This dual characteristic may be applied to the Gnostic Demiurge, the fallen archon who created the universe but is ignorant that he, also, is a creature (a point I shall develop further on).

It is essential to make it clear that the water, the serpent and the Logos are not allegories or metaphors; on the contrary, their characteristics constitute a symbol of the Son, or the Self. The Son may have the attributes of a serpent, but not vice versa, that is, the serpent does not mean the Son. Gnosticism considers the three as magnetic agents which attract man to gnose as a magnet attracts iron. Jung examines them thoroughly and states that they are *forms* of attraction: (i) the agent may be an inanimate, passive substance - the water, which means "the intuitive doctrine, the *aqua doctrinae* or the Word (Logos) and is transmitted by speech and rites;" (ii) the agent may be an animate and autonomous being, the serpent, which has an ambivalent aspect and may, thus, represent the Devil and the Son, and (iii) the agent may be the Logos, which is, on the one hand, "a philosophical idea and a conceptual abstraction of the personal and corporeal Son of God," and on the other hand, "the moving power of Thought and Word."<sup>4</sup>

Through a combination of Biblical allusions and Gnostic symbology, Poe constructs his ensnare for the reader. These



intertextual elements function, simultaneously as indices and baits. Baits, as they hold the reader's attention and thus cause him to meditate upon what he is reading. Indices, as they point the way towards cognition, towards the inner man, the Self. And the main bait, as well as the main index, is the mirror, which on the textual level is represented by the tarn. It acts like a magnet upon the Narrator and attracts his look to its "black and lurid" waters. There he will be able to find his true Self, for the water is the primordial substance, the source of life.

As Jung comments on Hippolitus' Elenchos and its description of the *zōn hydōr*, the living water, he writes that

'Da água viva nós, homens espirituais, escolhemos o que nos é específico (to oikeion)', pois toda criatura que mergulha nesta água escolhe (eklegousa), aí, a natureza que a caracteriza, e 'é desta água que toda criatura recebe o que lhe é próprio'. A água ou este Cristo constitui uma espécie de 'panspermia' [universalidade seminal], matriz de todas as possibilidades, na qual o pneumático (o espiritual) escolhe (eklegein) 'suum ossop', ou seja, aquilo que lhe é próprio, sendo atraído por ele (proserchestai), mais que o ferro pelo magneto. Mas ela só alcança sua natureza pneumática, quando passa através da 'verdadeira porta' que é 'Jēsous ho makarios' (Jesus, o bem aventurado) e adquire, assim, o conhecimento de sua própria totalidade, ou seja, especificamente, do 'homem pleno'. Este homem, que o mundo não honra, é o homem interior, espiritual, de que só se apercebem aqueles que passaram através de Cristo como através de uma porta que conduz à vida, e que foram por Ele iluminados. Aqui se misturam duas imagens, uma da 'porta estreita' e outra de João 14,6 ('Eu sou o caminho, a verdade e a vida. Ninguém vai ao Pai senão por mim'). Estas imagens representam, obviamente, um processo de

integração, característico da individuação psicológica. Na formulação destas imagens, o símbolo da água se mistura constantemente com Cristo, e este com o 'ēso ānthrōpos', o homem interior. Isto me parece menos uma falta de clareza do que, propriamente, uma representação psicologicamente correta, dado que Cristo é verdadeiramente a 'água viva', na sua qualidade de 'Palavra' (Verbo), e também o símbolo do homem interior e 'pleno', ou seja, do si mesmo.<sup>5</sup>

This quite long passage was quoted due to its clarity in associating the Gnostic symbols to the process of individuation, central to the focus of this dissertation. It sums up the triple symbolism of the Self in the figure of Christ the Redeemer: both the water and the Word were present in Jesus' life, as the baptism and the doctrine. He submitted himself to baptism and had to spread the Christian truth before he could sit to the right of God the Father. Likewise, the Narrator will use the lake and the narration as means of achieving revelation, as shall be developed below.

#### 4. The mirror in the mirror in the mirror

By looking at the images in the tarn, the Narrator seems to repeat Narcissus' myth. But while Narcissus was enamored with his own appearance, he is decided to know his true nature as it is a product of his interaction with reality. The Narrator's gaze is an infraction to the natural order of the lake/mirror which set off a mirroring structured narrative. His trip towards the origin of the reflections is the probation the hero must undergo before ascending to Heaven, is the painful quest for the Self.

#### 4.1. The mirror

The first reflection is represented by the exterior of the anthropomorphic House with its "vacant eye-like windows," whose contemplation the Narrator "can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into every-day life - the hideous dropping off of the veil" (231). It is the veil of *māyā*, the illusion, that hid the Narrator's condition of prisoner of the dullness of everydayness and that now he tears in pieces.

In The Birth of Tragedy, which he wrote in 1872, Nietzsche claims that when the veil of illusion is torn, the primordial unity of the universe and the I is revealed. The concept of *māyā* is applied to "the sense-world of manifold phenomena held in Vedanta to conceal the unity of the absolute being."<sup>6</sup> Developed probably between 1500 B.C. and 500 B.C., Vedanta is "an orthodox system of Hindu philosophy developing esp. in a quantified monism the speculations of the Upanishads on ultimate reality and the liberation of the soul."<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche equates *māyā* with the Apollinian aspect of art - "the dream world," where, according to Lucretius, the glorious divine figures first appeared to the souls of men:

The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is truly an artist, is the prerequisite of all plastic art (...). In our dreams we delight in the immediate understanding of figures; all forms speak to us; there is nothing unimportant or superfluous. But even when this dream reality is most intense, we still have, glimmering through it, the sensation that it is *mere appearance* (...).<sup>8</sup>

Apollo, the deity of light, is also ruler over the illusion of the inner world of fantasy, and image of the *principium individuationis*.<sup>9</sup>

On counterposition to the Apollinian, Nietzsche identified the Dionysian side of art - the intoxication, which is a mixture of the terror that seizes man as he is "dumfounded by the cognitive form of phenomena" plus the ecstasy that wells from the *principium individuationis*.<sup>10</sup>

Although he ascribed the Apollinian and the Dionysian mainly to the Attic tragedy, Nietzsche claims that they are

artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist - (...) first in the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being; and then as intoxicated reality, which likewise does not heed the single unity, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness.<sup>11</sup>

In Nietzschean terms, from the dialectical shock between the Apollinian illusion and the Dionysian intoxication, truth is generated and the individual is reborn, at once nauseated with the intromission of everyday reality. This nausea is the effect of knowledge, for knowledge inhibits action, as the individual understands that his actions cannot alter the eternal order of the universe. The Nietzschean concept of tragic presupposes the annihilation of the ego so that the individual can return to nature and the primordial Oneness. In a similar way, to the Narrator is left only the role of spectator of the *theatrum mundi* and it is through his eyes that the reader learns about the Ushers and their destruction.

The monistic aspect of Vedanta "seeks to trace phenomena of many different kinds to a single source or principle," similarly to what Gnostics preach and Poe defends in his theoretical works.<sup>12</sup> Gnosticism, as well as Poe's metaphysics, state that the "single source or principle," or Godhead, suffered a split and the resulting parts are subject to centripetal and centrifugal forces until entropy prevails, the opposites are paradoxically

reunited, annihilation is achieved and a new beginning is then possible. Likewise, Nietzsche sees the Apollinian and Dionysian in a dialectical relation, at moments seemingly balanced, but always fighting to overwhelm each other. The synthesis of this dynamic opposition is art, which is not meant to better or educate man, who, in turn, is not the true author of this art world. "On the contrary," warns Nietzsche,

we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art - for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*...<sup>13</sup>

It may be difficult to assert Poe's influence on Nietzsche, if there ever was any, but it can be suggested easily that Poe was a Nietzschean *avant la lettre*, for the concept of the world being justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon not only recurs in his works but seems to be a guiding motto.

This concept forecasts the eclosion of existentialism a hundred years later, with its pessimism towards existence and *la nausée* as a result of awareness. In fact, part of what Sartre and Camus developed as a philosophical and literary current could be found as early as Poe and Nietzsche. Poe differs from the existentialists in that, like the Gnostics, he believes that essence precedes existence, that Logos precedes creation. But the disgusting sensation that the "dropping off of the veil" generated in the Narrator is altogether the same that befalls the existentialist when faced with his condition in the world. On the other hand, if for existentialism there is no salvation, only commitment and *bonne fois*, for Poe there is a way out - through cognition and the awakening of the Self.

By housing a Dionysian content in an Apollinian form, Poe deflagrates a dialectical confrontation whose synthesis is the text

itself. If Nietzsche is right, then, with the synthesis comes truth, that is to say, the text equals truth. Indeed, Poe claims as much when he says that " Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale."<sup>14</sup>

A similar confrontation of opposing drives can be seen in the clash of the Gnostic forces of attraction and repulsion that cancel each other out into unity, if only to reappear as the newly formed unity which is split once again. In Gnosticism, this unity means knowledge, which is not immutable and eternal, but which ought to be always contested so that higher levels of truth be gained. It is this perpetual movement from *stasis* to *dynamis* which propels the Narrator in his search for knowledge and individuation.

#### 4.2. From textual to discourse level

As could be expected from a hermetic tale like "The Fall of the House of Usher," knowledge and truth are not presented readily. On the contrary, it has to be decoded, deciphered, found out within the undercurrents of meanings of the discourse. This was experienced by the Narrator as he gazed at the House and pondered about what it was that so unnerved him. He

was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among consideration beyond our depth. It was possible, he reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression ... (231).

This nearly mathematical notion of arrangement and combinations is

Poe's theory of formal construction explicit on textual level.

In The Philosophy of Composition, he explains that

Keeping originality *always* in view - for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable source of interest - I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects; or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone - whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone - afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combination of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.<sup>15</sup>

This principle, which is one of the basic notions of Formalism, was repeated by several Russian Formalists. Boris Eichenbaum, as he examined the literary discourse, theorised that "art's uniqueness consists not in the 'parts' which enter into it but in their original use."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Victor Shklovsky pointed out that "poets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them."<sup>17</sup> This is Horatio's *dispositio* - the two-thousand year-old notion that the arrangement of images in speech should be emphasised. Such arrangement, according to Shklovsky, does not aim to facilitate recognition, but rather,

to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.<sup>18</sup>

Poe is a master of making things familiar unfamiliar, or to use a better phrase, of creating the uncanny so as "to increase the difficulty and length of perception."

This works on a double level: like the Narrator who has to employ his intellectual faculties strenuously to understand the effect of the simple and common elements upon him, so does the reader, who finds himself lost in a maze of false signs and indexes that hinder his sorting out one possible meaning. Such difficulty seems intentional in "The Fall of the House of Usher," for, as a Gnostic text, it ought to be hermetic, that is, it should be understood only by the initiates. Its cryptic form, realised in terms of vocabulary, symbols and allusions, and their arrangement, is supposed to be a barrier against the profane, uninitiated man.

To increase such cryptographic effect, Poe places one character feeling one emotion in front of a mirror. This single character is the Narrator, who looks at the tarn and finds his first impression - "the hideous dropping off of the veil" - enhanced. The "consciousness of the rapid increase" of his sorrowful feelings "served mainly to accelerate the increase itself," such being the "paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis" (232). As the Narrator stares at the mirror, and is unable to perceive that what he can see is his own reflection, his fear expands and overwhelms him.

These three elements, one character, one emotion and a mirror, are the narrative elements Poe used to achieve his final goal: the effect of unity. His use of the mirror creates the illusion of a text filled with characters, and many are the critics who have been fooled by Poe's terrifying fun-house.

#### 4.3. *Mise en abyme*

When the Narrator comments on the reflection of the mansion he is introducing the effect of mirroring, which will attain a climax in Roderick's reading of "The Haunted Palace." André Gide named such effect *mise en abyme*. "J'aime assez qu'en une œuvre d'art,"



wrote Gide in 1893,

on retrouve ainsi transposé, à l'échelle des personnages, le sujet même de cette oeuvre. Rien ne l'éclaire mieux et n'établi plus sûrement toutes les proportions de l'ensemble. Ainsi, dans tels tableaux de Memling ou de Quentin Metzys, un petit miroir convexe et sombre reflète, à son tour, l'intérieur de la pièce où se joue la scène peinte. Ainsi, dans le tableaux des *Ménines* de Velasquez (mais un peu différemment). Enfin, en littérature, dans *Hamlet*, la scène de la comédie; et ailleurs dans bien d'autres pièces. Dans *Wilhelm Meister*, les scènes de marionnettes ou de fête au château. Dans *la Chute de la maison Usher*, la lecture que l'on fait à Roderick, etc. Aucun de ces exemples n'est absolument juste. Ce qui le serait beaucoup plus, ce que dirait mieux ce que j'ai voulu dans mes *Cahiers*, dans mon *Narcisse* et dans *la Tentative*, c'est la comparaison avec ce procédé du blason qui consiste, dans le premier, à en mettre un second "en abyme".<sup>19</sup>

Lucien Dällenbach tried to define the concept of *mise en abyme* and concluded that, as means of a return of the work towards itself, it appears as a modality of *reflexion*; that its essential property is to put forth the intelligibility and the formal structure of the work; that it is the appanage neither of the literary narrative (*récit littéraire*) nor of literature alone and that its name comes from a heraldic procedure, which Gide found out in 1891.<sup>20</sup> *Abyme*, then, is a technical term that refers to the heart of a shield: "C'est le cœur de l'écu. On dit qu'une figure est en abyme quand elle est avec d'autres figures au milieu de l'écu, mais sans toucher aucune de ses figures."<sup>21</sup> What attracted Gide's attention was the image of a shield housing, in its centre, a miniaturised replica of itself, suggests Dällenbach, who then states that "est mise en abyme toute enclave entretenant

une relation de similitude avec l'œuvre qui la contient."<sup>22</sup>

In literature, the most famous and most revered example of *mise en abyme* is that of the "play within a play" in Shakespeare's Hamlet, where the prince of Denmark repeats, on stage, the murdering of his father so as to show the assassin that he knew all about it. Hamlet uses theatre, whose function he defines as "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature," to reveal events both past and future, thus establishing the use of *mise en abyme* not only as a means of recollection, but also of prediction.<sup>23</sup> Rather incomprehensibly, Gide disregards Hamlet, together with "The Fall of the House of Usher", as not quite exemplifying what he meant by an episode *en abyme*. Dällenbach is intrigued by this fact because the reading of *Mad Trist* produces an undeniable effect of reduplication in the tale:

C'est une double fonction qu'y exerce le roman gothique: fonction emblématique dans la mesure où, associé de force au protagoniste, il blasonne, par son titre, ce personnage au tempérament lugubre et morbidement exalté; fonction préfiguratrice puisqu'en une manière de contrepoint il relate, à mots couverts, l'histoire même de l'hallucinante Madeline [sic] .<sup>24</sup>

Dällenbach believes to have found the answer to his puzzlement in one of Gide's letters, where he comments on his la Tentative amoureuse: what Gide had tried to write on was "l'influence du livre sur celui qui l'écrit, et pendant cette écriture même. (...) Le sujet agissant, c'est soi; la chose rétroagissante, c'est un sujet qu'on imagine. C'est donc une méthode d'action sur soi-même, indirecte (...)"<sup>25</sup> Gide states that Poe tried to know himself by writing "The Fall of the House of Usher." This may apply and may be backed by the Gnostic elements present throughout the tale, which, in a final analysis, can be proved to be a work of cognition. Poe's intentions, however, were known only to him and an attempt to find what they were is to fall in an

intentional fallacy, a fatal trap that shall be avoided here.

Gide tried, in his la Tentative amoureuse, to evidence the mutual construction of the writer and of the text, that is,

un couplage ou un jumelage d'activités portant sur un  
 object similaire ou, si l'on préfère, comme un rapport  
 des rapports, la relation du narrateur N à son récit R  
 étant homologique de celle du personnage narrateur n à  
 son récit r.<sup>26</sup>

To Gide, then, the subject of the work is relational, determined by the relationship between the text and the one who writes it, that is, it is duplicated from the very beginning of the composition process. From what Dällenbach suggests, here lies the reason for his dismissing "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a perfect example of *mise en abyme*. Gide claims that Poe's tale is the narration of a story, not the reciprocal construction of a story and of a narrator. The tale establishes a doubling which, according to Gide produces only two terms of the four he requires for a *mise en abyme*. In other words, "The Fall of the House of Usher" presents only *n* and *r*, and not *N, R, n, and r* in a relation of reciprocity. Consequently, the tale falls short of satisfying Gide, "un écrivain qui avait choisi, pour sujet problématique, la problématique du sujet."<sup>27</sup>

There are some wrong points with Dällenbach's reasoning: first, the episode of the "Mad Trist" is not the main *mise en abyme* in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Although it may have suggested the label of the narrative procedure to Gide, due to the presence of a shield in the tale within the tale, it is just an index that points to the heart of the question -"The Haunted Palace," the poem Roderick composed and the Narrator repeats. If the next is a shield that houses a smaller replica of itself in its center, then it is Roderick's poem, which Gide overlooked, that is the main *mise en abyme*. The story of the "Mad Trist," as will be seen

further on, is more what Jean Bellemin-Noël calls *effet de citation*: it places *en abyme* another fantastic text as a warrant of the veracity of the tale. It is a kind of fantastic intertextuality which is supposed to make credible the larger text, which, due to a number of references, is granted the status of referent.<sup>28</sup>

Supposing that Gide had not overlooked the poem, then the second wrong point in Dällenbach's reasoning would be the reasoning itself. Initially, it is necessary to compare "The Haunted Palace" to Dällenbach's thesis and see if it deserves the label of *mise en abyme*. His first definition of it requires an "enclave" that holds a relation of similitude with the work which contains it.<sup>29</sup> "The Haunted Palace" repeats not only the plot of "The Fall of the House of Usher" but also the anthropomorphic description of the mansion. Dällenbach's proposition is that  $N:R::n:r$ , which is also fulfilled by "The Haunted Palace." Here, the Narrator (N) bears a relation with "The Fall of the House of Usher" (R) homologue to that borne between Roderick (n) and "The Haunted Palace" (r). It is fair to believe that this is enough to prove that Dällenbach's requirements are met, and, therefore Roderick's poem is the very heart of the tale.

A conclusion may be reached that both Gide and Dällenbach failed to see the principal *mise en abyme* in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Gide's slip cannot be easily accounted for, for he is the one who introduced the term in literature. On the other hand, Dällenbach's can be explained by the fact that he was trying to justify Gide, not to verify if he was correct in disregarding the embedded poem.

In fact, Roderick's writing activity mirrors that of the Narrator, which mirrors that of Poe. Such *mise en miroir* of the writing activity is what Bellemin-Noël calls *l'effet d'écriture*, which is a personal mode, existential and stylistically marked, of the writer enjoying his own image of *auctor*.<sup>30</sup> This is strikingly

similar to what can be inferred from Gide's comments on the process of mirroring. These comments made Dällenbach write that "la sp  cularisation scripturale se soutient de la sp  cularisation imaginaire qui permet au sujet de l'  criture de jouir obsessionnellement de l'image le figurant tel qu'il veut se voir:   crivain."<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.4. Back to discourse level

Whether Poe was or was not enamoured of his image as a writer is out of the scope of this paper, but it can be asserted that he spread mirrors everywhere in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The most important of them, the lake in front of the House, introduces the idea of abyss in the very beginning, with its "precipitous brink" (231). But, together with the function of placing everything *en abyme*, the mirrors cast infinite reflections within and without the House of Usher.

This will pervade the whole story with such an intensity that the story becomes but a reflection of the Narrator. From a spectator he transforms himself in the author of the *theatrum mundi*. In fact, the story comes into existence at the moment when the Narrator turns his eyes upon the lake/mirror, and finishes when he turns them away.

The effect of unity is explicited by "the House of Usher - an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (232). Externally, the building seemed to have suffered little, in spite of its "excessive antiquity," and yet "there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones" (233). This foreshadowing of a <sup>racional, delidat</sup> split between external appearance and structural condition is more clearly announced by the reference to the "barely perceptible fissure, which extending from the roof of

the building (...) made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (233).

The House isolates its dwellers and the Narrator from the outside, providing one of the most important points Poe demands of a good work of art, in his Philosophy of Composition - circumscription of space. He claims that it

is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident:- it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with the mere unity of place.<sup>32</sup>

The family mansion is so appropriated to Poe's own requirements that it is felt to be a tomb, where the Ushers are buried alive. It is the corresponding image, in macabre terms, of the notion of "narrowness of consciousness," which the Self must break through so as to become one with the universe and attain the primordial unity.

The twins Roderick and Madeline were once a single being, but as they were born they separated, repeating the Gnostic version of Creation. Now, after the Fall, the two parts will attract and repulse each other until their eventual destruction. Roderick is hyperesthetic while Madeline, his symmetrical half, is cataleptic, which makes each complement the other. It is worth mentioning that their link with the House is so strong that it even bears their characteristics. It has a half which is sentient, like Roderick, and another half which is non-sentient, like Madeline; it repeats their split in its structure and will follow them in their annihilation.

The unnatural attraction that exists between the two brothers may be considered incestuous and therefore taboo, which fulfills one of Punter's parameters of Gothic fiction. But on the other hand it is the Gnostic concept of attraction of the opposites,

which is the natural way of things in the cosmos, after the Fall. For Poe, it is the endless power of centripetal forces that pull every atom towards centers of aggregation.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.5. The second reflection

Roderick's personality, like the House is also split, which he metaphorically shows through the poem "The Haunted Palace." As the House reflects the Narrator, so does the Haunted Palace to Roderick; it is his mirror and the whole situation mirrors that of the Narrator and the House. The Palace and King Thought explain what is happening to Roderick: in a once merry kingdom there was a civil war and the king was overthrown. Where spirits moved musically "To a lute's well-tuned law," vast forms now move fantastically "To a discordant melody;" where Thought reigned, now sorrow rules.

Here the mirroring effect, or *mise en abyme*, reaches its climax. The first character is Roderick, the first mirror is his poem, and his emotion is fear. The second character is the Narrator, his mirror is the House, and fear his emotion. It has been commented already that the story is a reflection of the Narrator and that it exists only when he tells it - he is the creator and the creature. In much the same way, the text only comes into "existence" as the reader opens the book and starts reading. By analogy, the text becomes a mirror for him, who thus equals the Narrator. And then again, there is only one character - the reader; everything else is a mirrored mirror, or yet, "a dream within a dream."

#### 4.6. The third reflection: meta-narration

*Abissus abissum vocat*, an abyss calls for another abyss, teaches the Bible, and so it is in "House of Usher" (Ps. 42:8).

To the adventures of the "Mad Trist," which acts as an indicator of the central *mise en abyme*, it must be added the chain mirroring of Roderick and his poem, of the Narrator and his text, of Roderick and the Narrator and of the Narrator and the Reader, which makes "The Fall of the House of Usher" a paragon of repetition of reflections. Such reflections are but an enunciate ("The Haunted Palace") that refers to the bigger enunciate ("The Fall of the House of Usher"), to the enunciation (the Narrator's story) and to the code of the narrative, at the same time, which is made possible by the support the enunciate provides the reflexivity.<sup>34</sup> This support operates on two levels, that of the narrative, which means that "The Haunted Palace" as an enunciate will keep its signification like any other enunciate, and that of the reflection, in which "The Haunted Palace" intervenes as an element of meta-signification that allows the narrative to take itself as theme.

But, as Dällenbach points out, "un énoncé ne devient réflexif que par la revelation de dédoublement qu'il avoue avec l'un ou l'autre aspect du récit."<sup>35</sup> For this relation to emerge, it is necessary, on the one hand, that the totality of the text be gradually apprehended and, on the other hand, that the reader as decodifier be able to move from one field of meanings to the other. In "House of Usher," the reader will find his task alleviated by the Narrator constantly bringing forth the analogies - "... which I can compare to ...," "... eye-like windows...," "... as if in a dream...," "... as if of..." etc, which, discrete at first, turn to more explicit ones in the retelling of the adventures of Ethelred:

for it appeared to me (...) - it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (...) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had



so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention (...). (243)

And also,

I did actually hear (...) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound - the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer. (244)

Then, Roderick undertakes the task and renders a word-by-word explanation of the sounds they had heard and the story told:

And now - to-night - Ethelred - ha!ha! - the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield - say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! (245)

Both "The Haunted Palace" and "Mad Trist" can be considered meta-narratives, that is, they are textual segments supported by an internal narrator to whom the Narrator temporarily gives place, dislocating, thus, his responsibility of conducting the narrative. More than that, they are reflexive meta-narratives, in that they reflect the narrative, cut it, interrupt the diegesis and introduce a factor of diversification in the discourse.<sup>36</sup> The diversification is introduced by the fact that both internal texts are written pieces and impersonalise, for a period of time, the narrative which had been told from an "I" point of view, that of the Narrator.

A point can be made that the repetition of the effect of *mise en abyme* would result in the pulverisation of the unity of the narrative. But this is not so. The single *mise en abyme* splits and denies a unified narrative; contrarywise, the multiple reflections, in a narrative doomed to shattering, as the fantastic

one is, represent a factor of unification as the "morceaux métaphoriquement aimentés se rassemblent et compensent au niveau thématique la dispersion métonimique."<sup>37</sup> "The Fall of the House of Usher," then, by its multiplicity of reflections acquires an effect of unity that confirms and fulfills Poe's requirement of singleness in a tale. Here, the *mise en abyme* provides the narrative with a *leitmotiv*, that of the mirror. In Poe's mirrors, the Author, the characters and the Reader are reflected and repeated, thus producing an abysmal text that seems to be viewed from the wrong side of a telescope.

##### 5. The uncanny, barbarism and paranoia

This telescoping effect generates the feeling of loss of beginning and end, as when two mirrors face each other. The story then loses its origin and its limits; it comes out of the text and engulfs the reader. Such effect is put to work to produce another, of which Poe is a consummated genius, that of de-familiarisation. As the Narrator proceeds to meet Roderick an uncanny sensation comes over him:

While the objects around me (...) were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy - while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this - I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. (233).

The uncanny, or the unfamiliar familiar, is attained as the veil of everydayness, which has been dulling perception, is dropped and reality is seen under a different light. Thus, the tarn becomes a mirror, the mansion a face and later a tomb, the relationship between brother and sister evolves into attraction and repulsion.

{ The first occasion the Narrator sees Madeline, her brother is talking about her infirmity and his incapacity to survive her

death, so dearly he loves her. Some time later, she suffers what seems to be a cataleptic attack and Roderick decides to bury her in the House, to prevent her tomb from being violated. But, if he knew about the nature of her illness, he should have kept her for a few days to make sure she was really dead. Instead, Roderick entombs Madeline in the vault and bolts both the coffin and the heavy door of her crypt. Such acts give away his extreme perversity, as exemplified by this intentional fratricide: "It may be asserted, without hesitation," says Poe, "that no event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death."<sup>38</sup>

Madeline's premature burial increases the effect of circumscription, for not even when she is supposedly dead is she allowed to leave the House. The metaphor of the House as a tomb is realised, and the vault becomes a tomb within a tomb. This works as a mirroring and adds to the oppressive feeling that not only the House but the text is a coffin where both the Narrator and the reader have been allured to and trapped by Roderick and, like Madeline, are now buried alive.]

Roderick's action will beget fatal consequences for his sister and himself. By trying to kill Madeline he hastens and confirms the split, and thus decrees their doom. In terms of the theory of the Gothic, this is a barbaric act, that is, in Punter's words, an action that verges on the boundaries of the civilised and demonstrates "to us the relative nature of ethical and behavioral codes."<sup>39</sup> In Gnostic terms, his act symbolises the opposite and complementary aspect of attraction, repulsion, or the centrifugal force that scatters all the atoms resulting from the primordial split.

The effect of *mise en abyme* is given another turn by the story of "Mad Trist" told by the Narrator during an ominous storm that presages the supernatural end of the Ushers. The hero and the dragon he fights are symbols that reappear in folklore and in

esoteric texts indicating a battle against something terrible to overcome. In alchemic texts, the dragon stands for *putrefactio*, which would correspond to psychic disintegration. One could hardly find a better phrase to define Roderick's state of mind during the tempest.

The story of Ethelred and the dragon foreshadows the final encounter between Roderick and Madeline, on the one hand, since another meaning attributed to the dragon is that of resolution of contraries.<sup>40</sup> It foretells the clash between the twins with the ensuing solution. On the other hand it serves to amplify the basic emotion that impregnates the tale. The Narrator first mentioned the paradoxical law of fear, which says that awareness of fear increases it; later, Roderick admits he "must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR" (235). Further on, the Narrator points out "an evidently unrestrained *hysteria*" in Roderick's demeanor, and finally, Roderick calls the Narrator a "Madman."

When the Narrator hears Roderick's cries and looks at the door, he sees "the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher." This has been often taken to mean that she, like the House, is a vampire, but, a vampire would not <sup>prefer</sup> deed to struggle to escape a coffin and a tomb, nor would he (or she) have his (or her) own blood (of all things!) on his (her) clothes. Madeline's apparition is a hysterical hallucination of Roderick that influences the Narrator, who also "sees" her. According to John S. Hill,

This is Poe's grand achievement in "The Fall of the House of Usher": he not only creates one man Roderick, going mad, but he creates two; he not only creates one man who conjures a hallucination, but he has the narrator cross over into Roderick's world so that he too sees it.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed this is a grand achievement of Poe, but his grandest achievement eluded Hill. As it has been pointed out, Roderick is

merely a double of the Narrator, his mirror image, and the Narrator is himself a double for the reader, another mirror image. Poe's feat is that one fails to realise that the Narrator is also mad by making one identify with him. But as the reader identifies with him, the reader becomes also mad. More than two characters infected with mental derangement, Poe creates a triple hallucination by ensnaring the reader in his mirror trap.

Roderick's paranoia established a paragon of Gothic fiction centered on persecution. The more effectively so, as his fears is provoked by an internal cause, without any roots in reality:

He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth - in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated - an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit - an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence. (235)

The Narrator hints that this explanation offered by Roderick to elucidate his behavior is supernatural, but he adds that there was another source of the terror which held the last master of Usher a bound slave:

He admitted, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin - to the severe and long-continued illness - indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution - of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth. (235-6)

Poe's awareness of the effect of the physical upon the mental has already been mentioned, and to it must be added the effect of the emotional upon the rational. That Roderick and Madeline are hostages rather than hosts of a stifling mansion and that this produces his sentiment of persecution is a much written about subject; that he is enslaved by his ambivalent feelings towards her is not. It must be borne in mind that emotions can transform themselves into chains which the Self must get rid of in order to emerge free and total. This the Narrator learns by witnessing Roderick's plight. His abnormal feeling of persecution is enhanced by a self-induced claustrophobia: he confines himself into a mansion with someone he desires and simultaneously and paradoxically, wants to suppress. This extremely unnerving situation eventually overcomes him, bringing about his destruction.

If this is the Gothic denouement, the same cannot be said of the Gnostic solution. Here, the annihilation of the physical is the inevitable outcome of any situation comprising attraction and repulsion. There is no irreversible end, but a new unity, a new cosmos. The wheel of creation never stops; it is a ceaseless transformation of matter into spirit, and vice versa. "Matter," claims Poe, "created for an end, would unquestionably, on fulfilment of that end, be Matter no longer. Let us endeavor to understand that it would disappear, and that God would remain in all ..."<sup>42</sup>

## 6. Esoteric symbology

After the fall of the House of Usher into the tarn, the Narrator is left alone contemplating a red moon shining over the place where the House once stood. Were this tale a traditional horror story and the sun would finish the series of events, bringing with it a new day and the reaffirmation that the

customary order of things remained unaltered. However, Poe's are not horror tales only, but mythic and esoteric parables as well, bursting with undercurrents of meaning. It is in the Gnostic tradition and collective symbology that an explanation for the closing image of the Narrator, the red moon and the lake/mirror can be found.

The moon has always stood for the occult side of nature; it is related to the unconscious, to imagination, to psychism, to dreams, to everything that is unstable, transitory and capable of being influenced. It is a symbol of "connaissance indirecte, discursive, progressive, froide," which makes it a perfect image of Gnose.<sup>43</sup> Poe uses the moon, not the sun, precisely to symbolise another kind of knowledge, the Dionysiac, related to the occult side of reality. Nevertheless, the moon has no proper light; it merely reflects that of the sun. And the moon that gleamed behind the House of Usher was blood-red, a very unusual phenomenon, since the atmosphere had been washed by the storm, and this should have made it cast a silvery white reflex. Poe taints his satellite red for a very good reason: in alchemy, according to Cirlot, the combination of white and red means the conjunction of opposites (*coniunctio solis et lunae*), that is, of Roderick and Madeline, of attraction and repulsion.<sup>44</sup>

It is possible to stretch the parallel between alchemic processes and "The Fall of the House of Usher" a step further, with the analysis of the Great Work. The Great Work of the alchemist follows three stages.<sup>45</sup> First, he works with the prime matter, which is a period of putrefaction, occultation and penitence. The colour here is black, and it would not be far-fetched to associate it to the black colour of the tarn and the dark interior of the House of Usher, feebly illuminated by "gleams of encrimsoned light." The second stage is that of mercury, when illumination is followed by ascension and pardon. Again, its representative

colour, white, could be related to an element of Poe's text - Madeline's white robes tainted with blood, in her last appearance. And blood is the colour of the moon and of the concluding step in the Great Work, which is suffering, the final sublimation that cleanses the soul and fills it with love.

Chevalier and Gheerbrant record that, traditionally, red is the colour of the Holy Ghost, of love and charity.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it symbolises Gnose as the divine grace which brings the soul a message of hope once it is immerse in darkness.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in one level, Poe's text is a Gnostic parable, not a horror tale; it is a fable which proposes an alternative knowledge, other than the Apollinian, experimental worldview. By doing so, he refuses an ideology that has been dominating the "official" culture and submits another system of knowledge. Instead of objectivism, subjectivism; instead of the direct light of the sun, the reflected gleam of the moon.

This reflective nature of the moon leads back to the final and, as befits a circular specular narration, the initial symbol of the text - the mirror. The "black and lurid tarn" which "lay in unruffled lustre" serves as a reflective surface in which the House is repeated upside down and in which it finally submerges. Such ambivalent characteristic equals it even more to a mirror, which, as Cirlot states, "is a surface which reproduces images and in a way contains and absorbs them."<sup>48</sup> The lake/mirror is the entrance to the text and, in the end, the only exit possible. It is a mythic door through which the Narrator, like Narcissus, embarks on his quest of the Self.

The symbolism of the mirror is complex and not easily exhausted. Its lunar characteristic is evidenced by the fact that it receives images as the moon receives the light of the sun. And, like the moon, it stands for consciousness with its double nature: wisdom and cognition on one side, and speculation on the other side. Speculation derives from the Latin *speculum*, mirror, and it



means indirect knowledge. So, the mirror is again an instrument of self-contemplation, cognition of the soul and of the universe. To quote Cirlot once more, "the cosmos appears as a huge Narcissus regarding his own reflections in the human consciousness."<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, a mirror is thought to be a conjuror of apparitions. Thus, the House of Usher and its inhabitants would be no more than phantasms conjured by the Narrator's gaze upon the mirror, or in other words, by the Narrator's scrying. The mirror would then produce magic symbols of unconscious memories, that is, the whole story would be a codified representation of the Gnostic genesis of the universe, engraved in man's memory since immemorial times and resurrected by a reflection. This means that man need not search the universe for answers - they lie within him. He only need have a clear soul to understand reality, for it is like a riddle reflected in a mirror, *Per spæculum in ænigmate* (1 Cor 13:12).

7. "Know thyself"

"A maior de todas as doutrinas," states Clement of Alexandria in Pedagogue (III,1), "consiste, na minha opinião, em conhecer-se a si mesmo. De fato, quando o homem se conhecer a si mesmo, conhecerá também a Deus."<sup>50</sup> Monoimus, in a letter to Teophrates, makes it clear that by God it is generally meant the Self:

Procura-o dentro de ti mesmo (apo heatou) e aprende quem é Aquele que se apropria de tudo que há em ti e diz: Meu Deus, meu Deus, meu entendimento, minha alma, meu corpo, e aprende de onde provém o afligir-se e o alegrar-se, o amar e o odiar, e estar acordado sem querer e o estar com sono involuntariamente e o aborrecer-se sem querer e, quando tiveres investigado isto cuidadosamente, dizem os gnósticos, encontra-lo-ás dentro de ti mesmo como Uno e como múltiplo, à semelhança daquele ponto (keraian), e

descobrirás dentro de ti mesmo (aph' heatou) a passagem e a saída.<sup>51</sup>

Jung has no doubt that in the universe of Christian concepts Christ represents the Self, in which he agrees with writers of the II century, who saw the Son as a *principium individuationis*.<sup>52</sup> The sacrifice of Christ the Man symbolises the imolation of the ego for the benefit of the Self: it now becomes man, it becomes what we are.<sup>53</sup> This process of individuation is antinomical, for, while it is the concentration of various unities, of something scattered, it is also the gradual upsurge and clarification of something which has always existed. The concentration of scattered parts is nothing more than the process of becoming aware, and as such, a conscious and voluntary operation of the ego, while the upsurge is the spontaneous rising of the Self which already existed. Thus, according to Jung, individuation "aparece como a síntese de uma nova unidade que se compõe de partes anteriormente dispersas, e também como a manifestação de algo que preexistia o eu e é inclusive seu pai ou criador, e sua totalidade."<sup>54</sup>

Individuation is what the Narrator is achieving as he visits the House of Usher: he is collecting unfamiliar memories of a long lost totality. As he gathers his pulverised atoms, a new unity is born - a synthesis is attained. However, his unity must not be mistaken for undifferentiation, which is represented by the Ushers, family and House. The building and the family compose an unconscious entity, whose elements are undifferentiated. One has only to remember that the three were so thoroughly merged that House of Usher meant "for the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (232). In fact, as the opposites merge there is no contrast and without contrast there is no subject nor object. Roderick and Madeline cancel themselves out and become one with the House, which is a structure of stones and wood, devoid of any consciousness. Thus, the Ushers oppose

themselves to the Narrator as the unconscious to the conscious and the subject to the object.

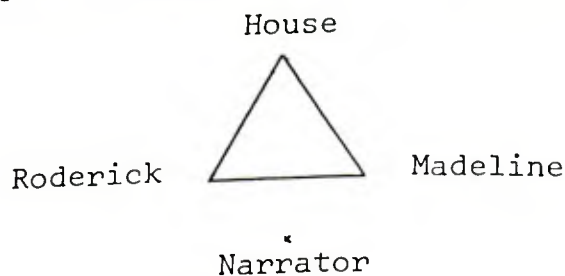
## 8. Gnostic structure

At a first glance, the triangle House-Roderick-Madeline seems to be a totality, the simplest of geometric figures, which is made up by the least number of sides and angles. But, as Jung warns in Aion,

A tríade pode ser considerada como uma totalidade relativa, porque, via de regra, ela representa uma totalidade imaterial (ou imaginada), como a Trindade, ou instintiva (ou ctônica), como a natureza triádica dos deuses infernais (a chamada 'tríade inferior').

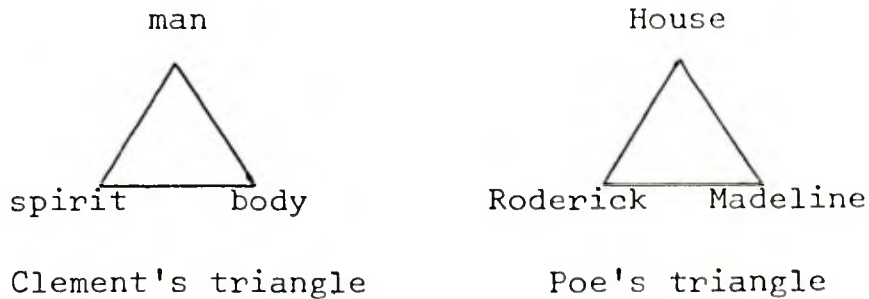
Psicologicamente, porém, a tríade deve ser entendida como uma quaternidade defeituosa ou como um estado de transição para a quaternidade, caso se relacione com o si-mesmo, de acordo com o contexto.<sup>55</sup>

Initially, the Narrator will appear as an oppositor to the defective quaternity, the triad; later, he will become the element that completes it and transforms it in a symbol of the Self.



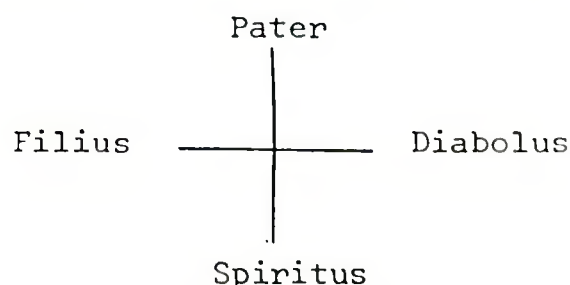
Clement states that man is formed by two triads; one feminine, somatic and emotional, composed of appetite, wrath and melancholy, the other masculine, psychic and rational, composed of reflexion, cognition and fear.<sup>56</sup> Following what has been discussed, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is concerned solely with the masculine triad, the reason probably being that Poe seems to believe that the spirit must free itself from its bodily constraints. Roderick,

thus, the masculine part, is associated with the spirit, whereas Madeline is linked to matter. In fact, he is hyperesthetic, a complete artist, counterpointed by a cataleptic sister, whose voice is never heard, and whose presence is barely felt. If Clement's concept of man is applied to the three Ushers, a triangle with the House at the top, standing for man, Roderick, the spirit, and Madeline, the body, as the bases, will be formed.



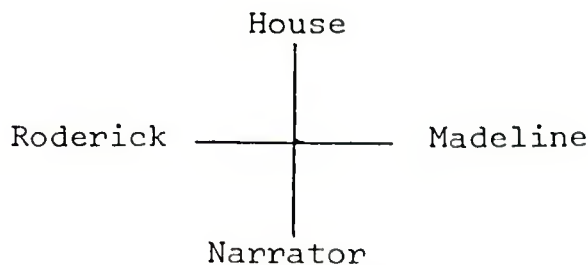
The House being made up by Roderick and Madeline, or conversely, giving birth to both of them, resembles another Gnostic trio, that formed by *Pater*, *Filius* and *Diabolus*. Certain Gnostic formulations claim that the Devil was the first son of God, and Christ the second.<sup>57</sup> By analogy with the first triangle, the House would now be the *Pater*, Roderick the *Filius* and Madeline the *Diabolus*, as she is thought of as an opposition. Indeed the House is a paternal image, at the same time linking the twins with the family and being a source of authority; brother and sister develop a most dubious relationship of support and opposition.

During the Middle Ages, a fourth element was added so as to complete the balance of the trinity, which then became a quaternity. *Spiritus*, the Spirit, was introduced to provide for a *complexio oppositorum*, a reunion of the contraries, in opposition to the Father, who is the *auctor rerum*, the maker of everything.<sup>58</sup>

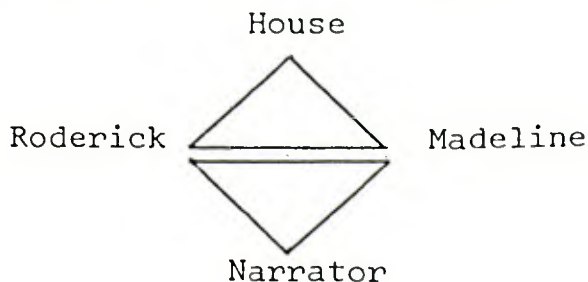


By that time, then, divinity symbology included the *Diabolus*, the Devil, which is something unacceptable for the modern Church. Early Christianity, however, did not take the Devil to be evil itself, but as an oppositor, originated from the same divine source as everything in the universe. Eventually, the Adversary of Christ was ousted and the quaternity became once again a trinity. But for the Gnostics the true symbol of totality is quaternity and as such it is reflected in Poe's tale of the Ushers.

To complete the second pair of oppositions, the Narrator must take the place of the Spirit at the bottom of the cross thus formed.



If the horizontal axis of opposition be considered, a new triangle is formed, facing the one composed of House-Roderick-Madeline; that of the Narrator-Roderick-Madeline.



The perfect complement for the triad is not another element that would make it three *versus* one, but a symmetric triad, which will then make it three *plus* one. Thus, to the triad House-Roderick-Madeline Poe did not merely add the Narrator, rather, he created

a mirroring triad: Narrator-Roderick-Madeline. The duality Roderick-Madeline is complemented with the duality House-Narrator, as in *Filius-Diabolus* and *Pater-Spiritus*.

The binary number, however, was thought by some later Christians to be a creation of the Devil, due to the character of opposition implicit in the double. Gerardus Dorneus, a philosopher and a doctor in the sixteenth century, discusses the counterpointing natures of the Trinity and the quaternity, which he attributes to the Devil. Jung proposes that

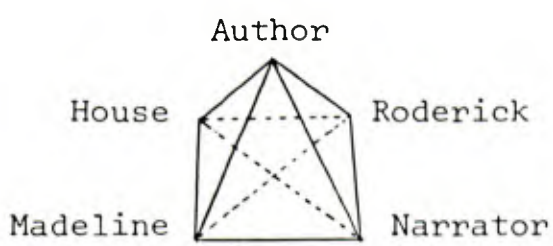
Dorneus rompe com toda a tradição quando, numa atitude rigorosamente cristã, defende o ponto de vista segundo o qual o três é o Uno, e não o quatro, que alcança sua unidade na *Quinta Essentia*. Segundo esse autor, a quaternidade é de fato "*diabolica fraus*" (engano do diabo). Assim, ele acha que o demônio, por ocasião da queda dos anjos, "*in quaternariam et elementariam regionem decidit*" (foi precipitado na região da quaternidade e dos elementos). Ele dá-nos também uma descrição minuciosa da operação simbólica mediante a qual o demônio criou a "serpente dupla" (a dualidade) de quatro chifres (quaternidade). A bem dizer, a dualidade é o próprio demônio, o "*quadricornutus binarius*" (o binário de quatro chifres).<sup>59</sup>

In the first binary, Madeline is the Adversary to Roderick, like the *Diabolus* to the *Filius*; in the second binary, the Narrator opposes the House, like the *Pater* and the *Spiritus*. But the true Adversary of the Pater the Creator is a fallen archon, the Demiurge, not the Spirit. The Narrator, whose visit accelerated the split and destruction of the House, then, could assume the attributes of the imperfect creator.

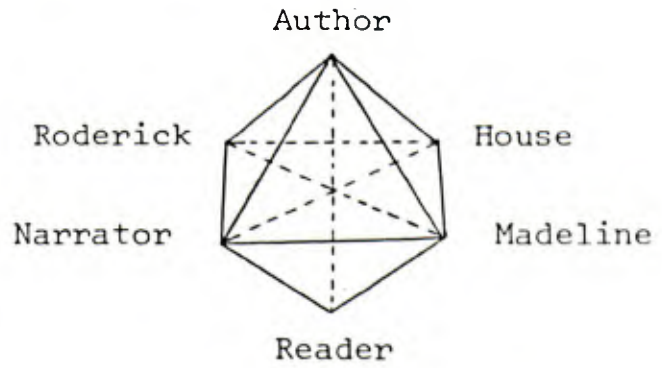
"The Fall of the House of Usher" is told by an unknown voice, which simultaneously generates and articulates the text.

Combining the Gnostic and the narrative points of view, the

Narrator can be thought as the Demiurge, an imperfect god who is ignorant of his origin, the primordial unity, that is, the Godhead - the Author. If the text is created by the Narrator, who is the devilish archon, then according to Dorneus, it is a *diabolica fraus*, whose unity is achieved with the *Quinta Essentia*. The fifth element has been just mentioned: the Author. Thus, if one wants to visualise the structure of the tale, one should think of a pyramid, whose base would be Roderick and Madeline and the Narrator and the House, at opposite angles, and the top would be the Author.



The quadrilateral formed at the base is nothing other than the text itself, which, like the tarn, is a mirror. This proposition leads to another: if the unity of the triad is achieved through a symmetric image of itself, and if the text is a mirror, then it is valid to expect that the pyramid will attain unity in a symmetric reflection of itself. The apex to the new geometric representation would be the Reader, the opposing element in relation to the Author. The role of Adversary, played by the Reader, is enhanced as he fills the gaps left by the Author, as he concretises the skeleton of the text, thus becoming a demiurgeous Author himself.

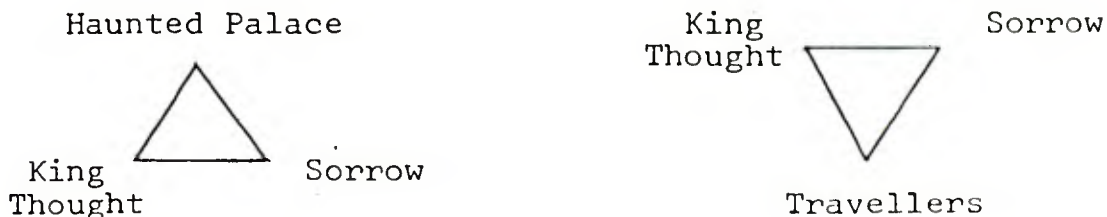


Double pyramids are not an original idea; in fact, they have

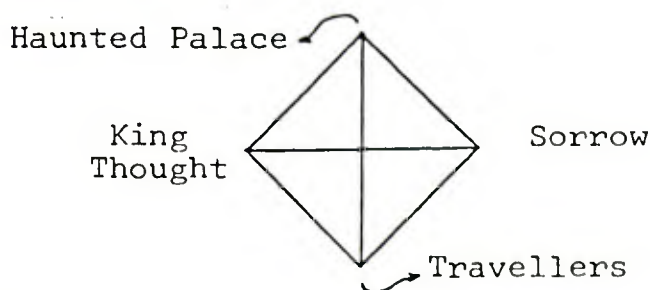




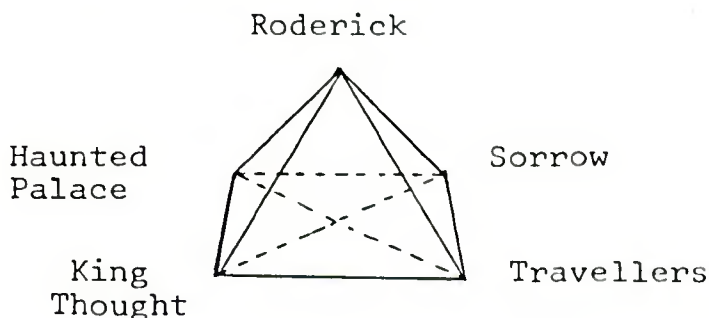
Haunted Palace," these triangles are composed of the Palace, King Thought and Sorrow, and of King Thought, Sorrow and the Travellers.



And, likewise, these triangles do not find equilibrium in the counterposition of a fourth element. Rather, they can be put together and form a balanced quaternity.

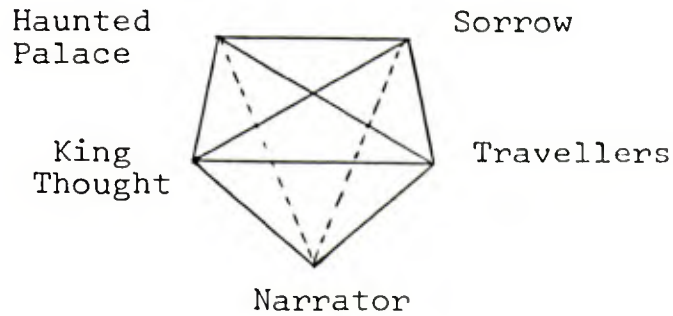


If one wants to extend the parallel further, one needs to find a *Quinta Essentia* for this quaternary. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" it is the Narrator, who functions as the fifth element, and who "creates" the tale, like a Demiurge creating the universe. The corresponding element in the embedded poem is Roderick, who, likewise, performs the creation of a universe: "The Haunted Palace." Roderick, then, fulfills two roles on different planes: he is both Madeline's opposer in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and the Author in "The Haunted Palace."



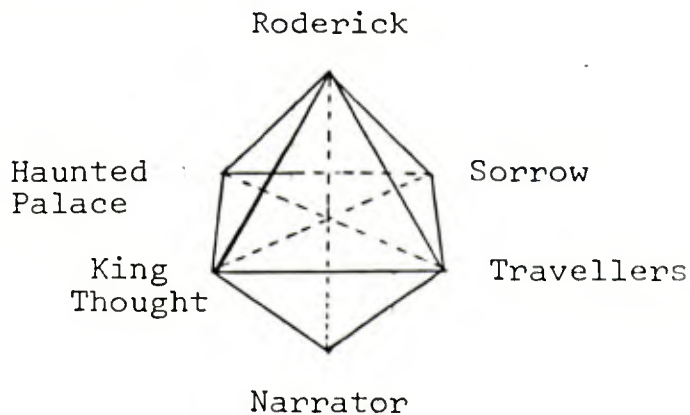
As the two triads above found unity in their symmetrical relation, that is, as they mirrored each other and produced a quaternity, the same applies to this pyramid. In fact, another, and symmetrical, pyramid will complete this one, repeating what

happened in "The Fall of the House of Usher." So, as Roderick occupies the function of the Author, the Narrator will take the place of the Reader, providing another *Quinta Essentia*, similar and inverted:

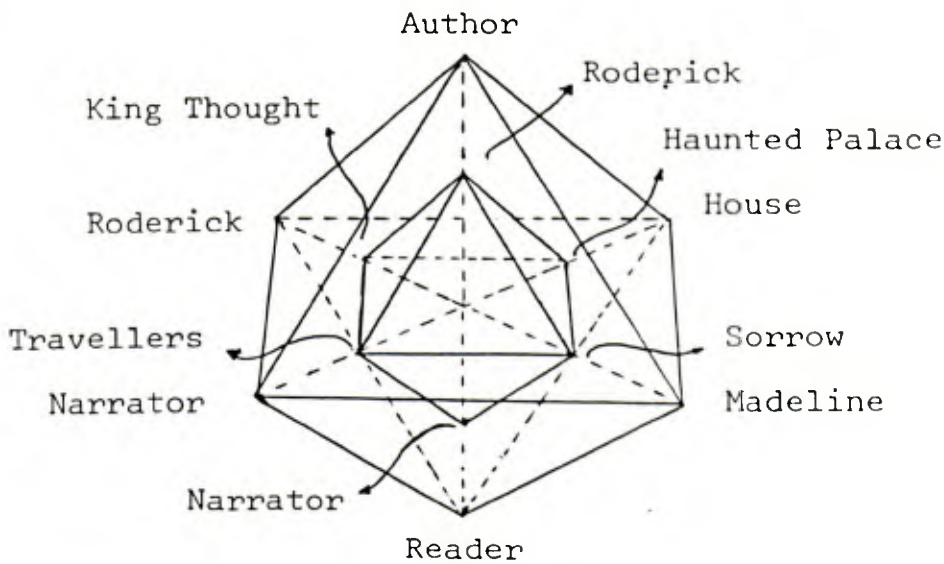


In much the same way, as Roderick in the inner representation took the place of the Author, the Narrator now assumes the role of the Reader. In other words, he changes from the Author of the *theatrum mundi*, to its audience, as explained above.

The placing together of these two geometric figures will determine a double pyramid, in a structural pattern identical to that of the larger text:



If the second double pyramid is the structural representation of the internal poem, which is an embedded composition, then it should fit inside the larger, first double pyramid. Indeed it does, and perfectly, as can be seen below:



As this was meant to be a further demonstration of an already explained effect, that of mirroring, the relations were not developed extensively. To extend the relations would be a superfluous repetition, for they can be checked some pages above. The point here is to show that there are two double pyramids, one repeating the other, one inside the other, at whose coincidental orthocentres lies the *lapis philosophorum* of the alchemists, the *imago Dei* of the Christians, the *ēso ānthrōpos* of the Gnostics, the way to the Self. If Poe ever proposes anything, it is not a new philosophy, it is not a new creed, it is not a new political system; it is, yes, an ancient Greek precept that is free from time and space boundaries: "Know thyself."

A journey towards the Self is what the Narrator embarked on as he left to meet the Ushers. It has been shown that his trip was a parable of the search for one's inner light, from the point of view of alchemy, Gnosticism and early Christianity. And a journey is a motif present in Hindu and Chinese religions as well. For the sake of providing more evidence that "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a mythic parable about the quest for illumination, I shall examine another philosophical and religious system - Taoism, which will shed some more light on the Narrator's journey into the self. Marguerite-Marie Thiollier explains that

Ce nom vient de *Tao*, qui signifie 'Voie'. C'est la notion fondamentale préexistante à la divinité organisatrice de la matière (l'Être issu du non-Être), grand principe de l'ordre universel, synthèse du *yin* et du *yang*; les deux catégories opposées, complémentaires, essentielles de la pensée chinoise, qui forment l'alternance constaté par tout dans la nature: le féminin et le masculin, le froid et le chaud, l'ombre et la lumière, le négatif et le positif, le mauvais et le bon.<sup>60</sup>

Her definition coincides with the dualism pointed out in Poe's metaphysics and aesthetics. It confirms that what was found was not the result of a fanciful analysis but a recurrent concept of creation and nature that can be considered even to be archetypal.

To stretch a point further, for the Chinese, the Self, which is the end and the prize of the human quest, is not to be found in the world of appearances. "La sagesse," states Thiollier,

consiste à rechercher la 'voie', qui est la réalité suprême mettant en accord les contradictions apparentes. Le mystique y accède par la méditation, la contemplation et l'extase (...). Il doit se soumettre à la puissance du Tao, entendu comme l'harmonie des forces cosmiques retrouvées dans la profondeur de l'Être'.<sup>61</sup>

And what else could one call the Narrator's visit to Roderick than a mystical attempt to harmonise contradictions? It is worth noticing that Roderick's family name, Usher, means either the doorkeeper, *ustiarus*, or the one who shows a person his way to his place.<sup>66</sup> As a servant ushers the Narrator to Roderick, Roderick ushers the Narrator to his totality, through a dismantling universe. But, is it not the Narrator the one who completes the quaternity, "o esquema ordenador por excelência," in Jung's words? This attribute of the Narrator gives him immense power: like a Demiurge, he is capable of cosmogony, of bringing

order to a chaos and, conversely, of bringing destruction to a unity.

As the Narrator looks at the lake, he triggers all the events. With a conjuror's gesture, he puts a whole world to revolve; he is the magician that operates the theatre of shadows, its creator and its audience. Like Narcissus, he is entrapped by his own reflection; unlike Narcissus, he frees himself and goes on redeemed. And he leaves with something more than when he arrived: the notion of a Fall that followed a split of the primordial unity. Through fear, this mythos will be engraved in his memory and he will be able to attain salvation by spreading the knowledge. Such is the way of Gnosticism.

Poe puts his texts to work as conventional propaganda of his beliefs. By proposing another way of understanding the world he advocates an ideology that should encompass both reason and observation, the concept and the object, the Dionysian and the Appolinian, the yin and the yang. He is not submitting a new ideology instead; he is offering a way out for man, a fallen and divided creature always prone to commit "a bitter lapse into everyday life." And the exit is via total knowledge; not a one-sided apprehension of reality, but a wholesome approach to the universe.

Such amplification of awareness is characteristic of the fantastic. The Narrator has altered his view of the world, as being a predictable *locus*, where nature follows rigid, preordained rules. He had a lesson on how to see the Other, as one who is in himself as he is the Other. Once his referential marks in reality underwent a change, the Narrator was forced to modify his ego accordingly. Such is the way of the fantastic.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1938; New York: Random-Vintage, 1975) 231-45. All subsequent notes appear between parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Jung, Aion 288.

<sup>3</sup> Jung, Aion 291.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, Aion 293.

<sup>5</sup> Jung, Aion 312.

<sup>6</sup> "Maya," Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. 1979 ed.

<sup>7</sup> "Vedanta," Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. 1979 ed.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random-Vintage, 1967) 34.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche 36.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche 36.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche 38.

<sup>12</sup> "Monism," Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. 1979 ed.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche 52.

<sup>14</sup> Poe, "Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales," The First Part of the Nineteenth Century, vol. 2 of American Literature, ed. Carl Bode et al., 3 vols. (New York: Pocket-Washington Square, 1973) 85.

<sup>15</sup> Poe, The Philosophy of Composition, The First Part of the Nineteenth Century, vol. 2 of American Literature, ed. Carl Bode et al., 3 vols. (New York: Pocket-Washington Square, 1973) 87.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" Russian Formalist Criticism; Four Essays, trans. and introd. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Regent Critics (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, n.d.) 112.

<sup>17</sup> Vitor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays, trans. and introd. Lee T. Lemon and

- Marion J. Reis, *Regent Critics* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, n.d.)
- 18 Shklovsky 12.
- 19 André Gide, Journal 1889-1939 (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1948) 41, as quoted by Lucien Dällenbach, Le Récit spéculaire; essay sur la mise en abyme, Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1977) 15.
- 20 Lucien Dällenbach, Le Récit spéculaire; Essay sur la mise en abyme, Poétique (Paris: Seuil, n.d.) 16-7.
- 21 Dällenbach 17.
- 22 Dällenbach 17-8.
- 23 William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (New York: Pocket-Washington Square, 1958) III.ii.21-22.
- 24 Dällenbach 42.
- 25 Dällenbach 25.
- 26 Dällenbach 30.
- 27 Dällenbach 30.
- 28 Jean Bellemin-Noël, "Notes sur le fantastique; textes de Théophile Gautier," Littérature 8 (1972): 16.
- 29 Dällenbach 18.
- 30 Bellemin-Noël 16.
- 31 Dällenbach 27.
- 32 Edgar Allan Poe, "Philosophy of Composition," The First Part of the Nineteenth Century, vol. 2 of American Literature, ed. Carl Bode et al., 3 vols. (New York: Pocket-Washington Square, 1973) 104.
- 33 Poe, "Composition," Complete Tales 104.
- 34 Dällenbach 62. Enunciate, enunciation and narrative are the English for *énoncé*, *énonciation* and *récit*, respectively. Enunciate, which is a neologism for utterance and/or discourse, will be preferred due to its closeness to both French and Portuguese terms. They were taken from A. J. P. Greimas and J. Courtés, Dicionário de semiótica (São Paulo: Cultrix, n.d.).
- 35 Dällenbach 63.
- 36 Dällenbach 71.

- 37 Dällenbach 94.
- 38 Poe, "The Premature Burial," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1938; New York: Random-Vintage, 1975) 262-3.
- 39 David Punter, The Literature of Terror (London, New York: Longman, 1980) 405.
- 40 Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des symboles, 4 vols. (1969; Paris: Seghers, 1973) 2:213.
- 41 John S. Hill, "The Dual Hallucination of 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Poe's Tales; A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. and introd. William L. Howarth, Twentieth Century Interpretations (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1971) 62.
- 42 Poe, "Composition," Complete Tales 106.
- 43 Chevalier and Gheerbrant 155.
- 44 J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 59.
- 45 Cirlot 55-6.
- 46 Chevalier and Gheerbrant 108.
- 47 Chevalier and Gheerbrant 109.
- 48 Cirlot 211.
- 49 Cirlot 211.
- 50 Jung, Aion 347.
- 51 Jung, Aion 347.
- 52 Jung, Aion 115.
- 53 Jung, Psicologia da religião 398.
- 54 Jung, Psicologia da religião 400.
- 55 Jung, Aion 351.
- 56 Jung, Aion 100, 50n.
- 57 Jung, Psicologia da religião 249.
- 58 Jung, Psicologia da religião 279.
- 59 Jung, Psicologia da religião 104.
- 60 Marguerite-Marie Thiollier, Dictionnaire des religions (1966; Verviers: Marabout, 1982) 348.
- 61 Thiollier 348.



Masque and Mask

Is *all* that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?

E. A. Poe

## 1. A Gnostic parable

Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" may be read as a Gnostic parable about revealed knowledge.<sup>1</sup> A hermetic text, it disguises ideological relations by the use of symbols. An ironical text, it mocks human folly by the inversion of expectations.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe built a kaleidoscopic trap with which to ensnare the reader's eye; here, he created a mask of mirrors, behind which the reader's eye will find the text. Poe's use of reflections as both thematic and structural patterns, according to which the former tale can be understood as a mirrored image of the reader, as shown above, indicate that it may be possible to consider "The Masque of the Red Death" a mirrored text, which the reader must decode so as to understand its cryptic meaning. Hence, the reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" demands some optical considerations.

The images given by plane mirrors have the same dimensions as those of the reflected object, but this does not mean equality, in the geometrical sense. The Enciclopédia Delta Larousse explains that

O objeto e a imagem não são *superponíveis*, mas *simétricos* em relação a um plano como são entre si a mão direita e a mão esquerda; sabe-se que é impossível introduzir a mão direita numa luva esquerda e inversamente. Resulta disso que um texto escrito ou impresso não é legível mediante reflexão em um espelho. Mas, se os raios luminosos se refletem de novo num segundo espelho, a imagem é invertida uma segunda vez; assim o texto torna-se legível depois de duas reflexões.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar way, to understand "The Masque of the Red Death," it must be taken into consideration that this is a text reflected in a mirror which, therefore, demands a second

inversion to become legible.

The concept of the text as mirrored and mirroring is present in some of Poe's tales, mainly in those which deal with the motif of the double. Specularisation has the effect of transforming textual elements into images, reflections and abstractions. As a result, the Poesque universe is peopled with very few "real" characters around whom revolve ghost-like representations of their fears and desires. This introduces a theme dear to Poe, that of the world as a dream-land, according to which life is a dream and consequently, death is an awakening.

Prefigured in a juvenile work, where Poe avows, "I have been happy - and I love the theme:/ Dreams !," the motif of dream has evolved into a major theme in his work, that of life as a somnambulist state.<sup>3</sup> This can be found in the following lines from "A Dream within a Dream," for instance - "You are not wrong, who deem/ That my days have been a dream," and "All that we see or seem/ Is but a dream within a dream."<sup>4</sup> Or, as in "For Annie," where life is equaled with disease and death with comfort and repose:

Thank heaven! the crisis -  
 The danger is past,  
 And the lingering illness  
 Is over at last -  
 And the fever called "Living"  
 Is conquered at last.<sup>5</sup>

This reversion of generally accepted concepts recurs in his poetry as well as in his fiction of horror. As such, it is one major aspect of his metaphysical and aesthetic projects and is thoroughly realised in "The Masque of the Red Death."

Gnosticism, which is at the basis of Poe's projects mentioned above, also presents a pattern of reversion. Contrary to what Christian doctrine claims, it preaches that the world was created

by an anti-god, a fallen Demiurge who is identified with the Old Testament Yahweh; that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was actually a divine agent come to give man knowledge so that he could try to save his soul, and that revealed knowledge is superior to faith and is the only way to salvation. But Gnosticism partakes some of the elements of Christianity, such as the pattern of fall, expiation and salvation. "Gnostic systems," John Ferguson explains, "commonly have a complex mythology of a cosmic fall, the imprisonment of the soul in matter, and the emergence of a saviour."<sup>6</sup> The world of matter, *physis*, is a prison into which man, a being with a divine spark, has fallen and needs to be awakened by a divine call so as to be restored to his highest state. The soul, *pneuma*, has known the truth before birth, but, as Plato theorised, "our birth is but a sleeping and a forgetting."<sup>7</sup> Thus, *pneuma* needs liberation from *physis*, which comes only from *gnosis*, certain knowledge, as contrasted with *pistis*, mere faith. The liberator is often seen as Christ, but because Gnosticism considers matter evil, "the Gnostics tend to distinguish between the spiritual Christ and the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>8</sup>

Allusions to Christ the Saviour, interpreted according to the Gnostic conception above, are recurrent in "The Masque of the Red Death." Together with references to Shakespeare's The Tempest, they are the main textual elements which Poe borrowed in order to tell a mythic parable of revelation. Indeed, the Bible and The Tempest seem to be the sources which have provided Poe with the largest amount of intertextual elements, as will be seen below.

The fantastic in "The Masque of the Red Death" is produced by the manner Poe takes these intertextual elements and defamiliarises them. He does so as he reinterprets them under the light of Gnosticism, that is to say, as he inverts the relations accepted as natural and, thus, traditional, in the Western, Christian world. In fact, one could say, following Louis

Althusser's definition of ideology, that Poe rearranges the "system of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts) endowed with a specific historical context and functioning within a given society."<sup>9</sup> Thus, by proposing a virtual image in his mirrored text, he forces the reader to adopt a new referential system and thus to alter his perception of the real. This counter-ideological facet of Poe's texts will be discussed in the concluding part of this dissertation.

## 2. The Bible, The Tempest and meaning in "The Masque of the Red Death"

Joseph Patrick Roppolo and Patrick Cheney are two critics who analysed the pattern of inversion and the references and allusions to the Bible and to Shakespeare's The Tempest. Roppolo's "Meaning and the 'The Masque of the Red Death'" is an attempt to offer an alternate reading of the Red Death.<sup>10</sup> After touring "the tangled world of the critics of 'The Masque of the Red Death'" - "a strange world, as confused and confusing as a Gothic Wonderland and in some respects as eerie as the blighted house of Roderick Usher," Roppolo tries to prove that the Red Death was not a pestilence.<sup>11</sup> He quotes the opening sentences in order to give evidence to his thesis:

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal - the redness and horror of blood.

Roppolo distinguishes two levels of interpretation in the above excerpt: on the first level there is a disease, a plague, of which blood was not a sign or symptom, but an avatar and seal. As seal, blood confirms, assures "the existence of the Red Death, or more broadly, of Death itself; as avatar, blood is the incarnation,

the bodily representation, of the Red Death."<sup>12</sup> On the second level, Roppolo suggests, "blood represents something invisible and eternal, a ruling principle of the universe," which may be death.

Here, Roppolo introduces his thesis: the second sentence, "No pestilence had ever been so fatal," is, to say the least, ambiguous. The grammatically exact statement engenders a doubt, which is heightened by the adjective "fatal," which does not permit of comparison. "I should like to suggest," he writes,

that here Poe is being neither ungrammatical nor even carefully ambiguous, but daringly clear. The Red Death is not a pestilence, in the usual sense; it is unfaillingly and universally fatal, as no mere disease or plague can be; and blood is its guarantee, its avatar and seal. Life itself, then, is the Red Death, the one "affliction" shared by all mankind.<sup>13</sup>

Roppolo quotes the Leviticus (17:14) as a confirmation - "For the life of all flesh is the blood thereof," and complements it with a comment from William Mentzel Forrest's Biblical Allusions in Poe (New York: Macmillan, 1928), which says that Poe's views on death are "essentially Biblical," that is, "death is looked upon not from the religious but from the natural viewpoint, as something to which all life is subject in harmony with the great laws of change" (p. 58; qtd. in Roppolo 140).

Roppolo goes on to state that Poe emphasises death so as to comment on life and achieve his single effect. Horror of death is the only thing men share and this horror is the reason why Prospero, "a kind of demigod," "creates a new and smaller world for the preservation of life." As he develops his thoughts, Roppolo stumbles and slithers on a paradox: "but time (the ebony clock) exists in [Prospero's] new world, and he is, of course, deluded in his belief that he can let in life and shut out death."<sup>14</sup>

If the Red Death is life, as he proposes, then why should Prince Prospero wish to shut it out? If the abbey was transformed into "a new and smaller world for the preservation of life," then, would not the Red Death, as "Life itself," be welcomed? And if the clock is an instrument of time and, thence, of death, why should he, conversely, allow its presence? Roppolo misses these contradictions, fatal to his thesis, but has an insight as he recognises that Poe links life with disease and death, by the use of the adverb "feverishly" to describe the beating of "the heart of life."

A conclusion must be reached, and Roppolo's is that the Red Death mummer was not Red Death itself nor a representation of death - it was "man's creation, his self-aroused and self-developed fear of his own mistaken concept of death."<sup>15</sup> But then, contradictions recur in Roppolo's article, without his being aware of them. First, he equaled the Red Death with life and did not explain why Prospero would close his abbey to it; now, he seems to have forgotten his initial suggestion and proposes that Red Death is man's fear of death. His last proposition is correct if "The Masque of the Red Death" is read from a traditional standpoint, as demonstrated above, but his explanation of the Red Death as life, which is partially true, is not acceptable from that standpoint. Hence, the second contradiction. I shall come back to his article when I have summarised Patrick Cheney's assumptions.

In Cheney's essay, "Poe's Use of The Tempest and the Bible in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" he suggests that Poe in "The Masque of the Red Death"

uses Shakespearean and Biblical allusions to reveal a tragic and ironic reversal of a mythic pattern which The Tempest and the Bible have in common. Where the mythic pattern of both The Tempest and the Bible depicts man's victory over sin, death, and time, Poe's mythic pattern



depicts the triumph of these agents of destruction over man. In Poe's "mythic parable" of man's role in the universe,\* Prince Prospero becomes an anti-hero, an image of man misusing his will as he attempts to shape reality; and the Red Death becomes an "anti-christ," an image of the cosmic force conspiring man's failure.

(\* Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" TSE 13 (1963): 63.)<sup>16</sup>

Cheney begins his article pointing the similarities between The Tempest and the Bible and how they relate to Poe's mythic pattern in "The Masque of the Red Death." Adam and Prospero, he explains, lived in their rightful estates from which they were expelled because of their misuse of will, and which they regained through a supernatural intervention. In Adam's story, it was the "second Adam," or Christ, while in The Tempest it was Prospero who, with the use of magical powers, regains for Miranda her lost inheritance.<sup>17</sup>

Poe's allusions to the Shakespearean and the Biblical texts in "The Masque of the Red Death" may suggest that he responds to this mythic pattern, Cheney proposes, then listing the similarities and dissimilarities between Shakespeare's and Poe's Prosperos. They are alike in that they use their will to confront death, but while Shakespeare's is punished with exile for his retreat, Poe's exiles himself in the abbey as a deffence against contagion. The differences increase as Poe deprives his Prospero from magical powers and leaves him "with an art that most closely resembles interior decoration."<sup>18</sup> In the abbey Prince Prospero creates an earthly paradise which mocks the "brave new world" of The Tempest. Cheney adds that the abbey is a world which, rather than transcend time, embodies the very instrument of time, the sinister clock of ebony. As a result, Prince Prospero ensures his own destruction. Somehow, Poe's story is Caliban's wish-fulfilment: "the red plague rid you,"

Caliban says to Miranda (I.ii.364); accordingly, Prince Prospero's abbey becomes not a new Eden but a "valley of the shadow of death."

Cheney, contrarily to Roppolo, does not consider Poe's use of Biblical symbolism noteworthy until the last paragraph, "where the language, rhythm and allusion are unmistakably Biblical."<sup>19</sup>

He singles out the phrase "like a thief in the night," used to describe the Red Death's apparition, which is a direct quotation from 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10, both references to the second coming of Christ. Cheney proposes that in Poe's mythology, "the Red Death replaces Christ as the reigning force in the universe:"

Hence, the Red Death is said to have "dominion over all" - a reversal of Paul's statement in Romans 6:9, in which "death hath no more dominion" because of Christ resurrection. Moreover, the halls of Poe's [sic] earthly paradise become "blood-bedewed" - suggesting a conflation of two familiar Biblical images, blood and dew; the blood of Christ's resurrection that redeems man and the drops of dew that fall from heaven to save man the harshness of nature (Deut. 33:28).<sup>20</sup>

Cheney suggests that Poe inverts the Pauline conception of baptism by bedewing his characters in the unholy blood of the Red Death. Death then becomes the "saviour" of this world; in fact, the Red Death wears a "vesture dabbled in blood" - an inversion of Christ in the Book of Revelation: "And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God" (Rev. 19:13).

One other allusion to the Bible that Cheney discovers is Poe's use of "masque" or "mask," whose Biblical counterpart is the "veil."<sup>21</sup> Paul says that the veil Moses wore to speak in the name of Yahweh was the veil of death, which blinded himself to the truth about man's relation to God, and that the "veil is done way

in Christ," that is, Christ triumphs over the law of death in his resurrection ( 2 Cor 3 and 14). "But Poe rejects the notion that Christ takes the veil of death away by having his masker, the Red Death, wear a veil that cannot be taken away," proposes Cheney.<sup>22</sup> By presenting man helpless against the apparition of death, he claims, Poe suggests the inefficacy of Christ's triumph over death - the Red Death denies Christ his power of resurrection and thus becomes an "antichrist" (1 John 2:22).

Next, Cheney discusses the abbey and the seven colours of the seven rooms: in the Bible this is a number which symbolises fullness, completeness - man's oneness with God and the colours correspond to those of the vestments worn in Catholic liturgy, "as well as to the seven colours of the rainbow (Biblical symbol of hope and the new covenant between man and God)."<sup>23</sup> Hence, as the Red Death annihilates the abbey, Cheney claims, Poe may be suggesting "the inefficacy of man's use of religious ritual to commune with God, as a means of transcending time and of triumphing over the law of death." Like Roppolo, Cheney believes that the "Avatar" and "seal" of Prince Prospero's world are not Christ, as in the Bible, but the blood of the Red Death.

As a conclusion, Cheney submits that "Poe's use of The Tempest and of the Bible to shape the mythic pattern of 'The Masque of the Red Death' is not so much the product of a wild fancy as it is of an astute reading of western literature."<sup>24</sup> That is, as J. L. Borges suggested in his story "The Gospel According to Mark," men have always told and retold the same two stories: "that of a lost ship which searches the Mediterranean seas for a dearly loved island, and that of a god who is crucified on Golgotha" (qtd. in Cheney 38). This, according to Northrop Frye, is a suggestion that romance provides a parallel epic to the Bible; that romance can be seen as a "secular scripture" whose mythic pattern mirrors that of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to Cheney, "The Masque of the Red Death" may be Poe's response to the mythic pattern of the two

kinds which form the basis of western literature as seen by Borges and Frye.

Most of the arguments offered by Cheney and Roppolo are valuable, and, as such, deserve being examined. Both critics agree that there is an inversion of some kind, but they miss its source and its reason of being. While Roppolo suggests that the Red Death is Life, Cheney equates it with an "antichrist" agent, two conflicting explanations resulting from a common line of approach. But while Roppolo contradicts himself, Cheney is coherent with his thesis, no matter how mistaken it might be. Had they taken in consideration Poe's metaphysical and aesthetic assimilation of Gnosticism and other mystery religions then most of the weak points in their articles would have been avoided. They would have realised that what is inverted is the standpoint, or better, the commonly accepted cultural images and representations a reader relies on to guide him through a text. There is a mythic pattern - that of fall, quest and redemption, but this is not inverted, and, contrary to what Cheney suggests, the Red Death is not an antichrist agent, but a Christ-like figure (that is, the embodiment of a Christ function) as I shall attempt to demonstrate. What these two critics failed to perceive was that "The Masque of the Red Death" is like a text reflected in a mirror, and, therefore, it is "illegible." But if the tale is reflected in a second imaginary mirror, it is inverted a second time and thus becomes legible. The second inversion is what Cheney and Roppolo missed and, consequently, as in the example of the hand and the glove, they tried to put the right hand into the left glove.

### 3. Red Death the Saviour

My suggestion is that "The Masque of the Red Death" is a Gnostic parable with a mythic pattern about the fall of man, his

salvation by a divine agent and the eventual liberation of his soul. As Gnosticism is one of the mystery religions, this parable is a hermetic text meant to be deciphered by the "initiate." The key to decoding it is the Platonic belief adopted by the Gnostics, and recurrent in Poe's work, that life is a dream and death is an awakening. Bearing this inversion in mind, I shall discuss the role played by the abbey, the Red Death and Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death." These textual elements shall be examined in terms of their importance to structure and meaning in the tale, according to the Gnostic syntax.

It is possible to advance Roppolo's questioning about the true nature of the Red Death and find an answer which will encompass both his and Cheney's suppositions. If the Red Death belongs in the realm of the natural, then it can be explained either as a pestilence or as Prince Prospero's fear of death. The first possibility is in fact an impossibility, for no pestilence disguises itself as itself and goes to a masquerade, nor does it kill "dreams" and "phantasms," which is how the courtiers are described in the text. Moreover, as Roppolo pointed out, on the textual level, the Red Death was not a pestilence. The second possibility does not account for any of the allusions to the Bible and The Tempest, nor to Prince Prospero's choice of an abbey in which to hide himself. Also, according to most of the critics of the fantastic, if the "monster" can be explained away through natural and rational causes, then it is not fantastic.

The natural realm being excluded, the Red Death may belong in two other realms: those of the supernatural and of the unnatural. Under supernatural laws, the Red Death would be a curse punishing Prince Prospero and his subjects for crimes committed back in the past. Or, if it is an unnatural plague, it could embody a mummer in a ball and kill Prospero. Neither of these solutions is acceptable because neither a curse nor an unnatural plague could kill Prince Prospero's "dreams" and "phantasms."

Since the major problem with the above explanations seems to be the killing of the courtiers, the solution to the puzzle may lie here. Instead of asking "What is the Red Death?," one should ask "What can kill one's 'dreams' and 'phantasms,' one's illusions and fears?" A possible and logical answer would be "The revelation of truth." And revelation of truth is the fundament of all religions throughout the world: they all claim to lead man from ignorance to illumination if he follows their precepts. In Biblical symbology, truth and its unveiling mean Christ, as in John 14:6, where the Son tells his disciples: "Eu sou o caminho, a verdade e a vida; ninguém pode ir ao Pai, senão por meio de mim." Hence, I would like to suggest that the Red Death's role in "The Masque of the Red Death" is similar to that of Christ the Saviour in the Christian system - the only way through which Prospero can reach *gnosis*, that is, revealed truth.

One of the symbols of the Son is the Logos, which Gnosticism considers a magnetic agent which attracts man to gnose as a magnet attracts iron. The Logos is the "Saviour" characteristic of Christ and, as such, is also an attribute of truth. Once Prince Prospero acknowledges the presence of the Red Death within the abbey, that is, the presence of truth, his fears and illusion, "dreams" and "phantasms," are dissolved. "The Masque of the Red Death" is, from this standpoint, a gospel of truth as the liberator of the soul. As a matter of fact, there exists a Gnostic scripture, The Gospel of Truth, attributed to Valentinus and discovered at Nag-Hammadi in 1945-6, that begins,

The gospel of truth is joy to those who have received from the Father of truth the gift of knowing him by the power of the Logos, who has come from the pleroma and who is called "the Saviour," since that is the name of the work which he must do for the redemption of those who have known the Father.<sup>26</sup>

The Gospel of Truth seems to be a reinterpretation of Christian

doctrine that presents men drunk in darkness, dreaming nightmares, oblivious of their origin and destiny. Salvation, through knowledge, is offered by Christ, whom Error tried to destroy. But he is Truth and Knowledge and, thus, cannot be destroyed.

This Gnostic belief can be found in Poe's aesthetics, as shown previously, and is present in most of his Gothic tales and poems. This is not easily perceived if one is not familiar with Gnosticism and its systems. Moreover, Poe tends to occult it under several different disguises, as a common precept of hermetic doctrines, so that only the "initiates" can recognise it. But at the same time, Poe provides the reader with everything necessary to understand the text within the text itself, that is, the textual elements function as indices to the inner meaning of his work. In "The Masque of the Red Death," one of such elements is the title of the tale, where the noun "masque" points to what the story is about: the reader must not take anything at face value, for there is mask concealing the truth. Thus, the intruder in the ball is not the Red Death, as Roppolo rightly claimed.<sup>27</sup> What he missed, however, when he discussed the concepts of "avatar" and "seal," as applied to blood, was the Biblical signification behind their textual value.

Blood, in the Bible, is at the same time, the seal and avatar of Christ. In Matthew 26:28, for example, Christ took a cup and passed it round to his disciples, saying, "Bebei dele todos, pois isto é o meu sangue, o *sangue da Aliança*, que é derramado por muitos para a remissão dos pecados." It is the seal of the new covenant between man and God, as can be found also in Mk 14:24 and Lk 22:20. In 1 Cor 11:25, Christ says, "Este cálice é a nova Aliança em meu sangue; todas as vezes que dele beberdes, fazei-o em memória de mim." That is, blood, besides being his seal, will be his incarnation, his avatar.

The Red Death partakes of at least one other characteristic with Christ - the coming. In the last paragraph, remarkably

Biblical, as Cheney pointed out, Poe describes the coming of the Red Death in an almost verbatim copy of 1 Thess 1:2 and 2 Peter 3:10, which refer to the coming of Christ. This may explain why Prince Prospero kept the huge ebony clock in the seventh room. If, as already given as explanation, he was afraid of his death and the clock was an instrument of time as destroyer, then why should he keep it? Were it a remainder of the imminent end then Prince Prospero should have dismantled it. Thus, according to Roppolo and Cheney, among others, he would have created a world which transcended time and, therefore, death. But the reason for his keeping the clock may be quite other. If one reads the text carefully, one will notice that everybody in the abbey - the "dreams" and "phantasms," is mentioned as being disturbed by the clock, *except* Prince Prospero. Indeed, he was not the least discomfited by its presence not by its sound; rather, I would like to suggest, he wanted it there to tell the time of his revelation. And the revelation came under the masque of the Red Death, destroying the bodily prison and liberting the soul to its encounter with Truth and Knowledge, at the stroke of midnight.

This exposition of similarities between the Red Death and Christ the Saviour is enough, I presume, to demonstrate that it can be read as Red Death the Saviour. But if this is so, then why should Prince Prospero flee from it? As already objected against Roppolo's interpretation, is it not a paradox, a contradiction fatal to everything which has been exposed? Once again, one must remember the pattern of inversion which the text follows. I suggest that Prince Prospero did not flee from the Red Death but, instead, he went to the abbey to wait for it there, as someone going through initiation ceremonies to be rewarded with revealed knowledge.

A person seeking initiation into a mystery religion has first to go into and out of a labyrinth, as a preliminar trial of his worth; only those who succeed to come out are allowed to enter the



initiatory cave.<sup>28</sup> The initiate-to-be, having passed the first tests and expiated his lesser faults, could proceed towards harder probations. In "The Masque of the Red Death," Prince Prospero has been cleansed of his minor sins, as represented by the deaths of his plebeian subjects, and locks himself with his major misconceptions, as represented by the courtiers, in the castellated abbey.

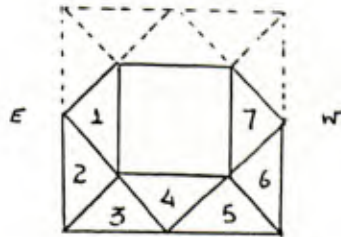
If, as already remarked, in Poe's works, life can be a dream, then the dreamer is able to meet the figments of his imagination, represented by dreams and nightmares. Prince Prospero, a typical Poesque character, has already freed himself from the petty lies and delusions which hampered his apprehension of reality and, entering the abbey, he is willing to get rid of all misrepresentations that mask the relations held in the world and, thus, contemplate Truth. Had he been a weak person and he would have got entangled in his own dreams and nightmares and would never awake to true knowledge, in the Gnostic sense. But, a "happy and dauntless and sagacious" Prince, as Poe describes him, Prospero finds himself in a position of one who is about to receive long sought revelation, as he enters the abbey.

#### 4. The journey of the soul

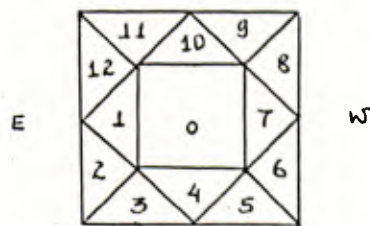
An abbey, in its origins, was a place of silence, of work and prayer which attracted mystics willing to escape the world.<sup>29</sup> It was built around a cloister which served as ambulatory, and followed a square or rectangular plan. Within its often fortified walls reigned monastic rules of asceticism, practices of devotion and the search for a greater spirituality through a separation of the world. Monastic life, according to Marguerite-Marie Thiollier, "est issu de la vie érémitique que menaient des anchorètes dans le désert, vivant seuls dans les grottes ou des cabanes."<sup>30</sup> The

abbey is a secluded place where those who seek Christian illumination go to; in this sense, it is a place of revelation, akin to the ancient caves of initiation.

I would like to propose that Prince Prospero finds a similar to a cave of initiation in "the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys," where he will undergo his rites of passage. The building was the product of "the duke's love of the *bizarre*," and its seven rooms were disposed so "that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time" (269). Were a plan of the duke's abbey to be drawn and it could be something like this:



with "a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite" (270). It happens that this is the actual plan of some abbeys, of some sacred cities and of the Temple of Salomon. This design was based on ancient representations of the Zodiac.<sup>31</sup> The complete plan is



where each triangle, or house, represents a sign through which the sun follows its path.<sup>32</sup>

To confirm this line of interpretation, it may be pointed out that Mithraism; one of the most ancient mystery religions, has as its central mystery the journey of the soul, which follows a cycle similar to that of the sun:

The soul is immortal, and its period on earth is a time

of trial. At birth it descends from the home of light through the gate of Cancer, passing through the seven planetary spheres, and accumulating impurity, ambition from Jupiter, lust from Venus, greed for gain from Mercury, sloth from Saturn, anger from Mars. On earth the soul has the chance to shake off the weight of these impurities by a combination of moral striving and revealed knowledge. After death the spirits of light and darkness struggle for the soul, with Mithras as arbiter. If the good qualities outweigh the bad, the soul ascends again through the fate of Capricorn.<sup>33</sup>

This repeats the seemingly universal mythic pattern of fall, probation and eventual redemption, undergone by every solar hero in his zodiacal quest for illumination.

Prospero, Poe's solar hero, will go through the seven rooms of the abbey before his final encounter with the Red Death. As he does so, he will be repeating the trials a fallen soul has to suffer before ascending to its former higher state. Each of the rooms stands for the planetary spheres and, then, symbolises all the impurities Prospero has gathered in his profane life and is now shaking off. This re-enacting of one's sins corresponds to a confession, a purgation of the soul which must be immaculate before moving into a more elevated state. Thus, I suggest, Prospero's death is another masque created by Poe, for, according to mystery religions, the body is a prison and its symbolical destruction is not a death but a rebirth.

Before his second birth, the initiate has to relive his earthly existence in a cave of initiation, which becomes an *imago mundi*.<sup>34</sup> Prospero's cave, the abbey, has provided much material for critics to deal with. Cheney considers the seven colours to correspond to the vestments worn by Catholic priests in the Mass, and, as such, to imply the inefficacy of religious rituals to help man commune with God. I find it difficult to accept this interpretation

although I have no other explanation to offer. Following my supposition that the rooms would correspond to the seven planetary spheres, then the colours could correspond either to the planets or to the impurities they represent. However, this is a possibility that will remain open and unresolved, for I could not find enough elements in the symbolic tradition to corroborate or deny it. A more promising line of interpretation, I believe, seems to be that related with Shakespeare's theme of the world as a stage. Indeed, if the cave is an image of the world where the initiate re-enacts his earthly deeds, then this "world" is a stage on which man puts on his show. The seven colours would be, then, the result of Prospero's art as interior decorator, as Cheney put it.

Poe seems to have borrowed this theme from Shakespeare and adapted it to his own theme of the world as a dreamland.<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, this latter conception appears also in The Tempest, to which "The Masque of the Red Death" owes a lot of its textual and structural elements. When Prospero dissolves his magically constructed world, he says that "We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on, and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep" (IV.i.156-58). But the Shakespearean quotation which could be used to describe Prince Prospero's abbey comes from As You Like It, where Jacques points out that

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His Acts being seven ages. (II.vii.140-44)

It seems possible to consider the seven rooms in the abbey Prince Prospero's seven ages, which he must relive so as to die symbolically and to be born again in a new order.

## 5. Plato and the cave

The seven rooms and their illumination which "produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances" are very similar to Plato's *imago mundi*, which is one of the basic concepts of the Gnostic systems. These rooms had no openings to the outside, through which sun light could come in. Quite the opposite;

To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. (...) There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire, that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. (269-70)

There are no real objects inside the rooms, just "a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances" which are phantasmagories produced by the rays of a brazier of fire projected through "the tinted glass." Such play of light and shadow is very similar to that which Plato depicts in his allegory of the cave.

In The Republic Plato compares man with a prisoner standing in the middle of an underground cave, with his back turned to the entrance, looking at the shadows cast on the walls.<sup>36</sup> The objects outside are the true "ideas" or "forms," but man can perceive them only as sensorial stimuli, as representations distorted by his flawed senses. The Platonic philosopher, Ferguson explains,

is the man who is released into the daylight. At first he is blinded by the brilliance, but gradually his eyes

grow accustomed to the light and he sees objects, not shadows, and knows the shadows for what they are." If he then goes back into the cave and tells the prisoners that they are living in a world of illusions they will mock him. Nonetheless, go back he must.<sup>37</sup>

When Prince Prospero "dies," that is, goes out of the cave into daylight, he will become a philosopher, in the Platonic sense, and an elevated soul or initiate, in the Gnostic system. As the philosopher must go back and tell "the prisoners that they are living in a world of illusion," so must the Gnostic, as he leaves the cave of initiation.

Gnosticism preaches knowledge (*Gnosis*) and its spreading as a means of salvation. Poe, who is much of a Gnostic, carries his soteriological work through his art. Here he apparently departs from Plato, who considered Art thrice removed from truth, as it were the imitation of an imitation and, as such, incapable of transmitting any reliable knowledge.<sup>38</sup> In a later work, however, Plato lessened his condemnation of Art as a debased mimesis. According to Vitor Manuel, he recognises, in Cratylus, that Art

é decorrente da exigência humana de exprimir por imagens a realidade circundante e, enquanto meio susceptível de aprender as idéias presentes nas coisas, é-lhe atribuído um valor simbólico-gnosiológico.<sup>39</sup>

This allows Poe to reconcile his literary practice with Platonic theories through impregnating it with Gnostic beliefs which can only be reached via the decoding of his hermetic symbolism.

#### 6. The last two lines of "The Masque of the Red Death"

"The Masque of the Red Death" may be read as the initiation of Prince Prospero in Gnosticism, told as a tale of horror. Its last line may mislead the reader into thinking that, in the end, it is a perverse story in which "man's use of his will to link himself

with heaven, as a means of triumphing over sin, death, and time, becomes a 'masquerade' - a futile display of self-deception that culminates only in death," as claims Cheney.<sup>40</sup> But Roppolo's conclusion, even though not entirely satisfactory, is much more likely:

"Let there be light" was one of the principles of Creation; darkness, then, is a principle of Chaos. And to Poe Chaos is synonymous with Nothingness, "which, to all finite perception, Unity must be." Decay occurs as matter "expels the ether" to return to or to sink into Unity. Prince Prospero's world, created out of a chaos ruled by the Red Death, returns to chaos, ruled by the trinity of Darkness and Decay and the Red Death. But, it will be remembered, Prince Prospero's world came into being *because of* the Red Death, which, although it includes death, is the principle of life. In Chaos, then, is the promise of new lives and of new worlds which will swell into existence and then, in their turn, subside into nothingness in the eternal process of contraction and expansion which Poe describes in Eureka.<sup>41</sup>

For Roppolo, then, the Red Death comprehends, simultaneously, the principles of life and death, which can be correctly inferred from Poe's aesthetics. Such principle found its way there through his metaphysics, which are, in turn, based in the Gnostic systems.

Cheney borrowed some of his ideas from Roppolo, but whereas Roppolo nearly succeeded in understanding "The Masque of the Red Death" as a mythic parable of Gnostic revelation, he saw it merely as an inversion of "the romantic conventions of The Tempest and the religious tenets of the Bible."<sup>42</sup> Cheney deduces logically that the Red Death is Christ, but he is unable to accept this, so his reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" becomes just another piece of the muchbattered line of criticism which approaches Poe's

works as if they were the product of a "poetics of perversion and cruelty," of an "insane aesthetic."<sup>43</sup> Had he tried to overcome his bias and prejudices and he would have understood that Darkness, Decay and the Red Death are not "an infernal triumvirate replacing the divine trinity as the ruling force of the world."<sup>44</sup> According to Poe's coherent pattern of inversion, under the mask of their alliterative names, they are the other face of the same coin - to the Holy Ghost, which is traditionally symbolised by Light, corresponds Darkness. To Decay corresponds the Father, the author of all creation but who, in Gnostic systems, stands against the world. To the Red Death, as has been exhaustively demonstrated, corresponds Christ the Saviour.

#### 7. Optics and cognition

"The Masque of the Red Death" is a Gnostic parable about rites of initiation or, also, about a mythic quest for illumination, which Poe rendered in the form of a Gothic tale. The fantastic component here is the defamiliarisation of accepted cultural references - the Bible and a Shakespearean play, by means of an optical principle applied to literary creation. Optical effects played a central role in nineteenth century fantastic literature, as, for example, in E. T. A. Hoffmann, Oscar Wilde, Théophile Gautier, Paul d'Aspremont and, of course, E. A. Poe. Max Milner discussed this literary manifestation from the viewpoint that it is a literature where a "machine à faire voir" functions explicitly and he concluded that

La prépondérance du modèle optique dans la théorie de la connaissance a eu pour conséquences non seulement de faire de la fantasmagorie l'instrument par excellence d'une hyperconnaissance sans cesse guettée ou contaminée par l'illusion, mais aussi de proposer à



l'homme une voie de sortie hors de la temporalité tout à fait différente de celles que constituait, pour les civilisations dites "primitives", la réinstauration cyclique d'un temps primordial obtenue par la répétition des rituels et de la récitation des mythes.<sup>45</sup>

Poe advances the fantastic in that his work offers both a means of "une hyperconnaissance" and the cyclic reinstauration of the primordial times. Cyclic alternation between cosmos and chaos and attraction and repulsion is at the basis of his metaphysics, as a derivation of Gnosticism, and is realised via his aesthetic project. Also, owing to Gnosticism being a mystery religion, that "hyperconnaissance" is carried through by the decoding of a hermetic labyrinth of optical effects. This point will be discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation.

#### 8. Primary falsehood, secondary realism

Gnosticism may explain Poe's Gothic tales as mythic parables of cognition, and it may also validate Irène Bessièrè's definition of the fantastic. She claimed, in one instance, that the poetics of the fantastic owes its creativity 'to the recording of objective data - religion, philosophy, esoterism and magic, and their deconstruction.<sup>46</sup> In addition, when she discussed Poe's fiction, she pointed out that his fantastic relies on scientific conceptions and on esoteric references which introduce a supernatural meditation.<sup>47</sup> If one applies her theory to "The Masque of the Red Death," Prince Prospero's story, as fantastic discourse, is antinomical due to the combination of its primary irreality with its secondary realism. The event told is deprived of any internal possibility - it becomes fantastic through the superposition of two external probabilities: one rational and empiric (the Red Death = Prospero's fears) which corresponds to

the realistic motivation; the other rational and meta-empiric (the Red Death = Gnostic Christ) which transposes the irreality to the supernatural level and which, there, makes it conceivable in default of acceptable.

At first, there appears to be a problem in Bessièrè's definition of the fantastic as it is applied to "The Masque of the Red Death." The Red Death would be made conceivable on the supernatural plan, but it has been shown that it is not supernatural, nor unnatural, probably natural. However, the apparent contradiction is solved when one remembers that Gnostic systems include supernatural notions such as a Godhead, a fallen Demiurge, the pleroma and a soul that follows a mythic quest. "The Masque of the Red Death," then, fits into Bessièrè's more comprehensive definition of the fantastic as perfectly as it fits any reductive theory.

I have suggested, and have been backed by Bessièrè's work, that the fantastic deranges the relationship held between the Self and the real. This can be demonstrated in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" as he inverts the patterns of accepted systems of representation. By making the Red Death a Redeemer, he displaced the most cherished attribute of the central Christian figure, Jesus. By naming the seemingly egoistic and prepotent Prince Prospero after one of the noblest Shakespearean characters, he upturned a human scale of values. With a hypothetical mirror placed in front of a system of representation, Poe forces the reader to rearrange the referential marks with which he interprets the real. The reader, then, will be able to perceive that his normally accepted beliefs and opinions are but masks that hide a void.

"The Masque of the Red Death" allows for an assessment of Poe's genius in that it is a masterpiece of fantastic literature. Here, one of the characters realises a metaphor of the fantastic text.

According to Bessière, the fantastic is a primary falsehood made verisimilar by a secondary realism. That is, it is a void made perceptible through elements of verisimilitude. Or again, the elements of the verisimilar are recomposed following a strategy which gives the improbable an effect of verisimilitude, through which the fantastic addresses us.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the Red Death mummer is an impossibility made probable and verisimilar: his "grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask" are "untenanted by any tangible form." What the courtiers find behind the mask is an unconquerable void that irrevocably expands its dominion. As the Red Death mummer is a vacuum covered by his "cerements" and "mask," so is the fantastic: a nothing occult by the images, myths, ideas and concepts of a culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (1938; New York: Randon-Vintage, 1975) 269-73. All subsequent references appear between parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> "Reflexão da luz," Enciclopédia Delta Larousse, 1978 edition.

<sup>3</sup> Poe, "Dream-land," Complete Poe 968.

<sup>4</sup> Poe, Complete Poe 967.

<sup>5</sup> Poe, Complete Poe 972.

<sup>6</sup> John Ferguson, An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson 145.

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson 68.

<sup>9</sup> Leon S. Rudiez, ed., introduction, Desire in Language; A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, by Julia Kristeva (New York: Columbia UP, 1980) 15.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" Tulane Studies in English 13 (1963): 58-69. Rpt. in Robert Regan, ed. Poe; A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views 63 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Spectrum, 1967) 134-144.

<sup>11</sup> Roppolo 134-49.

<sup>12</sup> Roppolo 139.

<sup>13</sup> Roppolo 139-40.

<sup>14</sup> Roppolo 140.

<sup>15</sup> Roppolo 142.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Cheney, "Poe's Use of The Tempest and the Bible in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" English Language Notes 3/4 (1983): 31-39.

<sup>17</sup> Cheney 32.

<sup>18</sup> Cheney 33.

- 19 Cheney 34.
- 20 Cheney 34.
- 21 Cheney 35.
- 22 Cheney 35-36.
- 23 Cheney 37.
- 24 Cheney 38.
- 25 Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass. and London: n.ed., 1976) 15, as qtd. in Cheney 38.
- 26 Ferguson 69.
- 27 Roppolo 141.
- 28 René Guénon, Os símbolos da ciência sagrada, trans. Constantino Kairalla Riemma (São Paulo: Pensamento, 1984) 173-80.
- 29 Marguerite-Marie Thiollier, Dictionnaire des religions (1966; Verviers: Marabout, 1982) 5.
- 30 Thiollier 256.
- 31 Ferguson 19-20 and Guénon 69-70.
- 32 Ferguson 19.
- 33 Ferguson 19.
- 34 Guénon 176.
- 35 See for instance Antonio in The Merchant of Venice,  
 I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,  
 A stage, where every man must play a part,  
 And mine a sad one- (I.i.77-79)
- or Macbeth,
- Out, out brief candle!
- Life's but a walking shadow, a poor, player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing. (V.v.23-28).
- 36 Plato, Republic, Critical Theory since Plato, ed. Hazard

Adams (New York: Harcourt, 1971) book II.

37 Ferguson 145.

38 Plato, Republic, book X.

39 Vitor Manuel de Aguiar e Silva, Teoria da literatura, 3rd ed. (Coimbra: Almedina, 1979) 142.

40 Cheney 38-39.

41 Roppolo 143.

42 Cheney 38.

43 See for instance Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," lecture, rpt. in Regan 98-120, and Patrick F. Quinn, "The French Response to Poe," The French Face of Edgar Poe, rpt. in Regan 64-78.

44 Cheney 35.

45 Max Milner, La Fantasmagorie; Essai sur l'optique Fantastique, Écriture (Paris: PUF, 1982) 165.

46 Irène Bessière, Le Fantastique; La Poétique de l'incertain, Thèmes et textes (Paris: Larousse, 1974) 13.

47 Bessière 135.

48 Bessière 233-34.

Conclusion:  
The Fall of the Masque

Horror is the removal of masks.

Robert Bloch



A possible reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" is that, in these tales, Gothic fiction and Gnostic systems merge, resulting in a pattern of search for truth. Gothic, as a manifestation of the fantastic, obtains its effect of uncanny from the questioning of accepted concepts of reality. Gnosticism, as a mystery religion, preaches that salvation can be reached only through knowledge, and knowledge is revealed only to those who undergo rites of passage.

Owing to the mentioned merge, "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" make of intertextuality their main structural device. This characteristic derives not only from the combination of a religious system and a literary manifestation, but also because Gnosticism in itself is a doctrine based on various other religions and philosophic schools. In a similar way, Gothic relies on the existence of a number of rational ideas and scientific conceptions which it attacks and, eventually, deconstructs. Intertextuality is, at the same time, a warrant and a sign of the fluid aspect of the fantastic: once it relates to various systems, there cannot be a single referent, one only ordering voice, a central authority.

The signifying code of "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" is mainly that of Gothic fiction as interpreted by Poe. This is equivalent to saying that the two tales rely on cumulation of suspense and release, as well as on unity of effect and effect of unity. Nevertheless, Poe's importance to literature goes beyond the field of the fantastic and of the Gothic, and further than the Romantic movement, of which he was one of the last representative authors in the United States. His extensive use of symbols gave his work such a suggestive and hermetic quality that the French Symbolists recognised it as precursory of their school. More contemporarily, there seems to be a revival of interest in Poe, as critics who follow psychological and deconstructionist approaches re-evaluate his

works.

A major symbol, and a structural device as well, which Poe used in those two tales was the mirror. Central in most of his literary production, it is employed as the symbol of symbols, that is, it concentrates in itself all the characteristics of representation. By employing a mirroring effect, Poe was able to create fictional worlds where everything is illusion, where reality is but a hallucination, a construction of deranged senses. He managed, then, to represent his belief that life is a sleep, the world but a dream, and reality, man-made illusions.

Poe shares these ideas with Gnosticism, which claims that man is deceived by his own chimaeras. Man is like that fallen archon, the Demiurge, who created the universe but is ignorant of his own origin, the Godhead. Likewise, man is entrapped in his phantasmagories, oblivious of the Self, his true source of equilibrium, individuation and wholesomeness. The Self will only emerge when the spirit is freed from the dictatorship of the senses. This is translated in "The Masque of the Red Death" and in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as annihilation, which means not total and final havoc, but, rather, an awakening and an enlightenment. Thence, chaos is the possibility and the requirement of the universe to become cosmos again.

This idea of re-creation, of starting over, of renewal of the universe seems to be recurrent since the earliest forms of civilisation. Primitive rites stress the importance of a periodical re-creation of the cosmos, which can still be found in the celebration of the New Year, considered as the opportunity to recover the absolute "beginning" through the destruction and abolition of the old world. This is a sacred time, when end and beginning almost coincide. Ritualistic celebrations or renewal symbolise man's attempts to dominate time. Whereas Indian religions preach that the universe obeys a cycle of creation and destruction, Jewish and Christian doctrines claim only one

apocalypse. What they have in common is the idea that an agent of evil will always bring chaos and reduce the ordered universe to a fading memory. Man's weapon to fight the oblivion of the *illo tempore* of creation is the telling and re-telling of cosmogonic myths. "Knowledge," among primitive men, was equated with knowing the central myth and trying never to forget it, which is very similar to Gnostic awakening and spreading of the truth.

Awakening implies in *anamnesis*, the recognition of the soul's true identity, that is, the acknowledgment of its heavenly origin, for the Gnostics. Anamnesis aims at resurrecting the total past of mankind, which makes it possible to alleviate time's pressure on man as he is projected out of his historic moment into *illo tempore*. It is misleading to think that philosophic anamnesis retrieves the memories of existences long past; on the contrary, it recovers truths, structures of reality, that man forgot when he fell from the *pneuma* down to the *physis*. The Gnostic, then, learns the myth so as to be free from its results, that is, once awake, he understands he has no responsibilities whatsoever in the primordial catastrophe which the myth tells him, and, therefore, he bears no real relationship with life, world and history. For Poe, as can be inferred from his tales, such awakening is synonymous with final unity. In his texts, all difference is abolished by an ideal consciousness: one which is a mixture of that of the man living in the real and of that of the liberated from the real. In Gnostic terms, the man who has recovered the Self.

Poe translates such Gnostic beliefs into a Gothic "monster," that is, the spring that makes the tales of horror move. "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" shelter a "monster" which is no more than a void disguised by man's fears and misconceptions. Indeed, Poe seems to be claiming that man's sorrows are originated in himself, and as such, they

are a vacuum, hidden behind man-made masks. His texts, then, offer an alternative view of reality: instead of a concrete world where everything can be taken at face value, a world that is mere delusion. In such a place, where everything is deceptive, truth cannot be attained by empirical, sensual and experimental means. Quite the contrary, it is the theoretical, ratiocinative and conceptual approach that will eventually disclose it.

Produced in an ideology of direct apprehension of reality, "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" project one other ideology, one of indirect cognition of phenomena. Rather than presenting a portrait of disintegration and "Southern decadence," they present, symbolically, a system of knowledge. In this sense, the tales signify not merely the decay of the aristocratic South but constitute an elaborate display of esoteric allusions - a display enabled by arcane motifs. The reader who finds his access to the tales' meaning hindered by their hermetic indexes is already in possession of that "meaning" without knowing it.

Poe's effect of unity and unity of effect might lead to the wrong assumption of a single meaning in the tales. The literary practice he chose, however, presupposes a plurality of readings, and by extension, no "meaning" at all. Moreover, his proposed knowledge system relying on each reader as the source of his own truth, is indicative of an infinite number of truths, as each individual ought to have his own and not rely on any external authority. There seems to be a paradox here, produced by a clash between the mode and Poe's use of it. The fantastic, and the Gothic as its manifestation, is considered a normative and reactionary literary practice, as has been seen above. Poe, however, produces an antinomy through the dialectical interplay set up between the texts and the reader as interpreter.

He succeeded in inventing two tales that assert the reader as the only reliable ordering voice of a text. Thus, "The Masque of

the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" mark the absolute difference in reading, for "meaning," in them, is originated from individual perception. Systems of knowledge may fall, but heightened perception remains; this is the counter-ideological (anti-normative) gesture of the texts, inscribed in the conspicuous fact of their very existence. It is in this sense that the tales' signifying code contradicts their signified, for, if the fantastic is normative, and if the work exists, then, it does so only as an implicit denial of its signifying code.

It may be argued, on the other hand, that Poe, as a Romantic writer, merely followed the drives of his time and made subjectivity the central emblem of "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." It may be so, but this does not alter the fact that they are Gothic tales and, consequently, conservative. The ideological paradox, then remains. Furthermore, Romantic writers in general seem unable to theorise the inadequacy of their concept of subjectivism and are committed to experience and emotion against theory and ratiocination.

Poe, who proposed a system of knowledge which is subject-oriented, that is, knowledge based on the subject, as he perceives reality, uses the Gothic as an expression of subjectivity. While the Romantic text in general moves towards a centre which is supposed to be the emblem of subjectivity, in the Gothic case it is this centre which expands until it covers the whole text. Instead of subjectivity, however, the Gothic emblem is a central absence. In "The Masque of the Red Death" it is the Red Death, a physical representation of a void tenanted by artificial means. It remains absent throughout the story, but growing irresistibly until it engulfs the whole tale. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the tarn is a void reflecting and is perhaps the graphic image of the text itself. Its discourse is circled by the abysmal tarn on whose precipitous brink the

Narrator is poised. Or, perhaps, *this* is the image of the text: the Narrator poised on the brink of a vacuum. Both the Red Death and the tarn, in the last instance, are a representation of the Gothic text itself, a text built around an absence - semi-revealed, semi-concealed truths, an absence made visible by human artifice.

On all the levels considered, truth seems to be the pivot around which "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" revolve. According to Western tradition, voice (Logos) is a source of authenticity (cf. "the word of the Lord" or "Roma dixit"). Thus, it is in the characters' speech that Poe's "truths" can be found. As the fantastic text with its absences, silences and voids annihilates man's references, it leaves him stranded in a chaotic and mysterious universe. As the fantastic text and its fluctuating signified cancels any external authority, it bestows on man all responsibility for ordering that chaos into a cosmos. Indeed, it is a frightening realisation: to know that behind every "monster" there lurks nothing but man's own image. This is what both Gothic and Gnosticism strive to prove, and what Robert Bloch expressed as he wrote that

"Horror is the removal of masks."

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