‘The Fall of the House of Usher’: A Religious Reading of the Macabre

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The identification of religion or ‘the sacred’ in literature is a personal and prejudicial task. Interpreters bring to the project a preformed awareness of the bounds of ‘religion’, ensuring responses so disparate that authorial intention submits to subjectivity. This raises questions as to whether the assessment of religiosity remains the singular assignment of the reader and whether *deliberate* religion is more authentic than *accidental* religion. In either case, it seems unwise to ignore the semiotic proposals that communication concerns not only what is articulated but also what is construed, and that relevance remains fluid, discretionary and phenomenological. This is not to soft-pedal the author’s involvement in the construction of meaning, nor to imply that a work cannot be *designedly* imbued with religious tenor; on the contrary, it is the writer’s exclusive business to cultivate suggestive material for the reader’s review and appraisal. It is the reader, however, who actively extracts religion from a text by collaring the cues he or she determines pertinent. This paper will pursue an analysis of cue-construction and cue-detection in the gothic tales of Edgar Allan Poe, with pointed reference to the evocation of fear as a means of provoking religious responses.

Whilst Poe was not an outwardly pious man,[1] a profusion of Episcopal allegiances imbued his formative years. Born, baptised and reared in the bosom of a Baltimore diocese, Poe’s exposure to the Christian faith was typical of his nineteenth century Anglo-American context. His stepmother’s fervent devotion to the canons of the Church was demonstrative of a wider, matter-of-course convention that ‘bathed [the public] in a general consensus of the existence of

[1] See the biographical profile rendered in Gray’s ‘“I am a Virginian”: Edgar Allan Poe and the South’ in R A Lee (ed) *Edgar Allan Poe: The Design of Order* (London, 1987) 182-201. See also the discussion of Poe and religion in M Burduck, *Usher’s ‘A Forgotten Church’? – Edgar Allan Poe and Nineteenth-Century American Catholicism* (Baltimore, 1999).

God and the importance of religion'.[2] Thus, while Poe – 'the would-be necrophiliac or vampire, the madman, the drug-taker, the alcoholic, the husband of a child-bride, the gambler and celebrant of "the perverse"'[3] – may have pursued little affiliation with organised religion in his adulthood, his upbringing rendered him versant with the principles and polemics of Christian belief. Accordingly, there is justification for construing from his tales an aesthetic of *polarity* which manifestly adheres to the biblical opposites of heaven versus hell, salvation versus damnation, godliness versus godlessness, and good versus evil.

Poe's concern with spiritual calamity is in part a product of historical circumstance. Mapping his position onto the broader field of religio-cultural history, one can observe that his preoccupation with the uncanny hails from a peculiarly American tradition of 'the mixture made of religion and revenge'.[4] To comprehend this convention is to track the seventeenth century vestiges of transatlantic settlement from England to America and to discern the foundation of a Christian clique with 'narrow and literal adherence' to biblical precedents.[5] The assumption that impiety was the cause of misfortune and discord constituted 'the fixed intellect of the age'[6] and fostered a fear of both divine chastisement and diabolic interference. Whether the newly-colonised land was folklorically – and intentionally – invested with 'American devils' by the 'English imagination'[7] or whether its demons were the natural creatures of frightened fancy, the evil figures of seventeenth and eighteenth century America were cast in moulds retrieved from the vast corpus of Christian history. Indeed, the Miltonesque prose of Bishop Hall neatly illustrates the attitude of early American Christians to the activity of Satan's lot: 'That evill spirits have given certaine proofes of their presence with men, both in

[2] Edgar Allan Poe Society, *Poe and Religion* (Baltimore, 2000) accessed 25 June 2006, http://www.eapoe.org/generalinfo/poerelig.htm.
[3] Lee, *op cit*, 7.
[4] A Eggleston, *The Transit of Civilization: From England to America in the Seventeenth Century* (Massachusetts, 1959) Preface.
[5] *Ibid*, 180.
[6] *Ibid*, 23.
[7] *Ibid*, 26.

visible apparitions and in the possessions of places and bodies ... is no lesse manifest then [*sic*] that we have soules'.[8]

If, as Eggleston maintains, 'gross superstition could not be disentangled from the creed of the time',[9] Poe's involvement with the Christian Church enculturated him with the crepuscular moments of a discernibly *macabre* tradition.[10] 'Child[ren] of the eighteenth century'[11] had already come to find the spectral legends of maleficent folklore to provide fruitful fodder for literature: a cursory sweep of the era's anthology uncovers the flagship gothica of Ann Radcliffe, Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne,[12] and exposes a literary epoch conducive to the production of romanticised, supernatural

[8] Cited in *ibid*, 24.
[9] *Ibid*, 23.
[10] The fundamentals of this tradition are most eloquently explicated by H P Lovecraft in his chapter 'The Weird Tradition in America' in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York, 1973) 60-75: 'This [tradition] ... proceeded ... from the keen spiritual and theological interests of the first colonists, plus the strange and forbidding nature of the scene into which they were plunged. The vast and gloomy virgin forests in whose perpetual twilight all terrors might well lurk; the hordes of coppery Indians whose strange, saturnine visages and violent customs hinted strongly at traces of infernal origin; the free rein given under the influence of Puritan theocracy to all manner of notions respecting man's relation to the stern and vengeful God of the Calvinists, and to the sulphureous Adversary of that God, about whom so much was thundered in the pulpits each Sunday; and the morbid introspection developed by an isolated backwoods life devoid of normal amusements and of the recreational mood, harassed by commands for theological self-examination, keyed to unnatural emotional repression, and forming above all a grim struggle for survival – all these things conspired to produce an environment in which the black whisperings of sinister grandams were heard far beyond the chimney corner, and in which tales of witchcraft and unbelievable secret monstrosities lingered long after the dread days of the Salem nightmare', *ibid*, 60-61.
[11] H P Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York, 1973) 22.
[12] See Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1819) and *Rip Van Winkle* (1820), and Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). This paper concerns early-mid nineteenth century literary trends in America; comparable works emerged from Germany at this time (in the writings of Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, Friedrich Heinrich Karl and Wilhelm Meinhold) and from England and Ireland in the following decades: Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890), Rudyard Kipling's *The Mark of the Beast* (1890) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

horror. Whilst on one hand it seems paradoxical to suggest that out of Calvinistic altruism sprung a thirst for the grotesque, it is on the other hand reasonable to explain terror (both personal and cosmic) as a response to the threats of Puritan dogma. Fear of the unknown, remarks Lovecraft, is the 'oldest and strongest emotion of mankind' and, while the parameters of the exotic and the unexplained have been steadily contracting for many thousands of years, a commodious 'reservoir of mystery' continues to flank the cosmos.[13] The gruesome fear stories of Poe and his contemporaries abound not because the unknown is innately dire, but because all feelings toward the *benevolent* facets of the preternatural have long been captured, ritualised and sacralised by the tenets of conventional religion. It has fallen to legend and literature to own the malevolent detritus.

Ironically, Poe himself stated confidently of his epics that each was geared towards a single effect or sentiment which 'elevat[es] the soul'.[14] With respect to the *blackness* of his balladry, precisely what Poe means by 'elevate' is uncertain: if it hints not so much at a hallowed raising up as at a didactic *awakening* of the soul, Poe's tales can be interpreted in the terms of true horror-lore, as devices intended for the excitement of spiritual dread. Archetypal of his disquieting stories, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' formulaically strives to interpolate readers and place them in a state of vulnerable solitude. Identifying with an affable, sometimes listless and deliberately unnamed narrator, the reader is primed, seduced and then utterly unnerved by a gently revealed horror that perplexes as much as it repulses. Saliba remarks: 'Meaning in Poe's gothic tales is synonymous with experience; that is, for the reader to comprehend one of his tales he has to experience it, to feel its effects. This means that his gothic art is emotive, like the dark side of the mind'.[15] The point of access for Poe, then, resides not in rational cognisance but emotional connection, at that moment where the reader is compelled

[13] Lovecraft, *op cit*, 12, 14.
[14] 'The Poetic Principle' in E A Poe, *Selected Writings* (Baltimore, 1967) 499.
[15] D Saliba, *A Psychology of Fear: The Nightmare Theory of Edgar Allan Poe* (Lanham, 1980) 6.

to confront the iniquity of the narrative personally, subjectively and with trepidation.

Admittedly, if the reader fails to experience the fear that Poe's tales endeavour to evoke, then his art is essentially impotent. But Poe is neither oblivious of this risk nor compelled to ignore it, undertaking in a most methodical and masterful way the task of ensuring that readers are powerless to evade the trauma that his horror inflicts. T S Eliot perhaps first observed the particulars of his design in his essay 'From Poe to Valery'. Here he observes that Poe's art 'has the effect of an incantation', perturbing the reader at a level too painful to investigate intellectually, so deep as to be appreciable only in terms of the Jungian 'unconscious', the irrational quarter of the mind wherein resides emotional instinct.[16] As concerns his method, Poe held obdurately to the theory that the literary evocation of terror 'could all be done by formula'[17] – a formula determined over a century later by David Saliba to be structurally identical to that which occurs in actual human nightmares. Replicating the mechanisms by which the *dreamer* is terrorised, Poe's four-step formula traces the 'isolation of the reader'; the 'stunning of the reader's sensibility'; the 'victimization of the reader's emotions' and the 'premature burial of the reader's reason'.[18] For the writer aiming to frighten his audience, the consequence of following a formula is that, once the reader conceives of himself in a position commensurate with that of the narrator, he commits to sharing the narrator's sense of hopelessness. Vulnerable to the craft of Poe's nightmare fiction, the reader is sentenced to suffer whatever earthly or metaphysical catastrophe besieges the protagonist and, like a dreamer in a nightmare, he is cornered, outflanked and pitilessly hamstrung.[19]

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[16] Cited in *ibid*, 2. A brief but pithy explanation of the unconscious as a repository for 'temporarily obscured thoughts, impressions, and images that ... continue to influence our conscious minds' should be sought from Chapter 1 of C G Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (London, 1964). See page 18 for the quoted passage.

[17] A Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London, 1968) 148.

[18] See Saliba, *op cit*, 17, *passim*.

[19] That Poe should draw so directly from the structural paradigms of dream and nightmare is doubly pertinent to the question of religiosity, as Lovecraft expounds: 'The phenomenon of dreaming also helped to build up the notion of an unreal or

Through 'parallel symbolic suggestions ... alternative explanations, natural and supernatural, of the phenomena set forth',[20] 'The Fall of the House of Usher' embodies dilapidation across familial, structural, and psychological gradients. Delivered to his lachrymose destination by a horse (the original nightmare incubus, Saliba reminds us[21]) Poe's narrator experiences nothing more cheerful than 'utter depression of soul', which he is unable to connect to any 'earthly sensation'.[22] The visitor is ill-equipped to convert his melancholia into 'aught of the sublime' (138) or in any manner to allay the deathly miasma which 'reeked up from the tarn', having 'no affinity with the air of heaven' (140). The deliberate dichotomisation of 'underworld' and 'upper world' make it impossible to evade a *biblical* reading, with associated eschatological impulses, as the horrors of Usher unfold. The opening paragraphs of Poe's calamitous tale foreshadow a *hellish* nightmare, characterised by a total absence of salvific potential. Beguiled by a 'mystery all insoluble' (138), the narrator is forced to approach the house in absolute isolation, not merely bereft of logic but apparently godforsaken.

A similar aura of godlessness prevails *inside* the mansion, although D H Lawrence avers that this attests, not to divine abandonment, but to the Ushers' abnegation of Christian sanctity.[23] Siblings Roderick and Madeline are the last surviving issue of an ancient ancestral legacy dictating that every dynastic member lies in a direct and immediate line of descent. Thus, the love between them is not merely filial but incestually carnal, conferring a 'gratification of [the] intensest

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spiritual world; and in general, all the conditions of savage dawn-life so savagely conducted toward a feeling of the supernatural, that we need not wonder at the thoroughness with which man's very hereditary essence has become saturated with religion and superstition', *op cit*, 13-14.

[20] D Abel, cited in '"William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"' in E W Carlson (ed) *A Companion to Poe Studies* (Connecticut, 1996) 192.

[21] *Op cit,* 162.

[22] Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 138. Subsequent references to the 'The Fall of the House of Usher' will be to this edition of his *Selected Writings*, and referenced by page number in the text.

[23] See D H Lawrence, 'Edgar Allan Poe' in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge, 2003 [1923]) Chapter 6.

vibration of the spiritual nerves, without any resistance'.[24] This deficit in piety, Lawrence explains, brings about the Ushers' demise:

> It is a ghastly psychological truth of what happens in the last stages of this beloved love, which can not be separate, cannot be isolate, cannot live in isolation to the isolate Holy Ghost. For it is by the Holy Ghost we must live by [sic]. And the Holy Ghost speaks individually inside each individual: always ever a ghost.[25]

Whilst Lawrence's heavy-handed, pseudo-Freudian psychoanalysis may seem to seep from the repository of 'ahistorical ontologies that suppose Man is essentially wicked',[26] his assertions about the perils of hedonistic excess are nonetheless pertinent to a Christian reading of Poe's disheartening story. The Ushers, unable to exist apart from each other 'betrayed the Holy Ghost in themselves',[27] precipitating a cataclysmic ruination of both themselves and their 'House' – 'an Enlightenment tradition still standing but about to collapse'.[28]

Semantically and symbolically, the 'fall' of which Poe speaks resonates with the cosmogonical narrative of Eden. In striving to 'know' an intensity of love properly reserved for the Divine, Roderick and Madeline parody their biblical counterparts, Adam and Eve, who occasion their own separation from God through a paradoxical bid to join Him. Just as God's chastening of Adam imposes 'enmity between thee and the woman',[29] so too the Ushers endure the torment of schism after violating what Lawrence terms 'the first law of life', specifically 'that each organism is isolate in itself'.[30] Roderick, vexed and frenzied by a gross acuteness of the senses, concedes that he '... *must* perish in this deplorable folly' (142) – an admission that identifies the inevitable consequence of his union

[24] *Ibid*, 39.
[25] *Ibid*, 43.
[26] J Keane, *Reflections on Violence* (London, 1996) 109.
[27] Lawrence, *op cit*, 43.
[28] S Peeples, 'Poe's "Constructiveness" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"' in K J Hayes (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge, 2002) 182.
[29] Genesis 3:15, *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, 1611 edition.
[30] *Op cit*, 37.

with Madeline and portends the apocalypse set to decimate both his castle and its dynasty.

Indeed, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is replete with eschatology, both at superficial and abstruse thematic levels. Madeline – cadaverous of person, cataleptic of disposition and prone to worsening bouts of comatose rigidity – represents arguably the most salient figure of *human* apocalypse in the narrative. But it is perhaps the more *diffuse* crises of reason and rationality that ought to be magnified for the purposes of this study. As Perry remarks, 'apocalyptic stories tell of reality coming apart and the failure of human will and reason to put it back together'.[31] When the narrator's increasing unease leads him to contemplate the 'combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of affecting us thus' (138-139), he identifies the grandest of threats to natural order: *the uncanny,* a semblance that takes hold when the 'apparently familiar reveals its unfamiliarity'.[32] These 'shadowy fancies' (138); these 'inverted images' (139); this 'wild inconsistency' (141); this 'hideous dropping off of the veil' (138): each connotes a moment at which the narrator surrenders to a panicky distrust of reason, returning to rationality only as a refuge from the grotesqueness of the 'facts'.[33] Like the 'house with its ominous crack',[34] the narrator's connection to *the real* is from the outset a frayed and fault-ridden alliance, as Lee submits: 'If what seems living can be deathly, and what seems whole be about to disintegrate, might this not be true of the narrator?'[35]

The psychological fates of Roderick, Madeline and their guest are echoed in the crumbling of the mansion. A Jungian reading of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' suggests itself: 'The house occurs very often as a symbol in dreams, and it generally means the habitual or inherited attitude, the habitual way of living ... or perhaps the way one lives with the whole family'.[36] In no other of Poe's tales is the

[31] D Perry, *Hitchcock and Poe: the Legacy of Delight and Terror* (Lanham, 2003) 45.
[32] P Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze* (Cambridge, 1991) 7.
[33] Abel, *op cit*, 205.
[34] *Ibid*, 192.
[35] M Kinkead-Weekes in Lee, *op cit*, 20.
[36] C Jung, *Dream Analysis Part I* (London, 1995 [1938]) 39.

house so central, both to the story's plot and to its intricate symbolism,[37] representing from the first an allegorical simulacrum of the flailing souls[38] that tenant its rooms. Even in the purely atmospheric sense, the House of Usher is beset by the same 'mystic' (138) and noxious effluvium that fogs the sentience of the narrator. Carlson remarks of Leo Spitzer that his 'knowledge of linguistics, comparative literature, and the history of ideas' led him to understand 'atmosphere' in the period 1797-1830 as 'the surrounding mental or moral element'[39] – bolstering suggestions of an intentional link between 'the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets' and 'the *morale* of [Roderick's] existence' (144).

It is perhaps the *interior* of Poe's house that plays more keenly on the narrator's (and indeed the reader's) spiritual sense. This metaphor repeats themes of the sixteenth century psychological treatise of St Teresa, *The Interior Castle*. As in 'William Wilson', the House of Usher is described in a manner 'that clearly suggests the "subdivisions" of the human mind'[40] and builds on St Teresa's declaration that 'we ourselves are the castle'.[41] *The Interior Castle*'s multi-storeyed morphology (with 'rooms above, others below, others at each side')[42] depicts a highly-wrought human soul with potential for both celestial communion and wanton trespass, beckoning its owner to enter its doors much like the narrator is summoned to Roderick's family fortress. Specifically, it is the lower rooms of the House of Usher – those 'numerous vaults' (150) – that are associated with the narrator's 'intolerable agitation of soul' (144), for it is in these catacombs that Madeline – 'the unconscious "evil" in Usher'[43] – is prematurely interred. St Teresa warns of the soul's lower rooms

[37] Peeples, *op cit*, 179.
[38] There is a strong parallel between Poe's idea of the individual soul and Jung's explanation of the unconscious: 'In fact, most of what Poe has to say about his "soul" indicates that it is basically the same concept that Jung refers to as the unconscious mind'. Saliba, *op cit*, 12.
[39] Cited in Carlson, *op cit*, 194.
[40] Peeples, *op cit*, 179.
[41] St Teresa of Avila*, The Interior Castle ('The Mansions')* (London, 1944) 3.
[42] *Ibid*, 2.
[43] Carlson, *op cit*, 197.

that 'so many reptiles get within them',[44] for it is these chambers that rest most remotely from throne of God and lend themselves to darkness and disaster.

Even Roderick's artistic flirtations – notably his 'Haunted Palace' poem with its 'evil things, in robes of sorrow / assail[ing] the monarch's high estate' (148) and his painting of a cavernous grotto with tunnels at an 'exceeding depth below the surface of the earth' (146) – intimate the godless vacuity that Teresa describes in the soul's less holy receptacles. Just as the lowly spirit 'becomes rooted in a pool of pitch-black, evil-smelling water', so too the House of Usher sinks into the 'deep and dank tarn' (157) as the narrator's psychology endures its final breakdown. The tarn itself, representing 'the oneness or nothingness from which all has emerged and to which all must return',[45] becomes a cesspool of spiritual refuse and a mirror for the narrator's personal apocalypse; it is, after all, *his* mind that is reflected in the murky water. Having ventured into his soul and found himself 'oppressed' (155), 'appalled' (152), 'terrified' and 'infected' (151) by the resident demons Madeline and Roderick, the narrator flees the tragedy in utter solitude lest he look back upon his miserable condition and 'be turned into pillars of salt ... just as Lot's wife was'.[46] Eliot captures the hellish predicament: 'Hell is oneself; Hell is alone, the other figures in it merely projections. There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to. One is always alone'.[47]

If the spiritual sense of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is indeed so perfectly hellish, one might wonder at the reader's persistence with the text. The formula of the nightmare, we have seen, identifies 'the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible',[48] luring the reader to an emotional quarantine where the principles of reality are vapid and useless. It does not explain, however, why Poe's dire and defeatist tales command such affection and patronage. Peeples remarks of this tale: 'the story is over, the text

[44] St Teresa of Avila, *op cit*, 4.
[45] Beebe, cited in Carlson, *op cit*, 194.
[46] St Teresa of Avila, *op cit*, 3.
[47] T S Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (London, 1953) Act I, Scene III.
[48] Poe, cited in Hayter, *op cit*, 148.

vanishes as the narrator escapes the collapsing building just as the reader closes the book. But of course, the book will be opened again, the narrator will go back over the causeway and the reader will follow him through that maze'.[49] Therein, it seems, lies the key to Poe's paradox: despite the torment that his drama inflicts, '[t]he hard fact is that violence can be experienced as pleasure'.[50] The view of human nature as inherently masochistic wields, for Poe, a certain intuitive appeal. It guarantees his tales of human demise a position on the bookshelves of posterity and institutes 'a new standard of realism'[51] in the annals of literary horror. Working with an analytical knowledge of terror's truest sources, Poe taps into a quintessentially human tendency, noted most eloquently in 'The Black Cat': the 'unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex* itself – to offer violence to its own nature, to do wrong for the wrong's sake only'.[52]

Freud supposed, perhaps misleadingly, that the experience of the uncanny – the vulgar and the spiritual operating in tandem – was a universal human ordeal.[53] He failed to appreciate that the uncanny 'tend[s] to be monopolized and strictly defined by core institutions such as religious authorities',[54] so that the success of Poe's supernatural mission is utterly dependent on the symbols of Christology. Witnessing a human soul in atrophy, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is unquestionably informed by Edenic legend, saturated in the threats of apocalypse, steeped in the impiety of 'atmospheric vampirism'[55] and imbued on all levels with the grand Christian fear of 'nothingness'. It is grotesque literature at its most real: intentionally perverse, inescapably frightening and utterly embroiled in a religious sensibility.

[49] Peeples, *op cit*, 187.
[50] Keane, *op cit*, 116.
[51] Lovecraft, *op cit*, 53.
[52] Poe, 'The Black Cat', 322.
[53] Keane, *op cit*, 119.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] Carlson, *op cit,* 198.