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FANTASTIC IMAGERY
IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S TALES OF TERROR

Although an acclaimed literary critic and poet, Edgar Allan Poe remains best known and appreciated for his short stories, chiefly those of terror, in which he depicted the solitary mind's confrontation with the mysterious and supernatural. The protagonist of Poe's most successful tales, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Black Cat", "William Wilson" or "Ligeia", is the abnormally sensitive man at odds with reality, who finds himself slowly drifting into a world of inexplicable terrors. Poe's unique approach to the problems of death, disease and irrationality has led to his being recognized as one of the finest craftsmen of fantastic fiction¹.

The "fantastic" itself is not an easy term to define; there is much disagreement among critics as to its exact nature. To differentiate between the various approaches to the problem, Gerhard Hoffman, in his essay, "The Fantastic in Fiction: Its Reality Status, Its Historical Development and Its Transformation in Postmodern Narration", briefly lists the chief definitions. The simplest genre definitions of the fantastic simply list such characteristic motifs of the supernatural as "pacts with the devil [...] the ghost, the appearance of the personified death among the living [...] vampires"². H. P. Lovecraft and R. Caillois

¹ G. H o f f m a n, *The Fantastic in Fiction: Its Reality Status, Its Historical Development and Its Transformation in Postmodern Narration*, "The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature", 1982, p. 301-302 (Berlin).

² *ibid.*, p. 270.

maintain that reader response is the main criterion of the fantastic: "We must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author's intentions and mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes. A tale is fantastic if the reader experiences an emotion of profound fear, awe and terror, the presence of unsuspected worlds and powers"³. On a deeper level, Caillois sees the fantastic as being in opposition to extralinguistic reality, an approach that Hoffman calls into question: "The reality status of the fictional world can only be defined through the text itself", he argues⁴. A similar observation is made by E. Rabkin in "The Fantastic in Literature": "when the ground rules of a narrative are diametrically reversed, the protagonist and the reader along with him-experience the fantastic"⁵. Thus, Rabkin considers "Alice in Wonderland" a true Fantasy because of its periodic reversals of the ground rules of fiction; an internally consistent mode-such as J. R. R. Tolkien's is merely a "fairy-tale"⁶. Tzvetan Todorov, an authority on the fantastic, defines the fantastic as a moment of hesitation, uncertainty as to the origin of the unexplained phenomena. Once this uncertainty is resolved, a tale can fall into the realm of the uncanny-permitting a rational explanation-or of the marvelous, where only a supernatural interpretation is acceptable⁷. To Todorov, then, the fantastic lies chiefly in the reaction of the subject to the supernatural, and not in the actual event.

Hoffman himself sees the function of the fantastic "in terms of the tension that exists between the real and the fantastic, the schema and its correction. This means that the fantastic can be merely an unimaginative and unproblematical extension of the real, or it can challenge the norms of the supposedly real and conflict with it. The fantastic accordingly ranges from the world of willing suspension of disbelief in the fairy-tale,

³ T. T o d o r o v, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 29.

⁴ H o f f m a n, *The Fantastic in Fiction...*, p. 270.

⁵ E. S. R a b k i n, *The Fantastic in Literature*, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ T o d o r o v, *The Fantastic: A Structural...*, p. 41.

through the depiction of the «abnormal» side of the human soul, to the hermetically fantastic world that questions [...] the reality status of the real itself, and to the satirically and grotesquely fantastic that is directed aggressively outwards"⁸.

What therefore is the nature of Poe's fantastic in light of the seemingly conflicting definitions posited by various critics? To begin with, there is Poe's use of the supernatural backdrop. Although Poe certainly did not rely solely on the stock tricks of the Gothic, most of his stories owe their grim effectiveness to his typically Gothic choice of setting and its concomitant atmosphere of gloom: the crumbling family mansion, the dark-or darkened-secluded room and a disquieting array of characters-black cats, mysterious doubles and strange women. Poe concentrated on what Todorov and Caillois called "the irruption of the unusual and unnatural into the ordered familiarity of the everyday"⁹, his singleminded devotion to the doctrine of "effect" ("The unity of effect or impression is of the greatest importance", he wrote¹⁰) moved him to pen tales of great emotional intensity. As for Todorov's definition, its rigidity pitches most of Poe's tales into either the uncanny or marvelous-he considers only "The Black Cat" fantastic, ambiguous to the end¹¹. Hoffman disagrees: "The step forward that Poe took for the fantastic short story and what Todorov fails to see [...] is the integration of the fantastic into the narrative situation. This gives the fantastic an atmospheric (in Todorov's terms "uncanny") base in space and time"¹². Hoffman considers Poe the master of the situational integration of the fantastic-in Poe the fantastic situation grows out of an uncanny one, yet still retains the characteristics of the marvelous¹³. Rational phenomena call forth irrational responses-Poe manipulates the trappings of the realistic so as to evoke the atmosphere of the fantastic. "The singular

⁸ Hoffman, *The Fantastic in Fiction...*, p. 283.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁰ E. A. Poe, *Twice-Told Tales*, [in:] *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. D. Galloway, Penguin Books, 1982, p. 446.

¹¹ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural...*, p. 48.

¹² Hoffman, *The Fantastic in Fiction...*, p. 301.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

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wrought out into the strange and mystical" - this is Poe's own interpretation of his craft¹⁴. In the diseased mind, the commonplace gradually becomes menacing and fantastic. (Poe himself refers to his tales as "phantasy pieces" in his Preface to his 1840 edition of "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque"¹⁵.) Poe's tales of terror fuse stock Gothic elements and the psychology of the abnormal and psychopathic into one bizarre vision; thus, the imagery of Poe's tales mirrors the complexities of the stricken mind and emphasizes the tortuousness of the journey into the unknown and the fantastic.

Gothic romance, with its proliferation of frowning castles, haunted galleries and lonely landscapes, recorded the age's belief in man's deep-seated desire for the beautiful and his inexplicable, instinctual yearning for mystery, wonder and fear, fear being, like love, a sublime emotion¹⁶. "Man's spirit feeds on mystery and his soul is quickened by the icy touch of fear, for he experiences pure terror when confronted by the dim world of the supernatural", writes D. Varma in "The Gothic Flame"¹⁷. Thus, the Gothic novelist strove to evoke suspense by educing terror from the mysterious supernatural, the beauty of which, in turn would refine terror and prevent it from verging on disgust¹⁸. The classical Gothic story-tellers, such as Ann Radcliffe, aimed at arousing dread by the use of dim suggestions of the supernatural¹⁹. The German school of horror, on the opposite hand, stressed the "exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting"²⁰. Poe, who would at times tend toward the sensationalistic and merely horrible (as he did in his earliest tales, "Metzengerstein" or "Berenice") saw his art in a slightly different light: "If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the

¹⁴ A. H. Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe; A Critical Biography, D. Appleton Century, New York 1963, p. 213.

¹⁵ Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe..., p. 23.

¹⁶ D. P. Varma, The Gothic Flame, Russell and Russell, New York 1966, p. 225.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

soul-that I have deduced this terror from its legitimate sources and urged it only to its legitimate results"²¹. Generally speaking, in his aim of producing a certain emotional effect and in his method of creating suspense, Poe seems to have been influenced by Ann Radcliffe²². Like, Mrs. Radcliffe, he is a "poet of apprehension"²³, choosing to downplay the physical atrocities and concentrating instead on the mental anguish of the protagonist, tracing his reaction to menace and the burgeoning of disquietude into fear and terror. However, in Mrs. Radcliffe's tales, the source of terror lies without, and is ultimately rationalized. In Poe's tales, the fantastic experience is usually self-induced and solitary, the result of the upsetting of the protagonist's delicate mental balance-with the exception of tales such as "The Pit and the Pendulum" or "A Descent into the Maelstrom", where the menace is intended to be objectively "real". If Radcliffe moves from the unknown to the known and explicable, Poe is moving in the opposite direction-from the real to the fantastic.

Like Mrs. Radcliffe, Poe can be very suggestive at crucial moments. We never learn exactly what it was that William Wilson saw the night he stole into his double's bedroom. Lady Madeline of Usher appears only as a fleeting sensation of dread during her life, and the feelings both Ushers evoke are distressingly vague. The consequence of the final plunge into a seething whirlpool or Inquisitorial pit are likewise left to the imagination, as are the horrors of live burial, vividly suggested through the medium of sound in "The Cask of Amontillado".

The central image conditioning the Gothic tale was that of the castle, or any other isolated or decaying edifice, timeless and impenetrable: one of the most popular themes was that of imprisonment²⁴. In the classical Gothic tale, the heroine's response to her surroundings was quite predictable. In Poe's stories, the relationship between the individual and the "outer" reality is usually highly irrational and cannot be predicted: "mere obser-

²¹ Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe..., p. 23.

²² V a r m a, The Gothic Flame..., p. 110.

²³ J. M. S. T o w p k i n s, The Popular Novel in England 1700-1800 Constable and Co., Ltd., London 1932, p. 258.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 269.

vation often changes immediately into emotional attunement and the inexplicable phenomenon of attunement again provokes the attempt merely to observe, thus giving rise to a psychologically well-founded sequence attunement, observation, attunement and so forth which is strengthened even more by the reflection that does not solve the riddle, and thus comes in nothing. Observation, attunement and reflection are brought into a tense, dynamic relationship [...] that forms the basis for the reader's experience of the uncanny and through the uncanny, the fantastic"²⁵, says Hoffman. External reality becomes a hostile entity, gaining an unshakeable hold on the vulnerable mind, feeding on the fear it engenders and drawing the protagonist into a disastrous whirlwind of obsession. Poe's characters, unable to face reality, seek refuge in dim, decaying mansions, where they can abandon themselves to timeless reverie. Darkness, seclusion and the solitary mind-these, the chief characteristics of incarceration, dominate Poe's tales-and these are reflected in the imagery.

Richard Wilbur points out that the most recurrent motif of Poe's tales is that of enclosure or "circumscription", which symbolizes "the exclusion from consciousness of the "real" world, the world of time and reason and physical fact"²⁶. Angularity is painful-as it is in "the Pit and the Pendulum". Poe's dreamer prefers to withdraw to the isolated chamber, the contours of which are either lost in shadow ("The Fall of the House of Usher") or concealed by rich drapes and tapestries or an eclectic array of period pieces ("Ligeia"). Even the characters of the sea tales ("MS. Found in a Bottle", "A Descent into the Maelstrom") who sail under open skies, soon find themselves entrapped in "stupendous ramparts of ice" which look like "the walls of the universe"²⁷. The inhabitants of the "House of Poe" voluntarily shun all light, drawing sable drapes during the day or relying on tinted glass to filter through sunlight, which then sheds "a

²⁵ Hoffman, *The Fantastic in Fiction...*, p. 302.

²⁶ R. Wilbur, *The House of Poe*, [in:] *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. Regan, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1967, p. 104.

²⁷ E. A. Poe, *Found in a Bottle*, [in:] *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, Doubleday and Co. Inc., Garden City, New York 1966, p. 153 (All citations from this source.).

ghastly hue on the objects within"²⁸. What Poe's protagonist aims at achieving is a state of permanent perceptual ambiguity, for, in the dreamlike ambience of a silent chamber, consciousness can, presumably, shed the fetters of sensation and delight in mystic visions originating within the mind. Unfortunately, the visions that Poe's dreamers experience do not form within the vacuum of consciousness, but are the fruit of the impingement of physical reality (whether heartbeat - "The Tell-Tale Heart", tapestry - "Ligeia", or simply sound - "The Fall of the House of Usher"). Unable to disassociate constructs of the mind from elements of reality, the clouded intellect fuses both inner reverie and outer sensation into a vision that can be called surreal.

Surrealism is a movement which glorifies the activity of the unconscious mind and stresses the over-all importance of the dream experience, which, in the words of Arnold Hauser, becomes "a paradigm of the whole world picture, in which reality and unreality, logic and fantasy, banality and sublimation of experience form an indissoluble and inexplicable unity"²⁹. Most of Poe's protagonists agree-there is, for instance, the celebrated statement made by the narrator of "Eleonora": "They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night"³⁰; Ligeia's lover confesses that his "labors" and "orders" "had taken coloring from my dreams"³¹. Usher paints indescribable paintings which evoke the immaterial. Whether of a surrealist frame of mind or not, all of Poe's protagonists ultimately find themselves facing a surrealist experience. The surrealist in Poe is produced in very much the same way as it is in the Gothic novel-by the extensive use of grotesque contrasts, notably by contrasting colours, light with darkness, big with small, sound with silence, the natural with the supernatural³².

When applying the principle of contrast to his tales of ter-

²⁸ E. A. Poe, The Masque of the Red Death, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 258-259.

²⁹ V a r m a, The Gothic Flame..., p. 66.

³⁰ E. A. Poe, Eleonora, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 513.

³¹ E. A. Poe, Ligeia, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 102.

³² V a r m a, The Gothic Flame..., p. 70.

ror, Poe never lost sight of his favorite motif - that of the circle, the traditional figure of perfection. David Halliburton writes, "Rhythm, cycle and revolution are closely connected with the idea of circularity, the circle being the constant expression of that circle of continuity which the other phenomena embody in flux. In the terror tales, rhythm and circularity are essentially negative-terror is compounded through the pattern of repetition"³³. Poe would often introduce an uneasy psychological rhythm, indicative of the growing destabilization of the mind, "the tottering of lofty reason upon her throne"³⁴, an intellectual and emotional see-saw conditioned by and conditioning external phenomena.

The most impressive surreal setting is created by Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death": "within the "voluptuous" chambers of his contorted, grotesque imperial suite he holds his bizarre masque: "To and fro in the seven chambers they stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And there-th; dreams-writhed in and about-taking hue from the rooms and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps"³⁵. Pleasure and fear, abandon and restraint, motion and stasis succeed each other cyclically, to terminate only with the arrival of the Red Death: "And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall"³⁶. Reality has once more intruded into a wonderful dream.

In "the Pit and the Pendulum", the narrator succumbs to the most maddening of rhythms - the anguish of sinking and soaring spirits, insensibility and hypersensitivity, apathy and activity, stimulated by the cyclical nature of the torture itself. Hope and despair follow each other in "A Decsent into the Maelstrom", as the moonlit walls of ebony waves spin the helpless fishermen around. Passages of arresting sensory impact alternate with re-

³³ D. Halliburton, Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 318.

³⁴ E. A. Poe, The Fall of the House of Usher, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 190.

³⁵ Poe, The Masque..., p. 258-259.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 260.

ports on inner doubts and vacillations. Everything is larger than life: in "MS. Found in a Bottle", the gigantic ship hovers "on a wave of an elevation beyond the albatross".³⁷ the blackness of the sea clashes with the dazzling whiteness of "ramparts of ice" and scorching walls of fire draw together menacingly in "The Pit and the Pendulum".

In stories such as "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" Poe shifted the focus from inner conflict to outer catastrophe, from narrator to setting—the sea whose awesome and terrifying force that the protagonist both fears and admires. In "MS. Found in a Bottle" Poe uses the perennial motif of the marinistic supernatural—the ghost ship and its ghost crew: "What she is NOT, I can easily perceive—what she is, I fear it is impossible to say"³⁸. In each case, Poe's protagonist moves from a state of uneasy onboard security into the dangers of shipwreck and finds himself at the mercy of howling wind and mountainous breakers. Nature provides the suspense when she turns supernatural: "Eternal light continued to envelope us, all unreleved by the phosphoric sea-brilliance to which we has been accustomed in the tropics. We observed too, that although the tempest continued to rage with unabated violence, there was no longer to be observed the usual appearance of surf or foam which had hitherto attended us. All around were horror, and thick gloom and a black sweltering desert of ebony"³⁹. The plot of these stories hinges on the narrators' desperate attempts to ride out the supernatural storm. They are prey to the nightmare of perpetual motion, of unspent energy, which hurtles its victims into mystery and discovery at the same time: "It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction"⁴⁰. A primeval rhythm animates the whole scene—the heave of the waves, the slack and upturn of the maelstrom, the rise and fall of the narrator's spirits. This is drama on a cosmic scale: "The rays of the moon seemed to search the very bottom of the profound gulf, but still

³⁷ Poe, MS. Found in a Bottle...., p. 148.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

I could make out nothing distinctly, on account of a thick mist in which everything was enveloped, and over which there hung a magnificent rainbow like that narrow and tottering bridge that Musulmen say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity"⁴¹. The sailors strike up an uneasy relationship with the sea, with Nature itself—they confront her in all of her tempestuous glory—and try to come out alive. The quality of this experience is different from that of Usher's or William Wilson's, who grapple with "the grim phantasm fear" or conscience.

In other tales, it is the protagonist's terror that transforms reality. In "The Black Cat", the killer's fear turns his pet cat into a shapeless and unrecognizable monster, of which only the mouth and eye remain. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", the victim, an old man, is likewise reduced from a person to a single "vulture eye". Ligeia's strangely luminous eyes inspire and obsess her soul-mate. The eye becomes a domineering entity—it comforts, it provokes, it observes and is observed, it is the stimulus which can goad a man to kill, condemn him to die, command fear or fascination, or both: "I met the glance of her meaning eyes, and then my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss" ("Morella")⁴². The experience of the eye is a kind of revelation, a revelation of a fantastic nature. The eyes intimate great powers, powers beyond the scope of understanding, possibly supernatural in origin. The "evil eye" of the old man mesmerizes: "Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold"⁴³, and finally becomes the murder motive. The solitary, fiery eye of the cat accuses and convicts the protagonist in the climactic moment of the tale. The discovery of Ligeia's takeover of Rovena's body occurs when the raven-haired figure opens her eyes. The eye takes on a life of its own, becoming, in effect, the actual seat of life. As mirrors of the soul, eyes in Poe's tales do more than reveal the identity of their owner—they also reflect the secrets of the narrator's perturbed self: the vision becomes insight.

⁴¹ E. A. Poe, A Descent into the Maelstrom, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 118.

⁴² E. A. Poe, Morella, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 222.

⁴³ E. A. Poe, The Tell-Tale Heart, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 121.

Allen Tate, who argues that sensation in Poe is "simulated", also maintains that "Everything in Poe is dead: the houses, the rooms, the furniture, to say nothing of Nature and human beings"⁴⁴. This is not necessarily so - to be more precise-everything in Poe seems dead, or, more exactly is presumed dead by the protagonist who would dearly love to believe so or has all the reason in the world to think so. The black cat is dead, and so is the old man with the evil eye, and so are Madeline and Ligeia, both of unknown but deadly diseases. The screw of terror begins to turn with the growth of the narrator's suspicion that the corpse might not be dead, that bodies laid to rest are coming back to life, that the prematurely buried are returning from their catatonic limbo, from the very threshold of death: "We have put her living in the tomb!", exclaims Roderick Usher⁴⁵.

Women are the beings most capable of revivifying; Poe's women are preternatural creatures-learned in abstruse, metaphysical lore and animated by a fierce, passionate energy, a fervent desire "but for life", which enables them to transcend the limitations of the physical. Morella wills her own reincarnation, Ligeia usurps the body of the Lady Rowena and the catatonic Madeline musters supernatural strength and claws her way out of coffin and dungeon keep. "Madeline, back from the tomb, neither dead nor alive, is in the middle state of the unquiet sleep of the vampire, whose heartbeats are heavy and horrible", writes Tate⁴⁶.

Poe's "vampires" prey not on blood, but on the protagonist's mental well-being. The undead may be welcome as is Ligeia-but more often the protagonist becomes an unwilling participant in their resurrection. The maleficence of the apparitions is a function of the narrator's insecurity or guilt: the black cat disappears in order to reappear atop the decaying corpse of the murdered wife, the old man's heart pounds anew after his body has been dismembered, and Madeline, buried too soon, returns to claim Roderick for her own. The fantastic in these tales is the fruit

⁴⁴ A. Tate, Our Cousin, Mr. Poe, [in:] Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays..., p. 48.

⁴⁵ Poe, The Fall of the House..., p. 190.

⁴⁶ Tate, Our Cousin, Mr. Poe..., p. 45.

of the conflict between the narrator's rational conviction that the dead are dead and his growing irrational dread that they are not. This condition is further aggravated by the vagueness of the physical reality, which breeds ambiguity and uncertainty. The narrator can never be sure of that which he sees-or which he thinks he sees: the fearful vision takes place against and through his will at the same time. The accumulated tension is given vent to and the supernatural climax of the story takes place when the hitherto unvoiced suspicion is finally uttered: "Not a thread in all his raiment-not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face, which was not even in the most absolute identity, mine own!"⁴⁷ ("William Wilson"), "long-long-long-many minutes, many hours, many days have I heard it-yet I dared not-oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am-I dared not-I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb!"⁴⁸ ("The Fall of the House of Usher"). Halliburton notes that sound in Poe's tales is generally reserved for moments of crisis: "However intense may be the effect of terror on consciousness, something is always self back for the final outburst (which, whatever the local variations, is essentially a cry)"⁴⁹. When the cowering suspicion becomes a certainty, terror becomes horror, and the uncanny, fantastic. The protagonist has completed the journey from the natural to the supernatural.

As for "dead Nature" in Poe-the matter is not as simple as Tate would have it. Nature herself is, in the world of hermetic chambers, a rather infrequent but always unruly guest. She makes her appearance under the guise of the Red Death⁵⁰ (the sole survivor of Prince Prospero's dream party), the black cat-or two, one dead and one very much alive-the "ferocious", "demonlike" and "unnatural" steed in "Metzengerstein", two landscapes and two seascapes. Usher's tarn, as moribund as Usher himself, is indeed the most lifeless landscape-it decays along with the House, and goes through some spectacular death-throes which coincide with

⁴⁷ E. A. P o e, William Wilson, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 170.

⁴⁸ P o e, The Fall of the House..., p. 190.

⁴⁹ H a l l i b u r t o n, Edgar Allan Poe..., p. 346.

⁵⁰ Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales, ed. W. Howarth, Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey 1971, p. 14.

Roderick and Madeline's violent decease. In "Eleonora", Poe's surprisingly lyrical tale, we witness the energy of Life and Love at work - "And Life arose in our paths" - and we experience Death - "And Life departed from our paths: for the tall flamingo flaunted no longer his scarlet plumage before us"⁵¹. However, for as long as Love and Life last, Eleonora and her lover dwell "beneath a tropical sun" in the Valley of Many-Coloured Grass, surrounded by "many millions of fragrant flowers" and a variety of exotic animals. Usher's mansion may overlook stagnant waters, but Poe has Eleonora and her mate muse on love on "the margins of a river and of many dazzling rivulets that glided through devious ways into its channel"⁵². In "Eleonora" we are faced with an atmosphere of fairy-tale wonder-we witness a gentle, natural mutability. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", we observe unnatural and violent decay and death.

Water, which stagnates in "The Fall of the House of Usher", and trickles languidly in "Eleonora", literally storms and seethes in "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom": "Here the vast bed of water, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into phrenzied convulsions-heaving, boiling, hissing-gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes, except in precipitous descents"⁵³ ("A Descent into the Maelstrom"). In these tales, the sea assumes the prominent role, posing a "real" and not hallucinatory threat to the narrator's life-water is the element which drives the narrator on, towards his destruction and towards "some exciting knowledge" and which tests his mettle.

A deceptive calm usually precedes the outburst of natural energy in Poe's tales. The Valley of Many Coloured Grass explodes into a kaleidoscopic display of shapes and colours when Love flowers in the hearts of Eleonora and her mate. A whirlwind tosses the hitherto unruffled waters of Usher's silent tarn, which ultimately arises to draw the House and its inhabitants down into

⁵¹ P o e, Eleonora..., p. 516.

⁵² Ibid., p. 514.

⁵³ P o e, A Descent..., p. 110.

its murky depths. The Maelstrom alternately seethes furiously and slackens into treacherous placidity, and a disquieting calm foreshadows the supernatural blast of the simoom in "MS. Found in a Bottle". The sudden unleashing of energy latent in the environment, in the hero or heroine, marks the tale's climactic moment. Ligeia's black hair rushes into the chamber, the killers' cool finally gives way to hysteria, and the silent House of Usher falls asunder in the supernatural whirlwind that envelops the tarn. Nature is hardly as dead as she would seem; if anything, she is perhaps maybe too stormy and violent. As the narrator of "The Black Cat" exclaims: "And a brute beast - whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed - a brute beast to work out for me - for me, a man, fashioned in the image of the High God so much of insufferable woe!"⁵⁴.

Besides being subject to the influence of the human and natural "undead", Poe's protagonists are also surrounded by animate dead matter. The gigantic ghost ship, the sailor hints, is almost a living organism ("It is as sure [...] as sure there is a sea where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of a seaman"⁵⁵). To Berenice's teeth, which obsess him, the protagonist assigns a "sensitive and sentient" power, even a "capability of moral expression"⁵⁶. Lady Rowena's chamber in "Ligeia", stacked with cumbersome furniture, boasts a rich tapestry "by a contrivance now made common [...] made changeable in aspect". A strong, continual current of wind behind the draperies gives "an uneasy and hideous animation to the whole"⁵⁷. The most sentient of all are, of course, the walls of the House of Usher-for to Usher, matter lives: "The evidence of the sentience was to be seen, he said [...] in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the water and walls. This result was discoverable in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had molded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw

⁵⁴ E. A. P o e, The Black Cat, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 67.

⁵⁵ P o e, MS. Found in a Bottle..., p. 153.

⁵⁶ P o e, Berenice, [in:] Complete Stories and Poems..., p. 175.

⁵⁷ P o e, Ligeia..., p. 104.

him!"⁵⁸. Usher himself is the spirit of the House, "a mind from which darkness [...] poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom"⁵⁹. His decay is the House's decay, his fall-its fall. In Usher's fantastic world mind infuses matter with gloom and matter behaves in a hostile, animated way. This "misbehaviour" of Usher's immediate environment is a case of what the German post-Romantics used to call *Tücke des Objekts* or "malice of the inanimate object". What this produces, is simply the fear that "things" are out to get you⁶⁰, the same fear that Usher lives in fear of. Given time, the narrator himself will begin to feel the influence of Usher's "fantastic yet impressive superstitions" creeping up on him.

The motif of the animation of the inanimate and of the dead brings to mind the gruesome yet voluptuous surrealism of the famous *Danse Macabre*, the nightmarish juxtaposition of Life and Death, Life-in-Death, to be more precise. In Poe's tales, however, Life-in-Death is no longer the hideous and leprous whore of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", but a magnetic and intellectually unsurpassable woman or an over-affectionate cat-bewitching, but ominous beings, which wreak havoc with the protagonists delicate mental balance and draw him into a fantastic "reality", perilous for both mind and body.

Poe's imagery, although derived from the Gothic, is not merely the melodramatic living dead, ghost ships, black cats and evil eyes, not merely the intangible Radcliffian air of mystery and the shock-realistic touches of the *Schauerromantik* movement-principally, it is the tale of the progress of the vulnerable mind, entrapped and unnerved by the physical, suffocating in its prison of medieval grandeur and gloom. The imagery is dreamlike, because the protagonist yearns to live out a dream, but what he does ultimately fall prey to is a nightmare, the intensity of which depends on the degree of the narrator's irrationality. The "reality" the protagonist experiences has a surreal quality-the mind is caught in the spin of sensory and psychological cycles

⁵⁸ P o e, *The Fall of the House...*, p. 185.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁶⁰ H a l l i b u r t o n, *Edgar Allan Poe...*, p. 247.

od contrasts. Consciousness, forced back upon itself, conjures up disturbing apparitions, in which the motif of the "undead"-dead people, things and Nature plays a dominant role. In these tales, the dead assault the living. Physical isolation, mental alienation and fear combine to help the distraught mind fashion its hermetic, fantastic world out of the elements of the commonplace and ordinary-this is reflected in the bizarre, almost surrealistic imagery that mirrors the unease of the protagonists' minds. This, the subtle fusion of the normal and abnormal accounts for the tremendous "effect" of Poe's tales of terror.

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OBRAZY FANTASTYCZNE W OPOWIADANIACH GROZY
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Teoria literatury zna wiele różnorodnych definicji terminu "fantastyka". Niektóre teorie zadowolają się katalogowaniem przewodnich motywów fantastycznych (jak np. duchów czy potworów), inne badają emocjonalne wrażenia wywołane przez tego typu literaturę, a jeszcze inne rozważają stosunek fantastyki do rzeczywistości tekstowej i pozatekstowej. Twórczość Poe'go, a szczególnie jego słynne opowiadania grozy, spełnia - choć w różnym stopniu - wszystkie te warunki; uważa się go za wybitnego przedstawiciela nurtu fantastyki. Poe wiąże stereotypową scenerię powieści gotyckiej z dramatem psychologicznym rozgrywającym się w duszy neurastenika czy psychopaty, tworząc w ten sposób własną fantastyczną wizję. Gotyckość utworów podkreśla psychiczne niezrównoważenie protagonisty i przyczynia się do powstania atmosfery niesamowitej fantastyczności.

W twórczości Poe'go widoczne są wyraźne wpływy Ann Radcliffe, czołowej przedstawicielki klasycznego nurtu powieści gotyckiej. Zarówno Radcliffe, jak i Poe stwarzali poczucie zagrożenia, psychicznego terroru za pomocą poetyckiej sugestywności opisu, pewnych niedopowiedzeń i niedomówień. Poe korzystał także z wielce popularnego motywu uwięzienia - bohater jego opowiadań

jest człowiekiem żyjącym w dobrowolnej izolacji od zewnętrznego świata, świata materii, czasu i rozumu. Dzięki temu hermetyzmowi psychicznemu, opowiadania Poe'go są nacięte silnym pierwiastkiem surrealistycznym, typowym dla powieści gotyckiej. Poprzez kontrastowanie kolorów ("Maska Czarwonego Moru"), światła z ciemnością ("W bezdni Maelstromu"), ciszy z dźwiękiem ("Serce oskarżycielem") czy wreszcie zjawisk normalnych z nadprzyrodzonymi ("Ligeja"), uzyskuje Poe złudzenie marzenia sennego, tak typowe dla surrealizmu. Atmosfera tajemniczości, niejasności i niezrównoważenia psychicznego podkreślana jest przez wprowadzenie cyklicznego rytmu psychologicznej niepewności, który może doprowadzić protagonistę do stanu totalnego rozkładu psychicznego ("Czarny kot", "Serce oskarżycielem"). Patologiczny prawie lęk protagonisty przeobraża bowiem rzeczywistość codzienną w rzeczywistość zgoła fantastyczną - dla mordercy, zwykły kot staje się "potworem", dla marzyciela kobieta Ligeja uosobieniem niezwykłych cnót.

Twierdzenie Allena Tate'a jakoby "wszystko u Poe'go było martwe" jest dużym uproszczeniem. Choć wszystko u Poe'go zdaje się być martwe (jak np. Madeline w "Zagładzie Domu Usherów"), w miarę rozwoju akcji narrator nabiera nieracjonalnego podejrzenia, że rzeczy bądź osoby dawno już pogrzebane powoli powracają do życia. Szczególny dar w tym względzie posiadają u Poe'go kobiety (Ligeja, Morella czy wreszcie "wampiryczna", wg. Tate'a, Madeline). Atmosfera fantastyczności jest owocem wewnętrznego konfliktu narratora rozrywanego między rzeczową analizą rzeczywistości a chorobliwą obawą przed "zmartwychwstaniem" istot już złożonych do grobu. Także i przyroda nie pozostaje martwa; Poe ceni sobie bardzo wszelkiego rodzaju burze i sztormy, zwykle poprzedzane niepokojącą martwością. Materia również zdradza cechy żywotności klasycznym tego przykładem jest "zdolność odczuwania" Domu Usherów", Tak więc cały świat zewnętrzny, czy kobieta, czy dom, widziany oczyma protagonisty opowiadań Poe'go, stanowi rzeczywistość niebezpiecznie fantastyczną.