

Christopher Rollason, Ph.D. - rollason54@gmail.com

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*: a Twenty-First-Century Revisit

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a detailed re-reading of particular aspects of Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Fall of the House of Usher". It concentrates primarily on two facets; the problems raised by the status of both Usher and the narrator as intellectuals and producers/consumers of literature, music and visual art and the avant-garde character of Usher's artistic practice; and Usher's strange beliefs about his mansion, its animated state and «peculiar» atmosphere, and the implication of those beliefs for and in the House's final collapse, considered in the light of current concepts of an alternative or parallel universe.

KEYWORDS: Poe, "Usher", avant-garde, art, parallel universe

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RESUMEN

En esta ponencia se propone una pormenorizada relectura de determinados elementos del relato de Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher", centrándose primordialmente en dos facetas del cuento de Poe: los problemas que plantea el estatus, tanto de Usher como del narrador, de intelectuales y productores/consumidores de literatura, música y bellas artes y el carácter de vanguardia de la práctica artística de Usher; y las extrañas creencias que alberga Usher con respecto a su mansión, su condición "animada" y su atmosfera "peculiar", y la implicación de estas creencias en el colapso final de la Casa, todo esto a la luz de conceptos actuales relativos a universos paralelos o alternativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Poe, "Usher", vanguardia, arte, universos paralelos

I. INTRODUCTION

The classical criticism of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" has privileged three types of reading: the supernatural reading (taking literally such phenomena as vampirism and animation of the inanimate) may be represented by the comments of Thomas Ollive Mabbott (in his Harvard edition of Poe's tales, 1978) or Lyle H. Kendall (1963); the psychological or rational reading, by I.M. Walker (1966) or G.R. Thompson (1973); and the third way of symbolic reading, by texts going as far back as Richard Wilbur in his 1959 lecture 'The House of Poe' (the House as symbolic mind – Wilbur, 1970) or, indeed, D.H. Lawrence in 1924 in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (the tale as allegorising destructiveness in the American soul – Lawrence, 1971). More recently, Poe criticism has laid the ghost of the naive supernatural reading, while continuing to affirm the psychological approach - as evidenced in studies such as those by Benjamin Franklin Fisher, for whom "Usher" exemplifies Poe's status as author of "some of the most sophisticated creations in psychological fiction in the English language" (Fisher, 2002: 78), David Roche, who points up 'the tale's representation of disease' (Roche, 2009: 23), and - this one firmly in the psychoanalytic register - Joseph C. Schöpp, who concludes in favour of "Usher" as "one of Poe's most uncanny pieces" in a strictly Freudian sense (Schöpp, 2006: 51). On a somewhat different tack, Scott Peeples has pointed in a more textualist direction, emphasising not so much *madness* as *madeness* - the status of both House and tale as intricately constructed yet eminently fissile artworks, in a paradoxical, creative-destructive aesthetic universe in which "the fall of the house gives rise to the story" (Peeples, 2002: 188).

What is proposed in this paper is a detailed re-reading of aspects of «Usher» for the twenty-first century, in the light of the tale's emphasis on avant-garde artistic production and also of the new critical horizons opened up by the Internet age. The paper will concentrate on two elements: the questions raised by the status of both Roderick Usher and the narrator as intellectuals and as producers/consumers of literature, music and visual art; and Usher's strange beliefs about the preternatural nature of his mansion and domain, and the implication of those beliefs in the House's final collapse. A comparative dimension, extending to literature, fine art and music, will also be invoked where relevant.

II. USHER AS ARTIST

In "Usher", the arts, and their production and consumption, are placed at the centre of an entire segment of the story, namely the account of the first days of the narrator's visit. The Usher family has been known for producing, "through long ages, ... many works of exalted art" (Poe, 1987: 398-99), and Roderick is a worthy continuer of that line. As artist and aesthete, he is a producer and consumer of both literature and music, and a producer of fine art. The narrator shares with Roderick, his boyhood companion, a similar educational and cultural background (both, for instance, have a classical education enabling them to read together in Latin). He is thus able to complement his friend, and accompanies Roderick in his reading, watches him paint and even paints with him, and listens to him perform music. In parallel, the narrator also presents himself to the reader as an expert in all those fields. Together, they pore over the esoteric books in Usher's library, while Roderick also creates literature in the form of poetry, in the "rhymed verbal improvisations" (406) with which he accompanies himself on the guitar. One of these – in reality Poe's own poem "The Haunted Palace", published some months previously – is transcribed for the reader from memory by the narrator, who thus acts as Usher's (posthumous) amanuensis and editor.

It is on Usher's creativity in painting and music that the narrative primarily focuses. Usher's paintings are numerous – one can imagine them forming a whole gallery - and the narrator witnesses several in gestation (“the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered ...”) (405). If Roderick is an artist-at-work, the narrator is his critic, interpreting his friend's canvases as “pure abstractions” and comparing his work favourably to that of a near-contemporary, the Anglo-Swiss Gothic painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825; cf. Menéndez, 2009). In the world of music, Usher is variously consumer, interpreter and composer. The “many ... musical instruments ... scattered about” (Poe, 1987: 401) in his studio suggest a multi-instrumentalist, though his illness has restricted him to the domain of “stringed instruments” (403); for the narrator, Roderick confines himself further, to the “fantasias” (406) that he performs, some with vocal accompaniment, on one instrument, the guitar (“the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar” - 404). One is “The Haunted Palace”; another consists of Usher's variations on an air from a real work, the “last waltz” (405), a piece attributed by Poe (and other contemporaries) to the German Romantic composer Karl Maria von Weber (1786-1826), but actually, as Mabbott points out (Poe, 1987: 418n), composed by another German, Karl Gottlieb Reissiger (1798-1859). The narrator, spellbound, listens to Usher sing and play “as if in a dream” (404), though his Weber allusion, in its erudition, projects an image of more than a mere listener – of a connoisseur of music, equipped to understand and interpret Usher's compositions.

The imaginary artistic production narrated in the tale is, significantly, linked to extratextual reality. Roderick's books, obscure as most may be, have, as I have shown in detail elsewhere (Rollason, 2009: 14-16), all (with the one exception of *The Mad Trist* by the imaginary Sir Launcelot Canning) been tracked down, by Mabbott and others, as actually existing, while the narrator's invocation of Fuseli and Usher's own appropriation of the “last waltz” connect to actual nineteenth-century artistic movements. Indeed, and beyond this, inside the House of Usher both painting and music take on powerful avant-garde connotations.

Usher's painting activity - in which the narrator, who states that they “painted ... together” (Poe, 1987: 404), is himself complicit – aspires beyond the bounds of the figurative: “If ever a mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher”. His friend describes his works as “pure abstractions”, feeling able to evoke in words only the semi-figurative painting of the vault, as “partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction”, and resorting to Fuseli as an avowedly inadequate and partial comparison – that artist's “glowing ... reveries” being, by the side of Usher's, “too concrete” (405). Usher is, then, and as critics have noted (Phillips, 1973; Menéndez, 2009), a proto-abstract painter. Usher's elevation of abstract over concrete and transformation of image into idea anticipate the art of the first half of the twentieth century and such movements as cubism, futurism and expressionism. Similarly, his musical performances privilege the experimental, not the comfortable: he continues a family musical tradition that has always prioritised “the intricacies ... of musical science” over its “orthodox and easily recognisable beauties” (Poe, 1987: 399). His variations on the “last waltz” are recalled by the narrator in terms – “a singular perversion and amplification” (405) – that strongly suggest he does not find them aesthetically gratifying. All in all, Usher as musician – composer, interpreter, performer - is a vanguard artist, ahead of his time and unafraid to break with his day's recognised musical canons. One could easily see his music as anticipating, here too, the early to mid twentieth century and the atonality of Schoenberg and Berg.

There are interesting analogies here with certain characters in the fiction of Poe's contemporary, Balzac (neither knew of the other's work, but the French novelist's more

speculative writings often throw up significant parallels with the American writer). In Balzac's story "Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu", published in 1832, the painter Frenhofer produces an "unknown masterpiece", a canvas covered in indeterminate forms and strange colour combinations, that, read retrospectively, suggests late Monet, or abstract expressionists such as Kandinsky and cubist colorists like Robert Delaunay (Balzac, 1970a). Complementing that story, "Gambara", from 1837, features a composer-musician whose opera score, when transcribed for piano, is perceived by his entourage as an unlistenable cacophony yet embodies an experimental pushing beyond conventional harmony that might prefigure late Mahler or, again, the Second Viennese School (Balzac, 1970b). These two Balzacian figures surprisingly parallel Poe's Roderick, as representations of the crazed artist ahead of his time, both visionary idealist and victim of delusion. In both Poe and Balzac, too, the artist's avant-garde aspirations fail: Frenhofer ends up burning his paintings, and Gambara's scores are auctioned off and finish their days as fish-wrappings at Les Halles – two artistic debacles echoing the swallowing-up of Usher's musical and artistic patrimony by the tarn.

III. USHER'S OBLITERATED WORLD

That final obliteration of Usher's intellectual and artistic world is, surely, one of the tale's bleakest aspects, if one rarely invoked by criticism. Books, paintings, instruments, all disappear into the dark waters, along with any manuscripts or scores that Usher may have kept in his studio. Roderick's aesthetic experimentation has no progeny, and the tale could thus be read as negating the avant-garde as a dead end. Nonetheless, this starkness of extinction is in part offset by the intensity with which the narrator *recalls* the aesthetic universe of his friend. He reconstitutes "The Haunted Palace" ("the words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered") (Poe, 1987: 406) as if anthologising Usher; his recollection of the paintings ("vivid as their images now are before me") enables one of them to be "shadowed forth ... in words" (405); and by describing Usher's performances he communicates something of the feel of his music-making. The narrator thus combines substantial skills of artistic appreciation with strong powers of memory and verbal description, to become a kind of trustee of Usher's artistic legacy and part-redeem its physical disappearance. There nonetheless still hangs a large textual question-mark in this tale over the ultimate value and viability, not only of art but of any endeavour whatever of humanity as we know it.

That question-mark may be spotted in the zigzag fissure that runs down the outside of the House. It is a critical commonplace to note that Usher's mansion is itself a carefully constructed artwork that – until its fall - parallels Poe's concept of the well-made tale. Less attention has been paid to the supposed history and manner of the House's construction. The mansion is the creation of Usher's ancestors, and if Roderick is to be believed, they appear to have been aided, like Solomon in some versions of the building of his temple, by a preternatural agency. The domain, too, has been conceived by his forbears, and the Usher property thus combines the two arts of architecture and (as elsewhere in Poe) landscape design. Usher believes that both the vegetable and the mineral components of house and domain - the stones, the fungi that cover them, the trees - are conscious and sentient - a sentience extending even to the element of water in the form of the tarn. This sentience is, Usher believes, possible, at least in the mineral kingdom, only "under certain conditions" – conditions which have been "fulfilled in the method of collocation of the stones – in the order of their arrangement", and reflected in the parallel arrangement of fungi, trees and tarn (408). The language in which the narrator relays Usher's belief – "method", "collocation", "order",

“arrangement” – makes of his friend’s ancestors conscious creators, if not wizards, who have designed the House as no ordinary mansion but as a magical artwork that is itself animated.

IV. CONCLUSION

Usher’s belief-system may, of course, be considered as, in the narrator’s words, the product of a “disordered fancy” (408); such has been the position of a multitude of psychological readings of the tale, and its organisation shows similarities with the delusional system of Judge Schreber, the deranged German magistrate whose memoirs Freud analysed in 1911 as exemplifying paranoia as an elaborately structured form of mental illness (Freud, 1979; Rollason, 1987: 728-33). Nonetheless and without denying in any way the validity of the psychological reading, I would today sustain that an alternative speculative reading has now become possible.

If Usher’s house is (in his belief) animated by spirits, that spirit-world is of a coherence and interrelatedness rivalling or even exceeding that of the human world, exhibiting “method” and “order” (Poe, 1987: 408), and a “perfect adaptation of parts” (400). Usher’s ancestors, aided by magical forces, may have generated a more evolved form of consciousness that inhabits realms which Roderick had aspired to but not reached in his avant-garde artistic practice. The animate, conscious House may even be read today, with retrospection, as foreshadowing the Internet as superior intelligence: in an image today obviously pregnant, its fungi hang in ... a “tangled *web-work*” (400; my italics). If Usher, his sister and all of his artworks finally disappear into the lake, their fall may finally represent the verdict of a higher intelligence on a failed humanity – its limitations embodied in the sterility and introversion of the Usher race that has led to the cul-de-sac of Usher’s incestuous passion for Madeline and the infertile childlessness of both. The more advanced consciousness no longer needs the humanity that created it, nor does it need its art. House and inhabitants disappear, yet the animate tarn remains, and so do the domain and its sentient trees and sedges; and the narrator survives to tell a tale of fear, of lost artworks and living stones. Here, in the context of the emerging genre of cybercriticism, as applied, for instance, to modern Latin American fantastic literature, we may find “Usher” anticipating fictions such as Adolfo Bioy Casares’ prescient novella of 1940, *La Invención de Morel*, in which artificial intelligence and the virtual world prevail over mere human beings (Bioy Casares, 1982). Poe’s Gothic narrative presages the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, unforgettably anticipating both the experimentation of avant-garde art and the *web-work* of a higher intelligence. In our time of rapid and unforeseeable advances in information systems, the House of Usher becomes a prefigurement, both challenging and disturbing, of still unexplored areas of our own house of knowledge.

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