

Luncheon in the Sepulcher: Poe in the Gothic Tradition

“There is no exquisite beauty,” says Bacon, Lord Verulan, speaking truly of all the forms and *genera* of beauty, “without some strangeness in the proportion.”

It is easy enough to assent to this proposition, which comes upon us at the beginning of Poe’s “Ligeia.” The exquisite beauty of that tale certainly has more than a little strangeness in the proportion, as do the stories collected in this volume. So, if your preference is all for the practice of storytelling, and if its theory has no lure for you, let us make an amicable parting here. You have my assurance that your taste for strangeness will be gratified abundantly, diversely, and perhaps, in one or two instances, to excess. What can an introduction do, finally, but offer that assurance?

Now, for the rest of us left in the study, a rhetorical question: Is it true, as Poe insists, that all the forms and *genera* of beauty are endowed with Strangeness? Is it not rather the specific virtue of classic art that it smooths away all traces of the “grotesque and arabesque” to reveal some irreducible wholeness, to offer us the no less exquisite (if not always so immediately arresting) beauty of the Ideal? I don’t mean only the classic art of Homer and Praxiteles or of Raphael and Palladio. In this normative sense, the cool architecture of a Cubist still life, or a movie such as *The African Queen*, in which admirable people perform noble deeds in Hollywood’s most stately style, can be said to be classical.

With Poe, the Ideal is experienced as oppressive (as in “The Domain of Arnheim”), the normative as ridiculous (“The Devil in the Belfry”). Indeed, without too great of a distortion to his aesthetic, one could reverse Bacon’s formula and say that there is, in Poe, no strangeness without some beauty of proportion; no horror that lacks an underlying loveliness.

Bear with me, readers. There is a reason why, though there is not a single story by Poe in this volume, he is the subject of this introduction. It is not so straightforward a reason as cause-and-effect: I don’t think all the writers represented here are in a direct line of descent from Poe (though I’d be surprised if there were any who were not on familiar terms with his

Introduction to *Strangeness: A Collection of Curious Tales*, edited by Thomas M. Disch and Charles Naylor.

best work). In fact, such fantasists as Bierce, Lovecraft, and Bradbury, who are too visibly his inheritors, have been deliberately excluded from the contents page. Likewise, there are no stories by writers of the “Southern Gothic” school, since their kinship with Poe is at least of the degree of cousinship. And again, on the grounds that few readers need to be pointed the way to such golden oldies, none of the celebrated progeny of C. Auguste Dupin, Poe’s primordial detective, will be met with here. These have been the acknowledged heirs. I believe that Poe’s real accomplishment and influence have been greater than this list of legatees would suggest.

His significance is a touchstone, as the first perfected form of a distinctively modern kind of sensibility. This is not the Poe known to his own countrymen, but the Poe celebrated by Baudelaire: Poe considered as a contemporary of Kierkegaard. Americans have always had difficulty viewing Poe in this light, for we are likely to encounter him first at too tender an age and to continue to think of him, in our later years, as a writer for children. That used to be my own case, certainly. I loved to terrify my younger brothers, and myself, reading aloud “The Tell-Tale Heart” by the light of a flashlight. My brothers have since assured me that these were vivid renderings, and I know they were sincere, so it can’t be said that I was entirely missing the point—or that Americans do, in general. And part of the point (which Baudelaire misses, as surely as we miss his) is that Poe is as much a charlatan and barnstormer as he is a mystic and modernist. Since an adequate account of his entire artistry is beyond the scope of anything less than a book, and since that book already exists, I will limit myself to recommending it (*Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, by Daniel Hoffman) and continue trying to make my single, if elusive, point about him—which is that his work embodies everything in the gothic tradition that can command serious, adult attention; and further, that this tradition is much broader than has usually been reckoned.

Before setting forth a general theory of either Poe or the gothic sensibility, I’d like to consider some of the specific ingredients to be found in his stories. Not the obsessive themes, such as incest or inhumation, for these, besides having received ample attention elsewhere, are idiosyncratic and limiting; nor yet the ornamental, fustian style, of which the same can be said. I mean such specifics as the landscapes he evokes, which are at once so nebulous and so minutely observed, or the peculiar humor of his “grotesque” tales, or the maniacal voices of so many of his narrators. The voice, for instance, of the murderous lunatic who tells “The Tell-Tale Heart”: “Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me.” This is at once a dry

burlesque of the high paranoid style and a lyric to delight the soul of R. D. Laing. For, of course, besides being absurd, it is true: madmen do possess a knowledge that is denied to others. As the same narrator observes: “the disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the Heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How then am I mad?”

Since those words were written the possibility that madness may be—at least for fictional purposes—a higher form of wisdom has become a staple of generations of writers, some of whom one would not readily class with Poe. The stories of Joyce Carol Oates and Virginia Woolf are both prime examples of this vein of psychological horror, or Naturalized Gothic. Oates’s affinities with the gothic have occasionally been noted, but . . . Virginia Woolf? Yet her tale “Solid Objects” cannot be considered a fluke, for the same theme of madness as a form of visionary experience is even more intensely rendered in what I believe to be her most representative novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Other stories in the present anthology inhabit this same intriguing, prenumbral zone between dementia and poetry, but to say which ones would be to spoil the unfolding of more than one ingenious plot. Another entire volume might be filled with tales in this vein that have acquired the status of the classics, like *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” as well as novels like *The Sound and the Fury* or *Some of Your Blood*. It is very nearly a genre in its own right.

Poe’s humorous tales are not as widely read as his exercises in the macabre, but they have not been without their influence. Poe’s is a humor of utter alienation. The workaday world involved in its business and domestic affairs becomes a kind of clockwork nightmare, in which ridiculous catastrophes overtake grotesque human automata, like the unfortunate Psyche Zenobia, who is beheaded by the minute hand of a giant clock and describes the entire process in the first person: “I was not sorry to see the head which had occasioned me so much embarrassment at length make final separation from my body. It first rolled down the side of the steeple, then lodged, for a few seconds, in the gutter, and then made its way, with a plunge, into the middle of the street.”

What underlies this humor is the realization that stories, being no more than words on paper, do not have to follow the rules that govern the day-to-day workings of the universe. The writer is free to fabricate . . . anything at all! The freedom is a dangerous one, but like all other

freedoms, once it has been set loose upon the world, it becomes impossible to suppress. Samuel Beckett, Harry Matthews, and Michael Moorcock have each written a trilogy of masterful and magnificently funny novels that may be said to spring from the same tradition.

The relevance of landscape to the craft of fiction is a harder matter to expound, yet in Poe's case it is crucial. Often it is all there is. His two longest fictions, "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym" and "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaal," are little more than extended travelogues, in which the only significant interactions are between the protagonists and their environments. These landscapes, whether on the monumental scale of the whirlpool in "The Descent into the Maelstrom" or reduced to the claustrophobic dimensions of a coffin, as in "The Premature Burial," are always inimical in a manner identifiably Poe's. The single most succinct rendering of his typical milieu occurs in "The Fall of the House of Usher," when the narrator describes one of the "pure abstractions" painted by Roderick Usher:

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

It would be a century before artists like de Chirico, Dalí, and Tanguy would create canvases in the stripped-bare style of Roderick Usher, and they were followed by a generation of French writers who pursued a very similar aesthetic. In practice I find the English practitioners of the *roman nouveau*—particularly J. G. Ballard and Brian Aldiss—more compellingly readable than Robbe-Grillet and others like him. Readers unfamiliar with this genre could not do better than to turn to Aldiss's novella "Where the Lines Converge," which is an epitome of this kind of infernal geometrizing.

A landscape need not be reduced to diagrammatic plainness for a family resemblance to this kind of avant-garde gothicism to be observable. Much of the fascination of "hard-core" science fiction lies in its creation of environments as spare and enigmatic, as full of strangeness, as any *roman nouveau*. Arthur Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* is the very apotheosis of this kind of science fiction, being an account of the systematic (and not

very dramatic) exploration of an alien artifact, which its explorers never really come to understand. The novel ends, like Poe's "Pym," with a question mark the size of an iceberg. It's altogether maddening, as of course it's meant to be.

In "The Black Cat," another of Poe's mad narrators declares, "My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events." That statement might well stand as an epigraph before many of the tales that follow. Poe was one of the first gothic artists to have understood that terror likes to warm its feet at the domestic hearth, that it has no need for exotic paraphernalia. Shirley Jackson's "The Beautiful Stranger" is an excellent example of such curdled coziness, as is her classic story "The Lottery." (For a further consideration of why this should be, may I recommend Freud's brief "Essay on the Uncanny"? Beginning with the simple observation that the German word for "uncanny," *unheimlich*, is often used as an equivalent to its opposite, *heimlich*, or "homelike," Freud deduces a series of consequences as baroque as any of the ratiocinations of C. Auguste Dupin.)

Readers of Poe soon come to the conclusion that the ultimate source of strangeness lies even closer to home than the hearth; it is to be found in the blood-dark depths of the heart, or even deeper, in the soul. All Poe's landscapes, from the arctic desolations at the end of "Pym" to the tatty eclecticism of the "Venice" described in "The Assignation," and most notably the House of Usher and its environs, are externalizations of what is forever unwitnessable within. Poe is not a dramatist; he speaks in a single voice to which even Echo does not reply. His secondary characters, when they exist, are mere wraiths, names without substance. Invariably, they are on hand to serve as victims: Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado," Madeleine in "Usher," the wife in "The Black Cat," the nameless old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart." But the isolation of Poe's protagonists is greater still, for even when their contest is between themselves and their environment, that environment is really but the flimsiest of tissues, a screen on which the protagonist (who is Poe) projects his inner conflicts; he inhabits, so to speak, his own dreams.

This may sound like a criticism, and indeed I don't think it's a method that would serve a novelist very well, but for short stories it has proven a highly effective formula. Stories as diverse as Greene's "Under the Garden," Zoline's "The Holland of the Mind," and Mann's "The Wardrobe" all employ this same procedure.

I stated earlier that Poe can profitably be considered a contemporary of

Kierkegaard. What they may be said to have in common is an expertise in the etiology of hidden disorders of the soul, specifically that condition known as “alienation.” However, for both writers the traditional term “damnation” is more to the point.

Poe secularized the idea of damnation. For all his gothic paraphernalia, he seldom has recourse to supernatural explanations. In this he is following the Devil’s own advice, as it has been presented through such able interpreters as Goethe and Baudelaire, who observes in one of his prose poems that “the Devil’s cleverest wile is to convince us that he does not exist.”

Whether or not the Devil exists is a matter of opinion, Baudelaire notwithstanding. The existence of the damned, however, is a matter of observable fact, and Poe was one of the fact’s best observers. All the specific qualities of his art referred to earlier become, when viewed in this light, facets of a single torment. The heightened awareness of his madness is not different from the unholy knowledge ascribed to such earlier gothic protagonists as Faust, Manfred, or Melmoth. To the damned soul, sealed within its selfhood, the world can appear only as ridiculous or threatening. From this fact proceeds the peculiar, skewed character of Poe’s humor, the insubstantiality of his dramatis personae and of his landscapes, as well. The damned are all, all alone: the other is invisible to them in all its forms—in nature, in personal relations—except insofar as these forms have been corrupted by evil, and the vision of the damned is most acute.

I say this not in disparagement of Poe, but by way of homage. Damnation—or, if you prefer, alienation—is the central theme of Romantic literature. It ties together such works as Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode,” Blake’s “Songs of Experience,” Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner,” and de Quincey’s *Confessions*. And these represent simply the first sounding of the theme, which swelled, by the latter part of the century, into a pandemonium. Within the chorus, Poe’s voice remains, even today, one of the most distinct.

Put it another way. Say that the problem is how we are to understand our human destiny, in all its complexity and ambiguity, without the support provided by the theoretical apparatus of religion; especially, how we are to face the problems of evil, of death, of despair, in a world deserted by the friendly gods of springtime. Simply to look the other way, denying the problem’s existence, is (as Kierkegaard argues in *The Concept of Dread*) to consign oneself to damnation in its darkest (if also its most common) form. But to face the problem is a treacherous business, as well, and the

safest way to do so is vicariously, through the agency of art.

An interest in diseases is necessarily a morbid interest, and this is—let us admit it—the nature of our interest in Poe, and in the gothic tradition, in general. That does not make it an unhealthy interest. Dualities must be studied in pairs. Health and disease are phases of a single process. The road to heaven, as mapped out by Dante and many other expert cartographers, proceeds through the central avenues of hell.