

THE AESTHETICS OF TERROR AND THE SUBLIME IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

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Abstract:

Edgar Allan Poe's unique sense of the sublime as an aesthetic experience that challenges the reader's imagination in profound and often unexpected ways finds expression in his well-known short story "The Fall of the House of Usher," a story in which the main characters are compelled to act and react in a setting that both mirrors and accelerates their physical and psychological degradation. Relying extensively on Burke's notion of terror as the ruling principle of the sublime, while also incorporating Kant's idea of the sublime as an experience that stretches the boundaries of human understanding, Poe creates a masterpiece in which the line between reality and supernatural horror is dissolved in order to explore the greatest emotions that man is capable of.

Rezumat:

Modul unic în care Edgar Allan Poe înțelege sublimul ca experiență estetică ce provoacă imaginația cititorului în moduri profunde și adesea neașteptate își găsește expresia în binecunoscuta sa nuvelă „Prăbușirea Casei Usher”, o povestire în care personajele principale sunt constrânse să acționeze și să reacționeze într-un cadru ce reflectă și, în același timp, accelerează degradarea lor fizică și psihologică. Bazându-se în mare măsură pe concepția lui Edmund Burke despre teroare ca principiu dominant al sublimului, dar integrând totodată ideea lui Immanuel Kant conform căreia sublimul reprezintă o experiență ce depășește limitele înțelegerii umane, Poe creează o capodoperă în care granița dintre realitate și groază de natură supranaturală se dizolvă pentru a explora cele mai intense emoții de care este capabil omul.

Keywords: aesthetics, terror, sublime, mystical, supernatural.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” reveals itself to the reader as a masterpiece that exemplifies Poe's engagement with the aesthetic theories

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of the sublime, particularly those of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, as well as his persistent effort to turn unsettling psychological and existential experiences into refined artistic expressions. Far from being a simple horror story, Poe's tale invites the reader to approach the text from a philosophical perspective, one that situates the atmosphere of terror and decay that governs the story within the broader eighteenth-century debate concerning the nature and limits of the sublime.

Starting from the premise that terror, the governing principle of the sublime, is the most powerful human passion that strips the mind of all its power and suspends rational faculties, Burke presents death as the king of all terrors, the perfect image of sublimity, provided that it remains mediated or distant, apprehended as an aesthetic object rather than an immediate reality. (Burke 1990: 53) From this tension between fear and safety emerges what Burke calls 'delight,' a paradoxical mixture of pain and pleasure experienced when the spectator recognizes his own immunity to the danger contemplated. (Burke 1990: 36) In this suspended state, terror is turned into an aesthetic experience in itself, while its artistic representations become mediums through which even the idea of death acquires sublimity.

Kant, though equally interested in exploring the limits of human understanding, approaches the sublime from a different perspective. For him, the sublime is that which is "absolutely great," (Kant 2000: 131) not in comparison with anything else, but capable of exceeding all measures of the senses by itself, an object whose magnitude or power surpasses the capacity of the imagination to fully comprehend it, suppressing its ability to represent it as a unified whole. Whether in its mathematical form, where pure magnitude – "beyond which no greater is subjectively possible" (Kant 2000: 135) – overwhelms our faculty of sensible comprehension, or in its dynamical manifestation, where nature appears irresistibly powerful in contrast to man's physical powers, the sublime exposes the inadequacy of imagination.

"[...] the magnitude that is apprehended may grow as large as one wants as long as it can be comprehended in one whole by the imagination. An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes. The mere presentation of a



concept, however, which is almost too great for all presentation (which borders on the relatively monstrous) is called colossal, because the end of the presentation of a concept is made more difficult if the intuition of the object is almost too great for our faculty of apprehension. – A pure judgment on the sublime, however, must have no end of the object as its determining ground if it is to be aesthetic and not mixed up with any judgment of the understanding or of reason.” (Kant 2000: 136-137)

Yet this very failure gives rise to a higher awareness: reason asserts its superiority over nature, recognizing within the subject a “supersensible vocation” (Kant 2000: 151) that no empirical magnitude can exhaust. Unlike Burke, therefore, Kant refuses to locate sublimity in the object itself or in artistic representation; strictly speaking, there can be no fully sublime art, since the sublime arises from a conflict within the faculties of the mind. Art may gesture towards such experiences, but only insofar as it remains bound to the formal conditions of presentation compatible with nature. In this sense, the sublime overcomes the condition of an intensified emotional response, and arises in a moment in which the mind confronts its own limits and subsequently discovers within that limitation the presence of a higher rational destination.

Poe’s aesthetic position emerges at the intersection of these two eighteenth-century philosophical paradigms, yet it resists complete alignment with either of them, incorporating instead Burke’s and Kant’s aesthetic ideas into a rigorously artistic framework. In “The Poetic Principle,” he defines poetry as “The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty,” subsuming the sublime within the domain of Beauty and insisting that the “most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense” pleasure arises from its contemplation. While he clearly rejects the claims of “Duty” and “Truth” as governing principles of art, he preserves the primacy of emotional exaltation, echoing Burke’s conviction that powerful feelings lie at the core of sublimity. Yet Poe complicates this structure by invoking the “unconquerable desire – to know,” (Poe 1984: 510) a restless intellectual impulse that suggests the aesthetic encounter is not confined to sensation. Beauty, in Poe’s opinion, draws the mind towards what surpasses its grasp;

it awakens a longing to penetrate obscurity, even while confronting the limits of comprehension:

“I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth. [...] pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived [...] from the contemplation of the Beautiful. [...] I make Beauty, therefore – using the word as inclusive of the sublime – I make Beauty the province of the poem, simply because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring as directly as possible from their causes: – no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation in question is at least most readily attainable in the poem. It by no means follows, however, that the incitements of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work: – but the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.” (Poe 1984: 78-79)

Thus, Poe does not fully adopt Burke’s emphasis on mediated terror, nor does he entirely accept Kant’s insistence that sublimity belongs exclusively to the inner conflict of the faculties, constructing instead an aesthetic synthesis in which terror operates simultaneously as an overpowering emotion and an instrument of destabilization of rational certainty. “The Fall of the House of Usher” embodies precisely this fusion, transforming death, decay, and psychological disintegration into a unified artistic design whose effect is at once terrifying and contemplative. Sublimity here does not depend upon vast natural magnitude, but upon the claustrophobic intensification of the collapse of the mind accomplished through a progressive dissolution of the boundaries between the real and the supernatural, Poe thereby demonstrating that the sublime arises from the aesthetic concentration of dread within the confines of the human mind.



In another review, however, Poe articulates a distinction that brings him into even clearer proximity with Burke's celebrated separation of the beautiful from the sublime. Writing on Sarah Stickney's *The Poetry of Life*, he commends the clarity and moral earnestness of her thought, praising the "strong understanding" that governs her reflections and the "keen relish for the minor forms of poetic excellence" evident in her style, but he also criticises her for failing to apprehend what he regards as the fundamental divergence between the two aesthetic modes: she is, he insists, "insufficiently alive to the *delicacies* of the beautiful – unable to appreciate the *energies* of the sublime." (Poe 1984: 346)

The phrasing is revealing because through it Poe describes two aesthetic categories, and he animates them through a vocabulary of sensibility and force at the same time. "Delicacies" suggests refinement, precision, restraint, qualities associated with proportion and harmony, while "energies," by contrast, evokes dynamism, intensity, and a kind of expansive pressure that exceeds containment. The antithesis is unmistakable: delicacy stands against energy, refinement against power, subtle modulation against overwhelming force, echoing Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* in which the beautiful is related to smallness, smoothness, softness, gradual variation, attributes that invite affection and calm contemplation, whereas the sublime is aligned with vastness, obscurity, terror, and strength, producing astonishment rather than pleasure.

Yet Poe's engagement is not merely derivative. What distinguishes his formulation is the emphasis on perceptual vitality, on being "alive" to aesthetic difference. The failure he attributes to Stickney is not technical incompetence, but rather a deficiency of imaginative responsiveness. She understands, but she does not feel deeply enough the qualitative shift that occurs when poetry moves from grace to intensity. In this respect, Poe subtly transforms Burke's descriptive taxonomy into a matter of artistic temperament. The sublime is not simply a category of objects or effects; it requires a heightened susceptibility to force, to excess, to that moment when language strains against the limits of form, a distinction which obviously anticipates Poe's own practice. In his criticism and fiction alike, the beautiful often appears as fragile, and it is frequently represented through delicate female figures, while the sublime emerges through



violence and terror. But unlike Burke, who tends to separate the two modes into relatively discrete aesthetic experiences, Poe is drawn to their unstable intersection. The “energies of the sublime” do not abolish delicacy; they infiltrate it. Beauty in Poe is often shadowed by decay, and sublimity is intensified through claustrophobic inwardness rather than sheer magnitude. Thus, while his terminology recalls Burke’s opposition, his imaginative trajectory moves towards fusion and transformation.

Kant too formulates a distinction that appears, at first glance, to reinforce the aesthetic vocabulary Poe seems to inherit. For Kant, “the beautiful charms,” it “announces itself through the cheerfulness in the eyes, through traces of a smile, and often through audible mirth.” The sublime, by contrast, “touches,” and “the feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy,” (Kant 2011:16) evoking seriousness, moral elevation and magnificence. At this preliminary stage, Poe’s criticism seems to move comfortably within this framework, as his opposition between delicacy and energy, refinement and force, resonates with the Burkean and Kantian classification of the aesthetic response. Yet in a later review of the poetry of Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck, Poe departs from the neatness of this binary scheme. Seeking to define what he terms the “sentiment of Poesy,” he introduces the faculty of Ideality, a concept that expands the aesthetic field beyond the simple opposition of the beautiful and the sublime. Ideality, he suggests, encompasses “the sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical,” and from it arises not only admiration for nature but, inseparably entwined with that admiration, “the unconquerable desire – *to know*.” (Poe 1984: 510) In this formulation, the beautiful and the sublime are no longer discrete aesthetic categories arranged in contrast; they are absorbed into a larger aesthetic principle that becomes the generative source of poetic effect, a faculty that produces the totality of impressions that constitute the poetic language. Through it, poetry moves beyond the task of representing pleasing forms or overwhelming magnitudes, giving voice instead to an elevated state of consciousness.

Poe’s endeavours to describe the ideal poetic language in terms of aesthetic ideas bring the author closer to the German Romantic tradition even though he resists identification with any European school and insists upon the need to create a genuine American literary tradition. The



principles he articulated move beyond the confines of poetry and extend into his theory of narrative composition. If poetry provided the space in which he could theorize aesthetic elevation, the short story offered the structural discipline necessary to realize it with precision. Every governing principle formulated, namely brevity, structural clarity, and above all unity of effect, converge towards a concentrated outcome that synthesizes beauty, sublimity and intellectual unrest. While often drawing upon mythic patterns and archetypal imagery, Poe anchors his narratives in plausible incidents, gradually leading the reader from the ordinary into a domain where the irrational and the supernatural invade the rational, material world.

With this carefully established framework in mind, Poe wrote “The Fall of the House of Usher,” a story that both exemplifies his theory of composition and condenses his distinctive understanding of the sublime. Conceived as a tightly controlled experiment, the tale subordinates its characters, setting, imagery, and even its narrative tempo to the gradual intensification of a single emotional atmosphere, one of oppressive gloom and mounting psychological dread. The description of the house, with its “vacant eye-like windows” and barely perceptible crack in the front wall establishes a visual and psychological pattern that grows increasingly deeper as the story progresses:

“During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.” (Poe 2004: 216)

From the opening lines that reveal the “insufferable gloom” that weighs upon the narrator’s spirit, the story establishes the mood that governs the entire action. What matters, however, is that Poe immediately *theorises* this mood from within the narrative itself. The narrator pauses over the word “insufferable” and insists that his response is not softened by the “half-pleasurable, because poetic” melancholy with which the mind

can usually receive even “stern” (Poe 2004: 216) images of desolation. This distinction is crucial: Poe is not offering the reader a conventionally “poetic” sadness that can be aestheticized at a safe distance, but an affect that resists relief and refuses conversion into something merely decorative or conventionally sublime. In Pahl’s terms, the tale begins to stage the sublime not as a momentary elevation but as a condition in which the subject remains in a “permanent state of crisis,” unable to stabilise perception into reassuring meaning (Pahl 2006: 31).

That crisis is sharpened by the narrator’s odd mixture of scepticism and compulsion. He admits, almost like an empiricist, that there exist “combinations of very simple natural objects” capable of producing such an effect, even if the “analysis of this power” lies beyond him; yet he cannot stop testing the mechanism. He hypothesises that “a mere different arrangement” of the scene might “modify, or perhaps annihilate” (Poe 2004: 217) its sorrowful impression, and he acts on this idea by moving to the tarn and looking again. The gesture is unmistakably compositional: Poe guides the reader to see that the effect does not reside in any single object (house, sedge, tree-trunks), but in the way elements are placed, repeated, and made to answer one another. Pahl makes precisely this point about “The Fall of the House of Usher” when he remarks that the power of the mansion lies in the “method of collocation” and in “the order of their arrangement,” a logic that behaves like manipulated rhetoric rather than a neutral description (Pahl 2006: 38). The tarn becomes therefore a second “frame” that remakes the scene: the narrator confronts “remodelled and inverted images,” a mirror-world that intensifies estrangement and produces “a shudder even more thrilling than before,” (Poe 2004: 217) Poe thus, training the reader to experience how perception itself becomes the instrument of awe.

Equally notable is the narrator’s insistence that “[there] was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – un redeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime,” (Poe 2004: 216) which, despite its apparent denial of the possibility to elevate the experience into sublimity, becomes nevertheless a sign of the sublime at work here. The narrator tries to keep the experience within known aesthetic categories and fails, as the view intensifies the atmosphere of psychological oppression that will eventually exceed his power of reason. The passage repeatedly presents a mind seeking a rational cause (“What was it...?”), before



reluctantly admitting that the forces at play can only be defined as a “mystery all insoluble,” (Poe 2004: 216) a Burkean sublimity that presses on emotions and on sensory impressions. Poe thus appears to be guiding the reader towards the sublimity of the story by showing, step by step, how the attempt to master the impression through analysis, through a change of viewpoint, or through aesthetic naming, only reproduces the impression more forcefully, as if the scene were designed to defeat the very habits of explanation the narrator brings to it.

Although the story remains striking for the sequence of events it stages – the narrator’s arrival at the mansion, the mysterious illnesses of its inhabitants, the premature burial of Madeline, and the final apocalyptic collapse of the house – its true artistic value lies in the perceptual framework through which these events are gradually revealed. The story unfolds through a carefully regulated succession of impressions sustained by language, description, and the restricted perspective of the narrator, whose observations filter every visual impression, spatial relation, and atmospheric nuance through a sensibility that gradually becomes attuned to the obscure forces operating within the house and its inhabitants. In this sense, Poe’s tale is narrated with a “meticulous attention to visual processes,” guiding the reader through a sequence of perceptions that mirror the narrator’s shifting relation to what he observes (Burwick 1998: 423), so that the narrative voice is no longer just a medium for recounting events, but becomes the central mechanism through which the aesthetic effect of the tale is produced, culminating in the overwhelming sensation of terror that governs the entire narrative design.

As the story advances, attention settles increasingly on the Ushers themselves, whose condition gives the tale its uncanny intensity. The family is introduced as one long associated with “a peculiar sensibility of temperament,” a sensibility expressed not only through “munificent yet unobtrusive charity” but through a “passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science.” The choice of words is important because it establishes from the outset a predisposition towards refined perception, towards nuance and excess, a temperament in which aesthetic delicacy easily slides into nervous agitation. This hereditary sensibility is reinforced by the strange economy of the lineage: the Usher race has “put forth, at no period,

any enduring branch,” the family remaining “in the direct line of descent,” so that “the patrimony with the name” has been transmitted with minimal variation. The consequence is not only genealogical, but also imaginative: the title “House of Usher” becomes “quaint and equivocal,” seeming to include “both the family and the family mansion” (Poe 2004: 218), an indistinction that frames the Ushers as figures whose identity has been sealed into a closed system, insulated from the external world and therefore vulnerable to inward collapse.

Roderick Usher appears as the embodied outcome of this enclosed inheritance, a figure whose physical presence registers as both strangely beautiful and disturbingly marked by “a cadaverousness of complexion,” an “eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison,” and an expression whose “ghastly pallor” and “miraculous lustre of the eye” “startled and even awed” the narrator. What the narrator encounters is not simply a man suffering from a strange illness, but an entire mode of being dominated by sensation, as Roderick’s disorder expresses itself through “a morbid acuteness of the senses,” a condition in which perception becomes oppressive rather than illuminating: “the most insipid food was alone endurable,” odours become “oppressive,” light is torture, and he could only tolerate peculiar sounds, which were the only ones that “did not inspire him with horror” (Poe 2004: 221-222). Such details do more than characterize a hypersensitive man; they make terror physiological, turning the body into an instrument that cannot regulate its experiences, so that life itself becomes an exposure to intolerable stimuli.

Roderick’s language clarifies that the ultimate object of his fear is not danger as an external event, but terror as an internal effect: “I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results.” His confession reveals that he regards dread as an affliction of the mind, further declaring that he has “no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect – in terror.” His fear therefore functions as a self-consuming mechanism, a “grim phantasm” with which he anticipates that he must “abandon life and reason together” (Poe 2004: 223). Within this logic, his illness becomes an inescapable mark of his future, and perception becomes a trap: the more acute the senses, the more total the subjection to fear.

Madeline, moving through life and through the story with minimal visibility, intensifies this enclosure of consciousness, since her very scarcity



of presence makes her appear less like a character and more like an apparition. When she passes through the room “without having noticed [the narrator’s] presence,” he experiences “utter astonishment not unmingled with dread,” followed by a “sensation of stupor” as his eyes follow her retreating steps (Poe 2004: 223). His response to her presence is explanatory: dread does not arise from an action she performs, but from the encounter with her mere existence, as if her body carried a force the narrator cannot interpret. Her disease, described as a “settled apathy,” “gradual wasting away,” and “frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character,” (Poe 2004: 224) positions her at the threshold of life and death even before the literal entombment, rendering her the figure of a “living dead” whose disappearance from social life seems to anticipate her premature burial.

The bond between the siblings clarifies the psychological dimension of this tension between life and death, and reason and madness, a conflict that constantly governs both of them. The tale insists on the exceptional intimacy of their connection, presenting Madeline as Roderick’s “sole companion for long years,” which evidently means that her impending decease, would leave him “the last of the ancient race of the Ushers” (Poe 2004: 223-224), a formulation that turns her death into the extinction of the Usher lineage and of Roderick’s self at once. Later, the narrator learns that they were twins, held together by “sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature,” (Poe 2004: 230) language that refuses to account for their relationship in rational terms while insisting on a binding force that exceeds ordinary human attachment. The tale’s terror thus develops within a closed relational system: Roderick cannot imagine existence beyond Madeline, Madeline appears as the shadow of his consciousness, and the narrator becomes the witness drawn into their sealed world.

The burial scene condenses this terror into a single tableau in which perception becomes unreliable and the boundary between reality and illusion begins to dissolve. When the coffin lid is turned aside, the narrator sees “the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip,” (Poe 2004: 230) details that would normally be considered bodily signs of life even while the ritual of entombment requires that she be treated as indisputably dead. And yet, these signs are completely ignored by both Roderick and the narrator, who

do not question the necessity of the burial, being absorbed into the logic of the ceremony itself, as though the authority of the ritual were sufficient to override the disturbing implications of what is actually visible. In this way, the scene transforms perception into a trap for both the characters and the reader, since, as Burwick observes, “compelled to ‘see’ the events through the narrator’s eyes, the reader must witness the illusions and delusions that victimize the narrator” (Burwick 1998: 423). The burial therefore becomes more than a moment of gothic spectacle: it exposes a deeper epistemological crisis in which visual evidence can no longer be trusted to yield stable meaning, and reason survives only by forcing itself to ignore what perception appears to reveal.

The subsequent deterioration of Roderick’s mental condition suggests that the burial does not bring any sense of closure, but rather transfers the whole process into the realm of consciousness, where it continues to unfold as an unresolved psychological burden. The narrator notes that “his ordinary manner had vanished,” that he “roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step,” that the “luminousness” of his eye “had utterly gone out,” and that “a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance” (Poe 2004: 231). The description offered by the narrator insists on agitation without an obvious purpose and movement without an apparent direction, suggesting that Roderick has turned into an individual no longer capable of securing a stable relation either to himself or to the world he inhabits. He thus appears as the kind of subject Pahl identifies in Poe, “de-centered and ambiguously positioned with regard to its identity” (Pahl 2006: 31), a mind “laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage” (Poe 2004: 231).

The narrator’s own position within this dramatic succession of events is not that of a stable rational individual, but that of a mind gradually infected by the same perceptual disorder that afflicts Roderick. He feels “creeping upon [him], by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of [Roderick’s] own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (Poe 2004: 232), and later, in the sleepless night before the catastrophe, an “irrepressible tremor” pervades his frame until “there sat upon [his] very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm” (Poe 2004: 233). The insistence on the absence of any identifiable cause for the acute fear that overtakes him is



significant because it turns terror into a self-generating affect, a condition no longer dependent upon any external threat. Fear arises from the instability of his own perception, as though the mind were struggling to assimilate an experience that exceeds its capacity for rational interpretation, an encounter in which “the otherness of the sublime object proves impossible to assimilate” (Pahl 2006: 31)

Madeline’s returns from the tomb provides the climactic revelation that clarifies the true source of Roderick’s terror and forces the story into a logic of confession. Confronted with the catastrophe he had long feared, he reveals that his heightened senses had already detected the signs indicating she was not actually dead when he decided to bury her, but he also insists that terror prevented him from speaking:

“Not hear it? – yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. [...] I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them – many, many days ago – yet I dared not – *I dared not speak!* And now [...] the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield – say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault!” (Poe 2004: 236)

His admission retrospectively reorganizes the entire burial episode. What had appeared earlier as nervous agitation or irrational dread now emerges as the consequence of a terrible knowledge that Roderick had recognized but was unable to acknowledge openly. His silence suggests an encounter with a truth that was at once known and repressed, as though he had been confronted with “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Morris 1985: 309). Interestingly enough, Roderick’s confession is triggered by the narrator’s reading of another story, one in which the events described coincide with the sounds heard all over the house. Each action in the fictional narrative appears to find its echo within the Usher mansion: the breaking of the hero’s shield corresponds to the “rending” sound heard within the structure of the

building, the clang of metal is followed by the “grating of the iron hinges” of Madeline’s prison, and the violent crash in the tale seems to anticipate her desperate struggles to break free from the sealed vault. Through this disturbing sequence of correspondences, the fictional narrative and the events unfolding within the house begin to merge, until what had remained hidden and unspoken becomes impossible to suppress. When Madeline finally appears in front of her brother, all covered in blood, bearing the “evidence of some bitter struggle,” she falls upon her brother and, “in her violent and now final death-agonies,” brings him to the floor “a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.” (Poe 2004: 237) Roderick dies not because Madeline returns, but because her return materializes the terror he had long been living with, exposing, in distinctly Gothic fashion, “the terror of the unspeakable, of the inconceivable, of the unnameable.” (Morris 1985: 312)

If the inhabitants of the mansion appear consumed by terror without any compensatory elevation of mind, Poe’s story nonetheless accomplishes the aesthetic transformation the author theorizes by drawing the reader into the same oppressive structure of perception that governs the characters themselves. As the tale progresses, misinterpretation of facts and dread accumulate in a carefully controlled sequence, so that the reader is compelled to experience the gradual tightening of uncertainty through which ordinary perception becomes increasingly unreliable. The Ushers therefore function as more than figures within a Gothic plot. Though them, the nervous disorder affecting Roderick expands into an oppressive atmosphere permeating the entire house, fear evolves into a mode of cognition that reshapes how reality is interpreted, and the supernatural becomes the result of a perceptual crisis in which reason fails to provide an explanation.

The narrator’s reaction to the scene in which the two brothers fall dead to the ground is that of a man desperately trying to find some coherent meaning in his immediate reality. He instinctively flees the mansion, not caring about the raging storm outside that seems to mirror the violence that has been accumulating within the house. Once he crosses the causeway and turns back, the barely perceptible fissure he had noticed at his arrival suddenly widens and the walls of the house collapse, vanishing into the waters of the tarn. Along with it disappears the last visible trace of the Usher lineage, as the destruction of the mansion



completes a process of disintegration that had long been unfolding within its inhabitants. The sublime thus emerging from “The Fall of the House of Usher” differs significantly from the formulations proposed by both Kant and Burke, for the story does not culminate in a moment of intellectual elevation. Roderick Usher is consumed by terror, Madeline returns only to die a violent death in front of an overwhelmed narrator, taking her brother with her, and the narrator leaves the house in a state of psychological shock. Rather than granting the characters any moment of transcendence, Poe’s tale transfers the apprehension of the aesthetic dimension of a catastrophe to the reader, who becomes the true recipient of the sublimity generated by the story, a sublimity anticipated within the narrative itself but experienced differently by the narrator and by those who reconstruct the terrifying sequence of events through his account.

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