House of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe’s
“The Fall of the House of Usher”

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“The Fall of the House of Usher” is among those few stories that seem to elicit nearly as many critical interpretations as it has readers. More recent critical appraisals of the story have largely followed two directions: a reappraisal of the genre of the story as a Gothic romance¹ and a close attention to Madeline Usher as a type of Poe’s other female characters.² But the tale presents the reader a multiplicity of problems that set it aside from Poe’s other stories. Madeline is as enigmatic as a new language and as

¹Perhaps the most helpful study of this sort is Gary E. Tombleson’s “Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ as Archetypal Gothic: Literary and Architectural Analogs of Cosmic Unity” (Nineteenth-Century Contexts 12.2 [1988]: 83-106). Tombleson locates the place of the story—both its traditional and innovative elements—within the tradition dating to Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story (1764). Also helpful is Stephen Dougherty’s “Dreaming the Races: Biology and National Fantasy in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (Henry Street 7.1 [Spring 1988]: 17-39). Of particular interest, and with a revealing twist on interpreting the story, is Mark Kinkead-Weekes’ “Reflections On, and In, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher.’” Kinkead-Weekes argues that the story is “not merely Gothick, but rather a ‘Gothick’ which at every turn signals a consciousness of its own operation” (17). This pattern includes, furthermore, an awareness of the writer of the Gothic.

²See, for example, Cynthia S. Jordan’s “Poe’s Re-Vision: The Recovery of the Second Story” (American Literature 59.1 [Mar. 1987]: 1-19). Jordan sets forth the ways by which Poe differs from Hawthorne and pays close attention to such stories as “Berenice,” “Morella,” and “Ligeia,” in addition to “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In “Sympathies of a Scarcely Intelligible Nature’: The Brother-Sister Bond in Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (Studies in Short Fiction 30 [1993]: 387-396), Leila S. May discusses the issue of the female persona with an interesting twist, arguing that the story represents Poe’s vision of social destruction with the breakup of family structures in mid-19th century. That the relationship between Roderick and Madeline is aberrant goes without saying, but May provides insufficient evidence of a social meltdown at this time or support for Poe’s holding this view.
difficult to construe. While debates about Lady Ligeia have filled the pages of many journals, it is not hard to understand why. Her contrarian social role, her purely gothic resurrection, and her defiant antithesis in character to Rowena sharpen her person from the start. But Madeline? This sylph-like creature, so attenuated and frail, seems to slip through the story like vapor, all the more mysterious for that and for her incredible power displayed in the conclusion.

Similarly, while the story is certainly Gothic in nature, here, too, we find exceptions and qualifications. In the majority of Poe’s Gothic tales the narrative point of view is first person, and, significantly, the reader is also placed inside the mind of this leading character-narrator who is only a step away from insanity. In “Usher” we also have a creeping horror and the mental disintegration of the principal persona, but the story is in fact narrated by an outside visitor (also representing the reader) who wants to find a way out of the horror. The only problem with this narrator is that, even having been given ample signs and warnings (as happens to Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado”), he is too inept to put the clues together. Poe has designed this deliberately, of course, for the reader is far more deductive than the narrator but has to wait for him to reach the extreme limit of safety before fleeing. However dull the narrator’s mental processing, it is altogether better than being trapped in insanity.

One of the more penetrating of these studies of Gothic traits is G. R. Thompson’s analysis of “The Fall of the House of Usher” in his Poe’s Fiction. Thompson addresses the variations Poe creates with the Gothic tale by structuring a conflict between reason and irrationality. Particularly successful is his analysis of

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3It is nearly impossible to keep track of all the articles and dissenting opinions that “Ligeia” has engendered. In Poe’s mind, at least, the story was his best to date. To Philip Pendleton Cooke he wrote, “‘Ligeia’ may be called my best tale” (9 August 1846 Letters 2: 329). Readers don’t always agree with authors on such matters. The story is, nonetheless, a fascinating document for Poe’s revision process. In The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, volume 2, Thomas Mabbott discusses these at some length.
the decayed House mirroring Usher’s mind so that “The sinking of the house into the reflecting pool dramatizes the sinking of the rational part of the mind, which has unsuccessfully attempted to maintain some contact with a stable structure of reality outside the self, into the nothingness within” (90). The analysis provides a lucid discussion of the process of that disintegration, of the dream-like qualities of Madeline as the devolution of the subconscious, and of the narrator’s final infection by “Usher’s hysteria.” What Thompson does not explore, however, is an accounting for the loss of reason and what conclusion the reader may infer by the storm-struck house crumbling into the murky tarn.

To explore such issues, one must investigate beyond the confines of the tale proper, even beyond its generic home as a Gothic romance. The tale yields its full meaning as we turn to areas much overlooked in the study of this work; first, the influence of Poe’s cosmology as set forth in other works but nonetheless pertinent, by his own telling, to his art; and, second, the historical context of his time when the effects of Enlightenment thinking of the prior century had not yet fully yielded (for Poe, at least) to the new spirit of Romanticism. The latter point in particular is crucial for an historicist appraisal of the story and of Poe, for it becomes evident that Poe did not reject Enlightenment thinking, that he was in fact suspicious of the newer Romanticism, and that at best he hoped for a tenuous harmony between the two. Keeping in mind such premises, we can observe the theory for unity, symmetry, and harmony emerging from *Eureka*, the aesthetic principles of the theory in his essays, and the application of those principles in a study of the conflict between Romanticism and Enlightenment in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

The casual treatment of Poe’s cosmology no doubt springs from the conception that this is but one more entertaining hoax from the master trickster, somewhat akin to the elaborate architecture of “The Raven” described in “Philosophy of Com-
position.” Undeniably, however, even Poe’s most wildly Gothic romances, his most mysterious tales of ratiocination, and virtually all his poems, spring from some “idea” of order, a principle that this world can try to twist and break but can never quite succeed. Basically, his cosmology rests upon the philosophical principle that the very apprehension of disorder assumes an agency of order. Those familiar with the works of Aristotle will recognize the argument immediately. The essentials of Poe’s cosmology reside in his essay *Eureka*, and there, too, he relies upon Aristotelian premises.

Since the work is less familiar to contemporary readers, I preface a discussion of it with a brief chronology. In 1843 Poe published the “Prospectus of *The Stylus,*” the literary magazine he hoped to launch in July of that year. In late 1847, he had completed the lecture “The Cosmogony of the Universe”\(^4\) that would be the introduction to *Eureka,* but also a lecture (nearly two hours long) that he could use to raise funds for *The Stylus.* The lecture had limited use. The only event we are certain of was an appearance on January 17, 1848, at Society Library where only 60 people showed up, most of them journalists. Poe finally prevailed upon Putnam to publish the work, asking for a print run of 50,000 copies and receiving instead a run of 500. It appeared in early July 1848.\(^5\)

There appeared to be good reason for caution. The narrative guise of the learned scholar adopted for the lengthy third section absolutely confounds the casual—or even the very liter-

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\(^4\)Technically, a “cosmogony,” the term Poe uses, is concerned with the origins and the evolution of the universe. A “cosmology,” the more fitting term here, deals with the universe in total relativity—from the origin to the acts and consequences of all life in the universe. As we will see, Poe’s theory clearly points in the latter direction.

Elsewhere, the narrator moves from humble observer to snide satirist. In addition to the shifting narrative poses, the work itself is simply such a strange miscellany of facts and thoughts and extrapolations that it is nearly impossible to find an orderly, fruitful, and singular thesis emerging in it. Every issue seems to lead to an ever-widening gyre of new questions. Admitting that, however, the work still constitutes Poe’s fundamental cosmological view, and it does remain central to understanding his aesthetic principles. That essential element of *Eureka*, at least, may be rather clearly and conveniently summarized.

Preceding all existence is a deity functioning like Aristotle’s Prime Mover. Humanity, and all physical nature, exists because this Prime Mover willed it to exist. Poe states that “‘In the beginning’ we can admit—indeed, we can comprehend, but one *First Cause*, the truly ultimate *Principle*, the Volition of God” (237). We have then, a fairly traditional view of God’s creation *ex nihilo*, that is, he willed all things into being out of nothing more than his will. As with Aristotle (and also the Judeo-Christian tradition) God is that being beyond which one can go no further.

But here Poe throws some of his own twists into the proposition. If the creator being is that ultimate first cause, it must represent unity. All the created order is individuated; necessarily, therefore, its source is not chaos but unity. Poe speaks of this as “Irradiation from Unity”—the primary creative act. Moreover, “This primary act itself is to be considered as *continuous volition*” (237). This is to say that God’s creative impulse contin-

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7Quotations from *Eureka* are from volume 16 of the Harrison edition of *The Complete Works*. Page numbers refer to this volume. More recently, Richard P. Benton has edited a new edition of *Eureka* with line numbers, a compendium essay, and a bibliographic guide (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1973). The text is quite difficult to find, however, while the Harrison edition is in nearly every library.
ues through the creative order, including humanity, that he has willed into being.

We arrive at the old religious and philosophical conundrum. If willed into being by God, and out of nothing, then what constitutes both our individuation yet also our unity with this God? Judaism provides the earliest answer with the story of the Edenic fall, where because of an act of transgression the unity was partially severed and, according to the Kabbalistic myth of “God in Exile,” God withdrew into mystery. Nonetheless, as God’s creation, humanity was still mindful of God. Plato provides the first coherent philosophical accounting in the western world with his concept of the Ideal Forms being transmuted by the earthly stuff of humanity. Only humanity, however, possessed the quality of mind to apprehend the ideal.

Poe, on the other hand, insists upon an ongoing volitional act of God apprehended by intuition. The idea led to his notorious concept in “The Poetic Principle” that the task of the poet is “to apprehend the supernal loveliness” (Essays 77) of God’s order and that the best way to do so is through sadness. Poe reflects “that (how or why we know not) this certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty” (Essays 81). This leads Poe, then, to the idea that the most sad thing, and therefore the most beautiful, is the death of a beautiful woman. The result is a body of work littered with female corpses.

It remains difficult, even for the most earnest reader, to take “The Poetic Principle” altogether seriously. Yet, herein lie many of Poe’s seminal ideas and aesthetic principles. Many of those ideas, moreover, relate directly to the cosmology of Eureka. One has to remember that Poe desires to startle the reader into an awareness of the divinity within, for, he insists, we are all part and particle of the divine. Necessarily so, since God willed all things

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8Poe made this point in a number of places, perhaps most forcefully in his 2 July 1844 letter to James Russell Lowell: “But to all we attach the notion of a constitution of particles—atomic composition. For this reason only we think spirit different; for
into being out of nothing. What then are we but particles of the divine itself? Therefore in all created order there resides what Edward Wagenknecht called “the Shadow of Beauty.”9 Poe describes it as such: “An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the beautiful” (Complete Works 14: 273). Therefore, Poe concludes that, since we are willed into being ex nihilo, since we are thereby part and particle of the divine, and since the ongoing volition of the divine rests among its creation as a shadow of beauty, symmetry that mirrors this unity of the universe is the paramount aesthetic quality of the work. Poe argues that the sense of the symmetrical “is the poetical essence of the Universal—of the Universe which, in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms; thus poetry and truth are one” (Complete Works 16: 302).

Poe takes the issue one step further, however. If indeed all things are willed into being ex nihilo, then not only all humanity but also all matter is part and parcel with God. Such a view Poe expresses as his infamous “sentience theory” in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”10 In particular the theory exerts itself twice. When Usher reveals that he has not left the mansion in many spirit, we say, is unparticled, and therefore is not matter. . . . The unparticled matter, permeating and impelling all things, is God. Its activity is the thought of God—which creates. Man, and other thinking beings, are individualizations of the unparticled matter” (Letters 1: 257). Humanity is a part or extension of God. Since it is the nature of God to create, humanity’s closest affinity to the Deity lies in its creativity. To express its godliness humanity must create in its own unique, but divine, method.

9Wagenknecht puts it as such: “For though the Shadow of Beauty may float unseen among us, we can never make much contact with it in human experience unless it can somehow be made to impregnate the stuff of human life. . . .” (151). It is precisely the task of the poet to make that “impregnation.”

10One should not be deterred from spotting similarities in cosmology by the fact that Eureka was published nearly a decade (1848) later than “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which first appeared in Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine, September 1839. The fundamental beliefs pulled together in Eureka were ones that Poe had been developing in part for years and in Eureka tried to systematize as a whole.
years, he describes the effect that the "mere form and substance" of the mansion has had upon him: "An effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought upon the morale of his existence" ("Usher" 403). Later, after Usher’s rhapsody of creative expressions, the narrator and Usher fall into a conversation on “the sentience of all vegetable things” (408). Remembering Usher’s description of this, the narrator describes the preternatural interconnectedness of mansion and family, and concludes, in Usher’s terms, that “The result was discoverable. . . in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was” (408).

Careful readers of Poe will quickly understand that this use of a mental landscape is nothing new to Poe. It appears most prominently, perhaps, in the poetry. In “Ulalume” for example, the weird and otherworldly geographical landscape is nothing more than an objectification of the narrator’s own mind. But so too it appears repeatedly in the short stories, particularly in the descriptions of the ornate and convoluted furnishings of a room (“Ligeia,” “Masque of the Red Death”) that mirror the mind of the narrator. In no other work, however, has Poe structured this

11All quotations from “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia” are from volume 2 of Mabbott’s authoritative edition and will be cited as “Usher” and “Ligeia.”

12In his “Sentience and the False Deja vu in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” John Lammers makes a distinction critical to understanding Poe. Sentience, he points out, is a matter of shared awareness:

Since the word “sentience” can mean “feeling with awareness” or “feeling without awareness,” since everyone believes that plants at least have “feeling without awareness,” and since Usher’s theory is unusual because only four writers in the history of the world have agreed with him, then the meaning of “sentience” here must be the unusual one—“feeling with awareness or consciousness.” In short, Usher believes that all vegetation has a mind. (21)

This view comports precisely with the “volitional” act of creation appearing in Eureka. For another discussion of sentience, see David L. Coss’s “Art and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (Pleiades 14.1 [1991]: 93-106).
sentience, or interconnectedness, between the physical world and the mental/psychological world more powerfully and tellingly than in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

On the basis of his cosmological and aesthetic theories, Poe thereby constructs his architecture of mirrors to prop the movement of the story. Several studies have probed the pattern of mirror images, usually relating them to the rationality/irrationality of Usher or the physical/psychological tension between him and Madeline. Indeed, it falls beyond the space or provision of this essay to list them all, but in order to demonstrate the functions of pairing and splitting that the mirror images provide, a few central patterns may be noted.

The most evident, but eerily complex, of course, is the House of Usher itself. Roderick himself tells the narrator that over the centuries the mansion and the family had been so bonded as to become identified as one. Moreover, the diminishment of the Usher family, through years of inbreeding to this one lonely brother and sister, precisely parallels the physical collapse of the house, standing far apart from civilization as it does in some distant, lonely tract of country. The pairing between Roderick and the mansion is sustained in the careful detailing of descriptions, as the narrator observes first the one, then the other, and discerns unnerving similarities.

Although paired in matters of neglect and in physical description, both the Ushers and the mansion are undergoing a simultaneous process of splitting. The house is rent by a zigzag fissure that threatens its stability. In his letter to the narrator, Roderick admits to “mental disorder” that threatens his stability. Similarly, the

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14 Earliest published forms of the story use the term “pitiable mental idiosyncrasy” here. See s2: 398. For a lengthier discussion of the house and the “divided mind,” see
brother and sister are paired—not only by heritage but also by being fraternal twins. They, too, however, are simultaneously splitting apart, Madeline into her mysterious cataleptic trance and Roderick into an irrationally surrealistic world of frenzied artmaking.

Many other mirror images accumulate in the story. The house is mirrored by its image in the tarn and collapses beneath its waters at the close. Roderick’s painting of the underground burial vault—at which the narrator marvels “If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher”—preternaturally and prophetically mirrors Madeline’s escape from the vault. The light with no apparent source in the painting may be referenced to Lady Ligeia’s exclamation on the Conqueror Worm. “O Divine Father,” Ligeia exclaims in a line that could be taken from *Eureka*, “Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who—who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (“Ligeia” 319). Surprisingly with her glacial, ghostly demeanor prior to her entombment, Madeline possesses just such a will also.

“The Haunted Palace” provides another artistic mirror image. The work precisely traces the devolution of the House of Usher from a palace governed in orderly fashion by “Thought’s Dominion” to a den of disorder in which demons flicker about like bats—except that these demons are in Usher’s mind. An interesting submotif of the poem is the transition from spirits moving “To a Lute’s well-tunèd law” to forms moving fantastically “to a discordant melody.” With the demise of some structured order, artforms rampage into dissonance and cacophony.

This process of devolution forms the centering thesis of Gillian Brown’s innovative study, “The Poetics of Extinction.” Drawing upon Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), in which he argues the diminishment and passing of “organic

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Jack G. Voller’s “The Power of Terror: Burke and Kant in the House of Usher.”
beings” over vast periods of time, Brown finds a model for the disintegration of both the House and lineage of Usher. The value of the essay resides in Brown’s crisp demonstration of the relationship between the devolution of environment and humanity, predicated on Lyell’s theory. As we have seen, moreover, that close interconnectedness between the physical and psychological, the external environment and the internal mind, is amply supported by *Eureka*, as well as by Poe’s essays and art. Nonetheless one questions to what end this devolution exists in the fiction. Is it simply that all things pass away? Nothing could be further from Poe’s writings, with their tenacious, almost frenzied grip upon the great mind that endures, as *Eureka* has it. Beyond anything Poe sought the physical incarnation of Hippocrates’s incantation in his *Aphorisms: Ars longa, vita brevis*. To complete the careful construction of the story into an imaginative architecture that endures, however, one final set of mirror images bears scrutiny.

In order to create something of a mental theater that draws out the suspense of the story, Poe constructed a conflation of such images at the ending. To put Roderick’s mind at ease, the narrator reads to him from “Mad Trist” by Sir Launcelot Canning. Every step of Ethelred to force the entrance to the hermit’s dwelling has its mirror in Madeline’s clangorous escape from the dungeon. Meanwhile, a storm descends upon and envelops the mansion, mirroring the swirling collapse of Usher’s rationality. Here, too, in the mirror of the storm and Roderick’s mind, we find a clear use of the sentience theory.

Yet, the reader somehow feels dissatisfied if only construing the story as a clever construction of Poe’s cosmology in his sentience theory. However carefully structured, the pairings and splittings of the mirror images point suggestively to a larger pattern than mere aesthetic architecture. Many directions to

15In an unusual twist on Poe’s notorious ending, Kinkead-Weekes views it as an ironic, comedic scene in which the affected superiority of the narrator is destroyed (30-31).
this larger significance have been offered.\textsuperscript{16} It may be profitable, however, to relate the story to a larger conflict that Poe had been struggling with for some time: how to balance Romantic passion with Enlightenment order. By virtue of his work in the Gothic tale itself, many readers are quick to place him without qualification in the Romantic camp. But it is a conflict that Poe had struggled with previously that does, in fact, inhabit \textit{Eureka} and comes to bear most forcefully in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Although literary scholars generally date the Enlightenment era from 1660 (as a departure from the Renaissance) to 1798 (with the publication of Lyrical Ballads), all acknowledge the artificiality of such dating. All such periods consist of attitudes, ideas, and cultural dynamics that precede and postdate the era. Benjamin Franklin’s fervid belief in perfectibility of self\textsuperscript{17} gave way to romantic dissolution in order to feel life more passionately. Moreover, one could convincingly argue that the conflict between Enlightenment, with its heroic grandiosity of the mind, and Romanticism, with all its disheveled passions, continue in full force. Perhaps the conflict was only more heightened at Poe’s particular point in literary history.

The Enlightenment presupposed the primacy of human reason, the ethical template of formal order, and the lifestyle of

\textsuperscript{16}Several of these different interpretations explore the conflict between the natural and the supernatural, such as E. Arthur Robinson’s “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (\textit{PMLA} 76.1 [Mar. 1961]: 68-81) and David Ketterer’s \textit{The Rationale of Deception in Poe} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979). Several studies explore the subconscious or the conflict between image and reality in the story. Representative here are Sam Girgus’s “Poe and the Transcendent Self” (\textit{The Law of the Heart. Austin: U of Texas P, 1979. 24-36}) and Leonard W. Engel’s “The Journey from Reason to Madness: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (\textit{Essays in Arts and Sciences} 14 [1985]: 23-31).

\textsuperscript{17}“It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time . . . . As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other” (Franklin 1384).
staid decorum. It may be argued that Poe’s short stories eclipse reason by the supernatural, disrupt ethical values by gothic disorder, and blast decorum by the weird and grotesque. The argument would be wrong, for Poe sought nothing less than the delicate symbiosis between the two—and the key quality of symbiosis is in the mutual benefit one to another.

That Poe had struggled with the national literary shift from Enlightenment to Romantic thinking is evident long before 1839. And while many of the early nineteenth-century writers embraced Romanticism passionately as the full outlet for an intuitive, imaginative, and story-driven art, Poe was by far more reserved. In his “1836 Letter to B____” Poe refers to the Lake Poets in quite derogatory terms: “As I am speaking of poetry, it will not be amiss to touch slightly upon the most singular heresy in its modern history—the heresy of what is called very foolishly, the Lake School” (Essays 6-7). The heresy of which Poe speaks, specifically in reference to Wordsworth, is that didactic poetry is seen as the most pleasurable. While admiring Coleridge’s great learning, despite all that learning Poe is quick to point out his “liability to err.” As for Wordsworth, “I have no faith in him” (Essays 8). Truly, the “Letter to B____” ends in a gnarled fist of contradictions (of Coleridge, Poe says he cannot “speak but with reverence”), and his attempt to define poetry is, in his own words, a “long rigamarole.” But shot through the essay resides the governing belief that intellect and passion work together in art.

Such also became the central argument of “The Philosophy of Composition,” a much better known, much clearer, but not necessarily more credible work. Here Poe lays his famous rational grid upon the composition of a poem of irrationality—“The Raven.” For example, he states his (predetermined) scheme for rhythm and meter: “The former is trochaic—The latter is octometer

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18For a more detailed analysis of Poe’s relation with the English Romantics and the part they played in his aesthetics, see my article, “Edgar Allan Poe: Artist, Aesthetician, Legend” (South Dakota Review 10.2 [Spring 1972]: 60-70).
acatalectic, alternating with heptameter catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with a tetrameter cataletic” (Essays 21). Poe’s “The Rationale of Verse,” moreover, might well be called one of the preeminent Enlightenment documents of the Romantic era. Surely, there were poets of Poe’s time who followed fairly rigid verse forms, yet none of them that I am aware of would likely ever claim such an ornate, intellectual concept prior to the poem’s composition. The fact is all the more telling in that the elegy, “The Raven,” corresponds in many ways with “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the singular exception being that in the former we are placed inside the disintegrating mind of the narrator while in the latter the narrator gives us some objective distance from the disintegration.

While “The Raven” remains one of the best known works in the western tradition generally, a second of Poe’s elegies, “Ulalume,” is perhaps of more critical importance to understanding the balancing act Poe was attempting between the Enlightenment and the Romantic. Upon a casual reading the poem seems archetypally romantic. We find the narrator wandering a strange landscape that ultimately is a mirror to his inner torment, if not his mind itself (his companion is Psyche). Similarly the time is more of a psychic state rather than the announced month of October with its withering and sere leaves. Into the groaning realms, he walks with Psyche his soul. Why? To what end? To discover the full meaning of the event for which they had traveled here the year prior.

The heightened, fantastic elements of the poem intensify throughout. The lonely season, the “dank tarn of Auber” (line 6), the unsettled and threatening landscape—all the essentials of the Gothic are here. Furthermore, supernatural figures enter—the ghouls who feed on the dead but also heavenly figures. The quarter moon rises, like twin horns hung in the sky. With it appears the figure of Astarte, Phoenician goddess of fertility and passion whose symbol is the twin horns of the bull. She is the consummate romantic figure, representing the outpouring of
creative passion. The narrator observes that “She is warmer than Dian” (39), a reference to the Roman goddess of chastity and order. Strangely, and in spite of Psyche’s caution to fly, the narrator trusts Astarte to lead him to the truth. Essentially, we have the old Appollinian-Dionysian conflict between order and impulse played out with two female goddesses—appropriate to the elegy for Virginia. In this case, and with the maddening desire to confront whatever lies at the end of his journey, the narrator insists,

Ah, we safely may trust to its gleaming,
And be sure it will lead us aright—
We surely may trust to its gleaming
That cannot but guide us aright. . . . (67-70)

Astarte, the goddess of passion, the fuel for the romantic flame, does in this poem lead him to the burning encounter with the fact of Ulalume’s death. In this poem, Poe appears to recognize the enormous creative potential in romantic passion; yet, he remains wary of it, cautions that once unleashed it has the capacity to consume someone entirely.

This tension is similar to that which Poe takes to “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Few other authors struggled as powerfully with that tension and with maintaining a balance between the analytic intelligence and the creative fancy. The possible exception is Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose “Rappaccini’s Daughter” can very profitably be read as a clash between the coldly analytic Enlightenment man (Rappaccini) and the Romantic man (Baglioni). In “The Fall of the House of Usher” one notices the conflict already in the first paragraph, a masterpiece of prose poetry. The narrator possesses the initial rational distance from the scene, reporting to the reader what he sees and feels as he approaches the mansion. The organic form with which he reports his findings, however, allows the reader intuitively to grasp the sense of insufferable gloom. In the initial sentence, heavy, sinking, o and u vowels droop like sullen rain. The pacing
of the sentences, with relatively brief, stumbling phrases in very long, heavy sentences, enhance the effect.\(^\text{19}\)

The carefully ordered architectural grid Poe places upon the story, including the escalation of mirror images, is similar to the (purportedly) careful ordering of his poems. In this story, however, the balance between Enlightenment and Romantic itself is situated at the heart of the story. Roderick himself is emblematic of Romantic passion, while Madeline is emblematic of Enlightenment. Their genesis, as fraternal twins, is unified—a perfectly mirrored complementarity—but the story unveils their splitting to mutual destruction.

This way of viewing the relationship between brother and sister is not customary, to be sure. The common view is that the narrator, coming from outside the palace of horrors, represents rational order. An example of this view appears in Jack Voller’s study of the sublime in Poe’s tale, in which he states that “The narrator is associated with the rescuing force of reason. . . . Although he strikes few readers as cheerful, the narrator is suited to his task . . .”\(^\text{29}\). Yet, it is hard to find the narrator exercising anything like a force of reason. In the main, his role is limited to some musing observations, a rather slow study in horror, and a hopeless inefficiency to do much of anything about the divisive destruction of the tenants of the House, which seems to be precisely Poe’s point. When Romantic passion and Enlightenment order divide, their mutual destruction is assured.

Madeline therefore becomes abstracted to little more than a mental evanescence—Enlightenment at its extreme, out of touch with reality. When the narrator first sees her passing in the distance, he is filled with unaccountable dread, so otherworldly she appears. She is, Roderick discloses, simply wasting away of some illness with no known etiology. At the very same time,

\(^{19}\)For linguists with an interest in quantitative rhetoric, the first paragraph is a treasure trove. Just dealing with the baseline figures, the first four sentences are 60, 22, 32, and 81 words in length, for an average of 49, an extraordinary average. But the proliferation of short phrases and clauses works as interior counterpart.
Roderick diverges in the opposite direction. While Madeline disappears into a vaporific mist, Roderick flames into an unrestricted creative power, full of unrestrained, raw passion. He becomes the fiery polar to Madeline’s cold abstraction. The narrator describes his successive days with Usher and his artmaking thus: “An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphurous luster over all” (“Usher” 405). Usher thereby enters a creative mania, churning out songs, paintings, and poems against the coming dark.

That is precisely the point Poe makes in this tale. When split apart, as they are here, Enlightenment thinking becomes all cold, analytic, and detached; Romanticism, on the other hand, blazes into a self-consuming passion. Aesthetically and ideally they ought to be mirrors to each other, working in a complementary fashion to serve art. When split from each other, they become mutually self-destructive. Preternaturally charged with his Romantic instincts, Roderick hears, above the storm, the approaching footsteps of Madeline. She enters, falls upon her brother, and together they die. The splitting pairs have conjoined once again, but tragically this time. The separation had gone to the extreme, disrupting the sentient balance, destroying both. As the narrator flees, the house itself parallels the act of Roderick and Madeline, first splitting apart along the zigzag fissure and then collapsing together into the tarn.

If *Eureka* teaches us the design of unity, and the essays teach us Poe’s efforts to integrate intellectual order into his aesthetics, then it may be fairly said that “The Fall of the House of Usher” is a cautionary tale, warning of a way Poe would not have artists go. While he did exult in the freedoms of the Romantic imagination, he was also highly suspicious of it. He needed, and called for, the orderliness of design inherited from the Enlightenment to contain that imagination. Without that synchronous working, as “The Fall of the House of Usher” demonstrates, both are doomed.


**Works Cited**
