

Through a Text Backwards: The Resurrection of the House of Usher

There is a certain kind of pictorial joke, a picture that presents the same image in two different ways. If you look at the portrait one way up, it looks like this; and if you turn it upside down, lo and behold! the elements of the representation turn themselves into a quite different representation. If it was a sad face, turn it upside down and it becomes a happy face. And vice versa.

The elements in Poe's voluptuous tales of terror — 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'Ligeia', 'Berenice' — are over-determined, so that it is very difficult to find out what is going on. That is, to find out what is *really* going on, what is going on under the surface. Because at first it looks as if *everything* is on the surface; there is a grand theatricality about Poe, the true child of strolling players.

His theatricality ensures we know all the time that the scenery is cardboard, the blade of the axe is silver paint on papier mâché, the men and women in the stories unreal, two-dimensional stock characters, yet still we shiver. The imagery is simply that of the most conventional tale of terror and easily translates into the medium of the conventional horror movie. His landscapes are those of the commonplace picturesque. We feel we know it so well just because it is so familiar; we feel we have been here before.

'I have been here before.' In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud says this feeling of familiarity means that we are remembering the bodies of our mother. If so, Poe's mother's body is a haunted house, one haunted by allusion. Allusions to the blasted heath in *King Lear* perhaps. To the castle where Macbeth killed the king, in the play from whence flapped that 'raven over the infected house', perhaps. And mightn't the body of an actress contain within it just such abandoned, weathered stage sets?

But, within the terms of the conventions of the tale of terror, Poe's compulsive sexual pathology is presented as straightforwardly as if everybody loved corpses best. The latent content of these stories greets us first, as in that extraordinary story, 'Berenice', where the husband becomes obsessed with his wife's teeth and finally pulls them all out, each one. This strategy for defeating the vagina *indentata* is presented with such unself-conscious relish it is tempting to tease out a subconscious meaning, as those jokes about Freudian dream symbolism: a man dreams about his wilting penis, it means he has a great longing for a new necktie.

There is a slippery quality about Poe's tales of sexual terror. They are

and they are not what they claim to be.

I decided to adopt the method of the painters of the double portraits I described a moment ago. I decided that I would invert 'The Fall of the House of Usher' - play it backwards, in the same way as one can play a movie backwards, and see what face is showed to me, then, and what story that face told about the Ushers and their author.

Consider the following story: 'The Resurrection of the House of Usher'.

A storm rages.

We see before us a sullen tarn. Above, in the stormy sky, a blood red moon. We may suppose that the tarn reflects the moonlight and therefore looks as though it is filled not with water but with blood.

Out of this pool, the House that is synonymous with the Usher family reconstructs itself. Stone by fungus-eroded stone, the ancient mansion rises from the crimson tarn, refreshed by its bath of blood just as the Countess Elizabeth Bathory, the Hungarian vampire, was by the baths of blood she used to take long ago, in Transylvania, in a benighted mansion not unlike this one.

The zig-zag fissure that runs from the base of the building to its roof now seals itself up so that we can no longer see the baleful head of the moon peering through the gap.

The wild tempest continues to rage.

The narrator — let us call him Edgar Allan Poe. For Poe consistently invites the reader to make this identification of the narrator with him. No matter how unreal the circumstances of the tale, how improbable Poe's presence there in the first person singular, the witness, the on-the-spot reporter, always lends them plausibility. It is the trick of an old newspaperman. Edgar Allan Poe arrives. He is the child of a pair of strolling players, David Poe and Elizabeth Arnold; picture his arrival as something like that of the Player King in *Hamlet*. Perhaps he has just arrived at the House of Usher, to perform a one-man show, perhaps. At the special request of Roderick Usher. A one-man show consisting, say, of a selection of Hamlet's soliloquies for he wears a suit of Hamlet's colours, i.e., sable.

Fleeing the fury of the storm, the newcomer makes across the causeway with all speed towards the ambivalent hospitality the frightful walls of the ancient house may offer.

We are — or, at least, Poe was born and spent all his life in — a country where there are no castles, that is, the USA. At least, there are no indigenuous castles. There may be one or two that have, like London Bridge, been shipped from their original sites by millionaires nostalgic for the picturesque, sent across the Atlantic in boxes of numbered bricks and put together again in Texas, California, Tennessee . . . but these imported

castles are few and far between and, besides, were shipped over well after Poe's day.

Unless he caught a glimpse of one during his brief period of schooling in England in his childhood (although there are no castles in Stoke Newington, now a suburb of London, then a village outside London) it is possible that Poe had never seen a real castle.

Not that he ever specifies a castle when he describes the great, crumbling mansions of his imagination, where his neurasthenic men and women play out their grim charades of love and death. Yet their interior design's that of castles, though not the castles of European fact but the castles of European fancy. The tapestries, billowing in chill draughts, the armorial trophies, the ancient furniture - we have seen all this before, too.

These great, doomed mansions and their melancholy, antique interiors may always be found in landscapes of the most extraordinary ferocity. The chateau in 'The Oval Portrait', a pile of 'commingled gloom and grandeur', lies in the wildest possible kind of countryside. Its isolation is absolute.

The abbey purchased by the hero of 'Ligeia' occupies a site in 'one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England' (one of the very few times that Poe gives some geographical location to these dream palaces). He describes the 'gloomy and dreary grandeur of the building, the most savage aspect of the domain'.

'The Masque of the Red Death' takes place in a 'castellated abbey'.

'There are no towers in the land more time-honoured' than those of the 'gloomy, grey, hereditary halls' of the husband of the unfortunate Berenice in the story of the same name.

The principal feature of the House of Usher seems to Poe to be 'that of an excessive antiquity'. Most of his mansions are indistinguishable from one another in terms of gloom and antiquity, but *this* house has a conspicuous deformity, 'a tangled web of fungus' that 'covers its exterior'. It must look as if it had been born in a caul.

There are no indigenous castles in the USA but the title of the Gothic melodrama in which Poe's mother first appeared on any stage was *The Mysteries of the Castle*. Elizabeth Arnold had just arrived in America with her own mother; it was April 1796, and Elizabeth Arnold was nine years old.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* had been published as long ago as 1765, setting in train a great vogue for tales of unease. Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was published in 1794. The architecture of anxiety was a literary convention long before Poe was born.

Most notably, the castellated abbey and gaunt mansions of Poe, isolated, abandoned in the middle of the howling wilderness, resemble the most

forbidden of all the forbidden places of de Sade: the castle in *The Hundred Days at Sodom* where ritual tableaux of the most extravagant sexual cruelty are acted out daily by a small group of aristocrats using imprisoned victims whose only hope of escape lies in death. (Poe's scheme of things differs in this particular from de Sade's; for Poe, death need not necessarily put an end to suffering.)

The mansions, abbeys and castles where Justine is tortured and her sister, Juliette, wreaks her infamies are built of the same imaginative fabric as the castles of Poe. This room of Juliette's might just as well come from one of Poe's stories: 'A dim, a lugubrious lamp hung in the middle of the room whose vaults were likewise covered with dismal appurtenances. . . 'but de Sade gives the game away, here; he goes on blithely: 'various instruments of torture were scattered here and there'. Poe retains enough self-control to keep the instruments of torture out of the bedchamber, at least where women are concerned - most of the time, at least. I don't know if Poe actually read de Sade; the dissemination of banned books is a difficult area to research. I do not even know if de Sade was translated into English at this period. Anyway, Poe would have denied reading de Sade.

To return to our inversions.

Edgar Allan Poe, the hero and narrator of 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the Ishmael of this *Moby Dick*, rushes headlong into the freshly reconstituted house. (Obviously, if we are running the story backwards, so is Poe himself running backwards, but I don't propose to retain that much fidelity to the conceit.)

He speeds up the worm-eaten stair and makes his way to an upstairs bedroom. There he stops, aghast. A man and a woman are clasped together on the floor, still as death, locked in what seems to be either the fatal embrace of a love suicide or else a post-coital slumber so profound it is as good as death.

The couple bear a marked physical resemblance to one another:

A cadaverousness of complexion; lips somewhat thin and very pallid; but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual and similar formations; a finely-moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten.

They look like one another because they are twins, each the fatal double of the other, It is also a face that somewhat resembles Poe's own in the celebrated photograph, with his bulging brow, pale, delicate, intellectual

features and curling, disdainful lips. (See how he writes himself into the script, as witness or voyeur, or second cousin twice removed of the protagonists.)

And perhaps this face also reminds him of the face of his own mother, if, indeed, he remembers it, because she died when she was twenty-four years old and he was two and perhaps retained no concrete memory, only a vague memory, an idea, an impression of the face of the woman he loved and lost, his lost dear one.

Certainly the two corpses on the floor look very much like Ligeia, the heroine of the authentic resurrection story, with her Hebraic nose and large, dark eyes; and the editors of the Harvard Editions of *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* claim, on I don't know what authority, that Ligeia looks like Elizabeth Arnold. (Who, therefore, must have given much of her face to her son, his only inheritance.)

Gazing in wonder at these felled lovers - or are they lovers? — our hero, whom we have decided to call Edgar Allan Poe, sees that there is blood on the woman's white robes, those robes that look so much like a shroud, and 'the evidence of bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated body'.

Perhaps she has just been raped and finally managed to wreak vengeance on her rapist.

Or perhaps her appearance is more like that of a woman who has just given birth. But in that case, what about the young man? Unless — it is he who has just been born?

They lie still, victims of some nameless and presumably erotic catastrophe, on the floor of the gloomy bedchamber, whilst the storm continues to rage outside and the narrator, with his face the mirror image of theirs, each of which is the mirror image of each other, gazes on, in horror, until the woman at last — oh, horror upon horror! — comes to life again.

Or was she only stunned? Or has she genuinely turned to life? Or is it something unspeakably else?

Be that as it may, now she rises up, as if the presence of Poe has set the action in motion — as indeed it has. Without him, nothing would be happening. He is more essential to the plot than either of the Ushers or their dilapidated habitation.

She rises up, her face a mask of horror. Screaming, she departs, backing out of the ebony doors of the apartment, leaving behind her on the air the vivid spook of her voice. The doors close behind her with a crash.

Her partner, her lover, her brother, her twin, scrambles unharmed to his feet, to discover that the newly arrived Poe is scarcely coherent from fear at what he has witnessed. Roderick Usher, believing the visitor to have been deranged by what he has just witnessed, exclaims: 'Madam!'

and then hastens to reassure: 'I tell you that now she stands without the door!'

And indeed she is gone.

A series of diminishing bangs and crashes indicate that the Lady Madeline is returning to from whence she came, leaving her brother and companion blessedly alone.

She is returning to her coffin.

For I do think the Lady Madeline is more undead than prematurely buried, and it was Poe's fate to have found her at her ungodly feast athwart the body of his friend, her brother, Roderick Usher. (Poe is suspiciously straightforward about his enthusiasm for dead and dying women.) 'The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,' he opined in 'The Philosophy of Composition', which should therefore, by rights, be retitled: 'The Philosophy of Decomposition'. It is a categorical statement. He will admit of no argument.

He was the child of a beautiful actress who died, of consumption, in his early infancy. If he remembered her at all, it would be the memory of a slow death. He watched his young wife die of the same disease; it took her somewhat longer, five years. His fascination for female morbidity is, however, a little over-determined; think how often the beautiful women in his stories turn out not to have been dead at all. Berenice wasn't really dead. Ligeia, by the sheer force of her will or of her husband's desire, returns to life through the possession of another woman's body. If Lady Madeline dies once, to rise again, might she not rise again and again and again from no matter how many deaths?

It is reasonable to suppose that Poe did not want his mother to die, or his beloved Virginia to die. It is reasonable to suppose that, somewhere, at some subterranean level of the unconscious, he did not really believe they were dead but only play-acting, isn't it?

The coffin of Lady Madeline rests, not in a graveyard, but in a vault in the cellarage of the House of Usher, a vault that at one time — renewed shades of de Sade — had been used as a torture chamber. Poe tells us so: 'the vault had been used in remote feudal times for worst purposes of a *donjon keep*'. The vault is sheathed in copper; apparently it was also used, at one time, to store gunpowder.

Lady Madeline's coffin is shut in by an iron door but now the men know she can get out whenever she wants to, in spite of all their precautions, so they may as well bring her coffin out of the vault, now, and let her be part of the household again.

They cannot resist opening the coffin and peeking at her face, which is their own face, and note that it has the freshness and liveliness characteristic of the undead, with 'the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and

the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death'.

But now they know that appearances are deceptive, that she is *not* dead. Or, more precisely, that she *is* dead, but that, for some reason, death, like an unsatisfactory injection, has not *taken*.

(If we start the story with her attack on Roderick Usher, and *then* she trots off back into her coffin, obviously we posit that her death — or an event similar to a death - has taken place before the story begins. The fiction cannot be tinkered with in such a way as to stop her dying, alas, but, seen retrospectively, her 'death' is a highly ambiguous state, even more ambiguous than it is if seen in the original sequence.)

The two young men lift up the coffin between them and bear it from the vault. And-

— and the text is silent. Presumably they take it to her bedroom. Poe doesn't say. Playing the story backwards as we are doing, all we see is that now the coffin disappears, here one minute, gone the next.

Poe never tells us where the coffin has come from, anyway. The Ushers probably had a stock of empty coffins laid in, anyway, in case of sudden emergency. They probably felt about coffins like other people feel about spare beds. All Poe says about the coffin is incorporated in a verb: 'The body having been encoffined, we two alone [i.e., Roderick and the narrator] bore it to its rest.'

(Or, rather, to its presumed rest.)

If we invert this sequence of events, the two young men now bear the coffin *away* from its rest, into a silence broken only by the wild strains of Roderick's guitar. Perhaps she has been taken to the music room.

Like Pater's Mona Lisa, the Lady Madeline has been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave. She lies on her bed in her somnolent, half-sleeping state, neither fully dead nor fully alive, the life of a sentient plant, waiting, waiting, waiting until the men downstairs call up for her to come and frighten them.

That is her lot. That is her fate. The reader's last glimpse of her is of a domestic spectre, not the angel of the health of Victorian domesticity but a house-ghost, the terrible beloved.

the Lady Madeline . . . passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment mingled with dread - and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings.

We know better to account for them, now. We cannot believe that those we love could leave us; we cannot believe that, in our hearts, we

might have been glad that they were gone. That was how vampires were born, out of grief, relief and guilt.

'FEAR!' cries Roderick and, ecstatic with dread, collapses in a heap on the sofa. Poe judges he has worn out his welcome and quits at last the House of Usher. On his way down the stairs, he meets the family doctor hurrying up them, presumably on an urgent call to attend to Roderick. He casts a weird look at Poe; perhaps he thinks Poe's visit is to blame for this crisis, perhaps he blames the storyteller for the story.

Has Poe, who presents himself all the while as a blameless observer of a family tragedy, had more of an active role in this scenario *for folie à deux* than he pretends? Was it *a folie à trois*?

Shaking off his heels the dust of the House of Usher, Poe rides away, into the savage landscape; the Player King is off to another engagement. On with the show.

The house he leaves behind him continues to look at itself in the still waters of the tarn, gazing at its fungus-encrusted face, contemplating the 'remodelled and inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows'. The House of Usher contemplates its double in the serenity after the story.

It is a haunted house and only the boldest enter it; only the boldest leave.

End of the story: The Resurrection of the House of Usher'.

Turn the story upside down and the face of Madeline Usher — which is also the face of her brother, and perhaps, of the narrator, Poe, whose presence has set all this in motion — upside down, the face of Madeline Usher turns into that of a vampire.

The paraphernalia of the occult is conspicuously absent from Poe's tales of terror — no witches, no black magic, no werewolves, nothing so tangible as a ghost. It is psychological terror he manipulates and though the decor of the tales is murky and theatrical beyond belief, the emotions of sexual guilt, of longing, of paranoia, are raw and real. The tension between the one and the other produces the genius of the tales.

All the same, it turns out that the latent content of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' contains — a vampire, a supernatural being of the kind that Poe usually rigorously rationalised as physical illness, as the promptings of a guilty conscience, or even, as in 'The Masque of the Red Death', as an allegorical figure.

The vampire. Especially, the female vampire, the *femme fatale*, epitomising the fear of and longing for sexuality, symbolising sex and femininity as compulsion and disease. She is the woman who takes by force the blood and life and potency of a man. A metaphor. A part of the decor, in fact — no lonely castle in these abandoned parts is complete without one.

The vampire is a tacky theatrical device, too, just like the collapsing house itself.

So the rawness of feeling turns out to be artifice, too. The sense of doom, the sense of impending psycho-sexual catastrophe that seems to permeate the tale is a device. We are left with the story as a self-defensive strategy, a mask; it tells us nothing about the writer, only about itself. The story is the story in a story. Its most significant images are the House of Usher looking at itself in the water, and the Usher twins gazing at one another's mirror image faces — images of gratified narcissism, entirely sufficient to themselves.

Metaphores, 1988