

**“THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER”:
A MASTER TEXT FOR (POE’S) AMERICAN GOTHIC¹**

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ABSTRACT. *This paper analyses a selection of Poe’s fiction taking as a point of departure the contentions of critics such as Hillis Miller and Eric Savoy on the characteristics of American Gothic. The paper starts with a discussion of these features, which “The Fall of the House of Usber” epitomizes. After a revision of “Usber”, the paper explores other Poe works, showing that the elements that make this narrative a master text for the history of American Gothic are somehow anticipated in Poe’s previous tales, like “Berenice” and “Ligeia”, in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, and peculiarly reflected in the late tale of detection “The Purloined Letter”.*

Keywords: American Gothic, romance, allegory, abstraction, personification, darkness, race, the return of the repressed, unreadable signifiers.

**“THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER”:
UN TEXTO CLAVE EN EL GÓTICO AMERICANO (DE POE)**

RESUMEN. *Este artículo analiza una selección de la narrativa de Poe, tomando como punto de partida los argumentos de críticos como Hillis Miller y Eric Savoy*

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sobre las características del Gótico norteamericano. El artículo se inicia con el análisis de estos rasgos, que "The Fall of the House of Usher" ejemplifica. Tras el estudio de "Usher", el artículo explora otras obras de Poe, mostrando que los elementos que hacen de este cuento un texto maestro para la historia del Gótico norteamericano se anticipan de algún modo en relatos previos del mismo autor, como "Berenice" y "Ligeia", en The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, y se reflejan de forma peculiar en el cuento detectivesco posterior "The Purloined Letter".

Palabras clave: Gótico norteamericano, romance, alegoría, abstracción, personificación, oscuridad, raza, el retorno de lo reprimido, significantes ilegibles.

"What was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation
of the House of Usher?
It was a mystery all insoluble."
E. A. Poe

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is not only a classic in the History of American literature but also a central point of reference for American Gothic as well as its most emblematic text. Significantly, critics are still questioning the "uncertain status" (Goddu 1997: 3) of American Gothic, not only because there was no founding period or a specific group of Gothic writers devoted to this mode, but mainly because of the peculiar impurity of the Gothic in the U.S. As is well-known, American writers and critics have preferred to use terms such as "dark" rather than "Gothic" or refer to the American "romance tradition" as opposed to the British tradition of the novel, as Richard Chase did taking Hawthorne's romances and his prefaces to them as a point of departure. In contrast to this recurrent repression of the Gothic, Leslie Fiedler (1982: 29) went to the opposite extreme in his declaration that American fiction is "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction [...] a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation". More recently, Toni Morrison has analysed the "darkness" of canonical American literature in the light of race: whereas Melville (1985: 2164) discussed "the power of blackness" with regard to Hawthorne's literary vision, imbued with "that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin", Morrison (1993: 37) relates it to the presence of a black resident population in the country, "upon which the imagination could play", and which "was available for meditations on terror".

What is significant is that no matter the critical perspective, concepts such as "darkness", "allegory", "ambiguity" and "abstraction" recur. In keeping with these notions, Eric Savoy has developed a theory of American Gothic which foregrounds the return of the unsuccessfully repressed ("the imperative to repetition"), and especially the peculiarities of this return, which takes place in a tropic field that approaches allegory: "the gothic is most powerful, and most distinctly American, when it strains toward allegorical translucency" (Savoy 1998: 4, 5-6). Savoy (1998:

6) argues that both allegory and prosopopoeia – a “ghostly figure” related to the allegorical mode in its attempt to personify the abstract – have created a “tropic of shadow” that in the end fails to convey a coherently meaningful symbolic: “it is precisely the semantic impoverishment of allegory, the haunting consequences of its refusal of transparency, that impelled American gothic’s narrativization of Otherness toward its insubstantial shadows, and viceversa”. As Paul de Man (Savoy 1998: 11) puts it, “Prosopopoeia undoes the distinction between reference and signification upon which all semiotic systems [...] depend”.

Savoy singles out the house as the most significant trope of American Gothic’s allegorical turn, and to exemplify his theory, he focuses on two apparently unrelated works: Poe’s tale “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and Grant Wood’s painting *American Gothic* (1930). What links them is a series of “representational tensions”, in particular their “inconclusive or incomplete turn” (Savoy 1998: 17) toward allegory. Both in the tale and in the painting, the allegorical signs generated are more important than the literal elements that constitute the text. Just as Madeline’s face in the coffin – “the face of the tenant”, in Poe’s narrator’s words – is unreadable and also suggestive of the double – the Other – and of the irrecoverable traces of the past, the figures in Wood’s painting are simultaneously illegible, “permanently armed against any conclusive speculation as to what they stand for” (Dennis 1986: 85), and also representative of the historical past, what Fiedler (1982: 137) calls “the *pastness* of the past”.

It is worth noting that Savoy’s contentions on the centrality of prosopopoeia and inconclusive allegory in the tradition of American Gothic bring to mind J. Hillis Miller’s analysis of Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” – a rather Gothic tale – in which he discusses the problematics of allegorization and observes Henry James’s critique of Hawthorne’s tendency to the abstractions of allegory. Significantly, Miller (1991: 51) describes Hawthorne’s tale as “the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling”, and highlights the pervasiveness of prosopopoeia in the text, relating it to “the unverifiable trope” of catachresis: “Such a trope defaces or disfigures in the very act whereby it ascribes a face to what has none” (Miller 1991: 94). Miller’s study not only prefigures Savoy’s, but also considers the possibility of ludicrous effects, something not contemplated by this critic. Thus, after quoting a passage in which James studies Hawthorne’s allegorical strategies, Miller (1991: 54) concludes: “James reproaches Hawthorne for failing to make the material base in his stories [...] the fit vehicle for the allegorical meaning it is meant to carry. The discrepancy between vehicle and meaning manifests itself in the form of the unintentionally ludicrous”.

I think that both Miller’s and Savoy’s conclusions are very appropriate to analyse Poe’s fiction, which in its suggestive but elusive symbols, deliberate vagueness, intentional or unintentional ludicrous effects, and recourse to ultimately

illegible signifiers, epitomizes the gap between “signification and reference” (Savoy 1998: 17), the “discrepancy between vehicle and meaning” (Miller 1991: 54) that we can take as constitutive of American Gothic. My analysis starts with “Usher” and continues with other Poe texts, since the features that make this narrative a “master text for the subsequent history of American gothic” (Savoy 1998: 12-13) are somehow anticipated in Poe’s previous tales, like “Berenice” (1835) and “Ligeia” (1838), in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and peculiarly reflected in the late tale of detection “The Purloined Letter” (1844).

As I have mentioned above, Savoy takes Madeline’s face in the coffin as the most striking allegorical sign in the tale, but the figure of king Thought in “The Haunted Palace” is similarly intriguing and could have also been chosen. In both cases, the character in question appears in a house (the coffin/the Palace) within a house (Usher), and their role has more to do with prosopopoeia and inconclusive allegory than with literal meaning. Each figure conveys a complex resonance that goes beyond the boundaries of the plot, and points to an unreadable past that keeps haunting the present. Just as Madeline’s face “becomes the text of the double, the twin, the Other” (Savoy 1998: 13), king Thought – Roderick’s double – and his haunted dominion duplicate and expand, in *mise en abyme*, the decline of the Ushers and their mansion. Significantly, this poem constitutes a brilliant example of opaque allegory: rather than clarify the events of the main text, it obscures them even more. As has been pointed out, its elusive allegorical elements suggest a variety of readings: psychologically, the poem anticipates how Roderick’s (incestuous?) obsession with Madeline provokes his madness and death; socially, it hints at slave or Indian revolts; politically, it suggests the fall of gentry federalism to the jacksonian, king-mob democracy; and it also contains premonitory, uncanny allusions to Lincoln’s speech “House Divided” and the future Civil War. (Cf. Leverenz 2001: 113-14; Bell 1980: 102).

In fact, we can only conclude that “Usher” functions, literally and metaphorically, as a house of mirrors and secrets that contains other houses within, but which – as a kind of deftly contrived hoax – only discloses Poe’s mastery of “unity of effect” and “pre-established design”: its perfect structure resembles a labyrinth in which all the elements are interconnected but encrypted, since every one takes us back to the other precluding the way out.² Thus, interpretations that see the mansion as the double of Madeline, Madeline as a double of the mother, and the mansion as

2. See, for instance, Scott Peeples’ “Poe’s ‘constructiveness’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”: Peeples (2002: 179) analyses the mansion of Usher as the fictional house in which Poe inscribes his “personal philosophy of architecture”, pointing out that recent criticism of “Usher” describes the story as “a hall or house of mirrors”, in which words “give the illusion of depth while actually keeping readers focused on the mirror-like surface of words” (Peeples 2002: 182).

mother (Bonaparte 1949: 237-250), are contested by others that equate the house with Roderick's body, and its interior with his mind or even with the narrator's mind (Wilbur 1967; Hoffman 1990: 295-316). No doubt, these interrelations are suggested by the narrator, when, for instance, he refers to the "equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher' [...] *which seemed to include* [...] both the family and the family mansion", and later on in the story when he adds that Madeline and Roderick "had been twins, and that sympathies of *a scarcely intelligible nature* had always existed between them" (Poe 1982: 232, 240, my italics). As we can see, his information is not only inconclusive, but equivocal: the narrator, both as the narrative voice and as a character, generates and increases the uncertainty. The reader's role is particularly complex in this work, since s/he has to read a text in which the narrator – the text's main voice – is both participant and observer, reader/interpreter and guide/"usher": in that sense, too, the narrator is a double of Usher and a double of the reader. We could also note that, to compound the reading, at the climactic moment of Madeline's apparition, Roderick calls the narrator "Madman" twice – an utterance which not only provides one more example of duplication, but especially serves to foreground the narrator's unreliability.³ No matter the interpretation followed, allegorical opacity makes meaning inconclusive: in the end, the House of Usher, as a building, emblem, or signifier, proves to be more powerful than any of the readings attached to it, and despite its collapse and dissolution in the tarn, it keeps coming back to life, exemplifying "the imperative to repetition" and originating further interpretations of the tale.

Together with "The Fall of the House of Usher", "Ligeia" (1838) – Poe's favourite story – is the tale that best conveys the defining features of American Gothic: the imperative to repetition and the incomplete allegorical turn.⁴ Structured around the tension between recalling and forgetting, past and present, transcendence and empty rhetoric, the tale as a whole, and especially Ligeia's ineffable eyes, keep haunting readers and critics. We might recall the narrator's lengthy description of them, which follows that of other parts of her face:

And then I peered into the large eyes of Ligeia.

For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. It might have been, too, that in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to which Lord Verulam alludes. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller

3. The second "Madman" is written in italics in the final version of the tale. Note also that the very name "Madeline" evokes the idea of madness and also malady. Interestingly, the former pronunciation of this name was identical with that of the word maudlin, an adjective that describes a mixture of sentiment, foolishness and sadness.

4. In a letter of January 8, 1846, Poe referred to "Ligeia" as "undoubtedly the best story I have written". On August 9, 1846, he wrote: "Ligeia' may be called my best tale" (Carlson 1996: 176).

than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. Yet it was only at intervals—in moments of intense excitement—that this peculiarity became more than slightly noticeable in Ligeia. And at such moments was her beauty—in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth—the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk. The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length. The brows, slightly irregular in outline, had the same tint. The “strangeness,” however, which I found in the eyes was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the *expression*. Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it—that something more profound than the well of Democritus—which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! they became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers. (Poe 1982: 655-656)

It is revealing that in order to highlight the enigma of Ligeia's eyes, the narrator asks a pleonastic question similar to the one employed by the narrator of “Usher” while describing the haunted house: “What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble” (Poe 1982: 231). No doubt, these questions provide a clear example of the frantic rhetoric of Poe's narrators, but above all, they contribute to foregrounding the central symbols of these narratives—the house, the eyes—the significance of which is mystified by the effect of prosopopoeia and catachresis.

Much has been said about the meaning of Lady Ligeia and her magnetic orbs. Some critics tended to analyse “Ligeia” in a visionary, transcendent light, taking the Lady as the epitome of forbidden knowledge, spirituality and “Supernal Beauty” discussed by Poe in “The Poetic Principle” (1848) (Cf. A. H. Quinn, Gargano, Wilbur, quoted by Carlson 1996: 176-187). In contrast, others (Griffith, Thompson, quoted by Carlson 1996: 176-187; Nadal 1996, Person 2001) have emphasized Poe's manipulating devices, such as irony and satire, and “Ligeia” is read as a text that ridicules, among other things, Transcendentalism and convoluted, inflated style, parodying in turn Mr. Blackwood's literary advice to Zenobia in Poe's “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838). Person describes “Ligeia” as a parody of domestic values, and the “circle of analogies” evoked by Ligeia's eyes resembles “a parody of romantic discourse”. In this reading, Ligeia “becomes a kind of hypertext—with each body part (and especially her eyes) linked to some classical or mythological site” (Person 2001: 145).⁵

5. In this regard, the name of Ligeia is significant: taken from Virgil's *Georgics*, it refers not to an ordinary woman, but to a dryad, a tree nymph. In Milton's *Comus*, Ligeia is the name of a siren. In its emphasis on the narrator's narcissism and subjectivity, Person's approach recalls that of Howarth (1971: 19-20),

Again, this interpretive oscillation between metaphysical transcendence and self-parody points to the gap between reference and signification on which the tale is based, and to the ludicrous effects – intentional or unintentional – that it entails. It is worth noting that Ligeia's eyes suggest the aesthetics of the sublime and its impossibility of representation: when the narrator alludes to the hypnotic power of Ligeia's eyes "which at once so delighted and appalled" him (Poe 1982: 657), he is evoking the power of the sublime, its combination of pleasure and pain. As Burke (1968: 58) put it in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime". Just as the sublime is linked to terror, it is also related to the uncanny – Freud's definition of terror— and its disruption of signifiers: if the Gothic sublime has been defined as "an excess on the plane of the signifiers" (Weiskel 1976: 28), the uncanny is something like "the radioactive energy given off when the atom of signifier and signified is split" (Williams 1995: 72).⁶

In its combination of uncanniness and terror, suggestiveness and opacity (Cf. Von Mücke 2006), Ligeia's eyes encapsulate the characteristics of Savoy's American Gothic: on the one hand, they provoke the "imperative to repetition", the return of the repressed through the narrator's obsessive dwelling on them; on the other, both Ligeia and her eyes constitute a clear example of prosopopoeia, that is, the attempt to personify the abstract, the unrepresentable. Finally, the irruption of history – the reference to a traumatic past – appears in "Ligeia" intertwined with the tension of memory and forgetting. As several present-day critics have argued – Morrison (1993), Dayan (1995), Goddu (1997), Ginsberg (1998); cf. also Kennedy & Weissberg, eds (2001) – Poe's Gothic is haunted by race.⁷ Dayan (1995: 200-201) focuses on the

who points out Poe's recurrent punning on the words *eye* and *I*, thus suggesting the projection of the narrators' subjectivity onto their victims' eyes: cf. "Ligeia", "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat".

6. Note that in "The Fall of the House of Usher" there are at least two references to the sublime: in the first paragraph, the narrator refers to it when approaching the mansion, only to emphasize its absence: "There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime" (Poe 1982: 231). The second allusion – without quote of the term – occurs when the narrator devotes a fourteen-line paragraph to describe the impressive storm on the night of the climax. The allusion is conveyed at the beginning of the paragraph: "The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty" (Poe 1982: 242). Significantly, this beautiful and terrifying storm, which evokes the sublime, prefigures the arrival of the uncanny (Madeline). Thus, we could affirm that "Usher" functions as a "master text" in more ways than one.

7. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison (1993: 32) remarks: "No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe". Significantly, the essays collected by Kennedy and Weissberg in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (2001) take Morrison's statement as a central point of reference for their analysis.

description of Ligeia, in particular her eyes, “far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race”, which evoke the features of the “tragic mulatta” or “octoroon mistress”, quite common in the literature of Poe’s time. In Dayan’s view, the narrator’s circling around the mystery of Ligeia’s eyes suggests the unspeakability of the subject. However, the text’s hypothetical allusion to the traumatic past of race does not bridge the gap between reference and representation: on the contrary, it seems to widen it, since race does not cancel other ghosts. In the labyrinthine world of duplications and incomplete allegorization of “Ligeia”, the reader, like the narrator, is left “upon the very verge” of resolution, but is finally unable to find the key:

There is no point, among the many incomprehensible anomalies of the science of mind, more thrillingly exciting than the fact —never, I believe, noticed in the schools— that in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves *upon the very verge* of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember. And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia’s eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression —felt it approaching— yet not quite be mine— and so at length entirely depart! (Poe 1982: 656)

More openly than “Ligeia”, “Berenice” (1835) foregrounds the discrepancy between vehicle and meaning: in fact, the elements of “Ligeia” are anticipated in “Berenice” in a more excessive way. Since, as a formula for success, and especially in defense of the plot of “Berenice”, Poe recommended the transformation of the ludicrous into the grotesque, we can affirm that in this story, the ludicrous effects derived from the aforementioned discrepancy are not completely unintentional.⁸ Just as the narrator of “Ligeia” is obsessed with his beloved and her enigmatic eyes, the narrator of “Berenice”, Egaeus, projects his monomania on the teeth of his cousin and wife Berenice. He also wavers between “the gray ruins of memory” (Poe 1982: 643) and the shadows and “anguish of to-day” (Poe 1982: 642), and after her death, he similarly evokes her presence by “call[ing] upon her name” (Poe 1982: 643), which again exemplifies the “imperative to repetition” and the centrality of the signifier in Poe’s work.⁹ In this tale, the gap between signifier and

8. Cf. the well-known passage in a letter to Thomas White, the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, where Poe apologizes for the repulsiveness of “Berenice” but justifies its subject on the following terms: “The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles *similar in nature to Berenice* [...] I say similar in *nature*. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. [...] To be appreciated you must be *read*, and these are invariably sought after with avidity”. (Buranelli 1977: 25-26)

9. Egaeus emphasizes this characteristic when, describing the symptoms of his mental disease he explains that one of his “most common and least pernicious vagaries” was “to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind” (Poe 1982: 644).

signified is extreme, since the narrator suffers from an "inversion" in the character of his thoughts. As he puts it: "The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself" (Poe 1982: 643). Particularly striking is the confusion that concerns Berenice's teeth: "I more seriously believed *que tous ses dents étaient des idées*" (Poe 1982: 647, Poe's italics). This inversion brings to mind Poe's linking of the terms Ligeia/Idea in his poem "Al Aaraaf" (1829), which he further develops in "Ligeia": the main appeal of the name Ligeia to Poe might have been its rhyming with "the Great Key Word", Idea, as Hoffman (1990: 243) has noted. In all these cases, Poe lays bare the discrepancy between vehicle and meaning, and juxtaposes the abstraction of ideas with the physicality of the signs used to convey them.

Whereas Poe insisted on relating his physical emblems with ethereal notions, the tendency of most critics has been the opposite. We could recall, for instance, that one of the most recurrent readings of "Berenice" is that of male fear of female sexuality: thus, Berenice's teeth evoke the *vagina dentata*, "furnished with teeth, and thus a source of danger in being able to bite and castrate" (Bonaparte 1949: 218).¹⁰ Berenice's teeth have also been taken to stand for life (Knapp 1984: 126; Peithman 1986: 36), mortality (Kennedy 1987: 79), horror, carnal desire (Weekes 2002: 156), and virginity defiled (Peithman 1986: 36). No matter their diversity, all these interpretations contribute to pointing out the gap between signifier and signified. In the end, they fail to explain the hypnotic power of the teeth, a signifier that appears both blank and loaded with meaning. Whatever our critical approach – psychoanalytical, cultural, feminist – "Berenice" constitutes an example of opaque allegorization and ludicrous effects made grotesque.

In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) the gap between reference and signification is even greater. Appropriately, this work has been called "the interpreter's dream text" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 231) and an "abyss of interpretation" (Kennedy 1995), since after decades of critical approaches, its ambiguous elements still "compel and resist analysis" (Kennedy 1992: 167) and its

10. Similarly, Hoffman (1990: 235-236) sees in Berenice's teeth a case of displacement, which he also finds in Ligeia's eyes: "Just as the vagina is the entrance to the mysterious womb, the unifier of all life, so is the eye to that all-synthesizing ratiocinator, the brain; and the teeth to the all-digesting stomach, in which the womb is lodged. [...] By shifting the object of fascination from the unmentionable and terrifying vagina to the mouth or the eye, and by substituting for the attributes of the unifying womb those of the unifying mind, Poe is able to pursue, in masquerade and charade, the object and the consequences of his obsessional love-attachment". Person (2001: 138-139) also makes reference to the notion of the *vagina dentata* and compares the teeth extraction to a clitoridectomy or oophorectomy: they all involve a surgical intervention that results in the victimization of women within a patriarchal culture.

conclusion “veils rather than unveils” (Thompson 1992: 198). *Pym* is an episodic, fragmented novel that combines features of travel writing, adventure fiction, and Gothic horror: it includes geographical elements taken from voyage accounts of the period and a variety of sensational and Gothic effects that range from the disgusting to the incomprehensible. It invites its reading as hoax, since its hyperbolic character conveys the parody of the literary models followed. Although there is critical agreement on the contradictions and errors that pervade the text – the first installments were published as fiction, the novel appeared with a preface affirming the fiction to be real fact, and the endnote increased the preceding confusion – *Pym* has been described as a quest for identity, for unity, for transcendence, as a voyage of the mind, as a biblical allegory, as a racial allegory, as a revolt against the Father and a return to the Mother. As in the criticism of the tales, some authors emphasize *Pym*'s urge towards revelation and transcendence, whereas others foreground the impulse to self-destruction and annihilation (Cf. among others, Bonaparte 1949; Kopley 1992; Kennedy 1992, 1995; Carlson 1996).

In keeping with his critique of Hawthorne, Henry James (1934: 257) was one of the first to realize *Pym*'s opacity: the text lacks “connexions”, and its elements “hang in the void”; however, we may add that like “Usher”, “Berenice” or “Ligeia”, it suggests much more than it delivers, and the allegorical signs generated are more important than the literal elements that constitute the text. As has been argued (Nadal 2000), the tension between horror and terror (or the abject and the sublime) articulates the novel, and the imperative to repetition, the power of the death instincts (the allure of the abyss, the fascination with horror and decay) intensifies the sense of entrapment and the deferment of closure. In this text, the allegorical opacity is encapsulated – literally personified – in the white shrouded figure that Pym encounters at the end of his narrative, a scene that “happens to be sublime even in the conventional terms of Burke's *Enquiry*” (Wilczynski 1998:180):

The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but, upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. Before there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (Poe 1982: 882)

No doubt, this enigmatic figure could be taken as the central emblem of Poe's use of prosopopoeia and inconclusive allegorization. Much more than Berenice's teeth or Ligeia's eyes, *Pym*'s shrouded apparition has become a source of controversy and speculation: whether taken as a symbol of God, of Christ resurrected, of the

White Goddess (Carlson 1996; Kopley 1992), of the Mother (Bonaparte 1949), of a Titan, a representation of race and racism (Morrison 1993; Goddu 1997; cf. also Kennedy & Weissberg 2001), the whiteness of the page (Ricardou 1967), the absence of stable meaning, or simply, an instance of misreading (Peeples 2006), it approaches the status of a pure signifier, since the text does not provide any definite clue about its possible meaning.¹¹

It is worth adding that both *Pym* and "Usher" play with the incongruous effect of a smile on a corpse: just as the Usher narrator points out Madeline's facial expression in the coffin ("that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death", Poe 1982: 241), *Pym* describes the putrescent smile of one of the corpses of the ship of death: "Never, surely was any object so terribly full of awe! The eyes were gone, and the whole flesh around the mouth, leaving the teeth utterly naked. This, then, was the smile which had cheered us on to hope!" (Poe 1982: 810). In both cases the smile proves to be a deceptive signifier, since it means the opposite of what it seems to signify.

After the analysis of some of the most conspicuous examples of Poe's opaque allegorization, it seems both appropriate and inevitable to put an end to it by briefly referring to "The Purloined Letter" (1844), a tale of detection – rather than gothic – that nevertheless follows the features of American Gothic and has raised especial interest among the critics due to the peculiar characteristics of its central icon, the letter. Significantly, it is the absolute inaccessibility of the letter's contents (and of its sender) that has resulted in a sophisticated allegorization of the tale, where the imperative to repetition is mainly enacted in a figurative, structural way. We could now recall Lacan's "Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"" (1956), in which he reads the tale as an allegory of psychoanalysis, since its plot can be taken to exemplify the Freudian notion of the "repetition automatism" (Lacan 1988: 43). In this text, the main emblem – the letter – reaches the status of "a pure signifier", "symbol only of an absence" (Lacan 1988: 32, 39). In her reading of Lacan's analysis, Felman (1988: 146) explains: "in much the same way as the repressed *returns* in the *symptom*, which is its repetitive symbolic substitute, the purloined letter ceaselessly returns in the tale – as a signifier of the repressed – through its repetitive displacements and replacements".

Thus, the letter is located in a symbolic structure "that can only be perceived in its effects, and whose effects are perceived as repetition", as Johnson (1988: 245) has remarked. In this text the return of the repressed is only metaphorical, since it is conveyed in the displacements of the letter; in turn, the displacement of

11. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1993: 32) singles out this "closed and unknowable white form" as the most significant emblem for the concept of American Africanism in early American writing.

the letter – the signifier – is somehow analysed as a signified, “as the recounted object of a short story”, as Derrida (1988: 179) has noted. Interestingly, Lacan’s and Derrida’s complex theorizations bear witness to Poe’s oblique strategies, which provoke effects far beyond the literal confines of his plots. Thus, Johnson (1988: 247) focuses on the “slippage” between signifier and signified that “The Purloined Letter” produces, noting that the “*difference*” between signifier and signified has been “effectively subverted” in Poe’s text as well as in Lacan’s. In fact, both of them explore the unreadable and the effects of the unreadable, as Poe had already suggested in the opening lines of “The Murders of the Rue Morgue” (1841): “The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects” (Poe 1982: 141). It is notable that the phenomenon of “repetition compulsion” occurs not only *in* the story, as Lacan studies it, but is also illustrated *by* the story itself, as Johnson (1988: 236) has noted: Cr ebillon’s *Atr ee*, from which Dupin quotes at the end of the tale, is also a story of revenge that repeats the original crime and which does so by means of a purloined letter: “thus, ‘The Purloined Letter’ no longer simply repeats its own ‘primal scene’: what it repeats is nothing less than a previous story of repetition”. In these unorthodox, oblique ways, “The Purloined Letter” conveys the imperative to repetition invoked in (Poe’s) American Gothic.

On the other hand, the inconclusive allegorization of this tale manifests itself in the variety of approaches that it has inspired: while Lacan only considers signifiers and structures, showing that the signifier can be analyzed in its effects without its signified being known, others attempt to find a substance, some message beneath. Thus, Marie Bonaparte – to mention a well-known psychoanalytical critic, very influential on the early criticism of Poe – was interested in uncovering the letter’s content, its signified, and interpreted the letter as the “very symbol of the maternal penis” (Bonaparte 1949: 483). However, as Derrida has noted in his reply to Lacan, the letter/signifier resists being totalized into meaning, leaving an irreducible residue which in our study serves to exemplify both the recurrent features of American Gothic and the mistifying effects that they usually provoke. In this regard, we may quote Johnson’s conclusion (1988: 247) about the interpretation of “The Purloined Letter”, very appropriate to put an end to our analysis: “What the reader finally reads when he deciphers the signifying surface of the map of his misreading is: ‘You have been fooled’”.

As I have tried to point out, Poe’s fiction explores the features included in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and epitomizes the defining characteristics of American Gothic: in his stories, the imperative to repetition (the return of the unsuccessfully repressed) is conveyed in a variety of ways: whereas Usher, Egaeus and the unnamed narrator of “Ligeia” experience the tension between recalling and

forgetting and keep haunted by the ghostly presence of the past, Pym’s recurrent motions are driven by the hypnotic power of the death instincts, the abject and the sublime; on the other hand, the repeated displacements of the purloined letter function as Poe’s playful and didactic tool devised for the sake of critical theory. Although not all these stories make use of the architectural impressiveness of the Usher mansion as a site for the haunting, it is the narrator’s mind – the correlative for the icon of the house – that accommodates the impossibility of forgetting and gestures towards a traumatic past that can be invoked but never fully recovered. In that past, the historical ghost of race casts an indefinite but far-reaching shadow.

On the other hand, the imperative to repetition takes place in a “tropic of shadow” that results from incomplete, inconclusive allegorization and from the catachrestic trope of prosopopoeia – “the master trope of gothic’s allegorical turn” (Savoy 1998: 10) – which in the act of personifying the abstract, of ascribing a face to what has none, generates uncanniness and epistemological disruptions. This is what happens in “Usher”, “Ligeia”, “Berenice” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: their central signs – the House/Haunted Palace, the eyes, the teeth, the shrouded white figure – are so empty of ascertainable meaning or so distant from the meaning for which they stand that they end up being emblems of their own opacity rather than expressions of some verifiable signified. And “The Purloined Letter”, with its sophisticated design of repetition, displacement, and unreadable central icon, epitomizes, in its schematic abstraction, the characteristics of American Gothic and the critical compulsion to the allegorical reading of allegorical texts, by virtue of which the letter becomes the signifier of the repressed and the carrier of the story’s truth, thus producing the slippage between signifier and signified. If Gothic writing implies “disorder in the relations of signifiers and signifieds” (Williams 1995: 71) and “endemic *fakery*” increasingly focused on “floating signifiers” (Hogle 2001: 154, 156), Poe’s suggestive and elusive House of Usher, together with the ultimately unreadable signifiers that pervade his best work, his mixture of the ludicrous and the transcendental, the horrible and the burlesque, provides the best example of American Gothic’s fissure between reference and signification.

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