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Night-Thoughts on Poe and Kant: The Critique of Reason

John Dolis

- 1 Poe's fascination with part/whole configurations plays itself out in several tales against the background of hallucination and insanity. Regarding "Berenice," for instance, the "*phantasma* of the teeth" exaggerate the part in its configuration with her facial features as a whole: "from the disordered chamber of my brain, [...] the white and ghastly *spectrum* of the teeth," without a speck or shade on their enamel, or "an indenture in their edges," would not "be driven away"; for these "I longed with a frenzied desire"; they became "the essence of my mental life [...]. I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason."¹ In "Eleonora," both the voice and eyes surpass all understanding—her voice, sweeter than "the harp of Æolus," and her eyes, brighter than the "River of Silence," incomprehensible "for *reasons* which shall be made known" only "in Heaven" (653, italics mine). Here, facial features portray the drama that assails narration's drive to understand itself.² These features enigmatically emerge as phantasms which indefinitely equivocate their sense and thus plague reason's totalizing need to comprehend the whole of things, entities which, translated to the psychoanalytic arena, characterize the drive itself, and not the object, as partial in its intrinsic constitution.³ These emblematic phantasies of teeth, of voice, of eyes, establish reason's *mise en scène* and, in the self-same act, profoundly compromise its reach.
- 2 "Ligeia" stages this event against the backdrop of aesthetic theory where the eyes, "those large, those shining, those divine orbs," provide the sole "irregularity," and serve to dislocate an otherwise perfectly proportionate whole—"far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race [...] even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad" (655). The scene, with all its histrionics, fervidly revolves around the "one," the integer, integrity, the whole—and its relation to the parts. Over and against the Greek ideal, Ligeia's "features were not of that regular mould which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors of the heathen" (655). While they approach perfection in the "faultless" forehead, the

“purest” skin, the “gentle prominence” above the temples, the “raven-black” tresses, the “harmoniously curved” nostrils, the “sweet” mouth, the “radiant” smile, the eyes exceed, in their significance, the whole. They virtually transcend the Greek idea(l) in their affect.⁴ Narration finds itSelf obliged to temper understanding with a certain supplement:

“There is no exquisite beauty,” says Bacon, Lord Verulam, speaking truly of all the forms and *genera* of beauty, “without some *strangeness* in the proportion.” Yet, although I saw that the features of Ligeia were not of a classic regularity—although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed “exquisite,” and felt that there was much of “strangeness” pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of “the strange.” (655)

- 3 Put “beauty” in parentheses, as but an afterthought. And disregard entirely “The Poetic Principle.” Narration’s path roams elsewhere and otherwise, against the grain, unhinged by “some *strangeness* in the proportion”—in other words, by the uncanny.
- 4 This “strangeness” occupies a space that borders the disjunction between part and whole, an “irregularity” in light of which consciousness, bewildered and itself estranged, irrevocably finds its self marginalized. In effect and affect equally, the part transcends the whole, equivocates, prohibits synthesis. Amid this inhospitable topography, the narrative degenerates. Consciousness misapprehends the very sense of its experience, arrogated by some “thing” with which it cannot come to terms, something which exceeds its grasp, something which borders, in the language of the philosophical milieu that frames so many of Poe’s tales, the “sublime.” Here the Enlightenment idea(l) of Reason furnishes the context in which narration finds itSelf arrested, at a standstill, in the seemingly irrevocable divide between subject and object, reflection and facticity.

* * *

- 5 Kant’s First Critique erects the theoretical machinery designed to heal this wound, the divide between the object and the subject who “exposes” it, between the world and consciousness—and, within consciousness itself, between the “concept” and the “idea.” To begin, the *a priori* forms of intuition always already structure all experience within a single, unitary “inner sense” (consciousness) and “outer sense” (objective reality)—to wit, time and space. Understanding, in its turn, integrates experience into a unified conceptual framework according to certain rules which *a priori* constitute empirical reality, a unifying function grounded, in its own turn, in the unity of consciousness, a formal unity characteristic of consciousness itself—specifically, self-consciousness, what Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception. In short, all knowledge “starts with the senses, proceeds from thence to understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which there is no higher faculty to be found in us for elaborating the matter of intuition and bringing it under the highest unity of thought.”⁵
- 6 Insofar as reason “secures the unity of the rules of understanding,” it provides “an *a priori* unity by means of concepts, a unity which may be called the unity of reason,” a unity whose purpose brings “the understanding into thoroughgoing accordance with itself,” a unity by means of which “the understanding is determined in its interrelations” as a whole.⁶ Or so it seems. A ghostly specter haunts this genial scenario and overshadows reason’s single-handed custody of understanding. Kant’s Transcendental Logic, in its desire to apprehend synthetic, *a priori*, truth, demands

imagination for the possibility of such a synthesis.⁷ To the extent that reason *needs* imagination, the transcendental synthesis is suspect from the start: truth harbors an unseemly supplement, its haunt con-figured in “desire.” Imagination constitutes a most uncanny guest in reason’s timeless home and bears an interest which inexplicably contaminates this *mise en scène*.⁸ Poe’s “Ligeia” stages this event.

- 7 Kant further confounds things, attributing to reason an uncanny “interest” of its own.⁹ Its interest extends, above all, to examination of itself. In this account, it stands before its own tribunal—judge and jury both. Given the Transcendental Dialectic’s own “antinomies,” reason’s reach extends beyond phenomena and finds itself divided from within, its own ideas at odds with its experience. Kant’s Transcendental Dialectic puts in play an isomorphic unity with no relation to experience as such—speculation beyond the reach of understanding, reason *purely* in its self-reflective character.¹⁰ Accordingly, in their disseveration from empirical reality, Kant’s transcendental Ideas—and, at their ultimate remove, the Ideal—accommodate the purely possible, the unconditional: contradictions as *justifiable* concepts, concepts that transgress the limits of experience, concepts internal, to and consistent with, the nature of reason as a whole. Reason understands itself so well that it acknowledges its contra-dictions as equi-valently true. Nothing stands outside its “understanding” of itself.
- 8 Reason’s *value* thus played out in Kant’s Second Critique, devoid of all deception and illusion, finally affords its own indemnity since *speculation* underwrites and guarantees its own Idea(l): in other words, it takes no risks. Elsewhere and otherwise, as far as reason figures in its own returns, to purloin an essential psychoanalytic dictum from Lacan, there is no Other of the Other. Thus, speculation guarantees a risk-free apparatus that discredits any fracture, any “fraction,” of the whole; it *discounts* its “irrationality,” while reason, in the *interest* of its “practice,” in the practice of *morality*, its *duty*, seeks to plug the holes (of happiness, its own desire). Reason, as a (w)hole, thus freely capitalizes on what’s *right*; yet, in the “mean” time, reason’s own desire returns as speculation’s specter, that which haunts the stage and steals the scene.
- 9 To borrow from Pascal, the heart has reasons of which reason itself knows nothing. And as desire has reasons of its own, reason, conversely, courts its own desire. Reason, by its own account, *wants* nothing of desire—and, as a *rule*, it wants totality, the whole. To this effect, it bears an *interest* of its own. While this is its desire, desire thus *reasons* that it wants to end; once it obtains the thing it wants, it will be full, fulfilled; it will no longer want; it will be whole. Desire’s own *raison d’être*, then, is to plug its hole(s), to end, to end its being as (nothing but) a hole in subjectivity. The logic of tautology—in other words, *coincidence*—ends here as well, where it begins. There is no outside to this circularity. Reason needs no other than its self, already othered in those contradictory truth(s) which guarantee, in turn, the truth of its account. This innermost (dis)union at the heart of rationality, its *Kern* (to borrow from Freud), this *ratio* that paradoxically both constitutes and, at the same time, circumscribes the One, here designates the *differance*, to call upon the deconstructive glossary,¹¹ the moment in which reason differs from itself, (de)parted, from within, between the faculty of understanding and the (speculative) possibility of wholly understanding its self, the very moment that denies to reason the unity upon which it insists. Poe’s “Usher” relocates this fractionality in the fracture that sustains the Usher house, the very fissure which leads to its disintegration in “the end.”

10 In both “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narrative is undone from the start. “Ligeia” ends where it begins, collapses back upon itself, timelessly beguiled by the ideal. “Usher,” in its own way, (re)enacts a comparable demise, the narrative itself inexorably driven by—and partial to—what, in the end, will be a self-sufficient, self-enclosed totality. Reason’s drive, in its deliberate and liberated sense, is wholly *partial* in the end.¹² Reason drives its self insane by its insistence on the whole. Given its configuration at the heart of consciousness, the (primal) scene of reason, with its brute insistence on totality and universal truth, is itself illusory, *imaginary* in Lacanian patois (not to mention Kant), and, at its limit, harbors the irrational, the price of its desire. In what follows, I’ll further inosculate—that is, confound and confuse—these deliberations on reason with a certain psychoanalytic inflection, night-thoughts (to re-sound Edward Young) presented as a series of meditative moments, musings, introspections, self-analyses. In their speculative design, these unruly ruminations militate against elucidation and explanation, but rather accommodate the specular as such, speculation’s own specter. To this end, I frame the theoretical foundation of my subsequent musings on Poe within that most uncanny in-stance that exposes an abysmal rift residing purely within reason’s all-inclusive self-reflection vis-à-vis which nothing stands outside, and leave all speculation on how comprehensively Poe read his Kant, and its *purposiveness* in certain tales, to those who find a sense of solace in their extrication of the plum of authorial intention.

* * *

11 “Ligeia” inscribes reason’s critical fracture in its very plot by reconfiguring the rational and the empirical as a reversible *gestalt*. In “the end,” they meet, fated to coincide, identical: to wit, Ligeia’s (eternal) return or the return of the repressed, whichever you prefer, in the transfigured body of Rowena. Ideal and real converge: the “metaphysical” Ligeia and the “practical”—a marriage made not in heaven, but through “thirst of gold” (660)—Rowena. In the “mean” time, the narration finds itself translated from the Rhine to England. It would appear that, from beginning to end, the narrative has time on its hands, passing (away) from the site in which narration, “[b]uried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world” and simultaneously illuminated by “metaphysical investigation” and “the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed,” originates—“some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine”—to that in which it terminates, “an abbey [...] in one of the wildest and less frequented portions of fair England,” an abbey whose “savage aspect” and “gloomy and dreary grandeur” reflect “the feelings of utter abandonment which had driven me into that remote and unsocial region of the country” (654, 657, 654, 660).¹³

12 Consciousness will undermine this timeliness—the narrative, as such, the product of a mind disjointed by hallucination, always already completed, a self-enclosed totality, the very mirror of madness. From the outset, it bites the tail of its tale and swallows itself whole: there is no outside to the tale. In retrospect, the narrative embraces contradiction in its untimely origin: the self-exposition of reason, the very exposition of the subject itself, surfaces as suspect at the dawn of consciousness.¹⁴ The primal scene speaks for its self:

I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is

feeble through much suffering. Or, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind, because, in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty [...] made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive, that they have been unnoticed and unknown. (654)

- 13 So “steadily” does narration pace itSelf, so “stealthily,” indeed, that time falls from its hinges as narration steals its self—a self entirely Othered in itself.
- 14 This stolen moment now commemorates a fracture in the narrative that will not heal—reason stalled, immobilized. Desire is on the outside looking in. The “strangeness” of Ligeia’s eyes, at last “referred to the *expression*,” fits no-thing in the world: “how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia’s eyes, have I felt approaching the *full knowledge* of their expression [...] yet not quite be mine [...]. I found, in the commonest objects of the universe, a circle of analogies,” objects such as a rapidly growing “vine,” a “moth,” a “butterfly,” a “chrysalis,” the “ocean,” a falling “meteor” (656, italics mine). Nothing in the real world wholly corresponds to that singularly disproportionate, excessive part of the idea(l) which, in the end, transcends experience. To this, narration, forced to find itSelf within the looking glass, discovers it within the other’s own desire—to which it gives its self away, its own desire: “the learning of Ligeia was immense”; her “acquisitions [...] were gigantic, [...] astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance [...]. With [...] how much of all that is ethereal in hope did I *feel*, as she bent over me [...], that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me” (657).
- 15 Reciprocally, the narrative idea(l), dis severed from reality, gives up itself as well, must suffer, must *endure* its end. Time gives itself away at last: at length, “I beheld my well-grounded expectations take wings to themselves and fly away” (657). Death interrupts the plot, and puts the tale at risk—the very narrative as such; for with the death of the idea(l), so goes the subject who supports it. It’s not by chance the subject, in this very moment, finds its self idealized in the other, mirrored as a whole: “in death only was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection. For long hours, [...] would she pour out before me the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to *idolatry*” (658, italics mine). Reason works at full capacity when *rationalizing* itself. Thus follows the removal of the story to the “other” side where reason *will* stand face to face with the (im)possible, the unconditional: it wills itself thus.
- 16 A change of scenery reflects the contradiction at the heart of this event, and harbors, in its own “remove,” that *Kern* of consciousness which would identify itself with the idea(l): the “gloomy and dreary grandeur” of the abbey purchased in England, “with its verdant decay hanging about it,” dissimulates the incoherent opulence within—the “gorgeous and fantastic draperies,” the “solemn carvings of Egypt,” the “wild cornices and furniture,” the “Bedlam patterns of the carpets of tufted gold” (660). Thus, while the inside and the outside are at odds, the inside contradicts itself as well. To further magnify the anarchy within, a single part, a room, will supplement the scene. In its phantastic constitution, the bridal chamber exceeds the “regal magnificence” of the abbey as a whole, “pentagonal in shape,” vaulted “with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidal device,” a “Saracenic” censer, “[s]ome few ottomans and golden candelabra, of Eastern figure,” a bridal couch “of an Indian

model,” and a “gigantic sarcophagus [...] from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor” (660-61).

- 17 Add now a further depth to this *mise en abyme*, a part within the a(part)ment itself: “in the draping of the apartment lay alas! the chief phantasy of all”—irregular and disproportionate in keeping with the (w)hole, yet consonant with the narration’s failure to deliberate, to liberate the thing and equally the whole of things:¹⁵

The lofty walls, gigantic in height—even unproportionately so—were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry—a tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains [...]. The material [...] was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures [...]. But these figures partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a further advance, this appearance partially departed; and, step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole. (661)

- 18 Self-sufficient in its arabesque design, the room precludes its own identity, collapsed upon itself and subject solely to that animation which accounts for its uncanny drift.
- 19 Here subjectivity might drift as well, void of its “single point of view.” The scene requires no opium; it harbors misperception on its own—Rowena having heard sounds which “I could not hear” and having seen motions “which I could not perceive” (662). The narrator, in turn, senses a shadow “of angelic aspect,” some-thing in reality that might be no-thing, something “fancied for the shadow of a shade” (663).¹⁶ And so occurs the final double-cross, what must “have been but the suggestion of a vivid imagination”: as Rowena “was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet [...] three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid. If this I saw—not so Rowena” (663).
- 20 The affect, in turn, turns logic on its head, turns into an effect that functions as (the shadow of) a cause: “her menials prepared her for the tomb” (663). Yet time will not give itself up so easily. Rowena seemingly returns to life, a “barely noticeable tinge of color” along her cheek; but, once again, “the usual rigorous stiffness immediately supervened” (665). The scene recurs “time after time,” in countless variations, “until near the period of the gray dawn” (665). Little wonder that narration hastens to its death: “Let me hurry to a conclusion” (665). Why the rush?
- 21 In its resurrected form, the narrative idea(l), embodied in the beautiful Ligeia, and Rowena’s loathsome physical reality always already coincide. Reason’s own integrity requires that it *justify* contradiction, accommodate the (im)possible, the unconditional—a crisis of reason that necessitates the self-same ending as “Morella,” here turned inside-out. Every-thing (re)turns to, and revolves around, those eyes—that point imaginary in which consciousness defers itself, and yet without which consciousness is at a *total* loss.
- 22 The tale reflects this *differance* which interosculates subject and object, and destabilizes each within itself and in each other equally, a transcendent, yet subversive, moment in

which desire (re)presents its own (im)possibility—to plug its hole, wholly fulfill its self. Understanding can know no-thing of this scene: desire, as Lacan argues, is a metonymy. Here, the uncanny plays its hand, its part. The “strangeness” of Ligeia’s eyes, “referred to the *expression*,” (mis)represents a disproportion at the heart of reason’s innermost integrity, a part that doesn’t figure in “numerically,” that carries over as remainder, as a supplement. It re-marks reason’s own excess, where reason would exceed itself, the part de-parted now—and whole: enough to drive a subject mad. Reason’s haunt is haunted by this ghost: desire sneaks in the back door at this point.¹⁷ “What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover” (656, italics mine). No wonder that the dead return to life; no wonder that narration, in the end, itSelf a blank, transfixed amid “a mad disorder in my thoughts,” stares into empty space, into the “black,” the “full,” the fully uninhabited, unoccupied “wild eyes—of my lost love—of the Lady—of the Lady Ligeia”—in the transfigured body of Rowena (665, 666).¹⁸

* * *

- 23 I’ll enter, by the front door, reason’s most definitive, ethe-real abode, the hideaway of reason’s monarchy, to further speculate on things.¹⁹ Such speculation brings, not unexpectedly, the specular, the specter back to life. Some-thing in the very “contemplation” of the Usher house unnerves the narrative: “It was a mystery all insoluble” (231). Things repudiate their sense; they contradict themselves. The composition of the house itself attests to an incongruous integrity; it’s sick at heart, its Kern:

I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity [...]. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. (233)

- 24 Not even individual parts are whole within themselves. Yet, inexplicably, beyond “this indication of extensive decay, [...] the fabric gave little token of instability” (233). To further qualify this riven state of things, narration interjects a parenthetical aside:

Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn. (233)

- 25 The fissure of this narrative “perhaps” unwittingly exposes, in reality, the universal state of things within the Usher “house”—both edifice and family line—and correspondingly engenders an “utter depression of soul,” an “iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” (231).

- 26 Sick at heart, and given to “an unredeemed dreariness of thought, which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime,” narration finds itSelf unable to account for things; the house refuses to expose the reason for the all-inclusive “sense” of illness and disorder since its first appearance in consciousness:

I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression. (231)

- 27 It doesn't help to turn things upside down: "acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images" (231).
- 28 Recount those moments most divisive in the tale, yet, for the moment of the tale itself, moments that remain intact: the Usher house is cracked, "perhaps"; the family line is split in two—or doubled, should you choose to understand things differently—by twins. Things generally endure a synthesis while everything disintegrates "internally," collapses from the weight of its "within." Even the season corresponds to this scenario: it's fall. The Usher house epitomizes reason as a (w)hole, the whole externally secure(d) and yet internally unsound, fractional. Narration *frames* this scene, secures its borders so that nothing inside might seep out while, at the same time, nothing from without seeps in—a frame-up not unlike the Usher "house" itself, both manse and family line alike. In other words, the narrative will mimic both the Usher house and line in this regard.
- 29 Return now to the tarn. Confused and searching for a "different arrangement of the particulars of the scene" while poised *outside*, and at a distance from the story it recounts, the narrative already finds itSelf—*inside* the tarn, the tarn that ultimately swallows every-thing—as *integral* to everything it apprehends but fails to comprehend. Thus, having reined the horse close "to the precipitous brink" (*precipitously* close, so close, in fact, narration cannot help but see itSelf), reflection here exposes both the house and narrator within a single frame, the narrator *con-fused*, now an essential *part* of the prefigured scene which will expose, in turn, the house before he ever enters it.²⁰ Let's not tarnish this event by questioning reflection's own veracity, its exposition in this "black and lurid tarn"—inverted, upside-down no less.
- 30 On close assay—that is, to "the eye of a scrutinizing observer" (from which narration surreptitiously excludes itSelf with its signatory "perhaps")—only when the narrator looks up, directly at the house, to apprehend its "real aspect," does it appear in its insolvent totality, reminiscent of "the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air" (233). In itself, the image of the house reflected in the tarn exposes but a solitary part, excessive in its isolated singularity: its "vacant and eye-like windows" (231). These vacant windows "figure" in the narrative account of Roderick's "head," and play their (counter)part within the house, where Roderick, sick in head and heart alike, inveterately ill, a fraction of himself, succumbs to what the narrator terms a "deficiency, *perhaps*, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name": to wit, "the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (233, italics mine).
- 31 Incest so identifies "the patrimony with the name" that one collapses on the other; both coincide so as "to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher'—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (232). If not literal, incest iconically re-marks the site at which disintegration has always already taken place, a state where both the "inside" and the "outside" coincide, a state wherein these "twins" will meet, within the narrative itSelf, *eventually* as One.²¹ Precisely here, reason totters on her throne, about to fall (apart).

32 Correspondingly, the incitation of a *poem* ironically interrupts—to mirror, and thus mimic—the tale itself, narration’s very *prose*. This piece disrupts, within the recitation of “The Fall,” the *récit*’s uni-*form*-ity and hence integrity, wherein “the monarch”—that is, Reason—“Thought’s dominion,” fully in accord with “a lute’s well-tuned law,” capitulates to “Vast forms that move fantastically/To a discordant melody” (239). And this, in turn, returns narration to those phantasies which threaten Roderick’s mind, ideas which had, “by dint of long sufferance,” obtained an “influence” over his “spirit,” over “the *morale* of his existence”—ideas regarding “some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion” (235). Aligned with his “distempered ideality,” hellish in its bent, casting “a *sulphureous* lustre over all,” Roderick’s “disordered fancy” now invests the mansion’s very stones with both a mood and sentience of their own:

The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement [...] above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence [...] was to be seen [...] in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own. [...] The result was discoverable, he added, 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. (236, 239)²²

33 It’s not by accident, but by *coincidence*, that the “arrangement” of the parts, in their relation to the whole, recirculates narration’s opening scene: “I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves” (233). Turning things once more, this *mutual* arrangement mirrors reflection’s own isomorphic, self-enclosed *mise-en-scène* as mirror-like itself. Notice, equally, that Roderick’s own disordered mind projects an ordered, mirror-like reality: both mansion and family line, house and housed, object and subject, outside and inside seamlessly coalesce, their mutual relationship a foregone synthesis.²³

34 In general, Poe’s “critique” of reason, for the most part, situates part/whole configurations at the “tell-tale” heart of rationality, a problematic that addresses the very nature of reason in its absolute demand for unconditional totality, its need to order things, to determine the position of parts relative to one another, and, in the end, to comprehend a whole which unconditionally circumscribes the parts in their entirety. While “Ligeia” exposes the mechanism of a mind whose operations typically (dis)place a part “outside” the whole, a part that, in its own immensity and disproportionality, exceeds the whole, a fetish, if you will, residing, somehow, beyond the reach of logic, “literally” outside—a part that might be (mis)taken as sublime —“Usher,” on the other hand, at its most (in)decisive boundary, collapses on the part/whole problematic, reconfiguring the border “line” of reason as a (w)hole: specifically, where reason draws the line itself, the very line that demarcates and circumscribes the subject’s own identity (Kant’s “consciousness”) and, at the same time, “separates” it from the world, the self-same line that generates and shelters its integrity, its sanity.²⁴ Reality itself requires this difference, the border that conjoins (in)difference and identity and, in a different sense, the subject’s *differance* from its self. It’s not for nothing that, ahead of things, the epigraph, the head of this tale, bespeaks its tail, its very end, the *final* circum-stance that will befall the story line: “Son cœur est un luth

suspendu ; / Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.”²⁵ If nothing else, the tale de-lineates a study in disintegration and the dissolution of this (border) line.

- 35 Incest constitutes a metaphor for the “unspeakable,” the paradigm of reason at its (tauto)logical extreme, where inside and outside coincide, collapse upon each other as a whole, as one, “identical” (although the Usher twins, uncannily, are not). There is no outside for the Usher twins. To this effect, the thoughts that ultimately annex Roderick’s own disordered mind reflect no “world” without, without exterior; rather, they (re)present a world without “without,” without an outside of its own—the product of the house alone, and its “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” (236, 239). Here house and patrimony verge upon the subject at its vanishing point, the point at which the (*mise-en*) scene will finally dissolve (the whole of) itself, will finally dissolve itself whole. Unthinkable, it spells the end of reason’s reign. It’s not by chance, therefore, that the “reality” exposed by the narration ends within the tarn where it began; nor is it any accident the ending coincides with the narration’s earlier conception of the mirror-like relationship between the sentience of the house and its reduplication in the tarn. Reason (re)configures the collapse of house and family line as “one,” and figures in its own demise as well.
- 36 The narrative itSelf stands on this brink, the mouth that eats itself, and mirrors Roderick’s own (dis)solution: “I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet uncertain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (241). And so it happens that, upon interring Madeline, despite her cataleptic past, the *pair* make *doubly* sure they’ve “screwed down the lid” and then “secured the door of iron” (241). One needn’t question logic here (it points to murder, sane or not, for reasons that remain unspecified). From here on, Roderick morphs into a ghost, attuned to “some imaginary sound” while, at the same time, the narration similarly struggles with itSelf, begins to fall away, apart: “I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. [...] But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame” (241).
- 37 An “other” story now dis(inter)rupts the story line, a tale intended to defer the fall of “lofty reason upon her throne” (237), “the ‘Mad Trist’ of Sir Launcelot Canning”—a pharmakon, as the narrator reasons, having nothing closer at hand, intended to fight reason’s impending dissolution with “the extremeness of the folly which I should read” (243). In other words, the narrative attempts to normalize extremes with extreme measures of its own, measures that undo all measurement and that, ironically, lie *nearest* to hand. And so begins the final “fall,” not of the house or family line, but of the story line itself, the story as a whole.
- 38 Abysmally, the tale collapses on itself. Having reached that point in the story of the “Trist” where Ethelred uplifts “his mace outright, and, with blows [...] in the plankings of the [...] door so [...] that the noise [...] alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest,” there comes “from some very remote portion of the mansion [...] what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo [...] of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described” (243). And, once more, as the dragon in the “Trist,” having been struck upon the head, gives up “his pesty breath” with a shriek “so horrible and harsh, and [...] piercing,” the narrator, beyond all doubt, does “*actually* hear [...] a low [...] but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had

already conjured up [...] as described by the romancer” (243-44, italics mine). And, for a final time, as, in the “Trist,” the shield falls to the floor “with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound,” the narrator becomes distinctly aware, no sooner “had these syllables passed my lips,” of a “hollow, metallic, and clangorous [...] reverberation” (244).

39 Three points of incidence preclude the possibility of chance. As Roderick condenses things: “the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault” (245). “Completely unnerved,” narration stumbles to its feet, *identified* now with the “other” it disclaims as Roderick shrieks the *sentence* that befalls them both: “*Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door*” (245). The shoe fits seamlessly the other foot.

26

40 Now enter, from without, the lady Madeline, within: enter the departed one: “reeling to and fro upon the threshold,” she “fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim of the terrors he had anticipated” (245).²⁷ Here integration and disintegration coincide. Here, at the Usher line’s extremity, its end, there’s every *reason* to *believe* that Madeline returns. Speculation guarantees as much, incorporates negation, contradiction, the im-possible as part of its domain.

41 As for the story line as such, bereft of any difference between the story within the story and the story as a whole, the narrative *re-cites* its own demise, the fall of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” It *reflects*, in other words, the disintegration of its self, self-enclosed and self-sufficient to “The End,” the recitation of its end included in the narrative itSelf.²⁸ Or so it would appear.

42 And yet the narrative itSelf escapes *in time*: “[f]rom that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast” (245). Now comes good sailing—a.k.a., the bona fide death-bed scene. Take it on faith:

The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light [...]. [T]he vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shown vividly through that once barely discernable fissure. [...] While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “*House of Usher*.” (245)

43 One needn’t doubt the final *sense* of things, the fragmentation that accomplishes the absolute de-parture of the “House.” The whole amounts to nothing in the end. The whole, its unconditional totality, belongs to non-being, to death—and death alone. Death constitutes the (w)hole in every-thing—call it “desire,” if you prefer.

44 Nor need I call attention to the stutter-step narration takes, its re-citation *dashed*—and at an end as well.²⁹ In “the end,” what is the narrative if not a “fetish” in itSelf that drives, and yet exceeds, the whole? What’s left over from the narrative amounts to speculation’s own returns, its “interest.” The narrative itSelf ostensibly recovers from this scene, returns, like Madeline—remaindered from the dead—but as a supplement, the ghost of reason as a whole, speculation’s ownmost specter, “shadow of a shade,” the

solitary witness to an inexplicable event. All speculation ends with this: “the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher.’”³⁰ The moment is, of course, sublime.

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NOTES

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 646-47. Subsequent quotations from Poe are parenthetically cited in the text.

2. I deploy the neologism "itSelf" in its reflexive sense to emphasize that the narrative act—narration in itself—implies a subject capable of not only reflection but also duplicity—that is, otherness. Call it the unconscious of the *text*, an unconscious that never and in no way underwrites intentionality. Narration might deceive, might contradict, its self. This textual unconscious bears the mark of *differance* in deconstructive terms. Distinct from the "narrator," narration itSelf is always and everywhere genderless—an "it," neither/nor, neuter(ed). The narrator is but a "part" of the narration as a (w)hole: the narrative event itself excompasses the exposition of narration's drive as such, the silhouette of its desire.

3. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 185: "The phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire."

4. For a reading of Poe's tales as parody of idealism, see Joan Dayan, "Poe, Locke and Kant" in *Poe and His Times: The Artist and His Milieu*, ed. Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV (Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1990), 30-44.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 300.

6. Kant, 303, 305.

7. Kant, 133: "The synthesis of apprehension is [...] inseparably bound up with the synthesis of reproduction. And as the former constitutes the transcendental ground of the possibility of all modes of knowledge whatsoever—of those that are pure *a priori* no less than of those that are empirical—the reproductive synthesis of the imagination is to be counted among the transcendental acts of the mind."

In the second edition of the First Critique (1787), Kant, most unpredictably, elides imagination, deferring its juris-diction to the "understanding" (a rose by any other name) as that faculty, bearing an immediate relation to intuition, which synthesizes apprehension. Here, the Transcendental Deduction, in its equi-vocation of imagination and understanding, confers the power of synthesis entirely upon the concept. Yet, more importantly, perhaps, the disappearance of imagination from the transcendental unity of consciousness prohibits the possibility of a non-conceptual world related to apperception and, hence, no "outside" outside consciousness itself—inside and outside thus collapsed, they coincide. I'll have recourse to resurrect this notion regarding the conclusive *fall* suggested in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Uncannily, Kant's Third Critique brings back imagination from the dead, not unlike the resurrection and return of Madeline.

8. See James Luchte, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Continuum, 2007), 56; indeed, while Kant “casually writes that the convergence of the idea and the concept is a *focus imaginarius*, an imaginary point,” any inclusion of imagination, “even one that was *a priori* and transcendental, would infect the eternity of reason with temporality” (144, 146).

9. Kant, 635: “All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the following three questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?” Moreover, in the interest of addressing these inquiries, reason stipulates that it reflect upon itself.

See Pauline Kleingeld, “The Conative Character of Reason in Kant’s Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 36.1 (1998), 77-97: reason “needs to present itself to itself in the process of gaining clarity about its own workings” (97, italics mine).

10. Regarding this transcendent employment of the pure concepts of reason, Kant understands, by the Idea, “a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience. Thus the pure concepts of reason [...] are *transcendental ideas*” and “overstep the limits of all experience” (Kant, 318-19).

11. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-30: “The verb ‘to differ’ [*différer*] seems to differ from itself [...]. In the one case, ‘to differ’ signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the *same* [...]. We provisionally give the name *differance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, both as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation.”

12. For an opposite perspective, cf., for example, John H. Timmerman, “House of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Papers on Language and Literature* 39.3 (Summer 2003), 227-44: “Poe did not reject Enlightenment thinking, [...] he was in fact suspicious of the newer Romanticism [...] [W]e can observe the theory for unity, symmetry, and harmony emerging from *Eureka* [...] in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (229).

For a take on “Usher” that affirms such universal correspondence over and against the context of Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” see Beverly R. Voloshin, “Explanation in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 23.4 (Fall 1986), 419-28: “This perfect adaptation of the parts of the Usher world is made absolute in the ending of the tale [...]. Poe sees the possibility of contact between mind and whatever is external to it in the unstringing of Roderick’s sensations and in the dissolution of the boundary of appearance. Hence [...] the dissolving consciousness of Roderick and the decaying world of Usher are brought into complete union” (427-28).

For an opposing view, cf. G. R. Thompson, “Locke, Kant, and Gothic Fiction: A Further Word on the Indeterminism of Poe’s ‘Usher,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 26.4 (Fall 1989): 547-50. Thompson argues that the end is indeterminate, and that Gothic fiction, in general, “repeatedly enmires itself in the epistemological swamp of ‘appearances,’ which are not necessarily connected to things, and which may simply be subjective impositions” (549-50).

Elsewhere, Thompson analyzes “Usher” in light of issues dealing with the opposition between reason and irrationality, and their relationship, in general, to the Gothic genre—*Poe’s Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973).

13. This sentiment echoes Kant’s own indictment of empiricism as barbaric.

14. In Kant’s own scenario, precisely insofar as and to the extent that consciousness projects the “world,” the very act of representation carries with it the emergence of the subject to its self—that is, self-consciousness.

15. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 174, where, over and against Kant’s transcendental object and the rift between phenomena and noumena, the “thing” (*res*) becomes a “gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter,” a “matter for discourse.”

16. For an extensive reading of the “thing” at odds with Kant—that is, nothing, or no-thing, as the condition of possibility for being, for there “to be” experience, cf. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

17. So, too, morality insinuates itself into Kant’s installment of the Second Critique.

18. It remains to be exposed, in Poe, how the return of the dead mimics and mocks the flip-side of Kant’s Reason in the Second Critique—that is, the Will in its relation to desire: “[a]n intensity in thought, action, or speech was possibly, in her, a result, or at least an index, of that gigantic volition which, during our long intercourse, failed to give other and more immediate evidence of its existence. Of all the women whom I have ever known, she [...] was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion” (657).

19. For a reading of “Usher” that enters by the back door, see Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, “Playful ‘Germanism’ in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’: The Storyteller’s Art,” in *Ruined Eden of the Past: Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson and Virgil L. Lokke (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1981), 355-74.

For a reading of “Usher” alongside Habermas’s account of the fall of reason in the history of philosophy, see Michelle Boulous Walker, “A Short Story About Reason: The Strange Case of Habermas and Poe,” *Philosophy Today* 41.3 (Fall 1997): 432-45; in effect, both “Usher” and Habermas’s account constitute stories concerned “with identifying the dangers of a rationality that goes beyond its rightful place” (432).

20. Reflection’s greatest danger is to lose itself. The tarn, here, mirrors and prefigures where narration both begins and ends; it functions as a frame whose unity might be disrupted forcefully from both the inside and the outside equally. See Dennis Pahl, “Poe’s Sublimity: The Role of Burkean Aesthetics,” *Edgar Allen Poe Review* 7.2 (Fall 2006): 30-49.

21. Cf. E. Arthur Robinson, “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *PMLA* 76.1 (March 1961): 68-81: “The lack of collateral issue does not prove incest, in fact would render a general family inbreeding unlikely” (76). How then account for Usher’s cryptic, yet damning, remark about this “malady”: it was “a constitutional and a family *evil*” (235, italics mine)?

22. For a gloss on Usher’s madness as a form of ecological “environmental pantheism,” see Matthew A. Taylor, “The Nature of Fear: Edgar Allan Poe and Posthuman Ecology,” *American Literature* 84 (June 2012): 353-79.

23. This isomorphic reciprocity mirrors Kant’s own discourse on reason, and the mutual relationship between the concept and sensation in their spontaneous receptivity and receptive spontaneity—a midpoint between the purely rational and the empirical as Heidegger explains in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. See Luchte, 44.

24. For a parenthetical gloss on the part/whole configuration—as it tangentially relates to Poe’s “Usher”—in light of Kant’s Third Critique and the sublime, contextualized by readings of Hegel on aesthetics and fine art, and Paul de Man on “aesthetic ideology,” as well as other thinkers in the continental tradition, see Susan Bernstein, “The Dome of the Mind: Monticello in Weimar,” *MLN* 123.5 (December 2008): 981-1005.

25. See Louise J. Kaplan, “The Perverse Strategy in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” in *New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 45-64: “The tale’s epigraph from De Béranger warns of a potential dissolution of the borders between illusion and reality” (48).

26. Cf. Jean Ricardou, “The Story Within the Story,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 18.3 (Spring 1981): 323-38: “the totality of the story is [...] only the dramatization of its own operation” (333). Ricardou thus reads this narcissistic *mise-en-abyme* in light of one detail the inner tale omits: “Roderick [...] avoids recalling an essential peripeteia: the complete destruction, by Ethelred, of the dwelling of the hermit” (327). Hence, in a reciprocal (in)version of my own reading, Ricardou’s argument doubles back upon the part in its relation to the whole: “the *mise en abyme* is before everything else the structural revolt of a fragment of narrative against the ensemble

which it contains” (331). In Ricardou’s rendition, then, against my own, this one detail sets up the narrative as narrative: it is presented as “the consciousness of the narrative by itself” (331). Yet I recall you to the “madness” that the outside narrative confirms—that, “in reality,” Madeline (re)turns. This completes the circle that *initially* inscribes narration’s own estrangement from the “outside” of its tale, beginning from the time that it inserts itSelf within the tarn.

27. The narrative alleges this occurs on “the night of the seventh or eighth day after placing the lady Madeline within the donjon” (241). It *purely* stands to reason: after seven or eight days in the coffin, she’s incontestably dead—at least she was. *Believe what you will.*

For a variant rationalization of this event, see John C. Gruesser, “Madmen and Moonbeams: The Narrator in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 5.1 (Spring 2004): 80-90: “as bizarre as the events the narrator describes are, they may have rational (as opposed to supernatural) explanations, as implausible as these may be. If Madeline is cataleptic and if Roderick suffers from pathological fear, then it is possible—at least within the realm of Poe’s fiction—that Madeline may not have been dead when she was put in the crypt and, after struggling to free herself from her coffin and tomb, may have sought out the brother who buried her alive” (84-85).

28. Cf. Leonard W. Engel, “The Journey from Reason to Madness: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 14 (May 1985): 23-31: “The first sentence [...] and the description that follows are highly suggestive of a tightly closed, virtually airtight box,” serving to “deepen the effect of confinement on the narrator, as though he were on the verge of suffocation” (24).

29. Cf. Pahl, 39: “With the last remnants of the Usher house sinking from sight, one might easily believe that the narrator finally begins to feel safe, whole, and secure, having passed through terror and anxiety to achieve a higher, more detached state of Reason. However, his fragmented language, emphasized by the multiple dashes and disjointed syntax in the tale’s last sentence, only betrays his continued sense of psychological fragmentation, as he stands—his self doubled, split, re-presented—before the mirror image of the ‘deep and dank tarn.’”

30. In passing, note the quote within the quote, the quotes put into play here at the end, a consciousness outside the narrative itSelf that sites/cites/recites narration’s own decline, its dissolution, disappearance *in the end*—one that refers explicitly, or so it would appear, “*perhaps*,” to the fall of the story (the “House of Usher”) itself. Is this Poe’s private joke?

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