

The Books in the House of Usher

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Poe has been so often accused of quackery in his display of learning that it seems only fair to record some instances of his peculiar knowledge in a field where one would little expect to find him expert—bibliography.

In the course of preparation of my edition of Poe's works I have slowly worked on the identification of books referred to by him in one connection or another, and particularly I have been interested in the volumes read by the stricken hero of "The Fall of the House of Usher." There is a long series of them—and they have been left by most of Poe's editors either without comment, or with the barest details of author and date of publication. The assumption that these volumes were named merely for the sake of their strange names has been tacitly implied or openly held by all who have hitherto shown any interest in the topic. And the obvious invention, for the plot's sake, of the strange *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canynge has lent a certain apparent reasonableness to this view.

But the peculiar care with which Poe prepared his stories—among which "The Fall of the House of Usher" is pre-eminent for elaboration and perfection of detail—seemed to argue that here, of all places, Poe would not have violated his own *dictum* against the introduction into the perfect tale of any irrelevant or purposeless word. And an examination of the books referred to has amply justified my belief in the conscious use of every book, dear to Usher's heart, to give us a greater insight into the neurasthenic's character.

Roderick Usher is portrayed, it will be remembered, as cultured,

Editor's Note: Professor Mabbott's manuscript draft of this previously unpublished essay, originally written in 1926 or 1927, is now a part of the Mabbott-Poe Collection in The University of Iowa Libraries. Through the courtesy of the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, it has been expanded to incorporate additional material which will appear in the forthcoming Mabbott edition of *The Tales in The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*.

overbred, sensitive, learned in strange learning, and as a believer in many strange doctrines and ideas—a lover of many things which the world has agreed to pass by as valueless, but in which he found a satisfaction, perhaps akin to another satisfaction of which Poe has spoken as arising from a consciousness of solitary possession, as when one finds himself in some wild, where, even wrongly, he believes no other human foot has trod. Such a man would be a bibliophile—and so the poet portrayed him—but he would be a lover of rare books not merely for their rarity, but also for their unusual contents. Usher of course is partly a portrait of Poe himself—although modified greatly to conform to the conventional type of “hypochondriack” or melancholy man, as conceived by the medical writers of the early nineteenth century; and also to have certain qualities of an identical twin. And Poe was himself as much a bibliophile as his dreadfully limited purse ever allowed him to be, as his one or two pitiful notes on “old magazines in his own possession” in the “Marginalia” make plain.

To make clear my comments, let me quote the passage on Usher’s library from the story, and then comment briefly on the books—which all have a certain appeal to the collector and student for their own sake. The text is that of *Tales* (1845).

Our books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the *Ververt et Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli; the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage* of Nicholas Klimm by Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean D’Indaginé, and of De la Chambre; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella. One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and Aegipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a forgotten church—the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*.

The significance of Gresset’s poems is not immediately apparent. A translation by “Father Prout” (Francis Mahony) of Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset’s poem “Vert-vert, the Parrot,” was published in *Fraser’s Magazine* for September, 1834, and Poe must have seen in *L’Erudition Universelle* (1767), Book II, chapter vi, section 17, Bielfeld’s mention of Gresset’s *Ververt* and *La Chartreuse*. Bielfeld said these were a special kind of composition, between heroic and burlesque poetry, and having something of the moral, satirical, serious, mocking, and nobly comic. *Ververt* is a convent parrot who talks ignorantly but sometimes meaningfully of holy things. He visits the waterfront, learns to swear, and is exiled, but, being heartbroken, is taken home again, forgiven,

and dies in the arms of the abbess. His poem made the Jesuits expel Gresset, but many readers find it a pious allegory of frail mankind with mystical implications. *La Chartreuse* lacks mystical qualities and Poe had probably not seen it, nor, I suspect, had Bielfeld.

The *Belphegor* is a novella by Niccolò Machiavelli written about 1515. The protagonist, a fallen archangel, comes to earth to investigate the complaints of many souls that their wives are to blame for their damnation. He comes to Florence as Roderigo, well supplied with money, and marries the beautiful Onesta Donati. She and her family mistreat and fleece him so that he must run away from his creditors. He proceeds to “possess” three ladies in succession, and finally, hearing that his wife is coming after him, he returns to Hell. The demoniac possession is what fascinated Roderick Usher. La Fontaine retold this story as *Belfegor*. (Reference to “the Selenography of Brewster” was removed after the second printing of Poe’s tale, perhaps because no such volume had been published, but in the manuscript notes Poe made in preparation for writing “Hans Phaall,” he mentioned “Brewster’s Selenography” as if it was something to be looked up. Sir David Brewster (1781-1868), Scottish physicist, was at various times editor of the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*, contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, editor of the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*, and toward the end of his life, principal of Edinburgh University.)

Emanuel Swedenborg’s great work *Heaven and Hell* (1758) deals with visions and mystical experiences.

The *Iter Subterraneum* (the “Voyage Underground”) by Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), founder of modern Danish literature, tells of a country inside the earth where the people are trees who walk and talk. Poe presumably found a reference in Bielfeld, Book II, chapter vi, section 45, for in the earliest version of his story he refers to “Nicholas Klimm de Holberg” as if it were a personal name.

The works on chiromancy (palmistry) are mentioned by Bielfeld, Book II, chapter xvii, section 10, in a single sentence. They are: *Tractatus de Geomantia*, by Robert Fludd, M.D., 1687; *Discours sur les Principes de la Chiromancie*, by Marin Cureau de La Chambre, 1653 (English translation, 1658); *Introductiones Apotelesmatici . . . in Chiromantiam*, by Joannes ab Indagine of Steinheim, 1522 (English translation, 1598). As the title indicates, the first is primarily concerned with geomancy, a method of divination by means of marking the earth with a pointed stick. It is most unlikely that Poe ever saw any of these books, but he obviously knew that these methods of fortune-telling are based on a belief in a mysterious relation between the stars, the configuration of the palms, and so forth; that is, between microcosm and macrocosm.

“Das alte Buch und die Reise ins Blaue hinein,” a novella by Johann Ludwig Tieck, is a satirical story within a story. First published in 1834 in the annual *Urania* (Leipzig) for 1835, it recounts the adventures of a medieval noble who marries Gloriana, the Faerie Queene. She reigns in a paradise inside a mountain, where dwell the souls of great poets—Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare. Ugly gnomes have taken over authors like E. T. A. Hoffman and Victor Hugo, but an emissary of Gloriana has embraced the young Goethe. (This note is by courtesy of my pupil Heidrun Smolka.) A brief mention of “the tale by Tieck, which opens the *Urania* of this year” appeared in “A Glance at the German Annuals” in *Blackwood’s* for February 1835 (37:388), and further mentions—with the title translated—in a review of Tieck’s *Life of a Poet* in *Blackwood’s* for September 1837. Poe refers to “A Journey into the Blue Distance” in “Marginalia,” number 78 (*Democratic Review*, December 1844).

The *Civitas Solis* (1623) by the Italian poet and philosopher Tommaso Campanella, is mentioned by Bielfeld, Book II, chapter vi, section 45. It recounts a visit to the people who inhabit a Utopia in the Sun. Campanella held that the world and all its parts have a spiritual nature.

Nicholas Eymeric of Gironne, who became Inquisitor of Aragon in 1356, wrote instructions to priests examining heretics and gave a list of forbidden books such as Usher wished to consult. The first edition of the *Directorium* was printed in 1503.

The passages in Pomponius Mela, the Latin geographer of the first century A.D., are marvelously appropriate to Usher’s moods—and I believe they were known to Poe (who quotes Mela, III, i, in “The Island of the Fay”) in the original Latin, which is so sounding and grand that I quote it in full, with a translation, from *De Situ Orbis*, I, viii, and III, ix.

Satyris praeter effigiem, nihil humani. Aegipanum, quae celebrantur, ea forma est.

Campi, quam ut perspicui possunt, Panum Satyrorumque. Hinc opinio causae fidem cepit, quod, cum in his nihil culti sit, nullae habitantium sedes, nulla vestigia, solitudo in diem vasta, et silentium vastius, nocte crebri ignes micant, et veluti castra late jacentia ostenduntur, crepant cymbala et tympana, audiunturque tibiae, sonantes majus humanis.

(The African tribe called Satyrs have nothing of man save the form. The appearance of the Aegipans is that of the mythological creatures they are named for.

(As far as one can see stretch the fields of the Pans and Satyrs. The reason for belief in them is that, although there is no sign of human care among them, no houses of inhabitants, no paths—solitude immeasurable by day, and a greater silence—yet by night many fires blaze, and as it were indicate widely scattered encampments, drums and cymbals are sounded, and there are heard flutes, sounding music more than human.)

Most curious of all the books is the *Vigiliae*. The title was apparently recorded by no bibliographer, and it was assumed that Poe had made it up on the analogy of similar things known to bibliographers. But the fact that so many of the books on the list were real, coupled with a very similar title for Cologne (Copinger 6225) led me to get in touch with the German Commission preparing the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*. They informed me that while they had found no earlier bibliographical descriptions of them, no less than three different editions (represented by five copies in the State Libraries of Darmstadt and Wolfenbüttel, and the Town Library at Mainz) were now recorded of the book apparently referred to by Poe—the Mainz services for the dead. Dr. Adolf Schmidt kindly furnished me with descriptions of the two items most like Poe’s—printed probably at Basel around 1500 in quarto and with Gothic type! While the title reads VIGILIAE MORTUORUM MAIORES &c MINORES SECUNDUM CHORUM ECCLESIAE MAGUNTINENSIS, the text begins “Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum chorum ecclesiae Maguntinae” as Poe writes. Both volumes are printed in black and red, with music and text, and consist of 52 leaves. Their makeup and pagination differ, however. How did Poe learn of the book? I cannot say. Perhaps through a bookseller’s catalogue—or even a collector, though I doubt any American owned a copy in that day. But, however it was, Poe described an incunable correctly, seventy years before the *Gesamtkatalog*—and he is among the bibliographers, as Saul is among the prophets.



Three of Roderick Usher's favorite books. A volume of the collected works of Robert Fludd, containing his treatise on geomancy; *Niels Klim's Journey Under the Ground* by Ludvig Holberg; and *The Marriage of Belphegor* by Niccolo Machiavelli. Copies from the collections of The University of Iowa Libraries.