

## Embedded and Embodied Poetry in Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"\*

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Edgar Allan Poe constantly revised everything he wrote from publication to publication. His revisions consisted mainly of deletions or alterations of phrases, but they also sometimes included more extended insertions of text, such as epigraphs and even poems. Although there are other instances of inserted poetical elements in Poe's tales (e.g. *The Assignment* 1850), this paper will focus on two examples in which Poe incorporated a poem of his own in one of his short stories. The first is "The Haunted Palace," published in April 1839 and inserted a few months later in his famous short story "The Fall of the House of Usher," and the other "The Conqueror Worm," first published in 1843 and incorporated a few years later, in 1845, in a second revised reprint of his short story "Ligeia" (first published in 1838).

What I propose to show is that, despite their seeming obscurity, the poems are invested with a crucial double function within the narrative. In terms of content, they offer the reader a key for interpreting the mysterious *poetic* characters who utter them. As narrative devices, by their placement in the middle of the stories in which they are embedded, they are figuring as an omen of the bad fortune ahead, foreshadowing the sinister ending of the tales. I will attempt to show that poetic speech in this context is given as a source of solemnity and authority so as to enhance the effect of inevitability in the outcome of the narrated tales. This addition of a disruptive element in the narrative level, aiming to draw the reader's attention on the semantic level,

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takes a major significance in the tales and contrasts with Poe's strict technique of composition, as he himself described it in his "Philosophy of Composition" (1846). According to Poe, the achievement of a specific desired effect calls for a tight, strictly focused structure, with no deviation from the *dénouement*.<sup>1</sup> The insertion of an autonomous piece of literature originally disconnected from the story seems to disregard this fundamental rule. Furthermore, the mixture of genres seems equally at odds with his philosophy.

### Poe's Poetic Deviations: Theory and Practice

Poe reserves different functions to the modes of literary writing, with poetry being particularly attuned to the expression of "Beauty," and prose being the right mode to convey "Truth":

Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes—that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment—no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to is *most readily* attained in the poem. Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable, to a certain extent, in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose. Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and Passion a *homeliness* (the truly passionate will comprehend me) which are absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul. (Poe, "Philosophy of Composition" 456)

If, as Poe claims, Beauty is the province of the poem and appeals to the soul, while Truth and Passion, appealing to the intellect and the heart respectively, are far better rendered in prose and are viewed as "antagonistic" to Beauty, then the insertion of the poems into the prose narrative could be viewed as a possible threat to the coherence of the structural edifice of the story; unless we were to see it as an attempt to achieve, through this intrusion, a synergy of the two genres for the production of a more complete work. This is however not discussed or even hinted at in Poe's "Philosophy of Composition."

Before rushing to declare that Poe disregards the rules he has laid himself in his theoretical writings, it would be of interest to further investigate this discrepancy between Poe's theory and practice. In his "Poetic Principle" (published posthumously in 1850) Poe grounds one of his central ideas, namely the positioning of the poem as the supreme artistic form, in the intuition of the human soul:

[...] but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem's sake. (131)

Although the essay is presented as a scientific treatise on the subject, Poe is choosing to appeal to the emotion in a similar way as he claims poetry does. He is investing "pure" poetry with an aura of mystic truth, while emphasizing its ability to bypass the intellect and have a direct effect on the soul. One would then expect him to very consciously safeguard this autonomy of the poem. And yet, Poe delights in being subversive even regarding his own ideas, and seeming inconsistencies appear often in his writings.<sup>2</sup> As it has been invariably repeated by writers and scholars alike,<sup>3</sup> given Poe's penchant for satire and his predilection for hoaxes, one most often not only can but also *should* question Poe's earnestness in his writings. However, I would like to put forth the idea that Poe actually needs his tenets to be taken seriously so as to build upon a well-secured set of ideas concerning the nature of poetry in order to create the right reception for his literary work, which is then based on a circular argument<sup>4</sup> pertaining to the function of poetry. In other words, while Poe seems to contradict his theory in his own tales, this is in fact a strategy in favour of poetry's supremacy, a means to an end. And to this end, the emphasis on the separate "provinces" of poetry and prose—namely Beauty and Truth—is of central importance.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Poe's quite "purist" ideas as they are exposed in his theoretical writings concerning the autonomy of the poem and its suprem-

acy as an artistic form, it is no surprise that scholars have often pointed out the peculiar poetical nature in Poe's tales as a general characteristic permeating his works. This characteristic can be viewed as blurring, to some extent, the clear divide between the two forms which Poe argues for, at least in terms of what those modes of expression can reveal (namely Beauty for the poem and Truth for prose).<sup>6</sup>

### Inserted Poems and Their Multiple Functions

Poe's predilection for the form of the tale and his insistence on its tight structure which best serves its strong point, the "unity of effect," is well known.<sup>7</sup> Viewed in the light of this unity of effect, the insertion at a later date of poems which were originally standing on their own, into tales that were also already completed, raises a series of questions regarding their function. If we look at those two instances of insertions in connection with this compositional rule, then his insistence on a tight structure and on a strategy of no deviation for a perfect result leads us to interpret these insertions either as a deviation from the rule (which is further emphasized by the fact that they were later additions to the text), or to assume that the poems are a necessary structural element to the creation of the "unity of effect." The first issue to take into account is that the insertion of the poems necessarily "reorganizes" the narrative structure of the tales. Both poems are placed in the middle of the story and, although related by the narrator, they clearly break his narration and momentarily eclipse the narrative "I." This breaking of the narrative serves multiple functions, including tempering with the unity of effect.

On the narrative level, the temporary shift away from the narrator's point of view makes possible the subversion of the well-known issue of the often hinted "madness" of the narrator. In "Ligeia" the narrator repeatedly questions his ability to see clearly; for instance, he talks of his "incipient madness" (83); admits that "There was a mad disorder in [his] thoughts" (88); wonders "What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought?" (88). The only secure objective view of Ligeia

as a character, in terms of her being seen from another perspective than the eyes of the narrator, is the quotation of her own words which constitute the poem. In "Usher" both the narrator, who avows: "I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness" (95); and Roderick Usher, who exclaims "MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR!" (98), bring to our attention the narrator's possibly clouded mental faculty. The quoted poem offers the reader the chance to have, at least seemingly, an unmediated glimpse of Roderick. For, although it is the narrator who is repeating Roderick's poem, we still get to bypass his possibly distorted and certainly objective view. The interpretation given is still the narrator's, but we as readers also have Roderick's verses in hand and can proceed to interpret them according to our own judgment. As James W. Gargano has pointed out,

the structure of many of Poe's stories clearly reveals an ironical and comprehensive intelligence critically and artistically ordering events so as to establish a vision of life and character which the narrator's very inadequacies help to "prove." [...] Poe suggests to his readers ideas never entertained by the narrators. Poe intends his readers to keep their powers of analysis and judgment ever alert; he does not require or desire complete surrender to the experience of the sensations being felt by his characters. (178)

This communication on an external level that the implied author conveys "over the shoulder" of the narrator, so to speak, gives the reader important information while offering a broader scope than the narrator's focalization. In the case of the two poems, this allows for the feeling that, regardless of the narrators' reliability in giving an accurate portrait of the respective characters of Ligeia and Roderick, we get to evaluate on our own their most important concerns which are the subject matter of their artistic expression (the will to live for Ligeia and the fear of madness for Roderick).

I would further like to suggest that the inserted poems are one of the narrative devices<sup>8</sup> Poe uses not only to "reveal" to the reader more than the narrator can convey in terms of plot, but also to communicate more than prose, as a literary form, can convey regarding existential

higher truths. Although Truth is the province of prose, the unreliability of Poe's narrators due to their unstable mental state undermines, at least to a certain extent, the veracity of their tale. In these cases then, paradoxically, it is poetry which conveys the "truth" rather than prose, but it does so in a special way. Poetry in those tales is presented as conveying a higher form of Truth, one that bypasses both the unreliability of the narrator and the limitations of the rationality of prose. It is a truth attained through beauty and intuition, rather than rational thought. On the plot level this translates into the artistic inspiration that is able to access hidden recesses of the artist's soul; on the theoretical level, for poetry to convey Truth through Beauty, it needs to be incorporated into prose in order to gain a firm grip on the reality the prose narrative has constructed.

In the tales, the poems are given as the artistic work of the mysterious characters on which the narration focuses and are therefore a means of self-expression of those characters. Poetry possesses the peculiarity of being a self-expression even without the use of "I," and this gives an extra dimension to the access of "truth" that cannot be attained through the characters' regular speech within the narrative. In terms of how the reader is to receive and interpret them as a form of expression, the implication is that those poems are revealing the innermost part of the character who composed them, which cannot be conveyed by the narrator's description nor by their own self-perception. They are then an added means of characterization which "escapes" not only the narrative frame, but also the consciousness of both the narrator and the character, thus being the repository of some element pertaining to their soul, the part through which, according to Poe, poetry is conceived and perceived.

In both stories the narrators know the characters well, but somehow their essence remains out of their grasp. Both narrators give a meticulous physical description before expressing their inability to portray them, their admittance that the most important element eludes them, or at least that it cannot be conveyed through words. The poems come to supplement this lack. The narrator in "Ligeia" opens his story with

putting emphasis on the limitations of his memory concerning his departed wife who haunts his mind: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" (79).<sup>9</sup> At the same time, he is also aware that her essence<sup>10</sup> is something he has often sensed, but which has always escaped him at every attempt to grasp it intellectually.<sup>11</sup> In "Usher," too, the narrator has known Usher since childhood but finds him "terribly altered" (90); and after describing the physical ravages of his illness he is at a loss what to make of the profound mental changes it has produced in Usher's being. A series of undecided nouns and adjectives—"incoherence," "inconsistency," "tremulous indecision," "unnatural sensations," "anomalous species of terror" (91)—express his inability to convey who Usher has become.

Where the narrators stop and avow their limitations, the poems express what the narrators are unable to do with their narrative, functioning as condensed, albeit abstract portraits of the characters. The limitations of prose narration are thus extended through the poetical expression. Poetry is circumventing logical conscious thinking and allows access to a deeper and less conscious part of the characters. Vagueness, which is a disadvantage in prose, is the means of poetry to convey meaning. Poe asserts that "Words cannot hem it [poetry] in. Its intangible and purely spiritual nature refuses to be bound down within the widest horizon of mere sounds" ("Drake-Halleck" 419). The core element of Ligeia's personality, the trait that cannot be expressed in prose narrative, is presented to be the extraordinary power of her will in her uneven fight with death. "It is this wild longing—it is this eager vehemence of desire for life—*but* for life—that I have no power to portray—no utterance capable of expressing" (82-83), confesses the narrator. He is describing as best he can a feeling that can only be displayed through the poem. Ligeia's own regular speech would not be enough to express what her artistic expression is conveying. Through her ultimate poetical work are revealed all the acuteness of the tragic fight of her will against the inevitability of death and her deep knowledge of the mysteries of life that will allow

her to come back once more from the realm of the dead. For a more comprehensive understanding of the person of Ligeia, the poem should also be viewed in connection to the tale's epigraph which is repeated by the narrator and by Ligeia herself just after the declamation of the poem. The words are attributed to Joseph Glanvill but are of Poe's own invention<sup>12</sup>:

*And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. (79)*

The narrator sees a "remote connection between this passage in the English moralist and a portion of the character of Ligeia" (81); these words are also Ligeia's only direct verbal expression in the narrative. The emphasis that is put on them by means of a four-time repetition in the tale (including the epigraph) leaves no room to question their significance to the understanding of the work. If there is a central effect for the tale, then it must be the conveyance of this extraordinary desire and power of the will to conquer death. To this effect the poem gives an added dimension through its capability to encapsulate the main element in the story and present it in a concentrated abstract form.

Usher's "indescribable" attribute, that is his connection with the house of Usher and his ability to see interconnections everywhere, to feel them with his over-excited and acute senses, is the counterpart to Ligeia's extraordinary will to live; it is the elusive part the narrator cannot relate and that the poem will reveal. Again it is the core element of the tale, and this is also alluded to by the epigraph which describes the strange ability of the character to resonate what is around him. Usher's descent into insanity due to his overly excited mind is given a powerful expression in "The Haunted Palace," where the edifice and the mind of its master and inhabitant are superimposed<sup>13</sup> and shown to be inextricably linked by one of the most elementary characteristics of poetry: metaphor. The interconnections Usher experiences are projected in his artistic work, and the bond



between Roderick Usher, his sister and the house is manifested not through rational explanation (which makes Usher sound mad) but through artistic sublimation, which elevates it into the sphere of intuitive attestation. Qualified that way, his ability needs no rational explanation (since there is none), but what a poem asserts requires no “proof” as such, it only requires to work in aesthetic terms; if those are met, then it has sufficiently verified what the narrator cannot express without sounding mad.

Another function those poems have within the narrative is connected with the stories' *dénouement*. In his theoretical writings, Poe repeatedly stressed the importance of all elements of the story working towards one ultimate goal.<sup>14</sup> Both poems foreshadow the tragic ending, sealing its inevitability like a sinister omen of fate. In the “Conqueror Worm” the inevitable death and the futility of fighting against it is indicated first by the “angel throng” (83.3) who, “drowned in tears” (83.4), is silently watching “a play of hopes and fears” (83.6) that they have seen over and over again. The “circle that ever returneth in / To the self-same spot” (83.21-22) alludes to the circularity of death and life and its inevitability. The final lines reveal that “the play is the tragedy, ‘Man,’ / And its hero the Conqueror Worm” (83.39-40) and are announcing that, no matter the extraordinary nature of Ligeia’s will, the end is predetermined. In “The Haunted Palace” the final collapse of the Usher siblings, Roderick’s mind, and the house, which is the physical manifestation of the mental collapse, is also foreseen. Once the description of the house is connected to the person of Roderick, the serenity and prosperity of the palace presented in the first four stanzas is seen to falter: “evil things, in robes of sorrow, / Assailed the monarch’s high estate” (93.33-34), the windows turn crimson, and the “well-tuned” (93.20) music of the first part becomes “a discordant melody” (93.44). “A hideous throng” (93.47) rushes out, and haunting laughter is heard.

This function of the poems to contain the ending of the story they are part of is reinforced by the sense of a-temporality, a sort of suspension of the narrative time that the poems bring within the tale.

Both stories are narrated retrospectively, giving a linear account of events, but the poems, as we have seen, come to interrupt the narrative voice; they also have the same effect on narrative time. They act like little pockets of a-temporality, giving an overall view of past and future that encompasses, but also supersedes, the characters of the tales. It is significant that they are both impersonal<sup>15</sup> and adopt an almost metaphysical point of view using a vantage point outside earthly affairs, which reinforces the effect of the omniscient authoritative poetical voice. Both poems begin with reference to the realm of angels. In "The Conqueror Worm," the angels are the saddened but passive spectators of the tragedy of man, a play they have witnessed many times before, rendering time unessential. Human time, and the human struggle within it, are reduced to a mere part of the play that the timeless angels are witnessing again and again in their eternity. In "The Haunted Palace" the scene is set in some indeterminate place and time: "In the greenest of our valleys, / By good angels tenanted, / Once a fair and stately palace" (93.1-3).

This remoteness from earthly and narrative time allows for the feeling of the poems encompassing the tales, even though they are embedded in them. While their form is condensed, their time-span is enclosing the time covered within the narrative. They include a remote and indeterminate past as well as the inevitable future fall of both characters, who have created them in a moment of artistic insight brought by the overexcitement of their souls, thus surpassing their creator's intellectual faculties and revealing their own future.<sup>16</sup> This effect of the poems encompassing the tales is further reinforced by their connection to the epigraphs: in "Ligeia," the strong sense of helplessness<sup>17</sup> and the lack of free will,<sup>18</sup> as well as the anonymity the tragedy of "Man" suggests, contrast sharply with the emphasis on the boundless power of the individual will expressed in the epigraph. They also contrast with Ligeia's own extraordinary will that permits her to conquer death and momentarily come back to life through the narrator's second bride's body in the horrifying scene which concludes the tale.

The poems have yet another function, as they are the structural elements of the tale which convey both the extra “complexity” and the “undercurrent” meaning which gives the tale its depth. According to Poe’s theoretical exposition of the genre, these are indispensable elements for the composition of a good tale:

Two things are invariably required—first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness—some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with *the ideal*. (“The Philosophy of Composition” 463)<sup>19</sup>

This function of the poems is reinforced by Ligeia herself and by both the narrator and Usher. Ligeia only speaks once throughout the narrative, and her words, coming directly after the declamation of the poem, stress its connection to the epigraph, thus hinting at the poem’s function as the key to the understanding of the tale:

“O God!” half shrieked Ligeia, leaping to her feet and extending her arms aloft with a spasmodic movement, as I made an end of these lines—“O God! O Divine Father!—shall these things be undeviatingly so?—shall this Conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who—who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.” (83)

By linking the epigraph on the power of the will as a general human tragic trait with her own personal struggle against death, and by giving it a religious tone through her address to the “Divine Father,” Ligeia is bringing together in her character the different elements of the story (epigraph, narrative, inserted poem), thus making visible the necessary interconnections that form the “undercurrent of meaning” that lends its unity of effect to the tale. The narrator in “Usher” also draws the reader’s attention quite overtly (we could even say bluntly) to this function of the poem: “I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it, because, in the *under or mystic current of*

*its meaning*, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (93; italics mine).

The "Haunted Palace" is in a way the manifestation of Roderick Usher's mysterious "illness" (for lack of a better word from the narrator) which makes him able to sense all the intricate and mystical connections that are not visible to the "sane" mind. In the poem, the palace takes the shape of its sovereign: the blending of the person and the edifice is suggested from the very beginning ("Radiant palace—reared its head," 93.4) and is sustained all through the poem with the "two luminous windows" turning into "red-litten" windows (93.18, 93.42) marking, with this colour denoting turmoil, the point when madness takes over. The character of Usher is in fact the connecting agent both between poem and narrative on the structural narrative level, and between literal and metaphorical (i.e. poetic) meaning on the semantic level.

A fusion can be seen to take place if we interpret Roderick Usher as being madness or poeticity<sup>20</sup> personified. Already in the epigraph Usher is likened to art: "*Son cœur est un luth suspendu; / Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.*—De Béranger" (88), and the poem, which represents Usher himself,<sup>21</sup> is also stressing its link to the epigraph. Usher's thoughts are first portrayed in the poem as being organized "To a lute's well-tuned law" (93.20), only to develop into "a discordant melody" (93.44) when he sinks into madness.

Roderick Usher interprets ("reads") the house through the interconnections of its structure,<sup>22</sup> inviting us to do the same with the poem and the tale: when the narrator reads to him a passage from "The Mad Trist," he interprets it through its analogy with his reality: "And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour 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! Oh whither shall I fly?" (98; italics mine). The events in the text correspond indeed to the narrative reality. Madeline stands in front of

her brother demanding revenge and blurring the limits between the literary text which is read out loud and reality, leaving the question of the “order” of events unanswered. Is it that Usher “reads” his inescapable fate in the texts, or is it the texts that “evoke” the events? In either case, the texts (both the poem and “The Mad Trist”) double the events, investing them with solemnity, and creating an atmosphere of inevitability; the fall is “written” and therefore inescapable. This feeling of being caught in a vicious circle with no way out is also intensified by the fully circular motion on the structural level, with both tales closing with the repetition of their title. “The Fall of the House of Usher” starts with the narrator’s description of the decaying house itself surrounded by the tarn, and ends with the phrase “and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘HOUSE OF USHER’” (98). “Ligeia” as well begins with the narrator expressing his inability to remember when he “first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (79) and ends with the words “LADY LIGEIA!” (88).

### How Poetry Conveys Truth

Within this circular, enclosed and confined space of the tales, the poems are no longer self-sufficient textual entities; they are part of the tale, but also “part” of the fictional characters. The uttering of the poems, which not only exist as written text but are also words spoken out loud, provides a two-way communication between prose narrative and poetic form. It gives the poems more than just a voice; it gives them a body through which they intrude into the narrative, while at the same time they become an intrinsic part of the characterization concerning the utterer, uncovering his supernatural abilities to access something more beautiful, more powerful, and elusive than what earthly existence can offer. Ligeia has the name of a Siren,<sup>23</sup> which hints at her song being as fatal as it is unearthly beautiful. The “thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language” (79), “the

almost magical melody, modulation, distinctness, and placidity of her very low voice" (81) imply that the ascendance she has over the narrator is not only due to the content of her teachings but also to the poetic form through which they are expressed. She does not only produce poems, she is poetic in her nature by virtue of her siren qualities which are manifested through her entire being. She is presented, even in her physical attributes, as a work of art: her skin "set[s] forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, 'hyacinthine!'" (80), and in her chin the narrator finds "the gentleness of breadth, the softness and the majesty, the fullness and the spirituality, of the Greek—the contour which the god Apollo revealed but in a dream, to Cleomenes, the son of the Athenian" (80). But it is the eyes, in which the narrator senses there is to be found "something more profound than the well of Democritus" (81), that hold all the mystic secrets.<sup>24</sup>

Usher functions as an incarnation of the poetic principle in a similar way. His quasi-assimilation into the lyrical instrument of the lute and his quality to vibrate in unison with the cosmic interconnections through his unnaturally heightened physical and spiritual senses present him as a sort of "medium" through which higher truths and hidden meanings can be reached. The narrator here again stresses the idea that mystical truths which cannot be conveyed through words are expressed in Usher's entire being: "Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphureous lustre over all. His long improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears" (92).

This function of poetry as a medium for the conveyance of some higher truth in general is one of Poe's main theoretical tenets. In "The Poetic Principle" he identifies the source of the power poetry has to move us as "a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" ("The Poetic Principle" 470).<sup>25</sup> It is this exact same feeling that the narrator of "Ligeia"

describes as his response to her entire person, which functions as the trigger for the reminiscence of what the soul knows as truth:

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 endeavours 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! (81)

Ligeia's poetic quality thus allows the narrator to access a truth that is beyond the mortal scope of man: "My brain reeled as I hearkened entranced, to a melody more than mortal—to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known" (82). This transcendent quality of poetry is a constant in Poe's artistic expression. As Edward Davidson has demonstrated, poetry was for Poe "an act of discovery and penetration; from Coleridge he had obtained the view that man's perceptive powers can transcend this world of space and time and give him insights as profound and earth-disturbing as the great discoveries in the physical sciences" (40).

This brings us back to Poe's clearly distinguished realms of poetry and prose which he emphasized in his theoretical writings. By assigning the realm of Truth to prose and reserving the realm of Beauty to poetry, Poe indirectly puts them in opposition with one another, while prompting the reader to give primacy in his reading to either the one or the other, depending on the form of expression chosen by the author. A mixture of the two seems somehow contradictory in a genre like the tale, in which, Poe insisted, everything should converge to one single aim. What I would like to suggest is that the insertions of the poems in the tales do not constitute, however, a contradiction in Poe's thought, but are rather part of a strategy which has the ultimate goal of merging the two in a deliberately circular argument. That argument, if successful, brings out poetry as a self-evident truth because it appeals to intuition and not to the intellect. The turning point of this

strategy, the final step, is to be found in the preface of what Poe considered his masterpiece, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. This work, which contains Poe's intuitional view of the universe, is dedicated:

To the few who love me and whom I love—to those who feel rather than to those who think—to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities—I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true. To these I present the composition as an Art-product alone,—let us say as a Romance; or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem.

*What I here propound is true:—*therefore it cannot die:—or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will “rise again to the Life Everlasting.”

Nevertheless, it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead. (*Eureka* 132)

By addressing *Eureka* to “those who feel rather than to those who think,” it is “as a Poem only” that Poe wishes us to judge it; and yet he boldly declares that it is a “Book of Truths,” and, what is more, a book of scientific truths that need, however, no scientific proof other than their beauty. Although *Eureka* is written in prose, Poe asks us to judge his work as a poem, that is on such aesthetic terms which need no empirical proof other than the soul's elevation due to the Beauty expressed, only to then turn his argument on its head and say that it is, however, this Beauty which is “constituting it true,” thus providing the “proof of Truth” through the non-demonstrable quality of Beauty.

Poe's demand for the judgment of his work “as a Poem” is to be viewed in connection with what he considers as poetry and its function. It is clear that the plea for poetry is a plea not to look for the “proof” in the conventional sense, but to take the text's truth at face value. Poe further explains this process in *Eureka* insisting on the sense of symmetry:

The sense of the symmetrical is an instinct which may be depended upon with an almost blindfold reliance. It is the poetical essence of the Universe—*of the Universe* which, in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms:—thus Poetry and Truth are one. A thing is consistent in the ratio of its truth—



true in the ratio of its consistency. *A perfect consistency, I repeat, can be nothing but an absolute truth.* We may take it for granted, then, that man cannot long or widely err if he suffer himself to be guided by his poetical, which I have maintained to be his truthful, in being his symmetrical, instinct. (*Eureka* 134)

This symmetry, which is traditionally a characteristic of poetry as a form,<sup>26</sup> is also carefully provided in the two tales discussed here through the introduction of the poems which reflect into the world of Beauty the Truth that is the ultimate goal of the tales, thus providing the guarantee for their success as credible narratives. Read in this light, the poems in “Ligeia” and in “The Fall of the House of Usher” add more than just a different point of view. By virtue of their poetic nature, they introduce into the tales, at the point where the narrator’s reliability is questioned, the guarantee of the Truth which pertains to poetry, a truth directly aiming at the soul’s intuition which, through a circular argument pointing to the notion of symmetry, encloses its proof within itself.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed analysis of Poe’s conception of the tale as a genre see Thompson.

<sup>2</sup>For instance, in his “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe emphasizes the importance of a well-organized plot and presents it as the prerequisite to any literary attempt: “Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen” (453). But in a review on Edward Lytton Bulwer, we find him claiming plot is not important: “A good tale may be written without it. Some of the finest fictions in the world have neglected it altogether. We see nothing of it in *Gil Blas*, in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or in *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus it is not an essential in story-telling at all” (*Graham’s Magazine*, November 1841; *Essays and Reviews* 151). Another instance of his inconsistency is that he often goes against his own rules. While Poe stresses that a work, especially a poem, should be short enough to be read in one sitting, and while he also gives a precise account of what constitutes a poem and how it operates differently than prose, he nevertheless considered as his best work his lengthy *Eureka*, which deviated from these rules. He also characterized this hybrid

text as a "prose poem." Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine, the editors of Poe's *Critical Theory: The Major Documents*, are right in giving the author's inconsistency the prominent place it deserves in his work: "That Poe's ideas sometimes contradict one another should not upset readers overmuch; indeed, acquiring a feel for his inconsistency is a good first step toward getting to know Poe's mind" (4).

<sup>3</sup>Henry James and T. S. Eliot considered Poe's work mainly to appeal to the adolescent mind. According to Henry James, to take Poe "with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self" (*French Poets and Novelists* 76); Eliot attributes to Poe "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty" ("From Poe to Valéry" 35). Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine describe Poe's theoretical text "The Rationale of Verse" as "bluffing and shoddy scholarship" (78). More recently, Stott argued that *Eureka* should be interpreted as a hoax attempting to reveal the gullibility of its readers, thus refuelling an old scholarly debate on that matter. It is interesting and quite telling for the case of Poe's reception by critics that, although Stott points out that we could "talk of irony rather than deception" and quotes critics who stress this aspect of his work, he however insists that: "Yet Poe was a *hoaxer*: one who took pleasure in mocking the public" (58). The reception of Poe's theoretical essays has also suffered due to this "hoaxer" image of the author. Even at the time of its publication, "The Philosophy of Composition," where Poe illustrates his theoretical ideas through his step by step description of how he composed "The Raven," was suspected to be a hoax; "Mallarmé called it an intellectual game" (see Voloshin 292n5).

<sup>4</sup>Poe is providing a prescriptive theory which comes from his own way of writing, thus making his work the perfect embodiment of artistic production. He even goes further than that in order to secure its reception; in 1845 he anonymously publishes a review of his own *Tales* where he asserts the originality and novelty of his work and establishes himself as a "genius": "A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader. That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high genius. It is the result of a peculiar combination of mental faculties [...] It is possessed by Mr. POE, in its perfection" (Poe qtd. in Voloshin 285-86).

<sup>5</sup>In his famous review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* Poe seizes the opportunity to stress this point once more: "We have said that the tale has a point of superiority even over the poem. In fact, while the *rhythm* of this latter is an essential aid in the development of the poem's highest idea—the idea of the Beautiful—the artificialities of this rhythm are an inseparable bar to the development of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in *Truth*. But Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale. [...] The writer of the prose tale, in short, may bring to his theme a vast variety of modes or inflections of thought and expression—(The ratiocinative, for example, the sarcastic or the humorous) which are not only antagonistical to the nature of the poem, but absolutely forbidden by one of its most peculiar and indispensable adjuncts; we allude of course, to rhythm" (*Essays and Reviews* 573).

<sup>6</sup>As Walter Evans points out in his overview of the scholarship on that matter, Edward Davidson has stipulated that “[t]hese tales are indeed ‘Poems’” (154); Thomas Woodson sees Poe’s fiction as tending “toward the conditions of lyric poetry” (Evans 141); Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate point to a “poetical” unity in “Usher” (Evans 141). Evans himself puts forth the view that “Poe demonstrably composed the body of the story of elements central to the lyric method but largely irrelevant to plotted narrative progression; he clearly subordinates combined incidents to patterned images” (140). The poems themselves have not so much been regarded as intrinsic elements of the narrative but rather as pointers to the poetic nature of the text. Tallack has seen “The Haunted Palace” as “imag[ing] the story’s poetic status” (51); and Kennedy has proposed that “Ligeia represents the presence of poetry within the sphere of the fictional text” (120). Bruce Olson has tackled the issue of the presence of the poem within the narrative but only as “proof” of the narrative itself: “Paradoxically, the poem really exists, embedded within the ‘fiction’ which accounts for its possibility; and the very existence of the poem itself helps to establish the ‘truth’ of the ‘fiction’” (558).

<sup>7</sup>In his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales* Poe repeats this undeviating rule for the success of a tale: “If his [the author’s] very initial sentence tend [sic] not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel” (*A Study of the Short Fiction* 125).

<sup>8</sup>The most common device Poe uses is the narrator’s own inconsistencies or obsessions. As the following example shows, the narrator is presented as being aware of his obsessions, often even questioning the reality of his own experiences due to their unnatural nature (in this instance, Ligeia trying to come back to life through Rowena’s body): “And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia—and again, (what marvel that I shudder while I write?) *again* there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed” (“Ligeia” 87).

<sup>9</sup>On the function of memory in Poe’s poetic economy as well as for an analysis of how the two poems work within the tales as a device for an economy “that always is doubled” (28) see William E. Engel.

<sup>10</sup>This sensation that Ligeia is more than he knows is expressed a few times in the tale; see, e.g.: “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!” (81).

<sup>11</sup>Right in the opening paragraph the narrator is struggling with his knowledge of Ligeia that seems to be intuitive and emotional but for that very reason also quite elusive: “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, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical lan-

guage, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown" (79).

<sup>12</sup>On possible functions of epigraphs in literary texts see Kronshage in this issue of *Connotations* <<http://www.connotations.de/debkronshage0232.htm>>.

<sup>13</sup>The palace takes the shape of a face, it "rear[s] its head" (93.4), has "two luminous windows" (93.18) for eyes, and "pearl and ruby" (93.25) for teeth and lips. The two images of the palace and the face are blended in the poem.

<sup>14</sup>"It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" ("The Philosophy of Composition" 453). See also the quote in n7 from Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.

<sup>15</sup>Both poems are narrative and not lyrical poems, which might have been expected because they are given as expressing the character's inmost being. However, this impersonal poetic voice allows for the poems to function as a *mise en abyme*, containing the expression of the core element of the entire tale.

<sup>16</sup>This form of trance is characteristic of all of Roderick's artistic creations: "the fervid *facility* of his *impromptus* could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement" ("Usher" 93). Concerning Ligeia's poem we only learn that it was "composed by herself not many days before," but her strong emotional reaction to hearing the narrator read it at her own request shows that her composition was conceived in internal turmoil. Her own words pronounced by the narrator excite her emotions anew: "'O God!' half shrieked Ligeia, leaping to her feet and extending her arms aloft with a spasmodic movement, as I made an end of these lines—'O God! O Divine Father!—shall these things be undeviatingly so?'" ("Ligeia" 83).

<sup>17</sup>Even the angels are merely spectators of "A play of hopes and fears" (93.6).

<sup>18</sup>Men are described as "Mimes," "Mere puppets" (83.9, 83.12).

<sup>19</sup>Poe goes on in this passage to show the wrong usage of this literary device and its detrimental effects in the poetry of the transcendentalists: "It is the *excess* of the suggested meaning—it is the rendering this the upper instead of the under current of the theme—which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists" ("The Philosophy of Composition" 463).

<sup>20</sup>In his article on "Poeticity," András Sándor defines the term as follows: "poeticity is an experiential phenomenon that emerges when verbal processes, activations of the linguistic system in discourse, trigger and interact with nonverbal mental processes, activations of nonlinguistic systems, that prove strong or predominant" (299). He stresses that "[p]oetic texts differ from non-poetic texts by

having a specific kind of openness or indeterminacy, and a specific kind of strategy for dealing with it" (300n1) that is textually based and can be analyzed linguistically. This is the way both poems function within their narrative prose frameworks.

<sup>21</sup>The spontaneous and peculiar artistic expression is said to be "the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration" Usher exhibits (93), and the narrator fancies he perceives in the specific poem "a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (93).

<sup>22</sup>"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, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn [...]. 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" ("Usher" 94).

<sup>23</sup>For a discussion of this aspect of the tale see Jones.

<sup>24</sup>"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the colour, 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" ("Ligeia" 80-81).

<sup>25</sup>We can see here a strong Platonic influence. Poe, however, seems to suggest that poetry can convey, albeit briefly, a clearer picture of the imperfect images of the true Forms or Ideas of which, according to Plato's myth of the cave (*The Republic*, Book 7, 514a-517e), man can only see the reflection. Poetry is then presented as a means to transcend momentarily man's limitations and gain access to a higher form of knowledge.

<sup>26</sup>In "The Haunted Palace" the poem is divided into two uneven sections with the first four stanzas describing the prosperity of the kingdom in the past which corresponds to the time when Roderick Usher still had a clear mind, and the last two describing the descent into madness. We notice the same slight imbalance in Ligeia's poem, with the entering in the scene of the "conqueror worm" occurring in the fourth of the five stanzas. Both poems have the rhyme scheme ABABCDCD. This slight deviation of poetical symmetry is the indication that something is wrong; in the case of Usher it mirrors the imbalance of his mental faculties and in Ligeia's case it reflects her excessive fear of death that causes her

to lose her mental serenity. For an analysis of the theme of symmetry in "Usher" see Herrmann and Kostis.

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