

Trauma and the Uncanny in Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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Abstract

As a disorder of memory and time, trauma implies a crisis of representation, of history and truth. It remains in the mind like an intruder or a ghost, foregrounding the disjunction between the present and a primary experience of the past that can never be captured. Like trauma, the uncanny implies haunting, uncertainty, repetition, a tension between the known and the unknown, and the intrusive return of the past. Taking the characteristics of these concepts as the point of departure, this paper analyzes Poe's Gothic tales "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," and explores the close relationship between trauma and the uncanny in both of them. Thus the protagonists of these tales experience the desire to know and the fear of doing so—the basic dilemma at the heart of traumatic experience—and are haunted by memories of a remote and repressed past not recoverable by conscious means but which determines their life in the present. The paper discusses trauma and the uncanny in the light of trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and Gothic criticism, pointing out the centrality of memory and the notion of origins.

Keywords

trauma, uncanny, Gothic, memory, origins

What was it . . . which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover.

—Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia"

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

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher"

“Ligeia” (1838) and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) are master texts in the history of the Gothic. In contrast to other Gothic narratives, they remain alluring and enigmatic because, among other reasons, they tackle questions that are only suggested and finally left unexplained. Their elusiveness has provoked a wide range of critical readings, which attempt to unveil the mysteries of the plot.¹ In my view, this enduring and fascinating power originates in Poe’s brilliant treatment of elements that can be analyzed in the light of trauma and the uncanny, notions that foreground the search for origins and the instability of memory, and in turn evoke and mirror the crises of history. After a few introductory reflections on trauma, the uncanny, and the Gothic—the literary mode committed to the representation of the uncanny—I will focus on the conflation of trauma and the uncanny in “Ligeia” and “Usher,” paying special attention to the ways these tales depict an attempt to return to the past that finally fails due to the ungraspability of that originary time and the unreliability of memory.

Although contemporary concern with trauma is mainly focused on the vicissitudes and consequences of victimization and war, trauma has become an “all-inclusive” phenomenon that pervades not only history but also literature and critical theory;² as Roger Luckhurst notes, trauma has become a paradigm “because it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life.”³ It is significant that identity and memory are the central issues that “Ligeia” and “Usher” highlight, as will be discussed below.

An all-inclusive notion, trauma crosses limits, disrupts boundaries, and “threatens to collapse distinctions”: “No genre or discipline ‘owns’ trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it,” Dominick LaCapra argues.⁴ In this regard, the Gothic is linked to trauma: both are characterized by disruption and excess. Michael Roth describes the excess of trauma as “radical intensity,” a peculiar kind of fascination that evokes the allure of “Ligeia” and “Usher”:

The concept of trauma has come to perform some of the same functions that negative utopia or dystopia once did. Trauma . . . designates phenomena that cannot be properly represented, but one characterized by radical intensity. A widespread longing for intensity has come to magnetize the concept of trauma, giving it a cultural currency far beyond the borders of psychology and psychoanalysis. Trauma has become the dystopia of the spirit, showing much about our own preoccupations with catastrophe, memory, and the grave difficulties we seem to have in negotiating between the internal and external worlds.⁵

Similarly, both trauma and the Gothic are concerned with violence, fear, hauntedness, stasis and entrapment, memory and the past, and emphasize the role of the unconscious. Just as trauma implies “a disorder of memory and time,”⁶ and points to an “enigmatic core” that originates in the past,⁷ the Gothic explores the tricks and gaps of memory and is also obsessed with remote events. The problem is that, although fascinated with the past and origins in general, the Gothic only functions as “ruin” and “overwritten site” that forever evokes something prior that eludes us, as David Punter and Elizabeth Bronfen have remarked: “Gothic . . . swerves away from that notion of the ‘precise point’ . . . It recognises that in fact wherever one digs one will come across the bones of the dead . . . and that instead of such excavations providing a new historical security, a new sense of order and origin, they will merely produce an ‘overhang,’ an increasingly unstable superstructure as the foundations are progressively exposed.”⁸ This description constitutes a graphic metaphor of the Gothic, with its sepulchers and crypts, conveying also an image of the depths and inaccessibility of the unconscious: in fact, these words evoke Freud’s notion of the uncanny, its terror and dark origins, and its recurrent and failed attempts to locate “the precise point” of absolute commencement from which everything derives. As Punter puts it, “The uncanny comes to remind us that there is no obvious beginning, to life or to thought, that we are composed of prior traces, some of them available for conscious memory but most of them sunk in a primal past which is not recoverable by conscious means but which continues to influence, and perhaps even determine, our sense of our place in the world.”⁹ This unceasing concern with origins is examined in Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. In this work, Derrida discusses the relationship among history, memory, trauma, and psychoanalysis. Like psychoanalysis, the archive focuses on events that are constituted by the way they disappear: they are remembered (archived), but also forgotten (erased). As he insists, “We are *en mal d’archive*: in need of archives.” This *mal* is not only a sickness: “It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. . . . It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”¹⁰ It is this compulsive desire to escape the pattern of repetition and return to “the authentic and singular origin” that pervades the uncanny and the phenomenon of trauma. Like trauma, the uncanny implies fear, haunting, possession, uncertainty, repetition, a tension between the known and the unknown—the familiar and the unfamiliar, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, in Freud’s terms—and the intrusive

return of the past: “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”¹¹ As Punter notes, “If we have a sense of the uncanny, it is because the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse.”¹² Similarly, the traumatic event is “fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time”;¹³ it remains in the mind like an intruder or a ghost, foregrounding the disjunction between the present and a primary experience of the past that can never be captured. Thus both trauma and the uncanny evoke an elusive event of the past that cannot be fully remembered and keeps haunting the present.

It is revealing that Cathy Caruth’s recent analysis of trauma, *Literature in the Ashes of History*, which draws on Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, emphasizes the desire “to grasp an origin,” and the constant oscillation between remembrance and forgetting: “Traumatic memory thus totters between remembrance and erasure, producing a history that is, in its very events, a kind of inscription of the past; but also a history constituted by the erasure of its traces.” Interestingly, Caruth highlights the strange notion of “a *memory that erases*” while trying to return to the past. Therefore the phenomenon of trauma implies an attempt to return to the origin that finally fails: “Trauma, and ultimately life and the drive itself, is an attempt to return that instead departs.”¹⁴

In various ways, the plots of “Ligeia” and “Usher” convey uncanniness and these traumatic symptoms: their protagonists are obsessed by the past, but despite their efforts the memory of it keeps receding. Their plight could be described as “a burning memory”: a burning for memory that entails its own destruction, its burning up.¹⁵ An atmosphere of vagueness and uncertainty pervades the narratives, so the reader perceives what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told.”¹⁶ Both tales depict the desire to know and the fear of doing so—that is, the basic dilemma at the heart of trauma and the uncanny. If to “be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event,” both Roderick Usher and the unnamed narrator of “Ligeia” can be taken to epitomize the features of this peculiar possession.¹⁷

In “Ligeia,” the symptoms of trauma are mainly associated with the protagonist, an unreliable narrator obsessed with the elusive memories of his dead wife, Ligeia—“the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed”—and with the strange expression of her eyes. It is revealing that his narrative starts by pointing out his poor memory, his confusion between the known and the unknown, and the gap between present and past:¹⁸

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, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive, that they have been unnoticed and unknown. Yet I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine. . . . And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have *never known* the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom. (654)

As the narrator explains, Ligeia's death has resulted in his "utter abandonment," "mental alienation," and "incipient madness" (660), which finds expression in the phantasmagoric decoration of his residence—a remote English abbey—and in his solitary and self-destructive habits: "In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug), I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathways she had abandoned—ah, *could* it be for ever?—upon the earth" (662). His obsessive behavior exemplifies Freud's notions of repetition compulsion and melancholia, and Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of incorporation: the narrator shows symptoms of "painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity," and obsessive memories, while he strives to incorporate his beloved within his own self, since the process of mourning has failed.¹⁹ Maria Torok notes, "Incorporation of the object creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency. Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression."²⁰ The narrator's fixation with his dead wife is mainly focused on her eyes, the secret of which he is unable to decipher: "What was it . . . which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover" (656). His desperate and failed attempts to unravel the meaning of their expression highlight the unbridgeable gap between past and present, and similarly, the tension between remembrance and forgetting that frames the narrative:

There is no point, among the many incomprehensible anomalies of the science of mind, more thrillingly exciting than the fact—never, I believe,

noticed in the schools—that in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves *upon the very verge* of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember. And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression—felt it approaching—yet not quite be mine—and so at length entirely depart! (656)

In different ways, the central concerns of this tale convey the phenomenon of trauma, the notion of the uncanny, and the problems of memory associated with both. Thus Ligeia's frightening eyes and their final unreadability suggest the ghostliness and terror of the uncanny—they are familiar and strange, homely and “wild” (657, 666)—and the enigmatic core of trauma, the locus of referentiality that remains inaccessible (it cannot be located in a specific place or time) and eludes representation. It is worth noting that the repeated and failed attempts at remembrance described in this quote (“*upon the very verge*”; “approaching . . . depart”) exemplify Caruth's notion of “burning memory”—intense but self-erasing—and trauma as a “failed return”: “The theory of repetition compulsion as the unexpected encounter with an event that the mind misses and then repeatedly attempts to grasp is the story of a failure of the mind to return to an experience it has never quite grasped, the repetition of an originary departure from the moment that constitutes the very experience of trauma.”²¹ On the other hand, the hypnotic power of Ligeia's eyes—“which at once so delighted and appalled” the narrator (657)—evokes the aesthetics of the sublime, its combination of pleasure and pain, and the limits of representation. The sublime, related to the Gothic because of its connection to terror, as Edmund Burke famously noted,²² is also linked to trauma, as LaCapra remarks: “In the sublime, the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy” (23). Therefore, in his evocation of Ligeia's eyes, the narrator is confronted with the sublime and with the core of his trauma, disrupting experiences characterized by radical intensity, and by the painful gap between event and representation.²³ Significantly, the problematics of representation inherent in trauma and the sublime that “Ligeia” epitomizes bring to mind the incomplete allegorical turn typical of American Gothic: both Ligeia and her ineffable eyes constitute a clear example of *proso-popoeia*—the attempt to personify the abstract—and of the gap between reference and signification.²⁴

Furthermore, the pattern of repetition that underlies trauma and the uncanny is a central element in this tale, a pattern not only reflected in the narrator's obsessive-compulsive symptoms but also in the character of the second

wife, Rowena, who, in different ways, duplicates and reverses Ligeia's identity. Thus Rowena plays the role of the double, which as Freud notes, becomes "the uncanny harbinger of death"—the harbinger of her own death in this tale—since her corpse becomes the medium to achieve Ligeia's reincarnation.²⁵ Moreover, the fragmentation of identity inherent in trauma that the narrator embodies is mirrored not only in his growing confusion between Rowena and Ligeia on the night of the climax, but above all in the progressive incorporation of Ligeia in his own self due to his melancholia, symbolized in his fixation with her eyes (his I's). As Punter argues, "The narrator may indeed 'behold' Ligeia, but in doing so he is dazzled, and the object is removed from his sight, just as it exists in a continuous erasure in his memory. The narrator cannot remember where he met her, cannot plumb the fathomless depths of her eyes, can indeed neither recollect nor reconstruct her at all: of course not, because he *is* Ligeia."²⁶ Similarly, the narrator's confession that he has "*never known*" Ligeia's paternal name suggests both an erasing memory and also the remoteness of her ancient origins, too distant to be pinned down: "That [her family] is of a remotely ancient date cannot be doubted" (654).

The narrator's traumatic behavior is also reflected in the pattern "dependency-desolation-retribution" that he exhibits toward the female protagonists and that, as Gerald Kennedy remarks, betrays the narrator's "outrage at his own helplessness and insufficiency."²⁷ While the narrator describes himself as a helpless child dependent on Ligeia's power and wisdom ("Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted," 657), he delights in Rowena's mortification and, finally, reenacts Ligeia's death by taking Rowena's body as a surrogate of the former. This cruel game, which denies the alterity of the copy, reflects the narrator's sadistic impulses, but also the effects of trauma.²⁸

Whereas Elizabeth Bronfen's feminist approach to this tale emphasizes the male triumph over the dead female body ("the corpse is feminine, the survivor masculine"), trauma theory allows the reader to see the narrator as possessed by the past and the loved object that he has incorporated into his ego.²⁹ If to be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or event, it can be concluded that in more ways than one, the possessor/victimizer is not the narrator, but Ligeia, who in the climactic ending of the narrative takes also possession of Rowena's body to consummate her return: once more, the narrator is forced to confront Ligeia's wild eyes—that radical intensity—and his fragmented self (his I's), in an abrupt and hurried dénouement that, rather than lead to a conclusion, takes the reader back to the frightening uncertainty of the uncanny and to the enigmatic core of the text—"What was it . . . which

lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it?”—which is also the core of the narrator’s trauma:

Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; *it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!* And now slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the *LADY LIGEIA*.” (665–66)

Ironically, the dénouement of the tale does not solve the enigmas of the plot; on the contrary, it exemplifies the disorder of memory and time inherent in trauma: the ending stresses the gaps that lie “far within” the narrator’s text—anticipated in its first paragraph—especially those concerned with his “feeble memory” and the time frame of his narrative, which blurs the boundaries between present and past and blocks access to the time of absolute commencement. Significantly, the only references to place reinforce the remoteness and decrepitude associated with the passing of time (“some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine”), and the prolonged period of sorrow between the indeterminate “*now*” and the distant past: “Long years have since elapsed . . . through much suffering” (654). In keeping with the characteristics of that early setting, the narrator’s choice of residence in an old English abbey in “one of the wildest and least frequented portions” of the country (660) points out his determination to “deaden impressions of the outward world” (654) and his desire to dwell in the past—that is, his increasing obsession and melancholia. In the end, the narrator’s final vision of Ligeia, rather than put an end to his trauma, only results in the perpetuation of its symptoms, as the opening of the narrative suggests. In an unexpected manner, the dénouement takes the reader back to the beginning of the text, which exemplifies the breach of temporal boundaries inherent in trauma and its pattern of acting out and repetition. It is revealing that the plot prefigures the narrator’s drive of repetition-compulsion far beyond the limits of his narrative: his story is that of “a missed encounter,” “a failed return.”³⁰

Whereas “Ligeia” portrays an individual, ongoing trauma, “The Fall of the House of Usher” evokes an unspecified transgenerational family trauma in which hints of historical change and aristocratic decay can be traced. This tale, probably the most emblematic work in the history of American Gothic, takes

as its basis classical German and British Gothic conventions—the haunted mansion, the isolated and sinister setting, a mysterious confinement that amounts to incarceration, hints of incest, a family curse, and the decline and collapse of the old family line—that it brilliantly refashions and transforms. However, the plot omits any allusion to country, to time and place, and, especially, to the causes of the Ushers' decline. In a variety of ways, "Usher" inaugurates and epitomizes the vagueness and abstraction associated with American Gothic: the Gothic trappings turn inward, producing a psychological, hypnotic, and symbolist terror that is finally left unexplained.

The source of the tale's fascination lies in the enigma of the Ushers, "a mystery all insoluble" (231) that recalls the enigma of Ligeia's eyes. Although the narrator wonders about this mystery—"what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?" (231)—his fragmented and unreliable narrative only discloses that the Usher family has never branched out, and that the only remaining members, Roderick and Madeline, who are twins, have not dared to leave the house for years and slowly waste away in the mansion, victims of a mysterious "family evil" and of the "peculiar" and "pestilent" (235, 233) atmosphere that emanates from the tarn and the walls, but which, paradoxically, they need to stay alive. As the narrator explains, the "House of Usher" proves to be a "quaint and equivocal appellation," not only because it "seemed to include . . . both the family and the family mansion" (232), but especially because it conveys the metaphor of the "architectural" psyche that Freud mentions at the beginning of "The Uncanny" (cf. the progression from *unheimlich*—unhomely—to uncanny, and to haunted) and that Poe evokes in the text through Roderick's poem "The Haunted Palace."

Soon after the narrator's arrival at the Ushers' house, Madeline dies and her brother's melancholia and nervousness increase, because, as the ending reveals, he suspected that she had been buried alive. The dénouement is well-known: as the return of the repressed, Madeline comes back from the tomb, and Roderick dies, "a victim of the terrors he had anticipated" (245). In fact, his anxious anticipation points not only to the future—to Madeline's vindictive return—but also to the past. As Lyndsey Stonebridge puts it, "Anxiety is predicated on the repetition of a past trauma: anxious anticipation has the potential to plunge the ego into traumatic anxiety anew and devastate its defences. 'Dreading forward,' for Freud . . . carries the seeds . . . of a past trauma."³¹ Just as Ligeia's eyes symbolize the uncanny and conceal the enigmatic core of trauma in the previous tale, in "Usher" it is Madeline—and her "lingering smile" in the coffin (241)—who *personifies* both the tension between the known and the unknown and the unreadable trauma of the Ushers: she is prematurely entombed by Roderick

and his friend the narrator, but only to return as “the uncanny harbinger of death”: she stands for the uncanny, the twin, the double, the Other, and for “the grim phantasm, FEAR,” in Roderick’s words (235). Moreover, she is also a figure for catachresis, since she is made to convey all that the tale suggests but never delivers. As J. Hillis Miller argues, catachresis in an “unverifiable trope” related to prosopopoeia, “which defaces or disfigures in the very act whereby it ascribes a face to what has none.”³² Like Madeline, Ligeia and her eyes can also be taken as examples of catachrestic personification: they stand for a referent that remains unverifiable, out of reach. Once more, the reader encounters the suggestiveness and indefiniteness of Poe’s Gothic, as well as the “narrative/anti-narrative tension at the core of trauma.”³³ As revenants and symbols of the uncanny, Madeline and Ligeia occupy a liminal position between the present and the past, the known and the unknown, life and death, fantasy and the real, beauty and terror, and represent the “overwritten site” that eludes deciphering.

In the dark context of “Usher,” LaCapra’s notion of structural trauma is illuminating: he describes it as “related to (even correlated with) transhistorical absence”—that is, “absence of/at the origin.” Structural trauma may be evoked “in terms of the separation from the [m]other . . . , the eruption of the pre-oedipal or presymbolic in the symbolic, . . . the encounter with the ‘real,’ alienation from species-being, the anxiety-ridden thrownness of *Dasein*, . . . the constitutive nature of originary melancholic loss in relation to subjectivity, and so forth” (77). According to this description, it would not be far-fetched to conclude that Roderick and Madeline—[m]other³⁴—suffer from structural trauma, given the characteristics of its symptoms: their solitary life seems to be related to their alienation from humanity (“species-being”), and their mysterious and voluntary confinement betrays an existential angst connected to a remote, unspecified loss that predates Madeline’s premature burial and Roderick’s separation from her. It is precisely the combination of absence (abstract, transhistorical, not an event) and loss (concrete, historical) that produces that prolonged melancholy that LaCapra associates with “hauntology,” and which, in turn, recalls Derrida’s spectral use of this term.³⁵ In LaCapra’s terms, “When absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy. The approximation or even conflation of absence and loss induces a melancholic or impossibly mournful response to the closure of metaphysics, a generalized ‘hauntology’” (68). While the melancholia described in “Ligeia” is mainly associated with loss, the one portrayed in “Usher” is connected to absence: abstract, unspeakable, and difficult to pin down, since it has no apparent or specific cause. In this regard, Brian Norman’s notion of “historical

uncanny,” which he applies to the analysis of this tale, is worth quoting, since it portrays the present as haunted and disrupted by the past: “The historical uncanny is a disquieting feeling that the past is not passed. . . . It arises when temporal boundaries are breached The historical uncanny can be provoked by not-so-welcome reminders that what we consign to a bygone era—in this case, caste and blood-borne privilege—remains alive (and wailing!) today, signs of an era to which we resist returning and yet are ineluctably drawn.”³⁶ In Norman’s reading of “Usher,” the uncanniness of the text is related to the breach between “the new American nation and the old world”: the Ushers are cut off from national time, they have become “anachronisms,” “frail, decaying relics.”³⁷ His interpretation of the story points not only to the temporal disruption inherent in trauma—the intrusion of the past in the present—but especially to the decisive role of history: as Caruth notes, trauma “is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history.”³⁸ It is significant, however, that “Usher” lacks concrete references to country, place, and time: the narrator only refers to the isolation of the setting (“a singularly, dreary track of country,” 231), to the Ushers’ “very ancient family,” and to “the long lapse of centuries” passed, which manifests itself in the “excessive antiquity” of the building: the “discoloration of ages had been great,” the narrator remarks (232–33). Therefore, the lack of a specific geographical and historical background only contributes to pointing out the unreadability of the Ushers’ past and the enigmatic core of their malady: in short, the “conflation of absence and loss” that characterizes structural trauma.³⁹

On the other hand, although many critics have referred to incest (a typical Gothic convention), or the fear of incest, as the key to the tale, taking this repeatedly quoted phrase as a basis—“sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them” (240)—the truth is that its words prove self-reflexive rather than explanatory, and in the end the text does not offer any reason for the prison-like situation of the protagonists, the malignant atmosphere of the setting, Madeline’s premature burial, or the family evil that the Ushers reproduce and inherit: it only highlights its own cryptic nature, gesturing toward a traumatic past that eludes representation.

In the end, the analysis of trauma and the uncanny in “Ligeia” and “Usher” raises questions (which uncannily duplicate the narrators’ queries: “What was it . . . which lay far within the pupils of my beloved?”; “what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?”), rather than answers, and emphasizes the epistemological limits inherent in both notions. If the sense of the uncanny is “an experience of limits” that especially characterizes “the whole of Poe’s *oeuvre*,” as Todorov argues, its liminality ties

in with trauma's disruption of boundaries;⁴⁰ if "the uncanny is destined to elude mastery," trauma involves "a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time," as these tales exemplify.⁴¹ Thus the history that these texts portray is mainly constituted not by the inscription of the past, but by the erasure of its traces.

In an original fashion, Poe explored the relationship between trauma and the uncanny many years before these concepts entered the realm of psychoanalysis and critical theory. Both "Ligeia" and "Usher" convey the desire to escape the pattern of repetition, transcend melancholia, and reach "the most archaic place of absolute commencement" that beckons from the ruins of the past. However, the search for origins results in failure, since in these tales memory is not only unstable and tricky but also self-erasing, like the fragmented identity of their protagonists. The excavations into the past do not provide a new historical security, but only an "overhang" graphically represented by the return of Ligeia and Madeline from the tomb: they are made visible, but their uncanny apparition fails to unveil the core of trauma that they catachrestically personify.⁴² Their figures, however, unambiguously embody the radical intensity of trauma, the attempt to return that instead departs.

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Notes

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1. Well-known interpretations of "Ligeia" discuss the story as a tale of vampirism: see D. H. Lawrence, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1971), 70–88; Allen Tate, "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), 38–50; as a tale "not of supernatural, but rather of entirely natural, though highly phrenetic, psychological phenomena," which portrays the narrator's madness and hallucination: Roy P. Basler, "The Interpretation of 'Ligeia,'" in *Poe*, ed. Regan, 51–63; as the clash between German Transcendentalism and "an impoverished English Romanticism," which conveys burlesque and satiric features: Clark Griffith, "Poe's 'Ligeia' and

the English Romantics,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe’s Tales*, ed. William L. Howarth (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), 63–72; as “the dreaming soul’s gradual emancipation from earthly attachments,” in which Ligeia stands for heavenly beauty: Richard Wilbur, “The House of Poe,” in *Poe*, ed. Regan, 98–120; as “the definitive projection of Poe’s tortured thinking about women”: J. Gerald Kennedy, “Poe, ‘Ligeia,’ and the Problem of Dying Women,” in *New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113–29; as an example of Poe’s racialized Gothicism: Joan Dayan, “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves,” in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 179–209; Leland S. Person, “Poe’s Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales,” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205–24; as a parody of domestic values and the Angel in the House ideology: Marita Nadal, “‘The Death of a Beautiful Woman Is, Unquestionably, the Most Poetical Topic in the World’: Poetic and Parodic Treatment of Women in Poe’s *Tales*,” in *Gender, Ideology: Essays on Theory, Fiction and Film*, ed. Chantal Cornut Gentile and Angel García Landa (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 151–63; Leland S. Person, “Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions,” in *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–65.

“Usher” has been analyzed as a tale of vampirism and incest: Lawrence, “Edgar Allan Poe”; Tate, “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe”; as a psychic conflict between Life-Reason and Death-Madness: Darrel Abel, “A Key to the House of Usher,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1949): 176–85; as a clash between the will to live (Madeline) and the death wish (Roderick): Leo Spitzer, “A Reinterpretation of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” *Comparative Literature* 4 (Fall 1952): 351–63; as a unity-radiation-diffusion-return-to-unity process discussed in Poe’s *Eureka*: Maurice Beebe, “The Universe of Roderick Usher,” in *Poe*, ed. Regan, 121–33; as a journey into the depths of the self: the House of Usher is, allegorically, the physical body of Roderick, and its interior, his visionary mind: Wilbur, “House of Poe”; as a portrayal of “febrile miasma” and its effects on the human mind and body: I. A. Walker, “The ‘Legitimate’ Sources of Terror in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe’s Tales*, ed. Howarth, 47–54; as a house of mirrors that reflects Poe’s emphasis on structure and his concerns as a builder of literature: Harriet Hustis, “‘Reading Encrypted but Persistent’: The Gothic of Reading and Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” in *Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2006), 111–28; Scott Peeples, “Poe’s ‘Constructiveness’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 178–90.

2. Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

3. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 80.

4. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 96. Further references to this volume are noted parenthetically.

5. Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 90–91.

6. Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 9.

7. Caruth, “Introduction,” 5.

8. David Punter and Elisabeth Bronfen, “Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical,” in *The Gothic: Essays and Studies, 2001*, ed. Fred Botting (Cambridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 12–16.

9. David Punter, "The Uncanny," in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEnvoy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 91.
11. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Art and Literature*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library 14 (New York: Penguin, 1990), 340.
12. Punter, "The Uncanny," 130.
13. Caruth, "Introduction," 8.
14. Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), xi, 78–80.
15. *Ibid.*, xi.
16. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 13.
17. Caruth, "Introduction," 4–5.
18. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1982), 666. Further references to this volume are noted parenthetically.
19. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library 11 (New York: Penguin, 1984), 252.
20. Maria Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse," in *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1 of *Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 114.
21. Caruth, *Literature*, 15.
22. "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*. . . . Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 39, 58.
23. Roth, *Memory*, xix, 90–91.
24. In "The Face of the Tenant," Eric Savoy discusses the characteristics of American Gothic, emphasizing its "allegorical translucency" and the use of prosopopoeia, "the master trope of gothic's allegorical turn," which in its attempt to personify the abstract generates epistemological disruptions, producing a gap between reference and representation. Eric Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic," in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 3–19. This instability of signification echoes Anne Williams's description of the uncanny, something like "the radioactive energy given off when the atom of signifier and signified is split." See Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 72.
25. Freud, "The Uncanny," 357.
26. David Punter, "Identification and Gender: The Law of Ligeia," in *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 119.
27. J. Gerald Kennedy, "Poe, 'Ligeia,' and the Problem of Dying Women," in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 126–27.
28. This uncanny pattern of murder, death, and duplication has also been portrayed in well-known works such as Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte* and Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo*.

29. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1992), 65.

30. Caruth, *Literature*, 15.

31. Quoted in Paul Crosthwaite's *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 43.

32. Joseph Hillis Miller, *Hawthorne and History* (Cambridge, U.K.: Blackwell, 1991), 94.

33. Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*, 80.

34. Note that the name "Madeline" evokes the idea of madness and also malady. The former pronunciation of this name was identical with that of the word "maudlin," an adjective that describes a mixture of sentiment and sadness.

35. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida discusses the paradoxical figure of the specter, its centrality and pervasive influence in contemporary history. Derrida argues that the trope of the ghost "is not just one figure among others. It is perhaps the hidden figure of all figures": it throws time out of joint, producing a "radical untimeliness" that cannot be reversed. In his approach, ontology becomes hauntology, since to be is to be haunted by an Other. Significantly, these arguments tie in with the spectrality of Poe's Gothic and its traumatic otherness. As Derrida puts it, "A ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 150, 123.

36. Brian Norman, "Dead Woman Wailing: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" in *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 31.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Caruth, "Introduction," 5.

39. In his essay Brian Norman draws from Duncan Faherty's analysis of the social terror in "Usher." Faherty reads "Usher" and "Ligeia" in the light of the society and culture of Poe's time. In this approach, both tales are "emblematic of Jacksonian uncertainties": thus the terror of "Usher" "resides in its depiction of the collapse of patrician privilege and power"; the aristocracy that the Ushers represent becomes "eclipsed by Jackson's iconoclastic remaking of the social order" and "the forces of unbridled change." With regard to "Ligeia," Faherty points out "the insecurity of identity during the Jacksonian era," "the instability of the color line," and the dangers of social mobility, which result in "the incessant horrors of indeterminacy" and the dissolution of identity. Duncan Faherty, "'Legitimate Sources' and 'Legitimate Results': Surveying the Social Terror of 'Usher' and 'Ligeia,'" in *Approaches to Teaching Poe's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Tony Magistrale (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008), 39-47.

40. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 48.

41. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2003), 15; Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*, 15.

42. In *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Paul de Man notes, "To make the invisible visible is uncanny" (49); in "The Uncanny," Freud quotes Schelling's definition of this concept: "'Unheimlich' is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light" (345).