

S. J. Iliopoulos and William Schultz

«THE OTHER LIFE»: NOTES ON POE'S AND JAMES'S MEN OF
IMAGINATION

USHER.	A malady.	FRIEND.	Madness!
	No, not madness.		
	More an ability		
	to see beyond		
	madness....		

Steven Berkoff, *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Proportions and values were upside down, ... the modern, the monstrous, the famous things ... were exactly his sources of dismay.

Henry James, «The Jolly Corner»

It was for... the aesthetic, fairly in fact for the cryptic, that he cared.

Henry James, *The Sense of the Past*

The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only....

E. A. Poe, «Berenice»

I

If literature provides us with a magic mirror for human nature, can we ever escape the fascination of its particular reflections? Or, can the mirroring itself become visible in the mirror? Literature is often explicitly about literature, and this self-reflection can help to explain the influence of Poe on James. Both writers create «Men of Imagination» in a twofold sense: these characters *have* literary or artistic imagination themselves; and equally they *belong* to the authors' psyches as projections of their own inner literary imaginations — like individual moving mirrors partially reflecting the literary process back to the author as a condition of its development, a kind of «feedback mechanism» in the contemporary

technological field of cybernetics. Poe influences James by unwittingly providing models of «Men of Imagination,» both as characters and as artist-heroes. Understanding the nature of this influence contributes to the larger question of the nature of literature as a mirror.

II

According to Gordon and Tate, Poe's Usher «becomes the prototype of the ... Jamesian hero who cannot function in the ordinary world.»¹ In Poe's and James's fiction many characters seek to retire from the ordinary world, in which they cannot or do not want to function, in order to pursue their peculiar interests — to cultivate their «inner sense,» as James would say.²

Some of Poe's and James's Men of Imagination can retire from the ordinary workaday world with its «beastly rent-values» because they can afford it. In Poe's «The Domain of Arnheim» Ellison enters into possession «as the heir of his ancestor Seabright, of a fortune of *four hundred and fifty millions of dollars.*»³ Though prosperity in the beastly «mere worldly sense» enables Ellison to live in another world, where the «worldly» sense does not make much sense, he does not use the word prosperity in its «mere worldly sense.» This attitude towards the question of money in relation to higher values was expressed well by John Goode: «the best way to escape the Balzacian limitation ... is to have so much money that you no longer have to think about it.»⁴ Money as an object of worship in «Apalachia» may be odious in itself but not when used with imagination by perfectionists like Ellison, by poets in the «widest and noblest sense» of the word.⁵

1. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of «The Fall of the House of Usher,»* ed. Thomas Woodson (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 28.

2. In this sense they are not just Men but Heroes of the Imagination. A future actual case is James Joyce who in «Araby» writes about a young male character seeking to leave his environment and the money-making everyday world for what became in a future work *A Portrait of the Artist*: «I could not call my wandering thoughts together. I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child's play, ugly monotonous child's play.» *The Essential James Joyce*, ed. Harry Levin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), p. 371. Joyce did leave Ireland for art's sake.

3. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. H. Ingram (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1883), vol. 1, p. 305.

4. «The Pervasive Mystery of Style,» in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 255.

5. According to James, «the imagination ... may be employed up to a certain point in inventing uses for money; but its office beyond that point is ... to make us forget that anything so odious exists.» *Notes on Novelists, with some other notes* (London, 1914), p. 91, quoted in

Unlike Poe, who did not sense a contradiction in this attitude towards the money-making world, James makes his characters more aware of a possible dissemblance. In «The Jolly Corner», for example, Spencer Brydon has a main capital coming from rents. But «there were values other than the beastly rent-values» for Brydon, «... and in short, in short — ! But it was thus Miss Staverton took him up. 'In short you're to make so good a thing of your sky-scraper that ... you can afford for a while to be sentimental here!」⁶ Not all of James's estranged Men of Imagination enjoy the wealth of Spencer Brydon (or of Ralph Pendrel in *The Sense of the Past*). In «The Madonna of the Future» Theobald, who defies «the common social ties» and the mercenary values, is finally defeated by the «cats and monkeys» of this world: «Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats; all human life is there!»

Poe's Men of Imagination are against the world *in toto*: they feel estranged as if by the destiny of their peculiar mental state. Usher, who struggles to overcome «an excessive nervous agitation» and makes Antonin Artaud feel that he is «not alone in the world,»⁷ is Poe's estranged hero-artist *par excellence*. Ellison, whose imagination carries him to the borders of surrealism, steps into an artificial paradise because of «the present darkness and madness» or the even more vague «wretchedness of mankind.»⁸ These complaints echo in James's fiction, though less loudly; it is as if the estrangement is useful for art — chosen rather than forced by «exterior» controlling forces, voices, demons, fiends, evil eyes. In Theobald's words: «the days of illumination are gone; visions are rare; we have to look long to see them.»⁹ So Theobald escapes for a purpose. In this «chilling blast of scepticism,» as the narrator in «The Madonna of the Future» describes the intellectual climate which opposes Theobald's artistic-religious fervour, mechanistic thought and the omnipotence of reason tend to blast the rare buds of intuition and inspiration: «We live in the evening of time!» is Theobald's motto and final verdict. Also, Theobald points, like Poe, at Americanism:¹⁰ «'We [Americans] are the disinherited

Goode, *The Air of Reality*, p. 254.

6. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962-64), vol. 12, p. 200.

7. See Steven Berkoff, «Introduction to Poe and Performance,» in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (London: John Calder, 1977), p. 84: «Such an affinity as Artaud felt existed between himself and Roderick Usher made him feel that he was not alone in the world ... since he could compare his suffering with that of the fascinating Mr. Usher. 'My life is that of Mr. Usher.... The soul of my nerves is disease within and I suffer from this.... I have experienced it, I think, as Roderick Usher had.'»

8. Other more concrete complaints occur in «Mellonta Tauta,» «Philosophy of Furniture,» and *Eureka*.

9. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 3, p. 21.

10. Americans are a race of «time-servers and money-lovers,» says Poe. See *The Works*

of Art!' he cried. 'We are condemned to be superficial!... The soil of American perception is a poor little barren, artificial deposit.... We lack the deeper sense. We have neither taste, nor tact'.¹¹ And James adds a finishing touch of bitterness: Mrs. Coventry wears on her bosom «a huge miniature copy of the Madonna della Segiolla».¹² And so Poe's and James's Men of Imagination step into «the other, the real, the waiting life.»

III

The «other» life makes one «queer,» an «inward sort.» In Poe's work Ellison pursues «the chimera of all perfectionists»; Usher communes with his «mansion of gloom»; the passionate painter in the Browningsque «Oval Portrait» «murders» his wife for «art's sake.» Similar to Poe's «other» life, James's Pendrel experiences a Yeatsian «backward vision» and the «ineffaceable life» within the walls of his house; Theobald is possessed with the *magnum opus* archetype. Conte Valerio,¹³ «a statue of the Decadence,» is haunted by the old gods. Behind the variety of these experiences lurks the *angst* of the nineteenth century, the Jamesian *malaise*, inherited (with mutations) from Poe: «the sensation that sweeps over one haunted by the world, that comes as one haunts oneself, or... as one becomes the haunter of others.»¹⁴

In both authors' fiction the Men of Imagination often engage in some «cryptic» literary or artistic activity. Poe's Usher composes «wild fantasias,» and Ellison conceives a «surrealistic» art-environment. In James's case the passage from Pendrel's little book reads like a quotation from the essay of a fanatical spiritualist; Theobald attempts to «paint an idea.»¹⁵ The estrangement and the isolation of these artist-heroes appears through an old house or a mansion that resembles a «face»: it is a «solid» architectural expression of a larger and «inner» reality. As in Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher,» or in Steven Berkoff's masterly Artaudian adaptation of Poe's tale, in James's fiction houses convey

of Edgar Allan Poe, vol. 3, p. 281.

11. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 3, pp. 14-25.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

13. In «The Last of the Valerii.»

14. Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (London and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972, pp. 134-35. The narrator in James's *Sacred Fount* becomes the haunter of others by employing the Dupinesque principle: «identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent,» the principle of «psychological evidence.» See *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 1, p. 504. See also Leon Edel's Introduction to *The Sacred Fount* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), p. 8. Leon Edel refers to Sherlock Holmes, but Poe's Dupin is the most likely prototype.

visual images of the «inner,» the «deeper» sequence of events. (See, for example, «The Ghostly Rental,» «The Jolly Corner,» and the fantasia entitled *The Sense of the Past*.)¹⁶

IV

Despite the many similarities and evident influence, a key difference emerges between the approaches to these leitmotifs by Poe and James. Poe does not let his characters escape from their labyrinthine imagination whose corridors turn in upon themselves or extend into a frightening, Escherian infinity. In «William Wilson» the «quaint» old building — «exquisitely romantic,» as the author of «The Last of the Valerii» would say — has its «innumerable, inconceivable» lateral branches. This estrangement is greater than in Spencer Brydon's house with its «more intricate upper rooms.» The Jamesian corridors often lead into another consciousness: James was planning Pendrel's rescue «on this side of time» by Aurora; Alice Staverton or even Aurora Coyne wait at the end of the long corridor. Only in this way can the Jamesian recluse be rescued from its «vaults and cellars and horrible underground passages»;¹⁷ only in this way can it be exorcized of its Poesque / existentialist *angoissé* and of its fear of desolation — the fear of «a race of visionaries.»

Certainly Poe's estranged Men of Imagination (such as Usher, Ellison, Egaeus, and the «passionate, and wild, and moody» painter in «The Oval Portrait») are forbearers of James's eccentrics, inquisitive observers, «rare young men,» «magnificent geniuses,» or obscure monomaniacs whose lives are «ruled by pale ghosts» and «sovereign presences» (heroes like Theobald, Brydon, Conte Valerio, Pendrel).

And yet James, in a review of *Our Mutual Friend*, claims that «Dickens's characters [are] so particular that they [have] no general significance.»¹⁸ They «have nothing in common with mankind at large. What a world were

15. See Edgar Allan Poe, «The Fall of the House of Usher,» *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 208: «If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher.»

16. See also James's description of his «most appalling yet most admirable nightmare,» the Galerie d'Apollon dream, in Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. F. W. Dupee (London: Criterion, 1956), pp. 196-97.

17. See D. H. Lawrence, «Edgar Allan Poe,» in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), pp. 87-88.

18. See John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978), p. 29: «But Gissing,» Goode says, «sees that this particularity in itself is a function of their typicality.... 'Precisely because his books are rich in extravagances of human nature is Dickens so true a chronicler of his day and generation,» says Gissing.

this world if the world of *Our Mutual Friend* were an honest reflection of it! But a community of eccentrics is impossible.»¹⁹ But isn't the world of Poe's fiction «a community of eccentrics»? Certainly, works such as *The Ivory Tower*, which James did not live to finish, are close to «mankind» and to «contemporary realities.» But «where are those exemplars of sound humanity»²⁰ in some of James's most challenging and intriguing works such as the «maddening» *Sacred Fount* where the narrator's return to the «enchanted castles» of his youth permits the Poesque subordination of the «evidential» to the «phantasmagoric»?

V

In this way Poe has influence on James: it is as if Poe is locked up in some subterranean vault of the Jamesian House of Fiction despite its architect's express intentions.²¹ Unlike Poe's more estranged, «enclosed» and isolated hero-artists, James's Men of Imagination interact with their social environment: they often use «the modern, the monstrous» things to the extent that they will help them enjoy or create an artistic world, «the other, the real, the waiting life.» «The other life» for James partakes more of its opposite.²² Or, in Paul B. Armstrong's crypto - Yeatsian/Jungian language, «the unlive life always haunts the life we have lived as the ghost embodying the possibilities we have not selected.»²³

19. *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira (London: Peregrine, 1968), p. 33.

20. *Ibid.*

21. A much-quoted passage from the essay on Baudelaire sounds dismissive indeed. See James, «Charles Baudelaire,» *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 56: «It seems to us that to take [Poe] with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection.»

22. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), vol. 2, p. 217: «The I creates for itself a kind of opposite in its own products... and it can contemplate itself only in this kind of projection.»

23. *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 107. This statement was made in reference to «The Jolly Corner.»

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

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Σε προηγούμενο δημοσίευσμά μας στην *Παρουσία* (Τόμος Η', 1992, σσ. 245-50) επισημάναμε το γενικά παραμελημένο από τη σύγχρονη κριτική λογοτεχνικό χρέος του Henry James στον Edgar Allan Poe με αναφορά στα μυθιστορήματα *The Golden Bowl* και *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Στο παρόν κείμενο εξετάζουμε μια άλλη — σημαντικότατη — πτυχή του χρέους αυτού: την πνευματική συγγένεια των μοναχικών, μονομανών, «υπαρξιακών» τους ηρώων - καλλιτεχνών που δεν μπορούν να λειτουργήσουν στον κόσμο των «φυσιολογικών» ανθρώπων. Με αναφορές στον Antonin Artaud και τον Steven Berkoff, συγκρίνουμε τους «Ηρωες της Φαντασίας» των Poe και James σε έργα όπως: «The Domain of Arnheim,» «The Oval Portrait,» «The Fall of the House of Usher,» «William Wilson,» «The Jolly Corner,» «The Madonna of the Future,» «The Last of the Valerii,» *The Sacred Fount*, *The Sense of the Past*, σχετικά με τη στάση των ηρώων απέναντι στον υλικό πλούτο, και την προσμονή μιας «άλλης,» «αυθεντικής» ζωής.