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## The Hidden God and the Abjected Woman in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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# THE HIDDEN GOD AND THE ABJECTED WOMAN IN "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

by DIANE LONG HOEVELER

D. H. Lawrence once observed, "Poe is rather a scientist than an artist" (Lawrence 65). According to Lawrence, Poe believed there was a substratum that existed beneath all the ornamentation, the distractions that Culture has conspired to erect to conceal the "truth." Getting at this buried body of knowledge constitutes the excavation work that we as readers undertake when we begin to delve beneath the artifice that Poe has spun so deceptively for our amusement. But at the core of Poe's deep truth, according to Lawrence, is Madeline, "the mystery of the recognition of *otherness*" (76), as well as its concomitant destructive compulsion: "To try to *know* any living being is to try to suck the life out of that being" (70). But if Lawrence would have the reader getting at some ultimate truth, it is perhaps more accurate to claim that Poe's text explores what Derrida has called the "trace." In this more radically discontinuous model, Derrida posits the trace as the basis of a "chain" of history, a history whose only logic is repetition and change, iteration and alteration working together to produce a "monumental, stratified, contradictory" history (Derrida 57). And such a notion of history corresponds to the textuality that emerges from Poe's tale.

For Derrida, there is no ultimate truth, no teleology to be discovered, only equally meaningful or meaningless layers, constructions around a vacuous core. But discovering "cores" constitutes the great seductive lure of reading Poe. We are offered, or so we think, a number of clues that will take us down into the secret chamber, the tomb of Madeline, the heart of meaning that must exist somewhere within the confines of the text. And so we follow any lead Poe drops in front of us, follow it to blind passages and discover, alas, only our own mirror image staring back at us in mockery.

## I

Let's begin with the bait. When Roderick Usher becomes a reader of texts, he, in a gesture that symbolically unites him with Poe's (post)modern critics, takes up a particularly intriguing volume: "An exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a

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forgotten church—the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorus Ecclesiae Maguntinae*” (409). This volume, Roderick’s “chiefest delight,” consists of the orthodox prayer service for the burial of the dead from the cathedral in Mainz, Germany. Surely Poe intends his reader to ask, why is such a volume Roderick’s favorite book? Why does he find pleasure, “delight,” in reading such a book? This strange detail surely must provide some clue, some significant fact about not simply Roderick Usher’s reading tastes, but about the text’s deep structure and meaning. And surely such a crucial clue has been either ignored, taken at face value, or truly misread by the critics who have gone before one. Consider, for instance, Clive Bloom, who has recently claimed that the book does not exist at all, and that Poe’s purpose in listing the volume, along with the others specifically named in the text, is to create “the mirror image of a real library with books that do not permit themselves to be read simply because they do not exist” (Bloom 113). What is ignored in his comments is not simply the fact that the book indeed *does* exist and that Poe knew it existed.<sup>1</sup> The more important factor has to be the book’s extreme specificity. With a little research the reader discovers that the *Vigiliae Mortuorum* is probably one of the rarest books in existence; in fact, as Thomas Mabbott states, there are probably only two or three copies of the book in the world and they have been seen by only a select handful of bibliophiles (see Poe, CW 421).

Why did Poe select this particular volume, then, as Roderick’s favorite book? Surely this question must be posed and answered satisfactorily. Mabbott claimed (rather lamely) that its rarity would have been sufficient to intrigue Poe, and cause him to use the book to encode Usher’s eccentric and rarefied tastes (7). But why did Poe have the narrator claim that the *Vigil* described a “wild ritual”? Did Poe want his readers to think that Roderick was spending his time reading up on the “Black Mass” (Kendall 452) in order to “exorcise a vampire from Madeline’s body” (Bailey 458)? These interpretations have been proffered by critics as reasonable explanations. But all of them are either too prosaic or too bizarre for this critic’s taste. There must be a hidden meaning implicit in the use of the book. Read on, if you too are prone to such obsessions.

With a good deal of fairly arcane research, one can construct an interpretation, speculative to be sure, that accounts for the text’s presence within the larger text. This interpretation begins by claiming that the *Vigiliae Mortuorum* tropes a religious history and ideology that have long been buried beneath the more extravagant gothic surface of both its own

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<sup>1</sup>Bloom more helpfully suggests that the “‘thing’ which invades Usher’s psyche is his relationship to the femininity of his sister. Usher’s library is Usher’s psyche is Usher’s sister is Usher himself” (113).

text and the text of "The Fall," both of which seem to be written in "Gothic." Surely the reference to the book conveys the specifically discursive nature of history in the text. As Derrida or Foucault among others have taught us, history is not teleological in nature, but simply a series of random, disconnected discursive acts (see Foucault 12-14). We are, then, as readers of Poe's tale in the same position of Roderick reading the *Vigil*. We also never experience the present in any simple sense, but are continuously in a process of reinscribing the traces of past discourses on our present reading. That is, the Mainz volume exists as a verbal artifact of the Catholic cathedral of Mainz, which in its turn stands as an architectural artifact, troping the triumph of Christianity. But the cathedral is, in fact, built on the archeological ruins of an earlier shrine to the Celtic god Mogon, a pagan god who gave his name not only to the city of Mainz but, ironically, to the major site of Christian worship in the heart of Germany (see Salisbury, Dumezil, Wald). What is truly buried in Poe's text, says this reader, is the discursive meaning of this bit of *bricolage*, this forgotten Celtic god who was first replaced by Apollo, a Roman god, and finally by Christ, the Christian manifestation of a religious ideology that Poe critiques throughout his tale.<sup>2</sup>

Mogon and his consort/sister Mogontia stand as the *bricolage*, the cultural residue that Roderick meditates on as one means of understanding, making real his relation to his own sister. In reading an ostensibly Christian text built on the edifice of Celtic and Roman myth, Roderick meditates on Mogon as a manifestation of what Lévi-Strauss labeled "untamed thought," as an expression of the male's confrontation with the female as Cultural Other (16-36). In the relation of Roderick and his twin sister, Madeline, Poe meant to critique not only the notion of some ultimate "truth" beneath the layers of historical constructs, but also the persistent religious impulse that had created Mogon and his consort/sister, Mogontia, as well as the later Apollo Grannus and his partner Sirona, and, finally, Christ and his mother Mary. By depicting history and the religious impulse as a continuously shifting need to invent fantastic beings, projections of our own grandiose egos, Poe suggests that both history and religion can only be understood primarily as discourse

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<sup>2</sup>A helpful discussion of the Visigothic Church and its assimilation of both the earlier Celtic and Roman religions can be found in Salisbury's *Iberian Popular Religion*. My rather sweeping historical statements must be set within the larger question of comparative mythological and religious history, largely charted by the work of Georges Dumezil. For a valuable and fairly technical survey of the theoretical issues involved in Celtic and Indo-European religions, see the Introductions of C. Scott Littleton and Udo Strutynski to Dumezil's *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ix-xlvi; and Wald.

systems, dialogical constructs that sacrifice male strength and creativity to the female-embodied powers of life and death, in other words, the cyclical nature of generation. In his fictional creation of Roderick and Madeline, Poe enacts the role of *bricoleur*, spinning out of his head a male/female couple who tenuously exist at the end of a cultural cycle, "gods" who can no longer believe in themselves because they understand the fictional nature of both history and religion. Consequently, like their creator, they no longer have the will or desire to sustain themselves. They have the energy only to self-destruct.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" can be said to express in extremely cryptic and encoded fashion Poe's sense of frustration and anger toward the female, toward the triumph of the body, the victory of the biological over the intellectual. But another crucial component in Roderick's (and Poe's?) fantasy is the dream of a purely masculine universe, a fortress where males engage in discourse without the intrusion of the female in any form—living or dead: "Us" versus "her": "Us/her." Roderick's fantasy of the purely masculine mind is subverted, however, by his compulsion to create a self-projected fantasy of a female double. And such a compulsion, Poe implies, informs all institutionalized religions as we have known them.

To prove that Poe purposely chose a text that would reverberate throughout his own text, we must begin by asserting that Poe actually knew the meaning(s) of the word "Maguntinae." Such a claim is not as frivolous as one might suppose. One possible source of information, suggested by Mabbott, was through Poe's friend William Gowans, who was a sort of connoisseur of incunabula (see Poe, CW 421). Another possibility is that Poe stumbled on the information in the course of his own reading in the British popular press, which was particularly rife with articles on Celtomania (Allen 209). A third (although admittedly remote) possibility is that Poe might have considered the existence of the *Vigil* as connected in some way with the world-view he had encountered in his readings in Hermetic and Kabbalistic works (see Levi St. Armand 4). Whatever the route, it seems statistically unlikely that Poe would have randomly selected for his use a text that had at its core a reference to a buried pagan god and his twin sister/consort. By sketching the meaning and history of the names "Maguntinae" or "Mogontium," we can suggest that Poe knew and chose the volume specifically for its convoluted historical, sexual, and religious connotations.<sup>3</sup>

John Rhys has pointed out that the words "Mogounus" and "Monuntiacum," well-known place-names, and their shorter forms,

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of all variations on the original name "Maguntina" and its basis for the founding of Mainz and its cathedral, see *Paulys Real-Encyclopadie der Classischer Altertums-Wissenschaft*.

"Moguntia" or "Mogontia," are all sources for the modern place-names of the French Mayence and the German Mainz. All of these words mean "to increase," "to make great" (22-23). The Celtic god who bore this name, then, was, along with his consort Mogontia, an ancient fertility god/goddess, a masculine/feminine source of life, a manifestation of a religious ideology that posited the male as the source of wealth and power, "might and main," and the female as the embodiment of fertility, healing, and the forces of life and death (see De Vries 73, Le Roux 2-3, *Paulys* 2419-22). We can briefly recall here that Roderick is specifically described as the last "of the ancient race of the Ushers," a family that never put forth collateral branches due to its incestuous inbreeding. Such an image suggests sterility, a man who has cut himself off not only from generation, but from the feminine sources of life that are embodied in his distanced/"dead" sister.

Statues of and inscriptions to Mogon and Mogontia were later effortlessly appropriated by the adherents of the Roman god Apollo Grannus and his consort Sirona, confirming the power of the basic religious ideology (see Dillon and Chadwick 14, 153). In both instances the combination of god/goddess tropes the object of worship as a fantasized combination of male strength with female fertility. Apollo Grannus took over numerous worship sites throughout the Celtic realm, but this should not obscure the fact that he and Sirona were, like Mogon and Mogontia, typically associated with fertility and healing (see Green 37, Davidson 121). In contrast to these female fertility goddesses, however, Madeline is a particularly sterile, empty woman. She never speaks in the text, and through her silence she quite literally tropes the woman as textual absence, a sort of non-signifying black-hole of anti-meaning. No longer an object of worship, she is simply an object, a commodity to be consumed by her creator, the masculine psyche.

The original shrines to Mogon and Mogontia, first traced out of existence by Apollo and Sirona, the objects of worship for the next wave of invaders, were next traced over as sites of worship for Christ and Mary, the fertility god/goddess of the next influx. Poe's cynicism about such "worship" can be discerned through his invocation of the Mainz prayer service, a "book for the dead." Religion, smiles Poe, is a panacea for those afraid of life and its challenges—people, that is, like Roderick Usher. Or, perhaps we can say, with considerably more paranoia, that Poe implies something even more sinister—that religions function to institutionalize female power and status. According to this fantasy, women, as Blake made clear throughout his poetry, use religion in their arsenal to subject and sexually oppress men, their innocent victims. Such a male-created ideology stands, of course, as a complete reversal of the realities for

women living under the constraints of patriarchal religions. If men can convince themselves that religion actually elevates the power of women, rather than the reverse, they can attack religion while absolving themselves of its hegemony over women.

Poe's use of the buried image of Mogon is a manifestation of "intertextuality" in Kristeva's sense, or polyphony/heteroglossia/the "dialogical" in Bakhtin's use of those terms. Both stylistic devices, using as they do the multiple voices of other texts, other historical fantasy figures, function to introduce Roderick as a species of the Abject Hero. The tale he enacts reads as an *agon*. As Michael Bernstein has noted, the dialogic quality of the Abject Hero's speech and thought is intensified by the presence of a multitude of other characters, including the reader, as counterpoints to the self-justifying hero. Bernstein observes about the Abject Hero: "what leads to the increasing shrillness of the character . . . is that the possibility for an explicitly thematized dialogical relationship with earlier texts in the same tradition increases in exact proportion to the historical development of the *topos*" (Bernstein 300). In other words, Roderick's textual hysteria increases in direct proportion to his self-induced participation in reading the "book of the dead." The options we have as readers include either becoming as hysterical as Roderick, Poe's text, and the *Vigil*, or refusing to participate in the reading game. The act of reading spirals its participants into a sort of gyre from which there is no escape, except into other fictions, other voices, endlessly repeating the same stories in one's head. These fictions all concern the same master narrative: the struggle of the Culture Hero to shape reality into the best imaginings of his desire. We recognize such a struggle as the basis of all religious and artistic ideologies, and we recognize, alas, that Roderick Usher—despite his pretensions—is no Culture Hero, no artist.

## II

I believe we can shed further light on both Poe's purpose and Roderick's peculiar identity as an Abject Hero and frustrated artist by considering Julia Kristeva's description of abjection as a religious/literary/psychic phenomenon. "Abject" means "to cast out," while "abjection" can refer to either the waste products of such casting or to the act of rejection itself. Kristeva defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4); her description of the process of abjection reads like a description of Roderick's relation with Madeline: "'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject" (18). Roderick as hero abjects out of himself his loathing of his own body, his distrust of his

emotions, his "femininity" and thereby creates Madeline, his "twin sister." Madeline functions throughout the text as the abjected woman, the waste product of Roderick's diseased mind, as well as the embodiment of the act of rejection itself. Both her nebulosity and her return—like the repressed—from the dead can be associated with what Kristeva has labeled the peripheral and ambivalent position of woman in the male psyche. And why does woman hold such a position; why is she abjected with such ferocity? Kristeva would claim that it is because of her reproductive capacity. Her body can only remind man of his own mortality, his own origins in the womb as unclean: "Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body" (Kristeva 78-79).

But let's also examine Roderick's mind by considering Kristeva's description of the threatened psyche as "A Fortified Castle." For Kristeva, the psychotic individual in the grip of a phobic hallucination is compelled to construct barriers between subject and object so that where others are concerned

he delegates phantoms, ghosts, 'false cards': a stream of spurious egos that confront undesirable objects. Separation exists, and so does language, even brilliantly at times, with apparently remarkable intellectual realizations. But no current flows—it is a pure and simple splitting, an abyss without any possible means of conveyance between its two edges. No subject, no object: petrification on one side, falsehood on the other. (47)

If this description uncannily resembles Roderick's predicament, so does Kristeva's observation that such persons always experience desire as "desire for an idealized norm, the norm of the Other." But in the course of moving toward such desire, the individual encounters abjection:

Abjection of self: the first approach to a self that would otherwise be walled in. Abjection of others, of the other ('I feel like vomiting the mother') . . . A rape of anality, a stifled aspiration towards an other as prohibited as it is desired—abject. (47)

Roderick's sister Madeline, in other words, functions as that abjected aspect of Roderick's self-loathing ego. He projects out of himself his feminine element as a "twin sister," what in religious ideology is known as the consort, and in traditional psychoanalysis as the fragmented self, the idealized double or alter-ego.



Another intrinsic component of the compulsion that leads to abjection is what Kristeva calls "the religious answer to abjection: defilement, taboo, or sin" (48). It is no coincidence that Madeline is Roderick's sister and thus under the incest taboo. It is also no coincidence that he experiences himself as walled in by a rotting house/body, or that he literally walls his abjected self/his "sister" into a tomb. Madeline is experienced by Roderick as unclean, a perception that she herself accepts and transforms as the vague physical illness that eventually "kills" her. But Madeline functions throughout the fiction as the complete psychic projection of Roderick, the body/feminine he projects, ab-jects, out of himself in disgust. The religious (and psychoanalytic) fantasy of an idyllic dual relationship of male and female—mother-son, father-daughter, brother-sister—is assaulted by Poe's tale, which makes such an ideology out to be a pernicious historical lie, a distortion of the necessary repudiation of the female in the history of both individuals and the larger culture.

Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that Roderick is the archetypal dispossessed male, the victim of his own narcissistic fantasies of the perfect feminine complement, the twin/idealized sister as religious consort. Narcissism exists when there is an ego but no real, ontological object in external relation to it. In his creation of his sister as a projection of himself (his fantasized feminine self), Roderick reveals that he is permanently fixated in the psychic dynamics of the mother-child dyad. Poe resorts to the textualized, buried image of Magon and all of his later religious manifestations in order to suggest that the sacrificial, compulsive, and paranoid aspects of patriarchal religions are simply attempts to ward off the danger and fear of incest, as well as to shore up the defenses of the narcissistic ego under siege. Retreating to his library with his treasured and rare books becomes for Roderick a compulsive act that inscribes his abjection, his complete divorce from the (female) body. His reading functions not simply as a display of his immersion in the world of language, the Symbolic, the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, but more importantly it tropes a purification rite. As we know from anthropologists, purification rites exist in "primitive" societies to separate groups from one another by prohibiting a filthy, defiling element (Kristeva 65). The Christian Church makes much of baptism as a purification rite, with its symbolic rinsing away of original sin, that is, the mother's blood. It would appear that the Usher mansion, inhabiting as it does the fringes of civilization (not to mention sanity) embodies a similar stance toward the female body.

Reading as a particularly male purification rite functions in Poe's fiction, finally, as a nostalgic gesture, a coded reference to those times before women read, before they wrote and actually became competitors

within the literary marketplace. Although this essay focuses closely only on the permutations of meaning and significance in the *Vigil*, it is appropriate to point out that the other volumes specifically mentioned in Roderick's library are all radically masculine documents, not simply in their authorship, but in their attitudes and visions. The fear that is being subverted by his allegiance to a line of male precursors is for Roderick (and Poe?) the fear of the mother's body, and, as Kristeva notes, "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing" (Kristeva 77). That is, one must do everything possible to separate oneself from the fertile and fertilizable feminine body, with its unpleasant and unsettling association with menstrual blood, a particularly unclean object worthy of abjection. The phantasmatic mother of the unconscious, the psychic abyss that the male struggles valiantly to escape, stands, then, as a residual reminder of the Mother Goddess who was only partially displaced by those patriarchal religions that posited instead as objects of worship (read cleanliness) an absent father and a son-figure in the grip of, what else, the mother.

### III

All of this returns us to the hook, the *Vigil*, the book of the dead that Roderick muses over in such ecstasy toward the conclusion of "The Fall." His plan has proceeded smoothly; he has a witness (the naive narrator) to verify his sister's "death." He has a "doctor" (a convenient authority figure) on the scene to certify the seriousness of her "illness." The fantasy of woman has been constructed; she can now be buried. But the return of Madeline from the "dead," her strange immersion into and emergence from the depths of the tomb, complete with blood, represents that moment in the text when the signifier goes out of control. Would it be too extravagant to claim that the "haunting" of the text by Madeline is analogous to the haunting of the buried god Mogon on Apollo and of Apollo on Christ and of Christ on Roderick? That is, those we have buried and displaced emerge from out of the text we call history to claim their rightful status. But such a discursive "haunting" is also finally analogous to the act of reading, the cannibalization that we are compelled to commit as we consume the ideas, the ideologies of the others who have gone before us in our own constructions of meaning.

Roderick is the author of his own madness, just as Poe is the author of Roderick's vision of cultural decay and historical meaninglessness, and just as we are the authors of our own readings. Poe as *bricoleur* can be seen to be conducting a continual metatextual dialogue with Mogon, Apollo, Christ, Roderick—and their female doubles—just as these characters

conduct fictitious dialogues with each other and their readers. And these dialogues constitute what we call literature, what we call "Culture," but what Poe knew was the excavation of overdetermined enigmatic codes. As readers we participate in the fantasy that we are excavating the hidden god Magon, and in doing so we give him meaning, a reified ideological construction that suits our purposes as postmodern critics. But make no mistake: we cannot pretend that such an act has a significance beyond the one that we ascribe to it. Like Poe, like Roderick, we ultimately inhabit the landscape of our own imaginings.

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