

## Roderick Usher and “Mad Trist”

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In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narrator reads a romance named “Mad Trist” by Sir Launcelot Canning to calm Roderick Usher’s agitation. On “Mad Trist,” David Galloway in his *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* comments: “The Mad Trist’ of Sir Launcelot Canning is almost certainly Poe’s own invention” (529). But Poe writes about this romance as if it is a ‘real’ romance, not his invention. According to the narrator, who reads a very ‘well-known’ portion of this romance in “The Fall of the House of Usher” the story is as follows: the hero named Ethelred breaks into the dwelling of the hermit, kills the dragon guarding the gold palace of the hermit and approaching the shield on the wall. The shield drops from the wall to the silver floor making ringing sound. This is all that the reader knows about the story of “Mad Trist.”

The reason Poe invented this romance and quoted this portion of “Mad Trist” is in part very simple. For example, the effect of terror from this quotation can be produced.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the narrator hears just the same sounds as the screaming of the dragon killed by Ethelred, and the metallic sound of the fallen shield, as if they were the real sounds heard by the narrator, when the narrator reads “Mad Trist” to Roderick. Poe, for example, afterwards soon introduces the portion of Ethelred’s killing of the dragon: “Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer” (155).

In “A Reinterpretation of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”, Leo Spitzer, for example, comments about the relationship between the dragon and Ethelred: “Surely ‘the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher’; as she is represented to us in apotheosis of Majesty in death, this female Ethelred returning, bloodstained, as a ‘conqueror’ from *her* battle with the dragon (a battle that broke the enchantment of death), is the true male and last hero of the House of Usher, while her brother has in the end become a figure of passivity whose body is reduced to a trembling mass” (353). Spitzer thinks that he can see the images of Madeline in Ethelred, while he, at the same time, interprets the dragon as a symbol of death and says: “While Roderick hears only the sounds in the Ethelred romance that

correspond to those caused by Madeline, these sounds themselves have another meaning in the story of Madeline. They spell her victory over the dragon of death, whereas Roderick is the embodiment of pure passive sentence; it is as if by the intensity of his feeling he had succeeded in conjuring up her presence and thus broken the spell of death, though in reality it is Madeline who has wrought her own liberation (it is she who has slain the dragon, whose fangs recede from its prey)" (356).

Spitzer's interpretation is, in fact, very interesting. But he never explains the hermit's palace of gold or the fall of the shield on the palace wall. Is it possible to interpret the meaning of "Mad Trist" including these details? That seems possible when the dragon, for example, is interpreted as Roderick Usher himself. From this point of view, "Mad Trist" can be read in its fullest meaning, which will be shown in the following argument.

The sound that the narrator and also Roderick heard was made by his sister Madeline, who had been buried in the vault of the House of Usher. She broke the lid of her tomb and was resurrected. Roderick was sure that she would be resurrected and be returned to him. To hear the sounds from the vault which curiously corresponded with those imaginary sounds in the romance "Mad Trist," Roderick becomes prey to an obsessive terror, although the narrator intends to calm Roderick by reading it.

It seems hardly possible, however, to suppose that Poe invented "Mad Trist," only for the effect of terror. Is it reasonable that he invented in "Mad Trist" those details such as the dragon, Ethelred, the hermit, and the palace of gold, only for the effect of terror? Did he invent them without any implications? It seems impossible to say so, because he writes, for example, in his "Philosophy of Composition": "I select 'The Raven,' as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (482). Just as he writes, in his poems and also in his short stories, it is possible to conclude that the details are interwoven and connected with the 'whole.' Therefore besides the effect of terror, the details of "Mad Trist" should have some innate relationship with "The Fall of the House of Usher." Therefore the detail such as Ethelred's killing the dragon, for example, should be read from this viewpoint.

Supposing that there is a close relationship between "Mad Trist" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," the details in the setting of the former should be related to those of "The Fall of the House of Usher." For example, in "Mad Trist" the dragon guards "a palace of gold, with a floor of silver." On the other hand Roderick and Madeline live in the Gothic mansion which is very old and decaying. Here it should be noted that the archway leading to the vault where Madeline was buried is sheathed with copper which is contrasted with

silver on the floor of the hermit's palace: "It had been used apparently, in remote feudal times, for worst purposes of a donjon-keep, . . . as a portion of its floor and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper" (150). The best example, however, that can suggest the close relationship between the hermit's palace in "Mad Trist" and the House of Usher is Roderick's own poem called "The Haunted Palace."<sup>2</sup> As many critics have pointed out, in this poem "the palace" suggests a man's face or head, which shows, without doubt, Roderick's changes from sanity into insanity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore "the palace" is Roderick himself, and at the same time the House of Usher itself. In this context it should be noted that in the third and fourth line of the first stanza of this poem, Roderick reads "Once a fair and stately palace—/ Radiant palace—reared its head." That is to say, according to his own poem the House of Usher seems to have been the "radiant palace," just like "a palace of gold, with a floor of silver" in "Mad Trist." Therefore it seems possible to conclude that the place where incidents happen in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is closely related to that in "Mad Trist."

Besides the description of the hermit's palace in "Mad Trist," it is notable that Ethelred broke into the hermit's palace at the time of the tempest: "And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and malicious turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, . . ." (154). The situation of weather, tempest, is curiously just the same with that in the night of the climax of "The Fall of the House of Usher," when Madeline was resurrected and returned to Roderick: "I endeavoured to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room . . . of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed" (152). On this night of the tempest, just after the narrator reads the story of "Mad Trist" to Roderick, Madeline was resurrected and Roderick died with her. Is it possible to think that this coincidence of the situation of the weather, and also of the place where the incidents happened, was created by accident or intuition without any implications in them? It seems reasonable to conclude that there exists some relationship between "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Mad Trist."

From this point of view, it seems natural that there are only three characters—Ethelred, the dragon and the hermit—in "Mad Trist," because they are suggestively associated with those characters in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick, Madeline and the narrator.

First of all the dragon in "Mad Trist" may be interpreted as Roderick Usher, although Spitzer interpreted it as Madeline. There are some similarities between the dragon and Ro-

derick. For example the dragon is described as a kind of guardian of the hermit and the palace of gold: “‘But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the malicious hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanour, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver;...’”(154). On the other hand Roderick, as one of the last of the Ushers and also as the only one brother of the lady Madeline, is the last guardian of the House of Usher and his sister: “He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin—to the severe and long-continued illness—indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution—of a tenderly beloved sister—his sole companion for long years—his last and only relative on earth” (144). Therefore it may be possible to read in the dragon “in guard before a palace of gold” the image of Roderick Usher.

Secondly, it should be noted that the dragon is described as not “it,” but “he.” Poe writes in “Mad Trist”: “And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath,...”(155). It seems reasonable from the viewpoint of Roderick’s correspondence with the dragon that the dragon gave up “his” pesty breath.

Thirdly, the terrible appearance of the dragon is associated with that of Roderick. The dragon is described as “a dragon of scaly and prodigious demeanour,” while the narrator says about Roderick’s countenance as follows: “We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feel of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher.’ It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood”(142). Again, the narrator comments: “The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me” (142). The narrator’s feeling of awe toward Roderick seems closely related with Ethelred’s encounter with the “scaly and prodigious” dragon.

Supposing that the dragon is Roderick, who is the hermit? From the viewpoint of the dragon and Roderick in the roles of the guardians, the hermit may be interpreted as Madeline, because it is the hermit and Madeline who are guarded by the guardians, the dragon and Roderick. Although there is very little description about the hermit in “Mad Trist,” but because of it, on the contrary, the hermit resembles Madeline. That is to say, the hermit never appears in the quotations of “Mad Trist,” because the hermit disappeared before Ethelred’s entering the palace. The reader hardly knows about the hermit except that the hermit was “obstinate and malicious.” And this is the same with Madeline in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” There also is very little description about her and it is as if she never

exists on the earth just like the hermit. For example the narrator sees her first on the day he came to the House of Usher: "While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so she was called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared" (144). The second time the narrator sees her is when she was dead and in the coffin: "I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight, (previously to its final interment,) in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (150). The third time he sees her is when she was resurrected and returned to Roderick with blood over her body: "It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame" (157). All through these occasions, Madeline never speaks a word, except "a low moaning cry" (157) when she was dead, falling heavily on her brother Roderick. Her perfect silence in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is parallel to the hermit's.

There still remains, in the end, the problem, who is Ethelred? Supposing that the dragon is Roderick and the hermit is Madeline, it seems that the narrator should play the role of Ethelred. This interpretation may sound strange because it follows that Roderick's death is due to the narrator. The narrator never killed Roderick, although Ethelred killed the dragon in "Mad Trist." There is only one similarity, however, that may justify the interpretation. Ethelred is, without doubt, an "intruder" into the hermit's palace, and the narrator is also an intruder or alien to the unusual world when he first enters the House of Usher: "Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master" (141). Therefore supposing the role of the intruder, it is not very far-fetched to think that he has something to do with the incidents in the House of Usher such as Madeline's death, Roderick's death and the fall of the House of Usher.

Although the narrator never kills Roderick, it is worth noticing that the former is described and contrasted with the latter. From the first stage of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator intends to solve the mystery about the gloomy House of Usher: "What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered" (138). And again, he is almost a man of scientific mind when he says: "These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical

phenomenon not uncommon" (153). The narrator, as a man of reason facing mysterious and dreadful scenes, retains his reason, while Roderick is out of his mind, overwhelmed by fear. Here the narrator's challenge to the mysterious may be compared Ethelred's fight with the dragon.

In the last scene of "Mad Trist," a shield of shining brass on the wall fell on the floor with ringing sound: "And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound" (155—56). This means, without doubt, Ethelred's victory and at the same time the hermit's defeat and the end of the hermit's palace. The fall of the shield directly reminds us of the word "Fall" in the title of "The Fall of the House of Usher." Therefore the story "Mad Trist" suggests beforehand the fall of the House of Usher in a different way. And Ethelred's victory may correspond to the narrator's success, as a man of reason, in finding a refuge elsewhere by getting away from the falling House of Usher.

As is demonstrated above by comparing each character in "Mad Trist" to each in "The Fall of the House of Usher," it seems hardly possible to deny that there is some connection between "Mad Trist" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Although every one of the details in the former may not correspond with every one of those in the latter, and although the correspondences are not always one by one, which may be due to the fact that "Mad Trist" is not completely quoted, "Mad Trist" not only has the effect of terror, but also suggests and foretells—by Ethelred, the dragon and the hermit—the fates of Roderick, Madeline and the narrator, and also the "fall" of the House of Usher. And this indicates the "The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of Poe's works written "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem."

#### Works Cited

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NOTES

1. Vincent Buranelli points out the clever effect of this quotation saying: "After Madeline has been entombed alive for some days, her return to her brother's study is orchestrated by a very clever device, the reading aloud of a legendary tale, the plot of which describes precisely the sounds she makes as she draws near" (78).

2.

I  
 In the greenest of our valleys,  
 By good angels tenanted.  
 Once a fair and stately palace—  
 Radiant palace—reared its head.  
 In the monarch Thought's dominion—  
 It stood there!  
 Never seraph spread a pinion  
 Over fabric half so fair.

II  
 Banners yellow, glorious, golden,  
 On its roof did float and flow;  
 (This—all this—was in the olden  
 Time long ago)  
 And every gentle air that dallied,  
 In that sweet day,  
 Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,  
 A winged odour went away.

III  
 Wanderers in that happy valley  
 Through two luminous windows saw  
 Spirits moving musically  
 To a lute's well-tuned law,  
 Round about a throne, where sitting  
 (Porphyrogene!)  
 In state his glory well befitting,  
 The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV  
 And all with pearl and ruby glowing  
 Was the fair palace door,  
 Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing  
 And sparkling evermore,  
 A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty  
 Was but to sing,  
 In voices of surpassing beauty,  
 The wit and wisdom of their king.

V  
 But evil things, in robes of sorrow,  
 Assailed the monarch's high estate;  
 (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow  
 Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)  
 And, round about his home, the glory  
 That blushed and bloomed  
 Is but a dim-remembered story  
 Of the old time entombed.

VI  
 And travellers now within that valley,  
 Through the red-litten windows, see  
 Vast forms that move fantastically  
 To a discordant melody;  
 While, like a rapid ghastly river,  
 Through the pale door,  
 A hideous throng rush out forever,  
 And laugh—but smile no more.

(147—48)

3. Richard Wilbur, for example, writes: "Let us begin with a familiar poem, 'The Haunted Palace'. The opening stanzas of this poem, as a number of critics have noted, make a point-by-point comparison between a building and the head of a man. The exterior of the palace represents the man's physical features; the interior represents the man's mind engaged in harmonious imaginative thought" (104).