

The Pentagonal Chamber in Poe's "Ligeia"

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Richard Wilbur writes in his essay "The House of Poe" about a circular form in Poe's 'dream room': "Since I have been speaking of geometry — of straight lines and curves and spirals — perhaps the first thing to notice about Poe's dream room is their shape. It has been already said that the enclosures of Poe's tales incline to a curving or circular form"(111). According to Wilbur, this kind of form symbolizes unearthly imagination: "Poe quite explicitly identifies regular angular forms with everyday reason, and the circle, oval, or fluid arabesque with the otherworldly imagination" (111-12).

He illustrates what he means with the examples of the circular ball-room in "Hop-Erog," the Devil's apartment of which corners are rounded into niches in "The Duc de l'Omelette" and the pentagonal bridal chamber in "Ligeia." He also points out some other examples, such as a variation of the circular form or the irregular form of the imperial suite in "The Masque of the Red Death" and the turret room in "The Oval Portrait."

His comments on Poe's "circular" dream room are very convincing. However, in the case of the pentagonal chamber in "Ligeia," it seems that this chamber is not simply a variation of the circular form. The pentagonal form or the pentagon has some innate meaning. It suggests something occult¹ in "Ligeia" and interestingly enough, from the viewpoint of occultism, "Ligeia" has some similarities with Goethe's *Faust*. In this paper, the meaning of this pentagonal chamber will be discussed from this viewpoint through a comparison with *Faust*.

First of all, it is necessary to show the interior decor of this pentagonal chamber by quoting from "Ligeia": "The room lay in a high turret of the castellated abbey, was pentagonal in shape, and of capacious size. Occupying the whole southern face of the pentagon was the sole window—an immense sheet of unbroken glass from Venice—a single pane, and tinted of a leaden hue, so that the rays of either the sun or moon, passing through it, fell with a ghastly lustre on the object within" (119). And at each of the five corners of this pentagonal chamber, a gigantic sarcophagus² from Egypt stood: "In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial sculpture" (119).

Strangely enough, this horrible pentagonal chamber is the bridal chamber for the narrator of "Ligeia" and his second wife Rowena of Tremaine. But it is hardly possible to think this pentagonal bridal chamber as being prepared by the narrator only for their new married

life. For the narrator is still firmly obsessed with images of his beloved wife Ligeia, who is dead. Even soon after his second marriage with Rowena, because of his obsession, it seems that he never loves his new wife: "In halls such as these—in a bridal chamber such as this—I passed, with the Lady of Tremaine, the unhallowed hours of the first month of our marriage—passed them with but little disquietude. That my wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of temper—that she shunned me and loved me little—I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (120).

Probably just as the narrator anticipated, Rowena passed away in this chamber. Her death bed scene is very mysterious and occultic. For example, the narrator saw "ruby drops" falling into the goblet: "It was then that I became distinctly aware of a gentle footfall upon the carpet, and near the couch; and in a second thereafter, as Rowena was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid" (122). Just after this drinking from this goblet, Rowena suddenly gets seriously ill: "Yet I cannot conceal it from my perception that immediately subsequent to the fall of the ruby-drops, a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife; so that, on the third subsequent night, the hands of her menials prepared her for the tomb, and on the fourth, I sat alone, with her shrouded body, in that fantastic chamber which had received her as my bride" (122).

The resurrection of Ligeia, however, is much more mysterious. The narrator says: "But if this idea was not, even then, altogether adopted, I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed, tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced boldly and palpably into the middle of the apartment"(125). And the narrator finally recognized that it was Ligeia: "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 Ligeia'"(126).

It is very important to remember that "this hideous drama of revivification"(124) was played in this pentagonal bridal chamber, because the occult atmosphere in "Ligeia" is heightened by Poe's suggestive use of the word "pentagonal" which is without doubt a term of occultism.

The meaning of the pentagonal chamber will be discovered by comparing "Ligeia" with Goethe's *Faust*. Curiously enough, the latter has some resemblance to the former, from the viewpoint of occultism. For example, Faust's chamber where he called Mephistopheres before him is described as follows: "A lofty-arched, narrow, Gothic chamber..."(13). On the other hand, the pentagonal chamber is described as follows: "the ceiling, of gloomy-looking oak,

was excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device. From the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended, by a single chain of gold with long links, a huge censer of the same metal, Sarasenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires" (119). It seems that it was appropriate for both Poe and Goethe to have a lofty-vaulted Gothic chamber as a place where something occult happened.

However, the most striking similarity between the pentagonal chamber and Faust's study is that they have a pentagram. Poe's chamber in "Ligeia" is pentagonal, and it has a pentagram inside. On the other hand, there is a pentagram on the threshold of Faust's study.

Mephistopheres. I must confess that forth I may not wander,

My steps by one slight obstacle controlled,—

The wizard's-foot, that on your threshold made is.

Faust. The pentagram prohibits thee?

Why, tell me now thou Son of Hades,

If that prevents, how cam'st thou in to me?

Could such a spirit be so cheated?

Mephistopheres. Inspect the thing: the drawing's not completed.

The outer angle, you may see,

Is open left— the lines don't fit it. (44)

The wizard's-foot or pentagram is a very traditional symbol of occultism, and it is said that this symbol has mysterious power. Hence, according to the note to this wizard's-foot in the text of *Faust* which was mentioned earlier, it is detailed as follows: "In the original *Drudenfuss*. *Drud*, from one root with *Druid*, was the old German word for wizard. The wizard's-foot or pentagram was a five pointed-star,...It was supposed to possess an especial potency against evil spirits, each of the points presenting a kind of spear-head against their approach. In this instance the lines pointing outwards over Faust's threshold did not join properly, so that Mephistopheres (in the form of a poodle) was able to enter, though not able to leave again" (400). Here the pentagram is clearly a symbol related to occultic recalling of spirits. Hence, the meaning of the pentagonal shape in "Ligeia" can be fully shown from this viewpoint: that is, the chamber was, as it were, an occult altar in which a rite of recalling the spirit of Ligeia was performed by the narrator.

It is inevitable to think about what Ligeia was after all. Was she a kind of spirit, just like Mephistopheres in *Faust*? It is not very difficult to give some examples indicating

that she was one. For instance, it is apparent that her name Ligeia is the same as one of three Sirens in Greek Mythology, and it derives from the Greek words, “sweet voiced.” Undoubtedly Poe successfully suggests that she is a siren with this image: “I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice” (111). Her voice seems to fascinate the narrator: “And of such passion I could form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me—by the almost magical melody, modulation, distinctness and placidity of her very low voice—and by the fierce energy (rendered doubly effective by contrast with her manner of utterance) of the wild words which she habitually uttered” (114). After all, her musical voice shows that she is someone unearthly, or some siren: Her voice grew more gentle—grew more low—yet I would not wish to dwell upon the wild meaning of the quietly uttered words. My brain reeled as I hearkened, entranced, to a melody more than mortal—to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known” (115).

Ligeia as a siren will be confirmed by the fact that she has lightness of foot-fall: “I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease of, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness of and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow” (111). It is not difficult to point out the similarity with a siren here, because, according to legend, it is half bird, half woman, which will suggest the lightness of footfall of a bird. Hence, here again, Ligeia is given the image of the siren.

After all, judging from these facts, it is hardly deniable that she was a kind of the siren, or some spirit like Mephistophères in *Faust*. So it was possible for the narrator, to call her back into his chamber through the symbol of the magic “pentagram”.

In comparing “Ligeia” with *Faust* from the viewpoint of occultism, it is interesting to note that the narrator in “Ligeia” is described as a kind of scholar just as Faust. It may be called “the motif” of a scholar who is shut up in his study pursuing wisdom. For example, the narrator in “Ligeia” says: “. . .yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage” (114). Another example may surely show that the narrator sometimes sounds just like Faust: “With how vast a triumph—with how vivid a delight—with how much of all that is ethereal in hope—did I *feel*, as she bent over me in studies but little sought—but less known—that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!” (114). Judging from these descriptions, he seems to be a scholar of metaphysics or philosophy.

On the other hand, as is well known, Faust is a man of profound learning.

Faust. I've studied now Philosophy
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,—
And even, alas! Theology,—
From end to end, with labour keen ;
And here, poor fool! with all my lore
I stand, no wiser than before : (13)

It is without doubt that Faust, as a man of learning, had some knowledge of occultism, because as has been pointed out, he at least knew the meaning of the pentagram on the of his chamber. Here it is interesting to note that going beyond the bounds of scholastic threshold research, "pursuit of wisdom" can come very close to mysticism or occultism. Faust is one of those who broke the limits and reached the world beyond reason.

The same is probably the case with the narrator in "Ligeia." When he speaks about "the goal of a wisdom" (114) or Ligeia's "guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation" (114), he sounds as if he were almost beyond the bounds of ordinary scholastic research of metaphysics just like Faust. So it is not very difficult to assume that the narrator also had some occult knowledge. This will be confirmed by "pentagram" in the pentagonal chamber prepared by the narrator.

But how could the narrator in "Ligeia" recall the spirit of Ligeia? Here again, *Faust* may be useful for showing another occult implication in "Ligeia." For example, what did Faust do to call the spirit and Mephistopheres into his chamber? It is true that he read some mystical Scriptures, and that he called the names of the Spirits. For example, Faust says as follows :

Fly! Up, and seek the broad, free land!
And this one Book of Mystery
From Nostradamus's very hand,
Is't not sufficient company?
When I the starry courses know,
And Nature's wise instruction seek,
With light of power my soul shall glow,
As when to spirits spirits speak.
'Tis vain, this empty brooding here,
Though guessed the holy symbols be :
Ye, Spirits, come— you hover near—

Oh, if you hear me, answer me! (14—15)

The point here, however, is Faust's concentration or meditation on the spirits, so that he could call the spirits into his chamber.

*(He seizes the book, and mysteriously pronounces
the sign of the spirit. A ruddy flame flashes:
the Spirit appears in the flame*

Spirit. Who calls me?

Faust. (with averted head). Terrible to see!

Spirit. Me hast thou long with might attracted,

Long from my sphere thy food exacted,

And now—

Faust. Woe! I endure not thee!

Spirit. To view me is thine aspiration,

My voice to hear, my countenance to see;

The powerful yearning moveth me,

Here am I!— what mean perturbation

Thee, superhuman, shakes? Thy soul's high calling, where? (16—17)

Just as Faust did, the narrator in “Ligeia” meditates on the visions of Ligeia beside the corpse of Rowena: “And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia and again, (what marvel that I shudder while I write?) *again* there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed” (124). Another example shows the intensity of the narrator's aspiration for Ligeia: “I fell back with a shudder upon the couch from which I had been so startlingly aroused, and again gave myself up to passionate waking visions of Ligeia” (124). Here the narrator is not merely remembering Ligeia, but from the viewpoint of occultism he is trying to call back the spirit of Ligeia.

We should note, however, that the narrator not only meditates on the image of Ligeia, but also he calls her name, because, from the viewpoint of recalling the spirit in the case of *Faust*, his calling the name of Ligeia is another example of his intention of resurrecting her. The narrator says:” 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 pathway she had abandoned—ah, *could* it be forever?—upon the earth” (120). And finally, just as he desired, he succeeded in “restoring her” in the corpse of Rowena through his knowledge of occultism deeply suggested by the “pentagonal” chamber.

After all the occult background of “Ligeia” is firmly connected with the narrator’s desire to restore Ligeia. It is essential to consider that he prepared his bridal chamber so as to be a place for an occult rite of resurrection. Although he did not perform any occult ceremony, the above comparison with Goethe’s *Faust* surely shows the meaning of the pentagonal chamber associated with occultism.

Works Cited

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Notes

1. David Ketterer points out in *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* the occult implication in the pentagonal shape: “This room is pentagonal in shape (as required for the magic of conuration),...”(40). And Michael J.S. Williams also says in *A World of World*: “Significantly, the room is pentagonal, the shape of the mystic ‘sacred space’ at the heart of the pentacle, which supposedly allows the magus to call up and control the powers of the spiritual world”(101).

2. Michael J.S. Williams writes: “These sarcophagi are emblematic of the problems faced by the narrator in his attempt to recover Ligeia in his narrative. The repository of royal flesh, memorizing in their inscriptions the king within, sarcophagi (from Greek, ‘flesh-eater’), in fact consume that flesh, and their inscriptions become ‘immemorial sculpture.’ Beneath the unreadable lids the monuments are hollow, a space occupied only by the irredeemable absence that is death, memorial only on the loss of memory” (101).