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CROFTANGRY'S CASTLE AND THE HOUSE OF USHER: SCOTT, POE, AND "DECAYED AND LINGERING EXOTICS"

George S. Williams

The final paragraph of Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) leaves the reader with a vivid image of the Usher house crumbling and sinking into "the deep and dank tarn."¹ It is a dramatic scene, underscoring the end, not only of the physical house, but also of the Usher family name and, indeed, of the story itself. Jeffrey Savoye has argued that one of Poe's sources for the scene was Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.² Scott's introductory note on the modern ballad "Lord Soulis," by John Leyden, describes the Borders Castle of Hermitage, which, unable to support the load of iniquity which had long been accumulating within its walls, is supposed to have partially sunk beneath the ground; and its ruins are regarded by the peasants with peculiar aversion and terror.³

In addition to the specific source posited by Savoye, Poe's story also has a deeper kinship with other Scott texts. As is suggested below, Savoye's argument can be extended and broadened by reading the same Poe story in relationship to passages from Scott's text, his *Chronicles of the Canongate*, First Series (1827).

Initially, Savoye's claims that Poe was indebted to Scott may have been surprising to some critics. Scott and Poe were very different in background, lifestyle, level of success, and posthumous reputation. How differently the two writers were regarded appears in their obituaries.

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. T. O. Mabbott *et al.*, 3 vols (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1969-1978), 2: 417. In-text references below are to this edition.

² Jeffrey Savoye, "Sinking under Iniquity," *Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 8.1 (2007), 70-74.

³ Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 2 vols (Kelso: Printed by James Ballantyne, 1802), 2: 334. Cf. Poe's story, where on first viewing the House of Usher the narrator senses an "insufferable gloom" ("Fall," 397).

Following Scott's death, the *Gentleman's Magazine* included a 22-page notice beginning "Sir Walter Scott, Bart., the proudest name in the modern annals of literature." The obituary describes Scott's many lifetime achievements and concludes:

It is by far the greatest glory of Sir Walter Scott, that he shone equally as a good and virtuous man, as he did in his capacity of the first fictitious writer of the age. His behavior through life was marked by undeviating integrity and purity, insomuch that no scandalous whisper was ever yet circulated against him. Of all men living, the most modest, as likewise the greatest and most virtuous, was Sir Walter Scott.⁴

In sharp contrast, when Poe died, the Evening Edition of the *New York Tribune* began its short obituary:

EDGAR ALLAN POE is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was well known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several of the states of Continental Europe; but he had few or no friends; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art has lost one of its most brilliant but erratic stars.⁵

We know now, of course, that this is the beginning of a deliberate and relentless character assassination mounted against Poe by Rufus Griswold—a litany of half-truths and outright lies that have haunted Poe's legacy at least up to our current day.

Despite the differences in their careers and posthumous reputations, Poe's interest in Scott is well documented. He was demonstrably familiar with many of Scott's novels and poems and respected Scott's literary talents. Poe's reviews of other writers contain over two dozen direct references to Scott's works. Though Poe never spelled the name of the novel correctly, he once referred to *The Bride of Lammermoor* as the "most pure, perfect, and radiant gem of fictitious literature."⁶ Even one of Poe's characters in his proposed *Tales of the Folio Club* was "A stout gentleman who admired Sir Walter Scott."⁷ When fellow American James Fenimore Cooper attacked Scott in a review of Lockhart's *Memoirs*, Poe took the opportunity, in reviewing Cooper's own *History of the Navy*, to come to

⁴ Sylvanus Urban, "Obituaries: Sir Walter Scott," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 34 (July-December, 1832), 361-384 (361, 383).

⁵ Rufus Griswold, "Death of Edgar A. Poe," *New-York Daily Tribune* (9 October 1849), p. 2, cols. 3-4.

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "Critical Notices," *Southern Literary Messenger*, 2.1 (December 1835), 2: 43-46 (43).

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Folio Club," *Collected Work*, 2: 205.

Scott's defense, commenting that Cooper, "the author of the attack upon Sir Walter Scott" may be suffering from "an absolute and irreparable mental leprosy."⁸

Nor is Savoye the only scholar to have noticed specific debts or parallels to Scott in Poe's work. Poe's poem "The Raven," and two of his short stories, "The Domain of Arnheim" and "The Pit and the Pendulum" have traces of *Anne of Geierstein*.⁹ The homicidal orangutan in Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" seems to parallel the ape in Scott's *Count Robert of Paris*, and Poe's character Rowena in "Ligeia" shares both a name and characteristics with Scott's heroine in *Ivanhoe*.¹⁰ At a deeper level, it was from an essay of Scott's that Poe derived his idea of the grotesque as a literary aesthetic, when Scott used the term in reviewing German author E. T. A. Hoffman.¹¹

Savoye's note about Scott as a source for Poe, therefore, suggests that further exploration may prove worthwhile. One group of parallels that does not seem to have drawn critical attention, with implications for both authors, is between the same story that Savoye examined, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and passages from Scott's *Chronicles of the Canongate*, First Series (1827). Separately, of course, both these texts have attracted considerable critical attention. From the Scott side, Claire Lamont, for instance, has read Scott's novel as a mediation of cultural

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Review of *The History of the Navy, Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1839), 56-62 (57). Cooper had accused Scott of being dishonest and self-serving in his conduct as a professional author: he selected his own biographer (Lockhart) who was not impartial, he reviewed his own works, he created *The Quarterly Review* in secret, and he used secret codes in letters of introduction.

⁹ John Robert Moore, "Poe's Reading of *Anne of Geierstein*," *American Literature*, 22.4 (1951): 493-496; Donald A. Ringe, "Poe's Debt to Scott in 'The Pit and the Pendulum,'" *English Language Notes*, 18.4 (1981): 281-283. See also more generally, Killa Campbell, "Poe's Reading," *Studies in English*, no. 5 (1925), 163-193.

¹⁰ Moore, "Poe, Scott, and 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" *American Literature*, 8 (March 1936), 52-58; Alexander Hammond, "Poe, Scott's Fiction, and the Holt Source Collection: The Example of 'Ivanhoe' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Resources for American Literary Study*, 34 (2009): 47-71.

¹¹ Scott, "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition: and Particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffman," *Foreign Quarterly Review*, 1 (1827), 60-98; cf. Gustav Gruener, "Notes on the Influence of E.T.A. Hoffmann upon Edgar Allan Poe," *PMLA*, 19 (1904): 1-25; George S. Williams, "Reading the Transatlantic Gothic Fiction of Walter Scott and Edgar Allen Poe" (PhD thesis, University of Dundee, 2019), ch. 3, 117-125, also presented as a paper at the conference "Lost in Translation," University of Dundee, May 2015.

conflicts and social difficulties in a post-Union Scotland.¹² In the words of Scott's frame-narrator Chrystal Croftangry:

The object of the whole publication is, to throw some light on the manners of Scotland as they were, and to contrast them, occasionally, with such as now are fashionable in the same country.¹³

The stories in *Chronicles of the Canogate*, to quote Caroline McCracken-Flesher, "seem to focus darkly on the material survival—never mind advancement—for Scots within a British discourse."¹⁴ Likewise, Poe's "House of Usher," as Clive Bloom suggests, is "probably the most interpreted short story ever written."¹⁵ It has been subjected to a wide variety of allegorical and symbolic interpretations, perhaps most notably as an allegory for a journey through a deranged mind. Richard Wilbur insists, "The House of Usher *is*, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher, and its dim interior *is*, in fact, Roderick Usher's visionary Mind."¹⁶ Of course, the idea of an "allegorical fact" may seem contradictory, but Wilbur's interpretation of the Poe story underlies much later discussion.

There are quite specific parallels that seem to have been overlooked in earlier commentary. One possible source for the beginning of "The Fall of the House of Usher," when the narrator first encounters the doomed house, comes, I would suggest, from the first series of Scott's *Chronicles of the Canogate*. The narrative framework in the *Chronicles* is set around Chrystal Croftangry, a bankrupt "child of perdition" (37) who writes the stories in the *Chronicles* based on tales he had heard from his friends. As part of this framework, Croftangry spends the first part of novel detailing his own life. Having returned from abroad, he visits his childhood home of Glentanner, the former House of Croftangry, with hopes of returning permanently. When he arrives at Glentanner, he discovers a dilapidated Castle surrounded by a decayed landscape. The estate is now known as Castle-Treddles, and nearly all traces of the House of Croftangry have been

¹² Claire Lamont, "Introduction," *Chronicles of the Canogate*, ed. Claire Lamont (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xi-xxix.

¹³ Scott, *Chronicles of the Canogate*, First Series [Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, vol. 20], ed. Claire Lamont (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁴ Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 156.

¹⁵ Clive Bloom, "Introduction: Death's Own Backyard: The Nature of Modern Gothic and Horror Fiction," *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁶ Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric Carlson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 264.

erased. It is this scene of Croftangry's return to Glentanner that I suggest could have inspired Poe's detailed description of the House of Usher.

Though there are several good reasons to look toward *Chronicles* as a possible source for Poe, there is no direct evidence to prove that Poe was familiar with this specific Scott work. He never mentions the novel, nor does he ever mention the stories contained within the novel. However, three very compelling characteristics of Scott's novel would have attracted Poe's attention. First, as we know, *Chronicles* was the first of the Waverley novels in which Scott admitted authorship. Poe, too, authored several works either anonymously or under a pseudonym, including his very first published collection of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), published only months before Scott's first series of *Chronicles of the Canongate*. Even in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe creates two works of his own imagination and attributes them to other writers. Once Scott admitted that he was the author of the Waverley novels, it became clear that he had reviewed his own novel *Tales of My Landlord* in 1816. In fact, this review was one of the reasons that Cooper had attacked Scott, accusing him of being dishonest as a professional writer. Nonetheless, years later, Poe would follow suit and review his own *Tales by E A Poe* anonymously.

Second, the first series of *Chronicles of the Canongate* was the first work of fiction Scott published following his major financial troubles, when he was forced to relinquish ownership of his home at Abbotsford and was living there as a tenant. Scott was struggling financially, a fact to which Poe could certainly relate even at the age of 18, steeped as he was in his own financial struggles due both to the cost of attending the University of Virginia and to the gambling debts he had incurred there. The financial collapse of one of the most commercially successful writers in the world would surely have caught the attention of an author who had only months previously published his very first collection of poems. Poe's intention to earn a living as a writer would certainly have come under question after Scott's financial crisis. It also seems likely that Poe would have been interested in Scott's attempts at financial recovery as well.

Third, and perhaps most important, the first series of *Chronicles of the Canongate* is Scott's only official collection of shorter fiction. Shorter fiction, of course, held a special interest to Poe. Less than a year before writing "the Fall of the House of Usher," he had written a satirical piece entitled "The Psyche Zenobia," which outlines the necessary elements of popular sensational short stories such as those that appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Years later, in his literary manifesto "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe would write, "there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single

sitting.”¹⁷ It seems unlikely that Poe would not have read a collection of short fiction written by a writer that he obviously admired and respected.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” exhibits a number of specific parallels to Croftangry’s narrative in the *Chronicles*. Chrystal was the last of the Croftangrys, his parents and siblings were all deceased, and he had no children. When he was younger, he was “a haughty, pettish, ignorant, dissipated, broken-down Scottish laird” (*Chronicles*, 28). He had inherited the Croftangry estate, but sold everything to fund his wayward lifestyle. He admits that “My course of life could not last—I ran too fast to run long” (*Chronicles*, 14). Yet when he returns from abroad, he is older and wiser, and he has the opportunity to live in his childhood estate of Glentanner once again. By this time, Glentanner had been renamed, and practically all traces of the Croftangrys were gone. His mother’s previous maid now runs the local Inn, but when he meets her incognito and suggests to her that Chrystal may one day return, she is horrified at the thought. She says, “he wrecked a dainty estate, and brought harlots to the door-cheek of his father’s house, till he made it nae residence for his mother; he was a ne’er-do-weel, and a child of perdition” (*Chronicles*, 43). Croftangry returns to an estate where his family name is not revered, as he had expected, but instead is uttered with indifference and even contempt. His memories of being a respected landlord, and thus his own concepts of history, are crushed. He realizes that his own iniquity led to the fall of the House of Croftangry. Similarly, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” siblings Roderick and Madeleine Usher are also the last descendants of the Usher name. Though the narrator never fully explains why the house sinks, Savoye notes “there is an ominous sense of history and oppressive legacy” in “both the physical structure and the familial line of descent” (Savoye, 70). The reader can only assume that iniquity had caused the slow decay of Roderick and his sister.

There are also connections or parallels between the setting used in the two texts. Although Poe characteristically omits the time and place of the events surrounding Roderick and Madeline Usher, Savoye argues convincingly that clues in the text suggest that the Usher house could well be located either in Northern England or Scotland. First, there are hints throughout the text suggesting that the House of Usher is too old to be in America: the Ushers were a “very ancient family” (398), both the Usher name and the Usher house had been around for a “long lapse of centuries” (399), and the house itself showed “excessive antiquity” and “the discoloration of ages” (400). When Poe wrote this story in 1839, America was not old enough to contain houses that showed signs of excessive

¹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, *Graham’s Magazine*, 28.4 (April 1846), 163-167 (164).

antiquity. There are other clues suggesting a European locale, such as the use of the phrases “the peasantry” (399), which is not typically associated with the Americas, and “armorial trophies” (400), which, although certainly present in America, were more common throughout Europe. The house also has a “donjon-keep” and “turrets” (410, 403), both architectural features of a castle, so features typically associated with Europe and widespread in Scotland.

There are also hints in the text that suggest a possible setting specifically in the borders, in ballad country. For example, Poe calls the water in front of the house a “tarn,” a term he uses no less than eight times in this short story. Though the term “tarn” is now used primarily for small mountain lakes in the north of England, and no specifically Scottish use is given in the Scottish National Dictionaries, OED includes some Scottish variants and citations.¹⁸ In Poe’s story, the surrounding vegetation shows sedges, both an echo of ballad landscapes and also a sign of wet or boggy ground. Savoye, indeed, states that Poe meant tarn in a purely “British sense of a bog or a moor” (Savoye, 70). Even though this “British sense” is not found in OED or the Scottish dictionaries, tarns, traditionally self-enclosed lakes or ponds with no outflow, are most commonly found on boggy, water-saturated uplands. The OED definition of “bog” is revealing: “A piece of wet spongy ground, consisting chiefly of decayed or decaying moss and other vegetable matter, too soft to bear the weight of any heavy body upon its surface.”¹⁹ A bog or a moor would certainly be unable to support the House of Usher.

As well as the parallels noted so far are several other short passages in which Croftangry describes Glentanner and Poe’s narrator first encounters the House of Usher. It is in these short comparisons where we find both Scott and Poe promoting a certain view of history, while at the same time questioning how we engage with that history. It is here where we see how they presented the past in these stories. The first set of comparisons is of the exteriors of both sites that are described in detail. Both landscapes are described as bare, gray, and decaying. Scott’s landscape is “as bare as my nail, except for a paltry edging of decayed and lingering exotics, with an impoverished lawn stretched before it” (31), while Poe’s had “decayed trees” and “gray walls” (400). Scott’s word choice is particularly intriguing, especially in the context of reading the separate stories in

¹⁸ Wordsworth had used the term in describing the Lake District in 1810, Scott refers to a “tarn” to describe a Scottish mountain lake in *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), and Coleridge used the term in *Christabel*. (1816).

¹⁹ “bog, n.1.” OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20953?rskey=a8Qxg7&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed 12 December 2017).

Chronicles as a series of interconnected tales with a common theme. Though Scott's stories have been examined individually, reading them together reveals what Padma Rangarajan describes as "a bleak vision of historical momentum."²⁰ Scott had witnessed his fellow countrymen abandoning Scotland at an alarming rate, for a variety of reasons, and the three stories in *Chronicles* all end fatally for the characters who leave Scotland. In this short passage, Scott sees these "exotic" lands as decayed forms of the past, yet their attractions linger in the minds of many of the Scottish people. Many still want to leave Scotland and search for something better, but these exotic lands that seem so attractive are decayed. The lawn is not greener on the other side, it is paltry and impoverished.

Again, the term decay appears in both descriptions. Scott's castle was "going to decay" (33) while Poe's structure had "indications of extensive decay" (400). The word decay is derived from the Latin word "decidere," which literally means "to fall down or to fall off."²¹ Both structures are near ominous bodies of water. For Scott, it is "the sweeping Clyde" (33) and Poe's water is the "black and lurid tarn" (398) that he so often mentions. Both the castle and the house are covered in mold and fungus. Scott's is "damp and mouldering" (33), Poe's has "Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior" (400). Both Scott and Poe use analogies of neglect, isolation, and fragmentation. Scott's structure "resembled fruit that becomes decayed without ever having ripened" (33). Poe's structure reminded the narrator of "old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air" (400). The windows are described in detail. Scott's are "finished in acute Gothic arches" with some "broken, others patched, others blocked up" (32, 33). Poe's "windows were long, narrow, and pointed" and "vacant" and "eye-like" (401, 397). Both of these descriptions characterize windows common in Gothic architecture, large windows designed to allow as much light in as possible. Such windows were a key characteristic of Gothic architecture because light was thought to reflect the Divine Light of Heaven.²² But neither Scott's nor Poe's windows allow light (or God) to enter the structure. They are broken,

²⁰ Padma Rangarajan, "History's Rank Stew: Walter Scott, James Mill, and the Politics of Time," *Romanticism*, 21.1 (2015), 59-71 (69).

²¹ "decay, n." OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/48067?rskey=iWGQR4&result=1&isAdvanced=f> also (accessed 12 December 2017).

²² Robert A. Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral*, revised edn (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 108-09.

blocked up, or vacant. Poe's windows perform the opposite of letting light in; instead, they look out with "eye-like" features.

Both Scott and Poe were suspicious of how we view history, of how unreliable our concepts of the past are. Critics have long noted both Scott's and Poe's resistance to conventional interpretations of the past, and their consciousness of history's fallibility. For example, James Kerr insists that in *Redgauntlet*, "Scott has set aside any ambition to write a faithful account of the past, and has composed a historical romance about the writing of history."²³ Margaret Criscuola suggests that Scott's historical novels "impart to historical events new order and intelligibility."²⁴ Poe scholars make similar arguments. The late Thomas Mabbott, for instance, insisted that one of Poe's three "favorite ideas" is "that history is unreliable."²⁵ This position becomes obvious in the themes and plots of such Poe stories as "Mellonta Tauta" and "Some Words with a Mummy."

The two texts discussed here underscore such suspicions about how we engage with history, by questioning the temporal boundaries of history itself. Scott's time, in a sense, is fast-forwarded, with fruit that decays before it even has a chance to ripen, while Poe's time seems to advance in slow motion with wood slowly rotting over a long period of time. By altering temporal contexts and using phrases such as "resembled" and "reminded me of," they are enforcing subjective apprehensions of an objective history.

Once the characters move to the interiors of the buildings, into the confinement of the structures, the detailed descriptions become even more ominous. First, both narrators are "ushered" in. Croftangry says: "To the inside, after many a vain summons, I was at length admitted by an old labourer" (33). Poe's narrator says: "A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages" (400). The structures in which they enter represent history itself, but they are not free to choose how to interpret this history, they are guided by the old guard, by the keepers of history who know how to navigate through the intricate passages.

Both describe the interior ceilings as extravagant but old and worn. Scott's were "fretted and adorned" (33), Poe's were "vaulted and fretted" (401). While the primary architectural meaning of "fretted" is for a patterned wooden ceiling, the word seems simultaneously to carry its more psychological sense, "to gradually wear away," or literally "to devour or

²³ James Kerr, "Fiction against History: Scott's *Redgauntlet* and the Power of Romance," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 29.3 (1987), 237-260 (237).

²⁴ Margaret M. Criscuola, "Constancy and Change: The Process of History in Scott's *Redgauntlet*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 20.1 (1985), 123-36 (123).

²⁵ *Collected Works*, as in n. 1 above, 3: 1289.

consume.”²⁶ Both interiors had dark walls that had changed over time. In Scott’s description, “The wood panelling was shrunk and warped, and cracked” (33). For Poe, “Dark draperies hung upon the walls” (401). As noted above, with broken or blocked up windows, the interior of these structures are dark and gloomy. Castle-Treddles had “a disconsolate air to all around” (33), while the House of Usher had “an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven” (399). Both smell of death, Scott’s scene “emitted the damp odour of sepulchral vaults” (33) while Poe’s narrator “breathed an atmosphere of sorrow” (401). These are the smells of a crude, barbaric, decayed, and sorrowful past

The past may be looked upon as a time that was dark and decayed, but it was once extravagant. It was once adorned and beautiful, but time has passed; it has warped and shrunk. We look back in time now with sadness and dejection. Neither structure has any hope of redemption. For Castle-Treddles, “The want of the usual means to preserve, was fast performing the work of decay” (33). For the House of Usher, “An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all” (397). Both interiors are described in terms of the feudal past. Scott’s “looked like the cages of some feudal bastille” (33), while Poe’s “had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep” (410). In these passages, we again see both Scott and Poe enforcing subjective apprehensions of an objective world. The feudal times referred to in both of these passages are not meant to indicate humanity’s progress, but instead underscore humanity’s failures, the gloomy failure of imagination itself and feudal oppression. And the gloomy structures evoke feelings of gloom in the narrators. For Croftangry, “Strange and various feelings ran through his bosom” (33). Poe’s character had “A sense of insufferable gloom, an utter depression of soul” (397).

Beyond the many specific parallels, of plot, setting, phrasing or imagery, Scott’s *Chronicles of the Canongate* and Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” demonstrate shared psychological preoccupations, which also manifest themselves more widely in the prose works of the writers. Even if we are unable to understand the fallibility of history, the failure of imagination, it would seem as though both Croftangry and Poe’s narrator do.

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²⁶ "fret, n.2". OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.nls.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/74554?rskey=IFHbeP&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid> (accessed 25 May 2018).