

Poe's Landscape: Dreams, Nightmares, and Enclosed Gardens

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Abstract: The continuation and innovation of Poe's handling of landscape and landscape gardens in Romantic and Gothic traditions can best be found in his construction of both the landscape of Gothic nightmares and the landscape of paradisiacal gardens. This article investigates Poe's poetic visions — dreamscape, Gothic landscape, and the paradisiacal landscape garden, and reveals that these features thread through Poe's poems, Gothic tales, and sketches, weaving Poe's view of man, nature, and the universe into an aesthetic theory of unity.

Key words: Poe; landscape; poetic visions; theory of unity

Throughout his literary career, Poe wrote a half-dozen landscape tales and a significant body of poetry that deals with dream visions.¹ The dreamscapes depicted in Poe's early poems anticipate the nightmare landscapes portrayed in his famous Gothic tales. The epistemological question reflected in the poetic dreamscape is central to the Gothic landscape. Therefore, before embarking on the quest to understand Poe's Gothic landscape and landscape garden images we should examine his early poems, moving from his early poems to Gothic tales, focusing on desolate landscapes, dilapidated mansions, haunted palaces, and the fear, horror, and terror they evoked. By focusing on Poe's famous story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) we can develop an allegorical interpretation of outer and inner dark landscapes of Usher himself to show that Poe employs the Gothic landscape as a vehicle to explore the realm of the collective unconscious as well as conscious epistemological and psychological perplexities. In contrast to Poe's vision of terror illustrated by the dark landscape is the vision of beauty and the supernal elaborated by the earthly paradise. Finally, using "The Domain of Arnheim" (1846) as an example, I shall demonstrate that Poe's apparently contradictory visions are two complementary parts of the author's vision of the universe and man's relationship with nature, which projects his

concern, frustration, and hope as a poet of dark Romanticism.

In his early poems, Poe evokes an image of indefinite imaginative landscapes. In "Spirits of the Dead" (1827), wandering in a cemetery and feeling surrounded by the spirits of the dead, the poet grasps a vision in which the landscape is shadowy and mysterious. A similar landscape image is also found in "Fairy-Land" (1829), in which the poetic landscape remains mysterious, shadowy, and formless. Such a perception of landscape is rooted in a Romantic view of nature illustrated in British romantic poetry. In the Romantic view, nature is not only celebrated as the source of life, beauty, and the embodiment of the infinite universe, but also worshipped for nourishing and guiding the individual heart and soul, and consequently it is treated as a site for exploring the human mind as well as the universe. For instance, landscape and nature constitute prominent subjects in the works of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). In the Romantic tradition, nature is the source of wondrousness through which Romantic poets experience esthetic ecstasy, and by means of intuition and imagination the poets' spirits are able to transcend to a supreme realm in which nature, humanity, and God form a harmonious unity. In other words, nature offers access to a transcendent vision--a poetic vision Poe strives to perceive and present in depicting his landscape and landscape garden images.

Incorporating Wordsworth's and Coleridge's ideas of nature and one of the most important themes of early Romanticism, imagination, into his poetry, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1803-1882) presents a different kind of landscape scenery. In contrast to the detailed and harmonious landscapes depicted by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the landscapes in Shelley's poems can be mysterious, shadowy, and indefinite. In his poems such as "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1817), Shelley directs the reader's attention to the abstract and shadowy elements of physical beauty and conveys the power of the invisible "Spirit of Beauty" through the similes of *the intangible* emphasizing that although there is no lack of physical beauty, once the mysterious power leaves, humans are no longer able to respond to beauty, and the earth becomes nothing but a dark unworthy planet.

Poe was influenced by a Romantic view of nature; however, unlike his optimistic British predecessors, as well as American contemporaries such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Poe was an advocate of Dark Romanticism. Comparing Romanticism and Dark Romanticism, Robert Hume comments that both groups' writings "spring from discontent with inherited religion and world view" and man's condition (111). While Romantic writers strive hopefully for solutions, Dark Romantic writers lack the Romantic faith in man's ability to transcend or transform it and often evoke an isolated and mysterious universe, in which the lonely poet struggles to pursue the absolute truth of the universe and a supreme realm in vain. Thompson states, "the word

Romantic usually evokes an ideal world infused with internal energy and dynamically evolving toward a yet higher state, in which the single, separate self seeks unity with Nature, itself symbolic of the aesthetic harmony of the cosmos” (“Introduction,” 1). In contrast, Dark Romantics evoke an isolated and mysterious universe, in which the lonely poet struggles to pursue the absolute truth of the universe and a supreme realm in vain. In Poe’s poetry, the ideal beauty and harmony of nature is either beyond grasp or manifests and disappears suddenly like a shooting star, and the poet is left forever tormented by the agony. Consequently, the harmonious unity between man and nature are lost, and the pessimistic poet views himself as surrounded by cold stars and dark trees of a mysterious landscape, suspended between faith and skepticism, horror and beatitude. Such vision is best illustrated in “The Lake__ To_____” from his first volume *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827) and “Al Aaraaf” from his second volume *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829).

“The Lake__ To_____” evokes a dark, isolated, and even threatening landscape image occupied by a wild lake, black rocks, and tall pines. His devoted love of the lonely wild lake reveals the poetic figure’s unusual character. The description of the dark landscape conveys a mood of melancholy, loneliness, and isolation, characteristics of a cursed romantic poet. Blessed and at the same time blighted by his youthful passion, powerful imagination, and poetic talent, the lonely speaker possesses a different, often pessimistic and skeptical view of the world. On the one hand, the world appears weary and dark in Poe’s view, as indicated by the images of “dark unfathom’d tide” in “Imitation” (1827) and the “bright, cold moon” in “Evening Star” (1827). On the other hand, the poet strives to grasp a vision of ideal beauty and the supernal, although such a vision often fades before it can be transcribed in earth-bound words. As seen in the last stanza of “The Lake__ To_____,” the poet’s powerful imagination transforms the dim and poisonous lake into an ideal garden.

Death was in that poisonous wave,
 And in its gulf a fitting grave
 For him who thence could solace bring
 To his lone imagining —
 Whose solitary soul could make
 An Eden of that dim lake. (86)

To the persona of the lyric poet, isolation, melancholy, terror, and death do not necessarily mean destruction. The transformation of the two apparently dramatically different images -- the dim lake and Eden -- illustrates Poe’s desire and ability to transcend the constraints of rationality, reason, logic, time and space, as well as his

pursuit of the ideal realm. Such desire and pursuit are further elaborated in poems from Poe's second volume.

"Al Aaraaf," one of Poe's most complicated poems, is an important example for examining his poetic vision and theory from his early period. In the poem, Poe--the poetic dreamer--sets his "half closing eyes" and mind on a wondering star--a realm from which he strives to obtain a vision of supernal beauty and ideality (108). The supernal beauty and ideality might be reached by means of imagination and yet disappear before the poet could transcribe it into earthbound words leaving mankind in a dark universe.

Opening with an image of the harmonious ethereal dream garden, the poem nevertheless ends with dark annihilation. The dark image of "the night that waned and waned and brought no day" powerfully reinforces Poe's dark romantic vision (115). It also conveys the tense anxiety of a romantic dreamer who is empowered by free imagination and yet is earth-bound. On the one hand, viewing the physical world as a prison, Poe struggles to transcend reality in pursuit of the ideality. On the other hand, although the supernal beauty (embodied in the image of the dream garden) reveals its brilliance to a romantic poet like Poe, it disintegrates after a sudden and brief appearance, like the mysterious star in the sixteenth-century. Like paradise, humanity is denied entrance to the dream garden. Later we shall see that the themes of self-annihilation and the horror of facing self-destruction emphasized in the end of the poem become the essential consideration of Poe's Gothic tales.

The poetic concept of the supernal beauty and ideal realm (often visualized in dream vision), as well as the images of the dream garden and indefinite mysterious landscape illustrated in "Al Aaraaf," can be found in many of Poe's other poems. Similarly definite, shadowy, and mysterious landscape and landscape garden images are also found in "Fairy-Land" (1829), "Alone" (1829), "The Sleeper" (1839), and "Ulalume" (1847), just to name a few. Among them is one of Poe's most famous poems, "Dream-Land" (1844). Compared to Poe's early dreamscape and landscape gardens discussed earlier, the tone and the poetic vision in "Dream-Land" are much darker. It is a chilling, nightmare vision of the threatening and sinister. In this poem Poe cries out for a dream land "out of Space – out of Time" (344). In his quest for transcending reality and obtaining ideality, Poe is constantly tormented by the pessimistic view of nature, the universe, and man's existential condition. Eventually, the pleasant dream garden image gives way to a Gothic nightmare landscape; and yet at the same time, one of the most beautiful imaginative landscape gardens in nineteenth-century American literature is also composed in his sketch.

Poe, in his most famous Gothic tale, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (hereafter "Usher"), depicts a memorable withered Gothic landscape. The mysterious desolate

landscape, the isolated and decaying mansion, and the imaginary and symbolic landscape garden evoke senses of mystery, fear, terror, and horror. Poe uses the nightmare landscape as a vehicle to explore the unconscious realm and psychic crisis, project epistemological perplexity, and dramatize the fears of the soul. For the tale addresses itself to the central concerns of Dark Romantics, ranging from the questionable mind, to existential anxiety, the uncertain universe, and the ambiguous relationship between man and nature. The nightmare landscape depicted in “Usher” can be seen, therefore, as the epitome of the ruined Eden—the world in the skeptical view of the Dark Romantics. By such extension, the following discussion deals with Usher’s dark domain as an allegorical landscape garden.

“Usher” offers a paradigm of Gothic themes, conventions, motifs, and the sensations evoked in Gothic writings. Its isolated and desolate landscape, and the exterior and interior of the house, sustain divergent interpretations and have drawn considerable scholarly attention. In the view of critics such as Darrel Abel, Edward Davison, Richard Wilbur, and G. R. Thompson, the tale is also read as an allegory. In one of the important articles written on “Usher,” Darrel Abel discusses the symbolic meanings of the setting and suggests that “the tale is a consummate psychological allegory” (185), in which “all the symbols express the opposition of Life-Reason to Death-Madness” (179). Davison asserts: “the tale is a study of the total disintegration of a complex human being, not in any one of the three aspects of body, mind, and soul, but in all three together” (197). Drawing several examples from Poe’s tales, poems, and aesthetic theory, Richard Wilbur provides a provocative analysis and argues that Usher is “a triumphant report by the narrator that it is possible for the poetic soul to shake off this temporal, rational, physical world and escape, if only for a moment, to a realm of unfettered vision” (267). Thompson examines Usher in the context of Romantic irony and suggests that the tale dramatizes “a weird universe as perceived by a subjective mind” (“Preface”, 34); and moreover, “the ultimate irony of this universe, however, is the ‘perversity’ of man’s own mind” (“Preface”, 37). Previous scholarship has cast light on our reading of Usher’s withered landscape—the nightmare vision of the Dark Romantic poet’s view of the blighted earth and an imagined picture of ruined Eden.

To discuss Usher’s dark and mysterious landscape as an allegorical garden we need to consider the tone and the mood of the tale in conjunction with the main themes and concerns of the story and the description of the landscape. Beginning with the first line, readers are seized by an oppressive and gloomy feeling. In a surrealistic portrayal, nature takes on an unnatural appearance in the opening paragraph. The words “dull” and “soundless,” the scene of the oppressively low clouds, the image of a lonely traveler in the dreary tract of country, and the sense of an oppressive and

insufferable gloom suggest that the narrator's journey on horseback is also a trip to the dreamland of horrors.

The bizarre landscape, indeed, reflects the view of the Dark Romantics, in which nature is inscrutable, mysterious, and deformed. As Poe states, "the fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease" (610). A typical Gothic hero is often suspended alone within such an incomprehensible and deformed world, struggling in vain to understand the universe and his existential condition.

The mysterious landscape and bizarre world is further mingled with the problematic realms of the mind and spirit. Searching for reasons to substantiate his irrational fear, the narrator rearranges his perspective by looking down upon the reflection of the mansion in the black and lurid tarn. Yet, instead of reaching a rational explanation as to why Usher's house has "so unnerved" him, his effort only increases his fear. While puzzling to the narrator, the landscape provides some clues to solving the mystery. The "vacant eyelike" windows, the "rank sedges," and the "white trunks of decayed trees" suggest an image of a head, more specifically, a symbolic representation of a disintegrated mind, which is further elaborated by Usher's poem, "The Haunted Palace". Reflecting the dilapidated mansion—the symbolic image of the withered mind, the lifeless tarn thus brings together the inside and outside. The withered landscape also hints at the theme of "doubles". Gazing down into the lifeless tarn, the narrator sees nothing but "the remodeled and inverted image of the gray sedge, the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows" (398). We may surmise that the narrator's face is reflected with the distorted landscape image in the tangent water. Therefore, the narrator's confrontation of Usher's house and its inverted reflection can be read as a symbolic procedure of plunging not only into Usher's disintegrated mind, but quite possibly into his own as well. Thus, the isolated and withered landscape not only mirrors the mysterious universe and incomprehensible existential condition of mankind, but also projects an isolated and disintegrating mind, and reflects the narrator's distorted perspective.

The allegorical reading of the withered landscape as a withered mind and dark soul is further supported by the appearance of the house and the ruined Eden motif is internalized into the symbolic decaying house, starting with the pond's reflection and moving toward the fungi covered exterior of the house and then into the house itself. The famous description of Usher's house establishes the relationship between physical reality and the state of Usher's spirit, specifically the correspondent relationship between the withered landscape, the dilapidated mansion, and his withered mind, which together convey an image of a ruined Eden.² Like Usher's domain, the mansion evokes desolation and isolation. The condition of the mansion mirrors its inhabitant's deeply troubled mental status. Like the mansion which is on the edge of collapse,

Usher's mind is at the very brink of insanity. We noticed that the zig-zag split in front of the building is emphasized. Poe reminds his reader that a "scrutinizing observer" may discover a "barely perceptible fissure" (400) which suggests a fatal flaw of the Usher clan: Usher's incipient madness, as well as the psychic crisis embodied in the three characters of the story. Although the exact meaning of the "fissure" remains ambiguous, we eventually discover that the house, Usher, and Madeline are three in one — the embodiment of madness and destruction. Thus, the dark landscape image illustrates Usher's, perhaps the narrator's as well, psychic condition: instable, isolated, and disintegrated. The principal feature of the landscape, Usher's mansion, visualizes and heightens the central tensions of the story — integrity and disintegration, order and disorder, and rationality and madness.³

The themes of madness and destruction, and the central tensions of order and disorder, rationality and insanity are further elaborated by the imagined landscape garden — the haunted palace. Usher's poem, "The Haunted Palace," opens with an image of a beautiful landscape garden: "In the greenest of our valleys, / By good angels tenanted, / Once a fair and stately palace – / Radiant Palace – reared its head" (406). In the rest of the poem, each stanza develops and reinforces the parallels between facial and landscape images, the condition of the valley and the palace reflecting the mental condition of the composer of the poem, Usher. In the second part of the poem, however, the greenest valley and the fairest palace are haunted, as the two "luminous windows" were replaced by the "red-litten" ones. At the end of the poem, hysteric laughter overwhelms the palace. As a result of developing and reinforcing the parallel relationships between the landscape-body and landscape garden-mind, the character/s, structure, and environment of the tale form a unity. Through the unified image of the disintegrating mind, decaying mansion and mysterious and lifeless landscape, Poe brilliantly weaves together the psychological, existential, and epistemological anxieties which characterized the eighteenth century in the wake of its rapid development in science and its increasing emphasis on materialism. Additionally, Poe's portrayals of nature and his understanding of mankind's existential condition are also closely related with his concept of poetry and the poet, and his aesthetic theory. Wilbur insightfully points out the reasons that Poe views the earth as a ruined Eden.

It [the Earth] has fallen away from God by exalting the scientific reason above poetic intuition, and by putting its trust in material fact rather than in visionary knowledge. The Earth's inhabitants are thus corrupted by rationalism and materialism; their souls are diseased; and Poe sees this disease of the human spirit as having contaminated physical nature. The woods and fields and waters

of Earth have thereby lost their first beauty, and no longer clearly express God's imagination; the landscape has lost its original perfection of composition, in proportion as men have lost their power to perceive the beautiful. (258)

Because Earth is a fallen planet, Wilbur suggests that escaping the physical confinement of the world and the body and gaining a glimpse of heavenly beauty become the ultimate goal of Poe, the poet.

Poe's allegorical landscape is significant, not only because it interweaves layered meanings together into a unity, but also because it is the manifestation of the main features of American Gothic fiction—the uncertain relationship between man and nature, and the ambiguous duality between consciousness and unconsciousness. Traditionally, on the gloomy, desolated, and alienated Gothic landscape, the lonely hero despairingly battles with various anxieties ranging from fear of the supernatural to religious oppression, feudal tyranny, political revolution, industrialization, urbanization, scientific development, and sexual transgression. Adapting the European Gothic tradition to American history and culture, Poe and his American contemporaries such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne replaced the windswept castle with the dark frontier landscape, allegorical garden, and the antiquated house, which refers to both building and family line, and add new dimensions of epistemological and psychological perplexities to the conventional anxieties of the Gothic hero. As mentioned before, the epistemological and psychological concerns revealed in American Gothic writings mainly deal with the nature of existence, the nature of the cosmos, the relationship between humanity and the world, between humanity and God, as well as the struggle between one's consciousness and unconsciousness. According to G. R. Thompson, Romantic fascination with the unconsciousness and epistemological problems of existence is inextricably linked with its obsession with their understanding of nature:

Central to the Romantic mind-set is the sense that some further "nature" mystery will always open out from a newly comprehended mystery, the whole series having a total unity that is almost, but not quite revealed. One is always *about* to comprehend some never-to-be imparted ultimate secret. This sense of being on the very edge of vast physical, psychological, and metaphysical discoveries permeated the age. (*Romantic Gothic Tales 1790-1840*, 28)

Poe's explorations of the "ultimate secret," the nature of existence, and the issue of unconsciousness can be found in "Usher," particularly his portrayal of the allegorical landscape. In "Usher," the nature of cosmos and nature are mysterious, and the

relationship between humanity and the universe in which the protagonist lived is ambiguous. Usher's domain suggests some supernatural influence upon the landscape and its tenants, and at the same time, it hints that the source of the mansion's excessive decay, the narrator's insoluble fear, and the ultimate reasons behind Usher's mental disorder are mysterious. It could be supernatural power, or the "the long-continued illness," the imagination of Usher's disordered mind, or the uncertain combination of all. Like many of Poe's protagonists, such as the characters in "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833), "Berenice" (1835) "Ligeia" (1838) "William Wilson" (1839), "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), and "the Black Cat" (1843), Usher is a victim of an external and internal power beyond human intelligence. In other words, through the exploration of Usher's mental condition and the world in which he lived, Poe illustrates that the nature of the universe and our existence are beyond our understanding and control.

Acting in the center of the dark psychological landscape, the three protagonists of the story are allegorical figures. Represented as the conscious part of the mind, the narrator is anxious to rationalize the mysterious domain and the increasing fear it evoked, as well as Usher's inconsistent behavior and mental instability. Needless to say, his struggle for penetrating the dark secrets of the universe and mind are fruitless. While at the beginning of the story the narrator appears as a character of intellectual rationalism, as the story continues his friend's irrational mind casts considerable influence on him, and his narrative becomes more and more unsteady. At one point, he is accused by Usher of being a "madman". Consequently, the narrative authority is brought under question. While the narrator/consciousness can be viewed as a victim of the irrationality, Usher and his twin sister Madeline can be understood as the symbolic representation of the unconscious and irrational part of the mind. We are told that Usher and Madeline live in a mansion "with no disturbance from the breath of the external air" (400), and for many years they had never ventured forth beyond the impenetrable walls surrounding them. Although the narrator and Usher had been intimate companions in boyhood, he knows little about him and he has no knowledge of Usher's twin sister. The strange bond between the three protagonists highlights the relationship between consciousness and unconsciousness—the former is initially unaware of the existence of and subsequently unable to reach a rational understanding of the latter. Madeline is prematurely buried in a vault. In order to understand Poe's exploration of the unconscious realm the vault scene requires a close reading:

The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for

light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. (409-401)

The details of the underground vault illustrate the symbolic meaning of the vault. First we notice that there is no light—the symbol signifies a lack of reason, rationality, and knowledge; second, it is a realm of the unfamiliar; and third, it is located at a great depth, immediately beneath the bedroom of the narrator. These details illustrate that the vault is the symbolic representation of the realm of the unconscious. It is not surprising to find that the dark vault eventually becomes the destination of Madeline, who stands as a symbolic figure of the unconscious. The premature-burial and Madeline's ghostly return vividly signify the nature of unconsciousness. Despite being buried in the deepest part of the mind, the unconsciousness always creeps out and threatens the rationality of the mind whenever there is a fissure in the guarding wall of the consciousness. "Usher" affects the reader at the unconscious level because it sets up unconsciousness on the central stage for investigation. Thus, the Gothic landscape of "Usher" becomes the site of investigating the uncertain, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable part of the mind. Upon Usher's Gothic external withered landscape—the symbol of the ruined Eden, the inner uncertainty of the mind is blended with the outward ambiguity of the universe, and together they intensify the epistemological and psychological perplexities.

The dark allegorical landscape depicted in "Usher"—the combination of the incomprehensible mind and world—evokes the sensation of fear, terror, and horror. Analyzing the Gothic tradition and the complicated emotions it evokes, Thompson asserts: "terror suggests the frenzy of physical and mental fear or pain, dismemberment, and death ("Introduction" 3). Horror suggests the perception of something incredibly evil or morally repellent; in addition to terror and horror, mystery is another important feature of American Gothic, which "suggests something beyond this, the perception of a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence" ("Introduction" 3). These discussions of terror and horror should help us to see how Poe produced and manipulated the reader's sensation on the level of body and mind. In "Preface" for *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839), Poe tells us that "terror is not of Germany, but of the soul" (473). Poe was a master at evoking fear, terror, horror, and mystery, which were employed by him to explore the depths of the soul. The Gothic waste land best illustrates Poe's purpose of conveying the terror of the soul.

The mysterious landscape functions as an epitome of the distorted physical universe; consequently, the narrator's attempted scrutiny only increases his fear. Gazing down the hellish water of the black and lurid tarn, "with a shudder even

more thrilling than before,” the narrator sees “upon the remodelled and inverted image of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows” (398). Here, “gazing down” is a meaningful gesture, is not a simple action of curiosity. The gaze signifies a Romantic hero’s journey of inquiring Truth—the truth of the universe and nature — even at the risk of doom and death, for what he saw foreshadows the destructive fate of the narrator’s journey. The inverted image of the landscape conveys the message that regardless of perspective (reason, order, and knowledge), the true nature of the universe is inscrutable, and what we see is no more than an inverted image of the world. The words “black and lurid” suggest a hellish quality of the tarn, and consequently the reflection of the house appears as if it has been swallowed by the bottomless dark abyss—an image of annihilation. Here nature appears to conspire against the mansion and its’ inhabitants. In addition, the remodeled reflection also hints at the unfathomable depth of the unconsciousness and the dark strata of the mind, which threatens to overwhelm its conscious and rational counterpart. It is upon the multiple levels that Poe’s Gothic landscape combines the outer darkness of withered landscape with the inner darkness of the withered mind and evokes “insufferable gloom” and increasing fear.

Not only nature, but the mansion as well appears sinister. Moving ever closer from a distance, the narrator finds himself standing in front of Usher’s mansion with a better view of the house. As mentioned earlier, the detailed description of the house establishes the relationship between the physical body and spirit and the correspondent connection between the landscape, mansion, and mind. The moment he enters the mansion, the narrator plunges deeper and deeper into the realms of the unstable mind and the subconscious. From this point, the narrator’s thinking grows more and more unsteady, and he soon realizes that he has become a victim of his friend’s insanity.

The climax of the tale—Madeline’s ghostly return and the final destruction of the mansion intensifies the sense of terror evoked by the image of nightmare landscape. In the second part of the story, Poe relies on the misgivings produced by insanity and the actions of a diseased mind to build up the climax and to terrify and horrify his reader. Incest between the twins is hinted. If we view the decaying mansion as representative of a deteriorating mind, and Usher and Madeline as its unconscious occupants, then the narrator’s awareness of the incestuous relationship suggests the reorganization of some morally repellent thoughts buried deep in our subconsciousness. Therefore, the twins are indeed the embodiment of terror (a frenzy of physical and mental fear) and horror (evil or morally repellent thoughts). The imagined picture of Madeline struggling to get out of the coffin and dungeon intensifies the terror and horror to a higher and higher degree. Madeline’s ghostly return illustrates the dangerous results of the repression of consciousness and the unleashing of the unconscious. The terror

and horror of body and mind eventually lead to a psychical breakdown, which is visualized in the final scene. The powerful images of the rapidly widened fissure of the house and “the deep and dark tarn closing sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’” voice the final destruction of the mind and the annihilation of the clan of Usher. The mysterious dark and silent landscape is center stage, once again highlighting the Romanticist’s dark view of the nature of mind and universe, and the ultimate miserable existential condition of humankind.

“Usher” constitutes a paradigm of the Gothic and Dark Romanticism’s visionary terror. The withered Gothic landscape of the story stands as an allegorical picture of the ruined Eden. Within a maligned universe and with deceptive perception, humankind is suspended in a despairing state of watching its mind breaking down and waiting for the moment of final destruction and annihilation. As a poet of mankind, Poe’s lament over the ruined Eden—the earth — produces a drive to regain it. Profoundly dissatisfied with man’s miserable condition in the world, through the power of imagination, particularly through his aesthetic sense as a poet, Poe strives to transcend man’s despairing condition and transform the ruined Eden by creating an imaginative earthly paradise.

In his sketches and tales, Poe creates several paradisiacal landscape garden images. Among them “The Landscape-Garden” (1842), “The Domain of Arnheim” (1847), and “Landon’s Cottage” (1849) particularly illustrate Poe’s visionary beauty—a belief in artistic perfectibility.³ By analyzing his principle paradisiacal landscape garden image we shall be able to see how Poe, discontented with the limitations of the physical world and man’s condition, endeavors to seek supernal beauty with the assistance of poetic taste. Poe’s literary criticism and aesthetic theory shall help us to understand his concept of supernal beauty, as well as his belief in the artist’s role in saving man from the blighted earth. Our final discussion shall focus on “The Domain of Arnheim”, for it is Poe’s most explicit statement concerning aesthetic principles, and his search for happiness on the blighted earth.

“The Domain of Arnheim”, a revised and greatly elaborated version of Poe’s “Landscape-Garden”, provides a splendid visionary image of the paradisiacal landscape garden. Before discussing Poe’s aesthetic principles, upon which the landscape garden is created, we must first look at the earthly paradise Poe created. Like the isolated domain of Usher and many landscapes depicted in Poe’s poems and tales, the location of the domain of Arnheim places an emphasis on solitude and enclosure, which entrusts the landscape with a dream-like and imaginary quality. Water, particularly the images of the narrow stream, gorge, and pond play a key role in accessing Poe’s paradise. The usual approach to Arnheim is by the river which grows narrow and takes thousands of turns. After some distance, the river becomes a gorge

between the walls of a high ravine. Finally, a sharp turn leads the water into a wide circular basin. Scholars have pointed out the sources and aesthetics of Poe's landscape fiction have been neglected.⁴ In addition to serving as a necessary step in separating the paradisiacal landscape from the rest of the mundane world, the hours wandering in the narrow watery maze also implies a spiritual journey of purification and rebirth. The reader is told the whole chasm effuses "an air of funereal gloom". Emotionally, the "funereal gloom" sets off by sharp contrast the ecstasy and happiness one is going to experience. More importantly and symbolically, the hours' long journey along the wandering, enclosed, dark and gloomy ravine indeed suggests the importance of purification before entering paradise.

Poe's thoughts on the concept of rebirth can be found in his earlier writings. The dialogues between the blessed spirits in Heaven, "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841), for example, illustrates that in Poe's view "the dark Valley and Shadow" are the boundaries that divide life from death and death from spiritual rebirth. In the voice of Monos (one of the blessed spirits), Poe claims: "that man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be '*born again*'" (611):

And now it was, fairest and dearest, that we wrapped our spirits, daily, in dreams. Now it was that, in twilight, we discoursed of the days to come, when the Art-scarred surface of the Earth, having undergone that purification which alone could efface its rectangular obscenities, should clothe itself anew in the verdure and the mountain-slopes and the smiling waters of Paradise, and be rendered at length a fit dwelling-place for man: — for man the Death-purged — for man to whose now exalted intellect there should be poison in knowledge no more — for the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still for the *material*, man. (611-612)

The imaginative excursion described here is very similar to the one in "Arnheim", and indeed the latter is a more elaborated version of the former. Viewed in such light, we see that the domain of Arnheim is divided into two parts. Permeated with "an air of funereal gloom" the enclosed and dark landscape in the first part of the journey is a crucial stage of Poe's construction of Paradise, since the only approach to the paradisiacal garden is the river. The journey indicates a process of purification and transformation. Not only man but also the "scarred" Earth has to undergo this process before reaching immortality. After the ordeal of purification, the earth is redeemed and men are exalted.

In contrast to the first part of journey, the landscape in the second part of journey is effused with an air of ecstasy and bliss. In Poe's most elaborate description of

earthly paradise, the beauty of earthly paradise is conveyed by the image of a serene water basin and its surroundings:

This basin was of great depth, but so transparent was the water that the bottom, which seemed to consist of a thick mass of small round alabaster pebbles, was distinctly visible by glimpses – that is to say, whenever the eye could permit itself *not* to see, far down in the inverted heaven, the duplicate blooming of the hills. On these latter there were no trees, nor even shrubs of any size. The impressions wrought on the observer were those of richness, warmth, color, quietude, uniformity, softness, delicacy, daintiness, voluptuousness, and a miraculous extremeness of culture that suggested dreams of a new race of fairies, laborious, tasteful, magnificent, and fastidious; but as the eye traced upward the myriad-tinted slope, from its sharp junction with the water to its vague termination amid the folds of overhanging cloud, it became, indeed, difficult not to fancy a panoramic cataract of rubies, sapphires, opals, and golden onyxes, rolling silently out of the sky. (1280)

The quality of the water is essential. Unlike the dark and impenetrable water of the tarn in front of Usher's house, the water here is transparent and reflects "a miraculous extremeness of culture". Poe implies that although slightly different, the earthly paradise is a copy of heavenly beauty and therefore shares the brilliant radiation of heaven. The reader is reminded that earthly paradise is the creation of mankind, for there are no fish, birds, trees, or shrubs.

The identity of the creator of the earthly paradise reveals Poe's understanding of the role of the poet. It is not by accident that the blessed spirits in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and the designer and the few visitors of the domain of Arnheim are poets. In Poe's view, poets are the only hope for the fallen earth and mankind. He believes that poets would lead us back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life, if man would submit to their guidance. In "Colloquy of Monos and Una", Poe stresses the importance of poetic aesthetic sense — "for, in truth, it was at this crisis that taste alone – that faculty which, holding a middle position between the pure intellect and the moral sense, could never safely have been disregarded – it was now that taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life" (610). In "The Poetic Principle," Poe's most elaborated statement on his aesthetic theory, he discusses the crucial role of aesthetic sense (taste) and the relationship between "Pure intellect, Taste, and the Moral sense":

Dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious distinctions,

we have the Pure intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense....Just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful, while the Moral Sense is regardful of Duty. Of this latter, while Conscience teaches the obligation, and Reason the expedience, Taste contents herself with displaying the charms: – waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her deformity – her disproportion –her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious – in a word, to Beauty. (*The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1025-1026)

Here we see, while relating moral sense with obligation, Poe sets Beauty as the ultimate goal of the poetic mind. Inspired by poetic sentiment, guided by pure intellect and taste, the poet strives to reach the Supernal Beauty. “The Poetic Sentiment”, Poe tells, “may develop itself in various modes—in Painting, in Sculpture, in Architecture, in Dance ... in the composition of the Landscape Garden” (1026).

Viewed in such light, we see that Ellison, the designer and the owner of the earthly paradise, is Poe’s poet of the landscape. Under the assistances of enormous fortune he inherited and his refined aesthetic taste, Ellison creates a paradisiacal landscape of beauty and lives in bliss. The paradisiacal landscape garden is the embodiment of Poe’s visionary beauty, the realization of his aesthetic theory, and the testimony of the power of the poet.

Notes

1. For an extensive discussion of this topic, see G. R. Thompson, *Circumscribed Eden of Dreams: Dreamvision and Nightmare in Poe’s Early Poetry* (Baltimore: The Enoch Pratt Free Library, the Edgar Allan Poe Society, and the Library of the University of Baltimore, 1984).
2. The central tension of “The Fall of the House of Usher” has been discussed by critics such as E. Arthur Robinson and Kent Ljungquist. See E. Arthur Robinson, “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”, *PMLA* 76 (1961): 68-81; and Kent Ljungquist, *The Grand and the Fair: Poe’s Landscape Aesthetics and Pictorial Techniques* (Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984).
3. The central tension of “The Fall of the House of Usher” has been discussed by critics such as E. Arthur Robinson and Kent Ljungquist. See E. Arthur Robinson, “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”, *PMLA* 76 (1961): 68-81; and Kent Ljungquist, *The Grand and the Fair: Poe’s Landscape Aesthetics and Pictorial Techniques* (Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984).
4. For discussions on Poe’s earthly paradise and landscape fiction, see Robert D. Jacobs, “Poe’s Earthly Paradise”, *American Quarterly* 12.3 (Autumn 1960): 404-413; Jeffrey A. Hess, “Sources and Aesthetics of Poe’s Landscape Fiction”, *American Quarterly* 22, no. 2.I (Summer 1970): 177-189; Joel R. Kehler, “New Light on the Genesis and Progress of Poe’s Landscape Fiction”,

American Literature 47.2 (May 1975): 173-183; and Kent Ljungquist, *The Grand and the Fair: Poe's Landscape Aesthetics and Pictorial Techniques* (Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984)

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