

“The Masque of the Red Death” – Castle of Alterity

Iolanda de Brito e Zôrro

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

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The main aim in this article is to briefly reflect on the importance that the thematic of alterity plays in “The Masque of the Red Death”¹ by Edgar Allan Poe. The focus will be on demonstrating how the bipartite structure of the “Inside Space” and “Outside Space” and the atmosphere of inversion, common to Carnival festivities, are both important factors to this line of thought. We will focus on the “Other” that lies within each one of us and is considered to be a disruptive element, often moving in the sideline spaces of society. In order to do so, and for the reasons discussed below, Todorov’s structuralism theory will be the starting point for our considerations due to the central place it occupies among the studies devoted to the gothic-fantastic.

Todorov is in fact a pioneer in his analysis of the way several elements of the fantastic gothic short story contribute to the general progress of the narrative. The critic describes to us, with very sharp sensitivity and acuity, the ambiance that characterizes the gothic by stimulating an immediate dialogue between the latter and both the characters of the text and its readers.

According to Todorov, the gothic short story has to be framed by a mimetic textual structure so the supernatural may prove itself apt to introduce what Freud would call uncanny events,² liable to bring with them the power to disturb the reader’s expectations of what he defines as normal. It is in this sphere, which stands between the real and the unreal,

¹ From this point onwards referred to as “Masque”.

² “(...) linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* [‘homely’] into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud, “Uncanny” 363-364).

that the fantastic effect takes place. The last, in its turn, gives way to the principle of hesitation experienced by the reader and characters who are, consequently, inserted in a space where they'll have to face events that are difficult to categorize: "Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel" (Todorov 29).

Following the critic's ideas, both the reader and characters have to admit the existence of two organizational systems, one from the natural order and the other from a supernatural order, seeing the fantastic effect occur somewhere between the two. Rosemary Jackson compares the hesitational effect to the paraxial area, i.e., to a place where the optic of the real touches that of the unreal, originating an intermediate zone which does not identify with either: "This paraxial area could be taken to represent the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two" (19). The mimetic impulses remain recognizable in this space, although they are overwhelmed by another set of laws where alterity acquires a supernatural contour. Thus, Jackson attributes to the fantastic discourse the role of legitimizing what society considers to be a taboo³ by bringing into discussion what convention has defined as transgressive. It is because the fantastic is inserted in a fictional sphere that the debate over marginal themes is possible without there being a threat to society's infrastructures. It is due to this that the fantastic is commonly defined as a place outside of reality:

To introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny. It is to introduce dark areas, of something completely other and

³ "Tabou, c'est précisément cette condition des objets, des actions ou des personnes isolées ou interdites, à cause du danger que comporte leur contact... Tout ce qui est sacré, prohibé, interdit, incestueux, de mauvais augure, dangereux... Les tabous peuvent être provisoires ou permanents; puissance à la fois attirante et repoussante, que tient de l'ambivalence et de l'insolite. Par sa séparation et par son isolement du reste des choses, le tabou prend une valeur supplémentaire mystérieuse, comme si *autre chose* ou *quelqu'un* l'habitait sous ses apparences" (Chevalier 255). Emphasis in the original.

unseen, the spaces outside the limiting frame of the 'human'
and 'real', outside the control of the 'word' and of the 'look'.
(Jackson 179)

In "Masque", the main taboo is that of alterity which goes through all of the castle's rooms like a veiled presence that gradually infiltrates within the heart and soul of the characters and that, in the end, proclaims its unreserved dominion over everything that lives. The expression of dualism and multiplicity inherent to the human condition is of vital importance to gothic texts of the 19th century where there is a portrayal of a Victorian society asphyxiated by the ruthless yoke of mores and the severity of morals that compelled the human being to restrain and violate his own plural nature. Accordingly, what Jackson calls the "myth" of alterity, arises from an identity wish of reunion with a lost centre of personality where the "Other" contains, in a dynamic and indissoluble relation, the hidden facets of the "Self", the two different sides of the same being.

The disruptive appearance of the figure of the "Other" is frequently associated with objects such as paintings – a commonly known example is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde – and mirrors. Foucault identifies the mirror as the heterotopic place *par excellence*, for it projects an image of the "Self" in a space that is different from the latter, an "Other" space we might say, where the individual may recognize and analyse itself from a relatively distanced point of view:

Le miroir (...) c'est également une hétérotopie, dans la mesure où le miroir existe réellement, et où il a, sur la place que j'occupe, une sorte d'effet en retour; c'est à partir du miroir que je me découvre absent à la place où je suis puisque je me vois là-bas. À partir de ce regard qui en quelque sorte se porte sur moi, du fond de cet espace virtuel qui est de l'autre côté de la glace, je reviens vers moi et je recommence à porter mes yeux vers moi-même et à me reconstituer là où je suis (...).
(756)

Both paintings and mirrors have reality at their core; they portray to the "Self" a dimension that is discerned as being strange and unexpected. Therefore, both may be interpreted as epiphanies of the "Self" and, as a result, as objects of self-discovery. The same sort of disclosure is present in

R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which explores the various mental levels where the human mind works. In the book, these gain a physical existence, endangering with impending chaos the sturdy order of Victorian society.

From the onset of "Masque", we may observe a clear difference separating the "Outside Space" of pestilence and suffering, where death is the ultimate and democratic dissolution of the "Self", from the "Inside Space" of Prospero's castle. It is here where the prosperity that echoes the environment felt in the courts of the Middle Ages, as well as joy, colour and life, are reiterated by the underlying atmosphere of subversion of the masque ball which, in its turn, suggests yet another sort of dissolution: the "Self" that is annulled behind a costume. The Carnival ambiance⁴ that pervades the tale is deliberate and should not come as a surprise for it is a literary device used to emphasize, yet again, the transgressive nature that is characteristic of the fantastic. During the celebration of this festivity, all social differences are levelled, abolished and subverted while the rules and conventions of everyday life are temporarily suspended giving way to chaos: "The jocular and merry approach is opposed to the serious and gloomy one; the usual and commonplace to the strange and unexpected, the material and bodily to the abstract and the exalted" (Bakhtin 234).

For Todorov, the transformation of time preludes the dissolution of the limits that stand between the immanent and the transcendent. This is a destructive relation because it is based on the violation of the order of nature in which its two main agents, Humanity and the world, interact according to a system of perception-conscience. In "Masque", the mental duplicity of the human being dissolves in and is represented by the contiguity of the castle's rooms which dominate and impose their presence to the characters that wander in their interior. Jackson argues that the Carnival exists in a time outside law and we can see this feature represented in "Masque" not only in its temporal and historical imprecision but also in the descriptive techniques that suggest an environment of almost unruly abundance. "Masque" also renders it possible to simultaneously feel the ominous and persistent presence of nostalgia, ruin and an almost mystical

⁴ Cf. Bakhtin (1984) for a diachronic exposition on the genesis of Carnival.

atmosphere. These elements help inscribe the narrative within a diffuse time that takes place outside the limits imposed by reality itself.

The castle's opulence contrasts with its devastated exterior and with the claustrophobic and labyrinthine architecture of its rooms:

"The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. (...) in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite" (Poe 671).

Consecutive chambers and successive colours insinuate both the plurality of human nature and the associative rapidity of human thought which, in the short story, lead the reader and characters to a point of entropy and absence of colour, represented by the last chamber's unique characteristics.⁵ Here, the predominance of the colour black is interrupted only by the same blood-red that, at the beginning of "Masque", characterises the "Outside Space" of horror which, as the narrative proceeds, penetrates the "Inside Space" of revelry and apparent safety of the castle:⁶

The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet – a deep blood color. (Poe 672)

The presence of black comes up as the dissonant chord among the other colours, giving the seventh room such a mystery and singularity that the reader and characters, at a certain point, are bound to experience a peculiar

⁵ Thompson (301) refers to the difficult task critics have faced when trying to identify the symbolic meaning of the colours of the seven rooms. Bearing in mind the importance of this mystic number, some of their interpretations include the seven ages of man, the seven days of the week, the seven deadly sins, the seven Christian sacraments and the seven broken seals of the Apocalypse.

⁶ "The Other expressed through fantasy has been categorized as a negative black area – as evil, demonic, barbaric – until its recognition in the modern fantastic as culture's unseen" (Jackson 173).

state of anxiety. The shadows within this room aren't extravagant or merry, but frightening, terrible and wild, capable of expelling even the boldest from its interior. Without a doubt, this is the place of death. All these features, together with the monochordic rhythm of the ebony clock lead up to the appearance of the ultimate fantastic element: the Red Death. It is the very phantasmagorical strike of the clock that announces hesitation and mystery and that foreshadows the arrival of the moment of interpenetration of two worlds, the physical and the supernatural. Thus, the reader and characters are transferred to a time outside Time itself, that is to say, to an imprecise, interstitial and interrupted time, where the fantastic may find the roots to its own legitimacy. The cessation of all activity, followed by a meditative, unsettling and even aggressive silence,⁷ the vague and distorted contours of the shadowy presences that roam Prospero's castle of dreams,⁸ or the undeniable opposition between the black room and the other ones, all of which prepare the reader and characters for the moment of apotheosis.

*But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven, there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-colored panes; and the blackness of the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the *other* apartments. (Poe 674)⁹*

⁷ Cf. the use Poe's short story makes of expressions such as: 'gay company' (672), 'laughter', 'musicians' (673), 'music', 'merrily', 'gaieties' (674) (sound/life) and 'ceased', 'meditation', 'whispering' (673), 'still', 'silent' (673), 'muffled' (674) (silence/death).

⁸ The association between the fantastic and dreams has been profusely studied by psychoanalytical approaches. It would be interesting to contrast Todorov's and Jackson's views on this approach for whereas the former resists the allegorical relation with the universe proposed by psychoanalysis, the latter finds the inquiry of the repressed to be crucial to the fantastic.

⁹ My emphasis, except in 'their'.

A brief consideration of the exceptional characteristics of the room "most westwardly" (Poe 674) of all is now in order. Its traits are emphasized by the initial use of the adversative "But" (Poe 674) which tells us that we are dealing with a room that is architecturally and semantically isolated from the other castle rooms. It personifies the human need of placing the "Other" and the monstrous outside the frontiers of the civilized world, thus assuring that its dogmas aren't questioned or that whatever it is that constitutes Humankind is not threatened. This was a very popular perspective in the Middle Ages:

Il est rare que le merveilleux existe dans les limites de notre horizon: la plupart du temps il naît là où le regard ne porte plus. C'est pourquoi les "extrémités" de la terre sont fécondes: qu'il s'agisse des régions polaires, de la périphérie de la terre ou tout simplement des terres mystérieuses, inexplorées, **aux confins de la terre connue**. (Kappler 36, emphasis in the original)

In the Middle Ages, the monstrous figure forced Mankind to question its boundaries (cf. Gil, 1994). The integration of the monster within a rigid cosmogony that revolved around a perfect God, responsible for the perfection of His creatures, proved to be ambivalent. It was urgent to find a place for the monster within the hierarchical chain of beings of the medieval system for not doing so was the same as admitting the existence of creatures outside the will and power of God. In order for divine power and the Roman Church to remain infallible the monster was either considered as part of God's creatures or simply dismissed as nonexistent. Kappler refers Saint Augustine as an example of the latter:

(...) la Parole de Dieu fut prêchée dans l'**Univers entier**. Or, comme la zone torride est infranchissable, cette Parole n'a pu parvenir aux éventuels occupants de l'hémisphère opposé au nôtre. Donc, il est inadmissible qu'il existe des êtres humains en ces lieux pour la bonne raison qu'ils seraient victimes d'une injustice monumentale, ne pouvant être «subiecs [sic] a l'église [sic] de romme». (30, emphasis in the original)

Let us go back to the point of preparation of the reader and characters to the triumphal moment of the appearance of the Red Death. The now

more insistent use of expressions alluding to silence such as “the music ceased”, “the waltzers were quieted” and “uneasy cessation of all things” (Poe 674) imprint the text with an exponential cadence that accompanies the reader and characters as they are confronted with a succession of several images that bring them closer to a mysterious dimension. The Red Death is the daughter of midnight, and as the latter exists in the confluence of two days, the former exists in the convergence of two worlds: the natural and the supernatural, as mentioned beforehand. We are dealing here with a veiled figure that moves in the time of uncertainty and penetrates the festive rhythm of the living, imposing them his subversive and deathly presence.

(...) before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure (...) the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. (...) The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. (...) His vesture was dabbled in *blood* – and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror. (Poe 674-675)

This character represents the inefficacy of human efforts to separate two indivisible dimensions of the human being, the “Outside Space” and the “Inside Space”. He is portrayed as a superlative creature because everything about him is excessive and dreadful. The preponderance of the colour red, associated to the subversive allusion to the decomposing body,¹⁰ haunts the castle's revellers by bringing the threat of the exterior into the dominion of the interiority, thus defusing an abrupt and unexpected depersonaliza-

¹⁰ Concerning the relationship between the fantastic and the theme of necrophilia, cf. Todorov (1970).

tion in the core of all the characters. Associated to the seventh room is the clock that announces the inexorable succession of Time and the "Outside Space". There is also the figure of the Red Death entering the castle, which is the last safety haven against the exterior devastation and death, and interrupting the apparently eternal and inalterable flow of the circle and cycle of life. The ominous presence of this figure of exile perturbs us and causes in each of the short story characters the loss of their personality centre and subsequent redefinition. It forces them to recognize other dimensions of the "Self", and the multiplicity inherent to human nature. The Red Death is a superior entity, a death herald that represents the cycle of life and the need each one of us has to accept our finite nature. Thompson underlines the special attention we need to pay to the term "avatar", used in the short story to describe the Red Death and highlight his immanent, yet supra-human, abstract quality (299). The fact that the Red Death walks through the castle's rooms from East to West has excited many critics' opinions who have considered this the figurative expression of the day and life cycle, both presided over by the syncopated chimes of a cosmic clock.

As we approach the end of the narrative, the insistent presence of a time that portends death pressures both characters and reader. The question here is not only the physical death of the "Self" but also the death of an inner plurality that is sacrificed in order for the human being to remain coherent and unilateral; a human being that doesn't threaten the laws of society with his internal multiplicity. As the Red Death walks, unimpeded, through all the castle's divisions and as he overlays his presence to the other revellers, he reveals social taboos and questions an infallible conception of the human being: "(...) unimpeded, he [Red Death] passed within a yard of the prince's person; and while the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centres of the rooms to the walls, he made his way uninterruptedly (...)" (Poe 676).

The final *anagnorisis* occurs with the realization that the "Other" is a constituent part of the "Self", a sort of 'alter-mirror', I would say, that reflects not the person we are but the "Other" that lies numb inside of us. Once we accept that human nature is multiple, society will on the one hand find it difficult to impose its undisputed will to the individuals. On the other hand, accepting that we are not entirely good or evil, but

something in between the two cannot be acknowledged without suffering, for it is always a hard task to admit our less than savoury nature.¹¹

The ending note in “Masque” is that of the triumph of ruin, of the eternity and placidity of time and the absolute cessation of all activity. In the end, we have to accept the victory of the Red Death, of that chaotic “Other” who, throughout time, has been shunned out to the limits of society and morals. It’s the victory of death over life, of the dissolved “Self” that brings with it the inauguration of a new order: “And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (Poe 677).

What is at stake is the dismantlement of reality and the erosion of the pillars that sustain society; it is the need to change and the conscience that it is inutile to delay the moment of acceptance of difference. It is urgent to find some sort of contract between the established order and what lies beyond it, an area where both the human and the social may be free to reveal their nature without having to sacrifice their integrity or to fear the disaggregation of their infrastructures.

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¹¹ Danto argues the following concerning the death of Narcissus: “(...) he died of self-knowledge, just as Tiresias predicted he would, an object lesson in epistemological suicide to be taken seriously by those who suppose “know thyself,” Socrates’ celebrated cognitive imperative, can be pursued with impunity” (Danto 9).

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ABSTRACT

The theme of alterity has haunted Humanity since it first could conceive the idea of the Self. "The Masque of the Red Death", by Edgar Allan Poe, struck me as the perfect opportunity to think and write about an important and global theme such as this one we are dealing with.

Being a product of the Victorian era, it is curious to notice how such a subversive short story subsisted in a fiercely repressive culture that asphyxiated itself with a morality and mores that were too strict to thrive. Thus, we should expect that the main taboo in this short story is the threatening idea of the Other that finds its own legitimacy not only in the very characteristics of the fantastic discourse but also in the atmosphere of revelry that pervades the entire narrative.

We have to try to harmonize the Inside space and the Outside space while they struggle with each other for dominion over the Self. These two worlds of light and darkness act as an extended metaphor for the irrepressible multiplicity of the human being.

We will follow Todorov's structuralist approach to textual analysis while trying to draw our attention to elements that play a crucial role to the moment of final anagnorisis where it becomes clear that the Other is contained in the Self, no matter how hard one tries to relegate it to the borderline of the human.

KEYWORDS

Gothic, Alterity, Taboo, Other

RESUMO

A temática da alteridade tem assombrado a Humanidade desde que esta primeiro conseguiu conceber a ideia de Eu. "The Masque of the Red Death", de Edgar Allan Poe, pareceu-me constituir a oportunidade perfeita para reflectir acerca de um tema tão importante e global quanto este.

Sendo um produto do vitorianismo, é curioso notar como um "short story" de cariz tão subversivo encontrou um modo de subsistir numa cultura marcadamente

repressiva que se asfixiou a si própria com uma moral e costumes demasiado severos para perdurarem. Assim, é de esperar que o principal tabu deste "short-story" seja a ideia ameaçadora do Outro cujo discurso é legitimado não só pelas características inerentes ao discurso fantástico, mas também pela atmosfera de reversão que perpassa toda a narrativa.

Temos de tentar harmonizar os espaços Interior e Exterior, enquanto ambos lutam pelo domínio do Eu. Estes dois mundos de luz e de trevas representam, pois, uma metáfora alargada para a multiplicidade irreprimível do ser humano.

Seguiremos Todorov e o seu método estruturalista de análise textual, realçando os elementos cruciais para o momento da *anagnorisis* final onde se torna claro que o Outro se encontra contido no Eu, por mais que o tentemos relegar aos espaços limítrofes do humano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Gótico, Alteridade, Tabu, Outro
